

English Verb Formation Competency of Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

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English language competency of undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities has become a necessity in the face of its significance in the higher education sphere. It is also important in terms of ensuring reconciliation and establishing relationship between communities as English is the lingua franca or the link language in the country. In this context, the accuracy of verb formation is an important aspect of sentence construction and overall language competency of learners. Thus, the present investigation focuses attention on the competency of English verb formation of the undergraduates in Sri Lanka. The research sample was selected from the undergraduates of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University of Ruhuna. Hundred answer scripts were selected as the research sample. The grammatical errors were analyzed syntactically and eleven types of errors in verb formation were identified, and identified errors were the main cause of malformation of sentences.

Overgeneralization of grammar rules, incomplete application of rules, ignorance of rules and restrictions were found to be the major causes of errors in verb formation in the undergraduates' writing. The results of the study indicated that only 51.46% of the sample is competent in the formation of verbs. Therefore, the study proposes methods to minimize Sri Lankan undergraduates' errors of verb formation. Enhancing the basic knowledge of verb formation, facilitating students' clear identification and usage of grammar rules according to tense and aspect and ensuring regular practice of language are suggested as essential requirements for minimizing errors in verb formation.

Key words: lingua franca, competency, verb formation, tense and aspect, regular practice of language

Introduction

English is a global language which aggrandizes the opportunities of higher education in most of academic disciplines around the world. For Sri Lankans, English language is regarded as the link language or the lingua franca. Beside the notion that English language still upholds a demanding position in the post-colonial Sri Lanka, English language has engendered a timely felicitous urging in the present social arena. It is language that unifies and binds a nation when the natives use different vernacular languages.

Thus, in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual setting, language plays a crucial role in responding group interests of people who live in one country. The protracted war in Sri Lanka and the lessoned learned from the past experience of conflict highlighted the necessity of mutual understanding among the different language speakers those who are separated or parted due to the language barrier (Chitta Ranjan de Silva, Amrith Rohan Perera, Karunarathne Hangawatte, Manohari Ramanathan, Chadirapal Chanmugam, Maxwell Parakrama Paranagama, Mohamed Thofeek, 2011). Further, the essential requirement of trilingualism in Sri Lanka is convinced by the establishment of Ten Year national Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka (Fernando, 2011) to ensure reconciliation and enhance sustainable peace within the nation. In this scenario, achieving competency of English language has become an indispensable certitude for Sri Lankans, especially for the undergraduates who are strive for aspiring educational goals which will ultimately reflect on the outcomes of the future events of the

country. Therefore, one must be accurate in using English language components in order to achieve its language competency. Accordingly, the evaluation of English verb formation competency will be beneficial sequel not only as a measurement to the field of education but also as a supportive fact that connotes long-lasting socio-political impacts to the entire society.

English Language in Sri Lankan Universities

There are thirteen Universities in Sri Lanka which provide higher education opportunities for the youth those who successfully excel in their G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination. There are 15 universities which are directly under the authority of University Grant Commission while four other universities which are under three other ministries. English is not yet considered a pre-requisite to university entrance although students are expected to sit for a general English paper at Advanced level Examination. The average student who enters the university has low competence level in English language due to the identification of many shortcomings in the national school curriculum and its difficulties and its difficulties in implementing them (Karunaratne 2003). The establishment of English Language Teaching Units and English language Teaching Departments provide a wide service of providing General English knowledge to the undergraduates in all the faculties either as ongoing English courses for continuous academic years or for a limited period of time as intensive English courses. The primary intention of these courses is to assist the undergraduates with their English so that they can function effectively in their respective disciplines. A pass in English is compulsory for these undergraduates in all faculties except limited number of courses offered by some faculties. The University Test for English Language tries to maintain the standards of English language teaching-learning system in the country along with the international standards while providing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

Verbs in English Language

Effective English language communication usually requires that each sentence contains a subject and a verb. Verbs are applied to a grammatically distinct word classes in English language. The accuracy of English verb formation is compulsory in achieving grammatical competency of the language to be proficient in English language. Verbs are parts of speech in English. A verb conveys an action, an occurrence or a state of being. The study reveals that the lack of knowledge in basic verbs classes and the ignorance of the affiliated grammar rules degrade one's competency level in verb formation.

On the other hand, verbs in English describe the action (aspect) and state while conveying (tense) the time. The English tense-aspect has basically two morphologically distinct tenses; present and past. Tense refers to the absolute location of an event or action in time, either the present or past. It is denoted by the inflection of the verb where some of the undergraduates in the sample study show that they are incompetent in grammatically correct verb formation.

Verb Formation Errors

As presented above verb formation errors can be classified according to two major sections.

Verb formation errors in basic verb classes

Verb formation errors in time and aspect

Verb Formation Errors in Basic Verb Classes

A lexical verb is the main verb of the sentence. An auxiliary (also called helping verb) serves to give additional meaning to the main or lexical verb following it. Lexical and auxiliary verbs are found with some errors in the research sample. The undergraduates have used both types of verbs with lack of basic knowledge about them. They can be summarized as follows in four categories.

Lexical verbs with inappropriate verbs

Transitive verbs and Intransitive verbs with errors

Ditransitive and Intensive verbs with Errors

Auxiliary verbs with inappropriate verbs

Some of the undergraduates in the sample do not aware about the usage of lexical verbs. Therefore, sometimes undergraduates have not used lexical verbs in sentence as a main verb.

Parents are send me money.

My brother is owns a house.

The above examples show how the undergraduates have used lexical verbs along with unnecessary auxiliary verbs which are inappropriate for grammatically correct sentences. In both examples, the verbs are lexical verbs which do not require any auxiliary verb. But in the other example, the undergraduate has used the lexical verb 'send' along with the auxiliary verb 'are' while in the next example, the undergraduate has used 'is' along with the correct form of lexical verb 'owns'. This shows that the undergraduate has not distinguished the grammar rules relevant to lexical verbs and auxiliary verbs.

Transitive verbs and intransitive verbs with errors are also notable in this study. A transitive verb is an action verb and it requires a direct object to complete its meaning in the sentence. In other words, the action of the verb is transferred to the object directly. But the following example depicts the confusion of using transitive verbs grammatically acceptable manner.

They are cried me.

The undergraduate has used an intransitive verb with the object in the construction which is grammatically wrong. The verb 'cry' is an intransitive verb which cannot be used with a direct object or complement. The language user seems to be unaware about the basic rules relevant to intransitive verbs. The sentence ends with the verb or is modified by an adverb or adverb phrase rather than being transferred to some person or object. Typically, an adverb or prepositional phrase modifies an

intransitive verb or the verb ends the sentence.

My father was died very soon.

I was cried by the other seniors.

The example 15 is a sentence without a direct object that needs an intransitive verb in past tense. But the undergraduate has used the verb with a 'be' verb in past tense along with the intransitive verb 'died' which is modified by the adverb phrase. On the other hand, intransitive verbs cannot be transformed into passive voice but an undergraduate had tried to use intransitive verb in passive form to convey the idea that "The other seniors made me cry".

The usage of ditransitive and intensive verbs are also found with errors in the sample study. A ditransitive verb is one that takes two complements, a direct object and an indirect object at the same time.

He was give her the letter yesterday.

In the above example, 'he' is the subject, 'the letter' is the direct object, what he gave, and 'her' is the indirect object, the person he gave it to. But the undergraduate has used grammatically wrong verbs- instead of making a ditransitive verb in this sentence with two objects; the verb that the undergraduate has used is 'was give'. In the place of past tense lexical verb in active voice the undergraduate has used 'be' auxiliary verb. Analogously, the following example depicts wrong formation of verb.

My mother bought is me a new sari.

Unfitting additional 'be' form verb is used instead of simple past verb in this active voice sentence. The above examples have shown that the undergraduates have not clearly understood that although two passive voice sentences can be derived from a ditransitive sentence, two types of verbs such as 'was give' and 'bought is' cannot be used in ditransitive sentences.

The post office in front of our hostel.

Our university a good place for us to study.

The above examples do not have intensive verbs. The clause element used after an intensive verb is a complement or adverbial. The verb 'be' is used in this manner is called copula (or linking verb). The intensive verb 'is' can be used for all the above examples.

Having discussed the basic verb classes and the common errors that can be exemplified by the research sample shows that although it might be quite difficult for a new language learner to grasp the linguistic terms, the function of them and the particular knowledge of their usage is essential to create a better foundation for achieving grammatical competency in verb formation.

Verb Formation Errors in Time and Aspect

The process of verb formation plays a vital role in the sentence formation according to the tense and aspect. Most languages have devices to indicate the time of action or state denoted by the verb of a sentence, in relation to the time that is referred to. Although there is a relationship between time and tense, they are not the same. Time is a universal concept while tense is a language matter. Further, relevant to the grammar rules, language learners have to follow certain set of rules when constructing sentences to construct grammatically correct sentences. In that process, frequent common errors in verb formation have been detected. The errors can be classified in to eleven main classes.

Inappropriate verb repetition

Unfit insertion of 'be' verbs

Improper form of verbs after do/does

Omission of has/have/had before past participle verb

Absence of past participle verb after has/have

Malformed verbs after model verbs

Omission of be before past participle verb

Inappropriate verb repetition

Verbs in a sentence are formed according to the time and aspect. There are accepted grammatical rules that should be followed by the English language learners. Despite the grammar rules, one cannot omit or insert verbs withholding the grammar rules to form grammatically correct sentences. The absence of following those grammar rules can be seen by the following examples.

He did not found his purse.

Two past tense verbs are used in the above example. The language learner has neither aware about that the verb 'found' is the past tense of 'find' nor he has the knowledge that a single verb is sufficient in simple past tense to denote the past verb.

I will going to do my exam next month.

The above example shows the confusion of verb formation to refer future times. But the undergraduate has not shown a clear understanding of using the model verb [will + root verb] or [be + going to + root verb]. The undergraduate has used both the methods to form one construction to denote future meaning by incomplete application of grammar rules of future meanings. In spite of that, the 'will' cannot be used with a present participle form of model verb in a grammatically correct sentence. Further, there are some other types of errors that have been occurred in the formation of future tense.

Our batch is will come to the university next month.

Simple future tenses need only the model verb “will” and the main verb in the root form. But the above example shows unnecessary inclusion of auxiliary verb ‘is’ in between the subject and the model verb ‘will’.

Unfit insertion of ‘be’ verbs

According to English grammar in active voice sentences ‘be’ verb is used in progressive tenses along with the present participle verb. In passive voice sentences simple present, simple past, perfect tenses progressive tenses are used. Apart from that ‘be’ is used in complements. According to the identified error patterns in the sample, there are two categories of verb formation errors. They can be demonstrated as [Use of be + root verb instead of root verb] and [Use of be + root verb + ed instead of root verb + ed].

Improper form of verbs after ‘do/does’

The auxiliary verb ‘does’ is used when the subject of the sentence is singular and the verb ‘do’ is used when the subject is plural. Further, the addition of ‘-s’ or ‘-es’ is not needed when the tense is denoted by the proper auxiliary verb. But the study reveals that some of the undergraduates have not been able to understand that grammar rule and they have tried to formulate verbs in singular forms in both places of verbs in the same sentence. This error pattern is also common in the selected sample.

He does not cares for his health.

I do has to work hard today onwards!

The undergraduates’ ignorance of grammar rule [does (+ not) + have/root verb] is highlighted by the examples.

Omission of ‘has/have/had’ before past participle verb

Perfect tenses indicate slightly more complex time relations and are generally used to express completed actions. Comparatively less number of the undergraduates of the sample has tried to use perfect tenses. Among the errors, the inability to identify the accurate tense type (whether it is a present perfect and past perfect) and lack of knowledge for verb formation are prominent. The omission of the auxiliary verbs is exemplified as follows.

Nishani given me many notes.

Some friends taken new dictionaries.

The above three examples do not have appropriate auxiliary verbs. Hence, the constructions are grammatically wrong. Although participle verbs have been used, they lack the required knowledge to use auxiliary verb before the past participle verb in the perfective aspect. A participle verb cannot be used without an auxiliary verb as they are non-finite verbs. These examples show the incompetency of to construct grammatically correct perfect tenses. These examples embody the fact that some of

the undergraduates are incompetent in verb formation relevant to perfect tenses.

Absence of past participle verb after 'has/have'

The sample proofs that instead of using the past participle form of verb, the other forms of verbs have been used in the absence of past participle verb. In past participle verb formation, the auxiliary verbs need the non finite verbs. Past participle verb cannot be replaced by simple past verbs. But these examples denote that some of the undergraduates have incorrectly used past participle verbs.

We have took the responsibility of painting the posters.

Some monks have disrobe at the end of first year.

These types of grammatical errors are very common in the undergraduates' attempt of forming present and past perfect sentences. Most of the time they have not used past participle verbs but they have used other forms of verbs with lack of grammatical knowledge of constructing perfect tenses.

Malformed verbs after model verbs

All the auxiliary verbs except be, 'do' and 'have' are called modals. Unlike other auxiliary verbs, modals only exist in their helping form; they cannot act alone as the main verb in a sentence. The modal auxiliary verbs are always followed by the base form.

Now I can saw the sea every day.

I can dancing very beautifully.

The above two examples denote that the verb forms are not only in the base forms but also in multiple forms at the similar requirement. These grammatical errors reflect the undergraduates' inability to form accurate verb forms after model verbs. Further, these examples show that they have no concrete knowledge about the formation of verbs after model verbs.

Omission of be before past participle verb

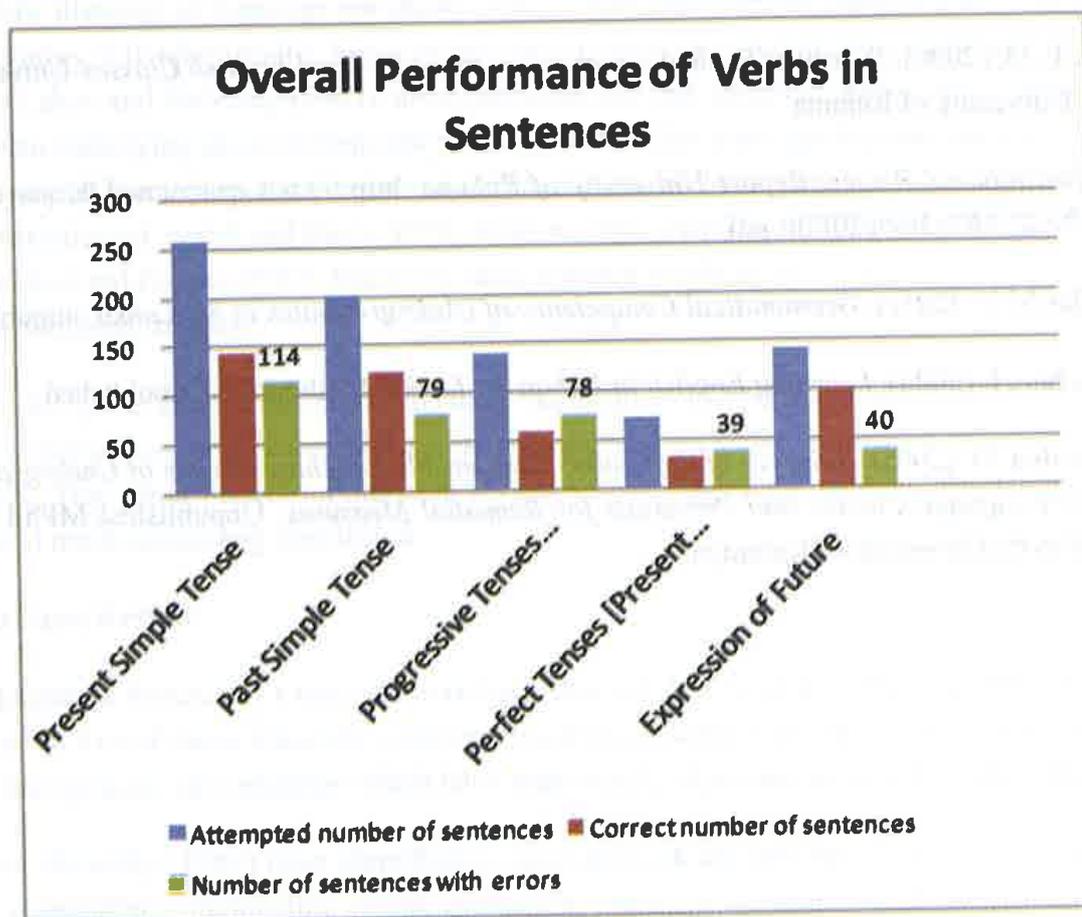
These errors occur in perfect tenses; present perfect tense or past perfect tenses. Participle verbs require auxiliary verbs to convey a meaningful message. But many of the undergraduates in the sample have not used the auxiliary verbs where necessary.

I born in Ampara.

The example symbolizes that some of the undergraduates do not have the knowledge about the passive tenses according to the grammatical structures. The undergraduates have used only past participle form of verbs as the verb in the sentence.

Discussion

The study based on the verb formation competency of the undergraduates unveils that there are eleven types of errors in the verb formation which are common in the selected sample. Due to the basic errors of verb formation, 48.54% undergraduates have not been able to achieve competency in verb formation while their performance in basic tenses can be demonstrated as follows.



Over generalization, ignorance and confusion of grammar rules as well as incomplete application of rules found as the major causes of incorrect verb formation.

Conclusion

English language competency of undergraduates in Sri Lanka has become a timely necessity with much significance with its feasible access and amenable opportunities to higher education. The objective of ameliorating the English language competency of the undergraduates focuses to examine the English verb formation competency of the undergraduates which is an imperative segment in achieving accuracy in language. Thus, the results of the study propose methods to minimize Sri Lankan undergraduates' errors of verb formation. Enhancing the basic knowledge of verb formation, facilitating students' clear identification and usage of grammar rules according to tense and aspect and ensuring regular practice of language are suggested as essential requirements for minimizing errors in verb formation.

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