

COMMON GRAMMAR MISTAKES IN THE COURSE PORTFOLIO OF STUDENTS OF PHARMACY AT THE MEDICAL UNIVERSITY “PROF. DR. PARASKEV STOYANOV” – VARNA: VERB-RELATED CHALLENGES

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Abstract: *In the present article, we examine some areas related to verb usage that represent a particular challenge to native speakers of Bulgarian as evidenced by the Writing Portfolios of students enrolled in the 2020/2021 Specialized English Course for Students of Pharmacy at the Medical University “Prof. Dr. ParaskevStoyanov”. We classify these challenges into Tense Challenges, Verb Form Challenges, and Subject-Verb Agreement Challenges. We reach conclusions about differences between English and the students’ native language as a probable rationalization of certain common errors.*

Key words: *Specialized English, English for Specific Purposes*

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Introduction

Identifying areas that represent a particular challenge for students cannot but be taken into consideration when aiming at ensuring a quality educational process. Being involved in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes at a Bulgarian university of Medicine, we have identified several common areas that our students find challenging. In the present article, we will examine some of those areas that relate to verb usage as evidenced by the Writing Portfolios of students enrolled in the 2020/2021 Specialized English Course for Students of Pharmacy at the Medical University “Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov”.

Writing Portfolios

The Writing Portfolios represent an integral part of most of the courses in Specialized English at our university. They are academic writings and as such belong to the realm of English for Academic Purposes. At the same time, they are the result of research in the field of Medicine-related Sciences, and thus belong to the realm of English for Specific Purposes, and in particular – English for Students of Medicine and Medicine-related sciences. Since the main aim of the Specialized English course for students of Pharmacy at our university is not teaching students how to produce high quality academic publications but rather it is to aid them with the possible application of English in their future profession, the Portfolios also belong to the realm of English for professional purposes. However, we will not delve further into the intricacies of these types of English since we have already examined the issue elsewhere (Goranova 2021).

Corpus

All students of Pharmacy enrolled in the Specialized English course are required to submit a total of 3 essays. Pharmacy students taught by the author were assigned essays on the same topic, the first one of them being regarding the COVID-19 pandemic which was in full swing at the time. Students were asked to evaluate the ongoing pandemic, to share their thoughts on the matter, and to defend their opinion whether it might be a question of an infodemic or a real pandemic.

We have examined all of the essays submitted as a first-essay assignment submitted in the Spring Term of 2020/2021 by first-year Pharmacy Students enrolled in our Specialized English classes¹.

Challenge Categorization

Based on the instances of errors in student essays submitted electronically via our Blackboard system, we have identified two main categories of challenges: Grammatical and Lexical Challenges.

Before we proceed with the categorization, it is important to note that for the purposes of the present article, we will not distinguish between *error* and *mistake* in the sense of the latter being incidental and not detrimental to the communicative act, and the former being systematic and evidencing "genuine ignorance of the accepted rules" (Atodo 2021:10) and demonstrating "the learner's competence in L2" (Garrido and Romero 2012: 4). In this paper, we will refer to any usage that does not comply with the established rules of English grammar as a *mistake*, *error*, or simply *misuse*, hence we will use the three terms interchangeably. Furthermore, we often prefer to write about an area of *challenge* in order to forgo the somewhat negative connotation of each of those terms, and to highlight the opportunity for a positive change: a challenge can be overcome.

In the category of *Grammatical Challenges*, we propose a three-member *Article Challenges* subcategory: *Indefinite Article Omission*, *Definite Article Superfluity*, and *Other Article Misuses*.

In the same category, we identify another three-member subcategory – that of *Verb-Related Challenges*. These challenges are considered to belong to *Tense Challenges*, or *Verb Form Challenges*, or *Subject-Verb Agreement Challenges* subdivisions.

The present article which is part of a planned comprehensive research (we have already promulgated some of our findings regarding the Article Challenges subcategory²), focuses on the subcategory of Verb-related Challenges.

Challenges: Instances

The first subdivision, *Tense Challenges*, is among the most numerous among the three subdivisions of *Verb-Related Challenges*. It includes instances of improper usage of a particular tense such as the following:

- *the researchers show that the virus has originated in an animal and mutated so it was possible to cause disease* instead of *the researchers show that the virus originated in an animal and mutated so it was possible to cause disease*;

- *we were hoping for it to be over we still to this day do* instead of *we have been hoping for it to be over*;

- *women and men were so busy... and the quarantine gave them the chance* instead of *women and men had been so busy... and the quarantine gave them the chance*;

- *this is like that because the virus became a part* instead of *this is like that because the virus has become a part*;

¹ The author taught about half of the all first-year students of Pharmacy: only our students were assigned to write about the COVID-19 Pandemic.

² See Goranova 2021.

- *then people have been forced to distance themselves* instead of *then people were forced to distance themselves*;

- *it was later learned that it was created in a laboratory and was accidentally released* instead of *it was later [found out] that it had been created in a laboratory and [had been] accidentally released*;

- *the rivers in Italy cleared up [...] and air pollution was going down* instead of *the rivers in Italy cleared up [...] and air pollution went down*;

- *we can pretend that there's nothing to worry about [...] but this could not change the truth* instead of *we can pretend that there's nothing to worry about [...] but this cannot change the truth*;

- *SARS-CoV-2 is a new strain of coronavirus that was not identified in human before December 2019* instead of *SARS-CoV-2 is a new strain of coronavirus that had not been identified in human[s] before December 2019*.

The second subdivision, Verb Form Challenges, comprises of instances of improper usage of one of the five verb forms, root form (bare infinitive, truncated infinitive), third-person singular Present Tense form (-s form), Past tense form, Present participle (-ing form), Past participle. There are quite a few examples that can be given:

- *hands should be washed and when we are out to avoid contact with sick people* instead of *hands should be washed and when we are out we should avoid contact with sick people*;

- *I have come across* instead of *I have come across*;

- *so that the governments can drain illegal money, to make small and medium-sized businesses go bankrupt and make many people lose their jobs* instead of *so that the governments can drain illegal money, make small and medium-sized businesses go bankrupt and make many people lose their jobs*;

- *wear a mask – saving lives* instead of *wearing a mask saves lives* or *wear a mask – save lives*;

- *which led several European countries forbid the use of the Oxform vaccine* instead of *which led several European countries to forbid the use of the Oxform vaccine*;

- *viruses have been, always will be, and they will be transformed with evolutionary processes* instead of *viruses have been and will always be [in existence], and they will be transformed with evolutionary processes*;

- *vaccine development often lasting 10 years* instead of *vaccine development often lasts 10 years*.

As its name suggests, the last subdivision, Subject-Verb Agreement, incorporates instances of faulty agreement between the subject and the verb, or rather of lack of such agreement. This is the least numerous of the three types of subdivisions. Only the following very few examples could be found:

- *one of the most horrible catastrophes that have happened* instead of *one of the most horrible catastrophes that has happened*;

- *vaccines contain weakened or inactive parts of a particular organism that triggers* instead of *vaccines contain weakened or inactive parts of a particular organism that trigger*;

- *a big number of people thinks* instead of *a big[large] number of people think*.

Discussion

It comes as no surprise that tense misuse among native speakers of Bulgarian is so common. Even though the grammatical category of *tense* is associated with the universal category of *time*, it is true that “time is a culturally relative concept” (Pettersson 1994: 184) and “the same phenomenon is expressed by different tenses in different languages” (Pettersson 1994: 183). The Bulgarian tense system is notoriously complex, of “most intriguing richness” whereas the English one is “less complicated” (Pettersson 1994: 186). This is not to say that native speakers of a language with a more complex system encounter no challenges with the less complex system of a foreign language: in fact, our Bulgarian students find certain aspects of the tense system of English especially challenging.

A typical area of misuse is the one of the Continuous tenses. This can be easily explained by the “obvious difference” between the two languages: “the presence of continuous tenses in English, which can express an action that is uncompleted related to the referential point, as opposed to Bulgarian where such tenses do not exist” (Lazarov 193). It must be noted that here we employ the term *tense* as it is most commonly used in the ESL practice and not in the sense of tense as complimented by the verb’s *aspect* and *mood*. Thus when we write of tense misuse, we refer to the tense that ought to have been employed (for ex. Present Continuous) instead of identifying the misapplied aspect (progressive). Still, should we have wished to take our observations in the direction of distinguishing between the grammatical categories of tense and aspect instead of focusing on the concept of tense from a semantic standpoint, then we would have had to admit that our findings clearly point to the dichotomy of aspect as being problematic: difficult to properly use is not only the progressive, but the perfect aspect as well. It seems justified to locate the source of this difficulty in the dissimilar morphological categories in the two languages: there have been identified “a set of three morphological categories in Bulgarian: tense, type of action and taxis, and two morphological categories in English: tense and aspect” (Lazarov 2020: 4). Furthermore, “the category type of action in Bulgarian and the category aspect in English represent two different categories with different semantics and categorial structure” (Lazarov 2020: 5).

Hence the challenge – explained by the different grammatical reality of the students’ native language -- that the continuous and perfect tenses represent for Bulgarian speakers has been well documented. For ex. the confusion between the Present Simple and Present Continuous tense is rooted in the inability of students to properly differentiate their uses “because in Bulgarian there is only one present tense which encompasses the following usages: general truths and characteristic features, habitual and recurrent activities, activities cutting through the present moment, activities coinciding with the present moment” (Choroleeva 2018:1). In contrast, in English there are four present tenses, three of them being rendered into Bulgarian with a present, and one – with a past time reference (Tsvetkova 2014: 133).

In addition, while in English it is often relied on adverbs of time to point to the relative moment of the activity, in Bulgarian it is a common practice for morphological markers to be employed: “the contrast between completed and incompleted activities shows in the usage of verbs with or without prefixes” (Choroleeva 2018:2).

Confusing the Past Simple with the Present Perfect is also commonly seen, especially in the absence of adverbials that indicate a specific point of time or when the

completion-incompletion opposition is not accounted for by students. Such confusion is present when "a past-time adverbial is not explicit and the remoteness should be defined in the context" (Tsvetkova 2018: 101).

Unlike the challenge of proper tense usage, the use of the appropriate verb form does not represent such a difficulty for native speakers of Bulgarian. Morphologically motivated word distinction, i.e. forms that differ in affixes, connecting vowels, and other morphological markers, are a familiar concept to Bulgarian speakers. Accordingly, we found no incorrect usage of the past participle: even though there was a misspelled case of the past participle of *to be* (*ben* instead of *been*), it was an obvious case of a typographical error.

It must be noted that the morphological marker *-ed* does not represent a particular challenge for Bulgarian speaking students since they are used to the morphological inflection that is typical of their native language (Bulgarian being a null-subject language). Similarly, the third-person singular Present Tense form is not likely to be erroneously employed (except when it is a question of faulty Subject-Verb Agreement but those errors belong to the province of the third subdivision of the present categorization).

Actually, student errors were usually a matter of substituting the bare infinitive for the present participle or vice versa, as well as of using the truncated instead of the *to-* infinitive or vice versa. Our findings correspond to the already established hierarchy of progressive mastery of, first, the past *-ed*, then verb-*ing* (Harakchiyska 2014:253).

The findings are also easily intelligible in light of a major characteristics of Bulgarian: unlike English, it has long lost its infinitive, substituting it in constructions mostly with *da-* clauses (MacRobert 1981:1). Furthermore, an important function of the bare infinitive, the fact that it marks completed events, is not only **not** found in Bulgarian, but it is **not** among the ones explicitly taught to students (Slabakova 2003: 42).

Subject-Verb Agreement refers to the relation between the subject and the verb that it "governs". It is true that, generally speaking, "agreement is an area where a lot of different mechanisms interleave" (Osenova: 8); however, of the very few instances (only three) of faulty agreement that we found, almost all seem to be a case of a "perverted" application of the proximity principle. The proximity principle refers to "the practice of relying on the noun that is closest to the verb to determine whether the verb is singular or plural" (Nordquist 2020:1). In two of the examples that we found, the verb agrees with the noun immediately preceding it, which, however, is not the subject. Thus *have happened* agrees with *catastrophes* whereas it ought to have agreed with *one of the horrible catastrophes* - here a single head noun is followed by a plural verb. In the second instance we are faced with just the opposite: a plural head noun (*parts*) is followed by a singular verb (*triggers*). The only time when the verb seemingly agrees with the subject (*thinks* with *a big number*) is actually an instance of a phraseological weakness: *a big [large] number of* is synonymous with *many*, and as such always requires a plural verb.

Thus, leaving aside the last of the three instances, we can conclude that Subject-Verb concord represents a challenge to our students only when the proximity principle ought not to apply - in other words, "difficulties over concord arise when

there is a conflict between grammatical concord and the principle of proximity" (Hamzah 2014: 2).

Conclusions

The examination of the Verb-Related misuses made by students of Pharmacy in their essays on the COVID-19 pandemic, has allowed us to suggest a three-member subcategory, *Verb-Related Challenges*, of the Grammatical Challenges category, with *Tense Challenges*, or *Verb Form Challenges*, or *Subject-Verb Agreement Challenges* subdivisions. Since the greatest differences between English and the students' native language are found in the area of *Tense* (as compared to *Verb Form* and *Subject-Verb Agreement*), it is only logical for the first subdivision to encompass the most numerous misuses. Hence it seems justifiable to urge that more andragogical attention be paid to aiding university students overcome challenges in this particular area. Of course, further research is needed, and a greater and more diverse corpus material must be examined, in order to substantiate the general nature of our claim.

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