

Essay Writing Errors of Iranian EFL Learners at Under-graduate Level: A Case Study of Medical Learners

Marzieh Marzoughi

Department of English Language Teaching, Bushehr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran

Batool Ghanbari

Department of English Language Teaching, Bushehr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bushehr, Iran

Abstract—This study aimed at analyzing essay writing errors of Iranian EFL learners at under-graduate level in Bushehr. Moreover, the researcher tried to find that if there was a significant difference between kinds of essay writing errors committed by Iranian EFL learners at under-graduate level. The significance of the results of their committed errors was also considered. The participants of this study were 80 under-graduate students at medical science university in Bushehr. Three questionnaires were used during the fall semester of 2014 to reach the aim of this study. The first one was general English proficiency test in order to have homogenized participants. The second was background questionnaire that was used to elicit information on students' age, gender, and level of education, etc. The last one was essay writing test which was selected to examine the ability of the subjects in order to distinguish various parts of an essay. The findings showed that there was a significant difference between kinds of essay writing errors committed by Iranian EFL learners at under-graduate level. Also, it was found that most of the errors occurred due to lack of knowledge. To eradicate and overcome the errors special drilling and practices have been suggested.

Index Terms—contrastive analysis, EFL learners, error analysis, essay writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Today English language is used as an international language; therefore, there has been a growing tendency to learn English among a large number of people all over the world. Error analysis as a field of language teaching has been used in language settings by many researchers. Errors are an inevitable part of learning a language and English is no an exception. Errors are actually the defective forms of utterances which appear regularly in the learner's language. Errors are regarded as incorrect forms since the norms of code are violated. Errors are committed by the second language learners because they do not have an adequate amount of knowledge of the target language. Therefore, errors occur at the competence level because the learners' knowledge of the target language is insufficient. In order to refer to erroneous features, various terms are used. Selinker (1972) uses the term "inter-language" that indicates the middle stage between the first language (L1) and the target language (L2). Nemser (1971) defines the errors as "approximate system". The term signifies that the learners system is transitional and goes on changing. There is a continuous changing of errors as the learners' competence increases. Corder (1973) calls them "idiosyncratic dialects" which reveals that errors are peculiar to individuals. The committed errors have been studied through contrastive analysis and error analysis method.

Contrastive Analysis (CA) came into view in the 1950s and 1960s. CA is to find the similarities and differences between two or more languages. Here, errors are considered as signs of evil and failure; therefore, the problematic areas must be predicted in learning second language to prevent committing errors. The main source of errors is the interference of mother tongue (L1). CA consists of two concepts of transfer: positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer is occurred when learners' native language facilitates the second language learning and when learners' native language makes the second language learning difficult, it is called negative transfer.

On the other hand, Error Analysis (EA) is defined as the study of errors which is committed by second or foreign language learners; actually, it is a reaction to native language interference thought by contrastive analysis' pioneers for the reason that it was considered as the major source of errors in second language learning (Khansir, 2010). According to Corder (1982), to analyze the errors, there is a comparison between the errors made in the target language and that target language itself. As it is mentioned before, CA is based on the prediction, but EA is in touch with actual errors that are appeared in the learners' performance.

There's no question that writing is a complex skill in nature, that's why it always absorbs so much attention as one of the four main language skills and needs much practice to be mastered (Rezapanah & Hamidi, 2013). Writing stimulates thinking and reinforces learning. Learners need motivation for writing because they usually consider it a tough job and are frightened to start writing, especially essay writing for an academic purpose (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). According to Richards (2010), an essay is a piece of writing that regularly analyses and evaluates a topic or issue. An essay is

actually a piece of writing that is usually written from an author's personal point of view. Essay is regarded as a non-fiction kind of writing that tries to make a point in an interesting way. Recently, a vital part of an education system is essay writing. Essays are exercised in various schools in order to improve the students' writing skills; moreover, essays are often utilized by universities in selecting candidates. Essays are also used to examine the subjects' comprehension level. They are asked to write considering a topic of study in the form of an essay. The writers' may be allowed to write an essay on his/her sight, but the use of the first person is often discouraged; then, the result will be judged to show their comprehension level.

There are different types of essay: one- paragraph essay and five-paragraph essay. One paragraph essay is rarely seen in publications, but it is remarkably handy for improving writing. It has some advantages. One obvious advantage is that it is short enough to allow the writer to spend his/her study time writing a really good one. Moreover, it is long enough to practice and demonstrate the fundamentals of writing. On the other hand, five paragraph essays includes an introduction paragraph in which the thesis statement is presented; three body paragraphs in which all sentences are in line with the thesis statement; and a conclusion, which restates the thesis and summarizes the supporting points. In this study, the participants were asked to distinguish different parts of an essay as shortage of time was the main problem.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

A. *Theoretical Background*

Error Analysis is regarded as one of the most essential issues in second language learning. Error analysis is a branch of Applied Linguistics that emerged in the early 1960s to show that learner's interference of the first language was not the only source in committing errors.

Corder (1982) mentioned that errors are valuable in three different ways. For teachers, since they will become aware of their learners' growth in second language learning. For researchers, the evidences of second language learning strategies are provided. For learners, as they are able to test their hypotheses on the language that they are learning.

Keshavarz (2011) maintained that errors are inevitable parts in the process of second language learning; actually, errors can be used to determine "the nature of his/ her (learner) knowledge of the target language at a given point in his/her learning career and discover what s/he has to learn" (p. 58). Moreover, Keshavarz made a distinction between errors and mistakes. Keshavarz remarked that "errors are regarded as rule- governed since they follow the rules of learner's interlanguage" (p.60). He also added that there is no self-correction in committing errors. On the other hand, mistakes are those which are not rule- governed. They are occurred because of some factors such as fatigue, lack of concentration, slip of the tongue or the pen. They can be corrected by the learners when their attention is called. According to Keshavarz (2011, p.58), "a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide to an understanding of the underlying processes of second language acquisition".

B. *Related Studies*

A large amount of error analyses have been done since during the past few years. The study of these errors, which are committed by groups of foreign and second language learners, revealed interesting findings.

Khansir (2008) conducted a research in an Indian university on a group of one hundred students. In this study, he did his best to classify "errors" made by these students. The research revealed that errors occurred in the use of auxiliary verbs, passive forms and tenses. It was shown that the errors occurred due to systematic errors in learner's target language. Actually, the errors showed that teaching English was not satisfactory in the colleges, and the learning strategies were the cause of errors. Ghadessy (1980) studied freshmen 'errors of Iranian university in their written composition. He discovered that most of errors occurred in tenses, articles, prepositions, word order, morphology, syntax, lexis that were similar to his previously reported studies. He stated that these errors appeared due to overgeneralization, analogy, incomplete application of rules, and false hypothesis on limited knowledge of the target language.

Al-kahtybeh (1992) checked up the syntactic errors in Jordanian tenth grade students' essays. 243 male and female students were selected from 8 schools in Irbid district. It was shown that males' major errors were in tense, auxiliary verbs and prepositions parts, but they had little problem in pronouns and concord. On the other hand, the females' main errors were in tense, article and prepositions parts, but they had little problem in subject - verb agreement and concord. It was concluded that the various syntactic errors were committed due to mother tongue interference, overgeneralization and ignorance of rules of usage.

In a recent study, Sarfraz (2011) examined Pakistani undergraduate students' errors in their essay writing. He found that the learners' interlanguage process was the main cause in committing errors and mother tongue interference was considered as second cause in committing some errors. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) studied 72 Malay students' errors in their essay writing. They discovered six types of errors in the subjects' essays. The committed errors were occurred in singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order.

Furthermore, Ridha (2012) investigated 80 EFL college students' English writing samples. The errors were classified according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical/ semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The finding proved that L1 transfer played a significant role in students' committing errors. Furthermore, she stated that the learners applied their mother tongue in conveying their thoughts. She also mentioned that there were different types of errors, but the most serious and repeated errors were grammatical and mechanical errors.

Sawalmeh (2013), in an attempt to study essay writing errors made by a group of Saudi EFL learners at university level, stated that errors were usually occurred in viz., verb tense, word order, subject/verb agreement, pronouns, spellings, capitalization, prepositions, articles, double negatives and sentence fragments.

C. Research Questions

RQ. Is there a significant difference between kinds of essay writing errors committed by Iranian EFL learners at under-graduate level at Medical Science University in Bushehr?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample/Participants

A total of 80 Iranian students in the age range of 18 to 25 at under-graduate level in Bushehr Medical Science University during the first semester of the academic year 2014/2015, as foreign language learners participated in this study. To control the variable of gender, the present researcher invited both male and female students to take part in this study. They were selected after they took a General English Proficiency Test and then they were ready to do administration of an Essay Writing Test.

B. Instruments

Three instruments were applied in this study. One of them is General English Proficiency Test (Transparent); this test was used to determine the participants' proficiency level in English. A Background Questionnaire was used to elicit information on students' age, gender, and level of education and Essay writing test was used to get information about the knowledge of the learners in English language.

C. Procedure

The procedures that were adopted in this study in order to achieve the objectives were as following:

1. Development of the Background Questionnaire
2. Administration of the General English Proficiency Test
3. Development of Essay Writing Test
4. Analysis of collected data

In order to analyze the data of the aforementioned tests Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used in this study.

To analyze this study, these following procedures were applied:

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

Actually, the goal of this study was to help the learners to improve their language and use English faultlessly.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language attitude is referred to the speakers' feeling of different languages towards other's languages or to their own language. There are positive or negative feelings towards a language that may cause ease or difficulty in the process of language learning. The following table is based on the participants' responses on language attitude in the current study:

TABLE 1.
LANGUAGE ATTITUDE

Language Attitude	Under-graduate level	
	Number	Percent
Like	63	78.75
Dislike	12	15
Tolerate	5	6.25
Total	80	100

Satisfaction with teaching English

In this part, the subjects' responses revealed that most of the under-graduate students were satisfied with teaching of English in their university.

TABLE 2.
SATISFACTION WITH TEACHING ENGLISH

Items	Satisfaction with teaching English
Yes	70%
No	30%

Analysis of test

A test of essay writing was conducted and administered in this study. The test offered a clear picture of participants' essay writing errors in English language for the researcher. In addition, it helped her in order to suggest remedial

measures for the subjects' committed errors in the test.

In this research, the essay writing test was particularly selected to examine the participants' ability in distinguishing different parts of English essay writing. This essay writing test includes two different parts.

Errors in recognizing different parts of essay

The first part of the test was classified in these major categories as: topic sentence, supporting sentence, supporting detail, and closing sentence. The following table manifests the subjects' committed errors in their essay writing test.

TABLE 3.
ERRORS IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF ESSAY WRITING TEST

Test items	Correct responses		False responses	
	Numbers of students	Percent	Numbers of students	percent
Topic sentence	34	47.5	46	52.5
Supporting sentence	31	38.5	49	61.5
Supporting detail	31	38.5	49	61.5
Closing sentence	31	38.5	49	61.5

The table displayed the participants' committed errors in their recognition about different parts of essay writing test. Table (3) revealed that the total numbers of errors in the participants' recognition of topic sentence were 46 which came to 52.5%. Moreover, this table displayed that the under-graduate students' errors in their recognition of supporting sentence and supporting detail were 49 and 49 that came to 61.5% and 61.5% respectively. Errors also occurred frequently in their recognition of closing sentence. The errors of closing sentence were 49 which came to 61.5%. In order to avoid errors in the recognition of various parts of an essay, the students should be familiar with the fundamental points of essay writing; in addition, they should be clearly taught about the parts of an essay. Teachers should do more practice in essay writing and its different parts in order to ensure the students having acquired them.

Errors in the participants' recognition of main idea of the essay

In other part of this essay test, the participants were asked to underline the main idea of the paragraph. After analyzing the Essay Writing Test, the following was found and it manifested the subjects' committed errors in the main idea part of the essay writing test.

TABLE 4.
ERRORS IN THE PARTICIPANTS' RECOGNITION OF MAIN IDEA OF THE ESSAY

Test item	Correct responses		False responses	
	Numbers of student	Percent	Numbers of students	percent
Main idea	32	40	48	60

In this part of the essay test, the participants were asked to underline the main idea of essay. In this category, the under-graduate students produced 48 errors which came to 60%. In order to avoid errors of recognition main idea, the subjects must be familiar with main idea. Teachers also should do more practice in their classroom situations and they should try to increase the knowledge of their participants in this part and other parts such as: topic sentence, supporting sentence, supporting detail, closing sentence.

Grammatical errors

In this study, the essay writing test also involved some fill in the blank parts and the subjects were asked to choose one option. This test was classified into four major categories as: article, tense, spelling, proposition. The following table indicated the grammatical errors of under-graduate student.

TABLE 5.
GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

Test items	Correct responses		False responses	
	Numbers of subjects	percent	Numbers of subjects	Percent
Articles	18	22.5	62	77.5
Tense	30	27.5	50	72.5
Spelling	35	43.5	45	56.5
Proposition	38	47.5	42	52.5

The table indicated that the total numbers of grammatical errors in the parts of article, tense, spelling, and proposition were 199.

Errors in the use of articles

Articles (definite and indefinite article) are small word and they are frequently applied before noun or noun phrase. This test included sentences requiring definite articles. The subjects committed errors by choosing indefinite article instead of definite article. So, the main problem was wrong use of one article for another article. The total number of errors found in this category was 62 which came to 77.5%. This study indicated that the participants committed some errors in using articles. Test demonstrated that that the subjects were not entirely mastered to use the article in their right positions. In order to avoid these kinds of errors, more attention is called in the classroom environment. Moreover, a meaningful drilling should be conducted until the students overcome the difficulties of this category.

Errors in the use of tenses

In grammatical errors, tense is applied to display the time of an action, event or state. The total number of errors found in this category was 50 which came to 72.5%. Test displayed that the students could not handle the different tense forms of the verb. They didn't notice that they had applied simple past instead of present tense. So, the learners should be taught how to use the correct form of the tense in English through some appropriate drills along with their separate rules. It should be taught to them when they can use present tense, and the teachers must explain that the present simple are used to express a habitual action, general truths, etc. The teacher should also do more practices in the classroom to make everything comprehensible.

Wrong use of spelling

This test also included some tests on spelling. The participants were asked to choose the correct form of a word. The total number of errors found in this category was 45 which came to 56.5%. For example, they choose wrong form "daily" and "nowdays" instead of the correct form of "daily" and "nowadays". These errors indicated the participants' lack of knowledge or lack of attention. In order to avoid these errors, the subjects must pay more attention and have more practice to overcome their difficulty in spelling part.

Wrong use of proposition

This current study involved some tests that asked the students to select the correct proposition. Errors in this category were 42 that came to 52.5%. In this part, the participants erroneously selected "with" and "of" instead the correct form "for". It indicated that the subjects' knowledge is insufficient and they must do more practice and have more study. The teachers must teach them to use the proper proposition in English language through suitable drills; since, a meaningful drilling can assist the learners to overcome the difficulties of proposition.

Discussion

In this part the findings of this study are compared with those of the most related previous studies. The present study found that there is a significant difference between kinds of essay writing errors committed by Iranian EFL learners at under-graduate level at Medical Science University in Bushehr.

This study and the previous studies tried to find the differences between diverse kinds of errors. The researcher found that there is a significant difference between kinds of essay writing errors at under-graduate level. Errors in essay writing and grammatical part were reported in a large number of previous studies (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Ghadessy, 1980; Khansir, 2008; Ridha, 2012; Sarfraz, 2011; Yang, 1994). This research revealed that the errors were similar to those previous studies; moreover, it was stated that these errors were considered as problematic area for EFL learners in the process of language learning. It was also mentioned that there were a significant difference in types of errors existed in essay writing. Moreover, the result of this present study indicated that the learners need to be taught more than what is being done at present. The learners should be encouraged to focus their grammatical knowledge on actual errors in their own work. Teachers should have more attention on their teaching in order to improve their students' ability in recognition of diverse parts of essay. Furthermore, to eradicate the errors, learning strategies and teaching plans should be based on scientific perception of grammatical use.

It should be stated that all factors that caused the divergence in the errors of under-graduate learners cannot be identified. In this study, teaching English and learning strategies could be considered as a responsible factor to increase or decrease the number of errors among the subjects' recognition of various parts of an essay. As a final point, remedial materials, teaching programs and planning of learning strategies should be designed and applied to enable the participants to improve their language and learn target language (English) perfectly.

V. CONCLUSION

Errors are integral and inevitable parts in the process of language learning no matter it is first language or second language. It is stated the analysis of errors are significant and valuable for the learners, for the teachers, for the course designer, and for the producer of the teaching material.

Teachers should identify that language learning ability is not the same among all learners. Accordingly, EA can be regarded as the best tools in order to describe, explain, and analyze the learners' errors in their process of language learning. The essay writing errors of the under-graduate learners can help the teachers to recognize the importance of errors which can be considered as one of challenging areas in teaching English.

It should be stated that all factors that caused the divergence in the errors of under-graduate learners cannot be identified. One factor, which was found in this study, was teaching English and learning strategies that could be responsible to increase or decrease in the number of errors among the subjects' recognition of various parts of an essay. As a final point, remedial materials, teaching programs and planning of learning strategies should be designed and applied to enable the participants to improve their language and learn target language (English) perfectly.

APPENDIX. ESSAY WRITING TEST

1. Write the correct answers and underline main ideas in this essay.

TV

TV is one of1..... of media,2....., despite the development of the internet television has become the most popular kind of media and the most important source of information. It's also the indispensable device in

our3..... life. Many people all over the world4..... most of their free time watching television. However, there are many advantages and disadvantages of watching TV there5..... considered in this essay.

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. a: kinds | b: the kinds | c: the kind |
| 2. a.nowdays | b: nowadays | |
| 3. a.daily | b: daily | |
| 4. a.spend | b: spent | c: spend |
| 5. a. is | b: are | |

2. a) Under the topic sentences, supporting sentences, supporting details, and closing sentence. b) Write the correct answers.

There are a lot of advantages of watching TV making it so popular. One of the main advantage and disadvantages of watching TV is that everybody can get the source of information. The main reason why so many people choose this means of getting information is its simplicity and convenience. Everybody can press a button and watch it. Another reason is so that there are a lot of scientific channels which are suitable for all ages. By pressing several simple buttons, you can see your appropriate programme that fit you taste. Last reason is that television 1..... an important role in our..... 2..... activities. It 3..... us informed of all current affairs in the world. Events through television are more vivid than those through books and magazines.

Apart from its advantages, however, television also brings lots of disadvantages to viewers too. The first disadvantage is that many people neglect their families so they can watch television. A family may be in the same room but would not say a word to each other. The second disadvantage is that many people do not realize how much time they spend watching television. You can only4..... what you could do with that time, it is possible to learn a language or do a university course. The final disadvantage of watching television is5..... violence that young children are often exposed too. Many television programs show6..... violence movies that are not suitable7..... children of young ages. The violence movies can also lead to more problems into adulthood. TV is one of the world's greatest8..... however, it has advantages and disadvantages as considered in this paper.

- | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|------------|----------|
| 1. a: played | b: plays | c: play | |
| 2. a: daily | b: daily | | |
| 3. a: keep | b: kept | c: kept | d: keeps |
| 4. a: imagined | b: imagines | c: imagine | |
| 5. a: the | b: a | c: an | |
| 6. a: a | b: an | c: the | |
| 7. a: of | b: with | c: for | |
| 8. a: inventions | b: invention | | |

REFERENCES

- [1] Al-khatatybeh, M. (1992). An analysis of syntactic errors in the essays of Jordanian tenth grade students (Unpublished master's thesis). Yarmouk University, Jordan.
- [2] Brown, H. D. (2000). Principles of language learning and teaching (4th Ed.). New York: Longman.
- [3] Corder, S.P. (1973). Introduction applied linguistics. Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books.
- [4] Corder, S.P. (1982). Error analysis and interlanguage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Darus, S., & Subramaniam, K. (2009). Error analysis of the written English essays of secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 483-495.
- [6] Dulay, H., & Burt, M. K., & Krashen, S. (1982). Language two. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Ghadessy, M. (1980). Implication of error analysis for second/foreign language acquisition. *IRAL*, 18, 93-101.
- [8] Hamidi, H., & Montazeri, M. (2014). Dictionary of second language acquisition. Retrieved June 10, 2015, from <http://www.iranelt.com/index.php/introduction-to-sla>.
- [9] Keshavarz, M. H. (2011). Contrastive analysis and error analysis. Tehran: Rahnama Press.
- [10] Khansir, A.A. (2008). Place of error analysis in language teaching. *India Linguistic*, 69, 195-202.
- [11] Khansir, A.A. (2008). Syntactic errors in English committed by Indian undergraduate students. *Language in India*, 8, 42-61.
- [12] Khansir, A.A. (2010). A comparative linguistic study of errors. Berlin: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- [13] Nemser, W. (1971). Approximative systems of foreign language learners. *IRAL*, 9(2), 115-123.
- [14] Rezapannah, F., & Hamidi, H. (2013). Investigating the effects of word games on Iranian EFL learners' application of the words in writing paragraph essays. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 2 (1), 35-43.
- [15] Richards, J. C. (1985). Error analysis and second language strategies. *Language Science*, 17, 12-22.
- [16] Richards, J. C. (2010). Dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics. London: Longman.
- [17] Ridha, N. (2012). The effect of EFL learners' mother tongue on their writings in English: An error analysis study. *Journal of the College of Arts, University of Basrah*, 60, 22-45.
- [18] Sarfraz, S. (2011). Error analysis of the written English essays of Pakistani undergraduate students: A case study. *Asian Transactions on Basic & Applied Sciences*, 1(3), 29-5.
- [19] Sawalmeh, M. H. M. (2013). Error analysis of written English essays: The case of students of preparatory year program in Saudi Arabia. *English for Specific Purpose World*, 40 (14), 35-48.
- [20] Selinker, L. (1969). Language transfer. *General Linguistics*, 9 (2), 67-92.
- [21] Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10, 209-231.
- [22] Yang, W. (1994). Error analysis in ESL writing (Unpublished master's thesis). California State University.

Marzieh Marzoughi has her M.A. in TEFL from Islamic Azad University, science and research Branch, Bushehr, Iran. She has been teaching English for about five years at different language institutes. Her areas of interest are teaching methodology and syllabus design.

Batool Ghanbari has her Ph.D. in TEFL. She has carried out a number of research studies, translated a couple of articles, and presented a number of papers in different conferences and seminars inside the country. Her areas of interest include teaching methodology and second language acquisition.