SYNTACTIC ERROR ANALYSIS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE GRAMMAR: A STUDY AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS OF KERALA

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Abstract

Learners make errors during the process of learning languages. This aspect should not be avoided as unimportant. There is a need to identify the errors and help them to reduce the errors. Syntactic structures are the base of English grammar. This study analyzes syntactic errors in writing task of 200 secondary school students of Kerala. Students were given language acquisition test and the investigators found 10 different areas of errors, categorized in the descending order of number of errors. The causes of these errors; from the perception of teachers were also analyzed using a questionnaire on a sample of 62 secondary school English teachers. The result through percentage analysis revealed that attitude of students, interlingual interference and the present method of teaching are the major causes of syntactic errors among secondary school students. Investigators also suggested two prominent teaching strategies, namely sheltered instruction and task based approach to help learners to overcome the errors. Along with the strategies certain helpful suggestions were also pinpointed in the study. Having such an understanding into language errors is useful for teachers, because it provides information on common syntactic errors in the process of communication. Also, it can be used to predict and reduce problems due to errors in learning the English language.

Introduction

In foreign language learning, error correction has become one of the important teaching processes. But actually, few teachers know a lot about error analysis and some related theories. Teachers often take so negative attitudes toward errors that they could not tolerate any errors. On the contrary, the students often feel upset, for they have found that there is a great gap between themselves and their teachers in dealing with errors and understanding of error correction. So it is necessary to have a theoretical foundation about error analysis. Error analysis is useful to the researcher, linguists and the learner himself (Corder, 1975). It is inevitable that learners make errors in the process of foreign language learning. The question is that why students commit errors and what the sources of errors are. Willcott, (1972/73) conducted an error analysis to discover some of the problems that native speakers of Arabic had with the syntax of written English. In the process of learning, language error is needed to be analyzed carefully. Ellis (1997) expresses that "classifying errors in these ways can help us to diagnose learners' learning problems at any stage of their development and to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time." Any one who has taught English to the learners from different backgrounds has found that there are many aspects of difference in the structure of the English language which is almost universally difficult for learners of English as a foreign language (Wilkins, 1972).

There have been many researches in the field of language learning. Findings about first language acquisition have been borrowed to foreign language learning and it has been concluded that the process works in a similar way. It is inevitable that all learners make mistakes and commit errors. However, that process can be impeded through realizing the errors and working on them.
according to the feedbacks given. The steps that learners follow get the researchers and language teachers realize that if the mistakes and errors of language learners in the formation of the new language system are analyzed carefully, the process of language learning will be understood. The analysis of errors, thus has become an important field of linguistics. This field of language teaching benefit from the findings of linguistics in many cases including error analysis. So, the analysis of learner language has become a crucial need to predict and conquer the problems of errors in the process of learning a foreign language.

Need and significance of the study

Syntactic structures are the basis of the English language grammar and the students have to be thorough with making error free syntactic structures while constructing sentences. Students of our state are less concerned about making grammatically correct sentences and are not bothered about their mistakes and potential. The fact is that the present method of teaching is not giving them chances to realize their information gap and identifying their errors. Analyzing the errors of the learners and providing corrective feedback is highly essential in the beginning stage itself. Otherwise, students won’t be able to communicate fluently and produce meaningful sentences. It is the need of the hour to make the teachers aware about the errors made by the learners, categorize the errors and to suggest necessary strategies that could be implemented to provide corrective feedback to the learners there by reducing their syntactic errors. The investigators are making an attempt to identify the areas of syntactic errors made by secondary school students, classify the errors and also to give necessary suggestions to reduce the errors. This paper would help the secondary school English teachers to introspect themselves and thereby improving their teaching methodology.

Objectives of the study

1. To analyze syntactic errors in English language grammar among secondary school students
2. To trace out the causes of syntactic errors in English language grammar from a teacher’s perspective
3. To suggest measures to reduce syntactic errors in learning English grammar among secondary school students

Methodology

The study used a survey method for collecting data. 200 secondary school students and 62 secondary school English teachers were selected randomly from the districts of Malappuram, Thrissur and Kozhikode for the study.

Tools used

1. Language Acquisition Test: A language acquisition test containing 5 descriptive questions was given to students for tracing out the areas of syntactic errors in English language grammar. The first question was a set of pictures telling the story of the crow that was fooled by the fox. The second question was to write another story using the hints given in the test. That was the familiar story of the hare and the tortoise. The third question asked the students to describe the process of preparing a tea. The intention of the investigator while putting this question in the question paper was to focus on prepositions, conjunctions and articles. This was followed by another question which asked the learners to describe how they spent their Onam (Festival) vacation as the tool was administered just after the days of their Onam vacation. The final question was a passage to edit. The investigator made all the possible errors that had been identified by the teachers in the passage and asked the students to edit the passage. 2 hours were given to the learners to complete the test. The investigator also provided all the necessary vocabulary throughout to the learners to complete the test.

2. Questionnaire: A questionnaire containing 30 questions was given to teachers to find out the causes of syntactic errors made by secondary school students.

Statistical technique used

Percentage analysis
Results

Tracing out the Areas of Syntactic Errors in English Language Grammar

Table 1

Result of syntactic error analysis in English language grammar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL NO</th>
<th>Areas of syntactic errors</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Concord in using auxiliaries</td>
<td>876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Errors in using SVO Pattern</td>
<td>784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Errors in using articles</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Errors in using Preposition</td>
<td>722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Errors in using the correct form of tense</td>
<td>707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Errors in using conjunctions</td>
<td>698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lexicon-syntactic errors</td>
<td>634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Wrong use of plural morpheme</td>
<td>432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Order change in questions</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Incomplete sentences</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

- **Concord in using auxiliaries**: Learners are making too many errors in using the correct form of concord in primary auxiliaries like *am*, *do*, *does*, *did*, *was*, *were*, *has*, *have* and had. The errors are far more in using modal auxiliaries like could, would, should, shall and might compared to primary auxiliaries. Most of the students are considering ‘does’ as the plural form of ‘do’. And they are always using *am* while writing the first person pronoun *I* whatever the tense form is. Students are not using the auxiliary *had*. It seems that they do not know when and where to use it. In the case of auxiliaries also there is no clear distinction of primary and modal auxiliaries of English, in Malayalam and the learners often makes the mistakes like "I has the book with me".

- **Errors in using SVO Pattern**: Secondary school students are following the sentence pattern of mother tongue in most of the situations. They are using the SOV pattern instead of SVO. In Malayalam we could use both SVO and SOV pattern depending on the situations but in English language this is not possible. The difference the structural arrangement of the sentences between the languages produces syntactic errors. In Malayalam the sentence usually has a subject – object – verb pattern, but in English it is subject – verb – object.

- **Errors in using articles**: most of the students in secondary schools are inappropriately using the definite article *The*. The investigator analyzed the over use of this article in the formation of major and the subordinate clauses. Learners are finding this article as a supporting word that could be used anywhere in the sentence when they find themselves confused with the indefinite articles, prepositions or conjunctions.

- **Errors in using Preposition**: Prepositional errors have also been potentially identified by investigators. There is no clear wise distinction like ‘since’ and ‘for’, ‘to’ and ‘for’ etc. of English in Malayalam and so, the students fail to observe it. Learners are either omitted prepositions or there is the addition of prepositions in certain situations. But the majority of students are using incorrect prepositions while constructing sentences.

- **Errors in using the correct form of tense**: A sensible look at the errors made by the learners lead the teachers to identify that almost most of the verbal errors are due to the interference of mother tongue. The major structural difference in Malayalam and English language like the use of linking verb, difference among simple past, present perfect and perfect tenses lead to major errors by the learners.

- **Errors in using conjunctions**: Learners are making mistakes in using conjunctions especially in coordinating conjunctions such as *for*, *And*, *Nor*, *But*, *Or*, *Yet* and *So*. They are omitting the use of subordinating conjunctions such as *if*, *since*, than that, *because* etc. wherever necessary. The investigator analysed the fact that secondary school students were completely unaware of where to use correlative conjunctions like not only but also, neither or etc. They are not omitting correlative conjunctions in sentence formation but over use of correlative conjunctions are seen in their descriptions.

- **Lexicon-syntactic errors**: The number of lexico-semantic errors has also been considerable. Majority of the students failed to conceptualize the subtle semantic differences among closely related words. They may use way for direction, ‘teach’ for
'study', 'buy' for 'sell', 'known' for 'understand' etc. that clearly indicates the lack of internalization of these terms. Here it may note that the degree of confusion in learning a second language among the learners increases when mother tongue and target language belongs to two different families, that here as Malayalam belongs to Dravidian group and English belongs to Indo-European group of languages.

- **Wrong use of plural morpheme:** While analyzing the answers of the students the investigator came to the finding that learners are confused with the plural forms of the English language. This may be as a result of the negative influence of the mother tongue. To quote some examples from the learners description they wrote "leaf of the trees", "the tree has many fruit", "added sugars in to the cup" etc.

- **Order change in questions:** The sample shows that the interrogative sentences have been used in the reverse order as where + sub + aux + verb (where he was going) instead of where + aux + sub + verb (where was he going). This is due to the influence of spoken forms of writing. The deviant word order of question found in the learner's performance is less acceptable in the spoken mode of Indian English and it is also expressed through intonation using the similar pattern.

- **Incomplete sentences:** Reason for the projection of the incomplete sentences is that some L2 learners, at the beginning stage just memorize the passage or linguistic elements for the examination purpose, then they try to project completion in the examinations, but it seems to them impossible to project completely what they have memorized. Then, they import the linguistic elements improperly whatever it comes from their memory as shown in the above sample. This type of error may be considered as errors due to linguistic vomiting or it is an outcome of rote learning.

### Analyzing the Causes of Syntactic Errors made by Secondary School Students in the Perception of Teachers

#### Table 2

Results showing the causes of syntactic errors in the perception of teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL NO</th>
<th>Major causes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Attitude of students</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interlingual interference</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Intra Present method of teaching</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Intralingual interference</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Inadequate exposure to English</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Teacher factor</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lack of planning to remediate problem</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is revealed from the perception of the teachers that a number of factors are contributing the causes of errors in constructing syntactic elements of the English language. According to their opinion inter lingual interference is one among the major factors. More recently, Charles Ferguson (in Stockwell and Bowen 1965 p.v), Robert Politzer (1967), and Leon Jakobovits (1970) reiterate the importance of LI interference in L2 learning. The difference in the syntactic arrangement of grammatical structures between the two languages is the major cause of errors in the perception of teachers. Attitude of students that there is no need of creating grammatically correct sentences to pass the examination is effecting negatively. Teachers also mentioned about the intra lingual interference of the language. The irregularity in spelling, exceptions in grammatical rules, and no proper rules concerned in the use of prepositions and conjunctions are some of the factors which makes the learners confused and leading to make...
errors while constructing sentences. Moreover, the present methods of teaching is not focusing on any of the forms or structures of English language which further makes the condition worse. Teachers are helpless as revealed from their opinions that they are not getting enough time to focus on any errors of the learners or to rectify those errors. They even do not get enough time to give exposure to the target language.

Suggestive Strategies

After analyzing the descriptions of the test by the secondary school students the investigator came to the conclusion that there are a lot of errors in their descriptions such that they are not even to communicate anything meaningfully. There is a strong need in the present scenario to help learners to overcome these errors. Based on the reviews and the theoretical background, the investigators are suggesting two effective strategies to help the learners for reducing errors.

Sheltered Instruction: Sheltered English instruction is an instructional approach that engages ELLs above the beginner level in developing grade-level content-area knowledge, academic skills, and increased English proficiency. In sheltered English classes, teachers use clear, direct, simple English and a wide range of scaffolding strategies to communicate meaningful input in the content area to students. Learning activities that connect new content to students’ prior knowledge, that require collaboration among students, and that spiral through curriculum material, offer ELLs the grade-level content instruction of their English-speaking peers, while adapting lesson delivery to suit their English proficiency level.

Task Based Approach: Task-based learning offers an alternative for language teachers. In a task-based lesson the teacher doesn’t pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it. The lesson follows certain stages.

• Pre-task: The teacher introduces the topic and gives the students clear instructions on what they will have to do at the task stage and might help the students to recall some language that may be useful for the task. The pre-task stage can also often include playing a recording of people doing the task. This gives the students a clear model of what will be expected of them. The students can take notes and spend time preparing for the task.
• Task: Students complete a task in pairs or groups using the language resources that they have as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement.
• Planning: Students prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class what happened during their task. They then practice what they are going to say in their groups. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to ask for advice to clear up any language questions they may have.
• Report: Students then report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher chooses the order of when students will present their reports and may give the students some feedback.
• Analysis: The teacher then highlights relevant parts of the text of the recording for the students to analyze. They may ask students to notice interesting features within this text. The teacher can also highlight the language that the students used during the report phase for analysis.
• Practice: Finally, the teacher selects language areas to practice based upon the needs of the students and what emerged from the task and report phases. The students then do practice activities to increase their confidence and make a note of useful language.

Suggestive Measures

Despite of the above mentioned strategies; the investigators are pinpointing certain suggestive measures for the teachers, which should be taken into consideration during the teaching learning process.

• Draw learners’ attention to linguistic features when they are engaged in meaning-centered communication rather than follow a set syllabus.
• Draw students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on the meaning or communication.
• Hold up the importance of communicative language teaching principles such as authentic communication and student-centeredness, and, on the other hand, maintain the value of the occasional and overt study of problematic L2 grammatical forms, which is more reminiscent of non communicative teaching.
• Teachers and curricula designers are not to focus instruction on the teaching/learning of specific L2 grammatical items. Instead, they should aim to help students learn how to use language in a way that emulates realistic communicative scenarios.

• Teacher-student/student-student classroom interaction, via both oral and written modes, should consume the majority of class time. Likewise, evaluation should center on students’ abilities to actively engage in authentic communication, using the forms they have learned during interaction.

• The emphasis should be on the meaning of the language which is primary and a shift towards a focus on formal aspects should occur only when meaning is not accurately conveyed or when the instructor suspects the shift is necessary for comprehension.

• Attention should be directed towards the grammatical features of the language. It is required that the students should focus on the grammatical correctness or incorrectness of the second language.

Conclusion

The results of the study show that errors which the students committed were both interlingual transfer based and intralingual transfer based. The participants also had a relatively weak vocabulary and their sentences were sometimes incomprehensible such that they interfered with the parallel form of words from their first language to target language. They committed errors in applying sentence structure rules. Therefore, it can be concluded that these participants have problems in acquiring normal grammatical rules in English. This study has shown that most of the errors are due to negative attitude of students and both interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. It further shows that classification of errors provides information on common problems in process of language learning. Also, by being able to describe and predict errors, teachers can inform their students to know or conquer their errors in process of language learning.

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