Common Grammatical Syntactic Errors in Tree Diagrams Done by 6th Semester English-Language Majors at Tripoli University: An Analytic Study

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Abstract:
This analytic study focused on the identification of grammatical syntactic errors in Tree Diagrams, figuring out the underlying reasons for these errors, and addressing these errors through effective teaching strategies. Data were collected through assignments and tests required 6th semester English language students at Tripoli University to represent given sentences using Tree Diagrams. Study findings revealed that students encountered various types of syntactic errors in using Tree Diagrams to represent sentences. The most common errors included the incorrect placement of constituents in the Tree Diagrams, misidentification of the head of a phrase, and improper use of syntactic rules, such as subject-verb agreement. The underlying reasons for these errors were found to be the influence of Arabic syntax on English syntax, limited knowledge of English syntax, and the difficulty of mastering the syntactic rules of English. The study had some pedagogical implications that could contribute to the development of a better understanding of the syntactic difficulties faced by Arab students. It could also provide insights into how these difficulties could be addressed through the implementation of effective teaching strategies in EFL contexts by taking into account of students' linguistic backgrounds and possible challenges that may impede the smooth transfer of syntactic structures from one language to another.

Keywords: Sentence Structure, Error, Tree Diagram.

الأخطاء التركيبية النحوية الشائعة في مخططات الأشجار التي تم اجراؤها بواسطة الفصل الدراسي السادس للغة الإنجليزية بجامعة طرابلس: دراسة تحليلية

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الملخص

ركزت هذه الدراسة التحليلية على تحديد الأخطاء التركيبية النحوية في تخطيط الأشجار، ومعرفة الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه الأخطاء، ومعالجة هذه الأخطاء من خلال استراتيجيات تعليمية فعالة. وتم جمع البيانات من خلال المهام والاختبارات المطلوبة لطلبة الفصل السادس للغة الإنجليزية في جامعة طرابلس لتمثيل الأحكام الصادرة باستخدام رسومات الأشجار. وكشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب واجهوا أنواعاً مختلفة من الأخطاء التركيبية في استخدام الرسوم البيانية الشجرية لتمثيل الجمل. ومن بين الأخطاء الأكثر شيوعاً وضع المكونات غير الصحيح في الرسوم البيانية للأشجار، وإساءة تحديد رأس عبارة ما، والاستخدام غير السليم للقواعد التركيبية، مثل الاتفاق على الموضوع - الوجه. وقد تبين أن الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه الأخطاء هي تأثير الصياغة العربية على الصياغة الانجليزية، والمعرفة المحدودة بالصياغة الإنجليزية، وصعوبة إتقان قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية. وتنطوي الدراسة على بعض الآثار التربوية التي يمكن أن تسهم في تطوير فهم أفضل للصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلاب العرب في مجال التركيب. كما يمكنها أن تقدم أفكاراً ثاقبة عن الكيفية التي يمكن بها معالجة هذه

الصعوبات من خلال تنفيذ استراتيجيات تعليمية فعالة في سياقات الدورة الدراسية عن طريق مراعاة الخلفيات اللغوية للطلاب، والتحديات المحتملة التي قد تعوق النقل السلس للهياكل التركيبية من لغة إلى أخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: هيكل الجملة، خطأ، مخطط الشجرة.

INTRODUCTION

Representing the syntactic structure of a sentence through Tree Diagrams is a common method, which provides a visual representation of the constituent parts and their relationships in a sentence Basically, syntactic competence is an essential aspect of language proficiency, as it enables students to construct and understand grammatically correct sentences (Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N.) [1] In practice, students in the Arab World do encounter difficulties in acquiring syntactic skills in English, owing to the different syntactic structures between Arabic and English. Certainly, despite the potential benefits of employing Tree Diagrams in teaching syntactic structures, FEL students still use this method improperly, due to their limited knowledge of the English language syntax (Radford, A.) [2]

In line with the background given above, this study seeks to (a) identify the common syntactic errors made by students of English when using tree diagrams, (b) to investigate the underlying reasons for these errors, and (c) to propose some effective teaching strategies that can mitigate these errors. Accordingly, the present study intends to respond to the subsequent issues:

1. What are the most common types of syntactic errors done by 6th semester English language- majors at Tripoli University when using Tree Diagrams to represent sentences?
2. What are the underlying reasons for these errors?
3. How can these errors be addressed through effective teaching strategies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar is considered one of the language components besides vocabulary and sound system, which students should acquire to gain mastery of a foreign language. Knowing grammar means understanding what the text means correctly. Cook [3.p2] defines grammar as "… the mental system, which relates sounds and meanings in mind; it is the we like." In addition, Swan [4] states that grammar is a bunch of rules managing the way of how words should be appropriately connected, arranged, and changed to denote and convey a multitude of diverse meanings. By nature, grammar is one of the significant factors that make English more acceptable, because it helps people speak and write in a clearer and more effective manner (Debata) [5]. Undeniably, mastering grammar contributes to effective communication both in speaking and writing.

Several researchers have conducted numerous studies regarding writing blunders. For instance, Al-Shujairi et al. [6] examined the interlanguage disruption of the mother tongue in writing the target language. In an example of their study, they attempted to locate the classes of errors done by EFL students. They took the sample from compositions written by 112 students. They found out that the most frequent errors in grammar were in the classes of prepositions, articles, singular and plural nouns, and tenses. In other separate studies, some researchers, like Abushihab et al. [7]; Hourani [8]; Sawalmeh [9] who revealed similar findings, where students were observed to commit blunders in tenses, prepositions, and articles. Similarly, Maros et al. [10] studied 60 students' errors in grammar in rural schools in three different Malaysian states: Pahang, Selangor, Melaka. Their findings unveiled that despite having learned English for six years in the school environment, the students were still having challenges in practicing appropriate English grammar in their writings. They reported that the three most frequent errors were in articles, subject-verb agreement, and copula 'be'. Thus, there is a need for EFL students to consider targeting grammar to write well. Grammar is an indispensable element in the perfect compositions that require combining words and phrases in paragraphs and essays (Richards [11].

A review of the previous literature has primarily focused on identifying the types of syntactic errors done by FEL students and the linguistic factors leading to these errors. However, there is a lack of research that specifically examines the syntactic errors done by FEL students when using Tree Diagrams to represent sentences. Therefore, the current study takes the initiative to address this gap in the literature by investigating the syntactic errors when using Tree Diagrams and identifying the underlying reasons for these errors. As EFL students face challenges with the structure of English, the current study focuses on grammatical errors that impact writing by applying the Error Analysis method, which refers to how to classify and interpret errors Al-Shujairi et al., [6]. Likewise, the current study researchers classified and interpreted the students' grammatical errors in writing an expository essay. The

main objective was to unveil the typical students' errors in expository essays and identify the underly reasons behind doing such errors. In doing this, the current study depended on Interlingual and intralingual factors of errors. Interlingual errors are due to native language barriers while intralingual errors are commonly associated with the negative interlingual grammatical errors found in students' writing (**Brown & Lee).** [13]

MATRIAL AND METHOD

This study employs a case study approach focusing on a random sample of 6th semester students in the English Language Department at Tripoli university. Data for this study were collected through a syntactic test that requires the participants to represent given sentences using Tree Diagrams. The test results were then quantitatively analyzed via descriptive statistics. That is by calculating the frequency and percentage of each type of syntactic errors to identify the types of errors done by the participants and the underlying reasons for these errors.
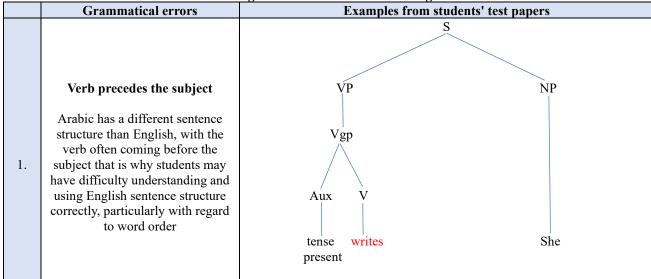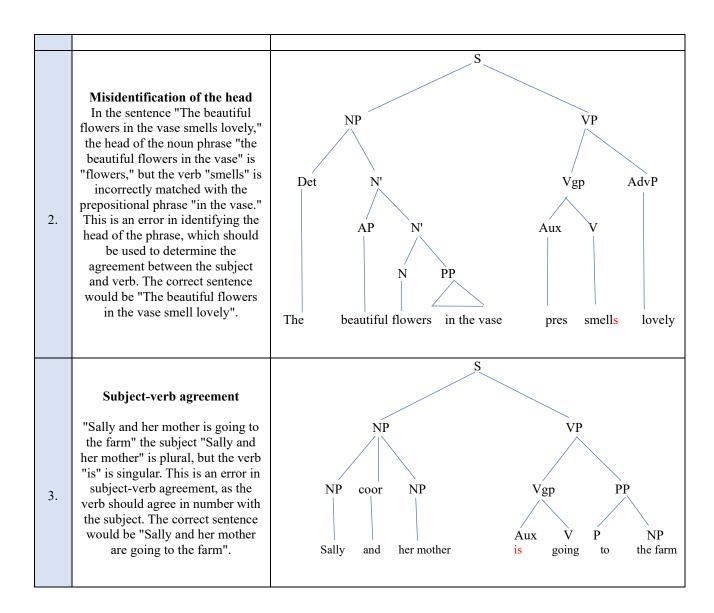
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 1 and 2 presented the results of running descriptive statistics, where errors were categorized under three main criteria. The most frequent type of errors related to the incorrect placement of constituents in the Tree Diagram, with 35 errors (47%). Within this category, the most common errors fell under the incorrect placement of subject and verb in the Tree Diagram, followed by errors connected to the incorrect placement of modifiers and prepositional phrases. The second most frequent type of errors associated to the misidentification of the head of the phrase, with 22 errors (29%). Within this category, the most common errors were related to the incorrect identification of noun phrases and verb phrases. The last most frequent type of error linked to the incorrect use of syntactic rules, with 18 errors (24%). Within this category, the most common errors were related to subject-verb agreement.

Table 1 The number and rate of grammatical errors.

	Variety of Errors	The number of errors	Rate of Errors (%)
1.	Incorrect placement of constituents in the tree	35 errors	47%
2.	Misidentification of the head of the phrase	22 errors	29%
3.	Incorrect use of the subject-verb agreement rule	18 errors	24%
	Total	75	100

Table 2 Students' grammatical errors in Tree Diagrams

Grammatical errors	Examples from students' test papers
1. **Verb precedes the subject** Arabic has a different sentence structure than English, with the verb often coming before the subject that is why students may have difficulty understanding and using English sentence structure correctly, particularly with regard to word order	S VP NP Vgp Aux V tense writes She present

2.	**Misidentification of the head** In the sentence "The beautiful flowers in the vase smells lovely," the head of the noun phrase "the beautiful flowers in the vase" is "flowers," but the verb "smells" is incorrectly matched with the prepositional phrase "in the vase." This is an error in identifying the head of the phrase, which should be used to determine the agreement between the subject and verb. The correct sentence would be "The beautiful flowers in the vase smell lovely".	S NP ... VP Det ... N' AP ... N' N ... PP Vgp ... AdvP Aux ... V The ... beautiful flowers ... in the vase ... pres ... smell**s** ... lovely
3.	**Subject-verb agreement** "Sally and her mother is going to the farm" the subject "Sally and her mother" is plural, but the verb "is" is singular. This is an error in subject-verb agreement, as the verb should agree in number with the subject. The correct sentence would be "Sally and her mother are going to the farm".	S NP ... VP NP ... coor ... NP Vgp ... PP Aux ... V ... P ... NP Sally ... and ... her mother ... **is** ... going ... to ... the farm

Type identification of grammatical errors

The analysis pinpoints the existence of three kinds of students' grammatical errors. The most common errors include incorrect placement of constituents in the Tree Diagram, misidentification of the head of a phrase, and incorrect use of syntactic rules, such as subject-verb agreement. This is due to the fact that Arabic has a different sentence structure than English, with the verb often coming before the subject. Clearly, students appear to have difficulty understanding and using the English sentence structure correctly, particularly with regard to word order. These findings are consistent with the findings of previous studies that identified similar difficulties faced by them when acquiring English syntax. According to studies conducted by Azar [13] and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman [14], subject-verb agreement errors are among the most common types of errors made by students of English as a second language. Lecturers have to step in to help students by providing explicit instruction on English sentence structure and by giving them ample practice using it in context. Sentence structure. Moreover, students may have difficulty in identifying the head of the phrase, which should be used to determine the agreement between the subject and verb, an error in subject-verb agreement, as the verb should agree in number with the subject.

Underlying reasons behind grammatical errors

The underlying reasons for these errors are multifaceted and complex. One possible reason underlying the student's grammatical errors is mother tongue disruption. Chen & Huang [15]. Evidently, English has a different system to the first language of the students, regarding the use of different word orders, the absence of articles, and the use of different types of phrases. The interference of the students' first language can affect their ability to

acquire English grammar and syntax. Based studies conducted by Kellerman and Sharwood Smith [16] and Ellis [17] students' first language can influence their acquisition of English grammar and syntax. For example, students whose first language is Arabic may struggle with the English present perfect tense because Arabic does not have an equivalent tense. Therefore, when using Tree Diagrams to represent English sentences, they may transfer their knowledge of Arabic syntax and apply it to the syntactic structures of English. This can lead to errors in identifying the constituents of sentences and their relationships. Moreover, errors mainly occur due to the limited knowledge over grammatical rules. English syntax is complex and includes many rules and exceptions. Hence, students may encounter difficulties in mastering these rules, particularly when they have limited exposure to English in their daily lives. In all of these cases, it is important for lecturers to consider the linguistic backgrounds of their students and the challenges they may face when transferring syntactic structures from Arabic to English. By doing so, lecturers can provide targeted instruction and support that can help their students to overcome these challenges and develop more accurate and effective syntactic analysis skills in English.

Effective strategies for teaching Tree Diagrams
Tree Diagrams can be an effective tool for teaching English grammar and syntax to students. Research conducted by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman [14], and Ellis [17] calls for the use of Tree Diagrams to help students understand the structure of sentences in order to improve their ability to analyze and correct grammatical syntactic errors. Effective strategies for teaching Tree Diagrams in English language instruction should include incorporating more interactive and communicative activities in the classroom according to error types. Notably, most students make grammatical errors because they have an inadequate grammar input. So, lecturers can promote students' syntax by task-related feedback after scoring assignments and tests. Also, lecturers can provide students with a set of English sentences and ask them to represent these sentences using Tree Diagrams. students can then compare their diagrams with their peers and identify any differences or errors. This activity can reinforce the syntactic rules of English and provide students with an opportunity to practice using Tree Diagrams .Finally, lecturers can integrate technology-based tools into their teaching strategies, such as online platforms that provide interactive exercises that allow students to practice constructing and analyzing Tree Diagrams. These tools can enhance students' motivation and provide them with interactive ways to practice English syntax and boost their competence in English.

CONCLUSION

Syntactic errors are challenges for EFL students when it comes to learning any foreign language. Research has shown that the differences between English and Arabic syntax can lead to difficulties in acquiring the syntactic structures of English. Tree Diagram is the optimal method that can be implemented to overcome such challenges. However, research has shown that English language majors may still encounter difficulties in using this method, due to their limited knowledge of English syntax. Therefore, first language interference can be the main source of errors found in students' assignments. It is noted that students transferred Arabic structure frequently. This study suggests that effective teaching strategies should be developed to incorporate interactive activities that allow students to practice constructing and analyzing Tree Diagrams, provide explicit instruction on the differences between English and Arabic syntax, and integrate technology-based tools that can enhance students' motivation and interest in syntax. By addressing the syntactic difficulties, this study can contribute to the development of effective teaching strategies that can enhance students' syntactic skills and improve their overall proficiency in English.

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