



English Grammatical Errors of Students in the Universities and Schools in Yemen: An Analysis

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Abstract

It is a well-known fact that, English is a global language and assumes great importance all over the world. No doubt, one of the useful and important areas of teaching and learning the English language is Applied Linguistics. Hence, in this paper, I have made a humble attempt to analyze mistakes and errors in English grammatical system made by learners of the second language in general and particularly students in Yemen.

Keeping this in view, the number of universities and schools in Yemen introduced English in their syllabus as a compulsory subject and many teachers and students have been leaving no stone unturned to overcome various difficulties in Grammatical System to teach and learn correct English. Hence, the main focus of this paper to highlight the importance of analysis of mistakes and errors in English Grammatical System made by students in Yemen especially at I & IV levels. Moreover, concepts such as ‘Interlingual Errors’, ‘Intralingual Errors’, ‘Mother Tongue Interference’ etc have been discussed. The paper also makes a brief mention of some models to analyze errors and a few sources of errors that are common among linguists. A reference to the constructive analysis of the English Grammatical System and that of Arabic has been made while pointing out similarities and dissimilarities. Finally, this paper includes some findings, suggestions, conclusions, and pedagogical implications.

Key words: The English grammatical system; Interlingual errors; Intralingual errors; Mother tongue interference; Mistakes and the constructive analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Needless to say that for the correct and meaningful teaching and learning of the English language, it is essential to analyze the errors in Applied Linguistics. This paper focuses mainly on the analysis of the errors made by second language learners. Different persons have highlighted the significance of errors in their own ways. In this regard, a reference may be made of Corder who has described three aspects of errors that are worth mentioning. First to tell the teacher how far the learners have progressed towards the goal and what remains for him to learn. Second, ask the researcher to provide evidence of how language is learned or acquired and, what strategies he is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, find out from the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn (Corder, 1984, pp.24-25).

To understand this problem, it is essential to clearly define the meaning of ‘Inter-lingual’. Many scholars hold the view that the term ‘Inter-lingual’ can be interpreted as a language system and explained as a midway between the mother tongue and the target language. To argue that the differences between the learner’s mother-tongue and target language are the only causes of errors would amount to set aside the factors responsible for intralingua errors. Wilkins who has explained phases of analysis of errors emphasized that the teachers should be aware of the areas of difficulties that come in the way of the learners. Therefore, the analysis of errors in the English Grammatical System can be categorized into two significant phases. The first is theoretical and the second is pedagogical. The theoretical phase shows that there is a relationship between learner’s errors and reconstructing

his/her language. The pedagogical phase emphasizes the understanding of errors before correcting them (Wilkins, 1972). Richards has asserted that the teachers can benefit from their errors as feedback about his/her materials and techniques. (Corder, 1974, pp.5, 55, 71, 174, &181)

Corder has categorized the analysis into two types: i.e., mistakes and errors. He points out: "Mistakes are made by first language learners because they know their linguistic knowledge. They can correct themselves because they control their own language system... "While Errors are made by second language learners because they are not able to correct themselves due to their own lack of language system" (Corder, 1984, pp. 61-62, 125-128).

In this way, the study brings to our notice the types of errors the learners require to find out the sequences and emphasis of instruction. Unfortunately, hardly a few well documented published works is available on how or what learners learn and how these can be explained. What generalizations and learning strategies the learners appear to be developing. Richards also has expressed more or less the same view (Corder, 1984)

The present study deals with one of the important aspects of analysis of English Grammatical Errors of Students regarding Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Phrases and Idioms, Articles and Prepositions as well as Construction of sentence which has not been a good deal of attention so far. Besides, the paper is based on empirical study and confined to the students of I & IV levels, Hodeidah University, Yemen. Most of the studies made in this regard have focused on the most frequent types of errors like spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, sources of errors and errors in composition.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A cursory look at the review of literature would help in understanding the research undertaken so far in this regard. It is important to note that as far as Error Analysis is concerned the attention of the researchers has been shifted from performance errors of learners to focusing on similarities and differences between the First language (L1) and Second language (L2) to concentrating on the regularities and types of errors by different learners of English.

Most of the studies undertaken on ESL/EFL errors analysis have been conducted on writing samples. Alahmadi & Kesseri have undertaken study of language transfer speaking errors among Sudia students. They have interviewed 30 students in Sudia Arabia and asked them general questions pertaining to speaking English (Alahmadi & Kesseiri, 2013). However, they have failed to mention the age of the students and the class in which they were studying during the collection of speaking samples. Bambang Sugeng has undertaken survey of 228 undergraduate theses from 28 English study programs in Indonesia. He has highlighted the errors in verb groups,

concord of nouns, clauses, passive voice and word choices etc (Sugeng, 2016). Abdalhussein, M. H. F. used 6 categories of error analysis (Abdalhussein, 2015). While Balewa, A. T. used 8 categories and others have used (Al-Tamari, 2019.) categories (Balewa, 2014). It is crystal clear that these categories have been made arbitrarily on the assumption that the students' language backgrounds lead to the occurrences of errors. Al-Tamari, E. A. while refereeing to Corder's steps in error analysis has said that there are three sources of errors, i.e., Inter-lingual errors, Intra-lingual errors, and Unique errors and attempts to explain why the students commit such errors¹⁰. As far as, the Communicative Approach is concerned, the major defect lies in comparing two grammatical systems to justify the learner's errors.

Research Methodology

The research is based on descriptive, analytical and empirical methods. That is to say I have conducted random survey of 60 students of both I & IV levels, English Department, Hodeidah University, Yemen by circulating questionnaire asking them to give their response regarding several issues pertaining to English. In this way, the researcher has collected information from them. The study is confined to the errors and the difficulties with regard to pronunciation, vocabulary, phrases and idioms, articles and prepositions as well as sentence construction faced by the students.

HYPOTHESIS

The study pre-supposes that errors and mistakes made by Yemeni students learning English as a foreign language may be attributed to negative transfer. The crux of the problem is the differences in meaning, form, and structure between two Grammatical Systems of English and Arabic languages. This is what Corder has asserted.¹ Moreover, the drawbacks in the method of teaching and learning and lack of attention of the students towards the rules of the target language may result in committing mistakes and errors and obstruct learner's communication strategies. The extraordinary errors which are neither Inter-lingual nor Intra-lingual may minimize in number. While Intra-lingual/ Developmental errors are supposed to be in large numbers. The study also assumes that the performance of students of IV year is better than those of I year. All this may be due to effective teaching, exhaustive assignments given to the students, and keen attention paid to correct and systematic way of teaching English.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims at finding out and describing the grammatical mistakes and errors made by the students in the schools and those of I and IV level at universities.

¹ Richards, J. C. cited Corder, S. P., op.cit.

The study also attempts to categorize and examine the errors in the English Grammatical system made by Arabic speakers. In addition to this, pedagogical solutions to overcome this problem have been suggested.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in the fact that it may go a long way in helping teachers to teach and learners to learn English as a foreign language at schools and universities in Yemen. It is also useful for the textbook writers as it provides information about the mistakes and errors in various areas in the English Grammatical System, particularly which are difficult for Arabic learners of English. It is likely to be an important source of information for the teachers to teach and the students to learn English as a foreign language.

Problems of the Study

It must be borne in mind that the students at I and IV levels in the university in Yemen very often face a number of difficulties while learning English Grammatical System. The method of teaching is one of the factors responsible for this state of affairs. It results in limited exposure and a lack of practice. Similarly, the absence of an effective method of learning or lack of attention to learning results in the scant attention of learners towards the rules and restrictions of the target language. Thus, they are not able to apply the rules to the appropriate context and commit several errors. The negative transfer of the mother tongue into English is the main cause of the errors. Besides, among other causes mention may be made of the complexity of the English Grammatical System and the differences in meaning, form, and structure between English and Arabic language. Consequently, Yemeni learners of the English language are unable to choose the correct forms of English.

Sample of the Study

The study is based mainly on a random survey from the Department of English, College of Education, Hodeidah University, Yemen. It consists of two groups of thirty students. The first group includes thirty students of I year which represent the input in the educational program of the English Department. On the other hand, the second group of thirty students of IV years represents the output of the developmental educational stage of our teaching/learning process.

Suggestions

Having analyzed the mistakes and errors in English grammatical systems made by the Students of both I & IV years of the Universities and schools in Yemen, I have made a humble attempt to make some suggestions to enable the teachers and the students to overcome these difficulties. In this regard, the role of teachers assumes great significance. While teaching at the university, teachers should pay keen attention to these mistakes and errors and assign the students exhaustive exercises dealing with these.

The study emphasizes that by and large, the students of both levels face two types of problems in EGS such as lack of teaching/learning and translation from Arabic, i.e., their mother tongue to English. The university teachers, whose mother tongue is Arabic, can easily understand the mistakes and errors in translation. Hence, one of the best methods for teachers would be to use remedial teaching techniques and overcome the problems of Inter-lingual errors.

Intra-lingual errors refer to the application of techniques and the methods adopted by the teachers while teaching. It is quite obvious that a particular technique is not appropriate in every situation. Therefore, the teachers should follow a variety of procedures and techniques to make his method more useful. It would be better if the teachers resort to their own way of teaching which is suitable for their learners.

In this connection, we cannot turn Nelson's eye toward the role of textbook writers. They should be asked to focus on the difficulties faced by the Arabic learners in EGS. This may go a long way to help the students in improving their English language.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

A scrutiny of the analysis of mistakes and errors in EGS indicates that students face many difficulties while learning English as a foreign language in the university. In short, mention may be made of an ineffective method of teaching resulting in limited exposure of the students, inappropriate method of learning, and indifference of the students towards the rules of the target language. All these give rise to several errors which are called Intra-lingual developmental errors. Besides, Inter-lingual errors caused by the complexity of the English Grammatical System and the differences in meaning, form, and structure between the two Grammatical Systems of English and Arabic languages need to be examined. Being a native of Yemen, having a good deal of knowledge of the Arabic language, in addition to the researcher in the field of English linguistic, I have observed several mistakes and errors in the translation of the First language Arabic into English.

A look at the similarities and dissimilarities between the two Grammatical Systems of English and Arabic would help in clearly understanding this problem. On account of dissimilarities between the two Grammatical System of English and Arabic as well as negative transfer, the learners are likely to commit more mistakes and errors. Corder has very well illustrated this when he refers to the negative influence of the learners' mother tongue on learning the target language². Similarly, Larsen- Freeman, and Long have pointed out that negative transfer is said to be there when the First Language differs from those of the Second Language, resulting in errors. They also proceed to assert that more than often not, it is similarities and

² Richards, J. C. cited Corder, S. P., op.cit.

not differences between the mother tongue and the target language which have caused the main problem. For instance, demonstratives of the English language “this” and “that”, like those of Arabic is used to indicate singular nouns (Larsen- Freeman and Long, 1991). In a nutshell, we can safely argue that ‘mother tongue interference’ plays a positive as well as a negative role in learning a second language or a foreign language and explains many mistakes and errors of learners.

In order to nip this problem of negative transfer in the bud, it would be worthwhile if the educational authorities in Yemen set up a committee consisting of scholars who have mastery over both Arabic and English languages. This committee has been assigned the task of translating Arabic into English and vice-versa.

What is important to note here is that teaching methods used are still very much influenced by the old (traditional) methods, which do not equip students with all language skills. Most of the teachers pay more attention to the questions asked in the exam and go on repeating the same questions every year. Hence, the students memorize the answers of those questions which are repeated and pay little attention towards learning grammatically correct English. All these remind us the remark made by Dr. Finer about examination system. He said that one generation which had the education to pass the examination is preparing the next generation to pass the examination.

In order to substantiate the arguments, the researcher has conducted the survey of 60 students of both I & IV level, Hodediah University, Yemen. The findings of the survey are as follows:

Table 1
Categorization of Errors in EGS

Category	Number of errors		Percentage of errors	
	I year	IV Year	I year	IV year
Pronunciation	12	10	6.66%	7.57%
Vocabulary	56	50	31.11%	37.87%
Phrases and idioms	70	52	38.88%	2239.39%
Articles and prepositions	25	22	13.88%	16.66%
Construction of sentence	18	10	10%	7.57%
Total number	181	144	----	----

Lastly, there is no iota of doubt that the study of the analysis of errors and mistakes in the English grammatical system is very essential and indispensable for teaching and learning the English language. Without this, our cherished goal of teaching and learning correct and meaningful English would remain a remote dream. I hope that the arguments made in this paper are likely to go a long way in helping the teachers and students to teach and learn correct English at the universities and schools in Yemen.

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