

## **A Critical Review of the Concept-Oriented Approach in Second Language Acquisition: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Misconceptions**

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### **Abstract**

The main starting point of functionalist approaches is to investigate form-to-function or function-to-form mappings in learners' interlanguage and developmental sequences of these mappings in second language acquisition (SLA). The term function here is used as meaning or concept, and one of the functionalist approaches is called the concept-oriented approach. Concept-oriented approach is not presented as a theory of SLA because it does not aim to do so but it is used as a framework mainly by Bardovi-Harlig (2015). However, it might actually respond to some of the questions that SLA researchers are interested in. Thus, critical evaluation of this approach by identifying its strengths and weaknesses and considering some misconceptions related to its scope is necessary. In this respect, our aim in this paper is to critically review the concept-oriented approach and identify some possible doorways for expanding the framework for a more widespread use in research studies considering the lack of studies on this approach.

**Keywords:** Functionalist approaches, function-to-form, interlanguage, second language acquisition, concept-oriented approach.

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## **Introduction**

As Cooreman and Kilborn (1991) stated, “language serves communication and form serves function” (p. 196). Functionalist view of language is one of the approaches devised to explain language learning, and functional approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) investigate learners’ interlanguage systems and their development through form-to-function or function-to-form mappings. Functionalists question how the language is used in a communicative way. More precisely, according to Tomlin (1990), “the purpose of language is communication; the purpose of grammars is to manage communication” (p. 160). Therefore, looking at the connection between the form and the meaning is emphasized in two main functionalist approaches (i.e., form-to-function analysis and function-to-form analysis).

Form-to-function analysis is the first of the functionalist approaches. The advocates of this approach suggest that learners begin the acquisition with forms, and then they focus on forms that lead to functions (Ellis, 1985). In addition, grammar represents the meaning of the context. To illustrate, the analysis starts with the examination of the past form of regular verb (-ed) and then work on the function, meaning what the form aims to achieve. Later on, other uses of the same structure such as adjectives are analyzed.

Function-to-form analysis (i.e., concept-oriented analysis), on the other hand, focuses on the opposite; the acquisition of the functions starts without the acquisition of the form (McLaughlin, 1987). After identifying a certain function, the use or structure to explain that function is investigated (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). However, Bardovi-Harlig (2015), one of the prominent figures of functional approaches, claims that the concept-oriented approach is not a theory, but mainly a framework for language analysis, and that these approaches are not known well outside Europe. Indeed, although they have been around for decades, there are relatively fewer discussions on the functionalist approaches compared to other major theories such as Universal-Grammar or usage-based approaches, and the lack of research studies utilizing such approaches makes the researchers’ claims more challenging in justifying the rationale in using such frameworks. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to critically review the concept-oriented

approach and identify some possible doorways for expanding the framework for a more widespread use in research studies considering the lack of studies on this approach.

### **Main Tenets of Concept-Oriented Approach**

One of the main tenets of the concept-oriented approach is that unlike the child who needs to acquire all the underlying concepts while acquiring his/her first language, an adult learner of second or foreign languages has access to the full range of semantic concepts from their previous linguistic and cognitive experience. While building up their interlanguage, knowing when and how to correctly apply and express this knowledge is the most difficult part of the acquisition process for the speakers. Studies in this approach use longitudinal designs in which data are collected through observing learner production over a long period of time (Bardovi-Harlig, 2015). The tasks that are used in the studies are communicative tasks through which learners can construct meaning because the concept-oriented approach looks into how meanings are conveyed. Concept-oriented analyses do not report the findings according to correctness of the usage of the target language, but instead how learners use language is reported.

A concept-oriented approach usually starts with a concept to be investigated. Specifically, the concept-oriented approach focuses on one concept or function in language and discovers how the concept is conveyed by language learners. Researchers conducting concept-oriented studies usually start by identifying one concept to be investigated, such as time, temporality, or futurity (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). Then, they form an inventory or repertoire of any linguistic means which are utilized by language users to express the concept under investigation. The meaning of the concept and how it changes in time are analyzed. For instance, Edmonds, Gudmestad, and Donaldson (2017) conducted a study to find out how many different verb forms and lexical verbs were used by both native and near-native speakers of Hexagonal French. As a result of the study, they were able to form an inventory of all future-time references used in Hexagonal French, and compare inventories used by native-speakers and near-native speakers of the language and find out whether near-native, or advanced, learners of Hexagonal French were able to use a similar repertoire of devices to refer to the future as native speakers.

Furthermore, “concepts can be overarching, such as time or temporality, or they can be subsets of larger concepts, like futurity” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2015, p. 55). The view of this approach to SLA is that adult learners of second or foreign languages employ their previous linguistic and cognitive experience to understand semantic concepts. In concept-oriented approach, L2 learners are considered to have basic semantic concepts, and they only need to pick up the specific ways to express them in the target language. In functionalism, L2 learners seem to go through several stages until the internalization of the target structure takes place, and the concept-oriented approach investigates the addition of new devices to the interlanguage as learners go through these different stages during the process of internalization (Bardovi-Harlig, 2015).

The first stage is called the pragmatic stage, referring to learners’ understanding of the universally accepted axioms (i.e., following a chronological order while giving an anecdote). Next is the lexical stage, which is the use of some lexical items to express the target function (i.e., the use adverbs such as then, later, and before to indicate time). At this stage, learners add new lexical devices to their already existing pragmatic repertoire of expressing a concept. The last stage is called the morphological stage in which the L2 learners finally discover how to express the concept accurately by using different means of verbal morphology (e.g., use of verb inflections such as using the past form of the verbs), thus adding a new variety of devices to express a concept (Giacalone-Ramat & Banfi, 1990; Meisel, 1987). As learners go through these stages, the balance among the devices that learners use also changes (Bardovi-Harlig, 2018). Although language learners would predominantly use lexical means rather than morphological means to express a concept at first, as they move to more advanced stages of language learning, the balance would change in favor of using morphological means.

Briefly, a functional analysis is concerned with how a concept is expressed or the means the learner utilizes to express a concept, and how the learner’s choice of expression changes in time (Bardovi-Harlig, 2014). For instance, variationist sociolinguistic studies focus on investigating the factors that affect a language user’s choice of utilizing different linguistic devices to express the same meaning or concept (Edmonds et al., 2017). The main distinguishing aspect of the concept-

oriented analysis is that it takes the interlanguage output into consideration, regardless of its accuracy in the target language. Thus, in concept-oriented approach, there is a classification of the production by the learner based on form; however, there is no evaluation of the accuracy of those forms. Also, the concept-oriented approach makes a multilevel analysis of all means of expressions used by language learners. Scaffolding is an example of interplay among these means of expression and the changing balance. According to the concept of functional load, which is another example, “every linguistic device, whether a structure, morphology, or word, has a function” and they share the “functional load” in a sentence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2015, p. 56). Specifically, according to the concept-oriented approach, a meaning, a function or a concept can be expressed with various forms. Such constructs might include any concepts from temporality to modality, locality, or plurality. Temporality, multifunctionality, chronological order and functional load are among the main constructs of this approach, which will be covered in this paper in detail.

### **Reflections on the Tenets of Concept-Oriented Approach**

Among the various empirical studies on the concept-oriented approach, the main contribution to the field is the expression of temporality (Edmonds et al., 2017). To illustrate, when the learner wishes to express a future plan, s/he finds the forms that can be used for this function such adverbs or modals as tomorrow or will, going to, present continuous or other lexical expressions such as want to. However, during this process, the learner goes through certain stages of development. In the early stages of SLA, learning is governed by the one-to-one principle (Andersen, 1984, 1990), which means that learners utilize only one form for one intended meaning or concept. This principle is predominantly used by second language learners at relatively early stages of second language learning (Ortega, 2013). As mentioned earlier, while developing his/her linguistic competence through multifunctionality principle, the learner passes three main stages: pragmatic stage, lexical stage, and morphological stage. However, in the later stages, multifunctionality principle (Andersen, 1984, 1990) emerges, which refers to using multiple forms for one meaning and multiple meanings for one form. These stages are mainly covered in the studies conducted on temporality (Giacalone-Ramat & Banfi, 1990; Meisel, 1987). In this sense, learning follows a certain sequential order, which has already been accounted for in various SLA

studies under different names such as the order of mention contract (Clark, 1971), the principle of natural order (Klein, 1986), serialization (Schumann, 1987), and the principle of chronological order (von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987).

One point we would like to add here is that some observations from our own teaching experience contradict with these stages of temporality. For Turkish learners of English as a second language, learning the uses of the adverbs before and after are generally problematic while expressing the chronological order of past events (Peker, 2010). According to the concept-oriented approach, learners first use lexical forms (e.g., adverbs) to express the chronological order of past events before learning the morphology of it. However, in the case of Turkish students, they learn and use the past simple structure (i.e., morphological stage) correctly but they fail to express which event occurred first. That is mostly because of their existing form-function mappings in their mother tongue (L1). The students cannot adapt to the meaning shift in L2 (Peker, 2010). To illustrate, before (*önce* in Turkish) and after (*sonra* in Turkish) can be used in two different meanings and ways in a sentence as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Form-Function Mapping Comparison of Turkish and English

<b>Turkish</b>	<b>English</b>
1. <i>Okula gitmeden <u>önce</u> kahvaltı yaptım.</i>	I had breakfast <u>before</u> I went to school.
Literal translation:	<u>Before</u> I went to school, I had breakfast.
“School went <u>before</u> breakfast I had.”	
2. <i>Kahvaltı yaptıktan <u>sonra</u> okula gittim.</i>	<u>After</u> I had breakfast, I went to school.
Literal translation:	I went to school <u>after</u> I had breakfast.
“I had breakfast <u>after</u> I went to school”	

3. Önce kahvaltı yaptım. Sonra okula gittim. First, I had breakfast. Then I went to school.

Literal translation:

“**Before** I had breakfast. **After** I went to  
school.”

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These dual uses of the two adverbs for chronological order in Turkish clearly cause an L1 constraint on the learners’ use of the equivalent expressions in L2 (See Table 1). This, in turn, disrupts the developmental stage order predicted by the concept-oriented approach. Von Stutterheim and Klein (1987) briefly mention the L1 effect in their introduction to the concept-oriented approach:

The first language certainly plays a role and forms a further constraint governing the learner’s choice of devices. Dominant conceptual categories (...) form the “equipment” of the learner at the beginning of the acquisitional process and lead to a certain form of selectivity in dealing with the L2 input. (p. 197)

However, the advantages and disadvantages of L1 effect could be considered in a more detailed way to enhance the basis of this approach. For instance, what Ortega (2015) stated is in line with this understanding. She claimed that the concept-oriented approach does not put much emphasis on L1 effect, but it could be considered as a doorway to improve the approach.

Considering the aforementioned examples and the history of SLA, it would not be wrong to state that L1 effect on L2 has been investigated for half a decade; however, today, L1 is considered not to have such a huge impact on SLA as it was thought to have in the past (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). However, several theories such as Universal Grammar (UG) theory and usage-

based approaches have been quite interested in the effect of L1 on L2, unlike concept oriented approach.

The basic tenet of UG is that humans are wired with certain set of structural rules innately, which are built in UG. Therefore, L1 grammar is considered as the initial state of L2 acquisition (White, 2015). Also, interlanguage grammar is made up of the parameters that are created in the acquisition of the native language according to UG. However, according to usage-based approaches (Ellis, 2009, 2014; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006, 2009; Ellis, O'Donnell, & Römer, 2014a, 2014b), a great deal of resources has been devoted to acquiring the mother tongue even though L1 is seen as a constraint. Part of the reason why L1 is seen as a constraint is that “L1-tuned learned attention limits the amount of intake from L2 input, thus restricting the end state of SLA” as stated by Ellis and Wulff (2015).

On the other hand, in concept-oriented approaches, L1 is not the focus or concern of the analysis or of the learner observations. Nevertheless, one of the basic principles of this point of view is that a full range of semantic concepts is open to the adult learners of second language, as they have already acquired their native language, unlike the case of L1 acquisition (von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987). The idea behind concept-oriented approaches is quite similar to universal grammar as they both refer to L1 as their point of departure while building SLA. Therefore, concept-oriented approaches might have been investigated more thoroughly to evaluate the effect of L1 on L2 acquisition, or as mentioned earlier, it could be a doorway to expand the concept-oriented approach as a framework.

Coming back to the issues related to stages, to exemplify, the present perfect tense has a high functional load because it does not have a functional equivalent. That is the reason why it is used earlier while past perfect has a functional equivalent (i.e., past simple) by which the same meaning can be conveyed. Therefore, it emerges later, as the learner does not feel the need to use it in the earlier stages. At this point, we wonder how this functional load can be measured. Or what could be said about the functional loads of function words (e.g., articles, prepositions, etc.)? Are



they difficult to learn because they do not have any functional load even though they are the most frequently encountered input?

Speaking of frequency, there are several views that need to be considered carefully in concept-oriented approach. Some views prioritize the role of frequency of the input. For instance, Ortega (2015) states, “the relative frequency of form-function mappings in the input is predicted to influence the directions in which learners expand their linguistic repertoires” (p. 260). However, Larsen-Freeman (2015) looks at the view from a different angle and criticizes prioritizing frequency as follows:

If acquisition were determined by frequency of forms in this manner, then articles and prepositions would be the first acquired since corpora show that the and of are the two most frequently occurring forms in English. This is clearly not the case. Therefore, SLA cannot only be about frequency matching. (p. 238)

While agreeing with her, we claim that it does not mean frequency is not helpful. If frequency is examined in terms of concept-oriented approach, focusing on the meaningful or functional frequencies of input may be the most important contribution of concept-oriented approach because meaningful repetition matters more (Peker, Regalla, & Cox, 2018). Pinpointing this important aspect may shed more light to instructed SLA because functionalists focus more on communication as the utmost purpose of language. Thus, meaningful frequency is important.

Another frequency and instruction related claim comes from Pienemann and Lenzing (2015). To illustrate, Processability Theory advocates that only the L2 linguistic forms that the current state of the language processor could handle can be comprehended and thus produced as output by the learners at any stage of L2 language development. Therefore, language development cannot be prioritized within the sole scope of the frequent occurrence of input since the processability concept constrains language development. Part of the reason is that every procedure stands as the necessary prerequisite for the upcoming one, and the learner has to go through this

hierarchy step by step and process through the developmental stages. Therefore, none of these processing procedure constraints can be skipped, which takes us to an understanding that frequency cannot override the constraints of this hierarchy in instructed second language learning. From a Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998; Pienemann, & Lenzing, 2015) point of view, Bardovi-Harlig (2015) examines learners' target language learning as follows:

.... meeting these acquisitional prerequisites [stages] is a necessary step even when the pluperfect is available in instructional input, but it also shows that merely meeting the prerequisites at the time of instruction is not sufficient. This is consistent with Pienemann's teachability hypothesis, according to which the effects of instruction on the developing interlanguage are constrained by the learner's current stage of acquisition. However, even learners who apparently satisfy the acquisitional prerequisites for an instructionally targeted form may not immediately integrate that form into productive use. (p. 66)

Looking at these several aspects, we suggest that the frequent practice of receiving input does not make linguistic communication and interaction perfect in terms of meaningful and communicative output by the learners. However, even though concept-oriented approach is not concerned with accuracy but meaning, the claims put forward by Bardovi-Harlig (2015) worth paying more attention to other aspects related to meaning. For instance, usage-based approaches also call for other factors that affect learning such as saliency, redundancy (or functional load) and prototypes besides frequency all alone. These possibilities direct us to consider other factors and there is definitely more room for thought here.

### **Clarifications on Some Misconceptions about the Approach**

Ortega (2015) presents a comparative summary of 10 theories of SLA in VanPatten and Williams' (2015) book, and the concept-oriented approach is among one of them. In her summary, she evaluates the theories under various important components of SLA. These are language knowledge and cognition, interlanguage, first language, linguistic environment, and the role of instruction. However, when one reads this summary, s/he might consider that the concept-oriented approach offers almost nothing about SLA. This may be partly because it is not a theory but an approach. However, the approach, indeed, is rather limited in its scope whereas there is still a minor point we would like to dwell upon regarding this comparative summary. It is about what Ortega (2015) claimed: "The concept-oriented framework and Processability Theory also share the view that L2 instruction can play no large role, although the forces thought to overpower instructional influences are developmental-functional rather than formal" (p. 262). It means that instruction in the concept-oriented approach does not have much of a role.

The effect of instruction is actually mentioned in another paper by Bardovi-Harlig (1995). In her study on the effect of instruction on tense and aspect acquisition of pluperfect, she found that readiness is crucial for the acquisition of the target structure. If the learner is not ready or has not reached a certain level of stability with the semantic mapping of the structure, instruction cannot make a difference. However, if the learner is ready, instruction has the potential of changing the rate of acquisition. One weakness here might be the avoidance of considering the type of instruction provided. This approach seems to deliberately avoid the discussion on implicit and explicit teaching and learning, as well. Despite these issues, while comparing the 10 SLA theories, Ortega (2015) seems to have overlooked this study; however, instruction aspect of this approach could be one of the elements in making this approach a guide for SLA research. Since studies in concept-oriented approach are generally longitudinal and use learner production data and observation of learners (Bardovi-Harlig, 2015), the discussion of implicit and explicit teaching and learning also should be considered.

According to many SLA theories, any source of language may be considered as input. Yet, the learners might not work with all the input that is around them. According to Corder (1967), input means everything available to be utilized by the learners and it is distinct from the intake that

is a piece of input that is comprehended by the learner. As exposure plays a significant role in language learning, there are several schools of thought; while some theories touch upon this issue briefly, some theories rely heavily on input, and the third line focuses on the level that a learner benefits from the exposure.

To exemplify, Becker (2007) presented that there were three main bases that influence second language learning: willingness, the level of exposure meaning getting in touch with the target language, and how efficient the learner is. The author described willingness or motivation as the driving force that would encourage the learner to learn the language. Exposure would be necessary for interaction of the learner with others to excel in language skills. The last factor, efficiency, is directly related to the capacity of the learner, some of which may be innate while the other might be acquired later in life. Becker (2007) focused on how these three main bases function together in the process of learning a second language, and proposed three lines of thought. First, the aforementioned three factors may be independently contributing to L2 proficiency and may be considered additive. Second possibility is that when one of the factors is enhanced, “the learner will definitely reach a high L2 level. But even if one of the factors is low, there is still a chance to reach the highest L2 level depending on the other factors” (p. 2). The last possibility was that all these three bases indicating a concrete foundation, meaning without either one, the learner would not be able to excel in second language proficiency. Thus, the study measured the second language skills of the 3-4-year-old children of migrant families in Germany by conducting Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children. The test involved pictures of certain objects and the children were asked to identify these objects in the target language. The main data collected were the gender and age of the children, parents’ interaction in German, the frequency of children’s watching German TV shows, children’s network with German friends, and the target language proficiency levels reported by the families. The results indicated that the interaction of parents with children in the second language enabled the children to acquire the language. Also, other factors including TV shows in the target language and children’s network of German peers indicated a positive impact in children’s proficiency of German language. When the efficiency of the children and the influence

of the exposure were tested in regression analysis, the results indicated that there was an exponential increase in the effect of exposure for the children with higher level of efficiency in learning the second language. The most significant result in the study was that the level of determinants indicated practical implications in the process of language learning. Another important result was that the children with higher levels of these bases would reach the level of proficiency easier while the lower levels of these determinants would represent lower level of gains in language proficiency. This study has been one of the few examples for concept-oriented approach regarding exposure to input.

Another approach that may be helpful in understanding the importance of input is usage-based approach. Usage-based approaches concentrate on exposure to input (Ellis & Wulf, 2015). Supporters of these approaches claim that linguistic constructions are acquired while learners engage in communication (Ellis, 2013). These constructions are mainly form-meaning mappings, similar to functionalist approaches. Usage-based approaches unite in two aspects: first, language learning equals with exposure to second language, and second, the learners make up their rules when they face the items (Ellis & Wulf, 2015). According to the advocates of usage-based approaches, neural connections are turned on each time a learner experiences a piece of language, and that leads to an increase in strength just as it happens with the muscles in living organisms (Ellis, 2013).

Another model that focuses on exposure to input is the Declarative/Procedural Model, which is more of a neurobiological model that attempts to understand how language is stored (Morgan-Short, Faretta-Stutenberg, Brill-Schuetz, Carpenter, & Wong, 2014). Declarative and procedural memory systems are the categorization of long-term memory systems in the brain (Morgan-Short et al., 2014). While declarative memory is responsible for arbitrary linguistic information, procedural memory is where rules of language are stored. That is, additional exposures solidify declarative memory (Ullman, 2015). To illustrate, Morgan-Short et al. (2014) indicated the importance of the level of exposure to input. It is stated that low levels of exposure correlated with declarative memory, while high levels of exposure correlated with procedural memory in terms of grammar measures.

Considering the importance that the aforementioned theories and models gave to input and the concept-oriented emphasis put on frequency of and exposure to meaningful input to convey the meanings of concepts more than their forms, it could be stated that concept-oriented approach may have a lot to contribute to second language instruction mainly thanks to the emphasis on frequency and exposure issues discussed here.

### **Conclusion**

Klein (1995) states, “a frame of analysis, if it is to be more than a temporary crutch, should also be flexible in the sense that it can easily be enlarged, refined and made more precise, whenever there is need to” (p. 17). Hence, if the concept-oriented approach does not claim to be a model or theory, but merely a frame of analysis, then it is time that it refined some of its main constructs such as frequency and reconsidered the acquisition of function words. The studies also should enlarge their scope to more than just temporality and include more languages since the predicted stages of learning might be disrupted due to the characteristics of a particular L1. It would be a significant contribution to the field. Bardovi-Harlig (2015) reports various studies as follow (p. 55):

Concept-oriented studies have investigated a range of temporal and non-temporal concepts, which include past (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, 2000; Dietrich, Klein, & Noyau, 1995), reverse-order reports (RORs) (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994), futurity (Bardovi-Harlig, 2004, 2005; Howard, 2012; Kanwit, 2014; Moses, 2002; Solon & Kanwit, 2014), and simultaneity (Aksu-Koç & von Stutterheim, 1994; Leclercq, 2009; Schmiedtová, 2004).

However, all of the aforementioned topics, including past, futurity, reverse-order reports and simultaneity, are temporal concepts, which has left us wondering about the studies on non-

temporal concepts. The non-temporal ones need to be studied in future studies. It is a new door for SLA field to look for.

All in all, the concept-oriented approach is distinguished from the other SLA theories thanks to its emphasis on learner output in interlanguage and function-to-form mappings. In addition, it has significantly contributed to the field with the studies on the expression of temporality. However, concept and form variances are not limited to temporality. Therefore, researchers studying the concept-oriented approach should consider expanding the approach, as there is a lot to consider as mentioned throughout this article. There are very few studies conducted through this approach, but these are not enough to generalize certain claims related to the concept-oriented approach. Thus, future research is necessary.

#### *Implications for Language Learning*

Because of the more focus put on the ability to convey the meaning than the accuracy in the target language, it can be suggested that as a functionalist subset, the concept-oriented approach could provide more freedom and less stress to the learners in that this approach identifies mistakes as a natural process or the learner output when learners attempt to communicate meaning. Therefore, obstructions to learning or acquisition due to learners' negative emotional reactions to their learning environment, which was defined as affective filter by Krashen (1982), can be lowered in that learners would feel less frightened of making linguistic mistakes and thus would feel less threatened to be scolded by their teacher whose teaching and classroom approach align with the concept-oriented approach. Thus, a non-judgemental and stress-free learning environment can be achieved in language classrooms.

Very closely related to this, it can be claimed that as a subset of functionalism in language teaching, the concept-oriented approach asserts that language is a system to express meaning and its fundamental function is to enable interaction and communication. Taking this notion into consideration, it can be suggested that the utilization of this approach could provide another practical strength to be observed in classroom. Through such teaching methods as task-based ones,

the target language can be used with meaningful purposes and with the aim of performing authentic functions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

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