

## **Word Order Error analysis in EFL Learners' Writing: Moroccan High School Students as a Case Study**

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**Abstract:** The majority of Moroccan EFL learners' writing lacks word order correctness. They just write to communicate their thoughts and view points, without questioning the correctness of their written sentences. The present survey aims to study word order errors in the writings of Moroccan EFL high school students. More precisely, it aims at determining the sources of errors in students' written simple sentences. The discovered errors and their explanation will help Moroccan EFL teachers gain insight into what to focus on while teaching writing. In addition, their feedback will hopefully target those commonly committed errors. Frequency and percentage are used as statistical tools to ensure impartiality in data presentation, interpretation and analysis.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis; Word Order; Writing.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The description of EFL learners' linguistic behaviour has long been an important concern of applied linguistics. As Grab (2002, p.9) [1] puts it, "the focus of applied linguistics is on trying to resolve language-based problems that people encounter in the real world". EFL learners' language deviations or errors as far as word order is concerned are among the issues that applied linguistics accounts for. Studies approaching such deviations have been conducted on the basis of two famous branches of applied linguistics: contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis (EA) theories. CA, as Shastri (2010, p.26) [2] states "it helps us to decide the extent of the interference of L1 in L2" by means of comparing learners' L1 system with the system of the language they learn. EA, on the other hand, goes beyond the level of comparing L1 with L2 to "accept many sources of errors such as intralingual interference, overgeneralization, misteaching and the role of the variables of age, attitude, aptitude, motivation etc." (Shastri, 2010, p. 25)[2]. However, both CA and EA have helped language researchers to gain insights into the processes that underlie EFL learning, demonstrate statistically the linguistic difficulties that EFL learners encounter and provide both teachers and learners with effective feedback and measures to cope with language problems.

Foreign language learners' writing often disrespects the linguistic rules of the target language. As an illustration, the majority of EFL Moroccan high school students tend to produce syntactically erroneous sentences the time they are asked to write. Previously conducted studies ascribe the problem to the syntactic differences existing between L1 and L2. That is, Moroccan learners of English use Moroccan Arabic word order when they write in English. However, the influence of Moroccan Arabic word order may not be the only source of learners' deviations in writing. Therefore, I've embarked on this study to see whether there are other sources of errors in students' writing, through investigating and determining the most common word order errors in their written simple sentences.

### **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **2.1. THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ERROR ANALYSIS**

The theory of Error Analysis is among the main fields of applied linguistics which is concerned with "the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, P.184) [3]. Second or foreign language learning is often characterized by the production of erroneous patterns and forms. These language problems are the main concern of error analysis (Crystal, 1999, p.108)[4]. The theory has started to gain ground within the field of second language acquisition as an alternative to contrastive analysis theory. CA studies errors through their prediction and description. That is, "We can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the language and culture of the student" (Lado, 1957 as cited in Richards, 1971, p.10)[5]. However, the failure of CA theory to predict and explain a great majority

of errors associated with second or foreign language learning led Stephen Pit Corder, one of the major proponents of error analysis, and his colleagues to give birth to the theory of error analysis in 1960s as a substitution.

EA goes beyond the level of comparing “two or more languages or subsystems of languages in order to determine both the differences and similarities between them” (Fisiak, 1981, p. 1) [6]. The process of comparing learners' L1 system with the system of their target language aims at studying the influence of L1 on L2 and uncovering the linguistic problems that may result from their dichotomy. As Richards (1984, p. 172) [7] states, “contrastive analysis can highlight and predict the difficulties of pupils”. This study identifies learners' errors through looking into the similarities and differences between the two languages. Yet, research shows that language transfer or L1 interference is not the only source of errors. As Richards (1971, p. 206) [5] specifies, errors can be committed when a learner attempts “to build up hypotheses about the target language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook and reflect his competence at a particular transitional stage in his learning process”. Therefore, incomplete learning or unconsciousness of the system of the target language may lead to language deviations. These kinds of errors are known as intralingual errors (Brown, 2000, p. 224) [8]. EA, on the other hand, “accepts many sources of errors such as intralingual interference, overgeneralization, misteaching and the role of the variables of age, attitude, aptitude, motivation etc.” (Shastri, 2010, p. 62) [2]. However, this does not mean that EA excludes the process of comparing between the L1 system and the L2 system. As Corder (1981, p. 37) [9] puts it, “We can regard the reconstructed utterances as translations of the learner's utterances into the target language”. Therefore, EA forms a comprehensive approach that deals with both interlingual as well as intralingual errors.

## **2.2. WORD ORDER**

One of the crucial areas that syntactic research accounts for is the issue of word order. This latter refers to the organization of words and how they are grouped together to form different patterns and sentences. Radford (1997, p. 1) [10] underlines that “syntax is concerned with the ways in which words can be combined together to form phrases and sentences”. However, this arrangement of words into sentences is required to comply with the rules that characterize each language. That is, since languages differ in terms of the “rules which govern the formation of sentences, making some sentences possible and others not possible” (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p. 535) [3], the construction of sentences has to obey the syntactic structures of the used language. As MohaEnnaji and Fatima Sadiqi (1994, p. 189) [11] put it “each specific language imposes specific restrictions on the order of words in sentences”. Therefore, sentence writing is not just grouping words together, but it is a well-structured process that characterizes each language.

Word order differences among languages usually affect L2 learning. L2 learners who write unaware of the word order of the target language, produce sentences which usually lack correct and accurate organization. In this respect, Arab learners of English often produce sentences containing word order errors. The problem may come at first from the dichotomy existing between the word order of the two languages. In other words, English word order is fixed (SVO) while Arabic has a free word order. Attia (2004, p. 3) underlines that in Arabic “all different word orders of VOS and OVS are possible”. Most of previously conducted surveys ascribe the production of erroneous sentences in writing to the Arabic word order influence. That is, Arab EFL learners use Arabic structures when they write in English. However, as it is the main objective of my study, further research may show the existence of other sources to EFL learners' word order errors.

## **2.3. WRITING**

Of the four skills, writing is the most difficult and challenging language area. Yet, it is always the best way to learn how to write correctly and effectively. In the realm of education, writing is seen as a learning and thinking process. That is, it promotes students' knowledge and reinforces previously taught materials. As Pobywajlo (2001, p. 12) [1] puts it, “what students are able to put into writing represents what they really know about the subject. The student is constructing an answer rather than memorizing one”. Likewise, teachers use writing as a tool to assess students' progress in a language and hence prepare remedial works on the basis of the discovered problems; believing that learners will not reach full literacy in the language they learn until they have attained competence in writing. (Hughey, 1983, p. 36) [12].

In the light of the above, writing refers not only to what we communicate in written forms but also to how we write what we intend to communicate. For instance, writing of both correct and meaningful sentences requires knowledge of word sequencing in the target language. As Fromkin and Rodman (1983, p. 200) [13] state, “Knowing a language means being able to put words together to form sentences to express our thoughts”.

Writing of well-formed and meaningful sentences is among the difficulties that Moroccan EFL learners encounter. The use of English in the Moroccan context is confined to academic institutions such as schools and universities, and hence learners are required to develop their writing proficiency. That is, most of the tasks that these learners carry out as well as the exams they take are writing-based. Therefore, the ability to write well-

structured and meaningful sentences is necessary for attaining competence in English. However, written sentences of many Moroccan high school students are syntactically speaking ill-formed because they lack respect of the English word order.

### III. PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

The study participants are 2<sup>nd</sup> year baccalaureate students who study in a large public school in the year 2015. Their age ranges between 17 and 19 and are randomly gathered from different literary classes. They are all Arabic native speakers who study English as a foreign language. All of these participants have studied English for four years now. And they practise writing of the simple sentence through a descriptive paragraph which is part of their 2<sup>nd</sup> year baccalaureate learning program. 85 participants took part in the study. They were asked to describe their favourite actors or sports people. Frequency and percentage are used as statistical tools in the process of data presentation, interpretation and analysis.

### IV. DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Fifteen papers are excluded from the study because they are either blank or recklessly written. 70 papers are taken into consideration. Data from the answer sheets was organized and put in the following chart. All the given italicized examples below are taken from the paragraphs written by the participants. All the collected errors and their categorization are pertinent to the objective of the study.

The analysis of the participants' written simple sentences was done in three phases: First, all the students' simple sentences were extracted from their written paragraphs. Second, each simple sentence was read carefully to identify and highlight word order errors, using different colors. Third, the errors were classified according to their types, counted and recorded on the chart below.

Frequent participants' errors	Correct structuring of the English simple sentence	frequency of errors	Percentage of errors
1/* <i>Stalone he is a good american actor.</i>	Stalone is a good American actor.	45	60%
2/* <i>Missi is a player short</i>	Missi is a short player.	41	54.66%
3/* <i>He is play football well</i>	He plays football well.	32	42.66%
4/* <i>Ronaldo a famous foobaler</i>	Ronaldo is a famous footballer.	25	33.33%
5/* <i>She has a nice blue eyes.</i>	She has nice blue eyes.	19	25.33%
6/* <i>People a lot love this player</i>	A lot of people love this player .	15	20%
7/* <i>He is strong person</i>	He is a strong person.	15	20%
8/* <i>Plays Ronaldo well in matches</i>	Ronaldo plays well in his matches.	11	14.66%
9/* <i>Must people respect this actor.</i>	People must respect this actor.	6	8%
10/* <i>I buy Missi t-shirts</i>	I buy Missi's t-shirts.	5	6.66%
11/* <i>I put on them .</i>	I put them on.	2	2.66%

On the basis of the data above, Moroccan high school students' written simple sentences involve an important number of word order errors. The first example shows students' errors at the level of the subject constituent. That is, most of the participants double the subjects of their simple sentences. They write nouns together with their pronouns. The second example shows students' errors at the level of the object constituent. Most of them write nouns followed by adjectives. The third example shows students' errors at the level of the verb constituent. They write two verbs, mainly, the verb "to be" and another different verb. The fourth example indicates that many of the students' simple sentences are without verbs. The fifth example shows that an important number of the students use indefinite articles with plural countable nouns. The sixth example shows that there are students who write nouns followed by quantifiers especially at the beginning of the sentence. The seventh example indicates omission of the articles. That is, students' sentences lack necessary articles at the level of the object constituent. The eighth example shows students' errors regarding verbs misplacement. That is, some students start their simple sentences with verbs. The ninth example indicates students' errors regarding modals misplacement. They start their sentences with a modal. That is, modals are placed before the subject of the sentence. The last example shows students problems with phrasal verbs. They do not place pronouns between verbs and their particles.

In the light of these findings, the Arabic word order transfer has an effect on the way Moroccan high school students write their simple sentences. That is to say, the interference of the Arabic word order structure hinders their progress and improvement in writing. According to the table above, the errors (2), (6), (8) and (9) show this phenomenon. However, in investigating the other errors, especially the first one, we find out that a great deal of students' mis-ordering problems are not caused by the Arabic word order transfer.

The majority of the participants initiate their simple sentences with double subjects, a noun and its pronoun. This problem makes out the highest percentage (60%) of the collected data. Arabic simple sentences do not start with two subjects. Therefore, this deviation can not be ascribed to the L1 transfer. In addition, the use of two verbs at the same time, as it is shown in the third example, isn't a characteristic of the Arabic simple sentence structure. And this type of error forms the third highest percentage (42.66%) in students' written simple sentences. Likewise, the last example (11) can't be attributed to the influence of the Arabic word order. Besides, English nouns may follow phrasal verbs' particles but not pronouns.

In the light of the above, we can deduce that in addition to the Arabic interference or negative transfer, intralingual causes are also of paramount effect on students' writing. That is, on the basis of the given data, many students attempt to arrange the words of their sentences in a way which disrespects both the English and Arabic word order systems. This phenomenon can be attributed to students' ignorance of the English word order, overgeneralization of some learned structures, incomplete application of rules, or unsuccessful teaching (Richards, 1972) [14]. For instance, learners' usage of double subjects at the beginning of simple sentences can be due to teachers' overuse of subject pronouns in the examples they teach or to learners' ignorance of the linguistic system of the target language (James, 2001, p. 62) [15]. The problem may also result from insufficient input or feedback on the part of the teacher; which encourages students' formulation of personal constructions.

### V. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Though it is argued that L2 word order errors may result from L1 transfer, the empirical results of this study showed that more than 60% of learners' word order errors cannot be traced back to the influence of the Arabic word order. Errors such as *\*Stalone he is a good american actor,\* he is play football well,* and *\*she has a nice blue eyes* are good illustrations for this phenomenon. These errors can be attributed to other intralingual factors. As Corder (1981, p. 65) [9] puts it, errors may happen when "there has not been enough effort on the part of the learner or enough explanation or practice on the part of the teacher". In the same line of thought, Sayehli (2001, p. 7) [16] notes that these errors are known as developmental errors and they are caused by the learner himself.

All in all, this study found out that EFL Moroccan high school students' word order problems result from both interlingual and intralingual factors. Therefore, it is hoped that these findings could help and raise teachers' awareness to the sources of word order errors in their students' writing. It is hoped also that teachers' feedback or remedial work would focus on the discovered writing errors.

As a matter of fact, this study was conducted just in one large high school because of time constraints. This could be a major limitation of the study. It would have been better and more important if the study had involved more participants from different high schools. Hence, for more enriching findings, a further research is required.

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