

**Syntactic deviations in Tamil speaking students' ESL writings:
A study in error analysis.**

Benzigar. M,
Assistant Professor of English,
CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Delhi NCR.

Vinothini M
Assistant Professor of English
CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Delhi NCR.

Abstract:

Syntax in English always remains the most difficult structural element for any learners to master. Learners' attempt in constructing sentences with wrong word order indeed troubles them exchanging information appropriately. A change in the word order negatively influences the learner from establishing or decoding the information accurately. India's long association with the English speaking country insisted on offering English language education in its soil. As a result, English in India with its long association provides education, documents administrative, scientific and academic endeavours and enjoys the privileges of being more than a second language. Thus it occupies the centre of academic and non-academic pursuits in India. Yet the proficiency, the learners of India carry with them is not exceptional to the observation, 'not satisfactory' or non-standard. Hence, an investigation was initiated on undergraduate students from arts and science programmes from Madurai District of Tamilnadu, India. The primary focus of the investigation is to identify the sources of syntactical deviations and its influence on ESL compositions. The study also proposes to suggest reinforcement strategies to remediate the syntactical errors that emerge in the language productions of the participants.

Keywords: Language learning, Syntax, Error analysis

1. Introduction

India with its huge population and apparent new boom for English learning ... is also a large beacon of English learning, quotes Nunan (2005: 5). The English language in India enjoys greater privileges than just being a second language. It has occupied a position of the

administrative, academic and a language of scientific deliberations. Though teaching of explicit knowledge of grammar remains much debated topic today worldwide, Ellis (2005) indicates Yuan and Ellis (2003) observation that learners' grammatical accuracy improved significantly if they had time for 'on-line planning' while performing a narrative task, a result most readily explained in terms of their accessing explicit knowledge (2005:13).

A language is rule governed. Mastery of a language's grammar, its structures and lexis are essential for effective use. A lapse in the choice of words, inappropriate grammar and wrong word order disables the user from establishing intended meaning. Each language has its unique language structures and word order. Comprehension of these specific features remains difficult for ESL learners and often an influencing factor in the production of sentence constructions. Word order in English plays a pivotal role in the construction of meaningful sentences. Syntax studies how words are joined together to build phrases and how these phrases are put together to create clauses or bigger phrases and these bigger phrases when connected constructs sentences. Syntax in English is more distinct from several other languages and follows a unique pattern in which words are organized to make meaningful sentences. The function of syntax is not only limited to the structuring of sentences but also the structure of phrases and clauses. According to Jacobs (1995: 4), syntax is the grammatical principles, units, and relations involved in sentence structure. He observes that three components- syntax, lexis and semantics necessarily interact. From the lexicon emerge the proper words, suffixes, and prefixes that fit into the slots provided by the syntax. Baker (1983: 03) observes that the syntax also informs the rules concerning the combination of words to make sentences. An ESL learner's production of error prone sentences with wrong word order can be attributed to his ignorance in understanding the unique structure followed in the target language or to first language inferences.

ESL teachers are often annoyed by the errors in syntax that plague the writing of their students. The ESL teachers unanimously agree that the basic knowledge on the syntactic structures are essential for the learners to move on to the next stages which demand the learners to perform linguistic analysis for simple and complex language structures. Therefore, learning English syntax shall be systematic and scientific. ESL learner's partial knowledge in syntax often causes ambiguities, especially with adverbs. It doesn't only change the meaning of the sentence but also make the sentence grammatical or ungrammatical (Carter, Hughes, and McCarthy

2000). Wrong positioning of an adverb in the sentence creates confusion and ambiguity. For example, in the sentence, *He opened, very slowly, the most amazing book I have ever seen*, the delay in introducing the object creates an atmosphere of suspense (Close, 1998). An examination of the following sentences also confirms it.

1. Only I was denied entry.
2. I only was denied entry.
3. I was only denied entry.
4. I was denied only entry.
5. I was denied entry only.
6. We must examine carefully the meanings of the words we use.
7. We must examine the meaning of the words we use carefully.
8. The students accept never their teachers' suggestions.

English language, when it is modified or promoted anywhere without any control, the native speakers find that their language is at the risk of being 'polluted' or 'corrupted', cites Pennycook (1994). Thus, any language production or use that shows a deviation from the accepted form is considered to be a 'dialect' (MacArthur, 1998: 200), a non-standard use. Kachru (1982: 43), who considered the use of English in the outer circle in his three concentric circles observes that the native speaker has been slow in recognizing and accepting non-native varieties of English due to their deviant phonological, lexical, grammatical, and discourse form. Patil (2007: 30) argues that the native speaker's approach to non-native varieties of English as deficient is due to cultural and linguistic ethnocentrism. There is no denial of the fact that to make a language production intelligible to native and non-native speakers, the speaker has to follow the features of English that are accepted. Therefore, precision with the set conventions of a language is inevitably essential.

Errors are once considered to be the defect of teaching and learning. Pathak (1999: 79) states that all the errors that are committed by the non-native speakers are marked as abnormalities and a result of faulty teaching methods because they represent not incremental but a decremental learning. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 139) observe error as "any deviation from a selected norm of language performance, no matter what the characteristics or cause of the

deviation might be". Further, they classified the errors into 'global' and 'local' on the basis of the communicative importance of the errors (191). Richards comments that the presence of errors is absolutely normal and inevitable features of the language. Errors provide evidence of learners' learning indicating the strategies that they use.

The failure to produce accepted language forms is always, if not, mostly contributed to inappropriate learning materials, untrained facilitators or the learners' lack of interest in learning a language. The other aspects that negatively influence a learner's language skills are deliberately or involuntarily ignored. This part remains unfocused or less investigated. The primary objective of this study is to identify the influencing factors other than materials, facilitators and learners' lack of interest which may force the learners to produce error prone sentence structures and to identify the sources of errors. The study focuses on the syntactic aspects of the English language.

2.0. Research Design

Error analysis model is employed to evaluate the ESL learners' writing to identify the grey areas in their writing and suggest strategies to remediate the errors. The contrastive analysis model assumed that errors have only one cause, namely influences from the mother tongue and model is best for predicting phonological errors. However, the error of morphology, syntax, lexis and discourses are imperfectly predicted by the contrastive analysis. Stephen Corder (1967) points out, "errors are indispensable for second language teaching". Error analysis as a method is chosen since it treats the errors not as 'sin' but as a system which enables the researchers to identify the learner's strategies in acquiring a language and also provide insights to adopt and redesign the teaching methods. It further provides a window into the learner's linguistic knowledge and provides evidence of learner's errors and learning strategies which may enable the teachers to determine the reinforcement strategies for teaching. The model proposed by Gass & Selinker (1994: 67) which identifies six steps in conducting an error analysis study: Collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analyzing the source of error, and remediating the errors has been adopted to study the syntactic deviations.

2.1. Participants

The study is conducted on undergraduate students attending various arts and science programmes in the Madurai district of Tamilnadu. Madurai, the third-largest city in the Indian state of Tamilnadu, has become a significant educational and industrial hub in the south of Tamilnadu. According to the All India Survey on higher education (2016-2017), Tamilnadu leads the country in higher education enrolment. The report necessitates the importance of higher education requirements and also advocates the language competence the learners expected to possess on the completion of their three years graduation programme. As informed, 126 written composition form the sample for understanding the learners' written competence. Participants' profile indicates that they speak Tamil as their mother tongue and share a homogeneous socio-educational background. It is observed that the learners read newspapers in English, watch videos and listen to audio lessons available in the tertiary to master the English language and earn a comparatively good grade in the examinations. These learners receive satisfactory scores if the assessment is a cloze test or short sentence structuring. The difficulty lies when the test is writing longer sentences and compositions. Confusion in word choices, word orders and appropriate grammar structures deter them from writing sentences and, at times, stop them from initiating the process though they can write the composition much better in their mother tongue. The participants were ensured that the data collected shall be used only for the study purpose and shall not in any form used for framing individual prejudice.

2.2. Instruments

Free composition is administered as an instrument to collect the written production from the participants for error analysis. Free composition writing was selected as it would encourage the learners to transform their ideas into a complete composition and increase the quantity of written production. The complexities in the word order shall provide the researchers with an insight into identifying the sources of errors and to deciding appropriate reinforcement strategies to remediate the syntactical errors. The respondents were asked to write a composition in 300 words on their 'favourite festival'. The topic was chosen as festivals are always an integral part of their lives and expecting that it would stimulate their thoughts. Adequate time was given to write the composition (Ellis 1997: 114). Descriptive method of analysis was applied to scrutinize and identify the syntactical variations.

3. Discussion

ESL learners' use of wrong syntax confuses the reader to misinterpret the text thus producing completely unintended meaning. A sentence structured using inappropriate word order leads the readers to interpret it in multiple ways therefore, any deviation in word order results in miscommunication. This demands appropriate syntax to achieve the intended meaning. Any disparity in decoding and encoding causes confusion. The corpus informs that these respondents are not exceptional to such phenomenon. It is evident that learners from this region commit syntactical errors due to interlingual and intralingual influences. The mother tongue plays a crucial role in limiting the learners' attempt to write and influences them to write error-prone sentence structures. The syntactical errors found in the corpus have been analyzed under the following categories.

3.1. Errors due to Interlingual interference

Influence of interlingual interference in writing remains one the most prompting factors in the production of deviant structures, which result from negative transfer i.e., from Tamil to English. This phenomenon is the result of thinking in the mother tongue language or word to word translation (Bhela, 1999). According to Oldin (1989), interference is "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired". It is observed that one-third of errors produced by the learners are caused by negative interference of L1 (Brudiprabha, 1972). Adbulmoneim (2000) and AbiSamra (2003) also in their study on Arab learners found that most of the errors in English syntax are due to their first language inferences. This can be considered as 'a matter of habit'. When learners face difficulty on how to express something in a foreign language, they directly refer to the mother tongue. This transfer or interference errors may also occur due to intense compulsion to communicate. Diab (1996) who researched writing errors of Lebanese EFL students confirms it. According to Kamala, defective teaching methods, learning strategies, inadequate teaching materials and lack of motivation also hinder the process of language acquisition.

3.1.1. Errors due to Direct Influence of Mother Tongue

Errors found in the corpus indicate that learners are prone to make errors due to the direct influence of their mother tongue. The errors identified in the composition are further categorized based on its deviant characteristics.

1. Errors due to misplacement of determiners.
 - a) Me and my family members all enjoyed the festival. (Naanum en kudumbathinar anaivarum pandikaiyai kondadi mazhinthom)
 - b) They both danced well. (Avargal iruvarum nandraga nadanam aadinar)
2. Split sentence: two different incoherent units of clauses or phrases are used instead of a single sentence:
 - 1) You must watch them how they dance.
 - 2) My father became president of the village at his age 36.
3. Redundant clause markers or other linking words are connected with mother tongue, e.g.
 1. My teacher advised me very kindly.
 2. We gave sweets to other people on Pongal.
 3. We were waiting for our own family.
4. Omission of clause markers and other related words on the mother tongue patterns:
 1. My teacher was very enthusiastic and he helps me.
 2. The best gift giving to my mother on that day.

3.1.2 Indirect Interference of the Mother Tongue

Second language learners often mix up target language with the mother tongue, which results in wrong word order. Syntax in English begins with a subject followed by a verb and an object (SVO). The sentence structure in the Tamil language follows a unique SOV pattern. Any attempt to apply the Tamil sentence pattern to the English language creates a wrong word order.

1. I English well speak (I speak English well)

The Tamil equivalent of the statement is: Naan angilam nantraga pesuven.

An analysis of the above sentence reveals that the learner resorted to writing in English applying the same word order of the mother tongue.

3.2. Errors due to Intralingual Interference

Learner's mother tongue influences his language acquisition process negatively. The current corpus offers evidence of such errors committed by the learners. Learners' use a) Wrong Word Order; b) Delete essential words; 3) redundant words, and 4) Broken sentence or split sentence in their English written compositions.

3.2.1. Wrong Word Order Causing Faulty Structures

Learner's ignorance on the structure of English language negatively influences him to produce sentences with wrong word order. The ultimate results of such influences restrict the learner from writing correct sentences, as a result, the sentences are often misinterpreted by the readers. The corpus also brings forth errors due to placing of determiners. Learners often place the determiners like 'some', 'all', 'our' to mother tongue patterns. The present corpus reveals that the errors in the word order are due to wrong placement of adverbials, wrong placement of adjectival, misplacement of subjects and verbs, and interchanging of nouns and qualifying phrases. The causes for these errors can be said to learners' inadequate understanding of the target language items. The following examples from the corpus exhibit such deviations.

1. They both were dancing well.
2. I was watched the festival.
3. In our college was held that party.
4. I have very much enjoying the festival.

3.2.2 Omission of Principal Elements

The errors in the learners' ESL composition indicate that learners chose to omit principal items such as subjects, phrasal verbs, and prepositions in their writing. Learners evolve a system of their own which is quite simpler than the system of the target language. As a result, learners'

weak structure causes so much concern to the readers. Plenty of sentences without subjects is found in the present corpus.

1. Now, continue discussing with all neighbours and friends.
2. A festival in my life was pongal festival in my place.
3. Dress coming to wear festival time.

Mother tongue influence may be cited as one of the causes of subjectless sentences. Learners are found omitting subjects in complex and compound sentences. Learners tend to change the pattern on account of their inadequate command over the language. Learner's ignorance in the voice and the non-personal subjects like 'it', 'one' and 'that' further results in the production of erroneous sentence structures. A few instances can be noted for discussion.

1. Omission of phrasal verbs and other relevant linguistic items:
 - i) My heart is full of my village festival (I am reminded of village festival).
2. Erroneous use of English prepositions.
 - i) My aunt supported me two hundred rupees. (My aunt supported me with two hundred rupees).
3. Deletion of object or object clause:
 - i) The teacher taught us... (The teacher taught us English).
 - ii) My father told me... (My father told me what I needed to do).
4. Omission of pronouns, relative adverbs, connectives etc:
 - i) M.B.A. is the which is good qualification for the job (M.B.A. is the best qualification for the job).

3.2.3. Addition of Words or Phrases

Unfamiliarity with the structures of target language leaves the learners to struggle helplessly with constructing complex or compound sentence structures. As a result, ESL writings are known for their redundancies. It predicts the fact that the learners are yet to become conversant with the rules of conjoining and embedding sentences. Tamil learners attempt to produce simple sentences, but partial exposure to complex and compound sentences negatively

influence their writing. The phrases, clauses and complex structures would complicate their linguistic problems and their written productions are marked for redundancies.

- i) We should not have no caste system which is the most powerful weapon which spoils our loyal life (We should have no caste system which, as the worst weapon, spoils our normal life).

3.2.4. Split Sentences Causing Confusion

Learners tend to shift from one structure to another within a sentence. Such constant shifting of structures produces confused and ambiguous sentences:

1. Man who had dedicated his lives for other, would not do any work which gives him fame or reward.
2. On seeing the result they who were belonging to nearby village approached.

In the English Language, in the use of embedded clauses (also known as object clauses or sentential complements), the inclusion of the overt complementizer (that) is quite optional:

1. He said he was eating.
2. He said that he was eating.
3. They knew he was eating
4. They knew that he was eating.

Use of 'that' in English sentence structures avoids ambiguities. The omission of 'that' creates confusion, ambiguities and delays the deliverance of meaning and information in the process of communication thereby providing a sense of 'garden path' effect. This commonly found mistake is argued to be the result of language transfer or language interference. The errors emerged in the writings of the learners indicate that they are used to the violation of the tense agreement.

3.3 Distribution of Errors

The errors committed by the learners in their composition has been quantified to analyze the frequency and the significance of errors and to identify the most prominent error type among the error categories that influence the learner to commit errors in their ESL writings. The errors identified from learners' ESL writing is categorized under interlingual errors and intralingual errors. These errors are further grouped under its subcategories. Error types and the number of times a specific nature of error appeared has been divided and listed in table 1.

Table 1: Error frequencies of syntactical errors

Sl. No	Error type	Frequency of errors
1.	Errors due to Interlingual interference	2908
	a) Direct Influence of Mother Tongue	2172
	i) Misplacement of determiners	493
	ii) Split sentence	497
	iii) Redundant clause markers	532
	iv) Omission of clause markers	650
	b) Indirect Interference of the Mother Tongue	736
2	Errors due to Intralingual Interference	2530
	i) Wrong Word Order Causing Faulty Structures	744
	ii) Omission of Principal Elements	701
	iii) Addition of Words or Phrases	585
	iv) Split Sentences Causing Confusion among Various Sentence Types	500

According to Candlin, the development of interlanguage syntax is constrained by three factors: 1) The general organizing principles common to all languages; 2) The influence of nature and target languages; and 3) The exploratory processes of learners' cognition. The syntactical errors present in the ESL writing of the learners confirm that the Tamil learners of English language encounter difficulties while trying to bring out the syntactical properties in their written productions. The number of errors found in the corpus indicates that interlingual interference outnumbered intralingual error. Learners produced a total of 2908 errors due to interlingual interference of the language. This brings forth the fact that the learners from the

study area require more reinforcement strategies on writing to overcome these syntactic constraints.

Descriptive Statistics of Syntactical errors

Syntactical Error categories	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Misplacement of determiners	126	1.00	7.00	3.9127	1.13151
Split sentences	126	2.00	7.00	3.9444	1.06061
Redundant Clause maker	126	2.00	7.00	4.2222	1.08730
Omission of Clause makers	126	2.00	8.00	5.1587	1.18263
Indirect Interference of mother tongue	126	3.00	8.00	5.8413	1.15525
Wrong Word order causing faulty structures	126	3.00	9.00	5.9048	1.08391
Omission of Principle Elements	126	2.00	8.00	5.5635	1.20330
Addition of Words or Phrases	126	3.00	7.00	4.6429	1.04663
Split sentences causing confusion	126	2.00	6.00	3.9683	.92897
Valid N (listwise)	126				

The descriptive statistics method is employed to identify the frequency of errors. The analysis indicates that the learners committed more faulty structures due to wrong word order. It reveals that learners are influenced by intralingual interference. The mean value of this category is 5.90. The corpus of errors demonstrates that the learner produced a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 9 errors in this category. It is evident from the data that the indirect influence of the mother tongue influenced students' ESL writing negatively, with a mean value of 5.84. Learners produced fewer errors in the misplacement of determiners category with a minimum of 01 error

and a maximum of 7 errors. Though the frequency of errors produced is minimum, the maximum number of errors committed in this category is higher than the split sentences causing confusion.

4. Conclusion

According to Krishnasamy (2014), no one has been able to unravel the mystery and say anything definite about the origin and development, how we learn a language, and how such a small brain manages a complex phenomenon like language (24). It is observed from the present study that learners from the study area are influenced by interlingual interference. They experience difficulty in specific features of English structures, especially when the syntactic conventions of English differ from their first language. This condition can also be a result of not learning a language in its naturalistic, non-classroom, English-speaking settings and learners' insufficient understanding of the rules and pattern of the English language. The bilingualism of the country and the teaching methods often, bilingual, also attribute to the deviate structure learners produce. These syntactical errors indicate mother tongue or language transfer influence profoundly in their writing. Learners learn syntax and vocabulary for formal writing situations from their textbooks at formal educational settings. When the learners receive more exposure to the settings and learning materials, they become more competent and use the vocabulary and the syntax required for formal writing. The study also indicates that Tamil learners of English used to violate the tense agreement. This commonly found mistake was argued as the result of Language transfer or Language interference. But Burt & Kiparsky (1972: 3) observe, "...for we have not found that the majority of syntactical goofs are due to the native Language syntax of Learner". They considered it as the breach of 'tense continuity across clauses', an instance of global error, as it affects the overall organization of a sentence and spoils comprehensibility more seriously than the local errors (Burt & Kiparsky, 1974: 73). Since learners' errors are indicative of the state of learners' knowledge and how a language is learned (Corder in Richards 1974), Error correction and structured input-based instruction (Cohen, 1975; Norrish, 1983) are suggested as remedial measures to control the syntactical errors in students' ESL writings.

References:

- Abdulmoneim, M.M. (1997). Learner-centred grammar instruction. *Forum Oman*, 35, 1.
- Abisamra, N. (2003). *An analysis of errors in Arabic speakers' English writing*. Retrieved July 2010 from <http://abisamr03.tripod.com>.
- Bhela, Baljit. (1999). Native language interference in learning a second language: Exploratory case studies of native language interference with target language usage. *International Education Journal*, Vol. 1, No 1, 22-31.
- Brudiprabha, P. (1972). *Error analysis: A psycholinguistic study of Thai English compositions*. Unpublished master's thesis, McGill University, Montreal.
- Burt, M., & Kiparsky, C. 1978. Global and local mistakes, in J. Schumann & N. Stenson (Eds.). *New frontiers in second language learning*. Rowley. Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishing, Inc.
- Carter, Ronald, Rebecca Hughes, and Michael McCarthy. (2000). *Exploring Grammar in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Close, R.A. (1998). *A Teacher's Grammar: The Central Problems of English*. London: Language Teaching Publications.
- Cohen, A.D. (1975). Error correction and the training of language teachers. *The Modern Language Journal*, pp: 414-412.
- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL* 5.4: 161-170.
- Corder, S.P. (1973). *Introducing applied linguistics*. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Daib, N. (1996). *The transfer of Arabic in the English writings of Lebanese students*. Retrieved from www.lael.pesp.br/specialist/18diab.ps.pdf.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *SLA research and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. *The Asian EFL Journal*. Vol. 7 Issue 3. Retrieved March 2014 from <https://asian-efl-journal.com>
- Jackobovits, L. (1970). *Foreign language learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Jackson, H. (1981). Contrastive analysis as a predictor of errors, with reference to Punjabi learners of English. In J. Fisiak (Ed), *Contrastive Linguistics and the language teacher*. New York: Pergamon.

- Jain, M. (1974). Error Analysis: source, cause and significance. In Richards, J. (Ed.), *Error analysis: perspectives on second language acquisition*, pp. 189-215. Essex: Longman.
- Kachru, B. (1982). Models for non-native Englishes. In B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (pp. 3157). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kamala, A.S. (1992). *A fresh look at errors in English*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company.
- Krishnaswamy, N. (2014). Let's teach English. *The Asian EFL Journal*, January 2014 Vol 73, Pp- 23-48. Retrieved Feb. 2015 from <https://asian-efl-journal.com>.
- McArthur, T. (1998). *The English languages*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Norrish, John. (1983). *Language learners and their errors*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Nunan, David. (2005). Important tasks of English education: Asia-wide and beyond. *The Asian EFL Journal*. 7 (3), Retrieved March 2014 from <https://asian-efl-journal.com>.
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Patil, Z.N. (2007). On the Nature and Role of English in Asia, *Journal of English as an International Language* Vol. 1. Retrieved July, 2013 from <https://www.eilj.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/1-april%202007.pdf>
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. New York: Longman.
- Richards, J. C. (1974). *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition*. Essex: Longman.