

DEALING WITH GRAMMAR ERRORS

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Abstract: *This paper explores the challenges faced by English language learners in dealing with grammar errors and provides strategies to address and overcome these challenges. The discussion delves into common types of grammar errors encountered by learners, including subject-verb agreement, verb tense consistency, word order, and punctuation. The paper highlights the importance of understanding the underlying rules of English grammar and offers practical tips for identifying and correcting grammar errors. Strategies such as proofreading, seeking feedback from peers or instructors, using grammar checkers, and engaging in targeted practice exercises are discussed as effective ways to improve grammar proficiency. The paper emphasizes the role of consistent practice, self-correction, and ongoing learning in enhancing grammar skills and achieving greater accuracy in written and spoken English communication.*

Key words: *common errors, proofreading, feedback, eliminating mistakes*

Introduction:

All students make mistakes at various stages of their language learning. It is part of the natural process they are going through and occurs for a number of reasons. In the first place, the students' own language may get in the way. This is most obviously the case with 'false friends' - those words which sound or look the same but mean something different such as 'assistir' in Spanish which means 'attend' in English and not 'assist'. False friends are more common where the student's language shares a common heritage with English (i.e. Romance languages).

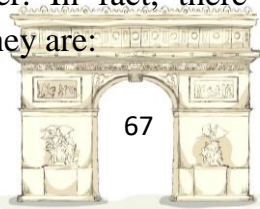
Interference from the students' own language is not the only reason for making mistakes. There is a category which a number of people call 'developmental' errors. These are the result of conscious or subconscious processing which frequently overgeneralises a rule, as, for example, when. A student, having learnt to say things like 'I have to go', then starts saying 'I must to go', not realising that the use of 'to' is not permitted with 'must'.

Some mistakes are deep-seated and need constant attention (ask experienced teachers about the third-person singular of the present simple!). While these are examples of 'errors', others seem to be more like 'slips' made while students are simultaneously processing information and they are therefore easier to correct quickly.

Whatever the reason for 'getting it wrong', it is vital for the teacher to realise that all students make mistakes as a natural and useful way of learning. By working out when and why things have gone wrong, they hear more about the language they are studying.

Common Grammar Errors

Just like Identifying Sentence Errors questions, Improving Sentences questions cover the same grammar over and over. In fact, there are following recurring errors on Improving Sentences questions. They are:



1. Passive voice
 2. Run-on sentences
 3. Misplaced modifiers
 4. Parallelism
 5. Using more words (Wordiness)
 6. Conjunctions
 7. Fragments
 8. Coordination and subordination
 9. Pronouns
1. Passive Voice

In sentences that use the active voice, the subject does the action. For example, in the sentence My dog ate a bunch of grass, you immediately know who ate a bunch of grass: the dog. The passive voice, in contrast, identifies the performer of the action late, or even never. For example, the sentence A bunch of grass was eaten leaves the reader unsure of who or what did the eating. Writers tend to avoid using the passive voice because it creates weak, wordy sentences.

So, how do you know if you are dealing with a case of “the passives”? Usually, you’ll spot these words: is, was, were, are (or any other version of the verb to be) and the word by. If you see these words, ask yourself, What’s the action and who’s doing it? If the person (or entity) committing the action appears only at the end of the sentence, or doesn’t appear at all, you’ve got a passive voice whispering bland nothings in your ear.

After Timmy dropped his filthy socks in the hamper, the offensive garment was washed by his long-suffering father.

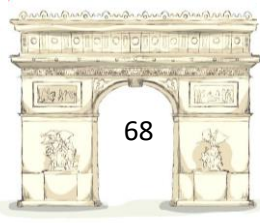
- (A) the offensive garment was washed by his long-suffering father
- (B) his long-suffering father washed the offensive garment
- (C) the washing of the offensive garment took place by his long-suffering father
- (D) long-suffering, the offensive garment was washed by his father
- (E) he left the offensive garment for his long-suffering father who washed it

There’s a was, a by, and the fact that you don’t know until the last word of this sentence who washed Timmy’s socks. The phrase was washed suggests that someone or something did the cleaning—a parent, a washing machine, a river in Egypt. The point is, you don’t know how the socks got washed.

In order to fix the passive voice, the performer of the action must get a place of prominence in the sentence and clear up what they’re doing. In the example above, the correct answer must make clear that Timmy’s father did the load of laundry. Both answers B and E fix the passive voice problem, but E is wordy and redundant, so B is the right answer.

2. Run-On Sentences

A run-on sentence results when two complete sentences get jammed together. Run-ons usually sound breathless, as if an excited child is telling a story. Here’s an example of a run-on sentence:



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I walked into the pet store and asked the clerk if she had any talking parrots, this made her roll her eyes.

The best way to test if a sentence is a run-on is to split the sentence in two and see if both halves of the sentence could function alone:

I walked into the pet store and asked the clerk if she had any talking parrots. This made her roll her eyes.

Because each half of this sentence is complete on its own, the two halves cannot be joined together with a comma.

Here are three ways to fix run-on sentences in Improving Sentences questions:

Method 1: Use a semicolon.

Method 2: Add a conjunction.

Method 3: Make the clauses relate clearly.

Method 1: Use a Semicolon

A semicolon (;) signals that both sides of the sentence are grammatically separate but closely related to one another.

I walked into the pet store and asked the clerk if she had any talking parrots; this made her roll her eyes.

Method 2: Add a Conjunction

Another method for correcting run-on sentences is adding conjunctions. Suppose you see this run-on sentence:

In her incredible eagerness to cheer her team to victory, Amy the cheerleader has lost her voice, therefore her performance at the games is a silent one.

If you add the conjunction and:

In her incredible eagerness to cheer her team to victory, Amy the cheerleader has lost her voice and therefore her performance at the games is a silent one.

The run-on disappears.

Method 3: Make the Clauses Relate Clearly

Sometimes sentences contain strange relationships among clauses that can obscure the meaning of the sentence. (A clause is just a bunch of words with a subject and a predicate). Here's an example:

The student council attempted to lure people to the dance with free food, most people attended the field hockey game.

This sentence suggests that despite the student council's efforts, people didn't go to the dance because they went to the field hockey game. You can correct this run-on sentence by adding a word that makes this relationship clear:

Although the student council attempted to lure people to the dance with free food, most people attended the field hockey game.

Okay, time for a real example:

The police reprimanded everyone at the graduation party, they didn't seem very sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year.

(A) at the graduation party, they didn't seem very sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year



(B) at the graduation party, seemingly the fact that it was our senior year did not make them sympathetic

(C) at the graduation party without being sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year

(D) at the graduation party they didn't, despite the fact that it was our senior year, seem very sympathetic

(E) at the graduation party; they didn't seem very sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year

A classic run-on. The two parts could easily stand alone:

The police reprimanded everyone at the graduation party. They didn't seem very sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year.

Notice that you could have corrected the question above by turning the second half into a subordinate clause:

Since they reprimanded everyone at the graduation party, the police didn't seem very sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year.

Alternatively, you could have inserted the word and between the two clauses:

The police reprimanded everyone at the party, and they didn't seem very sympathetic to the fact that it was our senior year.

The majority of Improving Sentence questions dealing with run-ons will require you to use one of the three methods we've discussed to fix the sentence.

Can teaching grammar eliminate grammatical errors?

Grammar teaching typically involves explaining rules like 'plural nouns in English are marked by the ending -s' so that we say one cat but two cat-s; or 'in English questions the auxiliary verb precedes the subject' e.g. 'is the baby sleeping'? Norris and Ortega 2008 conducted a meta-analysis of 49 studies and found that grammar teaching improves the grammatical accuracy of learners. The interpretation of this study is not straightforward though. Instruction does increase the learners' understanding of rules and their ability to spot errors in specific tasks. But it is less clear that it can improve their language long term. The reason is that knowledge of rules can exist independently of one's ability to speak the language. For example, I might, as an L2 speaker know that an -s is necessary at the end of 'like' in 'she likes chocolate' but still omit it when I speak. Just like I might know all the instructions or rules on how to ride a bike, but still cannot balance. Krashen 1981 recorded the spontaneous speech of a learner and then presented her with a transcript of her speech. The L2 speaker was able to correct her errors in the transcript. This example demonstrates that two distinct, though often conflated processes are involved in L2: language acquisition and language learning. Spontaneous L2 language use, which contains grammatical errors, reflects the unconscious knowledge of L2 learners and is the result of acquisition. The ability to self-correct errors reflects conscious L2 knowledge, which is the result of learning.

Krashen's distinction between (implicit) acquisition and (conscious) learning has underpinned debates regarding the place of grammar instruction in the L2 classroom.

There is no doubt that grammar teaching can improve the conscious knowledge of learners. It can be very helpful at beginner levels to de-mystify exotic or mysterious elements of the L2 as well as satisfy the natural curiosity language learners might have about their new language. It is a matter of debate whether grammar teaching can impact on (implicit) acquisition (van Patten 2016), yield long term effects and rid learners of their grammatical errors, especially at more advanced stages when learners rely much less on their conscious knowledge of rules and more on their implicit knowledge of their L2.

Strategies to Address Grammar Errors:

1. Understanding the Rules: To effectively address grammar errors, it is essential to have a solid understanding of the rules of English grammar. Invest time in learning the basic grammar principles and rules governing sentence structure, verb usage, and punctuation.

2. Proofreading: Develop the habit of proofreading your written work carefully before submission. Take the time to review your sentences for grammar errors and make necessary corrections. Reading your work aloud can help you identify awkward phrasing or grammatical inconsistencies.

3. Seeking Feedback: Don't hesitate to seek feedback from peers, teachers, or language tutors. Getting a second pair of eyes on your writing can help you spot grammar errors that you may have overlooked. Constructive feedback can also provide valuable insights for improvement.

4. Using Grammar Checkers: Take advantage of online grammar checkers and editing tools to identify and correct grammar errors in your writing. Tools like Grammarly or Hemingway Editor can help you pinpoint common mistakes and suggest corrections.

5. Engaging in Practice Exercises: Regular practice is key to improving your grammar skills. Engage in targeted grammar exercises that focus on specific areas of difficulty, such as subject-verb agreement or verb tense consistency. Practice writing sentences and paragraphs to reinforce your understanding of grammar rules.

Conclusion:

Dealing with grammar errors is a common challenge for English language learners, but with dedication and practice, it is possible to overcome these obstacles. By understanding the rules of English grammar, proofreading your work, seeking feedback, using grammar checkers, and engaging in targeted practice exercises, you can enhance your grammar proficiency and achieve greater accuracy in written and spoken communication. Remembering that consistent practice, self-correction, and ongoing learning are essential components of improving grammar skills and becoming a more confident English language learner.

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