

## THE SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH CONCORD

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the types and causes of errors in learning the English concord among Indonesian students of English. The errors would be focused on the students' interlingual (mother tongue) as well as intralingual (learning strategies) interference. The data were all collected from the students at Satya Wacana Christian University, Indonesia. Two research questions were answered: 1) between interlingual and intralingual errors, which one did the participants make more in learning English concord? 2) Among intralingual errors, which source of errors was the most evident? Fifteen students (n = 15) participated in this study. In regard to the data collection and analysis, I used the steps suggested by Corder (1974, in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). The results of this study suggest that the intralingual errors were more significant than interlingual ones in the acquisition of the concord. The results were in line with some of the previous findings found by Bataineh (2005), Chan (2004), Duskova (1983), Lim (2003), and Richards (1983). They also supported the claim in the field of SLA that acquisition of a foreign language is determined by the nature of the language that the learners are learning, rather than through contrast between the learners' first language and the target language.

**Key words:** error analysis, intralingual, interlingual.

For many years scholars have been concerned with errors in learning a foreign language. For instance, Wardhaugh (1983) suggests an approach to study learners' errors called the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH). In his article *The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis*, he proposes two versions of CAH, a strong version and a weak version. Though he confesses that the strong version is quite unrealistic and difficult to carry out, he believes that it is possible to contrast linguistic systems of two languages in order to predict the difficulties which may appear in learning a foreign language and to develop teaching materials that can help learners overcome these difficulties. Unlike its strong one, the weak version of CAH does not men-

tion anything about prediction of difficulties but rather urge the linguist or teacher “to use the best linguistic knowledge available to account for observed difficulties in second language learning” (Wardhaugh, 1983, p. 10).

However, many research studies later have found that this approach has several weaknesses. For example, the prediction of target language difficulties that CA has claimed turns out to be either uninformative (teachers have already known these errors before) or inaccurate, i.e. many of the errors that CA has predicted do not occur but some errors which are not predicted in fact occur (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; James, 1998). It is also found that differences between languages (the first and target language) do not necessarily lead to significant learning difficulties (Chan, 2004; Odlin, 1989; Richards, 1983). For instance, a study on errors made by Spanish learners studying English has shown that less than five percent of the errors were only due to the interference of the learners’ native language (Ellis, 1997).

Unlike CAH, which merely explained the similarities and differences between languages, another approach called Error Analysis (EA) focuses more on how to carefully investigate errors made by speakers of the first language attempting to express themselves in the target language (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1971 in Lim, 2003). Many error analysts believe that errors appear not only due to differences between the first and target languages but other causes as well. For example, according to Ellis (1997) many learners make overgeneralization errors, such as *eated* in place of *ate*, because they try to make the task of learning and using L2 simpler. Stenson (1983) also explains that learners sometimes produce induced errors as a result of teacher’s faulty explanation or misleading exercises.

Many studies on EA have been done in various countries (e.g. Bataineh, 2005; Chan, 2004; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Dulay & Burt, 1974; Duskova, 1983, Lim, 2003, Odlin, 1989; Richards, 1983; Salaberry, 1999; Wolfersberger, 2003). Dulay and Burt (1974) as cited by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) studied intralingual and developmental errors to Spanish speaking children. The study surprisingly showed that the interlingual errors accounted only less than 5 percents, while most of the errors were developmental ones. The result of the study indicated, “L2 acquisition is primarily developmental process similar to L1 acquisition” (p. 69). Therefore, making errors should be viewed as a necessary condition in learning process.

Richards (1983) also carried out a similar study to speakers of Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, French, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese, and major Indian and West African languages. The study suggested that intralingual errors reflected

the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply. On the other hand, developmental errors illustrated the learners attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language from their limited experience in the classroom or textbook.

In recent years Bataineh (2005), Chan (2004), or Lim (2003) also have done similar studies. Lim (2003) for instance found that the acquisition of the simple present tense among Malay learners was much influenced by intralingual factors, such as the rules governing the use of the tense, other related tenses or verb forms, rather than the learners' mother tongue. This finding was not much different from those found by Chan (2004) with Hong Kong Chinese learners or by Bataineh (2005) with Jordanian undergraduate EFL students. Chan (2004) who investigated the evidence of syntactic transfer from Cantonese to English found that syntactic transfer occurred more among learners of lower proficiency levels and less among high-proficiency learners. Furthermore, Bataineh (2005) who tried to identify the kinds of errors in the use of the indefinite article also came to a similar conclusion. She reported that even though juniors and seniors wrote the compositions twice as long, their errors were 20% and 23% less than those made by the freshmen and 34% and 40% less than those made by the sophomores respectively. The result of the study also showed that the influence of the learners' native language was minimal. Instead, the majority of errors occurred due to the results of developmental factors and common learning processes, such as overgeneralization or simplification.

There are two research questions that will be answered in this study: (1) Between interlingual and intralingual errors, which one do the participants make more in learning English concord? (2) Among the intralingual errors, which source of errors is the most evident?

## **METHOD**

The participants of this research were fifteen Structure II students studying at the Faculty of Language and Literature, Satya Wacana Christian University, Indonesia in the first semester of the academic year 2005/2006. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old and included nine males and six females. With regard to nationality, language background, educational level and age, the participants could be considered homogeneous.

The first data collection was carried out through experimental elicitation (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). Here the participants were asked to do a test that focused on displaying usage of a specific linguistic form (i.e. English concord). The second data collection was done through individual interviews. The interviews were recorded and done in the participants' native language (Indonesian) so that the problems of communication could be avoided. Here the participants were showed their erroneous answers and asked for their reasons for producing such answers. From this, the source of learners' errors could be identified. Finally, after the interviews had finished, the recorded data were transcribed for further analysis.

In this research grammaticality (not acceptability) served as a criterion for distinguishing the participants' correct answers from the erroneous ones. From the point of view of grammar, a certain answer was considered erroneous, if it breached the rule of the code (Corder, 1971 in James, 1998). In addition to grammaticality, in this research absolute errors (instead of dispreferred forms) was also used to determine the participants' errors so that subjective judgments of acceptability could be avoided (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). By using both grammaticality and absolute errors as criteria for all parts (1, 2, and 3) of the test, one single correct answer for each test item could be determined.

The analysis of the participants' errors in the English concord would be done using the steps suggested by Corder (1974) in Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005). The steps are as follows: (1) collection of a sample of learner language, (2) identification of errors, (3) description of errors, and (4) explanation of errors. After all the data had been collected and identified, a linguistic analysis of the participants' errors was carried out. The aim of this analysis was to classify the errors based on two different sources: interlingual (the participants' mother tongue) and intralingual (their learning strategies). According to James (1998), the strategies involve (1) false analogy (a kind of over-generalization), (2) misanalysis, (3) incomplete rule application (a kind of under-generalization), (4) exploiting redundancy, (5) overlooking co-occurrence restrictions, (6) hypercorrection, and (7) system simplification.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

After all of the tests had been corrected and the relevant data had been selected based on the purpose of the study, it was found that there were 201 wrong answers. In regard to the first research question "Between interlingual and intralingual errors, which one do the participants make more in learning English con-

cord?”, the finding showed that the participants made more intralingual errors than interlingual ones. Out of 201 wrong answers, 30 or 14.93% belonged to mistakes (neither intralingual nor interlingual), 24 or 11.94% were found to be interlingual errors, and the rest of 147 or 73.13% were intralingual ones. The result supports some previous findings (e.g. Bataineh, 2005; Chan, 2004; Duskova, 1983; Lim, 2003; Richards, 1983) that intralingual interference was more evident than the interlingual interference.

In regard to mistakes, there are two ways of distinguishing mistakes from errors (Ellis & Barkuizen, 2005). First, we should consult the learners. If they are able to self-correct the deviant, then it is a mistake. However, when they are unable to do it, then it is an error. The second one is to check whether the learners alternate between the erroneous form and the correct target-language form. If they consistently make the same ungrammatical form, it indicates a lack of knowledge, so it is an error. However, if they sometimes can supply the correct form but on other occasions they cannot, this would show that they have the knowledge of correct form and are just slipping up, therefore it is a mistake. For example, when one of the participants was shown a question *The sun and the moon cast \_\_\_ light in all directions* and was asked why he answered *its*, he soon realized the mistake he had made and was independently able to produce the correct answer. Another participant, on the other hands, alternated between the erroneous and correct target-language form. For instance, *Each penny, nickel, dime, and quarter \*are counted carefully by the bank teller*. The participant gave a wrong answer but in other three similar questions related to *each (of) + noun* construction, she managed to answer them correctly.

There were 24 errors (11.94%) that could be classified as interlingual. These interlingual errors appeared because of the negative interference from the participants' native language (Indonesian). Almost in all cases the participants translated the test items into Indonesian without making necessary adjustments and used the results of the translation to cope with the problems of concord in English. As a result, the interference from the Indonesian language occurred. For example, *Half of the money \*belong to you*. Unlike English, the Indonesian language is only familiar with countable nouns (singular and plural) and not uncountable ones. Thus, in Indonesian *money* regardless of its amount is generally considered plural. Interlingual errors also occurred in the determiners *each* and *every*. These two determiners are usually translated into Indonesian as *setiap*, such as *setiap orang* (each person or everybody) or *setiap rumah* (each house or every house). In Indonesian *setiap* usually indicates that the speaker is referring to all members of a group or all parts of

something and not only some of them. Consequently, in *Every woman should have a right to \_\_\_ own body*, several participants answered using pronoun *their*.

James (1998) explains that not all interference led to negative transfer but a positive one as well. "There are also occasions where learners have L1 patterns that could be advantageously transferred to the L2" (p. 180). For example, in *A number of good movies \_\_\_ been made recently*, two participants translated the sentence into their mother tongue and accidentally found that both in Indonesian and English the answer required a plural form. The problem here is that not all learners know and can exploit this potential.

Unlike interlingual errors, which were mostly caused by the interference of the participants' L1, the causes of intralingual errors were more complex. In many cases, though on the surface the error was the same, the sources were different. For example, in *The plane lifted \_\_\_ nose and rose in the air*. Four participants answered using *it* because they were unable to distinguish *it* as a subject/object and *its* as a possessive. Two other participants wrongly believed that all nouns needed possessive pronoun *their* (they did not distinguish between singular and plural). Finally, still two others mistakenly presumed that *plane* should require possessive pronoun *her* (female, human). Though fewer in number, on other occasions, however, two or more participants made same error and had the same reason for producing it. For example, *The committee \*consist of 4 students and 1 teacher*. All participants wrongly assumed *the committee* was plural (4 students and 1 teacher) so it required a plural verb.

The first source of intralingual errors is false analogy. False analogy, as James (1998) points out, generally occurs when the learner "wrongly assumes that item B behaves like A" (p. 185). For instance, in *Aunt Martha, with her six children, \*are leaving soon*, one participant wrongly assumed the sentence required a principle of proximity (the tendency of a verb to agree with the noun which is closer to it); therefore, he chose to answer using *are*. Another example is found in *The blind \*reads by using Braille*. The participant wrongly believed that *the blind*, like other common countable nouns, was singular because it did not have a plural marker *-s*. As a result, she answered *reads*. Still another example occurs in *The plane lifted \*her nose and rose in the air*. The participant, having known *a ship* to use pronoun *she/her*, mistakenly thought *the plane* behaved likewise, so he answered using *her* instead of *its*.

Unlike false analogy, misanalysis occurs when the learner forms a hypothesis of L2 item, but the hypothesis is unfounded (James, 1998). Richards (1983) uses the term 'false concept hypothesis' to refer to the same construct. He explains that

misanalysis appears due to poor gradation of teaching items or wrong contrasts. As a result, the learner makes faulty comprehension, which at the end may lead to wrong assumption or misanalysis. For instance, in the sentence *An orange and black bird \*are sitting in that tree*, several participants misinterpreted the subject as plural, i.e. *an orange and a black bird*. They were unable to analyze that semantically *an orange* never collocated with *sit*. Another example occurs in *Neither the horses nor the donkey \*work very hard today*. One participant found two subjects (*the horses* and *donkey*); therefore she believed that the answer should be plural. Three others also overlooked the principle of proximity in their analyses. Instead, they paid attention to *the horses*, and wrongly thought the subject was plural. The following table shows some other errors caused by misanalysis:

**Figure 1: Errors due to misanalysis**

Errors	Reconstructions	Description of Misanalysis
...are...	...is...	<i>Luggage</i> implied a plural form (bags and suitcases).
...is...	...are...	<i>The police</i> was misinterpreted as singular rather than plural.
...has...	...have...	The headword of <i>some signs of improvement</i> was wrongly assumed to be <i>assignment</i> .
...was...	...were...	<i>Some of + noun</i> construction was thought to require a singular form.
...reads...	...read...	<i>The blind</i> (collective noun) was misinterpreted as singular instead of plural.
...they...	...their...	Miscomprehending the sentence. Unable to know the meaning of <i>cast</i> .
...his/her...	...their...	<i>The staff</i> (collective noun) was misinterpreted as singular instead of plural.

The third source of interlingual errors is incomplete rule application. James (1998) as cited by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) mentions that incomplete rule application is opposite to overgeneralization and can be found in the learner's failure to utilize inductive word order: *Nobody knew \*where was Barbie*. Here the learner knows the general rule of wh-questions, but he or she does not know how to use it in an indirect sentence. Another similar error can be found in the sentence *How many of \*people do you know?* Though *how many people* was considered correct

in English, *how many of \*people* was grammatically odd because it required the addition of the demonstrative adjectives *these/those* or definite article *the* to the noun. While in *Not only the stars but the moon \*are shinning*, instead of using grammatical concord, the participant used semantic concord to answer the question. Consequently, she assumed that *not only...but also...* implied a plural form (from the meaning point of view) and overlooked the principle of proximity.

Meanwhile, exploiting redundancy often appears when the learner omits “grammatical features that do not contribute to the meaning of an utterance” (James, 1998 in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 66). For example, *Neither the horses nor the donkey \*work very hard today* and *One of the books that the teacher \*assign each semester is dull*. In the first sentence, although two participants knew that the construction of *neither...nor...* required a principle of proximity, they strangely explained that *the donkey* needed the verb *work* instead of *works*. In the second sentence, one of the same participants also made the same error. She pointed out that *one of + noun* should use a singular form (third person singular), but she overlooked third person singular marker *-s* in her answer (*assign*). It is hard to know the logical reason behind the occurrence of the above errors because the learners actually knew how the third person singular in English worked. Were they performance errors? Or as Ancker (2000) suggests, third person singular is one of the certain aspects of English, which is difficult for all students, no matter what their native languages are.

The fifth source of errors is overlooking co-occurrence restrictions. According to Richards (1983), a learner occasionally overlooks or fails to observe the restrictions of existing structures. James (1998) also points out that overlooking co-occurrence restriction appears in the use of the words *fast* and *quick*. People often mistakenly assume that the two words can be used interchangeably, though in fact they are not, because we may say *fast food* but not *\*quick food*.

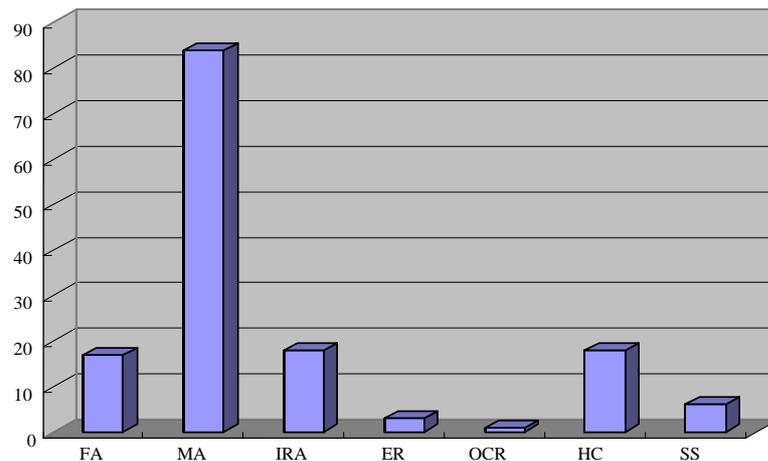
There is only one error in this research that belongs to overlooking co-occurrence restrictions: *The government's reason is that they \*doesn't have any affiliation with their counterpart*. Probably not having realized that *government* belonged to a collective noun and had a plural meaning, one participant believed that it was singular because the word did not possess the plural marker *-s*. Therefore, he changed the auxiliary verb *don't* to *doesn't*. As a result, he violated the restriction of the distribution of the auxiliary verb *does*, because *does* never agrees with plural nouns or pronouns. We may wonder why the participant could produce such a glaring error like *they doesn't*. The explanation probably is that he was too fo-

cused on a particular form and unable to see the relationship among words in a broader context.

In hypercorrection learners make errors because they over-monitor their L2 output (James, 1998). One example is *Each penny, nickel, dime, and quarter \*are counted carefully by the bank teller*. Three participants wanted to be consistent with their previous knowledge. Even though the sentence started with the determiner *each*, two of them thought that a list of nouns should require a plural auxiliary verb. Another participant gave the same answer, but had a different reason. She argued because the sentence had a connector *and*, logically there were more than one noun (subject) involved. Consequently the answer should be plural. Another example is also found in *Fifty minutes \*are the maximum length of time allowed for the exam*. Instead of viewing *fifty minutes* as a single measure of time (Biber et al., 1999), one participant wrongly assumed that it required a plural form, because it possessed a plural marker *-s*. Therefore, the answer should be plural.

The last source of intralingual errors is overgeneralization or system-simplification. James (1998) points out that overgeneralization or system-simplification occurs when the learner overuses one member of a set of forms and underuses others in the set. For example, *The number of accidents in the highway \*are shocking*. One participant was confused with *a number of...* and *the number of...*. He probably did not realize that *a number of...* was followed by a plural verb, while *the number...* took a singular one. As a result, he used only a single form where actually two different forms were needed. Another error occurs in *The plane lifted \*it's nose and rose in the air*. The participant knew that *it's* was the shorter form of *it is*, however, on different occasions he also used *it's* to refer to a singular possessive noun. It is possible that the participant over-generalized the use of apostrophe + *-s* to form possessives (e.g., *Mike's car* or *the girl's hair*).

Finally, to answer the second research question "Among the intralingual errors, which source of errors is the most evident?", the findings suggested that misanalysis was the most evident source of the errors. Out of 147 intralingual errors, 84 or 57.14% belonged to misanalysis (MA). 18 or 12.25% were due to both incomplete rule application (IRA) and hypercorrection (HC), while 17 or 11.57% were caused by false analogy (FA). Furthermore, there were only 6 (4.08%), 3 (2.04%) and 1 (0.68%) errors which occurred due to system-simplification (SS), exploiting redundancy (ER) and overlooking co-occurrence restrictions (OCR) respectively. The following chart summarizes all.



**Figure 2: Different sources of intralingual errors**

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this study suggest at least three pedagogical implications. First, since errors reflect learners' interlanguage (Selinker, 1972 in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), it is important for teachers to establish a comprehensive taxonomy of the learners' errors (both interlingual and intralingual) especially the one related to the English concord. Chan (2004) explains that establishing an empirically based taxonomy is a crucial step towards understanding the cognitive and psycholinguistic mechanisms of the learners' learning process. With such an understanding in hand, the teachers may be more aware of the sources of the errors and therefore can best help the learners improve their language (James, 1998). At the same time, the taxonomy may also inform the learners about their (common) errors and thus can help them learn more effectively.

Second, since this research found that more errors occurred due to learning strategies rather than the learners' L1, it is also crucial for teachers to make the grammar teaching more meaningful for their learners. For example, Larsen-

Freeman (2001a) suggests that the teachers apply both deductive and inductive methods in their grammar teaching. In the deductive method, as Nunan (2003) points out, the teachers give “a grammatical explanation or rule by a set of exercises designed to clarify the grammatical point and help the learners master the point” (p. 158). In relation to this, Tan (2001) argues that the teachers need to explain the rule explicitly and give the learners enough opportunities to self-express and experiment what they are learning in realistic situations. Baker and Westrup (2000) also suggest that the teachers not only use texts but also comparison, situations, pictures or real objects in explaining the grammatical structure. In the inductive method, on the other hand, the teachers encourage their learners to discover and acquire the grammatical rule for themselves through reading a passage that the rule is repeatedly used or through simple conversations in which the rule is recurrently used (Lim, 2003). Though the inductive method may demand greater mental efforts and take more time, some research shows that it can result in learners retaining more of the language in the long term (Nunan, 2003). By integrating both deductive and inductive techniques in the classrooms, the learners can be exposed to different teaching methods.

Nunan (2003) mentions that some grammar teaching does not produce effective results partly because the teachers “teach abstract systems, present the language as isolated sentences, and fail to give learners a proper context for the grammar point” (p. 159). Thus, the solution is to present the grammar within a context that clarify the communicative use of the structure (Ibid., 2004). In line with this, Givon (1993) in Larsen-Freeman (2001b) also explains that what is important in teaching grammar is not the rule that generates grammatical sentences, but rather the production of rule-governed sentences as a means of coherent communication. In other words, in teaching grammar the teachers should not only teach the knowledge of language rules, but also help the learners use this knowledge for communication. In doing this, the teachers for example may encourage the learners to participate in collaborative dialogues which can spur development of their interlanguage (Donato, 1994) or problem-solving that can promote grammatical development (Goss et al., 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

Third, in regard to the interference from the learners’ L1, Odlin (2003) argues that the L1 does not always bring a negative influence to FL learning. Instead, when there are some cross-linguistic similarities between the two languages, those similarities may also lead to positive transfer. Atkinson (1993), Brown (2000), Harbord (1992), and Nation (2003) also explain that the use of translation or L1 to cope with the problems in the L2 is inevitable and sometimes necessary especially

among the learners of lower proficiency levels. Although the use of translation in FL learning is frequently criticized, research shows that it can lead to better comprehension (Macaro, 1997; Nation, 2003), help students perform the task more successfully (Swain & Lapkin, 2000), and avoid ethnocentricity (Atkinson, 1993).

### **CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

To sum up the entire research, the results of this study suggest that the intralingual errors appeared more significant than interlingual ones in the acquisition of the concord or agreement in English. Out of all 201 deviant answers, 147 or 73.13% were classified as the intralingual errors, only 24 or 11.94% were the interlingual ones, and 30 or 14.93% belonged to mistakes. These results are in line with earlier claims in the field of SLA that acquisition of a FL is determined by the nature of the language that the learners are learning, rather than through contrast between the learners' first language and the target language (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Krashen, 1981). Furthermore, in regard to the sources of the intralingual errors, misanalysis was found to be the most evident source of errors. Among 147 intralingual errors, 84 or 57.14% were associated with misanalysis, 18 or 12.25% were due to both incomplete rule application and hypercorrection, while 17 or 11.57% were caused by false analogy. Only 6 (4.08%), 3 (2.04%) and 1 (0.68%) errors occurred due to system-simplification, exploiting redundancy and overlooking co-occurrence restrictions respectively.

Apart from those seven sources of errors, this study also found four main linguistic and non-linguistic factors, which contributed to the learners' deviant forms. The first one was the learners' carelessness or hesitation. Most of the participants confessed that they were not careful enough in doing the test, thus they made mistakes. However, since mistakes are self-correctable and normally most learners are immediately aware of them, they are generally considered to be insignificant to the process of language teaching (Corder, 1983). The second factor was related to the learners' native language. The errors were called interlingual errors. In this study, the interlingual errors occurred because the learners translated the test sentences into Indonesian without making necessary adjustments. As a result, the influence or interference from the Indonesian language occurred. The third factor was miscomprehension. Unfamiliar words and long and complex test sentences were found to be the two reasons for the learners' miscomprehending the test items. Because of that, the learners made wrong analyses and the errors appeared. The fourth one was related to the use of semantic concord. Though semantic concord might be helpful

occasionally, many of the participants used it when they actually should not and vice versa. Consequently, they produced the errors.

It is also appropriate to acknowledge at this juncture that this study has certain limitations. The first limitation concerns the number of the participants ( $n = 15$ ). I do believe if a larger number of participants could have involved, the results of this study would be much more representative to warrant reliable conclusions. Another limitation is related to the research methodology. The test used in this study was an elicitation task, which required a high degree of control over the participants' output production. As a result, the learners' true competence may not have been measured. Spontaneous production, on the other hand, can reflect the learners' competence under more natural conditions of language use (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), even though it may not be able to ensure as maximal output of the target language as the elicitation task does. Having considered two limitations above, in order to ensure more reliable and objective data, future research which aims to deal with the learners' errors should also include free writing and speaking tasks.

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