Correcting grammatical errors in university-level foreign language students' written work

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Abstract

This study examined the grammar errors in written work made by 30 freshman students in the English Language Teaching Department at a Turkish university. The students were divided into two groups (each consisting of 15 students), with one group at a higher level than the other, according to the results of their proficiency exam. The students' written work was marked and the grammar errors were noted down. An analysis of the errors revealed the following error types: plurality, articles, subject-verb agreement, word order, pronouns, prepositions, part of speech, auxiliaries, negation, tense agreement and lexis. Of these, most errors were made overall with parts of speech, plurality, subject-verb agreement, prepositions and articles. Although, as might have been predicted, the students in the lower group made more errors (the average of 3.5) than those in the higher group (the average of 2.8), the higher level students actually made more errors than lower level students for some errors types (parts of speech and lexis). This phenomenon might be attributed to the more complicated language being attempted by the higher level students, which presents a higher risk of error. Implications for the teaching and learning situation are discussed and suggestions are made for further research.

Keywords: writing; grammar errors; English as a foreign language; parts of speech; lexis

1. Introduction

Although over the years the issue of correcting grammatical errors in students' written work has given rise to a great deal of controversy, in many cases the basic concepts are poorly defined and understood. This article will therefore begin with definitions of both *grammar* and *error* before considering whether grammar is important, whether errors should be corrected, and, if so, which ones and how. In an attempt to throw some light on these questions, the findings of a small scale study carried out at a Turkish university will be reported in which students' written work was marked for grammatical errors and the results analyzed for error frequency and type according to student level. These results will be used to suggest pedagogical implications as well as suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical background

The literature for the topic of this article ranges over several areas. Firstly, there is the question of the nature of grammar, of the way grammar has been viewed historically, and the way it is currently viewed. Then, there is the question concerning the nature of error and views on error correction.

2.1. What is grammar?

Grammar is a term so frequently used in language teaching and learning contexts that it is easy to overlook the question of what we actually mean by the term. Traditionally, grammar has started at the sub-word level and considered how words are formed (morphology). For instance the negative prefix "in-" + the adjective "frequent" + the adverb suffix "-ly" = "infrequently" or "not very often". Words are then categorized into parts of speech (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, determiners, interjections) and then combined into sentences with subjects, objects, etc. (syntax). However, not everyone considers that these three basic concepts cover all that we mean by the term *grammar*. Purpura (2004), for instance, suggests that grammar should be viewed in its broadest sense to include all that we know about our language. In addition to the morphology, parts of speech and syntax already mentioned, this includes lexis (the vocabulary), phonology (the sound system, including pronunciation), graphology (the writing system), function (how language is used, such as complaining), pragmatics (language in context), and semantics (the study of meaning). Since it is unlikely that any one piece of research could cover such a broad canvas, it is important that a study identifies its boundaries at the beginning. In the case of the current study, this will be done at the beginning of the section devoted to the description of the study.

2.2. Is grammar important?

In the days of Grammar-Translation (GT), this would have been considered an unthinkable question. Long regarded as "the standard way of studying foreign languages" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 2), GT, as its name suggests, depended on the teaching and learning of the rules of grammar and translating to and from the target language. With the advent of Audiolingualism, pedagogical approaches tended to be based on behaviourist theories of language as a habit which could be developed by means of stimulus, response and reinforcement like any other behavior. Under the influence of this view, the teaching of grammar tended to be reduced to repetitive drills and substitution exercises rather than explicit teaching of the rules (Griffiths, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

But then Hymes (1972) introduced the influential notion of communicative competence, later further developed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). In the mid-70s, Krashen proposed the Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis (1976) and the Monitor Hypothesis (1977). The first of these reasoned that since children acquire their first language by means of natural communication without needing to learn grammar rules, non-primary languages should be acquired the same way. The Monitor Hypothesis proposed that formal learning was ineffective in the process of acquisition except for a limited role as a means by which learners might monitor their own performance. These perspectives provided an impetus for the development of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach by key figures such as Widdowson (1978), Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Littlewood (1981) and Savignon (1991). As a result of the emphasis on natural communication, rather than rule-driven learning, the focus in language teaching came to be on fluency rather than accuracy, and grammar was for some time viewed with suspicion and treated with neglect or even scorn.

In turn, however, as CLT failed to provide the hoped for miracle method whereby everyone would learn a second language by means of natural communication as easily as they had learnt their first, views swung towards eclecticism (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 1987; Tarone & Yule, 1989), and the usefulness of grammar is now again commonly recognized in the literature. According to Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 78), grammar can "accelerate the language acquisition process", and Ellis (2006, p. 86) claims that "there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence to support the teaching of grammar". Pawlak (2007, p. 5) also concludes that "this revival of interest in grammar teaching, currently more commonly referred to as *form-focused instruction,* or simply *focus on form,* can be attributed to research findings demonstrating that (...) purely communicative pedagogy may not be adequate". In Turkey, Arikan, Taşer and Saraç-Süzer (2008) discovered that the ability to teach grammar effectively was listed among student

perceptions of an effective English language teacher. Bade's (2008) empirical investigation supports these claims. She concludes that the students in her study "showed an overwhelming desire to be taught grammar" (2008, p. 178). The reason given by one of her respondents was: "I am a professional adult and yet I still make lots of errors in my writing. I don't want this" (2008, p. 179).

2.3. What is an error?

If views of grammar have changed over the years, perspectives on error have been no less variable. There was a time when the answer to the question "What is an error?" was simple: an error was something that was incorrect, and, therefore, more or less by definition, a bad thing. Identifying 'correct' language, however, is not always as simple as it might at first be thought to be. For one thing, usage is by no means always standard across language varieties. For instance "I done it" is quite acceptable in some varieties, but totally unacceptable in others. And grammar books, which might at one time have been considered a reliable point of reference, tend to be less absolute about what is or is not correct than they used to be. Examples of a more lenient approach to error might include the increasing acceptance of "should of" rather than "should have" in sentences such as "You should have/of gone"; or the frequent use of the third person plural pronoun in place of the singular, especially where the gender is ambiguous, as in "If there are questions, the student should see their advisor". As Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 56) remark, there is, in fact, no "unproblematic" definition of error.

Notwithstanding the fact that it has never been possible to achieve a unanimous agreement regarding precisely what an error is, the error phenomenon was viewed negatively under both Grammar-Translation and Audiolingualism. Corder (1967), however, presented a different perspective in his seminal article on the significance of learners' errors. According to Corder, errors should not be viewed entirely negatively, but seen as a sign of progress in the development of the new language, later called *interlanguage* by Selinker (1972). From this perspective, errors are a natural and necessary feature of language development, whether it be a first or a subsequent language. A child who learns "I jumped" and then generalizes what he has learnt to "I sitted" is testing his hypotheses about language and will modify his output according to the response he receives, or, perhaps, according to some later input. The same process is at work with the adult language learner who learns to drive a car and then decides to "drive" his bicycle to work.

In addition to changing the way errors were viewed from that point on, Corder (1967) also differentiated between *mistakes* and *errors*. He defined the former as slips in performance when the learner does actually know the correct

form and can often self-correct. An example of this might be my colleague who, in the flow of conversation, often refers to her husband as "she" although she obviously knows the correct form perfectly well. An error is where the learner actually does not know the correct form which has yet to be acquired and which, therefore, provides evidence of the learner's stage of interlanguage development. However, although theoretically interesting, the mistake/error distinction is not always so easy to pinpoint in practice, and it is therefore limited in terms of practical utility.

2.4. Should errors be corrected?

Under Grammar-Translation, correction by the teacher according to the rules was standard practice. Under Audiolingualism, even more emphasis was placed on error correction which was carried out rigidly and immediately in order to avoid the formation of bad habits which, if left uncorrected, would become fossilized (Roberts & Griffiths, 2008).

However, as the 1970s advanced, these rigid views of error correction were modified considerably, perhaps influenced by Corder's (1967) views of error as indicators of interlanguage progress. Long (1977) suggested that a great deal of teacher feedback on learner error is erratic, unclear, badly timed and not effective, while Krashen and Terrell (1983) introduced their Natural Approach to language learning, under which error correction was proscribed. Perhaps influenced by these ideas, as Communicative Language Teaching developed, there tended to be less focus on error correction unless it interfered with communication. Then in 1996, Truscott declared that error correction was a waste of time and even counterproductive, harmful, and should be abandoned. Gray (2004) suggested that the reason grammar correction is ineffective is that it only addresses superficial inaccuracies and does not take into account the underlying process of language development. Ferris (1999, p. 1), however, disagreed, suggesting that Truscott's argument was "overly strong" and that error correction that was selective, prioritized and clear could be effective. Truscott (2001) himself later modified his previous hardline position, agreeing that selective error correction could be useful.

Now any teacher who has ever spent hours marking a class's essays only to hand them back and watch as the students look at the grade and stuff them into their bags with all the painstaking work unread will understand Truscott's (1996) point of view. Even if the teacher insists that the students spend time checking the errors that have been marked, this can be a tedious and demotivating exercise to which students seem to pay little attention and from which they receive little benefit, often repeating the same errors time and again. Or if

a "good copy" is insisted on, the new version can often contain more errors than the first. And yet, according to Harmer (1998, p. 62), error correction remains "a vital part of the teachers' role", which includes being a "transmitter of knowledge" (Çakmak, 2011, p. 14). Hyland (2002, p. 108) agrees: "Feedback is vital to the process of learning (…) it enables students to assess their performances, modify their behavior and transfer their understandings". In a study among university students in China, Griffiths and Zhou (2008) discovered that the participants were unanimous that error correction was important. As one of the students put it: "It's bad for me to make mistakes, but nobody tells me and I don't know how to correct them" (2008, p. 133). In answer to the question "Should errors be corrected?", Ur (1996) agrees that, in general, students want to be corrected. Furthermore, she suggests "even if correcting is only of limited effectiveness, commonsense would argue that if there's one thing that is less effective than correcting, it is: not correcting" (1996, p. 171).

2.5. How should errors be corrected?

So if error correction is to be justified at least partly because it is something which students expect of their teachers, how should it be carried out so that it is useful for the student and worth the time that the teacher puts into it? Schmidt (1990) makes the seemingly obvious but extremely important point that for error correction to be useful it must first be noticed by the student. In other words, teachers must somehow find a way of drawing students' attention to their errors since "conscious noticing is a pre-condition for input to become intake" (Roberts & Griffiths, 2008, p. 287). It was the affective dimension of error correction which is of most concern to the students in the study by Griffiths and Zhou (2008), however. As one of them commented: "error correction should be done softly with a gentle attitude and humor and teachers should be careful about the students' self-esteem" (2008, p. 133).

2.6. Which errors should be corrected?

The students in the study by Griffiths and Zhou (2008) were in agreement that it was important for them that their grammatical errors were corrected in order that they did not continue to make the same mistakes. But which errors do students make? It is necessary to know this in order to be able to construct useful teaching programs since, clearly, it is truly a waste of time to either teach grammar that the students already know or which is so far beyond their current level of competence that they will be unable to absorb it. Intuitively, we would assume that lower-level students would make more grammatical errors than higher level students and

therefore require more correction. But is this actually the case? And is it possible to identify types of grammar error which are more or less typical of higher or lower level students in order to target feedback more effectively?

2.7. Previous grammar error studies

There have been a number of studies which have investigated the linguistic areas where foreign language learners have difficulty while trying to write effectively in English. For instance, Abushihab, El-Omari and Tobat (2011), during an investigation into the written grammatical errors of Arabic students of English as a foreign language at a university in Jordan, discovered that most of the students' errors related to prepositions (26%), followed by morphological errors, articles, verbs, use of active/passive and tenses. Another study conducted by Pardede (2006) focused on the grammatical errors made in the compositions written by fourth-semester students of the English Department of a university in Jakarta. The students' writings were examined to determine the morphological and syntactical errors. The results of the study revealed that the largest error category related to noun phrases. The second major type of error related to verb phrases. These were followed by word-order and verb construction errors. In order to identify the types of errors and their frequency of occurrence in the written papers of students, Mardijono (2003) examined the written work of English Language Department students who were in the fourth year of their university education in Indonesia. The data came from seventeen proposals for linguistics projects, which were the final projects required for the students to complete their undergraduate studies. The findings indicated that morphological (21.1% of the total) and syntactic errors (78.8% of the total) were the two main categories of errors. In Turkey, Bostanci (2006) studied students of English as a foreign language. Errors were discovered with the use of prepositions, articles, verbs, appropriate parts of speech, sequence of words and tenses, lexis, and negation. In general, however, although grammar is a well-recognized component of English courses in Turkey, there are remarkably few studies on the subject.

3. The study

As previously discussed, grammar is a big area, so it is necessary to narrow the scope of the concept in order to make it manageable for research purposes. For the purpose of the current study, it will be taken to include morphology, parts of speech, syntax and lexis. The study will examine these errors in students' written work and seek to answer the following research questions:
- What are the grammar errors that EFL students make in their writing?

- Do lower level students make more grammatical errors than higher level students?
- Do the types of grammatical errors change according to level?

3.1. Research setting

The current research took place at a private English medium university in Istanbul, Turkey. Having completed 12 years of schooling, students at this university are enrolled in a range of courses up to and including the PhD level. On entering the university, students are given an English proficiency exam to determine their placement. The exam includes the four skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening) and is marked out of 120. Students who get 70 out of 120 are able to enter their courses directly. If they get fewer than 70, they are placed in a preparatory program.

3.2. Participants

Thirty freshman students at the English Language Teaching Department participated in the study. Students were between 17 and 20 of age and they were all native speakers of Turkish. These students were divided into two groups:

- 15 had not passed the proficiency exam given at the beginning of the first semester, and, as a result, they attended the preparatory program for one semester before being admitted to the course. These students will be referred to as *the lower group* for the purposes of the study.
- The other 15 students had passed the proficiency exam and started their course without needing to attend the preparatory program. These students will be referred to as *the higher group* for the purposes of this study.

3.3. Data collection

The participating students were asked to write an essay on a selected topic. They wrote their essays in class in 50 minutes. They were asked to write an argumentative essay on the topic of *Nothing is more important than money*. The minimum length of the essay was 150 words, and all students wrote 150 words or more.

3.4. Data analysis

The written work was marked by the teacher (the first author of this article). Where essays were longer than the minimum 150 words required, just the first 150 words were analyzed in order to even out the potential for error. Subsequently, the essays

were remarked by the second author, producing an inter-rater reliability of 94%. Following a discussion to resolve marking disparities, the grammar errors were listed and then classified according to whether they involved plurality, articles, subject-verb agreement, word order, pronouns, prepositions, part of speech, auxiliaries, negation, tense agreement or lexis. The numbers of these errors were counted, both overall and according to the higher or lower groupings, and averages and differences were calculated.

3.5. Results

According to a descriptive statistical analysis, the overall average error rate across all 30 students was 3.1. For the lower level group, the average error rate was 3.5, and for the higher group it was 2.8.

Overall error pattern
The frequency of the errors made by the participants in each group and overall can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of errors made by higher- and lower-group students and over-all, sorted in order of *overall* Error Rate.

ERROR TYPE	OVERALL N=30	LOWER GROUP N=15	HIGHER GROUP N=15
Part of speech	19	7	12
Plurality	14	9	5
Subject-verb agreement	12	11	1
Prepositions	12	6	6
Articles	10	9	1
Lexis	8	0	8
Active-passive	5	1	4
Word order	4	3	1
Auxiliaries	4	2	2
Tense agreement	3	1	2
Pronouns	2	2	0
Negation	1	1	0
Average error rate	3.1	3.5	2.8

As can be seen from this table, by far the most common type of error overall is related to *parts of speech* (n = 19). The next most common error type relates to *plurality* (n = 14), and this is followed by *subject-verb agreement* and *prepositional use* (n = 12 for both) while *article usage* accounts for 10 errors over both the higher and lower groups. At the other end of the frequency scale, negation accounts for only one error, while pronoun misuse and problems with tense agreement also contribute minimally to the overall error rate.

Lower level error pattern

If we consider the errors according to student level, we can see from Table 2 that, as might have been expected, the members of the lower group on average make more errors (the average of 3.5) than members of the higher group (the average of 2.8).

Table 2. Number of errors made by higher- and lower-group students and over-all, sorted according to the *lower* group's error rates.

ERROR TYPE	OVERALL N=30	LOWER GROUP N=15	HIGHER GROUP N=15
Subject-verb agreement	12	11	1
Plurality	14	9	5
Articles	10	9	1
Part of speech	19	7	12
Prepositions	12	6	6
Word order	4	3	1
Auxiliaries	4	2	2
Pronouns	2	2	0
Active-passive	5	1	4
Tense agreement	3	1	2
Negation	1	1	0
Lexis	8	0	8
Average error rate	3.1	3.5	2.8

Subject-verb agreement seems to be a particular problem for the lower group, who made 11 of these kinds of errors compared with only one such error made by the higher group. Examples of this kind of error, taken directly from the students' writing, include:

> Lower group:
> *They needs to be healthy to earn a lot of money.*
> Higher group:
> *Money is necessary for people because we are social beings who also needs moral values.*

It should be noted, however, that although the examples quoted above both relate to subject-verb agreement, the example from the higher group relates to agreement of the verb with a relative pronoun, which is in itself usually considered a relatively high level grammatical structure. In other words, although both groups were found to make errors with subject-verb agreement, the level of the error is different.

In terms of frequency, the next most common error for the lower group includes both *plurality* and *articles* (n = 9 in both cases). The higher group makes five errors with *plurality*, but only one with *articles*, a finding which is, perhaps, a

little surprising, given that English articles are notoriously problematic for second language learners even at advanced levels. Examples of plurality errors include:

> Lower Group:
> *They do not want to spend <u>their life</u> in bad conditions.*
> Higher Group:
> *He was the founder of all <u>this companies</u>, however, his son was disabled.*

And for articles, one of which includes an unnecessary article while the other provides an example of a missing article:

> Lower Group:
> *Money is <u>the</u> one of the most important things.*
> Higher Group:
> *Money is* [the] *only necessity for people.*

Table 3. Number of errors made by higher- and lower-group students and overall, sorted according to the *higher* group's error rates.

ERROR TYPE	OVERALL N=30	LOWER GROUP N=15	HIGHER GROUP N=15
Part of speech	19	7	12
Lexis	8	0	8
Prepositions	12	6	6
Plurality	14	9	5
Active-passive	5	1	4
Auxiliaries	4	2	2
Tense agreement	3	1	2
Subject-verb agreement	12	11	1
Articles	10	9	1
Word order	4	3	1
Pronouns	2	2	0
Negation	1	1	0
Average error rate	3.1	3.5	2.8

Higher level error pattern

Although the higher level students' error rate is lower on average than the lower students' rate, it is, perhaps, surprising to find that some error types feature more frequently in the higher level students' work (see Table 3). This is particularly noticeable with *parts of speech*, where the higher group makes 12 errors, but the lower group makes only seven. This rather unexpected finding might possibly be explained by the fact that the higher level students are attempting to use more difficult grammatical structures in their writing. The following examples illustrate the participants' errors of this type*:*

Lower Group:
Researchers can <u>summary</u> from articles.
Higher Group:
The money has brought various <u>facilitates</u> to human life.

This phenomenon is also noticeable with errors related to *lexis.* In this error category, students simply use the wrong word or words. Examples are as follows:

Higher Group:
Learning to earn money does not <u>occur</u> rules.
People have to earn money by working to <u>resolve</u> these needs.

Although the lower level students are apparently making no lexical errors while the higher group students make 8 errors of this type, this would appear to be because the lower group students generally confine themselves to simpler vocabulary and they are not trying to use the more complicated vocabulary that the higher level students are attempting.

For *prepositions* and *auxiliaries,* both higher and lower groups make the same number of errors (n = 6 and n = 2, respectively). In the case of prepositions:

Lower Group:
You cannot pay enough attention [to] *your education*
Higher Group:
Some people believe [in] *the significance of spiritual values.*

It can be seen that both higher and lower examples of prepositional errors involve missing items. In the case of auxiliaries, both involve incorrect third person singular forms:

Lower Group:
When he <u>have</u> reached his aim.
Higher Group:
[A] human being <u>have</u> some basic requirements in order to survive.

The phenomenon of a higher error rate among the higher level students than among the lower level students is also in evidence with the use of *active and passive forms of the verb* (higher group n = 4, lower group n = 1) and with *tense agreement* (higher group n = 2, lower group n = 1). Examples of *active-passive* errors include:

Lower Group:
She was <u>ask</u> to attend some courses.

Higher Group:
Drugs and surgery <u>are required</u> a lot of money.

In the lower group's example, the error is simply the incorrect form of the participle. In the case of the higher group, the student is trying to use an unnecessary passive form. Examples of *tense agreement* errors are the following:

Lower group:
If they lost their money, there are their friends with them.
Higher group:
If some people become rich, they <u>lost</u> their friends.

In these examples, which both relate to attempts to use a conditional clause, the higher student's error is limited to a single word. In the case of the lower level student, however, the grammatical error actually makes the whole clause ambiguous. It is also noteworthy, although this is not observable from the limited examples quoted here, that one of the reasons why the higher level students make more errors with parts of speech, active-passive forms and tense agreement is that they are actually attempting more difficult structures and therefore running a higher risk of making mistakes.

Although the lower group makes errors relating to *pronouns* (n=2) and *negation* (n=1), these types of errors appear to have been entirely eliminated from the upper students' work. Examples of *pronoun* errors include:

Lower group:
A woman does not marry a man <u>which</u> does not have a job.
It does not provide we permanent feelings.

Example of *negation* errors are as follows:

Lower group:
Nobody hasn't found any cure.

Although when analyzed using a paired samples *t*-test, these differences did not prove to be significant, a careful examination of the types of errors made by higher and lower level students suggests some interesting pedagogical implications.

4. Discussion

Writing in a foreign language is not an easy task for either students or teachers. In order to be successful in the foreign language writing classroom, both the teachers and the students should be aware of the possible difficulties they can

face. It is important to remember that, as Corder (1967) pointed out, errors should not be viewed entirely negatively, but they should rather be seen as a sign of progress in the development of the new language. From this perspective, teachers should not be upset with the errors their students make. Rather, they should take these errors as an indication of their students' stages of development. In the case of this study, it is interesting to note that, although the lower-level students do indeed make more errors on average than the higher-level group (especially with subject-verb agreement, plurality and articles), the higher-level group do in fact make more errors than the lower–level group in some areas (especially parts of speech and lexis). Since it is hopefully unlikely that the higher group's level of proficiency has actually declined, this rather unexpected finding might be attributable to the fact that the higher-level group is attempting more difficult grammar and lexis and making more errors in the process. In other words it is, in a way, a positive sign indicating proactive (if imperfect) attempts to expand linguistic horizons.

In order to be able to help their students, writing teachers should prepare themselves well to overcome these difficulties by means of effective and planned instructional strategies. Gray (2004) recommends that writing teachers should give periodic short grammatical lessons at the beginning of a class and discuss widespread grammatical problems that have been encountered in the students' assignments. By doing this, it is possible that students might be able to avoid error traps that they might otherwise have fallen into. In addition, as mentioned by Roberts and Griffiths (2008), if students are to learn from error correction, it is essential that the corrections are first noticed. In other words, it is necessary first of all to draw students' attention to their errors, then to raise the students' awareness of the correct forms and to provide scaffolding so that they can use these corrections to their advantage. In order to focus attention, feedback sessions on the common errors made by the students should be conducted. These sessions can be helpful in raising the students' awareness of the errors that they are making and to provide instruction on how to avoid such errors in the future. An effective method for doing this can be to extract errors from the students' written work (perhaps disguised somewhat in order to avoid embarrassment to any individual student if the owner of the error is recognized) and to construct an exercise from these in which the class is required to identify and correct any errors. In this way, attention is drawn to the actual errors the class members are committing, which makes it a much more valuable exercise than one selected from an existing textbook, which may or may not be relevant to the actual needs of the class. The main (and *absolutely essential*) proviso with this technique is that it must be clearly stated that the phrases or sentences in such an exercise contain errors. Otherwise the students (who sometimes assume

that whatever the teacher gives them must be correct) are likely to misunderstand the purpose of the exercise, to copy the examples and use them in their own next piece of writing.

There are a number of ways in which this study could be extended: (a) the number of participants was limited to 30 students and thus there should be further research with more participants in order to make the results more generalizable; (b) the setting of the study was limited to preparatory school students in an English Language Teaching Department at a university in Turkey; further study is necessary by including a wider range of participants in a number of different contexts; (c) the data gathered from writing papers could be extended to include data from students' speaking, thereby extending the study to include productive skills more generally rather than limiting the research to written errors; and (d) most importantly perhaps, studies need to be conducted into how research findings can be applied to real-life classroom situations.

5. Conclusion

For the purposes of this study, *grammar* has been defined fairly broadly to include morphology, parts of speech, syntax and lexis. The level of importance ascribed to grammar has varied greatly over the years. Students, however, tend to consider it to be important and wish to avoid making grammatical errors. Although the concept of *error* has also been controversial, research shows that students tend to want at least some error correction, as long as it is done sensitively.

The current study was conducted among students at a Turkish university. The errors which these students were found to be making involved subject-verb agreement, plurality, articles, word order, pronouns, negation, prepositions, auxiliaries, part of speech, active-passive, tense agreement and lexis. Of these, the most common error overall relates to parts of speech, followed by plurality, subject-verb agreement, prepositions and articles. As might have been predicted, the lower-level group did indeed make more errors (the average of 3.5) than the higher-level group (the average of 2.8). This applies especially to subject-verb agreement, plurality, use of articles, word order, pronouns and negation. Nevertheless, some interesting trends are apparent from the data. For instance, the error rate is the same for both groups for prepositions and auxiliaries, notorious problem areas for learners of English right up to advanced level. When we come to parts of speech, lexis, tense agreement and the use of active-passive the higher group actually makes more errors than the lower group, a phenomenon which might be attributed to the fact that higher-level students are attempting to use more difficult language, thereby running a greater risk of making errors. This finding may well help to support Corder's (1967) assertion that errors are

not always a negative sign, but can be an indication of a learner's progress through the interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) stage of acquiring a new language.

To sum up, it is important to keep in mind that errors are an inevitable and natural part of language learning. When dealing with errors, it is essential first of all that errors are noticed by the learner and that attention is drawn to errors, perhaps by means of exercises based on the actual errors made by members of the class. This type of exercise is likely to be more useful than decontextualized exercises drawn from a standard textbook which may well bear little if any relationship to the actual needs of a particular group of students. Clearly, ongoing research is required to extend the findings beyond the current participants and context so that the results might be usefully generalized beyond the immediate research situation. Studies are also needed to experiment with ways of applying research findings to real life classroom environments.

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