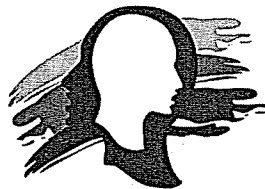


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“If Only It Were That Simple”: Helping Students of English as a Foreign Language Understand and Use Unreal Non-past Conditionals

Introduction

Corpus data is an invaluable tool in English Language Teaching which gives linguists access to examples of language as it is actually used (usually by native speakers) in both written and spoken discourse. Corpus data analysis has shown that some of the prescriptive grammatical rules we teach our students, often through contrived textbook examples, do not reflect actual real-world usage of those forms.

When it comes to conditionals, corpus data reveals that few actual utterances fit neatly into the traditional grammatical division of conditionals (i.e. zero, first, second and third). Mixed conditionals, uses of alternative modals other than “would” and the missing out completely of the conditional clause is far more common than pedagogical grammars suggest. This has led grammarians to move away from the traditional labels in order to allow for the much wider variety of conditional forms used in genuine communication (Jones and Waller, 2011). Since Maule (1988) introduced a new division, many subsequent writers (e.g. Thornbury, 1997) prefer to use his classification of “real” and “unreal” conditionals. Using this more recent classification, I will focus non-past “unreal” conditionals.

I have chosen this area because intermediate students often struggle to produce these structures accurately. Indeed Covitt (1976) found that conditionals ranked fifth among the most serious teaching problems for ESL teachers. Another reason for my choice is the wide variety of functions unreal conditionals perform making them useful for students to learn.

Linguistic Analysis

Meaning

Unreal conditionals are used when the speaker assumes that an action / event (consequent) did not, is not, or will not happen, because the condition upon which it depends (the antecedent) is also assumed to be contrary to fact. Potts (2002) calls this the “*but test*”, because “*I’d go to the concert if I weren’t broke*”¹ implies “*but I am, so I won’t*”. Unreal non-past conditionals refer to a hypothetical present or future e.g. “*I’m sure none of my clients would take me seriously if I didn’t turn up in a sharp suit*”² and can be contrasted with unreal past conditionals which refer to a hypothetical (counterfactual) past e.g. “*I’d have gone completely wrong if I’d stuck with my first version*”.³

Writers (e.g. Ur, 1989) sometimes present the meaning of some non-past unreal conditionals as unlikely, but I agree with Parrott (2010) that this is misleading, and the real point of the unreal conditionals is that they are considered impossible by the speaker. When we believe there is a chance of something happening, it is more natural to use a real conditional: “*If I win the lottery, I’ll move to Spain*.” However, there are many other functions that the unreal conditional can express, for example:

Functions

- **Imaginary or fictional situations:** “*Wouldn’t it be great if we all spoke the same language?*”⁴
- **Politeness:** “*Would you mind if I opened the window?*”
- **To imagine the outcomes of alternatives:** “*We could save money if we spent less on photocopying, but then we wouldn’t be able to do our jobs.*”⁵
- **Advice:** “*If you just apologised to Gabelhauser, he would give your job back*”⁶
- **Wishing:** “*If only I could get her back somehow.*”

Perhaps it is useful to think of these functions as all having a “hypothetical” (hence “unreal”) nature.

¹ Where an example is given without a footnote, it is the author’s invention

² British National Corpus data quoted in Thornbury 2006, p.42

³ Millin S. (2012) <https://sandymillin.wordpress.com/delta/>

⁴ Thornbury 2006, p.99

⁵ Yule, 1999, p.125

⁶ Big Bang Theory <http://authenticenglishtexts.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/second-conditional-sentences-in-big.html>

Form

Conditional clause	Main clause
If + past	past modal + bare infinitive
<i>If I won the lottery,</i>	<i>I'd buy a car</i>

The two clauses can come in either order. Course books often only include simple forms, but continuous forms are possible in both clauses.

"If you were driving downhill really fast, you'd get the following message..."

"I wouldn't be walking today if it weren't for him."

Pedagogical grammars often present the main clause as using *would* exclusively but corpus data shows this is not the case (Jones and Waller, 2011) so I have adjusted the rule to "past modal + bare infinitive / perfect infinitive" to allow for *could* and *might*.

*"If I were a boy I think I could understand."*⁷

Pedagogical grammars often teach that after the *if*-clause, we use "*were*" instead of "*was*" for 1st and 3rd person. But in fact, "*was*" is increasingly common, especially in spoken English (Novogradec, 2009 quoted in Phoochasoensil 2014):

*"Jeremy Corbyn would not use trident if he was Prime Minister."*⁸

However, in the expression "*If I were you...*" to give advice, we use *were*.

Both clauses use the past tense to mark the fact that the utterance refers to a hypothetical situation. As Willis (2004) points out, one of the functions of the past tense is to create a remoteness between the speaker and what is said, in this case, the distance is from reality. The main clause uses past modals to mark this distance. The verb in the conditional clause is "moved back one" from the time it refers to (Thornbury, 1997, p.224), so when we refer to a hypothetical present / future situation we use a past verb, (likewise, when we refer to a hypothetical past situation we use the past perfect). Comrie (1986 p.94) calls this "backshifting".

It is important to note that corpus research shows that the conditional clause is missing in 6 times as many utterances as when it is present (Willis, 1990), e.g. "*I'd probably say no.*" is much more common than "*If he asked me I'd probably say no.*"

Pronunciation

In the main clause, *would* is often contracted to 'd and added to the subject. "*I'd probably say no.*" Stress usually goes on the words which carry meaning, not the function words like "*would*" which is contracted to 'd. The *was* or *were* in the conditional clause are often weak forms /wəz/ and /wə/, and the *if* is often hardly pronounced becoming a whispered "f" added to the following word, so "*If I were you...*" becomes /faɪwəjʊ:/.

Teaching and Learning Problems

Problem 1: Resistance to use of past verb forms to signal non-past meaning

In my experience, many adult learners initially struggle to understand that in non-past unreal conditionals, the past form of the verb can have a present / future meaning. This means students might misunderstand "*If I spoke Spanish...*", to be referring to the past. They are also resistant to producing this construction themselves and instead "regularise the verb tense structure" (Parrott, 2010, p.282) in other words use future tenses when referring to the future and present tenses when referring to the present.

e.g. *"If it'll rain tomorrow, we are not going to set up the exhibition outside."*⁹

While this may not always affect successful verbal communication, it may create a negative impression of the student and be especially detrimental if the student is in an exam.

⁷ Lyrics to the song "If I were a boy" written by BC Jean and Toby Gad performed by Beyonce (2008)

⁸ News STV website: <http://news.stv.tv/scotland-decides/news/1329751-jeremy-corbyn-would-not-use-trident-weapon-if-he-was-prime-minister/>

⁹ Parrott, 2010

Problem 2: Oversimplification of pedagogical grammars

Course books often present the conditionals by providing students with a three-way categorization of conditionals into 1st 2nd and 3rd conditionals. This might lead to comprehension being affected if they are always expecting both clauses to appear together, or it might make their own output sound repetitive or redundant if they insist on always using the *if-clause*. It might even lead to students rejecting forms which do not conform to the narrow definition, dismissing them as incorrect (Maule, 1988).

Problem 3: Form: Putting would in both clauses

I have come across students saying things like **“If I would have more time, I would learn another language.”* in most teaching contexts, including general English to Greek and Ecuadorian teenagers. In fact I recently taught some very competent German and Scandinavian students in an IELTS class who still made this mistake. Parrott (2010) suggests this might be because they’re so worried about forgetting the “would”, that they add two for good measure. It might also be an L1 influence for some students as in German, for example, it is possible to put the equivalent “wurde” in both clauses.

In my experience though, this mistake has little effect on communication, as the meaning is usually clear, in fact I would tentatively argue that if the context was teaching English as lingua franca, this might not be worth correcting, as the hypothetical nature of both clauses is very clearly marked, making meaning even clearer for another non-native interlocutor. However, in exam classes, it is a mistake which would be detrimental to the students’ grades and so worth attention.

Problem 4: Comprehension of natural pronunciation

While teaching intermediate multilingual adults general English in England, some students complained that they found native speakers impossible to understand sometimes. The features of connected speech (e.g. prominence of information words, weak forms and missing out sounds (elision)), make it easy for learners to miss most if not all of the grammatical markers which form the unreal conditionals and this can seriously affect their comprehension of the intended meaning. For example, in the unreal past conditionals there can be significant elision:

“You wouldn’t have made it.”

/jəwʌntə(v)/

“You’d’ve noticed.”

/jʊdə /

Problem 5: Failure of students to proceduralize the forms

While teaching general English at an Ecuadorian university, I noticed that my students had excellent declarative knowledge of the unreal conditional forms and yet had very low procedural competence, especially in speaking tasks. They often produced ungrammatical sentences or sentences with meanings that they did not intend. I think this was partly owing to the focus on the grammar-translation method in their previous English language classes, with very little real-time speaking practice and partly due to the sheer number of grammatical components which make up these complex forms, so that even if they know the rules, under the pressure of real time communication, they simply skip some if not all of the necessary features. e.g. **“If you not go I not go”*.

Suggestions for Teaching

Guided Discovery Approach to Grammar

This approach is ideal for those teachers, who, like myself, find themselves sceptical of the inductive/deductive dichotomy when it comes to teaching grammar. Many of the shortcomings of the deductive approach were confirmed by my own experience; I found that simply telling students grammar rules was often ineffective since even when they understood the rules, they tended to forget them from one day to the next and knowing the rules seemed to make little difference to their ability to use the form correctly in communicative practice. But I also had my doubts about the inductive approach as an effective response to these criticisms; if native speakers themselves often have no idea about what the grammar rules are in many cases, how are learners of English simply supposed to work them out for themselves with nothing to go on but examples? Most of my students in most teaching contexts struggled and didn’t get very far at all with the inductive method.

So, when I read about the Guided Discovery approach, I felt it provided a sensible best-of-both-worlds solution. Guided Discovery involves the teacher providing students with a text which includes a number of (ideally authentic) examples of the target form. Accompanying the text are carefully crafted questions regarding the form, meaning and use of the target grammatical point. The questions are framed in simple English so are accessible

to the students and the answers can be worked out by looking at the examples from the text. The questions thereby guide the students to discover truths about the target grammar, so that students get the benefit of discovery learning, but are supported in their endeavour by questions which clearly scaffold this discovery instead of being left to their own devices to figure out what is going on.

Some guided discovery questions which could be asked about the unreal non-past conditionals are for example:

1. Do the sentences describe real or imaginary situations?
2. Do they refer to the past?
3. What word is 'd'?
4. Which verb tense is used after if?
5. Which verb tense is used after would?

This successfully avoids long, convoluted and confusing teacher-centred explanations about difficult concepts such as "hypotheticality", "unreal non-past" or "impossibility". It also avoids too much grammatical metalanguage which can also put many students off.

Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive analysis, i.e. showing students how their native language (L1) corresponds to the target language (L2), in this case English, is useful to raise students' awareness of the fact that in many languages, the past tense isn't exclusively used to refer to past time, it is also used to express a distance from the speaker i.e. hypothetical meaning and that this is not an exceptional way of using the past tense. (Willis, 2004).

With monolingual groups of young adult students whose L1 also marks unreal meaning with the past tense, (e.g. Greek), I have found contrastive analysis very useful. Indeed, Comrie (1986) notes that "backshifting" is a common phenomenon in Indo-European languages in unreal conditionals. After setting up a clear context e.g. by asking them to imagine that they have moved abroad to study, I generate some examples of target language from the students via a question e.g. "What would you miss if you lived abroad?" and write them up on the board. I ask them to focus on the past tense verb in the if-clause and ask them what the equivalent verb form would be in Greek. After doing this with a few examples they can see that the pattern is the same in both languages. I follow up with a pair or group speaking activity.

Clearly, this procedure will only be effective if the teacher is confident that the students' L1 does indeed backshift the way that English does and only with learners who are grammatically aware of their own language; i.e. well-educated teens or adults. In such contexts I think it can help solve problem 1 because this use of the past tense should no longer seem illogical or confusing, and as Lightbown and Spada (2006) argue, learners instinctively draw on their knowledge of other languages in order to make sense of the new language they are learning.

The text-based approach

To raise students' awareness of forms that don't neatly fit into the typical description of the conditionals, I use a text-based approach. I find authentic texts (e.g. articles, radio interviews etc.) and semi-authentic texts (e.g. scripted dialogues from films or TV programmes) the most effective in providing genuine examples of these forms as well as promoting students' motivation and interest in the topic. For example, there is a scene in an episode of the sitcom "Friends", in which Rachel and Phoebe exchange no less than seven conditional structures in quick succession. It includes one without the if-clause, a continuous verb form in the if-clause, and also an interesting case where the "if" from the "if" clause is replaced by "let's say". The scene is also very funny, so highly enjoyable for students.

Students listen at least once for meaning. I make sure they understand the context is a hypothetical present / future using concept checking questions. Students then listen again up to the point of the target language and I ask them to note down what they think comes next in a gapped script. They then check with the recording. I repeat for each instance of the target language.

A similar approach can be used to expose students to mixed conditionals and other modals e.g. *might* and *could*, not just *would* in the main clause. E.g. the song "If I were a boy" by Beyonce has a number of examples using *could* in place of *would*.

Because at least some of these forms will be new to the students it is important to keep the language of the text within their range, and for it to include a high frequency of the target forms. This will help learner's notice the new forms (Thornbury 1999, p.75). Once students have noticed the forms, they are much less likely to reject them as wrong and more likely to begin using them themselves when ready to do so.

Facilitating proceduralization

In groups, students prepare a role-play e.g. of a radio news programme where students discuss the possible alternative solutions to a topical issue. They prepare by taking notes of their ideas (but no full sentences). When

ready, students record themselves and then either listen to it themselves or the whole class listens to each recording, and note their errors by comparing it to their declarative knowledge of the forms. They can then make a second, improved recording based on the errors they noticed. If there is a specific persistent problem e.g. the over-use of *would*, then when the class listens to the recordings, they could be asked to signal (e.g. by holding up a piece of card with ~~would~~ crossed out on it) that they heard an extra *would*.

Recording students' voices makes students focus more on their accuracy during speaking and also encourages them to notice the difference between their output and the target grammar. This in turn aids automaticity as once students get their tongues around the structures a few times successfully in meaningful communication, it becomes easier for them to continue to do so. With a special focus on the features of connected speech, this activity can also help with problem 4.

Raising students' awareness of the features of connected speech

To improve students comprehension of the conditional forms I record myself reading a story with a high frequency of conditionals (e.g. about what I'd do if I didn't have to work) and students are asked to write down how many words they hear in each sentence. They are initially likely to miss the weak forms. Replay a few times and ask students to discuss and agree on what was said. They can negotiate and reconstruct the original sentences by thinking about the co-text. (Adapted from Scrivener, 2005, p.292)

Through having to consciously focus on reconstructing a grammatically correct sentence, they can use their declarative knowledge of the forms to work out the words they missed and in this way become more aware of the weak forms of the function words which carry the grammatical meaning.

Conclusion

Conditionals in English can be challenging both for the teacher and the students, but with special attention to the specific ways conditionals are actually used in authentic discourse, including extensive pronunciation practice, we can better help our students understand and use them correctly.

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