

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND RESEARCH: THE MOST COMMON TRAPS

JĘZYK ANGIELSKI I BADANIA NAUKOWE: NAJCZĘSTSZE PUŁAPKI

WERONIKA WASILEWSKI^{1,2 A-F}

¹ Northwestern University, USA

² Fulbright English Teaching Assistant,
Wyższa Szkoła Filologiczna, Wrocław, Poland

A – przygotowanie projektu badania | study design, **B** – zbieranie danych | data collection, **C** – analiza statystyczna | statistical analysis, **D** – interpretacja danych | interpretation of data, **E** – przygotowanie maszynopisu | manuscript preparation, **F** – opracowanie piśmiennictwa | literature review, **G** – pozyskanie funduszy | sourcing of funding

SUMMARY

English is commonly referred to as a “universal” language. Many people decide to study the language for a variety of reasons – to learn about a culture, to have a method of intercultural communication, to find a job, etc. In Poland specifically, students learn grammar and the theory of learning a language over the actual practice. As a result, common grammar mistakes occur throughout their learning process.

This paper presents a list of these common grammar mistakes that English learners make. It also includes tips on how to improve one’s grammar and what to pay attention to.

KEY WORDS: culture, English as a second language, grammar mistakes, articles, prepositions, verb conjugations, countable nouns, transitional phrases

STRESZCZENIE

O angielskim często się mówi, że jest językiem „uniwersalnym”. Wiele osób decyduje się studiować go z różnych przyczyn: by poznać kulturę krajów anglojęzycznych, zdobyć narzędzie do komunikacji międzykulturowej, znaleźć pracę itd. W Polsce, studenci poznają gramatykę oraz teorię uczenia się języka obcego równoległe z praktyczną nauką angielskiego. W rezultacie częste błędy gramatyczne towarzyszą im przez cały proces nauki.

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia listę błędów gramatycznych popełnianych często przez osoby uczące się angielskiego oraz porady, jak poprawić swoją gramatykę i na co zwracać uwagę.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kultura, angielski jako język obcy, błędy gramatyczne, artykuły naukowe, przyimki, koniugacje, rzeczowniki policzalne, frazy przechodnie

My name is Weronika Wasilewski and I am currently an English Teaching Assistant at the Wyższa Szkoła Filologiczna (WSF) in Wrocław, Poland. I am teaching English Conversation and American Studies to first, second and third year students working towards their Bachelor’s degrees. My students vary in skill level and in age even within each school year, but altogether they are fairly advanced – starting with B1 and ending in native proficiency.

WSF specializes in languages – students have the option to study English, Spanish, German and Italian. Most students decide to study English and are interested in either British or American culture as well. Students take a variety of courses related to their language, ranging from grammar to culture to conversation to translation.

Students see language as a method and a tool to learn about the culture. Most study American English because they want to learn more about the United States. They watch American movies, listen to American music, read books written by American authors. Students are intrigued to compare every day American life to what they watch and hear about. By being able to actually communicate in someone’s language, one learns much more than just the theory and conversational skills [6]. Language allows people to interact with one another and is used as an instrument of communication among people [7]. By learning a different language, you are learning what makes a culture so special and unique.

Polish students are also interested in studying and learning English for more instrumental purposes than

some other countries. They want to learn the language in order to go abroad and find a well-paid job, or get a promotion in their native country [3]. A major benefit of knowing a foreign language is this intercultural communication [6]. Every language includes such components as grammar, vocabulary and phonology. In order to be able to efficiently communicate, people should master the four skills involved with language: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Again, each skill requires practice and attention.

English altogether is not an easy language to learn. It is easy enough to get started and communicate the basics. But it takes years to learn the phrases and idioms, and all the various ways of using the language. Every foreign language learner commits errors. Learning a second language is a trial-and-error process compared to learning a first language. Errors occur because the learner does not know what is correct or may be directly translating from one language to the other [1].

As I mentioned previously, I am also teaching American Studies courses. Within this course I decided to focus on the American school system, teaching students about the structure and how it differs from what they grew up with. One major difference my students and I have noticed between the American school system and the Polish system is theory versus practice. My students all understand and have memorized grammar rules. However, they hardly ever have a chance to actually put this theory into practice [4]. Now that they have this opportunity, I am finding a few common grammar mistakes among every single year and age range. This is not an extensive list and not to say that everyone makes these mistakes. However, by being aware of them and knowing that they do exist, will make one a stronger researcher and English speaker.

ARTICLES

One of the most common English as a second language (ESL) mistakes made is the tendency to confuse indefinite and definite articles. The Polish language does not have articles – they use the equivalent of “that” for everything and students may not fully understand the need.

Indefinite articles (*a* or *an*) are used to refer to a noun, where the specific identity is unknown. *A* is used for words that begin with a consonant sound and *an* is used for words that begin with a vowel sound. The definite article (*the*) is used for nouns that are familiar to the reader and writer. *A car* refers to a single unspecified car while *the car* refers to a specific car [5].

Students understand that *a* is used for a consonant sound and *an* is used for words that begin with a vowel sound. However, they struggle at times with differentiating between an indefinite article and definite. How do you know if something is unknown or known? Let us look at it like this: if you say you are taking *a car* to the grocery store, you are referring to any car. You can go to the parking lot and choose whichever you would

like or take it from the street. Whatever car you choose; you are getting to the grocery store. However, if you are taking *the car*, you are taking one that is familiar to you. You are most likely taking the one that is in your driveway and you own [8].

PREPOSITIONS

There are over 150 prepositions in the English language. Students in the United States learn the prepositions and know from intuition what preposition goes with which verb. If someone asked me why sometimes it is *in a restaurant* and other times it is *at a restaurant*, I would not know how to respond. Both sound correct and are used in every day communication. This is why mastering prepositions is such a hard part of learning English – in some situations prepositions are interchangeable and in others they are not. It is not intuitive for anyone learning English, but there also are not many rules that go along with them in order to learn the theory when it comes to the interchangeable prepositions [2].

Prepositions are hard to assign a meaning to because of their often multiple and overlapping meanings as was in the case of *in a restaurant* and *at a restaurant*. Adding to this confusion, there can be regional variations in prepositions. For example, people in parts of the East Coast who are lined up to buy coffee at a café will say they are standing *on* line, while everyone else in the United States, will say they are standing *in* line. Both are grammatically correct; it is just a regional difference.

VERB CONJUGATIONS

English learners are able to conjugate verbs correctly; however, they struggle matching the verb conjugation to a noun. I often hear *they has* instead of *they have* as one example. Students get the point across, but they are not matching the correct verb conjugation with the noun.

Another typical error regarding verb conjugations is using the present simple tense instead of the present perfect tense. For example, *I saw this movie* vs. *I have seen this movie*. These tenses are not used in the Polish language and are confusing to English learners. An example: *I cleaned my house when my friend called me* versus *I was cleaning my house when my friend called me* [8].

COUNTABLE NOUNS

A few nouns are countable in Polish, but uncountable in English. In Polish, you are able to quantify it and make it more tangible; however, when translated to English, the words are more abstract. Two countable nouns my students often get wrong are: *advice* and *information*. I often hear students say *informations* as a plural.

Another issue is that there are nouns which can be either countable or uncountable, depending on the sit-

uation. If you say “I had a turkey for lunch” it would mean you ate a whole turkey, rather than just a part of it. But if you say, “I had turkey for lunch”, it would mean that you may have had a turkey sandwich or a part of the turkey. Students often forget to include additional words that would make the noun countable.

TRANSITIONAL PHRASES

Lastly, a common ESL mistake I see, especially in writing, is a dependency on transitional phrases. Often

in the English language, two related sentences do not need a transitional word to link them. However, students use these phrases in order to confirm relations and make their conversation or writing sound more professional.

This adds to the problem of wordiness. Students have issues trying to describe everything in one sentence when they could have done something more efficiently. Transitional phrases do not help with that – when writing, it is important to avoid wordiness and to be as compact and efficient as possible.

REFERENCES:

1. Brown HD. The optimal distance model of second language learning. *TESOL Quarterly* 1980; 14(2): 157–164.
2. Chodorow M, Tetreault JR, Han N. Detection of grammatical errors involving prepositions. *Proceedings of the Fourth ACL-SIGSEM Workshop on Prepositions*; 2007 June 28–28; Prague, Czech Republic.
3. Friedman A. America’s Lacking Language Skills. *The Atlantic* [online] [cit. 10.05.2015]. Available from URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/05/filling-americas-language-education-potholes/392876/>
4. Hing D. 5 common mistakes in English made by non-native speakers [online] [cit. 8.04.2015]. Available from URL: <https://www.kaplaninternational.com/blog/5-common-mistakes-english-made-by-non-native-speakers>
5. Lee J, Senff S. An analysis of grammatical errors in non-native speech in English. *Proceedings of the 2008 Spoken Language Technology Workshop*. Goa; 2008.
6. McWhorter J. 4 Reasons to learn a new language. TED. [online] [cit. 15.02.2016]. Available from URL: https://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_4_reasons_to_learn_a_new_language
7. Sapir E. *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and company; 1921.
8. Swan M, Smith B. *Learner English: A teacher’s guide to interference and other problems*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press; 2001.

Word count: 1793

• Tables: –

• Figures: –

• References: 8

Sources of funding:

The review was funded by the author.

Conflicts of interests:

The author reports that there were no conflicts of interest.

Cite this article as:

Wasilewski W.
English language and research: the most common traps.
MSP 2017; 11, 1: 24–26.

Correspondence address:

Weronika Wasilewski
Northwestern University Class of 2016
Learning and Organizational Change | Psychology | Business Institutions
e-mail: weronikawasilewski@gmail.com

Received: 23.02.2017

Reviewed: 27.02.2017

Accepted: 28.02.2017