

Analyzing Syntactic Errors in EFL Text

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the syntactic analysis of written text among EFL students of Saudi Arabia at undergraduate level. In case of language learning, the knowledge of Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, and Semantics of the target language is a necessity. The structural placement of functional and lexical entries of any language is essential for the formation of sentences in that language. For this, the second language learners need to know the scheme of appropriate placement of these entries in the structures of any language i.e. its syntax. For this study, written data composed by EFL students was collected and analyzed thoroughly. The focus was given to the syntactic part of the text in order to analyse syntactic errors. The study also provides pedagogical implications for EFL instructors, which might be helpful in developing suitable course outlines and providing required assistance to the students to overcome the errors they tend to make in writing.

Keywords: Syntactic patterns, error analysis, contrastive analysis, second language, writing.

Introduction

Since its commencement as an interdisciplinary field of Linguistics, second language learning has received a lot of attention from various scholars. In this regard, Krashen (1979) argues that acquisition is a subconscious process whereas learning is conscious. In case of language learning, the knowledge of Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, and Semantics of the target language is a necessity. All the four aspects of language have a fundamental role to play in language learning. The structural placement of functional and lexical entries of any language is essential for the formation of sentences in that language. For this, the second language learners need to know the scheme of appropriate placement of these entries in the structures of any language i.e. its syntax. It can therefore be said that a syntax based interpretation forms the basis of learning any language, along with the other aspects of language.

Errors and Their Causes

Error can be defined as a systematic deviation from a norm or a set of norms. They are a part of Language learning. It is through analyzing learner errors that errors are elevated from the

statue of "undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process" (Ellis, 1985: 53). The errors which are made in EFL writing are assumed to occur because of different factors like mother tongue influence, lack of the knowledge of basic grammatical rules, no or a little understanding of the parts of speech, inappropriate use of dictionary, overgeneralization, etc.

In the early 1960s, native language interference was identified as the only source of errors committed by language learners. Later, two major sources of errors were recognized, namely inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors: Inter-lingual errors are defined as the errors caused by the interference of the native language. These errors are the results of the learners' application of the native language elements in their spoken or written performances of the target language (Richards,1971:205). When encountered with new language, people tend to consciously or unconsciously draw a connection between what they already know and what they do not. Learners carry over the existing knowledge of their native language to the performance of the target language (Ellis, 1997: 28). They use the same language principles e.g., an Arabic student who has already constructed a grammar of Arabic and applies it to English while learning it. Though, the two grammars represent different choices within the guidelines set by Universal Grammar. The same linguistic principles are applied in different way in response to different environments; 'Experience is necessary to fix the parameters of core grammar' (Chomsky, 1981a: 8).

The L2 learner possesses a first language grammar incorporating the principles of Universal Grammar and specifying a particular set of values for its parameters. He has access to universal grammar through L1. In most cases, it is inevitable to learn a foreign language solely without depending on some linguistic features (syntax, semantics, morphology, phonology, etc.) of the language which have been already acquired. Furthermore, the influence presents in a degree to which both native language and target language differ or are similar to each other. Intralingual errors are referred to as the errors that occur because of the ineffective traits of learning such as incorrect application of rules and unawareness of the restrictions of rules. The intralingual errors, therefore, are irrelevant to the native language interference, but led by the target language itself. In the language learning process, these errors normally occur when the learners have acquired insufficient knowledge (Kaweera, 2013:13).

Writing of EFL Students

Out of the four macro skills of language, writing is the most difficult and the majority of EFL students tend to make writing errors. In assisting the learners to acquire this skill successfully, the analysis of errors and the understanding of their sources become important. This study attempts to explore the syntactic errors and the causes of these errors appearing in the writing of undergraduate EFL students. Written data composed by EFL students was collected

and analyzed. Results showed that the most frequent types of errors were syntactic errors including ungrammaticality, inappropriate word choice, use of inappropriate parts of speech, verb tense disagreement, and incorrect use of punctuation. It should be noted that errors in writing produced by EFL learners are the results of learners' incomplete knowledge of the target language.

Objectives of the Study

This study intends to find out the following objectives

- syntactic errors in EFL writing.
- causes of errors.
- recommendations to overcome errors and
- some pedagogical implications for EFL instructors, which might be helpful in developing suitable course outlines and providing required assistance to the students who tend to make errors in writing.

Literature Survey

Many research studies have been undertaken to determine the role of syntax-based interpretation or syntactic awareness in the comprehension of the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), while learning a second language. Syntactic awareness is defined as the awareness of syntactic structures and the ability to reflect on and manipulate the structure (Kuo and Anderson, 2008). Cummins (1978) in his Linguistic interdependence hypothesis states that the linguistic abilities, both knowledge and skills, present in the first language can facilitate the development of similar abilities in the second language. The speaker of any language follows a particular strategy for the utterance of structures and this strategy can be employed for performing a similar function in the target language. This is what we call as syntactic awareness. Researchers like August and Shanahan (2008) also argued that the awareness of syntactic patterns of one's native language can be employed in understanding the similarities and differences of structures while learning a second language. In a similar way, learning a second language nurtures the syntactic awareness of a speaker since it is done consciously and the speaker in this case is aware of the rules (grammatical rules) while formulating an utterance. Radford (2004) mentions that grammar is traditionally sub-divided into two different, but inter-related areas of study namely morphology and syntax. Morphology is the study of words, how they are formed, and their relationship to other words in the same language.

Syntax is the study of the way in which phrases and sentences are structured out of words, and so addresses questions like 'What is the structure of a sentence? How words are put together to form sentences? Within traditional grammar, the syntax of a language is described in terms of taxonomy (i.e. classificatory list) of the range of different types of syntactic structures found in the language. The central assumption underpinning syntactic analysis is that phrases and

sentences are built up of a series of constituents (i.e. syntactic units), each of which belongs to a specific grammatical category and serves a specific grammatical function. According to Kuo and Anderson (2008), there are two main components of syntactic awareness, both of which have a very important role to play in second language learning. These are:

- knowledge about word order
- morpho-syntactic awareness

Knowledge about word order refers to the detection of differences between native and second language, while morpho-syntactic awareness is the ability to analyze, compare, and manipulate language forms consciously. Since all the languages use morphology for the specification of relations within and across the sentences, this component is quite important for learning a language. For example, in English the case marking on the nouns is covert. Identification of such features in a second language makes it easy for one to form syntactically well-formed structures in that language. Some other researchers such as Slobin (1980) used studies like Contrastive Analysis, where languages are studied in pairs to look for their structural similarities and dissimilarities. Contrastive analysis was extensively used in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the 1960s and early 1970s, as a method of explaining why some features of a target language were more difficult to acquire than others. According to the behaviouristic theories prevailing at the time, language learning was a question of habit formation, and this could be reinforced or impeded by existing habits. It was suggested that the difficulty in mastering certain structures in a second language (L2) depended on the difference between the learners' mother tongue (L1) and the language they were trying to learn. The learner tends to make errors and the errors that occur in learning of second language cause interference categorized as developmental errors, ambiguous errors and unique errors. Interference is the result of old habits of the first language, and it must be unlearned before the learning of the new habits of second language (Dualy, Burt, & Krashen, 1982).

The theoretical foundations of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis were formulated in Robert Lado's *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). Lado claimed that those elements which are similar to [the learner's] native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. While it was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systematic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. That involved describing the languages (using structuralist linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning difficulties. So the researchers concluded that learners often apply their knowledge of L1 in the construction of sentences in L2 which often leads to common grammatical errors like overgeneralizations. These studies are in contrast to the findings of Cummin (1978).

Corder introduced the concept of Error Analysis in Second Language learning in 1960's. An error, according to Corder is a systematic deviation, which is consistent and characteristic to the language learner. Analysis of errors that learners tend to make can thus lead to make generalizations about the problems they encounter in learning a language. According to Brown (2007), it is an identifiable alteration of the grammatical elements of a native speaker which presents the competence of a learner in target language. They are also considered as the sign of learning process and this perspective is based on Chomsky (1986:23).

Error analysis was used in a study carried out by Rattanadilok and Normah (2015) on Thai students learning English. According to them, English writing of EFL Thai students is unsatisfactory. Error analysis was used as a means to gain understanding on how writing skill is learnt. They investigated the types and sources of errors in writing and explored the linguistic feature in which the students made the most errors. Their results suggested that EFL students had grammatical difficulties in writing and had faced a problem in selecting the appropriate words that convey the writers' intended meaning. Their study confirmed that learners' native language has played a major role in English learning among Thai students. Addressing students' areas of difficulties, instructors are able to make the right judgment in material selection and preparation.

Method

This study consisted of written texts in which the syntactic patterns in words were studied. Those written pieces were collected from the undergraduate female students with the age ranging from 18 to 24 years. The written data which was collected consisted of topics like essays, paragraphs, emails, written conversations, etc., which was then analyzed and categorized syntactically.

Results and Discussion

Results showed that the most frequent types of errors were syntactic errors including ungrammaticality, inappropriate word choice, use of inappropriate parts of speech, verb tense disagreement, and incorrect use of punctuation. Some examples of written pieces of conversation which were under consideration for this work are given below:

Essays

1. My Favorite Person

Introduction

Everyone has a favorite person either from friends or family. That person have a good character, good thinking or good hearted. My mother is the best person that I have.

Body paragraph 1

My mother has fine looking. She has black and long hair. Her eyes brown colour. She has tall and slim body. Her face look like moon. She is quiet and beautiful, when talk.

Body paragraph 2

All the mothers personally is very nice. My mother has kind heart. She is strong and patiance. She works doctor because she like help people. Mom always talk me every thing and she give me a lot of advice.

Conclusion of Essay

My mother taught me in useful things in my life, and helped me overcome difficulties. My mother a great woman. On my opinionI never find person like Mom.

2. Online Classes

Whether or not online classes are better than traditional classes.

Introduction

We like traditional classes more than online classes. The traditional classes essay (easy) for us, because we can ask the teacher about my difficult over us. But another student their like online classes because their can be listening for lecture and they are stay in their home. The online classes is save the time. They can be understanding more than traditional classes.

Body paragraph 1

Some of student perform online classes, because it cut their hours in university and helps to perform more hours in one semester. And student can be more confidence when they ask their teacher. And the student can present easer.

Body paragraph 2

We preference traditional lecture. For easy connect between teacher and student. When the class on the morning we can understand easily. Then other time. On traditional class the student can help each other.

Body paragraph 3

Consequences of online lectures is some of students have not enternet. If they have exam they can cheating. In other side, traditional lecture is not transport. The lecture after noon we cannot understand because fatigue for student.

Conclusion of Essay

The most of students like traditional classes more than online because it is easier.

Analysis of Essays and the Errors Detected

In the above mentioned essays, it is observed that

- Functional entries mostly prepositions are missing at most of the places. However in some instances these have been used but incorrectly.
- Use of lexical entries as nouns, adjectives or any other part of speech is incorrect e.g., in body paragraph 2 of the essay 1, in third sentence noun (Patience) is used instead of an adjective (patient), In essay 2, in the second sentence of introduction part, an adjective (difficult) is used instead of a noun (difficulty).
- Pronouns and verbs are used incorrectly.
- Words in the sentences are not linked properly.
- Use of infinitival 'to' (*She likes help people*) is missing e.g. in the body paragraph 2 of Essay 1.
- The main point in all these texts is that it is syntactically improper.

Pieces of Conversation in Written Text: Their Analysis and the Detection of Errors

3. I wanted 2 tell u something yesterday, but I couldn't. cause I am facing some difficulties this period in my college & in my normal life I can't tell you about it. I know you refuse that I do anything new after submission time, but I still trying because I need any single mark.

Analysis

- In this example, the informant has used informal language (which is used in informal settings like social media e.g. 2 instead of to, cause instead of because, u instead of you).
- The use of a verb 'will' and a proper use of tenses is missing and punctuation is wrong.

4. Good morning. I plead with you to the doctor to reconsider the degree of research. I gave my research more than once to even teach me my mistakes and I've also corrected. But I was surprised and saddened by the mark given by. I tired to search them too much. And decreased in the last 10 degrees. Many who knew them their grade were good. I crashed. I do not want class bad it will affect the average. 10 degrees I see they are many. Please. Please. I will get you to your office, but I am far from the university. Thank you so much. I hope to respond.

Analysis

- In these sentences, the subject 'you' is missing in instances where it is important.
- Number (use of plural) and vocabulary (use of tired instead of tried) are again problem areas.
- Overuse of determiners like 'them, their' etc. are common. In addition to it, this piece of conversation is ungrammatical to a considerable degree.

5. please tell me why give me this mark for my research I do all my know and you know I can't came to lectures same another student please I need my grads tell me what is the errors and I try

correct it I'm crying every time about my baby and difficult this courses I set with my baby I can't study anything please help me look at my baby it's very tired.

6. *Sorry, forgive you late but my mom sick and i can't give you Early, because i don't come to university last week.*

Analysis

In these examples, it is observed that

- Tenses are not properly used.
- Punctuation mistakes are there, sentence structure is wrong.
- Use of verbs and number is improper (what is the errors), etc.

7. *You made me absent in 13, 23 which I was present in them. I'm sure I was present in these days. Please understand me.*

Analysis

In this example, there are mistakes in the use of prepositions (in 13,23)and punctuation.

8. *doctor last week when you ask us the outline i was so busy in tuesday and thursday i had a quiz in writing for specific propuses.
so this weekend i worked so hard about my outline please can i give you tomorrow?? please doctor i need every mark in this subject.*

Analysis

In the above example, the areas of concern are

- use of prepositions (in Tuesday instead of on Tuesday)
- spelling mistakes (propuses instead of purposes)
- punctuation marks (use of i instead of I).

9. *Hello What is required in the search type line and size? and my search about linguistic, is ok? because i was change my topic to linguistic.*

Analysis

In this example, the problem areas are

- word order (because i was change my topic to linguistics)
- punctuation (i instead of I).

10. *In the first I couldn't come to the college because our driver have a trip to his country he is forigen not saudi, So I cannot come to see my project. Second Ms in this semester we have a lot*

of exam a lot of project a lot of project we cannot come to you and discuss with you. Sometimes we have 2 exams in the same day. How can you cover all of that. help me please. I did not like my total, My total is 41. I could not show my mother my total this is the first time I took 41 in my studying, when I finished my project, I came to you and show to you my project and I asked you about the project. Help me

Analysis

In the above paragraph, the problem areas are

- tenses (present and past e.g. show to you instead of showed you),
- verbs (has, have, had e.g. driver have a trip).

11. *Tomorrow I will miss the university session to travel to Jazan with the family to visit a serious in the hospital and if I can attend I will attend and thank you.*

12. *During the holiday, my family and I went to a restaurant in the northern area, and we asked for some food, and they brought them to eat in the style of etiquette. They gave us delicious food and a wonderful taste.*

Analysis

In examples 10, 11 and 12, there is redundancy, ungrammaticality and syntactic disorder.

13. Paragraphs

a. Football

I like football, it is my favourite sports. they are useful and because it is also played by more than one person. They are bring together relatives and friend. I love football because it is strong and health keeps fit.

b. My favourite place

My favourite place is town in South Saudi Arabia. It is very beautiful and has a beach, more plant and small house. I go this place with my family in last weekend. When we in the road and the road is very long I saw more animal. We find the goat, cow and camel. And I saw monkey on the plant. In the end of the road there is a small and beautiful house. The opposite the house is the beach. When I enter the house I find living room. It has T.V and beautiful and small carpet, and some white flowers on the table. Next to the living room there is a bedroom. It has window next to the plant. After the bedroom there is a big hall It has a long and big window. It opposite the beach, like this view so much and I don't forget this place as long as live.

14. *Teacher, I have an exam at 8.00 am in Sunday. So, I hope you can taste me in another time.*

15. *Teacher, i was not absent but the internet didn't work at the last minute, while you was talking the students name.*

Analysis

In the aforementioned examples (14 and 15), the student uses the wrong word “taste (test)” instead of adjust, here the student has translated from GoogleTranslator and made the wrong choice of word. In another example, there is punctuation mistake, inappropriate form of verb like “was” instead of “were”; she has used the word “talking” instead of mentioning or calling.

16. *please give me degrees that I needed to have only the degrees of activity please help me. I want success only. because my Family will get angry. i will do my best in the final exam.*

Analysis

This example consists of run on sentences and is ungrammatical.

Conclusion of the Study

After a thorough analysis of the text, it was observed that syntactic errors are quite frequent. In some instances, it becomes very difficult to comprehend the text due to incorrect word order. This is another important area of concern. Keeping other mistakes aside like mistakes in punctuation, spelling and semantics, this paper focused mainly on their syntax in writing and found syntactic errors. In all the examples given in the paper, syntactic errors are prominent. The most frequently occurring errors are wrong use of the parts of speech, inappropriate word order, overuse or underuse of determiners, subject dropping, verb tense disagreement, wrong use of punctuation marks, inability to spell the words correctly. Another striking feature that comes on the surface while analyzing these texts is that the students are using informal language, slangs and short forms of words i.e. the language used in social networking sites in their texts. Also, the use of language translator is a general trend, which implies that the students are trying to learn and write the language using the translation method, which has proved to be quite futile and vague as far as second language learning is concerned.

The errors that the students are making can be attributed both to MTI (mother tongue influence) and the fact that English is not taught in a proper environment. Since Arabic is the official language, English does not receive the required attention in the primary school. It is included at a later stage in the curriculum. Due to this, the students face many difficulties while learning the language and study it just for the sake of passing the exams. It was observed that some errors are made because of MTI. For example, in Arabic, word order is SVO in Classical

and Colloquial Gulf Languages. And they use the same word order in English as well. The study confirmed that EFL learners' native language has a role in their writing. They tend to write Arabic and English in the same way.

Along with MTI, the other grave issues that need to be addressed are

- An explicit and thorough understanding of word order,
- Use of tenses,
- Sentence structure,
- Parts of speech,
- Use of verb 'be' and infinitive 'to',
- Function and content words,
- Punctuation marks,
- Spellings, etc.

Recommendations of the Study

Different levels of syntactic-interpretation or syntactic awareness skills can be easily detected among young children since syntactic error detection is acquired in the earlier stages of learning, although the error detection skills and their explanations are acquired in the later stages. It is important for the students to analyze the syntactic structures along with the identification and analysis of different parts of speech and their respective roles in a sentence. Syntactic awareness can be measured using a variety of tasks including tasks to correct and explain syntactic structures, word correction tests and cloze tests. Although, these may not always lead to accurate results, but these tasks can be relied upon to a great extent as they provide an insight of the syntactic interpretation of the learner. Though in these tests, it is known that syntactic interpretation evolves both developmentally and with experience. The more the learners are exposed to a particular language and the more they are made to use it in concrete situations, the more they will be able to produce and write correct structures as well as identify and analyze the errors in their own sentence production. So, creating a friendly environment, with proper use of teaching material is important on the part of instructors. One more implication of this research study is that English must be included in the curriculum at an early stage so that the students become familiar with the language and study it for the sake of learning the language rather than for just passing the examinations. This will lead to improvement in efficacy of the students in different language skills.

Also, a friendly classroom atmosphere and a healthy teacher student interaction are the factors that are worth mentioning. The teachers must try to encourage the students for learning the language so that they get involved actively in the process and try to learn English in English rather than using the traditional translation methods. This will limit the use of Google Translators by the students, since they would be well acquainted with the context in which the language is to

be used. The teachers should encourage the use of dictionaries to find different meanings and different forms of the word. Enhancement of dictionary skills can assist the students to choose a word correctly. By knowing that, they can make the correct choice of words to use in their writing.

Lastly, an active involvement of the students in all the activities is equally important to address the problem. Addressing students' areas of difficulties, instructors are able to make the right judgment in material selection and preparation. From errors they can make the list of things which they will teach to lessen the number of errors in writing. This is an empirical study, though more work is required in this field.

Acknowledgments

The authors extend their appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work through research group program under grant number R.G.P. 1/2/38.

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