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Implementing error analysis technique in ESL/EFL teaching-learning activities: A case study in Saudi context

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the written errors of Saudi secondary-level ESL/EFL learners as a means to evaluate and enhance English language teaching methodologies within the Kingdom's educational framework. Grounded in the principles of error analysis, the research treats learner errors not as failures but as essential markers of the inter-language development process. By analyzing written assignments from 50 students enrolled in public schools, the study identifies recurring grammatical inaccuracies, syntactic deviations, and lexical misuse, pointing to a limited mastery of English language rules despite its compulsory status in the national curriculum. A key finding is the pronounced influence of the learners' first language, Arabic, which manifests through negative language transfer and structural interference, particularly in verb usage, sentence formation, and article application. These insights reveal the need for more nuanced, contrastive grammar instruction and culturally responsive pedagogical strategies that address the linguistic challenges specific to Arabic-speaking learners. Ultimately, the study affirms the value of error analysis as a diagnostic and corrective tool, capable of informing curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment practices aimed at improving English proficiency among Saudi learners.

KEYWORDS: ESL; EFL; Error Analysis, First Language (L1), Teaching-Learning Activities; Language Transfer, Contrastive Analysis

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Introduction

Error Analysis (EA) is a cornerstone in applied linguistics and second/foreign language acquisition. It aims to shed light on the complexities of learning processes, especially within non-native environments. In Saudi Arabia, where Arabic is the mother tongue and English is taught as a foreign language, EA helps educators better understand learner difficulties and refine pedagogical approaches accordingly. Building on Corder's foundational distinction between errors and mistakes, EA facilitates targeted instructional adjustments based on systematic identification of recurring errors.

Saudi learners often make consistent grammatical and syntactical errors due to differences between Arabic and English. These include challenges with verb tense usage, sentence structure, and subject-verb agreement. Errors thus reflect not only the learner's current level of proficiency but also the influence of the Arabic linguistic system. Teachers can utilize this insight to develop more effective teaching methods tailored to the Saudi context.

The field of applied linguistics and second and foreign language acquisition is dominated by error analysis. As a discipline, applied linguistics aims to address difficulties and challenges associated with learning and teaching processes and provide answers to the queries. EA gives a deeper knowledge of the language acquisition process. For a long time, people have tried to understand better the process of language acquisition and learning (Richards, 1971, 1974; James, 1989, 1998; Norrish, 1983; Ellis, 1995).

Their findings contributed a lot to the teaching and learning of second and foreign languages. It's considered that learners learn the SL/FL in the same manner as they learn their first language (L1), to some degree (Corder, 1967, 1971, & 1974). Children make several mistakes and errors when learning their first language. Corder distinguished between an error and a mistake. According to him, errors happen due to inadequate learning and lack of language competence which the self cannot correct. On the other side, mistakes are the outcome of low performance in language use due to a variety of circumstances such as exhaustion and learners' carelessness, and so on. Learners are aware of the appropriate language forms and can self-correct these inaccuracies using this information.

This is the fundamental distinction between mistakes and errors. And, to do accurate analysis, one must be extremely precise about the identification of mistakes. They make grammatical and semantically inaccurate statements at an early stage of their learning, which they eventually fix by receiving guidance and feedback from their parents. When learning any language, L2 learners go through the same procedure. As a result, there isn't much of a distinction between learning an SL/FL and learning the L1 (Corder, as cited in Richards, 1971, 1974).

EA is also significant in the teaching of second and foreign languages. It assists instructors in gaining a better grasp of new teaching methods by providing feedback on student mistakes or errors. It is undeniable and well accepted that learners make errors throughout the learning process. These errors give language instructors and linguists fresh insights and solutions for resolving language acquisition issues.

The behaviourist learning theory of language describes learning as habit development. Errors occur due to the obstruction created while the habit formation process goes on. The established L1 habits obstruct the formation of habits in the SL/FL. Learners' mistakes are, in fact, the consequence of the interference of the L1 (Corder, 1967, 1971 & 1974; James, 1989, 1998).

Importance of the Present Research

In terms of the topic, this study is quite important. Its goal is to offer information regarding various mistakes made by students and the causes and justifications for such mistakes. Error analysis gives insight on the many underlying mechanisms that play a role in complicated phenomena of language acquisition. Among the most important branches of applied linguistics, EA attempts to answer difficulties and challenges linked to SL/FL acquisition and instruction, and at the same time, provides practical solutions to language-related issues. The study also aims to provide language practitioners and instructors with several ways for making their instruction more successful. It also emphasizes the significance of incorporating relevant content into language instruction. It gives students the option to self-correct by identifying their errors. In addition, it aims to discover the reasons behind these students' low performance in language learning. Considering all of these factors, it is possible to conclude that the current research is of great significance to all its stakeholders.

Objectives of the research

The major objective of the research is to assess the errors made by certain students of English as a second or foreign language at higher secondary level. The following are few particular goals and goals:

- Defining the role of error analysis in teaching and learning of English as SL and FL;
- Analyzing errors made by SL/FL learners;
- Providing language instructors with new language teaching strategies;
- Enabling students to identify their errors; and
- Identifying the deeper mechanisms underlying the language acquisition process.

Research questions

Based on aims and scope of the study, the present research aims to identify the following research questions with reasonable responses:

- i. What are the typical characteristics of English learner errors?
- ii. How and why these errors occur?
- iii. What causes these learners to write poor and grammatically incorrect English?

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

Concerning the theoretical foundation for the analysis of errors, errors must first be detected and documented. For the error analysis, various categories are proposed (Corder 1967, 1971 & 1974) and divided the errors into four main types: addition, Omission, Selection, and Ordering.

- Addition refers to any grammatical item being added. For example, “The *childrens* are playing”. Here, plural marker suffix ‘-s’ is an unnecessary addition to ‘children’. The grammatically correct structure is: “The *children* are playing”.
- Omission takes place when a grammatical construction has an essential element missing in it. Such as in “Rohan wake up early”, suffix ‘-s’ is omitted in the verb phrase ‘wake up’, which is a necessary element for a true grammatical construction.
- The difficulty of an incorrect selection of a specific form, causing an error, is termed as Selection. In the expression “I am tallest than you”, a wrong selection of the word ‘tallest’ is made in place of the correct construction ‘taller’, to be used for comparison between the two.
- Ordering refers in the phrase to the incorrect sequence of words. For example, “I have read all the book of this pages”, the sequencing in the phrase ‘book of this pages’ is incorrect. Instead, it should be: ‘pages of this book’.

The theoretical context of the investigation is formed on the basis of the above mentioned 4 types of errors, and the whole analysis of the data would be based on these.

Previous Researches

The behaviourist learning theory of language affected the area of error analysis in the past. The learners’ errors were thought to be the consequence of the presence and interference with the first language rules. Teachers and linguists concentrated on comparing and contrasting two languages. And, using contrastive language analysis, the learners’ errors were examined. But in the later phase, the contrastive analysis theory was unable to give adequate justifications for the learners’ errors.

It was discovered that the learners’ errors are caused by a variety of structures, rather than only the influence of mother language (MT). The learner’s cognition and a variety of other elements are to blame for the learners’ errors and blunders. The area of error analysis, according to Keshavarz (2003, 2006), is separated into two types:

- *Theoretical error analysis*: It aims to identify and investigate difficulties and concerns linked to language acquisition and the underlying structures that operate while the process of language learning is on. It looks at the causes of errors made throughout the learning process.

- *Applied Error Analysis*: This is concerned with the creation of materials, as well as other remedial courses and approaches, to address the issues raised by the theoretical analysis of the errors.

The current research focuses on the mistakes made by certain higher secondary students in Saudi Arabia. It aims to investigate the problematic areas of students in using a language for writing purposes. It emphasizes the significance of providing pupils with mistake analysis-based feedback. Furthermore, it gives language instructors a variety of methods to use in their classes. This research looks at various types of errors made by these students. It concentrates on the reasons behind the occurrence of these errors and enables the learners to identify the errors made by them throughout the language learning process and explore the fundamental mechanisms involved in language acquisition. The research also aims to make instructors more efficient in their teaching via alternative approaches and resources.

Developmental phases of Error Analysis

As noted earlier, the study of errors in the 1940s was strongly affected by the behaviourist theory of language acquisition. The interference of initial language norms led to the main errors done by learners. Language learning was regarded to be to accustom, and once one of the languages' habits have developed, they are resistant to the SL/FL norms of learning. To explain the errors made by learners against the rules of both languages, the theory of contrastive analysis was developed. Following the similarities and differences between two language rules, terms like positive and any resistance to language learning negative transfers were coined. Positive and constructive effects on learning have been termed positive and negative transfers (Ellis, 1995; Norrish, 1983; Čanal, 2007; Gas & Selinker, 2008; Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014).

Nevertheless, the contrastive analysis could not explain all the sources of the problems, and it was understood that the process was not as easy as it would be defined by contrastive analysis. Language acquisition is a tremendously complex activity, and linguistic analysis is essentially an error analysis.

The nativist hypothesis of Chomsky offered the study of misinterpretation and language acquisition a new path later on. According to this view, language acquisition is not merely the building of the habit, but a universal grammar exists. This hypothesis suggests that there are several language acquisition cognitive processes. In this regard, he stresses that some of the learning processes and methods employed by the learners of SL or FL are similar to those used in the learning process of L1 (Corder, as cited in Richards, 1974: 22).

Several reasons can be listed for the student's errors. One of them is the scarcity of language teaching and learning materials or inadequately trained language instructors. Some of the factors in the analysis of errors offered by the researchers (James, 1989, 1998; Ellis, 1995) include the transfer of language, overgeneralization, simplification, underuse, fossilization, interference, failure to understand the grammar rules, etc.

The paper now details some of them to demonstrate how language learning errors are caused by these elements. Language transfer is the study of one language in the presence of another language. Sometimes, it leaves a favorable influence on language acquisition when similarities are found, occasionally problematic interferences when linguistic differences are observed between L1 and L2 (Selinker, 1972 as cited in Richard, 1974, p.37). Overgeneralization indicates the circumstance when a linguistic form or norm over the other structures is exaggerated. The widespread usage of specific conditions relates to over-generalization and leads to language learning errors. This can also be seen in a child's first language acquisition process (James, 1998, pp.178-179). Simplification is described as a circumstance in which learners prefer using extremely simple forms to avoid complicated structures. This often leads to inaccuracies. Fossilization stands for a situation when the linguistic or grammar growth of a learner is stopped in particular areas while the learner develops his/her knowledge in other linguistic areas. This might also cause the errors. Failure to know the rules is also one of the main causes of students' errors. In addition, sometimes students may lack adequate understanding of rules, which leads to language errors and blunders and impedes language acquisition.

Over the decades, Error Analysis (EA) has become a fundamental approach in second and foreign language acquisition studies. Over the decades, Error Analysis (EA) has become a fundamental approach in second and foreign language acquisition studies. Early contributions by Corder (1967, 1971, 1974) laid the foundation by asserting that learner errors should be seen as evidence of learning progression rather than failure. He emphasized that errors provide insights into the learner's interlanguage, a transitional linguistic

system shaped by both the first language (L1) and the target language (L2). Richards (1971, 1974) and James (1998) further contributed to the field by classifying common error types and exploring their implications for language instruction.

In the context of Arabic-speaking learners, several studies have examined how negative language transfer from Arabic affects English learning. Abisamra (2003) conducted a comparative study of Lebanese EFL students and found that most grammatical errors stemmed from structural differences between Arabic and English, particularly in tense use and word order. Similarly, Rabab'ah (2003) observed that Jordanian learners exhibited frequent syntactic and lexical errors, attributing them to both L1 interference and insufficient communicative exposure to English.

Specific to Saudi Arabia, Al-Khresheh (2010, 2016) conducted empirical studies highlighting the dominance of interlingual errors, especially in sentence structure, due to the syntactic disparity between Arabic and English. His research confirmed that L1 interference is a significant barrier to mastering L2 structures, particularly in writing. Alhaisoni (2012) analyzed the written English of Saudi university students and found that omission, selection, and addition were the most common error categories—closely aligning with Corder's classification.

In a broader pedagogical context, Zughoul (1987) and Kharma & Hajjaj (1997) discussed the systemic weaknesses in English teaching across Arab countries, including curriculum inconsistencies and an overreliance on grammar-based instruction. These studies advocate for reform in teaching strategies that focus on contrastive analysis, communicative competence, and learner autonomy.

Originating in the seminal work of Corder (1967, 1971, 1974), EA redefined the role of learner errors, positioning them as developmental milestones rather than mere signs of failure. Corder emphasized the significance of understanding the learner's *interlanguage*—a transitional linguistic system shaped by both native and target languages. James (1998) further expanded this perspective by exploring the pedagogical and diagnostic roles of EA in language instruction.

In the Arab ESL/EFL context, research has consistently demonstrated that first language interference, especially from Arabic, plays a dominant role in the errors made by learners. Abisamra (2003) and Rabab'ah (2003) highlighted persistent syntactic and lexical errors among Lebanese and Jordanian learners, attributing them to negative transfer from Arabic. In the Saudi context, Al-Khresheh (2010, 2016) reported that Saudi students' English errors frequently reflected direct syntactic translations from Arabic, such as misuse of word order and verb tenses. Similarly, Alhaisoni (2012) found that omission and selection errors were the most frequent among Saudi university students, closely mirroring the categories outlined by Corder.

Recent research has extended these findings with a focus on technology use, digital communication habits, and instructional practices. Alhaysony (2016) studied the misuse of articles among Saudi learners and recommended integrating focused error correction strategies in classroom instruction. In a broader regional study, Bani-Khaled and Altakhaineh (2020) examined Saudi EFL students' errors in academic writing and found that fossilized errors—especially related to verb agreement and prepositions—remain common even at advanced levels. This indicates persistent gaps in grammatical instruction and corrective feedback mechanisms. Moreover, the increasing prevalence of SMS and digital shorthand language has introduced a new dimension to learner errors. Al-Khalifa and Al-Khater (2021) observed that informal texting habits were beginning to influence formal academic writing among Saudi students, particularly in spelling, punctuation, and abbreviation use—echoing the present study's observation of “SMS language” effects.

The Saudi Vision 2030 educational reforms, which emphasize digital fluency and English proficiency, have also prompted a wave of applied linguistics studies. Alfayyadh (2022) investigated how digital tools impact English grammar learning among high school students in Riyadh and emphasized the need for more adaptive and interactive pedagogical approaches that integrate real-time error correction. Meanwhile, Alharbi and Altuwairesh (2023) advocated for teacher training programs that equip instructors with a deeper understanding of interlanguage theory and contrastive analysis, particularly to mitigate the challenges of L1 interference.

International scholarship continues to support the application of EA in diverse linguistic contexts. Swan and Smith (2021) provided a comparative study of learner English errors from various L1 backgrounds and reaffirmed that learners from Semitic language families (like Arabic) consistently struggle with article usage, verb forms, and prepositional systems in English. Zhang and Chen (2020) underscored the effectiveness of AI-

driven grammar-checking tools as supplemental aids in EA-driven instruction, a suggestion highly relevant for the tech-savvy youth population in Saudi Arabia.

Recent studies have expanded the understanding of error analysis in EFL contexts by exploring innovative pedagogical tools and psychological factors. For instance, Khan et al. (2020) investigated the reliability of speaking tests, highlighting the importance of assessment design in identifying learner errors. Similarly, Kumar et al. (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of code-switching in primary-level language classrooms, suggesting that strategic use of L1 can mitigate errors stemming from L2 comprehension gaps.

The role of technology in language learning has also been examined. Pan et al. (2022) compared MOOCs and flipped instruction, noting their differential impacts on speaking anxiety and motivation—factors that indirectly influence error production. Further, Li et al. (2022) explored the interplay between cognitive dominance and language skills, emphasizing how individual differences may predict error patterns.

Psychological and social dimensions are equally critical. Jahara et al. (2022) linked self-assessment and coping styles to academic stress, proposing that stress management could reduce error frequency in high-pressure tasks. The predictive effects of social media on engagement and achievement (Assefa et al., 2023) further underscore the need to address digital literacy in error analysis, particularly given the infiltration of informal “SMS language” into formal writing (Al-Khalifa & Al-Khater, 2021).

Emerging tools like augmented reality (Khan et al., 2023) offer promising avenues for error correction by providing immersive, context-rich language practice. These studies collectively advocate for a multidimensional approach to error analysis, integrating technological, cognitive, and affective perspectives.

The present research considers all the reasons mentioned above for errors and examines the errors of a group of higher secondary students in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the research seeks to clarify the function of the analysis of errors in teaching and learning English as a second and a foreign language. Overall, the literature strongly supports the use of error analysis as both a research and instructional tool, especially in Arabic-speaking contexts. The persistent patterns of grammatical, syntactic, and lexical errors across studies underline the urgent need for contrastive, culturally responsive, and technologically enhanced teaching methods. Within the framework of Saudi education, such strategies are vital for aligning English language instruction with national goals and global proficiency benchmarks.

Methodology

The qualitative characteristic of this research is that the technique of analysis is the examination of content. This approach is used to analyze the contents of any document and to figure out if particular words have particular meanings. The analysis of content is a commonly used approach of study in the social sciences. The qualitative design of this study aligns with recent calls for adaptive methodologies, such as those proposed by Kumar et al. (2021), who emphasized context-sensitive strategies for error identification.

The data are gathered from the assignments based on grammar activities given to the participants of the study. The goal of these assignments was to develop students' writing skills in English. For detection and description of errors, 60 assignment copies were evaluated. Errors were detected in terms of addition, omission, selection and ordering. The obtained data contained errors in several parts of the language. For error analysis, two questions were taken into consideration. One question involved precis writing, and the other question was translating the provided Hindi texts into English. It was observed that these issues were extremely common if the underlying deeper structures and cognitive variables were to be investigated in the SL/FL acquisition process.

Data Analysis

The data for this study were derived from 60 written assignments submitted by Saudi secondary-level students enrolled in public schools. These assignments were part of classroom grammar activities specifically designed to enhance students' written proficiency in English. The tasks included two core components: (1) a precis writing exercise, and (2) a translation task, in which students were instructed to translate Arabic passages into English. These components were selected to evaluate both spontaneous language production and the influence of L1 (Arabic) on L2 (English) expression.

To identify and categorize learner errors, the analysis followed Corder's (1974) established framework,

which classifies errors into four types: addition, omission, selection, and ordering. This categorization enabled a systematic examination of various grammatical and syntactic inaccuracies across learner submissions.

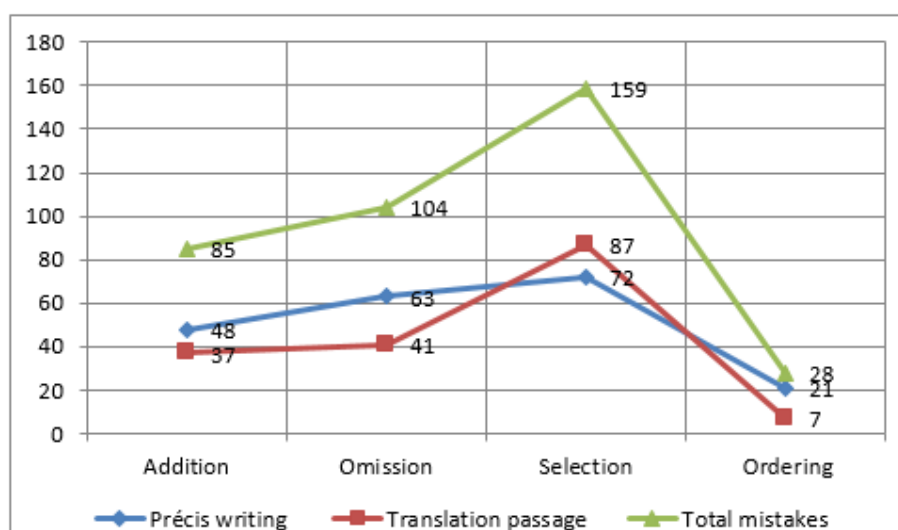
The content analysis revealed a broad range of errors distributed across these four categories:

- Selection Errors were the most frequent, particularly in the use of verb tenses, prepositions, and determiners. Students often substituted incorrect words or grammatical forms, reflecting confusion about English syntax and functional usage.
- Omission Errors commonly included the absence of auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement markers, and article usage. This type of error highlighted gaps in students' understanding of English sentence structure, especially in compound and complex sentence constructions.
- Addition Errors involved the unnecessary inclusion of morphemes or words, such as plural markers ("childrens") or redundant auxiliaries. These instances often stemmed from the overgeneralization of grammatical rules or L1 interference.
- Ordering Errors appeared in word arrangement, particularly in noun phrases and interrogative constructions. These errors typically reflected Arabic word order patterns being transferred into English writing.

The data were examined in terms of addition, omission, selection and ordering in the four categories provided by Corder (1974). It was discovered that learners had made many blunders in several grammatical areas. Difficulty was also discovered in establishing a logical link. In precis writing, the effect of SMS writing could also be found. The study of the translated paragraph illuminated the contrastive error analysis based on similarities and variations in the rules of L1 and L2.

They mostly occurred errors were the incorrect forms of the verb tenses. The absence of agreement on the subject-verb was likewise the major error in their assignments. Moreover, in their written scripts, there were numerous orthographic errors and the inappropriate usage of the various sections of the speech. These errors provide insight on the issues faced by students in SL/FL acquisition, assisting instructors to wash away students' complications. The table below shows the total errors in the written scripts of participants.

Table 1. Total mistakes in the assignments of students



The diagram above illustrates that the rate of errors in the selection category is greater than in the other error analysis categories.

There are several aspects that influence the language of the learner. The use of the short text, also recognized as SMS language, have not yet been accepted in regular formal writing. The present research takes examples from some such occurrences for the study purpose. Below are some examples of these words:

Actual words	Frequently used short texts
Please	Plz
You	U
At	@
Between	B/w
Before	B4
Thanks	Thnx
Night	Ny8
By the way	Btw
Are	R
Would	Wud

The list is endless. It illustrates the phenomena of the quick use of SMS such that, owing to their extensive usage nowadays, students unintentionally utilize them in academic writing.

The investigation of these mistakes also shows how deeply the structures of the language is absorbed in the mind of humans.

Analysis of Errors

Some example sentences are offered to explain the various sorts of mistakes and the reasons. The following are the sentences:

Example 1:

- a) Childrens are innocent by nature.
- b) Boys does not attending regular classes and scoring less marks.
- c) I had not went to school yesterday because of a family function.

In statement 1 (a), the morpheme ‘-s’, added to ‘children’ is because either the pluralization rules are over-generalized or students have inadequate understanding of the rules. In sentence 1 (b), the student does not know how to frame negative expressions in present indefinite or imperfect. S/he has mixed two structures of different aspects. It also demonstrates a lack of grammar knowledge by students when they make erroneous usage of present participle verb form in present indefinite tense. The third sentence 1 (c) shows that some students are unaware of the rule of using past participle form of verb in past perfect tense. The rule of the past indefinite is applied here with past tense verb form ‘went’.

Example 2:

- a) He tops the class, and he is not confident of it.
- b) They will coming for tea in the previous evening of the new year.
- c) I have studying this school from five years.

The initial sentence 2 (a), written by some students illustrates the deletion of the “-ed” morpheme. It demonstrates that some students do not know how to use the past tense form of a verb. The second sentence 2 (b) also illustrates the failure of students in using the linking verb “be” according to the rule of the future continuous. It points out another error of “in the previous evening” rather than “on the eve of.” The third sentence 2 (c) indicates that certain students are unable to use the right tense of verb forms. It also exposes another mistake of “from” rather than “for”. This mistake has been caused by negative mother tongue transmission and interference.

Some instances of incorrect sequencing resulting in the erroneous constructions were also observed, which might be caused by linguistic interference in the language learning process.

Example 3:

- a) I can eat myself.
- b) The mother served delicious dishes to the child on silver plates.
- c) Will not be she get surprised after knowing this?

This wrong sequencing of the sentence 3 (a) reveals that some students do not have a clear understanding of the language and cannot produce semantically accurate expressions. The second sentence 3(b) likewise represents an excellent example of a sentence's wrong word order. However, the phrase is meaningful, but some learners do not employ the adverb, subject or object in the correct sequence, and thus reveals the target language to be incompetent. There is also no correct usage of punctuation. In the third sentence, 3(c), learners are unaware that auxiliary verbs are correctly converted to questioning and negative phrases. In the creation of a question sentence, there is a mistake. Just like that, in their written scripts, there are so many additional instances of the learners' blunders. Such errors are also detected to be committed by highly qualified trainees. The contribution of the above written sentences with several errors and their explanations, used in this survey is crucial to understand the process of SL/FL learning processes.

Conclusion

This research observes errors committed by learners of any language as a crucial step in the learning process. A systematic examination of these errors is extremely significant as the linguistic analysis is used to analyze errors and offers a deep insight into the linguistic process. Error analysis and contrastive analysis happens to be a major area in the discipline of applied linguistics, specifically, the learning of second and foreign language. The results of this research on various language errors may enable language instructors and curriculum developers to design the material and to adopt approaches and methods that significantly contribute to enhanced and effective teaching and learning of a language.

This paper discusses how errors and second-language acquisition are related. It explains the many tactics that students utilize in the linguistic process. It also examines how error analysis affects the comprehension of language learning and outlines the problems faced by students in the language learning process, and helps instructors develop alternative treatments to promote learning. The categorization of error analysis offers instructors insights and information about and allows them to concentrate on those topics. It gives deeper understanding into several linguistic fields. Future research could build on the findings of Assefa et al. (2023) to examine how digital engagement shapes error patterns, or leverage Khan et al.'s (2023) insights on augmented reality for targeted error remediation.

Limitations of the research

Some of the limitations of this research include that just four kinds of errors committed by students were examined, and the research was confined to examination of only two questions. The future study needs to address the gaps such as grammatical and lexical errors committed by students in advanced studies, etc. In this field, there is a great deal of study to be done. Errors in spoken language may also be studied to enhance the communication abilities of students.

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