



Writing Errors, what they can tell a teacher?

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Abstract

The language learners' errors can be categorized into two categories; interlingual and intralingual errors. While the former results from the interference of the learners' mother tongue, the latter should be traced in the target language system itself. The purpose of the study is to find out what proportion of the learners' errors are intralingual errors and whether the native language plays a major role in learners' difficulties in learning the target language. 30 erroneous sentences of some Iranian EFL learners with Persian as their mother tongue were analyzed to find the errors pattern. Only 16.7 percent of the errors were interlingual errors. This shows that most of the difficulties a language learner is faced with can be traced to the target language system and contrastive study of the two languages to predict the learners' learning problems is not without problems.

Introduction

Many language teachers complain about their students' inability in using target structures as they are taught. This situation is due to the teachers' false impression that the learner-produced structures should be in complete accordance with the input they are exposed to. This perspective ignores the role of intake – the part of input that the learner internalizes – which is independent of the teacher's syllabus and relates to the learners' internal syllabus.

The study of learners' errors is a common practice in the field of second language teaching and second language acquisition research. As Corder (1974) points out errors are significant in three different ways: first, they provide a the language teacher with an understanding of how far they achieved the predetermined goals of the system and what remains to be taught; second, the study of learners' errors is a good way for researchers to study how language is learnt and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. The third way is that they are significant to the learner himself. Errors can be regarded as a device for



the learner to learn. "learners' errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using at a particular point in the course" (Corder, 1974).

Researchers in the field of language acquisition are interested in the study of learner errors, because they are believed to be valuable indicators of learners' strategies in the acquisition of a second or foreign language. Teachers also are interested in the study of learners' errors because they indicate the learners' difficulties in the learning process and show in which parts of the program they need further consideration and which parts of the subject to be learned by the learners need further stress and emphasis on the part of both the teacher and the learners.

Jain (1969) also maintains that errors are significant, because they provide means first, to understand the process of second-language acquisition and second, to plan courses which incorporate the psychology of second-language learning. Errors have played an important role in the study of language in general and in the acquisition of second or foreign languages in particular. They are believed to be an indicator of the learners' stages in their target language development. From the errors that learners commit, one can determine their level of mastery of the language system. Thus, the investigation of errors serves a double purpose: diagnostic and prognostic.

According to Brown (1994), in the middle of the 20th century the prevailing approach in applied linguistics for the study of learner errors was the contrastive study of two languages. Contrastive analysis was originated from the behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics, which propose that every linguistic system can be broken down into its constituent parts. The major claim of contrastive analysis hypothesis was that the main barrier to second language acquisition lies in the interface of the first language system and the second language system (Dulay and Burt, 1975; Brown, 1994; Johnson, 2001).

The common practice in contrastive analysis is to compare and contrast the two language system to find similarities and differences between these systems. Contrastive analysis hypothesis predicts that the learner will have difficulty in the



areas in which the two languages are different, but will learn the target language easily whenever the two systems, that is, native language and target language, are similar (Corder, 1986; Brown, 1994; Keshavarz, 1999, Johnson, 2001).

The proponents of contrastive analysis believe in language transfer as the main process in second language acquisition. Odlin (1989) defines transfer as the influence of the similarities and differences in between the target language and the other language(s) that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired. According to Odlin (2003) transfer affects all linguistic systems. Johnson (2001) distinguishes between positive and negative transfer and negative transfer which are referred to as interference. Some second language researchers, most notably Ringbom (1987, 1992) have argued that positive transfer affects acquisition much more than negative transfer.

Although very few researchers have denied the role of cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition, findings indicate that not all errors committed by language learners are due to L1 interference (Johnson, 2001). For instance, the percentages of interference errors found in various studies conducted (Ellis, 1994, as cited in Johnson, 2001) indicate that few errors from the total errors committed by learners were due L1 interference. In this situation, the findings of first language studies and inability of contrastive analysis in the prediction of learner errors results in the emergence of another approach to the study of learner language – called error analysis (EA) in the late seventies. Error analysis is the systematic investigation of second language learners' errors (Mitchell and Myles, 1998). According to Keshavarz (1999) this approach is based on theories of first and second language learning and possible similarities between them. Schachter, (1974) points out that EA focuses on learner production of errors in speech or writing and considers only systematic errors, which are supposed to reflect the learner's interlanguage competence. Non-systematic errors are attributed to performance problems and are not investigated.

According to Haded (1998) the status of EA as *persona grata* in language pedagogy was praised by the findings of many works that had proven successful in



isolating inter- and intra-lingual errors. He points out that language pedagogy using Error Analysis will be effective in identifying errors that may not be predicted by classic CA.

In this context, errors are categorized into two categories, interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual errors are those resulted from the L1 interference, and intralingual errors are the ones which are committed regardless of learner's language background. The errors are sometimes referred to developmental errors (Richards, 1971; Corder, 1986; Brown, 1994; Keshavarz, 1994, Johnson, 2001).

According to Richards (1971) intralingual errors reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalizations, incomplete application of the rules, and failure learn conditions under which rules apply. Richards (1971) argues that developmental errors illustrate that learner is attempting to build up hypotheses about the target language from his limited experience of being exposed to the language.

Keshavarz (1999) in the linguistic taxonomy of errors classifies errors into four distinct categories, namely a) orthographic errors; b) phonological errors; c) lexico-semantic errors; and d) syntactico-morphological errors. The first two categories are not dealt with in this study. Errors can also be categorized into micro classes on the basis of their processes. Four main processes which lead to erroneous sentences and utterances are omission, addition, substitution, and permutation or wrong ordering (Corder, 1973; Mckeating, 1981; Brown, 1987 as cited in Keshavarz, 1999).

Johnson (2001) cites Ellis (1994) reporting studies which concentrated on the percentage of the intralingual errors. In the studies with participants on different language background by Graunberg (1971), George (1972), Dulay and Burt (1973), Tran-chi-chau (1975), Mukkatesh (1977), Flick (1980) and Lolt (1983), the percentage of interference errors 36, 33, 3, 51, 23, 31, and 50, respectively. This shows that approximately little amount of errors are due to L1 interference.

The present study is in line with the previous researcher conducted to differentiate the errors produced by learners of English as a second of foreign



language. This study is an attempt to find out the pattern in errors committed by Iranian learners of English, that is to say, what proportion of the errors committed by them is interlanguage errors and whether they follow the same pattern as the above-mentioned studies.

Method

To investigate the problem addressed in this study, that is, finding the pattern of errors in Iranian learners of English as a foreign language, they were instructed to write a few paragraphs about a topic selected by them. In this way, they were thought to feel relax and have more to write about. The written records of the participants were analyzed and 30 erroneous sentences were randomly selected from their essays. Then these sentences were subject to reconstruction to make them as close to native-like sentences as possible and come up with a correct version of the sentence so that we can compare the erroneous one with the correct sentence. The next step was to categorize the errors into the categories of interlanguage and intralanguage error and determine whether they are lexico-semantic or syntactico-morphological errors. At the last step, they were further classified into one of the processes errors, namely, addition, omission, substitution, and wrong ordering (see the appendix). After the classification of the errors into different categories, the frequency of each type of error was calculated. It is worth mentioning that some sentences included more than just one type of error and all of the errors are considered in the frequency analysis.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the frequency of interlingual errors in comparison to intralingual errors. In table 2 the frequency and percentage of syntactico-morphological and lexico-semantic are presented and table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of errors categorized in four process classes.

Table1. The frequency and percentage of interlingual and intralingual errors.

<i>Error Type</i>	<i>frequency</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Interlingual	5	16.7
Intralingual	25	83.3



total	30	100
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Table2. The frequency and percentage of syntactico-morphological and lexico-semantic

<i>Error Type</i>	<i>frequency</i>	<i>percentage</i>
syntactico-	27	90
morphological	6	20
lexico-semantic		

Table3. The frequency and percentage of addition, omission, substitution, and misplacement errors.

<i>Error Type</i>	<i>frequency</i>	<i>percentage</i>
addition	8	26.7
omission	8	26.7
substitution	22	73
misplacement	7	23.3

The results show that the major part of the errors committed by the Iranian EFL learners is intralingual errors. Although some sentences contained interlingual errors (%16.7) which were resulted from the interference of the mother tongue, in this case Persian, but intralingual errors constitute the majority of errors (%83.3). This finding confirms the results of the previous researches which were conducted with participants with different language background (Graunberg, 1971; George, 1972; Dulay and Burt, 1973; Tran-chi-chau, 1975; Mukkatesh, 1977; Flick, 1980; and Lolt, 1983).

Syntactico-morphological errors in comparison with lexico-semantic errors are of high frequency. This shows that most learners have difficulty with the syntax and, generally speaking, the grammar of the English as their foreign language. The most



common type of process errors belong to the category of substitution which is significantly high in the frequency. The three other categories are almost of the same occurrence. This finding is in line with the discussion about the syntactico-morphological errors.

Conclusion

The present study is an attempt to find out if Persian as the native language interferes with the learning of English as the foreign language. The focus of the study was mainly the syntactic and to some extent semantic system of the language rather than orthography and phonology, in which the L1 interference may be even more evident. The results suggest that although L1 is not without its influences in learners' production, the majority of the errors are intralingual errors which should be traced in the target language system. The results confirm the findings of previous studies investigating this problem and show that if one is to grasp a better understating of the learner language system, the only way is not to trace every error in the learners' native language. This study indicates that the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, although of some use, can not give a clear understanding and prediction of the difficulties the language learner is faced with.

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MJAL 3:2 Summer 2011

ISSN 0974-8741

Writing Errors, what they can tell a teacher? By Akram Nayernia

Appendix

1. *There are very beautiful places in my country.



Reconstructed sentence: there are many beautiful places in my country.

Error(s): wrong use of the qualifier *very* instead of *many*

This error is an intralingual error and it can be classified in the category of syntactico – morphological errors. It seems that the learner has confused the use of these two quantifiers. This error is placed in the category of selection errors.

2. *It's a really fun place.

Reconstructed sentence: It's a really funny place.

Error(s): wrong use of parts of speech, that is, wrong use of a noun instead of an adjective

This error is an intralingual error in that the learner has confused the use of nouns and adjectives and it is classified as a syntactico – morphological error. This error belong to the category of selection errors

3. *Shahla don't have key.

Reconstructed sentence: Shahla doesn't have the key.

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of auxiliary.
- b. omission of definite article

Both of the errors committed in this sentence are intralingual errors. The first error is a syntactico – morphological error and relates to the wrong use of tenses. It seems that the learner has difficulty in the selection of the correct form. The second error is also a syntactico – morphological. It is a matter of omission.

4. *Please tell her that I give the key to Mr. Amir.

Reconstructed sentence: Please tell her that I will give the key to Amir.

Please tell her that I gave the key to Amir.

Error(s):

- a. Wrong use of tenses
- b. Wrong use of titles and nouns

The first error is an intralingual error. It can be classified as a syntactico – morphological error. The learner has not mastered the tense system of English. The second error seems to be an interlingual error. The learner has confused the



use of titles, because in Persian the titles are used with both first name and last name; however, this is not the case in English. This error is classified in the category of addition, i.e. redundant use of one lexical item – titles-.

5. *Which kind of sandwich you want?

Reconstructed sentence: What kind of sandwich do you want?

Error(s):

- a. Wrong use of question word
- b. Omission of auxiliary verb in question

Both of these errors are intralingual and are classified as syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is a matter of misplacement or wrong selection and the second one is an omission error.

6. *I ate lunch at the Alborz restaurant two last week.

Reconstructed sentence: I ate lunch at Alborz restaurant two weeks ago.

Error(s):

- a. Redundant use of definite article
- b. Wrong use of adverb of time

Both errors are intralingual and syntactico – morphological. The first error is a matter of addition. In the case of the second error it seems that the learner has confused the correct use of adverb of time.

7. *The waiters was politely and everythings was good.

Reconstructed sentence: The waiters were polite and everything was good.

Error(s):

- a. Lack of agreement in number between the subject and the verb
- b. Wrong use of parts of speech, i.e. wrong use of adverb instead of adjective
- c. Wrong use of quantifier

All of these errors are intralingual errors. All of them can be classified as syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is due to lack of concordance within a verb group, the subject and the verb do not agree. This error is due to wrong selection. The second error is a matter of misplacement, i.e. using adverb instead of adjective. In the case of the third error, it seems that the learner has used



the plural form of the quantifier because of *every*. It is a matter of wrong use of the plural item.

8. *I forgot tells you, my cousin working at Iran air.

Reconstructed sentence: I forgot to tell you that my cousin works in Iran air.

Error(s):

- a. Lack of agreement between the subject and the verb
- b. Wrong use of preposition
- c. Wrong use of English tenses.

All of the above mentioned errors are intralingual and all of them belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is a matter of agreement and this sentence lacks the agreement between the subject and the verb. The second error belongs to the group of deletion errors, i.e. the preposition *to* is omitted from the sentence. In the case of the third error, the learner has wrongly used present continuous tense instead of simple present tense.

9. *One day in Bahman month my family and I went to Shilla restaurant.

Reconstructed sentence: One day in Bahman my family and I went to Shilla restaurant.

Error(s): Redundant use of the word *month*

This error is an interlingual error. In Persian the word *month* is used after or before the name of the month. It seems that the learner has transferred the rules for this type of structures from his/ her mother tongue to English. This error can be considered an addition error, because the learner has redundantly used the word *month*.

10. *The sandwich was very little and short.

Reconstructed sentence: The sandwich was very small.

Error(s): wrong use of adjectives

These errors are intralingual errors. They belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. In this sentence the learner has confused the correct use of adjectives and misplaced *little* and *short* instead of *small*.



11. *In the spring is best time to visit there.

Reconstructed sentence: spring is the best time to visit there.

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of preposition
- b. wrong use of definite article

Both errors are intralingual errors from the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is due to redundant use of prepositions and the second one is because of redundant use of definite article. Therefore, they both can be classified in the category of addition errors.

12. *Flower are open and show a very beautiful view to us.

Reconstructed sentence: the plants are in flower and make a very beautiful view.

Error(s):

- a. Lack of agreement in number between the subject and the verb
- b. Wrong use of lexical items

The first error is an intralingual error from the category of syntactico – morphological errors. However, the second error belongs to the category of lexico – Semantic errors. It is an Interlingual Error and it seems that the learner has translated the Persian word for flowering into its English equivalent.

13. *I think most beautiful place in my country is a town called Shiraz.

Reconstructed sentence: I think the most beautiful place in my country is a city called Shiraz.

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of definite article
- b. wrong use of lexical items

The errors committed in this sentence are both intralingual errors. The first error is from the category of syntactico – morphological errors and is due to the omission of definite article. However, the second error belongs to lexico – semantic errors and is resulted from the wrong use of lexical items. It seems that the learner has not mastered the semantic difference between the words *city* and *town*. It is a matter of selection errors.



14. *Many times it was a capital of many titles.

Reconstructed sentence: Many times it was the capital with many titles (or names).

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of articles
- b. wrong use of prepositions

Both errors are intralingual and are from the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is due to the wrong use of articles, i.e. use of *a* instead of *the*. The second error is resulted from the wrong use of prepositions, using *of* instead of *with*. It is due to wrong selection of lexical items.

15. *It has an average weather.

Reconstructed sentence: It has a temperate (or mild) weather.

Error(s): wrong use of lexical items

The error committed in this sentence is an intralingual error. It belongs to the category of lexico – semantic errors. The learner has confused the correct use of lexical items. This error is classified in the category of selection errors.

16. * Iran has many big city but I think north cities are most beautiful between these cities.

Reconstructed sentence: Iran has many big cities but I think northern cities are the most beautiful among these cities.

Error(s):

- a. lack of agreement between the quantifier and the quantified noun
- b. wrong use of lexical items
- c. omission of definite article

The first error is an intralingual error. It belongs to the category of syntactico – morphological errors in that the quantifier and the quantified noun do not agree with each other in number. The second error is also an intralingual error but it belongs to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The learner has misplaced a noun instead of an adjective. It is a selection error.



The third error committed in this sentence is an intralingual error and is a matter of syntactico – morphological errors. It belongs to the group of omission errors.

17. *I hope all of us trying to keep it safely.

Reconstructed sentence: I hope all of us try to keep it safe.

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of verb tenses
- b. wrong use of lexical items

Both errors committed in this sentence are intralingual errors and belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. Both of them are a matter of wrong selection. In the first error the learner has wrongly used present continuous instead of present simple. In the case of second error the learner has misplaced an adverb instead of a noun.

18. *My opinion is all place in my country is beautiful.

Reconstructed sentence: My opinion is that every place in my country is beautiful. Or

In my opinion all places in my country are beautiful.

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of lexical items
- b. lack of agreement in number between the subject and the verb

All errors committed in this sentence are intralingual errors. The first error relates to the category of lexico – semantic errors. The learner has not yet mastered the correct use of these concepts. The second error is a syntactico – morphological error.

19. *It don't far from the sea.

Reconstructed sentence: It isn't far from the sea.

Error(s): wrong use of verb type

The error in this sentence is an intralingual, syntactico – morphological error. It is due to wrong use of verb. The error belongs to the category of selection errors.

20. *You can't see nothing of around yourself.



Reconstructed sentence: You can't see anything around yourself. Or

You can see nothing around yourself.

Error(s):

- a. wrong use of negative structure
- b. addition of preposition

Both errors are intralingual error. They belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. In the first error, the learner has used double negative structure. The second error is an addition error, i.e. redundant use of preposition.

21. *In annual a lot of tourists go there and see it.

Reconstructed sentence: every year a lot of tourists go there and see it.

Error(s): wrong use of lexical items

This error is an intralingual error. It can be classified in the category of lexico – semantic errors. The learner has used one item instead of another. The error is a matter of selection error.

22. *She is the goodest teacher in the world.

Reconstructed sentence: She is the best teacher in the world.

Error(s): wrong use of the adjective form

The error is intralingual and syntactico – morphological. It seems that the learner has not yet mastered English adjective system. It is classified in the category of selection errors.

23. *Yesterday my friend called me to his birthday.

Reconstructed sentence: Yesterday my friend invited me to his birthday.

Error(s): wrong use of lexical items

This error seems to be an interlingual error. It seems that the learner has transferred his / her native language habits to the target language. This sentence is a word for word translation from Persian to English. It can also be classified in the category of selection errors.

24. *Could I have some sandwich?

Reconstructed sentence: Can I have a sandwich?



Error(s): wrong use of lexical items

The error committed in this sentence is an intralingual error. It can be classified in the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The learner has wrongly used *could* instead of *can*. So we can classify it as a wrong selection error.

25. *I love to be teacher.

Reconstructed sentence: I love to be a teacher.

Error(s): omission of indefinite article

The error is an intralingual error from the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The learner has omitted the indefinite article *a* before the professional noun.

26. *I go English class because to learn English.

Reconstructed sentence: I go to English class to learn English.

Error(s):

- a. omission of preposition
- b. addition of a lexical item

The errors committed in this sentence are intralingual errors and belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is a matter of omission in that the learner has omitted the preposition *to* from the sentence. The second error is an addition error, i.e. the learner has used *because* redundantly in the sentence.

27. *I am going to home every day at 6:00.

Reconstructed sentence: I go home every day at 6:00.

Error(s): wrong use of tenses

In this sentence the learner has committed an intralingual error which belongs to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The learner has wrongly used present continuous instead of simple present tense. This error is due to wrong selection.

28. *I go to swimming usually in the summer.

Reconstructed sentence: I usually go swimming in the summer.



Error(s):

- a. wrong ordering of the elements in the sentence
- b. addition of a preposition

The errors are both intralingual and syntactico – morphological. The first error belongs to the category of ordering, i.e. the learner has wrongly ordered the elements of the sentence. The second error is an addition error in that the learner has redundantly used the preposition *to*.

29. *I have two bigger brother and one smaller sister.

Reconstructed sentence: I have two older brothers and one younger sister.

Error(s): wrong use of lexical items

The errors seem to be interlingual errors. May be the learner has transferred the Persian words to convey his / her intended meaning. The errors belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. They can be classified in the group of selection errors.

30. *most important thing is that there aren't very far from to capital.

Reconstructed sentence: The most important thing is that they aren't very far from capital.

Error(s):

- a. omission of definite article
- b. wrong use of pronouns
- c. addition of preposition

All of the errors committed in this sentence are intralingual and belong to the category of syntactico – morphological errors. The first error is a matter of omission in that the learner has wrongly omitted definite article before the superlative degree of the adjective. The second error is classified in the category of selection errors in which the learner has wrongly used *there* instead of *they*. The third error is an addition error in that the learner has used the preposition *to* redundantly.