

An Analysis of the most Consistent Errors in English Composition of Shiraz Medical Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at finding the most consistent errors of 42 medical students before and after they attended a writing course. The students were asked to write about assigned topics both at the beginning and the end of their writing course before Surface Strategy Taxonomy was used to analyse their assignment. To see if there is a significant difference between errors made by students before and after their writing instruction, paired sample t-test and Wilcoxon test were run. The results indicated that the most consistent error, both in test and retest, was *omission*. Furthermore, the number of errors in the retest reduced significantly compared with the number of errors in test which could be, at the first glance, interpreted as satisfactory training of writing skills. However, when the significant difference between each type of errors (*omission, misordering, addition* and *misformation*) was examined, the results showed that except for the *omission* error, the reduction of all the other types of errors was not significant. This result could help writing instructors in this university to know the areas of language that their students are struggling with and devote more time and energy to overcome their weakness. Furthermore, teaching and learning writing would be more purposeful.

Keywords: Error analysis, English composition, most consistent errors, surface strategy taxonomy, writing

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 15 September 2016

Accepted: 22 March 2018

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INTRODUCTION

It is never easy for those from non-Anglicised linguistic and cultural backgrounds to write in a language other than their own (Afrasiabi & Khojasteh, 2015; Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). In Asia, the problem, as reported by Rabab'ah (2003), is quite dire

whereby university students face challenges in English academic writing. Utilisation of error analysis (hereafter EA) is beneficial for not only students but also English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Undoubtedly, a better comprehension of the errors EFL learners commit while writing and the source of these kinds of errors can assist instructors to know students' weak points. In addition, it will help teachers to choose suitable teaching strategies in order to enhance the learning skills of EFL learners. The primary aim of this study is to show how EA can assist teachers to focus on student's weaknesses that need reinforcement (Al-haysoni, 2012).

According to Myles (2002, p. 10) "the more content-rich and creative the text, the greater the possibility there is for errors at the morphosyntactic level." Therefore, one of the best tools that can help researchers assist EFL learners is by using error analysis which is considered one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. Error analysis gives the researchers and teachers a chance to compare the learners' acquired norms with those of the target language in order to identify the errors committed (James, 1988).

Most studies on EA (see Khansir, 2013; Mungungu, 2010; Vahdatinejad, 2008) looked at how students were asked to write about an assigned topic before the error analysis. However, this study is unique in its nature because the same procedure has been done twice to find the most recurrent and consistent errors made by EFL learners even though they had attended a writing course

for the period of four and a half months (one semester). These kinds of studies provide the researchers with more fruitful results than the others because the findings can shed light on the errors by EFL learners even after receiving numerous feedback (oral and written) during their academic writing course.

So, given the important role of writing as one of the main skills of English learning and how error recognition will aid language learners and teachers to recognise common difficulties, the study objectives are:

- 1) To identify the most recurring errors made by Iranian medical students.
- 2) To see if there is any significant difference between errors made by medical students before and after instruction.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

This section discusses recent studies on error analysis in writing.

Khansir (2008) carried out a syntactical error analysis. A group of 100 second-year college students at Mysore University in India participated in this research. The purpose of the study was to categorise errors made by the students in sentences. The result of the study revealed that there are systematic errors in learner's target language which were related to auxiliary verbs, passive voice, and tenses which showed that English language instruction is insufficient.

In a corpusbased study, Sun and Shang (2010) investigated errors among English majors in Ludong university,

China. The major focus of their study was error features, why learners made those errors, the developmental characteristics of errors in different grades, and why those developmental features occur. Grammatical errors were the most, 11.48%, in terms of subject-verb agreement. It was also revealed that these errors were caused by vocabulary and impact of negative transfer from learner's native language. Yet, in another corpus study, Shamsdin and Malady (2010) examined the writing errors of first-year students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (also known as UTM). The results showed that first-year students were making grammatical and lexical errors in their writing. In 66 paragraphs analysed, 1,202 errors were detected, out of which 85 were subject-verb agreement errors (7.07%).

Zawaherh (2012), examined compositions of 350 10th grade students in Jordan. Subjects were required to write an essay about "a journey to the ancient city of Jerash in Jordan". Their writings were collected and analysed to detect errors. Outcomes of the study showed that tenth graders mostly made subject and verb agreement errors. That is, 104 errors were detected for the lack of agreement between subject and verb. It was also inferred that errors were due to Arabic language interference. Moreover, the results revealed omission of *to be verb* which is likely due to native language interference.

In another study, Gustilo and Mango (2012) examined learners' errors and their assessment of ESL writers from Philippines. This study included 150 essays written by

freshmen college students attending their first week of classes at Metro Manila. Their study found subject-verb agreement errors were the most consistent in their writing.

Omidipour (2014) conducted an error analysis on two sample writings of 40 Iranian students. He adopted Corder's (1973) model of error analysis which classified the errors as Orthographic errors, Syntactico-morphological errors, and Lexico-semantic errors. The results revealed 120 errors in learners' writing from which 19 of them were orthographic errors, 76 of them Syntactico-morphological errors and 25 lexico-semantic errors.

In another study conducted by Wu and Garza (2014), the nature and distribution of writing errors of 6th grade EFL learners were analysed. This study focused on grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The results showed that out of 22 categories of errors identified in 6th graders' writings, the most prominent were grammatical errors, with the greatest related to subject-verb agreement. The other types of errors in descending order were sentence fragment, sentence structure, singular/plural and verb omission. In general, findings revealed that Taiwanese 6th graders had more interlingual/transfer errors rather than intralingual/developmental errors.

As can be seen from the above reviewed studies, none of the studies mentioned above had done a two-stage error analysis to investigate the most consistent errors in students' writings within the period of four and a half months (one semester). Therefore,

analysing students' errors in two stages, one at the beginning of the semester and then at the end of it can really help teachers and researchers to identify errors that are most persistent even after receiving training in writing skills.

METHOD

Population

The target population in this study was all medical students, collectively referred to as EFL students, enrolled for the writing course at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in the fall semester of 2015. The reason behind choosing this population was that these students were among the EFL university students who, at the time of collecting data for this study, were required to take writing courses as a compulsory 3-unit course before their graduation.

Participants

The researchers utilised convenient sampling to choose 42 medical students in their second semester of their studies from two out of eight other classes offered in writing because these classes were the only two classes for which their instructor was

the same. The age of the participants ranged between 20 and 30 and they consisted of both male and female students. As to the proficiency level of the students, it could be said their proficiency level was intermediate to upper intermediate, since in Iran students were required to have intermediate level of English language at National University Entrance Exam if they want to be admitted to Shiraz University of Medical Sciences as one of the leading medical universities in Iran.

Since in this study two classes were selected and homogeneity of the classes chosen was very important, the first compositions that all 42 students wrote at the very first session of their writing course were marked to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the means of two groups. An Independent sample t-test was utilised for this purpose. Significance was determined at (p<0.05) level.

An independent sample t-test for equality of means was used to determine the differences in test scores of the two classes for writing performance at the beginning of the semester. The table below shows the results of test.

Table 1
The mean of test scores of two groups in two writing classes

Variable	Frequency	Mean	SD	T	sig
Class 1	19	38.2	3.3	-0.667	0.507
Class 2	23	38.7	5.2		

Results of the test showed a mean (M) of 38.2 and a standard deviation (SD) of 3.3 for the group in class 1 and a mean (M) of 0.387 and a standard deviation (SD) of 5.2 for the group in class 2. Equal variances assumed the sig. level for the difference between test mean score of the first class and test mean score of the second class was 0.507 which is higher than P value (0.05). It shows the difference is not significant. Thus, it could be concluded that both groups were homogenous so they can be merged.

Instruments

Students' Compositions. Medical students' compositions were used as the main instrument in this study. At the beginning of the term, the students wrote 100- to 150-word paragraph about "what can be done to change the growing trend of obesity in children?" At the end of the term, again the instructor asked the students to write on "the effects that smoking can have on the body". The reason why these topics were chosen was first, both topics were from a genre which is expository in nature. This type of discourse describes, evaluates and explains the topic in the form of collection/description, comparison, cause/effect, enumeration, problem/solution and procedural. Second, the participants were medical students and they all had background information and knowledge of these two topics.

Surface Strategy Taxonomy. To identify students' errors, Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) was

adopted. Surface Strategy Taxonomy highlights the ways surface structures are changed. It is by using this taxonomy that researchers can come up with a logical conclusion about learners' errors. This taxonomy classifies errors as: *omission*, *addition*, *misformation* and *misordering*.

Procedure

The researchers adopted convenient sampling to choose 49 (24 male and 25 female) medical students who were required to take writing courses as a compulsory 3-unit course before they graduate. This sampling is convenient because all 49 students of this study (N=23 from one class and N=26 from another class) were instructed by the same teacher (one of the researchers); hence, the researchers could control the effect that various teaching instructions on the students' writing performance. It is also worth mentioning that although two classes were chosen to participate in this study, this study was not experimental in nature and only the writing assignments of two classes were used as the source for error analysis to increase the amount of data for the researchers.

In both classes, Paragraph development: A guide for the students of English as a Second Language (2nd Ed.) was used as a reference book. The instructor focused on a three-phase strategy for building students' writing skills through planning, writing, and revising. In the meantime, writing conventions such as spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, and grammar were emphasised. As to the grading

and giving feedback, the main focus of the writing instructor was on writing mechanics, idea development, and word choice. Evaluation included a midterm and a final test, two in-class quizzes, and weekly homework assignments on the most recent content covered in class. Finally, in all of the homework assignments, it was the instructor who assigned the topics, not the students (though they could come to an agreement on the topic). Also, almost all the topics were in areas related to the students' field of study, medicine (e.g. stress, obesity, exercise and weight loss, health education, to name a few).

As to data collection, it was performed both at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. The errors were explained thoroughly to two independent raters who had the experience of teaching English for 10 years. Then, the errors were coded by two raters and after that by using Cohen's (1960) kappa. The inter-rater reliability test was utilised to make sure of inter-rater agreement between the two raters who had identified the errors in medical students' compositions. The researchers used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 to analyse this and the result showed 0.87 inter-rater agreement between the raters of this study. By convention, a Kappa greater than 0.70 is considered acceptable inter-rater reliability.

Data Analysis

This study focused on four types of errors (omission, addition, misformation, and misordering) of writing compositions of

medical students at graduate level. To answer the first research question (what are the most consistent and recurring errors made by medical students?), frequency and mean of the errors were identified descriptively using SPSS version 20. Then to see if there is a significant difference between errors made by medical students before and after their writing instruction, paired sample t-test and Wilcoxon test were run.

RESULTS

Normality test

To investigate the research questions, it is necessary to establish normality assumption using One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Normality Test and Shapiro-Wilk. Table 2 illustrates the results of normality analysis for the four types of errors investigated both in test and retest. As it can be seen here, all the significant levels are lower than 0.05 except retest omission errors and test misformation error. Although test misformation error shows significance value of .084 which shows normal distribution of scores before instruction, retest misformation error shows a very strong lack of normalcy. This may be due to the improvement happened in writing performance of the learners after instruction, leading to errors/scores with lower dispersion. Since lack of dispersion is very strong in retest (sig= .000), non-parametric test, namely Wilcoxon test is performed. For omission error, what happened is vice versa, that is, in test omission errors significance level shows normalcy of scores/errors. Although in

retest omission errors the significance level does not show normalcy, its effect is not strong. Therefore, parametric test, paired sample t-test, should be used. In brief, the nonparametric test of Wilcoxon was run to investigate the existence of any significant difference between the 3 types of errors

(addition, misformation, misordering) made by medical students' test and retest writing test and paired sample t-test was run to investigate the existence of any significant difference between test and retest writings in terms of omission errors.

Table 2
Tests of normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
test-total-error	.147	42	.024	.945	42	.044
retest-total-error	.150	42	.019	.934	42	.018
test-omission-error	.142	42	.032	.945	42	.044
retest-omission-error	.122	42	.119	.962	42	.173
test-addition-error	.205	42	.000	.865	42	.000
retest-addition-error	.233	42	.000	.828	42	.000
test-misformation-error	.131	42	.068	.953	42	.084
retest-misformation-error	.215	42	.000	.853	42	.000
test-misordering-error	.409	42	.000	.635	42	.000
retest-misordering-error	.373	42	.000	.705	42	.000

Inferential statistic

In order to answer the first research question, “What are the most consistent and recurring errors made by medical students?”,

frequency and mean of the test and retest errors were identified and presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Difference between errors in test and retest

Error	Pretest		Posttest		P value
	Mean	SD	Mean	STD	Sig.
Total	12.83	.97	9.59	.56	.002
omission	19.11	1.37	4.33	.42	.000
addition	1.97	.31	1.38	.17	.135
misordering	.571	.12	.50	.13	.695
misformation	3.95	.53	3.38	.27	.588

As can be seen in the table, the most common types of errors of test and retest in the descending order are *omission*, *misformation*, *addition* and *misordering*. It is interesting to see that here, the order of the most recurring errors both in test and retest has not been changed. Hence, although the number of *omission* errors has been decreased dramatically, it is still remained one of the most consistent errors in the retest. However, despite attending grammar and writing skills, the participants of this study did not really outperform in the other types of errors such as *addition*, *misformation*, and *misordering*. This shows that since the other types of errors were not as frequent as *omission* errors in the test (and most probably in the paragraphs students wrote at the beginning of the semester), not enough attention has been given to the training and the feedback provided during the semester to reduce the number of these types of errors towards the ending of the semester (shown in the retest).

For the second research question, “Is there any significant difference between errors made by medical students before and after instruction?”, the p value helps to answer this question.

As can be seen in Table 3, the number of total errors in retest reduced significantly as compared with the number of total errors in test ($.002 < .05$) which shows that training was satisfactory in terms of reducing the overall number of errors.

By looking at the table, we can see that there is a decrease in the number of omission errors from test to retest and this reduction is

significant ($.000 < .05$). For additional errors, although the number of *addition* errors was reduced from test to retest, this reduction is not significant ($.135 > .05$). Hence, it can be concluded that teaching writing did not have a significant impact on the *addition* errors. *Misformation* errors were also reduced from test to retest, but this reduction was not significant ($.588 > .05$). This, too, shows that teaching writing could not really reduce students’ *misformation* type of errors. Similar to what we could see in other types of errors (except for omission), Table 3 shows misordering errors were reduced from pre-test to post-test but this is not significant ($.695 > .05$).

DISCUSSION

As reported earlier, the result of the first objective showed that *omission* error was the most consistent error followed by *misformation*, *addition* and *misordering*. This result is in line with another error analysis study done by Zawareh (2012) who reported that the most consistent errors found in the writings of 350 Jordanian 10th graders were prepositions and verb *omission* errors followed by verb *misformation*. The result of this study is also in agreement with Omidipour (2014) who reported that *omission* errors (e.g., omission of preposition, plural markers, regular past tense markers, third person singular markers, to name a few) were among the most consistent errors made by 40 Persian learners. The result of this study is also consistent with that of Wee, Sim and Jusoff (2010) who reported that

in the descending order the most common errors of Malaysian university students were *omission*, *addition*, *misformation* and *misordering*. Among all *omission* errors, the omission of the third person singular “-s/es/ies”; of “-ing”; of “-ed” and of be-verb were the most common. The result of this study, however, contrasts with that of another study that reported *misformation of words*, *prepositions* and *articles* as the most common errors made by 25 sophomore medical students (Eun-pyo, 2003). As to the root of these errors, most of the studies were carried out in Iran or other similar Asian settings (see Abisamra, 2003; Barzegar, 2013; Beheshti, 2013; Falhasiri, Tavakoli, Hasiri, & Mohammadzadeh, 2011; Kafipour & Khojasteh, 2012; Sattari, 2012). Studies indicated that a great number of errors made by upper-intermediate to advanced level learners were due to faulty learning which should be based on interlingual or developmental (Khodabandeh, 2007). If these errors are to be avoided, it is very important to treat the errors promptly before they lead to fossilisation (Skinner, 1957). One sensible action that can be taken into consideration in this regard is to draw students’ attention to their most recurrent errors. However, as Falhasiri et al. (2011) stated, teachers should be selective in their types of feedback based on the types of errors made by the students. For example, in the case of this study, feedback can sometimes be less effective for intralingual errors as opposed to interlingual ones in the short period of time, so it requires more effort and patience on the part of writing instructors

(Falhasiri et al., 2011). Another reason is lack of motivation. According to Brookhart (2008), good feedback which focuses on both cognitive and motivational factors can help learners feel they have control over their own learning. Therefore, teachers should be aware of the impacts of their feedback on motivation of their learners and how this successively will affect students’ writing ability. For example, in the case of the participants of this study whose language proficiency was at intermediate level, it would be helpful if more positive written comments are provided to the students rather than just pointing out students’ errors by circling or underlining them, the method which was actually applied by the writing instructor of the course.

This study was also aimed at finding out if there was any significant difference between errors made by medical students before and after writing instruction. The results showed that the total number of errors in the retest reduced significantly when compared with the total number of errors in the test. However, after investigating the significant difference between four types of errors made in the test and retest, it was revealed that except for the *omission* error, a reduction of other types of errors was not significant. Although it was not under the scope of this study to see whether attending writing classes and receiving explicit error feedback from teachers could positively affect students’ writing, the results of this study showed that not much has been achieved in terms of accuracy in students’ end-semester writings. According to Liu

(2008), although direct feedback can reduce students' errors in the immediate draft, it cannot really improve students' accuracy. It is very important, however, to organise mini-lessons or workshops with the focus on different types of errors or aspects of grammar in order to increase students' awareness towards self-editing (Liu, 2008). Not finding a significant difference between the errors made by students at the beginning of the semester and the end (except for *omission* error) can show that surface error-corrections if used as a primary medium of written feedback could not be really effective for high-proficiency level learners (Kepner, 1991). Sometimes learners do not act upon the feedback the way they should because the written feedback is not frequent, timely, sufficient and detailed enough, and their main focus is on marks rather than learning (Glover & Brown, 2006).

The EFL/ESL teachers should seriously think about the type of feedback that should be given in various situations (e.g. in the present case when a majority of errors made are were intralingual in nature). Deductive (explicit) explanation or inductive (implicit) clarifications are two types of feedback extensively discussed in the literature on writing; however, the latter, it seems can be more beneficial for students in the long run. According to Ferris (2002), direct feedback is more favourable for the beginner level's and for errors that are considered "untreatable". Although it is sometimes perceived by the students that indirect feedback cannot really solve their more complicated errors (Ferris & Roberts, 2001),

Chandler (2003) believes that indirect feedback can challenge students' cognitive effort to rectify their mistakes. Although it is not within the scope of this study to explain about the kind of feedback the writing instructor of this investigation (one of the researchers of this study) provided his/her students with, it can be valuable for the readers of this study to know that direct metalinguistic feedback was the most common feedback given to students throughout the semester. This might be one the reasons why not much progress was observed in terms of errors made by the students at the end of the semester. Not asking students to revise their work and hand in their composition to the writing instructor again can be another contributing factor for not observing much improvement in students' writing. According to Chandler (2003), not much progress can be seen in students' writing if they do not revise their work based on their teachers' feedback.

IMPLICATIONS

Although attitudes towards L2 learner error treatment has always been controversial, the findings of this study are useful for both ESL/EFL learners and teachers. It is important for learners to know their errors because first, in many cultures, learners value feedback from their teachers highly and second, because it is very important to be accurate in academic and scientific writing when targeting professional audiences (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Therefore, learners would be more aware of the errors they make and they can be more careful in their

writings. However, it is also very important to consider L2 learners' proficiency level and the stage which this feedback is given to students. For example, Burston (2001) believed that when the students are in the middle of drafting and revising their drafts, it is better for them to incorporate their teachers' feedback and respond to it immediately rather than wait until their final draft. Furthermore, studies showed students welcomed direct feedback compared with indirect ones, with no codes to name a few (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Additionally, teachers would be able to understand students' specific areas of weakness and focus on improving them. Therefore, both teaching and learning would be more purposeful. Error analysis also enables teachers to predict learners' most common errors which will in turn be an efficient aid for creating teaching materials and choosing teaching methods (Kiato & Kiato, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that the most consistent error, both in test and retest, is *omission*. Therefore, not enough attention has been given by teachers based on student feedback. This study revealed that although the number of errors in the retest (taken at the end of the writing course) reduced significantly when the significant difference between each type of errors (*omission*, *misordering*, *addition* and *misformation*) was taken into consideration, except for the *omission* error, the reduction in all other

types of errors was not significant. Thus, it can be concluded here that sometimes writing instructors who focus on one particular error rather than the others might lead students to repeat the errors which may lead to fossilisation. One sensible action in this regard is to draw students' attention to the most recurrent errors if our goal is to achieve more accuracy and clearer communication.

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