

## Iraqi EFL University Learners' Use of Block Language in English

Muneer Ali Khudhayer

Dept. of English/ College of Education for Human Sciences/University of Babylon/  
Babylon/ Iraq

muneerali52@yahoo.com

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### Abstract

Block language is the form of language used in newspaper headlines, titles, notices, labels, headings, slogans personal letters, cables, and diaries. Students of English as a foreign language often face difficulty in using English block language because it is one of the types of irregular sentences which do not correspond to the regular patterns of sentence structures and the students lack knowledge about the different types of block language and here lies the problem of the study. It is hypothesized that Iraqi EFL university learners encounter difficulty in using the topic under investigation.

A random sample of (40) students has been taken from the fourth year stage in the Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon to undergo a diagnostic test designed to assess the students' performance in using the English block language. The findings of the test show that the number and percentage of the incorrect answers in the whole test (266, 66.5%) are more than those of correct answers (134, 33.5%). These results show that the students face difficulty in using the block language at both the recognition and production levels and this, in turn, verifies the hypothesis of the study.

This study includes the theoretical study of the block language with their different types followed by the practical part which encompasses a diagnostic test applied to a random sample of EFL university students to investigate their performance in using the topic under investigation.

**Keywords:** Use, Performance, EFL

### استعمال الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين دراسي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية لحمل اللغة المغلقة الإنكليزية

منير علي خضير

قسم اللغة الأنكليزية/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة بابل/ محافظة بابل/ جمهورية العراق

### الخلاصة

الجملة اللغوية المغلقة هي صيغة من صيغ اللغة المستخدمة في عناوين الصحف، الملاحظات، الملصقات، عناوين أعلى الصفحات، الشعارات، الرسائل الشخصية، والمذكرات. يواجه الطلبة متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية الصعوبات في استخدام هذه الصيغة النحوية كونها إحدى أنواع الجمل الشاذة باللغة الإنكليزية والتي لا تتطابق مع التراكيب النحوية المستخدمة في اللغة الإنكليزية وكذلك لافتقار الطلبة للمعلومات عن مختلف أنواع هذه الصيغ النحوية وهنا تكمن مشكلة هذه الدراسة. تفترض الدراسة بان الطلبة العراقيين الجامعيين دارسي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية يواجهون الصعوبات في استخدام هذا النوع من الجمل. تم تطبيق اختبار الإنكليزية/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة بابل. تشير نتائج الاختبار بان عدد ونسبة الاجابات الخاطئة للطلبة هي (266, 66.5%) والتي تفوق عدد ونسبة الاجابات الصحيحة في الاختبار والتي كانت (134, 33.5%).

أن النتائج المذكورة تشير الى ان الطلبة يواجهون الصعوبات في استخدام هذه الصيغ النحوية في اللغة وعلى كلا المستويين الادراكي والانتاجي وهذا بدوره يؤكد الفرضية التي جاءت بها الدراسة.

هذه الدراسة تتضمن الدراسة النظرية لمادة البحث وكذلك الجانب العملي المتمثل بالاختبار التشخيصي.  
لعينة من الطلبة وعددهم (40) طالب تم اخذهم عشوائيا من المرحلة الرابعة لقسم اللغة الانجليزية.

الكلمات الدالة: أستعمال، اداء، اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية

## 1. Introduction

Block language is a particular subject which causes a problem of understanding for Iraqi EFL university students because this topic is a type of structure which differs from normal clause or sentence structure. [1, pp. 55] states that It is a term used in some grammatical description 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 sentence.

## 2. Section One

### 2.1 The problem

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. This paper will answer the following questions: [1,pp:2]

1. what is block language and what are its types?
2. What is the area of difficulty the students encounter in using block language?
3. What recommendations can be suggested to overcome the difficulty faced by Iraqi EFL learners in using the topic under investigation?

### 2.2 Value

The work is hoped to be of value for English teachers and students of English as a foreign language and to pave the way for further research.

### 2.3 Aims

The study aims at:

1. Presenting a theoretical account about block language in English.
2. Assessing the Iraqi EFL university students' performance in using block language in English.

### 2.4 Hypotheses

The study adopts the following hypotheses:

1. Students often face difficulty in using block language.
2. The range of this difficulty is higher on the production level than the recognition one.

### 2.5 Procedures

The following steps will be followed in this work :

1. Providing a comprehensive study about block language.
2. Designing a diagnostic test to assess the students' performance in using This topic.

### 2.6 Limits

The work is limited to the study of block language in English. The test will be applied to a random sample of Iraqi EFL university students from the fourth year in the Department of English, College of Education for Human Science, University of Babylon.

### 3. Section Two

#### 3.1 Irregular Sentences

State that irregular sentences differ from the regular patterns of sentence structures and do not correspond to the variation of these structures in the major sentence types. Some types of irregular sentences are shown below: [2, pp. 244]

a. The formulaic subjunctive, one use of the base form of the verb. It is combined with subject- verb inversion, for example:

1. Long live the Republic!
2. So help me God!

Or it is sometimes found without inversion, for example:

3. God save the Queen!
4. God forbid!

A less archaic formula (with subject-verb inversion) for expressing wishes has "may" in front:

5. May the best man win!
6. May you always be happy!

b. There are several kinds of irregular wh- questions, which occur mainly in conversation, for example:

7. What If it rains?
8. Why all the noise?

c. Several kinds of subordinate clauses are used as sentences, generally with exclamatory force:

9. If only I'd listen to my parents!
10. That I should live to see such ingratitude!

d. Adverbials may have the force of commands, sometimes in combination with another element:

11. Hands up!
12. Left, right!

e. Many proverbs have an aphoristic sentence structure, in which two short constructions are balanced against each other:

13. Waste not, want not.
14. First come, first served.

One of the most important types of irregular sentences is the use of the block language.

#### 3.2 Block Language

Block language can be structured in terms of single words or phrases rather than in terms of organized units of clause and sentence . It appears (especially in writing) in such functions as labels, titles, headings, newspaper headlines, notices and advertisements. Simple block language message often consists of a noun or noun phrase or nominal clause in isolation, no verb is needed, because all else necessary to the understanding of the message is furnished by context:

15. English Department
16. Fresh Today
17. Entrance

Block language (especially in newspaper headlines) develops its own abbreviated clause structure:

18. FILM- STAR MARRIES EX- PRIEST (SVOO).
19. ELECTION A LANDSLIDE FOR SOCIALISTS (SCs).
20. NIXON TO MEET ASIAN PREMIERS (SVOo).
21. SHARE PRICES NOW HIGHER THAN EVER (SACs)

## 22. CHANCES OF MIDDLE- EAST PEACE IMPROVING (SV).

These differ from the traditional clause structures in omitting closed- category words of low information value, such as the articles and the finite forms of the verb (be).

Example (19) would read " the election is a landslide for the socialists". Obviously, the purpose of the omission is to reduce the length of the message to the smallest number of words compatible with comprehensibility. [3, pp. 360]

### 3.3. Types of Block Language

#### 3.3.1 Newspaper Headlines

Mention that newspaper headlines can be considered as one kind of block language which is formed with the omission of words that can be understood from the context, such as the finite forms of the verb Be and the articles:[4, pp.845]

23. OIL SPILL THREAT DECREASING

24. PRESIDENT CALLS FOR CLAIM

25. SHARE PRICES NOW HIGHER THAN EVER

26. MINERS BAN OVER TIME

The abbreviated style of newspaper headlines is characterized by short words, clichés, and ellipsis.

States that newspaper headlines explain in complete sentences what each of the headlines is about: [5, pp.242]

27. FOR TONIGHTS HOLIDAY SHOETRING

28. BY- PASS CRASH; NOTORIST CHARGED

29. GOYA FOR THE NATION

30. BIGGER GRANTS FOR REPERTORIES

Denotes there are many types of newspaper headlines without articles, some of these types are headlines for commentary or editorial pieces which do not appear to show article and also subheads are considered as smaller headlines that can be combined with the main headline also appear not to show article drop: [6, pp.9]

31. MAN BITES (A) DOG

#### 3.3.2 Titles, Notices, Labels, Headings, and Slogans

Indicates 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. [8, pp.329] states that the name of a story, a book, a film, and a word is used in front of persons' name or a sport championship. The label (noun) is a slip of paper indicating contents ownership, etc. Sometimes we forget that people, not words who make meaning. When this happens, we pay too much attention to labels and too little attention to reality, we can approach this phrase of our study of meaning by labels and how strongly they can influence use, for example: [7,pp.1]

32. Royal Hotel

33. Bus Stop

34. Super Cinema

35. Police Out

36. More Money for Nurses

#### 3.3.3 Personal Letters, Cables, and Diaries

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 notes taken from lectures or books where the first person pronouns are often omitted: [4, pp.846]

37. Sorry about John.

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

38. No money send hundred.

The abbreviation can be used in diaries:

39. Went to office instead. Worked till 12 on government contract.

## 4. Section Three

### 4.1 The Test

Testing is defined by [9,pp.1] as being a means of checking what students can do with the language and what they cannot do with it. The most important characteristics of a good test are:

#### 4.1.1. Validity

It is the extent to which a test measures what it is supposed to measure.[9, pp.24]

The most important types of validity are:

##### 4.1.1.1 Content Validity

It means that the test covers, as far as possible, the material to be assessed.[9,pp.25]

##### 4.1.1.2 . Face Validity

It simply means the way the test looks to the examinees, test administrators, educators and the like and its importance should not be underestimated. [10, pp.144]

#### 4.1.2 Reliability

It refers to the stability of the test scores. When a group of student is given the same test twice, under the same conditions achieving the same or nearly the same results, then it is reliable [9, pp.25].

Most items of the test are taken from English grammar books and A University Grammar of English Workbook by [11, pp.66 ].

The test consists of two questions and each question includes ten items, the first question assesses the students' performance at the recognition level in which the students are given sentences and they have to mention whether these sentences are related to block language or not. The second question assesses the students' performance at the production level in which the students are given sentences of block language and they have to paraphrase them to make their meaning clearer.

The test is applied to a sample of forty students from the fourth year in the Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon.

## 5. Section Four

### 5.1 The Results of the Test

The results of the test in question one are shown in the following table:

Table (1)

| Items | Number of Correct Responses | Percentage% | Number of Incorrect Responses | Percentage% |
|-------|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 1     | 30                          | 75%         | 10                            | 25%         |
| 2     | 22                          | 55%         | 18                            | 4%          |
| 3     | 32                          | 80%         | 8                             | 20%         |
| 4     | 30                          | 75%         | 10                            | 25%         |
| 5     | 32                          | 80%         | 8                             | 20%         |
| 6     | 10                          | 25%         | 30                            | 75%         |
| 7     | 16                          | 40%         | 24                            | 60%         |
| 8     | 34                          | 85%         | 6                             | 15%         |
| 9     | 26                          | 65%         | 14                            | 35%         |
| 10    | 6                           | 15%         | 34                            | 85%         |
| Total | 238                         | 59.5%       | 162                           | 40.5%       |

According to the results shown in table (1), it is noticed that the number and percentage of the correct responses of question one (238, 59 %) are more than those of correct ones (162, 40.5%). These results verify the second hypothesis of the study.

Item 10: Long live the republic

The number and percentage of the correct responses (6,15%) are less than those of incorrect responses (34,85%) because students can't distinguish between the block language and other types of irregular sentences.

Item 6: President calls for calm

The number and percentage of correct responses (10,25%) are less than the incorrect responses (30, 75%) because the students face difficulty in recognizing the type of this sentence and students are not familiar with such sentence.

Items 1 and 4: share prices now higher than ever

The fruits were eaten

The number and percentage of correct responses (30, 75%) are more than of incorrect responses (10,25%) because students are familiar with these sentences and they study them through the four years of their courses.

Item 8: Gasoline Drums

The number and percentage of correct responses (34, 85%) are more than the number and percentage of the incorrect responses (6,15%) because the students can easily understand the meaning of each word from its context.

The following table shows the results of the test in question two:

Table (2)

| Items | Number of Correct Responses | Percentage % | Number of Incorrect Responses | Percentage % |
|-------|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 1     | 0                           | 0%           | 4                             | 100%         |
| 2     | 2                           | 5%           | 38                            | 95%          |
| 3     | 4                           | 10%          | 36                            | 90%          |
| 4     | 6                           | 15%          | 34                            | 85%          |
| 5     | 2                           | 5%           | 38                            | 95%          |
| 6     | 8                           | 20%          | 32                            | 80%          |
| 7     | 0                           | 0%           | 40                            | 100%         |
| 8     | 2                           | 5%           | 38                            | 95%          |
| 9     | 0                           | 0%           | 40                            | 100%         |
| 10    | 6                           | 15%          | 34                            | 85%          |
| Total | 30                          | 7.5%         | 370                           | 92.5%        |

According to the results shown in table (2), it is noticed that the number and percentage of the incorrect responses of question two are more than those of the correct responses. They are (370,92.5%) and (30,7.5%), respectively. This, in turn, confirms the second hypothesis of the study.

Item 6: Immigration rules criticized

The number and percentage of incorrect responses are (32,80%) and the number and percentage of correct responses are (8,20%) because the students don't study this sentence through the four years of their courses.

Therefore, they are not familiar with it.

Items 2,5, and 8: Woman claims drug caused cancer

Senator to seek reelection

Having wonderful time

The number and percentage of the incorrect responses are (38, 95%) and the number and percentage of the correct responses are (2,5%) because it is easy to

recognize that these sentences are related to block language but it is difficult to understand their meaning.

Items 1,7, and 9: Road words ahead

Holiday price war starts

Oil pollution measures to be tested

The number and percentage of the incorrect responses are (40, 100%) and the number and percentage of the correct responses are (0, 0%) because students can't understand anything from these sentences and they are very difficult to produce the real meaning of them.

## 5.2. Conclusion

Block language is the form of language used in newspaper headlines, cables, notices, labels of products, and so on. It is distinguished by specific rules or patterns. Simple block language message often consists of a noun phrase in isolation.

A diagnostic test was applied to a random sample of twenty students from the fourth stage in the Department of English College of Education for Human Sciences University of Babylon during the academic year (2014-2015) to assess the students' performance in using block language. According to the results of the test, the total number, and percentage of incorrect responses for the whole test (266, 66.5%) are more than those of correct responses (134,33.5%) which indicates that the students face difficulty in using block language especially at the production level in question two. These results in turn, verify the hypotheses of the study.

## 5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations that can be suggested in this regard are:

- a. Due attention should be paid to use different types of block language through extensive training and more exercises.
- b. A great deal of attention is to be paid in teaching block language in English to simplify the process of learning.
- c. For the alleviation of the difficulties, remedial work should be provided to enhance the students' mastery of the subject.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

## 6. Abstract

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#### 7. Appendix 1: The Test

Q1/ Mention (Yes) if the sentence in the following is block language and (No) if it is not block language:

1. Share prices now higher than ever
2. So help me God
3. City scandal fraud called
4. The fruits were eaten
5. Changes of Middle East Peace Improving
6. President calls for claim
7. Handsome is as handsome does
8. Gasoline drums
9. Refrigerate after opening
10. Long live the republic

Q2/ Paraphrase each of the following sentences of block language so as to make their meaning clearer:

1. ROAD WORKS AHEAD
2. WOMAN CLAIMS DRUG CAUSED CANCER
3. ELECTION A LANDSLIDE FOR SOCIALISTS
4. BRITISH VICTORY SURPRISED EXPERTS
5. SENATOR TO SEEK REELECTION
6. IMMIGRATION RULES CRITICIZED
7. HOLIDAY PRICE WAR STARTS
8. HAVING WONDERFUL TIME
9. OIL POLLUTION MEASURES TO BE TESTED
10. MEAT PRICE RISE AGAIN

#### 8. Appendix II: Suggested Answers

Q1/

1. Yes
2. No
3. Yes
4. No
5. Yes
6. Yes
7. No
8. Yes
9. Yes
10. No

Q2/

1. Warning: you will soon come to part of the road.
2. A woman has claimed that a drug had caused her cancer.
3. The election is landslide for the socialists.
4. The British victory has surprised experts.
5. The senator is to seek reelection.
6. The immigration rules have been criticized.
7. A war has started over the price of holidays.
8. I am having a wonderful time.
9. Oil pollution measures are to be tested.
10. Meat prices have risen again.