Teaching of Focus Structures in English

Cennet Altiner

Correspondence: Cennet Altiner, Lecturer, Uşak University, Turkey.

Abstract

English permits certain non-prototypical sentence forms that have focusing or foregrounding effect. Focus structures place certain elements of the basic version of the sentence in different positions in order to make them more prominent. Due to the widespread usage of them, EFL/ESL teachers should be familiar with the grammar of these structures and how they are usually used, the points learners have difficulty with, and the necessary pedagogical implications for teaching these structures. However, the problems that ESL/EFL students have while using English focus structures have not been widely investigated. Thus, this paper firstly looks into the cleft sentences, formed through movement of constituents and other changes, and the sentences with fronting and left-dislocation involving only movement. Then, studies which reveal a clearer picture of learners' problems with these structures are presented. Finally, some activities are designed in order to show how focus structures can be handled in language learning classroom.

Keywords: focus structures, non-prototypical sentence, grammar, teaching

1. Introduction

English permits certain non-prototypical sentence forms that have focusing or foregrounding effect. Focus structures place certain elements of the basic version of the sentence in different positions in order to make them more prominent. These structures have also been termed information-packaging structures, as by Hudleston and Pullum (2002). They use the term to refer to sentences that have a corresponding S-V-O, or "basic canonical form" and are used for several functions: (1) maintaining given-new flow of discourse; (2) focusing; (3) shifting heavy NPs; and (4) topicalizing. Focus structures are widely used in both conversation and writing; thus EFL/ESL teachers should understand the grammar of these structures and how they are usually used. This paper will look into the cleft sentences, formed through movement of constituents and other changes, and the sentences with fronting and left-dislocation involving only movement.

2. Fronting

Fronting refers to the initial placement of core elements which are normally found in post-verbal position. There are patterns which differ in stylistic effect and in register distribution. A full understanding is not possible without also considering variation in the order of the subject and the verb (Biber et al.,1999). Fronting has different functions such as organizing information flow to achieve cohesion, expressing contrast, enabling particular elements to gain emphasis.

Fronting with subject-operator inversion

In some instances, fronting a negative adverbial constituent or an adverbial constituent expressing extent, degree, or comparison gives a more emphatic or exclamatory reading to the sentence as a whole; in such cases, subject-operator inversion accompanies the constituent fronting (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman,1999).

Present participle fronting

Our missing uncle was sitting at the kitchen table. ⟶ Sitting at the kitchen table was our missing uncle.

Past participle fronting

Several barrels of wine were hidden in the cellar. ⟶ Hidden in the cellar were several barrels of wine.

Note: As Bresnan (1994) correctly points out, the locative element in such participle fronting examples is often quite strong (*at the kitchen, in the cellar*) and if the locative adverbial is deleted, the sentence becomes less grammatical.

Comparative fronting

What he said was more important than what he did. ⟶ More important than what he did was what he said.

Fronting with or without subject-verb inversion

Adverbial fronting

There are many types of adverbial fronting that occur in English. Some of them are:

Adverbials of time

He jogs in the morning. ⟶ In the morning he jogs.

Adverbials of manner

Garth proceeded to carve the roast skillfully. ⟶ Skillfully, Garth proceeded to carve the roast.

Adverbials of reason

I made some unfortunate remarks at the meeting because I was annoyed. ⟶ Because I was annoyed, I made some unfortunate remarks at the meeting.

John ran into the house.   a) Into the house John ran.

                                 b) Into the house John ran.

Cleft Sentences

Cleft sentences, or clefts are a variation of basic declarative sentences differing from them in that constituents have been made prominent through changes that include splitting, or "clefting", the sentence (Cowan, 2008).

Example (1)   a. It was a small red convertible that he bought.   It cleft

                 b. What he bought was a small red convertible.   Wh-cleft

It-Clefts

It-clefts consist of:

- the pronoun *it*
- a form of the verb *be*, optionally accompanied by the negator*not* or an adverb such as *only*
- the specially focused element, which may be of the following types: a noun phrase, a prepositional phrase, an adverb phrase, or an adverbial clause
- a relative-like dependent clause introduced by *that, who/which, or zero*, whose last element receives normal and end-focus (Biber et al., 1999).

Examples: (The specially focused element is in bold in the examples below and the dependent clause placed in [ ])

His eyes were clear and brown and filled with an appropriate country slyness. It was **his voice** [that held me].

WH-Clefts (Pseudo-clefts)

Wh-clefts (also referred to as **"pseudoclefts")** are the other important focus construction in English. Wh-clefts consist of:

- A clause introduced by a wh-word, usually what, with its own point of focus, typically at its end.
- A form of the verb be
- The specially focused element: a noun phrase, an infinitive clause, or a finite nominal clause (Biber et a., 1999).

Wh-clefts, also referred to as **pseudo-clefts**, are formed by placing what (or, less often, another wh-word) in front of part 1 and inserting some form of be before part 2, which becomes the focused element. This process is illustrated in the example below.

Part 1	Part 2
a. [He bought] [a small red convertible].	
b. *What he bought was* a small red convertible.	

Left Dislocation (Prefaces)

What linguists call left-dislocation is similar to fronting in that some item is moved from its more customary position in a prototypical construction to a position at the beginning of an utterance, where it receives greater focus. It consists of a noun phrase, with a co-referent pronoun. As opposed to fronting, a pronoun that is co-referential with the fronted item remains in its original position (Endley, 2010). Preface is the term used for what is often called 'left dislocation'.

Prefaces may precede both declarative and interrogative clauses. The relationship between the preface and the clause may vary (Biber et al, 1999).

Examples:

Poor old Doctor Jones, [he] said you'll never wear your heart out.

Well you see **somebody like PC Jones**, being an older person, [he] does it properly I suppose.

Purpose of using Cleft sentences

The basic function of cleft sentences is to make certain elements more prominent. However, in filling this basic function, cleft sentences have more specific uses in discourse, and it clefts and wh-clefts differ somewhat in these uses.

Uses of It clefts

The focused element in and it cleft may contain old information or new information. Depending on whether the focused element contains old or new information, then it cleft will be used by speakers and writers for different purposes.

Contradict

It clefts are often used to contradict something that has been said or written. In the example below, speaker B's response contradicts the information presented by speaker A-that a particular person is going to be fired as a result of a scandal.

Example:

A: This has blown up into an enormous scandal. I hear that they are going to fire the secretary of state.

B: No, *it's the secretary of defense who they want to fire*, not the secretary of state.

Argue a point

In persuasive writing, it clefts are frequently used to argue a point.

Example:

But why is the shape of the wing so important? *It is the shape that determines the maximum speed that can be attained by a jet airplane.*

In the example given above, the writer wants to make the point that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between wing shape and the maximum speed that a jet airplane can attain. The writer does this by first asking a question about shape and then answering it in a new sentence containing an *it cleft*. Here the focused element (*the shape*) is the old information, and new information-the reason why the shape of the wing is important-follows in the clause beginning with *that.*

Uses of Wh-Clefts (Pseudo-clefts)

Generally, in wh-clefts, the clause beginning with what is old information, and the focused element is new information. Wh-clefts are used primarily in conversation for a range of specific uses.

Resume a Topic

Wh-clefts are used to resume a topic that was being discussed.

Example:

A: Well, they served us some kind of white beverage in these interesting-looking bowls.

B: What kind of bowls?

A: Well, they were all covered with beautiful colors and designs.

B: They were painted on?

A: No. They were more like carved on….. I can' think of the word.

B: "Inlaid"?

A: Yeah. "Inlaid." Well, *what I didn't realize at the time was that the beverage was alcoholic.*

In the example above, speaker B asks a question that causes speaker A to shift from the topic of beverage to the bowls that it was served in. The new topic is continued for a while until speaker A uses a wh-cleft to resume the original topic-the beverage. The new information-its alcoholic nature-is in the focused element.

Contradict Something Said and Present an Alternative Interpretation

Speakers may use a wh-cleft to contradict something that has been said in conversation and then, possibly, present what they believe is an alternative interpretation.

A: When people reach retirement age, they usually slow down and become less interested in things like physical appearance and a lifestyle that includes things like dating and fast car.

B: Actually, *what often happens is that older people become more interested in regaining some of their youthful appearance and lifestyle.* They have more money, so they often spend it on changing their appearance, buying sports cars, and, not infrequently, getting back into the dating game.

Purpose of using "Fronting"

Fronting is usually done for one three reasons. The speaker or writer may want to emphasize the fronted element, to emphasize a contrast between elements, and to introduce a new topic or a topic shift while maintaining a bridge to previously mentioned information.

Emphasize an Element

Fronting emphasizes elements both because it moves them to sentence-initial position- a position of prominence-and because it violates the usual word order.

Example:

(1) I work outside in the fresh air, which I really enjoy, and I don't have anyone telling me what to do every minute. *That* I also like.

Introduce a Topic or Topic Shift

Fronted reduced relative clauses frequently introduce topics of newspaper articles in the first sentence of initial paragraphs. An example sentence given below shows this situation. Here the author uses the fronted reduced relative clause to highlight a serious problem, which is elaborated on throughout the article.

Example: *Racked by drug scandals, rider departures, team withdrawals, and fighting among the leaders of the sport,* the 94th Tour de France ended Sunday as one of the most tumultuous races in the event's history.

Purpose of using "Left Dislocation"

The preface is used to establish a topic first and then attach a proposition. It aids the planning of the speaker as well as the decoding of the hearer, because it breaks up a complex task into parts. By this arrangement the speaker can check that the hearer has clearly identified the main referent before going on to the main point. The hearer's response may be verbal (yes, mm, and the like) or non-verbal (nodding, eye-contact) (Biber et al, 1999). Prefaces are also a sign of the evolving nature of conversation. Note how the first speaker in the example below appeals to the addressee by adding the discourse marker *right.* The addressee responds and the original speaker goes on to the main point (Biber et al., 1999).

A: When I went to hospital today, **there was this girl**, right

B: Yes

A: [She] took an overdose.

Problems that ESL/EFL students have with focus structures

Although the problems that ESL/EFL students have producing and using English focus structures have not been widely investigated, new research is emerging that may reveal a clearer picture of what these might be. One research project that holds potential for shedding light on the acquisition of English focus structures in an EFL environment is described by Callies (2002). Using a battery of judgement, error identification, production and introspection tasks, Callies and his colleagues are examining the competency of advanced-level German learners of English in forming wh-cleft, it cleft, and fronting. German and English are closely related, consequently these focus structures are virtually syntactically identical in two languages. Klein (1998), Plag and Zimmermann (1998), and Zimmermann (2000) have suggested that advanced learners are not fully competent with regard to the restrictions on focus structures, nor are they sufficiently aware of their discourse functions. Plag and Zimmermann have stated that learners avoid infrequent structures such as focus constructions, do not use them productively, and overuse specific structures such as fronting. Aso, Cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences both are more frequent in spoken than in written English, which may explain in pat why they have been ignored in ESL/EFL texts.

Although there are some reports of SLA research on the use of specific focus structures by speakers of other L1s, these are not always sufficiently detailed. This leaves an important gap about how English focus constructions are learned by speakers of non-European languages.

Pedagogical Suggestions

Due to the low frequency of focus structures explained above, having a target-like competence of these structures only through input is very difficult. Most of the publications in the second language research area focus on the linguistic

features of these structures, but teaching dimension of them is generally neglected. The number of the research papers which deal with the teaching aspect of these structures is quite limited. Only the papers by Katz (2000), Blyth (2000), and Kerr (2002) can be listed at this point. These researchers emphasize that these structures should be taught based on their functions in discourse at the intermediate or advanced proficiency level. Blyth's (2000) paper is particularly important in terms of emphasizing the teaching of focus structures through a discourse-oriented approach and proposing different techniques for teaching of them.These techniques are based on three different fields: focus on form methodology, discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. On the other hand, with regard to teaching materials, it has been observed that these structures are not generally given place in coursebooks for advanced level language learners. Callies (2007), on the other hand, claims that the publication of the recent corpus-based grammars of English changed this situation and they all include individual chapters which present the features of the most important focusing devices (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, 2005).

Due to the limitations of teaching materials, Callies (2007) suggests a functional approach to advanced foreign language teaching in order to help learners to reflect on the different features of linguistic structures and particularly on their pragmatic functions in discourse. Lastly, an important didactic implication is suggested for awareness raising related to the basic functional features of discourse and information structure. In terms of pragmatic point of view, learners need to understand that the focus structures are utilized with a discourse-pragmatic intention.

Based on the claims presented above with regard to scarce representation of focus structures in teaching materials, it is really important to provide language teachers with guidance about the presentation of these structures in a suitable manner thorugh well-prepared materials. At this point, this paper is important in terms of both providing a theoretical foundation and also suggesting real hands-on activities which could help learners to raise their awareness about these structures.

Suggestions for teaching focus structures

Below some activities will be presented to show how focus structures can be handled in language learning classroom (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Teaching suggestions for It-clefts and Wh-Clefts:

Teaching of it-clefts: For teaching it-cleft sentences, the teacher should give several examples showing how it-clefts embody certain presuppositions and differ from their normal affirmative and negative statement counterparts (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

For example:

Sam studies physics. (Cue: He doesn't study chemistry.)

Answer: It's physics that Sam studies, not chemistry.&   It's physics, not chemistry, that Sam studies.

John doesn't drive a Ford. (Cue: He drives a Buick.)

Answer: It's not a Ford that John drives, but a Buick. &It's not a Ford, but a Buick, that John drives.

In groups of three, students should be given one 3×5 card, each with a false affirmative or negative statement as a cue. The statements will be about their fellow students. They should write a mini-dialog that makes natural use of an it-cleft construction.

One cue card: Kim comes from Hong Kong.

Sample student –generated dialogue:

A: Is anyone in this class from Hong Kong?

B: Yes, Kim comes from Hong Kong.

C: No, he doesn't. It's Lee who comes from Hong Kong, not Kim.

Teaching of pseudo-clefts (wh-clefts): Pseudo-cleft sentences can be learned and practiced in the context of a small-town planning committee meeting. Each member of the committee is trying to present a different proposal.

Sample dialogue:

Chairman: What our town needs is careful development. May I hear your proposals?

Head Librarian: What we see as important is a new library branch to supplement the main library.

High School Principal: What we need is better athletic facilities for the high school.

Businessman: What we should have is a Chamber of Commerce like all the other town in the area.

The class can be split into groups to practice and role-play the sample dialogue. The follow-up activity could be for each group to make one or more suggestions concerning their ESL/EFL class.

For example:

What we need is fewer exams.

What we would like is less homework.

What we would prefer is more conversation.

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Teaching of Fronting: Using Fronted Purpose Adjuncts for Topic Shifts (Advanced)

Fronted purpose adjuncts are commonly used in academic and other writing to introduce an attempted solution to a problem that was described, often in the previous paragraph. Mastering this use of fronted purpose adjuncts will enable your students to improve their writing; moreover, it is fairly easy to teach (Cowan, 2008).

Teacher explains to student that fronted purpose adjuncts can be used when a writer presents a problem in one sentence and wants to shift to the related topic of an attempt to solve this problem. Then, s/he shows a typical example of a purpose adjunct in the form *in order to*…..For example, on the board write the sentences below.

Example: Scientists don't really understand how tornadoes work. They are undertaking research *in order to learn more about how tornadoes work*.

Then, teacher shows the fronted version in a sentence.

Fronted version: Scientists don't really understand how tornadoes work. *To learn more about them,* they are undertaking research.

Then, teacher explains that the sentence with the fronted clause makes a smooth connection to the previous sentence. It begins with information related to the previous sentence—learning more about tornadoes, which scientists don't really understand, and it ends with something new---the solution of undertaking research. For this reason, sentences with fronted purpose clauses frequently serve as transition sentences showing a shift in the topic.

Next, present via handout or projector two paragraphs that illustrate how such sentences are effective in shifting the topic from one paragraph to another. Keep the paragraphs short and use simple current events topics that you can find in newspapers or on the Internet.

Point out how the sentence with the fronted clause makes a much smoother transition than would the alternative. Next, present the students with an account of some research and ask them to write two paragraphs based on the research similar to those in the example above.

Variations of these approach can be extended to show other fronted structures (e.g. fronted adjectives and prepositional phrases) used for the purposes of topic shift. Each teacher must decide how many of these structures should be covered based on his or her students' needs and the time available (Cowan, 2008).

Lesson plan for teaching of "Left Dislocation"

Description

In this lesson students will be introduced the topic of "left dislocation", and will practice "left dislocation" with various activities.

Main Aim:

To provide clarification and practice of left dislocation

Warmer/Lead-in (5-10minutes) To set lesson context and engage students

Write the example sentences below on the board and ask them what is different with them. Give three minutes to discuss it with their pairs. Ask them what causes such a syntactic difference in a sentence. Then, discuss as a whole class.

Poor old Doctor Jones, [he] said you'll never wear your heart out.

Mark- will [he] be first to finish?

Teach (15-20 minutes) Clarify the topic of "left-dislocation"

Explain that left-dislocation is similar to fronting in that some item is moved from its more customary position in a prototypical construction to a position at the beginning of an utterance, where it receives greater focus. It consists of a noun phrase, with a co-referent pronoun. Preface is the term used for what is often called 'left dislocation'. Give the

following sentences as examples.

Examples:

Well you see **somebody like PC Jones**, being an older person, [he] does it properly I suppose.

And actually you know **this Time Chemicals**, [they] deliver you now, [they] come here with the stuff.

This women, [she]'s ninety years old.

But **Anna-Luise** what could have attracted [her] to a man in his fifties?

Test (8-10 minutes)

Provide students with free practice of the target language. Tell them to work in pairs and write a dialogue including at least five left-dislocation sentences by using the information presented beforehand. Monitor students during the all parts of the task. At the end, hear some good examples of dialogues from students. If there is any problem with left-dislocated sentences, write them on the board and discuss as a whole class.

3. Conclusion

Although focus structures may seem unimportant as a grammar topic, in fact, many of these structures occur frequently enough in spoken and written English to justify their inclusion in a grammar curriculum. Focus is a discourse-functional notion, related to what speaker/writer wants to draw the listener/reader's attention to in the ongoing discourse or text. As it was pointed out, such attention can be activated through the use of marked word order and special focus constructions. As it was explained in the previous chapters, clefting occurs widely in conversation and basic function of them is to make certain elements more prominent. It clefts can be incorporated in regular oral grammar practice and in composition instruction. On the other hand, wh-clefts used to contradict something that has been said are good candidates for oral grammar activities. Main functions of it-clefts are contradicting, arguing a point and establishing a topic whereas the functions of wh-clefts are resuming a topic, presenting the gist and contradicting.

Fronting of prepositional phrases, adverbs, and reduced relative clauses is used often in academic and popular writing, as left-dislocation. The main goals speakers and writers often use fronting are emphasizing an element, emphasizing a contrast, introducing the topic of an article and introducing a topic shift. Thus, knowledge of how to use these two focus structures effectively could help advanced students to improve their writing skills. Also, teachers of English should be knowledgeable about these structures, the points learners have difficulty with, and the necessary pedagogical implications about the effective teaching of these structures.

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