

## An Analysis of the English Mistakes made by ESL students (1978/79) in their Written Assignments

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Because of the current interest in English and the drop in the standard of English among school children, it might be of interest to examine some of the mistakes made by ESL students — all of whom are teachers of English in the lower secondary forms. It must be pointed out, however, that these mistakes were not made by all the students, but by the average and below-average ones.

The mistakes fall into several categories:

1. spelling
2. punctuation
3. grammar
4. sentence construction
5. choice of words

The following are some of the spelling mistakes committed:

admist (amidst)	enviroment (environment)
accomodate (accommodate)	extremeties (extremities)
architectual (architectural)	interuption (interruption)
breadthtaking (breathtaking)	occassional (occasional)
conjestion (congestion)	pedastrian (pedestrian)
decend (descend)	priveleges, priviledged, privilages,
dimunitive (diminutive)	privileges (privileges)
defination (definition)	sorrrounding (surrounding)
	unequality (inequality)

The mis-spelling could be due to wrong pronunciation, as with the word "dimunitive;" spelling that follows the sound of the word, as with "conjestion"; mistaking a double letter for a single one and vice versa, as with "occassional" and "accomodate"; and confusion over the sounds conveyed by the letters 'i', 'e' and 'a', as in the multiple spellings of the word "privilege".

Fewer mistakes occur with punctuation marks. Two notable examples are the following:

"I gazed far into the horizon ..... cool, quiet and serene, and yet just a drop of a few hundred feet below, sprawls a hive of activity the hustle and bustle of city life"

"I can also see the Moorish styled Railway Station, which was once an outstanding landmark of the capital, but now it is partially concealed by a flyover — that is supposed to divert roaring traffic to another part of the town."

In Example 1, a semi-colon should replace the comma after "serene" and commas should be inserted after "yet" and "activity". In Example 2, the dash after "flyover" is not required. The dearth of such punctuation errors and the fact that these errors occurred in quite lengthy sentences, which could have caused the students to lose sight of relevant pauses, indicate that the students do not find punctuation problematic.

Quite a number of grammatical errors were made, as the following list shows:

- a) not keeping to the same word class in listing a series of items:—  
"It becomes difficult for them to accept that others face problems like shortage of money and food, transportation and no electricity and water supply."
- b) wrong choice of prepositions:—  
"To build a school for the elite will be unfair for the others."
- c) wrong choice of determiners:—  
"In a plural society like ours, children should mix and experience life with the cross-section of society."
- d) wrong choice of comparatives:—  
"My heart sympathised with the miserable traffic policeman who was ironically contributing to the already worse traffic conditions."
- e) wrong choice of connectors:-  
"I feel that the setting up of such a school will not eventually create a better society and will ultimately create social imbalance."
- f) mistakes with tenses:-  
"Dull grey roads weaved and wind forming a network through the area."
- g) use of an adjective in place of an adverb:-  
"Beyond that, the land rises relatively steep until it reaches its peak at about five hundred feet above."
- h) nouns wrongly used as verbs:-  
"It venues sports meets at national and international level."
- i) mistakes with subject-verb concord:-  
"In previous societies, the setting up of special schools for the elite were acceptable."
- j) mistakes with relative pronouns:-  
"Here and there were the green tops of trees where vendors appeared to have stationed themselves."

The above instances show that some of the ESL students are still rather weak in fundamental grammatical rules.

There are quite a number of flaws involving wrong choice of words. In the sentences below, these flaws have been underlined and the correct word given within brackets:

"Plainly, the spontaneous (immediate) impression is that each segment is living within its own bounds."

"My heart pounded away and beats (beads) of sweat filled (covered) my face."

"The sensational sight before my eyes captured (captivated) me right away."

"A guard in dark blue led us up a flight of staircase (stairs)"

"The flow (line) of traffic moved slowly."

"There was the lake called Serpentine, famous for (popular with) those who love to take leisurely rides in the boats."

"Here, the main aim of the government is to avoid (eradicate) illiteracy."

"As it is today, we can see that the material (syllabus and and teaching facilities) are about the same; yet there are some schools which are better (perform better) than others."

"So, the aim of the government in promoting unity among the citizens seems to diminish (to be undermined)."

As the examples show, students are not alert to the nuances of the language, resulting in imprecise expressions.

Faulty sentence structures have also been encountered. One cardinal fault is the use of superfluous words, resulting in wordy, roundabout expressions. Examples are given below:

"We have heard about suggestions to build a kind of school for this group."

"The elite, by definition is referred to as a particular group in a society that is considered to be superior because of the power and privileges of its members."

"This will deprive them of the sharing of the good educational facilities provided."

Another fault involves sentences that were cramped with ideas, so much so that circumlocution also results. An example is the following:-

"As I observe, inescapably the problems of air pollution pass through my mind while reflecting on the situation."

Confused sentences like the following are prevalent:-

"**To view a city** from the top of a building seemed entirely different."

It is the view and not the act of viewing which is different. Lengthy sentences often result in confusion, causing sentences to be inconcise. One example becomes near-unintelligible:-

"Formations of minor groups among the non-elites will converge upon fighting against the rights and privileges the elite enjoy which in turn will be opposed by the elite in spelling out their powers and status."

Some ideas are too weakly expressed, as in the following:-

"Therefore the setting up of a special school for the elite **should not come by.**"

A corollary to this is a sentence like the following where the idea is too forcefully put across:-

"As a result, there is a possibility that a member of the elite may be a late developer; thus he may **ruin his life** for not being able to cope with the progress made by his colleagues."

There are also instances of incomplete sentences, as in this example:-

"The custom of boarding education is associated with the elite, whose habit is putting children of the same calibre ....."

Another phrase is needed to complete the idea expressed.

The above are some of the mistakes made by the students in their written assignments. From the foregoing it would seem that ESL students need a better grounding in grammar, more exposure to a wider range of vocabulary items and a better grasp of the mechanics of sentence construction, especially as these people exert considerable influence on the English of the pupils they teach.