



# Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2021, Vol. 26, 39–51



## Past vs Previous in EFL Teaching of L1 Slavic Students

Anatol Szewel

University of Rzeszow, Poland

*Received 14 June 2021*

*Accepted 22 December 2021*

### Abstract

In Germanic and Slavic languages, the Verb is the most extensive grammatical item, which causes most of the troubles for second language learners. It has been noticed that Slavic L1 learners of English make mistakes in using verb forms due to the transfer of their L1 grammatical system (grammar concepts) onto the English language. The goal of the paper is to show how the wording of grammatical explanations in English influences the conceptualisation of grammatical items. The paper refers to one of the most probable sources of such misunderstanding – the way grammatical forms are named and explained in frequently used course books and grammars of English, which leads to a corrupted or limited understanding of the functionality of a grammatical form in L1 Slavic learners. The practical clues presented below might be beneficial for authors of course-books, FL language teachers and teacher trainers in solving the dilemma between the implicit vs explicit approach to teaching grammar, in constructing concept questions and formulating clear explanations in class.

**Keywords:** *Cognitive Grammar, Communicative Approach, Concept vs Exception, L1-L2 Interference, Wording*

### Introduction

The discussion of the erroneous understanding of grammatical explanations by L1 Slavic EFL learners will be made clearer by scrutinising the notion of grammar and grammatical concept. As the starting point, I refer to the claim that grammar is meaningful, as stated by Langacker (2008) in his Cognitive Grammar. Further, the author supports his claim by suggesting that the elements of grammar have meanings in their own right, likewise vocabulary items. It seems obvious from this statement that for the purposes of the didactics of language teaching, we can use the term “grammatical item” as a meaningful unit representing a fragment of a speaker’s cognitive

experience. Grammatical items can be of different size (e.g. the Adjective vs Irregular degrees of comparison of adjectives), or of different levels of complexity (e.g. the Adverb vs the Tense). Additionally, Langacker (2008) highlights the role of grammar in constructing and symbolising the meanings of phrases, clauses and sentences treating it as a crucial part of the conceptual apparatus through which we engage the world. Accordingly, the role of a foreign language teacher presenting a grammatical item to their learners is in showing how the users of a foreign language “engage the world” through certain language structures. A similar understanding of what grammar is can be seen in other works published in the twentieth century. Halliday (1978) offers a systemic-functional view of grammar, with three functions: ideational, textual and interpersonal, claiming that these are the aspects of grammar (the forces) participating in arranging the form we use to combine the words in our message. What is especially valuable for my discussion of the subject here is the claim that grammar conveys ideas that can be explained to language learners or grasped by them intuitively. Leech & Svartvik (2003), developing the communicative approach to understanding grammar, provide a convincing explanation of the hierarchy of meaning of a grammatical item and the formal units of language organisation where this meaning is located. Concept (as a core point in understanding grammar) reveals itself in a word, phrase or clause. The next layer – information, reality and belief –are expressed in a sentence. Further, mood, emotion and attitude are communicated in an utterance, and, finally, meanings in connected discourse are seen in a text and/or context (p.6).

The authors mentioned above agree about the potential of grammar (grammatical items) to express (reflect) certain concepts (meanings, ideas). In my study, the notion of *concept* is understood as a mental representation of the world best described as the language of thought (Fodor, 1979), or, as in the cognitivists’ view, in which meaning derives from embodied human experience where mental processes in semantics and grammar play a critical role (Langacker, 2008, p.28). This interaction between semantics and grammar is crucial in my discussion, as well as in its broader application in the teaching process when a teacher has to prepare their students for the school-leaving exam (Matura), and they are to apply the lexico-grammatical approach during the exam. A clear example of the interaction between vocabulary and grammatical items can be demonstrated by the following example:

1) When we were in the woods we got lost because we did not have a map.

(Past Simple)

2) When we were in the woods we got lost because we had not taken a map.

(Past Perfect)

Here, the meaning of the lexical item (have vs take) dictates the grammatical form (Tense). The opposite direction of interaction is also possible– students are offered exercises where they decide what word goes with a prescribed grammatical item in a sentence. However, let us analyse the notion of *concept*, as it is the focal point of this article.

Apart from a variety of synonyms (concept, idea, meaning, notion, conception, theory, view, image, perception, approach), *concept* is also multidimensional and multifaceted. In education, a common explication of *concept* appears in the question “What does something mean?” in

reference to a vocabulary or grammatical unit. Respectively, the most workable understanding of *concept* seems to have been formulated by Langacker (2008) where he points out the dynamic nature of *meaning* which: “/.../ is not identified with concepts but with conceptualisation, the term being chosen precisely to highlight its dynamic nature” and further on the author clarifies the boundaries of this dynamic nature by saying: “While everything may be negotiable, something has to be learnt and conventionalised as a basis for negotiation” (p.30). This idea seems to reflect the language teaching dilemma, especially in the domain of teaching grammar: what should be learnt by heart and what should be understood? The most evident answer to me is a demarcation between the concept/ meaning/ idea of a grammatical item (to be understood) and the form plus exceptions<sup>1</sup> (to be remembered). Such a dichotomy can be formulated for any item, for example, the concept of the Present Continuous tense is to indicate the processual nature of an activity at or around the moment of speaking (now), while the form is: auxiliary *be* + -ing verb, and the exceptions: activity planned for the near future or irritation.

Concepts, as components of human cognition, are studied primarily as a part of cognitive science, encompassing linguistics, philosophy and psychology, but they also appear as formal tools or models in natural sciences, mathematics and computer sciences. An interesting view is found in publications discussing *concept* through the instruments applied in studies on Artificial Intelligence (Murphy, 2004; Freund, 2008), where one of the tools is the stratification of concepts based on their complexity, as well as studies on the internal structure of concepts leading to the characterisation of all smooth sub-concepts of a given concept. Likewise, in Langacker (2008, p.105) we find a discussion of “multiple levels of conceptual organisation” within a grammatical item. According to Boldyrev (2016), grammatical concepts result from generalised information about the properties and application of grammatical units, as well as about “the way the relations between language units reflect the relations between the realities of the world surrounding us” (p.60, translation mine). Further, the author explains that part of this knowledge is purely linguistic and formal, such as a sequence of tenses in English or the agreement between attribute and noun in Russian. They are called “elementary grammatical concepts”. Others are based on more general (non-linguistic) notions and reflect them. Here Boldyrev includes the grammatical time, gender, number, etc. These are “bi-dimensional grammatical concepts” and those that involve more generalised knowledge are “multidimensional grammatical concepts” (p.61).

The methodological aspect of this approach lies in the possibility to clearly identify the degree of complexity of a grammatical item for the purpose of adjusting its teaching to the level of the learner’s cognitive development. We can specify the hierarchy of complexity inside a grammatical unit, as well as the overall hierarchy between the units. First of all, as I have postulated, we should clearly see what should be understood and what should be remembered when we teach a grammatical item. In the light of the discussion above, we can ascribe the forms and exceptions to the elementary grammatical concepts, which are to be presented explicitly and

---

<sup>1</sup> By *exception* I mean any instance where a grammatical item is used in a way formulated as a rule that contradicts the concept.

demand only memorisation. Some examples of this are: the ways of making comparative and superlative degrees in adjectives and adverbs; articles with certain names and articles in fixed phrases; third person 's' in verbs or the auxiliaries 'do-does' and 'have-has'; regular-irregular verb forms; exceptional use of the Continuous aspect to indicate temporary facts; non-progressive verbs; Present tenses to refer to a future time; unordinary tense use to create hypotheticity, etc. These are the forms resulting from formal conventions in the language and do not engage the world, therefore a language user need not apply any logic or cognitive experience to use these forms correctly.

Higher-level grammatical concepts, those bi-dimensional and multidimensional ones, do engage the world, thus demand a certain level of cognitive maturity in the user. Among them we see such notions as: the degree of generalisation of a noun on the scale *specific in a group - any in a group - near abstract* (the Article); the correlation between the general understanding of time and grammatical time where activities can be located; the idea of *agency* as the determining factor in deciding between the Active and Passive voice; hypotheticity, modality, etc. The higher-level concepts in grammar are of different levels of complexity. Many of them are acquired naturally in the early stages of cognitive development, so they fall into the low-level complexity group within the bi- and multidimensional concepts. My experience in raising English-Polish-Ukrainian multilingual children suggests that by the age of four they have mastered such notions as *objects have names* (nomination, the Noun); *objects possess qualities* (the Adjective); *objects can be referred to without naming them* (the Pronoun); *objects can be counted* (Cardinal Numeral) or *appear in order* (Ordinal Numeral); *non-hypothetic condition* (First Conditional); *activity appears in a certain way* (the Adverb); *activity is in progress at the moment of speaking* (the Present Continuous tense); *any of these* (Indefinite Article); *specific one of these* (Definite Article); *physical or mental ability* (modal verb Can), etc. Similar observations have been made by Schaeffer and Matthewson (2005) who discuss the "immature pragmatic system"; by Lust (2012), who discusses the biological programming for language acquisition and development; by Ionin et al. (2009), who deal with the issue of access to semantic universals in children, and others. Later, the richness of cognitive experience, coupled with the baggage of semantic experience and less complex bi-dimensional concepts, help to master and apply the multidimensional concepts, such as: *hypothetical situations in the present and past time* (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Conditionals, mixed Conditionals); *countability of the Noun*; *transitivity of the Verb*; *agency of the Subject* (the Passive voice constructions), *Perfect vs Non-Perfect verb forms*; *factuality of activity* (the Simple Aspect), etc. My teaching experience supports the necessity of recognising the "here and now" principle in teaching young learners, suggesting the idea that we can teach any grammatical item to any learner, only if this item refers to a situation that is understandable for this learner, in other words, if the grammatical item engages with the world that is familiar to the learner.

In a situation where a language is learnt/taught as foreign, we face the clash of different language systems affecting the success in achieving a high level of linguistic competence. The interference of two languages is not always beneficial, especially in adult learners when the brain

lateralisation is coupled with fossilisation (Selinker, 2009). Han (2004, p.29) explains this phenomenon by external and internal factors which unfold in the following way:

*External:* Environmental: absence of corrective feedback, lack of (written) input, lack of instruction, lack of communicative relevance, language complexity, etc.

*Internal:* Cognitive: L1 influence, lack of access to UG (*Universal Grammar*), lack of attention, lack of verbal sensitivity to input, lack of verbal analytical skills, failure to detect errors, etc.

*Neurobiological:* changes in the neural structure of the brain, decrease in cerebral plasticity for implicit acquisition, age, etc.

*Socio-affective:* satisfaction of communicative needs, lack of acculturation, socio-psychological barrier.

I find the cognitive component here, being a fossilisation factor, particularly useful for the discussion of grammatical concepts. The L1 may be rightly considered the primary element. In this view, it is reasonable to highlight that the correlations between L1 and L2 can manifest three possibilities.

1) The two languages show a similarity of grammatical concepts and forms referring to the same situation.

For instance, the concept *gradeability of quality* present in English and in Slavic languages is expressed in the comparative and superlative degrees of comparison of adjectives through the same convention (form) in both language systems:

**Table 1**

*Conventions for the Degrees of Comparison of Adjectives*

English	Polish	Russian
Interesting	Interesujący	Интересный
More Interesting	Bardziej interesujący	Более интересный / Интереснее
The Most Interesting	Najbardziej interesujący	Самый интересный

2) Both languages have the same grammatical concept, but forms of expressing them are different.

Let me supply a few examples. In English and in Slavic languages, we can present activities in progress (concept *processual activity*), but in Slavic languages we do not have a Continuous verb form (be + -ing verb), though on the experiential level we discriminate activities as being factual or processual. Instead, we apply other indicators (markers) of processuality (such as ‘in the process of’, etc.):

**Table 2**

*Differences among the Languages in Expressing the Same Concept*

English	Polish	Russian
When/While <u>we were eating</u> ...	<u>Podczas/ W trakcie</u> jedzenia... OR <u>Kiedy</u> jedliśmy...	<u>Во время/В процессе</u> еды... OR <u>Когда</u> мы ели...

In this case the mere verb form 'were eating' signals that the activity was in progress, while 'jedliśmy' or 'ели' do not.

To take another example: in both language systems we have the concept *activity performed for the subject*. In English, we discriminate this concept from other Passive voice situations through the Causative form 'have', while in Slavic languages, we do not differentiate this concept (*activity performed for the subject*) even from the Active voice situations. Due to this, we do not decipher the proper agency from the Slavic verb form. When we go to the hairdresser's to get a haircut, it is unacceptable in English to say "I've cut my hair", while in Polish we use the elliptical Zero-subject construction "Ściąłem włosy" – the verb form suggesting "I've done it", and in Russian – "Я подстригся" – "I've done it myself". In the latter two cases we apply the Active voice forms and we can interpret who the agent is only through the context *going to the hairdresser's*.

There are more examples of this kind, such as the Third Conditional, Perfect verb forms, Question word order, Modal verbs, Reciprocal pronouns, etc., where certain grammatical units are missing in Slavic languages.

3) A grammatical concept is missing in one of the language systems and so is the form.

This is the case of the English Article. Slavic languages are generally known as no-article languages (Kaushanskaya, 2008, p.32). However, it would be wrong to say that users of Polish or Russian do not operate the concept *degree of generalisation of the Noun*. They do, but they do not express it through the Article. Importantly, the modern conventions in these languages do not demand determination of every noun in a sentence. Hence, one of the most fossilised mistakes that Slavic L1 speakers make is 'naked' nouns in a sentence. My observations suggest that sentences with undetermined nouns are more common in English L2 learners who started learning English in adolescence or later due to the stronger L1 negative interference.

At the other end of this spectrum we see concepts and forms appearing in some Slavic languages but missing in English. The most spectacular case – fatalistic constructions – is strongly culture related. English does not allow a sentence like "Uderzyło go prądem" (Pl), "Его ударило током" (Ru), since the conceptualisation of agency in English does not include the possibility of some mysterious force performing an activity. This situation is discussed by Janda (2018), who states that in Russian things happen to people, whereas in Czech, like in English, many of the same experiences are things done by people. The author finds a possible cultural correlate in this instance claiming that no corresponding 'Czech fatalism' is observed, as such an attitude is not recognised in the Czech culture. In a similar way we can find culture-related justification of the presence or absence of certain grammar structures comparing the systems of modal verbs.

Another interesting issue to consider is "How theory informs application and how application informs theory" (Janda, 2010). This methodologically-oriented article would be incomplete without mentioning the way we 'deliver' grammatical concepts to our students. The common understanding of teaching grammar is associated with 'the Rules'. Langacker (2008) writes: "By rule I simply mean the characterisation of some pattern. In Cognitive Grammar, rules take the

form of schemas: they are abstract templates obtained by reinforcing the commonality inherent in a set of instances” (p.23). Beyond doubt, we can formulate in words any commonality inherent in certain instances, but will this Rule always work and what else participates in teaching grammar? Let us keep in mind that beginner level learners and children have limited ability to comprehend what they hear or read. So, let me formulate a list of the factors that, I believe, participate in the overall success of developing the learner’s grammatical competence.

1) The wording and syntax of the rule.

Reading the Foreword to a majority of commonly used grammar books I’ve noticed that the revised editions mention only the amount of material that has been added or reduced, but hardly ever the way this material is presented. As one of the positive examples, we read in Gethin’s *Grammar in Context* (1990): “Elsewhere in the book I have occasionally altered the wording of the explanations where I have thought these could be made clearer...” (p.4). However, the authors of grammars and grammar files in coursebooks quite often do not consider the wording. The most common drawbacks of such rules are the multitude of words and/or use of ‘terminological tautology’ known in logic as ‘circular reasoning’. Consider the following examples:

a) “We can use the Future Perfect to say that something will have been done, completed or achieved by a certain time in the future” (Swan, 2017, p.217).

b) “The English future perfect tense can be understood as a combination of a future time and the present perfect tense: it shows an action or event that started in the past, is starting or will start in the future and that will also be completed at some future time” (Sperling.[http://www.eslcafe.com/grammar/future\\_perfect\\_tense01.htm](http://www.eslcafe.com/grammar/future_perfect_tense01.htm); available 26.01.2018).

c) “The future perfect tense is used to describe an action that will have been completed at a certain point of time in the future. Consider this situation. You are working on a project and you will finish it in two months. Then, at the end of two months, you will have completed that project” (<https://www.englishgrammar.org/future-perfect-tense/> available 26.01.2018).

2) The rule is incomplete and/or examples are wrong.

There are many cases when the formulation of the rule looks correct, but it is missing so much that it does not give a learner the right idea of the grammatical item. Let me illustrate this with the following examples:

a) “Zero Conditional – to express real situations; First Conditional – to express real situations; Second conditional – to express unreal situations; Third Conditional – to express unreal situations” (Capel & Sharp, 2013, p.179).

Here, the authors are missing an essential element – the time reference – forgetting the fact that English Conditionals represent a correlation between the hypotheticality and time of a situation. Further, an example of Mixed Conditionals is a combination of an incomplete form with a faulty explanation. The authors write: “Mixed Conditionals. If + past tense | might/could/should/would – for situations in the present which affect the past. *If I weren’t so untidy, I wouldn’t have lost your keys*” (p.179). Firstly, there is no mention of the verb form in the main clause (perfect infinitive), which is crucial for the construction; secondly, in this case it

is not the situation in the present that affects the past, but the one of a generalised type. Though the example itself is fine we cannot expect that learners will infer all the information by themselves.

b) “To express regret about the past, *should* or *ought to* is combined with a perfect tense form. *We should never have bought Alex that drum kit! I’m sorry, I ought to have remembered that you can’t eat strawberries*” (Capel & Sharp, 2013, p.178).

Example (b) shows that the authors forgot to mention the fact that we use Modal Verbs with Infinitives, not with Tenses, and that the abbreviated comment (and examples with the first-person subject only) does not present a more common form of this grammatical unit (should/ought to + Perfect infinitive) to indicate *reproach*. In this case I see two dangers of theory misinforming application: 1) the quoted manual is used as a profiling practical English course book in MA teacher training; 2) less inquisitive students will not spot the mistakes and their grammatical competence will remain limited. As a result, these drawbacks will be replicated in their pupils.

3) Teachers wrongly implant or present the concept of a grammatical item.

In this instance I should refer back to the discussion above on the equilibrium between the implicit and explicit approaches to teaching grammar. A successful teacher facing this problem should bear in mind the following facts: 1) every grammatical item consists of the concept (to be understood) and the form + exceptions (to be memorised); 2) grammatical items display various levels of conceptual complexity; 3) L1 and L2 can have different arrangements of the correspondence between their grammatical concepts and forms; 4) understanding of a grammatical concept by a learner is rooted in their cognitive experience, thus is prone to placing a grammatical item into a proper situation familiar to the learner; 5) while presenting grammatical concepts teachers can choose different paths (schemas) of engaging the world through grammatical items.

Quite commonly, the presentation of complex grammatical concepts is facilitated through linking them to certain markers, such as *now*, *at the moment* in Present continuous; *always*, *never* in Present Simple; *just*, *yet* in Present Perfect; hence, 90% of upper-intermediate English L2 users indicate these formal markers in answering the question: “When do we use these grammatical items?” (Literally, the answer is: “We use the Present Continuous when there is ‘now’ in a sentence). A similar opinion is expressed in Kermer (2020) discussing a way the Present Perfect tense is presented with a particular emphasis to time adverbials (*since*, *for*, *just*) to underpin definite time frames, which may lead to a situation confusing the learners and result in erroneous conceptualization of the temporal relations of speech, event and reference time. The same problem has been reported by Comajoan-Colomé, et. al. (2021). Such a ‘mechanical’ understanding of grammar drastically reduces the learner’s ability to improvise with grammatical items, which I understand as a fluent “manipulation of conventionally-defined ways of saying things” (Heller, 1982, p.4) on the level of language use.

The most evident example of how a concept is wrongly implanted in the learner’s brain is the way we teach the Article. Studies on article acquisition in children (Zdorenko & Paradise, 2008;

Ionin et al., 2009) have found that children from +article language backgrounds recognised the definiteness/indefiniteness of situations much better than those from –article languages. Without a doubt, it is due to the already existing patterns of conceptualisation in which every noun is “weighed” on the scale of generalisation in the +article language users. So, how do we teach the Indefinite Article *a*? This item is introduced among the first ones at the stage when children can comprehend the rules only through illustration/demonstration, where showing a single object and saying “a pencil” or showing a picture labelled “a cat” does not induce in young learners the concept “*one of many in a group of similar objects*”. If we make the same demonstration to adults, they might intuitively grasp the idea that you mean “any of those”, but later they are confronted with explanations that do not facilitate their conceptualisation, such as: “Singular, concrete nouns require an article, except for some idioms. The definite article is precise and refers to something, while the indefinite article is vague and more general, or is used when something is mentioned for the first time” (Capel & Sharp, 2013, p.185). Comparing the performance of L1 English and L1 Slavic college students in managing English articles I have observed the following regularity: Slavic students are better at tests which cover the exceptional cases of using English articles, and they score lower results if the test is dominated by cases requiring a decision on the degree of generalisation.

### **Application of the Theory**

I have chosen *Practical English Usage* by Michael Swan (2002) which is a popular representative source of grammatical reference for wide circles of English learners. The approaches and terminology used in this book are widely repeated elsewhere. Further, I will focus on what is problematic for L1 Slavic students in understanding How English Works.

These two language systems (Germanic and Slavic) show many instances where the grammatical forms of verbs fail to match, but most importantly, they comprise different concepts which the grammatical units express (such as: processuality-factuality of activities, active-passive reference, hypotheticity, modality, time location, etc). I would like to focus now on the discussion of the confusion caused by the way grammarians indicate the TIME in which English verbs can be placed.

The claim is: *The notion of PAST functioning in English grammars is often misleading for Slavic L1 learners.*

The core problem here is in the Perfect forms (Tenses and Infinitive) which are referred to as “representing activities in the past”. A few examples from M.Swan’s book:

Page 419. If we say that something *has happened* we are thinking about the past and present at the same time.

Page 427. The basic meanings of the simple past perfect are “earlier past” and “completed in the past”.

Page 262. Perfect infinitive can have the same kind of meaning as perfect or past tenses.

Page 601. Wish. Past perfect tenses are used for wishes about the past.

What is so confusing about this PAST? The answer is to be found in the fact that in Slavic languages the grammatical item ‘Past tense’ is monolithic – one past (located in the time space previous to NOW), while in English we discriminate different past time areas – many pasts in the past. Accordingly, Slavic L1 learners are supposed to decide in which past an English activity is said to have taken place.

This choice could be made much easier by changing the terminology and providing separate names of time locations for the non-perfect and perfect tenses and infinitives, such as:

Non-perfect forms locate activities inside a present, past, future moment, i.e. they present activities as being parallel to a moment in time, while Perfect forms locate activities before a present, past, future moment, suggesting the previousness of an activity to one of these moments in time. My teaching experience suggests the necessity of introducing the concept of relativity in using the English Perfect tenses and Perfect infinitive (i.e. the positioning of an activity in relation to the moment of speaking or another activity expressed by a tense).

Respectively, the distribution of English finite and non-finite forms in time is as follows:

**Table 3**

*Non-Perfect vs Perfect Time Locations for the English Finite and Non-finite Forms*

<b>Time</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Example</b>
Inside the Present	Present, Past,	She understands/understood/will understand this.
Past Future moment in time (“parallelism” of activities)	Future tenses and Non-perfect Infinitive	She called me when she arrived in the city. She seems/seemed/will seem to understand this. She called me arriving in the city.
Before present, Before past, Before future moment in time (previousness of activity)	Present Perfect, Past Perfect, Future Perfect tenses, Perfect infinitive.	She has/had/will have understood this. She called me when she had arrived in the city. She seems/seemed/will seem to have understood this. She called me having arrived in the city.

Now, looking at the English past time from this perspective we see the three grammatical past time locations: before present, closed past, before past. Respectively we can advise Slavic L1 learners to locate an activity from their native language monolithic past in one of these English pasts.

For instance, the Polish ‘zrobiłem’ can be placed in three time locations in English through applying the following reasoning:

1. Zrobiłem to i jest gotowe (I did it and it is ready) – before present (open past) – the Present Perfect
2. Zrobiłem to wtedy (I did it then) – past (closed past) – the Past Simple
3. Zrobiłem to zanim wtedy (I did it before then) – before past – the Past Perfect

The same reasoning can be applied by L1 Russian language users, as the three situations where a Russian past tense verb can be located are identical.

The perfective-imperfective forms in Slavic languages are subject to another common fallacy. They are erroneously associated with the Perfect and Non-perfect tenses. My observations suggest that Slavic learners of English in this case are misled by the terminology and the wording of the explanations. In Polish “for my dokonane-niedokonane” are explained through the same words as the Perfect tenses – the key words are “już” (already), “dopiero” (just), “ukończonaczynność” (completed activity). In Russian the wording is similar. I believe we should highlight that these Slavic forms are closer to the Simple and Continuous aspect than to Perfect - Non-perfect tenses.

Another grammatical pitfall in this area – constructions with the hypothetical ‘wish’ are classically explained as: we use past tenses to speak/regret about present and past perfect tenses to speak/regret about the past. With this explanation in mind, 80% of students go wrong in the task: *Rewrite the sentence “We wish we knew this” into the past tense*. Although they apply the right reasoning concerning the shift of the regret (expressed in the ‘wish’– Predicate) into the past form, their answers were: “We wished we had known\* that”. Their justification was based on associating the Perfect form with the past time.

By replacing the terms ‘present’ and ‘past’ with *activity at the same time as the ‘wish’* and *activity before the moment of the ‘wish’* we would give our students an understanding of how it works instead of making them remember all the combinations between the time of the ‘wish’ and the other activity.

A more complex situation, where both tense forms and infinitives can appear, is the construction ‘it’s time’. We can facilitate students’ comprehension of this by showing that the Predicate ‘be’ here is the point of reference and the form of the verb depends on where the activity is in reference to this point. The following table illustrates the options.

**Table 4**  
*Options for Using the ‘it’s time’ Construction*

Predicate ‘be’ used in a Tense – the point of reference	<b>Same time</b> with the Predicate ( <i>be</i> )	<b>Before the time</b> of the Predicate( <i>be</i> )
It’s time	to do sth.	to have done sth.
It’s time + Object	did sth.	had done sth.
It’s time for + Object	to do sth.	to have done sth.

The same reasoning is helpful in transformations of Infinitive constructions. When L1 Slavic students are asked to shift the sentence “She seems to understand this” into the past tense, the majority of them write: “She seemed to have understood that”, again by associating the perfect infinitive with the past time. Applying the suggested conceptualisation (parallelism or previousness of activity relative to the point of reference), we can facilitate the understanding of the Nominative-with-the-Infinitive construction (S+V+ Infinitive) where the learner has to choose between a Perfect and Non-Perfect Infinitive. In my opinion, a very clear explanation of the choice of the Infinitive here is given by Gethin (1990) discussing the transformation Active-Passive: *People thought at first (that) the President had been murdered* → *The President was at*

*first thought to have been murdered*. The author writes: “/.../ the perfect infinitive (to have been murdered) is used only when we wish to refer to time before that of the introductory verb (thought). This time difference shows in the active as a tense difference” (p.161).

This approach is also productive in dealing with cases when the time reference of Modal Verbs is determined by the choice of the infinitive, not by a change of the verb form.

Some very reasonable explanations pertaining to the discussion of the ‘past vs previous’ can be found in a book published in 1967 by Hill, stating that “the difference between the ‘have done’ tense and the ‘did’ tense is one of mode – the way you look at the action” (p.26). “As for the difference between the ‘did’ tense and the ‘had done’ tense, this is one of relative time”. (p.27) This idea of relative time is another valuable tool for teachers, as it provides the most efficient way of explaining or justifying the use of the perfect forms in various constructions – no matter what the structure is, the principle of parallelism for the non-perfect forms and previousness for the perfect forms remains.

Further studies into the subject could investigate the ways of expressing past time in other language systems in order to give the authors of English grammar and course books the tools to tailor their content for specific groups of receivers. In a broader perspective, more methodological studies can be carried out in the field of the communicative approach to language teaching, in which an instruction should link a meaningful context to a grammatical form in English, considering the culture-specific understanding of this context in L1.

## **Conclusions**

It is important to teach grammar by striking a clear division between its two integral components – that which we ‘remember’ (constructions and exceptions) and ‘understand’ (concepts). Relevant ways of presenting concepts to our students facilitate the conceptualisation of the world through grammatical items conventionalised in English, thus enabling them to develop the ability to be creative users of grammar.

The approach advocated in this article can also benefit teachers by prompting more effective ways of formulating concept questions during the student’s self-correction of grammar mistakes. In terms of L1 Slavic learners, they should point out that one past tense form of the Verb can refer to three time locations in English.

Comparing the English language conventions to the Slavic ones in terms of Verb forms, the teacher should clearly indicate the options not available in the Slavic languages – the perfect forms and the Continuous aspect – by projecting their concepts onto meaningful contexts.

The choice between inductive and deductive ways of teaching grammatical items depends on the conceptual “size” of the item and the stage of the cognitive development of the learner. Grammar items differ from one-another in their conceptual load, and various levels of conceptual complexity can be found within one item.

Users of grammar courses should understand that even the most reputable publishers can offer explanations which, though partly correct, fail to explain an item properly, or still worse, by using erroneous wording totally confuse the learner.

## References

- Boldyrev, N. N. (2016). *Когнитивная семантика: курс лекций по английской филологии*. Direct-Media.
- Capel, A., & Sharp, W. (2013). *Cambridge English Objective Proficiency. Student's book*. Cambridge University Press.
- Comajoan-Colomé, Llorenç; Llop Naya, Ares, (2021). *An SLA-Informed and Cognitive Linguistic Approach to the Teaching of L2 Catalan Tense-Aspect*. *Círculo de Lingüística Aplicada a la Comunicació*; Vol 87 (2021): Monograph: Tense, Aspect and Modality in L2. *Recent Applied Studies*; 95-120
- Fodor, J. A. (1979). *The Language of Thought*. Harvard University Press.
- Freund, M. (2008). On the notion of concept. *Artificial Intelligence*, 172(4-5), 570-590. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.artint.2007.09.003>
- Gethin, H. (1990). *Grammar in Context: Proficiency Level English*. Collins ELT.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Edward Arnold.
- Han, Z. H. (2004). *Fossilisation in Adult Second Language Acquisition*. *Multilingual Matters*. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853596889>
- Heller, M. (1982). *Language, Ethnicity and Politics in Quebec*. (Unpublished PhD dissertation). University of California.
- Hill, L. A. (1967). *Selected Articles on the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Ionin, T., Zubizarreta, M. L., & Philippov, V. (2009). Acquisition of article semantics by child and adult L2-English learners. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12/3, 337-361. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728909990149>
- Janda, L. (2010). How theory informs teaching and how teaching informs theory. In E. Tabakowska, M. Choinski & L. Wiraszka (Ed.), *Cognitive Linguistics in Action: From Theory to Application and Back* (pp. 103-124). Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110226096.1.103>
- Janda, L. A. (2018). From cognitive linguistics to cultural linguistics: How Cognitive Categories Reflect Culture. *Ten Lectures on Cognitive Linguistics as an Empirical Science*. 1-31. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004363519\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004363519_002)
- Kaushanskaya, V. L. (2008). *A Grammar of the English Language*. АйрисПресс
- Kermer, F. (2020) A cognitive grammar perspective on temporal conceptualization in SLA. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* vol. 55, 2020, 223-246. <https://hdl.handle.net/10593/26111>
- Langacker, R. (2008). *Cognitive Grammar. A Basic Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (2003). *A Communicative Grammar of English*. Routledge
- Lust, B. C. (2012). *Child Language: Acquisition and Growth*. Cambridge University Press <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803413>
- Murphy, G. (2004). *The Big Book of Concepts*. MIT Press.
- Selinker, L. (2009). Interlanguage. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1972.10.1-4.209>
- Schaeffer, J., & Matthewson, L. (2005). Grammar and pragmatics in the acquisition of Article systems. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 23(1), 53-101. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11049-004-5540-1>
- Swan, M. (2017). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zdorenko, T., & Paradis, J. (2008). The acquisition of articles in child second language English: fluctuation, transfer or both? *Second Language Research*, 24/2, 227-250, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658307086302>

## Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

## Funding

Not applicable.

## Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

## **Rights and Permissions**

### **Open Access**

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. You may view a copy of Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.