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A Comparison of Freshman and Sophomore EFL Students' Written Performance through a Referential Writing Task

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ABSTRACT

In teaching writing to foreign or second language learners, one of the issues concerning teachers is the amount and types of errors students make in their writings. This paper aims to obtain a clear understanding of types of errors in the writings of Turkish EFL learners by comparing freshman and sophomore students' writing performance. To this end research questions were formulated to see whether there is any significant difference between the participants' grade and their error types in writing. Data were collected through a picture story task consisting of six pictures. The statistical analyses revealed that a) there was not a statistically significant difference between grade groups on the number of t-units and proportion of words per t-unit they wrote in their picture stories, but b) there was a statistically significant difference between grade groups on the number of words they wrote and errors they made.

INTRODUCTION

There are three types of assessment of writing: holistic, analytic, and objective (each with its peculiar strengths and pitfalls) (Bailey, 1998). In holistic scoring a single scale is used to describe different levels. In holistic scoring the reader handles the student's writing as a whole. In analytic scoring the rater reacts to the student's composition on a variety of categories. Objective method relies on quantified methods of evaluation and despite the positive associations the term has objective scoring is said to reveal serious drawbacks.

Another objective scoring relying on quantified method of evaluation in writing is offered by counting the number of t-units in a text. A T-Unit is a measurement in linguistics which refers to a main clause plus any subordinate clauses that may be attached to it. Hunt (1965) suggested, the T-unit, or *minimal terminable unit* of language, was intended to measure the smallest word group that could be considered a grammatical sentence, regardless of how it was punctuated. The length of t-units is also a good indicator to measure syntactic complexity.

Brown (2004) classifies writing types into four groups as imitative, intensive, responsive and extensive. In imitative writing the aim is to get the learners to master the mechanics of

writing. Since most focus is on form at this stage, context and meaning are of secondary importance. In intensive writing although meaning and context gain importance, most assessment tasks are again concerned with a focus on form. While in responsive level learners are to perform at a limited discourse level, the expectation from extensive writing covers all the processes and strategies of writing for all purposes.

Regarding the assessment of writing Brown (2004) suggests that picture-cued controlled tasks have been used in teaching English all over the world. Picture-cued tasks are favored by language teachers because when you assign a picture-cued writing task to your students, the sole resources they have is their minds. Since they do not have anything written, they could not rely on words or phrases found in the reading materials they are assigned. Thus picture-cued tasks are among the best means to measure writing skills exclusively.

However, picture cued story tasks may have some disadvantages. For example, in an action story conducted by nine experienced language teachers with the participation of 165 students from kindergarten to second grade teacher-researchers concluded that although pictures can provide context and background information for student writers of all ages, they may also hinder creativity due to lack of background experience and knowledge of the English language (Joshua et al, 2007)

Related Research

Ever since Corder's (1967) seminal study on errors in language learning, errors made by language learners has been one of the hot issues in language research with several articles and books dealing with the various aspect of this phenomenon. Later in a monograph on this issue Corder (1983) identified two opposite ways of approaches in respect of learners' errors in the field of language teaching methodology. One example of such approaches could be seen in the theory and practices of methods such as Audiolingualism and Situational Language Teaching which prevailed the language teaching field under late 70s. Under the influence post-modernist thoughts the second school of language teaching believed "that we live in an imperfect world and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts" (p.6).

In the study of L2 acquisition one of the common ways is to look at samples of language learners and conduct a cross-sectional study comparing different groups or through a longitudinal study looking at the pace and pattern of change. According Ellis (2003) there are three good reasons to study learners' errors. First, they help language teachers and researchers focus on why learners make errors and provide us with useful information on learner language. Secondly, the types of errors learners make can help teachers so that they can shape how and what they teach. Thirdly, which is also a kind of common sense knowledge, making errors may actually help learners to learn when they self-correct the errors they make.

To examine whether the CAI (computer assisted instruction) tutorial program had an impact on the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) grammar skills of the beginning EFL language learners in Taiwan, Chen (2006) developed a taxonomy based on structured-linguistic error taxonomy. She classified 15 major categories including subcategories for each Major error types compromising this taxonomy included: *errors in the use of nouns, articles, pronouns* (incorrect case forms, missing possessives), *verbs* (tense, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary, verb omitted), *prepositions* (prepositions omitted, wrong prepositions, unnecessary prepositions), and *conjunction* (coordination, subordination, missing).

One of the quite detailed taxonomy, which is also provided in the table below, was offered by Kroll (1994). She identified six major categories and a total of 33 subcategories as shown in the table.

Error Taxonomy as offered by (Kroll, 1994)

Error Name	Subcategories
1. Sentence Structure Errors	1. Whole Sentence or clause aberrant 2. Subject formation 3. Verb missing 4. Verb complement/object complement 5. Prepositional phrase/infinitive mixup 6. Dangling/Misplaced modifier 7. Sentence Fragment 8. Run-on Sentence 9. Parallel Structure 10. Relative clause formation 11. Word Order 12. Gapping Error 13. Extraneous words 14. Awkward phrasing
2. Verb-Centred Errors	15. Tense 16. Voice 17. Verb formation 18. Subject-verb agreement 19. Two-word verb
3. Reference Errors	20. Noun-pronoun agreement 21. Quantifier-noun agreement 22. Epenthetic pronoun 23. Ambiguous/unlocatable referent 24. Voice shift
4. Word-level choice	25. Lexical/phrase choice 26. Idiom 27. Word form 28. Singular for plural (except verbs) 29. Plural for singular (except verbs) 30. Quantity words 31. Preposition
5. Article Errors	32. Missing/Extra/Wrong Article
6. Punctuation	33. Missing/Extra/Wrong Mark

In another study conducted with the participation of a group of Taiwanese student whose mother tongue is Mandarin Chinese, Wu and Garza (2014) examined EFL learners' writing samples following taxonomy of grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. They found that participants made more mistakes on interlingual/transfer errors than on intralingual/developmental errors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This investigation was concerned generally to see how the written performances of freshmen and sophomore students differ; the extent of difference between the number of words, t-units and errors in the writings of the two groups. Since picture stories assigned to students serve as written documents, the research design implemented in this study was Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA), which involves systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic. These documents also ‘include advertisements; agendas, attendance registers, and minutes of meetings; manuals; background papers; books and brochures; diaries and journals; event programs (i.e., printed outlines); letters and memoranda; maps and charts; newspapers (clippings/articles); press releases; program proposals, application forms, and summaries; radio and television program scripts; organizational or institutional reports; survey data; and various public records’ (Bowen, 2009; p.27-28).

When the researchers focus on document analysis, the implementation process is of crucial importance. O’Leary (2014) suggests in order to carry out document analysis the researchers should: plan for all contingencies; gather the documents; review their credibility; interrogate their witting and unwitting evidence; reflect and refine the process; and finally analyze the data.

Participants

The participants who took part in the present study were 118 Turkish BA students majoring in English Language Teaching. 59 of the participants were freshmen and 59 of them were sophomores.

Instrument

Only one instrument was utilized to collect data for this study. The picture story task which was drawn by a junior student was assigned as a writing topic for freshmen and sophomores. The students were required to spend 60 minutes on writing the down picture story using their own words.

Upon collecting the essays in the first step the researchers counted the number of words and t-unit in each essay. The next step was an attempt to identify the error types in essays. Then, a number of selected grammatical and lexical features were examined for specific frequency counts as well as correct or incorrect use. The basis for marking and categorizing errors was the Kroll’s (1994) error classification. Since article errors can be grouped under word-level choice errors and Kroll’s taxonomy is too detailed; and punctuation errors were observed only three times in the essays, we put these two categories under the word-level choice errors, which also helped us to better interpret the results. Thus the four major categories employed in this study are as follows: a) sentence structure errors, b) verb-centred errors, c) reference errors and d) word-level choice errors.

Finally, once the error types were thoroughly detected, a frequency count regarding the occurrence of error type in each text was performed.

RESULTS

As the first step of our analyses, we counted the number of words and t-units in the stories of both groups of students. Since the stories were written on paper, we counted the words and then identified the errors in each story manually. In the table below we present the results of independent samples t-test and descriptive statistics for word numbers in the stories of our participants.

Table 1. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for Word Numbers in the Stories of Freshmen and Sophomores

Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
1	59	234,92	69,028	2,632	116	,010
2	59	202,69	63,851			

As seen in Table 1, Independent sample t-test was used to determine the number of words used by freshmen and sophomores. Having a look at Table 1, we see that the mean number of words in the stories of freshmen is about 235 words, while the mean in the stories of sophomores is about 203 words. After t-test, it was found that number of words used by freshman is significantly different from sophomore ($t(116)=2.632$, $p<.05$).

In the second step of our analysis, we investigated whether there was again a significant difference between the written performances of the two groups in terms of t-unit numbers in the stories.

Table 2. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for Numbers of T-Units in the Stories of Freshmen and Sophomores

Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
1	59	28,31	8,180	1,642	116	,103
2	59	26,02	6,905			

Although the number of words provides us some insight about the performance of the students, to have better understanding of their performance we have to look at the number of t-units. Having a look at Table 2 we see that the mean number of t-units in the stories of freshmen and sophomores are about 28 and 26, respectively. The results of the t-test; however, show that the difference between the two groups is not significant ($t(116)=1.642$, $p>.05$). Thus the average number of words in t-units are about 8,50 words for freshmen and 8,0 words for sophomore students, which suggests that freshmen students employed more words per t-unit in their stories.

In the last analysis of the study, how many errors each group of student me in their stories, what are the types of these errors and whether there was a significant difference between the numbers of errors each group made.

Table 3. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for the Number of Errors in the Stories of Freshmen and Sophomores

Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p
1	59	10,6102	5,51805	3,133	116	,002

Before having a look at Table 3, we should give information about the total number of each group of students. There are 626 errors in the 59 stories of freshmen and 450 errors in the 59 stories of sophomores. The results of the independent samples t-test show that there was a significant difference between the numbers of errors each group of students made ($t(116)=3.133, p<.05$).

As mentioned in the Method section the four major categories employed in this study are as follow: a) sentence structure errors, b) verb-centred errors, c) reference errors and d) word-level choice errors. Below, we will deal with these error types, citing some of the participants' verbatim remarks at the introduction of each error. The first type of errors to be handled is sentence structure errors because this category is by far the most occurring type of error in the stories of both groups.

They didn't know how spent this money. (Freshman Participant #2)
This wasn't enough for them. They want to go on holiday. (Freshman Participant #2)

The first sentence is an example of "aberrant clause" and the second sentence is an example of "parallel structure" errors classified under sentence structure errors.

He played gambling. (Sophomore Participant #58)
They noticed that spending all money. He thinks that having a lot of money.
 (Sophomore Participant #57)

The two examples above from the stories of two sophomores reveal aberrant clause type error. This type of error could be labelled also as interlingual error because these two errors reflect the structure of Turkish language

One of most occurring three types of errors is verb-centred errors. Regarding verb-centred errors we would like cite the following verbatim examples:

He open the TV. (Freshman Participant #28)
The winner of lotto declared. (Freshman Participant #18)

His friend recommend him to play that. (Sophomore Participant #28)
He come across a lottery outlet. (Sophomore Participant #57)

As seen in the examples the prevailing type of error under the category of verb-centred error is subject-verb agreement errors. There are also some voice errors as exemplified by the second verbatim example above.

Reference errors are the least occurring type of errors in the writing of Turkish speaking EFL students. Below are two examples from each groups' stories.

John and her wife Mary watched this program. (Freshman Participant #14)
He and her girl friend screamed with happiness. (Freshman Participant #26)

He called her wife. (Sophomore Participant #8)
He realizes that he becamed winner of the lottery yourself. (Sophomore Participant #12)

As seen in the examples most of the reference errors labelled as “noun-pronoun agreement” type errors. Students used possessive determiner ‘her’ to refer to a male figure or the reflexive pronoun ‘yourself’ is used to refer to a ‘he’.

One of the subcategories of errors in reference errors is the use of epenthetic pronoun. The participant in this study never used an epenthetic pronoun in their stories because epenthetic pronoun is not used in Turkish relative class either. Regarding the use of epenthetic pronouns by Iranian learners, however, Schachter (1993) provides two exemplary sentences. According to Schachter Farsi is language in which relative clauses are marked by epenthetic pronouns so it is not uncommon among Iranian learners to use the epenthetic pronoun as follows:

Today you can find rural people that *they* don’t have education.
There is three roads which people can take *them* to reach Caspian.

Word-level choice errors are the second most occurring type of errors in the study. When we look at the verbatim examples below we see that word-level choice errors generally involve the use of redundant preposition or wrong preposition. As with verb-level errors, word-choice errors should be labelled as interlingual errors because the reasons underlying use of redundant or wrong preposition are to be found in the mother language.

My mom divorced with him. (Freshman Participant #15)
They decided to go to a good holiday. (Freshman Participant #16)
If he wins a lottery, he will be happy. (Sophomore Participant #18)
He got poor all the night (Sophomore Participant #37)

Wu and Garza (2014) found that the grammatical category is the dominant error category in their study. Especially, many subject-verb agreement errors were found from writing samples. Next, the second place error is lexical error. In the third place come the word choices. When we look the types of errors in this study in detail we see a similar picture in that the number of sentence structure, verb-centred and word-level choice errors are 219, 154, and 241, respectively. Only twelve errors out of 626 errors are labelled as reference errors. On the other hand sophomore students made 192 sentence structure errors, 88 verb-centred errors, 11 reference errors and 159 word-level choice errors.

Our study has provided useful classroom implications: we have conducted the study on freshman and sophomore year students in 2017. We will be using Kroll’s error taxonomy and sample errors from this study in our freshman year writing courses as to create awareness of possible error types committed by Turkish EFL learners. We also believe that this will provide useful insight for both pre-service and in-service teachers in Turkey since our analysis entails the errors of Turkish EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

This study compares errors produced by Turkish speaking EFL freshman and sophomore students. This study revealed that there are significant differences between freshmen and sophomores in terms of word count and the number of errors they made; however, although the number of words and average number of words per t-unit is higher in freshmen stories, the figure was not found to be significant. That the number of errors made by sophomores is significantly less than that of freshmen implies that following one-year study at the department there was a remarkable improvement in the writing ability of students.

Among the four categories of errors, sentence structure errors, verb-centred errors and word-level choice errors are the most observed error types. The number of reference errors was marginal. Therefore, we would like to highlight that in writing classes in teaching English teachers should put special emphasis on these error types.

Finally, despite some counter findings this study suggests that picture cued tasks are among the best means to foster creativity of the students and as a valid and reliable instrument in assessing writing.

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