Overgeneralization: A Corpus-based Analysis of L2 Leaners' Essays in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Emitting errors in writing process is unavoidable. Immense errors of second language learners have always been identified in learning process. Concern of present study is to identify and analyze the errors caused by overgeneralization within target language particularly. Qualitative method was applied to collect the data based on composition of written essays of forty-two female English foreign language learners. The data analysis was made quantitatively through Gass &Slinker's (2008) model of error analysis and later on a classification of errors was quantified into different grammatical categories. The results were presented quantitatively into frequency and percentage. Overgeneralization of the English language rules was quite evident in the essays of higher secondary level students of English. The study suggests that English foreign language learners should be offered such syllabus which could help them in avoiding overgeneralization of rules within the target language.

Keywords: Overgeneralization, Errors,Second Language Acquisition,Frequent overgeneralized errors

1. Introduction

Instructors toil a lot in correcting learners' errors, hence incorrect piece of compositions have never been thought as a natural outcome of learning process rather stamped as an indication of failure (Haider, 2012).The ever-present language from politics to the priorities of personal living,is English(Pennycook, 2014).Proficiency in English language is something complex and conscious where errors are inevitable.Competency in English language is not actually construction of some key-rules or of dictionary makers rather it arises from a learner's work for getting command on language. Cataloging of errors based on their stems was made by (Corder, 1974).First categoryis '*interlingual errors'*, caused by first language interference. Second type of errors are caused by interference of second or target language bygeneralizing or overgeneralizing certain rules. Such errors are known as '*Intralingual errors*. While third type is based on inappropriateteachings and Corder categorized them as teacher induced errors.The present study stems its foundation on such intralingual errors which are produced by overgeneralization particularly.Overgeneralization is an unconscious and self-created but a systematic pattern to overlap the rule over the items which have a decided set pattern to appear. It has also denounced the idea of learning the language by imitation. To learn a language is something creative and errors are part of it. Creative essence of human language is carefully displayed in overgeneralization which means Rules are carefully implemented over the items that has no bonding with it. Overgeneralization is only one aspect of error analysis in which learners try to get language competence by forming their own rules (Ellis, 1994). The involvement of psychological process and creative nature which causes

overgeneralization, is not in doubt in learning process. Learners often over generalize the rule by adding past tense suffix-ed like 'we *holded the baby rabbit (Pinker,1995). The Present research tries to investigate how English foreign language learners overextend the rules to the items that don't require it.

Over-grammatical forms are an example of overgeneralization in a sentence like making an addition of suffix-ed with irregular past forms i.e. 'buyed', 'setted' and 'goed'.Such errors like 'comed' and 'foots' are the most common errors that would stay as long as the language development is being studied for learning purpose (Marcus, et al., 2006)

To avoid overgeneralization, apt application of rules demands apt knowledge of rules otherwise the expression would be unidiomatic, unnatural and foreign. The learners commit mistakes in the application of irregular forms of verbs; preposition, and same or irregular forms of singular and plural nouns.

Error analysis is the only way which could help in finding out the problematic areas that demand enforcement in teaching process (Corder,1967). Under this context, the present research investigates how and why different grammatical parts of speech were overgeneralized most by the English foreign language learners. This study is quite in line with the above given justifications. The present research has been set out with an objective to find out the overextension of rules over the items which don't require it.

1.2 Research Question

As described previously, errors of overgeneralization within target language wereprobed by the researcher particularly and worked over the following question:

1. How have the rules of English language been overgeneralized by the second language learnersandinwhichcategory overgeneralization occurs most?

2. Literature Review

The question how and why language develops into a particular manner? is the question investigated by researchers and Generative language development also focused on it. (Kanacorn Sermsook, 2017) collectedthe compositions of 104 students of grade 12 and analyzed the sentences. They found out the reasons of errors and identified four major sources of errors: interlingual interference, intralingual interference, poor knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and carelessness.Katiya et al (2015) collected corpus of Chemistry first year students' essays to analyze errors. The learners made errors of punctuation, syntactic, spelling and misapplication of grammatical rules. He came to the conclusion that all these errors were caused by the interference of mother tongue. A compelling explicit overgeneralization found to be involved in the development of mother tongue and second language acquisition. The studies on the development of languages in human minds demonstrated that learners use grammatical morphemes to overgeneralize in the developmental procedure of first and second language

(Ellis,1994;Gass& Selinker, 2008). This overgeneralization might affect the semantic, syntactic, morphological and behavioral aspects.

Overgeneralization and cognitive science are intertwined.Parallel Distributing Processing (PDP) or neutral networks approach, a strong representation of the Runelhart-McClelland model, worked over the hypothesis that overgeneralization occurs most when the percentage of past forms boosts up, having foundations on cognitive process that is strongly interconnected with the neuron link units. This model is a support for PDP and an objection to rule based approaches (McClelland, Runelhart & Hinton, 1986). Pinker and Prince (1988) challenged it in psychological grounds in relation to the quality and quantity of data required for testing of data. They denounced it on the grounds that it lacks quantitative reports in the developmental course of overgeneralization. Hence, this phenomenon has nothing to do with psychological process.

Errors were also identified by Darus and Subramaniam(2009) in 72 essays of Malay students and he came to the conclusion that the student made frequent errors in singular/plural forms, subject-verb agreements, verb tense, prepositions, word order and word choice. Learners overgeneralized the rules, made simplification and ignored the rules restrictions. Overgeneralization was also noted by (Kim, 2001) after examining the errors. Kim revealed that most of the errors were caused by overgeneralization and there was only a small portion which was caused by the interference of first language. Farooq (1998) categorized two types of errors in the composition of Upper-Japanese learners and resulted thatmost of the sources of errors are overgeneralization and transfer. The work of (Richards, 1974) denoted a clear mark that learners create structures on the behalf of their incomplete knowledge by overgeneralizing the rules.Previously, researchers worked overthequestion how and why language develops into a set or particular certain fashion and set their pattern of research on the mental process working in children and adults to mark the overgeneralization in various categories in the process of learning the language. But the present research is concerned with intralingual features merely to find how language rules are overgeneralized and which category is overgeneralized most. Contrary to the above researches the present studyis just interested in female adults and their performance in written English essays.

3. Research objectives
The aims of present study are:
  ➢ Finding the errors of overgeneralization within target language, is the focus of study.

- ➢ Secondly, how do the target language learners overgeneralize the rules? is also the concern of the author.
- ➢ Thirdly, analyzing the reasons of overgeneralization is the objective ofpresent work.

4. Research Methodology

Collecting the data for error analysis, caused by overgeneralization in target language particularly was mainly focused. Qualitative method was used to collect the dataand Gass and Selinker's (2008) model of error analysis was applied as a tool to analyze the errors. Finally, the results were presented quantitatively into frequency and percentage.

4.1 Population and Sample

Higher secondary level students of final year were the focused population. Non-random-a convenient sampling procedure was followed for participants' selection fromGovernment Degree college, Marghazar, Gujrat.Pakistan. The participants of study were comprised offorty-two female studentsofsame age group (16-18) years and it had already been assumed that they had proficiency and command in English grammatical patterns, features and rules.

4.2 Instrumentation

The instrumentation used to find the answer of research question was written essays in English by 42 participants of Government Degree college, Marghazar, Gujrat. The topics were general but argumentative in nature. The participants of study had to write an essay. The written essays comprised 150-200 words within time limitation of 40 minutes.

4.3 Data collection procedure

Participants of study, belonging to same age and gender were given a test, comprising four essays (Women place in society, A Trip to Hill Station, my aim in life, Cricket Match) and the students had the choice to attempt only one of them. The participants of study were unaware that their written essays would go for any investigation.The students were given instructions to write any one of the given essays comprising 150-200 words within a time limitation of 40 minutes. The participants of study did their task within given time limitation. At last, all the forty- two essays were collected for analysis.

4.3 Data analysis procedure

The present research proposed Gass and Selinker's (2008) model of error analysis, based on six steps: (i) collect data (It is mostly done with written data but oral data can be a base of analysis as well); (ii) identify errors (It is related to the domain of an error e.g. wrong use of verb form or sequence of word order and so on); (iii) classify errors (It is categorization of a linguistic form whether it is an error of inflectional verb or wrong use of irregular verb); (iv) quantify errors (It is about numbers. How many errors belong to a certain class?); (v) analyze source (It is related to transfer of knowledge whether it is interlingual or intralingual); (vi) remediate (Based on the type and frequency of occurrence pedagogical implication is carried out). So according to Gass & Selinker (2008) model of error

analysis, firstly, essay of each participant of study was collected. Secondly, the nature of all the errors was identified by using observation. Thirdly, all the errors were categorized according to their nature. Fourthly, all the errors belonging to each category were quantified into frequency. Fifthly, the researcher exemplified and described errors to explain the particular characteristics that induced the target language learners to overgeneralize the rules. Sixthly, remediation was given by telling the correct use of overgeneralized forms for overcoming the errors. The statistics used for data analysis was frequency and percentage.
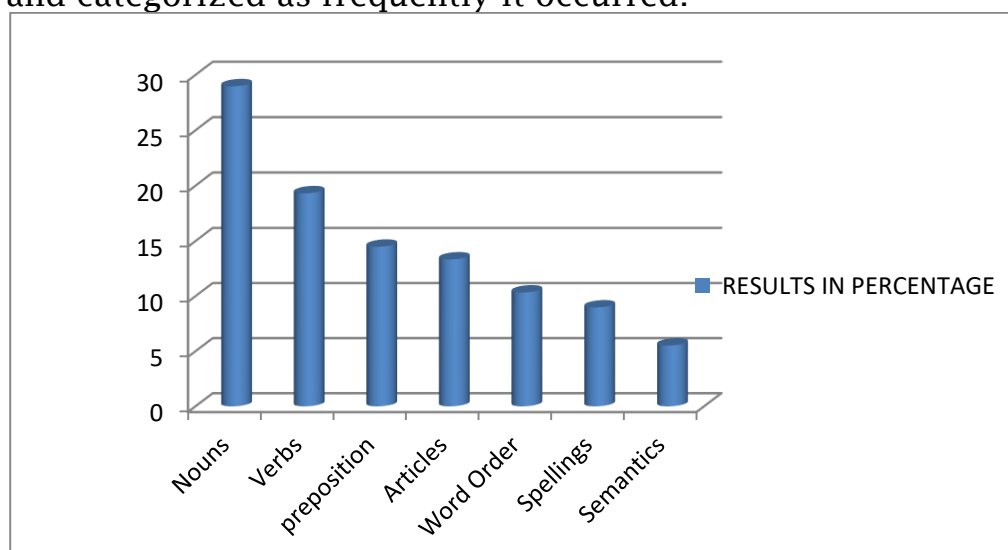
5. Results

To be able to examine, quantitatively, errors of overgeneralization within target language, a classification of errors has been made. This classification has been drawn in table 1.

Table 1:

Data of results, as described in table 1, indicated that errors of

Serial	Types of Errors	Frequency of	Percentage of
1.	Nouns	42	28.97%
2.	Verbs	28	19.31%
3.	Prepositions	21	14.48%
4.	Articles	18	13.33%
5.	Word order	15	10.33%
6.	Spellings	13	8.97%
7.	Semantics	8	5.52%
	Total	145	100.00%

nouns (28.97%) were most frequent overgeneralized errors. Then errors of verb (19.31%), preposition (14.48%), article (13.33%), word order (10.33%), spellings (8.97%) and semantics (5.52%) took place and categorized as frequently it occurred.

Figure 1: The results were drawn in the above chart to show the difference explicitly.

5.1 Errors of Nouns

Overgeneralization, in errors of nouns occurred by target language learners while dealing with singular and plural nouns as the learners overextended the rule by adding -s or –es with the signal plurals. The students could not extricatesingular or signal plural.

Error Identification	Error Correction
1.Heaven lies under mother's *feets	1. Heaven lies under mother's feet.
2.A mother breeds her*childs.	2.A mother breeds her children.
3.A lot of *peopleswere enjoying the weather.	3. A lot of people were enjoying the weather.

5.2 Errors of Verb

Overgeneralization, most commonly by target language learners wasexplicated in verbs by making regular past forms of irregular past forms of verb. Overgeneralization had been observedin verb semantic equivalent and verb inflections often.

Error identification	Error correction
1. In Faisal Mosque we *sayedour Fajar prayer.	1. In Faisal Mosque we offered our Fajar prayer.
2. In K.P.K, a woman cannot *journey alone.	2. In K.P.K, a woman cannot travel alone.
3. Most of Pakistani women are not highly *studied.	3. Most of Pakistani women are not highly educated.
4. Women *has to serve every member of their family.	4. Women have to serve every member of their family.

5.3 Errors of Preposition

Errors of overgeneralization in case of preposition wereexpounded by applying it on a misfit place or considering it equivalent to the actual preposition.

Error identification	Error correction
1. Aim motivates oneself to achieve *to his goal	1. Aim motivates oneself to achieve his goal
2. I want to be *in expert in IT.	2. I want to be an expert in IT.
3. Being a Muslim, I am not afraid *from anything.	3. Being a Muslim, I am not afraid of anything.
4. We reached*in Islamabad at 8.00 AM.	4. We reached Islamabad at 8.00 AM.

5.4 Errors of Article

Hence, overgeneralization appearedwhen the learners inserted an article inappropriately, not realizingthe requirement of rule according to the nature of a feature.

Error identification	Error correction
1. I am sure to become *a IT expert after four years.	1. I am sure to become an IT expert after four years.
2.*The women are respected in our society.	2. Women are respected in our society.

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3. After *a hour, the match started again.	3. After an hour, the match started again.
4. We enjoyed in *the Muree.	4. We enjoyed in Muree.

5.5 Errors of Word Order

Inappropriate agreements of subject/verb, subject/verb/object, and adjective/noun effectedthe writings of second language learners. Absurd knowledge of rulesthen predictive behavior in the application of signal plurals, words and grammatical rules persuaded learners to overgeneralize the grammatical rules.

Error identification	Error correction
1. People *feels afraid of black cats.	1. People feel afraid of black cats.
2. IT is *the hour of need.	2. IT is the need of hour.
3. Aim forces to be honest, *work hard and punctual.	3. Aim forces to be honest, hardworking and punctual.
4. The poor natives in Muree toil hard for*the needs to meetin their life.	4. The poor natives in Muree toil hardto meet the needs of their life.

5.6 Errors of Spellings

Conventional accepted formation of words through letters of a language are named as spellings. Phonetic representation of the words create confusion and overgeneralization occurs. A s long sound of '*o'*was overgeneralized in the word *ball* and */i:/*sound was overgeneralized in the word **preach**. In the same way, learners ignored some letters as they don't give prominent sound.

Error identification	Error correction
1. The *bollhit the boundary line.	1. The ball hit the boundary line.
2. It is the duty of every Muslim to*preechIslam.	2. It is the duty of every Muslim to preach Islam.
3.*Disipline is very important to get success in life.	3. Discipline is very important to get success in life.
4. Our *collage arranged a trip.	4. Our college arranged a trip.

5.7 Errors of Semantics

In this category, word equivalents or similar phonological representation (which require a particular environment to adjust)enforced overgeneralization.

Error identification	Error correction
1. Only *illegible people can progress in the field of IT.	1. Only eligible people can progress in the field of IT.
2. Success and *unsuccess move side by side in life.	2. Success and failure move side by side in life.
	(continued)
3. I would go *outside the country for higher education.	3. I would go abroad for higher education.

4. We took *swings on chairlift.	4. We took a ride on chairlift

6. Discussion

The outcomes of present research explicitly revealed that partial knowledge of target language caused overgeneralization within the substance and structure of target language.As present study, based on the written essays of 42 target language learners, found that oblivious concepts of grammatical features and patterns persuaded English foreign language learners to overgeneralize the rules by inserting a feature where it did not require or by changing word into inappropriate forms and by putting unsuitable substitutions. The outcomes explicitly revealed that partial knowledge of target language caused overgeneralization within the substance and structure of target language. It was found that oblivious concepts of grammatical features and patterns persuaded English foreign language learners to overgeneralize the rules by inserting a feature where it did not require or by changing word into inappropriate forms and by putting unsuitable substitutions. This thing not only affected the writing skill of English foreign language learners but also caused decline in performance.

In addition, the analysis proved that learners overgeneralized the forms when they had strong proportion of regular forms stored in their mind. Errors of nouns caused decline in the performance most. As in errors of verbs students made an addition of's-es' with signal plurals because they had strong conception in mind that singular word can be changed in plural forms by just adding 's-es'. While making verb forms, students added suffixes -ed to make past forms of irregular verbs. They have poor knowledge about the use of verb inflection. So, they added's'in simple present tense with first person pronoun. The analysis proved that students were not aware of the correct application of article and preposition. They changed common nouns into proper noun by adding 'the' and also could not distinguish where to apply 'a' or 'an'. In the case of preposition, students applied preposition which they considered equivalent to actual ones or where there was no need of preposition.

In spellings the students produced words on phonological bases. In the errors of word order the students were found confused about the right placement of words. In the errors of semantics, they added prefixes like un- to make negatives of those features which did not require it. The learners produced their own word to convey the message. So, the present research is strongly in line with the past researches (Ellis, 1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008;Kazemian and Hashemi, 2014)). The findings of present analysis proved that partial knowledge of target language caused interference, by overgeneralizing the rules and learners inserted inappropriate substitutes and created unsuitable forms, within the target language.

Further, the analysis pointed out the problem areas of English foreign language learners. It highlighted the weaknesses of the students and guided the researcher how to guide the learners for

overcoming the weaknesses.The present study can be used in improving teaching and learning process by offering such material to study which could strongly discern among different applied rules and forms.

7. Results

In present research, English foreign language learners overgeneralized signal plural nouns mostly by using past experiences, knowledge and other structures while producing the target language. In the same run, the learners also made regular past forms correctly but the decline in writing skill was noticed by making irregular past forms of verb. The researcher found that this overgeneralization was mainly caused by interference of limited knowledge as Kim (2001) discovered in his work. The researchers who searched over the question how and why language develops into a certain fashion came to the conclusion that learners overgeneralize the rules of first and target language while learning the language. So, in present study it was noticed that the learners faced decline in performance because they tried to convey the message by overgeneralizing the rules in above mentioned categories. The outcomes presented by some other researches (Ellis,1994; Gass & Selinker, 2008) who worked over the mental process working in children and adults while learning a language, induced the results that children overgeneralize grammatical morphemes while in adults this overgeneralization occurs on different categories like lexical, syntactical, morphological and behavioral. Contrary to the researches of Ellis (1994); Gass and Selinker (2008) the present research was just interested in female adults committing errors in written English essays and focused over the overgeneralization of noun, verb, article, preposition, spellings, semantics and word order.It was also noted that the learners mostly committed errors of noun. Therefore, overgeneralization of nouns caused severe decline in their performance.

Conclusion

Considering all the procedure, the outcomes of research suggested that errors of overgeneralization were caused by oblivious set up of rules in learners' mind. While making errors, they remained unable to discern the particular attributes of an existing stems by making or creating something which was unsuitable to aparticular criterion. The finding of results explicitly revealed that learners added -s with the signal plurals, inserted preposition with no requirement, had little knowledge about the correct placement of articles, wrote single inflectional verb with a plural noun and etc.

In addition, the study also observed some considerable limitations. First, the participants of study were only females. Therefore, we could generalize the rules if both sexes would be included. Secondly, the participants of study were only those who were enrolled inMarghazar college Gujrat, Pakistan who were studying under a preparatory program. Concludingly, it will be

unjustified to generalize the results, on all the English foreign language learners.

Nevertheless, the findings of present research recommend for further research: first to analyze errors of overgeneralization by English foreign language learners of undergraduate students involving both genders.Secondly, investigating interlingual and intralingual errors caused by overgeneralization by those English foreign language learners who are not enrolled in any institution. Last but not least,it was really interesting to examine the errors of overgeneralization produced by English foreign language learners. The errors really looked like pun of words.

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