Error Analysis in English Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the common errors made by the Saudi students (male and female- 60 each) of Jazan University in their English paragraph writing. The study was conducted in four leading colleges of Jazan University. The instrument used for this study was students' paragraphs written in English language in the answer scripts of final examination. All the errors were identified and the most common errors found were: verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, word order, prepositions, articles, auxiliaries and spellings. These errors were classified and tabulated according to their number of frequency in the students' English paragraph writing. The responses of 120 students and 10 teachers were taken reflecting their attitudes and opinion towards the English paragraph writing skills. The responses were further clarified by conducting interviews with 4 coordinators to strengthen further understanding and interpretation of the results. The data revealed that the Saudi students commit different types of errors, and most of these errors were due to intralingual transfer than the interlingual. Besides, the findings and the results clearly showed that English paragraph writing skill needs more attention and improvement and development and the recommendations and pedagogical implications acknowledges the significant role of EFL teacher, curriculum designers, educators and policymakers to get the desired results.

Key Words: error analysis, paragraph, intralingual, interlingual, pedagogical

1. Introduction

Writing skill, a part of the communication skills is vital and indispensable in one's career. It's very important for budding engineers, managers and professionals to use proper language abilities and grammar in writings and communicate well because of extensive use of the Internet and a highly competitive job environment. It is an undeniable fact that understanding of the English language and grammar is essential and evident; if vocabulary is the flesh of the language and then grammar is the skeleton. Writing has always been considered difficult in mother tongue in any language but it becomes even more complex and colossus to write in the foreign language; it is the "most difficult

of the language abilities and skills to acquire (Allen & Corder: 1974) but the level of perception and complexity varies between native and non-native speakers. The learners in the current context are Arabic thereby making writing in English a more complex. Mother tongue or the first language always becomes constraint and hindrance in acquiring second language in the process of writing in English (Benson, 2002; Cedar, 2004; Chen & Huang, 2003; Collins, 2002; Jarvis, 2000; Jiang, 1995; Lado, 1957; Liu, 1998; Mori, 1998; Yu, 1996). Likewise, writing in English as a foreign language often imposes a huge challenge to the learners at all stages, particularly paragraph writing activity

which is a preliminary step or a part of essay writing.

Writing a paragraph in English is a problem for Saudi students studying at Jazan University and EFL Teachers from various countries after effective teaching often found that despite good learning about the subject, the students usually commit many mistakes in paragraph writing; as mentioned, that students who have memorized a good amount of English vocabulary and grammar rules, but have seldom put that knowledge to practical use (Wachs, 1993). The students spend most of their time in translating words, phrases, and sentences from Arabic to English that jeopardize their writing. The teacher must analyze students' perception and prior knowledge of writing skills to exercise the right teaching strategy to guide and help the students to practice to bring down their common errors. As Richards & Renandya (2002:303) affirms that there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these notions into legible text.

The learners have tremendous knowledge and sound writing skills in their first language, but they always hesitate, demotivated, afraid of or unwilling to write in English, but by converting their ideas, concepts, prior and current knowledge to consistent practice under strict guidance, the learner involve in "a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text" (Bereiter & Scardamalia:1987). Any writing needs consistent, conscious effort and practice in creating, composing, developing and analyzing ideas. But, in reality, most

students find it difficult to write paragraphs in English and always hesitate to write and feel about committing errors which is alarming the EFL teachers today.

Enormous researches have been undertaken on this subject, but very few could reach to the grass root of the common problems that the Saudi EFL learners make in writing. This multi-dimensional proposed research on 'Error analysis in English writing: A Case Study of Saudi Students' involved both students and EFL teachers and employed a mixed method design- first quantitative, and then qualitative research methods, is a seminal attempt to examine and discuss methodically the root cause of the common language and grammatical problems made by Saudi EFL learners in their paragraph writing at the Jazan university along with the conclusion and recommendations that have been often ignored or missed in the previous works.

2. Literature Review

The researcher explains the development of the concept in the succeeding paragraphs under different heads.

2.1 Errors and Mistakes: Not synonyms, but different terms

Errors play a significant role in the teaching and learning of foreign language. But majority of teachers are not well familiar with this and relate 'error' and 'mistakes' as synonymous terms, whereas they need to understand them to derive at a concrete and pedagogical solution to the subject problem. There is a comprehensive definition of these terms given in Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1992) which states that a learner makes mistakes when writing or speaking because of lack of

attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspects of performance. Thus, mistakes can be self-corrected when attention is called whereas, an error is defined as the use of linguistic item in a way that a fluent or native speakers of the language regards it as showing faulty or incomplete learning.

After describing the difference between error and mistakes, let's understand the error elaborately as a systematic deviation, when the learner has not learnt something and consistently get its wrong (Norrish, 1987:7). The systematic deviation (that happens repeatedly) is a common term used by Cunningworth (1987) when he states that errors are systematic deviations from the norms of the language being learned.

2.2 Classification of Errors

Corder (1971) classifies the Errors as the errors of Competence and the errors of performance. Errors of competence are further classified first as interlingual which depends on linguistic differences between the mother tongue and the target language and second the intralingual error which is cause due to overgeneralization in both the languages- mother tongue and the target language learning. Errors of performance happen when learners' mistakes occur due to stress, fatigue, etc. and are due to false starts or slips of the tongue. Burt and Kiparsky (1975) classified as local (affecting a part of a sentence) and global error (affecting the meaning of the whole sentence). The term Error is also required to find out something about the learning process and about the strategies employed by human beings learning another language (Lungu, 2003:323) and are dispensable here while teaching EFL learners at Jazan University.

2.3 Causes of Errors

Richards (1971) shows the four main causes of intralingual errors: incomplete application of rules, overgeneralization, false concepts hypothesized and ignorance of rule restrictions. Brown (1980:173-181) further mentioned four sources of errors: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning and the communication strategies. Norrish (1983) mentioned three causes of errors: carelessness, first language interference and the translation. Keshavarz (2008) stated five causes of error: transfer of training, language learning strategies, interlingual error, communication strategies and last the intralingua and developmental errors.

2.3.1 Interlingual Error

Selinker (1972) first used the term that denotes the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learner's L1 and the target language (Abi Samra, 2003:5) and the errors noticed to first language interference are termed interlingual errors. Kavaliauskiene (2009:4) stated that transfer of errors may occur because the learners lack the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second language routine. He classifies into: positive and negative. When the transfer is due to the similarity in the structure of the two languages, then it's a 'positive transfer' and if it is because of difference in the structure of the two languages, then it is called 'negative transfer' (Wilkins, 1972:199). In context to this article, It is noteworthy to mention here that the structure of L1 (Arabic language) and the target language (English) is different. These errors may occur due to transfer of phonological, grammatical and lexical or

semantic elements of the L1 into the target language.

2.3.2   Intralingual Errors

These errors occur because of faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer (Keshavarz, 2003:62; Fang and Xue-mei, 2007:11). Erdogan (2005:266) further expanded as the errors occur as a result of learners' attempt to build up concepts and hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience with it. Saudi students' perception, lack of interest and motivation and overconfidence in some cases also contribute and lead to intralingual errors. These errors may occur due to overgeneralization, simplification, communication based errors.

2.4 Error analysis

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make in writing. In linguistics, the study of errors and their analysis has been a central field of interest for the researchers and a number of approaches have been viewed which can be bifurcated into two main categories, linguistic and non-linguistic. The term has its roots probably in the 1960s when Corder (1967) also known as profounder and the father of this term studied it different from his predecessors, further developed by Brown (1980) and Crystal (1987) respectively in their works. According to Corder: errors are 'flaws' which must be eliminated, but pivotal to the learners in learning the target or any language and felt that the teachers, learners and researchers can gain enormous from error analysis. Richard (1971) expanded its scope further by stating that errors are of great significance not only for linguists and psycholinguists but for teachers also.

Then, Brown (1980:166) states that the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by the learner. Crystal (1987:112) explains it as a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics. Xie and Jiang (2007) revealed four productive allied aspects of error analysis, both in language teaching and learning. Firstly, an overall knowledge of a teacher is obligatory about the learner's errors which are unavoidable and teachers should not focus on local errors of the students. Secondly, the hierarchy of errors reflects learners' progress towards their goal as a feedback in order to take few remedial measures to lessen the errors. Thirdly, committing errors is a device adapted to learn and know the errors of learners. Finally, to take appropriate steps to handle and avoid recurrence of the errors.

Error analysis facilitates teachers, learners and syllabus designers as there can be constructive outcomes of the remedial material regarding error analysis and it can assist to point out the learner's linguistic problems as well as to highlight the grey areas of the student. The syllabus should be constructed in an appropriate organism which encompasses all the errors (Keshavarz, 2008). Therefore, we may precisely say that error analysis is an in-depth study of learners' errors in any target language to find out the deviation from the standard rules of the target language and perceptive core reason along with the remedial measures to prevent the re-

occurrence of the similar types of errors in the future (Sharma Vipin: 2015).

2.4.5 Error Analysis's Reliability over Contrast Analysis

The error Analysis approach is a qualitative approach and is considered as the most reliable approach for the study of errors because it is pertinent to the student's performance and its scope is limited to linguistic interference. The eminent scholars favorable to error analysis are of the opinion that both languages (L1 & L2) have similar errors and all viewed that mainly the source and target language acquisition both follow the similar process. (Corder, 1967; Dulay & Burt, 1972; Richards, 1971). Error analysis is preferred over contrast analysis because an empirical error analysis reveals the accurate and precise details which provide to decide remedial lesson, exercising with the sequencing of material, a pertinent emphasize on particular linguistic component and achievement test with proficiency regarding content (Richards, 1974, Fisiak, 1981). The error analysis is more precise, meticulous, systematic, consistent and constructive in analyzing errors in target language.

3.   Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives

The objective of the current study is to investigate the types of writing errors and to identify the frequency of writing errors performed by Saudi male and female students studying at different colleges of Jazan University while writing English paragraphs.

3.2 Research Questions

The researchers have focused on the following questions:

- What type of writing errors is committed by the Saudi students studying at Jazan University in paragraph writing?
- Which error does occur more frequently in paragraph writing?
- Which error does occur less frequently paragraph writing?
- Who commits more errors- male or female students?

It is hypothesized by the researcher that errors in subject-verb agreement occur more frequently than in other grammatical errors.

3.3 Research Design

The present study aims at investigating the types and frequency of writing errors committed by the Saudi students studying at various colleges in Jazan University. The study embraces both the quantitative and the qualitative research design to accomplish its objectives. As Nunan (2001) states quantitative research as the techniques employed to collect a large number of data or any measurable things. Besides, quantitative research also enables us to summarize vast resources of data and helps in comparisons with other studies (Kruger, 2003). The qualitative research ensures confirmation of the findings and results of the former and brings more accuracy to the results and proves worthy to be exercised in future researches.

3.4 Limitation of the Study

The data that were used for this research has been derived from the written answer scripts of only 120 EFL students at four colleges, 10 EFL teachers and 04 coordinators of Jazan University. The data that was collected came from one piece of paragraph written on different topics in a semester final exam.

3.5 Participants & Material

3.5.1 Participants

The participants were 120 Saudi students from the four different colleges of Jazan University for the academic year 2014-2015.

For qualitative study, ten EFL teachers were interviewed by the researcher to get their views on the students' problems in paragraph writing and to verify the results extracted from the answer scripts. The researcher had gone further to ensure accuracy of the results by interviewing four coordinators from different campuses that would help and guide the students, teachers, evaluators and policy makers to design a curriculum that can assist and lessen the problems of making an error in paragraph writing.

3.5.2 Material

The quantitative study that focuses on the most common errors in paragraph writing, the researcher selected 120 answer scripts of students (final semester examination) from four colleges following random sampling technique. The sample consisted answer scripts of equal number of male and female (60 male and 60 female). The answer scripts were taken from the following colleges of Jazan University:

1) College of Engineering, Main Campus
2) College of Computer Sciences, Main Campus
3) College of Business Administration, Main Campus
4) College for Women, Samata

Total 120selected answer scripts of final examination were drawn from English Language Centre examination cell from each of the abovementioned colleges. All of them were Saudi students with different specialization who studied English as a compulsory subject at secondary level and from the Arabic medium background. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years. All the students' participants were homogeneous in terms of their linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic background. They were also imparted formal teaching and instructions in English and therefore it was expected that they possessed the required knowledge of writing skills in the target language.

The data and results prepared though interviews (of EFL teachers and coordinators) conducted for qualitative purpose.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The researcher analyzed all the data collected using Chanquoy (2001) classification of writing errors. Chanquoy classified these errors into three main types. First, spelling errors that deal with the errors related to the orthography errors. Second, the grammatical errors that discuss the errors related to gender and number, agreement of nouns, verbs and adjectives, and subject-verb agreement. Third, the punctuation errors that deals with punctuation and capitalization errors. The researcher used only the first two types and the errors required to make the study objective and productive.

The findings of the study comprise two sub-sections. The quantified data collected from answer scripts (male & female) in the first section. This section tabulates and classifies the types of errors- verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, word order, prepositions, articles, plurality and auxiliaries made by subjects in the paragraph writings. The data obtained were analyzed and quantified according to

categories and frequency of occurrence of errors and percentage found among the subjects in paragraph writings. The second section discusses the qualitative data obtained from the EFL teachers and the coordinators on their attitude and opinion towards the English writing skill to analyze, confirm and correlate with the quantitative data.

4.1 Types and Frequency of Errors in Paragraph Writing

Data analysis of the samples of collecting answer scripts comprised of error identification, interpretation and classification and a statement of error frequency. Having identified all the errors the researcher classified them in accordance with their frequency rate in order to find out the error which is the most frequent and least frequent and who commits the most male/female among Saudi ESL learners. The tables given below summarize the frequency rate of the errors.

Table 1. Analysis of errors produced by Saudi EFL learners (male & female)

Type of Error	Frequency of errors	Percentage %	
Verb tense and form	183	19.98	3rd
Subject-verb agreement	218	23.8	2nd
Word order	139	15.17	4th
Prepositions	80	8.73	
Articles	37	4.04	
Auxiliaries	28	3.06	
Spellings	231	25.22	1st
Total	916	100	

In table 1, the learners' (both male and female) highest error frequency found in their spellings is (N: 231), in subject-verb agreement (N: 218), in verb tense and form (N: 183), in word order (N: 139), in prepositions (N: 80), in the use of articles (N: 37), in the use of auxiliaries (N: 28). Hence, the learners made nine hundred and forty six errors in all in all the eight abovementioned domain.

Table 2. Analysis of errors produced by Saudi EFL learners (male)

Type of Error	Frequency of errors	Percentage %	
Verb tense and form	87	20.1	3rd
Subject-verb agreement	114	26.32	1st
Word order	69	15.94	
Prepositions	45	10.4	
Articles	15	3.46	
Auxiliaries	10	2.30	
Spellings	93	21.48	2nd
Total	433	100	

In table 2, the learners' highest error frequency found in their subject-verb agreement is (N: 114), in spellings (N: 93), in verb tense and form (N: 87), in word order (N: 69), in prepositions (N: 45), in the use of articles (N: 15), in the use of auxiliaries (N: 10). Hence, the learners made four hundred and thirty three errors in all in all the eight abovementioned domain.

Table 3.Analysis of errors produced by Saudi EFL learners (female)

Type of Error	Frequency of errors	Percentage %	
Verb tense and form	96	19.87	3rd
Subject-verb agreement	104	21.53	2nd
Word order	70	14.5	
Prepositions	35	7.25	
Articles	22	4.55	
Auxiliaries	18	3.73	
Spellings	138	28.57	1st
Total	483	100	

In table 3, the learners' highest error frequency found in their spellings is (N: 138), in subject-verb agreement (N: 104), in verb tense and form (N: 96), in word order (N: 70), in prepositions (N: 35), in the use of articles (N: 22), in the use of auxiliaries (N: 18). Hence, the learners made four hundred and eighty three errors in all in all the eight abovementioned domain.

4.2 Attitude and opinion of EFL teachers toward the English writing skills

The EFL teachers teaching these subjects have been interviewed and found that they all are unanimous about the low level of students, committing the errors in paragraph writing, lack in essentials of communication in English, lack of interest and motivation in learning EFL, interlingual and intralingual factors affecting their learning, Cambridge syllabi mismatching with the students' level and studying the subject merely to pass a prerequisite to their degree. They didn't accept the bitter fact that they also contribute substantially in students' committing errors in a paragraph writings. Besides, the coordinators of these colleges were also expressed similar opinions except that the students can be motivated

and indirectly held teachers also accountable marginally for these errors.

The present study was conducted to find out EFL learners' problems in their paragraph writings in English in semester final exam to address the following research questions:

1. What type of writing errors is committed by the Saudi students studying at Jazan University in paragraph writing?
2. Which error does occur more frequently in paragraph writing?
3. Which error does occur less frequently paragraph writing?
4. Who commits more errors- male or female students?

As to the first research question, the findings of the study revealed that the subjects committed numerous errors when writing English paragraphs. These errors include: - verb tense and form, subject-verb agreement, word order, prepositions, articles, auxiliaries and spelling errors committed by subjects in the paragraph writings. The results considerably align with the researcher's previous study that:

It is worthy here to mention that correct and precise writing is difficult in all languages and needs practice to attain expertise and when a learner starts writing in the foreign language like here at Saudi

Arabia, he faces many difficulties because he lacks the fundamental knowledge of English. The concerted efforts should be made to teach, develop through practice and evaluate the writing skills from school level. Later on, the basic and in-depth knowledge along with knowledge of 7Cs would definitely make the learners more confident and competent in writing formal or informal contents (Sharma Vipin: 2015)

As to the second research question, the findings of the study indicated that the learners' most frequent error is spelling mistakes (25.22%) in the Target Language in English paragraph writing. The female students committed more errors (N: 138) in spellings than the male students (N: 93). The results substantiate and demonstrate the previous researches that "the main problem in writing is attributed to spelling mistakes as it has been noted that many English language learners, including Arab students, have difficulties with English spelling" (Al-zuoud, K. M., & Kabilan, 2013).So the learners need explicit formal pedagogical instructions from EFL teacher and practice in this regard.

As regards the third research question, the least frequent error in the paragraph writing was found in their use of auxiliaries (3.06%) in the L2. It may be due to the fact that the students have hardly written five to seven lines in a paragraph making less use of the auxiliaries.

The findings of the study in table 3 answers the last research question that shows that the students (total) have a higher frequency of spelling errors (N: 231) than the frequency of errors in subject-verb agreement (N: 218) proving hypothesis of the researcher wrong. But, the findings support the hypothesis in case

of grammatical error frequency which is highest in subject-verb agreement comparing to the other grammatical errors. The male students have more frequency of errors in subject-verb agreement (N: 114) than the female students (N: 104). The students should be encouraged to adopt a blended learning approach and practice to lessen these errors using ICT, online and other related resources respectively (Sharma Vipin: 2014).

5. Conclusion

An old adage 'To err is human' may be an acceptable excuse and errors in L2 learner's writings are unavoidable, but can't carry it along with learning EFL language. The results revealed that most of the learners' errors contribute substantially to both inter-lingual and intra-lingual and inadequate knowledge of the fundamentals of English language. To explicit these common errors, the teacher must take the stock of this grave situation and devise his plan of action judiciously to make and create students' awareness of the vitality of learning English language as the need of the hour along with the learners' level and needs to be looked into. The teacher should exemplify a sense of brotherhood, the feeling of being concerned (FBC) for his students to motivate and create interest to learn English and ultimately reducing students' anxiety (Sharma Vipin: 2015). In order to avoid committing or re-occurrence of the same errors again, the teachers should be cognizant of the findings and results of researchers' works on errors analysis, factors like lack of motivation, mother tongue interference, social and cultural aspects, assorted learner's linguistic knowledge, perception of linguistic system, medium transfer and their own

perception about their students while preparing their learning objectives and lesson plans respectively. The teacher has to travel extra miles to lessen these errors through preparing remedial materials, and planning of teaching and learning strategies to facilitate learners to improve their English writing skills flawlessly.

6. Recommendations

The researcher feels that the error analysis is a significant part and a vital organ in EFL teaching-learning process which displays both teachers-learner's exact status of linguistic development in teaching-learning process. The study revealed that the errors are attributed to both inter-lingual (mother tongue-L1 influence) and intra-lingual called (developmental), thereby directing teacher to make the necessary changes in the teaching strategy, materials, techniques, etc. to get constructive and progressive results. The teacher should familiarize the students about the morphological variations involved while transferring ideas/speech from L1 to L2, perceptible differences of phonemes to eliminate spelling errors and lastly the distinctive features and differences in a paragraph writing in L1 to L2 respectively. Then, the teacher should believe and adopt the technique of 'Practice makes a man perfect' for the learners in improving the writing skills and considerable lessening in errors. The teacher should prepare adequate numbers of practice exercises for the students to be practiced under his guidance providing instant corrective measures as a remedy exclusively focusing on errors committed. Sharma Vipin (2014:99) has rightly asserted, "Creative writing should be encouraged, as it engages the learners and the finished work usually provides them with the sense of pride, confidence and self-recognition."The results may be passed on the policy makers, curriculum designers, teachers and scholars devise strategies and take vital decisions to develop and enrich teaching-learning process. Besides, the training programs may be conducted on motivation and error analysis for the teachers and linguists to identify, classify and analyze EFL learners' errors to modify their teaching strategies accordingly. This research further opens up new avenues and scope for the linguists, scholars and researchers explore more in error analysis in writing skills and others to contribute and enrich in the linguistic development and teaching-learning process at large.

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