



SUPPORTING EAL LEARNERS



Language Differences

In order to better understand the major differences between English and other world languages, it is good to know something about the nature of the English language.¹

- **Phonology:** Standard English has about **20 vowel sounds** (12 pure vowels / 8 diphthongs) and about 24 consonant sounds. Speakers of languages which have fewer vowel sounds often have difficulty making a distinction between words like *sit/seat*; *pull/pool*; *food/foot*. The same applies to the consonants clusters in many English words: *strength*; *splash*, *chronicle*. Non-native speakers may say such words with an extra vowel sound or leave out the syllable.

The **pronunciation** of English words such as *this*, *thin*, *clothes*, *thirteenth*, *months* inevitably causes problems for learners who do not need to use the tip of the tongue to produce words in their own language.

Further difficulties for learners attempting to produce spoken English that sounds natural are the unpredictability of English word stress, the omission of weak syllables and the insertion of consonants. Examples:

- **y**esterday - to**m**orrow (word stress)
- Wha**t**a time? (omission i.e. what's **t**he time?)
- more (**r**)and more (insertion of consonants)

English is a **stress-timed language**. Its intonation patterns, therefore, are different from those of syllable-timed languages like French, Spanish or Hindi. This accounts for the heavy English accents that many native speakers of those languages retain even after years of speaking English and the acquisition of flawless grammar.

Areas of Difficulty:

- **First language interference:** Some sentence level errors are a result of interference by a student's first language. Test yourself – look at the 7 sample sentences below. Identify the issue and make the correction. What first language could be interfering? The answers can be found at the end of this document.

Sample #1: **Sun is hot.**

Sample #2: **When I walked in, she slept.**

Sample #3: **I am wanting to leave now.**

Sample #4: **My father he lives he lives in Windsor.**

Sample #5: **She is a beauty woman.**

¹ This site has a lot of useful information about the differences between English and various other languages: <http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/index.htm>

Sample #6: **My sister dropped his purse.**

Sample #7: **I received a lot of advices. Their advice are useful.**

Although the following examples seem obvious, they highlight that sometimes there is a logical reason why some students make the mistakes they do, and these errors often distract from the content of their writing.

- **Verb Tenses:** In one respect English verb grammar is easy, as it does not have a large number of inflections (unlike French or Russian). For example, there are only 4 forms of the regular verb *to ask*: *ask, asks, asked, asking*. On the other hand, English does have a large number of possible tenses (verb forms); and their designations are not always helpful to the learner. The past simple tense, for example, can be used to talk about the future: **If I won a lot of money, I would buy a new house**. Many languages do not have a continuous tense form, so English learners may make mistakes such as: **I had a bath when the phone rang (i.e. I was having a bath when the phone rang)**.

One of the most significant problems for learners is to decide which tense (verb form) is required in English to correctly express the meaning that they wish to convey.

A further feature of verb grammar that causes difficulties is the correct choice of modal. **Modal verbs** are heavily used in English to convey shades of meaning in the areas of compulsion, ability, permission, possibility, hypothesis, etc. For example, learners have problems understanding the difference between: **He must have done it** and **He has had to do it**.

- **Word Order:** Meaning in English is conveyed largely by word order. Word order in English sentences becomes significantly more difficult when indirect objects or adverbials are added to the standard *Subject-Verb-Object* syntax. Most learners of English have problems ordering words correctly in longer, more complex clauses.
- **The article system (*a; an; the*)** is another feature of English grammar that causes some students enormous difficulties; particularly, of course, those whose native languages do not use articles, e.g. Russian, Farsi, Urdu, Mandarin.
- **Vocabulary:** English has the largest vocabulary of any language. Depending on counting methods it is approaching one million words. The Anglo-Saxon lexical base has been supplemented by the influx of words from Latin and Greek, from French and the languages of countries colonized by England.

English shares cognates with most other languages, but a significant number of these are 'false friends'. For example, the German / English words ***Maus/mouse; Antenne/antenna; trink!/drink!*** are identical in meaning and virtually so in pronunciation. The German word *sensibel*, however, translates as *sensitive*, not *sensible*, and is stressed on the second syllable. Similarly, the German word *also* does not mean *too* as in English, but *therefore*, and is pronounced to rhyme with shall (not all).

A significant feature of English vocabulary that can cause severe difficulties for learners are **phrasal verbs**. Sentences such as *I put it down to the weather*, or *I made up with my sister*, are usually impenetrable to non-native speakers. Unfortunately, phrasal verbs are extremely common in colloquial language, where they are inevitably preferred to their equivalents whose source is Latin or Greek (put down to = attribute / make up with = reconcile).

- **Spelling:** A final feature of English that is enormously problematic for some native-speakers and non-native learners alike is the unpredictable* correspondence between word sound and word spelling. Compared to 'phonetic languages' such as Turkish it is often impossible for learners to predict the spelling of a word they first encounter in speech, or the pronunciation of a word they first encounter in writing.

* In fact, a majority of English words do conform to spelling patterns. The difficulty for the learner, however, is that the words which don't are the most common words in the language, and thus the ones that learners encounter first.

Answers:

Sample #1: **Sun is hot.**

- **Issue: Article usage** → The **sun** is hot.
- **Languages: Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Urdu, Thai**

Sample #2: **When I walked in, she slept.**

- **Progressive forms** → When I walked in she was sleeping.
- **Languages: French, German, Greek,, Russian**

Sample #3: **I am wanting to leave now.**

- **Overuse of progressive form** → I want to leave now.
- **Languages: Hindi, Urdu**

Sample #4: **My father he lives he lives in Windsor.**

- **Personal pronoun restates subject** → **My father lives in Windsor.**
- **Languages: Spanish, Arabic, Gujarati**

Sample #5: **She is a beauty woman.**

- **Nouns and adjectives have the same form** → She is a beautiful woman.
- **Languages: Chinese, Japanese**

Sample #6: **My sister dropped his purse.**

- **No distinction between he/she and his/her** → **My sister dropped her purse.**
- **Languages: Chinese, Japanese, Russian**

Sample #7: **I received a lot of advices. Their advice are useful.**

- **Difficulty with uncountable nouns in English**
- → **I received a lot of information. Their advice is useful.**

Error Correction: Treatable vs. Untreatable²

The following chart lists a few errors that are considered treatable and those which are untreatable. Treatable problems are rule-governed and thus can be corrected fairly easily with correction and explicit instruction. Untreatable errors are not rule governed and take time to correct.

Treatable = rule governed	Untreatable
Subject-verb agreement	Inappropriate word choice
Verb tense	Idioms
Verb formation	Prepositions
Word order	Countable vs. Uncountable nouns
Singular / plural nouns	Articles

Treatable errors are best treated through indirect feedback. Point out the error but let the student figure out how to correct it. Conversely, untreatable errors are better corrected through direct feedback because students cannot be expected to find the correction.

Finally, remember that students learn best when learning grammar in context of their own writing and immediately applying the acquired knowledge through correcting their own work.

² <http://www.academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=65801>