Common Error Types of Iranian Learners of English

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Abstract

This paper aimed at obtaining a clear understanding of Iranian EFL learners' L2 writing error types. To develop such an understanding, a research question was formulated to see whether there is any significant difference between the participants' language proficiency level and their error types in writing. To this end, a sample version of the structure and reading sections of a paper-based TOFEL test, and a Test of Written English (TWE) were administered to 103 university students majoring in English. The statistical analyses revealed that a) there were statistically significant differences among proficiency groups on overall error types they made in their compositions, and b) frequency of occurrence of error types in each group was different.

Keywords: Error analysis, Proficiency level, L2 Writing

1. Introduction

The study of second language learners' errors has emerged as one the focal concerns of second language studies since 1970s. Since then, many researchers have devoted their time to explore the nature and the cause of the errors second language learners make in their production of the second language. Many studies aimed at identifying the frequency of error types among either EFL or ESL learners. Among these studies, some have tried to observe errors which are mainly caused by the L1 influence (Chen, 2006; Kao, 1999; Lin, 2002; Tseng, 1980; Ying, 1987), other studies have dealt with detecting those error types which are general among all EFL and ESL learners (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972; Fitikides, 2002; Richards, 1974).

However, most of these studies have not considered error types which are peculiar to different proficiency levels. And this insufficiency can be traced in the studies conducted on the error types of Iranian-speaking English learners' error types (for example, Rooshanzamir, 1995; Shakeri, 1993). In fact, the present study seeks to observe the performance of Iranian speakers of English regarding the error types they make in their writing. For that reason, the study aims to answer the following research question:

Are there any significant differences in the type of writing errors of Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels?

2. Background

2.1 Significance of Studying Learner Errors

One strategy to address the problem of how much the standard of English in non-native production has declined is to first look at the type of errors that learners make. We can cite evidence that the analysis of errors provides researchers with valuable information on learner language, and helps teachers improve instruction. (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972; Corder, 1967; Dulay & Burt, 1972; Ellis, 1983; Richards, 1974; Selinker, 1972; Silveira, 1999). As Ellis (2003) notes there are good reasons to study learners' errors. First, they tell us why learners make errors and provide us with useful information on learner language. Secondly, the types of errors learners make can help teachers. Thirdly, "paradoxically, it is possible that making errors may actually help learners to learn when they self-correct the errors

they make" (p. 15).

Studying any kind of deviation, from a selected norm of language performance, regardless of its cause(s), paves the way for remedial actions in the process of error correction (Corder, 1981). It also helps teachers and learners in finding the areas of weakness in which learners have difficulty in producing the second/foreign language (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982).

Brown (2000) believes that the occurrence of errors in L2 learners' production is inevitable. He adds that if learners neither make errors nor receive any feedback on their errors, their acquisition process will be impeded. These errors, deemed meaningful and systematic, are of outmost importance to researchers and teachers of L2 writing (Benson, 1980; Chen, 2006; Li & Chan, 1998; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005; Leki, 1992, Frodesen, 1991; Hirokawa, 1986; Kao, 1999; Lin, 2002; Neumann, 1977; Tseng, 1980; Silva, 1993; Ying, 1987; Yu & Atkinson, 1988). Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, and Warschauer (2003) draw attention to the significance of the study of student text in teaching effectively. They, referring to some studies (Biber & Reppen, 1998; Granager, 1998; Milton, 1999), believe that this helps "teachers target students' more frequent and intractable errors" (p. 166).

2.2 Error Taxonomies

Following Dulay et al. (1982), four criteria for descriptive classification of errors can be established: *linguistic taxonomy*, *surface strategy taxonomy*, *comparative analysis taxonomy*, and *communicative effect taxonomy.* A linguistic taxonomy includes categories which are based on descriptive grammar of the target language. Such a grammar emphasizes on categories concerning "basic sentence structure, the verb phrase, verb complementation, the noun phrase, prepositional phrase, adjuncts, coordinate and subordinate constructions and sentence connection" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 60). Surface strategy taxonomy is based on the ways surface structures are changed. Learners may *omit* necessary items or *add* unnecessary ones; they may *misform* items or *misorder* them. To develop a comparative taxonomy, a researcher should classify the error types based on "comparisons between the structure of L2 errors and certain other types of constructions" (Dulay et al., 1982, p. 163). Dulay et al. (1982) presents four categories in comparative taxonomy: developmental, interlingual, ambiguous, and other errors. The first two error categories are major and the second two ones are drawn from the first two error categories. Developmental errors are errors comparable to those made by children leaning the target language as their first language. Finally, communicative effect taxonomy focuses on the effect of errors on the listener or reader. Based on such a category, there exist "*global*" errors which significantly hinder the flow of the communication, and "*local*" errors which do not (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972).

However, it should be noted that researchers have developed different systems of error categories. For example, Weltig (2004) adapted a system for error classification of his study from Sachs (2003), which was adapted in turn from Polio (1997) and Kroll (1990). He tried to develop a linguistic category, and focused on more linguistic and lexical errors (verb tense, verb voice, verb formation, preposition, lexical choices). Albeit classified in terms of linguistic units and dealt with sentence-level elements of discourse, error types were ranked from those errors which hinder communication to those which did not.

Otoshi (2005) developed a linguistic taxonomy of grammatical errors, focusing on five major error categories: verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, wrong word, and sentence structures. He claims that these five categories have been considered as major errors in much of the second language writing literature.

Chen (2006) developed a taxonomy based on a structured-linguistic error taxonomy. His error classification was devoted to 15 major categories including subcategories for each. Major error types compromising this taxonomy included: *errors in the use of nouns, articles*, *pronouns* (incorrect case forms, missing possessives), *verbs* (tense, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary, verb omitted), *prepositions* (prepositions omitted, wrong prepositions, unnecessary prepositions), and *conjunction* (coordination, subordination, missing).

Kao (1999) studied 169 compositions written by Taiwanese students to find out their English learning deficiencies. Of total of 928 errors found grammatical errors displayed the greatest frequency (66 %), followed by semantic errors with 18%, and then lexical errors with 16% (as cited in Chen 2006, p. 79).

Neumann (1977) made an attempt to investigate common errors shared between intermediate and beginning learners by identifying and analyzing errors made in compositions of 158 students. The most frequent errors of the intermediate students in Neumann's (1977) study, as reported in Hatch (1983, p. 103), were errors in the uses of noun modification, verb, preposition, lexical option, number agreement, noun, adverb of time/place, and negation.

A focal point, worth mentioning, is that most of these studies have barely paid due attention to different proficiency levels at which structural and/or lexical errors creep. The present study, thus, aimed at filling the gap. However, as to limitations of the study, factors such as L1 background knowledge, psychological sources of errors, participants'

psychological and emotional status, which deserve independent research studies, were not taken into account. Moreover, gender showed itself a problem as far as statistical theories were concerned. In Iran, male English learners are few compared to female ones due to socio-economic reasons, making researchers unable to find equal number of students for their sample.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants who took part in the present study were 103 Iranian BA students majoring in English at various proficiency levels. They were studying at two universities in Iran - University of Tehran, and Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch. The sample included 78 females (75.7%) and 25 males (24.3%).

3.2 Instrument

Two instruments were utilized to collect data for this study: (1) The structure and reading sections of a paper-based TOFEL test selected from the "*TOEFL Test Preparation Kit*, second edition" (2003), (2) A Test of Written English. The topics for the essay were selected from TWE section of the *'TOEFL Preparation Course (2001)* by Longman Publication.

3.3 Procedures

The instruments were administered in a two-phase session. In phase one, participants should spend 90 minutes to answer to the Structure, Reading Comprehension sections of the TOEFL test. In phase two, started immediately after phase one, students were required to spend 60 minutes on witting an essay about one of the topics presented on their TWE sheets. The scoring scheme appeared in the *TOEFL Preparation Kit (2003)* was applied to scores the participants obtained by responding to structure and reading comprehension tests.

Once the proficiency scores were defined and ranked, a descriptive statistics was conducted in order to classify the participants into three groups (high, med, low). To do so, the mean (472.18) and the standard deviation (90.47) of the participants' proficiency scores were used as the criteria for grouping the participants (Table 1). Accordingly, those who scored higher than 'mean-plus-one half' standard deviation were assigned to *high group* (30 people- 29.1%), those who stood within the 'mean-plus-one half' standard deviation and the 'mean-minus-one half' standard deviation range were assigned to *mid group*(36 people- 35%), and those who scored below the 'mean-minus-one half' standard deviation were assigned to *low group* (37 people- 35.9%).

The next step was an attempt to identify the error types on compositions. As for the compositions, a number of selected grammatical and lexical features were examined for specific frequency counts as well as correct or incorrect use. The basis for marking and categorizing errors was the Weltig's (2004) error classification. Furthermore, the criterion for conducting our error analysis was grammaticality. It means errors found were defined as "breach of the rule of the code" (Corder, 1971, as cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 56). However, issue of acceptability relating to researcher's sense in "making stylistic judgments" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) was not considered in determining errors. Finally, once the error types were thoroughly detected, a frequency count regarding the occurrence of error type in each text was performed.

4. Results

The initial step in data analysis was counting the errors in the writing of the participants. Total errors found were 4109 in number, of which 1939 (47.2%) were observed in low group, 1579 (38.4%) in middle group, and 591 (14.4%) in high group. The minimum number of each participant's total error frequency count equaled 16 in low group, 7 in middle group, and 0 in high group. According to Table 2, the maximum number of total error frequency for each participant was 112 in low group, 96 in middle group, and 55 in high group**.** Among the participants, only one student in high group made no errors, while another student in low group made 112 errors which showed the maximum total number of errors, regardless of their types, among participants.

Furthermore, as shown in Table 3, a frequency analysis was used to identify the proportion and percentage of error types in three proficiency groups (low, middle, and high), and to explore the most frequent error types among groups. The first ten most frequent error types among the three proficiency groups were: errors in punctuation, lexical/phrase choice, spelling, article, verb formation, the use of plurals (singular for plural), preposition, verb tense/ aspect, clause structure (aberrant clause), and subject/verb agreement.

To answer the question addressed in the present study, data were analyzed through a Kruskal-Wallis test on overall error frequencies as well as a series of Kruskal-Wallis test on error frequencies within individual error categories.

The Kruskal-Wallis test on error frequencies within individual error categories revealed a significant change across levels in the mean ranks of groups on 22 error types. They include: aberrant clause, verb/object complement,

sentence fragment, run-on sentence, word order, tense/aspect, voice, verb formation, subject-verb agreement, quantifier-noun agreement, ambiguous reference, lexical/phrase choice, idiom, word form, comparative & superlative adjectives, singular for plural, plural for singular, preposition, article, punctuation, spelling, and possessive (Table 4). Unlikely, no statistically significant difference was found among the performances of three proficiency groups on 22 other error types. As shown in Table 4, they include: subject formation, verb missing, dangling modifier, parallel structure, relative clause, extraneous words, missing word, wrong model, noun-pronoun agreement, epenthetic pronoun, wrong case, noun phrase morphology, genitive, native language equivalent, mixed construction, coordinating conjunction, conditional, question form, regularization, abbreviation, meaning duplication, and word duplication.

Further, the results of Kruskal-Wallis test on overall error frequencies ($x^2= 39.306, df= 2, P< .05$) revealed that there are significant differences among proficiency groups on overall error types they made in their compositions (Figure 1 and 2).

5. Conclusion

One of the most immediate implications of the present study would be considered productive for L2 writing teachers, in particular those opting for direct feedback (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, Cheyney, Komura, Roberts, & McKee, 2000; Komura, 1999; Rennie, 2000). They will find errors of different nature and types naturally occurring in compositions of students at varying proficiency levels in heterogeneous classes where groups may diversely struggle with verb tense, sentence structure, word order, word choice and so forth. However, it is immature to claim that errors found in this study should only be targeted since students, depending on their learning experience, make different errors in a special context.

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Table 1. Sample analysis

Proficiency Scores of TOEFL						
Proficiency Levels of Participants	N	Percent	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
low	37	35.9%	381.4865	34.41707	310.00	425.00
mid	36	35.0%	467.6389	21.06066	430.00	510.00
high	30	29.1%	589.5000	45.05456	520.00	665.00
Total	103	100.0%	472.1845	90.47985		

Table 2. Participants' total number of errors

Proficiency Levels of Participants	Number of participants in each group	Sum of errors in each group	Percent	Minimum	Maximum
low	37	1939.00	47.2%	16.00	112.00
mid	36	1579.00	38.4%	7.00	96.00
high	30	591.00	14.4%	.00	55.00
Total	103	4109.00	100.0%	.00	112.00

Table 3. Hierarchical frequency list of each error type in all groups

	error types	Sum	Percent		error types	Sum	Percent		error types	Sum	Percent
1	punctuation	698	17.0%	**16**	word form	70	1.7%	**31**	extraneous word	20	.5%
2	lexical/phrase choice	347	8.4%	**17**	sentence fragment	61	1.5%	**32**	noun phrase morphology	17	.4%
3	spelling	346	8.4%	**18**	word order	58	1.4%	**33**	possessives	15	.4%
4	article	297	7.2%	**19**	coordinating conjunction	58	1.4%	**34**	wrong case	15	.4%
5	verb formation	251	6.1%	**20**	missing word	57	1.4%	**35**	epenthetic pronoun	14	.3%
6	singular for plural	241	5.9%	**21**	subject formation	52	1.3%	**36**	word duplication	12	.3%
7	preposition	221	5.4%	**22**	verb/object	40	1.0%	**37**	mixed construction	10	.2%
8	tense/aspect	151	3.7%	**23**	quantifier-noun	36	.9%	**38**	abbreviation	10	.2%
9	aberrant clause	147	3.6%	**24**	voice	34	.8%	**39**	plural for singular	9	.2%
10	subject-verb	118	2.9%	**25**	noun-pronoun	32	.8%	**40**	Native language equivalent	9	.2%
11	run-on sentence	110	2.7%	**26**	relative clause	32	.8%	**41**	Meaning duplication	8	.2%
12	dangling modifier	107	2.6%	**27**	comparative & superlative	26	.6%	**42**	wrong model	8	.2%
13	parallel structure	104	2.5%	**28**	conditionals	25	.6%	**43**	regularization	7	.2%
14	idiom	97	2.4%	**29**	genitive	23	.6%	**44**	question form	4	.1%
15	ambiguous reference	89	2.2%	**30**	verb missing	22	.5%	**Total**		4109	100.0%

Table 4. The Kruskal-Wallis test on error frequencies within individual error categories

Ambiguous reference	Kruskal Wallis Test				Lexical / phrase choice	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	64.61	13.056	2	.001		60.91	20.169	2	.000
	45.82					59.86			
	43.87					31.58			

Idiom	Kruskal Wallis Test				Word form	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	60.50	16.678	2	.000		57.88	10.481	2	.005
	56.33					54.33			
	36.32					41.95			

Comparative & Superlative	Kruskal Wallis Test				Singular for Plural	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	59.91	7.742	2	.021		54.39	13.883	2	.001
	47.85					62.74			
	47.23					36.17			

Plural for Singular	Kruskal Wallis Test				Preposition	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	61.73	10.723	2	.005		58.49	17.103	2	.000
	58.51					60.82			
	32.18					33.42			

Article	Kruskal Wallis Test				Punctuation	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	62.38	19.882	2	.000		60.46	6.769	2	.034
	57.97					52.11			
	32.03					41.43			

Spelling	Kruskal Wallis Test				Possessive	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	61.70	7.531	2	.023		55.78	5.983	2	.050
	50.36					53.11			
	42.00					46.00			

Subject formation	Kruskal Wallis Test				Verb missing	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	56.92	4.781	2	.092		55.92	3.098	2	.212
	53.50					52.10			
	44.13					47.05			
Dangling modifie	Kruskal Wallis Test				Parallel structure	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	53.77	4.636	2	.098		57.91	4.504	2	.105
	57.58					53.17			
	43.12					43.32			
Relative clause	Kruskal Wallis Test				Extraneous words	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	51.26	.087	2	.957		54.27	2.095	2	.351
	52.01					52.99			
	52.90					48.02			
Missing word	Kruskal Wallis Test				Wrong modal	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	54.85	3.068	2	.216		51.73	.835	2	.659
	54.69					53.38			
	45.25					50.68			
Noun-pronoun	Kruskal Wallis Test				Epenthetic pronoun	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	50.81	1.807	2	.405		53.32	.414	2	.813
	55.54					51.01			
	49.22					51.55			
Wrong case	Kruskal Wallis Test				Noun phrase morph	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	54.34					47.84			
	48.81					55.17			

	52.95	2.160	2	.340		53.33	4.118	2	.128
Genitive	Kruskal Wallis Test				Native Language Equivalent	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	55.22	4.739	2	.094		54.59	3.538	2	.171
	47.00					51.83			
	54.03					49.00			
Mixed Construction	Kruskal Wallis Test				Coordinating Conjunction	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	52.68	.175	2	.916		56.00	1.534	2	.465
	51.42					49.28			
	51.87					50.33			
Conditionals	Kruskal Wallis Test				Question Form	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	53.27	5.381	2	.068		51.92	0.22	2	.989
	56.19					51.92			
	45.40					52.20			
Regulariza-tion	Kruskal Wallis Test				Abbrevia-tion	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	54.59	3.583	2	.171		53.68	1.315	2	.518
	51.83					50.97			
	49.00					51.17			
Meaning Duplication	Kruskal Wallis Test				Word Duplica-tion	Kruskal Wallis Test			
	Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.		Mean Rank	Chi-Square	df	Asymp Sig.
	52.28	.230	2	.891		53.20	2.564	2	.277
	52.39					48.90			
	51.18					54.23			

Grouping Variable: Proficiency Levels of Participants

	Proficiency Levels	N	Mean Rank
Each participant's total number of errors	low	37	68.23
	med	36	58.74
	high	30	23.90
	Total	103	

Figure 1. Kruskal-Wallis test on overall error frequencies

	Each participant's total number of errors
Chi-Square	39.306
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Proficiency Levels of Participants

Figure 2. Kruskal-Wallis test on overall error frequencies (test statistics)