

# I Congreso Internacional sobre la enseñanza de la gramática

## Presente, pasado y futuro

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# WHY STUDENTS MAKE MISTAKES WITH GRAMMAR THEY KNOW WELL?

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## ABSTRACT

With a typical grammar exercise, the instructor simply checks the students' answers and explains why the answer was wrong. In this pilot study, students were instructed to think of the reasons why they chose the wrong answer and to write them down, which led to the understanding why students make mistakes. Students also commented on what they think of this practice.

## Keywords

Grammar lesson, reason for grammatical mistakes.

## INTRODUCTION

While there are numerous studies that list various types of grammatical errors, only a few have tried to dig deeper to find out why students make grammatical mistakes. Krashen, for example, stated three conditions need to be met to utilize Monitor. They are: time, focus on form, and knowing the rule, but students seem to make mistakes even when all these conditions are met. For instance, when they work on grammar questions, they should come up with the correct answers, but often they do not. Then, what are the reasons? Case lists 10 reasons, but only overgeneralization seems to be the plausible explanation for our students. Gass & Selinker claim negative transfer is one reason.

This study is two-fold: to find out why students make mistakes and to suggest one exercise to direct students to grammar points they missed.

## METHODS

### Participants

32 college freshmen, in Business English minor, who are trying to get higher TOEFL scores for studying abroad, participated in the pilot study. They have studied English as a second language over 9 years and are exposed to almost all the structures of English. They have had this TOEFL Prep class once a week for two semesters (15 weeks each) and they took TOEFL Tests at the end of spring and fall semesters. Their scores are shown in graphs 1 & 2 below.

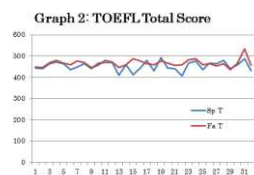
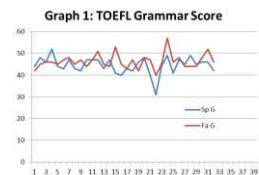


Table 1: Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Source	Measure	Semester	Type III Sum Of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Semester	Grammar	Linear	49.000	1	49.000	5.624	.025
	Listening	Linear	.063	1	.063	.009	.924
	Reading	Linear	90.250	1	90.250	8.484	.007
	Total Score	Linear	2889.062	1	2889.062	13.456	.001

It shows that they have improved between semesters, in listening and reading at significance levels at .025 and .007 respectively.

### Instrument

Participants worked on TOEFL Review exercise of the Structure & written Expression part (10 questions) on pp. 167-8 in the textbook (*Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test: PBT*) and the questions to be reviewed are listed in the Findings section. Students were given enough time to work on the questions, but were not allowed to use a dictionary. After the instructor explained the answers, students were instructed to focus on the questions they missed, to think about why they made the mistakes, and to write them down. Also, students were asked to comment on what they think of this type of practice. This type of exercise (i.e., to think about the reasons and write them down) was given only three times a semester because it is time-consuming. The result of the final exercise is presented in the next section.

## FINDINGS

The following Table shows the number of students who made mistakes for each question.

Table 2: Number of students who made mistakes for each question (N=32)

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
1	5	4	5	4	4	17	24	3	28

Due to space constraints, questions 2, 4, 7, 8, 10 are listed below, which will be discussed here.

Choose the letter of the word or group of words that best completes the sentence.

2. Because of his reservations about the issue, \_\_\_\_\_ refused to vote for it.  
(A) who (B) and (C) which the senator (D) the senator

4. It has been estimated that if we intend to stay above the starvation level, \_\_\_\_\_ the food supply.  
(A) so we will have to double (B) and it must double  
(C) which it must be doubled (D) we must double

Choose the letter of the underlined word or group of words that is not correct.

7. Automakers Nissan and Ford and several aerospace research facilities in Great Britain  
A  
\_\_\_\_\_ are working lately to apply active noise cancellation to entire cars and planes.  
B C D

8. When a country in an early stage of development, investments in fixed capital are vital.  
A B C D

10. Inasmuch he kept mostly to himself, the author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was known as "the mysterious B. Treuen."  
A B C D

Q2: Careless thought that "which..." should come after a comma. 【Overgeneralization】

Q4: Misunderstanding of the structure when a sentence with an if-clause is embedded. 【Lack of thorough understanding】

Q7: Not knowing that "lately" is used with a present perfect tense. 【Vocabulary】

Q8: Most students focused on the main clause and displayed diverse responses. Some did not think "fixed" was used as an adjective: a verb after a preposition should be a gerund. Others thought it was a tense question: "are" should be "were" because "fixed" is a past tense or "in an early stage" indicates a fact in the past. A few mistook "capital" as the subject in the main clause and "are" should be "is". 【Overgeneralization, Lack of thorough understanding of the structure, etc.】

Q10: Almost all students could not answer and the most common reason was that they did not know the word "inasmuch", which is the key to the answer. 【Vocabulary】

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of students' responses shows that students made mistakes due to the following reasons: lack of thorough understanding, difficult vocabulary words, overgeneralization, misunderstanding the point in question for something else, being distracted by parenthetical expressions, etc.

This study does not explain what type of grammatical mistakes students make when they produce sentences. The exercise made the students pay deeper attention to why they could not utilize their grammatical knowledge.

Students positively commented on what they thought about this type of exercise as follows: "Thinking of the reasons will help me not to make the same type of mistake." "Reviewing the process of my thinking helps me to understand the point that I did not understand clearly."

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