

Common Linguistic Errors in the Writings of Tunisian Third-Year Undergraduates of English: Sources and Possible Remedies

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Abstract

Various types of linguistic errors are a fact of life among learners in the processes of first-language and second-/foreign-language learning. Certain serious errors are made even by proficient native and non-native users of English. In this frame of reference, this study focuses on specific errors, to wit: run-ons, faulty parallelism, misplaced and dangling modifiers, subject-auxiliary inversion in indirect wh-questions, and using the bare infinitive after 'to' as a preposition instead of the gerund. The study aims at investigating and discussing the various causes of these errors and suggesting possible remedies. The subjects of the study were 43 third-year English majors from the Higher Institute of Applied Languages and Computer Science of Béja, Tunisia. The author of the study collected 396 written pieces of work from the participants, namely reading and writing classroom activities and exams during the second semester of the academic year 2018 - 2019. The results of the inquiry revealed that these linguistic inaccuracies are fossilized errors which sprung in no small measure from overgeneralization, lack or absence of formal instruction, and deficient teaching. In the light of what lies at the root of the issue, it has been put forward that both effective formal teaching and constant autonomous learning with the object of assisting learners in avoiding those errors and all the other types of errors in their different writings can really be of considerable help with linguistic accuracy and academic writing proficiency.

Keywords: linguistic errors; third-year English majors; sources; remedies

1. Introduction

The diverse types of learner errors are common during the process of first-language acquisition and second-/foreign-language learning. Extensive research has, therefore, been conducted in this regard. Much focus has been put on particular errors, such as mechanical, phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and syntactic, which – due to a variety of reasons – non-native users of English as a foreign/ second language frequently make. However, insufficient attention has been devoted to a number of other high-frequency linguistic errors which even many proficient native and non-native users of English still make in their different writings. Therefore, the present study zeroes in on such errors in terms of their sources and the possible remedies. For starters, let us shed some light on these linguistic errors.

Subject-auxiliary inversion, also termed subject-operator inversion, is a type of syntactic movement in particular structures in which an auxiliary verb is displaced to sentence-initial position. Examples of such structures include direct wh-question and direct yes-no questions. Below are examples:

Can you do it without your parents' help?

Where did you spend your last summer holidays?

For particular reasons which will be examined later in this study, many non-native learners of English as a foreign or second language use inversion erroneously in indirect wh-questions. They, for instance, say and write: **Tell me where did you spend your last summer holidays?*

Aside from this, such learners are not familiar with the correct use of parallelism, also called parallel structure. This is a stylistic tool and a syntactic structure consisting in using identical forms of words, multi-word phrases, and clauses in sentences. One important advantage of parallel structure is that it contributes to organizing ideas and clarifying them, which can help with comprehension. Here are examples of parallel structure:

"If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward" (King Jr., 1960, pp. 10 -11).

“The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries” (Winston, 1945).

Contrariwise, faulty parallelism, that is also referred to as non-parallel structure, lies in not using the same grammatical forms of individual words, multi-word phrases, and clauses, which is likely to result in lack of organization and clarity of ideas, thus making it probably confusing and difficult for a reader or a listener to make out the different messages of a reading or listening material.

Another common linguistic inaccuracy committed by many non-native learners and native speakers of English is run-on sentences, also termed run-ons. As defined by Sanford (1979, p. 169), “A run-on sentence is two or more sentences [that are] incorrectly joined.” According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 464), a run-on sentence, also called fused sentence is “[A]n error in punctuation where one or more full stops are omitted between sentences or independent clauses.” They illustrate the definition by the following example:

**Mrs. Lee is a great teacher she always explains things very clearly.*

The authors explain that the above run-on sentence can be corrected by “[rewriting it] as two independent clauses separated by a comma followed by the coordinating [conjunction] *and*.”

Mrs. Lee is a great teacher, and she always explains things very clearly.

The above sentence could be better corrected by dividing it into two independent clauses with a comma, followed by the subordinating conjunction *because*, and not by the coordinating conjunction *and*: *Mrs. Lee is a great teacher, because she always explains things very clearly.*

It could be affirmed that Neumeister’s (2011) definition of a run-on is precise. She defines a run-on as “Two complete thoughts that are run together with no adequate sign given to mark the break between them,” and she categorizes run-ons into two types: fused sentences and comma splices. Fused sentences “have no punctuation at all to mark the break between the thoughts. [T]hey are fused or joined together as if they were only one thought.” But a comma splice is a run-on whose thoughts are connected or “spliced” only by a comma, which “is not enough to connect two complete thoughts.” An appropriate punctuation mark is, therefore, needed to connect the thoughts. Below are examples of a fused sentence and a comma splice by the author. The examples have been slightly modified.

**Rosa decided to stop smoking she was afraid of lung cancer.* (Fused sentence)

**Rosa decided to stop smoking, she was afraid of lung cancer.* (Comma splice)

The above sentence can be corrected to: *Rosa decided to stop smoking, because she was afraid of lung cancer.*

Misplaced and dangling modifiers are equally prevalent in many students’ written pieces of work. As defined by Sanford (1979, pp. 173 - 174), “A misplaced modifier is a phrase or a clause that seems to modify the wrong person or thing,” whereas a dangling modifier is a phrase or a clause that does not modify anything in the rest of the sentence. Below are examples by the author:

. **Asking help from her friend Ollie, the car could be fixed by Vera.* (Misplaced modifier)

The author expounds on the above sentence asserting that as such, it “seems to say that the car is asking for help. [...]. The problem arises from the placement of the [modifier] *Asking help from her friend Ollie*. It should be next to *Vera*, because *Vera* is the person who is doing the asking.” So, this sentence should be corrected to: *Asking help from her friend Ollie, Vera could fix the car.*

. **Putting in many hours of work, the car finally worked.* (Dangling modifier)

The author explicates that this sentence “seems to say that the car put in many hours of work. It “should say *who* worked.” So, the sentence should be corrected to: *Putting in many hours of work, Ollie and Vera finally got the car to work.*

Using the bare infinitive instead of the gerund after *to* as a preposition, and not as an infinitive particle, in particular grammatical structures is another frequent error among many learners. Here is an example of such an error:

**She devoted her life to help the poor.* This sentence should be corrected to: *She devoted her life to helping the poor.*

In light of what is deliberated above, the study intends to mainly answer the following research questions:

. What are the sources of the aforementioned errors?

. What optimal remedies could be provided to help learners avoid these errors, especially in their writings?

2. Literature Review

There has been a rich vein of literature on the different types of linguistic errors committed by first and foreign/second language learners, their causes, their effects on the learning process, and how they can be treated.

2.1. Types of linguistic inaccuracies

The terms *mistake* and *error* are at times dealt with wrongly as being interchangeable. One should, therefore, be precise and aware of the fact that not any type of linguistic inaccuracy can be reckoned a mistake or an error. To put it plainly, depending on their frequency, the causes of their occurrence, whether the learner can notice them, and whether s/he can correct them on her/his own, linguistic inaccuracies can be categorized into three types: an error, a mistake, and a slip.

Corder (1981, p. 10) and Richards & Schmidt (2002, p. 184) distinguish between an error and a mistake. Corder makes a distinction between inaccuracies of performance and inaccuracies of competence. He refers to the former as mistakes and the latter as errors. Richards and Schmidt assert that both an error and a mistake are linguistic inaccuracies, but the difference between them is that an error is the result of incomplete knowledge, whereas a mistake “is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspect of [performance].” They put it intelligibly stating that

Errors are sometimes classified according to vocabulary (**lexical error**), pronunciation (**phonological error**), grammar (**syntactic error**), misunderstanding a speaker’s intention or meaning (**interpretive error**), production of the wrong communicative effect, e.g. through the faulty use of a speech act or one of the RULES OF SPEAKING (**pragmatic error**).

Edge (1989) could be claimed to be more specific in that regard. He refers to linguistic inaccuracies using the term *mistakes* in a general sense, and classifies them into two broad types: mistakes of meaning and mistakes of form. In respect of mistakes of meaning, the author maintains that the most serious mistake is the one that causes some misunderstanding (p. 2). He illustrates his assertion with the following conversation:

Peter: How long are you here for?

Amira: Two years.

Peter: Wha...! You are already here since two years!

Amira: No, no, I am come yesterday.

Peter: Oh, yester...

Amira: No, no, last week, I mean I came last week.

Edge (ibid. pp. 2-3) explains that the most serious mistake in the above conversation is in Peter’s first question, because it causes misunderstanding. Peter’s question *How long are you here for?* usually refers to the future, and Amira answers it appropriately. The question Peter wanted to ask was *How long have you been here for?* He used the wrong verb form, which caused the misunderstanding. However, although Peter’s use of *since* and Amira’s use of *am come* are surely mistakes, they are not as serious as Peter’s mistake in the first question, because they do not lead to any misunderstanding.

Edge (ibid. pp. 9-11) goes into more details categorizing mistakes of form into three types: a slip, an attempt, and an error. A slip is a small mistake that is due to carelessness or lack of attention, and this is why the learner can self-correct it if s/he is given the chance somehow or other. An attempt is a linguistic inaccuracy which shows that the learner succeeds in conveying a particular meaning, but does not know how to structure it correctly in English as in “*I wish I went my grandmother’s house last summer,*” or which shows that the meaning s/he intends to express or the structure s/he is trying to use is not clear as in “*This, no, really, for always my time, and then I happy.*” An error is the most serious type of mistake, inasmuch as the learner cannot self-correct it even if it has been pointed out.

2.2. Causes of learners’ errors

The common causes of errors made during the processes of first-language and foreign- /second-language learning are examined below.

2.2.1. Interlingual interference

So many authors in the field of second-/foreign-language learning and Error Analysis researchers contend that the most common cause of errors committed by language learners is the mother tongue interference that is also referred to as interlingual interference. In this context, Harmer (2007, p.137) notes that “[It] is widely accepted that there are two distinct sources for the errors which most, if not all, students display.” One of these, as pointed to above, is L1 interference.

The author reports that when the learners' mother tongue and the variety of English they are learning come into contact with each other, there usually occur confusions which result in the learners' making different types of errors in their use of English at the level of pronunciation, grammar, and word usage.

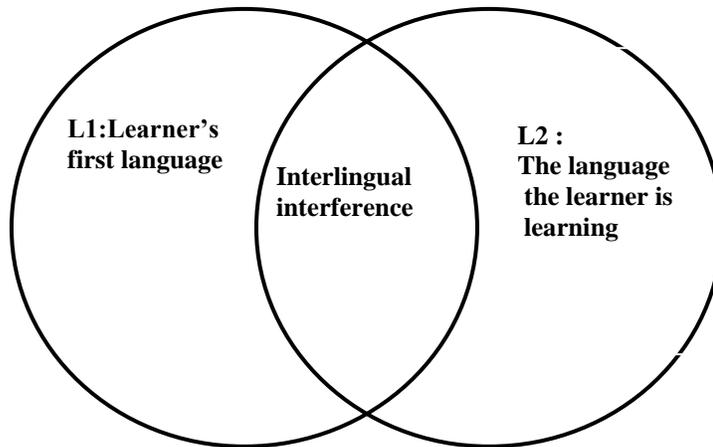


Figure 1: Interlingual interference (Adapted from Corder, 1981)

This phenomenon is also often referred to as language transfer. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 294) explicate that there are two types of transfer: positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer facilitates learning, and may take place in case of true cognates, such as the word *table* which has the same form and meaning in both English and French. Negative transfer, also known as interference, however, consists in using an L1 pattern or rule that results in an error in the target language.

2.2.2. Intralingual interference

According to Richards (1971), intralingual interference “reflects the general characteristics of rule learning, such as a faulty generalisation, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.” A typical manifestation of intralingual interference is thus overgeneralization. By implication, he refers to intralingual errors as the errors that occur because of the ineffective traits of learning, such as faulty application of rules and unawareness of their restrictions (p. 206). In a similar vein, Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 507) state that “Intralingual errors are also known as developmental errors. The claim here is that they are common to all language learners, thereby being part of language development.”

2.2.3. Simplification

As the term suggests, this consists in simplifying the target language rules in one way or another in the process of learning, such as through omission, addition, applying regularization instead of irregularization, etc. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 486), define simplification as:

[The learner's] use of rules which are grammatically (or morphologically /phonologically, etc.) less complex than [target-language rules], often as a result of an [overgeneralization]. For example, a learner may have a single rule for forming the past tense (by adding *-ed* to the verb base) ignoring exceptions and producing incorrect forms such as *brokened, standed*.

Selinker (1974, p. 40) refers to *simplification* as an example of a strategy of second-language learning. However, the accuracy with which one may be able to classify certain examples of *simplification* as strategies of second-language learning could be open to doubt. For example, when a Japanese learner omits an article or utters what should be a plural as a singular, is that *simplification* or is it *language transfer*? It could also be argued that it is a *strategy of communication* which consists in the fact that although the utterance is ungrammatical, the learner has recourse to it just to convey a message which can be understood by a native or a non-native receiver. Johnson and Johnson (1999, p. 304) refer to the reason behind this phenomenon stating that “[S]implification of the target language is a learner strategy employed to make the learning and speaking of the target language easier.”

2.2.4. Overgeneralization

It is the application of a grammatical rule in situations where it is not applicable. This is what Selinker (1972) calls overgeneralization of target language rules.

It is also referred to as over-extension or over-regularization (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, pp. 379 – 380). The authors denote that it is the situation in both first- and second-language learning where “A learner extends the use of a grammatical rule of a linguistic item beyond its accepted uses, generally by making words or structures follow a more regular pattern.” Harmer (2007, p. 138), instances the phenomenon averring that “[A] child who perfectly correctly says *Daddy went, they came*, etc. suddenly starts saying *Daddy goedand they comed*, etc. by reason of his overgeneralising a new rule that he has [subconsciously] learnt.”

2.2.5. Fossilization

Fossilization in the areas of language acquisition and language learning was first used by the American linguist Selinker (1972). As delineated by the author, such a psycholinguistics-related phenomenon consists in “[L]inguistic terms, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular [native language] will tend to keep in their [interlanguage] relative to a particular [target language], no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the [target language]” (p. 215). Canale and Swain (1980) elucidate the phenomenon through referring to one of its possible causes asserting that fossilization is the result of inadequate focus on teaching particular linguistic forms. Johnson and Johnson (1999: 135) put it more plainly defining fossilization as “The phenomenon whereby linguistic items (particularly erroneous ones) become permanent in a learner's [interlanguage].” A common point between Johnson and Johnson's definition of the phenomenon and that of Richards and Schmidt (2002) is the permanence of linguistic inaccuracies. The latter define fossilization as “[A] process which sometimes occurs in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a person speaks or writes a language.” Such a common point between both definitions raises somewhat a controversial query of whether fossilized errors could be eradicated. To put it in a nutshell, Han (2012, p. 4) reports that a number of strands of research have found that formal instruction can expunge learner errors, thus enhancing accuracy and precluding fossilization.

2.2.6. Deficient teaching

Many learners' errors can at times be caused somehow by the teacher, usually without even realizing that s/he has done so. Overcorrection or, as termed by Touchie (1986), hypercorrection on the part of the teacher may be one factor that induces learners to make particular types of errors. He exemplifies this error-inducing factor asserting that “[T]he teacher's insistence that Arab ESL learners produce the phoneme /p/ correctly prompts them to always produce /p/ where the phoneme /b/ is required. Thus, Arab ESL learners say *pirdand pattle*, instead of *bird* and *battle*” (p. 78). Other teaching-related factors that can occasion errors among learners, as reported by Corder (1974), include inappropriate teaching materials, deficiency in the teaching methodology, and the teacher's recourse to the use of overgeneralization or simplification in an attempt to help learners with comprehension.

With reference to Touchie's above point as regards the phonological errors made by Arab ESL learners due to the teacher's overcorrection, it is worthy of note that all Arab learners learn English as a foreign language, not as a second language, and that not all of them make phonological errors as the aforementioned ones. For example, Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan learners of English as a foreign language can perfectly produce the speech sounds /p/ and /v/ although they do not have counterparts in Arabic.

2.3. Attitudes towards learners' linguistic inaccuracies

There have been favorable and unfavorable attitudes towards learners' errors. By and large, there are implicit and explicit negative attitudes towards errors on the part of many of the parties involved in one way or another in the language-teaching-learning process and language acquisition, namely, teachers, researchers, and learners themselves. This is manifest, for instance, in the fact that learners would always like and do their best to use language accurately, be it a mother tongue, a foreign, or a second language. Teachers, in turn, although there is a strong likelihood that their learners' diverse errors can help them somehow or other improve their teaching methodology, would usually like and expect their students to produce language in its written and oral form without making any mistakes or errors.

The most disapproving attitude towards learners' errors is that of Behaviorism, a theory of language learning that was predominant during the 1950s and early 1960s. Such a theory is premised upon the principle of habit formation which is based on drilling, imitation, a stimulus-response association, and reinforcement. Behaviorists affirm that learners' errors are totally unacceptable. They contend that they are an indicator of unsuccessful leaning, which, in turn, is the product of ineffective teaching methodology. In his book *Verbal Behavior*, F.B. Skinner (1957) expounds that if an individual does not

succeed in responding correctly to a certain stimulus, his response ought to be promptly confronted by “a negative audience.” Such an audience penalizes wrong responses with corrections and/or reproof, so that they will not recur.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are a number of different statements about errors which suggest their inevitability and the justification of their benefits. Examples of these are: *To err is human; Mistakes are the stepping stones for learning; You can always learn from your mistakes; He who makes no mistakes never makes anything (English proverb)*. In a similar setting, the English author of short fiction and novels Gaiman (2011) refers to the benefits of mistakes in general maintaining that “[I]f you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world. You are doing things you have never done before, and more importantly, you are doing something.”

2.4. Significance of learners’ errors

Much has been opined for the significance of errors to the language teacher, the language researcher, as well as to the language learner. Where first-language acquisition is concerned, Corder (1967, p. 165) points to errors made by children maintaining that nobody expects a child in the earliest stages of learning his mother tongue to produce forms which adults consider correct or non-deviant. The author postulates that a child’s errors should not normally be deemed at all as such, but they are rather a childish communication which establishes proof of his linguistic development at a particular age. A similar postulate is voiced regarding second-language learning. Indeed, Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 102) and Selinker (1969) assert that errors are important to the language teacher, because they indicate the learner’s progress in language learning. In the same framework, Selinker (1972) maintains that instead of viewing learners’ errors as an indication of failure, the teacher should regard them as a sign of what s/he needs to teach. In respect of the significance of learners’ errors to the researcher, Gass and Selinker (ibid.) report that results of studies on child language acquisition have shown that second-language errors do not reflect faulty imitation. Rather, they are to be reckoned as signs that a learner attempts to impose regularity on the language to which s/he is exposed. They, therefore, are proof of an underlying rule-governed system. In a similar vein, Corder (1967, p. 167) posits that the learners’ errors provide the researcher with “evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the Language.” The author adds that the most important aspect of errors is that they are necessary for the learner himself as they can be deemed to be a device he uses in order to learn. He further affirms that making errors is “a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.”

In this frame of reference, it could be adduced that it is unquestionable that learners cannot learn from their errors without the teacher’s pedagogical expertise. The teacher’s pedagogical expertise lies in particular requisites that can actually prompt and enhance learning from errors. A few of these, among other ones, are efficacious feedback, creating and increasing motivation in learners, and building or boosting their self-confidence. As concerns the teacher’s feedback, Tulis et al. (2016) report that “Mathan and Koedinger (2005) focused on learners’ error-detection and error-correction skills and how these can be supported.” They add that “The authors provide evidence that feedback which allows students to detect, correct, and reflect on their own errors fosters learning at a faster rate, conceptual understanding, and (transfer) performance.”

2.5. Error treatment

By and large, as Mezrigui (2012) argues, in order to make error correction beneficial, it should be borne in mind which errors ought to be corrected, when they ought to be corrected, and how and by whom they ought to be corrected. In this setting, with respect to which type of errors should be corrected, Touchie (1986) suggests the teacher should give priority to correcting the errors affecting the meaning of utterances, high-frequency errors, and the errors related to a particular pedagogical focus.

It is worth noting that attention has been focused far more on treating the errors that impede communication than on the errors which do not. This fact is justifiable by virtue of the actuality that the principal function of language is communication; however, this should never imply underestimating the treatment of the errors that do not hinder communication. These need to be treated earnestly for more than one reason, the major one of which is to avoid the risk of their becoming fossilized.

Apropos of when errors should be corrected, it is strongly recommended not to correct students’ errors on the spot, especially during oral classroom activities and oral exams, so as not to interrupt the flow of the students’ performance and not to intimidate them. Respecting by whom and how errors should be corrected, the teacher should not always be the sole error corrector. S/He ought to initiate the error-correction process with self-correction. As James (1998, p. 240) suggests, the teacher should inform the learner that there is an error, allot her/him some time to discover it, and then ask her/him to

correct it her/himself. James’s suggestion could be supplemented by putting forward that if the student cannot correct her/himself, a peer of hers/his can correct her/him, and should this procedure fail, the teacher should do the correction.

Nonetheless, it could be held that this error-correction technique can work effectively with elementary- and secondary-school learners, particularly in the matter of mistakes or errors made during oral activities. However, regarding errors made in written pieces of work or written exams, especially by tertiary-level language majors, it could be maintained that such errors should be treated explicitly via one way or another by teachers and supervisors of Master’s dissertations and doctoral theses, because such students are expected and required to write accurate English.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context of the study

The study was conducted in a Tunisian context, more precisely at the Higher Institute of Applied Languages and Computer Science of Béja, University of Jendouba. As noted above, the study delves into particular common linguistic errors made by third-year English majors, namely run-ons, faulty parallelism, misplaced and dangling modifiers, auxiliary-subject inversion in indirect questions, and using the bare infinitive after the preposition *to* instead of the gerund.

3.2. Research tools

As noted earlier, the research tools of the study are 396 written reading and writing classroom activities and written exams collected from the subjects during the first semester of the academic year 2018 – 2019.

3.3. Participants

The participants of the study, as cited earlier, were forty-three third-year university students majoring in English during the first term of the academic year 2018 – 2019. Some features of the participants’ profile are described in the table below.

Table 1: Features of the participants’ profile

Age	The participants’ ages range between 21 and 25
Period over which they had been studying English	Without taking into account repeaters, they had been studying English for 11 years (4 years in basic education, 4 years in secondary education, and 3 years in higher education).
Subjects they were studying in English at university during the academic year 2018 – 2019	Subjects related to English linguistics, American literature, British literature, American civilization, and British civilization
University degree they were studying for	Bachelor’s Degree in the English Language, Literature, and Civilization

3.4. Significance of the study

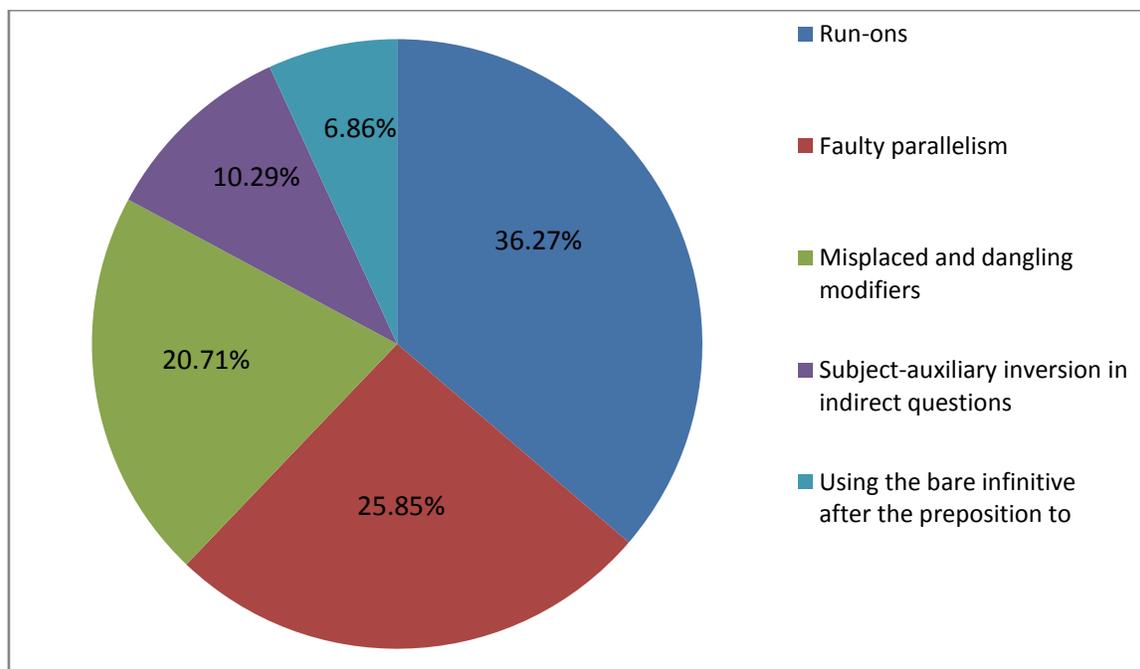
As respects its significance to the participants and other undergraduate English majors, this study can benefit them, especially in case they intend to do a Master’s degree. Since they are expected to produce a well-written dissertation in terms of linguistic accuracy and good writing style, the study can help them in that regard. Its possible significance to native and non-native advanced users of the language is that it can serve as a catalyst that contributes to improving their academic writing.

4. Results and Discussion

In the participants’ pieces of writing, many errors of diverse types have been found, to wit: mechanical, lexical, grammatical, and syntactic, but as cited earlier and shown in the table below, focus in this study has been placed on run-ons, faulty parallelism, misplaced and dangling modifiers, subject-auxiliary inversion in indirect questions, and using the bare infinitive after the preposition *to* instead of the gerund. The number of errors and the percentage are displayed in the table in order of frequency.

Table 2: Statistics on the participants' errors, examples, and corrections

Linguistic errors	Number of errors out of 758	Percentage of errors	Examples of students' errors and corrections
Run-ons	275	36.27 %	*Many children drop out of school, their parents cannot afford their school supplies. Correction: Many children drop out of school, because their parents cannot afford their school supplies.
Faulty parallelism	196	25.85%	*Every child has the right to registration to birth, a decent education, and being healthy. Correction: Every child has the right to registration to birth, a decent education, and good health.
Misplaced and dangling modifiers	157	20.71%	. *Living away from city centers, no job opportunities can be offered to them. (Misplaced modifier) Correction: Living away from city centers, they cannot be offered any job opportunities. * Having been working all day long, no reward was received. (Dangling modifier) Correction: Although she had been working all day long, she received no reward.
Subject-auxiliary inversion in indirect questions	78	10.29%	. *Let's see to what extent is the author's standpoint justifiable? Correction: Let us see to what extent the author's standpoint is justifiable.
Using the bare infinitive after the preposition <i>to</i>	52	06.86%	*Many women devote their lives to work for their families. Correction: Many women devote their lives to working for their families.

**Figure 2: Percentage of errors**

As shown above in table 2, the total number of errors found in the students' pieces of writing is 758. The error of the highest frequency and with a percentage of 36.27 %, as demonstrated in table 2 and figure 1, is run-on, followed by faulty parallelism (25.85%), misplaced and dangling modifiers (20.71%), subject-auxiliary inversion in indirect questions (10.29), and using the bare infinitive instead of the gerund after the preposition 'to' (6.86%).

What is at the bottom of run-ons, relying on a personal teaching experience, is the students' unfamiliarity with the correct use of punctuation marks and lack of familiarity with sentence connectors, both of which are due to absence or dearth of effective teaching.

In this context, I asked my students several times whether they had been taught the use of punctuation marks and sentence connectors, and all of them answered in the negative concerning punctuation marks, whereas regarding sentence connectors, they affirmed that they had been taught them in secondary school, but not adequately.

Faulty parallelisms, also termed parallel-structure errors as well as misplaced and dangling modifiers proceed from the same principal cause. What lies at the root of such errors is absence of formal instruction. To date, parallel structures as well as misplaced and dangling modifiers have been included neither in the writing course syllabus, nor in the grammar course syllabus of any level of tertiary education. What is also more than likely to be behind the prevalence of parallel-structure errors in the students' writings is the actuality that such errors are often not easy to detect, especially on the part of so many non-native teachers for more scores than one, one of which is that they normally are not grammatical errors in the full sense of the term, and aside from this, they do not usually affect meaning. In spite of this fact, faulty parallelisms should not be underestimated. De facto, as they are one aspect of academic language, and given that they can contribute to comprehension through making ideas organized and clear, as noted in the Introduction, parallelisms should be adequately taught formally.

The same aforementioned reason could equally be behind the high frequency of misplaced modifiers in the subjects' writings. In point of fact, in certain sentences, misplaced modifiers – like faulty parallelisms – may not be easily spotted either, particularly in case the meaning of the utterance is intelligible from the context. Here is an example that could back up such a claim: *Having been absent for a long time, his boss dismissed him.* Although this sentence contains a misplaced modifier, in that it is followed by the wrong referent, i.e., *his boss*, its meaning is actually comprehensible. It is normally clear that it was the employee who had been absent for a long time, and it was the boss, i.e., the employer who did the dismissal. Nonetheless, in respect of dangling modifiers, as they every so often seem to modify nothing in the sentence, they can cause unintelligibility and confusion. Here is an example taken from a student's composition that could illustrate this assertion: **Sparing no effort, the project was a real success.*

A manifest source of using the bare infinitive instead of the gerund after the preposition 'to' is overgeneralization, which is in all likelihood due to deficient teaching. According to what the students reported, an instance of deficient teaching consists in their previous teachers' instructing them that the form of the verb after *to* is the bare infinitive without explaining the difference between *to* as an infinitive marker – after which the bare infinitive should be used, as in: *In the United Kingdom, it is obligatory to drive on the left side of the road* – and *to* as a preposition after which the gerund should be used, as in: *He is accustomed to driving in foggy weather.*

The other error which equally stems from overgeneralization is subject-auxiliary inversion in indirect questions. Undoubtedly, it is the *wh*-question word that makes students use subject-auxiliary inversion in indirect questions and put a question mark at the end of the sentence as is the case for direct questions.

All in all, the errors on which this study focuses proceed directly or indirectly from the inadequacy or absence of effective formal instruction. Therefore, in view of this fact, and as such linguistic inaccuracies are committed even by so many native speakers and advanced non-native users of English, they are deemed to be fossilized errors. Below are examples of errors made by proficient native and non-native users of the language.

. **I still do not know what will I teach? I have not received my timetables yet?* (Wrong subject-auxiliary inversion – Error made by a non-native university teacher of English.)

Correction: *I still do not know what I will teach. I have not received my timetables yet.*

Or: *I still do not know what I will teach; I have not received my timetables yet.*

Or: *I still do not know what I will teach, because I have not received my timetables yet.*

. ** I am sorry for the belated reply, I didn't know the deadline was so close.* (Run-on: comma splice – Error made by a non-native university teacher of English.)

Correction: *I am sorry for the belated reply; I didn't know the deadline was so close.*

. ** As one of the scholars in this field, we hope you will be interested in the special issue to convey your ideas, intellect and experience.* (Misplaced modifier – Error made by a native speaker of English who served as editorial assistant of an academic journal.)

Correction: *We hope you, as one of the scholars in this field, will be interested in the special issue to convey your ideas, intellect and experience.*

The query at issue, in this setting, is how to help students avoid the errors which are the subject of this study and other fossilized errors.

Avoiding those linguistic errors, especially in the learners' writings rests unquestionably not only with the teacher, but it also falls to the learners themselves and any other user of the language who commits them.

The structures in which students make those errors should be included in the grammar or syntax course curriculum, and in order to further assist learners in avoiding run-ons, punctuation should be included in the writing curriculum. All should be taught in class effectively, and for the sake of focusing more attention on them on the part of students, they ought to be examined on them. Aside from this, it is noteworthy that as concerns the treatment of learners' errors, the teacher ought to focus not only on the errors that hinder communication and those of the highest frequency, but also on all types of errors, so as to eschew fossilization.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has focused upon five linguistic errors which the subjects of the study and even quite a large number of native and non-native proficient users of English make in their various writings. The principal sources of such errors are overgeneralization, lack or absence of formal instruction, and deficient teaching. Hence, taking into account their main causes, and on account of the fact that they are committed even by native and non-native proficient users of the language, those errors are reckoned to be fossilized. Accordingly, due to the actuality that the conventions of the writing skill are typified by linguistic accuracy and rhetorical organization, adequate formal instruction that aims at helping English majors to steer clear of all the types of errors is really necessary.

On the other hand, it may be worthy of note that although no one is perfect, and by implication errors are inevitable, certain errors are inexcusable, especially in case they are committed by language majors of a high education level, or by native or non-native users of English who are regarded as proficient in the language. For instance, it is intolerable that third-year undergraduates majoring in English use the present participle instead of the bare infinitive after modal auxiliaries, or that graduates of English use the bare infinitive instead of the gerund after 'to' as a preposition in particular grammatical constructions. One should, therefore, do their best to always err on the side of linguistic accuracy, particularly when using English in its written form.

Considering the above concluding notes, the author of the study offers the following recommendations:

- . Learners of English as a first, second and foreign language, especially advanced ones, should be conscious of and sensitized to the necessity of autonomous learning; ergo, they should not confine their learning of English to what they are taught in the traditional academic setting, in that the teacher cannot teach all that should be taught at times due to a number of objective reasons, as time constraints and the obligation to cover all the content of course syllabi. In this frame of reference, constant reading of and listening to a wide variety of Standard English material can really help significantly with linguistic accuracy, fluency in productive skills, and the ability to write academic English;
- . Curriculum designers in collaboration with teachers should every now and again improve curricula on the basis of the learners' needs and the various errors they make in their writings;
- . Taking into account learners' errors, teachers ought not to always stick to teaching only the content of curricula; all types of learners' errors should be dealt with through effective formal instruction and other ways that can actually help avoid them.

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