



Morphosyntactic errors in learning English as a foreign language: The context of university students

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to identify the most common morphosyntactic errors in the learning of English as a foreign language in the written production of 36 A1 level EFL students from a public university in Cotopaxi. Some authors agree that the most common morphosyntactic errors in texts written by students are word omission, spelling, article usage, double consonant usage, incorrect verb tense, incorrect word choice, punctuation, preposition, incorrect word form, agreement, pronouns, translated words, simple words, lexicon, style, number and order of adjectives (Suleman, Altayib and Muhammad, 2018); (Khatter, 2019); (Cordero and Martin, 2020); and (Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar, 2020). To achieve the objective, the error analysis method was used. Two types of written compositions were used as data collection instruments, which were obtained in the last two weeks of July 2022. As results, the most common errors were Punctuation, Spelling, Capitalization and Sentence Structure, which belong to mechanical and grammatical errors. It is concluded that writing in English is quite challenging for students, as they need to be in constant contact with the English language. In this sense, if written errors are corrected early, students will have better written communication.

Keywords: morphosyntactic errors; written compositions; instruments; codes; error analysis.

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Errores morfosintácticos en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera: El contexto de estudiantes universitarios

Resumen

La presente investigación tiene como objetivo identificar los errores morfosintácticos más comunes en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera en la producción escrita de 36 estudiantes de nivel A1 de EFL de una universidad pública de Cotopaxi. Algunos autores concuerdan en que los errores morfosintácticos más comunes en los textos escritos por los estudiantes son la omisión de palabras, la ortografía, el artículo, el uso de consonantes dobles, el tiempo verbal incorrecto, la elección incorrecta de palabras, la puntuación, la preposición, la forma incorrecta de la palabra, la concordancia, los pronombres, palabras traducidas, palabras simples, léxico, estilo, número y orden de adjetivos (Suleman, Altayib y Muhammad, 2018); (Khatter, 2019); (Cordero y Martin, 2020); y (Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca y Escobar, 2020). Para alcanzar el objetivo, se utilizó el método de análisis de errores. Se emplearon dos tipos de composiciones escritas como instrumentos de recolección de datos, que se obtuvieron en las últimas dos semanas de julio de 2022. Como resultados, los errores más comunes fueron Puntuación, Ortografía, Mayúsculas y Estructura de la oración, estos pertenecen a los errores mecánicos y gramaticales. Se concluye que escribir en inglés es bastante desafiante para los estudiantes, ya que necesitan estar en constante relación con el idioma inglés. En este sentido, si los errores escritos se corrigen temprano, los estudiantes tendrán una mejor comunicación escrita.

Palabras clave: errores morfosintácticos; composiciones escritas; instrumentos; códigos; análisis de errores.

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1. Introduction

Morphosyntactic errors in learning English as a foreign language in the university context are diverse due to variations in each written production (Cordero and Martin, 2020a). The most common errors include word omission, spelling, articles, incorrect use of double consonants, verb tenses, word choice, punctuation, prepositions, word form, agreement, pronouns, translated words, lexicon, style, number, and order of adjectives (Suleman, Altayib and Muhammad, 2018a); (Khatter, 2019a); (Cordero and Martin, 2020b); (Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar, 2020a).

Along the same lines, Cordero and Martin (2020c): discovered that the most common errors in written texts were found in morphology, syntax, discourse, and semantics. In accordance with this, Khatter (2019b): identified less common errors as word order, conjunctions, infinitive and gerund, nouns, dependent preposition, excessive use of the conjunction “and”, missing copula, grammar-nouns, number of adjectives, and plural.

Some researchers (Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar, 2020b); (Suleman, Altayib and Muhammad, 2018b): applied different instruments for data collection and error classification, as part of the error analysis process. These instruments were written paragraphs, essays, letters, questionnaires, and tests on various topics.

In Ecuador, Muñoz (2017): studied the written productions of Ecuadorian public high school students in EFL, discovering grammatical errors, such as verb omission, subject-verb agreement, and pluralization of adjectives; mechanical errors, such as misspelled words and inadequate punctuation; and content errors, such as omission of transition words and inadequate paragraph organization.

In the context of Ecuador, the problem faced by students who are learning English as a second language is that they have not adequately developed linguistic macro-skills; this happens because they have not been

corrected since the early years of study (Escudero, Cutiopala, Caisaguano and Gallegos, 2020).

The objective of this research is to identify the most common morphosyntactic errors in learning English as a foreign language in the written production of 36 A1-level EFL students at a public university in Cotopaxi.

Therefore, the research question for this study was: What are the most common morphosyntactic errors in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the written production of A1-level students at a public university in Ecuador?.

1.1. Literature Review

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to the study of the language by non-native speakers in countries where it is not the official language. Given that English is the global lingua franca and the primary means of global communication, many people choose to learn it to take advantage of the benefits it offers, such as numerous job opportunities and the ease of connecting and exchanging experiences with people from different cultures (Jumayeva, 2022), which has become essential for professional and personal success in an increasingly interconnected world.

In Ecuador, learning English in high school was unusual before 1912. In the last 20 years, it has gradually developed to being learned in all schools and universities (Espinar, 2021). The Ministry of Education seeks to provide knowledge and skills in English to thrive in the globalized world, access knowledge, and empower professionally and personally, considering monolingual, bilingual, Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking students when designing the curriculum (Cifuentes-Rojas, Contreras-Jordán and Beltrán-Moreno, 2019a).

The Ecuadorian curriculum prioritizes productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (reading and listening) skills to turn people into competent

English users (Cifuentes-Rojas, Contreras-Jordán and Beltrán-Moreno, 2019b). Writing is crucial in various life situations and is a habit that students must adopt to succeed in school and pass courses, and is also the main tool to evaluate student performance at all educational levels (Hidayati, 2018).

Representing the errors made by language students can improve teaching, as it reveals the areas where they are most frequently committed and their causes (Salehi and Bahrami, 2018a). To limit or eliminate errors in an organized way, it is essential to identify their sources. Since the 1960s, comparisons between the target and native language have been made to determine the root of the problems (Salehi and Bahrami, 2018b).

Making mistakes is crucial for acquiring new language skills and provides information to teachers about their students' writing, allowing problems and solutions to be identified (Maolida and Hidayat, 2021). According to Muftah (2023a), error analysis is a method to systematically identify, classify and interpret the unwanted forms produced by language students. Analyzing the differences between learning and natural language use is considered the domain of error analysis (Suleman, Altayib and Muhammad, 2018c).

The cognitive process that guides target language students' constructions can be observed through surface strategy analysis (Aziz, Fitriani and Amalina, 2020). This study focuses on Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) surface structure taxonomy, which considers how surface structure is modified by adding foreign material, misaligning or deforming parts, emphasizing changes in the internal functioning of linguistic organizations (Al-Ghabra and Najim, 2019a).

Errors in second language learning can be intralingual, caused by the target language, or interlingual, caused by the student's first language (Songxaba and Sincuba, 2019a). The first language can have a negative impact on learning and using second language vocabulary (Dissington, 2018), especially if they are very different. Interlingual errors occur when aspects of

the first language are employed in speech or writing. Students' educational backgrounds also affect their language proficiency.

Some notable interlingual errors are code-switching, the process of alternately using two languages (Torres, 2020), and mother tongue interference, the impact of the student's native language on their assimilation of the target language (Abid, 2016).

Unlike interference errors caused by the first language, intralingual errors are created by the target language itself. Their fundamental causes are ignorance, incorrect application of linguistic conventions, and conceptual wrongness. There are five types: simplification, overgeneralization, induced errors, false concepts hypothesized, and fossilization (Songxaba and Sincuba, 2019b).

Simplification is the first type of intralingual errors and includes errors with words or grammatical constructions. Students may favor simple over complex forms, creating simplified structures instead of applying the rule exactly, for example "You like sing?" instead of "Do you like to sing?" (Manirakiza, Mugirase and Hakizimana, 2021a).

The second category of errors is "overgeneralization or analogical errors" in which the student uses a different linguistic structure instead of using it correctly (Manirakiza, Mugirase and Hakizimana, 2021b); (Amara, 2015a). In this case, the student might say "Ana teached the Spanish class", for example, instead of "Ana taught the Spanish class".

"Induced errors" are the third type of errors. These types of errors are caused by instructors' overcorrection, incorrect language training, or "teacher's presentation of the material" (Manirakiza, Mugirase and Hakizimana, 2021c). An example is teachers consistently pronouncing "de" instead of "the".

"False concepts hypothesized" are the fourth type of errors, in which the student may use incorrect phrases due to erroneous beliefs about the use of certain words (Khatter, 2019c). "Fossilization", the fifth category, is the

permanent inability to master the target language in most students, caused by ignorance of the rules or inadequate learning (Tajeddin and Tabatabaeian, 2017); (Amara, 2015b). Students ignore some rules, leading to errors like “He made me to go to rest” instead of “He asked/wanted me to go to rest” (Amara, 2015c).

Morphology studies the rules of language for word formation and their internal structure. Words greatly influence language comprehension and are essential for daily communication. Words are vibrant, inventive and constantly being created as a result of new technologies (Giyatmi, 2019a). As a component of language, words play a crucial role in society.

Errors are lapses in the language code that cause unacceptable failures in performance, occur systematically and must be eliminated, although it is difficult for students to identify their own (Ramadan, 2015a). Morphology studies words, morphemes and how they are formed and structured internally. The main morphological errors are inflectional and derivational morphemes, compounding and conversion (Ramadan, 2015b); (Giyatmi, 2019b).

Syntax, a branch of linguistics, studies the construction of sentences using words and phrases in a specific order, following rules and procedures of each language. A syntactic error is a violation of these grammatical rules.

Syntax includes crucial information about the organization of words in sentences and their use in combination. Encoding syntactic information of words can help with the performance of natural language processing tasks. Syntax errors are those that do not adhere to the writing conventions of the language being learned, and include phrase errors (collaborations between parts of a sentence) and sentence errors (in any complete sentence) (Li, Parnow and Zhao, 2022).

Morphological and morphosyntactic errors, which involve aspects of word structure and sentence construction, can create deficiencies in language learning, affecting the ability to write and understand sentences adequately.

The main morphosyntactic errors include: word order/sentence structure, omission or addition of copulative/linking verb, errors in negation, modal verbs, tense usage, prepositions and conjunctions (Sang, Thu, Chi and Luan, 2022a).

Grammatical errors go against the rules, but do not hinder understanding the information. They include sentence fragments, run-on sentences, confused words, homophones, and erroneous punctuation (misuse of apostrophe, commas, colon and semicolon). Grammar is the main issue in non-native writing, with errors in adjectives, adverbs, articles, nouns, possession, pronouns, prepositions, verbs, spelling, capitalization and punctuation affecting the content (Alghazo and Alshraideh, 2020); (Sermsook, Liamnimitr and Pochakorn, 2017).

Semantic errors were also considered, referring to the rules or constraints by which sentence meanings are derived from word meanings, and the meanings of words and sentences (Rezai and Davarpanah, 2019a). A main problem for EFL speakers is incorrect word choice or collocation, such as “take the decision” or “deprive of liberty”.

Semantic errors related to word choice refer to lexical choice, collocations and lexicogrammatical choice (Rezai and Davarpanah, 2019b). On the other hand, grammatical errors differ from mechanical errors. Grammar is the framework for spoken or written language and deals with the components of speech and sentence construction (Yuliah, Widiastuti and Resta, 2019a), while the mechanics of writing include the use of capitalization, punctuation and spelling (Kusnadi, 2018a).

Capitalization follows eight main rules and punctuation uses symbols to guide readers in understanding sentences (Yuliah, Widiastuti and Resta, 2019b). Errors occur when these elements are used incorrectly.

Spelling involves creating words with acceptable and correctly ordered letters. Spelling errors include: (1) substitution: replacing a letter, e.g. “dicidad”; (2) omission: omitting a vowel or consonant, e.g. “qual”, “especialmente”; (3)

insertion: adding a letter, e.g. “intentar”, “recomendar”; (4) transposition: reversing the order of letters, e.g. “frito”, “encia” (Yuliah, Widiastuti and Resta, 2019c).

The most common errors studied align with those proposed by Johansson (2008a): grammatical errors (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, agreement, preposition+complement and word order), information structure and cohesion (connectors, structure) and mechanical errors (punctuation, capitalization, spelling). Interlingual errors (code switching, language interference) were also considered according to (Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar, 2020c); and (Suleman, Altayib and Muhammad, 2018d).

2. Methodology

A total of 36 students, composed of 10 men and 26 women between the ages of 18 and 27, belonging to the Pre-Basic A1.3 level of the Language Pedagogy program at the Technical University of Cotopaxi, participated in this study. The data was collected through two written compositions, one about the description of a house and the other about the biography of an artist.

These tasks were assigned and evaluated by a teacher during the last weeks of July 2022 as part of the course. Subsequently, the compositions were handed over to the researchers for detailed analysis, with the objective of identifying the most common morphosyntactic errors in the written production of English as a foreign language students at this level.

After selecting the written productions, an error analysis was carried out through extensive reading to categorize the different types of errors, proposing it as the optimal approach. Error analysis identifies and classifies errors made by language learners. Its objective is to determine what the learner understands and what needs improvement in second language acquisition (Muftah, 2023b).

The analysis of the participants' errors was carried out following the steps proposed by Suleman, Altayib and Muhammad (2018e): Sample collection, error identification and categorization, error description, and providing an explanation of the errors.

3. Results

To answer the research question about the most common morphosyntactic errors in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the written production of A1-level students, following Johansson (2008b), the errors were classified into grammatical, semantic, mechanical, and interlingual. Table 1 shows these errors committed by task.

Table 1. Errors by task (House Description and Biography).

Task	Error types	#	Error Categories	Example	Frequency	Percentage	Code
Description of the house	Grammatical errors	1	Verbal tense	It has a laundry room	13	5.42	VT
		2	Sentence structure	The kitchen is big	45	18.75	SS
		3	Singular plural	Clothes	11	4.58	S/P
		4	Verbal omission	You can take a taxi	2	0.83	VO
	Semantic errors	5	Word Choice (Meaning)	In the kitchen there is a large refrigerator	22	9.17	WCh
	mechanical errors	6	Punctuation	I don't have a garage, but I have	73	30.42	Pun
		7	Capitalization	It's a small house	31	12.92	Cap
		8	Orthography	Dining room	43	17.92	Spe
Total					240	100	
Biography	Grammatical errors	1	Verbal tense	He returned to Ecuador	18	7.44	VT
		2	Sentence structure	He was six years old	29	11.98	SS
		3	Singular plural	-	-	-	S/P
		4	Verb omission	She got married - Correction: She got married	13	5.37	VO
		5	Conjunctions	He worked in a women's shoe store and began participating in Radio Cóndor programs.	2	0.83	CSw
	Semantic	6	Word Choice	He traveled the	11	4.55	WCh

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	errors		(Meaning)	world			
	mechanical errors	7	Punctuation	His father died when he was six years old.	52	21.49	Pun
		8	Use of capital letters	He was inducted into the "Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" in 2001.	52	21.49	Cap
		9	Orthography	Singing	58	23.97	Spe
	Interlingual errors	10	Code change	She worked in a women's shoe store and began participating in Radio Cóndor programs.	5	2.07	Conj
		eleven	language interference	He was born on February 1, 1994 in Cheshire	2	0.83	LanI
Total					242	100	

Source: The Authors (2022).

In the first task related to the description of a house, the most relevant percentage of error was found in the punctuation subcategory (Pun) 30.42%, followed by sentence structure (SS) 18.75%, then spelling (Spe) 17.92%, capitalization (Cap) 12.92%, and finally, word choice (WCh) 9.17%.

On the other hand, the less relevant errors were found in the grammatical categories, particularly, verb tense (VT) 5.42%, followed by the singular/plural subcategory (S/P) 4.58%. Finally, the least relevant error was found in the verb omission subcategory (VO) 0.83%.

In task two related to a biography, the most relevant percentage of error was found in the spelling subcategory (Spe) 23.97%, followed by the error corresponding to the capitalization subcategory (Cap) 21.49%, punctuation (Pun) 21.49%, sentence structure (SS) 11.98%, and finally, verb tense (VT) 7.44%.

Regarding the least relevant error percentage, it was found in the verb omission subcategory (VO) 5.37%, followed by the word choice subcategory (Wch) 4.55%, then by code switching (CSw) 2.07%, and finally, the least relevant error percentage was found in the conjunctions (Conj) and language

interference (LanI) subcategories with 0.83% each.

Table 2. Types of errors.

Category	Error type	Frequency	%
Grammatical errors	1 Verbal tense	31	6.43
	2 Sentence structure	74	15.35
	3 Singular plural	11	2.28
	4 Verb omission	15	3.11
	5 Conjunctions	2	0.41
Semantic errors	6 Word Choice (Meaning)	33	6.85
mechanical errors	7 Punctuation	125	25.93
	8 Use of capital letters	83	17.22
	9 Orthography	101	20.95
Interlingual errors	10 Code change	5	1.04
	11 language interference	2	0.41
Total		482	100

Source: The Authors (2022).

Out of 482 errors, the most common were punctuation (25.93%), spelling (20.95%), capitalization (17.22%) and sentence structure (15.35%), denoting grammatical and mechanical errors. These were followed by word choice (6.85%), verb tense (6.43%) and verb omission (3.11%). The least frequent were conjunctions (0.41%), language interference (0.41%), code switching (1.04%) and singular/plural (2.28%). Although less frequent, they affect oral and written productions, causing grammatical, lexical, semantic and mechanical errors.

4. Discussion

The study suggests that the most common error committed by A1.3 level students at a public university is punctuation (25.93%), coinciding with the findings of Khatter (2019d). Regarding this topic, Isnaeni and Asisi (2017) indicate that errors in punctuation omission are the most frequent in both recognition and production tests. External obstacles and intralingual transfer

were the main causes of these errors, attributed to the rules of the target language and reasons such as carelessness or lack of attention, rather than lack of knowledge (Songxaba and Sincuba, 2019c).

The second most common error is spelling (20.95%), as in the study conducted by Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar (2020d), and Khatter (2019e). For Kusnadi (2018b), any written error in English words that stems from a student's lack of knowledge of phonology, morphology, orthography and semantics is called a spelling error, suggesting that ignorance leads to spelling errors.

The third most common error identified in this research was capitalization (17.22%), which contrasts with studies such as that of Al-Ghabra and Najim (2019b) where this error ranked fifth among 8 errors analyzed. According to Pathan (2021), capitalization is one of the most challenging aspects of written English for EFL students, and its incorrect use is one of the most frequent and notable errors in student writing, hindering their ability to write clearly. Most students are unaware of and unconcerned with the proper use of uppercase and lowercase letters, leading to frequent errors.

The fourth most important error made by students is sentence structure (15.35%), while in Khatter's (2019f) research, this error ranks seventh. According to Sang, Thu, Chi and Luan (2022b), they identified seven types of problems, with fragmented sentences being the most frequent error. These errors are regularly found by local and foreign academics in academic works of various genres. The frequency of errors indicates that a significant amount were caused by the use of sentence forms, influenced by factors such as the mother tongue, instructional strategies and resources, lack of grammar, allowed time, and focus on academic vocabulary. Both intralingual and interlingual errors are present.

The next three types of errors made by students were word choice, verb tense, and verb omission, in an order similar to that found by Khatter (2019g).

Inaccuracies were due to the inappropriate use of verb tenses that did not reflect the exact moment of an activity (Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar, 2020e). Students omit verbs and other phrases due to a lack of understanding of their functioning and sentence construction, and choose incorrect words to convey their ideas.

In this study, the least relevant errors were conjunctions and language interference (0.41% each), coinciding with Khatter (2019h) but not accounted for in Soto, Vargas, Cajamarca and Escobar (2020f). The second least relevant error was code switching (1.04%), while in Cordero and Martín (2020d) it was the lack of basic mechanisms to organize sentences.

The third least relevant error is singular/plural (2.28%), committed by incorrect omission of the plural morpheme “s”, possibly due to erroneous pronunciation in the mother tongue and omission of the 's' in irregular plural nouns in English. The errors found are mostly mechanical and grammatical. More research is needed on why Ecuadorians make these errors and educational interventions. According to Bakan, et al. (2020), correcting errors early in foreign language learning reduces errors and facilitates individual teacher-student contact.

5. Conclusion

This study identifies the most common morphosyntactic errors made by A1-level EFL students at the Public University of Cotopaxi when learning English. The objective was to identify these errors in their written production. Error analysis was used to detect what the student knows and does not know, along with a linguistic analysis of the errors found in second language acquisition.

The most common errors were punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and sentence structure, denoting grammatical and semantic (mechanical) errors. The least frequent were conjunctions, language interference, code switching,

and singular/plural errors. Although less frequent, they affect oral and written productions, producing grammatical, lexical, semantic, and mechanical errors.

Finally, the teaching of writing should start from the most basic level of communicative competence to build effective writing, since if students do not learn to write correctly, they will not have adequately acquired the language. Moreover, teachers should prioritize and incorporate writing as a fundamental process in teaching.

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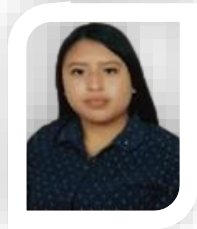
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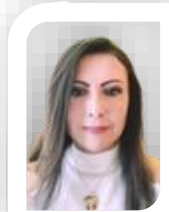
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