

# **A Morphosyntactic Analysis of Yemeni Students' Writing Compositions**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper studies the morphosyntactic errors in written texts of 20 Yemeni students enrolled in the fourth year, Department of English, Faculty of Education, Hodieda University. The main objectives are to describe the morphosyntactic errors committed by students while involving in written tasks, classify them and discover their sources. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative descriptive research method is employed. A written task of 250 words is to be written by the students on one of two topics. The findings of this study reveal that the syntactic errors are more than the morphological errors. Furthermore, both the morphological and syntactic errors are distributed in omission, addition and misformation whereas the disordering errors include syntactic errors only. The misformation errors represent nearly a half of the total errors. Concerning the sources of errors, most errors are intralingual errors which are related to the Target Language (TA).

**Keywords:** Contrastive analysis; error analysis, interlingual, intralingual, morphological errors, syntactical errors.

## **1. Introduction**

People must master any language because it is an essential tool for communication. Communicating with others who have similar needs and various social functions obviously help people to get all human needs. People learn English, an international language utilized in the global community, in addition to their mother tongue (MT), a language that is useful only inside the family or community in which they live.

In Yemen, English is studied as a foreign language. It is studied from Seventh class at preparatory school to the third year of secondary school. Yemeni students learn English as a subject and not as medium of instruction or learning (Al-Ahdal & Al-Awaid, 2014). Those who want to be an English teacher or a translator, they study in the department of English in the faculties of Education, Arts or Languages. Thus, the level of English learners in Yemen is not as the level of students in India or any other country where English is taught as a second language. Due to lack of interaction and exhibition to English use, Yemeni learners commit numerous errors in their writing or speaking. Thus, the main objectives are to describe and classify the morphosyntactic errors committed by the students while involving in written tasks and to discover the sources of these errors.

However, the many worldwide research focused on morphosyntactic errors (e.g., Faisyal, 2015; Hariri, 2012; Hijjo, 2013; Sebonde & Biseko, 2013), the researcher believed that these errors need more investigation in Yemen. Likewise, the studies conducted in the Yemeni setting seemed to go in other direction (Algamal et al., 2021; Mudhsh & Laskar, 2021). Thus, this study aims to:

Describe and explain the morphosyntactic errors made by Yemeni learners in their written task.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Morphosyntax**

Morphosyntax is the study of morphology and syntax. It is the study of the ways by which words are constructed. Morphology has traditionally been described as the study of the inner structure of words. The elements which form words are called morphemes. The morpheme is "the minimal distinctive unit of grammar, and the central concern of morphology" (Crystal, 2011, p.313). Morphemes can be bound or free. Bound morphemes are parts of words, such as prefixes, infixes, and suffixes. Free morphemes are the words without any bound morpheme. To go second part of the word, i.e., syntax, Crystal (2011) defined syntax as the study of the rules governing how the words are combined to form sentences in a language. The goal of syntax is to examine the structure and formation of sentences. To do so, some criteria and rules should be set for creating meaningful and grammatical acceptable sentences through concentrating on word order, phrases, clauses and their connections.

Furthermore, morpho-syntactic errors are related to our competence in the composition form which mirrors our unawareness of language rules (Shahid et al., 2021). Morphosyntactic errors include the topics of the language competence which reflect ignorance, misunderstanding and also incorrect use of morphological and syntactical rules which are necessary to produce grammatical correct sentences. In short, morpho-syntactic errors are the consequences of misapplication of morphological and syntactical rules (Vosse, 1992).

Rijkhoff (2016) argues that morpho-syntactic categories are essentially specified by formal, semantic and functional factors. Noun phrases, subordinate clauses, complement clauses and members of morphological units such as prefixes and other affixes are some of morpho-syntactic items. Morpho-syntactic errors often result in writing ungrammatical sentences. When writing an English paragraph or essay, grammar frequently presents problems for students on a linguistic level. Thus, most of morphosyntactic errors occur during writing tasks.

### **2.2 Contrastive analysis**

To study the morphosyntactic errors, some theories are necessary. There was a great deal of interest in studying and analyzing the writing errors of second and foreign language learners in the last few decades. In general,

there are two important theories to investigate errors: Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA). CA is defined as a comparison between the learner's MT and TL. The pioneer of CA is Robert Lado (1961). CA was extensively popular in the 1960s and early 1970s as a procedure of knowing why some properties of TL were more difficult to learn than others (Rustipa, 2011). Lado (1961) claimed that when the learning elements are similar to the learner's MT, they are easier than the different learning elements. The reason is given by Mammeri (2015) who points out that the learners often make errors because the rules of the language are not petrified. Learning any language, whether it is a first language or a second language, involves committing errors. When learning a first language, the board is clean, but when learning a second language, the grammar of the first language is already inscribed. As a result, the similarities and differences between the two languages result in learning predictions; similarities lead to easy learning (positive learning) and differences to difficult learning (negative transfer). Saville-Troike (2006) stated that contrasting MT and TL results in both positive and negative transfers. A positive transfer occurs when the MT rules can be applied in the acquisition of the TL. On the other hand, a negative transfer or interference occurs when MT rules cannot be applied in the acquisition of the TL.

### ***2.3 Error analysis***

EA replaced CA in the early 1970s for the following shortcomings according to Rustipa (2011) for: Firstly, CA was criticized for not being supported by actual data. Secondly, it was quickly noted that numerous Contrastive analysis-predicted errors in learners' language were mysteriously absent. Moreover, learners made several consistent errors regardless of their L1. Thus, it became evident that CA was only helpful in the retrospective justification of errors and did not forecast learning difficulties. These changes significantly reduced the appeal of CA, along with the waning of the behaviorist and structuralist<sup>1</sup> paradigms.

EA emerged in the 1970s to discuss language learners' errors. EA can be seen as connected to both applied linguistics and the second and foreign language learning. Richards and Schmidt (2013) describe EA as the study

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<sup>1</sup> The behaviorism and structuralism theories are psychological theories which put emphasis on repetition for learning and were the background psychological theories of CA.

and analysis of the errors made by second language learners. EA suggests that learning errors are caused not only by the native language, but also by more global learning strategies (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). As the pioneer of the examination of learners' errors, Corder (1981) reframed the errors in terms of the language process and language learning. The base for EA to study errors is that the learners' errors can be observed, analyzed, and resolved. In EA, it is crucial to distinguish between two important terms. These are errors and mistakes. These two terms refer to the to the use of incorrect utterances in the TA. Errors happen when the learner make faults which are new rules for them, but the mistake is a misuse of the rule. Furthermore, Ellis (1994) argues that error arises from ignorance. On the other hand, if learners do not use their language skills, mistakes will occur.

To assess the errors made by the learners, this study adopts the steps of error analysis proposed by James (1998), among others, which include: collecting data, detecting errors, finding errors, describing errors, and evaluating errors. Collecting data for analysis is the initial step. The detection of errors is the second phase in which the learners' statements are contrasted with the comparable native sentences. This helps the researcher to pinpoint the errors in this stage. Finding errors comes in the third stage. The researcher identifies the errors in this stage to discover the causes of the learners' errors. Describing and classifying errors into types is the fourth phase. Error evaluation is the final phase. The researcher determines in this phase which components need more clarification and awareness (James,1998).

#### **2.4 Classification of errors**

As mentioned above, the errors are classified in the fourth phase. The errors are classified according to Dulay et al. (1982) into: omission of errors, addition of errors, misformation errors and disordering errors. Dulay et al. (1982) argue that learners may omit indispensable components, add dispensable components<sup>2</sup>, misform and disordering components. Purinanda

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<sup>2</sup> Corder (1981) states that unfortunately the classification of errors which are often applied by teachers is not profound. Errors are still categorized on a shallow base such as *omission errors* when some items are omitted which should be present; *addition errors* when some elements which should not be present are added; *selection errors* when the wrong element has been chosen instead of the right one; and *disorder errors* when the components are wrongly ordered. "This superficial

and Sutrisno (2022) and Gayo and Widodo (2018) describe in detail the types of errors with clarifying examples.

Omission is the term for leaving out parts of an English sentence that are essential for the phrase or clause to make grammatical and contextual sense as in the examples below:

1. The adults may find a deeper and heavy (heavier) meaning to the jokes (Purinanda & Sutrisno, 2022, p.70).
2. The school was located in a suburb (suburban) area. (Purinanda & Sutrisno, 2022, p.70).

Addition errors take place when extraneous words are inserted into a phrase or a sentence. The addition error occurs when additional elements result in grammatical or contextual errors as in the examples below;

3. If the deck is emptied (empty), ... (Purinanda & Sutrisno, 2022, p 72).
4. Cockroach is a insects (an insect).(Gayo & Widodo, 2018, p.66)

In disordering, the linguistic components inside a phrase or clause are not arranged in a manner consistent with the natural construction or accepted English grammar as in the examples below;

5. The main cause of this problem is the lack interest of students (students' lack of interest) (Purinanda & Sutrisno, 2022, p.74).
6. Cactus has a body large (large body). (Gayo & Widodo, 2018, p, 68)

Misformation indicates the use of inappropriate linguistic elements as in the examples below;

8. Elephant is a largest (large) mammal on the land. (Gayo & Widodo 2018, p.67)
9. They are breed (bred) by sprouting. (Gayo & Widodo 2018, p.67)

### **2.5 Sources of errors**

Concerning the sources of errors, Brown (2000) identifies three main sources of errors, i.e., interlingual, intralingual and communication

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classification of errors is only a starting point for systematic analysis. It is only the evidence or *data* for an analysis". (Corder , 1981 p.36)

strategies. Interlingual errors are a result of the effect of the MT structures. They occur when second or foreign language learners commit errors in the TL influenced by the negative transfer of his/her MT. The second source is intralingual errors, which are more related to the correct grammar use of TL. The last source is the communication strategy. It is related to the intentional use of some techniques to express a notion if the accurate linguistic structures and expressions are not readily available to the learner during conversation.

Gayo and Widodo (2018) reported that Richard (1974) puts emphasis on four types of intralingual errors:

a. Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization takes place when the rule of the target language is not used correctly. Overgeneralization includes the errors that are committed by students when a correct rule is not applied in an appropriate context as in the example (10-11) from Ellis (1994) is as follows:

10. He cans sing.\*

11. He can sing.

b. Ignorance of rule restriction

Intralingual errors appear also as ignorance of rule restriction when the learners cannot use the exceptions. This type of error takes place when a regulation is not applied in the context where it should have been used as in the example ( 12 ) from Ellis (1994) as follows:

12. He asked me to go.

c. Incomplete application of the rule

The incomplete application of the rule happens when the learners cannot show some significant components in a word, phrase, or sentence as in the example (13-14) from Ellis (1994) as follows:

13. You like sing?\*

14. Do you like to sing?

d. False concept hypothesis

The false concept hypothesis occurs when the learner cannot interpret the TL grammatical rule which leads to use inappropriate grammatical elements as in the example (15-16) from Ellis (1994) as follows:

15. It was happened last Sunday.\*

16. It was last Sunday.

### **3. Previous Studies**

Many researchers from different countries study morphosyntactic errors and analyze them. However, many studies may share the same wide objectives,



they do so in different environments and conditions with different findings. Some of these studies are discussed below.

Hariri (2012) studied the morphosyntactic errors in the written tasks of Iranian EFL linguistics. Nine pre-intermediate female Persian English language learners in Rasht, Iran were the participants in this study. They were required to compose an essay. The findings of this survey revealed that the "use of prepositions" and "use of articles" were the most errors that learners frequently made. Another study conducted by Taha (2012), tried to detect morphosyntactic errors in the essays of ESL learners. It also investigated and analyzed these errors. The 36 narrative essays that made up the study's subject were written by university students in Sudan, and the minimalist program was employed as an analytical tool. According to the findings, the lexical projections of TP, agreement characteristics, inflectional morphology, categorical features, and derivations were all shown to be errors. The lexical item's insertion affected both the meaning of the sentence and its logical form (syntax).

In Hijjo's research (2013), Malaysian secondary school students were examined for morphosyntactic and grammatical errors. The goal of the research paper was to concentrate on the morphosyntactic problems that resulted in grammatical errors when Malaysian secondary school pupils were writing in English. The results showed that Malaysian students were in need to more instructions in using the plural mark "s" and the "3rd singular" in the present tense. Moreover, because of the varied word orders, they were unable to construct a basic sentence. In their article from 2013, Sebonde and Biseko explored problems with morpho-syntactic errors made by secondary school pupils in Tanzanian English Language Classrooms (ELCs). The study specifically evaluated the methods the teachers used to deal with their pupils' morphosyntactic errors (both written and spoken errors). According to the statistics, Tanzanian ELCs frequently employed a total of four corrective feedback approaches; focused corrective feedback, direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback, and metalinguistic corrective feedback. Additionally, it was shown that while marking written assignments, teachers preferred to employ indirect corrective feedback. Furthermore, Faisyal (2015) analyzed morphosyntactic errors found in English written texts. The subjects were the students of Daarut Taqwa Islamic Boarding School Klaten. The findings of the survey revealed that

the students made syntactic errors more than morphological errors with different sources of errors. Most errors were intralingual errors (related to TL), language transfer, strategies of second language learning, and overgeneralization. Similarly, Shamsan and Attayib (2016) examined the morphosyntactic translation errors made by the students of the English Department (Translation Program) at the University of Science and Technology in Yemen. Errors were categorized into different types; tenses, pronouns, articles, prepositions, verbs, nouns, relative and conditional clauses, subject-agreement errors, capitalization errors, mood, word order, and speech errors. Results of this study showed that the students made important errors in tense, noun, verb, preposition, pronoun, relative, speech, article, and voice errors when they should translate sentences from Arabic into English.

In a study conducted by Agustiani (2019), 22 students from the fourth semester of the genre-specific writing course 2017/2018 were the sample of his study. The study revealed that 98 errors were found in the descriptive texts written by the students, including misformations, omission, addition, and disordering. misformation included verb subject-verb agreement, verb passive, verb past tense, and verb past participle , future tense verbs, nouns, prepositions, pronouns, verb to be, and determiners. Omissions included omissions of –s in plural, articles, verb to be, pronouns, and adverbial suffixes. Moreover, addition errors were divided into addition of conjunctions, to be, articles, pronoun, and suffix in noun. Additionally, 3 errors in the disordering were made.

Padilla and Padilla (2021) focused on major language errors in writing in 7<sup>th</sup> grade in one of public secondary schools in the Philippines. This paper identified the morphosyntactic errors. The findings showed that the most notable morphosyntactic errors involved verb tense, wrong use of preposition, absence of linking verb, omission of preposition, and unnecessary use of articles.

Most of the studies discussed above analyzed the morphosyntactic errors and classified them. Very few of them studied the sources of these errors as well. This research paper studied and classified the morphosyntactic errors and examined the sources of these errors.

## **4. Methods**

### ***4.1 Research design***

This study is a descriptive qualitative research which typically offers the exact opposite of what is suggested by quantitative research. It frequently incorporates data gathering techniques that usually provide non-numerical, open-ended data that are subsequently evaluated using non-statistical methods. Creswell and Creswell (2017) claim that the qualitative research is frequently linked to create an understanding and testing hypotheses. It searches for the hypotheses or ideas that can explain the gathered information or the observed facts. As a result, it does not predetermine which variables are crucial. Instead, it makes an effort to describe the observed phenomenon in as much detail as feasible (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### ***4.2 Sampling***

It is necessary to choose a sample in a qualitative research to check the validity of the research. For this study, 20 students—boys and girls—were selected at random. These individuals were in the fourth year, Department of English, Faculty of Education, Hodeida University, for the academic year (2022/2023). It is important to remember that the chosen students were between the ages of 18 and 28 and speak the same language, i.e., Arabic. Additionally, they have finished learning 12 credit hours of writing and 12 credit hours of grammar.

### ***4.3 Instrument***

Free writing sessions served as the basis for the data collection. The participants were required to write a written task of 250 words on one of two topics: the effect of the war on education in Yemen and the role of woman in society. The writing session took place for one hour.

## ***5. Data Analysis***

The primary goal of the study is to describe and explain the morphosyntactic errors made by Yemeni learners in their written task. To this end, the researcher divided the errors into their grammatical components and determined how frequently each type of error occurred. To assess the errors made by the students, this study adopted the steps of error analysis proposed by James (1998), among others: collecting data, detecting errors, finding errors, describing errors, and diagnosing errors. Then, the errors were classified according to Dulay et al. (1982).

## 6. Results and Discussions

### 6.1 Classification of errors

It has been discussed above that the errors were classified into four types; omission, addition, misformation and disordering errors. They were investigated in students' written assignments as in Table 1.

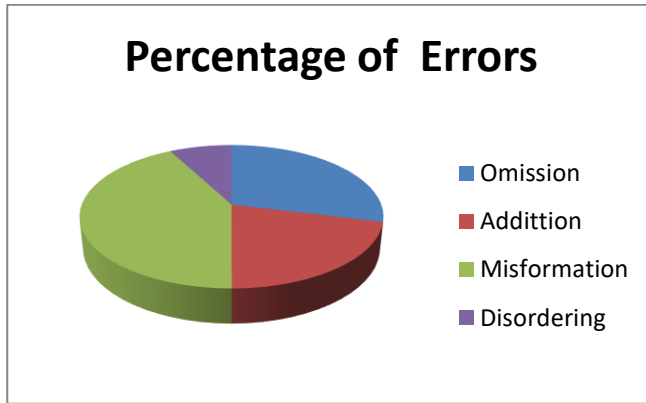
**Table1**

*Classification of errors*

Type of Errors	Morphological /Syntactic Errors	No. of Errors	Percentage	Examples
<b>Omission</b>	Morphological Errors	8	2.96%	...the effect are ...
	Syntactic Errors	70	25.92%	I don't (know)from where to begin.
<b>Addition</b>	Morphological Errors	6	2.22%	To make useful things and mak*ing*...
	Syntactic Errors	51	18.88%	She is *was* emotional.
<b>Misformation</b>	Morphological Errors	49	18.14%	She is easier(easifying) the difficulties.
	Syntactic Errors	65	24.07%	They lacks electricity, furniture, ...
<b>Disorder</b>	Morphological Errors	0	0%	
	Syntactic Errors	21	7.77%	...in the field agriculture...
<b>Total</b>		270		

Table and Figure 1 indicate that the syntactic errors were more than the morphological errors (203 syntactic errors out of 270 errors). This result is consistent with the findings of Faisyal (2015). Concerning the types of errors, the misformation errors shape 114 out of 270 (42.21%) represented approximately half of errors. This finding is in line with Özkayran and Yilmaz (2020) who found that misformation formed the highest amount of the errors committed by students with (50%) of the total errors. It is stated above that misformation indicates the use of inappropriate linguistic elements (Gayo & Widodo 2018). This result is surprising because the fourth year students are expected to commit less misformation errors.

Figure 1. Types of errors



**Table 2**  
*Error categories*

Error Categories	Frequer	Percentage (%)	Examples
Spelling	14	5.49%	She is emotional with paintes (patients).
Capitalization	10	3.92%	The war affects everything in yemen(Yemen).
Derivation	13	5.09%	If they are absence(absent), the education will be absence(absent).
Lexicon	10	3.92%	The woman is solid (strong).
Nouns	13	5.09%	The war affects economic (the economy) so hard.
Articles	27	10.58%	The woman is half of ( the) society.
Personal Pronouns	19	7.45%	She took care about there(them).
Relative pronouns	9	3.52%	She can do any job who (which) needs women.
Adjectives	9	3.52%	She has the great (greatest) regard.
Prepositions	27	10.58%	She takes care about (of) children.
Tenses	52	19.25%	The woman in society (is) like the man.
Auxiliary	40	14.81%	The woman is (has) the role...
Conjunctions	10	3.92%	The teachers stopped teaching because (of) the war.
Sentence fragments	17	6.66%	Yet solid be woman ...
Total	270		

Table 2 shows that most of errors committed by the students were on verbs whether they were related to the use of tenses or auxiliaries (92 errors with 34%). Thus, a third of errors was categorized in tenses and auxiliaries. This result was in harmony with the result in Table 1 which revealed that most errors were misformation errors. Beside these errors, there were other misformation errors like the ones made mostly in personal and relative pronouns, nouns and conjunctions. This finding is consistent with Padilla and Padilla (2021) who found that the major language errors of Phillipian

students involved verb tense. This is because of the many tenses found in English which students do not have in their MT.

## 6.2 Sources of errors

**Table 3**

*Interlingual errors*

Types of Errors	Aspects of Errors	Examples
Negative Transfer	copular	She very much concerned ...
Word order	Nouns before Adjectives	She has role staple in society.
Spelling		She takes care of natural children.

CA highlights the effect of interlingual errors on the proficiency level of TA learners. Interlingual errors may appear as the negative transfer of MT structures (interference). In the example, ‘She very much concerned ...’, the learner has omitted the copular ‘is’ because it is not available in his MT; Arabic language. This is a negative transfer of the absence of the copular structure in Arabic language into the learners’ TL. Using the word order of the MT is another type of interlingual errors. For example, ‘She has role staple in society’, the learner has put the noun ‘role’ before the adjective ‘staple’ as he always does in Arabic language. Concerning the spelling, the alphabet and spelling of English are different from Arabic. Thus, spelling errors are expected as in ‘She takes care of natural children’ (natural children).

The second source of errors is the intralingual errors which are more related to correct grammatical use of TL. The researcher found out that the intralingual errors were more than the interlingual errors. This is because the misformation errors represented about a half of the learners’ errors and most of these errors are intralingual errors. Besides, most of omission and addition were related to intralingual errors more than interlingual. Concerning the interlingual errors, the students were in the last year so the influence of the MT was expected to be little. Table 4 shows examples of Intralingual errors

Table 4

*Intralingual errors*

Types of Errors	Aspects of Errors	Examples
Overgeneralization	Irregular verb forms	The war leaved negative effects.
Ignorance of rule restriction	Modal Auxiliary	I will going to write about ...
Incomplete application of rules	Superlative adjectives	The women make the strong society.
False concepts hypothesis	Quantifier	Some the teachers stop the teaching.

The intralingual errors may appear as overgeneralization, in the example 'The war leaved negative effects' in Table 4, the students overgeneralized the addition of 'ed' in the regular verb forms to the formation of the irregular verb forms. This is confirmed by Richard (1974) who reported that errors may come in the form of overgeneralization. Another type of intralingual errors examined in the students' written task was the ignorance of rule restriction. In the example 'I will going to write about ...', the students ignored the grammatical rule of the obligatory use of infinitive (without to) after the modal auxiliaries. This finding meets Ellis (1994) argument that error arises from ignorance of rules. Another type of intralingual errors was the incomplete application of rules as in the example 'The women make the strong society' where the student didn't follow the rule of the superlative adjectives and left the adjective without the suffix 'est'. The last type of intralingual errors was the false concepts hypothesis. In the example 'Some the teachers stop the teaching' the student misunderstood the use of the quantifier 'some' which should be followed by plural nouns (without the definite article 'the') or uncountable nouns. These examples are in line with Faisyal (2015) who analyzed morphosyntactic errors of students at Daarut Taqwa Islamic Boarding School Klaten. The study found that most errors were intralingual errors (related to TL).

## 7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the two linguistic branches of morphosyntax, i.e. morphology and syntax. The findings of this study showed that the syntactic errors were more than the morphological errors. In addition, both the morphological and syntactic errors were found in omission, addition and misformation whereas the disordering errors included syntactic errors only. The misformation errors represented nearly a half of the total of errors. Most

of these misformation errors were related to tenses and auxiliaries which constituted a third of errors. Concerning the sources of errors, both interlingual errors and intralingual errors occurred in the students' writing but the intralingual errors were more than interlingual errors.

### **Implications and future research**

These results and findings may help the teachers of English language to expect the errors which may be committed by the learners so they can use appropriate techniques to help these learners to avoid or decrease such types of errors. Future research is in need on exploring strategies which may minimize the number of such error in students productions. Experimental studies are also required to show the effect of any instructional strategies to help students master the English language with less number of errors.

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