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Analysis of Errors in the Writing Productions of Algerian University Students

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Abstract:

With the growing need to use English as a means of communication, it is high time to shed light on the importance of writing skill as the most efficient way. Teachers find difficulties to understand as well as to remediate the writing errors made by learners; therefore this paper focuses on the importance of error analysis to language teaching. It seeks how to apply it in the writing productions of Algerian EFL learners at university. Thus, it demonstrates the significance of writing skill at university and its role as a mean of assessment more than other skills such as speaking, reading and listening; moreover, it illustrates the various error analysis theories and provides thorough manifestations of the most recurrent types of errors. Collecting data was in the format of a teacher's questionnaire to understand how they deal with learners' errors. Furthermore, a quantitative research method is used in the form of writing tests for students. The results revealed that error analysis, if used appropriately in the classroom setting, helps EFL learners to write better and avoid errors. Furthermore, the learners become more confident to write again. Above all, it suggests and recommends certain measures, techniques to enhance writing productions.

Keywords: Writing Production, Error Analysis, EFL learners, Mistakes.

INTRODUCTION:

The past few decades have witnessed some significant changes in the field of English language learning especially as a foreign language. Language scholars and teachers have always put much emphasis on learners' errors, particularly in their productive manifestations, in both speaking and writing. The question of errors has been intensively and extensively tackled to reach a considerable and solid ground for the arising controversial phenomenon. In this context, two main approaches have dominated the learners' errors scene: Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis.

Written performance has long been an important corner-stone in learners' respective productions as it has always given insightful proof of their language mastery. The previously mentioned approaches deeply investigated the aspects of writing errors so as to analyze the circumstances under which learners make these deviations from correctness. In Algeria, English language is a third language after Arabic and French. There is a lack of exposure to the language and most learners are not introduced to the language at an early age. These factors combine to make Algerian learners more vulnerable to errors.

Algerian university learners face difficulties once being asked to draft full writing compositions in spite of their familiarity with grammatical rules and relevant vocabulary. These difficulties vary from learners false hypotheses

formed about the nature of the language, in addition to the lack of competence in terms of vocabulary, grammar and style.

The research tends to both raise and answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the reasons that lie behind Algerian university learners' inability to fully make up pieces of writing?
- 2- To what extent can error analysis improve learners' writing performance?

The present research aims at testing the following hypotheses:

- 1- A contextualization of Pit Corder's error analysis would improve the productive performance.
- 2- Traditional approaches to analyse errors no longer contribute in the promotion of modern approaches to language teaching and remediation.
- 3- Learners ill-structured passages are results of faulty remediation. They would best-interact adopting eclectic models of evaluation.

This research paper aims to:

- 1- Identify, classify and categorise the nature of error analysis varieties in a constant attempt to alleviate the intensity and recurrence of errors in the context of Algerian university students.
- 2- Adopt models of error analysis, the objective is to academically contextualize error analysis on learners' writing deficiencies in order to help scholars, teachers and researchers to develop efficient teaching environment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

I.1. Historical Background

Scholars dealt with the idea of comparison between languages since the 18th century where errors were treated in a systematic detailed way to find similarities between languages. Linguists also compared elements from the same language through its development. This was classified under the umbrella of Comparative Linguistics.

The Behaviourist theory dominated in the first half of the 20th century. The practical need to teach a second language in the best way possible required the use of the most effective materials, methods and techniques to cover all the pedagogical aspects. The pedagogical need led to the emergence of Contrastive Analysis. Fries gave an insight into modern CA in 1945 in his book Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language, "The most efficient materials are those

that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner” (9).

I.2. Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive Analysis was constructed in the behaviorist framework. The behaviourist learning theory is a theory of learning in general. It stresses the importance of habit formation. One of the most important advocates of behaviorism, B.F. Skinner (1957) developed S-R theory into a learning theory, which describes learning as the formation of associations between responses. A stimulus is that which is produced as a reaction to an individual organism. A response is the behavior which is produced as a reaction to a stimulus. (Wang 183) M.H Keshavarz said that "Contrastive analysis (CA) is the systematic study of a pair of languages in order to identify their structural differences and similarities, usually for translation and teaching purposes" (Keshavarz 5). Until the late 1960's "errors were predicted to be the result of the persistence of existing mother tongue habits in the new language" (Hamer 1), and that most errors "were ascribed to interference" of the mother tongue on the target language (1).

I.3. Error Analysis

As a reaction to the linguistic revolutions and the shortcomings of contrastive analysis hypothesis, researches took place to come up with a new approach to study errors. An approach was described by Keshavarz as "an approach which would be theoretically more justifiable and pedagogically practicable" (57). Jain explains that the main focus in language teaching now is on the significance of learners' errors for the aim of understanding the processes of second language acquisition, and consequently curricula setting. However, the ambiguity lies in finding solid means to predict errors and identify their sources and causes besides the contrastive means, as well as how to interpret their importance. (J. C. Richards 189) Keshavarz states that "Errors were no longer considered as evil signs of failure ... they were seen as a necessary part of language learning process."

In the vein of these previous remarks and definitions, we can have as a conclusion that error analysis has three major assumptions:

1. When we learn a language, whether first or second, errors are inevitable.
2. Interference of the first language is not the only source of errors.
3. Errors are significant in different ways. (Keshavarz 59)

I.4. Stages of Error Analysis

According to Corder (1981), there are three main stages for an effective error analysis: Data Collection (recognition of idiosyncrasy), description (idiosyncratic dialect), and explanation. As the first two stages were purely linguistic, this stage is more related to psycholinguistics as Corder further illustrates that error analysis serve to "elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language" (24) That is theoretically speaking, as for the

applied object, it is to enable “the learner to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes” (24).

I.5. Receptive versus Productive Errors

It is common in language learning to have two kinds of competence, receptive and productive. The same can be applied with errors. We can classify them as productive and receptive errors. Keshavarz provides a definition for both as he says “Receptive errors are those which result in listener's misunderstanding of the speaker's intentions, and productive errors are those which occur in the language learners utterances” (Keshavarz)

I.6. Errors VS Mistakes

There is a difference and a distinction between errors and mistakes. It is significant for teachers and educators to understand this difference and use it to analyse, evaluate and assess their learners.

I.6.1. Systematic errors

According to Keshavarz, “Errors are considered to be systematic, governed by rule, and appear because a learner's knowledge of the rules of the target language is incomplete” (60). Thus, they indicate the language system of the learner in a particular phase of learning of the learner's linguistic system at a given stage of language learning.

I.6.2. Mistakes

Unlike errors, mistakes are not related to any system, they are random distortions or deviations which can appear in the oral or written production of native speakers, “such as slips of the tongue or pen, false starts, lack of subject-verb agreement in a long complicated sentence, and the like.” (Keshavarz 61)

I.7. Teachers' Correction of Errors

Nelson Brooks considered error to have a relationship to learning resembling that of sin to virtue. He stated: “Like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence is to be expected” (58 qtd in Keshavarz 148). Studying the errors made by the learners is a repeated action that teachers do most of times in classrooms for purely practical reasons (Corder 35). He further explains that errors are a “major element in the feedback system” of both learning and teaching.

I.8. Classification of Errors

I.8.1. Linguistic-Based Classification

In this classification, Keshavarz introduced four categories of errors along with details: orthographic (spelling errors), phonological (phonemes, pronunciation differences, silent letters), lexico-semantic (related to the semantic properties), and morphological-syntactic (wrong use of parts of speech, tenses, prepositions, articles ... etc). (90-104)

I.8.2. Process-Based Classification

Keshavarz account for four main processes: “Omission (Leaving out some required linguistic elements). Addition (Redundant use of certain elements in a sentence). Substitution: (Replacement of incorrect elements for correct ones), and Permutation (Incorrect word order)” (105,106)

I.9. Sources of Errors

Corder’ classification distinguishes three types of errors with respect to their sources. He provided sources between languages and within the same language.

I.9.1. Interlingual Errors

These errors are the result of transfer of certain elements from learner’s mother tongue to the target language. Transfer can be in: 1) phonological elements, which represent interference in pronunciation, syllables and stress. (Keshavarz 121). 2) L1 Transfer of morphological elements 3) Transfer of grammatical elements. 4) Transfer of lexico-semantic elements, this category can be two sub-categories: (a) Cross-Association, and (b) False Cognates.

I.9.2. Intralingual Errors

Keshavarz stated a number of Intralingual errors, which are caused by “the mutual interference in the target language” (124). He provided a list of the most common errors such as: 1) Overgeneralization, as in ‘*He comed yesterday’. 2) Ignorance of rule restriction, as in ‘*There are many fishes in the lake’. 3) False analogy, the learner wrongly assumes that the new item B behaves like A, as in ‘*He thinks most woman should remain home and grow up children’. 4) Hyperextension, as in ‘*the apples smelled freshly’. 5) Hypercorrection: it is the result of learners over-monitoring L2 output, and trying to be consistent, so it is akin to system simplification, for example, ‘*She doesn’t afraid of anyone’, and 6) Faulty categorization, for example, I enjoy to dance’. (Keshavarz 125-129)

I.9.3. Teacher-induced Errors

There is another type of errors which goes beyond the language and the learner to the educational pedagogical procedures. Sometimes, the teacher is the source of error and we call them teacher-induced error. Keshavarz defined it as “an error, which has been caused by the method in which a language item has been presented or practiced (through teaching techniques or course design)” (Keshavarz 128). Teachers can unconsciously mislead learners when defining items or delivering lessons without paying attention to order or pre-requisites. This may lead to either overgeneralization or interference.

I.10. Writing Skill

In comparison to Listening, Reading and Speaking .Writing is considered to be the most difficult task to do even in one’s first language, in this sense Jeremy Harmer states that some students do well in writing while others tend to take a little longer in writing full compositions, In particular essay writing because it is

a bit challenging and demanding to write than in the case of paragraph writing. (Harmer 79)

Full compositions writing pose a problem to EFL learners regardless of their prerequisites in terms of the considerable amount of vocabulary and rules they perform (Wachs 82). In most of the time, the nature and the circumstances these students live in may influence the language they write in the sense that most of them translate words and even phrases from their language in our case Arabic to the target language English with absolutely hazardous faulty results. The constant challenge that teachers face lies in their inability to make use of the prerequisites students possess in order to write faulty- free productions. In this sense, a better understanding of the influence of mother tongue L1 on target language L2 will help teachers absorb students' problems in writing in English and learners to become more conscious and mature in relation to their errors.

I.10.1. University English Learners Writing

Algerian English learners at university find it extremely challenging to write completely error-free essays. In this vein, teachers should have a considerable grasp of errors nature so that they can predict errors and categorize them in the best conditions.

The complexity of the language writing does indeed put a heavy burden on teachers to overcome; Corder states in this context that "it is the most difficult of the language abilities and skills to acquire" (122). The writing dilemma has two sides, between writing for natives and writing for non-natives who think and accordingly write in the target language. Algerian English learners at university as an example may think intensively not only about what to write but how to write. By the latter, we mean the set of ideas learners possess in mind and ways to transform them into readable correct format.

I.10.2. Writing Accuracy

The writing skill includes other sub-skills like the aptitude to transform ideas into error-free sentences. Rivers explains that any academic good writing should contain conventionalized correct spelling of the language, ambiguity –free sentences; good conduct of the language so that pieces of writing are clearly comprehensible to readers (67).

To sum up, errors are part and parcel of the learning process. It is by the virtue of these errors that teachers assess and build their lesson plans. The process of identifying and understanding these errors is significant in second language acquisition. Through error analysis, both teachers and learners will perform better especially in the writing production which is the backbone of university learning in Algeria. The writing skill goes beyond words to a way of communication as well as means of evaluation and assessment. This significance, precision and

accuracy call for certain measures to alleviate errors and understand them on different levels.

II. Methodology

II.1. Data Collection

Questionnaire and observation were utilized for the sake of gaining prevalence and save much effort and time besides the validity and reliability of the outcomes of this research. In addition we will rely on the technique of FGD i.e. focus group discussion which can lead to insights that might not have come to light through the one -to-one conversational interview with teachers.

The questionnaire included the following points:

- 1- How do you evaluate written production?
- 2- It is important to know the types of errors in order to evaluate written production properly.
- 3- The most recurrent kind of errors is related to
 - Grammar -Lack of Vocabulary -Spelling mistakes –others.
- 4- Do you apply error analysis in correcting written passages?

II.2. Data Analysis and Discussion

II.2.1. Questionnaire Analysis

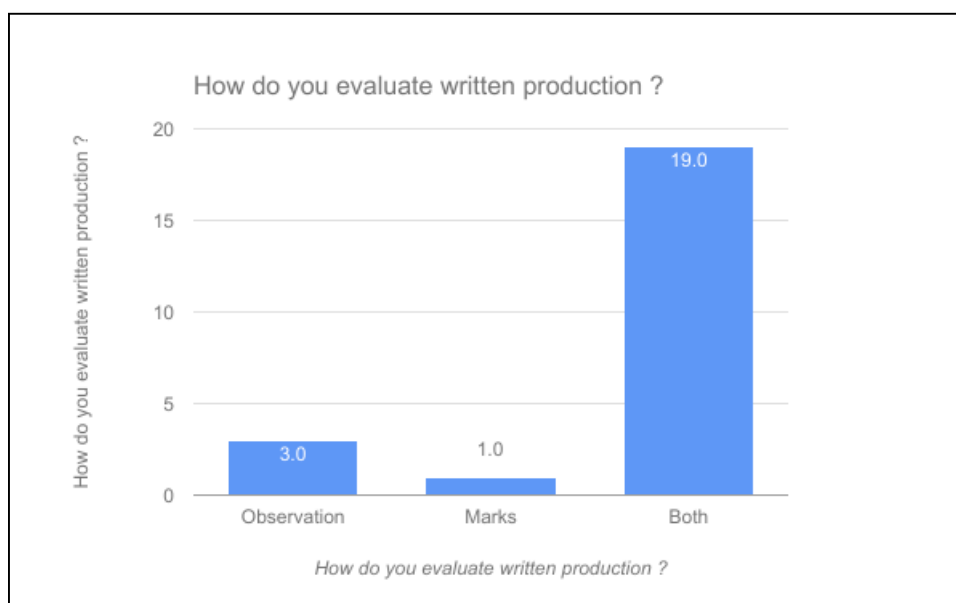
Question 1: How do you evaluate written production?

-Marks

-Observation

-Both

This question was posed to understand how teachers give feedback, either by marks, observation or both. Each one has its special characteristics.



Graph 1: How do you evaluate written production?

Evaluation	Marks	Observation	Both
Number	1	3	19
Percentage	4.3%	13%	82.6

Table 1: How do you evaluate written production?

The majority of teachers (19), making 82.6% use both marks and observation as a way of evaluating written productions. Only 3 teachers (13%) use observation only and one teacher uses only marking. This can be explained as a positive sign of dealing with written productions. It is significant to provide observation in addition to marks to give learners a chance to understand their errors and try to fix them in the future.

Question 2: It is important to know the types of errors in order to evaluate written production properly.

-Strongly agree -Agree -Disagree -Strongly disagree

It is necessary to know if teachers understand the importance of types of errors as means to evaluate learners' writing productions.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Number	11	11	1	0
Percentage	47.8	47.8	4.4	0%

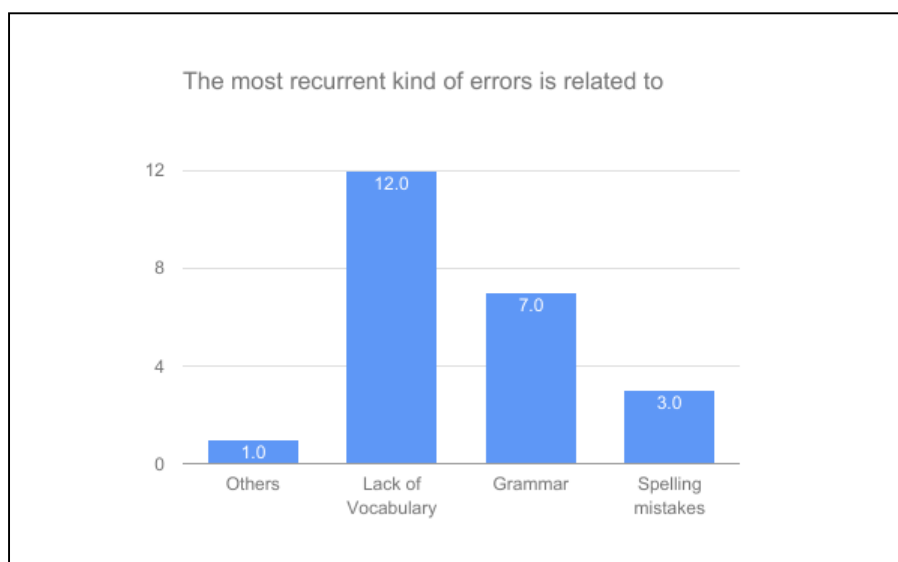
Table 2: It is important to know the types of errors in order to evaluate written production properly.

The great majority of teachers (22), forming a percentage of 95.6, either agreed or strongly agreed that it is significant to know types of errors and one teacher disagreed. These statistics show how Algerian teachers pay attention to error types in their evaluation.

Question3: - The most recurrent kind of errors is related to:

- Grammar -Lack of Vocabulary -Spelling mistakes -others

It is essential to understand the kind of error which is frequently and repeatedly made by learners in order to categorise errors according to significance.



Graph 02: The most recurrent kind of errors is related to.

	Grammar	Lack of vocabulary	Spelling Mistakes	Others
Number	7	12	3	1
Percentage	34.4%	52.2%	13%	0.4%

Table 03: The most recurrent kind of errors is related to

12 teachers chose Lack of vocabulary, 7 teachers chose Grammar, only 3 teachers selected Spelling mistakes, and one teacher referred to other kinds. The table shows that the problems learners face are related primarily to the lack of vocabulary then misuse and ignorance of grammatical rules. While spelling mistakes do not happen very frequently.

Question 04: Do you apply error analysis in correcting written passages?
 -Yes -No

	Yes	No
Number	19	4
Percentage	83%	17%

Table 04: Do you apply error analysis in correcting written passages?

It is significant to see that teachers apply error analysis in correcting written passages, 19 teachers said that they apply EA, while 4 teachers said that they do not apply it. The percentage explains that there is maturity in dealing with errors and that teachers are updated and using efficient measures for a better performance in writing.

II.2.2. Essays Analysis

This part represents the analysis and interpretations of the already gathered Data using the essay samples and focus group discussions. Thirty copies of 1st year university learners that have been analyzed will be presented in the form of tables to better signal the errors made in the written productions.

II.2.2.1 Errors classification

a. Interference Errors: we have chosen three striking examples to evaluate.

<i>I did not cheat But as a result I got a bad mark</i>	Interference	Negative transfer from L1 to L2 ولكن كنتيجة The translation of the form was unsuccessful
<i>Cheating is haram in our religion</i>	Interference	Negative transfer from L1 to L2 حرام Is an Arabic word equivalent to forbidden in English
<i>Cheating is a bad phenomene</i>	Interference	Negative transfer from French to English Phenomene is a French word equivalent to Phenomenon

Table 05: Interference errors

b. Omission Errors recurrent with articles (the – an – a) and auxiliary (to be)

<i>My teacher (....) very helpful</i>	Omission	most probably a lack of competence or focus
<i>He is (...) very hard working man</i>	Omission	Over simplification Probably due to the fact that in Arabic no articles are used before adjectives or nouns
<i>Cheating is (...)bad activity</i>	Omission	Over simplification

Table 06: Omission errors

c. Addition Errors Great examples of this are: overgeneralization, double marking, and the redundant use of certain elements in a sentence.

<i>I didn't cheated</i>	Double marking	Verbs are not conjugated in second positions
<i>I geted 10 in English</i>	overgeneralization	The learner deduced that all verbs finish with ''ed'' neglecting the existence of irregular verbs.
<i>We always discuss about different topics when we are in class.</i>	Redundant use of certain elements in a sentence	We always discuss different topics when we are in class.

Table 07: Addition errors

d. Lexico-Semantic Errors:

<i>Algeria is my mother country.</i>	Lexico-semantic error	<i>Algeria is my home country.</i> وطني الأم
<i>The teacher said we should read hard.</i>	Lexico-semantic error	<i>The teacher said we should read intensively.</i>

Table 08: Lexico-Semantic Errors

The results reveal that the majority of students commit spelling, addition and linguistic interference errors. We note that more than half of our sample commit structure errors (Morpho-Syntactic Errors, Lexico-Semantic Errors, Wrong word use and Spelling).

II.3. Recommendation

The major focus of this study is actually to analyze the impact of using Error Analysis as a model to improve learners' written productions. Based on this analysis, it is considered very important to make the following recommendations:

1. Government should encourage schools and be motivated to invest on remediation related projects in schools. It should try to encourage the curriculum with a view to incorporating the use of these evaluation grids and instructions in teaching English.
2. A comprehensive study of barriers to the adoption of Error Analysis identified in this study would promote the integration of the latter at least in the writing course and identify ways to eliminate or in better terms alleviate the situation.
3. Emphasis must be placed on the pedagogy behind the use of Error analysis for teaching and learning.

4. Error Analysis should be linked to the development of life-long learning and professional practices that enable teachers to keep in touch with writing developments.

Conclusion

Error Analysis has contributed to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in so many different ways. The pedagogical advances that have been taking place in Society have progressively reconstructed the scientific research conducted in the English Language Teaching. Many education specialists have underlined important changes in the methodological approaches to the teaching of foreign languages with the integration of error analysis so as to account and evaluate the intakes of learners as well as provide enough insights about the reasons behind which learners err.

The applications of these techniques are widespread in modern foreign languages teaching and learning processes. Existing studies usually tend to reflect case studies or shorter experiences carried out and developed under very limited situations.

From this paper, the need arises to find alternative solutions together with adequate and specific programs, whose contents really provide effective response to the teacher's needs. The necessity to take the teachers training needs into consideration is urgent and it has to be done before the design, creation, and implementation of teacher training programs

The obligation of including the needs of the different educational parts with their particularities and the necessities of teachers working there constitutes another consideration that we would like to offer.

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