Investigating Iraqi EFL learners' Use Of English Syntactic Structures

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Article Info	Abstract
	This research is devoted to study the Iraqi EFL learners' awareness of certain syntactic structures in standard English . It aims at theoretically investigating certain types of English syntactic structures and practically studying the Iraqi EFL learners' performance in dealing with syntactic structures by means of a specialized test designed for this purpose . The present study falls into four chapters. The first chapter includes general definitions of syntax and word order from scholars' and linguists' points of view. The second chapter deals with the main syntactic forms in modern Standard English with reference to their main types. Chapter three includes the test which is made for the students from the non-departmental post graduate studentsin the College of Education to measure their total performance at the recognition and production levels with a discussion of the main types of errors which are committed by them. The fourth chapter summarizes the main conclusions and findings of the present study.

1. Introduction

As far as English is concerned , the sentence is traditionally defined as " an expression of a complete thought " . It is also defined as " the largest unit to which we can assign a particular grammatical structure" (Partridge , 1949 : 90 ; Palmer , 1971 : 73) . Some grammarians like Stageberg , Roberts and others present various treatments and orderings of syntactic patterns in English . It is beyond any dispute that basic syntactic sentence structures represent a crucial part for English language learning . Therefore , any shortage in understanding these syntactic structures will consequently be reflected in learners' inability to express their thoughts .

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in dealing with these structures in both recognition and production levels . Accordingly , a diagnostic test was presented to validate the above mentioned hypothesis . The test includes two questions , each with 25 items (see appendix) . Results show that , at the recognition level (question 1) , most Iraqi EFL learners (62.8%) fail in recognizing these structures , whereas at the production level the percentage of learners unable to produce these structures increased to reach (68.4%) including the avoided items which are considered as incorrect in both first and second questions . This research is expected to be valuable for English speaking students who aim at achieving a good mastery over English . The study ends with some of the recommendations for EFL teachers and learners and the way they encounter such sentences in spoken and written English .

Section Two

2.1 Definitions and General Description of English Sentences

By definition , **syntax** is defined as the set of rules, principles, and processes that govern the structure of sentences (**sentence structure**) in a given language, usually including word order.

The word syntax is originally taken from Ancient Greek: σύνταξις which refers to "coordination", it consists of two parts σύν *syn*, i.e. "together", and τάξις *táxis*, "an ordering".Thus the term syntax (which implies word order) refers to " ordering words together " in a proper manner .

One basic description of a particular language's syntax is the sequence in which the basic sentence elements (subject - verb - and object) usually appear together in meaningful sentences .

As for the definitions of sentences , we can note that the traditional definition of a sentence as a " group of words expressing a complete thought " has failed to be adequate , because it tends to be vague and notional . In other words , it relies entirely on meaning . Considering a sentence is " a group of words containing a subject and a predicate " (Roberts , 1954 : 292) ,this definition can apply to many sentences , but it fails with single – word sentences . As a result , this definition has been reformed as " a set of words (or occasionally one word) containing or implying a subject and a predicate and expressing a statement , question , exclamation or command " (Allen , 1984 : 681) .

In addition , Palmer (1971 : 73) defines a sentence as " the largest unit to which we can assign a grammatical structure " . As for identification , Scheurweghs (1959 : 1) states that the written sentences are easier to identify owing to the use of punctuation marks as indicators of sentence boundaries , i.e. capital letters at the beginning of sentences – full stops , exclamation marks and question marks at the

end of these sentences . However , Zandvort (1975 : 195) adda that pause and intonation usually indicate the beginning and the end of a particular sentence with reference to preceding or following sentences

In non-functional linguistics, a sentence is viewed as a " textual unit that consists of one or more words that are grammatically linked". In functional linguistics, a sentence is a unit of written texts delimited by graphological features such as upper case letters and markers such as periods, question marks, and exclamation marks (Halliday and Matthiessen , 2004: 6) .

A sentence can include words grouped meaningfully to express a statement, question, exclamation, request, command or suggestion. It is a set of words that in principle tells a complete thought (although it may make little sense taken in isolation out of context). It may be a simple phrase, but it conveys enough meaning to imply a clause, even if it is not explicit.

 for example :

 "Two" as a sentence (in answer to the question "How many were there?") implies the clause "There were two." Typically a sentence contains a subject and predicate.

In the teaching of writing skills (composition skills), students are generally required to express (rather than imply) the elements of a sentence, leading to the schoolbook

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definition of a sentence as one that must (explicitly) include a subject and a verb. For example, in second-language acquisition, teachers often refuse one-word answers that only imply a clause, asking the student to "give a complete sentence," by which they mean an explicit one.As with all language **expressions**, sentences might contain function and content words and contain properties such as characteristic intonation and timing patterns.

In non-functional linguistics, a simple complete sentence consists of a single clause. In functional linguistics, a sentence is typically associated with a clause and a clause can be either a clause simplex or a clause complex. A clause is a clause simplex if it represents a single process going on through time and it is a clause complex if it represents a logical relation between two or more processes and is thus composed of two or more clause simplexes.

A clause (simplex) typically contains a predication structure with a subject noun phrase and a finite verb. Although the subject is usually a noun phrase, other kinds of phrases (such as gerund phrases) work as well, and some languages allow subjects to be omitted. In the examples below, the subject of the outmost clause simplex is in italics and the subject of boiling is in square brackets. Notice that there is clause embedding in the second and third examples.

[Water] boils at 100 degrees Celsius.

It is quite interesting that [water] boils at 100 degrees Celsius.

The fact that [water] boils at 100 degrees Celsius is quite interesting.

There are two types of clauses: independent and non-independent/interdependent. An independent clause realizes a speech act such as a statement, a question, a command or an offer. A non-independent clause does not realize any act. A non-independent clause (simplex or complex) is usually logically related to other non-independent clauses. Together they usually constitute a single independent clause (complex). For that reason, non-independent clauses are also called interdependent. For instance, the non-independent clause because I have no friends is related to the non-independent clause I don't go out in I don't go out, because I have no friends. The whole clause complex is independent because it realizes a statement. What is stated is the causal nexus between having no friend and not going out. When such a statement is acted out, the fact that the speaker doesn't go out is already established, therefore it cannot be stated. What is still open and under negotiation is the reason for that fact. The causal nexus is represented by the independent clause complex and not by the two interdependent clause simplexes.

2.2 Sentence classification by structure

One traditional scheme for classifying English sentences is by clause structure, the number and types of clauses in the sentence with finite verbs.

- A simple sentence consists of a single independent clause with no dependent clauses.
- A compound sentence consists of multiple independent clauses with no dependent clauses. These clauses are joined together using conjunctions, punctuation, or both.
- A complex sentence consists of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.
- A compound–complex sentence (or complex–compound sentence) consists of multiple independent clauses, at least one of which has at least one dependent clause.

As far as purpose is concerned ,Sentences can also be classified into :

- A declarative sentence or declaration, the most common type, commonly makes a statement: "I have to go to work."
- An interrogative sentence or question is commonly used to request information—"Do you have to go to work?"—but sometimes not; as in the case of rhetorical questions.

- An exclamatory sentence or exclamation is generally a more emphatic form of statement expressing emotion: "I have to go to work!"
- An imperative sentence or command tells someone to do something (and if done strongly may be considered both imperative and exclamatory): "Go to work." or "Go to work!"

2.3 Major and minor sentences

A major sentence is a regular sentence; it has a subject and a predicate, e.g. "I have a ball.". In this sentence, one can change the persons, e.g. "We have a ball.". However, a minor sentence is an irregular type of sentence that does not contain a main clause, e.g. "Mary!", "Precisely so.", "Next Tuesday evening after it gets dark.". Other examples of minor sentences are headings (e.g. the heading of this entry), stereotyped expressions ("Hello!"), emotional expressions ("Wow!"), proverbs, etc. These can also include nominal sentences like "The more, the merrier". These mostly omit a main verb for the sake of conciseness, but may also do so in order to intensify the meaning around the nouns.Sentences that comprise a single word are called word sentences, and the words themselves sentence words (Noordegraaf, 2001 : 24) Gary (2011 : 370) and Katherine (2011:108) agree that the average length of a particular sentence generally serves as a measure of sentence difficulty or complexity. Thus , as the average sentence length increases, the complexity of that sentences increases as well.

Section Three: The Test

3.1 Background:

In order to reach the required aims of the present research, a test has been made to identify the aspects of difficulty encountered by Iraqi EFL students with reference to certain syntactic structures. The test consists of two questions. The first question measures the students' responses on the recognition level. The second question, however, is specialized to measure their responses on the production level. The first question includes twenty-five items that are designed to measure the students' ability to recognize the correct word order. The second question contains twenty-five items that are intended to measure the students' ability to form meaningful sentences .

The test has been applied to a sample of 50 Iraqi EFL university students at their post-graduate stage , College of Education, Mustansiriya University.

In this section, an attempt is made to present the results of the students' performance regarding the test. The degree to which they master the English sentences is, thus, conditioned by their correct responses.

As mentioned above, the first question of the test is constructed to measure the students' performance at the recognition level. In brief, the students'   total performance of question one is presented respectively in the following table:

Table (1): Subjects' Total Performance at the Recognition Level in Question (1)

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
1	186	37.2	285	57	29	5.8

As Table (1) shows, the total number of correct responses in question (1) is (186 , 37.2 %), while the incorrect responses (in addition to the avoided ones) is (314 , 62.8%). The rate of the correct responses reflects the subjects' ability in identifying the grammatical sentences in the first question of the test. In addition , the rate of the incorrect responses, indeed, reflects that some of them have encountered difficulty in identifying thecorrect sentences employed in this question.

As for the question of the subjects' performance at the production level, table (2) summarize the results:

Table (2): Subjects' Total Performance at the Production Level in Question (2)

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided Items	%
2	158	31.6	314	62.8	28	5.6

Depending on the results presented in Table (2), it can be concluded that most of the subjects are incompetent in making grammatical sentences because most of their responses to the second question are incorrect in addition to the left items (342,68.4%) , when compared with their correct ones (158, 31.6%).
Finally the subjects' performance of the entire test with respect to the recognition and production levels can be revealed in the following table:

Table (3): Subjects' Total Performance at the Recognition and Production Levels

No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%	No. of Avoided	%

					Items	
1	186	37.2	285	57	29	5.8
2	158	31.6	314	62.8	28	5.6

3.2 Error Analysis:
3.2.1 Sources of Errors:
Depending on the analysis of the subjects' errors, this section is specialized to identify the strategies employed by learners in learning English as a foreign language. In this sense, Brown (1987:177-8) says that errors made by learners may be attributed to: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies.

3.2.1.1 Interlingual Transfer:
This means that many errors are attributed to the influence of the mother tongue (i.e. Arabic language). Witting (1981:179) states that the basis of interference is the fact that learning a given material may inhibit retrieval of some other learned materials. Thus, learners may recourse to the structure of the native language in their attempt to make up the deficiencies of their knowledge of the foreign language. Ellis (1994:48) and Yule (1996:195) add that such errors take place when the patterns of the native language differ from those of the target language. This factor is revealed also by Johnson and Johnson (1999:110) who put the rule that "where the L1 and the L2 differed, the learner would transfer inappropriate properties and learner errors would result: a case of negative transfer."

3.2.1.2 Intralingual Transfer:
These errors occur due to the structure of the foreign language itself and, according to Born (1987:81-3) Chanier et. al. (1992:134) may be attributed to the following factors:

Overgeneralization:
This means the incorrect application of a previously learned material to a present foreign language context.

Ignorance of rule restriction:
By this, the learners tend to apply a given rule to a category to which it is not applicable. This can be illustrated in (Q2 Items : 2 , 5 , 8 and 9)

Incomplete applications of rules:
This happens where a learner fails to learn a rather complex structure because he (i.e. the learner) thinks that he can achieve effective communication depending on rather simple rules.

False concepts hypothesized:
This occurs due to the incorrect comprehension of a distinction in the target language. For example, in (Q2 Item 7), most of learners think that the ambiguity lies in the word (can) because they comprehend it as a modal auxiliary, while it means the container of the trash.

3.2.1.3 Communication Strategies:
These strategies refer to the ways learners use when they express their aims. In other words, communicative strategies, as Farch and Kasper (1983:14) mention, are the plans employed by the learners to solve the problems that may arise in a given communicative situation.

1. Avoidance:
This reflects subjects' inability of saying what they want to say. This is vividly expressed in (Q2 Item 1) which is avoided or left unanswered by a number of students:

2 . Guessing:
This refers to the clues used by learners in order to guess or predict the meaning. It occurs when learners have no complete knowledge of target language elements or structures .

Section Four
Conclusions and Findings
On the basis of the findings arrived at in the previous section, it can be concluded that understanding proper English syntactic structures is an inevitablerequirementforlanguage learning and it is a problematic side of study since , as seen from the students' responses , most students face difficulties in forming adequate and grammatical sentences . This finding asserts the hypothesis presented in section one .

Generally speaking, English word order is very essential as a basic requirement for learners. Consequently, due attention must be given to the nature of the English syntax and how to overcome the difficulties learners probably encounter . The teacher must explain the main types of sentences, and he must teach the students how to form sentences correctly as far as possible.

Appendix (1): The Test

Q1) State whether the following sentences are true (T) or false (F) in terms of word order.

1- Why / you / would / go / to / Mr. Reynolds ?

2- Agatha / Christie / was / educated / at / home / , where / her / mother encouraged / her / to / write / from / a / very / early / age .

3- Van Gogh / painted / many / other / and / The / Sunflowers / famous pictures .

4- Sorry / , could / you / repeat /   please / the / name ?

5- Do / you / easy / find / it / to / make / in / English / an / announcement ?

6- Eating / everyday / fruit / and / vegetables / is / for / your / health / good .

7- Where / do / you / usually / record /   new vocabulary ?

8- I'm / really / to / see / you / looking / forward / again .

9- Why / he / didn't / want / to / be / a / newsreader ?

10- Roger Federer / is / the / best / probably / player / tennis / in / the / world / today .

Q.2\ The following sentences are incorrect . Put them in the correct order .

1- Madagascar / is / it / although / very / is / rich / mountainous / agriculturally / very .

2- you / would / do / like / to / research / a / university / future / the / at / in ?

3- pollution / may / increased / to / illness / lead / more .

4- information / do / what / need / sort / you / of ?

5- speak / two / someone / equally / languages / well / can / bilingual / who / is .

6- he / why / want / to / be / didn't / newsreader / a ?

7- pollution over / world / air / all / major / the / problem / is / a / today .

8- near / a / there / is / sports / pool / club / house / a / swimming / your / with ?

9- find / phones / without / and / manage / many / not / them /essential / people / could / mobile .

10- going / you / to / next / are / the / in / Istanbul / week / conference ?

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