

The Spoken Errors and Mistakes Committed by Senior English Students at Princess Alia University College

Rula Tahsin Tarawneh

Princess Alia University College, Al-Balqa' Applied University, Jordan

Islam Mousa Almomani

Princess Alia University College, Al-Balqa' Applied University, Jordan

Abstract—The researchers have carried out an analysis of ungrammatical sentences uttered by some senior Jordanian English students in order to explore whether they are errors or mistakes. This paper claims in general that most Jordanian English students are unable to speak English accurately although many of them have learned a great deal of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. In recent years, the teaching method is changed from focusing on the grammar structure into communicative teaching in order to facilitate oral English development. However, fluency of language becomes a hot research topic in second language acquisition, and that makes the teachers' corrective feedback indispensable part in foreign language teaching. Researchers have carried out studies on corrective feedback from various perspectives in order to check whether corrective feedback has a positive effect on improving oral English accuracy.

Index Terms—mistakes, errors, feedback, L1, positive transfer, negative transfer

I. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on some second language learners' ungrammatical utterances in order to investigate whether they are errors or mistakes. The data of analysis are taken from a sample of senior English students at Princess Alia University College. The paper aims at answering the following research questions:

1. Do the ungrammatical utterances uttered by our students are errors, mistakes or both?
2. Can our students decide whether the ungrammatical utterances are errors or mistakes?
3. Does artificial learning play a major role in understanding the differences between the above two terms?
4. Are the ungrammatical utterances committed by our students due to L1 interference (Arabic Language), overgeneralization, fossilization, and students' back ground knowledge, i.e., teachers' role inside the classroom?

The researchers follow the descriptive-analytical approach. The data collected for this research are an amalgamation of genuine sentences uttered by senior students of English. Casual speech is tape-recorded for the subjects talking freely about different topics of their choices for different period of time. Tape-recording is carried out in quiet classrooms in a friendly atmosphere. A tape-recorded connected with a microphone is used to ensure a high quality recording and reliable data.

II. INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces some ungrammatical utterances provided by some Jordanian students whose major is English. The ungrammatical utterances are classified into two categories, namely, errors and mistakes. Jordanian students of English, in general, are unfamiliar with the two concepts, and if they are aware of the distinction, they cannot apply the grammatical rule(s) in everyday real life spoken language.

Princess Alia students of English in Jordan make grammatical errors based on over generalizing grammatical rules. For example, "go" as "goed", "mouse" as "mouses", "bring" as "bringed". Also, our students utter ungrammatical statements as an influence of L1 interference. For instance, "I saw a dog yesterday. He was a very huge one." Though this ungrammatical English sentence used by our students is grammatical in Arabic-mother tongue.

Before going into any details concerning the researchers' analysis of the data, and claiming whether they are errors or mistakes, this section provides a brief analysis and definition of the above terms in the literature of modern linguistics.

A linguist as Pit Corder (1974) makes a distinction between a mistake and an error and its effect in teaching and learning. He introduces the difference between errors and mistakes as systematic and unsystematic errors. Mistakes according to him are considered as unsystematic errors and they occur in one's native language; whereas, errors are defined as systematic ones which occur in a second language. According to him, errors are noteworthy to the teacher, researcher, and learner. Errors enable the teacher to follow the learners' progress in the language. As far as the

researcher and learner are concerned, errors help the researcher to define how a language is acquired by learners and what strategies learners use, and help the learner to learn from these errors.

Hagège (1996), states that interference of L1 and L2 is observed among Second language learners. As learners grow older the influence of L1 gets stronger and accordingly mistakes or errors committed by our students get fossilized. He also claims that learning a second language such as English may be frustrating and difficult for some students and there is always the danger of over-correcting them. When adults such as parents correct every single mistake made by their kids, their children are likely to lose motivation and their flow of thinking will be disrupted.

Mahmoud (2005) claims in his article, after examining 42 essays written by Arabic-speaking university students majoring in English, that second language learners utter 'unnatural' and 'strange' combination of English sentences.

According to Lakkis and Malak (2000), positive and negative transfer of Arabic prepositional knowledge to English will help students and teachers to identify the problematic areas and help Arab students to understand where transfer should be encouraged or avoided.

According to Langit-Dursin (2008), mistakes committed by second language learners constitute normal language progress and learning. Those mistakes indicate that students are figuring out the rules and patterns of the language.

Karra (2006) argues that the input of the learner is determined based on his choice, whereas, the teacher only presents the linguistic forms which are not necessary to be the real input of the learner.

Freiermuth (1997) claims while studying the case of exposure that a child creates his own language to express an idea by using a kind of a linguistic form he hasn't yet acquired. Thus, the learner will most likely make errors which are ineffective because he is not aware of them.

Thanh Ha Nguyen (1995) argues while conducting a case study of L1 transfer in Vietnamese learners of English using particular language form in English past tense making. He concludes that the role of L1 transfer in learning English is determined by age, time, place, and purpose of exposure to English.

Lake (2011) discusses five common mistakes made by learners of English as a second language. He argues that learners of English make mistakes in some countries that are common while most common mistakes are different in other countries. This is an indication that speaker of English make mistakes in general and these mistakes are not due to country specific.

According to Zaghlool (1984) English oral lexical errors committed by Jordanian secondary students were classified and explained into four major types: substitution, overuse, omission and insertion.

III. DISCUSSION

Senior students of the English Department at Princess Alia University College have been chosen as a sample in a *Conversation course* through which the study is conducted. The number of students used as the sample of the research is one hundred. The data of the students have been recorded and analyzed by the researchers in terms of a mistake and an error. The data consist of simple short sentences and short paragraphs as shown in this paper to test the usage of the simple present tense and the plural form of nouns, i.e., whether our students apply these two grammatical rules appropriately or not. The researchers chose the above data as a result of the reoccurrence of the ungrammatical utterances in the spoken courses. Through the analysis, the researchers realized that some students commit mistakes, whereas others produce ungrammatical utterances as errors.

Students of English at Princess Alia University College as learners of English as a second language make grammatical errors and mistakes due to several reasons like overgeneralization, slip of the tongue, lack of competence, and etc. Some of our students, for example, apply the regular plural form, -s morpheme to "man" as "mans", "mouse" as "mouses", and "tooth" as "tooths". Also they utter the past tense of irregular verbs by adding the final -ed morpheme to the verb base. For instance, they utter "bring" as "bringed", "cut" as "cutted", and "fight" as "fighted".

The ungrammatical utterances performed by our students are considered as controversial issues according to their teachers. Some say that teachers should correct their students' mistakes or errors at spot to speak English correctly. Learning English as a second language may be frustrating for some students and there is always the risk of overcorrecting them. Others claim that mistakes or errors should not be corrected right away because they are normal and can not be avoided during the learning process. The researchers believe from their own experience that correcting learners inside the classroom is necessary if the mistake or error is major.

According to Lynch (2002), feedback is very important in classrooms and is considered more important in online environment. Teachers' feedback is often considered as the channel for students learning a second language, and lack of feedback is most often cited as the reason for our students to withdraw and change their English major. Ertmer and Stepich (2004) claim that the use of constructive feedback can increase the standard student discussion responses that is direct, consistent, and continuous. However, teachers must spend a noteworthy amount of time and effort with their students to reach a high level of feedback of the spoken courses they teach.

Peer feedback as an instructional strategy can be considered as a crucial element for instructors. Students are asked by their teachers to provide feedback to one another and at the same time higher levels of interaction are encouraged. Depending on how feedback process is structured, instructors could be spared from assessing large number of students, yet still provide enough instances of influential and collective feedback. Students, on the other hand, can get the feedback they need in order to evaluate their progress.

The distinction between a mistake and an error has serious implications for teaching and learning processes. Many of our students are unaware of the differences between the two or if they are aware, they are unable to apply the grammatical rule(s) to their spoken utterances.

Any attempts to distinguish between errors and mistakes can be explained as to what constitutes either in the classroom. Thus, if the ungrammatical utterances performed by our students are the result of carelessness, a slip of the tongue or a momentary lapse in thought, they might be considered mistakes. Whereas, if our students committed ungrammatical utterances without knowing the grammatical rules and patterns of the language, i.e., have a problem in competence, they are considered errors. For example, a student was answering a question raised by the researchers to describe her daily routine, and her answer which was recorded is as follow:

i. *My mum wake me up at six o'clock then I goes to the bathroom to washes my face and brushes my teeth. As usual my mum prepare my breakfast and give me a sandwich for college.*

As can be seen in the above mentioned example, the student is insisting on adding the –s form to the first person singular; whereas the –s form is omitted where needed. Also the student is not realizing the rule of to-infinitive. Thus, this is a real example from our English class which proves the student's unawareness of the grammatical rules and patterns of subject-verb agreement and the infinitive form.

Another student was answering a question raised by the researchers to describe her brother's daily routine and her answer was as follow:

ii. *Ahmad wakes up at 7 o'clock then he gets out of bed at 7:30. He walk to the bathroom and washes his face and brush his teeth.*

The above example is an indication of a mistake because the speaker knows the grammatical rule of subject verb agreement but for a reason or another he committed the above mistakes. They could be committed by him for different reasons:

- Carelessness
- Slip of the tongue
- Momentary lapse in thought

A. Data Analysis

This section analyzes the data uttered by our students in order to check students' understanding of the differences between the two terms; whereas, the researchers will realize accordingly whether the ungrammatical utterances are errors or mistakes. (The asterisk (*)) indicates the ungrammaticality of the statements). The following utterances are provided by our English senior students. The found data of mistakes and errors are classified under three categories: subject-verb agreement, plural morpheme, and L1 interference which have been analyzed by the researchers as follows:

B. Subject-verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement is a rule which learners have difficulties acquiring it because the morphological realization of agreement in English is poor in comparison to its richness in Arabic language. For example, in English we have two and only two forms of agreement in the present tense, namely, the base form and the –s form, and one form of agreement in the past tense, (-ed). Whereas in Arabic every pronoun in the subject position has its unique verb form. Accordingly, our students have this difficulty as shown in the following examples.

1. **He live in Amman and he have many jobs that he have to do the whole day.*

This statement is ungrammatical and considered as an error because the learner does not correct herself. She does not realize the subject-verb agreement in English. We as researchers figured out that the ungrammatical utterance is not due to a slip of the tongue or carelessness. We checked out that the learner emphasized the correctness of her statement after discussing it with the researchers. Thus, the researchers concluded that her statement is a matter of lack of competence, i.e., the learner does not know when to use subject verb agreement.

2. **They goes to school and stays in a big hotel in Irbid.*

This statement in (2) is also ungrammatical and considered as an error because the learner thinks that the pronoun is plural and accordingly the–s form which is added to the verb is a must. This indicates that learner here cannot distinguish between the plural morpheme and the present tense morpheme (-s). It shows that the learner has over-generalized the rule in the example above.

3. **Liala brush his teeth and washes her face and then she goes to the school.*

This statement is ungrammatical and considered as a mistake because the learner corrects herself. It is obvious that this ungrammatical utterance is due to a slip of the tongue because the learner has corrected herself automatically without any help. Also, she commits other mistakes such as the misuse of gender and the addition of the definite article (the) which is not appropriate in this context as shown above. We as researchers will not focus on such mistakes in this paper and we will leave it for further investigation.

4. **I has to studies my exam English because I finds difficulties in know English.*

The above ungrammatical utterance is an error due to the repetition of the third person singular of the verb. Also, the infinitive is used with the –s form in this statement to emphasize her knowledge of the grammatical rule in English, i.e., she is describing herself as a feminine third person singular with the first-person singular pronoun which is (I).

Finally, the adjective which is (*English*) in this utterance follows the noun that it describes, and this shows L1 interference. In Arabic, the adjective does not precede but follows the noun.

5. **Does Ahmad has a pencil?*

In (5), the ungrammatical utterance can not be judged whether it is a mistake or an error because the data is not sufficient. Though the learner knows the grammatical rule of subject verb agreement, she missed the appropriate form of the main verb which is "have".

6. **Do he has to drinks coffee?*

Utterance (6) which is ungrammatical shows that the learner has an idea about subject-verb agreement but she started the yes-no question with verb "do" and misuse the to-infinitive rule. The learner knows the grammatical rule but cannot apply it in the appropriate position which is an indication of a mistake.

7. **Does he speaks and enjoy English?*

Utterance (7) indicates the awareness of the learner of the grammatical rule because she uses the rule in an appropriate way but she does not apply it with the verb, "speaks". This mistake is due to a slip of the tongue because she corrects herself automatically when uttering the second verb of the utterance "enjoy".

8. **He have wrote her homework and have did it.*

The above utterance is an error because the learner could not correct herself in the subject verb-agreement as of repeating the same error which is "have". The learner is not realizing the ungrammatical utterance because she lacks competence (her knowledge of the internal structure of the language).

C. Plural Morpheme

The following utterances show that students have problems with the plural morpheme because they confuse it with the present -s form. Accordingly, the researchers while analyzing the data concluded that there is a big gap between the rules of pluralization in L1 and L2.

9. **The girls is here.*

Utterance (9) is an error because the learner uses the singular form of verb "be" with the plural subject NP (the girls). This ungrammatical utterance cannot be justified by the researchers because we have not experienced such an error from a senior English student before. Also, the data is not enough to decide whether it is a slip of the tongue or an error. When the learner was asked to re-utter the ungrammatical utterance, she pronounced "here" as "her" intending to show that the agreement is between "is" the verb and "here" instead of the pronoun "her".

10. **The box are empty.*

Utterance (10) is a mistake because the learner thinks that the subject NP "the box" is plural confusing it with the word "books" since the words are pronounced the same.

11. **I has a new car and has a big house.*

This utterance is an error. The learner thinks that "has" is the singular form of verb "have" and hence it has to agree with the first singular pronoun "I". This ungrammatical utterance is due to over-generalization.

12. **One of us are stupid and behaves foolishly.*

Utterance (12) is a mistake because the learner corrects herself and misuses the subject verb agreement. She does not pay attention to the subject NP (one of us), where the agreement is done between "us" and "are" rather than "one".

13. **The boy's car are beautiful and they took it for a long ride.*

The above ungrammatical utterance is an error because the learner cannot distinguish between the plural and the singular/plural possessive morphemes. She uttered the sentence confusing it with the noun plural "boys".

D. L1 Interference

The last sub-title under this section shows the great influence of the learners' mother tongue while learning English as a second language. This influence could be positive or negative. If the transfer from L1 to L2 is positive, the utterances provided by the learner are grammatical merely because of the similarities between both languages. But if the transfer from L1 to L2 is negative, the learner provides ungrammatical utterances because the grammatical rules between L1 and L2 contrast.

14. **The students clever.*

This utterance is an error because the learner applies the rule of her mother tongue which is Arabic. In Arabic, verb "be" is not used in the present tense in nominal sentences. Thus, she wrongly applies it in the second language which is English.

15. **How is you?*

The above ungrammatical utterance is an error because the learner has transferred the rule of L1 to L2 and dealing with "you" as a singular form which must take "is" according to her knowledge. It can also be considered as an error because the learner cannot distinguish between the singular and plural "you" and accordingly she uses the singular form of verb "be".

16. **My parents they Ahmad and Reem.*

Utterance (16) is an error because of the influence of L1 and the learner omits the main verb of the sentence, "be". She adds the pronoun "they" as an emphasis of the plurality of the subject NP "my parents".

17. **My parent are overseas.*

Utterance (17) is an error because the learner thinks that the subject "my parent" is plural itself and uses the plural form of verb "be" influenced by her mother tongue thinking that "my parent" is the same as "my family". In order to overcome the negative transfer from L1, learners have to master the standard pronunciation, vocabulary, and accurate grammatical rules of the target language which is English in the case of our students. When our students increase their linguistic knowledge of English, their linguistic competence increases too. Our students have also to improve their cultural awareness of the target language because language and culture interact, i.e., learning a language is inseparable from learning its culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researchers have found out that the learners while uttering short simple sentences; they commit either a mistake or an error as a result of L1 interference, overgeneralization, lack of competence, and carelessness. The researchers suggest that learners must be aware of their mistakes or errors in order to avoid them in future use. Inside the classroom, the learners must be corrected by teachers to realize their mistakes or errors because feedback by teachers will give an indication of positive learning.

Learners of English cannot decide whether the ungrammatical utterances are either mistakes or errors even though they know the differences between the two terms. Our students utter short simple sentences full of mistakes and errors because of lack of practice in the classroom. English senior students of Princess Alia must be aware of their spoken mistakes and errors to overcome them with the help of their teachers and when they go out into the teaching fields, they will be able to teach the coming generations to a level of proficiency, accuracy, and fluency.

The researchers' recommendations are:

1. Learners must have oral practice inside and outside the classroom for fluency in the language in order to keep on with English language.
2. Learners must be able to express themselves freely inside the classroom even if they make mistakes or errors. Most of our learners are hesitant to speak English because of the blame they get if they say something wrong.
3. Teachers' feedback is important in the process of learning. The feedback must be positive and with high level of encouragement.
4. Learners must think and speak in English only and avoid L1.
5. There must be English clubs in all schools, colleges, and universities for practicing the language. All majors of English at university levels must join such clubs to improve their spoken language which is composed of teachers, students, and English or American foreigners. The High Ministry of Education must include the oral practice in such clubs as part of the graduation requirements.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ertmer, P.A., and Stepich, D.A. (2004, July). Examining the relationship between higher-order learning and students' perceived sense of community in an online learning environment. Paper presented at the proceedings of the 10th Australian World Wide Web conference, Gold Coast, Australia.
- [2] Freiermuth, M. R. (1997). "L2 Error Correction: Criteria and Techniques." *The Language Teacher Online* <http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/97/sep/freiermuth.html> (accessed 9/10/2012)
- [3] Hagège, C. (1996). *L'enfant aux deux langues*. (The child between two languages), Greek translation, Polis editions, Athens 1999. (Original publication: Editions Odile Jacob).
- [4] Karra, Maria. (2006). Second Language Acquisition: Learners' Errors and Error Correction in Language Teaching. *Translation Theory, Translator Education*, pp 18-33.
- [5] Lake, William. (2011). "Common Mistakes in the English Language." English as Second Language, Articles base. <http://www.articlesbase.com/languages-articles/common-mistakes-in-the-english-language-4219109.html> (accessed 10/5/2012)
- [6] Lakkis, K. and Malak, M. A. (2000). "Understanding the Transfer of Prepositions." *FORUM*, Vol 38, No 3, July-September. <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol38/no3/p26.htm> (accessed 7/3/2012)
- [7] Langit-Dursin, Richel. (2008). "English as a second language -- learning from mistakes." Jakarta Post. Opinion. Sat, March. 15 2008, 11:56 AM. www.thejakartapost.com (accessed 18/6/2012)
- [8] Lynch, M.M. (2002). *The Online Educator: A Guide to Creating the Virtual Classroom*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- [9] Mahmoud, Abdulmoneim. (2005). "Collocation Errors Made by Arab Learner of English." *Asian EFL Journal*. <http://asian-efl-journal.com/teaching-articles/2005/07/05/collocation-errors-made-by-arab-learners-of-english> (accessed 23/2/2012).
- [10] Nguyen, Thanh Ha. (1995). First Language Transfer and Vietnamese Learners' Oral Competence in English Past Tense Marking: A Case Study. *Master of Education (TESOL) Research Essay*, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia.
- [11] Pit Corder, S. (1974). Techniques in applied linguistics. In *Edinburgh course in applied linguistics*, 3, ed. J. P. B. Allen and S. Pit Corder. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [12] Zaghlool, Zohair Dawood. (1984). An Analysis of the English Oral Lexical Errors of Jordanian Secondary Students. Thesis, Jordan University.

Rula Tahsin Tarawneh is currently teaching Applied Linguistics at Princess Alia University College/ Al-Balqa' Applied University-Jordan. She received her MA and BA from Mutah University/ Jordan. She has published several papers in linguistics

especially in the field of Phonetics, Phonology, and Education. Her research interests include Literature, Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and Contrastive Linguistics.

Islam Mousa Almomani was born in Irbid-Jordan in 1966. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Linguistics/Syntax from Bombay University/India in 1998, an M.A. degree in Linguistics from Delhi University/India in 1992, and a B.A. degree in English Language and Literature from Yarmouk University/Jordan in 1989.

He is currently working as the head of the Department of English Language and Literature at Princess Alia University College/Al-Balqa' Applied University/Jordan. He has been teaching there since 2011. Before that, he worked as an Assistant Professor at Al-Hussein Bin Talal University/Jordan for eight years, and also occupied several positions over there as: the head of the Department of English Language and Literature for the academic year 2006/2007, a member of the Faculty of Arts Council for the academic year 2005/2006, and a member of the University Council for the academic year 2007/2008. He also worked as an Assistant Professor for four years at the Department of English Language and Literature/Al-Isra private University/Jordan.

He has published several papers in Linguistics especially in the field of Syntax in international scientific journals. His research interests include Applied Linguistics, Semantics, Contrastive Linguistics, and Sociolinguistics.