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Syntactic Errors in English Committed by Indian Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

In a second language or foreign language situation “errors” explain the learner’s inability to use appropriate grammatical structures, semantic categories and other linguistic units. This paper deals with “errors” in second language especially at the sentence level. A test was administered to a group of one hundred college students enrolled in Second Year B.Com at Mysore University. The sentence lays more stress on the structural aspects of language. It aims at developing grammatical competence in learners. This study aims to classify “errors” made by the students at the sentence levels such as: Auxiliary verbs, passive and tenses. The research shows errors committed in the use of auxiliary verbs, passive forms and tenses. The paper suggests remedial measures regarding type of errors committed by the students.

Key words: Errors, auxiliary verbs, passive and tense sentences.

1. Introduction

Grammar has always played a crucial role in language teaching. Language teachers and specialists are of the view that grammar can help first, second and foreign language learners develop linguistic competence as part of communicative competence. Littlewood (1994) mentioned that communication through correct grammar could help learners make a wider and more creative range of meaning choices. Thus he added that “through the grammatical system of language, then communication can become increasingly independent of its setting” (p. 14).

Wilkins (1972) wrote, “Grammar is the means through which linguistic creativity is ultimately achieved.” Chomsky (1982, p. 107) mentioned the importance of the notion of grammar rather than notion of language. “I do not know why I never realized that clearly before, but it seems obvious, when you think about it, that the notion of language is much more abstract than the notion of grammar. The reason is that grammars have a real existence, that is, there is something in your brain that corresponds to the grammar. That’s got to be true. But there is nothing in the real world corresponding to language. In fact the notion of language might turn out just to be a useless notion.”

In this background, this paper attempts to study the syntactic errors committed by the undergraduate students in some selected colleges of the University of Mysore, Karnataka State, India.

Error analysis

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Errors are natural for second or foreign learners of English language. Errors hamper communication, which is the main function of language. Sometimes errors committed by second language learners are due to mother tongue interference. Another reason for learners' errors is due to what Richards (1971) mentioned: ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized, developmental errors and over generalization. So, it is very necessary to study the errors and, if possible, offer some suggestions for the improvement of the performance of students in English.

Corder (1967) claimed that the information arrived at through error analysis could be useful to textbook writers, teachers and learners. Analysis of grammatical errors offered significant insight into the nature of difficulties in writing faced by second language learners.

According to Selinker (1972, p. 220) the use of the present instead of the past is the result of a "learning strategy" of simplification, a tendency on the part of the learner to avoid grammatical formatives such as the past tenses forms.

Wyatt (1973) mentioned that 2.5 percent of all errors (106) in tenses related to the use of present simple in a past context or of the past simple in a present context.

Some Indian Scholars' Findings on Errors of Indian Students

Several Indian scholars, who studied the errors committed by groups of Indian students learning English as a Second or Foreign language in India, have reported interesting findings:

Kaur (1993) claimed that some grammatical aspects cause more linguistic problems for the learners than others. Nemser (1971, p. 116) mentioned that the interim grammar constructed by the learner comprise of "the deviant linguistic system actually employed by the learner attempting to utilize the target language".

Nanjaiah (1994) reported that, out of 578 errors in his data in the use of active voice and passive voice, 60 of the errors were found in the wrong use of passive voice. According to Bhatia (1975) one major problem the students seemed to face was the inability to maintain tense continuity across clauses. He added that out of 231 errors in his data in the area of tenses, 69 of the errors related to the use of the simple present instead of the simple past, and 97 of the errors related to the use of the simple past instead of the simple present.

Shielamani (1998) said "many errors committed in the use of auxiliaries by the learners can be explained in terms of interference." He classified the errors related to the heading auxiliary verbs as follows:

1. Omission of auxiliary.
2. Faulty insertion of auxiliary.
3. Wrong form of auxiliary.
4. Wrong form of verb after auxiliary.

5. Errors in modal usage.
6. Unnecessary use of the perfective.
7. Present or past simple used instead of the perfective.
8. Progressive used instead of simple tense or do.

Method Adopted in This Study

Participants

The subjects for the present study were 100 students enrolled in the second year of B.Com in several colleges under University of Mysore, India. The subjects commenced their studies in July of 2007. The subjects were randomly selected from Day and Evening colleges. Fifty of the students were male and the rest were female.

Procedure

The Language Proficiency Test (Nelson, series 400B) was used. The test consisted of multiple choice, cloze passage, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation sections. Fifteen students were selected to carry out a pilot test so as to ensure reliability of proficiency. Its reliability through the K-R21 formula turned out to be 0.69.

An English grammar test including auxiliary verbs, passive and tenses were used. The grammar test was designed to be administered to the second year B.Com students. The test was developed by the researcher based on the textbooks of the aforementioned colleges. The test was administered to Day and evening colleges respectively.

Results and Discussion

In the present study, out of 1678 errors made in the use of sentences, 554 (33%) were observed in auxiliary, 476 (28%) were observed in passive voice, and 648 (39%) were in tenses (as seen in Table 1).

Table 1
Type of errors

Type of Errors	Number of Errors	Percent
Auxiliary	554	33
Tenses	648	39
Passive voice	476	28
Total	1678	100

The errors related to the auxiliary in the present study are shown in Table 2 along with the number of errors.

Table 2
Errors committed in auxiliary

Errors in auxiliary	Number of errors
Wrong form of modal used	273
Wrong form of auxiliary after wish	60
Future in past instead of future in past perfect	74
Wrong form of auxiliary	30
Present, past, future used instead of present perfect continuous tense	62
Wrong form of verb after auxiliary	55
Total	554

The errors committed in the use of auxiliary verbs by the students are considered in Table 3 along with their examples.

Table 3

Error	Correct form
A: Wrong form of modal used	
A dog <i>can be able to</i> kill a cat.	A dog can kill a cat.
Why did not you take the university entrance examination? You <i>must</i> have passed it easily.	Why did not you take the university entrance examination? You <i>could</i> have passed it easily.
I <i>can able to</i> finish it by next week.	I <i>shall be able to</i> finish it by next week.
He is only a little boy; how could he <i>knows</i> what to do?	He is only a little boy; how <i>should he know</i> what to do?
B. Wrong form of auxiliary after “wish”	
Mary wishes she <i>can</i> play the Piano well.	Mary wishes she <i>could</i> play the Piano well.
2. Mary wishes she <i>could to</i> play the piano well.	Mary wishes she could play the Piano well.
C. Future in past instead of future in past perfect.	
If I had not shown her the way, she <i>may get lost</i> .	If I had not shown her the way, she might have got lost.
If I had not shown her the way, she might get lost.	If I had not shown her the way, she might have got lost.
D. Wrong form of auxiliary	

Either my father or I <i>is</i> mistaken.	Either my father or I <i>am</i> mistaken.
Either my father or I <i>were</i> mistaken.	Either my father or I <i>am</i> mistaken.
E. Present, past and future used instead of present perfect continuous tense.	
Before she came here, she will have to study in England.	Before she came here, she must have been studying in England.
Before she came here, may study in England.	Before she came here, she must have been studying in England.
F. Wrong form of verb after auxiliary.	
She did not know the first seven answers but she do <i>knows</i> the eighth.	She did not know the first seven answers but she did know the eighth.
She did not know the first seven answers but she did not know the eighth.	She did not know the first seven answers but she did know the eighth.

The type of errors revealed that the students did not know the proper use of auxiliary verb. They need more practice in this area. As this study indicated there is a lack of knowledge of English auxiliary verb rules among the students. In order to remove the errors in the use of auxiliary verb, the students need sufficient exercises to be conducted in the classroom in order to increase their knowledge of English auxiliary verb and reduce their errors.

The errors related to the tenses in the study are shown in Table 4 along with the number of errors.

Table4
Tense of errors

Errors in tenses	Number of errors
Present continuous tense is used instead of simple past tense	45
Past continuous tense is used instead of simple past tense	36
Present perfect continuous tense is used instead of simple past tense	25
Simple future tense is used instead of present perfect tense	53
Present continuous tense is used instead of present perfect tense	38
Simple present tense is used instead of present perfect tense	16
Past perfect tense is used instead of present perfect tense	15
Future perfect tense is used instead of present perfect tense	10
Simple present tense is used instead of past perfect tense	47
Simple past tense is used instead of past perfect tense	82
Future in past is used instead of the past perfect tense	15
Past perfect tense is used instead of simple past tense	23
Present continuous tense is used instead of simple present tense	18
Past perfect continuous tense is used instead of simple present tense	5
Past continuous tense is used instead of simple present tense	24
Present perfect tense is used instead of past perfect continuous tense	22

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Simple past tense is used instead of past perfect continuous tense	28
Past continuous tense is used instead of past perfect continuous tense	29
Past continuous tense is used instead of present perfect tense	31
Present perfect tense is used instead of past perfect tense	26
Simple future tense is used instead of passive simple present tense	34
Passive simple future tense is used instead of passive simple present tense	18
Wrong use of passive simple present tense is used instead of passive simple present tense	8

The following Table 5 indicates some of the samples of errors in the use of tense committed by the students.

Table 5

Error	Correct form
A. Present continuous tense is used instead of simple past tense.	
I cannot believe that you <i>are ever looking</i> like your mother.	I cannot believe that you <i>ever looked</i> like your mother.
B. Past continuous tense is used instead of simple past tense.	
I cannot believe that you <i>were ever looking</i> like your mother.	I cannot believe that you <i>ever looked</i> like your mother.
C. Simple future tense is used instead of present perfect tense.	
I <i>will send</i> him only one letter up to now..	I <i>have sent</i> him only one letter up to now.
D. Present continuous tense is used instead of present perfect tense.	
<i>I am sending</i> him only one letter up to now.	I have sent him only one letter up to now.
E. Future perfect tense is used instead of present perfect tense.	
This bridge is so long that by the time, we <i>will have reached</i> the other end, it will be time to start again at this end.	This bridge is so long that by the time, we <i>have reached</i> the other end, it will be time to start again at this end.
F. Future in perfect past is used instead of past perfect tense.	
We <i>would have lived</i> on Kendy Street for seven years before we had moved here.	We <i>had lived</i> on Kendy Street for seven years before we had moved here.
G. Past perfect tense is used instead of simple past tense.	

Parviz had already finished his lunch when his friend <i>had come</i> .	Parviz had already finished his lunch when his friend came.
H. Present continues tense is used instead of simple present tense.	
My father <i>is knowing</i> George quite well.	My father knows George quite well.
Present perfect tense is used instead of past perfect present tense.	
“What about Mary” “When her father left, she <i>has not yet finished</i> writing the composition, but she soon gets it done.	“What about Mary” “When her father left, she <i>had not yet finished</i> writing the composition, but she soon gets it done.

The test showed that the students were unaware how to use tense in English. In order to avoid errors in the use of tense, students should be made familiar with the rules of tense in English sentence. Sufficient exercises and drills are to be conducted in the classroom till the students attain mastery over the difference between the forms of tense in their productive skills.

Table 6 indicates some of the samples of errors of change of voice committed by the students.

Table 6

Error	Correct form
A. Simple past tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense.	
Signatures <i>used</i> as one method of identification.	Signatures <i>have been used</i> as one method of identification.
B. Past perfect tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense.	
Signatures <i>had used</i> as one method of identification.	Signatures <i>have been used</i> as one method of identification.
C. Present perfect tense issued instead of passive simple past tense.	

Errors in passives	Number of errors
Simple past tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	42
Past perfect tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	12
Present perfect tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	67
Present perfect tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	69
Present continuous tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	14
Past continuous tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	5
Present continuous tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	7
Past continuous tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	19
Past participle is used instead of passive simple past tense	6
Passive simple present tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	35
Passive present participle tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	25
Wrong use of passive simple future tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	22
Simple present tense is used instead of passive simple future tense	23
Simple future tense is used instead of passive simple future tense	14
Passive past perfect tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	11
Passive simple tense is used instead of passive simple future tense	16
Future perfect tense is used instead of passive future perfect tense	19
Passive future present tense is used instead of passive future perfect tense	30
Wrong use of simple future tense is used instead of passive future perfect tense.	21
Present perfect tense is used instead of passive simple past tense	4
Simple past tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense	21
Passive simple present tense is used instead of passive simple future tense	10
The contract <i>has signed</i> by the President of the United States of America.	. The contract <i>was signed</i> by the President of the United States of America.

D. Present continuous tense issued instead of passive present perfect tense.	
Our radio <i>is not repairing</i> .	Our radio <i>has not been repaired</i> .
E. Passive simple present tense is used instead of passive simple past tense.	
She <i>is born</i> on 21 st October 1943.	She <i>was born</i> on 21 st October 1943.
F. Passive present participle tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense.	
All the bread <i>being eaten</i> by the mice.	All the bread <i>has been eaten</i> by the mice.
G. wrong use of passive simple future tense is used instead of passive simple past tense.	
Candidates <i>will selected</i> after many interviews.	Candidates <i>were selected</i> after many interviews.

Table 7

The errors related to the passive voice in the present study are shown in Table 7 above along with the number of the errors.

The test showed that the learners did not have knowledge of the rules of transformation from active to passive voice and vice-versa. In order to avoid errors in the use of passive voice, learners should be taught the rules of transformation from Active voice to Passive voice and vice-versa. The learners should also be taught when to use active voice form and when to use passive voice form. Sufficient exercises should be conducted in the classroom till the learners know how to change active voice sentences into passive voice sentences in English.

4. Conclusion

Errors are an integral part of learning a second/foreign language. As Dulay and Burt (1974) maintained, “You can’t learn without goofing.” A systematic analysis of learner’s errors can be discussed in terms of the following points: for the learner, his teacher, the course designer, and the producer of the teaching materials.

The present study has shown that there exist systematic errors in learner’s target language.

Within the perimeter of this paper, the errors pertaining to auxiliary verbs, passive voice, and tenses indicate that teaching English is not satisfactory in the colleges, and that learning strategies are the cause of errors.

Teachers and students should concentrate on grammar and use ability-based teaching to avoid errors. Teachers should find out learner’s errors and adopt a few remedial measures to enable them to improve their language and use the target language flawlessly.

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