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HUMANITIES

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE GRAMMATICAL MISTAKES MADE BY ADVANCED EFL WRITERS

ABSTRACT

Limited studies have appeared on the grammatical mistakes by EFL writers at advanced level. Thus, the current study aims at investigating the grammatical mistakes made by advanced English as a foreign language (EFL) writers in their written products. The sample group of the study consisted of 75 learners; a background questionnaire and the paragraphs they produced were used for data collection. The results indicate that advanced EFL learners make rare mistakes about the tenses, verbs, adjectives, nouns, adverbs, conjunctions, articles, relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and prepositions. It was concluded that EFL teachers should give more detailed and corrective feedback whereas learners should increase the quantity of their products and use computerized software to decrease the level of their mistakes.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Writing, Advanced Learner, Grammatical Mistakes

İNGİLİZCEYİ YABANCI DİL OLARAK ÖĞRENEN İLERİ DÜZEY ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN DİLBİLGİSİ HATALARI ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME

ÖZET

İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen ileri düzeydeki öğrencilerin yaptıkları garamatik hatalarla ilgili çalışmalar oldukça sınırlıdır. Bu nedenle, mevcut çalışma, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen ileri düzeydeki öğrencilerin yazılı ürünlerinde yaptıkları hataları incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın örneklem grubu, 75 öğrenciden oluşmuş; bir arkaplan anketi ile öğrenciler tarafından yazılmış paragraflar veri toplamak için kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, öğrencilerin zamanlar, fiiller, sıfatlar, zarflar, bağlaçlar, belirteçler, sıfat cümlecikleri, zarf cümlecikleri ve edatlar ile ilgili nadiren de olsa hatalar yaptıklarını göstermiştir. Yapılan hataların daha da azalatılması için, yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin, daha detaylı ve yapıcı geribildirimler vermeleri, öğrencilerin yazılı ürünlerinin miktarını artırmaları ve bilgisayar yazılımları Kullanmaları Önerilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce, Yazma, İleri Düzey Öğrencisi, Dilbilgisi Hataları



1. INTRODUCTION (GİRİŞ)

Writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) is considered as one of the productive skills that allow learners to discover what learners produce or not. In addition, it allows EFL learners to demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency implicitly and explicitly. Speaking more specifically, writing is not only a critical language skill for EFL learners' academic achievement but also a means of developing fluency and accuracy in the areas of grammar and vocabulary [1].

Grammar, in a general sense, defined as the area of knowledge that includes the body of the rules and regulations that governs the use of a language, constitutes a significant knowledge area in writing as it is directly related to fluent and accurate writing in EFL. Nevertheless, EFL teachers and learners mainly complain about grammatical mistakes in writing pieces. That is, the foreign language learning process cannot be separated from creating mistakes, and it is also possible to learn from grammatical mistakes if a teacher corrects them during and after the writing process. However, what is significant here is that EFL teachers should have a high level of awareness of grammatical mistakes that learners make in their writing papers. Speaking more specifically, teachers should have the knowledge of the types of grammatical mistakes. Thus, the current paper aims to examine and categorize the grammatical mistakes of EFL learners.

According to the related literature, one of the reasons of making grammatical mistakes is the low proficiency of students in grammar. Nevertheless, it is not possible to state that advanced EFL learners do not make grammatical mistakes during their writing process. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the grammatical mistakes among advanced EFL writers as little attention has been paid to the related issue, and the research activities mostly focused on the theories of composition and writing process. As an example, Cannady [2] emphasizes that the task of writing teachers is to convince the reluctant developmental writer to see writing not just in terms of grammatical correctness whereas Slaughter [3] believes that revision encompasses to eliminate mechanical and grammatical errors. Moreover, Marting [4] claims that correctness is valued over content under the old pedagogy. Last of all, although Daniel [5] notes that while schools stopped teaching any grammatical system some time ago, grammatical mistakes still appear in written pieces. Before presenting the literature review, the difference between the terms of *mistake* and error should be mentioned. To begin with, Yulianti [6] emphasizes that an error is different from a mistake. For her [6], a mistake is a performance error whereas an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. She also clearly differentiates a mistake from an error by stating that a mistake is a slip that a learner can self-correct whereas an error is what a learner cannot. In conclusion, it can be stated that the clear distinction between an error and a mistake is that a mistake is just a slip that the learner forgets the right form while an error is a deviation that is made by the learner because s/he does not know the rule and will make it repetitively.

One of the research areas in relation to the grammatical mistakes made by EFL learners is the types of mistakes. To begin with, Boyd and Buchanan [7] revealed that ESL techniques could also present the advantages in teaching certain points of grammar through drill, in helping students structure, in developing their writing by providing transitions from drills to composition, and in correcting their papers by marking their errors with generic rather than specific terms. In another example, Belanger [8] examined the reasons of the errors and



tried to find out an answer for these by asking whether patterns existed in the kinds and amounts of writing errors students made or whether teachers followed any sort of pattern in correcting these errors. Findings obtained from the study revealed that students made 3.870 English usage errors, of which one-third were corrected, and that no one manageable set of editorial usage rules could be used to improve significantly the writing of all of the students. In addition, the study established that the teacher followed no pattern for error correction. Furthermore, Black [9] applied a practicum that was designed to improve and expand the writing skills of 13 fifth-grade students placed in an upper elementary school Alternative Education Program. The data indicated that that students' use of adjectives and adverbs increased. Moreover, Liou [10] noted that a computerized grammar checker was developed to assist teachers of English as a second language in editing students' compositions. The first stage of the development consisted of an error analysis of 125 writing samples collected from students. This analysis served as the basis for constructing taxonomy of mistakes and ranking the categories according to the frequency of occurrence and comprehensibility. Results indicated that the subjects committed more errors in expository than in creative writing, and that variation in essay length did not correlate with error quantity. In another example, Arani [11] conducted a study that aimed to describe differences in performance by non-native learners of English to determine communicative value of grammatical errors. In addition, Besnard [12] listed the 50 most common writing errors made by college students of French, and found that the mistakes included spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. In addition, Izzo [13] stated that Japanese university EFL students had problems with structuring English sentences, especially complex and compound sentences. The study reviewed undergraduate EFL students' writings from three Japanese universities to identify common sentence structure aberrations. It was concluded that Japanese university level EFL writers needed more instruction and writing assignments that involved the use of coordinating conjunctions such as and and but, the subordinating conjunction because, and the introductory phrase for example. Last, Quible [14] mentioned that two types of sentence-level writing problems were often observed in students' writing. The results revealed that the mistakes were in relation to subject-verb agreement errors, comma splices, and beginning a sentence with an expletive structure.

2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE (ÇALIŞMANIN ÖNEMİ)

As a result, the current study was conducted under the guidance of three factors. First, grammatical mistakes should be examined and categorized to develop strategies with regard to the Turkish EFL learners as no study was found on the mistakes made by Turkish learners. Second, as studies mainly focused on the grammatical mistakes made by EFL learners at the level of low proficiency, the issue should be investigated in terms of advanced EFL students. Third, as the related literature demonstrated, the studies mainly focused on errors rather than mistakes. With these concerns in mind, the paper has one research question: What are the grammatical mistakes that advanced EFL writers make?

3. METHOD (YÖNTEM)

Before contacting the participants, a research proposal was presented to the head of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at Necatibey Education Faculty of Balikesir University. The proposal included both purposes and methodology of the study. Then,



the research ethics and purposes of the study were explained to the students and the teachers. They were all informed before, after and during the research process on the purposes and outputs of the study. Finally, the participants stated that they voluntarily participated in the study.

3.1. Participants (Katılımcılar)

The sample group in the study consisted of 75 students studying in the ELT Department of the Necatibey Education Faculty at Balikesir University in Balikesir, Turkey. The students were chosen as the sample group because they had taken writing courses. Of the participants, 57 (76%) were female students whereas 18 (24%) students were male. The gender distribution in the group was directly related to the general reflection of the overall population in the department. Their mean age was 19 falling within the age range of 18 and 22. All of the participants were the students with an advanced level of English. They all previously studied English during their high school education before they attended the ELT department. Additionally, in the study, three instructors of English had the responsibility of the examination of the papers. The instructors were the English teachers who taught writing at the department, and experienced in feedback strategies.

3.2. Tools (Araçlar)

The data collection instruments consisted of a background questionnaire interrogating participants' age and gender, and the paragraphs produced by the students. In the study, the participants' sample paragraphs written in certain paragraph methods and techniques such as listing specific details, classification, using examples, definition, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and problem solution were examined to obtain the grammatical mistakes by three writing instructors.

3.3. Procedure (Uygulama)

The research used a three-step procedure: instruction, data collection, and data analysis.

- The content of writing instruction which lasted 12 weeks throughout the first semester of the academic year of 2009-2010 consisted of two periods. In the first period, sentence structures such as simple, complex and compound sentences, capitalization, punctuation, the elements of paragraph development, unity, coherence, signal words, brainstorming and paragraph outlining were introduced. The second period included paragraph development methods, such as listing specific details, classification, using examples, definition, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and problem solution. During this process, first, the students brainstormed, outlined, and produced their first drafts. Then, they gave and received peer feedback using different scale for each writing method and technique. After revisions and corrections, they produced their second drafts in accordance with their revision plans. Next, the students received teacher feedback from three writing teachers.
- Data collection: To provide triangulation and to obtain validity of the data, three teachers examined the papers. During the teacher feedback, the teachers examined the pieces produced in accordance with the methods and techniques of listing specific details, classification, using examples, definition, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and problem solution, and also



noted the grammatical mistakes in students' pieces separately from each other.

• Data Analysis: During the process, the teachers examined 525 paragraphs produced by the students. The data obtained were analyzed independently by each teacher. First, the teachers classified the grammatical mistakes in the samples, and prepared three separate tables indicating the numbers and frequencies of each type of mistake. After comparing the tables, it was observed that the findings in each table seemed similar in terms of mistake types, numbers, and frequencies. In other words, the triangulation indicated the data validity. Then, the data from the three tables were combined and presented in a detailed table (Appendix 1).

4. FINDINGS (BULGULAR)

The findings presented in Appendix 1 indicate that the mistakes made by advanced EFL writers focus on a variety of fields such as tenses, verbs, adjectives, nouns, adverbs, conjunctions, articles, relative clauses, adverbial clauses and prepositions. To begin with, EFL writers make some mistakes about the usage of tenses. One of the mistakes is related to the confusion of past and present forms of the verbs as indicated in the examples below:

- Last year the system is different.
- It leds to permanent damages to vital organs such as brain and liver.
- An earthquake makes the ground move or shake.
- We pass through while the red light was lighting.

The results show that EFL writers make some mistakes about the usage of verbs in five categories. According to the findings given in Table 1, first, EFL writers have difficulty in using the verb to be whereas they confuse the verb and noun form of a word in the second group. As an example, instead of using the verb form of the word affect, they use the noun form of it and this causes the confusion. The third mistake group includes the misuse of gerunds and infinitives while the fourth one consists of the usage of passive forms of the verbs. Lastly, there exist some mistakes in relation to the contextual misuse of the verbs and adverbs.

(labio i. lillerin kartanimina iliýkin nacatal)			
Туре	Example		
	\checkmark Several kinds of food consume is gained		
Misuse of the verb <i>to</i>	from animals.		
be	\checkmark They afraid of flying.		
De	\checkmark Their physical developments is different.		
	\checkmark These effect the economy.		
Verb and noun confusion	\checkmark Drug addiction also effects social life of		
	a person.		
	\checkmark Students practice by doing homework.		
	\checkmark People should abandon to take alcohol for		
Misuse of gerunds and	their health, money and peace.		
infinitives	✓ People go on to have their habits.		
	\checkmark Safranbolu has many places for visiting.		
Passive forms of the	\checkmark His songs are about 200 and they are still		
verbs	listening all over the world.		
Misuse in context	✓ You're understood wrongly.		

Table 1. Mistakes related to the usage of verbs (Tablo 1. Fiillerin kullanımına ilişkin hatalar)

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Another area is the adjectives about which EFL writers mostly make mistakes that can be categorized into different types such as adjective and meaning confusion, misuse of possessives, determiners and distributives, as indicated in the table below. The other problematic area is that EFL writers make some mistakes related to nouns. The confusion of plural and singular forms and misuse of comparative forms and superlative forms can be regarded as the mistake types in this group, as demonstrated in Table 3.

(Tablo 2. Sifatların kullanımına ilişkin natalar)			
Туре	Example		
Adjective and meaning confusion	 ✓ People can be social. ✓ The Internet makes people asocial and aggressive. 		
Misuse of possessives	✓ It's name is İzmir in Turkish.		
Misuse of determiners	✓ They can't express this feelings.		
Misuse of distributives	 Everyone of the high school students wants to pass the university exam. 		

Table 2. Mistakes related to the usage of adjectives (Tablo 2. Sıfatların kullanımına ilişkin hatalar)

Table 3. Mistakes related to the usage of nouns (Tablo 3. İsimlerin kullanımına ilişkin hatalar)

(labio 5. ibimielin karlanimina ilişkin nacalar)			
Туре	Example		
Confusion of plural and singular forms	 ✓ Scientist are researching ways to predict earthquakes but their prediction are not always accurate. 		
Misuse of comparative forms	\checkmark She seems more old and more tired.		
Misuse of superlative forms	 ✓ This is perhaps biggest threat to mental life. 		

EFL writers also make some mistakes related to adverbs in terms of difficulty in placing correctly them in sentence order as they use in the sentences below. In addition, the mistakes related to *conjunctions* are another grammar topic with which most EFL writers have problems whereas the misuses of indefinite and definite articles stand out in these two groups, as shown in Table 4.

- Because of all these effects, our unique earth becomes worse and worse inevitably as time passes.
- Diabetes is resulted from the resistance of the body to insulin despite pancreas produces more insulin.
- In addition, women perceive the pain intensively because of the right amygdale which is an area of the brain is activated during the pain.

(Tabio 4.Belirleçlerin kullanımına ilişkin natalar)			
Туре	Example		
Misuse of indefinite articles	✓ A individual can't express his feelings.		
Misuse of definite articles	 ✓ Internet has been perhaps the most outstanding innovation. ✓ It's said that it comes from Roman's the goddess of abundance. 		

Table 4. Mistakes related to the usage of articles (Table 4 Belirteclerin kullanımına iliskin batalar)



EFL writers also make some mistakes concerned with relative clauses, the usage of adjective clauses, and prepositions, as indicated in the following tables. An example of the mistake is shown in the following statement.

• Barış Manço was so an active person that he visited 150 different countries.

As for prepositions, EFL writers encounter some difficulties in using prepositions in terms of the misuse of prepositions and verb patterns with prepositions.

Table 5. Mistakes related to the usage of relative clauses (Tablo 5. Sıfat cümleciklerinin kullanımına ilişkin hatalar)

Туре	Example		
Misuse of relative clauses	 ✓ The game is played between two teams which ea has 5 players. ✓ Samsun which it has 6 lakes is a nice city. 		
	4		
Reduction of relative clauses	 ✓ The last type is Gestational Diabetes is caused by glucose intolerance during pregnancy. ✓ Wastage is the most crucial problem the earth 		
	had to struggle for it.		

Table 6. Mistakes related to the usage of prepositions (Tablo 6. Edatların kullanımına ilişkin hatalar)

Туре	Example			
Misuse of	\checkmark It has negative effects to human health.			
prepositions	\checkmark The game is played two teams.			
Verb patterns with prepositions				

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION (SONUÇLAR VE TARTIŞMA)

In the study, it was concluded that EFL writers at advanced level make grammatical mistakes in the use of tenses, verbs, adjectives, nouns, adverbs, conjunctions, articles, relative clauses, adverbial clauses and prepositions. First, as, the most frequent mistakes are related to the verb patterns with prepositions. Second, the EFL learners sometimes confuse the past and present forms of the verbs, misuse the indefinite article and conjunctions. Third, they rarely have some problems with the use of the verb to be verbs, nouns, gerunds, infinitives, relative clauses, definite articles, plural and singular noun forms, adjectives, and contextual use of English grammar. Last of all, they make tolerable amount of mistakes in passive voice, possessives, determiners, distributives, comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, the positions of adverbs, and adverbial clauses.

Below is a summary of the study results. The results of the study indicate that learners, though they are advanced level, make grammatical mistakes as Black [9] suggests that learners make mistakes in the use of adjectives and adverbs. Similarly, in the study, it was also found that EFL learners have some problems about combining the sentences as Izzo [13] notes that they have problems structuring



English sentences, especially complex and compound sentences. Another similar finding to the prior research is that mistakes are in relation to subject-verb agreement errors as found by Quible [14]. As a result, the findings of the previous study demonstrate similar results in relation to the grammatical mistakes made by EFL learners.

Given that advance EFL learners make grammatical mistakes in their writing pieces, some practical recommendations can be noted. First of all, teachers who teach writing and give feedback to their students should have a high level of awareness as Belanger [8] notes that teachers follow no pattern for error correction. In this sense, as Lawley [15] highlights, giving detailed and corrective feedback can decrease the amount of mistakes. Second, students need more writing practice to decrease their mistakes as Black [9] suggests that the more students write, the more they increase the use of adjectives and adverbs. Third, students should be allowed to write creatively in addition to expository writing as Liou [10] finds that learners commit more mistakes in expository than creative writing. Lastly, students should use computer software to decrease the amount of mistakes as Morra and Asis [16] underline that computerized grammar checking will be beneficial to decrease the grammatical mistakes of EFL learners.

As a final note on the limitations of the study, the participants of the study were restricted to 75 students studying English as a foreign language in the ELT Department at Balikesir University, Turkey. Moreover, the scope of the study was confined to the data obtained from these participants' written pieces by three writing instructors. Finally, further research should focus on the feedback strategies specifically focused on the grammatical mistakes in EFL writters' written products.

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APPENDIX (EK)

Appendix 1. Grammatical mistakes made by EFL writers (Ek 1. İngilizceyi yabancı bir dil olarak öğrenenlerin yaptıkları dilbilgisi hataları)

Mistake Type	Incorrect Form	amples Correct Form	Frequency	Percent
Confusion of	<u>.</u>	lenses		
	Last year the	Tast waar swatom was		
past and	system is	Last year system <i>was</i> different.	5	8.9
present forms	different.	different.		
of the verbs		Tl		
		Verbs	1	Г
	Several kinds of	Several kinds of food		
Misuse of the	food we consume is	we consume <i>are</i> gained	3	5.4
verb <i>to be</i>	gained from	from animals.		
	animals.			
Verb and noun	These effect the	These <i>affect</i> the	3	5.4
confusion	economy.	economy.	-	
	People should	People should abandon		
Misuse of	abandon to take	taking alcohol for		
gerunds and	alcohol for their	their health, money	3	5.4
infinitives	health, money and	and peace.		
	peace.	and peace.		
	His songs are about	His songs are about		
Passive forms	200 and they are	200 and they are still	1	1 0
of the verbs	still listening all	listened all over the	T	1.8
	over the world.	world.		
Misuse in	You're understood		-	1.0
context	wrongly.	You misunderstood.	1	1.8
		jectives		
Adjective and	-			
meaning	People can be	People can be	2	3.6
confusion	social.	sociable.	-	0.0
Misuse of	It's name is İzmir	<i>Its</i> name is İzmir in		
possessives	in Turkish.	Turkish	1	1.8
Misuse of	They can't express	They can't express		
determiners	this feelings.	these feelings.	1	1.8
decerminerb	Everyone of the	enebe recrings.		
	high school	Every high school		
Misuse of	students wants to	student wants to pass	1	1.8
distributives	pass the university	the university exam.	-	1.0
		the university exam.		
	exam.	Nouns		
	Scientist are			
		Scientists are		
Confusion of	researching ways to	researching ways to		
plural and	predict earthquakes	predict eartquakes but	2	3.6
singular forms	but their	their predictions are		
5	prediction are not	not always accurate.		
	always accurate.	-		
Misuse of	She seems more old	She seems <i>older</i> and		
comparative	and more tired.	more tired.	1	1.8
forms				
Misuse of	This is perhaps	This is perhaps the		
superlative	biggest threat to	<i>biggest</i> threat to	1	1.8
forms	mental life.	mental life.		
		dverbs		
	Because of all	Because of all these		
Position of	these effects, our	effects, our unique		
adverbs in a	unique earth	· · ·	1	1.8
	becomes worse and	earth <i>inevitably</i>	1	1.0
sentence	worse inevitably as	becomes worse and		
	time passes.	worse as time passes.		
		junctions		
		-		



	Diabetes is			
Misuse of conjunctions	resulted from the resistance of the body to insulin despite pancreas produces more insulin.	Diabetes is resulted from the resistance of the body to insulin despite the fact that pancreas produces more insulin.	4	7.1
	Aı	rticles		
Misuse of indefinite articles	A individual can't express his feelings.	An individual can't express his feelings.	4	7.1
Misuse of definite articles	Internet has been perhaps the most outstanding innovation.	The Internet has been perhaps the most outstanding innovation.	2	3.6
	Relati	ive clauses		
Misuse of relative clauses	The game is played between two teams which each has 5 players.	The game is played between two teams each of which has 5 players.	3	5.4
Reduction of relative clauses	The last type is Gestational Diabetes is caused by glucose intolerance during pregnancy.	The last type is Gestational Diabetes <i>caused</i> by glucose intolerance during pregnancy.	2	3.6
Adverbial clause of result	Barış Manço was so an active person that he visited 150 different countries.	Barış Manço was <i>such</i> an active person that he visited 150 different countries.	1	1.8
	Prep	positions		
Misuse of prepositions	It has negative effects to human health.	It has negative effects <i>on</i> human health.	4	7.1
Verb patterns with prepositions	Fortune telling is defined the practice of preceding the life through mystical or natural means often for commercial gain.	Fortune telling is defined <i>as</i> the practice of preceding the life through mystical or natural means often for commercial gain.	10	17.9
	Total		56	100