Analyzing Errors Made by Libyan Students When Learning Nominal Clauses

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Abstract.

This study aims at investigating the errors Libyan students commit when learning English nominal clauses. In order to study these errors a ten-item test was designed and administered to fifteen students enrolled at the English department at the faculty of Arts and Science-Almarj. The data collected shows that participants have trouble in producing English nominal clauses. Their major difficulties lie in the area of nominal clause heads, pronoun retention, verb phrase, wrong clause choice, preposition, omission of subjects and adjacency errors. Additionally, the study provides suggestions for teaching English nominal clauses.

Keywords.

Contrastive analysis, error analysis, errors, teaching practices, mother tongue interference.
1. Introduction.

In early 1970s applied linguistics scholars opened the door for error analysis to be a new technique in the field of language teaching and learning. The proponents of error analysis claim that many errors which learners of foreign language commit cannot be interpreted by contrastive analysis and mother tongue interference is not the only source of errors. Richards [14] distinguishes three types of errors', interference, intralingua, and developmental errors.

Error analysts believe that learners use specific strategies to internalize the grammatical items of the target language. Dulay and Burt [8] assume that these strategies involve simplification, overgeneralization and redundancy of target language structure. They argue that although data they gathered contained interference –like- goofs, they did not reflect the transfer of the target language structure. Selinker [16] declares that strategies learners adopt when acquiring a target language consist of five processes: language transfer, transfer of learning, strategies of second language learning, strategy of second language communication and overgeneralization of linguistic material of the target language.

Language transfer is a result of mother tongue interference while transfer of learning occurs when data reflects the misuse of teaching procedures. Strategies of second language learning, however, is a kind of simplification of the target language as in the omission of the plural 's'

*He has two car.

Strategies of second language communication help learners believe they have adequate knowledge to effectively communicate in the target language. For example, language learners may omit the third person /s/ depending on their experience that /s/ is not used with plural nouns as subjects. Overgeneralization of target language materials occurs when learners overgeneralize a particular item with their parallel structures as in contraction rules.

Researchers of error analysis have developed procedures to analyze and interpret learners' errors. These procedures consist of collecting data, describing errors and classifying errors. Researchers and teachers alike collect data by using oral and written tests to push learners to project their knowledge and competence about a particular grammatical structure. Examples of these tests are translation, dictation, composition, score interviews and multiple
choice item tests. In an error-describing procedure, researchers should be concerned with those errors "which result in unacceptable utterances and appear as breaches of codes... they are not physical failures but the sign of an imperfect knowledge of the code" [7] (p. 259). Therefore, errors are classified into three categories: omission of elements, addition of incorrect elements and misordering of elements.

Researchers who are involved in classifying errors managed to discover their real sources. According to Richards [14], errors are classified into interlingual, developmental, or intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are caused by mother tongue interference when a learner produces the target language. The latter happens where the structures of two languages are different. An example of this is the omission of the verb 'be' auxiliary by Arab learners whose first language has no equivalents. Developmental errors reflect testing hypothesis about the structure of the target language to help learners build up its linguistic system. Intralingual errors "reflect the general characteristic of rule learning; such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn condition under which rules apply" [14] (P.201). Richards divides intralingual errors into overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, in complete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized.

Overgeneralization is a strategy where learners create erroneous learning against the rules of other structures. The omission of the third person singular 's’ is one example of this type since learners know that verbs with first and second person pronouns have no 's', they tend to delete it in other cases in which the 's' must be used. Ignorance of rule restriction represents "the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply" as in article misuses. Incomplete application of rules involves "the occurrence of structures whose deviancy represents the degree of development of rules required to produce acceptable utterances" [14] (P.209). It occurs in transformational practices adopted by teachers:
false concepts hypothesized refers to the lack of awareness of the whole structure of the target language as a result of contrastive teaching and inappropriate grading of grammar. An example such as *he is speaks English is created by learners because they know that 'is' expresses present time.

Error analysis has received great enthusiasm in the field of language teaching and learning because of satisfying both theoretical and applied objectives through verifying linguistic theory in language teaching and bringing up pedagogical assumptions. There is a wealth of evidence that linguists have been influenced by its principles, which led to the manifestation of a number of studies, some recent ones being Amoakohene [4], Ibatova [10], Siroj & Wijayanti [17], McDowell [13] and Abdullah [1]. After reviewing these studies, it turned out that they followed suit the principles and methods of error analysis, succeeded in drawing information concerning students' language difficulties and successfully suggested pedagogical remedial feedback. However, since none of these studies investigated Arab learners' errors nor profoundly delved into Arab Educational settings, the researcher, therefore, and for the purpose of appropriacy, will enumerate three studies dealing with Arab subjects learning English as a foreign language.

Scott and Tucker [15] conducted a study at Beirut university in which they collected data from 22 students enrolled in an intensive English course. The study aimed at describing errors of Arab learners in speech and writing. The conclusion they draw confirms that the large majority of errors are intra-lingual errors while interference errors represent a small number. The study also concludes that subjects language is a rule-generated system which could be developed from being easy to sophisticated and from wrong to right.

Bertkua [6] investigated the distribution of errors of relative clauses among Arab learners who were required to produce from 9 to 18 utterances resembling the cue utterances given to them. The study finds out that students tend to simplify the target language structure either by substituting, overgeneralizing, or omitting its linguistic items.
Adam [3] investigated Libyan student errors at Almarj university when learning English relative clauses. To draw data from students, a fifty item test was given to forty students who were divided into two groups. The first group referred to as the control group includes twenty students from the third year in the department, while the second group designated as the experimental group encompasses twenty students from the fourth year. The results of the test avow that students have great trouble in producing English relative clauses. Their major trouble is in the area of relative pronouns, wrong clause choice, pronoun retention verb phase and semantic confusion. On the other hand, errors such as adjacency, preposition, antecedents and omission of subjects caused minor trouble for them.

The research also discovers that about 34.11% of these errors are mother tongue interference resulting from the presence of a feature in the source language not found in the target language. However, the rest of trouble is intra-lingual and developmental errors representing 65.89%. Overall, errors were a result of overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction, and false concepts hypothesized.

1.1 Aim of Study.

As an instructor at the university level, I believe that Libyan student face difficulties in producing English nominal clauses. Thus, this study comes to investigate the sources of errors made by seventh semester students in the English department at the faculty of Arts and science-Almarj. This aim is broken down into specific aims:

1. To distinguish the types of errors made by our subjects.
2. To know the causes of these errors and recommend suitable teaching feedback for them.

1.2 Significance Of The Study.

The significance of the study lies in the fact that it helps us determine the problems and difficulties Libyan students encounter when learning English nominal clauses. Moreover, the findings of this investigation of errors will provide us with recommendations about teaching nominal clauses in Libyan classroom settings.
1.3 Methodology.

1.3.1 Instruments.

Since the following study will employ the quantitative research method in collecting and analyzing data, the researcher will construct a test, each item of which will examine a specific linguistic point pertaining to nominal clauses. Quantitative research, Fulcher and Davidson [9] argue, avails from tests in gauging views, identities, self-perception and performances of research subjects. These tests can be available in the form of standardized tests or be constructed by the researcher to gauge "very specific constructs" that operate in unparalleled avenues. Therefore, to gather data from our subjects, a sentence completion test consisting of 10 items is administered to our subjects. While the students are required to complete sentences using suitable nominal clauses, it is intended to test the type of errors subjects make.

1.4.2 Subjects.

The subject involved in this research are fifteen students enrolled in the seventh semester in the English department at the faculty of Arts and science-Almarj. They form a homogenous group for whom English is considered to be a foreign language and who come from the same background of Education. In addition, all our subjects have been exposed to nominal clauses in a course called Grammar C in the sixth semester.

To get the number of the population of the study, the researcher employed a probability sampling technique called systematic sampling. "Systematic sampling is where every nth case after a random start is selected. For example, if surveying a sample of consumers, every fifth consumer may be selected from your sample. The advantage of this sampling technique is its simplicity"[18] (p.21). So, the researcher took a list of seventh semester student names from the department and chose every fifth name on the list. This process was replicated four times to get the fifteen subjects.

1.4.3 Data analysis.

Statistical analysis is a crucial step towards obtaining a full understanding of our data, a term that we use to refer to quantitative numbers. Therefore, statistical analysis is a systematic gathering of numerical data so that we can research and unravel the relevance amidst subjects, concepts, and theses until we can elucidate phenomena [12]. To discuss the
general aims of the study, some simple statistical techniques (raw scores and percentile ranks) will be used to pinpoint the differences between the types of errors: inter-lingual, developmental and intra-lingual. These techniques will be also used to count the number and percentage of error categories. What we will do in our research is to give raw scores real meanings by translating them into percentile ranks.

To describe, classify and interpret data, I will adopt errors analysis approach drawing on Jack Richards' model of errors for the analysis of errors our subjects commit. Since we aim at analyzing the language of foreign learners when producing nominal clauses, not all errors were recorded; lapses and spelling errors were not counted. Only systematic syntactical and semantic errors are considered. In addition, unrepeated errors which students make in one place but later use them correctly were excluded. For example, if the student substitutes *who* for *whom* in one place, but in another use them correctly, such an error is considered a lapse.

2. Interpretation.

Overall, all errors gathered are a result of omission of a grammatical item, substitution of a grammatical item or a redundant use of a grammatical item. Once errors have been identified, they have been categorized according to rules, relations and categories found in each linguistic level. Syntactically speaking, all errors are described according to rules and relations of the parts of nominal clauses. Therefore, errors are classified as nominal clause heads, pronoun Retention, verb phrase, wrong clause choice, preposition, omission of subjects and adjacency errors. The following table shows these categories as well as the number and percentage of each one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error category</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>Percentage of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominal clause heads</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun Retention</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb phrase</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong clause choice</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preposition</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omission of subjects</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjacency Errors</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>157</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 **Nominal Clause Heads.**

This is considered one of the major trouble of our subjects accounting for 19.11% of the total number of errors. Most of such errors are a result of substituting nominal clause heads with one another. These errors are due to intralingual interference within the target language. Depending on their background about the variation of nominal clause heads in English, students use one head in the place of another. This process of overgeneralization is reinforced by teaching heads one at a time without taking into consideration gradation in language teaching:

*I don't know what I use it.*  
For  
*I donot know how I use it.*

*I wonder which this man is.*  
For  
*I wonder who this man is.*

The data also showed that the use of nominal clauses at the beginning of sentences was a major trouble of students since they failed to do item 6 of the test: whether or not he comes is not sure yet.

Omission of nominal clause heads also appeared in the language of our subjects. Many students tend to omit these heads as a result of their way of testing hypothesis about the structure of the target language:

*I donot know I was.*  
for  
*I don’t know where I was.*

*I wonder many bottles they have.*  
for  
*I wonder how many bottles they have.*

Students as well used nominal clause heads redundantly as in:

*I can't tell who what broke the window.*  
for  
*I can't tell who broke the window.*
2.2 Pronoun Retention.

This type of errors also constitutes a major trouble of our learners representing 16.56% of the total number of errors. In this type of errors students unnecessarily inserted pronouns in places where they should not be used. I believe that these errors relate to inadequate awareness of the whole structure of the target language. As Bahatia [5] puts it: it is "a transition stage in the system of the target language learners. They are due to overgeneralization and interference between forms and function of language being learned and to psychological causes such as in adequate learning" [5] (P.309). Example of these errors are:

*I do not know how I carried it this case.
for
I do not know how I carried this case.

*I do not guess where the house it is.
for
I do not guess where the house is.

This type of errors cannot be referred to mother tongue interference since Arabic does not allow the retention of these pronouns. Whiteman and Jackson [19] who studied their hypothesis about the predictability of contrastive analysis in discovering learner's difficulties argue that contrastive analysis could not serve as a tool for predicting learners' errors and interference played a weak role in the learning process and had low correlation with the students' performance.

2.3 Verb Phase.

Data shows that students have trouble in constructing right verb phrases in nominal clauses, which involved auxiliaries, tense, and third singular marker. The percentage of this type of errors reaches to 14.65 % of the total number of errors. Errors of auxiliaries recurred in our subject interlanguage as omission and redundancy errors which can be attributed to false concept hypothesized:

*I wonder where Ahmad.
for
*I wonder where Ahmad is.
*I do not guess if he can is sit on the chair.

for

I do not guess if he can sit on the chair.

Subjects also failed to choose the correct tense in their interlanguage because they did not pay attention to tense concord between verbs in the subordinate and independent clauses as in:

*I asked if he can go to the cinema.

for

I asked if he could go to the cinema.

Scott and Tucker [15] declare that tense concord errors are not due to mother tongue interference. They claim that carelessness and the misconception that the verb in the subordinate clause is unnecessary and redundant is the real source of errors. Thus, such errors are attributed to the developmental strategy in which subjects still build their own systems.

Errors are also made in the use of third person singular marker which appear in nominal clause. This resembles the developing stage in the first language acquisition when children produce incorrect utterances. Ritchard [14] relates the omission of the third person singular 's' to overgeneralization process where subjects decrease their linguistic burden. He quotes Duskova who says learners in English do not need a verbal ending except for the third singular 's'. So, student either omit the 's' or they overgeneralize it. Ritchards [14] also argues that teaching practices participate to a large extent to such errors, especially when teachers use pattern drills which contrast grammatical items.

Teacher

I walk

You walk

They walk

He walks

She walks

It walks

Example of marker 's' errors are as follows:

*I cannot tell who will plays volleyball.

for

I cannot tell who will play volleyball.

*I wonder if she compose poetry.
for
I wonder if she composes poetry.

2.4 Wrong Clause Choice

Wrong clause choice errors cause trouble for our subject representing 13.38%. Some student answers show that they were unable to choose right clauses. Instead, they constructed adverbial clauses which are completely different from nominal clauses. In many examples, students use adverbial heads such as after, before and until to start clauses:

*I asked after we had lunch.
*I do not guess before I met him in the lobby.

I argue that such errors are attributed to overgeneralization process in which subjects mistake nominal clauses with adverbial ones. It is a way of developing their learning strategies about nominal clauses.

2.5 Prepositions.

The data collected shows that many of our learners failed to suitably use prepositions in nominal clauses. This type of errors reaches to 12.74%. Many students omit preposition or use them redundantly in their answers. I attribute such errors to ignorance of rule restrictions in the use of preposition in nominal clauses, as in:

*I wonder where I should sit on.
*I know that Bill sits the chair.
*I know that Bill sits on the chair.

2.6 Omission Of Subject.

Another consistent error among students is the omission of nominal clause subjects constituting for 12.10% of the total number of errors. This kind of errors is attributable to mother tongue interference when the native language affects the structure of the target language. In the following examples students tend to omit subjects since Arabic permits such omission:

*I know when plays football.
for
I know when he plays football.
*I wonder where parks his car.
for
I wonder where he parks his car.

Abunowara [2] asserts the existence of interference errors as a main factor of language deviancy among Arab learners. In an interference situation but with different grammatical items, Abunowara describes the behavior of mother tongue interference as a matter of load functionality. Studying passive and active voice errors, he argues that since passive voice is rarely used in Arabic, it has a less functional load than the active one. Therefore, when Arab students communicate in English, they carry this phenomenon and produce actives more frequently than passives.

2.7 **Adjacency Errors.**

Adjacency errors are another problem facing learners, totaling 11.47% of the number of errors. Some learners unnecessarily tend to inset words between the independent clause and the dependent nominal clauses as in:
*I believe with that the man writes in English.
for
I believe that the man writes in English.

I would argue that adjacency errors are related to developmental errors in which learners still test their hypothesis about the use of nominal clauses.

3. **Discussion**

One of the important findings of this research is shown by the statistical analysis of the types of errors. The following table shows that the number of developmental and intra-lingual errors is larger than interference errors, representing 82.80% and 17.20% respectively:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Errors types</th>
<th>Number of errors</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intralingual and developmental errors</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>82.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interference errors</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total NO. of errors</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This reminds us of the clear correlation between intra-lingual and developmental errors and teaching practices. For example, to present linguistic forms to students, teachers use strategies that contrast grammatical forms to one another and 'leads to mutual interference between the relatively meaningless forms involved[11]. The following diagram shows this:

Errors due to traditional teaching practices [11].

In his study, Adam[3] argues that the large majority of his subjects' errors are intra-lingual and developmental which are increased by traditional teaching practices. He notices that teachers use exercises consisting of two sentences, the second of which contain subject or object pronouns. Then, teachers tell students to replace these pronouns with suitable relative pronouns as in the following example:

I met the man. I saw him at the airport.
I met the man whom I saw at the airport.

Later, when students combine two sentences to produce relative clauses, they keep subject and object pronouns in their new sentences as in

*I met the man whom I saw him at the airport.

Another issue that pops up in the study is the notion of positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the idea that whenever two linguistic items of two different languages are congruent, the students transfer the habits of their mother tongue inference unconsciously to make choices about the form they want to produce in the target language. But, if the two items are different, they apply the same strategy which will cause them difficulty. That means negative transfer (mother tongue inference) ensues[3].
4. Conclusion.

To conclude the study shows that the subjects have a major problem in producing nominal clauses. Their errors are classified into nominal clause heads, pronoun retention, verb phrase, wrong clause choice, preposition, omission of subjects and adjacency errors. The study also shows that the number of developmental and intralingual errors reaches up to 82.80% while interference errors represents 17.20% as shown before. These errors are reinforced by traditional practices such as weak presentation of grammatical points and inadequate teaching of the target language structure.

5. Suggestions and Recommendation For Teaching Nominal Clauses.

The place of feedback and correction has been negotiated widely in the field of English languages teaching. Research shows different ways of tackling this issue. Some studies focused on the effectiveness of correction while others adopted a strategy of non-interference leaving it for students to be self-corrected.

The reality stays that a lot of learners in foreign language classrooms anticipate to be corrected. The problem that may face teachers is deciding on what language to be corrected and what to be ignored. It is taken into granted that correct nominal clauses produced by learners should be highlighted and largely praised, but there is much debate on what to do with student interlanguage. Although it is the teacher who corrects errors in grammar, teacher interference stays the least effective shape of feedback in terms of student improvement. Learners can repeat corrected feedback, but this does not assure us that repetition will be reinforced and internalized. It is hard that students focus on the appropriacy of form when conveying a message as a contribution in the classroom.

The question that arises in the classroom setting is whether the teacher should be concerned with the structure or meaning of language. Great deviations such as nominal clause errors that change the message of communication should be resolved before the listener can interpret the chunk of language that he/she hears. If the aim of instruction involves improving students' accuracy, teachers should help learners monitor their own language in spite of our general belief that it is the responsibility of students to monitor materials they covered in classroom.
A class of foreign learners who want to learn nominal clauses should be directed towards intelligible accuracy of clause formation. All effort and time spent in class should be formulated to make students recognize nominal clause function and use.

The method used in English language teaching to speakers of other languages plays an essential role in the process of teaching in general. It is the method then that brings great results in the classroom setting. This requires that the method used should create the environment for the aims of instruction and the results achieved to go side by side. Any conflict between the method and the objectives of instruction lead to discrepancies that put us in a corner to either disregard one.

The findings of the study brings to light questions with regard to teaching nominal clauses. The audiolingual method used at the university with its traditional practices such as poor presentation of grammatical points and lack of recycling affects the language of our subjects. Weak exposure of the target language and lack of practice on points of difference increased the occurrence and reoccurrence of errors. Old ways of teaching grammar assume that learning grammatical items should be evoked by giving examples and drills. Therefore, this study suggests that traditional habits of language teaching should be abandoned and replaced by new communicative ways of teaching nominal clauses in which forms are conveyed through social interaction. A good example of communicative teaching of nominal clauses is the input-transition-output model suggested by McEldowney (1982) (cited in Imssalem[11]). The model is put in use to help learners use the target language communicatively. It consists of three cycles. Cycle one helps learners with their productive and receptive tasks. Receptive tasks ameliorate learner awareness of communicative competence of grammatical forms. That is, they construct learner's recognition of grammar; they push learner grasp the meaning of grammatical points; and they enable learners reconstruct their version of the original text. On the other hand, productive tasks help students to reproduce the grammatical items correctly in both their written and spoken language. cycle two aims at making students concentrate on the meaning of the grammatical items. Learners are required to discover the meaning of linguistic items through visual receptive and productive tasks by connecting forms with their meanings. Cycle three reinforces the input in the previous two cycles and exposes new linguistic items.
References

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Appendix

Complete the following sentences using suitable nominal clauses.

1. I know .................................................................

2. I wonder .................................................................

3. I guess .................................................................

4. I think .................................................................

5. I believe .................................................................

6. ................................................................. is not sure.

7. I asked .................................................................

8. I don't guess .................................................................

9. I can't tell .................................................................

10. I don't know .................................................................