

Undergraduate University Students' Competence of English Reported Speech

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ABSTRACT English Second Language (L2) learning always poses difficulties to students who only use the language in the classroom environment. The aim of the paper was to investigate the English Advanced Usage competence of the 3rd year level South African university students. As reported speech is part of the third level module outline, therefore it was imperative that they had fully mastered this aspect. The students were tested on whether they were able to report pronouns, time and place expressions, statements and questions when the reporting verb is in the past tense. The research methodology employed was quantitative in nature. Fifty questionnaires comprising eight questions relating to English reported speech were distributed to all the participating students. The majority of the participants were competent in reporting pronouns, time and place expressions and statements. However, the majority of the participants were incompetent in reporting questions because the requirement is to deal with both tenses and word order. The paper concludes that the students' inability to sequence tenses by some students was due to lack of prior knowledge in tenses especially past tense and past perfect tense. Also, incompetence in questions formulation compounded the challenge of word order when reporting questions. Therefore it is recommended that

when dealing with reported speech, the lecturer should first establish the level of knowledge the students have regarding the English tenses. The reported speech rules should be explained per tense. There should be a clear understanding of the difference between the present tense reporting verb and past tense reporting verb at least by the end of level one.

INTRODUCTION

Defining direct and indirect speech

In each speech language, speakers are required to report what they have heard and there are rules to be followed when changing speech from direct to indirect or reported speech. Farlex (2014) defines direct speech as the repeating of what someone says by using the exact words. Direct speech in writing entails the use of quotation marks such as: colon or semicolon after the reporting verbs, followed by open inverted commas and close inverted commas at the end of the statement, question and/or a command. Indirect speech or reported speech is the repeating of something said or written by conveying what was meant rather than repeating the same words. It involves repeating what the speaker said consisting not of the speaker's exact words but of a version transformed for grammatical inclusion in a larger sentence. Hopwood & Stander (1984) expound that when reporting statements introduced by reporting verbs in the present tense, the tense of the sentence remains unchanged. The pronouns do change and the word order changes when reporting questions. Tregidgo (1986) explains that the quotation marks as well as the colons and semicolons are omitted. In reported speech the tenses, word order and pronouns may be different from those in the original statement. When the reporting verbs are in the past tense, the reported speech should be one tense back or sequenced in time from the tense in direct speech. If the original statement was about something that is still true, there is no change of the tense in that statement or question. These two speech forms serve different purposes.

According to (Eerland, Engelen & Zwaan, 2013), direct and indirect speech serve different functions in linguistic function. Indirect speech is thought of as description like, while direct speech is considered to be more depiction like. Direct speech is more vivid and perpetually engaging than indirect speech on the nature of mental representation. Although both speech functions are important, there are rules involved in dealing with both.

Bot & Wadenjo (2004) state that reported speech does not improve understanding, it can confuse the parties involved with regard to speech attribution, while direct speech implies that the reporter identifies more closely with what is being said. Holsanova (2006) & Tannen

(1989) suggest that reported speech can be used as a linguist's device to indicate a person's attitude and position in a conversation. Van de Mierop (2012), adds that reported speech disambiguates the authorship of the source language utterance. The findings by (Eerland, Engelen & Zwaan, 2013) indicate that participants were better at remembering the exact words that were used in direct speech than in indirect speech. It seems that remembering the direct message word for word might be difficult even if the L1 is used. Therefore, English L2 learners are at risk of understanding direct speech and reporting the information heard. The complexity of the reported speech calls for teachers to assist learners by explaining or deductively teaching the grammar rules. Scheffer (2008) confirms that learners feel they benefit from difficult rules being explained and practised. Nonetheless, Franke (1884) holds the view that grammar rules are best taught by using them actively in the classroom. More importantly, the learning of reported speech necessitates that the learners should have already mastered the English tenses. Some languages do not have the same tense sequence as compared to that of the English language.

L2 Learners' Difficulties in Learning English Grammar

Apart from differences in tenses, English (L2) learning poses difficulties because of the differences in language structures and cultures. Grammar on the other hand gives guidance by prompting the performance of complex cognitive operations (Fauconnier, 1994). This intricate process causes L2 learners' to transfer the L1 previous or existing knowledge which can result in errors when learning tenses or any English grammar aspect. On the other hand, Corder (1967) claims that errors constitute a useful window into the process of second language acquisition acting as potential indicators of the developmental stages learners are likely to have reached. The research by Yusuf (2012) revealed that first year level college students overgeneralised the English grammar rules. Many South African learners live in environments that provide little opportunity for the natural uninstructed acquisition of the English language (Potgieter & Conradie, 2013). Therefore, explicit instruction benefits L2 learners and better draws their attention to linguistic rules leading to increased levels of performance. It increases learners' competence in a language especially grammatical competence. Ellis (2006) advocates for the identification of grammatical features that prove problematic for learners and focus on these, rather than the entire scope of grammatical features of the L2.

There is also a notion that the learners' first language is not the only linguistic factor affecting the acquisition of English tenses. The learners' failure to grasp the significance of auxiliary verbs used in combination with the inflectional suffixes of the main verbs, has been

identified as a factor causing learning difficulties (Khazaal, 2009). According to the research findings by Blom & Parodis (2013) regarding the learning of verbs, L2 learners were found to be more accurate at existing regular verbs or novel verbs. The irregular past tense is largely dependent on word frequency in contrast to regular past tense acquisition which relies on word frequency type and variability. For that reason, L2 learners with vocabulary size and word frequency predict accuracy with both regular and irregular past tense forms. Learners with large vocabulary size can connect more verb types and their schemas will be stronger. Then, the successful learning of tenses depends on the knowledge of both regular and irregular verbs, but the irregular verbs prove to be more difficult to learners than the regular verbs.

According to Ranta (2006) learning progressive or continuous form tenses by L2 learners is problematic to understand and regarded as the most difficult grammar items. The past perfect continuous tense is considered the furthestmost difficult within this category of progressive tenses. Still, CAL (2014) suggests that tenses are seen as the building blocks of meaning in English without competence in tenses, there will be no accuracy in speaking about time in English. Lack of a tense system in some languages, makes it difficult for L2 learners to use tenses correctly and organise all the parts of the different parts of the sentence correct. Nonetheless, Gabriele (2005, 2009)'s findings revealed that L2 learners can succeed in acquiring the aspectual interpretations not found in their L1. Hence so many L2 learners in the world have successfully mastered the English language and also use it as a medium of instruction. This is an indication that L2 learners are capable of mastering English tenses as well as other grammatical aspects such as syntax/ word order and questions.

Tense Sequencing

Sequence of tenses is a feature of direct speech that many languages do not have. In these languages there is no back-shifting of tenses because of lack of the tense system (Coulmas, 1986). The sequence of tense in reported speech means that when the reporting verb is in the past, the rule of the sequence of tenses should be obeyed. If the statement of the direct speech is in the present tense form, the reported speech form should be in the simple past tense (Tredgido, 1986). E.g. Tali said: "Mary works in her study room." The reported speech form would be *Mary worked in her study room*. If the statement is in the simple past form, it is changed into the past perfect tense form. E.g. He said: "Khume wrote the book." The reported speech form would be *Khume had written the book*. If the direct statement is in the present perfect tense, it is changed into the past perfect tense. E.g. My grandmother told me: "I have visited my son several times." The reported speech form would be *My grandmother*

told me that she had visited her son several times. When the direct statement is in the past perfect tense, it remains unchanged since there is no further past form (beyond past perfect tense) in English. Therefore, it is essential that L2 speakers are competent in appropriate sequencing of various tenses in English reported speech as required by the grammar rules. The tense sequence works hand in hand with the knowledge of present time and past time expressions as well as change of place when reporting the information.

Time and Place Expressions

When reporting what has been said, while in a different place and in a different point of time, there is a need to change the place and time expressions accordingly. The expressions of time and place tend to show changes of view point. Following are examples for when and how to change place and time expressions (Tredgidgo, 1986):

Direct viewpoint (from, now)	Indirect view point (from, then)
<i>now, here, this</i>	<i>then, there, that</i>
<i>today</i>	<i>that day</i>
<i>tomorrow, next week</i>	<i>the following day, the next day, the following week</i>
<i>in three days' time</i>	<i>three days later</i>
<i>yesterday</i>	<i>the day before, the previous day</i>
<i>last week</i>	<i>the previous week</i>
<i>two days ago</i>	<i>two days before</i>

Conversely, the reporter must always use common sense, if the person is reporting something that someone said ten minutes ago for instance, and the location is still the same, and the time frame is still the same, then there is no need to change place and time expressions (Really, 2010-2014). It is not enough to master tenses and time expressions only. Equally, English reported speech also calls for the speakers to pose questions which must be reported using the correct grammar rules.

Reporting questions

According to Farlex (2014) a question refers to words addressed to a person in order to elicit information or evoke a response; interrogative sentence, while word order refers to the temporal or linear sequence of words in a sentence, clause or phrase. Jiang (2009) asserts that in English word order is more important than it is in many other languages, because change in basic sentence order can make an English sentence senseless or make it mean something

completely different. Word order can be challenging to L2 learners because the word order features of their L1 and L2 are often different. In support of this assertion, Tregidgo, (1986) emphasises a need to change word order when reporting a question because it is no longer a question and in writing there is no question mark. After reporting the question, the word order should resemble that of a normal statement (subject-verb-object). This process appears to be more challenging than reporting a statement. Following is a discussion of rules on how to report questions.

When reporting questions; pronouns, place, time expressions and tenses (backshift) should be changed. The questions are to be transformed from direct into indirect or reported form as statements using the question words such as: where, when, what and how are used with if/whether. The word order of the questions including tenses (backshift), expressions of time and places are to be changed in reported statements (Hopwood & Stander, 1984). If the reporting question verb is in the past tense, the suitable process of sequencing of tenses should be adhered to. The inclusion of persons, places, things and ideas in sentences and questions results in the non-avoidance of the use of pronouns. Then L2 speakers should be knowledgeable on how to report pronouns within questions or statements.

Reporting Pronouns

According to (Jayarman, 2013) pronouns are a category of lexical items to be acquired by learners in the early stages of language learning. English pronouns are difficult to master because there are several kinds and some of them are alike, while others are completely different. Mastering pronouns takes a lot of time and practice (Grammar, 2014). Lambani (2014) found that Grade 7 English teachers had a problem of understanding and explaining reflexive pronouns. The reason might be that the teachers' languages do not have for example; pronouns showing gender differences. Although learners are required to master pronouns early, the pronouns in the English have a variety of functions. They are used in place of noun, differentiating gender, possessive, reflexive, interrogative and demonstrative. Therefore, a clear distinction and understanding will assist the L2 learners in reporting speech.

The first person pronouns in the direct speech change according to the subject of the reporting verb in the indirect speech. Direct speech- John said: "I shall be late"

Indirect speech- John said he will be late

The second person pronoun in the direct speech changes according to the object of the reporting verb in the direct speech. Direct speech- He said to me: "You have to come with me." – Indirect speech- He said to me I had to go with him.

The third person pronoun in the direct speech will not change in the indirect speech. Direct speech- He said: ‘She is a good person’ Indirect speech – She was a good person.

The suitable application of tenses, questions and pronouns in reported speech signifies that the L2 speaker is competent in this aspect. Therefore the English university L2 students who will be required to use English in a professional environment have to master and be fully competent in reported speech.

Research questions

The research questions for this paper sought to determine:

- Whether third year level university students were competent in sequencing English tenses in reported speech or not.
- Whether third year level university students were competent in reporting questions or not.
- Whether third year level students were competent in changing pronouns and time expressions in reported speech or not.

METHODOLOGY

Problem Statement

The researcher was prompted to research on the reported aspect after having heard on the radio and television talk shows that reported speech grammar rules are always broken. Again the students who seemed to be fluent in English experienced challenges in reported speech even if they were explicitly taught the grammar rules.

Participants

All fifty students registered for the third year university English Advanced level gave consent to participate in the research paper. The students were L2 speakers of English admitted into the stream after having passed the first and second year levels in both language and literature. The students were expected to be able to function linguistically in the academic environment as well as in society. They, at that stage, were expected to write clearly and concisely as well as construct variety of correct sentences in given situations. They were also in the threshold of going out to working in the society as either teachers or media professionals. They were taught reported speech at first and second levels and revision of rules was thoroughly and explicitly done in order to benefit the students at third level (Advanced level).

Consistent with the ethical requirements, an information leaflet requesting the students’ participation about the purpose of the research was written and distributed to the students.

They were duly informed that they had the right to decide, voluntarily, whether to participate or not without the risk of incurring any penalty, and that they had a right to: ask questions, refuse to participate or withdraw from the research. The response rate was 100% because the entire group consented to take part in the research.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure.

Written data were collected through the use of a questionnaire consisting of questions relating reporting information from direct speech to reported speech. The questions aimed at testing students' competency regarding change of pronouns, tense sequencing, change of time expressions and word order while reporting questions.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the majority, 80% of the participants were competent regarding the change of pronoun from direct to reported speech. Hundred percent of the participants were competent in changing the first person pronoun (*I*) in item (c) to the third person pronoun (*she*). Again, 100% of the participants were competent in dealing with the possessive pronoun (*his*) in item (f), they were aware that in this case, the pronoun should remain unchanged. The finding is in congruent with the suggestion by (Jayarman, 2013) that pronouns are supposed to be mastered at early stages of life and/ or learning for L2 learners. Therefore the participants had already mastered the first and possessive pronouns as they did not experience any difficulties.

Forty percent of the participants could not change the second person pronoun (*you*) in item (h) to the object case personal pronouns (*them/him/her*) depending to whom the question was addressed. Although there was a range of three options to answer the question, the participants did not correctly do so. The implication is that pronouns pose challenges to L2 speakers as confirmed by Lambani (2014; Grammar 2014). The participants' knowledge of pronouns did not expand to a point where they were expected to apply knowledge or use common sense.

With regards to the use of time expression and place in reported speech, all the participants 100% competently changed the direct view point to the indirect view point. In items (b) and (e) the time expressions (*last night and yesterday*) were successfully changed to (*the previous night and the previous day/the day before*). All the participants were able to change the future time expression (*tomorrow*) to (*the following day*). The findings confirm (Scheffer 2008 and Potgieter & Conradie, 2013) assertion that L2 learners benefit from difficult rules being explained and practised. Although the concept of time expression is not the same as that of

the participants' languages, they managed to conceptualise and apply the rules. They might have memorised the time expressions as they were provided on a list and thoroughly explained. The finding also supports Gabrielle (2005, 2009)'s finding that L2 learners are able to master and become competent of the L2 aspects that are not necessarily found in their L1.

Fourteen percent of the participants were not competent in terms of changing the place expression (*here*) in item (c) to (*there*). The challenge might be that there is a high frequency use of the time expressions as compared to the place expressions. The finding suggests what Corder (1967) postulates that committing errors gives L2 learners an opportunity for developmental learning.

The findings show that 90% of the participants were competent in sequencing the tense from present continuous tense to past continuous tense in item (c). The participants might have succeeded to change the statement because present continuous tense form is not complicated as compared to other tense forms such as perfect tense. The requirement was to change the helping verb into the past tense while the main verb remained unchanged. The finding is in contrast with Ranta (2006)'s assertion that progressive tense is difficult to understand. However, National Institute (2005) support this finding as the recommendation is that students at advanced level should be able to apply the knowledge of continuous tense taught and they should know how to form and when to use continuous tense.

The finding regarding the sequencing of the present future tense to past future tense item (d) in reported speech revealed that the participants were incompetent. Only 20% of the participants were able to correctly sequence the tense. The participants' inability was caused by the overgeneralisation of the past tense rule. They changed the helping verb (*shall*) to (*should*) instead of (*would*). They did not consider that the first person pronoun (*I*) changed to (*she*) and therefore, the helping verb *will/would* should be used. The finding is in line with what Yusuf (2012) found that L2 students' overgeneralisation of grammar rules causes errors. The finding indicates that memorisation of grammar rules does not always yield good results as suggested by (Franke, 1884).

The findings show that the majority of the participants 63% were competent in sequencing the tense in reported speech from the present tense to the past tense in both items (a) and (f). In item (a), 30% of the participants suffered from the overgeneralisation of the rule. They used the helping verb (*did*) in the past together with the past tense form of the main verb (*wanted*). Again, 75% of the participants were competent in sequencing item (f), from present tense to past tense. The main verbs involved in this case were both regular (*watched and*

parked) therefore, to change this, the participants had to add a past tense allomorph (-ed) to form the past tense. The finding supports Blom & Parodis (2013) who found that L2 learners find it easier to deal with regular past tense verbs than the irregular past tense verbs. The implication is that irregular verbs do not have a particular pattern to follow and are challenging.

The findings revealed that the majority (73%) of the participants were incompetent in terms of sequencing the past tense to the past perfect tense in items (b) and (c). In item (b), they repeated the tense as is, although the rule entailed adding the helping verb (*had*) and the past participle form of the verb (*watched*) which remained unchanged, because of its being regular in form. In item (e), the participants did not use the helping verb (*had*) and also were not aware of the irregular past participle form of the verb (*cut*) which takes a zero allomorph for both the past tense and past participle. This confirms what Khazaal (2009) found that L2 learners find it difficult to work with auxiliary verbs and inflectional suffixes of the main verb. Lambani (2014) also found that Grade 7 English teachers were not competent in perfect tenses. However, the findings contradict CAL (2014) who argues that correct usage of tenses is an indication of speaking accurately about time in English. The implication is that the participants were not competent in tense usage.

The majority 72% of the participants could not report questions as they had to deal with four aspects per sentence namely: change of pronouns, time expressions, tense sequencing and word order. Instead of changing the word order of the question they still reported the questions as they are in items (b), (g) and (h), even if the question mark was not included. The finding is in contrast with Tregidgo (1986) who asserts that after removing a question mark from direct speech, the reported information should be in a statement form. However the finding supports Jiang (2009) who found that word order is a challenging grammar aspect for L2 learners because their L1 syntax is not the same as that of L2.

CONCLUSION

The results for the paper revealed that third year level students were competent in terms of changing time expressions and pronouns from direct to reported speech. They were also able to sequence tenses when the statements are in the present tense; they found it easy to change them into past tense. They were incompetent regarding the reporting of statements already in the simple past tense as they could not sequence the tense back to past perfect tense.

The participants were not competent in reporting questions as they had to deal with tense sequencing, word order, pronouns and exclusion of quotation marks particularly the question

mark. They experienced a challenge of sequencing the tense from past tense to past perfect tense when dealing with questions especially when the main verb is irregular. They were unable to deal with word order from question expressions to statements. Although, the students could deal with certain aspects of reported speech accurately, the expectation was that the participants should have been fully competent as they were at the exit level to either teach or work as media professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings informed the lecturer of the students' areas of competence and incompetence regarding reported speech. Therefore, there is a need to devise strategies to assist students such as; informing the students about the importance of mastering English tenses as early as level 1 in order to avoid battling with tense sequencing at an advanced level. There is also a need for lecturers to teach grammar rules deductively even if the students are at an advanced level. Lecturers in other streams should be made aware of the students' difficulties in reported speech so that they also assist.

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RESULTS

Table 1: Students' competence of Reported Speech (n=50)

ITEM Questions	Correct responses Percentage	Correct responses Percentage	Correct responses Percentage	Correct responses Percentage

	<i>Pronouns</i>	<i>Time expressions & place</i>	<i>Statement & tense sequence</i>	<i>Questions & word order</i>
a. He said: “Mary wants to dance with <u>me</u>” ✓ He said that Mary <u>wanted</u> to dance with <u>him</u>.	80%		70%	
b. My friend asked me: “Did <u>you</u> <u>meet</u> the group members <u>last night</u>?” ✓ My friend asked me if <u>I had</u> met the group members <u>the previous night</u>.	72%	100%	35%	30%
c. She said:” I am working <u>here</u> temporarily.” ✓ She said that <u>she</u> was working <u>there</u> temporarily.	100%	86%	90%	
d. Shudu said: “I shall take my car for service tomorrow.” ✓ Shudu said <u>she</u> would take <u>her</u> car for service <u>the following day</u>.	86%	100%	20%	
e. She said: “ I cut my hair at Chibale hair salon yesterday.” ✓ She said <u>she had cut her</u> hair at Chibale hair salon <u>the previous day</u>.	88%	100%	20%	

f. He said. "Leo parks his car well." ✓ He said Leo <u>parked his</u> car well.	100%		75%	
g. My friend asked me: "Did you go fishing last week?" ✓ My friend asked me if <u>I had gone</u> television <u>the previous night</u>.	70%	100%	40%	45%
h. His parents wanted to know: "How much homework did the lecturer give you?" ✓ His parents wanted to know how much homework the lecturer had given <u>them/him/her</u>.	40%		20%	10%