

**A STUDY OF THE SYNTACTIC ERRORS COMMITTED  
BY PAKISTANI ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS  
IN RELATION TO THEIR MOTHER TONGUE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Writing in a foreign language is generally a troublesome task for learners. The Pakistani EL learners are also found struggling in English writing even after completing their K12 education because of being poor at English grammar and L1 interference. However, they have to write assignments and take examinations in English throughout their academic career specially in their tertiary education. The present research attempted to find the most common syntactic errors committed by the Pakistani EL learners in their written compositions with regards to their mother tongue (MT) interference. The EL learners enrolled in English Diploma at National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, participated in the study. Mixed method research design including quantitative and qualitative methods is used to answer the research questions. Pit Corder's theory of Error Analysis and Larry Selinker's theory of Inter Language are used to analyze the data. The study discovered that for majority of the participants the grammatical category of verb is the most confusing. It is suggested that teachers teaching English as a foreign/second language should pay special attention to the English verb during the course of their teaching.

**KEYWORDS**

Writing composition, syntax, errors, Pakistani learners and their writing problems.

**INTRODUCTION**

Writing is a continuous but complicated procedure of expression involving complex thought processes, linguistic synthesis and a strategic effort (Ngangbam, 2016). Alinsunod (2014) views writing as a challenge to deal since it includes multiple inevitable aspects; spelling, punctuation, organization etc. Rao (2019) and Javid and Umer (2014) argue though writing comes at the end in the natural order of language learning yet its significance escalates manifolds in the academic contents.

Language teachers emphasize writing skill being the language of instructions especially in tertiary education (Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2010). Globally English is extensively applied for knowledge interposition so excellence in writing is highly valued and necessary. This need is surging and competence in English writing is widely discerned as cardinal for a myriad of reasons (Mahboob, 2014). Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) opine English writing is growing essential in academic and professional settings for non-native speakers because it is the only tool academicians use to evaluate students' success. Gonca (2018) considers that writing has to involve drafting and organization of ideas, revising and editing the content, vocabulary and cohesion. The beginners of a foreign language are more prone towards using L1 writing skill in L2 writing. Karim (2016) considers writing mindful, fruitful, and planned and in a foreign language, it is even tougher. For this reason, it is time consuming to become an expert writer in a foreign language. A large foreign language class of inept learners, finds it a hard nut to progress at a noticeable pace within a time limit. Hence, the language instructors should encourage them that it is not an exasperating and pointless activity. Their writing competence can be boosted if instructors have insight of learners' issues and revisit their teaching strategies by actively integrating writing with grammar and reading. Instead of a drudgery, students should be made realize that writing is an imperative and effective way to communicate (Al-Gharabally, 2015).

Errors happen to be an unavoidable reason behind learners' hesitation towards learning. Since learners are not competent in the target language (TL), errors work as a mirror of learners' incompetence in L2 and are a key to provide better future instructions by addressing those gaps in the gained knowledge (Klassen, 1991). Errors, actually, are the deviations from the standard forms of a native's grammar resulting from ineptitude (Amara, 2015). Errors are systematic in nature and indicate learners' progress in language acquisition. (Gass & Selinker, 1984; Khan, 2018; Amara, 2015). Hence, conducting error analysis is one of the best ways to explain these errors and can tell the sources and causes of errors' common occurrences. Thus, experienced instructors are aware of the fact that errors serve as an authentic source in learning not as grade-lowering (Brenes, 2017). Finding the sources and reasons help trace the solution and improvement in future instructions.

Depending upon their sources, the errors are basically: (i) inter lingual errors, and (ii) intra lingual errors (Phuket & Othman, 2015). Intra lingual errors are the outcome of faulty application and ignorance of grammatical rules (Richards, 1971). During language learning, these errors are natural on the basis of learners' inadequate knowledge of the TL (Kaweera, 2013).

Contrarily, L1 Interference, Transfer or Cross-lingual Influence the mother tongue's influence has become a central concern. A foreign language learner has an inclination to transfer structures from his mother tongue to the second language system, Inter-lingual interference (Komba & Bosco, 2015) resulting in inter-lingual errors (Richards, (1971; Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). These errors mirror conscious or unconscious link between their competence in their MTs and the TL inadequacy (Ellis, 1997). Ellis (2008) claimed that in majority of the learners, it is unescapable to learn a foreign language without any transference of some linguistic features of their already acquired first language. These interferences occur at various levels; phonology, morphology, grammar, syntax, lexis and semantics.

According to several researchers, ESL/EFL learners struggle with English sentence structures particularly because English syntax is different from their mother tongue (Talosa & Maguddayao, 2018). English syntax defines subject or object and distinguishes among parts of speech like nouns or verbs, adjectives from nouns, and so on. In this regard, English word order is more discrete and restricted than most languages. Because of the L1 interference or incomplete comprehension and application of English syntax, the learners change the word order in a sentence which ultimately modifies the meaning (Susana, 2007) or make an utterance ungrammatical globally or locally.

Besides, a foreign language comes from a different social and cultural milieu, that is why, learners more often come across a number of syntactic errors during the learning process. Hailing from a diverse linguistics background, it is quite common for the Pakistani learners to find trouble in making grammatical sentences, therefore, they commit many errors (Sultan, 2015).

Syntactic rules of any language are the key factor to enable students to communicate in written and oral and, precisely command on syntax is indispensable in this regard. So, they need to master these syntactical problems to learn the language successfully. This finally develops the ability to write well-knit compositions by developing grip on the English clauses perfectly. They can become able of self-correction once they identify ungrammatical items or structures. In this way, the difficulty of writing a coherent text can be effortlessly overcome because this competence guides to put words correctly in a sentence (Gedion, Tati & Peter, 2018).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In SLA, the role of mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1) cannot be ignored at all and mother tongue interference is one of the main factors responsible for syntactic errors committed by EFL learners in their written compositions. Errors in writing are committed due to differences in the rules of L1 and L2 that leads to negative transfer. Sabbah (2018) and Ngoc (2016) reported the negative transfer as hostile to consolidate rules of L2. In his research, Ngoc found some frequented syntactic errors in students' written composition due to this negative transfer of their mother tongue into English. The study strengthens the view that these forms are readily and naturally in their access which learners apply to the TL at different stages of their linguistic progress.

Singh and Maniam (2020) conducted a study on Malaysian students of secondary level who were supposed to write essays. The purpose of the study was to see the impact of mother tongue on the committed syntactic errors in their essays. The finding revealed these students used translation method while writing essays which became the base of syntactic errors in the TL i.e., English. The first language highly interfered in students' writing skill. In their study Guo, Liu and Chen (2014) explored that the influence of students' mother tongue was beyond the control of English teachers in China leading towards grammatical errors and Chinglish expressions.

In a research study, Megaiab (2014) also stated the detrimental impact of the participants' mother tongue on different facets of acquiring the grammar of the foreign language.

Likewise, Mahmood (2016) investigated errors in English syntax of Iraqi learners. Errors committed in piece of writing which are errors of; spelling, vocabulary, verbs and punctuations, particularly grammar. The result confirmed that negative syntactic transfer from the L1 is the main cause of these errors.

Being a medium of private and official correspondence as well as the global means of communication, English is taught in Pakistan as a compulsory subject at all levels of education (Rahman as cited in Ahmed et al, 2016). Pakistan is linguistically fertile and the learners in Pakistani EL classrooms come from a diverse linguistic background having different regional languages such as: Sindhi, Saraiki, Balochi, Punjabi, Pashto, Balti and Shina etc, as their mother tongue. At schools, they are formally introduced to the national language, Urdu, followed by English. Resultantly, learning English is a real hard task for them specially learning writing skills. Pakistani students particularly of intermediate level encounter problems in English writing skills (Behram et al, 2015).

In view of Sattar et al, (2019) Pakistani EL learners generally commit errors in the structure of sentences, regular/irregular verbs, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and punctuation etc. The study found inter lingual influence to be one of the major reasons contributing towards syntactic errors committed by the Pakistani EL learners.

A study conducted by Ahmed, Amin and Qureshi (2017) analyzed grammatical errors committed by Pakistani university students. The findings revealed that the study participants made frequent errors in the area of grammar; word choice, capitalization, articles, adverbs, prepositions and possessive noun. The study concluded that majority of these errors was due to learners' reliance on their first language. According to Fareed et al (2016), the most serious and frequent problems were related to interference of the mother tongue, dearth of vocabulary and poor understanding of grammar.

According to a study conducted by Asif et al, (2019) on the online students of Virtual University of Pakistan, writing and syntactic comprehension are linked to each other as writing is a process in which sentences are needed to be organized to build a coherent paragraph. They claimed that dissimilarities in the syntax of L1 and foreign languages are likely to cause errors in their piece of writing. In this research study, the most commonly committed errors are: punctuation, verbal, tense and wrong choice of word. Henceforth, Pakistani students have to combat syntax of English while undergoing any writing process.

In far flung areas of Pakistan the state of English language learning is even poorer. A study carried out by Khan and Khan (2016) tried to look into the problems that the English learners of these regions encounter by considering and assessing the position of English vis-a-vis Urdu and Saraiki. They have quoted syntactic errors in adult performance" occur due to the use of first or mother language in the life of a student and this impact remains for a long period in the mind of a learner.

Bashir et, al (2021), conducted a study on Pakistani Level students of five top schools in Lahore. It investigated morpho-syntactic errors while penning down Narratives in the TL, English. The most problematic areas in these compositions were of: prepositions, Subject-verb agreement, tenses, articles and punctuation. The research corroborated that these students committed errors of different grammatical categories.

To have command on writing in any language, learning its grammar correctly is of great importance. The grammars of English and Urdu are different which make one of the main difficulties for Pakistani learners to apply it flawlessly especially in writing, and writing is a part of examination and needs much heed to be paid. So, while writing, they make many errors in identifying correct form of verbs, conditional sentences, punctuation choosing an appropriate modal verb or plurals and possessive case of nouns (Nawaz et, al 2015).

According to Hamza and Abbasi (2017), writing is not just writing sentences one after the other but it is actually an art that effectively tells what the writer intends to convey to the readers. It not only needs knowledge but command on the linguistic rules, syntax and vocabulary. But in Pakistan, most of the university students cannot correctly write even a summary or a letter or an essay because of incompetence in syntax besides other reasons. In this backdrop the present study attempted to answer the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

1. What types of syntactic errors are committed by the Pakistani EL learners in their written compositions?
2. Which of these syntactic errors are more common in the Pakistani EL learners' written compositions?
3. Is mother tongue interference a factor in the syntactic errors committed by the Pakistani EL learners in their written compositions?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study derives its significance by highlighting problematic areas in syntax in the milieu of the Pakistani learners' diverse linguistic background and finding out the most common syntactic error(s) in writing compositions of the study participants in relation to their MT. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no research has encompassed the these many regional languages of Pakistan while studying the syntactic errors in written compositions in relation to the participants' mother tongue. But significance of the current study lies in its consideration of these errors with respect to almost all major regional languages spoken in Pakistan. And then, these errors were analyzed for the sake of comparison from the perspective of the respective mother tongue interference while learning the target language, English.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This mix-method approach examined common syntactic errors in writing composition of Pakistani undergraduates. The study is quantitative as collected data has been quantified; primarily, in terms of counting errors and categorizing them under the grammatical categories, and secondly, by calculating the percentages of errors falling in each category. The data gathered has been explained with the help of tables. In qualitative paradigm, the study has described and discussed the quantitative data.

The first step for data collection used the research tool of evaluation tests as spot writing. The participants had not been given time for any preparation so that their existing level of English writing proficiency can be evaluated and categorized grammatically. The topic chosen was broad so that students could easily write about it without taking any help

from the dictionary. Then, the samples were separated on the basis of their mother tongues to count the total errors of each mentioned part of speech for the respective mother tongue. In the second step the data was marked. Afterwards, categories based on the grammatical classes of the errors were made for each sample test. The third step involved classification of the samples according to their MTs and tabular representation of the percentage of each model grammatical category for each MT.

In addition to the data collection, its marking and tabulation, the researchers also conducted an informal survey of the participants to develop better understanding of the sentence structure and translation from the respective mother tongue into English. The sole purpose of this survey was to look into the words (content/functional) or syntax of mother tongues being borrowed to the English learning while writing composition. It really proved fruitful in keenly analyzing how these learners' mother tongues cause errors, supporting the Inter Language hypothesis of second language acquisition. They use their mother tongue sentence structure to compensate for their TL inadequacies in vocabulary, verbs, word order, and other syntax areas. When they were asked to provide the respective alternate of syntactically wrong sentences in English, it gave the insight to their reliance on the particular MT.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current research integrates Larry Selinker's theory of Interlanguage (IL) and Pit Corder's Error Analysis (EA). The Inter language Theory investigates if there is a continuum in the internal grammar of learning additional languages and views language development as a combination of several factors; nature of input, environment, internal processing of the learner, and influence of L1 and on L2. IL considers transferring rules of L1 into L2 that ultimately causes errors affecting English syntax. IL was applied to probe whether the syntactic errors in the written composition of Pakistani learners are due to MT interference or not. Contrarily, EA helps identify learners' linguistic challenges and needs and the present study has adapted EA to identify and classify errors. It compares the errors made in the TL and the TL itself. The study of errors is particularly relevant to focus on teaching methodology today. Error Analysis was established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues. Error Analysis remediates learners' errors during the second language learning. This approach reframed the perspective of looking at errors as something undesirable rather according to EA, these errors give insight to learners learning process. Corder (1987) explains the significance of learners' errors in three different ways: Firstly, errors tell the teacher how far the learner has progressed towards the goal and consequently what he still needs to learn. Secondly, they provide evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is following in discovering the new language. Thirdly and most importantly, they are indispensable to the learner himself since errors help learners learn. Corder's significance was evident through the analysis of data.

**Table 1**  
**Corder's Model of Error Categorisation**

Types of Errors	Example Sentence	Error Analysis
Omission	1*It was pleasant morning. /*Somehow, I managed myself as foreigner learner.	Omission of the indefinite article <i>a</i>
	2*English language does not confine western people.	Omission of the definite article <i>the</i> and preposition <i>to</i> .
Addition	3*muslim celebrates two Eid festivals in a year.	Addition of <i>festival</i> other than omission of article <i>the</i> ( <i>omission</i> )
	4*We communicate with others through the English.	Article <i>the</i> is extra
Misformation	5* I was cook some special type of foods.	Wrong form of the verb <i>cook</i>
	6*I have no idea where is my class.	Wrong form of the verbs <i>have</i> and <i>is</i> respectively. Furthermore, placement of <i>is</i> is also wrong.
Misordering	7*There are two canteens in my university and one mosque.	Wrong word order of the phrase <i>in my university</i>
	8*I and my whole family together start celebrating Eid.	Wrong placement of personal singular pronoun <i>I</i> .

**i) Omission**

Omission is considered to be the absence of any grammatical category that is an integral part of sentences. In first two sentences article *A* before adjective followed by noun and preposition *to* its object noun are omitted.

**ii) Addition**

Addition is the use of a word that is not needed in a well-formed sentence. In the table, article *the* and the lexeme *festival* are examples of addition.

**iii) Misformation**

Corder considers misformation as the wrong form of the morpheme. But the research has used the term verbal errors for including any problem that was found to be related to the form.

**iv) Misordering**

When the placement of a word or a phrase does not follow the English syntactic rules, misordering happens.

Corder's model (1973), which offers four sub categories; omission, addition, misformation and misordering, has been adapted for this research study.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

As the first step in data analysis evaluation tests were given to the English Diploma students at NUML. The tests also elicited information about the linguistic background of the study participants. It was found that the participants belong to twelve different regional language backgrounds namely:

<b>1</b>	Pashto	<b>7</b>	Hindko
<b>2</b>	Punjabi	<b>8</b>	Saraiki
<b>3</b>	Urdu	<b>9</b>	Sindhi
<b>4</b>	Potohari	<b>10</b>	Kashmiri
<b>5</b>	Pahari	<b>11</b>	Shina
<b>6</b>	Kashmiri	<b>12</b>	Balti

Next step in the analysis was to analyze the evaluation tests so to mark all the syntactic errors committed in them. The errors were then categorized based on their grammatical categories. The errors were found to fall under the following twelve grammatical classes:

<b>1</b>	V (verb)	<b>7</b>	P (preposition)
<b>2</b>	W.C (word choice)	<b>8</b>	Pr (pronoun)
<b>3</b>	W.A (word addition)	<b>9</b>	C (conjunction)
<b>4</b>	W.PI (word placement)	<b>10</b>	A (article)
<b>5</b>	W.M (word missing)	<b>11</b>	Pl (plural)
<b>6</b>	S.V (subject verb agreement)	<b>12</b>	Pos (possession using apostrophe)

Finally, the percentages of errors of all grammatical categories were calculated and compared to figure out the most problematic grammatical class for the Pakistani EL learners in the backdrop of their respective MT.

The table given below presents the comparison of errors committed by the study participants across their MT.

**Table 2**  
**Comparison of Errors of the Highest Percentages**  
**of all Mother Tongue**

<b>Mother Tongue (MT)</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1. Pashto	WC	21.8
2. Punjabi	V	21.7
3. Urdu	V	23.5
4. Potohari	V	22.8
5. Hindko	WC	28.2
6. Sindhi	WC	22.3
7. Saraiki	WC	21.0
8. Kashmiri	V	25.7
9. Pahari	V	22.9
10. Shina	V	27.4
11. Balti	V	21
	WC	21



The data revealed that the speakers of four regional languages; Pashto, Hindko, Sindhi and Saraiki, faced difficulty in choosing a context based appropriate word. The participants from rest of the seven languages exhibited syntactic errors belonging to varied grammatical classes, verb being the most frequently committed error. So, the grammatical category of verb is identified as the major hurdle among the Pakistani EL learners speaking different mother tongues.

According to the theory of Error Analysis by Pit Corder, the syntactic errors committed by the study participants fall under: Errors of Omission, Word choice, Addition, Misformation and Misordering., and, according to the theory of Inter Language by Selinker, many of these syntactic errors mirror interference from their mother tongues. Omitting English article; *the*, *a* and *an* and placement of wrong form of personal pronoun *I* in phrases like *me and my friends / family / bothers* are typical instances of Errors of Omission and Misordering, respectively. These errors strongly show the impact of participants' mother tongues on their learning. Because of non-existence of articles in Pakistan's regional languages and the national language (Urdu), the participants usually end up with omission of articles. Secondly, L1 interference is also quite evident in the participants' usage of phrases like mentioned above. In the national language, Urdu, and in any other regional language, there is no fixed pattern of translation of the phrase, *my friend and I*.

As far as the Error of Misformation is concerned, the researchers have named it as Verbal Error and all problems related to tense and forms of verbs were included in this category. So, *drinked*, *was came*, *taked*, *tooked*, etc were counted in this category of errors. Any part of speech which was extra in the sentence was taken as Error of Addition. They included unnecessary use of articles, words and phrases etc. Many participants failed to use a suitable lexical item according to a given situation which affected the sentence structure and ultimately, also marred the meaning conveyed. This was called as Error of Word choice. Moreover, Errors of Misformation and Word choice happened because of participants' incompetence in the target language. But Errors of Addition may have occurred due to the mother tongue interference. All in all, these errors proved interference of mother tongues' prepositional, lexical, syntactic and verbal features.

The results showed that the study participants committed a great number of errors in their composition reflecting their incompetence in English syntax. They are noticed to be from different areas of syntax. The grammatical class of errors showing the highest percentage by the speakers of each of the 11 mother tongues was calculated and identified as the model problematic class for that MT. Lastly, the data for all the eleven mother tongues was compared to find out the most commonly committed error among all the MTs being studied.

Based on the analysis of the data the study found that except Pashto, Hindko, Sindhi and Saraiki, the learners of all other MTs committed the highest percentage in the category of Verbs; 21.7% in Punjabi, 23.5% in Urdu, 22.8% in Potohari, 25.7% in Kashmiri, 22.9% in Pahari, 27.4% in Shina. While the learners of these four MTs committed the highest percentage in the category of Word Choice; 21.8%, 28.2%, 22.3% and 21%, respectively. Only the Balti speakers showed equal incompetence in the categories of word choice and verbs, 21 % each.

Among all the participants who committed majority of errors from the category of verbs, the nature of errors was the same. No particular pattern in the nature of these verbal errors was discovered. Most of the participants were unable to use forms of verbs aptly and contextually. They were unable to retain the difference between regular and irregular verbs, as well as, to memorise present participle and past participle forms of verbs. Corder's category of Misformations like *\*spended*, *\*to visited*, *\*is speak* are examples of such verbal confusions. Secondly, errors depicting aspects of verbs were also found. At times the participants failed to write verbs in the required aspect. They were unable to decide the aspect of verbs according to the desired action; e.g., simple present for describing routines or hobbies or progressive actions. Majority of them kept switching between the forms of the verbs from one tense to the other, usually present or past, without identifying the correct one for the given topics. Verbal confusions and placement of auxiliaries in direct/indirect narration were found to be another hurdle in this regard. Some examples of this type are:

- \* *We bought new cloths for Eid* (this sentence is from the topic *How do I spend my Eid?*).
- \* *Cricket is being a good hobby for everyone. Then we came in class & attending class* etc.

## CONCLUSION

The primary concern of the current study was to find out common syntactic errors which the Pakistani EL learners of various linguistic backgrounds make in their written compositions. The theory of Error Analysis proved fruitful in the classification of the syntactic errors committed by the study participants, while, the theory of Inter Language has helped to see the errors which were committed due to negative transfer from their mother tongues mainly because of translating the utterances of mother tongues into English. The participants have also been found to have relied on their knowledge of their MT structures while writing English compositions reflecting their incompetence in English syntax. All in all, the study affirms MT interference as a significant factor leading to the syntactic errors on part of the Pakistani EL learners in their written compositions. The current research study has also helped to examine if these learners commit similar or different syntactic errors depending upon the area they belong to and the regional language they speak (their MT). It is hoped to add another perspective to the current literature on the teaching/learning of English syntax in Pakistani context and the pedagogical implications about making the students aware of their syntactic errors thus to improve their writing competence. It can help instructors and syllabus designers in designing a remedial teaching program focusing English syntax.

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