

## Linguistic effect of focus projection in the ESP classroom: some pedagogical implications

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Georgi Dimitrov

Faculty of International Economics and Politics, Bulgaria

Email: [gmdimitrov89@gmail.com](mailto:gmdimitrov89@gmail.com).

### **Abstract**

*Placing emphasis on words, which in turn spread this emphasis to the preceding word, is a phenomenon typical of English. This is technically known as focus projection, or projection. Since projection as defined above is realised in and through speaking, the relation between projection and speaking is studied in the context of ESP. Due to the lack of enough practice, speaking appears to constitute a challenge for most ESP students. Although practice remains the best solution, the question is how to practice, or how to encourage students, in an artificial environment. I define artificial environment as an environment where learners of English are not surrounded by native speakers, so the former do not have the opportunity to practice, i.e. to speak, English on a regular everyday basis. Hence, a research question emerges naturally, namely can projection be used to facilitate speaking? This paper studies the relevance of focus projection in the ESP classroom. The introductory section exemplifies the concept of projection, sets the objectives of the study, and briefly describes the methods that are used. The main objective is to study if awareness of focus projection on the part of the teacher can serve as a tool to facilitate learning, especially speaking, in an ESP context. The second section deals with theoretical and practical, including pedagogical, implications, and is followed by empirical data on the basis of which these implications are further discussed. The concluding section continues the discussion by lending weight to the constraints the teacher faces if they apply the above presented ideas but also reinforces the practical benefit of encouraging students to attach emphasis to particular words in the sentence.*

**Keywords:** *linguistic affect, emphasis, focus projection, ESP, pedagogical implications*

### **Introduction**

Two of the phrases in the headline of this article are in need of further clarification: *focus projection* and *ESP*. It is clear that in the context of teaching foreign languages, more precisely English, at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), ESP is definitely much more familiar of the two; it stands for *English for Specific Purposes*, and in the context specified above it relates to teaching a particular type of English, as it were, especially with respect to terminology, style, register, etc., to students of International Relations, Economics, Tourism, and Law. Focus projection could be, on the other hand, completely unfamiliar, therefore a working definition of this phenomenon is in order.

In the oral medium of language, we place *emphasis* on particular words but we do not treat all words so. This is fairly obvious, but let us explore what follows as a result of emphasising certain words when we speak. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that in the sentence *He won the elections*. the word *elections* is emphasised. This means that the word in question is somehow important for the speaker: for example, it could represent new information or the most informative part of new information. There

could well be other reasons behind emphasising this particular word, but the ones mentioned suffice to illustrate focus projection.

Further, we assume that the speaker uses the sentence above in response to *Why is he celebrating?*. In terms of old and new information, in *He won the elections*. Both *won* and *elections* constitute new information. Thus, the speaker can place emphasis on both words but he decides to emphasise *elections* only.

The word *elections* projects, as it were, its emphasis to the preceding non-function word, i.e. *won*. This is known as *focus projection*. As a result, *won* is also part of the new information despite the lack of emphasis on it. Technically speaking, *focus projection* refers to accenting a particular word, usually the *object* in a *subject-verb-object clause*, which projects the meaning of the accent – newness, informativeness, importance, etc. – to the preceding (transitive) verb. Thus, the whole extended verb phrase, i.e. the verb and the object, signals newness, informativeness, importance, etc. This intonation pattern is also described in intonation textbooks, for example Wells (2006: 12-13).

Having clarified the most important concepts in this paper, we proceed with the objectives. The main objective is to study the relation between projection and speaking, or more precisely, to study if the teacher's awareness of projection can be used to enhance students' speaking skills in the context of teaching ESP.

To gather empirical data, I used the gaps from gapped listening comprehension exercises. At UNWE, ESP students have a state exam where one of the components is listening comprehension. The students have a gapped version of the recording they listen to, and their task is to fill in the gaps with the missing words which are usually up to four. This is a perception exercise, which actually combines listening comprehension and dictation.

I studied all listening comprehension exercises in Bratanova (2021), focusing on the gaps and the surrounding context of each gap. My motivation behind choosing this source is that since I teach ESP mostly to students of International Relations and European Studies, I am most familiar with this particular ESP field, and Bratanova's (ibid.) textbook is specifically designed for students of these majors. This does not mean that if I had chosen a different ESP textbook, for instance one for students of economics, the empirical results would have been markedly different. Other textbooks with similar listening comprehension exercises include, but are not limited to, Bozoukova et al. (2012) and Boycheva (2016).

### **Theoretical background**

It is clear that focus projection in the sense specified above is part of the intonation of the sentence. Since intonation is, unfortunately, barely paid attention to in foreign language teaching in general and in ESP classes in particular, this also applies to focus projection. This article studies particularly the idea of applying the concept of focus projection in the ESP classroom.

By applying the concept of focus projection in the ESP classroom I do not mean explaining to students what focus projection is or expecting of them to identify the phenomenon. It will be difficult to familiarise ESP students with focus projection but more importantly it is unnecessary. Needless to say, focus projection is a specific phenomenon occurring in specific syntactic contexts, and students need a linguistic background in order to grasp the idea behind it.

Still, it is my firm conviction that awareness of focus projection on the part of the teacher can facilitate the teaching process. First, and this is obvious, the more the teacher knows, the greater the confidence he exudes; hence, it is easier for them to apply their teaching methods in the classroom. Second, and this is specifically related to the line of reasoning developed in this article, the idea of focus projection can be used in speaking exercises.

As discussed above, focus projection is a particular intonation pattern occurring with particular syntactic structures. This means, in turn, that focus projection appears in speaking. And in this day and

age it seems to me that students find speaking especially in a foreign language difficult not only due to the abundance of social media but also to a lack of practice outside the classroom. For instance, students may listen to songs in English, watch movies in English, etc. on a regular basis, but when they go shopping, they hardly use any English. This means that in most cases students are exposed to enough perception exercises at the expense of very few production exercises such as speaking.

Then, the following question arises: given the discussion above, how exactly is focus projection applicable in the ESP classroom? We can safely claim that the SVO word order is one of the most frequently used syntactic structures in English, as discussed, for example, in Dryer (2013). This syntactic structure in particular constitutes the context of focus projection. This means that students will inevitably use SVO sentences when they speak irrespective of whether they identify the sentences as such. What follows is that students will create many focus projection contexts while doing speaking exercises.

Basically, focus projection is one of the manifestations of the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning in language. As far as English is concerned, projection has been studied extensively both theoretically and empirically.

Theoretically, projection is the notion on which the *focus-to-accent approach* is based. As can be expected, there are different versions of the model, such as Gussenhoven's (1983a) and Selkirk's (1984, 1995) This approach narrows the gap between the *normal stress view* and the *highlighting view*, to use Ladd's (2008: 215-216) parlance, by incorporating the insights of the two views. According to the normal stress view, e.g. Chomsky and Halle (1968), each sentence has one pattern of accenting; on the other hand, proponents of the highlighting view, e.g. Bolinger (1972) among others, claim that any word can be accented to indicate informativeness, newness, and contrast. The highlighting view also assumes that accent carries meaning. Thus, roughly speaking, the focus-to-accent approach, a term introduced by Gussenhoven (1985: 125), reinterprets normal stress as broad focus, which more or less corresponds to focus projection, and preserves the idea of the highlighting view that accents are meaningful.

Empirically, existence of the phenomenon is demonstrated fairly conclusively by independently conducted experiments by Gussenhoven (1983b), Birch and Clifton (1995), Welby (2003), and Bishop (2011), among others. These studies show that focus projection, though not an obligatory phenomenon, is found in sentences similar in syntactic structure to *He won the elections*. This means that the structure of the sentences used in their experiments consists of, in most cases, apart from the obligatory subject, a transitive verb and a direct object. This is the canonical Subject – Verb – Object (SVO) word order in English. Also, focus projection could be one of the features transferred in language contact situations as demonstrated by Dimitrov (2020).

To conclude this section, I touch upon projection at the textual level. The following passage is taken from Bratanova's (2021: 71, emphasis mine) textbook:

Most of us have heard about United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. But the many other ways the United Nations **affects our lives** are not so well known. The United Nations is central to global efforts to **solve problems** that **challenge humanity**. Cooperating in this effort are more than 30 affiliated organizations, known together as the UN system. Day in day out, the UN and its family of organizations work to **promote respect** for human rights, **protect the environment**, **fight disease** and **reduce poverty**. UN agencies **define the standards** for safe and efficient air travel and help **improve telecommunications** and **enhance consumer protection**. The UN **leads the international campaigns** against drug trafficking and terrorism. Throughout the world, the UN and its agencies **assist refugees**, **set up programs** to **clear landmines**, help **expand food production** and **lead the fight** against AIDS.

The phrases in bold indicate contexts in which focus projection may be realised. Let us assume that the task the students have is to provide an oral summary of the passage. Below I simulate a potential summary given by a student. I also simulate some mistakes that a teacher could expect to find. Again, the phrases in bold indicate focus projection contexts.

United Nations **changes out lives**. Many organizations help the United Nations to **solve different challenges**. These organizations want to **defend human rights, make the standards** for air travel, **fight poverty**. United Nations also is active in other activities, for example refugees, food production, terrorism and others.

I do not claim that the summary I provided above is the optimal example of a student’s summary in terms of grammatical mistakes, content and register. Still, I believe that the simulated example adequately serves the purposes of this paper. The point of the example is not to emphasise possible students’ mistakes but to account for a realistic number of expected focus projection contexts, i.e. instances of (S)VO word order.

As can be seen, neither the original, nor the simulated example lacks focus projection contexts. Other original texts and summaries thereof may vary in the number of focus projection contexts; nevertheless, the point remains: one can hardly produce a text without focus projection contexts.

**Methodology**

I studied all gapped tasks, the gaps in particular, of all listening comprehension exercises in Bratanova (ibid.). The gaps were analysed with respect to how they relate to projection. That is, my aim was to find out whether the missing words illustrate projection or part of projection, how many of the gaps are part of projection contexts, etc. The results are given in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Distribution of projection contexts among the gaps.

| Total number of gaps | Total number of projection contexts | (Part of) verb missing | (Part of) object missing | Both verb and object missing |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>311</b>           | <b>64 (20.57%)</b>                  | <b>25</b>              | <b>29</b>                | <b>11</b>                    |

Before we continue with the discussion of the results, two caveats are in order. Since this study focuses on the awareness of the teacher as far as projection is concerned, I did not take the recordings into account. The second caveat can be seen to a certain extent as a corollary of the first: I did not exclude narrow focus contexts, in which projection cannot occur by definition. I did so simply because as for the teacher designing the gapped tasks, what matters is the syntactic structure of the sentences; broad and narrow focus are, on the other hand, indicated contextually (and intonationally). Thus, the definition of projection offered above is not strictly followed, but this is immaterial with regard to the awareness the teacher demonstrates of projection.

**Results and discussion**

Table 1 shows that the total number of the gaps is 311 of which 64, or 20.57%, are (part of) projection contexts. The distribution of missing verbs and objects, or parts thereof, within the 64 contexts is as follows: 25 of the gaps have (part of) the verb missing, 29 of the gaps have (part of) the object missing, and in 11 cases both the verb and the object are missing. It should be noted that the sum total of the distribution of missing verbs and objects is 65 and the total number of contexts is 64. This is so because one of the gaps is subject to two interpretations.

One fifth of the gaps (20.57%) are (part of) projection contexts. I am of the opinion that this figure can be interpreted as indicative of teacher's implicit awareness of projection, or at least indicative of him/her viewing the extended verb phrase, i.e. the verb plus the object, as a unit. On the face of it, one fifth does not sound conclusive, but it has to be examined by taking into consideration other factors.

One such factor is that not all sentences have a subject-verb-object structure. When we say that English is an SVO language, we mean that the verb usually follows the subject and precedes the object; however, the last slot may be reserved for an adjunct, or a subject complement, etc. in which case we do not have a projection context in the sense defined above. Another factor is that not all gaps constitute, partially or entirely, projection contexts: the missing words/phrases may function as a subject and a verb, a sentence modifier, a prepositional phrase, etc.

One might also suspect that when preparing the gapped tasks, the teacher's idea has been to omit complete phrases in most of the cases. But complete phrases in the broad sense of the term have different realisations: a complex verb phrase, an appositive phrase, an adjective phrase, or an extended verb phrase consisting of a verb and an object, to mention just a few. The point worth making here is that a focus projection context, i.e. a specific type of extended verb phrase, is simply one kind of a complete phrase that may have been deliberately omitted by the teacher. Following this line of reasoning, we find it easier to claim that a fifth of all the gaps indicates that the teacher tends to perceive the verb and the object as a unit, hence at least implicit awareness of projection. By implicit awareness I mean that the teacher may have intuitively identified the phenomenon without being able to verbalise it.

Then, we go back to the question raised above: how does focus projection serve the teacher? In my opinion, what the teacher can do from a purely pedagogical point of view is to encourage the students to emphasise the final word before they make a pause. This would presumably mean in most cases a pause either after a clause or after a short sentence. However, the approach of telling the students to highlight the final word before a pause has both advantages and disadvantages. We deal with the disadvantages first.

It goes without saying that not each and every word preceding a pause is part of a focus projection context. This could potentially mean that students may acquire a '(contextually) wrong' intonation pattern. Yet, it is often the case that students have never been taught intonation and they have acquired other 'wrong' or inappropriate intonation patterns, for instance due to language contact that has been occurring in their minds.

The advantages, I think, outweigh the disadvantages. In *most* cases in English, it is safe to emphasise the final word (before a pause) if it is a lexical item. I can hardly imagine that a student will produce – often and especially in speaking – a sentence ending with a preposition.

There is another, more important advantage. When students are encouraged to emphasise the final word before a pause, they are expected to pronounce the preceding words (before the final one) faster, and to de-emphasise them. This scenario comes with two further advantages. The first is that a greater contrast is achieved between emphasised and de-emphasised material. The second advantage is fluency. Students will focus on the final word; since this word is the focus of their attention, their goal will be to reach this word. Thus, they will pay less attention to the preceding words, de-emphasise them, and increase speech tempo. This will lead to greater fluency. Greater fluency, in turn, leads to more confidence to be gained on the part of the students.

When practicing a skill, especially speaking in the above-described situation, confidence is a necessary component whose level needs to be increased. One of the sources of confidence is clarity, that is when one knows what, when and how to do something. There are cases in which a student knows how to start a sentence but they do not know how to finish it. Being told to emphasise the final word, the student has more clarity as to how to finish their sentence. When one is clear about the start and the end of a sentence, though in some cases partially clear, it is easier to engage in practicing

because the level of confidence is higher. This type of confidence can, in turn, be viewed as a realisation of some of the aspects of the linguistic affect that projection carries. I use 'some of the aspects' because projection as an intonational phenomenon necessarily has an emotive component which could comprise more than one aspect.

### Conclusion

The teacher inevitably faces certain constraints when applying the concept of focus projection in the ESP classroom. These constraints stem from the fact that a) ESP is a practical subject and b) ESP students are not by definition students of linguistics. I divide the constraints into two groups. Group one concerns terminology. The teacher should not introduce any terminology simply because it is not necessary. Students will find it difficult to grasp the meaning of terms such as projection, accent, transitive verb, etc. Group two comprises the following piece of advice: if the students overdo the task, i.e. emphasising the last word when inappropriate (e.g. the word is a pronoun or a preposition), let them overdo; it is better to be on the path to fluency with inappropriate intonation than to never put an effort into improving one's speaking skills.

Finally, I conclude the paper by claiming that it revolves around five concepts: *ESP*, *focus projection*, *emphasis*, *fluency*, and *confidence*. What all these five have in common is that they can be used as tools for improving the speaking skills of the students. Focus projection is a tool at the disposal of the teacher belonging to their pedagogical arsenal, ESP is the context, emphasis is what the students are told to do, and fluency and confidence stem from the application of emphasis on the part of the students.

In this scenario, confidence seems to be the final and most important by-product along with the improved speaking skills of the students. Confidence is also a sign of the emotive side and could be seen as a partial realisation of linguistic affect. But another important by-product is the direction the students are given as a result of applying emphasis and becoming fluent and confident. The direction is given by the end of the sentence: the students are encouraged to imagine, to anticipate, and to reach the last word and contrast it with the preceding material.

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