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A Linguistics Analysis on Errors Committed in English by Undergraduates

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Abstract- This study was conducted to examine errors committed in writing and speaking performances by first year undergraduates of Uva Wellassa University. To achieve the objectives, 23 male and 22 female undergraduates were observed. Written compositions and oral test have been implemented as research instruments while manipulating the statistical software Minitab 14 for analytical purposes. Then, all the identified errors were classified into eight main categories. Hence, the study has explored grammar as the greatest category where undergraduates commit errors in both writing and speaking. Moreover, advanced analysis has ascertained that newspaper reading and committing errors in grammar and syntax are as dependant variables. Study has shed the light on manner in which students internalize the rules of the target language and the findings are vital in designing curricula for the better fulfillment of the objectives of Second Language teaching and learning while providing guiding light to create effective teaching methodology.

Index Terms- linguistic analysis of errors in English, linguistic analysis in English, syntax errors in English, errors committed in English

I. INTRODUCTION

English language has incorporated into Sri Lankan education system as a compulsory subject in the post colonial era. At present, English plays an inevitable role as a medium of instruction in some schools as well as in most of the universities. The essential requirement of having exposure in English in higher education further increases the importance of English language proficiency among the undergraduates who belong to Sri Lankan education arena.

However, most of the undergraduates have not gained the proficiency in English language and they use erroneous English in their academic writing as well as in their oral performances. Even though they have been learning English for number of years, errors they commit are numerous. This poor command of English makes them discouraged in the academic career if it is not treated in an effective manner. Hence, the researcher decided to conduct an Error Analysis (EA) which has been taken into the limelight by S.P. Corder in 1967. According to Corder, it is possible to determine the areas which need reinforcement in teaching after analyzing the errors systematically. Further, EA is emphasized by Johanson (1975) as the best tool for describing and explaining errors committed by learners of other languages.

Error Analysis in language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language. (Crystal, D., 1999:108)

Sercombe (2000) explains, EA serves 3 purposes, first, to find out the level of language proficiency the learner has reached. Second: to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning. Third: to find out how people learn a language.

After reviewing the relevant literature, it has been noticed that none of the researches has been conducted which involves analyzing errors committed by undergraduates especially in Uva Wellassa University where English is the medium of instruction for all the degree programmes. Therefore, the research problem has been formulated as 'What are the most frequent errors committed in writing and speaking by the first year undergraduates (2009/2010) of Uva Wellassa University (UWU)?'

The prime objective of conducting this research is to examine the most frequent errors committed by the first year undergraduates of UWU in their writing and speaking and to discover the common difficulties in language learning. In addition, this research aims to ascertain the awareness of the first year undergraduates of UWU on errors that they commit in their academic pursuit. Ultimately, the findings of the research scope will forecast a common picture of errors committed by all English medium undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. In addition, this research will also assist to propose remedial activities in order to treat errors in an effective manner.

This research is not only for theoretical application, but also for practical application as well. Theoretical application is that the result of this research is intended to be one consideration for English teachers applying any strategy or increasing any technique of teaching English. Practical significance can be taken into account as the ability of using the research by English teachers as a means to improve the quality of the students' performances in analyzing errors.

The research can be used by syllabus designers, either at schools or universities as a model in improving an effective English teaching materials and methodology. Moreover, it can develop the researcher's mind through the problem-solving process and further researches can be conducted based on the findings of the study.

II. RESEARCH ELABORATION

A. Participants of the Study

The informants used for this study are 55 first year undergraduates (23 male and 22 female) at Uva Wellassa University from eleven degree programmes including 5 from each. To select the sample, the proportionate based random sampling method was utilized. A conscious effort was made to ensure that all participants used for this study have studied English in their schools. (Based on Ellis, 1994:49-50)

B. Research Instruments

As primary data collection methods; Questionnaire, written compositions, oral test and interviews were used to collect data in the field of study. Based on the objectives of the research, questionnaire was designed including total of 26 structured and open – ended questions.

In addition, written compositions were utilized to identify the errors committed by undergraduates in writing (cf. Appendix 01). Besides, the oral test was conducted to identify the errors committed in speech by the undergraduates of UWU as well as to observe them. Further, Professor Rajiva Wijesinha was interviewed in order to obtain expert's viewpoint on errors committed by undergraduates in the field of ESL[1] in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the statistical software, 'Minitab 14' was used to analyze the data. In addition, related research reports, books, journals and websites etc. were utilized to collect secondary data.

C. Error Identification and Categorization

The procedure explained by Corder in 1974 has been utilized to conduct EA and identified errors through written compositions and oral test were classified into eight main categories as Grammar, Syntactic, Semantic, Lexical, Orthography, Morphology, Phonology and Other under both written and spoken aspects simultaneously.

However, the foremost aim of conducting this research is to educate the reader about the errors committed by English medium undergraduates discovering the most frequent errors in their writing and oral performances. Consequently, findings of the research tend to suggest remedial activities giving the advancement to future undergraduates who will use English as the medium of instruction.

III. Results/Findings

A. Errors Committed in Written Compositions

Following the guide lines presented by Ellis, R. in 1995 for the selection of corpus language, written compositions were collected from 55 first undergraduates which have been written on the topic: "The life in my university" in 250 -300 words and given sufficient time to complete the composition (Ellis, 1997) and to make corrections.

Errors found in written compositions (cf. Appendix 01) were ranked after analyzing them; the most common errors which have indicated more than 80% of total number of errors were reported under Grammar, Orthography and Syntactic categories. Among them 42% being the maximum percentage of committed errors is reported in the field of Grammar. Moreover, errors on Orthography takes the second place exhibiting 27.2% and Syntactic errors represent 14.3%. However, Lexical, Morphology and Other categories collectively report 16.5% being fewer numbers of errors committed by respondents (see Figure 01-1).

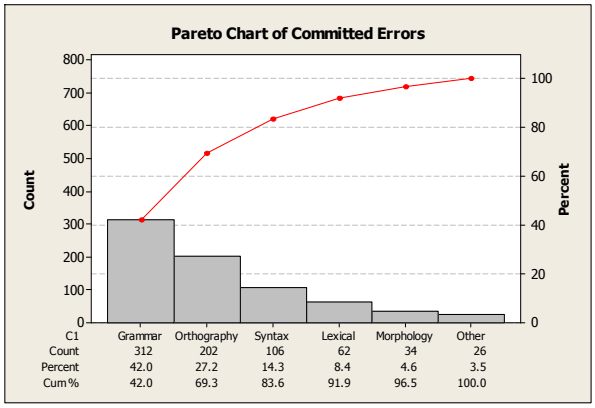


Figure 01-1 Categorical distribution of errors committed in written compositions

B. Errors in Oral presentations and Oral Test

In order to identify the errors committed in speaking, the oral test which has been conducted as a formal interview has been recorded and there undergraduates were given the topic 'The life in my university' to speak on. Subsequently, orally committed errors by the participants have also been ranked into eight categories as to the classification used in the written compositions and reported (cf. Appendix 02) them.

The result found through the analytical aspect of the study has been demonstrated using the Pareto Chart regarding the errors committed in spoken phase. (see Figure 01-2)

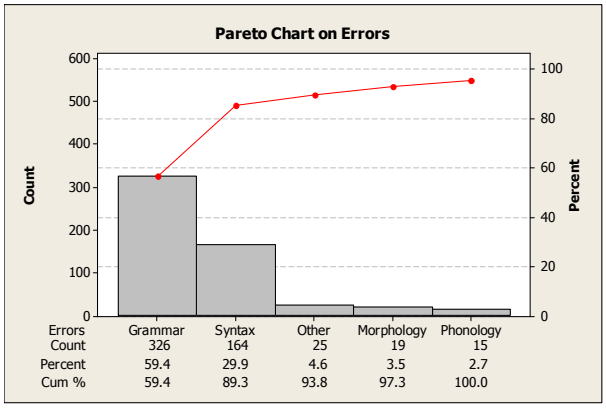


Figure 01-2 Categorical distribution of errors committed in oral presentations and oral test.

Equivalent to the errors committed in writing, the most prominent errors committed in spoken language are also reported under the category of Grammar. It reflects the greatest value 59.4% under Grammar while the second place is recorded in Syntactic category representing 29.9%. However, error categories, Morphology, Phonology and Other stand for fewer percentages than 5%.

After conducting the preliminary data analysis, the advanced analysis was carried out with the purpose of identifying the relationships between committing errors and some of the specified aspects ascertained through the results of questionnaire analysis. Depending on null and alternative hypothesis, using the

[1]English as a Second Language

statistical software Minitab 14, these situations have been taken into consideration under Grammar, Syntactic and Orthography categories which have recorded the collective value of committing errors more than 80% of total errors under writing as well as speaking performances.

C. Errors Vs English Newspaper Reading

Advance aspect of the analysis indicated that there is an inverse relationship between reading English newspaper and committing grammatical errors as well English newspaper reading and committing syntactic errors. This is evident through the Mann-Whitney test which is statistically significant at 0.0324 and 0.420 respectively representing fewer values than the probability value of 0.5. It further implies that there is 95% confidence in stating the above results. Students who read English newspapers as their leisure activity commit fewer numbers of grammatical and syntactic errors than the others who do not engage in reading English newspapers. Through this finding, a hypothesis can be built up as reading English newspapers positively affects to reduce both grammatical and syntactic errors.

IV. Discussion

Difficulties with grammar cause more discouragement and drive away more students than anything else in our profession. (Stevick, E.W. 1982:83)

In the academic environment, it is noteworthy of using the correct grammar rules to produce good piece of writing as well as to be fluent in language. Further, fluency in English directly adds value to one's career and in Sri Lankan context it is one of the ways to gain the social acceptance. Richards, J.C. (1972:83) also identified 'English' as a key to social mobility.

Also, exposure in English plays a major role in scoring marks in examinations, oral presentations etc. But in the context of Sri Lankan university education, most of the students face the common difficulty of learning English as their Second Language (L2). Even though students are following their degree programmes in the English medium, recorded errors in grammar illustrate the incomplete knowledge they have in using grammatical rules correctly.

The result ascertained through the research has also been proved through the study conducted by Darus, S. et. al (2009, p. 493) by concluding the result as the errors that participants committed were basically grammatical. Further, emphasis indicated that the problems of the participants had in acquiring normal grammatical rules.

Grammar is also considered as one of the most important factor in language teaching and learning. This is also enlightened in the study conducted by Caroline Mei Lin Ho in 2003.

Teachers' 'knowledge of grammar and how it functions' is acknowledged to contribute to 'effective language use' (ibid: 6).

Significance of teaching and learning grammar in the field of ESL is highlighted through all the findings discussed above and further, it is important to search the reasons for these errors in order to enhance the performances of undergraduates in their academic career.

Professor Wijesinha, Rajiva (2011)[2] points out the reasons for the most common errors,

Obviously grammar is not taught effectively. One reason for this is the failure to incorporate it into all aspects of teaching and learning, in particular with regard to reading and writing skills.

Grammar being the most critical factor where undergraduates commit most of the errors in both the writing and speaking performances has paved the way towards instructions for language teachers to focus the special attention on teaching grammar in an effective and more interesting way not only in the tertiary level, but it should also be planned to teach in the school education to persuade students in learning the language not only to pass the subject but also gain the expected proficiency level in both writing and speaking skills.

As to the advance analysis recorded, reading English newspapers is much more advantageous in every one's life because it always refreshes the knowledge while guiding reader to use the language correctly. If students read English newspapers, they can add new words into their vocabulary while getting familiar with the sentence patterns. Especially, practicing this as a leisure activity assists them to have thorough understanding on various grammatical elements and correct usages of them while gaining the grammatical and syntactic proficiency of L2.

V. Conclusion

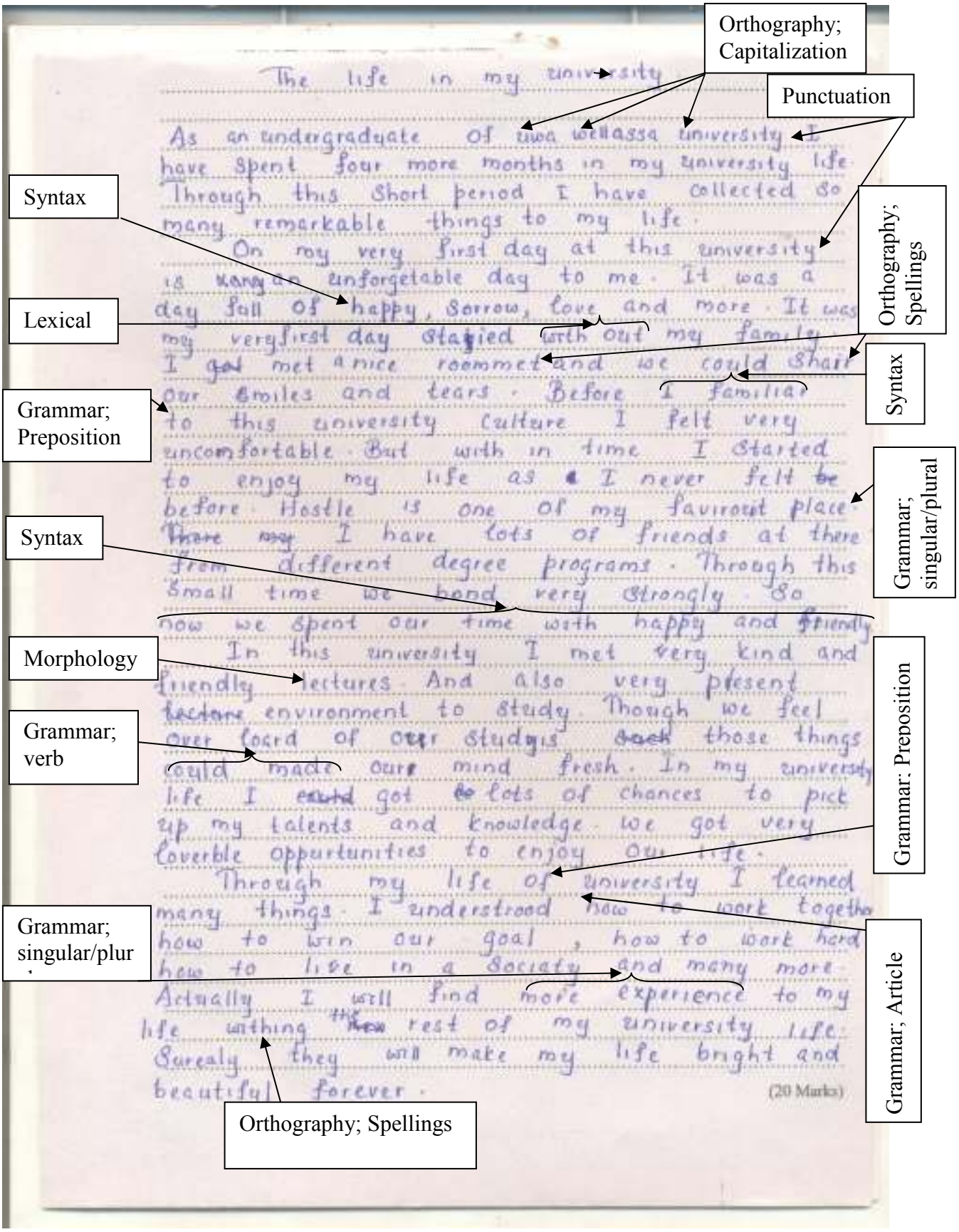
Especially, to overcome the difficulties encountered by undergraduates in the field of ESL, first and foremost thing is, giving proper training to English teachers in Sri Lankan education scenario to have sound knowledge on all aspects of language. Moreover, teachers must be equipped with discovering new ways of creative teaching and designing interesting grammar games to make students familiar with the rules subconsciously in the primary stage of Second Language learning. Further, to enable students to write more accurately, they need more practice on reading and thinking in English.

Furthermore, to make speaking interesting, it is inevitable implementing brainstorming, debates, role plays etc in the pedagogical language class room. In addition, encouraging students in reading English newspapers will add extra value in their performances while gaining general knowledge and reducing the frequency of committing errors in grammar and syntactic perspectives.

In conclusion, the findings could be applicable to have a common view on all English medium undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Consequently, it sheds the light on designing curricula for the better fulfillment of the objectives of teaching and learning ESL. The ultimate result of this survey is to assist to achieve the prime objective providing guiding light to the teachers and syllabus designers as well to future researchers to pursue on this line of research.

[2] Personal Communication, March 02, 2011.

Appendix 01


Orthography; Capitalization
Punctuation
Syntax
Orthography; Spellings
Lexical
Syntax
Grammar; Preposition
Grammar; singular/plural
Syntax
Morphology
Grammar: Preposition
Grammar; verb
Grammar; singular/plur
Grammar; Article
Orthography; Spellings

APPENDIX 02

ðə ˈlaɪf ˈɪn ˈmaɪ ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti:

ˈaɪ ˈθɱk ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: ˈspeʃəl ˈwen kəmˈper ˈwɪð ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiːs, ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiːs ˈhæv ˈmətʃ ˈfriː ðən ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: əˈkɔrdɱ tə ˈmaɪ ˈfrendz aɪˈdiːə. ˈriːliː aɪ ˈfiːlɪŋ [^] ˈveriː ˈfriː ˈlaɪf ˈɱ ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: ˈaɪ ˈkeːm ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: əz tə ˈmaɪ ˈfərst səˈlekʃən əv ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiː. ˈaɪ kən ˈgo tə ðə ˈmænɪdʒmənt ˈfækəltiː ˈɱ ˈiːstərn ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: ˈbət ˈaɪ səˈlekt ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiː. ˈaɱ ˈfrəm [Ampara], [dehiaththaakandiya]. ˈso ˈaɪ ˈθɱk ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: ˈɪz ˈgud bɪˈkɔz ˈwiː kən ˈteɪk ˈtaɱ ˈlɑt əv ˈtaɱ tə ðiː ˌedʒəˈkeɪʃən ənd ˈɔlso ˈɪf ˈwiː ˈθɱk ˈwiː kən ˈteːk ˈtaɱ tə mˈdʒɔɪ ənd ˈəðər ækˈtɪvətiːz ənd ˈɔl ˈθɱz ˈwiː kən ˈduː. ənd ˈaɪ ˈfiːl ˈsəm fəˈsɪləti:z ˈɑr ˈnɑt ɪˈnəf. ˈaɪ ˈθɱk ˈstuːdənts ˈhæv ˈnɑt ɪˈnəf tə ˈpleɪ, [playground] fəˈsɪləti:z ənd ˈɔlso ˈsəm ˈəðər ˈgeɱz ˈwen kəmˈper ˈwɪð ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiːs ənd ˈspeʃliː ˈlaɪˌbreriː fəˈsɪləti: ˈɔlso ˈwen kəmˈper ˈwɪð ðiː ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: ˈnɑt ɪˈnəf. ˈaɪ ˈθɱk ðə ˈpleɪsɪz ˈðæt tə ˈgæðərd ənd ˈwen ˈwiː ˈduːɱ ˈsəm ˈgruːp ækˈtɪvəti: ˈwiː ˈspeʃliː ˈstuːdənts ˈhævənt tə ˈpleɪs ˈgæðərd ənd dɪˈskəs ˈðer ˈwiː ˈɔlwiːz ˈjuːs kænˈtiːn, ˈɪt ˈɪz ˈveriː ˈdɪfɪkəlt. ˈspeʃliː, ˈgruːp ˈwərk ˈwen ˈwiː ˈduːɱ ˈsəm ˈgruːp ækˈtɪvətiːz, ə sərˈveɪ ˈɔr [QRE] ˌpriːˌzenˈteɪʃən ˈɔr ˈɱglɪʃ ˈlɑt əv ˈgruːp ækˈtɪvətiːz ˈwen ˈwiː ˈduːɱ, ˈwiː ˈhævənt ˈpleɪs, ˈstuːdənts ˈhævənt ˈpleɪs. ˈwen ˈθɱk əˈbæʊt ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiː, ˈaɪ ˈθɱk ˈteɪbəl ənd ˈtʃer bɪˈhamd ðiː ˈəndər ðə ˈtriː ənd ˈɔr ˈsəm ˈbɪldɪŋ. ˈhɑstəl fəˈsɪləti: ˈɪs suˈpərb, ˈwen kəmˈper ˈwɪð ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiːs. aɪ ˈlaɪk ˈɪt bɪˈkɔs ˈwen ˈwiː ˈθɱk əˈbæʊt ˈəðər ˌjuːnəˈvərsətiː, ˈðer ˈɑr ˈsɪks ˈɔr ˈmɔr ðən ˈsɪks ˈstuːdənts ˈɱ ˈwən ˈruːm ˈbət ˈɱ ˈðɪs ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti: ˈonliː ˈtuː. ˈwiː kən ˈduːm ˈɑr ˈstədiːz ˈwel ˈɱ ðə ˈhɑstəl. ənd ˈɱ ˈhɱ ˈaɪ əm ˈgoɪŋ tə ˈlərn ˈmeniː ˈsəbdʒɪkts mˈkluːdɪŋ ɪˈsenʃəl ˈskɪlz, ˈbrɔd ˈdʒenrəl ˌedʒəˈkeɪʃən ənd ˈmeniː ˈmɔr. ˈɱ ˈmaɪ ˈɪskuːl ˈaɪ ˈgɑt ˈɔl ðə ˈθɱz ˈfrəm ˈmaɪ ˈtiːtʃərz ˈbət ˈnæʊ ˈaɪ ˈhæv tə ˈriːd ˈmɔr ənd ˈstədiː ˈhɑrd tə əˈtʃiːv ə ˈfərst ˈklæs dɪˈgriː. aɪ ˈhoːp ˈaɪ wəl kən ˈduː ˈðɪs. ˈfaməliː, ˈaɪ ˈwɔnt tə ˈseɪ ˈaɪ ˈhæd ˈveriː ˈhæpiː [^] ˈɱ ˈmaɪ ˌjuːnəˈvərsəti:

Phonology

Grammar: Verb

Grammar: Sig./plu.

Syntactic: Sen.

Grammar: Verb

Other: pragmatic

Grammar: Modal

Phonology

Grammar: Verbs

Syntactic: Noun

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