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An Error Analysis Case Study: Out of Context Translation of Persian Sentences into English for Elementary EFL Learners

YASIN KHOSHHAL

Abstract

This study aims at analyzing errors committed by the Iranian elementary EFL learners. The investigation not only considers the types of errors committed, but also tries to shed light on the sources of these errors. To this end, a worksheet of ten Persian sentences translated from the original English content of the learners' course book were provided to a class of 20 elementary level English students. The learners were tasked with translating each sentence back into English. The researcher then had to analyze each translated sentence with regard to three aspects of grammar, choice of words, and spelling. The next step was categorizing any errors and finding the frequency of each of them. The results indicated that errors in the use of articles were the most frequent (20% of the total number of errors), followed by the wrong uses of verbs (18.66%), and the wrong use of tense (10.66%). According to the findings, correct use of articles should more often be the focus for EFL context, and the use of correct verbs and tenses should also be absolutely clarified and emphasized.

Keywords: error analysis, contrastive analysis, EFL, ESL, translation.



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Introduction

Language, as a means of communication, permits people to convey their ideas and represent their communicative aims. Catford (1978) outlines language as a kind of shaped human behavior. For human beings, it is believed to be the most important way of interacting in their social situations.

The degree to which college students are in touch with English sentences (more frequently than they were in senior high school) shows us how essential the process of translation can be. Without translation, forthcoming experts will be left behind in following the progress of science if they cannot read foreign language texts on their own (Widyamartaya, 1989).

With regard to the linguistic or non-linguistic difficulties that a translator may encounter, Nida (1964) states:

But difficulties and thanklessness notwithstanding, if the translator is to produce acceptable translation he must have [an] excellent background in the source language and [at] the same time must have control over the resources of the language into which he [is] translating, he cannot simply match words from a dictionary, he must in [the] real sense create a new linguistic form to carry concept expressed in the source language. (p. 64)

Writing is a complicated process that requires cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis. Writing in a foreign language often takes significant time and effort, and interference from the first language can be considered as a main source of difficulty in this regard for EFL learners.

Analyzing learners' produced language in written form for the sake of testing their proficiency level is the preferred test of their abilities since the influence of their native language can be clearly observed.

Gorjian and Molonia, who translated the work of Simpson (1999), claimed that it is impossible to reach to the closest equivalents in both languages, as a result the translator needs to focus and try to attain specific circumstance in order to accomplish accurate equivalence; whereas Duff (1989) believed that if there is no proper equivalence in the target language, there is no obligation for the translator to include it in the translation. Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) elaborated that equivalence in the target language should "replicate the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording" (p. xx). Representing a complete scheme of the ideas, expressing the style and manner, bringing the ease, and making an identical response of the original text are the most accepted features of an accepted translation (Nida, 1964; Tytler, 1907).

The errors made by EFL/ESL learners are relatively rooted in interlingual transfer or overgeneralization within the target language itself. Errors are studied to provide experts with a clear image of the process of learning and the strategies employed by the learners (Lungu, 2003).

Brown (2007) asserts that learners inevitably commit errors; moreover, these errors can be detected, investigated and categorized in order to indicate how the system of learning is operating within the learner. This investigation by Brown finally led to an

important aspect of study of learners' learning called error analysis. However, according to Ellis (2008), error analysis is a procedure of gathering models of the learner's language, detecting any errors in the models, labeling these errors, categorizing them according to their hypothesized sources, and weighing their significance.

The study of errors is achieved by Error Analysis (EA). In the 1970's, EA replaced Contrastive Analysis (CA) which was an attempt at anticipating errors that learners commit by finding the linguistic differences between their first language and the target language. Fundamental to CA was that errors happen mainly as a result of interference at the time the learners transfers native language structures into the second language they are learning. When structures of the first and second language vary, it was believed to lead to the interference. While CA considered merely the learner's native and target language (i.e. fully formed language), EA delivers a method for investigating the learner's language. Because of this, EA finds an accurate starting point for the investigation of second language acquisition process (Ellis, 1996).

Ringbom (1987) believes that learners' errors bring about some viewpoints into the process and needs of the learners. In this regard, CA was known not to work perfectly for one reason; interference of the first language is not the only potential source of errors. Moreover, CA can be used in order to describe observable difficulties than to anticipate them more appropriately. Thus, the most effective tool for explaining errors committed by non-native speakers of a language is error analysis. Corder (1967), in line with this claim, considers EA as an important part of applied linguistic. A large number of learners' errors are rooted in the strategies used in their language acquisition and the mutual interference of the target language options. Error Analysis (EA) helps teachers to focus on the areas that are necessary and shows them where the attention is needed in a second language context. In this regard, language teachers are capable of developing develop curriculum and choosing materials that can foster the process of learning a second language.

The two terms of "errors" and "mistakes" are different. Corder (1967) defines error as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker reflects the competence of the learner" (p. xx), and on the other hand calls mistakes "a performance error that is either random guess or a slip in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly" (p. xx). Furthermore, based on what mention, mistakes are made because of a lack of attention, tiredness, or carelessness (malperformance). In this vein, mistakes can be corrected by learners themselves, while errors happen due to lack of knowledge (competence). As Corder (1967) notes, errors play an essential role for teachers in order to define goals, for learners to use them as tools in learning, and for scholars to specify the process of language acquisition.

Error Analysis made significant advances in the 1960's and 1970's with the emergence of the communicative approach to learning a second or foreign language. As Keshavarz (2011) notes, "Error Analysis emerged as a reaction to the view of second-language learning proposed by Contrastive analysis theory" (p. xx). He also believes that "Error Analysis considers the performance of learner in terms of the cognitive process learners make use of in reorganizing the input they receive from the target language" (p. xx).

Error Analysis as "the process to observe, analyze, and classify the different rules of the second language and then to discover systems operated by learners" (p. xx). In this vein,

Error Analysis collects information about the nature of learners' knowledge and finds out what they have to learn.

Corder (1974) categorized errors into four main classes; "omission of some required element," "addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element," "selection of incorrect element," and "disordering of elements" (p. xx). Within each language class level are phonology, morphology lexicon, grammar, and discourse.

Based on statements by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), the most appropriate and common classification of errors is "linguistic category," "surface category," "comparative taxonomy," and "communicative effect taxonomy" (p. xx).

Brown (2000), considers two main sources for error: interlingual and intralingual. The interlingual (transfer) errors deal with the speaker's native language. These errors happen when the learner's L1 prevents the learner from acquiring the rules of L2. Sanal (2008) defines interlanguage as errors committed by learners because of the direct influence of their first language. The second source are intralingual (developmental) errors, which reflect the learner's interaction with the second language. According to Sanal (2008), intralingual errors are made by learners due to a lack of knowledge in L2 interlingual errors show a structure that does not follow L1 or L2. Zawahreh (2012) mentions that the source of errors can be teachers, interference, or false analogy. The stages of error analysis are data selection, error identification, error classification, error explanation, error evaluation, and error correction.

Review of related literature

A number of analyses have been conducted on EFL/ESL learners' written language errors. In one of the earliest studies, Duskova (1969) recognized a total of 1,007 errors of 50 Czech learners of English and investigated them through a series of nine classifications. According to her study, errors in articles (n=260) had the highest frequency, while errors in lexis (n=233) were next. The two aspects of syntax and word order were categorized as the next levels with 54 errors for the former and only 31 errors in the latter. 2,455 errors in the English writing passages of 12th grade English learners in the Republic of Korea. The results indicated that errors in using "be" and auxiliaries were the most frequent errors (n=419), while 287 errors in prepositions was the next level of frequency. It was therefore shown that intralingual errors had a greater impact than transfer errors.

In the subsequent year, Kim (1988) analyzed the errors of English verbs according to the correct usage of tense, mood, and voice. To this end, 120 Korean EFL learners from the 11th grade were asked to translate 42 sentences from Korean into English. The findings indicated that among the 2,508 errors, the largest portion seen was for mood with 903 errors, while errors in voice (n=885) and tense (n=720) were the subsequent levels. Regarding the sources of the errors, 65% of the errors happened as a result of overgeneralization, while 22% of them were attributed to L1 transfer, and simplification was the source for the rest (13%).

An error analysis was performed with 200 English learners in Korea from the 10th grade, with 30 Korean sentences translated into English. From a total of 1,122 errors, 24% were believed to be the result of the transfer of L1 structures, while overgeneralization of the patterns were responsible for 23% of the errors. 2,122 errors in the English composition of 200 Korean 10th grade EFL learners. She placed them in six domains and categorized them

into 22 linguistic classes. The results indicated that errors in articles were the most frequent ($n=354$) and that there were only eight errors in word order, and that voice was the least common (only 2 errors). Performance of Iraqi EFL university students in using adjective modifiers order in English and the sources of the probable usage errors. The findings indicated that 943 (66%) of the responses were incorrect. It was then confirmed that students had difficulty using adjective modifiers order in English. The researcher claimed that the results were attributed to intralingual transfer, the effect of context of learning, the learners' use of communicative, and interlingual interference.

Krisetyawati (2010) administered six kinds of English noun phrases in an essay with 30 items to 30 Indonesian students of English language to be translated back into Indonesian. A total of 300 (39.44%) errors were observed, categorized into four different types. 175 (49.30%) errors were attributed to omission errors, 144 (40.56%) to misformation errors, 27 (7.61%) to misordering errors, and only nine (2.53%) to addition errors.

Among the large number of studies conducted on spoken errors, Chin (2001), Kim (1997), and Lennon (1991) are believed to be the most notable.

In EA studies, only one incomplete image of the learner's language is observed which considers the real and essential dimension of it, leaving no room for consideration of the avoidance strategy in L2 acquisition because EA only deals with what learners actually do.

In this vein, Learners who avoid using exact structures which seem difficult to them because of the differences between their native language and the target language may be considered to have difficulty with them (Brown, 2007; Ellis, 1996).

Corder's (1974) views on data collection and analysis have several stages. The first stage in the technical process of describing the linguistic nature of errors is to detect and identify them. The next step in the linguistic analysis of the collected data is to interpret what the learner has intended to say and reconstructed his sentence in the target language.

Sinclair (2003) insisted that "A word may have several meanings, and dictionaries present the meanings without giving much guidance as to how they may be differentiated from each other" (p. xx).

The objective of the current study is to examine the errors that Iranian EFL students make while writing and to analyze the sources of these errors. Specifically, what types of errors are common in the writings of EFL students and how are they classified as the source of errors? The final aim of this current study is to shed light on the probable problematic differences between some Persian sentences and their possible equivalents in English (strong version of CA) to clear up and explain the differences in meanings.

Methodology

Twenty female EFL learners participated in this study. They had elementary proficiency in English (A1 level based on the common European framework reference). Their ages ranged between 13 and 31 years old.

In order to analyze Iranian elementary EFL learners errors, a sample of ten English sentences were selected from their current course book (Top Notch Fundamental, 2nd edition, published by Longman), which were then translated into Persian. The students were tasked with translating the sentences back into English. The errors that the students may have committed in translating the sentences were then analyzed in order to indicate the proportion of each error and their source.

Results

The translated sentences were analyzed and classified with regards to the types of errors across three dimensions of syntax, spelling, and word choice. The errors were categorized based on both quality and quantity. At first, each sentence was analyzed in terms of the error type. In this vein, the correct form is also mentioned and the type of error identified. All the details are shown in Table 1.

It is worth mentioning that the classification used in this study for errors is by Keshavarz (2011), known as the Morpho-Syntactic Errors. The errors below are a list of the most common ones suggested by Keshavarz:

- Wrong use of plural morphemes
- Wrong use of parts of speech
- Wrong use of tenses
- Wrong sequence of tenses
- Wrong word order
- Using it instead of there is
- Misplacement of adverbs
- Errors in the use of preposition
- Errors in the use of articles
- Omission of a/an
- Redundant use of a/an
- Wrong use of articles
- Wrong use of active & passive voice
- Wrong use of conditional sentences
- Double negation
- Wrong use of negative imperative
- Error Due to Lack of Concord or Agreement
- Typical Persian Construction
- Subject-Verb Inversion in Indirect Questions

One sample of each sentence has been mentioned in order to show how the errors were analyzed. Each section of Table 1 provides information about the correct and incorrect form of the sentences. Moreover, the class of error and the taxonomy have also been illustrated.

In the subsequent part, the total number of errors and the frequency of each class have been indicated. The percentage of each category was calculated with the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Frequency of errors in each categories}}{\text{Total number of errors}} \times 100\%$$

Table 1. Classification of errors in each sample sentence

| | | |
|--|---|---------|
| دختر جوان هرروز با ماشین به مدرسه می رود | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | Young girl <u>was going</u> to school by <u>the</u> car in morning. | |
| Correct English | A young girl went to school by car in the morning. | |
| <u>Description</u> | <u>Taxonomy</u> | |
| 1) Errors in the use of article | Omission of A | |
| 2) Wrong use of the Tense | Past continuous instead of simple past | |
| 3) Errors in the use of Articles | Redundant use | |
| 4) Errors in the use of Articles | Omission | |
| او در خانه ی بزرگی زندگی می کند | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | He is live in big house. | |
| Correct English | He lives in a big house. | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| 1) Wrong use of Tense | Omission of a/an | |
| 2) Error in the use of Articles | | |
| هفته پیش آنها در خانه بحث کردند | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | They <u>have argued in</u> home last week. | |
| Correct English | They argued at home last week. | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| 1) Wrong use of Tense | Present perfect instead of simple past | |
| 2) Wrong use of Preposition | | |
| او از دو سگ من ترسید | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | She is afraid <u>from</u> my two <u>dog</u> . | |
| Correct English | She is afraid of my two dogs . | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| 1) Wrong use of Preposition | From instead of <i>Of</i> | |
| 2) Error Due to Lack of Concord or Agreement | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---------|
| من با برادرم موافق نیستم | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | I <u>am not agree</u> with my brother | |
| Correct English | I do not agree with my brother | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| Wrong Use of Preposition | Mistaken use of English structure | |
| Typical Persian Construction | | |
| او به کلاس وارد شد | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | She enters in classroom. | |
| Correct English | She entered the classroom | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| 1) Errors in the Use of Prepositions | Redundant Use of Preposition | |
| 2) Error in the Use of Articles | Before nouns made particular in textual situation | |
| او نمی تواند زمان ازدواج پدرش را به یاد بیاورد | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | She can't remember when <u>did his father</u> get married | |
| Correct English | She can't remember when his father gets married | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| 1) Subject-Verb Inversion in Indirect Questions | Overgeneralizing the question form | |
| بعد از دو ساعت به تهران رسیدیم. | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | We will arrive back to Tehran after 2 <u>o'clock</u> | |
| Correct English | We will arrive back to Tehran after 2 hours | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| Typical Persian Construction | O'clock instead of hours | |
| من هرروز به مدرسه میروم | | Persian |
| Incorrect English | I now to school am going | |
| Correct English | I am going to school now | |
| <u>Taxonomy</u> | <u>Description</u> | |
| Wrong use of Tense | Present progress instead of present | |

Sources of Errors

In EA, although the role of interference from L1 in making learners' error is obvious, it's not the only source of error making.

Corder (1974) distinguished three types of errors with respect to their sources:

- Interlingual errors, which are caused by first language;

- Intralingual errors, which are caused by the learners’ over generalization of particular grammatical rules;
- Errors which are caused by faulty teaching techniques

However, in this current study, complete classification of sources of errors presented by Keshavarz (2011) are taken into consideration, and form the basis of this study’s analysis. The sources of errors and their subcategories accompanied samples are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Example Sources of Errors and Examples

| | |
|---|---|
| S | Transfer of morphological elements |
| E | She is afraid from my two dog |
| S | Transfer of grammatical elements |
| E | I now to school am going |
| E | Young girl <u>was going</u> to school by the car in morning |
| E | They <u>have argued</u> in home last week |
| S | Transfer of Lexico-Semantic Elements |
| E | We will arrive back to Tehran after 2 <u>o’clock</u> |
| E | She enters <u>in</u> classroom |
| E | She is afraid <u>from</u> my two dogs |
| E | He doesn’t <u>have</u> interested in discussing <u>about</u> Politics |
| E | They have argued <u>in</u> home last week |
| S | Intralingual – Overgeneralization |
| E | She can’t remember when <u>did his</u> father get married |
| E | He <u>is live</u> in big house |
| S | Intralingual - Hypercorrection |

Note: S = sources of Error, E = Example

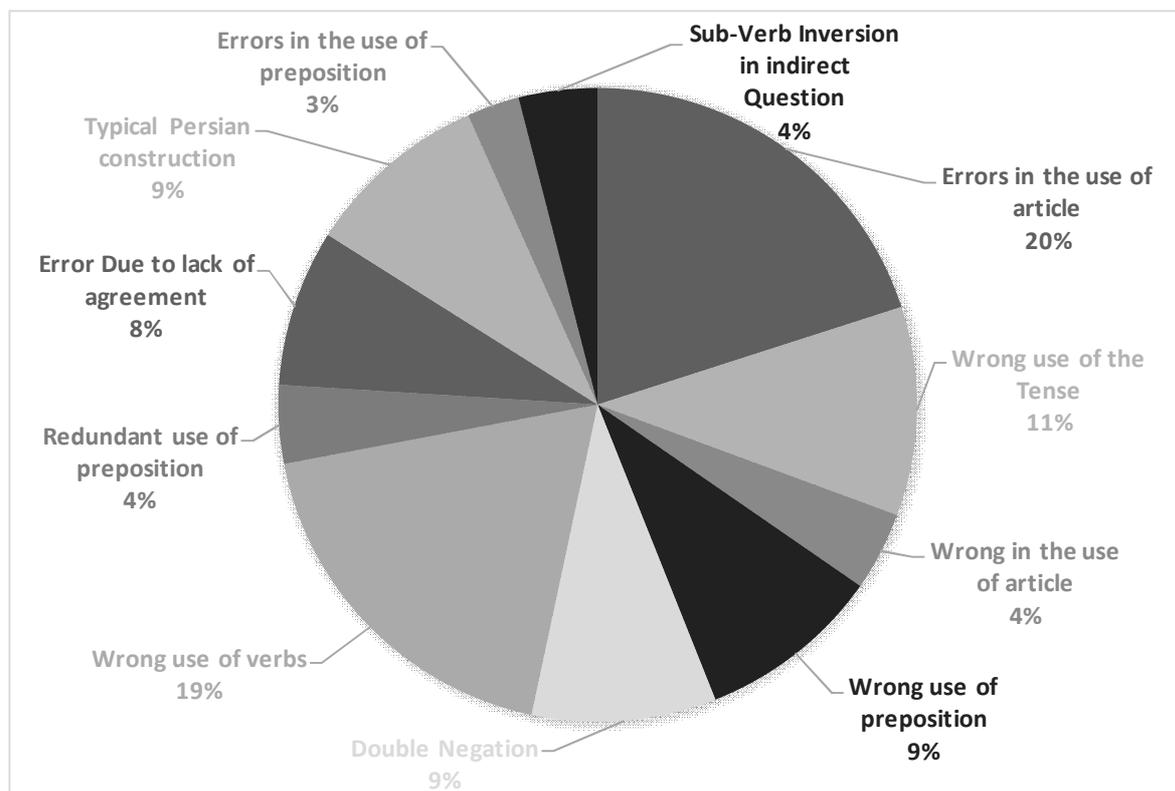
Based on the results shown in both Table 3 and Figure 1, errors in the use of articles are the most frequent, with 20% of the total number of errors; this is followed by the wrong uses of verbs (18.66%), and wrong use of the tense (10.66%). Wrong use of preposition, double negation and typical Persian construction occurred at the same level (33%).

According to these findings after errors due to lack of agreement, the number of errors attributed to the wrong use of articles, redundant use of prepositions, and sub-verb inversion in indirect question were identical (4%).

Table 3. Frequency of the Morpho-syntactical errors

| <i>Morpho-syntactic errors</i> | <i>Number of errors</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1) Errors in the use of article | 15 | 20% |
| 2) Wrong use of the Tense | 8 | 10/66% |
| 3) Wrong in the use of article | 3 | 4% |
| 4) Wrong use of preposition | 7 | 9/33% |
| 5) Double Negation | 7 | 9/33% |
| 6) Wrong use of verbs | 14 | 18/66% |
| 7) Redundant use of preposition | 3 | 4% |
| 8) Error Due to lack of agreement | 6 | 8% |
| 9) Typical Persian construction | 7 | 9/33% |
| 10) Errors in the use of preposition | 2 | 2.66% |
| 11) Sub-Verb Inversion in indirect Question | 3 | 4% |
| Total | 75 | 100 |

Figure 1. Frequency of the Morpho-syntactical errors



Conclusion

This current study centers on error analysis in translation as a means to enlighten teaching practices in the EFL/ESL context. Teachers can explicitly remind students of the causes of errors in order that students can compose more correct sentences in communicative and written context.

First and foremost, the numbers of errors indicate the effectiveness of the teaching material and teaching technique. In this vein, the findings of this current study show that more focus should be paid to articles and verbs since these two areas are believed to be more cumbersome for the learners. In this regard, the teachers are advised to bring more examples into the class in order to immerse students into a large number of authentic examples so as to ensure they have the opportunity to understand the correct form, and are therefore better prepared to use it. Finding the correct equivalents, in general, as referred to earlier in Gorjian and Molonia's translation of Simpson (1999), and the translation of Persian sentences into English by elementary EFL learners, in particular, is considered a highly challenging task, especially when it comes to the point of "Out of Context Translation."

The findings of the current study are considered to be important for the teaching of English in Iran, as it makes significant contribution to the understanding of English language teaching and learning for: a) Teachers of English, as they can make use of the findings in being aware of the role of Persian as a first language in the teaching/learning process of English as a target language; b) Teacher educators, as they can make use of the findings in reexamining their foreign language teaching methodology of teacher training and centers of development; c) Material writers and syllabus designers, as they can make use of the findings in preparing teaching materials and designing syllabuses; d) Teaching methodology researchers, as they can make use of the findings in conducting more studies in the area which could be helpful in developing new English language teaching methods and techniques, and finally; e) Iranian students of English as a foreign language, as they can make use of the findings to develop their translation abilities, not to mention their ability in translating Persian to English.

In light of the results of the current study, the researcher recommends conducting studies on the fruitfulness of using bilingual and monolingual dictionaries in the process of translation from Persian to English and vice versa, and the effect of cultural knowledge on choosing the right equivalents in translation.

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