

EXPRESSING TIME RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH ADVERBIAL CLAUSES OF TIME – AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' WRITINGS

Rita Rafajlovičová

Abstract: The paper deals with the use of Adverbial clauses of time in student's writings. It focuses on the mistakes students most commonly make when they relate time to grammatical tense in order to express different time relationships within sentences. The writing task we analysed was designed to measure the students' language proficiency with special emphasis on their ability to relate the time of the situation in the dependent clause to the time of the situation in the main clause. According to the instructions, the students had to write a letter to their friend describing a problem that they've faced recently saying what happened, how the problem was resolved and how they would do things differently if it happened again. It was a clear authentic context of communication in which the students demonstrated their ability to appropriately use particular subordinators that convey different meanings and produce time clauses which are determined by their function within the sequence of linguistic events. The results of the study revealed that the students' competence to use a wide range of grammatical features to convey specific meanings was on a lower degree than we had expected. Moreover, we elicited a considerable number of other grammatical errors in their writings. Therefore, the paper also deals with the issue how to avoid the most common mistakes students make in the performance.

Key words: written performance, language proficiency, adverbial clauses, subordinate clauses, errors, tenses, reporting

Introduction

The overriding aim of each English teacher is to prepare communicatively competent students who will be able to appropriately and effectively use the language in everyday real life situations. It is especially important for university students studying English language and literature as their major subject. However, the level of language competence of most of these students, trained to become teachers, is contrary to this aim. Both their oral and written performance on seminars, language development classes and even on their final state exams only scarcely attains the required level and in many cases it doesn't meet our expectations. In order to diagnose the students' weaknesses and get a clear picture of what sort of mistakes they most commonly make, an analysis of their written performance was done.

There is no doubt that when investigating an individual's performance in a language we are interested in how the speaker/writer employs his/her knowledge of grammar and how

he/she demonstrates that knowledge. Both knowledge of grammar and the ability to use grammar are important features of language proficiency. Since grammar is everywhere in communication, it is the 'stuff' with which we communicate even at the simplest level, and as it is an integral part of the language we use in everyday communication, it is a category to be measured. Grammar is seen as the on-line processing component of discourse since it enables us to build stretches of dynamic discourse in speech and writing. The less grammar we know, the less likely we will be able to communicate; the more grammar we know, the more efficient will be our communications. However, there is a very interesting question as whether fluency should be promoted before accuracy. Most advocates of a communicative approach have favoured fluency, with production gradually being refined towards more accurate control. Some researchers advocate slow, accurate production gradually being speeded up to become more fluent. The need to focus on form changes according to the educational objectives. When one is teaching a receptive skill such as listening or reading, it is irrelevant to emphasise grammar since these skills require competence primarily in the areas of word recognition and semantic processing. On the contrary, if the teacher is focusing on productive skills (speaking and writing), formal accuracy can become an important concern because rules of pedagogical grammar are essentially rules of production. If the teacher is offering a conversation class, then accuracy is much less an issue than it is if the class is dealing with formal writing. If the learner's goal is survival communication, formal accuracy is of marginal value (Celce-Murcia, 1992: 464).

Error Analysis

So as to measure the 'rules in use', we prepared a task-based writing that intended to measure communicative language ability, of which grammatical competence is one important integral part. The students were engaged in a communicative act, in a context that allowed for the creation of meaning.

The present study offers the results of the analysis of 54 first year master degree students' writings with the focus on their ability to express different relationships through adverbial clauses as well as other types of subordinate clauses. The writing task was designed to measure the students' language proficiency. However, it measured not only the candidates' knowledge of sentence structure, but also that of vocabulary and text cohesion. The selection

of the appropriate verb forms and clause structures had to be made on the basis of the meaning that these forms have in the given context. According to the instructions, the candidates had to write a letter to their friend. The title of the writing task was: *Your friend is going on a camping holiday to a remote and dangerous area you visited recently. Write a **letter** to your friend, describing your experience and advising on what precautions to take before leaving.*

The essays were approximately 300-350 words long, which gave enough space to make use of a variety of grammatical forms and functions that were needed for successful fulfilment of the task. It was designed in a way that the writers were to describe events in the past, present, and future, which involved the use of a wide range of structures such as verb tenses, reporting, conditionals, connectors to express different types of relationships through dependent clauses, etc. expressions of time as well as time clauses.

When correcting the students' essays, we made a list of all types of errors that occurred in the writings. It came clear that the most troublesome areas of grammar they've been still struggling with are: expressing time relationships in sentences with adverbial clauses, namely the use of past simple, present perfect and past perfect, the distinction between simple and progressive aspect, expressing condition by conditional clauses, the language of reporting and back shifting, and last but not least the proper use of articles. There were altogether about 670 various errors detected in the essays, which means that there were almost 13 errors in each essay on average. Table 1 below shows the incidence of the most common errors found in the students' writings.

structure	number of errors	% of all
articles	298	44,2
conditionals	15	2,2
language of reporting/backshifting	38	5,6
past tenses and the present perfect	265	39,3
simple/progressive aspect	8	1,3
subordination (noun, adverbial, relative clauses)	13	1,9
Other errors (countability, negation, quantifiers, clause structuring, etc.)	37	5,5
Total	674	100

Table 1 The most commonly occurring errors in students' writings

The analysis revealed that students by far most commonly made mistakes in the use of verb tenses and that of articles. This can be explained by the fact that Slovak does not distinguish between the expression of the notion that an event occurred at some indefinite time within a period leading up to the past/present and a single definite event in the past. For both, our language uses the simple present tense. Our students prefer using the past tense instead of the present perfect as the latter is absent in our language. The list below shows some examples of errors made in the use of past tenses:

- I **had been** there just once, after our graduation.
- On my way to Peru I **had seen** a lot of dangerous animals.
- We decided to go to the first camp we **had seen**.
- It was the most horrible camping holiday, since I **have lost** my car and almost my life there.
- I **had been** there for a week last month.
- I was bitten by a snake. It **had been** a bit painful.
- You had to be surprised when you had opened ...letter I wrote to you.
- I've been** there and me and my friends we **have been going** from place to place by a caravan.
- They told me a story they **experienced**.
- I **have been** there last summer.
- When have you been there?
- It was the most beautiful place I **ever saw**.
- Before that moment I **have never had** my feet in two different countries
- My first holiday **had not been** enjoyable
- Since my childhood **I'm reading** a lot of books and articles.
- In your last letter **you have** mentioned

The differences in the incidence of errors between the structures can be accounted for the character of the task. A considerable part in each essay was devoted to the description of past events; therefore, the number of sentences using past tenses to refer to past time is so high. There is no doubt that the high occurrence of a particular structure is in proportion with the occurrence of errors.

There was a considerable number of errors in adverbial clauses of time and condition. Students tend to use the future tense to express future time:

- Don't forget to read the information before you **will decide** to go.

I hope he will come and visit me when he **will come** to Slovakia.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you **will need** some advice.

If you **will be** in troubles...

The extremely high incidence of errors in using the definite and indefinite articles can also be accounted for the fact that we do not use articles to determine nouns in Slovak. The vast majority of mistakes is the result of omitting the indefinite article before pre modified countable singular nouns, or omitting the definite article before nouns the identity of which is known to both the speaker and the listener, and before post modified nouns such as in:

It is very exhausting even for **x** good hiker.

It is **x** inhospitable place.

During one of our walks we spotted something in the bushes- it was **x** bear.

x Next day I set off early in the morning and met my friends near **x** jungle.

I went straight to bed because **x** flight was really exhausting

I had forgotten **x** torch at home.

First of all there is **x** need to tell you...

We couldn't find **x** good camping place or **x** cheap hotel.

We had to sleep in **x** tent.

Take this as **x** friendly advice

A camping holiday is **x** fantastic idea.

I went to **x** restaurant for **the** lunch.

I remember that **x** couple I met told me that...

On the other hand, our students tend to put an indefinite or definite article where they should not be placed :

I would like to give you **an** advice.

You should get vaccination against **the** insect.

Don't leave valuable things under **a** towel when you are on the beach.

The second thing is **the** crime.

While Australia is a country of **a** low crime...

We had to learn how to build a tent and make **a** fire.

Another grammatical structure that ranks among the many commonly occurring mistakes our students make is the language of reporting. When speaking in English, the students do not realise that the report is taking place in a different place and other time, and thus they do not backshift tenses, pronouns, temporal adverbs and adverbs of place. This witnesses the fact that Slovak most students think in their mother tongue, in which we do not apply the rules of back shifting, and then translate their thoughts into English.

When my father arrived, he told me that something **is** in the woods.

You wrote that you **are going** to spend...

I thought that we **will go** by bus, not by train.

They often fail in creating reported questions as they do not change the original question word order into declarative word order:

In your last letter you asked me **what was** my itinerary and **how did I travel**.

You need to realise what kind of danger **are you** getting into.

I'm not sure what is your travelling experience.

They asked us where were we coming from and where were we going.

If they do backshift, they apply these changes mechanically without understanding the underlying semantics. They tend to overuse *that*-clauses for the presentation of the message content report, and fail to recognize the illocutionary force of the original speech act and select an appropriate reporting verb.

The tour guide said **that we mustn't** come off the marked tourist track.

instead of The tour guide **warned /ordered us** not to...

The use of double negatives in English sentences is a very common practice of Slovak students, too. This can be accounted to the fact they don't think in English, but in their native language and then translate it word by word into English.

It was... great adventure that **nor** I **or** my friends will **never** forget

We **didn't** like **neither** the hotel nor the food.

Though the students whose writings were analysed are supposed to be on level C1, there also occurred some errors that are typical for lower level students, which is really alarming:

After this, we decided to **going**...

My first holiday had not been enjoyable **than I expected**.

I'm looking forward **to hear** from you.

These people stole us later and we nothing noticed.

Our skin turned red and big pimples **have been appeared** on our bodies.

This experience I'll never forget.

You have to visit as **much** beautiful places as possible.

If I have **a** right information

Conclusion

This is only a brief account of the most commonly occurring errors in our students' written performance. However, it is enough to provoke some discussion or speculation about where the nature of this state resides. The level of language competence of applicants for studying English at our institute has been gradually declining of late. We've been trying to find out why it is so. In my opinion there is an urgent need to enhance the quality of teaching English at secondary schools, as well as to change the acceptance procedure of applicants for studying English as a major subject at Prešov University.

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Author

Rita Rafajlovičová, PhDr., Ph.D., Institute of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Prešov University, Prešov, Slovakia; e-mail: rafael@unipo.sk
