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Abstract

Linking words.

Linking words are very difficult to teach. Teaching them by means of translation, or as simply a question of grammar does not work well, and English textbooks are often little help. I propose a teaching method which consists of familiarising students with the types of errors which are possible, and encouraging them to make a dictionary of linking words in a form that they will find useful.

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Les mots de liaison

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Mots-clés

Mots de liaison, analyse des erreurs, grammaire, registre, syntaxe, pédagogie, worksheet

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Keywords

Linking words, error analysis, teaching method, grammar, syntax, register, collocation, worksheet, exploration,

Summary

Linking words are very difficult to teach. Teaching them by means of translation, or as simply a question of grammar does not work well, and English textbooks are often little help. I propose a teaching method which consists of familiarising students with the types of errors which are possible, and encouraging them to make a dictionary of linking words in a form that they will find useful.

LINKING WORDS

John Mullen (Paris V)

Quand nos étudiants, une fois entrés dans la vie active, veulent écrire des lettres ou des rapports en anglais, les mots de liaison présentent pour eux un problème assez grave. Dans les devoirs qu'ils font dans l'IUT, les erreurs sont très courantes. Dans cet article je présente quelques idées sur comment enseigner les mots de liaison. Ces exercices seraient probablement appropriés pour les étudiants de deuxième année, mais pourraient être utilisés avec les groupes de première année qui ont déjà un bon niveau d'anglais général.

1) La démarche générale

Dans les quelques heures par semaine que nous passons avec nos étudiants, il est peu probable que nous puissions expliquer en détail l'usage de toutes les expressions de liaison en anglais. Le but de mes exercices est de faire que les étudiants prennent conscience des causes des difficultés qu'ils ont avec les mots et les expressions de liaison, et qu'ils se munissent d'un certain nombre de tactiques pour résoudre ces problèmes. Par ailleurs, ils auront la possibilité de pratiquer un certain nombre des mots de liaison les plus courants.

La démarche implique une tentative de faire participer au maximum les étudiants, y compris pendant la phase de présentation de la grammaire, parce que nous savons que plus ils participent, plus ils retiennent.

Les worksheets sont, bien sûr, à adapter aux méthodes de chaque enseignant individuel ; l'ordre des exercices peut également être varié. En général, je trouve que pour les groupes plus forts en anglais, il est bien de faire un exercice du type QCM au début, pour leur démontrer qu'ils ont des problèmes avec ces mots. (cela s'appelle «proving the need» en TEFLese»). Les étudiants ont parfois l'impression d'avoir «done» linking words, ou de pouvoir s'en sortir par le «feeling». Une impression, bien sûr, relativement fautive.

2) L'analyse des mots de liaison

Bien sûr une analyse claire est essentielle avant que l'on puisse enseigner quoi que ce soit.

La grammaire de Eastwood, et celle de Leech présentent à mon avis les meilleures explications. Je ne vais pas les résumer ici.

Pourquoi les mots de liaison posent-ils tant de problèmes à nos étudiants ? D'abord parce qu'ils sont, en effet, difficiles, mais deuxièmement parce qu'ils exigent une approche pédagogique un peu différente de l'approche traditionnelle qui les traite ou bien comme un problème de grammaire, ou bien comme un problème de vocabulaire.

Une difficulté dans l'enseignement des mots de liaison est la difficulté de donner des exemples clairs. Par leur nature même, beaucoup d'entre eux ne peuvent pas être expliqués par une seule phrase, car ils puisent leur sens dans le lien entre deux phrases, voire deux paragraphes.

C'est pour cela que les manuels traditionnels, basés sur les phrases de thèmes et les exercices de grammaire traités par phrase isolée sont peu satisfaisants pour l'enseignement des mots de liaison. Pour cette raison aussi, il est essentiel que l'enseignant se munisse de très nombreux exemples des phrases ou paragraphes qui emploient les mots de liaison différentes pour faciliter les explications que les étudiants vont demander. Sur le champ, dans la salle de cours, il est extrêmement difficile d'inventer un exemple qui montre clairement la différence exacte, par exemple, entre «Contrary to» et «In contrast with».

3) La traduction :

Les mots de liaison sont particulièrement difficiles à traduire. Plus encore qu'ailleurs, il est important d'expliquer aux étudiants que la traduction est pleine de pièges, et qu'il ne doivent en aucun cas essayer de rédiger une liste de mots de liaison anglais avec leur «équivalent français» dans l'autre colonne.

D'ailleurs, la traduction présente d'autres problèmes. Un certain nombre d'étudiants auront des problèmes avec les mots de liaison en français également, et, si le professeur est anglophone, il risque fortement de ne pas comprendre le fonctionnement détaillé des mots de liaison en français (une bière pour le premier anglophone qui m'explique le sens exact du mot «or» en

français!)

Maintenant, les étudiants vont essayer de trouver des traductions en tout cas. Le mieux que nous pouvons espérer est de leur expliquer pourquoi il n'y a pas de traductions exactes.

Mais cela ne veut pas dire que nous ne tenons aucunement compte de la langue maternelle de nos étudiants. Il faut prêter une attention particulière aux faux amis (par exemple «Au contraire» et «On the contrary» dans certains cas), et à d'autres «erreurs classiques». Il est aussi important d'enseigner aux étudiants que l'expression de liaison «At the opposite» n'existe pas, que de leur expliquer quels sont les sens différents de «though». Sinon, les étudiants ont facilement l'impression que vous leur enseignez des expressions qu'ils peuvent choisir s'ils veulent, mais que beaucoup d'autres qu'ils ont toujours utilisées vont aller aussi bien, ce qui n'est pas le cas, bien entendu.

Suggested teaching method.

A la fin de l'article vous trouverez un certain nombre de worksheets que vous pouvez utiliser avec vos étudiants. Mais tout d'abord je vais exposer une méthode pédagogique que je propose.

A: Exploration and presentation

Exercise 1 : get the students to answer, working perhaps in pairs. The conclusion you are looking for is that

1) Linking words often have more than one meaning (eg «on the one hand... on the other can be contrast OR reinforcement, and «while» can be «at the same time as» or «despite the fact that».)

2) In some of their uses they are extremely difficult to translate; try translating the French linking word «or». What is more, logical links which are expressed in one language by a single word require a whole sentence in another language. (oder?)

Exercises 2 and 3 I have only mixed a few groups of linking words at once, because I think it would be too difficult to mix them all together. Occasionally a word may go into more than one category. For the moment, the only aim is to group them in categories, not to discuss their precise meanings, or grammar or style. Once all eight categories are established on the blackboard, you can ask students if they have any more linking expressions which can be added to any of the categories. They will suggest a

certain number, and you have to put them into the right category.

The aim of asking them for more is to get them to tell you their favourite, non-existent, linking words. When a student gives you an expression which doesn't exist, especially if it is a common error like «At the opposite», don't ignore it. Write it on the blackboard with a big line through it, in the category where people put it in general.

The most important problems that students will have with this exercise are the following :

1) confusion between linking words which are used to order time, and those which are used to order arguments. students endlessly use «At last» to introduce the last argument in their essay, instead of «finally»; What makes this more difficult is that while «at last» can never be used to order arguments, «finally» can sometimes be used to order time!

2) «On the one hand... on the other» is today almost always used to contrast two opposing arguments («On the one hand if we went for a picnic it would be cheaper than a restaurant, but on the other hand we wouldn't risk getting wet in a restaurant.'). However, there does exist an older more literary usage which is similar to a common use of «D'une part... d'autre part» in French where two arguments which reinforce each other are linked by means of this expression. («The board saw two major advantages. On the one hand the move would permit us to make better use of public transport facilities and on the other it would mean we were nearer the major centres of industry.») I find it more practical only to teach the contrast usage, since their most common error is to use the reinforcement usage where it cannot be used.

Before getting involved in long discussions about the exact meanings of the different linking expressions (i.e. the fact that all the words in a category do not mean exactly the same), get them to do Exercise 4

B: CONTROLLED PRACTICE

Once you have established that they have understood the four possible sources of error in the field of linking words, you can go onto multiple choice exercises. You may do one of these before exercise one, but only so as to show them that they need to learn more about linking words : if you do do a multiple choice exercise first, delay doing the corrigé until after exercise four.

Multiple Choice exercises are not too difficult to make. The best thing to do is to take a real business letter or short article in English and

blank out a certain number of linking words. For the three or four alternative answers you propose for a given blank, try to make sure that one is correct (!) that one has the wrong meaning, that one has the wrong grammar and that one has the wrong style. In this way the students will be forced to think about all these aspects. If you would like to see some examples, there are some in «Writing in English 3», published by OUP and in «Build your vocabulary 2» by John Flower and Michael Berman (LTP1989)

The corrigé of Multiple Choice exercises will give you a chance to discuss more precise differences between meanings (eg between “namely” and “for example”) of different linking words, and differences in their register, (“What’s more” is more informal than “Moreover”, for example), or in their syntax (“If not” has the same meaning as “otherwise” but is normally only found at the beginning of a sentence, for example), or in their grammar (“although” is a conjunction, “In spite of” is a preposition, “nevertheless” is an adverb, but “though” can be a conjunction or an adverb, for example).

For those exercises where students must choose between various linking words for the appropriate one, try to get them, as well as choosing the right answer to analyse why each of the others is not appropriate, and to frame their answer to this question as one of the four sources of error you have taught them (meaning, grammar, syntax, style). In this way you continue reinforcing their understanding of the structure of linking word errors.

C: PRODUCTION

The Production phase of the teaching of linking words will mostly take place through the students’ written homework. Over the following weeks after teaching linking words pay particular attention to the linking words in students’ homework. Mark not only whether they are right or wrong, but what sort of mistake is made in the choice of the linking word (meaning, grammar, syntax, style). Insist that the students correct their incorrect linking words, which you have commented on. Do not write the correction in yourself when marking their homework.

DICTIONARY

The aim of your teaching is not to give your students an exhaustive list of all English linking words with their meanings, grammar and register. They would not remember it if you did. The aim is rather to point out to them where the dangers

are, and get them into the habit of noting linking words in a form which adequately explains them (the meaning, the grammar, the style, the syntax, and an example.) Encourage them to make a little dictionary of linking words. There are only a few dozen they are ever likely to meet.

You can help them on their way by giving them an example of what an entry in their linking wordlist should look like. Here is an example I made up.

NOTWITHSTANDING

Grammar : can be a preposition or an adverb
Meaning : means the same as “nevertheless” as an adverb or “in spite of” as a preposition.

Syntax : as an adverb, it is almost always at the beginning of a sentence.

Style : it is a very formal word, reserved for formal letters or literary or academic usage.

Example: «Notwithstanding the outstanding quality of his performance in the department, the board feel that a promotion would be premature in this instance.»

MISCELLANEOUS PROBLEMS

1) We need to explain to students that the majority of linking words are used to join sentences together and therefore any link expressed should be with the sentence immediately previous. For instance, students have a tendency to use the expression “for example” in order to exemplify something which was mentioned three sentences earlier. They should not do this. In the same way, such words as “therefore” must refer to a link with the sentence immediately previous.

2) Students will often begin sentences with «And» or «But». This is an informal usage which in general terms is not appropriate for essays or for business letters. Your students will gleefully point out to you that NEWSWEEK begins sentences with «And» and «But». The answer to this is that NEWSWEEK writes in a more informal form than would be normal in business letters and reports, and also that NEWSWEEK writers know when it is acceptable to use “And” or “But”, whereas our students do not. It is necessary to be particularly hard on this usage because if you let it go by your students will happily begin every second sentence with «And» or «But» and forget all the other linking words they have ever seen.

3) Unless you are sure you know exactly what you are talking about do not get drawn into discussions about the exact meaning of French linking words. Your students will all disagree about their “real” meaning. If you are anglophone, you may not know, and if you are franco-phone you may not find it easy to explain either.

Student Worksheet One

Exercise 1

What are linking words ?

Why are they difficult ?

Are they also difficult when you are writing in French ?

Look at these sentences

- 1) Nous avons polréauté pendant trois heures et enfin il est arrivé.
- 2) Enfin, je ne sais pas.
- 3) Enfin, il y a d'autres raisons pour cette politique.

Can you translate them ? Is it difficult ? Why ?

What can you conclude about the linking word «enfin» ?

Exercise 2 Meaning categories A

Here are some linking words and expressions.

besides moreover
afterwards meanwhile
even more important is the fact that
later on furthermore
on the other hand next
nevertheless at last
all the same in short
well now
notwithstanding
despite
still
before this
while
although
even though

Can you divide these linking words into five categories according to their meanings ?

The four categories are

- 1) ADDITION OR REINFORCEMENT,
- 2) CONTRASTING
- 3) ORDERING TIME
- 4) MAKING A NEW START
- 5) SUMMARY

Student Worksheet Two

Exercise 3 Meaning categories B

Here are some more linking words

By the way
secondly
for this reason
thirdly
namely
e.g.
consequently
as a result
finally
in other words
similarly
viz
lastly
to start with
therefore
in the same way
such as
in the first place
for example
for instance

Can you sort them into categories according to their meanings ?

The categories are

- 1) ORDERING ARGUMENTS
- 2) CHANGING THE SUBJECT
- 3) COMPARISON
- 4) RESULT
- 5) EXEMPLIFICATION

Student Worksheet three

Exercise 4 : Correct these sentences

- 1) Despite I have been working all day, I don't feel tired.**
- 2) No sugar in the coffee thanks mate. Nevertheless, I want some milk in it.**
- 3) Contrary to profits in the car industry, wages have fallen by ten per cent.**
- 4) I recommend that he be invited to retire early therefore.**
- 5) There are many examples of good French actors, namely Gerard Depardieu.**
- 6) We have reason to believe that he is guilty of fraud, what is more.**
- 7) Anyway, I am writing to you in the hope that you can be of service to me in this matter.**
- 8) Even though his conduct last time, I have invited him to come again, provided that he doesn't drink.**

There are four different types of mistakes in these sentences. there are two mistakes of each type.

Firstly, there are those mistakes where the linking word does not have the correct meaning. Which sentences are these ?

Secondly, there are those mistakes where the linking word is not followed by the correct grammatical construction. Which sentences are these ?

Thirdly, there are mistakes where the linking word is the correct one, but in cannot go at that point in the sentence. these are mistakes of syntax. Which sentences are these ?

Finally, there are mistakes where the linking word has the right meaning and grammar, and is at the correct point in the sentence, yet it is still not appropriate. Why not ?

This is one of the things which makes linking words so apparently difficult. It is not enough to learn the meanings of the linking words. In fact, for each linking word or expression, you need to know :

- 1) Its exact meaning**
- 2) Its grammar : is it, for example, a preposition, a conjunction or an adverb , (Do you remember what these are ?)**
- 3) Its syntax rules. Does it always go at the beginning of the sentence ? Always at the end? Or can it vary ?**
- 4) Its «register» or style. Is it an informal word which should therefore be used only in conversation ? Or is it rather a formal term only appropriate in formal letters, or is it situated somewhere in between these two extremes ?**

As a last exercise, underline all the linking words in the explanatory paragraphs on this page and explain how they are used.