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## **TEACHING GRAMMAR AND WHAT STUDENT ERRORS IN THE USE OF THE ENGLISH AUXILIARY 'BE' CAN TELL US**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In teaching grammar, teachers often are faced with the dilemma of either emphasising the formal properties of the language or its meaning aspect. One of the more popular language teaching approaches of the last three decades has been the communicative approach. This approach has had a significant impact on the teaching of grammar as its objective of communicative competence has led to a diminished role for grammar teaching. However, of late, numerous voices have advocated a more prominent role for grammar in achieving this objective. The question of whether to emphasise form or meaning remains central. Several theorists have attempted to reconcile the differences between the two emphases. This paper, however, suggests that the errors that learners make can inform teachers on whether a relatively stronger emphasis on form or meaning is required. This paper will focus on one particular grammatical structure – i.e. the auxiliary be – and suggest specific teaching techniques that may be appropriate based on the kinds of errors students make. It will use language data from an available corpus of the language of Malaysian English language students to examine the use of the auxiliary be. Learner errors will be analysed according to possible intended meanings and sources of errors. The paper will also attempt to provide a taxonomy of different types of grammar teaching based on learner errors and extend the discussion of grammar teaching to the development of appropriate curricular treatment of grammatical structures.

### **Introduction**

Learning a second language is often a difficult task for many, especially for those who are not in the second language environment. In Malaysia, although English is widely used it is considered a second language after the national language, Bahasa Melayu. Additionally, the languages of the different ethnic groups in the country are also widely used in their respective communities. There are therefore few opportunities to naturally acquire the second language through interaction and conversation especially in the rural areas of the country. Hence, formal instruction in the classroom becomes the main means of learning the language, and in secondary schools, it tends to be limited to only five hours per week. During this limited period, teachers have to decide how to help their students become proficient in the language.

In the early 1980s, the communicative approach to language teaching slowly emerged as the preferred teaching approach among theorists and educationists for teaching a second language. Sociolinguists such as Hymes and Halliday, adapting the notions of competence and performance suggested by Chomsky, mooted the idea of communicative competence. Spurred on by the works of these theorists and the opinions of others such as Krashen, as well as a general dislike of the repetitious language drills often used in many classrooms, the communicative approach slowly took shape. Despite the emphasis on communication in the communicative approach, grammatical accuracy was not completely neglected (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). Canale and Swain (1980) consider grammatical competence to be one of four types of competencies which make up communicative competence while Bachman (1990) categorises communicative competence into organizational and pragmatic competence with grammatical competence as an important element of the former. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the approach relegated grammar to a less central role in the teaching of a language. A popular notion associated with the communicative approach is that students should focus on meaning and communication as grammar would take care of itself during this process.

After nearly three decades of communicative language teaching, however, several misgivings among educators have emerged regarding the communicative approach in language teaching. Central among them is the lack of emphasis on the structural aspect of language or language form. To counter this, various teaching approaches and techniques have been proposed. These provide emphasis on the grammatical aspect of the language without neglecting the importance of language use or communication. A broad movement in this direction has been the effort to distinguish between Focus on Forms and Focus on Form. While Focus on Forms is equated with “discrete grammatical forms selected and presented in an isolated manner”, Focus on Form refers to the “teacher’s attempts to draw the student’s attention to grammatical forms in the context of communication” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004, p. 131) and in which the “overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991, p. 46). This distinction between the two has been emphasized in order to separate the teaching of grammar from the traditional methods espoused by the Focus on Forms approach and to show that grammar need not be separated from meaning. However, while this distinction is now fairly clear to most, numerous other concerns related to the teaching of grammar remain contentious. Among them are included whether grammar should be taught explicitly or implicitly, intensively or extensively, in separate lessons or integrated into communicative activities, massed or distributed, and before or after the students acquire some linguistic competence (Ellis, 2006). These issues are important and not completely resolved. However, learner errors and the possible sources of these errors can provide insight into some of these issues.

It is not surprising that numerous teaching techniques and approaches have been suggested in order to address these issues. Nassaji and Fotos (2004), for example, have outlined five of the more popular alternative ways of teaching grammar in the language classroom which include: processing instruction, interactional feedback, textual enhancement, task-based instruction and the discourse-based approach.

Table 1: New grammar teaching approaches and their characteristics

Approach	Characteristics and related terminology
Processing instruction	The goal of instruction is to intervene in learners' natural processing of language input in order for learners to notice grammatical/syntactic formations which they would have overlooked. Processing instruction – processing strategies
Interactional feedback	“Negotiation and modification strategies such as repetitions, clarification requests, confirmation checks, and the like, which are made by learners or directed to them to facilitate understanding” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004, p. 132). Negotiation of meaning – interaction hypothesis – recasts
Textual enhancement	Enhancement of text through such techniques as boldfacing, italicizing or underlining words in a text in order to promote noticing. Input flood – noticing
Task-based Instruction	Tasks that are meant to make grammar more salient through use of grammatical forms to complete the tasks. Tasks also denote “opportunities to practice the target structure in a communicative context” (Ellis, 2004, p. 93) Consciousness raising – pushed output – communicative gaps
Discourse-based Instruction	Use of authentic or simplified discourse to provide learners with contextualized use of structures. Grammar is normally integrated with writing. Corpus analysis.

All the approaches in Table 1 reflect varying degrees of implicit or indirect teaching of grammar which are often absent in more traditional, teacher-fronted and rule based teaching.

In addition to these approaches, other more comprehensive techniques which are intended for use in lessons have also been suggested. Donato and Hauck (1992), for example, have suggested the PACE model which stands for P – presentation of meaningful language, A – attention to aspects raised in the presentation, C – co-construction and explanation, and E – Extension activity. Similarly, Sysoyev's EEE approach – Exploration, Explanation, and Expression – is another example

(Sysoyev, 1999). These techniques do not provide a general approach to the teaching of grammar as is the case of the approaches in Table 1 but rather suggest procedures for how grammar should be presented in the classroom. Nevertheless, together with these approaches, they reflect the myriad techniques available to the language teacher. All these approaches and classroom procedures, however, take a Focus on Form orientation as mentioned earlier as they emphasize form within a communicative context.

Textbooks on grammar teaching which are popular in teacher training have also emphasized the importance of integrating meaning and form. In his textbook, Batstone (1994) first describes how grammar can be taught as product, as process, and as skill; and goes on to argue that each supplements rather than supplants the other. Similarly, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) invite their readers to conceive of three dimensions of grammar – its form, its meaning and its use – and to attend to each dimension both separately and as one. Thornbury (1999) also lays stress on grammar and meaning early in his textbook and proceeds to contextualize grammar teaching later in the same text.

Based on the information available, it is clear that there is no dearth of teaching approaches where grammar teaching is concerned, although a major contention that exists among these approaches is the roles of meaning and form. Nevertheless, the choice of an appropriate teaching approach will have to also be based on numerous other considerations. In a student centered teaching approach, efficient learning of a particular language structure requires knowledge of how students respond to the structures. This may often be indicated by the kinds of errors that they make. Consequently, the careful presentation of these structures is based on this knowledge. This paper will therefore suggest grammar teaching approaches based on the errors that students make and the possible sources of their errors by taking into consideration the emphasis on meaning and form by different approaches. Additionally, it will also discuss specific roles the language curriculum can play to facilitate the teaching and learning of grammatical structures. In order to achieve these aims, language data available from a Malaysian based corpus are analysed, specifically with respect to errors made in the use of the BE + verb construction.

### **The Study**

In this study, sentences with the BE construction formed by Standard 5 students in Malaysian primary schools were analysed. The BE form was selected because it is a rather common grammatical form used in the English language. Additionally, in so far as Bahasa Melayu is concerned, it is difficult to attribute any observed errors in the use of the form to interference from Bahasa Melayu which does not have a

similar form. The BE form of the verb is expressed in the progressive auxiliary be, the copula be, as well as in the passive as in *The girl is singing*, *The girl is ready to go* and *The girl is respected by her friends respectively*.

The main objective of this study is to examine the types of errors that students make when using the BE + verb form and to suggest possible reasons for these errors. Secondly, the study aims to provide general pedagogical suggestions related to the BE construction. Finally, contextualization of the grammar point within a teaching curriculum will also be discussed. In describing the potential sources of errors, it should be noted that the sources identified are based on the researchers' analysis and interpretation of the corpus set.

Both the progressive auxiliary be and the copula be are difficult structures for second language learners to acquire. Tode (2003) provides the example of Japanese second language learners of English. He notes that "half the grades 8 and 9 students who had studied English for one year and two years respectively failed to supply *be* in obligatory contexts" and "overused it in the context of the simple present full verb – e.g. *He is like music*" (p. 15). The underuse as well as overuse of the BE form is not surprising. As a progressive auxiliary, the BE form acts only as a functor and does not carry much semantic meaning. Hence it is likely to lack salience. Similarly, the BE form in passives have similar characteristics as it is essentially an auxiliary as well. When the BE form is used as a copula, its functions are numerous, ranging from locative expressions (*The book is on the shelf*); adjectival predicatives (*She is sick*); deictic (*There is the house*); identificational (*That is a cat*); existential (*There are bugs in the room*); to nominal predicatives (*He is a doctor*). While the construction is simple and straightforward, the different meanings this single construction can express can be quite demanding for second language learners to master. Consequently, if errors are made by the learner, they can be attributed to different causes depending on the learner's intended meaning as well as what the learner has understood the structure to mean.

The sentences used in the study were obtained from two corpus sets. The first corpus was collected in 2000 while the second corpus was collected in 2007. The 2000 corpus is known as the English of Malaysian School Students (EMAS) corpus and is a collection of language of primary 5, Form 2 and Form 4 students generated from written and oral tasks. The 2007 corpus is a smaller scale version of the earlier corpus involving the same language tasks and student educational level. In this study, only primary 5 students and their essays entitled "The Happiest Day of My Life" were used.

A search of the two corpora using *is* and *was* as the search terms was the first step in the study. It is important to note that in order to work with a more manageable

set of data, this analysis focuses on the combination of BE + verb structures only and excludes the use of copulas that do not have a verb form after it. As such, constructions such as the subjective complement as in *He is a student* which does not require a verb form after the BE verb were not analysed. Similarly, errors in number agreement will also be ignored. In this study, errors involving the non use of the BE form in obligatory contexts such as *He running* instead of *He is running* is not analysed. This is because it is difficult to explain whether the omission is a typographical error or a proficiency related error. Furthermore, it is also difficult to search for a form that is not used.

The accuracy of use of the BE construction in this study is determined by the following examples of correct usage:

BE + V + *ing* as in present/past progressive tenses e.g. *He is/was walking to school.*  
 BE + V + *en* (participle form) in passive sentences e.g. *He is/was awarded the medal.*

### Results and Discussion

Sentences containing the incorrect use of the BE + verb construction are presented in Table 2 according to their data sets and arranged according to type of error.

Table 2: Incorrect use of the BE + verb construction

*1.	... my brother played at the fun park. I [[was]] very enjoyed the roller coaster ride be ... <sup>1</sup>
*2.	... presents. After half of hour, the party [[was]] started, I saw many people was ate ... <sup>1</sup>
*3.	... party was started, I saw many people [[was]] ate their foods, they also had talk had ... <sup>1</sup>
*4.	... our things under the tree. My mother [[was]] already prepared many delicious foods ... <sup>1</sup>
*5.	... was very dark. Suddenly, the lamp [[was]] opened ownself. My friend sing me a ... <sup>1</sup>
*6.	... me present. It was a surprise to me. I [[was]] very liked it. It is a first time I ... <sup>1</sup>
*7.	... when I fail to get number 1. That thing [[was]] worried me until this day. But nothing ... <sup>1</sup>
*8.	... my birthday with happily. My mother [[was]] made delicious cake. I invited my friend ... <sup>2</sup>
*9.	... my neighbour to the party. The party [[was]] started and 2.00p.m. They brought along ... <sup>2</sup>
*10.	... that day I so happiest. My father [[was]] bought a dog for me. My father also ... <sup>2</sup>
*11.	...knocked down by a big truck. The truck [[was]] crashed onto a lamp post. Many people ... <sup>2</sup>
*12.	... forgot that day was my birthday. When i [[was]] just woke up my mother gave me a big ... <sup>2</sup>
*13.	... One weekend, my family and I [[was]] go to Pulau Tioman. We go to Pulau ... <sup>2</sup>
*14.	... At ten o'clock, My birthday party [[was]] finish, my friend also go back home. ... <sup>2</sup>
*15.	... birthday. In that day, parents and me [[was]] go the Singapura. We go there by plane. ... <sup>2</sup>
*16.	... her is very like my. 2. Very day, they [[was]] buy many thing for me. 3. They buy the ... <sup>2</sup>
*17.	... to look the beautiful beach. Two day [[was]] go, we want to go home. Father go to ... <sup>2</sup>
*18.	... the shouted was coming. I saw a kid [[was]] struggling in the river. I quickly jump ... <sup>1</sup>
*19.	... To my surprise, I saw a school boy [[was]] lying on the road. It seemed to me ... <sup>2</sup>
*20.	... My happiest day is my birthday. I [[was]] borned on 14 September 1990. Many people ... <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From the 2007 corpus; <sup>2</sup> From the 2000 corpus

The sentences in Table 2 have been grouped according to the type of error and will be discussed according to the three major aims of the study as follows:

i. Types and sources of errors

It is not possible to identify the exact sources of the errors as such a task will require experimental research conditions which involve the careful manipulation and control of various factors in the study. However, several possible sources are proposed in this section based on an analysis of observed errors

The first group of sentences in Table 2 indicate that students may have overgeneralized the use of *was* to indicate past tense although the sentence already expresses past through the use of the simple past tense inflection *-ed*. This is seen in sentences 1 to 12 where each sentence can clearly be corrected by simply deleting the BE form as follows:

\*1. I ~~[[was]]~~ very enjoyed the roller coaster ride ...  
I enjoyed the roller coaster ride..

\*2. ... After half an hour, the party ~~[[was]]~~ started  
...After half an hour, the party started.

The error in sentences 1 to 12 in Table 2 can be attributed to the overuse of the past tense BE form to indicate past time although the simple past would have been sufficient. The verb forms in these inaccurate constructions, including the irregular verbs *eat*, *make*, *buy* and *wake*, are all in the simple past form and none appear in the past participle form. We therefore believe that a possible reason for this error is simply extra caution exercised by the students in expressing the past.

A second possible explanation for the error in sentences 1 to 12, however, could be the influence of positive input that has been incorrectly applied. Language input provides many correct instances of the use of the past tense BE form followed by a word that looks very much like the past tense verb form. For example *was involved*, *was caught* and *were kicked* are all correct phrases in sentences such as *He was involved in an accident*; *She was caught stealing*; and *The cans were kicked about* respectively. In the first sentence, however, a predicative adjective *involved* is used while in the other two sentences participle forms of the verb are used in passive sentences. Therefore, it may be possible that since the learners have come across the BE + verb + ed/en construction although the verb form may be in the past participle form rather than the simple past, they have erroneously applied it to sentences 1 to 12. A point to note, however, is that in many of these sentences, it is clear from the subject of the sentences that active rather than passive sentences were intended.



The second group of sentences involve the use of the inaccurate form of the verb which may have once again been affected by the use of BE. The students who constructed sentences 13 to 17 seem to rely on the past tense of the BE form to indicate the past. Consequently, they do not seem to see the need to change the main verb from the present tense root form to the simple past form with the *-ed* inflection. Hence they construct sentences such as *I was go to Tioman and They was buy many things for me* instead of *I went to Tioman and They bought many things for me* respectively. Once again it is difficult to understand why these students have made this error. One hypothesis is that they have used the BE form specifically as a marker or indicator of time. Proving this requires that a researcher examine instances of the BE form to indicate present time such as in *I is go to Tioman or They are buy many things for me*. However, in this small corpus, there is no instance of such a construction.

Two other possible explanations may also be offered. The first is that the students are not aware of the difference between the use of BE as an auxiliary verb and as a main verb. The students may have treated the BE in these sentences as a main verb. Consequently, in order to express the past, they have attached the past tense marker to BE to form *was* and felt there is no longer a need to do so to the second verb in the sequence. The second explanation is that these students have used the singular past tense form of BE because of evidence from input. This explanation, however, may not be very feasible as the combination of *was* followed by the present tense form of the verb does not appear in the input.

Sentences 18 and 19 in Table 2 indicate that the learners have problems with complex sentences. The sentence *I saw a kid struggling in the river* is a complex sentence consisting of the main clause *I saw a kid* and the subordinate clause *The kid was struggling in the river*. When combined, it should read as either *I saw a kid who was struggling in the river* using the relative pronoun *who* or *I saw a kid struggling in the river* which is in the reduced relative clause form. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) note that relative clause reduction is possible when the relativised subject is followed by a BE verb or auxiliary and that it is “far and away the most frequent” (p. 609) form involved in relative clause reductions. What appears to be happening with sentences 18 and 19, therefore, is some form of incomplete transformation in the reduction of the relative clause where the students have deleted the co referent noun phrase but retained the BE auxiliary. Hence they come up with the sentence *I saw a kid was struggling in the river*.

Finally, there is one sentence which is not easily classified or explained. Sentence 20 clearly involves the incorrect form of the verb *born* as it should read *I was born* instead of *I was borned*. We have hesitated to place it together with the first group of

sentences (Sentences 1 to 12) as its correction does not simply involve the removal of the BE form to produce the sentence *I borned*. It may be possible to argue that the students have once again used the BE + verb + en/ed form simply because this construction is familiar. However, the cause of the error in sentence 20 seems more likely to stem from the nature of the verb itself. The verb *born* is unlike most of the other verbs in the sentences in Table 2 – *enjoy, start, eat, prepare, open, like, worry, make, buy, crash, wake up* (sentences 1-12); *go, finish, buy* (sentences 13-17); *struggle and lay* (sentences 18-19). None of these verbs can occur in a construction such as SUBJ + BE (past) + V. Constructions such as *I was enjoy, I was start, I was eat* right up to the last verb in the list *I was lay* are all incorrect. On the other hand, many of these verbs can occur in constructions such as *I enjoyed ..., I started ...; and I ate ...* while it is not accurate to form the sentence *I borned*. Although it may be possible to argue along the lines of the passive voice construction *I was borne by my mother*; this construction is rather formal and archaic and it is unlikely that such a sentence was intended by a Primary 5 student. Hence, this idiosyncratic aspect of particular verbs such as the verb *born* must also be given some attention in teaching and learning.

ii. Selecting appropriate pedagogy

In principle, we subscribe to the notion that language teaching should focus on helping students express their meanings in the second language and that grammatical accuracy is a means to that end. Hence, the errors that were observed in Table 2 can be examined in terms of whether or not the meanings of the sentences in which they occur have been clearly and accurately conveyed or whether there is a possibility of misinterpretation. This can be illustrated in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Possible misinterpretation and suggested teaching techniques for observed errors

Sentences	Type of Error	Possibility of	Possible misinterpretation	Suggested teaching technique
1 to 12	Overuse of the past tense form	High	Similarity to passive forms especially when regular verbs are used, hence may lead to wrong assignment of subject	Focus on meaning – help students realize that there is a potential for misunderstanding
13 to 17	Use of past form BE instead of past form of the main verb which remains in base form	Medium	Confusion over time reference; confusion between auxiliary and main verbs	Focus on form – an implicit or indirect treatment of the error may be sufficient

18 and 19	Retention of BE in reduced relative clause or non-use of relative pronoun	Low	Little likelihood of misinterpretation	Focus on form - more explicit presentation of the form
20	I was borned instead of I was born	Low	Intended message is clear	Focus on form – more explicit presentation of the form

In Table 3, we suggest that the teaching technique used in presenting a grammatical structure should be according to the likelihood of misinterpreting the meaning of the sentence in which the structure is used. Therefore, pedagogical treatment that focuses more explicitly on the formal structure of an error may be suitable for errors that do not greatly distort the meaning of a sentence as in the case of sentences 18 to 20. On the other hand, when a misinterpretation is possible because of ambiguity in meaning or because the meaning is unclear, teachers may want to make their students more sensitive to this by either getting the students to use the structure interactively with others or by informing them of the possible misinterpretation. Through interaction, students become involved in the negotiation of meaning involving the structure. Consequently, they may realize how the structure is correctly used when they are forced to ensure that their message is clearly and correctly conveyed. Similarly, informing students of the possible misinterpretation either directly through explanation or indirectly through techniques involving self-discovery is supported by VanPatten (1996) who believes that when left to their own, some students fail to notice their own errors because they process the message specifically for meaning. Simply telling students the correct form without requiring further cognitive activity on their part may not be sufficient for them to realize the confusion they may cause if they continue to make the error as in the case of sentences 1 to 17.

Secondly, in order to help students notice how the BE + verb form is used, the correct BE + verb form needs to be enhanced or given more prominence. As an auxiliary, BE does not really carry much semantic weight or meaning and may tend to be overlooked. Hence, the salience of the BE form is an issue and teaching strategies must take this lack of salience of the BE form into consideration. Appropriate teaching techniques should be considered. For example, the use of yes-no question forms involving the BE + verb form such as *Is he married?* and its truncated response as in *Yes he is* has been used as a means to highlight the BE auxiliary especially in the teaching of auxiliaries to children with language learning problems (Bliss, 1988). This approach is also supported by Richards (1990) who suggests the Auxiliary Clarification Hypothesis

in which auxiliaries in initial position as found in yes-no questions are more readily processed and remembered. Fey & Loeb (2002) further argue that initial auxiliaries may also be fuller in phonetic form and hence more salient and easier to process than those that are sentence internal. These studies clearly support the use of a technique that may highlight the structural and formal properties of a particular grammatical structure such as BE. While the position of the BE auxiliary in a sentence can provide formal and physical salience to the grammatical structure, it is still advisable to attend to the cognitive salience of the grammatical form. Providing context to tasks, for example, can help students relate the form to specific meaning. For example, the question *Is he married?* can be preceded by information to provide context such as a photograph of a man and information that the man was married but is now divorced. These studies indicate that despite the more prevalent use of the BE structure in sentence internal constructions, the learning of the structure may be more effective when it is presented in a more prominent position such as in yes-no questions either prior to or together with the use of the structure in declarative sentences.

Finally, it is also important to deal with the idiosyncratic aspects of particular verbs and phrases. Lewis (1997) argues for the teaching of vocabulary as chunks or fixed expressions rather than single, individual words. Phrases such as *I was born ...* would be relevant to this teaching approach as the three words in the phrase are often found together as a fixed expression. The use of this phrase is also rather common, especially in social situations, and is therefore meaningful to the students. A technique that could be used to present this expression is by matching the expression with words and phrases with which it is often collocated. For example, the words *in, on, at, to* and *during* in sentences such as *I was born in Selangor, I was born on a Wednesday, I was born at 5 in the morning, I was born to dance, and I was born during a time of hardship* respectively could be used. The repeated use of the three word phrase *I was born ...* can help the students internalize the phrase despite the focus of the task being on the collocation of the phrase with other words and phrases.

### iii. Contextualisation into the curriculum

The Malaysian English language school curriculum emphasizes a cyclical approach to the teaching of grammar where grammatical structures should be repeatedly presented in diverse situations. Additionally, the curriculum states that the teaching of grammar should also be context-bound, and although the isolated and explicit teaching of grammar is not encouraged, it is not completely prohibited as teachers are allowed to resort to such an approach if and when necessary. While in line with language acquisition theories, these general guidelines do not fully exploit the language curriculum as an organizational tool for the effective presentation of grammar. Teachers will be greatly assisted when the sequence that grammatical structures are presented facilitates the teaching as well as the learning and acquisition

of the language. Once again, the errors learners make using the BE + verb construction is used to illustrate this point.

The observations made in Table 2 above have distinct implications on how we may want to integrate grammatical structures, specifically the BE + verb construction into the language curriculum. It is often the case that although the emphasis may be on a particular grammatical structure, there may also be the need to introduce and discuss related structures. This is also true of the BE + verb construction in this study, especially with regard to voice – i.e. active and passive, and transitivity in verbs, so as to avoid errors such as in sentences 1 to 12. In order to help students understand that passives can be formed with *scold* and *throw* as the main verbs but not *think*, *run* or *laugh*, it may be necessary to make the students aware that *scold* and *throw* are transitive verbs and hence may appear in a passive sentence with the BE auxiliary while *think*, *run* and *laugh* are commonly intransitive verbs which do not occur in passive sentences. The presentation of the BE + verb construction in the curriculum, or any grammatical structure for that matter, must therefore appear close to grammatical structures that they are often associated with. The combining of these grammatical structures together may help students obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how to use a structure. Hence, the effective use of the language curriculum as an organizational tool involves careful sequencing of inter-related grammatical structures and concepts as in the case of the passive form and transitivity in verbs.

Secondly, the sentences in Table 2 show that the BE form is used in different constructions and to express different meanings. It is therefore important to help students distinguish between the use of similar forms to express these different meanings. One way to do this is by providing contrasts between the forms. These contrasts include the difference between the copula BE and the auxiliary BE, between verbal and adjectival participles; between passive and active voice; between transitive and intransitive verbs; as well as between the simple past tense form of the verb and its participle form. Teachers can draw the students attention to differences in sentences such as *He was interested* which contains a subjective complement as opposed to *He was scolded* which does not. This can be more clearly exemplified by using the full form of the passive that contains the *by* + agent phrase as in *He was scolded by his father* as contrasted to an incorrectly formed *He was interested by his father*. Similarly, the confusion between auxiliary and main verbs that may have led to errors made in sentences 13 to 17 may be more easily sorted out when sentences containing both types of verbs are placed next to each other and contrasted. This requires that the teaching of both these types of grammatical structures must not only be specified in the curriculum for the teacher but also arranged in a manner that would allow for their comparison and contrast. In this respect, we believe that

the language curriculum should facilitate the use of contrast by sequencing similar constructions close to each other so as to encourage and allow teachers to highlight the differences between them in terms of their form and how they are used. Such an approach would be in line with Tode (2007) who suggests that “instruction should be supplemented by frequent uses of the copular sentences, the simple present full verb, and the progressive along with assistance in noticing the contrast among these three forms” (p. 28).

### **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to examine three major issues related to the BE + verb construction from a comparison between language collected in 2000 and in 2007. The issues concern, errors found in these two data sets and possible causes of these errors, their pedagogical implications and the contextualization of the grammar in the language curriculum. The errors observed in the sentences from these corpora are grouped into four different types. While two of these error types seem to involve expressing the past time correctly, the third is about relative clause reduction and the fourth concerns the nature of the verb used. The different sources of errors indicated by these different types of errors indicate that the learning of the BE + verb construction may be more complex than it seems. More linguistically inclined readers may want to read more technical accounts of these errors provided by researchers such as Oshita (2000) who discusses and examines five accounts of “the non target ‘passive’ unaccusative structure.”

The analysis of the errors indicates that teachers need to be well prepared to face the demands of teaching grammar. Teachers play an important role in teaching grammatical structure as they are often the only sources of English language input for their students. However, in addition to providing a positive language model, the teacher must also be sensitive to how students respond to the kind of input presented. They need to equip themselves with a repertoire of teaching techniques that can be employed according to a clear understanding of the linguistic complexity their students may be encountering. The analysis of errors also seems to indicate that the students are heavily influenced by the input that they receive. Some of the errors that the students commit may be attributed to the misapplication or over-generalisation of correct use of grammatical structures to inappropriate contexts. We have argued that this may be the case for errors in sentences 1 to 12 where the students may have considered their sentences as correct because of the existence of such be + verb structures in the passive form. In order to prevent students from continuing to make such errors, teachers must not only be sensitive to different uses of the same form of linguistic structure, but also to how best to present these structures in order to assist learning. The teaching of grammar, therefore, requires careful and strategic presentation of the grammatical form which considers student response to these

forms as evidenced by how correctly the form is used as well as how the learners may have hypothesized how the form works. In this article, we have argued that teachers should take student use of these forms into consideration especially in terms of the errors they commit and that their teaching approach should be influenced by whether these errors are purely structural or affect the meaning of the sentence as well.

At the same time, the language curriculum should also serve to assist teachers in their demanding task. The curriculum should be in line with findings from research in second language acquisition in order to present and sequence grammatical structures in a more systematic and orderly manner. Preferably, teachers should also be made aware of the common student errors that occur for a particular structure as well as appropriate teaching techniques to address student difficulty with the structures. The intention here, however, is not to straight-jacket teachers into using a particular technique but to make them aware of the issues and to encourage them to consider options in solving the language related problems their students face.

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