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ERROR LOGS FOR BETTER ENGLISH

Research Article

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate the common errors of L2 learners in a Turkish university setting where they have to learn L2 and pass a B1 level exam in order to be faculty students. The study aims at identifying what types of errors the learners do, what the possible determining factors at the background are and how they can overcome these. The problem areas are analyzed within 17 English paragraphs of 17 Turkish students. As Corder (1974) suggested sample collection, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation are the steps followed in this study. So, first, the errors were identified; then, the errors were explained and analyzed. The analysis of the writings showed that errors commonly occurred in areas of lexis, grammar, syntax and were the results of the differences between L1 and L2. As a solution, error logs were used in order to have the learners be aware of the origins of the problem areas and after the error correction, drafting was done to reflect the improvements in their writings by trying to overcome the problem of L1 interference.

Keywords: error, error correction, feedback, error log, L1 interference

1. Introduction

In today's world, English plays a major role in education and students are expected to communicate effectively in English medium universities; even in non-English speaking countries. They have the task of mastering their subjects in English when they are faculty students. Therefore, they study English for a specific purpose, for academic studies. As defined by Hutchinson and Waters (1997), it is “an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reason for learning.” As already known, EAP consists of four skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking which students of L2 have to master in order to be proficient in their EAP contexts of study.

Writing, by nature, is a challenging process even in the first language. It is the “most difficult of the language abilities and skills to acquire” (Allen & Corder, 1974, p. 177). Obviously, its level of difficulty varies between native speakers who think in the language used and non-native speakers who think in their own native language. L2 learners have more difficulty in writing. Nunan (1991) indicates that producing a well-organized piece of writing is the most difficult task in language, since the written context is the medium between the reader and the writer. As a result of the difficulties to master writing in a second language, EFL learners commit errors. Thus, it can be easily said that errors are unavoidable while learning writing in L2. As errors reflect the process of learning a language, they should be analysed carefully. As Selinker (1969) points out, errors are significant in three respects: (1) errors are important for the language teacher because they indicate the learner's progress in language learning; (2) errors are also important for the language researcher as they provide insights into how language is learnt; and (3) finally, errors are significant to the language learner himself/herself as he/she gets involved in hypothesis testing.

When we look at the context where I teach, it can be said that, in writing classes in the Turkish universities, teachers are generally faced with students who have memorized English vocabulary and grammar rules, but have seldom put that knowledge to practical use (Wachs, 1993). Most of these students are unfortunately translating words, phrases, and sentences from Turkish to English with often very strange results. When teachers; even the Turkish ones, try to assess the writing outcomes, they have problems in understanding the outputs of the students. To overcome this problem, a better understanding of the L1 influence in the process of EFL writing will help teachers know students' difficulties in learning English. Students writing in L2 have to be proficient in the use of the language as well as writing strategies and skills in order to be able to write accurate, fluent texts without any errors. Therefore, writing teachers need to anticipate and be aware of certain common types of errors the L2 writing students can have. My study is based on this rationale. In order to help the learners communicate better in English in written medium, I conducted a research about the causes of the errors they have in their writings and analyzed the data using an error-code. The approach I used for this is error analysis. Afterwards, I gave feedback using an “error log” which helped learners notice their errors and they tried to correct them within group work using the teacher as a resource as well if necessary. I hope my study about the effects of L1 influence on L2 writing and a suggested feedback way of the use of error logs can be of some help to my colleagues and the L2 learners by helping them to be aware of their errors themselves, and by keeping a trace of them by error logs and noticing the improvement in their drafts in addition to developing learner autonomy skills.

2. Literature Review

Error analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. It was developed in the 1970s with the belief that errors can reflect the gaps students need to fill in their language learning process. As stated by Corder, (1981) it deals with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors. For Crystal, (1999) error analysis in language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language. Although in the past, errors were perceived as “forms of miscommunication that have to be avoided” and learners were afraid of making errors, recent studies emphasize the positive effect of errors in the learning process.

There are various ways to classify errors. One of them is linguistic that involves phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, lexicon and vocabulary. A second way depends on how the structure of a sentence is changed by the error. This type includes omissions, regularizations, misinformation, alternating forms and misordering errors. Another way is a comparative one. According to Ellis (1994), errors are divided into two types: local and global errors. Local errors “affect only a single constituent in the sentence (for example, the verb), and are, perhaps, less likely to create any processing problems,” whereas global errors “violate the overall structure of a sentence and for this reason may make it difficult to process”. (p.20). In the literature, many studies have focused on local and global errors.

Lee's (2004) study focused on how instructors corrected errors in students' papers. The researcher found that there were a total of 19 types of errors in students' papers and most of them were local errors. They were mostly in noun ending, spelling, punctuation, verb tense, and article. Eight of them were lexical errors. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) found that errors in the L2 writings were in word choice, word order, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, prepositions, and singular/plural forms. However, Elkılıc, Han, and Aydın's (2009)

study highlighted only punctuation and capitalization errors. According to the results it can be said that as students became more fluent in L2, errors in punctuation and capitalization became less. Intralingual errors were identified in Kırkgöz's study (2010). Overgeneralization was the type of intralingual error highlighted in her study. With overgeneralization she meant "negative transfer of language items and grammatical rules in the target language, incomplete application of rules" (p.4356). Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni's (2011) study presented several other different causes of learners' errors based on results of surveys given to participants. Some participants thought that their problems were because of their lack of practice in writing, whereas others attributed their problems to their Iranian instructors' lack of experience as teachers. Some others blamed the environment for their lack of motivation. In addition, Al-Khasawneh (2010) concluded that participants' problems were due to "their weak foundation, environment, and methods of teaching English in their countries" (p. 16) as in the interviews with L2 students. In most of the studies done as mentioned above, it can be observed that EFL writing errors happen for a numerous reasons.

2.1. Cause of Errors

Errors happen for different reasons. Intralingual or developmental and interlingual factors are considered as the major reasons of errors. Intra-lingual or developmental errors are simplification, overgeneralization, hypercorrection, faulty teaching, fossilization, avoidance, inadequate learning, and false concepts hypothesized. This type of errors gives an indication about the learner's competence at a particular time and reveals the language acquisition rather than reflecting the incompetence to distinguish between two languages (Richards, 1974). On the other hand, interlingual errors are caused mainly by mother tongue interference. These errors are "similar in structure to a semantically equivalent phrase or sentence in the learner's native language" (Dulay et al., 1982, p.171). They are outcomes of interference or transfer of first language; consequently, they reflect the native language structure. Various studies in error analysis like El-Sayed (1982), Kharma (1981), Politzer & Ramirez (1973) found that most of the second language errors are interlingual errors. As suggested by Brown (1987) the only system learner can rely on is his mother-tongue, so, it is very possible that learners commit L1 interference errors. Interference occurs when "an item or structure in second language manifests some degree of difference from and some degree of similarity with the equivalent item or structure in the learner's first language" (Jackson, 1987, p.101). When the learners feel there is a gap between L2 and L1 and they cannot find the right structure to fill in the gap, negative transfer; in other words; interference occurs.

Within the scope of these studies and theoretical background, the research questions are:

- 1) What types of errors are there in the writings of the students?
- 2) What are the possible determining factors at the background?
- 3) How can they overcome these?

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Participants

17 adult learners of English aged 18-21 took part in this study. They are students at the English Preparatory Program of a university and most of them are going to study at Maritime faculties after completing the program at B1 level. At the time of the study they were A2 level learners.

3.2. Method

The 17 L2 students were assessed by clinical elicitation method (CE). Corder (1981, p. 29) states that: “The CE requires the learner to produce any voluntary data orally or in writing, while experimental methods use special tools to elicit data containing specific linguistic items”. Since the method involves getting the informant to give data of any sort, either by spoken way or written way, I used learners’ process writings for this. Process writing, as stated by Nunan (1999) is formed of four steps as brainstorming, drafting, group work, peer editing and publishing. Here, at university Prep. Program, students need to develop critical thinking skills and develop, organize their ideas as well as using the L2 in a comprehensive way. This cycle is completed in three drafts. The first draft is written in class and graded by a rubric. (*App.1: Process Writing 1st Draft Rubric*) The second draft is written outside the class after the teacher’s feedback similar to the third draft and students get grades from the final draft as well. In this process writing, the learners wrote paragraphs telling about their hobbies which can be playing an instrument or doing sports. First, they did brainstorming all together as a class and then they tried to select the ones they want to use in their paragraphs and wrote their first drafts. They got feedback on content and then organization at this stage according to the 1st draft rubric. Next, they wrote the second draft with an improved content and organization. This time, they got feedback on grammar and vocabulary. I analysed the writing data using an error code. (*App. 2: Error Code*) At this stage, I used error logs for the students to be able to notice their errors themselves rather than ignoring them despite the feedback. This is unfortunately the general attitude of the students in the context where I teach. They just get the first draft, take it to a person who knows English and asks him/her to write it for him/her in order to get good grades. That’s another important reason why I wanted them to work with error logs. They had to fill in the logs (*App. 3: Error Log*) in class and then wrote the third draft accordingly. Then, I graded the third draft.

While giving feedback using error-codes, the most frequent errors that happened were the reflection of L1 on L2.

As seen in the chart above, the percentage of interference errors is nearly close to the general errors. I classified the errors as in the table below and counted the numbers according to the categories.

Table 1. The classification of interference errors in the 2nd drafts

	Error type	Number of Errors
	<i>General Errors</i>	315
	<i>Interference Errors</i>	251
<i>Morphological category</i>	- Tense Errors	20
	- Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	15
	- Other morphological errors	19
<i>Lexical category</i>	- Word for word translation/Word choice	57
	- Wrong use of uncountable nouns	45
	- Verb errors	18
<i>Syntactic category</i>	- Article Errors	49
	- Preposition Errors	20
	- Errors in word order	

The analysis of the writings indicated that there are a variety of errors as listed above in two main categories: general and interference. In interference errors, tense, subject-verb agreement, word for word translation, wrong use of uncountable nouns, verb errors, article errors, preposition errors and other morphological errors can be observed. Only interference errors are analyzed in this study as it is the most frequent one. When the most common ones are analyzed, these can be seen in word choice errors.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1. Explanation and evaluation of the errors

4.1.1. Tense errors

There are 20 errors in this category. They happened in the use of “present simple and continuous” tense because both tenses can be used in each other's place in Turkish. Therefore, students use the same structure in English, too and end up with inaccuracies such as:

“Sports is helping people in a lot of situations” However, the correct version should be “Sports helps people in a lot of situations”, as the student here wants to say something in general about sports.

The errors in the use of “present perfect” are observed as well, as both past simple and present perfect are translated into Turkish as: “Yıllarca basketbol oynadım” if the action is over.

E.g.: “I played basketball for many years” should be “I have played basketball for years”.

As in the example, instead of present perfect tense, past simple is used.

4.1.2. Verb Errors / “To be” addition/omission errors

There are 18 of them in these writings. These errors happen as a result of the nonexistence of a separate verb “be” in Turkish. (Şimşek, 1989, cited in Han 2009:52) Since Turkish students are not familiar with the use of “to be” verb as it is in English, they either add it in unnecessary situations or omit it in necessary ones.

E.g.: “Doing sports is make you feel happy” should be “Doing sports makes you feel happy”

“Many people interested in sports” should be “Many people are interested in sports.”

“Furthermore, you are be successful.” should be “Furthermore you are successful.”

4.1.3. Word for word translation errors

There are 57 errors in this category. I gave some of them as examples below:

E.g.: “Firstly, if you *make sports*, you *being* a social person.”

In the sentence above, collocation error “make a sport” and wrong usage of “be” are observed. This is because of L1 interference again. In Turkish both “do” and “make” have the same meanings; that’s why, the student could not differentiate them. He/she wanted to say “do sports” but he/she said “make sports” instead, which caused an inaccurate use of L2. Also, he used “being” instead of “become” and made another mistake. In Turkish these two words both mean “olursun”, so the student wrote “being” rather than “become”.

E.g.: “*Sensitive* meatballs are healthy for a sportsman”.

In this example, it can be easily seen that the student used a wrong word “sensitive” in order to replace “içli” in Turkish. There are two meanings of “içli” in Turkish. In this context,

it refers to an original Turkish food (stuffed/filled), whereas the student used a word in English “sensitive” that refers to a characteristic of a person. L1 interference caused a very strange language output.

E.g.: “First of all, making sports *earns* motivation.”

Again, a word choice “earn” is done incorrectly in this sentence. The student wanted to say; “people have motivation when they do sports”, but because of the L1 interference, he/she used a wrong word and ended up with false English.

E.g.: “Travelling people want to *shopping* information with new people”.

By “shopping” information, the writer means “exchange” of information; but because of L1 interference, he misused “shopping”. Also, it could be noticed that there is lack of collocation knowledge.

E.g.: “*If when you work listen to music, you be happy.*”

This sentence is a word by word translation from Turkish. When it is translated into Turkish, I can understand the student’s intended message. However, in English there is a misordering of the vocabulary in the “if” clause and also a wrong use of “be” once more. Instead of “become”, the student used “be” as they have the same meaning in Turkish: “olmak”

Another lexis example is as follows:

E.g.: “This *tidies up* your social life. The word “tidies up” is a direct translation from L1. It has the same meaning with “organizes” in Turkish. Therefore, the learner misused it.

4.2. Error Feedback and Error Logs

Although there are many views against the need of error correction, in my context it is used for the betterment of English. Also, there are many views for it, obviously. However, the questions to think for the teachers are: “Which errors should be corrected? How should they be corrected? And when should they be corrected?” For example, according to Fanslow (1977), teachers should ignore all the errors that do not cause a communication problem. Likewise, the types of errors that Walz (1982) reports as the most significant ones are errors that students make generally and the ones problematic for communication.

In the context where I teach, the necessity for error correction can easily be observed in the students' writings which are to train students for acquiring process writing skills and also be able to compose their ideas fluently and accurately in the end. The writing component of the program is assessed as a part of the Preparatory Exit Exam which measures the expertise of students' language skills at B1 level. Students have to meet the requirements of a certain criteria (*App 4: Exit Exam Criteria*). Since the aim of the students is to progress throughout the one year program, they are involved in certain tasks which aim to provide them with the learning strategies to acquire these skills. In one of these tasks: “Process Writing”, I analyzed the errors of the students in my class with the aim of moving them up and gave them feedback.

Above is the analysis of some of the significant errors. Although I can understand these most of the time and they act as “local errors” to me, as a Turkish teacher, when a native reads the sentences, he/she has difficulty in addressing meaning to them. Therefore, for this analysis, it is not only being “global” or “local”; but these learners need to produce accurate texts to pass. Therefore, in order to meet the standards of the academic program they are involved in, they get standard feedback with the help of Error-Correction Codes and try to meet the passing bands in the rubric.

They have to master certain learning strategies and be autonomous learners throughout their university life. As the social constructivists state; they are acting as “meaning-makers”, “problem solvers”, so what they bring into their environment is significant for the acquisition of second language. Based on this view, when I started giving feedback to my learners on their written products, I conducted the feedback process in several steps:

4.2.1. Peer-correction step

Students exchanged their writings and discussed the errors they had by referring to the error codes. They also graded each other's work according to the grammar and lexis bands in the rubric.

4.2.2. Coded-feedback/Error log step

Then they noted down the errors marked by codes in their error logs. Although there are a few studies done about the use of error logs, they are in general considered to be useful consciousness raising tools for the learners to notice their errors, their frequency and then their treatment.

This noticing stage is the learner’s awareness raising stage about the language she/he produced and the correct form. This study is based on Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 1994, 1995, and 2001) which proposes that “the process of noticing enables the conversion of input to intake”.

Error logs also help in the long-run to develop learning strategies such as keeping track of one’s own weak areas, self-editing skills and in short; learner autonomy which is an underestimated skill in most of the Turkish students to develop, as they mostly come from an educational system of “memorization” and “spoon-feeding”.

4.2.3. Feedback study group step

After filling in the logs, learners tried to find the correct forms for their errors in groups. One average, one below-average and one above average learner got together in order to help each other by trying to find the correct form of the language. If they could not find the correct forms, then they got help from online resources. If necessary, they can get help from the teacher as well. This kind of practice reflects “zone of proximal learning theory”. When scaffolding is taken into consideration, it can easily be observed that teachers and peers can act as scaffolders in the error correction process.

Table 2. The classification of interference errors in the Final-drafts

	Error type	Number of Errors
	<i>General Errors</i>	103
	<i>Interference Errors</i>	58
<i>Morphological category</i>	- Tense Errors	6
	- Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	5
	- Other morphological errors	5
<i>Lexical category</i>	- Word for word translation/Word choice	11
	- Wrong use of uncountable nouns	10
	- Verb errors	5
<i>Syntactic category</i>	- Article Errors	11
	- Preposition Errors	4
	- Errors in word order	2

4.2.4. Drafting step

After studying in groups and discussing their errors with the aim of finding the correct forms, learners revised their writings. They wrote the final draft with the necessary corrections made about language and vocabulary.

In the final draft it was observed that students showed a decrease in the number of errors. The improvement was 76,8%. (Table 2)

5. Conclusion

The study done by experimenting the use of error logs and the drafting process highlights that there is a need for the continuing practice of error logs, because the students showed a remarkable betterment in their language and vocabulary in the second drafts. Obviously, there were limitations in this study as the time limitations and the program. In fact, one to one tutorials could have been done after the students got feedback

About the use of error logs, the feedbacks students were asked to provide about their effectiveness showed that there is a need for the logs in order to have them notice their errors and get involved in self-correction work. When students get feedback directly from their teachers, most of the time they ignore it, since only the grade is important for them. However, with error logs, they had to fill in the charts and be aware of their weak areas in addition to trying to correct them.

Error logs also provide the teachers records about their students' language problems and with their help remedial lessons can be planned. Lim (1976), stated: "One of the main aims of error analysis is to help teachers assess more accurately what remedial work would be necessary for English as a Second Language (ESL) students preparing for an English Language test, so as to help these students avoid the most common errors".

In this study, having found that students' errors mostly stem from L1 interference, it would be beneficial for students to focus more on vocabulary learning strategies as students learn vocabulary in isolation and they need more practice in context. Obviously, this contextualized practice need is true for the grammatical topics as well. As we live in a setting where English is only a part of the education system, students need to be exposed to real life English and have the chance to practice it so that they can use it fluently and correctly. Therefore, it would be effective to provide them with authentic, semi-authentic texts which they could develop their language skills with and employ them with a variety of learning strategies.

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