

An Analysis of Grammatical Errors in Writing Made by Turkish Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This study investigates and classifies grammatical errors in writing made by twenty second-year students at the Department of English Language learning English as a foreign language in Gazi University of Turkey. The students are enrolled in a writing course in the first semester of the academic year 2011 – 2012. They were asked to write about the difficulties they face while learning English. The errors committed by the subjects are classified under five categories. They are errors in tenses, in the use of prepositions, in the use of articles, in the use of active and passive, and morphological errors.

The results show that the participants made 179 grammatical errors of which 27 errors are in tenses, 50 errors in the use of prepositions, 52 errors in the use of articles, 17 errors in the use of passive and active voice and 33 were morphological errors.

Keywords: Grammatical errors, Error analysis, Contrastive analysis, English learning

1. Introduction

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is based on Structuralism and Behaviorism which gained great popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. CA was formulated by Fries (1945) and developed by Lado (1957). CA deals with the comparison of the structures of two languages or more and with the attempt of finding out the points of differences which are the main source of difficulty for language learner. The main aim of CA is to compare phonological systems, morphological systems, syntax and lexical meanings of two or more languages. The development of CA is the result of the need to teach L2 in the most effective way. As Lado (in Ellis) makes clear that “The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real problems are and can provide efficient methods for teaching them.” (1985:23). According to CA, L2 errors are the result of differences between L1 and L2. The strong version of CA claims that these differences can be used to predict the errors that will occur. The weak version of CA presupposes that these differences can be used only to identify some of the total errors that usually arise. (cf. Ellis, 1996).

Error Analysis (EA) henceforth is a branch of Applied Linguistics and has two functions. The first function is theoretical which has its place in methodology and describes the learner’s knowledge of the target language. It also helps the researcher find out the relation between the knowledge and teaching the learner has been receiving. The practical area of EA is to overcome the mismatch between the knowledge of the learner and the demands of the situation.

Mourtaga (2004) points out that errors and mistakes are different from each other because an error cannot be self-corrected and is caused by a learner’s inadequate knowledge of the target language whereas a mistake can be self-corrected. Gas and Selinker (2001) explains that a mistake can be self-centered, but an error is systematic.

Errors occur repeatedly and cannot be recognized by the learner. Hence, only the teacher or researcher could locate them. While mistakes according to Yuksel (2007) are not a result of deficiency in competence. They can be characterized by the slips of the pen or the slips of the tongue. Lapses may result from some factors such as memory failure and physical or mental fatigue. Richards et al describe errors as “the use of a linguistic item in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete action” (1985:95).

The Interlanguage was introduced by Selinker (1972) and views the learner’s verbal performance in L2 as a series of overlapping systems characterized by having aspects from both L1 and L2. Selinker talks about five central processes related to Interlanguage:

1. Language transfer: This process is a result of overgeneralization and of fossilization of items, rules and subsystems, which are transferred from the native language to the target language during the performance of interlanguage.
2. Transfer of training: The errors in this process result from misleading and overgeneralized information given by textbooks and language teacher.

3. Strategies of second language learning: There are different strategies which affect the surface structure of sentences. This process is exemplified by the tendency of learners to simplify the target language.
4. Strategies of second language communication: This strategy can be characterized by the avoidance of grammatical formatives like articles, plural forms, past tense forms, etc.
5. Overgeneralization of target language linguistic material: Second language learners tend to overgeneralize the rules in the target language in order to reduce them to a simpler level.

Hourani remarks that the primary causes of errors can be as follows: “Interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are those which are related to the native language whereas intralingual errors are those which are due to the language being learned.” (2008:11).

Correction is essential in helping students become more accurate in using the foreign language. Russel and Spada (2006) stress that there is growing evidence that error correction is overall useful and can be helpful in L2 learning.

2. Methods, Sample and Procedure

The subjects of this study are 20 Turkish second-year students at the Department of English language learning English as a foreign language in Gazi University of Turkey. They were enrolled in a writing course during the first semester of the academic year 2011 – 2012. The students were supposedly good in writing because they had to write different topics during the attended course under the supervision of their instructor. The subjects were asked to write about the difficulties they face while learning English. The compositions were all written in a 50-minute class session. The compositions were required to fulfill the following criteria:

1. The students’ writing should consist of about 200 – 250 words.
2. The participants ought to take into consideration elements of good writing: unity, coherence, cohesion, grammar, and vocabulary.

The researcher analyzed and classified the errors of the compositions. Then, copies of the same compositions were given to two other raters who had enough experience in teaching “paragraph writing” at the department of English in Alzaytoonah University of Jordan.

Dulay et al (1982) point out that there are four major linguistic categories of errors. These are:

1. Orthography (spelling).
2. Lexicon and semantics (vocabulary and meaning).
3. Syntax and morphology (grammar).
4. Discourse (style).

The researcher categorizes the identified errors into: tenses; prepositions; articles; active and passive voice and morphology.

On the basis of the students' results, the researcher will include in this paper some pedagogical implications for teachers and textbook writers.

3. Results, Discussion and Application

Twenty students who learn English as a foreign language (L2) at Gazi university of Turkey were chosen as the subjects for this study. They were all enrolled in a writing course designed for second-year students in the academic year 2011- 2012. The students were asked to write an essay of 200 -250 words about the difficulties they face in learning English. The researcher and two other raters analyzed the written data, and then classified and identified the grammatical errors into errors in the use of tenses, in the use of prepositions, in the use of articles, in the use of active and passive voice and errors in morphology. A total of 179 grammatical errors were found. The results presented in table 1 show that the most common grammatical errors were as follows: Tenses (15%), Prepositions (28%), Articles (29%), Active and passive voice (9.5%) and Morphology (18.4%).

Table 1. Classification of Grammatical Errors

Types of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Tenses	27	15%
Prepositions	50	28%
Articles	52	29%
Active and Passive Voice	17	9.5%
Morphology	33	18.4%
Total	179	100%

The results of the analysis of the grammatical errors shown in table 1 reveal that the most common grammatical errors were in the use of articles 52 errors making 29% of the total. This may be due to L1 interference because English has both definite and indefinite articles, whereas Turkish has no word for the definite article. Only the context states when to insert the definite article "the" as in the following examples:

- a) Çay pahali /tʃæj pæhæli /
Tea is expensive
- b) Çay soğuk /tʃæj sɔ:uk/
The tea is cold

3.1 Detailed Discussion of the Grammatical Errors

The total number of grammatical errors were committed by the participants of the study was 179. As stated in table 1, the results show that the most common grammatical errors are in

tenses 27; prepositions 50; articles 52 active and passive voice 17 and morphology 33.

A- Tenses:

The errors in the use of tenses are subcategorized as in table 2 below:

Table 2. Subcategorization of Errors of Tenses

Types of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Present progressive instead of present simple	8	29.6%
Simple present instead of present perfect	9	33.3%
Simple past instead of present perfect	7	26%
Simple past instead of simple present	3	11%
Total	27	100%

The syntax of Turkish is very different from that of English. Turkish is described as a head final language where the modifiers always precede the modified. Crystal remarks Turkish is classified as being one of head languages in which the head parameter is that principle used especially in relation to universal grammar which concerns the position of heads within phrases. It asserts that a language has the heads on the same side in all phrases. Thus, languages are categorized either as head-first languages where a verb in the verb phrase is to the left of the noun phrase as in English or head-last languages in which the heads appear on the right as in Japanese(1991:163) .

This characteristic affects the word order of Turkish sentence which consists of SOV whereas the English sentence consists of SVO. Turkish is agglutinative language. Its modals and auxiliaries are used as suffixes and they cannot be separated from the predicates (verb, nouns, and adjectives) which have final position as follows:

Ben suyu içiyorum /ben suju içijɔ:rum/

I + water + drink + progressive suffix – yor + personal suffix (- um) I Accordingly, the Turkish participants produced the following errors:

1. We learned English for years.
(simple past instead of present perfect).
2. I study English since 1999.
(simple present instead of present perfect).

In the examples stated above, Turkish students used simple present and simple past in place of present perfect tense. Such errors are due to the lack of tense equivalents in Turkish. Another probable reason for such errors could be the literal translation of English tenses. In Turkish, there is no perfect suffix but the perfect tense is understood from the context as the following example shows:

Geldim / geldim/

Come + past suffix (dı) + personal suffix (I)

It could be translated as “I came” or “I have come”.

The Turkish participants substitute the simple past for the simple present as follows:

I usually spoke English.

And they also misuse the present continuous for the simple present as follows:

We are understanding everything in the classroom.

Such errors may be the result of poor mastery over the tenses they have to use and to the different structures of tenses in both languages.

B- Prepositions:

The errors which the participants made in the use of prepositions amounted to 50 errors -25% of the total grammatical errors.

Table 3 below shows this in details:

Table 3. Errors in the Use of Prepositions

Type of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Omission of preposition	30	60%
Addition of preposition	7	14%
Misuse of preposition	13	26%
Total	50	100%

Unlike Turkish, English prepositions have different functions. And it is not easy for Turkish learners to use them correctly, since some prepositions as (in , on , and at) are used as suffixes in Turkish without any differences, because the (- da) suffix is used for them all as in the following examples show:

- a- Ali okudayidi / æli ɔ:kuldæj |d| /
Ali + school + (da) in + Be past suffix
Ali was in school.
- b- Ahmet evdeymiş /æhmet evdejmiʃ/
Ahmed + home + de (at) + past suffix (miş) (Be)
Ahmed was at home.
- c- Masanın üstünde bir kitap var /mæsænən ystynde bɪr kɪtæp vær/
table + possessive suffix (-ın) + above(üstü)+ (de) on +a (bir)+book+available.
There is a book on the table.

Accordingly, the participants wrote the following sentences:

- 1- We cannot talk the topic. (omission of the preposition).

2- When I go to bed. (Addition of the preposition) .

3- I like to study on university. (misuse of the preposition).

Prepositions in Turkish are used as suffixes attached to words, while in English as separate words. This causes difficulties for Turkish learners.

Therefore, it is no surprise if Turkish learners commit such errors.

C- Articles:

This category seems to cause more troubles for Turkish learning English. According to the study, participants committed 52 errors (29%) of the total errors. The errors are classified as in the table below:

Table 4. Types of Errors in the Use of Articles

Type of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Omission of “the”	20	38.5%
Omission of a/an	22	42.3%
Misuse of articles	10	19.2%
Total	52	100%

As already stated before, there is no Turkish definite article. Only the context tells us when to use the English definite article “the” as follows:

Köpek suyu içiyor. /køpɛk sũjũ itʃijø:r/

(The) dog + water + drink + progressive marker – yor (- ing)

(The) dog is drinking water.

From the context, we add the article (the) which does not have an equivalent in Turkish. Turkish has only indefinite article “bir” such as:

bir kitap /bır kıtæp/ (a book)

Turkish learners committed errors in the use of articles which are due to the negative transfer of the native language and to incomplete knowledge of the foreign language. Some supporting examples are stated below:

1- English is an international language in __ world. (Omission of the).

2- Turkey is – European country. (Omission of a).

3- Language helps in building a good relations among people. (misuse of a).

D- Active and Passive Voice:

The category comprises 17 errors (9.5%). Unlike English passive which uses auxiliaries and

word order change, Turkish passive is a matter of affixation. For example, a passive suffix (-n) is attached to the verb taken into consideration the rule of vowel harmony as follows:

Active: polis hırsızı vurdu /pɔːlɪs hɛrsɛzə vʊrdʊ/

(The) police + thief + kill + past suffix (-du)

The police killed the thief

Passive: hırsız vuruldu / hɛrsɛzə vʊrʊldʊ/

(The) thief + kill + passive suffix (-ul) + past suffix (-du)

The thief was killed.

According to the above examples, the errors committed by the subjects of the study could be ascribed to the fact that Turkish is different from English passive constructions. The errors are divided into three categories as shown in table 5:

Table 5. Categories of Errors in the Use of Active and Passive Voice

Type of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Passive auxiliary Be omission	9	53%
Passive with intransitive verb Be addition	3	17.6%
Misuse of passive	5	29.4%
Total	17	100%

Below are some examples of these errors:

- 1- I __ interested in learning English (Be omission)
- 2- I am decided to listen to English T.V. (misuse of passive)
- 3- The lecture was given was interesting (Be addition)

The error stated in sentence 2 is due to the difference in passive construction in English and Turkish. Unlike English, Turkish make passive from intransitives and transitive verbs as shown below:

Buraya girilmez /buræjæ gırılmez/

here + enter + passive suffix (- il) + negative suffix mez (no)

which is equivalent of “No entrance” in English.

E- Morphological Errors

This category makes up 33 errors (18.4%) of the total errors. The following table gives evidence of the types of morphological errors.

Table 6. Morphological Errors

Types of errors	Number of errors	Percentage of errors
Omission of plural ending 's'	6	18.1%
Misuse and addition of the plural ending 's'	5	15.1%
Misuse of possessive 's'	6	18.2%
Incorrect use of comparative adjectives	4	12.1%
Wrong word form	12	36.4%
Total	33	100%

Most morphological errors committed by Turkish learners are due to the incompetence of the learners in using English morphology and to the negative transfer from the native language as the following examples show:

1. I attend three lecture weekly. (lack of plurality)
2. One advantages is studying abroad. (addition of the plural ending – s)
3. It's importance leads us to use English out the university. (misuse of possessive)
4. English is important than other languages (incorrect use of comparative)
5. I was very please when I passed all my exams. (wrong word form)

3.2 Pedagogical Implications

Teachers of English as a foreign language should take the analysis of interlingual or transfer errors as an important strategy in learning process. That is to say, they should make use of the native language in order to facilitate their students' learning process. Mohammad (1998) insists that many language teachers and researchers talk about making use of the mother tongue in the classroom. The learners of English as a foreign language tend to rely on their previous linguistic knowledge to acquire L2. The best way to benefit from the mother tongue is to contrast it with the target language; i.e. , to make a contrastive comparison. Accordingly, the learners have enough knowledge about the differences and similarities between them. This method is helpful for the learners to avoid some of the interference errors. Gas and Selinker (2001) state that interlingual or transfer errors are those that can be attributed to the native language. They occur as a result of the negative influence of the native language on the target language. Identifying and finding areas of similarities and differences help teachers in the explanations and in understanding these explanations.

Teachers may set up methods and techniques based on these areas to help learners avoid making transfer errors. Bialystok (1990) points out that when a native language and a foreign language are very different from each other, there will be more learning difficulties for the learner as well as for the teacher. The role of the teacher is to fill in this gap by building remedial exercises which help the learner acquire adequate knowledge in the target language.

Self correction is a good technique for learners to correct grammatical structures. Teachers provide different contexts for the learners to practice correcting errors on their own, since correction is for teaching not just for evaluation. Ferris (2004) assures that the students are able to correct and edit successfully the errors marked by their teachers if they are given the chance to do so. Error correction is an essential part in the learning process. James (1998) states that teachers should provide their learners with information and hints to revise their written works so that they can discover and repair the errors.

Turkish teachers should place great emphasis on the differences indicated above in order to reduce the difficulties which appear in learning English. Because of the differences between Turkish and English, Turkish learners commit the following errors:

1. They use “informations” in place of “information” because the uncountable nouns can be pluralized in Turkish (- ler) bilgiler /bİlgılær / (informations) –lar stands for plural suffix attached to the noun.
2. They use “two book” instead of “two books” because Turkish employs singular noun after numerals as follows:
3. İki Kitap /ıkı kıtæp/ (two book) which is used wrongly in English.

4. Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to investigate and classify the grammatical errors in writing made by second-year students learning English as a foreign language at Gazi University of Turkey. The study supports the assumption that error analysis can provide knowledge about the development of learners’ language. Accordingly, error analysis is essential for language teachers. They understand students’ errors and they build the educational techniques and methods to improve the level of their students and to help students avoid most of the interference errors. As a result, the teachers shape the classroom atmosphere efficiently.

Finally, by the results of the study the researcher becomes more convinced that contrastive analysis helps very much in solving difficulties which occur during learning L2.

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