

(3rd person singular , Verb Tenses and Punctuation Marks) At University level

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Introduction

This paper represents an attempt to investigate some errors in writing free composition which are commonly committed by students of first stage Department of English , college of Education , University of Thi-Qar . It is believed that the paper would shed light on the type or the nature of such errors as well as the reasons behind committing them . The paper falls in the domain of error analysis . The area of research is interested in investigation the various types of errors which the language users may commit . According to Crystal (1980 : 38) , in language teaching and learning error analysis is :

“a technique for identifying , classifying , and systematically interpreting the mistakes made by someone learning a foreign language , using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics “ .See also Corder (1973 :115)

It is hoped that the findings of this paper would be of some benefit to the teaching staff at the Departments of English at Iraqi universities , syllabus designers and linguists , especially those who are interested in error analysis and English as a Foreign Language(EFL).

Objectives and Hypothesis

This paper aims at providing an image of the type of the mistakes which are committed by new students who are enrolling in undergraduate courses at the department of English – College of Education University of Thi-Qar. They are students who have just finished studying at secondary schools . Such errors were limited to the written form of language . This could lead us to errors in grammar , spelling and punctuation , see Jamil (1989 :76).

Errors of such a type could not be said to occur on a similar rate between male and female students . As such differences are expected to occur in this respect . Furthermore , as English is a foreign language it is planned to investigate the structural items which represent an area where Arabic and English do not meet , such as the third person singular (s) , the verb tenses and the punctuation technique.

Selection of informants

The informants which have been chosen as a representative sample the study involve (30) students of the first year stage – Department of English – College of Education / University of Thi-Qar . They were divided into two groups ; the first group involves (15) male students while

the second involves (15) female students . All the students were new graduates of the secondary schools . Among the students who are usually accepted in the Department of English are primary school teachers who are granted a study leave so as to pursue their study . those teachers were excluded from the representative sample of the study.

Obtaining Data

This section focuses upon the process or the methodology which is adopted in the data collection. For more information about the various techniques of data collection see Milroy (1978 :211), Simon (2000:35) and Ring (2001:46). As the paper is concerned with showing the errors in the written form of English which is used by students, the data which is obtained has to be free, spontaneous and representative of the sort of English which the students usually use. Therefore, the informants were asked to write a free composition about their first day at the University, i.e, the academic year 2005 – 2006. A period of 45 minutes was given as a time for writing the composition which was found to be quite enough to let all the informants finish the task.

Analysis of Data

The data which has been obtained is in the form of written compositions which were written by first stage students. The analysis of the data involves investigating the items which are at hand, see Milroy (1978), Wilson (1994) and Back (2002). The score percentage of the real tokens was implemented in the calculation of the frequency of occurrence of each item (see Butler 1985) For example, if an item is supposed to occur correctly 10 times and the actual occurrence was 5 token correct and 5 wrong, then the percentage score was 50%.

The analysis of the use of third person singular (s) by the informants showed a low score percentage of use of this item. The score percentage for the male students was (11.572%) while that of the female students was (16.418%). These figures can be interpreted in two lines. The first is that the students were not fully aware of the use of this structure. This could be looked at in terms of the fact that this item is not found in Arabic, which could well represent a difficulty for the EFL learner. Furthermore, it can also be the case that students have not practiced using this item quite sufficiently before. The second is that the female students were slightly better than the male students in this respect. Table (1) below shows the score percentages of the 3rd person singular.

Informants	Score Percentage
Male Students	11.572
Female Students	16.418

(Table 1) : Score Percentages of the 3rd Person Singular

The use of tenses has also investigated. Most of the informants use the simple present tense as the main verb tense throughout the composition. The score percentage for the simple present tense was (71.88%) for the male students and (80.03%) for the female students while the simple past tense score percentage was (48.927%) for the male students and (55.74%) for the female students. The present continuous tense score percentage was (28.15%) for the male students and (33.8%) for the female students. There was only (7.13%) score percentage for the present perfect tense by the male students and (11.39%) for the female students and (6.39%) for the past continuous tense by the male students and (7.17%) by the female students. These figures indicate that our students are not fully aware of how the various tenses are used. The relatively higher score percentages of the simple present and simple past tenses provide us with a view about how the

students use the verbs. The simple and direct use of those two tenses could well provide us with a simple interpretation. This may mean that the students, both male and female, lack the sufficient training/ practice in the use of the other tenses at hand. Such points are of considerable importance especially to the teacher of grammar. Table (2) below shows the differences between the male and the female students' score percentages of the various verb tenses.

Verb Tense	Male Students	<i>Female Students</i>
Simple Present	71.88	80.03
Simple Past	48.927	55.74
Present Continuous	28.15	33.8
Past Continuous	6.39	7.17
Present Perfect	7.13	11.39

(Table 2): Score Percentage of the verb tenses

The analysis of the punctuation in the obtained data showed a high score percentage for the use of the full stop by both groups. The male students score percentage was (79.11%) while that of the female informants was (88.3%). The use of the question mark use was (73.5%) for male students and (76.44%) for the female students. The use of comma has also been investigated. The male students score percentage was (33.91%) while that of the female students was (36.06%). No scores were found for the semi colon and the colon. These results can be interpreted as an indication of the lack of experience and practice in punctuation. This result is of importance to the teacher of composition and essay writing. Figure (3) below shows the score percentages of the punctuation.

Item	Male Students	Female Students
Full stop	79.11	88.3
Question Mark	73.5	76.44
Comma	33.91	36.06
Semi Colon	0	0
Colon	0	0

(Table 3): Score Percentages of the punctuation

Results and Recommendations

This paper aims at supplying the reader with a view of some of the errors which are really committed by first year students of the departments of English / colleges of Education. The findings can be simply summarized as follows:

(1) There is a clear lack/shortage of experience, training and knowledge which the first year students are suffering from. This is true in the case of all the items under investigation. This could lead us to say that more training/practice is on the behalf of the secondary school teachers. This is quite essential if we are to pre-equip the student to successfully enroll in a university advanced courses in English.

(2) This could well lead us to suggest the following:

(A) More training courses are required so as to enhance the level of teaching English as a foreign language in secondary schools. Such teacher training courses could be arranged with the Department of English at the Iraqi universities.

(B) An analysis of the English language syllabus which is taught at the secondary school level is recommended. This could be achieved by the educationalists, syllabus designers, language specialists and university teachers. The syllabus could be enriched with modifications which deal with the items which represent difficulties for the learners, especially those which are related to the differences between English and Arabic.

(3) On the other hand, the findings of this study could be implemented in the design of syllabuses which are taught at the Department of English. Emphasis should be laid upon the items which have been "problematic or difficult" for our new students. The teaching of grammar, composition, essay writing should put so much emphasis upon improving language capabilities as well as mastery of good and correct English, trying to eliminate such mistakes which have been found in this paper.

(4) It is recommended that our students are exposed to native speaker's English. The use of video/audio tapes, CDs and computer programmes should be of invaluable benefit in this respect. This will definitely improve the type and nature of English they use.

(5) The investigation has also shown a difference between male students and female students. The female students' score percentages were higher than those of the male students. Such a result indicates that the male students need more practice and training than the female students. It can also be interpreted in terms of the social network, environments and structure. Male pupils are usually more exposed to social interaction and have less time for studying than the female pupils. The result does not mean by any parameter that the female students are more intelligent than the male students. It could be the case to say that male first stage students should receive more attention from their teachers throughout the process of the academic teaching in the Department of English.

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