EXAMINING L2 WRITTEN OUTPUT: A CASE STUDY MA; EFL STUDENTS IN A SAUDI NOVICE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT: *This article is based on a qualitative oriented methodology to examine the written performance of six MA students majoring in English as Foreign Language (EFL) in the MA Program at one of the recently established universities in Saudi Arabia. Students' final exam sheets were thoroughly looked at for the description of the syntactic structures in the students' writing performance. The sampling process was selective and purposeful in the sense that it comprises three outstanding and the three poor performances out of a total of fourteen students' exam sheets. Deviated structures together with the correct ones were analyzed and described with the aim of mapping common issues in writing performance in targeted university and assumingly which might help the targeted university and other similar contexts inside Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries, two major sources of the unacceptable performance is lack of knowledge of the target language together with mother tongue influence. Additionally; diagnosing a remedy for the deviated forms was proposed. More reinforcement and support for those who were successful were too recommended.*

KEYWORDS: writing, performance, higher education, EFL

INTRODUCTION

L2-second language is often defined as "the systematic study of how people acquire a second language". The word "second" can refer to any language that is learned after the mother tongue. Thus, it can refer to the learning of any new language even a fourth one (Ellis, 2003:3). The field of second language acquisition (SLA) is a rich one, in the sense that much can be seen, described, analyzed, examined and investigated in it. Observation, as the first step in any scientific experiment, can be functioned to observe endless numbers of cases of second language learners (SLLs) each with a diagnosis of his/her own. And with a large number of exploratory studies in the literature, much can be done to help SLLs to develop and improve their L2.

In Saudi Arabia (KSA), English is valued whether as a second language (spoken and written in various government and private institutions and companies throughout the Kingdom) or as a foreign language (taught in both public and private schools and universities). The L2 is a preferred term in the context of this study because English is used both inside and outside classes. For social purposes, L2 is – in Saudi context

English mainly much welcomed by individuals regardless of their age, social status, or gender. It has recently got a positive attitude from almost all members of the society, from an ambassador to a perfume vendor. Because almost everybody needs it, therefore most people are strongly motivated to learn it.

Because the Saudi society is rich in many ethnic groups, English, together with some other mixed codes, is used and preferred. In this rich area of communication, second or foreign English language learners face lots of problems in their learning process.

From this vantage point, there is a need to observe the process of second language learning in such context. This study aims to investigate the written output of a slice of L2 learners in a Saudi context. The purpose is to raise awareness by diagnosing the problems in lexemes, grammar, morphology, and syntax. Such analysis will uncover common difficulties to be addressed easily to aid faster and more effective L2 acquisition.

Problem of the study

It has been found out by the evidence of the written performance of MA students in the targeted university's Master of Arts degree in Applied Linguistics that there are gross failures with some students as there is an outstanding success with others. Those failures represent extreme distortion to the correct use and usage of L2. The syntactic structures in some students' writings are deviated, distorted, and unacceptable. Some students do not fit into the program and some need special help. The problem, then, touches those students who are deteriorating within the program while their classmates are improving.

Aim of the study

This study aims to map common issues in writing performance in MA; EFL students targeted university and assumingly which might help the targeted university and other similar contexts inside Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries. The study will focus on analyzing of the written performance of six MA students majoring in English as Foreign Language (EFL) in the MA Program at one of the recently established universities in Saudi Arabia.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited to the description of the written performance of one of the MA courses' final exam essay question. This study is confined to a description of the syntactic structures in the written performance of the six students selected in this research.

Procedures

An objective approach has been followed in this description of the subjects' written performance. Following Ellis (2003), the researcher attempted "to find out what learners actually did" (p.4) when they wrote answers to the essay question. The following question was asked:

"Write short notes on how to avoid plagiarism in doing any of the following academic writings;

a) *Taking notes*
b) *Summarizing*
c) *Paraphrasing*
d) *Choosing a style of writing*
e) *Using the internet".*

So, the question is, as shown from its wording, it is classified as academic writing for the MA degree in English. The major step in this approach was to collect "samples of learner language-the language that learners produce when they are called on to use an L2 in speech or writing-and analyze them carefully" (Ellis, 2003:4).

The samples that were collected in this study were then synchronically analyzed with the aim of description. Most important here is that the focus has been on the syntactic structures used by the subjects mentioned in this study.

Research questions

This research attempted to find an answer to the following question:

- What are the most common errors in writing performance for MA; EFL students at the targeted university?
- What might be the reason behind these errors?
- What recommendations can be proposed to help addressing these errors easily to aid faster and more effective L2 acquisition?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is investigating description, analysis, and explanation of L2. The term 'L2' has been always attached to its sister term 'interlanguage', a term coined and introduced by the American linguist Selinker in 1972. It refers to "the systematic knowledge of an L2 that is independent of both the target language and the learners L1" (Ellis, 2003: 140). In this study, this definition is controversial in the sense that although the term refers to "the systematic knowledge", which is the approach followed up here, it is not completely independent of both the target language and the first language "mother

tongue". It is a mixture of both. When it is described, it calls on knowledge from L1 and knowledge from L2.

Willkins (1982) states that in this respect "a learner uses features of his native language in his /her attempts to speak and write in the foreign language" (p.190). That is why "contrastive analysis" was initiated by Robert Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures in 1957. Brown (1982) too believes that the L1 system represents a "barrier" to L2 acquisition and "a taxonomy of linguistic contrasts" (p. 148), is required. Van Els (1982) called for an analysis of similarities and differences between the two languages in question be provided in addition to the description and explanation of L2 problems (p. 40).

Willkins (1982) believes that errors (as he called them) "are all cases of transfer (p.202). Brown (1982) tried to soften the issue by suggesting a prediction to the difficulties faced by the L2 learners "a priori", or showing "observed difficulties in L2 language learning", "a posteriori" (p. 157). Vivian Cook (1993) discussed the analogy in some more details where she clarified that both learners' knowledge of the second language" and the "actual speech of L2 learners" are contained in the term 'interlanguage' (p. 19). Van Els (1982) states that "hypotheses about the learning process are therefore usually inferred from the learners' language product" (p. 48). He called them "creative errors" or deviations from the L2 norms. Van Els et al. (1982) expressed that the changes in CA, EA, PA (performance analysis), DA, and deviations from the L2 norms as reflecting the changes in perspectives on the L2 learners over time (p. 37). Van Els concluded that the learners' speed or success in L2 varies from learner to learner and there are lots of factors that determine that success in L2 (p. 101). Brown gathered all these factors together to represent a comprehensive or gestalt view of the description of L2. He emphasized three angles; Selinker's (1972) interlanguage, Nemser's (1971) approximative system of L2 learner, and Corder's (1971) idiosyncratic dialect.

The first approach is important in that it includes the L2 learners' hypotheses and the testing of the hypotheses in the actual language performance. If his/her hypotheses about L2 is deviated, s/he tries other ones. The other two approaches work as monitors, terms coined later by Krashen (1982). That is what Willkins (1972-1983) called successive hypotheses and testing them in actual performance. Keith Johnson (1996/1997) called them 'processing dimensions. Lightbown & Spada (1993) expressed this notion by calling it "learners process the second language data" … "rule-governed and predictable", and "very much like the system of young first language learners" (p.55).

Johnson (1996) asked the question "why [is it] that students get things wrong" (p.121). She offered two reasons; the first is that students do not have "the appropriate declarative knowledge", or have some false knowledge, and the second is a lack of

"procedural knowledge" of processing ability (p.122). This is the diagnosis of our case study here in this paper.

As has been mentioned earlier in this research, the field of SLA and the description of SLLs' language are too much to account for in this case study. So, this research focused on the most related studies that might be of closer help here. Foremost among the earlier studies is the case study by Schmidt (1983), in his study, Schmidt described his subject (Wes), an adult SLL, once as a "very poor learner" (Ellis, 203;91) and once as a good language learner. And depending on how we look at the term language, we, as language analysts, can judge whether some SLLs are good or bad. Schmidt's subject needed the type of language that he is in real need of; i.e. to use language for communication, to understand and be understood by people whom he works with, to accomplish things with language, and to participate in meaningful communication and social interaction. Schmidt's subject succeeded in that task and he proved to be a good SLL. The study was conducted within a naturalistic context.

Another study was carried out in a classroom context by Ellis (1992). He investigated the language of two young SLLs. The view of the term language here is not used for naturalistic purposes but oriented more on academic writing and more specifically on the syntactic aspect of English. The two language learners in Ellis' study developed the use and usage of the L2 requests successfully. The atmosphere in which they were put in, i. e. the classroom, helped them and provided some freedom of choice and gave them a variety of forms of constructing requests in English.

Earlier in 1981, Corder argued that errors or deviations that native speakers make are actually "adventitious artifacts of linguistic performance and do not reflect a defect". Put in similar everyday life situations like the native speaker, the L2 learner is expected to comment errors too. Researchers are asked by Corder to differentiate between the two types of error for the benefit of the L2 learner. Corder (1981) recommends that deviations of performance be termed mistakes and those of competence are termed errors. He said that the first is nonsystematic while the second is systematic. Data from L2 performance can clearly show this distinction.

The L2 learners are privileged by the fact that they possess prior knowledge of how language works since they speak and know their mother tongue. Deviations from the norm may arise from the incorrect guesses of how the L2 works and this may lead them to make errors. Most of them also may not function the cognitive ability or the metalinguistic awareness they have (Lightbown & Spada, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1993; Brown, 1980).

Studies on modified language input and comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) have stressed the fact that this receptive factor is crucial in the acquisition of L2. L2 acquisition will occur if the challenge between the new input and the L2 learners' level

of competence in language are met. Krashen's input hypothesis occurs among other hypotheses which are altogether necessary conditions for the optimal achievement of L2 acquisition (Dulay, Burt, &Krashen, 1982; Lightbown, 1987; Long 1985; Sachs, Bard, & Johnson, 1981; White, 1987; White, Spada, Lightbown, &Ranta, 1991).

Relevant research on writing performance output in the Saudi context

Among the performance studies that have been conducted to describe the written output of Saudi learners is the study carried out by Alsulmi (2010). It was about the interference of Arabic and English articles among other sources. It was a multiple-choice study in Qassim University, which is also one of the recently established universities in Saudi Arabia; just the targeted university of this research, the study focuses more on the errors attributed to the use of learning strategies rather than the L1; Arabic interference.

Alamin & Sawsan's (2012) study investigated some basic English grammatical problems with Taif University freshmen. The study concluded that errors were attributed to intralinguistc interference and the developmental sequence of the learning of the English language.

Zughoul & Husain (1985) found three problems in their students' writing, namely; lack of lexical variety, subordination difficulties, and heavy reliance on redundancy. Scott & Tucker (1974) classified Arabic-speaking students written product into verbs, prepositions, articles, relative clauses, sentential complements, repetition of subjects or objects, word order, adjectives, adverbs, and genitive constructions.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects of this study are six participants "MA EFL students" enrolled in the *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. They were deliberately chosen as cases in this research. Three of them represent the optimal or highest scores achieved in the course and the other three the lowest scores achieved by the total number of students in the group which consisted of fourteen students. The reason for the choice of the highest and lowest scores is to match the output of the comprehensive test with the input the students received during the course.

 The subjects of this study attended the course together. They were exposed to the same procedures of instruction. All the students shared the same content of the course and made presentations in class and submitted classroom assignments and had the very same final exam.

Data collection

This case study was conducted using date from six written comprehensive test outputs done by six MA students enrolled in level one of the MA program. The collection of the written outputs was done in an intentional way out of a total of fourteen students.

Data analysis and findings

The following anomalous structures were identified out of the subjects' written outputs which represented the corpus of this study. These anomalous structures were checked by the researcher. Several cooperating staff members at the Department of Foreign Languages were also involved in the consultation, identification, and classification of the deviated structures in the subjects' outputs. Bilingual staff members at the department participated in the judgment of whether the cause of deviation was attributed to mother tongue interference or lack of knowledge of the syntactic structures on the part of the subjects.

Errors attributed to lack of knowledge of the syntactic structures of the target language and the rules of the application of that knowledge

a) *Compound Prepositions:*

"According to"; examples include:

* *According to Hacker (2010) to prevent unintenation plagiarism…*

It is noticed that the deletion of "to" from the compound preposition "according to (Stageberg& Oaks, 2000: 148), is not due neither to the mother tongue influence (interlanguage error) or to the target language deficit (intralinguistic error).

It is most likely due to the lack of the minimum level of proficiency in English. It could have had a positive transfer. The student might have had a lack of knowledge of the mother tongue as well. There is an equivalent compound preposition similar to the English one in Arabic but the student does not know it. So, there is also a lack of knowledge of some syntactic structures in the students' mother tongue.

b) *Misuse of gerund:*

Items of gerund were found incorrect; examples include:

* *For take not, unless you identify borrowed.*

* *and for avoid plagiarism…*

* *try use exact word when you quote it.*

c) *Incorrect spelling:*

Lots of misspelt words were found in the students' written outputs; examples include:

* *" not"* for *"note"*

* *"unintenation"* for *"unintentional"*

* *"significted"* for *"signified"*

* *"summerising"* for *"summarizing"*

* *"munshen"* for *"mention"*

* *"sourses"* for *"sources"*

* *"commin"* for *"common"*

* *"wabsit"* for *"website"*

* *"acadimec"* for *"academic"*

* *"quation"* for *"quotation"*

It was clear for the reviewers that this type of deviations is more likely due to the mother tongue interference. As native speakers of Arabic, reviewers know that in Arabic every single letter is pronounced. The students transferred the spelling habits of Arabic to English; which means that they did not know the inconsistencies between orthography and pronunciation in English.

f) *Morphological deviations with incorrect spelling:*

It was noticed that the students showed several morphological deviations which were closely connected with incorrect spelling; examples include:

* *"unintenation"* for *"unintentional"*

g) *Subject-verb agreement:*

Examples include:

* *"There **are** different **style** of documentation."*

* *"There **is** a short **notes**……"*

* *"…**the part** of the subject **show**…"*

* *"**The student choose** a phrases new from the original topic."*

There is no influence of the mother tongue here. In Arabic, there is always the accord between the subject and the verb, and between nouns and complements in singularity, duality, plurality, femininity, and masculinity. But, despite these facts about Arabic concord, the lack of knowledge on the part of the students was inevitably the major cause of deviation. The students failed to make their hypotheses and to test these hypotheses.

h) Incorrect use of prepositions:

Examples include:

* *"We have to write with our word… "*

"Researcher should emphasize on the key-words."

Here, the mother tongue influence was the most important factor. In Arabic, the verb "write" is mostly used with the preposition "with", and accordingly, it was negatively transferred to English.

i) Misuse of Capitalization:

Examples include:

"...the most imPortant Point…"

"...the imPortantinFormation…"

"avoid Plagiarism must Put the..."

It can be noticed that the deviation from the norm of writing English letters whether capital or small is very systematic. The student used the letter "p" in its capital form in five environments. The phenomenon of fossilization can be best studied here. The student did not even make any improvements throughout her years of study. The deviation has become an inevitable habit.

j) Incorrect use of relative clause:

Examples include:

"All the sources that we take the information from it."

* *"The information which we need it in our writing…"*

Here, the cause of deviation is most likely the mother tongue influence. In Arabic, the object-forming suffix is attached to the verb of the relative clause. As a synthetic language, this is a rule. The influence of Arabic probably represents the cause of incorrect output.

k) Use of fragments:

Examples include:

"…and use the not right the imPortant…"*

This is another cause of mother tongue influence. In Arabic, a sentence could be as long as one can extend. Commas can be used to separate ideas only. The students in this case study probably mad incorrect hypotheses when they wrote in English. They still deviate from the English norms in writing English sentences.

l) Deletion of head nouns:

 Examples include:

*"*Unless you identify borrowed. "*

In Arabic, the head nouns could be deleted if the verb is in the passive form. A negative transfer undoubtedly took place here.

m) Unacceptable word order:

Examples include:

*"*Summary report signficted fewer formation by own word than the text source."*

Here, students probably negatively transferred this structure from Arabic because it is a free word order language.

n) Incorrect use of infinitive:

Examples include:

"…try use exact word…"*

Probably, this is a dialectal transfer because Standard Arabic has a similar structure. however, it likely that students did not even have mastery of that structure in their native tongue.

o) Insufficient amount of answer:

Compared to the top three answers of the best subjects, the three poor answers contained deviations that characterize the subjects as 'poor language learner.' The performance of 'good language learners' shows that these learners knew the structures of the target language, and they also knew the rules of using that knowledge.

A look at the deviated structures done by the poor learners shows that the two major sources of the unacceptable performance is a lack of knowledge of the target language

together with mother tongue influence. The good learners possibly thought in the native language and performed in the target language. It is likely that the poor learners thought in the native language and performed in the native language as well. This performance was due to a lack of awareness of the forms and structures of the target language and the insufficient use of the rules of that language. Poor learners deviated from the target language norms. Good learners did not. Poor learners misused the structures which have been mentioned above.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to describe and analyze adult students' written performance in an advanced academic English program (M A in Applied Linguistics). From the results of this study, it has been found that the major cause of the deviated written outputs is most likely to be lack of knowledge of the target language system and also lack of the application of the rules of writing academic English. If the students have this appropriate knowledge, they would have shown that knowledge in their comprehensive exams. The good language learners in this study have shown thus appropriate knowledge. A comparison between good language learners and bad language learners has shown that the first type knew the language system but the second type did not. A second-in- order cause for deviation is the mother tongue interference together with other cultural factors attached to it. The method of analysis followed here could be utilized to describe other forms of ESL or EFL outputs such as other written non-comprehensive and spoken outputs. A final concluding remark on description and analysis of ESL/EFL output that is has provided the field with too much data that need to be dealt with in an explanatory way to make the theory of SLA more practical, the explanation of causes of deviated output should be emphasized. In other words, more work needs to be done on the explanation of the causes of deviated outputs. This might have more pedagogical implications for the development of L2 learners in both spoken and written performance.

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