

## **Analysis of Errors in the Written Production of English Majoring Students at Misurata University**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate the errors committed by the undergraduate students of Misurata University, majoring in English language. 25 students who had passed grammar and writing courses in their previous semesters, participated in this study. The instrument consisted of 50 paragraphs -2 paragraphs on two different topics by each participant- written by these participants. The paragraphs were closely examined for the patterns of errors made in their writings. then errors are classified and presented in a tabular form. The findings show that the subjects have committed seven types of errors, of which subject-verb disagreement tops the list, and incorrect spelling occupies the last rung. It concludes that the study throws significant light on errors committed by students and provides insight into the way the learners internalize the target language rules.

**Keywords:** error analysis, interlingual, writing, grammatical errors

### **1.Introduction**

Error analysis ( EA) has developed as an important discipline in applied linguistics. Until the late 60s, committing errors by the English as Foreign language (EFL) students in writing, was

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considered unacceptable. On the question of why learners committed errors, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), which was then in vogue, tried to explain that learner errors were the linguistic features transferred from their L1. But as some research studies showed, the transfer of certain linguistic features from L1 were only partially true, as there were many other kinds of errors which could not be explained as transfer errors. It was realized that learners committed errors because of multiple reasons. Consequently, as a reaction to CAH, Corder (1967) proposed Error Analysis to explain the errors committed by the learners. Today the procedures and methods of error analysis have become an invaluable tool to identify learners' errors to understand the nature, and possible causes of learner errors. In fact errors, in general, are seen not as negative features of written production, but as an indicator of learners' developmental stage.

The purpose of this study is to investigate errors, not mistakes. Linguists have made a distinction between the two. Both terms do not mean the same. It is widely recognized that every native speaker of a language makes a mistake occasionally, but becomes aware of it and corrects it himself /herself, whereas when a learner makes an error, he/she does not become aware of it and commits the same error repeatedly. The clear distinction between the two will be explored further in literature review.

### **1.1 A Brief history of English education in Libya**

English education in Libya has a considerably long, but an interrupted history. Moshen (2014) gives this account :

Teaching English in Libya goes back to 1940s after the end of World War II. Exactly after the establishment of the British administration in the northern part of Libya; the southern part of Libya was administrated by France (El-Haddad; 1997), it was a part of the British policy to teach and spread English language in the area. Intensive English language courses were interesting and were liked by the inhabitants.

Due to some political reasons, and after the air-raid against the Gaddafi regime led by the United States of America and the United Kingdom in mid of April 1986, and as a consequence, the Minister of Education made the decision No. 195/1986 to stop teaching foreign languages in Libya. The decision badly affected the future of education in Libya. Till the time of writing this material; very serious consequences relating to that decision are still active.

English language teaching was resumed again in the Libyan educational system in 1993/1994, but in the beginning, due to the gap(that) existed then in the teaching and learning (of) English language, it was necessary to consider that all students in both preparatory and secondary stages as learners of English for their first time; therefore it was necessary to use the same course-book, English for Libya, at both stages. The book was formerly used in preparatory schools. Many problems occurred such as a great lack of English language teachers. It was very difficult to fulfil the needs with a sufficient number of qualified English teachers.

.... English was taught in the 3rd class for only one year. It was stopped but introduced to the 5th and 6th in 2006/2007. Right now,

English is a compulsory course from the 5th primary class up to the 3rd secondary class; i.e. it is taught for 8 years.

### **1.2 Background and Statement of the problem**

English is not an official language in Libya, nor is it used for social communication. Practically one does not hear any English word anywhere outside of an English language classroom. At the Secondary or Higher Secondary level, exposure of the students to the English language is very scanty and the teaching methods are traditional and teacher-centred. Because of this students who enter university do not have a good English language foundation. But they are enthusiastic to specialize in English as it is a global language, and also it might provide them jobs.

It has been observed that students who enter university and register themselves for specializing in English, commit variety of grammatical errors. In order to eliminate or minimize these errors, the Department of English at Misurata University offers courses in grammar, covering different aspects of it. But even after successfully completing these courses, students continue to make the same kind of errors. This study, therefore, intends to investigate the kinds and extent of the errors committed by the students.

### **1.3 Objectives of error analysis**

- a. To investigate the errors committed by Semester Five students, majoring in English, at Misurata University.
- b. To identify the kinds of errors committed by students.

### **1.4 Research questions**

a. Do the students studying in Semester five who have completed grammar and writing courses in their previous semesters commit errors in their written production?

b. What kind of errors do these students commit in their written production?

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

Error analysis is invaluable for teachers as it provides information on students' errors, which in turn, helps teachers to correct these errors and also improves the effectiveness of their teaching. Systematic analysis of different kinds of errors also provides a reliable picture of the students' knowledge of the target language. Consequently, an awareness of the errors committed by the students helps the teachers to design effective remedial materials. This study is also very significant in that, a study of this kind has never been done on English majoring students at Misurataa University or at any other university, in Libya, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, which will throw significant light on the kinds of errors the ESL learners commit.

### **1.6 Scope and delimitation**

The aim of this study is only to focus on identifying, classifying and describing errors, and not to investigate the sources or causes of these errors.

## **2. Literature review**

Presented below are the views expressed by scholars and researchers on the nature, importance, classifications and sources of

EA. They are classified under subheadings to give a clear view of the different aspects of error analysis.

### **2.1 Definitions of Error Analysis**

Pit Corder, (ibid) considered to be the father of Error analysis has this to say: “The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. In this respect it resembles, methodologically, the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provide sus with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner.”

James (1988), reiterates almost the same, but makes it more clear: EA is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners’ acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors.

Crystal’s Penguin Dictionary (1999, p. 108) defines it as ‘the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language.’ According to James (2001, p. 62), EA refers to “the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance”.

### **2.2 Errors and Mistakes**

For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to distinguish errors from mistakes. Errors are systematic, likely to have repeated occurrences and are typically produced by language learners. An error takes place when the deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge. It represents a lack of competence i.e. the learner’s

underlying deficient knowledge of the target language linguistic system.

Conversely, mistakes are unsystematic, occasional and occur typically at random. A mistake occurs when learners fail to perform their competence (Corder, 1967). A mistake is a result of processing problems that prevent learners from accessing their knowledge of a target language rule and causes them to fall back on alternative, non-standard rule which they find easier to access. Mistakes are thus performance phenomena and are regular features of native-speaker speech. They reflect processing failures that arise as a result of factors such as memory lapses, emotional strains, carelessness and lack of automaticity. Rod Ellis (1997) suggests a practical method to ascertain which are errors and which are mistakes: learners should be asked to re-read their written production and correct the mistakes, if they find any. If they can identify the mistakes and correct them then they are genuine mistakes, not errors. But if they cannot identify the deviations and those errors are repeated then they are errors. Mistakes, as Corder points out, have no pedagogical importance

### **2.3 Classifications of EA**

How to classify errors? What criteria should one use? Researchers have expressed diverse views on this question. According to Corder (ibid), they can be classified into two: performance errors and competence errors. The former are not serious as they are made when learners are tired or hurried. The latter are more serious since they reflect inadequate learning. Dulay et al. (1982) provide a more comprehensive classification of errors. They

identify four types of errors: i. developmental, ii. interlingual, iii. ambiguous and iv. others. Developmental/intralingual errors are “similar to those made by children learning a target language as their first language” (p. 165). Interlingual errors are similar in structure to a semantically equivalent phrase or sentence in the learners’ negative transfer. To identify interlingual errors, researchers usually translate the learners’ production (e.g. phrases, sentences etc) into the learners’ native language to examine whether similarities exist (which is more or less what the Weak Version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis does). The third type, ambiguous errors, are those that could be classified either as developmental or interlingual, since they reflect the learners’ native language structure and at the same time are of the type found in the speech of children acquiring their first language. The last type of errors is categorized as others. Errors of this type are items that do not fit into any other category.

#### **2.4 Sources of errors**

What are the sources of errors? There could be many. Referring to the errors, Richards (1971), observes aptly: errors are items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. The learner, in this case, tries to “derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language” (Richards, 1974, p. 6). In other words, they produce deviant or ill- formed sentences by erroneously applying their

knowledge of the target language (TL) rules and structures to new situations. In 1974, Selinker (in Richards, 1974, p. 37) reported five sources of errors:

1. Language transfer.
2. Transfer of training.
3. Strategies of second language learning.
4. Strategies of second language communication.
5. Overgeneralization of TL linguistic material.

### **2.5 Importance of EA**

Systematic analysis of Error made by learners provides valuable information about the learners' progress made in acquiring the target language and what needs to be done to improve the areas of deficiency. At the level of the classroom it helps the teacher to design remedial materials to help the learners to overcome the problem. Corder (ibid) contended that those errors are "*important in and of themselves.*"(Italics researcher). For learners themselves, errors are indispensable, since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. According to Corder, (1974) error analysis has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object serves to 'elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language.' And the applied object serves to enable the learner 'to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes'

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Participants**

30 students studying in Semester five, majoring in English at Misurata university, participated in this study. (25 females and 5 males). ( Usually very few boys join the Department of English). All of them had studied 3 courses in grammar and two courses in writing skills in their previous semesters. They all had the same educational and cultural background. All of them had done their secondary and higher secondary education at schools located in Misurata. They speak Libyan Arabic as their L1.

#### **3.2 Procedure and instrument**

The participants were given two topics to write a paragraph each, on 'My Family Picnic to Misurata Beach Last Friday' and 'Why I like to Watch Football Match on T V', in about 75 words. The purpose of giving two topics was to test their tense errors in past tense and present tense, besides other errors. The participants were asked to re-read their composition, as suggested by Ellis, to correct the mistakes they might have committed before submitting the answers. This was to make sure that the errors in their writing were really errors and not accidental mistakes. The writing took place in the regular classroom. They were given one hour to finish the writing. All participants finished their writing within the stipulated time and submitted their papers to the researcher.

Of the 60 paragraphs submitted by the participants 50 were found to be valid, and they constituted the instrument for analysis of the errors.

Following the practical advice given by Ellis (1994), the data analysis will be done in 5 stages: 1. Selection of corpus,( this stage has already been carried out), 2. Identification of errors 3. Classification of errors 4. Grammatical analysis of each error and 5. Explanation of different types of error .

### 3.4 Results and discussion

#### 3.5 Most common errors

Most commonly found errors in the written production of the participants are presented in the following Table in descending order, i.e. the highest percentage to the lowest one.

**Table 1. Most common errors**

	<b>Classification of errors</b>	<b>Number of errors</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1	Subject-verb disagreement	610	25.33%
2	Verb-incorrect use of tenses	490	20.34%
3	Lack of Capitalization	480	20.00%

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4	Wrong use of Preposition	260	10.79%
5	Addition of pronoun	230	9.55%
6	Omission or addition of articles	170	7.00%
7	Spelling	160	6.64%
	<b>Total No. Of errors</b>	<b>2408</b>	<b>100</b>

As shown in the Table1 above, the errors can be divided into two groups: errors in high percentage and those in relatively lower percentage.

In the higher percentage group, it is the subject-verb disagreement which tops the list with 25.33%, followed by incorrect use of tenses 20.34% and lack of capitalization 20%. The latter two share identical value.

The errors in the lower scale group are : wrong use of preposition 10.79%, addition of pronoun 9.55%, omission / addition of articles 7% and spelling 7.00%. Here too the last two share identical value.

The following Table presents the description, identification and correction of the most common errors. Two examples will be given for each type of error.

**Table 2. Description and correction of errors .**

<b>Error classification and description</b>	<b>Identification of error</b>	<b>Correction of error with explanation of rule</b>
<p><b>Subject-verb disagreement.</b></p> <p>Error in deciding the correct form of the verb required</p>	<p>My father <i>walk</i> on the sand.</p> <p>Mother always <i>bring</i> sufficient food</p>	<p>My father <i>walks</i> on the sand.</p> <p>Mother always <i>brings</i> sufficient food.</p> <p>In both the cases noun, father &amp; mother are singular. So they <i>need singular verbs</i>.</p>
<p><b>Verb-incorrect use of tenses.</b></p> <p>Error in choosing the correct form of tense i. e. past form / present form</p>	<p>Our family <i>come</i> here last year.</p> <p><i>I am watching</i> TV whenever there is a football match</p>	<p>Our family <i>came</i> here last year.</p> <p><i>Last year</i> refers to the past time, needs past form of the verb.</p> <p>I <i>watch</i> TV whenever there is a football match</p> <p><b>Repeated action</b> needs simple present</p>
<p><b>Lack of Capitalization.</b></p> <p>Not starting a sentence/proper names, names of months , days with a capital i.e. An upper case letter</p>	<p><i>friday</i> we all get up late.</p> <p><i>he</i> comes to my place to pick me up.</p>	<p><i>Friday</i> we all get up late.</p> <p><i>He</i> comes to my place to pick me up.</p> <p>Friday is the <i>name</i> of a week day and <i>He</i>-is the <i>starting of a sentence</i>. Both need to start with a capital letter</p>
<p><b>Wrong use of Preposition.</b></p> <p>Using inappropriate preposition</p>	<p><i>In</i> Friday I get up late.</p> <p>Yesterday I went <i>at</i> her house</p>	<p><i>On</i> Friday I get up late.</p> <p>Week days need <i>on</i></p> <p>Yesterday I went <i>to</i> her house and <i>motion verb</i> takes <i>to</i>.</p>

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<p><b>Addition of pronoun.</b> Adding an unnecessary pronoun after a noun.</p>	<p>My friend Zainab <i>she</i> comes to spend time with me.</p>	<p>My friend Zainab comes to spend time with me. Personal pronoun <i>cannot be used with a proper name</i> .(Only Emphatic pronouns can be used</p>
<p><b>Omission or addition of articles.</b> Either leaving out where necessary / adding one where it is not required.</p>	<p>The beach was full of <i>the</i> people. We saw boy running to touch water.</p>	<p>The beach was full of people. No article before a general plural noun. We saw <i>a</i> boy running to touch water. Boy, a <i>countable noun</i> , needs article <i>a</i>.</p>
<p><b>Spelling.</b> Not writing the correct spelling</p>	<p>He <i>dose</i> not know. <i>Whome</i> did we see?</p>	<p>He <i>does</i> not know. <i>Whom</i> did we see? No specific rules. Spellings are to be learnt.</p>

#### 4. Conclusion

This study clearly reveals that the students studying at Misurata University, majoring in English language, have committed errors. This answers the first question. And the most common kinds of error are : subject-verb disagreement, use of incorrect tense, lack of capitalization, incorrect use of preposition, addition of personal pronoun, omission or addition of articles and incorrect spellings. As it has been pointed out by several researchers committing errors is part of a second language acquisition process. The result of this

study throws significant light on the deviation of the grammatical norms of the learners from the norms of the target language, English, and provides insight into the way the learners internalize the target language rules. This will help the teachers to prepare the remedial materials and create awareness among the learners of the errors they commit.

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