Omani Students' Written Errors and Improvements with Special Reference to Paragraph Writing: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at discovering the writing errors of Omani undergraduate students with special reference to essay writing. In this regard, fifty writing final examination papers from five different levels were selected to be investigated. To begin with, the writings of the students were categorized into two different classes based on their levels, i.e., the upper vs. the lower levels. Then, using a ten-dimensional model developed by Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong (2008), each criterion for good paragraph writing was reviewed. In case the criterion was not observed by a student, it was noted down by the researchers. In search for statistical significant differences among the frequencies of errors in the two levels, the Chi-Square procedure was applied. The result of the test revealed statistically significant differences among the frequencies of the errors committed by the two afore-mentioned groups of students. Finally, some relative discussions were made in terms of the nature of errors committed by each group of students.

1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has always been regarded as a controversial sub-field in the Applied Linguistics. When it comes to Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), many scholars have provided various types of theories as to what the best process of teaching would be. Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), Tasked-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) are only few examples of this broad area (Brown, 2000). One of the most investigated sub-areas related to the process and product of teaching is the notion of errors. According to Richards (1974), errors occur as an essential part of the language learning process. These essential segments of a language learning

process can be treated and tackled in many different ways (Davies & Pearse, 2002).

A quick search into the related literature shows that many studies have been conducted to deal with the students' written errors. However, the main merit of the present work was focusing on the progress of the students while dealing with an academic course. In this regard, the written errors of the students studying in a certain academic program at different hierarchical levels were investigated simultaneously to find out whether the courses they have dealt with had been useful or not. The present study aimed at finding suitable answers to the following questions:

1. Based on the ten-dimensional model (Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008), what are the most common types of written errors committed by Omani students at different levels when dealing with paragraph writing?

2. Are there any statistically significant differences among the frequencies of the errors committed by Omani students with insights from their levels of education?

2. Background

The literature on the errors reveals that errors and mistakes go hand in hand in most cases. According to Kirkgoz (2011), these two terms are usually used interchangeably; however, differences exist among them. In fact, errors and mistakes must not be considered the same. Brown (2000) defines errors as deviant structures from the standard language through which the inter-ability of a language learner is manifested. Mistakes, on the other hand, are those types of performance errors which would result in the learner using the language incorrectly (Richards, 1974).

Scholars usually classify errors under two main categories. The first category of errors roots back to the behaviorist school of thought (Kirkgoz, 2011). In this regard, teachers and learners are asked to avoid error occurrences as much as possible, so that the probable outcome would be a perfect language teaching (Brown, 2000). According to this school of thought, if the learners are exposed to errors, it would gradually turn into a habit for them and therefore, it will show a sign of an inadequacy of teaching methods (Kirkgoz, 2011). The second category is related to the cognitivist school. In fact, it claims that whatever efforts made by the teachers in an EFL context, errors would finally occur and this does not necessarily mean the learner's failure, rather progress the learner is making in the language learning system (Kirkgoz, 2011).

Many studies have been conducted in order to identify different types of students' errors. In a study conducted by Alice (2010), common lexico-grammatical problems found in English as a second language (ESL) learners' written English output were examined. In this work, 387 students participated and were asked to do writing tasks with the word limitation of 200 to 300. Having dealt with the task, those common lexo-grammatical errors among the students were identified and listed. While errors at the lexical level included vocabulary compensation and inaccurate directionality, errors from the syntactic level included calquing, existential structures, incorrect ordering of adverbials, and independent clauses as subjects. In addition, errors from the discourse level would represent periphrastic-topic constructions. The results of the study revealed to have potentials for enhancing the understanding of the inter-language grammar of learners, as well as the sources of learner's written errors. Finally, a discussion of how the taxonomical

classification would be useful for language teachers was provided by Alice (2012).

Sawalmeh (2013) also investigate the students written errors in an Arabic EFL context. In this regard, a corpus of 32 essays was established. All the students who participated in the study were male students graduated from Saudi secondary schools and joined the Preparatory Year Program at University of Ha'il. The errors in these essays were identified and classified into different categorizations. The results of the study revealed ten common types of errors related to the participants of the study. These errors were: verb tense, word order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spellings, capitalization, articles, sentence fragments, and, prepositions.

Providing a feedback has also been the topic of discussion among researchers interested in dealing with students' written errors. In a study seeking for this issue, Jacobs et al.(1998) collected some questionnaire data on whether second language learners prefer to receive peer feedback as one type of feedback on their writing or not. The participants of that study were first-and second-year undergraduate ESL students of lower intermediate to high proficiency, 44 in a university in Hong Kong and 77 in a university in Taiwan. All were enrolled in writing courses in which peer, self, and teacher feedback were used. The chi-square test was used to analyze the questionnaire data, with the alpha level set at .05. A statistically significant percentage of participants (93%) indicated they preferred to have feedback from other students as one type of feedback on their writing. This finding, as well as students' written explanations of their choices, is discussed with reference to how best to incorporate peer feedback into second language writing instruction.

3. Method
3.1. Materials
Fifty writing final examination papers formed the materials of the study. These papers were selected from the work of the students in Gulf College, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman, by the end of first semester of Academic Year 2015-2016. All of the students were studying in their International Foundation Program (IFP). In fact, at the time the present study was carried out, the IFP in Gulf College consisted of five different levels. Therefore, ten papers from each level were selected based on accidental sampling to form the corpus materials of the study consisting of fifty papers. The topics of writing tasks were selected based on students' abilities and their entry and exit levels were considered as an important factor. For instance, for the students with lower levels of performance, only a 150-180 worded writing with simple and general topics such as family, job, the future plans, etc. were given as questions. However, the upper-level students were asked to write a 150-worded letter, as well as a 250-worded essay with topics more of technical nature such as the effects of rubbish on the environment, the effect of computers in reading and listening skills of students, as well as their opinions about women joining the army, the navy, or the air force. Each paper consisted of different paragraphs, which were used individually as the materials of the study.

3.2. The Model
The researchers used a ten-dimensional model developed by Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008). All the ten criteria presented in the model are gathered from the survey done by Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008) in addition to the principles of good paragraph writing from many well-known

books such as *'TOEFL criteria for correcting paragraphs'* (Mahnke & Duffy, 2002), *'Writing Academic English'* (Oshima & Hoque, 2006)*,* and *'Logic, Language, and Composition'* (Willis, 1975). All these criteria are considered as types of errors. These criteria include:

1) Inability to perform the assigned task because of not understanding the question.
2) No introduction
3) Lack of main ideas
4) No topic sentence stating the main points
5) Lack of development of the main ideas (adding details and facts about the main point)
6) Lack of organization
7) Accumulation of errors in sentence structure and / or usage
8) No transitional words
9) Incoherence
10) No conclusion

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

In order to collect the data, the researchers reviewed the work of the students in each of the five levels. These levels included 1) Beginner Level (BL), 2) Pre-IFP, 3) Semester 1 (also known as Block 1), 4) Semester 2 (also known as Block 2), and 5) Pre-Sessional Plus Program (PSPP). There are many possibilities for the students studying at IFP in Gulf College to proceed from one level to another. In other words, the college provides many different possibilities based on the abilities of the students. Table 1 provides an overview on the entry and exit level of the students which are all based on IELTS marking system:

Table 1 Students' Entry and Exit Level at IFP in Gulf College.

Level	Entry Level (Based on IELTS)	Exit Level (Based on IELTS)
BL	3.0	4.5
Pre-IFP	3.5	4.5
Sem 1	4.5	5.0
Sem 2	5.0	6.0
PSPP	5.5	6.0

As shown in Table 1., there must be a correlation between the students' entry and exit levels based on IELTS scoring system. Holding a cross-sectional nature, the present study aimed at investigating written errors from all of the five levels mentioned simultaneously. While the BL, Pre-IFP and Sem 1 students were categorized under lower-level students, the Sem 2 and PSPP students were classified under the upper-level ones. The reason for such classification (which was done based on the entry and exit levels of the students) was facilitating the researchers with the process of data collection and data analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

In search for statistically significant differences among the frequencies and types of errors in the students' paragraph writing tasks, the Chi-Square procedure was used by the researchers. In addition, the results were tabulated and some relevant discussions were provided.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section provides a detailed overview on the nature and frequencies of the written that the students had already committed.

4.1. Nature of the Errors

Concerning the nature of the errors, the BL, Pre-IFP and Sem 1 students' errors were mostly related to all of the ten criteria mentioned in the model presented by Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008). In fact, BL and Pre-IFP students with the entry levels of IELTS 3.0 and 3.5 respectively, as well as the exit level of IELTS 4.5 committed errors related to all of

the ten criteria mentioned by Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008). For Sem 1 students (with the entry level of IELTS 4.5 and the exit level of IELTS 5.0-5.5), the errors were only related to criteria 2, 3, 6, 9, and 10.

Findings of the study also revealed that Sem 2 and PSPP students (with the entry level of IELTS 5.5 and exit level of IELTS 6.0) had very few types of errors in their writing tasks. Only few cased relating to criteria 3 and 5 were detected in the work of those students. All in all, the findings revealed a difference among the nature of the written errors committed by the lower-level as well as the upper-level of students.

4.2. Frequency of the Errors

Table 2. provides an overview on the frequencies of written errors occurred by lower-level students (i.e., BL, Pre-IFP and Sem 1 students):

Table 2.   Frequencies of Written Errors Committed by Lower-Level Students (N=30)

Code	Criterion	f
1	Inability to perform the assigned task because of not understanding the question	12
2	No introduction	17
3	Lack of main ideas	14
4	No topic sentence stating the main points	7
5	Lack of development of the main ideas (adding details and facts about the main point)	18
6	Lack of organization	21
7	Accumulation of errors in sentence structure and / or usage	7
8	No transitional words	23
9	Incoherence	20
10	No conclusion	9
	Total	148

Likewise, Table 3. represents the written work and the frequencies of the errors committed by the upper-level students (i.e., Sem 2 and PSPP students):

Table 3.   Frequencies of Written Errors Committed by Upper-Level Students (N=20)

Code	Criterion	f
1	Inability to perform the assigned task because of not understanding the question	0
2	No introduction	0
3	Lack of main ideas	4
4	No topic sentence stating the main points	0
5	Lack of development of the main ideas (adding details and facts about the main point)	6
6	Lack of organization	0
7	Accumulation of errors in sentence structure and / or usage	0
8	No transitional words	0
9	Incoherence	0
10	No conclusion	0
	Total	10

In search for statistically significant difference among the frequencies of the errors committed by the two groups of students (i.e., the upper level vs. the lower-level), the Chi-Square procedure was applied. Table 4. shows the result of this test:

Table 4.   Result of the Chi-Square Test

Chi-Square	120.532
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	0.0001

The result of the Chi-Square test revealed statistically significant differences among the frequencies of the errors committed by the two afore-mentioned groups of students. Findings of the study were in accordance with previous studies with the aim of investigating students' effect of competence on their performances (e.g., Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong 2008; Sawalmeh 2013, etc.). Likewise, as Fang and Xue-Mei (2007) pointed out, teachers should employ different flexible error treatment procedures in direct relationship with teaching objectives and aims as well as students' linguistic competence.

Findings of the study did not support the results obtained by Llach, Espinosa, and Fontecha (2005). In fact, Llach et al. (2005) argued that the length of the composition could have a significant impact on the

quality of writing and the lengthier the text is, the more erroneous performance would appear. However, as the findings of the present study showed, the upper-level of students committed less errors in their

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the students in upper levels (i.e., Sem 2 and PSPP) committed fewer numbers of errors as compared with the lower-level students (i.e., BL, Pre-IFP, and Sem 1). The result of the Chi-Square test also revealed statistical significant differences among the frequencies of the criteria mentioned by Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008). Therefore, it could be concluded that the hierarchical level of education which the participants of the study have been going through has been more or less successful, as the frequencies of errors have been reduced to a significant number from the lower-level (f=148) to the upper-level (f=10).

Some of the criteria mentioned in the ten-dimensional model presented by Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008) are directly linked with the level of the students. For instance, criterion 5 (i.e., Lack of development of the main ideas (adding details and facts about the main point) is more or less expected to be observed by an upper-level students. The same expectation may go to criterion 8 (i.e., use of transitional words), as well as criterion 9 (i.e., coherence). In conclusion, it could be pointed out the performance level of an individual student might be linked to their competence level, which in turn, could help the lecturers in their writing assessments.

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