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Undergraduate Writing Errors in English in a Generative Syntactic Perspective

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Abstract

It is widely believed that language learning, like any other human learning, involves the tendency to make of errors. (See Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982) Learner errors are an indication of the cognitive processes they make use of in analyzing, interpreting, and reorganizing the input they receive from the target language. Hence, learner errors are considered an integral part of language learning/acquisition. Consequently, error analysis (EA) emerged with the understanding that learner errors provide useful insights into the underlying processes of second language (L2) acquisition. From this stance, the present study examines 30 writing samples of a group of undergraduates of the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna, focusing on the morpho-syntactic errors made by them. The objective of the study is to find out the types of morpho-syntactic errors made by the university undergraduates in their classroom work and assignments and to provide a Generative Syntactic explanation for them. The preference for morpho-syntactic errors over other error types is due to the fact that, by far, most of the L2 learner errors fall into this category. The selection of the Generative Syntactic approach is determined by the dearth of error analysis studies that have used this particular approach. Data analysis is done by using 10 syntactic rules and explanations in different modules of the Government and Binding (GB) theory. It is revealed that most of the errors are related to the predicates and argument structure relations, movement in embedded "Wh" questions, pronoun reference, clausal complementation, and adjacency violations. The least number of errors are related to adverb use, person-number agreement (phi-feature agreement), coordination, verbs with clausal complements, and in the use of 'that' complementizer.

Keywords: Classification, Errors, Government and binding, Morpho-syntactic

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INTRODUCTION

Learner errors have always received considerable attention in the Second Language (L2) classroom because of their significance in understanding the nature of Second Language learning/acquisition. In this regard, one cannot ignore the theoretical justification, which claims that a study of learners' errors is part of the systematic study of the learners' language (interlanguage) which itself reflects upon the process of second language acquisition. With respect to L2 teaching/learning, a good understanding of the nature of errors is necessary before looking for a systematic means of minimizing them. As Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982) assert, people cannot learn a language without first systematically committing errors.

Errors can be classified as linguistic-based errors, process-based errors, receptive, and productive errors. Linguistic based classification focuses on the linguistic aspects of errors related to orthography, phonology, lexico-semantics, and morpho-syntax. Process based classification includes errors of omission, addition, substitution, and permutation. Receptive errors occur when there is a mismatch between the listener's interpretation and the speaker's intentions. Productive errors, as the name suggests, are language production related and hence can be observed in the utterances of the L2 learner (Hossein; 1993, 90-91). However, it is not possible to maintain strict borderlines between these different classificatory types, and therefore, a considerable amount of overlapping can be expected in any study of this nature.

Pedagogical practitioners often make a distinction between errors and mistakes. Errors are considered to be systematic, rule-governed, and occur due to L2 learners' insufficient knowledge of target language rules. This systematic and rule-governed nature can be seen, for example, when a learner frequently uses the regular past tense inflection (-ed) even to make the past tense form of the irregular verbs (putted, drived) in his utterances. Thus, these errors indicate the learner's linguistic system /interlanguage competence at a given stage of language learning. Such errors show that the learner has followed the grammar of his interlanguage which allows such over-generalizations at that particular stage of his L2 development. Gass & Selinker, (1993) observe that, since the learner cannot recognize his/her own errors, only the teacher or researcher can locate them.

In contrast with errors, mistakes are random deviations, which might occur due to non-linguistic factors such as fatigue, strong emotions, memory limitations, lack of concentration, or due to any other physical, emotional factors. They are typically not systematic, are unrelated to any linguistic system and can be corrected by the L2 learner himself if brought to

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his attention (Corder, 1981,p.18,; James,1977,p.76, Hossein, 993,p.60).

From an L2 error analysis perspective, an analysis of undergraduate students' writing reveals that their errors belong to all types of linguistic-based classification: orthographic, phonological, lexico-semantic, and morpho-syntactic. A process-based classification reveals that the L2 learner errors belong to errors of omission, addition, substitution, and permutation. However, out of all these error classificatory types, by far, most of the L2 errors fall into morpho-syntactic category. This phenomenon can be observed in the writing of the undergraduates of the Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna, too.

EXISTING LITERATURE

Due to the multiple advantages error analysis offered to the field of language pedagogy, many studies were conducted to analyze students' errors in ESL and EFL contexts. These studies offered useful insights for teachers, researchers and students to follow in organizing their teaching and learning. Accordingly, Katiya et al. (2015), having analyzed some essays written by a group of 1st Year Chemistry students, found that errors identified as mother tongue interferences, punctuation and spelling mistakes, misapplication of essay construction rules, and syntactic and morphological anomalies affected the quality,

meaning, and stylistic consistency of the learner writing. In a similar study, Taher (2011), in an investigation carried out with a group of Swedish junior high school students, discovered that verb tense, verb inflection, and subject-verb agreement errors were common in their writing, because of their lack of grammatical knowledge and their habit of translating ideas from the Swedish into English. Heydari and Bagheri (2012), in a study focused on the sources of L2 learner errors, discovered that that the Iranian students' errors in their writing in English were caused by the students' unfamiliarity with colloquial English, their ignorance of the target language rules, their unfamiliarity with the formalities in written English, and their lack of sufficient practice. Hinon (2015), on the basis of a sample of the syntactic errors made by the Thai University students in their English writing found that the errors in grammar and lexis were the most frequent and that the sources of most of their errors are first language interference and poor writing organization. Abewickrama (2010) examined L2 learner errors made by a selected group of Sinhala speaking undergraduates offering English as a Second language for their BA (General) Degree at the Universities of Kelaniya, Peradeniya and the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. The corpus consisted of essays written by 60 students in the first and the second academic years of their degree programs. His major focus was on finding out whether L1 transfer was the

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main cause for the learner errors. He concludes that the negative L1 transfer/interference is not the major cause for errors in the English writings of Sinhala speaking undergraduates.

Dissanayake & Dissanayake (2019) have examined the syntactic errors made by the Sinhala-speaking university undergraduates in their L2 writing. Their analysis was based on 100 undergraduates of the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) program at the Kandy Regional Centre of the Open University of Sri Lanka. They have analyzed a sample of written essays on a given specific topic focusing on word order, negation, modal verbs, tenses, and the use of prepositions. Dissanayake et.al conclude that most of the errors in written English are due to the first language interference of the L2 learner, mainly emanating from the word order differences in the two languages. Further, they argue that the learners seem to believe that the rules of grammar in both languages are similar and transferring rules from L1 to L2 would not make an erroneous construction.

The studies sited above have dealt with different types of errors made by the junior high school students and university undergraduates in their L2 writing. The major focus of all of them seems to be finding out the sources of errors where L1 negative transfer is shown to be one main factor. None of them provide a syntactic analysis of errors based on a particular syntactic theory. Hence, there seems to be sufficient scope for a study on morpho-syntactic errors made by the university undergraduates based on a particular syntactic theoretical approach. The present study intends to fill this research gap by analyzing a sample of L2 learner errors from the undergraduates of the university of Ruhuna by applying a generative syntax approach.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of the present study is to find out the most common morpho-syntactic errors made by the Arts undergraduates of the University of Ruhuna in their L2 writing assignments and to provide a syntactic analysis/explanation of them by using the Government and Binding Theory introduced by Chomsky (1981).

METHODOLOGY

Data and Data Collection

The data for the study consisted of the writing assignments of 30 second-year undergraduates of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. All of them were the students of the Foundational English Course Level 2000 conducted by the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT). The mother tongue of all of them was Sinhala. The specific writing task included an essay written by each student on a topic of their choice. The researcher did not wish to limit the corpus only to a specific essay topic.

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Rather, when they are given the choice to select their own topic, the scope and potential for analysis become greater. The researcher also did not wish to conduct a placement test for sample selection. This too was due to the fact that a sample of the same ability in English would limit the scope and potential for analysis. The researcher expected a varied performance from the students in terms of sentence structure so that the corpus would be extensive. In order to maintain a distinction between errors and mistakes, the researcher adhered to the theoretical principle that the errors are systematic deviations from the norm whereas mistakes are not.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background used for the data analysis was the Government and Binding (GB) theory of Syntax, developed mainly by Chomsky (1981, 1982, 1986). GB-Theory is modular in its basic architecture and presentation. In pursuing explanatory adequacy, it explores linguistic phenomena related to language acquisition in terms of a number of modules such as X-bar, Theta, Case, Bounding, Trace, Control, Binding, and Government. GB expounds the idea that a series of conditions /modules and associated rules relate the parts of a sentence together while at the same time those rules constrain unbounded variation. GB assumes that a large portion of the grammar of any particular language is common to all languages, and is therefore part of Universal Grammar (UG) which can be broken down into two main components: levels of representation and a system of constraints. The rules pertaining to each module act as constraints.

GB assumes a derivational model with four levels of representation for each structure/sentence. They are the D-structure (underlying structure), S-structure (surface structure), Phonological Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF). Derivation starts with selection of lexical items from the lexicon, which contains idiosyncratic properties of lexical items such as what arguments the item subcategorizes for. Lexical items are combined together at D-structure (underlying structure), which is then mapped into S-structure, which is the syntactic representation that most closely reflects the surface order of the sentence. S-structure is then fed into the other two representations (PF and LF) for phonological and semantic interpretation: Phonological Form (PF) is the interface with the Phonology. LF is the interface with the Semantics. The scope of quantifiers and operators of various kinds, and predication relationships are represented in the phrase structure at LF. These levels are not independent of each other as they are related to one another by rules. A single movement rule, Move-α, maps between D-structure and S-structure and a similar rule maps S-structure into LF (Black, 1999, p.2).

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ANALYSIS

In the first place, it is necessary to mention on what theoretical or empirical basis the researcher selected the particular examples analyzed here as errors, as opposed to mistakes. The distinction between the two is often blurred and the task is also difficult due to the existence of many parameters to define and discuss these two terms. Some of them focus on grammaticality while others focus on acceptability. Nevertheless, in considering the examples /data given here as errors, the researcher adopted the following definition by Lennon (1991).

'A linguistic form or combination of forms, which in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speaker's native counterparts' (Lennon, 1991, as quoted in Ellis, 2009:56)

The linguistic taxonomy used for the data analysis was mainly the syntactic rules and explanations in different modules of the Government and Binding (GB) theory. These included the use of adverbs, predicates and argument relations, movement in "Wh" questions, Person-number agreement (phi-feature agreement), coordination, pronoun reference, use of 'that' complementizer, verbs with clausal complements, clausal complementation, and Adjacency requirements. Table 1 illustrates these morpho-syntactic categories with the exact nature of the errors identified in the corpus.

Table1: Morpho-syntactic categories, errors, and examples.

Morpho-syntactic category of the error	Exact nature of the error	Example
a) use of VP adverbs	use of the VP adverb away from the VP.	1) *My brother quickly will find out. 2)*The doctor thoroughly may examine the patient.
b) predicates and argument structure related errors	a) omission of the argument b) use of incorrect complement type.	3) *The teacher gave a present. 4) *The robber waited his trial.
c) movement in embedded "Wh" questions	Auxiliary inversion in the embedded periphery.	5) *My friend asked what is the time.
d) person-number agreement (phi-feature agreement)	inflectional suffix 's' not used in the verb with a third person singular subject in simple present tense.	6) *Ravi play cricket every evening.

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e) coordination	Coordination of the constituents of different types	7) *The house was [very large] and [in the city].
f) pronoun reference	unclear antecedent /ambiguous pronoun reference	8) In that village people had many cultural items. My friend Ravi also lives there. He is a dancer. <u>Ravi</u> thinks that those people like <u>himself</u> very much.
g) use of 'that' complementizer	use of both 'that' complementizer and the "Wh" together	9) *I know <u>that</u> <u>what</u> he wanted to buy.
h) verbs with clausal complements	wrong use of the verbs that require finite clauses and verbs that require non-finite clauses as complements.	10) *My friend thinks to improve his English knowledge. 11) *They tried that they can do it.
i) clausal complementation	Use of clauses in the complement position of a preposition	12) *The teacher talked about that English is very important.
j) Adjacency violations	An adverb intervening between the verb and its object	13)*We finished <u>quickly</u> our work.

Table 2 illustrates the errors according to frequency of occurrence.

Table 2: Errors according to frequency of occurrence

morpho-syntactic category of the error	Frequency (no: of occurrences in the corpus)
a) predicates and argument structure related errors	42
b) movement in embedded "Wh" questions	36
c) pronoun reference	35
d) verbs with clausal complements	33
e) adjacency violations	28
f) use of 'that' complementizer	20
g) coordination	18
h) clausal complementation	16
i) person-number agreement (phi-feature agreement)	15
j) use of VP adverbs	06

DISCUSSION

a) Use of VP adverbs

14) *My brother <u>quickly</u> will find out.

15)*The doctor <u>thoroughly</u> may examine the patient.

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Both (14) and (15) contain two adverbs: *quickly* and *thoroughly*. In both sentences, the adverb modifies the verb. It shows that the action indicated by the verb will be done in a certain manner (quickly, thoroughly). Hence, *quickly* and *thoroughly* are VP adverbs (as opposed to sentence adverbs). They modifying the VP rather than the whole proposition. The following example with a sentence adverb will illustrate this point.

16) My brother <u>certainly</u> will find out

The adverb *certainly* modifies the meaning of the whole clause (whole proposition), and therefore, it is a sentence adverb. What is *certain is that my brother will find out*. These two types of adverbs (VP and sentence adverbs) occupy two different positions. The sentence adverb precedes the modal auxiliary while the VP adverb follows it, and is therefore, closer to the VP. Thus, when the VP adverb is used away from the VP, the sentence becomes erroneous.

b) Predicates and argument structure related errors

17) *The teacher gave a present.

At a glance, this sentence seems correct. Indeed, within a proper context, if there is preceding discourse about it, or as an answer to a Wh question (what did the teacher give?), the sentence in (17) is correct. Yet, when the L2 learner writes it independent of these conditions, the sentence is ungrammatical. 'Give' is a three-place predicate (a ditransitive verb) which requires 03 arguments to complete its meaning: An Agent (giver), a Theme (something given), and a Goal (recipient). Thus, in the above sentence, the Goal argument is missing, and thus the sentence is ungrammatical.

18) *The robber waited his trial.

A convenient explanation for the above is that the preposition (for) is missing, and therefore, an error of omission. Syntactically, this can be explained in relation to the Argument structure of the predicates. In particular, their subcategorization. Verbs have different properties and hence require certain type of complements. Thus in the above example, the predicate *wait* subcategorizes for a prepositional (PP) complement (for his trial). But the learner has used a nominal complement, and therefore the sentence is wrong. This nominal complement would be subcategorized by the predicate *await*.

c) Movement in embedded "Wh" questions

19) *My friend asked what is the time?

In the above sentence, the predicate *ask* takes a "Wh" complement (a complement with [+ "Wh"] feature) and it is an embedded clause. Auxiliary movement does not take place in an embedded clause. The learner has treated it as a main clause and thus has moved the auxiliary (with the "Wh"). Therefore, the sentence is erroneous.

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d) person-number agreement (phi-feature agreement)

20) *Ravi play cricket every evening.

The prevalence of this kind of sentences in the corpus show that this is an error rather than a mistake. The verb agrees with the subject in Person and Number features in English when the value for Person is 3rd and Number is Singular. This person and number agreement is indicated by the inflectional suffix 's' in the verb and hence is a morpho-syntactic feature. The sentence has violated this agreement rule when the inflectional suffix is missing and therefore, the sentence is ungrammatical.

e) Coordination

21) *The house was [very large] and [in the city].

The learner has combined two phrases by using the coordinating conjunction 'and'. Coordination is possible if the two coordinated constituents belong to the same type. In the above example, the two coordinated phrases are an adjective phrase (AdjP) and a prepositional phrase (PP), thus making the sentence erroneous. Another adjective phrase (such as 'very beautiful') would be a proper coordination with adjective phrase 1.

f) pronoun reference

22) In that village people had many cultural items. My friend Ravi also lives there. He is a dancer. Ravi thinks that [those people like himself very much].

The learner has used the anaphor 'himself 'which refers to Ravi. Though 'himself' and 'Ravi' agree in person, number, and gender, still this sentence is ungrammatical. Syntactically, this error can be explained in terms of the principle A of the Binding theory which says that an anaphor must be bound in its governing category, where; the governing category for an element is the minimal Inflectional Phrase (IP) containing the anaphor and the governor. In the sentence, the anaphor occurs in the embedded clause, but the antecedent (Ravi) is outside of this clause. Hence, Ravi cannot bind the anaphor and the sentence is ungrammatical.

g) Use of 'that' complementizer

23) *I know that what he wanted to buy.

The error is due to both the 'that' complementizer and the Wh word occurring together. This error can be explained in terms of a 'filter' called 'Doubly Filled Comp Filter'. This is a restriction barring the occurrence of a "Wh" phrase in [Spec, CP] when the head of this CP is filled by an overt complementizer. (Haegeman, 1994, 383). In the above sentence, the complementizer 'that' occupies the Head C(omplementizer) position and the "Wh" occupies the Spec C(omplementizer) position, hence, 'doubly filled', and therefore is incorrect.

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h) Verbs with clausal complements

24) My friend thinks [to improve his English knowledge].

The error in the sentence is due to the use of a finite complement with the predicate 'think'. The type of complement a verb takes (subcategorizes) is largely determined by the properties of that verb. 'Think' is a verb that takes a finite complement. (if it is a clausal complement. In addition, it can take other phrasal complements too)

25) They tried [that they can do it].

What we notice here is the opposite of the above. Here the learner has used a finite complement with a verb that does not subcategorize for a finite complement. The verb 'try' subcategorizes only for a non-finite complement. (if it is a clausal complement. In addition, it can take other phrasal complements too)

i) clausal complementation

26) The teacher talked <u>about</u> [that English is very important].

Generative Syntax explains above kind of errors in terms of the Case Theory. 'That English is very important' is a clause which functions as the complement of the preposition 'about'. In syntax, this position is considered as a case position (where case is assigned by the preposition). According to Stowell (1981), clauses avoid case positions. Hence, the clausal complement cannot serve as a proper complement here.

j) Adjacency violations

27)*We finished <u>quickly</u> our work

The sentence shows an Adjacency violation. According to X-bar theory of syntax, the Head and its complement should be in direct sisterhood, and no material should come between the two. The object in the above is in the complement position of the verb, and therefore, the adverb violates this relationship. Structurally, the branches of the VP structure cross, violating X-bar. According to Stowell (1981), the verb assigns Accusative Case to its direct object (NP, our work, in the example). Hence, the adverb violates Adjacency between the Case assigner and the Case assignee.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed some errors made by the Humanities & Social Sciences undergraduates of the university of Ruhuna in their ESL classroom. The theoretical tool adopted for analysis was the rules of Generative Syntax as expounded in the Government and Binding Theory introduced by Chomsky (1981-83). Thus, the paper attempted to go beyond the traditional taxonomies of error analysis commonly found in literature. It was revealed that most of the errors were related to the predicates and argument structure relations, movement in embedded "Wh" questions, pronoun reference,

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clausal complementation, and adjacency violations. The least number of errors were related to adverb use, person-number agreement (phi-feature agreement), coordination, verbs with clausal complements, and in the use of 'that' complementizer.

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