Types and Attributes of Writing Errors with Reference to Paragraph Writing

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Abstract

Errors are a fundamental part of language acquisition. Researchers have examined the learners' errors to understand the process of second language acquisition. Findings suggest that understanding the sources errors can contribute to better second language teaching practices. The aim of this study paper is therefore to give a brief account of the types, techniques and treatment of second language learners' errors, with reference to paragraph writing. The data for this study were seventeen students at the under graduate level – University of Benghazi. The data for this study was collected via assignment given to the students in which they were asked to write a paragraph describing a family member. The results show that students at the department of English encounter serious problems related to paragraph writing; the total number of errors that Libyan students made were 97 error. The maximum number of errors were made in spelling was 44 which came to 45.3% of errors. On the other hand, the minimum number of errors in writing recorded in this study was in the wrong use of 'capitalization'. The total number of errors in the use of capitalization was 1, which constituted 1.0 % of errors.

Key words: error -errors Analysis- interlangaue, intralanguage, second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

Langan (2004, p11) defines paragraph as " a series of sentences about one main idea or a point". These sentences work as providing specific details to support that main point. Langan also states that the essay does the same thing the paragraph does. However, the difference between them is that the paragraph is a sequence of sentences around one main idea while the essay is a sequence of paragraphs about one main idea.

Since many instructors and second language researchers believe that writing is one of the most difficult skill, it is acceptable that learners make errors when they learn a second or foreign language. In fact, English language differs in many aspects from the Arabic language. Therefore, it is possible for Arab students to commit some errors or face difficulties in their learning process. Teachers always try to understand why some learners repeat the same error. Especially when such mistakes have been explained to them. However, some second language research believe that errors can be seen as positive aids to learning, Norrish (1983, p 6) argued that " the error itself may actually be a necessary part of learning a language."

Since mistakes are of different nature and resources, number of studies have conducted by second language researchers in order to fully understand the nature of errors and carefully analyze errors that individuals make in the process of learning a foreign language. In fact, teachers can get feedback of errors in classroom; such feedback will allow them to adopt some remedial procedures that accelerate the process of acquiring a second language.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Error Analysis

Imssalem (2001, p 181) states that until the late sixties, the dominant view of language learning in both applied linguistics research and language teaching and learning was behavioristic, which viewed learning as " habit formation, and learning was a matter of acquiring a set of new language habits". Therefore, errors were considered as being the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language. In other words, errors are the result of negative transference of mother tongue habits into the new language. She adds that the technique that the behaviorists used was called Contrastive Analysis and this analysis was seen as central regarding foreign language teaching. However, the Contrastive Analysis was criticized as being not fully useful because of its limited view not only from the point that there is no entirely described languages to permit complete comparison but also the Contrastive Analysis cannot predict the nature of the mother tongue interference.

As a reaction of contrastive analysis theory, error analysis is based on the assumption that learners' errors are not only because that the learner is transferring the first language's patterns and forms into the target language, but also they are reflection of some learning attitudes . Erdoğan (2005, p262) argued, " Error analysis, a branch of applied linguistics, emerged in the sixties to demonstrate that learner errors were not only because of the learners' native language but also they reflected some universal learning strategies". In addition, Wu & Garza (2014, p1027) state, "Error Analysis is a type of approach to analyzed a second/ foreign language learners' speech or written performance". Moreover, Imssalem (2001, p187) asserts, " is considered an evidence of a system which the second language learner is using although it is not a desired system".

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p24) refer to the difference between errors and mistakes. They declare that teachers and researchers must distinguish that mistakes are due to "memory lapse, physical states, psychological conditions" and that they do not reflect a defect in the linguistic knowledge of the first or second speaker of the language. However, errors reveal the underlying knowledge of the language of the second language learner.

2.2 Previous studies

Khansir (2013) compared and examined types of written errors such as paragraph, punctuation, articles, spelling, and conjunction by Iranian EFL and Indian ESL leaners. The researcher collected his data from 200 under graduate students. The results show that most of the errors were made in punctuation, and the minimum number of errors were committed in spelling. He argued that " … the findings of this study revealed that the occurrence of all errors types found here any proportionally related to the knowledge of the subjects on the basis of English writing." (Khansir, 2013, p369).

Wu and Garza (2014) conducted another study to investigate five 6th grade EFL leaners' writing errors in English through email communication. The participants' writings in this study were examined carefully and followed by error taxonomy such as grammatical, lexical, semantic, and mechanic errors. After the data has been analyzed, the results showed that the interlingual/transfer errors, which the learners made, were more than those of intralingual/development errors, this was properly due to first language interference i.e. students used their native language's rules and pattern in the second language. Furthermore, El-Bouri (2003) investigated the writing problems of Libyan learners of English as a foreign language in University of Benghazi (previously known as Garyounis University). She found that

the students are not able to communicate their ideas through writing. She attributed the findings to the lack of language and writing skills.

Another study was conducted by El-fadil (2009) to analyze, categorize, and explain the points of deficiencies that third year students in the Department of English at University of Benghazi (Garyounis University) encounter in writing thesis statements in English essays. The results show that the third year students in the Department of English had serious problems in dealing with writing good and correct thesis statements on both levels of language and writing.

2.3 Types of Errors in Writing

In general, English learners make various types of errors in their writings , these distinct types can be generally subsumed under three major categories: the lexical, grammatical, and mechanical. Some types of the commonly committed writing errors in English language are presented follows:

2.3.1 Lexical Errors

This type of error involves the use of an inappropriate word or vocabulary, this means that the learner have selected a word in his written sentence which does not belong to the linguistic context in terms of meaning. Ellis, (1994, p 58) states that, “Lexical errors are the most frequently occurring category of errors in written English. They significantly affect the quality of academic writing and native speakers consider them the most irritating." Furthermore, Hemchua & Schmitt (2006, p 3) argue that “ When inappropriate lexical choices are made (lexical errors), this can lead directly to misunderstanding of the message, or at least to an increase in the burden of interpreting the text.

Additionally, Lexical errors in English learners' writings are of different types for instance, formal miss selection, miss formations, distortions , confusion of sense relations, collocation errors, connotation errors and stylistic errors. (Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006)

2.3.2 Grammatical Errors

Grammarians refer to the wrong use of forms such as, a misplaced modifier or an inappropriate verb tense as grammatical errors. "Also called a usage error" (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982, p4).

Furthermore, grammar, as a very important aspect of the English language in general and in English writing in particular, can be a very difficult element to acquire. This is not only because these grammatical rules are of huge in number and the learners need to remember them all in order to write error-free sentences, but also because these rules or structures are not shared by or common to their native languages, so confusion usually occurs on the part of the learners.

Moreover, there are so many examples of grammatical errors in writing some of which are, errors related to subject–verb agreement, verb tense, number (singular – plural), misplaced modifier, run on sentences, wrong use of articles, wrong use of models, wrong use of prepositions, sentence fragments and incomplete comparisons. (Norrish, 1983).

2.3.3 Spelling Errors

Usually as a type of grammatical errors in writing, spelling mistakes or errors can be defined as, "an error in the conventionally accepted form of spelling a word" (Collins English Dictionary, 2020).

According to Ismail et al. (2013), English spelling can be tricky, even for English speakers. Some of the most commonly misspelled words are:

- *A commodation [incorrect]*
- *Accommodation [correct]*
- *Acheive [incorrect]*
- *Achieve [correct]*
- *Adress [incorrect]*
- *Address [correct]*

2.3.4 Wrong Use of Prepositions

Although this type of errors is mainly considered as a type of grammatical errors in writing but its frequency in English learners' errors is remarkable and the following are some very common examples:

- *I can not agree to you in this situation (incorrect)*
- *I can not agree with you in this situation (correct)*
- *He agreed with my demands (incorrect)*
- *He agreed to my demands (correct)*
- *She is waiting for the arrived of her friend (incorrect)*
- *She is waiting for the arrived of her friend (correct)*
- *The flight will depart in 8.00 am (incorrect)*
- *The flight will depart at 8.00 am [correct]*. (Emma, 2018, p.1)

2.3.5 Wrong Use of Articles

The wrong use of articles is a type of errors, which is usually related to grammar, but it constitutes a great part of the English students' writing. The

errors in articles "has been classified under three main headings: Omission of articles, redundant of articles, and wrong choice of articles" (Elmahdi, 2015, p 29). Some examples of the incorrect use of articles are:

- *We live in village (incorrect)*
- *We live in a village (correct)*
- *He is best player in the team (incorrect)*
- *He is the best player in the team (correct)*

2.3.6 Wrong Use of Punctuation

According to Picard (2017), the most frequent errors in punctuation are:

- Omitting commas for nonessential elements:

This means that any nonessential clauses or should be written between two commas, and English learners often omit these commas in their writing resulting in an error.

- Splicing the comma:

This occurs if the learner or any other English writer put a comma in a place where a full stop should be used, such as between two independent clauses.

- Joining sentences with a colon
- Using too many commas.
- Writing run-on sentences.
- Putting a colon after a fragment.
- Putting sentence – ending punctuation outside of quotes.
- Using oxford commas inconsistently.

- Mixing up (it's) and (its).
- Adding extra apostrophes.
- Not hyphenating words serving as a single adjective.
- Omitting a comma after (e.g.) or (i.e.).
- Hyphenating adverbs that end in (-ly) (Picard, 2017).

2.3.6 Capitalization

The most known rule about capitalization is that one should capitalize the first letter of the sentence, but some learners of English sometimes fail to apply this important rule, resulting in errors such as:

- *The museum is magnificent. [incorrect]*
- *The museum is magnificent [correct]*
- *Because he is cold, My friend is wearing a jacket [incorrect] Because he is cold, my friend is wearing a jacket [correct].*

3. Controlling Errors

Imssalem (2000, p 197), stated that "The majority of error analysts have given little or no attention to how to control errors." Although linguists have given great evaluations of learners' errors. However, The inquiry as to how learners can communicate in the target language free from error? Still emerges. (Imssalem,2000).

Corder (1981) is one of the few linguists who describes the role of error analysis in guiding the correcting procedures and remedial actions, which must be applied to edit and control the unsatisfactory linguistic production of the second language learners, and he in this concern suggests two valid points:

- Effective remedial teaching requires understanding of the nature of the learners' difficulties. In other words, only when we know why an error has been produced, we can deal with it in a systematic way.

- Reteaching the items of the language which have proven to be the problem by using the same method and the same material is usually not productive. This is especially true of those errors which result from the method of teaching in the first place. (Corder, 1981).

Moreover, McEldowney (as cited in Imssalem, 2000, p 198-199) in her approach to controlling errors, she suggests the following considerations and procedures adapted from:

1. Basing learning materials on pedagogic description instead of contrastive one. learning materials should be arranged in the way students learn, and not based on contrastive teaching which compares the target language to the mother tongue; this means that they should introduce present simple before past simple and past simple before any continuous tenses and not as contrastive linguistics presents language by introducing all simple tenses together and contrasting them with their counterparts in the other language.
2. Arranging the insights provided by a normal linguistic description for pedagogic purpose. Meaning using information from linguistics in a way that makes them teachable, in other words, teaching the students to use the language instead of just teaching them about it.
3. Establishing clear meaning for each redundant item according to communicative purpose. There are items may confuse the learners due to redundancy, such as final [s] and final [d], but their meaning can be found in the communicative

purpose they serve, so when presenting said items, the teacher should make their communicative purpose clear to the learners.

4. Contextualization of grammatical items in a linguistic context. Grammatical items should be taught in contextualized sentences rather than in single sentences meaning that the teacher should put the items in a real and meaningful context to try to give a real communicative value to the language, and to help the learner recall the learned information later on.

4. Correcting Errors

Despite the fact that error correction is a very important aspect in the learning, but overdoing it may result in de-motivating the students. For that reason, teachers should have awareness on how to give the students a corrective feedback in a way that would not cause any frustration to the students. (Holley & King, 1971).

In addition, Tedick and Gortari (1998) present the following various procedures of correcting errors:

1. Explicit Correction: where the teacher clearly points out that the students' language was incorrect, then he or she presents the correct form.
2. Recast: where the teacher reformulates the student's error, or presents the correct form without a direct indication that the student's linguistic output was incorrect.
3. Clarification request: the teacher indicates that the student's utterance was incorrect or that the message has not been understood, by using phrases like: *"Excuse me?"* or *"I do not understand",* to show that a repetition or reformulation is needed.
4. Meta-Linguistic Clues: the teacher provides comments or questions related to the formation of the students' output, without providing the correct form. For example, *"Do we say it like that?"*

5. Elicitation: it differs from meta-linguistic clues in that elicitation questions require more than yes or no answers. The teacher elicits the correct form from the student by asking direct questions such as: *" How do we say that in Arabic?"* , by pausing to give the students a chance to complete the teacher's sentence by using phrases like *" say that again"* or *" rewrite the sentence again."*

Furthermore, there are five more techniques listed by Wingfield (1975) concerning effective and suitable correcting of the students' errors:

1. The teacher gives signs to enable the students to self-correct.
2. The teacher corrects the script.
3. The teacher could write the errors in the margin of the student's paper and write notes.
4. The teacher might need to explain to the students individually.
5. The teacher could illustrate and explain the error to the whole class.
6. Repetition: the teacher draws attention to the student's error by repeating it and adjusting the intonation.

5. Methodology

The current study investigates the writing errors that undergraduate students made during the fall semester (2019-2020). The researchers of this study adopted a qualitative methodology, which involves data collection and data analysis. Following data analysis, remedial procedures will be suggested.

5.1 Participants

The sample for this study consisted of seventeen Libyan English major students at the third semester of the Faculty of Languages in the University of Benghazi. They were chosen randomly to grantee the maximum level of

reliability. Although, it is worth to mention that all participants speak Arabic language as their first language and were received the same formal instruction of English as they were in high school. Consequently, they almost have no chance to participate English outside their classroom. Participants were similar in age (19-20 years old). Therefore, they were able to produce data for analysis.

5.2 Data Collection Procedures

To collect data, the participants were asked to write a paragraph in which they describe one of their family member. They also were given a framework of notes that they can follow to help them generate more ideas and write more sentences, which is required at their level, in which they are familiar with writing only one paragraph, the information included: {The relation, physical features, education, job, and hobbies.}. This section focuses on those writings and tries to give an analysis of the errors found there.

5.4 Data Analysis

After the data were collected, the researchers adopted the following steps to analyze the data. First, each paragraph was examined word by word and sentence by sentence. Then, researchers created coding categories based on the writing samples. Secondly, they counted the number of errors and classified them as mentioned in the table below.

5.4.1 Error Identification and Categorization

Identifying and categorizing errors constitute the first step and the solid foundations for analyzing them effectively. In this aspect, Imssalem (2001) asserts, these errors are universal regardless of the

learner's language backgrounds and that they are due to the nature of the target language or to the methodology of teaching. Consequently, after collecting data from the participants. The samples were analyzed and illustrated in the table below.

Language Errors that Most Students Fall in

The Error Category	The Number of the Students	The Percentages
Articles	**4**	**6.1%**
Prepositions	**2**	**3.0%**
Spelling	**17**	**45.3%**
Capitalization	**1**	**1.0%**
Punctuation	**2**	**3.0%**
Grammatical Errors		
	17	**41.2%**
Subject -verb agreement	**12**	**11.3%**
Verb forms(tense/aspect)	**1**	**2.0%**
Verb omission	**4**	**9.2%**
Pronouns	**9**	**16.4%**
Formation of Negation	**1**	**1.0%**
Verb use (unnecessary use of the verb)	**1**	**1.0%**
Total number of errors	**97**	

The percentages above show that all subjects of the study have serious problems dealing with the error categories shown. It is noticed that most of the students' errors were in spelling and grammatical aspects.

5.4.2 Article Errors

The subjects of the study encounter some difficulties in using articles. The results of the analysis concerning this category indicate that the students had some problems with the use of articles in English. Moreover, some students were using articles incomprehensibly. As shown in the examples below, some students used unnecessary articles while others omitted necessary articles.

- *"in th cooking"* (unnecessary article the)
- *"Is leucher*" (omitted article a)
- *"Want to be tracher"* (omitted article a)
- *"His the apperance"* (unnecessary article the)
- *"The father person*" (unnecessary article the)
- *"Very patient*" (omitted article a)

5.4.3 Errors of Preposition

As shown in the examples, the participants in this study had some difficulties in using the correct prepositions in their paragraphs.

- *"I want talking"* omitted preposition (to)
- *"I want talk"* omitted preposition (to)
- *"I wana like about"* omitted article (to)

5.4.4 Spelling Errors

Spelling is considered as one of the common problems of mechanics. In fact, spelling is always a challenge for students when writing any piece of writing. Concerning the current study, it has been found that the majority of the students have serious problems in

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spelling. The following examples illustrate some errors that students have made.

- *"talke" instead of (talk)*
- *"noise" (nose)*
- *"insed" (inside)*
- *"defferent" (different)*
- *"spek" (speak)*
- *"languag" (language)*
- *"god" (good)*
- *"psycholojy" (psychology)*
- *"semster" (semester)*
- *"with" (white)*
- *"blae" (blue)*
- *"heir" (hair)*
- *"blac" (black)*
- *"lesson" (listen)*
- *"smille" (smile)*
- *"modet" (model)*
- *"adout" (about)*
- *"brwon" (brown)*
- *"satudent" (student)*
- *"fachen" (fashion)*
- *"mum" (mother)*
- *"gat" (got)*
- *"th" (the)*

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- *"leaucher" (teacher)*
- *"hobbise" (hobbies)*
- *"apperance" (appearance)*
- *"Aeyes" (eyes)*
- *"studnt" (student)*
- *"hight" (high)*
- *"Troplie" (Tripoli)*
- *"hir" (hair)*
- *"stadent" (student)*
- *"unvirsty" (university)*
- *"ajod" (a job)*
- *"bowt" (about)*
- *"heri" (hair)*
- *"whit" (white)*
- *"skian" (skin)*
- *"wana" (want)*
- *"blak" (black)*
- *"avreig" (average)*
- *"teture" (teacher)*
- *"swiming" (swimming)*
- *"drwing" (drawing)*

5.4.5 Grammatical Errors

The current results reveal that the participants had serious grammatical problems. 41.2% of them had problems in different grammatical aspects.

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First, errors concerning the subject-verb agreement:

- *"she have"*
- *"he have"*
- *"she have got"*
- *"she like"*
- *"he like"*
- *"her don't "*
- *"eyes is brown"*
- *"his help me"*
- *"his study in "*
- *"she love"*
- *"one hobbies"*

Second, Errors of omitting the verb in the sentence:

- *"she in sixth" (verb be is)*
- *"her name husam"*
- *"she student"*
- *"she working"*
- *"my mom best mom"*
- *"she nineteen years"*
- *"he old 53 year"*
- *"he job"*
- *"she hair dark" (verb has)*

Third, Errors relating the formation of negation:

- *"she is not has" (she does not have)*

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Fourth, Errors of pronouns:

- *"her name Husam" (his)*
- *"her don't" (she does not)*
- *"Mum his name" (her)*
- *"it's 50 old" (she is)*
- *"she is eyes" (her)*
- *"they friend" (her friend)*
- *"his" instead of (her)*
- *"she education" (her)*
- *"she hobbies" (her)*
- *"it is" (she is)*
- *"his study in university" (he)*
- *"father person for me" (my father)*
- *"he is eyes" (his)*
- *"and hair black" (his)*
- *"he job" (his job)*

Fifth, Errors of the verbs' tense (form):

- *"she didn't have" (does not)*
- *"I want talking" (to talk)*

Sixth, Errors relating to verbs' use:

- *"she love is" (unnecessary use of the verb be)*

5.4.6 Capitalization Errors

The results showed that only one participants committed an error regarding capitalization.

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- *"husam" (Husam)*

5.4.7 Punctuation Errors

Similarly, two students made errors in punctuation as follows.

"language. and" / "school. but" (using a full stop with conjunction "and, but" instead of a comma.)

- Run on sentences.

5. Conclusions

First, It should be mentioned that due the small number of students who participated in this study, the conclusions are tentative and not final absolute ones: therefore, more researchers are needed to investigate more aspects related to paragraph writing. However, after the samples of this study had analyzed, they indicated that third semester students at the department of English encounter serious problems related to paragraph writing. Results also indicated that students have made a lot of errors at both interlingual and intralingual levels. Students who made interlingual errors used his/her first language to overcome his/her ignorance and lack of knowledge of the target language. On the other hand, students also made Intralingual errors such as overgeneralization, misanalysis, system simplification, incomplete application of rules, or misanalysis. In fact, these errors are universal which denote the ongoing process of learning.

During the process of data analysis, it was noticed that the vast majority of the students committed errors related to spelling. These errors, which constitute about 45.3% of errors, were not associated to particular part of speech, but were committed in verb, nouns, adjectives, etc.

With reference to grammar, it was found that students were using wrong grammatical structures, starting from misuse of pronouns with 16.4%. In addition, results reveal that 11.3% of students, the sample, had serious problems with subject-verb agreement. They were not able to apply the correct number and person agreement between the subject and its verb. Approximately, the same percentage was recorded regarding verb omission where 9.2% of the students were omitting the main or the auxiliary verb of the sentence.

As for using the appropriate tense, only 2.0% of the students could not apply the right tense. They, for example, used past simple instead of present simple tense. The minimum number of errors were committed in the formation of negation and unnecessary use of the verb, both with 1.0%.

Despite their obvious uses, 3.0% of the students commit errors in prepositions' use. In particular, they omitted preposition as in "I want talking" (omitted preposition "to"). Moreover, the percentage was recorded with the misuse of punctuation. In this regard, some students used a full stop with conjunction "and, but" instead of a comma as in "school. but".

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