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An Error Analysis of Iranian EFL Learners' L2 Writing in the Application of Cohesive Devices

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September 2009

IN THE NAME OF GOD

Declaration Form

I, Seyed Amir Heydari, an English language student majored in teaching from the college of Foreign Languages and Linguistics declare that this thesis is the result of my own research and I had written the exact reference and full indication wherever I used others' sources. I also declare that the research and the topic of my thesis are not reduplicative and guarantee that I will not disseminate its accomplishments and not make them accessible to others without the permission of the university. According to the regulations of the mental and spiritual ownership, all rights of this work belong to Shiraz University.

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TO MY PARENTS

WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE

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ABSTRACT

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This study aimed at investigating the most frequent errors committed by Iranian EFL learners in the application of cohesive devices at different levels of proficiency as well as the sources of cohesive errors. This study was conducted with an overall number of 67 undergraduate students at Shiraz Azad University. To have three groups of learners with different proficiency levels, Oxford Placement Test 1B1 (Allan, 1985) was administered. To achieve the objectives of the study, the participants were given a writing task requiring them to write an approximately 250-word narrative composition. Then, the compositions were scored based on the taxonomy developed by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Finally, the data were analyzed through appropriate procedures using quantitative methods and with regard to the frequencies and percentages of errors, it was found that low-level learners' most frequent errors were involved in references (20), followed by errors in lexical (14), and conjunctive cohesion (1). Besides, the findings showed that errors in references were the most common (17), followed by errors in lexical (13), and conjunction cohesion (2) in the mid-level learners' narrative compositions and, finally, the high-level learners' most frequent errors were involved in lexical cohesion (17), references (14), conjunction cohesion (3), and substitution (1).

This study also allowed for an examination of the sources of cohesive errors. It was found that errors in the use of relative pronouns, conjunctions, along with different forms of repetition appeared because of the incomplete knowledge of the learners—intralingual causes. Furthermore, in this study, the errors in the use of personal-, possessive-pronouns, demonstratives and collocations were among the interlingual causes of errors.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.0. Introduction

As the first chapter, the present chapter includes four parts. The first part, generally, deals with the importance of Error Analysis and cohesion analysis along with some definitions of these terms. Second, the significance of the study is stated followed by the objectives. In the last part, the research questions of the study are presented.

1.1. Preliminaries

In recent years, there has been a growing research interest in the analysis of errors adults make while learning a second language. The study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners (i.e. Error Analysis or EA), either in their speech or writing or both has been brought under consideration by many educators, EFL teachers, linguists, and researchers throughout the world. In fact, learners' errors have been the subject of controversy for a long time.

Generally, as Keshavarz (1999, p. 11) stated, "there have been two major approaches to the study of learners' errors, namely Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis." He further discussed that, "Error Analysis emerged on account of the shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis which was the favored way of describing learners' language in the 1950s and 1960s" (p. 42).

The process involved in CA is the comparison of learners' mother tongue and the target language. Based on the similarities or differences between two languages, predictions were made on errors that learners would be likely or disposed to make as a result (Kim, 2001). As Kim (2001) explained, by early 1970s, CA lost its favor because of the inaccurate or uninformative predictions of learner errors; errors did not occur where predicted, but instead errors showed up where CA had not predicted. More serious criticism was raised on account of its adopted views from structuralism in linguistics and behaviorism in psychology. Being questioned about the reliability of the CA research, it yielded to Error Analysis in 1970.

Unlike CA which tries to describe differences and similarities of L1 and L2, James (1998 cited in Kim, 2001) stated that, EA attempts to describe learners' interlanguage (i.e. learners' version of the target language) independently and objectively. He believed that the most distinct feature of EA is that the mother tongue is not supposed to be mentioned for comparison. The studies in EA have for the most part dealt with linguistic aspects of learners' errors; not enough attention has been paid to the errors at discourse level and in particular to cohesive devices that are very important in the organization of the texts. Identifying and describing the origin of the learners' errors is now an activity that has received much attention during the last three decades.

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), cohesive devices are formal elements in the text that function to make links between the components of the text. Two broad categories and some subcategories have been identified for cohesive devices. These are grammatical and lexical cohesive devices. The grammatical one includes reference, conjunction, substitute, and ellipsis while the lexical cohesive devices are reiteration and collocation.

Thus, this study attempts to use Error Analysis to study Iranian EFL learners' L2 errors in their writing mostly in terms of cohesive devices used. Such an analysis may lead one to understand the types of significant cohesive errors associated and the origin of such errors.

1.2. Significance of the Study

Many scholars in the field of EA have stressed the significance of second language learners' errors. Corder (1967), for instance, in his influential article, remarks that "they are significant in three different ways. First, to the teacher, in that they show how far towards the goal the learner has progressed. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how a language is acquired, what strategies the learner is employing in his learning of a language. Thirdly, they are indisputable to the learner himself because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn" (p. 161).

In addition, there are few research studies focusing on EFL writing specifically on Iranian students. In particular, no studies have attempted to show the cohesive errors committed by Iranian EFL learners in their written texts.

There is the hope that the findings of this study will help EFL teachers and educators to become familiar with the most frequent errors committed by EFL learners in the case of cohesive devices leading them to make more objective decisions about how to go about adopting appropriate teaching strategies to help EFL students learn better.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to empirically investigate, classify, and analyze the errors which students make in terms of cohesive devices in their L2 writing at different levels of proficiency. Moreover, this study tries to investigate whether the identified errors in the use of cohesive devices are due to their L2 proficiency level or the L1 interference phenomenon.

1.4. Research Questions

The following questions are to be answered through this study:

1. What are the most frequent errors committed by Iranian EFL learners in the application of cohesive devices at different levels of proficiency?
2. Are there any differences in the Iranian EFL learners' cohesive errors which can be attributed to their L2 proficiency level?
3. Are there any differences in the Iranian EFL learners' cohesive errors which can be attributed to L1 interference phenomenon?

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

2.0. Introduction

This chapter consists of two main parts. The first part mostly illustrates fundamental background studies done in the field of Error Analysis. The main objective of this part is to familiarize the reader with the most frequent errors committed by EFL learners and categorized by prominent figure in the field. The second part presents the most common cohesion taxonomy as well as a review of the studies that are relevant to the issue of second language writing and cohesive device use.

2.1. Error Analysis

Writing is a complex process even in the first language. Undoubtedly, it is more complicated to write in a foreign language. Consequently, lots of researchers have intended to identify the common errors EFL students make in writing the second language. Of course, a better understanding of the errors and the origin of such errors in the process of EFL writing will help teachers know students' difficulties in learning that language. Moreover, it will aid in the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies to help EFL students learn better.

Therefore, EA can be considered as a fundamental tool in language teaching in order to reorganize teacher's point of view and readdress his/her methodology for fixing and fulfilling the students' gaps (Londono Vasquez, 2007). In other words, as Corder (1967) defined, EA is a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in

the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness. The purpose of Error Analysis is, in fact, to find " what the learner knows and does not know" and to " ultimately enable the teacher to supply him not just with the information that his hypothesis is wrong, but also, importantly, with the right sort of information or data for him to form a more adequate concept of a rule in the target language" (Corder, 1974, p. 170).

Consequently, the review of the literature that follows addresses itself to the sources of errors rather than the most frequent EFL learners' errors reported in various studies per se. At first, for this review of the literature, it is necessary to study known and popular error taxonomies and classifications.

2.1.1. Error Taxonomies

Perhaps, one of the first and most important studies conducted in the field of Error Analysis was the one done by Richards (1971). His study involved learners from different language background (Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese, and Indian and West African Languages) and showed the different types of errors relating to production and distribution of verb groups, prepositions, articles, and the use of questions. Based on this, he distinguished three sources of errors:

1. Interference errors: errors resulting of the use of elements from one language while speaking/writing another,

2. Intralingual errors: errors reflecting general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply, and

3. Developmental errors: errors occurring when learners attempt to build up hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experiences.

According to Richards (1971), intralingual errors are also subdivided to the following categories:

1. Overgeneralization errors: the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of other structures in the target language (e.g. "He can sings" where English allows "He can sing" and "He sings").

2. Ignorance of rule restrictions: the learner applies rules to context where they are not applicable (e.g. He made me to go rest" through extension of the pattern "He asked/wanted me to go").

3. Incomplete application of rules: the learner fails to use a fully developed structure (e.g. "You like to sing?" in place of "Do you like to sing?")

4. False hypothesis: the learners do not fully understand a distinction in the target language (e.g. the use of "was" as a marker of past tense in "One day it was happened").

However, as Schacheter and Celce-Murcia (1977) pointed out, the distinction between intralingual and developmental errors is rather fuzzy in their term. As a result, Richards (1974) classified errors, according to their causes, into two categories later on. The two categories are as follows:

1. Interlingual errors: these errors are caused by mother tongue interference.

2. Intralingual and developmental errors: this kind of errors occurs during the learning process of the second language at a stage when the learners have not really acquired the knowledge. In addition, errors are also caused by the difficulty or the problem of language itself.

Elsewhere, some experts believed that the distinction between intralingual and interlingual errors is not always clear-cut as it may sound. They also claimed that it is obviously more difficult to identify different types of intralingual errors that Richards (1971) described. In order to deal with this problem, Dulay and Burt (1974) classified learners' errors into three broad categories:

1. Developmental errors: errors that are similar to L1 acquisition

2. Interference errors: errors that reflect the structure of the L1

3. Unique errors: errors that are neither developmental nor interference

Stenson (1974 cited in Karra, 2006) proposed another category, that of induced errors, which resulted from incorrect instruction of the language.

Brown (1980 cited in Hasyim, 2002) further classified sources of errors into the following categories:

1. Interference transfer: that is the negative influence of the mother tongue of learner,

2. Intralingual transfer: that is the negative transfer of items within the target language. In other words, the incorrect generalization of the rules within the target language,

3. Context of learning: this overlaps both types of transfer. For example, the classroom with the teacher and its materials in the case of school learning or the social situation in the case of untutored second language learning. In a classroom context, the teacher or the textbook can lead the learner to make wrong generalization about the language, and

4. Communication strategies: it is obvious that communication strategy is the conscious employment of verbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when linguistic forms are not available to the learner for some reasons.

There are five main communication strategies, namely:

1. Avoidance,

2. Prefabricated patterns,

3. Cognitive and personality style,

4. Appeal to authority, and

5. Language switch (Brown, 1980 cited in Hasyim, 2002).

Later, James (1998), in his study, showed the different types of learners' errors relating to omission, overinclusion, misselection (use wrong words not wrong forms), misordering, blends (blending arises when two alternative grammatical forms are combined to produce an ungrammatical blend.)

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