

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AT INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

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Articolul prezent tratează problema greșelilor gramaticale comise de către studenți la nivel intermediar de engleză. În articol sunt analizate tipurile și cazurile care influențează asimilarea limbii engleze. Lucrarea prezintă analiza unui experiment care demonstrează greșelile caracteristice însușirii adjectivului și gradelor de comparație în limba engleză.

*As long as your mistakes are new ones
you can argue that you are making progress.
Anonymous*

At various stages of language learning students make mistakes which are an integral part of language acquiring and usage thus being inevitable. Teachers have the following picture of the mistakes: *"It depends on circumstances", "It could be something a native speaker would not say grammatically, something a native speaker would not say in a certain situation", "It depends on the audience", "The definition of a mistake shifts".* Students often believe that a mistake is: *"To say or write something wrong", "Everything which is wrong. I cannot give details. There are too many", "A wrong opinion, idea or act because of wrong information" [1].*

According to the methodologist J.Edge [2] *"many of the things we call mistakes and see as problems are in fact signals that our students are successfully learning the language: they are taking the necessary learning steps; they are trying things out, testing out their knowledge and skills in learning the language, and making mistakes is a part of their language learning development. We should not see mistakes as negative. Helping learners by correcting them can be away of giving information, or feedback, to your students, just when it will support their learning"*. The linguistic mistakes that students make are an important and necessary part of their language learning, and in this case, mistakes should not be perceived as a big problem, but as a part of learning.

For example, if we compare the sentence *'Although he is my friend, but I do not trust him'* to an earlier sentence written by the same student *'Yes, is very beautiful, but I no like it here'* it is possible to see that this student has made some learning steps, and the second sentence was a step on the way to the first one [3].

Thus, the mistake is the evidence of learning. It is clear, for example, that the word *'buyed'*, used by a pupil, indicates that this pupil has learnt the basic rules of past tense formation. What the pupil has not learnt yet is the exceptions. Therefore, the mistake here is evidence that the learner is moving forward [4].

By making errors learners are testing out their ideas about the language – they are experimenting. Therefore, making errors is a part of the learning process: by receiving feedback students get to know the difference between correct and incorrect language, they see what to focus on.

Errors are believed to be an indicator of the learners' stages in their target language development. From the errors that learners commit, one can determine their level of mastery of the language system. Thus, the investigation of errors has a double purpose: it is *diagnostic* and *prognostic*. It is diagnostic because it can identify and give information about learners' problems and difficulties at a given point during the learning process; and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language-learning materials based on the learners' current problems, it shows how learning process is likely to develop in the future [5].

At various stages of this, process students' making mistakes is caused by various reasons, such as the influence of students' mother tongue, insufficient knowledge, physical and moral conditions. Alternatively, people may say things that they know are not correct, because this is still their best chance of getting their message across and they are trying to communicate something quite complicated by using the language they already know.

According to causes of making errors, M. Lightbown [6] distinguishes four types of errors such as:

1) Developmental errors: are clearly not due to first language interference but rather are 'developmental' in nature. That is, they reflect learners' understanding of the second language system itself rather than an attempt to transfer characteristics of their first language.

2) Over-generalizing errors: are caused by insufficient knowledge, by trying to use a rule in a context where it does not belong, for example, a regular *-ed* ending with an irregular verb.

3) Simplificating errors: happen when elements of a sentence are left out, or where all verbs have the same form regardless of person, number, or tense. This type of errors can be caused by physical and moral conditions. Mistakes can happen because someone is in a hurry, or tired, or is thinking about something else and just forgets the correct language.

4) Transfer errors are made because of native language influence.

When people use the word ‘mistake’ in general sense, it is clear what they mean by it. When a teacher says, “*These exercises are full of mistakes*”, or, “*Their writing is good but they make a lot of mistakes when they speak*”, there is no difficulty in understanding that the teacher means typical, usual mistakes such as phonetic, style, vocabulary and grammar errors.

Speaking about common grammar errors, the following types can be outlined [7]:

a) Irregular use of articles, especially definite ones. For example, the use of definite article before abstract nouns such as ‘*life, life, nature*’, etc. (e.g., ‘*Many people love the nature*’);

b) the tendency to use Past Indefinite instead of Past Perfect and Present Perfect; Present Indefinite instead of Present Continuous;

c) Incorrect using of Conditional and Subjunctive Mood forms, especially in the past tense;

d) Unwillingness to use Gerund and the tendency to replace it by infinitive forms, or to use it as a noun (e.g., ‘*There are different ways of the establishing of discipline*’ instead of ... ‘*ways of establishing discipline*’);

e) Use of Future Indefinite and, especially, Future in the Past after conjunction *if*;

f) Use of interrogative constructions in indirect speech (e.g., ‘*He asked what did they mean*’ instead of ‘*He asked what they meant*’);

g) Use of Adjective instead of Adverb and visa versa (e.g., ‘*The scene is described good*’; but ‘*It is naturally that every young country...*’).

h) A problem some writers find is changing the time of the action from present to past (e.g., ‘*It is very dark. We walk slowly through the unlit church. Suddenly we saw a strange shape*’), or from past to present (e.g., ‘*I shrank back in horror. Was this the ghost we all had heard so much about? I decide to be brave*’).

The first version of this confusion (starting in the present and then moving to the past) happens much more often than the second one. One way of avoiding the problem is to tell stories using past tenses, rather than present tenses, unless there are very good reasons for using the present.

i) A common error is to put a singular verb with a plural subject: (e.g., ‘*During the concert Dave, my best friend, and my sister, Sandra, was sitting very close to the stage*’). The subject consists of two people: Dave and Sandra, so the verb should be *were sitting*. So, a student should ask himself, “If I replace the subject words with a pronoun, which pronoun would I use?” The answer: Here would be *they*, so the verb must be in the plural.

j) Use a plural verb with such words as *each, every, everyone, and no one*.

These words are all singular: they refer to *one* of something. That is why they all need the singular form of the verb, ‘*Each of the children has been given a present*’;

k) Problems connected with use of *less/fewer, amount/number* with countable and uncountable nouns. It is necessary to remember here that ‘*less*’ and ‘*amount*’ are used with uncountable nouns, but ‘*fewer*’ and ‘*number*’ are used with countable nouns.

l) Word order: changing of the position of the subject and predicate usually leads to changing of the meaning of a sentence like in the next example: ‘*My friend met the brother*’; and ‘*The brother met my friend*’.

m) Problems connected with prepositions in sentences with relative clauses in them. Such sentences can become a little complicated. ‘*This is the book about which I told you about*’. In order to avoid such mistakes people have to try not to lose control of what is going on in their sentences, especially when they are using a preposition with a relative pronoun. This can be corrected to either: ‘*This is the book about which I told you*’; or ‘*This is the book I told you about*’;

n) Double negation.

The question that constantly appears is whether to correct or not to correct. Correction helps students to clarify their understanding of the meaning and language structure. It is a vital part of the teacher’s role and the teacher should be very gentle, tactful and sensitive in correction. What is appropriate for one student maybe quite wrong for another one.

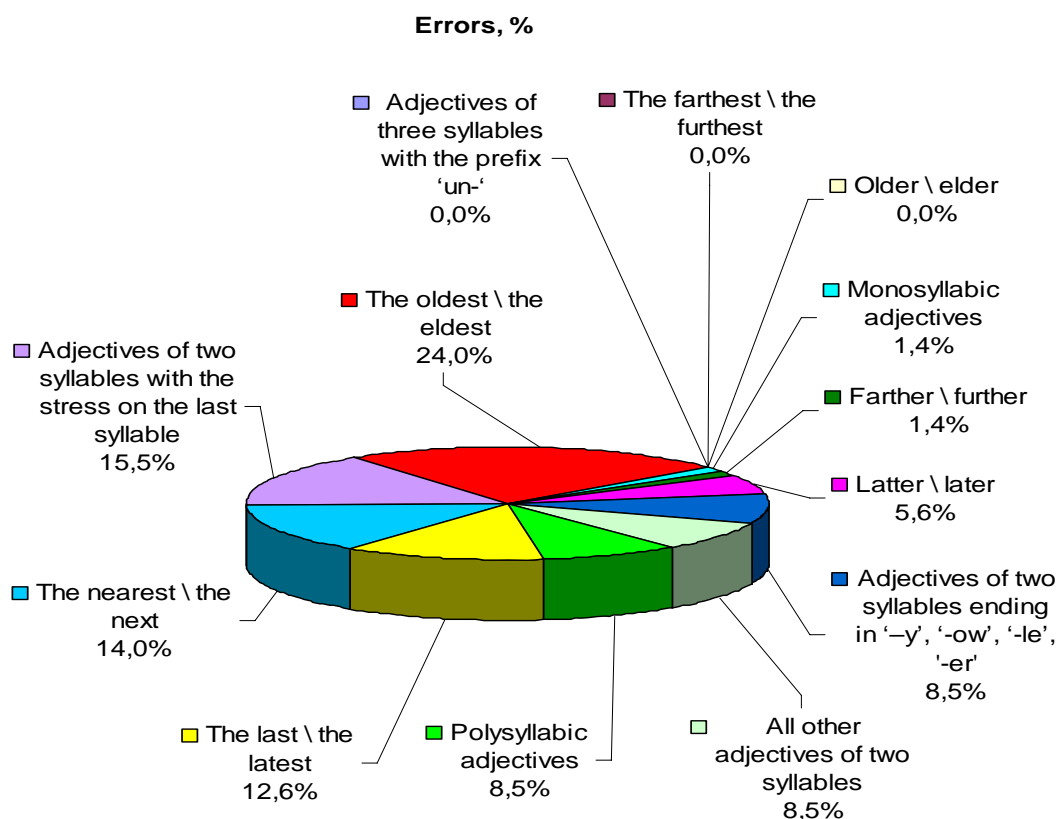
The first thing to remember is that the best form of correction is self-correction. It is very important to give a chance for self-correction, to show the student that a mistake has been made and give him/her a little time to recognize it and correct it. The more the students are involved in correction, the more they have to think about the language used in the classroom. However, if they cannot find mistakes and/or correct them, teachers have to help them. The teachers can do this by asking if someone can help or by explaining the problem by themselves.

Teachers often worry about **when to correct** – immediately, after a few minutes, at the end of the activity, at the next lesson, or never. The distinction between accuracy and fluency aims is important here. If the objective is accuracy, then immediate correction is more likely to happen. If the activity is aimed at fluency, then immediate correction is less appropriate and any correction should take place at the end of the activity.

Various types of correction can be used such as, Peer correction, Oral correction, Chain correction, Use of the blackboard, Humour, The red pen syndrome, Restrictive correcting, Self-correction without indication of mistakes, Underlining mistakes, Mistakes underlined and coded [8].

To have a clear picture what kind of mistakes learners make, an experiment was carried out at a school in the seventh form. The learners were at the intermediate level. These are the results of the pupils' tests on the theme “Comparative and Superlative Degrees of Comparison”. It turned out that pupils made mistakes even if the topic had been taught during ten lessons.

The following table and diagram illustrates the results:



As we can see from the table and diagram, the majority of errors is connected with the category ‘*the oldest; the eldest*’ that presents the superlative degrees of the adjective ‘*old*’. Nevertheless, there are no mistakes at all in the category ‘*older; elder*’, that is the comparative degrees of the same adjective ‘*old*’.

The pupils usually differentiate between these two irregular forms of comparison of the adjective ‘*old*’ in the following way: ‘*elder*’ ‘*the eldest*’ are used in the context of family; ‘*oldest*’ ‘*the oldest*’ are used in different situations.

Considering ‘*older; elder*’, the pupils do not have problems, they just follow the main rule. However, in case with ‘*the oldest; the eldest*’ there is one moment that pupils usually do not understand – ‘*the oldest*’ is also used in the context of family, but there is a difference in use of ‘*the oldest*’ and ‘*the eldest*’ in this context.

The same difficulties the pupils have with the use of two types of the superlative degrees of the adjective 'late'. That is the category 'the last; the latest'. 'The last' has such a sense, as there will be no other variants anymore; while 'the latest' means 'the last' but for this moment, because then there will be other variants of this subject, event, etc.

As for the category 'later; latter', which represents the comparative degrees of the adjective 'late', four pupils made mistakes. Actually, they do not have problems in understanding the differences between these two variants. They know that one form means 'the last from two'. The antonym is 'the former'. The second form is used to compare different things. The problem is that the pupils confuse the meaning of these two forms.

The pupils usually do not have any problems with the categories 'farther; further' 'the farthest; the furthest'. In case with the distance, it is possible to use all variants, but in indirect meanings only 'further' is used. (Just one pupil made a mistake)

Many mistakes were made in case with the category 'the next; the nearest'.

These two words have the same equivalents in Russian. Thus, the cause why pupils make these mistakes is not sufficient knowledge of the pupils' native language. As for the causes of making mistakes in the cases with such categories as 'the oldest; the eldest', 'the latest; the last' in general, all these mistakes belong to the transfer errors, which are made because of the influence of the native language. The problem is that in Russian there is no difference between the meanings of 'the oldest' and 'the eldest', 'the latest' and 'the last'.

In usage of adjectives 'severe' and 'complete' 11 pupils made mistakes. These adjectives belong to the category 'adjectives of two syllables which have the stress on the last syllable' that form their degrees of comparison in the synthetic way, but not in the analytical way.

Another situation is with the word 'modern' that belongs to the category 'all other adjectives of two syllables' that forms its comparative and superlative degrees of comparison in the analytical way. However, six pupils formed the degrees of comparison of this word in the synthetic way, because they attributed it to the category 'adjectives of two syllables which have the stress on the last syllable'. These pupils thought that the stress falls onto the last syllable but onto the first one in the word 'modern'.

Another example of over-generalizing errors is the word 'comfortable' that belongs to the category 'polysyllabic adjectives' and it forms its comparative and superlative degrees in the analytical way that is with the help of such words as 'more' and 'the most'. Though six pupils formed degrees of comparison of this word in the synthetic way, because they attributed it to the adjectives that end on the '-y', '-ow', '-er', and '-le' and form their degrees of comparison with the help of such suffixes as '-er' and '-est'. The problem is that these pupils forgot that these adjectives have to be the adjectives of two syllables, and the word 'comfortable' belongs to the polysyllabic adjectives.

It can be inferred from the experiment that one of the main causes of making mistakes in formation the comparative and superlative degrees of the categories of adjectives is not sufficient knowledge, over-generalizing, using a rule in a context where it does not belong, influence of the mother-tongue etc.

To sum up, it can be said that mistakes should be considered as a constructive criticism while foreign language acquiring. The main thing with mistakes is to make them work for the benefit of the successful language learning. They should be interpreted and treated correspondingly in order to improve linguistic skills.

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