

A Cognitive Framework in Teaching English Simple Present

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Received: November 16, 2014 Accepted: December 17, 2014 Online Published: February 13, 2015

doi:10.5539/elt.v8n3p24 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n3p24>

Abstract

A Cognitive Grammar (CG) analysis of linguistic constructions has been claimed to be beneficial to second language teaching. However, little empirical research has been done to support this claim. In this study, two intact classes of Chinese senior high school students were given a 45-minute review lesson on the usages of the English simple present tense. Instruction for the experimental class was based on Langacker's cognitive grammar analysis that highlighted the common motivation linking various usages, while that for the control class followed traditional teaching method. Results showed that the learners in the CG approach did not perform significantly better than the control group both on a grammaticality judgment and error correction task, and on a fill-in-the-blank task, though the CG approach did improve students' performance considerably. The author argued that four reasons might have diminished the benefits of the CG approach: 1) the selection of the samples was inappropriate; 2) the CG approach ran counter to learners' expectations about grammar; 3) the presentation of the CG treatment was too abstract, and linguistic terminologies new to the students were introduced, which made the lesson hard to follow; 4) instructional time was too limited. Therefore more classroom research is needed to substantiate the claimed pedagogical benefits of the CG approach.

Keywords: cognitive grammar, English simple present, English teaching

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The application of cognitive linguistics (CL) to second and foreign language (L2) teaching has been the subject of discussion among cognitive linguists in recent years. The interest in this topic is understandable given the current emphasis on teaching language in a meaningful, communicative context. CL seems to be a natural fit for this approach to language teaching, as its primary concern is the description of language use and motivation rather than abstract rules of structure. Cognitive linguists such as De Knop and Tyler believe that meaning plays a key role in determining the form of grammatical constructions: what we wish to communicate motivates how we formulate an utterance. Language learning from the CL perspective is thus based on contextualized usage and the expression of meaning. In this way, a CL description of language can be of potential benefit to the way grammar is taught in the L2 classroom. The emphasis on what grammar means rather than how grammar is formed promises to help learners gain a greater understanding and insight of how to express themselves in the L2 (De Knop et al., 2010; Tyler, 2012).

Promising as it sounds, the impact of cognitive linguistic theory on language pedagogy is only beginning to be felt. Previous research has focused on teaching idioms, phrasal verbs, prepositions etc (Tyler, 2012). Very little research has been conducted on the teaching of tense/aspect within this cognitive paradigm. In the present research, the author proposed a pedagogy based on Langacker's (1987a, 2001, 2003) analysis of the semantics and conceptual foundation of the English simple present tense and intended to test the effectiveness of such a CL approach.

1.2 The Problem of the Current Teaching Method of the English Simple Present

The English simple present tense has multiple usages. It can refer to present time (including state present, habitual present and instantaneous present), to the past and to the future. It is used in commentaries (e.g. sports commentaries), demonstrations, special exclamatory sentences (with initial adverbials), performatives, fictional

narratives etc (Quirk et al., 1985). Although the simple present tense is taught to EFL learners at a very early stage of their learning, few of them have mastered these multiple usages, including both the canonical usages and special usages. Part of this problem stems from the way English tense/aspect is represented in contemporary reference grammars and EFL textbooks. The typical EFL student appears to be presented with a list of usages of the simple present tense followed by example sentences containing verbs typically occurring in each usage, while very little of the motivations linking various usages are taught.

Teaching the simple present tense in China usually follows the following procedures: 1) introducing the form of the simple present, including its form in the statement, the negative, and the question; 2) emphasizing the canonical usages, e.g. habitual present, state present and eternal truths, illustrating with example sentences and then asking students to construct their own sentences; 3) introducing special usages, e.g. instantaneous present, historical present, and scheduled future, illustrating with example sentences and then asking students to construct their own sentences; 4) introducing the adverbs usually used with the simple present; 5) comparing the simple present with present progressive (Huang, 2003; Shen, 2000; Wang & Liu, 1996; Yao, 2005).

In this way, the varying usages of the simple present tense are presented as an unorganized list of unrelated usages, while the systematic relations between the multiple usages remain unexplained in such representation. This leaves the learner with the impression that the various usages are arbitrary. As a result, learners have to memorize the usages one by one and look to the example sentences as models to construct their own sentences. That is, the materials are learned by rote learning. As for the question of when to use the simple present tense, EFL students' judgments are most often based on linguistic rules rather than semantic considerations or communicative purposes. Many EFL teachers have noted that acquiring the multiple usages of English simple present (i.e., using them appropriately in discourse) is very difficult. In spite of the difficulty, a preliminary survey of a few currently used ELT textbook series found that none even ever mentioned this issue (Shen, 2000).

1.3 Theoretical Basis

Cognitive Linguistics (CL) has revealed that much that has been deemed arbitrary under the traditional view of language is, in fact, systematic and motivated (Langacker, 1987a). CL provides a unified account of how many grammatical constructions and lexical items work, and how varying usages of these forms are systematically related to one another. Because CL adopts a usage-based approach to language, it is mindful of the contexts in which lexical items and grammatical constructions occur. Context-based analyses have revealed that speakers' choice of a grammatical construction is meaning based. This insight is coherent with the basic CL tenet that syntax and morphology are meaningful. For the teacher, this approach has the potential to provide rich insights into the organization of and motivation for the core and 'exceptional' usages associated with aspects of lexis and grammar. Ultimately, these insights offer language learners a more coherent and explanatory description of the language.

Langacker (1987a, 2001, 2003) examines the English simple present tense from the perspective of his theory of Cognitive Grammar (CG). He criticizes the traditional way of looking at tense mainly on the grounds that these approaches have been objectivist in nature. They lack an awareness of construal (i.e., our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternative ways) and viewing arrangement and the subjective basis of factors like homogeneity and bounding. Langacker offers a motivated account for the various usages of the simple present tense on these bases.

In my study, I intended to test the effectiveness of Langacker's insight to the teaching of the English simple present tense.

1.4 Research Questions

From the CG framework, two research questions are formulated as follows:

- 1) A proposed Cognitive Grammar approach introduces to EFL learners the systematic relation between and coherent semantic foundation underlying the various usages of the simple present. Does the CG approach significantly affect EFL learners and yield better results than the traditional approach?
- 2) Is the CG approach more favorably evaluated by the students than the traditional approach?

2. A Cognitive Analysis of English Simple Present

The one thing that is generally agreed upon concerning the English simple present is that it is really not a present tense, i.e. it does not necessarily indicate that the process in question occurs at the time of speaking. On one hand, events that do occur at the time of speaking generally cannot be expressed in the simple present. As descriptions of actual, bounded events occurring at the time of speaking, sentences like (1a) are consistently infelicitous:

e.g. (1)

a. **Bill {sleeps/paints a fence/changes a tire/learns a poem} right now.*

b. *Bill {is sleeping/is painting a fence/is changing a tire/ is learning a poem} right now.*

To say these things, we must instead use the progressive, as in (1b).

On the other hand, many usages of the present tense do not refer to the time of speaking. Standard usages of the simple present pertain to the future, to the past, the timeless situations, or even to eternal truths etc:

e.g. (2)

a. *our driver's license expires on your next birthday.* [scheduled future]

b. *I am driving home last night and I hear a siren. I pull over and stop. This cop comes up and starts writing me a ticket.* [historical present]

c. *Hamlet moves to center stage. He pulls out his dagger. He examines it.* [stage directions]

d. *A kitten is born with blue eyes.* [generic]

e. *My cousin goes to a singles bar on Friday night.* [habitual]

f. *Water decomposes into hydrogen and oxygen.* [timeless truth]

Langacker (1987b) has argued that the English present characterizes a full instantiation of the profiled process occurs and precisely coincides with the time of speaking. The key factor is what it means for a process to occur. In the canonical usages, the occurrence is out there in the world. In describing the occurrence of a process, a speaker must conceptualize it, mentally running through the continuous series of profiled relationships (distributed through a span of conceived time) that constitutes it (Langacker, 2003). This mental scanning through the constitutive phases of a process amounts to its conceptual occurrence, residing in the speaker's conceptualizing activity. A speaker can carry out these operations autonomously, without their being driven by immediate observation of the process happening out there. For certain usages of the simple present, what counts as the occurrence of a process is precisely an autonomous conceptual occurrence of this sort. Not pertaining to external developments, but residing solely in the conceptualizer's mental activity.

The canonical use of the simple present is taken to be the description of actual processes occurring at the time of speaking. In this canonical situation, a perfective verb normally cannot be used in the simple present, while an imperfective verb does take the simple present. This analysis accounts for a striking systematic exception to the usual non-occurrence of simple present perfectives, namely 'performatives', as in (3).

e.g. (3)

a. *I promise to cooperate.*

b. *I beg you to give me another chance.*

c. *I hereby sentence you to 30 years in prison.*

Performatives indicate that the durational and epistemic problems are not problems with simple present perfectives per se. Rather, they stem from particular circumstances of viewing, namely the default viewing arrangement. In the default arrangement, the event to be described is independent of the speech event and beyond the control of the speaker, who merely observes the occurrence and then reports it. In this case the speaker can hardly begin its description coincident with its initiation, nor is its duration likely to match the time needed to utter a finite clause. But performatives, being intentional actions which implement the very events described, avoid these problems by their intrinsic nature.

There are other kinds of viewing arrangements which, by their nature, avoid the durational and epistemic problems. We simply need to imagine a situation where the speaker controls both the occurrence and the duration of the event described and can therefore make the description coincide with the occurrence. For example, a child is playing with toy cars and a play village and accompanies each action she takes with a descriptive sentence. The successive utterances in (4) then coincide with the successive acts of pushing a toy car from one place to another. This use of the present tense for perfective events seems perfectly natural and unproblematic.

e.g. (4)

Now I drive to work. Now I go to the store. Now I drive home.

More generally, the simple present is naturally used for the 'narration of demonstrations'. Imagine a cooking program on television, as in (5), where each clause accompanies the action it describes.

e.g. (5)

I put a tablespoon of butter in the pan. Now I put the fillet in. I cook it at a low temperature.

In the demonstration, the speakers have sufficient control over events to avoid the durational and epistemic problems. The speaker controls both the occurrence and the duration of the event described and can, therefore, make the description coincide with the occurrence.

The above-mentioned imperfective simple present, performatives and demonstrations are strong evidence for the correctness of the proposed characterization of the canonical use of the simple present, where the actual processes occur at the time of speaking. However, in many usages of the simple present, the designated process does not occur at the time of speaking, for example, the sentences in (2). These expressions do not refer directly to actual events. To account for these so-called ‘special’ usages, as well as to accommodate the above-mentioned canonical usages, Langacker (2003) posits a distinct viewing arrangement for the simple present that is different from the canonical viewing arrangement in which a static observer directly describes objectively construed events and situations involving specific individuals. This viewing arrangement does not specifically involve the simultaneous narration of actions. Langacker suggests that the events in question are conceptualized more abstractly as entries in a list, collectively constituting a kind of script or scenario that is being followed. In this respect, they would be roughly analogous to stage directions, as in (2c). The simple present verbs are not in fact being used for the direct description of actual events. They indicate the reading off of entries on some kind of list or scenario. In other words, what is being coded linguistically is not the ‘actual’ occurrence of events, but rather their ‘virtual’ occurrence as part of a non-canonical viewing arrangement. The viewing arrangement is such that the virtual occurrence does coincide with the time of speaking. A good example is the ‘scheduled future’ use of the simple present, as in (6).

e.g. (6)

Our new furniture comes tomorrow.

Such expressions relate only indirectly to the actual event in question. What a sentence like this directly describes is not the actual event per se, but rather a ‘representation’ of that event on some kind of ‘virtual schedule’, some kind of plan or projection concerning the anticipated occurrence and timing of events in the future. Metaphorically, we can think of a virtual schedule as a ‘document’ available to be ‘read’ at any time. In producing a sentence like (6), the speaker is essentially reading off one of its entries. Reading an entry amounts to the ‘virtual’ occurrence of the event it comprises, and since that event is profiled by the sentence produced, a (virtual) occurrence of the profiled process precisely coincides with the time of speaking.

Langacker (2003) takes this as being typical of the so-called ‘non-present’ usages of the simple present in English. Although details vary, a number of them are plausibly described metaphorically as the reading of a virtual document; the differences reside in the kind of document envisaged. In the case of (5), the document would be an imagined script of how the cooking demonstration is supposed to proceed step by step. In the case of ‘stage directions’, as in (2c), the script may well be physically embodied. As for the ‘historical present’ in (2b), the virtual document consists of a series of recalled events that the speaker can mentally ‘replay’ at leisure, at the pace required for linguistic encoding.

More generally, the key to understanding ‘non-present’ usages of the simple present lies in recognizing the special viewing arrangements they presuppose. They all diverge from the default arrangement by invoking some kind of ‘mental construction’—such as a schedule, a script, or mental replay—consisting of event representations. Even when these correspond in some fashion to actual events, the represented events are the ones directly coded linguistically and profiled by the simple present verb. What counts as the occurrence of such a process is therefore not an actual occurrence, but rather a virtual one consisting in its apprehension in the manner indicated by the special viewing arrangement (e.g. reading the virtual schedule, or running the mental replay). Indeed, the profiling of actual events in accordance with the default viewing arrangement can be seen as special case of this more general scheme, the case of identity between the mental construction of represented events and the observation of actual ones.

In one word, the simple present indicates that the viewing, and thus the ‘virtual occurrence’ of the event or situation in question coincide with the time of speaking.

3. Methodology

All data collection was conducted on the campus of Wuhan No.27 Senior High School. Two intact classes of final year students participated in the study. The teaching and testing were conducted between July and August 2013. During their regularly scheduled class, the pretest was administered to the two classes. And then the

treatment sessions followed, and the students were given the posttest immediately after the treatment session. Students in both groups were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the instruction after they took the posttest. Four weeks later, the two groups took the posttest again, along with a similar questionnaire. The researcher was not involved in either the classroom teaching or test paper marking. A middle-school teacher with three years of teaching experience taught both classes and marked all the papers from the experiment.

3.1 Participants

Two intact classes of final-year students in Wuhan No.27 Senior High School participated in this study. Each class consisted of 30 students. One class was the experimental group; the other was the control group.

Biodata forms were administered to the students at the beginning of the study. Information pertinent to second language acquisition, such as the students' age, gender, age when started English learning, length of English study, motivation for learning English, textbooks used, and their self-evaluation of their knowledge of the simple present were elicited.

80% of the students were 17 years old, while the rest were 18 years old. 60% were boys, while 40% were girls. 90% of them had learned English for five years, starting from the first year in junior high school. Only very few of them had learned some English in elementary schools. For more than 85% of them, the motivation for learning English was to pass examinations, for English was a mandatory course in high school. The textbook series they used included the national textbook series published by People's Education Press, *Look, Listen and Learn*, and *New Concept English*.

All the students had learned the English simple present before. Almost all of them thought that they had mastered it.

3.2 Pedagogical Treatments

The author designed two 45-minute lesson plans of a review lesson on English simple present. The first 45-minute session was based on Langacker's analysis. The second 45-minute session followed traditional teaching method. In the two treatments, the same set of example sentences were used, and all the example sentences were taken from Langacker (2001, 2003) and Zhang (2002). Both lectures were delivered in Chinese, which was the mother tongue of the participants.

The teaching objective of the two review lessons was the same, i.e. to enable the students to master six usages of the simple present, namely habitual or state present, eternal truths, performatives, present actions (e.g. demonstrations and stage directions), scheduled future and historical present. The approach to achieve the objective differed as described below.

3.2.1 Experimental Treatment

As for the experimental approach, the treatment consisted of the following four steps.

- 1) The teacher explained the difference between 'perfective' and 'imperfective' processes with figures. A perfective process has a starting point and an ending point, while an imperfective process has indeterminate beginning and end, and a stable status that persists through time. And then the teacher asked the students to name some perfective verbs (e.g. *walk, talk, hit, dress, sing*) and imperfective verbs (e.g. *believe, know, think, have, resemble*).
- 2) The teacher interpreted the present perfective and the present imperfective with figure illustrations.
- 3) The teacher explained that the usages of demonstrations and performatives could be fitted into the present perfective, while the state present could be fitted into the present imperfective.
- 4) The teacher explained the 'non-present' usages of the simple present. In explaining the habitual present, eternal truths, scheduled future and historical present, the concept of 'virtual document' was introduced, and figures were used to illustrate the meaning of the simple present.

3.2.2 Comparison Treatment

In contrast, the control approach followed the traditional teaching method described by Huang (2003), Shen (2000), Wang and Liu (1996) and Yao (2005). The procedure consisted of three major steps.

- 1) Emphasizing the canonical usages, i.e. habitual present and state present, illustrating with example sentences and then asking students to construct their own sentences;
- 2) Introducing the adverbs usually used with the simple present;
- 3) Introducing special usages one by one, i.e. eternal truths, performatives, present actions, scheduled future and

historical present, and illustrating with example sentences and then asking students to construct their own sentences.

3.3 Instruments

During participants' regularly scheduled class, the pretest and biodata sheets were administered to the two classes. And then the treatment sessions followed, and the students were given the posttest immediately after the treatment session. Students in both groups were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the instruction after they took the posttest. In the questionnaire, they were asked to evaluate the lesson and give a self-assessment of their knowledge of the simple present at that point in time. Four weeks later, the two groups took the posttest again, along with a similar questionnaire asking students how much they felt they knew about the simple present at that moment. As for the questionnaires, students were told that they could respond in their native language if they wanted. The immediate and delayed posttest made use of the same test paper, which shared no common items with the pretest. Sentence items in the tests were taken from Quirk et al. (1985), Langacker (2001, 2003) and Zhang (2002, 2003). The tests consisted of two tasks: one being grammaticality judgment and error correction, the other being filling in the blank with the correct form of the given words. As for the former task, students were asked to indicate on a five-point scale how certain they were that each of their answer was correct. Each test paper had 50% targeted forms and 50% distracters. The exact sentences used on the pre- and two post-tests were not used in the classroom instruction as examples.

The researcher also conducted individual interviews with volunteer students—5 from the experimental class and 5 from the control class—in order to elicit further feedback. Unfortunately, the interviews did not yield enough meaningful data due to the small number of participants and the wide range of answers, but relevant comments will be incorporated into the discussion of results.

4. Results

Before SPSS analysis, students' raw scores on each exercise item in the pretest and posttests had been converted to the 100-point system for ease of comparison. For example, the maximum raw score a participant could achieve in Exercise 1 of the pretest was 20, so a raw score of 10 would be converted into 50 in the 100-point system for SPSS analysis. An independent samples t-test of the pretest scores revealed no significant differences between the two classes. The results of the other measures will be presented in terms of the two research questions listed earlier.

4.1 Results of Research Question 1

Research question 1 is: Does the CG approach significantly affect EFL learners and yield better results than the traditional approach?

According to the data collection instruments adopted, four specific questions were raised:

1) Do CG students perform better on a grammaticality judgment and error correction task than students in the comparison approach?

Table 1. Means of grammaticality judgment and error correction task (maximum score = 100)

	Pretest	Immediate posttest	Delayed posttest
Experimental (n = 30)	52.2	71.6	70.4
Control (n = 30)	53.0	67.7	65.4

Table 1 shows the mean scores on the grammaticality judgment and error correction tasks for the pretest, immediate post-test and delayed post-test. An independent samples t-test revealed no main effect for group ($p = 0.781$, $p = 0.225$, and $p = 0.111$ for the pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest respectively): both groups performed in a similar manner during each testing session and no group was significantly more accurate in their responses than the other group. Not surprisingly, a main effect for time was found, indicating that instruction had a significant effect on learner performance. For the pretest and immediate posttest of the control group, $p = 0.000$; for the pretest and delayed posttest of the control group, $p = 0.000$. For the experimental group, the pre-immediate $p = 0.000$, and the pre-delayed $p = 0.000$. These results suggest that the students all learned the simple present equally well from instruction, regardless of whether the lesson was presented in the CG approach or the traditional approach.

The decrease in scores by the experimental group between the immediate and delayed post-tests was not significant, $p = .220$. The decrease experienced by the control class between the two post-tests was not significant either, $p = .125$. These results suggest that both approaches have a durable effect.

2) Do CG students perform better on a fill-in-the-blank task than comparison students?

Table 2. Means of fill-in-the-blank task (maximum score = 100)

	Pretest	Immediate posttest	Delayed posttest
Experimental (n = 30)	54.0	68.6	67.6
Control (n = 30)	56.3	70.0	63.7

Table 2 shows the mean scores on the fill-in-the-blank task for the three testing sessions. As in the grammaticality judgment and error correction tasks, a paired samples t-test revealed a main effect for time. For the experimental group, the pre-immediate $p = 0.000$, the pre-delayed $p = 0.000$. For the control group, the pre-immediate $p = 0.000$. An independent samples t-test revealed no main effect for group, for the pretest, immediate posttest and delayed posttest, $p = 0.563$, $p = 0.605$ and $p = 0.203$ respectively, indicating that it was instruction in general, not the particular approach, that had an effect on learner performance.

Pairwise comparisons revealed that the increase between the pretest and immediate post-test was significant for both groups. However, the increase between the pretest and delayed post-test was only significant for the experimental group, and was not significant for the control group. What's more, the change between the immediate and delayed post-test was only statistically significant for the control group ($p = 0.016$), and was not significant for the experimental group ($p = 0.306$). These results suggest that the learners who received the control treatment had more difficulties recalling the rules after a four-week lapse than those who received the CG treatment. Consequently, we could tentatively speculate that the CG approach has longer durability than the control approach, although both approaches yielded the same overall results.

3) Are CG students more certain of their responses to the grammaticality judgment and error correction task than comparison students?

Table 3. Certainty for grammaticality judgment and error correction task (maximum score: 5x10 target items = 50)

	Pretest	Immediate posttest	Delayed posttest
Experimental (n = 30)	31.8	38.5	38.5
Control (n = 30)	32	36	37.3

Because the CG approach aims to increase the learners' understanding of the simple present construction more than an arbitrary list does, I hypothesized that the learners in the CG groups would be more certain of their responses than the control group. Table 3 shows the mean certainty for the grammaticality judgment and error correction task. Wilcoxon signed ranks test revealed a main effect for time, but Man-Whitney test revealed no main effect for group. Again, it was instruction in general, not the type of instruction, that increased the certainty level of the learners.

For the experimental group, the learners were significantly more certain between the pretest and immediate post-test as well as between the pretest and delayed post-test. In contrast, for the control class, the only significant difference in certainty was between the pretest and delayed post-test, $p = .007$; there were no significant differences between the pretest and immediate post-test. These results suggest that the CG approach had a more immediate effect on the certainty level of the learners than the control approach since the experimental group was significantly more certain on the immediate post-test while the control group did not increase significantly in certainty until the delayed post-test.

4) Do CG students rate their knowledge of the English simple present more highly than comparison students?

Table 4. Means of self-rating of knowledge (maximum score = 5)

	Biodata sheet	Post-questionnaire	Follow-up questionnaire
Experimental (n = 30)	2.94	3.84	3.91
Control (n = 30)	2.87	3.50	3.67

Table 4 shows the means of the participants' self-rating of their knowledge of the simple present on the biodata sheet, post- and follow-up questionnaires. Both groups rated their knowledge at similar levels. Even though the experimental class appeared to rate themselves consistently higher, the difference is not statistically significant. Instruction, regardless of type, was the factor that had a significant effect on knowledge.

4.2 Results of Research Question 2

The second research question is: is the CG approach more favourably evaluated by the students than the traditional approach?

Table 5. Mean rating of aspects of review lesson on post-questionnaire (maximum score = 5)

	Clear	Simple	Comprehensible	Useful	Complete	Interesting
Experimental (n = 30)	4.55	4.4	4.3	4.35	4.1	4.00
Control (n = 30)	4.4	4.24	4.32	4.36	4.08	3.92

Table 5 shows how the experimental and comparison groups rated the lesson according to the criteria listed. There were no significant differences in the ratings of the two groups on any of the criteria. Both the CG and the control treatment seem equally well-received by the learners, although the results do not indicate whether, given the option, the learners would have preferred the CG approach to the control approach as both treatments would have needed to be administered to the same group of students. Moreover, it is difficult to tell which standards the students used to rate the approach, and there are factors beyond the treatment itself that may have influenced the learners' reactions, such as individual learning preferences or personal reactions to the researcher.

4.3 Other Findings

A qualitative analysis of the post-questionnaire and follow-up questionnaire responses was conducted in order to shed further light on the learners' reactions to the treatment. Two sets of responses were chosen for analysis: what the learners were still unsure of following the lesson, and what they liked about the lesson. The other questions did not yield informative responses as they tended to address specific aspects of the lesson rather than the approach in general.

Table 6. Percentages of uncertainties following treatment

	Usages still unclear		More practice/more time		Relation to verbs		No uncertainties	
	post	follow-up	post	follow-up	post	follow-up	post	follow-up
Experimental (n = 30)	47%	63%	16%	6%	5%	0%	32%	31%
Control (n = 30)	26%	50%	30%	15%	0%	0%	43%	35%

Table 7. What learners like about the treatment. Post-questionnaire

	Simple	Clear	Pictures	General presentation
Experimental group	21%	11%	53%	16%
Control group	12%	47%	N/A	20%

Caution must be taken in interpreting these results since they are based on free responses and many learners chose simply not to answer the questions. Fewer CG learners than control learners explicitly stated that they had

no uncertainties. In fact, although the CG approach was rated as simple more often than the control approach, perhaps because the simple present was reduced to figures instead of numerous specific usages, the reverse was true for clarity. This may be because the control approach presented the usages as discrete items, while in the CG approach, the usages were more flexible and therefore, more difficult to grasp. The difficulties with the CG approach seem to exist at the level of learner perception only, as the experimental group did not perform significantly worse on the post-tests. These answers suggest that perhaps the unfamiliarity of the CG approach intimidated the learners and caused them to perceive themselves as having more difficulties than they actually did.

5. Discussions

The results of this study indicate that the CG approach is not significantly more beneficial than the control approach, although the results also showed that the CG approach was not detrimental either. The learners in the CG group did not differ significantly from the control group in terms of accuracy of performance, certainty levels, and self-ratings of knowledge, nor in their evaluation of the treatment. Both the experimental and control groups' knowledge of the simple present increased by similar amounts following treatment, suggesting that instruction, regardless of type, was the significant factor. The CG approach seemed to show a larger substantial gain and longer durability for the fill-in-the-blank task, although these benefits did not carry over to the grammaticality judgment and error correction task, and the differences between the CG group and the control group were not statistically significant for either task. The CG approach also showed a more immediate effect on the certainty levels of the learners.

The findings of this study run counter to the purported linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical benefits of the CL approach outlined above. The question thus arises as to why CG did not prove itself to be the better treatment in this study, despite its advantages on paper. It is important to note that while CG was not superior to the control approach, it was still effective in that the students' accuracy in using the simple present increased significantly following treatment.

As with any empirical study, there always exists the possibility that the methods used are lacking in some way. This study tried to be as rigorous as possible. Pre-treatment measures were included to ensure the comparability of the groups. Learners were tested both immediately after treatment as well as four weeks later. Qualitative measures in the form of questionnaires were used to clarify aspects that quantitative instruments could not measure.

The following sections will discuss possible limitations of the study and point out the directions for further research.

5.1 *Inappropriate Sampling*

The participants of the experiment were the final year senior high school students. They had been taught the simple present tense long ago, and may have been sick of it, given the pressure of the looming national college entrance examinations. Thus, it was difficult to attract students' attention in a review lesson on the English simple present tense. A better participant group would be the beginner-level adult learners enrolled in a short-term intensive English course, whose cognitive capabilities could handle the CG treatment.

5.2 *Unfamiliarity with the CG Approach*

A possible reason for the absence of higher scores from the experimental group may be the unfamiliarity of the CG approach. Grammar rules are traditionally presented as absolute truths that must be applied without exception, and learners have come to expect black-and-white rules that they are to memorize and regurgitate. The CG approach goes against the traditional presentation of grammar by showing learners that language is motivated by the meanings that one wishes to express. Therefore, it is of no use to follow a set of rules; rather, learners must think about what is being expressed. This may account for why the CG groups perceived more problems than the control group because in the experimental treatment, the usages of the simple present tense were not presented as discrete but rather as flexible.

In addition, the CG approach focused on the process of arriving at an answer and not so much on the answer itself. The goal of the CG approach is not to learn the multiple usages of the tenses but to understand why these usages can all be expressed by the same construction. However, many classrooms still focus on the product rather than on the process, perhaps due in part to time limitations: it is far quicker to tell students to use the simple present for A, B, and C than to help them understand why. Thus, the CG approach is unfamiliar to learners both in its presentation of rules as flexible rather than absolute and in its emphasis on the process of selecting a tense rather than on which tense is 'correct'. The newness of the CG approach may have made

learners more hesitant in their performance and they may have even reverted to the more familiar control approach under the pressure of a test, as indicated by a few test papers where the learners had scribbled down the individual usages to use as a checklist. This discomfort with the CG approach may have negatively affected learners' performance on the tests, thus working against any benefits of CG.

The unfamiliarity of the CG approach was exacerbated by the short duration of the treatment. As one student mentioned in the individual interviews, it was not that he disliked the CG approach, but that it was simply not familiar enough for him to put to use, so he preferred using the traditional discrete list of usages that he had been taught in the previous years.

5.3 Abstract Presentation and Difficult Terminologies in the CG Approach

Students' feedback revealed that the presentation in the CG approach was not easy to follow. The abstract figures were especially challenging. In addition, the teacher used some linguistic terminologies such as 'aspect' in class, which may confuse the learners, for they had never been exposed to these terms before.

If the figures had been modified and linguistic terminologies had been avoided, the performance of the experimental group might have been better.

5.4 Insufficient Instruction Time

One possible limitation of the study is the amount of time spent on the treatment. Both the CG and the control lesson only lasted a total of 45 minutes, which may not have been enough time for the differences in the approach to be made salient. As these were intermediate learners, all of them had previously learned about the simple present at the beginner level, and it is possible that the 45-minute lesson merely served to refresh their memory about what they already knew, without increasing their awareness of the systematicity behind the usages.

It is thus conceivable that if the learners had been given more time to think about the simple present in terms of the CG framework and what they wish to express, they would have come to understand it much more than they would under the control approach. In other words, the effects of the CG approach on accuracy may be a function of time. The reaction of the learners to the CG approach and the importance of having sufficient time in order to overcome its unfamiliarity could not have been predicted without empirical research, thus highlighting the need to collect classroom data before we can have further discussions on the benefits of CG for language teaching.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Research

Classroom data to support the application of a linguistic theory to pedagogy and the communication between linguists and language teachers are called for. In order for the CG approach to be considered feasible by language teachers, sound classroom data is needed to support—or not support—the touted pedagogical benefits that cognitive grammar have attributed to their theory.

Future studies will need to address the issue of the duration of the treatment. It may be a question of short presentations over a long period of time as opposed to intensive sessions over a short period of time so that learners can have time to digest the more abstract ideas. A further option would be to have learners work in groups to reflect on the role of rules in pedagogy so that they can see the limitations of a list of discrete rules.

6. Conclusions

Cognitive Grammar (CG) assumes that meaning plays a key role in determining the form of grammatical constructions: what we wish to communicate motivates how we formulate an utterance. This emphasis on what grammar means promises to help learners gain a greater understanding and insight of how to express themselves in the L2. In recent years, the CG analysis of linguistic constructions has been claimed to be beneficial to second language teaching. In the present research, the author intended to test the effectiveness to the English simple present tense reviewing of taking a CG approach that introduced to EFL learners the systematic relation between and coherent semantic foundation underlying the various usages of the simple present. The author hypothesized that the CG approach would enhance learning. Results showed that the performance of learners in the CG approach improved considerably after the treatment. However, they did not perform significantly better than the comparison approach on the two test tasks, nor in how certain they were of their answers, their self-ratings of knowledge and confidence, or their evaluation of the treatment. The author argued that four reasons might have diminished the benefits of the CG approach: 1) the selection of the samples was inappropriate; 2) the CG approach ran counter to learners' expectations about grammar; 3) the presentation of the CG treatment was too abstract, and linguistic terminologies new to the students were introduced, which made the lesson hard to follow; 4) instructional time was too limited. Therefore more classroom research is needed to substantiate the claimed

pedagogical benefits of the CG approach.

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