

Hierarchy of ESL Error

updated version at <http://flightline.highline.ctc.edu/wac/ESLstudents.htm>
Thanks to Wendy Swyt at Highline Community College for this information.

Most Serious – usually interferes with the reader’s ability to understand

Word order in the sentence confused

Verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs seem out of order. This type of error pattern often produces an uneasy feeling in the reader – As the tutor, you might feel that you don’t know what is wrong with the paper.

- *Ask the student if he is translating – tell the student to write from what he knows in English and avoid direct translation.*
- *Have the student tell you what he means and write it down if he is saying it more clearly*
- *Write down the correct sentence structure on scrap paper and compare it to the original: have the student look at sentences and explain the difference.*

Word Form

This error pattern, like sentence structure problems, produces sentences that sound really strange.

“I am so scary when I scene a creep house” (I am so scared when I see a creepy house)

- *Use the Parts of Speech handout to call student’s attention to error.*
- *Test student’s knowledge of correct form: can he/she say it when prompted?*
- *Tell student about importance of using correct word ending: love vs. lovely vs. loving*
- *Show student how she needs to pay attention to word forms when using the dictionary*

Verb Tense

- *Test the student’s knowledge of the spoken tense: can he/she say it when prompted?*
- *Use the verb tense chart*
- *Ask student: is this past, present or future?*
- *Explain common patterns (progressive tense= to be form + 2nd verbing: is going, are swimming) (infinitive forms never change tense: to swim, to go, to do)*

Preposition Use

The usage that students have trouble with is usually idiomatic (For these type of prepositions, they can’t memorize some rule in a grammar book, unfortunately) --- e.g. We talk on the phone. We wrote papers in that class.

- *Test the student’s knowledge of the spoken preposition: can he/she say it when prompted?*
- *Explain the preposition use, and have student write it down. Generate some other examples of this type of usage. Have student write down other examples.*

Less Serious, but still irritating to a reader who is a native speaker

Idioms

“I got marriage last year” (instead of ‘got married’)

- *Test the student's knowledge of the spoken idiom: can he/she say it when prompted?*
- *Explain the idiomatic usage to the reader: "We always say 'I got married. He got married. Will you get married? We also say 'I got divorced.' Will they get a divorce?"*
- *Give the student a chance to practice and ask questions about the idiom.*

Missing or Misused Articles

"I told teacher that I didn't have a homework."

- *Test the student by reading sample mistakes out loud and see if student can self-correct.*
- *Point out places where the student uses them correctly.*
- *Use the Article handout or section in handbook on articles to help yourself understand the distinctions.*
- *Use kinesthetic references. A book (open hands) The book (point to book)*
- *Use Nancy's inductive explanation: Once I mention the noun, it sometimes switches to 'the.' 'A student complained yesterday. Once I listened to the student's complaint...'*

Missing plural 's'

This is one of the hardest errors for ESL students to eradicate and one of the last errors that sticks around as students acquire English.

- *Test the student by reading sample mistakes out loud and see if student can self-correct.*
- *Point out places where the student uses it correctly.*
- *Ask student if he means "more than one or just one."*
- *Explain idiomatic usage and give several examples to illustrate. "We never say 'homeworks.' 'I have to do homework.' 'Did you bring your homework?'"*

Subject-Verb Agreement

"The mother of the children call other parents and complain." This happens with ESL and native speakers most often when the subject is separated from the verb by a phrase or clause. Students seem to lose sight of the subject and instead match the verb with the noun next to it.

- *Test the student by reading sample mistakes out loud and see if student can self-correct.*
- *Point out places where the student uses it correctly*
- *Make sure the student knows what a subject and verb are!*
- *Show the student the s-v agreement handout and explain the agreement rule. (It seems counter-intuitive...In English we take the 's' off verbs when the subject is plural: dogs go dog goes)*
- *Show an error and have the student fix. Have the student practice finding others and fixing them.*

Misplaced Phrases/Clauses

With these errors, the meaning is clear but awkward: My mother always told after we cooked me to wash the bowls.

- *Read the sentence out loud and see if the student can restate it out loud, using correct placement. Then, write down what the student said and ask if she can tell the difference between the two sentences.*
- *Try to phrase a question that will prompt the student to clarify the phrase placement: "When did she tell you to wash the bowls?"*
- *Make sure to let the student move the phrase on her paper – don't write it or draw an arrow for the student.*