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TARGETED INTERVENTIONS IN EFL: A STUDY OF ERROR PATTERNS AND SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY

Research scholar.
[1]Syriack Pulikkattu Thomas

Research supervisor.
[2]Dr Tamishra Swain

[1]Lecturer in English, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Oman
[2]Asst. Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, Banasthali University, Jaipur, India

Abstract

This study focuses on L2 error analysis and L2 syntactic complexity analysis (L2SCA) of EFL learners. The study employs a cross-sectional approach to investigate the types, frequency, and sources of errors through the analysis of 25 timed-written samples. Error analysis is conducted to categorize errors related to grammar, syntax, vocabulary and mechanics, offering insights into the learners' interlanguage. Complementing error analysis, L2SCA is used to measure syntactic complexity by evaluating various indices related to syntax such as mean length of sentence, clause density, and subordination. Combining error analysis and L2SCA, the current study aims to reveal patterns of syntactic maturity alongside common L2 learner errors which would contribute to a comprehensive understanding of learner proficiency. Moreover, the finding will help inform targeted pedagogical intervention to enhance leaner proficiency.

Key words

error analysis, syntactic complexity, interlanguage, grammatical errors, syntactic competence grammatical competence, language transfer, overgeneralization, subordination, coordination, clause density, pedagogical intervention, TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching), L2 Syntactic Complexity Analysis (L2SCA), interlingual errors, intralingual errors, linguistic errors, omission errors, implicit, focus-on-form, automatization

Introduction

Research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) provides significant insights into the challenges in language acquisition and the linguistic progression of learners over time. Error analysis is a process that systematically finds, categorizes, and investigates learners' errors, revealing patterns of prevalent linguistic problems that may indicate interlanguage development and the transfer of native language structures. Similarly, L2 syntactic complexity analysis provides insights into the learners' interlanguage's structural complexity, including sentence length, grammatical intricacy, and clause diversity. By investigating both the errors and syntactic complexity of EFL learners' interlanguage, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the learner language and devise pedagogical strategies for effective and targeted intervention.

learners and interlanguage

(Selinker, 1972/1973) introduced the construct of 'interlanguage', which provided greater insights into the nature of learner language. It views learner errors not as negative but as necessary transitional phases in the process of learning another language. A systematic analysis of learner language provides information on the strategies and processes involved in the acquisition, as well as the subsystems that constitute the learner's interlanguage. Weinreich discussed the concept of "interlingual identifications," (Weinreich,1953, as cited in Selinker, 1973, p. 33), a latent psychological structure present in the human brain during bilingualism when the learner interacts with multiple languages. Selinker compares it to Lenneberg's "latent language structure," a (Lenneberg as cited in Selinker, 1973, p. 33) which is a previously formed arrangement in the brain and is like universal grammar in a biological sense. An infant's brain changes this "latent language structure" into the realized structure of a specific grammar as they grow up (Selinker, 1972/1973, p. 35). Nemser (1971/1973) asserted that the learner's language is "an approximative system “originates from the interface between the target language and the learner's native tongue. This deviant linguistic system is employed by the learners as they attempt to utilize the target language. This approximative system, which varies depending on several external and internal factors such as the learner's exposure to the target language, learning style and characteristics, proficiency level, etc., is transitional in nature. According to Corder, the learner's language reflects "his transitional competence" (Corder,1967, p. 10). This competence has a 'built-in syllabus' that is systematic and definitive, although it may exhibit random deviations because they reflect the learner's internal process of hypothesis testing the nature of the target language. Therefore, learner errors provide information about the language that he or she has learned to date. Selinker identifies five central processes in second language learning, which are language transfer**,** transfer of training strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication**,** and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material and analysis of learner language shall relate to one or more of these aspects of second language learning (Selinker, 1972/1973, p. 35). The data relevant to any systematic analysis of L2 learning is “(1) utterances in the learner’s native language (NL) produced by the learner, (2) IL utterances produced by the learner, and (3) TL utterances produced by the native speakers of that TL” (Selinker, 1972/1973, p. 35). According to Ellis, analysis of learner language provides *“(1)* a description of the linguistic systems (i.e., the interlanguages) that learners construct at different stages of development and (2) an explanation of the processes and factors involved in acquiring an L2." (Ellis & Barkhuizen (2009, p. 15). Learner errors hold significance in three ways: (1) they provide the teacher with an analysis of what the learner has and has not yet acquired; (2) they inform the researcher about the process of language learning and the strategies learners use; and (3) they hold significance for the learners, as their errors reflect their testing of hypotheses about the rules of the target language. *(Corder,1982)*

Error and mistake

Despite the frequent interchange of the terms error and mistake, error analysis clearly distinguishes between them. According to Corder, errors are those that betray the ‘transitional competence’ of the learner, whereas mistakes are those of performance. Adults also make mistakes in their language use, which external factors like memory lapses and fatigue account for. The mistakes that occur in adult speech are "adventitious artifacts of linguistic performance" (Corder,1982, p. 10), and they do not necessarily reflect any deficit in the speaker's competence, as the speaker is capable of self-correcting such mistakes. Second language speakers often make similar mistakes in their speech and writing. Such errors are errors of performance, while “those which reveal their underlying knowledge of the language to date” ... are errors of the learner’s ‘transitional competence’ which will be ‘systematic’ while the former would be ‘unsystematic’ in nature. Hence, errors that reveal the learner’s transitional competence are the subject matter of error analysis.

errors can be broadly classified into two categories: interlingual errors, which stem from the influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the target language (TL), and intralingual errors, which arise from the complexities and peculiarities of the target language itself, such as overgeneralization of rules. Similarly, errors can be treated as overt errors, which can be identified by examining the sentence or utterance in which they occur, and covert errors which become apparent only upon examination of a larger stretch of language (Ellis & Barkhuizen (2009). Further, errors can be categorized as grammatical errors, errors due to omission, misinformation, misordering, overgeneralization, and transfer errors. Similarly, errors can be global, which “violates the overall structure of a sentence and, for this reason, may make it difficult to process,” or local, which “affects only a single constituent in the sentence” (Ellis, 2003, p. 20).

collection of samples of learner language

The raw data for analyzing learner language can be had from three sources: "(1) non-linguistic performance data, (2) samples of learner language, and (3) reports from learners about their own learning." (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 15) and the process of errors analysis has five distinct phases which are (1) collection of the sample of learner language, (2) identification of errors, (3) description of errors, (4) explanation of errors, and (5) error evaluation. (Corder (1974, as cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 57). Ellis and Barkhuizen (2009) suggest three types of samples of learner language: naturally occurring samples, clinically elicited samples, and experimentally elicited samples. These three types of samples of learner language are "a continuum, with naturally occurring samples on the one extreme, which places no restriction on language production, having the primary focus on message content, and experimentally elicited samples of the other extreme, with the primary focus on message form, while clinically elicited samples come between the two extremes, where "control is exercised through the choice of task, but learners are primarily expected to be engaged in message conveyance for a pragmatic purpose" (p. 24) and the choice of writing genre and its timing can significantly impact "the macro and micro linguistic characteristics of the samples" (p. 29).

The current study has been carried out using naturally occurring samples, which are a collection of argumentative essays as "an obvious source of natural written samples *is essays produced in an examination"* (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009, p. 30). The subjects are twenty-five Omani students from Level 4 of the General Foundation Program (GFP) of university education. They have been exposed to the English language in an EFL context through TBLT in formal classroom settings for over 10 years in school and 2 years of study at the university, in a graded and integrated curricula. The learners are expected to have acquired knowledge of grammar, syntax, required lexis and pragmatics of the language, as well as critical thinking skills. Moreover, listening and reading skills exams are theme-based which are expected to provide learners with the required schema for the writing tasks.

Academic writing at Level 4 of the GFP of the university requires learners to respond to two writing tasks within a time frame of 70 minutes. Task 1 requires learners to analyze and interpret visual data, such as graphs and charts, within 25 minutes, while Task 2 requires them to write an argumentative essay of at least 250 words within 40 minutes. However, learners have the freedom to adjust the duration of each task according to their convenience within the 70-minute time limit.

Furthermore, the learning objectives of the General Foundation Program (GFP) are mapped with those of the Common European Frameworks of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR). Accordingly, Level 4 of the university's GFP corresponds to Level B2 of the CEFR. The Vantage Level, the descriptor for Level B2, represents the independent user level on the global scale of the Common Reference Levels (Council of Europe, 2001, p.115). It means that, so far as writing competence is concerned, graduates of Level 4 of GFP should be able to "produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue, giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options." (UTAS GFP Common English Curriculum, 2019, p. 5).

Grammar and syntax interface with each other. In fact, they are mutually so inclusive that any one competence cannot be investigated totally exclusive of the other. CEFR defines grammatical competence as … "as knowledge of, and ability to use, the grammatical resources of a language…. the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognizing well-formed phrases and sentences… (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 112–113). Similarly, CEFR defines syntax as "the organization of words in to sentences in terms of the categories, elements, classes, structures processes, and relations involved often presented in the form of a set rules" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.115). Therefore, the current study intended to investigate learners' grammatical and syntactic competences through error and syntactic competence analyses through the analysis of learners' writing samples. The descriptor of the illustrative scale for overall written production of B2 level states that learners "can write clear detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his /her field of interest, synthesizing and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources" (Council of Europe, 2001, p.61).

The timed- samples consists of twenty-five argumentative essays. First, a reconstruction of the learner samples was prepared, then, structures reflecting standard use were eliminated from the original samples, and then, identified sentence parts in the original learner samples that clearly deviated from the reconstructed material. Following Ellis (2009), error analysis of the learner samples was conducted using a combination of both linguistic taxonomy and surface structure taxonomy, Similarly, the same learner samples were also subjected to syntactic complexity analysis (L2SCA). However, the subjects were not interviewed in this instance as it was a Level Exit Examination where the learners are not available after the examination.

Moreover, it is practically impossible for the learners to ascertain the intended structures later because "errors are indeterminate, making it impossible for learners to specify which particular construction they were attempting to use" (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2009, p. 59.)

The study sought to find out:

1. What types of common errors are evident in the academic writing of L4 learners?
2. Does L4 learners' writing reflect grammatic competence commensurate with CEFR B2
3. Does L4 learners' writing reflect syntactic competence commensurate with CEFR B2

Error description

Description of errors is the process of judging the grammaticality and acceptability of learner language against the reconstructed texts. According to James (1998), "the description of errors is essentially a comparative process, the data being the original erroneous utterances and the reconstructed utterances" (p.128). Similarly, Ellis & Barkhuizen (2009) state that "errors should be classified in terms of the target language categories that have been violated rather than the linguistic categories used by the learner" (p.60) and for the description of errors, a linguistic taxonomy or a surface structure taxonomy can be used (James 1998). According to Dulay, et al. (1982), "a surface strategy taxonomy highlights the ways surface structures are altered" (p.150) because learners may alter surface structures in their language production by omission of 'a necessary item', or by addition of an 'unnecessary item', misinform items' or they may 'misorder them' (p.150). Nevertheless, these two types of taxonomies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Hence, the present study has employed a combination of linguistic taxonomy, following James (1998) and a surface structure taxonomy, in line with Dulay, et al. (1982) and the frequency and percentage of each category and sub-category of error were recorded as given in table number 1 below.

Table 1 error description

sample # 2	error	reconstruction	linguistic description	surface structure description
	..study or work….	….studying or working ..	verb phrase/regular verbs/present progressive	misinformation-regularization
	..study or work are	..studying or working is ….	noun phrase /subject-verb agreement/singular verb	misinformation-regularization
	.. a better…	…better….	adjective phrase/regular adjective /comparative	simple addition
	…students gives…	…students give…	noun phrase/subject-verb agreement / plural verb	misinformation-regularization
	..others doesn't…	..others do not…	verb phrase /subject-verb agreement/plural verb	misinformation-regularization

analysis of the sample of learner language revealed that learners a good number of learners face challenges in their grammar and syntax of the target language. The errors have been categorized as grammatical errors, errors of omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering.

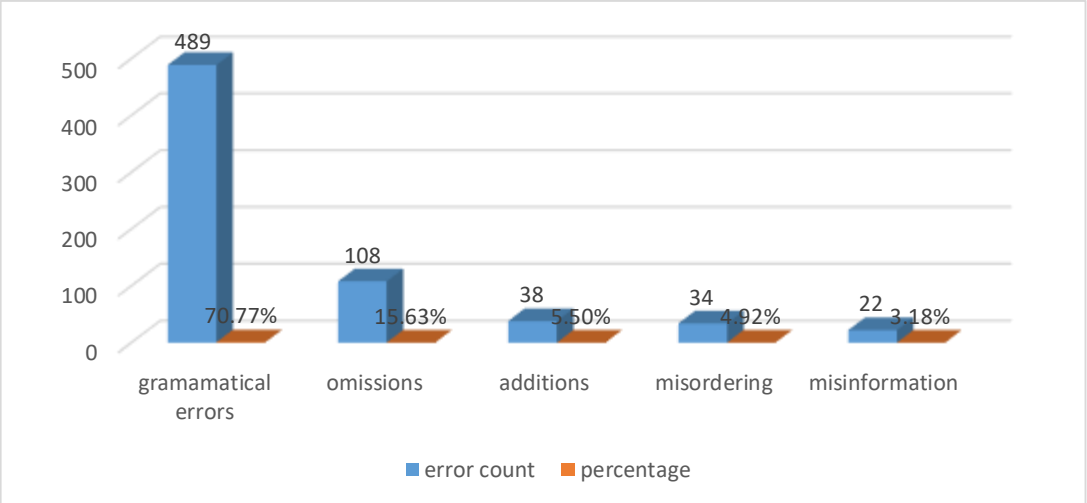

Figure 1.0 learner errors and categories

1. Grammatical errors

Grammatical errors accounted for 70.77%, indicating challenges in learners' mastery of syntax and structure. These errors are in the areas of subject-verb agreement, verb forms, including orthographic errors, tense and aspect, use of pronouns, prepositions, and article errors as illustrated by the diagram below:

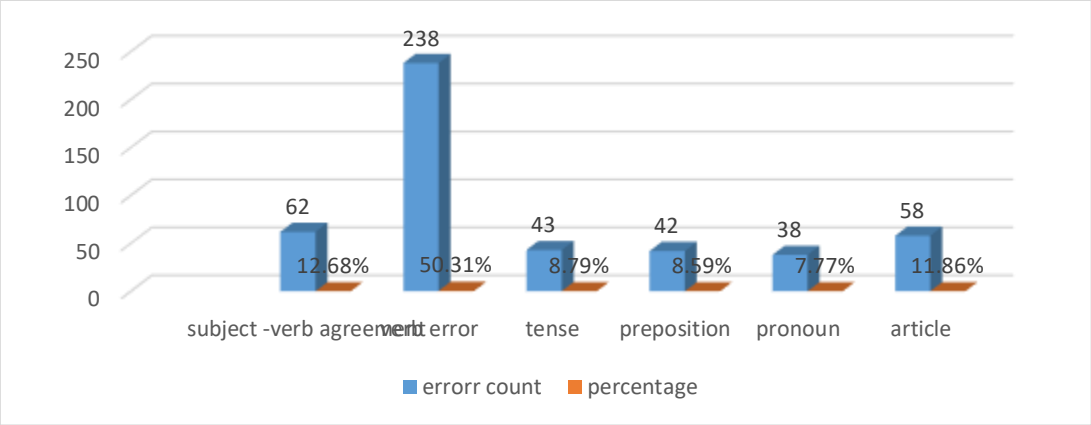

Figure 1.1 error count and percentage of grammatical errors

a. Subject -verb agreement

Errors of subject-verb agreement accounted for about 12.68% as in:

- … the other *students gives* an important information….

b. verb errors

general verb errors accounted for the highest percentage (50.31%) which includes orthographic errors, omissions of copula 'be', etc. betraying learners' insufficient knowledge of the orthographic system of target lexical items and their conjugation as:

- ….. give the parts of work for all *they can fished* that in a small time …

c. tense and aspect

Similarly, errors related to tense and aspect are pegged at 8.59% reveal lacunae in their expected grammatical competence as:

- Moreover, if the students work while *study* the students *will leazy* and tired.
- For example, …. do in group *should will finished* in a short time.

d. Errors of pronoun

Errors of pronoun use accounted for 7.77% suggesting that appropriate use of pronouns is yet to be mastered by the learners. This includes both inappropriate use and omissions of pronouns as:

- … each student shares *our* knowledge and *our our* learning with teams….

e. Prepositional errors

Prepositional errors accounted for 8.59% which clearly indicates that appropriate use of prepositions of various categories has not yet become part of the learners' interlanguage as:

- … rely *for themself*" → "rely on themselves"

f. article errors

Likewise, article errors account for 11.86% of the errors under the category of grammatical errors. It includes both inappropriate use of articles as well as rampant omissions of articles affecting the natural flow and specificity of expressions as:

- ….. some student have *a written* skills and others have *a speaker* skill….

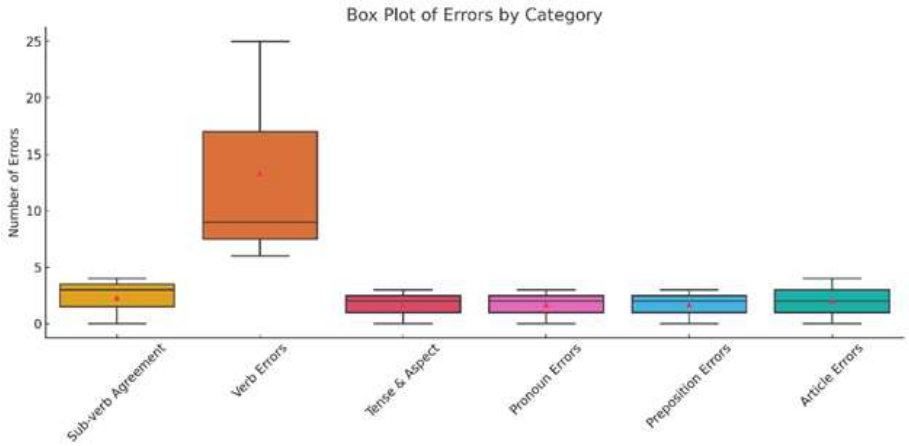

Figure 3: boxplot of error by category

The boxplot above was produced with a view to provide a detailed view of the range of grammatical errors of the learners. In the case of subject -verb agreement, the central line of the box representing the median is at **3**, indicating that half of the learners made at least 3 sub-verb agreement errors while the interquartile range (IQR) box extends from zero to four indicating that most students made zero to four errors in subject-verb agreement. However, the minimum and the maximum ranges are relatively low which is suggestive of most students have similar pattern of error count. In the category of verb related errors, the median value is 9 which suggests that half of the learners made 9 or more verb related errors. Moreover, IQR of this category ranges between 6 and 25, with outliers, indicating very high variability and challenge in learners' performance. This higher range is due to counting their orthographic errors such as spelling in the samples. However, median of tense and aspect errors, pronoun errors, preposition errors and article errors are 2 suggesting that at least two errors exist per sample, which is negligible.

2. Omission errors

Omission errors account for 15.63% of the data collected. According to Dulay et al. "omission errors are characterized by the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance" (Dulay, et al. 1982, p. 154). In other words, omission includes both content morphemes and grammatical morphemes as in:

- Thirdly, gives strong personality. (Thirdly, it (working in teams) gives team members strong personality.
- When they give some work for their can not do that. (When they are given some work, they cannot do that)

3. Misordering

Errors due to misordering, which constitute 4.92% of the data, "are characterized by the incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance" (Dulay et, al. 1982, p.162) as in:

- ….. argue that it is good to study or work in teams for students. (…. argue that it is *better for students to study or work in teams).*

4. Misinformation

Errors due to misinformation constitute 3.18% which "are characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure" (Dulay et.al, 1982, p.1582) which result from

Regularization "in which a regular marker is used in the place of an irregular one" (p. 158), as in:

- ……. and *don't spent* more time for work

Alternating forms which are "apparently fairly free alternation of various members of a class with each other" (p.161) as in:

- "First, *some people think he can work together* to do some projects or something eas *because he can take some relax to do his friends the work and he work less then his friend."*

5. Addition errors

Errors due to additions accounts for 5.50% which result from "the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance" (p.156) which manifest through:

Double marking where two items instead of one are marked as in:

- ……*he don't want to do something* all the work so go for one person……

Regularization wherein "a marker that is typically added to a linguistic item is erroneously added to exceptional items of the given class that do not take a marker" (p.157) as in:

Simple addition as in:

- ……. tell *a* good members…. (…… tell good members …)

Global errors

Apart from what has already been discussed above, learner samples also contained several global errors in their language use which "violates the overall structure of a sentence and, for this reason, may make it difficult to process," as in:

- The second reasons, when I stady in groups maby I don't anderstand the teacher I can't ask my frind but when stady alon I can not ask any one and I fill not happy.

Another area that calls for attention is that learner samples contained multiple instances of sentence fragmentation, especially due to omission of the grammatical subject of the construction as in:

- "Thirdly, gives strong personality".

In general, analysis of the data of learner errors reveals that there is room for targeted intervention.

Syntactic competence and L2SCA

To evaluate learners' syntactic competence in the target language, the same sample corpora of learner language were subjected to L2SCA. The data set yielded by the fourteen indices of the L2SCA was further subjected to analysis of the L2SCA data set provides insights into the distribution, central tendency, and variability of each index as in table no:2.

Table 2: L2SCA descriptive statistics

L2SCA INDICES	MLS	MLT	MLC	C/S	VP/T	C/T	DC/C	DC/T	T/S	CT/T	CP/T	CP/C	CN/T	CN/C
SAMPLES	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
MEAN	10.78688	15.49862	9.392952	1.162972	2.370308	1.657556	0.427672	0.71864	0.70072	0.547652	0.499652	0.301464	1.543972	0.928728
MEDIAN	10.5625	15.76	9.2632	1.1111	2.4	1.6522	0.4474	0.72	0.7	0.56	0.4737	0.2647	1.4286	0.9333
STAND.DEV	2.132276	1.881727	0.983123	0.277441	0.276096	0.191768	0.071621	0.173959	0.139596	0.128011	0.195464	0.115064	0.505092	0.266302
MINIMUM	7.1591	11.1429	7.9524	0.7059	1.8286	1.1714	0.1951	0.2286	0.4412	0.2	0.1364	0.0909	0.8077	0.5
MAXIMUM	15.0952	18.6	11.6552	1.8261	2.9524	2	0.5161	0.9565	1.1304	0.7778	0.913	0.5	2.6667	1.6

The line graph above reflects the mean values of various syntactic indices, providing insights into the average syntactic complexity in the writing of the learners. Higher mean values are observed for the Mean Length of Sentence (MLT), Mean Length of T-Unit (MLT), and Mean Length of Clause (MLC). MLS being around 10.78 and MLT with a peak close to 16 indicate that learners can construct longer sentences and T-units. However, the sharp decline in the values of all other eleven indices, particularly the lower value of Clause per Sentences (C/S), suggests that though the sentences may be rather long, they do not necessarily contain multiple clauses. Moreover, the graph presents consistently lower values for the indices such as Verb Phrases per T-unit (VP/T), Dependent Clauses per Clause (DC/C), T-units per Sentence (T/S), and Complex T-units per T-unit (CT/T) which are suggestive of limited use of syntactic structures that involve subordination or coordination. Indices Coordinate Phrases per Clause (CP/C) and (Complex Noun per T-unit (CN/T) with values 0.301464 and1.543972, respectively, suggest that learners may incorporate coordinate phrases and complex noun structures in their sentence constructions.

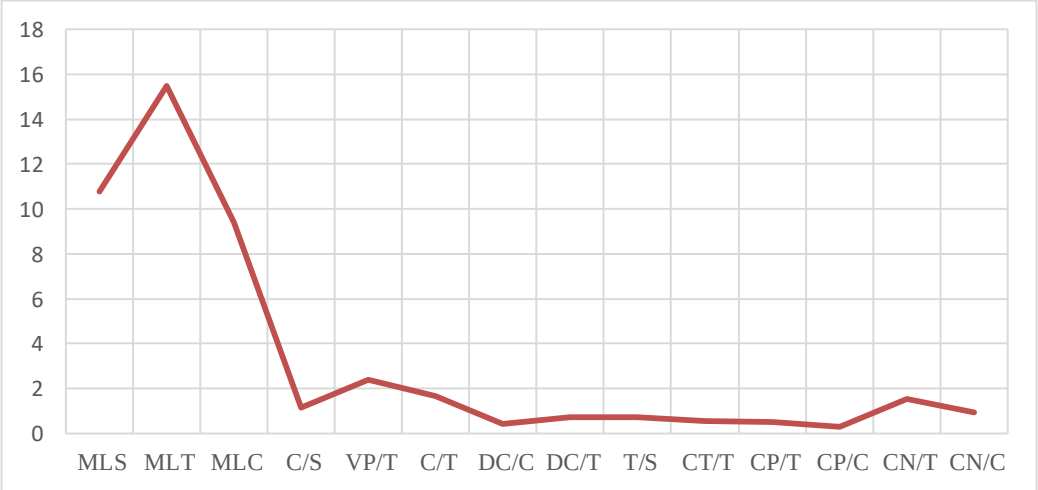

Figure 4: mean values of L2SCA indices

Explanation of errors

The source and cause of learner errors can be traced to the learners 'psycholinguistic sources which refer to "the processing mechanism involved in L2 use and to the nature of the L2 knowledge system" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009, p.62) and sociolinguistic sources of errors. Learners often encounter difficulty in processing their L2 knowledge when they communicate in the target language. According to Ellis, "if the L2 forms have not yet been automatized, they require controlled processing, which places a heavy demand on the learners' information processing systems. The result is that they resort to the use of non-standard forms that have been acquired earlier and are automatized" (p. 62).

The two major categories of errors are interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors manifest as errors of 'transfer' and errors of 'borrowing' where transfer refers "to the introduction of an L1 form into the interlanguage system" whereas "borrowing involves the temporary use of an L1 form as a communication strategy but does not entail incorporation of the form into the interlanguage system" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009, p.65). The factors that determine L1 transfer are "prototypicality, the extent to which a form is perceived as basic and natural, and language distance, the extent to which the L2 is linguistically close or distant from the target language" and accordingly, "learners are less likely to transfer forms that are non-prototypical and if their L1 is distant from the target language" (p.65). Intralingual errors are the result of 'learning strategies' that learners, irrespective of their L1 background, use in communication. According to James (1998), learners may resort to false analogy- a kind of over -generalization, misanalysis – learners may take the singular possessive as plural form because of the – s, incomplete rule application- a kind of under-generalization, exploiting redundancy – omitting grammatical features that do not contribute to the meaning of the utterance, over-looking cooccurrence restrictions, , and System simplification – simplifying the burden of learning by substituting a single form where the target language uses two or more. Errors may also be explained as natural which means the natural code breaking strategies of the learner or as induced errors which result from 'the way language was taught" (p.66). However, it is not easy to ascertain the source of a particular error as "many errors are likely to be explicable in terms of multiple rather single sources" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2009, p.66).

According to Dulay et al. (1982), "language learners omit grammatical morphemes much more frequently than content words" and among the grammatical morphemes, "copula (is, are) and – ing marker are used earlier in the English acquisition process than are simple past tense and third person markers" (p.155). Omission of content words normally does not occur in the language production of L2 adult learners as they have been exposed to the language for longer duration and they have achieved greater cognitive maturity, yet if omission of content morphemes occurs in the utterances of adult learners "it is usually occasioned by lack of vocabulary... (p.155).

Misordering errors may occur in simple(direct) and embedded (indirect questions) in both L1 and L2 utterances of learners as they may use declarative forms of sentences in framing questions. Similarly, misordering errors may occur due to "word-for word- translation of native language surface structures" (Dulay et.al, 1982, p.163).

Implications for teaching

The current study presents opportunities and challenges for further targeted pedagogical intervention. The higher values in terms of grammar errors demand targeted direct instruction in grammatical rules, given the situation that they do not have opportunity to acquire TL grammar beyond classrooms. Another remedial step could be contextualized grammar practice that requires the use of specific grammatical items rather than isolated drills, through TBLT. Since the skills integrated curriculum does not demand overt teaching of grammar, implicit focus-on-form approach may be beneficial to the learners.

Likewise, the L2SCA analysis suggests that some of the learners have not yet automatized the basic structures of sentence construction. The mean values s for MLS, MLT, and MLC suggest that learners can construct rather longer sentences and T-units. However, it does not necessarily entail any syntactic complexity in sentence construction. This is further evidenced by the consistently lower mean values of other eleven indices related to subordination and coordination which range from 2.370308 (VP/T) to as low as 0.5(CP/C) indicate that learners lack proficiency in utilizing complex syntactic structures.

Presence of longer sentential constructions, as indicated by the higher mean values of indices MLS and MLT, without corresponding clausal complexity, as evidenced by the rather lower mean values of other indices related to subordination and coordination, suggest that learners may benefit from focused instruction on subordinate clauses and coordinate clauses to attain desired level of syntactic complexity in sentence construction. Secondly, the consistently lower values of indices such as DC/C, T/S, CT/T related to

subordination and coordination indicate that while learners attempt to construct longer sentences, they struggle to embed clauses in sentence construction. Hence, targeted intervention to provide practice in using varied sentence structures and clause embedding could help improve learners' syntactic competence. Overall, the learners' syntactic competence can be placed on the average performance across various syntactic indices.

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