MISPLACEMENT AND MISUSE OF VERY: HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME THE VERY + VERB PROBLEM

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Abstract

This article discusses the nature and causes of a common problem encountered by elementary ESL learners in Hong Kong – the placement of the intensifying adverb very in sentences involving a degree expression; and suggests an algorithmic approach to error correction so as to help students overcome the problem. It is suggested that both L1- and L2-related factors may contribute to the error. The algorithmic approach suggested, is characterized by four main features: (1) pedagogically sound input requiring minimal cognitive effort; (2) proceduralized steps supported by instructive examples; (3) explicit rules to help learners conceptualize the correction procedure; and (4) reinforcement exercises. It is argued that with the help of carefully-designed algorithmic steps which take the form of instructional language or questions, students can be guided to progressively approximate the target language norm.

Introduction

In the process of learning a second language, students often make errors. According to James (1998), errors that second language learners make can be classified into different categories linguistically, such as omission, addition, misformation, disordering and blends. The students’ errors can be attributed to various reasons, such as overgeneralization, mother-tongue interference, hypercorrection or transfer of training (Odlin 1989). In order to help students overcome their errors, teachers should be aware of the nature and causes of the problems so as to be able to design appropriate and effective remedial instruction materials. In this article, we will discuss the nature and possible causes of one common error often found among elementary learners of English in Hong Kong – the misplacement and misuse of the intensifying adverb very in sentences involving a degree expression, and suggest some teaching procedures which teachers can adopt to help students overcome the problem.
Misplacement and Misuse of *very*

The placement of the intensifying adverb *very* in sentences involving a degree expression is a problem that many elementary Chinese ESL students in Hong Kong encounter. Instead of expressing the degree meaning using an adverbial such as *very much* or *so much*, students tend to place the intensifying adverb *very* before the verb, resulting in sentences such as the following:

(1) *I very like* music. (cf. I like music very much).
(2) *I very enjoy* playing basketball (cf. I enjoy playing basketball very much.)

A number of reasons can be speculated for this structural problem, of which L1-related factors may probably be the most salient. In Chinese/cantonese, the mother tongue of the majority of students in Hong Kong, the corresponding adverb 很 (han) expressing the intensifying function is placed typically before verbs (e.g. 很喜歡 (han he fun (very like)). 很欣賞 (han jan soeng (very appreciate)) and predicative adjectives or adjectival verbs (e.g. 很有用 (han jau jung (very useful)). 很大 (han daai (very big)) (see Li & Thompson 1981; Matthews & Yip 1994), as in the

(4) 我 很喜歡 音樂。
    ngo han hei fun jam ngok
    I very like music.
(5) 我 很欣賞 他的努力。
    ngo han jan soeng taa dik lou lik
    I very appreciate his efforts.
(6) 這本書 很有用。
    ze bun syu han jau jung
    This CL book very useful
(7) 這間房子 很大。
    ze gaan fong zi han daai
    This CL house very big. (CL is an abbreviated form of Chinese Classifier)

Such resemblance between the syntactic behavior of Chinese verbs and adjectives, coupled with the acceptability of a similar *very* + *ADJECTIVE* structure in English (e.g. *very good*, *very big*) as in

(8) This book is *very useful*.
(9) This house is *very big*.

may lead students to think that the structure *very* + *VERB* is acceptable (e.g. *very like*) in English.
L2-related factors may also play a part in explaining students’ misuse of the English intensifying adverb *very*. While the adverb is typically used as a PRE-modifier of adjectives as in sentences (8 & 9) above, but typically AFTER the finite verb as part of a degree adverbial as in sentences (10 & 11),

(10) I love music *very much*.
(11) She sings *very well*.

it is nonetheless acceptable in English to have degree adverbials (or adverbials expressing other meanings such as *manner*) placed BEFORE the verb or BETWEEN the finite auxiliary verb and the non-finite main verb, as in sentences (12 - 14), where the verb concerned is either a verb followed by a *that-clause* or a *to-infinitive clause*, or a verb in the passive voice (see Collins COBUILD English Usage 1992: 411).

(12) They *very much* want to go.
(13) We *very much* hope that he will continue to be our leader.
(14) This was *very nicely* done.

An inadequate understanding of the differences in forms and functions between the degree adverb *very* and other adverbials such as *very much* or *very nicely* can cause such errors. Furthermore, being unaware of the context which allows fronted adverbials, students may fail to grasp the correct model and overgeneralize the use of the adverb *very*, resulting in the formation of the erroneous sentences.

**Correcting the Error**

To help students correct the *very + VERB* structure, we suggest that a consciousness-raising approach to error correction be adopted (see Sharwood Smith 1981; Rutherford 1987, 1988; Schmidt 1990). It has been argued that an algorithmic approach characterized by

- pedagogically sound input requiring minimal cognitive effort
- proceduralized steps supported by instructive examples
- explicit rules to help learners conceptualize the correction procedure
- reinforcement exercises

is effective in helping students overcome structurally well-defined errors and consolidate their grasp of the form and function of the correct model (Chan & Li 2002; Li & Chan 2000, 2001). In this section, we will exemplify how the *very + VERB* problem can be overcome using such an algorithmic approach, and highlight the rationale behind the teaching steps by structuring the correction procedure in different phases. It should be noted that the correction procedure has been designed to make students understand and grasp the correct model through carefully guided proceduralized steps. Since the structure concerned is typically made by elementary learners of English, teacher guidance through every single stage of the correction procedure is absolutely necessary, and depending on the teaching context, teachers may consider making adaptations to one or some of the following teaching steps.
PHASE 1: HELP STUDENTS NOTICE ERROR
Are the following sentences correct? Give a √ if you think so, and a × if you don’t think so. An example has been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentences</th>
<th>✓ or ×</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: He study Form 5.</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example: He studies Form 5.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) I very like music.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) They very enjoy ice-cream.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) We very want to visit Japan.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PHASE 2: GUIDE STUDENTS TO DISCOVER CORRECT PLACEMENT OF DEGREE ADVERBS
Now look at (iv) below:
(iv) John ♥ football  
(♥ = ‘like’)
Write a sentence using the verb ‘like’:
(v)

Now look at (vi) below:
(vi) John ♥♥ dancing
How many ♥ are there in (vi)?
What does John like more? Tick the correct one.
(a) John likes football more. ❑
(b) John likes dancing more. ❑
Write sentence (vi) again using the word ‘more’.
(vi) John ♥♥ dancing

Now look at (vii) below:
(vii) John ♥♥♥♥ squash
What does John like most? Tick the correct one.
(a) John likes dancing most. ❑
(b) John likes squash most. ❑
Write sentence (vii) again using the word ‘most’:
(vii) John ♥♥♥♥ squash

Now write a sentence for each of the following (use ‘more’ and ‘most’ where necessary):
(viii) Michael Chang ♥ football
(ix) Michael Chang ♥♥ squash
(x) Michael Chang ♥♥♥ tennis
PHASE 3: INTRODUCE USE OF **VERY MUCH**

Circle the words 'more' and 'most' in (ix) and (x). Look at their position: before the verb or after the verb?

Now if we are talking about (x) only, can you write a complete sentence below, using 'very much'?

(x) Michael Chang ♥♥♥ tennis

Look at (xi) below, write a complete sentence for it using 'very much':

(xi) Joey ♥♥♥ singing

PHASE 4: ALERT STUDENTS TO CORRECT USE OF DEGREE ADVERBIALS

Where are the words 'very much'? Are they **before** the verb or **after** the verb?

Note: Correct : ✓ Thank you **very much**.
✓ She **cooks** very well.
✓ You **did** it very nicely. etc.
Wrong : ✗ I **very enjoy** ice-cream.
✗ He **very likes** music.

Now, write a complete sentence using the words provided:

(xii) tennis plays Michael well **very**

(xiii) enjoys tennis much **very** Michael

In the two sentences that you have just written (xii and xiii), underline the verb and circle the word 'very'. Where is the word 'very' (e.g. very well, very much)? Is it **before** the verb or **after** the verb?

Remember:

... **LIKE** [ **something** ] very much
...
... **LIKE** [ **someone** ] very much
...
... **ENJOY** [ **something** ] very much

PHASE 5: GIVE REINFORCEMENT EXERCISES

Determine whether the following sentences are correct or wrong and rewrite the wrong ones.
e.g.  a. John likes chocolates. □
Correction: John does not like chocolates.

b. John do not like chocolates. □
Correction: John does not like chocolates.

(a) I very like music. □
(b) They very enjoy ice-cream.
(c) We want to visit Japan very much. □
(d) She very loves Leon. □
(e) When I was eight, I very liked football. □
(f) She enjoys singing very much. □

Translation exercise. Translate the following Chinese/Cantonese sentences into English:

(a) 佢好喜歡音樂。
(b) 我好鍾意足球。
(c) 他們很想日本。

Conclusion

The very + VERB structure is a persistent common error made by many elementary learners of English in Hong Kong. The learners' mother tongue, Chinese/Cantonese, is arguably one of the most important causes leading to the anomaly, though apparently positive evidence in L2 may also be at work contributing to the learner's misplacement and misuse of the adverb very. More research is needed to uncover other possible reasons underlying the misformation, and it is interesting to see if the same anomaly is also common among learners of a different language background. While the acquisition of English as a second language by Chinese learners in Hong Kong is yet to be investigated, we hope to have demonstrated here how the use of algorithmic steps, instructive examples and explicit rules spelling out the correct use of the items in question can help students conceptualize the correct usage model.

The consciousness-raising approach to error correction exemplified in this article have great potential for helping students overcome persistent, structurally well-defined errors. Research studies have shown that such an algorithmic approach does work for other structurally well-defined errors (e.g. *I am convenient to see you now), the incorrect use of the verb concern and the related adjective concerned (e.g. *We all concern the 911 tragedy), as well as the confusion in the use of the
connective on the contrary (e.g. *John is very tall. On the contrary, his wife is very short.) (Chan & Li 2002; see also Chan 2000; Li & Chan 2000, 2001). But for error types which are commonly made by elementary learners, such as the very + VERB structure discussed here, care has to be taken to minimize grammatical jargon and complex explanations, so as to facilitate both the learning and the teaching processes.

References


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