

The Study of Written Errors of Iranian EFL Pre-university Learners: A Case Study

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Abstract

Learning a new language, especially the English language, can be very problematic for us, and since knowledge of a foreign language is a great achievement in our lives, paving the path of language learning and making the whole process easier for language learners would be a great help from teachers and researchers. The researcher of the present study tried to focus on errors Iranian EFL learners make in their writing tasks and to find out what their perceptions are regarding the errors they probably make in their writings even before starting a writing task. The researcher finally concluded that students' most frequently occurred error was in using Articles, and the least common one was in using Present Perfect tense. Having done other statistical calculations, the researcher concluded that the students believed they would display an average level of performance in using grammatical lessons they had been taught, and finally the students' perceptions about errors before doing the writing tasks only matched errors in using future tense, possessive, simple past, order in a sentence, present perfect, countable and non-countable nouns.

Keywords: Language Learning, Error, Second Language Acquisition, EFL Learner, Essay

1. Introduction

English is a universal language and everyone must learn it if they are eager to make noticeable improvements in their life and especially in their profession. Regarding the importance of learning the English language Anamaria-Mirabela and Monica-Ariana (2013) claim that "beyond the intellectual benefits, knowledge of a foreign language facilitates travel, enhances career opportunities, and enables one to learn more about different peoples and cultures." (p. 167). Learning a foreign language in school years is truly important and crucial because when students move to higher levels of education and once they start their jobs they are much more successful than those who do not know English very well. In order to learn a foreign language efficiently the first step is to be aware of our errors and to work on them until we get rid of them all and are able to convey messages correctly when we talk to someone or write a text.

In the beginning, to make everything clear, it is better to define language learning, as there is a difference between this term and language acquisition. According to Fawzi Al Ghazali (2006: 2) "first Language Acquisition (FLA) and New Language Learning (NLL) have sometimes been treated as two distinct phenomena creating controversy due to their variability in terms of age and environment." Oxford (1990) argues that the differences between FLA and NLL come from naturalistic and unconscious language use. Brown (1994: 48) believes that "both learning and acquisition are necessary for communicative competence particularly at higher skill levels." Joanna Huang (2002: 20) points out that "language learning is a process in which, like learning to swim, learners profit from mistakes by obtaining feedbacks to make new attempts that successively approximate the desired goals."

So according to these clarifications, there is a very clear difference between language learning and language acquisition. Niami Amra (2015) defines first language acquisition as follows:

The term acquisition is used to refer to subconscious learning which is not influenced by explicit instruction about the L2 system or about errors against the L2 rule system. It takes place in a natural environment. Language data is not arranged as in a language teaching situation. The infant is exposed to an unlimited data. The child is acquiring many things at the same time. Hence, first language acquisition is a mental psychological process which is natural, spontaneous and unconscious (p. 58-59)

Niami (2015) believes second language learning is a conscious process and "learning, in this case, is conscious. The data is arranged by syllabus designers. The learner is not exposed to unlimited data like the infant. It takes place under formal instruction. The learner is not necessarily young." (p. 59)

Learning a new language is like learning a new skill, making the error is an inseparable part of the process of learning a skill and learners can benefit from all unconscious errors they make to be masters and to enjoy their new skills, but what is an error in the process of language learning?

Coder (1973) defines errors as "those features of the learner's utterances which differ from those of any native speaker" (p. 260). Lennon (1991) believes an error is "a linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context, and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the native speaker counterparts"(p. 182)

Making errors is an inevitable part of learning a language for both L1 and L2 Learners and Corder (1967) believes learners make errors when they try to convey a message either orally or through a written text. Mungungu (2010) states "language learning consists of certain steps, errors are one of the steps in this process because educators could see what kind of difficulties learners have and what strategies they use to produce language (as cited in cited in Çagla Atmaca 2016: 235)

By analyzing errors researchers and teachers can help learners overcome their weakness and as Çagla Atmaca (2016, p. 235) believes "committing errors is seen as a sign of improving". As Othman and Na Phuket (2015) believe "errors used to be recognized as the undesirable problems which teachers tried to prevent, but recently, errors are differently considered as a sign of learning progress."(p. 100)

Undoubtedly English is a great tool for those who want to make a connection with other people around the world, travel abroad or even do small or big businesses with people based in other countries and etc. There is no better option but learning the English language to those who want to change their lives in a good way.

In countries such as Iran which there is no way for language learners to interact with native speakers, the best option is to try hard to learn it at high schools, universities or private institutes, and learning process will be much easier if learners try to know more about their weakness and to focus on them. When learners have no idea what their errors are when they speak and write how they can improve their language skills, so finding more about types and frequencies of errors is crucial.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to find out if Iranian EFL learners are familiar with the errors they make in their writings. Relatively, the objectives of the study include the followings:

1. To find out the most frequently occurred errors.
2. To examine EFL learners' perceptions about their weakness.
3. To find out how much EFL learners' perceptions match reality.

2. Review of Literature

So far, many researchers have focused on errors done by EFL Learners. The researcher spent a month to read previously done researches about Iranian EFL Learners and their errors. Finally, the researcher found out that no researcher had ever focused on the fact that how much students are familiar with their potential errors. Many types of research around the world have been done on the most common errors done by EFL learners, some of them have focused on the source of errors and whether they were interlingual or intralingual errors. The first research which is worth mentioning is the study done by Çağla Atmaca (2016) under the title "Error Analysis of Turkish EFL Learners: A Case Study". The researcher of the aforementioned research tried to find out "types and frequency of learners' written errors in the final examination of the English course at a state university research center." (p. 234) 32 elementary level students participated in this research, they all first participated in English courses for three months. The research had two parts the first one was a written test and the second one was an interview. The interview was at the end of the term to elicit participants' feelings about written feedback. The participants were taught some specific lexico-grammatical structures in each unit and then some writing assignments were given to them that were related to the structures and vocabularies that had been taught. In the final written exam, three different questions were given to them and they had an option to answer to whichever they liked. After analyzing the errors the researcher concluded that "the error categories include prepositions, verbs, articles, sentence structure, punctuation, gerunds, pluralism, possessives and word choice. In addition, the categories were divided into sub-categories like omission, overuse, and misuse." He also concluded that "elementary level learners' errors in Turkish EFL context could result from both interlingual and intralingual factors." (p. 238) The researcher also found out from the interview that "feedback sessions including the discussion of learner mistakes were also useful for them to clarify ambiguous points in which they had difficulty. (p. 239)

Another study is research done by Azizi Yahya, Ishak, Zainal, Faghat, Noordin Yahaya in 2012 titled "Error Analysis of L2 Learners' Writings, a Case Study". The aim of this study was to analyze errors made by 30 students from the lower secondary schools. They were supposed to write one narrative and one descriptive essay. The researchers made a checklist for types and frequency of errors students made in their writings.

Finally, the researchers concluded that articles, possessives, prepositions, pronouns, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, verbs, infinitive "to", word choice and spelling are the most frequently occurred errors by the participants in narrative writing. A total number of 300 errors were found in descriptive writings. After analyzing the errors which were found in descriptive writings researchers concluded that:

The category having the most errors is the singular/plural which accounted for 64 errors. The second is articles with a total of 59 errors, verbs with 28 errors, 26 in SVA, 24 for spelling, 22 in tenses, 21 for prepositions, 16 for both word choice and possessives and 7 for the infinitive 'to'. More subjects had difficulties in the singular/plural (28), the articles (26) and the verbs (20) compared to the other types of errors. Nevertheless, errors in the categories should also be given emphasis since more than half of the total number of subjects contributed to the total number of errors made in each category. (p. 116)

Researchers also found eleven categories of errors in narratives writings which were articles, possessives, prepositions, pronouns, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, verbs, infinitive "to", word choice and spelling. According to the analyzed data, only one of the subjects showed difficulty in all the language areas, and the rest of the subjects committed errors in 5 to 9 types of errors. The language areas which made problems for the subjects

include articles (30 subjects), singular/plural (29 subjects), prepositions (28 subjects), tenses (28 subjects) and choice of words (22 subjects). (p. 115). According to the researchers ", the total number of errors made by the thirty subjects is 665."(p. 115)

3. Methodology

The present research is a case study which consists of a learning group at a pre-university level in an Iranian pre-university context. The participants were 40 pre-university students of one of the national selective schools in Birjand, South Khorasan, Iran. Half of the participants were girls and the rest were boys, all of them were in the same range of age between 16-18 years old. All of them were at the pre-university level and were preparing themselves for university entrance exam, which means all of them had already reviewed and read all English lessons they had learned during their last four years of study at high school.

To conduct the study first the participants should fill out a questionnaire, which had been prepared based on the Likert scale, and then they were asked to write a text of about 300 words length for all of the three questions they were given.

The Likert scale questionnaire included 17 statements. The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out how much the students were aware of the type of errors they were going to commit in their writings.

3.1. Procedure

To have a homogenous group of participants, the researcher selected participants who had completed their high school studies in one of the national selective schools. All of them were selected from one single city because that way the researcher was sure that all of them had enjoyed the same and equal privileges at school. The errors mentioned in the questionnaire were gathered and put together after examining all the language lessons the students had received.

The questionnaire was designed according to Corder's (1973) taxonomy, and Stienbach's (1981) category. It was meant to find out how much the participants were aware of their weakness and abilities. Before preparing the questionnaire and its statements the researcher gathered all the lesson the students had been taught up to the pre-university grade, and all of the statements were just about them. The article, modal, present perfect, simple present, conditional types, countable and non-countable, future tense, adjective, possessive, past perfect, simple past, gerund, lexicon, word order, phrasal verb, and past progressive, were the grammatical lessons the students had been taught. The subjects received three different topics to write a 300-word length text for each. The questions were as follows;

1. What is your plan for the future?
2. How did you spend your last summer holidays?
3. Tell us about your daily life.

By answering each of these questions participants could show their abilities and weakness in different grammatical structures.

4. Results

In this part of the research, the findings of the research will be provided. In order to find the results, the researcher used both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics usually describes data by using central tendency and variability, and inferential statistics tests the hypotheses and generalized the results.

4.1. Reliability

Cronbach's alpha was used in the present research to find the reliability of the questionnaire. Alpha coefficient was assessed by using the SPSS22 software. If the alpha coefficient is bigger than 0.7 it means that the questionnaire is reliable. The alpha coefficient for the

present questioner is 0.860 which can be interpreted as the high reliability of the questionnaire.

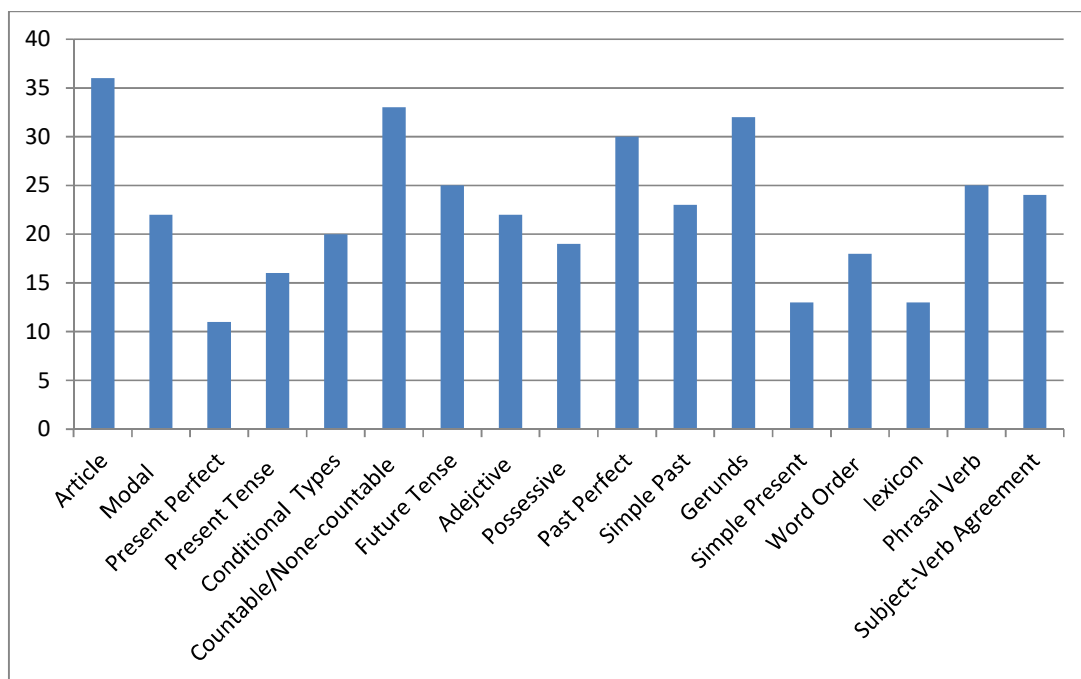
After gathering the data from the questionnaires and assessing the writings of the student by two raters, the required information was gathered for answering the research questions.

First, the research question will be repeated one by one, and then the finding will be interpreted as well.

Research Question 1: What kind of errors do Iranian EFL learners commit in their writings and what are the most and least common type of errors?

Students committed errors in all of the language areas they had been taught. Chart 1 represents the number of each type of errors made by the 40 students.

Chart 1. Number and types of the errors made by the EFL learners



According to Chart 1, the most frequently occurred error in writing was in using articles. The researcher found 36 cases of this type in all of the writings. The total number of errors in 3 writing of 40 students was 330. The least common type of error was “Present Perfect”, as the researcher fount just 11 cases of it in all of the three writings of the 40 subjects.

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of students regarding the potential errors they might make in their writings?

In order to answer the second research question, the researcher used One Sample T-test. Table 1 represents the results of the aforementioned test.

According to Table 1, Sig. is more than 0.05 for all of the types of grammatical errors which means that the students had predicted they would show an average level of performance in using the 17 cases of language areas.

Table 1 *One Sample T-test*

<i>Language Area</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Article	40	2.98	1.672	-.095	39	.925
Modal	40	2.80	1.324	-.955	39	.345
Present Perfect	40	2.95	1.280	-.247	39	.806
Present Tense	40	2.85	1.292	-.734	39	.467
Conditional Types	40	2.83	1.279	-.866	39	.392
Countable and Non-countable Nouns	40	2.80	1.488	-.850	39	.401
Future Tense	40	2.68	1.347	-1.526	39	.135
Adjectives	40	2.83	1.338	-.827	39	.413
Possessive	40	3.10	1.429	.443	39	.660
Past Perfect	40	3.15	1.442	.658	39	.514
Simple Past	40	3.10	1.464	.432	39	.668
Gerunds	40	3.23	1.405	1.013	39	.317
Past Progressive	40	2.65	1.331	-1.663	39	.104
Order In A Sentence	40	2.85	1.424	-.666	39	.509
Word Choice	40	2.95	1.300	-.243	39	.809
Phrasal Verbs	40	3.10	1.317	.480	39	.634
Subject-Verb Agreement	40	2.95	1.377	-.230	39	.820

Research Question 3: To what extent do the students' perceptions of the errors match what happens in reality?

In order to find the answer to this question, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used and its results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 *Pearson correlation coefficient test*

<i>Language Area</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Correlation Coefficient</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Article	40	-0.119	0.027
Modal	40	-0.280	0.009
Present Perfect	40	-0.052	0.453
Present Tense	40	0.147	0.011
Conditional Types	40	0.307	0.001
Countable and Non-countable Nouns	40	0.051	0.419
Future Tense	40	0.021	0.751
Adjectives	40	0.218	0.016
Possessive	40	0.050	0.511
Past Perfect	40	0.109	0.038
Simple Past	40	0.033	0.648
Gerunds	40	0.126	0.025
Past Progressive	40	0.146	0.021
Order In A Sentence	40	-0.027	0.578
Word Choice	40	0.200	0.015
Phrasal Verbs	40	-0.109	0.044
Subject-Verb Agreement	40	0.287	0.001

According to the results presented in Table 2, sig. for present perfect, countable and non-countable nouns, future tense, possessive, simple past and order in a sentence is bigger

than 0.05 which means there is no significant relationship between students' perceptions about the errors and the real errors they made in their writings.

Sig. for present tense, conditional types, past perfect, gerund, subject-verb agreement, and past progressive is smaller than 0.05 and correlations is positive which means the students' perceptions of the errors matches with what happens in reality

Sig. for articles, modals, and phrasal verbs is smaller than 0.05 and correlation is negative, which means the students' perceptions of the errors do not match with what happens in reality, more precisely it means that the students' perceptions regarding the errors they might make in their writings are different from the errors they really committed in their three writings.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

There are many reasons why someone should learn the English language. Some of the most important advantages of learning English are understanding of global issues, finding a career and studying opportunities, obtaining an ability to admire literature, music, and film done by foreign artists, easy and enjoyable traveling and etc.

As Fred Genesee says "according to the cognitive/ nativist point of view, early exposure to a second language is advantageous because it capitalizes on the innate language learning ability that all children seem to have"(p. 146)

Chomsky (1972) and McNeill (1970) also believe that children have innate language learning mechanisms. So language learning for younger children would be easier and more natural. These statements put emphasis on learning a language at school, the older a learner gets, the harder the process of language learning becomes to him.

Learning the English language at an early stage of life not only can be effective from the scientific point of view, it is also beneficial to children who do not have opportunities in learning foreign languages out of school, so it is really important to focus on teaching English in school. Authorizes and teachers should do their best effort to provide high-quality language learning environment for children. High standard language classes can have different criteria and one of them is knowing exactly what should be focused on. Teachers must know what are the most frequently occurred errors of language learners in a country, and of course doing different researches can help the teachers in the process of effective language teaching, the main focus of the present study was to help language instructors by finding more information regarding the types of errors usually Iranian EFL learners commit.

After reading a couple of articles and case studies done in the field of language teaching, the researcher decided to write an article to fill the gaps for the case studies which have been done in Iran and about Iranian EFL learners. The researcher specifically focused on Iranian EFL learners at a pre-university level and gathered the data after examining the students' writings and the questionnaires which the students filled out before doing the writing task.

After examining the writings the researcher found out that most frequently occurred error was in using Articles and the least frequently occurred error was Present Perfect as the researcher just found 11 cases of this error in all of the students' writings.

Later by running One-Sample T-Test, the researcher found about the students' perceptions regarding the errors they might commit in their writing tasks, and finally, the researcher concluded that the participants believed that their level of performance regarding using the language areas would be average.

In order to answer the third research question the researcher run Pearson Correlation Coefficient and the result showed that there is a significant relationship between the students' perceptions regarding the errors they thought they would commit in their writing tasks, and

the errors they really made, these types of errors were conditional type, present tense, gerund, simple present, past perfect subject-verb agreement.

Kees de Bot in his article "The effectiveness of early foreign language learning in the Netherlands" conducted in 2014, concluded that "there is no negative effect on the mother tongue and that the gains in English proficiency are substantial" (p.409)

The major limitation of the present research was the time-consuming process of gathering data. The data was gathered with the help of the students, as they were the main focus of the research. It took a long time for the researcher to find the students who were eager to take part in this research. At the beginning of the process many of the students accepted to participate but after weeks they told the researcher that they did not have enough time to participate in the study so the research had to find new students. As it was not possible to gather all the students in one place and ask them to write their writings on the same condition, at the same time and with the supervision of proctors, so the researcher asked them to write the essays at home, without the help of anyone or cheating.

Doing such researches is beneficial to both students and teachers and enable them to be familiar with errors that students usually do or encounters with, it can also help them to prevent such errors, it helps teachers to keep in mind that errors of their students must be analyzed first, and then they can help students by giving more and relevant excises and by using the most updated teaching methods. Students can benefit from the results of the present study as they will know that their perceptions about their weaknesses and strengths do not necessarily match with their real weaknesses so they need to focus on them and try to know them better so they can improve their language skills.

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