

Error analysis of composition writing: A case of Iranian EFL learners

Bahrpeyma, Mitra ✉

University of Guilan, Iran (Mitra_bahrpeyma@yahoo.com)

Ostad, Omid

University of Guilan, Iran (omidostad007@gmail.com)



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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to investigate errors in the compositions of 30 Iranian students, both male and female and all at the intermediate level, who were selected from two language institutes, one in Rasht and the other in Bandar Anzali. The selected students were studying American English File 3, as their course book, and the researchers were their instructors. They were given a model from their course book to write a letter in reply to another letter. Thirty samples were collected, and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively following Keshavarz's (2013) linguistic classification of errors. Findings showed that students committed different errors with different degrees of occurrence. Morphosyntactic errors were the most frequently occurring, followed by orthographic, lexicosemantic, and phonological errors respectively.

Keywords: error analysis; composition writing; intermediate level; EFL learners

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1. Introduction

According to Nunan (1991), writing is both the process the writer employs in order to put words to paper and the final outcome of that process. This product and process are also conditioned by the place and purpose of writing i.e., its audience and genre. Writing in a second language can even be more complicated by issues of proficiency in the target language, L1 literacy, differences in culture, and rhetorical approach to the text. Teaching writing can improve student proficiency in a number of important areas. With the status of English as an international language and the expansion in its use, an increasing number of second language learners are engaged in academic pursuits that require them to write compositions. One interesting area of investigation in second language writing is to see how errors are committed by non-native writers of English in compositions. Within the past fifty years or so there has been an increasing interest in the theoretical status of errors, focusing on what they are, what they mean, and what functions they manifest in texts. Error Analysis is one of the most critical theories of second language acquisition. It deals with analyzing the errors made by second language learners through comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms, and explaining the identified errors (James, 1998). For Error Analysis in language teaching and learning is "the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language" (Crystal, 1999; p. 108). According to James (2001, p. 62), EA refers to "the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance".

1.1 Problem and Purpose

The present study reports on the frequency and sources of the errors in compositions of Iranian EFL students at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The research is based on the premise that the knowledge derived from this investigation can provide insights into the nature of academic compositions of EFL students. Research on the role of second language proficiency in second language writing ability continues to be insightful in order to fully understand the nature of second language writing. One of the most important findings of linguistics, benefiting language teaching in many cases, is error analysis. Error analysis enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and to take pedagogical precautions towards them. As Selinker (1992) puts it, errors are indispensable to learners since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. Corder (1982) explains the significance of learner's error in three different ways. Firstly, it is important for the teachers, because it can show them, if they do a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learners have progressed, and as a result, what remains for them to learn. Secondly, they provide evidence to the researchers on how different languages are learned or acquired. Thirdly, they are essential to the learner himself, because the making of errors could be regarded as a device the learner employs in order to learn.

According to Corder (1973) the most obvious use of analysis of errors is to the teachers. It has been proved that errors provide feedback. They tell the teacher not only how well learners have assimilated what have been taught before, but also what aspects of learning and teaching should be taken into more consideration. This requires language teachers to be more sensitive, better equipped, and aware of the difficulties students face regarding the learning process. That is why Corder (1974, cited in Keshavarz, 2013) proposed five steps in error analysis research in order to reach those objectives. These steps are:

- Collection of sample of learners
- Identification of errors
- Description of errors
- Explanation of errors
- Evaluation of errors

In addition to the points mentioned above, the sources of errors are the other important area of investigation in this field. Regarding the sources of errors, Corder (1975, cited in Keshavarz, 2013) introduces three kinds of errors including:

- Interlingual errors
- Intralingual errors
- And errors which are the results of defective teaching techniques

Firstly, interlingual/transfer errors are those attributed to the native language (NL). These errors interfere with or prevent the language learner from, to some extent, acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (Corder, 1971). Additionally, intralingual/developmental errors are due to the language being learned (TL), independent of the native language. These errors, on the one hand, illustrate the impact of one target language item on another, and on the other hand, indicate the learner's capability at a special phase of development of second language (Keshavarz, 2013). Finally, Keshavarz (2013, p. 128) describes "teacher-induced errors" as "those which result from pedagogical procedures contained in a text or employed by the teacher."

Drawing on the above-mentioned, this study was aimed at investigating learner errors amongst Iranian students studying English as a foreign language. This study focused on the 5 steps mentioned by Corder and the three sources of errors. In order to examine the relation of errors and composition writing of EFL students, the following questions were posed:

1. What different types of errors are committed by EFL learners in their writing?
2. Which type of error is the most occurring one?
3. What are the main sources of errors of these EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010) error is, in the speech or writing of a second or foreign language learner, the use of a linguistic item (e.g. a word, a grammatical item) in a way that a fluent speaker or a native speaker of that language may regard as demonstrating defective or incomplete learning. The difference needs to be pointed out between an error, that results from incomplete knowledge, and a mistake which is made by a learner when speaking or writing and which stems from fatigue, lack of attention, negligence, or other aspects of performance. Errors are sometimes classified according to vocabulary (lexical errors), pronunciation (phonological errors), grammar (syntactic errors), misunderstanding the speaker's intention or meaning (interpretive errors), and production of the wrong communicative effect, e.g. by faulty use of a speech act or one of the speaking rules (pragmatic errors). In the literature of second and foreign language learning, errors have been observed to discover the processes learners employ in learning and using a language.

Also, error analysis or, EA, has been defined as the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), Error analysis may be carried out in order to:

- identify strategies which learners use in language learning
- try to identify the causes of learner errors
- obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials.

Error analysis evolved as a branch of Applied Linguistics in the 1960s, and set out to indicate that many learner errors did not stem from the learner's mother tongue, but, reflected the universal learning strategies

underlying language learning. Error Analysis was, therefore, offered as an alternative to Contrastive Analysis. Attempts were made to develop classifications for different types of errors on the basis of different processes that were assumed to account for them. A basic distinction was drawn between intralingual and interlingual errors. Based on Keshavarz (2013), intralingual errors were classified as over-generalizations (errors caused by extending target language rules to inappropriate contexts), simplifications (errors that result from learners producing simpler linguistic rules than those which exist in the target language), developmental errors (those which reflect natural developmental stages), communication-based errors (errors that result from communication strategies), induced errors (those resulting from transfer of training), errors of avoidance (which result from failing to use certain target language structures because they are considered to be too difficult), or errors of overproduction (which refer to structures that are used too frequently). However, attempts to apply such categories have been difficult, due to the difficulty of identifying the cause of errors. By the late 1970s, error analysis had largely been superseded by studies of Interlanguage and SLA.

Until late 1960s, the prominent theory regarding the second language learning was behaviorism. What is more, within the framework of such behaviorist perspectives, second language acquisition was regarded as the process in which the “new” habits of the target language are added to the learner’s verbal behavior in such a way that they become coexistent with the “old” habits of the first language which have already been established. Many behaviorists argued that in this process of adding second language new habits, the first language (old habits) may either hinder or facilitate forming new habits (Keshavarz, 2013).

Errors were considered to be very bad, and as skinner (1957) argued, errors had to be prevented in any way, either by punishment (when errors were made) or through rewarding of the correct responses. Regarding the negative perspectives towards errors in L2 learning, errors were looked upon as evil which had to be eradicated. Brooks (1960) even asserted that errors were ‘sins’. Therefore, errors were considered as being the result of persistence of mother tongue habits in the language being learnt. Consequently, contrastive analysis, the comparison of native and target language in order to make predictions and explanations about errors, struck the mind of applied linguists. As a reaction to that view, error analysis, a branch of applied linguistics, flourished in the sixties by the works Stephen Corder to demonstrate that learner errors were not only the learner’s native language interference, but they also reflected some learning strategies. Error analysis showed that contrastive analysis compared the learner’s first language with second language and identified the linguistic differences, predicting those specific target language items that would cause difficulties when behaviourists were unable to predict a great majority of errors in learning a second language (Stockwell, Bowen, & Martin, 1965). Error Analysis is useful in identifying and explaining the errors that are systematically made by the learners, and if such description and classification is made in linguistic terms, as Corder (1973) stated, one can create a picture of those features of language which are causing learning problems for learners.

2.2 Research Background

Errors have been investigated in classroom oral discourse (Hays, 1992), informal settings (Lee, 1999; Trillo, 2002; Muller, 2004), academic genres (Abdi, 2002; Blagojevic, 2003; Bunton, 1999; Longo, 1994; Mauranen, 1993; Ventola & Mauranen, 1993), lectures (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000; Perez & Macia, 2002), reading (Abdullahzadeh, 2006; Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007), and student writings (Connor, 1984; Field & Yip, 1992; Johns, 1984; Johnson, 1992; Karasi, 1994; Norment, 1994; Steffensen & Cheng, 1996). All these studies have targeted the use of patterns in frequency of errors.

Johns (1984) analyzed English essays by tertiary-level teachers following Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) model. In a similar study, Connor (1984) carried out a comparison of six essays which were written by English native speakers and ESL students, based on Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) framework. Field and Yip (1992) compared 67 Hong Kong students with 29 Australian students writing on an argumentative topic. Johnson (1992) analyzed 20 expository essays in Malay, 20 essays in English by the same group of Malay students, and 20 essays in English by native speakers. Karasi (1994) analyzed 135 expository essays by Singapore secondary

students. Norment (1994) studied 30 Chinese college students writing in Chinese and English on both expository and narrative topics following Halliday and Hasan's (1976) framework.

Results have shown that conjunctions were overused and lexical cohesion was moderately used by native speakers (Johns, 1984). In addition, non-native students of English used more conjunctions than Australian students did, and they usually put all conjunctions at the beginning of the sentence (Field & Yip, 1992). Also, there was a difference between text types in the use of cohesive devices (Norment, 1994). Furthermore, the results revealed that, differences between essays that received good ratings and essays that received poor ratings were in the number of words.

Furthermore, a study has been done in Thailand, aiming at analyzing errors caused by the interference of language learners' mother tongue. The results of this study showed that the three most frequent categories of errors related to the interference of mother tongue were verb tense, word choice and sentence structure. For this study, the researchers examined errors in three different genres of writing, and concluded that because different composition types are in need of varied structures, genre can affect the language learners' errors in writing (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2012).

The findings of some studies were contradictory as well. For instance, while researchers such as Connor (1984), Johnson (1992), and Karasi (1994) found no discrimination between native and ESL students in the frequency of ties, Norment (1994), on the other hand, discovered a correlation in the frequency of ties and the quality of writing. The results of these studies, generally, suggest that language learners make more errors (compared with native speaker use), especially for their pragmatic functions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 30 EFL students selected from two different language institutes, one in Rasht, SAMA Language Centre, and another in Bandar Anzali, Iranian Language Centre. The participants were teenagers and adults with the average age of 25, ranging from 17 to 33. Out of 30 participants, 16 were female and 14 were male. All of them were either high school students or university students, and the university students were all studying in fields other than English. The three classes were at the intermediate level, sharing the same course books and teachers, i.e. the researchers. They attended evening classes twice a week on Saturdays and Mondays, and Sundays and Tuesdays. Participants had to attend 20 sessions of two-hour classes.

3.2 Instrumentation

The instrument was a composition for the purpose of gathering data. The task was selected from the students' course book, American English File 3, second edition, by Christina Latham-Koenig and Clive Oxenden (2014), page 113. First, the students were given the lesson for the day along with explanations, then were asked to write a reply to the letter in the book just like the sample presented, using their own identities in 20 minutes. The rationale for the selection of this composition was that the students were more familiar with this kind of writing and it is a common practice in writing classes; therefore, it was believed the effect of rhetorical structure on learners' performance in writing was minimized.

3.3 Procedure

After introducing the task, students were asked to write a reply to the letter, with the presupposition that the letter was addressed to them. Students were observed carefully. They had to do the task in 20 minutes and on their own. After finishing their compositions, students were given sufficient time to go through their work once more in order to check their mistakes, in this way many mistakes would be corrected by students themselves, so

that the researchers would not have to consider the mistakes and separate them from errors. A total number of 30 compositions were delivered to the researchers. During and after the writing process, they received no feedback. Next, the compositions were carefully scrutinized to determine the number and types of errors.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The first step, after the papers had been written, and the samples collected, was reading the compositions carefully. The errors were identified. Then, they were categorized according to their linguistic specifications and linguistic taxonomy of errors which can be applied to corpus. This linguistic taxonomy classified errors according to errors which had been committed in linguistic items. Then, these categories were further classified into sub-categories in order to give more detailed explanations. In this study, the linguistic taxonomy of errors prepared by Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz (2013) was applied. Finally, the errors were examined carefully to find their sources.

The error taxonomy and description of each error is displayed in the following tables. Then, the proportion of different types of errors to all the errors was manually calculated. After identifying and categorizing the errors, their frequency and percentage were calculated in order to determine which categories of errors were committed most frequently by the students, and what the main cause of their errors was. The percentage of each category was calculated by using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Frequency of errors in each category}}{\text{Total number of errors}} \times 100\%$$

After the calculation was done, the highest percentage of a particular category was revealed. Table 1 presents the number of frequency and percentage of errors.

Table 1

Analysis of errors produced by Iranian EFL Learners

Type of Error	Frequency of errors	Percentage (%)
Wrong Verb Tense	32	12.5%
Wrong Word Order	11	4.3%
Subject/verb Agreement	32	12.5%
Wrong Verb group	8	3.1%
Spelling	25	9.8%
Capitalization	38	14.9%
Preposition	21	8.2%
Articles	39	15.2%
Omission of verbs	13	5.1%
Wrong Plural Morpheme	16	6.2%
Typical Persian Construction	18	7%
Conditional Sentences	3	1.2%
Total	256	100%

The detailed frequency of observed errors and their percentage is shown in table 1. As presented in Table 1, Morphosyntactic errors were the most frequently observed type of error, amongst which the errors related to articles were the most frequent one (15.2%). In what follows, the types of errors, their sources, along with an example of each one are provided in tables 2 to 13.

4.1 Verb Tense

Errors of wrong tense or wrong verb are made when a learner uses the wrong verb tense in a sentence. The results of this study reveal that the participants were not aware of applying the correct tense to the verb in the sentences.

Table 2*Verb tense*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Verb Tense	1. She is 28...all her siblings <u>were</u> married.	1. She is 28...all her siblings <u>are</u> married.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, past simple instead of present simple		Source of error: this type is very unique, neither English nor Persian!

4.2 *Wrong word order*

The syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence, clause, or phrase is called word order.

Table 3*Wrong word order*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Wrong word order	1. <u>He with his family</u> goes out.	1. He goes out <u>with his family</u> .
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, SCV instead of SVC		Source of error: interlingual, it is obvious that this structure comes from Persian structuring.

4.3 *Subject verb agreement*

Subjects and verbs in a sentence, clause, or phrase must agree with one another in number (singularity or plurality). Therefore, if a subject (a person or a thing) is singular, its verb (the word which represents that action) has to be singular as well; and if the subject is plural, its verb must also be plural.

Table 4*Subject verb agreement*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Subject Verb Agreement	1. She <u>study</u> very hard.	1. She studies very hard.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic		Source of error: intralingual or developmental, overgeneralization of L2

4.4 *Wrong use of gerunds and infinitives*

Mainly using them interchangeably or omitting *to* or *-ing*.

Table 5*Wrong use of gerunds and infinitives*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
wrong use of verb groups	1. I recommend her for <u>rent</u> your room.	1. I recommend her for <u>renting</u> your room.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic		Source of error: faulty categorization, intralingual

4.5 *Spelling errors*

Spelling is the process or act of writing words by means of using the conventionally accepted letters for their

formation.

Table 6

Spelling errors

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Orthographic errors	1. She graduated from Rasht <u>university</u> .	1. She graduated from Rasht <u>university</u> .
Type of error: orthographic, letters with similar sounds are mistaken		Source of error: intralingual, false categorization

4.6 Capitalization

Capitalization refers to writing a word with its first letter as a capital letter or upper-case letter, and the remaining letters of the word in small letters or lower-case letters.

Table 7

Capitalization

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Capitalisation errors	1. She is studying.... <u>english</u> with me.	1. She is studying.... <u>English</u> with me.
Type of error: spelling, orthographic		Source of error: ignorance of the rules, intralingual

4.7 Prepositions

Prepositions are words that show the relationship between a noun, or a pronoun, and the rest of the words in a sentence. Prepositions also link nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence. The word or phrase that the preposition introduces is called the object of the preposition. A preposition usually determines the spatial, temporal, or logical relationship between the object to other words in a sentence. A great majority of the participants in this study demonstrated confusion for the right usage of prepositions as shown in the examples below.

Table 8

Prepositions

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
redundant use of preposition	1. He doesn't help <u>to</u> his wife.	1. He doesn't help his wife.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, using 'to' where it is not required	Source of error: interlingual, transfer of L1 grammatical elements	

4.8 Articles

An article is a word that is used with a noun to determine the type of reference which is being made by the noun. There are two types of article in English: *the* and *a/an*. *The*, called the definite article, is used to refer to a specific or a particular noun; *a/an*, or the indefinite article, is used to modify non-particular or non-specific nouns.

Table 9*Articles*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Omission of the indefinite article	1. She is MA student	1. She is <u>an</u> MA student.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, not using 'an' where it is required.		Source of error; interlingual, transfer of L1 grammatical rules.

4.9 Omission of verbs

A very rare type of error was not using verbs in sentences.

Table 10*Omission of verbs*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Leaving out some required verb.	1. You have careful with her.	1. You have <u>to be</u> careful with her.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic		Source of error: this structure is neither present in English, nor in Persian, a unique error!

4.10 Wrong plural morpheme

Some nouns do not take a plural morpheme, or some might have irregular forms, while learners might have the assumption that a plural marker is required.

Table 11*Wrong plural morpheme*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Wrong use of plural morphemes	1. If you need any more <u>informations</u>	1. If you need any more <u>information</u>
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, adding the plural morpheme to an uncountable noun.		Source of error; interlingual transfer. In Persian information can take a plural marker.

4.11 Typical Persian construction

These structures are seen when the learner still thinks in Persian and goes word for word, when it comes to writing English.

Table 12*Typical Persian construction*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Using Persian structures in English	1. He <u>has</u> two years (old).	1. He <u>is</u> two years old.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, in Persian a person can have two years (old)!		Source of error: interlingual transfer.

4.12 Wrong use of conditional sentences

Either mixing them, or confusing the 3 conditional forms.

Table 13*Wrong use of conditional sentences*

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Using second conditional if-clause with first conditional sentence.	1. If you <u>wanted</u> more information, I will give you.	1. If you <u>want</u> more information, I'll give you.
Type of error: Morphosyntactic, In Persian past tense can refer to present	Source of error: interlingual transfer (e.g. I wanted to know instead of I want to know.)	

To sum up, Morphosyntactic errors (75.3%) were much more frequent than lexico-semantic or orthographic ones. In addition, as displayed by Figure 1, interlingual errors with 42.1% were the most frequent source of errors of this group of language learners, whereas, intralingual errors had the frequency of 40.3%. The rest of errors might be due to some fossilized structures, which can be related to the previous defective teaching techniques.

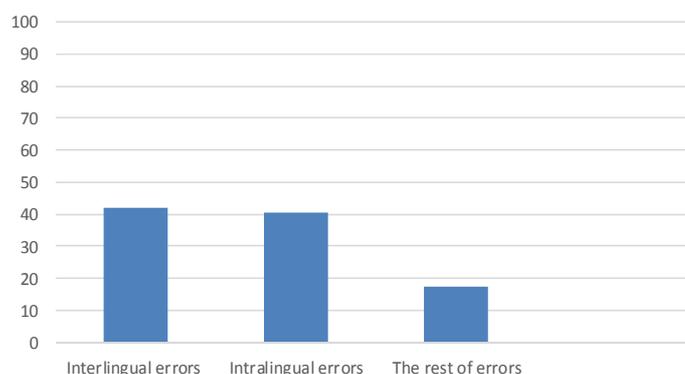


Figure 1. The percentage of the most frequent errors' main sources

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, although writing has been considered as the most difficult of the four English skills, it is possible for L2 student writers to improve their writing accuracy. Similar to a medical service, before coming up with an appropriate remedy, a disease should first be diagnosed and its characteristics of symptoms need to be known. Analogous to the nature of this study, prior to producing a good piece of writing with as few errors as possible, the roots of ineffective writing should be identified as well.

The findings of this study revealed that the most frequent types of errors were from Morphosyntactic and orthographic groups, among which Articles (15.2%), Capitalisation (14.9%) and Wrong Verb Tense and Subject/verb Agreement (12.5%) were the first three most frequent groups of errors. These errors were mostly interlingual ones which can be related to the interference of their mother tongue. The results are also in line with the findings of Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2012) who studied the Thai learners of English. In both studies verb tense is one of the main problematic areas in writing compositions. However, by taking a detailed look, Iranian language learners had more difficulty with articles and using the capital letters correctly, whereas Thai learners of English mostly had problems in choosing words and sentence structure.

This study has given an account of the main errors made by a group of Iranian EFL learners at high school and university levels in their written work. It goes without saying that, most of the students' errors can be due to

L1 transfer. The overt influences of Persian on the students' writing of English indicate that language teachers need to take meticulous record of the interference and transfer of the learners' mother tongues in their spoken or written production. Therefore, one way to highlight the influences of the mother tongues on students' learning of English is to collect these errors and ask the students to analyse them and see if they could correct them (Ridha 2012, p. 42).

Observations of this study have gone some way towards enhancing the understanding of categorising and diagnosing the errors in English composition writing of the Iranian EFL learners. The present study, like all other studies, has a number of important limitations that need to be considered. First, the participants of this study were those enrolled in Sama Language Centre, and Iranian Language Centre. Thus, the results in this investigation could have been more generalisable to other groups of Iranian EFL learners if more language institutes participated in the study. Another limitation of this study was that the number of participants involved was relatively small.

Given the results of this study, a number of recommendations for further research are suggested. Firstly, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to investigate the errors made by undergraduate students majoring in English. Furthermore, detailed investigation into interlingual and intralingual errors of writers of other languages is strongly recommended. Last but not least, it would be interesting to compare experiences of learners from high school and university for the purpose of examining the common errors produced by these two groups.

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