



## Language and Testing

*Elixir Lang. & Testing* 92 (2016) 38970-38975

**Elixir**  
ISSN: 2229-712X

# Error Analysis through Controlled Writing: A Turkish EFL Case

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 2 February 2016;

Received in revised form:

7 March 2016;

Accepted: 12 March 2016;

#### Keywords

Error analysis,  
Controlled writing,  
Writing assessment,  
Error types.

### ABSTRACT

Error analysis is among the interests of many language researchers. Beginning from the times when behaviorism was popular, and following the contrastive analysis studies, error analysis researches have been conducted and researchers aimed at having an insight into language development through their researches. Although language teaching approaches and methodologies have undergone some changes, error analysis still preserves its place in language teaching and likely to keep its significance in the future. This study investigated the erroneous usages of EFL writers through a controlled writing task. Participants of the study were 31 students at Düzce University, Social Work Department, Turkey. The study was conducted in the first semester of 2014-2015 academic year. Student errors that constituted the research data were grouped into 8 categories. The results of the study suggested that the majority of errors were in the conjugation of verbs with a 53.92 percent, where errors of omission, orthography, subject-verb agreement, substitution, word order, addition, and declension of nouns followed respectively. Resulting from the data obtained throughout the study, some instructional implications were provided mainly for the researchers, language teachers, curriculum designers, and coursebook authors.

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### Introduction

The literature on applied linguistics suggests that focusing on and identifying the errors may constitute a valuable source for awareness about language learning difficulties. An analysis of the incorrect usages is expected to assist language teaching and finding solutions to the problematic points by providing precious hints mainly for the teachers, textbook authors, curriculum specialists and the learners. From this perspective, once an illness is diagnosed, finding a cure can become a greater expectation.

More than half a century ago, attempts to compare grammatical structures of two different languages to find out the most problematic cases for language learners became popular under the name 'contrastive analysis' (James, 1980; Corder, 1981; Brown, 2000, 207; Silva and Matsuda, 2002). As the different patterns in the language learner's native tongue and the target language were assumed to be the main sources of language learning difficulties, finding out and classifying the errors would be contributing to language teaching.

Therefore, error analysis received great concern following the interest in contrastive analysis in linguistics. When the literature on language learning is reviewed, a number of views on errors can be observed (Corder, 1974a; Richards, 1974; Selinkar, 1974; Celce-Murcia, 1991). Hence, arising mainly from the linguistic theories and views, error analysis has been among the widely studied fields of language teaching.

To begin with, one of the significant identifications to form a basis for error analysis was made between 'mistake' and 'error' (Corder, 1974b; Touchie, 1986; Brown, 2000, 217). Therefore, such a distinction represents a few basic criteria for identifying whether an erroneous usage is a mistake or an error. Although it is not always easy to identify whether a usage is a mistake or an error clearly, mistakes are mainly regarded as slips of tongue, and performance related erroneous usages that can be corrected by the speaker/writer when s/he pays enough attention. In this case, errors are the false usages that the speaker/writer is unable to correct, and errors are defects in competence of language users. Therefore, mistakes are seen as less important, whereas errors might be resulting from some more serious sources such as inadequate learning, or some difficulties of the target language to be learned.

As mistakes are not to be taken very critical, errors were focused on, and observing the errors resulted in studies called 'error analysis', yielding at the same time a difference from the contrastive analysis (Brown, 2000). To be precise, while contrastive analysis depended primarily on the mother tongue interference on the target language (interlingual), error analysis deals with errors that may be resulting in relation to various sources such as the target language (intra-lingual), and some sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, cognitive or affective domains of language learning.

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One of the major identifications about errors is reported as the 'overt' versus 'covert' errors (Corder, 1981). Errors of grammaticality at the sentence level are called 'overt' errors. However, covert errors occur in contexts and discourses where the sentences are grammatical but not accurate and meaningful in terms of the communication context.

Another significant grouping of errors to be observed in language learning literature has been the classification of errors into addition, omission, substitution, and ordering (word order) (Corder, 1981; Brown, 2000). That is to say, a language item might be erroneously added, or omitted by the learner, or even a language item might be substituted by another false element. Ordering errors reflect the learner errors committed in the sentence structure.

On the other hand errors may also be sorted and analysed in 4 main linguistic categories (Brown, 2000; Touchie, 1986):

**Phonology or orthography:** Spelling errors

**Lexicon and semantics:** Vocabulary and meaning

**Grammar and morphology:** Grammar errors in word order, subject-verb agreement, and the use of pronouns etc.

**Discourse:** Errors associated with style

Just at this point, it is also worth citing about Burt and Kiparsky's (1972) view of errors as 'global' versus 'local' (cited in Brown, 2000; Touchie, 1986). That is to say, global errors are defined as the ones that have major violations on the message sent to the hearer and the hearer's comprehension of the message is hindered. Errors that do not have significant negative effects on the message are labelled as local errors such as noun and verb inflections, use of articles, prepositions, and auxiliaries. However, Celce-Murcia (1991) suggested using *sentence-level errors* instead of local errors, and *discourse-level errors* for global errors.

Besides acknowledging the benefits of research on errors to language teaching, just like any other topics, error analysis is not free of limitations and criticisms either. A remarkable point to be noted here is that although error analysis dates back to the times when behaviorism was popular (Dulay and Burt, 1974), depending on the criticisms behaviorism lost favor, but error analysis is still a valuable tool today, regardless of the many new approaches, methods or techniques that have been invented so far.

Spada and Lightbown (2002) reminds us of some limitations of classroom language and methodology for error analysis that might constitute another valuable contribution to the debate. Not surprisingly, most language learners experience the second language they are learning limited to the classroom contexts. Therefore, a language learner's knowledge and use of the language may be confined to the linguistic borders of the language used in the classroom. The learner may not always have the opportunity to master the structures or functions of the target language in real life contexts. Even contemporarily popular language classrooms where communicative and content based language teaching take place may be viewed as hindrances to accuracy in language learning.

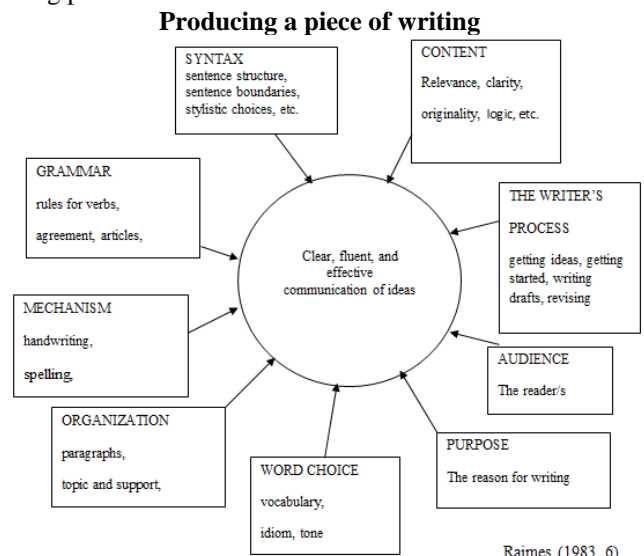
When the error analysis literature is examined, a tendency towards conducting error analysis researches through guided (or free) writing tasks is observable (Hendrickson, 1976; Darus and Subramaniam, 2009; Abushihab, El-Omari and Tobat, 2011; Alhaysony, 2012; Sawalmeh, 2013). To be precise, the students are presented some certain amount of language for a period of time and then they are given topics and asked to write on one of those topics. Practicing error analysis in this way depends on somehow valid reasons.

However, using writing assessment as a means of evaluating students' performance in putting the language they have learned into practice might signal some inherent aspects to be questioned, as well.

Firstly, asking the students to display their performance in the language they have learned through a given task (writing in most cases) does not reflect enough precautions against the learners' possible "risk taking" behaviours. Similar to many other forms of evaluation and measurement cases, it is highly possible that the students may take risks to show that they know more than they actually do, to get high marks, or even to get in the teacher's good books.

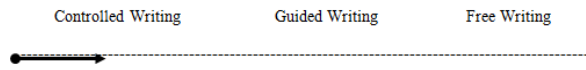
On the other hand, when an error is detected in a piece of writing, it is rarely possible to identify the source of the error. When or at which stage, or through what forms of presentations of the language could the errors be resulting from cannot be made clear. Therefore, assessing the students' performance in the target language through writing, lacking precisely drawn borders of the assessment, may not always be enough to measure the amount of the language and to what degree real learning has taken place. In other words, without somehow limiting the error analysis to the language level the learner is expected to have complete control over, it is not likely to claim that an effective error analysis can be done. Before anything else, it will not be easier to identify the exact point where the error emerged, and in relation to what factors it happened.

There might be a need for taking into account some other dimensions or phases to be identified when measuring language through writing. The following table from Raimes (1983) can give a preliminary view of the complexities of the writing process and some of the aspects to be figured out in a writing product:



In addition to its continuous interaction with and relation to the other language skills, writing bears some peculiar complexities both as a process and as a product. Analyzing errors in a piece of written product may signal limitations as it is formed out of a complex series of operations and in relation to various aspects of the language. Consistent with the many factors playing roles in the construction of a written text, assessment of writing requires taking those factors into consideration, and a comprehensive assessment of writing requires, at least, assessing a written text in terms of its content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics (Weigle, 2002).

In addition to the complex interplay among various factors, the literature on writing suggests writing is likely to be performed mainly in 3 degrees, in various contexts (Raimes, 1983; Silva and Matsuda, 2002). In general terms, writing is likely to take place, especially in language teaching contexts, in the form of three interrelated stages as *controlled*, *guided* or *free writing* which can be represented on a line of continuum as follows:



Designing a writing course of controlled writing activities was popular especially in the 1950's and 1960's due to the audio-lingual approach in language teaching, because mastering grammatical and syntactic patterns of speech was primarily emphasized. Controlled writing was used as a means of mastering accurate structures to help developing the spoken language. The teachers would move to a slightly freer writing for only the students above the intermediate level, because accuracy was emphasized over fluency and originality. Sentence or paragraph exercises, fill in the blank exercises, changing the questions to statements, combining the sentences, picture prompts, memory of a model presented by the teacher are among the types of exercises used in a writing class as the controlled writing activities. In a typical controlled writing class, the students produce nearly the same products. They aren't expected to create some more pieces of writing but just strictly master the estimated structures. It is sometimes viewed as quite a restricting way of dealing with teaching writing.

In time, some teachers and researchers adopted emphasizing fluency and originality. They thought that if learners can put their ideas on page, then accuracy will follow. As the name suggests, free writing gives the students the freedom to produce texts however they like. The teacher provides the title and lets the learners do the rest. They are given interesting topics to write on, and the teacher mostly comments on the ideas expressed by the students rather than focusing on grammatical accuracy.

Guided writing takes place just in the middle of the scale. That is, it can be defined as half controlled-half free composition. The teacher prepares the situation and helps the students via either written or oral guidance. Even if the content and organization are the same, it has a controlled side due to the teacher's assistance and a free side because the students develop their own thoughts and express them through their own sentences. Depending on the level and the requirements of the writing task and the amount of teacher guidance, a writing task may come closer to a more controlled nature or a freer one.

If, for example, a learner is given a guided or a free writing task, there is nearly no barrier to save the learners from using a term or language structure that they have met coincidentally (either read or heard) somewhere once but not mastered yet. Usage of any language structures that the writer has not mastered enough yet will be prone to bear faulty usages and such usages may well be included in the error inventories. The written product is not likely to be free from hypercorrections either, even at the best of times. An assertion at this point might be that any guided or free writing task completed by a second language learner is not likely to be free of errors until he acquires an adequate level of expertise in the language.

From this perspective, error analysis may sometimes be limited to error correction. More precisely, if a written product is most likely to bear errors just from the beginning, expecting an error free text will not be meaningful. So, the written text may only be a source for the teacher to correct student errors but have less (even no) value for the curriculum specialists or textbook authors in gaining insight into the most problematic language learning topics. Error analysis, then, will be limited to the writings of learners in the same sample, but not a realistic source of hints to be generalized for further teaching experiences. Hence, learning a piece of language, and having proficiency in a second language need to be reevaluated with regard to their relationship with error analysis. In that sense, it is likely to claim that error analysis needs to be done under some kind of control, focusing directly on the amount of language taught, and limited to assessing certain language structures or functions.

Arising from the review of literature and for the maximum benefit from error analysis for language teaching methodology, there seems to be a need to conduct error analysis researches at different levels, through writing tasks with clearly identified limits, and for specific instructional purposes. The researcher's observations in this regard and the dimensions found to be less highlighted in the relevant literature have played a significant role in conducting this study.

#### **Methods, Sample and Procedure**

This study aimed at obtaining a sample of error analysis consistent with the natural flow of language instruction and through a relatively more controlled type of a writing task, similar to the controlled writing activities proposed by Raimes (1983). 31 University first year students of Social Work Department at Duzce University, Turkey were chosen as the participants to the study. The data subjected to error analysis were gathered during the obligatory elementary English language instruction. Regardless of their English language education at varying degrees during their K12 education, all participants had 3-hour-a week English class for their university first year education. They completed an elementary English course book as part of an obligatory language course.

Most of the language structures and functions to be studied were in fact familiar to the participants as they had received English language instruction prior to their university education. Thus, they practiced nearly the same structures with additional exercises and activities.

Specifically the third unit of the course book focused on simple present tense with compatible language functions with regard to friends, free time activities, and work-life balance. The unit consisted of the necessary grammatical structures, vocabulary, and activities focusing on the development of four language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) for the completion of the writing task used for error analysis. Thus, prior to obtaining the data for this study, paragraphs starting with the sample sentences "Maria is a student. She likes her classes very much. She doesn't have many free-time activities..." were studied in class (Soars and Soars, 2011, 28).

The following week after studying the unit, the learners were asked to "write about a friend, using the information provided in the unit" in order to obtain written data for error analysis. Thus, the writing assessment used for error analysis was more of a *controlled* type of writing that students just needed to imitate the structures presented in class. Error analysis in this study was limited to the participants' sentences written to introduce a friend using the simple present tense.

## Results

Written data obtained from the participants were evaluated with regard to the language structures and functions studied during the English language instruction. The results section of the study presents qualitative data regarding the total number of sentences written, the number of errors identified in the sentences, and percentage values for the errors. In classifying the data, error taxonomies suggested in the relevant literature were evaluated and findings from this research were categorized.

The 31 written texts obtained for the study included 323 sentences. Papers handed in by the participants were evaluated and the erroneous usages were marked. Table 1 presents information on the number and classification of errors identified:

**Table 1. Error types and figures**

Error type	Number of errors identified	Percentage %
conjugation	110	53.92
omission	24	11.76
orthography	23	11.27
subject-verb agreement	13	6.37
substitution	11	5.39
word order	9	4.41
addition	8	3.92
declension	6	2.94
<b>Total</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>100</b>

As can be seen in table 1, as a matter of the limits of the writing task, no error analysis at the discourse level could be conducted. The task consisted of sentences about a friend, and the analysis of the papers indicated erroneous usages within the grammatical dimensions conjugation, declension, s-v agreement, orthography, omission, addition, substitution and word order. Although these categories might be associated closely with each other, or even be included one into another, such a classification has been preferred, depending on the attention-grabbing usages, in an attempt to reach a more comprehensive grouping of the language errors the learners committed.

The highest rate of errors committed in the task was in the conjugation of verbs in the simple present tense, with a percentage of 53.92. Sample erroneous usages included within this category can be exemplified as follows:

\*She like sleeping.

\*She don't likes cooking.

The second highest rate observed in errors was the omission of some language items (articles and prepositions), with a percentage of 11.76. For example:

\*Bekir is student.

\*She listens music.

Orthographic errors constituted the 11.27 percent of the errors. Instances of orthography errors were as:

\*She has many free-time activiting.

\*He dosen't spend...

6.37 % of the errors were identified in the papers as subject-verb agreement errors. Examples of errors of this type observed in the papers are as follows:

\*She doesn't have breakfast before *you* go to work.

\*She doesn't think about work when *you* are at home.

5.39 % of the errors were marked as substitution errors that some of the students substituted some words for another. For example:

\*Faruk is a student, *his* doesn't like ....

\*(After the sentence "She has many free time activities.")

*Its* reading....

There were also some word order errors detected, with a frequency of 4.41 %:

\*Murat *very* likes his work.

\*He *very* likes his work.

The percentage of errors found in the addition of unnecessary words to the sentences was 3.92% as:

\*.... meet *to* friend....

\*She likes *a* sleeping at the weekend.

The least amount of errors observed in the data was the declension of nouns with a percentage of 2.94, which can be exemplified as follows:

\*She has many free *times* activities.

\* with family and friend.

Briefly, a preliminary interpretation of the results of our study would suggest that the errors detected in the participants' papers were mainly local but not global, overt but not covert, orthographic or grammatical but not semantic or discursal, including the error forms of addition, omission, substitution, and ordering, as well. From the highest frequency to the lowest, errors were identified in the form of conjugation, omission, orthography, subject-verb agreement, substitution, word order, addition, declension, all of which can primarily be associated with syntax rather than semantics. These results suggest some differences from Thomson's (1987) findings about Turkish EFL learner problems as well as the similarities.

## Discussion

Some of the errors identified in this study may be viewed as not 'errors' but rather as 'mistakes' from different perspectives. If these errors were encountered in speech, it might be possible to include some of them into a 'mistake' category because it is possible that a speaker realizes an erroneous usage at the time of utterance and corrects it. However, the nature of writing might result in a limitation in terms of identifying the clear 'errors' as the writer doesn't have the opportunity to correct after he submits his written document. Therefore, what's written on the page incorrectly, or faulty in the participants' papers were regarded as error. A recent discussion of "mistakes" and "errors" can be found in Botley (2015).

No single taxonomy offered in the error analysis literature was found enough on its own for the comprehensiveness of the data obtained in our study. Therefore, adopting a mixture of the taxonomies has become obligatory in an attempt to reach a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the learner errors. To be precise, describing the data only as 'local vs. global', or "addition, omission, substitution, or word order" wouldn't be sufficient to see what's going on in the sentences analyzed. As Corder (1981) states, including tense, number, mood, gender, case etc. would contribute to having a more adequate classification. An error might even be included into more than a single category and might, as well, be interpreted as having connection to more than one aspect of the language. For example, substitution of a verb with another might be regarded as a 'local' error and a 'grammatical' error, at the same time in the form of a 'conjugation' error. That is why, the current classification in this study is adopted to provide the audience of this research, from a different point of view, and with more specific signs of the erroneous usages of our participants.



Complementary to the significance of effective and comprehensive error analysis researches to language teaching methodology, Celce-Murcia (1991) reminds ELT specialists and teachers of the need for finding effective ways to teach grammar, lexis, and phonology with meaning, social function and discourse in a consistent manner, also supporting each other, with a view to taking the developments about the popularity of the communicative language teaching into consideration. Analogously, as Van Lier (2001) reports, raising some kind of awareness (either explicitly or implicitly) about language structures, meaning, contexts or the other relevant dimensions of language has taken its place among the priorities of language teaching.

Conducting analysis on errors in the usage of limited language items (e.g. a single one like 'articles') through a 'not limited' written product is less likely to result in very realistic and efficacious outcomes for the ELT methodology. In the first place, analyzing errors holistically (identifying all errors existing in a text) might be a better stand to take. For example, Abushihab, El-Omari and Tobat (2011) found in their research that errors in prepositions, morphology, articles, verbs, active and passive and tenses were the most problematic areas, which in turn, form the basis for their pedagogical implications for teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers and text developers arising from their research.

Secondly, the language amount, level, or structures that will be subjected to analysis need to be identified specifically in order that the findings from error analysis studies may contribute more expediently to the improvement of foreign language learning. Therefore, an error analysis research can focus on the teaching and assessment of a certain language level, unit, structure, item etc. (e.g elementary, simple past, prepositions of place, time) that step-by-step analysis might constitute an opportunity to assess and develop language curriculums, coursebooks, course contents, methodologies, or even teacher qualifications. Error analysis might have more precious contributions to language learning as pinpoint as it could be.

One of the limitations of this study was that it couldn't be possible in this research to measure the exact time when these errors emerged exactly. That is to say, all the learners receive foreign language education during their K12 education at different levels and they are also offered courses at university. Students are also offered an English proficiency exam, prior to the university language courses. Those students who fail in the exam and the ones who do not enter the exam, obligatorily take the English course at the university. The participants were already acquainted with English, and in most respects, the process was a kind of relearning or repetition of the language structures and functions subjected to error analysis in this study. However, the current data in this study did not enable the researcher to clarify and comment on whether these participant errors can be traced back to the first introduction of the language to the learners, or whether it could be a matter of retention. Surely, there is still a need for further research in this field, with a broadening view of treating errors. Conducting long term researches to evaluate the processes, relevant to error formation, beginning from the first time language learners encounter the target language might have more valuable contributions to language teaching as well as error analysis.

## Conclusion

It is not very likely to claim today that error analysis has contributed to language learning as much as it was expected at the times of its emergence. There is still a need to find more ways to let language learning enjoy the benefits of error analysis. For this purpose, error analysis studies with clearly identified goals and borderlines need to be conducted to assess the amount and degree of the language second/foreign language writers achieve. Error analysis researches need to be improved with a view to have an understanding of measuring the specific structures, functions and amount of the language learned, that is, through error analysis within clearly identified limits.

It is no doubt that error reducing precautions need to be taken for a successful language teaching. For this purpose, a re-evaluation of our understanding of the communicative language teaching approach might be a meaningful starting point. As is highlighted by Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1997), discussion of the emergence of a *principled communicative approach* might be a necessity for language teaching methodology. Therefore, integrating some of the methods and techniques from the previous language instruction approaches, or application of some new ones, could be taken into consideration until the language learners reach a certain language level. From this perspective, raising some kind of awareness on grammar and the preassembled language chunks that the native speakers have in their repertoires is believed to have contributions to language learning.

Another complementary comment on errors worth noting here is that error correction may have a limited effect on the learners (Spada and Lightbown, 2002). To be precise, they propose that some errors may be easier for second/foreign language learners to cope with than some others, and learners may benefit from feedback on syntactic errors than semantic ones. In that case, providing students with feedback on their meaning related errors can result in the reduction of errors, but correcting the grammatical learner errors (once they have come out) is not viewed to be such a painless task. Therefore, error prevention may be seen to be much more significant than error correction, especially in terms of structural difficulties of language learning and being closer to the solutions of language teaching problems. For a more successful language instruction, then, it seems reasonable to conclude that preventive treatment prior to mis-learning is superior to error correction.

Thus, course books that take notice of the interlingual and intralingual challenges for EFL learners, and include methods, techniques or exercises accordingly might constitute a valuable topic to put on the language teaching agenda. At any rate, error analysis needs to guide language teaching and, no doubt, such a guidance crucially depends on carrying out error analysis in very clear-cut forms. Factors that may result from adventitious, individual experiences or level differences need to be excluded from the learners' written assessments. To sum up, error analysis through relatively more guided or free writing could be effective at relatively more advanced levels of language testing while error analysis at lower levels of language proficiency requires relatively more controlled writing tasks to be efficacious.

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