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PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATION OF VERB ERROR CORRECTION IN AN L2 COMPOSITION

TONJA BROWN AND MARNI MYLES-VOLLAN

ABSTRACT

Using error analysis can be an effective tool by ESL teachers for discovering individual student's difficulties with the English language. Controversies exist, however, over which of these errors should be used for focused instruction. In this study, a detailed inspection of grammatical errors was done with a sample essay written by an anonymous college-level ESL student. The results of the analysis found that out of the eight parts of speech, verbs were the most prevalent errors within this essay. In particular, four grammatical verb errors were noted. The first error included subject-verb agreement when an auxiliary verb was used. The second error showed confusion between tense verbs that are bound by time frames compared to infinitive forms - which are not bound by these frames. Third, there were misunderstandings between the correct usage of gerunds and the infinitive forms of non-finite model verbs. Finally, the student showed a lack of use of modal verbs to correctly express mood in an opinion essay. It was therefore determined that this student, as well as other ESL students, could benefit from specific instruction on English verb peculiarities through the use of mini-lessons within a student's own work.

1.0 Introduction

For almost every student learning a second language, grammar errors are to be expected. However, the issue surrounding how grammar mistakes should be addressed by teachers is often debated. Some linguists feel that acquisition of grammatical skills from direct teaching should be limited and in some cases altogether avoided (Richards, 1989: 1-11), while others such as Celce-Murcia (Teaching, 2001) say that error correction is important, but focusing explicitly on grammar should be handled with care. "It bears repeating that too much focus on error not only promotes a limited perception of the role of grammar in communication but may create-or reinforce-negative attitudes about this very important component of second language writing instruction" (p. 237). Our analysis in this paper agrees with Celce-Murcia that grammatical error correction is an integral part of written textual analysis; however, following her admonition to be mindful of the amount of focus, we concentrate only on one main issue that we feel is critical for mutual intelligibility between our case study and the reader, namely the misuse of verbs. Most contemporary linguists agree on the importance of the verb in language. For instance, Fromkin et al. (2003) contend that the verb is the most important element in the sentence, "In all languages, the verb plays the central role in the meaning and structure of sentences. The verb determines the number of objects and limits the semantic properties of both its subject and objects" (p. 191). With this said, a proper understanding of verbs can give students the necessary framework for understanding other aspects of grammar.

2.0 Data Analysis and Methodology

For our analysis, we examined a sample paper written by an NNS who is labeled as Student C (Appendix A). The nationality, age and gender of the writer are unknown. Thus, we were unable to assess if there were any issues dealing with negative or positive transfers from the

writer's L1, and focused strictly on the actual errors as they were written in the paper. We considered only the errors that directly included the eight parts of speech: verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions and articles (Koffi, p. 8), and did not include punctuation or stylistic writing errors. We conclude that there are 50 total grammar errors (Appendix B), twelve of which we excluded from this analysis, including spelling mistakes, incorrect idioms, capitalization corrections and stylistic errors. Of the 37 remaining errors, 17 (45%) involved some form of a verbal error - almost half of all the parts of speech errors (Figure 1). This was followed by six noun errors (17%), four incorrect conjunctions (11%), three adverbs, two errors each for adjectives, and articles, and one preposition error (Figure 2).

Based on the high percentage of verb errors, we therefore elected to focus on mini lessons to teach the vital aspects of subject-verb agreement, verb tense, correct use of infinitives and gerunds, and correct modal verb use. Given the importance of verbs in a sentence and the propensity of this student to misuse them, instruction on verbs is necessary before addressing the remaining errors, which included primarily the number agreement in nouns.

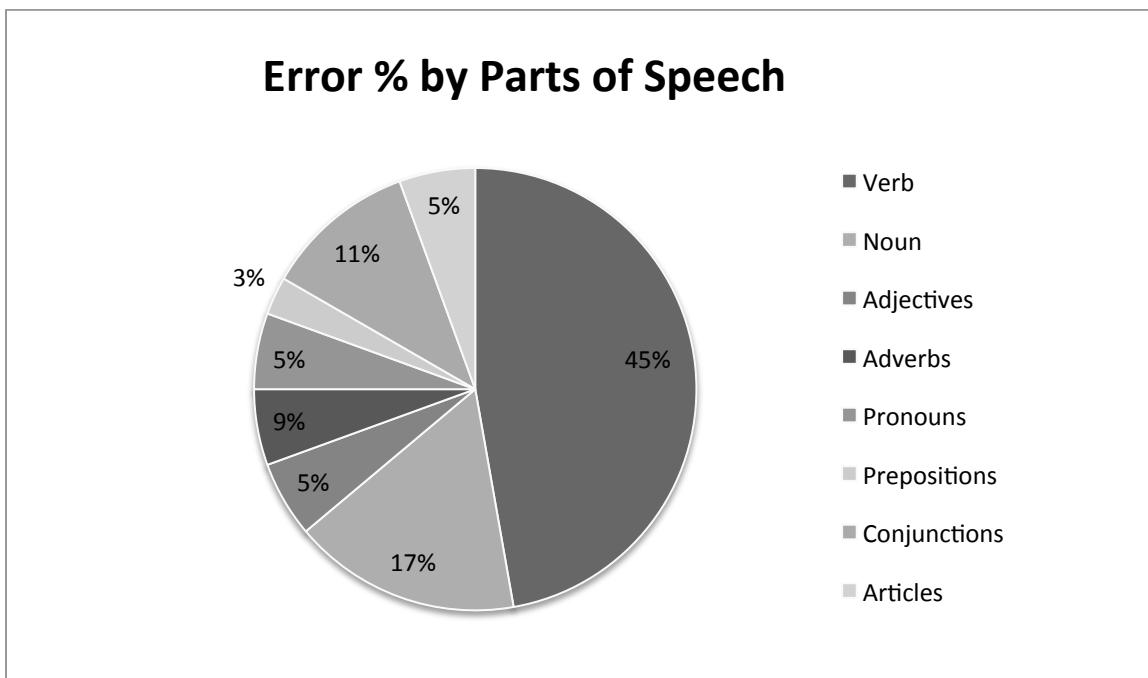


Figure 1: Error percentages based on parts of speech

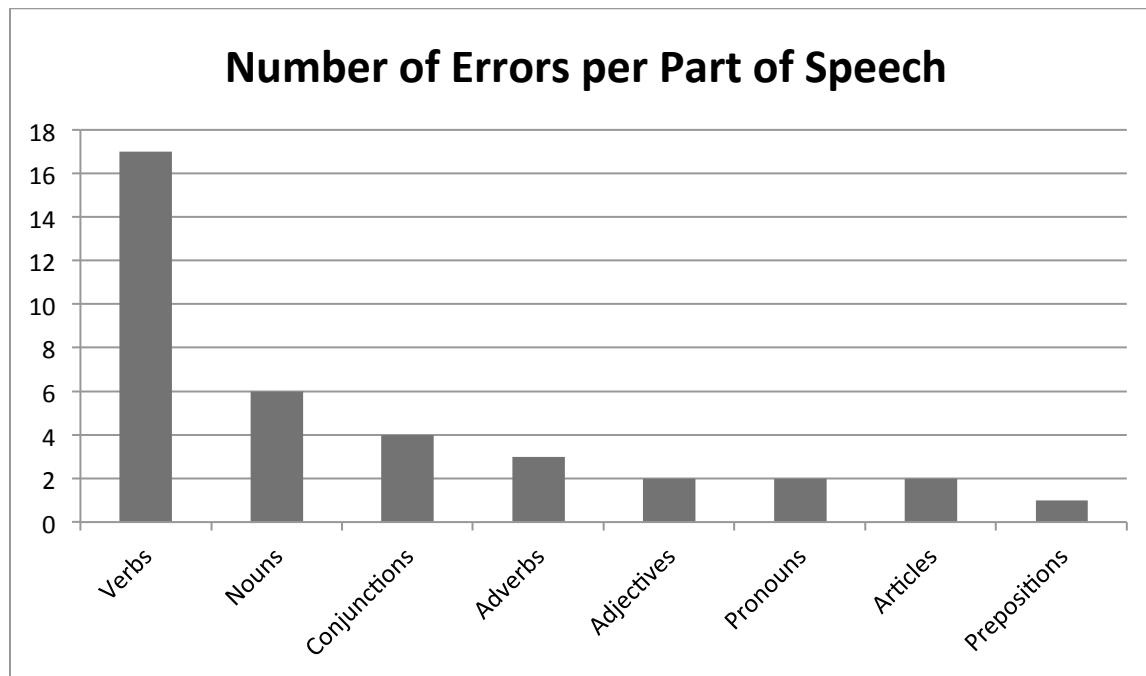


Figure 2: Number of errors in parts of speech

3.0 Subject-Verb Agreement

According to Koffi (2010: 166), the standard phrase structure rule that has been proposed for generating well-formed sentences in all languages is as follows:

$$S \longrightarrow NP \ AUX \ VP$$

The syntactic category “auxiliary,” abbreviated AUX, is on par with both the NP and the VP. Since AUX is a syntactic category similar to NP, VP, AdjP, AdvP, and PP, it does contain the following phrase structure rule (with MV being “main verb”):

$$AUX \longrightarrow Tense \ (Modal) \ (Have ----EN) \ (BE----ING) \ (Be ----EN) + MV$$

English AUX contains both non-lexical and lexical elements. The non-lexical components of AUX are Agreement, Tense, Aspect, Mood, and Voice. The lexical elements comprise a closed class of verbs known as auxiliary verbs (Koffi, p. 166). One of the most important non-lexical components of AUX is agreement. It transfers the semantic features of number and person of the head noun or pronoun onto the main verb or the auxiliary verb. The essential ingredient of Agreement can be summarized as follows:

In English, there is a number and person agreement between the head noun and the verb or the auxiliary verbs <Have>, <Be>, and <Do>. If the head noun is singular, the verb with which it agrees is singular; if it is plural, the verb is plural.

Student C's essay produces the following examples of errors in subject-verb agreement:

- “....and any university *have* to have physically active.”
- “....every school and every university *have* to have a physically active and healty.”

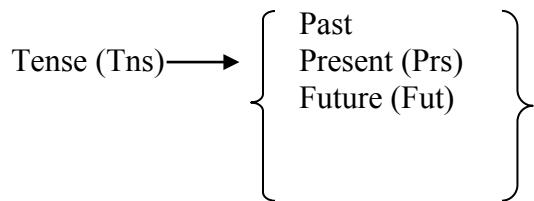
In both these instances, a singular subject and a plural verb are used. Agreement between subject and verb in both instances should read:

- “...any university *has* to have”
- “...every university *has* to have”

To remedy this, we would provide instruction that illustrated singular and plural forms of <Have>, <Be>, and <Do>, coupled with several examples of singular and plural nouns and would practice agreement by using flashcards and sentence-writing. The activities would have the student differentiate between the plural and singular while using the correct agreement between subject and verb.

4.0 Tense

Tense is a grammatical concept that illustrates time, a concrete reality. Not all languages express tense grammatically. For example, Classical Hebrew and many African languages do not have morphological tense, instead indicating tense by means of adverbial markers such as <yesterday> for the past, <today> for the present and <tomorrow> for the future. These same temporal divisions are indicated in English, as well as many European languages, however, by inflectional morphemes. Tense suffixes are added to the main verb or to the auxiliary verb to indicate that it has been inflected for tense. (Koffi, p. 168). In Generative Grammar, tense is a syntactic category with the proposed phrase structure rule:



Student C produced the following examples of tense errors in the essay:

- “Sometime we *got* bored....” (8)
- “Sometime we *got* sick....” (25)

In general, the present tense is used to present customary, habitual or ongoing actions or general truths. In both instances, getting bored or getting sick are habitual, ongoing actions, which should be referred to in the present tense. The corrections are as follows:

- “Sometime(s) we *get* bored...”
- “Sometime(s) we *get* sick...”

Because tense could confound ELLs, in particular those whose first language (L1) does not contain morphological tense, we would focus instruction on differentiating between present, future and past tense using repeated exposure and practice, as well as introducing the classification of aspects which are so closely related to tense. One important lesson to teach this student is that some verbs such as <got> are tensed because they are bound by a time frame (present, past, future); whereas, some verbs that take the infinitive form <to need> are not bound by any time limits. Furthermore, our student needs to understand that written language is not necessarily the same as spoken discourse. For example, “Sometimes, we got bored” and “We gotto do” would be more appropriately heard in casual speech. One mini lesson that would incorporate these elements is through small writing samples. On the first day back in the classroom after a weekend, we would have students write a short paragraph describing what they did on the previous weekend. Sample questions could include, “What did you do?” “Where did you go?” “What was the best part of your weekend?” Students should practice writing using the past tense with a more formalized writing style. This could be followed up by a short fill-in-the-blank that has students differentiate between got/get/need/need to.

5.0 Non-Finite Verbs: Gerunds and Infinitives

Main verbs that do not carry tense, mood, and number information are called non-finite verbs. English main verbs have four non-finite forms: the infinitive, the gerund, the present participle and the past participle. Our subject appears to have difficulty distinguishing when to use gerunds and infinitive forms of non-finite verbs. Gerunds can be described as verbal forms ending in <-ING> that function as a subject or an object (Koffi, p. 212). In our essay, Student C produced the following errors with regard to gerunds:

“Many people say that physically active and healthy....” (1)
 “....all of these thing are parts of physically active....” (16)

The correct use of non-finite verbs in the previous sentences should be:

“Many people say that *being* physically active and healthy are....”
 “....all of these things are parts of *being* physically active....”

In these sentences, the phrase, “*being* physically fit and healthy” can be replaced with the word <it>; therefore they are gerund noun phrases (NP). We conclude that the student incorrectly writes the NP as “physically active and healthy” instead of “*being* physically active and healthy,” leaving out the necessary gerund word <*being*>.

Infinitives use a form of <to> + verb (Koffi, p.197). Confusingly, the free morpheme <to> can appear with verbs or nouns. If <to> precedes a word that has the properties of a noun, then that word is a noun; if <to> precedes a word that is not a noun, then that word is an infinitive verb. For many verbs, the gerund or infinitive forms can be used interchangeably. For example, the word “swim” is a verb, but “swimming” can be a gerund/noun and “to swim,” an infinitive. As a result, “I like swimming” can be used interchangeably with “I like to swim.” The distinction between non-finite verb forms (unmarked for tense, mood and number) and finite verbs is an important one. “I was swimming yesterday” is an example of a finite verb, because *was swimming* is marked for past tense. Student C writes:

“...because it keeps us to work hard.” (6)

In this case, using the infinitive is inappropriate because work needs to have the idea of a continuous time frame, which is *working* hard.

To clarify the distinction between finite and non-finite verbs and to practice using gerunds and infinitives interchangeably, we would design a whole group lesson where students would volunteer examples of activities that they engaged in over the week-end or activities which they enjoy (an extension of the previous lesson), and would write these examples on the board. In each case, we would practice using gerunds and infinitives interchangeably, and asking the students to give other ways the sentence could be restated. For example, using the sentence, “Jose says he likes jogging,” we would ask how this sentence could be restated using a gerund. One answer would be, “Jose likes jogging.” An infinitive? “Jose likes to jog.” A finite verb? “Jose went jogging yesterday.” For additional practice, students would be presented with a list of activities and would be asked to write sentences using the activities in gerund, infinitive, and finite verb form.

6.0 Modal Verb Use

English modal auxiliary verbs are: <can/could>, <shall/should>, <will/would>, <may/might>, and <must>. Modal verbs express mood which indicates the speakers’ attitude toward their utterances. The prompt for Student C’s essay requires that an opinion should be expressed (Appendix A). This is a perfect example where modal auxiliaries can effectively convey the student’s ideas. For example, the student wrote:

- “I think all of these things are parts of physically active and any university have to have physically active.” (16)
- “Sometime we got sick so can need to go to a doctor to see what we have.” (25)
- “In addition, we have to mak check test to know about our health.” (27)
- “I think if you want to be in a good motion or a good feeling take care of your health and your physically active.” (47)

Obviously, there are other grammatical errors that could be addressed in the aforementioned examples, but an obvious omission relevant to mutual intelligibility is the lack of modal auxiliaries to express mood. Suggested corrections for these sentences could include:

- “I think that all of these things provide opportunities for physical activity and any university **should** provide ways for students to be physically active.”
- “Sometimes we **may** get sick and **might** need to go to a doctor to see what we have.”
- “In addition, we **might** have to make a check up to learn about our health.”
- “I think if you want to be physically fit and in a good mood, you **must** take care of your health and stay physically active.”

Given the striking semantic similarities between modal auxiliaries, it is easy to understand how their use could be confusing for ELL’s. Corrective instruction would begin with the rationale for the use of modal auxiliaries and ample examples. A mini lesson could include pictures of actions or short video clips with the endings removed. The student would be required to tell what should/could/would happen next. For example, “If the boy falls off the bike he....

(should/would) do what?" As a follow-up, have the student get with a partner and ask a permission question using can/may/will in which the other partner must respond appropriately.

7.0 Conclusion

Error analysis of student writing is a powerful and useful tool for L2 teachers. Careful analysis provides a rationale for focused instruction that meets students' needs. As described by Diaz-Rico (2010), error correction works best when a student's own samples are used in conjunction with mini-lessons done with the individual student, or in small groups (p. 100). In the case of Student C, 47% of his/her errors involved verb use- specifically subject-verb agreement, verb tense, incorrect use of infinitives/gerunds, and modal use. We concluded, therefore, that first addressing errors in verb use through the help of mini lessons, should come prior to any lessons on other grammatical errors due to the high rate of errors in verbs. Although there are many ways to create these mini-lessons, such as grammar recitation and grammar trees, we felt that the errors provided by this student would be assisted more with focusing on writing samples that distinguished the writing from casual spoken conversations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tonja Brown got her BA at SDSU with an emphasis in medieval literature and medieval history. While studying Old English during the undergraduate process, she became captivated with the historical development of the English language, and took numerous ESL classes for fun. In 2010, prior to entering the TESOL Program at SCSU, Tonja achieved her MA in English at SCSU. She is currently teaching college ESL classes at SCSU while concurrently obtaining her MA in TESOL and MN K-12 licensure in ESL. Her ultimate educational goal after licensure is to teach EFL in another country.

Marni Myles-Vollan is a graduate student in the MA TESL Program at SCSU. She earned a BA in Biology with a life science teaching license from Gustavus Adolphus College. She also earned an MS from SCSU in special education with a teaching license in Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. She was a special education teacher for 12 years at the Adolescent Treatment Unit and Greater Minnesota Shelter Care in Willmar, MN, and then taught science at the Willmar Area Learning Center for 7 years. After taking a four year leave from teaching to be a full time mom, she returned to teaching in 2010 as an Academic Strategies instructor at Prairie Lakes School working with PHLOTE students and students who were preparing for the GED. Marni is currently an English Language instructor at Kennedy Elementary in Willmar, MN.

Recommendation: This paper was recommended by Professor Ettien Koffi, Ph.D., Linguistics Department, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN. Email: enkoffi@stcloudstate.edu

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Appendix A

A College ESL Composition Placement Test
By: Student C

Prompt: Write an essay about the following topic:

SCSU offers a variety of programs to help students stay physically active and healthy. Do you agree or disagree that SCSU should require that each student participate in at least one of these programs every semester until they graduate. State your opinion clearly, and explain it in detail.

Following are the final three paragraphs in Student C's essay:

Many people say that physically active and healthy (1) one (2) of the important thing (3) in the University (4) because it (5) keeps us to work hard (6). Sometime (7) we got bored (8) from something (9) and we need to have some fun. We got to do (10) some exercisees (11)(11b) and play football and houky (12) (13). I think all of these thing are (14) parts of physically active (15) and any university have to have (16) physically active (17). Also health it must be (18) in university (19). We must have a hospital or clainic (20) where can we see (21) a doctor or we have any problem (22) (23). Sometime (24) we got sick (25) so can need to go to the doctor (26) to see what we have. In addition, we have to mak (27) check test (28) to know about our health.

Many people say that physically active and healthy (29) make our life (30) and work easy. I think when we do excuse (31) in the gym we got some fun (32) and we take care about our phycall (33a) (33b) than we (34) work hard. In addition, when we have good health then we are feeling comfortable (35) and can work hard and keep a good work (36) (37).

In conclusion, I would lik to mention (38) that every school and every university have to have (39) a physically active and healty (40) (41). Because if we have both (42) of these we get rid of many problems. We will get rid of dieases (43) and physically (44) problems. I think if you want to be in a good motion (45) or a good feeling take care of your health (46) and your physically active (47). There are important (48)

Appendix B

Errors Described by Part of Speech

	Error	Correction	Type
1	physically active and healthy	being physically active and healthy are	verb
2	One	two	adjective
3	Thing	things	noun
4	University	university	capitalization
5	it	they /these things	pronoun
6	to work hard	working hard	verb
7	Sometime	Sometimes	adverb
8	we got bored	we get bored	verb
9	Something	delete	stylistic
10	We got to do	We need to do	verb
11	some excercisees	some exercise	noun/spelling
12	Hooky	hockey	spelling
13	excercisees and play football and houky	exercise like football or hockey	conjunction
14	these thing are	these things are	noun
15	of physically active	being physically active and healthy	verb
16	university have to have	should have	verb
17	to have physically active	have physical activity	noun/verb
18	health it must be	health must be	pronoun
19	in university	in a university	article
20	Clainic	clinic	spelling
21	where can we see	where we can see	verb
22	or we have any problem	if we have any problems	conjunction
23	Problem	problems	noun
24	Sometime	sometimes	adverb
25	we got sick	we may get sick	verb
26	so can need to go to the doctor	and need to go to the doctor	conjunction
27	have to mak	Might have	verb
28	check test	check-up	idiom
29	physically active and healthy	being physically active and healthy	verb
30	make our life	makes our life	verb
31	Excsuse	exercise	spelling
32	we got some fun	we have some fun	verb
33a/b	care about our phycall	take care of our physical	preposition/spelling
34	than we	when we	adverb
35	we are feeling comfortable	feel comfortable	verb
36	and keep a good work	and do a good work	verb
37	and keep a good work	and do good work	article
38	lik to mention	like to mention	spelling

39	have to have	should have/needs to have	verb
40	a physically active and healthy	word choice/ a program to support...	noun
41	Healty	healthy	spelling
42	Because if we have both	If we have both,	clause
43	Dieases	diseases	spelling
44	Physically	physical	adjective
45	be in a good motion	be in a good mood	idiom
46	or a good feeling	or feel good	idiom
47	take care of your...physically active	must take care/health and be physically	verb
48	There	These	spelling?