

ANALYSIS OF ERRORS MADE BY INTERMEDIATE EFL STUDENTS IN THE USE OF PAST SIMPLE AND PRESENT PERFECT

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Abstract: Error detection is an important component of writing instruction, yet there are a few studies analyzing errors made by EFL students. When speaking or writing, whether in the first or second language, it is inevitable that learners make mistakes. However, what is questioned by language teachers is why students go on making the same mistake even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. There are not many Albanian researchers that had focused on the learners' errors in different contexts in foreign language teaching. Albanian learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. Kacani (2014) had analyzed these difficulties by indicating the kind of errors associated with both language use and language usage. Corder (1973) argued that the study of errors is part of the investigation of the process of language learning since these errors provide us with clear picture of the linguistic development that learner undergo and give us indicator on what are the learning strategies employed within this learning process. This research makes a study of error analysis in writing mainly concentrating on Past Simple and Present Perfect. It starts by giving a systematic review of the concepts and theories concerning Error Analysis, the various reasons causing errors are comprehensively explored. Also it examines errors in a corpus of 100 essays written by 100 participants. The participants are Albanian students who are studying at Middle school Kiril Pejcinoviq - Tetovo, 40 male and 60 female, aged 16-17. All participants come from non-English speaking backgrounds and hardly communicate in English outside school. All of the errors in the essays were identified and classified into various categorizations. The results show that Past Simple and Present Perfect are the most common errors committed by the students. For errors in tenses found in the students' writing, L1 transfer may result in avoidance that occurs when specific target language features are under-represented in learner production in comparison to native speaker production. Because of the interference of the L1, students tend to refer to their L1 whenever they face difficulties when they write. This confusion also occurs because students lack sound of grammatical rules in their L1. So, this proves that L1 plays a significant role in causing Albanian students to make errors whenever they write in English. However, a large number of errors occur due to Developmental / Intralingual reasons. So, these are some of the aspects of writing that pose the most difficult problems to students. This research has been written to answer some of the questions that my students and colleagues over the years have needed to ask.

Keywords: Error analysis, Past Simple, Present Perfect

INTRODUCTION

Why do students make errors when they speak or write? Should we feel concerned? How can they be traced and analyzed? In what way can we correct students' mistakes? These are just some of the questions that have turned into issues, which do not mean they cannot be included within the boundaries of a study. Everyone makes mistakes when using a language. We hear them at school, on television, at work and even from our members of the family so often that errors start to sound 'correct'. However, they are still errors and they can make us feel and sound less sophisticated or less creative than we really are. Learning English as a first language is a lifelong process and it is often a challenging experience for EFL learners. English has become the EFL since it was introduced to Macedonia in the last few decades. Nowadays, it is an international language and is used as the language in international relations and in exchanging knowledge and technology. It has only been a few decades since it started being taught to almost all school children. In general, Albanian students have been exposed to approximately 10 years of learning English in primary and secondary schools.

In addition, they are in contact with English through Internet, films, music, though which they get authentic language input. There is a mismatch between receptive skills and productive skills. As Ambjornsdottir & Ingvasrdottir (2007) pointed out that "proficiency in receptive skills in English, of students may lead to overestimation of their language skills." This is shown in cases when students have to produce oral or written texts in English, and when they go on to study at university, where they are required to use English as a language of communication and study. In the same study Ambjornsdottir & Ingvarsdottir (2007) link the problems of students' dropout rate with their poor performance in English productive skills. A key to the solution of this problem is to pay more attention to teaching writing, even in primary schools. According to Hedge (2005), one possible reason for the drop out is that the majority of teachers tend to address writing as a product rather than a process. So, instead of engaging students in an extensive practice of writing through process approach activities, such as drafting, redrafting, generating ideas or reviewing others' writing, teachers expected students to produce a piece of written product for evaluation. Hedge (2005) also claims that this kind of writing is not the same real-life writing, rather it is writing meant for learning, not for communication. Another reason for the dropout is

related with teachers giving inappropriate feedback on students' writing. The feedback given is very little and based on their previous teaching experience and their assumption about how written corrective feedback should be provided on learners' writing, rather than following a standard written corrective feedback policy. As Williams (2003) stated vague comments or the inconsistent marking of errors by teachers do not help students, but discourage them and make them indifferent.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY / RESEARCH QUESTIONS / HYPOTHESIS

English language plays a significant role in school programs in Macedonia. But, it seems that the mastery level of English language by students do not satisfy their needs. English teachers and students (who learn English) are confronting many difficulties in different fields. A common problem that each teacher is facing nowadays is the large number of errors that students of different levels of proficiency make. Every day teachers have to deal with this issue in their classes, especially in their students' assignments. So far, based on the existing study acquired in the field of error analysis and framed within a cognitive perspective acquisition, the present research will examine and answer two research questions as described below:

1. What are the common errors that students make when using Past Simple and Present Perfect?
2. Why do students make errors when using Past Simple and Present Perfect?

Most of the teachers have tried to understand this issue in a scientific way. Recently, a relevant approach has been made in the field of errors. The systematic approach of errors would be very fruitful and maybe that is the main reason that ultimately turned into researcher's decisive aim and purpose to work and investigate the issue of students' errors when using Past Simple and Present Perfect. When students tend to write, whether in their first or second language, grammatical mistakes will be made. The aim of this paper is to look into errors in the use of Past Simple and Present Perfect made by Albanian high school students when writing in English and analyze why these errors occur. This paper also aims at looking into what grammar teaching can be in high schools and how some teachers look upon their students' writing proficiency. Thus, the purposes of this study are:

1. To find out the most common errors made by students when using Past Simple and Present Perfect.
2. To find out the reasons why errors occur when students use Past Simple and Present Perfect.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research concentrates on the most common errors, though it includes some oddities which the researcher considers especially interesting or that are simply pet peeves of the researcher. The research does not make any pretense to exhaustively explore complex topics, limiting it to pointing out the most commonly encountered problems and giving hints for avoiding them, using a minimum of technical terminology. The results from learners can help teachers and trainers understand learners' preferred ways of learning how to write and adjust the writing techniques to learners' needs and interests. The research activities related to writing can provide better understanding of the error analysis which can be relevant for material designers. The theoretical justification for the research can be supported by the fact that this will be a descriptive analysis which can trigger many other similar types of research at different levels of EFL education. Also, the fact that the resources which are explored in this research are ELT course books, which are used worldwide, can only increase the importance of the research.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Error analysis

Researchers, such as Corder (1967&1974) and Brown (2000) define the word 'error' when people do not follow grammatical rules or structures. At the basis of the accuracy-fluency controversy is the question of error. Once thought to be deviant behavior, error is now seen as a neutral phenomenon in learning of all kinds; learning to ice skate, to type, to analyze literature, to speak a first or second language. Of course, errors in written language can be due to intonation, memory lapse, or indifference and in an in-class writing situation, NES (Native English Speaker) as well as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students will make hasty performances errors. Generally, EFL errors are neither random, nor sporadic or deviant, instead they are systematic, regular and rule-governed, the result of intelligence, not stupidity. According to most dictionaries the term 'error' and 'mistake' are synonyms, but in error analysis, it is conducive to reserve the term 'mistake' for something rather different. Corder (1967) emphasizes that it would be pragmatic to refer to errors of performance as 'mistakes' which is not significant to the language learning process and reserve the term 'error' for the systematic errors of the learner from which his knowledge of the language to date can be reconstructed. Norrish (1983) claims that making mistakes can be regarded as an essential part of learning, whereas Brown (1994) says that language learning is a process that involves making mistakes.

Learning a foreign language is a step by step process, where errors or mistakes are quite expectable during this learning process. Corder (1967) says that when errors are made it is evidence that the process of learning is going on. He also emphasizes that if errors are studied systematically they can provide us significant information on how a language is learned by a foreign student. He also agrees that by studying students' errors ultimately language teachers can have some benefit and immediate practical application for language teachers. In his opinion, errors can provide feedback, they tell the teachers whether his teaching is effective or not. So, we raise the question why should error analysis be undertaken? Corder (1973) says that "the most obvious practical use of the analysis of errors is to the teachers." These can provide us with feedback; they tell the teacher whether he/she is using the appropriate material, books, corpora etc. Also they can show if the teacher is using the right teaching technique or need further attention. If we analyze carefully the explanation given above we will come to a conclusion that error analysis can be a very useful tool of a foreign language teaching program.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

All participants that took part in this study are students from the middle school Kiril Pejcinoviq - Tetovo. 80 of these participants are researcher's students whereas 20 are selected from researcher's colleagues as volunteers who wanted to participate at their own will. Their age ranges from 16-17. The female students constitute 65% of the subject of the study, while male students constitute 35%. The students scored an average a grade A, B, C and D at their English tests. They have experienced approximately the same number of years of education through primary and secondary education. All of these students come from Albanian speaking families and Albanian is their mother tongue. They also speak Macedonian and some of them German or even Turkish. They only use English during their English classes or when needed to.

Materials

The aim of this part is to describe materials and techniques used to collect the data. An English grammar test was used as a research instrument. The test was divided into three parts: part one included ten statements where their task was to fill in the gaps with verbs in the Past Simple or Present Perfect. The test was adapted from John and Liz Soars Headway Test Book. The second part of the test included a discussion where their task was to tell a narrative. Its aim was to test students' ability to distinguish and check competence in the use of the Past Simple and Present Perfect. And the last part included a paragraph where their task was to fill in the gaps with Past Simple or Present Perfect. Its aim was to test their production of Past Simple and Present Perfect. All parts were administered based on the components of English structure. Moreover, every task was taken from John and Liz Soars' Intermediate Test Book. First and foremost, the English grammar test was given to collect data and it was analyzed by descriptive statistics to gather grammatical errors.

Data collection

All 100 participants in this research were asked to do the English grammar test in the classroom. Students had 45 minutes to complete the three part test and then hand the tests immediately. The data was collected in October through November 2016. Past Simple and Present Perfect tense were taught in the English core subject since that was obligatory for second year students at middle school Kiril Pejcinoviq. The research used data analysis and quantitative methodology of data collection. The participants were divided into three groups; two groups included 33 students each, whereas one group included 34 students. The test had three parts: sentence completion, discussion and close passage. Its aim was to measure students' ability and language production using the Past Simple and Present Perfect.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The collected written data from Albanian students' tests were analyzed in order to identify the grammatical errors which were generated. The results showed that the main major grammatical errors were mainly in the following categories: tenses, mainly in Past Simple and Present Perfect. Data analysis revealed that Albanian students at middle school Kiril Pejcinoviq had insufficient knowledge on how to use several English tenses in their tests. Starting with the verb use, when students use the question and negative form of Past Simple they make mistakes because there is no equivalent of auxiliaries (did) in Albanian (e.g. 'I not stay / stayed late' instead of 'I didn't stay late; 'How I looked?' instead of 'How did I look'?

Tense Aspect Combination Errors

Regarding the tense aspect combination sixty three cases were found in students' papers that involve the present perfect and the past simple tense. Then, 59% of errors were found in connection with the use of the past simple tense instead of the present perfect and 41% of errors occurred due to the use of the present perfect instead of the past simple tense. See the diagram below:



Graph 1: Proportion of erroneous use of past simple and present perfect

Past Simple instead of Present Perfect

Here are some examples where students have used the past simple instead of the present perfect:

1. By building the city center is likely to attract a number of investors who might invest their money into bigger projects and make Tetova even more attractive in the future – probably more attractive than Struga or Ohri. Building the city center in Tetova **helped** create prosperity in our lovely town.
2. Many soldiers **died** after the end of the major operations than during the war. So, what is wrong in that country?
3. By building a vital city center, people can go after work or at the weekends do their shopping or drink something in one of the cafes that **emerged** last year.

In these three examples mentioned above the students should have used the present perfect because the past situations are viewed from the present moment and there are no temporal specifications about the past situation. The first two examples require the use of Present Perfect since the effect of the past situation is still present, whereas the third example requires a Present Perfect of recent past underlining the temporal proximity and the present relevance of the situation. There is another example where both of the verbs were used in the past tense but in contrary the student should have used the present perfect since they describe the persistence of the situation.

4. I really believe that this is the reason why this topic **attracted** so many people as it **did** the last ten years here in this city.

The appropriate form *this topic has attracted so many people as it has for the last ten years* would again require an elliptic omission, in this case the omission of the main verb *attracted* in the second finite verb construction, thus here were counted two present perfect errors.

Present Perfect instead of Past Simple

There are some cases where students have used the present perfect instead of the past simple:

1. When he **has started** university in 2001, the subject of Information Technology **has been** brand new. As we can see in this example a specific point in the past is shown, such as *2001* which prohibits the use of the present perfect in English language.
2. The main character has just read lately that the managers in the business world who **have been questioned** did not know how to distinguish BA from MA.

In this case the student should have used the past simple tense because the questionnaire was carried out only once in the past. This action was completed somewhere in the past and there are no proofs that this process will be repeated. Surprisingly, these errors show only 5.5% of the total number of errors in finite verb constructions that require the present perfect, additionally it can be said that the present perfect has not been avoided. Whereas, the errors where the past simple was used instead of the present perfect show that students have more difficulties in this field with 8.7% of the total number of errors in finite verb constructions. These results show that students more often use the Present Perfect tense to cover the meaning of the Past Simple tense than the Past Simple tense is used to cover the meaning of the present perfect. For students the transfer strategy is more significant than the avoidance strategy, even though the total number of occurrences suggest the opposite.

The significance of errors in the tense production was also reported in previous studies (Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Kacani, 2014). Errors in the use of Past Simple and Present Perfect were the most problematic area among Albanian EFL students. E.g. incorrect subject-verb agreement in the past simple tenses, regular and irregular past forms, the misuse of the auxiliary verb 'have'. The results show the highest production of tense errors in the target language. Correspondingly, some errors are strongly related to negative transfer from their mother tongue into target language (i.e. interlingual) because there is no equivalent between English continuous and perfect aspect forms and Albanian ones.

7. CONCLUSION

While teaching and supervising the teaching of English, the researcher has observed that, in spite of the fact that students have studied English for 10 years during their elementary and middle school and that their vocabulary ranges from 2.000-3.000 words, most of the students are not able to write a correct paragraph using adequately the basic structures of the English language. This means that one or more of the aims defined in the

middle school curriculum have not been achieved. And the `dream` of the teacher is shattered by the poor results attained by the students. The results of this research show that L1 features tend to intervene when students use Past Simple and Present Perfect. It can be hypothesized that when the features of both languages first and second are extremely different in terms of grammatical rules then it is likely for students to make mistakes. Thus, errors occur as a result of the differences between languages. In teaching writing, teachers need to be aware that students have difficulties in these areas of English grammar. These errors are caused by interference of L1 and inadequate understanding of grammatical rules of English. Because of the interference of the L1, students tend to refer to their L1 whenever they face difficulties when they write. They also encounter problems due to their exposure to Albanian as it is a language that is used in many subjects. Therefore, the students will form sentences with errors because of the differences of grammatical rules of all the languages: their L1, Albanian and English. This confusion also occurs because students lack grammatical knowledge in their L1. So, this proves that L1 plays a significant role in causing Albanian students to make errors whenever they write in English. There are other assumption on why grammatical errors occur, such as a result from the students' intention and limitation to do the test, including their background knowledge in English. Except these assumptions, there are cases when errors occur because of student's carelessness while he/she did the test. The causes of students' errors also consisted of performance error and wrong teaching techniques. However, a significant number of errors occurred in spelling and misformation, so it is recommended that both the teachers and the students should emphasize those problematic issues. On the other hand, the students will not be able to produce quality pieces of writing.

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