Investigating the Performance of Iraqi EFL University Students in Using Block Language

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ABSTRACT

Block language is a term used in some grammatical description to refer to the use of abbreviated structures in restricted communicative context, a special application being made of a word or phrase, rather than a clause or sentence. In this paper, I will present a comprehensive theoretical study about block language in English for fourth-year class University students in the Department of English by selecting a random sample of students to have a test in block language, then analyzing the results to point out the difficulty of the Iraqi EFL university students encounter in using block language in English. Because most Iraqi EFL university students often find a problem in using block language because it is one of the types of irregular sentences which do not correspond to regular patterns of sentence structure and the students do not have the mastery of the types of block language in English.

KEYWORDS: Irregular Sentences, EFL, Using Block Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Problem

Block Language is a term used in some grammatical descriptions to refer to the use of abbreviated structures in restricted communicative context, especial use being made of a word or phrase, rather than a clause or sentence. The problem arises from the state that most Iraqi EFL university learners often find difficulty in using block language because it is one of the types of irregular sentences which do not correspond to the regular patterns of sentence structure and the students do not have the mastery of the types of block language in English.

1.2. Aims: The study aims to:

1. Presenting a theoretical study about block language in English.
2. Identifying the difficulty faced by Iraqi EFL university learners in using block language.

1.3. Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL university learners often face difficulty in using block language in English.

1.4. Procedures: The following steps will be followed:

1. Presenting a comprehensive study about block language.
2. Selecting a random sample of students to have a test in block language.
3. Analyzing the results of the test to point out the difficulty the students encounter in using block language in English.

1.5. Limits

The paper is limited to block language in English and the test will be applied to a random sample from the fourth-year students in the Department of English /College of Education for Human Science/ University of Babylon during the academic year (2011-2012).

1.6. Value

This paper will be of value for further research in this regard.

3. Block language

2.1. Irregular Sentences

Quirk and Greenbaum (1987) mention that sentences can be divided into two types: regular and irregular (or major and minor). Generally, in English language the forms of sentences fall in one of the patterns of sentence structure. But there is another type of sentences which do not match the regular patterns of clause structure, called "irregular sentences "which have a full meaning. Irregular sentences do not follow the grammatical patterns which cannot be altered to show changes in time, tense, or number. So, although we might often say 'Good Morning 'we cannot say 'Good Mornings' nor can we say, 'How did you do?''.

The major obstacle is to define the precise distinctions about these sentences, here in, we can mention different methods in which sentences are classified as irregular:

A. The formulaic subjunctive. It is combined with subject-verb inversion (induced by the initial adverb), for example:
Long Live the Republic! So, Help Me God.

B. There are several kinds of irregular wh.questions: Why Listen to Him?
What if it Rains?

C. Several Kinds of subordinate clause are used as sentences: If Only I'd listen to my parents!

D. Adverbials may have the force of commands: Hands Up!
Everybody Inside!

E. Many proverbs have an aphoristic sentence structure: The more, The merrier
Waste Not, Want Not

One of the most important type of irregular sentences is the block language.

2.2. Block Language

2.2.1. Definitions

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) mention that block language can be structured in terms of single

words or phrases rather than in terms of organized units of clause and sentence. This language is called 'block language' that is found in such functions as labels, titles, headings, advertisements. Block language may consist of a noun or noun phrase or nominal clause and there is no need for the verb and also the determiners, operators and pronouns are omitted because the message can be understood from the context, for example:

Danger: Falling Rocks English Department Entrance
Fresh Today
Pure Lemon Juice

Quirk and Greenbaum (1990) mention that block language can be used in many situations for example in prohibition like:
No Smoking
No News
No Entry
Crystal (2003) defines block language as "a term used in some grammatical descriptions to refer to the use of abbreviated structures in restricted communicative context, especial use being made of the word or phrase, rather than the clause or sentences", for example:
Exit
One way

Matthews (2007) denotes that block language "is the form of language used in newspaper headlines, cables, notices, labels of products, and so on. Block language can be distinguished by specific rules or patterns, which have been developed in part independently of those in ordinary language."

2.2.2. Types of Block language

2.2.2.1. Newspaper Headlines
Quirk et al. (1985) mention that newspaper headline is considered as one kind of block language that can be formed with the omission of words because it can be understood from the context, such as the finite forms of the verb Be and the articles:
- Oil Spill Threat Decreasing [SV]
  President Calls for Calm [SVA]
- Share Prices Now Higher Than Ever [SACs] Goya for the Nation
- Miners Ban over Time

There are many characteristics of newspaper headlines:

A. **The simple present is used instead of the present perfect:**
   Meat Prices Rise Again ("Meat Prices have risen Again.")
B. **"To" is used to express the future or referred to arrangements:**
   Senator to Seek Reelection ("The Senator is to Seek reelection.")
C. **Asyndeton is more common:**
   Woman Claims Drug Caused cancer, sues ("A Woman has claimed that a Drug had Caused her Cancer, and she has Sued Somebody.")
D. **Transitive verbs are used intransitively:**
   British Victory Surprises ("The British Victory has Surprised the Experts.")

Weir (2009) mentions that there are many types of headline that show or describe the headlines of newspapers without article, some of these kinds are headlines for commentary or editorial pieces do not appear to show article drop and also subheads are considered as smaller headlines that can be combined with the main headline also appear not to show article drop:
(A) Man Bites (A) Dog

2.2.2.2. Titles, Notices, Labels, Headings and Slogans
Swan (1995) denotes that they can be formed in short phrases rather than in sentences without including articles which means that we can drop the articles from the titles, headings and also the name of buildings and institutions:

Royal Hotel Bus Stop Police Out!
More Money for Nurses!

2.2.2.3. Personal letters, Cables and Diaries
Quirk et al. (1985) state that block language can

be used in many situations because of its simple structures. So, it can be used in postcards, informal personal notes especially note taken from lectures or books where the first-person pronouns are often omitted:

Sorry about Jane
Block language also can be used in cables when the sender decides to omit some words that can be understood by the receiver:

No Money Send Hundred

The abbreviation can be used in diaries:
Went to Office Instead. Worked till 12 On Government Contract

3. The Test

3.1. Testing
Brown and Abeywickrama (2004) defines a test as "a method of measuring a person's ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain."

3.2. The Features of a Good Test
The most important features of a good test are:

3.2.1. Validity
Madsen (1983) denotes that validity "is one that in fact measures what it claims to be measuring." The most important types of validity are:
A. Content Validity:
Harris (1969) mentions that content validity "is used to measure mastery of a specific skill or the content of a particular course of study."
B. Face Validity
Face Validity "is the way the test looks to the examinees, test administrators, educators, and the like." (Greenbaum, 1990)

3.2.2. Reliability
Reliability "is meant the stability of test scores. A test cannot measure anything well unless it measures consistently." (Quirk. 2010)

3.3. Test Design
The test includes (20) items distributed over two questions. The first question consists of (10) items, this question is designed to test the student's ability at the recognition level. Students are given some sentences and asked to tick the block language sentences. The second one also consists of (10) items designed to test the student's ability at the production level in which they are asked to paraphrase the sentences of block language so as to make their meanings clearer.

3.4. Test Material
The items of the test are taken from grammar books mentioned in Chapter Two and from
A University Grammar of English Workbook, by Close (1974).

3.5. The Sample of the Test
A random sample of (25) students is taken from the fourth-year level in the Department of English/ College of Education/ University of Babylon during the academic year (2011-2012) to apply a diagnostic test in order to investigate their performance in using block language.

4. CONCLUSION
Block language is the form of language used in newspaper headlines, cables, notices, labels of products, and so on. Block language can be distinguished by specific rules or patterns, which have been developed in part independently of those in ordinary language.
A random sample of (25) students was taken from the fourth-year level in the Department of English/ College of Education/ University of Babylon to apply the test during the academic year (2011-2012) in order to investigate their performance in using block language.
According to the findings of the test, the number and percentage of incorrect responses for the whole test (377, 75.4%) are more than those of the correct responses (123,24.6%) which indicates that the students encounter difficulty in using block language in English and this, in turn, verifies the hypothesis of the study mentioned in (1.3) which reads:
"It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL University learners often face difficulty in using block

language in English."

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