

The Impact of Morphological Errors on ESL Engineering Students' Writing: A Descriptive and an Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT: The past tense acquisition has always been a challenging task for the Second Language (L2) learners. The challenge resides in conveying ideas, thoughts, and opinions either in spoken or written production. This study attempts to designate and classify the causes of morphological errors committed by Moroccan EFL learners'. The focus is on factors that augment morphological errors more precisely in students' written productions. Corder's (1974) Error Analysis is adopted to evaluate and measure the errors spotted in learners' essays. The subjects who participated in this investigation are 120 Moroccan engineering students at ENSET Mohammedia, Hassan II University. The findings demonstrate that a) the students' English morphological appropriateness is low b) the learners overgeneralize the rule of the regular past tense over the irregular. Even though the participants' levels vary between beginners and pre-intermediate English language level according to the placement test. English inconsistency, misuse of rules, and language interference are the main factors causing such errors. This paper suggests that English language instructors need to pay close attention to learners' language proficiency. It is quite impossible to eradicate all of the learners' errors. Yet, a meticulous explanation by providing a semantic context of verbs could help reduce students' errors.

KEYWORDS: Morphology, Errors Analysis, Language Interference, Overgeneralization, Past Tense Acquisition, Appropriateness, Analogy, Interference.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

L2 :	Second Language
SLA :	Second Language Acquisition
EFL :	English as Foreign Language
EA :	Error Analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

Humans use language on a daily basis to express an immense range of thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. Since language is governed by rules. It is inevitable that second language learners commit mistakes. That is quite natural because learning a language is a conscious effort and relies heavily on correction. Learners' language proficiency could improve when mistakes are corrected. Even though the term error and mistake seem to have the same meaning, but it is not. The dictionary of applied linguistics and phonetics (2008) clearly distinguishes between the two; errors which are noticed and corrected by the speaker, errors which the speaker can correct if prompted to do so, and errors which the speaker cannot correct because of a lack of linguistic knowledge. [...]

2 BACKGROUND

The process of learning a language, be it French, English, Spanish, or any other second language, involves committing mistakes. In the past, instructors believed that errors should be eradicated. Lately, applied linguistics scholars prove that when

learners are committing mistakes it means that first the learning is active second there is a language development; by doing so learners test their hypotheses and use several second language learning strategies (Touchie, 1986).

2.1 MORPHOLOGICAL ERRORS

The distinction between errors and mistakes was introduced by Corder(1967, 1971). Corder identifies errors as a lack of linguistic knowledge. If the learners fail unintentionally to self-correct the mistake then it is a problem of competence. However, if the learner arrives to intentionally rectify what he/she produced as a mistake then it is not about performance only. For instance, *teached* could be uttered instead of the correct form *taught* if it is rectified by the learner it means that it is only 'a slip of tongue' or 'a slip of brain'. According to Corder Learners' errors provide evidence of the language system used. In other words, errors are assumed to reflect the level of competence achieved by learners.

2.2 ERROR ANALYSIS

Vivian Cook identifies Error Analysis as a methodology for dealing with data, rather than a theory of acquisition (Cook, 1993). Moreover, the significance of errors is manifested in the three following features a) provide the teacher with learners' progress b) equip the researcher with the strategies adopted by the student to learn a language c) and how errors are committed as well as the learner proceeding of learning by testing different possible hypothesis (Corder, 1967). The following figure demonstrates the errors committed during the process of acquiring a second language. L2 learners test several hypotheses for instance comparing the existing structures in the first language and apply it on the target language.

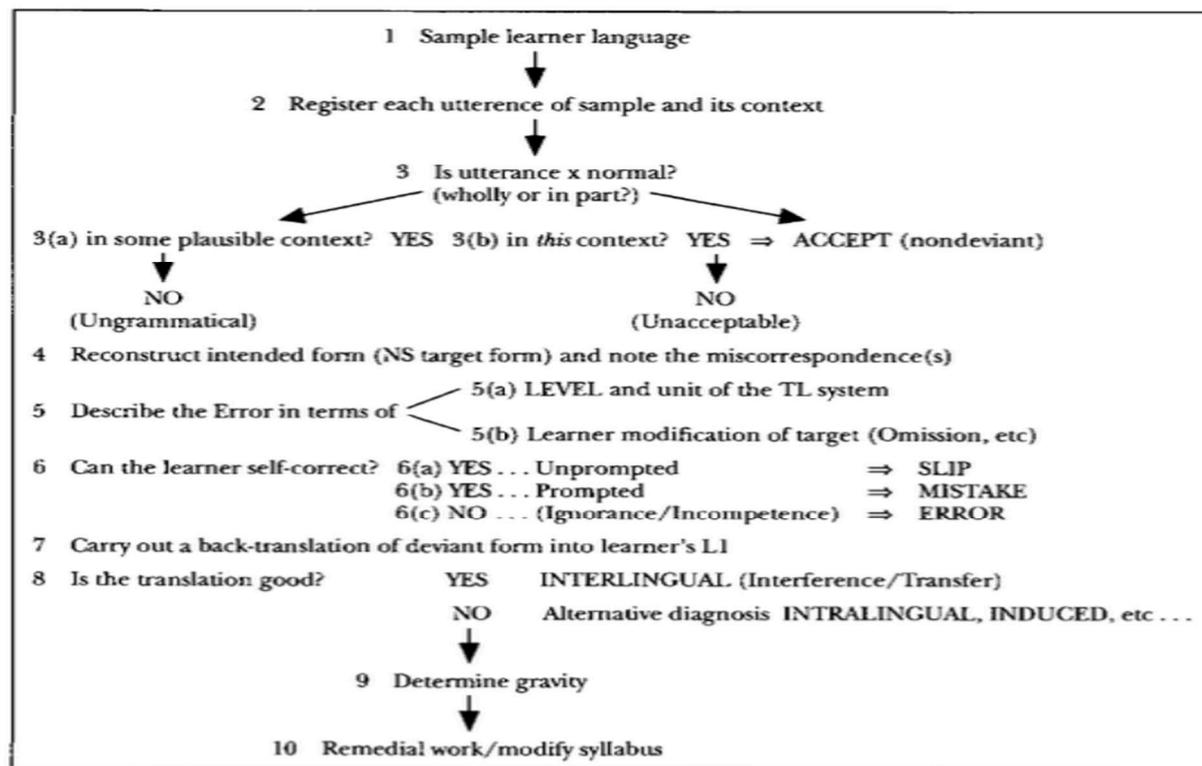


Fig. 1. Algorithm for Error Analysis

2.3 TYPES OF ERRORS

Richard (1971) categorized four main types of errors a) overgeneralization, when the learners create and apply a different structure on the basis of another structure, b) ignorance of rule restriction, sometimes second language learners succeed to put the rule into use but they fail to observe the restrictions, c) incomplete application of rules, arising when the learners utter an incorrect output and d) false concepts hypothesized, emerging from the lack of the linguistic knowledge of the target language.

2.4 CAUSES OF MORPHOLOGICAL ERRORS

The earlier stages of the process of second language learning are usually characterized by the impact of the native language over the target language. The three leading causes of errors in SLA according to Trianingsih (2010) are transfer, analogy, and teaching induced errors. Transfer arises when the learners carry or activate the patterns and parameters from the mother tongue to second language which are not operative. Taylor (1975) has pointed out that while learning a language human over generalize target language rules, reduce grammatical redundancies, and omit those rules that they have not learned. Furthermore, analogical errors appear when learners have learnt the rules of the target language, yet they are unable to avoid the errors into consequently the correct structure. The teaching induced errors refers to learners' errors that are steered from the classroom situation more than students' competence or the first language interference.

Brown (1980) stated that before the learner becomes familiar with the system of the second language, the native language is the only linguistic system upon which the learner can rely. First language interference may result from a number of interferences, such as grammatical, prepositional, and lexical interference. Brown belongs to a school of thought that classifies morphological errors into four main categories; interlingual, intralingual, communication based-strategy and induced errors. Interlingual errors are caused by mother tongue interference (Touchie, 1986). Al-Khresheh (2010) suggested that interlingual error is committed by either literal translation mother tongue interference, or transfer error. Whereas, interlingual interference refers to output produced by learner, which reflect not only the structure of mother tongue, but generalization based on partial exposure of the target language (Richard, 1974). Overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of the rules, and false concept hypothesized or semantic errors are the four main intralingual errors committed by L2 learners (ibid). Communication based-strategy errors are when linguistic forms could steer the learners to commit errors. And as it is mentioned earlier, induced errors might be caused by the strategies and the materials used by the instructor during the teaching learning process.

3 MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The task required a morphological manipulation of verbs. The subjects were asked to write an essay in the simple past tense by using at least ten verbs from a given list. The selection of verbs was based on (a) less frequently used verbs and (b) verbs that the subjects are not acquaintance with or have never encountered before e.g. Shrink, Alight, Foresee, Inlay, etc.

3.2 SAMPLE OF THE STUDY

The participants of this study were 120 Moroccan engineering students enrolled in their 1st and 2nd year at a public engineering school, ENSETM, Hassan II University. The students belong to different department namely Renewable Energy, Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Big Data and Cloud Computing, and Software Engineering. There are two English language levels of the subjects; a pre-intermediate group and intermediate group. The two levels were defined by a placement test designed by the instructor.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The current inquiry adopted the three main steps of error analysis suggested by Corder (1974): (1) Collection of sample errors; (2) Identification of errors, and (3) Description and explanation of errors. The data was gathered from 120 out of 150 essays written on different topics in the simple past tense. Each of these essays varies between 100-250 words. The committed errors in the essays are identified by the language instructor. Then, the errors were classified into aforementioned categories by the researcher. Later, a trained research assistant on error analysis checked for the accuracy of the classification. Inter-rater reliability was high.

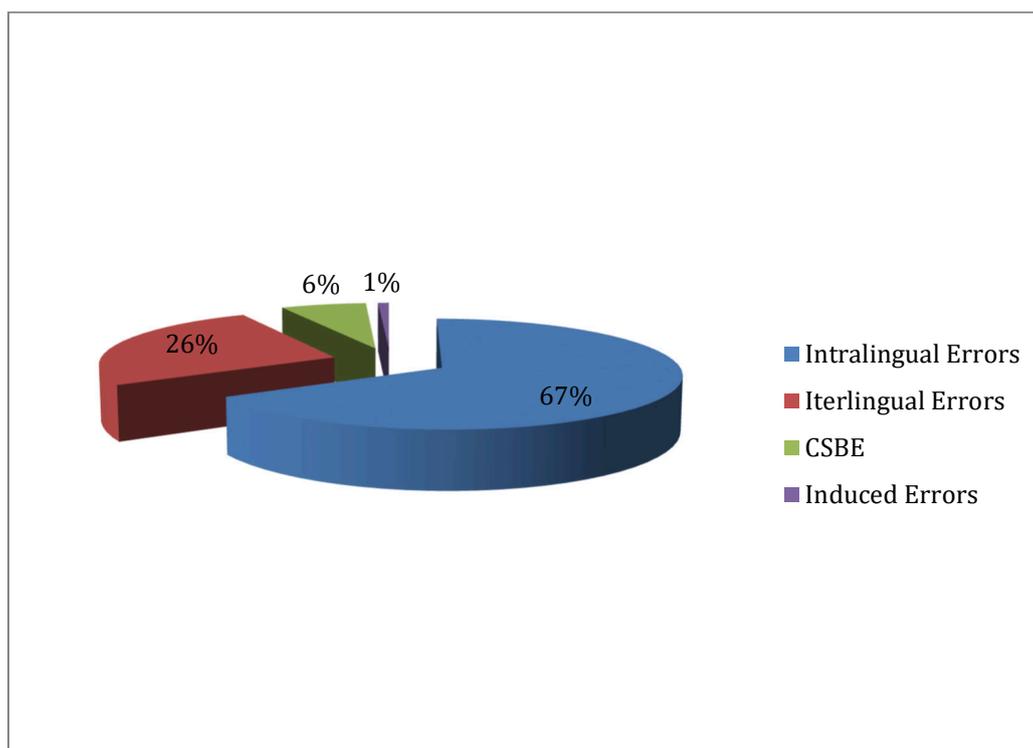


Fig. 2. Factors affecting Morphological Errors

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 demonstrates that the morphological awareness is modest but statistically significant. The major causes of errors in learners' writing essays was intralingual error by 67% which represents more than the half of the overall. Followed by 26% of interlingual errors that is also representative compared to 6% of Communication Strategy Based Errors and merely 1 % of induced errors.

Table 1. Illustration of intralingual errors made by ESL learners

Factors	Error	Correction	Morphological Error	Surface Strategy Taxonomy
Intralingual	I hearded someone knocking the door	I heard someone knocking at the door.	Inflectional past tense (- ed)	Addition -Simple addition Omission of Preposition
	When we meeted it was time for a long discussion	When we met , we had a long discussion.	Inflectional past tense (- ed)	Addition -Simple addition
	I buyed some food.	I bought some food.	Inflectional past tense (- ed)	Addition
	The conference helded *in the U.S Embassy.	The conference was held at the U.S Embassy.	Inflectional past tense (- ed)	Omission of 'be' Auxiliary in Passive Voice Blend error - Preposition Choice

This table displays some of the intralingual errors made by second language learners. These erroneous sentences are discussed based on two theories; surface structure taxonomy and language transfer. The surface structure taxonomy consists of omission, addition, missformation, (s) miss-ordering, and blends (Dulay, Burt, Krashen,1982). The subjects employed the strategy of language transfer and overgeneralization of the target language. Producing utterances such as *buyed, helded, meeted, hearded, eated, finded, rided, toked* instead of *bought, held, met, heard, ate, found, rode, took*. The learners tend to overregularize the regular simple past tense over the irregular. This demonstrates that the students have a limited knowledge

of the English language structures. Consequently, several hypotheses are tested by L2 learners some might fit in and some might come up with deviant structure depending on his/her previous experience of the target language.

Table 2. Illustration of interlingual errors made by ESL learners

Factors	Error	Language transfer	Morphological Error	Surface Strategy Taxonomy
Interlingual	We goed my friend and I to buy ticket.	Nous sommes allés, mon amie et moi, pour acheter les billets.	Inflectional past tense (- ed)	- Addition - Misformation of possessive adjective/ subject pronoun
	We doesn't finded time...	<i>On n'a pas eu le temps...</i> (French) <i>Malqinach al-waqt</i> (Moroccan Dialect)	Inflectional past tense (- ed)	- Addition Misformation of 'do' - Auxiliary in Negation

Table 2 shows the interlingual errors that emerge when the native language or the first language interferes with the acquisition or the use of a target language. The instrument used in this study was based on a morphological manipulation of verbs. However, subject was reluctant to employ the suggested verbs, unfamiliar or not frequently used verbs, instead they chose to resort to frequently used verbs or those verbs that sounds similar to other verbs in a previously learnt language.

The subjects write in their compositions erroneous sentences like a) '*I assisted the conference*' – '*j'ai assisté à une conférence*' and b) '*He showed me good places*' - '*Il m'a montré les bons endroits*' which is a negative transfer of L1 (French) over L2 (English). In these cases, learner's calque a verb from French and apply it in the same context in the target language; using the verb '*to assister*' instead of the '*to attend*' and '*to show*' instead of '*to take*'.¹

The obtained findings show that both communication-based strategy errors and teaching induced errors were less used by the L2 learners. Therefore, the main causes of errors are intralingual errors first followed by interference or interlingual errors. This confirms the study hypothesis which claims English language inconsistency, misuse of rules, and language interference are the main factors causing such errors.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The participants involved in this study face several difficulties in employing the rules and concepts of morphology in their writing essays. This inquiry has investigated the types of written errors produced by Moroccan L2 students who are beginners and pre-intermediate in their level of English proficiency. The frequency of the erroneous writings emanate from the intralingual errors while the process of learning the target language. It is recommended that learners need to be explicit about the difficulties they face and instructors should provide a very simple and clear explanation to their learners to reduce such committed errors.

¹ In the Moroccan context learners acquire French before than English, that why French is labeled in this study as L1 and English as L2. The findings display clear the impact of the first over the second.

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