



COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS AND ENGLISH VERB ASPECTS: UNDERSTANDING LEARNER CONCEPTUALIZATION AND PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

Cognitive linguistics provides a valuable framework for examining how learners of English comprehend and utilize verb aspects, including progressive, perfective, and habitual forms. Traditional grammar instruction often prioritizes form and accuracy, frequently overlooking the conceptual foundations essential for a nuanced understanding of these aspects. This paper posits that a cognitive linguistic approach can significantly enhance the teaching of English verb aspects by focusing on learners' conceptualization of time and events. The discussion draws on research concerning cognitive models, cross-linguistic influence, and language pedagogy to illustrate how integrating cognitive principles in the classroom can support learners in achieving both grammatical precision and a deeper conceptual awareness of verb aspects. By exploring the cognitive mechanisms underlying language use, educators can help learners navigate the complexities of aspectual distinctions more effectively, fostering improved communicative competence. Ultimately, this paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations rooted in cognitive linguistics, advocating for strategies that promote a holistic approach to teaching English verb aspects. These strategies emphasize the importance of linking linguistic forms to learners' cognitive experiences through methods such as conceptual metaphors, event segmentation, and consciousness-raising activities. By creating an environment that encourages exploration and internalization of the conceptual dimensions of verb usage, educators can facilitate a more integrated and effective language learning experience, equipping learners with the tools they need to use verb aspects accurately and meaningfully in real-world contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Cognitive linguistics, Verb aspects, Second language acquisition, Conceptualization, Pedagogy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The learning and teaching of verb aspects in English progressive, perfective, and habitual has long posed significant challenges for both learners and educators alike (Andersen, 1991). In second-language acquisition, learners are often taught verb aspects through a traditional focus on form and usage, with the primary goal being grammatical accuracy. This approach, while useful for developing structural proficiency, often leaves learners with an incomplete understanding of how these grammatical forms interact with underlying conceptualizations of time and events (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Cognitive linguistics, a field that examines the relationship between language and thought, provides an alternative framework for understanding how learners process and internalize these complex grammatical categories (Langacker, 2008).

Verb aspects in English do more than merely describe actions; they convey a speaker's view of the temporal structure of events, whether actions are ongoing, completed, or habitual. From a cognitive linguistic standpoint, verb aspects reflect different ways of mentally representing the flow of time and the nature of events (Comrie, 1976). For learners to fully grasp these distinctions, it is essential to move beyond rote learning of grammatical rules to foster a deeper, conceptual understanding. This paper explores how insights from cognitive linguistics can enhance the teaching of English verb aspects, providing learners with tools not only to use aspects correctly but to understand the mental processes underlying their usage. Drawing on research in cognitive linguistics, second-language acquisition, and pedagogy, this article argues for a rethinking of how verb aspects are taught and learned in the language classroom.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Verb Aspect in English: A Cognitive Perspective

2.1.1. Progressive Aspect

The progressive aspect, which expresses ongoing or incomplete actions, is one of the most frequently encountered verb aspects in English. The sentence *I am reading* exemplifies the progressive, marking the action as unfolding in real time and not yet concluded (Comrie, 1976). Cognitive linguistics views this aspect not merely as a grammatical form but as a conceptual tool for representing temporality. Specifically, the progressive aspect allows speakers to conceptualize events as occurring within a bounded timeframe, focusing on a specific point in the action's development (Langacker, 1987).

Traditional language instruction often emphasizes the structural features of the progressive aspect, such as the auxiliary verb *be* followed by the present participle (*-ing* form). However, this method frequently overlooks the cognitive task of interpreting the event as ongoing. As Langacker (2008) suggests, the progressive aspect is a mental construction that invites speakers to view events from within, as they happen, rather than as completed wholes. For second-language learners, this distinction can be difficult to grasp if they are only taught to associate the progressive with present actions without understanding its deeper conceptual significance.

Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the importance of helping learners visualize this "in progress" quality of the progressive aspect. One way to achieve this is through the use of visual metaphors or timelines that represent actions as dynamic,



continuous processes. For example, instructors can use a timeline to show how the progressive aspect zooms in on a specific moment during an ongoing event, compared to the perfective aspect, which views the entire event as a whole. This approach aligns with Langacker's (1987) notion that the progressive aspect involves "scanning" an event from within its temporal boundaries, allowing learners to develop a mental representation of actions as unfolding over time.

In addition to visual aids, instructors can introduce contextualized activities that require learners to identify and use the progressive aspect in real-life situations. For instance, learners might watch a video clip and describe the ongoing actions using the progressive, emphasizing the temporary and incomplete nature of each event. Such activities not only reinforce the form of the progressive aspect but also its conceptual underpinnings, helping learners internalize the idea that the progressive aspect captures an action in the middle of its progression.

2.1.2, Perfective Aspect

The perfective aspect, by contrast, marks actions that are viewed as complete, with clear boundaries marking their beginning and end (Smith, 1997). For example, in the sentence I have eaten dinner, the action is viewed as a whole, with the focus on its completion rather than its internal structure. This conceptualization of events as bounded wholes is central to the cognitive linguistic understanding of the perfective aspect. Learners must develop the ability to mentally construe actions as completed entities, which requires a different cognitive process than that used for the progressive aspect, where the action is still unfolding.

In traditional pedagogy, the perfective aspect is typically taught as a grammatical structure involving auxiliary verbs (e.g., have, has, or had), combined with the past participle form of the verb. While this approach provides learners with the necessary tools for forming perfective constructions, it does not always address the cognitive task of segmenting events in time. Cognitive linguistics suggests that learners need to practice viewing actions as completed wholes, with clear temporal boundaries that distinguish the action from its surrounding context (Taylor, 2002).

One effective way to teach the perfective aspect is through narrative sequencing activities, where learners are asked to describe a series of events that have been completed. For instance, learners could be presented with a sequence of pictures depicting a task such as baking a cake and asked to describe the steps using the perfective aspect. By focusing on each action as a completed event, learners are encouraged to segment the timeline of actions and distinguish between the ongoing process (e.g., I am mixing the ingredients) and the completed result (e.g., I have mixed the ingredients). This activity helps learners develop a clearer understanding of the perfective aspect as a tool for conceptualizing actions in their entirety, rather than as unfolding processes.

2.1.3, Habitual Aspect

The habitual aspect, which describes actions that occur

regularly or are characteristic of a person or situation, poses unique challenges for learners. Unlike the progressive and perfective aspects, which focus on specific points in time, the habitual aspect represents patterns of behavior or repeated actions over a period of time (Binnick, 1991). For example, in the sentence I walk to work, the action of walking is framed as a regular, repeated event, rather than a single occurrence.

Cognitive linguistics views the habitual aspect as part of a broader conceptualization of time and frequency, where learners must recognize patterns in behavior and use language to reflect this regularity (Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca, 1994). Teaching the habitual aspect from a cognitive linguistic perspective involves helping learners develop an intuitive sense of how language encodes recurring events. This can be particularly challenging for learners whose native languages do not use aspectual distinctions to represent habitual actions in the same way as English. For instance, languages that rely on adverbial markers of frequency (e.g., always, often) rather than verb morphology may lead learners to overuse adverbs instead of mastering the habitual aspect in verb form.

To address these challenges, instructors can use real-world examples and personal narratives that require learners to describe habitual actions. For example, learners could be asked to describe their daily routines or cultural customs, focusing on the habitual aspect to highlight regular, repeated behaviors. Additionally, teachers can contrast habitual statements (e.g., I walk to work) with specific, time-bound actions (e.g., I am walking to work) to reinforce the conceptual difference between patterns of behavior and singular events. This contrastive approach helps learners develop a deeper understanding of how the habitual aspect functions to convey recurring actions, rather than isolated instances of behavior (Talmy, 2000).

2.2, Learner Conceptualization and Verb Aspects

2.2.1, Cognitive Models in Language Acquisition

Cognitive linguistics posits that language learners develop cognitive models or mental schemas that guide their understanding of temporal and aspectual distinctions in language (Lakoff, 1987). These cognitive models are shaped by learners' interactions with both linguistic input and their experiential knowledge of the world. In the case of verb aspects, learners rely on these models to interpret and produce grammatical structures that encode temporality, such as whether an action is ongoing, completed, or habitual. As learners acquire a second language (L2), they must develop new cognitive models that align with the grammatical and conceptual rules of the target language, which can differ significantly from those of their native language (L1) (Slobin, 2006).

Research in second-language acquisition has shown that learners often face difficulties in constructing accurate cognitive models of verb aspects in English, particularly when their L1 lacks similar aspectual distinctions. For instance, languages that do not differentiate between progressive and perfective aspects may lead learners to overgeneralize or misuse these forms in English (Andersen, 1991). Learners from



such linguistic backgrounds may default to using simple present or past tenses without fully grasping the conceptual nuances of aspectual distinctions, such as the difference between I am reading (progressive) and I read (habitual).

Cognitive linguistic theory suggests that language teachers can support learners by explicitly teaching the conceptual differences between these aspects and by providing opportunities for learners to practice constructing mental models of time and event structure in the target language (Robinson & Ellis, 2008). For example, teachers might engage learners in tasks that require them to describe the same event using different verb aspects, thereby encouraging them to think about how different aspects encode different perspectives on time and action. This approach helps learners build cognitive models that reflect the aspectual distinctions in English, leading to more accurate and nuanced language use.

2.2.2, Influence of L1 on L2 Verb Aspect Acquisition

Cross-linguistic studies have demonstrated that a learner's native language (L1) plays a crucial role in shaping how they acquire and use verb aspects in a second language (L2) (Slobin, 1996). This influence, often referred to as L1 transfer, occurs when learners rely on the grammatical and conceptual structures of their native language to interpret and produce language in the target language. In the case of verb aspects, learners whose L1 does not mark aspect in the same way as English may struggle to develop an intuitive grasp of aspectual distinctions, leading to errors in both comprehension and production.

For example, learners from languages that do not distinguish between progressive and habitual actions may overuse the simple present tense in contexts where the progressive aspect is required (Park, 2006). In English, the sentence I am eating conveys an action currently in progress, while I eat is interpreted as a habitual action. However, learners from languages such as Japanese or Korean, where aspectual distinctions are marked differently, may use the habitual form I eat in contexts where the progressive would be more appropriate (Yoshimoto, 2002). This pattern of overgeneralization reflects the learners' reliance on cognitive models developed in their L1, which do not map directly onto the aspectual system of English.

To help learners overcome these challenges, cognitive linguistics-based instruction encourages explicit cross-linguistic comparisons that highlight the differences between L1 and L2 aspectual systems. By raising learners' awareness of how aspect is encoded differently across languages, teachers can help them adjust their cognitive models to align with the target language. For example, teachers could present parallel sentences in the learners' L1 and English, asking learners to identify how the aspectual meaning changes between the two languages. This activity not only reinforces the grammatical distinctions between progressive, perfective, and habitual aspects but also helps learners develop cognitive models that are better suited to the target language (Ellis & Wulff, 2015).

2.3, Pedagogical Implications of Cognitive Linguistics

2.3.1, Conceptual Metaphors in Teaching Verb Aspects

One of the most significant contributions of cognitive linguistics to language pedagogy is the use of conceptual metaphors to explain abstract linguistic concepts. Conceptual metaphor theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), argues that people understand abstract concepts, such as time and events, through metaphorical mappings from more concrete experiences. In the context of verb aspect teaching, metaphors of space and time can be particularly useful for helping learners grasp the abstract distinctions between progressive, perfective, and habitual aspects.

For example, the metaphor of viewing an event "through a window" can help learners understand the progressive aspect. Just as a person looks through a window to see a portion of an unfolding scene, the progressive aspect allows the speaker to focus on a specific moment within an ongoing action (Langacker, 1987). This metaphor not only explains the grammatical form of the progressive aspect but also provides learners with a cognitive framework for understanding how the aspect conceptualizes time. Similarly, the perfective aspect can be explained using a metaphor of "seeing the whole picture," where the action is viewed as a complete, bounded event.

Instructors can use these conceptual metaphors in the classroom to make abstract grammatical concepts more accessible. For example, teachers might use visual aids, such as diagrams or animated sequences, to represent how different verb aspects capture different perspectives on time and events. These visual representations can be paired with contextualized language tasks, such as describing an event from different temporal perspectives, to reinforce learners' understanding of the conceptual distinctions between verb aspects. Research has shown that the use of conceptual metaphors in language teaching can significantly improve learners' comprehension and retention of complex grammatical structures (Robinson & Ellis, 2008).

2.3.2, Event Segmentation as a Teaching Tool

Cognitive linguistics suggests that verb aspect usage is closely tied to how individuals segment events in their minds (Zacks & Tversky, 2001). Event segmentation refers to the cognitive process by which people divide the continuous stream of experience into discrete events, each with its own temporal boundaries. In the case of verb aspects, learners must learn to recognize and describe the boundaries between ongoing, completed, and habitual actions. Teaching verb aspects, therefore, should involve training learners to identify these event boundaries and apply the appropriate aspect to describe them.

Event segmentation can be effectively taught through multimedia activities that require learners to observe and describe events in real-time. For example, learners might watch a short video clip depicting a series of actions and be asked to narrate what is happening using the appropriate verb aspect. As learners describe the ongoing actions (using the progressive), completed actions (using the perfective), and repeated actions (using the habitual), they practice identifying and segmenting



events based on their temporal structure. This activity not only reinforces learners' understanding of verb aspects but also helps them develop the cognitive skills necessary for accurate aspectual usage in spontaneous language production (Taylor, 2002).

In addition to video-based activities, teachers can use narrative sequencing tasks to further develop learners' event segmentation skills. For instance, learners might be asked to describe a familiar process, such as cooking a meal or completing a project, using different verb aspects to mark the stages of the process. By focusing on the temporal boundaries between different actions, learners become more adept at applying the correct aspect to each event. This approach aligns with cognitive linguistic theories of language acquisition, which emphasize the importance of meaningful, context-rich input for developing accurate grammatical representations (Robinson & Ellis, 2008).

2.3.3, Input Enhancement and Consciousness-Raising

Input enhancement and consciousness-raising techniques have been widely used in second language acquisition research to help learners notice and internalize specific grammatical features. In the context of verb aspect teaching, these techniques can be particularly useful for drawing learners' attention to the functional distinctions between different aspects. Input enhancement involves making specific grammatical features more salient in the input, for example, by highlighting or underlining verb forms in reading passages or emphasizing their pronunciation in listening exercises (Schmidt, 1990). This heightened awareness helps learners to notice how verb aspects function in context and to develop a more intuitive understanding of their use.

Consciousness-raising, on the other hand, involves engaging learners in reflective tasks that require them to think about the meaning and use of verb aspects. For example, teachers might present learners with a series of sentences using different verb aspects and ask them to identify how the meaning changes with each aspect. This type of metalinguistic awareness task encourages learners to focus on the cognitive and conceptual dimensions of aspectual distinctions, rather than just the grammatical forms (Ellis & Wulff, 2015). By raising learners' consciousness of the cognitive processes involved in using verb aspects, teachers can help them move beyond rote learning and develop a deeper, more conceptual understanding of aspect in English.

3. PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATION FOR TEACHING VERB ASPECTS

Based on the insights from cognitive linguistics, several practical recommendations can be made for teaching verb aspects in the English language classroom. First, instructors should integrate conceptual metaphors into their lessons to help learners understand the abstract nature of verb aspects. For instance, metaphors such as "viewing an event through a window" for the progressive aspect and "seeing the whole picture" for the perfective aspect can provide learners with concrete images to conceptualize these grammatical forms

(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Second, visual aids and timelines should be employed to help learners visualize the temporal dimensions of verb aspects. Timelines can be used to show how different aspects capture different perspectives on the same action whether it is viewed as ongoing, completed, or habitual. These visual representations can be especially useful for learners who struggle to grasp the temporal distinctions between verb aspects.

Third, teachers should incorporate event segmentation activities into their lessons, helping learners practice identifying the boundaries between ongoing, completed, and habitual actions. Activities such as describing real-world events, narrating videos, or sequencing narrative actions can reinforce learners' understanding of verb aspect and improve their ability to apply the correct aspect in spontaneous speech.

Fourth, input enhancement techniques should be used to highlight verb aspect distinctions in reading and listening materials. By drawing learners' attention to how aspects are used in context, input enhancement can help learners develop a more intuitive understanding of aspectual meaning and usage.

Finally, consciousness-raising tasks should be incorporated into lessons to encourage learners to reflect on the cognitive processes underlying their use of verb aspects. These tasks can help learners move beyond mechanical rule-following and develop a deeper, more conceptual understanding of aspect in English.

4. CONCLUSION

Cognitive linguistics provides a robust framework for understanding how learners conceptualize and acquire verb aspects in English. This approach emphasizes the cognitive processes underlying language use rather than merely focusing on grammatical forms. By adopting this perspective, educators can facilitate a deeper understanding of how time and events are represented in language, ultimately enhancing learners' communicative competence.

One of the central tenets of cognitive linguistics is the idea that language is rooted in human cognition and experience. This insight encourages educators to shift their focus from traditional grammar-based approaches to more meaning-driven strategies. For instance, instead of solely teaching the rules governing the use of verb aspects, instructors can engage students in exploring how different aspects relate to their experiences and perceptions of time and action. This shift not only makes learning more relevant but also fosters a more intuitive grasp of verb aspects.

The integration of cognitive principles into the teaching of verb aspects can take several forms. Conceptual metaphors play a crucial role in how learners understand and relate to verb aspects. By introducing learners to metaphors such as "time is a journey" or "events are containers," educators can help them visualize and internalize complex temporal concepts. For example, the perfect aspect can be taught as a "completed journey," while the progressive aspect can be framed as an "ongoing action." This metaphorical framing allows learners to



connect abstract grammatical concepts with concrete experiences, thereby improving retention and application.

Event segmentation is another cognitive principle that can enhance the teaching of verb aspects. By encouraging learners to break down narratives or descriptions into distinct events, educators can help them identify the appropriate verb aspects to use in context. This technique not only sharpens learners' analytical skills but also promotes a more nuanced understanding of how different aspects convey various temporal relationships. For instance, learners can practice identifying when to use the simple past to indicate completed actions versus the present perfect to emphasize relevance to the present moment.

Consciousness-raising techniques are also essential in this pedagogical approach. By prompting learners to reflect on their language use and the choices they make regarding verb aspects, educators can foster metalinguistic awareness. Activities such as guided discovery, peer feedback, and reflective journaling can empower students to examine their understanding of verb aspects and articulate their reasoning. This self-awareness can lead to more thoughtful and accurate language use in real-world contexts.

As research in cognitive linguistics and second-language acquisition continues to evolve, the pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. Educators can expect to see further developments in learner-centered approaches that prioritize cognitive understanding. For example, future teaching methods may incorporate technology and multimedia resources that provide immersive and interactive environments for learners to explore verb aspects dynamically. Virtual reality, for instance, could offer simulations where students navigate through time-based scenarios, reinforcing their understanding of aspectual distinctions in context.

In conclusion, by embracing the insights of cognitive linguistics, educators can transform the way verb aspects are taught and learned. The emphasis on cognitive understanding rather than rote memorization can lead to more meaningful and lasting language acquisition. As we continue to explore the intersections of language, cognition, and pedagogy, we can anticipate the emergence of innovative teaching strategies that not only address the complexities of verb aspects but also empower learners to engage with English in a more profound and intuitive manner. This approach ultimately prepares learners not just to use verb aspects accurately but also to understand and convey the richness of human experience through language

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