
GRAMMATICAL DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

Grammatical rule is among other difficulties found in the process of learning other languages. this truth also applies to those who are studying english in different levels of education. second language learners usually make mistakes in certain grammatical rules. this research aimed to identify and analyse such grammatical difficulties in order to give a contribution to the study of linguistics and help students in identifying grammatical errors commonly made by second language learners of english. the data taken for the purpose of this research were from second language students. the writings of the students were copied both from them and from their teachers to be analysed. reading the papers to find grammatical errors was the first thing to do. after underlining those mistakes, the next step was to take notes on the kinds of the errors found. this led the present researchers to group the data into smaller classifications, based on the characteristics the data showed. the data were then analysed in details in order to answer the research question. the result of this research shows that the major kinds of errors made by the students are related to plural markers, articles, verbs, and tenses. hopefully these findings would be beneficial to those studying and teaching english to l2 learners.

Keywords: *article, grammatical error, plural marker, tense, verb agreement*

1. INTRODUCTION

As English is taught as a foreign language in Indonesia, it has generally been learned by students since they were in basic levels of education. Most of the teaching process focuses on mastering the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. All of the skills are to be improved in the process of learning English. Emmaryana (2010) emphasizes that in the process of learning English, writing ability is the most difficult and complicated language skill to be learned almost by the students in every level of education. In addition to that, another author says that for the most part, within the classroom, any mention of grammar causes the student moments of discomfort and sometimes even terror (Al-Mekhlafi, 2011).

Because grammar has so far become one of problems faced by second language learners when studying other languages, the researchers were interested in digging out English grammatical issues that the students are having difficulties with. The purpose was to pose those difficulties to researchers and teachers so that further research could be done either to find the factors or to take action to overcome the problems.

In the effort of language learners studying other languages, there have been problems and theories found as well as other issues coming therewith (Bhela, 1999; Galasso, 2002; Lekova, 2010). Thus, dealing with students with this problems at the university level brought the present researchers to find out specific grammatical difficulties they encounter in their effort to learn English as their second language.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED THEORIES

This research is a decriptive qualitative one based on the theories set forth by Pit Corder and Larry Selinker (Lightbown, 2011: 79-81). However, the aim of the research was not to predict further difficulties like the ones done by those holding Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis or CAH (Henderson, 1985; Yu, 2011), but to simply find out the errors made by the language learners. Thus, the notion of

difference between errors and mistakes was not addressed specifically in this research. It focuses more on error analysis theory in its nature.

The data sources were naturally written materials copied from both students and teachers of third and fourth year students studying at a foreign language college. The writings were about the students' general opinion about what was going on around them in the society. Having the data source copied, the researchers began to read and collect relevant data related to the mistakes or errors the students made. After that, the researchers classified the data gathered into similar characteristics they had. The last step was to analyse the data in order to formulate the findings. Having the data processed systematically, the researchers prepared to report the result in an analytical, descriptive-qualitative report.

3. ANALYSIS DATA AND DISCUSSION

Among the mistakes found from the data the researchers have analysed, below are the issues occurring the most. They cover issues about plurality, articles or determiners, verbs, and tenses.

Plural Markers

One of the problems found related to plural markers is the omission of the linguistic element that marks the plurality of a given noun. Some examples are presented in the following.

- [1] Many Indonesian
- [2] ... already seven month.
- [3] There are so many cultural aspect that we need to consider.

Seen from the data presented above, the students did not put the plural marker *-s* where it is necessary like in the ends of *Indonesian* in [1], *month* in [2], and *aspect* in [3]. According to English grammatical rules, the words used here should be *Indonesians*, *months*, and *aspects* respectively. In addition to this common issue of plural markers, the data processed also show that the learners face this kind of difficulty in irregular plural markers, indicated by clauses [4] and [5] in the following sample.

- [4] There are many child
- [5] They became career woman

Linguistic elements like *are* and *many* in [4] and *They* in [5] require the nouns *child* and *woman* in plural forms *children* and *women*. However, the data found revealed that many students failed to realise this rule correctly. There is another case that attracted the researchers' attention during the data analysis process; examples are given below in [6] through [8].

- [6] I am a Javanese people.
- [7] ... a useful things.
- [8] This words is very essential.

It is interesting that in their effort to apply the grammatical rules that they know, there are students who use the plural markers incorrectly. While in data [1] through [5] above they omitted or, in this case, did not add the plural marker *-s*, they used it incorrectly in [6], [7], and [8]. In the first datum from the group above, the plural noun *people* should be either replaced by a singular noun *person* or completely omitted from the sentence. In the second, the presence of the article *a* indicates that the noun *things* should be singular. In the last datum, the words *This* and *is* suggest that the plural marker in *words* is not needed. This increases the varieties of difficulties the students encounter akin to plurality.

Determiners

From the data gathered for the purpose of answering the question underlying this research, it was found that the students, in their effort to learn English as their foreign language, have difficulties in using determiners. The first type of mistake is related to the learners' ability in referring to a fact, an object, an idea, or a person that has already been introduced in the discourse and in introducing a new one.

- [9] Some years ago I saw the man walking....

At glance, the clause in [9] is well-formed. However, the context from which the datum was taken does not show any indication that the noun *man* being talked about has been previously discussed. The student here is introducing the person for the first time. It is then obvious that the presence of determiner *the* here is not needed. The data presented below are still about determiners but with another type of mistake.

- [10] ... because in the end, the women will have to stay at home.
 [11] It is one of the negative culture
 [12] ... able to make decision in wise way.

In datum [10], the student is talking, from context, about women in general. This means that there is no any intention to refer to certain group of women. So, the determiner *the* before the plural noun *women* causes the clause to be ill-formed. Datum number [11] is in a similar case with the previous one. A determiner is used before the phrase *negative culture* where it is not grammatically necessary. In addition to that, the phrase's head *culture* has to be in plural form.

- [13] I think this is a something bad ...

That in [13] is provided here as it shows another type of mistake made by the students in their writings. The word *something* in the construction implies that the article *a* should not be there. Cases found during the research process reveal the tendency of the learners to make a lot of mistakes related to the usage of determiners.

Verbs or Predicates

Grammatical difficulties encountered by the students about verbs seen from the data are often in relation to other issues like tenses and syntactic categories. The term predicate is employed by the writers here in relation to terms of Indonesian syntactic function as the learners' linguistic background. Some of errors are brought forward in the data below.

- [14] Actually my father tired.

Among typical difficulties encountered by the students related to how verbs are used is the absence of verbs. This often occurs in nominal sentences or constructions. In [14] above, the possible verb *was* or *to be* is not inserted by the student between the subject *my father* and the complement *tired*. Another case found is demonstrated by constructions [15] and [16] in the following cluster.

- [15] I don't patient to go there.
 [16] I asking to my father,

In contrary to the case discussed in number [14], these two data contain linguistic elements that might be considered by the students as verbs used correctly. However, although [15] contains *don't* as an element that is usually used with verbs, there is no verb in the sentence. The other construction in [16] has *asking* as a word possible to be counted as verb but it is in an incorrect form. Among possible corrections, putting *asking* in its simple past form *asked* is the most acceptable one to make it a grammatically accurate clause. The following data also contain problems about verbs but it is more about the agreements between the subjects and the verbs.

- [17] Maybe it's look silly but ...
 [18] These has the same perspective.
 [19] It also help Indonesia

Datum [17], for example, has its verb *look* but the letter *s*, which should structurally be placed with the verb, was misplaced and attached to the previous word. In this form, *it's look* or *it is look* is ungrammatical in the construction. Number [18] and [19] prove that the students sometimes use incorrect form of a verb or violate the subject-verb agreement rules. In other words, they use *has* where it has to be *have* and *help* where it has to be *helps* or *helped*.

Tenses

Problems with tenses were also found a lot from the data sources. Most of the time, the students used present tense to express distinctions of time. Five examples are elaborated in the following.

In [20], the student made two mistakes related to tense; first with *is* which should be *was* and second with *want* which should be *wanted*. The data in [21] and [22] also demonstrate the same issue in which *am* and *is* are used for *was*. Using simple past form is the right choice here as the propositions in the clauses refer to the past. The action expressed by the verb *learn* in [23] should be *learned* because it is about a past event but the student used the present form instead.

Related to the notion of tenses, in many cases, students will have to be able to identify whether certain clauses should be in present or past tenses. That in number [24], for instance, needs a logical understanding that the action in the clause was in the past, so the verb *became* is the correct form.

- [20] That is me. I always want to ask questions.
- [21] When I am a child, ...
- [22] Who is the first fisherman?
- [23] After I learn to read ...
- [24] This thought become philosophy because ...

Apart from the common mistakes above, it is not impossible that the learners will use a past form where they need to use the present. The sentence below shows this kind of tendency. The verb *knew* is used instead of *know*.

- [25] We knew a lot of cultures.

This sentence looks acceptable grammatically at glance, but it is not when the context is brought into discussion. The researchers looked at the context in which the sentence was used and found out that the student was talking about the fact that *we* nowadays know various cultures. Other data also show the same problem with tenses.

4. CONCLUSION

The representations of the errors elaborated above underline grammatical difficulties encountered by the students in learning English as their second language. The researchers tend to hold that the difficulties, like the lack of subject-verb agreement, plural markers, or rules related tenses, might be caused by the linguistic backgrounds of the learners but as the objective of this research was to simply identify the difficulties the students face, the researchers would leave the questions related to factors of and predictions about the errors for further research. English teachers and researchers, however, have to be aware of the issues brought up here so that solutions might be found or emphases could be made in order to minimize the mistakes and maximize the learning process.

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