Why Are Ergatives Tricky to Acquire? Insights into Algerian Undergraduates' Use of Ergatives

دراسة حول صعوبات تعلم فئة خاصة من الأفعال المقتصرة على القواعد النحوية للغة الانـجليزية: دراسة عينة من الطلبة الجزائريين

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Abstract

English ergative verbs, also referred to as ergatives, have been classified as one of the trickiest grammatical areas, even to very advanced students from various first language backgrounds, including Arab learners. This paper aims at getting insights into students' awareness about using this class of verbs which has a special status in pedagogical grammar. An empirical study was undertaken in order to explore whether the students at the Department of Letters and English, Frères Mentouri University, Constantine1, are aware of ergative verbs and their distinctive properties. The analysis of the results has revealed that this class of verbs has created to the students two learnability problems: one is related to the first type of ergative verbs (typical ergatives), and the other problem to the second type (ergatives in the broad sense). On the basis of such findings, recommendations are put forward in order to address the problems encountered by students with both types of ergative verbs.

ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث فئة خاصة من الأفعال التي تقتصر على قواعد النحو للغة الانجليزية، والتي تسمح بإقران الفاعل لفعل معين لازم في سياق معين مع مفعول به لنفس الفعل في سياق آخر كفعل متعد دون أن يطرأ أي تغيير على صيغة الفعل في كلا السياقين. ويجدر بالذكر أنه تم تصنيف هذا النوع من الأفعال من طرف العديد من علماء قواعد النحو على أنه من أصعب أنواع الأفعال التي خلقت لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية صعوبات جمة لتعلمه، بما فيهم متعلمي المستوى المتقدم. وقد تم إجراء دراسة من أجل الكشف عن مدى إدراك طلبة اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة قسنطينة1 لهذه الفئة الخاصة من الأفعال، وكذا تسليط الضوء على الأسباب التي تجعلها صعبة الفهم والاستخدام. أظهرت النتائج أن فئة الأفعال قيد الدراسة قد خلقت للطلبة مشكلتين رئيسيتين، كل منهما متعلق بنوع معين من هذه الأفعال. وعلى هذا الأساس، تم اقتراح مجموعة من التوصيات لمدرسي مقياس قواعد النحو بهدف معالجة الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة اللغة الانجليزية في استيعاب هذه الفئة الخاصة من الأفعال.

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1. Introduction

The discussion of English ergative verbs has eventually found its way into pedagogical grammar after many theoretical discussions of their inherently distinctive properties. Many previous studies– such as those of Burt & Kiparsky (1972), Richards (1973), Kellerman (1978), Rutherford (1987), Hubbard & Hix (1988), Zobl (1989), Abdullayeva (1993), Yip (1994), Hubbard (1994), Hirakawa (1995), Lock (1996), Ingham (1996), Oshita (1997), Montrul (1997), Can (2000), and Ju (2000)– have shown that learners from various first language backgrounds, including Turkish, Japanese and Arabic, usually tend to misuse ergative verbs, avoid using them in the first place and prefer the use of passive verbs instead. The motivation for the choice of the current topic stems from the fact that English ergative verbs, or the notion of ergativity in general, have been singled out by many language teaching professionals, such as Yip (1994), Hubbard (1994) and Lock (1996), as one of the most troublesome grammatical aspects to second and foreign language learners of English. Ergative verbs have been found to cause difficulty to learners from various first language backgrounds, including Arab students. More strikingly, they have proven to pose a serious logical problem of acquisition, even to very advanced students of English. Previous research by Kellerman (1978) and Abdulleyava (1993) has revealed that the rate of ergative avoidance increases as the students' proficiency level increases. We believe that such difficulty of this class of verbs is worth investigating.

The present investigation has been carried out in an attempt to answer the following four research questions:

• Are the students under study aware of ergative verbs and their inherently distinctive properties?

• Why is this class of verbs hard to acquire?

• What kind of problems do students encounter in acquiring this type of verb patterns?

• Do such problems relate to one particular type of ergatives or to both– typical *ergatives* with a transitive counterpart (Type 1), and *ergatives in the broad sense* which are always intransitive (Type 2)?

An empirical study, using a test as a tool for collecting data, has been conducted in order to tap into the students' awareness about using this class of verbs which has a special status in pedagogical grammar. As background to the present investigation, a definition of ergative verbs is initially provided. Then, a clear-cut distinction is drawn between the two types of ergatives, with a special focus on the *causer-affected* analysis (in contrast to the conventional *actor-goal* one) which could best account for this particular type of verbs. In addition, light is cast on the sources of difficulty of acquiring this class of verbs, highlighting various reasons as to why ergatives are "tricky" for students to acquire.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What Are Ergative Verbs?

Ergative verbs are divided into two types: *"typical ergatives"* (referred to in this paper as Type 1) and *"ergatives in the broad sense"* (referred to as Type 2). In order to define ergative verbs, Yip (1994) points out, a distinction between their two types proves to be important: typical ergatives can occur both as transitive and intransitive (for instance, *open, break and cook*), whereas ergatives in the broad sense are unaccusative verbs occurring always as intransitive (for example, *happen, fall* and *die*). The first typical type of ergatives always allows the passive voice, whereas the second does not, since only transitive verbs allow passivization in English. She distinguishes between ergative verbs which have two alternative sub-categorization frames (a transitive and an intransitive one), and ergative verbs which can only occur as intransitive, as the following examples demonstrate:

• Ergatives WITH a transitive / causative counterpart (Type 1), such as in:

– The sun melted the ice. (Trans.V; active)

➤ The ice *melted*. (Intrans.V; ergative)

– The enemies sank the ship. (Trans.V; active)

➤ The ship *sank*. (Intrans.V; ergative)

– The burglar broke the window. (Trans.V/ active)

➤ The window ***broke***. (Intrans.V; ergative)

Other verbs that belong to this category (Type 1) *include boil, bounce, close, dry, fracture, hang, move* and *roll*.

• Ergatives WITHOUT a transitive counterpart (Type 2), such as in:

– Something ***happened***.

– The guests ***arrived***.

– The leaves ***fell***.

Other examples *include appear, arise, disappear, emerge, pass away* and *erupt*.

Chalker & Weiner (1994, p. 138) define a typical ergative verb (Type 1) as a "kind of verb with which the same noun can be used as the subject when the verb is intransitive, and as the object when the verb is transitive." For example:

The door *opened* ➤ Someone *opened* the door.

The meat *is cooking*. ➤ *I am cooking* the meat.

In relation to Type 2, there are certain verbs which do not have a transitive counterpart; nevertheless, they are described as having an ergative interpretation in the broad sense– for example, *fall, happen, die* and exist. Perlmutter (1978) was the first to discuss a class of "change-of-state" verbs, which he called *"unaccusative"*, that denote processes that lack volitional control. To put it differently, he discussed a class that indicates verbs of *being* or *becoming*, verbs of *happening*, and in general, any invariably intransitive verb which indicates something other than a conscious voluntary action. This class of verbs looks like active intransitive verbs (such as *eat, sing* and *dance*); however, the two are basically different one from the other. Perlmutter (1978) proposed the *Unaccusative Hypothesis* which makes a distinction between simple intransitive verbs (like *eat, sing* and *dance*) which imply volitional control, and unaccusative verbs which do not (like fall, happen and exist). Later on, the latter have become known as "ergative verbs in the broad sense," following Keyser & Roeper (1984). Simple intransitive verbs may be referred to as *unergative* or *non-ergative* for the sake of precision.

2.2 Analysis of Ergativity: Conventional Actor-Goal Vs. Causer-Affected

It is possible to introduce a second participant into the following two sentences, as explained by Lock (1996):

Eg.(1a) <u>The ice melted</u>. (S + Ergative V)

Eg.(1b) <u>The ship sank</u>. (S + Ergative V)

not in the object position, but rather in the subject position, making the original subjects the objects:

Eg.(2a) *<u>The sun</u>* <u>melted the ice</u>.   (S+V+O)

Eg.(2b) *<u>The enemies</u>* <u>sank the ship</u>. (S+V+O)

It is also possible to mark these ergatives with passive morphology, if the intention is to give a sense of *causality*:

Eg.(3a) The ice *<u>was melted</u>* *(by the sun)*.

Eg.(3b) The ship *<u>was sunk</u>* *(by the enemies)*.

In applying a conventional actor-goal analysis to the aforelisted examples, one would have to label as **actors** *the ice* and *the ship* in Eg.(1a) and Eg.(1b) respectively, but as **goals** in Eg.(3a) and Eg.(3b).This apparently exaggerates the difference between *"The ice melted"* and *"The ice was melted"*, and between *"The ship sank"* and *"The ship was sunk."* The ice and the ship have the same participant role in both versions. They are neither actors nor goals, but the participants that are **affected** by or undergo the processes. Lock (1996) suggests the label "affected" to be used to refer to such participants. In the transitive clauses, the participants *the sun* and *the enemies* are also not really actors, but rather **"causers"** of the processes. In other words, Eg.(2a) and Eg.(2b) are in some respects similar to clauses such as *"The sun caused the ice to melt"* and *"The enemies caused the ship to sink"*, which are causative structures. The analysis of the three versions of the first clause, thus, becomes:

• <u>The ice   melted</u>. ➤(**MIDDLE** voice)

(Affected) (Process)

• <u>The sun   melted</u> <u>the ice</u>. ➤ (**ACTIVE** voice)

(Causer) (Process) (Affected)

• The ice <u>was melted</u> (<u>by the sun</u>).

(Affected) (Process)   (Causer)

➔ (**PASSIVE** voice)

Such three versions can be regarded as three options in the voice system (the *active*, *passive* and *middle* voice) which English allows with some particular verbs (**Type 1: typical ergatives**) which represent processes of movement and change. In some languages, the middle voice is distinguished from the other voices by the use of a different form of the verb or by certain morphology marked on the noun. In English, however, the verb form is the same as for the active voice, and this may be confusing to learners of English (Lock, 1996).

The causer-affected type of analysis can best account for the current class of verbs (ergatives) and the notion of ergativity in general. It brings to light the fact that English grammar allows representation of processes not only in terms of **actions** which have a doer (the actor) and which may or may not be extended to a second participant (the goal), but also in terms of **happenings** which affect one participant (the affected) and which may or may not be caused by another participant (the causer). Following an ergative analysis, all one-participant clauses in which the single participant is an entity to which something **happens** (i.e. with the one participant affected), rather than an entity which **does** something, can be interpreted as *middle voice*. More examples include: "The branch I was sitting on suddenly **cracked**", "My level **has improved**", "Sand rose into my eyes", "My letter **did not arrive** on time" and "**I fell**." However, not all ergative verbs can be used in clauses with a causer (a second participant) added. Ergative patterns such as *rise*, *arrive* and *fall* (**Type 2: ergatives in the broad sense**) do not allow causers to be introduced, as the following ungrammatical clauses illustrate: *<u>The keen wind</u> **rose** sand into my eyes, *<u>The postman</u> **did not arrive** my letter on time, and *<u>Rebecca</u> **fell** me on purpose (Lock, 1996).

2.3 Sources of Difficulty of Acquiring Ergative Verbs

A number of studies carried out by various researchers, mainly Burt & Kiparsky (1972), Richards (1973), Kellerman (1978), Rutherford (1987), Hubbard & Hix (1988), Zobl (1989), Abdullayeva (1993), Yip (1994), Hubbard (1994), Hirakawa (1995), Lock (1996), Ingham (1996), Oshita (1997), Montrul (1997), Can (2000), and Ju (2000), have shed a great deal of light on learners' tendency to misuse ergative verbs in ways that could be summarized as follows:

• Learners mistakenly passivize such verbs as in:

– *He <u>was arrived</u> early. (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972);

– *One day, it <u>was happened</u>. (Richards, 1973);

– *The most memorable experience of my life <u>was happened</u> 15 years ago. (Advanced learner/ First language: Arabic) (Yip, 1994);

– *Most people <u>are fallen</u> in love and marry with somebody. (High intermediate learner/ First language: Japanese) (Yip, 1994).

• They reject grammatical sentences such as in:

–The mirror shattered during the earthquake, What <u>cooks</u> most quickly? and supply incorrect alternatives like "*The mirror <u>was shattered</u>, What <u>can be cooked</u>" (Yip, 1994), in contexts where the agent (causer of the action) is not called for.

• They mistakenly use unaccusative ergative verbs (Type 2 which are always intransitive) transitively, introducing a causer, as in:

*The shortage of fuels <u>occurred</u> the need for economical engine (Rutherford, 1987).

• They add a post-verbal noun phrase in sentences like:

*I was just patient until <u>dried my clothes</u>, meaning "I was just patient until my clothes <u>had dried</u>" (Zobl, 1989).

On the acquisition of ergative verbs by Turkish students of English, research by Abdullayeva (1993), Montrul (1997) and Can (2000) has found that Turkish students tend to avoid using ergative patterns, preferring the use of passive patterns over them. Moreover, Abdulleyava's (1993) study has demonstrated that the rate of ergative avoidance increases as the students' proficiency level increases. Kellerman's (1978) findings support the case.

In her attempt to answer the question: *Why are ergatives very hard to acquire?* Yip (1994) clarifies the fact that learners' treatment of ergatives as if they were passives may be seen as a reflection of the typological organization of English, in which grammatical relations are based on the nominative-accusative system. In this system, the semantic role of *agent* normally corresponds to the grammatical function *subject*, that of *theme* or *patient* to the grammatical function *object* (Marantz, 1984; cited in Yip, 1994). Thus, in an ordinary (unergative) transitive sentence like *"John kicked the ball"*, *"John"* is the agent responsible for the action, who provides the energy involved and wilfully instigates it. The *"ball"* is the inert participant which undergoes a change of state (motion, in this case). This mapping of the agent role to the subject of a transitive verb is the most preferred and productive mapping in English. However, in a passive sentence, a theme surfaces in subject position: *"The ball was kicked (by John)"*. In this case, *"the ball"* appears as a subject, but is not an agent, so the verb has special morphological marking to indicate the change.

Yip (1994) argues that in spite of the many similarities that ergatives share with passives, they differ in one crucial respect: Ergatives have **no** special morphological marking, but appear just like other simple intransitive verbs (such as *sing*, *dance* and *eat*)– a phenomenon which is deemed **exceptional** cross-linguistically. Languages other than English use various devices such as reflexive morphemes (as in French) and vowel alternation (the German and Japanese languages) to mark the *ordinary* (non-ergative) *transitive* and *ergative* verbs differently, for example:

-the French word *break*:*"**se** briser"* (ergative)/ "briser" (transitive)➤ **[reflexive morphemes]**

- the German word sink: "s**i**nken" (ergative)/ "s**e**nken" (transitive) ➤ **[vowel alternation]**

- the Japanese word fall: "tao**re**ru" (ergative)/ "taoˢu" (transitive) ➤ **[vowel alternation]**.

Since the passive is very productive in English, it is plausible for learners to adopt the working hypothesis that says: Whenever the theme is in subject position, mark the verb with passive morphology. However, the class of ergatives is an exception to this rule. Ergative verbs do not require any special marking to indicate the change in grammatical relation; for instance, I *boiled* a few eggs. ➤ A few eggs *boiled*. In order to master ergative verbs, learners of English as a second or foreign language have to learn not to mark them, in contradiction to the typological organization of English grammar described earlier, whereby the subject of the sentence is assumed to be the agent of the action (Yip 1994).

Moreover, there is a further factor that might contribute to the difficulty involved: Learners display unwillingness to believe that certain changes of state may occur spontaneously. This belief may have a deep-seated intuitive basis. Carey (1985) notes that laypeople, and even undergraduate physics students, have a firm but misguided intuition that no motion is possible without a force causing it. The preference of foreign language students for the passive over the ergative form accords with this intuition by suggesting the presence of a missing *agent*. Yip (1994) explains that one characteristic of ergative verbs is that the theme tends to be misunderstood as the agent that causes the change of state; for example, *The ship sank* is interpreted as though the ship was sinking itself away. Many languages use reflexive forms to express such predicates, as seen earlier, but English does not. Learners think: "There has to be a reason for everything." They fill this logical gap in English by incorrectly supplying the *missing causal agent*, which results in the creative causative/ transitive use of ergatives as reflected in the passive. One example is students' misuse of *be happened* to mean "be caused/ made to happen": **That car crash was happened last month.* (Passive implying the causal missing agent: "traffic" or "a careless driver")

More studies have shown that English ergative verbs are seriously troublesome in second and foreign language acquisition. Kellerman (1978) has found that Dutch learners of English tend to reject and avoid typical ergative structures such as *"The cup broke"*, preferring the agentless passive *"The cup was broken."* Rutherford (1987) notes that learners from different first language backgrounds produced

the following sentences:

– *The shortage of fuels <u>occurred</u> the need for economical engine.

–*This construction will <u>progress</u> my country.

– *Careless currency devaluation will <u>go back</u> us to old habits.

He explains that students' preference for the passive version over the ergative one is probably due to their interpretation of ergatives, of both types, as being transitive (since only transitive verbs can be transformed into the passive in English). The evidence which he puts forward is the observation that learners often turn ergative verbs into transitives/ causatives, as the aforelisted three examples confirm.

Zobl (1989) sheds light on foreign language production of passivized ergative constructions such as *are fallen (frequent in Japanese learners' English grammar), and *was happened (spotted in advanced learners' grammar whose first language is Arabic). According to him, even very advanced learners of English struggle with these verbs which involve certain subtle semantic distinctions. Other works dealing with error analysis, such as Burt & Kiparsky (1972) and Richards (1973) consider these errors to result from problems that learners have with tenses or the passive voice. If this were the case, one would expect all verbs to be equally susceptible to appearing with this incorrect morphology. It is reported in Hubbard (1983; cited in Hubbard, 1994), however, that the overwhelming majority (more than 90%) of such errors, in a sample of compositions from eight different languages, occurred with a specific class of verbs: those which have a special status and are called unaccusative or ergative verbs in the broad sense.

Yip (1994) spotlights the fact that the tendency of foreign language learners to passivize ergative verbs can be traced back to the distinctive properties of this class of verbs. Ergatives share close similarities with agentless passives: both are intransitive, lack an agent, and the patient appears in Subject position in the clauses of both. Students' inclination to treat ergatives like passives originates from the inherent similarities between the two structures. However,

the two exhibit different syntactic behaviour, in that the passive allows a "by-phrase", as in the following Eg.(1a) and control into the purpose clause (Eg.2a), whereas the ergative does not (Egs.1b and 2b):

Eg.(1a) The ship *was sunk* <u>by the enemies</u>.

Eg.(1b) *The ship *sank* by the enemies.

Eg.(2a) The ship *was sunk* <u>to collect insurance</u>.

Eg.(2b) *The ship *sank* to collect insurance.

Jaeggli (1986) argues that when there is a "by-phrase," it takes on the agent role, while in an agentless passive, the agent role remains as an "implicit argument," and its presence is implied by the passive morphology. This explains why the passive allows control into the purpose clause (Eg.2a): there is an implicit argument in the passive which is absent in the ergative structure.

The overgeneralization of the passive to ergative patterns creates a major learnability problem. As has been discussed earlier (in Subsection 2.1), ergative verbs can be divided into two main types or subgroups (Yip, 1994):

• Type 1: ergatives that are both transitive and intransitive (typical ergatives, such as melt and break); and

• Type 2: ergatives that are always intransitive (i.e. unaccusative verbs, such as happen and die).

As far as Type 2 is concerned, learners' grammar generates a superset which includes both correct passives and ill-formed passives such as *be happened, *be existed and *be died. The unaccusative analysis suggests an explanation for why this particular pattern of errors may occur. Hubbard (1994) explains that learners extend the passive to sentences such as *"This problem <u>has existed</u> for many years"* because they wrongly think that the direct object (*this problem*) of verbs like exist can advance to become a surface subject. It is true that such unaccusative verbs have a direct object as their *underlying argument* (person/ being that *undertakes* the action or *undergoes* the change of state); however, they never have a subject (person/ being that *performs* the action).

Looking for solutions, Yip (1994) raises the learnability question: How can learners cut back from

the *superset* (i.e. overgeneralisation) to the restricted *subset* which English allows? In other words, How can the malformed passives drop out of the learners' grammar? She answers these questions by explaining that there is no positive evidence in the English input for the non-occurrence of these forms; they simply do not occur in the input. Hearing **positive evidence** exemplifying the ergative pattern containing these verbs could not necessarily lead the learner to the conclusion that they do not undergo the passive. A student might wrongly think that *"happen"* allows both the passive and active forms. The active version (ergative construction) which s/he hears in the input would not serve as disconfirming evidence for the impossibility of the passive version. This is where the question of grammatical instruction arises: **negative evidence**, which the situation seems to call for, can be supplied in the classroom in order to address such learnability problems. Yip (1994: 132) suggests that "(…) **consciousness-raising** directing the learner's attention to the ill-formedness of the passive form [of verbs like *happen*, exist and rise] may trigger the expunging of these forms." Instead of leaving it up to chance for the learner to notice the non-occurrence of the deviant patterns, consciousness-raising can make him/ her not overgeneralize the passive rule to ergative verbs of Type 2 (those that are always intransitive; unaccusative verbs/ ergatives in the broad sense).

Typical ergative verbs (Type 1: those that do have a transitive counterpart) create a different problem. The transitive counterpart of such typical ergatives always allows passivization:

Eg.1. The snow *melted* (**in** the heat).

Eg.2. The snow *was melted* (**by** the heat).

Yip (1994) explains that the difficulty, here, lies in the distinction between the typical ergative construction (Eg.1) and the agentless passive one (Eg.2). Learners do not distinguish between the typical ergative verb and the passivized transitive verb, but instead, wrongly use the two interchangeably. In terms of learnability, the question raised here is not that learners have to eliminate the ill-formed passive verbs from their grammar as it is the case with Type 2. Rather, what needs to be learned is the distinction

between the passive and the ergative constructions. To put it differently, learners need to learn when to use the ergative pattern and when to use the passive one. According to the Uniqueness Principle proposed by Pinker (1984; cited in Yip, 1994, p.132), "(…) a learner assumes each meaning to be encoded by a single morphological form or syntactic structure, unless the language provides evidence to the contrary." In other words, only when learners perceive a difference in meaning will they mark a form distinctively. Likewise, Yip (1994) suggests that in a situation where students incorrectly use two similar meanings interchangeably (in the present case, the ergative and the passive meanings), consciousness-raising may be useful in alerting these learners to the subtleties of meaning involved.

3. Research Methodology of the Study

3.1 Participants

The present investigation is based on a random sample of **80** second-year students at the Department of Letters and English, Faculty of Letters and Languages, Frères Mentouri University/ Constantine 1, during the academic year 2020-2021. The students were assigned to groups by the administration in a random manner. The choice of second year level was based on the consideration that *transitive/ intransitive verbs* and the passive voice are programmed for second-year students and taught through a series of consciousness-raising activities. These two particular grammar aspects play a key role in grasping the notion of ergativity, in general, and understanding the distinct properties of ergative verbs, in particular. Second-year students are expected to have dealt with verb transitivity/ intransitivity and voice, and thus developed awareness about how to use such grammar constructions.

3.2 Method and Data Collection

An empirical study was undertaken to tap into the students' awareness of the targeted class of verbs (ergatives) and its distinctive properties. A **grammaticality judgment test** was selected as a tool for collecting the required data (***See the Appendix***). We had thought about the highest level– free production (writing a composition), but decided against it

because it requires a large scale operation, and there is no guarantee that the students would use ergative verbs in the first place (avoidance phenomenon) in their composition. Even if the participants employed a few ergatives, we would have a limited number, making the present study incomplete. In contrast, the grammaticality judgment test presents a variety of ergative verbs (24 ones) of both types, and this enables us to get closer insights into the students' use of this type of verbs.

The grammaticality judgment test used in the current study, from Yip (1994, p. 139), in its original shape and before any adaptations were made, had been designed for ESL learners with a rather good level in English. As the context being dealt with was EFL, with rather less advanced students, the researcher of the current investigation decided to adapt the original test in a way that would suit the level of the EFL subjects involved in the study. The original text was shortened and divided into five parts, each entitled to make the text less overwhelming for the students. In addition, a few complex cultural aspects were dropped to not impede the subjects' comprehension of the text.

The text contains **24** ergative verbs: 12 grammatical and 12 ungrammatical. Out of each category, 08 are typical ergative verbs (Type 01, which is more frequent and can be used both transitively and intransitively in *different* contexts), and 04 are unaccusative verbs with an ergative interpretation only in the broad sense (Type 02 which are always intransitive and do not have a transitive counterpart). All verbs in the text were underlined to ensure that the students would not skip identifying any ergative verb. However, the non-ergative verbs (such as *have, guess, don't know*) were not taken into account in the analysis of results because they were irrelevant to the study. They were merely used as distractors from the targeted focal point: ergative verbs.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the grammaticality judgment test results is **twofold**: the *grammatical* ergative verb patterns are analyzed first, then the *ungrammatical* ones. The primary focus is on the students' judgment (identification) of the ergative verbs as "grammatical"

or "ungrammatical," as well as the *corrections* they provided for the ergatives judged as "ungrammatical." It is important to note that corrections of tenses, spelling, or any other irrelevant grammar aspects were not considered for the focus was exclusively on the notions of ergativity, as related to verb transitivity/intransitivity, and the voice system.

4.1 Grammatical Ergative Verbs

They are *twelve* verbs highlighted in the following sentences (from the text in the Appendix):

- The window **broke** last night when the door **opened**.

- The car was bought just recently, when prices **dropped**.

- You know how much I love these movies although I **scare** easily.

- Good idea, but we should have dinner first. What **cooks** most quickly?

- Pizza **heats up** in the oven quickly.

- Also, eggs **boil** in only ten minutes if you'd like to have some.

- I hope the supermarket **hasn't closed**.

- In fact, two of them which **had arrived** a month ago were read last week.

- I must go back very soon to my town because things at home **developed** drastically the last couple of weeks.

- Oh, It seems that an accident **happened** here!

- For dessert, I'll get some oranges which **fell** in the garden.

It is key to analyze the ergative verbs in their particular context. The first *eight* verbs are Type 1: typical ergatives (which can be used both transitively and intransitively, but in different contexts and with different intentions in meaning), whereas the last *four* are Type 2: ergatives in the broad sense (unaccusative verbs with no transitive counterpart).

Table 1 presents the obtained results in terms of judgment (identification) of *grammatical* ergative verbs by the **80 students** involved in the study. The participants' corrections will be supplied in the discussion, either.

Table 1:

Rates of Judgment of Grammatical Ergative Verbs

	Ergative Verbs	Judgment			
		Right		Wrong	
		N	%	N	%
TYPE1	broke	08	10	72	90
	opened	11	13.75	69	86.25
	dropped	19	23.75	61	76.25
	scare	06	07.50	74	92.50
	cooks	03	03.75	77	96.25
	heats up	27	33.75	53	66.25
	boil	31	38.75	49	61.25
	hasn't closed	15	18.75	65	81.25
TYPE2	had arrived	51	63.75	29	36.25
	developed	42	52.50	38	47.50
	happened	61	76.25	19	23.75
	fell	75	93.75	05	06.25

Developed by the Researcher

The figures in the table demonstrate the students' inability to recognize correct ergative verbs. In their identification of the grammaticality of the typical ergative verbs (Type 1) in the text, the majority of the students wrongly judged correct ergative verbs as "ungrammatical": *cooks*: 96.25%, *scare*: 92.50%, *broke*: 90%, *opened*: 86.25%, *hasn't closed*: 81.25%, *dropped*: 76.25%, *heats up*: 66.25%, and *boil*: 61.25%. These students suggested the following corrections:

■ What *_is cooked_ / _can be cooked_ most quickly?/ *What dishes that _are cooked_ quickly?/ *What cooks are most quickly? (*"cooks"* in this sentence is not used as a verb, but as a noun: *dishes*)

■ You know how much I love these movies although I *_am scared_ / _get scared_ easily.

■ The window *_was broken_ last night when the door *_was opened_.

■ I hope it *_hasn't been closed_.

■ The car was bought just recently, when prices *_were dropped_.

■ Pizza *_is heated up_ / _can be heated up_ in the oven quickly.

■ Also, eggs *_are boiled_ / _can be boiled_ in only ten minutes.

The students assumed that the aforementioned typical ergative verbs *(cook, scare, break, open, close, drop, heat up and boil)* had to be put in the passive form. They had difficulty distinguishing between the ergative verb patterns (spontaneous, natural actions) and the agentless passive ones (causative actions). It is true that typical ergative verbs have a transitive counterpart, and thus can be converted into the passive; however, in this particular context, there is no agent intended, so the ergative pattern has to be opted for instead of the passive one. The students need to be aware about when to use the ergative pattern and when the passive one, so as to become able to mark the earlier distinctively from the latter. It is **wrong** to use the two distinct verb patterns interchangeably, as emphasized by various grammarians such as Yip (1994), Hubbard (1994) and Lock (1996).

The other type of ergative verbs which has a broad sense of ergativity (unaccusative verbs which are always intransitive, and thus do not have a transitive counterpart) appears to be less problematic to the students in comparison to Type 1 (typical ergatives). Out of the 80 students involved in the study, the higher percentages correctly identified such verbs as "grammatical", which is the right judgment: fell: 93.75%, *happened*: 76.25%, *had arrived*: 63.75%, and *developed*: 52.50%. As for the students who wrongly identified such ergatives as "ungrammatical", they suggested the following corrections:

■ I'll get some oranges which *_were fallen_ in the garden.

■ Oh, It seems that an accident *_was happened_ here!

■ Two of them which *_had been arrived_ a month ago were read last week.

■ (…) because things at home *_were developed_ drastically the last couple of weeks.

4.2 Ungrammatical Ergative Verbs

As was the case with grammatical ergative verbs, there are equally *twelve* ungrammatical ergative verbs highlighted in the following sentences (from the text in the Appendix). The first *eight* verbs are Type 1: typical ergatives, and the last *four* are Type 2: ergatives in the broad sense.

- Water **is evaporated** from seas, rivers and lakes

- When the vapour **is cooled**, it **is condensed** into droplets around tiny particles of dust, smoke and salt. Then, it **is poured** as rain.

- The mirror **was shattered** during the last earthquake.

- My car **has been broken down**.

- That motorcycle **was crashed** in an accident weeks ago.

- (…) and chicken **is fried** quickly, either.

- Do you have an idea how the rain cycle **is occurred**?

- Water is evaporated from seas, rivers and lakes and **is risen** into the air as vapour.

- Then, it is poured as rain and **is existed** in a liquid form.

- I don't know what **was gone** wrong!

Table 2 reveals the obtained results in relation to judgment of ungrammatical ergative verbs by the **80 students** participating in the investigation.

Table 2:

Rates of Judgment of Ungrammatical Ergative Verbs

	Ergative Verbs	Judgment			
		Right		**Wrong**	
		N	**%**	**N**	**%**
T Y P E 1	is evaporated	27	33.75	53	66.25
	is cooled	32	40	48	60
	is condensed	24	30	56	70
	is poured	13	16.25	67	83.75
	was shattered	01	01.25	79	98.75
	has been broken down	35	43.75	45	56.25
	was crashed	05	06.25	75	93.75
	is fried	09	11.25	71	88.75
T Y P E 2	is occurred	28	35	52	65
	is risen	37	46.25	43	53.75
	is existed	42	52.50	38	47.50
	was gone	21	26.25	59	73.75

Developed by the Researcher

As far as typical ergative verbs (Type 1) are concerned, the majority of the students wrongly judged such ungrammatical verbs as "grammatical":

*was shattered: 98.75%, *was crashed: 93.75%, *is fried: 88.75%, *is poured: 83.75%, *is condensed: 70%. The rest of the ill-formed (i.e. passivized) typical ergatives *is evaporated, *is cooled and **has been broken down* were wrongly identified as "grammatical" by more than half the students: 66.25%, 60% and 56.25%, respectively. This confirms, again, the students' tendency to wrongly passivize ergatives in contexts which call for the use of ergative verbs, i.e. *spontaneous natural* actions, rather than agentless passive verbs which imply that there is a sense of *causality* in the actions (even though the agent is not explicitly mentioned).

In regard to Type 2 of ergative verbs, the larger proportions of the subjects did not recognize the ill-formed (passivized) ergatives: *was gone: 73.75%, *is occurred: 65%, and *is risen: 53.75%. The students considered such ergatives (which are invariably unaccusative and do not have a transitive counterpart) as transitive verbs, turning them into causatives by marking them with the passive voice morphology. However, verbs such as go (in the context of *"go wrong"*), *occur* and *rise* are only ergatives in the broad sense. They are always intransitive, in all contexts; therefore, they do not allow causers to be introduced. It is worth noting that the verb *is existed was accurately judged as "ungrammatical" by slightly more than half the students: 52.50%. The latter also supplied the right correction:

(…) as rain and exists in a liquid form.

4.3 Overall Interpretation of Results

The test findings have confirmed that the majority of the students were not aware of ergative verbs and their distinctive properties. This lack of awareness was reflected through their inability to recognise correct ergative verbs in the test (**cook, scare, break**, being the least recognized ergatives, in addition to **open, close, drop, heat up** and **boil**), on the one hand, and their judgment of most of the ill-formed (passivized) ergatives of both types as grammatical, on the other hand: Type 1: ***be shattered** and ***be crashed** (being the least familiar to the students), besides *be fried, ***be poured**, ***be condensed**, ***be evaporated**, ***be cooled** and ***be broken** down; Type

2: **be gone** (in the context of *"go wrong"*), **be occurred** and **be risen**. It has also been found that Type 1 of this class of verbs (typical ergatives with a *transitive* counterpart) was more problematic to the students than Type 2 (ergatives in the broad sense, which do not have a transitive counterpart) due to the students' lack of awareness of the subtleties of meaning involved in the typical ergative pattern and the agentless passive one.

It is of equal significance to bring to light the fact that both types of the grammar construction under study (ergative verbs) gave rise to two learnability problems: one is related to Type 1, and the other to Type 2 of ergatives. First, the students were unable to distinguish adequately between typical ergative verbs which have a transitive counterpart (such as **break, open, drop, scare, cook, heat up, boil** and **close**) and ordinary passivized transitive verbs. This was reflected through their production of wrong patterns such as ***was broken**, ***was opened** and ***is cooked** as corrections to the already correct ergatives. Grammarians like Yip (1994), Hubbard (1994) and Lock (1996) stress that it is **ungrammatical** to use ergative and agentless passive verbs interchangeably, in that every pattern has to be used in its particular context with its particular meaning or intention. Second, in regard to Type 2 of ergative verbs, which is always intransitive (unaccusative/ ergative in the broad sense), the results have revealed that the students tended to mistakenly mark it with the passive form assuming that it had a transitive counterpart. This was reflected through their acknowledgement of incorrect ergative verbs as "grammatical": ***is occurred**, ***is risen**, ***was gone** (in the context of *"go wrong"*), and their production of wrong corrections of certain ergatives which were already correct in the text: ***had been arrived**, ***were developed** (in the context of "Things developed drastically") and ***was happened**.

As discussed earlier in Section 2. Literature Review, students' tendency to passivize ergatives could be traced back to the inherently distinctive properties of this class of verbs. Ergative verbs and passive verbs share close similarities, in that both verb types are intransitive and lack an *agent*, while the *patient* appears in Subject position. Such inherent similarities usually result in students treating ergatives like passives. However, the two structures exhibit different syntactic behaviour: the passive pattern allows a "by-phrase" and *control* into the clause, while the ergative verb pattern does not. In addition, when there is a "by-phrase", it takes on the *agent* role, whereas in an agentless passive, the *agent* role remains an *implicit argument*, and its presence is implied by the passive morphology.

5. Recommendations of the Study

We recommend grammar teachers to incorporate this class of verbs (ergatives) in their instruction. Besides, the English voice system should be taught in a more comprehensive and communicative manner so as to address both learnability problems associated with the two types of ergatives. In other words, in the instruction of voice, teachers as well as grammar textbook designers should consider the use of consciousness-raising activities that could address the subtleties of meaning involved in the two verb classes: typical ergatives (Type 1) and passives. Such type of activities could also raise students' awareness to reduce the scope of the passive so as not to include ergative verbs which are always intransitive and do not have a transitive counterpart (Type 2). In doing so, students will have more opportunities to focus, reflect and manipulate ergative verbs of both types. Consequently, their awareness of such significant kind of verbs will increase.

Future research involving larger samples of students may help get more and deeper insights into the learnability problems raised by this class of verbs. The present study opens the door for other endeavours that can enrich the discussion of English ergatives and their distinctive properties. Researchers are invited to carry out empirical studies in order to get to grips with the difficulties encountered by learners from various first language backgrounds in learning ergatives. Furthermore, it is highly recommended to investigate viable methods, such as consciousness-raising, that can best teach this class of verbs which has created serious learnability problems, even to advanced students of English as a second as well as foreign language.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the test results has demonstrated that this class of verbs (ergatives), which has a special status in pedagogical grammar, has created to the students two learnability problems. One is related to the first type of ergative verbs (typical ergatives with a transitive counterpart), and the other problem to the second type (ergatives in the broad sense which are always intransitive). The students were found unaware of the distinctive properties of ergative verbs; therefore, they could not distinguish between typical ergative verbs with a transitive counterpart and passivized transitive verbs. The subtleties of meaning involved in the typical ergative pattern and the agentless passive one made the students wrongly use the two forms interchangeably. The second learnability problem was that the students exhibited a tendency to mistakenly extend the passive voice morphology to ergative verbs which are always intransitive, treating them as if they had a transitive counterpart. In brief, as evidenced *theoretically* and *empirically*, the current class of verbs under investigation (ergatives) has proven to be very tricky to acquire by learners of English as a foreign language, and thus deserves to be assigned more appropriate attention in the teaching of Grammar.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix

Grammaticality Judgment Test

(Adapted from Yip, 1994, p. 139)

– Identify the underlined verb patterns in the following text as "*grammatical*" or "*ungrammatical*".

–Correct the verbs you identify as ungrammatical.

Note: The ergative verbs of both types are highlighted in bold characters to make it easier for the paper reader to spot them in the text. However, they were not highlighted for the participants. They were only underlined like the other non-ergative verbs.

Dialogue: In a Study Room

Part One: The Rain Cycle

A: Do you have an idea how the rain cycle **is occurred?**

B: Water **is evaporated** from seas, rivers and lakes and **is risen** into the air as vapour. When the vapour **is cooled**, it **is condensed** into droplets around tiny particles of dust, smoke and salt. Then, it **is poured** as rain and **is existed** in a liquid form.

Part Two: The Books

A: That's amazing! All those books <u>have</u> already <u>been finished</u>!

B: In fact, two of them which had arrived a month ago <u>were read</u> last week. All these books <u>should be given back</u> in two weeks. As you <u>know</u>, <u>I must go back</u> very soon to my town because things at home **developed** drastically the last couple of weeks.

Part Three: The Window

A: Oh, It seems that an accident **happened** here!

B: The window **broke** last night when the door **opened**.

A: What about the mirror?

B: The mirror **was shattered** during the last earthquake.

Part Four: Plans for Tonight

A: What <u>are</u> you <u>doing</u> tonight?

B: I have no idea. My car **has been broken down**. I don't know what was **gone wrong**! The car was bought just recently, when prices **dropped**.

A: I guess your brother can lend you his motorcycle for tonight.

B: No, he can't. That motorcycle **was crashed** in an accident weeks ago.

Part Five: Suggestions for Tonight

A: There's a scary movie which they say <u>must be seen</u> as soon as possible. You <u>know</u> how much I <u>love</u> these movies although I **scare** easily.

B: Good idea, but we <u>should have</u> dinner first. What **cooks** most quickly?

A: Pizza **heats up** in the oven quickly, and chicken is **fried** quickly, either. Also, eggs boil in only ten minutes if you<u>'d like</u> to have some. For dessert, I'll

get some oranges which **fell** in the garden.

B: That's good. I'll go and <u>get</u> what we <u>need</u>. I <u>hope</u> the supermarket **hasn't closed**.

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