

Linguistic Analysis of Writing Errors Made by EFL Majors in Najran University

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Abstract: This study attempts to analyze and determine the causes behind writing errors made by EFL Majors in Najran University. The study took place by the end of the second semester of the educational year 2017/ 2018. The tools for collecting the data are scripts of classroom assignments, quizzes, and final examinations written by undergraduate EFL majors studying in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah.

The research adopted an analytical descriptive approach. The findings have revealed that the most common writing errors are Auxiliary omission/ misuse of possessives and pronouns, subject-verb disagreement, misuse of tenses, sentence disorder, preposition errors, punctuation errors, word choice, spelling errors, article errors.

Keywords: EFL majors, writing errors, applied linguistics, competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, we have seen a true revolution in the field of information technology and telecommunications. As a result, our world has become, in the full sense of the word, a small village where information is incredibly exchanged at an accelerated pace.

Keeping up with these tremendous changes requires sound knowledge of foreign languages. Among the four skills, writing is always a big challenge, for it usually takes longer time and greater efforts to master. Writing in a foreign language requires not only solid knowledge of vocabulary, word usage, grammar, stylistics and reading a lot of diverse resources, but It also requires from the writer to be able to think in the foreign Language itself to ensure the least minimum L1 interference.

Thus, analyzing writing errors made by EFL majors is one of the main issues that has to be studied by researchers because errors, as defined by Gass and Selinker (1994), are "red flags" that support evidence of the learner's comprehension of the target language, besides, they contain vital information on the strategies that students use to acquire a language (Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975).

Many researchers studied the errors committed by Arab EFL learners, such as, (Selinker, 2001; Corder, 1967; Khreshah, 2011; Crompton, 2001; Abisamra, 2003; Diab, 1996 and many others).

In terms of Saudi EFL learners' achievements, Garmi (2010) claimed that the results of the Saudi students in IELTS test have shown that the average score in listening, speaking, and reading were low, yet the average score of the writing section was even lower (cited in Barzanji Amal, 2016:2).

Therefore, as a contribution to the ongoing research, this study is intended to identify the writing errors made by Saudi EFL majors in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah-Najran University, KSA.

Objectives of the Study

This research attempts to explore and identify the nature and types of writing errors made by Saudi EFL majors studying in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah-Najran University, KSA.

The study will also attempt to investigate the causes behind these errors and the ways to eradicate them.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to studying the writing errors of the male EFL section of the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah, Najran University, KSA. So, studying writing errors made by the female majors in the above-mentioned faculty is beyond the scope of this research.

Significance of the Study

This study draws its significance from the fact that no previous study has been conducted on writing errors made by EFL majors in Sharorah, although the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah was established 8 years ago. There's no doubt that identifying the most general types of writing errors will definitely assist in finding solutions either by improving the current textbooks and / or the teaching methods.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers agree that writing in a foreign language is a very tough task. This point of view can be found in the literature of (Daud, Daud & Kassim, 2005; and Abu Shawish & Atea, 2010; Kurk & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007).

Therefore, systematically analyzing the writings of EFL learners is extremely important because errors hold vital clues about the process of EFL learning. Corder (1967) states that errors inform teachers how the learning processes proceed and what needs to be taught.

For researchers as well, writing errors are particularly informative for tracing the causes behind them, and for recommending strategies for improvement. Johnson (2002, p. 59) compared errors with the pain that may tell the doctor more than all the parts that do not hurt.

Therefore, errors committed by Arab EFL learners have been studied by many researchers, such as (Selinker, 2001; Corder, 1967; Khreshah, 2011; Crompton, 2001; Abisamra, 2003; Diab, 1996 and many others).

Investigating writing errors, Hashim (1996), cited in (Fawzi, 2016), claims that, Arab EFL learners' writing errors are usually in: prepositions, verbs, articles, conjunctions, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and sentence structure.

In terms of Saudi EFL undergraduates, many researchers agree that they experience great difficulty in writing although English is a compulsory subject in Saudi schools, and is taught for six years.

According to Javid et al. (2013), states most of the writing errors made by Saudi EFL undergraduates in Al-Taif University were in prepositions, spelling, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes and prefixes, while Nazim and Ahmad (2012) indicate that Najran EFL majors tend to make writing errors in conventions, punctuations, capitalizations, spelling, and language use.

However, It should be noted that spelling errors are always present in the writing of Saudi undergraduates, and they constitute the lion's share among other errors. Accordingly, a lot of research has particularly been devoted to spelling errors. Khan and Itoo (2012), investigating the most common spelling errors made by EFL majors in Najran University, indicated that the most frequent spelling errors were respectively in: deletion, substitution, reversal and addition.

Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud, & Gaudel (2015) indicate that omission errors were the most frequent among spelling errors made by Saudi EFL majors in the University of Ha'il.

This short literature review is particularly vital for better understanding of previous studies, and for providing some insight into the nature of our study.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This study adopts the descriptive analytical method for its suitability to its purpose, as dozens of writing scripts had to be thoroughly analyzed in order to identify the most common errors made by EFL male majors studying in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah-Najran University, KSA.

Suggested by Ferris (2002), the data of our study consisted of a corpus of classroom written assignments, quizzes, and final examinations. The study took place by the end of the second semester of the educational year 2017-2018.

4. DATA AND ANALYSIS

Consisting of scripts of classroom assignments, quizzes, and final examinations written by undergraduate EFL majors, the data, having been identified and thoroughly analyzed, has revealed a tremendous amount of writing errors that have been classified into the following categories. The examples are in pairs. The first ones with asterisk are the wrong ones followed by the correct versions.

Misuse of possessives and pronouns

This occurs in a variety of ways. One of the typical errors that students commit is the use of a subject pronoun in the place of a possessive adjective, as in:

*He name is Ahmed

His name is Ahmed.

Also, leaving out the possessive ('s), as in:

*My friend car is beautiful.

My friend's car is beautiful.

or using a subject pronoun instead of an object one:

*I saw he

I saw him

subject-verb disagreement

This type of errors is reflected in leaving out the third person singular (s). This could probably be justified by L1 interference:

*My brother speak English

My brother speaks English

*Ali go to school everyday

Ali goes to school everyday

Auxiliary omission/ misuse

Because of the absence of auxiliaries in Arabic, this category of errors could be attributed to L1 interference, where learners of English tend to copy their mother tongue auxiliary-free structures wherever possible in their writing in English. This leads to the omission or at least the misuse of auxiliaries. As Scott & Tucker, 1974 put it: (The most frequent type of deviation An Arab speaker encounters in forming the English verb is the deletion of the copula). The following examples illustrate both, omission of and misusing auxiliaries

*Where * he from?

Where is he from?

*Ali is not live in Sharorah.

Ali does not live in Sharorah.

*We are study in Najran University.

We study in Najran University.

Misuse of Tenses

This type is very common in the writing of EFL majors. It can be attributed either to ignorance of English grammar mother tongue negative transfer or because of both factors. A typical example is in confusing the past simple and the past perfect, or the confusing present simple with the continuous. The examples below illustrate the point:

*I already lived in Sharorah for five years.

I have already lived in Sharorah for five years.

*I'm Learning English in Najran University.

I Learn English in Najran University.

Sentence disorder

English and Arabic do not share the same sentential word order, so it's highly expected that EFL learners make errors in this respect. An instance of such mistakes is following the Arabic order of noun-adjective pattern order instead of the opposite. The following examples vividly show L1 influence:

*Our teacher gave us assignment interesting.

Our teacher gave us an interesting assignment.

* My number academic is ...

My academic number is ...

Preposition errors

The most problematic for the Arabic speaking learners according to Al-Haidari (1984) and Meziani (1984), cited in Hashim H. Noor (1996), are the prepositions of recipient/target, time, destination, and cause/purpose., while Noor, Hashim H., (1996) reports that the types of preposition errors found in their research, were deletion, substitution, and redundancy use of English prepositions.

However, in our research we tend to confirm the outcomes of Mehdi (1981), Meziani, 1984). We've found that the types of preposition errors are in: wrong choice, insertion of unnecessary prepositions and omission of necessary prepositions. The following are some examples taken from the students' writing assignments:

*I heard this news in the radio.

I heard this news on the radio.

*After that, I go to home and ...

After that, I go home and ...

*When we arrived Jeddah, my friend ...

When we arrived in Jeddah, my friend ...

Punctuation errors

In terms of punctuation errors, the results have shown that capitalization and comma usage are the greatest in number. This finding goes in line with what have been achieved by Siddiqui (2015), where capitalization errors constituted a large number of students' errors.

Many researchers who studied writing errors of Arab EFL majors agree that this occur because of the absence of capitalization in Arabic.

The Semi-colon and the exclamation mark aren't as well used in Arabic, neither are there any strict rules for comma usage.

Gomaa (2010), cited in (Fawzi 2016:5), states that it's accepted to write a chain of sentences in Arabic with almost no punctuation marks, while it is not acceptable at all in English.

The following examples are some of the typical mistakes in punctuation that have been found in the writings of Saudi EFL majors:

* my friend ali studies in najran university, he is a good student and ...

My friend Ali studies in Najran University. He is a good student and ...

Word choice

Such errors are versatile, and can be ascribed either to lack of proper knowledge in the grammar of English, or to the MT interference factor. The characters of errors in this category varied from choosing an adjective instead of an adverb, as in:

*My friends speak English good.

My friends speak English well.

or choosing an infinitive instead of a gerund:

*I suggest to go on a picnic.

I suggest going on a picnic.

Errors in collocation are also very frequent in this category:

* When my friends arrived, I had to cook a fast meal.

When my friends arrived, I had to cook a quick meal.

Spelling Errors

Most of the research conducted on writing errors made by Saudi EFL university learners indicates that spelling errors are always present in the writings of the learners.

In his research on EFL majors in King Khalid University, Fawzi Eltayeb Yousuf Ahamed (2016) confirms that spelling errors are always present and versatile in character. He relates them either to bad memorization or to the fact that EFL learners tend to spell words in the way they are pronounced. In our study, the data analysis has shown that the overwhelming majority of EFL majors in Najran University do experience spelling errors. These varied from wrong choice, omission of letters or both, as is shown in the following examples:

*begining vs. beginning

*excelant vs. excellant

*forein vs. foreign

*neibor vs. neighbor

*iland vs. island

*dangerus vs. dangerous

*heared vs. heard

Some of the spelling mistakes are attributed to the learners' mispronunciation or to the absence of some phonemes in Arabic, as in the case of:

*twelfe vs. twelve

*bound vs. pound

Article errors

In her master's thesis, Amal Barzanji (2016) has found that article errors constitute the fourth most common errors made by Saudi EFL majors. She attributes the reason to the fact that Arabic has only the definite article (the). In her opinion, this leads to the erroneous overuse of it.

We completely agree with her finding as our research has also revealed that learners tend to use the definite article in contexts where indefinite ones should be used, as in the following examples:

*The water is essential for our life.

*The fruit provides us with vitamins.

In addition to that, students also tend to leave out indefinite articles, as in the following examples:

*I want to become doctor.

I want to become a doctor.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As is shown above, the analysis of the students' writing transcripts has vividly revealed that Saudi EFL majors in the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharorah do have serious issues with writhing in English, which is a real obstacle, hindering their academic achievements.

In our point of view, the causes behind the writing errors in the case of our subjects could have been due to:

1. Carelessness and lack of motivation, which are remarkably spread among most of the students.
2. Lower levels of educational attainment at schools; due to lack of discipline and/ or because of the instructors' low proficiency.

3. Mother tongue interference manifested in the usage of prepositions, articles and punctuation, topped with literal translations of ideas.
4. The inconsistency of the English spelling rules.
5. Reliance on outdated approaches and textbooks.
6. Lack of reading in English, which is essential for enhancing the grammar and improving the writing skill in general, enriching it with new vocabulary, expressions and structures.

Researchers unanimously agree that most of the school graduates are ignorant of the very basics of English, worse than that, neither do they have the willingness, nor the motivation to improve.

Regarding the recommendations, previous studies have recommended many measures, yet, in our opinion, most of them would be less effective without adopting serious, comprehensive and large-scale reforms at the school in order to restore motivation and build willingness to excel among pupils, for these two factors are the driving force for any activity.

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