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TEACHING ESL STUDENTS ADVERB POSITION TO DEVELOP RHETORICAL EMPHASIS

JAMES RUTLEDGE AND ZACHARY FITTON

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the importance of teaching ESL students adverb placement to increase rhetorical awareness. Instructors are encouraged to consider designing grammar lessons at early stages in ESL composition for adverbs that focus not only on prescriptive accuracy but also on those that create rhetorical emphasis. As previous researchers have indicated, placing adverbs in unique positions can add emphasis to particular words or phrases such as using an interrupting adverbial modifier or adverbial fronting. This paper provides a review of literature that promotes teaching adverb placement as rhetorical emphasis, which is significant in ESL composition because it can help ESL writers gain native competency, and foster in them rhetorical awareness.

1.0 Introduction

The position of adverbs can be challenging for Second Language (L2) learners because adverbs can fall into various positions of a sentence, depending on the type of adverb. After L2 learners have a fundamental grasp of where adverbs traditionally fall within a sentence, showing them how adverbs can add clarity and create style would be the next logical step. We will first look at some traditional positions of adverbs and then consider placing adverbs in unique positions to add emphasis or decrease intensity. ESL/EFL instructors are encouraged to consider adverb placement as a significant component that adds emphasis and rhetorical value to composition. It should also be noted that focused instruction on adverb placement enables ESL students to gain social capital as their rhetorical understanding increases. While traditional adverb placement is always encouraged for clarity, an ESL student's rhetorical development relies heavily on understanding adverbial emphasis and adverbial position. As a result, ESL instructors can improve their students' rhetorical understanding by teaching not only adverbial placement rules that follow prescriptive grammar, but also by instructing ESL students to understand adverbs as rhetorical modifiers.

Learning adverbs is already difficult enough for L2 learners, but ESL instructors should still develop a clear understanding of adverb position for emphasis when they teach adverb placement. To simply define adverbial emphasis, Pérez-Paredes and Díez-Bedmar (2012) describe emphasis as a receptive intensification: “[i]ntensification is a kind of linguistic grading that adds expressive richness to one's message....the desire to ‘exploit hyperbole’; it is ‘a vehicle for impressing, praising, persuading, insulting, and generally influencing the listener's reception of the message’” (p. 105). Interpreting this statement suggests a need for ESL instructors to consider the importance of adverbs. It also infers a possibility of struggles ESL students might have learning adverbs or

misplacing adverbs in sentences. As a result, adverbs are key rhetorical components in the composition process, but while adverbs relating to manner, time, modal, or place can have clear placement in a sentence, they can often change position in sentence structure, while, at the same time, preserving a similar semantic context. Instructors themselves might have questions because some adverbs will be fixed and require accurate placement to produce grammatically clear sentences, and other adverbs offer flexibility.

Many articles and books offer in-depth explanations of adverbs and the position required for clarity, as well as helping reduce ill-formed sentences in English. Helping explain the importance for adverb position, Hernández (2006) identifies adverbs as one of the primary parts of speech that can shift position, but which often causes problems for ESL students. As a default position for adverbs, Koffi (2010) states, "...rather reluctantly, that the default position of adverbs is after the main verb" (p. 276). In addition, adverb position helps develop place, time, and manner often times even prior to revealing key details in a text. For example, Tufte (2006) shows an artful illustration of the complexity of adverb use from Dylan Thomas' *Adventures in the Skin Trade*: "Early one morning, under the arc of a lamp, carefully, silently, in smock and rubber gloves, Old Doctor Manza grafted a cat's head on to a chicken's trunk" (as cited in Tufte, 2006, p. 156). This poses an exaggeration of what an ESL student might learn in class lessons; however, ESL instructors can teach traditional default positions for adverbs while also introducing the rhetorical emphasis of adverb repositioning at an early stage (Dissosway & Hartford, 1984). Dissosway and Hartford strongly advocate introducing these patterns as early as possible to L2 learners because, as Zi-hong (2010) adds more rationale to consider, "it seems impossible for adult students to learn or acquire the syntactic positions of adverbs in English as a foreign language" (p. 50).

2.0 ESL Rhetorical Awareness and Adverb Placement

Before moving forward with the primary discussion, the reader should be aware of the rhetorical importance adverbs have for ESL/EFL writers. In the study mentioned earlier by Pérez-Paredes and Díez-Bedmar (2012), young Spanish language learners were assigned to write an essay in English about a favorite movie, and the essays were analyzed for adverb intensifiers. The writers' ages in the study ranged from ten to sixteen (fifth and tenth grade). The younger students used a minimal amount of adverbs, while older students were more likely to use adverbs. The results indicated a level of evolving maturity using adverbial intensifiers during academic instruction. Ultimately, the study revealed that even though students might not require native-like competency and adverb proficiency in general contexts of communication as they progress academically, a student's lack of adverbial use in written essays can indicate a deficiency or misunderstanding of rhetorical awareness for ESL students: "this low awareness could have a negative impact on the professional careers of these students if poor persuasive language skills [are] maintained" (Pérez-Paredes & Díez-Bedmar, 2012, p. 119). In another study on social class and adverb use, Macaulay (2002) found that middle-class speakers utilized adverb movement strategies more effectively than working-class speakers. In reviewing discourse patterns, the researchers found middle-class speakers

offered clear opinions compared to working-class speakers who avoided using adverbs and adverb repositioning to add emphasis to sentences, phrases, and words (Macaulay, 2002). Such rhetorical importance of adverb placement and proficiency suggests a need for ESL instruction to have a focused position on adverb placement (Hartford, 1984).

Adding to the discussion of adverb placement, Hernández (2006) states, “[p]utting the adverb in an unusual position can also give it greater emphasis, particularly if a speaker stresses the word or phrase” (p. 274). As an example, Hernández shows how this works in these two sentences: “We have always stated our commitment to equality **in public**. (neutral position) We have always stated **in public** our commitment to equality (emphasis)” (p. 274). Hernández adds insight to this by suggesting, “Instructors usually teach that placing the adverb between the verb and the direct object is a mistake” (pp. 274-75). Significantly, this rule can be flexible as demonstrated by the two sentences above. Pérez-Paredes and Díez-Bedmar (2012) agree, as modifiers, adverbs vary the intensity and lexical meaning. Placing adverbs in unusual positions can add emphasis, but ESL instructors should also consider the overuse of adverbs. Adverb position can be complex, yet before discussing adverb intensity, something needs to be said about the most common prescriptive positions of adverbs.

3.0 Common Adverb Placement

When adverbs modify a verb, they can come in three positions: end, mid, or front. Hewings (2005) states that in the end position adverbs will come after the verb or the object if there is one.

- (1) We reviewed the material *quickly*.
- (2) They worked on their homework *diligently*.
- (3) She slept *peacefully*.

He also mentions that when there is a present participle or a to-infinitive in the sentence, the adverb should not split the main verb and present participle or the to-infinitive:

- (4) We tried to leave *immediately*.
- (5) She started running *abruptly*.

However, such adverb placement rules are often times considered foolish because they are nothing but prescriptive rules created by the “grammar police” (Koffi, 2010). In addition, rather than leaving adverbs in a prescriptive location, “they receive emphasis when they are moved between the infinitive particle ‘to’ and the main verb” (Koffi, 2010, p. 467).

The end position can also be used for location, routines, and specific times.

- (6) He lives *under the bridge*.
- (7) She goes to the doctor *monthly*.

- (8) They got divorced *in September*.

In the mid position, an adverb will occur between the subject and the verb, after *be* as a main verb, or after the first auxiliary verb.

- (9) He *always* sleeps in class.
(10) She is *consistently* happy.
(11) They could *possibly* come here.

The mid position can be used for degree, order, or frequency, respectively shown in 12, 13, and 14.

- (12) He *hardly* works late.
(13) I *first* saw the play in school.
(14) She *rarely* misses work.

The front position is referred to as adverbial fronting. Adverbs that show relation to a previous sentence, time and place, or highlight a feeling about what they are going to say can be used in the front position (Hewings, 2005).

- (15) Tony studied hard. *As a result*, he passed his test.
(16) The students are watching a movie. *Tomorrow* they will take a test.
(17) Susie has a job. *Economically*, she is stable.

Hewings (2005) states that manner adverbs should come first followed by place and time adverbs, respectively.

- (18) The firemen rushed *energetically into the house at one o'clock*.
(19) They arrived *hastily at noon*.
(20) They ran *fervently into the house*.

The one exception explained by Hewings (2005) is when one adverbial is significantly longer. When one adverbial is longer, the shorter one should come first, regardless of the type.

- (21) The plane made an emergency landing *at the airport with a large amount of haste*.

Once students have grasped the traditional positions of adverbs, it is time to help them understand how they can be used to create clarity in their sentences. When using the end position for an adverb, a writer can move the adverb to a position that is directly after the verb and before the object in the sentence. By moving the adverb to this position, the writer can add clarity when there is an extra-long object.

- (22) The politicians thought about possible solutions to the uncertain economy *thoroughly*.
- (23) The politicians thought *thoroughly* about possible solutions to the uncertain economy.

By moving the adverb directly to the position after the verb, the writer can clarify that *thoroughly* is modifying *thought*.

Moving the position of an adverb can also create emphasis. As mentioned before, an invented adverb rule suggests that adverbs should not split a present participle or a to-infinitive and its main verb. However, we can move an adverb to a position that directly follows the present participle or to-infinitive. The following sentences demonstrate how position can create emphasis:

- (24) I remember telling the truth *sincerely*.
- (25) I *sincerely* remember telling the truth.
- (26) We tried to extinguish the fire *quickly*.
- (27) We *quickly* tried to extinguish the fire.

In sentence (24), *sincerely* modifies *telling the truth*. While in sentence (23), *sincerely* modifies *remember*. The same is true for sentences (25) and (26). *Quickly* modifies *to extinguish the fire* in sentence (25), but modifies *tried* in sentence (26). These examples show how the position can create emphasis based on the position they take.

Another important use of adverb positioning is the creation of sentence variety. Once students learn a specific way to use an adverb, they tend to recreate the same style sentences again and again. This leads to the creating of stagnant sentence structure and relatively boring writing. After students have grasped the positions of adverbs, it is important that they understand that adverbs can take different positions. Good examples are the adverbs of frequency *always*, *sometimes*, and *never* (Hewings, 2005). *Always* and *never* take a fixed place in the mid position. They need to be placed after the subject and before the verb.

- (28) She *always* goes shopping with her friends.
- (29) He *never* watches movies at home.

Once students have learned this position, they will logically place *sometimes* in the same mid position. However, *sometimes* can occur in all three positions. It is important to show them that *sometimes* can be placed in the front, mid, and end positions.

- (30) *Sometimes* they play basketball together.
- (31) They *sometimes* play basketball together.
- (32) They play basketball together *sometimes*.

It is important to show students that a good number of adverbs can take various positions within a sentence in order to create some sentence variety in their writing.

4.0 Adverb Placement, Emphasis, and Rhetorical Modifiers

In a different view of adverb placement, Jacobson (1964) offers an analysis that suggests adverb placement does not always rely on a semantic or syntactic relationship; rather adverb placement functions as a modifier but also as a distinctive variation for prominence. Jacobson considers even word length as a significant component in adverb placement. For example, consider the two adverbs placed in a middle position: “now” and “immediately.” Even though the word “now” is shorter than the word immediately, in certain contexts each can occupy the same amount of time as a rhythmic pattern. This point relies on stressed syllables following each other as in these two sentences: “We’ll start **immediately** if you like.... We’ll start **now** if you like” (Jacobson, 1964, p. 102).

In those examples, Jacobson (1964) notes the stressed differences and the weight of adverb placement should be considered as a way to change pitch, stress, or junctural connectors in the sentence:

The combined effect of the length and stress, pitch and junctural surroundings of an adverbial may be called its *weight* (or *strength*). We can thus distinguish *heavy* (*strong*) and *light* (*weak*) adverbials. It should be noted that it is not the absolute *weight* of an adverbial that is of importance for the choice of position, but its relative weight. English word-order depends to very great extent on the *balance* of the sentence, i.e., the weight of the various parts of the sentence in relation to each other. (Jacobson, 1964, p. 103)

To slightly elaborate on this point, Jacobson (1964) adds that the form of the adverb is also significant, so single adverbs will not be as heavy as an adverb phrase, nor as heavy as a larger unit such as an entire clause. With this mind, the reader can begin to see that an entire subordinate clause will function differently in the middle of the sentence from how it behaves at the end or beginning of a sentence. Thus, adverb positioning can add emphasis or even deemphasize another word or clause in a sentence. For example, one word such as “never, never, never” repeated three times in a sentence can add emphasis; on the other hand, adverb placement can remove intensity such as in the following sentences: *Surely*, I will discuss that with the director, or I will *surely* discuss that with the director. In the first sentence, the adverb *surely* has more prominence than in the second sentence because of the fronting position, so ESL instructors will want to consider incorporating such strategies in adverb lesson plans to enhance a student’s rhetorical understanding and adverb placement (Jacobson, 1964).

In addition to defining stressed and weighted adverbs just discussed, Pérez-Paredes and Díez-Bedmar (2012) define adverb intensifiers in another way. This can best be explained by how adverb emphasis is formed and by varying the degree of the intensity or adverb intensifiers into subdivisions:

Intensifiers are divided into “emphasizers,” “amplifiers,” and “downtoners.” Intensifiers ‘are not limited to indicating an increase in intensity; they indicate a point on the intensity scale which may be high or low...[e]mphasizers have a general heightening effect; amplifiers scale upwards from the assumed norm; downtoners have a lowering effect, usually scaling down from an assumed norm.’ Amplifiers can be divided into “maximizers,” which denote the upper extreme of the scale (*absolutely, altogether, completely, entirely, fully, quite, thoroughly, utterly, in all respects, most*) and boosters, which denote a high point on the scale (*badly, deeply, greatly, heartily, much, so, violently, well...*) (Jacobson, 1964, p. 106).

Adverb intensifiers help to mark a level of degree, which requires the use of an adverb to denote a semantic variation. As a result, the importance of manner, time, place, duration, frequency, focusing, modal, and degree rely on adverb intensifiers as a semantic marker (Pérez-Paredes & Díez-Bedmar, 2012).

5.0 Conclusion

Finally, taking this to another level, the adverb *surely* in the previous example above can also be set out with commas for more emphasis: I will, *surely*, discuss that with the director (Jacobson, 1964). The flow of the sentence shifts and pauses are inserted, slightly weighing the sentence heavier in this context. More importantly, within this context of adverb placement, emphasis can be created or changed, depending on the context of the sentence and the placement of the adverb, phrase, or clause. As another final consideration, Delfitto (2006) finds adverbial placement intriguing because “...adverbial syntax seems to lead to quite puzzling questions concerning the interplay between issues of placement and issues of movement” (p. 103). Without question, adverbial placement calls for particular cases of accuracy for clarity to eliminate ill-formed sentences, but an ESL instructor should note the significance of teaching adverbial placement to students not only for sentence clarity but to develop rhetorical awareness and rhetorical emphasis in composition.

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