Types of Common Errors in Middle Eastern Students' Opinion Essays: A Case Study

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Abstract

Analyzing students' written errors is an approach to better understand the challenges that second and especially foreign language learners faced while writing in English. The aim of this study is to investigate the common errors in English essays made by English as a foreign language learners focusing on students from the Middle Eastern countries. Participants were ten male students who attended a preparatory intensive English program at a public university, and they were required to write an opinion essay at the beginning of the program. The errors were analyzed, identified and categorized using the parameter of types of errors set by Carl James, i.e. general grammatical, substance, lexical, syntactic and semantic errors. The findings showed that students made all types of errors with a heavy percentage on general grammatical, substance and syntactic errors. It was also found that some students did not adhere to the standard structure of an essay. By identifying the common errors, it has become an essential strategy to assist teachers to understand students' weaknesses in writing, and their needs in order to prepare appropriate strategies and learning materials to help the students.

Keywords: Common written errors, English for foreign language learners, Error analysis, Opinion essay.

Introduction

Writing is a challenging skill for those native or none native speakers as it requires these students to have a mastery of the multiple issues in the process of writing such as its format, organization, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics of writing. For many non-native speakers, their academic success, very much rely on their competency in writing in the target language. As part of internationalization efforts, many foreign students from the Middle East countries have found Malaysia as a destination in pursuing their tertiary studies. As these international students come from different backgrounds, they enter tertiary institutions with different expectations, bringing with them varying educational experience. They may also find learning English in a new educational environment culturally different from what they have been used to and this may affect their learning. Both English and Arabic linguistics and orthographic systems are different from one another and this resulted in the international students facing difficulties in writing. Karma & Hajjaj (1997) & Khalil (2000) stated that Arab students often make errors in writing a well-developed paragraphs and essays that deter them from achieving the literacy expectations of the institutions that they are studying in.

One of the error that these international students tend to commit is the transfer of stylistic features of Arabic (L1) and into their writing tasks. By looking at the 'errors' in their writing of these students specifically, hence the purpose of this study is to identify and discuss the most frequent errors committed by the male Middle Eastern students in written essays in their   Level 1 of the Preparatory Intensive English program in University Malaysia Pahang, Malaysia.

At Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), the main entry requirement for international students has been set at IELTS band 5.0/ TOEFL 500 for undergraduates (Alwi et al., 2018). However, for those who do not have IELTS, it is observed that most of these candidates do not have the required level of English language proficiency. The majority of the international students come from countries where English is a foreign language, for instance China and Middle-Eastern countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. These students have no opportunities to sit for the IELTS examination. As a result, the Preparatory Intensive English (PIE) program was introduced by the Centre for Modern Languages and Human Sciences (CMLHS), UMP in 2009 to cater to this need. The aim of the PIE program is to facilitate international students who do not possess the required English language proficiency to achieve an adequate level of language competence prior to registering for their mainstream program (i.e. engineering, technology or management). Therefore, students who have not taken IELTS examination and those who have sat and obtained IELTS band 4.5 and below are required to enrol into the PIE program This foundation program is focused on developing international students' English language skills specifically in writing, reading, speaking and grammar. Students enrolled in the program have the opportunity to acquire and practice a wide range of vocabulary using complex and accurate sentence structures as well.

The primary concern of this study is to identify and discuss the most frequent errors committed by the male Middle Eastern students in written essays in their level 1 of the Preparatory Intensive English program. This study aimed to answer these questions: 1) What are the most frequent errors committed by the Level 1 EFL male Middle Eastern students in written essays in their Preparatory Intensive English program? 2) What are the categories of writing errors committed by these level one learners?

Literature Review
Many recent studies have been done significantly on learners' errors to study difficulties involved in acquiring a second language. These studies are very significant as it highlighted the areas EFL students encounter difficulty in writing. Corder (1967) stated we cannot teach the language; we can only create circumstances in which it will spontaneously develop in their mind of its own way.

Error Analysis
Error analysis is a kind of linguistic analysis that learners of a target language commonly make. For learners, these errors are of vital importance because learners learn through making errors (Weireesh, 1991) and for second language acquisition for second language learners. Furthermore, Dulay et al. (1982) contends that error analysis encompasses all errors made by ESL learners i.e. errors resulting from the first language learning (interlingual factors) and those not linked to the learner's native language (intralingual factors). In addition, Corder (1981) contended that these errors are significant in three ways, firstly, it

highlights on how learners learn the second language and the strategies adopted by them in order to learn, secondly, these errors are important for the teachers as an indicator of learning and finally they are important for learners themselves as these errors are indicator of hypothesis testing by the learners about second language learning. Moreover, Abi Samara (2003) asserts that error analysis focuses on errors made by learners.

Types of Errors
There are two main sources of errors; inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors. Inter-lingual (interference) errors are traceable to first language interference (Brown, 2000, p.224). These errors are due to negative inter-lingual transfer. Intra-lingual errors on the other hand, are often caused by faulty or partial learning of the target language transfer (Kesjavarz, 2003). Richards (1972) identified four types of inter-lingual errors; overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. Later he identifies an additional six sources of errors: interference, overgeneralization, performance errors, markers of transitional competence, strategies of communication and assimilation, and (6) teacher-induced errors.

Previous Studies
There is a lot of literature and research done on studies on analyzing writing errors committed widely by EFL/ESL learners which also involves Arab speaking EFL learners. The findings of these studies have identified some common types of errors committed by EFL students in their writing. In Arab countries, where Arabic is their native language and English is the foreign language, they share almost the same scenario in the field of errors in writing (Ruwaida, 2015; Taiseer, 2008; Barry, 2014; Salem, 2007).

Abi Samara (2003) in his study on an analysis of Errors among Arabic speakers of English from 10 students in Grade 9, found writing errors in the following categories; grammatical (prepositions, articles, adjectives), syntactic (sentence structure and word order), semantic (punctuation, capitilisation, and spelling) and discourse errors. The results revealed that one third of these errors were transfer errors from the native language. He also revealed the highest number of errors were from semantics and vocabulary. Similarly, Ridha (2012) examined 80 writing samples of EFL college students and he classified their errors according to the grammatical, lexical/ semantic, mechanics, and word order taxonomies. The findings also revealed that most of students' errors were due to L1 transfer. Furthermore, she found that grammatical and mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent errors that was committed.

In addition, Sawalmeh (2013) examined errors of 33 Arabian speaking Saudi learners' essays from the Preparatory Year Program at University of Ha'il. The results of this study revealed students had committed 10 errors. These errors were: (1) verb tense, (2) word order, (3) singular/plural form, (4) subject-verb agreement, (5) double negatives, (6) spellings, (7) capitalization, (8) articles (9) sentence fragments and (10) prepositions. Hence it can be concluded that both inter lingual and intra lingual errors are the one hinders students from writing effectively in their writing classroom.

Similarly, a research conducted by Al-Buainain (2007) reached a conclusion that some of the errors made was due to negative interference of L1 habits and some were caused by

students' lack of sufficient English knowledge. She examined 40 exam scripts of the first writing course taken by the Arab students at Qatar University to identify the problems they faced in writing. She classified the errors committed by focusing on some syntactic features such as verbs, relative clauses, articles, fragments, noun modifiers, and prepositions. Ali (2007) studied on interlingual errors or interferences from Arabic into English at University of Mosulon and found that spelling, pronunciation, and some syntactic features, namely, verbs, relative clauses, articles, and prepositions are the most common errors committed by Arab students due to the heavy influence of their L1. Hence,it can be inferred that the main focus of this study on Arabic students, are the problems they had encountered in their writing due to negative influence of their first language habits , as these students tend to adopt the L1 rules and apply them in the L2 writing.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilised the method of content analysis to gather the research results. The subjects of the study were 10 Middle Eastern Male students from Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia who are enrolled in Level 1 of the Preparatory Intensive English program. 10 male students' essays were collected from their writing classes. They were required an opinion essay in about 250 words. Corder's (1967) method of error analysis which consist of three steps; (1) collection of sample errors, (2) identification of errors and (3) description of errors were used to analyse the English essays. The methods are explained as such; first, in order to ascertain the types and number of errors, each paragraph was examined word by word and sentence by sentence, to examine the frequency, errors were categorised into different categories by using coding and thus converted into percentage. Last but not least, the researchers then compared the categories and number of errors committed by these students after analyzing the types of errors. The errors were tabulated using frequency and percentages.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the written essays are tabulated in Table 1 - Categories and Types of Common Errors identified.

Table 1. Categories and Types of Common Errors Identified in Student Essays

Category	Type		Frequency	%
Syntax (Grammatical)	1)	Subject / Verb Omission (Sentence Fragment)	27	15.0
	2)	Subject-verb Agreement	15	8.33
Lexical	1)	Verb	7	3.89
	2)	Determiner	5	2.78
	3)	Preposition	12	6.67
	4)	Conjunction	10	5.56
	5)	Word choice	11	6.11
Mechanics	1)	Capitalization	20	11.11
	2)	Punctuation	24	13.33
	3)	Spelling	42	23.33

Typography	1) Paragraphing		3	1.67
	2) Paragraph indentation		2	1.11
	3) No spaces between paragraphs		2	1.11

This study was to investigate the types of writing errors commonly committed by level 1 PIE students. The study had used Corder's 1967 taxonomy of writing errors. According to the findings, it was found that the bulk of the errors commonly committed by these students were in the area of mechanics of writing, that is related to capitalization, punctuation and spelling. These students have main difficulty in their spelling (23.3%) punctuation (13.33%) and capitalization (11.11%).

As for punctuation it was found that students' common errors were that they do not put full stops at the end of their sentences, also their sentences are combined with commas making it a very long one. Examples are available in Table 2. As for Capitalization, they do not have capital letters at the beginning of the sentence, (from my point of view..). In addition, on their spelling, they have difficulties, on words with double vowels (Believe > Belive) also on words ending with 'e' – the letter 'e' is missing (Improve > Improv) as well as words with three syllables and more (Advertisement > Adveritisment, Government > Government Authority > Authorite.

Table 2. Type of Mechanics Errors Identified in Student Essays

Type	Description	Example
Punctuation	No full stops at the end of the sentence. Sentences are combined with commas making it a very long one.	...think that it is the faut (sic) of the parent **(.)** Discuss...
	Phrases and clauses are not properly punctuated with commas.	...presented all around us on (sic) the streets **(,)** on (sic) the TV programs **(,)** in the shops and so on.
Capitalization	No capital letters at the beginning of the sentence	...bedency (sic). **f**rom my point of...
Spelling	Words with double vowels	Believe > Belive View > Viwe
	Words with double or triple consonants	Blamed > Balmed Influence > Infuence
	Words ending with 'e' – the letter 'e' is missing	Improve > Improv
	Words with three syllables and more	Advertisement > Adveritisment Government > Goverment

As for lexical use, it was found that these students had most errors on wrong use of prepositions, 6.67 %, [government should be blamed for the rise on child obesity], conjunction error 5.56%, [A (and)n], the other verb 3.89% [Wrong verb used - ...technology

effecting (affecting), ...when they went (want) to...] and the least for determiner at 2.78%.- [Missing 'the'- I think that (the) rise in obesity in children is (the) fault of both parents...]

Table 3. Type of Lexical Errors Identified in Student Essays

Type	Description	Example
Verb	Wrong verb used	...technology **effecting** (affecting) ...when they **went** (want) to...
Determiner	Missing 'the'	I think that (the) rise in obesity in children is (the) fault of both parents...
	Adding unnecessary 'the'	...their children due to the business about at **the** work.
Preposition	Use of at, on and in	**At** the same time > **In** the same time ...presented all around us **on** the streets **on** the TV programs in the shops and so on
	Other prepositions	...government should be blamed for the rise **in** child obesity...
Conjunction	Wrongly used	**A (and)n the other**

As for the Syntax errors, these students had committed grammatical errors as well as they had written week structures which were disjointed and impeded the meaning of the sentence structure, I was revealed that frequent errors were students had omitted the verb 15% and wrongly used SVA at 8.33%.Students tend to omit the verb,[belive that livin (in the) city (**is**) the best place] as well as].

Table 4. Type of Syntax (Grammatical) Errors Identified in Student Essays

Type	Description	Example
Subject / Verb Omission	Omission of verb	belive that livin (in the) city (**is**) the best place.... many good place (**places**)/ many place (**places**)
Subject-Verb Agreement	Subject and verb do not agree	...parents (**is** - are) the reason
Sentence Fragment	Disjointed /Fragmented	... make people (sic) make do not (sic) good or comfortable ...there are many problem effect has technology

As for Typography, that is paragraph indentation and paragraphing, common errors were the length of paragraph was inconsistent, it was either too long or too short, the introduction,

body and conclusion are combined into one long paragraph and some had no indentation at the beginning of the paragraph. However students were aware of this requirement and they had the less errors with a total of 3.89%

Conclusion

This study had identified common errors committed by Middle Eastern students in their writing class in the Level 1 of the Preparatory Intensive English Program. The results of the analysis showed the 5 most common categories of errors, were syntax, lexical, semantic mechanics and typography. In general, the results of this study indicate that the most common errors for this level 1 students were in Mechanics of writing. The second area was in syntax followed by lexical and typography. This study will be significant to PIE instructors to be aware of these errors and take them into consideration while teaching writing in the preparatory intensive English program.

Acknowledgement

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