

## **An Analysis of Grammatical Errors made by Senegalese English Majors**

Hafissatou KANE

Cheikh Anta DIOP University of Dakar (Senegal)

**Research Article**

### **Corresponding Author\***

Hafissatou KANE

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**Abstract:** This study identifies, classifies, and interprets the grammatical errors made by 30 second-year students at the English Department of Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar (Senegal) in their grammar-translation tests. The said students took a course on Grammar during the academic year 2018-2019. The exercises consist of translating some French sentences into English. The errors made by these participants can be classified into seven categories. There are errors in the use of tenses, auxiliaries, articles, relative adverbs. In addition, morphological and structural error types and other errors related to the choice of verbs (i.e., tell/say) have also been listed. The results show that the participants made both inter-lingual errors (due to the influence of French language) and intra-lingual errors (over generalization of rules, addition or omission of items, etc.).

**Keywords:** *Grammatical errors, Error Analysis, Contrastive Analysis, English learning*

### **1. Introduction:**

Under the Senegalese educational system, French is the language of instruction. Nevertheless, other foreign languages have also been given a lot of consideration. For instance, English language curricula are taught from primary school to university, with a number of reasonable materials that focus on both fluency and accuracy. English majors are then supposed to achieve oral and written proficiency in the language. For all that, the English students are faced with challenges, not the least of which is grammar, as they move through their studies. This shines through the recurrent grammatical errors noted in their interactions and written texts.

(Meskhi, 2002: 3) notes of the three major language sections, sounds, grammar and lexicon, students find grammar to be the hardest section of a foreign language to understand and master. However,

understanding grammar is a prerequisite for learners' progress in language learning and if there is no acquisition of grammar, there is no acquisition of language.

To enable students to avoid these grammatical errors and acquire a good knowledge of English, English teaching pundits should do research into such errors and bring findings to the attention of teachers, material developers, and curriculum designers. To that effect, this paper sets out to obtain information about the common grammatical difficulties that learners have when translating from French to English and provide a means of avoiding these errors.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

The study addresses the following specific objectives. It aims:

To identify the different grammatical errors;

To classify these errors following their grammatical categories;

To explain their causes and eventually propose suggestions to avoid and correct them

## **3. Literature Review**

### ***3.1 Definition of Language Errors***

Mourtaga (quoted in Abushihab, 2014: 214) explains that errors and mistakes are different from each other because an error cannot be self-corrected and is caused by a learner's inadequate knowledge of the target language whereas a mistake can be self-corrected. Errors occur repeatedly and cannot be recognized by the learner. Only the teacher or researcher could locate them while mistakes according to Yuksel (2007) are not a result of deficiency incompetence. They can be characterized by the slips of the pen or the slips of the tongue. Richard et al (1985: 95) describe errors as the use of a linguistic item in a way that a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete action.

### ***3.2 The Importance of Studying Learners' Errors***

Tizazu (2014: 70) believes that when people learn a second language, they cannot instantly develop a native-like control over the target language. Instead, language learning is a gradual process of internalizing the rules of the target language (hereafter TL) and in such a process people can't acquire the TL without making errors (incorrect forms).

For most researchers, these errors give the teacher insights into the pitfalls facing learners with regards to the language acquisition process, and, accordingly, are crucial to streamlining the teaching and learning business. In Brown (2007: 132), making errors is a natural process of learning and must be

considered as part of cognition. Thus, learners' errors must be studied systematically, and approximately analyzed in order to give effective remedial.

Corder (quoted in Tizazu, 2014: 69) maintains that the advantages of analyzing learners' errors are, roughly speaking, two-fold. Firstly, it gives a good understanding of the nature and types of errors so as to devise appropriate ways to avoid them (pedagogical advantage). Secondly, it provides an insight into the process of second language acquisition. These two functions of error analysis are therefore important to the development and improvement of pedagogical techniques and materials of second language teaching. From this standpoint, Ellis (1997: 23) states that the L2 acquisition analysis or description, in general, focuses on learners' errors owing to the following three reasons: (a) Errors are prominent features of language learning and they strike the important question such as 'Why do learners make errors; (b) Errors inform teachers about the nature of learners' difficulties; (c) Errors help learners, especially when they are able to correct their errors by themselves.

Hence, linguists and second language teachers have developed many approaches and techniques for the study of learners' errors and ways of improving them.

### ***3.3 Approaches to the Study of Learners' Errors***

There are two major approaches discussed and used in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature for the study of learners' errors: the Contrastive Analysis (CA) and the Error Analysis (EA).

#### ***3.3.1 Contrastive Analysis***

Contrastive Analysis (hereafter CA) is a technique for comparing the learner's first and target languages. According to this approach, errors occur as a result of interference (when learners transfer first language habits into the target language and such interference takes place whenever there is a difference between the first and the second languages. Brown (1985: 253) notices that success in second or foreign language learning involves mastering the differences between L1 and L2. However, this CA has been severely criticized for the following reasons. Firstly, it assumes that error derives exclusively from first language interference. Nevertheless, it has been many times found that the combination of inter-lingual and intra-lingual factors give rise to errors in learning a second language. The contrast between the two systems is not the only factor involved in second language learning. Richards (1974: 182) showed that "many errors, however, derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition and from the mutual interference of items within the target language". Secondly, CA is successful in predicting phonological difficulties. The literature has demonstrated that

L1 influence is apparent as Delay et al. (1982: 96) found “present research results suggest that the major impact the first language has on second language acquisition may have to do with accent, not with grammar or syntax”. Finally, the CA approach has been criticized because it does not give attention to what is happening in the mind of the learner; it only focuses on analyzing the surface level of languages.

Selinker (1972: 209) views the learner’s verbal performance in L2 as a series of overlapping systems characterized by having aspects from both L1 and L2. He talks about five central processes related to inter-language:

- **Language transfer:** This process is a result of overgeneralization and fossilization of items, rules, and subsystems, which are transferred from the native language to the target language during the performance of interlanguage.
- **Transfer of training:** The errors in this process result from misleading and over generalized information given by textbooks and language teachers.
- **Strategies of second language learning:** There are different strategies that affect the surface structure of sentences. This process is exemplified by the tendency of learners to simplify the target language.
- **Strategies of second language communication:** This strategy can be characterized by the avoidance of grammatical formatives like articles, plural forms, past tense forms, etc.
- **Overgeneralization of target language linguistic material:** Second language learners tend to over generalize the rules in the target language in order to reduce them to a simpler level.

### **3.3.2 Error Analysis**

Richard and Schmidt (2002: 184) define Error Analysis (hereafter EA) as a technique for identifying, classifying, and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms of a language in the production data of someone learning either a second or foreign language. Such systematic analysis of errors eventually provides useful insights into the system operating in the learners’ minds and reveals the learners’ knowledge about grammatical systems of the target language. By identifying what is exactly lacking in the learners’ competence, EA brings the problem areas to the attention of teachers, syllabus designers, and textbook writers, and suggest remedial action to overcome the mismatch between knowledge of the learner and the demands of the situation.

Ellis (1985) states that EA is usually operated on the production data of language learners (composition, speeches, etc.), and any EA activity entails the following procedures:

- Defining a corpus of language
- Identifying errors in the corpus
- Classifying the errors
- Explaining the errors

Then, the contrast between the two systems is not the only factor involved in second language learning. Learners of a foreign language can make identical or other errors similar to those of children learning their native languages. Carol (1964) claims that the circumstances of learning a second language is like those of mother tongues. In any case, correction is essential where the error occurs, in order to help students become more accurate in using the foreign language. Russel and Spada (2016: 171) stress that there is growing evidence that error correction is overall useful and can be helpful in L2 learning.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

This study is based on 30 second-year students at the English Department of Cheikh Anta University of Dakar (Senegal) in their grammar-translation tests. The students took a course on Grammar during the academic year 2018-2019. The exercise consists in translating foursome sentences into English. To conduct this study, the researcher used copies of the first-semester evaluation. This grammar examination lasted 2 hours and composed of three exercises: (a) giving the right form of the verbs in brackets, (b) French-English translation and (c) English-French translation. The present data were collected from the second exercise where the subjects were asked to translate four French sentences into English.

After grading these copies, the researcher selected 30 at random and listed the different errors made in these English translated sentences.

#### **5. Findings and Discussion**

In this present research, the identified errors are classified in the following types: tenses, auxiliaries, articles, relative adverbs, choice of verbs, morphological and sentence structure.

A total of 111 grammatical errors made in the translation of four French sentences into English have been listed. Table 1 show that tenses (35, 9%) are among the most common grammatical errors of these English language learners. Afterward, there are the morphological errors (23, 6%); confusion in relative

adverbs (12, 2%); articles (9, 6%); finally, the use of auxiliaries and errors in the sentence structure (7, 8%) in each type.

**Table 1: Classification of grammatical errors**

Types or errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Tenses	41	35,9%
Auxiliaries	9	7,8%
Articles	11	9,6%
Relative adverbs	14	12,2%
Choice of verbs	3	2,6%
Morphology	27	23,6%
Structure	9	7,8%
Total	114	100%

### A) Tenses

Using tenses correctly seems to be the main challenge of Senegalese English learners. 41 tense errors out of a total of 114 are made. The present study shows six inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors in this type. Table 2 below shows it in details:

**Table 2: Classification of errors made in tenses**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Simple Present instead of Present Perfect continuous	14	34,1%
Simple Past instead of Present Perfect	10	24,3%
Present perfect instead of Past Perfect	4	9,7%
Present Perfect instead of Simple Past	8	19,5%
Present perfect instead of Simple Present	2	4,8%
Present Continuous instead of Simple Present	3	7,3%
Total	41	100%

Generally, English uses the present perfect to express past actions that have connections with the present moment while in French these correspond to the simple present or *passé composé*. Due to negative transfer, many Senegalese learners use the simple present in English where the present perfect

is expected. In addition to that, many of them mistakenly use the simple past instead of the present perfect in many situations. These are shown in examples (1) and (2) below:

1. Since 2012 till now they only convince one percent of the population (Present perfect instead of simple present).
2. Since 2012 till now they couldn't convince only one percent (Present perfect instead of simple past).

The structural similarity between the present perfect and the French “passé composé” is also another source of errors made by Senegalese learners. They usually do literal translations whenever these two tenses are involved. The present perfect tense is also used when there is vague information about perfective actions. Instead, when some precisions such as time or place references are given, English uses the simple past tense while French can use the “passé composé” in both situations. The overgeneralization of the French rule and poor level in the use English tense make these participants repeat errors as in (3).

3. The winner who was honored the day when Senegal has become independent (Simple past and not present perfect).

Time agreement is another challenge for Senegalese students. They make many errors like those in the following sentences (4) and (5):

4. He doesn't say that he hadn't taken the book (Simple past instead of Simple present).
5. What he said is someone has given him the book (Past perfect instead of present perfect).

The English language can use the simple present tense to express habits in present and the present continuous for casual events whereas French use the simple present in both contexts. Some subjects substitute the present continuous for simple present and write:

6. I can't believe that some twelve million of people are watching this program every Monday (simple present instead of present continuous).

They also substitute the present perfect for the simple present (continuous); which may be the result of the weak mastery of tense formation in English. This is illustrated in (7)

7. The women lawyers have always defended parity (simple present or present continuous).

## B) Auxiliaries

The types of errors that the participants have made in the use of auxiliaries amount to 9 (7, 8%) of the total grammatical errors. Table (3) below can be used as an illustration.

**Table 3: Errors in the use of auxiliaries**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage
Use of Be instead of Have	9	100 %

In compound tenses, English uses the auxiliary “have” to mark the perfective form of the verb. This seems difficult for Senegalese learners who have already mastered French grammar; where both auxiliary “avoir” (have) and “être” (be) can express the same perfective idea. Therefore, it happens that they use the auxiliary “be” with English verbs when a French equivalent verb agrees with the auxiliary “être” while English requires ‘have’. Examples (8) and (9) below are perfect illustrations:

8. The winner is just been nominated as a champion (has instead of is).
9. What he said is the book was been given to him (had instead of was).

## C) Articles

The participants of this study have also made 11 errors (9, 6%) out of a total of 111 errors related to the misuse of the definite article “the”. This is shown in table (4).

**Table 4: Classification of errors made in the use of articles**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Use of “the” instead of article “zero”	11	100%

In English, nouns are used with the definite article “the” in specific contexts while they require the article “zero” in general contexts. This use of articles is also true with the name of countries. When the name of a country is written in the singular, it generally stands without the definite article. But, those countries whose names are in plural forms are preceded by the article “the”.

Senegalese learners make errors in the use of articles which are due to the negative transfer of French which uses a definite article in all the above-mentioned situations. Some examples are given in (10) and (11):

10. The day when Senegal became independent (Senegal instead of the Senegal).



11. The women lawyers defend the law on the parity (parity instead of the parity).

#### D) Relative Adverbs

The choice of relative adverbs causes much trouble for Senegalese English learners. The study reveals that participants have made 14 (12, 2%) errors of this type. This is represented in table (5).

**Table 5: Errors in the use of relative adverbs**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Use of where instead of when	14	100%

In French, the adverb “où” (where) introduces both time and place relative clauses. This is different from English where the relative adverb “where” refers to a place relative clause while “when” is for time clauses. Due to the negative transfer of French to English, several Senegalese students make errors like the one found in the example (12):

12. The day where Senegal became independent (when instead of where).

#### E) Choice of Verbs

There are 3 instances of errors related to the choice of adequate verb in English. The French verb “dire” means both “tell” and “say” in English. The errors made by the subjects in this study can also be classified in inter-language transfer of French to English.

**Table 6: Errors made in the choice of verbs**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Use of “tell” instead of “say”	3	100%

In English, the rule is: “tell somebody something” or “to say something to somebody”. However, many students find it difficult to use these two verbs appropriately. This is because in the French pre-established grammar, “dire” (tell, say) is used in both contexts. Therefore, it is very common to hear errors like this:

13. He didn’t tell that he had taken the book (say instead of tell).

#### F) Morphological errors

Morphological errors are the second common types listed in this study 27 (23, 6%) of the total errors. The five morphological types of errors made by the subjects are given in Table (7) below.

**Table 7: Morphological errors**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage
Omission of 3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular “s”	10	37,03%
Addition of the plural “s”	2	7,4%
Omission of the past participle mark	4	14,8%
Addition of the past participle mark	2	7,4%
Confusion between Simple Past and Past participle	9	33,3%
Total	27	100%

The Overgeneralization of the rules in the target language is another source of errors found in these participants’ exam copies. In the simple present tense, English verbs appear in their base forms at all grammatical persons, except at the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular that requires an ‘-s’ ending. But, it occurs that Senegalese learners omit this verbal mark and use the base form everywhere. Here are some supporting examples:

14. What he say is someone gave him the book (says and not say)

15. He haven’t said that he took the book (hasn’t instead of haven’t)

16. He don’t say that he had taken the book (doesn’t instead of don’t)

Unlike English, verbs in French agree in number with all the grammatical subjects. Due to negative transfer of this French rule, English learners often add the plural “-s” to the verb at the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural in Simple present tense. This can be seen in (17) below:

17. The women lawyers defends the law on the equality (defend and not defends)

It has been noted that overgeneralization and lack of competence in the target language are the main causes of the morphological errors which are also intra-language errors. In this study, the participants omit the past participle mark of verbs and add this past participle mark where it is not expected. They also make confusion between the Simple Past and Past Participle forms. These are all shown from example (18) to (23):

18. He didn’t say that he had take the book (taken and not take)

19. Since 2012 till now they have only obtain one percent (obtained instead of obtain)

20. The day where Senegal becomed independent (became instead of becomed)

21. He doesn’t said that he had taken the book (say instead of said)

22. He didn't say that he taken the book but someone has gave him (took and given)

23. The day when the Senegal has became independent (become and not became)

### G. Errors at the sentence structure

Errors made in the sentence word order involve two categories. These are misplacement of adverbs and misuse of the personal pronoun "it" where not required. The following table gives evidence of the structural errors.

**Table 8: Structural errors**

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage
Place of adverbs	5	55,5%
Misuse of "it"	4	44,4%
Total	9	100%

Language transfer is the only cause of these structural errors observed in this present analysis. For instance, adverbs of frequency are generally placed before the verb in English while in French they post-modify the verb. Also, in English, the personal pronoun 'it' is not used when the subject of the verb is a clause beginning with "what", while in a French corresponding sentence, the personal pronoun 'ce' (it) can be used. All these difference between the two languages are what makes it difficult for Senegalese learners to put adverbs of frequency in their right place and often misuse the personal pronoun "it" as in examples (24) and (25):

24. The women lawyers defend always the law on gender equality (always defend)

25. What he said it is somebody had given it to him (addition of the personal pronoun "it")

### 6. Conclusion:

On the basis of the data analyzed in this study, it can be concluded that English grammar is hugely affected by errors in the learners' French/English translation.

The analysis has shown that English majors make a great number of grammatical errors of which the wrong use of tenses constitutes the most persistent error type. These tense errors mainly involve confusion between the present perfect and simple present or between the present perfect and simple past. The study also reveals that students frequently use wrong auxiliary verbs (e.g., be instead of have); wrong articles (e.g., definite instead of zero articles) and wrong relative adverbs (e.g., where instead of when). Morphological errors such as the addition or omission of the plural or 3<sup>rd</sup> person

singular 's'; and the past tense marking are very recurrent in the data. Besides, errors in word order are manifested in misplacement of adverbs in one hand and the misuse of the personal pronoun "it" where it is not required on the other hand. The final error type shows the difficulty that learners have in the choice between the two verbs "say" and "tell".

This paper has demonstrated that the main cause of grammatical errors in English learners is the interference between French and English languages. But, other reasons lie under incomplete knowledge and overgeneralizations of rules.

### **Pedagogical implication of Error analysis**

The analysis of inter-language errors should be taken as a strategy in teaching English as a second language in Senegal. As this research revealed the main trouble of learners is due to the French pre-established grammar. It is important, therefore, for teachers to use the learners' first language to facilitate the acquisition of English, their target language. Abushihab (2014) notes that English learners as a foreign language tend to rely on their previous linguistic knowledge to acquire L2. Since in inter-lingual contexts, errors are bound to occur wherever a rule is different from the first to the target language, the contrastive analysis will allow learners to identify and keep the similarities and differences that exist between the two languages. This will allow them to prevent negative transfers.

The contrastive analysis method is also helpful for English teachers. Ellis (1996: 710) notes that classification of errors helps us in diagnosing learners' language problems at any stage of their development. The identification of errors is also essential in the sense that it becomes easier on the part of the teacher to help correct the errors after identifying their various types. After that the role of the teacher is to propose exercises that students can use as self-correction. As assured, self-correction is a good technique for learners to correct grammatical structures. Teachers must provide different contexts for learners to practice correcting errors on their own, since correction is for teaching not just for evaluation.

This method of error analysis is also useful to Senegalese material developers and curriculum designers because it informs them of the main difficulties that teachers and students face in English language acquisition in order to fit programs with these specific difficulties.

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