

ANALYSIS OF SYNTACTIC ERRORS IN ESL/EFL CONTEXTS: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF COMMON ERROR PATTERNS AND CAUSESS Ranathunga¹ and S Godage²**Abstract**

The syntactic errors are one of the most prominent and frequently occurred error types among phonological, lexical, morphological, semantic, and orthographic errors in ESL/EFL contexts. This desk research aims to execute a systematic examination of the syntactic errors in ESL/EFL contexts of Sri Lanka, Arab, China, and Korea to achieve its primary objective of increasing the awareness of syntactic errors among ESL/EFL learners and educators. Then, the causes of the syntactic errors, and the pedagogical interventions to alleviate the syntactic errors are investigated as the secondary objective of the research. The qualitative research approach is utilized while manipulating the purposive sampling method and implementing the theme-based content analysis as the analytical technique. The findings of the research highlighted that all the recognized syntactic errors indicate a common pattern across the selected ESL/EFL contexts. Hence, this desk research identified six major syntactic error types of ESL/EFL learners around the world, which are copular errors, concord errors, tense errors, conjunction errors, prepositional errors, and adjective word order errors. Negative transfer from the native language of the learners, faulty or partial learning of the target language, or the momentary lapses in target language production are perceived as causes for these syntactic errors. Therefore, productive pedagogical intervention strategies to minimize the syntactic errors in ESL/EFL contexts are recommended through this desk research. The constant immersion in the target language through interactive ESL/EFL teaching and learning processes and providing constructive feedback to terminate the fossilization of syntactic errors can be proposed as effective pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Causes, ESL/EFL, Pedagogical recommendations, Syntactic errors

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Introduction

In linguistics, "syntax" is defined as the branch of grammar that studies the principles and rules governing the arrangement of words and phrases to form grammatical sentences in a language (Chomsky, 1965). It is concerned with ways in which words combine to make sentences (Brown and Miller, 2002), and structuring and ordering components within a sentence (Yule, 2006). Hence, syntactic errors are incorrect arrangement of words and phrases in a sentence, violating the syntactic rules (Dissanayake and Dissanayake, 2019) and it is unacceptable due to its inappropriate use, or its absence in real life discourse (Hendrickson, 1978). Even though, these errors are an integral part of ESL/EFL learning, the proper intervention is essential to alleviate these syntactic errors according to the learner's developmental readiness to learn complex syntactical problems that the learners have (Varnosfadrani and Ansari, 2010).

In ESL/EFL contexts syntactic errors are commonly committed by ESL/EFL learners, and these syntactic errors are distinctively categorized by researchers. This desk research focuses on the syntactic errors in Sri Lanka (Dissanayake and Dissanayake, 2019; Jayasundara and Premarathna, 2011; Mendis, 2019; Navaz, 2017; Umarlebbe et al., 2024; Wijesinghe, 2020), Arabic (Hafiz et al., 2018; Khatter, 2019; Ngangbam, 2016), Chinese (Tan, 2022), and Korean (Lee, 2013) ESL/EFL contexts. The primary objective of this research is to increase awareness of syntactic errors among ESL/EFL learners and educators, followed by a secondary objective of providing pedagogical recommendations to mitigate the syntactic errors by addressing the root causes. Hence, the desk research was implemented to answer two research questions; what are the frequent types of syntactic errors, and the reasons for ESL/EFL learners to make syntactic errors, and what are the targeted pedagogical intervention strategies to minimize syntactic errors in ESL/EFL contexts.

After an extensive analysis of the distinctive categorizations of syntactic errors, this research has identified six types of common syntactic error patterns; copular errors, concord errors, tense errors, conjunction errors, prepositional errors, and adjective word order errors. Copular errors refer to the omission, unnecessary insertion, or mis-selection of the copular verbs (am, is, are, was, were) when connecting the subject of a sentence to the complement. One of the most common grammatical error types in ESL/EFL contexts is the lack of concord between subject and verb (Khatter, 2019). Tense errors occur when the verbs used in a sentence do not convey the intended tense. Conjunction errors and prepositional errors occur when conjunctions or prepositions are omitted, over produced, or misplaced within the sentences. Adjective word order errors are observed as confusion of the syntactic arrangement of adjectives, mainly due to the differences between placement of adjectives in L1 and L2 (Hafiz et al., 2018). Thus, syntactic errors primarily stem from linguistic transfer from the native language, lack of comprehensive exposure to the target language, or momentary lapses in language production (Hafiz et al., 2018; Ngangbam, 2016).

Methodology

This desk research takes the qualitative research approach, following textual analysis strategies by in-depth analysis of existing research studies on syntactic errors in ESL/EFL contexts. Four ESL/EFL contexts were focused in this desk research; Sri Lanka, Arab, China, and Korea. Six research studies from Sri Lanka context are chosen, which had utilized samples from six separate universities in Sri Lanka, to conduct the research; University of Uwa Wellassa (Jayasundara and Premarathna, 2011), University of Ruhuna (Wijesinghe, 2020), University of Moratuwa (Umarlebbe et al., 2024), Kandy Regional Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka (Dissanayake and Dissanayake, 2019), National Institute of Business Management (NSBM), Kurunegala (Mendis, 2019), and South Eastern University (Navaz, 2017). These samples include both Sinhala speaking ESL learners, and Tamil speaking ESL learners in Sri Lanka, offering a broad view of the syntactic errors committed by multi-cultural ESL/EFL learners in Sri Lanka. Apart from Sri Lanka, three research studies from Arabic context (Hafiz et al., 2018; Khatter, 2019; Ngangbam, 2016), one research study from Korean context (Lee, 2013), and one from Chinese context (Tan, 2022) were selected to represent EFL contexts. The selection of Arabic, Chinese, and Korean EFL context related research studies was deliberate to select a linguistically and culturally diverse samples, manipulating the purposive sampling method. Studying ESL/EFL learners from diverse contexts leads to a comprehensive view of syntactic errors committed by ESL/EFL learners.

The research studies were analyzed using the approach of content analysis by systematically reviewing relevant information. The extracted data were thematically categorized based on frequent and common patterns that appeared across the four selected ESL/EFL contexts; Sri Lanka, Arab, China, and Korea. Through this thematic categorization, six types of common syntactic error patterns were identified; copular errors, concord errors, tense errors, conjunction errors, prepositional errors, and adjective word order errors. The technique of thematic categorization helped to identify how certain syntactic errors have commonly occurred across each of the selected ESL/EFL contexts.

Discussion and Findings

This paper will focus on six major syntactic errors of ESL/EFL learners around the world, which are copular errors, concord errors, tense errors, conjunction errors, prepositional errors, and adjective word order errors, examining the causes behind the syntactic errors.

1. Copular Errors

Copular or the linking verb act as a link between subject and verb. This is also known as be verb. Majority of the ESL/EFL learners tend to omit, or use the incorrect form of this copular be verb in English sentences due to the first language influence. According to Hafiz et al. (2018) Arabic EFL learners write English sentences as “My friend Osman”, “My classroom nice”, “My new apartment big rooms”, and “Nawaf my new classmate in this semester” instead of writing as “My friend is Osman”, “My classroom is nice”, “My new apartment has big rooms”, and “Nawaf is my new classmate in this semester” (p. 5). Also, Khatter (2019) states that Arabic EFL students frequently omit this copular be verb, because of the non-existence of linking verbs in Arabic language. Tan (2022) illustrates how Chinese EFL learners choose the incorrect form of the linking verb for English sentences. For instance, Chinese EFL learners form English sentences as “Classes is over”, and “People will nervous” instead of writing the sentences as “Classes are over”, and “People will be nervous” (p.7). In addition to that Sri Lankan ESL learners also delete the copular ‘be’ verb in the English sentences. As Dissanayaka and Dissanayaka (2019) exemplifies Sri Lankan ESL students construct English sentence as “I afraid” instead of forming the sentence with linking verb “I am afraid” (p.9) due to the non-existence of copular verb in Sinhala language.

2. Concord Errors

Concord refers to the subject – verb agreement in English sentences. This is the most common syntactic error in ESL/EFL classroom due to the lack of practice, and interference of the first language. The subject – verb agreement implies the person and number of the subject (Umarlebbe, 2024, p.8).

Since there is not a rule or agreement in Sinhala language, ESL learners write English sentence without considering the person of the subject. For example, “Ravi play cricket” instead of “Ravi plays cricket” (Umarlebbe, 2024, p.8). This omission of inflectional suffix [-s] in third person singular verbs is supported by Wijesinghe (2020) under the category of common morpho- syntactic errors of Sri Lankan ESL learners. Also, the third person singular [-s] pronoun marker is frequently omitted, or added unnecessarily by Arabic EFL students, since the Arabic language does not include an subject – verb agreement. According to Khatter (2019), Arabic EFL students form English sentences as “We takes” instead of “We take”, and “He understand how different life is” instead of “He understands how different life is” (p.11). Hafiz et al. (2018) exemplifies the omission of the third person singular verb ending [-s] by Arabic EFL learners’ English sentences such as “She work in Jazan hospital”, “Musa dislike smoking”, “My friend go shopping”, Maryam like English documentaries”, and “Ahmed have big car” instead of “She works in Jazan hospital”, “Musa dislikes smoking”, “My friend goes shopping”, Maryam likes English documentaries”, and “Ahmed has a big car” (p. 7).

3. Tense Errors

Another major grammatical error of ESL/EFL students is the incorrect use of tenses in sentences. Tan (2022) demonstrates how the influence of the first language initially results in this error as the mother-tongue, or the first language may or may not have a tense system as English does. Tan (2022) also reveals how Chinese EFL learners are struggling to form English sentences with correct tense. For example, Chinese EFL students write “The last time...it takes a long time” instead of keeping the correct form of tense as “it took a long time” (p. 6). Tan (2022) further discusses how Chinese EFL students are focused on the simple past tense and replace those with simple present tense. The Arabic language does not have a progressive [-ing] tense, which results Arabic EFL students to construct English sentences without progressive [-ing] tense. Hafiz et al. (2018) provides the examples from Arabic EFL context where learners have omitted the progressive tense in the sentence. Instead of writing the English sentence as “She is studying in College” Arabic EFL students write “She is study in College” (p.7). Also, Arabic EFL students struggle to form simple present sentences as Arabic language mainly focuses on the simple past tense.

Hafiz et al. (2018) exemplifies how Arabic EFL learners write English sentence as “I drank milk usually” instead of writing “I drink milk usually” (p.7). As Ngangbam (2016) states the frequency of verb errors among Arabic EFL students as 3.46% due to the lack of tense agreement in sentences (p.10). In Sri Lankan ESL context the omission of future tense is frequent. According to Dissanayaka and Dissanayaka (2019) Sri Lankan ESL learners form English sentence as “In the future, English is the very important

language” instead of forming that with future tense as “English language will be an essential in future” (p.9).

4. *Conjunction Errors*

Conjunction is used to join two elements or clauses to form one larger unit. There are two types of conjunctions as coordinating conjunctions, and subordinating conjunctions. Coordinating conjunctions are used to join two independent clauses, while subordinating conjunctions join independent clauses and a dependent clause to create one sentence. Mendis (2019) denotes how majority of Sri Lankan ESL learners overuse the conjunctions in target language production. According to Umarlebbe (2024) the misuse of the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ is common among the Sri Lankan ESL students. Hafiz et al. (2018) illustrates how Arabic EFL learners repeat or misuse conjunctions to emphasize the meaning of the sentence. For instance, Arabic EFL learners tend to write “I am single, and my dream is buy house big and car nice and I have money no” which should be “I am single, my dream is to buy a big house and a nice car, but I don’t have money” (p.6). This occurs due to the direct influence of the first language (Arabic). Furthermore, Korean EFL students overuse the conjunctions in the English sentences. Lee (2013) implies how Korean EFL students overuse conjunctions such as “and”, “but” and “though” in the English sentences, while underuse conjunctions such as “although”, “however” and “yet”. As Lee (2013) states, the main reason behind these overuse and underuse of conjunctions is the influence of Korean language.

5. *Prepositional Errors*

Prepositions are words that stand in front of a noun or gerund noun. Even the proficient English speakers find difficult to use correct preposition in the language production. According to Dissanayaka and Dissanayaka (2019) Sri Lankan ESL students tend to overuse of prepositions because of direct translation of the first language (Sinhala). For example, Sri Lankan ESL learners write English sentence as “I helped to a beggar” with unnecessary use of ‘to’ in the sentence. Apart from that, Hafiz et al. (2018) highlights the misuse of prepositions in English sentences done by Arabic EFL students. Arabic EFL learners attempt to find one - to - one correspondence in Arabic to English, which makes either omission of prepositions, or use of wrong prepositions. For instance, the grammatically incorrect sentences like “I born in Samtah at 1991” , “Abd hul Kalam is live Sabhiya” and “The size my classroom is big” are done by the Arabic EFL students which should be write as “ I was born in Samtah in 1991” , “ Abdul Kalam lives in Sabhiya” and “ The size of my classroom is big” (Hafiz et al.,2018,p.6).

6. *Adjective Word Order Errors*

Adjectives are the words that modify or describe the noun in a sentence. The grammatical rule of adjectives in an English sentence is that adjective should always precede the noun. However, in ESL/EFL contexts, learners write English sentences as “She has car nice”, “My dream is buy house big”, “What is your number phone?” instead of “She has a nice car” and “My dream is to buy a big house” and “What is your phone number?” (Hafiz et al.,2018, p.6). Furthermore, Hafiz et al. (2018) explains how in Arabic language adjectives come after the noun which influence the learners to create grammatically incorrect sentences.

According to Jayasundara and Premarathna (2011) syntactic errors represented as 29.9% and ranked as the second most common error type, among grammatical, lexical, orthographic, syntactic and morphological errors. The frequency of errors in oral presentations is marked as 14.3% (Jayasundara and Premarathna, 2011, p. 6). Apart from these main errors that are critically analyzed in this paper, there are many other syntactic errors made by ESL/EFL learners around the world. According to Navaz (2017) Sri Lankan ESL learners encounter a difficulty in identifying plural form of irregular nouns. Even though the irregular plural noun errors do not alter the syntactic structure of the sentence, irregular past tense verb errors disrupt the grammaticality of the sentence. Omission of articles [the, a, an] and overgeneralization are also considered as syntactic errors that ESL/EFL students commit due to that heavy reliance on the first language, or the mother- tongue, lack of practice, and limited exposure to the target language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Errors have an integral connection to learning a language (Brooks, 1960, as cited in Hendrickson, 1978). Thus, effective instructional procedures should be implemented to help language learners to produce error-free sentences. Corder (1967) considered errors as natural ingredients of the process of second language acquisition. Thus, ESL/EFL teachers should expect errors in language production from the ESL/EFL learners, accepting them as “a natural phenomenon integral to the process of learning a second language” (Hendrickson, 1978, p.388). Furthermore, Hendrickson (1978) states that “systematic analyses of errors can provide useful insights into the

processes of language acquisition” (p.388). Yet, it is essential to handle certain errors as they can get fossilized. According to the research findings, negative language transfer (borrowing structures from the native language) is the major reason for syntactic errors. Yet, these “interference errors are only one of many types of errors found in the lexicon, syntax, morphology, and orthography of students’ utterances in the target language” (Hendrickson, 1978, p.388). Apart from that, extending structures from the target language due to the lack of comprehensive exposure to the target language, or faulty or partial learning of the target language are the main root causes of the syntactic errors in ESL/EFL contexts. In addition to that, these syntactic errors can be momentary lapses while the process of language production (Hafiz et al., 2018; Ngangbam, 2016).

Thus, after the identification of syntactic error patterns and causes for their occurrence in ESL/EFL contexts, effective strategies and pedagogical procedures were investigated through this desk research. The pedagogical recommendations can be recognized as strategies that ESL/EFL learners should practice in the process of target language learning, and strategies that ESL/EFL educators should incorporate in the process of target language teaching. As Ngangbam (2016) suggests that the educators should specifically the differentiate between the first language, and the English language to the students, and provide a well- designed pedagogical plan to address the needs of ESL/EFL learners. Also, ESL/EFL learners should be aware of the negative language transfer as the first step to mitigating syntactic errors. Constant practice, and immersion in the target language, help the learners to acquire the syntactic structures of the language (Tan,2022). ESL/EFL learners should be encouraged to utilize the target language outside the classroom to develop their language skills. As Umarlebbe (2024) points out how the constant exposure to the target language can improve the target language production of ESL/EFL students. ESL/EFL educators play a crucial role in addressing syntactic errors by creating an interactive classroom environment, and providing constructive feedback (Tan,2022). Moreover, ESL/EFL teachers should shape a positive attitude in students towards English (Ngangbam,2016). Also, the employment of flexible teaching strategies that align with teaching objectives, and learners’ linguistic competence is indispensable in addressing syntactic errors (Naimi, 2015).

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