Teaching English word order to ESL Spanish students: A functional perspective

Isabel Alonso Belmonte
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Abstract

This paper's main goal is to approach the problem of teaching English word order to Spanish native speakers from a functional point of view. It is a well known belief that English is a fairl y rigid SVO word order language whereas Spanish is a more flexible tongue which orders claus e constituents pragmatically. As ESL teachers, we are all aware of the problems that thi s difference causes to the ESL Spanish learner not only in early stages of learning but beyond . In this study we will provide an account for the m ost common problems regarding word order found in a sample of ESL student compositions written by Spanish native speakers at th e University Autónoma of Madrid and later we will sugg est some didactic lines of action which could be useful to familiarize students with English word order and the pragmatic organizatio n of English sentences.

Resumen

Nuestra intención en este artículo es estudiar el orden de los constituyentes en la oració n declarativa en inglés desde un punto de vista funcional. Es bien sabido que el inglés tiene u n orden de palabras bastante rígido gobernado por la sintaxis, mientras que el español es un a lengua mucho más flexible, que dispone del orden de los elementos en la frase con fine s pragmáticos. Nuestro objetivo es dar cuenta de cuáles son los problemas más comunes que la rigidez del orden de los constituyentes en la cláusula en inglés causa a los alumnos hispano - hablantes. Para ello analizaremos una muestra de redacciones escritas por estudiantes de l a Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Después realizaremos algunas sugerencias didácticas qu e pueden resultar útiles para familiarizar a los estudiantes con el orden de constituyentes en l a claúsula en inglés.

Introduction

In this paper we will attempt to approach the problem of teaching English word order to Spanish native students from a functional point of view. As we all know, English and Spanish belong to the same family of languages SVO (Tomlin, 1986). However, whereas English maintains a fairly rigid SVO word order mainly used to signal grammatical roles: subject, verb, etc., Spanish is a more flexible language which orders clause constituents pragmatically in order to distinguish roughly what is «known» (the old information) from what is «not known» (the new information) in a sentence.

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Although English does not arrange elements within sentences according to pragmatics, the language is not insensitive to pragmatic influence; as we will see later on, the choice of one sentence pattern over another allows the speaker/writer to create a sentence that reflects the basic distribution of pragmatic elements in a grammaticalised manner (Bardovi-Harlig, 1980)[1].

At first sight English word order does not seem to be a difficult obstacle to overcome for Spanish speakers. However, as ESL teachers we are all aware of the problems that this difference causes to some Spanish learners who still produce sentences like *is very complicated this problem* instead of *this problem is very complicated* not only in early stages of learning but beyond. Some other times ESL students produce sentences which, although grammatically correct, are perceived by native speakers as unusual or deviant from the norm because learners ignore the pragmatic force of certain constituent arrangements over others in English. We refer to sentences like «Peter I can't stand» which is the direct translation of «A Pedro no lo aguanto»: the two sentences are cognitively synonymous but they do not have the same pragmatic force, therefore, we cannot teach them as equal.

Faced with this reality, we have turned to ESL text books to check whether English word order is worked on in the L2 classroom or not. Most of the teaching materials available at present only deal with the appropriate placing of frequency adverbs and adverbial phrases within the sentence, adjective order, DO and IO placement, and in more advanced stages of learning, with adverbs causing SV inversion. Obviously, most English methods aim at a wider audience than Spanish speakers, and therefore, the particular pragmatic differences between English and Spanish word order are not specifically studied[2]. Thus we believe this study can be of some help to ESL teachers. In this paper we will try to provide an answer to the following questions:

1. Which are the most common problems concerning word order in ESL Spanish student compositions? In order to address this issue, we carried out a qualitative analysis of a sample of ESL student compositions written by Spanish native speakers from a discourse-pragmatic point of view. Later we divided the results obtained into three groups of different interlingual errors according to the underlying problem.

2. What can be done to improve our student awareness of English word order? To answer this, we will suggest to ESL teachers some didactic lines of action and activities concerning English word order and the pragmatic force of certain arrangements over others.

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[1] This article is based on the panel with the same title presented by the author in the *XI Encuentro de Profesores de Lenguas* at the University of Alcalá, on the 23rd June 1998.

[2] To our knowledge, Merino & Spencer (1994) is the only book on English word order with exercises for students aimed at the Spanish speaking audience.

2. Corpus

To give an answer to the above-mentioned questions, we analyzed 50 student compositions written by native speakers of Spanish studying English in «Santa María» College at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. The sample was compiled from October 1997 to June 1998 and was selected at random. The subjects manifest an intermediate level of English, that is, they have basic control of the writing system, they show good control of elementary vocabulary and some control of basic syntactic patterns but major errors still occur when expressing more complex thoughts. In sum, their writing, though faulty, is comprehensible.

25 of the compositions analyzed are text commentaries on a number of different novels and theater plays the students had to read for the subject «Comentario de Textos II». Most of these exercises are narrative and expository texts of approximately two pages length. The other set of student compositions were written for the subject «Lengua Inglesa II». All of them are argumentative texts written in answer to prompts like the following: *Is higher education a right or a privilege? Are you for or against testing on animals?* etc.

At this stage, we would like to point out that we are well aware of the limitations of the corpus size. However, as a preliminary study it has enabled us to uncover the most common sources of problems as regards word order in L2 writing.

3. Data analysis

After analyzing the data, we divided the results into three groups of errors according to the underlying problem. The first group of errors appears in *existential-presentative clauses,* which are used to introduce thematically-important new referents into discourse (Givón 1993, II:206). As we all know, in English they are introduced by unstressed *there* followed by the verb *to be* and a noun group which works as the notional Subject: *There is a man fishing in the lake*. In formal English or literary writing, a few other verbs like *seem, appear,* and less commonly *exist, remain, arise, rise, emerge, follow, come,* etc. can be used after *there* in a similar way to *be: There appears to be a vast amount of confusion on this point; There comes a time when y ou have to make a choice*. In Spanish, existential sentences are introduced by the verb *haber* in third person singular followed by the notional Subject: *Hay un hombre pescando en el lago;* or by some other existential verbs –empezar, continuar, llegar, ocurrir, etc.– which cause a VS inverted order: *comienza el verano* (Hatcher, 1965a and b). At first sight, existential clauses should be easy to internalize for the ESL Spanish student since there does not seem to be many differences between these two structures; the notional subject represents new information and thus is postponed in both languages (Prince 1981). However, we have detected problems not only in early stages of learning but beyond. As regards word order, Spanish students tend to produce sentences like:

(1) Centuries before, exactly between the years 1000 and 1300 AD, were created the Universities of Salem (Italy) and Mompellier (France) for principally one main

reason: centralize all the knowledge. In those places could work all kind of people. But _came the Church_ and monopolized all this science because of its powerful tirany.

Example (1) shows an interlingual error produced by a Spanish-native student who signals the new information presented in the clause in English by using a common Spanish device: SV inversion. Besides, the student forgets to add *There* since in Spanish there is no need to include any presentative device at the beginning of certain existential clauses: *llegó la iglesia.* Example (1) illustrates how the students' mother language, in this case, Spanish, still exerts a strong influence on English word order at an intermediate level.

Another group of problems concerning word order is related to *adverbial placement,* specially to the location of place and time adverbials within the clause. In Spanish, the fronting of these adverbials is a very common option on the part of the speaker causing SV inversion: *Ayer murió Ramón; En ese banco trabaja Pepe .* In English, on the other hand, adverbials are fronted to give emphasis to the message, being thus marked and they usually do not cause SV inversion: *Yesterday Ramón died; In that bank Pepe works.* Due to this difference, the ESL Spanish student again shows a tendency to generalize the rule which applies in his/her native language:

(2) – Centuries before, exactly between the years 1000 and 1300 A D, were created the Universities of Salern (Italy) and Mompellier (France) for principally one main reason: centralize all the knowledge. In those places could work all kind of people (...)

– *I'm writing you because this summer was stolen muy baggage with all of my money and passport.(...)*

– If I can think that university education is a priviledge is because years ago to the university only could acced people with enought money to pay an university....

Finally, the third group of interlingual errors concerning word order is related to the pragmatic device of *topicalization.* By *topicality* we mean an announcement of what is to be talked about by fronting it and following it with a complete clause. This is a well known cognitive constraint used to achieve communicative effectiveness which, among other advantages, ensures that the speaker and the hearer have the same topic in mind. Spanish usually topicalize by using a OVS inverted order: *La tarta la hizo mi madre.* However, English can choose among several possibilities like thematization of a verbal object, passivization, stress-focus, etc.: *The cake, my mother made it; The cake was made by my mother, MY MOTHER made the cake;* etc. The marked effect of any of these devices in English is outstanding, whereas in Spanish the corresponding structures would not be at all unusual. In other words, by using examples like:

(3) This fragment, we can divide in two parts (...)

the Spanish student gives an unintended effect of markedness which the Spanish *Este fragmento podemos dividirlo en dos partes* does not have.

3. Didactic activities in ESL text books.

Some recent grammar books and language course books have begun to incorporate work on information structure and to add emphasis, which are on the basis of the three groups of errors studied in the previous section. For example, Willis's *Students' grammar* (1991), published in the Cobuild Series, and the ESL text book *New Headway -Upper Intermediate* (OUP 1998) present some emphatic word arrangements in English in units entitled «Changing the focus of a sentence» and «Adding emphasis» respectively and provide exercises in manipulating word order of sentences to allow for different Given a New Information. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the activities proposed in these text books are mainly traditional transformation and fil-in-the-blank exercises which do not encourage communicative practice and do not deal with the particular pragmatic differences between English and Spanish word order.

To work on with specific word order differences between English and Spanish, we suggest information gap activities to practice existential sentences and adverbial placement. Picture dictation, finding differences between two pictures and giving routes from maps are well-known examples of such activities. To habituate students with English pragmatic word order, Bardovi-Harlig (1980) suggested and developed a very interesting activity based on a domino game. The teacher chooses an appropriate text to the linguistic competence of his/her students and converts it into a domino. He/she prepares a set of traditional dominoes, each one with two halves. On each half is one sentence, both with the same information but having different pragmatic organization: *the big red car hit John/John was hit by the big red car.* The students will have to construct the text playing domino, that is, choosing a pragmatically appropriate sentence from a pair of synonymous ones.

4. Conclusion

This paper wants to reinforce the idea of the usefulness of functional discourse analysis to understand phenomena which take place in language learning and teaching. We believe functional studies can be a source for L2 teachers to understand more about their student's developmental needs and to find inspiration to transmute theoretical findings into practical applications or activities for the L2 classroom.

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Isabel Alonso Belmonte teaches English and Didactics at the Departamento de Filologí a Inglesa, E.U. «Santa María», Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Cantoblanco, 28049 Madrid. E-Mail: isabel.alonso@uam.es.