Analyzing Sentence Structure Errors in Students' Writing Compositions: The Case of First Year Students of English at Oum El Bouaghi University

Analyse des Erreurs de Structure de Phrases dans les Compositions Écrites des Étudiants : Le Cas des Étudiants de Première Année d'Anglais à l'Université d'Oum El Bouaghi

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Abstract

Writing is the most difficult skill for EFL learners, and the most serious problems they encounter in writing are related to sentence structure. In fact, many Algerian students of English are unable to produce well-structured English sentences, because of the presence of run-on and fragment errors. Hence, the present study is undertaken to determine the extent to which Algerian EFL learners face this problem in their writing compositions. To do so, an Error Analysis is conducted to find the frequency and percentages of these errors and their types, and subsequently to give possible explanations for their occurrence. The participants are asked to write a paragraph (around 15 lines) about an experience that had a great impact on their life. Only three types of fragments are found: Subject-only fragment (no finite verb),

verbal-phrase fragment, and dependent-clause fragment, in addition to both types of run-on sentences: comma splice and fused sentence. However, the frequency of fragment sentences is very low in comparison with that of run-on sentences. This is attributed to the interference of Standard Arabic.

Key Words: sentence structure; Error Analysis, fragments, run-on sentences, writing compositions

Résumé L'écriture est la compétence la plus difficile pour les apprenants d'anglais langue étrangère (ALE), et les problèmes les plus graves qu'ils rencontrent en rédaction sont liés à la structure des phrases. En fait, de nombreux étudiants algériens en anglais sont incapables de produire des phrases anglaises bien structurées, en raison de la présence d'erreurs de phrases mal connectées et de phrases incomplètes. Par conséquent, la présente étude vise à déterminer dans quelle mesure les apprenants algériens d'anglais langue étrangère sont confrontés à ce problème dans leurs compositions écrites. Pour ce faire, une analyse des erreurs est menée afin de trouver la fréquence et les pourcentages de ces erreurs et de leurs types, et par la suite de donner des explications possibles de leur occurrence. Les participants sont invités à rédiger un paragraphe (d'environ 15 lignes) sur une expérience qui a eu un grand impact sur leur vie. Seuls trois types de phrases incomplètes sont identifiés : fragment avec sujet uniquement (sans verbe fini), fragment de phrase verbale et fragment de proposition subordonnée, en plus des deux types de phrases mal connectées : phrase à virgule et phrase fusionnée. Cependant, la fréquence des phrases incomplètes est très faible par rapport à celle des phrases mal connectées. Cela est attribué à l'interférence de l'arabe standard.

Mots-clés : écriture, structure des phrases, analyse des erreurs, fragments, phrases mal connectées, compositions écrites

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered the most difficult skill in the EFL classroom. It requires physical and mental processes that make it a daunting task for learners (Saddler &Asaro-Saddler, 2010).The most serious problems EFL learners encounter in writing are related to sentence structure. Based on the researcher's experience in teaching writing to first year university students of English, she has noticed that they are unable to produce well-structured English sentences. Most of them write very long strings of groups of words separated by commas. In some of their paragraphs, only one full stop can be found in a whole paragraph, i.e., at the end of a paragraph. This leads to say that they have no sense of the English sentence. Conducting a study about how college students understand the concept of sentence, Harris and Rowan(1989, as cited in Weaver, 1996) arrived to the conclusion that many of them neither know what is a sentence neither what is not a sentence since they could not distinguish between grammatical sentences and run-ons and fragments. Kagan(1980) conducted two studies in the first of which she administered two tests to English remedial college students. The first test contained fifteen combinations of fragment sentences and five complete sentences while the second one consisted of 11 run-on sentences and

four complete sentences. Subjects were asked to determine which combinations were fragments and which were complete sentences. In the second study, the students received a test consisting of 8 sentence fragments. Each sentence fragment was composed of two parts: a five - word prepositional phrase and a five- word verb-object sequence. Considering the results, the researcher concluded that "subjects associated a complete written sentence with: (a) A verb-noun sequence of a certain requisite length, and (b) a word string containing a prepositional phrase" (p. 137).

As to non-native student writers, most research examined grammatical mistakes found in sentence structure in general (Sarasua, 2021; Seemeen et al., 2019; Seitova, 2016). Pratiwi (2017), however, focused on sentence fragments in the writing compositions of 8 Indonesian participants and found five types of fragments: absence of subject, absence of verb, uncompleted thought, incomplete verb, and complex errors. Dawood and Salman (2011) administered a recognition test to 76 male and female second and fourth –year Iraqi students at the Translation Department in the university of Basra and found that all students had difficulties to recognize complete sentences but in different percentages. On the Algerian level, although fragment and run-on sentences "are among the most prevalent and irremediable errors found

in grammatically deficient prose"(Kagan, 1980, p.127),no article on fragments and run-ons and even on sentence structure was found in the Algerian Scientific Journal Platform(ASJP). Therefore, the researcher has chosen to undertake the present research to determine the extent to which Algerian EFL learners suffer from this problem and to find the types or patterns of fragments and run-ons through analyzing the errors in their writing compositions. As a matter of fact, the present study seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the types of sentence structure errors (fragments and run-ons) in the writing of first year Algerian EFL students?
2. What are the causes of sentence structure errors (fragments and run-ons) in the writing of first year Algerian EFL students?

2. Literature Review

This section introduces the literature about Error Analysis and sentence fragments and run-ons.

2.1. Error Analysis

Error Analysis is a discipline that emerged in the early 70's with the publication of Corder's (1967) famous article: The Significance of Learners' Errors. Opposing the behaviourist and taxonomic view about learners' errors, which consider them as a sign of the inadequacy of the teaching techniques, he attributed a new value to them. Learners' errors should be viewed as evidence of the language system they are using at a particular point in their learning process. They are significant to the

teacher, to the researcher and to the learner himself. First, they tell the teacher how far the learner has advanced towards the goal and what he has still to learn. Second, to the researcher, they provide him with evidence of what strategies the learner is using to discover the language. Third, they are a means the learner uses to test his hypotheses about the nature of the language he wants to learn. Thus, error analysis has both theoretical and practical objectives. The first theoretical objective is to describe the language of the learner or what Corder (1973) called his 'idiosyncratic dialect'. "The assumption underlying the description of errors is that they are evidence of a system, not the system of the target language, but a system of some other language. To describe that other language is precisely the theoretical objective of error analysis" (Corder, 1973, p.268). The second theoretical aim of error analysis is to discover the universal strategies second language learners use to learn it:

> The study of errors, then, is part of the psycholinguistic search for the universal processes of second language learning. But we can go a little further. It is hypothesized, and some evidence is now available that children do follow a similar course in the acquisition of their mother tongue. . . . What we would like to know is whether the same is true in the case of learning a second language.(Corder, 1973, p.267)

The practical objective of Error Analysis is to provide feedback for the teacher about the techniques and the parts of the syllabus that need more attention. However, with new learners, errors enable him to design a remedial syllabus (Corder, 1973).

2.1.1. Methodology in Error Analysis

Three stages are involved in the analysis of errors (Corder, 1973):

2.1.1.1. Identification of Errors

There are two distinctions to be made in the recognition of errors. The first one made by Corder(1967) is between a mistake and an error. Errors are systematic revealing the underlying knowledge of the second language learner (his transitional competence). Mistakes are performance errors "due to memory lapses, physical states, such as tiredness and psychological conditions such as strong emotion" and do not show a defect in his knowledge of the second language (Corder, 1967, p.166). Corder (1967) noted that the error analyst should be concerned with errors and not with mistakes, but recognized the difficulty of distinguishing between them. The second distinction is between overtly erroneous utterances and covertly erroneous utterances (Corder 1971). Overtly erroneous utterances are clearly deviant in form according to the rules of the target language and thus are easily identified. Covertly erroneous utterances are superficially well formed, but are ungrammatical when their context is examined.

2.1.1.2. Description of Errors

The erroneous utterance is compared with a reconstruction of this utterance in the target language i.e., the description of errors involves, thus, classifying them into different categories. According to Corder (1973, p.277), learners' errors can be grouped into four categories: omission of some required element, addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element, selection of an incorrect element, and misordering of elements. To achieve a deeper description, these items are assigned to the different linguistic levels: orthographic/phonological, syntactic and lexico-semantic.

2.1.1.3. Explanation of Errors

It involves finding the psycholinguistic sources of errors to discover the strategies learners use and the process they undergo to learn a second language, which is the theoretical objective of Error Analysis. According to Corder(1973), there are three main sources of errors: the influence of the learner's mother tongue, analogy or overgeneralization (e.g. I seed him), and the nature of the teaching and teaching materials. Richards (1971b) suggested three other sources: interference errors; intralingual errors, which "reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization; incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply"; and developmental errors (as cited in Ellis, 2008).

2.2. Sentence

Traditionally, a sentence is defined as a set of words which expresses a complete thought. For Anker (2009, p.388),"a sentence is the basic unit of written communication."McWhorter (2011, p.769) asserted that "A sentence is a group of words that must include at least one independent clause (a subject and a verb that express a complete thought).Anker (2009, p.388) explained that a complete thought is "an idea that is expressed in a sentence and that makes sense by itself, without other sentences. An incomplete thought leaves readers wondering what's going on." For example:

Incomplete Thought as I was leaving [*What is going on?*]

Complete Thought The phone rang as I was leaving.

Collins English dictionary(2024) defined a sentence «as a group of words which when they are written down begin with a capital letter and end with a full

stop, question mark, or exclamation mark. Most sentences contain a subject and a verb."

2.2.1. Fragment

"A sentence fragment is a group of words that cannot stand alone as a complete **sentence**. A fragment is often missing a subject, a complete verb, or both" (Mc Whorter, 2011, p. 777). However, a word group maybe a fragment even if it contains both a subject and a verb as it does not express a complete thought (Mc Whorter, 2011). This includes subordinate clauses beginning with a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun (Hodges and Whitten, 1967).Although fragments are often found in speech as well as in personal writing, they may sometimes be used on purpose «in some professional and academic writing. . . for emphasis or to convey a particular tone such as playfulness, anger, or scorn." However, they should be generally avoided in formal writing (Wyrick, 2011, p.564).To identify fragments, Nazario et al. (2013) proposed three methods. The first one is to read one's writing beginning from the end of the essay. If a "sentence" does not make sense alone, it is a fragment. The second method is to check whether the word group contains a subject and its verb. Another method is to put the phrase "is it true that" before the specific word group to get a question, or to add a tag question to the end of the word group. If the question can be answered by *yes* or *no*, it is a complete sentence; if not, it is a fragment. For example:

We were very busy that day. Because we had to meet our deadline.

"Is it true that we were busy that day?"

"Is it true that because we had to meet our deadline?"

She was busy that day, wasn't she?

Driving by the park, didn't he?

2.2.1.1. Types of Fragments

Different writers tried to classify fragments according to the type of construction and the presence or absence of the verb and/or subject. Nazario et al. (2013) divided them into six types. Purdue Online Writing Lab OWL(2024) added a seventh type: no-subject fragment.

2.2.1.1.1. Subject-only Fragment(no finite verb)

In this type, the word group lacks a finite verb.

The man in the booth.

Fragment The subject *man* has not a verb, which is needed to complete the idea.

RevisionThe man in the booth gave me instructions.

2.2.1.1.2Verbal-Phrase Fragment

Verbal-phrase fragments can be a participial, a gerund or an infinitive phrase. Since they contain non-finite verbs, they cannot be complete sentences.

Fragment I read the list. Hoping to see my name.

Revision*I read the list, hoping to see my name.*

OR

I read the list. Hoping to see my name, I searched nervously.

2.2.1.1.3. Prepositional-Phrase Fragment

Since prepositional phrases, do not contain a verb and its subject, they cannot express a complete thought and therefore cannot be complete sentences.

He made many errors. *Throughout the report.*

He made many errors throughout the report.

2.2.1.1.4. Split-Compound Fragment

When a coordinating conjunction not followed by a subject is used, both parts should be written as one sentence.

Fragment *Jessica left early. And took the bus*.

Revision *Jessica left early and took the bus.*

OR

Jessica left early, and she took the bus.

2.2.1.1.5 .Transitional-Word Fragment

This type of fragment begins with transitional words and expressions (*thus, however, especially, for instance ,for example, therefore, etc.).* It often lacks a verb.

Fragment *We have been to many exciting cities. For example, Los Angeles.*

Revision *We have been to many exciting cities, for example, Los Angeles.*

OR

We have been to many exciting cities. For example, we have enjoyed Los Angeles.

1.2.1.1.6. Dependent-Clause Fragment

Dependent clauses are fragments because they do not express a complete thought. They have to be joined to an independent clause to complete the meaning.

Fragment *When I complete the project.*

Revision *When I complete the project, I will be happy.*

OR

I will be happy when I complete the project.

2.2.1.1.7. No-subject Fragment

This type of fragment lacks a subject. Called mixed constructions, these fragments often begin with a prepositional phrase and end with a predicate (Perdue OWL, 2024).

Fragment With the ultimate effect of all advertising is to sell the product. **Revision** The ultimate effect of all advertising is to sell the product.

2.2.2. Run-on Sentences

"Run-on sentences are independent clauses that have not been joined correctly" (Hacker&Sommers, 2016, p.195). There are four types of run-on sentences:

2.2.2.1. Comma Splice: The independent clauses are joined using a comma.

Air pollution poses risks to all humans, it can be deadly for asthma sufferers(Hacker&Sommers, 2016).

Another type of comma splice is when the comma is accompanied by a conjunctive adverb or a transitional phrase with incorrect punctuation (Hacker&Sommers, 2016).

Air pollution poses risks to all humans, however, it can be deadly for asthma sufferers.

2.2.2.2. Fused Sentence: The independent clauses are joined using no punctuation mark or no coordinating conjunction (Hacker&Sommers, 2016).

Air pollution poses risks to all humans it can be deadly for asthma sufferers

3. Method

The method used to collect the data and analyze the results is explained in what follows.

3.1. Population and Sampling

The population of the present study is composed of 340 first- year students enrolled during the academic year 2022-2023 at the Department of English, OEB University. The sample consists of 73 students whose age ranges from 18 to 21. They are 23 males and 50 females.

3.2.Means of Research

To conduct the present research, the participants were asked to write a paragraph (around 15 lines) about an experience that had a great impact on their life. The errors in fragments and run-on sentences were identified and subsequently classified into types. Then, the frequency and percentage of each type were counted.

4. Results

This section presents the results in terms of the types of the errors committed and the frequency and percentage of each type, and gives possible explanation to these errors.

4.1. Fragments

Fragment Type	Frequency	Percentage
Subject-Only Fragment (no finite verb)	3	42.85%
Verbal-Phrase Fragment	1	14.28
Prepositional-Phrase Fragment	0	0%
Split-Compound Fragment	0	0%
Transitional-Word Fragment	0	0%
Dependent-Clause Fragment	3	42.85%
No-subject Fragment	0	0%
Total	**7**	**100%**

Table 1: Types of Fragments and their Frequencies and Percentages

As shown in table 1above, the frequency of fragments is very low (only 7 cases). No finite- verb fragments, dependent- clause fragments, and verbal phrase fragments are the only types of fragments committed by the students (3 errors for dependent- clause fragments, i.e., 3 for finite- verb fragments, and 1 error for verbal phrase fragment). The three no-finite verb fragment errors are identified and corrected in the table 2 below.

Error	Correction

1. My entire view of life crashing down. 2. She stolen from me. 3. After 30 seconds, I stopped that and my sister still alive.	1. My entire view of life crashed down. 2. She was stolen from me. 3. After 30 seconds, I stopped that and my sister was still alive.

Table 2: No-finite Verb Errors and Their Correction

In fact, in the first two cases, the students omitted the auxiliary *to be* from the finite verb. In the first case, *was* is needed to complete the past continuous verb *was crashing* although the continuous form is not appropriate here. In the second case, *was* is needed to complete the passive verb *was stolen.* In the third case, the main verb *to be* is omitted.

The three dependent-clause fragment errors, which are all relative clauses, are shown in the following table.

Error	**Correction**
1. My future was dependent on it and now I lost it. The hope that I will have a future 2. I'm done being told that I don't matter. That I'm worthless. That I don't deserve to live.	1. My future was dependent on it and now I lost the hope that I will have a future. 2. I'm done being told that I don't matter, that I'm worthless, that I don't deserve to live.

Table 3: Dependent-Clause Fragment Errors and Their Correction

The only verbal-phrase fragment error is a participial phrase.

Error	**Correction**

Finally after completing the exam. Then I sat thinking about how much the rate would be.	Finally, after completing the exam, Isat thinking about how much the rate would be.

4.2. Run-on Sentences

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Comma Splice	201	80.07%
Fused Sentence	50	19.92%
Total	**251**	**100%**

Table 4: Types of Run-on Sentences and their Frequencies and Percentages

As indicated in table4, the majority of run-on errors are comma splices (80%). Fused sentence errors constitute only 19% of the total number of run-on errors. It means that the investigated sample tends to put commas between main clauses or complete sentences rather than leaving a gap between them. The following are examples of fused sentence errors.

Error	Correction
1. I will never forget the day I got my bachaloriate exam it was a special day. 2. I brought my cat into our house while she was still new born she was very active and played with everyone.	1. I will never forget the day I got my bachaloriate exam; it was a special day. 2. I brought my cat into our house while she was still new born.She was very active and played with everyone.

Table 5: Fused Sentence Errors and Their Correction

The following are examples of comma splice errors.

Error	Correction
1. I took all the lessons and notes,I practiced a lot of exercises about Math and accounting. 2. Fortunately, I didn't face any distractions, also our home was perfect for study. 3. One day, I went to the city of Constantine to watch a football match Between Mouloudia of Algiers and JSK, there is a great hostility Between the two teams, when I arrived in the city I found cars coming from the capital destroyed and many wounded, I entered the stadium with difficulty, and there were many clashes in the stadium, this match was the most dangerous in the history of Algeria with many casualties, it was one of the worst days of my life, after the match we stayed in the stadium for four hours.	1. I took all the lessons and notes.I practiced a lot of exercises about Math and accounting. 2. Fortunately, I didn't face any distractions; also our home was perfect for study. 3. 3. One day, I went to the city of Constantine to watch a football match Between Mouloudia of Algiers and JSK. There is a great hostility Between the two teams. when I arrived in the city, I found cars coming from the capital destroyed and many wounded. I entered the stadium with difficulty; there were many clashes in the stadium. This match was the most dangerous in the history of Algeria with many casualties. It was one of the worst days of my life. After the match we stayed in the stadium for four hours.

Table 6: Comma Splice Errors and their Correction

Few of the comma splice errors occur between two main clauses/simple sentences like in the first example in the table above. The majority of the comma

splice errors form a long string of simple/main clause, compound, or complex sentences as in the third example. In one case, the comma is accompanied by a conjunctive adverb (*also*) with incorrect punctuation as in the second example.

4.3. Fragments and Run-on Sentences

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Fragments	7	2.33%
Run-on sentences	251	97%
Total	**257**	**100%**

Table 7: Frequency and Percentage of Fragments and Run-on Sentences

As table7 above indicates, the majority of errors are run-on errors (251), which constitute 97% of the total fragment and run-on errors. The students committed only 7 fragment sentences, i.e., 2.33 % of the total errors. This means that the investigated students do not have problems with fragments, and have a very serious problem with run-on sentences regarding the huge number of run-on errors.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the extent to which a sample of Algerian EFL learners face the problem of run-on and fragment sentences in their writing compositions determining the percentages of the types of fragments and run-ons. It was found that the frequency of fragments was very low (only 7 cases, i.e., 2.33 % of the total errors), while 251(i.e., 97% of the total fragment and run-on errors) were run-ons. This can be attributed to transfer from Standard Arabic, which tends to link ideas through commas forming, thus, very long sentences. For example, in El-Aqqad's (1960)*Sara,* a 314-word paragraph is punctuated by a single full stop, two

ellipsis marks, two exclamation marks, and 16 commas(Yagi et al, 2024). Also, in Ahmed Amin's (1947), Fayd al-Khatir," it is common to find paragraphs of 100 words, punctuated by a single full stop and sentences averaging 100 words each."(Yagi et al, 2024, Introduction Section).It means that the students tend to write long sentences rather than short ones following the structure of Arabic; that is why they do not commit fragment errors, but run-on errors. The three no-finite verb fragments can be attributed to the influence of Standard Arabic, which has no specific form for the verb *to be*. As for the three dependent-clause fragment errors, which are all relative clauses, they can be explained by the fact that the students consider the relative clause as a main clause since it contains a verb and do not know that it is merely a modifier. Finally, as for the only verbal-phrase fragment error committed, it can be explained by the fact that the student considers the present participle as a finite verb, since it is a verbal.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated the problem of run-on and fragment sentences in the writings of 73 first year students at the Department of English, OumEl Bouaghi University. The aim was to find the extent to which the students face this problem, to identify the types of these errors, and to find possible explanations for them. Theoretically, there are seven types of fragment sentences: Subject-only fragment (no finite verb),verbal-phrase fragment prepositional-phrase fragment, split-compound fragment, transitional-word fragment, dependent-clause fragment, and no-subject fragment; and two types of run-on sentences: comma splice and fused sentence. Only three types of fragments were found: Subject-only fragment (no finite verb), verbal-phrase fragment, and dependent-clause fragment. However, the frequency of fragment sentences was very low in comparison with

run-on sentences in types, comma splices and fused sentences. This was attributed to the interference of Standard Arabic which tends to link ideas through commas forming, thus, very long sentences. Another instance of this interference was the presence of three cases of no-finite verb fragments as Arabic has no specific form for the verb *to be*. The other very few errors found in the present research were intralingual ones.

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