

## Morpho-Syntactic Deviations of Verbs: A Study of Undergraduates' Writings

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper intends to investigate into the Morpho-syntactic deviations of verbs in the writings of undergraduate students of Psychology 1<sup>st</sup> semester. Theoretical framework chosen for this study was taken from the model of Gass and Selinker(2008). I took a sample of twenty students (BS first semester) of Psychology Department and analyzed their writings to figure out errors of verbs made. At the end of my research I presented some remedial measures in order to avoid such errors in future*

**Keywords:** Morpho, syntax, deviation, verbs, analysis, writings, error analysis

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term morphology is generally attributed to the German poet, novelist, playwright, and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who coined it early in the nineteenth century in a biological context. Its etymology is Greek: morph-means 'shape, form', and morphology is the study of form or forms. Aronoff and Fudeman (2011) refer morphology to the mental system involved in word formation or to the branch of linguistics that deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed.

Morphology is intimately related to syntax. For everything that is larger than a word is the domain of syntax. Thus within morphology one considers the structure of words only, and everything else is left to syntax. The first to notice is that words come in different classes.

Morphemes combine to form word, words to phrase, phrases to clause and clauses combine to make a complete sentence. These combinations on the basis of structure and their arrangements are studied under syntax. Sentences are not just strings of words there are some specific syntactic rules for the combination of words and their arrangements in the sentence. Baker (2001) gives us grammatical rules about the structure of sentences is syntax. Syntactical rules determine how word order and sentence structure is constrained, and how those constraints contribute to meaning (Baker, 2001:265).

Syntax in linguistics deals with the ways that the elements of a sentence or phrase can be arranged and rearranged to express different meanings. For example, in spoken and written English, sentences are often constructed by following a subject with a verb and the direct object. The positions of the words convey the subject-object relationship. For example, a sentence such as "The dog bit the cat" conveys a meaning that is different from "The cat bit the dog," even though they contain exactly the same words (Meg Kramer, 2014).

Syntax allows speakers to communicate complicated thoughts by arranging small, simple units in meaningful ways. In English, for example, a sentence can be simple as a one-word interjection, or it can be a lengthy composition with multiple clauses strung together. Human language is unlimited, because even within the rules of syntax, humans can generate new sentences or phrases to express novel ideas or experiences (Kramer, 2014).

Morpho-syntax is a strong relationship between morphology (how words form) and syntax (arrangement and structure of sentence). Syntax and morphology are together traditionally called as grammar and in more technical terms as morpho-syntax (Van Valin, Robert D. Jr., 2001). On morpho-syntactic level words are divided into two categories, lexical and grammatical. Lexical category is open class of words as it allows more new words to come in while grammatical category is regarded as closed class as it allows no addition or very little change. Noun and verbs belongs to open word class and my focus of study is mainly upon verbs (Van Valin, Robert D. Jr., 2001).

As I intend to study deviations in verbs it is important to know about errors as well. Richards (1972), Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), Norrish (1983), Corder (1976), Johanna Klassen (1991) all see errors as deviations from a standard form of the language. Hendrickson (1978) defines errors from an etymological viewpoint. Error is, a word derived from 'errare' meaning 'to wander, roam or stray', depends on its purpose of use and objective. He defines error as an utterance, form or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use or its absence in discourse (Hendrickson, 1978).

Error Analysis (EA) is a branch of Applied Linguistics, popular among in 1960's looked specifically at Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Error Analysis (EA) is the study of learner errors, providing the way to examine learner language, being a part of language teaching, finding out whether errors were caused by L1 interference or developmental factors (Reid, 1993). A learner's errors give proofs of how the language learner has systematically learned the language. Learner's errors are seen as a useful device in three various aspects. Firstly, they are useful for the teacher. They can give the teacher a clue as to how the learner's learning process is going. Secondly, they show the researcher what the language learning strategies of learners are. Thirdly, they are regarded as a tool for the learner to use in learning the language. It deals with how the learner tests their hypotheses about the nature of the language they are acquiring (Corder, 1982).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study was conducted to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent morpho-syntactic errors of verbs committed by the first semester undergraduate students?
2. Why the errors of verbs recur time and again in the works of BS. Psychology (1<sup>st</sup> semester)?
3. What can be the possible solutions to those frequently occurring errors?

## **THEORETICAL FRAME WORK FOR THE PRESENT STUDY**

The model that was followed to carry out my research based on the morpho-syntactic deviations in verbs in the writings of undergraduates is Gass and Selinker's Error Analysis Model.... This model proved to be very helpful for this type of research as it gives details about morphology and syntax, the major areas of my study. The model is based on six stages that are to conduct an error analysis. I followed these steps during collection and analysis of data.

In this research paper researcher has analyzed morpho-syntactic deviations from the writings of undergraduate students.

Morpho-syntax is the internal structure of words and of the way these words are put together in phrases, clauses and sentences. It is the combination of morphology and syntax and these are combined due to close relationship between them. According to Crystal (1980) it is a term in phonetics which is utilized to elude linguistic classes or properties for whose definition criteria of morphology and language structure both apply, as in portraying the characteristics of words and morphemes.

Morpheme is the minimal unit in the grammar of language (Payne.T.1997). Morphemes are the units that are combined to form a single word, for example, the word watches (verb) has two morphemes watch (free morpheme) and es (bound morpheme). Bound morpheme is the one that is dependent on others to complete its meaning while free morpheme gives its complete meaning on its own.

Morphology is the process through which the elements are made to fit in together while syntax is the way elements of a phrase, clause or sentence fit together. The relationship between the two words can only be told by defining the terms since morphology is the study of the form and structure of words but syntax is the study of the form and structure of sentences. Morphology is related to the internal economy of the words while syntax is related to the external economy of the words (John Lawler, 2009).

In this research I intend to study morpho-syntactic deviations that are the irregularities in the standard language, through mistakes and errors. Error and mistake both differs one another in the respect: errors accrues from inability of a learner to use the language system appropriately while mistake on the other hand is the performance error that may be characterized as slip of pen (Brains,2013). Errors cannot be self-corrected while mistakes could be (James, 1998).

The method employed for evaluating and analyzing morphemes and syntax within a sentence is called morpho-syntactic analysis. It determines that the right part-of-speech category each word belongs to. To do this it is often necessary to disambiguate several possibilities. For example, the word 'general' can be either a noun or an adjective. Its context helps assessing the right word class (Temis, 2010).

## **METHODOLOGY OF STUDY**

In the present study a mixed approach is utilized. It is based on dominant quantitative methodology with a less-prevailing qualitative information gathering method. In the light of the objectives of the present study, the researcher needs to discover the amount of errors the sample makes in their written work. After analyzing these errors the researcher has to grade the sorts of errors which show up in the information gathered. This implies that information is broken down into the frequency and the types of errors in the information/data gathered.

### **Sampling Procedure in this Study**

Random sampling is utilized as a testing system as a part of this study. The sample of 20 students had been selected from the population of 55 students of BS Psychology first semester of Government Post Graduate College, Rawalpindi. Each student was given equivalent opportunity to be chosen as specimen. The information taken from the population is quantitatively examined.

A pretest was taken to survey the mistakes and their sorts. The preparatory test or pretest comprised of a descriptive passage of approximately 250 words. The morpho-syntactic lapses of verbs in these passages were highlighted in accordance with the model given by Gass and Selinker (2008). After this pretest, the same students were exposed to pedagogical exercises that I had designed with the purpose to teaching verbs to the students. After the passage of

one month, the same learners underwent another test (post- test). This post- test again was of descriptive nature, in which the students were asked to write paragraph approximately of 250 words. Their lapses were evaluated once again to see the impact of new showing exercises on their repeating failures.

The research design of this examination is both descriptive and quantitative and the specimen is examined through pretests, post- tests, overviews and surveys. Questionnaire is used for survey purpose and several activities are also designed to gather data about students' errors in their writings and also to judge what are the basic reasons behind such errors and to find out possible remedial measures

## **RESULTS**

First step according to the model is data collection. Following the first step I collected the data through pre-tests and post-tests taken from students. Then I moved towards the second step that is identification of errors. I identified errors from these pre-tests and post-tests based on writing an essay. Then I classified the errors as nouns, verbs, adjective, adverbs and prepositions etcetera. I further classified the verbs to various forms as regular, irregular, helping verbs, modal verbs, action verbs etcetera as my focus of research is on verbs. The next step according to Gass and Selinker's model is quantification of errors so following this stage I quantified the data in numeric form. Fifth stage is analysis of source I analyzed the possible reasons behind such errors and finally I figured out some remedial measures to overcome such errors which is the last stage of the model.

A small research was carried out in Government Post Graduate College for women, Satellite Town, Rawalpindi. The views of 20 students of BS Psychology (first semester) were collected with the help of questionnaire. They were the same students who later on went through pretests, rigorous language learning practice exercises and a posttest.

The aim of such questionnaire was to get information about students' interest in learning English, their opinion about the way grammar is taught to them, their feeling about making errors and opinion about the checking method and remedial work. Some of the other tools used for the research work were pre and post -tests (attached in the appendices).A pre- test was taken to observe students' prior knowledge about English grammar and the post- test was conducted after students practiced the exercises of verbs for one month. Through these two pretest and posttest I was enabled to know about the real causes of errors made by the learners.

### **Analysis of Student's Questionnaire**

20 students of BS (Hons) Psychology filled questionnaire for the students.

### **Types of School**

75% of the students who filled the questionnaires were from English medium school.25% were from Urdu medium schools out of which 15% were from government schools and 10% from private schools.

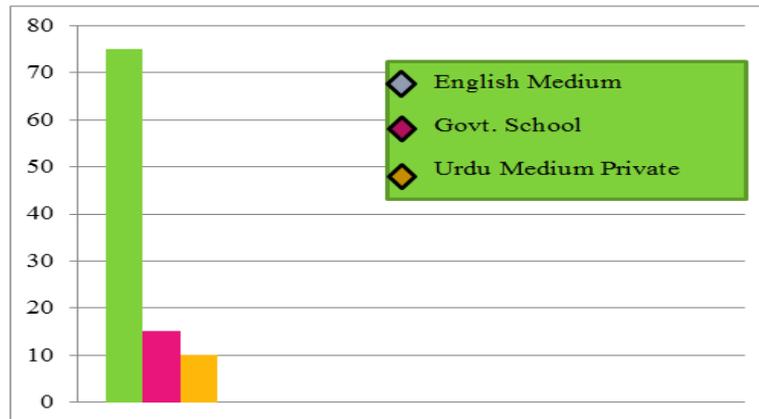


Figure 1. Shows types of school

### Modes of Improving English

15% read books other than their course books to improve English. No student took help from their elders or friends. 40% listened to or watch English programs. 10% only depended on what is taught in class. 10% try to spoke more in English. Whereas 25% read books other than course books and also they listened and watched English programs.

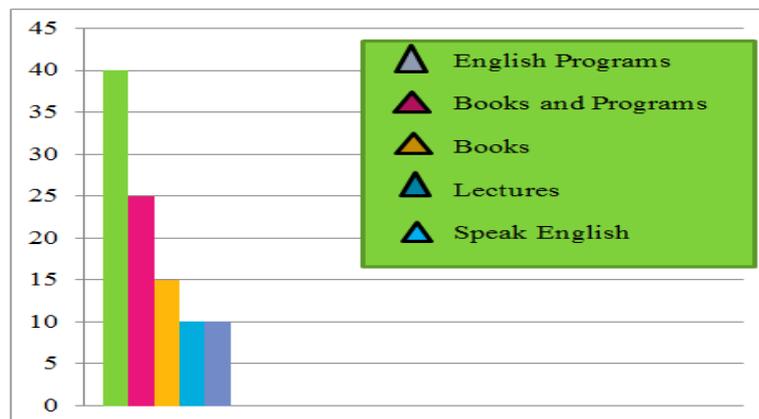


Figure 2. Shows modes of improving English

### Ways of Teaching Grammar

60% of the students opined that the grammar was taught in an interesting way. 5% felt that grammar was taught in a boring way. 5% thought it was helpful and 10% felt that grammar was taught in an interesting as well as confusing manner.

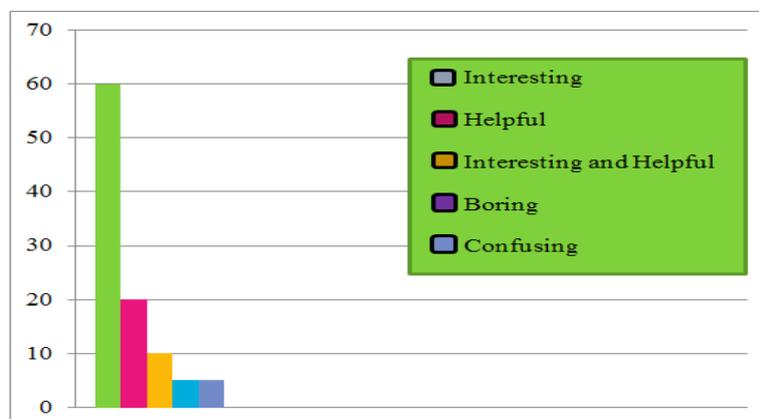


Figure 3. Shows ways of teaching grammar

**Feeling about Errors**

85% students strongly felt that they learned from their mistakes. 10% got discouraged after making mistakes and only 5% became embarrassed.



Figure 4. Shows feeling about errors

**Rectification**

35% respondents wanted the teachers to mark all the errors. 15% opted for peer correction. 50% preferred that teacher should merely indicate the line in which the error was and they themselves would find it out.

**Choice of Rectification**

- Written comments 40% students
- Teachers’ help while you are writing 25% students
- Marking all the errors 20% students
- Remedial exercises 10% students
- Discussion with the teacher in private 5% students

**Second Method**

- Marking all the errors 35% students
- Discussion with the teacher in private 25% students
- Remedial exercises 20% students
- Teachers’ help while learners are writing 10% students
- Written comments 10% students

**Third Method**

- Remedial exercises 30% students
- Marking all the errors 25% students
- Written comments 20% students
- Discussion with the teacher in private 15% students
- Teachers’ help while learners are writing 10% students

**Fourth Method**

Teachers' help while learners are writing 45% students  
 Written comments 20% students  
 Remedial exercises 15% students  
 Mark all the errors 15% students  
 Discussion with the teacher in private 5% students

**Fifth Method**

Discussion with the teacher in private 50% students  
 Remedial exercises 35% students  
 Teachers' help while learners are writing 10% students  
 Mark all the errors 5% students

**Conclusion**

These responses show that students prefer teachers' involvement. On the contrary, there is a need for more students' involvement. They should be motivated to make effort rather than dependent on written comments by the teacher. Marking all the errors have been given the second position by the majority, which can be easily interpreted as an indicator of students' strong dependence on teacher.

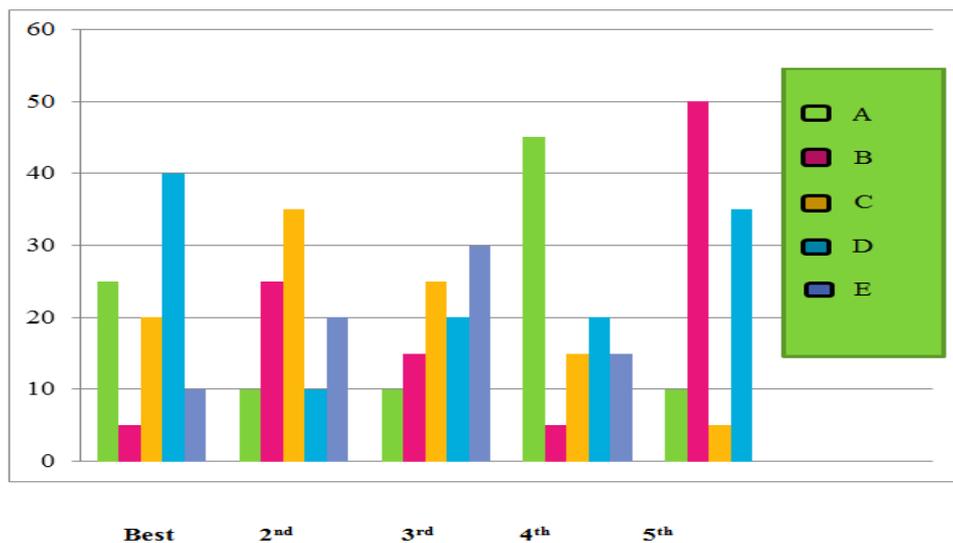


Figure 5. Shows choice/methods of rectification

**Analysis of Pre-tests of Students**

20 students of B.S. (Hons) Psychology semester one took a pre-test. They were asked to write an essay. The test was carried out at Govt. Post Graduate College for Women Satellite Town Rawalpindi.

**Types of Errors in the Pre-test**

There were several errors in the pre-test. There were errors of almost every word class like nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions etcetera. But majority of the errors were based on verbs. Different types of verb errors were seen and after the analysis of such tests the results recorded were as follows:

**Types of Errors of Verbs in the Pre-test**

Majority of the errors were based on incorrect usage of helping verbs and forms of verbs. There was very little continuity of tense in the whole essay. Errors of irregular verb forms were more in number than regular ones.

**Numerical Data for Errors of Verbs**

The numerical data collected after analyzing the pre-test based on writing essay has the following facts and figures.

**Errors in Verbs**

The percentages of errors recorded in the use of helping verbs were:

Progressive be:	40%
Perfective have:	35%
Passive be	10%
Modals	10%
Dummy Do	5%

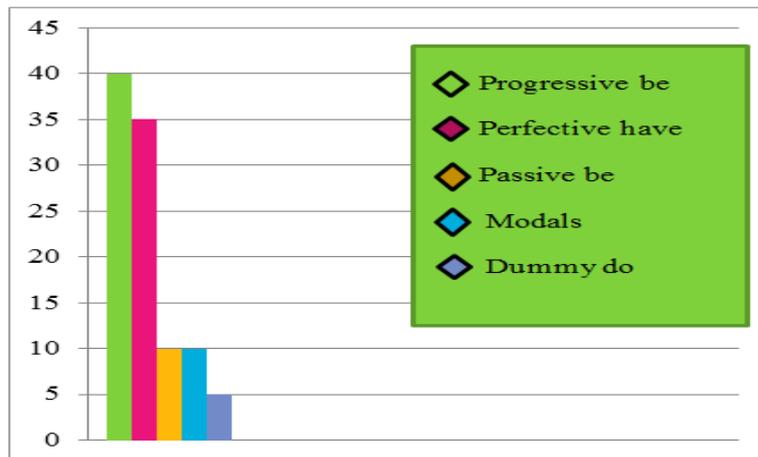


Figure 6. Shows Percentages of Types of Verbs

**Errors of forms of Verbs**

Out of 50% errors of forms of verbs 60% of the errors were in irregular verb forms and 40% of the errors of regular verb forms.

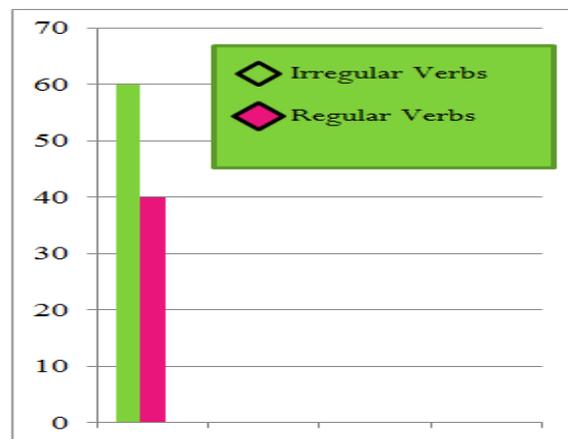


Figure 7. Shows percentages of forms of verbs

## Conclusion

The pre-test shows that the majority of errors were based on helping verbs and forms of verbs. Through this data collected from pre-tests it is obvious that these are the two areas in which the students make frequent errors most of the time either consciously or unconsciously. This descriptive type pre-test gave me an idea about those weak areas of verbs on which I had to work while trying to suggest remedial exercises.

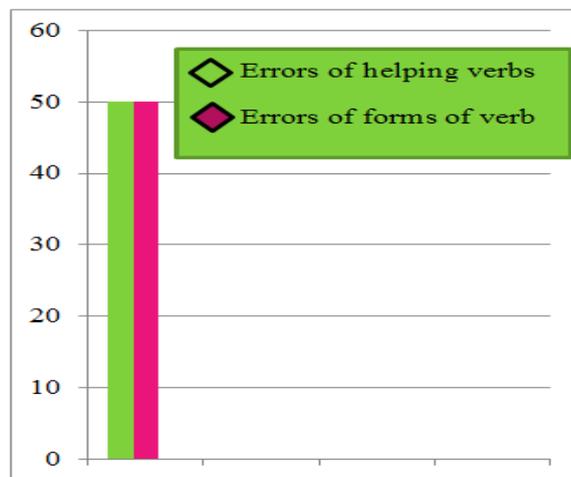


Figure 8. Shows percentages of types of errors of verbs

## Analysis of Post-test

The same 20 students were asked to write another essay of 250 words as a post-test after teaching them about verbs in detail. This post-test was taken to observe the differences between the level of understanding of students about verbs and frequency of errors in that after the total instruction session and before such sessions. This was held to know that whether the errors in the pre-test were due to lack of guidance or there was some other reasons.

### Results of Errors of Verbs in Post-Tests

After analyzing the post-test following results were recorded. The frequency of errors in helping verbs, forms of verbs were lessen to 50% than the frequency of errors recorded in pre-tests.

## Conclusions

Through the analysis of post-tests, it is concluded that the errors become less in number after guidance and the concepts that confuse the students beforehand became clear to them due to guidance. They became conscious about their errors and this consciousness and awareness results in low frequency/ number of errors. Before this the students unconsciously or consciously made generalizations and apply rules wrongly as they had incomplete knowledge of rules of verbs. After getting guidance rules become clear to them and this had the impact that there was great decrease in errors in post-test.

## DISCUSSION

Several hypotheses were made according to the research questions of the research study. After analyzing the student questionnaire, pre-test and post-test which were based on writing essay of 250 words the hypotheses made were proved true to great extent. It is seen that most

of the errors made were due to overgeneralizations, ignorance of rules restrictions and incomplete application of rules.

## **CONCLUSION**

In traditional classrooms teachers had the exclusive authority to set goals and then to test learners and give grades on their efforts. Teachers hardly ever felt the need to test the effectiveness of their teaching or the materials they were using. In modern times these concepts have changed and the need is that we should change our methods accordingly, especially in our country. Errors are inevitable and there are many causes for it. The important point is that they should be dealt with great care.

Some learners may need more guidance and support from the teacher in overcoming their errors. Explicit instructions in some cases may need to be repeated in the mother tongue. For remedial work to be effective, it is important that the students are told about the causes and nature of their errors. The teacher should introduce self as well as peer corrections. This method will be more helpful for the teachers handling larger classes. It will help students in detecting errors themselves and enhance their learning. While analyzing errors the teacher should concentrate on one kind of error at one time. It will enable the teacher to deal with it easily and thoroughly. It will be essential from both the organizational and learning point of view that learners keep a record of most of their errors, as pointed out by the teacher and submit it regularly for perusal by the teacher. There should be more involvement on the part of the teacher in the learning process and dealing with the errors. So if the errors are because of inattentiveness and boredom, they can be avoided. In order to enable the students to take charge of their own learning, tasks like planning any methodology are better carried out with their help. Teachers need to provide with the checklists and questionnaires to help them identify their goals and objectives.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study recommended a few things that I have learned from studying the classroom sessions of BS (Psychology). Traditionally, teachers used to check all the errors in the given work. Hence the students would get the work back covered with red ink. Some of the students did not even bother looking back at the work after correction. The result of student's questionnaires indicated that the students were least interested in the method where students wanted teachers to talk in private, which is quite a rational approach. Moreover, there is a need to encourage the students in taking part in the process of correction. These recommendations are easy to follow and are applicable in any ELT context. It also demands equal participation of the students and teachers. To point out errors with sensitivity and effectiveness, one does not need any high qualifications. Being reprimanded and receiving a piece of work all covered with red ink can be discouraging and heartbreaking for a student. One of the roles that a teacher plays in lesson is of a 'corrector'. The teacher must come to a decision about what, how much, when and how to correct.

An easier method can be underlining the errors as shown in the figure. Note: these figures are the samples collected from the students of before- mentioned college. Another method that can be helpful is to keep a record of students' errors; therefore they may enforce a table where the students must record the frequency of types/ causes of the errors. This can be in least discouraging and can definitely help students to overcome their errors.

Some of the activities that can easily be adopted within the spectrum that I have used for my research work are annexed in the appendices. Since the teachers have to deal with more than eighty students, without any period for teaching grammar, therefore it is relevant for the

students to help themselves. These activities are quite learner-centered. Also these take very little time and can be practiced twice a week or may be more than this.

The free- writing activities have been conducted among the students of before-mentioned college. The students were hesitant at the beginning. After some practices an inclination

The research was carried out to answer the following research questions that what are the most frequent morpho-syntactic errors of verbs committed by students, why these errors occur again and again and how could these be rooted out? After carrying out the research and analysis of data the most frequent types of errors in verbs are highlighted and several reasons comes out that that causes such errors like overgeneralizations by students, lack of awareness about several concepts of verbs, incomplete application of rules etcetera. I am now able to suggest several recommendations that could be helpful in eradicating such errors and clearing ambiguities about such concepts that is by changing methodology of teaching according to the needs of the students and demands of the learning content. Design such strategies that are really helpful to both the teachers and the students.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper was an opportunity to explore the significance and causes of errors. In the process an effective system of analyzing evolved along with the elaboration of the points, which a teacher should consider and analysis of errors. The next step is putting into practice what has been theoretically presented in this research paper.

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