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Systematicity in language use of the L2 learners of English: A corpus-based study of the students' written production

The current study scrutinizes one of the most complex skills to develop in the second language learning process — writing. It aims to explore major trends in the complexity of L2 writing to depict written language production. The corpus of the study is built from the exam papers at the written text production part of the Basic English Language examination (BLE). BLE is the obligatory examination that needs to be passed by English majors at the Hungarian University and plays a crucial role in the educational field. L2 English learners tend to produce a text and prove B2+ level proficiency according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The research method includes manual analysis based on six categories of grammatical features (incl. Verb agreement; Prepositions; Article Use; Capitalization; Word order; and Spelling). The analysis could help reveal the systematicity in their performance that L2 learners tend to have in their writing based on the corpus in the selected corpus. Among the most common ones are prepositions, more precisely their omission and misuse, verb agreement, and spelling. To identify the nature of the errors, a deep and thorough analysis should be conducted. The present piloting study provides significant insights, and its outcomes are crucial for further research design of the analysis of L2 writing.

Keywords: language learning, written text production, grammatical analysis, world English, learners.

Introduction

Scrutinizing L2 writing, which stands as one of the major concepts of this research, is crucial both for language teaching and learning processes. More precisely, the study focuses on investigating the distribution of the selected grammatical features present in the written text produced by L2 English learners. Exploring these patterns is vital, providing valuable insights into language teaching and learning methodologies.

The analysis is based on the six key grammatical categories — verb agreement, prepositions, article use, capitalization, word order, and spelling — that were involved in the research. The selection of chosen variables was established based on the existing literature findings and their relevance to common issues of L2 learners. By analyzing L2 written text production, the current study aims to contribute to the development of L2 teaching and learning processes. From a broader perspective, it also plays a crucial role as one of the piloting stages for the large-scale validation of the Basic English language examination (BLE) administered at the Hungarian University. The outcomes from the study tend to offer valuable insights for analyzing the grammatical complexity of the written texts, contributing to a deeper understanding of their language development and performance.

The approach implemented in the study views errors not as deviations but as indicators of systematicity, reflecting a distinct variety of English influenced by multilingual environments. This concept aligns with contemporary linguistic theories that recognize the legitimacy of World English [1; 4] and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of linguistic variation. Therefore, this research endeavors to bridge the gap between error analysis and the broader sociolinguistic framework of English as a global language.

Research purpose and objectives

Extensive research on second language (L2) acquisition and writing has been conducted, yet there is still a remaining gap in examining the systematic nature of L2 written text production. While previous studies have largely focused on feature frequency, they have not fully explored the grammatical patterns learners produce. This current research addresses that gap by examining error types and their systematic patterns in written texts of L2 English learners at a Hungarian university.

The primary aim of this research is to identify grammatical patterns in L2 learners' written text production and explore their systematic nature. The study is guided by the following objectives:

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1. Establish the frequency of grammatical errors in L2 written text production.
2. Determine the systematic distribution of grammatical patterns in L2 learners' writing, based on the grammatical categories involved in the analysis.
3. Attempt to reframe errors by viewing them as learner-specific variations of English, offering deeper insights into existing second language acquisition (SLA) theories.

Overall, this study aims to analyze systematicity in L2 written text production in the context of the Basic English Language Examination (BLE) level, focusing on selected grammatical categories. More broadly, it seeks to provide empirical evidence to refine theoretical frameworks and contribute to curriculum development and development of language teaching strategies.

Literature review

Learning a foreign language is a very complex process that requires hardworking and patience from the learners. And writing is considered as one of the most complicated skills to be mastered. While helping students to develop and improve their writing proficiency, teachers may stimulate them to learn grammatical patterns, expand their vocabulary, and practice writing. Besides, one of the most effective methods commonly used by both teachers and students is the analysis of students' errors and working on them.

Furthermore, accepting the notion of World English and the Circle Societies, represented by Kachru [1], there are three main circles that illustrate the varieties of English in the world. Referring to Kachru, The Three Circles model clarify "the type of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages" [1; 12]. Kachru's Circle displays the roles of English in different societies, and it may also bring significant insights to language learning process too. It consists of 3 circles, which are the Inner Circle (countries where English is a Native language), the Outer Circle (where English has an official status, but not native for majority of the residents) and the Expanding Circle (where English is learnt as a foreign language) [1; 4]. The learners of English in the countries of the Inner Circle tend to have more opportunities to practice the language as they are immersed in the language environment. The second two mentioned circles also provide language learning space, and the importance of English learning is driven by professional motivation. Considering the official status of the language as well as the language learning environment, language teaching strategies are built accordingly in those countries. Therefore, Kachru's Circle theory depicts important aspects influencing language policy, teaching strategies, learners' motivation that impacts language learning process.

Extensive literature has been focused on the frequency of the linguistic items used by L2 learners of English compared to native speakers. However, it is important to highlight that these features were not considered as deviations from the "native" norms or errors, apart from that, they reflect the sociolinguistic reality of language use. Furthermore, according to the scholars' statements, we should teach how to be aware of World English, without limitations to the norms of one variation only, but also including the Inner Circle, Outer Circle or Expanding Circle variations. Moreover, the students should study cross communicational strategies, as language use is specified by the domains, cultures.

In addition, English is not owned by native speakers, just like any other language. Moreover, as the number of English language speakers from the Expanding Circle significantly overweighs the speakers from the other Circles, hence they make a greater impact on the nature of language [1]. Despite that, a variety of English used by the speakers from both the Expanding and Outer Circles, knowledge and "mistakes" are assessed and limited by the Inner Circle speakers' variety only.

Moreover, referring to Jenkins [2], while travelling from one domain to another, language becomes more flexible, and it is unavoidable for changes and varieties to occur. And the author points out that it is important to be more tolerant to all of the varieties of language, determined by a particular group of people, depending on the culture, contexts. English is already widespread in international settings and thus, it will be principally used in multilingual context in future as well. Accordingly, the number of L2 speakers from the Expanding Circle will increase undoubtedly.

Therefore, the aim of this piloting study is to explore the systematicity in the students' written production and analyze the variety of English used by them based on their frequency. However, the found items and tendencies are not evaluated as errors; instead, they are considered as specific features that identify the variety.

First of all, it is important to mention that making errors is an unavoidable component of a foreign language learning process. In other words, referring to Brown [3], errors may occur in the process of language learning and language acquisition as they are indivisible from these processes. Therefore, the learners usually

make errors in comprehension and production as well. Moreover, as it was claimed by Gass and Selinker [4], analysis of the L2 learners' errors provides evidence of a system, since the errors are consequential and meaningful.

Following this, errors are not only the output of the learners' incomplete knowledge; hence they can also indicate the systematicity, which was created by the learners' attitudes toward the particular language system. Besides, the errors are not always signifying the deviations or anomaly; conversely, they should not be established as negative attributes, as they represent the specificities of the variety. Therefore, careful analysis of the learners' errors as meaningful items indicating the learners may provide the data about the essential understandings of learners, since they are embedded in these specific features. Accordingly, studying the variation in written texts stimulates us to reveal systematicity in second language development.

The notion of "systematicity" was first introduced by Fodor and Pylyshyn [5] as a "feature of cognition, inferential coherence". In other words, according to the authors, it is "the ability to produce/understand some sentences is intrinsically connected to the ability to produce or understand certain others" [5; 37]. Moreover, they highlighted "the productive and systematic features of thought along with its inferential coherence" [5; 39]. Likewise, our mechanisms of thinking and understanding the particular meaning are considered to be systematic and our capacity to adhere to pattern of inference is natural and innate and is closely related to our abilities to make other inferences.

The concept of "systematicity"; the problems of assessing students' writings; and the ways how teachers see the "errors" have been discussed by many researchers, including Shaughnessy [6], McKinney & Swan [7], Lillis [8], Baynham [9], Lea [10] and others. Furthermore, they explored new features and means for the academic literacy analysis in their studies. Among the major issues concerned with language learners' performance, "errors" were highlighted inadequate socialization into the academic community, a gap between teacher expectations and student interpretations [7; 577]. Consequently, "errors" are interpreted as a complex set of social and contextualized practices, but not the identifiers of the learners' unsuccessful production.

Moreover, Shaughnessy [6] was the first to question the status of writing for students in her book and claimed that "for the basic writing (BW), academic writing is something that someone writes, but by the time he reaches the BW stage, the student both resents and resists being seen as a writer" [6; 7]. So, according to Shaughnessy, for many students academic writing does not seem to increase academic literacy, since "errors" include improperly incorporated regulations that they believe are standard. Therefore, referring to Shaughnessy [6], while the language learning process is teacher centered, it allows learners to improve their linguistic competence, whereas on the other hand, "take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without their experiences as outsiders" [6; 29].

Investigating the common challenges that L2 English learners faced while producing grammatical units might have significant impact on effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Following the approach of viewing errors like systematicity rather than deficiency, Han and Tarone [11] also refined the connection between patterns in grammar usage with developmental stages in second language acquisition. Some studies (e.g. Myles, [12]) also identified L1 interference as one of the valuable factors impacting on systematicity of errors produced in L2. Especially, the grammatical units that were found to be the most challenging are verb agreement, articles and prepositions. Granger and Paquot [13] in line with previous research established systematicity in patterns underlined by L2 learners' efforts to build meaningful constructions within their linguistic repertoire.

As discussed above, students come to colleges and universities with their own views, systems, and opinions. Hence, the researchers emphasize that language is rather dynamic, than static, and what is important to mention — the language is social. Ellis and Shintani [14] in their study also highlight that systematicity in errors offer significant insights into learners' underlying linguistic knowledge. They highlight that grammatical complexity in L2 writing often emerges as learners experiment with syntactic structures, leading to errors that signify progress rather than failure. Therefore, there is an alternative approach to teaching and learning processes, where students' responses may be considered as ideologically interpreted. Moreover, a new view to the analysis of students' positions as socially identified issues may facilitate them to develop new paths of interpreting the world and self-positioning according to it. And the central role is given to teachers, as their "attitude toward a student's speech is the most powerful single factor" in determining the expectations for that student [10; 49].

Fundamental theoretical frameworks, including Input Hypothesis [15] and Output Hypothesis [16] portray the basic understanding of errors and their impact on language production. While comprehensible input

contributes to language acquisition process, scrutinizing language production aids clarification and refinement of language use. The findings suggest that both comprehensible input and targeted feedback addressing the major aspects of the output have significant roles in language learning process.

Research settings and methodology

The pilot study investigates the analysis of the “systematicity” of the features in students’ writing. The participants of this study are the students at the Hungarian University, who are studying English as a major. Successfully passing the Basic English Language Examination (BLE) in their second semester is a mandatory requirement for continuing their studies. This examination serves as proof that their language proficiency has reached the B2+ level. The Basic English Language Examination is a sit-in assessment which consists of four parts:

1. Use of English
2. Reading
3. Writing
4. Speaking

The research focuses on the analysis of the writing section of the BLE, which includes a single task, where the students are required to produce a 180–200-words text on a selected topic. Students need to compose a text in one of three following genres: a review, a formal letter of inquiry or a narrative. The genre varies for each examination occasion. In the specific examination analyzed in this study, students were tasked with writing a formal letter of inquiry regarding a degree program, available summer camp jobs, or a language school. The task provided an explanation and guiding questions to help students address key aspects of the topic in their letters.

The evaluation is differentiated and based on four basic characteristics:

- task achievement;
- coherence and cohesion;
- grammar;
- vocabulary.

Each of the above-mentioned competences is accessed on scale from one to five points. Moreover, each score is based on the descriptor to specify the evaluation criteria for assessment.

The corpus was created from the examination papers ensuring that data collection adhered to ethical research guidelines of research conduction. A learner corpus was created from 12 written texts, which consists of 2575 running words in total. Texts of the database were scanned and transcribed as preparatory stage for data analysis.

To identify the specific features and examine “systematicity” of the students’ language use, the different aspects of their writing texts were examined. Based on previous literature [17], three main categories were identified in the analysis, which include:

- 1) Content features (genre, text requirements);
- 2) Grammar features;
- 3) Vocabulary features.

The research entails the grammar features, which are also subdivided into six subtypes, including:

1. *Verb agreement*;
2. *Prepositions*;
3. *Article Use*;
4. *Capitalization*;
5. *Word order*;
6. *Spelling*.

Following this, the study seeks to identify the systematicity on the basis of specific items and forms, which are usually marked by foreign language teachers as “errors” with respect to the variety of English spoken by native speakers; categorize; describe; analyze and interpret the data as well. Besides, errors in this analysis have a role of markers of the particular language variety, differing from L1 variant equivalent, but not regarded as deviant.

This current study examines students’ language use by collecting and describing learners’ writings, identifying the items that were used and assessing the variability found in the learner language. In addition, this descriptive analysis helps to determine the “systematicity” of students’ performance and identify specific items and characteristics of the specific language variety.

The methodology contains manual analysis aiming to identify systematic grammatical patterns in L2 learners’ written performance. The manual approach implements a color-coding scheme to label and categorize the data. A special color code was assigned to each of six categories and the identified grammatical features were then highlighted according to their designated color code.

Results and Discussion

Following the approach described above, the study is aimed on the exploration of patterns in grammatical units' production of L2 learners of English. And the specificity was established based on the particular items that were represented in the writing papers of students, which are regarded by language teachers as typical learner errors.

First, six subtypes of grammatical features were established, including: 1. Verb agreement; 2. Prepositions; 3. Article Use; 4. Capitalization; 5. Word order; 6. Spelling. The bar-chart below illustrates those components and their frequency.

Based on the analysis, the most frequent features are prepositions, which are about 36 % of all, whereas the least frequent ones are features in capitalization, which are 6 %. 26 % of characteristics were identified as verb agreement; percentage of frequency of article use, word order and spelling are 9 %, 10 % and 13 %, respectively (Fig. 1). Consequently, the significant number of the most frequent features performed by students are verb agreement and prepositions, which are apparently, labeled by the teachers as the most common errors for students.

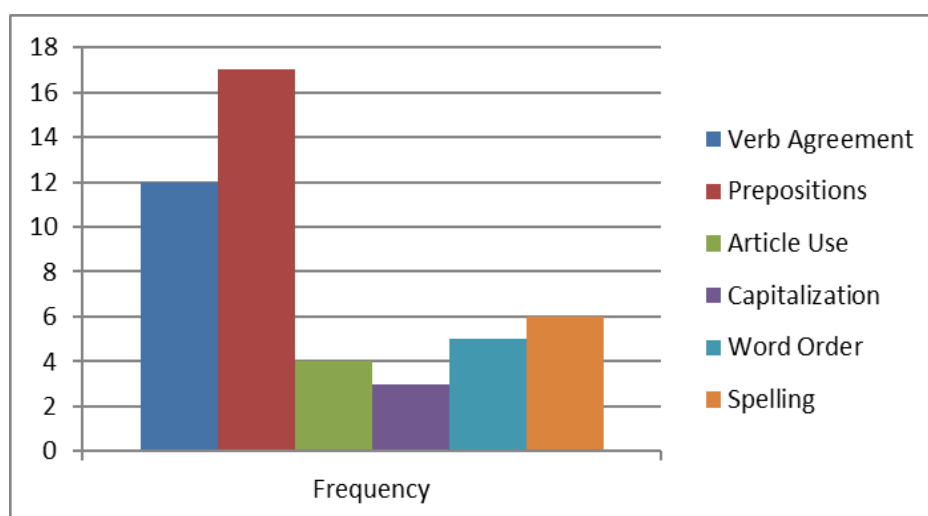


Figure 1. Frequency of the selected grammatical features

The analysis revealed that some specific typical errors of the students demonstrated in preposition misuse. One of them is inserting redundant prepositions, as is illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Example of redundant prepositions

Student's answer	Reconstruction
...would be so kind to answer to my questions.	..would be so kind to answer my questions.
... what your school generally offers to students...	... what your school generally offers students...

Another identified pattern in article usage was the omission of prepositions, which is exemplified below in Table 2:

Table 2

Example of omission of prepositions

Student's answer	Reconstruction
I look forward hearing from you as soon as possible	I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible
I am eagerly waiting your response.	I am eagerly waiting for your response.
Should I look accommodation	Should I look for accommodation

The third common tendency in prepositions production was a *misuse of prepositions* before the nouns, after some verbs, as illustrated in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Example of misuse of prepositions

Student's answer	Reconstruction
student program in the University of Edinburgh	student program at the University of Edinburgh
a university student from	a university student of
in your website	on your website

The analysis shows that prepositions were one of the most challenging grammatical features in the learners' production. More precisely, deeper analysis demonstrated three main cases of the misuse of prepositions, including inserting redundant prepositions, a misuse of prepositions and omission of prepositions.

Another subcategory of grammatical features, which was the second most frequent was verb agreement. The most common errors identified in the verb agreement may be classified in three main groups, including the verb forms of the perfect aspect: the agreement of the main verb form and the auxiliary and the agreement of the main verb form and the modal verbs (subcategory of auxiliary verbs).

Table 4

Verb Agreement features

Type of "error"	Student's answer	Reconstruction
The Main Verb and the Auxiliary	What type of tasks does a language exam contains ?	What type of tasks does a language exam contain ?
The Main Verb and the Modal Verb	Is there an information office nearby the university where I can checked the programmes in the city during my stay?	Is there an information office nearby the university where I can check the programmes in the city during my stay?
the Verb forms of the Perfect Aspect	I have already look through some of the schools' offers...	I have already looked through some of the schools' offers...

Table 4 illustrates the examples of the above-mentioned features. It is also important to highlight that errors in the usage of the Perfect Aspect, Modal verbs and construction of the sentences with Auxiliaries are the most frequent cases of the verb agreement aspect.

Spelling is determined as the third most frequent error of the students. Moreover, three out of twelve students have made a mistake in the spelling of the word "accommodation", dropped one /m/ and wrote "accomodation". I suppose "errors" in spelling may not be identified as specific features of the EFL learners, as they need to be observed more deeply and be systematic.

Finally, capitalization, word order, and article use seemed to be the least frequent "errors" in the students' writing performance, and thus, no systematicity was identified.

The content features and vocabulary were also established as the main categories for the analysis. The students were expected to write a formal letter of inquiry about a degree program, about available summer camp jobs or about a language school; hence there are special formal requirements to the text that need to be produced. Notably, they were supposed to use appropriate vocabulary and style features. Among the major elements of the formal letters are address (both addresser and addressee), date, specific content, including formal greeting and ending.

The data shows that four out of twelve students (about 33 %) didn't follow the content requirements, as they didn't insert the address. Some of the test takers overused certain verbs, which are inappropriate to the style and should not be used in formal letters, as, for instance, in the expression: "I want to be informed". In other cases, the test-takers presumably misused some vocabulary items, such as, for example (Table 5):

Vocabulary features

Type of “error”	Student’s answer	Alternatives
Vocabulary	Thirdly, are there any other benefits for the employees next to payment?	Besides, except, in addition to
Vocabulary	I have a little practice	little experience
Vocabulary	How many variations are there to choose from? (about the extra-curricular activities)	options

The analysis of vocabulary features established the systematicity in production and usage of some lexical units and stylistic elements. That also provides valuable insights that will be discussed in the next chapter of the paper.

Conclusion

To summarize, the study concerned the analysis of the grammar, vocabulary and content features of the language use of the particular social group — Hungarian students. The study was based on the identification of the systematicity in the writing production of the students at the Basic English Examination. All the characteristics that were presented and described in the research are not stated as conclusive results but as hypotheses about what might constitute as meaningful characteristics of L2 learners’ writing.

Overall, the analysis reveals the major tendencies in the performance, including the usage of articles, verb aspect and spelling. As stated in the aim, the piloting study helped to investigate the major systematic usage trends in L2 written performance within the context of the study. The insights from the research might bring a new view to language teaching and language learning strategies. The findings might explain some aspects of language production and can also be useful for defining potential confusions and misconceptions.

According to Seifdlhofer [18], the items identified as systematic features in the English learners’ performance are likely to be considered as typical learner errors. However, the author points out, that conversely, they should not be regarded as negative criterion, as English learners are “agents of language change” [18; 4]. Therefore, the labeled components identified in the language learning research represent active choices of linguistic options that were used, and not incomplete knowledge. On the other hand, the analysis of the linguistic features of L2 learning is a complicated process, which requires a much larger corpus and deeper analysis to identify them and make particular statements. Overall, the reviewed approach may explore new directions of the language development as in the present era of globalization, the world is interconnected, and English tends to be one of the main tools of the intercultural communication.

The present analysis revealed several patterns in L2 production, including misuse of prepositions with typical errors including redundant prepositions and omission. Verb agreement was also established as one of the common errors and in perfect aspect forms (e.g. main verb-auxiliary agreement). Among the less frequent were capitalization errors determined, word order and article use. As aligned with existing literature reviewed in the previous chapters, the current study contributes to existing approach and provides evidence that language learners’ errors interfere with language acquisition process.

The study aids in investigating the most challenging patterns in L2 production for students in a particular context. As outcomes suggest, they are prepositions, verb agreement and stylistic specificities, including the usage of appropriate vocabulary. Similar findings were pinpointed in Tetreault and Chodorow [20] establishing prepositions as one of the most complex and consistent errors of L2 learners. Housen and Simoens [19] also reported verb agreement as systematic patterns identified in language learners’ production. Overall, the study explores systematicity in L2 writing and established consistent patterns of errors that reflect learner-specific varieties of English. The range of grammatical features identify linguistic units from prepositional misuse to verb agreement issues highlight the transitional competence and developmental stages of L2 acquisition.

The findings suggest the necessity of implementing the focus of the instructional activities on the identified grammatical features. The practical implications offered might contribute to the development of language training and provide beneficial results for language production. In addition to proposed targeted grammar instruction strategies and curriculum development, extensive, error specific feedback may also provide language learners valuable insights to gain deeper understanding of grammatical structures and their

appropriate usage. Inclusion of genre specific tasks and specific targeted and detailed feedback might also be beneficial and enhancing for comprehension of the output produced by the learners.

This study, despite its limited sample size, highlights the potential of corpus-based analysis in uncovering patterns of systematicity in learner errors. Expanding the learner corpus in future research could bring in more comprehensive data that can provide valuable insights for language teaching. Extension of the variables, including linguistic variables and factor variables (e.g. L1 interference, genre, duration of preparation, etc.) might also facilitate further research and might reveal significant findings contributing to L2 research field.

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К. Адамова

Ағылшын тілін екінші тіл ретінде үйренушілердің тілдік қолдану жүйелілігі: Студенттердің жазбаша жұмыстарына корпусқа негізделген зерттеу

Ағымдағы зерттеу екінші тілді үйренудегі ең қиын дағдылардың бірі — жазуды қарастырады. Ол жазба тілдің жасалу картасын жасау үшін шет тілінде жазудың күрделілігінің негізгі тенденцияларын зерттеуге бағытталған. Зерттеу органы негізгі ағылшын тілінде жазбаша емтихан мәтінін құру тұрғысынан емтихандық жұмыстарға негізделген. Бұл емтихан Венгрия университеттерінде ағылшын

тілінде оқитын студенттерге міндетті тест болып табылады және білім беру саласында шешуші рөл атқарады. Ағылшын тілін шет тілі ретінде үйренушілер, әдетте, жалпы еуропалық анықтамалық негіздемеге (CEFR) сәйкес мәтін құрайды және тілді меңгеру деңгейін B2+ көрсетеді. Зерттеу әдісі грамматикалық белгілердің 6 категориясына негізделген талдауды қамтиды (соның ішінде етістік келісімі; көсемшелер; артикльдерді қолдану; бас әріппен жазу; сөз тәртібі; орфография). Талдау EFL студенттерінің корпусқа негізделген жазуында жиі болатын жұмысындағы жүйелі үлгілерді анықтауға көмектеседі. Анықталған ең көп тараған тенденциялардың кейбірі предлогтар, дәлірек айтқанда, жіберіп алу және дұрыс қолданбау, етістік келісімі және емлесі болды. Қателердің сипатын анықтау үшін терең және жан-жақты талдау жүргізу қажет. Бұл пилоттық зерттеу маңызды түсініктер береді және оның нәтижелері болашақта шет тіліндегі жазуды талдау зерттеулерін жобалау үшін өте өзекті.

Кілт сөздер: тіл үйрену, жазбаша мәтін жасау, грамматикалық талдау, «әлемдік ағылшын тілі», оқушылар.

К. Адамова

Систематичность в письменном продуцировании речи изучающих английский язык как второй: корпусное исследование письменных текстов студентов

Исследование рассматривает один из самых сложных навыков, который необходимо развивать в процессе изучения второго языка — письмо. Статья направлена на изучение основных тенденций в сложности письма на иностранном языке, чтобы отобразить создание письменного языка. Корпус исследования построен на экзаменационных работах в части создания письменного текста для экзамена по базовому английскому языку. Данный экзамен является обязательным этапом проверки, который необходимо сдать студентам, специализирующимся на изучение английского языка в университетах Венгрии, также он играет решающую роль в образовательной сфере. Изучающие английский язык как иностранный, как правило, создают текст и подтверждают уровень владения языком на уровне B2+ в соответствии с общеевропейскими компетенциями владения иностранным языком: изучение, преподавание, оценка (англ. Common European Framework of Reference, CEFR). Метод исследования включает анализ на основе 6 категорий грамматических признаков (согласование глаголов, предлоги, использование артиклей, заглавные буквы, порядок слов, правописание). Анализ помогает выявить систематические ошибки в письме изучающих иностранный язык на основе корпусного исследования. Наиболее распространенными выявленными тенденциями являются предлоги, точнее — пропуски и неправильное использование, согласование глаголов и правописание. Для определения характера ошибок необходимо провести глубокий и тщательный анализ. Данное пилотное исследование дает существенные сведения, а его результаты имеют решающее значение для дальнейшего проектирования исследований посвященных анализу письменной речи на иностранном языке.

Ключевые слова: изучение языка, создание письменного текста, грамматический анализ, «мировой английский», учащиеся.

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