

To *be exist or not to *be exist ? That is the Question

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Abstract :

This corpus study analyses the wrong use of the verb *to exist* as **to be exist* under various forms and tenses such as **is exists*, **are existed*, **does not exist*, and **existness*. The corpus consists of more than two thousand exam copies for the academic years 2003 through 2013 held at the university of Adrar, Department of English. Error Analysis considers a fault as *mistake* or *error* depending on its frequency of repetition and on its over or under-generalisation to the learners. The research contends that this mistake/error is not the learners' deed, but is taught to them under that erroneous form in intermediate or secondary schools. To substantiate this argument, the survey shows that the wrong verb *to *be exist* is used by students from different levels (Classical and LMD systems) with different educational and geographical backgrounds.

ملخص:

يتحور هذا البحث حول الاستعمال الخاطئ للفعل يكون من طرف طلبة اللغة الانجليزية من التعليم العالي بجامعة أدرار. يتكون الجزء الأساسي للبحث من أكثر من ألفين ورقة امتحان للسداسي الأول و الثاني لعشر مواسم جامعية. أساس فرضية البحث هو أن الاستعمال الخاطئ للفعل يكون لا ينجم عن الطلبة بل هو ناتج عن للتدريس الخاطئ لكيفية استعماله في مدارس الطور المتوسط و الثانوي.

Introduction:

Along Spanish, French and Chinese, English is one of the most powerful means of worldwide business, communication, diplomacy, science and technology. It is the widely taught language around the world, and has become a useful tool of instruction in both academic and technical fields. In academia, EFL students are required to write essays, exposés and memoirs/research papers in the target language, i.e.: English (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998) as part of their proficiency in the target language (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982, and Ellis 1984). To successfully achieve this task, they need to ‘master’ the language forms and genres that pertain to the various subjects such as civilisation, literature and linguistics.

Throughout the Arab world, much has been said about the topics related to the problems of learning English. The difficulties encountered are at the level of phonetics/phonology, morphology, and syntax. The causes are numerous, among which the pedagogical (methodology and curricula), the personal (motivation and instrumentality of the learning of English), and the social (lack of language environment to perform the target language).

The point of departure of this study is a pedagogical shortcoming noticed in the department of Letters and English at the University of Adrar. The main drawback is the misuse and overuse in exam papers of the verb ‘to exist’ as **to be exist*. It is found under various grammatical forms with adverbs, auxiliaries, and tenses.

To tackle this topic, a corpus study is undertaken. It consists of more than two thousand five hundred exam papers. The compositions are written by first year LMD students, second, third and fourth year classical system students. They range between the academic years 2003 and 2013 in the fields of Discourse Typology, Linguistics and Sociolinguistics, Phonetics and Phonology. Those modules are chosen at random among others, for they are the researcher’s principal taught subjects.

Among the several results obtained from the data and their analyses is the fact that, although the wrong verb is not used by the majority of students, it is nevertheless significantly found in a number

of exam sheets. Not only is the verb to exist misused, but others too such as to depend as *is depended and *is dependent, to belong as *is belonged, to happen as *is happened and so on.

1. Theoretical background

Writing academic papers is a time-consuming task, which necessitates the personal involvement of the students, their concentration and knowledge, and their savoir-faire. Yet, this is not easily achieved, for the students need to be trained to write in correct English respecting its grammar, written expression and semantics.

It has already been reported in many studies in the Arab world (Abbad 1988; Hisham 2008; Rabab`ah 2003; Tahaineh 2010; Zughoul and Taminian 1984) that Arab learners of English face difficulties to learn the language of Shakespeare both in speaking and in writing. The language is taught as an academic subject at school and university levels, but nowhere else. It is a foreign language which does not leave the classroom, and is restricted to classroom activities and the reading of few books (Bhela 1999:22). The examples around the Arab world are illustrative of the phenomenon.

Mukattash (1983) studied the problems faced by Jordanian students of English. He reached the conclusion that the learners have difficulties in pronunciation, spelling, morphology and syntax. Kambal (1980) asserts that the syntactic errors of Sudanese students of English are at the level of verb formation and tense. The significant finding is that the students are unable to communicate in the target language neither about 'academic topics' nor about 'common everyday topics' (Mukattash, 1983:169). He adds that they lack the necessary knowledge that would enable them talk fluently in the foreign means of communication.

Zughoul and Taminian (1984) studied Jordanian learners of English, and reported that the latter had tremendous problems at the lexical level. Abbad (1988), on the other side, reports the low level of the Yemeni learners of English who are admitted to the department of English. He refers this problem to the inappropriate methods of teaching and the social environment which does not help in the English teaching/learning process.

According to Rabab`ah (2003), the problems of Arab learners of English are mainly due to the fact that the teachers are not English

but Arabic native speakers who teach foreign languages.¹ As far as Hisham (2008) is concerned, Arab students of business at University Utara Malaysia have difficulties with the vocabulary register, grammar and referencing. Tahaine (2010) studied the faulty use of English prepositions by Jordanian EFL learners. He concludes that the “MT [mother-tongue] is the major source of EFL learners’ errors (58%=1323). However, transfer strategies of the TL [target language] itself are also detected and constituted a major part of the errors too (42%=967)”.

In Algeria, many theses, books and academic papers dealt with the learning of English at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Among the dissertations that tackled this topic are Lakehal-Ayat Bermati (2008) and Cherouana (2010). The academic papers that focused on the teaching/learning of English in Algeria are Benrabah (1999, and 2002) and Rezig (2011). Most of the difficulties reported are about the misuse of the English sounds and phonemes, syntactic constructions and meanings.

Benrabah (2002) gives a historical description of the implementation of the Arabization process in Algeria. He also talks about the gradual introduction of English at the primary level of education, i.e. sixth grade, as part of the new reform (cf. Lakehal-Ayat Bermati, 2008:139). For Benrabah, the introduction of English at the primary level is a political decision; he says: “Et, à partir de 1996, le ministre de l’Education de l’époque décide de favoriser l’anglais au dépens du français.” (p:76)²

As for Rezig (2011), the difficulties encountered are not only linguistic, but also human. She asserts that the implementation of Arabisation entailed the teaching of Arabic at the expense of English and French, and that the teachers “were not formed to cope with such alterations [reforms] as it is the case of university teachers with the application of the LMD system” (p:1328).

She also stresses the fact that, although they are taught English since the age of 13, many young university students are ill-oriented towards the study of English at a higher level. Many have chosen other branches and specialties, but did not receive a favorable answer from the services of orientation to higher education after succeeding in the baccalaureate exam. Rezig (2011) points to the problem faced by

the students who have negative attitudes towards the culture of the target language. She says:

“The students reaction to the English culture is one of the elements that affects much their motivation since some students who develop a negative attitude to the foreign language culture have learning differences because of the striking cultural differences between the Algerian and the English societies.” (p: 1330)³

The attitudes of the learners towards the target language have an impact on their success or failure in learning the foreign languages. In 1969, Bernard Spolsky noted that the environment around the learner is a factor influencing and “controlling the learner’s motivation to acquire the language” (p: 237). He adds that the main actors in that situation are the learner, the teacher, the learner’s peers and parents, and the speakers of the language.

Spolsky (1989) asserts that the social context has a direct influence on the learning of a second language. He says that the social context: “...plays a major role in developing in the learner the set of attitudes towards the language being learned, its speakers, and the language learning situation that...are hypothesized to influence motivation directly.” (p: 131)

On the other side, Cherouana (2010) says that the main hindrance felt by Algerian learners of English is at the level of speech intelligibility, recognition, and production. Whether pupils or students, the learners have difficulties in recognizing the English *accent*. As such, they do not render it as it should be, but pronounce it approximately. Most of the time, they rely on their own L1 phonology to realize the foreign sounds, particularly the interdental, the short vowels, and the diphthongs and triphthongs.

Concerning the implementation of the LMD system at the higher education level, Lakehal-Ayat Bermati sees that the most important drawback related to the teaching of foreign languages is the “Haste to recruit teachers who did not have yet the right qualifications.” (2008:126). Rezig (2011) confirms the conclusion of Lakehal-Ayat. Both researchers are concerned with the level of the teachers of English, which is decreasing more than it is improving.

In general, the various studies of Arab learners of English report the same hindrances; these can be summed up as follows:

- low quality of teaching at the intermediate, secondary and university levels
- low level of competence of the pupils and the undergraduate students,
- impact of the mother-tongue (phonology and syntax) on the learning process,
- the curricula and teaching methodology are inconsistent,
- lack of the target language's environment (summer linguistic village, language immersion or 'bain linguistique'),
- pupils' and students' lack of motivation, and
- instrumentality of the foreign language (job seeking, chatting, tourism, etc.)

The above-cited causes are serious issues in the field of applied linguistics, particularly those dealing with the influence of the mother-tongue on the learning/teaching of foreign languages. Comparing the phonetic/phonological and syntactic patterns of the mother-tongue to those of the target language would permit to predict and explain the errors made by the learners.⁴

2. Error Analysis

As a branch of Applied Linguistics, *Error Analysis* is crucial as it seeks to find suitable language learning strategies based on the learners' own ways of acquiring their mother-tongues. Both the theoretical and the practical parts of error analysis are devoted to the discovery of the mental processes that trigger the learners' methods and tactics to learn/acquire a language, such as analogy, overgeneralization, and simplification. It also tries to find out the similarities and differences between language learning and language acquisition procedures to set an exhaustive theory about their development and progress (cf. Erdogan 2005, and Keshavarz 1997).

A probable source of influence on the learning of a foreign language is the linguistic transfer. There are two types of language transfer that lead to errors on the part of the learners; the interlingual and the intralingual.

Interlingual transfer consists in the influence of the learners' phonological, syntactic and lexica-semantic levels on the learning of a

foreign language. Conversely to the behaviouristic approach to language acquisition, interlingual errors are not old habits that the learners cannot get rid of; rather, they are evidences that the learner is 'learning' the new language patterns.

The intralingual transfer, on the other side, is a universal characteristic found in the learners' attempts to simplify the learning process (Ellis, 1997). As an instance, most learners use the suffix of regular past forms, {-ed}, with all verbs. They simplify and over generalize the pattern.

The interference of L1 on the learning of L2 is quite apparent when the two languages are structurally different, for instance Arabic and English. The learners show a high frequency of errors both in speaking and writing to the point that some researchers (Bhela 1999) ask the question: "what kinds of language do second language learners produce in speaking and writing?"

Interference is defined as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue' (Lott, 1983:256).

At this level of description, it is necessary to explain some terminological matters, such as the terms error and mistake. According to Ellis (1997)⁵, an error is a gap in the learner's knowledge because he does not know if it is correct or not. The mistake is the learner's occasional lapse; it happens when the learner does not know how to put his knowledge into practice.

Ellis (1997) stresses that there are two possible ways to verify whether a form is a mistake or an error. The first is through consistency of performance, i.e. frequency of repetition on the part of the learner. If this last uses the wrong form a few times, it is a mistake. If he persistently uses it and does not consider it incorrect, it is an error. The other way is to ask the learner to correct the deviant word. If he succeeds, it is a mistake; but if he fails, it is therefore an error.

In general, a mistake is a fault due to inattention, fatigue, or carelessness on the part of the learner. The error, on the other hand, is perceived by native speakers as the proof of incomplete learning of the target language. Moreover, the mistake can be self-corrected, while the error is not (cf. Richards, J.C. *et al.* 1992).

In foreign language learning, making a mistake/error shows

the learner's trial to reproduce or reconstruct the target language forms. As such, as pointed to in Corder (1973), the learner may face several kinds of errors. These are:

- 1-omission of some element,
- 2-addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element,
- 3-selection of an incorrect element, and
- 4-misordering of the element.

The present research illustrates that the learners' misuse of the verb to exist is at the level of Corder's (1973) second type of error, i.e.: addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element. The added elements are the auxiliaries to be and to do, the bound morphemes {-s} and {-ed} for the present and past tenses respectively. The other syntactic elements are the modals must and should, as well as the adverbs already, also, never, and still. The misused verb is found in the affirmative, interrogative, and negative forms.

3. The Actual Research

Throughout the years, the researcher noticed in exam papers the recurrence of the verb to exist as **is exist-is existed, was existed, is already exist, is also exist*, etc. At first, it seemed to be an individual **mistake**, but after a closer examination, it appeared to be a frequent **error** committed by several students from the four different levels.

In light of this observed phenomenon, the research questions that arise and that the present study seeks to answer are:

-Are these errors due to the 'Interlingual' transfer from MSA to English, or to the 'Intralingual' transfer from the students' mother-tongue at the level of grammatical forms?

-Where did the students learn these mistaken forms? Is there any geographical distribution of this error at the level of formal schools? and

-What is the frequency of repetition of this misuse?

3.1 Research Methodology

The study consists of a survey of 2525 exam sheets in the fields of discourse typology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and phonology starting from the academic years 2002 until 2013. It is important to report that the years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 were not involved in the research, since the exam papers of those four years

were missing in the university archives. It is also worth noting that the module of discourse typology is taught to the first year LMD students only in the first semester. Hence, only three year exams were considered in the study, namely 2011, 2012, and 2013.

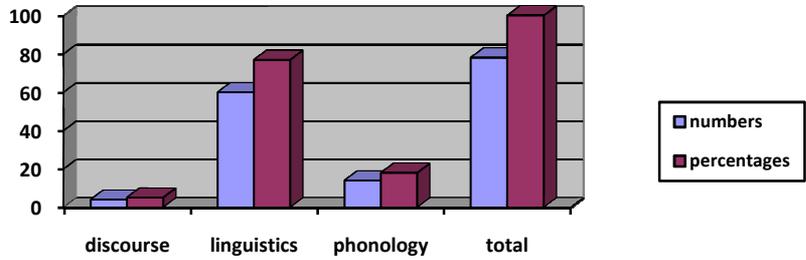
From another angle, the modules were not chosen randomly but purposefully, that is the researcher teaches those pedagogical and scientific units. As such, having access to papers already corrected, and on which the mistaken forms are already notated is time saving.

4. The results

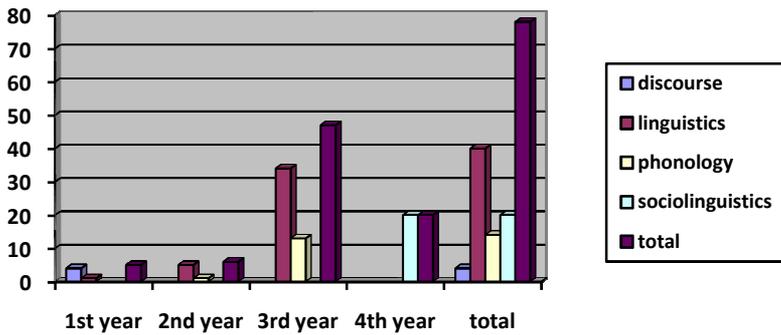
Various results are obtained, among which:

1. Out of 2525 exam sheets , only 67 (=2.65%) contain the wrong verb form
2. The number of token is 78.
3. 47 students present this error/mistake in their exam papers.
4. 5 students repeated the error more than once, and throughout the years.
5. Students who present this misuse are both males (n=09) and females (n=58).
6. The misused word is found in the exams of linguistics (n=60, or 76.92%), phonology (n=14, or 17.94%), and discourse typology (n=4, or 5.12%). (cf. Graph n°1)
7. The academic years 2009 and 2010 record the highest use of the wrong forms.
8. The token is found mainly in the second term exams, more than in the first, the make-up, and remedial exams.
9. Students who misuse the verb to exist belong to the four classical and the 1st year LMD academic levels. (cf. Graph n°2)
10. Students who make use of the wrong verb come from the three areas of the Touat-Tidikelt-Gourara (Aoulef, Reggane, Zaouiet-Kounta, Sali, Inzegmir, Timimoun, Adrar, Fenoughil, Aougrou, Bouda, Oufrane, and Zaglou)

Graph n°1: number and percentage of tokens by fields



Graph n°2: number of tokens by modules



4.2 Grammatical forms of the wrong verb

Aux. + Vs Sing. = is exist(s)

Aux. + Vs Sing. = does exist(s)

Aux. + Vs plur. = are exist

Aux. + Ving Sing. = is existing

Aux + neg. Part. + Vs Sing. = is not exist(s)

Aux + neg. Part. + Vs Sing. = does not exist(s)

Aux + neg. Part. + Vs plur. = are not exist(s)

Aux + adv + Vs Sing. = is also/still/already exist(s)

Aux + adv + Vs Sing. = does never exist(s)

Modal+ V.inf = must be exist

Aux. + Ved Sing. = is existed

Aux + Ved plur. = was existed

Aux. + Ved Plur. = are existed

Aux + neg. Part. + Vs Sing. = was not exist(ed)

Aux + neg. Part. + Ved plur. = are not existed

neg. Part. + adv. + Ved = not already existed

modal + Aux + Ved. = should be existed

miscellany :

As being non-existed

Existness

Table1: details of the corpus of exam sheets

2012-2013	2011-2012	2010-2011	2009-2010	2008-2009	2007-2008	2003-2004	2002-2003	grand total
31	79	28	57	29	36	12	36	308
68	75	60	57	19	80	12	55	426
98		42	48	6	36	21	20	271
		55	46	61	6	2	43	213
		23	25	27	28	19	45	167
		14	27	23	22	40	12	138
		1	56	61	23	19	12	172
		10	55	61	80	40	3	249
		59	18	7		32	32	148
		22	6	60		10	3	101
		61	22	8		39	10	140
			2	38		44	53	137
							44	44
							11	11
197	154	375	419	400	311	290	379	2525

4.3 Analysis of the results

The analysis shows that the most frequent wrong forms that occur in the exam papers can be listed as follows:

The grammatical forms	Frequency of use
Is exist(e)	17
Is existed	09
Is not exist(e)	07
Is exists	06
Are existed	05
Is no exist	04
Was existed	02
Is already exist(s)	02
Are not exist	02
Were not existed	01
Was not existed	01
Was not exist	01
The existness	01
Should be existed	01
Not exists	01
Not already existed	01
Must be exist	01
May be existed	01
Is still exists	01
Is never exist	01
Is also exists	01
Doesn't existed	01
Doesn't existe	01
Does never exist	01
Does it exists	01
As being non existed	01
As being non existed	01
Are not existed	01
Are not existe	01
Are existing	01
Are existed	01
Total	78

As the table illustrates, there are two types of errors; those which occur once (n=24 or 30.76%), and those which have more than one occurrence (n=54 or 69.23%). Those that belong to the first set can be labelled mistakes; whereas, those that are part of the second category exemplify errors, since they are frequently repeated.

4.4 Geographical distribution of the wrong form

The other important finding is that the students who present this error/mistake do not come from the same geographical background. This result leads to the conclusion that the misused form of the verb to exist is widely spread throughout the wilaya (department) of Adrar. The following table illustrates the spatial distribution of the token according to the students' exams:

Districts	Number of students using the wrong form
Adrar	21
Aougrouit	01
Aoulef	01
Bouali	01
Bouda	01
Fenoughil	01
Inzegmir	02
Oufrane	01
Reggane	02
Sali	02
Timimoun	06
Zagloul	02
Zaouiet-kounta	06
Total	

The same form is found in the written papers of some students, who were born in other wilayas of Algeria. For instance:

Districts	Number of students using the wrong form
Bechar	01
Ghardaia	01
Meniaa	01
Tlemcen	01

The last table brings to the forth another questioning: did the students from the other wilayas learn the wrong form in Adrar? Or did they bring it with them? To answer these questions, an exhaustive and quantitative field-research is necessary. It needs to involve researchers and informants from different regions in the country, both in the south and in the north.

4.5 Examples of individual errors

The examination of the results shows that there are real cases of errors. The number of students concerned by this ill-writing is five (n=05) which represents 10.63% of the whole number of students. As far as error analysis is concerned, the students who repeat the same mistake more than once and who do not seem to consider it as a mistake, or who do not consciously correct it are not too numerous with regard to the total number of students. But their wrong use of the verb to exist is significant, for it represents 31.91% of the whole data.

From another angle, the five students misuse the verb sometimes twice in the same exam paper, or in the same year and in different exam sessions. Some others use the wrong form throughout various years and exams. The next table reports the evolution of the use of the wrong verb by some students, who for ethical reasons are represented anonymously as ST1, ST2, etc.:

	1 st exam	2 nd exam	Make-up exam	Remedial exam	years	Total
ST1			Phon3 x 01		2008- 2009	05 4 years
				Ling3 x 02	2009- 2010	
			Ling3 x 01		2010- 2011	
				Ling4 x 01	2012- 2013	
ST2		Ling3 x 01			2007- 2008	03 2 years
	Ling3 x 01				2008- 2009	
		Ling3 x 01			2008- 2009	
ST3		Phon3			2011- 2012	02 2 years
	Ling4 x 01				2012- 2013	
ST4		Phon3 x 01			2011- 2012	02 2 years
				Ling4 x 01	2012- 2013	
ST5		Ling3 x 01			2008- 2009	02 2 years
	Ling4 x 01				2009- 2010	
Total	03	04	02	04	6 years	

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study shows that, even if the misused verb **to be exist* is not frequent in the exam papers; it is nevertheless present in the students' written compositions in a significant way (s=78) For some, it can be considered as a mistake, but for others it is an error which is repeated more than once in the same paper, or throughout the years.

The fact that the students who make this error and mistake come not only from the various areas of the Touat-Tidikelt-Gourara, but also from the other wilayas (districts) is puzzling on itself. It shows that this written fault is more widespread than one might believe. It also tells us that the students have brought this misused verb from the secondary or the intermediate schools. In other words, the present research is just a tentative answer to a phenomenon which is deeply rooted in the educational system. It also means that the research needs not to stop at this stage, but has to go further by taking into consideration not only the learners but also the teachers of the three educational levels, the intermediate, the secondary, and the higher.

As far as language transfer from L1 to L2 is concerned, one can say that there is no clear-cut evidence that it is the case for the learners. The interlingual transfer from the mother-tongue to the target language is not probable, for the construction **to be exist* does not exist in 'Arabic'. On the other hand, intralingual transfer is more probable than the interlingual. As evidence for this assertion are the frequent uses of grammatical constructions like **to be exist* found in the students' exam papers. These are, for instance: **are belong*, **are disappear*, **is differed*, **is differ*, **are differing* with the meaning is different from, **is dependent on*, **is depended on* for it depends on, **is finded* for is found, **is happened* instead of has happened, **can identified*, **should be know*, **can used it*, **can defines*, **do not born*, **did not born*, **can said that*, **could not appeared*, **I can says that*, etc.

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University students: Factorial structure and intervening variables. *The International Journal of the sociology of Language* 50:28-45.

1 This point is well commented on by Widdowson (1994) who says: "the native speaker teachers are generally equipped with knowledge only in a privileged intuitive sense, and with pedagogic competence only to a rudimentary degree... the nonnative speaker teachers know the "subject", English, in an explicit rather than intuitive sense, by virtue of having themselves learnt it as a foreign language."

2 And, starting from 1996, the minister of education at that time decides to promote English at the expense of French."

3 According to Gardner and Lambert (1959) there are two types of motivations, Integrative and Instrumental. Integrative motivation characterizes the foreign language learner who shows a real interest in the culture of the target language, and who would like to be part of it. The instrumental, on the other hand, is a feature of those who learn foreign languages for utilitarian aims, such as getting a job, communicating with foreigners or chatting, etc.

4 Vecide Erdoğan, Mersin University Journal of the Faculty of Education, Vol. 1, Issue 2, December 2005, pp. 261-270. He says that: "Error analysis enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and take pedagogical precautions towards them. Thus, the analysis of learner language has become an essential need to overcome some questions and propose solutions regarding different aspects." (p. 263)

5 For Ellis (1997: 51) a 'transfer' is 'the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2'.