

Exploring the Types and Sources of Iranian EFL University Students' Writing Errors

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Abstract: Making errors is considered to be an integral part of language learning process. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that different types and sources of students' errors be identified. The present study aimed to examine the types and sources of errors in a corpus of essays written by 40 Iranian university students. They were given a title and asked to write an essay having at least 150 words. Based on Keshavarz's (2013) model for error analysis, the errors made by the students were identified and tabulated according to their frequency. Moreover, the errors were classified into intralingual and interlingual ones. The results of the study indicated that the participants made 404 different errors among them, 71.88% were caused by interlingual interference, and 23.84% of them were caused by intralingual factors. The results of the study can be informative for EFL teachers to be aware of the frequency and different types of learners' errors in EFL writing classes and the reasons underlying them.

Keywords: EFL students, EFL writing, Error Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Learning each of the four language skills exposes learners to different challenges. When it comes to writing, students may experience a more complicated situation (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012) as writing skill has been perceived to be one the most complicated language skills (Harris & Cunningham, 1994; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). The complexity is not limited to the second language learners, and even native speakers find it problematic to produce a high quality, piece of writing (Kukurs, 2012).

As committing errors is an integral part of the language learning process, it is highly important that the frequency, types, and sources of learners' errors be identified so that teachers know in which aspects of the language input the learners may have more problems (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012; Nazarloo & Navidinia, 2016). Having this knowledge also enables teachers to teach more efficiently by working more on the problematic areas, and improving students' awareness of the input (Navidinia, Mobaraki, & Malekzadeh, 2019). However, one can notice the paucity of studies aiming to identify the sources and types of writing errors committed by university students in EFL contexts. Therefore, the present study aimed to address this issue by identifying the types and sources of errors committed by EFL university students in the Iranian context.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Error Analysis

Error analysis (EA) analyzes how second/foreign language learners' speech or written performance is influenced by different factors (Wu & Garza, 2014). The systematic errors that learners commit during the process of language learning have appealed scholars to trigger investigations (Sermsook, Liamnimitr & Pochakorn, 2017). According to Corder (1967), these errors are systematic, and they should not be overlooked as they show the process of developing the language. EA can be employed for both EFL and ESL learners (Sermsook, et al., 2017). Factors such as lack of motivation, tangible success and negative attitude toward the target language may always create challenges for learners to write (Myles, 2002).

Although learning English language requires being proficient enough in four language skills, writing skill seems to be more difficult for learners, and also it is more reflective of learners' achievements (Applebee, Langer & Mayher, 1987; Hekmati, Ghahremani Ghajar, & Navidinia, 2018). In this skill, learners have more time to organize their ideas (Satariyan & Mohseni, 2014), and their attitudes can be mirrored through the process of writing (Fulwiler & Hayakawa, 1994). In addition, in language learning, making errors is not only inevitable but also it is a vital part of learning process (Keshavarz, 2013). Through EA, learners' common difficulties would be revealed and the process of language learning can be further clarified (Sercombe, 2000).

Classification and Sources of Errors

There are different classifications of learners' errors. Brown (2000) classified them into two main categories: interlingual and intralingual errors. The former refers to the negative interference of learners' mother tongue while the latter specifies errors which may occur during the process of learning another language (Sermsook, et al., 2017). In other words, incomplete knowledge of the target language rather than the first language negative transfer is more responsible for intralingual errors (Keshavarz, 2013).

Examining Spanish-speaking students' writing, Dulay and Burt (1973) claimed that 85% of errors are intralingual/developmental ones. In addition, Hourani (2008) conducted a study in which 105 students and 20 teachers were asked to answer two separate questionnaires on their attitude towards English writing. In addition, an interview was conducted with 5 supervisors to reach a more in-depth understanding. Different types of errors were revealed through the

investigation with higher frequency of intralingual errors such as, subject-verb agreement, passivation and word order rather than interlingual ones.

However, in Wu and Garza's (2014) study, the results did not endorse those of the above-mentioned studies. In this study, interlingual errors were found to be more frequent than intralingual ones. Learners' mother tongue was mainly responsible for the participants' errors although overgeneralization and incomplete L2 knowledge were also proved to be troublesome. Katiya, Mtonjeni, and Sefalane-Nkohla (2015) analyzed essays of freshmen students majoring in Chemistry. The results showed that the content of the essays was affected by learners' mother tongue interference. Moreover, problems in punctuation and spelling were also noticed. Learners' limited knowledge in applying the morphological rules were also shown.

Furthermore, Satariyan and Mohseni (2014) studied 190 first year university students' essays. The results showed that organization and vocabulary were more problematic than mechanics and syntax. In this study, mother tongue was also the reason for many errors to occur besides students' lack of exposure to authentic materials. Unlike this study, analyzing English writing samples of 80 EFL college students by Ridha (2012) proved that L1 negative transfer is responsible for making most of errors, namely, grammatical, lexical and word order. The results also indicated that learners rely too much on their mother tongue once they are going to express their ideas. Among all, grammatical and mechanical errors were the most frequent ones.

Like many studies that argued learners' first language for the source of errors, Sermsook et al. (2017) also showed that mother tongue can adversely affect the process of language learning. They conducted a study in which 104 pieces of writing of 26 second-year English major students were analyzed. The final results reported different kinds of sources for errors such as intralingual and interlingual ones.

Classifying errors into more detailed categories, Darus and Subramaniam (2009) analyzed 72 essays of 72 Malay students. Using Corder's (1967) model for analysis, they claimed six types of errors in singular/plural forms, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order.

METHDOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study were 40 (25 females and 15 males) English language university students. They were freshmen students at University of Birjand in Iran. They aged between 18 to 21 years old.

Instrumentation

The students were asked to write an essay of at least 150 words. They were given a topic. The topics was "The internet access must be limited for students. To what extent do you agree or disagree."

Procedure

After explaining the purpose of the study to the students, they were given 40 minutes to write about the topic, and review their writing within this period. To remain anonymous, they were told not to write their names on the paper. Moreover, they were asked not to consult with each other and not to use their dictionaries.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Once students' writings were collected, they were reviewed carefully. As a reliable taxonomy was needed to classify the learners' errors, the error analysis model presented by Keshavarz (2013) was used. This model was selected because it was developed within the Iranian context with due consideration of Iranian learners. In addition, it is a comprehensive model including many types of errors. However, based on the identified errors of the students, some types of errors were added to the model. Table 1 shows the number of errors made by the students.

Table 1: The number of essays, sentences and total errors

Total number of essays	Total number of Sentences	Ungrammatical sentences	Total errors	Total analyzed words
40	600	180	404	6000

According to Table 1, a total of 6000 words in the format of 600 sentences were analyzed. The forty essays were first classified based on grammatical/ungrammatical sentences. After the classification was completed, the results indicated that 370 sentences were grammatical and 230 ones were ungrammatical. Some sentences had more than one type of errors. For example, the sentence: “*Student don't need always use internet*” contains 3 types of errors:

1. Subject/verb agreement
2. Wrong word order
3. Articles

But, the sentence “*I am agree*” contains just 1 type of error which is: Typical Persian structure.

In what follows, a detailed analysis of the errors along with the type of violated grammatical rules are presented. Moreover, to be able to analyze errors more precisely, they were classified based on being committed at the word or sentence levels.

Errors at the word's level

According to Sermsook et al. (2017), errors in the word level are related to problems in articles, propositions, word choices, nouns, pronouns and verbs. Tables 2 and 3 present the errors in the corpus at the word and sentence levels, respectively.

Table 2: Identified errors at the word level

Error classification	Error example	Error correction	Other identified errors in the sentence
1 Preposition	Students are interested to the internet.	Students are interested in the internet.	
2 Articles	In some field the students need to using computers.	In some fields students need using computers.	- singular/plural - Wrong verb group
3 Wrong Verb group	Excess in using internet cause that they have not enough time to spend with their family.	Excessive use of the internet causes that they do not have enough time to spend with their family.	Articles Persian typical structure
4 Spelling	Parents should pay atention to their childern.	Parents should pay attention to their children.	
5 Word choice	Internet can be a way to extract money.	The Internet can be a way to make money.	Article error
6 Singular/ Plural	Most of the student don't have enough information.	Most of the students don't have enough information.	Countable/uncountable error
7 Countable/ uncountable	Internet give us many information.	Internet gives us much information.	Subject/verb agreement

As presented, some of the written sentences contain more than one type of error.

Table 3: Identified errors at the sentential level

Error classification	Error identification	Error correction	Other identified errors
1 Wrong Tense	Students are using internet every day.	Students use the Internet every day.	article
2 Wrong Word Order	Advantages the internet is more far than disadvantages	Advantages of the internet are far more than the disadvantages	articles
3 Subject/verb Agreement	It helps us to improve our English	It helps us to improve our English	Capitalization
4 Capitalization	we should learn how to use it.	We should learn how to use it.	
5 Omission of verbs	All of us responsible for our children.	All of us are responsible for our children.	
6 Conditional Sentences	If limited internet they can't get the information	If they limit the internet, they can't get the information.	article

7	Subject omission	I think is necessary for students.	I think it is necessary for students.	
8	Noun phrase omission after preposition	If someone wants to study he/she study without pay attention to the Internet.	If someone wants to study he/she has to study without paying attention to the Internet.	Conditional sentences
9	Clause problems	you see what is unrelated.	You see what is unrelated.	capitalization
10	Parallel structures	The Internet is good, helpful and can solve all problems.	The Internet is good and helpful and can solve all problems.	
11	Part of speech	There is no different in using networks.	There is no difference in using networks.	

Although according to Keshavarz (2013), there are 12 different classifications for errors, 8 other classifications were also added in this study as they were frequently observed in the collected writing corpus. For example, “Typical Persian Structure” was the second most frequent error as shown in Table 4. The importance of this category which stems from the interference of mother tongue has been highlighted in many previous studies (Amiri & Puteh, 2017; Hourani, 2008; Wu & Garza, 2014). An example of such error is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: *Typical Persian structure*

	Error identification	Error correction	Other identified errors
1	I'm agree with this.	I agree with this.	

Overall, Table 5 presents the frequency and percentages of different types of errors in the corpus.

Table 5: Frequency and the percentages of errors

Rank	Errors	Frequency	Percentage
1	Capitalization	140	34.65
2	Typical Persian structure	60	14.85
3	Subject/verb agreement	33	8.16
4	Spelling	33	8.16
5	Articles	20	4.95
6	Wrong verb group	19	4.70
7	Wrong word order	15	3.71
8	Omission of verbs	15	3.71
9	Word choice	15	3.71
10	Parallel structures	10	2.47
11	Singular/ Plural	7	1.73
12	Conditional sentences	6	1.48
13	Countable/ uncountable	6	1.48
14	Objective of preposition	6	1.48
15	Subject omission	5	1.23
16	Clause problems	5	1.23
17	Parts of speech	4	0.99
18	Preposition	3	0.74
19	Wrong verb tense	2	0.49
20	Wrong plural morpheme	0	0
	total	404	99.92

Identifying the sources of different errors

In this section, the classification and sources of writing errors are presented.

Capitalization

According to the data, “capitalization” accounted for 34.65 percent of errors made by the students. The appropriate justification can be the lack of such an item in their mother tongue (Farsi). These results are in line with those of the study presented by Bahrpeyma and Ostad (2018) that found first language interference as the major source of error in mis-capitalization.

Typical Persian Construction

The present study found that the first language interference is responsible for a series of other errors as follows:

Wrong verb group

Due to word for word translation, Iranian students add a “to be” verb while using “agree/ disagree” as a verb of a sentence. According to Table 2, out of 60 errors in “Typical Persian structure”, 19 sentences contain a redundant to be verb.

For example:

*I am agree with this idea.

*Parents are disagree with using the internet.

Wrong word order

Wrong word order is what language students' face mostly due to the negative interference of their mother tongue word order. For example:

*We can use everywhere from internet. → We can use the internet everywhere.

Wrong Preposition

As it is almost difficult to guess the correct preposition for each grammatical structure, the students used their mother tongue to put a preposition based on the meaning they believed would mostly fit which in many cases resulted in writing ungrammatical sentences. For example:

*They are interested to technology. → They are interested in technology.

Wrong word choice

To deal with the difficulty of collocations, students used translation which could not be a wise decision as it resulted in producing ungrammatical sentences. For example:

*Parents largely appreciate the internet limitation. → Parents greatly appreciate the internet limitation.

Subject/verb Agreement

Subject/verb agreement was proved to be problematic for the students in this study, and also a series of other studies conducted before (Kotsyuk, 2015; Sawalmeh, 2013).

Spelling

The results of this study showed that spelling was among the first five high frequent errors committed by the participants. This is in line with the findings of some previous studies (Bahrpeyma & Omid, 2018; Sermsook et al. 2017; Sawalmeh, 2013;). However, in some other studies spelling was not observed as the first five most common errors (Sataryian & Moheseni, 2014; Wu & Garza, 2014).

Articles

Using articles properly showed to be difficult for the participants in this study. Similarly, it was shown to be problematic for Taiwanese EFL learners too (Chen, 2000). The results of Alhaysony's (2012) study showed that the participants had many problems with the correct use of articles.

According to Ghadessy (1980), limited L2 knowledge manifested in overgeneralization, analogy and false hypothesis might result in article related problems.

Verb

Errors with general category of “verb” can be divided into three sub-categories: wrong verb group, omission of verb and wrong verb tense. Errors in improper verb group accounted for 4.70% of total errors. Out of 404 recognized errors, 15 sentences did not have any verbs. Omission of verbs accounted for 3.71% of total errors. Surprisingly, only 2% of total errors was related to wrong verb tense which is highly in contrast with the obtained results of Jobeen, Kazemian and Shahbaz (2015) who found tense problem as the most significant error. The number one probability in this regard can be the nature of the given title, “The internet access must be limited for students. To what extent do you agree or disagree.” Participants of the present study did not need to maneuver over different tenses.

Wrong Word Order

In the present study, wrong word order showed itself in different forms.

Wrong verb place

As a SOV language, Iranian learners may find it problematic to locate a verb in its appropriate position. Problems such as: *I very much love playing with computers. (I love playing with computers very much) clearly show the negative effect of L1 on the sentence. Traces of such a negative effect were also reported among even highly professional bilinguals (Erdocia & Laka, 2018).

Wrong adjective place

In some extracted errors such as: *Find topics interesting and increase level of knowledge (Find interesting topics and increase level of knowledge), the adjective is placed wrongly after the correspondent noun which is the result of misapplication of L1 grammatical structure. Hourani (2008) also found similar results while analyzing the order of Arabic language adjective following a noun.

Word choice

Being able to choose appropriate words for making a correct sentence is sometimes challenging. The participants’ problems in so doing may stem from their L1 interference, as in most cases word for word translation cannot be helpful. Word choice problem was also reported in the study done by Amiri and Puteh (2017).

Parallel structures

Although participants of the present study had difficulty in this regards, it cannot be considered as a major problem for them considering the number of errors that they had in this area.

Nouns

The participants had problems while confronting with irregular nouns such as man/men. Moreover, recognizing countable and uncountable ones was problematic for them. L1 negative transfer can be overtly observable as many uncountable English nouns can be easily counted in Farsi. Hourani (2008) also reported how Arabic language triggered similar issues. Problems with nouns were reported in many other previous studies as well (Hourani, 2008; Sermsook et al. 2017; Wu & Garza, 2014).

Noun phrase omission after preposition

The participants had some errors in choosing correct prepositions or applying appropriate noun phrases. However, a few students in the present study wrote incorrect structures.

Conditional sentences

Students committed few errors in this category (1.46%). Solati (2016) mentioned that intralingual interference can be considered as a source for this error.

Wrong plural morpheme

Interestingly, no errors were detected related to misapplication of plural morphemes. As mentioned earlier, the participants made errors while recognizing countable and non-countable nouns but when they recognized a noun as countable their choice of the plural morpheme was accurate. This result is in sharp contrast with some other studies (Samhudi, 2016; Yordchim & Gibbs, 2014).

Other Categories

In spite of the low frequency of errors related to subject omission, clauses, and parts of speech, they were identified in this study although they were not in Keshavarz's Model.

Overall, Table 6 shows the sources of errors for different categories. As indicated in Table 6, errors made by the learners had two main sources which were interlingual and intralingual. According to Kaweera (2013), interlingual errors caused by the negative transfer of the learners' first language and intralingual errors originated from incomplete knowledge of the target language.

Table 6: The sources of different types of errors

Intralingual errors	Interlingual errors
Subject/verb agreement	Capitalization
Spelling (65%)	Typical Persian structure
Articles	Spelling (35%)
Parallel structures	Wrong verb group
Conditional sentences	Wrong word order
Noun phrase omission after prepositions	Word choice
	Singular/ Plural
	Verb
	Nouns

According to the results, interlingual errors had higher frequency in this study. Based on the findings, approximately 71.88 % and 23.84% of error sources were identified as interlingual and intralingual, respectively.

CONCLUSION

The aims of this study were to identify the types, frequencies, and sources of EFL students' errors in writing. The findings indicated that the main reason behind students' errors were interlingual, meaning that negative transfer or interference caused many errors. However, the lack of target language knowledge was also problematic. By analyzing students' errors, the probable reason for their first language interference can be students' endeavor to use their mother tongue as a tool to facilitate the writing process. Heydari and Bagheri (2012) also found Iranian mother tongue as a major error source. It seems that by enriching L2 input, students would be able to rely on the target language for developing the sentences, therefore, the frequency of these kinds of errors may decrease (Valette, 1991).

The obtained results are in line with those of Wu and Garza (2014) which reported 72% for interlingual errors and 28% for intralingual ones. Similarly, Sermsook et al. (2017) found interlingual interference is the main cause of students' errors. Unlike aforementioned studies, Hourani (2008) reported a share of 62% for intralingual errors while interlingual grammar errors were reported only to be 38%.

The results of this study can be helpful for both teachers and learners. According to Amiri and Puteh (2017), the analysis of learners' errors can empower teachers to predict them and consequently, they can help learners to correct the errors more efficiently. Considering the importance of writing skill and the difficulties students have in this skill, it is hoped that other researchers continue this line of research. Replicating this study with a larger corpus, or with students with different native languages can be areas for further research.

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