

# Analysing Errors Committed by Iraqi Students of English in Recognizing Existential *There* from the Adverbial *There*

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## Abstract

This paper proves by a test how Iraqi students of English face difficulty in distinguishing between existential *there* and adverbial *there*, though both can occur initially in the English sentence. The test is applied on fourth year students / university of Babylon, college of education , dept. of English. The test shows high percentage of errors committed (about 93%) on the recognition level. However, the paper begins with shedding some light on the nature of existential *there* and how it is different from adverbial *there*. Then, the paper focuses on the interpretation of students' errors in this area and arrives at certain conclusions. Finally, a number of recommendations are presented in the light of the arrived results.

## Introduction

In English, existential sentences are special constructions that serve to bring attention of the hearer to the entire sentence message (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1992:242).

1. *There* are many students in financial troubles. (Ibid)

The commonest type of such constructions is the one that is introduced by *there* (as in 1), accompanied by the simple present or past of *be* (Quirk et al, 1985:242):

2. *There was* no question about the plan. (existential)

3. *There is* the book I bought yesterday! (place adjunct)

Existential *there* (also called introductory by Hornby, 1975:16 Alexander, 2002: 194, or expletive by Praninskas 1975:40) differs in many aspects from the place adjunct *there*, though both have the same written form, and often come initially in sentences (as in 2 and 3). Consequently, this may cause confusion in learning the foreign language. It is assumed that Iraqi students of English often face difficulties in distinguishing existential sentences with *there*, and how being confused with the place adjunct *there*. This paper will exclusively be concerned with existential sentences that are introduced by *there* only (as the commonest type of existential constructions) by shedding some light on its nature, and how it is different from the locative one. Then, a test will be

applied on Iraqi students of English (Department of English, College of Education, University of Babylon) as a means to identify their difficulties by analysing the errors committed.

### 1. Existential *There*

Existential sentences are special constructions that serve to provide the hearer's attention to the entire message given by the sentence, i.e., as a means to provide more focus to sentence proposition (Lyons, 1979:742). The commonest type of such constructions is the one that is introduced by the unstressed *there*, accompanied by simple or past of the verb *be* (as in 4).

4. *There was a large crowd.*

Introductory *there* (as called by Hornby, 1975:16) may have regular correspondence with clauses of equivalent meaning as specified by the basic clause patterns provided by Quirk et al (1985:1403), since the aforementioned clauses provide the following requirements. Firstly, may have an indefinite subject. Secondly, has a form of the verb *be* in its verb phrase:

- a. Subject+ (auxiliary) +be +predication
- b. - there + (auxiliary) +be + subject+predication

The subject in formula (a) may be called the *notional subject* of there sentence which for most purposes the grammatical subject (ibid). Examples of the seven clause types along with the existential correspondences are given by Quirk et al (ibid):

1. SVC Something must be wrong. There must be something wrong.
2. SVA Was anyone in the room? Was there anyone in the room?
3. SV No one was waiting. There was no waiting.
4. SVO Many students answered the questions quickly. There were many students answered the questions quickly.
5. SVOC A worker was painting the fence green. There was a worker painting the fence green.
6. SVOA A maid was cleaning the room. There was a maid cleaning the room.
7. SVOO Fair elections made Bin the manager. There was fair elections made Bin the manager.

The existential *there* differs from the locative adjunct *there* in:

1. lacking stress: the locative adjunct *there* usually comes with primary stress, while existential *there* usually comes unstressed :
  5. There is a screwdriver here. (existential)
  6. *There* is the screwdriver! (place adjunct)

(Greenbaum & Quirk, 1992:426)

2. carrying none of the locative meaning of the place adjunct *there*. That absence of the locative meaning is expressed through the acceptability of the place adjunct *here* with the existential sentences introduced by *there* (as in 5).
3. Existential *there* behaves mostly like the subject of the sentence and often determines concord,

7. There are some people in the waiting room.

(Quirk et al,1985:1405)

Also, it can act as a subject in yes-no and *taq* questions (as in 8 and 9) and in infinitive and *-ing* clauses (as in 10 and 11).

8. Is *there* any more soup?

9. *There* haven't been any phone calls, have there?

10. I do not *there* to be any misunderstandings.

11. He was disappointed at *there* being so little to do. (ibid)

4. When the place adjunct *there* comes initially, it usually implies exclamation (as in 12), whereas existential *there* cannot because it cannot take primary stress (as in 13). i.e., a strong form.

12. *There* are the others!

13. \**There* are many cars in the park! (Hornby,1975:17)

Thus, it clear that existential *there* differs significantly from the place adjunct *there* in several aspects, though both have the same written form and consequently may cause confusion to learners.

## 2. The Test

The test applied in this paper was made by the researcher, and sentences used in the test are mostly taken from Hornby's *Guide to Pattern and Usage in English* (1975:17), and from Quirk et al's *A Comprehensive Grammar of English* (1985:1403, see appendix 1). It is made short so as to save time and effort for both the tester and testees. The test

presents ten sentences, seven sentences present *there* as existential, while three sentences present it as place adjunct. Number of items for both types (existential and place adjunct) is made unequal so as to avoid testees' guessing. In all the ten sentences, *there* comes initially (except in 6), and the role of the testee is to distinguish the word *there* by writing (a) for place adjunct, and (b) for existential (see appendix 1 the test).

The testees are Iraqi students of English (fourth year students from University of Babylon, College of Education, Department of English). Fourth year students are chosen because students at that level are supposed to reach a good level in English grammar, as they are about to practise teaching English in Iraqi secondary schools, and consequently be teachers of English after few months. Finally, the number of students who have participated is thirty students.

## 3. The Error Analysis

"Errors are the defective side of learners' speech or writing. They are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from the mature language performance" (Dulay et al, 1983: 21).

Ellis (1999:68) asserts that investigating learners' errors serves two major purposes:

1. It provides data from which inferences about the nature of language learning process can be made.
2. It indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part

of the target language learners find difficult to produce correctly.

S. P. Corder(1967:160) states that there is a difference between *mistakes* and *errors*. Mistakes are slips of the tongue and are not systematic because they are performance failures done by all speakers.

Errors on the other hand, are systematic which reflect the learners' competence.

Generally, Richards (1971:208) asserts that all studies of error analysis identify three principal causes for errors.

1. Interlingual errors: this class of errors is known also as errors of negative transfer from the mother-tongue.
2. Intralingual or developmental errors: these errors that result from the learning process.
3. Context of learning : this class of errors is assigned to faulty teaching techniques or materials.

### 3.1 Interpretation of errors

After identifying and categorizing testees' errors, a description of the possible factors that caused them could be presented. Errors identified within this area ( recognition of existential *there*) can be classified into two types, namely *Intralingual* and *context of learning errors*. Interlingual errors cannot be identified, since the testees' are not aware that such constructions may exist in their mother-tongue (Arabic), and consequently cannot affect learning English.

#### 3.1.1 Intralingual Errors

This type of errors include errors that are committed due to reasons other than the negative effect of the mother-tongue. More intralingual errors in the target language are clearly manifested as

learners begin to acquire more knowledge of the system of the target language(Dulay etal,1983:22).

S.P. Coder(1967:160) asserts that Overgeneralization of previous knowledge in the target language is the most common form of intralingual errors. The students may create deviant structures in the target language as a result of incorrect application of structures in the target language. Such deviancies (overgeneralizations) include processes such as incomplete applications of rules, false conceptual hypothesis, and ignorance of certain language rules restrictions.

All errors committed within this area can be traced back into the fact that students may overgeneralize their knowledge in using the adverbial *there* into the recognition of the existential constructions, particularly with introductory *there*. Students are not aware of the sharp difference between the adverbial adjunct *there* and the introductory one, though both have the same written form, and often come initially. However, the adverbial *there* is more frequent with exclamatory styles only (as in item 5 and 8 in the test, see appendix 1 the test).

#### 3.1.2 Context of learning Errors

This type of errors is assigned to teachers' faulty teaching techniques or materials. S.P. Coder (1978:103) states that "little systematic study has been made to know the real cause of this type of errors and consequently errors not readily classed as inter-or intra-lingual can be confidently assigned to this type."

Brown (1987:178) asserts that in classroom situation, the teacher and the

textbook may play a very significant role in making students develop a certain faulty hypothesis about the target language. Thus, as far as this type is concerned, all errors committed within this area (recognition of existential *there*) are due to the fact that teachers at the university level have not given the significant difference between introductory *there* and the adjunct *there* any attention in teaching English grammar. This act is intensified by the fact that all English grammar syllabuses designed for the university level do not shed any light on the difference between the two, and consequently, students are left ignorant of these differences.

#### 4. Conclusions

To sum up, existential sentences are special constructions that are used to serve specific purposes, and Introductory *there* is the commonest type of such constructions. However, introductory *there* differs significantly from the place adjunct *there* in a number of aspects; (1. lacking stress: the locative adjunct *there* usually comes with primary stress, while existential *there* usually comes unstressed, ( 2. carrying none of the locative meaning of the place adjunct *there*. That absence of the locative meaning is expressed through the acceptability of the place adjunct *here* with the existential sentences introduced by *there*(as in 5), (3. Existential *there* behaves mostly like the subject of the sentence and often determines concord, and When the place adjunct *there* comes initially, it usually implies exclamation (as in 12).

Consequently, such differences caused Iraqi (fourth year) students great difficulty in recognizing introductory *there* from the place adjunct one.

To measure such difficulties, a special test is designed for that purpose. The test presents ten sentences and the students are asked to classify them into either (place adjunct) or (existential ), and all the ten sentences presents the word *there* in initial position(except item6). The test clearly shows that Iraqi students face great difficulty in recognizing between the two, because students' percentage of committing errors in this area is about (93%). The high percentage of errors shows that Iraqi students are almost unaware of the distinct differences between introductory *there* and the place adjunct one, though both words have the same written form and often come initially .

The errors committed in this area, can be classified as intralingual (misuse of students' knowledge in the target language),and teaching-related errors(faulty teaching techniques or materials). Finally , this area requires more attention from both teachers and students.

#### 5. Recommendations

1. Existential sentences with introductory *there* should be given more attention from both textbooks and teachers at the university level.
2. The place adjunct *there* should be given more attention when teaching adjuncts by shedding light on its characteristics and differences in relation to the introductory *there* and consequently initiating the ability to differentiate between the two.
3. Further research is to be made in the area of existential constructions in English in relation to the difficulties Iraqi students may face, and to what extent teachers and textbooks shed light on that area.

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## Appendix (1)

## The Test

The present test has been designed by the researcher, and checked for validity and reliability by the teaching staff of the Department of English / University of Kerbala/ College of Education.

## The Test form

Classify the word *There* in the sentences below as

**A** Place adjunct

**B** Existential

1. There must be a mistake somewhere.
2. There are three windows in this room.
3. There is the man who was waiting to see you.
4. There was a plan of the town on page 23.
5. There is the screwdriver!
6. Are there many apples in your trees this year?
7. There is only one man qualified for this job.
8. There the girl I met yesterday!
9. There have been many such incidents.
10. There were some problems here.

خلاصة البحث:

البحث يحمل عنوان (تحليل خطأ الطلبة العراقيين الدراسين للغة الانكليزية في تمييز (There) بكونها (وجودية) او (ظرفية مكانية) البحث هو استعراض لخصائص (There) الوجودية والظرفية، وأوجه التشابه والاختلاف بينهما، يتناول البحث أخطاء الطلبة الدارسين في التمييز بينهما من خلال تحليل نتائج الاختبار الذي أعده الباحث وتوصل الباحث إلى جملة من النتائج والتوصيات جعلها في خاتمة البحث.