

# A Case Study on Errors of EFL Learners

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**Abstract**—Error making is a natural phenomenon in learning a language. Students' errors are strong evidences of the different strategies they employ in the process of learning the target language and they play an important role in the study of second and foreign language acquisition. Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language.

This study examines errors in a corpus of 54 paragraphs written by A1 level students studying English in the School of Foreign Languages, Anadolu University. The corpus was examined to identify errors in the production of verb groups and errors in the use of articles. Errors were classified into two categories as intra-lingual and developmental errors and some sub-categories emerged. It has been found that most errors in the use of verbs and articles stemmed from interference or negative transfer from their first language, overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions and faulty comprehension of distinctions. Some suggestions have been made on how to correct errors.

**Index Terms**—EFL learning, errors, error analysis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Errors are inevitable in learning a language and students' errors provide valuable insights about their progress for teachers and researchers. By analysing errors, it is possible to arrive at pedagogical generalizations useful in foreign language teaching program.

Corder [1] states that learners utilize a definite system of language throughout their language development, and both L1 and L2 learners make mistakes or errors. The two terms seem to have the same meanings but actually they are different terms. As Brown [2] states mistake refers to a type of performance error that results in the learner who learns the language incorrectly although an error is a deviant structure from the standard language that reflects the interlanguage ability of the learner. Mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning. But a learner's errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using at a particular point in the course. They are significant in three different ways. First, to the teacher, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn [3]. There have been two schools of thought in respect

of learners' errors. The behaviorist school maintains that if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method the errors would never be committed in the first place, and therefore the occurrence of errors is a sign of the present inadequacy of our teaching techniques. The cognitivist school, on the other hand, claims that we live in an imperfect world and errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts. It appears that not only is the error an inevitable part of the learner's output but it's quite possibly a necessary part too.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Types of Errors

Errors are classified as being of two types: local and global errors. As Ellis [4] states local errors 'affect only a single constituent in the sentence and are less likely to create any processing problems', and global errors 'violate the overall structure of a sentence and may make it difficult to process'.

There are also systematic errors which are evidence of a learner's current state of interlanguage and which are to do with incomplete or faulty knowledge of English, and mistakes which are caused through inability to perform that knowledge in production because of factors to do with carelessness, tiredness, distractions or difficult circumstances [5].

Moreover, there are Interlingual Errors that are the result of interlingual transfer from the native language and these types or errors include grammatical, prepositional and lexical interference. These errors are the results of the learners' application of the native language elements in their spoken or written performances of the target language. Thus, learners carry over the existing knowledge of their native language to the performance of the target language [4]. Intralingual Errors, on the other hand, refer to the negative transfer of language items within the target language and occur in the rule learning stages of language [6]. The intralingual errors are irrelevant to the native language interference, but led by the target language itself. In the language learning process, these errors normally occur when the learners have acquired insufficient knowledge [7].

### B. Error Analysis

Error analysis provides teachers with insights into the main problems that learners have with English [5]. Richards & Schmidt [8] defined Error Analysis (EA) as "a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms of a language in the production data of someone learning either a second or foreign language." Such systematic analysis of errors eventually provides useful insights about the system operating in the learners' mind and reveals the learners' knowledge about the grammatical systems of the target language. By identifying what is exactly

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lacking in the learners' competence, EA brings the problem areas to the attention of teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers, and suggests remedial action to overcome the mismatch between knowledge of the learner and the demands of the situation [9].

In terms of learner errors a number of case studies, diary studies, classroom observations and experimental studies were carried out and classifications were set up that attempted to account for different types of errors. This study was based on Richards' [10] classification of learner errors but only two categories in this classification were taken into account because of time limitation. These categories were the ones that consisted of errors in the production of verb groups and errors in the use of articles.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Participants and the Design of the Study

The study was carried out with 54 students attending two A1 classes of Preparatory School of Anadolu University. The students have nearly the same background of English, they studied English for about 6-7 years and most of the students attended preparatory classes in Anatolian High Schools. They have 26 hours of instruction which consists of English in Context I and II, Language in Use and LAB lessons and they had been exposed to 8 weeks of instruction by the time they got the second quiz. In the second quiz, the students were wanted to write a description of a famous person in class using at least 100 words. They were not allowed to use dictionaries. The aim of the study was to see their errors in the use of articles and verb groups.

Although Richards [10] divided the errors in the production of verb groups into 21 categories, 7 categories were used in this study and the last three categories were added by the researcher which were not found in Richards' classification. These categories were:

1. *be + verb stem for verb stem*
2. *be + verb stem + for verb stem + ed*
3. *be omitted before verb + stem + ed (participle)*
4. *be omitted before verb + ing*
5. *verb stem for stem + s*
6. *have + verb + ed for verb + ed*
7. *errors in tense sequence*
8. *have instead of has*
9. *is instead of are*
10. *omission of be*

In the use of articles, Richards used 5 categories and he sub-categorized them. Two extra categories (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) were added by the researcher. These categories were:

1. *omission of the*
  - a) *before a noun modified by an of-phrase*
  - b) *before superlatives*
  - c) *before unique nouns*
2. *the used instead of ∅: before proper names*
3. *a used instead of the*
  - a) *before superlatives*
  - b) *before unique nouns*
4. *a instead of ∅*

- a) *before a plural noun qualified by an adjective*
- b) *before uncountables*
- c) *before an adjective*
5. *omission of a*
6. *a used instead of an*
7. *a used after adjectives*

#### B. Analysis of Data

A total of 54 errors by 45 students in the production of verbs and 67 errors by 49 students in the use of articles were detected after examining all the descriptions of the students. Some students made more than one error. There were 9 students who did not make any errors in the production of verb groups and 6 students in the use of articles. The errors were classified according to above mentioned categories and every time they made an error, a tick was marked in the list. Then errors in each category were calculated and their frequencies were found (see Table I and II). In order to strengthen the reliability of the research, quiz papers were checked again after one week and also another rater checked the papers. There was %95 agreement in the scoring.

TABLE I: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF ERRORS IN THE USE OF VERB GROUPS

	Number of Errors	Number of Students	Ratio
Be + verb stem for verb stem	10	9	0,19
Be + verb stem + for verb stem + ed	1	1	0,02
Be omitted before verb + stem + ed (participle)	2	2	0,04
Be omitted before verb + ing	1	1	0,02
Verb stem for stem + s	15	12	0,28
Have + verb + ed for verb + ed	2	2	0,04
Errors in tense sequence	6	6	0,11
Have instead of has	1	1	0,02
Is instead of are	1	1	0,02
Omission of be	15	10	0,28
TOTAL	54	45	

TABLE II: FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF ERRORS IN THE USE OF ARTICLES

	Number of Errors	Number of Students	Ratio
1. omission of the			
a) before a noun modified by an of-phrase	4	4	0,06

b) before superlatives	1	1	0,01
c) before unique nouns	3	3	0,04
2. the used instead of $\emptyset$ : before proper names	6	6	0,09
3. a used instead of the :before superlatives	2	2	0,03
4. a instead of $\emptyset$	0	0	0
a) before a plural noun qualified by an adjective	3	3	0,04
b)before uncountables	1	1	0,01
c) before an adjective	3	2	0,04
5. omission of a	40	23	0,60
6. a used instead of an	2	2	0,03
7. a used after adjectives	2	2	0,03
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>49</b>	

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analysing the data, it was seen that most errors were committed in 3 categories in the production of verbs. These categories were: 1. be + verb stem for verb stem (10 errors by 9 students), 2. verb stem for stem + s (15 errors by 12 students), 3. omission of be (15 errors by 10 students).

In the first category one student committed 2 errors (see Appendix A, the first two sentences) and the others made 1 error per person. In the second category, a student made 3 and another student 2 errors. These students systematically avoided using the third person singular –s. In the third category, a student made 2 and another one 4 errors. The one who made 4 errors did not use to be verb in all the sentences she wrote about the person. She wrote sentences such as; *\*He always sweat*, *\* It doesn't important for me*. The one who made 2 errors wrote sentences such as *\*He has normal tall*, *\* He has serious and decisive a person* (this student will also be discussed in the use of articles).

In the use of articles, 5<sup>th</sup> category (omission of be) is seen to be dominant. 40 errors were made by 23 students. 11 students made more than one error; 7 students made 2 errors, 3 students made 3 errors per person and one student made 4 errors.

It is interesting to note that 2 students made the same type of error which is not found in Richards' classification. They used a after the adjectives and made sentences such as *\* Mr. Kongar is short and handsome a man*, *\* He has serious and decisive a person*.

Above mentioned two errors can be called as interference or negative transfer from the mother tongue. In Turkish

indefinite article a (bir) is used after the adjectives, e.g. *O yakışıklı bir adamdır*. These two students transferred the rule in their mother tongue into English.

The errors of the students in this study are of two types: systematic and unsystematic. Some students made only mistakes because they were not repeated and they do not reflect a defect in their knowledge. They are unsystematic and not very serious, because the students themselves can correct them. But intralingual and developmental errors are systematic and persistent since they reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition. They cannot be called as lapses or mistakes, they are systematic errors. Most of the developmental errors were found to be caused by overgeneralization which is defined as the use of previously available strategies in new situations. As Richards [10] states overgeneralization covers instances where learners create a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of other structures in the target language such as *\* She wear modern clothes*, *\*he do his job*, *\*some people thinks*, *\*he born to be crazy*, *\* he is always becomes determined*. Overgeneralization generally involves the creation of one deviant structure in place of two regular structures. The omission of the third person –s was used mostly (%28) because it is an exception. As Erkaya [11] states, Turkish language does not have definite and indefinite articles and sometimes learners use articles when they do not need them or do not use them when necessary. The results of this study also support this claim. Kırkgöz's [6] study is in line with our study and the participants in her study added, omitted and misused both definite and indefinite articles like the participants in this study. Another cause of errors is ignorance of rule restrictions which may derive from analogy, with the learner rationalizing a deviant usage from his previous experience of English. It is also seen in article usage. Learners made sentences such as *\*She'll open the Europe's door with a success*, *\*She wears a modern clothes*.

Faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language is another cause of errors. Students in this study confused *have* and *has* in present perfect tense (e.g. *\*He have always respected to other ideas*), *to be* and *have*, *has* (e.g. *\*He has serious*), *were* instead of *was* (e.g. *\*Every street were in big, red flags*).

#### V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides evidence of A1 level EFL learners' errors and it gives an idea of the learners' progress, what strategies or procedures they employ in learning the target language. Errors are significant for the teachers and researchers. By looking at errors learners do, learners' progress can be determined and the teacher can gain a clearer overall picture of what the students know and can plan remedial work. Errors arise not only from the choice of the material itself but also from the students' state of mind. The language teacher needs to be aware of all these possible factors and be sympathetic towards the learners' problems.

According to Erkaya, [11] instructors should emphasize the correction of global errors, not the local ones. For Brown [2], the solution to errors of interference is to make students

aware of the origin of the error. Thus, good students will get rid of the interference once they understand where it originates.

As Darus and Subramaniam [12] point out “teachers who can analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students become more aware of their errors; and error analysis is the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages” (pp.486-87).

This study has some limitations. Firstly, data were collected from 54 students in two A1 level classes. It would be better if more data were gathered in all the classes of the same level. Secondly, their compositions were limited to a description of a person. Thirdly, only errors in the use of articles and verbs were detected because of the lack of time. Future studies may be carried out by looking at errors in the use of adjectives or adverbs, and the students may be required to write essays or compositions on a different topic.

#### APPENDIX A

##### ERRORS IN THE PRODUCTION OF VERB GROUPS

1. be + verb stem for verb stem  
He's always becomes determined.  
He likes a emotional baby.  
Most of people likes Sezen Aksu.  
He is go on Atatürk's way.  
Every street were in big, red flags.  
He also be honest.  
He is fall in love with Derya.  
Some people thinks.....  
She isn't escape.  
If you are want laugh, definitely you are have to watching Şener Şen.
2. be + verb stem + for verb stem + ed  
Hülya Avşar was choosed a beauty queen.
3. be omitted before verb + stem + ed (participle)  
When people criticize her, she doesn't effect them.  
He born to be crazy.
4. be omitted before verb + ing  
He always preparing reliable programmes.
5. verb stem for stem + s  
He help a lot of poor people.  
He solve problems a few.  
She play for a theatre.  
Sometimes he wear sporth clothes.  
He always play many films.  
Everyone know him in the world.  
He never stop.  
He never tell lie to me.  
He never become arrogant.  
He like to help people.  
He never delay work.  
Everybody know him.  
Usually she wear a modern clothes.  
He always keep his promises.  
He do his job.
6. have + verb + ed for verb + ed  
He has never do a record until this year.  
Lots of people have became famous to won beauty contests.
7. errors in tense sequence  
He was thin and tall when he is in twenties.  
When he give a concert, he will give the money to people that want to help.

- Everybody said for him he is very gentle and polite.  
The first thing that we notice about him was his moustache.  
I like watching him while they were dancing.  
When I met him, my first idea was he is a cold and arrogant boy.
8. have instead of has  
He have always respected other ideas.
  9. is instead of are  
His eyes is big and green.
  10. omission of be  
He always different from the other people.  
He has normal tall.  
He has serious and decisive a person  
He always exciting in the races.  
He has lovely.  
I will like him in the business world.  
He doesn't afraid of political situation.  
She one of the important people in Turkey.  
She can serious.  
He generally modest and easygoing.  
He always sweat.  
He can successful abroad.  
He is a confident person who doesn't arrogant.  
It doesn't important for me.  
He always responsible about his job.

#### APPENDIX B

##### ERRORS IN THE USE OF ARTICLES

1. omission of the
  - a) before a noun modified by an of-phrase  
He is king of pop.  
He is president of ADD.  
He is the boss of the Microsoft Company.  
She is solist of Spice Girls.
  - b) before superlatives  
He is best in his team.
  - c) before unique nouns  
He is the oldest man in NATO.  
He wants to be in World.  
She can play guitar.
2. the used instead of Ø: before proper names  
She'll open the Europe's door with a success.  
The art is very important for me.  
When you watch the Brat's films, you see his behaviour.  
He is stubborn to solve the Turkey's problems.  
He wants to be in the Europe.  
When he turned the Turkey, he became prime minister.
3. a used instead of the : before superlatives  
He is a prime minister of Turkey.  
He is a best.
4. a instead of Ø
  - a) before a plural noun qualified by an adjective  
He has a well behavior.  
He doesn't wear a glasses.  
She wears a modern clothes, sometimes dress, sometimes jean.
  - b) before uncountables  
He seems like a iron.
  - c) before an adjective

He is a rich.  
She is a short.  
He is a famous.

5. omission of a

She is beautiful, interesting and friendly woman.  
She is very rich woman.  
She is very stupid person.  
He is authoritative man.  
He is very optimistic person.  
He has light complexion.  
He is famous singer in Turkey.  
He was worker when he was young.  
İbrahim Tatlıses is diligent and successful person.  
He has got round face.  
He is patient, honest and funny man.  
He was brilliant student.  
He is very complex and comic person.  
He has got good personality.  
He is very honest and confident person.  
He is peaceful, realistic, fair and sensitive man.  
He is very important and famous person.  
He is very eccentric singer.  
He isn't kind person.  
He is very cheerful singer.  
He is very famous person.  
He is intelligent person.  
He must be genius.  
Fazıl Say is very brilliant artist.  
He is optimistic and confident person.  
He is very creative person.  
She is very nice person.  
He is very ambitious person.  
He is polite person.  
She is really beautiful woman.  
He is famous film star.  
He is very good looking person.  
She has got round face.  
He is modest person.  
He is handsome man.  
He is genius and arrogant person.  
He always wears black jacket.  
It is special job for me.  
He said: I'm good listener.

6. a used instead of an  
He likes a emotional baby.  
He is a old man.

8. a used after adjectives  
Mr. Kongar is short and handsome a man.  
He has serious and decisive a person.

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