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Factors Affecting the Morphological Errors in Young ESL Learners' Writing

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Abstract

Learning grammar has always been a challenging task for individuals especially for ESL learners. Most ESL learners face difficulties in learning the concepts and rules of the second language due to mother tongue intervention, which lead to poor writing that consequently hinders the process of conveying ideas, thoughts and expressions. This paper explores the factors that contribute to morphological errors in ESL learners' writing. A total of 30 essays written by primary students were analysed according to Surface Strategy Taxonomy (1982) classification. The findings show that the main cause of error in the students' writing is intralingual factor or the interference of language within the second language for the students tend to overgeneralize one rule of grammar into another. This paper concludes that teachers need to be more attentive towards students' language proficiency and the area of learning the students lack understanding, in order for them to tackle the errors committed by the students. A thorough description is needed to assist the students in learning second language even with the conviction that complete elimination of error is impossible.

Keywords: Morphological Errors, Factors, Surface Strategy Taxonomy, ESL Learners' Writing

Introduction

In Malaysia, even though the Malay language is the formal language of the country, in many occasions the usage of the English language is far greater than the Malay language. The English language is used in many different sectors such as business, education, employment, mass media etcetera. Acquiring English language in Malaysia has become a necessity for an individual rather than an option for learning (Rashid et al., 2017).

Dulay and Burt (1972) propose that the second language developed during childhood, first involved acquiring a specific innate mental organization which make use of restricted classes of developmental strategies in order to produce an utterances in a language. The second phase is when second language learners practise the processing strategy in a linguistic rule and modify the language as the learners hear more of it. This process is steered in first language acquisition by a particular form and this process is similar when acquiring the second language. The errors children make are generally recognised through the intervention from the mother tongue.

The mother tongue can assist the learning of the second language, but in other cases it interferes with the acquisition of the second language. When the process of acquiring is interrupted, errors and mistakes are bound to happen. Errors and mistakes are inevitable and to be expected especially among ESL learners. Through errors and mistakes learners are able to build their comprehension of the rules and amend the errors or mistakes during this process. Thus, it is vital to identify errors as it aids learners in learning.

Rather apparent in spoken form, errors made by ESL learners are considerably significant and noteworthy in written ones. However L2 writing is always considered as a support skills and is not viewed as a language skill to be taught to ESL learners (Nozen et al., 2017). Second language learners in Malaysia, mostly face difficulties in learning the concepts and rules of the language especially in the aspect of grammar. Learning grammar during childhood is one of the core stages that provide a vast input to the student in order for them to master the grammar as they grow up.
It is a widely held view that learners are taught to write yet the focus is not on teaching grammar. Learners are able to make comprehensible sentences but with grammatical errors, portraying their lack of proficiency especially when dealing with formal circumstances. Being aware of the demands of the English language in Malaysia, especially in written form, this study is conducted to investigate the morphological errors committed by ESL learners in their writing.

Morphological Errors
An error is an opening of the language's code; it is the aftermath by which the utterance or written document is considered as unacceptable. It is possible in second language learners, as the rules and context of the language is not fossilized in the learner themselves (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). On the other hand, mistakes are also known as lapses which are the cause of failure of performance. It happens when a language user makes a slip of the tongue or thought. Nzama (2010) defines mistake as inaccuracy that can be identified by the learners and are corrected by them, but errors on the contrary are 'systematic' and needs to be weeded out. If errors are made continuously, learners would not identify their own errors.
Morphological errors are errors formed or made when the morphological aspect of grammar is being tainted, or misinformed. Morphology is the structure of words; it is the relation on how words are formed and how it fits together. If these rules are wrongly applied by the second language learners this means that they have committed morphological errors, even though they have prior knowledge pertaining the rules.

Types of Error
Richard (1971, cited in Khansir, 2012) categorizes four types of errors which are (a) overgeneralization:learner creates a similar structure on the basis of experience of the other structure, (b) ignorance of the rules restrictions: second language learner applies the rules of context in a situation that they do not compromise, (c) incomplete application of the rules: the correct form of rules learned is not applied in a correct manner, and (d) false concept hypothesis: misassumption of the rules learnt, as second language learners do not fully grasp the comprehension of the target language.

Factors Affecting Morphological Errors

According to Trianingsih (2010), there are three causes of error in second language learning which are transfer, analogical, and teaching induced errors. Transfer errors happen at the very beginning of the process of learning the second language. It is the interference of the first language into the second language as the native language is the only source of background information in relation to language. Thus, learners refer mostly to their native language and apply the rules of the first language into the second language.

The second factor, analogical errors occur when learners have learnt the rules of the targeted language, but they are unable to apply the errors accordingly into the correct formations and categories. Lastly, teaching induced errors are committed when learners make errors due induced teaching process. It may be caused by the strategies and materials used by the teachers that can steer the students in committing errors.

Another school of thought on factors affecting morphological errors is derived from Brown (1998, cited in Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). He categorizes four causes of errors namely interlingual, intralingual, communication based-strategy and induced errors. Interlanguage errors happen when the mother language interfers with the learning of the second language. The mother language acts as a negative interference in learning. Intralingual errors are errors that happen when learning the target language itself. It is the interference within the second language. Examples of intralingual errors are overgeneralization, misconceptions, and incomplete rules applications.

Communication based-strategy errors are when linguistic forms are available for the learners and can lead to errors. Lastly, induced errors happens when the learning and teaching are mislead. For instance, teachers provide wrong definition, wrong example or wrong explanation during the teaching and learning session resulting in misunderstanding among learners.

Method

Research Design

In order to identify and classify the errors committed by the students, a mixed-method approach was implemented in this research. Document analysis, according to Bowen (2014), is the process of evaluating documents which can be done in both printed and electronic data. It requires the researcher to study the interpreted data in order to proceed to the next phrase which is the extraction of information, building comprehension and fostering knowledge.

Participants

Participants of this study were standard six students of Sekolah Kebangsaan Taman Kota Kulai, Johor. 34 students were chosen from the first class; Six Berlian as they were able to complete the written task given and it was suggested by the teacher of the school. The essays were picked based on two criteria; whether participants could answer the task and whether the written essays were written at an appropriate length. As all the participants came from the same class, it could be assured that they were exposed to the same teaching of grammar with similar teaching tools and materials and that the duration of them being exposed to the language was also equal.

Data Collection

In this research, the main instrument used for error analysis was the written English essays produced by standard six students during their monthly test. Only Section A was chosen to be

analysed as the section required students to write a full page essay as compared to the other two sections. The essays were written in the form of past tense. A Malay translated instruction were provided for the bilingual students to ease their understanding pertaining to the directions of the task. The students wrote an essay based on the pictures and vocabularies provided. The vocabularies provided must be visible in the students' essay.

Data Analysis

This research employed document analysis in obtaining the results. The short narrative essays written by the students were analysed using Corder's (1974) Error Analysis Procedure. Corder introduced five steps in analysing errors which are; choosing the language corpus, identifying the errors in the corpus, classifying the errors, explaining the errors and evaluating the errors. These steps were taken into measure in this study. Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy was used to group the errors accordingly. There are four classifications of in the taxonomy which are omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. The data classified was converted into percentages and presented in the form of pie charts to give a clearer overview of the findings of the research.

Results and Discussion

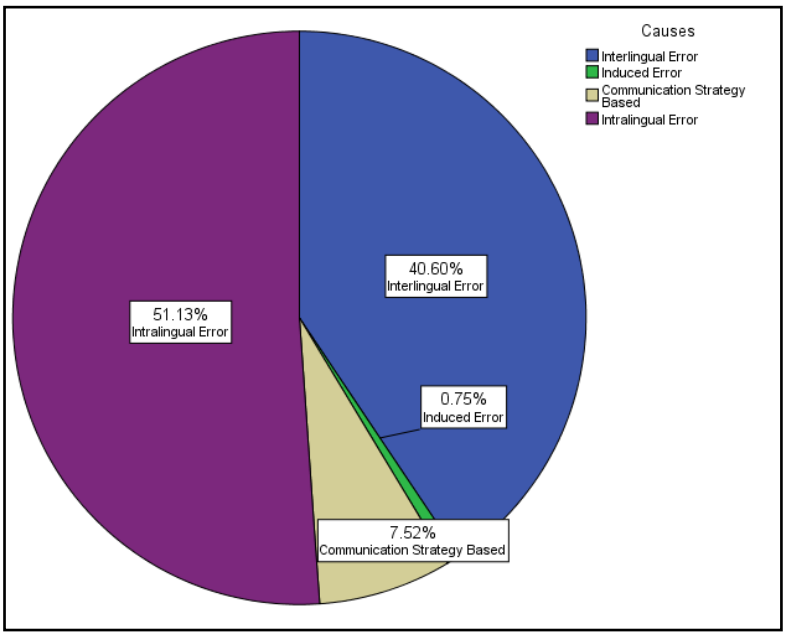

Figure 1: Factors affecting Morphological Errors

Figure 1 shows factors affecting morphological errors. The main causes of error committed in students' writing was intralingual error with a percentage by half of the errors committed, 51.13%. Intralingual is the interference of language within the second language itself. Second language learners cannot make their first language as reference as the grammar of the first language does not correlate with the second language, thus gives an aftermath of students making assumptions of the rules and applied it with other form as well as forming misconception and applying incomplete rules at hand. Students tend to overgeneralize one rule of grammar into another, as students have limited encounter with English language either spoken or written. They are likely to apply any forms known at hand into others structure that might fit in or seemed similar in their own judgment.

Table 1:
Examples of intralingual errors made by ESL learners.

Factor	Error	Correction	Morphological Error	Surface Strategy Taxonomy
Intralingual	The kitten did not walked towards Adam.	The kitten did not **walk** towards Adam.	Inflectional – Past tense (-ed)	Addition – Simple addition
	His father walked hurryiedly.	His father walked **hurriedly**.	Inflectional - Past tense (-ed)	Misinformation – Regularization
	He is ten year-old-boy.	He is (a) ten **years**-old-boy.	Inflectional – Plural (s)	Omission
	It is meowing because neighbour's kitten is scaring.	It is meowing because (the) neighbour's kitten is **scared.**	Inflectional – Past tense (-ed)	Misinformation – Alternating form

The second main factor of errors was interlingual error with a percentage of 40.6%. In describing events happening in the past, students like to use simple present tense, not realizing that the text should be in simple past tense. Tenses was a major problem in students' writing, as the grammar of the Malay language does not provide its users to indicate special events of time. This rule was brought within the second language by the second language learners.

The students do not fully grasp this notion when trying to elaborate events happening in the past. Present tense was being used in replacement of past tense. Students only grasp that when something was happening in the moment of speaking, the text should be presented in forms of (-ing) or present tense. The major transfer of the first language into the second language can be seen by the choices of words the students used. Instead of 'His leg is broken' they would wrote 'His leg is broke' which was a direct translation of 'Kaki dia patah'. From here were can see that the word 'patah' does not have any other morpheme attached to it, thus logically students would only write *broke*, the past tense of *brake* rather than *broken*. Similarly, Aknade (2003) found that the students have a poor mastery of the use of English past participle, possessive, past tense and plural inflectional morphemes.

Table 2:
Examples of interlingual errors made by ESL learners.

Factor	Error	Correction	Morphological Error	Surface Strategy Taxonomy
Interlingual	Every afternoon, he at home and playing with neighbour's kitten.	Every afternoon, he (is) at home and **plays** with (the) neighbour's kitten.	Inflectional – Third Person Singular (s)	Misinformation – Alternating form
	Ahmad has broke his leg.	Ahmad has **broken** his leg.	Inflectional – Past participle (-en)	Omission
	He want to help that kitten.	He **wanted** to help that kitten.	Inflectional – Past tense (-ed)	Misinformation – Archi form
	The neighbour was thankyou because Amir was recuing a kitten.	The neighbour **thanked** Amirbecause he (had) rescued(the) kitten.	Inflectional – Past tense (-ed)	Misinformation – Archi form

The least causes of error were communication based-strategy and induced error which weight 7.52% and 0.75% respectively. Communication based-strategy and induced errors were the least, as it was difficult to be analysed without having interview with the students. Majority of the respondents could not answer the questions well because they stuttered a lot due to nervousness.

From the findings obtained, the main cause of errors was intralingual error followed by interlingual error, communication strategy based, as well as induced error.

Conclusion

The students involved in this study face difficulties and misconceptions about the rules and concepts of morphology in their writing. The main cause of the erroneous writing is due to the intralingual errors by which the students face while learning the second language itself. It is recommended that the teachers provide a clear explanation to the students and assume that the students have no prior knowledge in the lesson. On the other hand, the students need to ask when they are lost in the learning process and to practise writing in English besides reading loads of English reading materials.

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