

## The Effect of Form-Focused Practice on the Learning of Thirteen Expressions with *To Be* in English <sup>1</sup>

PATRICIA ANDREW, UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO - ACATLÁN CAMPUS <sup>2</sup>

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In an effort to identify factors which are critical to success in foreign-language learning, the classroom itself has increasingly become the focal point of research looking at the different variables which come together there. The effect of instruction, a major component of the formal classroom experience, is one of the areas being studied with a view to providing the basis for decisions on how best to utilize the limited time and resources available so as to obtain maximum benefits in terms of learning. While much research remains to be done, there seems to be a consensus at this date that, in general terms, instruction and form-focused practice are effective in the case of adults learning a foreign language (Doughty 1991; Ellis 1990; Fotos & Ellis 1991; Fotos 1994; Lightbrown & Spada 1990; Long 1983, 1988).

In light of the foregoing, a preliminary study was undertaken to explore the effect of instruction and intensive practice on adult Spanish-speakers learning English in Mexico. In addition to establishing whether instruction in this context is, in fact, effective, it is hoped that this and further studies will be able to identify those aspects of language learning which respond best to it, i.e., points of contrast, fossilized structures identified by error analysis, or those features of language having the greatest degree of conceptual difficulty for the learner.

Despite theoretical claims to the contrary over the past 20 years, many EFL teachers remain convinced of the value of contrastive analysis, based on their classroom experience with students sharing the same L1. This initial study, then, set out to determine whether instruction and intensive practice would positively affect the subjects' mastery of one specific area of contrastive difficulty for the adult Spanish-speaker learning English: the series of

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<sup>1</sup> This is a refereed article.

<sup>2</sup> The author can be reached at Ahuehuetes No. 42, Izcalli del Bosque, Naucalpan, Estado de Mexico 53278. Tel: 373-2392. E-mail: pjean@servidor.unam.mx

expressions with TO BE + ADJECTIVE whose Spanish equivalent is TENER + NOUN. Negative transfer in the early stages of learning frequently results in the tendency of Spanish speakers to use TO HAVE + NOUN in these expressions, occasioning the production of utterances such as \*I HAVE 23 YEARS rather than the grammatically acceptable I AM 23 YEARS OLD. Thirteen such expressions were identified, making the structural point a particularly compact one to work with (Table 1).

Table 1. Expressions with TO BE + adjective in English whose Spanish equivalent is TENER + noun

	BE	TENER
1.	....(years old)	....años
2.	hungry	hambre
3.	thirsty	sed
4.	cold	frío
5.	warm	calor
6.	hot	calor
7.	in a hurry	prisa
8.	right	razón
9.	wrong	no razón
10.	afraid	miedo
11.	sleepy	sueño
12.	careful	cuidado
13.	lucky	suerte

## Method

A quasi-experimental design using intact groups was carried out at the National University of México (ENEP<sup>3</sup> Acatlán campus) in the spring semester of 1995. Four third-level (approximately 120 hours of prior instruction) EFL classes offered at the language center of the university were selected for the study, two classes forming the control group (C) and two the experimental group (E). All subjects had been enrolled in the third-level

<sup>3</sup> Escuela Nacional de Estudios Profesionales

course either on the basis of placement test scores or by having successfully completed the previous course. It was decided to work with students at this level because their accuracy in the use of the target structure was low and still in a state of fluctuation, which would indicate that instruction and practice could possibly be of utility to them. At the same time, their general knowledge of English was extensive enough to enable them to work independently on practice exercises. The definitive population numbered 68, 34 in the C group and 34 in the E group, with only those subjects who participated in 80% or more of the intensive practice sessions being included in the experimental group.

The research plan involved pretesting and posttesting (C and E groups) and a treatment period (E group) of ten sessions. The pretest contained two sections, a 10-item completion exercise and a 10-item translation exercise. Examples of these items:

(completion) I am going to be 21 years old next month.

(translation) *Tenia tanta sed que tomó tres vasos de agua.*

S/he was so thirsty that s/he drank three glasses of water.

One item tested each of the thirteen target expressions. So that the subjects would not readily identify a pattern of responses for these items (all correct answers are forms of the verb *TO BE*), seven similarly constructed items corresponding to other non-problematic expressions using forms of either *TO HAVE* or *TO BE* were interspersed throughout the test.

For the treatment period, a set of ten exercises was developed to provide intensive practice of the series of expressions with *TO BE + ADJECTIVE*. Interestingly, all of these refer to the physical, mental or emotional state or condition of humans or other living beings. Only the first, referring to age, can be used when talking about inanimate objects as well. Items involving non-problematic expressions were added to make the exercises more challenging. Five types of exercises were used, including matching, multiple choice, recognition of the correct form, sentence completion, and translation from Spanish to English. For posttesting, it was decided that a sufficient interval of time between applications (2½ to 3 weeks) had elapsed to make it possible to use the pretest instrument. This test and all practice exercises were reviewed by a teacher and textbook author and then piloted with third-level students from other classes prior to their use with the population par-

ticipating in the study to check validity and internal reliability. The regular classroom teachers were not present during the testing, nor were they informed of the precise language structure being focused on in order to avoid any involvement on their part which might alter the results of the study.

Ten intensive practice sessions were given to the E group on ten consecutive class days, each session lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes. A single instructor, rather than the classroom teacher, directed the practice sessions. A short explanation of the target structure was given at the beginning of the first session. Exercises were resolved by the individual subjects, and then checked with the whole group at the end of each session. When necessary, further clarification of the target structure was offered by the instructor.

The pretest and posttest were scored for each subject on a scale of 0-13, taking into account only the 13 items testing the target expressions. The selection of the verb *TO BE* was considered a correct response, independently of whether the tense and number of the verb or the corresponding adjective were in the correct form. The mean and standard deviation for each group (C and E) were then calculated for the pretest and the posttest. A *t*-test was used to determine the existence of any significant difference (.05) between the mean scores of the two groups in each of the tests.

## Results And Discussion

The analysis of pretest scores (Table 2) revealed no differences between C and E groups ( $t = -1.33, p > .05$ ), thus insuring the equivalence of the two groups before treatment.

Table 2. Pretest scores for accuracy in the use of 13 expressions with  
TO BE + ADJECTIVE in English

Group	n	Mean	s	t value	df	p
Control	34	3.9	3.0	-.133	66	n.s.
Experimental	34	3.8	3.2			

The posttest results (Table 3) showed highly significant differences between the C group ( $X = 4.8$  of 13) and the E group ( $X = 11.9$  of 13) ( $t = 10.758, p < .001$ ).

**Table 3. Posttest scores for accuracy in the use of 13 expressions with TO BE + ADJECTIVE in English**

<i>Group</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Control	34	4.8	3.4	10.758	66	.001
Experimental	34	11.9	1.8			

The results of the study support the research hypothesis that instruction and practice would be effective in improving accuracy in the use of thirteen expressions with TO BE + ADJECTIVE in English. These findings concur, in general terms, with related research on the effectiveness of instruction.

There are certain implications for future research growing out of this study. First, the language point addressed in this case belongs to the area of potential problems identified by contrastive analysis. Further research in this same area should be undertaken to corroborate these findings, as well as in other problematic areas to determine if the response to instruction and practice would be similar.

Second, the 10-session treatment phase was possibly longer than necessary to effect a significant improvement in the subjects in the case under study. The question of determining the optimum amount of time required for the instruction phase should be explored more meticulously in future studies.

Lastly, it would be recommendable to conduct a follow-up study of the participating subjects after a few months have elapsed, to determine the permanence of the improvement achieved in mastery of the target expressions.

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