Interlingual or Intralingual Errors in the Use of Prepositions and Articles

The case of first-year students of English at Biskra University

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By

Saliha CHELLI

Abstract

Many students in our department make a lot of errors in the use of prepositions and articles in their written productions. These errors contain valuable information on the strategies used by them to acquire English as a foreign language. It is through error analysis that the teacher can assess learning and teaching and determine the priorities for future efforts. The aim of this article is to identify, describe and explain students' errors in the use of prepositions and articles at Biskra University based. This serves as an empirical evidence to prove that the problem exists and to corroborate or refute the hypothesis that learners' difficulties are due either to interlingual or intralingual interference. For this purpose, a corpus drawn from the written productions of 92 first-year students of English was used to test the formulated hypothesis. The results obtained in this research study revealed that 79, 15 % of the errors made in preposition and 72,85% in articles were caused by negative transfer of the Arabic language, the remaining ones were due to overgeneralization and false concepts. To conclude, students' attention should be drawn on the difference between Arabic and English use of preposition and articles. They also need to be exposed more to the difficulties which may be encountered in the target language in order to internalize them and then to be able to use them appropriately.

Key words: error analysis, mistake, error, interlingual interference, intralingual interference

1. Introduction

We have decided to conduct an error analysis of first-year students' written productions at Biskra University in order to know the sources and the reasons behind the continued occurrence of errors in prepositions and articles. The need for such a study is supported by the great number of errors made by learners in grammar. This is not limited to the modules of grammar and written expression, but this concerns all the modules that require learner' writing ability such as: literature, civilization and psychology. One can argue that the thing to focus on is the content of the message to be communicated regardless of errors, however, the value of grammar is undeniable since the meaning is greatly affected by the fact of making numerous errors, as it is the case of many students in our department. This is supported by Habernas (1974) who asserts that 'communicative competence involves communicating in accordance with the fundamental system of rules that adult subjects master to the extent that they fulfil the conditions for a happy employment for sentences in utterances'. This shows that the value of the message depends not only on its appropriateness, but also on its correctness. The aim of this paper is to identify, describe and explain the reasons why our students make errors, which include many types, but just in the use of prepositions and articles. It is also intended to draw teacher's attention on the situation of our students because it is necessary to determine the areas that require remedy in order to think of appropriate solutions.

2. Literature Review

In the 1950s the behaviourist learning theory described language as habit formation and explained why second or foreign language learners made errors. According to that theory, old habits hinder or facilitate new habits. There was the danger of errors becoming habits if they were tolerated so, they should be avoided. Depending on behaviourism and structuralism, contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) focused on the interference of L1 on L2 learning (Brown 1987). In the early 1970s contrastive analysis (CA) was criticized in terms of empirical, theoretical and practical considerations. Criticisms of CA were classified as follows: first, there were doubts concerning the ability of CA to predict errors. These doubts arose when researchers began to examine language in depth. The second was that there were a number of theoretical criticisms regarding the feasibility of comparing languages and the methodology of CA. Third, there were reservations about whether CA had anything to offer language teachers. According to the cognitive approach, the making of errors is inevitable and a necessary part of learning.

Chomsky (1998) confirms that errors are unavoidable and a necessary part of learning. They are visible proof that learning is taking place. Thus, Corder (2000) proposed that not only language learners necessarily produce errors when communicating in a foreign language, but these errors, if

studied systematically can provide insight into how languages are learnt. He also agrees that studying students' errors of usage has immediate practical application for language teachers. Candling (2001) considers EA as 'the monitoring and analysis of learners language'. Error analysis can be used to determine what a learner still needs to be taught. It provides necessary information about what is lacking in his or her competence. Weireech (1991) also considers learners' errors to be of particular importance because making errors is a device the learners use in order to learn. According to him EA is a valuable aid to identify and explain difficulties faced by learners. He goes on to say that EA serves as a reliable feedback to the design of a remedial teaching method. Sercombe (2000) explains that EA serves three main purposes. Firstly, to find out the level of language proficiency the learners have reached. Secondly, to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning and thirdly, to find out how people learn a language. Several Arab researchers reported and confirmed that Arab EFL students face serious problems in using prepositions (e.g., Rababah, 2001, 2003; Zughoul, 1991, 2003,; Al Khataybeh, 1992). Hashim,Kharma & Hajjaj also reported that the majority of students' errors in syntax, and in particular, prepositions are the troublesome aspect of syntax.

3. Interlingual/ Intralingual Interference

3.1. Concept of Error

In order to analyze learners' errors in a proper perspective, it is crucial to make a distinction between 'mistake' and 'error. To distinguish between these two concepts, Ellis (1997) suggests two ways: the first one is to check the consistency of the learner's performance. If he sometimes uses the correct form and sometimes the wrong one, it is a mistake. However, if he always uses it incorrectly, it is an error. According to Brown (2000), ' a mistake refers to a performance error in that it is ' a failure to utilise a known system correctly while ' an error is a noticeable deviation from adult grammar of a native speaker reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner.

3.2. Sources of Errors

Brown (1980, pp. 173-181) classifies sources of errors into:

- **Interlingual transfe**r, that is the negative influence of the mother tongue of the learner.
- **Intralingual transfer**, that is negative transfer of items within the target language.
- **The Context of learning** which overlaps both types of transfer, for example, the classroom with the teacher and the materials in the case of school learning or the social situation in the case of untutored second language learner. In a classroom context the teacher or the textbook can lead the learner to make wrong generalization about the language.

- **Communication strategies**. It is obvious that communication strategies is the conscious employment of verbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when linguistic forms are not available to the learner for some reason.

Interlanguage transfer errors are errors attributed to the native language. These kinds of errors occur when the learner's habits (patterns, systems, or rules) interfere or prevent him or her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (Corder, 1971). Interference (negative transfer) is negative influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the performance of the target language (L2), (Lado, 1964). The dictionary of language teaching and linguistics (1992) defines interlingual errors as being the result of language transfer, which is caused by learner's first language.

Intralingual errors are those due to the language being learnt (target language), independent of the native language. According to Richards (1971): " They are items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. The learner, in this case, tries to 'derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the native language nor to the target language (Richards, 1971, p.6). In general terms, they refer to the deviations from the norms of the target language which 'derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition and the mutual interference of items within the target language (Richards, 1974, p.182).

Intralingual transfer (within the target language itself) is a major factor. At an intermediate level, learners' previous experience and existing subsumes begin to influence structures within the target language itself. Most of the time, negative intralingual transfer or overgeneralization occur and these kinds of errors are called developmental errors. Ellis (1997) states that some errors seem to be universal, reflecting learners' attempt to make the task of learning and using the target language simpler. The use of the past tense suffix' ed' for all verbs is an example of simplification and overgeneralization. Overgeneralization makes it significant to study the psychological process of language learners.

In addition to interlingual/intralingual interference, cultural interference can also cause either linguistic errors or inappropriateness in the context. It sometimes hinders communication, so it should be taken seriously. In some occasions, due to their insufficient linguistic knowledge, learners have to express themselves with the help of communicative strategies. The most frequently used communicative strategies are avoidance, language switch and prefabricated patterns. In fact,

communicative strategies do help learners a lot in expressing their ideas and the communicative teaching approach need these strategies a swell. Richards focuses on intralingual/ developmental errors and proposed four major strategies for language deviations:

- **Overgeneralization "**one of the strategies used by learners, which consists in applying a rule which has been learnt beyond the extent to which it applies". Many examples can be given in support of generalization, Littlewood (1984) cites the example of forming plural by adding 's' to even irregular plurals, also generalizing the 'ed' past form.

- **Ignorance of rule restriction:** to apply a rule to the context where they do not apply. These errors are explicable in terms of analogy or rote learning

- **Incomplete application of rules**: "Failure to learn the more complex types of structure because the learner finds that he can achieve communication by using relatively simple rules simple rules".

- **False concepts hypothesized**: "I do not mean the teacher gives false information, but rather, incomplete information, so that logically he (the learner) may perhaps logically draw wrong conclusions" (Corder, 1981, pp. 52-53). False concepts hypothesized can be considered as sorts of generalizations which are due to the learner's limited knowledge of the target language.

4. Description of Errors

A number of different categories for describing errors have been identified. Firstly, Corder (1974) classifies errors in terms of the difference between the learners' utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way errors fall into four categories:

- Omission: certain linguistic forms may be omitted because of their complexity. In pronunciation consonant clusters often create problems and some of their constituents are left unpronounced. This also occurs in morphology; learners often leave out the third person singular morpheme 's', the plural marker 's', and the past inflection 'ed'. In syntax, learners may omit some elements which are obligatory. This can be illustrated by some examples from the corpus:

'It is an instrument which is used humans'

'Speech is oral means of communication''

'There are many languages in the world, but famous language is English.'

'It divided into three parts…'

'…, he pleased so much because he wait me for a long time.'

'There are many people dream…'

- **Addition**: addition of some unnecessary incorrect element, In morphology, for instance, students often overuse the third person singular morpheme 's'. At the syntactic level learners may use the definite article with a place name like ' the Algiers'. The following examples can be used as an illustration:

'The speech is a group of the sounds…'

'a speech is sound…'

'In the writing we use some letters'

'The causes of pollution are: the factories near for the house of people'

'so we must be study this event…'

'I consider it that it is the means of expression…'

- **Selection**: learners commit errors in pronunciation, morphology, syntax and vocabulary due to the selection of the wrong morpheme, structure or vocabulary item. At the phonogical level this may be characterized by interlingual transfer, the learner substitute a familiar phoneme from the mother tongue, like Arabic students who substitute 'p' with 'b', like saying ' broblem' instead of 'problem'. An error in morphology is something like the selection 'est' instead of 'er', but they are less frequent errors like in other spheres. In syntax, the learner may select a wrong structure. At the lexical level he/she often selects words which do not convey the meaning. Some examples selected from students' exam papers will be given to support this:

'… when the immigrants leave in abroad countries…'

'I was surprised by my succeed'

'you can saw…' , ' I can watched…'

'The demographic explosion which need many houses…'

'… and this comes for the problems which face them'

Some of the errors above may be classified in more than one category.

- **Ordering:** Misordering may occur in pronunciation by shifting the position in some phonemes, e.g., a speaker may say 'fignsicant' instead of 'significant. At the syntactic level, misordering is much common as in the sentence: 'He's a dear to me friend, where the constituents of a single word are inversed. The learner may also reverse the elements of a compound noun, e.g., a car key may become a key car. In this category some of the learners' errors have been selected:

'English is the best language international'

'The life easy in abroad make them immigrate'

Corder (1974) adds that the classification he suggested is not enough to describe errors. That is why he includes the linguistic level of errors under the sub-area of morphology, syntax and lexicon. Ellis (1997) maintains that the classification of errors in these ways can help us

diagnose learners' problems at any stage of their development and to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time: this categorization can be illustrated as follows:

Omission	in morphology	- A strange thing happen to me yesterday
	in syntax	- Must say also the names?
Addition	in morphology	-The books is here.
	in syntax	- The London
	in lexicon	- I stayed here during five years ago.
Selection	in morphology	- My friend is oldest than me
	in syntax	- I want that he comes here
Ordering	in pronunciation	- fignisicant for ' significant'
	in syntax	- get upping for ' getting up'
	in lexicon	- key car for car key

Table 1: Classification of Errors

An error vary in magnitude, it can include a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a sentence or even a paragraph. Due to other facts, errors may also be viewed as global or local (cited in Brown 2000). Global errors hinder communication and they prevent learners from comprehending some aspects of the message. Local errors do not prevent the message from being understood because there is usually a minor violation of one segment of a sentence that allows the hearer to guess the intended meaning. According to Hendrickson (1980), global errors need not be corrected and they are generally held true. But the expression such as 'a news' or 'an advice' are systematic errors and they need to be corrected. As for systematic errors, teachers can simply provide the correct one.

5. The Error Analysis Procedure

In order to proceed to error analysis, three stages are to be followed: Recognition of errors, description of errors and explanation of errors (Corder, 1974, pp.126-128). Van Else et al (1984) proposed the same steps, in addition to evaluation of errors, prevention and correction of errors.

The first three stages are logically dependent on each other in that we cannot describe errors without recognizing that a sentence is classified as erroneous, and ultimately trying to supply an appropriate explanation.

6. Methodology

6.1 Participants

This study examines errors in a corpus drawn from the written productions of 92 first-year students. They have experienced the same number of years of education through middle and secondary education. All the participants come from a non-English speaking background and hardly communicate in English outside the classroom.

6. 2 Description of the Test

Learners were given the choice of writing a composition in the form of a paragraph on one of the following topics:

- The reasons of their choice to study English.
- The main causes of pollution and suggestions to cut down this problem.
- The reasons of immigration of many Algerian young people.
- The causes of road accidents and measures to be taken to reduce them.

6.3. Procedure

First, I will present, classify and tabulate some common errors, then comments will follow, taking into consideration the three steps in error analysis procedure: identification, description and explanation. Errors will be classified within the sub-categories of omission, addition, selection and ordering. Then, intralingual errors will be classified according to the four strategies of language deviations.

7. Errors in Prepositions

Numerous errors have been recorded in the use of prepositions. The categorization is illustrated in the table below:

Types of errors	Examples of errors	No. of errors
omission	They are away their families	67
Addition	influence for people. factories are near to them. They can give to them…	85
Selection	…depend to… …obligatory at me…	95
Total		247

Table 2: Quantification of Errors in Prepositions

The following selected examples drawn from the corpus can show the misuse of prepositions by the respondents. They are categorized according to whether they are due interlingual or intralingual interference.

Interlingual Errors	Intralingual Errors

1. The structure of people contains <u>of</u> blood
    'of' instead of zero preposition.
	1. His explanation <u>for</u> the lesson
	    ' for' instead of 'of'

2. We can travel from a continent to another
    <u>for</u> hours.
    ' for' instead of 'in'
	2. She attracted me <u>in</u> her pronunciation
	    ' in' instead of ' with'

3. Life <u>in</u> earth.
    'in' instead of ' on'
	3. The government should provide the television <u>by</u> a lot of programmes.
	    ' by' instead of ' with'

4. They can tell <u>to</u> the responsibles…
    'to' instead of zero preposition.
	4. They share <u>for</u> actions.
	    'for' instead of zero preposition
	    .

5. These immigrants live <u>in</u> abroad.
    ' in' instead of zero preposition.
	5. <u>in</u> the other hand
	    ' in' instead of on

6. <u>In</u> generally…
    ' in' instead of zero preposition
	6. …concerned <u>to</u> …
	    ' to' instead of with

Table 3: Selected Examples from the Corpus

The quantification of the two categories is displayed in this table:

Interference errors		Intralingual errors		Number of errors	
Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
197	79.15%	50	20.85%	247	100%

Table 4: Quantification of Interlingual and Intralingual Errors

According to the results recorded above, prepositions pose a great difficulty for the participants. On the one hand, this may be mainly explained in terms of interference of the Arabic language prepositional phrases such as; 'I study English in this year' instead of I study English this year. The preposition 'in' is required in Arabic but not in English. Learners usually find themselves unable to use the appropriate preposition because of the big number of prepositions that have the same functions in English, like the prepositions 'in', 'at' and 'on'; therefore, they often refer to

literal translation. Hence, we can say that one difficulty with prepositions stems from the fact of language-specific differences.

On the other hand, learners sometimes use prepositions incorrectly. This signals a false concept of the use of prepositions. This may also prove that they do not master parts of speech. For instance, these examples taken from the corpus show that learners ignore phrasal verbs (influence for, provide of, aware for …). Aiyewumi et al (2004) also state that preposition misuses are mainly caused by linguistic interference, inappropriate learning and wrong application of rules

8. Errors in Articles

Too many errors have been recorded in the use of articles. This proves that most of the learners are unable to use them appropriately. The quantification of the results is shown in the table below.

Interference Errors		Intralingual Errors		Total	
Number	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**	**Number**	**Percentage**
161	72.85%	60	27.15%	221	100%

Table 5: Quantification of errors in Articles

The types of intralingual errors in articles include overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized as displayed in the table below:

Parameter	Error Type	No. of Errors
Overgeneralization	'a' instead of ' zero article	25
Incomplete application of rules	' zero article' instead of 'the'	29
False concept hypothesized	'the' instead of 'a' 'a' instead of 'the'	02 04
Total		**60**

Table 6: Quantification of the Types Intralingual Errors in Articles

The largest number of errors occurred in the use of the definite article, and especially supplying it where not necessary. This can be explained in terms of negative language interference. For example, in English abstract words referring to ideas, attributes, or qualities are used without the article 'the' to refer to that idea or attribute. In Arabic, however, such abstract words are preceded by the definite article equivalent to 'the' in English. Hence, errors of this kind often occur. Examples illustrating this are, for instance, 'the pollution is threatening the life on the earth'. On the other hand, abstract words become specific when they are preceded by the article 'the' in English. They may become the possession of a certain person, group, object, etc. The usual way of expressing this possession is by a phrase starting with 'of' 'to' or 'for' like: I study the language of communication. In contrast, Arabic does not make use of an article before an abstract term when it is in the possession of a specific person or object. Rather, the abstract word is rendered specific by the modifying noun that follows it.

As noticed in the table above, there are more errors in the use of the definite article 'the'. However, some other errors occurred in the misuse of the indefinite article 'a'. Some students omit it. This can be explained as negative transfer since this article does not exist in Arabic, this account for zero article instead of an indefinite article. Some other students use it with plural nouns. However, it may be assumed that students build up their own systems because they have no frame of reference. This can be related to previous teaching (lack of practice). This assumption is based on our knowledge of secondary school syllabus. This is why students refer to literal translation or build false concepts hypothesized.

9. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study confirmed that learners make a large number of errors in most areas of grammar, including the use of prepositions and articles. 79,15 % of the errors made in preposition and 72,85% in articles are caused by negative transfer of the Arabic language, the remaining ones or about 20,85% (in the use of prepositions) and 27,15% (in the use of articles) are due to overgeneralization and false concepts hypothesized mainly because of lack of practice. There might be other causes, but they are not the focus of this study. So, being aware of the causes of learners' idiosyncracies might indicate pedagogical practice and determine the approach to be adopted. On these grounds, we suggest that: As students encounter problems in most aspects of grammar, this does call for a re-evaluation of the ways grammar is taught and the teacher's emphasis to raise students' awareness for producing acceptable pieces of writing in terms of accuracy and clear communication. We, as educators know that motivation is a powerful tool whether or not the best materials and texts are provided; a student will learn only if he or she is motivated enough to do so.

This can be reached by designing interesting and appealing activities to invite and draw on the students' intrinsic motivation. A needs analysis is always necessary along the teaching process for the selection of appropriate remediation as well as the appropriate methods and techniques to be applied.

Another important point to raise is that most of the time this requires teachers to introduce some systematicity into error procedures. They should not only be aware of students' common difficulties, but they should also evaluate these difficulties with a view to giving them appropriate emphasis in their remedial teaching in the light of error gravity, especially at this level (first year); otherwise, the problem will persist – students will reach the third year incapable of producing a piece of writing without numerous grammatical errors. Therefore, we should note that error correction should be given enough importance and that students need to receive significant feedback. Hence, we do need to draw students' attention on the difference between Arabic and English. They also need to be exposed more to the difficulties which may be encountered in the target language; in other words, they need more practice of the necessary structures in order to internalize them and then to be able to use them appropriately in their writing.

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