

Error Analysis of Inflectional Morphemes Made by Preparatory Year Saudi EFL Students at Al-Jouf University

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ABSTRACT :

This paper aims to investigate the problems that face Saudi preparatory year students at Al-Jouf University as relates to their use of grammatical and inflectional morphemes. The students commit a number of errors in inflectional morphemes when they are involved in writing activities. The focus in this study is to investigate the occurrence of errors in inflectional morphemes, and to find out the types of errors and the most frequent errors that are made by the students. Also, the paper seeks to identify the errors of inflectional morphemes, that affect the students' writing performance to determine which errors have the highest rate of occurrence among the students. The students' answers in the final examination of the academic year 2013-2014 were used as a tool to collect the data for the purpose of the study. The students were asked to write on two different familiar topics. The study shows that the total number of errors is 53 out of 75 sentences with 50.9%. The researcher found out that EFL teachers of Preparatory Year at Al-Jouf University are required to deal with the inflectional morphemes more appropriately. Also, teachers should explain to the students all types of inflectional morphemes clearly during the process of teaching. Finally, the standard of teachers must be raised in order to promote their teaching performance.

Keywords: *overgeneralization , omission , transfer.*

المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة الي تحليل الاخطاء النحوية والتصريفية في مفهوم الازمنة التي يرتكبها طلاب السنة التحضيرية بجامعة الجوف في المملكة العربية السعودية. المشكلة الاساسية في هذا البحث هي ان الدارس السعودي للغة الانجليزية يخطئ وينحدر ادائه الي الحد الادني في التصريفات عند استخدامه للازمنة. شمل البحث الطلاب السعوديين المتحدثين باللغة العربية الذين تم اختيارهم من طلاب السنة التحضيرية فقط واعتمد البحث علي اوراق الاختبار النهائي للعام الجامعي 2013-2014 للطلاب والطالبات معا. من اهم اهداف البحث معرفة الاخطاء التي يرتكبها الطلاب السعوديون عند استخدامهم للازمنة والتصريفات النحوية , اذ ان نسبة الخطاء فيها عالية, ثم معرفة المشاكل التي تؤثر في اداء الطلاب عند استخدامهم الازمنة والتصريفات النحوية. ومن اهداف البحث كذلك مساعدة الطلاب علي اكتساب الاستخدام الامثل للتصريفات النحوية. ومن اهم نتائج البحث ان الاخطاء النحوية والتصريف في كل انواع الازمنة وقع في 53 جملة من العدد الكلي للجملة وهو 75 جملة بنسبة 50.9%.

من اهم توصيات البحث مايلي:

ان تعطي الازمنة والتصارييف في اللغة الانجليزية اهتماما اكبر, وان يتم تدريسها مرتبة وبالتفصيل. كذلك , ثمة حاجة الي تاهيل المعلمين في مجال تدريس اللغة الانجليزية بطريقة افضل .

INTRODUCTION :

According to the development and innovations in all aspects of life, the world has become a global village. Consequently, people need to communicate with one language . Therefore, they need to learn foreign Languages, and the most demandable language to learn in the world is the English language, because it has the greatest number of speakers and learners.

In Saudi Arabia which is the richest country in the middle east English is taught as a foreign language, and the developing of the students' writing performance is one of its teaching courses ,and the students are required to think critically and write correctly.

The researcher has worked as an EFL teacher at Al-Jouf University, Saudi Arabia for almost two years ,during 2012 and 2014. He noticed that some students make errors when they deal with the third person; singular or with plural. Although according to some linguists errors might not be seen as signs of failure, the researcher thinks that they are the clearest evidence of the need for developing the systems of learning. For these errors need to be given special attention.

The researcher would like to investigate the problem that face the Saudi preparatory year students at Al-Jouf University who commit a number of errors in inflectional morphemes when they are involved in writing

activities. The researcher thinks that an inflectional morpheme is the smallest linguistic unit that has a grammatical function, which means that it is a very definite unit of grammar. Thus, people involved in reading will be confused when errors occur in writing , and this might make the reader to fail to understand the intended meaning of the writer (student). This condition should not exist or at least should be minimized in order to prepare the students of Al-Jouf University for further university studies such as medicine and engineering colleges . Therefore, the researcher focuses this study on the inflectional morpheme errors.

The researcher chose the area of inflectional morphemes because inflectional morphemes are the closer to grammatical morphemes than derivational morpheme or lexical morpheme. If the students make errors in these morphemes, this might lead to poor understanding of the basic English structures that they should learn at the primay and secondary schools.

There are many related studies to this research; such as Kambal (1980) who analyzed the syntactic errors in composition written by first- year-Sudanese University students who were admitted to Khartoum University in 1968. He reported that the most frequent errors were in (a) verb, (b) tenses, (c) preposition, (d) articles and

(e) concord. However, the researcher in this paper only focuses on the errors in (a) verb and (b) tenses, ignoring the other errors since they are not included in the purpose of this paper.

Tadros (1966) investigated the writing errors of Sudanese Secondary School Students. She found that the most frequent errors were in (a) the verbal group- tenses, form, voice, concord- (b) the nominal group, (c) the articles and (d) the prepositions. Not all of these errors are important for the researcher but only the verbal group- tenses forms, because they are parts of the concern of this study.

The two above related studies carried by Kambal (1980) and Tadros (1966) indicate that there a large number of inflectional morphemes errors in the students' writing and this is what happens in Sudanese Secondary Schools. The researcher attempted to find out whether this problem can be found among preparatory Saudi students or not.

Objectives of the Study This study attempts to:

- 1- find out what types of the errors in inflectional morphemes are made in writing by preparatory year students at Al-Jouf University.
- 2- identify the errors of inflectional morphemes, which affect performance, and reduce students' comprehensibility.
- 3- find out which errors of inflectional morphemes have the highest rate of occurrence among the preparatory year students.

Materials and methods - Subjects

The participants of this study were chosen from two groups of students who were studying English during the academic year 2013- 2014, at Al-Jouf University, Preparatory Year Deanship. The sample of the study were both male and female who studied the same textbooks and sat for the same examination.

Instruments

The scripts of the students in the final examination result of the academic year 2013-2014 was used as a tool to collect the data for the purpose of the study. The examination tested the students' kills of reading and writing. However, the researcher selected writing because he wishes to confine his research to the writing skill . The subjects were asked to sit for the exam under the supervision of two EFL teachers. The time allowed was two hours. The students were asked to write on two different topics, which were selected from the Elementary and Pre-intermediate books. The researcher was present when the test was carried out. The number of students was very large (about eight hundred students male and female).

The selection of the sample was done randomly. Twenty (20) male students and twenty (20) female students from the Preparatory Year Deanship at Al-Jouf University.

These students spent (11) years of their education including learning English language as a preparatory program. Therefore, they were expected to have mastered the basic grammatical structures, or usage of inflectional morphemes.

The researcher identified all occurrences of the errors in inflectional morphemes, using Godby' theory. The data was identified in the form of transcription. It was classified by using the theory of errors by Littlewood, applying overgeneralization, transfer and simplification by omission.

After classifying the data, the researcher analyzed it according to interpretation of table (1). The researcher found out the highest occurrence of students' errors. He calculated the percentage of the most frequently produced errors, to determine whether it is overgeneralization of plural, overgeneralization of superlative, or transfer of plural, etc. The following formula was used to calculate the errors:

$$A\% = \frac{IC}{TC} \times 100\%$$

A%: Tendency of the students' errors.

IC: Incorrect sentences.

TC: Total of incorrect sentences.

Discussion

In writing this paper, the researcher used some related theories, which consisted of one main theory, and two supporting theories. The main theory was the theory of Language Acquisition and error analysis of Littlewood (1984). The supporting theory was the theory of Morpheme, presented by Godby (1982). Moreover, for supporting Godby's theory, the researcher presented a theory set by Katamba (2003).

Error Analysis

In his tackling of the problem in this paper the writer shall be referring back mainly to the Theory of Error

Analysis. "Error is the failure of student to use the appropriate rules of the language, which will help him to process the second language and develop underlying systems of rules" Littlewood (1984,p.44). Thus, errors need not be seen as a sign of failure because learners use errors as a tool to acquire the second language, as they apply strategies in dealing with errors. According to Littlewood (1984) all ESL learners use two types of errors. Those are interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual error occurs when ESL learners directly translate the first language into the second language. It will cause error because there is discrepancy of between the mother tongue and the second language. Later, it is known as the strategy of transfer. Furthermore, intralingual errors occur when ESL learners use their own rule in processing the second language data. As a result of this type of errors, second language learners use the strategy of overgeneralization and simplification by omission (See tree diagram 1).

Overgeneralization

According to Littlewood (1984,p.52) "Overgeneralization is expressions of the same underlying strategy of using previous knowledge to understand new experience". The overgeneralization errors might occur, firstly, because of the failure of the ESL learners to know the exception to the general rule. For example; sometimes, beginners who starting to learn English language do not know the exception in forming past form for the irregular verb. They would add suffix *-ed-* to all the infinitive, in fact, there is an exception rule for the

irregular verbs e.g. *let- letted*. This error occur because some students do not know the exception of the rule, although they have allocated the verb into the appropriate category. Secondly, the overgeneralization error might also be due to the student's inability to know the appropriate rule for each item. For instance, the use of modal "have" and "has". Some students might make errors like this: "I has.....", because students have learnt the rule of perfect tense but failed to apply it "I" should be attached with "have" instead of "has". Below are some examples of overgeneralization error, produced by ESL learners:

- * We are not knowing the rules. (overgeneralized use of the rules for forming progressive).
- * Mona have a happy family. (overgeneralized use of third person singular 'has').
- * We also shares our lecture, school building. (overgeneralized use of third person singular 's').
- * I loves to eat pizz. (overgeneralized use of third person singular 's').
- * Do you loves pizz? (overgeneralized use of third person singular 's').
- * Oh, is there another apples? (overgeneralized use of plural marker 'are').

Transfer

Transfer belongs to the interlingual errors as the students' errors originally come from the mother tongue. Students use their mother tongue's rules and to apply them to their second language and make use of them in organizing the second language data. Littlewood (1984,p.60) says that "It is economical and productive for second language

learners to transfer their previous knowledge of language (including the first language) to the new task". According to this definition, it is clear that transfer is not only contributing to the existence of errors but also giving advantages in learning the second language. Transfer causes error when the mother tongue's rule is different from the second language rule. Sometimes, ESL learners fail to construct sentences in the new rule (rule in the second language). For instance, when a native speaker of Arabic language says "I sick", that means he/she uses Arabic language rule to form sentence in English, he/she does not add to be which is necessarily added in English. Furthermore, transfer becomes an advantage in learning second language when learners' mother tongue rule can be shared to the second language rule.

Simplification by omission

Overgeneralization and transfer of errors can be regarded as a form of simplification. EFL students use the strategy of simplification to ease their suffering in learning foreign language. Simplification by omission is also one of those strategies; This kind of simplification is sometimes called "redundancy reduction". It means that, in forming sentences, students omit many items (e.g. inflections and other morphemes), which are redundant in conveying the intended message (Littlewood,1984).

Redundancy reduction, as mentioned above, can make EFL learners' difficulties. It can also be not easy for readers or interlocutors to comprehend learners' intended meaning. For

example, the omission of the verb inflection and the article in “*teacher want chair*” still does not prevent the meaning from being understood. But when much greater reduction takes place, such as “*nanny sock*” it would make it difficult for reader or interlocutor to understand the learners' intended meaning.

Below are some examples of simplification by omission:

My father get up early in the morning everyday.(the omission of third person singular ‘s’).

The lesson in the class make me hungry. (the omission of the third person singular ‘s’).

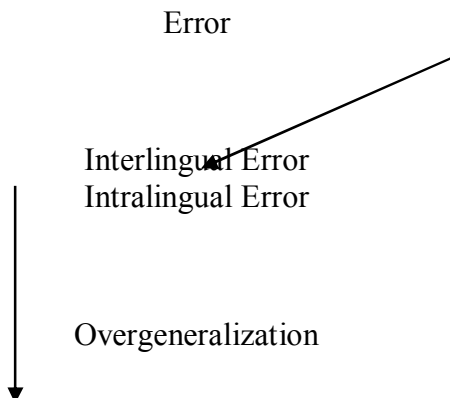
Hey! You have already interview me (the omission of the past participle ‘ed’).

And now I will give you some prescription. (the omission of the plural marker ‘s’).

You should try my mother cook. (the omission of the possessive ‘s’).

The researcher used the theory of Error by Littlewood (1984) because he thinks that Littlewood has given a clear distinction on overgeneralization, transfer, simplification by omission.

To make a clear understanding about the idea of error analysis, see the tree diagram below:



Transfer
Simplification by Omission

Diagram (1)Error analysis Supporting Theory

The supporting theory will explain the nine inflectional morphemes by Godby.

Inflectional Morphemes

Godby (1982,p.33). “A morpheme is the minimal linguistic unit which has a meaning or grammatical function” Morpheme can be divided into two types; those are free morphemes and bound morphemes. A free morpheme has the ability to stand alone, it does not need other morpheme to get its meaning, e.g. dog, cat, etc. Bound morpheme is opposite to the free morpheme, it can not stand alone, it needs other morphemes e.g. progressive–ing, adverb –ly, plural marker ‘s’ to get its meaning. Derivational and inflectional morphemes are classified into the bound morphemes. Both derivational and inflectional morphemes are called affixes. When they are added to the beginning of a word or morpheme they are called prefixes, and when it is added to the end of a word or morpheme they are called suffixes. According to Godby (1982), in English, the derivational morphemes are either prefixes or suffixes, but the inflectional morphemes are all suffixes. Therefore, all the errors in the analysis will contain error sentences in suffixes. (See tree diagram 2)

“An Inflectional morpheme has a grammatical function, but never changes or creates new word.” Godby (1982,p.43). And, we can see the same

definition of inflectional morpheme by Francis Katamba. He states that an inflectional morpheme does not alter the word-class of the base to which it is attached. Inflectional morphemes are only able to modify the form of a word so that it can fit into a particular syntactic slot e.g. the 's' ending only the number of carries information about entities. There are only eight of them in English, as follows:

The inflectional suffixes of English.

Base Function

Suffix

Wait
p sg present

-s

Wait
past tense

-ed

Wait
progressive

-ing

Eat
past participle -en

Chair
plural marker -S

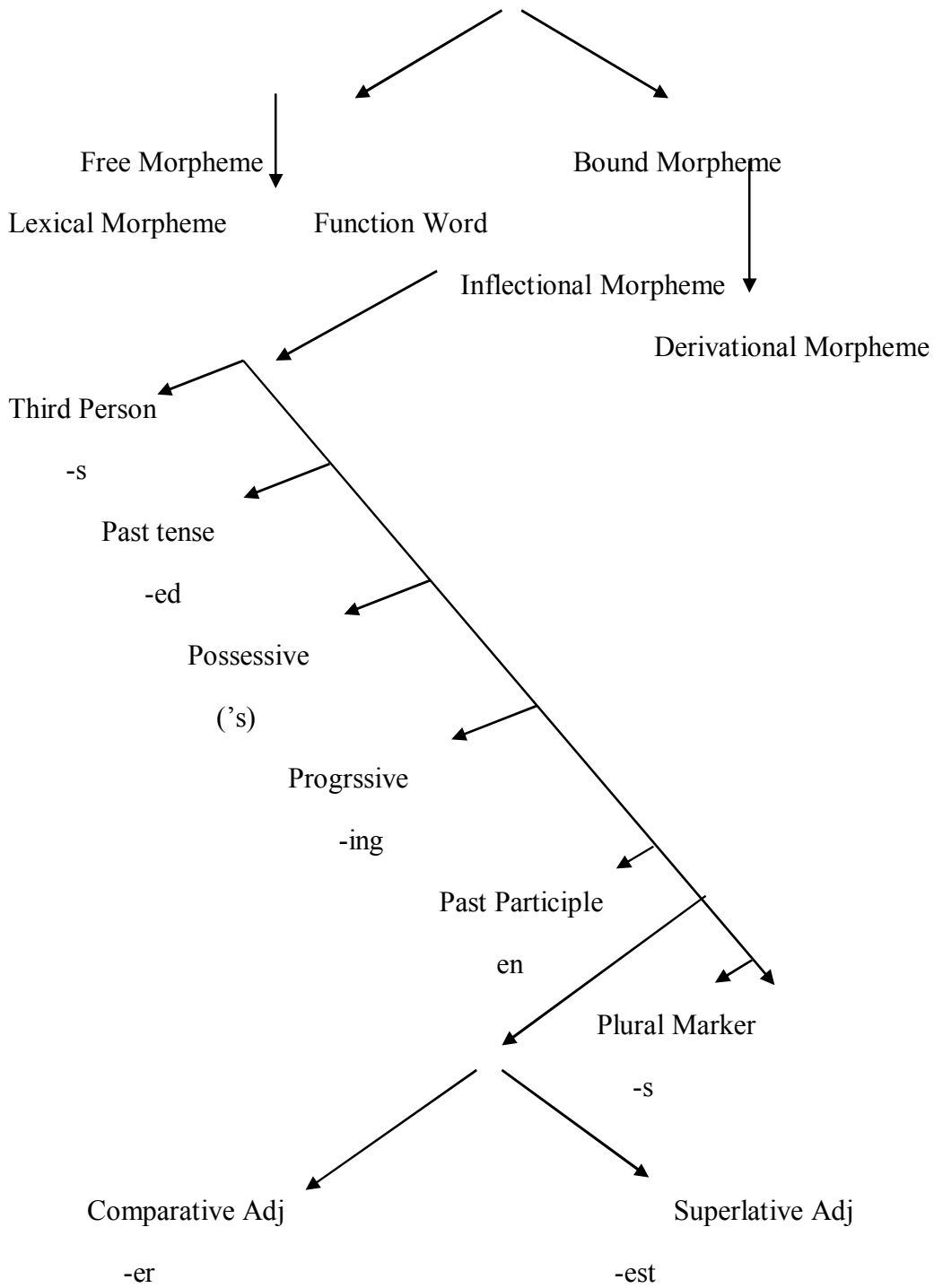
Chair
possessive -'s

Fast
comparative adj or adv -er

Fast
superlative adj or adv -est

The researcher used Godby's theory because Godby has described the English inflectional morpheme clearly, and she also stated the eight inflectional morphemes in English clearly. Her eight inflectional morphemes has helped the researcher to analyze the data of the research. In addition, the researcher thinks that this theory is related to Katamba's theory, thus, the researcher uses Katamba's theory to support Godby's theory.

Diagram 2 Morphemes



English Morphemes Data analysis

In analyzing the data, the researcher has two rules; first, he ignores the other kinds of errors (e.g.) the derivational morphemes errors or grammatical errors, which occur in the data because the focus of this study is only on the errors in the inflectional morphemes. For example, “my name was Ahmed” this is an incorrect sentence, but it has not been included in the analysis, though counted as a correct sentence, because there is no indication that this sentence contains the inflectional morphemes. Second, in one sentence there can be more than one error of inflectional morphemes .In this case, the researcher only had analyzed one error, which belongs to the analyzed category, and analysis of other errors could be done according to the suitable category.

Overgeneralization

Before starting to analyze the data , the researcher noted that there was no error identified in overgeneralization in progressive and superlative adjective or adjective adverb.

Overgeneralization in third person singular present

In the data, the students did not use the third singular person correctly. The researcher found several incorrect occurrences of third singular present that appeared in the students’ sentences. Here is an example of the overgeneralization of third singular:

*It can makes me terrify.

It can make me terrify.

The researcher found that the students often overgeneralize the use of the third

person singular as in the above example overgeneralization of third person – ending. They should not attach –s after the verb make after the model can. Instead, they attached it.

Overgeneralization in past tense

The researcher found some incorrect sentences in the use of past tense of the inflectional morphemes. Here is the example:

*But we had to decided first.

But we had to decide first.

The researcher noticed that most errors have occurred in this part, because the students overgeneralized the use of past form (-ed) to the present form.

Overgeneralization in progressive

There were incorrect uses of progressive –ing that were identified in this study, mostly in the formation of questions. Besides, it also occurred in the use of ‘to’ infinitive form. Here is the example:

* I liked to eating my breakfast early.

I like to eat my breakfast early.

Overgeneralization in past participle

The researcher identified incorrect sentences when using the past participle, but the sentences sounded correct. Consider the example below:

*My daughter got a fever since two days ago.

My daughter has got a fever since two days ago.

Overgeneralization in plural marker

The students sometime overgeneralize the use of plural dealing with the rule in

forming the singular form of another. Here is the example:

Do you have some hobbies? Another hobbies?
Do you have some hobbies? Another hobby?

Overgeneralization in comparative adjective or adverb

There were not any inflectional morpheme error identified in comparative adjective or adverb in this study.

Transfer

The researcher identified only one kind of transfer error in the data that was transferred into superlative adjectives or adverbs.

Transfer in superlatives, adjectives or adverbs

The researcher found out and analyzed only one type of superlative adjective morphemes in this study. Here is the example;

*my mother is the most great woman.
My mother is the greatest woman.
The researcher noticed that the student transferred the rule directly from Arabic into English language .

Omission

The researcher did not identify the error of omission in progressive, comparative adjectives or adverbs and superlative adjectives or adverbs.

Omission in third person singular

In using third singular present, the students seem to have difficulties, because most of the incorrect use in third singular present is in omission. Consider the example below:

*My mother get cold and also fever.
My mother gets a cold and also a fever
Many incorrect use of third person singular present form have been identified in this study. The students who wrote this sentence, have omitted the required suffix 's' that sentences needed to fulfill the rule of third person singular present form.

Omission in past tense

The researcher found out some incorrect sentences in this type of error. The students omitted the inflectional morpheme '-ed', see the example below:

*I try that, but it did not work.
I tried that, but it did not work

Omission in past participle

In this type of error, the researcher found out only two errors, as listed below:

*Hey, you have already interview me.
Hey, you have already interviewed me.
The students tended to ignore the need to change the verb form into the third form (past participle e.g. interview-interviewed) in forming the present perfect tense by omitting '-ed' in each verb.

Omission in plural marker

In using plural '-s/ es', the students seem to find difficulties; they made many error sentences in this part .All of

the errors that occurred in this study can be exemplified by the following examples:

*I am sorry to hear that, let me take some aspirin.

I am sorry to hear that, let me take some aspirins.

When countable nouns such as aspirin, friend, singer, etc, follow quantifiers such as a lot of, many, some, etc, they should be added by '-s or es'. Nevertheless, the students sometimes omitted the inflectional morphemes '-s or es' as the plural marker.

Omission in the possessive

It seems that some of the students made many errors in writing sentences that indicate possession. Here are wrong

Table 1

The order in arranged descending from the highest percentage of errors

examples of possession and their corrections.

*You should try my mother food.

You should try my mother's food.

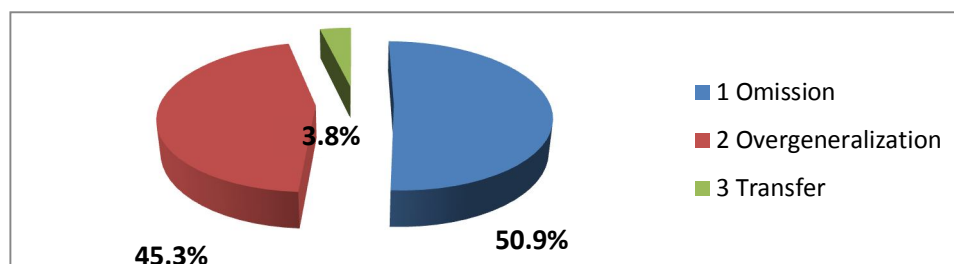
All the errors in possessive belong to the omission type of error. The students tend to omit the required apostrophe ('s). Even though, there was only one kind of error, but they made it very often so that numbers of that omission was high.

In order to obtain good results of the data analysis , the researcher summarized the results in a table , which indicates the number and percentage of the incorrect sentences , based on the three errors and eight inflectional morphemes, as shown in the table below:

sentences to the lowest percentage of errors sentences. (See pie chart).

Types of errors	Inflectional Morphemes	Frequency	Percentage
Over-generalization	Third person singular	8	15.1%
	Past tense	7	13.2%
	Progressive	7	13.2%
	Past participle	3	5.7%
	Plural Marker	2	3.8%
	Possessive	0	0%
	Comparative adjective	0	0%
	Superlative adjective	0	0%
Sub Total		27	50.9%
Transfer	Third person singular	7	13.2%
	Past tense	6	11.32%
	Progressive	5	9.5%
	Past participle	3	5.7%
	Plural Marker	2	3.8%
	Possessive	1	1.9%
	Comparative adjective	0	0%
	Superlative adjective	0	0%
Sub Total		24	45.3%
Omission	Third person singular	2	3.8%
	Past tense	0	0%
	Progressive	0	0%
	Past participle	0	0%
	Plural Marker	0	0%
	Possessive	0	0%
	Comparative adjective	0	0%
	Superlative adjective	2	3.8%
Sub Total		53	100%

Percentage of findings



Notes:

1- Omission (50.9%)

2-Overgeneralization (45.3%)

3-Transfer (3.8%)

Findings:

The number of all error sentences is 53 out of 75 sentences in the data. It means that the occurrence of error is 15% out of the total sentences. From those 53 errors sentences found in the data, 27 error sentences belong to omission error (50.9%) 24 error sentences belong to over generalization error (45.3%) , and 2 error sentences belong to transfer error (3.8%) .As can be seen in the pie chart, omission error is of the highest rate in error based on the data (50.9%). From the table, the researcher noticed that omission in plural occurred 8 times, thus, it became the most frequent error sentences (15.1%) in the data. 7 of error sentences are omission of third person singular present, and it is 13.2% of the total error. The total error in omission in past tense is of the same percentage of omission in third person singular present (13.2%). There were 3 error sentences of omission in past tense (5.7%). Omission in past participle was in the fifth rank, the error sentences occurred 2 times (3.8%) and in the sixth, seventh and eighth ranks are omission in progressive, omission in comparative adjective or adverb and omission in superlative adjective or adverb. As zero % of error sentence occur here.If omission error is in the first rank, then overgeneralization is in the second rank. The total errors of overgeneralization was 24 sentences. It is only slightly less than the omission error. The overgeneralization in past participle is on the highest rank of generalization error. It occurred seven times (13.2%) and overgeneralization in

past tense is on the second rank as 6 error sentences occurred (11.3%). Of the third rank, is overgeneralization in the third person singular present because there are 5 error sentences (9.5%) occurred. Immediate after that is overgeneralization in progressive as 3 error sentences occurred (5.7%); and overgeneralization in plural maker is in the fifth rank, as two error sentences (1.9%) occurred in comparative adjective adverb. Thus, only overgeneralization occurs in overgeneralization error. Transfer error indicates the lowest tendency to produce error. Differ from omission error or overgeneralization error, which is only slightly different in amount, the findings of transfer error here is quite far different from those two types of errors. The only type of error that occurs here is transfer in superlative adjective or adverb, as two error sentences (3.8%) are found. So, the error sentences in transfer in past tense, transfer in progressive, transfer in past participle, transfer in plural maker, transfer in possessive , and transfer in comparative adjective or adverb are not found. Omission is on the highest rank; however it contains fewer variants compared to the overgeneralization error. There are six types of errors that occur in overgeneralization error. These are overgeneralization in third person singular present , in past tense, in progressive, in past participle , in plural maker, and in comparative adjective or adverb. Yet, there are only five types of errors that occurred in omission error.

These are omission in third person singular present, in past tense, in past participle, in plural and in possessive.

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