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Errors in Grammar as an Aspect of Learners' Incompetence A Case Study of Biskra-First year University Students of English

Dissertation in part requirement for the "Magister Degree" in applied linguistics.

Presented By :   **Jury:**

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Researchers are interested in errors made by ESL and EFL learners because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Richards). In 1994 Gass and Selinker defined errors as " red flags" that provide evidence of learners' knowledge of the second language. This also applies to foreign language. Hence, it is through error analysis that the teacher may assess learning and teaching and determine the priorities for teaching efforts.

As a teacher for many years and having taught all the levels from 8 AF to university students, I am well aware that learners make a lot of errors in English and mainly in grammar. This represents an aspect of learners' linguistic incompetence, in other words, they have not attained a linguistic level which allows them to manipulate the language easily. Thus, I have decided to conduct an error analysis of first-year students of the Department of English of Biskra University. As mentioned before the need for such a study is motivated by the great number of errors made by learners in grammar. This is not limited to the topic of grammar but concerns all the topics that require learner' writing ability such as: written expression, literature, civilisation, and psychology. One can argue that the

focus is on the message to be communicated regardless of errors. However, the value of grammar is undeniable since the meaning itself may be greatly affected. The value of the message depends not only on its appropriateness but also on its correctness. Thus, to attain an acceptable level of accuracy, students need to be provided with appropriate tools to acquire such a level of proficiency.

Another factor, is that the "licence" delivered at the end the fourth year is teaching oriented, which means that most of the graduates will be recruited in either middle or secondary school, so if the fact of making errors persists, the situation will worsen.

My study is, then, intended to sensitise teachers on the situation of our learners and to attempt to find reasons for such a situation in order to determine the areas that need reinforcement. I share the same view as Corder (1974) who claims that systematically analysing errors made by learners is possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching. This might of course shed light on obscure areas in the process of learning, which , if treated adequately would lead to better learning. Otherwise, errors will be fossilised and learners linguistic competence would not reach an acceptable level.

Since error analysis in grammar serves as an effective way to improve writing proficiency, I have decided to analyse grammatical errors that constantly occur in the English compositions of first-year students at Biskra university.

More specifically, the current study will address the following Questions:

1- What are **the most common and recurrent grammatical errors** made by these learners revealing their linguistic incompetence?

2- Are these errors due to **interlingual or intralingual interference?**

It is hypothesised that a large number of grammatical errors made by these learners is caused by interlingual interference , which means the negative transfer of the mother tongue on the performance of the target language.

The present study is based on the identification of the problematic area to be investigated through a linguistic description of the most recurrent errors in students' English language productions, The descriptive method is thus used along with an analysis of the gathered data.

Since it requires a great deal of effort to carry out the research on the whole population of the Department of English, a representative sample has to be chosen, random sampling seems to better fit this research. Therefore, the population subjected to the test consists of first-year students. The corpus is drawn from 92 written productions of 77 females and 15 males. They were given the choice to write a composition on four proposed topics. The other tools used to gather the necessary information are: a questionnaire administered to teachers in charge of grammar and written expression classes. This questionnaire is believed to be of great help. Some students have also been interviewed because their opinion on their errors and their difficulties constitute my first-hand data. The interview was unstructured to allow students to be spontaneous in revealing their difficulties.

The present study comprises three main parts. The first one deals with students educational background, a contributory factor to errors. In the second one , I defined grammar and presented some theoretical approaches to its teaching together with some techniques of error analysis. In the third part the focus was on the research work done on the learners
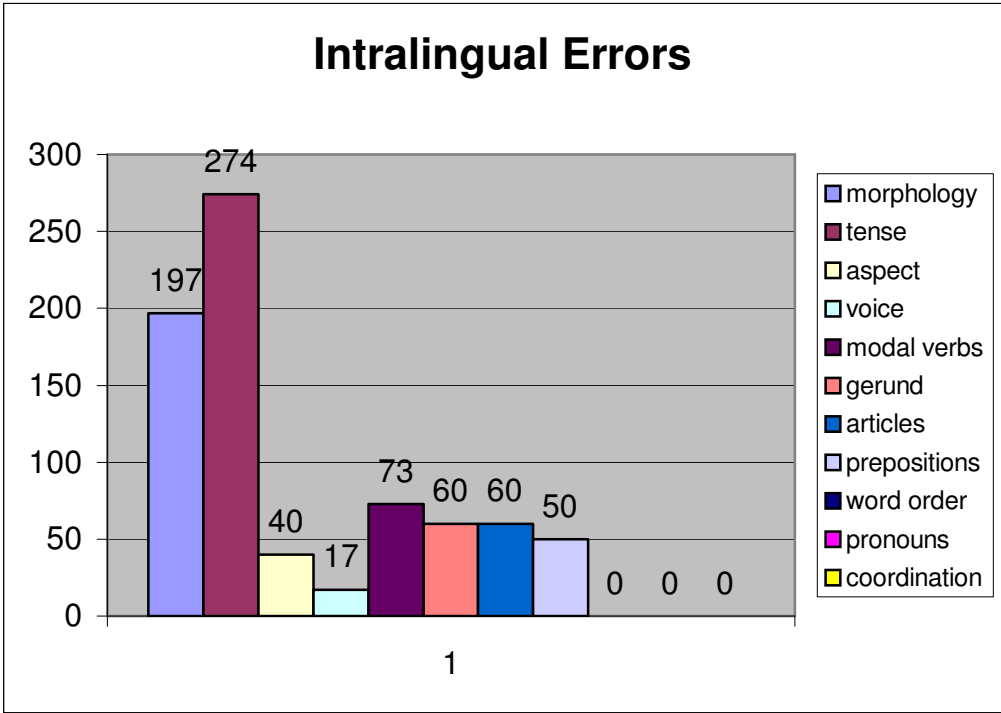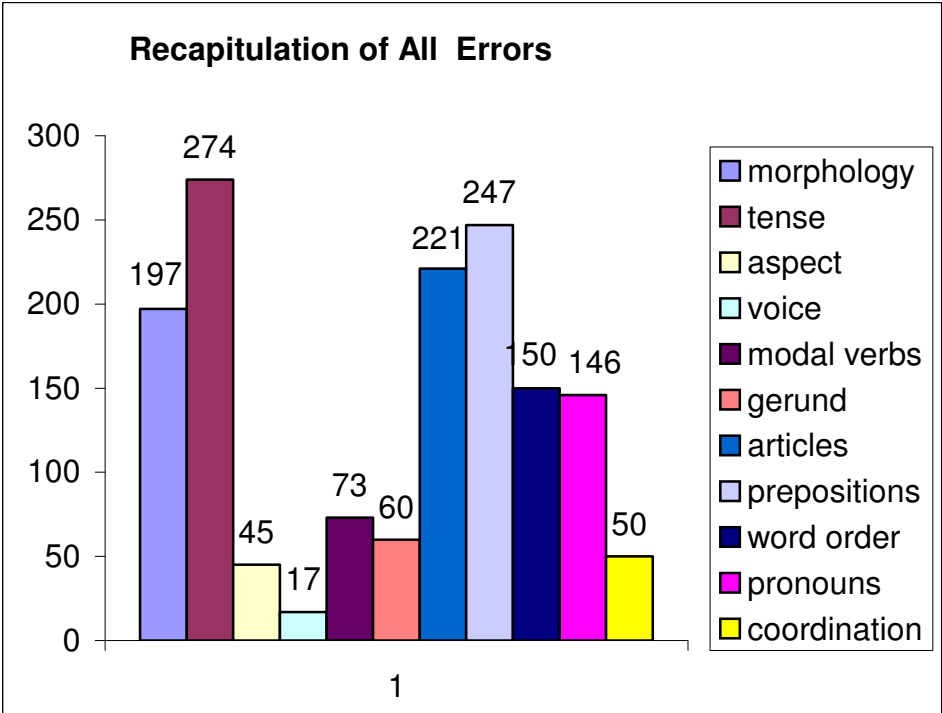
productions, identification of the most recurrent errors, their analysis and presentation of the results recorded. Finally, the research is ended up with pedagogical implications in addition to some recommendations.

In the second part errors have been classified within the sub-categories of omission, addition, selection and ordering. The errors recorded are: morphological errors, errors in tense ,aspect and voice errors in modal verbs, the use of articles and prepositions. Some syntactic errors among them word-order errors, errors in the use of pronouns and connectors have been recorded.

V.1. Recapitulation of all the Observed Results

Table 36: Recapitulation of all the Observed Results

Error Type	No. of Errors	Percentage
Morphology	197	13.53
Tense	274	18.12
Aspect	45	03.09
Voice	17	01.17
Gerund	60	04.12
Modal Verbs	73	04.12
Articles	221	15.17
Prepositions	247	16.93
Word order	150	10.30
Pronouns	146	10.03
Coordination	50	03.43
Total	1480	100 %

Recapitulation of All Errors

Bar chart data:
- morphology: 197
- tense: 274
- aspect: 45
- voice: 17
- modal verbs: 73
- gerund: 60
- articles: 221
- prepositions: 247
- word order: 150
- pronouns: 146
- coordination: 50

Intralingual Errors

Bar chart data:
- morphology: 197
- tense: 274
- aspect: 40
- voice: 17
- modal verbs: 73
- gerund: 60
- articles: 60
- prepositions: 50
- word order: 0
- pronouns: 0
- coordination: 0

V. 2. Recapitulation of Interlingual Versus Intralingual Errors

Error Type	Number of Interlingual Errors	Percentage	Number of Intralingual Errors	Percentage
morphology	00	00	197	100
tense	00	00	274	100
aspect	05	11.11	40	88.89
voice	00	00	17	100
gerund	00	00	60	100
Modal verbs	00	00	73	100
articles	161	72.85	60	27.14
prepositions	197	79.75	50	20.24
Word-order	150	100	00	00
pronouns	146	100	00	00
coordination	50	100	00	00
Total	709	47.90	771	52.1

Table37: Recapitulation of Interlingual Versus Intralingual Errors
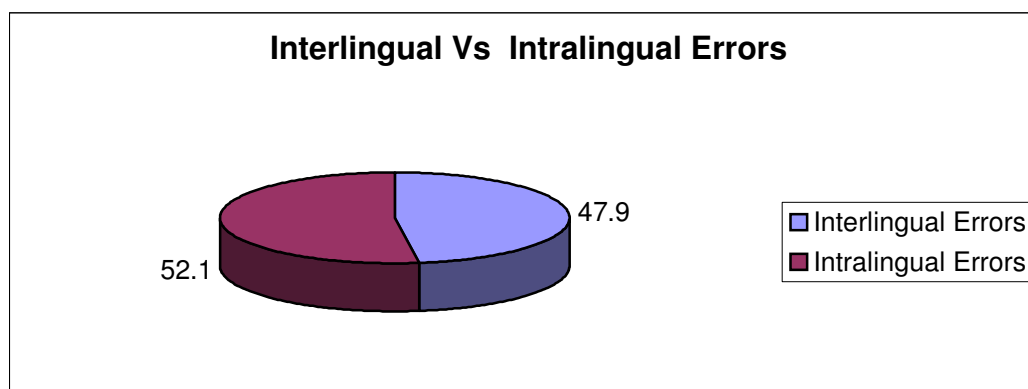
Graph 2: Interlingual Vs Intralingual Errors

My study confirmed that students make a large number of errors in different areas of grammar. Nearly half of them or 47.9 are caused by negative transfer such as errors in prepositions, articles and pronouns. The rest of the errors 51.1 can be attributed to intralingual reasons. Most of the errors are due to overgeneralisation and sometimes to false concepts because of lack of practice of certain structures as in the case of morphological and tense errors. Hence, we need to draw our students attention on the difference between Arabic and English in the areas where the errors are due to negative transfer. Our students also need to be exposed more to grammatical structures, they need more practice to internalise them and to be able to use them in their writing . In this way , they will develop their linguistic competence.

To conclude, grammar teaching should be extended to third and fourth year as suggested by both teachers and students.

Grammar teaching should not be isolated from writing. Coordination of teachers of grammar, written and oral expression would be beneficial to improve students writing proficiency.

As we know motivation is also a powerful tool, a learner will learn only if he or she is motivated enough to do so. This can be reached by designing interesting and appealing activities to

incite or draw on students' intrinsic motivation. Thus, the use of old fashioned techniques such as drills, grammar explanation and correction of errors may still contribute to learning if combined with more modern communicating activities i.e., the eclectic approach seems to be the most appropriate as the teacher has more freedom to select activities and to adapt them to the students' need. Therefore a needs analysis is always necessary along the teaching operation for the selection of the appropriate remediation as well as the appropriate methods and tools to apply , taking into consideration learners' differences and interests.

 Another point to raise is that most of the time this requires teachers to introduce some systematicity in error procedures. Teachers should not only be aware of the common difficulties, but they should evaluate these difficulties in order to give them emphasis in the light of error gravity, especially at this preliminary level; otherwise the problem will persist. It means students will move to higher levels incapable of producing a short paragraph without numerous grammatical errors. Hence, error correction should be given enough importance and our students need to receive feedback.

To conclude, I do insist that our students need more practice of grammatical structures in communicative contexts to be able to use them spontaneously in their writing.

This was a short summary of my modest research , but as Humbold said" humans

are prone   not only to commit language errors themselves but to err in their judgements of those errors committed by others.

Graph 1: Recapitulation of all Observed Errors
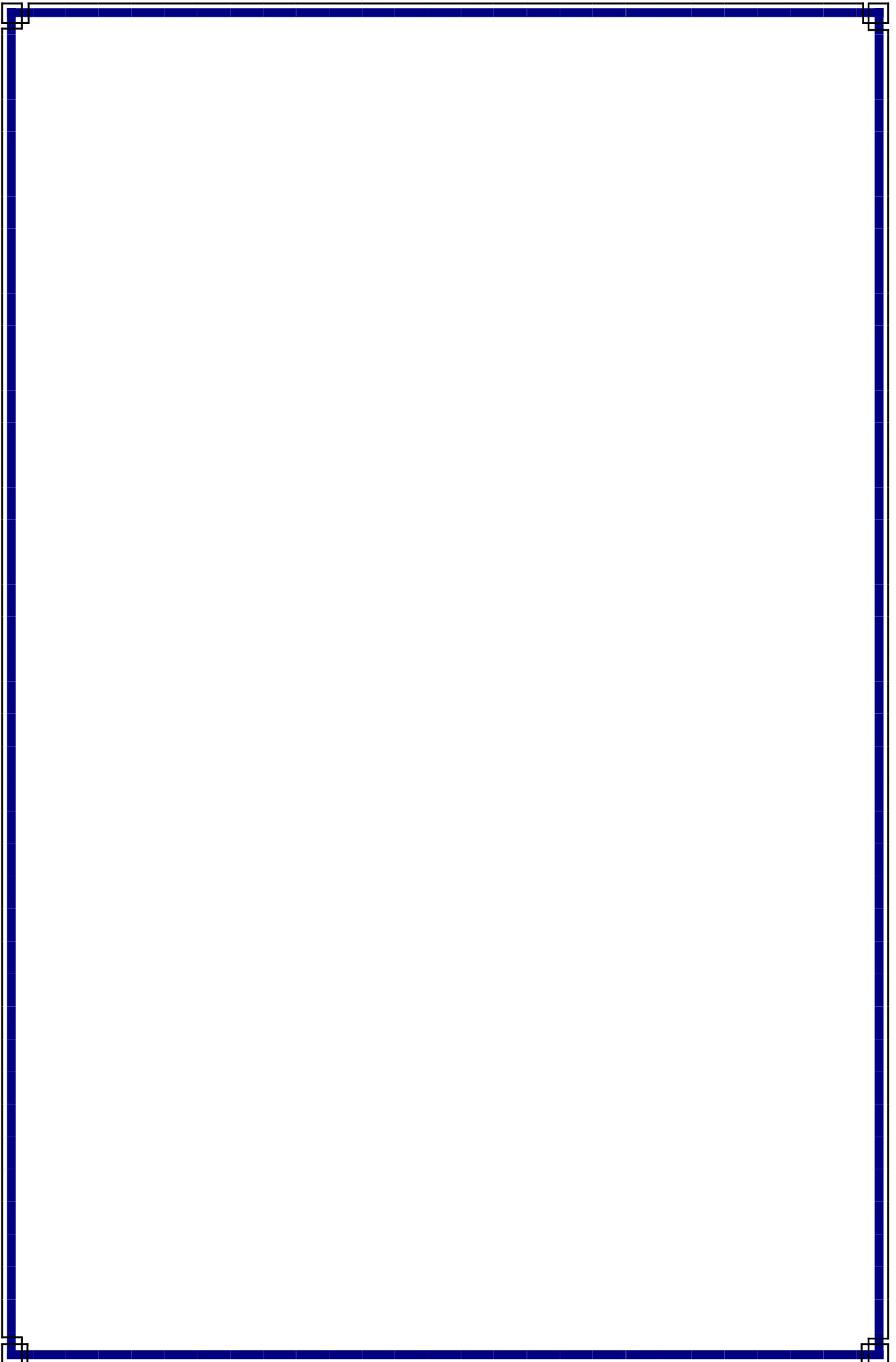
Comments

As shown in the table above, the total number of errors recorded in the compositions was about 1480. We can say that the highest percentage was in tense (18.12%), prepositions (16.93%), articles (15.17%) and morphology (13.53%) respectively. Other errors worth mentioning occurred in word-order (10.30%) and in the use of pronouns (10.03%). The rest cannot be considered as really significant.
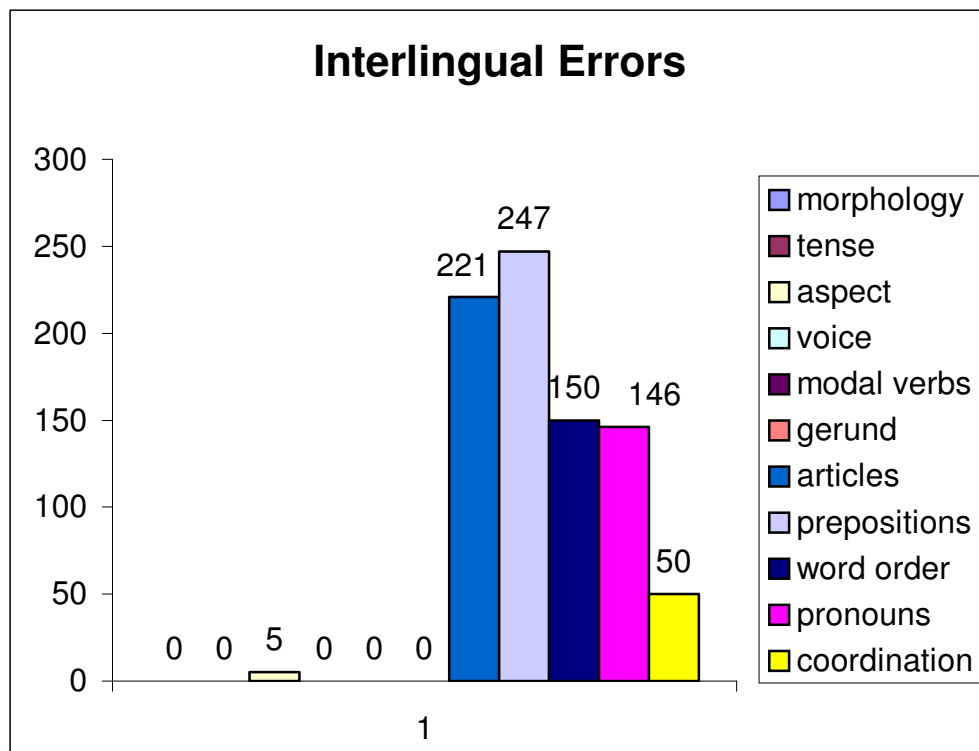
Comments

The results displayed in the table above show the number and percentage of Interlingual errors Vs Intralingual errors for each category. The total number of Interlingual/Transfer errors was 707 errors or 47.90 % as shown in the graph, whereas the total number of Intralingual/Developmental errors was 771 Or 52.1 %.

Based on these findings, we can say that first-year university students do commit errors in grammar because of negative L1 transfer; however, it is not the only reason: but a nearly similar number of errors is due to Intralingual reasons.

V. 3. Interlingual Errors

Interlingual Errors

Chart values by category:
- morphology: 0
- tense: 0
- aspect: 5
- voice: 0
- modal verbs: 0
- gerund: 0
- articles: 221
- prepositions: 247
- word order: 150
- pronouns: 146
- coordination: 50

Comments

According to the results recorded in graph 4, the areas in which the errors are due to interlingual interference are those of articles with 221 errors, prepositions with 197 errors, word-order with 150 errors and coordination with 50 errors. This proves that students find difficulty in the use of articles, prepositions, and in word-order mainly because of negative transfer from Arabic.

Graph 4: Intralingual Errors

Comments

The graph above reveals that Intralingual errors concern more categories, than Interlingual errors, though with differences in occurrence. The highest number of errors was recorded in tense with 274 errors. This may be due to the complexity of the English tense system, contrary to the Arabic one which includes only three tenses. The second highest number of errors was in morphology with 197 errors. Other categories such as modals and the use of the gerund are all due to intralingual interference because they do not exist in the Arabic language. However, they do not really constitute a serious problem because they are form errors which can be easily corrected.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that students commit a large number of errors in different areas of grammar. Nearly half of them (47.9) are caused by negative transfer such as errors in

prepositions, articles and pronouns, the rest of the errors or a bit more than half (51.1) can be attributed to intralingual reasons. Most of the errors are due to overgeneralization and sometimes to false concepts because of lack of practice of certain structures as in the case of morphological and tense errors. Hence, we do need to draw our students' attention on the difference between Arabic and English in the areas where the errors due to negative transfer are recurrent. Our students also need to be exposed more to the necessary grammatical structures, in other words they need more practice in order to internalise them and then to able to use them in their writing.