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University Students' Avoidance Behavior in English Classes

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the systematic avoidance of difficult expressions by learners of English to achieve error-free production. It is an attempt to reveal why this strategy is being so widely used and its negative effects on the overall L2 development. The frequency of relative clauses used by thirty-six B2 level undergraduate students in their graded essays was analyzed and compared with the frequency of relative clauses in their ungraded essays and in sample essays provided by essay-writing websites on the internet. Finally, a comprehensive grammar test on relative clauses was given to students to see how well they know relative clauses. The findings of the study were compared with the findings of earlier studies of other researchers on avoidance, and the contribution of error correction and evaluation system in English courses to the emergence of avoidance behavior was displayed.

Key Words: Language Learning, Writing Skill, Avoidance, Error Correction, Evaluation and Grading.

1. Introduction

Avoidance in second or foreign language learning is accepted to be one of the strategies used by learners when they face a communicative difficulty in the target language. Ortega (2013; 40) sees it as a systemic case of mother tongue (L1) influence and a kind of negative transfer from L1 to L2. She informs that when there is a negative transfer, it doesn't mean that there is or there are always noticeable error(s) or ungrammatical expressions in the L2, and sometimes certain lexically or grammatically difficult expressions that might lead to errors are omitted or avoided in the L2 production.

This systematic case of L1 influence was displayed long before Ortega in a widely known study by Schachter (1974), who compared the Japanese and Chinese learners of English with the Arabic and Persian learners of English according to their use of relative clauses in their English L2 compositions. She found that the Japanese and Chinese learners of English made strikingly much fewer relative clause errors when compared to the Arabic and Persian learners of English. However, she also found that the Japanese and Chinese learners of English used much fewer relative clauses in comparison with the Arabic and the Persian learners of English. According to Schachter, this is because Chinese

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and Japanese relative clauses are produced quite differently from English relative clauses, whereas Persian and Arabic relative clauses follow patterns that are much closer to English, and the Chinese and Japanese learners might have consciously or unconsciously avoided relative clauses in their English compositions, thereby making few mistakes.

The reason for this L1 influence might not only be the differences between L1 and L2. According to Gass *et al* (2013: 141), it may also originate from the similarities between the L1 and the L2, because the learner may doubt that these similarities are real. In a study of Dutch learners of English, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) found that although Dutch, like English, has phrasal verbs, learners did not accept English phrasal verbs when they have close similarity with the Dutch ones and avoided using them. It is highly possible that they found these English phrasal verbs too Dutchlike and thought that it would be incorrect to use them.

Many learners indeed tend to avoid using a target language lexical item or grammatical structure when they find it to be difficult, and they prefer using an alternative expression which is simpler, and which conveys almost similar message. In other words, as Laufer and Eliasson (1993-36) put it, they communicate by those linguistic means that make them feel safe from error. It is like paraphrasing all the time. This strategy results in fewer errors on the part of the learner, but it also makes it inevitable for the emergence of a learner language which is much simpler than it should be.

As Ortega (2013; 41) informs, the interest in avoidance has decreased over the years, perhaps because it implicitly invokes conscious choices that are difficult to prove. Ellis (2012; 357) states that it only makes sense to talk of avoidance if the learners know what they are avoiding. As a result, the concepts of *underuse* and *overuse* have gradually replaced the concept of avoidance and become more popular. So, one cannot find much recent research on avoidance. However, the concept of avoidance which involves avoiding the use of difficult expressions and which causes the emergence of a simpler language, deserves to be treated quite differently from the concepts of underuse and overuse which involve too rare or too frequent use of certain expressions, and, perhaps it is necessary to go beyond L1 interference and approach it from a different perspective.

2. Problem

Research made on avoidance behavior displayed by Turkish learners of English is quite limited. Studies generally involve the underuse of phrasal verbs and articles which the Turkish language lacks. In other words, these studies are mostly based on L1 and L2 differences and negative L1 transfer. There might be a considerable number of English learners who, especially the adult ones, habitually avoid using certain difficult lexical items or grammatical structures. No doubt that one of the reasons for this is the above-mentioned differences between English and Turkish. However, there is another factor peculiar to Turkey that seems to be adding to the problem of avoidance. It is the fact that those who learn English through their formal education tend to avoid using lexical or grammatical expressions they find difficult because they do not want to risk their scores in the oral or written exams they take. This strategy seems to be plausible when one considers how the students' grades are lowered due to the mistakes or errors they make in these tests.

As Brown and Lee (2015: 513) put forward, “learners all too often view tests as dark clouds hanging over their heads, upsetting them with lightning bolts of anxiety as they anticipate a hail of questions they can’t answer and, worst of all, a flood of disappointment if they don’t make the grade.” This is mostly the case experienced by almost every one of Turkish learners of English from around the age of nine until the end of the university education, and because of the nature of testing and evaluation, students, quite typically, tend to forget the fact that the purpose of taking English courses is to be able to communicate in a different language but focus on being successful in the exams and getting higher grades in the end. When their basic focus is on higher scores, it is quite common that they habitually try to develop strategies to achieve success in these exams. And, one of the strategies they favor, consciously or unconsciously, is avoidance, which is based on the idea that fewer mistakes bring higher scores, because they know that their teachers lower their scores when they make mistakes.

Brown (2001: 63) states that many instructional contexts around the world do not encourage risk-taking; instead, they encourage correctness, right answers, and withhold “guesses” until one is sure to be correct. And Turkey is no exception. Yet, research has proven that learners should be encouraged to feel and think that making mistakes are normal and that it is a part of learning process (Scovel, 1978; Spielberger, 1983; Horwitz, 1991; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). According to Kusumaningputri (2012), when teachers do not give enough atmosphere to forgiving-situations for learners, many situations in classroom and outside classroom become anxiety-provoking areas. What is more in Turkey is the fact that, in classrooms where learning English is obligatory and success is a must, learners, while trying to get higher scores through avoidance of difficult language points, make sacrifices in their overall performance in English, because this strategy, combined with internally and externally imposed anxiety, turns into a habit which disregards the benefits of risk-taking and which generally causes the emergence of a simple and fossilized foreign language.

As Truscott (2007) informs, Perkins and Larsen Freeman (1975) and Kleinmann (1977) made studies similar to Schachter’s (1974), and they also observed that learners who find a construction difficult tend to avoid it, using it only when they are especially confident that they can get it right, or when they have no choice. Very similar to the hypothesis in this study, Truscott (2007) connects this observation to error correction, the immediate goal of which is to make learners aware of their errors. According to Truscott, this awareness creates a clear motivation for avoiding the type of construction corrected, and as a result of this, the corrected students later display a tendency to hide their weaknesses. Studies have shown that those students who are not corrected also tend to avoid difficult expressions, but to a lesser extent, because they are not repeatedly pushed to focus on their errors.

Chandler (2004) claims that it is not errors as such that are avoided but rather the situations in which one might make them. To him, when learners are afraid of making errors they resort to paraphrasing, which is the typical avoidance strategy. They make fewer errors, but they do not become better writers. So, error correction raises awareness in learners, but this awareness does not make them better writers but better error avoiders, and instead of contributing to writing skill, it turns into a major hindrance to progress.

3. Method

This paper is based on studying 250-word essays written by thirty-six B2 level undergraduate university students in the first two tests they took in their English courses and analyzing the quantity and the quality of the *relative clauses* they used. Relative clauses were deliberately chosen for this research, because like Japanese and Chinese in Schachter's research (1974), Turkish, as it is in the following example, is also left-branching (i.e. nouns are pre-modified), which is dissimilar to English where nouns are post-modified (i.e. right-branched):

Parayı çalan çocuk (= The child who has stolen the money)

Parayı çalan (= who has stolen the money) *çocuk* (= the child)

Thus, it would be possible to compare our findings with those of Schachter's and to observe more specifically how the students' strategy of not taking risks contributes to the case of avoidance that stems from the differences in two languages. Moreover, conducting the study parallel to Schachter's, and as a result, eliminating a parameter which had been settled before would make it easier to focus on if there are any other reasons why students feel the need to write error-free essays and avoid using difficult expressions and what sacrifices they make in the process of learning English as a foreign language.

The reason why the avoidance behavior of the university level students is studied stems from the fact that they are young adults and their abstract thinking ability is much higher than that of the younger learners, so they are expected to have a more sophisticated strategical approach to getting higher scores, and it was also thought that their previous learning experiences might have had certain contributions to their tendency to avoid using difficult structures.

A 250-word essay had been the traditional means for many years to evaluate the writing skills of the B2 level students at the School of Foreign Languages of the university where this study was conducted, so it was thought that it would provide the most reliable data in the easiest and the most natural way. In each test conducted at this university, the essay writing section covers the 25 percent of the overall score, and topics are generally parallel to the reading passages in the course-books. After the analysis of the first two tests, the total number of relative clauses produced by those thirty-six students was calculated and the number of erroneous sentences was also found.

Then the average number of relative clauses used by students for a 250-word essay was compared with the average number of relative clauses used in 250-word sample essays provided by essay-writing websites on the Internet. 30 different sample essays which shared almost the same length with the essays written by the students were taken from four different websites, which are *Good Luck IELTS*, *TOEFL Resources*, *ESL Fast*, and *skypublishing.wikispaces.com*. These sites, which were selected because of their popularity and reliability on the internet and their inclusion of sample essays written by the native speakers of the English language, provided the most easily available but at the same useful resources to make this comparison.

A week later, in addition to what Schachter (1974) did in her research, the students were asked to write another essay whose subject was again parallel to the reading passages in their course-books, however, this time they were informed that they wouldn't be graded and were encouraged to do their best with all their creative power. This was done to see if there would be any change in students' avoidance behavior when there was no pressure of being graded.

In the following lesson of the same week the same students were given a grammar test based on the assessment of their knowledge of English relative clauses, because it was thought that the results of this test would make it easier to verify if this avoidance behavior originates from insufficient proficiency in the use of relative clauses or not. This is again what Schachter did not include in her research.

4. Results

As given in the table below, total number of relative clauses used by 36 students in their 250-word essays in two exams (70 essays in all as two students did not write anything in the first exam due to poor time management) was found to be 83, which makes it 1.19 relative clauses per each essay. 12 of these 83 relative clauses involved some minor or major errors, which means 14,4 percent of relative clauses used by students were erroneous.

The average number of relative clauses in 30 sample essays selected randomly from different essay-writing websites of American origin was found to be 7,23 per each essay.

Total number of relative clauses used by 36 students in the essays they wrote after having been instructed that they would not be graded and encouraged to do their best with all their creativity was found to be 69, which makes it 1.91 relative clauses per each essay. 17,2 percent of these relative clauses involved some minor or major errors.

	Number of Relative Clauses per Each Essay	Percentage of Erroneous Relative Clauses
Graded Exams	1,19	14,4 %
Ungraded Exams	1,91	17,2 %
Sample essays on the Internet	7,23	-

Comparison of the Frequency of Relative Clauses

The number of the relative clauses used by students is much smaller than the number of the relative clauses used in sample essays on the Internet. This difference combined with students' relatively small number of relative clause errors appear, at first glance, to show that they avoided relative clauses because they were difficult. The above-mentioned difference between the structures of the Turkish and English relative clauses seems to be the explanation for this difficulty, but the question is, "Is this difference the only explanation for the use of so small number of relative clauses by students in their graded essays?" or "Can't there be any other reason for this case of avoidance?"

The analysis of the relative clauses used by students in their ungraded essays reveals the fact that there is a slight increase in the number of relative clauses per essay, but it is still too low when compared to the average number of relative clauses used in sample essays on the Internet. And again,

there is not a dramatic increase in the number of erroneous sentences although students knew that they would not be graded.

This situation might have two interpretations. Either the difficulty of relative clauses for the Turkish learners of English due to the differences between two languages causes them to avoid relative clauses wherever and whenever they produce the English language, or their strategy of not taking risks to score higher in exams has turned into a kind of habit and they habitually avoid using relatively difficult expressions such as relative clauses.

In the B2 level grammar test based on relative clauses 12 students managed to score more than 85 out of 100. These students, who are accepted to have been successful in the grammar test, had used an average number of 2.21 relative clauses per each graded essay and 2,45 relative clauses per each ungraded essay. The average number of relative clauses used by these 12 students seems to be very low, because the results of the grammar test indicate that relative clauses do not involve any problem or difficulty for these students.

5. Discussion

The findings obtained in this small-scale research are almost similar to Schachter's (1974) findings. Language learners consciously or unconsciously avoid using difficult expressions whose difficulty arises from the fact that they are being produced quite differently in the target language and the mother tongue. However, this study, which involves the analysis and the comparison of the results of graded essays, ungraded essays and a grammar test based on relative clauses, reveals that there is an additional factor to the problem of avoidance. And, this factor is very similar to the factor that Truscott (2007) mentions. According to the results of the grammar test, 12 out of 36 students do not have any problem in the use of relative clauses, but the frequency of relative clauses used by even these students is too small when compared to the frequency of relative clauses in sample essays on the Internet. So, it seems that the difficulty of expressions or structures cannot be the only explanation for the systematic case of avoidance, because there are certain students who still refrain from using relative clauses although they have attained nearly full command of relative clauses.

Though not as dramatic as anticipated, there is a slight increase in the average number of relative clauses used in ungraded essays. If the average number of relative clauses, accurate or inaccurate, used by the students in their ungraded essays were closer to the average number of relative clauses in sample essays in essay-writing websites, one would be able to say that the students consciously avoided relative clauses in graded essays because they did not risk their scores and they used relative clauses comfortably in ungraded essays because there was no risk. However, since there is only a minor increase in the frequency of relative clauses produced by those students who scored well in the grammar test, the following conclusion seems to be quite plausible:

When students had problems in using relative clauses, they consciously or unconsciously avoided using them in graded exams in order not to risk their scores because they knew that when they made errors the teachers would take their points off, and this strategy has turned into a habit of avoiding relative clauses even when they are not graded or in real-life contexts.

The students are not able to apply their knowledge about relative clauses in real language use, i.e. they haven't managed, as Ortega (2009:81-5) puts it, to go beyond declarative knowledge and reach procedural knowledge, because they haven't practiced what they have learned about relative clauses sufficiently, and they can't use them automatically. And, in a country like Turkey where it is very difficult to practice English in real-life contexts, the fear of getting lower grades in exams is one of the biggest reasons why students do not embrace the opportunity of practicing what they have learned. So, there is something wrong in the way we evaluate and grade our students. It directly or indirectly, but negatively, affects their competence and performance.

6. Conclusion

The findings in this small-scale research confirm the previous findings on avoidance, and support the conclusions reached by Truscott (2007), Schachter (1974), Perkins and Larsen Freeman (1975), Kleinmann (1977) and Chandler (2004).

Though it is not so comprehensive, the results obtained from this study make one think that the problem is much deeper than it was stated before, because especially in countries like Turkey where 99 percent of people learn foreign languages in formal school settings, students are more vulnerable to the negative effects of avoidance, and the sacrifices made by students are bigger. Excessive error correction and lowering of grades due to errors, which are the results of a demand for error-free production, both oral and written, have created a kind of language learner who habitually avoids using structures and expressions no matter how well he has learned them. And, in these countries the only place where learners have a chance to practice is the school. Since practice is the only means for them to achieve proceduralization or automatization, which is the ultimate goal of language learning process, this habitual strategy of avoidance almost totally deprives them of this opportunity. This fact, which might be one of the main reasons for the general failure in foreign language teaching, urges us to re-evaluate our evaluation system and create a new system which focuses mostly on content rather than accuracy and which promotes creativity, and in turn, which encourages the learners to take risks and try to verbalize whatever ideas they conceive, disregarding the fact that they might make errors.

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