Most Common Errors in Libyan University Students' Writing

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Abstract:

The main aim of this study was to investigate the most frequent L2 writing errors, which appeared at the sentence-level made by Libyan university students majoring in English. It also aimed at knowing the percentage of each type of error. Thirty (30) undergraduate Libyan students participated in this study. The methods used in this study were descriptive and analytic. The data were collected during the spring semester of 2018 through an essay writing. This study used Corder's (1967) taxonomy of writing errors: grammatical, lexical, semantic, syntactic, and mechanics. This study was designed to answer the following questions: 1) what are the most types of errors made in English writing by EFL Libyan university students? 2) What are the reasons behind the most common types of writing errors among English language major students? 3) What are the suggested remedies to overcome writing problems made by English language major students? Different types of errors were identified. These errors could be due to overgeneralization in the target language, resulting from ignorance of rule restriction and incomplete application of rules and interference resulting from first language (Arabic) negative transfer. These findings were discussed with implications for English as foreign language Libyan teachers. Along with the discussion of findings, limitations of the present study were discussed, and suggestions for further research were highlighted.

Keywords: English Writing, Error Analysis, Types of Errors, Writing Errors.

Introduction

The present study sheds light on the most common writing errors committed by EFL Libyan university students as well as the difficulties that face them in learning the writing skill.

This study could be a practical reference guide for some teachers and learners of English as a Foreign Language (FL). It may help them anticipate the difficulties that learners face in learning the writing skill and the reasons behind them. There are, of course, many reasons for these difficulties such as First Language (L1) interference.

Despite the difficulties that EFL students encounter in writing, there has not been much research on EFL writing in Libya. In order to help Libyan students improve their writing, there has been a great need for error analysis research in which students' common errors are identified and addressed. This type of research will be particularly beneficial to overcome the difficulties Libyan students face while writing in English.

Research Questions

Three main questions are addressed in this study:

1. What are the most common types of errors made in English writing by EFL Libyan university students?

2. What are the reasons behind the most common types of writing errors among English language major students?

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3. What are the suggested remedies to overcome writing problems made by English language major students?

Review of Related Literature

The purpose of this study is to identify the most common errors in the writing of Libyan university students. This chapter will present the major points regarding writing in a foreign language, and error analysis; it will also present some of the related studies found in the current literature concerning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students.

Difficulty of the Writing Skill

Writing is fundamental to learning, to the improvement of the learners, and to their success in their educational career. Therefore, teachers have to work frequently with their students in order to help them in becoming good writers.

Writing is considered a productive skill, which requires the learner to produce language. Writing has always been an essential need for the learners. Some researchers such as Matsuda (2001) considered learning writing as the most difficult task for the non-native speakers. According to White (1987), writing is the demonstration of ideas and it entails great effort and attention; Kroll (2003) goes even further by stating that it is the most challenging macro-skill for both native and non-native language learners. Byrne (1991, p.4) illustrates that "writing is a difficult activity because it is neither a natural nor a spontaneous activity" and that "the problems related to writing are usually grouped under three headings which overlap to some extent: psychological, linguistic and cognitive."

From the previous views, one can conclude that writing is the activity that facilitates communication with language through a graphic representation of ideas.

It is also a difficult, sophisticated, and an important skill for language learners as well as native speakers.

Errors vs. Mistakes

Mistakes are misuses in performance. The term 'performance' was introduced by Chomsky (1965). He contrasted it with 'competence', i.e., the speaker's knowledge of the language. Competence is the knowledge of what is grammatically correct; performance is what occurs in practice either spoken or written. Chomsky regarded performance as the faulty representation of competence and that mistakes reveal nothing about the underlying competence. A mistake can be self-corrected, but an error cannot. A mistake is a problem not of knowing but of application. According to Brown (2007), mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance or slips of the tongue.

Errors arise because the correct form or use of a target item is not part of a speaker or writer's competence, whereas mistakes arise for reasons of fatigue, stress, lack of concentration, etc, even though the correct form or use is part of the user's competence. When native speakers make mistakes, they can identify and correct them immediately because they have almost full knowledge of the linguistic structure of their mother tongue. Non-native speakers and L2 learners not only make mistakes, they also commit errors and as they have only an incomplete knowledge of the target language, they are not always able to figure out and correct the errors that they make. Therefore, learners' errors reflect a lack of the underlying competence in the language that they are learning.

Approaches to Studying Learners' Errors

In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the analysis of errors learners make while learning a foreign language. Learners' errors have been the

subject of controversy for a long time. The study and analysis of the errors made by foreign language learners, either in their speech or writing or both, has been brought under investigation by many educators, EFL teachers, linguists, and researchers throughout the world.

Error Analysis

Error analysis (EA) as defined by VanPatten and Benati (2010, p.28) is "a research tool characterized by a set of procedures for identifying, describing, and explaining L2 learners' errors". EA was developed by Corder in the early 1970s as an alternative to CA to overcome its limited scope.

Error Analysis provides evidence that learners acquire the rules of the target language through the process of unconscious rule formation and testing (Corder, 1967). EA asserts that learners play an active role in the learning process, generating hypotheses and testing them. Accordingly, not all learners' errors are a result of L1 interference, but also reflect the strategies that learners use through the learning process.

According to Corder (1981), EA serves theoretical and practical purposes. The theoretical aim is concerned with language learning processes and strategies employed by learners to acquire the target language, such as overgeneralization. On the other hand, the practical aim is concerned with designing appropriate pedagogical strategies and materials and proposing remedial courses based on the theoretical analysis.

Types of Errors

Different types of errors have been classified: lexical (word choice), semantic (meaning), phonological (pronunciation), syntactic (grammar), and pragmatic (content) errors.

A distinction can be also made between two types of errors; global and local errors. A global error is one which involves the overall structure of a sentence, and the local error is one that affects a particular constituent. Examples of global and local errors include: 'I like a taxi, but my friend said so not that we should be late to school' and 'If I heard from him I will let you know'. Richards, et al. (1992, p. 123) cited in Chelli (2006, p.65). In the first example of the global error, the meaning of the sentence is comprehensible. However, the second example of the local error only 'heard' in the sentence is considered an error because the meaning of the sentence is clear. That is, local errors do not hinder communication and the intended meaning can be understood because there is a violation of only one segment of a sentence. On the other hand, global errors prevent comprehension of the message and hinder communication as they involve a violation of the rules of the overall structure.

A distinction can be also made between two groups of errors: interlingual transfer errors which are made due to the interference of the learners' mother tongue, and intralingual/developmental errors, which are made due to the new language learned.

Errors that are attributed to the influence of the first language are called interference errors, transfer errors, or interlingual errors (Sari, 2013). Interlingual errors refer to those errors that occur when language learners' L1 habits interfere or prevent him/her from acquiring the patterns and rules of L2 (Corder, 1971). For Keshavarz (1999), interlingual errors result from the transfer of learners' mother-tongue phonological, morphological, and semantic elements to the learning of the L2.

Previous Studies

The performance of Arab learners of English in writing has been investigated. Most of those studies examined the problems at the sentence level, focusing on grammatical correctness, problems in tenses, prepositions, the mechanics of writing, and the causes of weakness. The problems that Arab EFL learners encounter in writing English and the causes of these difficulties were investigated by many researchers.

Difficulties such as mechanics of writing, overgeneralization, and grammatical errors are also common among Arab students. Younes & Albalawi (2015) investigated the most common types of writing problems among English language and translation major students at Tabuk University. They found out that most language problems occurred in the students' writing assignments were grammatical errors such as tenses, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and misuse of articles. The study also revealed that errors of form such as punctuation, spelling and word order were also common. They assumed that the possible reasons behind the students' writing weaknesses were due to the explicit way of grammar teaching, using Arabic by both teachers and students in class to simplify the rules and much focus on form over meaning.

According to Carroll and Wilson (1993, p.191), learners "encounter punctuation problems as there are no universal rules of punctuation." Similarly, Byrne (1988) said that punctuation is very problematic as it has never been standard. Shokouhi and Zadeh-Dabbagh (2009) believe that learners are inconsistent in using commas and periods.

Mann (2003) claims that there is a difficulty in learning punctuation marks. For example, Awad (2012) investigated the most frequent punctuation errors among An-Najah National University TEFL and English major students. He found that

participants face difficulty in using punctuation marks and they use them inappropriately replacing one mark with another one, such as using commas instead of full stops. Similarly, Adas and Bakir (2013) reported that most Arab ESL learners struggle in their writing and particularly in punctuation, which has been clearly proved in this very study.

In general, most studies conducted in the field of error analysis among Arab students revealed that most common types of errors were almost similar (e.g., prepositions, spelling, tenses, articles, and subject-verb agreement). These studies have attributed the causes of these errors to overgeneralization in the target language, which result from ignorance of rule restriction and incomplete application of rules and interference resulting from first language (Arabic) negative transfer.

Methods - Research Design

In order to identify the most frequent errors produced by Libyan university students in their academic writing, the participants were asked to write one timed essay each. Each essay was written in approximately 60 minutes. The method that was used in this research was a quantitative one where the researcher analyzed the students' writing in order to know the type of errors students do most in their writing.

To classify and categorize the types of errors, the researcher used Corder's (1967) error writing taxonomy, which categorized grammatical, lexical, semantic, syntactic, and mechanics errors.

Population and Sampling

The research data were collected from the students of university of Tripoli majoring in English. The participants were Libyan seventh and eighth semester undergraduate students studying in the Faculty of Languages. Their plan of study

included four composition classes and two creative writing classes. The data were collected by the researcher during the academic year 2017/2018 from two of the students' courses, which were creative writing 1 and creative writing 2. The estimated number of students was 30.

The participants were randomly selected as the sample of this study from a general population of approximately 200 students. Two instructors, who worked as lecturers in the Faculty of Languages, were involved in the study. The subjects who participated in this study were male and female students. Their age range was from 20-23. The participants were not placed according to their level of English proficiency. They have taken English for approximately eight years about four hours a week in the preparatory and secondary schools and two years in the elementary school plus the whole time allotted in college. All the students speak Arabic as their L1. English is spoken only inside the classroom or at certain places. The students have had little experience in English composition since the writing skill is not emphasized in the preparatory and secondary schools.

The selection of this sample was based on the assumption that students by this stage would be aware of the different writing types and the components of a good piece of writing. Additionally, the population of seventh and eighth semester students should have at least experienced difficulties in writing.

Data Collection

Writing samples of essays were collected as data to analyze. Sample writings were collected during the lectures because sample writings reflected their real skills and knowledge in writing. If the participants were asked to write paragraphs just for the research, they might have not taken it seriously. Therefore, samples taken during English writing classes gave the true pictures of the participants' writing errors. The essays were written during a regular university lectures. This was meant to remove

any sort of anxiety among the subjects. Language samples were collected using a composition task developed specifically for this study rather than using examination paper. To make the process of the analysis as accurate as possible, the participants were given one hour to accomplish the task.

Data Analysis

The methods of collecting data were quantitative and qualitative ones. Error detection was the first stage of the analysis. The errors in written essays were detected by the researcher and the supervisor who works with the researcher in the Faculty of Languages. Each one worked independently to determine types of errors and categorize the errors into classification.

In order to classify and categorize the type of errors, the researcher used an error writing taxonomy developed by Corder (1967) which included grammatical, lexical, semantic, syntactic, and mechanics error categories. The focus was to identify the most frequent errors found in the essays. The researcher analyzed, classified, counted, and then compared error types. The value '0' indicates no errors, '1' indicates one error, '2' indicates two errors, etc. After the data were collected, the researcher followed Corder's (1974) approach to error analysis, which has been used in many previous studies (e.g. Chastian, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992). First, each paragraph was examined word by word and sentence by sentence to ascertain the types and number of errors. Second, they were put under different categories by using coding and thus converted into percentage to examine the frequency. The number of errors were counted in each category and then the most common errors were identified.

Results

The results were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program. Descriptive qualitative and quantitative method was used in presenting the result of data analysis. After analyzing type of errors, the researcher categorized what factors cause these errors based on the distinctions between intralingual and interlingual errors.

In order to analyze the data of this study, the researcher used an error writing taxonomy developed by Corder (1967), which categorized these types of errors: grammatical, lexical, semantic, syntactic, and mechanics.

It is clear from the results that punctuation errors (20.8%) were the most common, followed by capitalization (15.3%), spelling (13.9%), verb tense (13%), wrong word choice (11%), article (9.3%), preposition (7.5%), word form (4.4%), wrong word order (2.6%), pronoun (1.2%), s/v omission (1%), subject/verb agreement (0.4%), and noun (0.2%) were the least frequent ones. The findings greatly match the study of Ridha (2012) where the researcher investigated the errors in English essay writing of the EFL Iraqi College students where the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones.

The findings revealed that punctuation errors were the first most frequent errors among the thirteen types of errors (20.8%). Caroll and Wilson (1993) illustrate three problems linked to punctuation problems. The first is that punctuation rules are not totally exact, punctuation is complex, and it depends on one's style to determine the meaning. The way students punctuate writing can change the meaning completely, because each punctuation mark is a distinctive way of interpreting the meaning. Therefore, students need to pay attention to the way they punctuate, which is in most cases a problem for them. It is very likely that students' level of proficiency and exposure to English was the result of this type of error.

Capitalization errors, on the other hand, were the second most frequent errors among the thirteen types of errors (15.3%). This is due to the fact that capitalization does not exist in Arabic. Arabic language does not make a distinction between uppercase and lowercase characters. This could indicate that although learners have studied various writing and grammar courses, they have probably not mastered the rules of capitalization in English during their years of study. This is probably due to inadequate teaching techniques, lack of the linguistic input provided for the learners or insufficient practice. Also, students' level of proficiency and poor teaching instructions might be the reason for such errors. The Arab learners should have manipulated such a phenomena which does not exist in their L1 and to consider it the first thing to learn, and never use it wrongly when they write. It could be hard at the beginning, but easy to learn.

Spelling errors constituted the third highest number of errors among the thirteen types of errors (13.9%). Spelling is the way writers express clearly their ideas (Cook, 1992). It has been shown that the lack of the spelling skill makes it challenging for both native speakers and L2 learners (Al-Jarf, 2010).

While Arabic learners might be confused by some consonant letters in English such as 'b' and 'p', some of their spelling errors were vowel errors. While analyzing the data, the researcher found that some of the spelling errors were vowel errors.

Verb tense errors constituted the fourth highest number of errors among the thirteen types of errors (13%). Data analysis revealed that participants had insufficient knowledge on how to employ several English tenses in their written discourse. Tense errors were due to the substitution of one tense for another. These errors may have resulted from the negative transfer from Arabic which has different concepts of time. The misuse of tenses is not difficult for only Libyan students, but also for most Arab students, as in Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali's (2000) findings,

which showed that Arab students misused tenses in their writing. This result is not surprising since the Arabic language has only three tenses, yet there are 14 tenses in English and each one has more than one usage. Thus, tenses can be a problem even for advanced learners of English in Libya.

Word choice was the fifth highest number of errors among the thirteen types of errors (11%). Apparently, many sentences contained inappropriate or inaccurate vocabulary, which deviated the meaning of the written text. For example, 'I *remeber my previous years of *struggling were a bit hard, kind of *toughness to ***memorise**'. While to memorise is to learn something by heart, to remember is to keep in mind. In this sentence, to remember is more appropriate because it conveys the accurate meaning. In another sample of using wrong word choice, participant 13 wrote 'I Felt ***Enjoy**' instead of 'I felt happy'. Enjoy means to take pleasure in something and it is a verb. There is no way you could use the verb felt with the verb enjoy. It is not the meaning the writer wanted to convey. In this case, happy, pleased or glad, is a better selection of word. The participants had difficulty in choosing correct words to express their ideas clearly. Some messages were totally obscure due to incorrect word usage in the sentences. The meaning was not comprehensive in English usage because many nouns were translated from Arabic. Semantically, the wrong word choices in their writing mislead the readers. In addition, some participants wrote very little, and this might be explained by their limited vocabulary. They could not think of appropriate words and phrases to express their ideas. Some students' writing samples were very short because they did not have too much exposure in English writing. The lack of fluency in writing also increased the difficulty to comprehend students' writing samples. This finding was similar to Chen's study (2001) on 89 EFL institute students, who had insufficient vocabulary and phrases to express their ideas freely.

Article errors were the sixth most frequent errors among the thirteen types of errors (9.3%). In English, abstract words referring to ideas or concepts are used without the article 'the' to refer to that idea or concept. In Arabic, however, such abstract words are preceded by a definite article equivalent to 'the' in English. Hence, errors pertaining to the misuse of the article 'the' occur (Diab, 1996). Al-Buainain, 2009, p.6) stated, "although articles are among the most frequently occurring morphemes, they are among the last elements of syntax to be acquired by Arabs. Mastering their usage correlates with high proficiency in other language skills".

Preposition errors, on the other hand, were the seventh most frequent errors among the thirteen types of errors (7.5%). Prepositions are functional words that present the relationships between groups of words. EFL students found difficulty in using prepositions correctly in their writing tasks. Prepositions exist in both Arabic and English languages. Therefore, the Arab learners of English might use the literally translation of Arabic in order to understand and apply the prepositions which may result in making syntactic and semantic errors.

Word formation was the eighth most common error (4.4%). Lexical errors in this category consisted of the items where the students used the wrong form of a word in their writings. For instance, when a student intends to use an adjective in a sentence (e.g. dark) but ends up using the noun form of that adjective (e.g. darkness). In addition, using an adjective in a sentence (e.g. everybody lives in ***peaceful**) instead of using the noun (peace). This error is categorized as an error of word formation. In another example, the participant wrongly used the noun form (e.g. when you ***success** in a game) instead of (succeed) the verb form and thus, provided lexical error.

The ninth most common error was word order (2.6%). The participants of this study made errors in word order when forming English sentences. The following are

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some examples, which the researcher of the current study noticed in her students' writing: '*She continued entire the year sat with me'. In English, adjectives precede nouns, whereas they follow nouns in Arabic.

Pronoun errors were the tenth most common error among the other errors (1.2%). It is also obvious that the pronoun error was also a problematic area for participants, it could be exemplified as in: '*when he came back in **he** hous', '*I deiscover my shoes is lost or gone I couldn't finde **it**'. In terms of pronouns, the learners commit errors involving a wrong selection of pronouns and the insertion of unnecessary pronouns as shown in the previous examples.

The eleventh most frequent errors were found in subject/verb omission (1%) (Also known as sentence fragment). A sentence fragment is a group of words that do not form a complete sentence, nor express a complete thought. Sentence fragment is part of a sentence that becomes disconnected from the main clause due to the lack of a subject or a verb. This type of fragment is produced probably due to negative L1 transfer. For instance, '***My best person in the world my Grandmother'**, '***after that the toy still inside the house**'. Omission of verb to be is obvious in most Arabic written tasks for it does not appear in the sentence but it is known from the context.

According to this study, subject-verb agreement was the twelfth most common error among the thirteen types of errors (0.4%). This percentage in misusing subject-verb agreement could reflect the incompetence of the learner in using this aspect of language. In addition, it refers to the possibility of negative transfer from L1. In English grammar, the subject and verb should both agree in number and in gender. Depending on whether the subject is singular or plural, the verbs should take similar forms. However, this rule is often disregarded by Libyan students. In many cases, the students did not use the third person singular 's' with the verb when the subject is singular as in the following examples: '*Although I already have 2 brothers and

know we are treating our self like an enemies and **fights** almost every single hour', '*it **mean** you can read what do you want to read'. Another participant overgeneralized the rule and added the morpheme 's' to a verb in the past tense: '*so he **cames** to them'. The findings of the current study were in line with those of previous EFL research studies (e.g. Ababneh, 2017) in that EFL learners faced difficulty in using subject-verb agreement to generate grammatical sentences.

Noun errors were the least common types of errors (0.2%). A noun is a word that refers to a person, place, thing, event, substance, or quality. According to Frank (1972, p.6) "The noun is one of the most important parts of speech. Its arrangement with the verb helps to form the sentence core... In addition, it may function as the chief or head word in many structures..." Participant 1 made an error in the pluralisation of the word '*ourself' which was wrongly put in the singular form. For instance, '*we are treating ourself like an enemies'.

Generally, the results of data analysis showed that the errors made by the participants are caused by two major sources: i.e. inter-lingual errors, which occur because of L1 transfer, and intra-lingual errors, which occur due to the lack of L2 knowledge. A comparison of participants' errors revealed that the majority of participants with higher level of language proficiency made more intralingual errors than inter-lingual ones whereas those with lower level of language proficiency made more interlingual errors due to the L1 interference. The key to this problem is the fact that they always take resort to literal translation before they form English patterns. Moreover, they translate one language phrase into another language word by word instead of phrase by phrase. These findings go parallel with the findings of Abbasi & Karimian, (2011) and Sadeghi, (2009). In addition, they lack the necessary vocabulary for expressing their thoughts appropriately. The results of this research also revealed that the Libyan EFL learners were weak in grammatical rules, vo-

cabulary, spelling, mechanics and semantics which were also in line with some other studies of both Arab and other EFL contexts.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Libyan University students still have a long way to go in writing satisfactory essays in English. The way they composed their essays clearly showed their weak grasp of the English language, which clearly reflected what the researcher had hypothesized. In an attempt to find out solutions to such students' difficulties and weaknesses in writing, a set of pedagogical recommendations was suggested in the next section.

Recommendations

The present study suggests that teachers need to put emphasis on certain aspects of writing in English. They need to teach basic grammar rules, tense, subject-verb agreement, mechanics, word order, etc. at an early stage of learning.

Libyan students in EFL writing classes should be given ample opportunities for practice in and outside the classroom in order to be familiar with the appropriate style of writing good English essays. Teachers, therefore, need to increase the number of assignments so that students would have to do a lot of writing during their free time, hence they would be reading a lot of English material and thinking in English, especially if they have to make oral presentations for their work.

This study would suggest that teachers need to prepare students to use English in real-life settings. Thus, classroom activities need to be embedded to authentic audience and materials and teachers should design authentic tasks in ways that align English language learning with students' interests and learning styles.

Suggestions for Further Research

Correlating what has been found in the research investigation, the research questions were answered; and the research hypotheses were confirmed. However, this research is an on-going topic, which needs to be extended with a large number of students with different objectives. In addition, the findings of this study identified thirteen most common errors. These errors are examples of the errors made by the students who participated in this study, but another sample of students might make completely or partially different errors. Moreover, students' perspectives should be studied to find the causes of their writing difficulties and errors.

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