ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF VERB 'TO BE' IN SPOKEN ENGLISH IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to observe students' use of verb to be in speaking in an EFL context. To this end, 43 students' speaking exams in 2014-2015, and 2015-2016 academic year has been transcribed and the students' use of verb 'to be' has been analyzed. The data has been gathered from three different exams to understand the process entirely. The findings of the study will be presented under the subtopics which will include omission, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses and false concepts hypothesis of verb 'to be'. In this context, it has been planned to find out in which level and how the correct use of verb 'to be' occurs and to determine the common errors of verb 'to be' in each level. Results will be presented in a manner that will show the trend students following using verb to be over the time.

Keywords: Spoken English, Verb 'To Be' in English, EFL context.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are life-long learners, and in every kind of learning process, they make mistakes, and errors. However, mistakes and errors are two different phenomena as Brown (2000, p. 217) defines; 'a mistake is a performance error that is either a random guess or a slip, in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly; whereas an error, a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflects the competence of the learner.' He adds that a mistake can be self-corrected when an emphasis is put on it; yet, an error cannot be (Brown, 2000). Foreign language learning, in this sense, results in making errors and mistakes respectively as errors are performed due to competences, and mistakes are slips even though they are well-known structures.

Significance of Errors and Error Analysis
Prior to the 1960s, the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers and structuralists took the part of preventing, and if take place, immediately correcting the errors whatever it takes. However, errors are no longer evaluated as annoying signs of failure to be avoided or eradicated; rather, they are thought to be signs of progress, and stairways to proficiency (Shekhzadeh & Gheichi, 2011). Corder (1967) stated that mistakes are of no importance as they are not related to the progress of the learners in foreign language learning; however, errors of learners are significant in three ways: "They give…

- the teachers a chance to evaluate and analyze their students' progress,
- the researchers a chance to discover how languages are learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learners are employing,
- the learners themselves a chance as they are devices to learn." (p. 167).

In this regard, analyzing errors is of crucial importance for the researchers and also teachers to have an opinion about the learners' progress. Furthermore, error analysis is necessary to be able to give feedback to the learners, and carry them beyond in terms of proficiency. Error analysis is the process of observing, analyzing, and classifying the learners' errors to reveal something of the system operating within them (Brown, 2000).

For Corder (1967), every sentence a learner utters is idiosyncratic – unique and must be analyzed in its own content - and he adds that basically there are two kinds of erroneous utterances; overt, and covert. Overtly erroneous utterances are, without question, grammatically inaccurate at sentence level. However; covertly erroneous utterances are grammatically accurate but not appropriate by some way or another in a communicational context as they are not interpretable. The sentence 'I feel bad today.' is overtly accurate; yet, if answered to the question 'How is the weather today?', it is covertly inaccurate.

As for Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), errors are flaws in the language use of learners in speech or writing, and they are deviated parts of conversation or compositions from some selected norm of mature language performance. They classified errors as;

- **Omission:** absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance.
  i.e. "Mary president new company." ➝ "Mary is the president of the new company"
- **Addition:** presence of an item/items which must not appear in a well-formed utterance.
- o *double marking:* failure to delete certain items which are required in some linguistic constructions.
  i.e. "He doesn't knows English." ➝ "He doesn't know English."
- o *regularization:* inaccurate usage of exceptions in a class of linguistic items such as nouns, verbs, articles, or prepositions.
  i.e. "The car is in here." ➝ "The ball is here."
- o *simple addition:* if an addition is not a double marking nor an error, it is called a simple addition. They are 'grab bag' additions, and cannot be classified under a certain rule.
- **Misformation:** use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure.
- o *regularization errors:* a regular marker is used in place of an irregular one such as 'runned' for 'run', or 'gooses' for 'geese'.
- o *archi-forms:* the selection of one member of a class of forms to represent others in a class. Using the demonstrative adjective 'that' all the time instead of using the other ones 'this', 'these', and 'those' as in "that dogs" is an example for this phenomenon.
- o *alternating forms:* as the learners' vocabulary and grammar grow the use of alternative archi-forms.
  i.e. "Those dog", "This cats", using "he" for "she" or "him" or vice versa.
- **Misordering:** incorrect placement of a morpheme or a group of morphemes in an utterance.
  i.e. "He is all the time late.", "What the teacher is doing?", "I don't know what that is."

Causes and Types of Errors
As mentioned before, errors are significant in learning so finding the underlying reasons why they happen, and classifying them are important to correct them. Touchie (1986) stated that there are two major causes of errors: interference with the first language (L1) or interlingual factors, and intralingual and developmental errors. As people think and learn with their mother tongues, it is inevitable for the L1 of any learner to interfere with the target language. This interference is called 'transfer or interlanguage errors'. As for 'intralingual and developmental errors', they occur because of the difficulty of the second/target language, and they include the followings:

- **Simplification:** Choosing simple forms instead of complex ones. i.e. 'using simple present instead of present perfect'
- **Overgeneralization:** Using one form or construction and applying it to all similar ones where it shouldn't be. i.e. use of 'comed' or 'goed'.

- **Hypercorrection:** This happens where the teacher tries hard to correct an error and makes the learners have other mistakes due to this correction. i.e. the 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 'pird' and 'pattle' instead of 'bird' and 'battle'.
- **Faulty teaching:** These errors are caused by the teacher, the teaching materials, or the order of presentation.
- **Fossilization:** This happens when the errors are persistent for long periods, and hard to get rid of.
- **Avoidance:** Some learners have difficulty using some structures so they avoid using them, and use simpler structures. This lets them make errors.
- **Inadequate learning:** This is due to ignorance of rule restrictions, and incomplete learning. An example is omission of the third person singular 's' as in: '*He want.*'.
- **False concept hypothesized:** This may look similar to the previous one but it is the result of wrong hypotheses formed by the learners. For example, some learners think that 'is' is the marker of the present tense. So, they produce: '*He is talk to the teacher.*'. Similarly, they think that 'was' is the past tense marker. Hence they say: '*It was happened last night.*' (pp. 78-79).

Brown (2000) also sorted errors into two groups as interlingual transfer, and intralingual transfer. He notes that in the early stages of learning a language most of the errors are due to interlingual factors; however, once the learners become more proficient in the target language system, the errors are mostly due to intralingual factors such as overgeneralization, "a process that occurs as the second language learner acts within the target language, generalizing a particular rule or item in the second language-irrespective of the native language—beyond legitimate bounds" (Brown, 2014, p. 98).
Previous Studies.

Elmahdi (2015) conducted a study to find out the Sudanese university level students' errors in the use of articles. To achieve his goal, he chose 25 male students in the same language proficiency level, and gave them forty-five minutes to complete a free writing task. After detecting the article errors in the writings of the students, he categorized the errors as 'article omission', 'redundant articles', and 'wrong choice of articles'. It can be seen in the article that most of the errors (60%) are because of redundancy, and almost all the errors arise from mother tongue interference (interlingual/transfer factors).

In his study, Kesmez (2015) aimed to investigate the interference errors of English learners by analyzing 120 composition sheets of in total 54 prep-class students studying at the Department of English Language and Literature. After the analysis, he found a total 298 interference errors. He, then classified these errors into four different categories as morphological, lexical, syntactic, and orthographic. In the end, he came to a conclusion that, Turkish learners of English heavily rely on their mother tongue while producing written utterances.

Akarsu (2011) investigated the errors committed in oral production by Turkish learners of English. To identify the errors, and sources of them, he used Corder's model, which has five steps; collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors. He analyzed the learner utterances in terms of two main categories as grammatical errors, and lexical errors. Also, he conducted the study on both high school students, and university students. The results showed that university students produced less errors than high school students, and the errors were due to lack of knowledge on the target language, limited knowledge on certain topics, or L1 interference. His own words are as follows:

"In the light of the results, it can be said that learners have some difficulties while speaking the target language. Learners do not know the target language properly or they have incomplete knowledge about certain topics and hence they can be affected by their mother tongue when constructing

sentences. As it was discussed before, some of the errors committed by the learners originated from the native language interference." (p. 251)

In a study conducted by Sönmez & Griffiths (2015), they analyzed the grammatical errors in the written works of 30 freshmen students who were studying in the English Language Teaching Department at a university in Turkey. They divided the participants into two groups; one with lower proficiency, and the other with higher proficiency; then they compared the errors of each group. The results showed that the students had errors in the following points: plurality, articles, subject-verb agreement, word order, pronouns, prepositions, part of speech, auxiliaries, negation, tense agreement and lexis. They came to a conclusion that errors are signs of development, and in the early stages of learning, most of the errors are results of L1 transfer.

Mede, Tutal, Ayaz, Çalışır, & Akın (2014) conducted a study in which they investigated to what extent the Turkish learners of English transferred their L1 in terms of word order. The results showed that there is a strong syntactic transfer especially in the field of word order patterns between the two language. They stated:

"Based on the data gathered from the grammaticality judgment and picture description tasks, the participating students showed some traces of negative transfer particularly with the use of action verbs such as 'lie tell', 'slowly speak', and 'Turkish Liras earn'" (p. 79).

The aim of this study is to examine the use of verb "to be" in spoken English in an EFL context and to find out the possible reasons of the errors that the learners perform and in the end, to recommend possible teaching implications that can be helpful. As the aforementioned error analysis procedures suggest, first, the errors were detected, and then classified into different categories. As Ellis (1997, p. 18) states "classifying errors in these ways can help us to diagnose learners' learning problems at any stage of their development and to plot how changes in error patterns occur over time.". Since the focus of this study is to discover the usage of a simple and narrow topic as the verb 'to be', the errors of the students were in narrow range. The errors of the students were labeled as omission, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, and false concept hypothesis. This process and the results are presented below in the 'Findings' section.

METHODOLOGY

In this part of the research, information about the model of the research, the population and sampling, data collection tools, application of the corpus, interviews where qualitative data are obtained, collection of data and analysis of obtained data are included.

Research Method
In this study, descriptive method has been used and in the light of this method, qualitative data have been benefited. The performance of the students in the speaking section of three of the 4 midterm exams taken by the students during one academic year has been examined, no experimental study has been done, and only the present situation has been defined.

Population and Sample
The universe of the research is composed of students who are studying at the Düzce University Preparatory Unit in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years. The sample of the research consists of 43 preparatory class students who were recorded with the video camera or voice recorders during the exam in the speaking section of 3 midterm examinations made during this academic year.

Data Collection
For this study, a qualitative approach to collecting data was used to access the students' oral usage of the verb 'to be'. The voice and video recordings of the oral exams of 48 students studying at Hakime Erciyas School of Foreign Languages at Düzce University were transcribed. Data were collected from

three different midterm oral exams in 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years. Permission was granted to record the exams from each of the students. The samples were chosen randomly among students who participated the oral exams. In the oral exam; a small chitchat is done to make the students relax, then the students randomly choose a piece of paper on which a topic is written to talk for 2 minutes, and in the last part, the teachers ask further questions related to the topic to be able to test the students more critically. The oral exam is, as can be understood, is designed to be semi-structured in terms of interviewing the students since there are fixed questions to be answered; however, the last part of the exam is flexible, and impromptu to evaluate the most of it. In this respect, the oral examination resembles semi-structured interview as 'it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses '(Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 88).

Data Analysis

After the transcription, the raw data were analyzed using content analysis as it best suits our aims. As Krippendorff describes (2013); content analysis is a research technique which generates replicable and valid inferences from the data. Drisko and Maschi (2015, p. 7) defines content analysis more extensively as "a family of research techniques for making systematic, credible, or valid, and replicable inferences from texts and other forms of communication".

In data analysis process, the steps below were followed;
- The recordings of 48 students' oral exams were transcribed,
- The students, then, were divided into categories regarding their English proficiency levels in accordance with the exam results.
- It was found out that there were three different groups of students regarding English proficiency according to CEFR levels: A1, A2, and B1.
- In the transcriptions of all the participants' oral exams, every usage of the verb 'to be' was detected to determine the usage of it by students in different levels.
- The obtained data were then categorized into the levels of the students, and the errors were detected and coded and sorted into the categories (Schilling, 2006, p. 33) below;
  o Lack of Use
  o Misuse
  o Overuse
    Validity

In the scope of the research, the speaking exams of the students were recorded with the help of video camera sound recorder. The recorded data is written down in the original form without skipping any data. One hundred thirty-two (132) page texts consisting of the written texts of the exams were read in detail. Expert examination has been applied to the creation of the themes of the research data and interpretation of the obtained data. According to the expert's opinion, the research has been re-edited. No changes were made to the raw data and researchers sticked to the data during the data analysis. Expressions indicating students' use of verb 'to be' are given directly in the quotations.

Reliability

The written format of the research records is read more than once for each theme. In the interpretation of research data, continuous comparison with the results of the studies of acquisition of present simple negation to avoid any subjective hypothesis that might arise from the researcher was made and clear and correct coding of the data was provided. It was determined that the obtained data were placed in appropriate themes. The sound recordings taken during the examinations and the documents in which these records are written are kept for the purpose of subjecting them to a review process when necessary.

FINDINGS

The oral exam recordings of 43 students were transcribed within the scope of this study and 132 pages of corpus were obtained from the transcriptions.

Table 1: Distribution of participant according to proficiency levels

Level	f	%
A1	25	58
A2	7	16.5
B1	11	25.5
Total	**43**	**100**

The participants were sorted into 3 different proficiency levels (A1, A2 and B1) which were determined in terms of the exam results of the students. There were 25 participants in A1 level, 7 participants in A2 level and 11 students in B1 level.

Table 2: Distribution of participants using correct and incorrect forms

Level	Number of students using correct form	Number of students using incorrect form
A1	9	16
A2	3	4
B1	1	10
Total	**13**	**30**

According to the results obtained from the data, it was figured out that 13 of the total number of the participants used verb "to be" correctly in their speeches. As it can be seen in the table above, in A1 level 9 students, in A2 level 3 students and in B1 level 1 students utilized verb "to be" successfully. It can be inferred from the results that one of the reasons why A1 level students are more successful in using verb "to be" structure in comparison to A2 level and B1 level is because verb "to be" structure is one of the basic grammar forms of A1 level and the students who are about the complete the level can use this grammar structure in a better way. On the other hand, the reason B1 level students fail it is because of their tendency to demonstrate a complex discourse without paying attention to simple structures which causes mistakes in their speeches.

Table 3: Overall information about the use of verb 'to be'

Levels	Number of Students	Correct usage	%	Errors	%	Total Usage
A1	25	140	% 78,2	39	% 22,8	179
A2	7	48	% 58	15	% 42	63
B1	11	117	% 81,25	27	% 19,75	144

It was found out that all the participants used different forms of verb "to be" in their speeches. In this corpus, 386 different usages of verb "to be" were detected. A1 participants used it 179 times and 39 of the total number were incorrect. In A2 level, there were 63 usages and 15 of them were incorrect. On the other hand, B1 level participants performed verb "to be" 144 times and 27 incorrect usages were showed up in this level. It has been discovered that one of the reasons why percentages of A1 and B1 level usages are almost equal is because B1 level students performed more complex discourse with more sophisticated sentences which leads to mistakes in their grammar as Corder (1967) defined them as slips in performance since the speaker knows the correct form and can frequently self-correct. Another reason for this situation is that B1 level students perform more spontaneous speech and this causes them to ignore basic grammar rules such as using the verb **'to be'**.

Table 4: Distribution of errors according to 4 different categories

Types of Errors	Amount	Frequency
Omission	34	% 41,9
Subject Verb Agreement	5	% 6,17
Verb Tense	25	% 30,8
False Concepts Hypothesis	17	%
TOTAL	81	% 100

After carefully reading the transcripts repeatedly, the errors performed by the students were categorized in the table above. As can be seen in the table, there are four types of errors;

a) **Omission:** In accordance with the analysis of the corpus, 34 errors related to omission verb "to be" were detected. The number of the students who made errors are 18 and 9 of these students belong to A1 level, 3 of them belong to A2 level and 6 of them belong to B1 level. The examples below, gathered from the corpus, can be useful to understand the topic better;

> **i.**e. Student 3: "My favorite season summer."
> Student 10: "She from Sakarya I think."
> Student 36: "My mother angry me to be honest."

b) **Subject Verb Agreement:** In the light of the results, it was found out that 5 different students failed verb "to be" structure because of subject-verb agreement. 2 students from A1 level and 3 students from B1 level made this type of errors whereas no errors were detected in A2 level. The total number of the errors performed by these students is 5.

> **i.**e. Student 8: "There isn't any cell phones."
> Student 24: "First speaking exam and second exam was not hard."

c) **Verb Tense:** According to the data, 16 different students made 25 errors during their speeches. 10 students from A1 level, 2 students from A2 and 4 students from B1 level performed verb tense errors.

> **i.**e. Teacher 2: "What about the exam yesterday? How was it?"
> Student 5: "It is hard."
> Student 15: "I don't addict."
> Teacher 1: "Are you married?"
> Student 9: "No, I don't married."

d) **False Concepts Hypothesis:** As it was obtained from the data, 13 students made errors caused by false concepts hypothesis in their speeches. There are 4 students in A1 level, 2 students in A2 level and 7 students in B1 level who used verb "to be" incorrectly due to false concepts hypothesis.

> **i.**e. Student 7: "Because, it is cope stress actually."
> Student 11: "I was write at school."
> Student 4: "It is have all company here."

Table 5: Distribution of errors and their frequencies according to proficiency levels

Levels	Total Usage	Omission	f	Subject Verb Agreement	f	Verb Tense	f	False Concepts Hypothesis	f
A1	41	19	%	2	%	15	%	5	%
A2	15	7	%	0	%	3	%	5	%
B1	25	8	%	3	%	7	%	7	%

According to the results obtained from the corpus, the distribution of the errors in terms of the proficiency levels can be seen in the table above. A1 students made more errors compared to A2 and B1 students as their level of English and interlanguage are lower than the other two levels. In this

25

regard, it can be inferred that there is a direct relationship between the proficiency level and correct grammar use. That most of the errors made by A1 level students such as omission and verb tense based errors is a proof of low English grammar proficiency which ends up with incorrect use of specific grammar structures. On the other hand, as can be understood from the table, the amount of incorrect verb "to be" use increases in B1 level that is a sign of "back-sliding" that is a type of fossilization and interlanguage.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In virtue of the results obtained from the detailed content analysis and later error analysis of the corpus within the scope of this study that aims to examine the use of verb "to be" in spoken English in an EFL context and to figure out the types and eventual causes of the errors that the learners perform, to suggest some useful implementation for the teaching process. This paper mainly focuses on the question "How do Turkish EFL learners use verb 'to be' in their spoken language in each proficiency level?" by analyzing the errors and their reasons to figure out the nature of the learning process and to find some possible remedies to the problem. As Richards (1971) pointed out that study of errors committed by language learners is crucial due to the following fields:

- Linguistics, because the study of human language can lead to discoveries on what constitutes human intelligence.
- Psycholinguistics, because the study of children's speech and its comparison with that of adults can reveal mental processes involved in language.
- Teaching, because it enables the discovery, identification, and analysis of learner mistakes as well as the design of appropriate methods for their mitigation.

As part of this study, 132 pages (24874 tokens) corpus from the oral exam recordings of 43 students from 3 different proficiency level (A1, A2 and B1) was created. After repetitive analysis of the data, it was found out that 70 percent of the study group committed verb "to be" errors in their speeches. Most of the students who made errors were from A1 and B1 level. The main reason of the failure of the first group is lack of knowledge and interlanguage which causes misuse of the language as Brown (2000) mentioned learners perform most of their errors based on interlanguage factors in early stages of learning like A1 level. On the other hand, the reason of the failure in B1 level is not because of inadequate grammar but because of both backsliding and tendency to speak more fluently without paying much attention to the grammar. Some errors reappear when the speaker is "focused upon new and difficult intellectual subject matter or when he is in a state of anxiety or other excitement, and strangely enough, sometimes when he is in a state of extreme relaxation" (Selinker, 1972, p. 36)In addition to this, it was found out that B1 level students make 'mistakes' not 'errors' as they correct themselves if they realize. An error cannot be self-corrected, according to James (2013), while mistakes can be self-corrected if the deviation is pointed out to the speaker.

In the light of the data analysis, the four main types of errors were detected; omission, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, and false concepts hypothesis. It was figured out that, among these four categories, omission and verb tense constitute the great majority of the errors committed by the students.

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