The Dative Case for Comprehension-Based Grammar Teaching

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Abstract
This paper presents a comprehension-based model for explicit grammar instruction. It argues that the process of grammar teaching and learning can better be treated as a communicative event with content drawn from pedagogically relevant aspects of contrastive linguistic analyses of the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Within a task-based pedagogy, L2 learners can be engaged in concept-forming activities that allow them to develop an understanding of the target grammatical features to facilitate later interlanguage restructuring. This model is illustrated with an exercise in the English dative alternation based on a contrastive analysis of this lexico-syntactic phenomenon in English, the target language and Moroccan Arabic, the students' L1.
Key words: Dative case, comprehension-based grammar teaching **,** interlanguage

0. Introduction

Is there room for grammar instruction in the EFL classroom? As the pendulum of language teaching methodology swung from one approach to the other, corollary shifts took suit in answer to this question. Answers varied from positive to negative and were often inconclusive. With the move towards the communicative approach to, explicit grammar teaching was initially attributed a minimal if not a non-existent role in language teaching, relegating focus on form activities to an unnatural practice which does not pay heed to the basic function of language, that is communication.

By contrast, Fotos & Ellis' (1991) interpretive tasks create a niche for grammar instruction within communicative methodology, making the grammar point being taught the object of communication itself. In the footsteps of this task-based framework and consciousness raising (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1988), the present article develops a series of activities to teach the English dative alternation to Moroccan EFL learners, emphasis drawing on the pedagogical implications of the formal typological mismatches between Moroccan Arabic as L1 and English as an L2. Under such an approach, not only can grammar instruction qualify as a communicative event but finds justification in the insights it derives from formal theoretical linguistics as well.

1. A framework for explicit grammar instruction.

For long, proponents of the communicative approach have relegated focus on form to an unnecessary burden or a non-naturalistic practice at its best. (e.g. Krashen and Terrel, 1983). Grammar exercises were kept for homework to reassure those who enjoy rule-learning. However, there is more to grammar teaching than the rote learning of rules and paradigms. Alternatively, it can be better viewed as a process of consciousness raising (CR) whereby the learner's attention is deliberately drawn to the formal properties of the target language (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1988). The main departure of CR from traditional grammar teaching lies in the way pedagogical decisions are made. Within CR, decisions as to how to teach a specific grammar point vary along two dimensions: explicitness and elaboration. Contrary to expectation, learners can be made aware of the idiosyncrasies of the grammatical system of the target language without indulging much on meta-language. On a continuum of explicitness, a grammar point can be presented through the use of either an informal rule or any other technique that would capture the form/function pairing under consideration such as matching exercises with forms in one column and their functions in the other. It is also suggested that different aspects of a grammatical structure be highlighted through the use of typographical techniques: underlining, circling, capitalizing etc…

The second dimension along which grammar instruction can vary is that of elaboration. Keeping their degree of explicitness constant, teachers may opt for different pedagogical decisions as to how elaborate their presentation might be. They may allocate more time and space or treat in more depth one structure while restrict their presentation to an informal rule in passing for another. But how can such pedagogical decisions be made in as a systematic a manner as possible?

In fact, it cannot be denied that CR is not a solution to all evils. The teacher's decision as how to teach a certain grammar point depends primarily on learner variables, mainly, age and

level. CR works best for adolescents and adults in intermediate and advanced levels while a more implicit method would better suit children and learners at beginning levels. More importantly, the grammatical structure to be taught also has a say in the pedagogical decision of the teacher. Bearing in mind that EFL learners come to the learning task with a predetermined, full-fledged L1 grammar, EFL teaching cannot not make use of the L1-L2 pairing to inform the pedagogical decision making process. In short, it is the mismatches between the L1 and the L2 that deserve more explicit grammar instruction. Thus, comparing the L1 to the L2 sheds light at the areas EFL learners find difficult to acquire and, hence, lay a solid ground for pedagogical intervention.

Many of the principles of CR discussed above find realization in Fotos & Ellis' (1991) interpretive tasks later work (Ellis, 1995, 1999, 2001, 2002). Unlike traditional grammar teaching which focuses on output (the production of the grammatical structure taught), interpretation-based grammar tasks highlight the importance of input, the learners' comprehension of the grammar point. The learners are given an opportunity to comprehend input and compare it to their own output in the hope that this would result in intake through the cognitive comparison of grammatical and ungrammatical utterances. The importance of these tasks lies in their provision for negative evidence, information on what is not correct in the target language, by having learners judge or process the grammaticality of the examplar items. Structuring the learning experience in this manner is believed to raise the learners' awareness to the idiosyncratic formal properties of the target language. This in turn serves as a trigger for learners to subsequently notice the grammar point taught in communicative input, a basic process for the acquisition process to be set into motion (Schmidt, 1990). This highlights the importance of exposing the learners to rich input including the structures taught in an extended period later to instruction especially in the EFL context where natural exposure to the target language is very limited if not non-existent.

Grammar interpretation task may well be conducive to natural communication if designed as an information gap activity. In small groups, each learner can have a mixed set of grammatical and ungrammatical examples to study on the provision that the information every learners derives from the first cycle in the task fits into a larger picture to help the group form an informal rule later on in the task through negotiation of meaning and form.

As discussed earlier, explicit grammar instruction requires a thorough understanding of the target structure to be taught for the learning experience to be engineered smoothly; thus, a comparative account of the linguistic phenomenon both in the L1 and the L2 would serve to show which grammar points are worth an explicit treatment and to determine the different aspects of the linguistic structure which begs for more attention. To provide a comparative account for the dative alternation in English and Moroccan Arabic emphasis will be directed next as to unveil the similarities and differences this lexico-syntactic alternation exhibits in English, the target language and Moroccan Arabic, the students' mother tongue.

2. The dative alternation in English and Moroccan Arabic.
Provided with the frame "John gave……." and the two words (a ring, Mary), the sentence can be completed as "John gave Mary a ring", resulting in a double object construction or as "John gave a ring to Mary", ending up with a prepositional dative construction. This alternation realization of the recipient argument either as a noun phrase "Mary" (indirect object)

or a prepositional phrase "to Mary" (dative) is called in the literature as the dative alternation (Bresnan, 2003; Levin, 1993; Oehrle, 1976 Among others).

On hearing examples of this kind, learners are justified in judging as grammatical such a non-target structure as "He donated the museum the painting". Despite the synonymy of the two verbs (give, donate), "give" can be considered as an alternating dative verb, admitting both constructions while "donate" occurs only in the prepositional dative construction, hence its non-alternating nature. This mismatch between the two verbs leads the learners to apply the alternation rule to instances where it does not, producing an overgeneralization error (Bley-Vroman and Yoshinaga, 1992, Inagaki, 1997, Mazkurewich, 1984; Zeddari, 2010, 2015). To constrain this over-general rule in the learners' interlanguage (their developing mental grammars) , it is of crucial relevance to sensitize learners not only to which verbs alternate and which do not but also to the reasons lying behind their variable surface syntactic behaviour. The examples below illustrate this point within Pinker's (1989) framework.

(1)   a- He gave/donated all his money to the poor.
       b- He gave/*donated the poor all his money.
       c- She told/whispered the news to her friend.
       d- She told/*whispered her friend the news.
       e- Zidane threw the ball to Ronaldo.
       f- Zidane threw Ronaldo the ball.
       g- He pushed the box to Ann.
       h- *He pushed Ann the box

With the aesterix (*) standing for "ungrammatical", it is not difficult to see that the verbs "give", "tell", and "throw" occur both in the double object construction and the prepositional dative construction while the non-alternating "donate", "whisper", and "push" are restricted to the prepositional dative construction and blocked from occurring in the double object construction. Apart from the morpho-phonological ban on verbs like "donate" through their Latinate root, which restricts the alternation to verbs with a native origin (e.g. give), all the other constraints are semantically grounded as will be discussed below.

In the examples (1 a-b) above, the verb "give" is constrained by the animate possessor constraint which dictates the future possessor of the giving event be animate and so is the case with the recipient argument "the poor". Second, the verb "tell" also freely alternates in both constructions in (1 c-d) as a verb of speaking encoding no specific manner of speaking unlike the verb "whisper". The manner of speaking constraint just rules out of court the dative verb "whisper" and other semantically related verbs (e.g. shout, scream, mutter, mumble), hence, its ungrammaticality in "*She whispered her friend the news". Another constraint pertains to the alternating verb "throw" which admits its recipient both as a noun phrase in a double object construction or as a prepositional phrase in a prepositional dative construction. A throwing event assumes a ballistic motion through the air and this features allows this verb category to alternation. Similar verbs are *kick, shoot, throw, and toss*. Push, on the other hand, does not involve such a motional ballisticness but encodes a continuous imparting of force on the object pushed. By virtue of the continuous motion constraint, this verb is restricted in use to the prepositional dative construction along other similar verbs (e.g. bring, take, carry). Having laid

the main constraints regulating the English dative alternation, this section will proceed with a comparative treatment of the same linguistic phenomenon in Moroccan Arabic to see if these constraints are active in Moroccan Arabic. It is believed that contrasts between Moroccan Arabic as L1 and English as L2 would yield significant insights into pedagogical practice because these mismatches cause more problems to EFL learners and deserve a more an explicit and elaborate treatment in the EFL classroom. Moroccan Arabic is a Western, North African type of Arabic spoken in Morocco (Caubet, 2011). As a Maghrebi Arabic dialect, the realization of arguments with dative verbs is mostly restricted to the prepositional dative construction unlike the other eastern Arabic dialects (Wilmsen, 2012). Given the alternate realization of arguments that English dative exhibits, the English dative alternation poses a serious learnability problem to Moroccan Arabic speaking EFL learners (Zeddari, 2010, 2015). This justifies the choice of these verbs as the subject of a thorough investigation in terms of representation, acquisition and teachability. Below is a presentation of the key characteristics of the syntactic behaviour of dative verbs in Moroccan Arabic (for more discussion see Zeddari, 2008, 2010, 2015).

(2) a- `simu  ʕtˤa  lktab  lddri`
    'Simo gave the book to the boy'

  b- `simu  ʕtˤa (l)*ddri lktab`
    'simo gave to the boy the book' (only with a special intonation (Adger, 2003)

  c- `simu  ʕtˤah lktab`
    'Simo gave him the book.'

Even with the most prototypical dative verb "`ʕtˤa`" (give), differences arise. In Moroccan Arabic, this verb cannot occur in a double object construction except when the recipient argument is a pronominal clitic. This may partly explain why Moroccan EFL learners find double object constructions with the verb "give" and pronominal recipients (Zeddari, 2010, 2015). It is also interesting to note that the prepositional phrase "`lddri`" (to the boy) may naturally occupy the position most adjacent to the verb, contrary to fact in English. This echoes utterances like "he gave to me the book" frequently produced by Moroccan EFL. These systematic errors might be due to this crosslinguistic contrast between English and Moroccan Arabic. The following example illustrate the syntactic behaviour of "`laħ`" (throw) and "`dfʕ`" (push).

(3) a- `simu  laħ / dfʕ  lkarta  lddri`
        Simo threw/pushed the cards to the boy'
  b- `simu laħ / dfʕ (l-)*ddri lkarta`
    'Simo threw/pushed to the boy the cards'
  c- `simu  laħ/ dfʕ (li)*h  lkarta`
    'Simo threw/pushed the cards to the boy'

As the above example show, the dative verbs "`laħ`" (throw) and "`dfʕ`" (push) show an identical syntactic behaviour. It seems that Moroccan Arabic is insensitive to the ballistic motion constraint and the continuous imparting of force constraint and so are Moroccan EFL learners

when judging the grammaticality of these verbs in illicit double object constructions (Zeddari, 2008). Unlike "ʕtˤa" (give) however, these verbs categorically rule out the double object construction even with pronominal clitics as the ungrammaticality of (3 c) attests to. Let's now turn to the Moroccan Arabic dative equivalents of whisper "wʃwʃ" and tell "qal".

4)   a- fatima wʃwʃat / qalt klmt ssr lkarima
            'Fatima whisper/told the password to Karima.'
        b- * fatima wʃwʃat/ qalt karima klmt ssr
             'Fatima (*whispered)/ told Karima the password'
        c̣ fatima w ʃ w ʃ a t / qalt (l)-* ha klmt ssr
             'Fatima (*whispered)/ told Karima the password'

Similar to " laħ" (throw) and "dfʕ" (push), the verbs "wʃwʃ" (whisper) and "qal" (tell) are not delineated as to dativization as they are restricted to one syntactic frame, namely, the prepositional dative construction. The distinction between verbs of speaking (e.g. tell) and manner of speaking verbs (e.g. whisper) is blurred in Moroccan Arabic. This makes the learning task for Moroccan EFL learners even harder. While they could learn double object constructions with the verb "tell" from the target input though its equivalent is nonexistent in Moroccan Arabic, they could hardly recover from overgeneralization errors and expunge such an overgeneral rule from their language. Still, the preposing of the prepositional phrase within the verb phrase is also possible as is the case with the other dative verbs.

In the face of these sharp contrasts, it seems that Moroccan EFL learners are at a disadvantage when learning English dative verbs. Despite the clarity and straightforwardness of an overgeneral rule deriving the double object construction from the prepositional construction by deleting the preposition and moving the indirect object argument to the position most adjacent to the verb, this rule just misses the semantics regulating the variable syntactic behaviour of English dative. Therefore, it is an endeavour worth undertaking to draw our EFL learners' attention to the morphophonological and semantic restrictions on the English dative alternation. Consciousness raising (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1988) and interpretation-based tasks (Ellis and Fotos, 1991) seem a good match to serve this end. The coming section develops an activity in the spirit of this framework, taking into account the crosslinguistic differences between English and Moroccan Arabic.

3. Teaching the English Dative Alternation.
The task designed in this section aims at drawing the learners' awareness to the morphophonological and semantic restrictions regulating what seems at first sight a simple dative rule. It will capitalize on the lexical variation various dative verbs exhibit as to dativization.

Instructions: Teacher (Tr.) cuts up into three separate cards and have the Students (Ss) form groups of three each. One card for each S with correction column folded with a paper clip.
Cycle I: One card for each S with correction column folded with a paper clip.

Ss will individually focus on meaning trying to understand the examples on their card

Student A :

Example	Correct or Wrong	Correction
John gave the book to Mary.		**Correct**
She is telling story to the child.		**correct**
He whispered his sister the news		. **Wrong**
He pushed the cards to the other player.		**Correct**
The artist donated the museum the paintings.		**Wrong**
Ronaldo threw Zidane the ball.		**Correct**
Ann faxed the news to Beth.		**Correct**
She e-mailed her friends the pictures**.**		**Correct**
She gave to me the book**.**		**Wrong**

Cut here---

Student B:

Example	Correct or Wrong	Correction
John gave Mary the book.		**Correct**
She whispered the password to her friend.		**correct**
Ann faxed Beth the news**.**		**Correct**
He pushed the other player the cards.		**Wrong**
The old lady donated the money to the association.		**Correct**
Ronaldo threw The ball to Zidane.		**Correct**
The babysitter always tells a bedtime story to the Kids.		**Correct**
She pushed the guest the tea Wagon.		**Wrong**
She whispered to her sister the news.		**Wrong**

Student C:

Example	Correct or Wrong	Correction
He gave his wife a diamond ring.		**Correct**
She whispered her friend the password.		**Wrong**
He threw the beggar a dirham.		**Correct**
The artist donated the paintings to the museum.		**Correct**
She is telling the child a story.		**Correct**

Zidane threw to Ronaldo the ball.		**Wrong**
She e-mailed her friends the pictures.		**Correct**
She pushed the tea wagon to the guest.		**Correct**
She pushed to the guest the tea wagon.		**Wrong**

Cycle II: Ss focus on form. They will individually process the grammaticality of each example and then check the correct ones while the teacher is monitoring.

Cycle III: Ss will attend to the function of the recipient argument and its possible realization as a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase.

Instructions: Complete the following Chart with the verbs which occur in these constructions *Verb* (**someone**)+(*something) AND Verb (something*)+(**to someone**). Discuss all the options with your partners.

Verb (**someone**)+(*something)*	*Verb* (*something*)+(**to someone**)
Give	**Give**

Cycle IV: Students will pair form to function

Instructions:

Step 1: Look again at the verbs in the chart again and classify each verb into one of the following categories depending on their meaning.

    Verbs of giving: …………………………………………………………………

    Verbs of speaking: ……………………………………………………………….

    Verbs of speaking in a specific manner: ………………………………………….

    Verbs referring to means of communication: ……………………………………..

    Causing something to move while controlling it: …………………………………..

    Causing something to move through the air: …………………………………………

    Verbs from latin (French-like verbs): ……………………………………………….

Step2: Note:

> Some of the verb categories above belong to an alternating class, accepting both constructions: (*Verb* **someone**+ *something* *and Verb* **something** + **to someone**). Others are non-alternating, accepting only one grammatical construction: either (*Verb* **something** + **to someone**) or (*Verb someone* + **something**).

Step3: Look at the categories above and write "A" for the alternating classes and "N" for "the non-alternating classes"

Step 4: for the alternating and non-alternating verbs is it possible to use the following order.
Verb+to someone+something
Cycle V: Ss will extend the alternating non-alternating distinction to semantically related verbs.

Example	Correct or Wrong	Correction
David suggested the trip to Ruth.		
David suggested Ruth the trip.		
I suggest you this cream.		
Susan explained the problem to Jane.		
Susan explained Jane the problem.		
Please, could you explain me this exercise?		
James lends his friends huge sum of money.		
James lens huge sums of money to his friends		
Please, could you lend me some money?		
She passed the salt to the guest.		
She passed the guests the salt.		
She always carries breakfast to her father.		
She always carries her father breakfast		
She always carries to him breakfast		
He murmured words of love to her		
He murmured her words of love		
Ann wrote Richard an email		
She wrote to Richard an email		

Lead-out: students discuss the punch line in jokes based on an ambiguity in alternate dative verb usage.

Joke 1: At a bus stop
A man was waiting at a bus stop, eating some fried fish and potato chips. A lady with a cat was standing next to him. The cat could smell the fish and became excited. It started to jump on his leg. The man turned to the lady and said, do you mind if I throw your cat a bit?
No not all, the lady said. So the man picked the cat and threw it over the wall.

Joke 2: At the hotel doorway
'call me a taxi' said the fat man.

'Ok' said the door man ' you're a taxi, but you look like a truck to me.'

Joke 3:
In 1951, An African American was down South during the apartheid days. He walked into a fancy restaurant and this white waiteress, embarrassed, came up to him and said, 'We don't serve colored people here'.
The African American guy said ' That's all right. I don't eat colored people. Bring me a piece of fried chicken.

Conclusion
This article has presented a model for explicit grammar instruction within a comprehension-based approach to Focus on Form. It has been shown that while interpretation-based grammar tasks and consciousness raising principles could inform the way a grammar lesson may proceed, insights derived from formal linguistics give it substance and provide suggestions as to which structures deserve a more explicit treatment. All this was achieved through a working example, the English dative alternation.

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