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A Morphosyntactic study of Iraqi EFL college students' written essays: A corpus based analysis

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Abstract
The present paper attempts to examine the written essays of EFL Iraqi students on the basis of morphosyntax. Assuming that EFL students commit morphosyntactic errors, the researcher tries to identify, classify and interpret the morphosyntactic errors made by Iraqi EFL learners. A corpus of 80 English written compositions of students studying in the second year of college was analysed by the researcher for the purpose. After a detailed study and analysis of the samples, the research revealed that students commit the following morphosyntactic errors: subject-verb concord, word order, verb forms, word-morpheme omission or addition, short forms. A classification of these errors enabled the researcher to determine some pedagogical implications and arrive at ways to overcome the problems and enhance writing skill of students.

Keywords: Morphology, syntax, morphosyntax, error analysis, writing skills

1.1 Introduction

Learning a second language includes acquiring all four skills in the second language and among the expressive skills, learning the writing skill is the most challenging especially for EFL learners. Spoken language is acquired through exposure but writing skill has to be learnt intentionally (Harmer, 2004, p7) [10]. Writing academic language is even more difficult as it requires planning, organization, development of ideas and analysing (Myles, 2002, p1) [15]. Writing involves semantic, syntactic as well as morphological cues. Semantic cues refer to knowledge of ideas and cultures. Syntactic cues refer to knowledge of grammar while morphological cues are related to word formation. EFL learners are likely to commit errors in all the three areas. Error analysis gives an insight into the types of errors committed and makes it possible for teachers and instructors to find ways of guiding learners so that they avoid making morphosyntactic errors.

Students in Iraq learn English as a second language (SL) and they face many difficulties while acquiring expressive skills rather than the receptive skills. Writing is considered to be the most advanced and hence the most difficult skill. Essay writing is an individual activity. Students are expected to write essays independently on given topics. For this purpose, they have to collect information about the topic, organize the content logically and systematically and present it in a convincing way and easy style. Each of these tasks requires varied skills; naturally students are apprehensive about their performance, especially because it is going to be evaluated by teachers. Errors are inevitable; one proven way of overcoming the problem is analysing the types of errors committed by maximum students repeatedly and concentrating on them.

There may be good and appropriate content in a piece of writing but writing cannot be effective until it is free form errors. According to Jimenez (1996) some errors do not seriously hinder communication yet, accuracy is an important component in language. Norrish (1980, p 111) [17] adds that "we cannot pretend that accuracy is totally unimportant."

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Besides spelling mistakes, EFL learners commit a number of morphosyntactic errors. These errors are sometime intralingual, that is they are committed with relation to morphosyntactic elements in the target language. Errors which are committed due to the influence of native language are interlingual. Syntactic features of languages differ. Hence, learners having different native languages commit different syntactic errors while learning English. While studying the errors, the syntactic features of native language of the learners has to be taken into account at least to some extent.

1.2 Significance of the study
One of the aims of teaching English in non-native English-speaking countries is to raise the level of scholarship in all areas. Being a library language as well as the language of trade and business, it is essential to have sufficient proficiency in English in order to work on a global level. Whether for business purposes or for higher education and specialization in various fields, adequate development of writing skills is crucial. EFL learners are bound to make errors initially. A study, classification and analysis of the errors helps to identify the types that are common. The teachers can focus on dealing with errors identified and ensure that EFL learners avoid committing them. What kinds of errors the learners commit and their frequencies depends upon the morphological, phonetic, syntactic patterns in the native and target languages of the learners. Hence, the types of errors are different with different age-groups, communities, people belonging to different communities and so on.

This study focuses on the second-year college students studying EFL in Iraq. The native language of the learners is Arabic. The students have a background of studying English in school and also in the first year of college. In the second year, they are expected to have developed the skills of English language to a considerable extent. In spite of the previous background, the researcher observed that they commit a number of morphosyntactic errors while writing. Hence, the researcher attempted this study of error analysis. The researcher also tried to examine the possible cause of each type of error, and whether they are intralingual or interlingual. Further, the researcher has given some suggestions for teachers who teach English a as foreign language, so that they can make sure that their students avoid committing morphosyntactic errors. The study is unique in that it takes into consideration a particular level and age group. Moreover, their native language is Arabic while the foreign language is English which makes them a special group for study. Studies have been carried out in error analysis but the age group and the language pair render this study different from the others. This study will enable teachers in Iraq teaching at school and college levels to understand the types of morphosyntactic error common among Iraqi EFL students and deal with them during classroom instruction.

1.3 Aims and objectives
- To carry out a detailed study of the sample essays.
- To identify the morphological errors and syntactic errors.
- To classify the errors.
- To give a plausible interpretation of the errors.
- To suggest a solution for overcoming the errors.

1.4 Research Questions
The aim of this study is to find answers to the following questions:
- What kind of morphosyntactic errors are committed by Iraqi EFL students while writing essays?
- How can the errors be explained?
- What can be the solution so that students do not commit morphosyntactic errors?

1.5 Hypothesis
The Iraqi EFL students lack sufficient knowledge of English morphology and syntax hence they commit morphosyntactic errors.

1.6 Method
The researcher has used the descriptive qualitative method in this study.

1.7 Population and Sample
The essays written by students enrolled in the second year of college in IBN Rushd College of Education, Baghdad University for the academic year 2018-2019 served as the sample for the study. 80 essays were randomly selected and analysed.

2.1 Theoretical background
a. Error analysis: An error is an inaccurate form of learner language, that is, it differs from a form used by native speakers of that language. According to Hendrickson (1987, p 357) [11], errors are signals that indicate an actual learning process while the learner has not yet mastered enough competence in the target language. An error differs from a mistake. An error is committed out of ignorance or lack of knowledge about a linguistic feature. A mistake is committed in spite of having knowledge. Errors can be predicted but mistakes cannot be predicted. Historically, error analysis followed what was called contrastive analysis (CA). It was believed that errors in EFL/SL learners occur due to interference of the native language of learners. However, errors are also committed on account of lack of awareness about certain morphosyntactic rules in the target language. EA came as an alternative to CA. It was established by Corder *et al.* in 1960 (p 55). CA was influenced by the behaviourist theory according to which language is acquired through habit formation. CA believes in language transfer. However, CA was unable to predict a large number of errors committed by ESL / EFL learners. Discovery of the fact that many learners' errors are produced because of faulty inferences about the rules in the target language led to the idea of EA.

Error analysis includes identification and documentation of errors committed by second language learners, analysis of the errors and giving possible causes of the errors. Native speakers also make errors but they are performance errors like slip of the tongue or spoonerisms. Error analysis enables us to understand systematic violations of patterns of errors. The errors lead us to reflect upon the input given to the learners, about interlanguage and about underlying rules of the target language (Corder, 1981, p 10). It also helps to understand the cognitive processes in second language learning. Sometimes, an error may have more than one cause.

Many linguists, teachers and researchers have been focussing on error analysis in recent years. Heydari &

Bagheri, (2012, p 1583) [12] point out that analysis is of two types: Contrastive analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA). In the former type, the learner's native language is compared to the target language and their performance is based on a comparison between the two. In the latter type, the errors committed in the target language are analysed and an effort is made to point them out to the learners and guide them so that they can avoid them. (Corder, 1967, as cited in Heydari & Bagheri, 2012, p 1584) [12]. He further adds that "EA is 'a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of the learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness." Ellis (1997, p 31) states that errors are natural during the process of language learning and are part of the learning process. Errors can occur on account of several reasons. Sometimes, learners impose structures from their native language causing grammatical errors. Sometimes, they make a mistake in applying grammatical rules while sometimes they apply incomplete rules. Sometimes, they fail to understand the difference between native language and target language (Richards, 1971, p 15).

Richards (1971: p 173-181 as cited in Bootchuy 2008) [3] has classified errors into 3 main types: interlingual, intralingual and developmental. Interlanguage errors are the result of interference of mother tongue while intralingual errors are those which "reflect the general characteristics of rule learning." The causes of intralingual errors can be ignorance of rules, incomplete application of rules or over generalization. Developmental errors are common in the initial stages of second language learning. They are viewed as positive. They are caused due to limited language experience in the initial stages.

b. Morphological errors: Morphology deals with word formation. Words are formed in different ways in different languages. In case of SL acquisition, the process of word formation of the target language may be different from that of the learners' native language. Hence, the SL learners commit mistakes initially. Errors committed with respect to formation of words are called morphological errors. Morphological errors in English can occur with respect to plural formation, genitive case or verbal inflections. For example, English plurals are formed by adding -s (cat – cats) or -es (box – boxes) or in some cases -ies (lady – ladies). However, some words have strange plural forms (datum – data, ox-oxen). Thus, there is no single set of fixed rules for plural formation. Some words are always used in the plural (scissors, mathematics) while some are always used in the singular form (hair). This leads to confusion for EFL learners and they commit errors by generalizing rules or by applying incorrect rules.

The genitive marker in English is generally the apostrophe 's' ('s). However, this is not used for inanimate nouns, in which case, the 'of' genitive is used (eg. name of my school). If nouns end in an 's', the apostrophe is placed after the letter 's'. Hence, the genitive suffix is also confusing. In few cases, the genitive is omitted (It is a one-day job).

Most verbs form the past tense by addition of 'ed' (ask – asked) but some retain the same form in the past tense (cut-cut), some are formed by addition of 't' (spent), in some verbs the root form is changed come – came). Thus, verbal inflections are another problematic area for EFL learners of

English. All these errors are related to word formation so they come under morphological errors.

c. Syntactic errors: Syntax is the proper order of words and phrases in a sentence to create a grammatically correct sentence. It refers to word order. A grammatically well-structured sentence is effective and unambiguous. Every language follows its own syntactic structures. The most common structure in English is SVO that is a subject followed by a verb followed by an object. In case of SL learners, the word order of their native language may be different. There is a tendency on their part to impose the word order of the native language on the target language, leading to ungrammatical structures and miscommunication as well as ambiguity. Errors committed due to lack of knowledge of grammar are called syntactic errors. They consist of errors in the concord of auxiliaries, use of articles, use of prepositions and conjunctions, tense forms and word order.

2.1.1 Advantages and Limitations of error analysis
Error analysis plays a very significant role in second and foreign language learning. Just as one cannot learn to ride a bicycle without falling and hurting oneself, one cannot learn a language without committing errors. Error Analysis leads one to understand 'why' and 'how' behind each kind of error. EA helps to build new understanding of language processing. It helps students to get rid of generalizations and misconceptions. Dulay (1982, p 138) [7] stated that EA allows teachers to record data, observe the progress of learners and plan remedial measures. The purpose of EA is to provide corrective feedback.

Richards *et al.* (1996, p 127) have given a number of advantages of EA. According to them, EA helps to understand language learning strategies, understanding the causes of errors, identifying the common difficulties in language learning, devising new methods and materials for teaching. Michaelides (1930, p30) believes that EA can be useful to all stakeholders like teachers, students and researchers. He adds that EA gives corrective feedback to students. Research findings can benefit the education system because EA is a systematic process.

Anefnaf (2017, p 4) states that the occurrence of errors doesn't only indicate that the learner has not learned something yet, but also it gives the linguist the idea of whether the teaching method applied was effective or it needs to be changed. Corder (1976, p 163) supports this view in the words, "The occurrence of errors is merely signs of the present inadequacy of our teaching methods."

No doubt error analysis has its advantages. Yet, one must not overlook the shortcomings in the strategy. For example, while focusing on errors, one may miss the correct use of linguistic features which may be the result of interlanguage. Error analysis completely misses the factor of avoidance. If students are not confident about the morphosyntactic rules, they avoid their use. Very often, EFL learners avoid using articles because they lack confidence.

2.2 Literature Review
Error analysis and contrastive analysis studies are conducted by researchers from many countries all over the world. However, the situations differ, making every study unique and important. The overall aims and objectives of all studies are common yet the contexts and conditions vary.

Hourani (2008) [13] examined the kinds of errors committed by Emirati students while writing essays. His sample consisted of 105 students from five schools. He noticed that the frequently committed errors in the essays were related to verb form, tenses, word order, articles, subject-verb concord, voice, prepositions, plurals and auxiliaries. he found that these errors were intralingual. He suggested that inclusion of more guided and free writing practice exercises in the text book could possibly help to improve the writing skills of students.

A study was conducted by Nayernia (2011) [16] in order to identify the intralingual errors of Irani EFL learners and to find out the impact of L1 on the acquisition of L2. The students wrote some paragraphs on a topic of their choice and 30 sentences were selected for analysis. The researcher discovered that less than 20% errors were interlingual and the remaining were intralingual. The study also emphasized the importance of error analysis for enhancing the writing skills of students.

Students mostly commit errors in essays. Rostami and Boroomand (2015) studied the sources of errors committed by Irani EFL students in essays. They identified, classified and described the errors on the basis of their sources. The corpus consisted of essays written by 50 male and 50 female students. They also found that few of the errors resulted from L1 transfer and most of them were intralingual. Both male and female students made similar kinds of mistakes but females committed more errors compared to males.

Zainal (1990) [22] identified two kinds of errors in the writings of Malaysian students – morphological and syntactic. In the first category, the common errors were related to omission of plural morphemes, subject verb agreement, genitive markers. The syntactic errors included tense forms and auxiliaries. These structures do not exist in their native language Malay, hence, learners tend to omit them. Daru and Subramaniam (2009) [6] also analysed a corpus of 72 essays written by Malaysian students. They noted the following mistakes common among Malaysian students in essay writing: Verb tense (11.2%), Plural forms (33.3%), prepositions (9.3%), subject-verb concord (7%) and word order (7%). They also found that the errors were intralingual.

Wee *et al.* (2010) [21] conducted a study in order to investigate verb-form errors, their frequency and types, committed by Malaysian students studying in the second year of college. The errors found were mostly related to addition, omission and ordering. Omission of third person singular marker 's' was a frequent error. The researchers recommend the study of English grammar as essential for EFL Malaysian learners.

A major study in this area was conducted by Al-Shormani (2012) [1]. He attempted to find out the sources of syntactic errors committed by Yemeni EFL learners while writing compositions. 50 Yemeni learners from Ibb University, Yemen, were selected for the study. He applied James' error taxonomy according to which there are 4 types of syntactic errors: L1 transfer, L2 influence, and L1 and L2 unrecognized errors. The study revealed genuine problems faced by Yemeni students with English syntax. The researcher recommended inductive method for teaching grammar so that learners get an opportunity to discover rules rather than learning them by heart. The method is similar to that recommended by Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988). It consists of 4 stages 1) presentation 2) focussed practice 3) communicative practice 4) incorporating information gap and 5) teacher feedback.

It can be observed from the literature review that researchers value the importance of error analysis while dealing with writing skill related problems of EFL students. It is also observed that EFL learners from different countries and communities have unique problems depending upon the similarities and differences in their native languages and English. L1 transfer can take place at least to some extent, affecting the syntax of the target language. Hence, the researcher decided to analyse the written essays of Iraqi EFL learners and understand the types, frequency of errors, reasons, that is whether they are intra-language or inter-language and how they can be avoided.

3.1 Procedure
A descriptive qualitative method was used for the study. The researcher analysed sentences consisting of morphosyntactic errors in a corpus of 80 essays written by Iraqi EFL students. The researcher identified the errors, classified them and calculated their frequency in order to compare the frequency of the different types of errors. The errors and types were tabulated as follows:

Sentence	Type of error	Total number of instances in all the essays	Remarks

3.2 Sample
A corpus of 80 essays written by 80 second year EFL students was analysed. The students wrote a composition of 100 to 150 words on a topic of their choice. They were asked to select a descriptive topic. All the incorrect sentences form all the 30 essays which consisted of morphological and / or syntactic errors were identified. The total number of sentences consisting of morphosyntactic errors in all the 30 essays was 442.

3.3 Scope and limitations
The study can be useful to all ESL / EFL learners whose native language is Arabic. The study is limited to mophosyntactic errors; it does not include all types of errors committed generally by EFL learners. The study is limited to the overt errors committed by EFL learners while writing essays assigned by the teacher. In an overt error, the deviation is apparent in the surface form. Covert errors may be committed in the essays, that is errors which are superficially well-formed but one cannot understand what the writer meant. The covert errors were left out of this study.

4.1 Section 4 – Data Analysis

List and classification of errors

Sentence	Type of error	Total number of instances in all the essays	Remarks
The aims of the project was to inspire children.	Subject-verb agreement	176	Students cannot conjugate the verbs according to number. (39.8%)
They complete this activities in one year.	Addition of plural morpheme	51	Students add plural morphemes unnecessarily. (11.5%)
I work never at night. She came daily here.	Word order	18	Students cannot place the adverbs of frequency in the right position in a sentence. (4.1%)
She tooked bread from the market.	Verb forms	23	Students over generalize the past tense rules. (5.2%)
There were twenty apple in the basket.	Omission of word morpheme	65	Students tend to omit the plural and past tense morphemes. (14.7%)
The teacher wanted to learn them addition.	Incorrect words	11	Students use incorrect words. (2.4%)
There were 14 boy's in the team.	Use of apostrophe in plural form	66	Students are not sure where to put the apostrophe. 14.9%
The neighbours house was very big.	Omission of apostrophe	19	Students tend to omit the genitive marker. 4.3%
The girl's uniforms were ready.	Genitive case	13	Students are not sure where to put the genitive marker. 2.9%

4.2 Observations

It can be observed from the above table that maximum number of errors committed by the students are related to subject-verb agreement. This type of error is intra-lingual. Verb form does not depend upon the number of the subject whether it is singular or plural in Arabic language which is the native language of the students. This error type is common among EFL learners in almost every part of the world where English is not the native language. The rule in English is very simple; there is a difference in the verb form only in case of third person singular noun. In spite of this, EFL Iraqi learners are observed to commit this error very frequently. Whether it is the copula or any other regular / irregular verb, the percentage of subject verb agreement errors is very high, that is 39.8%.

In 51 instances, that is 11.5% cases, students added the plural morpheme to singular indicators or demonstratives. The cause of this kind of error can be sheer negligence or carelessness on the part of students. In this particular instance, the student knew well that only one activity was conducted during the year. The student had written about that single activity throughout the essay. Yet, in one sentence, he pluralized the noun.

There were 18 instances related to incorrect positioning of adverbs in a sentence. When there are more than one adverbs in a sentence, the position of adverbs is almost fixed (with few exceptions, when they can occur at the beginning or end of a sentence). It depends upon the kind of adverb. They occur in a specific order in a sentence. Most Iraqi EFL students had no idea about the placing of adverbs in a sentence, so they committed errors.

Most verbs end in '-ed' in the past tense. However, there are many exceptions to the rule. Some verbs like 'cut' or 'put' retain the same form in the past tense. In some verbs, the vowel sound changes, as in the case of 'take' which becomes 'took'. Students may not be aware that some verbs are already in the past tense, yet, when they use the past tense in sentences, they tend to add '-ed' to the past tense forms. It is impossible to remember the past tense formation rules and their exceptions which are numerous. This kind of error is the result of overgeneralization of the rule. The frequency of errors is 23 that is 4.1%. Although negligible, this kind of error cannot be neglected.

Omission of the plural morpheme is another kind of common error committed by EFL students in general. This is an intralingual error. 65 instances of this error were found in the essays. The possible causes can be negligence or lack of awareness of the precise plural morpheme to be attached to different wards. As stated earlier, the morphemes differ. There are several rules and exceptions to rules regarding pluralization in English. According to Richards (1971, p 2&3) incomplete application of rules, ignorance of rule restrictions and overgeneralization of rules are three common types of intralingual errors.

Errors related to incorrect use of words were rare, only 4.1%. It may happen because of not knowing the correct word, that is weak vocabulary or sometimes, because students fail to understand the usage of words. Knowing the meaning of a word is not enough; students must learn how to use the word in different contexts.

As many as 66 instances of incorrect use of apostrophe were found in the essays. This error is common among EFL learners all over the world and not just in Iraq. Once students learn the genitive case, they tend to put the apostrophe in plural words every time. It is difficult to trace the cause for this error; it may be psychological.

At the same time, few instances were observed when students did not use the apostrophe even in a genitive case. 4.3% students omitted the apostrophe. This may be due to ignorance about its use or perhaps lack of confidence regarding its use. Many EFL students are not sure where exactly to put the apostrophe, whether before the genitive marker or after it. 13 more similar instances were found in which the apostrophe was put in the wrong place. In the word 'its' even when it is used in the genitive case, the rule is that the genitive marker is not necessary. Such are the confusing rules in English.

5.1 Discussion

Committing errors is part of the process of learning a language. Whether it is oral or written medium, errors are natural. EFL learners are more afraid of committing errors

while writing essays because the essays are going to be assessed and perhaps marked / judged by the teachers. Written essays are documented evidence of their language performance. Hence, if teachers identify the errors commonly committed by learners, classify the errors and try to understand why they are common, it enables teachers to help learners to avoid the errors. Errors are either inter-lingual or intralingual. When it is clear which errors are cause due to interference of the native language and which are caused due to the nature of the second language, the teachers can guide the students accordingly to avoid making the errors. For this, teachers must have knowledge of the native language of the learners. Research has proved that error analysis is beneficial especially in case of ESL/ EFL learners. It is certainly not a futile exercise.

As per the behaviourist view, errors indicate failure on the part of teachers a swell as students. According to the Mentalist theory, errors are inevitable and are evidence that learners are proceeding in the right direction towards mastering the rules of the new language.

Errors are systematic unlike mistakes so they can be predicted. If teachers study errors carefully and can predict them in case of new EFL learners, they can prepare learning material in such a way and adapt their teaching methods and materials so that students will not commit the errors.

5.2 Conclusion
It can be concluded that Iraqi EFL learners commit a variety of morphosyntactic errors while writing essays. They include error related to subject-verb agreement, addition/ deletion of plural and/or past tense morphemes, word order, verb forms, use of incorrect words and genitive case markers. Some of the errors are intralingual and some are interlingual. Most of these types of errors are common among EFL learners across the world. Errors are essential while learning a language. The Iraqis are not any special case. Hence, it can be said that morphosyntactic errors in the writings of EFL learners are a common problem and issue. An analysis of the errors can help learners to become aware of the reasons so that they can be avoided. While a theoretical analysis of errors helps to explore underlying language structures and problems in language learning, applied EA helps to design materials and methods for resolving the problems and preparing remedial courses.

5.3 Suggestions and recommendations
Equipping students with language proficiency in all four skills is the ultimate aim of EFL courses. Teachers handling EFL courses should conduct error analysis of written essays of the students periodically, each type of error must be identified and isolated. The teachers must give deep though and try to understand why that type of an error is committed. The teachers must take into account the characteristics of the native language of the learners in order to understand the reason behind the errors. Once the cause of the error is understood, the teacher must plan and devise ways of making the students aware of the errors, the causes and finding ways to help students to avoid that kind of error in writing. This needs deep thinking on the part of teachers. Remedial teaching may be necessary in some cases. The teachers may have to find a new and suitable method for teaching some grammatical units.

The evaluation of written essays must be regular and error analysis can be carried out periodically. EA can help

students, teachers, researchers and course or syllabus designers.

Mistakes can be self-corrected but errors cannot be self-corrected by EFL learners. Hence, teachers must help learners to enable them to avoid errors, particularly if they can be predicted.

Similar studies can be carried out for different levels and age groups. Researchers can list the common types of errors committed by EFL learners in non-native English-speaking countries and suggest different ways of handling them.

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