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A New Outlook to L2 Learners' Writing Errors*

Dr. Hassan Edalat**

E-mail: edalathassan@yahoo.com

Abstract:

One question always engages the mind of those who are concerned with teaching and learning language in general and learning English language by Iranian students in particular. In case of Iranian students, teachers and researchers are interested to find out why graduate students from university fail to master English language after many years of study.

An error analysis of Iranian students traces the influence of different elements within L1 on the final production of their L2. The corpus was examined from two aspects: Sentence-level errors and paragraph level errors. The findings of this study reveal that the differences between sentence patterns in English and Persian force students to employ structures in positions quite alien to English language sentence pattern. Students' word choice affected by the style of word choice in Persian constitutes another area responsible for the production of unnatural English sentences.

Having knowledge about the problems of the students will help both teachers and students to use their effort and knowledge more fruitfully in the process of language teaching and learning.

Key words: *Language Transfer; Wrong Word Choice; Persian Style; Wrong Application of Modifiers; L2 and L1 sentence Pattern; L2 and L1 Thought Pattern.*

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** - Assistant Professor of Tabriz University

Introduction

Different studies and research projects (Lado, 1957; Fries, 1945; Corder, 1974; Richards, 1973; Ellis, 1985) throughout the history of language teaching and learning prove the life-long concern for the problems of L2 learning. Out of different sources which SLA has proved to be the cause for the problem in the speech of all L2 learners -omission and overgeneralization-, other errors "reflect learners' attempt to make use of their L1 knowledge" (Ellis, 1997:19). This study scrutinizes L1 transfer aspect of the problem to find an answer to the basic question: What prevents learners' attempt to become more fluent in their use of L2?

There are characteristic factors within L1 which influence the final production of learners' L2. These factors of L1 are responsible for the production of the interlanguage of the students. Ellis (1997:37) has pointed out that "researchers have been primarily concerned with identifying the internal mechanisms that are responsible for interlanguage development". To raise the question of why learners make errors, the interlanguage production of the students is studied.

In the 1970s, Error Analysis (EA) supplanted Contrastive Analysis (CA), which sought to predict the errors that learners made by identifying the linguistic differences between their L1 and the target language. The underlying assumption of CA was that errors occurred primarily as a result of interference when the learner transferred native language that habits, structures, and patterns into the L2. Interference was believed to take place whenever the 'habits' of the native languages differed from those of the target language. CA gave way to EA as this assumption came to be challenged. Whereas CA looked at only the learner's native language and the target language, EA provided a methodology for investigating learner language (Ellis, 1994: 47-48). Contrastive Analysis attempted to

predict the errors that learners made by identifying the linguistic differences between L1 and the target language. Still, when it comes to deal with foreign language situation where language learners do not have communicative contact with native speakers of L2, contrastive analysis take stride. In Ellis's words (1985:33), the use of contrastive analysis is "worthwhile, if it (CA) explains why some errors occur."

Faghih (1997:127) argues that "CA will remain one of the contributing components of language transfer". He believes the success or failure of learning a second language depends on recognizing the differences and similarities between the learners' first language and the language they are learning. In addition to the significance of recognizing the differences and similarities between L1 and L2, the present study will focus on the reasons for the choice and the determination of items in the final production of L2. The following extract from Ellis introduces this area of SLA in relation to the comparison made between L1 and L2.

It has been noted in the discussion of 'translation equivalence' that Contrastive Analysis needs to consider not only linguistic contrast but also pragmatic contrasts such as the similarities and differences in the stylistic uses of items in the first and second language and in the form-function relationships (Ellis,1985:38).

The Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study is based on studying the errors of students on sentence and paragraph levels in essay writings of Iranian English major students in Tabriz University. Special attention has been paid to both sentence and paragraph level errors.

Considering the English writings of Iranian essays, it is quite clear that the students produce paragraphs that do not match English writing model. Out of the four models of composition offered by Williams (1998:52-69), the product (current-traditional model) and the process models are of importance because the writings of Iranian students show evidence of product model and lack of process model.

To be familiar with the types of errors that students made, it was necessary to determine the reason and logic for the selection and sequence of syntactic structures and lexis. The overall structure of students' writing, assigned in the undergraduate program of English Language Department, Faculty of Literature and Foreign Languages of Tabriz University, was studied closely.

It is essential here to mention the fact that the official language these students speak at home and outside class is mainly Farsi – apart from their ethnic language-, not English. The basic question is, then, "Why does students' native language (L1) affect their English (L2) both in sentence and paragraph levels?" Narrowing this further, the focus of the study is to identify if different thinking patterns in L1 from those in L2 results in different language features causing erroneous production in writing in English. Put it in other terms, this study aims to trace the origin of all types of errors- except intralingual errors- in the students' L1, disregarding the fact that the case complicates when the students' mother tongue (Turkish, Kurdish, Gilak. . .) is different from Persian, which is national language.

What makes this study different from previous studies is that in this study errors are looked upon from a general stance instead of working with too much specification, as it is common in CA. The degree of the occurrence of the errors is the basis to search for the cause of errors, not the differences existing between L1 and L2 individual linguistic items as it is followed in the studies made by the

researchers who support CA and attempt to find differences regarding meaning, structures, phonetics or rules to predict the problems L2 learners face (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Fallahi, 1991; Faghih, 1997; Manuchehri, 1974).

As a result of this study, the students are required to use their active mind in three areas (Note 1) which are the main causes for the problem they face in language use. Students will become psychologically encouraged to practice in these three areas because they feel exhilarated in producing new items one after the other. Such exhilaration encourages them to be cautious about the use of items in both L1 and L2. They will switch from L1 to L2 continually in producing L1 or L2 respectively. This will result in students' psychological involvement in the language use. Such an involvement is quite different from having knowledge about the differences of the use of linguistic items emphasized by CA.

What students are expected to do as a result of this study is quite simple. Students' practice in language use consists of conscious involvement in producing the language both in L1 and in L2: to identify the position of corresponding modifying elements in English and Persian, which occupy different positions in relation to head noun or verb; to be alert when using "and" or "but" to prevent a very long and irrelevant sentences; to be cautious about the powerful influence of Persian vocabulary in choosing L2 equivalent; and to know that some Persian structures or expressions are responsible for the wrong corresponding structures in L2.

Participants

Forty senior year English majors studying at English department of Tabriz University in the winter term 2004 participated in this study. These students had begun studying English six years before they entered university. However, their use of English Language has been

limited to their English courses. Nearly, all of them spoke Persian or their native tongue after their English classes and their use of English language continued in the next English class. These students belonged to different ethnic groups, who came from different regions and had their own different dialects but with the same official Persian language taught throughout their education.

The group was taught for three months during the whole term of their fourth year of study at English department of Tabriz University. During the term, the participants were administered a treatment about paragraph organization, process of writing a paragraph, and organizing as well as writing an essay. It was intended to see students' success in following the instructed material to write a well organized paragraph and, as a result, to write an acceptable essay on English standards. The group consisted of 40 intact subjects and no attempt was made to randomly assign subjects to the group. Indeed, the design did not provide any additional group as comparison. Thus, the group was given one treatment and one observation.

Procedure

Following guidelines offered by Ellis (1985:51-52), a sample of written language was collected from students' final essay writing exam in winter semester 2004.

During treatment, a textbook by Reid (1982), *The Process of Composition*, was the focus of study. Students were informed of the fundamentals of writing.

Students were expected to show their ability in writing a sound topic sentence, a well organized paragraph, a well organized introductory paragraph for the essay and a complete essay on the basis of what they had learned during the course. The individual sentences students had included in their writings were also considered closely. The sentences were expected to be based on the English sentence

pattern with right word choice, right choice of modifiers, and right position for modifiers, right punctuation, and logical length of sentence. It was presupposed that the students had gained enough knowledge about writing a suitable sentence.

Error Classification

Based on the literature, (Brown, 1994; Ellis, 1995; Hubbard et al, 1996), the errors were first identified and then classified. The grammatical explanation of the classification of the errors resulted in the following category and sub-categories. In the choice of these categories and sub-categories, it was intended to have a simple classification to cover almost all the errors found in the essays.

1- Errors due to Wrong Word Choice and Misuse of Vocabulary as a result of Word Choice in Persian (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and demonstrative).

2-Ambiguous English Structures caused by Persian expressions or structures (FE).

3-Erroneous Sentences Caused by the Overuse and Misuse of Coordinators such as 'and' and 'but'.

4-Incomplete Use of L2 Grammatical Rules

5-Wrong and Unnecessary Application of Modifiers affected by the position and application of modifiers in Persian.

Sources of Errors

Once the categories were chosen, the next step was to identify the sources of errors. The search for the sources of errors was based on Ellis (1997).

Considering different areas which proved to be copied from Persian lexis and syntax in the classification, it was apparent that, except the ignorance of L2 rules, L1 influences the English production of these students in the following areas: stylistic choices, word order,

the position of modifiers, word choice, productions due to fixed expressions of native language, and wrong application of structures due to the influence of students' first language.

The total number of errors found in different areas was 2416 errors shown in Figure 1.

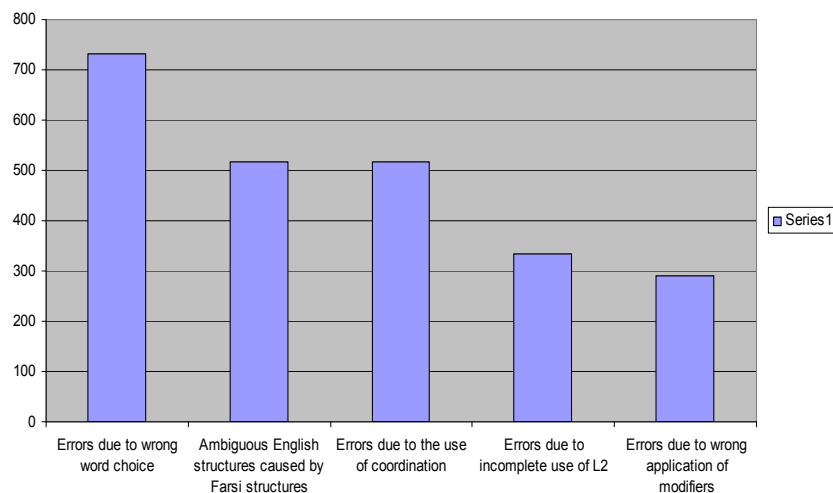


Figure 1: Distribution of Errors found in 40 essays.

Total errors 2416= 732 (30.29%) +518 (21.44%) +516 (21.36%) +341 (14.12%) +341 (14.12%)

Example of Errors (Notes 2 and 3):

Errors due to semantic distinction:

Wrong Word Choice

Wrong word choices are underlined.

1- Television is an influential device in people's life.

2- people try to conform their idea about many things with what is said in TV.

Syntactic Errors

A- Errors due to the Imitation of Persian Structure

Persian expressions which are transferred into English are underlined.

1- It is for us to be aware of our country in which we live and about its situations and television do this for us.

2- we can be aware of our country's economic problems whether it is in high degree or not.

B- Errors due to the Use of Coordination

1- another reason for increasing in sells is [that people know about their productors, factory product credit and experience that play a crucial role in having an increase in sells.]

2- [with having a prior knowledge about goods their effects, their procedures to use and etc] people will have a good choice in one hand, and people will be healthier because they will have information about cosmetics and medical treatment and etc, on the other hand.

C- Errors due to Wrong Application of Modifiers

The wrong modifiers in this category are placed in brackets. These modifiers are either misplaced or mis-chosen.

1- teenagers believe that it is useless [talking about their problems to their parents] because they won't understand.

2- No matter of what kind, [social, political, etc,] they usually have argues over this[time and again].

3- What is peopl's [way of life news] and country's social problem.

Grammatical Errors

Errors due to Incomplete Use of L2

1- Young people use *the* television very much.

2- when the football matches *are broadcasting* in a live program.

Errors in Paragraph Organization and Rhetorical Devices

Table 1 deals with paragraph organization and rhetorical devices
The following items are the focus of attention in each paragraph.

- 1- Suitable topic sentence on the basis of thesis sentence, abbreviated as T.S.
- 2- Inclusion of controlling ideas in the topic sentence, abbreviated as I.C.I.
- 3- Developing controlling ideas, abbreviated as D.I.
- 4- Summation or synthesis, abbreviated as S.
- 5- Announcing the truth and providing information instead of narrowing the idea, abbreviated as P.I.
- 6- Inclusion of "that" or "which" as a way to sound less "basic" i.e. to use the structure to change the subject. Such structures first provide information; on the other hand, since no idea remains as a central focus, no argument can logically be developed, abbreviated as I.that/what.I.
- 7- Inclusion of "that" or "which" to modify a single idea. This will help the writer to focus on the idea to refine it without moving away from it, abbreviated as I.that.M.
- 8- The technique of embedded and recursive structures. Students repeat syntactic structures to produce parallelism, abbreviated as P.
- 9- The number of sentences in each paragraph, abbreviated as N.

Table 1: Lack (-) or inclusion (+) of elements of a well organized L2 paragraph

Student	T.S	I.C.I	D.I	S	P.I	I.That.I	I.that.M	P	N
1	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
2	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	3
3	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	4
4	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	4
5	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	5
6	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	5
7	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	4
8	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	8
9	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	6
10	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
11	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	7
12	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
13	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	2
14	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	4
15	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	5
16	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	4
17	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	2
18	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	4
19	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	6
20	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	+	3
21	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	4
22	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	4
23	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	12
24	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	2
25	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	3
26	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
27	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	10
28	-	+	+	-	+	-	-	+	5
29	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	10
30	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	2
31	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	7
32	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	+	8
33	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	6
34	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	5
35	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	7
36	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	8
37	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	10
38	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	4
39	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	+	5
40	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	10
Total – (lacks)	40	24	30	40	9	16	40	7	
Total +(inclusion)	0	16	10	0	31	24	0	33	

Examples of Students' Paragraphs:

1- One of the television programmes which cover most part of it is news, this news are variable. But the most important of them I think is the news about social life's and problems of people's in countries. Television give news about the people's manner of life in their family life and their relationship with others.

2- Television, today has filled most of people's free time, much of people which come from tiring job the first act they do they turn on T.v and look for interesting programme. Everyday its time to fill this free time increase. It include comedy film and matches which somewhat make people to realization.

3- The main problematic issue that raised much controversy is the fact that, the managing of the medias, especially television by government authorities can lead to reinforcement of dominant culture, whereas the authorities can by the means of their programmes help to prevail their favorite and profitable culture in society . This process, eventually cause the enervating of local and less dominant cultures and in some way helps the establishment of a special kind of government.

Discussion

This study reveals the problem of Iranian students in two distinctive areas in the course of essay writing: The influence of their L1 on producing sentences which are not English from sentence pattern point of view. The second area is the lack of attention to apply necessary knowledge about writing rules and conventions in English. Since these problems are the problems of advanced students, not

freshmen students, the methods used to teach the language should go under the focus of attention.

1-Discussion about sentence level errors

The basic problem regarding both areas stems from the difference between Persian and English sentence structure. Persian sentences are basically established on S+ O+ V pattern, written from right to left; while, English sentence pattern is based on S+ V+ O pattern, written from left to right. The difference does not seem so important superficially but the long term effort of Persian students to learn the language proves the opposite.

With S + V + O pattern, the position that modifiers occupy is distinctive. For example, the subject and verb can easily be noticed as the core of sentence in 'a'.

a- The festival opened.

The subject and the verb can be modified by individual or phrasal modifiers as seen in 'b'. Individual modifiers are underlined and phrasal modifiers are placed in brackets

b- The Iranian film festival [entitled "review of Makhmalbaf works"] opened [in the Indian city] [of Bombay].

In this example, the modifiers of the core of sentence (subject) are 'the Iranian film' and [entitled "review of Makhmalbaf works"]. The verb of the sentence -as the other core- accepts [in the Indian city] [of Bombay] as modifier. The place for noun modifier is before the noun, if it is individual modifier, and after the noun if the modifier is phrasal or clause modifier. In Persian, the case is not the same. The core or the noun is placed at the beginning of the group and all the other modifiers are linked through 'ezafeh' or preposition as seen in the Persian equivalent of the subject and the modifiers of 'b'.

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In English, the position for verb modifiers is generally after the verb, or in some occasions, at the beginning of the sentence, whereas they are placed between subject and the verb in Persian.

Thus the general English sentence pattern with phrasal and clause modifiers looks as follow:

[verb modifier] + S + [modifier of subject] + V + Ob [modifier of object] + [verb modifier].

While corresponding sentence pattern for sentences with only prepositional phrases in Persian looks as follow:

[verb modifier] + S+ [subject modifier] + O + [object modifier] + [verb modifier] + verb.

For example, an English sentence with the above mentioned pattern looks as follow.

Three young women {armed with rifles} **killed a policeman** {patrolling the university of Elsalvaor campus} yesterday.

The sentence pattern with phrasal and clause modifiers in Persian looks as follow.

دیروز سه خانم جوان {مسلح به تفنگ} پلیسی را به قتل رساندند {که در محوطه دانشگاه السالوادور مشغول گشت زنی بود}.

[verb modifier]+ S+ [subject modifier] + O + [verb modifier] + V+ [object modifier].

The core of the sentence is in bold, individual modifiers are underlined and phrasal modifiers are in brackets.

It is vital for any Iranian student to have preliminary knowledge about core of a sentence and the role and position of modifiers in both languages (Schacher, 1983; Faghih, 1997). The students should distinguish noun modifiers from that of verb modifiers in Persian and English sentences. They should also know where the positions of those modifiers are in each language.

2- Discussion about Paragraph Level Errors

Development of every paragraph is important to show the thought pattern of the student (Kaplan, 1966: 4). Silva (1993:668) has argued that L1 and L2 writer's text organization was found to be different. According to Silva, L2 writers used different text structures and established different logical relationships between parts of the text. To this end, the first paragraph of 40 essays written by English major graduate students of Tabriz University was studied to find out the students' approach to organizing the paragraph and essay. These students were familiar with the method of organizing a paragraph in other courses offered during their studies at English department of Tabriz University. Still, learning to organize paragraph and essay was the major focus during their course. Students were overwhelmingly under the influence of an invisible force to produce paragraphs with the outcome which is shown in Table 1. This invisible force has been so influential that almost majority of students have failed to consider the materials discussed and practiced during their studies. It might be possible that the tight condition of examination plays an important role for the outcome. But students had to write an acceptable answer to the questions on the basis of course material.

One possible reason for their failure to write an acceptable paragraph on the norm of English language is the powerful influence of their strategy to write in Persian. Their strategy can be inferred from the classification of their misconduct shown in Table 1. This study proves that students' attitude about writing is strongly influenced by the manner of writing in Persian in which the main purpose is to provide as much information as it is possible for the subject of discussion, without having any organized pattern to follow. In general, students' paragraphs reveal that they have problems in discourse level competence. Their basic problem is the way the text should be structured with reference to how coherence and cohesion are

established. Once again, students should approach writing in English consciously. Conscious raising activities through teachers and materials should come first to prepare students to write effectively in English.

Conclusion

Related to writing a sentence accepted by L2 standards, this study reveals that there are three distinctive areas responsible for the transfer of L1 elements for the Iranian students. Awareness of these three areas on behalf of the learner is responsible for conscious learning of that language. These three areas are the areas that ignorance of which paves the ground for the L1 elements to penetrate L2 performance and students' conscious language processing will control their overall use of language (Dullay and others, 1982:110-111).

If one reflects on the process of reading an English sentence and producing equivalent for that sentence by an Iranian student, the importance of conscious familiarity of the learner with these three distinctive aspects of the language become evident. As soon as one reads a sentence, the ideal condition for the reader is to assimilate a sentence in Persian which sounds quite natural, a sentence without disordered words. This cannot be achieved unless the sentence, which is formed in the mind of the reader, is created in such a way that words or group of words are arranged naturally on the basis of the right position they occupy in Persian. In other words, the reader should be attentive to the normal position of the words and phrases to produce a sound sentence which is acceptable by the Persian speakers. An example will clarify this.

On the basis of the degree of English knowledge, the reader can produce different Persian equivalence as final production for the following sentence. It is pre supposed that the reader has no lexical problem in understanding the sentence.

The tall boy threw the green ball into the pool when he saw his friend.

- ۱- پسر قد بلند انداخت توپ سبز رنگ را داخل حوض وقتی که دوستش را دید.
- ۲- پسر قد بلند توپ سبز رنگ را انداخت داخل حوض وقتی که دوستش را دید.
- ۳- پسر قد بلند توپ سبز را داخل حوض انداخت وقتی که دوستش را دید.
- ۴- پسر قد بلند وقتی که دوستش را دید توپ سبز رنگ را داخل حوض انداخت.

All the productions in Persian are formed with Persian words but the degree of acceptability depends on whether the arrangement and the position of words or group of words are natural in Persian. In the process of achieving proficiency in the production of the language learner, the above-mentioned steps are followed so that the ideal sentence is felt for the language learner on the basis of natural word order in his language, Persian.

The same is true when the Persian language learner attempts to write in English. Language learner's production for any Persian notion which the student thinks of is acceptable for the L2 native speakers provided that the production match up natural English sentence pattern. This cannot be achieved without conscious choice of words or group of words from Persian sentence and, then, providence of their equivalents according to the sentence pattern of English language. In other words, core and modifiers should occupy their natural position in English production.

The three distinctive areas of knowledge which will hold back the occurrence of fore-mentioned errors are as follow.

First, students should have knowledge about the core of the sentence (subject, verb, and object). This is important because of the differences in the general sentence pattern in Persian and English. This means that the student should distinguish the core of sentence, especially when he is working with a compound or complex sentences. Just providing word for word equivalence of the English

pattern will not result in a well-ordered and natural sentence in other language. Thus, for the students, the process of producing a meaningful sentence in L1, when reading an English sentence, should include a conscious involvement of selecting the words and producing equivalence in order to have a sentence which is compatible with natural word order in Persian. Identifying the core of sentence would be his first step.

The second area of knowledge, without which L1 transfer is about to occur, is related to the manner of placing words in a noun group in English and Persian. In Persian, the position of adjectives in a noun group is after the head noun, linked to the noun through 'ezafeh'. At the same time, the phrasal modifiers are linked to the head noun in the same way, after the noun. In English, the position of adjective to the head noun is directly before the noun and the position of phrasal modifiers are after the head noun. Such a difference is the cause for many L1 transfer in the production of L2.

The following errors are produced as a result of this fact:

television interesting program/ television social program/ countries social problems/ information news/ people thought/ our ancestors thought.

Students' conscious knowledge about this linguistic difference will result in the production of structures which are acceptable in both languages. In order to achieve this end, students should have enough skill to know which word is used with what function in any specified sentence.

Finally, Students should have a conscious knowledge about the kind of modifiers used in any sentence for any noun and verb. They should be informed of the shape, the position and the function –used as an adjective or an adverb- of modifiers both in Persian and English to overcome the problem of L1 interference. Students will find this third area of knowledge very helpful in gaining the two former skills

automatically without spending too much time and effort. So it is quite right to say that the process of producing a sound sentence is conscious arrangement of the meaning of words on the basis of the word order of the language in question. Such a conscious knowledge is helpful not only in writing activities, but, it will help develop other skills such as reading speaking and listening. Teachers should provide such knowledge in preliminary level of teaching the language. It would also be the responsibility of course designers to provide materials to encourage conscious learning among students from early years of learning English.

As related to producing an acceptable paragraph on the basis of English language standards, this study has relied exclusively on general trend on writing. To this end, general approach to logic in Persian has also been considered. One of the limitations of this study is its failure to identify individual writer's state of mind in writing. Errors of every student should show the state of mind of each student. The researchers should have access to the thought pattern of each student and should know about his or her approach to logic. Students' approach to logic, which base his social relationship, should also be clarified.

It would be upon further studies to discover the influence of individual characteristics side by side the general trend of writing of Iranian students.

The only suggestion which would be useful for pedagogic purpose is to practice writing in L2 through practice in reading. The purpose of such reading would be to discover what the writer of the text has tried to do and how successful s/he has been in achieving his goal. It is through this approach that the students will gradually get familiar with the method of writing in L2 through reading courses. As a result, such terms as topic sentence, controlling ideas, developing of ideas, refining the ideas, providing support, organization of ideas,

unified thought, diversion of subject, and outlining, will be acquired indirectly. In general, reading should help develop writing skill of L2 learners by informing students about the approaches native L2 writers have followed.

Notes:

- 1- These three areas are discussed in Conclusion.
- 2- All the examples are copied from students' writing exam without any change.
- 3- Elements responsible for the errors are marked.

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