

Common *mistakes*.

The errors adult learners make — sorted by first-language background, with corrections and short explanations of why they happen.

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How to use this database. Find your student's L1 page. Pin or save it before next lesson. When you hear one of these errors in class, you'll have the correct form and the reason ready. Each page is one-glance scannable.

A practitioner's reference, not a corpus. These are the high-frequency errors most teachers will recognise from their own classrooms. Your students will surprise you with errors that aren't here — and that's normal.



Universal errors — *any* first language.

UNIVERSAL

Errors that appear across nearly every L1 background. Start here for any class.

ARTICLES

✗ I am teacher.

✓ I am a teacher.

English requires articles before singular countable nouns. **a/an** before consonant/vowel sounds.

3RD PERSON -S

✗ He don't know.

✓ He doesn't know.

Third person singular always takes **-s/-es/-ies** in present simple.
Negative: **doesn't**.

WORD ORDER IN QUESTIONS

✗ You like coffee?

✓ Do you like coffee?

Yes/no questions in English need the **auxiliary verb first** (do/does/did/is/are/can...).

ADJECTIVE + NOUN ORDER

✗ A car red.

✓ A red car.

English puts the **adjective before the noun**. Many languages do the opposite.

MAKE / DO CONFUSION

✗ I make my homework.

✓ I do my homework.

Make = create something. **Do** = perform an action/duty.

SINCE VS FOR

✗ I live here since 5 years.

✓ I have lived here for 5 years.

For = duration. **Since** = starting point in time.

BORROW VS LEND

✗ Can you borrow me your pen?

✓ Can you lend me your pen? / Can I borrow your pen?

Lend = give. **Borrow** = take/receive.

USED TO VS BE USED TO

✗ I am used to drink coffee every morning.

✓ I am used to drinking coffee every morning.

Be used to + -ing means accustomed. **Used to + infinitive** means past habit.

STATIVE VERBS IN CONTINUOUS

✗ I am knowing the answer.

✓ I know the answer.

Stative verbs (know, understand, want, like) don't usually take continuous form.



Romance-language patterns: article overuse, double negatives, false friends with English.

ARTICLE OVERUSE

✗ The life is hard.

✓ Life is hard.

Spanish/Portuguese use articles with abstract nouns; English doesn't.

PEOPLE = PLURAL

✗ The people is happy.

✓ The people are happy.

People is plural in English. The verb agrees: **are**.

SUBJECT PRONOUN DROP

✗ Is raining.

✓ It is raining. / It's raining.

English always needs a subject. Use **it** for weather, time, distance.

DOUBLE NEGATIVE

✗ I don't know nothing.

✓ I don't know anything. / I know nothing.

English uses **ONE** negative per clause. **not + any** or **no/nothing/never**.

COMPARATIVES

✗ He is more tall than me.

✓ He is taller than me.

Short adjectives take **-er**. Use **more** only with longer adjectives (more interesting).

POSSESSIVE VS ARTICLE

✗ I broke my the leg.

✓ I broke my leg.

English uses **possessive only**: my, your, his. Don't combine with **the**.

CONFUSING 'DO' AND 'MAKE'

✗ I make a course.

✓ I do a course. / I take a course.

Romance languages use one verb (*hacer/fazer*) for both; English splits them.

ADJECTIVE AGREEMENT

✗ Two beautifuls cars.

✓ Two beautiful cars.

Adjectives in English do **NOT** change for number or gender. Always singular form.



Romance-language patterns with strong avoir vs être confusion in English be.

HAVE VS BE (AGE)

✗ I have 30 years.

✓ I am 30 (years old).

English uses **be** for age. Italian/French use **have**.

HAVE VS BE (FEELINGS)

✗ I have hot. / I have hungry.

✓ I am hot. / I am hungry.

English uses **be** for physical states. Italian/French use **have**.

SYMPATHETIC / SYMPA

✗ He is very sympathetic.

✓ He is very friendly / nice / likeable.

Sympathetic in English means showing pity, NOT friendly. Classic false friend.

ACTUALLY VS CURRENTLY

✗ Actually I work in London.

✓ Currently I work in London. / I work in London at the moment.

Actually in English means "in fact", NOT "now". Use **currently** for now.

ARTICLE WITH POSSESSIVE

✗ I love the my mother.

✓ I love my mother.

English never uses an article with a possessive adjective.

DAYS OF WEEK (WITH ON)

✗ I work the Monday.

✓ I work on Monday. / I work on Mondays.

English uses **on** with days of the week, never **the**.

ADJECTIVE POSITION

✗ It was a meeting interesting.

✓ It was an interesting meeting.

English adjectives go **before** the noun (with few exceptions).

REFLEXIVE VERBS

✗ I myself wake up at 7.

✓ I wake up at 7.

Most English verbs are NOT reflexive even when Italian/French ones are. Drop the pronoun.



German & Dutch speakers.

L1-DE/NL

Germanic-language patterns: word-order interference, false friends, since/for confusion.

WORD ORDER IN SUBORDINATE CLAUSES

✗ I know that he is at home not.

✓ I know that he is not at home.

English uses **SVO** in subordinate clauses too. German moves the verb to the end; English doesn't.

CAPITAL LETTERS ON NOUNS

✗ I bought a Car yesterday.

✓ I bought a car yesterday.

Only **proper nouns** (names, places, brands) and the start of sentences get capitals in English.

BECOME VS GET

✗ I become 30 next year.

✓ I'll be 30 next year. / I turn 30 next year.

Become in English means "transform into", NOT "get" or "receive". Classic false friend.

EVENTUALLY VS POSSIBLY

✗ I eventually come tomorrow.

✓ I might come tomorrow. / I'll possibly come tomorrow.

Eventually = in the end, finally. NOT "perhaps".

SINCE VS FOR (TIME)

✗ I work here since 5 years.

✓ I have worked here for 5 years.

For + duration. **Since** + starting point. Also requires present perfect.

MAKE A PHOTO

✗ Can I make a photo?

✓ Can I take a photo?

English: **take** a photo. Not **make**.

ALREADY VS EVER

✗ Have you already been to Paris?

✓ Have you ever been to Paris?

Ever for questions in present perfect. **Already** = before now (statement).

WILL FOR GENERAL FUTURE

✗ I will tell you my plans tomorrow.

✓ I'll tell you my plans tomorrow. / I'm going to tell you my plans tomorrow.

Going to for plans already made. **Will** often for decisions made in the moment.



Article-free L1: missing a/the, aspect/tense confusion, flexible word order interference.

ARTICLE DROPPING

✗ I bought car yesterday.

✓ I bought a car yesterday.

Slavic languages have no articles. English needs **a/an** for singular countable nouns.

WORD ORDER FLEXIBILITY

✗ Yesterday I to the shop went.

✓ Yesterday I went to the shop.

English has fixed **SVO** word order. Slavic languages allow flexibility English doesn't.

TO BE MISSING

✗ On the table is book.

✓ There is a book on the table.

English uses **there is/are** for existence. Don't omit the dummy subject.

ASPECT CONFUSION

✗ I am writing a book yesterday.

✓ I was writing a book yesterday. / I wrote a book yesterday.

English uses tenses (was writing) where Slavic uses aspect (perfective vs imperfective).

DOUBLE NEGATION

✗ I don't know nobody.

✓ I don't know anybody. / I know nobody.

English uses **ONE** negative per clause.

SPECIFIC / CONCRETE WORDS

✗ Give me one tea.

✓ Give me a tea, please. / Can I have a tea?

Use **a/an**, not **one**, unless emphasising quantity (one, not two).

MAKE VS DO

✗ I'm doing photos for my friend.

✓ I'm taking photos for my friend.

Photos = **take**. Decisions = **make**. Homework = **do**.

REPORTED SPEECH

✗ He said he is tired.

✓ He said he was tired.

Backshift the tense in reported speech: **is** → **was**, **will** → **would**.



Japanese & Korean speakers.

L1-JP/KR

No-plural-marking L1, no articles, V-final word order. Pronunciation needs separate attention.

PLURAL MARKING

✗ I have many friend.

✓ I have many friends.

Countable nouns take **-s/-es** in plural. Japanese/Korean don't mark plural the same way.

ARTICLES

✗ I read book yesterday.

✓ I read a book yesterday.

English needs **a/the** before singular countable nouns. Japanese/Korean have no articles.

SUBJECT REQUIRED

✗ Is interesting.

✓ It is interesting.

English always needs a subject. **It** for impersonal references (weather, opinions, time).

WORD ORDER IN QUESTIONS

✗ You like sushi?

✓ Do you like sushi?

English yes/no questions need **auxiliary inversion**: Do/Does/Is/Are first.

PRONOUN OVERUSE VS DROP

✗ Tanaka-san is my friend. Tanaka-san likes coffee. Tanaka-san comes from Osaka.

✓ Tanaka is my friend. He likes coffee. He comes from Osaka.

After introducing a name, use a **pronoun** (he/she/it/they). Don't repeat the name.

R/L DISTINCTION

✗ I will play in the lain.

✓ I will play in the rain.

Pronunciation, not grammar — but classic. /r/ and /l/ are distinct phonemes in English.

"MAYBE" OVERUSE

✗ Maybe I will come.

✓ I might come. / I'll probably come. / I think I'll come.

Native English limits **maybe**. Use **might, probably, I think** instead.

"ALMOST" MISUSED

✗ Almost people like pizza.

✓ Most people like pizza. / Almost all people like pizza.

Almost needs a quantifier: **almost all, almost everyone**.



No verb-tense marking, no articles, no plural -s. Pitch tone vs stress.

ARTICLES

✗ I want to buy car.

✓ I want to buy a car.

Chinese has no articles. English requires **a/an** for singular countable nouns.

PLURALS

✗ Many student come.

✓ Many students come.

Add **-s/-es** for plural countables. Verb agrees: **come** with plural subject.

VERB TENSES

✗ Yesterday I go to the shop.

✓ Yesterday I went to the shop.

English marks tense on the verb: **go** → **went**. Time words alone aren't enough.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

✗ He don't like coffee.

✓ He doesn't like coffee.

Third person singular needs **doesn't/does**, not **don't/do**.

BE VERB OMISSION

✗ She very tired.

✓ She is very tired. / She's very tired.

English needs **be** before adjectives. Don't drop it.

WORD ORDER: PLACE / TIME

✗ I yesterday at home was.

✓ I was at home yesterday.

English order: **subject + verb + place + time**.

YES/NO ANSWERS

✗ "Do you like tea?" "Is." / "Have."

✓ "Do you like tea?" "Yes, I do."

English short answers repeat the auxiliary: **Yes, I do / No, I don't / Yes, I am**.

QUESTION TAGS

✗ You like coffee, isn't it?

✓ You like coffee, don't you?

Question tags in English match the main verb's auxiliary: **do, does, is, are, will**.



Verb-final word order (Turkish), be-verb omission (Arabic), possessive structure differences.

ARTICLE CONFUSION

✗ I am a teacher of the English.

✓ I am an English teacher. / I am a teacher of English.

Don't use **the** before subject names (English, French, music).

AUXILIARY BE

✗ I student. / He happy.

✓ I am a student. / He is happy.

English needs **be** + complement. Arabic and Turkish often omit it in present tense.

WORD ORDER (TURKISH: VERB-FINAL)

✗ I tomorrow to the cinema go.

✓ I am going to the cinema tomorrow.

English is strict **SVO**. The verb comes before the object and place.

PLURALITY AFTER NUMBERS

✗ I have three brothers and two sister.

✓ I have three brothers and two sisters.

After numbers > 1, English plural marking is **REQUIRED** (Arabic uses singular after some numbers).

"MAKE" OVERUSE

✗ I will make a decision and make my homework.

✓ I will make a decision and do my homework.

Decision = **make**. Homework = **do**.

POSSESSIVE STRUCTURE

✗ The book of my friend.

✓ My friend's book. / The book of my friend.

English prefers **'s possessive** for people: **John's car**, not **the car of John**.

"THIS / THESE" AGREEMENT

✗ This are my friends.

✓ These are my friends.

This = singular. **These** = plural. **That/those** follows the same pattern.

DIRECT SPEECH TO REPORTED

✗ He said "I am tired." → He said he is tired.

✓ He said he was tired.

Backshift the tense one step into the past when reporting.



False friends & pronunciation traps.

CROSS-CUTTING

Words that look like a learner's L1 word but mean something else — plus the sound contrasts that trip everyone up.

WORD	L1 LOOK-ALIKE	NOT...	ACTUALLY MEANS
Actually	es: actualmente / fr: actuellement / it: attualmente / de: aktuell	<i>Currently / now</i>	In fact, in reality
Eventually	fr: éventuellement / de: eventuell / it: eventualmente	<i>Possibly, maybe</i>	In the end, finally
Library	es: librería / fr: librairie / it: libreria	<i>Bookshop</i>	Place to borrow books
Sensible	es/fr/it/de: sensible/sensibel	<i>Sensitive</i>	Reasonable, practical
Sympathetic	fr: sympathique / it: simpatico	<i>Friendly, nice</i>	Showing pity or understanding
Pretend	es: pretender / fr: prétendre	<i>To claim</i>	To act as if (falsely)
Assist	es: asistir / fr: assister	<i>To attend</i>	To help
Discuss	es: discutir / fr: discuter	<i>To argue</i>	To talk about (neutrally)
Realise	es: realizar / fr: réaliser	<i>To carry out</i>	To become aware of
Embarrassed	es: embarazada	<i>Pregnant</i>	Feeling awkward/ashamed
Constipated	es: constipado	<i>Having a cold</i>	Unable to pass stool (medical)
Notice	fr: notice	<i>Instructions</i>	Sign, brief written observation
College	fr: collège	<i>Secondary school</i>	University / higher ed (US)
Argument	fr/es: argument / argumento	<i>Reasoned point</i>	Quarrel / disagreement (mostly)
Patron	es: patrón / fr: patron	<i>Boss, employer</i>	Customer or supporter

Pronunciation contrasts that L1 backgrounds keep tripping on:

/ɪ/ VS /i:/ — SHIP VS SHEEP

Many L1s have one sound; English has both. **Ship** is short, **sheep** is long.

/v/ VS /w/ — VINE VS WINE

Spanish, German, Polish often use one sound for both. **V** = teeth on lip. **W** = round lips.

/θ/ AND /ð/ — THINK, THIS

The 'th' sounds don't exist in many languages. Stick out the tongue gently.

/r/ VS /l/ — RIGHT VS LIGHT

Japanese, Korean, Mandarin: tongue position matters. /r/ = back, /l/ = tip touches teeth ridge.

/ʃ/ VS /tʃ/ — SHEEP VS CHEAP

Polish, French often blur these. /ʃ/ = sustained. /tʃ/ = sharp, plosive start.

WORD STRESS — PHOTO / PHOTOGRAPHY

Same root, different stress shifts meaning. English is very stress-sensitive.

SCHWA /ə/ — BANANA = /bə'ndɑ:nə/

Unstressed vowels become schwa. Most languages don't reduce; English does, heavily.

SILENT LETTERS — COMB, KNEE, DOUBT

Don't pronounce them. Many letters are written but silent.



Register & *politeness* errors.

CROSS-CUTTING

When the grammar is correct but the tone is wrong. These errors damage relationships, not comprehension.

DIRECT REQUEST TO SENIOR PERSON

✗ Send me the report.

✓ Could you send me the report when you have a moment?

In English business culture, even simple requests need softening words: **could you, would you mind, when you have a moment.**

DEMANDING TONE IN EMAIL

✗ I want to meet you tomorrow.

✓ I'd like to meet you tomorrow if possible.

Use **I'd like** rather than **I want** in professional contexts.

OVER-FAMILIAR GREETING

✗ Hi dear, how are you?

✓ Hi Sarah, hope you're well.

Dear is too intimate for first contact in English; reserved for letters or known relationships.

TELLING A CLIENT WHAT TO DO

✗ You must sign here.

✓ Could you sign here, please?

Must sounds like an order. Use **could you + please.**

BLUNTNESS IN FEEDBACK

✗ Your work is bad.

✓ I think there's room to improve this. Let me show you.

English softens negative feedback: **I think, there's room to, perhaps, possibly.**

WRONG SIGN-OFF

✗ Best regards, JOHN

✓ Best regards,\nJohn

Don't write your name in all caps in a sign-off. Use a normal capital + lowercase form.

SAYING 'NO' TOO DIRECTLY

✗ No, I can't.

✓ I'm afraid I can't / Unfortunately, I won't be able to

English softens refusals: **I'm afraid, unfortunately, sadly.**

OVERUSING 'PLEASE'

✗ Please send me please the report please.

✓ Could you send me the report, please?

One **please** per sentence. More feels desperate.

FORGETTING 'SORRY'

✗ Move, I can't see.

✓ Sorry — could you move? I can't see.

English uses **sorry** very often as a politeness marker, not just for apologies.

DIRECT DISAGREEMENT

✗ You're wrong.

✓ I see it a bit differently / I'm not sure I agree.

Direct disagreement is rare in English business contexts; soften with **a bit, perhaps, not sure.**



Quick *correction phrases* for teachers.

FOR THE TEACHER

Mid-lesson phrases that correct without breaking flow. Adapt to your class.

FOR A SMALL VERB ERROR

"Almost — try the verb again."

FOR A WRONG PREPOSITION

"Close — different little word at the end."

FOR WORD ORDER

"All the right words. Different order."

FOR PRONUNCIATION

"Try just the stressed syllable — PHO-to."

FOR WRONG TENSE

"Right idea. Past or present?"

FOR ARTICLE MISSING

"One small word in front — a, an, or the?"

FOR A FALSE FRIEND

"Same word in your language, different meaning here."

WHEN UNSURE THEY HEARD IT

"Hmm? Say it again?"

FOR A REGISTER PROBLEM

"That's grammatically perfect — but a bit too direct."

TO PRAISE A SELF-CORRECTION

"That's the one. You heard it yourself."

TO ELICIT THE CORRECT FORM

"What's another way to say that?"

WHEN MULTIPLE THINGS NEED FIXING

"Lots happening — let's just fix the verb today."