

Analysis of Errors in English Writings Committed by Arab First-year College Students of EFL in Israel

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Abstract—This study is conducted as an attempt to examine the errors in English writings committed by Arab learners who live in Israel. These students were required to write an essay in English. The participants were 22 students, four males and 18 females. For error identifications and categorizations, the researchers developed, based on the Israeli matriculation (Bagrut), and on the literature (Ellis, 2004; Fries, 1974 and Robertson, 2000), a table of categories and subcategories. The findings of the current study reveal that the participants committed four types of errors in varying degrees, they are: Errors in content and organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanism. The most frequent error type is 'language use'. This type of errors consists of word order, negation, copula and auxiliary omission, subject-verb agreement and prepositions. The causes of these errors are attributed to interlingual factors, i.e. negative transfer of interference and overgeneralization, especially in cases of differences between English and Arabic (negative interference). In cases of similarities between L1 and L2 (positive transfer), errors are less frequent. Neither gender, nor age played an important role in this study. Finally the researcher recommended conducting another study to investigate the types of errors in speaking skill committed by Arab learners of English in Israel.

Index Terms—errors, EFL, ELT, interference, overgeneralization

I. INTRODUCTION

Al Buainain (2007) claimed that writing is dynamic, nonlinear and involves multiple processes. Therefore, it is clear that not everyone can become a writer especially in L2. However, everyone can learn to write better. Students should be given a way of understanding of their capacity to write, motivation, self confidence and courage.

This study examines the errors in writing committed by Arab College students whose major is English, and they are educated to be English language teachers (ELT).

It is important to make a distinction between errors and mistakes, both Corder (1967) and James (1998) reveal a criterion that helps us to do so: it is the self-correctability criterion. A mistake can be self-corrected, but an error cannot. Errors are "systematic", i.e. likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner. Hence only the teacher or researcher would locate them, the learner would not (Gass and Selinker, 2001). The current study will focus on learners' errors not mistakes.

Many researchers examined the errors produced by Arabs who learn English as a foreign language (Selinker, 2001; Corder, 1967; Khreshah, 2011; Crompton, 2001; Abisamra, 2003; Diab, 1996 and many others). This study investigates the writings of Israeli Arab learners of English at a college level, and with different categorization of error types. The researcher believes that few studies were conducted to examine the errors in writing committed by Arab learners of English in Israel.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In recent years many studies on FL acquisition (James, 1998; Brown and 1994; Ellis, 1995) have been conducted focusing on learners' errors to investigate the difficulties involve in acquiring a SL or FL. These studied helped EFL teachers to be aware of the difficulty areas encountered by their students. Corder, (1967) said "we cannot teach language, we can only create conditions on which it will develop spontaneously in the mind of its own way" (p. 27).

Error analysis is a kind of linguistic analysis that emphasizes the errors learners of a target language (TL) usually make. This analysis consists of a contrast or comparison between the errors made in the target language and the target language. In his article "The significance of learner errors", Corder (1967) contented that those errors are "important in and of themselves". For learners themselves, errors are 'indispensable', since committing errors in the target language can be considered as a device the learner uses in order to learn. He also stated that there are two types of errors: performance errors and competence errors. The first are made when learners are tired or hurried. The later are more

serious since they reflect inadequate learning. Ellis (1997) noted that "errors reflect a gap in learner's knowledge, while mistakes reflect occasional lapses in performance

Gass and Selinker (1994) defined errors as "red flags" that support evidence of the learner's comprehension of the target language. Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain vital information on the strategies that students use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975). Moreover, Richards (1974) "at the level of pragmatics classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning, and teaching determines priorities for future effort." (p.14).

Researchers provided practical advice with clear examples of how to identify and analyze learner's errors. The first step requires a selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors. The errors are then classified. The next step, after giving a grammatical analysis of each error, demands an explanation of different types of errors (Ellis, 1995; Brown, 1994; Hubbard et al. 1996).

Robertson (2000) and Jarvis (2002) looked for systematicity in errors learners made and found that some of the systematicity in the errors that learners committed was attributed to discourse factors and some linguistic contexts, e.g. variation in syntactic forms.

Burt and Kiparsky (1972) made a distinction between two types of errors: Global errors which hinder communication by causing confusion in the relationship between and among the parts of discourse; e.g. wrong word order in sentence and Local errors, i.e. those that do not go beyond the clause or sentence level. Thus, global errors should be corrected while local ones should not be.

There are two major causes of errors. The first is interlingual, i.e., interference from first or native language of the learner. Lado (1975) and Fries (1974) emphasized interlingual errors. The second cause of errors is intralingual, i.e., the difficulty comes from the second language itself (Dulay and Burt (1947). Intralingual errors are manifested by the following phenomenon:

- a. Using simple structures instead of more complex ones, for example: the use of the simple present tense instead of the present progressive tense.
- b. Using a structure where it does not apply. Example: *gived, *comed.
- c. The unnecessary correction. Example: *pird instead of bird.
- d. Errors stay in use for a long time as in producing a Sentence like: *he go to bed.
- e. Error caused by bad teaching (fossilization).
- f. Learners sometimes avoid difficult structures. Kleinmann (1977) stated that Arab learners of English avoid, for example, the passive voice.
- g. It has been found that some learners think that (is) is the marker of present tense as in *John is works as an engineer. Similarly, those learners think that (was) is the marker of the past tense.

Littlewood (1998) mentioned other types of errors which are related according Selinker (1972) to 'interlanguage'. These are due to the influence of L1 on the acquisition of L2, these errors are called 'interlingual which is similar to those produced by the child in the mother tongue and suggest that the second language learner is employing the similar strategies, notably generalization and simplification.

One of these errors that are considered interlingual and will be analyzed in this study is 'transfer' or 'language interference'. Oldin (1997) stated that language transfer can occur at different levels such as linguistic, pragmatic etc. According to him transfer means the influence resulting from similarities and differences between first language and any other learned or acquired one.

Doughty and William (1998) pointed out that "a learner's previous linguistic knowledge influences the acquisition of a new language in principal, if not straightforward, contrastive way" (p. 226). This influence could be positive or negative. It is considered positive when the learner's knowledge of L1 enhances his ability to understand L2. Whereas, negative transfer means that the learner's knowledge of L1

Crompton (2011) discussed a common error that is committed by Arabic speakers' who learn English as a foreign language is the definite article. It is suggested that even for learners of English with mother- tongue which have an article system, such Arabic, L1 transfer may be a problem. Moreover, Khreshah, (2011) found that the errors in acquisition of English coordinator conjunction 'and' committed in L2 Jordanian EFL learners might have been attributed to the differences between the subjects' L1 and L2. This difference between the two languages makes the students who use their L1, which is Arabic, confused and make them commit such interlingual errors.

Abisamra (2003) stated that most of the syntactic errors made by Arab EFL learners in their written production are because of the interference of their first language. Interference or transfer from L1 could be taken as 'a negative matter of habit'. And negative transfer would be obvious in cases of differences between first language (L1) and the target language (L).

Alkhreshah (2010) found that Jordanian EFL learners committed a huge number of syntactic interlingual errors with regard to word order within simple sentence structure. He revealed that these errors were due to the transfer of L1 habit.

Another interlingual error which will be dealt in this study is 'overgeneralization'. Littlewood (1998) stated that the majority of interlingual errors are examples of the same process of overgeneralization. In this error the learners try to

allocate items to categories; on the basis of these categories, the learners construct rules which predict how different items will behave, sometimes these predictions could be wrong.

Richards (1971) defined overgeneralization as covering instances where the learners create a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of the structure of the target language (TL), ignorance of rule restrictions, complete application of rules.

Ellis (1994) claimed that it is not easy to differentiate between interlingual and intralingual errors, and even more difficult to identify the different types of intralingual errors. In an attempt to deal with the problem of identifying sources, Dulay and Burt, (1974) classified errors into three categories: developmental, interference and unique.

Selinker in Richards (1974) reported five sources of errors: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning (SLL), strategies of second language communication and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material.

Although many studies on errors of non-native (NNT) learners of English have been conducted during the recent years, few of them focused on Israeli- Arab native speakers who learn English as a foreign language (FL). The aim of the recent study is to investigate the errors committed by Arab native speakers' writing in English as a foreign language. These speakers live in Israel.

III. METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The participants of the recent study are 22 first year Arabic native speakers who Study English as their major at Sakhnin College for Teacher Education (TE) in Lower Galilee, in Northern Israel. They are 4 male and 18 female students; their age ranges between 19 and 25. They are first Year students whose major is English. They have learned English as FL at Israeli- Arab schools for 11 years. The majority of them speak Arabic at home, but use English at school and college during English lessons which were instructed by Arabic native speakers' teachers at schools and Arabic and English native speakers' lecturers in the College. They have problems in Speaking and writing English, however, the focus of the current study is on errors in writing.

This study attempts to investigate the problems which face these students during their writing in English as a foreign language. In other words, it will investigate the interlingual errors committed by these students in writing English as a foreign language (FL) or target language (TL).

Instrument

As this study tries to examine the types of errors in writing committed by the Arab EFL students who live and study in Israel, as well as to find the frequency of committing such errors, a writing presentation test was used. This instrument was used in this study because it saves time, and there is less alternation of performance errors (Darus and Ching, 2009). Halliday and Hassan (1976 cited in Darus and Ching, 2009, p. 247) pointed out that "writing allows writers to demonstrate their ability to construct a string of well connected sentences that logically correct". They also pointed out that asking learners to write essays in a target language will reflect their normal and actual performance.

The participants in the recent study were given the freedom to choose any topic of their choice. Then, they were asked to write an essay from 120 to 150 words within one hour during their English period. The students' compositions were read by the researcher in an attempt to analyze the errors committed by the subjects of the present study.

For error identification and categorization in present study, the researcher developed, based on the Israeli matriculation (Bagrut) rubric for assessing written presentation, and on the literature (Ellis, 2004; Fries, 1974 and Robertson, 2000). The researcher also consulted EFL lecturers and experts in the field of first and second language acquisition from the college to suit the current context, their comments and notes were taken into account. The unit of analysis was the errors committed produced by the subjects of this study. Table one shows the categories and the subcategories of the participants' errors in English written presentation.

TABLE 1
CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS' ERRORS IN WRITTEN PRESENTATION

Types of errors	Subtypes
Content and organization	Errors in the topic Errors in semantics Errors in text organization
Vocabulary	-errors in the use of varied lexemes - errors of word/ idiom choice and usage - avoidance of certain words
Language Use	errors of agreement errors of verb tense errors of word order errors in negation auxiliary deletion errors of prepositions omitting the copula
Mechanism	Errors of spelling Errors of punctuation Errors of capitalization

The aim of the present study is to demonstrate the most occurring or frequent types of errors that Arabic speaking learners encounter in writing in English as a foreign language. These type of errors are presented in four main divisions and 16 sub-divisions. These are shown in Table One.

The first category of errors committed by the participants is "content and organization". It consists of three subcategories which are:

- a. Topic error, some learners write off topic; that means the writing is irrelevant to the topic.
- b. Errors in semantics which is related to literal translation. For example, عملا اؤمن عندما (when I secure a job), instead of 'when I found a job'. Another example from the participants' errors related to this type is " I asked what my destiny would be, it is a literal translation of "مصيري هو ما تساءلت", instead of 'I wondered about my destiny'.
- c. Errors in text organization, for example some students did not follow the text structure: opening, development and ending.

The second category of errors type is "vocabulary" which consists of the following subdivision:

- a. 'Errors in the use of varied lexemes', for example, using the same word many times without looking for another synonymy.
- b. "Error in word/idiom choice" such as, 'my health is right'. It is a literal translation from Arabic "جيد صدتي". (I am healthy), another example of error committed by a participant in this study: "I have a strong disease", it is a literal translation from Arabic for "قوي مرض عندي", (I am very sick).
- c. "Avoidance of articles" such as " I saw woman", instead of "I saw a woman". The participants avoid using the indefinite article 'a' because it is not used in L1 (Arabic). Another example is the overuse of the conjunction 'and', and the definite article 'the'.
- d. Errors in the use of prepositions, for instance, "I uploaded the file in the internet" instead of "on the internet", or "in Monday", instead of 'on Monday, and many others.

The third category of errors that are committed by the subject of this study is "language use" which consists of the following subcategories.

- a. Errors in word order such as, "I saw the boy intelligent", instead 'I saw the intelligent boy', which is transfer from Arabic. Arabic word order is Noun and then Adjective.
- b. "verbal error", for example the following sentence: *the men came late last week and enter the room. The error in this sentence is the sequence of tenses.
- c. Error is omitting the auxiliary, especially in progressive and perfect tenses. Examples: "*They writing a story", instead of "they are writing a story", or "*the pupils already eaten the food' instead of "the pupils have already eaten the food". Errors of negation structures, for examples some participant wrote: ' *we no have money', instead of ' we do not have money'.
- d. The misuse of the infinitive 'to and the verb' especially after the modals. For example, '* She can to eat' instead of "she can eat". This error is transfer from their L1 'تاكل ان ت س تطيع'.
- e. Omitting or deleting the copula. For example, many students wrote: "* he a strong man", instead of "he is a strong man".
- f. "Errors in 'subject verb agreement" such is "*He usually write a story", instead "he usually writes a story, or 'he have' instead of 'he has' and 'you is' for second person singular instead of 'you are'.

The last category of error types is mechanism. It consists of the following subdivisions:

- a. Errors in spelling, such as the learners wrote 'lisen' instead of 'listen, the cause of this error is transfer because there are no silent sounds in Arabic, or orthography and pronunciation are almost identical in Arabic which is L1 for the participants of this study.
- b. Errors in punctuation, including commas, full stops, marks, such as putting full stop(.) instead of a question mark (?) at the end of an interrogative.
- c. Errors in capitalization, for example, proper names such as 'ahmad' instead of 'Ahmad'. Another example "the college of Sakhnin" instead of "The College of Sakhnin", and many others.
- d. Data Collection and Analysis

The objective of the current study is to investigate the errors made by Arab EFL learners in their written presentation. The written presentations were marked and analyzed by the researcher. The errors, committed by the first year EFL students in the College of Sakhnin, were counted and then analyzed and categorized according the four types and 16 subtypes of errors mentioned above and demonstrated in Table One.

IV. RESULTS

After coding the data, The frequency and the percentage of Errors committed by the subjects of this study were calculated. The Results are shown in Table 2.

TABLE TWO
THE CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES OF THE STUDENTS' ERRORS AND THEIR FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES

No.	Categories	Subcategories	Frequencies	Percentage %
1	Content and organization	Error in the topic	8	4.18
		Errors in semantics	18	9.42
		Errors in text organization	8	4.18
2	Vocabulary	Errors in use of varied words	15	7.85
		Errors of word/ idiom choice or usage	20	10.4
		Errors of avoidance of certain words	18	9.42
3	Language Use	Errors of agreement	10	5.2
		Errors of verb tense	12	6.2
		Errors of word order	7	3.7
		Errors in negation	5	2.6
		Errors of auxiliary deletion	11	5.8
		Errors of prepositions	8	4.18
		Errors of omitting the copula	8	4.18
4	Mechanism	Errors of spelling	21	11
		Errors of punctuation	9	4.7
		Errors of capitalization	13	6.9
Total	4	16	191	100

Table Two demonstrates that the 22 participants in the current study made 191 errors. The errors are classified according to four main types:

The frequencies of the 'content and organization' subtypes are the following: errors in topic are 8 while in semantics are 18; errors in text organization are 18. Errors in semantics are the most frequent in this category; this is, the researcher believes, is due to the literal translation from the Arabic. In other words, L1 interference. Errors in use of varied words are the least frequent in 'Vocabulary' (15) occurrences. While errors in word choice or usage are the most frequent in the second category (20 occurrences).

The most frequent error type is 'language usage'. This category is divided into 7 subcategories: errors in agreement, verb tense, word order, negation, auxiliary deletion, prepositions and omitting the copula. The most frequent subcategory of the third type is in the verb tense (12 occurrences), while the least frequent is negation (5 occurrences). The participants also committed errors in omitting the copula or the auxiliary and in word order. Errors of omission or word order is attributed to the fact that the participants L1 (Arabic) does not have the copula, and has different word order (Diab, 1996).

The last category of errors made by the subjects is 'mechanism'. The most frequent subtype is spelling (21 occurrences). This is also due the fact that English pronunciation is different from Arabic. In Arabic, graphemes and phonemes are almost identical while in English they are not (Roach, 1983).

According to Table Three 191 errors are counted from the 22 essays written. The errors could be also classified into grammatical, lexical, Semantic and syntactic. These could be attributed, as Diab (1996) claimed, to a negative interlingual transfer from Arabic linguistic structure into English.

Table Three demonstrates the frequencies of the four main types of errors

TABLE THREE
THE FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF THE OVERALL ERRORS COMMITTED BY THE PARTICIPANTS

No	Category	Frequency
1	Content and organization	34
2	Vocabulary	53
3	Language Use	61
4	Mechanism	43
5	Total	191

Table three shows that in the 22 written presentations, 191 errors are committed by the participants of the recent study. The most frequent type of errors is "content and organization" with 61 occurrences. This category consists of structural errors such as subject verb agreement, word order, copula and auxiliary omission and verb tense. Abisamra (2003) stated that the cause of these structural errors committed by Arab EFL learners in their written production is the interference of L1. Interference or transfer from the native to the target language could be taken as 'a matter of habit' or negative transfer especially in cases of differences between the L1 and the L2.

The least frequent error type is "content and organization" with 34 occurrences out of 191 errors produced by the participants. This is, the researcher believes, refers to the similarity between Arabic and English in this respect. Vocabulary and mechanism also occurs in high frequencies, this also due to the interference of L1 in L2 (Abisamra, 2003).

The students' writings show main cause of errors which are interlingual, i.e. interference from L1. Scott and Toker (1974) suggest that interference in written English by Arab learners comes from high variety (*alfusha*) while interference in spoken English by these learners results from the interference of colloquial Arabic. Ancker (2000) stated that errors occur for many reasons, for example, interference from the native language, overgeneralization, incomplete knowledge of the target language and the complexity of L2 itself.

For more clarification, Figure 1 shows the percentage of the main types of errors.

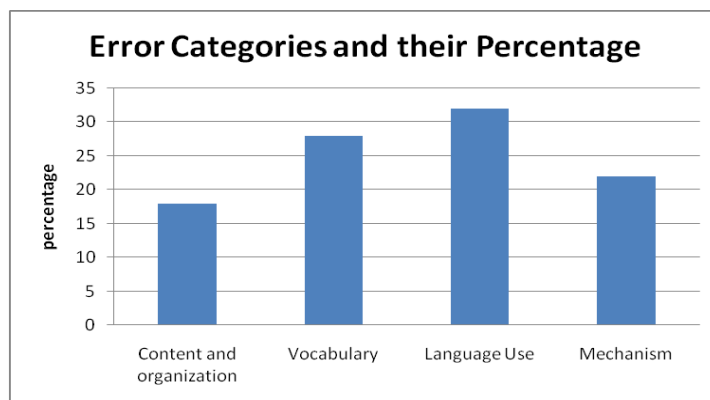


Figure one demonstrates that the category of 'language use' was with the high percentage, 32% of the students' errors in this study related to this category. While 27% of the errors committed by the learners, in this study, is attributed to 'vocabulary' errors. 23% of the errors related to 'mechanism'. It consists of spelling, punctuation and capitalization. 'Content and organization' is the least frequent with 22 percent.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study attempts to investigate and analyze the types of errors in writings committed by Arabic native speakers who study English as their major at an Israeli Arab College, Sakhnin College for TE.

The findings show the participants committed four main types of errors; they are: content and organization (discourse), vocabulary (semantics and pragmatics), language use (morphology and syntax) and mechanism (spelling, punctuation and capitalization).

The recent study also demonstrates that the most frequent type of errors committed by the participants is errors of 'language use' and 'vocabulary'. This might be attributed to the fact that Arabic morphology and structure are different from the target language, English. This justifies Anker's claim (2000) that interference of L1 in learning L2 and over generalization could be the main reasons for committing errors by Arab learners of English. This kind of interference or transfer could be negative, because it hinders learning.

The least frequent types of errors are content and organization. This could be attributed to the fact that Arabic and English are similar in this respect. This could be positive transfer, especially in cases of similarities between L1 and the target language (TL). Neither the gender nor the age played any role in this study since the participants' age and gender are almost identical.

It is recommended to conduct another study with participants from different ages. This allows comparison in errors in writings committed by Arab learners of English from different ages. Moreover, it is recommended to conduct another study to examine the errors, in speaking, committed by Arab learners of English.

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