

# The Study of Written Errors of EFL Pre-university Learners

Ali Akbar Khansir

Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services, Iran

Hajar Shahhoseiny

Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran

**Abstract**—In a second and foreign language setting, all language learners inevitably produce errors when they write or speak the second or foreign language. Therefore, systematic analysis of the errors is very valuable and can provide a useful insight into the processes of the second or foreign language acquisition. Error analysis as a branch of Applied Linguistics is one of the best tools for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages. A test was administered to a group of one hundred Pre-University students enrolled in Bushehr Pre-Universities Schools. This study aims to classify “errors” made by the students at the sentence levels such as: Article, passive and Active and Tenses. The research shows errors committed in the use of Article, Passive and Active forms and Tenses. Finally, this study suggests remedial measures regarding type of errors committed by the Iranian EFL students.

**Index Terms**—error, error analysis, written errors, EFL learners

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study is to examine the written errors of Iranian –pre-university such as articles, tense, and active and passive voice. Khansir (2008, b) argued that error analysis, a branch of Applied Linguistics, emerged to reveal that learner errors were not only because of the learners’ native language but also they reflected some universal learning strategies. This is a reaction to contrastive analysis theory, which considered native language interference as the major source of errors in second language learning what behavioristic theory suggested. Ellis (1994, p48) mentioned that “it was not until the 1970s that EA became a recognized part of applied linguistics, a development that owed much to the work of Corder.” Corder (1967) introduced many major concepts of Error Analysis which are considered as following:

1. It is the learner who determines what the input is. The teacher can present a linguistic form, but this is not necessarily the input, but simply what is available to be learned.
2. There is distinction between systematic and non-systematic errors. Unsystematic errors occur in one’s native language, it is called “mistakes” and they are not significant to the process of language learning, but “errors” which occur in a second language, they are systematic.
3. Errors are significant in three ways such as to the teacher: they show a student’s progress, to the researcher: they show how a language is acquired, what strategies the learner uses, and to the learner: he can from these errors.
4. Learner has made an errors, the learner should learn to find the correct linguistic form by searching for it.
5. According contrastive analysis, errors are due to that the learner uses structure from his native language, but Corder claimed that possession of one’s native language is facilitative. Errors in this case not inhibitory, but rather evidence of one’s learning strategies.

Gass and Selinker (1994) argued that errors as “red flags” that provide evidence of learner’s knowledge of the second language. Richard and Sampson (1974, p. 15) mentioned that “at the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort”. Corder (1981, p. 24) argued that error analysis has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object serves to “elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language.” And the applied object serves to enable the learner “to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purpose.” (cited in Khansir, 2008, b). Error analysis has always played a crucial role in language teaching. Language teachers and specialists are of the view that error analysis can help first, second and foreign language learners develop linguistic competence as part of communicative competence. “Errors are natural for second or foreign learners of English language. Errors hamper communication, which is the main function of language. Sometimes errors committed by second language learners are due to mother tongue interference. Another reason for learners’ errors is due to what Richards (1971) mentioned: ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized, developmental errors and over generalization” (cited in Khansir, 2008, P 2. a).

## II. REVIEW OF THE PIONEERING STUDIES

Chan (2004) investigated writing errors made by 710 Hong Kong Chinese ESL learners at different proficiency levels with the focus on 5 error types, namely (a) lack of control of the copula (b) incorrect placement of adverbs (c) inability to use the *there be* structure for expressing the existential or presentative function (d) failure to use the relative clause and (e) confusion in verb transitivity. The results showed confirmatory evidence for syntactic transfer from Chinese to English with regard to the five syntactic patterns selected for experimentation, and the extent of syntactic transfer was particularly large for complex target structures and among learners of a lower proficiency level. Ferris (2002) studied syntactical errors. The results of the study indicated that 22.5% of the errors were due to sentence structure, 2.9% due to lack of proper conjunction, and, 1.8% due to incomplete sentences. Wang and Wen (2002) investigated a number of adjective errors related to China learners. According to her findings, 62% of errors were due to transfer in language, 28% due to transfer between languages, and 10% due to strategies in communication.

Ghadessy as one of the Iranian researcher examined errors of 370 freshmen students at Shiraz University in 1976. He divided the Iranian students into 12 sections; approximately 30 students per section. The classification of the students was based on the results of a diagnostic test administered prior to their participation in a five week summer intensive course in English at Shiraz University in 1967. In addition, achievement test was used by him, among other items; the achievement test included a written assignment of approximately 150-200 words on one of three topics printed on a separate sheet at the end of the examination books. In the research, the time was 30 minutes for assignment. Two samples were selected randomly from 11 sections and three samples from the twelfth. The errors were divided by him into two major types. The errors that occurred within sentences and those that related to the relationship between sentences and the combination of sentences into paragraphs.

The types of errors based on the research are classified as follows:

1. Morphology
2. Modal verbs
3. Tenses
4. Articles
5. Word order
6. Syntax
7. Construction
8. Preposition
9. Lexis

The total of the errors of the study were 216, 167 were systematic errors committed by the students and 49 other errors that occurred within the study.

The result of the study showed that 77.3 percent of the writings of Iranian university freshmen learning English contained systematic errors most of which caused by the lack of reducing sentences by either conjunction or embedding. He also concluded that because the majority of students written errors occur in systematic patterns, these patterns could serve as a basis for developing instructional materials for individual learners.

El-Sayed (1982) investigated the frequent syntactic errors in compositions written by Saudi students. The errors were categorized into verbs and verbals, articles, pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and prepositions. Verbs and verbals were found to be the major source of errors. His findings also supported the claim that mother tongue interference was the prime cause of student errors.

Khansir (2008, a) examined syntactical errors of second language learners were studying in the field of Second Year B.Com at Mysore University in India. The purpose of this research was to classify "errors" made by the learners at the sentence levels: Auxiliary verbs, passive and tenses. The study showed that the learners have committed errors in the use of auxiliary verbs, passive forms and tenses. The study indicated that the errors have been committed by the Indian learners was systematic in target language. According to these findings of the study, the errors pertaining to auxiliary verbs, passive voice, and tenses indicated that teaching English was not satisfactory in the colleges, and that learning strategies were the cause of errors.

### III. NEED FOR THE STUDY

Today English has a special place in the school curriculum in foreign countries, because English is an international language. There is, however, a feeling that the standard of English is not satisfactory in the foreign countries. In general, in EFL setting, and particular, in Iran teachers and learners of English face several problems. One of the most important problems is that the teachers of English face a large number of errors committed by the learners at pre-university level. Teachers face with this problem every day in their classroom teaching and particularly in the written work of the learners. So far, English teachers have been trying to understand this problem in a scientific manner. The researches have shown significant developments in the areas of learners' errors in recent years that are why; the study investigates the written errors committed by EFL learner's pre-university level. It would be useful to undertake a systematic study of learners' problems in this area.

### IV. QUESTION OF THE STUDY

Is there a significant difference between tenses, voice of sentences (active and passive) and articles errors committed by Iranian EFL learners at pre-university level?

#### V. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

There is a significant difference between tenses, voice of sentences (active and passive) and articles errors committed by Iranian EFL learners at pre-university level.

#### VI. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine types of errors in target language (i.e., English Language).
2. To compare types of errors in tenses, articles, and active and passive.
3. To suggest remedial measures to overcome the committing of errors.

#### VII. METHODOLOGY

The research concentrates on the errors of writing of Iranian EFL learners at pre- university level. The methodology of this research consisted of the processes: a) Data collection and b) Data analysis.

The collection of data in this study is usually similar to the other studies was determined by its objectives. In this research, the collection of data is used in terms of the objectives: 1) to examine types of errors in target language (i.e. English language); 2) to compare types of errors in tenses, articles, and active and passive) and finally suggest remedial measure to overcome the committing of errors. The data is analyzed utilizing the computer programmed from SPSS in this study.

##### A. Participants

The subjects for this research were 100 students at Pre-University level in Bushehr. The subjects were randomly selected from Pre- University schools and the students were also both male and female. Fifty of the students were male and the rest were female. The students commenced their studies in September of 2012. The subjects were enrolled in Mathematic, Human Science, and Experimental Science. Most of the students passed their high school course in several schools of Bushehr City.

The students were comprised of 50 male and 50 female who were selected for computer analysis from three Pre-University schools after they took a General English Proficiency Test, and a Grammatical Test (tenses, articles, and active and passive). All of the selected students of the three Pre-University schools studying in Bushehr City were participated for the purpose of collecting data. The Pre-University schools were used to collect data as follows:

1. Doctor Ali Shariati High School1.
2. Omm Abiha High School
3. Hejab High school

##### B. Instruments

The instruments used in this research were as follows:

A. A General English Proficiency Test (Transparent) for determining the proficiency level in English of the participants.

B. A Background Questionnaire to elicit information on students' age, gender, and level of education.

C. A Grammatical Judgment Test (G.J.T.), which was developed by the investigators on the basis of syntactic competence (tenses, articles, and active and passive), covered in English textbooks designed for the pre- university level.

##### 1. General English Proficiency Test

In this research, The General English Proficiency (Transparent) consisted of 50 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items was selected to assess the participant's level of proficiency in English. In a administering the test, the first of all, the Researchers piloted the test for the target subject. In addition, 15 students with the same level and similar characteristics to participants of this research were selected in the pilot study. The General English Proficiency Test was found to be appropriate for the participants' performing level. Its reliability through the K-R 21 formula turned out to be .65 and .67 to the pre-university students.

##### 2. Background Questionnaire

In this study, the researchers had to develop a background questionnaire to elicit information on students. The questionnaire developed by the researchers consisted of some questions which were related to their information about parents, language attitude, etc. in addition; Iranian participants' parents in the current study belonged to middle class. They were not only highly educated but also belonged to the middle income group.

##### 3. Grammatical Judgment Test (G.J.T.)

Khansir (2010) argued that Grammatical test has always been used as one method for collecting data. Grammar tests are designed to measure learner's proficiency in an academic work. Grammatical test is a test which aims to measure knowledge or control of grammatical structures, as compared with tests of ability to use the language, such as performance test. The test was used to identify the type of errors in this research. It was chosen to examine the ability of

the students in selecting the correct grammatical rules of sentences. In administering the test, a pilot test was carried out by the researchers for the target subject. Meanwhile, 15 students were selected as pilot study with the same level and similar characteristics to participants of this study participated in the pilot study. To ensure whether the grammatical judgment test is appropriate for subjects of the research, the Researchers experimented with the K-R21 formula. Applying this formula to measure the reliability of grammatical judgment test for the Iranian EFL students appeared 65 and 67.

The Grammatical judgment test utilized in this research was as follows:

Articles, Tenses, and Passive voice (active and passive) which were used in the form of multiple – choice.

### C. Procedures

In this research, the following procedures were done by the researchers.

- 1- Development of the questionnaire.
- 2- Administration of the proficiency test.
- 3- Development of the grammaticality judgment test and its administration.
- 1). Analysis of collected data.

In this research, the role of the grammaticality judgment test was used as the role of pedestal function. Before, the researchers developed and administered the grammaticality judgment test in this research, the English General Proficiency and Background questionnaire tests were developed and administered by the researchers.

#### 1. Administration of the General English Proficiency Test

The test is administered to the Pre-University students. The Researchers selected 100 Pre-University students studying in the three Pre- University schools to participate in the next stage.

#### 2. The background questionnaire

In this study, the background questionnaire was designed in order to elicit information on the students. The questionnaire developed by the researchers consisted of some questions which were related to their information about parents, language attitude, etc.

#### 3. The Grammatical Judgment Test

In this research, the Grammatical Judgment Test was chosen to examine the ability of the Iranian EFL students in selecting the correct grammatical rules of sentences. Going through the following grammatical books, the Grammatical Judgment Test was developed by the researchers related to this research, because one of the basic principles of selecting a test is to use the scientific books related to the test materials.

1. Modiri, A. H. (1993). English Grammar and Test
2. Farzam, A. (2009) English Grammar and Test
3. Swan, M. (2005) Practical English Usage.
4. Langan, J. (1999) Sentence Skills. A work book for writer.

Meanwhile, the researchers of this study in order to elicit information on their subjects, they visited the Pre-University Schools and discussed with the teachers and studied text books and syllabus.

## VIII. ANALYSIS OF COLLECTED DATA

In this research, the analysis of data was concerned with the following tests:

- *General English Proficiency Test*
- *Background Questionnaire*
- *Grammatical Judgment Test (G.J.T.)*

The above tests were analyzed utilizing the computer programmed from SPSS. The statistical analysis proceeded in three steps as follows:

#### *Analysis 1*

In the first analysis, the General English Proficiency Test was examined as the first test of this study. After this analysis, the researchers selected students for the purpose of the collecting data.

#### *Analysis 2*

In this analysis, the Background Questionnaire was analyzed to elicit information on the students.

#### *Analysis 3*

In this analysis, the Grammatical Judgment Test was used to investigate the one hypothesis of the study and errors committed by the Pre-University students.

The analysis of work in this research was concerned with the following processes:

- Classification of errors
- Comparison of errors
- Suggestion of remedial measures

### A. Classification of Errors

In the first process, an attempt was made to classify errors of Pre –University students in this research. For example, while analyzing errors of the students, whether it is an error of simple past tense is used instead of passive present perfect tense, or it is an error of wrong use of definite article "the" for indefinite article "a".

#### B. Comparison of Errors

A further attempt was made to study and compare types of errors of Pre- University Students.

#### C. Suggestion of Remedial Measure

In the last process of this study, an attempt was made to suggest remedial measures to overcome the committing of errors of Iranian EFL students. The aim was to help the Iranian learners to improve their language and use English flawlessly in the classroom.

### IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study dealt with the actual analysis of the written errors of the Iranian EFL students in their target language (i.e. English). An attempt is made here to classify the observed errors and categorize them. A further attempt is made to compare types of the written errors of Iranian EFL students. The test was specially chosen to examine the ability of the Iranian EFL students in applying the correct grammatical rules in the construction of the sentence in the English language. The test was classified into three major categories: auxiliary verbs, passive voice, and tense.

Of 1755 the errors which were committed in the grammatical judgment test for this research classified into three major categories. Based on the result of this research, the largest number of errors committed by the Iranian EFL students was from the realm of the article form (669). The minimum number of errors recorded in the test was active and passive voice (506). The three major categories have been presented in table 1.

TABLE (1):  
NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF WRITTEN ERRORS OF IRANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Test item	Pre-university	
	Number of errors	Percent
Active and Passive voice	506	28.8
Article	669	38.2
Tense	580	33
Total	1755	100

In active and passive voice category, the largest number of errors observed was wrong use of ' Simple past tense which was used instead of passive simple past tense. In this sub-category, the number the of pre-university students' errors was 47 which came to 9.8% for errors in sentence voice. The minimum number of errors was recorded in the following sub-categories:

'Present continuous tense was used instead of passive simple present tense', passive present perfect tense is used instead of passive past perfect tense, 'active past continuous tense is used instead of passive simple past tense', simple present tense is used instead of passive simple past tense', ' Present perfect continuous is used instead of passive simple present tense'.(see table 2 in chapter 4). It is possible that the students were not familiar with the rules of transformation from active to passive voice and vice versa. They lacked knowledge on how to use ' passive form' in English language.

In tense category, the largest number of errors observed is that simple present tense is used instead of present continuous tense. In this sub-category, the number of the pre-university students' errors was 46 which came to 8% of errors for tense. The minimum number of errors recorded in the following sub-categories:

'Simple past tense was used instead of present participle tense', 'simple present tense was used instead of simple future tense', 'Simple past tense is used instead of passive simple past tense', 'Simple past tense is used instead of present continuous tense', 'simple present tense is used instead of simple past tense'. It was found that learners were not aware of the rule of tense properly. It is meant that their lack of knowledge of the proper use of tenses has led to errors in this category. For example, they didn't make a distinction between simple past and present participle tense, etc.

In article, the maximum error observed was the wrong use of the omission of the definite article 'the'. In this sub-category, the number of the pre-university student' errors was 155, which came to 22.9%. The minimum number of errors was omission the indefinite article 'an. In this sub-category, the pre-university students committed 73 which came to 10.8 %. The subjects seemed to have not mastered in the use of the English definite and indefinite articles. The learners were not familiar with the use of articles in English.

### X. IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The outcome of this research, which in many ways is similar to the findings of previous studies, showed that the Iranian learners were not aware of rules of certain grammatical structured of English language. The result of the research indicated that in general, the Iranian learners have committed systematic errors in their English language. Therefore, in this study, it seems that there were several other sources which could be held responsible for the occurrence of the errors in the target language (English). The source of the errors could be held for responsible for the

cause of the Iranian EFL students at the pre-university such as interference of the mother tongue of the learner, complexity of the English language, learner incomplete knowledge or lack of certain structures in English language.

One of the best ways to help teachers of English in EFL settings can be students' errors as output of the results of their studies. The study of learners' errors shows the linguistic area where the learners have the most difficulty in their target language. The role of error analysis as a field of applied linguistics can be used in order to increase the knowledge of researchers, teachers, linguists, and syllabus designers to acquire second and foreign language and resolve the problems of the second and foreign language learners.

The results of the research indicated that the Iranian EFL students are not master of English writing in their schools. The lack of master of English in this linguistic area may be lack of practice and sufficient instruction in writing during their education. Researchers believe that Iranian English teachers should concentrated on their students most common errors and use the best methods and techniques in order to increase their students' competent knowledge of English writing and prepare exercises and skills related to the problematic areas of their target language.

## XI. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the written errors of EFL learners and its contribution to English language teaching at the pre-university level in Iran. For Iranian students, English Language is used as a foreign language. As results of analysis of learners' errors, 1755 written errors were found in the three categories. Based on the outcome of this study, the largest number of errors caused by the students was from the realm of the article form (669). The minimum number of errors recorded in the test was active and passive voice (506).

The results revealed that there is a significant difference in types of errors between article and active and passive voice. As, there is a significant difference in types of errors between article and tense, but there is no significant difference in types of errors between tense and voice of sentences in pre-university level.

The study shown that Iranian learners' errors was systematic, is mean that the students had lack of knowledge in their target language and teaching English and learning strategies could be responsible for the increase or decrease in the number of the written errors in the students' data in the Iranian Schools. The outcome of the three categories of the written errors in this study can be used as important factors in the preparation of effective teaching materials for Iranian students. In addition, the study of language learning problems can be considered as useful factors in order to provide information to teachers, and help the learners improve their English language and use English flawlessly.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Chan, Y.W. (2004). Syntactic transfer: evidence from the interlanguage of Hong Kong Chinese ESL Learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, 88(1):56-74.
- [2] Corder, S.P. (1967). The significance of learner's errors. *IRAL*, 5/4, 147-161.
- [3] Corder, S.P. (1981). *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] El-Sayed, A. M. (1982). *An investigation into the syntactic errors of Saudi freshmen's English compositions*. Ph. D. dissertation. Indianan University of Pennsylvania.
- [6] Ferris, D. (2002). *Treatment of error in second language students writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- [7] Gass, S. and L. Selinker. (1994). *Language Transfer in Language Learning*. (Revised edition). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- [8] Ghadessy, M. (1976). An error analysis of the writings of Iranian freshman students learning English – a Pilot study. *IRAL*, 14, 74-81.
- [9] Khansir, A. A. (2008, a). Syntactic Errors in English Committed by Indian Undergraduate Students. *Language in India*. Vol. 8, 1-11.
- [10] Khansir, A. A. (2008, b). Place of Error Analysis in Language Teaching. *Indian Linguistics*. 69, 195-202.
- [11] Khansir, A. A. (2010). *A Comparative Linguistic Study of ERRORS*. Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.
- [12] Richard, J.C. (1971). A Non-Contrastive Approach to error analysis. *ELT*. 25 (3), 204-219.
- [13] Richards, J. C. and Sampson, G. P. (1974). The study of learner English. In Richards, J. C. (ed) (1974). *Error Analysis: Perspective on second language acquisition*. London: Longman.
- [14] Wang, W. & Wen, Q. (2002). L1 use in the L2 composing process: An exploratory study of Chinese EFL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 11(3), 225-246.

**Ali Akbar Khansir** is an Assistant professor in English Language Teaching at the Bushehr University of Medical Sciences and Health Services in Iran. He has completed M.A. in English Language Teaching at the Aligarh Muslim University in 2003 and PhD in English Language Teaching at the Mysore University in 2010 in India. He has published some articles in the field of Applied Linguistics, English Language Teaching and Linguistics and published two books: *English Error Analysis* in 2010 and *English Spelling and Sound* in 2012 in Germany.

**Hajar Shahhoseiny** is an MA student of TEFL in Department of English, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran. Her area of interest is Language teaching.