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## Analysis of Intralingual Errors in Learning English as a Foreign Language by Yemeni Students

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### Abstract

This paper presents the errors committed by Yemeni students of English while writing English. The errors committed by the students are classified into three different categories.

The **first category** is *interlingual and intralingual errors*. The Interlingual errors are those that result from language transfer and are caused by the learner's native language, say L1 whereas the Intralingual errors are those which result from faulty or partial learning of L2, rather than from language transfer (Richards 1973, Gass and Selinker, 2008, Brown, 2007).

The **second category** is *language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication and overgeneralization* (Selinker 1972, 1992).

The **third category** is *addition, fragment, omission, simplification, structure of the sentences, selection of the words, word order and subject-verb agreement* (Corder 1973, Dulay, Burt, Krashen, 1982, & Ellis 1997).

The aim of this paper is to focus on the intralingual errors Yemeni learners make while writing. The data was derived from free compositions written by 200 learners.

Additionally, this paper will also draw attention of teachers of English language to a list of errors that is recurrent among learner.

The errors were identified and categorized and the result highlighted a significant difference between the frequencies of intralingual errors types.

**Keywords:** Intralingual errors, Yemeni learners, omission, addition, simplification, fragment, selection, structure of sentence

## **Introduction**

In Australia, UK or USA, English is studied as the first language. In India and Pakistan, it is studied as a second language. In Arab countries, it is studied as a foreign language and has become very popular. The youth in Arab countries have realized the necessity of learning and mastering English for direct communication with foreigners.

In Yemen, the country of the researcher, students learn English from seventh grade for six years before joining university. In the university, there are three types of colleges: Education, Arts, and Languages.

In these colleges, English department is one among the many. In colleges for Education, there are three courses the students must study, namely, *Linguistics*, *Literature* and *English language teaching*. In colleges for Arts and Languages, there are only two courses, namely, *Literature* and *Linguistics*. While learning English as a foreign or second language, the students will make errors, which are inevitable during the process of learning.

## **Literature Review**

Ellis (1994) identifies *four essential areas* for investigation of acquisition of second language:

- 1) The characteristics of learner language, which involve errors, acquisition orders, variability, and pragmatic features;
- 2) The learner-external factors where social contexts are concerned;
- 3) The learner-internal mechanism, which deal with first language transfer, learning processes, communication strategies and knowledge of linguistic universals; and
- 4) The language learner, motivation and learner strategies.

Among these areas of study, the description of the characteristics of learner's performance in the language is the most essential. The acquisition process cannot be explained without describing the learner's performance in the language in detail. In other words, we cannot investigate how learner-internal/external factors affect the learner's performance in the language until we have a good idea of the general characteristics of learner's language itself.

## **Error Analysis**

To understand the nature of the learner language, Error Analysis (EA) has been used among researchers of second language. The EA substituted its predecessor, *contrastive analysis*, in the late 1960s. EA begins with the premise that errors can be attributed to a variety of factors.

It is quite natural for a second language learner to make errors when he/she puts the language to use. Errors should be well defined to help the teachers recognize them and help the learners of the language to get rid of them.

### **Error versus Mistake**

In order to analyze the learner language in an appropriate perspective, it is crucial to make a distinction between *mistakes* and *errors*. At the level of analysis, deciding whether a deviation is an error or a mistake is a problem.

Corder (1967, 1971, 1981) contends that mistakes should not be included in the quantification or analysis of errors and this is the approach taken by most analysts.

According to Richards & Schmidt (2002), mistakes are those made by a learner while writing or speaking and are caused by *lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness*, whereas errors are those made by a learner while writing or speaking caused by *incomplete learning*.

On the other hand, Brown (2007) said that a mistake refers to *performance error that is either a random guess or a 'slip'* in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. People make mistakes in both native and second language situations. Natives are capable of recognizing and correcting such 'lapses' or 'mistakes', whereas an error, *a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflects the competence of the learner*.

An error cannot be self-corrected, while a mistake can be self-corrected if the deviation is pointed out to the speaker or writer (James 1998). Errors occur when the learner does not know and is required to be taught the rules or when the learner needs to be shown that the wrong knowledge or partial knowledge has been applied to that particular situation.

### **Error and Inability of Students Correct**

On the other hand, other scholars identify the term "errors" with regard to inability of the students to correct these errors by themselves. Edge (1997, p.18) defines "errors" in a simple way *"If a student cannot self-correct a mistake in his or her own English, but the teacher thinks that the class is familiar with the correct form, we shall call that sort of mistake an error."*

Edge's definition has one trait in common with that of Cunnings; i.e., certain parts of the language being learned are problematic to students. Thus, they make errors unconsciously, which accounts for their incapacity to self-correct. Investigation of the types of errors reveals

that the sources of errors may be *attributed to two major transfers/interferences : interlingual and intralingual transfer* (Brown, 2007).

## **Intralingual Interference**

### **Intralingual Errors**

Intralingual errors or intralingual transfer/interference refer to the negative transfer of language items within the target language and occurs generally in the rule learning stages of the language, such as overgeneralization of grammar rules within the target language, and the learner's failure to apply rules of the target language under appropriate situations (Richards, 1974, 1992).

### **Diagnostic and Prognostic**

Learner errors can serve two purposes i.e., the diagnostic and the prognostic (Corder, 1967, 1992). It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's grasp of a language at any given point during the learning process. It is also prognostic because it can tell the teacher to modify the learning materials to meet with the learners' problems.

Corder (1967, 1992) also contended that errors are visible proof that learning is taking place. He has emphasized that errors, if studied systematically, can provide significant insights into how a foreigner actually learns a language. He also agrees that studying the errors of usage by students has immediate practical application for language teachers. In his view, errors provide feedback; they tell the teachers something about the effectiveness of their teaching.

### **Usefulness of EA Application**

The use of EA and application of appropriate corrective techniques can aid learning English effectively. In recognition of the crucial role played by errors in inter-language of learners, this study aims to analyze the most intralingual errors made by Yemeni students learning English as a foreign language in public universities.

### **Previous Studies about Analyzing Learner's Language**

Liu (1999) conducted a study of lexical and grammatical collocational errors from 127 copies of final examination papers and 94 copies of compositions of students. The majority of the errors were attributable to *negative interlingual transfer* comprising four kinds, among which *ignorance of rule restrictions* resulted in more errors than the other three.

Huang (2001) investigated the nature and distribution of different kinds of grammatical errors made by 46 English majors of a Taiwanese university. A total of 1700 errors were found and categorized into 13 types of errors. The top six common errors were (1) *Verb* (2) *Noun* (3) *Spelling* (4) *Article* (5) *Preposition* and (6) *Word choice*. Overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, simplification, incomplete application of rules and L1 transfer were the major causes of EFL errors of learners.

Huang (2006) presented an analysis writing errors of 34 Taiwanese English majors based on a web-based writing program, which included error categories of *grammar, mechanics, style and usage*. The distribution of errors was *usage* (55%), *mechanics* (20%), *style* (16%) and *grammar* (9%). Huang concluded that most EFL writing errors of students were not due to insufficient command of linguistic complexity. On the contrary, they made a big portion of basic errors such as the subject-verb agreement or incomplete sentences.

Connell (2000) cited in Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong (2008) analyzed the kinds of errors Japanese students made. The result showed that the use of subject in a sentence, the parts of speech and the general word order created more problems than other grammatical aspects.

According to James (1998), errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent types of errors that are committed by learners.

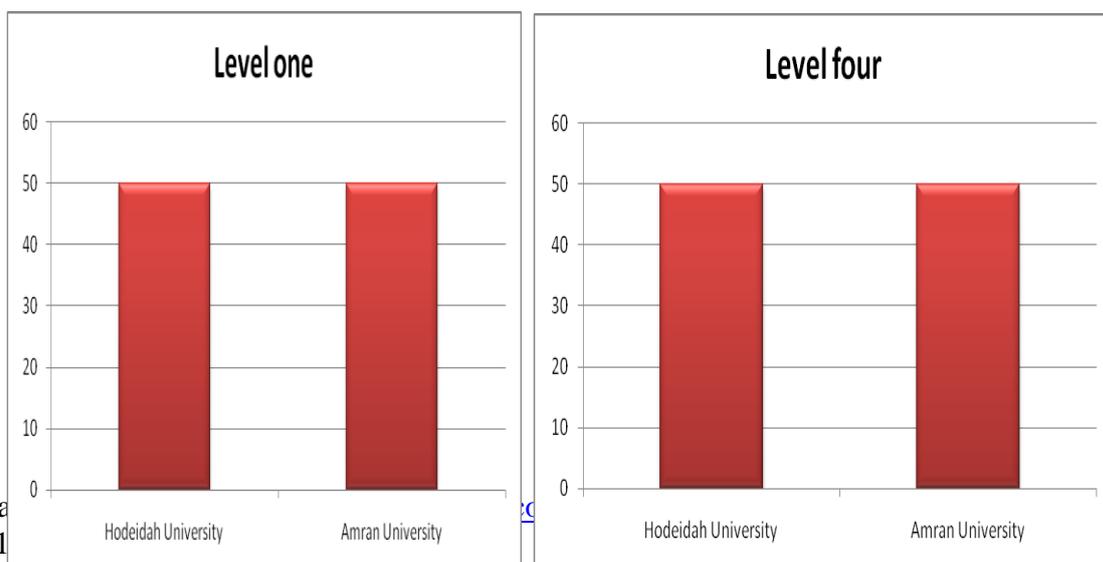
**Method**

The 200 subjects of the study represent the two levels i.e., 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year university students majoring in English at Amran and Hodeida University in Yemen. 50 participants were chosen from each level. The following table shows the number of the participants according to their level and university.

**Table 2 The frequency of the participants**

University	Level one One	Level four Four	Total
Hodeidah University	50	50	100
Amran University	50	50	100
	100	100	200

Figure 1: the frequency of the participants



All of them speak Arabic, which is their mother tongue and they studied English as a foreign language subject for six years before getting into university. In those years, they had five classes per week.

### Data Collection and Analysis

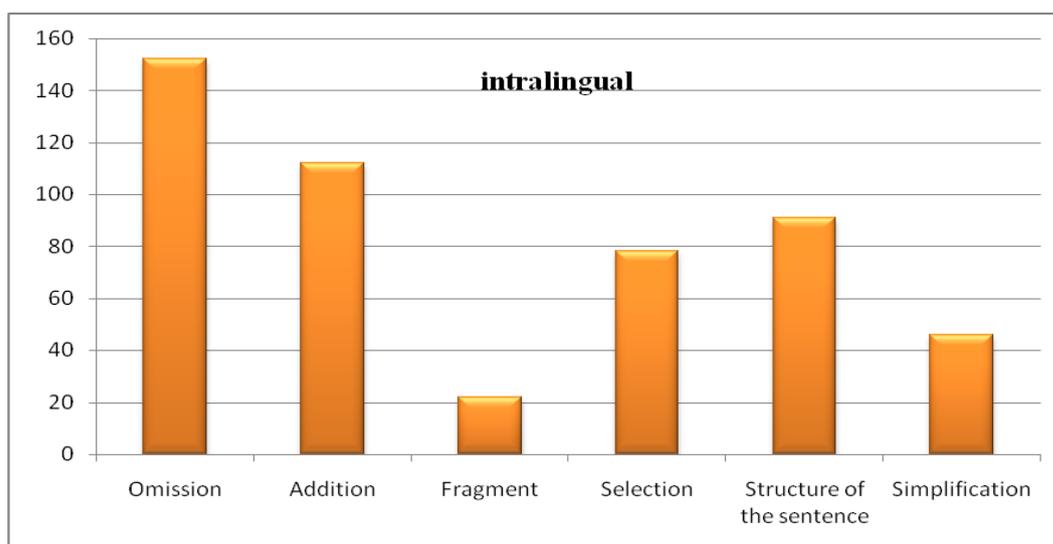
In the present study, the three steps of EA specified by Corder (1974) were followed: 1- *Collection of Sample Errors*; 2- *Identification of Errors* and 3- *Description of Errors*.

The data obtained from the compositions written by the students were examined to identify the typical errors in writing produced by Yemeni students.

### Findings

**Table 2. The Relative Frequency of Error Types**

Classification of errors	Types of errors	No. of errors	Percentage
Intralingual	Omission	152	30.35%
	Addition	112	22.35%
	Fragment	22	4.39%
	Selection	78	15.57%
	Structure of the sentence	91	18.16%
	Simplification	46	9.18%
<b>Total</b>		<b>501</b>	<b>100.00%</b>



## Figure 2 The frequency of intralingual errors

The above table displays categories of intralingual error types in compositions of students. A total of six types of intralingual errors were found in the writing of students, and 501 individual errors were identified. As indicated in the above table, the category (intralingual) was further classified in detail. The results show that 501 intralingual errors were committed by the Yemeni students. Intralingual errors were divided into six categories namely, *omission, addition, fragment, selection of the word, structure of the sentence and simplification.*

### Sample of Errors

#### Intralingual Errors

##### 1-Omission

The omission errors constituted 30.35% of the total number of the errors made by the students and were the highest percentage.

Learners of English tend to commit omission errors when they write or speak English. The omission errors are one of the characteristics of L2 learners in general and Arab learners of English in particular. Dulay, Burt, & Krashen (1982:154) hold that “omission errors are characterized by the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance”. Accordingly, when Arab learners commit an omission error, they actually omit an element necessarily required without which the sentence is ill-formed or ungrammatical. Consider the following examples.

1-\*We have speak in English.

2-\*You should enough background.

3-\*I don't reasons for learning.

The above sentences show different types of omission that have taken place during writing in English by the students. The first type of omission is the word 'to' before the second verb as :

\*We have speak in English.

The correct sentence is: We have to speak English.

The second type of omission is the omission of the main verb after modal verb as:

\*You should enough background.

The correct sentence is: You should have/get enough background.

The third type of omission is the omission of the main verb after 'do' as:

\*I don't reasons for learning.

The correct sentence is : I don't have reasons for learning.

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## 2-Addition

The addition errors constitute 22.35% in this category. Dulay et al. (1982:156) state that “addition errors are the opposite of omission. They are characterized by the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance”. They add that addition errors indicate that “some basic rules have been acquired but the refinements have not yet been made.” The following sample exemplifies the issue in question.

Examples of errors of addition from students’ writing:

- 1-\*It is helps us to live in this life.
- 2-\*I have a plans for my future.
- 3-\*I will working well.
- 4-\*English is a very important.
- 5-\*I learn the English.
- 6-\*I used to studying in this college.

The above sentences show different errors of addition, addition of definite and indefinite articles as:

\*I have a plans for my future. In this sentence indefinite article was added to plural noun. The correct sentence is ‘I have plans for my future’.

\*I learn the English. In this sentence, definite article was added to proper noun. The correct sentence is ‘I learn English’.

\*English is a very important. In this sentence indefinite article was added to adjective phrase.

The second type of addition was the addition of ‘ing’ to the main verb after modal verb. Also there is an addition of ‘ing’ to infinitive verb with to as “to studying”.

\*I will working well. This sentence may have omission errors ‘be’ after ‘will’  
The correct sentence may be: I will work well. Or I will be working well.

The third type of addition is the addition of verb ‘is’ before the main verb in the present tense as:

\*It is helps us to live in this life. The correct sentence is ‘It helps us to live in this life’.

## 3-Fragment

The sentence fragment lowest made by the Yemeni learners of English among all errors constituting only 4.39 % of the total.

Sentence fragment means a phrase or clause that is punctuated and capitalized as a sentence but does not constitute a complete grammatical sentence or a group of words that begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation point but is grammatically incomplete. On the other hand, a sentence fragment fails to be a sentence in the sense that it cannot stand by itself. It does not contain even one independent clause.

For example

- 1-\* Because English language is used in the computer.
- 2-\* If I finish learning English.
- 3-\* My opinion to improved English.

These three sentences show the sentence fragment because they contain only one part of the clause and must have another clause to complete the meaning.

#### **4-Selection of the Correct Word**

The selection of word errors constitute 15.57% of the total errors.

Yemeni students had the difficulty to distinguish between the verb 'teach' and the verb 'learn' as:

- 1-\* Teacher does not *learn* good.
- 2-\*I *learn* students English.

Another difficulty of selection of word was the choice between verb *to be* and verb *to have* as:

- \*I want to *be* a lot of information.

The third difficulty of selection is pronoun as:

- \*Teacher encourages the student to develop *your* skills.

#### **5-Structure of the sentence**

This type of error constitutes 18.16% of the total errors. In this type, the sentences have more than one error and do not convey the complete meaning.

- 1-\*I must be person have language.
- 2\* In school to teach the student.
- 3-\*English language is describes in the feeling and come day.

#### **6-Simplification**

The simplification errors constitute 9.18 % of the total errors. This is the sixth common error made by Yemeni learners in writing English as a foreign language. The participants used the

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simple present tense for all cases. They seemed to be ignorant of the tenses. This finding revealed that students did not have comprehensive knowledge of the use of different verb tenses. The following sentence shows this type of errors.

- 1-\*I learn English since 12 years.
- 2-\*I start learning English when I was 15.
- 3-\*We study English since childhood.

The above sentences show different kinds of tenses but with only one form of verb which was present simple.

## Conclusion

This study is set out to investigate the kinds of errors made by Yemeni students of first to fourth levels and University EFL students in writing. In addition, this study investigated different types of intralingual errors produced by the students.

A total of 501 common errors were found and categorized into six types of intralingual errors namely omission, addition, fragment, structure of the sentence, selection of words and simplification.

Most errors were found in the omission of the required elements. Addition of few unnecessary or incorrect elements comes next, followed by the structure of a sentence which is the mis-order of the elements in a sentence. Selection of an incorrect word element ranked next.

The other types of errors are relatively less frequent: simplification and the least frequent of the errors was sentence fragment.

Therefore, more attention must be paid to the error types, which are more frequent. This also indicates the part of the target language students have maximum difficulty to use correctly; that is, the type of error causes most difficulty to communicate effectively or compose a grammatically correct sentence (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982).

The errors serve as an important means for teachers and researchers to observe the learning process and learning strategies of students.

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