Identifying the Grammatical Errors Committed by EFL Learners: A study of Public Sector Universities Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

Grammar is considered very important for learning a foreign language as it is an important pedagogical skill and a significant part of target language proficiency. Teachers are, thus, supposed to identify L2 learners' common grammar mistakes for addressing them in their teaching.   This study is intended to investigate the most common errors made by Pakistani students at university level. Data was collected through Google Survey by dispatching questionnaire to the participants (*n=80)* also distributed manually. The data was analyzed using SPSS software version 21. The results show that Pakistani university EFL students make a large number of both intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. The results also revealed that there was consensus found about the effectiveness of error correction. Teachers supported the use of different methods and stated that it has a positive impact on EFL learners' correct use of grammar. It is recommended that grammatical errors need more attention and the teachers need to provide essential feedback to minimize the error occurrence.

Keywords: Error Analysis, GTM, Perceived Common Errors, Interlanguage, L1 Interference

1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Grammar is considered very important for learning a foreign language (Rivers, 1981). Grammar, according to Richards (1971), is the study of the structure of linguistic units including words and phrases which are joined to make sentences and meaningful units in the language. Pollock (1997, p. 7) suggests that "the grammatical patterns and rules of a language do not communicate or tell us what to do. Rather, such rules tell us in what way to respond appropriately or correctly within the structure pattern or system of the language". Although it's not easy to achieve accuracy in grammar, a person who wants to be proficient in acquiring skills in another language must master grammatical rules governing   structures such as form and organization of the sentences. Grammar is elaborated as "the set of rules that determine how a language's sentences are constructed" (Thornbury, 2000, p. 1). Grammar is seen as "a syntactical system that provides the sequence and ways in which words are put in a sentence" (Close, 1982, p. 13).

Realizing the significance of grammar in learning a foreign language, Shanklin (1994) maintained that "grammatical expertise and proficiency is both an essential pedagogical or teaching skill and an essential part of target language expertise or   proficiency" (p. 147). Distinguishing between the levels of proficiency in grammar by the native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs), Shanklin (ibid.) maintains that the knowledge of NSs' is implicit. According to her, NSs are competent in making the correct use of grammar; however, they have less knowledge of grammatical rules. In comparison with NSs, NNSs acquire explicit knowledge and develop awareness of formal grammar (different rules of formation). Although they have the explicit knowledge of grammar, they still have to face a great deal of difficulties in applying grammar rules while using a target language. In this regard, Shatz and Wilkinson (2010, p. 165) reports that L2 learners "usually are not able to elaborate complex thoughts or ideas because of their incapability to develop complex or complicated sentences indicating complicated relationships".

It is very important for learners to know grammar in case they want to be proficient in the language. Otherwise, lack of understanding will result in incorrect/wrong use of grammar which will disturb their progress in learning a foreign language (Savage, Bitterlin, & Price, 2010). Thus, teachers must be capable of   finding out the most repeated grammar mistake made by L2 learners and try to address them in their teaching because, the accurate grammar facilitates learners to create "clear, properly or well-structured, non-complicated and unambiguous sentences" (Derewianka, 1998, p. 3 as cited in Shatz& Wilkinson, 2010, p. 164). Language errors have remained in focus in SLA research (Truscott, 1996; Greenslade and Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). Therefore, there is a need to carry out further research to systematically treat a large variety of interrelated elements including the domain of finding/determining grammatical errors/mistakes by the students. As reported in the background section, NNSs are susceptible to making more grammar errors, English teachers in Pakistan face the challenge to address to the grammar mistakes their students make in using English in all skills both receptive and productive. A large number of learners in Pakistan do not succeed in acquiring the basics of English even after spending many years in learning English at schools. Students in public sector schools in Pakistan start learning English as a compulsory subject from primary to intermediate level of education. After spending that much of time in formal education, the students are expected to acquire at least a satisfactory level to communicate well in

all skills without making grammar mistakes. But the majority of the students do not succeed in acquiring that level.

1.1 Purpose and the significance of the study
In the light of various definitions of grammar cited above, it is clear that accuracy in a language is mainly related to producing structurally correct sentences. On the other side, inaccuracy leads to errors which cause learners to produce structurally incorrect sentences. Inaccuracy causes failure in achieving the objectives set in any language curriculum. This study addresses the issue of identifying the grammatical errors made by EFL learners in Pakistani public sector universities with the purpose of enhancing their grammatical knowledge and improving their skills.

The main assumption is that errors or mistakes committed by second/foreign language learners are very useful in improving language skills in case if they get good feedback from their teachers (Corder, 1967, Corder, 1981, Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005, Gluth, 2003). Language learners learn from mistakes by obtaining feedback to make new attempts which help them achieve the desired linguistic and learning objectives. This study is concerned with discussing, explaining and categorizing the most grammatical errors EFL learners commit in Pakistani public sector universities with the aim of providing teachers of English in Pakistani universities with useful insights they can use in their teaching. This will ultimately help in reducing students' errors and improving their language skills. In order to achieve the study purpose , the current study seeks to answer the following research questions .
1. What are the most common errors committed by Pakistani university EFL learners?
2. What are the perceptions of English Language teachers towards the most common errors made by Pakistani university EFL learners?
3. What teaching techniques are exploited by English Language teachers to address the most common errors made by Pakistani university EFL learners?

3 Research Methodology
The teachers of English language throughout the public sector universities of Sindh were administered with the online survey and some were contacted and the questionnaire was manually provided to them. This study is based on data collected from 80 participants. This number of participants is thought to be enough for generating reliable data about the topic. which investigates the participants' perception towards the grammatical errors students commit, the feedback methods, and the way/s they correct these errors. The questionnaire data was analyzed through SPSS and presented in descriptive tables

4.   Presentation of Results
Table 4.1
Recognized probable Repeated Errors that are often committed by students (RRE)

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
RRE1	EFL learners of Pakistan often forget to use 's' with third person singular in present simple tense	80	1	5	2.08
RRE2	Pakistani EFL learners usually omit the verb 'to be' with 'going to' for future	80	2	5	3.04
RRE3	EFL learners in Pakistan often confuse using 'going to' for the present continuous and future	80	1	4	2.28
RRE4	EFL learners in Pakistan often more generalize the regular verbs' final 'ed' in irregular verbs	80	1	4	2.14
RRE5	EFL learners in Pakistan often wrongly utilise prepositions	80	1	4	2.39
RRE6	EFL learners in Pakistan often mix the use of gerund and infinitive	80	1	4	2.84
RRE7	EFL learners in Pakistan often miss indefinite article 'a/an'	80	1	4	2.51
RRE8	EFL learners in Pakistan frequently forget the definite article 'the' usage	80	1	4	2.05
RRE9	EFL learners in Pakistan often use the definite article 'the' unnecessarily	80	1	4	2.15
RRE10	EFL learners in Pakistan often forget to use verb 'to be' in the passive structure	80	1	4	2.43
RRE11	EFL learners in Pakistan often confuse the usage of verb forms past and present in a single conditional statement	80	1	4	2.28
RRE12	EFL learners in Pakistan often use superlative degree when	80	1	4	2.45

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
	they are comparing two items				
RRE13	EFL learners in Pakistan frequently have confusion in 'do /does' usage in present indefinite tense	80	1	5	2.05
RRE14	EFL learners in Pakistan often miss 'did' when it comes to construct past tense questions	80	2	4	2.89
RRE15	EFL learners in Pakistan often miss 'did' when it comes to construct past tense negative sentences	80	1	4	1.96

The table 4.1 has got 15 questions. The table shows that highest mean stands for PRE 2 which is 3.04. It means that the ESL learners do not forget using of helping verb in the future tense which is constructed with going to. Most of the participants strongly disagree to this statement. However, the lowest mean value is 1.96 which stands for PRE15. It means that ESL learners mostly have a habit to miss did when they have to construct a past tense negative. Most of the participants have strongly agreed to the statement. It proves that forgetting did in past tense sentences is common when it comes to Pakistani ESL learners. Further, it is 2.08 mean for PRE-1 which means L2 learners of Pakistan often forget to use's' with third person singular in present simple tense most of the participants have strongly agreed for this statement .Similarly, for PRE-3 mean is 2.28 which says L2 learners in Pakistan often confuse using 'going to' for the present continuous and future, most of the participants agree to this statement. In PRE-4 which reads as L2 learners in Pakistan often more generalize the regular verbs' final 'ed' in irregular verbs, for this there is mean value 2.14 which means most of the participants strongly agree with the statement. It reveals that Pakistani learners generalize regular verbs in all irregular verbs by adding 'ed'.
Table 4.2

Recognized Possible Cause of Repeated Errors the students commit (RPRE)

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
RPRE1	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose feel difficulty in using irregular verbs	80	1	5	2.46
RPRE2	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose use gerund '-ing' in abundance because it's more familiar as compare to the infinitive	80	1	4	2.44
RPRE3	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose use definite article 'the' quite frequently due to the L1 interference	80	1	5	2.91
RPRE4	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose forget the vowel letter due to it they use 'a' in place of 'an'	80	1	4	2.15
RPRE5	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose feel reluctant to use conditionals due to their rarity in L1	80	1	4	1.98
RPRE6	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose commit errors in utilization of relative pronouns due to their short knowledge regarding the sentence structure	80	1	4	2.50
RPRE7	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose want to have fixed rules when it comes to comparative and superlative usage	80	1	5	2.68
RPRE8	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose miss the use of 'than' due to L1 interference after comparative adjectives	80	1	5	3.44
RPRE9	Pakistani EFL learners I suppose omit 'the' usage before superlative adjectives due to L1 interference	80	1	4	2.09
RPRE10	I suppose one of the reasons Pakistani EFL learners usually make wrong use of irregular comparative adjectives is due to over generalization	80	1	4	2.51

The table 4.2 has got 10 questions. It is about Recognized Possible Cause of Repeated Errors the students commit (RPRE). The results show that the highest mean value is 3.44 which is for statement RPRE-8 which reads as Pakistani EFL learners I suppose miss the use of 'than' due to L1 interference after comparative adjectives. It means the participants disagreed that the 'than' misuse is because of L1 interference. Similarly the lowest mean value is 1.98 for RPRE-5 which read as Pakistani EFL learners I suppose feel reluctant to use conditionals due to their rarity in L1. The results show for the said RPRE that the EFL learners are reluctant towards the conditional usage because they are rare in L1. Likewise, the results show that the reasons Pakistani EFL learners usually make wrong use of irregular comparative adjectives is due to over generalization.

Table 4.3

Teaching Strategies incorporated by teachers to rectify grammatical errors in the classroom (TSRE)

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
TSRE1	I suppose error rectification is beneficial in EFL learning	79	1	5	3.94
TSRE2	I suppose that rectifying grammatical errors has a constructive effect on EFL learners' correct use of grammar	80	1	4	2.89
TSRE3	I hold the view that teachers should incorporate various techniques for error rectification	80	1	4	1.91
TSRE4	I am of a view that feedback strategy relying on the proficiency levels of Pakistani EFL learners is good	80	1	5	3.24
TSRE5	I am of a view that Pakistani EFL learners mostly do not like being corrected in class is because they feel uncomfortable	80	1	4	2.15
TSRE6	I am of a view that altering feedback strategies as per the response of Pakistani EFL learners is good	80	2	4	3.03
TSRE7	I am of a view that selective error rectification is much effective way to improve students' grammatical proficiency	80	1	4	1.81
TSRE8	I am of a view that comprehensive error rectification is more outcome giving way to enhance students' grammatical proficiency	80	1	4	2.86
TSRE9	I am of a view that pointing out grammatical errors by underlining or circling them without any explanation is good	80	2	5	4.08
TSRE10	I am of a view that identifying grammatical errors and also asking students for self-rectification is good	80	1	4	2.54
TSRE11	I am of a view that pointing out grammatical errors and besides that asking them for peer-rectification is good	80	2	5	3.36
TSRE12	I am of a view that locating grammatical errors and also modifying them is good	80	1	4	2.43

The table 4.3 has got 12 questions. The results show that the highest mean value is 4.08 which is for TSRE-9 which reads as I am of a view that pointing out grammatical errors by underlining or circling them without any explanation is good. It means the results show that the participants strongly disagreed to the statement that only pointing out mistakes should not be done. It means they need to be rectified. Similarly, the lowest mean value is 1.91 for the statement TSRE-3 which reads as I hold the view those teachers should incorporate various techniques for error rectification. The results show that the participant s strongly agreed with the statement and they want teachers to adopt different strategies to fix the errors committed by the learners.

5 Discussion & Conclusion
5.1 Recognized Probable Repeated Errors
The study results of the reveals that most of the participants found that the common errors committed by EFL learners were as EFL learners in Pakistan often more generalize the regular verbs' final 'ed' in irregular verbs. The study matches with the earlier studies done by Marcus (2001) who believes that L2 learners generalize regular verbs' ed in irregular verbs. The other dominant errors in the present study are f auxiliaries 'do' and 'does' which L2 learners misuse in sentence construction in present simple tense structures. These findings are in conformity with the previous studies conducted by Al-Dubib (2013) who found that students commit errors in grammatical construction especially use of tenses and subject-verb agreement. The learners do not use present auxiliaries appropriately whether in spoken or written. In line with the use of simple present tense, the L2 learners forget to use 's/es' with the 3rd person singular in simple present tense. Talpur& Shah (2017) show in their studies that the highest frequency of errors committed by L2 learners is that of Simple present tense followed by other errors including capitalization, plurality, articles, gerund and infinitives etc.

For definite article 'the' mean is 2.05 which shows that most of the participants in the present study agreed that they make errors while using 'the' in their writings. The learners use definite article 'the' unnecessarily *(M=2.15)*. The findings of the study are also supported by Unar et al. (2017) who found in their studies that articles especially use of 'the' creates a major problem for L2 learners in ESL/EFL context. Moreover, the learners are mistaken to use prepositions appropriately. Due to overreliance on translation method, L2 learners fail to produce the correct prepositions in the sentences. This is due to the fact that learners do not learn fixed chunks in language which is referred to as 'collocations'. Akhter et al. (2017) notes that these prepositional errors (overuse or omission) is result of L1 interference in L2. They conducted study in Pakistani context and suggested that the dependence of L2 learners on L1 misleads them to use of correct prepositions. To avoid this, the L2 learners need to rely on collocations which can guide them to the appropriate way of using prepositional

phrases and idiomatic expressions in English language. Besides these errors, other errors include gerund, infinitive, use of indefinite articles and plurals.

5.2 Recognized Possible Cause of Repeated Errors the students commit
The least mean related to possible cause of repeated errors in the present study is (*M=1.98)* which shows that L2 learners find it difficult to use conditional because L1 hardly finds the availability of conditionals. The reason behind conditional errors lies in the nature of L1 which acts as an interference in L2 learning. Fasih et al. (2016) conforms to the findings of the present study who found that due to rarity of conditional use in L1, ESL learners fail to figure out the use of conditional structures in second language. In a similar vein, L1 interference also holds accountable for omission of definite article in L2 writing. In addition, the overgeneralization by learners is a major factor behind the errors such as formation of comparative and superlative degrees and construction past and past participle regular verbs. Hussain et al. (2013) showed in their study that faulty translation and overgeneralization are the major factors hindering correct use of L2. Jobeen (2015) in Pakistani context noted several causes for the errors. These causes include language transfer, overgeneralization, simplification, underuse, fossilization, lack of knowledge of the rules, interference. Their study puts a greater emphasis on 'overgeneralization' in L2 Pakistani context where the learners overgeneralize in formation of verb forms, degrees and tense auxiliaries. The present found the similar results i.e. lack of knowledge of the rules also grammatical errors. For instance, the use of pronouns is such a result.

5.3 Teaching Strategies incorporated by teachers to rectify grammatical errors in the classroom
There are several opinions the present study has explored pertaining to teaching strategies to correct grammatical errors. The least mean (*M=1.81*) shows that most of the participants agreed to the fact that the rectification of the selective errors is an effective strategies to improve grammar skills of the students instead of highlighting the whole text with the errors. Naimi (2015) shows in his study that most teachers agreed that errors need to be corrected. If the errors are not addressed immediately, they are fossilized. The present study shows that most of the participants are in favor (*M=1.91)* that teachers should take notice of L2 learners' errors and use different strategies to rectify them. However, the results indicate that most learners feel uncomfortable while being corrected in their grammatical structures. Self-rectification is an effective strategy which L2 teachers can utilize in their classrooms followed by an expert look into the errors by teachers themselves, most of the participants remained neutral and some disagreed that comprehensive feedback on errors is necessary. The present study finds that the comprehensive feedback on L2 learners' language affects their proficiency levels and it does not help them develop proficiency in L2. Khanom (2014) showed in her study that self-rectification is an integral part language correction which does not match with the findings of the present study.

Conclusion
The most common errors were with subject verb agreement, usage of preposition, articles. The errors also caused because of interlanguage inference and due to mother tongue. The students were making errors in the construction of present indefinite and past simple tense. The teachers believed that error if not corrected on the time was being a part of their language .Moreover, pointing out errors and letting them for self-rectification also benefited in this context.The studied was conducted from public sector universities of the Sindh province. Moreover, the teachers of English language were chosen for responses. The data was collected through questionnaire uploaded in google survey and administered in hard copy wherever it was not possible for the respondents to access internet. However, the study data was kept confidential and was used only for academic purpose. The studied could be replicated at broader level involving more teachers of English from other provinces. However, it could also include other subject teachers and results could benefit the teaching and learning environment

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