# Iraqi EFL University Students' Usage of Ergative Verbs

## By

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## Abstract

The research reported in this paper specifically explores the constructive properties of ergative verbs as a special subclass of English verbs and focuses on examining the students' knowledge about these verbs through the use of English sentences. Also, its endeavor to pinpoint the errors committed by the students by using these structures. The researchers postulated that English Iraqi students come up against learnability problems to conceive this theme. Hence, it is pondered as one of the problematic subjects for them. A grammatical judgment test is administered on an incidental sample of 50 fourth-year students majoring in English taken part in this study through the colligate year (2019-2020).

The actualized results procured from the test dispose of numerical calculation of the percentage as they rely on the students' responses. They bring forth a requisite account of the practical hindrance the students confront in utilizing them. This resultant comes on the scene from the overall evaluation of the students' answers.

**Keywords:** Ergative , transitive, intransitive, learnability, transformation

## 1. Introduction

In the English language, there are an eminent number of certain genuine verbs which are notorious as ergative verbs. They are a special group of verbs. Compared with other traditional verbs, they have unusual rules and denotation attributes. Those verbs can be used both in intransitive and transitive ways. Transitive verbs are movement verbs that invariably give vent to accomplishable activities that are be relevant to or have an influence on someone or something else. Those components are dominantly direct objects, nouns, or pronouns that have been impacted by the verb.

On the other hand, intransitive verbs are those ones that perpetually show conceivable actions that are unalike the former ones as there is no direct object ensuing the latter verbs.

Using ergative verbs doesn't change the meaning sof the sentence once the object of the sentence will be the doer of the action of that sentence . Generally, sentences are in the active case or passive case. However, ergative verbs don't follow this pattern. They are used in the middle voice in which the subject is the object of the verb, but there is no passive form used.

Iraqi EFL may not have full comprehensive knowledge or skill in telling the difference between these verbs and other common verbs. The former is looked at as one of the most difficult issues faced by students schooling English as a new tool of communication. The authors presume those students pervert such verbs in some ways, for example, they passivize them or they use them transitively. Based on this observation, the present study has made an assay to predict the hindrances which Iraqi students of English cope with and which will result in errors arising.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 Ergative Verbs

A verb is a sort of word category whose (grammatical function) used to describe an act , a condition, or occurrence. This lexeme is the most important member of a sentence: every sentence has a predicate. A verb is the unique form of word that undergoes conjugate (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Each language in our universe has verbs, yet they are not consistently utilized along the same lines. Moreover they can have dissimilar features in various languages. The skeleton of the present research is based on paired ergative verbs.

As specified by Radford (1997), syntactically verbs *are* ordered in consonance with the number of object which they call for. They could become apparent in two discrete constructions. In a certain construction, they might take one thing to talk about, whereas in another construction they require two things to discuss without any grammatical adjustments. Furthermore, the semantic role of the external argument of these verbs when they are utilized as intransitive is comparable with the one set to the internal argument when these verbs are utilized as transitive. Of such kinds of verbs are termed 'ergative verbs'.

From the grammatical standpoint, one key mark of an ergative verb is that its characterization of being whether it is transitive or intransitive. Its subject when it is intransitive matches up with its direct object when it is transitive. By origin, the ergative system is employed to give an account of some constructions. Another property is that this type of verb is unaccusative, its behavior is completely much the same as passive, although it is different from that in the sense that there is no structural or linguistic change of the verb of the sentence.

In line with the idea of unaccusative supposition Perlmutter (1978) claims, that there are pair well-known sorts of verbs that do not go along with passivation or they are of one-side verbs which include unergative verbs and unaccusative verbs.

The central difference between them is that the former has an agent subject figured out as in charge of the action conveyed by the verb as in the following structure:

## 1. The boy died.
Linguistically, the latter type is labeled as 'ergative' and / or 'unaccusative' verbs which are in contrast to unergative verbs. The grammatical agent does not commence actively or is accountable in an inactive way for the role of the verb as it is obvious in the following example :

## 2. The rice cooked.
( The above instance is taken from Halliday (1994).
The doer of the action of Halliday's example above does not take part in the activity of the event.
By using a syntactic transformation which is pointed to as an ergative or causative

transformation, ergative verbs which are one- place predictions can be transformed to transitive as it is stated by Lyons (1968) or a causative process as it has been suggested by Hale and Keyser (1986) and the two structures together, the intransitive and the transitive one, are said to be corresponding in that they are syntactically and semantically correspondence as it is confirmed by Huddleston and Pullum (2002). Moreover, there are two types of paired ergative verbs: middle (e.g. 3a) and inchoative, i.e. change of state verbs (e.g. 3b).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (3) | a. The door opened. | Intransitive |
| | b. I opened the door. | Transitive |
| (4) | a. His novels read well. | Middle |
| | b. The window broke suddenly. | Inchoative |

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) widely employs the term 'middle' to make a reference to a kind of passivation process with active and passive characteristics in like manner which does not present in English language by its nature.

In this respect, Jespersen (1927) asserts that middles do not relate to a number of verbs furthur except for transitive forms that could arrive to be intransitive in an odd "active-passive use" whereby their linguistic behaviuor of the subject rationally becomes their direct object of the verb. The subject will not be focused on due to its vagueness, however, it is not applicable to every kind of verb:

5.      The truths reverse properly.
6.      His games should act well.

Therefore , it is said that middle verbs are conceptually passive despite the fact that they are active in a formal manner and are not regarded as a category of verbs intrinsically but a particular usage of them set determined states and dependent on the nature of a lexical verb (Jespersen, 1927).

Due to their importance, Keyser and Roeper (1984), as cited in Can (2000), add that middle verbs are generic sentences that require adverbs to be acceptable, while inchoative verbs recount specific states and can be used without any adverb.

Burzio (1981) informs that an essential formal trait for the ergative verb is that the receiver of the action ( noun phrase) could be moved to the position of the subject and as a result such movement is considered allowable choice to choose. Ergative verb constructions can be categorized into two sorts. Each of which has its own characteristics and significance for usability. One subgroup of these structures does not have a transitive/causative equivalent whereas the second one has a transitive/causative ditto:

( **I** )      Ergative constructions without an object:
(7)      a. An accident happened.
          b. *George happened an accident .
(8)      a. The visitors arrived.
          b. *The drivers arrived the visitors.
(9)      a. Many car disappeared.
          b. *The storm disappeared many cars .
( **II** )      Ergative constructions with an object:
(10)      a. The clothes dry.
          b. The machine dried the clothes .
(11)      a. They hang as a group.

b. She hung up her shirt.

Some scholars whose their specialization is linguistics think about the process of adding the "unaccusative verbs (e.g. **arise, arrive, emerge, occur, lean, sit**)" to the set of verbs at issue on varied linguistic bases (Belletti, 1988).

(12) a. A new problem emerged with the last design.
b. The contrary argument ensued subsequently.
c. A conference began regarding the matter.
(These three instances are taken from Cortés (1997).

Lock (1996) asserts that ergative verbs differ from other verbs in a sense that they have a characteristic which enables them to be of three options. They can be used as active , middle , or passive. Examples are:

13. The sun summer evaporates the water in the pool.      (Active Voice)
14. The water in the pool is evaporated by the sun.        (Passive Voice)
15. The water evaporates quickly.                (Middle Voice)
16. The student dropped a pen from his bag.            (Active Voice)
17. A pen was dropped by the student.              (Passive Voice)
18. A pen dropped suddenly.                  (Middle Voice)

For him **,** the middle structure can be come as in the middle of active voice and passive voice. When it is used, the receiver of the transitive clause (e.g. *water* in sentence 13 and *a pen* in sentence 16) will occupy the position of the actor of the action (see sentences 14 and 17). These actors can be considered as the doers of the actions expressed by the ergative verbs (e.g. *evaporate* in sentence 14 and *drop* in sentence 17) and act upon themselves, however the actions interrelated commonly appear more or less in a spontaneous manner. In such cases, it might be no performer of the actions absolutely , and even supposing the actions are done by the performers , those actions are frequently not done purposely or knowingly by the performers of the actions.

## *3. Research Questions*

This paper addresses the under mentioned research questions:

1-      Are Iraqi EFL learners able to understand what is meant by the ergative pattern?
2-      Are those learners able to distinguish between ergative verbs and other kinds of verbs?
3-      What are the justification(s) of the greatest number of their errors?

## 4. Methods

### *4.1 Participants and Sample*

50 undergraduate BA students of English participate in this study. The participants include one group only which is made up of (38 females and 12 males), Department of English, Faculty of Education, University of Babylon, through the colligated year **(**2019-2020). All of them are Iraqi students in the fourth level of education and they are regarded as advanced examinees. Their age ranges in a span of 22 to 24. They are asked to take part in the study on a voluntary basis. All of them speak Arabic at home. Purportedly, they are all superior and are of alike qualifications. Those students are decided on without previous order.

### *4.2 Instrument / Data Collection Tool*

In order to see the participants' knowledge of ergative verbs, a diagnostic test is used.

In consonance with Lado (1961), a good test is one that actually measures what is intended to measure. Ingram (1968) affirms that a test is only worth having if it measures accurately what a tester wants it to measure. Like any other type of measurement, a test has to do with steadiness when judging a new similar subject at any occasion (Harrison, 1983).

In compliance with this information, a test has been drawn to discover the skillfulness of the learners to get the hang of ergative verbs. The exam is formed of two parts. The starting part of the test is shaped to evaluate the learners' responses at the recognition stage. It builds in (10) sentences. The leaners are involved to badge the errorless sentences. (See Appendix 1)

The second part is put to judge the students' production level in using ergative verbs. It includes (10) sentences and the students are required to change those sentences into middle voice sentences. To be deemed, the results of the study require two paramount notions that are got together with data nature which are **reliability and validity.** Missing the improvement of such sides**,** the upshot of the study analysis might be unreliable**.** Equally with the second portion of an acceptable study instrument, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) underlines that "validity is the extent to which a psychometric instrument measures what it has been designed to measure". *Generally, evaluators grasp two prime sorts of validity*: **content** and **face validity**. Fulcher and Davidson (2007) expose that "content validity is defined as any attempt to show that the content of the test is a representative sample from the domain that is to be tested"**.**

Boyle and Fisher (2007) define face validity as a variety of validity overall pointing to the grade that the planned document "measures what it appears to measure". To determine the quality of being valid, this manner is confirmed by bidding the test to a band of specialists and the strategy taken on to value the interior firmness of precision of the current treatise will be ***Kurder- Richardson***. This technique has the following set expression:

R=N / N-1 (m ( N-m) / NX² ),
Here **R** stands for accuracy,
**N** typifies the items value in the evaluation,
**m** symbolizes the average of the evaluation marks and
**X** means the level variation of the marks of the examinees.

### *4.3 Procedure*

The questions of the test are well-printed and distributed to the examinees who participates in the experience to collect the only source of data. It is used as a tool that allows us to mark the material done by the students electronically. In one meeting, the test is done**.** Primarily , a summary of the nature of the test is given to the examinees and are told how to rejoin to the its elements **.** The examinees are required to make correct judgments on 10 sentences by marking one of the two possible answers, which are correct, or incorrect.

For the second question, they are asked to transform the given sentences into middle voice sentences. On that occasion, they are gently demanded to supply the requested returns. In general, the students are able to finish the test within a period of 20 minutes.

## 5. Findings and Discussion of Results.

This subdivision is consigned to introduce the results of the learners' replies to twig if

the outcomes are of importance or not**.** The consequent consequences are evidence of the area for which the learners would react to appointed ergatives. Those indicate some valuable findings for consideration. Furthermore, they are a pertinent illustration to confirm or invalidate the research questions of the current study which are stated in  (Section 3).

## 5-1 Students' Achievement of Question One

Question one quantifies the students' acting on the level of realization. As is mentioned in Section (4.2), the students are called for to select the true sentence. The outcomes got hold of on all elements are outlined in the following table:

**Table (1).** Data Distribution of the Recognition Level in Question (1)

| of.No Items | No. of Correct Items | % | No. of Incorrect Items | % | No. of Avoided Items | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 10 | 20 | 39 | 78 | 1 | 2 |
| 2 | 15 | 30 | 35 | 70 | | |
| 3 | 22 | 44 | 28 | 56 | | |
| 4 | 14 | 28 | 35 | 70 | 1 | 2 |
| 5 | 30 | 60 | 19 | 38 | 1 | 2 |
| 6 | 32 | 64 | 17 | 34 | 1 | 2 |
| 7 | 38 | 76 | 9 | 18 | 3 | 6 |
| 8 | 29 | 58 | 21 | 42 | | |
| 9 | 18 | 36 | 31 | 62 | 1 | 2 |
| 10 | 21 | 42 | 27 | 54 | 2 | 4 |
| *Total* | 229 | 45.8 | 261 | 52.2 | 10 | 2 |

The results which are displayed in Table 1 show that the whole number and the ratio of the right replies is (229, 45. 8), whilst the whole number and the ratio of the wrong **responses** (*embracing the left items*) is (261, 54.2).

The highest percentage of the true feedbacks is **(76%)** which belongs to item number (7). A result which points out that the students are knowing more regarding the nature of this element " ***The plants were died from industrial pollution***." where the verb **'die'** cannot be used as a passive verb as it is an intransitive verb which does not have an object and so it cannot go through the transformation to passive, whereas the smallest ratio of the true replies is (10%) which belongs to element number (1). Resting on this ratio, It is visible that those students lack the needful proficiency to reply to this item " ***A pen dropped''*** where this sentence is in middle passive which is not active nor passive since the subject of the verb is not labeled as either agent or patient. It has components of both. Consequently, the students do not have enough information about this aspect. Hence, the first research question which says" ***Are Iraqi EFL learners able to understand what is meant by the ergative pattern?*** is answered.

## 5-2 Students' Achievement of Question Two

The second question values the students' render of the producing standard. Through this request, the students have to change the given sentences into middle sentences. The results grabbed from each sentences display in Table (2) below

The results which are displayed in Table 2 above connotes that the whole number and the rate of the right responses is (176, 35. 2), whilst the whole number and the rate of the wrong responses (*embracing the left items*) is (324, 64.8).

**Table (2).** Data Distribution of the Production Level in Question (2)

| No. of Items | No. of Correct items | % | No. of Incorrect Items | % | No. of Avoided Items | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 27 | 54 | 21 | 42 | 2 | 4 |
| 2 | 21 | 42 | 27 | 54 | 2 | 4 |
| 3 | 14 | 28 | 33 | 66 | 3 | 6 |
| 4 | 11 | 22 | 36 | 72 | 3 | 6 |
| 5 | 22 | 44 | 21 | 42 | 7 | 14 |
| 6 | 12 | 24 | 32 | 64 | 6 | 12 |
| 7 | 18 | 36 | 27 | 54 | 5 | 10 |
| 8 | 13 | 26 | 35 | 70 | 2 | 4 |
| 9 | 28 | 56 | 15 | 30 | 7 | 14 |
| 10 | 10 | 20 | 27 | 54 | 13 | 26 |
| *Total* | 176 | 35.2 | 274 | 54.8 | 50 | 10 |

The highest percentage of the true replies is (28%) in item (9), whereas the smallest ratio of the true replies is (20%) which belongs to item (10). These results put on view that the students are having little knowledge and are unfamiliar with the structures of the topic under discussion where the implication of agency is suppressed. Most of the results bring to light that the students deal with these verbs as if they are ordinary verbs. As a result, it is difficult for them to distinguish the middle voice from the active voice. This end answers the second research question which says" ***Are those learners able to distinguish between ergative verbs and other kinds of verbs?***

The upshot of the entirety test is substantiated in Table (3) below which contains the outcome of both sides: the recognition and production ranks.

**Table (3).** Data Distribution of the Recognition and Production Levels

| Level | No. of Correct Items | % | No. of Incorrect Items | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Recognition* | 229 | 45.8 | 271 | 54.2 |
| *Production* | 176 | 35.2 | 324 | 64.8 |
| *Total* | 405 | 40.5 | 595 | 59.5 |

It is seen from Table (3) above that total number and the rate of the incorrect responses which has touched at (595,59,3) is a low performance than that of their correct responses which has touched at (405, 40.5). This leads to the belief that the students are pretty bad at judging the grammatical usage of ergative constructions and they are not aware of them. This proof introduces a big revelation that those types of verbs exhibit challenging learning problem for students of English and this is the answer to the third research question.

## 5-3 Sources of Error Occurrence

In acquiring a second language, the concept of error analysis was founded by **Corder** (**1967**) and colleagues. It is a method which is used to detail the errors which come into view in learning a language as the errors of the learners are worthy of attention in the sense that they supply the researcher with an index of how the learners are learnt and which way they use in deducting the language .

According to **Richard and Schmitt (2002),** error analysis may be implemented with the intention of.

- identifying the procedures which the learners use in language acquisition;
- identifying the sources of errors made by the learners;

● identify the conventional hindrances in learning the language.

For Bell (1981), error explanation is a difficult duty as it requires forming a hypothesis about the causes of error occurrence. In this area, the analyst can only suggest plausible answers as being explanations of the facts since there may be more than one plausible answer or source.

To answer the research question(3), sources of errors which are seen through the answers of the students can be normally categorized as follows:

1- Some errors may come from Interlingual interference, in accordance with which the students may transfer rules from their language before they become are acquainted with the system and knowledge of the goal language they would like to learn. When he/she is confronted with the task of learning a second language his/her first language linguistic system is likely to interfere with the second linguistic system and this interference generally has an impact upon the occurrence of some errors (Brown, 1987), as in:

Original sentence (2), Question (1) :

*** *The bus was arrived.*
Reconstructed sentence:

*"The bus arrived."*
The interference between L1 and L2 presumably exists as of the reason that hiders acquiring English by Iraqi students.

2- Intralingual transfer is in contrast to interlingual error, the source of such errors lies in the target language itself whereby the students make use of their prior knowledge of the system of the target language in the stage of education the material of that language (Richards, 1971). What is more, he subdivides intralingual errors into four categories:
**A**) Overgeneralization errors: the learner overgeneralizes the principles of learning he / she learns in conditions at times it is viable but at times it is unviable.
**B**) Unawareness of rule constraints: the learner puts the rules into application to a situation where they are inapplicable.
**C**) Uncompleted rules implementation : the learner cannot succeed to develop a required structure.
**D**) Wrong concepts : the learners form false comprehension of diferences in the second language.
Original sentence (5), Question (1) :

**A bag with straps carries easily.*
Reconstructed sentence:

*A bag with straps was carried easily.*
**3-** Context of learning: occasionally it occurs that some errors are induced by teachers or they induce because of the elements of education , or the way of giving  those materials which may lead the students to form false concepts about the material (Keshavarz, 1999), as in:
Original sentence (2), Question (2) :

*George wrote the essay*
Reconstructed sentence:

*The essay was written.*

**4-** Communication strategies: such techniques are used by the learners to master their problems which are induced as a result of an insufficiency in language sources . They are selected by the learners to transmit the meant message. Such methods are approximation, avoidance, rewording, and asking for clarification which may lead the learners to make errors (Ellis, 2003)**.** Its influence can be noted through the students' replies to elements (7) and (10) Question (1) and Question (2) respectively which are left by some students with no answer.

Original sentence (7), Question (1) :

*The plants were died from industrial pollution.*

Original sentence (10), Question (2) :

*His parents walked the dog in the garden.*

## 6. Significance of the Study

Research is an important tool that helps us in all areas of our lives. In light of this information, it is an essential piece of the academic learning process as it has some educational impact. As for this paper, it is mulled over as one of the explorations in focusing on a pivotal concern in English sentence structure pointedly ergatives. We expect that it renders assistance to students to catch on to correct usage of the subject gone into. Also, it provides more insight for curricular framework planners in designing teaching materials, lecturers, and instructors who are associated with the realm of education. Over there**,** the feedbacks can be advantageous for those who are attentive in learning English language and would like to develop their skills in the art of dealing with the language.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

Results of the study outfit validation and indisputable proof that the sample under discussion is scanty in perceiving and producing ergative verbs**.** A message **is** sent from the incorrect replies percentage of the total elements, (595,59.5 %), which is lower than the correct ones, (405,40.5 %). This judgment puts forward a reply to Research Question One exhibited in section three**.** Depending on these numbers **,** we infer that ergative verbs pose a challenging acquisition learning problem for Iraqi students of English which is a reply to Research Question Two. As for Research Question Three the errors sources which may be after the deplorable achievement are classified into four classes:

**1.** First Language Interference Errors
The source of interference errors signifies the results of using the elements of the mother language while the learner is speaking and writing the target language.

**2.** Intralingual Error
The kind of intralingual errors result pending the **steps of** learning **the** target language at a phase at which the students do not truly get the required proficiency .

**3.** The learning context
The learning context errors is caused by misleading teaching or the textbook or both. This interferes the two kinds of transfer.

**4.** Communication Strategies
The strategies of communication are strategies that the learners use to convey their intended meaning because of the lack of linguistic resources.

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# APPENDIX 1

**The Test**
**Q1:** Go through these sentences delicately and decide whether each of them is grammatically correct. If you feel sure that is correct, mark (C). If you feel sure that is incorrect, mark (NC).
1. A pen dropped.
2. The bus was arrived.
3. The prices increased.
4. The sun was appeared clearly.
5. A bag with straps carries easily.
6. The door opened after she turned the key.
7. The plants were died from industrial pollution.
8. A pistol fired to start the race.
9. Unfortunately, letters write rarely in today's world.
10. All thoughts about love were vanished from his mind.

**Q2**: Transform the following sentences into middle voice sentences.
1. She has burnt the meal.
2. George wrote the essay.
3. The old rang the bell.
4. The chef boils the water.
5. Rania cooked the meat well.
6. My sister stretched the elastic.
7. Some children broke the chair.
8. The manager closed the company.
9. The high temperature melt the snow.
10. His parents walked the dog in the garden.

# APPENDIX 2

**The Possible Answers**
**Q1:**
1.  C
2.  NC
3.  C
4.  NC
5.  NC
6.  C
7. NC
8. C
9. C
10. NC

**Q2:**
1. The has burnt.
2. The essay wrote.
3. The bell rang.
4. The water boils.
5. The meal cooked well.
6. The elastic stretched.

7. The chair broke.
8. The company closed.
9. The snow melt.
10. The dog walked in the garden.