
Investigating Errors Committed by University Students in English Sentence Structure

WIJDAN ABDELGADIR ABDELWAHAB ABDALLA

Sudan University for Science and Technology

Faculty of Education

Department of English Language

Dr. ABDULGADIR MOHAMMED ALI ADAM

Supervisor

Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate Errors made by University Students in English Sentence Structure. The participants of the study are (50) males and females students from Sudan University of Science and Technology, third-year students (faculty of education). The instrument used for this study was a test. The results showed that university students made errors in word-order (in statements, interrogative sentences), Subject-verb agreement, Passive construction, and relative clauses (defining and non-defining clauses). These errors are due to Intralingual errors (overgeneralization of the rules) and interlanguage errors (the effect of mother tongue). On the basis of these results, a set recommendations for further studies were suggested.

Key words: language errors, English Sentence Structure, Sudan University of Science and Technology

INTRODUCTION:

In spite of their studying English for many years, Sudanese university students encounter many problems in writing

English sentences. The researcher mainly focuses on sentence construction, because it represents the core of writing. In this study, the researcher will shed light on the errors which are made by Sudanese university students in sentence construction and try to find out why learners misuse or get confused when they write sentences, is it due to the interference of the mother tongue (interlanguage errors) or to intralingual errors or the techniques which are used by the teachers in initial teaching of new structures and patterns of English language are not effective.

Corder (1981) argues that "... if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method, the errors will never be committed in the first place and, therefore, the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of their teaching techniques".

The differences between one's native language and the foreign language of study can pose problems for students with language difficulties. Languages differ in grammatical rules. The arrangement of word order in sentences, agreement between subject and verb, and how clauses are linked, are examples of grammatical rules. (Ganschow and Schneider 2006).

Learning a foreign language is not easy, because the target language has different elements compared to the native language. These differences lead students to make errors in writing and speaking, but writing is the most important skill for students to learn.

According to Geoffrey (1980) making errors in writing is not a bad thing, but a good proof that learning is taking place. making errors in a way or another is unavoidable and is a necessary part for the learning process. It is very crucial for the teachers to have full knowledge of the causes of errors in order to adopt a more effective teaching strategy.

It is very important to arrange words and phrases to create well- formed sentences. Students should follow the rules and principles that govern sentence structure. One way to begin

studying the basic sentence structure is to consider the traditional parts of speech (also called word-classes); (nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, article, and interjections ...etc).

AIMS OF THE STUDY:

This study aims to investigate the types of errors that are made by Sudanese university students in sentence construction.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The main concern of this study will focus on syntax which covers a variety of linguistic aspects for example; Grammar and error analysis. The selection of this topic is due to two main reasons: First, syntax is a very crucial branch of linguistics, it touches the area of the writing system. Second, most of the Sudanese university students lack the ability to produce well-formed sentence and hence fail to express themselves in a good design- work. There are many problems which encounter learners in sentence structure.

Richards and Schmidt (2002: 184-185), mention that Error analysis developed as a branch of Applied Linguistics in the 1960s, and set out to demonstrate that many learners' errors were not due to the learners' mother tongue but reflected universal learning strategies. Errors analysis was therefore offered as an alternative to Contrastive Analysis.

Error analysis may be carried out in order to:

- a. Identify strategies which learners use in language learning.
- b. Try to identify the causes of learners' errors.
- c. Obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of Teaching materials.

James (1998:5) says that, error analysis accounts for the learners' interlanguage and the target language itself followed

by a comparison of the two, so as to locate the mismatches. Errors could be described in terms of the target language without return to the mother tongue of the learners.

Larsen (1992:59) states that "An error is a noticeable deviation, reflecting the competence of the learner. It is a systematic deviation made by the learner who had not yet mastered the rule of the target language".

Corder (1967) mentions that, Error Analysis is a method used by teachers and researchers to collect samples of the learner's language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness.

Sources of errors:

Richards (1971) distinguished three sources of errors;

- a. Interference errors: These kind of errors occur when L1 learner uses elements from his/her mother tongue while speaking/writing the target language,
- b. Intralingual errors: These types of errors reflect on the general features of the rules learning. For example, faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply,
- c. Developmental errors: errors occur by learner who tries to build up a hypothesis on the second language on the basis of limited experience.

Richards (1971) says that, intralingual errors can be divided into the following categories:

- a. Overgeneralization errors: the learner creates a wrong structure on the basis of the other structure in the second language, for example; "He can sings" where English permits "He can sing".
- b. Ignorance of rule restrictions: the learner uses rules in the context where they are not used. for example; " He made me to go rest" instead of "He asked or wanted me to go rest".

c. Incomplete application of rules: he learner fails to use a fully developed structure for example; " You like to read" in the place of "Do you like to read?"

d. False hypothesis: the learner does not perceive or understand a distinction in the target language for example; the use of "was" as a marker of past tense in "one day it was happened English Language Teaching Journal, 25,204-219.

Dulay and Burt (1974), divided learners' errors into three categories:

a. Developmental errors: errors that are the same as the mother tongue acquisition.

b. Interference errors: errors that reflect on the structure of the mother tongue.

c. Unique errors: these kind of errors are not due to developmental and interference errors.

Selinker (1972) says that, there are five different factors responsible for the learner's errors. First, transfer of structure or rules from the mother tongue to the target language. Second, transfer of training, this includes fossilized items, rules and subsystems. Third, the strategies that learners use when learning the target language. Fourth, the strategies of target communication referring to the methods and strategies utilized by learners to communicate with native speakers of the second language. Fifth, overgeneralization of the rules.

The nature of the learner's language:

Identifying Errors

Ellis (1997: 15-16) states that the first step in analyzing the learner's errors is to identify them. To identify errors we have to compare the sentences that learners produce with what seems to be the normal or correct sentences in the target language which correspond with them. Allen and Corder (1974: 128) mention that, "the process of recognizing and identifying errors is one of comparing original utterances with their

plausible and authoritative constructions, and identifying the differences" The way to identify errors is to compare between the original language and the language that is written or spoken by learners.

Describing Errors:

Corder (1973: 277) states that, errors can be divided into four categories: **omission** of some required elements for example;(*Cow is useful animal). (Cow is **a** useful animal). **Addition** of some wrong element for example; (*She came **on** Last Monday). (She came Last Monday). **Selection** of an incorrect element for example (*He was angry on me). (He was angry **at** me). And **disordering** for example (*He asked her what time was it). (He asked her what time **it** was).

Ellis (1997: 18) mentions that, to recognize general approaches in which the learners' utterances differ from the reconstructed target-language utterances. Such ways contain **omission** (i.e leaving out an item that is needed for an utterance to be considered grammatical), **misinformation** (i.e. using one grammatical form in place of another grammatical form), and **misordering** (i.e. putting the words in an utterance in the incorrect order). Dulay et al (1982) says that, **addition errors** due to errors which are characterized by the presence of an item that should not appear in a well-formed utterances. **Misformation** errors happen when the learners utilize a morpheme or a structure inappropriately. **Misordering** errors refer to those errors that are marked by the incorrect placement of one morpheme. For example (*she bad is). (she is bad).

Classification of Errors:

Valdman (1975), divides errors into global and local errors, a global error is a communicative error that causes a proficient speaker of foreign language either to misunderstand the message in the utterance of the speaker, or to regard that message incomprehensible within the textual context, while a

local error is an error that relates to linguistic. It occurs when the structure or form is badly designed. Hammerley (1991), divided errors into surface errors and deep errors. First, surface errors, these kind of errors need minor corrections. He says that, these errors do not need corrections with explanation. They need to put them correctly without explanation. While deep errors require explanation of why the error was made and what the right form is. Prabhu (1987), divided errors into systematic errors and incidental errors. He states that, systematic errors are the type of errors that deviate from the form of the native speaker, but incidental errors are the kind of errors that do not need linguistic explanations or exemplifications from the teacher for example; the teacher corrects the errors of pronunciation when he raises his eyebrows to draw the attention of the student .

Significance of learners' Errors

James (1998: 12) gives Corders' five important points, published in Corder's Seminar 1967 paper titled "The significance of learners' errors"

- 1- (L1) and (L2) are parallel processes; they are ruled by the same mechanisms, procedures and strategies. Learning Second Language is facilitated by the knowledge of the First Language.
- 2- Errors reflect the learners' inbuilt syllabus or what they have taken in, but not what the teachers think they have put in. So there is a difference between input and intake.
- 3- Errors show that (L1) and (L2) learners develop an independent language system.
- 4- Errors must be distinguished from mistakes.
- 5- Errors are crucial, because they tell the teacher what he should teach, they tell the researcher how learning proceeds and allow the learners to test their (L2) hypothesis.

Ellis (1985:258-260) explains that, the important contribution of linguistics to the process of language teaching was seen as direct study of the systems of mother tongue and target language. As a result of this came the inventory and exploration of the area of difficulty which learners might face and the value of directing this inventory to the attention of teachers to exert more efforts to overcome or even avoid such difficulties. Learners' errors provide evidence about the systems of the language students learn in four ways:

- 1- Through learners' errors the teachers will undertake a systematic analysis the last or final progression.
- 2- They give evidence to the researcher about the approach or procedures learners should employ in the discovery of language errors.
- 3- The crucial aspect of learners' errors are essential, because they can be considered as a device which learners use for learning. Thus the making of errors is a way employed by both children acquiring their first language and those learning a target language.
- 4- The investigation of errors has two reasons. First, diagnostic, because it gives information to the learners, stage and their level at a given point during learning process. Second, prognostic because, it is able to supply or provide the course designers with the necessary language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems.

Johnson and Johnson (1998: 112), criticized Error Analyses. They say that, it tries to collect knowledge of the language learning processes by examining the output of the learner. Error analysis has proved that the area of difficulty is to determine whether there is an error at all, and if so, what it exactly constitutes of. It is not easy to differentiate between error and mistake. Error can be classified by more than just one way. It is difficult to know the causes of errors, because there

are many causes (for example; Communication strategies, personal factors, external factors). In addition of error taxonomies often confuse description with explanation. Ellis (2008) explains, that "weakness in methodological procedures theoretical problems and limitation in scope". Alexander (1979...etal) mentions that, some of the second language constructions may be avoided by learners, because they do no know how to produce them or, because certain structures are interpreted as difficulty and more likely to induce errors.

Population of the Study:

The population of the study are Sudanese Universities Students who study English Language as a foreign language.

Sample of the Study:

The sample includes (50) participants whom were chosen randomly from Sudan University for Science and Technology (Third-year students in faculty of education, English Language Department).

Instrument of the study:

The researcher has used the descriptive analytical approach as well as a test as a tool in the collection of data.

FINDING AND RESULTS:

Word order:

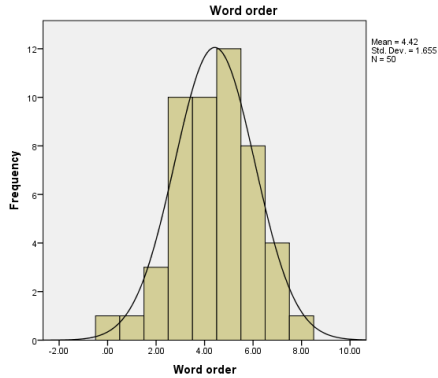
Table (1) below shows the analysis of data related to word order in percentile form.

Table (1) Word order

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	1.00	1	2.0	2.0	4.0
	2.00	3	6.0	6.0	10.0
	3.00	10	20.0	20.0	30.0
	4.00	10	20.0	20.0	50.0
	5.00	12	24.0	24.0	74.0

Wijdan Abdelgadir Abdelwahab Abdalla- **Investigating Errors Committed by University Students in English Sentence Structure**

	6.00	8	16.0	16.0	90.0
	7.00	4	8.0	8.0	98.0
	8.00	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	



Histogram (1): Word order

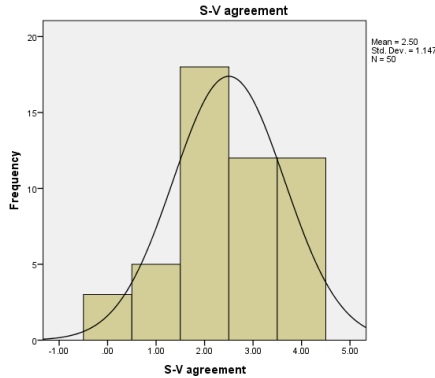
The curve in the histogram (1) shows a normal distribution of data. The table shows that 74% of the students scored (5) out of (8) or less. It shows that 26% scored (6) out of (8) or more.

This means that the performance of the majority of the students in writing well-formed sentence is not up to the required standard.

S-V agreement:

Table (2): S-V agreement

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	3	6.0	6.0	6.0
	1.00	5	10.0	10.0	16.0
	2.00	18	36.0	36.0	52.0
	3.00	12	24.0	24.0	76.0
	4.00	12	24.0	24.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	



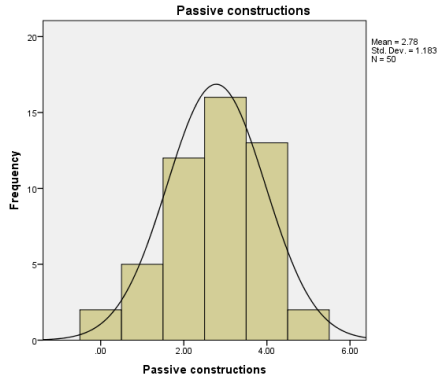
Histogram (2): S-V agreement

The curve in the histogram (2) shows a normal distribution of data. The table shows that 52% of the students scored (2) out of (5) or less. It shows that 48% scored (3) out of (5) or more. This means that the performance of the most of the students in constructing well-formed sentences is not up to the required standard.

Question three: Passive constructions

Table (3): Passive constructions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	2	4.0	4.0	4.0
	1.00	5	10.0	10.0	14.0
	2.00	12	24.0	24.0	38.0
	3.00	16	32.0	32.0	70.0
	4.00	13	26.0	26.0	96.0
	5.00	2	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	



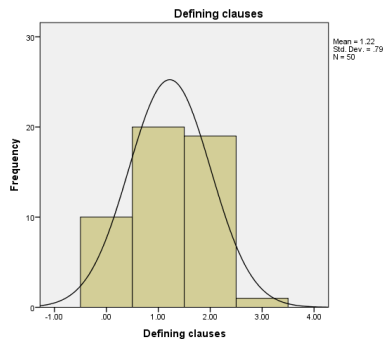
Histogram (3): Passive constructions

The curve in the histogram (3) shows a normal distribution of data. The table shows that 70% of the students scored (3) out of (5) or less. It shows that 30% scored (4) out of (5) or more. This means that the performance of the greater number of the students in passive constructions is poor.

Question four: Defining clauses

Table (4): Defining clauses

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	10	20.0	20.0	20.0
	1.00	20	40.0	40.0	60.0
	2.00	19	38.0	38.0	98.0
	3.00	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	



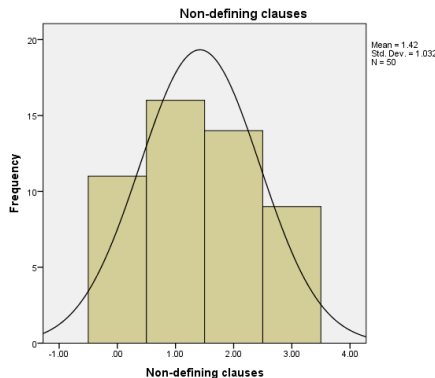
Histogram (4): Defining clauses

The curve in the histogram (4) shows a normal distribution of data. The table shows that 60% of the students scored (1) out of (3) or less. It shows that 40% scored (2) out of (3) or more. This means that the performance of the majority of the students in defining clauses is not bad.

Question five: Non-defining clauses

Table (5): Non-defining clauses

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	11	22.0	22.0	22.0
	1.00	16	32.0	32.0	54.0
	2.00	14	28.0	28.0	82.0
	3.00	9	18.0	18.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	



Histogram (5): Non-defining clauses

The curve in the histogram (5) shows a normal distribution of data. The table shows that 54% of the students scored (1) out of (3) or less. It shows that 46% scored (2) out of 3 or more. This means that the performance of the most number of the students in non- defining clauses is bad.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the light of the results of the study, the researcher mentions some points for recommendations.

1. The techniques which are used by the teachers in initial phase of teaching new structures and patterns in second language should be effective.
2. Students need qualified teachers to teach writing skills.
3. Students should improve their level by reading, listening, and communicating more because what the syllabus teaches in university students is not enough.
4. Teachers should give students more practices.

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