

Teaching English Reported Speech to Engineering Students

Irina-Ana Drobot*

Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest, Romania

*Corresponding author: anadrobot@yahoo.com

Received September 30, 2014; Revised November 26, 2014; Accepted May 27, 2015

Abstract The purpose of this paper is to underscore some common difficulties that Romanian engineering students face in learning English reported speech. The paper will consider situations in which students will need both to use and to understand reported speech, and will also suggest teaching activities that can help to improve students' communications skills.

Keywords: ESP, ELT, tenses, visualization, activities

Cite This Article: Irina-Ana Drobot, "Teaching English Reported Speech to Engineering Students." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 3, no. 6 (2015): 749-752. doi: 10.12691/education-3-6-13.

1. Introduction

Teaching reported speech in English is an essential lesson for all students, regardless of their age and interests. Different grammatical rules govern English and Romanian reported speech, which can be confusing to those students who are learning English as a second language, and can be disastrous in real-life engineering scenarios. Students tend to let their first language, in this case, Romanian, interfere with their understanding of how native English speakers turn direct speech into reported speech. This happens especially in the use of tenses. Once students use past tense in the main clause in English they are tempted to use present tense in the secondary clause, just like in Romanian. They need to be made aware that, when speaking English, they should also use the past tense in the secondary clause. However, they interpret the meaning of the sentence through the filter of their native language. For a sentence such as "He said he loved her", Romanian students tend to interpret that, at the present moment, he no longer loves her. They tend to say "He said he loves her" in order to communicate that he still loves her at the present moment. While this sort of misinterpretation could be confusing or even embarrassing in social conversation, it is important to remember that we are discussing students who are learning English for the purpose of working as engineers. Interpreting a sentence such as "Steve said the pipe was corroded" to mean that the pipe used to be corroded, but no longer is, can lead to very dangerous situations.

Students should be given detailed explanations of the contextual problems they are facing as native speakers of Romanian. This will grant them a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, which will help them remember how to correctly use the tenses when they turn direct speech into reported speech.

An issue we also need to address is the sometimes narrow understanding of the change of tenses in English exercise books and multiple choice tests. Many answer keys favour using past tense in the secondary clause when it has been used in the main clause; in everyday life, these two variants are often interchangeable for native English speakers. Sometimes we encounter the situation where emitter, message and receiver are all situated at the same time, and then there is no sequence of the tenses. E.g. "Sid said the run was leaking a bit" is usually considered correct when in fact "Sid said the run is leaking a bit" is also equally correct. Tests often do not take this into account, and students who have a good intuition of the different situations do not benefit from the rigid answer keys.

One goal of teaching English to Engineering students is to help them to understand and create business communication and academic presentations in a world where English is seen as a global language. For this purpose, they need to be made aware of the subtle details of the English language, including those related to reported speech. Understanding how languages work and differ from one another is to their benefit. They need to be made aware of theoretical details about languages that will prompt them to know where and what to search for in a grammar book when they have to use reported speech.

2. Literature Review

The internet nowadays is full of activities shared online by communities of teachers trying to make their students better able to understand the change from direct speech into reported speech in the English language. Many propose teaching reported speech with the use of flashcard games. The teacher writes a direct speech statement one side and an indirect speech statement on the other. Students are asked to make the change from direct into

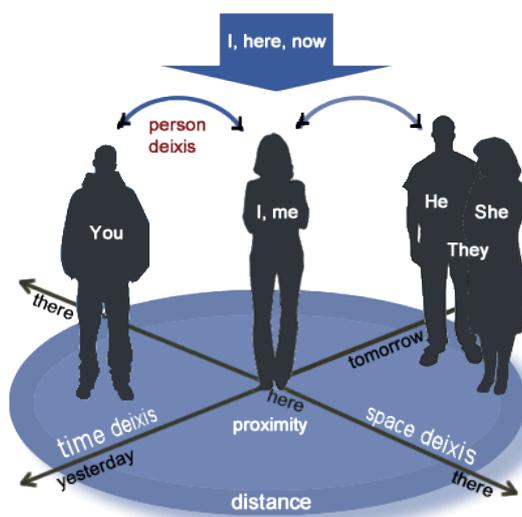
indirect speech and then to check the answer on the other side. C. David Smith's *Teaching Reported Speech for Writing: A Game Approach* is an example of academic paper dealing with this method.

Other exercises focus on the way verb tense, time, place and pronouns change in reported speech. Kelly Robart offers examples of activities in her paper *Quoted and Reported Speech*. Some of these proposed activities focus on whether or not tense change is necessary in the secondary sentence.

Ian P. Harman, in *Teaching Indirect Speech: Deixis Points the Way* (1990), believes that the key to understanding indirect speech is, as the title of his paper suggests, deixis. Harman proposes a "three-way view of tense" (236): proximal, medial and distal, corresponding to the use of present, past and past perfect. The time adverbial "now" illustrates its proximal use; it becomes "then" for medial use and "at that time" for distal use. Lyons (1977) refers to the change of the "spatio-temporal coordinates of the act of utterance" when it comes to turning direct speech into indirect speech.

One issue that has not been addressed by the authors mentioned is related to the comparison of the sequence of tenses and reported speech. In fact, when it comes to the use of tenses, sequence of tenses and rules of reported speech are one and the same.

3. Methodology



The impact of the visual, such as that pictured above, is not to be contested in its ability to help students remember rules. Theoretical explanations regarding the way visualizations work come to support this idea:

"Graphic displays serve multiple functions, such as attracting attention and interest, recording information, and modeling actual and theoretical worlds (Tversky, 2001). Visualizations convey information and allow users to draw inferences about that information (Tversky, 2001). Visual displays can serve both long term and working memory. Visualizations offload cognitive load onto the external world (Card, Mackinlay, & Shneiderman, 1999), and allow information to be inspected and reinspected easily." (Kessell 2008: 1-2)

Images such as the one pictured above will help students to remember grammatical rules and understand deixis more effectively.

Understanding reported speech depends mostly on the change in tenses. Here Romanian students of English often fall prey to language interference. The changes of adverbs of time and space are also significant: they can be used to draw the students' attention to the proximity or distance of the incidents described in the reported speech and locate the action efficiently.

Before giving the students some exercises, the teacher could focus on a visual approach. The teacher can prepare a graphic schema for his students to help them see the location of the events in time.

Visual understanding is generally accessible for most students. To see something is to understand something. You just need to picture it. When something is clear to you, you can say: "I see", meaning "I understand". Mike Parkinson underlines the contribution of the visual aspect to the process of understanding:

"'People think using pictures.' John Berger, media theorist, writes in his book *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1972), 'Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.' Dr. Lynell Burmark, Ph.D. Associate at the Thornburg Center for Professional Development and writer of several books and papers on visual literacy, said, '...unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear. [...]'"

Understanding how changing direct speech into reported speech works can benefit from the following illustration (Sevastopoulos):

Once our students understand and visualize grammatical rules, we can move on to exercises and activities.

Some of the more common exercises are drills: turning direct speech dialogue into indirect speech and the use of flashcards. Students can work in groups, illustrating situations and contexts by means of role play, thus making the experience vivid. At the same time, we need to take into account the fact that when we teach English to engineers, we teach English for Specific Purposes.

According to Lorenzo (2005), teaching English for ESP students should take context and students' interests into account when considering the grammatical structures chosen for the exercises:

"ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional

skills and to perform particular job-related functions. An ESP program is therefore built on an assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required.

ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. [...] The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners."

One of the questions Engineering students ask when it comes to the study of English as a foreign language is how much their studies are connected to the other subject matters they are studying related to their future jobs. Next to the study of grammar issues, special attention should be given to gaining students' interest by using situations they are likely to encounter in the everyday reality of their future jobs. Otherwise, they may wonder what the use is of learning abstract grammatical rules they can later easily forget.

One way to gain their attention and take their interests into account is to use textbooks which relate to their future jobs.

The textbook created by Graham and Celia Waterhouse, *English for the Construction Industry*, includes language practice based on situations engineers are likely to encounter, such as communication on a construction site. In Unit Seven, *Plumbing and Drainage*, reported speech is defined in the section *Communication on Site* as *passing on what other people have said*. The examples of direct and reported speech focus on technical problems and vocabulary. This textbook draws a distinction between the use of present tense and past tense in the main clause and its consequences for the secondary clause. The information is presented in the following table (Waterhouse 1981: 141):

Sid's actual words	Sid's words reported	
	Present tense (says)	Past tense (said)
The run's leaking a bit	Sid <i>says</i> the run's <i>leaking</i> a bit	Sid <i>said</i> the run <i>was leaking</i> a bit
I'll come and check it tomorrow	Sid <i>says</i> he'll <i>come</i> and check it tomorrow	Sid <i>said</i> he <i>would come</i> and check it tomorrow
The others have been checked already	Sid <i>says</i> the others <i>have been checked</i> already	Sid <i>said</i> the others <i>had been checked</i> already

Explanations follow the table: "when the reporting verb is present tense (Sid says...) then the reported speech stays in the same tense as the actual speech. But when the reporting verb is in the past tense (Sid said), then all present tense verbs change to past in the reported speech" (Waterhouse 1981: 141). Drills to practice this issue follow. However, no mention is made of variants such as "Sid *said* the run *is leaking* a bit" when emitter, message and receiver are all situated at the same time. This variant is considered incorrect when doing drills and when doing multiple choice exercises with only one correct answer. This is a problem when it comes to having contact with real-life language, which functions differently. Students should be made aware that these rules are just one side of the larger issue. It is true that they need to practice the change in tenses, but they need also be made aware of the way the situations in real life can be interpreted. For this, the visual aspect is crucial. What is more, it needs to be completed by an easy-to-handle grammatical rules kit, which can be offered by teaching the sequence of tenses.

The teacher can put the examples in a simple, easy to visualize table on the blackboard.

Other activities can be based on what the students' future jobs are going to be like. Some of them may have to deal with research. A practical exercise can include reading research papers and then asking students to say what certain scientists have said, followed by the sequence of tenses. For the rest, communicative activities that have been proposed in students' textbooks and that are being proposed online can also work. Engineering students can use communicative activities based on business communication textbooks. In their future careers, they will have opportunities to do business and talk to groups of people. At some point, they will need to turn direct speech into indirect speech, for example in presenting a certain proposal for business put forth by someone to the rest of the group. Role play activities can be thus encouraged to fit situations these students are likely to encounter.

One question usually found in research papers deals with whether the teaching method should be a communicative approach or based on grammar. The case of teaching reported speech shows that a combination of communicative approaches and grammar can be used.

4. Results

Learning a language occurs as a function of the learners' level. First, they are usually made aware of grammar. Grammar "is a cornerstone of communicative language teaching" (Scarcella and Oxford 1992: 171). However, this method of teaching grammar has been under critique. The main reason was constituted by the idea that "grammar instruction was equated with boring language drills" so that "grammar instruction had little or no place in a communicative classroom" (Scarcella and Oxford 1992: 171). For teaching reported speech, drills are just a phase in learning the grammatical rules. They are just a method to help students memorise these rules. The structures learnt that way will afterwards be put to use in communicative activities. One needs a bit of training before plunging into communicative activities such as role play.

Even if grammatical rules are laid out before students, it will take time before they can master them. The problem comes from the interference from their first language, Romanian.

Some theorize that, regardless of the learners' age, they "are capable of acquiring grammar through natural exposure to input rather than instruction" (Scarcella and Oxford 1992: 171) from Krashen (1981, 1972). Krashen believes that learners can pick up "the language subconsciously - much as children acquire their first language" (Scarcella and Oxford 1992: 171). This strategy is quite difficult to use for reported speech, as rules are the key to understanding how it works and, even so, these rules are often put away in favour of the interference from the Romanian language. Exposure to reported speech, however, can be of help as a side exercise.

While the grammar rules of reported speech need not always to be practiced through drills, as grammatical structures should be understood in various speaking, reading or listening contexts, drills can be regarded as a first step until students have mastered some basic

structures. Teaching methods can complement one another. Communication skills are achieved gradually, especially in the case of the complex rules of reported speech. After all, "Innate mechanisms do not work alone. If they did, students could learn English by themselves, without interacting with others. But students do not learn English alone." (Scarcella and Oxford 1992: 29)

The communicative method for teaching reported speech (role play tasks) should be used as a way of putting into practise theoretical knowledge of grammar or vocabulary.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Students learning how to turn direct speech into reported speech often start from what they know, that is they tend to translate directly from their native language, in this case, Romanian. This can be prevented by making them aware of the differences between languages and by showing them visually how the change into reported speech is done in English. This will help them to understand that English is a new reality. Understanding grammar should be coupled with understanding the reality offered by tenses. Tenses and the way they work in English are most effectively explained by using visual materials. Teaching reported speech is no exception. Students can benefit from aroused interest by teachers explaining that textbooks and tests do not present the situation as it really is in everyday life. Students will feel that they are benefitting from learning something new and from gaining a new perspective on the understanding of reported speech. They have studied rules of reported speech in school, but can now benefit from "the secrets" of a knowledgeable teacher who gains their interest and who prompts them to visualize the rules in order to remember them more efficiently.

The site of the Carnegie Mellon University lists, among principles of learning, those related to the students' use of prior knowledge which can help or hinder their learning process. They can be set on applying grammar rules and practice using drills, yet if they are given a new context of learning they will be more motivated. For this, role play

activities related to their future profession can be a good idea. They will be prompted to imagine real-life situations, perhaps related to the business environment, and see how relating what others have said is significant and not just a mechanical exercise. Understanding the process of learning the students are going through will always help the teaching process. The way they understand and apply what they learn is also part of the principles of learning listed on the Carnegie Mellon University site. Engineers enjoy looking for solutions to problems, which can help us guide the teaching process so as to provide the most benefit to these students. Learning how to use reported speech in English can become a challenging activity for both students and teachers. However, through this process, they will all gain a better understanding of how languages work.

References

- [1] Carnegie, M., *Principles of Learning*. [E-article] Available: <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/principles/learning.html>
- [2] Hartman, I. P., *Teaching Indirect Speech: Deixis Points the Way*, 1990.
- [3] Kessell, A. M., *Cognitive Methods For Information Visualization: Linear And Cyclical Events*, A Dissertation Submitted To The Department Of Psychology And The Committee On Graduate Studies Of Stanford University, In Partial Fulfillment Of The Requirements For The Degree Of Doctor Of Philosophy, 2006.
- [4] Parkinson, M., *The Power of Visual Communication*, 2012. [E-article]. Available: <http://www.billiondollargraphics.com/infographics.html>
- [5] Robart, K. *Quoted and Reported Speech*. [E-article]. Available: www.sjsu.edu/.../QuotedandReportedSpeech.pdf
- [6] Scarcella, R. C. and Oxford, R. L., *The Tapestry of Language Learning. The Individual in the Communicative Classroom*, Boston, Massachusetts, USA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1992.
- [7] Sevastopoulos, J., *Statement clauses. Restate quoted speech*. [E-article] Available: <http://www.grammar-quizzes.com/nounclause4.html>
- [8] Waterhouse, G. and C., *English for the construction industry*, Macmillan Publishers Ltd., London and Basingstoke, 1981.
- [9] Smith, D. C., *Teaching Reported Speech for Writing: A Game Approach*. [E-article] Available: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Smith-ReportedSpeechGame.html>