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Language Acquisition: Common grammatical errors encountered by ESL learners across various levels of proficiency

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Abstract

"To have another language is to possess a second soul." (Charlemagne). As cited, learning second language makes a person multifaceted and provides a high level of aplomb to depict a vitrified personality. English is not just a language, it is a method of global communication. Language is the only asset by which thoughts and ideas can be conveyed and knowledge can be dolled-out. But having good command over grammar do enhance the significance of language learning. Language acquisition is a multifaceted process characterized by the gradual development of linguistic competence and proficiency in a second language. Central to this process are the occurrence of grammatical errors, which reflect learners' attempts to internalize and apply the grammatical rules and structures of the target language. The aim of this research paper is to investigate common grammatical errors made by language learners at various proficiency levels and their frequency, exploring the factors influencing their occurrence.

Introduction

Language acquisition is a dynamic and complex process that includes the gradual development of linguistic skills and proficiency in a second language. "The knowledge of grammatical rules is very important in expressing what the learners want to say and interpret correctly" (Sari Sadiah and Seli Ade Royani, 2019). Within the sphere of language acquisition, a fundamental element of the journey lies in the observation and analysis of grammatical errors. The objective of this research paper is to investigate the phenomenon of grammatical errors in the context of language acquisition, highlighting, specifically on the common errors

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made by English as a Second Language learners at various proficiency levels. Richards (1971) highlighted that intralingual errors, those occurring within the target language itself due to overgeneralization or simplification, are common among learners at intermediate and advanced levels.

This study seeks to address the following key questions:

➢ What are the common grammatical errors frequently made by ESL learners at different proficiency levels?

➢ How do these errors evolve as learners progress from beginner to advanced levels of proficiency?

➢ What factors contribute to the occurrence of these errors, and how do they impact language acquisition?

By exploring above questions, this paper aims to enhance current understanding of language acquisition and provide practical implications for language teaching and learning. The initial phase of this paper involves reviewing relevant literature on grammatical errors and language acquisition, providing a theoretical framework to comprehend the nature of errors, their role in the language learning process and how these errors evolve. Gass and Selinker (2008) highlighted the concept of fossilisation, the process where incorrect language patterns become permanently fixed in a learner's interlanguage, is a significant concern. This phenomenon emphasizes the persistence of certain grammatical errors despite extensive practice and exposure to the target language. The paper then presents empirical findings from prior researches that have examined common grammatical errors, synthesizing these findings to identify patterns and trends in error occurrence. Hourani (2008) found that mother tongue interference is a significant cause of the errors observed in her study. Similarly, Dulay and Burt (1974) identified that developmental errors, akin to those made by children learning their first language, are prevalent among ESL learners, suggesting that these errors are a natural part of the language learning process.

Research Methodology

The research is entirely based on past studies and responses of ESL learners at different levels. Primary data was collected through a structured English proficiency test given to students, pursuing graduation and post-graduation courses. Secondary data was gathered through a comprehensive literature review of books, academic journals, and previous research studies.

Area of Research

This research is focused on the responses of students regarding common grammatical errors at various level of proficiency located in Jaipur city. The study includes a variety of higher education institutions, including university and college students pursuing graduation and post-graduation. The sample size included 90 respondents categorized into beginner, intermediate, and advanced.

Literature Review

The study of grammatical errors in second language acquisition has long been a focus for linguists and educators, aiming to understand the underlying processes and factors influencing language learning. Grammatical errors provide valuable insights into the developmental stages of language learners and the challenges they encounter. This literature review explores the common grammatical errors made by ESL (English as a Second Language) learners across various proficiency levels and examines the theoretical frameworks and empirical findings that inform this area of research. Rod Ellis (2008) emphasized the importance of understanding the types of errors learners make, classifying them into interlingual and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors result from the influence of the learner's native language, while intralingual errors arise from within the target language itself, often due to overgeneralization or simplification. This distinction is crucial for identifying the sources of errors and addressing them effectively in language instruction. Mother tongue interference is a significant factor contributing to grammatical errors among ESL learners. Hourani (2008) found that learners often transfer grammatical structures from their native language to English, leading to errors such as incorrect verb conjugations and sentence structures. This phenomenon, known as negative transfer, highlights the importance of understanding the linguistic backgrounds of learners to provide targeted support. Dulay and Burt (1974) introduced the concept of developmental errors, which are similar to the errors made by children learning their first language. These errors reflect the natural progression of language acquisition and are often systematic and predictable. For example, ESL learners might use "comed" instead of "came" as they apply regular past tense rules to irregular verbs. Recognizing these patterns can help educators develop curricula that align with learners' developmental stages.

Intralingual errors, those arising within the target language, are particularly prevalent among intermediate and advanced learners. Richards (1971) identified that these errors often stem from overgeneralization or simplification of grammatical rules. For instance, learners might incorrectly apply a common rule, such as using "he goed" instead of "he went," reflecting their
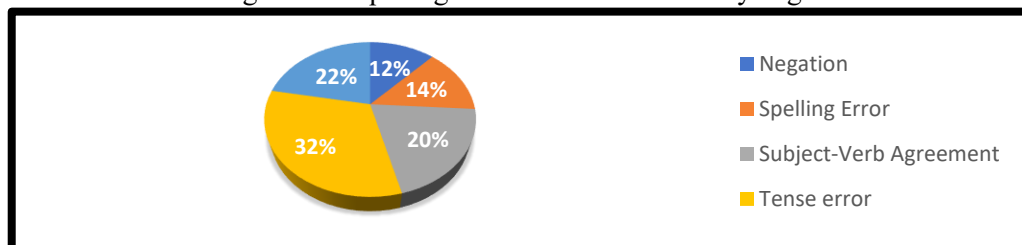
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attempts to internalize complex language structures. Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of interlanguage, a transitional linguistic system that learners create as they acquire a second language. Interlanguage is characterized by systematic errors, which can become fossilized if not addressed properly. Fossilization refers to the process where incorrect forms become permanently fixed in a learner's language use. Gass and Selinker (2008) emphasized that understanding interlanguage development is crucial for identifying persistent errors and preventing fossilization.

Brown (2000) highlighted the role of overgeneralization in second language acquisition, where learners apply a linguistic rule too broadly. This phenomenon is common among learners at the intermediate level, who might produce forms like "childs" instead of "children." Such errors indicate learners' attempts to generalize rules and simplify the language learning process, underscoring the need for explicit instruction on irregular forms. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the prevalence of specific grammatical errors among ESL learners at different proficiency levels. For instance, Lennon (1991) found that beginners frequently struggle with subject-verb agreement, often omitting necessary verb inflections. In contrast, advanced learners tend to make fewer basic errors but may still grapple with complex structures such as passive voice and conditionals.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The discussion is organized according to the types of grammatical errors frequently identified, including subject-verb agreement, tense usage, prepositions, articles, and word order etc. The result brings the importance of innovative teaching methods to overcome such issues by which the overall process can be enhanced. These findings are discussed in the context of existing research and observation within an ESL classroom to provide a comprehensive understanding of how grammatical errors manifest across different stages of language acquisition.

FIGURE 1: Showing most frequent grammatical error made by beginners in ESL learning

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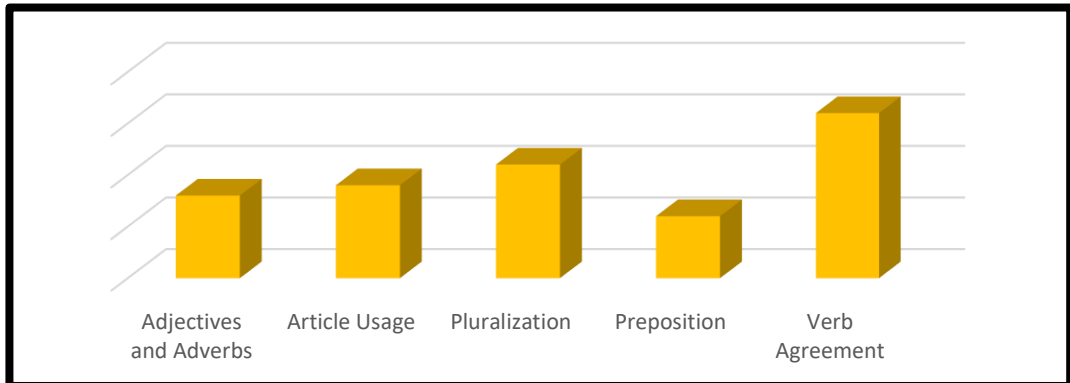FIGURE 2: Represents most often grammatical error by intermediate learners in ESL learning

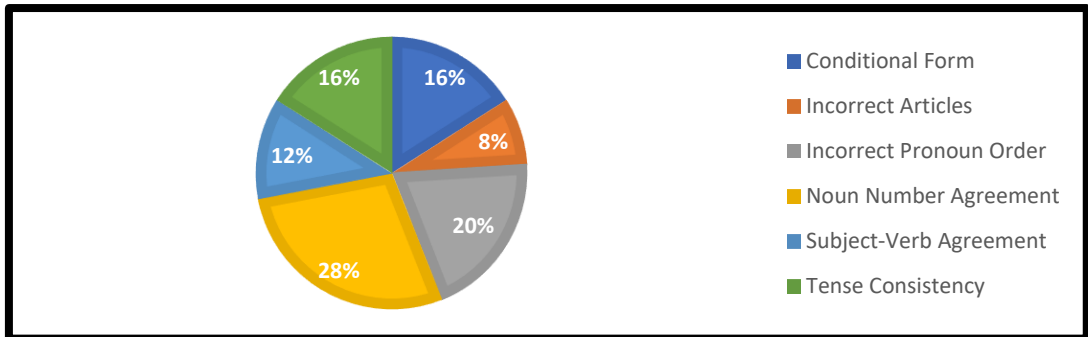FIGURE 3: Showing most commonly made grammatical mistake by advanced learners in ESL learning

Table 1: The table below highlights typical errors made by beginner learners, demonstrating the specific challenges they face in acquiring English grammar:

Error Classification	Incorrect Sentence	Correct Sentence
Subject-Verb Agreement	She like to learn English language.	She likes to learn English language.
Tense Error	Yesterday, I go to the store.	Yesterday, I went to the store.
Verb Form Error	I am belong to a rural area.	I belong to a rural area.

Negation	The teacher not speak clearly.	The teacher does not speak clearly.
Spelling Error	He is my favourite sudent.	He is my favourite student.

In above sentences ESL learners at beginning level get confused about she/he/it/Noun + verb + s/es/ies. Past form 'went' is used as 'yesterday' represents past and singular third person + does + not is the correct formation. The data analysis of grammatical errors among ESL learners across different proficiency levels reveals distinct challenges at each stage of language acquisition. Beginner learners predominantly struggle with tense errors, often confusing past, present, and future tense as evidently shown in figure 1. Tense are the foundation of English language acquisition, the complexity of structures makes them unable to retrieve the correct structure as per tense.

Table 2: This table presents a detailed overview of the common grammatical errors encountered by ESL learners at the intermediate proficiency level. Each type of error is illustrated with examples and corrected forms:

Error Classification	*Incorrect Sentence*	*Correct Sentence*
Article Usage	He is a best student in the college.	He is the best student in the college
Adjectives and Adverbs	She sings beautiful.	She sings beautifully.
Preposition	He is good in English.	He is good at English.
Pluralization	Childs are playing in the ground.	Children are playing in the ground.
Verb Agreement	I am agree with you.	I agree with you.

The word "best" implies a superlative, so we should use "the" instead of "a." When describing how someone sings, we use an adverb, not an adjective therefore "beautifully" instead of "beautiful." The correct preposition often depends on the specific word and context. For example, when we want to indicate someone's proficiency or skill in a subject, we use "good at" rather than "good in." The correct plural form of "child" is "children," not "childs." The verb "agree" stands alone when used to express agreement. It does not need to be combined with an auxiliary verb like "am," "is," or "are" in the present tense. As shown in the figure 2 above It was found in the study that Intermediate learners frequently encounter verb agreement issues as when intermediates cross the initial phase of learning they start speaking

English and able to pick the sentences that sound natural in English speaking. Some errors such as subject-verb agreement doesn't sound unnatural while speaking therefore intermediates unable fetch such errors.

Table 3: This table provides an in-depth overview of the prevalent grammatical errors encountered by advanced ESL learners. Each error type is exemplified with instances and rectified alternatives:

Error Classification	Incorrect Sentence	Correct Sentence
Incorrect Articles	He is a MLA	He is an MLA
Incorrect Pronoun Order	You, me and Kerry are going to attend his birthday party.	You, Kerry and I are going to attend his birthday party.
Noun Number Agreement	Maria is one of the best student, who is doing excellent in the examination.	Maria is one of the best students, who are doing excellent in the examination.
Conditional Form	If I was rich, I helped him.	If I were rich, I would help him.
Tense Consistency	Our teacher will take our test tomorrow.	Our teacher will give us a test tomorrow.
Subject-Verb Agreement	The great politician and chief guest are coming for flag hoisting.	The great politician and chief guest is coming for flag hoisting.

The article "a" is used before words that begin with a consonant sound, while "an" is used before words that begin with a vowel sound. Although "MLA" starts with a consonant letter, it is pronounced starting with the vowel sound /ε/, so the correct form is "an MLA."Whenever three nouns or pronouns, joint together and used as a subject, the formula of 231(2nd person, 3rd person, 1st person) is used. One of the" implies that Maria is part of a group, so the noun should be plural ("students"). For unreal or hypothetical situations in the present or future, the subjunctive mood "were" is used instead of "was." "Take" is more often used from the student's perspective therefore there should be "give" instead of "take." "the great politician and chief guest" refers to the same person as there is no article is used along with "chief guest", then it should take a singular verb "is." Advanced learners, despite their higher proficiency, frequently make noun-number agreement errors, such as incorrect pluralization or singularization of nouns reflected in figure 3. As the sentence shown in the table sounds naturally correct when spoken but actually grammatically wrong.

Factors Influencing Grammatical Errors among ESL Learners

Grammatical errors among ESL learners are influenced by various factors. Firstly, learners' first language (L1) significantly shapes their English language production, leading to errors due to differences in syntax and structure Additionally, learners undergo interlanguage development, blending elements of their L1 with English, which may result in transitional errors. Individual differences in language learning aptitude also play a role, with higher aptitude learners demonstrating fewer errors. Effective instructional methodologies and strategies can mitigate errors by providing structured language input and opportunities for practice. Moreover, the amount and quality of language exposure, coupled with learners' motivation and attitudes, impact their engagement and willingness to self-correct errors. By understanding and addressing these factors, educators can support ESL learners in improving their grammatical accuracy and proficiency in English. Interactions with peers and social dynamics within language learning environments can impact the occurrence of grammatical errors. Peer feedback, collaboration, and emulation of language models can influence learners' language production and error correction processes. Studies have shown that learners may adopt grammatical patterns and error tendencies observed in their peer group, highlighting the role of social dynamics in language acquisition.

Evolution of grammatical errors as learners progress from beginner to advanced

At the beginner level, learners often simplify grammatical structures and overgeneralize rules in an attempt to grasp basic communication. They may rely heavily on simple sentence structures and use of basic verb tenses, resulting in errors such as missing articles, incorrect verb conjugations, and confusion of word order. For example a beginner learner might say, "She go store yesterday," simplifying the verb tense and omitting the auxiliary verb "to" in "went to the store yesterday." As learners progress to intermediate levels, they begin to experiment with more complex grammatical structures and expressions. While they may demonstrate greater accuracy in basic sentence construction, they are more likely to make errors in using subordinate clauses, complex verb forms, and idiomatic expressions. For example, an intermediate learner might say, "I am study English since two years," incorrectly using the present continuous tense instead of the present perfect continuous tense to indicate an ongoing action. Advanced learners exhibit a higher degree of grammatical accuracy overall but may still encounter errors related to nuanced grammar rules and idiomatic expressions. However, their errors tend to be more sporadic and context-dependent, reflecting a deeper understanding of language structure and a willingness to take linguistic risks. For instance, an

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advanced learner might say, "The reason because I'm late is because of the traffic," mistakenly using "because" twice in the same sentence when one instance would suffice.

Implications for Language Teaching

Effective language teaching entails a multifaceted approach that addresses the evolving needs of learners at different proficiency levels. Teachers must employ targeted instructional strategies tailored to learners' specific error patterns, fostering error awareness and correction through systematic feedback and explanation. An integrated skills approach, which combines grammar instruction with meaningful language use in reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities, enhances learners' comprehension and production of grammatical structures. Contextualized learning activities promote authentic language use, while creating a positive and supportive learning environment encourages risk-taking and learner autonomy. Formative assessment practices provide valuable insights into learners' progress, guiding instructional decisions and facilitating continuous language growth. Additionally, ongoing professional development ensures that teachers remain abreast of best practices in grammar instruction and language pedagogy, ultimately enhancing their effectiveness in supporting learners' language development journey.

Conclusion

This research has explored the grammatical errors experienced by ESL learners at various proficiency levels, illuminating the specific challenges inherent in their language acquisition process. Recognizing these errors is crucial for educators, as it allows for the implementation of targeted teaching strategies that can effectively guide and support learners on their linguistic development path. The study highlights the importance of continuous assessment and constructive feedback, which are essential for systematically addressing grammatical inaccuracies and enhancing overall language fluency. By focusing on the particular needs of learners at different stages, educators can facilitate a more accurate and fluent use of the language, ultimately leading to more successful language acquisition outcomes. Moreover, the findings highlight the necessity of tailoring grammatical instruction to match the proficiency levels of ESL learners. Beginner learners benefit from intensive practice on tense usage, intermediate learners need reinforcement in verb agreement, and advanced learners require deeper exploration of noun-number agreement rules. Future research should continue to explore the cognitive and contextual factors contributing to these grammatical errors, further refining instructional strategies to meet the evolving needs of ESL learners

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