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Analysis and Categorization of the Most Prevalent Errors of Intermediate and Elementary Iranian EFL Learners in Writing in Iran

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Abstract

Nowadays English is used as a lingua franca for international relationships. Committing errors in using it may become a hindrance to effective communication. Therefore, knowing about the kinds of errors which are commonly committed by the language users, specially the non-native users of this language, seems essential.

This paper presents an analysis and categorization of the most dominant errors of intermediate and elementary Iranian EFL learners in writing.

The specific research areas of interest are: (1) to which category the most dominant errors are attributable; (2) whether the level of language proficiency makes any differentiation in the category to which the most dominant errors are attributable; and (3) to what extent the adopted model (Keshavarz, 1999) is suitable for the categorization and analysis of the errors.

An Oxford placement test was administered to 107 female subjects, majoring in TOEFL in the fifth term of Najafabad Azad University to detect the participants' proficiency level. Then, 30 elementary and 30 intermediate (based on Oxford scale) subjects were selected randomly from among them. Next, they were asked to write an essay in 200 to 250 words. After that, the essays were analyzed and the errors were determined and categorized based on the adopted model.

The results indicate that:

1. The most dominant errors belong to the syntactico-morphological category.

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2. The level of the proficiency makes no difference in the category to which the most common errors belong. 3. The adopted model (Keshavarz, 1999), revised a little at the end, is approximately applicable for analyzing and categorizing the errors.

Keywords: error analysis, error categorization, proficiency, intermediate and elementary groups, writing.

Introduction

The views toward errors of language learners were once greatly affected by the ideas of structuralism and behaviorism. They considered errors as signs of not having adequately acquired a linguistic system. These views asked that language teachers take greater care to help learners avoid errors in their language production. They suggested contrastive analysis to make distinctions between the learners' first and second language to predict errors and help the teacher and students avoid them.

A Turning Point

Pit Corder, an important researcher in the field of Error Analysis, changed the views toward error analysis and provided it with new directions. He disagreed with the views of structuralists and behaviorists considering the errors as blemishes that needed to be eliminated. He asserted that errors are important in and of themselves (Corder, 1967). He claimed that, for learners themselves, errors are unavoidable and mandatory because making errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses to learn. He defined error analysis as a type of linguistic analysis concentrating on the errors learners make in the process of language learning and comparing the errors made in the Target Language (TL) with that TL itself. Corder (1974) believed that systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching.

Errors Provide Means to Assess Learning

Researchers are interested in errors because the errors contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Dulay and Burt, 1974). Moreover, according to Richards and Sampson (1974), "at the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort." (p.15).

Error Analysis versus Contrastive Analysis

Error analysis, offering an alternative view to contrastive analysis, has its value in the classroom research. Whereas contrastive analysis, which may be at least predictive at the syntactic level and at the early stages of language learning (Brown, 1994), allows for prediction of the difficulties involved in acquiring a second language (Richards, 1974), error analysis emphasizing "the significance of errors on learners interlanguage system" (Brown, 1994: 204) "may be carried out for pedagogic purposes" (Ellis, 1995; & Richards *et. al.*, 1993: 127).

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

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language. And the applied object serves to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by exploiting the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes.

Mistake versus Error

It is essential here to make a distinction between mistake and error; both Corder (1967, 1971) and James (1998) revealed 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, but the learner wouldn't (Gass & Selinker, 2001). And it is in this light that this paper focuses on students' errors not mistakes.

Typologies of Errors

There have been some studies on error analysis in writing in recent years: a psycholinguistics study of Thai English compositions (Brudhiprabha, 1972), recognizing article errors in the writing of Japanese learners of English (Nagata, et. al, 2004), recognizing syntactic errors in the writing of second language learners (Schneider and McCoy, 1998).

There are different typologies of errors. They can be classified based on basic types: *omissive*, *additive*, *substitutive* or related to *word order*.

These can be classified by how apparent they are: *overt* errors such as "I angry" are obvious even *out of context*, whereas *covert* errors are evident only *in context*.

Closely related to this is the classification according to *domain*, the breadth of context which the analyst must examine, and *extent*, the breadth of the utterance which must be changed in order to fix the error.

Errors may also be classified according to the level of language: *phonological* errors, *vocabulary* or *lexical* errors, *syntactic* errors, and so on.

They may be assessed according to the degree to which they interfere with *communication*: *global* errors make an utterance difficult to understand, while *local* errors do not. In the above example, "I angry" would be a local error, since the meaning is apparent.

Methodological Problems in Error Analysis

From the beginning, error analysis was beset with *methodological* problems. In particular, the above typologies are problematic. From linguistic data alone, it is often impossible to reliably determine what kind of error a learner is making. Also, error analysis can deal effectively only with learner production (*speaking* and *writing*) and not with learner reception (*listening* and *reading*). Furthermore, it cannot control learner's use of *communicative strategies* such as *avoidance*, in which learners simply do not use a form with which they are uncomfortable. For these reasons, although error analysis is still used to investigate specific questions in Second Language Acquisition, the quest for an overarching theory of learner errors has largely been abandoned.

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Treatment of Errors in Teaching

Error analysis is closely related to the study of error treatment in language teaching. Today, the study of errors is particularly relevant for focus on form teaching methodology. The investigation of errors can be at the same time diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's state of the language (Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems.

Corder (1967) believed that the teachers need to know about the kind of the errors commonly made by the students. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to decide how quickly to proceed from one topic to another, or which type of interactions to concentrate on in the classroom.

The Focus of This Paper

In this paper, it is intended to analyze and categorize the most dominant errors of intermediate and elementary Iranian EFL learners of English in writing based on the detailed model of Keshavarz (1999), which to the best of my knowledge, has not been attempted in the previous studies. The motivation behind the study is to provide the teachers involved in the course with some quantitative information about the patterns of the errors.

Research Purpose

In this research, it is intended to investigate the category to which the most dominant errors belong, the effect of proficiency level on the category to which the most dominant errors were attributed, and the suitability of the Keshavarz (1999) taxonomy for error analysis.

Subjects and Corpus

In this paper, the focus of study is on the analysis and categorization of the most dominant errors of intermediate and elementary Iranian EFL learners of English in writing. To investigate the research questions, an Oxford placement test was administered for 107 female students, majoring in TOEFL in the fifth term in Najafabad Azad University.

This test consisted of 100 Grammar questions, administered in 50 minutes, and 100 listening questions, administered in 10 minutes. All of the students passed grammar and essay writing courses.

Based on the Oxford scale, 30 elementary and 30 intermediate students were randomly selected from among 107 students. Then, these students were provided with the topic **An Ideal Student** and were asked to write an essay on it in 4 or 5 paragraphs. They were given sufficient time to write (Ellis, 1997) and were allowed to use their dictionaries to show their ability in writing. This procedure made sure that errors were not because of lack of time.

In identifying the errors, the practical advice suggested by Ellis (1997, pp. 15–20) and Hubbard, *et. al.* (1996, pp.135–141) was followed. They believed that the initial step requires the **selection** of the corpus of language followed by the **identification** of errors. The errors are then **classified**. The next

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step, after giving a grammatical analysis of each error, demands an **explanation** of different types of the errors. The classification and explanation stages are done based on a detailed model suggested by Keshavarz (1999). He divided the errors into four large categories:

Table 1: Keshavarz (1999) taxonomy of error analysis

Orthographic Errors: By the orthographic errors, he meant "spelling errors (e.g. 'baks' for box) which mostly are caused by no one to one correspondence between the letters of alphabet and sounds they represent, the same spelling which have different pronunciations, homonyms, and ignorance of spelling rules such as doubling of final consonants in monosyllabic words before a suffix beginning with a vowel: e.g. **runner**". (Keshavarz, 1999, pp. 77–8).

Phonological Errors: (With which we are not concerned in this paper): "They may be due to lack of certain language phonemes in the learner's mother tongue, differences in the syllable structure of the two languages, spelling pronunciation of the words, and silent letters". (Keshavarz, 1999, pp.79–80).

Lexico-semantic Errors: Keshavarz (1999) gave some examples. One of these is given here to clarify this type of error: **I am working 24 o'clock each week**. The use of **o'clock** instead of **hour** is a lexico–semantic error (Keshavarz, 1999, p. 80).

Syntactico-morphological Errors: Keshavarz (1999) divided these into the following categories:
1. Errors in the use of tenses 2. Errors in the use of prepositions 3. Errors in the use of articles 4. Wrong use of active & passive voice 5. Wrong sequence of tenses 6. Wrong word order 7. Errors in the use of "it is" instead of "there is" 8. Misplacement of adverbs 9. Errors in the use of negative construction 10. Errors in the use of conditional clauses 11. Errors in the use of negative imperative in indirect speech 12. Errors in the use of relative clauses 13. Lack of subject–verb inversion in wh–questions 14. Errors in the use of subject–verb inversion in indirect questions 15. Errors in the distribution and use of verb groups 16. Errors due to lack of concord 17. Wrong use of plural morpheme 18. Wrong use of parts of speech 19. Wrong use of quantifiers and intensifiers 20. Use of typical Persian construction.

Four other kinds of errors, made by both intermediate and elementary groups, were added to these sub-categories of syntactic-morphological errors to enable the researcher to include all of the observed errors. These were errors with **conjunctions, pronouns, punctuation, and words deleted wrongly** (considered as **word omission**, in this paper).

4. Results and Discussions

This study investigated the errors of Iranian elementary and intermediate learners of English in writing. More clearly, the present study was intended to reveal the most dominant error category, the role of proficiency and the appropriateness of the adopted model.

The analysis of the total corpus showed that there were totally 860 errors in the essays of the two groups. There were 360 errors in the intermediate group essays, 12 each essay, and 500 in those of the elementary group almost 16 in each essay. It is important to note that the phonological errors are not considered here.

The observed finding reveals that Iranian writers of English make proportionally a large number of errors. Thus, errors need to be taken into account more seriously to improve intelligibility and effectiveness of communication. Also, this shows the knowledge of the most dominant errors may be useful for teachers, students and material designers.

Predominance of Syntactic-Morphological Errors

Further analysis of the two groups' errors as shown in the following table (Table 2) shows that most of the errors belong to the syntactic-morphological category for both intermediate (88.44) and elementary groups (44.6). This finding can indicate the inadequacy of the teaching process, the focus of which has been on teaching the grammatical points or perhaps the effect of negative transfer.

This table also shows orthographic errors were made after the syntactic-morphological errors by both groups. This finding suggests that the teachers should provide their students with the strategies to improve their dictation, being a very important aspect of writing and affecting the text understandability and communication with readers.

This table (Table 2) also indicates that lexico-semantic errors were less frequent in the essays of both the groups. Perhaps this may be because of the avoidance strategy adopted by the subjects. The results show that the proficiency level made no changes in attributing the most dominant errors to the syntactic-morphological category in both group essays.

Table 2: The percentages of different kinds of errors

<i>Proficiency level</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Elementary</i>
<i>Error categories</i>		
<i>Orthographic Errors</i>	9.44	17.6
<i>Lexico-semantic Errors</i>	6.11	7.8
<i>Syntactico-morphological Errors</i>	88.44	74.6
Total number of errors	360	500

On the whole, the statistical analysis shows that the differences between the two groups are statistically significant. They show that the elementary group had more syntactic-morphological, orthographic and lexico-semantic errors than the intermediate group.

Table 3: Percentages of different types of the errors

Proficiency level	Intermediate	Elementary	All
Orthographic Errors	34 27.9%	88 72.1%	122 100.0%
Lexico-semantic Errors	22 36.1%	39 63.9%	61 100.0%
Syntactico-morphological Errors	304 44.9%	373 55.1%	677 100.0%
All	360 41.9%	500 58.1%	860 100.0%

Table 4: Pearson Chi-square based on the percentages of different types of the errors ($p \leq 5.99$)

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.232 ^a	2	.001

Errors in the Use of Subcategories

A closer investigation of the errors of the two groups is possible if the sub-categories of syntactic-morphological errors of the two groups are taken into account. As a general rule, it seems that errors due to lack of concord are found to be the most dominant syntactic-morphological errors in both group essays (Fig. 1 and 2).

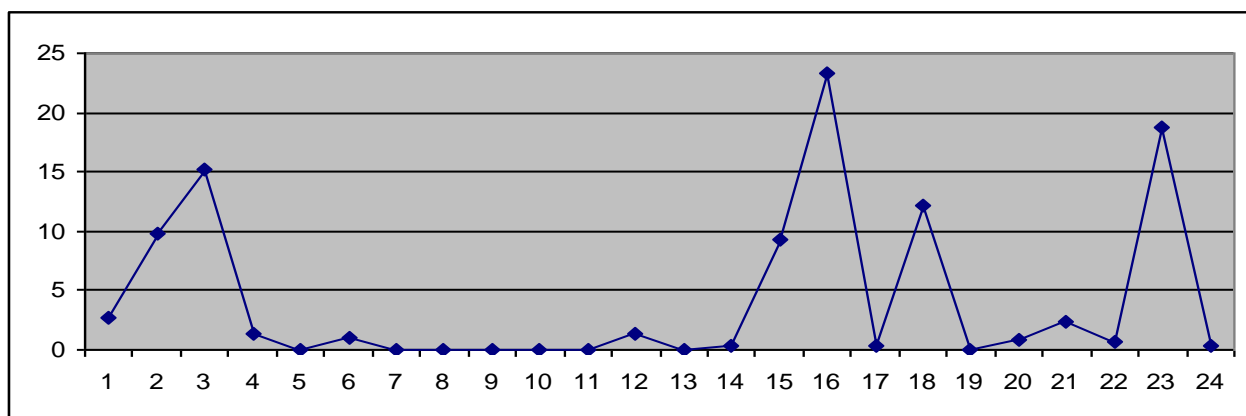
Keshavarz (1999) divided errors due to lack of concord into two sub-categories which were subject-verb agreement and agreement within a noun group.

It is interesting to note that punctuation errors are in the second level of frequency for both groups.

These findings show the great problem learners faced with the use of these two items and call for greater attention on the part of the teachers to these two items.

Errors in the use of negative construction, errors in the use of subject verb inversion in indirect questions, wrong use of the plural morpheme, and use of conjunctions were at the same and last level of difficulty in the essays of the intermediate group.

Figure 1: A detailed analysis of 304 Syntactico-morphological errors of the intermediate group

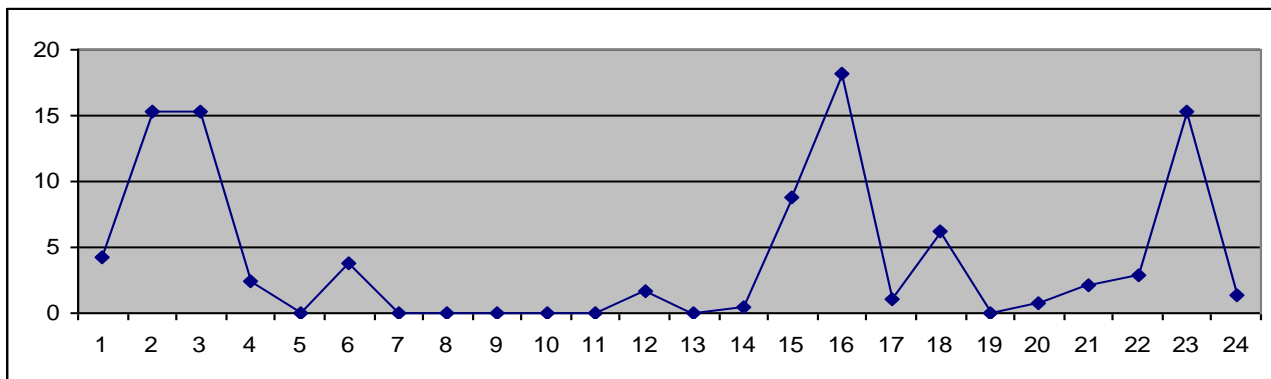


1. Errors in the use of tenses
2. Errors in the use of prepositions
3. Errors in the use of articles
4. Wrong use of active and passive voice
5. Wrong sequence of tenses
6. Wrong word order
7. Errors in the use of "it is" instead of "there is"
8. Misplacement of adverbs
9. Errors in the use of negative construction
10. Errors in the use of conditional clauses
11. Errors in the use of negative imperative in indirect speech
12. Errors in the use of relative clauses
13. Lack of subject-verb inversion in wh-questions
14. Errors in the use of subject-verb inversion in indirect questions
15. Errors in the distribution and use of verb groups
16. Errors due to lack of concord
17. Wrong use of plural morpheme
18. Wrong use of parts of speech
19. Wrong use of quantifiers and intensifiers
20. Use of typical Persian construction
21. Error in the use of pronouns
22. Word omission
23. Punctuation
24. Error in the use of Conjunction

As Fig 2 shows, the elementary group has the same amount of problem with the use of prepositions and articles as with the punctuation errors. But they are relegated to the 5th and 3rd position in the intermediate group essays.

It is also interesting to note that both of the groups had no problems with the sequence of tenses, ('it is' is used instead of 'there is') placement of the adverbs, negative construction, conditional clauses, subject verb inversion in wh-questions and use of quantifiers and intensifiers. This is so perhaps because of repetition, great attention paid to these items from the early stages or avoidance strategy.

Figure 2: A detailed analysis of 373 Syntactico–morphological errors of the low group



1. Errors in the use of tenses
2. Errors in the use of prepositions
3. Errors in the use of articles
4. Wrong use of active & passive voice
5. Wrong sequence of tenses
6. Wrong word order
7. Errors in the use of "it is" instead of "there is"
8. Misplacement of adverbs
9. Errors in the use of negative construction
10. Errors in the use of conditional clauses
11. Errors in the use of negative imperative in indirect speech
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17. Wrong use of plural morpheme
18. Wrong use of parts of speech
19. Wrong use of quantifiers and intensifiers
20. Use of typical Persian construction
21. Error in the use of pronouns
22. Word omission
23. Punctuation
24. Error in the use of Conjunction

The analysis and categorization of the most dominant errors show that (the answer of the third research question) the adopted model (Keshavarz, 1999) is approximately applicable, but it is better to add the errors of punctuation, conjunction, pronoun and the omission of some of the words to this taxonomy because they had great frequency in the essays of both the groups. The results show the need to try to teach more effectively the rules and conventions of writing.

Conclusion

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The results of this study indicate that foreign language learners of English suffer from basic syntactic problems, indicating that such learners undergo certain process of learning. These processes of learning necessarily start with form and most probably only later on develop into the practical and pragmatic considerations of language. The pedagogical implication for teachers could be the redeployment of their plans in order to tackle the basic problems in learning that language. This is actually in contrast to the communicative language teaching where much attention is to be given to the non-directive and relaxed program of teaching communication.

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