

WRITING CENTER

A List of Common Non-Native and Bilingual Speaker Errors for UHCL Faculty

Be mindful that the list below should not be over-generalized to all non-native and bilingual speakers (NNS/BLS). While some errors are, indeed, common given a speaker's native language, one must be aware of the many other individual factors which facilitate student error, such as a student's academic English proficiency.

To best use this list, it is helpful to distinguish whether an error is global or local. While a global error interferes with the overall meaning of a text, a local error does not. There are no hard-and-fast rules to distinguish which of the below errors are global or local as one must always take into consideration the context in which an error is produced. Nevertheless, correcting global errors takes precedence over correcting local errors, and, for the most part, the list below begins with global errors and ends with local ones.

After pinpointing both global and local errors in a student's paper, use this list to prioritize those errors by focusing more on identifying and correcting patterns of error rather than errors that occur sporadically.

Finally, keep in mind that identifying and explaining errors to students should not be an end in-itself, but part of a larger plan for improving the student as a writer.

Confusing Word Order

This is a syntactical error where parts of a sentence are out of order. This can be demonstrated in the following example: "*The doctor some medicine gave to the child.*" Here the verb "gave" should follow the noun "doctor."

Misplaced Phrases or Clauses

This occurs when phrases or clauses are not integrated correctly into sentences. Consider this sentence: "*My mother always after we cooked told me to wash the bowls.*" Here the prepositional phrase "after we cooked" is an introductory element that should begin the sentence, preceding the subject "My mother."

Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject in a sentence must agree with the corresponding verb. For example, in the sentence "*The mother of the children call other parents and complain,*" the verbs "call" and "complain" need to be plural so they complement the singular noun "mother."

Wrong Word Form

A word's form depends on its function in a sentence. Consider this sentence: "*The driver was scare to drive on the freeway.*" In this case, "scare" is the subject complement of the noun "driver" with "was" acting as a linking verb between the two. To properly function as an adjective, however, "scare" needs to be "scared."

Mixed Construction

A mixed construction occurs when there are two parts to a sentence that do not fit together. This can occur, for example, with subordinate clauses in NNS/BLS writing: “*Although the U.S. is wealthy, but there are still many people in poverty.*” In this case, the coordinating conjunction “but” is unnecessary because the subordinating conjunction “although” already indicates contrast between the wealth of the U.S. and the existence of poverty.

Wrong Verb Tense

Verbs change tense given the time at which an action occurs. Because many languages do not have verb tenses at all, many NNS/BLS have trouble mastering English verb tense. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that there a myriad number of different tenses, complicating any simple breakdown of tenses into the past, present, and future.

Preposition Usage

Prepositions are words that express relationships related to space and time. For example, in the sentence “*We talk on the phone,*” the preposition “on” denotes a spatial relationship between the noun “we” and the object of the preposition, “phone.” Oftentimes, prepositions in English idiomatic phrases are the most difficult for a NNS/BLS.

Idiomatic Phrases

Idioms are set phrases or combinations of words that seem to not be guided by any concrete grammatical convention. For example, one would say “*I left work at 5:00p.m.*” rather than “*I left work in 5:00p.m.*” The lack of a teachable grammatical rule makes learning English idioms particularly difficult for NNS/BLS.

Misused or Missing Articles

Depending on the kind of noun in a sentence, an article (i.e., “a,” “an,” or “the”) may need to precede it. Look at this sentence: “*I told the teacher that I didn’t have a homework.*” While “the” is used correctly before the definite noun of “teacher,” no “a” should precede “homework” since the latter is a non-countable noun.

Many non-Western languages do not include articles at all, making it extremely difficult for non-native and bilingual students to know when and how to use them. Consequently, proficiency in articles is usually gained last by students learning English as a second language. Fortunately, however, missing articles do not typically detract from the meaning of a sentence.

Missing Plural ‘s’

The form of a noun will be dependent on whether it is singular or plural. In the sentence “*He has five kid and two dog,*” both “kid” and “dog” should be plural because there is more than one of both. The distinction between singular and plural nouns is difficult for NNS/BLS, especially in the case of those irregular plurals (“children” instead of “childs”) which, to be learned, have to be memorized. Like missing articles, though, a missing “s” on a noun does not hinder overall meaning.