

CHAPTER 2: Words and structures

The Collins COBUILD English Course

In 1983 my wife, Jane, and myself were commissioned by Collins to write a new English course to be called the Collins COBUILD English Course. Once a design had been agreed we were to have overall responsibility for writing the course, but we were not to be entirely free agents in drawing up the syllabus which would form the basis of the course. A decision had already been taken that the syllabus would be lexically based. Instead of specifying an inventory of grammatical structures or a set of functions, each stage of the course would be built round a lexical syllabus. This would specify words, their meanings, and the common phrases in which they were used.

Initially, the notion of a lexical syllabus gave us two grounds for concern. We both had firm ideas on the kind of methodology we would like to incorporate in an EFL course. It would be a task-based methodology firmly based in language use. We were, however, for the reasons outlined in Chapter 1, far from sure that our ideas on methodology would be compatible with a linguistically specified syllabus.

Secondly we had at that stage no real idea what a lexical syllabus would look like. We were familiar with the idea of a syllabus built round grammatical patterns and notions, and we were equally familiar with the idea of a functionally based syllabus. We could not understand at first how a list of words with their meanings and common phrases would be significantly different. It was only when we began to look at the grammar of English very much from a lexical viewpoint that we began to see real possibilities. We felt that a lexical approach might answer at least some of the doubts we had so far entertained about structure-based pedagogical grammars, and about the syllabus as an inventory of structures.

Priority and difficulty

Very often one of the striking features of ELT materials is the lack of balance in the treatment of grammar. I have already suggested that the number of patterns presented in most coursebooks gives a very restricted picture of the grammar of English. Most courses spend a great deal of time on the verb phrase and on a limited set of clause and sentence structures. Relatively little time is spent on some areas of English which formal grammars find extremely difficult to handle, such as transitivity and the structure of the noun phrase.

If we are to judge priorities by the amount of time afforded different features of English, then tense, aspect and voice are seen by most coursebook writers as being of overwhelming importance. In addition to this, a number of sentence patterns feature heavily and take up a good deal of the learner's time. Among these are the three conditionals. Another item which takes up a lot of time is

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reported speech, particularly tense in reported speech. The consensus seems to be that these items are of central importance, and that they cause learners particular difficulties, and therefore justify the expenditure of a good deal of time in the classroom and a good deal of space in coursebooks. There are further indications that the passive voice, the conditionals and reported speech are seen as difficult. They all tend to come relative! late in the teaching sequence. They are not usually 'presented' until well into an intermediate course.

But why should these patterns be regarded as difficult?

The passive

The uses of the past participle are illustrated in these five examples:

- 1 I would be interested to hear an account of your experience.
- 2 Thank you very much for your detailed letter.
- 3 I think they must have got mixed up.
- 4 A van equipped with a loudspeaker . . . toured the reservoir.
- 5 He was rescued by one of his companions.

Four of the patterns in which it occurs are closely paralleled by patterns with adjectives:

- 6 I would be happy to hear an account of your experience.
- 7 Thank you very much for your newsy letter.
- 8 He must have got very angry.
- 9 One man, happy with the results of his efforts, was able to take home a large sum of money.

Sentences 1 and 6 are examples of an adjective as complement after the verb **be**. Sentences 2 and 7 show an adjective qualifying a noun. Sentences 3 and 8 have an adjective after **get**. Several other verbs like **look**, **grow** and **become** display this same pattern. Sentences 4 and 9 show an adjective followed by a prepositional phrase. There seems, therefore, to be a good case for treating the past participle as an adjective. If we do this, it need no longer be seen as presenting any special difficulty. Some teachers, however, may balk at regarding 5 as an adjective. In 1 the past participle **interested** is descriptive and tells us how the recipient of the letter felt. In 5, however, **rescued** tells us what happened to someone. Semantically the past participle **interested** is stative and the past participle rescued in 5 is dynamic.

This is certainly true. There is a large class of past participles which are stative in meaning- delighted, tired, worried, broken etc. - and which are therefore better regarded as adjectives. But the distinction is not as clear cut as that. In a sentence like:

- 10 The windows were broken.

the past participle broken could be regarded as stative:

- 11 The house was a mess. The paintwork was peeling and the windows were broken.

or dynamic:

- 12 The windows were broken by the force of the explosion.

Similarly **frightened**:

13 He was frightened of snakes.

∴ is descriptive or stative. But:

14 He was frightened by a snake.

is dynamic.

But it is not only past participles that can be either stative or dynamic, with some having the potential to be either. As we have already seen, the same is true of adjectives:

Stative and dynamic adjectives differ in a number of ways. For example, a stative adjective such as tall cannot be used with the progressive aspect or with the imperative: *He's being tall, *Be tall. On the other hand we can use careful as a dynamic adjective: He's being careful, Be careful. (Quirk et al. 1972)

A Grammar of Contemporary English goes on to list well over fifty adjectives some of them such as **kind** and **nice** extremely common - which can be used dynamically.

It seems, therefore~that the only real distinguishing feature of the passive is the use of *by* with a noun phrase to mark an agent. Rather than pick out the passive for special treatment, an economical teaching strategy will allow the past participle to be treated adjectivally. One of the consequences of this is that the collocation of **be** with **-ed** forms is noted but not given undue prominence:

5 + -ed / -en

Your father's called John? and your mother's called Pat? (19)

It was built in 1890. (55)

It was built for William Randolph Hearst. (55)

This street is called Montague Street Precinct. (67)

. . .teenage girls who are interested in fashion. . . (95)

Are you tired?

Wally is awakened by the phone ringing. (91)

. . .so that I can make sure that you are properly looked after. (193)

Listen for the words that are stressed. (103)

Once this is put together with:

by (111)

1 who / what did it

Wally is awakened by the phone ringing. (91)

Handicrafts made by people in the Third World. (104)

Is that a magazine published by Macmillan? (146)

the learner has all that is needed to produce the passive. But the greatest prob

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lem with the passive is not form but use. Again, the teaching strategy proposed here seems more likely to be effective than a transformational approach which relates the passive closely to the active. If the participle is treated adjectivally it will quite naturally be used when the focus of attention is on the subject of the passive verb. The difficulty is not with the sentence structure. This is no different from sentence structure with adjectives. The difficulty lies in understanding that the past participle is passive in meaning.

The second conditional

The COBUILD main corpus which was analysed to produce the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary contains just under 15,000 occurrences of the word **would**. It is the forty-fourth most frequent word in the COBUILD corpus, more frequent than **will**, for example, which has 8,800 occurrences. In around half of its 15,000 occurrences **would** is described as 'used to talk of events which are of a hypothetical nature at the time of being mentioned, either because they are in the future or because they depend on other events which may or may not occur'.

Examples include:

The people of South Vietnam would receive their conquerors with relief / I think The Tempest would make a wonderful film / I suspect that the West Germans would still be a little bit cautious.

In these examples a condition has been established earlier in the text, or is implied in the word **would**. This use accounts for around 7,500 of the occurrences in the COBUILD corpus. A sub-category of this, accounting for a further 1,200 occurrences, is **would** used in explicitly conditional sentences:

It would surprise me very much if sterling strengthened. / If he wasn't such a reactionary I'd feel sorry for him.

In fact although many ELT grammars and coursebooks talk about the three conditionals:

- 1 If it rains we'll get wet.
- 2 If it rained we would get wet.
- 3 If it had rained we would have got wet.

everyone is well aware that there are actually a very large number of possible conditional patterns:

- 4 You can always explore the neighbourhood if you have half an hour to spare.
5. Even if I had the time I feel too tired.
- 6 If it got out it might kill someone.
- 7 If it's all right by you we could start now.

Why then does ELT practice isolate three patterns for special treatment?

All of the models, not only **will** and **would**, are common in conditional sentences. Most of these models are taught lexically. Students learn that **might** and **could**, for example, are used for possibility. It is not thought necessary to teach a fourth and fifth conditional like 6 and 7 above. Provided learners know what if means and they know what **might** and **could** mean, it is assumed that they are capable of creating for themselves sentences like 6 and 7. In exactly the same

way, if **would** is taught lexically with its main meaning of hypothesis, learners will be well able to generate for themselves sentences like 2.

The strategy of highlighting word meanings is a much more productive one than the strategy of teaching structural patterns. If the second conditional is taught as a means of introducing learners to the most important meaning of **would** this seems to me to be an economical teaching strategy. Learners may then be led to the generalisation that **would** also occurs in all kinds of environments without **if**. But this is not what generally happens. The second conditional is taught as though it had some life of its own, as if there was something unique about this combination of the past tense and the modal **would**. But both these elements carry the meaning of hypothesis quite independently of the second conditional. In fact **would** in conditionals is no more difficult than **might** or **could** in conditionals. It is simply more common. This again stems from its meaning, since conditional sentences are very much concerned with hypotheses.

The *Collins COBUILD English Course (CCEC) Level 2* includes a section entitled 'Your favourite cheap meal'.

This Language Study exercise simply draws learners' attention to the use of the past tense and of **would** to express a hypothesis. It also makes the point that **would** is preferred to **will** for an unreal hypothesis. Knowing the second conditional is not a matter of being able to recite a particular pattern of words: it is a matter of knowing the meaning of **would** and the meaning of this use of the past simple tense.

89 Your favourite cheap meal

a Jenny asked the others what they would cook for their favourite cheap meal for four people. David chose baked potatoes with a filling of cheese and Jenny said she would do scrambled eggs on toast. Danny said he wouldn't cook anything himself. He would go out for some pie and mashed potatoes. Jenny then asked them how much it would cost to cook these things at home and how much it would cost if they went out to a cafe or restaurant.

89a Make notes about how much each meal would cost. Compare your notes with a friend.

- Tell the class.

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89b Listen and see if you were right.

c What would members of your group cook and how much would their meal cost?

- Tell the class. Whose dish would be the best value for money? Take a vote.

90 Language study

Would

a Look at the verbs in colour. What tense are they in? Do they refer to past time?

JV: Are we ready? Yes. Erm now what would each of you cook if someone dropped in unexpectedly and stayed for a meal in the evening?

JV: What would you cook David? DF: Whatever vegetables happened to be there.

JV: Supposing they arrived after the restaurants had shut.

JV: But er and if you'd made it at home. . .

Why are they in the past tense?

b Look at these sentences. What does **would** mean? Why is it **would** not **will**?

We asked Jenny Bridget David and Danny what they would cook for an unexpected guest.

JV: What would you do Danny?

DL: Would I have to cook them something, because I'd prefer to take them out for a meal.

JV It says here What would each of you cook? .

DL: Emm...

JV: So, to summarise. Bridget would cook sausage and beans
 Danny would cook an omelette David would cook something exotic that he'd rustled up from bits in the fridge and I would cook a cheese flan.

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Reported statements

It is a fact of the English language that the tense we select is liable to change if we take a different standpoint in time. If George says 'I'm tired' and I report this as 'George said he was tired' I can choose the past tense because George's being tired occurred in the past, rather than because the verb **said** is past tense. Even if George is still tired, I may nevertheless choose to say 'George said he was tired.' But if George is still tired and I want to make this clear I can choose to report what he said by saying 'George said he's tired' or even 'George says he's tired.' So the choice between past and present does not simply indicate when something happened. It may also indicate whether or not I think the happening is still relevant.

The fact that we sometimes have a choice between past and present tenses is not simply a feature of reported speech. I might talk about something which happened in the past by saying 'We stayed in the Grand Hotel. It was an awful place.' If the hotel still exists and is still awful I can nevertheless choose to use the past tense if I do not think my statement has any relevance to the present. On the other hand I can choose to give my assessment some present relevance by selecting the present tense: 'We stayed in the Grand Hotel. It's an awful place. You certainly shouldn't stay there.'

While preparing the *CCEC* materials we asked someone to rewrite a story as a radio script. The story included this passage:

'What part of London are you headed for?' I asked him.
'I'm going right through London and out the other side,' he said. 'I'm going to Epsom, for the races. It's Derby Day today.'
'So it is,' I said. 'I wish I were going with you. I love betting on horses.'
'I never bet on horses,' he said. 'I don't even watch them run. That's a stupid silly business.'
'Then why do you go?' I asked.
He didn't seem to like that question. His little ratty face went absolutely blank and he sat there staring straight ahead at the road saying nothing.
'I expect you help to work the betting machines or something like that,' I said.
'That's even sillier,' he answered . . . (Roald Dahl, *The Hitch-hiker*)

This summary was produced:

The other day I picked up a hitch-hiker who was heading for London and then going on to Epsom for the Derby. I got very curious about him because it transpired that although he was going to the Derby he didn't like horses or racing, he didn't bet on races and he didn't seem to have any kind of job at the race track.

The interesting thing about this is that although the second version reports what was said there are no verbs of saying. There is no past tense verb like *said* to trigger a tense change. The report is in the past tense because the reported events happened in the past.

There is nothing difficult about tense in reported speech in English. The logic it follows is the same as for the rest of the language. In spite of this, many coursebooks insist on regarding reported statement as a structure of some kind which has a system of rules to itself. Instead of looking for broad generalisations about the language, there is an attempt to cordon off sections and treat

them as if they were in some way unique. Reported speech, particularly the use of tense, is treated in this way and is seen as creating great difficulties for learners, even at quite an advanced level.

One practice book for the Cambridge First Certificate, for example, solemnly lists the 'rules' for reported speech. It explains that changes have to be made to certain items with the result that **this** becomes **the** . . . or **that**, **today** becomes **that day** and **I** becomes **he** or **she**. To complicate the issue further, it is explained that if the reporting verb is in the past tense then all the senses 'go one step backwards in time'. These backwards steps are then listed. Present simple becomes past simple, present perfect and past simple become past perfect and so on.

This is all totally unnecessary. These differences in person and in phrases of time and place occur because we are taking a different standpoint from the original writer or speaker. It would be stupid to refer to something as happening today if I am well aware that it happened several days ago. Similarly it would be silly if someone asked me the question:

Do you think I'll be late?

to reply by saying:

Yes I probably will.

We are constantly changing reference to person, time and place to accommodate the standpoint of a different speaker at a different time. This is a feature of language as a whole, not simply a feature of reported speech. It is a confusing and uneconomical teaching strategy to single out reported statements and treat them as if they were unique in some way.

In fact it is difficult to sustain the argument that *reported statement* is a useful grammatical category at all. An analysis of noun clauses introduced by **that** in the texts for CCEC Level 3 produced examples like these:

- 1 Cecil Sharp felt **that** the old songs of England might disappear for ever.
- 2 If it's a job interview try to show **that** you're interested in the job.
- 3 The government brought in a rule **that** children under thirteen weren't allowed to work.
- 4 The unsuccessful artist decided **that** his prayer had been answered.
- 5 The monkey said **that** there was no such thing as food, only fruit.
- 6 A long time ago there was this theory **that** women always passed first time.

Altogether in the texts which make up CCEC Level 3 there were 212 occurrences of **that** used to introduce a noun clause. Of these 212 occurrences:

- 87 are introduced by verbs of thinking: think, feel, assume, decide, realise, understand, conclude, believe, know, wish, recall, remember.
- 40 by verbs of saying: say, tell, demand, report, explain, suggest, point out, assure, argue.
- 38 by nouns: rule, fact, idea, theory, problem, situation, thing, information, implication, promise, belief, impression, assurance, grounds, speculation, claim, announcement, signs, concern, conclusion, feeling, case, background.

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13 by adjectives:

glad, clear, sure, likely, incredulous, satisfied, convinced.

34 by miscellaneous other words:

show, see, it, except, mean, imply, turn out, hear, notice, pretend, reveal.

This tells us a number of things. First of all, comparatively few of the 212 occurrences could accurately be described as reported speech. Reported thought is much more common than reported speech. But reported thought does not figure in pedagogic grammars with anything like the same inevitability as does reported speech. Secondly, a large number of the occurrences, such as 2, 3 and 6 above, could not be described as reports at all. Thirdly, noun clauses are by no means always dependent on a verb.

What, then, does the learner need to know about noun clauses of this kind? As I have pointed out, many pedagogic grammars imply that the difficulty lies particularly with tense, and with the changes in time and place reference. But I have argued that there is nothing unique about tense or about time and place in these noun clauses. I would suggest that, as with the passive the most important thing about noun clauses is not how they are formed but how they are used. They are used, for example, in the way I have used them earlier in this paragraph with words like **argue** and **suggest** to help develop an argument. They are used with nouns like **thing**, **problem**, **situation** and **theory** to help define and develop ideas. In particular they have an important function in identifying and highlighting a notion that is going to be developed in the text:

	thing . . .	
	problem . . .	
The	situation	is(that)
	theory . . .	
	difficulty . . .	

Once we begin to look at the uses of noun clauses, we begin to look at the words with which they are associated, and to ask how those words function in text. In asking what it is that the learner needs to know, and what it is that should be highlighted, we acknowledge the importance of the noun clause, but we also come back to the importance of the word as a unit of syllabus design.

English as a lexical language

I have suggested that three of the items traditionally regarded as difficult for the learner are not in fact difficult in the way they are generally believed to be. They are generally regarded as being difficult *structures*. I have argued in effect that the passive and the conditionals do not need to be presented as 'structures', since they can readily be created by learners for themselves, provided they have an understanding of word meaning. This does not mean that they will necessarily be easily acquired by learners. Even a rule as straightforward as the subject-verb concord in 'he rues' is not easily acquired. It is a long time before it becomes a consistent part of the learner's production. We do not know why this should be. Perhaps because it is heavily redundant. We can never be sure when, or even whether, input will become part of the learner's behaviour.

Indeed the very concept of *input* is a misleading one. Input implies intake, and there can never be any guarantee that learners will take in the language that they hear. A structurally based approach which is linked to input will be more diffuse than a lexically based approach in two ways. In the first place it does not offer such powerful generalisations. Once the learners are aware of the potential of the past tense and **would** to encode hypothesis, they are in principle capable of producing:

I think the Tempest would make a wonderful film.

and:

I wish I lived in a caravan.

They are also in a much better position to make sense of further input. They will be more likely to identify the general hypothetical use of the past tense and **would** if they are able to abstract them from the second conditional pattern. Similarly, once they identify the past participle as adjectival, a range of uses is open to them. It may be some time before they take advantage of this, but they are more likely to do this if this is the starting point than if the passive is treated transformationally, or in some other way~which associates it very closely with verb forms.

In the second place, the fact that a lexical description depends on a more powerful generalisation means that the learner will have more evidence on which to base useful generalisations about the language. I have shown, for example, that **would** expressing hypothesis is much more common than the second conditional. The learner will therefore have many more opportunities to reinforce the meaning of **would** than the structure of the second conditional.

A similar lesson can be drawn from our look at the noun clauses which realise, among other things, reported statements. Noun clauses of this kind are ubiquitous. There are three examples in the paragraph above, none of them strictly speaking a reported statement. This noun clause, therefore, is likely to be a much more useful concept than reported statement. It is not linguistically complex, since it follows the general rules governing English tense and adverbials of time and place. Once learners become aware of this, they can begin to work on the variety of uses of such clauses, and in particular the words that introduce them.

A focus on words, therefore, as well as providing the raw material to make more powerful generalisations, seems to offer learners the potential to create structures for themselves. Word forms are also easily recognisable and easily retrievable. This is not always the case with structures.

Learners can find words for themselves and begin to make useful generalisations about them. As we shall see later, it is possible to build on this accessibility to devise exercises which encourage learners to speculate usefully about the meanings and functions of words - a process which leads to greater awareness of language use. If we are to adopt a strategy which aims at awareness raising, therefore, there are good arguments for highlighting meaning; and if we are to do this, the most effective unit is likely to be the word rather than the structure.

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This may or may not be the case with other languages, but it certainly seems to be the case with English. It is perhaps particularly unfortunate that English has for so long been described in terms of a Latinate grammar derived from a highly inflected language, when English itself is quite different, a minimally inflected language. Obviously I would not claim that there is nothing more to English than word meaning, but it does seem that word meaning and word order are central to English in a way that may not hold true for other languages.

Difficulty in EFL - a re-assessment

Some of the grammatical systems of the language seem to operate a logic to which it is very difficult for the learner to gain access. Perfective and progressive aspect in English are notoriously difficult. A lot of time in elementary and intermediate courses is spent contrasting the present and past simple, and the present and past continuous tenses, and equally on contrasting the present perfect and the past simple. Another notorious area of difficulty in English is the system of determiners, particularly the definite and indefinite article. This again is an area which receives a good deal of attention in most courses. But the vexing thing about grammatical systems like these is that they are conspicuously resistant to teaching. However hard teacher and learners may try, some language systems take a long, long time to learn.

A number of theories have been put forward to account for this. It may be that there is a fixed order of acquisition which is broadly speaking common to all learners. There is some, though not conclusive, evidence for this view. Prabhu (1987) argues that any relationship between the grammatical systems as we describe them and grammatical systems as they are subconsciously conceptualised by the learner (between descriptive and operational systems) is purely accidental. If this is so, it is meaningless to look to our description of grammatical systems for an index of the learner's progress. Interlanguage theorists like Selinker and Corder describe language learning as a process of continually forming, testing and revising hypotheses about the grammar of the language. If they are right, then learners will need a lot of evidence in the form of exposure to the language before they are able reach stable conclusions about the grammar.

Whatever the reasons for these difficulties, they are certainly an observable and sometimes worrying fact of life in the EFL classroom. It is simply a fact of life that some systems are not immediately accessible to teaching. They take time, often a long time, to assimilate. Indeed perhaps the only real answer to the question 'What systems of English are difficult to learn?' would be 'Those systems that take a long time to learn.' This is not objective or demonstrable in any straightforward way. I have already given subject-verb concord as an example of something which is easy to understand but very difficult to assimilate. It may be that teaching helps learning. It may well be the case that some teaching procedures hinder progress in the development of some grammatical systems. What is sure is that learners need time to assimilate language. Strategies that aim to help assimilation by awareness raising are more tolerant of the learner's position and more likely to be successful than strategies which aim to

incorporate the target language into the learner's repertoire more or less immediately.

It can be argued that the attempt to reduce language to presentable patterns actually adds to the difficulties faced by the learner, and compounds this by confusing the learner as to the true nature of language. Language patterns are often presented to learners contrastively so that they are required to distinguish between, say, the present perfect and past simple tenses. Many coursebooks tell us, for example, that the present perfect is used for events which happened in the recent past, particularly if the effects of the action can still be seen or felt. Very often pictures are used to illustrate sentences like:

I've broken my arm.

But in spite of appearances, the 'recent past' has nothing to do with how much time has elapsed since something happened. There is nothing ungrammatical about:

- 1 I broke my arm this morning.
or about:
2 I'm afraid I've broken my arm. I broke it last week.

Similarly if the present perfect is used because the effects of what happened can still be seen or felt, how could we account for:

- 3 A: I've broken my arm.
B: Oh dear. How did you break it?

as opposed to:

- 4 A: I've broken my arm.
B: ?Oh dear. How have you broken it?

We may make useful generalisations about the present perfect and the past simple, and we may be able to point to a few cases in which the contrast is absolute. We may advise learners, for example, that the past simple rather than the present perfect is used when the time at which an event took place is made explicit:

5. I broke my arm yesterday.

as opposed to:

6. *I've broken my arm yesterday.

But this still leaves problems with the choice between:

- 7 Have you been to church this week?

and:

- 8 Did you go to church this week?

This leads us to two important points. The first is that it is meaning that determines what is and is not acceptable in terms of sentence structure. The sentence:

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6 *I've broken my arm yesterday.

is unacceptable not because there is some abstract rule which tells us that we cannot have the present perfect tense together with a past time adverbial, but because there is a contradiction between the meaning of the present perfect tense and the meaning of **yesterday**. By selecting the present perfect tense the speaker is asserting the present relevance of his utterance. By adding yesterday he is denying this present relevance. Learners make mistakes of this kind not because they have not grasped the rule, but because they do not understand the meaning and use of the present perfect tense. If the teaching strategy we adopt illuminates that meaning, it may be a useful strategy. If it simply asserts the incompatibility between the tense and the adverbial, it is unlikely to be successful.

The second point elaborates Widdowson's distinction between usage and use. The essence of language use is choice. Restrictive rules such as the one stating that the past simple is preferred to the present perfect when the time of an event is made explicit, tell us something about when not to use the present perfect tense. They may help us to avoid some instances of faulty usage. But they do not tell us when or why the present perfect is to be preferred to the past simple. They do not give us insights into use. They do not afford us criteria to choose between formulations such as 7 and 8 above. Again this points to the need for exposure. Learners need experience of the present perfect in use if they are to grasp its meaning. Only when they have this will they be able not only to avoid the contradiction inherent in:

6 *I have broken my arm yesterday.

but also to select the present perfect tense when it is appropriate to the meaning they wish to convey.

This is also an argument in favour of the use of authentic text in language learning rather than text specially written to illustrate some aspect of language. Such specially written text is usually constructed to focus on contrived contexts in which there is a clear cut distinction between the present perfect and the past simple. Learners are asked to engage in such exchanges as:

A: Have you read War and Peace'?
B: Yes I have. I read it last year.

The only reason for selecting one tense or the other is that that is what they have been told to select. The exchange is meaningful in that it consists of three acceptable sentences of English for which we can readily imagine a meaningful context. But the selection of one tense as opposed to the other is not meaningful. It is a teacher-led contrivance. The system which is presented to learners involves conformity to superficial rules, often of a restrictive kind, under careful teacher control. If learners are to create appropriate meanings, they need to become aware of the choices realised in genuine language use.