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The Role of Learners' Gender Differences in L2 “Inter-Language” Errors of Intermediate- Level Saudi Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have attempted to examine the unwanted forms (errors) appearing in learners' spoken or written language production, which are often attributed to the learning process. The level of language proficiency differences in the second language (L2) learning between male and female learners has also been investigated. Most findings show that women are better language learners than their counterparts, (Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987), although this assumption has been debated, as other studies have proven otherwise. This study is an attempt to investigate errors resulting from inter-language in second language acquisition through speaking skills. These errors are analyzed in terms of syntax forms between male and female learners to explore the role of gender in error commission. The participants of this study are intermediate-level Saudi English language students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that inter-language errors in L2 speaking are less observed in males than in females. Furthermore, gender plays an important role in the types of errors produced by L2 learners. Errors resulting from the linguistics process of language development from L1 to L2 provide better understanding of L2 acquisition among different gender.

Keywords: Gender Differences – Interlanguage Errors - Language Errors- Second Language Acquisition.

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1. Introduction

Gender is widely accepted as playing a crucial role in second language learning. Based on research conducted over the past years in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), many factors are shown to influence language learning, either related to the learner's background or individual

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characteristics such as age, language aptitude, motivation, personality and gender. In examining the process of language learning, gender has been studied in areas such as learning strategies (Young & Oxford, 1997), skills acquisition (Boyle, 1987) and even error production (Llach, Fontecha, & Espinosa, 2006; Jiménez, 2010). Thus, gender is considered one of the most influential factors in second language learning (Bacon & Finneman, 1992; Bergvall, 1999; Boyle, 1987; Burstall, 1975; Coskun, 2014; Feery, 2008). Studies conducted to provide a strong foundation in this particular area. This study is an attempt to investigate the role that a learner's gender plays in the consistency of second language errors, in particular, "interleagued errors" in speaking. The debate of whether or not gender and L2 learning are potentially related is still not evident, as some specific aspects of the relationship between gender and L2 learning is somehow controversial. Therefore, the findings of this study seek to investigate the possible differences in language use and errors commission between males and females, and how gender effect learners' second language proficiency.

To pinpoint the role of gender in Second Language (L2) errors, two types of methods were employed: interviews to record learners' speech, and error analysis to analyse the types of errors produced and the consistency of these errors among male and female learners. Considering research-related studies, the findings are inconclusive in regard to the role of gender in SLA. This study revealed that gender acts as an influential factor on the frequency and the type of inter-language errors in L2 speaking that learners committed, and that errors were less observed in males than in females. However, it is worth examining the key areas in the literature where the relationship between gender and learners' performance are identified in the field of L2 learning/acquisition and gender differences among 30 Saudi students, both males and females.

This manuscript presents the methodology used in this study, findings and discussion. Conclusion and implications of further research in the field of SLA are also provided.

2. Literature review

Research on gender differences in foreign language learning has been controversial over the last three decades in the domain of second/foreign language (L2) acquisition and teaching. This is because differences between males and females in language performance have been considered crucial in developing L2 acquisition theories and teaching methods as well as explaining individual and gender differences in L2 acquisition (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992; Campbell & Shaw, 1994; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

However, there is still a paucity of literature on the relationship between language learners' performance in terms of errors and stable individual differences, such as gender. In psychology, some researchers are interested in the relationship between gender and behaviour in learning have found vital gender-related differences in cognitive activity, social behaviour and general verbal ability of learning (Bacon & Finnemann, 1992). Yet, in the field of L2 acquisition, a comparatively small number of studies report findings in relation to these variables.

By looking into the theories surrounding the old relationship between language and gender, we can gain insight into this relationship and understand it. However, it is difficult to determine a neatly established connection between language and gender models from the 1960s to the present, as another did not sequentially substitute one model or theory. According to Feery (2008), as it relates to the linguistics analysis and studies on language and gender throughout the history of language theories, the empirical studies conducted can be divided into two main categories: interactional studies, which concentrate on language use and gender differences, which will be the focus of the current study and, variationist studies, which focus on actual linguistic gender patterns and associated factors.

3. The community of practice approach

One of the approaches that focus on the linguistics gender patterns over the past 15–20 years is the community of practice model. Although it is not one of the first theories of learning, it has been applied frequently within a language and gender context since the 1990s; for example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet studied adolescent communities and gender identity construction (Feery, 2008). Unlike other models that focus on the historical overview of using linguistics pattern among gender,

which will not be discussed in detail in this study, the community of practice model briefly suggests that gender debates should be conducted only within certain practice groups, enabling diversity within certain categories. However, as research increased in this area, language and gender became characterized in the late 80s, with reference to the concepts of gender which are frequently associated with learning and communication. As this study focuses on the role of gender “male and female” in language learning, with a particular focus on “inter-language errors”, therefore the community of Practice Approach is briefly presented. However, it is worth looking at the contribution of the second language acquisition (SLA) field to the relationship between gender and language learning.

4. The field of SLA research

The SLA field has become one of the largest areas of interest in modern-day linguistics in the past 30 years (Ellis, 1994). In fact, researchers (Corder, 1993; Corder, 1974; Ellis, 1994) invest into the numerous processes and approaches to learning and teaching in second language theories and methods. However, many researchers (Ellis, 1994; Krashen 1983) have influenced the main theoretical approaches towards SLA. Some of the most common approaches discussed in the SLA field are the universal grammar-based approaches, as well as cognitive theory models, interaction approaches and the socio-cultural prospective approach. Although the socio-cultural framework has gained a great deal of ground amongst the SLA theorists and researchers, few studies have been conducted that pinpoint the role of gender as non-linguistics factors in SLA, and other theories of SLA/learning dominate the field at present. In fact, Learning a second or a foreign language, becomes affected by many linguistics and non-linguistic factors. Second language acquisition is a “complex process which involves several factors, and this process is highly influenced by these factors, such as individual differences, learning input, etc.,” (Muhammed, 2017, p.75)

Furthermore, the memory systems of both males and females learners have different types which, also play a crucial role that makes the genders distinct. Hence gender is one of these factors that greatly impact language acquisition process, the present study aims to investigate the role of gender and its influences on SLA by analyzing learners errors as it tries to compare inter-language errors among different learners' gender.

5. Gender in SLA research

SLA research is often considered to include comparable factors, such as age, race, ethnicity and character, but few research mention SLA studies related to gender factors. Several investigations have examined the impact of such factors on the SLA system, particularly the impact of age and personality on the L2 learning. For example, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) presented an entire chapter on the individual differences on SLA, as opposed to “native linguistic factors”, “native language variables”, “input variables” and “instructional variables” (Feery, 2008, p 22). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that individual differences should allow other variables, such as gender, to be considered. Pica (1998) has included social-psychological factors, such as motivation, attitude, cognitive styles and learning strategies, under the category of individual differences in language learning.

In relation to individual differences and language learning, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) stated that individual differences are considered one of the best predictors of L2 performance as well as in explaining the differences in L2 acquisition. This is because differences in age, gender and other factors interfere mainly with L2 acquisition in three stages: inviting, processing and producing information (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2000a). However, several researchers have acknowledged the role of individual differences in L2 performance in various learning contexts, but the results have not been consistent, partly because of broad variation amongst the types of differences, such as motivation, anxiety and gender, and due to the lack of consistent evidence of reliability and validity.

In addition to the brief studies mentioned above about the factors that influence L2 learning and performance, some researchers include “other factors” under the category of “sex” as features claimed to influence SLA (Bergvall, 1999). Although Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) asserted that “no study that has systematically investigated the rate of SLA in females versus males”, they indicated

some studies that discuss the possible effect of gender on SLA performance, as they “have reported sex-related differences incidental to their main focus” (p. 204).

Similarly, while reviewing some SLA theories and the relation between gender in the SLA research and learners’ performance, we noticed that the various examples have advanced attempts to explain possible differences between males and females in language usage, such as the studies conducted by Matsuda and Gobel (2004) and Zhang (2000). However, these studies have primarily related to the L1 influence and to its usage as opposed to language learning. Additionally, it is clear that some studies have common ground with the implications for SLA research and language and gender; thus, gender and language learning are related to each other. Regardless to L1 or L2 learning. For instance, understanding how females and males use their own native language and a second language may point to possible differences in language acquisition. This does not mean that the relation between gender and language learning process is redundant in the validity of their findings;; rather, that more studies need to be conducted to sharpen the link between gender and SLA, which was not deeply examined in previous studies.

For instance, one study conducted by Kissau (2006) on the role of gender in L2 acquisition found that, in general, females perform better than males in L2 acquisition because females tend to have an advantage over males due to their motivation level. However, considering the roles of motivational factors in SLA and L2 performance, this result will lead to a wider perspective when compared to the role of gender, as motivation plays a crucial role in L2 performance regardless of gender. In addition, some studies have emphasized the role of motivation between both genders and found out motivation is higher in girls than in boys (Balemir, 2009). Ludwig (1983) also noted concerning males’ and females’ motivations for learning a language that males learners study L2 for practical reasons, whereas females study based on the level of interest in that language. Nevertheless, factors like motivation, anxiety and gender are intricately related to each other and have a significant impact on learners’ performance. On the other hand, according to Park (2014), there is a logical assumption that males perform better in L2 communication than females, which, in turn, may lead to lower L2 performance compared to females in terms of language proficiency and accuracy. This assumption, however, has produced conflicting findings in gender studies of language performance (Campbell & Shaw, 1994; Koul et al., 2009).

However, clearly there is a gradual development of SLA research related to gender in L2 learning. The studies carried out thus far consist of two types. The first emphasizes language performance-related differences between males and females, as well as the gender-differentiated use of learning strategies, and the nation of female activity in the process of language learning. The second type represents recent movement, taking into consideration the social constructionist role of gender and language within SLA research. In particular, a variety of research has considered L2 learners’ social identity. Additionally, there have also been some practical applications of the community of practice construct within the L2 classroom (Kettemann et al., 1998).

6. Gender-related differences in SLA performance

Feery (2008) provided a comprehensive overview of research in her study of the role of gender in learning languages, which examined some theories and possible gender-related differences in foreign language acquisition. The overview sheds light on some related differences in learners’ performance. For instance, some studies outlined females’ superior performance on L2 tests than their male counterparts in both secondary and primary levels (Oxford, Young, & Sumrall, 1997). Moreover, some studies have shown that gender can have a significant impact on how students learn a language. For example, males surpassed females in the use of a particular language pattern; on the other hand, females employ more learning strategies to perform better and gain skills more effectively (Tercanlioglu, 2004). However, in terms of the differences not related to language performance, Kettemann et al. (1998, 14f) mentioned three different aspects of these differences: first, the learning strategies used by girls and boys; second, the attitude of learners towards learning an L2; third, the recognition of language subjects amongst males and females.

In regards to the differences in learning strategies employed by males and females, Thompson and Rubin (1993) found a significant difference in the kinds of strategies used by men and women, such

as (flexibility of learning, combination of cognitive and compensation strategies, active naturalistic strategies where male found to use these strategies significantly more than females. In the Contrary, Bacon and Finnemann (1992) did not find such differences. Further, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) stated that women at the Foreign Service Institute reported more use of learning strategies.

Another point mentioned in the literature in regard to gender differences is the difference in the attitude towards L2 language learning; for example, Oxford (1993, 1995) pointed out that females appear to be more motivated towards language learning than males. Additionally, Saunders (1998) emphasized a more positive attitude towards foreign language learning amongst females. They are more motivated to learn foreign languages, besides their desire to expand the existing knowledge of language learning. According to Feery (2008), recent studies reached a similar conclusion and stated that the interest level of L2 learning is greater in females than males in a foreign language; they concluded that females are more likely to have positive attitudes appear to be more positive toward language learning in comparison to their counterparts. Additionally, some researchers have attempted to summarise different approaches and reasons to explain the role of gender in foreign language learning. Kettemann et al. (1998, 16f), as cited in Feery (2008), categorized the potential reasons for these differences into a “biological stance, a cognitive-psychological approach and a socialization theory-based approach” (p. 11).

However, the results of the aforementioned studies in terms of gender differences in learning remain unclear and difficult to generalize to different contexts, as a specific singular influence of different systematic effects of gender in SLA is not precisely identified across previous studies. Therefore, further considerations should have been taken in the field of SLA to identify and interpret the L2 learning process through different factors among the two genders. To determine the link between L1 to L2 performance and gender differences, which is the focus of this study, more investigations need to be carried out in terms of the acquisition of specific language components, such as the syntactic and grammatical accuracy of L2 throughout speaking. Indeed, it is worth mentioning the value of errors committed by L2 learners and link it to differences between both genders.

7. Errors in L2 acquisition/ learning

The causes and the nature of errors made by L2 learners have been greatly studied in the field of SLA. Certain linguists (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994; Klein, 1989; Selinker, 1992) have used the term error to identify unwanted forms of language, while others (George, 1972, Krashen, 1983) have used the mistake to indicate learners' failures to apply the rules. Carter (1993) and Corder (1967) differentiated between errors and mistakes in terms of language production. However, Corder (1967) defined mistakes as unwanted forms of language due to emotional or physical conditions. Ellis (1997) and Selinker (1992) defined errors as a result of a transitory competency in L2 and language proficiency. Corder (1974) distinguished different types of errors in SLA as follows: (a) interlingual errors; (b) intralingual errors; (c) overgeneralization; (d) ignorance of rule restrictions; (e) incomplete application of rules. To investigate the effect of gender on L2 language errors, in particular, “inter-language errors”, it is worth clarifying the term inter-language errors and its role in the theories and approaches of understanding learners' errors in the field of SLA.

In addition, it is important to explain the mechanism by which errors occur. In Fact, the term *Error* here refers to the reoccurring of unwanted form in a learner's production of spoken or written second/foreign language (in this context, English) that is a result of processing the new knowledge and rules of L2 (George, 1972). In other words, the error has been learned, and it has appeared while communicating using L2. Therefore, its importance should be explained on the same grounds as introducing the new rules to learners. When a learner is exposed to a new language either from a teacher, a classroom or an L2 environment, we identify this as input to the learner. When learners produce written or spoken L2, this is defined as output from learners. Consequently, errors appear in a middle stage of the process between receiving rules from the input and the production of these rules in output.

This process and the mechanism between the input of a learner and the output represent the nature of rules functioning in L2, the differences between which can be observed and investigated. George (1972), in his survey of error analysis, explains the relationship between the input and the

output of learners in his Model of Error Production (Figure 1), which allows the investigation of learners' errors and the analysis of areas of difficulty in learning L2. The model has been adapted and modified from its original source for the purpose of this study.

Figure 1 indicates the input of the learners as black box (1), in which learners receive information from courses, teachers and the environment. On the other hand, Black box (2) indicates how learners process the information they receive from input (1) black box (1) which represented by the "course designer or teacher or classroom" in figure (1) through input (2) represented by "the learner's application of rules" black box (2), which may cause changes in the rules and language structure as a result of previous knowledge (e.g., rules of L1, false assumptions of L2). This leads to the production of errors, or 'unwanted forms of L2'. (Goerge, 1972)

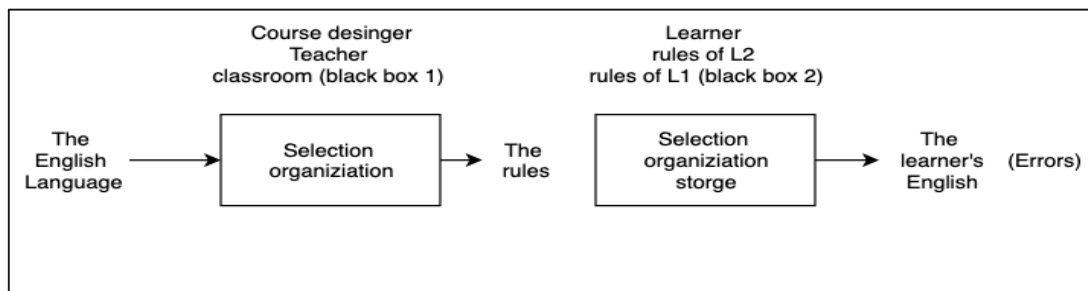


Figure 1. Model of error analysis

In other words, when learners learn new rules from L2 to whatever input they are exposed to, the familiar pattern they know will be produced correctly, and the unfamiliar patterns of rules will be produced incorrectly either due to the interference of L1 or the incorrect assumptions of L2. Errors resulting from the use of L1 to produce an unfamiliar pattern are called inter-language errors. Inter-language errors are classified into different categories. In fact, there are many taxonomies for error classification in the literature, but errors are classified and adapted in this study according to their specific linguistic types, not the structural deformations the utterances undergo (Richards, 1992). For instance, Corder (1973) mentions four main processes of L2 errors: substitution, omission, addition and permutation, or incorrect order of grammatical forms (Corder, 1973; Keshavarz, 2008). According to Corder (1973), substitution means, 'choosing an incorrect element instead of the correct one of the target language while omission involves the deletion of items or function words in the second language learner's utterances' (p. 277). Johnson and Johnson (1999) define errors of addition as 'the learner's addition of incorrect or unnecessary elements or items which is not present in the target language, and permutation errors or wrong ordering, are happening when the target language words are not used in their correct order' (p. 111).

8. Inter-language errors made by L2 learners

Errors caused by the influence of the native language or the mother tongue are linguistically defined as interlingual errors (Ellism 1997; George, 1972; Selinker, 1992). Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) stated these errors are "those caused by the influence of the learner's mother tongue on the production of the target language in presumably those areas where languages clearly differ" (p. 443). This type of error occurs as the result of language transfer, although not all errors are due to the learner's mother tongue. Language learning goes through a complex cognitive language process, and the production of language patterns interfere with many other factors. There are two types of transfer: positive and negative. Interlanguage errors are caused by the negative transfer of certain linguistic structures from the L1 (Al-khresheh, 2016). In other words, a negative transfer can be linked to the existing pattern of the L1, which may lead to some errors while communicating in the L2. Consequently, the analysis the negative influence of L1 on L2 can provide a broader understanding of learners' errors. For instance, according to Decherts & Dillis, as cited in Bhela,(1999) when L2 learners attempt to communicate using the target language, they will rely on their first language structure to express their intended meaning, if the structure is different, then errors occurred. Moreover, Behla (1999) states that "interference is the errors that can be traced back to the first language, while the learners use the second language" (p.22). Moreover, second language learners tend to transfer meanings, forms and

structure of their L1 to the foreign language when attempting to speak or write using the second language. By learning L2 rules, L1 rules are also transferred and then the errors occur (Nemati & Taghizadeh, 2006). Similarly, Karim & Nassaji (2013) examined the role of the first language in L2 writing, and the study found that L2 errors in writing were as a result of using the rules of L1 and apply it on the writing of L2. Other studies examined other types of errors for instance, errors of habit transformation such as (Abolhassan, et al, 2012). As well as, developmental errors studies by Nation (2001) as cited in (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015) who claimed that, "L2 learners want to gain a higher level of L2 performance, L1 plays a useful role in helping the learners. The L1 is a useful tool like other tools that should be used in learning L2 but should not be overused" (p. 2114). However, the aim of this study is to examine one type of learner error, which is the errors resulting from the transfer of patterns of the learners' L1 and compare its consistency among males and females.

9. Research questions

The study will be guided by the following research questions:

- a) What types of inter-language errors are most observed among intermediate-level students?
- b) What is the role of gender in the consistency of errors produced by Saudi learners?

10. Participants

The sample in this study includes 30 Saudi students (15 male and 15 female). The number were chosen for the sake of convenience as this study intended to focus on the type of errors produced by learners and 30 is a sufficient size of sample to conclude the findings. Participants are in the intermediate level, which is an appropriate level of language to test learners' language competence and error production (Ellis, 1994). All students study in the English language centre, University of Leeds, United Kingdom where many Saudi students received their scholarships to the United Kingdom by the Saudi government. More specifically, students who participated in this study are postgraduate students, where most Saudi students are enrolled in academic courses, mostly scientific academic programmes. To ensure the homogeneity of the study, all learners study English language as a second language and their native language is Arabic. Their level of English language proficiency is based AEUS (Academic English for Undergraduate Studies) course' criteria, which have a mixed-methods approach to leveling those students, the test that students undertake involved pre-existing IELTS scores, a short piece of writing (which is leveled into lower, middle or higher), and the English language centre grammar test. The results then were combined and students are leveled accordingly. Participants in this study are all enrolled in the pre-sessional postgraduate course to prepare for an academic English language. All students studied academic English language courses. The course covers equal emphasis on the four English language skills, mainly: reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

11. Methodology

In order to answer the questions of this study, two different methods were employed to collect the data. First, students' Language level were decided based on the test undertaken in the English language centre at Leeds university. Then, interviews with students were conducted in order to track students' errors throughout their speech. The other method used is, analyzing those errors in term of their source. Each method will be explained briefly.

Indeed, interviews are interviews is considered to be one of the effective tools for data collection in most social science (Silverman, 2006). As the focus of this study is to listen and observe participants' speech and analyse errors, the semi-structured interviews are used in order to serve the purpose of the research. According to Gill, et al. (2008), "Semi-structured interviews contain not only multi key questions that help to highlight the areas to be examined, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail".(p.3). This interview format is used in this study in order to provide some guidance on what to talk about, and explain to the participants the goal of the interview. As in some parts, participants needed elaboration of the answers they give.

In fact, interviews were recorded and started with open-ended questions, in order to turn the interviews into a kind of conversation which helped the learners to talk more and give longer

sentences. However, some of the questions were follow-up questions. The aim of using this technique is to encourage the learners to speak and expand the conversation. Robson (1993) describes effective interviews as a speech genre. Most interviews should consist of three parts: the beginning of the interview, which is also described as a warm-up stage, then, the body of the interview, where the main content is presented, finally, the final stage is, the end of the interview, which was implemented with a summarising sentence. The interviews conducted in this study mostly followed these stages. In the first part, an informal opening was introduced. In the second part, students were asked to describe a book or a film of their choice. In the third part, they were asked about the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom. The interviews were summed up with two or three sentences to bring the interview to an end.

The second method used in this study is the errors analysis approach. Pit Corder established error analysis in the 1960s. This approach was introduced to replace the role of the contrastive analysis, which was abandoned in the last ten years, to interpret learners' errors. Thus, this study employs the theory termed as Error Analysis, which is originally developed from S.P.Corder's theoretical framework. However, the major finding of error analysis is that the majority of learners' errors are committed as a result of the transfer of the rules of the L1 into the new language. Thus, this approach is used to investigate certain interference of L1 in SLA in this particular context. In order to investigate learners' errors between male and females, the "traditional error analysis" of Corder (1967) is followed. According to Corder (1967), as cited in Rustipa (2011), the methodology of error analysis should follow certain steps to investigate learner's performance. These steps include; 1. Collection of data, 2. Identification of errors, E.g (what are the common errors that learners commit?), 3. Classification of errors. 4. Explanation of errors and finally, 5. Evaluation of errors (where errors in this study are evaluated and compared between male and female in terms of consistency, frequency and type. Following Corder's approach, therefore, learners' errors were collected through interviews, identified, classified and then analyzed in terms of their sources.

11. Findings and discussion

Before we discuss in detail the types and sources of errors examined in this study, as well as the differences between males and females in terms of error consistency and the role played by the learner's gender in terms of errors commission. It is worth mentioning that other types of errors were found in learners' speech, and attempts have been made to determine the sources of these errors among males and females. Therefore, only syntactic errors have been analysed and classified according to their processes, as illustrated in Table (1) and Table (2).

Table 1.

The percentages of syntactic errors of female students

Type of Error	No. of Errors	Percentage
Substitution	89	36%
Omission	78	32%
Addition	44	18%
Permutation	31	14%
Total	242	100%

Table 1 illustrates the four different types of errors as classified in this study according to their occurrence among female learners.

Table 2.

The percentages of syntactic errors of male students

Type of Errors	No. of Errors	Percentage
Addition	73	38%
Omission	51	26%
Substitution	48	25%
Permutation	17	9%
Total	189	100%

Table 2 illustrates the four different types of errors as classified according to their consistency among male learners. As shown in Table (1) and Table (2), the majority (36%) of female learners' errors

are related to errors of substitution, while less of this type of error was found in the male group. A total of 129 errors of omission among both groups were divided into 78 errors for females and 51 for males with an average of 32% and 26%, respectively. Females had fewer errors of addition at 18% compared with 38% for male, which indicates that errors of addition are one of the common types of errors among male learners. In addition, permutation errors tended to appear less frequently among both males and females with a total number of 48 errors between both groups.

Errors of substitution were found in a number of syntactic forms that were used incorrectly in the learners' speech, such as the incorrect use of prepositions, pronouns, tenses of verbs, adverbs and adjectives, as well as articles. For example, learners substituted some prepositions as a result of L1, and they tended to express meaning while relying on L1 structures. For instance, they may say 'he stays here for the end of this month' instead of using the preposition *to*, 'we have a class at this building every day' instead of using *in* or 'we walk from the supermarket until our house' instead of using *to*.

Further errors appeared when using pronouns that indicate the same meaning in Arabic, such as 'the school she' instead of *it*. In this example, learners produced incorrect pronouns and could not differentiate between various types of English pronouns, such as personal and possessive pronouns (for which there is no equivalent in Arabic) and instead used the nearest elements of their L1 for meaning due to the lack of knowledge of the target language. This type of error is called 'false analogy' and happens when learners make incorrect assumptions of some element of the target language and rely on their L1 elements in which learners are attempting to communicate through different contexts. According to Keshavarz (2008), 'Analogy seems to be the main cause of errors in the misuse of prepositions and article for L2 learners' (p. 109).

The other classification of syntactic errors to be discussed is errors of omission, which involve the deletion of function words like '(prepositions and articles), or morphemes like (plural and third-person singular, past and past participle), and auxiliaries' (Keshavarz, 2008, p. 98) while communicating using L2. Some examples were found in this type of error as follows: 'what you studying?' without using the auxiliary verb *are*, or 'it mandatory for the students' without using the verb *is* in the sentence. In fact, these examples may be interpreted as the learners being influenced by their L1, as the sentences are grammatically correct when translated into Arabic.

In addition to the selected examples, errors of addition seem to be another area for which the source appears to be learners' inter-language errors, such as adding unsuitable articles, adjectives or prepositions. For instance, some learners said, 'I must go to home' instead of 'I must go home'. Other errors of this type include adding indefinite articles to plural nouns, such as 'I have a bad marks' instead of 'I have bad marks'.

In terms of the last category of errors, which is classified as permutation, or the wrong ordering of words in a sentence, some examples are errors with adjectives or verb order, for instance, 'say the teacher to her students' instead of 'the teacher says to her students' or 'study the students in the college instead of 'the students study in the college'. Permutation errors also appear in the use of adjectives, although this type of error is less frequent for both genders. For example, some students say 'class active' rather than 'active class' or 'system smart' instead of 'smart system'. In fact, errors of permutation in verb or adjective order are influenced by learners' L1 as Arabic begins with the verb instead of the subject, and sentences start with nouns before adjectives. This means that students in this case rely on the structure of their L1 rather than L2. According to Faisal (2013), 'erroneous sentences of permutation are affected by the interference of the native language of the learner because the subjects think in Arabic, which is their mother tongue, when they produce L2 utterances, This indicates that the students' mother tongue disturbs their performance in the foreign language' (p. 468). In fact, according to the number of errors, regardless of their type, male participants showed better oral communication skills with fewer permutation errors in terms of using the correct tenses, as well as more errors of addition. Some types of errors that involved verb forms, confusion of past or present tense and past participle forms were more frequent among both genders, which fits in the category of errors of omission. Furthermore, some errors show a failure to create subject-verb agreements, which is attributed to L1 transferred rules and, to some extent, to L2 redundancy. For example, errors of substitution and errors of tense sequence mostly occurred in male students rather

than females. Furthermore, the shift from direct speech to indirect speech was mostly attributed to relying on L1 structures rather than using L2 between both males and females.

In regard to the second research question about the role of the learners' gender on the type and the consistency of errors produced by learners, the results from a small sample study indicate that some types of errors, such as errors of substitution and errors of omission, happen more among females rather than males. On the other hand, errors of addition are more frequent in males rather than females. However, the overall performance of language proficiency which is represented by the number of errors in this study indicates that Saudi male learners have better language performance which could be tracked by the (less number of errors), regardless of error type, in comparison to their counterparts. This could be attributed to the male learners' better use of communication skills (Tannen, 1993; Meier, 1991) which, as a result, affects their language performance. An explanation of these differences may link gender to the learning process, (Eliss, 1994; Young & Oxford, 1997).

12. Conclusion

This study was performed to investigate the role of Saudi learners' gender in second language acquisition in terms of syntax forms. The study focused on analyzing and classifying errors in learners' speaking skills and their ability to communicate using L2 accurately. Inter-language errors were examined in terms of their consistency and frequency among both males and females to highlight the role played by gender. In fact, male students showed better performance in using speaking skills rather than female. The number and the types of errors were different between male and female. For example, errors of substitution and errors of tense sequence mostly occurred in male students rather than females. Also, errors of omission were less occurred among male students rather than female. On the other hand, errors of addition were more noticeable in males rather than female. Furthermore, female students relied heavily on using the structure of their L1 rather than L2, which resulted in more inter-language errors. However, these findings could reveal that gender plays an important role in SLA as male students proven to be better language learners than females with more accurate language utterances and less errors, which may refute some previous researchers' work, such as that of Coskun (2014), who claims that females are better language learners in term of cognitive ability to communicate in L2.

This study recommends more investigation into the role of gender in testing a language learner's performance. Although this study presented inter-language errors, other types of errors can be examined in relation to language competence. Moreover, this study tested syntax errors in speaking, where more studies can be conducted among different language components such lexical or phonology errors to highlight other factors that influence the second language learning process.

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