A Study of Written Grammatical Errors of Iranian EFL Learners at Undergraduate Level

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Abstract—This article is designed to investigate a study of written grammatical errors of Iranian EFL learners at undergraduate level. The main purpose of error analysis is to express the learners' errors in target language. One of the major topics interested in English language is error analysis by research scholars more than four decades. Today, Error analysis plays an important part in the study of foreign or second language acquisition in over the world. There is, in fact, errors in learning and teaching of language are significant. This project is designed for the students who are studying at Payam Noor University in the first year under graduate level with a Persian language as a native language. The participants for this article were 100 students at undergraduate level at Payam Noor University in Bushehr city, Iran. In this article, the three kinds of tests such as General English Proficiency Test; Background Questionnaire; and Grammatical Test were used in order to show the ability of the students in the field of Error analysis. The outcome of this article indicated that there is a significant difference in types of written grammatical errors by Iranian EFL learners.

Index Terms—error analysis, contrastive analysis, Iranian EFL learners, English language teaching and learning, English as foreign language

I. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this article is to investigate a study of written grammatical errors of Iranian EFL learners at undergraduate level. Before inquiring error analysis as the main topic in this research, we need to consider contrastive hypothesis briefly in this part of this paper. Contrastive analysis was appeared in the middle of the 20 century, as one of the most important applied linguistics studies. Fisiak (1981) mentioned that contrastive linguistics focused on the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of language in order to show both differences and similarities between them (cited in Khansir, 2012a). This hypothesis has been rooted in the behavioristic and structuralist approaches. Khansir (2012a) mentioned that Fries was the first linguist, studied contrastive linguistics in 1945. Then, after him, one of the applied linguistics linguist namely, Robert Lado followed this hypothesis about ten years later, thus; he discussed this hypothesis in his book, "Linguistic Across Cultures" in 1956. Khansir (2008b) said that contrastive analysis theory believed that native language interference was as the major source of errors in second language learning. Birjandi et al (2006) argued that contrastive analysis has focused on two main assumptions: 1. the learners' native language interferes with the target language; 2. interference from the mother tongue is the main cause of errors.

Research on error analysis has been carried out for a number of decades. The error analysis hypothesis as one of the applied linguistics branches has been introduced by Corder in 1967. In order to get more information about learners' errors in second or foreign language, we consider errors of second language learners based on a new approach appeared instead of contrastive hypothesis in 1967 is called error analysis. Error analysis followed the two main purposes in order to determine the learners' errors in language in early its appearances: the first is that errors are considered as natural process of learning a language; they used as integrate part of learning; they appeared as a significant system and inevitable in learning a second language; the second part of this purpose is that interference of mother tongue is not the only source of errors in learning second language. Brown (1987) indicated that in the process of second language learning, the four types of stages are used by the learners, each of which has certain characteristics. He mentioned them as follows:

1. Pre-systematic stage: in this stage, the learner is not aware of the fact there is some systematic order to a particular class of items.

2. Emergence stage: in this stage, the learner has started to understand that the target language has got a system of interrelated rules.

3. Systematic stage: in this stage, the learner is able to produce target language more than previous stage.

4. Post –systematic stage: in this stage which is also called stabilization, the learner has made few errors and has got some fluency in the target language; the learner also has the ability of self- correction without waiting for feedback from someone else.

Ellis (2003) mentioned that one of the main ways of investigating second language acquisition is by collecting and describing samples of learner language. He added that there are good reasons in order to consider learners errors. First, they are a conspicuous feature of learner language, following this question, why do learners make errors? Second, it is useful for teachers to know what errors learners make. Third, paradoxically, it is possible that making errors may actually help learners to learn when they self –correct the errors they make. Brown (2007) tried to define error analysis, as "the fact that learners do make errors, and that these errors can be observed, analyzed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, led to a surge of study of learners' errors, called error analysis (p. 285)".

In discussion of statement of problem, one of the important reasons that researchers of this paper selected this topic is that they felt that the standard of English of written skill is not satisfactory in EFL setting, especially in Iran. English language used as foreign language in Iran. In addition, in Iran English is taught from middle school as foreign language (Khansir and Dashti, 2014). Several times, they observed that learners of English face several problems in using of English in general and writing in particular. One of the most important problems is that the teachers of English face a large number of written errors committed by the learners at undergraduate level every day in their classroom teaching and particularly in the syntactic work of the students. In this paper; thus, the main aim of this paper is to cover: a) to examine kinds of errors in English language; b) to compare kinds of errors in tenses, active and passive voice, prepositions; c) to suggest remedial measures to overcome the committing of the errors. This article used one question and one hypothesis of the study is written as follows:

1. Is there a significant difference in types of written grammatical errors by Iranian EFL learners?
2. There is a significance difference in types of written grammatical errors by Iranian EFL learners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of error analysis as one of branches of applied linguistics for helping teachers, syllabus designers, and teachers has always played as a basis for remedial language teaching in recent years. Khansir (2008b) mentioned that language teachers and researchers have studied errors analysis to identify the learners' errors in order to help them improve their language and use English language flawlessly. In this article, many research works have been concerned with error analysis in recent years over the world mentioned as follows:

Khansir (2012b) reported on the syntactic errors such as auxiliary verbs, passive voice, indirect form, preposition, tag question, relative pronouns, WH- question, and tense in writing of Iranian and Indian students. Data collected of this study has been done from two universities, the first university was from Mysore University, India and the second university was from Bushehr Islamic Azad University in Iran. The study followed EFL students in Iran and ESL in India. Two hundred students from the universities joined to this project as participants. Finally, Khansir found that the total number of errors committed by the Iranian students was 2841 and that of their Indian peers was 3736. Khansir (2013) investigated five types of Iranian and Indian written errors such as paragraph, punctuation, articles, spelling, and conjunction. In this project, two hundred students from Mysore, India and Bushehr Islamic Azad University in Iran selected as the sample of this project. This study tried to demonstrate errors of writing of EFL and ESL learners produce in this paper. However, this project also pointed out those Indian students has committed more errors than Iranian students. Based on the result of this study Iranian students have committed 3045 written errors whereas their Indian peers have committed 3274 written errors. Saraireh (2014) examined common practice errors related to syntax in English-into-Arabic translation in Jordan. His participants were studying at BA and MA levels. Thus, in this research work, the students translated texts, and subtitled or dubbed movies and documentaries. The findings of this paper showed that errors of this study can be attributed to several factors: incompetence in the SL or the TL or both, translator's attitude, misunderstanding of modification (what constituent modifies what), shallow encyclopedic knowledge of the translator, ignoring the context, and influence of dialects. Zawahreh (2012) focused on the written English errors of learners in Ajloun, Jordon. In this article, three hundred fifty students were selected as the sample of the study. The samples consisted of both female and male learners of schools. The learners were asked to write a free essay in English language. The results of this study indicated that the students committed errors in turn within morphology; function words; syntax; tenses; lexical items. He mentioned that the errors of this study due to lack of knowledge of learners in using essay writing. Sawalmeh (2013) analyzed English essay of thirty two Saudi students who were joined the Preparatory Year Program at University of Ha'il. The learners are asked to write an essay in English language. In addition, the sample of this work was male. The outcome of this article pointed to ten types of errors in written essay committed by the learners such as verb tense, word order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spellings, capitalization, articles sentence fragments and prepositions. Khansir (2008a) investigated English errors of Indian students studying B.Com at Mysore University. The sample of this paper consisted of one hundred college learners. The main aim of this article was to classify errors of auxiliary verbs, passive and tenses of the learners in second language setting. The findings of this paper pointed out that teaching English and learning strategies were the cause of errors in this study. Dela Peña (2009) analyzed written errors of 21 faculty members of collages at the Liceo de Cagayan University. The teachers have taught in the college science, math, and engineering. Thus, they are asked to write essays in this research. The essays of the teachers were considered and the researcher

identified the common errors in writing. The results of the study focused on errors committed by the teachers were in grammar and punctuation. Finally, this paper reported that teachers need to get more accuracy in the use of English.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants for the present study were 100 at undergraduate level at the Bushehr Payam Noor University in Bushehr, Iran. In this paper, both male and female students were participants in order to collect data. However, the students were randomly selected from different classes in the same educational level at the Payam Noor University after they took General English Proficiency test. The groups of one hundred students were selected for computer analysis after they took grammatical test.

B. Instruments

Based on the question and hypothesis of this research paper, the researchers decided to select instruments for their research purpose. The instruments used for this article consisted of Background Questionnaire, General English Proficiency test, and Grammatical Judgment Test. The background questionnaire was developed by the investigators in order to get information on the learners' subjects. The test included 10 questions that were related to the learners' family, age, language attitude and siblings, etc. second test of this paper was General English Proficiency test which used in order to get information about the participants' level multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. The grammatical judgment test was last test of this study was developed by the researchers in order to collect data. The Grammatical judgment test utilized in this research was: Tenses, voice (active and passive), and prepositions which were used in the form of multiple - choice tests.

C. Procedure

In order to get the aim of this article, the research procedures were used as follows:
1. Development of the background questionnaire and administration of background questionnaire;
2. Administration of General English Proficiency test ;
3. Development of the grammatical judgment test, and administration of the grammatical judgment test.

Before the collection of this research data, the researchers informed the Bushehr Payam Noor University and their teachers and students on the aim of the research. The first question was administered to the learners was General English Proficiency test. In administering the questionnaire, the investigators selected fifteen the students in order to pilot the questionnaire for reliability of the test. In addition, in order to achieve the purpose of the reliability of the test, they chose 15 students with similar characteristics participated in the pilot study. The General English Proficiency Test was found to be appropriate for the participants' level and its reliability through the K-R 21 formula turned out to be 0.65 and 0.67. The second test developed and administered by the researchers was the background questionnaire. This test focused on the information about the students' family, age, language attitude and language use, etc. The last test of this study was the grammatical judgment test was developed by the investigators in order to measure the students' knowledge of grammatical structures. Note that the test was used to identify the type of errors of Iranian EFL students in this research. It was chosen to examine the ability of the students in selecting the correct grammatical rules of the sentences in English language. In administering this test, the researchers carried out a pilot test for the purpose of the reliability of the test in this paper. In addition, 15 students of the same level and similar characteristic participated in the pilot study. To ensure whether the grammatical judgment test is appropriate for subjects of the current study, the researchers experimented with the K-R21 formula. Applying this formula to measure the reliability of grammatical judgment test for the Iranian learners were 0.62 and 0.64.   However, the Grammatical judgment test used in this research consisted of Tenses, voice (active and passive), and prepositions which were utilized in the form of multiple - choice tests.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Error analysis focuses on language competence of learners in second or foreign language. Chomsky (1965) made a fundamental distinction between competence as the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his/her language and performance as the actual use of language in concrete situation. Corder (1967) added that errors related to competence of learners, he discussed clearly that this kind of errors are systematic and second or foreign language learners commit this kind of errors, however; there may be errors which are non-systematic errors , a native speaker may commit this kind of errors, this kind of errors are called mistake or lapse. This error is related to performance of learners. The results of this paper are discussed in this part of this paper.

After analyzing the Grammatical Judgment Test, the following table and its figure show that the errors were committed by the undergraduate students.

TABLE (1):
GRAMMATICAL JUDGMENT TEST

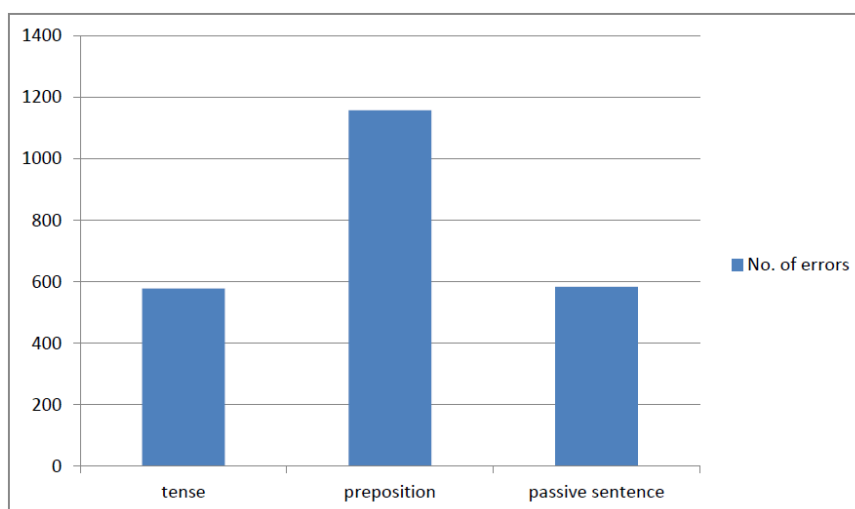| Test item	Undergraduate level	
Sentence level	Number of errors	Percent
Active and passive voice	584	29.2
Preposition	1158	57.9
Tense	578	28.9
Total	2320	38.6

Figure (1): Grammatical judgment test,

Table 1 and its figure revealed that the total number of errors committed by the undergraduate students at Bushehr Paym Noor University was 2320. In this category, Iranian learner committed 584 active and passive errors which came to 29.2% of this project. In the part of preposition errors, they made 1158 errors which came to 57.9% and, the last item of this category was tense, in the item, the learners produced 578 errors came to 28.9% of this paper. We can see that in the part of preposition, Iranian learners committed more errors than other parts of errors in this study. The details of the errors of this paper are discussed in turn. Passive structures are often chosen when people want to talk about an action, but are not interested in saying who or what does/did it. Active verbs are chosen when does of action. For example, she drove the car. In English, in general, the passive rule requires transposition of the object: Object to the position of subject and transposition of the subject to the position of object after 'by' and the insertion of to be + pp. For example, she will open the mail. The mail will be opened by her. However, passive voice is used when the person or the thing acted upon is to be made more prominent. Table (2) revealed that the total number of errors in active and passive voice was 584 which came to 29.2. The major errors observed were the wrong use of passive simple present tense instead of passive simple past tense. The undergraduate students' errors in this area were 33% of errors for active and passive tenses. The second and third most frequent errors were found in past perfect tense instead of the passive present perfect tense and present perfect tense instead of the passive present perfect tense, which were (28.2%) and (26.7%) respectively. Errors also occurred frequently in the use of simple past tense instead of the passive simple past tense and passive past perfect tense is used instead of the passive simple past tense., which were (22.5%) and (20%) respectively. In order to avoid errors in the use of passive voice, the students should be made familiar with the rules of transformation from active to passive and vice-versa. Teachers should do some practice based on the rules of change of the voice to ensure the students having acquired. The second part of this study was tense; we discussed this part along with details. Tense is a grammatical category used to indicate the time of action or event. In any language, tense is divided into three classes namely: 'Present tense', 'Past tense, 'Future tense'. In English, the verb system is not clearly organized around the concept of time. Thus, the grammatical category 'tense' in English does not strictly refer to time but to the form of the verb. Tense may, therefore, be described as 'grammatical time' as against the concept of 'optional time'. According to Khansir (2010), the structure of the verb system in English and Persian is different. In English the structure of the sentence is as subject + verb + object (S+ V+ O) whereas in Persian it is as subject + object + verb (S+O+V). Of the 20 types of grammatical errors identified, it was apparent that the undergraduate student participants had the greatest problem with using present continues tense instead of the simple present tense which was 30% of tense errors of this paper. These tests indicated that the students cannot handle the difference tense forms of the verbs. They didn't know how to answer the questions. The students had used present continues tense instead of the simple present tense and vice versa frequently. It is found that the learners were not properly aware of the rules of tenses. Therefore, their lack of knowledge of the proper use of tenses led to errors in this category. The learners should be taught how to use verbs in their tense forms in English through some suitable drills along with their separate rules. In addition, the use of various tenses should be taught in English for the learners. The number of errors in the selection of preposition was 1158 which came to 57.9%. Analysis of data has been shown in the above table and its figure, preposition errors committed by

undergraduate students at the Bushehr Payam Noor University. Wrong use of preposition in the context was main cause of the errors of this paper .Preposition plays a crucial role in English. It is generally used before a noun or pronoun to show place, position, time etc. The errors committed by the subjects in using the prepositions showed that they did not have knowledge of the rules (usage) for using even the simple prepositions in English. It may be partly because of the lack of their practice in classroom. The learner should be taught use of preposition in English. The teacher should do some exercise containing various types of errors in the use of prepositions and ask her/his students to correct the errors in the context.

V. CONCLUSION

Error analysis has attributed the difficulty of learning second or foreign language learners in EFL or ESL settings. Consideration of learners' errors in target language also leads to results of output of learners which influence language learning. As errors are related to the learner's needs and perception on language leaning. However, more generally the focus on the learner's errors helps the teachers, syllabus designers, learners and even educational system in the area. What we wanted to do is to show a study of written grammatical errors of Iranian EFL learners at undergraduate level. What we are saying is that the Iranian learners have not perfected in using of English grammatical structures in general and in using of English tenses, passive and active voice, and preposition in particular in this project. However, the results of our paper showed that there is a significant difference in types of written grammatical errors by Iranian EFL learners. In other words, the hypothesis was accepted.

What is important to indicate is that many researchers conduct error analysis studies in the target language because they are interested in collecting data relating to English language learning and their aim is to gain a better understanding of how instruction works and how error analysis facilities language learning in English language for second or foreign language learners. This paper conducted a study to investigate written grammatical errors in EFL settings in order to help the students achieve greater accuracy in their writing.

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