Analysis of Syntactic Errors in English Writing: A Case Study of Jazan University Preparatory Year Students

Muhammed Suleman Hafiz
PYD, Jazan University, Jazan, KSA.

Dr. Abdul-Majeed Altayib Omar
English Language Center, Umm-Al_Qura University, Makkah, KSA

Khalil ur Rehman Muhammad Gul Sher
English Language Center, Umm-Al-Qura University, Makkah, KSA

Abstract:
The present study focuses on the most common syntactic errors which Arabic speaking learners in Preparatory Year, Jazan University (Saudi Arabia) face in learning English as a foreign language. The results of this study reveal that the most common syntactic errors made by the learners are in sentence structure; subject verb agreement, tense, auxiliary verb, number, use of conjunction, preposition, article, etc. Many students in this study were categorized as slow learners who were not even aware of the importance of writing skill. Non-seriousness and less concentration of learners result errors and mistakes in their writing. In addition to that, the errors were hypothetically associated to the transfer of mother tongue and over generalization. In the Arab context, writing is not an easy task; it is, indeed, a challenging job for the teacher. Therefore, traditional methodologies do not help. Unless the teachers create interest about writing skill in the minds of the learners, the desired results can't be achieved. For the present study, the researchers used the primary source. Different colleges at Jazan University were selected for data collection. The students were tested by asking to write compositions on different topics related to their academic or day to day life. Analysis of previous answer scripts was also a part of study to trace out a common pattern or a series of errors made by the students.
Keywords: Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Writing skill, Syntactic errors, Error analysis

1.   Introduction

Error analysis is defined as the process of studying the appearance, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language. The data collection of error analysis includes two steps. The first step is the universal collection, which makes a preliminary understanding of the learner's writing level. The second step is the deep analysis of errors. The errors of the sentence level are more common and affect the semantic expression, discourse level analysis. Therefore, it is of great help to improve the writing ability, strengthen the training of the sentence level and correct the mistakes of the English sentence patterns. The common syntactic errors are incomplete sentence structure, subject verb agreement error, improper use of conjunctions, prepositions, articles, etc. Researchers have identified that Arab university students' lack the required English language proficiency that thwarts their academic progress. Undoubtedly, a learner needs proper language learning atmosphere to facilitate the students' success in English language learning in general and developing writing skills in particular. Such atmosphere is usually not found in Arab universities as the students are exposed to English language on university campus only.

Language cannot be really taught, the conditions are created to develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way. The correct knowledge of English language is necessary for students studying in higher education in general and in professional courses in particular. Nowadays, English is used worldwide because of the advances in technology and other businesses. Flanagin and Rudd (2000) found that English is necessary for all professions. However, Teaching English in the Arab world is challenging. Many students are able to understand the language, but most of the students face problems while communicating their ideas effectively.

Writing has been an extension of human language across time and space. It is assumed that writing began with the political expansion in ancient cultures, which needed reliable means for transmitting information, maintaining financial accounts, keeping historical records, and other similar activities. Writing is one of the most important inventions in human history. It provides a relatively permanent record of information, opinions, beliefs, feelings, arguments, explanations, theories, etc. Writing allows us to share our communication not only with our contemporaries, but also with future generations.

Arabic society misses the opportunity to use a foreign language like English in their daily life. As a result, many problems occur when they study at a university where the medium of instruction is a foreign language like English (Al-Khasawneh, 2010). Ansari (2012) mentioned that more than 50% of students in Saudi Arabia do not know how to write in English.

Like the rest of the world, English language teaching (ELT) has embedded firmly in the Arab world during

the last few decades and a growing mass of research produced in this region has been related to English teaching and its sub fields (Al-Seghayer, 2011). Though tremendous efforts have been made, as reflected by the huge funding allocated to ELT, the research studies conducted in the Arab world reported that EFL learners in the Arab world including Saudi Arabia suffer from serious problems in this regard such as students' poor performance or low proficiency level in the target language (Javid, Farooq, & Gulzar, 2012). Bacha (2002) suggested that it might be due to the fact that the students are not motivated to develop their writing and that "L2 writers are known to face problems in developing their writing skills at the university level. These problems are even more accentuated with L1 Arabic non-native speakers of English in required English composition courses (p. 161). A report published by the Cambridge Examination Center in 2009 about the proficiency level of Saudi students "…ranked them 39th of the 40 nations participated in both academic and general training tests" (Cambridge ESOL: Research Notes, 2010 cited in Al-Seghayer, 2011, p. 45). This poor performance has been more strongly revealed by the studies which were conducted to evaluate Saudi students' writing skills (Bersamina, 2009; Grami, 2010; Al-Eid, 2000) cited the results of IELTS test report of Saudi students which revealed that they scored comparatively low in all English language skills (5.17, 4.97, 5.81 out of 9 in listening, reading and speaking respectively) but the average in writing skills was the lowest (4.83 out of 9).

Numerous studies have been conducted to identify the problems of Saudi EFL learners in their writing. The findings of these studies reported that despite the fact that Saudi students study English as a compulsory subjects for six years before joining any university but actually only a few of them are able to show satisfactory performance in the university entrance examinations (Grami, 2010).

2. Significance and Objective of the Study

It has been noticed by the researchers that most of the studies in the field of writing problems or errors are done through the quantitative method. It can't be ruled out that there are researches based on linguistic interpretation as well to identify the root cause of the errors made by the learners. The present work aims at studying the common syntactic errors Arabic speaking learners come across in learning English as a foreign language. The present study could be employed as a reference for future research in this field. It will also benefit the curriculum designers and text book writers to design syllabi and text books accordingly.

3. Review of Literature

Acquiring English is a difficult issue among second or foreign language learners ESL/EFL especially Arabic learners (Zughoul & Taminian, 1984). Researchers have stated that learners face difficulties to write effectively. It has been found that most language learners at all levels believe that writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Kurk & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007) or a sophisticated skill compared with other skills (Daud, Daud & Kassim, 2005).

Writing, as compared to speaking, can be seen as a more standardized system which must be acquired through special instruction. Mastery of this standard system is an important prerequisite of cultural and educational participation. The fact that writing is more standardized than speaking allows for a higher degree of sanctions when people deviate from that standard. (Grabowski, 1996).

Concerning the problems of ESL learners' in writing, Alsamadani (2010, p. 53) stated that "it is a complex, challenging, and difficult process" because it includes multiple skills such as identification of thesis statement, writing supporting details, reviewing and editing. This complex process makes it rather difficult to teach it. The difficulty of teaching/learning of this skill is due to the fact that it involves a comprehensive knowledge of grammar, suitable vocabulary, writing mechanics (e.g., punctuation & capitalization), organizational skills, style, imagination etc. Another factor that makes teaching of writing rather difficult is that it has been historically dealt with vis-à-vis the other skills.

Much research has offered valuable insights into the reasons of Arab EFL learners' weaknesses in English in general and writing skills in particular. Khan (2011) reviewed several studies in this regard and concluded that Arab EFL learners' problems are caused by the following reasons: a) school graduates have lack of information regarding the university or college they enrolled in; b) there is deficiency in the English language curricula offered by some schools and universities; c) dreadful teaching methodology; d) problems with proper language environments; and e) lack of personal impetus on the part of the students. (p. 1250)

According to his findings, the causes of the problems may be dealt with from four perspectives, i.e., the learners, faculty members, curricula and the environment of teaching /learning context. It has been reported that Saudi EFL learners are more interested in getting better scores instead of learning the target language and they are in the habit of memorizing passages without understanding, grammatical rules and lexical items to achieve high grade point average (Grami, 2010; Zaid, 1993). Another very strong reason behind this marks-oriented behaviour of Saudi EFL learners is that a vast majority of them lack intrinsic motivation and bear various extrinsic motivational factors to learn English language (Javid, Asmari, & Farooq, 2012). Concerning the role of EFL teachers, a growing mass of research has suggested that a vast majority of EFL teachers are hired from the

Arab countries (such as Egypt, Sudan, Jordan etc.) to serve in Saudi Arabia. These teachers seem to lack the following: a) a proper and appropriate training to teach English, b) a proper motivation to indulge in teaching process, and c) willingness to incorporate innovation and modern techniques in their teaching practices; thus, causing the continuation of traditional, outdated and teacher-led teaching practices that is a major impediment in the way of effective and efficient ELT in Saudi Arabia (Bersamina, 2009; Grami, 2010; Zaid, 1993). One of the main factors in this regard is the absence of appropriate and learner-centered curricula to cater for the specific EFL needs of the learners. It has been frequently reported that the curricula taught in several Saudi universities are outdated, traditional and textbook-based that encourage the students to merely memorise instead of making them grasp the target language (Khan, 2011; Zughoul, 1987). According to Fageeh (2011), "many EFL learners heavily rely on writing as integral skill to language learning" as supported by much research that EFL learners' listening, speaking and reading skills mainly depend on their writing competence (AlGhamari, 2004; Cayer & Sacks, 1979). Tahaineh (2010) has stated that Arab students' errors in writing mainly fall in the category of syntax and grammar and quoted Hashim's (1996) findings, who reviewed and analyzed a number of studies conducted on Arab EFL learners' syntactic errors and stated that Arab learners' errors can be categorized in seven syntactic subcategories: prepositions, verbs, articles, conjunctions, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and sentence structure. Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) is another study that reinforced the previous findings and revealed that Arab EFL learners' errors in writing are syntactical and especially in prepositions.

Sara Cushing Weigle (2002, p. 4) states, "Perhaps the best way to begin to appreciate the complexities of L2 writing is to contrast it with L1 writing … While virtually children are able to speak their native language when they begin school, writing must be explicitly taught. Furthermore, in comparison to speaking, listening, and reading, writing outside of school settings is relatively rare, and extensive public writing (that is, writing beyond the sentence or paragraph level and intended for an audience other than oneself or one's close associates) is reserved for those employed in special careers such as education, law, or journalism."

Problems related to writing have been discussed by many linguists, but there is still a lot that needs to be discussed or taken into consideration in research perspective. The present work is an attempt to study the most common syntactic errors which Arabic speaking learners in Preparatory Year, Jazan University encounter in learning English as a foreign language. This work can be considered as a preliminary one in the context of Jazan University.

4.   **Methodology and Data Source**

This study was undertaken through an error analysis, to investigate the syntactic errors committed by Preparatory Year, Jazan University English learners. Furthermore, it helped in finding the problematic areas of the inter-language syntax of Arabic speaking learners and to explore what is peculiar of the second language learner, which makes the language difficult to learn. Error Analysis has been an important part of language pedagogy since its emergence. EA became a recognized part of applied linguistics, a development that owed much to the work of Corder (1974) who suggests these steps in EA research:

4.1) Collection of a sample of learner language: The first procedure of EA is to collect samples of learner language. The size of sample could be massive, specific or incidental. A massive sample is a collection of samples of language use from a large number of learners in order to compile a comprehensive list of errors, representative of the entire population. A specific sample consists of one sample of language use collected from a limited number of learners. An incidental sample is one sample of language use produced by a single learner.

4.2) Identification of errors: The second step is identifying the errors. At this stage, the most crucial question which needs to be answered is 'What is an error?' Corder (1967) distinguishes 'errors of competence' from 'mistakes in performance' and puts forth the argument that EA should investigate only errors.

4.3) Description of errors: The third step is the description of errors, "one of the prime purposes of describing errors was that this procedure reveals which errors are the same and which are different, and this was a necessary step in putting them into categories" (James, 1998).

4.4) Explanation of errors: The fourth stage is an attempt to explain the errors based on the cause and sources of errors. By identifying the sources, it is hoped that there will be new findings which can help teachers to take another step toward understanding how the learners' cognitive and affective processes relate to the linguistic system and to formulate an integrated understanding of the process of second language learning (Brown, 2000). He has broadly categorized the sources of errors into: 'interlingual transfer', 'intralingual transfer', 'context of learning', and 'communication strategies'. (ibid: 223-227).

4.5) Evaluation of errors: Finally, the fifth stage which involves the evaluation of errors, affects the learners who

make the errors. The outcome of the final step should be pedagogically motivated – to create better teaching and learning materials which will help teachers to improve their teaching, as well as for learners to learn more effectively.

4.6) Data and Source: The researcher used the primary source for this work. The data was collected from the students of Jazan University at different colleges. The students were asked to write compositions on different topics related to their academic or day to day life. The previous answer scripts were also analyzed to find a common pattern or a series of errors made by the students.

5.   Discussion and Results

The study reveals that language transfer or linguistic interference is the main reason for errors. They occur due to language contact situation. Dulay et al (1982) says, "Interference is the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language". Lott (1983: 256) defines interference as "errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue". The common errors reported in the analyzed data are discussed below:

5.1) Copula

Copula means 'link' or 'tie' that connects two different things. It is a word used to link the subject of a sentence with a predicate (a subject complement). It is often a verb or a verb like word, though this is not universally the case. A verb that is a copula is sometimes called a copulative or copular verb. Most languages have one main copula, although some (such as Spanish, Portuguese and Thai) have more than one, and some have none. It means, in some languages, copula omission occurs within a particular grammatical context. Arabic is one of the languages (such as Russian, Indonesian, Turkish, and Hungarian) which consistently drop the copula in present tense.

Scott & Tucker, 1974 say, "One of the significant characteristics of the Arabic language syntax is the absence of an overt verbal copula. The most frequent type of deviation Arab speaker encounters in forming the English verb is the deletion of the copula." The studies refer this type of deviation to MT interference since Arabic, as they claim, does not have copula. Arabic language does not report verbal copula in its structure. It is clear in the following example that Arabic construction does not use overt verbal copula:

/khalid-u fallaah-un/

Khalid-Nom farmer-Nom

'Khalid is a farmer.'

While speaking English by Arabic natives, this phenomenon prominently influences the structures of English language. The deletion of verb in English sentences is a common practice. Examples are given below.

1.   *My classroom nice.
       My classroom is nice.
2.   *My friend name Osman.
       My friend's name is Osman.
3.   *My family big.
       My family is big.
4.   *My new apartment big rooms.
       My new apartment has big rooms.
5.   *Nawaf my new classmate in this semester.
       Nawaf is my new classmate in this semester.

5.2) Concord

In broad terms, concord means agreement between the subject and the verbs as well as other elements of the clause structure, (Babajide 2004, Leech and Svartvik 1994). The concept of concord in the grammar of English suggests that for a correct and meaningful English sentence, its constituent parts (i.e. subject, verb, object, adverbial) must be in perfect agreement. When we talk about Arabic language, many studies report the deletion of the [-s] marker when the Arabic speaking learner uses the present simple (Beck, 1979; Al-Kasimi et al. 1979).

The concord system of Arabic is complex. The typical Arabic sentence begins with a verb. If a subject comes before a verb, the verb agrees with the subject in gender and number. When a subject is followed by a verb, it must agree with it in number and gender. If the verb is followed by two or more subjects, the verb agrees with the first subject. If the first subject is plural, the verb will remain singular and agree with it only in gender. In comparison to Arabic, concord system in English is easy. Only 3rd person singular subject (e.g. Ali/Fatima/Bird, He/she/it) takes [s, -es, or -ies (e.g. eats, does, flies, etc.)].

The correct subject-verb agreement in English sentences is not easy for Arabic speaking learners due to coexisting mother tongue rules e.g.

6. *He work in Jazan hospital.
    He works in Jazan hospital.
7. *Musa dislike smoking.
    Musa dislikes smoking.
8. *My friend go shopping.
    My friend goes shopping.
9. *Ahmed have big car.
    Ahmed has a big car.
10. *Maryam like English documentaries.
    Maryam likes English documentaries.

5.3) Tense/Aspect
Tense is the form, a verb takes to show the time it happened. Aspect refers to the degree of completeness of an action or state. It can be said that when talking in terms of aspects, the main concern is if the action is completed, partial, ongoing or yet to occur. In Arabic, most of the verbs do not occur in the progressive aspect. So it is not an easy job for Arabic speaking learners to understand the phenomenon. The literature reported cases where Arab learners do not use the progressive instead use the non-progressive (Mukattash, 1986). In progressive aspect, either the progressive morpheme i.e. [-ing] is deleted or the auxiliary verb is dropped by the learners. These errors can be seen due to negative transfer of their mother tongue.
11. *Ahmed is study in Arts College.
    Ahmed is studying in Arts College.
12. *She is stay in Madina.
    She is staying in Madina.
13. *Faris is play football.
    Faris is playing football.
14. *Abdullah is eat burger.
Abdullah is eating burger.
The other problem, Arabic speaking learners face is their misunderstanding of tense. Instead of simple present they use past simple e.g.
15. *I drank milk usually.
    I drink milk usually.
16.*Yahya didn't go shopping every day.
  Yahya doesn't go shopping every day.
Similarly, the learners are unable to make difference between simple past and present perfect e.g.
17. *Majid has gone to Damman yesterday.
    Majid went to Dammam yesterday.
18. *Yesterday, I have bought a new shirt.
    Yesterday, bought a new shirt.

5.4) Adjective - Word Order
An adjective is a word that describes something (a noun) or someone (a person). The place of adjective in English is before the noun which it modifies. In Arabic, adjectives come after the noun. How this order difference influences the Arabic learner's English, can be seen in the following examples.
19. *I have car red.
    I have a red car.
20. *What is your number phone?
    What is your phone number?
21. * My number apartment is …
     My apartment number is …
22. *My hobby favorite is swim.
    My favorite hobby is swimming.

5.5) Prepositions
Prepositions are short words (on, in, to) that usually stand in front of nouns (sometimes also in front of gerund verbs). Even advanced learners of English find prepositions difficult, as a 1:1 translation is usually not possible. One preposition in your native language might have several translations depending on the situation. There are hardly any rules as to when to use which preposition.
     Use of prepositions for Arabic speaking learners is a hard task. They try to form one-to-one correspondence between Arabic and English prepositions. As a result, they either omit the preposition or use a wrong one e.g.

23. *I born in Samtah at 1991.
    I was born in Samtah in 1991.
24. *Abdul Karim is live Sabiya.
    Abdul Karim lives in Sabiya.
25. *He is student in English.
    He is a student of English.
26. *He live in Street Prince Khalid.
    He lives on Prince Street Khalid.
27. *He joined university on July, 2012.
    He joined university in July, 2012.
28. *The size my classroom is big.
    The size of my classroom is big.

5.6) Infinitival 'To'

Infinitive is a grammatical term referring to certain verb forms existing in many languages, most often used as non-finite verbs. In traditional descriptions of English, the infinitive is the basic dictionary form of a verb when used non-finitely, with or without the particle *to*. In many other languages the infinitive is a single word, often with a characteristic inflective ending like *morir* ("(to) die") in Spanish, *manger* ("(to) eat") in French, *portare* ("(to) carry") in Latin, *lieben* ("(to) love") in German, etc. However some languages have no forms which can be considered to be infinitives. Being a verb, an infinitive may take objects and other complements and modifiers to form a verb phrase (called an infinitive phrase).

Arabic has no infinitive. The verb meaning 'write' is often specified as 'كَتَبَ' /kataba/, which actually means 'he wrote'. In this context, it is not easy for Arabic speaking learners to use the infinitival to properly e.g.
29. *He like watch movies.
    He likes to watch movies.
30. *He like eat noodles.
    He likes to eat noodles.
31. *Murtaza like go Dubai.
    Murtaza likes to go Dubai.
32. *My dream is visit all countries world.
    My dream is to visit all the countries of the world.
33. *I want become good doctor.
    I want to become a good doctor.

5.7)Articles

In English we have definite nouns which are usually preceded by 'the' (i.e. the student, the tables) as well as indefinite nouns (i.e. a student, tables). Arabic also has definite and indefinite nouns. The Arabic definite article joins with the word that it precedes. For example, the word كتاب /kitāb/ 'book' can be made definite by prefixing it with *al-*, resulting in الكتاب /al-kitāb/ 'the book'. Consequently, *al-* is typically translated as *the* in English. The most noticeable error in using the indefinite article by Arabic speaking learners was in deleting the indefinite article (Scott & Tucker, 1974). It is also reported that Arabic speaking learners are unable to differentiate between definite and indefinite article e.g.
34. *His father is teacher in Abha.
    His father is a teacher in Abha.
35. *Hassan is a engineer.
    Hassan is an engineer.
36. *Mohsin is a best doctor in Jazan hospital.
    Mohsin is the best doctor in Jazan hospital.
37. *I usually get up at 7am in morning.
    I usually get up at 7am in the morning.

5.8) Conjunction

It is a part of speech used to connect clauses or sentences or to coordinate words in the same clause (e.g. and, but, if). In Arabic, conjunctions are indeclinable words used in a sentence to join together the different parts of speech. They serve to connect words and sentences, and to express their relation to each other. Arabic writing has been characterized as syndetic, that is, as using conjunctions to link discourse elements. Due to the influence of Arabic language, the learners are unable to use English conjunctions properly e.g.
38. *I am single, and my dream is buy big home and car nice and I have money no.
    I am single. My dream is to buy a big home and a nice car but I don't have money.

39. *I like watch T.V and like swimming and I recite the Qur'an.
    I like watching T.V, swimming, and reciting the Qur'an.

6. Conclusion

This primary research was conducted to test the English proficiency in Jazan University students. The research focused on common syntactic errors students commit. The researcher took basic syntactic structures to test the errors. It is reported that students err in copula (*My family big./My family is big.), subject-verb agreement (*My friend go shopping. / My friend goes shopping.), tense (*Faris is play football./Faris is playing football.), to infinitive (*He like eat noodles./He likes to eat noodles.) and function words like articles (*Mohsin is a best doctor in Jazan hospital./Mohsin is the best doctor in Jazan hospital.), prepositions (*He is student in English./He is a student of English.), conjunction(*I like watch T.V and like swimming and I recite the Qur'an./I like watching T.V, swimming, and reciting the Qur'an.). It is also seen that students unnecessarily add or omit some grammatical or lexical units. In some cases, students even don't use the main verbs or some other head words. The lack of practice and interference of mother tongue is reflected in their colloquial as well as written language. The level of students can be improved by improving the curriculum. The classrooms must be practical in order to get good results in language learning. A due space should be given to the activities which will prove helpful in the learning process. The teachers' focus must be the performance, though we can't rule out the linguistic competence of the learner. The students will err for sure in the beginning of the course, but it is teacher's responsibility to encourage them. For desired results, it should be mandatory for both (the teacher and the students) to use only English in the classroom. The more it is practiced, the easier it will be for the students to speak.

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