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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 199 (2015) 298 – 304

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

GlobELT: An International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language, Antalya - Turkey

What exam papers make us think

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Abstract

Although errors are accepted inevitable in the foreign language learning, they give information about teaching- learning process of the students. The fact that even ELT students' exam papers contain lots of serious errors has led to this research to find the reasons for them. With this aim, the exam papers of ELT students were examined in terms of their overall quality and the errors the students have made and they were listed according to their types. This study is a qualitative study which reflects the errors of students in their exam papers. To get the data, document analysis was conducted. The documents are the exam papers of sophomore and junior students of ELT department of Akdeniz University. It was found out that ELT students have problems in expressing their own ideas on any topic by analysing the situation. Besides, most of them are not careful with their writing, in terms of grammar, syntax and spelling. Some errors can be regarded as careless errors when the exam situation is considered. However, some of them result from overgeneralization of rules. Some errors occur because of the effect of the native language or students' inefficiency to use correct structures in writing although they know everything by heart. It is important for ELT students to use the language accurately as they are English teacher candidates. To overcome the problem, foreign language teaching and testing processes should be taken into consideration.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: exams in language teaching; error analysis; foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

Language learners commit a lot of mistakes while they are using the language orally or written. Edge (1989) divides mistakes in three groups and calls the mistakes that cannot be self- corrected by the student himself/ herself as errors. From the beginning of foreign language teaching, errors have been one of the important issues to be taken

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into consideration. While in some methods such as grammar translation method, direct method and audio-lingual method, errors should be avoided and corrected immediately, in recent foreign language teaching methods, they are accepted inevitable during the learning process (Larsen- Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Corder (1967) emphasizes the importance of learner's errors in three points as in the following: First, if the teacher makes a systematic analysis, he/she will learn how much the learner has reached the objectives. Second, how language is learned. Thirdly it gives information about the learner as it is accepted as a device the learner uses in the process of language learning.

Investigation of second language learners' errors systematically is called as error analysis (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden, 2013). With the help of error analysis, teacher can find out the reasons for errors and they can take some measures to make students avoid them (Erdoğan, 2005). Hinkel (2005, p.615) thinks that "error analysis was based on an assumption that many L2 errors are outcome of L1 to L2 transfer of syntactic and lexical regularities and language properties". According to Keshavarz (1999, p.44), error analysis is based on these assumptions:

1. Errors are inevitable as we cannot learn a language without goofing.
2. Errors are significant in different ways.
3. Not all errors are attributable to the learner's mother tongue.

Errors that learners make in the exam papers provide feedback for language teaching and learning process (Corder, 1986). After examining the errors on students' exam papers, educators can improve their materials, techniques and tests which are suitable for learners (Erdoğan, 2005). Şanal (2008) claims that finding errors and analyzing them through contrastive analysis can be a beneficial step in setting up teaching priorities.

There are many different reasons for students to make errors in the process of learning a foreign language. The native language of the learner has a great influence on learning another language. If the target language has elements in common with the mother tongue, the similarities make learning easier; when they have differences it gets difficult to learn the target language (Cook, 1996). Brown (2000) accepts native language interference as the most noticeable source of error among second language learners. Ferguson (1965) believes that interference results from the structural differences between the native language and the target language (cited in Khansir, 2012).

Corder (1986) defines interlanguage as the language systems of language learners. The interlanguage is between the native language and the target language and it has features different from and similar to both languages (Keshavarz, 1999). Ortega (2009, p.82) claims that "interlanguages are systematic and natural languages and learners are constrained in their development of a second language by the same natural principles of any human language". According to Harmer (2001, p.100), "errors are part of the students' interlanguage, that is the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of development, and which is continually reshaped as he or she aims towards full mastery".

Examining students' errors in the acquisition of English as a second language, Richards (1984) recognizes that beside their interlanguage errors, students make other errors that do not result from interference of their mother tongue and he calls them as intralingual or developmental errors. Richards (1984, p.173) believes that "intralingual and developmental errors reflect the learner's competence at a particular stage and illustrate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition". According to intralingual theory, as learners make progress in the foreign language learning, their former experiences and what they have learn will influence structures in the target language (Brown, 2000).

No matter what the reason for them is, we observe that second language learners and foreign language learners make errors in their exam papers while learning the target language during the learning process. The responsibility of researchers and teachers is to find out the reasons for these errors and try to find ways to overcome them. At all levels of language learning period, students tend to make errors even students at ELT departments. The errors can be interlanguage or intralingual errors, however they should be examined carefully and necessary precautions to prevent them should be taken.

ELT Departments are preferred by the students who like English and wish to be an English teacher in the future. The requirement for being a student in the department is to pass the national language exam with high grades. To succeed in the exam which includes multiple choose questions mostly about grammatical structures, vocabulary and reading they spend a lot of time to study. Before the exam, they have to learn how to develop strategies to answer the questions by studying hard. After such a difficult process prior to university education, the first year, they have courses based on developing language skills. Starting from the second year, the courses are based on topics related

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