

An Analysis of Common Grammatical Errors Made by Saudi University students in Writing

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Abstract:

The study aims at investigating the possible causes of grammatical errors made by Saudi university students in composition writing. The study adopted the descriptive analytic research method. The data of the study was collected from a composition writing test for the students. The test was administered to a total sample of 250 first year Saudi students, not majoring in English language at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia .The above mentioned tool satisfied the criteria of validity and reliability. The findings revealed low abilities of the students in understanding and using syntactical rules properly which was reflected in the enormous number of grammatical errors made the respondents in the test. Wrong tense errors, prepositions, articles errors were found to be the most frequent ones . The findings also revealed that negative transfer from the mother tongue language is the major cause of most of the syntactical errors made by the students in the written text. In light of the study findings several recommendations were suggested by the researcher that could assist in reducing syntactical errors and promoting students' writing abilities.

Key words: grammatical errors, writing, error analysis

المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة لبحث اسباب الاخطاء النحوية الشائعة في مهارة كتابة التعبير للطلاب السعوديين غير المتخصصين في اللغة الانجليزية بالجامعات السعودية. تبنت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي حيث قام الباحث بتصميم ادوات البحث المتمثلة الاختباران لعينة بعدد 250 . وقد تم التأكد من مطابقة هذه الاداة لمعايير الصدق و الثبات. اظهرت نتائج الدراسة عن ضعف مقدرات الطلاب في فهم القواعد النحوية وفي استخدامها في مهارة كتابة التعبير. ادوات التعريف هي الاكثر تكرارا. كما اظهرت النتائج ان النقل السلبي من اللغة الام هو السبب الرئيسي للأخطاء النحوية للطلاب السعوديين في مهارة الكتابة التعبيرية. الدراسة اقترح الباحث بعض التوصيات التي يمكن ان تسهم في التقليل من الاخطاء النحوية للطلاب و في الارتقاء بقدراتهم في مهارة كتابة التعبير.

Introduction

Saudi EFL learners encounter many problems in learning English. They learn English in their native country, where Arabic is the native language. Strevens (1980:25) states that “In Saudi Arabia, EFL learners live in a country where English is not the medium of communication. English is not needed for survival or to be able to enter the job market, therefore learning occurs in a very low acquisition environment. English is not used in this society except in a few businesses or organizations. Consequently, students are not motivated to learn English because they do not see the need for learning it; they mostly study English as a required subject in school or for the fun of speaking a second language. Likewise, Alfallaj (1998:16) indicates that in a society as conservative and closed as that of Saudi Arabia, it has been very difficult for people to accept the idea that a language other than Arabic can be taught to Muslims. People fear that teaching a foreign language might result in students adopting the culture and values of that language. Therefore, Saudi EFL students normally learn English through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the English Language teachers are native speakers of Arabic, i.e. Saudis, Sudanese, Egyptians, Jordanians, etc. Student’s opportunity to learn English in a natural atmosphere through direct interaction with native English speakers is very limited. This is possible only when students encounter native English speakers who come to the country as pilgrims or expats.

Writing is a complex skill and even considered by many linguists as the most difficult of all the four skills (Corder & Allen, 1974, p.177). It is difficult for both native and non- speakers. However, writing is a real problem to most of EFL learners such as the Saudi learners. The sources of difficulty arise from the fact that non-native speakers think on their own native language (Arabic) when they write in English. Since good knowledge of grammar is one of the basic requirements of effective writing, learners must acquire proper use of grammatical rules and structures.

Objectives of the Study

The primary goal of this study is find out the most recurrent types of grammatical errors made by Saudi university students in writing and to identify the major causes of their occurrence.

Literature Review

2.1. Error Analysis:

Before the 1960s, when the behavioral point of view of language learning was prevailing, learners' errors were considered something undesirable and to be avoided. It is because of the behaviorist perspective, which is based on the view that people learn by responding to external stimuli and receiving proper reinforcement. A proper habit is being formed by the reinforcement, hence learning takes place. Therefore, errors were seen as a wrong response to the stimulus, which should be corrected immediately after they were made. Unless corrected immediately, the error becomes a habit and wrong behavior pattern will stick in the mind. However, this point of view of learning was eventually opposed by the well-known radically different perspective proposed by Chomsky(1959) who wrote in his review of Skinner's 'Verbal Behavior', that human learning , especially language acquisition , cannot be explained by simply start off with a " tabula rasa" state of mind. He believes that human beings must have a certain kind of an innate capacity which can guide them through a vast number of sentences generation possibilities and have a child acquire a grammar of that language until the age of five or six with almost no exception. He called this capacity "Universal Grammar" and claimed that it is this very human faculty that linguistics aims to peruse. This rationalistic view of language learning led many linguists to criticize the behavioristic language learning style and emphasize cognitive code learning approach.

2.2. Definition of Error Analysis

According to Corder (1975), the term error analysis refers to the study of erroneous utterances produced by groups of learners"(207). Error analysis was defined by Sharma (1981:21) as "a process based on the analysis of learners' errors with one clear objective, which is evolving suitable and effective teaching and learning strategy and remedial measures necessary in certain clearly marked out areas of the foreign language." Reid (1993) defined error analysis as the study of learners' errors, providing the way to examine learner language, being a part of language teaching, finding out whether errors were caused by L1 interference or developmental factors .James (1998) states that error analysis is the study of linguistic ignorance which investigates "what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their

ignorance”. The fact that learners find in ways how to cope with their ignorance makes a connection between EA and learner strategies, which we divide into learning strategies and communication strategies. (62).

2.3. Types of Errors

Corder (1967:28) separates between two types of errors: performance errors and competence errors. He states that “ it would be more valuable to treat errors of performance as ‘mistakes’ because they are not affecting the language learning process, and to use the term error for the systematic(competence) errors of the learner from which his knowledge of the language to date can be affected”. In the same vein, Norrish (1983:8) maintains that a mistake is an infrequent derivation that occurs just in certain times and can be corrected by the learner himself. Richards et. al (1985:95) points out that the mistake is made by a learner when writing or spelling unintentionally due to fatigue, carelessness, etc. Performance errors are non-systematic mistakes. They are minor deviations of the language and therefore they are not given much attention by error analysis, since they reveal nothing about the real status of the learner’s language knowledge. They include the lapses and slips of the tongue and pen .The student commits these mistakes not because he doesn’t know how to use the language, but because may be he is in a hurry, or under stress or careless. These mistakes are committed by both native speakers and second language learners and they do not show the level that reveals whether the learner has mastered the target language or not. Competence errors, on the other hand, are serious mistakes because they are systematic. These types of errors are referred to as competence errors. They reveal the extent of knowledge of the target language that was mastered by the learner. They also show the areas of weakness that need more reinforcement. As regarding correction, performance errors can be self-corrected by the learner himself unlike competence errors which cannot be corrected by the learner alone and therefore they need more efforts from both the teacher and the learner.

2.4 Sources of Errors

According to Brown (1980) the most recurrent sources of errors Brown are interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, the context of learning, and communication strategies used by

learners. James. Likewise, James (1998) classifies errors according to their sources into four types and he added what he called induced errors.

Interlingual transfer which is also referred to as mother-tongue influence causes errors that are mainly occur due to mother tongue interference. They are very common at the early stages of the target language based on the learner's only previous knowledge of the first language system .Brown (1980: 173). indicates that when one is learning L3, L4 etc., transfer takes place from all the previously learnt languages but the degree of transfer is variable (1980: 173). Intralingual negative transfer on the other hand, is one of the main sources of errors made by second language learners. They are considered as learning strategy errors. According to James (1980: 185) there are seven types of intralingual errors as learning-strategy based errors and lists 7 types of them:

- i) False analogy: This refers to the learner mistakenly thinks that a new item behaves like another item already known to him or her. For example the learner already knows that *babies* is plural from *baby*, so he or she thinks that **childs* is plural from *child** This Incorrect analysis indicates that the learner has formed an unfounded hypothesis in the L2 and is putting it in practice..
- ii) Incomplete rule application: It occurs when the learner doesn't use all the rules necessary to apply in a particular situation. In fact, it is the converse of overgeneralization.
- ii) Exploiting redundancy: This appears in the use of unnecessary morphology, and intelligent learners try to avoid those items which they find redundant to make their learning and communication easier. The opposite of exploiting redundancy is overelaboration which is usually observable in more advanced learners.
- iv) Overlooking concurrence restrictions: It means that the learner doesn't know that certain words go together with certain complements, prepositions etc. An example given by James (1998: 186) is when the learner doesn't understand that the verb *to practise* is followed by gerund and not infinitive.
- v) Hypercorrection: It refers to the learners over-monitoring their L2 output”.
- vi) Overgeneralization: It refers to use of one member of a set of forms also in situations when the other members must be used. This usually leads to overuse of one form and underuse of the others. Well known candidates for overgeneralization are pairs as other/another, much/many, some/any etc. (James 1998: 187) - the learner uses one of them instead of distinguishing between

them and using each in the appropriate situation. Overgeneralization of language rules is also common, e.g. **Will he can speak to?* reflects that the learner overgeneralizes the use of auxiliary verbs in questions.

2.5. The Significance of the Learners Errors

Corder(1967:167) states that the errors are significant to the teacher in that “they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently what remains for him to teach”. He also maintains that “the learner’s errors give the teacher indications of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies and procedures the learner is using in learning the language”. James (1998:1) maintains that errors made by learners are very valuable to the degree that they can be like a register that shows their current progress on the learned language. Lengo (1995:20) states that errors play an important role in the study of language acquisition in general and examining second and foreign language learning in particular. Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language. Errors are believed to be an indicator of the learner’s stages in their TL development. From the errors that learners commit, one can determine their level of mastery of the language systems. Again, Lengo, (ibid) explains that, the investigation of errors has a double purpose: it is diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic, because it can tell us about the learner’s development at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the learner’s current problems.

2.6 Review of previous Studies

A number of studies have been conducted to determine the role of error analysis in second and foreign language learning.

Attia (1990) conducted a study on errors made by Sudanese EFL learners in the use of prepositions. In his study Attia investigated three types of errors: omission, redundancy, and

replacement errors. The study shows that more than 53% of the errors were replacement errors and 23.3% were omission errors and about the same percentage were the redundancy errors. The prepositions that more frequently omitted are 'of', 'to', 'in', 'for', 'at', 'up' and 'with'. It was observed that redundancy and omission errors were mostly committed in the context of prepositional verbs. According to the study these errors are caused by interlingual and intralingual factors.

Khaoural (2002) conducted a research study to find out grammatical, syntactical and lexical errors in English composition of English major students of Rajabhatt Institute, Nakhon Pathom. For grammatical aspects, errors found were: tenses, prepositions, determiners and verbs. For syntactical aspects, errors found were: contraction form, incomplete sentence structure, compound sentences, word order and punctuation. For lexical aspects, errors found were: spelling, translating from Thai to English, overgeneralization of translating and using general lexical items. The findings showed that first three causes of errors were: the lack and incomplete application of restricted rules, L1 interference and false hypotheses. The results suggested that most of the students transferred their native language rule patterns into their English writings.

3. Research Methodology

The present study aims at investigating the common grammatical errors made by Saudi students in writing at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia. The data of the study was obtained from the responses of the students to a composition writing test. It was intended to investigate students' grammatical errors in writing.

The researcher adopted the Analytic Descriptive Method in conducting this study. The quantitative data was analyzed through using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to test the variability of the scores of the respondents as shown in the results.

3.1. Population of the study

The population of the present study consisted of first year Saudi university students not majoring in English language enrolled in Jazan University's Preparatory Year Program.

3.1.1. The Students' Sample

The first population of the study was represented by a sample group made of 250 students at Jazan University. The subjects were first year male students not majoring in English language.

The majority of them have the same cultural and language background, and Arabic is their native language. Most of them had studied English as a compulsory subject for seven years according to the curriculum of the Saudi Ministry of Education. The research subjects were selected by using convenience sampling method which is based on easy availability and accessibility of the target subjects. The participants selected for the purpose of this study are between 19 and 20 years old. They live in an exclusive Arabic speaking community. They are homogeneous in terms of their linguistic, educational and socioeconomic background. They speak Arabic at home. Most of them didn't receive any English instruction in any English speaking country which indicates their lack of any sort of English exposure.

3.2. Instrumentation

The researcher designed a composition writing test as the instruments for conducting this study as shown below:

3.1. The Writing (composition) Test

The writing test is the major instrument of this study because the analysis of the students' writing errors is the central objective of this study. No special writing test was designed for the purpose of this study. However, the same participants' compositions were taken from their answers to the first semester's final test.

In the first semester's final examination, the students were asked to write about one of the following two topics: "A Situation in Which You Experienced Joy, Peace or Pleasurable Emotion" or "My Best Friend". The composition should not be less than 80 words and should contain a main idea sentence, supporting and detail sentences and a conclusion.

3.3. Validity of the research tools

The validity of an instrument is the degree to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Polit & Hungler 1993, p. 448).

To ensure the validity of the study tool, the method of trustee's validity was employed .The researcher consulted three ELT expert referees. He distributed copies of the writing test to the experts to give their judgement, suggestions and recommendations about the research tool in terms of its clarity, relevance and suitability.

3.4. Reliability of the study Test

For the present study the researcher used a test- retest device to measure the reliability of the test. It was first conducted through selecting 15 students from the target population randomly. These students did not take part in the actual study. Then, it was administered once again with the same group of the students ten days later.

The results were processed using SPSS program and the scores of the subjects in the first test were correlated with those in the second test. The reliability coefficient of the subjects of the pilot sample was found 0.750 according to Pearson's correlation equation which proved that the test was reasonably reliable.

3.5 Procedure

The procedures adopted in the implementation of the study tool were as follow: The study was conducted at the Preparatory College at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia. The students at this college were all first year male students. The test was administered to a number of 250 students. The written productions (compositions) were taken from the subjects' answers of the first semester's final exam 2014-2015.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section the results obtained from writing test administered to the first year Saudi students not majoring in English language will be displayed and analyzed. The test aimed at assessing first year (Preparatory) Saudi university students not majoring in English language performance in a composition writing test. The test was intended to investigate the different grammatical errors that students' made in their written texts.

As mentioned before the written production of the subjects compositions were taken from their answers to the first semester's exam 2014-2015. The test was conducted in the preparatory college where English is not a major specialty. All of the students are first year university students. The number of students' composition books selected for the study was 250 copies. The students' composition scores were listed. A word count was made and the grammatical errors were classified and tabulated. They include wrong tense, subject and verb agreement (concord), prepositions, verb to be, pronouns, articles ,word order, possessives , adjectives, adverbs, passive, time clauses, and pluralization.

A total of approximately 2115 errors were counted in the writing composition of 250 students. Table (4.18), below shows the frequency of the occurrence of each type of the grammatical

errors made by the subjects of this study. They are listed starting with the most frequent types of errors. Percentages and ranks are also supplied.

Table (4.18): Frequency of occurrence, percentage and frequency rank of syntactical errors in the composition test.

Type of error	Frequency of occurrence	Percentage%	Frequency Rank
Wrong Tense	464	21.9%	1
Prepositions	345	16.3%	2
Articles	340	16%	3
Verb to be	268	12.7%	4
Subject verb agreement	224	10.6%	5
Pronouns	190	8.98%	6
Pluralization	76	3.6%	7
Adjectives	68	3.2%	8
Word order	63	2.97%	9
Adverbs	33	1.6%	10
Possessives	24	1.1%	11
Relative clauses	20	0,94%	12
Total	2115	100%	

As can be seen in table (4.18) 12 types of syntactical errors have been made by the subjects of this study in their writing work (composition). These errors have been arranged in a descending order beginning with the most frequent errors and ending with the least frequent ones. It is clear from the table that the most frequently made errors are “wrong tense” accounting for 21.9 percent of the total number of errors. They are followed by “prepositions” accounting for 16.3 %,

articles 16%, verb to be 12.7%, subject and verb agreement 10.6%, pronouns 8.98%, pluralization 3.6%, adjectives 3.2%, word order 3%, adverbs 1.6%, possessives 1.1% and relative clauses as the least frequently committed error accounting for 0.94% of the total number of errors. Examples of the types of errors were taken from the actual subjects' writing production will be given in the next section.

Conclusions

In the light of the responses of the performance of the students in the composition writing test, the following conclusions were revealed:

Generally it could be concluded that the low performance of the study subjects in the composition writing test revealed that the respondents' lack the abilities of understanding and using syntactical rules properly. The findings of the study revealed clearly that the wrong tense errors followed by prepositions and verb to be errors are the most frequent syntactical errors made by the respondents in the study as shown by the results of the respondents in the writing test. They also showed that negative transfer from the mother tongue was the major cause of syntactical errors made by the students in their written texts. Since wrong tense errors are the most frequent errors in this study, more attention should be paid to grammatical errors particularly tenses using more effective ways stressing tenses in meaningful and interesting texts. Teachers should be more aware of the different types of errors made by their students and provide the necessary follow up work to check the problem areas and provide the suitable solutions. Moreover, it is important for teachers to establish what an error is, to be aware of the possible sources of errors, to explain why they happen because a full knowledge of the causes of errors enables the teacher to work out a more effective teaching strategy to deal with them. Furthermore, Students need be encouraged to look critically and analytically at their written texts and try to find out the grammatical errors by themselves and correct them. In addition, the English language syllabus and course textbooks should include more free and controlled writing exercises that could help improve students abilities in both grammar and writing.

In conclusion, the findings of this study could be applicable to have a common view on all medium undergraduates in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, this piece of the article sheds

light on designing curricula for the better fulfilment of the teaching and learning EFL. The ultimate objective of this study is to assist in providing a guiding light to the teachers, the syllabus designers as well as the future researchers to pursue in this line of research. A few steps have to be revealed in further researches concerned to the same.

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