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STRATEGIC UNDER-CODING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

ABSTRACT: The paper will show that the Foreign Language (FL) learning context provides a very supportive environment for message under-coding in certain key areas of information packaging. It will argue that this is because message framing in the FL context occurs principally i) in the written medium, which allows robust access to co-text in the interpretation of the writer’s intent, and ii) with teacher as interlocutor; teachers are particularly adept at making the co-text relevant to the interpretation of the less skilled writer’s intent. It will suggest that these features of the context of communication allow for unproblematic message processing and, hence, the absence of negative feedback; they, therefore, encourage a sustained use of under-coding at even high-intermediate levels of language proficiency.

KEYWORDS: Pragmatics, written discourse, L2 acquisition, EFL teaching, reference framing, discourse relations, discourse development, genre signalling, learning strategies, message under-determination, learnability, applied linguistics

0. INTRODUCTION

The linguistic system serves to code the speaker’s message. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the insufficiently coded message will result in less than complete understanding of the speaker’s intent. I will suggest, however, that EFL learners under-code some key conventions for packaging information because it eases message framing, without generating less comprehensible prose. To do this, the paper will examine a large sample of EFL learner prose, to show under-coding of the requisite information-packaging conventions in

i) NP reference framing,
ii) the marking of intersentential relations, and
iii) the signalling of genre.
NP reference serves to identify entities the language user wishes to talk about, intersentential relations indicate the way successive propositions increment the text, and genre serves to provide an overall perceptual frame for the communicated message. These areas are selected because they are very important aspects of message coding, at core levels of text structure. In addition to examining learners’ under-coding of information-packaging conventions in these areas, I will assess teacher feedback on this under-coding. I will suggest that this reveals compelling motivation for the sustained use of message undercoding by students who are otherwise at high-intermediate levels of proficiency. Recent literature with interest in the acquisition of information packaging principles in the FL learning context has suggested that students show far less competency in this area than in syntax (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei 1998; Walters 1980; Rover 1996; House 1996; Schmidt 1983; Schmidt & Frota 1986; Cohen 1997; Niezgod & Rover 2001). This study will suggest that one significant reason for this lag in learning is the considerable accommodation of under-coded information-packaging conventions in the FL learning context.

The sample of prose examined in this study comprises fifty personal narratives, sixty story-recalls and twenty pieces of expository prose by high-intermediate EFL learners, enrolled in the humanities program of a Hong Kong university. All the writing tasks were short in-class assignments, completed in between fifty minutes to an hour and a half. In the personal narratives, students were asked to write on a recent event of some personal significance. In the story recalls, students were given fifty minutes to read Maugham’s short story “The Dream” and then asked to write it from memory. In the expository essay, students were asked to explain why they decided to choose English as a major area of study. All the students used Cantonese as L1 and were English users with some fifteen years of experience at the time they composed the essays examined in this study. They had taken English as a school subject until age twelve, at which time they were required to use it as the medium of instruction for most of their school subjects. Their English use was limited to the context of the classroom, however, with significantly more emphasis given to writing over speech.
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Written feedback to these essays was obtained from eight trained EFL instructors each with a minimum of two years of EFL teaching experience. The teachers were asked to treat the students’ assignments as first drafts and to comment on them as they normally would in response to similar assignments submitted to them in their own EFL courses.

1. THE PHENOMENON OF UNDER-CODING

I am using the term ‘under-coding’ to refer to a certain type of mapping between the coding means and the functional domain it serves to mark. In under-coding, the mapping between the coding means and the functional domain it serves to mark is flawed either because the coding means are unable to capture the functionality to the right degree of specificity, or because the functional specificity of the coding means is not given proper realization in the use it is put to.

Under-coding is actually, first, evident as an inherent part of the linguistic system. Consider the dissimilar relationships that are all uniformly represented by the English possessive, in (1).

   b. John’s father. = The male parent of John.
   c. John’s job. = The job John is employed to do.

The possessive in each of the NPs of (1a-c) serves to modify its accompanying noun. But whereas in (1a) the book referred to is the one that John owns, in (1b) the father is the male parent of John, not the one John owns, and, similarly, in (1c) the job is the one John is employed to do, not the one he owns. There are, in fact, three different modifications of the accompanying NP in (1), all marked by the possessive. The differences between these NP modifications are not linguistically coded (Blakemore 1992; Grundy 1995). The problem in this case is with the linguistic coding system itself; it is not as discriminating as it needs to be. That is, the coding means are unable to capture the functionality to the right degree of specificity.
But it is also possible to under-code in this way by selecting an insufficiently discriminating coding means, although the right one does, in fact, exist. One can say, for example, ‘she cried’, when the actual intent is to describe her act of weeping, rather than merely crying.

In the second, above-referred to, kind of under-coding there is a failure to realize the functional specificity of the selected coding-means in the use of it. So, to use ‘she wept’ to describe the less well-specified act of crying would qualify as this kind of under-coding.

There are, therefore, two principal misuses of the linguistic system that result in under-coding:

1) Type 1 under-coding:
The selection of an insufficiently discriminating coding means (e.g., ‘cry’ to represent weeping). This is a problem of choice between existing options. It qualifies as under-coding in failing to capture the intended functional specificity.

2) Type 2 under-coding:
The use of a coding-means without proper recognition of its level of functional specificity (‘weep’ to represent crying); the functional specificity is under-estimated, in this case. It qualifies as under-coding in failing to realize the right level of functional specificity.

2. STRATEGIC UNDER-CODING

It is also true, however, that using language without exploiting its full potential to mark functional specificity is common, and widely perceived as making for both easier and more economical message framing (Grundy 1995). Skilled language users customarily choose to under-code whenever they are in a position to assume that the interlocutor will understand the message in spite of this under-coding. People, in fact, routinely represent linguistically only what cannot be understood without explicit representation. In this strategic under-coding, shared knowledge and shared context play a crucial role in supporting proper message processing and its full comprehension. Take, for example, the NP “John’s book”, of
(1a) above. It can actually refer to either the book he has authored or the one he owns (example from Grundy 1995). In this case, the under-coding can be strategic when it serves to ease message framing, in a situation where there is enough shared knowledge between speaker and interlocutor to allow the interlocutor to successfully disambiguate the NP.

3. FL LEARNERS AND STRATEGIC UNDER-CODING

I would like to suggest that FL learners routinely over-extend the use of strategic under-coding, by applying it to aspects of the linguistic system to which skilled users would not apply it. This is evident in their framing of indefinite reference, their marking of intersentential relations and their signalling of genre.

3.1 Indefinite reference framing (Type 1 under-coding)

The over-extension of strategic under-coding is first evident in the learners’ framing of indefinite reference. Whereas our data suggest that learners frame definite reference in standard ways, the same is not true for the framing of indefinite reference. Indefinite NPs show under-coding in significant numbers.

To refer to something successfully, information packaging must be monitored to ensure that the entity referred to is made salient/well-distinguished amongst same-set entities. That is, it must be made to stand out amongst like entities.

2a. The man in the red cap is staring at you.
   b. The man who came to see you yesterday is here again.
   c. I shared a table with a man whose appearance entertained me.
   d. Yesterday, I saw a man.

In (2a), the man the speaker is drawing the hearer’s attention to is distinguished from other present men by the selection of the descriptive modifier ‘in the red cap’, which is known to both the speaker and the hearer as singling him out. In (2b), the man is distinguished by the selection of the mutually known descriptive phrase of the modifying relative clause...
‘who came to see you yesterday’. In (2c), the indefinite referring expression ‘a man’ is, similarly, made unique amongst other men by the descriptor provided in the relative clause ‘whose appearance entertained me’. This description is recognizable as capable of distinguishing a man amongst other men. But in (2d), the indefinite referring expression, ‘a man’, is unacceptable, because it is not made unique amongst other men at all.

There is a subtle difference, however, between the way in which definite referents and indefinite referents are singled out. In definite reference, the NP-modifying descriptor that serves to single out the referent (“in the red cap” in (2a) and “who came to see you yesterday” in (2b)) is already known to the hearer. In indefinite reference, the descriptor (“whose appearance entertained me” for “a man” in (2c)) is not already known. But what is known is that such a descriptor can make the referent unique (as in (2c)).

Learners frequently generate insufficiently salient/well-distinguished indefinite referring expressions like (2d) (above) as is illustrated in the examples taken from learner prose in (2e) and also (2f) and (2g) (below),1 because generating the needed abstract descriptor (like “whose appearance entertained me”, which modifies “a man” in (2c)) is a much greater challenge than using a descriptor known to the hearer (e.g., “in the red cap” that modifies “the man” in (2a)).

2e. (i). There were a lot of people. I needed to share a table with a man.
   (ii). The restaurant was crowded and small, so he shared the table with a man.

2f. He shared a table with a tall Russian, with a small nose, (small) hands, long thin hair, black eyes, double chin and large red sensual mouth, in shabby clothes.

2g. (i). He shared a table with a fat man.
   (ii). He share a table with another man dressed neatly.

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1 All learner generated examples are in italics.
2f. He shared a table with a man with extraordinarily chiselled features, raven black hair and the deepest of blue eyes.

2g. (i). He shared a table with a man of enormous size.
(ii). He shared a table with a man who was immaculately dressed.

In (2f), the learner attempts to make NP reference well-distinguished by generating a list of NP modifiers to delimit the scope of the referring expression and so particularize the referent. But properly well-distinguished NP reference must be made unique to a conventionally established degree. Although the functional scope of the NP in (2f) is delimited by the accompanying modifiers, the resulting referring expression still does not qualify as sufficiently salient amongst same-set entities to a conventionally accepted degree. The reformulated NP of (2f'), on the other hand, does.

In (2gi) and (ii) the learner also attempts to make the NP reference well distinguished. But this too is not done to a conventionally acceptable degree (since only children would consider that simply being fat or neatly dressed can single out a man amongst his peers). The reformulated NPs of (2gi') and (2gii'), on the other hand, are well-distinguished to an acceptable degree, and, therefore, felicitous.

The assessment of the learner-language data gives evidence that learners under-code in the framing of indefinite reference in the above-illustrated ways. Examination of teacher feedback on the learners’ essays serves to provide an explanation for the sustained practice of under-coding in the framing of indefinite reference at even high-intermediate levels of proficiency. What becomes apparent when we examine teacher feedback on student essays is that teachers do not object to this type of under-coding at all. There is nothing in the teachers’ comments to suggest that under-coded indefinite reference poses any sort of comprehension problem.

If we return to an examination of the students’ use of indefinite reference framing, and now take account of the textual context in which it is used (namely, a story-recall task), we find that the teachers’ failure to object to its under-coding is likely to be because in its textual use the intent to use it as well-distinguished is quite clear. In examining the co-text, it
becomes evident that indefinite reference invariably comes with a detailed description of the referred to NP, immediately following it. This is true as much for skilled writing as for the students’ prose. In Maugham’s short story “The Dream,” the first reference to the protagonist of the story, ‘a man whose appearance entertained me’ is followed by a detailed description of him (cf.(3), below):

3.

He was a Russian, a tall fellow, but amazingly stout, and he had so vast a paunch that he was obliged to sit well away from the table. His hands, small for his size, were buried in rolls of fat. His hair, long, dark, and thin, was brushed carefully across his crown in order to conceal his baldness, and his huge sallow face, with its enormous double chin, clean-shaven, gave you an impression of indecent nakedness. His nose was small, a funny little button upon that mass of flesh, and his black shining eyes were small too. But he had a large, red, and sensual mouth. He was dressed neatly enough in a black suit. It was not worn but shabby; it looked as if it had been neither pressed nor brushed since he had had it.

(Maugham 1975: 227)

This post NP representation of its saliency is also evident in every student narrative, as is illustrated in (3´), signalling that though the referent is not made unique in its referring expression, there is a clear intent to refer to a unique entity.

3´. I shared table with a man.  
He was a Russian. He was fat and poorly dressed with a bad appearance.

3.2 Intersentential relations
I will next comment on the learners’ under-coding in the use of intersentential relations.
Differentiated ways of incrementing text can be put in place by managing the character of intersentential relations. Different relations can be lexically marked by the use of sentence adverbials (e.g., ‘because’ in (4´)), but are not always made explicit in this way (as in (4)).

4 a. She liked him.
   b. He was very kind.

4´a. She liked him
   b. because he was very kind.

Whether they are lexically marked or not, they are apparent in the way in which the propositional incrementation (e.g., in both (4b) and (4´b)) relates to the proposition that precedes it in (4a) and (4´a). Both (4b) and (4´b) increment the text by instantiating a reason for the assertion of (4a) and (4´a). It is self-evident that when the intersentential relationship is lexically marked (as in (4´)), there must be correlation between the selected adverbial (e.g., because) and the relationship that holds between the successive sentence propositions (e.g., the reason for (a), instantiated in (b)).

Learners’ samples, again, show two types of under-coding of intersentential relations:

1) Type 1 under-coding: The implemented relationship between successive propositions is not sufficiently well-specified for the context in which it is used.

2) Type 2 under-coding: The functional specificity of the selected adverbial is not realized by the relationship that holds between the propositions it binds.

3.2.1 The use of temporal ‘then’ (Type 2 under-coding)

I will first comment on learners’ under-coding in the use of temporal types of intersentential relations, focusing on under-coding in their use of temporal ‘then’.

We can set up a basic distinction between temporal and atemporal modes of incrementing text, and, first, examine learners’ use of temporal ‘then’
as a principal means of marking temporal text incrementation. Learners’ use of ‘then’ qualifies as a type-2 under-coding, because they fail to recognize its functional specificity and, therefore, use it between propositions that convey a less well-delimited type of temporal passage.

‘Then’ is properly used only when all three of the following informational conditions constrain the proposition it accompanies in the context of its preceding proposition:

1) the event represented in the ‘then’-marked clausal proposition is one that is completed, following a completed event represented by the preceding proposition,

2) the ‘then’-marked proposition is informationally salient in the context of its preceding proposition, and

3) the ‘then’-marked proposition is informationally new (not already known) to the interlocutor in the context of its preceding proposition.

All three of these conditions are properly met in (5), but not (6) and (7).

5a. I got home at 4:00 o’clock.
   b. Then I took the children to the park.

6a. I left at the last minute.
   b. #Then I arrived in the nick of time.

7a. I wanted to sleep.
   b. #Then I fell asleep.

The event represented in the ‘then’-marked proposition of (5b) is completed and follows the completed event represented by the preceding proposition (as required by condition 1). The ‘then’-marked proposition is also informationally salient (as required by condition 2) and new with respect to its preceding proposition (as required by condition 3). Hence all three above-referred to conditions are met. The same is not true of (6b) and (7b).

In the ‘then’-marked proposition of (6b), the event of arrival is completed and follows the preceding completed event – departure - of (6a) (as
required by condition 1). Arrival is also salient in the context of departure (as required by condition 2). But arrival after departure is not entirely new information (as required by condition 3). Rather, arrival is anticipated in the context of departure. For this reason the use of ‘then’ in (6b) is not felicitous.

In (7b), the ‘then’-marked proposition represents a completed event – ‘fell asleep’ – but this does not follow a preceding completed event (as required by condition 1), since ‘want’ is a state rather than an event. For this reason, the use of ‘then’ in (7b) is infelicitous.

Learners, however, systematically use ‘then’ in contexts like (6b) and (7b) where the conditions that constrain its proper use are only partially met (as in the examples taken from learner prose of 8 and 8’, below). That is, it is used to mark a much less well-specified type of temporal passage than it does in skilled usage.

8.
*But striving to survive for our family, my father had never complained on the fate. He didn't even mention his illness before our siblings, a) but tried to recover his health by practising some special exercise and taking endless treatments instructed by doctor. b) Then he could really defeat the cancer and survive.*

8’.
*Recently I have made quite a great progress in the use of Chinese words a) From the beginning our lecturer of the subject modern Chinese writing had provided us with quite a lot of great writings to read. b) Then we needed to try do some exercises which was aiming at finding out some words which were wrongly used.*

In (8b), the ‘then’-marked propositional event (defeat) does not follow a preceding completed event. Hence ‘then’ is infelicitously used.

In (8’b), the use of the past perfect gives the act of ‘provide with great writings’ no end point in the context of the ‘doing of exercises’ of the clause that follows. Hence ‘then’ is not felicitously used.
Assessment of teachers’ feedback, however, shows no objection to such instances of under-coding. This is again likely to be because the examination of the use of temporal ‘then’ in its textual context allows for proper understanding of the intended intersentential relationship. When we examine the use of ‘then’ in (6b), (7b), (8b) and (8´b) with respect to the co-text in which it is used, that is, (6a), (7a), (8a), and (8´a) respectively, we recognize that it is inappropriately used. But we also recognize that we understand the intended intersentential relationship in spite of the inappropriately used ‘then’, merely by taking account of the actual relationship that bears between the propositions of (6a) and (6b), (7a) and (7b), (8a) and (8b), and (8´a) and (8´b), respectively. Because teachers are able to do this, no misunderstanding results, and, therefore, students also receive no negative feedback.

3.2.2 The use of atemporal relations (Type 1 under-coding)
In examining learners’ under-coding in the use of atemporal intersentential relations, we must first acknowledge that two basic atemporal intersentential relations constitute key modes of building prose by atemporal means: incrementing by adding an informationally distinct proposition to the preceding proposition, and incrementing by expanding the preceding proposition.

9 a. I went to work in Hong Kong for a number of reasons.
   b. It is fast paced and exciting.
   c. It is an interesting mix of the East and the West.
   d. It is a place to make loads of money.

In (9), (9c) adds a discrete proposition to (9b), as the second itemization of the reasons I went to work in Hong Kong, and (d) adds a discrete proposition to (9c), as a third itemization of the reasons I went to work in Hong Kong.

10 a. I was on sentry duty.
   b. I saw the enemy approaching (when I was on sentry duty).
   c. I fired (when I saw the enemy approaching when I was on sentry duty).
On the other hand, (10b) and (10c) increment the text by using the relationship of expansion. For this reason, (10b) retains (10a) in its incrementation, and (10c) retains (10b).

Learners do not consistently select either addition or expansion as well-distinguished basic ways incrementing text. Sometimes, the incrementation is not sufficiently well-specified to qualify as either expansion or addition.

11. Dealing with the stress of college life
1) In everyone’s life, stress seems to be unavoidable. 2) When one grows up, one will face different kinds of stress in different stages. 3) In the college life, students have to face the stress comes from themselves, from their classmates as well as from their families. 4) Stress will bring to the students a sense of feeling that is unfree or even uncomfortable. 5) Sometimes if stress is not properly deal with, it may cause trouble to the students. 6) Therefore, it is important to deal with the stress of college life properly.

In the student sample of (11), for example, expansion is used to increment clause 3 in clause 4:

Students feel unfree and uncomfortable (clause 4) because they are stressed (clause 3).

It is also used to increment clause 4 in clause 5:

Sometimes it causes trouble (clause 5) when students feel unfree because they are stressed (clause 4).

It is also used to increment clause 5 in clause 6:

It is important to deal with stress (clause 6) when it causes trouble when students feel unfree because they are stressed (clause 5).

But expansion does not account for the relationship between clause 1 and 2; nor does addition account for this relationship. (Addition does, however, account for the relationship between clauses 2 and 3.)

Using expansion between clause 1 and 2 we get:
When one grows up one faces different kinds of stress in different stages (clause 2), because stress is unavoidable (clause 1).

This is not fully meaningful.

Using addition between clause 1 and clause 2, we get:

Stress is unavoidable (clause 1) and when one grows up one faces different kinds of stress in different stages (clause 2).

This, too, is not fully acceptable, since addition must be between instantiations of the same kind. (That is, there must be some aspect of parallelism between the units so combined, and this is not the case in the propositions of clauses 1 and 2.)

Teachers’ comments, however, do not address this problem. We find once more that an assessment of this lack of intersentential specificity in its broader textual context makes it possible to understand the student’s intended sentential relationships. This contextual assessment for clauses 1 and 2 suggests the following intended intersentential relations:

Stress is unavoidable (clause 1)

By expansion: Therefore (because it is unavoidable (clause 1)), one faces it at every phase of life (clause 2a).

By addition: It is also true that every phase of life comes with its own kind of stress (clause 2b).

So, what a contextual assessment gives us is the following:

Stress is unavoidable. Therefore one faces it at every phase of life. It is also true that every phase of life comes with its own kind of stress.

It is reasonable to assume that teachers use the readily accessible co-text to work out the intended intersentential relations. In consequence, however, there is no misunderstanding, and, therefore, also no negative feedback.
Finally, I will examine learners’ under-coding in the marking of genre. Genre represents a perceptual framework within which to process the message, and there are established formal means by which one genre is made well-distinguished from another. For example, a sequence of events in past time can be a story or a mere report of past events, and it is necessary, therefore, to signal which genre of narrative it represents. One way in which ‘story’ is signalled is by the representation of a passage from past event to past event that varies in pace, rather than being invariant or temporally flat. This is done by the use of differentiated clausal types. For example, a measured pace is indicated by the use of canonical order (‘He walked out. He ran into the street …’), a much more rapid pace by the use of the VP-conjoined clause (‘He walked out and ran into the street.’) and a much slower pace by the use of the ‘then’-marked clause (‘He walked out. Then he ran into the street.’). When there is a strategic alternation between different clausal types, and hence change, too, in the pace of temporal passage, what the interlocutor perceives is a developing story. Compare, for example, the two versions, (12A) and (12B), of the same sequence of events in past time.

12.

A. One night he heard the sound of a piercing scream.
   He woke up.
   He sat up
   He was startled and confused.
   He turned to her.
   He asked her what happened.
   She had had a nightmare.
   She dreamt that he had tried to kill her.
   He picked her up.
   He threw her over the balusters.
   It was a drop of 30 feet to the floor below.
   It meant certain death.

B. One night he awoke to the sound of a piercing scream.
   He sat up in bed, startled and confused.
   Turning to her, he asked her what happened.
   She said she had had a nightmare.
She dreamt that he had tried to kill her, that he picked her up and threw her over the balusters, to the floor beneath, a drop of some 30 feet and certain death.

Notice that (12B) uses a variety of syntactic constructions and therefore implements a perceptual variation in the represented passage of time; whereas (12A), in using canonical order across all its constituent clauses, marks an invariant or flat passage of time. (12B), in consequence of marking variable temporal passage, reads much more convincingly as a story.

When we look at student samples of stories, we find a consistent failure to use the requisite syntactic means to mark variable temporal passage, as is illustrated in the extract from one student’s rewrite of Maugham’s short story “The Dream,” in (13).

13.

The Russian began to tell me his relationship with his wife. He started the story by the night he heard the scream of his wife. She had a nightmare that his (her) husband wanted to kill her and threw her over the balusters. She was very frightened. The nightmare changed the impression between the couple. The wife was afraid of having the nightmare. The husband thought that it was easy to throw his wife over the balusters.

There is an almost exclusive use of canonical order in the successive clauses of this extract.

Yet because ‘story’ as genre is redundantly signalled by various recognized conventions (including the very standard and widely recognized ones such as ‘once upon a time’) the learners’ intent to tell a story is not in doubt. In consequence, we again find no teachers’ comments that point to the failure to mark variable temporal passage, and, therefore, no relevant negative feedback.
4. CONCLUSION

What I have attempted to show is that the FL learning context provides a very supportive environment for under-coding in certain key areas of information packaging, namely, indefinite reference framing, the marking of intersentential relations and the signalling of genre. I have argued that this is because message framing in the FL context occurs principally

1) in the written medium, which allows robust access to co-text in the interpretation of the writer’s intent, and
2) with teacher as interlocutor. Teachers are particularly adept at making the co-text relevant to the interpretation of the less skilled writer’s intent.

It is these unique features of the context of communication which account for the unproblematic message processing and absence of negative feedback, and, therefore, the sustained use of under-coding at even high-intermediate levels of language proficiency.

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