Type-errors and Token-errors in Grammar Evaluation

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Abstract*: Evaluation forms an integral part of the teaching-learning process and therefore needs to be judiciously conducted. When it comes to languages, there is a danger of evaluation being subjective or, at least, one-dimensional. Two teachers may, for example, evaluate the same essay differently, with one teacher focusing on every error therein (token-based evaluation of errors), while the other focuses on just the types of errors committed (type-based evaluation). Depending on the kind of evaluation adopted, therefore, a learner's grades may differ significantly. With a view to address such discrepancies, this paper proposes a mode of evaluation where token-errors and type-errors are both considered, but in different grammatical areas. The proposed mode of evaluation is expected, among other things, to save teachers some amount of 'correction time' and promote independent learning among learners.*

Keywords: Grammar and Language Teaching, Token-Errors, Type-Errors

1. Introduction

Evaluation plays a critical role in both teaching and learning (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2001; Cameron et al., 2002; Lu & Wu, 2018). It enables teachers to assess the quality of their own teaching based on the performance of learners and also allows them to understand how much of the teaching input they have understood. Evaluation is therefore important in any field of study. It is particularly important when it comes to languages (Beretta, 1992; Rea-Dickins, 1994; Jabbarifar, 2009), where the ramifications of one-dimensional evaluation may be significant.

For example, two English teachers may grade the same essay differently depending on how they treat language errors. More to the point, a teacher who views every instance of a language error (token-error) as a separate error may give the essay a significantly lower grade than a teacher who focuses broadly on the types of errors (type-error) occurring therein.

Learners at the same learning level may thus receive significantly different grades for their work depending on the mode of evaluation adopted by the teacher, making it difficult for them to review their linguistic performance. Furthermore, it is not a straightforward exercise to reconcile the grades entailed by the two modes of evaluation mentioned above. This in turn makes it difficult for institutions to understand where their students stand in terms of language ability. Taking into consideration these challenges, this paper proposes a mode of evaluation in which certain kinds of grammatical errors are treated as type-errors and certain others are treated as token-errors.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses three kinds of grammatical errors committed by learners in their written English and argues that it is better to treat them as type-errors than as token-errors. Section 3 argues the opposite for three other kinds of grammatical errors. Section 4 summarizes the benefits that accrue for the teacher and learner from the proposed mode of evaluation and concludes the paper.

2. Type-Errors

This paper focuses exclusively on grammatical errors committed in written English by learners for whom English is a second language (Awasthi, 2011; Chauhan, 2017; Mekala et al., 2016; Qin 2016; Srinivas & Harish Rajaraman, 2018).[1] In this section, errors in subject-verb agreement (subsection 2.1) and the use of indefinite articles (subsection 2.2) as well as Time-Tense mismatches (subsection 2.3) are argued to be better treated as type-errors than as token-errors.

2.1 Subject-Verb Agreement

English has a poor verb-agreement system (Al-Jarrah et al., 2020) vis-à-vis many European and Indian languages. Verbs in English are overtly marked for agreement only in the Present Tense and only when their subject is 'third person singular'. This makes subject-verb agreement in English seen simple, but errors (Alahmadi, 2019; Stapa & Malaysia, 2010) like the ones underlined in (1) are not uncommon in the writing of high school and undergraduate students in India (see note 1 for details. Linguistic chunks which contain grammatical errors are marked with an asterisk, in keeping with common practice, throughout this paper.)

(1)   **Subject-verb agreement errors**

a. *He <u>come</u> because the ironmaster's daughter's kindness…

b. *The <u>peddler decline</u> the invitation of the ironmaster…

c. *<u>Mr. Cuss think</u> of him as a strong invisible man…

d. *…when the other <u>people</u>…<u>sees</u> the stolen money

e. *…<u>people</u> who <u>leads</u> a luxurious life…"

In sentences (1a-c), the agreement error involves the use of the general Present Tense form of a verb with a third-person-singular subject. As for the agreement error in sentences (1d-e), it involves the use of the third-person-singular Present Tense form of a verb with a non-third-person-singular subject. Despite the difference, all the errors in (1) may be corrected if a general guideline like the following is given to a learner just once.

(2)   **Subject-verb agreement error – correction[2]**

's' or 'es' should be added after a verb, if the verb is in Present Tense and has a third-person singular subject. If the verb is in Present Tense and has some other subject, its bare form should be used.

The advantage of considering subject-verb agreement errors as type-errors is two-told. It saves the teacher some amount of 'correction time'[3] and gives the learner an opportunity to extend the correction given at the site of one mistake to other similar ones. Such extensions obviously demand time and attention from the learner, but they are well-invested because they promote independent learning.

2.2 Indefinite articles

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[1] The writing data presented in this paper are drawn from the examination answer-scripts of Class XII students taught by the second author and those of undergraduate engineering students taught by the first and the third (formerly). All mentions of the writing of Indian high school and undergraduate students in this paper therefore pertain to the aforementioned data.

[2] The guideline needs to be appropriately modified when a verb does not encode agreement with the subject through suffixation (e.g., *have, be, do* etc.)

[3] Time is a precious resource in our kind of teaching context: each of us teaches two to three classes every term and every class comprises, on average, forty to sixty students.

There are two articles in English, the definite *the* and the indefinite *a/an*. Omission of these articles where they are necessary, and the gratuitous use of these articles where they are not, may both be simply treated as type-errors. Additionally, errors which involve the use of one indefinite article instead of the other may be treated as type-errors as well.

(3)   Errors of substitution involving *a/an*

   a. *an euphoric day

   b. *an union of states

   c. *an universal truth

   d. *an yesteryear myth

   e. *an European trip

   f. *a idea we had

   g. *an safe place

Such errors usually occur before words beginning with the letters '(e) u' and 'y', as endorsed by the phrases in (3a-e). Learners tend to use *an* in such cases because of the grammatical requirement that *an* be used before vowel-initial words (Pak, 2016). The requirement though is a sound-level one rather than a spelling-level one: that is, a word must begin with a vowel sound (as opposed to a vowel letter) for *an* to be used before it.

Though the words which follow *an* in (3a-e) all begin with vowel letters, the sound represented by the first of these letters is [j], which is not a vowel sound, but a glide (Padgett, 2008). Therefore, *a* must be used before such words (see also Harb (2014)). The errors in (3f, g) are more clear-cut in that they involve the use of *a* before a vowel and *an* before a consonant respectively.

All the errors in (3) may be corrected at one go if the following two-point guideline is given to learners just once:

(4)   **Errors involving indefinite articles – correction**

   a. Before words beginning with vowel sounds, *an* should be used; elsewhere, *a* should be used.

   b. The letters '(e)u' and 'u' do not represent vowel sounds. So, *a* should be used before words beginning with these letters.

As with the errors in subject-verb agreement discussed earlier, treating errors of substitution involving indefinite articles as type-errors saves the teacher some 'correction time'. For the learner, it presents an opportunity to extend the correction supplied from one error to others of the same type, which in turn encourages self-learning.

2.3 Time and Tense

English has two grammatical Tenses, the Past and the Present, with the modal verbs *will* and *shall* called upon to express Future Tense. Still, high school and undergraduate students in India (see note 1) sometimes fail to encode time with the correct tense, as evident from the sentences below:

(5)   **Time-Tense mismatches**

   a. *Yesterday…we are walking to the hostel… we see an accident. [Past Time – Present Tense]
   b. *Last weekend, I want to meet my friends and I plan an outing with them. [Past Time –Present Tense]

c. *In earlier times, without mobile phones, people spend time with their families…. [Past Time – Present Tense]

d. *Was it a holiday today because of the rains? [Present Time – Past Tense]

e. *Onions were very expensive nowadays… [Present Time – Past Tense]

All sentences in (5) contain adverbial elements which definitively mark Time as Present or Past. The Tense used to encode Time is, however, not correct in these sentences. In order to correct mismatches between Tense and Time, the following three-point guideline may be given:

(6)   **Time-tense mismatches: correction**

Tenses should accord with time-markers:

a. Past Tense with markers of Past Time;

b. Present Tense with markers of Present time; and

c. Future tense with markers of Future Time.

Just like in the case of the other type-errors discussed earlier, it is enough for the above guideline to be given just once, which saves the teacher 'correction time'. The learner will then have to extend it to other errors of the same type, which gives him/her an opportunity to apply what they have just learned.

3. Token-Errors

In this section, errors involving the use of irregular Past Tense endings (subsection 3.1) and prepositions (subsection 3.2), and those involving the use of reflexive pronouns and question tags (subsection 3.3), are shown to be better treated as token-errors than as type-errors.

3.1 Irregular Past Tense forms

The Past Tense of a verb in English is usually formed with the addition of the suffix 'd' (e.g., *sate-d*, *abate-d*, *berate-d* etc) or 'ed' (e.g., *call-ed*, *cross-ed*, *mix-ed* etc.) to a verb root. A number of English verbs, however, undergo past tense formation without suffixation (e.g., *steal* → *stole*; *tell* → *told*; *sink* → *sank*; *know* → *knew*; *think* → *thought*; *fall* → *fell*; *choose* → *chose*; *stick* → *stuck* etc.). When confronted with irregular Past Tense formation, high school and undergraduate students in India (see note 1) tend to commit errors, like those underlined in (7).

(7)   **Errors in irregular past tense formation**

a. *The peddler stealed thirty kronor from the crofter's house [correct form: *stole*].

b. *The invisible man stoled things from Iping and escaped [correct form: *stole*].

c. *The ship sinked in the ocean before they got any help [correct form: *sank*].

d. *Mr. Raju teached at the school for thirty years before retiring… [correct form: *taught*]

e. *As a young boy, I stucked stamps on a diary given by my father [correct form: *stuck*].

In (7a, c, d) verbs appear incorrectly in the regular Past Tense form. In (7b, e), the regular Past Tense ending 'ed' is added (redundantly) to the irregular Past form of verbs. Each error in the sentences in (7) must be separately corrected because the verbs in question have different Past Tense forms. Errors in irregular Past Tense formation are therefore better treated as token-errors than as type-errors.[4]

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[4] There are classes, indeed, even among verbs which undergo irregular Past Tense formation. For example, *sink*, *sing, ring* and *drink* are similar in that the Past Tense of these verbs is formed by replacing 'i' with 'a'. However, not all verb roots which end in 'ing' or 'ink' undergo Past Tense formation in this way, as attested by *think* (Past: *thought*), *link* (Past: *linked*), and *ping* (Past: *pinged*). It is best therefore not to refer to classes when correcting errors in irregular Past Tense formation.

3.2 Prepositions

Prepositions are a fertile ground for researchers who are interested in looking at grammatical errors committed by second language learners of English (Tetreault & Chodrow, 2008; Saeed et al., 2015). Mistakes involving the use of one preposition instead of another, like the underlined cases in (8), are sometimes found in the written work of Indian high school and undergraduate students (see note 1).

(8)   **Incorrect prepositions**

   a. *<u>At</u> one such occasion, he had the chance to meet him [correct preposition: *on*].

   b. *During the holidays, we travelled everywhere <u>in</u> car [correct preposition: *by*].

   c. *Tharun hits the ball hard <u>by</u> the bat [correct preposition: *with*].

   d. *We returned home <u>by</u> foot, but others took the metro [correct preposition: *on*].

   e. *She has been playing the violin <u>since</u> many years [correct preposition: *for*]

Clearly, every incorrect preposition in (8) must be individually replaced by the correct one. It is not possible in such cases to give a single corrective guideline, which the learner can extend from one context to other similar ones. Such an extension may even be counterproductive and lead the learner to replace a contextually correct preposition with a wrong one.

Suppose that a teacher spots the error in (8a) and indicates that *at* should be replaced by *on*. The learner may then replace *at* with *on* even in a sentence like 'Our friends are not going to be at the function', where *at* is already the correct preposition. The upshot is that contextually incorrect prepositions are better treated and corrected as token-errors than as type-errors. The same may also be said of redundantly used prepositions, evidenced below:

(9)   **Redundant prepositions**

   a. *The Principal discussed ~~about~~ the bad side of social media with the school children.

   b. *Everyone should attend ~~to~~ the flag-hoisting programme.

   c. *Sometimes it is better to trust ~~to~~ one's instincts.

Just like the incorrect prepositions in (8), the redundantly used ones in (9) must be individually pointed out by the teacher. Otherwise, the learner may extend the non-necessity of prepositions from the contexts in (9) to other contexts where they may be necessary after all. For example, if the verb in (9a) were 'talk' or 'speak', the preposition *about* would be necessary. The teacher should therefore inform the learner that *discuss* should not be followed by *about* (or any other preposition) because *discuss* itself means 'to talk *about'*. In summary, errors in the use of prepositions are better treated as token-errors than as type-errors.

3.3 Reflexive Pronouns and Question Tags

Reflexive pronouns and question tags[5] are similar in that both derive their contextual forms from grammatical items that precede them in a sentence. In (10a), for example, the proper noun *Preethi* is the antecedent of *herself*. In (10b), the negative *haven't* in the question tag corresponds to the verb *have* used earlier in the sentence.

(10) **Examples**

   a. Preethi$_i$ forgets herself$_i$ when she writes poetry.

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[5] Though question tags are normally used in speech rather than writing, a learner's use of question tags is often tested in writing in India, especially at the school level.

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b. They have$_i$ won the match, haven't$_i$ they?

Though the relationship between reflexive pronouns (RPs)/question tags (QTs) and their antecedents/correspondents seems like a simple one, errors like those in (11) and (12) do occur in the writing of high school and undergraduate students in India (see Zhang (2010) on QT errors committed by Chinese learners of English).

(11) **Errors in the use of RPs**

　　a. *Shekar ~~itself~~ gave me the book [correct RP: *himself*]

　　b. *Donkeys ~~itself~~ are dirty animals [correct RP: *themselves*]

　　c. *Priya itself took the dog for a walk [correct RP: *herself*].

'*Isn't it*' is a particular 'favourite' among these learners of English and is often used even when the part of the sentence preceding the tag does not contain *is*, or a noun that may be replaced by *it* (12b-d).

(12) **Errors in the use of QTs**

　　a. *We <u>did not</u> go out of town last week, <u>were</u> we? [correct QT: *did*]

　　b. *Their friends can join them, <u>isn't it</u>? [correct QT: *can't they*]

　　c. *Shailesh should be taking rest, <u>isn't it</u>? [correct QTs *shouldn't he*]

　　d. *You are making the presentation today, <u>isn't it</u>? [correct QT: *aren't you*]

Errors in the use of reflexive pronouns and question tags are most simply treated as token-errors because a pronoun or a question tag which is correct in one context may not be correct in another. More to the point, the teacher needs to look at the antecedent of a reflexive pronoun – and in the case of question tag, its correspondent – in every instance to point out the correct form of the latter to the learner.

4. Conclusion

This paper has argued that grammatical errors committed by second language errors of English may be classified as type-errors and token-errors. The two kinds of errors have been shown to differ mainly with respect to the kind of correction they demand from the teacher.

While correction for a type-error may be supplied just once, and be extended to other errors of the same type by the learner, correction for a token-error should be done on a case-by-case basis. We acknowledge at this point that there may be grammatical errors which do not straightforwardly fall under the type class or the token class.

All the same, a mode of evaluation that treats some grammatical errors as type-errors and some as token-errors is useful because it provides a general framework within which language teachers can operate and saves them some amount of 'correction time'. Arguably, it also ensures greater consistency in how they grade written work.

From the point of view of learners, the corrections supplied at the site of one type-error encourage them to transfer their learning from that site to other similar ones. As for the case-by-case correction of token-errors, it may help sharpen their memory with reference to specific aspects of the grammatical system of a language.

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