



COMMON MISTAKES MADE BY ENGLISH LEARNERS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the most common errors made by English language learners and offers research-based strategies for avoiding them. It examines interlingual and intralingual interference, fossilization processes, as well as phonological, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic errors in depth. The study highlights effective pedagogical approaches, corpus linguistics tools, technological aids, and learner-centered strategies to minimize these mistakes. The findings contribute to the improvement of English language teaching methodologies and the enhancement of learners' communicative competence.

Keywords

English language learners, learner errors, interlingual interference, fossilization, grammatical errors, pronunciation errors, lexical collocations, pragmatic competence, corpus approach, teaching strategies.

The acquisition of English as a second or foreign language remains one of the most extensively studied phenomena in applied linguistics, yet persistent challenges continue to confront learners across diverse linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels. Despite widespread access to instructional resources, digital platforms, and immersive environments, a significant proportion of learners exhibit recurring errors that impede fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic competence. These mistakes are not merely surface-





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level slips but often stem from deep-seated interlingual and intralingual interferences, cognitive processing limitations, fossilization tendencies, and inadequate exposure to authentic discourse patterns. Understanding the typology, etiology, and remediation strategies for these errors is essential for advancing pedagogical practices and supporting learners in achieving near-native proficiency. One of the most prevalent categories of errors involves article usage, particularly the definite and indefinite articles “the,” “a,” and “an.” Speakers of languages that lack articles, such as Russian, Chinese, Arabic, or Turkish, frequently omit articles where required or insert them inappropriately. For instance, a learner might produce “I went to hospital” instead of “I went to the hospital,” reflecting a direct transfer from L1 structures where definiteness is encoded through context or morphology rather than dedicated lexical items. Even advanced learners struggle with nuanced distinctions, such as generic versus specific reference (“Dogs are loyal” versus “The dogs in the park are friendly”). Avoidance strategies begin with explicit contrastive analysis in the classroom, where instructors systematically compare article systems across languages. Extensive reading of authentic texts, coupled with focused noticing activities such as highlighting article usage in corpora helps internalize patterns. Learners benefit from keeping error logs that categorize mistakes by type and reviewing them through targeted exercises, gradually shifting from conscious rule application to automatic production. Tense and aspect errors constitute another major obstacle, often arising from the complex English tense-aspect system that differs markedly from many other languages. Learners commonly confuse present perfect with simple past (“I have seen him yesterday”) or overgeneralize progressive forms (“I am believing this”). These difficulties reflect conceptual mismatches: languages with simpler verbal systems or different ways of marking time and completion force learners to restructure their temporal frameworks. Intralingual errors also emerge when learners apply rules too broadly, such as adding -ed to irregular verbs. Effective remediation requires contextualized practice rather than decontextualized drills. Task-based





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activities that simulate real-life scenarios narrating past experiences, discussing ongoing changes, or speculating about future events encourage meaningful use of tenses. Visual timelines, corpus-driven examples from sources like the British National Corpus or COCA, and recasts during interaction provide immediate feedback that promotes noticing and uptake. Longitudinal studies indicate that sustained exposure to rich input combined with output opportunities leads to significant reduction in tense-related fossilization.

Pronunciation and phonological errors frequently undermine intelligibility, even among grammatically proficient speakers. Issues such as vowel reduction, consonant cluster simplification, stress placement, and intonation patterns are particularly challenging. Speakers of tonal languages like Mandarin may impose syllable-timed rhythm on English's stress-timed structure, resulting in unnatural prosody. Dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are often substituted with /s/, /z/, or /t/, /d/, while intrusive vowels break up clusters ("estudent" for "student"). To address these, learners should engage in systematic phonetic training using tools like shadowing exercises, where they mimic native speakers from podcasts or TED talks. Minimal pair drills, articulatory awareness activities (focusing on tongue position and airflow), and recording self-evaluations foster self-monitoring skills. Importantly, the goal should not be accent elimination but intelligible pronunciation aligned with international intelligibility standards, such as those proposed in the Lingua Franca Core. Integrating pronunciation instruction across all language skills rather than isolating it prevents compartmentalization and promotes holistic development.

Lexical errors, including collocation mistakes, false friends, and over-reliance on direct translation, represent a persistent barrier to idiomatic expression. Learners might say "make a research" instead of "conduct research," or "strong rain" rather than "heavy rain," revealing gaps in collocational knowledge. False cognates such as "actual" meaning "current" in some Romance languages versus "real" in English lead to





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humorous yet communication-disrupting errors. Building a robust mental lexicon demands extensive reading and listening combined with explicit vocabulary instruction focused on chunks and formulaic sequences. Techniques such as lexical notebooks, where learners record words with their common collocations, synonyms, and example sentences, prove valuable. Corpus consultation, even without advanced tools, through simple searches on Google Books or academic databases, reveals authentic usage patterns. Semantic mapping and thematic vocabulary building further reinforce networks of related terms, reducing reliance on L1 equivalents.

Syntactic complexities, particularly in areas like relative clauses, conditionals, passives, and word order, also generate substantial difficulties. Learners from subject-object-verb languages may produce awkward English sentences reflecting L1 transfer. Overuse of coordination instead of subordination results in choppy, immature prose. Advanced learners sometimes struggle with subjunctive mood or inverted structures in formal writing. Pedagogical interventions should emphasize consciousness-raising tasks, such as comparing parallel texts in L1 and L2, or reformulation exercises where learners improve their own output based on native models. Process writing approaches, involving multiple drafts with peer and teacher feedback, cultivate syntactic maturity over time. Pragmatic and sociolinguistic errors deserve equal attention. Inappropriate levels of directness in requests, apologies, or refusals can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Learners may transfer politeness strategies that clash with English expectations, such as excessive formality or insufficient mitigation. Role-plays, discourse completion tasks, and exposure to authentic interactions via films, series, or virtual exchanges enhance pragmatic awareness. Metapragmatic instruction explicit discussion of cultural norms helps learners navigate the nuances of power, distance, and imposition.

Beyond individual error types, broader factors influence error persistence. Motivation, anxiety, limited exposure to comprehensible input, and instructional





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approaches that prioritize accuracy over fluency all play roles. Fossilized errors often require focused corrective feedback that balances explicit and implicit techniques. Teachers should adopt a developmental perspective, recognizing that errors signal learning progress rather than failure. Portfolio assessment, self-assessment rubrics, and reflective journals empower learners to take ownership of their interlanguage development. Technological advancements offer promising avenues for personalized error correction. Intelligent tutoring systems, speech recognition software, and AI-powered writing assistants provide immediate, individualized feedback. However, technology must complement rather than replace human interaction and meaningful communication. Blended learning models that integrate digital tools with collaborative projects maximize benefits while addressing the affective dimension of language learning. Ultimately, overcoming common mistakes demands a multifaceted, learner-centered approach grounded in second language acquisition principles. By fostering metalinguistic awareness, providing abundant authentic input and output opportunities, delivering timely and appropriate feedback, and cultivating positive attitudes toward error as a natural part of the learning process, educators and learners can significantly accelerate progress toward advanced proficiency. The journey from interlanguage to near-native competence is gradual and effortful, yet the rewards enhanced cognitive abilities, expanded professional opportunities, and richer intercultural connections make it profoundly worthwhile. Continued research into error patterns across learner populations will further refine instructional methodologies, contributing to more effective English language education globally.

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