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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Syntactic Structure in the English Writing of Undergraduate Students at Kinnaird College, Lahore

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the syntactic structure of English paragraph writing among undergraduate students at Kinnaird College, Lahore. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study focused on a target population of 50 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the compulsory English subject during their initial semester, along with 15 teachers teaching the subject at Kinnaird College. These students, who missed their intermediate English examinations due to the pandemic, had their post-pandemic paragraphs analyzed to observe the effects of the lack of testing on syntactic structures. To gain insights into the challenges faced by students, the teachers were provided with a questionnaire. Their responses shed light on how the absence of examinations contributed to an increase in mistakes. The questionnaire not only confirmed the authentic difficulties encountered by students but also highlighted the significance of testing in shaping the syntactic structures of English. The research aims to unveil the implications of these testing-related challenges and, ultimately, proposes measures to address and mitigate the consequences of disrupted examination patterns.

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has instigated unprecedented shifts in various facets of life, and education has been no exception. It not only physically impacted lives of the people but also affected the cognitive and linguistic abilities of people. As institutions worldwide adapted to remote learning and examination disruptions became commonplace, the consequences on language acquisition and application have yet to be comprehensively explored. Focusing on undergraduate students, this study aims to unravel how the altered educational landscape, particularly the absence of traditional testing mechanisms, has influenced the syntactic intricacies of English writing. The research centers on a group of first-year students at Kinnaird College, Lahore, who, due to the pandemic, missed their intermediate English examinations. By employing a mixed-method approach, encompassing the analysis of post-pandemic written paragraphs and insights from English teachers, the study seeks to not only identify the challenges faced by students but also to illuminate the broader implications of the pandemic on linguistic proficiency. Understanding these impacts is crucial for devising effective strategies and interventions to mitigate potential setbacks in the development of syntactic structures in English among undergraduate students.

Literature Review

COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is a contagious virus that can cause mild to severe respiratory illness, including death. The best preventive measures include getting vaccinated, wearing a mask during times of high transmission, staying 6 feet apart, washing hands often and avoiding sick people (Cleveland Clinic, 2022).

Error analysis is defined as the process of studying the appearance, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language. The data collection of error analysis includes two steps. The first step is the universal collection, which makes a preliminary understanding of the learner's writing level. The second step is the deep analysis of errors. (Hafiz et al., 2020).

Syntax refers to the formation of sentences and the associated grammar rules (Foorman, 2016). It is a study that discusses the structure of a sentence where there are several components that must be understood. According to Yule, "when we concentrate on the structure and ordering of components within a sentence, we are studying the syntax of a language." It means that syntax is one of the branches of linguistics which studies rules that determine how words form phrases and phrases form sentences (Gustira, 2019).

The world tended to stop functioning at its normal pace and mechanism after the wave of Covid-19 hit it. The education system worldwide took a sharp shift from a conventional method to a super unconventional one. Essentially, the shift from physical to virtual classroom was a big change which demanded direct understanding of technology since all sorts of educational approaches, principles and teaching methodologies had to be repositioned. Pakistan, being an under developed country faced several hurdles including the problem of load shedding, unavailability of electronic devices such as laptops, mobile phones and tablets to majority of the under privileged students. In addition to this, the new educational dynamics were vague to the students as all the students were not trained accordingly and did not have the IT facility equally, so they had some genuine concerns about it. (Shahzad et al., 2020). As stated earlier as well, the main problems were including improper study environment, inequality in the availability of gadgets, insufficient online study material, no access or slow internet speed, and load shedding. The above said challenges negatively influenced the study duration and attention span of students. Moreover, student's health was also reported to be badly affected by attending online classes. Weak eyesight, overweight, sleep deprivation, and behavioral issues among students were found to be higher in the lockdown era. (Noor, 2020).

It is significant to understand that the writing process demands a lot of efforts to achieve excellence in it. The manner of writing consists of several factors leading to well written drafts. For example, appropriate lexicons, good syntactic structures, morphology and more. Covid-19 has somewhat affected the production of well-developed writing abilities in students because the above mentioned factors need rigorous practice and drills to be understood and used effortlessly and flawlessly. (Shahzad et al., 2020).

Once the virtual classes shifted to physical classes after the COVID pandemic lowered, another series of trials and challenges came into limelight which were unknown before. It was identified that the base of various learnings of students onto which the formation of knowledge laid was utterly weak. Multiple concepts taught to them were not fully understood by them. Apart from this, lack of proper testing techniques further deteriorated the case when students were put to test in physical classrooms on what they were taught in virtual ones. It was known that the learnings of online educational system were not as credible as they might felt to be. (Iqbal, 2022).

According to Shahzad et al. (2020), the impact of virtual teaching on the behavior of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners was predominantly positive. However, the study, which focused on students from universities in Pakistan, identified specific challenges inherent to the virtual learning environment. The research highlighted that learning various subjects, particularly English language, posed a significant challenge due to the requisite resources, environmental factors, and skill sets that typically involve aspects such as classroom atmosphere, social interaction, and diverse forms of physical discussions. Participants in the study, as indicated in the administered questionnaire, emphasized the difficulty in acquiring a smooth writing pattern in virtual settings, attributing this to a lack of sufficient practice and exercise, leading to inadequate mental absorption of expressive strategies. Another dimension explored by Syed Khuram Shahzad and colleagues pertained to students' attitudes towards acquiring proficiency in English writing skills. The study posited that a positive attitude is crucial for learning writing in a second language, and this positive attitude is contingent upon students' familiarity and comfort with the online learning system. It is emphasized that to excel in English writing skills, students should directly practice writing in the target language (Shahzad et al., 2020).

According to Imran et al., (2021) the education sector of Pakistan faced several other tough challenges pre-COVID and during the pandemic in terms of schooling and imparting learning to the students. Studies have helped in extracting the information that remote learning is one of the teaching modes off-campus students use to catch up on lessons. However, it is not proven to be universally beneficial, especially where low ICT proficiency prevails. The research done by Waqas highlighted such issues as well as explained that there is a prevailing consensus on the fact that syntactic and grammatical structures in writing forms the basis of semantic meaning needed to be conveyed. This is essential to understand why the inclination in virtual teaching due to Covid-19 lead to students being weaker writers. When the grammar will be well formulated, the meaning would be well interpretative (Imran et al., 2021).

Hafiz et al. (2020) conducted a case study on the analysis of syntactic errors in English writing of Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. An analysis of previous answer scripts was a part of the study to trace out a common pattern of errors made by the students. Firstly, the results revealed that the most common syntactic errors made by the learners were in sentence structure. Non-seriousness and less concentration of learner's result in mistakes in their writing. In addition to that, the errors were hypothetically associated to the transfer of mother tongue and over generalization. Furthermore, over the period of COVID '19, there was lack of proper testing and practice sessions for students in respect to English writing which resulted into weaker syntax grip by students that deteriorated their performance when they were back to physical classes (Hafiz et al., 2020).

According to Sheng (2016), if the source of syntactic errors in English compositions is known, only then appropriate correction could be carried out. His research requires the sample students to write 120 words in 30 minutes and onto that he uses induction and comparative analysis to analyze the students' mistakes. As per the results, errors in words and phrases compilation were common and prominent. Few of the syntax errors consisted of incomplete sentence structure, conjunctions used improperly and parallel errors. Therefore, it is of great help to improve the writing ability, strengthen the training of the sentence level and correct the mistakes of the English sentence patterns by rigorous training (Sheng, 2016).

According to Mweri (2021) , during the Corona Virus era, the dynamics of language tended to change. His research is a sheer study about the coinage of new words and he studies their spread. He collected data from social media and daily newspapers;

qualitatively analyzed them. In his study, he also talks about the fact that the syntactic structures of the English language need to be learnt and practiced keenly. This repetitive exercise leads to growth and development of a person in these aspects of language. Particular cases of repetition maybe conventionalized with time and end up producing slower or more careful speech. However, it is different with syntactic structure because the more an individual practice, the more he/she becomes aware of the correct syntax of the English language. (Mweri, 2021).

Material and Methods

This research employed a mixed method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative elements to comprehensively investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the syntactic structures in the English writing of first-year undergraduate students at Kinnaird College. The qualitative aspect involved the analysis of written material from the selected sample, focusing on identifying syntactic errors for a more nuanced evaluation. The written manuscripts from the first-year undergraduate students were examined to uncover syntactic errors and analyze their nature, enhancing the depth of our assessment. Concurrently, the quantitative component of the research utilized surveys, with the target population being instructors responsible for the compulsory English subject at Kinnaird College. Through these surveys, we aimed to gather expert opinions and insights directly from individuals in direct contact with the research sample—the undergraduate students. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the syntactic structures in English writing. Instructors, through the survey, not only provided expert advice but also validated and verified the improperly structured syntax in the writing of the students, adding an additional layer of reliability to our findings. The written sample data was sourced from a total of 50 first-year undergraduate students at Kinnaird College, all of whom were promoted from their intermediate level of education without undergoing the compulsory English language exam. These paragraphs were meticulously analyzed to identify and document the syntactic errors made by the sample students.

Results and Discussion

Syntactic Mistakes in Sample Manuscripts

The written manuscripts were keenly analyzed to find the types and nature of most occurring syntactic mistakes. It was found out that the students lacked proficiency and ample development in syntax of English language. A wide variation in the types of syntax errors were identified and those errors were found to be in constant repetition in the manuscripts of almost all the samples.

Singular and Plural Rules

In the majority of the manuscripts, there were instances where singular and plural words were used incorrectly. The students appeared to be unaware of the rule stipulating that verbs associated with plural nouns and pronouns should not end with an 's.' For instance, one manuscript contained the following incorrect sentence: "Students thinks for themselves." This is not standard or correct English, as a plural verb should be followed by a plural noun. Similarly, another manuscript stated, "More than millions deaths were reported." This is also incorrect, as the adjective 'millions' should have been used in its singular form to describe the noun 'deaths' for the sentence to be grammatically accurate.

Another category of error concerning the classification and usage of singular and plural words was identified when manuscripts included sentences such as, "Schools, colleges, and university went into e-learning." Here, a noticeable mistake is evident. When the words 'schools' and 'colleges' are used in their plural forms, instead of the

word 'university,' the plural form or the morpheme '-s' should have been used. On the contrary, at least 5-6 manuscripts included the word 'spreaded' while expressing their ideas. 'Spreaded' is an incorrect term; the past tense of 'spread' is simply 'spread.' It is important to rectify such linguistic inaccuracies to enhance the overall quality and clarity of the written expressions.

Usage of Articles

The absence of articles (where needed) and the incorrect use of articles were also identified as common mistakes. The presence of articles in sentences is crucial as they contribute to the clarity of the intended meaning. In the English language, 'the,' 'a,' and 'an' are three articles. For instance, a manuscript included the sentence, "That was very hard time for all people in the world." The correct and more standard version of this sentence would be, "That was a very hard time for all the people in the world." In this corrected version, the article 'a' is added before "very hard time," and the definite article 'the' is inserted before "people" and "world" to ensure grammatical accuracy and enhance clarity.

Absence of Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks play an integral role in English language writing, holding absolute essence and significance. They ensure the presence of pauses, guaranteeing that the tone or manner of what is being said is accurately delivered. In the manuscripts of undergraduate students, the absence of punctuation marks was detected. Consequently, the sentences lacked fluency in their expression. Such mistakes are not expected from students at such a high level of education. This lack of practice and understanding of syntax was evident. Among the most common errors pertaining to punctuation marks included the absence of full stops (.) and commas (,), especially. It is imperative to address these issues as proper punctuation not only aids in conveying meaning effectively but also contributes to the overall readability and coherence of written expressions. By rectifying these errors, the clarity and precision of the students' writing can be significantly enhanced.

Run On Sentence

A run-on sentence is a grammatical error characterized by the incorrect joining of two or more independent clauses. Such sentences are not grammatically correct, and it is preferable for these types of sentences to exist as separate entities. In the manuscripts of the students, numerous run-on sentences were identified. An example, among many analyzed mistakes, is as follows: "It has affected a lot of students' academic learning because of the environment students were not able to concentrate in their studies English is the most important subjects which needs to be polished every time because of the negation most students were not able to perform well in English and had to work hard after the pandemic."

In this example, multiple ideas are expressed within a single sentence without the addition of sufficient coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and punctuation marks. This lack of proper punctuation and sentence structure introduces ambiguity and hinders the clarity of the intended message. To enhance readability and comprehension, it is crucial to address run-on sentences by appropriately separating independent clauses or by incorporating the necessary conjunctions and punctuation marks.

Tenses

Tenses stand out as one of the most crucial and critical aspects of English language syntax. Their correctness is immensely essential, as they play a substantial role in expressing meaning in its finest and most authentic form. In nearly all 50 manuscripts, errors related to tenses were both visible and repetitive. Additionally, mastering tenses requires dedicated and consistent practice.

Moreover, within the English language, three primary types of tenses exist: past, present, and future. Each of these types comprises four further variations: simple, perfect, continuous, and perfect continuous. Consequently, there are 12 most frequently used tenses in the English language, namely: simple past tense, simple present tense, simple future tense, past perfect tense, present perfect tense, future perfect tense, past continuous tense, present continuous tense, future continuous tense, past perfect continuous tense, present perfect continuous tense, and future perfect continuous tense. Despite being introduced to students in the early years of education, our sample students had not yet mastered these tenses due to the lack of practice during the COVID tenure.

Here are some examples of mistakes involving tenses that affect sentence formation and structure. For instance, a student wrote, "They have not know." The correct versions of this sentence would be, "They have not known" or "They do not know." These examples illustrate the importance of a precise and accurate application of tenses for effective communication in English writing.

Types of Sentence Structures

In the English language, there are four basic types of sentence structures: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences. This classification aids in understanding the independence or dependence of clauses within a sentence. In essence, independent clauses can stand alone as complete sentences, while dependent clauses cannot.

The undergraduate students, who are the focus of this research, made several mistakes concerning sentence structure. They either incorrectly used coordinating and subordinating conjunctions or erroneously added a full stop (.) after a dependent clause, transforming it into an incorrect sentence. For instance, a manuscript includes the following dependent clause with a full stop (.), "After the pandemic of coronavirus has affected almost all the countries with the loss of lives, economic collapse, destruction of social structures and educational sector suffered." This is incorrect because the presence of the word 'after' makes it a dependent clause, requiring an independent clause to provide balance and form a complete sentence.

Incorrect Syntax leading to Abrupt Meaning

During the process of analyzing the manuscripts for syntactic errors, it was discovered that, at certain points, English grammar was used incorrectly. Consequently, such sentences either conveyed a very abrupt meaning or were nonsensical.

For example, one manuscript included the sentence, "It is because of the decrease the impact and effect." This sentence fails to convey a clear and fluent meaning due to its incorrect syntactic arrangement of words.

Survey; Professional Evidence and Advice

The survey gathered evidence and advice regarding syntactic errors, lending greater credibility to the research. Importantly, all the instructors believed that online classes during COVID, coupled with the lack of testing, had an impact on the development of syntactic structure in the English language writing of those students.

Each of the 15 instructors provided their unique perspective, insights, and advice based on their experiences with the students.

Impact of Online classes on the Development of Syntax
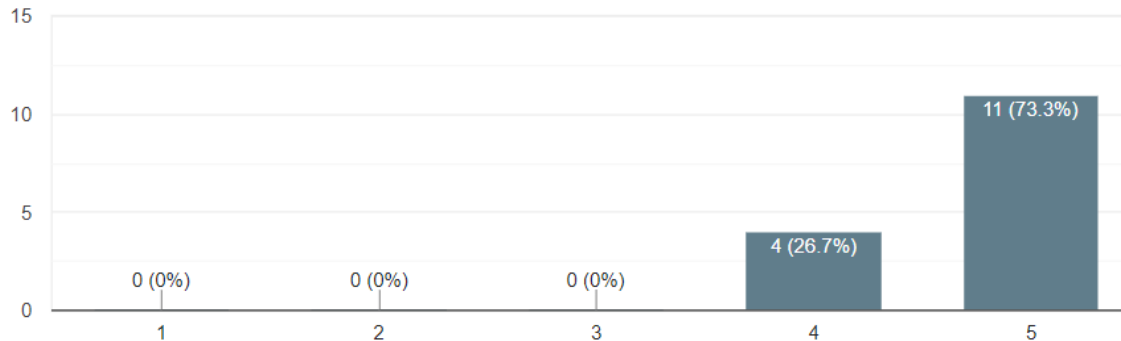
All 15 of the instructors believed that the occurrence of online classes due to COVID has impacted the development of correct syntactic structures in students. On a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, 11 of the instructors selected '5' as they believed that the impact of online classes during COVID on syntax patterns was the highest. These 11 instructors constituted of the 73.3% of the 100%. Whereas, the remaining 4 instructors out of 15, who constituted 26.7% of the 100% believed that online classes during COVID impacted the syntactic structures at scale of '4'.
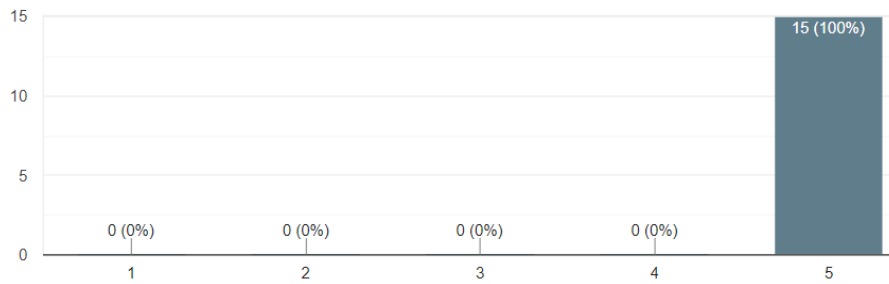
When asked why have online classes due to COVID impacted the development of correct syntactic structures, the instructors replied giving their own viewpoints. Most of them believed that English Language and its skills can majorly be mastered or be well understood by the help of excessive revision and rigorous practice. They believed that syntax of language after its conceptual understanding can be implemented or applied correctly once its amply practiced. In the online system of studying English language, the writing practice was not done enough and as a result students lacked to develop correct and authentic syntax pattern.

Moreover, some of the instructors believed that unlike in physical classrooms, there was insufficient interaction between students and teacher in online classes. Therefore, there was no proper check and balance done on the students by the teacher. Additionally, instructors also believed that in order to understand syntax knowledge and apply its rules, it is essential for the students to be motivated and keen to learn. During the culture of online classes, students lost their determination to learn and were distracted easily.

When asked how online classes due to COVID impacted the development of correct syntactic structures, the instructors replied giving their own viewpoints. They told that the impact can be seen vividly in the English writing patterns of students. Some of the instructors even mentioned the nature of syntax mistakes. For example, incorrect usage of present tense, past tense and problems while applying punctuation marks. One of the instructors mentioned that as a result of the impact, students are neither able to recognize the types of sentences nor use them in their pieces of writing correctly.

On the other hand, as a result of reduced social interaction in the COVID era, students had lower levels of confidence. Therefore, with low confidence level, problems in just being motivated and interested enough to learn and practice grammar rules arose. For example, an instructor quoted that students were not interested to practice even when questions were assigned to them so they failed to absorb language rules.

Impact of lack of testing on the Development of Syntax

All 15 of the instructors believed that the lack of testing has impacted the development of correct syntactic structures in students. On a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, all 15 of the instructors selected '5' as they believed that the impact lack of testing on syntax patterns was the highest. They believed that these students' syntax suffered because they were promoted from intermediate level to their undergraduate level without having to appear for their compulsory English language's examination.

When asked why has lack of testing impacted the development of correct syntactic structures, the instructors replied giving their own viewpoints. Instructors expressed that testing encourages students to be conscious about their learning. For example, if students will be aware that they will be tested on their syntactic structures of English, they will be attentive while rules are being told to them and also rigorously practice to achieve excellence in it. Therefore, it can be said that lack of testing is synonymous to lack of practice. This is because when students are not tested for their grammar skills, they stop revising and loosen grip over their proficiency level as they fail to find their motivation to learn.

Some of the instructors told how lack of testing comforted the students in a way that there was no pressure on them to study. Even when grammar skills were assigned to them as a test or practice during the online classes, they opted for cheating and visited the internet for solutions.

Furthermore, when students have the thought of being evaluated in the back of their minds, they tend to consciously perform better. They prepare themselves well and strive for accuracy in their written expression as a result they pay closer attention to grammar rules. Along with this, one of the samples of this research's survey stated that while preparing an English language's test, diverse reading materials are added sometimes which have the tendency for students to improve and internalize correct syntax. Once tests are not conducted, students have fewer opportunities to learn from.

When asked how has lack of testing impacted the development of correct syntactic structures, the instructors replied giving their own viewpoints. Some of them stated that it has resulted in the students having problems in even the basic syntactic patterns. This is because once students are tested, they get a feedback on it. When they are not tested, there is no evaluation mechanism and as a result no feedback mechanism.

Along with impacting the way that students write, lack of testing has hindered the students to track their language progress. One of the instructors included that it has caused weaker syntactic patterns of students and basic rules such as subject – verb agreement and correct sentential constructions are unknown to the sample students.

Observed Syntax Errors by Instructors
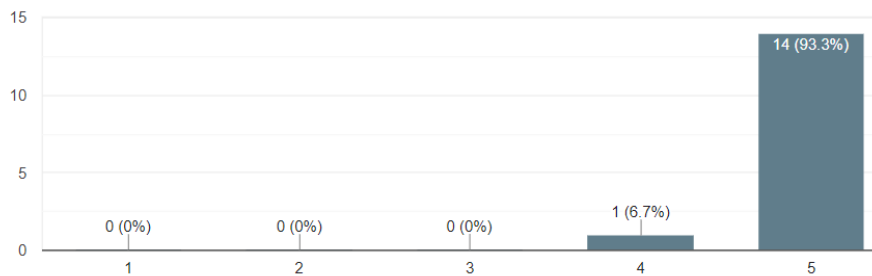
All 15 of the instructors claimed that the occurrence of syntactic errors was frequently observed in writing of students who were promoted without taking English's final exam at intermediate level. On a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, 14 of the instructors selected '5' as they believed that the occurrence of syntactic errors was the most. These 14 instructors constituted of the 93.3% of the 100%. Whereas, the remaining 1 instructor out of 15, who constituted 6.7% of the 100% believed that the occurrence of syntactic errors was frequent at scale of '4'.

The instructors were provided with two statements in the survey. The statement A was of the idea that syntactic errors in English writing was same before and after COVID era. However, statement B put forward the idea that the batch of undergraduate who did not appear for intermediate level's English exam and who had to study through online classes had underdeveloped syntax as compared to previous batches.

Out of both the statements, 100% of the respondents chose statement B. This means that 15 out of 15 instructors conform to the idea that online classes and lack of testing has contributed to more mistakes in the syntax and underdeveloped syntactic structures in students' manner of English language's writing.

When asked what kind of syntactic mistakes in the students' writing did the instructors encounter in the batch of students who are the target population of this research, the instructors replied according to their personal experiences. Some of them told that there is a lot of confusion amongst students regarding the correct sentence structure, students are not fully aware of the simple, compound, complex and compound – complex sentences.

One of the instructors told that the students end verb with the '-s' morpheme even when it's not needed. They highlighted the presence of errors pertaining to punctuation marks, subject – verb agreement, run on sentences.

One of the instructors brought in limelight one mistake that is previously not talked about. The issue of not adding discourse markers where needed was quoted. Discourse markers are assistive in connecting sentences and ideas.

Solution

When asked what can be done to solve the prevalent problem of unstable syntax development in students' writing, the instructors gave their viewpoints and advices. Almost all of them believed that syntax can be mastered and developed through doing rigorous and a lot of practice. This is because English language skills such as writing and attaining perfection in writing through owning syntax can only be done through practicing it well.

Furthermore, instructors believed that the teacher should cater the problematic areas of students and introduce grammar focused lessons. They should ensure that students have developed syntax patterns and give feedback by correcting them

wherever they are wrong. For students to have well developed syntax, it is essential for them to identify and be aware of where they are making mistakes. On top of that, personalized guidance should be given to students struggling with syntax.

Besides this, one of the instructors proposed the idea to make students speak in English language correctly because a student will write correct when they speak correct. Therefore, speaking practice would help them in writing and developing accurate syntax. Similarly, an instructor advised to make the students read diverse texts with standard English so they have more opportunities to write in the standard manner too.

Regular assessment and testing should also be done to maintain evaluation patterns and motivate students to be interested in their understanding of syntax. It is immensely essential for the students to be interested in their learning and enjoy it. This is because a student is prone to learning better when they enjoy the learning process. For this reason, new writing exercises should be planned with some variations so that they are not monotonous.

Henceforth, if all these measures are taken into account, the prevalent problem of undeveloped syntactic structures can be catered well.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the syntactic structure of English language was not well developed in the batch of students from Kinnaird College for Women University who took online classes in the Corona Virus period and then were promoted to undergraduate level without appearing for their compulsory English's examination of intermediate level. Online classes affected the development of syntax since there was lack of practice, limited student and teacher interaction and ultimately low motivation levels of students to own standard syntax. Moreover, lack of being tested made the students unbothered about their weak syntax, there was no proper evaluation and feedback mechanism. As a result of all of this, syntax patterns in the target population of students are not amply developed. However, measures can be taken to have them developed. These measures include; rigorous practicing, teachers assessing the students' progress, making students read diverse texts in standard English syntax, making students speak in correct syntax, making them listen to standard English audios, give personalized guidance to students having weaker syntax and initiating grammar focused lessons.

Recommendations

This research study examined and analyzed manuscripts of only 50 students. The sample size could have been more; reading at least 100 manuscripts and then analyzing them would have brought more authenticity to the research. Similarly, the survey conducted to gain professional advice had only 15 respondents or instructors. If the instructors would have been at least 50, then there would have been more validity regarding evidence for syntactic mistakes and even advices to solve that problem. In addition to this, the data collection for this research was done from within the premises of Kinnaird College for Women University only. The manuscripts of students as well as the instructors for the survey were chosen from Kinnaird College. For the research to be more authentic and reliable, manuscripts of students from various universities should have been selected. Also, instructors of other universities should have been part of the sample in order to attain more valid results. Increasing the sample size would have brought more clarity, genuineness and reliability to the research findings.

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