

Error Analysis of Composition Writing: A case of Saudis EFL University Students

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Abstract

The study aimed at identifying and classifying the errors that committed by Saudi students of English in composition writing based on analytical, descriptive method.

The study has reached to many findings of it: Syntactic, Lexical and mechanism errors with different degrees of occurrence. As subcategory of syntactic category, verb agreement errors were the most frequently occurring with 42%. Whereas wrong word choice comes as highest lexical errors committed by the respondent with 72%. Spelling errors, which was subcategory of mechanism were at the top of errors that committed by the very same respondents with 75%. MT interference may be one of the main sources in committing these errors. The subjects directly translate the Arabic words into English equivalents which led to incorrect of sentences. The study recommended the necessity of given more care to composition writing, as well reading, this will help students developing their English language, as will lead them to avoid committing Syntactic, Lexical and mechanism errors. For this researchers ought to carry out depth studies to address the area of composition writing.

Keywords: EFL learners, Saudi context, error analysis; composition writing, mother tongue (MT), interference.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the analysis of errors adults make while learning a second language. The study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners (i.e. Error Analysis or EA), either in their speech or writing or both has been brought under consideration by many educators, EFL teachers, linguists, and researchers throughout the world. In fact, learners' errors have been the subject of controversy for a long time. Generally, as Keshavarz (1999, p. 11) stated, "there have been two major approaches to the study of learners' errors, namely Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis." He further discussed that, "Error Analysis emerged on account of the shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis which was the favored way of describing learners' language in the 1950s and 1960s".

Appeared in the late 1960s and flourished in the 1970s, and as a result of the failure of Contrastive Analysis (CA) to adequately account for student errors, Error Analysis (EA) came as an alternative approach. According to Yang (2010: 266), error analysis is "the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language". Additionally, EA provides data and results in actual and attested problems and not on hypothetical ones (Sridhar, 1975). EA has suggested a new way of looking at errors; they

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are no longer seen as 'sins' but as a way of making learning significant (Sridhar, 1975). Thus, Corder (1974 – as cited in Al-Bayati 2013:42) claims:

"The study of errors is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. It provided us with a picture of the linguistic development of the learner and may give indications to the learning strategies".

Also, EA is important in improving teaching methods. That is, it supplies valuable data that can be used in the preparation of teaching materials, textbooks, and assessments, as well as practical applications for language teachers. Corder (1973) suggested five steps to follow during error analysis namely collection of data, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors.

Crystal's (1999) (cited in Bain, 2006) defines "error analysis" in language teaching and learning, as a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics. Errors are assumed to reflect, in a systematic way, the level of competence achieved by a learner; they are contrasted with "mistakes," which are performance limitations that a learner would be able to correct"

"The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. In this respect it resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process."

Hence the researchers were led to study on the inevitable existence of language and to find out the natural steps for learning. Only if the teacher is aware of them and able to make use of them in the teaching process appropriately that findings of error analysis function as facilitator in language teaching in many ways (Erdogan: 2005).

As stressed by AbiSamra (2003), error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the Target Language (TL) and that TL itself. Pit Corder is the "Father" of Error Analysis (the EA with the "new look"). It was with his article entitled "The significance of Learner Errors" (1967) that EA took a new turn. Errors used to be "flaws" that needed to be eradicated. Corder presented a completely different point of view. He contended that those errors are "important in and of themselves." For learners themselves, errors are 'indispensable,' since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. In 1994, Gass & Selinker defined errors as "red flags" that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the second language. Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1974). Moreover, according to Richards and Sampson (1974, p. 15), "At the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort."

As writing is a continuous complex process of expressions. It is not itself a simple process with its native language and rather even more a complicated process if the language is a foreign language. A number of studies conclude with the impact or interference with their first language during the process of writing in English. Studies done by Cedar (2004); Chen & Huang (2003); Benson (2002); Collins (2002), Seyyed (2012), Neda Ghabool et.al (2012) and Jarvis (2000), all supports this phenomena. Likewise, with any other learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL), the English in the Arab countries was expected to have its impact with its Arabic language interference.

A text is determined legal by the language of syntax and the disagreements with the syntactic rules are called syntax error. This judgment can easily be detected by our knowledge of language but one purpose of a theory of syntax is to possess the structural sentence as acceptable or not. Susana (2007), describes syntactic complexity as the ability to produce writing that shows how ideas and large chunks of information are represented with the use of subordinate and embedded subordinate clauses. Syntax complexity is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL/EFL learners. Scott (1998), identified a number of issues in the study of expressive syntax. Among these were;

- Syntactic structures added and developed in this period occur less frequently in the ambient language.
- The number of discourse contexts for studying syntax increases, (eg. Written as well as spoken language, and informational in addition to narrative and conversational discourse).

Research Method

This study used a quantitative research design based on a survey method through test. The analytical, descriptive method has been used. The survey method employed in this research because it is an efficient way of collecting information from a large number of respondents.

1-Objectives of the Study

The present study aims at fulfilling the following objectives.

- 1- investigating the errors committed by al-Baha University EFL learners in composition writing.
- 2- Describing the types of errors committed by al-Baha University EFL learners in composition writing.
- 3- Analyzing these types of errors.

2. Research Questions

The present study raises the following research questions:

1. Which types of errors are more frequent in their writing compositions??
2. What are the main sources of errors of these EFL learners?
- 3- What problems students tend to have in writing compositions?.

3-Significance of the Study

Although much research has been done on the field of error analysis in EFL learners' written compositions, still this topic is worth investigating with new populations and contexts. The present study can be considered as a significant input to EFL studies. Besides, the significance of the study lies in its findings and implications that can be used by universities teachers in order to address the students written performance problems.

4-Instruments

In obtaining the needed data for the current research, a composition test is utilized. The participants are instructed to write an essay of no more than one hundred words on the topic entitle: '*Computer is the best teacher: Do you agree or disagree. Give reasons to support your choice*'.

5-Sample of the Study

The population of the study consisted of students al-Baha University, College of Sciences and Arts- Biljurashi, level two, at the department of English language. They were 30 in number.

Data Analysis and results

After data collection, the following steps of error analysis specified by Corder (1974) were followed. First, each essay was examined word by word and sentence by sentence. The researcher generated the coding categories based on all writing samples. They were in major three categories as follows: *Syntactic category*, *lexical category* and *mechanism category* respectively.

A- Syntactic Category

The first category of errors committed by the participants is " Syntactic category ". It consists of three subcategories which are:

No	type	percentage
1	Verb agreement	42
2	Omission of 's' plural	25
3	pronouns	18
4	prepositions	15
		100

1- Verb agreement

Error detection	Error correction
<i>I agree that computer also <u>help</u> us in learning</i>	<i>I agree that computer also helps in learning</i>
<i>Computer <u>contain</u></i>	<i>Computer contains</i>
<i>I agree computer <u>develop</u> our skills</i>	<i>I agree computers develops our skills</i>
<i>The students <u>makes</u> progress when using computer</i>	<i>The students make progress when using computer</i>
<i>I <u>does</u> not agree with idea</i>	<i>I do not agree with idea</i>
<i>Teachers <u>makes</u> great effort with students</i>	<i>Teachers makes great effort with students</i>
<i>Yes, I <u>am</u> agree that computer</i>	<i>Yes, I agree that computer</i>
<i>Yes, I <u>m</u> agree that computer</i>	<i>Yes, I agree that computer</i>

2- Omission of 's' plural

Error detection	Error correction
<i>They are many <u>disadvantage</u> of computer</i>	<i>They are many disadvantages of computer</i>
<i>Upgrade our language <u>skill</u></i>	<i>Upgrade our language skill (skills).</i>
<i>They are some <u>reason</u> when we lose our data</i>	<i>They are some reasons when we lose our data</i>

3-Pronouns errors

Error detection	Error correction
<i><u>It's</u> not the best teacher</i>	<i>It is not the best teacher</i>
<i>To make <u>his</u> minds</i>	<i>To make our minds</i>
<i>Computer is important in teaching, but <u>he</u> cannot replace human</i>	<i>Computer is important in teaching, but he cannot replace human</i>

4-Preposition errors

Error detection	Error correction
<i>Studying <u>at</u> computer</i>	<i>Studying by computer</i>
<i>Computer helps you to write <u>on</u> less effort</i>	<i>Computer helps you to write with less effort</i>
<i>I didn't agree <u>on</u> the idea</i>	<i>I didn't agree with the idea</i>

Errors in 'subject verb agreement' such as "I agree computer develop our skills ", instead "I agree computer develops our skills. And the example: ' Yes, I'm agree that computer' instead of ' Yes, I agree that computer' however, the error here is confined to the subject- auxiliary agreement.

It is also obvious out of the respondents product, pronouns error was also a problematic area for them, it could be exemplified as in: Computer is important in teaching, but he cannot replace human' instead of ' Computer is important in teaching, but it cannot replace human'.

Errors in the use of prepositions, for instance, " Computer helps you to write on less effort " instead of " Computer helps you to write_with less effort ", and many others.

From this above section, it indicates that the frequency of the error committed by the subjects might be influenced by many causes and strategies. It also shows the interference of first language MT in interpreting or translating to TL. The subjects were found with certain specific difficulties in empowering the target language. The reasons behind may be multidimensional and varied. Situation like the learning styles, classroom discourse.

B- Lexical Category

No	type	percentage
1	Wrong word choice	72
2	Word formation	13
3	Adding/ addition	15
		100

i- Wrong word choice

Error detection	Error correction
<i>We always <u>believe</u> on computer</i>	<i>We always <u>depend</u> on computer</i>
<i>We need to listen to our teacher and <u>speak</u> with him</i>	<i>We need to listen to our teacher and <u>interact</u> with him</i>
<i>We can use computer to change the <u>school</u> atmosphere.</i>	<i>We can use computer to change the <u>learning</u> atmosphere.</i>
<i>Computer helps to <u>learn</u> new skills</i>	<i>Computer helps to <u>acquire</u> new skills</i>
<i>And <u>make</u> new information</i>	<i>And <u>get</u> new information</i>
<i>You can connect with native <u>people</u></i>	<i>You can <u>communicate</u> with native speakers</i>
<i>In education <u>doctors</u> have computer to make best teaching</i>	<i>In education <u>lecturers/ teachers</u> have computer to make best teaching</i>

Word formation

Error detection	Error correction
<i>And we gain new <u>experiment</u></i>	<i>And we gain new <u>experience</u></i>
<i>Computer is a good <u>teach</u></i>	<i>Computer is a good <u>teacher</u></i>

3- Adding/ addition

Error detection	Error correction
<i>You need to <u>learning</u></i>	<i>You need to <u>(learn)</u>.</i>
<i>Some people <u>can</u> use the computer for entertainment</i>	<i>Some people <u>use</u> the computer for entertainment</i>

The analysis of the data yielded to three categories of lexical errors as explained below. The lexical errors under this category are the items that are directly translated into L2 by sticking to the literal L1 meaning. In other words, the errors in this category are made when the learner literally transfers the individual meaning of an item without knowing the set expressions in the target language. Although it may make some sense to a native speaker of L1, it sounds awkward to a native speaker of the target language (L2). This category consists of lexical errors where a wrong lexical item is used instead of the correct one. By having that wrong item there, the whole sentence does not make any sense. This generally happens particularly when the learner selects a wrong or inappropriate item from several L2 equivalents of the same word. Following are the examples of errors of wrong word choice from the data: Lexical errors in this category consist of the items where the students use the wrong form of a word in their compositions. For instance, when a student intends to use a noun in a sentence (e.g. experiment) but ends up using the noun form of that noun (e.g. experience) this error is categorized as an error of word formation. The student wrongly uses the verb form (teach) instead of (teacher) the noun form from the very same verb (teach) and thus, provided lexical error.

C-Mechanism Category

No	type	percentage
1	spelling	75
2	punctuation	13
3	capitalization	12
		100

1-Spelling

Error detection	Error correction
<i>Computer <u>assitence</u> is good in learning</i>	<i>Computer assistance is good in learning</i>
<i>Computer can assist you to study <u>scince</u></i>	<i>Computer can assist you to study science</i>
<i>I agree computer is best teacher <u>becuse</u></i>	<i>I agree computer is best teacher because</i>
<i>We <u>gein</u> new experience</i>	<i>We gain new experience</i>
<i>Computer is not good <u>enugh</u> to us</i>	<i>Computer is not good enough to us</i>
<i>Unlike computer the teacher smiles and <u>lughs</u></i>	<i>Unlike computer the teacher smiles and laughs</i>
<i>You will get more <u>binifets</u></i>	<i>You will get more benefits</i>
<i>You can find so much information <u>semple</u> by <u>kllking</u> the search <u>buttens</u></i>	<i>You can find so much information simply by clicking the search buttons</i>
<i><u>Thir</u> is no relation between them</i>	<i>There is no relation between them</i>
<i><u>Combuter</u> unlike human</i>	<i>Computer unlike human</i>
<i>The most <u>imbortant</u> thing in computer</i>	<i>The most important thing in computer</i>
<i>Computer makes my learning so <u>eyser</u></i>	<i>Computer makes my learning so easier</i>
<i>I say <u>agine</u> computer is the best teacher</i>	<i>I say again computer is the best teacher</i>
<i>Computer helps in language <u>practis</u></i>	<i>Computer helps in language practice</i>

2- punctuation

Identification error	Error correction
<i>I agree. Because it refreshes our mind</i>	<i>I agree, because it refreshes our minds</i>
<i>Yes. I agree because you find whatever you want</i>	<i>Yes, I agree because you find whatever you want</i>
<i>I disagree. Because we want to connect (communicate) with person.</i>	<i>I disagree, because we want....</i>
<i>and speak with him</i>	<i>And speak with him</i>
<i>Yes. computer assists you</i>	<i>Yes, computer assists you</i>

3- Capitalization

	Error detection	Error correction
1	<u>a</u> computer is the best teacher	A computer is the best teacher
2	<u>i</u> don't agree with idea	I don't agree with idea
3	<u>that</u> doesn't mean that the computer is useless	That doesn't mean that the computer is useless
	<u>ok</u> , computer can be used with the presence of the teacher.	Ok, computer can be used with the presence of the teacher.

The last category of errors made by the subjects is 'mechanism'. The most frequent subtype is spelling 75%. The problem here is due to the fact that English pronunciation is different from Arabic. In Arabic, graphemes and phonemes are almost identical while in English they are not (Roach, 1983).

Errors in punctuation, including commas, full stops, marks, such as putting full stop(.) instead of comma (,) at the end of sentence.

And errors in capitalization, for example, proper names such as 'i' instead of 'I', and many others.

Factors cause these errors in the students' writing samples

the result of factors causing the students' errors. First, in syntactical errors, this study found that the participants have interlingual/transfer errors and intralingual/development errors. Second, in the lexical errors was found in the intralingual errors, and was found in the interlingual errors. Third, in the mechanism errors, only intralingual error was and the most of errors are interlingual.

MT interference may be one of the main sources in committing these errors. The subjects directly translate the Arabic words into English equivalents which led to malformation of sentences.

Conclusion

To sum up, one could say that Saudis students of English committed numerous syntactic, lexical, and errors in mechanism. Syntactic errors produced by the participants included the following categories: verb-agreement with 42%, omission of plural's' with 25%, pronouns with 18% and prepositions with 15%. In regard to lexical errors, wrong word choice were 72%, word formation with 13%, while adding or addition were 15%. Finally, mechanism errors were as follows: spelling errors were the highest with 75%, punctuation with 13%, whereas capitalization errors were 12%. This might be attributed to the fact that Arabic the native language of the study's subjects are different from the target language, English. This justifies Anker's claim (2000) that interference of L1 in learning L2 and over generalization could be the main reasons for committing errors by Arab learners of English. This kind of interference or transfer could be negative, because it hinders learning. Overall, errors produced by Saudi Students of English were discussed and analyzed thoroughly in this study in order to enhance our understanding of the nature and sources of those errors.

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