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Analysis of English writing errors committed by students learning English as a Foreign Language at Al-Istiqlal University in Palestine

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Abstract: This study investigated the most common English writing errors committed by students at Al-Istiqlal University. The researchers used a descriptive-analytical approach as it suits the study purposes. The population of the study consisted of all the male and female students at Al-Istiqlal University in Jericho – Palestine. A random sample consisted of 22 students at the modern languages department were chosen to sit for a standardized test to examine the writing errors they may commit in content and organization, mechanism, language use and vocabulary. The written compositions were marked based on content, organization and mechanical accuracy. Results revealed that most of the students were unable to spell correctly, they committed great semantics errors. Moreover, some of them were unable to differentiate between the use of present tense from present continuous tense and they also committed many errors due to sub-verb agreement. Results also indicates that females committed less error than males. Based on the findings it was recommended that intensive writing courses should be added to the program.

Key words: error analysis, Palestine, students



1 INTRODUCTION

Learners usually make mistakes when they want to communicate or convey a message in L1 or L2 (Corder, 1967). Mistakes usually occur as "inconsistent deviation and may be caused by a gap, lack of attention, fatigue, or carelessness but producing the incorrect language piece constantly is regarded to be error" (Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 201). Such mistakes may become errors with time unless "foreign language learners' competence in writing entails teaching them a number of sub-skills ranging from the mechanics of writing to sentence and discourse skills" (Fareh, 2014: 923). Error analysis is a branch of applied linguistics (Erdogan 2005; Richards 1971). It is concerned with the compilation, study and analysis of errors made by foreign /second language learners. It aims at investigating aspects of foreign /second language acquisition. Arab foreign language learners find the acquisition of writing skill a complex process as a result of a number of factors. For example, the amount of exposure to foreign language (English) is not more than few hours per week. Arab learners do not use English outside class time or school. Therefore, foreign language writing instructors should take into consideration both strategy development and language skill development when working with students. Choosing analysis of errors in English writings committed by students at Al-Istiqlal University as the subject for the present study did not come from vacuum. This study examines errors that are clearly noticed in the writings of students who come to study at Al-Istiqlal University. Hopefully, the present study will help the English department to develop a curriculum that will improve students' writings and suggest remedial courses that foster such weaknesses.

1.1 Problem

As an instructor at the Modern Languages Department, the researcher noticed that students frequently committed errors in their writings. Therefore, the problem of this study can be summarized in the following question: What common types of errors are likely to be redundant in the writings of modern languages students at Al Istiqlal University (IU)?

1.2 Questions of the Study

The current study tends to answer the following questions:

What are the most common(frequent) writing errors in English committed by the students of Arab learners?

Are there significant differences at ($\alpha=0.05$) in English writing errors committed by the students of due to gender variable?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RELATED STUDIES

Writing is considered as a difficult, complicated, cognitive process and demanding skill for both native and non-native speakers because several issues must be maintained such as content, organization, grammar, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics (Abu Rass , 2015; Alsamadani, 2010; Nuruzzaman, Islam and Shuchi, 2018; Othman, 2018; Phuket and Othman, 2015; Zuhour &



Fatima,2015). Generally, there are different approaches for the identification of possible learning problems in the second language acquisition: contrastive analysis, transfer analysis and error analysis. These approaches differ in focus. As far as for the Contrastive Analysis approach (CA) is grounded in behaviourism and structuralism (Atmaca, 2016). It blames the learners native language for the errors he/she commits in the target language. It compares the structure of two language systems and predicts errors. And that the main reason for the errors committed is an interference from the learners native language. The cause of these errors is the differences between the first language and the target language. According to this approach the more the differences there are, the more learning difficulties the learner of the second language will face. So it can be safely said that intralanguage is the starting point of this analysis. Unlike Contrastive Analysis, error analysis compares between learner errors in target language and the target language forms. Error analysis (EA) focuses on the errors that second language learners produce while using the target language itself, and attempts to explain how the learners are “ignorant” of grammatical and semantic rules of the target language. According to Atmaca (2016) error analysis emerged in the late 1960s as an alternative to CA as an investigation of the language learning process (Amara, 2015) to deal with learner errors as a feedback opportunity for the researcher to determine learning strategies. Accordingly, learner errors do not occur just because of L1 interference (negative transfer) but also because of L2 system, that is, the causes of errors could be interlingual or intralingual (Al-Khreshah, 2016). Corder (1973) maintained that L2 learners’ errors could point to the teacher about the strong and weak points of their teaching style and in light of errors teacher can make changes in their practices to serve students’ needs better. In Corder’s (1974) model, there are three stages in error analysis; data collection, description and explanation. Errors are considered as a phenomenon of a second language acquisition. As language develops, it is natural to notice error that learners commit. Also, a chance where educators develop courses and offer remedial plans to increase the accuracy of language use and skills (Atmaca, 2016; Demirel, 2017; Dweikat & Aqel, 2017; Nuruzzaman, Islam and Shuchi, 2018; Zafar, 2017; Kepner, 1991). It is noticeable that native speakers commit unsystematic errors of performance such as slips of the tongue from time to time compared with second language learners who make more frequent errors, and often ones that no native speaker ever makes. Error analysis should focus on errors that are systematic violations of patterns in the input to which the learners have been exposed. Such errors tell us something about the learner's interlanguage, or underlying knowledge of the rules of the language being learned (The Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2016). Errors are considered as a phenomenon of a second language acquisition. As language develops, it is natural to notice error that learners commit. Also, a chance where educators develop courses and offer remedial plans to increase the accuracy of language use and skills (Atmaca, 2016; Demirel, 2017; Dweikat & Aqel, 2017; Nuruzzaman, Islam and Shuchi, 2018; Zafar, 2017; Kepner, 1991). It is noticeable that native speakers commit unsystematic errors of performance such as slips of the tongue from time to time compared with second language learners who make more frequent errors, and often ones that no native speaker ever makes. Error analysis should focus on errors that are systematic violations of patterns in the input to which the learners have been exposed. Such errors tell us something about the learner's interlanguage, or underlying knowledge of the rules of the language being learned (The Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, 2016). Bartram and Walton (1991) there are four great dangers that shows how much writing needs more correctness and it is a difficult skill of its own in which the teacher can fall:

1-not preparing students enough.

2-testing something different from what you think you are testing.



3-not encouraging students to check their work.

4-blind correction.

There are many causes and sources of errors. And they vary but have much in common according to different linguists.

Selinker (in Richards, 1974, p. 37) reported five sources of errors, which are as the following:

1. Language transfer.
2. Transfer of training.
3. Strategies of second language learning.
4. Strategies of second language communication.
5. Overgeneralization of TL linguistic material.

Corder in 1974 (in Allen &Corder 130) has also identified three sources of errors: summed up in 1-Language Transfer. 2-Overgeneralization or analogy.3- Methods or Materials used in the Teaching (teaching-induced error).

There are two major sources of errors that have been recognized. First, interlingual errors, which are a result of the interference of the native language where the learner applies the native language elements in the written performance of the target language. Second, are the intralingual errors, these errors have nothing to do with the interference of the native tongue but a result of a faulty application of the rules and unawareness of the restrictions of the rules. So these errors occur in the target language because the learner starts to build up hypothesis about the English language from his/her limited knowledge of it.

Several studies have been conducted on the analysis of errors committed by EFL/ESL learners with special focus on Arab learners. In the Arab world Arabic is the native language and English is the foreign one. Learners in the Arab world, linguistically speaking, share almost the same experiences in this field of errors in writing (Nuruzzaman, Islam and Shuchi, 2018). Some studies focused on the spelling (Al-Jarf, 2005; Al-Jabri, 2006; Al-Taani, 2006; Al-zuoud and Kabilan, 2013; Fender, 2008) others emphasized articles errors (Alhaysony, 2012; Bukhari and Hussain,2011; Lakkis and AbdelMalak, 2000; Mizuno,1999). Other studies concluded that the most frequent errors were grammars, lexical, spelling, and semantics, tense, preposition/conjunctions, language use and subject verb agreement (Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud & Gaudel, 2015; Al-karazoun, 2016; Barzanji, 2016; Darwish, 2016; Flynn & Featherstone, 2017; Hamdi, 2016; Herdiawan, 2015; Joan, 2016; Mohsen & Qassem, 2016; Mulya and Syamsul, 2017; Murad, 2015; Ngangbam, 2016; Owu-Ewie, & Lomotey, 2016; Sychandone, 2016; Thyab,2016).

METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the descriptive-analytical approach which suites the purpose of the present study.

Population

The population of this study consisted of all students at the modern languages department at Al-Istiqlal University.



Sample

The sample of the study were “22” male and female students. Such sample is clear in table 1.

Table 1. Sample distribution according to gender variable.

Variable	Frequencies		Percentages %	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Gender	12	10	54%	46%
Total	22		100%	

Characteristics of the study sample

The total number of the study sample was 22 students from the modern languages department at Al-Istiqlal University(IU). The students are Arabic native speakers and they study English as their major in the IU. Their ages range between 19 and 23. What makes this sample special is that all the students have to stay in the barracks of the University as they have their whole week scheduled by the administration of the University.

The Pilot Study

The researcher conducted a pilot study on a number of students to achieve the following purposes:

1. To establish validity and reliability of the instruments.
2. To modify unclear items.
3. To determine the time that the test may take when it is administered to the students.
4. Table (2) shows the results of the piloting of the test

Table 2. The mean, STD and t test for the pilot study

	mean	STD	Standard error	T	Sig.
Male	3.00	1.15	2.193	4.97	1.70
Female	1.43	1.81			

The result of table 2 indicates that there is no significant relationship between males and females in mistakes in writing skills of English language as sig. is 1.70. This means that the test is valid.



Instrumentation

As this study aims at examining the writing errors committed by the students at the IU the researcher designed a standardized writing test where students had to write a composition of 80 words and answer some questions concerning linguistics and language. Using such instrument was because it saves time, and there is less alternation of performance of errors. As Murad (2015) and Faisal et.al.(2017) pointed out that in their researches.

Table 3. Categories and subcategories of the participants' errors in written presentation.

No.	Types of errors	Subtypes
1	Content and organization	Errors in semantics. Errors in text organization.
2	Vocabulary	Errors of word/idiom choice and usage. Avoidance of certain words.
3	Language use	Errors of agreement. Errors of verb tense. Errors of word order. Errors in negation. Auxiliary deletion. Errors of prepositions. Errors in the use of articles.
4	Mechanism	Errors of spelling. Errors of punctuation. Errors of capitalization.

Validity of the test

The researcher distributed the test to a jury who are specialized in linguistics and language. The content was reviewed; some items were deleted so that the test does not take a long time and bore the students while answering other items were changed to a simpler form to make it easy and in order to get better results. And finally the juries agreed that the test suits the purposes of the study.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing the data collected, the researcher used Means and Standard Deviations and an independent sample T-test.

The first question says *what are the most common (frequent) errors in writing of English language committed by the students of modern languages at Al Istiqlal University?*

In order to answer this question a standardized writing test was conducted, where table 4 shows the means and results of the committed errors.

Table 4. The frequencies and percentages of the committed errors.

No.	Types of errors	Subtypes	Frequencies	Percentages
1	Content and organization	Errors in semantics	54	11.1%
		Errors in organization	7	1.4%
2	Vocabulary	Errors of word choice	45	9.2%
		Avoidance of certain words	17	3.5%
3	Language use	Errors of agreement	50	10.3%
		Errors of verb tense	30	6.1%
		Errors of word order	5	1%
		Errors in negation	1	0.2%
		Auxiliary deletion	5	1%
		Errors in the use of articles	27	5.5%
		Errors in the use of prepositions	34	7%
4	Mechanism	Errors of spelling	68	14%
		Errors of capitalization	27	5.5%
		Errors in the use of full stop	26	5.3%
		Errors in the use of comma	17	3.5%
		Errors in the use of apostrophe	2	0.4%
		Errors in the use of question mark	15	3%
		Errors in the use of exclamation mark	18	3.7%
Errors in the use of quotation mark	36	7.4%		
Total			484	100%

As noticed in table 4. The total number of errors are 484 errors. These errors were classified type or reason such as some due to omission, substitution or insertion. The most common errors the students commit are in spelling, "spelling is the learner's ability to write a word correctly" (Othman, 2018: 17) where the errors are 68 errors which are 14%. Such errors were in words which contain sounds such where these sounds do not exist in their mother tongue which is Arabic this due to language tongue



interference such results concur with (Al-Oudat,2017 ; Corder, 1993; Kharma and Bakir, 2010). There are some sounds in English do not exist in Arabic. Such as /p/ /g/ /v/ etc. Therefore, students either borrow from their first language or just invent sounds. And that is what affects their spelling the most (Al-Busaidi and Al-Saqqaf, 2015). As for substitution and omission errors, for example, a word like "People" students tended to write it "peobl" substituting the sound /p/ with /b/ (Othman, 2018) and omitting the silent /e/. Another example is the substitution participants made was clear in words such as: the sound /tʃ/ where it is written like /tu/ is substituted with /ch/ like for example in words "picture". 'nesassry' for 'necessary'. Another example is the substitution of /s/ instead of /c/ like in words "nesassry" instead of "necessary". The mixing between /i/ and /e/ such as "acheive" for "achieve", "Cil fone" for "cell phone" as a result of mispronunciation. As for insertion errors, students tend to write words the way they say these words. Such as: "whay" for "why", this is attributed to the learners lack of knowledge in English language as English is not a phonetic language. Omission errors are clear where the phoneme [e] is the most common one in words 'befor' for 'before', "experie" for "experience"..etc. These errors are due to lack of knowledge of phonological awareness. Aqel made this clear in his study 1993 when said the reason behind omission errors occurrence is mainly due to the distinction and discrepancy found between Arabic and English. English pronunciation and orthography. For example, students write "plase" instead of "please", "coffe" instead of "coffee", "evry" instead of "every", "studing" instead of "studying" and "chating" instead of "chatting" and "realy" instead of "really". Results agree with (AlBalawi, 2016; Benyo, 2014).

Other categories of errors are in *content and organization* of learners' writings. They consist of two subcategories which are: Errors in organization, some learners did not follow the text structure - *introduction, transition and conclusion*- . Learners tended to write many main ideas with very few number of supporting ones. This is because the learners' mother tongue is Arabic. Studies found that while the structure of English paragraphs is hierarchical, Arabic paragraphs tend to be organized including as many topic sentence as possible whereas English paragraph has one main idea or topic sentence and supporting one. Errors in semantics which are related to literal translation from the native language. For example, نختار أن نتصرف بطريقة سلبية (we choose to behave in a negative way), instead of 'we choose to behave in a negative manner'. Another example from the participants' errors related to this type is using the word "specialize" instead of the word "specify" when they actually mean سنخصص . . The second category of errors types is "vocabulary" which consists of the following subcategories:



a. Errors of word choice, for example, saying 'his grandfather is not life' instead of saying 'his grandfather is not alive'. b. avoidance of certain words such as, saying “ kill yourself” instead of “suicide”.

The third category of errors that are committed by the subject of this study is *language use* which consists of the following subcategories. A. errors of agreement. Such as saying “ Four years, are a long time” instead of saying "Four years, is a long time” . b. errors in articles such as " My mother is allergic to the cigarette smoke", instead of "My mother is allergic to cigarette smoke". B. errors of verb tense . such as saying “ Technology helping people to communicate with each other” instead of saying “Technology helps people to communicate with each other”. C. auxiliary deletion , like saying “ The punctuations only ... “ instead of saying “ The punctuations are only ...” . D. errors in the use of prepositions . Such as saying “ She spent the entire afternoon in the phone” instead of saying “ She spent the entire afternoon on the phone” . The last category of error types is mechanism. It consists of the following subcategories: a. Errors in spelling, such as writing “realy” instead of “really” . b. Errors in punctuation, including commas, full stops, marks, such as putting full stop(.) instead of an exclamation mark (!) c. Errors in capitalization, for example, proper names such as “huda” instead of “Huda” and many others. Such results are consistent with Othman (2018).

The second question states *are there significant differences at ($\alpha=0.05$) in English writing errors committed by the students due to gender variable?*

In order to answer the second question a standardized writing test was conducted where table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of errors according to gender.

Table5. Frequencies and percentages of errors according to gender variable.

		Frequency	Percent %	Valid Percent%	Cumulative Percent
Variable	Male	12	54.5	54.5	54.5
	Female	10	45.5	45.5	100.0
	Total	22	100.0	100.0	

Study results indicated that the highest percentage of committing errors is among males as their percentage is 54.5%, while the percentage of females is 45.5%. To determine if there were significant differences due to gender variable, an independent Sample T- test was conducted. Table 6 shows the results.



Table 6. Results of independent sample T-test. Means, STD and t test for the study.

Variable	Mean	STD	Standard Error	T	Sig.
Male	2.6429	.42857	.21429	.188	.675
Female	1.9796	.56802	.21469		

Table 6 shows that there is no significant relationship between males and females in mistakes in writing skills of English language as the value is 0.675. However, the mean of the males is more than females. This means that the males commit more mistakes than females in English language writing skills. The researcher found that the results are quite similar to the results of another study which was also conducted on Arab learners of English in Israel by Murad (2015).

Conclusions

The objective of this research was to identify the most common writing errors committed by the modern languages students at Al-Istiqlal University. The results show that most students face difficulties with their English spelling (14 % of the total number of writing errors) second place comes the semantics errors (11.1 % of the total number of writing errors). It has been argued that these writing errors can be attributed to several factors, such as fossilization, language1 interference and overgeneralization of English language rules. In order to prevent such writing errors, the teacher's role is extremely vital in order to guarantee an affective correction of errors.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that there should be a list of compulsory intensive English writing courses for the students focusing on such sources of errors.
2. The Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education should pay much attention to English language curricula by focusing on making special English writing courses.



Further research

1. Further research is recommended to verify the findings of this study in order to strengthen this contribution towards the development of research in the field of foreign language learning.
2. This study was conducted on a sample of English students; further research could be done to on English teachers as well.



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