



An Empirical Study Of Common Grammatical And Lexical Errors Among Beginner-Level Undergraduate German Learners At Doon University

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Abstract: This study examines the grammatical and lexical errors made by the selected students registered at the undergraduate programme at the Department of German Studies of German at Doon University, Dehradun. The focus of this study primarily lies at the errors exhibited at the beginners level. It is generally understood, Learner errors constitute a central area of inquiry in second language acquisition (SLA), offering valuable insights into how linguistic systems are gradually internalized. Drawing upon the theoretical constructs of Error Analysis, Interlanguage, and Intralanguage processes, this research interprets learner errors as systematic manifestations of developing linguistic competence rather than random deviations. Data were collected from 31 A1-level students through class observation notes, Google forms questionnaires and submitted written assignments. A total of 322 errors were identified and categorized. The analysis indicates that grammatical errors account for approximately 65% of all instances, with recurring issues in article usage, case marking, and verb placement. Lexical errors, comprising around 35%, are largely associated with direct translation, misuse of cognates, and instances of code-mixing influenced by English and Hindi. The findings of the this study suggest that learner errors emerge from both interlingual transfer and intralingual developmental processes. While first-language influence remains significant, especially in syntactic structuring, learners also demonstrate rule-based generalizations characteristic of early-stage language acquisition. The study concludes by emphasizing pedagogical strategies that integrate grammatical instruction with contextualized vocabulary learning.

Index Terms - Error Analysis, Interlanguage, German language pedagogy

I. INTRODUCTION

Second language learning is rarely an error-free or linear process. Instead, it unfolds through closely related and transitional stages of experimentation, partial understanding, and gradual refinement of the linguistic competence. Within this developmental trajectory, errors serve as vital indicators of how learners actively gain knowledge of a new language. Recent research in SLA no longer treats errors as mere shortcomings; rather, they are understood as evidence of cognitive engagement and hypothesis testing (Ellis, 1994). Further, Selinker (1972) argued that learner output follows internal rules and patterns, reflecting evolving competence rather than random mistakes.

In order to understand the matter at depth, one must take the growing interest in learning foreign languages in India in the recent times in consideration as background, particularly, in the European language due to certain socioeconomic and global factors, which reflects India's increasing contact economically and politically significant European countries. The institutions of higher education and professional networks in Europe also attract a lot of interest in learning German, French, Spanish,

Italian etc. along with English among young Indian learners. A globalized world order era also has contributed in expanding the influence of foreign cultures and languages, which as a result has resulted in an increasing trend of opting for foreign languages as a vocation and also as a general interest. In this regard, the challenges faced by Indian students in acquiring these languages are perplexing in nature often tied to their multilingual backgrounds. Regional languages and English are prevalent in both daily communication and higher education in India. Although the multilingualism offers learners a degree of adaptability, it also leads to interference when they strive to acquire a new linguistic system. The mistakes they commit in grammar and vocabulary are not arbitrary; rather, they are systematic, influenced by the structures of the languages they are already familiar with. For learners of German as a foreign language, the acquisition process presents particular challenges. German grammar is structurally distinct from both English and Hindi, especially in areas such as grammatical gender, inflectional morphology, and syntactic organization. Beginners often struggle to reconcile these differences, resulting in patterns of errors that are both systematic and predictable.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Error Analysis as Theoretical Background

The shift from Contrastive Analysis to Error Analysis marked a turning point in SLA research. While early approaches emphasized the predictive role of L1 interference, subsequent studies demonstrated that many learner errors could not be explained solely on this basis (Ellis, 1994). Corder (1981) argued that errors are systematic and reveal the learner's internalized linguistic system at a given stage of development. This perspective reframed errors as constructive rather than detrimental, positioning them as essential data for understanding language acquisition. Further developments in Error Analysis highlighted its methodological importance. By identifying, classifying, and interpreting errors, researchers can gain insight into the strategies learners employ as they navigate unfamiliar linguistic structures (James, 1998). This approach remains particularly useful in classroom-based research, where learner output provides a rich source of empirical data.

Interlanguage as Learners' Tool

Selinker (1972) coined the concept of interlanguage, which in fact provides a comprehensive framework for understanding learner language. This refers to the evolving linguistic system(s) that learners construct as they progress toward target language proficiency while learning a foreign language. This system is neither identical to the learner's native language nor fully aligned with the target language; instead, it represents an intermediate stage characterized by its own internal rules. It may be interesting to observe, Interlanguage is subject to continuous restructuring by its users as it is inherently dynamic. Learners test hypotheses about linguistic forms actively, leading to patterns of usage that may deviate from target norms but remain internally consistent. Gass and Selinker (2008) emphasize that interlanguage is caused by multiple factors, including language transfer, overgeneralization, and communicative strategies. A key feature of interlanguage is that some incorrect language forms can become fixed, even with continued learning and practice. This shows that language learning is complex and may require specific teaching strategies to help learners improve.

Role of Intralingual and Cognitive Processes

In addition to interlanguage influences, learner errors often arise from intralingual processes, which originate within the target language itself. These include overgeneralization, simplification, and incomplete rule application (Richards, 1974). Such errors are particularly common at the beginner level, where learners rely on limited knowledge to construct sentences. For instance, a learner may apply a single grammatical rule across multiple contexts, resulting in incorrect forms. This tendency reflects a natural cognitive strategy aimed at reducing complexity and achieving communicative efficiency. Gradually as learners gain more exposure to the language, these generalized rules are refined accordingly.

Grammatical Errors in Learning German

German presents a number of structural challenges for learners, especially those whose native languages lack comparable features. The system of grammatical gender, for example, requires learners to assign nouns to one of three categories (masculine, feminine, neuter), often without clear semantic cues. Similarly, the case system necessitates changes in articles and noun forms depending on their

syntactic role. Verb placement rules, particularly the verb-second (V2) constraint, also pose certain difficulties. Learners frequently transfer English word order patterns, leading to deviations from standard German syntax. Studies have consistently identified these areas as major sources of error in beginner-level learners (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

Lexical Errors and Vocabulary Development

Lexical competence extends beyond the knowledge of individual words to include appropriate usage in context. Learners often rely on strategies such as direct translation, approximation, and code-switching when faced with lexical gaps (Odlin, 1989). While these strategies facilitate communication, they can also lead to errors. False cognates represent a particularly persistent challenge. Words that appear similar across languages may differ significantly in meaning (cf. faux amis), leading learners to make incorrect assumptions. Additionally, limited vocabulary often results in over-reliance on familiar words, reducing the precision and clarity of expression.

The Multilingual Context of Indian Learners

The linguistic environment in India adds another layer of complexity to foreign language learning. Most learners operate within a multilingual framework, with Hindi and English serving as primary languages of communication. This linguistic diversity enhances cognitive skills and cross-linguistic awareness, aiding vocabulary acquisition and communication. However, constant language transfer can also lead to grammatical mistakes and lexical errors when learning foreign languages, as interference from familiar languages affects accuracy and fluency. Research suggests that multilingual learners draw on all available linguistic resources, resulting in a hybrid interlanguage system that incorporates elements from multiple languages (Ortega, 2009). This phenomenon is clearly reflected in patterns of code-mixing and structural transfer observed in learner output. Consequently, understanding the dual impact of India's multilingual context is essential for designing pedagogical approaches that both leverage learners' linguistic repertoire and mitigate interference in foreign language acquisition.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed-method design that combines qualitative interpretation with quantitative analysis of error frequency. The study involved thirty one A1-level undergraduate students registered in the BA Hons in German programme at the Department of German Studies of Doon University, Dehradun, India. At the beginners level, students at the department learn German grammar four hours a week along with supplementary courses on spoken German and cultural history. The mixed batch of students had nearly equal sex ratio with female being relatively more in numbers. They fall under the common age group of 17 to 19 years old and did not have prior knowledge of German before beginning to pursue a graduation in German at the university. The students come from the state of Uttarakhand; around two thirds from Dehradun and its suburbs predominantly, and the remaining from the hill regions of Garhwal and few from the Kumaon region. The data on the concerned errors was retrieved from various means for a duration of around a month. Information was gathered from analyzing the class observation notes, Google forms questionnaires and submitted written assignments, which varied in the language usage, context and progression. Errors were further put in tables and examined and divided into lexical and grammatical categories. Each category was further subdivided to allow for in-depth analysis. Patterns were eventually analyzed in light of SLA theories and their frequencies were computed.

IV. ANALYSIS ON GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL ERRORS

Within the locale of this research paper the analysis on the language usage of the beginners level German language students at Doon University revealed that there are a variety of reasons which produce grammatical and lexical errors among the young learners due to L1 interference in cross-linguistic patterns. Errors are concentrated in distinct grammatical domains, reflecting the influence of learners' multilingual backgrounds. By and large, the most common grammatical error category was the inappropriate and incorrect use and also omission of articles – also through case marking. Since Indian languages do not have definite or indefinite articles, this influenced the students in the article usage frequently. Often students tend towards the over-usage of zero article in almost all situations where in reality an article was required. For example, it was commonly observed that the students said

“Ich habe Buch” (I have book) rather than saying “Ich habe ein Buch” (I have a book) or “Ich habe das Buch” (I have the book). Learners frequently failed to adjust the articles according to case, number and gender, as observed in the sentences “Ich sehe ein Mann” (I see a (nominative) man) instead of “Ich sehe einen Mann” (I see a (accusative) man); or “eine schön deutsch Stadt” instead of “eine schöne deutsche Stadt”.

The second most prominent grammatical error originates in the usage of the verbs. Verb-related errors, including incorrect auxiliary selection, verb placement, and tense formation, represent around 22% of the observed errors, particularly in subordinate clauses and modal constructions, demonstrating transfer effects from L1 syntactic patterns. For example, one sees that in the wrong V2 placement of the main verb as in “Heute kann ich komme nicht” or in the double application of the present tense verb as in “Ich bin esse Pizza”, evidently an interference from English continuous tense (I am eating pizza). Learners often produced structures such as “Heute ich gehe zur Uni,” (Today I go to the university) reflecting the influence of English syntax while missing out the general rule of German to keep the conjugated verb at the second position. The separable verbs in German also cause troubles among the beginners as the students often forget to cut the verbal prefix and bring it to the end at. For example, “ich einkaufe” rather than “ich kaufe ein”.

The remaining grammatical errors are about the misplacement of the adjectives and incorrect usage of adjectives across gender, number and cases. Errors in case marking and preposition usage indicate difficulty in applying accusative and dative forms as well as appropriate prepositional structures. For example, there are certain verbs which strictly take dative form, such as *helfen* or *zeigen*. The students were often making mistakes of writing “Ich helfe dich” in the accusative form instead of “Ich helfe dir” in the dative form or “Ich zeige Sie” instead of “Ich zeige Ihnen”. Students also find issues with the verbal prefixes, as in “ge-” prefixes for the past participle form and often overdid that by saying “gevergessen” instead of “vergessen” in past participle form. Apart from these, a some of the grammatical errors were also found in the study on wrong placement of negation and in locating the difference between “nicht” and “kein”.

Lexical errors, although less frequent, had on the other hand a significant impact on communicative effectiveness. Many learners tended to depend on direct translation strategies, producing expressions that were structurally acceptable but pragmatically inappropriate, often result from literal translation or overgeneralization from the native languages. The analysis of lexical errors produced by beginner-level German learners at Doon University reveals consistent patterns shaped by their multilingual linguistic backgrounds.

A significant proportion of errors arises from cross-linguistic influence, where learners draw on existing lexical and semantic knowledge while attempting to communicate in German. This often results in inappropriate word choices, non-standard expressions, and deviations from target-like usage. For instance, learners produce structurally acceptable but pragmatically incorrect expressions such as „Ich bin heiß“ instead of „Mir ist heiß“, reflecting misinterpretation of experiential constructions. In other cases, lexical gaps are filled through direct borrowing or substitution, as in „Ich gehe ins Cinema“ rather than „Ich gehe ins Kino“. Errors in collocation are also evident, for example „Ich mache einen Spaziergang gehen“ instead of „Ich gehe spazieren“, indicating difficulty with fixed verb-noun combinations. Additionally, prepositional choices often diverge from standard usage, as seen in „Ich wohne Delhi“ instead of „Ich wohne in Delhi“.

Additionally, instances of code-mixing, such as „Ich mache meine homework“ instead of „Ich mache meine Hausaufgabe“, further demonstrate the influence of English on learners’ lexical choices. The reason German looks strikingly similar to English in its structure and cognates gives the students this uncalled-for confidence that any blank word can easily be filled by an English word. These patterns suggest that learners rely heavily on their existing linguistic repertoire, which, while facilitating communication, also leads to predictable lexical deviations.

Two additional examples further illustrate distinct categories of lexical errors commonly observed among beginner learners. One such case involves incorrect lexical choice due to semantic overgeneralization, as in „Ich nehme ein Foto“ instead of „Ich mache ein Foto“, which reflects confusion in verb selection due to L1 interference despite the sentence being structurally acceptable. Another example concerns the misuse of degree expressions influenced by first-language patterns, as seen in „Ich habe sehr Hunger“ rather than „Ich habe großen Hunger“, indicating inappropriate use of intensifiers and noun modification. Together, these examples complement previously identified patterns by highlighting errors in verb selection and modifier usage, thereby expanding the range of observed lexical deviations.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of beginner-level German learners at Doon University revealed systematic patterns of grammatical and lexical errors, largely influenced by learners' multilingual backgrounds and cross-linguistic interference from Hindi, Garhwali, and English. Grammatical errors were concentrated in specific domains, reflecting predictable difficulties arising from L1 transfer. The findings support the view that learner errors are systematic and reflect the interplay of multiple cognitive and linguistic factors. Interlanguage theory provides a useful framework for understanding these patterns, as it accounts for both L1 transfer and developmental processes.

The analysis of total 322 errors made by beginner German learners at Doon University, who are native speakers of Hindi and Garhwali, reveals systematic patterns in both grammatical and lexical domains, reflecting the influence of multilingual backgrounds. Across 209 analyzed grammatical errors, distinct clusters emerge, indicating areas where cross-linguistic interference most strongly affects language acquisition. Misuse of articles and gender agreement was the most frequent category, comprising 34% of errors. This is consistent with the absence of grammatical gender in learners' native languages, which makes the correct application of *der*, *die*, and *das* particularly challenging. Errors in verb usage, including incorrect auxiliary selection, tense formation, and verb positioning, accounted for approximately 22% of grammatical errors, highlighting the challenges learners face in applying German syntactic rules that differ markedly from those in Hindi and Garhwali. Case marking and preposition errors represented 13% of instances, reflecting difficulties in distinguishing between accusative, dative, and prepositional constructions. Misplacement of adjectives and adjective endings accounted for 11%, while negation errors formed 9% of the total. The remaining 11% of grammatical errors involved plural formation and adverb placement within sentences, often arising from direct transfer of L1 structures or overgeneralization of German rules.

In the lexical domain, analysis of 113 errors showed that transfer from native language structures was the largest category, comprising 36% of errors. These included misselection of words, inappropriate idiomatic usage, and modifier placement influenced by learners' native linguistic patterns. Interference from English or bilingual code-mixing accounted for 18% of errors, indicating the strong impact of prior bilingual exposure on learners' lexical choices. Misuse of articles, plural forms, and noun selection represented 10% of errors, highlighting similar morphological challenges observed in grammatical analysis. Errors in verb-noun collocations were 14%, while incorrect or missing prepositions comprised 12% of lexical errors. Misplacement of degree modifiers and intensifiers accounted for the remaining 10%. These patterns indicate that lexical development is closely linked with grammatical knowledge, and difficulties often arise when learners attempt to map German structures onto the syntactic frameworks of their native languages.

Overall, the findings suggest that while multilingual learners benefit from enhanced cognitive flexibility and broader lexical awareness, their first languages and bilingual experiences also introduce predictable patterns of interference. Both grammatical and lexical errors frequently reflect transfer effects, overgeneralization, and difficulties in applying target language conventions, particularly in areas that are absent or differently structured in Hindi and Garhwali. Pedagogical strategies should therefore target article and gender usage, verb positioning, case marking, collocations, and preposition practice, while leveraging learners' multilingual background to reinforce vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. Explicit focus on contextualized language use, idiomatic expressions, and structural patterns is likely to improve accuracy and fluency, ultimately supporting more effective German language development in multilingual learners.

V. CONCLUSION

This research paper demonstrates that grammatical and lexical errors among beginner learners are both systematic and meaningful. Statistically, the grammatical errors were more frequent than lexical errors, accounting for approximately two-thirds of the total dataset. They were present in the earliest phases of language learning and also exist in later classes in comparison to the lexical errors which are induced only after a certain level of competence in German is reached.

Furthermore, interlingual factors significantly shape the grammatical and lexical errors of beginner German learners at Doon University, complementing intralingual influences such as overgeneralization. Learners often transfer structures and meanings from Hindi, Garhwali, and English, affecting word

order, article use, prepositions, and lexical choices. These cross-linguistic influences interact with learners' developing German competence, producing hybrid forms that reflect both prior linguistic knowledge and emerging target-language rules. Recognizing this interplay underscores the need for teaching approaches that address L1 transfer while supporting controlled, informed use of German. At the same time, intralingual factors such as overgeneralization play a significant role. Learners are not merely transferring structures from their native language; they are actively constructing rules based on limited input. This dual influence highlights the complexity of language acquisition and underscores the need for comprehensive teaching approaches.

The findings on grammatical errors similarly underscore the importance of targeted pedagogical interventions. Errors in article usage, verb placement, tense formation, adjective agreement, and prepositional choice reveal systematic patterns of L1 interference and overgeneralization, reflecting the challenges multilingual learners face in mapping German grammatical structures. These patterns indicate that learners require explicit instruction focused on core syntactic rules, contextualized practice with verb and article usage, and reinforcement of case and gender agreement. Addressing these areas can reduce predictable errors, improve overall sentence accuracy, and support the development of fluent, grammatically coherent German language production among beginner learners.

The findings on lexical errors highlight the need for pedagogical approaches that emphasize idiomatic usage, collocational accuracy, and context-sensitive vocabulary development to support more fluent and target-like German production. These findings suggest that while multilingual exposure provides cognitive advantages and broadens vocabulary awareness, it simultaneously gives rise to predictable interference patterns, resulting in a hybrid interlanguage system. Pedagogical interventions focusing on article usage, case marking, verb placement, and word order, alongside leveraging learners' multilingual competencies, are likely to enhance grammatical accuracy and overall language proficiency in German.

By analyzing these errors within established SLA frameworks, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how languages are learned. It also highlights the importance of adopting pedagogical strategies that address both structural and lexical aspects of language learning.

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