

CASE STUDY OF ERROR ANALYSIS OF THE USAGE OF TENSE IN ENGLISH BY I YEAR ENGINEERING STUDENTS FROM TAMIL MEDIUM SCHOOLS

JOSEPH THOMAS

Head, Department of English, PSNA College of Engineering & Technology, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

This study makes an attempt to analyze the English language proficiency of the first year engineering students who had their school education in regional (Tamil) medium. The study covers the types of errors, causes of errors in using tenses and remedial suggestions to improve their proficiency. The student's mistakes are analyzed. The findings of the study show that errors are due to lack of adequate exposure and practice in the case of L2 learning. The study throws light on the areas of difficulties faced by the students.

KEYWORDS: Error Analysis of Tense Usage, Challenges in Learning English as a Second Language, L1 Interference in L2

Academic Discipline and Subdisciplines: Learning English as a Second Language

Subject Classification: English

Type (Method/Approach): Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The usage of tense plays a decisive role in the case of an L2 learner. The thoroughness and accuracy of the tense usage reflects both in the written and the spoken English. Some may speak the language freely and fluently, but analysis points out that they commit a number of grammatical errors especially in the use of Tense. In the English language, 'verb' denotes an action and the action has the time relationship with the doer of the action. Many use 'tense' wrongly and the error is excused as the listener understands the message. Tamil medium students find it difficult as they have not learned the grammar rules systematically at an early stage. The present study analyses the characteristic mistakes committed by Tamil medium students. It also investigates into the reasons for committing such mistakes. The study attempts to give a few suggestions to improve L2 learning.

METHODOLOGY ADAPTED IN THE STUDY

Specific mistakes committed by Tamil medium students are collected. The second stage is to identify the types of mistakes. The third stage is selection of suitable remedial measures for implementation.

COMMON ERRORS

Wrong Usage of Present Tense

Generally students from Tamil medium are not able to distinguish between present tense and present continuous. For e.g.: "Ramesh is going to the college daily."

This sentence is considered to be correct by many, but grammatically the sentence is wrong. Therefore it needs correction. "Ramesh goes to college daily".

A similar mistake occurs very often in the case of I BE students when they remark "what are you doing in the evenings?" The sentence has to be changed to "what do you do in the evenings?" as it is a habitual action. The L2 learner has not assimilated the basic difference between the present tense and the present continuous tense.

Wrong Usage of Present Perfect and Past Tense

In the case of using present perfect tense and past tense, the above type of mistake is committed by the L2 learner. Attention is drawn to the following sentences:

- I have met him long ago.
- I have not met him for a long time.

The Tamil medium students consider the first sentence is error free as it follows the pattern of the second sentence. It takes time to note the difference between the two actions. The present perfect tense used in the first sentence is wrong as it denotes a past action. So the sentence is corrected as "I met him long ago". The L2 learner has not internalized the time relationship between the past action and the present perfect action. Another example for similar mistake is "I saw this film many times". The mistake is ignored conveniently by the users but it should be corrected as "I have seen this film many times". Look at the usual error in the following sentence "I did not pay the electricity bill yet." Using past tense in the place of present perfect tense is a habitual error committed by Tamil medium students. The reason for committing this error is due to the interference of L1 (mother tongue) with the L2 learning. Otherwise this is called interference of negative language transfer as per the study of S PitCorder. A number of examples for negative transfer can be quoted. "He went to Madurai yesterday." The sentence is correct. When he is asked to give its negative, it goes wrong "He did not went to Madurai yesterday." The L2 learner does not understand the fact that 'did' should be followed by the root verb.

A few more examples are given below:

A student of 1st year engineering writes,

- We are go to Chennai last week.
- We were went to Chennai on 14th August.
- Two faculty members were accompanied us for going to in-plant training.
- Why is the police man stopped the man who crossed the signal?

The above four examples bring out the confusion in the mind of the L2 learners due to the interference of mother tongue(L1) and the negative language transfer from L1 to L2. In the words of JieSun of Ludong university, a linguist from China "The process of learning English as a foreign language is actually a process of making errors, correcting errors and promoting the acquisition level". Hence the active participation of teacher and learner is very essential in the process of acquisition proficiency in the English language.

Wrong Usage of Present Continuous and Present Perfect Continuous Tense

In the case of present perfect continuous tense, the period of action is longer than present continuous action. The L2 learner commits the mistake as follows:

- I am sick for the last one week.
- It is ten years since my sister got married.
- I am living in Tamilnadu for the last 20 years.

The above sentences are grammatically wrong but generally used by many and considered correct. It takes time for the L2 learner to realize the errors and correct them subsequently as

- I have been sick for the last one week.
- It has been ten years since my sister got married.
- I have been living in Tamilnadu for the last 20 years.

Wrong Usage of Tenses in Conditional Clauses

Conditional tenses are handy in day-to-day expressions. But the Tamil medium students find it difficult to master it. Once they learn the intricacies they may avoid the mistakes. For the probable condition, the conditional clause is in present tense and the main clause in future tense.

- If he runs, he will catch the train.

The implied meaning in the above sentence is that, if he hurries (runs), he will not miss the train.

In the second type of conditional clause,

- If he ran, he would catch the train.

The implied meaning is that since he has no mind to run, he would miss the train.

In the case of improbable condition past perfect tense is used in the 'if' clause and perfect condition in the main clause. For e.g.: "If he had studied well, he would have got a first class". In other words "He did not study well, and he did not get first class". Invariably students use "If he was studied well, he would have got a first class". To be free from this error one needs a lot of practice and drilling in its correct usage. The same is the case with imaginary condition which says "if I were the prime minister, I would eradicate poverty in no time." The L2 learner's tendency is to use "If I was the prime minister, I would eradicate poverty in no time." In most of the cases the Tamil medium students think in Tamil and then they translate the idea into the target language. As a result, instead of positive transfer negative transfer takes place, and the structure of the sentence goes wrong.

Wrong Usage of Past Perfect Tense

Generally L2 learners avoid using past perfect tense and past perfect continuous. Sometimes students use past perfect tense where past tense is required. For e.g.: "He had returned from Chennai." Another example "the Patient died before the doctor arrived". The learner forgets the correct usage "The patient had died before the doctor arrived".

The same is the case with the usage of past perfect continuous “My father was working in the Army from 1970-1990”. The sentence is to be corrected as “My father had been working in the Army from 1970-1990”.

Wrong Usage of Past Continuous and Past Perfect Continuous

The past continuous is used to denote an action which was going on sometime in the past. The learners find it easier compared to other tenses. It is generally related to another past action.

But the students use it in isolation, for e.g.: “Ramesh was sleeping”. The contextual situation is not brought out. The sentence can be improved as “when I went to Ramesh’s house, he was sleeping.” For the L2 learner past perfect continuous is confused with past continuous “Throughout the whole day it was raining yesterday.” It can be changed to “throughout the whole day it had been raining yesterday.”

Errors in the Use of Future Tense

Generally speaking the Tamil medium students do not find the usage of future tense problematic except for future perfect tense which is very rarely used. “While the past is the chronicle of facts, future is a tale untold, a mirage of events unfulfilled”. In future tense what is going to take place is expressed; it also expresses the mood, feelings, certainty and uncertainty. ‘Will’ with first person indicates ‘decision’ or ‘determination’ whereas ‘will’ with second person shows simple future. Students are liable to commit mistakes as this usage is absent in the mother tongue. For him “His friend will surely help him financially” whereas the correct usage is “His friend shall definitely help him”. In other words for the L2 learner there is not much difference between the usage of ‘will’ and ‘shall’. Constant practice and drilling is essential to pick up the correct grammatical usage.

Errors in Using Sequence of Tense

Unlike other languages, in English, the sequence of tense is strictly followed. The L2 learner often says “My friend informed me that he will visit me next week” sequence of tense is followed in the case of indirect narration.

REASONS FOR MAKING ERRORS

According to behaviorist learning theory “language learning is habit formation”. Old habits hinder or facilitate forming new habits. Making errors is an unavoidable part of language learning (Brown-1987). According to Pit Corder, “Inter lingual errors take place when the learner’s L1 habits interfere, or prevent him from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language”. Influence of the mother tongue is the negative influence on the performance of the target language learner. The learner has the tendency to find out an equivalent word for the target language from the mother tongue. Every L2 learner thinks only in his mother tongue and then he tends to communicate in English. The L2 learner should keep in mind that he can use the mother tongue only as a ladder and he must be prepared to kick the ladder when he reaches the top.

To develop learner’s competence and to avoid errors the following suggestions are given.

REMEDIAL SUGGESTIONS

Situational Presentation with Structural Practice

While framing sentences in English, tense plays a significant role. There cannot be any sentence without tense. One can be thorough with tenses only through situational presentation. According to H.G.Widdowson “Language items are

presented in situations in the class room to ensure that their meaning is clear and then practiced as formal structures by means of exercises and drilling.” In other words, contextualization of language items by presenting them in situational sittings in the class room goes a long way in improving the learner’s competency.

Newspaper Reading and Listening to T.V. Channels

A regular reader of the newspaper and habitual listener to the T.V. channel will unconsciously learn how to translate his thoughts into language.

Communicative Approach to Language Acquisition

The ability to compose sentences is not the only ability we need to communicate. Learning grammatical rules is essential. But communicative approach helps the learner pick up the language unconsciously. In the words of Widdowson, a linguist “Knowing what is involved in pulling sentences together correctly is only part of what we mean by language and it has very little value of its own.” The knowledge of language should be used as a means of communicating. Sometimes message is conveyed with erroneous expressions. An example is given below.

“Now I am feel well and like to continue my job given by your esteemed institution. Kindly permit me to join the duty and also grant me permission to stay with family (next skin) in the bachelor’s accommodation already allotted to me in the medical and extreme compassionate ground”. The idea is communicated but with errors-errors due to tense, article, inappropriate vocabulary and preposition.

ADVANTAGES OF ERROR ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

Researchers and language teachers have identified it a valuable technique. It is a multi-dimensional process. Errors provide feedback to assess the teacher’s performance. In the words of H.D. Brown, “Language learning is like any other human learning, a process that involves making mistakes”. According to S.P. Corder, “All learners make mistakes”. Error analysis helps the learner verify how far he has progressed and what remains to be learned. It is an indispensable device for the learner to learn.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus the present study has made an attempt to analyze the common mistakes committed by the first year engineering students (Tamil medium). The errors are taken from the student’s class room writings. The reasons for committing errors are pointed out. Some suggestions are given to develop the learner’s competence. The study is rewarding and profitable for any language teacher.

REFERENCES

1. Brown, H.D, “Principles of Language Learning and Teaching”, Englewood cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hal, UK, 1987.
2. Brumfit C.J and Johnson K (ed.), “The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching”, (ELBS/Oxford university press), UK, 1979.
3. Close R.A., “English as a Foreign Language: Its Constant Grammatical Problems”, George Allen and Unwin, London, UK, 1962.
4. Corder S.P., “Introducing Applied Linguistics”, Penguin Books Ltd, UK, 1973.

5. Corder S.P., "Error Analysis", Oxford: OUP, UK, 1974.
6. Faerch Claus and Kasper Gabriele (ed.), "Strategies in Interlanguage Communication", Longman, London, UK, 1983.
7. Yule George, "The Study of Language", Cambridge press, UK, 1985.
8. Asian Social science, "A corpus based study of Errors in Chinese English major's English writing", vol.6. no.1, Jan 2010.
9. Journal of Education and practice, "Error analysis on Tense Usage made by Indonesian students", vol.4, no.6, 2013.