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ENGLISH REPORTED SPEECH TAUGHT TO CZECH NATIVE
SPEAKERS



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Abstract

Being a teacher at the Faculty of Education at the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic), the author refers to her own experience in training pre-service and in-service teachers of English. The main focus is placed on the issue of the English reported speech taught and learnt in the Czech educational environment. The issue is discussed with the reference to the courses in Pedagogical Grammar in which pre-service teachers of English discuss principles of the language and potentially effective ways of presenting these principles to learners of English. The research revealed that primary and secondary school teachers usually present English reported speech as a set of rules which are to be applied more or less automatically. The paper presents findings which were made when the students were to reflect on some issues related to English indirect speech. These reflections focused on the clarity of explanations given in the teaching materials and on the linguistic explorations themselves. The research showed that deeper explorations of grammar issues and their presentations are welcomed by students majoring in teaching foreign languages. They realised how important it is to provide learners with clear inputs and how helpful it is to refer to the learners' already acquired linguistic competences.

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1. Introduction

One of the courses offered to the students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Hradec Kralove (Czech Republic) who major in teaching English is called Pedagogical Grammar. Quite numerous people involved in teaching foreign languages have wondered about the contents of this course. Its objective is to train future English teachers in presenting and clarifying the grammar system of English in the Czech language environment. Within the framework of the course, the students, whose knowledge of English have reached at least the upper-intermediate level, are expected to reflect on their already acquired knowledge of the English grammar and to think about the best possible ways how to forward their knowledge when presenting grammar issues to their learners.

Courses in Pedagogical Grammar make pre-service teachers realise that they are in a quite specific position – they themselves are still studying the target language itself, so they are in the position of students, but they are also getting into the position of English teachers, so they need to more deeply explore the language system to be able to present it to their future students. The following point of view is definitely not the most recent one (it was expressed by Lewis, 1986, p. 18, i.e. more than thirty years ago), but it is still valid, and therefore presented to our pre-service teachers of English: “Teachers often feel that “explaining grammar“ is an important part of their job. Such a view must be a mistake – it is placing the emphasis on the teacher instead of the student. The teacher’s task is not to tell the student how the language works. Much more useful is for teachers to find good questions to ask students about examples, so that students may discover for themselves”.

The course of Pedagogical Grammar is not about memorizing rules and giving definitions. This course is about making the students explore the principles of the language. Through such explorations, a better understanding of not only the language rules and principles themselves, but also of the learning and teaching processes can be reached. As Batstone (1994, in Introduction) claims: The more we can find out about how grammar is learned and used, the better we will teach it effectively.

We try to make our pre-service teachers be creative, we make efforts to encourage them to discover the target language and simultaneously their mother tongue creatively because as Harmer (1994) says: “...discovery activities are so valuable since by asking students to discover ways in which language is used we help to raise awareness about the creative use of grammar – amongst other things” (p. 23).

Within the course, the students often work in groups, discuss possible ways of presenting varied grammar issues, make comments on their colleagues’ proposals, think about potentially problematic situations and expected failures, and they reflect on their own early teaching experience. The students are also guided to creative thinking about their own mistakes and mistakes made by others. Exploring the language through learning from mistakes is (maybe surprisingly) appreciated by our undergraduates. They realise that being aware of one’s own mistakes is a kind of prevention against making such mistakes furthermore, and being aware of others’ mistakes and of probable causes of these mistakes can result in a more effective way of teaching.

One of the aim of the courses in Pedagogical Grammar is to make our under-graduates aware of the fact which was nicely presented in the following way (Ur, 2009): “Learning more about language and about how language works is a useful, productive and interesting activity: increasing one’s awareness – being more ‘alive’ to language - can bring considerable benefit, both personal and professional” (p. 5).

2. Problem Statement

Indirect speech is one of the issues which occur in more or less all course-books of English. This occurrence is absolutely logical since it reflects everyday language situations – we interpret someone else’s and/or our own opinions, statements, questions, etc. more or less every day, and so do all media. To be communicatively successful and to avoid potential and crucial misunderstandings and misinterpretations, we definitely need to interpret the really used direct speech properly.

In everyday communication, people usually do not care much about the perfect interpretation of the directly addressed speech, they do not care much about potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations caused by ignoring important rules. However, coming to the English teacher’s point of view, numerous problems, ambiguities and misunderstanding can appear during the process of the teaching input concerning the issue of indirect speech, which can result in inappropriate learning outputs and then in ineffective and/or problematic communication. Language teachers are (or at least should be) aware of the fact which is nicely expressed by Ur (2009): “There are rules which govern how words have to be manipulated and organized so as to express these meaning: a competent speaker of the language will be able to apply these rules so as to convey his or her chosen meanings effectively and acceptably” (p. 3). Our objective is to train our undergraduate teachers to become not only highly competent speakers but also highly competent teachers – only in this case can they become such teachers who will make their future learners competent as well.

Nowadays, in the world of an increasing number of media of the most varied kinds, the frequency of cases when it is necessary to interpret other people’s opinions, media’s opinions and subsequently to interpret somebody or something already interpreted is enormously increasing. The necessity to interpret (or to report) in the correct way is therefore quite crucial. As it was already mentioned above, the reported speech is generally one of the linguistic issues which traditionally occur in foreign language course-books, and our pre-service teachers will definitely present this issue to their future learners. To educate and prepare them properly for their future professional career, we feel that is highly important to make our undergraduates realise how important the issue of the reported speech is in the current world.

2.1. English reported speech from learners’ point of view

Learners of English generally do not consider English reported speech as a highly problematic issue. Course-books and workbooks offer exercises which can be done more or less automatically without deeper thinking about the changes and transformations needed if the direct speech is to be changed into the indirect speech or vice versa. When (before being referred to the learning materials) the researched group of pre-service English teachers was asked about the most important issues related to the indirect speech, the answers were (in this order): changes of tenses, indirect questions, changes of some words. The students were not wrong. They mentioned all the issues which are usually listed in summaries presented by course-books and handbooks. Not only in these learning materials does the change of tenses appear as the first item on the list. Even in the *University Grammar of English* (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1993) says that “The most important alteration takes place in the verb phrase: this is the change of tense that is referred to as ‘back-shift’” (p. 342).

Moreover, learners of English are aware of the fact that if any problems with understanding of indirect speech appear in everyday communication, there is a possibility not to use indirect speech at all.

This approach is even supported by some teaching materials addressed to learners of English. The following advice is presented as a summarising comment in the chapter called 'Indirect speech' which is included in Oxford Living Grammar upper-intermediate (Paterson, 2012): "Remember that in conversation we can just repeat what someone actually said: *At about ten o'clock last night Katie said to me, 'Listen, I'm tired. I'm going home'*" (p. 68).

However, some of our students do not consider the issue of indirect speech as completely non-problematic, which can be witnessed by the following opinion: "I think that English reported speech is quite difficult. But I am not sure why. It might be caused by the fact that when I attended both primary and secondary school, our teachers did not spend much time explaining it to us." This opinion justifies our decision to make research into the issue of teaching English reported speech.

2.2. English reported speech from teachers' point of view

The author's long-term practice in training English teachers has shown that the issue which seems more or less non-problematic to students with the upper-intermediate level of knowledge of English is not as non-problematic if it comes the teacher's point. The knowledge of the rules to be taught is obviously important, but it is definitely not sufficient. Teachers who are not able to apply rules creatively and in an understandable way and who lack the ability of creative performance are not good teachers.

Teachers of English in the Czech educational environment have to keep in mind Ur's (2009) opinion: "People learning the grammar of an additional language through a formal course of study probably do not do so the same way as they learnt their first language" (p. 4). It is definitely fruitful to reflect on the phenomena of indirect speech existing in both Czech and English, to use numerous linguistic abilities and skills which Czech learners have acquired in their mother tongue, and then creatively present the phenomena which are specific for English indirect speech.

3. Research Questions

Based on the purpose of our study, we decided to answer our main research question: Which are the most problematic issues of teaching and learning of English reported speech? Numerous "sub-questions" appeared in the process of finding the answers to the above mentioned main research question, and they were mainly related to the clarity of presentations and explanations given in the teaching materials used by learners of English. A vast majority of these teaching materials come from publishing institutions located in English speaking countries, so the issues are presented from native speakers' points of view. Some explanations thus can be hardly understandable or confusing for learners whose mother tongue is completely different from English. On the other hand, there can be some issues occurring in reported speech which are shared by more languages, so the learners can use a positive transfer. That is why our main "sub-question" was: "Which phenomena existing in the Czech reported speech can be positively transferred when teaching and learning English reported speech?"

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to find ways how to improve the effectivity of teaching and learning English reported speech in the Czech educational environment. On the basis of her long-term professional

career in training pre-service and in-service teachers of English in the Czech educational environment, the author can claim that the effectivity of teaching English grammatical issues improves if “conveniently chosen examples referring to the students’ already acquired knowledge are used, since the students are effectively motivated to constructively use their already existing linguistic abilities and skills“ (Ondrakova et al., 2019, p. 144).

We believe that already existing language abilities and skills are highly important in the process of learning other languages. Learners can use and further enlarge their language competences, which can even result in their improved linguistic creativity. At this point it seems convenient to quote Chomsky (as cited in Harmer, 1994): “It is competence that a child gradually acquires, and it is this language competence (or knowledge of the grammar rules) that allows children to be creative language users (e.g. experimenting and saying things they have never said before)” (p. 33). If teachers are competent and aware of their learners’ abilities and competences, then they are able to provide their learners with a kind of input which enables to train and develop their ability of creative performance. In that case we can say that the whole teaching process was effective.

Our findings made in 2016 (Tauchmanova, 2017), however, showed that “learners of more foreign languages are not sufficiently trained in thinking about their learning process, they are not fully aware of potentials of the positive transfer and of potentials of using and applying the already built language competences. This is definitely a challenge for foreign language teachers” (p. 2729).

Exploring the issue of English indirect speech with the objective to think about ways of clarifying this issue to Czech students of English can not only make our pre-service teachers more competent but it can also be motivating for the readers to further discover the issue and come up with improved clarifications or presentations of the appropriate rules. As Ur (2013) says: “it is helpful to have an explicit rule available for a grammar point being learnt, provided this is simple enough to be grasped by the learner” (p. 5).

5. Research Methods

The research was carried out during courses in Pedagogical Grammar of English, and it was qualitatively oriented. The students were referred to available linguistic, methodological, teaching and learning materials focused on the issue of the English indirect speech. Firstly, the quality of the students’ understanding of the issue itself and of the materials referred to was being revealed. Secondly, the level and quality of the students’ abilities to further discuss, interpret and clarify the presented findings were being examined.

The whole research process aimed to be formative. Within the framework of both the individual work and the group work the students were trained in revealing not only their own strong and weak points, but they could also learn from their teacher’s and their colleagues’ opinions, arguments, experience and also from their colleagues’ mistakes.

6. Findings

Being asked about problematic issues related to English indirect speech, pre-service English teachers usually cannot see a lot of them at first. The list is usually limited to “the necessity to change tenses”. However, the students start to become less confident when they are to answer subsequent questions like:

'Are the tenses changed every time?', 'What else must or can be changed?', 'Are there any changes that must be made when changing direct speech into indirect both in English and in Czech?', etc. Pre-service teachers of English gradually come to the point that teaching and clarifying of English reported speech can be rather a problematic issue, and they come to realise that language teachers should be better aware of potential causes of mistakes made by their learners.

The following part of the paper deals with some findings which were made during courses in Pedagogical Grammar in which the students were to reflect on some issues related to English indirect speech. These reflections focused on the clarity of explanations given in the teaching materials and on the linguistic explorations themselves.

6.1. Reflections on teaching materials

As it was mentioned above, the trainees come to the course in Pedagogical Grammar with at least the upper-intermediate level of their English, so they are aware of the existence of the phenomenon of indirect speech. This issue is thus approached "more sophisticatedly" through references to "more academic" linguistic texts and materials.

As an introduction to the issue of English reported speech, the students' attention was drawn to the following two sentences presented in Carter and McCarthy (2006): "An indirect report consists of a reporting clause, plus a reported clause which is more fully integrated as the object of the reporting verb and not usually separated by punctuation. The reported clause has a form which reflects the speech act of the original utterance" (p. 804). The students were quite happy about understanding the meaning of the first sentence but they were rather in trouble when being asked to clarify the second sentence ("... a form which reflects the speech act of the original utterance") in their own words. Therefore, they were referred to the following text (Carter & McCarthy, 2006): "When someone's words are reported indirectly, pronouns, tenses, clause types, etc. change to reflect the situation of the current report in relation to the original moment of speaking of the words reported" (p. 805). Referring to this statement, the students were asked to make comments on the changes which were needed and on the rules which were applied in the process of transforming the direct speech in the resulting indirect report appearing in the form '*She asked why she would not be promoted.*' The comments resulting from the group work appeared in the following order:

- 1) *would* resulted from *will* – this is a rule saying that *will* changes into *would* in indirect speech
- 2) *she* in the second clause resulted from *I* – personal pronouns change in indirect speech
- 3) it was necessary to change the word order – indirect questions have different structures

There is no reason to disagree with the comments, the students came to the conclusion that the original direct question was: '*Why won't I be promoted?*'. At this point, the wording of the following explanation used by Carter and McCarthy (2006) was welcomed by the students since it really clarifies the above mentioned change 3): "The interrogative clause has become declarative as the clause is now an indirect report and is no longer a direct question" (p. 805). Being asked about the equivalent sentence structures in their mother tongue, the students surprisingly revealed that the same change (i.e. interrogative clauses change into declarative ones) is applied in Czech. This fact is definitely worth mentioning when English indirect questions are presented to Czech native speakers learning English.

Thinking about courses in practical English, students would still use a “less sophisticated” explanation – even an advanced English grammar course (Swan & Walter, 2015) uses the following wording: “In indirect questions the subject usually comes before the verb. *Do* is not used, and there are no question marks” (p. 218)

However, the students got rather confused when being asked whether there is really only one possible version of the direct question. They grew even more confused when the teacher came up with the version ‘*Why won’t she be promoted?*’. When the students realised that two (or even more) direct questions can result in the same reported statements, which can cause problematic misunderstandings, they became less self-confident about proper using of personal and possessive pronouns. Some students expressed their loss of self-confidence through comments like “Personally, I do not like ambiguity and then its subsequent analysis with lengthy discussions. For this reason, I prefer study materials and exercises in which it is clear at first glance what the author wanted to express / to say.” This view is quite understandable from a student’s point of view but it shows that such an undergraduate is not fully ready for a teacher’s position.

It was quite convenient to mention the term “deictic expression” in connection with the issue of personal and possessive pronouns. Carter and McCarthy (2006) give examples of deictic expressions - they list words pointing to time (today, ago), to place (here, this) and to persons (I, you). The following explanation of the term seems quite convenient and understandable (Carter & McCarthy, 2006): “Deictic meanings are relative to where the speakers are and when they are speaking. Such meanings may undergo changes in indirect reports to reflect the viewpoint of the person reporting the words spoken (since the person reporting is frequently in a different time and place from the original situation and reporting someone else’s words)” (p. 810).

Most of the students found working with and commenting on the changes to the deictic reference quite challenging. The bellow given examples and explanations taken from Carter and McCarthy (2006) show how important the use of correct deictic words and correct verb tenses is. The two authors work with the following original direct question to be changed into the indirect one: ‘*Will you be coming here tomorrow, Jane?*’. Instead of being asked to come up with the resulting indirect questions, the students were provided with the below given versions presented by Carter and McCarthy (2006), and they were asked to make explanations of these different versions. There were quite interesting and fruitful discussions within the group work, the students’ opinions were compared. Finally, the students were provided with the explanations offered by the authors themselves (Carter and McCarthy (2006, p. 810):

“*I asked Jane if she will be coming here tomorrow.*’

- the reporter is the same person and is at the same place where the original question was asked, and ‘tomorrow’ has not come yet

‘*I asked Jane if she would be going there the next day.*’

- the reporter is the same person but is at a different place from where the original question was asked, and ‘tomorrow’ has gone

‘*He/she asked Jane if she would be going there the next day.*’

- the reporter is a different person and is at a different place from where the original question was asked, and ‘tomorrow’ has gone

‘*He/she asked me if I will be coming here tomorrow.*’

- the reporter is Jane herself, she is at the same place where she was originally asked the question and ‘tomorrow’ has not come yet.”

At this point it is important to mention that the students did not notice that the deictic phenomenon have an impact even on using different lexical verbs (the same place is referred to through the verb 'come', a different place is referred to through the verb 'to go'). Moreover, at first the students were rather frustrated due to the rather complicated changes in the deictic expressions given above. However, when the teacher referred them to Czech indirect speech, they surprisingly realised that the changes are more or less equivalent in these languages, and they realised how helpful the already acquired linguistic competences can be. The students expressed their agreement with the following opinion (Tauchmanova et al., 2017): "Linguistic competences are acquired through the natural language acquisition or through controlled learning. The results of the controlled teaching depend on the level of a particular learner's active involvement into the studies of the given foreign language" (p. 107). In their future teaching career, these students majoring in teaching English will probably not stick to oversimplified versions of explaining deictic words which are used in teaching materials: "The following pronoun changes normally take place: I → he/she; we → they; my → his/her; our → their" (Paterson, 2012, p. 66).

The students' last but definitely not least comment which was discussed was the so called back-shift. Actually, the comments on the necessity of the change of the verb tense were the first comments expressed. This can be a result of rather oversimplified kinds of presentations used in teaching materials – the change of tense is stressed in all of them. However, we can get really confused when reading explanations similar to the following one (Fuchs & Bonner, 2003): "When the reporting verb is in the past simple, the verb in the indirect speech statement is usually in a different tense from the direct speech statement" (p. 319). How should we understand the word 'usually'? Does it mean that nothing happens if the reporting verb is in the past continuous? Does it mean that the above given sentences '*I asked Jane if she will be coming here tomorrow.*' and '*He/she asked me if I will be coming here tomorrow.*' are actually incorrect? Having worked in groups, our students revealed an important guideline: The tenses are changed only in case when we refer to the events which happened in the past and are "limited" to the past.

With reference to the use of 'will' and 'would', the students' attention was drawn to Quirk, who speaks about "future time in the past" (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1993, p. 50). This wording may seem rather confusing but it really reflects the necessity to change the original 'will' into its past form only in case when "something was future at the moment which is already past".

Having discussed the so-called back-shift, our future English teachers will probably not oversimplify this issue in their professional career, and they will probably clarify the differences between sentences '*I asked Jane if she will leave on Monday.*' and '*I asked Jane if she would leave on Monday.*' properly even if both of them are translated equally in Czech.

6.2. Reflections on explorations of reported speech

When being trained for their future professional career of teachers of English, numerous students admit that they often rely too much on their "language feeling", which can result not only in incorrect using of the language but also in their inability to justify and clarify the language items used correctly. As one of our students said: "I found myself doing a lot of exercises automatically, not thinking about all the rules related to them. When I imagined myself giving an explanation of the topic to a student, I could not find a better answer than 'Well it is just simply done that way.'. And I was quite mad at myself for a time. Fortunately, this problem disappeared when I started looking at more materials and videos online".

Our research also showed that deeper explorations of grammar issues and their presentations are welcomed by students majoring in teaching foreign languages. This can be witnessed by the following opinion expressed by one of pre-service teacher of English: “This part of lessons – part when we discussed practical problems and how to deal with them, what is the best way of teaching grammar and how to explain it – this is what I see as the biggest advantage, learning from the teacher’s experience and not just from some books”.

The students were motivated to further explore the issue of English reported speech, to look up other teaching and learning materials, to practice blended learning, which is so much supported by current highly developed technologies. Our pre-service teachers of English are aware of the fact which was proved by Vymetalkova and Milkova (2019), who claim that one possible suitable and efficient way how to improve and deepen foreign language seems to be the blended learning model.

The research into effectiveness of teaching seemed quite challenging for our students. As Parrot says, this kind of research can help them “to evaluate the effect their teaching has on their learners’ awareness, understanding and speaking or writing” (Parrot, 2015, p. 457).

At the end of our research into English reported speech, the majority of our students agreed that it was really surprising for them to find out how helpful it can be to refer to the system of their mother tongue when presenting English reported speech to Czech native speakers. Never before had they realised that there are any some important similarities between Czech and English reported speech, and that Czech native speakers learning English can profit from their knowledge of Czech, and that they can positively transfer this knowledge into the process of learning English.

7. Conclusion

Since reported speech is a phenomenon often occurring in varied types of media, it definitely requires a more systematic attention in the process of training future English teachers. Our research was carried out within the course in Pedagogical Grammar which is offered to students majoring in teaching English. It revealed that primary and secondary school teachers usually present English reported speech as a set of rules which are to be applied more or less automatically, ignoring important nuances, which can result in ineffective communication.

The research showed that existing teaching and learning materials can be presented creatively with references to learners’ already existing knowledge and skills. Then, learners of English will be presented the issue of English reported speech in a more understandable way, clear inputs will make the necessary practice easier and the whole learning process will be more effective.

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