
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interlanguage Theory Revisited: Implications for the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the development of learners' interlanguage. It also tried to track the sources of the errors that they committed. To discover these errors, the researchers adopted a mixed methods approach. The findings revealed that the participants involved actively in learning the target language and their endeavors manifested all types of errors which may indicate that some of these errors are systematic and universal. The errors were classified according to their sources and their impact on students learning. The findings also revealed that the shortcomings of grammatical knowledge and the lack of exposure to the target language might have a negative impact on students' interlanguage and the production of native-like competence. Some of the errors indicated that the mother tongue interferes, while other errors indicated interlingual and intralingual strategies effect and attempts of simplification and miss-use of grammatical rules. Some suggestions for further research and pedagogical implications were provided.

KEYWORDS

Interlanguage theory, error analysis, interlingual and intralingual strategies, learner's language

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the interlanguage of eight learners enrolled in a Foundation Programme at two universities in a foreign language context. Many teachers may notice that students learning English may make extraordinary errors which may not be as a result of mother tongue interference, e.g., *eated*, *brang*, and so on. This goes in line with what Tarone (2014) claimed as a third language. In her opinion, learners have three languages, the mother tongue, the target language, and the learner language. This type of error indicated that students might try to construct their own knowledge and 'create' their own grammatical rules. Therefore, this observation has shifted from the ways of teaching to the learners' characteristics and their possible effect on the process of learning a second language (Wenden, 1987:3). It is no longer a controversy to say that learners play an essential part in the activity of acquiring a second/foreign language. In their endeavours to construct knowledge, learners may make errors similar to the above, which may enhance their learning in one way or another. For example, 'eated' shows that students know the rules, but they are confused between regular and irregular verbs.

According to Richards, error (2003) is the use of a linguistic item, such as a word, grammatical item, speech act, etc., in a way that is different from a fluent or native speaker of the language. The learners use erroneous sentences thinking that they are correct. The language produced in this way was termed by Selinker (1972, 1974) as interlanguage. The cause of students' errors or the learner's language is a controversial topic; for Corder (1967), it is idiosyncratic or a transitional language, and for Selinker, it is interlanguage. Analysis of these errors witnessed a lot of debate and views in the last century, such as error analysis and contrastive analysis. Both theories were attacked and criticized, and as a result of this, criticism emerged the theory of interlanguage. Tarone (2014) argued that interlanguage is not a theory but a hypothesis. The researchers are of the opinion that interlanguage is a theory because it helps the researchers to explain and illuminate students' errors clearly. Focusing on the interlanguage of a learner may

reveal the strategies s/he is using to learn. Casting light on some of these strategies, for example, overgeneralization and omission of articles, is likely to disclose the type of errors they commit. Identifying these errors accurately may help teachers to devise remedial programmes to encourage students to improve their interlanguage and be competent enough to use the target language properly. The researchers aim to explore these types of errors by implementing the interlanguage theory to find out the real reasons for making these errors and if it is possible to avoid them or benefit from them in the learning and teaching process.

1.1. Statement of the problem

It has been observed by several teachers in a foreign language context that students make errors that are different from the native language, and these errors may not be explained as mother tongue interference which may arouse interest in researchers to find out their sources.

1.2. Significance of the study.

This study is significant for teachers, learners, curriculum designers, and shareholders because it may cast light on the sources of the errors and how to benefit from them in developing remedial programmes.

To achieve the above objectives, the researchers posed the following questions:

1.3. Research Questions

1. To what extent learner's language is different/similar to the target language?
2. What are possible learners' errors based on their years of study?
3. In what way their learners' language is related to their mother tongue or/and native language?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Epistemological and Ontological Stands

There are two major approaches to educational psychology: behaviourism and cognitive psychology. Behaviourism could be traced back to positivism, an approach that claims that knowledge and facts exist within the real world and can be discovered by experiments under certain conditions. Behaviourism proponents argue that all human behaviour can be explained in terms of the way Stimulus-Response connections are built. Therefore, language learning, on the one hand, was habit formation; hence, the role of the teacher is to develop the learner's good language habits and help them avoid bad habits (errors).

On the other hand, cognitive psychology is concerned with the way the human mind thinks and learns. Cognitive psychologists are interested in the mental processes that are involved in learning the language. In a cognitive approach, the learner is an active contributor to the learning activity. S/he uses different mental strategies to learn the language (Williams and Burden, 1999:7-11).

The former approach seems to be more suitable for learners who are less motivated and depend to a great extent on the teacher and employ a rote-learning strategy, while the latter is suitable for those who are highly motivated and exert their efforts in order to learn the language following different strategies and seems to enhance learner autonomy. This does not mean that some learners learn without thinking about the language they are learning. It rather means that some are more active in the process of learning by using cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. In what follows, the researchers address learners' endeavours in learning a foreign language.

2.2 Interlanguage

According to Ellis (2001), the notion of interlanguage draws directly on the cognitive view of first language acquisition. Cook (1996:31) defined interlanguage as "the knowledge of the second language in the learner's mind." Ellis (2001, 349) provided a more specific and detailed definition. He claimed that interlanguage is used "to refer to both the internal system that a learner has constructed at a single point in time ('interlanguage') and to the series of interconnected systems that characterize the learner's process over time ('interlanguage continuum')". Since learners play an important role in the learning process, researchers' data should be based on what learners really attempt to understand or produce in natural contexts. Selinker, who coined the term 'interlanguage' (1985), claimed that the learner activates psychological structures which are latent in the brain when they attempt to learn. During their attempts to learn the target language, these psychological structures predominate, thus producing both correct and incorrect sentences (see the discussion section).

2.3 Fossilisation

Fossilisation is an interesting area of interlanguage. It is a mechanism that is assumed to exist in the latent psychological structure. Fossilised linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules, and subsystems that speakers of a certain native language will tend to keep in their interlanguage relative to a certain target language regardless of their ages and the language data they are exposed to (Selinker, 1985). In Selinker's opinion, the most interesting phenomenon in interlanguage performance is items, rules, and subsystems that are fossilized in terms of language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies

of second language communication, and overgeneralization. Examples of such interlanguage performance from the collected samples are: Transfer of training, pupil's for pupils (plural), and animal's for animals (plural) because learners are always told to add the apostrophe before the possessive 's', so they add the apostrophe whenever they see an 's' of a plural noun. In the beginning, they may apply the apostrophe properly, then they regress and fail to distinguish between the plural's' and the possessive's'; later, they may self-correct the error. Overgeneralization is a phenomenon that occurs when learners extend the grammatical rule to an utterance where it does not apply, for instance, the third person 's' with singular and plural subjects. Ellis (2001:353) defined fossilisation as "the process by which non-target language forms become fixed in interlanguage.

2.4 Error Analysis

Ellis defined errors as a deviation from the norm of the target language. In the 1970s, EA supplanted contrastive analysis (CA), which failed to account for a real prediction of difficult areas learners would encounter (Ellis: 2001). Learners produce errors while trying actively to use the target language, either in production or comprehension. Ellis (2001:47) claimed that "learners make errors in both comprehension and production." The reason for these errors is the attempts learners make to bring their language in line with the target language. Corder (1974:122) explained why learners make errors. He argued, "A learner of a language is progressively changing his (sic) language performance to bring it in line with that of the native speaker." Researchers and scholars who are interested in learners' errors find that these errors are variable. For example, Richards (1985:173) claimed that there are two types of errors: interlanguage errors, which are caused by the interference of the learner's mother tongue, and intralingual: "errors which result from faulty or partial learning of the target language" (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1993:187) and developmental errors. Intralingual errors are frequent, regardless of the learner's language background. These errors reflect the learner's competence at a stage and elucidate some of the general characteristics of language acquisition.

3. Methodology

The researchers adopted a mixed methods approach, quantitative and qualitative approaches because it allows an in-depth understanding of the students' interlanguage and their linguistic development by collecting learners' produced language in both writing and speaking, especially while giving presentations. The emerged data were coded and classified to know the types of errors and the researchers tried to find the reasons that might cause them. Since the purpose of the study is to examine the impact of interlanguage on students' learning, the best method to employ, in the researchers' opinions, is the mixed methods approach. The mixed methods approach, as Bergman (2008) claimed, is one of the most utilised methods in research methodology today. According to Bergman, it seems to be simple because by adopting this method, the researchers use the most appropriate combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Denscombe (2008) also argued that the mixed methods approach could guarantee the accuracy of data collected and is able to provide an obvious picture of the problem under investigation better than a mono-method.

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were four randomly selected students, both males, and females, from two tertiary institutions. They are native speakers of Arabic and have studied English as a foreign language for 12 years at school (an average of 4-5 hours weekly). Their ages ranged between 19 and 21 years. They are hardly exposed to English outside the university campus.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1 Presentation of the Findings

A short questionnaire (Appendix 1) was devised to investigate their background knowledge of the United Kingdom and the English language. It also aimed at finding out some information concerning their motivation and attitudes towards the target language. Moreover, it intended to probe the learning strategies these learners practice to improve their interlanguage.

The findings of the questionnaire have revealed that most of them have general information about Britain. Furthermore, these learners believed that English is the most important language today. Therefore, it is the most needed language for anyone who wants to travel abroad. They also think that English is a key requirement in Oman to study at the university and to get a good job.

The questionnaire illustrated that three of the participants never used English outside the campus. The others sometimes used it in malls and coffee shops (some of the shop assistants in Oman are non-Arabic speaking Asians). Three of the subjects watch different English programmes on TV, YouTube, and Tik Tok and read English newspapers or magazines to improve their listening and reading skills. All of them but one think English classes are interesting.

The following section explores the interlanguage of these learners by analysing collected samples of their written work. These samples are collected from the learners' work during the fall semester (nearly four months). Some work is collected from writing tasks and presentations. There are also some examples taken from free writing tasks. For example, students are asked to write a paragraph on 'smoking' or given some information as clues to write about a country.

This section exemplifies some of the learners' written work to focus on each individual's interlanguage in relation to their errors and the strategies used to comprehend the extent to which they have learnt the target language. Moreover, it throws light on the

interlanguage of each learner to investigate his correct and incorrect utterances. Moreover, it displays the learners' errors and also identifies them, describes and explains them in order to find out why they commit these errors. According to Wenden (1987:3), there are some interlanguage studies, for example, Taylor (1975) and Richards (1975), that consider universal language processing strategies such as overgeneralisation, transfer, and simplification as one cause of learner errors and the instability of learner interlanguage. Such analyses and studies may help teachers to understand the learning process and teaching techniques that may help them to apprehend the type of difficulties students may encounter and also devise effective remedial programmes for future classes.

It is worth mentioning that the names that appear are not the real names of the students in order to protect their identities for ethical considerations.

4.2 Interlanguage

- Med

(The numbered examples hereafter refer to Appendix 2)

The demonstration of Med's interlanguage reveals that he is able to produce utterances identical to or near the norm of the target language. Look at the following sentences: -

2. *Watches are things that tell us time.*

3. *An artist is a person who paints pictures.*

However, close scrutiny depicts other sentences as a deviation from the native speaker's norm.

4. * *A fisherman is man who catches fish.*

8* *Butter are produced from Denmark.*

(For other examples, see Appendix 2)

His interlanguage contains both target and non-target language forms. For example, sentences 2/4 both contain a relative clause; however, he succeeded in constructing a correct form in 2 but failed in 4, where he violated the rule of the indefinite article (a plausible interpretation is *a man*). Sentences 2-4 may indicate that he has learnt the rule of the relative clause, but he has some difficulties with the indefinite article. Although sentence 8 has correct passive forms, the learner misused the verb *to be* and also used a wrong preposition. This should be considered by the teacher when devising a remedial programme. In sentence 9, he used *watching* for *watch*. This error indicates ignorance of rule restrictions, i.e., *can* should be followed by a bare-infinitive. In 10, he used *was* for *were*. If the above non-target language forms become fixed in the learner's interlanguage, there is a probability of fossilisation. The teacher's role in such cases is to help learners to develop their interlanguage by applying positive strategies to benefit from the input of the data they are exposed to. For example, the proper use of the indefinite article, rule restrictions, and so on.

- Sab

Sab's interlanguage is also subject to variability and indicates that he has not yet formed a better concept or view of the rules she was exposed to. It seems, however, her interlanguage is more developed than her classmates. She could produce many correct utterances, such as,

1. *Tailors are people who make clothes.*

5. *They went to England to learn English.*

(See Appendix 2 for more examples). However, she failed to build some other forms correctly, in particular, correct forms of tenses; the verb *to be* and the passive form. The ill-formed utterances may illustrate that she is still a long way from the end of the interlanguage continuum. For the types and sources of her errors, see the section about error analysis.

- Wad

Wad's interlanguage is heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, which indicates that he is using different strategies to learn. Sentences 1-4 are correctly formed, which illustrates his knowledge of some rules of the second language. For example, he wrote these sentences properly:

1. *Leaves are green things that grow on trees.*

3. *Clothes are made in Italy*

On the other hand, sentences 5-10 disclose his weak points. For instance, he breached the rules of the indefinite article in (4), the verb *to be* in (6), and the passive in (5). The strategies he is using should be altered to avoid fossilisation in the future. Further discussion about his errors comes later.

- WaL

WaL also produced some correct and incorrect sentences. For example, he wrote these sentences properly:

1. *An apple is a fruit that grows on trees.*
2. *Computers are made in Britain.*

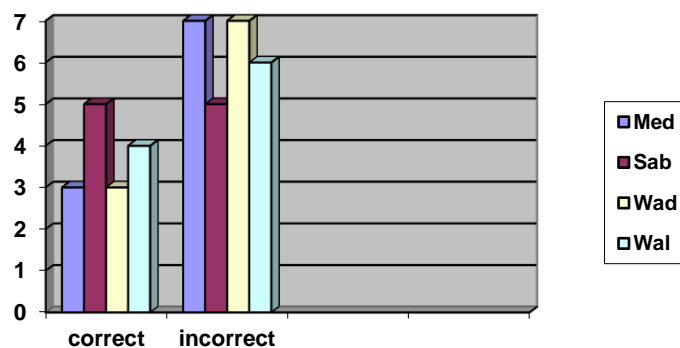
WaL's incorrect utterances obviously deviated from the norm of the English language, i.e., they are overt errors. Most probably, they are a result of the lack of knowledge of the proper rules. For example, in sentences (6/7), he used the indefinite article with a plural noun and with an uncountable noun.

All these learners committed errors by breaching grammatical rules of the target language; hence, their deviations are in correctness (the usage of the language), not in appropriateness (the use of language) (Ellis, 2001,52). This does not mean they can use the target language properly in the social context. The core units in the course books concentrate heavily on the usage of the language rather than on the use of the language.

The following table illustrates the correct and incorrect utterances of the aforementioned learners.

The learner	Correct utterances	Incorrect utterances	Total
Med	3	7	10
Sab	5	5	10
Wad	3	7	10
WaL	4	6	10

Table (2) illustrates the learners' interlanguage.



Graph 1 illustrates the learners' interlanguage.

4.3 Error Analysis

These learners, as mentioned above, have been learning English for a long time; thus, most of their errors seem to be systematic and regular. In spite of their erroneous utterances, they can give an account of why they have chosen that form. This section presents a survey of the errors committed by the participants in this study.

- Med

4.3.1 Identification of Errors

Med's errors are of the same type as those of his classmates. They are overt and caused as a result of breaking the grammatical rules of the language he is attempting to learn.

4.3.2 Description of errors

- Omission, e.g., *A fisherman is man...* (Sentence4)
- Addition, e.g., *Reading is a good...*(7)
- Misinformation, e.g., He used 'shoot' for 'shoots'; 'watching' for 'watch'; 'animal's' for 'animals' (6/9/10)
- Misuse of the verb *to be*, e.g., He used 'are' for 'is'; 'was' for 'were' (8/10)
- Wrong preposition 'from' for 'in' (8)

4.3.3 Explanation of errors

4.3.3.1 Interference error

Like his peers, he failed to use the indefinite article and the verb *to be* correctly because of the absence of these items in his mother tongue.

4.3.3.2 Intralingual errors

As his companions do, he attempts to facilitate his learning by simplifying the rules of the second language either by overgeneralisation or omission of some grammatical items.

4.3.3.3 Developmental errors

It is likely that *You can watching* is a result of a false hypothesis. He may be making an analogy with *You are doing...*

- Sab

4.3.4 Identification of Errors

Sab's errors are not much different from his classmates. They are overt and may also be caused due to the lack of knowledge of the rules of the second language. He breaks the rules of the grammar of the language he is learning. Moreover, his errors can be judged as a deviation in correctness rather than appropriateness.

4.3.5 Description of Errors

- Misinformation, e.g., pupil's for pupils; verb stem +s for verb stem; verb stem for verb stem +d (6/8/7)
- Omission, e.g., *It used* for *It is used* (9)

4.3.6 Explanation of Errors

- Interference errors

The omission of the verb *to be* seems to be interference from the Arabic language, in which this form does not exist.

- Intralingual errors

The misuse of tenses seems to be the result of the overgeneralisation strategy he is using to simplify the rule of the language.

- Developmental errors

Sab built the following sentences on a false hypothesis... *so the donkey was bitten (sic) his arm... the man was shouted.* (a plausible interpretation is ... so the donkey bit his arm and the man 'its owner' shouted at him.) In these forms, the verb *to be* 'was' is used as a marker of the past tense.

- Wad

4.3.7 Identification of error

Wad's errors share similar features with some of his classmates. He also employs learning strategies that lead to negative results. He needs help to alter them.

4.3.8 Description of errors

- Omission, e.g., omission of articles ... *is very big animal; Is very famous country; This is box.* Omission of the verb *to be* *It good.* (4/7/9/)
- Addition, e.g., *Earthenware it is...* (8)
- Misinformation, e.g., *are grow* for *are grown*; *are produce* for *are produced* (5/10)

4.3.9 Explanation of errors

- Interference errors

The omission of both the verb *to be* and the indefinite articles is likely to be the influence of the mother tongue (Arabic does not use these forms)

- Intralingual errors

Most of the misinformation errors are a result of omission and overgeneralisation, which are aspects of intralingual errors.

- Developmental errors

He uses 'are' incorrectly as a marker of the present simple. (5/10)

- Wal

4.3.10 Identification of errors

Wal's errors are also overt, and they are not much different from those of his mates.

4.3.11 Description of errors

- *Misuse of the indefinite article*, e.g., *A cars; A butter*; (6/7)
Omission, e.g. *... shows family in for a family...* (8)
- *Addition*, e.g., *was defeated the Aztec* 'was is added'; *Florence Nightingale she is* 'she is added' (5/9)
- *Number-verb agreement*, e.g., *This is the shoes*. (10)
- *Errors in the use of prepositions*, e.g., *died on 1910* for 'in 1910'. (9)

4.3.12 Explanation of errors

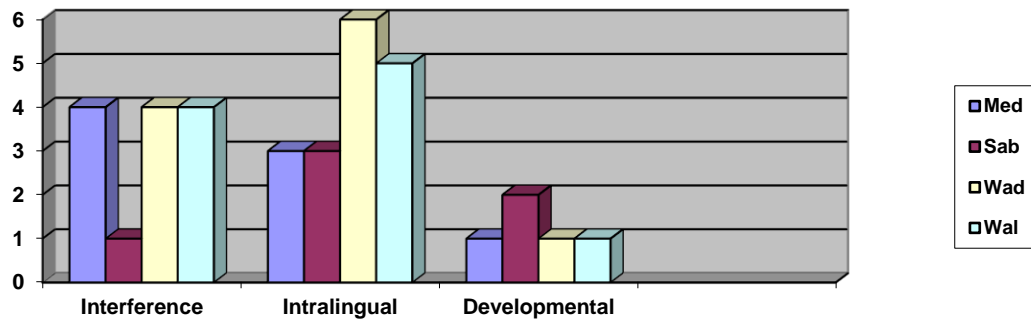
The sources of his errors may be as depicted below:

- *Interference*
The misuse of the definite article and the verb *to be* may be viewed as interference with the mother tongue.
- *Intralingual errors*
In his attempt to make the second language easier, Wal seems to utilise the strategies of overgeneralisation and omission.
- *Developmental errors*
The French was defeated the Aztec (5) is likely to be a developmental error. He might have built the above sentence on a false hypothesis. He used 'was' as a marker of the past tense (Richards, 1985:178).

The following table and graph illustrate the learners' error sources.

Table 3 depicts the learners' error sources

The sources of error \ The learner	Interference	Intralingual	Developmental
Med	4	3	1
Sab	1	3	2
Wad	4	6	1
Wal	4	5	1

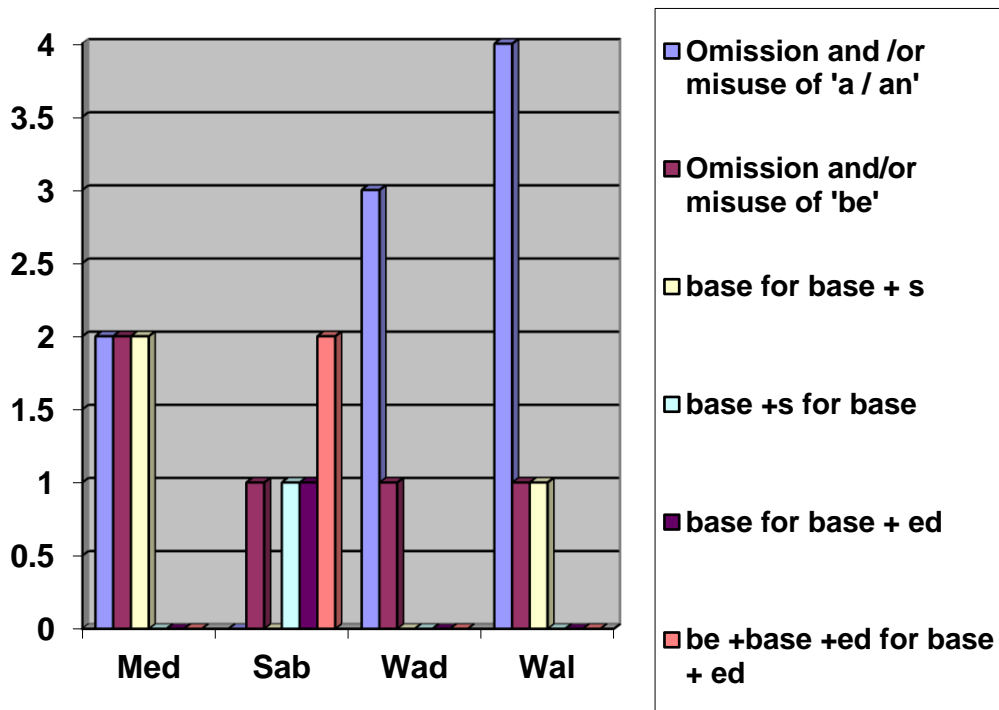


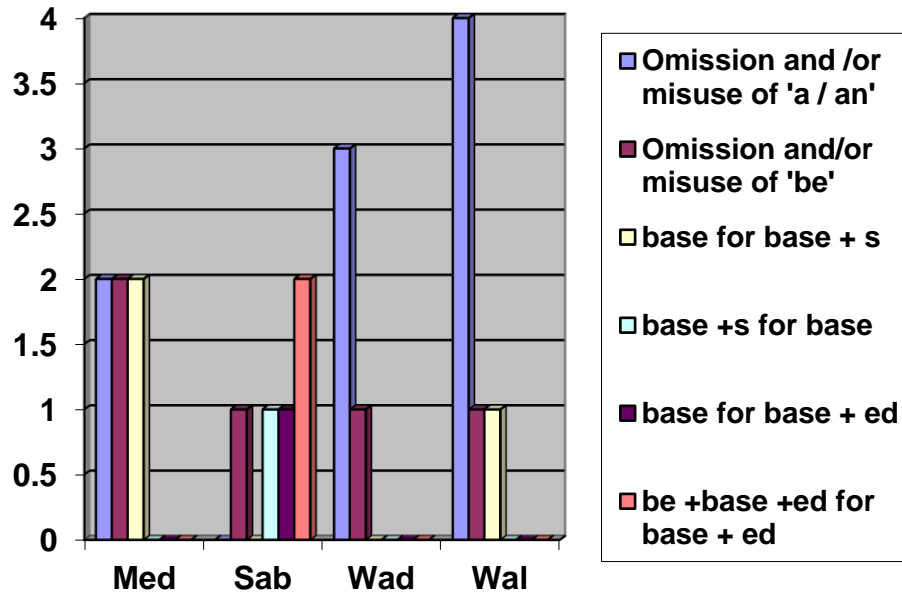
Graph 2 illustrates the learners' error sources.

The following table and graph depict the distribution of errors among the learners.

The learners \ The type of errors	Med	Sab	Wad	WaL
Omission and/or misuse of indefinite article	2	0	3	4
Omission and/or misuse of the verb to be	2	1	1	1
Verb stem for verb stem +s	2	0	0	0
Verb stem +s for verb stem	0	1	0	0
Verb stem for verb stem +ed	0	1	0	0
Be + verb stem +ed for verb stem +ed	0	2	0	0

Table 4 shows the distribution of errors among the learners.





Graph 3 shows the distribution of the errors among the learners

4.4 The Discussion of the Findings

This study focuses on the interlanguage of the learners and on the types of errors they made in their attempt to learn the target language. The study has revealed that in spite of their erroneous utterances (most of their errors are interference and intralingual), these students are doing their best to learn the foreign language by choosing different learning strategies. The varieties of strategies they used probably made them apply the same grammatical rules in correct and incorrect forms. Sometimes they alternated an incorrect form with a correct form and vice versa.

The main difficulties they encountered can be summarised in the following:

- (i) The indefinite article
- (ii) The verb *to be*
- (iii) The preposition
- (iv) The plural forms ending in 's.'
- (v) The construction of the passive voice forms

These findings may be useful for both teachers and learners. They can help the former to design remedial programmes for future classes. They can also be helpful to the latter to learn the correct forms either by self-correction or with the help of the teacher.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study explains that the interlanguage of the learners involved in this research is unstable. This instability is, for sure, a good sign and indicates that learning is taking place in their minds. The exploration of their interlanguage has proved that they are not passive learners and that they exert much effort to learn the language by employing varieties of learning strategies. Some of these strategies help them construct target language forms. Others, such as overgeneralisation and omission, do not.

Close scrutiny of their incorrect utterances or their errors illustrates that they take place as natural consequences of the strategies employed. For example, two shared features of errors are mother tongue interference and overgeneralisation. The main reason for the former can be attributed to the fact that these learners first think in Arabic and then mentally translate it into English. The latter shows that they attempt to apply the grammatical rules they have learnt to a situation in which a native speaker would not. The researchers refer to this as the incomplete learning of the rule due to insufficient exposure to the target language. Besides, they have no opportunity to use the language outside the campus. Those learners who use the language with shop assistants do not benefit much because most of these shopkeepers are uneducated and speak poor English.

The researchers suggest further studies; for example, fossilisation could be a growing potential research area.

5.1 Implications of the Study

To help the learners to improve their interlanguage and to cope with the difficulties of learning a foreign language, teachers should observe the attempts students make to learn. They should also analyse the errors learners commit from time to time to locate their sources. Furthermore, they should be aware of the strategies learners use to encourage the appropriate and discourage the inappropriate ones. Regarding gender markers, teachers should stress the differences between Arabic and English regarding this. Moreover, plural forms are different between languages.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

This study, however, has some limitations. It concentrates mainly on the negative strategies learners utilise and ignores the positive ones. It also demonstrates why these learners commit errors but does not say why they produce correct utterances, i.e.; it ignores the strategies that lead to the correct sentences. The number of participants was very few, so the researcher may not claim the generalization of the findings.

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Appendix 2

Collected samples from students' written work

Med

The text

1. My sister eats too much.
2. Watches are things that tell us time.
3. An artist is a person who paints pictures.
4. *A fisherman is man who catches fish.
5. *A chili is a vegetable that make food hot.
6. *A bow is a tool that shoot arrows.

7. *Reading is a good for you.
8. *Butter are produced from Denmark.
9. *You can watching bird's at Amboli Park.
10. *Lions was the most popular animal's.

Sab

The text

1. Tailors are people who make clothes.
2. Leaves are green things that grow on trees.
3. A doctor is a person who looks after sick people.
4. They traveled to Salalah to play football.
5. They went to England to learn English.
6. *Teachers are people who teach pupil's.
7. *He buy some land to build a house.
8. *Watches are things that tells us the time.
9. *It used for cups, plates and vases.
10. *Ali hurt the donkey, so the donkey was biten his arm and the man was shouted.

Wad

The text

1. Leaves are things that grow on trees.
2. A waiter is a person who serves food in restaurants.
3. Clothes are made in Italy
4. *An elephant is very big animal that lives in Africa.
5. *Flowers are grow in Holland.
6. *Reading is a good habit. It good for your future.
7. *Egypt is very famous country.
8. *Earthenware it is made of clay.
9. *This is box Bob keeps pencils in.
10. *Dates are produce in Oman.

Wal

The text

1. An apple is a fruit that grows on trees.
2. Computers are made in Britain.
3. Joseph Lister was a famous doctor.
4. Taj Mahal was built by Shah Jahan
5. *The French was defeated the Aztec.
6. *A cars are exported from Germany.
7. *A butter is made in Denmark.
8. *This picture shows family in a house.
9. *Florence Nightingale she died on 1910.
10. *This is the shoes that Fatma found.