

Term Paper

## The Notions of 'Recentness' in Present Perfect Tense

Course

Communicative Grammar, PS

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# 1 Introduction

There arise many controversies around ‘novel’ or ‘modern’ ideas in teaching as soon as we try to apply such ideas to our everyday lives as teachers. Without a doubt a healthy amount of skepticism is viable in a profession such as teaching, lest we expose ourselves – and our pupils – to a neverending cascade of different approaches without providing the continuity that is required to build learner-teacher-relationships based on reciprocal trust.<sup>1</sup> However, if we take such cautious approaches too far we run afoul the risk of growing stale and being unable to adapt anymore. If there are well-proven concepts with a high degree of practical applicability there is no reason not to incorporate those into our teaching in order to make it more consistent, more useful for our pupils and just plain and simple better. One such concept is Cognitive+Communicative Grammar (C+C Grammar). I will outline this concept, show in how far it may be useful for teaching and provide practical examples to show how easily it can be used in a real-world classroom in this school.<sup>2</sup>

## Notions trump form

The first aspect to understand about C+C Grammar is that it is function-based. In C+C Grammar we only care about grammar (which is a ‘form’, not a ‘function’ of language) insofar as it helps us to achieve our goals in communication. It is but a tool and thus, just like a hammer or an axe idling in a shack in our garden, Grammar on its own is meaningless. It is only via the functions of language that we as humans can use grammar to express meaning. Furthermore we do not necessarily need grammar to express ourselves, as sign language, paintings or music consistently prove. If we give proper merit to these ideas, there is no sense in teaching grammar in an isolated, function-based way. Please do note that this is not to say that grammar is a useless concept per se – quite the contrary. Grammar is an integral aspect of the English language and we need to teach grammar. However, we need to be wary of structuring our teaching around grammar, as on its own it does not provide us with the required competence to communicate successfully, which in the end should be the motivation for teaching, should it not?

1 I think that such a relationship is the crucial one which we should try to establish, as mutual respect is the basis for positive human interaction. Exactly *how* such a relationship might be achieved depends on individuals. Every one of us has to find an approach that is consistent to their personality. Looking at how others might have achieved it can be helpful. There are numerous books which provide us with this opportunity. I include one such book in my bibliography (Herndon 1971).

2 To give you an idea of how profoundly modern cognitive science has changed the understanding of how humans interact (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

## **Communicative competence is king**

In contrast to other views, the focus of C+C Grammar is on enabling the learner to communicate successfully. ‘Successful’ communication means, that – at the end of a learning process – a learner has the ability to apply the learned language in real-world contexts. Said contexts can be any given situation that might arise in everyday life, holidays, work, university, etc. It is highly important to note, that such situations do oftentimes not require a formally perfect handling of English language (although some, of course, may require exactly that). Therefore in C+C Grammar learners’ mistakes are often not our primary point of focus in teaching. The focus is always on how successful the communication is in a given context. Form (e.g. the required grammar to master a communicative situation) thus always follows function (e.g. what the learner wants to express using language). In case you are wary of such statements as quick look Michael Swan’s ideas on the usage of English clearly underline my case (cf. Swan 2016: viii-ix).

## **No aimless teaching**

What ‘form follows function’ first and foremost means is, that we can never simply ‘teach the past tense’ (or any other grammatical form, for that matter). We need to ask ourselves what functional aim we are trying to achieve with every single part of our teaching, be it a month of English teaching, one single lesson, or just a single 10-minute activity. What might sound intimidating and complicating at first, does in reality provide us with a set of simple tools which – once learned – simplify the task of providing coherence and structure to our teaching immensely.

Assume we want to teach the notion of ‘recentness’ to our pupils as opposed to teaching ‘the Present Perfect Tense’. If we start with the latter, traditional idea we will probably follow our textbook to some degree which tells out that 13-year old kids really just need to know the Present Perfect Tense (PPT). We then start by structuring our lesson(s) based around explaining how the PPT is formed, some practice with applying that form, talk about exceptions in the third participle, talk about how it has nothing to do with the German ‘Perfekt’ – even though it looks suspiciously alike – and – probably after two or three lessons – try to make our pupils use the new tense, for example in a homework. At any stage during this process we would be hard pressed to answer just one simple and legitimate question by a student: “What do we need that for?” We cannot answer it because we really do not know in the first place. We are trying to teach grammar and grammar just does not have any intrinsic meaning on its own.

If, on the other hand, I start from a notional point of view and center our learning around the aim of teaching the notion of ‘recentness’ (for the particular case of the Present Perfect Tense cf. Newby 1989: 84-87) the whole process of structuring our teaching changes. I would argue that in such a case we teachers claim back from – oftentimes useless – textbooks the right to make sense of what we do in class. If I structure my lessons around notional ‘recentness’ I am immediately provided with a rough outline to my teaching. First, I will think of contexts where expressing recentness arises in my pupils’ lives – which should not be a problem since it is (as is the case with all notions) such a universal concept, that we can find multiple applications of it in all humans’ lives. Second, I need to apply these contexts to my classroom. Once again, normally not a problem, as our experience tells us that our classroom can be anything – from a submarine to an airplane, from a hotel on the Bahamas to a chalet in the Rocky Mountains. Third, I will come up with – or use a pre-existing – set of activities that guides my pupils along the C+C Grammar-standard for teaching language (cf. Newby 2015/16: 36):

1. **Gaining awareness** about the problems in the context and the required concepts of language.
2. **Conceptualizing** the required language in a guided, yet learner-based way.
3. **Proceduralizing** the language in highly scaffolded conditions.
4. **Producing** own, meaningful language within the real-world context.

How exactly such a continuum of learning will look like is dependent on the teacher, the pupils and the context and should be subject to constant evaluation, revision and, if necessary, change. However, the structure remains the same and provides every activity with a sense in the continuum of learning. Furthermore, whenever a pupil asks us “Why do we need to learn that?” the answer is immediately clear, as we have defined the communicative goal beforehand.<sup>3</sup>

## **We (teachers) are context providers**

In any C+C Grammar-learning process the responsibility of creating meaningful contexts for communication lies with the teacher. This does not mean, that this is the teacher’s only function! Yet it is probably the most crucial one, as the motivation of my pupils will be highly dependent on how meaningful the context of learning is. If, for example, I am trying to teach ‘giving directions’ to my pupils and I confront my group of 11-year-old learners with an inner

<sup>3</sup> If the answer is not clear, I as teacher have not done my ‘homework’ sufficiently.

city map of Tokio this is probably going to overwhelm them (while also possibly creating cultural and/or geographical problems). If, on the other hand, I let them explain the way to the Inner City of Graz from school to a foreign student, they will be able to more easily relate and feel more involved in the learning process.<sup>4</sup>

## **Communication does not (exclusively) mean ‘speaking’**

There is one last important concept about communicative teaching I want to address. Often people will brush aside communicative approaches as being a complementary set of ideas on how to teach speaking. However, communication does not refer speaking alone, and neither does communicative language teaching. C+C Grammar is not exclusively about speaking. Listening, reading and writing are equally important skills to communication and are all to be taught along the same continuum of **Awareness** → **Conceptualization** → **Proceduralization** → **Production**. It might often make sense to focus on one or maybe two of the skill-areas in any given segment of learning. How, then, do we decide what to focus on? Once again everything depends on the context. In the same way that giving directions in the above examples will probably focus on the spoken-part of language, application letters will involve a heavy amount of written language or analyzing music will focus on listening.

Communicative language teaching is not just about speaking. We are following the functional motivations of language. If it makes sense we talk about and within certain contexts, if it does not, we should not do it.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching will always be subject to methodological discussion – and well it should be! In this sense it does not matter if we approach our craft ‘conservatively’ or if we go ‘cutting-edge’. What we need to do is find a methodology that caters to the needs of our pupils as well as us teachers. That methodology also needs to have enough scientific backing to not make our teaching arbitrary. C+C Grammar fits both these conditions – and then some. Grounding our teaching on a notional approach gives us freedom and flexibility in teaching and makes our teaching relevant to our pupils’ lives. This potent combination makes it an ideal basis for preparing our pupils for their future. Let us not take ourselves and our educational system too important in its own right. Our pupils do not want to learn just because school tells them to. Let us give meaning to what we teach and what our kids learn, so they can find meaning for their lives in it, even though those might happen far away from us teachers and our schools.

<sup>4</sup> The exacte opposite might be the case if the group of learners is 17-years old and interested in traveling. Teaching communicatively is always dependent on my assessment of my group of learners.

## 2 Practical Part

### Overview

The following three lessons are designed for learners at the level A2, meaning that in Austrian schools learners should be 11-12 years of age.

The estimated class size is 16 pupils.

Considering the level of the learners it is feasible to assume that there is no existing knowledge about the notions of the Present Perfect Tense. However, I do assume that there is a varying degree of unstructured knowledge about the tense as such, some grammatical rules surrounding it and the concept of the past participle.

### Unit 1 – The notion of recent events

#### Introduction: Actions, Events, States – 20 min – 0‘-20‘

- Ss turn to their neighbor, each pair of Ss is handed 2 slips of paper by the T (WORKSHEET 1) with a sentence on them.
- T writes ‘Action’, ‘Event’, ‘State’ on the blackboard (*if necessary German translations can be included; depends on how familiar Ss are with the concepts*)
- In pairs Ss decide, which of the categories their sentences belong to and write A, E or S on their respective slips. On their third (empty) slip of paper, Ss write down the ‘missing’ letter. *2 minutes*
- In turns Ss come to the blackboard, read their sentences (1 per S) and pin them to the respective category on the blackboard.
- Ss now write down a third sentence on their remaining slip of paper. That sentence has to be of the noted category. *2 minutes*
- Ss bring their own sentences to the blackboard, read and pin them.

#### Events – 15 min – 21‘-35‘

- T visually emphasizes the lessons’ focus on the blackboard (that is, outlines ‘Events’ with colored chalk).
- T asks Ss to write down 3 sentences which are about events. *3 minutes*

- Ss then exchange their sentences with their neighbors'. Ss read their neighbors' sentences and assess whether the sentence is about an event. If not (or if they have trouble in assessing) they consult the T.
- Ss keep their neighbors' sentences!

### **Recent Events – 15 min – 36'-50'**

- T turns to the sentences on the blackboard in the section 'Events'. T picks one sentence and asks: 'When did that happen?'
- Ss provide an answer, the level of detail does not matter, as long as it provides information about the temporal aspect.
  - e.g.: Yesterday, last week, 5 minutes ago, 10 years ago, next week, now, etc.
- T asks Ss to do the same for their neighbors' sentences by writing the 'answer' on the sheets. Ss then give back the sentences to their neighbors and quickly check, if their assessment of the time of the event was correct. *2 minutes*
- T asks Ss to identify the temporal difference between: 'Where have you just been?' and 'Where did you go to in your last holiday?'
- T asks Ss to identify the difference in the form of the sentences and underlines the results.
- T explains that the difference in form is important, because of the difference in meaning that it creates.
- T asks to collect their sentences from the blackboard and bring them back next time.

## **Unit 2 – The notion of recent events**

### **Identifying the form – 10 min – 0'-10'**

- T writes 'Event' and draws a column beneath it onto the blackboard.
- T asks Ss to underline the verb in each of the sentences.
- Ss bring their event-related sentences from last lesson to the blackboard, read them and pin them to the column.
- T now analyzes the underlined verbs together with the Ss.
- T then outlines the used form [AUXILIARY] + [PAST PARTICIPLE] on the blackboard.

### **Applying the form I – 15 min – 11'-25'**

- T now gives Ss the following task:

- Write down one sentence about the last thing you have done before the start of this English lesson. *1 minute*
- In turn Ss now read their sentences out loud.

### **Applying the form II – 25 min – 26'-50'**

- T instructs Ss that they will be handed a worksheet. They are given 10 minutes to complete the worksheet on their own (no talking to neighbors).
- T hands out (WORKSHEET 2).
- After 10 minutes T asks Ss to work in pairs. One S reads the questions on his worksheet, the other S provides them with the answers.
- Role-swap.

### **Homework**

- Write your 7 solutions to the worksheet into your notebook. If you think an answer you gave in class is not correct → correct it before you write it into your book!  
Remember: everything you write down in your book should be carefully checked! :)

## **Unit 3 – The notion of recent events**

### **Warmer – What have you just done? – 10 min – 0'-10'**

- T asks a random S “What have you just done?”
- After S elicits an answer, T asks the next S, and so on, until every S has been asked a question.
- No correction by the teacher – it’s a warmer!

### **Recent events in news – 20 min – 11'-30'**

- T asks Ss to think of a news headline from today. *2 minutes*
  - “Think of something that may have happened in Graz, Austria or the World just now. Your ‘news’ can be fictional!”
- T provides each S with one empty flashcard.
- T asks Ss to draw their news item. *5 minutes*
- T collects flashcards from Ss and hands them out to other Ss.
- T now asks Ss to write ONE sentence describing the news headline on the other side of the flipcard. *5 minutes*
- Ss then present their flipcards and their news item to the whole group and give back their flipcards to the creators.

### **Reviewing the homework – 10 min – 31'-40'**

- T asks Ss to get out WORKSHEET 2 from last week and their homework answers.

- Ss flip homeworks with their neighbor, who corrects it. Instructions for correction:
  - If you think something is wrong, underline it with a pencil.
  - If you think a sentence is correct, tick it.

**Cooler – Continue the sentence – 10 min – 41'-50'**

- T writes a sentence on the blackboard:
  - “Simon has just gone to the cinema.”
- T tells Ss “No, this is not true, because I have just seen Simon in school!”
- T throws a ball to a S who gives an answer that tells us, why this in turn is not true.  
This S then throws the ball to another S and so on, until every S has spoken.

**Testing Exercise**

Write a short article for an online newspaper. Your article should be brand-new and interesting! Because of that, you should give information on an event that has happened just today.

You are a new journalist, who is not yet highly accomplished, so you only have 50 words for your article. If you write more, your boss cannot print the article! Do not forget that your article needs a headline.

### 3 Theoretical Part

#### Unit 1

<b>Grammatical objective(s)</b>	<p>Process – handling of the grammatical concepts of ‘event’ and ‘recentness’</p> <p>Form – The grammatical construction of the Present Perfect Tense</p>
<b>Activity type</b>	Pairwork, Groupwork, Teacher-Student-Dialogue
<b>Learning aim</b>	<p>Ss know what an ‘event’ is, in terms of notional grammar.</p> <p>Ss are aware of the notion of recent events.</p>
<b>Cognitive learning stage(s)</b>	Awareness raising – The concepts of ‘recentness’ and ‘event’ are not familiar by heart to learners at this stage. Therefore, the first step in learning this particular notions has to be focused on raising the students‘ awareness about these core concepts. Awareness to the notion‘ s specific form is also raised.
<b>Pedagogical principles</b>	<p>Depth of processing: high – students need to concentrate on their tasks and are bound to provide answers</p> <p>Dual processing / Authenticity: low – the language is artificial and not directly pulled from a real-world context</p> <p>Personalization: medium – students can write their own sentences during the lesson, however the tasks are highly scaffolded</p> <p>Commitment filter: medium – while the grammatical concepts can be daunting the lesson also aims at raising the students‘ curiosity concerning what might distinguish ‘Events’ from ‘Activities’ and ‘States’</p> <p>Peer learning and interaction: high – peer work and also assessment is woven into all activities</p> <p>Testing vs. Teaching: focus on teaching; there is no grading whatsoever, also students cannot provide ‘wrong’ answers as sentences will always refer to either an event, an acitivity or a state.</p>
<b>Coherence</b>	The lesson is directly linked with the following two lesson which move the students further along the cognitive learning stages.

#### Unit 2

<b>Grammatical objective(s)</b>	Process – Familiarizing the concept ‘recent events’
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	Form – The grammatical construction of the Present Perfect Tense
<b>Activity type</b>	Individual work, Pairwork, Groupwork
<b>Learning aim</b>	Ss are aware that there is a grammatical form that is used to express the idea of recent events in English. Ss can identify that form and apply it themselves in scaffolded exercises.
<b>Cognitive learning stage(s)</b>	Awareness raising → Conceptualization – First, this lesson concentrates on introducing the form [AUXILIARY] + [PAST PARTICIPLE) and thus builds on last lesson's achievements. Then we move on to enabling students to use the notion in scaffolded exercises.
<b>Pedagogical principles</b>	Depth of processing: high – students need to concentrate on their tasks and are individually bound to provide answers  Dual processing / Authenticity: medium – some authenticity is introduced by having the students refer to recent events in their personal lives happening in school  Personalization: medium – students have to produce individual sentences in the beginning of the lesson  Commitment filter: medium – students might be intimidated by the focus on grammar in the beginning, however, this should be alleviated by the highly personal section following it  Peer learning and interaction: medium – limited interaction during the later segments of the lesson  Testing vs. Teaching: focus on teaching, aim of the lesson focuses on applying the concepts in a real-world context
<b>Coherence</b>	The lesson is directly linked with the two lessons it is sandwiched by. There is further coherence with Lesson #1 by re-using the sentences produced by the students then.

### Unit 3

<b>Grammatical objective(s)</b>	Process – Producing real-world language based on the concept of 'recent events'
<b>Activity type</b>	Teacher-Student-Dialogue, Pairwork, Groupwork
<b>Learning aim</b>	Ss can express ideas about recent events using the PPT forms in relatively open exercises. Ss are aware that the form used for recent events is not

	exclusively used for recent events.
<b>Cognitive learning stage(s)</b>	Conceptualization → Proceduralization – The ‘move’ towards proceduralization is achieved by providing the students with a less scaffolded, while yet not time-sensitive (and thus not real-world), set of exercises.
<b>Pedagogical principles</b>	<p>Depth of processing: high – students need to concentrate on their tasks and are individually bound to provide answers</p> <p>Dual processing / Authenticity: high – recent news are relevant to students’ real lives thus framing a sensible real-world context for using the acquired notion</p> <p>Personalization: high – students produce language based on their own real-world experience; students also work with their own homework</p> <p>Commitment filter: medium – students are directly addressed individually, however, there are some periods of little individual action (i.e. after having given an answer during the first sections of the lesson)</p> <p>Peer learning and interaction: low – interaction happens mainly with the teacher and from individual to the whole group</p> <p>Testing vs. Teaching: focus on teaching, aim of the lesson focuses on applying the concepts in a real-world context; some testing-content in reviewing students’ homeworks</p>
<b>Coherence</b>	The lesson is directly linked with the preceding lesson and provides a coherent closure for the lesson-continuum.

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## 5 Appendix

### Worksheet 1

It has just rained.	The weather is bad.	
I have just moved here.	We love ice cream.	
You have just taken my pen!	My name is Thomas.	
Where have you just been?	Croatia has very nice beaches.	
I have just seen the new lion at the zoo.	Where do you come from?	
They have just split up.	The sun is shining.	
Susan has just killed a spider!	Susan is reading the new Harry Potter book.	
I have had an exam.	I am going home.	

### Worksheet 2

Newby, Exercise book, pg. 67, #131.