

Grammatical Error Analysis in EFL Students' Writing: A Case Study

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Abstract

The study at hand endeavors to identify grammatical errors committed by EFL students. It aims to identify the types and sources of errors that occur in the EFL learners' writing. Writing samples from 20 First-year Master's EFL students at University of GHardaia were analyzed for this purpose. The subjects were asked to write short paragraphs to answer questions related to the field of sociolinguistics. This study followed a descriptive design, where the data were analyzed qualitatively and reported in terms of percentages. Throughout the study, the researchers conducted an error analysis of the students writing samples following the surface strategy taxonomy model [1] (Dulay et al., 1992). Findings revealed that the most common type of errors was misinformation 34.5%, followed by addition 28%, then omission 25%, and then misordering 12.5%. Moreover, findings showed that, 75% of the errors were due to intralingual factors, while 18.75% and only 6.25% were due to interlingual and ambiguous factors, respectively. Based on the findings, the researchers recommend that, writing instructors need to raise an awareness of the sources and types of errors, among students, and customize courses that mainly targets these errors in a prescriptive fashion.

Keywords: Error; grammar; writing, Surface strategy taxonomy.

1. Introduction

One of the features of successful writing is grammatical accuracy, where the fewer the grammatical mistakes the better the composition. Without grammatical knowledge, it is impossible for the learner to master writing skills such as paraphrasing and using of the passive voice, or to produce a coherently arranged text. Students at university level are required to use the language skillfully, by fulfilling the two criteria of grammaticality and appropriateness. The sentences composed by students at this level are expected to display a certain level of competence. Sentences need to follow the rules and preserve the structures of the language in order to avoid any kind of ambiguities in terms of meaning, or misarrangement in terms of text coherence. Moreover, other aspects such as mechanics and discourse patterns do play a role in determining the quality of students' writing as well.

Even at a high level, after studying the English language for many years, since middle school, Algerian English as a Foreign language (EFL) learners still struggle with grammatical errors when it comes to writing. This shows that, in order to write proficiently, learners need to attain an adequate level grammatical competence. Lack of grammatical knowledge may lead the students to commit different types of errors, that can be related to interlingual, intralingual, or developmental factors. In order to explore this issue in the Algerian context, the study at hand attempts to identify the errors committed by first-year Master's EFL learners at University of Ghardaia, by addressing the following research questions:

1. What types of grammatical errors do first-year Master's EFL learners at University of Ghardaia commit?
2. What are the causes of these errors?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Error Analysis and the context of the study

As one of the productive language skills, which sits at the end of the natural order continuum, Writing is a difficult and complex task to master and a challenging qualification to attain for both the native or the non-native writer, where the case of the latter is more difficult [2] (Alen and Coder, as cited in Lasaten 2014) , as Widdowson (1983, p. 34) states that: "For the moment let us note that getting the better of words in writing is commonly a very hard struggle. And I am thinking now of words which are in one's own language. The struggle is all the greater when they are not." [3] Even though it seems like an advantage to be a native speaker of the language, mastering writing is still as difficult as mastering another language, for no one is a native speaker of writing [4] (Leki, 1992).

One of the criteria of successful writing is grammatical accuracy, where the more the grammatical accuracy the better the composition. Like with any other skill, when it comes to foreign language writing, the production of the output is prone to committing grammatical errors that may arise due to different source or factors. These source may be cross linguistic (interlingual) or sources related to the learners' comprehension of the target language structures. Furthermore, erroneous utterances can be either regarded as mistakes (at the performance level), or errors (at the competence level). Research in the field of error analysis devoted a great deal of attention to this issue.

According to Dulay (1982) errors are identifiable deviations the learner makes, from the grammar of a native speaker [5]. The difference between errors and mistakes is that, errors represent failures to understand a rule or a concept, which reflect the learner's competence, whereas, mistakes are deviations that take place at the performance level [6]. Such negative view of errors was opposed by many researchers [7,8], where they claimed that Errors are natural and inevitable steps to take throughout the learning process without which no one can learn.

Error analysis (EA) aims at analyzing and classifying errors in order to reveal something about the system operating within the learner [9].

Error analysis involves collecting samples of the learner's output, identifying and describing the errors in those samples, then classifying and attributing those errors to their predicted sources, and finally evaluating the influence of these factors on the learner's output [10]. One of the models of error analysis that can be used to identify learners' grammatical errors in writing is surface strategy taxonomy [1], where, analyzing errors from a surface strategy perspective holds much promise for researchers concerned with identifying cognitive processes that underlie the writer's reconstruction of the new language [1].

2.2. Surface Strategy Taxonomy

Surface strategy taxonomy is an error analysis model that was propounded by Dulay et al. [1], which classifies language errors into four categories: omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering.

2.2.1. Omission errors: these errors stand for cases where the learner leaves out some of the elements needed to complete the sentence, such elements may include grammatical items such as articles, prepositions, verb inflection etc. Examples of omission errors may be a missing article in the a sentence like "I bought blue hat" where the correct sentence is "I bought a blue hat"; or a missing preposition in the sentence "x refers y" where the correct sentence is "x refers to y".

2.2.2. Addition errors: Addition errors take place when the learner adds unnecessary elements that make the sentence redundant, and that violate writing parameters like paralellism. Such errors can be detected by identifying additional items in the sentence. Addition errors may include the addition of a pronoun, an article, a possessive adjective, or an auxiliary verb. Examples of such types of errors may be the additional pronoun in the sentence "the learner's attitude **it** may affect his achievement".

2.2.3. Misformation errors: Misinformation errors refer to the misuse of grammatical morphemes and structures within the sentence. According to finding from different Studies [11,12] misformation is one of the most types of errors committed by the students in written and spoken English. Misformation errors are divided into three subcategories:

Regularization errors: These errors are related to subject-verb agreement as in the sentence "the child go to school", the use of incorrect singular or plural as in the sentence "the childs go to school", and regulizing irregular verbs by adding "ed" as a suffix.

Archi-form errors, which represent grammatical errors such as using unsuitable pronouns "I told **he** to be quiet" where the correct sentence is "I told **him** to be quiet", an unsuitable prepositions "I am good **in** swimming" where the correct sentence is "I am good **at** swimming", a demonstrative adjectives "**that** books are mine" where the correct sentence is "**those** books are mine", or articles.

Alternating forms, which constitute errors that happen due to an eroneous choice of connectors and conjunctions, conjunctions like in the sentence "it was raining **and** he stayed inside the house" here the alternation error took place because of the use of an unsuitable conjunction, **and**, to express a cause-effect relationship. The correct sentence in this case is "it was raining **so** he stayed inside the house". Alternating errors can also be committed at the lexical level, as an alternation in word class like when the learner confuses between pronouns he and him.

2.2.4. Misordering Errors arise when the learner places a grammatical item in the wrong position within the sentence. For example saying “check out it” in stead of “check it out” or wrongly sequencing a question, in a declarative in stead of a an interrogative order, as in the sentence “why you did leave?” in stead of “why did you leave?”

2.3. Causes of Errors

When it comes to language production, whether written or spoken, errors arise due interlingual or intralingual influences [9]. However, it is often difficult to distinguish between these two types of errors, where the source of the error seems to be ambiguous.

2.3.1. Intralingual errors: These errors represent attempts made by the learner in attempt to make sense of the target language, as the learner tries to acquire the target language TL in the same way he/she acquires his/her first language L1. Here the idea of the L1 influence on the learner’s TL acquisition is dismissed, where the complexity of the TL is the factor affecting the learner’s output in TL.

2.3.2. Interlingual errors: Interlingual errors are due to the negative transfer of linguistic features from the learner’s L1 to TL. This can be evident at the phonological, lexical, and grammatical level, where L1 structures influence the learner’s output in TL.

2.3.3. Ambiguous errors: These errors can be labeled either interlingual or intralingual, due to the fact that it is difficult to tell whether they arise due to the negative transfer from the learner’s L1 to TL or to the complexity of latter’s structures [13].

3. Methodology

The study at hand followed a descriptive design, where data were collected through a qualitative scrutiny of 20 subjects’ writings, and then converted into percentiles to describe the frequency of each type of error identified through a process of error analysis, which adopted the surface strategy taxonomy [1]

3.1. Sample of the Study

The sample of the study included 20 first-year Master’s EFL students at Ghardaia University, whose first language is Arabic. The subjects’ ages ranged between 22 and 47.

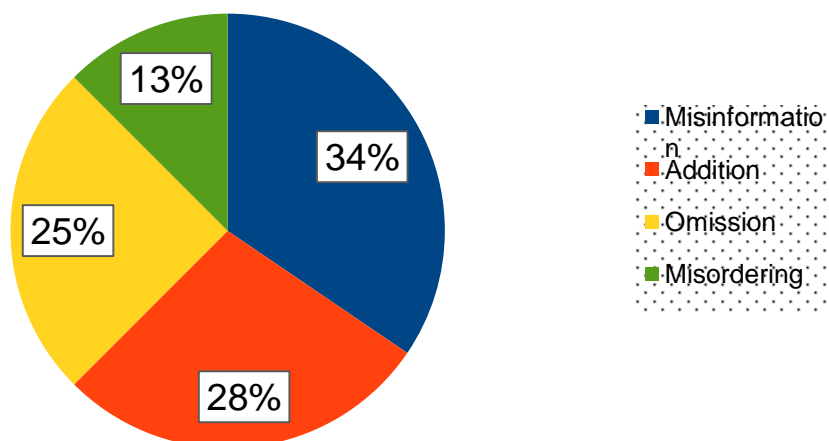
3.2. Data collection

The data of the present study were collected through a writing composition. The subjects were asked to provide short answers to questions in the field of sociolinguistics. The model of error analysis implemented through this study was the surface strategy taxonomy [1]. The model categorizes errors into four main types: Omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering.

4. Data Analysis

After the collection of the data, students’ errors were identified and classified under the corresponding category according to the surface strategy taxonomy. The data then were displayed in pie charts and a table and analyzed by reporting percentages that express the frequency of the occurrence of each type of error.

Figure 1. Frequency of Students Errors



As it is displayed in figure 1, the data showed that the learners committed four main types of errors: Misinformation, addition, omission, and mis-ordering. The data indicated that, the most common errors among students were misinformation errors (34.5%), followed by addition errors (28%), omission errors (25%), and misordering errors (12.5%). More details about these errors are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Types of Students’ Errors

Type of error	Samples	Correction
Omission	1. Where learner learn	Where the learner learns
	2. <u>Each program based on</u>	Each program is based on a specific object
	3. Teaching the language with an attach to its culture	Teaching the language with an attachment to its culture
	4. Transmission of culture stand:	Transmission of culture stands for
	5. <u>The Queen language</u>	The Queen’s language
	6. <u>The instrumental program refers using</u>	The instrumental program refers to using
	7. The accent chosen based on	The accent is chosen based on
	8. <u>The learner mother tongue</u>	The learner’s mother tongue

Addition	9...using more spoken <u>more</u> using more spoken than written than written language language	
	10.Accent that is <u>a</u> widelyAccent that is widely intelligible. intelligible.	
	11...focuses on <u>the</u> literacy	
	12.Using the language asfocuses on literacy medium of <u>the</u> instruction Using the language as medium	
	13.The accent model which <u>it</u> isof instruction	
	14. The teacher’s culture <u>it</u> mayThe accent model which is influence the way... The teacher’s culture may	
	15. Intentional transmission ofinfluence the way... culture <u>is</u> stands for... Intentional transmission of	
	16. <u>It is related to their culture</u> culture stands for... and their life style. t is related to their culture and	
	17. It <u>is</u> focus on life style. It focuses on	
	Misinformation	18.Where learner learn Where the learner learns
		19.It needed to be simple It needs to be simple
		20.Teaching the language withTeaching the language with an an attach to its culture attachment to its culture
		21.In purpose On purpose
		22.Home variey is teached Home variey is taught
		23.Here the teacher have Here the teacher has
		24.Intentional transmission ofintentional transmission of culture stand for culture stands for
		25.The culture influence The culture influences
26.it focus focuses		
27.It depend on depends		
28.It transmissions transmits		
Misordering	29. <u>Teaching material available</u> The more available teaching <u>more</u> material	
	30. Awareness program also isAwareness program is also used used	
	31. The accent chosen is based on... The accent is chosen based on	
	32.Spoken widely more... More widely spoken	

According to table 1, findings revealed that the types of errors made by the learners were omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. It seemed that the misinformation type of errors had the highest frequency, 11 times, constituting 34.5% of all the errors committed. while, errors of addition had the second highest frequency 10 times, which represents 28% of the errors made; omission 8 times (25%), and misordering four times, which constitutes 12.5% of the total set of errors.

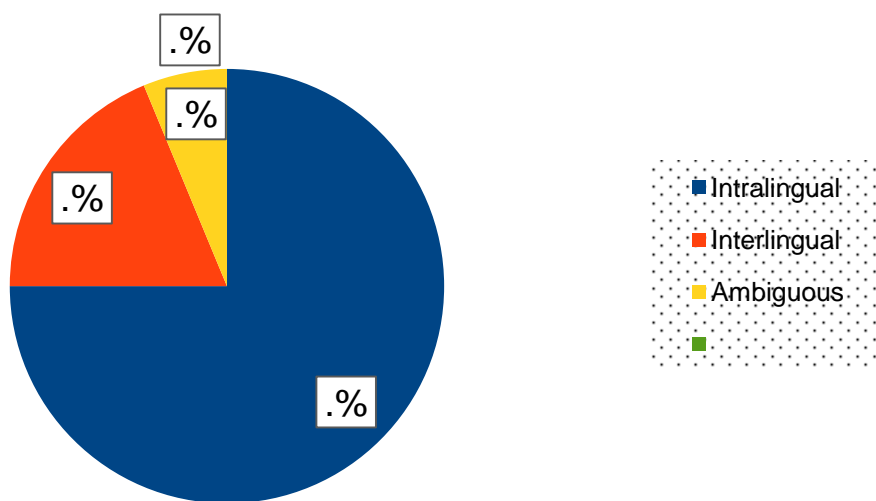
Regarding Misinformation errors, the most common type was regularization, mainly the ones related the subject-verb agreement (Here the teacher **have**=Here the teacher **has**), which occurred 6 times, and regularization of irregular verbs, only once (teach=taught). Archi-form errors were committed twice, once with an erroneous word class choice (with an attach=with an attachment) and once with a wrong choice of a preposition (**in** purpose=**on** purpose).

As to the addition errors, the data form table 1 showed that, most of the errors were related to othe addition of articles (Using the language as medium of the instruction=Using the language as medium of instruction), pronouns (The teacher’s culture it may influence the way=The teacher’s culture may influence the way), the auxiliary verb “is” (culture is stands for=culture stands for), and the addition of possessive adjectives (It is related to their culture and their life style=It is related to their culture and life style).

Concerning omission, errors were related to the omission of prepositions (Transmission of culture stands =Transmission of culture stands **for**:), possessive ‘s’ (The Queen language=The Queen’s language), and the auxiliary verb (Each program based on a specific objective=Each program **is** based on a specific objective).

Regarding the misordering errors, errors included the misplacement of the determiner more, the auxiliary verb ‘is’, and the linking word ‘also’.

Figure 2. Sources of Students’ Errors



As it is shown in figure 2, the data gathered by means of the error analysis process revealed that, most of the errors committed by the learners (75%) were due to intralingual factors. These errors where due to either overgeneralization (Home variey is **taught**=Home variey is **taught**), ignorance of rules restrictions (Awareness program **also** is used=Awareness program is **also** used), or incomplete application of rules. According to the findings, data showed that 18.75% of the errors committed by the learners were due to interlingual factors, in other words the negative transfer features from the learners’ first language, Arabic, to the target language, English, for example the omission of the possessive ‘s’ as in the sentence (The Queen language=The Queen’s language). Furthermore, the data revealed that 6.25% of the errors were classified as ambiguous, which means that the researchers were not able to classify these errors under either intra- or interlingual errors.

5. Discussion

The study at hand aimed at identifying EFL learners' grammatical errors using the surface strategy taxonomy [1]. Regarding the first research question of the study, about the types of grammatical errors committed by first-year Master's EFL students at University of Ghardaia, the researchers identified four types of errors: omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. As to the misinformation error, data showed that it was the most common type among students 34.5%, mainly, subject-verb agreement errors, which took place 6 times and regularization of irregular verbs, which occurred only once; while, archi-form errors were committed twice, once with an erroneous word class choice and once with a wrong choice of a preposition. Regarding addition errors, the second most common type of errors committed by the subjects (28%), where students erroneously include an additional element in the sentence, the results revealed that, the addition of the pronoun *it* was the most frequent type of addition error, followed by the addition of the articles *a* and *the*, the auxiliary verb "is", and repetition of possessive adjectives. As to the misordering errors, data showed that 12.5% of the errors were related to the misplacing of the determiner *more*, the auxiliary verb 'is', and the linking word *also*.

Regarding the second research question of the study, about the sources of the errors committed by the students, findings showed that, the sources of the aforementioned errors were predominantly intralingual (75%), whereas, unexpectedly, only 18.75% and 6.25% were due to interlingual and ambiguous sources, respectively. This was due to the fact that there is minimal interlingual transfer between the learners' first language, Arabic, and the target language, English. However, there still can be some negative transfer between the two languages, for example, in terms of syntax (misordering errors) or in terms of selection of prepositions (archi-type errors) when learners think in Arabic and then translate the output into English. The learners' errors ranged from cross linguistic to intralingual errors. However, there is a possibility to attribute errors to another source, which might be somehow related to intralingual factors, which is the learners' unique fabrication of the utterances they produce as they creatively use target language. However, the scope of the current study is limited to the investigation of the three aforementioned sources: interlingual, intralingual, and ambiguous sources.

6. Conclusion

This study attempted to identify the grammatical errors committed by first-year Master's EFL students at University of Ghardaia. Using the surface strategy taxonomy [1] as a model of error analysis, the researchers identified four types of errors: omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. Data revealed that, misinformation errors had the highest frequency, 11 times, constituting 34.5% of all the errors committed. while, errors of addition had the second highest frequency 10 times, which represents 28% of the errors made; omission 8 times, 25%, and misordering four times, which constitutes 12.5 of the total set of errors.

Regarding the sources of these errors the results suggest that most of the errors 75% were caused by intralingual factors, whereas, only 18.75% and 6.25% percent were due to interlingual and ambiguous factors, respectively. Based on the results, the researchers suggest that, by recognizing the types of errors and where they come from, educators can design curricula that preemptively address these errors and focus on the forms and structures in order to cover students' needs.

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