

Errors in Using Past Tense Form in Writing Essays among Kurdish University Learners

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Abstract: The study was conducted to identify the common errors in the use of past tense form made by Kurdish learners of English language when writing essays and to investigate the factors that influenced these errors and how the Kurdish first language affect their process of learning English language. The participants for this study were from the English Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok. A total of 29 students participated in this study. All the errors were identified and classified into various categorizations. The results of the study showed seven most common errors in the use of past tense form committed by the participants which were simple past, past progressive, past perfect, past passive, future in the past, irregular verbs and regular verbs. The findings also showed that the errors committed were influenced by the use of the participants "first language (mother tongue) and intralingual factors. On the basis of these findings, the researcher discussed some pedagogical implications and provided suggestions for teachers and future researchers.

Keywords: error analysis, first language, essay writing, Kurdish language

INTRODUCTION

Writing is difficult even in the first language. It is more difficult to write in a foreign language because the first language affects the learners to commit errors in their writings. The influence of the first language in committing errors in using tenses in their writings is that the learners of EFL „English as a Foreign Language“ think in the first language and write in the foreign language and both languages have their own rules so they make mistakes (Zoble, 1980a; 1980b).

In the speech or writing of a second or foreign language, error is the use of a linguistic item „e.g. a word, grammatical item, speech act, etc.“ in a way which fluent or native speaker of the language regards as faulty or incomplete (Mahdi Abbas & Amin Karimani, 2011).

In the past, the English language was studied in Iraq in general and especially in Kurdistan and started from the fifth grade in schools as one subject called the English language. Nowadays, the English language is also studied as one subject in the schools in Kurdistan, but it starts from the first grade. Studying the English language during university levels is different because there are some colleges that offer the English language as one subject and some others like the college of medicine, the college of engineering and the college of science where all their curriculums are in the English language, since English is the language of science. For master and doctoral students, they are obliged to take the TOEFL or ILETS test in order for them to apply for the respective study programs.

Even though the English language became more common in schools and colleges and it became the language of business after the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America in 2003, the problem still existed. The problem still persists in schools and colleges in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where students make many mistakes in speaking and writing English even among those who are professional in the English language. The problem units because they do not emphasize on tenses and they do not think that the meaning of the sentence changes if they make mistakes in using tenses.

ERROR ANALYSIS

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the Target Language „TL“ and the TL itself. Muzi V. Nzama in her study (2010) mentioned that “Pit Corder is the “Father” of Error Analysis (the EA with the “new look”). It was with his article entitled “The significance of Learner Errors” (1967) that EA took a new turn. Errors used to be “flaws” that needed to be eradicated”. However, Error Analysis as a mode of inquiry was limited in its scope and concentrate on what learners did wrong rather than on what made them successful” (Larsen Freeman & Long, 1991, p. 61).

Ibrahim Abushihab (2011) mentioned in his study that Error Analysis involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their hypothesized causes and evaluating their seriousness. Such errors are called Intralingual and/or developmental errors.

According to Brown (2004, p. 216), “a mistake refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly; while an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner.”

Ellis (1998, p. 17) distinguishes mistakes and errors in such a way that: “Errors reflect gaps in a learner’s knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes reflect occasional laps in performance; they occur because, in a particular instance, the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows.”

According to Richards (1970, p. 6) Intralingual/Developmental errors are items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. The learner, in this case, tries to “derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language.”

Brown (1980, p. 66) considers “the significance of the intralingual source of errors, namely those which occur within the target language itself”. He means that the errors made by the influence of intralingual factors are those of incorrectly use of rules of the target language.

James (1998) states that intralingual errors are created without referring to L1 resources. The outcomes produced by the learner are non-existed in the second language, but result from the misapplication of language rules. The existence of intralingual interference is not the only cause of the error production; here the interlingual transfer has also its own effect on the production part of the second language.

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L1 interference is considered as part of interlanguage factor of committing errors. The term Interlanguage was first used by Selinker (1969) to describe the linguistic stage second language learners go through during the process of mastering the target language. Since then, “interlanguage has become a major stand of second language acquisition research and theory.”

Various alternative terms have been used by different researchers to refer to the same phenomenon; Nesmer (1971) refer to approximative systems and Corder (1971) to idiosyncratic dialects and transitional competence. These terms reflect two related but different concepts. First, interlanguage refers to the structured system which the learner constructs at any given stage in the development i.e. an interlanguage. Second, the term refers to the series of interlocking systems which form what Corder (1976) calls the learner’s “built-in-syllable” i.e. the interlanguage continuum.

Richards (1971) explains that the interlanguage “reflects the general characteristics of rule learning such as a faulty

generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply". Therefore, the interlanguage generally involves the overgeneralization of rules in the second language production. The students overgeneralize the rules from one single part of the second language utterance and apply them to other parts and consider them correct. Some rules, like the past form of a verb, differ from one to another, and sometimes the prepositions and their use can cause problems for the students and lead them to use incorrect ones.

According to Selinker (1972) interlanguage is a temporary grammar which is systematic and composed of rules. These rules are the product of five main cognitive processes:

1. Overgeneralization: Some of the rules of the interlanguage system may be the result of the overgeneralization of specific rules and features of the target language.
2. Transfer of Training: Some of the components of the interlanguage system may result from transfer to specific elements via which the learner is taught the second language.
3. Strategies of Second Language Learning: Some of the rules in the learner's interlanguage may result from the application of language learning strategies as a tendency on the part of the learners to reduce the target language to a simple system.
4. Strategies of Second Language Communication: Interlanguage system rules may also be the results of strategies employed by the learners in their attempt to communicate with native speakers of the target language.
5. Language Transfer: Some of the rules in the interlanguage system may be the result of transfer from the learner's first language.

Akhmad Subkhi Ramdani (2009) in his undergraduate study on students of the English Department, Faculty of Letters at Gunadarma University conducted a research to describe the common errors that the students made in using

simple past tense, and he explained that the errors that were committed by students were in making interrogative sentences, meaning of irregular and regular verbs and in changing.

Another study was conducted by Ibrahim Abushihab, Abdallah Hussein Al-Omari and Mahmoud Tobat (2011) on 62 second year students from the Department of English Literature and Translation at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan. The number of errors in tenses in his study was 25 which comprised 2.7% of the total number of errors. He stated that the lowest number of errors among the linguistics categories employed in this study. This is because of the number of students who did not use different types of tenses in their writing. Another reason for the low number of errors in this category is because the subjects did not make so many errors and they had learnt the grammatical rules.

Another study was conducted by Mahdi Abbasi and Amin Karimnia (2011), they were given a test which included four letters from the selected books to translate from the Persian language into English. They stated that thinking in the first language and translating to the target language is the reason for committing mistakes for the learners of foreign language.

Saadiyah Darus (2009) collected her data from 72 Malaysian students. 346 errors were committed by the students in using verb tense from the total of 3090 errors.

Another study was conducted by Lisa Andersson (2008) on 44 ninth grade learners of English in Sweden at Göteborg University, Department of English. The study examined 44 essays randomly selected from the National Test in 2003 for year nine. The purposes of the study were first, to investigate what types of errors the students made concerning time and tense and second, to compare the types of errors with the results found from 1995 in To Err Is Human (Köhlmyr, 2003). Lisa Andersson (2008) in her study showed that the total number of errors made by the students were 263 errors.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of this study consisted of 29 students from the English Department, Faculty of Humanities of the University of Duhok. The participants of this study were chosen from an intact group. They were not from one level of proficiency, as some of them were good in English and some of them were not good.

The instruments for this study were two essays that were written by the students. One essay was in English and the other one was written in Kurdish in order for the researcher could find the errors that were committed in English language by the influence of Kurdish language. The students of the third year class, English Department had to write one paragraph about one of the movies that they had seen recently and described the most interesting scene in that movie as a story.

The researcher collected a few essays from some of the students from the English Department, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok for this study. These essays were collected by the researcher and checked for the errors that had been made by the students. Then the researcher highlighted the errors and analyzed them. The students who had written these essays were non-native speakers in English language and it was difficult for them to write an essay without committing any mistakes.

In this study, the researcher used written essays for collecting data in order to find out the grammatical errors, errors in the use of English past tense form which the English Department students had committed. The essays that they wrote were about one of the movies that they had seen recently and they described the most interesting scene in that movie as a story. The students first wrote Kurdish version of essay then English version. There was no time limit for writing the essays. The researcher himself collected the essays that were written by the students.

Analyzing the collected data was based on Pit Corder's design of error analysis. Referring to the steps of error analysis, the data were analyzed as follows:

First, the researcher acquired the data and identified the types of grammatical errors made by the students in their essays. Then, the researcher calculated the errors in order to know how frequent these errors had been made by the students. By calculating the frequency of each error, the researcher was able to identify the most frequent error and the least frequent error made by the students. When the errors were calculated and analyzed, the results of the analysis were tabulated. The researcher then presented the errors in the form of tables and examples according to the types of errors, number of errors made by the students and the percentage of errors made by the students.

For analyzing data for the Kurdish version of essays, the researcher first highlighted all the errors in the English language that made by the influence of the Kurdish language. Then, these errors were presented in the form of examples in Kurdish written language with their transcriptions to show the errors made in English compared to the Kurdish version. The researcher then showed the effect of Kurdish language on the errors in English made by the students.

RESULTS

According to Pit Corder's (1974) error analysis procedure which suggested five steps for analyzing data (identification of error, description of error, explanation of error, evaluation of error and correction of errors) the researcher is going to analyze the data that he collected from Kurdish learners of English language.

Common errors in the use of English past tense form that were made by learners in writing essays

The students who participated in this research were required to write two essays, one in the Kurdish language and the other one in the English language and they were required to use past tense in their writing so as to identify the different types of errors committed in using the past tense. The students committed 10 types of errors in using past tense and only 7

of them were analyzed by the researcher due to the very few number of errors committed for the other 3 types.

The errors in using past tense form, which were investigated in this study, were:

1. Simple past
2. Past progressive
3. Past perfect
4. Past passive
5. Future in the past
6. Irregular verb
7. Regular verb
8. Incorrect verb
9. Incorrect use of verb “to be”
10. Incorrect use of verb “to do”

Figure 1

Types of errors in using English past tense, the number of each error made by students and the percentage value for each error

<i>Errors made by Kurdish Students in using Past Tense</i>	Number of Errors	Percentage
Types of Errors		
Simple past	230	56.51 %
Irregular verb	41	10.7 %
Past Progressive	30	7.37 %
Past Perfect	23	5.65 %
Past Passive	21	5.15 %
Regular verb	21	5.15 %
Incorrect verb	18	4.42 %
Future in the Past	13	3.19 %
Using incorrect helping verb verb to be	8	1.95 %
Using incorrect helping verb verb to do	2	0.49 %
Total	407	

Kurdish learners' L1 influence on the errors made in the use of past tense form in writing English essays

Errors resulted from first language interference is one of the factors that influences the process of learning any language. First language or mother tongue of the learners of any language affects the production of learning the target language. While writing an essay, the learners of any language try to use the rules of their own native language and they transfer something directly from the first language to the target language. In the course of target language production in the essays, the learners who commit errors of mother tongue interference seem to have transferred some of the first language structures into the target language but error occurred when there were no equivalent structures in the target language.

Examples of Students' errors:

1. The girl immediately got interest and tried to know who that person is. (Shift from Simple Past to Simple Present)
2. The person who is manages things sent drugs and cure for them hanging in balloon. (Shift from Simple Present to Simple Past)
3. If they injured they can use it and it will recover it immediately. (Shift from Simple to Simple Future)
4. When the ship sinked, Jack died. (Irregular Verb)
5. Batman was misled by his friend to a trap prepared by Bane. (Past Passive)
6. After he tried, he saw that the notebook is real. (Past Perfect)
7. When William went there, the British army arrest him. (Past Progressive)

Other factors that contribute to the errors made by Kurdish learners in using past tense form in writing English essays

As mentioned before in analyzing research question number two, first language interference was the main factor for errors committed in writing essays by Kurdish students. In addition to that factor, there were some other factors that contribute to the errors made by Kurdish students in using past tense form in writing English essays. Richard (1974, p. 174), pointed out that errors are not only caused by the interference from the mother tongue “first language”, but also from what he called as overgeneralization, ignorance of the rules restriction, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized.

Examples of errors by the influence of Intralanguage

1. They were taught people some type of art fighting. (Overgeneralization)
2. The place when they met for their appointment were top of the ship. (Ignorance of rule restrictions)
3. Hachi▼ doing this everyday. (Incomplete application of rules)
4. Things started to changed again. (False concept hypothesized)

CONCLUSION

Generally, Kurdish students of English language were not knowledgeable of using English tenses while writing an essay and they considered the past tense as only consisting of the simple past tense and they did not use any other types of past tense form in their essays. In this respect, many students did not know how to write a grammatically correct sentence using the past tense form. Thus, they committed errors in using the past tense form while writing essays, which affected the process of learning the English language.

Therefore, committing errors in using the English past tense form is a serious problem among the Kurdish students in Kurdistan.

Based on the findings of this study, the following are some suggestions to be considered in teaching. English teachers must assist their students in identifying their grammatical errors and discuss the possible causes of making such errors. Teachers should also provide more instructional time to this problematic area. In teaching English grammar and especially in teaching English tenses, teachers should provide clear explanations in order to make the students more interested in learning the English tenses. This can be done by giving more examples of sentence using different tenses and showing the differences between each tense. Teachers should know in which area the students are weak in, so that they can pay more attention to these areas and teach students how to avoid such errors. In this study, errors in using regular verbs and irregular verbs were ranked as the most number of errors made by the students, thus, EFL educators should make the students aware of some of the errors that they often make in their writings and teach them the correct rules, especially in changing verbs from the base form to past and past participle or -ing forms.

Language interference is apparently a common problem for learners of English as a foreign language. Kurdish English teachers can help beginning EFL students reduce language interference by specifying the differences between Kurdish "L1" and English language, in order to make the students aware of the differences between the structure of English tenses and the Kurdish tenses. EFL teachers should give the students daily exercises to ensure effective learning of the English tenses. EFL teachers should also compare the differences in the verb forms and tense concepts between the Kurdish and English languages. English teachers should teach students suitable techniques on how to translate written materials from the Kurdish language to the English language by refraining from thinking in the first language and directly translating them into the English language.

The teachers should be familiar with their students' ability in order to find address their difficulties, in applying the correct rules of the target language. Teachers should also clearly explain the structure of all the tenses to the students and provide them with extensive practice and examples so that they will refrain from overgeneralization of the rules of one tense to another. Teachers should always immediately correct student's errors so that they will avoid similar errors due to ignorance of rule restrictions. Lastly, not only students need more exposure to the target language but teachers also need to be knowledgeable, well experienced and well exposed, since the majority of teachers of English are non-native speakers in Kurdistan. They need always to keep themselves well-informed of this issue by reading studies, journals and books.

Lastly, Kurdish curriculum designers need to refer to more sources for designing a curriculum for the school syllabus and other academic institutions for learning and teaching. They can get benefits from such studies like this present study which identified the students' weak areas. They should put more emphasis on topics about tenses in the school syllabus and provide clear structures and rules for various forms of grammar of the English language in the syllabus. Curriculum planners or designers may provide the school syllabus some essays, stories and short stories with using different tenses so as the students can differentiate between them. Textbook writers can also get benefits from this present study. They can choose the areas that the students have problem with and focus more on them. They can put more exercises at the end of each unit in the textbook to provide practice for the students

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