

AN ANALYSIS OF SYNTACTIC ERRORS COMMITTED BY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS IN THE WRITTEN COMPOSITION OF MUTAH UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the English syntactic problems persistent in the written performance of freshmen English language class of Mutah University. Subjects were 60 native Arabic speaking students. 15 categories of errors were classified to find out the causes of syntactic error, which type of errors are more frequent, areas of weaknesses and problems tend to occur in writing compositions. Results indicate performance problems committed in this study were due to mother – tongue interference, misuse sentence fragment, overuse, lack of grammatical knowledge, formation and developmental errors.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Syntactic Error, English as a Foreign Language Learners (EFL).

INTRODUCTION

The aim of teaching a language irrespective of either English, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese or Russian etc. is to make the learners proficient in some or all of the basic language skills, that is speaking, reading, writing and understanding. Since fifties onwards, researchers have paid increasing attention to the structural and functional language changes. A number of issues in study of expressive syntax in school-age children and adolescents that contrast with studies of younger children-issues have an impact on attempts to develop and interpret a normative database Scott (1988). The modern roots of the syntax can be traced to the pioneering work of Noam Chomsky, who in 1957 wrote syntactic structures.

As writing is a continuous complex process of expressions. It is not itself a simple process with its native language and rather even more a complicated process if the language is a foreign language. A number of studies conclude with the impact or interference with their first language during the process of writing in English. Studies done by Cedar (2004); Chen & Huang (2003); Benson (2002); Collins (2002), Seyyed (2012), Neda Ghabool et.al (2012) and Jarvis (2000), all supports this phenomena. Likewise, with any other learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL), the English in the Arab countries was expected to have its impact with its Arabic language interference.

A text is determined legal by the language of syntax and the disagreements with the syntactic rules are called syntax error. This judgment can easily be detected by our knowledge of language but one purpose of a theory of syntax is to possess the structural sentence as acceptable or not. Susana (2007), describes syntactic complexity as the ability to produce writing that shows how ideas and large chunks of information are represented with the use of subordinate and embedded subordinate clauses. Syntax complexity is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL/EFL learners. Scott (1998), identified a number of issues in the study of expressive syntax. Among these were;

- Syntactic structures added and developed in this period occur less frequently in the ambient language.

- The number of discourse contexts for studying syntax increases, (eg. Written as well as spoken language, and informational in addition to narrative and conversational discourse).

Thus, this paper is a modest attempt to bring a broader discussion of what defines normal syntactic ability in university age children and adolescents especially focusing on second language learners of English in particular Arabic – speakers. This study will help to find the continuing syntactic growth in the service of more effective discourse, either spoken or written. Hence, this type of research should be viewed as significant because it reflects the features that distinguish the Arabs' English as a performance variety which develops where English is used as a foreign language, Kachru (1983). Investigating in these areas may continue to persist the specific difficulties face by the Arab learners of English as a second language at the beginning of their college education.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A wide range of materials have been found relating this present study. And considering the main purpose, only a few studies have been selected for reviews. Research dealt with investigating the errors produced by second language learners of English have been selected in a way that investigating this subject choice can diagnose the areas of weakness and strength in learners' English. As already mentioned, the role of the first language has long been considered as the main obstacle to a successful learning of another foreign language. Eventually, the context of English in the Arab countries does also have its impact on the type of English learned, due to the Arabic English interference. Therefore, a better understanding of the first language (L₁) influence in the process of EFL writing might help the teachers to know students difficulties in learning English. Khaleel (1985) analysed the written errors of Bethlehem university students in the first year of their college education on the West Bank. He distinguished between grammatical errors, i.e., word order, concord and verb, and semantic errors, i.e., lexis and collocation. The latter was found to impede communication. Kharma (1983), studied the syntactic difficulties faced by the Kuwaiti high school students. His study was based on contrastive analysis of English and Arabic. He devised a test focusing on the problem areas and sorted out the frequency and types of the structural errors which were mostly related to tense. Kambal (1980) studied the written errors of the Khartoum university students in Sudan and found that their errors fell in the areas of tense, verb formation, articles, concord and prepositions. To discover learning deficiencies in writing English, Kao (1999) scrutinized 169 compositions from 53 Taiwanese college students who were English major students. A total of 928 errors were found among which grammatical errors with the greatest frequency of 66 per cent, semantic errors occurred 18 per cent of the time, and lexical errors occurred with the least frequency of 16 per cent. Lin (2002) also examined 26 essays from Taiwanese EFL students at the college level. The results of this study indicated that the four highest error frequencies were sentence structures (30.43 per cent) wrong verb forms (21.01 per cent), sentence fragments (15.99 per cent), and wrong use of words (15.94 per cent) respectively.

In a study by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992), comparing translation as a strategy in L2 composing vs. direct composing in the L2, the researchers found that as syntactic complexity increased in the cognitively demanding translation task, awkward forms and transitional problems emerged which frequently interfered with the intended meaning. “The syntactic features of English spoken by advanced bilingual Arabs”, by Atawneh (1994), examined the English syntactic problems persistent in the performance of educated Arabs living in the

United States. Results indicate performance problems in the areas of (1) tense agreement; (2) relative clause construction; (3) indirect questions; (4) perfective tenses; and (5) use of prepositions. He furthermore explains that the degree of deviation in these areas depends on both amount of time spent in the United States and their educational level.

Jayakar Mukundan (2008), at his similar study, "Malaysian ESL students' syntactic Accuracy in the usage of English Modal Verbs in Argumentative writing", examined the use of modals in argumentative written tasks by Form 5 Malaysian secondary school ESL students. The aim of this study was to examine the use of English modals at the syntactic level from data presented in the MCSAW Corpus. The research findings showed that Malaysian students had little problem using modal verbs grammatically in argumentative writing. It was also found that Malaysian students preferred to use a lot of modals in their writings. However, the use of these modals was limited to a few words only. It was concluded that despite the inaccuracies in terms of meanings, most students were able to use syntactically accurate modals in their sentences. Zughoul (2002), also conducted similar study entitled, "inter language syntax of Arabic – speaking learners of English: the noun phrase. He concluded with a result indicating that noun phrase errors were second to verb phrase errors. He furthermore conveys that the most frequent noun phrase errors were in the use of articles, ordinals were used interchangeably, and quantifiers were confused as to their use with count / non count nouns.

Al-Khasawneh, (2010), in his studies, "Writing for academic purposes: problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the college of business", aimed at investigating the academic writing problems of the Arab postgraduate students of the College of Business at University Utara Malaysia and to provide solutions to these problems. The findings of the study revealed that the students faced problems in relation to vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing. At a similar study titled, "Investigating Pakistani ESL Students' Writing Problems on Convention, Punctuation and Language Use at Territory Level", Anum Shahzadie et.al. aimed to investigate the three problematic areas of written language convention, punctuation, and language use at territory level from students and teacher experience, using questionnaire and essay as the tools for examining the problems. The finding revealed that Pakistani students have problems in writing especially unable to tackle the language use. A very similar study done by Neda, (2012), "Investigating Malaysian ESL Students' Writing Problems on Conventions, Punctuation, and Language Use at Secondary School Level", aimed at investigating the challenges in three aspects of writing development process, namely conventions, punctuation, and language use (proper use of grammar) in secondary school level from students and teachers experiences. A questionnaire and an essay examination were utilized as the instruments of the study. The findings revealed that Malaysian ESL students have problems in writing tasks, especially in language use (grammar) and punctuation. The first language interference was also very tangible in their writings. The study suggests some practical methods in order to cope with writing difficulties.

From this above reviews, it can be concluded that certain specific difficulties were found faced by second language learners. It can be seen that second language learners tend to overuse coordinate clauses, at the same time, learners also have difficulties in tense, verb formation, articles, concord, prepositions, language use (grammar) and punctuation, vocabulary register, organization of ideas, spelling, and referencing lexical errors and semantic errors. These specific difficulties were found to face the learners beginning at their college education investigating in these areas seems to be important in bringing a broader scope in learning English as a second language. The theoretical framework of this paper

follows with the methodology, analysis and result of the collected data and finally discussions conclusions drawn with suggestions made for further research.

METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken through an error analysis, to investigate why and what problems tend the freshmen English language class university students to have syntax error. This paper would also help in finding the problematic areas of the interlanguage syntax error. Furthermore, it would also help in finding the problematic areas of the interlanguage syntax of Arabic – speaking learners and to explore what is peculiar of the second language learner, which makes the language difficult to learn.

Statement of the Subject

“An Analysis of Syntactic Errors Committed by Students of English Language Class in the Written Composition of Mutah University: A Case Study”

Sample of the Study

The main objective of conducting this study was to obtain the background information about the proficiency of English as a second language in particularly analyzing at the syntax errors committed in writing compositions. The sample of the study comprised of sixty English language class students of Mutah University for the second semester 2005/2006. All these students had gone through 12 years in empowering the language at the class room entity, and were now in the first year of a four year program in teacher training, preparing to be teachers of English as a foreign language. They were all native speakers of Arabic, representing people from urban and rural background with different socio-economic groups. This sample was selected without the barriers of sex and religion. The researcher preconceived the subjects to have been shared similar English proficiency levels and hence homogeneous. Thus, the sample formed a group quite representative of young educated learners.

Research Questions

In order to fulfill a deeper analysis of this paper, the researcher postulated the following research questions.

- (i) What are the causes of these syntactic errors?
- (ii) Which types of syntactic errors are more frequent in writing compositions?
- (iii) To diagnose the areas of weaknesses in the writing compositions.
- (iv) And what problems students tend to have in writing compositions.

Research Design

Since, the study focuses at investigating the problematic areas of syntactic errors committed in writing compositions, the researcher postulated a set of syntactic error categories to be analysed.

- Adjectives and adjectives phrases.
- Adverbs and adverb phrases errors.
- Noun – phrases errors.
- Sentence structure errors
- Word order errors.

The findings and the results of this study might contribute a wider spectrum of structures and find a remedy for this critical period of college study. This also will investigate a positive change in teaching literacy instructions.

Analysis of the Collected Data

The process of analyzing the collected data was to examine the student performance. Thus, the procedure of analysing the error was taken in accordance with the following four steps (Huang: 2002).

- (i) Data collection
 - (ii) Identification of errors
 - (iii) Classification of errors into error types
 - (iv) A statement of error frequency
- (i) Methods of Collecting Data

A typology of errors based on a pilot project was established in which the major part was to analyse a syntactic errors. Data was collected via written discourse completion tests, in the form of narrative essays. The subjects were asked to write in the class situation within a time limit of 45 minutes, with permission from the head administrator. The researcher hand-collected the completed samples, in order to ensure that all the samples collected from the subjects were valid and non-revised first drafts. The subjects were asked to write manually, and to eliminate writing anxiety and to provide a clear perspective to the subjects a hard-copy drafts were provided and to provide confidentiality of the participants, all the samples were encoded with numbers instead of the students names.

The following writing prompt was presented to the participants

Write a short essay on this following topic "The first day of the university".

This task was given within a time limit of 45 minutes and the minimum page requirement was one page. The essay should include with three main parts: Introduction, the Body of the Essay and the Conclusion. The subjects were guided to write as directly, concisely natural and simple as possible. To add and develop more examples at the body of the essay and to give a personal opinions or the influence the event has had on you at the conclusion.

(ii) Identification of Errors

Errors of the collected data in the form of narrative essays were identified and classified into different error categories by two raters who were reliable English grammar experts. The researcher also tried to interpret the structures as best as she could and emphases are put more on syntactic error as this is the main theme for this research. The completed score sheets was used to calculate error rates by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for data analysis. Absolute frequencies refer to the actual occurrence of errors, usually expressed by natural numbers of errors, such as verb errors 838 (Huang: 2002).

(iii) Classification of Errors into Error Type

The errors were classified into different error categories – based on (Horney's: 1998), nine classifications of error categories were chosen and six more were alerted from the conventional grammatical categories of the sample, thus, the researcher altogether classified the typology into 15 categories. (See Appendix)

(iv) A Statement of Error Frequency

Since the error analysis used in this study focused especially at the syntactic structure, regardless of their writing skills. Expression of idea, organization and cohesion, the essay scoring involved error frequency counts for grammatical errors only. As English is foreign language of the subjects, the researcher found errors committed because of the interference of Arabic, their native language. The sentences were found to be of direct translation from the Arabic language such as, "I talked about first week in university", "the hostel is small, so I feared".

Eventually, the errors were identified for each composition and counted according to the subheading of the classification. Errors were counted if it occurred repeatedly. Thus, the error rates were counted. The error rates in this study were obtained from dividing the absolute numbers of errors by the total words the participants had written.

Descriptive Analysis

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. Data collected totaled 5,255 words. After a thorough analysis, by two raters, total error found by Rater 1 was 2,426 and Rater 2 with 2,453. Pearson correlation coefficients for each error frequency identified by Rater 1 and Rater 2 were computed in order to establish the inter-rater reliability. The overall errors found by the two raters were found having a positive significant relationship at 0.01 level. The Pearson correlation coefficient r was 0.915. thus, it indicates from this result, that there is a strong significant relationship between the errors identified by Rater 1 and Rater 2 as $r = 0.915$, with frequency $n = 60$, and significant value = 0.000. Hence, it can be concluded that the error identified by the two raters were quite similar and selecting one of the rater for the data analysis could be acceptable. This is done to avoid bias in error counts identified by the two Raters.

Therefore, the researcher for the present analysis chooses errors identified by Rater 1.

**Table – 1: Inter – Rater Coefficients for Typology of Error Categories
Pearson Correlation**

Error Categories	Rater 1	Rater 2	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig (p – Value)
Spelling	507	509	0.846	0.000
Sentence Fragments	285	296	0.809	0.000
Syntax	266	258	0.792	0.000
Adverbs	28	31	0.594	0.000
Punctuation	303	308	0.813	0.000
Verbs	182	188	0.765	0.000
Lexicon	235	239	0.787	0.000
Subject Omission	102	97	0.738	0.000
Conjunctions	89	90	0.710	0.000
Articles	84	85	0.702	0.000
Nouns	87	79	0.683	0.000
Pronouns	75	79	0.675	0.000
Prepositions	75	72	0.661	0.000

Capitalization	50	47	0.654	0.000
Adjectives	58	71	0.598	0.000

The above table 1 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients for each error categories. Even though the values of coefficient r varied within different error typology, the coefficient for overall error was convincing. Table 2 shows the error typologies committed by the subjects. The errors were run in ascending order with the most frequent mistakes to the least frequent committed by the subjects.

Table – 2: Error Frequencies and Error Rates

Error Categories	Frequency	Error Rates (%)
Spelling	507	9.65
Punctuation	303	5.77
Sentence Fragments	285	5.42
Syntax	266	5.06
Prepositions	235	4.47
Verbs	182	3.46
Subject Omission	102	1.94
Conjunctions	89	1.69
Articles	87	1.65
Nouns	84	1.60
Pronouns	75	1.43
Lexicon	75	1.43
Adjectives	50	1.10
Capitalization	58	0.95
Adverbs	28	0.53

From this above table the highest error rate was found with 9.65 concerning the spelling mistakes committed by the student of English language class. Punctuation, sentence fragments, syntax, prepositions and verbs were found with greatest repeated number of error occurred in this study with 5.77, 5.42, 5.06, 4.47, and 3.46 respectively. The error rates with subject omission, conjunctions, prepositions, adjectives, capitalization were found with moderate error rates whereas, the least predominant error committed was found with adverb with 0.53 error rates.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This section discusses the discussion, conclusions of the study as well as suggestions for further study.

From this above sections, it indicates that the frequency of the error committed might be influence by many causes and strategy. It also shows the interference of first language L_1 in interpreting or translating to second language. This study is found consistent with the study of Lin (2002), Kao (1999), and Kambal (1980), in which the second language learners were found with certain specific difficulties in empowering the second language. The reason behind may be multidimensional and varied. Situation like group size, the learning styles, classroom discourse, educational setting might have been an impact to this study.

In general, the educational setting focus usually being on language teaching and still many students still have the problem in expressing proper language. Chaudron expressed that "Aside from general instruction, the primary role of language teachers is often considered to be the provision of both error correction, a form of negative feedback, and positive sanctions or approval of learners production" (1988: 132). The students may require additional proactive with English grammatical areas in order for them to become comfortable in expressing the language.

The salient features in syntactic error in this study were discussed into these following sources.

- (i) Arabic Interference.
- (ii) Failure in separating meaningful sentences
- (iii) Performance error
- (iv) Developmental error
- (v) Overuse

(i) Arabic Interference

Arabic interference may be one of the main sources in committing these syntactic errors. The subjects directly translate the Arabic words into English equivalents which leads to malformation of sentences. The following are some of the illustration.

- "Came to university to record program".....(paper 12) "to register".
- "The first day at the university was tired day".....(paper 41) "a tiring".
- "Although my feel was fearing".....(paper 5) "I felt scared".
- "I met a girl who I had never seen before".....(paper 49) "whom I never met before".
- "I need to drink water".....(paper 7) "want".

This examples show that the mother tongue interference was a main source of committing errors. This finding echoes Scoot and Tucker (1974), assertion that Arabic interference may be one of the reasons for this type of mistake.

(ii) Failure in Separating Meaningful Sentence

Another source where most of the subjects committed errors was due to failure in dividing a sentence into meaningful portions or connecting the portions into meaningful sentences. Subjects were often found confused and divide a sentence in a wrong place. The illustration below connects with this point.

- "I felt happy, and excited, but at one day I was frightened, and worried, because"..... (paper 1).
- "I felt very hard and tired, it was a strange place for me, and I did not know anyone there".....(paper 39).
- "The first week in university was so bad and unpleasant, because I was very afraid. While I was sitting in the university. I think myself a stranger person from all the student, and"..... (paper 34).

(iii) Performance Error

The other reason which might have caused this syntactic error was performance error. Sharma (1981) says that, "an important characteristic of these lapses is that the language user becomes instantaneously aware of a lapse". Even though this errors were not taken as a

serious matter, but still it leads in the ill formation of sentences. The following are illustrative of this point.

- "I don't anyone and any place".....(paper 14) "don't know".
- "We got back to the house".....(paper 31) "return home".
- "I brought my brother to help me in booking"(paper 34) "for registration".
- "I want to get a high mark".....(paper 2) "score".

(v) Developmental Errors

The fourth sources of error may be discuss as developmental errors. Oller and Richards (1978) identified these errors as systematic and may represent either a transitional stage in the development of a grammatical rule or the final stage of the speakers' knowledge". These errors caused either by incorrect collection or meaning similarity. The following illustrations are some of this point.

- "Mutah University it is beautiful".....(paper 20).
- "I talked about first week in university" (paper 49) "am writing".
- "I started crying, my friends tried to smile"..... (paper 59) "comfort me".
- "I research the classes".....(paper 18) "search".

(vi) Overuse

The fifth and last sources of syntactic error discuss in this paper was overuse. This error was also illustrated as overgeneralization errors. These errors were caused by the extension of the target language grammatical rules. The subjects commit this kind of errors because of correct recurrent grammatical weaknesses to enhance writing instruction. The following are some examples.

- "We went to the unity of registration".....(paper 4) "committee".
- "I get certified degree after three or four years"..... (paper 55) "will complete my degree".
- "One day I felt afraid but now I am not"..... (paper 20) "the first day".
- "My sister not defined me anything".....(paper 13) "doesn't advice".

Furthermore, the findings of the overall errors helped the researcher to learn about the overall performance of the subjects. Moreover, the researcher felt it would be worthy to discuss these findings, as this will help in diagnose the areas of weaknesses and the problems the students tend to have in writing compositions.

From table 2, it can be seen that the most frequent error committed by the subjects were in spelling, punctuation, sentence fragments, syntax, prepositions and verbs. The highest error rates occurred within the error typology was spelling mistakes with 507 frequency or error rates with 9.65 per cent. This finding shows quite a high rate in this error typology. The reason behind might be due to lack of consideration, memory lapses, carelessness, physical state, confusions or late exposing of English which leads to poor background knowledge. Similarly, regarding punctuation, the frequency errors runs with a total of 303 or an error rate of 5.77 per cent. In this study, the most frequent error type in this error typology was misuse or overuse of commas. Many studies ignored these mistakes or not even considered and targeted to major grammatical errors that typically refer to the parts of speech like verbs, adjectives, nouns or articles etc. This finding even though might not be taken as a serious matter, still it plays a major factor influencing in expressing a proper correct English sentences. Nevertheless, many run-on sentences could result from these neglected errors.

Error frequency rate for sentence fragments, syntax, prepositions and verbs were also found committing higher error rates in this study, with 285, 266, 235 and 182 respectively. These mistakes may explain that these grammatical forms were the major difficult areas in learning a second language for the students. Some of the students were found having incomplete expressions or sentences in describing a situation, under sentence fragments error typology. Concerning prepositions, the subjects committed most of the errors by omitting or overuse unnecessary prepositions or using wrong preposition. Errors regarding verb, students were found having errors due to lack of tense agreement and subject – verb agreement.

Thus, it can be concluded from this study that the errors were found committed due to mother – tongue interference, sentence fragment, overuse, lack of grammatical knowledge, formation, and developmental errors. The findings of this study was found coincide with the conclusions put forward by Lin's (2002), Yao C.K. (1991), Jiang's (1995). Lastly, for an overall sum up, we should be more aware of which pedagogy would be more suited, while teaching the English language can led to a more efficient and successful impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL EDUCATORS

1. Educators should specify the differentiation between English (L₂) and Arabic (L₁) grammar, to avoid language interference and for a more effective impact in learning English language.
2. A well – designed pedagogy giving specific attention to the needs of the EFL learners should be plan.
3. Educators while exposed a subject should ensure a thorough knowledge of the subject.
4. Educators should encourage in developing a positive attitude towards English language.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following suggestions were postulated for further research.

- Study with a wider sample group should be taken.
- Study comparing students who finished from private schools and ordinary publish schools.
- Study comparing the achievement and progress of the students whom taught by an experience educator.

Appendix: Error Categories Used in This Study

- ❖ Errors in the use of nouns
 - ◆ Singular /Plural
- ❖ Error in the use of articles
- ❖ Error in the use of pronouns
 - ◆ Incorrect case forms
 - ◆ Missing possessives
- ❖ Errors in the use of verbs
 - ◆ Tense
 - ◆ Subject-verb agreement
 - ◆ Auxiliary

- ◆ Verb omitted
- ❖ Error in the use of prepositions
 - ◆ Prepositions omitted
 - ◆ Wrong prepositions
 - ◆ Unnecessary prepositions
- ❖ Errors in the use of adjectives
 - ◆ Wrong form (confusion of adjectives and adverbs)
 - ◆ Comparative / Superlative forms
- ❖ Errors in the use of adverbs
 - ◆ Wrong form (confusion of adjectives and adverbs)
 - ◆ Comparative / Superlative forms
- ❖ Error in the use of conjunction
 - ◆ Coordination
 - ◆ Subordination (adverbial clauses, relative clauses, and nominal clauses)
 - ◆ Missing Conjunctions
- ❖ Errors in sentence fragments
 - ◆ Incomplete sentences
- ❖ Error in Syntax
 - ◆ Word order (incorrect sentence structures)
- ❖ Errors in Lexicon
 - ◆ Word choice
- ❖ Errors in Punctuation
- ❖ Error in Spelling
 - ◆ Misspelling
- ❖ Error in Capitalization
- ❖ Error in Subject omission

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