Nouns on the Job Market: An Approach for Recognizing Noun Position Errors

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As an English as a foreign language instructor, you don't have to look at too many student writing samples before you see sentences like this:

1. *The boy he went to the store.

2. *The first situation, the girl loses her purse.

3. *That is the boy who I know him.

4. *That is the boy went to the store.

At first, these sentences seem to represent disparate grammatical problems. The first sentence could be interpreted as a subject issue, the second might be a prepositional phrase problem, and the third and fourth might reflect a lack of mastery of adjective clauses. However, dealing with these issues separately is time-consuming and redundant when they can all be subsumed under an overarching category of noun position. In fact, an understanding of noun positions in sentences can correct many recurring problems in the writing of English language learners. This article outlines an approach for anticipating and preventing these sorts of errors while providing a framework to explain the errors to students. For this approach to be successful, students need to have an understanding of parts of speech, so it works best with low-intermediate to advanced students.

To address this topic, you can start by introducing an analogy, something like this:

> Instructor: Yichen, what are you planning to study at university?
>
> Yichen: Architectural engineering.
>
> Instructor: And what kind of job do you want?
>
> Yichen: I want to work in my father's construction company—building bridges.

Continue to question students, always leading them to say that having one job is the ideal situation. After inquiring about the job plans of several students, you circle back to Yichen.

> Instructor: Yichen, you want to be an architectural engineer, right?
>
> Yichen: That's right.
>
> Instructor: Do you want to be an architectural engineer *and* a teacher?
>
> Yichen: No. Just an engineer.
>
> Instructor: So you only want *one* job?
>
> Yichen: Yes, just one job.
>
> Instructor: So, are you saying that one job is enough and that two jobs are too many?
>
> Yichen: Yes!

Sum up by saying, "Nouns are like people—they only want one job. But nouns can't just be whatever they want to be. There are a limited number of jobs that a noun can fill."

From here, students need to be introduced to the "job possibilities" for nouns. Look at nouns as subjects, objects of verbs, objects of prepositions, and complements and the corresponding positions they can take in sentences (see Table 1). A little simplification makes the information accessible to students with a wide range of English proficiencies. For example, possessives are omitted, indirect and direct objects are grouped together under the term "Object of Verb," and only subject complements, and not object complements, are addressed. Depending on the students' level, Table 1 can be expanded to include these other noun roles.

When you present Table 1, leave the second and third columns blank so you can elicit this information from students. It's best to use the same noun for all the examples, allowing students to focus on how the noun moves around the sentence in various positions. In Table 1, the students have used *pizza* in all the examples.

Job of the Noun	Position in the Sentence	Example
Subject	*before the verb*	*<u>Pizza</u> <u>is</u> popular in this country.*
Object of Verb	*after the verb*	*I <u>ate</u> the <u>pizza</u>.*
Object of Preposition	*after the preposition*	*There's pepperoni <u>on</u> the <u>pizza</u>.*
Complement	*after a linking verb*	*It<u>'s</u> a <u>pizza</u>!*

Table 1. Noun jobs and corresponding sentence positions

Students need to know what linking verbs are and to understand that there may be intervening words between the noun and the other part of speech used as a point of reference in the position column. In addition, if you are using (and students are writing) multi-clause sentences, they will need to understand that each clause will have its own subject and verb, minimally.

After you work through the table, provide students with sentences in which they need to identify the job of the noun. To scaffold this activity, begin with sentences, like the examples in Table 1, that focus on the same noun.

1. Subject (S): That <u>book</u> is boring!

2. Object of Verb (OoV): I didn't read the <u>book</u> until I was in college.

3. Object of Preposition (OoP):
   In the <u>book</u>, you'll find discussion questions.

4. Complement (C): There are ten new <u>books</u> on the shelf.

5. Complement (C): My essay for this class is becoming a <u>book</u>!

Students need practice like this periodically to keep them thinking about the jobs of nouns in sentences. From here, an open-ended exercise provides students with a greater challenge. Students analyze each sentence by underlining all the nouns and then identifying their jobs. Refer to Table 1 to address any misunderstandings. A final product might look like this:

1. There is <u>snow</u> on the <u>trees</u>.
             C   OoP

2. <u>She</u> is meeting <u>me</u> at the <u>library</u> after
    S   OoV   OoP
   <u>class</u>.
   OoP

3. On <u>Monday</u>, our first <u>assignment</u> is due.
        OoP   S

4. My <u>brother</u> ate <u>breakfast</u> late, so <u>he</u>
        S   OoV   S
   doesn't want <u>lunch</u> yet.
                 OoV

5. <u>I</u> can't talk now because <u>I</u> forgot my
   S   S
   <u>homework</u>, and <u>I</u>'m trying to redo
      OoV   S
   <u>it</u> before <u>class</u>.
   OoV   OoP

This preparatory work enables you to explain errors to students when they begin turning in writing assignments. In fact, even before you deal with student-generated errors, it is useful to spend time going over problematic sentences. The example sentences from the beginning of this article provide fodder for identifying errors.

When students underline the nouns and determine the job of each noun in the first sentence (*"The boy he went to the store"), they discover that one noun is left without a job. *Store* is happily employed as the object of a preposition, and, if *boy* is fulfilling the job of subject, then *he* is left with no job at all. Add humor to the analogy by explaining that students are looking at the bleak case of an unemployed noun. Even worse, they are seeing firsthand a noun trying to steal a job from another noun that is already in the position.

The analysis of the second sentence (*"The first situation, the girl loses her purse") should identify *girl* as a subject and *purse* as an object of the verb. *Situation*, however, has no job, so, as in the first sentence, we see an unemployed noun. This case differs, though, in that the noun here is not trying to fill a job that has already been taken. We can gainfully employ that noun by adding a preposition to the beginning of the sentence. This allows *situation* to work as the object of a preposition. Students need to understand that, when they are faced with an unemployed noun, the question must be: Is this noun trying to fill a job that is already taken? In such cases, the nouns will most likely refer to the same entity—for example, *he* and *boy* in the first sentence—and one of the nouns can be deleted. If the noun is not trying to take the place of another noun that is already in the coveted position, students should determine whether a job for the noun can logically be created.

The third sentence is more complicated because of the fronting of a relative pronoun in an adjective clause, but, in essence, it parallels the first example. Students might need help, but the analysis reveals the following:

   *<u>That</u> is the <u>boy</u> <u>who</u> <u>I</u> know <u>him</u>.
     S   C   OoV S   OoV

Here, as in the first sentence, two nouns are vying for the same job. Sometimes this is possible, such as when a sentence has a compound object, but compound objects

refer to different entities and are joined by some type of conjunction (e.g., "I know him [OoV] and her [OoV]"). In the third sentence, however, the nouns *who* and *him* are referring to the same entity ("boy"). One of them has to go.

An analysis of the fourth sentence (*"That is the boy went to the store") reveals *That* as the subject and *store* as the object of the preposition, but what about *boy*? Is it a complement to the linking verb *is*, or is it the subject of *went*? This overworked noun is struggling to fill two jobs! It needs help. And help can be introduced in the form of a relative pronoun (*who*) at the front of an adjective clause.

This fourth sentence shows us another way to look at these sentences. The class discussion starts like this:

> Instructor: Luis, what if the accountant at a company left to take another job. Would the company leave the position empty?
>
> Luis: Of course not. They would hire someone.
>
> Instructor: So, important jobs should not be left empty, right?
>
> Luis: That's right.

That is the segue into the idea that certain jobs in a sentence *must* be filled. Verbs need subjects (unless they are "understood," as with imperatives); transitive verbs need objects, as do prepositions; and linking verbs need complements (although they could be adjectives instead of nouns). Therefore, we can say that nouns need a job (one job—no more and no less), and we can also say that job positions need to be filled. This concept can be viewed from the perspective of the potential employee (the noun) or from the potential job opening (the position that needs to be filled). When checking a sentence, students could begin with the first approach, checking the nouns to make sure that the nouns are adequately employed. Alternatively, students could begin by looking at positions and then making sure a noun is filling each

position. If students take this position-oriented approach, the focus must shift to the other parts of speech in the sentence and their characteristics and requirements. The easiest place to start is by finding the verb and then looking for its subject. After checking that the subject position is filled, students need to check whether the verb is transitive and needs an object or whether it is linking and needs a complement. If students identify a preposition, they must make sure that the preposition has an object.

The checklist below can help students through this type of analysis.

POSITION CHECK STEPS

Verb check 1: Find the verb(s) in the sentence. Check each verb separately.

- Does the verb have a subject?

    o If yes, does it have more than one subject?

        —If yes, do the subjects refer to different entities (e.g., *he* and *she*)?

            —If not, delete one of the subjects.

    o If not, write a noun in the subject position (unless the verb is an imperative).

Verb check 2: Look at each verb again.

- Is it transitive?

    o If yes, does it have an object?

        —If yes, does it have more than one object?

            —If yes, do the objects refer to different entities?

                —If not, delete one of the objects.

—If not, write a noun in the object of verb position.

- Is it a linking verb?

    o If yes, does it have a complement?

        —If not, write a noun in the complement position.

Preposition check: Find the preposition(s) in the sentence.

- Does it have an object?

    o If not, write a noun in the object of preposition position.

Final check:

- Did you write the same noun for any of the answers above?

    o If yes, this noun is doing two jobs. Add another noun, or delete the extra position.

A "reverse analysis" of the fourth sentence (*"That is the boy went to the store") would look like this:

POSITION CHECK STEPS: ""That is the boy went to the store."

Verb check 1: Find the verb(s) in the sentence. Check each verb separately: *is*, *went*

- Does the verb have a subject?
  Yes: That is; the boy went.

    o If yes, does it have more than one subject? *No.*

Verb check 2: Look at each verb again.

- Is it transitive?
  No, neither verb is transitive.

- Is it a linking verb?
  Yes: is.

o If yes, does it have a complement?
  Yes: "boy."

Preposition check: Find the preposition(s) in the sentence: *to*

- Does it have an object?
  Yes, "store."

Final check:

- Did you write the same noun for any of the answers above?
  Yes: "boy."

    o If yes, this noun is doing two jobs. Add another noun, or delete the extra position. *There is a problem with* boy. *It is in both the complement position and the subject position.*

Neither analysis provides students with the correct answer, but each directs students' attention to problems. Once students work through enough sample sentences, then common errors, the environments in which they occur, and their solutions will become evident. For instance, when a noun is working as both a complement and a subject, as in the fourth sentence, the solution is to keep the noun in complement position and add a relative pronoun to fill the subject position. This sort of complement/subject mistake frequently occurs when students begin sentences with "there is" or "there are." It does not matter whether students first run the noun check or first run the position check, but checking in both of these ways is necessary to cover all the noun position issues that can arise.

To sum up the noun check process, we can refer to this checklist:

NOUN CHECK STEPS

1. Find all the nouns in the sentence.

2. Identify the job(s) of each noun.

3. If you find a noun that has no job,

a. remove the noun if it is redundant, *or*

b. create a job for the noun if it is necessary to the sentence.

4. If you find a noun that is working two jobs,

a. add a noun to take on one of the jobs, *or*

b. terminate the extra job.

In writing classes, I have found that spending time going over these concepts at the beginning of a semester makes explanations move along more quickly when these issues arise later. Viewing the issues as noun position errors provides a framework that encompasses multiple error types, thus giving the students a powerful tool to carry out of the classroom. Using the employment analogy provides a fun and memorable way to help students relate to this sentence-level grammatical concept. Of course, you can't anthropomorphize every grammatical concept, but this tactic works well for explaining noun positions to students.

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