Exploring Sources of Errors in L3 English Production of Natives of Moroccan Arabic

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Abstract

Language learners' writing products can provide insights into how these learners acquire the target language through the analysis of the committed errors. Indeed, research has revealed that error analysis in writing essays is crucial for understanding and improving language acquisition by identifying common errors, and their sources, and informing teaching strategies to address these issues. The current paper aims to identify, describe and analyze errors committed by Moroccan secondary school students in writing. The study also attempts to determine some of the possible causes of the errors to offer an understanding of how linguistic interference influences the foreign language learning process. To this end, a sample of tasks written in English by a group of 20 secondary school students was collected. Then, an analysis procedure was conducted to analyze errors and explain their sources. Hence, this study adopts a mixed-method approach design to generate qualitative as well as quantitative data by identifying error categories and calculating the total number of error types and sources, respectively. The findings show that the errors are committed both at the word as well as the sentential level including lexical, grammatical, substance, and syntactic errors. Besides, the results indicate that learners commit errors in their English writings partly due to interference of Moroccan or Standard Arabic and French, but mostly due to other developmental sources within the scope of the target language. These findings offer valuable insights into how learners acquire a second or foreign language and what obstacles they encounter in the learning process and, thus, could suggest some implications to reduce the errors caused by negative language transfer and improve learners' language proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Formal learning of a language is not a simple task. It requires a lot of cognitive skills from learners and effective teaching methods from teachers. The learning of foreign languages also demands constant practice and persistence. In Morocco, most of the learning and use of English, at the secondary school level, happen within the walls of the classroom. We are aware, as language teachers that it is quite challenging for learners to get acquainted with this foreign language easily. Besides, foreign language learning might be affected by native language interference as in the case of Moroccan students who live in a multilingual community. When producing the target language, non-native speakers think of the rules that need to be applied and sometimes employ the rules of their mother tongue, which leads them to commit a variety of errors both in writing and orally. This is known as interference or language transfer that can manifest in various forms and affect learners differently, depending on factors such as their proficiency levels, the similarity between the languages involved, and individual learning strategies. Indeed, some studies suggest that mother tongue interference affects various aspects

of foreign language learning, including phonetics, grammar, and communication, with both positive and negative influences (Seddik, 2023; Septianasari, 2019; Sharma, 2021).

The rationale of this study is to be aware of the various mechanisms that cause language errors and that can hinder English language learning for Moroccan beginner learners. The study also seeks to examine how linguistic interference is problematic to EFL learners while producing the target language in writing. To attain these objectives, an error analysis of writing assignments was conducted to determine the different types of errors and trace their sources. Error analysis is considered "the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages" (Johansson, 1975, p. 249). The findings of the study can raise teachers' awareness of the learning process by understanding the sources of the errors and the role of the native language, or other existing languages in learners' speech community, in language interference. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the types of errors committed by Moroccan EFL beginner learners in writing?
2. What are the major sources of the committed errors?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Error Analysis

Error analysis is a way of analyzing errors that foreign or second language learners commit in their learning process. It describes and analyzes the errors to explain their possible sources; whether they are caused by the native language or derived from other sources. With Corder's (1967) article "*The Significance of Learner Errors*," error analysis has become popular in language education area. From a behaviourist point of view, errors are regarded as habits that should be avoided from the very beginning while learning a language. However, Corder (1967) considers errors as significant for teachers, researchers, and learners themselves. For teachers, errors can provide information about how much learners have learned and what remains to achieve the learning objectives. Researchers also have much to gain from error analysis since it offers insights into what strategies are used by learners in language acquisition and, therefore, allows researchers to clearly understand the way foreign or second languages are acquired. As for learners, committing errors is regarded by Corder (1967, p. 167) as "a device the learner uses in order to learn" and "a way a learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning." Indeed, errors are significant in the language learning process as they assist teachers in effectively planning lessons and preparing remedial work for learners by dealing appropriately with errors.

The review of the literature reveals that several models and approaches to error analysis have been developed to systematically identify, classify, and understand these errors. Some prominent models will be presented in this paper. Firstly, being a pioneer in the domain of error analysis, Corder (1967) suggests a model consisting of collecting language samples produced by learners, identifying errors, describing and categorizing errors, explaining errors by determining their sources, and evaluating errors by assessing their influence on communication. Likewise, Selinker & Gass (2008, p. 131) outline a six-step model including "collection of a sample of language output, identification of errors, description of errors in linguistic terms, explanation of errors, evaluation of errors, and correction of errors" by providing feedback to promote better language acquisition. Ellis (1997) expanded on previous models with a simplified and comprehensive approach that offers practical steps for identifying and analyzing errors. The first step in this model is to select a language corpus and exactly identify errors. The next step is to classify the errors in detail. The last step is to explain the various errors by focusing on cognitive processes that lead to committing errors to decide

whether they are committed due to language transfer, developmental errors such as overgeneralization, or unique errors that are related to the learner. Clearly, these models share common elements and provide structured approaches to analyze and understand the errors committed by language learners. By systematically collecting, identifying, describing, and explaining errors, educators and researchers can gain an understanding of the language learning process and create targeted methods to improve learner outcomes.

2.2. Language Interference

Language interference occurs when one language affects the performance or learning of another, manifesting in phonological, lexical, and grammatical errors, and can occur in contexts like bilingualism, translation, and language learning (Ellis, 1997; Gashimov, 2023; Summers & Roberts, 2020). It is also known in the literature as language transfer and linguistic influence, which results from the mutual impact of the native language and the target language leading to the unconscious transfer of some linguistic aspects due to differences in language systems. These linguistic dissimilarities are one of the main factors influencing interference as bilingual or multilingual learners attempt to incorporate vocabulary and grammatical structures, found in their mother tongue, into the language being learned. Limited knowledge of the target language is another reason which leads learners to experience interference, especially for beginners who have a restricted proficiency level (Archvadze, 2012). Furthermore, cognitive factors such as memory, cognitive flexibility, and metalinguistic awareness influence how learners manage interference (Ardini et al., 2022). This means that learners with higher cognitive flexibility might better switch between languages without interference. Other factors affecting interference include the learning context since immersive environments might reduce interference by providing constant and varied exposure to the target language (Pei, 2023; Rowe & Weisleder, 2020). That is why regular practice and increased exposure to the target language in different settings can help reinforce correct usage and reduce reliance on first language patterns. Metalinguistic awareness can also assist language learners to avoid interference by teaching them about the specific interference patterns between their native language and second language, which can help them recognize and correct errors (Kieseier et al., 2022). Besides, providing constructive feedback by teachers on errors that result from interference can also help learners adjust their language use. All in all, interference is a natural part of learning a second or foreign language. While it presents challenges, understanding its mechanisms and employing effective strategies can help learners navigate and overcome these obstacles, ultimately leading to more proficient and accurate use of the foreign language.

2.3. Analysis of Recent Studies

Some research studies have attempted to analyze errors found in Moroccan EFL students' written works and focused on a variety of features and categories of errors like lexical, syntactic, and morphological components of language. Hsoune et al. (2024) investigated EFL university students' error patterns focusing on syntactic category and four types of errors including mis-ordering, mis-formation, addition, and omission. The findings reveal that addition is the most recurrent syntactic error that the learners commit, whereas misordering errors are the most infrequent ones. Besides, Benzizoune (2022) explored the challenges that high school EFL students encounter in writing. The study indicates that students lack understanding of the vocabulary, syntax, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and cohesion. This study also demonstrates that the French language affects students' writing as a result of language interference. Likewise, Aknouch and Bouthiche (2022) analyzed errors committed by high school students to identify their categories and the sources behind their occurrence. The researchers conclude that there is a variety of error types found in students' written products with grammatical errors being the most dominant category. The study also confirms that intralingual sources are the most significant factors which lead students to commit errors. Further, El Malaki (2020) examined the causes of morphological errors made by EFL university learners by analyzing their written assignments. The findings show that language

interference, inappropriate use of rules and English inconsistency represent the key factors that have caused overgeneralization of the regular past tense rule over the irregular in addition to low morphological appropriateness. Similarly, EL Mansouri (2019) investigated the violations of the verb phrase structure made in university students' writings. The data analysis displays that English learners' errors involve intralingual, interlingual, and induced sources. Nevertheless, according to the results achieved, most of the errors that the students committed were intralingual and induced ones including types of mis-ordering, addition and omission. Clearly, these studies show that error analysis of EFL students' writings is fundamental as it reveals a range of common errors, mainly affected by the target language developmental sources and language interference.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Participants
The participants engaged in the study are 20 middle school students studying in the third grade and aged from 14 to 16 years. There are 12 female students and 8 male students. The students were selected randomly and the data was collected at the end of the school year. The students are beginners and have been learning English for one school year. It is worth mentioning that these students have the same educational background and speak only Moroccan Arabic with their parents at home and with their friends at school. Besides, they have been studying French since the third grade of elementary school (i.e., for 7 years).

3.2.Instruments
By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to identify common error types and understand their underlying causes. Therefore, written paragraphs were collected from students in the form of a short letter addressed to a pen-friend to exchange personal information (name, age, nationality, favourites, etc.). The students were offered sufficient time to complete the task. As for data analysis, Adopting Ellis's (1997) error analysis framework, the errors were identified, categorized, and explained. Moreover, based on the taxonomy developed by AbiSamra (2003, p. 13), errors are classified into four main categories including "grammatical (prepositions, articles, singular/plural, adjectives, relative clauses, tenses, and possessive case, etc.), syntactic (coordination, sentence structure, nouns and pronouns, and word order), lexical (word choice), and substance (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation)". Then, the total number of categories and sources of errors were calculated. The last step was explaining the errors committed in students' written outputs to find out their sources.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
This section presents the main findings of the data pertaining to the research questions exploring the types of errors committed by Moroccan EFL beginner learners in writing and the reasons behind their occurrences. Besides, a discussion of the results is provided in the light of previous research.

4.1.Types and Sources of Students' Errors
The total number of errors found in the 20 written paragraphs is 257; 64 grammatical, 32 syntactic, 29 lexical, and 132 substance (capitalization, punctuation and spelling) errors. Figure 1 below summarizes the numbers of the errors according to their types.
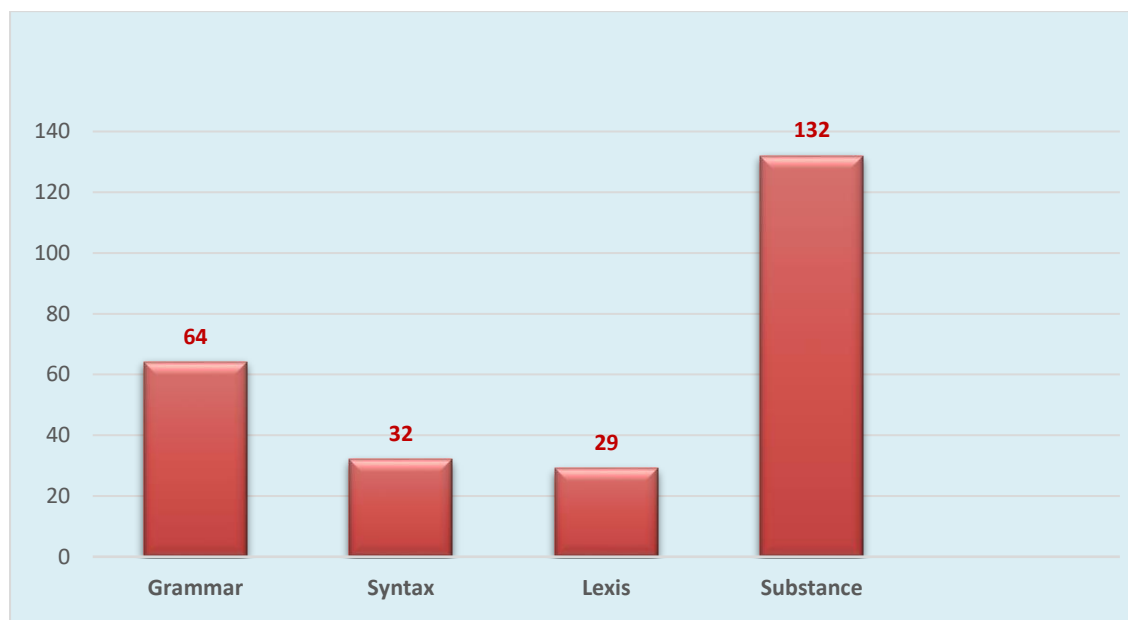
Figure 1. **Types of students' errors**

Figure 2 below displays the number of errors committed according to their sources; whether caused by language transfer or by developmental reasons. The analysis of the data shows that most grammatical, lexical, and substance errors are due to developmental sources, whereas most syntactic errors are attributed to language interference.
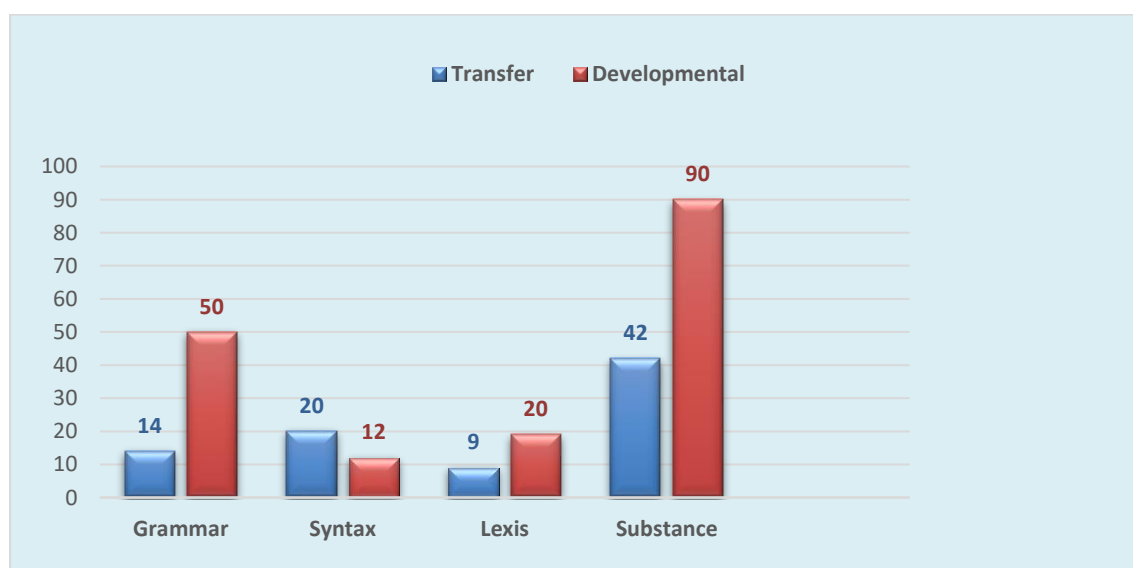

Figure 2. **Sources of students' errors**

Figures 1 and 2 show that the highest number of errors is that of substance (132); 90 errors are due to developmental reasons, and 42 are caused by language transfer. This result can be due to the low language proficiency of learners as they are still beginners at the early stages of language learning spending only one year studying the target language. These errors of substance are also caused by insufficient practice in English writing, intralingual interference, and interlingual interference (Chaudhary & Al Zahrani, 2020; Seddik, 2023). As for the second rate of errors, the total number of grammatical errors is 64 including 50 developmental and 14

transfer errors. The data indicates that the students encounter challenges in using English grammatical structures. This result aligns with the findings of a study by Wang (2013) who concludes that the most frequently occurring errors committed by English learners are grammatical errors, which impede the mastery of the target language. As for the sources of the errors, the findings show that English developmental errors outnumber transfer errors. This data can be attributed to the level of learners, as in the case of substance errors, meaning that the learners lack knowledge in the target language leading to errors committed due to inadequate application of rules, ignorance of rule application, and overgeneralization. Besides, the total number of syntactic errors is 32 incorporating 20 interlingual errors and 12 developmental ones. This data can be explained by the fact that the differences between the language structures cause confusion for students leading to literal translation and making wrong word order at the level of the sentences. The last category concerning lexis is the least occurring type of errors. Lexical errors found in this study are mostly concerned with wrong word choice and literal translation that are caused by learners' limited vocabulary. In short, interference errors made in this study are still common although the major source of errors that learners make is developmental.

4.2. Examples of Students' Developmental Errors

Table 1. Examples of students' developmental errors

Grammar	Syntax	Lexis	Substance
"My favourite subject**(s)** are Arabic and science" "My favourite clothes **is** sandals and T-shirt" "My friend drink**(s)** tea" "My name **(is)** Yassine" "she is **better** mother"	"My friend likes also" *for* "My friend also likes" "she is name is Asmae" *for* "her name is Asmae" "I eat and lunch couscous" *for* "I eat couscous for lunch"	"My favourite **subject** is tennis" "I am from **Moroccan**" "I **eat** milk"	"**fourty** years old" "My favourite sport is **tenis**" "I have three **braders**" "I am **fiften**" "**verey** nice" "**Englishe**"

Table 1 above displays examples of developmental errors committed by students. To start with grammar, English language learners sometimes omit 's' in the third person singular as well as in the plural nouns. This happens as a result of incomplete application of rules or ignorance of rule restriction. Other examples include subject-verb agreement, verb omission, using comparative form instead of superlative, and article omission. In fact, omission remains the major type of errors found in the data. This can be attributed to the low level of the learners concerning the target language proficiency. These results align with previous research confirming that omission represents the main type of errors that are made in learners' writings (Rochmadi, 2020). Concerning syntactic errors, the most frequent errors are found at the level of sentence structure, word order, and use of pronouns. For example, ignorance of language

rules leads students to commit errors such as *"she is name is Asmae"* instead of *"her name is Asmae."* As far as lexis is concerned, students seem to struggle with word choice as they fail to select the appropriate words for convenient contexts. Learners, for instance, use the word 'Moroccan' instead of 'Morocco' in the sentence *"I am from Moroccan."* This failure of using correct word choice is attributed to lack of language use and practice in meaningful contexts. Indeed, context assists learners to comprehend the correct meaning of sentences and vocabulary, and it plays a central part in constraining word meanings in sentences or passages (Yan, 2023). The data of the last category related to substance shows that the various errors are committed partly in punctuation and mainly in spelling. The errors produced in this type are caused by factors inherent in the target language and not by the influence of linguistic interference. Examples of such errors include *"Englishe"* for *"English,"* *"tenis"* for *"tennis,"* *"fifteen"* for *"fifteen,"* etc.

4.3. Examples of Students' Transfer Errors
Table 2. Examples of students' transfer errors

Grammar	Syntax	Lexis	Substance
"I am from **à** casablanca" "My father**('s)** name is Mohammed" "my family **(is)** nice" "My **favourites** friends are Zineb and Nadia"	"I have **house very nice**" "My father **he** is a teacher" "I like grey jackets **and** I like orange pullover **and** I like to drink coffee"	"Tanger is **belle** city" "my favourite drink is **café**" "I **have** fifteen years"	"the living-room is **traditionnel**" "I am a student in **classe** nine" "My **familly** name" "**i** am **m**oroccan'" "My favourite school subject**,** is Arabic, and my favourite sports**,** are tennis and soccer"

Table 2 above shows examples of interference errors that occur when the structures and the rules from learners' native language (L1) or second language (L2) influence their use of English. In grammar, for instance, students apply rules from L1 or L2 and come up with errors such as *"my family nice"* omitting the verb 'is' as a result of literal translation from Arabic. Other errors include the use of prepositions as in the example *"I am from à casablanca"*. In fact, Moroccan learners of English face challenges with prepositions and they often make comparisons between their sentence and its Arabic or French equivalent leading to insertion of inappropriate prepositions. Besides, In French and Moroccan Arabic, the modified nouns agree with adjectives in number. Therefore, errors like *"my favourites friends"* occur in Moroccan learners' writings. Indeed, most interlingual errors of grammar include omission of verbs, articles and prepositions. In this vein, a study by Sharma (2021) reveals that the highest frequency of grammatical errors was omission of prepositions due to mother tongue transfer. Conversely, addition errors are less frequently observed in students' compositions. Regarding

syntactic errors caused by language transfer, students make errors particularly at the level of word order. It is optional to start with a noun or an adjective in French, and adjectives follow the nouns they modify in Arabic. Thus, this fact impacts the production of the target language in students' writings resulting in errors like *"house very nice."* This data is consistent with the findings of some previous studies suggesting that syntactic errors are mostly committed as a consequence of interlingual interference and the dissimilarities between the target language and the native language (Alqhtani, 2018; Jiang et al., 2023). Furthermore, lexical errors found in this study are mostly concerned with wrong word choice and literal translation. Learners have a limited vocabulary and, thus, make use of French words or translate equivalents from Arabic. These findings align with previous research concluding that EFL learners make two main types of lexical interference: loanwords and loan translation in L1 (Samingan, 2020). Finally, substance errors frequently occurring in students' written productions are mostly spelling errors that are influenced by language interference mainly French in the case of this study. In this regard, Al-Hamzi et al. (2023) confirm that the learning context, interlingual comparisons, and interlingual transfer are the main reasons for the occurrence of the spelling errors that EFL learners make. Interference with French occurs especially when the English words resemble those in English. Students use for instance *"classe"* for *"class,"* *"familly"* for *"family,"* *"traditionnel"* for *"traditional,"* etc. Other substance errors are made by students as a consequence of the different punctuation conventions in addition to the absence of the capitalization system in Arabic.

All in all, based on the findings, Moroccan learners of English commit a variety of errors with substance and grammatical errors being the most significant type that the data reveals. Besides, the students' errors are made due to the interference with L1 or L2. However, the majority of errors, as shown in the results, are due to developmental and intralingual sources. These results are consistent with previous research conducted in different educational settings. Aghoulid and Trimasse (2023) found that the production of English as a third language by Moroccan EFL learners, particularly at the lexical level, is influenced by their L1 or L2. The study also demonstrated that some errors are committed due to the English structure as a consequence of the common similarities in features with French (Aghoulid & Trimasse, 2023). In addition, a study by Şahin (2020) revealed that more developmental errors are significantly made by Turkish EFL learners compared to interference errors, which indicates that most errors are due to the learners' evolving grasp of English rather than their mother tongue. Likewise, other studies indicated that errors are often caused by learners' inadequate knowledge of grammatical rules, vocabulary, and sentence structure, which are essential for constructing coherent and cohesive texts (Lahuerta, 2018; Zulfikar, 2020)

On the other hand, some studies yielded different findings concerning the sources of EFL learners' errors. For instance, Hikmah & Wahyudi (2023) concluded that errors in morphological and syntactical structures, including issues with use of articles, sentence structure, propositions, and word order, are often caused by differences in linguistic systems between English and learners' native language. Further, a study by Mandarani (2020) disclosed that errors in EFL learners' writings mainly occur due to language interference in the form of incorrect verb use and copula 'be' omission, compounded by lack of motivation. Along the same line, Duangpaserth et al., 2022 examined the causes of errors in Lao EFL students' writings and found out that L1 interference in learners' writing and translation word for word

from native language into English lead to lexical and grammatical errors in sentence level. Similar results were revealed in a research study conducted by Phuket & Othman (2015) indicating that the dominant source of errors in EFL students' writing is native language interference, affecting prepositions, word order, verb tense, and word choice.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study is to identify and categorize the errors in English of beginner Moroccan students and trace those errors to their sources. To attain these objectives, the researcher relied on error analysis as one of the effective tools for characterizing and elucidating errors that non-native speakers of English make to determine the origins of the errors and to understand the causes for their continued occurrence. The study demonstrates that the errors are produced mostly due to an over-application or incomplete application of rules of the English language and partially by interference with the learners' L1 and L2. Besides, the results reveal that learners make developmental errors at the level of grammar, lexis, and substance, whereas syntactic errors are attributed to the effect of negative language transfer. This type of study is valuable chiefly for two kinds of readers: students taking a course in second-language acquisition who want to gain an understanding of the usefulness of error analysis, and teachers who want to get a clear awareness of how learners learn an L2 or an L3 and what obstacles students face in their learning process.

From a pedagogical perspective, English language teachers should be aware of the types and causes of their learners' errors and be equipped to address them appropriately and constructively. Teachers need to teach the writing skills and conventions effectively. It is often argued that the lack of linguistic tools and lexical repertoire is an obstacle to students' performance in writing. However, students can express themselves with little language development. Just as students are required to practice the language orally, they are also required to write in English as much as possible. Training students to think in English through writing is a good opportunity to avoid the problems of literal translation. Teachers also ought to make students aware that literal translation between the native language and the target language is often inaccurate due to differing sentence structure rules. So, it can be beneficial to educate students about cross-linguistic differences using contrastive analysis with clear illustrations. Additionally, to effectively deal with students' mistakes and errors, it is advisable that teachers support learners in correcting their mistakes. Thus, teachers need to adopt some effective strategies such as self-correction, peer correction, and group correction in order to encourage students to take primary responsibility for correcting their mistakes and errors. Students need to be taught some writing skills and techniques such as organization, process writing, drafts, linking and transition words to enhance their creativity and motivation.

The study at hand has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. The first limitation has to do with the possibility of making wrong explanations of the sources of errors. That is, there may be more than one explanation for a particular error as different factors can contribute to the occurrence of errors. Error analysis often focuses on surface-level errors, such as grammar, lexis, or spelling, and may overlook deeper cognitive or contextual factors that contribute to these errors. It may not fully address the underlying causes of errors, such as conceptual misunderstandings or cultural influences. The second limitation concerns the small amount of data used in the study as limited numbers of participants and writing assignments

were involved. Thus, the results of the study cannot be generalized as more representative findings may have been obtained with a larger population and sample of learners' written works. Besides, the fact that the students involved in this study are beginners and from the same school can limit the applicability of the study to learners from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Finally, collecting the data at one point in time to examine the written productions of students does not capture how errors evolve over time as learners progress in their language acquisition.

Having these limitations in mind, a number of suggestions for future research can be made. Future studies ought to include larger population of students with different linguistic backgrounds to offer more representative findings and to reflect the diversity of errors that occur among EFL learners in different contexts. In addition, future research should take into account the contextual and cognitive features in error analysis so as not to provide a narrow view of the learners' writing abilities, focusing on symptoms rather than root causes of language difficulties. Moreover, longitudinal studies of error analysis can be carried out to offer deep insights into how certain errors change, persist, or diminish as learners gain more experience with the target language. Another vital remark about the conclusions drawn from the study is that the results may be limited to writing and not fully represent learners' overall language proficiency. In other words, findings from error analysis in writing may not necessarily apply to other language skills such as speaking as each language skill involves different cognitive processes and challenges. Therefore, more studies are needed to investigate errors made in other areas of language skills to provide comprehensive findings and offer practical solutions for educators to address the identified errors.

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