

Common Syntactic Errors made by the Undergraduates in Writing English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Learning a language is a strenuous task as many learners encounter a great deal of problems and challenges when they are engaged in developing listening, speech, reading and writing skills. Of the four skills, writing is a significant skill for language production and it is too considered as the most difficult skill, particularly in the English as a second language context as it requires knowledge of grammar, idioms, language structure, vocabulary and orthography. Even though the Sri Lankan students are exposed to English language for nearly thirteen years at the primary and secondary level, the language proficiency of the majority of the undergraduates is not satisfactory. It can be observed that the writing skill of the undergraduate ESL learners are alarmingly poor and tend to make syntactic errors and struggle immensely in coping with writing requirements.

This study focuses on describing and analyzing the errors occurred in syntax in writing English as a second language of the undergraduates in Sri Lanka whose mother tongue is Sinhala. The analysis was based on the 100 undergraduates who are following English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) at the Kandy Regional Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka. A sample of written essays of a given specific topic was analyzed and it was found that most of the errors in written English are due to the second language interference of the writer. In addition, the learners' ignorance of language rules and the hesitate they show to change their existing habits of inaccurate structures in the process of learning English were evident in the study.

Key Words: Second Language, ESL Learners, Syntax, Syntactic Errors, English for General Academic Purposes,

1. Introduction

Syntax is a part of linguistics that studies the structures and formation of sentences. It explains how words and phrases are arranged to form coherent sentences. It is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages. Syntactic investigation of a given language has as its goal the construction of grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentences of the language under analysis (Noam Chomsky, 1971). Hence syntactic error is a violation of the syntax or grammar rules of the language.

Teaching and learning languages are arduous tasks. Teachers as well as the learners encounter a great deal of problems and challenges when they are engaged in their tasks. When the students use their target or second language, the characteristics of their native language could be noticed very often. This may be due to the lack of knowledge on grammatical structures, rules, vocabulary and the lack of exposure to the target language. In learning a second language, learners are more likely to use the same language processes that have been used in acquiring their first language. The differences between the two languages are disregarded by the learners and thereby the process of learning the second language is facilitated through the usage of same rules, structures, sounds and spellings of their first language. The L1 is present in L2 learners' minds whether the teacher wants it to be there or not. The L2 knowledge that is being created in them is connected in all sorts of ways with this L1 knowledge (Cook, 1991).

The instances of L1 interference in L2 learning can be examined by using the approach of Error Analysis. It is the study of the improper or ill-formed language production that depicts the difficulties of the learner. According to the Penguin Dictionary of Language, David Crystal defines 'Error

analysis, in language teaching and learning, is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language,. Errors are considered to be systematic, governed by rules, and appear because a learner's knowledge of the rules of the target language is not complete'. The fact that learners do not make errors and that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, led to a surge of study of learners' errors are called error analysis (Brown, 1994).

Extensive research had been done on the topic of Syntactic Errors made by the undergraduates in writing English as a second language. Muhammad Fareed, Almas Ashraf and Muhammad Bilal have done a research on "ESL Learners' Writing Skills: Problems, Factors and Suggestions" in 2016 with special reference to the Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. The findings revealed that the major problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing are insufficient linguistic proficiency (including command over grammar, syntax and vocabulary), writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1 and weak structure organization. Further the researcher has been identified lack of trained teachers, ineffective teaching methodologies and lack of reading and writing practice at the classroom due to huge number of students in a classroom as the causes for this issue.

A research done by Zuhour Bani Younes and Fatima Salamh Albalawi of the Tabuk University, Saudi Arabia on the topic of "Exploring the Most Common Types of Writing Problems among English and Translation" revealed that that major problems in writing English as follows.

- I. Grammatical problems in the fields of tenses, prepositions, syntactic, subject-verb agreement and the use of articles.
- II. Punctuation problems (absence, misuse or addition of the punctuation marks)
- III. Spelling problems (substitution, omission addition, disordering segmentation and unrecognized words)

"Common Errors in English Writing and Suggested Solutions of Thai University Students" by Apinya Hinnon of Khon Kean University conducted a research to examine syntactic errors that the Thai University Students have made while coping with the writing requirements in English. It was revealed that the errors in grammar and lexis, first language interference and writing organization are three main errors detected from Thai university students' writing. The researches has used Error Analysis to investigate the syntactic Errors of the Thai University students and the three main errors such as grammatical-lexical errors, first language interference and writing organization errors have been identified.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the common syntactic errors made by the undergraduates in writing English as a second language.
2. To trace out the causes of the syntactic errors in writing.
3. To suggest measures to avoid the syntactic errors made by students in writing English as a second language.

3. Methodology

The sample consisted of all the visiting academics in English and 100 undergraduates who are following English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) at the Kandy Regional Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka. A sample of written essays on given specific topics were examined and analyzed from 100 randomly selected students to trace out the syntactic errors that the students tend to make in the writing process. In addition 10 teachers who are in the EGAP programme are interviewed to trace out the experience and the difficulties that they encounter in teaching written English.

4. Results and the Discussion

A linguistic analysis has been carried out to examine the syntactic errors of the undergraduates in writing and can be analysed under the several sub topics.

i. Errors in word order/sentence structure

The principle error observed in writing of the sample group is the word order or the structure of the sentences. The SOV order in Sinhala is transferred into English by the most of the students. It was obvious that they are in dilemma of the differences between the structures of Sinhala and English. Hence the sentence structures of Sinhala are applied in English and syntactic errors have been occurred.

The following examples taken from the sample of writing conveys the influence of the L1 SOV over L2 acquisition.

- *We necessary English to go to the future.* (example)

In the above example the students want to say “We need English language for our future” or “English language is a necessary thing for our future”. The sentence “*We necessary English to go to the future*” is a direct translation of the Sinhala sentence. The words “we” and “necessary” are written together because in Sinhala these two words come together as “*apətə atyawasyai*”.

- *English want to our studies.* (example)
We need English for our studies. (correct sentence)
- *We are essential to learn English.* (example)
It is essential for us to learn English/ Learning English is an essential requirement for us. (correct sentence)
- *Everything necessary to English.* (example)
English is necessary for everything.
- *I very like this job.*(example)
I like this job very much. (correct sentence)

All these examples demonstrate the use of inaccurate word order in English sentences. when these erroneous constructions are translated into Sinhala, it is evident that the learners’ constructions have been directly influenced by their mother tongue- Sinhala.

ii. Omission of the copula/linking verbs

Another major error that was observed in students' writing is the omission of the copula/linking verbs. The reason behind this type of errors could be the absence of the above mentioned verbs in their mother tongue. Therefore the learners of English tend to omit or ignore these verbs although they have been taught all the structures in the classroom.

- *I also very happy* (example)
I was very happy too. (correct sentence)
- *I afraid* (example)
I am afraid. (correct sentence)
- *They unconscioused.* (example)
They became unconscious. (correct sentence)
- *For next year, English will essential for A/L students for their university entrance.* (example)
From next year onwards, English will be an essential requirement for the university entrance. (correct sentence)

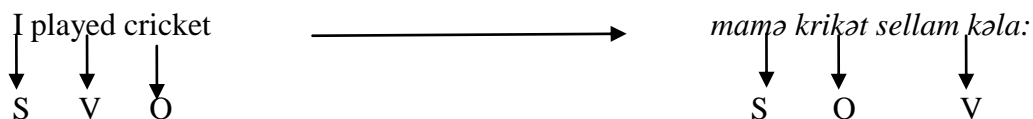
The absence of the construction – subject + copula/linking verb + complement-in Sinhala may pose of the non use of the copula/linking verbs in English.

iii. Addition of copula/linking verbs

Another type of error that was observed in students' writing is the addition of the copula/linking verbs in the unnecessary positions in the sentence. These types of sentence structures are prominent when the simple present tense and the simple past tense are required.

- *I am also think English is very helpful and also important for success of my life.* (example)
I think that English language is helpful and important for a successful life. (correct sentence)
- *I was played cricket.* (example)
I played cricket. (correct sentence)
- *I was went to the town.* (example)
I went to the town. (correct sentence)

In the above examples the unnecessary usage of copula/linking verbs could be seen due to the overgeneralization of a rule. The learners attempt to transform all the elements of the sentence into the simple present or simple past tenses when they want to emphasize the tense. Further due to the differences in the surface realization of the sentences between Sinhala and English, despite the fact that the deep structure or the meaning of both sentences is the same. The deep structure (meaning) of the sentence "I played cricket" in Sinhala and English is the same, but the surface structures of the same sentences are different from each other.



When different grammatical rules of the two languages are applied to the deep structure of the sentence, the surface realization could be obtained, but with certain different characteristics of grammar.

I played cricket.		<i>mamə krikət sellam kəla:</i>
S → NP+AUX+VP		S → NP+AUX+VP
AUX → Tense		AUX → Tense
VP → V+ NP		VP → NP+V
V → Played		V → <i>sellam kəla:</i>
N → I		N → <i>mamə</i>
N → cricket		N → <i>krikət</i>

According to the above figure, the deep structure of both sentences is similar. The application of grammatical rules to transform the deep structure into the surface structure makes the two sentences different from each other in word order.

iv. Errors in negation

Sinhala has a number of negative markers and the word order is not rigid in negative structures in Sinhala. Therefore the students tend to continue the habit of using a free word order in negative sentence in English too. They do not concentrate on the fixed and rigid word order in negative sentences of English. When the rules of negation are applied incompletely, particularly in the simple present and simple past tenses, the auxiliary verbs- 'do' and 'does' in the simple present tense and 'did' in the simple past tense- are unconsciously dropped. Consequently the negative markers 'no' or 'not' are simply added to the verb in the negative.

- *But in some schools there not facilities and English teachers.* (example)
But in certain schools, there are no adequate facilities and teachers for English. (correct sentence)

v. Errors in modal verbs

The majority of learners have not learnt the accurate use of modal verbs. They presume that the modal verb is sufficient in a construction in English as in Sinhala. Thus an infinitive verb is not added to the modal verb. Further some students though they are aware of the fact that a verb or verbs should be added to the modal verb, they are not certain of the proper usage of the verb/verbs with the modal verbs.

- *If we can't English we face many problems*(example)
If we do not have sound knowledge on English, we will have to face many problems in the future. (correct sentence)
- *We can reading, listening, speaking and writing English.* (example)
We can read, write, listen and speak English. (correct sentence)

vi. Errors in the use of Tenses.

- *In the present many universities teaching English.* (example)
At present many universities conduct lectures in the medium of English. (correct sentence)
- *In Sri Lanka, government try to develop the knowledge of English even in primary schools.* (example)
The Sri Lankan government tries to improve the knowledge on English in schools including primary schools. (correct sentence)
- *One day we are happy because we can speak in English very well.* (example)
We will be very happy the day we would be able to speak in English. (correct sentence)
- *In the future, English is the very important language.* (example)
English will be an essential language in future. (correct sentence)

As observed in their writing, it could be stated that the students, when they are given an essay topic, tend to think in their mother tongue and translate their ideas directly into English. They gather information, organize and structure their writing in Sinhala in the first place and then attempt to transform it to English. When this strategy is used, errors in tenses occur.

vii. Errors in the use of prepositions

The improper use of prepositions is another common and prominent problem among the learners of English. This problem could be observed in almost all the learners of English, since there are complex subtle distinctions between certain prepositions.

- *I helped to a beggar*(example)
I helped a beggar. (correct sentence)
- *I like to be a teacher. I like to it.* (example)
I like to be a teacher. I like it. (correct sentence)
- *I went a trip in last week.* (example)
I went on a trip last week. (correct sentence)

5. Conclusion

Most of the syntactic errors made by the undergraduates are owing to the usage or transfer relocation of L1 rules in L2. They believe that rules of grammar in both languages are similar and transferring rules from L1 to L2 would not make an erroneous construction. Further ignorance of the grammatical rules and structure of English and their poor attention and lack of interest to learn the language too are reasons for the syntactical errors in the language.

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