

Typical ESL Problems

Articles and Determiners

Articles, which are part of a class of words called "determiners," are the little words "a," "an," and "the." The rules for article use are surprisingly complex and subtle, and there are so many exceptions that approaching articles through rules is entirely impractical. One problem is that most grammatical analysis does not go beyond the sentence level, but article usage often depends on the context of the whole discourse. For example, the first mention of an object will generally have an indefinite article, but subsequent occurrences will have a definite one. (Yesterday I bought a car. The car is red with black upholstery.)

Other Languages

Chinese, Japanese, Korean, most Slavic languages and most African languages, do not have articles, and those languages that do have them use them in ways that are very different from English. Speakers of Asian languages who are acquiring English tend to leave articles out entirely at first. In English a lack of articles creates a very odd effect. For example, the difference between "the man" and "Man" is the difference between an individual and a philosophical abstraction.

A related problem is the distinction between count and non-count (or mass) nouns. What is a count noun in one language may be non-count in another. "Information" is non-count in English but countable in French and Spanish. ESL students will often talk about doing "a homework," or how many "vocabularies" they have to learn.

Prepositions

Prepositions are another source of difficulty. These little words define relationships rather than referring to objects or meanings. In many languages this kind of information is coded in an inflection on a noun. English has more prepositions than most languages, and if you look a preposition up in a dictionary you are likely to find twenty or thirty meanings, all rather vaguely defined.

Tense

The English tense system is another source of confusion. In English we pay a lot of attention to the order of events—what happened first, what happened before that, what is happening now, and what will happen. On the other hand, Chinese dialects don't have tense at all, although time is represented in other ways.

Simple Past

ESL writers often believe that things expressed in the past tense are no longer true. A student may write "Mr. Williams was my math teacher in high school. He is a very strict no-nonsense teacher." If we point out that "is" in the second sentence should be "was," the student might respond, very logically, "But he still is a strict teacher!" However, in this context, "was" does not indicate that the teacher has changed, or no longer exists. "Was" simply indicates that the condition existed at that time in the past.

Perfect Tenses

The present perfect and past perfect tenses also cause problems. Most Americans avoid the perfect tenses in their spoken language. If someone asks us "Are you hungry?" we respond, "No, I already ate." However, technically the present perfect should be used in this situation, because what happened in the past has current relevance—if you hadn't eaten in the past the questioner is likely to feed you. Thus the correct response is "No, I have already eaten."

For most of us this sounds too formal for ordinary conversation, but perfect tenses are still essential for academic discourse, especially written discourse. Native-speaking students tend to write like they talk and stick to simple present and simple past. Non-native speakers have generally been taught all about perfect tenses, but have not become fluent enough to use them correctly.

Vocabulary

Finally, after the problems noted above, lack of vocabulary probably causes more syntactic difficulties than any other single problem. When you don't know the word for something, you are forced into one of two strategies: to use a bi-lingual dictionary and choose a word you have not acquired and therefore have no feeling for, or to "write around" the gap, describing the concept you are groping toward. The first strategy usually ends up with a word with inappropriate connotations, and the second often produces a complex and tangled sentence structure.