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Indirect Speech in the English Language

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to see the most common mistakes high school students make when they learn the difference between direct and indirect speech in the English language. For students who are not native English speakers, converting sentences from direct to indirect speech can be problematic because there is a number of rules that must be followed. Based on the essays and homework they had written throughout their high school education, I analyzed the mistakes they made with reported speech, which mistakes were most common and possible reasons why they made these mistakes.

Keywords: direct speech, indirect speech, common mistakes, rules, language learning

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1. Introduction

All English learners have to master the difference between direct and indirect speech. When we are asked to repeat/retell someone else's words, we can do it by either quoting their exact words, or by using indirect speech. Croatian and English language differentiate in many ways when it comes to converting sentences from direct to indirect speech, so it comes as no surprise that Croatian students have trouble with this considering English is usually their second or even third language. They often make mistakes in reported speech when they write their homework and their essays, so the aim of this theses is to explain the rules of reported speech, analyze the most common mistakes that the students make and try to see what gives most trouble to students who are trying to learn this chapter of English grammar.

The most important thing is to understand the terms direct speech and indirect speech. When we are asked a question like “What did he/she say?”, we can answer it by either repeating the spoken words or by reporting them. We can talk about things that are happening at the very moment or things that happened in the past, but we are talking about them now. Direct speech means repeating someone's exact words. When we are using it in writing we have to enclose these words in quotation marks. There are no quotation marks in indirect speech but the word “that” is often used to mark the introduction of reported words. We can refer to indirect speech as reported speech because of the second part of a reported sentence that comes after the word „that“, is called reported speech (English4today, 2020).

Direct speech: “I love taking care of animals”, she said.

Indirect speech: She said she loved taking care of animals.

Usually we use indirect speech when we talk about something that someone has previously said to us. Because we use our own words when we are reporting what someone has said, we need to follow certain rules for converting direct to indirect speech (Hewings 2013:74). An important part of indirect speech is “backshifting” or going one tense back in indirect speech. When it comes to “backshifting”, we also have to separately analyze modal verbs because they are a separate grammar category and there are a few rules that apply only to modal verbs in reported speech and not all other verbs. Changes need to be made in pronouns, adverbs and demonstratives based on the context and the situation the speaker is in when he or she is

reporting someone else's words. Depending on whether the sentence we are reporting is a statement, a question or a command, it will have a different form in indirect speech. All of these rules will be explained and analyzed in this paper.

The main goal of this paper is to explain how to use indirect speech and all the requirements for converting sentences from direct to indirect speech based on the analysis of high school students' essays and homework. The purpose of this paper is to inquire into the most common mistakes that the students who learn English as a second language make and the reasons why they make them.

2. Methodology

The aim of this paper was to analyze indirect speech in high school students' essays and homework. The corpus comprised seventeen essays on various topics that the students have written during their high school education. Most of them are argumentative essays because they are practicing for their matura exam, but there are also narrative and interpretative essays. I also included my own old works and the materials of my high school colleagues. The students attend grammar school, which means that they have English lessons three times per week. In Croatia students start to learn English in the first grade of elementary school as a compulsory subject. Children learn the basics of reported speech in elementary school and go into more detail in the second year of high school. Each student provided me with their workbooks from the second year, which contained many reported speech tasks, as well as their notebooks, in which they practiced reported speech on the sentences given by their teacher. Their workbook tasks were formed in a way that they were given statements, questions and commands in a form of direct speech and then they had to convert them into indirect speech.

3. Basic rules

3.1. Backshift

Usually the first rule students learn when it comes to indirect speech is that they have to make changes to the original verbs in order to have a grammatically correct sentence. “Backshifting” is the term we use for moving a verb expression backward in time. We do this because a certain amount of time had passed between the first moment the sentence was spoken and the time of reporting it (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020).

Table 1. Tense changes in indirect speech

Direct speech		Indirect speech
Present simple	→	Past simple
Present continuous	→	Past continuous
Present perfect simple	→	Past perfect simple
Present perfect continuous	→	Past perfect continuous
Past simple	→	Past perfect simple
Past continuous	→	Past perfect continuous
Future (will)	→	Future-in-the-past (would)
Past perfect	→	Past perfect

However, when it comes to present tenses, we do not have to always change the verbs from present to past in reported speech. It depends on the context. When present moves backward, it may become past, since that moment is now gone, but if that verb is not finished yet, or its effects are still relevant, we use present perfect. However, a present simple verb expressing something that is always true is probably still true, so it should remain in the present simple form (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020).

I have noticed that most students did not have problems with backshifting verbs and they almost always used correct tenses in indirect speech; however, when the verbs were in the present tense,

they always shifted them to the past tense, no matter if what was said was still true or relevant and should have stayed in the present simple tense or present perfect. For example, for their homework they were given twenty sentences written in the form of direct speech and they had to convert them into indirect speech. The sentence: Amy said: "The Sun rises in the east", almost all of them converted into: "Amy said that the Sun rised in the east". It is a universal truth that the Sun rises in the east so the sentence should have been: "Amy said that the Sun rises in the east". Students made the same mistake with sentences that had the adverb "just" in them. For example: "I just finished reading a great book", he said". Considering this action probably happened only a few moments before the sentence was spoken, the correct report would be: "He said that he has just finished reading a great book". However, most students wrote "He said that he had just finished reading a great book". Believing that they always have to change tenses when reporting sentences, they do not pay much attention to the context. Those mistakes appeared in both their homework and their essays. One student was writing a scary story for her class and in that story she wrote: "He told me he was a gravedigger", even though it was obvious from the context of the story that that person still is a gravedigger at the moment of speaking, so the sentence should read: "He told me he is a gravedigger". This problem mostly occurred with present tenses, the students did not have many issues with past tenses.

"Backshifting" is difficult for Croatian students learning English because it does not exist in the Croatian language. In Croatian there is no change in tense when converting sentences from direct to indirect speech. That is why "backshift" could be difficult to understand when you first start learning it.

3.2.Modal verbs

Modal verbs are also called modal auxiliary verbs. They are: will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, must, need, ought to and dare. We use modal verbs to express necessity or possibility. They are also used when we want to forbid or allow things and also to express how certain or uncertain we are. If we are reporting situations that still exist or are in the future depending on whether the verb in the reporting clause has a present or past tense, we use different modal verbs.

Example 1

Direct speech: "I'll be in Paris at Christmas."

Indirect speech: She **tells** me she'**ll** be in Paris at Christmas.

Even though there are exceptions in most cases if the verb is in a present tense, the modals we use in the reported clause are: will, can, and may. If the verb has a past tense, the modals we can use in the reported clause are: would or will, can or could, or may or might.

Example 2

Direct speech: "The problem can be solved."

Indirect speech: They **said** the problem **can/could** be solved (Hewings 2013:74).

In reported speech modal verbs sometimes change from their original form. We need to change the modal verb we find in the original sentence with its counterpart in the reported form. Those changes can be seen here:

Table 2. Modal verb changes in indirect speech (Hewings 2013:74)

modal verb in original	modal verb in report
could, would, should, might. needn't ought to, used, to, could have, should have, etc.	could, would, should, might, needn't ought to, used, to, could have, should have, etc.
will, can, may	would, could, might will, can, may (existing or future situations and <i>present</i> tense verb in reporting clause) will or would, can or could, may or might (existing or future situations and <i>past</i> tense verb in reporting clause)
Shall	would (talking about the future) should (offers, request for advice, etc.)
must (=necessity) must (=conclude) mustn't	must or had to must mustn't

Sometimes even if there is no modal verb in the original sentence, we still use it in the reported sentence.

Example 3

Direct speech: “You are not allowed to smoke here.”

Indirect speech: She told me that I mustn’t smoke here (Hewings 2013: 74).

The most frequent problems students seem to have in indirect speech were with modals “shall” and “may”. It is similar to the problem they had with present tense in indirect speech. They would automatically change the present tense to the past tense, not paying attention to the context of the situation they were reporting. When there was a modal verb “shall” or “may”, they would more often than not change it to “should” or “might”, even if the reported sentence would not have the same meaning as the original sentence. In reported statements “shall” changes to “would”. As they know that they have to backshift verb tenses, they often backshift modal verbs even when it is not necessary. Here are some examples from their homework where they reported sentences with the wrong modal verbs:

Original sentence: “I **shall** go to the concert.”

Student’s report: She said that she **should** go to the concert.

Correct report: She said that she **would** go to the concert.

In the original sentence what was meant was that the person will go to a concert. If we report it with “should”, it changes the meaning of the sentence in a way that the person feels like she must go to this concert. However, if we report the sentence with “would”, the meaning stays the same. “Would” would also be more formal and more appropriate in writing.

“Shall” changes to “would” in reported statements, but it changes to “should” in reported questions.

Direct speech: “I **shall** go to the movies with you.”

Indirect speech: She said she **would** go to the movies with me.

Direct speech: “**Shall** I ask her out on a date?”

Indirect speech: He asked if he **should** ask her out on a date.

With the modal verb “may” the situation is different. When we use “may” to indicate possibility, then it changes to “might”. When we use “may” to indicate permission, then it changes to “could” (Hewings 2013:74). Sometimes students were not thinking about this difference, so when they would see “may” in the original sentence they would automatically change it to “might” even though the correct modal verb should have been “could”.

Here is an example of their correct use of “may” in indirect speech, and an example where most of them used “might” instead of “could”.

Original sentence: “I **may** be back soon”, she said.

Student’s report: She said that she **might** be back soon.

In this sentence “may” was referring to a possibility: it is possible that she will return quickly, but maybe she will not. Students correctly changed “may” to “might” in reported sentence.

Original sentence: “**May** I use your bathroom?”, she asked me.

Student’s report: She asked me if she **might** use my bathroom.

Correct report: She asked me if she **could** use my bathroom.

In this sentence “may” does not express possibility like it did in the previous one. Here “may” expresses permission, so it has to be changed to “could” and not “might”. When it comes to modal verbs, students encountered most problems with “shall” and “may”. They occasionally forget to make the change in reported speech, so they simply leave the original modal verb. They also have no problems with understanding that modal verbs like “could”, “would”, and “should” do not change in reported speech because they already are in the past.

3.3.Changes to pronouns

Pronouns in indirect speech also change. There are several simple rules that have to be learned to correctly report someone’s speech. The first rule applies to the first person pronouns. When there is the first person pronoun (I, me, mine, we, us, our) in direct speech, it changes

into the third person pronoun (he, she, it, his, her, hers, them, their, theirs, his) in indirect speech if the reporting verb refers to the third person pronouns (7ESL, 2020). For example:

Direct speech: “**I** want to go to visit **my** friends”, he said.

Indirect speech: **He** said he wanted to go to visit **his** friends.

The second rule also applies to the first person pronouns. If the reporting verb refers to the first person pronoun, then the first person pronoun in direct speech does not change in indirect speech. For example:

Direct speech: “**I** will not make it in time for dinner”, **I** said.

Indirect speech: **I** said **I** would not make it in time for dinner.

The third rule for pronoun changes in indirect speech says that if there is the second person pronoun (you, yours, your, yourself, yourselves) in direct speech, it is changed according to object of the reporting verb. For example:

Direct speech: “**You** are very beautiful”, John said to Amy.

Indirect speech: John said to Amy that **she** was very beautiful.

The fourth and final rule applies to the third person pronouns. When there is the third person pronoun in direct speech, we do not change it in indirect speech, it stays the same. For example:

Direct speech: “**They** are lying to me”, **he** said.

Indirect speech: **He** said that **they** were lying to him.

When it comes to changes in pronouns in reported speech, students did not have any problems because they come intuitively. There was not one mistake in their homework or in their essays concerning the misuse of pronouns. That is probably because in the Croatian language we also have to make these changes to pronouns in indirect speech, and we do it automatically.

3.4.Changes to adverbs and demonstratives

Adverbs and demonstratives are also part of indirect speech that we need to be careful about. Because we are reporting someone’s words later in time from when they were originally said, adverbs and demonstratives need to be changed in indirect speech. When we are reporting something, we need to keep in mind all the changes in the situation: there is a different speaker, possibly a different place and almost always a different time. That is why adverbs and demonstratives have to be changed to suit specific situations.

If, for example, Anne found herself talking to a friend called Jess at the park and Jess says: “I will meet you here tomorrow morning”, and later that day Anne is at home telling her mother about her conversation with Jess, she would say: “Jess told me she would meet me at the park tomorrow morning”. Anne cannot say: “Jess told me she would meet me here tomorrow morning”, because the situation had changed. At the moment Anne is speaking to her mother, “here” would mean their home because that is where they are. If Jess does not show up at the park the next day, Anne would say to her: “We were supposed to meet this morning”. Considering it is the next day at the time of speaking, “tomorrow morning” becomes “this morning”. Adverbials mostly depend on the situation the speaker is in at the time of reporting. Here are some of the most common changes of adverbials of time:

Table 3. Common changes to adverbials of time (Eastwood, 2002:350)

Direct speech		Indirect speech
Now	→	then/at the time/immediately
Today	→	yesterday/that day/on Monday etc.
yesterday	→	the day before/the previous day etc.
tomorrow	→	the next day/the following day, etc.
this week	→	last week/that week
last year	→	the year before/the previous year, etc.
next month	→	the month after/the following month, etc.
an hour ago	→	an hour before/an hour earlier, etc.

Table 4. Changes to demonstratives

Direct speech		Indirect speech
This	→	that
These	→	those

Adverbials of time and place could be difficult for people who are learning English as their second language. Again, we have to think about the context of reported speech, and we have to keep in mind the situation in which something was originally said and how it differs from the situation in which that same words are being reported. That is why students can find this a little bit more difficult to grasp. Interestingly, adverbials were not a problem for them when writing essays. Because the stories they were writing for their essays came from their own imagination, they understood the context and what their characters wanted to say, so there were not many mistakes. For example, a student was writing a scary story and she wrote: “Okay, I promise I will wait for you here”, he said. Later, when the character this was promised to realized that her friend was not where he said he would be, the student wrote: “I can’t believe this! He promised he would wait there for me”. The fact that there were not many mistakes in their essays could be because students tend to avoid writing something that they are not completely sure is correct, so they choose simpler sentences.

However, there were several mistakes in their homework. They were given sentences written in direct speech that they needed to rewrite in indirect form. These sentences were more complicated than the ones they chose for their essays. The mistake they most frequently made when it came to adverbials in indirect speech, is that they would not change it at all and simply leave the adverbial from the original sentence. Because the original sentences were written in a specific way, so that students would practice changes in adverbials, every time they would not change it was wrong. This most often happened with adverbials such as “an hour ago”, “last week/month/year” and “yesterday”. They would not change it to “an hour before” or “the year before” or “the day before”. This could be confusing because even though the adverbials of place in Croatian indirect speech change according to the situation, adverbials of time usually stay the same, “last year” and “previous year” have the same meaning in Croatian: “prošle godine”. Here are several examples students had trouble with:

Direct speech: “**Last year** I went to Paris to visit my cousin”, he said.

Student’s report: He said that he went to Paris to visit his cousins **last year**.

Correct report: He said that he went to Paris to visit his cousins the **year before**.

Direct speech: “I had lunch at a restaurant with my family **yesterday**”, she said

Students report: She said she that she had had lunch with her family **yesterday**.

Correct report: She said she that she had had lunch with her family **the previous day**.

Even though there are only two simple changes concerning demonstratives, students would often forget that “this” changes to “that” and “these” to “those”. Just as pronouns and adverbials, demonstratives change when the reported statement changes context or is otherwise different from the direct speech. When teaching reported speech, emphasis is on the backshift, so students mostly focus on using the correct verb tense and neglect other rules of reported speech. Here is an example where most students forgot to change the demonstrative:

Direct speech: „**This** mirror is there so that you can see yourself dancing“, the instructress told him.

Student's report: She told him that **this** mirror was there so that he could see himself dancing.

Correct report: She told him that **that** mirror was there so that he could see himself dancing.

4. Reporting statements

When reporting statements the most important thing to remember is that it is usual for the verb in reported clause to move „one tense back“.¹ However, there is more to reporting statements than backshift. For example, sometimes we report the idea rather than actual words, so there are many verbs that are more descriptive than “say” and “tell”, like “explain”, “interrupt”, “demand”, “insist”, “admit”, “complain”, “warn”, etc. If a sentence written in direct speech says: “I can give you a ride home if you want me to”, then it is better to report it as “He **offered** to give me a ride home” than “He **said** he would give me a ride home”. Students never used any other verb than “said” or “told” when they were reporting statements in their homework. This is not necessarily a mistake; however, other verbs might be more stylistically appropriate in certain situations. For example:

¹ Tense changes are explained in the Backshift chapter.

Direct speech: “I **won't** help you”, she said.

Students report: She said she **wouldn't** help me.

Correct report: She **refused** to help me.

Often instead of reporting what someone said or thought, we report what someone did not say or think. We refer to this as negatives in reporting. The reporting verb has to be negative if we want to report negatives: “She didn’t say how she managed to do that”. When we have a negative sentence to report, we report this in the reported clause: “You are right, she isn’t a very good dancer,” becomes “He agreed that she wasn’t a very good dancer”. We can sometimes report this in the reporting clause, but it all depends on the meaning of sentence: “I don’t agree. She isn’t a very good dancer”, becomes “He didn’t agree that she was a good dancer”. With certain verbs (“believe”, “feel”, “intend”, “plan”, “propose”, “suppose”, “think”, “want”), to report a negative sentence, we make the verb in the reporting clause negative: “I don’t believe he would tell the truth”/“I believe he won’t tell the truth” become “She didn’t believe that he would tell the truth”.

When we are reporting statements, most commonly we use a that-clause in the reported clause. There are also certain rules regarding the use of a that-clause in reported speech and when we can leave “that” out. We can leave “that” out if it comes after the more common reporting verbs (“agree”, “mention”, “notice”, “promise”, “say”, “think”), especially in informal speech. There are some situations in which “that” should not be left out: after less common reporting verbs (“complain”, “confide”, “deny”, “warn”, “speculate”) and specific common reporting verbs (“answer”, “argue”, “reply”), in formal writing, if that-clause does not immediately follow the verb (“She agreed with her that the dress looks nicer than jeans.”) (Hewings 2013:66). While analyzing the students’ homework and essays, I found that students always use “that” in their reported speech, even in the sentences where it could be left out. This is not necessarily a mistake because in formal writing it is recommended to use “that”, but knowing those little stylistic differences such as when it is necessary to use “that” and when we can leave it out in indirect speech shows that they have great knowledge and high understanding of English language. For example, this was sentence from their homework: “He mentioned that he was going away on a trip”. “That” was not necessary here and the sentence could have been: “He mentioned he was going away on a trip”.

5. Reporting questions

5.1. Yes-no questions

There are three types of questions that can be reported. First, there are “yes-no” questions, questions with “or” (choice questions) and wh-questions.

Table 5. Types of reported questions

	Direct speech	Indirect speech
yes-no questions	I said: “Can I help you?” She said: “Do you like the movie?”	I asked if I could help her. She asked me if I liked the movie.
choice questions	“Do you prefer summer or winter?”, he asked.	He asked whether I preferred summer or winter.
wh-question	“How are you?”, he asked me. “Where are the car keys?”, she asked.	He asked me how I was. She asked me where the car keys were.

“Yes-no” questions are the ones that can be answered simply with “yes” or “no” like: “Do you have a driver’s license?”. Questions with “or” offer us a choice: “Do you want ice-cream or pizza?”. Indirect reports of these questions have a reported clause introduced by “if” or “whether”. It is important to note that in some case “if” cannot be used, and we must use “whether”. For instance, we cannot use “if” if it is followed by “to-infinitive”.

Example:

Correct: The employee told me I had 30 days to decide **whether** to keep the clothes or not.

Incorrect: The employee told me I had 30 days to decide **if** to keep the clothes or not.

The most common verb we use to introduce reported questions is “ask” (He/she asked if/whether...). When we are reporting questions, we also need to pay attention to all the pronoun changes, tense changes as well as time and place changes. All the rules that applied to reporting statements also apply to reporting questions. When we are reporting questions, it no longer has

the form of a question, but a statement. We do not put question mark at the end of it and the word order is that of a statement (subject-verb-object).

Direct speech: “Do you want to build a snowman?”, she asked.

Indirect speech: She asked me if I wanted to build a snowman.

Yes-no questions and questions of choice seemed to be slightly easier to understand by students than wh-questions. They did not have any problems with the use of “whether” or “if”, although they preferred using “if” and rarely used “whether”. This is probably because “if” is more informal than “whether”, so they hear it more often when they listen to someone speaking English (for example, when they watch television, play video games, work on the computer, etc.). They only used “whether” when it was followed by a “to-infinitive”

Sometimes students would keep the word order that was in the original question when reporting it and they would also leave a question mark at the end of the sentence instead of putting a full stop. Here is an example from their workbook, where some students left a question mark and did not use the correct word order:

Direct speech: “**Will you be back early?**”, she asked.

Student’s report: She asked **will we be back early?**

Correct report: She asked us **if we would be back early.**

What students most often forgot was that verb tenses in the original questions also need to be changed when we report them. They focused on “backshift” when they were reporting statements, but because they had to focus on word order and the use of “whether” and “if”, they would forget to backshift the verb tense.

Direct speech: “**Can** I borrow your car?”, he asked me.

Student’s report: He asked me if he **can** borrow my car.

Correct report: He asked me if he **could** borrow my car.

5.2.Wh-questions

To report wh-questions we first need to understand what wh-questions are. Wh-words begin with the interrogative pronouns “who”, “what”, “when”, “where”, “why”, “which” and

“how”. To report a wh-question we need to have a reporting clause (reporting clause is the part which includes verbs such as “tell”, “say”, “ask”) and a reported clause (reported clause is what the original speaker said) that begins with a wh-word (“He asked me where I lived.”). There are several rules that we need to follow when we report wh-questions. First, when we convert wh-questions from direct to indirect speech they must have the form of a statement and not of a question. The word order of a reported wh-question is the same as the word order in a reported statement (subject + verb):

Correct word order: She asked me where **I had** been.

Incorrect word order: She asked me where **had I** been.

However, there is an exception. We can use inversion in indirect speech when the main clause goes at the end, like an afterthought (“*Where did Elaine have lunch, I was wondering.*”) (Eastwood, 2002:353).

With wh-words “who”, “whom” and “what” in indirect speech it is important to know that these words can be the subject or the object of the reported clause.

Example 1

I asked them who had bought them all that candy. (“Who bought you all that candy?”)

In this sentence “who” is the subject.

Example 2

He wondered what she wanted. (“What do you want?”)

In this sentence “what” is the object.

Wrong word order in reported wh-questions is one of the most common mistakes in indirect speech. In both their homework and their essays students would report questions with the wrong word order. They would keep the word order that was in the questions instead of changing it to a statement word order. This sometimes happened with reporting yes-no questions, but it was much more often with wh-questions. Here are several examples from their workbook:

Direct speech: “How long are you going to be at the gym?” she asked.

Student’s report: She wanted to know how long **was I** going to be at the gym.

Correct report: She wanted to know how long **I was** going to be at the gym.

Direct speech: “Why are you crying?” he asked.

Students report: He wondered why **was she** crying?

Correct report: He wondered why **she was** crying.

The inversion in the reported questions was not the only problem students had with reporting wh-questions. They would often put a question mark instead of a full stop at the end of a sentence as it can be seen from the example above. As with inversion, this also happened with yes-no question, but it was much more often with wh-questions. The beginning of each reported question in students’ workbooks was already written for them, that is why different reporting verbs (“wanted to know”, “wondered”, etc.) were used in examples above, according to the context of the sentence. When students had to write reported questions by themselves in their essays or when they did not have the first part of the reported question already written, they used only “asked”.

For a school assignment, students had to write a short horror story. These essays contained a lot of reported speech because the students preferred to write in a form of a reported dialogue. They made the same mistakes in their essays as in their homework:

Student’s report: Emma looked at me like I was crazy and asked me what **was I** talking about.

Correct report: Emma looked at me like I was crazy and asked me what **I was** talking about.

In addition to the errors related to word order and punctuation, the students made mistakes with verb tenses. Interestingly, they made fewer mistakes when they reported statements than when they reported questions or commands.

6. Reporting commands, suggestions, offers

Commands differ from statements and question in the aspect that there is no tense backshift. We still do need to change the person and adverbials of time and place to fit the situation of report. To report a command or a request, we use “tell” or “ask” + object + to-infinitive:

Direct speech: “Leave me alone!”, she said to him.

Indirect speech: She **told** him to leave her alone.

Direct speech: “Please don’t go”, she said to him.

Indirect speech: She **asked** him not to go.

To report orders we can also use “must” or “have to” to emphasize the fact that it is a command and it must be done:

Direct speech: “You **must** do your homework!”, our teacher told us.

Indirect speech: Our teacher told us that we **must** do our homework.

Direct speech: “You have to get a job”, my mother told me.

Indirect speech: My mother told me that I had to get a job.

There are some other points to note when it comes to reporting commands. For example, the main clause can be in a passive form (“We **were told** to leave.”). In informal English besides using “told” and “ask” we can also use “say” (“The waiter said to wait outside.”), we can use “ask” without the indirect object (“He asked me to leave him alone.”/“He asked to leave him alone.”), to report a request for permission we use “ask” + “whether” or “if” (“Sarah asked her mom if she could go to a party.”).

When we report offers, apologies, warnings, we can use verbs “say” or “ask”, but it is better if we use a verb more suited for the given situation like: “offer”, “warn”, “apologize”, “advise”, etc. There are several forms we use with these reports.

1. A simple clause

“I’m sorry.” → She apologized.

2. Verb + (object) + to-infinitive

“I’m not going to talk to her.” → James refused to talk to her.

“You should move to France.” → She encouraged her friend to move to France.

3. Verb + (object) + that-clause

“I won’t be late.” → He promised that he wouldn’t be late.

“I won’t be late.” → He promised me that he wouldn’t be late.

4. Verb + (object) + (preposition) + gerund

“We should share the cost.” → Someone suggested sharing the cost.

“Why didn’t you tell the truth?” → They blamed him for not telling them the truth.
(Eastwood 2002, 355)

Considering that commands, requests, suggestions and offers are the easiest part of reported speech because there are fewer changes that need to be made than when we report statements or questions, students did not have much trouble with this. However, there were some mistakes when they were not sure whether to use a that-clause or a to-infinitive clause:

Direct speech: “Stay a little longer”, they told us when we were about to leave.

Student’s report: They insisted **to stay** a little longer.

Correct report: They insisted **that we stayed** a little longer.

This mistake was not common, and students mostly did great with reported commands and suggestions, except for those who had problems with English in general. In Croatian reported commands have a similar structure like reported commands in English, so this could also be the reason why students found them rather simple to convert.

7. Present simple reporting verb vs. past continuous reporting verb

There are several other rules of indirect speech that are not taught in English language classes even though they are useful to know, for instance, the different uses of present simple reporting verb and past continuous reporting verb. We use present simple and past continuous tense in reported speech for specific situations. Present simple reporting verb was already mentioned as the tense we use when the word or thoughts that we are reporting are still relevant or if they are often said or repeated (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020):

“The law says that no one under the age of 18 can buy cigarettes or alcohol.” (The law still says that.)

Present simple is also often used in newspaper headlines because that way the news sounds more dramatic:

“JUDGE TELLS REPORTER TO LEAVE COURTROOM”

“PRIME MINISTER SAYS FAMILIES ARE TOP PRIORITY IN TAX REFORM”

(Cambridge Dictionary, 2020)

We usually use past continuous form of the reporting verb when the speaker wants to focus on the content of the report because he has something important or interesting to say or even when the speaker wants to start a new topic of the conversation:

“Annie was telling me that the schools are closing because of the corona virus.”

8. Conclusion

Learning and understanding any new language is a long and demanding process that requires time and dedication. Indirect speech is a very complex part of the English language, and there are many rules that need to be followed, in order to speak and write sentences correctly. In indirect speech there are differences between reported statements, reported questions, reported commands and request. Each one of these parts needs to be studied individually in order to completely grasp indirect speech and the differences between direct and indirect speech. While analyzing students' works, I have found that the most common mistake they make is with "backshifting". They often go one tense back even when it is not necessary. There was also a problem with modal verbs "shall" and "may" because students would often covert them into "should" and "might" when they were supposed to convert them into "would" and "could". They had no problems with changes in pronouns, but when it comes to adverbials, they would forget that they have to change them so that they fit the context in indirect speech. A common mistake was also the wrong word order in reported questions. The students would often write them in the form of a question instead of a statement and leave a question mark at the end of the reported question. Most of the mistakes they made were minor, and they understand reported speech well. The only way to avoid making errors is to be familiar with the rules, to practice and to be exposed to the language. If we know the most common mistakes that (new) learners make, we will place particular focus on these problems and learn how to deal with them and improve our knowledge of the English language.

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