An Applied Linguistic Approach to Grammatical Errors Analysis: The Case of First -year Master Students at the Department of English

مقاربة لسانية تطبيقية لتحليل الأخطاء النحوية: طلاب السنة الأولى ماستر في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية أنموذجا

Nacèra Benali Reguieg

Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef –Algeria

TICELET Laboratory (Information and Communication Technologies in the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Translation)

n.benalireguieg@univ-chlef.dz

Abstract

Error Analysis is a tool that researchers in applied linguistics use to scrutinize errors made by foreign language learners through the comparison between errors made by learners of a target language and their native language system. It is widely used nowadays for it helps scholars identify the difficulties in the acquisition of a foreign language. It allows teachers to know their students' errors and give special attention to them. This paper aims at analyzing first-year Master students' grammatical errors at the Department of English in Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef in order to recognize their errors, describe and categorize them and explain their occurrence. Twenty essays were randomly selected and analyzed focusing on students' grammatical errors only. Students were given one hour and a half to write an essay in which they explain how a researcher formulates a good research title. The study was based around one research question: What are the most frequent grammatical errors made by students of English as a foreign language? It was found out that reliance on L1 to L2 transfer may have an impact on misleading foreign language learners, thus, they produce grammatical errors while writing. EFL teachers should be able to deal effectively and positively with types of their students' errors.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics, Grammatical Errors, Error Analysis, Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

الملخص

يستخدم الباحثون تحليل الأخطاء كأداة في اللسانيات التطبيقية للتدقيق في الأخطاء التي يرتكبها متعلمو اللغة الاجنبية وهذا من خلال المقارنة بين الأخطاء التي يرتكبونها ونظام اللغة الأم. في الوقت الراهن، يستخدم تحليل الأخطاء على نطاق واسع وهذا يعود لكونه يساعد الباحثين على تحديد صعوبات اكتساب اللغة الأجنبية حيث انه يتيح للمدرسين امكانية معرفة أخطاء طلابهم وبالتالي إيلاء اهتمام خاص لهذه الأخطاء ومحاولة معالجتها

وتصحيحها. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحليل الأخطاء النحوية لطلاب السنة أولى ماستر في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة حسيبة بن بوعلي بالشلف من أجل التعرف على أخطائهم النحوية، وصفها، تصنيفها وشرح حدوثها. من اجل بلوغ هذا الهدف، تم اختيار 20 مقال بشكل عشوائي وتحليلها مع التركيز على الأخطاء النحوية للطلاب فقط. تم منح الطلاب ساعة ونصف لكتابة مقال يشرحون فيه كيف يصوغ الباحث عنوان بحث جيد. ان هذه الدراسة اعتمدت على سؤال بحثي واحد: ما هي الأخطاء النحوية الأكثر شيوعًا بين طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية؟ تبين أن الاعتماد على النقل من اللغة الام إلى اللغة الاجنبية قد يكون له تأثير على تضليل متعلمي اللغة الأجنبية اثناء عملية التعلم، وبالتالي، فإنهم يرتكبون أخطاء نحوية عند الكتابة. اوصت الدراسة بأن يكون مدرسو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية قادرين على معرفة أسباب الأخطاء النحوية لطلابهم من اجل التعامل معها بفعالية وإيجابية.

الكلمات الدالة: الأخطاء النحوية، اللسانيات التطبيقية، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تحليل الأخطاء

Introduction

Error Analysis is a tool that researchers in applied linguistics use to compare errors made by learners of a target language to their native language. Linguists use Error Analysis to find out what difficulties learners face when acquiring a new language. It helps teachers of foreign languages recognize their students' errors and give special attention to them. First-year Master students at the department of English in Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef are native speakers of Arabic or Berber; however, they are required to use the English language, which is a foreign language, in class. With more or less unconscious transfer of their mother tongue system, they make errors while writing in English. This research aims at analyzing first-year Master students' exam answer papers in order to recognize their grammatical errors, describe, classify them and explain their occurrence. It is based on one research question: What are the most frequent grammatical errors made by learners of English as a foreign language in their essays? Twenty essays were collected to identify, describe and explain the factors that lead students of English to commit grammatical errors. Students were given one hour and a half to write an essay in which they explain how a researcher formulates a good research title. They were not allowed to use dictionaries or any other resources. The analysis of the essays focused on grammatical errors only without taking into consideration other types of errors such as spelling.

1.   Literature Review

According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), errors happen when there is a gap in the learner's English background knowledge. The influence of the native language is usually the cause of error existence in second language

acquisition. However, other sources may lead to L2[1] errors. Error analysis is an approach that can be employed to elucidate L2 errors. Brown (1994) argues that Error Analysis has great significance in classroom research. It is defined as "the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language"(James, 1998, p.1). Similarly, Ellis and Barkhuizen confirmed that Error Analysis is "a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors" (2005, p. 51) ˙Error Analysis is not about describing or counting errors only, but it includes the explanation of the reasons behind their occurrence.

According to Corder (1967), learner's Error Analysis has two purposes:

1. **Diagnostic**: It explains the learners' comprehension of L2 during the learning process.

2. **Prognostic**:   It helps teachers modify the teaching material to remedy their learners' deficiencies.

In 1973, he limited Error Analysis objectives to two main points; theoretical and applied. The theoretical objective tests the validity of the theories such as the theory of transfer. The applied objective concerns "Determining the sequence of the presentation of target language items in textbooks and classrooms, deciding the relative degree of emphasis on material, devising remedial lessons and exercises and finally selecting items for testing the learner's proficiency (Sridhar, 1981, p. 221). In other words, it targets pedagogical purposes.

Essays written by learners disclose learner's grammatical competence and give an idea about how learners use correct grammar to produce good essays (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 21). Error Analysis is conducted in four consecutive stages as stated by Ellis (1994, p. 48). These stages are as follows:

1. **Collection of a sample of learner language:** In collecting data, researchers should take into account the purpose of the study in order to collect relevant data that meet the aims and research questions (ibid, p. 57).

2. **Identification of errors**: Identifying an error is different from explaining what an error is. Corder suggested a model for the identification of erroneous or idiosyncratic utterances in a second language. According to his model, "every sentence is to be regarded as idiosyncratic until shown to be otherwise" (1981, p.21). For instance, identifying grammatical errors needs to compare them to correct grammar found in grammar books (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 58).

---

[1] Second language

3. **Description of errors**: Describing an error requires knowing how the English learner's error differs from the native speaker's (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 60). They classified grammatical mistakes as follows:

   a. Errors of omission: leaving out a word e.g. "My sister happy".

   b. Errors of addition: adding a word or an ending to another word that is grammatically incorrect e.g., "I have eated".

   c. Misinformation/Substitution: Using the wrong form of a morpheme or structure e.g. when they use the wrong preposition in a sentence such as "It was the hardest time in my life".

   d. Misordering: inserting a morpheme incorrectly in a grammatical construction such as "She fights all the time her brother".

   e. Blends: blending two different phrases e.g., "The only one thing I want".

4. **Explanation of errors:** This is the most important part of Error Analysis for it explains L2 error occurrence. Researchers use different elements to categorize types of errors. For instance:

   a. Transfer errors: L2 learner uses his L1 to create a sentence, thus committing an error.

   b. Overgeneralization error: L2 learner "creates a deviant structure on the basis of other structures in the target language"(Ellis, 1994, p. 59)·

   c. Ignorance of rule restrictions: L2 learner administers rules to inappropriate situations (Richards, 1974).

2.   Methods

The study aimed at analyzing first-year Master students' grammatical errors at the Department of English of Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef. Those Students sat for an exam and were given one hour and a half to write an essay in which they explained how a researcher formulates a good research title. They were not allowed to use dictionaries or other references. The analysis of the essays focuses on grammatical errors only without taking into consideration other types of errors such as spelling.

3.   Results

   Data were analyzed using Ellis' four stages of Errors Analysis as follows:

   1. students' essays were selected as samples for data collection. The essays were corrected so as to fit the study aim,

   2. grammatical errors were identified,

   3. described and

   4. explained.

Students' grammatical errors were identified and categorized to recognize their frequency. They were arranged in four main types depending on which

type of error it was:

     a) Subject-verb agreement errors

     b) Errors related to verbs

     c) Contracted form errors

     d) Passive voice errors

4-1- Frequent Errors

     As a first step and after the correction of the students' essays, their grammatical errors were classified and counted in order to know what types of errors are commonly made. Figure (1) shows the frequency of grammatical errors made by first-year Master students at the department of English. As demonstrated, subject-verb agreement errors were the most frequent errors committed by students (72%), followed by errors related to verbs (43%). Contracted form errors (25%) and passive voice errors (19%) were regarded as insignificant errors, yet they were discussed, too.

Fig. 1. Frequent Errors
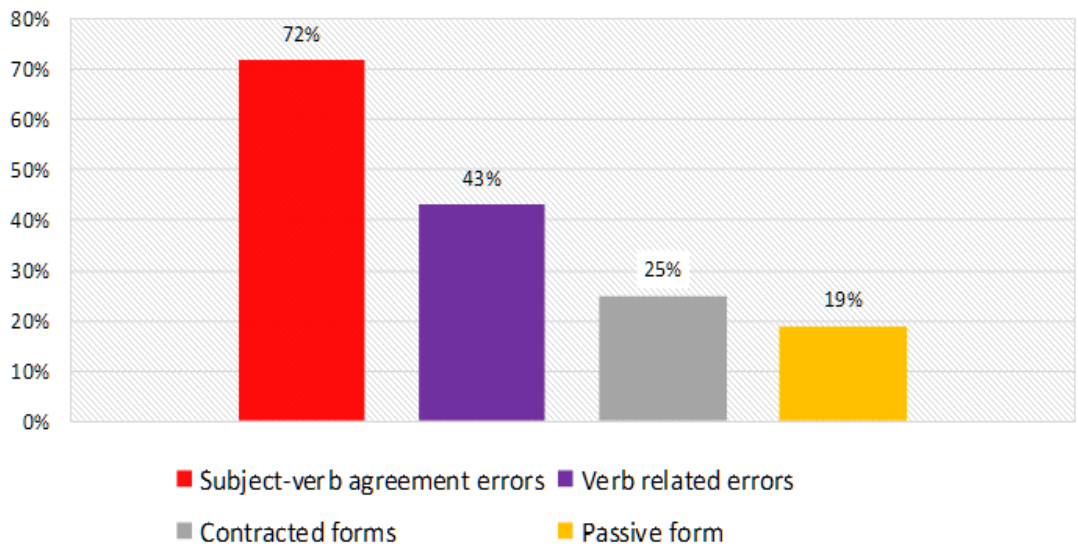
4-2- Errors Categories

Examples of grammatical errors from students' essays were illustrated and described.

a. Subject-verb Agreement Errors

     1. The researcher have to read

2. The researcher read a book

3. Researcher face, problems in choosing a topic

4. Selecting a topic or title that have references

5. Cause he don't

The five examples above show that students do not master the use of third-person singular in the simple present tense for both verbs and model verbs although it is the first tense that Algerian students learn. Köhlmyr (2003) claimed that the present tense is the most frequently used tense and thus has the largest amount of errors. Probably, the origin of this type of error is because of the fact that they do not pay attention to the subject in their sentences. In English, when using the simple present tense for the third person singular, the verbs always end in –s. This rule does not exist in the participants' mother language, which is Arabic or Berber. For this reason, it is difficult for them to add the –s since they cannot borrow this grammatical notion from their native language to the target language.

b. Errors Related to Tense of Verbs

6. If the title is done before

7. He to formulates

8. He beguns

9. The researcher should generates

In example 6, "If the title is done before", the form of the verb to 'do' is correct; however, its use is incorrect. Instead of using the present perfect "has been done", the student used the simple present with 'before'. This type of error is viewed as an error of tense since the tense of the verb is replaced by another tense. The present perfect is often used to refer to experience up to the present (Present Perfect, n.d.). This tense is not part of the Arabic Grammar. Consequently, students fail in distinguishing its different functions and confuse it with the present simple tense.

In examples 7, 8, and 9, students added an incorrect ending to the verbs 'formulate', 'Begun', and 'generate'. This is known as verb inflection error that refers to a process of word formation in which items are added to the base form of a word to express grammatical meanings (Nordquist, 2018).

Example 8, "He beguns", concerns the irregular form of the verb "to begin"; in English regular verbs use the -ed ending to express the simple past and the past participle as in (discuss, discussed, discussed). The irregular verbs are very challenging for ESL/EL learners because each irregular verb has its specific form in the past simple or participle. The learners of English as a

second or foreign language have to learn the irregular verbs by heart. In the given example, the participant knows that the verb "to begin" is irregular and requires a specific ending when conjugated in the simple past or past participle; yet s/he added the "s" of the third singular person in the simple present to the past participle of the verb "to begin". Clearly, the participant is confused about the use of the tenses.

Example 7, "He to formulates" is about the infinitive form of verbs which is (to + root of the verb). The student added the ending—s to an infinitive verb because the subject of the sentence is the third singular person. As teachers of English as a foreign language, lecturers often focus on the use of the ending—s in the simple present with the third singular person. The fear of neglecting the ending—s and being blamed by their tutors makes the students incorrectly overuse it.

c. Contracted Forms Errors

> 10. *You can't discuss your research with no purpose*
> 11. *This is a statement that gonna be understandabal*
> 12. *Wonna*
> 13. *don't*

Examples 10, 11, 12, and 13 show different types of errors of contracted forms. Examples 10 and 13 are errors of overgeneralization because students learned that the contracted form of 'cannot' is 'can't and the contraction of 'do not' is 'don't'. They do not take into account that contracted forms should not be used in academic writing. In Examples 11 and 12, students used the informal contraction of 'be going to' and 'want to'. 'Wanna' and 'gonna' are frequently used in speech in informal colloquial English, particularly American English.

d. Passive Form Errors

> 14. *The title consider as the first step*
> 15. *It can applied*

In examples 14 and 15, students omitted the auxiliary 'to be' to express the passive form. In English, the passive voice is expressed when the doer/subject is not as important as the action itself. It is made by putting the verb 'to be' into whatever tense is required and then adding the past participle. This rule is totally different in Arabic and the auxiliary "to be" is not needed to formulate the passive form. This difference leads to students' errors when transforming a sentence from the active to the passive voice.

4. Discussion and Recommendations

The results showed that the most frequent grammatical errors were errors of subject-verb agreement and verbs related errors including verb tense and verb inflection. The findings validated the theory of transfer. Therefore, instructors should take into account that the native language of the participants in this study is Arabic or Berber. Most of the learners use literal translation from their mother tongue to the target language on the one hand. On the other hand, English grammatical rules differ from Arabic grammatical rules. Students commit such errors for they fail in transferring grammar that does not exist in their native language. For instance, Arabic does not require the verb "to be" in the passive form, consequently, EFL Arabs omit it. In brief, students' errors were divided into four varieties:

A. **Omission**: Students omitted the '--s' ending of the 3rd person singular to express the present simple tense.

B. **Substitution**: Students substituted a tense for another.

C. **Addition**: Students added an incorrect ending to the verbs

D. **Overgeneralization**: Students overgeneralized the use of the contracted forms.

The study aimed to find out what grammatical errors were most frequently made by first-year Master students at the Department of English. The findings may contribute to the enhancement of teaching grammar to L2 learners especially Master students who are expected to be advanced learners and are supposed to have a good command of the English language. Pedagogically, the big question that should be answered is: What grammar points should teachers of English grammar focus on? On the ground of the study findings, ESL/EFL teachers should discuss the similarities and differences between the English and the learners' native language grammatical structures in class. Moreover, they should have enough knowledge about the target language they teach. Furthermore, they should explain the techniques of academic writing and the difference between formal and informal style.

5. Conclusion

Error Analysis in foreign language acquisition is a tool that helps teachers identify, describe, and explain their learners' errors. Results of Error Analysis serve as a basis to correct learners' errors. This research pointed out that reliance on L1 to L2 transfer may have an impact on misleading foreign language learners, thus, they produce grammatical errors while writing. EFL

teachers should be able to deal effectively and positively with types of their students' errors. This study is no more than a small investigation; more grammatical errors should be studied for future research.

Bibliography

Brown, H. D. (1994). Principles of Language Learning and Teaching (3rd ed.). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Regents.

Corder, S. P. (1967). The Significance of Learners' Errors. In J.C. Richards (Eds), Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition (pp. 19-27). London: Longman.

Corder, S. P. (1981). Error Analysis and Interlanguage. Oxford University Press.

Ellis, Rod & Gary, Barkhuizen, (2005). Analysing Learner Language. Oxford University Press. UK.

Ellis, Rod (1994). The Study of Second Language Acquisition. Oxford University Press.

James, C. (1998). Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis. London: New York: Longman.

Köhlmyr, Pia (2003). To err is human - An Investigation of Grammatical Errors in Swedish 16-year-old Learners' Written production In English. Göteborgs Universitet.

Nordquist, R. (2018, August 18). What Are Inflections in English Grammar? Retrieved from https://www.thoughtco.com/inflection-grammar-term-1691168.

Present Perfect. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/english-grammar-reference/presentperfect

Richards, J. (1974). 'Analysis : Perspective on Second Language Acquisition'. In J. C. Richards (Eds.), A Noncontrastive Approach to Error Analysis (pp. 172-188). London: Longman.

Sridhar, S. N. (1981). 'Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage: Three Phases of One Goal'. In J. Fisiak, (ed), Contrastive Linguistics and the Language Teacher (pp. 207-241). Oxford: Pergamon Press.