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ANALYZING THE ERRORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS AT MORPHOLOGICAL LEVEL AND STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THEIR LANGUAGE LEARNING SKILL

J. Preethi

Post Graduate Department of English

Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous), Periyakulam-625601, India

Abstract

Communication in English is unavoidable at this present scenario. Though the importance of learning English is clearly understood by the students, they are unaware of their errors they commit and they are unconscious sometimes. In order to make them aware to avoid their errors, the researcher analyses their errors at the present paper and tries to suggest remedial measures to improve their learning skill. It is essential that the learner of English should focus upon the acquisition of words. This paper concentrates on Morphology which deals with the study of words. Morphology is the science and study of the smallest grammatical units of language, and of their formation into words, including inflection, derivation and composition. It is very important for ESL (English as Second Language) learners to have adequate morphology in order to reduce the occurrence and frequency of morphological errors in their spoken and written English.

Key words: Errors, second language, suffix, affix, derivation, composition

1. Introduction

Learning words in any second or foreign language program involves not only learning the meanings of the words, but also learning how these words are used appropriately in linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural contexts. Communication in any language is impossible without some mastery of the words used in that language. It is mainly through using words that we compose and express our thoughts to others. A second language learner of English is required not only to focus upon the sentence structures but also upon the acquisition of words. Often, the learner seeks to learn the words before even attempting to understand and use the sentences.

Morphology is the science and study of the smallest grammatical units of language, and of their formation into words, including inflection, derivation and composition. According to Dorfman, morphology is the study of the ways and methods of grouping sounds into sound-complexes or words, of definite, distinct, conventional meaning. Bloomfield calls it the study of the constructions in which sound forms appear among the constituents. Broadly speaking, morphology is the study of the patterns of word-forms.

In morphology, the meaningful unit is called as morpheme. It is divided into two types known as free-morphemes and bound-morphemes. The morpheme that can stand by itself is called a free morpheme and the one that cannot stand-alone is called bound-morpheme. The bound forms that can be added to the free forms are called affixes. The affixes are of three types namely, prefix, suffix and infix. The infixes are not available in English. The different kinds of suffixes are plural suffixes in nouns, genitive or possessive suffixes, case suffixes, suffixes in present tense, past tense, and past participle etc., degree suffixes in adjectives and verbs and pre-nominal inflections.

It is very important for ESL learners to have adequate morphology in order to reduce the occurrence and frequency of morphological errors in their spoken and written English. These are different phonetic realizations of the plural morpheme in English. There are many variations.

SINGULAR	PRON	PLURAL	PRON
cup	/kʌp/	cups	/kʌps/
club	/klʌb/	clubs	/klʌbz/
church	/tʃɜ:rtʃ/	churches	/tʃɜ:rtʃiz/
rose	/rəʊz/	roses	/rəʊziz/
drum	/drʌm/	drums	/drʌmz/

In this, the words which end in voiceless sounds /-s/, won't get change in pronunciation. The words which take '-es' as its plural marker will be pronounced by /-iz/ sound and the remaining words end in voiced sounds and nasals /b, d, g, m, and n/ are pronounced by /z/ sound. So the phonetic transcriptions indicate that the plural morphemes have three allomorphs. This is because of having phonological conditions.

Similarly, the past tense morpheme -ed has the same rules.

- i. If the word ends with voiceless sounds, the past tense marker will be /-t/ in pronunciation but not in writing.

talked - /tɔ:kt/

- ii. If the word ends with voiced sounds, the past tense marker will be /d/ in pronunciation but not in writing.

Bagged - /bægd/

clapped - /klæpt/

- iii. The words end with -t and -d in the final syllable of a word will take /-id/ as its past tense marker in pronunciation but not in writing.

pocketed - /pokitid/

robbed - /rɒbd/

depended - /dependid/

2. Classification of Errors

2.1. Intralingual Errors

Many of the errors are caused by incomprehensive understanding and incorrect application of the target language during the period of internalization. These errors are called intralingual and development errors, which will be discussed in terms of overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and hypothesized false concepts.

2.2. Misspelling

According to the data, misspelling plays an important role in errors. Some misspelling errors are surely due to bad memorization or generalization. The rural students get confused even in using the simple words in a sentence. For example, *These lines are taken from the poem "Ode to the West Wind"*.

The students commit errors even in the spelling for the word *lines* in the repeating sentence in English. Instead of *lines*, they write *lions*.

This is due to memorization and they thought to write something but ended with a different meaning.

pounds- ponds

museum- meusim /meusium

culture- cluture

dujing - during

complant- complaint

pround - proud

amoung- amoung

experement - experiment

They commit errors in writing because they are unfamiliar with some words and replace with familiar vocabulary. For example, in the word 'bud', the rural students learn this vocabulary at collegiate level only, so they do not try to memorize the spelling of the new word. Instead of memorizing, they replace the spelling of the word which is familiar to them. They are not conscious about the change in meaning.

2.3. Suppletion

Replacement of the base by an entirely new form is called suppletion. In some cases, the base is modified to such an extent that no variant of suffix seems to occur in the inflected form, the base being replaced by a new form. Many pronominal inflections have this phenomenon *good, better, best; bad, worse, worst*.

The students commit errors in irregular forms. For example, they get confused in the words which are given below.

Word	Correct	Incorrect
get	got	gotten
go	went	went
forget	forgot	forget

2.4. Affixation

Oxford English Readers Dictionary (1981:19) defines affix as a letter or a group of letters, which are added to the beginning or at the end to make a new word. Affixes are generally added either before or after the base form. The affixes that come before are prefixes and those that come after are suffixes. Since a word has been defined as a free form with or without bound forms, the structure of an English word can be systematically known as

BF + FF + BF

BF stands for *Bound forms* and FF stands for *free forms*. The suffixes are generally divided into two classes a) those have grammatical functions b) the others that are used to derive new words from the base form. (Inflectional suffixes and Derivational suffixes.)

impossible 'im-' stands for prefix

surely '-ly' stands for suffix

But both /im-/ and /-ly/ come under affix. The students often commit errors in adding affixes. They get confused in forming negative forms.

Incorrect	Correct
Untolerable	Intolerable
ununiform	regular uniform
unuseful	Not useful
disregular	irregular
Innecessary	Unnecessary
inavailability	Unavailability
non-sensitive	insensitive

At morphological level, the students get confused with the bound forms. They make errors while trying to negative forms. In adding prefix, they commit errors due to the lack of knowledge in the target language. The suffixes -un, in-, im-, and non- are all interchanged. The majority of the students have no thorough knowledge of the rule of affixing 'un' or 'in' to form an opposite.

2.5. Inconsistency of the target language

The students commit errors due to the inconsistency of the English language whereas in their mother tongue, they do not find this kind of inconsistency. They look the paradigm of other words and use their own idea which leads to create a wrong word. This is explained by the following examples.

Students from rural say, *The one who cooks is called cooker*

Word	Correct	Incorrect
Write	writer	
Cook	cook	cooker
Drink	Drunkard	Drinker
Stitch	Tailor	Stitcher

The students often commit errors in adding the suffix 'er' to the verb in order to get the noun form. The students from rural background frame the word 'cooker' to refer the word 'cook' by looking at the pattern of noun forms such as 'writer, singer, dancer' which are derived from the verbs such as 'write, sing,

'dance' by simply adding '-er' after the verb stems. Similarly many forms are listed below related to this. They commit errors due to the analogical creation. Analogical creation means looking at the pattern, and framing some nouns from the verbs which exist. Many nouns in English are formed by adding suffix -er to the verb and thus we have the noun forms.

2.6. Irregularity in Plural suffix

The students lack the knowledge in the target language even though they learnt English as a second language from their third standard onwards. They are unaware of the irregular forms of plural. They do not memorize the rules of the grammar.

For example, they frame sentences wrongly.

*The room must be kept free of **dusts** and dirt.

*Many **peoples** have mobile phones.

In pairs such as *man-men; child-children, and cattle-cattle, deer-deer*, in which, a few students went wrong.

The forms such as *sheep, deer, cattle* have the same singular and the plural. However, the linguist, for the sake of uniformity assumes that the plural morpheme is present but its phonetic representation is zero. It has no visible marker in the environment.

In the pairs of *goose-geese, mouse-mice, louse-lice*, the plural vowel /i:/ replaces the /u:/ . Such a morpheme is called 'replacive' morpheme, because it involves the replacement of a vowel. This is not understood by the learners. So they commit errors.

2.7. Irregularity in Tense markers

The students are unaware of the English language exceptions in morphological rules. This is due to deficient teaching / learning of the second language.

Correct			Incorrect		
Pre.	Pa.	Pa.Part.	Pre.	Pa.	Pa.Part.
Go	went	gone	go	went	went

Cut cut cut cut cutted cutted
Keep kept kept keep kepted kepted
The main cause of morphological errors is due to deficient teaching /

learning. Inconsistency of the English language patterns also contributes this condition since the students and teachers do not find such patterns in their mother tongue.

2.8. Wrong Usage of Similar looking Words

The students often commit errors while they use words which are similar in appearance and spelling (orthography) in a sentence. This leads to misinterpretation in understanding of a listener. The given below sentences will convey this.

Our house is **arounded** by many trees. - **Incorrect**

Our house is **surrounded** by many trees - **Correct**

We **serviced** here for twenty years - **Incorrect**

We **served** here for twenty years. - **Correct**

These errors are caused by confusion between formally similar vocabularies. The learner is confused between terms of which are similar in form but different in meaning. The learner may be is unable to distinguish between different grammatical functions of similar items. When the learners lack adequate knowledge of vocabulary, they are confused between two related items.

2.9. Confusion in Usage of vocabulary

Some errors have occurred due to their lack of knowledge of the target language in using vocabulary while framing sentences.

I **lost** your class.- **Incorrect**

I **missed** your class.- **Correct**

I have been **describing** the girl for the last twenty years.- **Incorrect**

I have been **admiring** the girl for the last twenty years.- **Correct**

The students do not know the usage of vocabulary. They lack knowledge in understanding where to use certain vocabulary and how to use them. This is because they use English-Tamil Dictionary to learn vocabulary. The meaning which is given in the dictionary leads them to the wrong usage.

2.10. Errors made by wrong insertion of past tense markers

The students are not thorough with the Past tense and Past participle of irregular forms. They must be trained to memorize the three forms of the verbs which is the basis for framing grammatically correct sentences. Many students commit errors on these because they add -ed simply after the stem. They feel that the morph 'ed' stands for all past tense marker. They are not aware of the irregular forms.

Word	Incorrect	Correct
Say	sayed	said
Cry	cryed	cried
Telecast	telecasted	telecast

2.11. Errors arising from making uncountable nouns into countable nouns

The students commit errors in adding the plural marker -s to uncountable nouns also. They have deficient learning in this. They know the rule of insertion of -s to a singular word to make a plural. But they fail to understand that the uncountable nouns will not take the plural marker -s.

Word	Incorrect	Correct
Rice	* Rices	Rice
vocabulary	* Vocabularies	vocabulary
Glossary	*Glossaries	Glossary

2.12. Confusion between the verbs and the nouns with a slight difference

The errors are committed by the undergraduate students when they are compelled to use certain nouns and verbs which has a slight difference in spelling.

Verbs	Nouns	Incorrect
advises	advice	advices
Packs	packages	packages
performs	performance	performances

2.13. Errors caused by the wrong use of suffixes in degrees of comparison

The students confuse the rule that adjectives of one syllable take -er and -est and other adjectives will take 'most'. They make errors like difficulter, and beautifuler. This is caused when the learners adopt simplification of rules.

great - greater
difficult -difficulter
beautiful - beautifuller

2.14. Errors caused by the wrong use of suffix by adding '-ly'

The students memorize the rule that adjectives take -ly in all places. Thus they commit errors in some of the words. When the suffix '-ly' is added to the form, the noun class becomes adjective. The learners keep this in their mind but they apply the same for all the forms.

Incorrect	Correct
* fastly	fast
*joyily	joyfully
*boyly	boyish

These errors are due to applying the same rule for irregular forms also.

The morphological errors are caused by various factors. They are roughly evaluated as

- Inconsistency of the language
- Lack of knowledge of rules
- Overgeneralization
- Misapplication of rules
- First language interference

The main cause of morphological errors is interpreted as the inconsistency of the English language.

Secondly though such variations prevail in morphology, the learners are unaware of these specific rules. In their secondary school learning, the students are not given proper training of morphological rules. The other causes are the over generalization and misapplication of rules. What they have already known is over generalized to all situations and contexts and they misapply certain rules. Most errors are caused by the first language interference. Though they have a very little knowledge of target language, first language interferes into the complete learning.

Morphological errors in English can be eradicated first by making them learn those rules. Rural students make more errors when compared to urban students. This shows that the mother tongue has much influence over the learning of morphology in second language. When they enter into college the students are given an intensive bridge course. But also it should be rectified by making them to analyze their morphological errors. If they are aware of their errors, they will try to avoid them.

3. Strategies to rectify Errors at Morphological Level

Jill Hadfield (1992: 136) proposes some of the following suggestions to motivate students in the process of learning:

- Warm-up activities for the first week of term
- Individual learning styles and group strategies
- Thinking about groups: group strengths, individual contributions
- Staying positive
- Ensuring participation
- A sense of direction: setting, assessing, and resetting goals

Jeremy Harmer (1991:149) focuses his attention on both oral and written practice through activities. The majority of activities focus on accuracy, with its communicative element built into them. This element is ensured by more life-like (four-phase) drilling, information gap, or personalization and localization. The oral activities comprise seven categories:

- Reaching a consensus
- Discussion
- Relaying instructions
- Communicative games
- Problem-solving
- Talking about yourself
- Simulation and role play

Jeremy Harmer (1999:163) focuses on five written communicative activities:

- Relaying instructions
- Writing reports and advertisements

- Co-operative writing
- Exchanging letters and
- Writing journals

He also stresses on vocabulary teaching. He (ibid 202) insists that after a theoretical introduction on how to select vocabulary and what it means to 'know' a word, the teacher has to design activities based on functionality of the word to practice word meaning, word use, and word form and word grammar.

Vocabulary Learning

Ellis (1993:10) proposes "...we devise activities which encourage learners with the help of the teacher, to try to discover a particular grammar rule, to learn about a grammar point for themselves." If teachers produce materials based on their difficult areas and error possibility areas, it will be more suitable for controlled practice exercises.

According to the needs of students at lower level, the approach must be focused. In terms of input, they obviously need to expand their knowledge of lexis and grammar in English substantially. They have to be aware that discourse is sequenced and organized as synonymy and opposition and that the meaning of a text may not be explicit, but needs to be inferred. They need to expand their overall language awareness.

Simon Borg (1999:157) suggests some ideas on how teachers make sense to grammar teaching:

- Students expect grammar work. Formal instruction addresses these expectations, and eases the concerns students would develop in the absence of such work.
- Grammar work based on the errors students make during fluency activities validates such activities in the students' eyes, and encourages initially reluctant students to accept these activities more enthusiastically.
- Students like to be made aware of their errors. Grammar teaching creates this awareness, which also improves students' ability to monitor and self-correct their use of language.

Vocabulary teaching is a very important step. Even as we focus on the mastery of language skills and grammar, adequate attention must be paid to the

mastery of words in English. Words are learned in many ways. Reading is an important means to learn new words.

Teachers may have to provide some kind of information, such as stylistic nuances, in which they may want to write the information on the black board and have students copy it. Care should be taken not to spoon feed too much information to students, as their individual efforts to discover and develop meaning enhance both their learning of vocabulary and their independence from the teacher.

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