

## STUDENTS' ERRORS IN ENGLISH MASTERY FOR AGRICULTURE STUDENT

Syamsiah Depalina Siregar, M.Pd

Lecturer at English Department in Muhammadiyah University of South Tapanuli

### Abstract

Agriculture students need to be aware not only of their present and of future needs during the course of Agriculture English but also of difficulties and problems they possess concerning the knowledge of general English. The aim of the study was to collect and analyze students' errors as markers that would point to the areas of English where additional teaching and instruction is needed in order to be able to participate in the course of agriculture English. The study was carried out in 2016 at the Faculty of Agriculture in UMTS included 150 first - year agriculture students. It relies on data obtained from grammar-based placement test and from conversations with the students. Although an intermediate level of general English is necessary for participating in the course of agriculture English, the results show that there are areas of language that present problems to the students and need to be particularly emphasized and practiced. Students' errors and comments on their problems may serve as useful diagnostic markers. Using these data, along with information obtained in direct communication with the students, the teachers may develop a plan, which would help broaden the knowledge and enable the students to become more confident in professional communication in English. It is very important and useful to take advantage of the agriculture context because it presents a source of great motivation for the students.

*Key words:* English for agriculture purposes, error analysis, context-based teaching

### Abstrak

Pengetahuan mahasiswa pertanian tentang bahasa Inggris, bukan hanya untuk sekarang dan selama mata kuliah bahasa Inggris saja tetapi juga sangat penting untuk menghadapi kesulitan dan masalah yang mereka hadapi pada pelajaran bahasa Inggris secara umum di masa mendatang. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengumpulkan dan menganalisa kesalahan siswa sebagai penanda untuk menunjukkan bagian mana siswa mendapat kesulitan didalam belajar bahasa Inggris, dimana pengajaran yang sesuai atau yang dibutuhkan sesuai dengan kebutuhan mahasiswa pertanian. Penelitian ini dilaksanakan pada tahun akademik 2013/2014 pada fakultas pertanian yang terdiri dari 150 mahasiswa semester pertama. Penelitian ini didukung oleh data yang diperoleh dari tes grammar dan percakapan dengan mahasiswa. Walaupun pelajaran untuk level intermediate sangatlah penting untuk diajarkan untuk memperdalam pengetahuan mahasiswa, namun hal dasar masih banyak yang belum memahaminya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada masalah pada mahasiswa yang harus diselesaikan secara teori dan prakteknya.

Kesalahan yang dibuat oleh mahasiswa dan komentar mereka merupakan diagnosa penanda. Penggunaan data ini selama data yang diperoleh dari komunikasi langsung dengan mahasiswa, dosen mengembangkan rencana yang membantu mahasiswa untuk memberikan solusi terhadap kesalahan yang dibuatnya dan membantu siswa untuk menjadi lebih percaya diri dalam berkomunikasi bahasa Inggris. Hal itu sangat penting dan berguna untuk jurusan mereka karena menghadirkan motivasi yang bagus bagi mahasiswa.

Key words: Bahasa Inggris untuk pertanian, error analysis context-based teaching

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

The English Language plays a significant role in Indonesian society. It is the only official language of communication and, to a large extent, the official medium of school instruction. It plays a unifying role in the country by facilitating contact between Indonesian of diverse linguistic backgrounds. Knowledge needed for the social, economic and technical advancement of the country is found in books written in English. Even warnings designed to keep them safe from danger are written in English. All competitive examinations, whether

for entry into educational institutions or occupation include tests in one's competence in the use of English. In effect, English is the language of education, administration, law, communication and commerce. Consequently, it has a distinct role to play in the social life of the Indonesian. It is the mark of elitism in the Indonesian society. Once one chooses to educate one's self, one has no good reason not to speak English well. Moreover, one's deficiency in the use of English can easily be exposed in an interaction with another person.

Compared to other forms of English language teaching, English for specific purposes (ESP) is in a privileged position because it is set in an academic context that primarily favors learning. This provides it with an opportunity to become a powerful educational device and in order to achieve this goal, teachers need to adopt a critical view of learning and studying language and integrate both subject matter and students' needs. One way of obtaining information about students' needs, interests and aspirations is by asking them directly which would allow teachers to make important decisions concerning course objectives, select appropriate methodological principles and design a suitable English Specific Purposes course.

In order for students to be able to participate fully in Agriculture

classes, they need to possess a good knowledge of general English at an intermediate level. Without this uniformity of general English knowledge, learning English for agriculture would represent a great problem. In particular, it is important to insist on specific areas of language that are more common in agriculture English. Lack of English language skills is a major obstacle because students have to master terms used in agriculture, to be able to understand formal professional texts and authentic materials, to write medical articles, make professional presentations and participate in discussions on agriculture issues. Therefore, it is very important for students to be aware not only of their language learning needs but also of difficulties and problems they have concerning the English language. This can be determined by means of

diagnostic tests that would focus on problem areas in English language learning and by direct conversations between teachers and students. This study focuses on problematic areas in learning English in agriculture academic context. It aims at collecting and analyzing students' errors and reported problems in order to pay particular attention to language elements that present the greatest difficulties to medical students at the Faculty agriculture in Muhammadiyah University of South Tapanuli. The information obtained could be used as an important marker that would inform the teacher about the areas where additional teaching and instruction is needed.

## **B. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Corder (1971), in his article "The significance of learners' errors", introduced some major concepts which

are presented below; 1) The learner determines what the input is. The teacher may present a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned.

2) Keeping the above point in mind, learners' needs should be considered when teachers/linguists plan their syllabuses. Hitherto, syllabuses were based on theories and not so much on learners' needs. 3) Mager (1962) postulated that the learners' built-in syllabus is more efficient than the teacher's syllabus, and Corder reaffirmed that if such a built-in syllabus exists, then learners' errors would confirm its existence and would be systematic. 4) The distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors was introduced by Corder.

Unsystematic errors occur in one's native language; He calls these "mistakes" and states that they are not

significant to the process of language learning. He also keeps the term "errors" for the systematic ones, which occur in a second language. 5) Learners' errors show the teacher a student's progress; they show the researcher how a language is acquired and the strategies the learner uses, while they show the learner how he/she can learn from these errors. 6) When a learner has made an error, the most efficient way to teach him/her the correct form is not by simply giving it to him/her, but by letting him/her discover it and test different hypotheses. 7) Many errors are as a result of transfers of the learner's native language. Corder claims that possession of one's native language is facilitative. Errors in this case are not inhibitory, but rather evidence of one's learning strategies. The above postulations played a significant role in

linguistic research, and in particular in the approach linguists took towards errors.

All students make mistakes, even when they are using our mother tongue. Ellis and Tomlinson (1980, p. 259) defined an error as "when a language learner unconsciously breaks the unwritten rules of the target language as a result of faulty learning, he makes an error." After a careful observation of agriculture students in Noun, it was discovered that the reason why the agriculture students commit errors is habitual and systematic. They are affected by peers, the mass media and a personal unwillingness to regularly communicate in correct, intelligible and functional English. The classification between errors and mistakes is hardly identified. According to Ellis and Tomlinson (1980, p. 259), if students usually use a

lexical item correctly but get it wrong once, it is obviously a mistake.

On the other hand, when the students use the same vocabulary wrongly then they are almost certainly making errors. However, in the present study, mistakes and errors would not be differentiated; that is all mistakes will be counted as errors. Although in everyday life the term “mistake” and “error” may sometimes be used interchangeably especially when they are referring to the same language phenomenon; there are still differences in meaning between the two terminologies. While a mistake can be self-corrected and thus not a consistent language phenomenon in learner performance, error is necessarily a more persistent and consistent phenomenon in second language performance since the occurrence of errors accompanies his development of

second language proficiency. The more proficient he is, the less frequent the errors he will make.

However, the frequency of mistakes and errors any learner will make as his proficiency improves is hardly predictable. Error is of utmost importance when marking students’ writing. Teachers are intent to begin their markings with issues concerning errors (Harris 1997; Kline 1996; Greenbaum et al., 1981; Bamberg, 1981). Their holistic impressions and judgments of students’ compositions are always connected to the errors. They usually remain more spaces for marking and correcting the errors. Meanwhile, teachers focus on the surface errors in the writing of students.

Then, Haswell (1988, p.479-494) has defined eight surface errors, such as: 1. Misinformation of

possessives: mistakenly add or does not add an apostrophe after nouns or pronouns 2. Faulty predication: when main verb(s) do not agree in number with the subjects 3. Faulty pronoun reference: when the pronoun and the reference in its immediate antecedent do not agree in the number or gender 4. Faulty syntactic parallelism: when different grammatical classes, for example noun and adjective are put together 5. Wrong punctuation of final free modifiers: when final modifiers are preceded by no punctuation, a semicolon, or a full stop 6. Sentence fragments: when grammatically dependent fragments are punctuated as a complete sentence 7. Common splices: when two dependent clauses are linked only by a comma or by no punctuation 8. Misspellings: spelling errors According to Connors and Lunsford (1988, p.400-401), there are

more than forty items of “formal errors” and “mechanical errors” that can be identified in students’ writing. All the formal error items are divided into a more detailed one when comparing with the “eight surface errors”.

This however, depends on relatively more error patterns and the patterns of how the teacher marks the errors. They also postulated that two factors determine how language teachers mark errors: how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be at a given time for both teacher and student, and how difficult it is to mark or explain. Interestingly, many language teachers do not necessarily mark every single error in the students’ written work. Many teachers and researchers treat errors as the most important factor in language learning, since they believe that error reduction

leads to improvement (Bright and McGregor, 1970; Broughton et al., 1988). After teachers mark the error, their students correct it. From this trial and error experience, the more error they made, the more they would learn.

#### Category Error Investigation

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#### **C. METHODOLOGY**

The study included 150 first-year agriculture students from the Faculty of Agriculture at Muhammadiyah University of South



Tapanuli. It consisted of two parts - the data were drawn from a placement test and from teacher's own observations, direct conversations with students during lectures or in consultations. The placement test included major English grammar points - tenses, modal verbs, nouns (abstract, mass nouns and derivations), adjectives, Wh-questions and yes/no questions. These grammar elements were favored due to their high frequency in medical English. The test was in English and students had 60 minutes to answer the questions. The percentages were drawn from the obtained answers. As for the second part, it relied on the teacher's personal observations of the students' difficulties combined with an interactive method which was carried out through oral communication with the students. The students were asked to talk about the test, name the part

they thought was the most difficult and also to state the linguistic elements not included in the test but which still represent a problem. The obtained answers were compared with the results for the placement test and analyzed.

#### **D. RESULT**

Out of 150 students taking the test, seven of them were not taken into consideration for this analysis since they had answered all the questions correctly. In the first question, the students were asked to put the given adjectives into appropriate forms (comparative or superlative) in a sentence. The majority of students (86.5%) answered correctly. However, it is interesting to note that among the wrong answers the most common mistake (19.3%) was with the irregular forms of adjectives (such as little/less/the least).

The second question dealt with the use of nouns. Out of 193 students, 65 (33.6%) had at least one wrong answer considering the irregular plural (such as datum/data, appendix/appendices). An even greater percentage of students (38.5%) made mistakes in noun verb agreement with irregular countable nouns (such as people and news). Overall, the part of the test that dealt with Wh and Yes/No questions showed that the students possess a good knowledge of their usage (83.7% correct answers). The analysis of the wrong answers revealed that the most common problem was concerning the word order in the question for example: Where *he was* treated last time?) As for derivations, 49.9% of students provided correct forms. However, it is interesting to note that the most common problem here was spelling. As much as 82 students

(42.4%) had at least one spelling error in their answers. Modal verbs were also included in the test in the form of multiple-choice exercise. The analysis of students' errors demonstrated that 15.9% of students had provided only one wrong answer. In total, out of 193 students, there were 45 students (23.4%) with wrong answers. Despite the relatively good percentage of correct answers (76.6%), it should be pointed out that the students emphasize modals to be one of the most difficult areas for them. The last part of the test was the multiple-choice exercise in which the students were asked to put the verbs into correct tense in a sentence. The results show that there were 43.9% wrong answers (84 students). Similar to modals, the students stated that the correct use of tenses also presented great difficulties despite the fact that they were familiar

with the rules of their usage. The second part of the study included an interactive method based on conversations between the teacher and the students. During the lectures and in consultations, the students had an opportunity to draw attention to some problematic areas which need additional work and instruction. Along with the use of modals and tenses, the students emphasized that they need more help with the use of passive and exercises in class showed that additional work is needed with relative pronouns.

## **E. DISCUSSION**

A good knowledge of general and agriculture English is a prerequisite for professional improvement and progress. For English in agriculture course to be successful, it is necessary that students possess an intermediate level of proficiency in general English.

However, despite their predominantly good knowledge, it is often the case that students of medicine need additional help and instructions concerning specific linguistic areas that present problems even in academic context. It is the responsibility of the teacher to work with the students in identifying and understanding these problem areas and to try to integrate the findings into a coherent course design in order to achieve the objectives set before them.

Placement test is one of the useful methods for finding out what the students lack in terms of language proficiency and whether they need additional teaching in some areas. In this sense, placement tests are also diagnostic. Their formative characteristic is emphasized when the results are used in forming the content of the course. These kinds of tests

should be used as approximate markers and should therefore be applied very carefully [3] with the aim of determining not only the negative but also the positive factors - the learning potential that can be used during the course. The results of the test represent a basis in the teacher - student interaction, a source of valuable information that influences the content and methods used in the course and helps improve future work.

Another useful method is observation when the teacher monitors the work of the students and discusses their problems in direct conversations. The teacher can rely on the students' opinion because they are adult learners with well developed learning strategies and they are able to perceive their difficulties and needs in language learning. This part of the research uses qualitative case study methodology

which is different from standard questionnaires and tests because it does not provide numerical data. However, qualitative case study methodology offers an appropriate insight into the field of research from which important conclusions and decisions can be made.

The information obtained from the test results, combined with the conclusions drawn from communication with the students, provided a better understanding of the difficulties and needs in English language teaching and learning. Integrated within the course design, the data showed where further instruction is needed. If take the problem of derivations, for example, the test shows that it was the part with the most errors. However, since a great number of them were spelling errors and observation in class shows that the students are generally able to produce correct forms

orally, more attention should be directed towards improving the writing skill. The second problematic area, According to the test results, is the use of English tenses. A careful investigation of this problem revealed some interesting points. Namely, when asked to describe the use of a particular English tense in isolation and provide examples, the students generally show a satisfactory level of knowledge. On the other hand, the tests present a difficulty and the students complain that the tasks with tenses take them the most time to finish and they are not certain about the answers. The problem is also apparent in class when they are writing (for example, describing and organ or system) and speaking (in medical interview). It is assumed that the source of the problem is in part the previous high school education that relied mostly on Grammar -

Translation Method which produced learners equipped with a good knowledge of theory and artificial sentences but with little practical use. They believe that a way to treat this issue is to go through the English tenses and bring the most common to the fore (such as the present and past simple, past perfect).

As with grammar in general, the tenses are also integrated within the medical context and practiced through the use in professional situations. For example, the medical interview is a suitable form because it includes the present complaints (present simple tense), past conditions (past simple tense) and patient's history (past perfect). The medical interview is also appropriate for practicing the use of Wh- and Yes/ No questions. The problem of word order in questions can be corrected by constant practice when

the students ask and answer questions and adopt the correct forms through practical usage. Even before proceeding with agriculture English course, it might be useful to go through major grammar points. In this way, students would be alerted in the direction of general rules and attention could then be directed towards some particularities concerning medical English.

One of the issues that would come to the surface is the use of adjectives and nouns. In particular, the students will revise the comparison of adjectives and irregular plural of nouns which will later come in useful, for example, when describing the levels of pain or working with medical nouns which have Latin origin and are often characterized by irregular plural. The results of the placement test showed that the students have a pretty good

knowledge of the modal verbs (76.6% correct answers). However, the students emphasize that they are not always sure which modal verb to use and in some cases they even resort to avoiding using any modal. This problem becomes particularly evident in medical interview when, for example, a student is expected to give suggestions, recommendations or even orders to a patient. Again, modal verbs are placed in medical context and the medical interview is used as a valuable base for applying the students' general knowledge of modals and widening it with shades of meaning. Hedging is another point in the course when students have an opportunity to practice with the modals in order to express beliefs, a lack of certainty and to soften what is said. In other words, hedging is a device which is used to lessen the impact of an utterance.

The advantage of teaching hedging to students is that it enables them not only to achieve greater delicacy of meaning but also to acquire a routine of using modals verbs. One of the points not included in this placement test but observed in class was the wrong use of relative pronouns. For example, the students often fail to use the correct forms when referring to people, time or place. So, a brief explanation and a reminder of their use would be a good starting point before moving on to the phase of the course when the students practice writing scientific articles and when the use of relative pronouns is necessary.

In addition to the problems indicated by the placement test or observed by the teacher, the students also pointed out the difficulties with the passive. Since the passive is one of the major characteristics of agriculture

English it is obligatory for students to gain a good mastery of this grammar point. A great opportunity for practicing and expanding the knowledge of the passive emerges in the part of the course when the students write scientific medical papers, case histories and case studies. Here, as well as with all other grammar points, the students are more motivated to learn when they realize that the material presented will be useful in their future careers [6]. Only then will the acquisition of language come in more naturally. It should be pointed out that this diagnostic placement test targeted specific grammar points because of their frequency within medical English language which is characterized by precision, clarity, short sentences, and passive constructions. Contrary to English Specific Purpose which often favors one specific linguistic skill, in

English for medical purposes all four skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) need to be equally practiced and placed within the medical context which provides a source of great motivation for students.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

English for Specific Purposes, in our case agriculture, is one of the most demanding areas in the process of teaching and learning. Each group of students is different and their needs, demands and difficulties are ever - changing. There are no ready - made directions and rules for teachers to use when designing the course because they are faced with a program which is constantly evolving. For this reason, it is necessary to monitor the students directly, establish a close contact and keep in mind the ultimate goal of the course which is to enable them to use

English in real life professional situations.

This study has shown that the road towards the realization of the goals must necessarily lead through the difficulties and problems the students face when learning English. The best way to help the students overcome the obstacles is by taking advantage of the specific context, in our case medicine, and incorporating the necessary grammar elements into a well-planned course design. If the course is to be effective and successful, the teachers should use every available source of information. Therefore, they believe that a combination of the placement test results which would provide a diagnosis of the problem areas and conclusions drawn from observations and direct conversations with the students would be of great help in 'filling in the gaps' which would in



turn enable the students, future doctors, to develop from *learners* to successful *users* of English in professional communication.

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