Second Language Writing Development of Turkish Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the writing development of a group of elementary-level students attending English Preparatory Programme at a state university in Turkey. It entails a detailed quantitative analysis of data including texts produced by 21 students on an online platform over a ten-week period to describe and outline linguistic changes that could take place between the commence and end of the semester. The findings have revealed that lexical density of the texts has increased significantly, that not a significant difference was found across the texts in terms of readability, and that the number of different words used by the students has consistently increased from the first week onwards despite slight fluctuations. It has been revealed that phonological and syntactic errors were the most frequented error types whereas lexical and morphological errors randomly appeared in the texts throughout the semester.

Key Words: *Second language acquisition, linguistic change, writing development*

1. Introduction

Second language writing has been an issue of concern since the second half of 20th century. The pioneering studies conducted by Loban (1963) and Hunt (1965) with a focus on linguistic features in student writing have lead many scholars to collect written productions of students with various proficiency levels in their first and/ or second language. As put by Droughty and Long (2003:3), it encompasses basic and applied work on the acquisition and loss of second (third, etc.) languages and dialects by children and adults, learning naturalistically and/or with the aid of formal instruction, as individuals or in groups, in foreign, second language, and lingua franca settings. In a similar vein, the application of newer findings from the study of SLA to educational concerns has both informed and sustained long standing debates about the role of the learner's consciousness in the SLA process, and about the nature of the learner's input needs and requirements (Pica, 2005: 1). Droughty and Long (Ibid) go on to say that SLA research findings offer guidance on numerous issues including the optimal timing of L1 maintenance and L2 development programs, the linguistic modification of teaching materials, the role of implicit and explicit negative feedback on language error, and language and content achievement testing. In the light of these assumptions, the present study aims to explore the writing development of a group of elementary level students attending the English Preparatory Programme at a state university in Turkey. It basically examines the texts written by these students in terms of lexical density, readability and word variety. In addition, it specifically deals with the errors and error types occurring in these texts throughout a semester. Accordingly, the following research questions were addressed.

Q1. Do written productions of English elementary students differ across a semester with respect to lexical density, readability, and word variety?
Q2. What types of errors are found in written productions of English elementary students?
Q3. Do error types in written productions of English elementary students significantly differ across a semester?

Originated by Ure (1971), lexical density refers to the ratio of the number of lexical (as opposed to grammatical) words to the total number of words in a text. According to Halliday (1985: 62), it is the kind of complexity that is typical of written language. It is determined by text-type and is largely independent of text-length (McCarthy, 1990: 72). Namely, Berman and Ravid (2009) examined the language of literacy as reflected in different types of texts constructed by speaker-writers from middle childhood across adolescence, and reported that expository texts have higher level of lexical density than the narratives produced by the same subjects across age groups.

Readability, on the other hand, is described as the ease with which a reader can read and understand a text (Oakland & Lane, 2004). Jauss (1982) contends that it is determined by such characteristics as the suitability of the text for the readers' background, their language, and the instructor's curricular goals. He goes on to state that a text is more readable when it presents concrete issues rather than abstract ones, provides the "who," "what," "where," and "when" familiar to the reader, appeals to the age of readers, it is written in a genre familiar to the readers, acceptable to the reader's cultural background, and when it is longer, with context clues, or written as a short text on a familiar topic. According to Richards et al. (1992: 306), it is determined by several factors including the average length of sentences, the number of new words contained, and the grammatical complexity of the language used in a passage. Analysing essays produced by Japanese university students in English, Kodachi (2002) reported that error coding enhances students' ability of composing sentences in the target language, and that readability level of the essays written by the students improves with practice. Duppenthaler (2015) found that the average readability of the texts produced by Japanese students was measured approximately half of those by the native speakers. Advocating that lexically diverse texts are usually regarded more competent and persuasive in its effect than equivalent low-diversity reproduction of the same texts, Kakkonen (2009) compared British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus and the Uppsala Student English (USE) corpus composed of texts written by non-native English-speaking students in Sweden. He concluded that both lexical diversity and readability of texts written by native speakers were higher than those written by the non-native students.

Kwon (2009) reported significant differences between texts written by native and non-native university students of English with respect to lexical diversity and lexical sophistication. His findings indicated that the essays produced by L1 writers contain fewer easy words than those produced by L2 writers whereas both L1 and L2 texts contain moderately high level of content words. In a similar study, Vidaković and Barker (2009) examined English L2 texts written by candidates who obtained Cambridge Certificates in ESOL Skills for Life (SfL) in five levels. Their findings suggested that the average length of words, sentences, number of different words and lexical variation across texts increase with proficiency, and that lexical density did not differentiate between proficiency levels of the candidates. Comparing lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and lexical density in the narratives produced by Czech EFL students, Šišková (2012) concluded that the strongest correlations were found between measures of lexical diversity and sophistication; measures of lexical diversity and density correlate very weakly, and there are no significant correlations between measures of lexical density and sophistication.

As cited in Camiciottoli (2007: 73), there is a general consensus that high lexical density is associated with more propositional content and greater complexity, which can render language more difficult for to process, particularly for non-native speakers (McNeill, 1994; Ventola 1996; Hartnett, 1998). In a study involving the analysis of essays written by Swedish students in the UK, Linnarud (1973) revealed that native students produced texts lexically richer and more varied when compared to those written by the non-native students. Green (2012) reported no significant difference between the native speaker and non-native speaker writing in terms of proficiency level but stated that such differences as L2 writing contains more argument overlap, more semantic overlap, more frequent content words, fewer abstract verb hyponyms and less causal content than native speaker writing. Analysing argumentative essays written by Hungarian undergraduate students of English, Doró (2014) reached no statistically significant difference between the reported writing behaviours of students and the lexical richness measures of their essays. To et al. (2013) investigated the nominalisation of two IELTS writing test papers of candidates achieving band 7 and band 5, and found a strong relationship between nominalisation, lexical density and readability of the texts.

They also found that the text with higher marks was denser and more difficult to read whilst the lower-graded text was less dense and easier to comprehend, and ultimately concluded that nominalisation and lexical density express linguistic complexity in writing, which extensively contributes to the ability of the writers. In a recent study, Gregori-Signes and Clavel-Arroitia (2015) analysed written productions of Spanish-speaking university students who learnt English as a foreign language, and reported a difference between the first and the second assignments of first-year students regarding lexical density, which they attributed to the nature of the task. They concluded that the students with higher proficiency level in English tend to write more complex compositions. Hoch (2013) argues that language learners often make mistakes in vocabulary and grammar, and that as they take risks and experiment, their accuracy level may be negatively affected, which is a normal part of the language development process.

Hyland (2003: 3) advocates that one way to look at writing is to see as marks on a page or a screen, a coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences, structured according to a system of rules, and that conceptualizing L2 writing in this way directs attention to writing as a product and encourages a focus on formal text units or grammatical features of texts. He goes on to say that, in this way, learning to write in a foreign or second language mainly involves linguistic knowledge and the vocabulary choices, syntactic patterns and cohesive devices that comprise the essential building of blocks of the texts. While producing such kind of writing, learners inevitably commit errors, which, according to Gass and Selinker (2008: 102), are to be viewed as indications of their attempt to figure out some system to impose regularity on the language s/he is exposed to. Errors committed by language learners have been classified into different groups by various scholars in the field of second language acquisition particularly since the pioneering study of Corder (1967), whereby he calls on applied linguists to focus on L2 learners' errors not as bad habits to be eradicated, but sources of insight into the learning processes (cited in Saville-Troike, 2006).

Namely, they are categorized as interference (interlingual) errors, intralingual errors and developmental errors (Richards, 1972); errors stemming from language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of SL learning, strategies of SL communication and overgeneralization (Selinker, 1972, 92); errors resulting from addition, fragment, omission, simplification, structure of discourse, selection of words, word order, and subject-verb agreement (Corder, 1972); interference-like errors, L1 developmental errors, ambiguous errors (either interference-like errors or L1 developmental errors), and unique errors (neither interference-like errors nor L1 developmental errors) (Dulay & Burt, 1972); iterlingual errors, intralingual errors, and teacher-induced errors (Corder, 1974); global errors and local errors (Burt & Kiparsky, 1974); errors stemming from interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies (Brown, 1980); psycholinguistic errors, sociolinguistic errors, epistemic errors, and discourse structural errors (Taylor, 1986); intralingual errors and developmental errors (Touchie, 1986); and interlingual errors and intralingual errors (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Touchie (1986: 77) classifies errors regarding language components involved in the language learning process as phonological errors (e.g. lack of distinction between the phoneme /p / and the phoneme /b/ among Arab ESL learners, morphological (e.g. production of *womans*, *sheeps*, and *furnitures*), lexical errors (e.g. word-for-word translation from the learner's native language or the use of wrong lexical items in the second language), and syntactic errors (e.g. errors in word order, subject-verb agreement, and the use of the resumptive pronoun in English relative clauses produced by Arab ESL learners).

That there is divergence of opinion among scholars about the definition, identification and classification of errors, especially those produced by second/ foreign language learners, might be regarded as an indicator of a great deal of research has been devoted to this issue for the last half century. For instance, Rizzo and Villafane (1975) found that the errors committed by Spanish-speaking students in English appear to have origins in Spanish grammar, pronunciation, usage or spelling. Approximately a decade later, Bryant (1984) reported interlingual errors in the essays of Japanese ESL students as a result of intrusion of their mother tongue (e.g. omission of definite and indefinite articles, omission of plural –s, incorrect inflection of the verbs, incorrect verbal aspect, and omission of locative preposition), and intralingual errors (e.g. incorrect use of verb tense, and incorrect use of the s-genitive) across students' essays. Conducting a corpus-based study, Meriläinen (2010) revealed that the Finnish students have greater difficulty in learning English syntactic constructions retaining relatively more L1 syntactic influence in their L2 writing as opposed to the Swedish students who received English instruction during the identical period of time. Moving from this particular finding, the researcher attributes the non-parallel development between lexical and syntactic transfer patterns to that L1 transfer is relatively more persistent at the level of syntax than it is at the level of lexicon for learners whose L1 is genetically and typologically distant from the L2.

She concludes that Finnish students' increased exposure to and use of English does not seem to help them to acquire an equivalent level of proficiency in syntactic structures even though it may have a positive impact on their lexical development in L2 and communicative competence. In a similar corpus-based study, Kırkgöz (2010) identified and classified written errors of Turkish-speaking adult learners of English. Her findings indicated that the interlingual errors, which result from the students' L1 interference, constitute over 55% of the written errors in their essays, and that intralingual errors mostly stem from overgeneralization, addition/ omission/ misuse of articles, incorrect spelling and redundancy. Oflaz and Bolat (2012) evaluated interference errors stemming from mother tongue and English in learning German analysing compositions produced by Turkish-speaking learners of German whose second language is English.

Their study revealed that interlingual errors are commonly found in word order and using prepositions and forming past verb forms, adjectives, and plural forms of nouns, and that lexical errors and errors in using small or capital letters frequently appeared. Analysing essays of EFL major students in Taiwan, Timina (2013) reported L1 interference errors caused either by the rhetorical differences between Chinese and English in terms of an essay organizational structure, content, and argumentation, and grammatical and lexical errors caused by considerable differences in the structures of the two languages. The grammatical and lexical errors mostly reported in the study are incorrect tense choice, using wrong words, incomplete structures or sentences (e.g. omitting verbs), incorrect word forms, and incorrect plural form of nouns. Another study conducted by Liu and Xu (2013) on syntactic errors committed Chinese-speaking non-English major university students displayed that errors in tense and voice were the most frequented type among ten groups of syntactic errors identified in the study, and that the errors generally tended to decrease across tasks. They also revealed that there is an inverse correlation between the errors and the students' writing performance, and that the errors were caused by various reasons such as carelessness and the differences between Chinese and English.

More recently, Sawalmeh (2013) identified ten types of errors committed by Arabic-speaking Saudi learners of English, most of which he attributes to L1 transfer (e.g. incorrect use of verb tense, wrong word order, incorrect use of singular/plural form of nouns, subject-verb disagreement, and etc). Abushihab (2014) identified five groups of errors committed by Turkish-speaking EFL students, (e.g. errors in tenses, in the use of prepositions, in the use of articles, in the use of active and passive voices, and morphological errors), and reported that the incorrect use of prepositions and that of articles constitute approximately 60% of all errors produced by the students, which he attributes to L1 interference and the students' incomplete knowledge of the target language. In a similar study, Çetin-Köroğlu (2014) found that Turkish-speaking EFL students studying Arabic Language Teaching at a state university in Turkey mostly produced interlingual errors stemming from negative L1 transfer, followed by intralingual errors stemming from overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restriction and incomplete application of rules. Kesmez (2015) analysed interference errors in compositions written by Turkish EFL students into four major groups as morphological, lexical, syntactic and orthographic errors. He reported that lexical errors stemming from word for word translation, incorrect plural form of uncountable nouns, and that incorrect use of verb forms constitute were the most frequented type of errors among the four groups. In this study, errors produced by the language learners were analysed into the identified groups in concern. One more group entitled punctuation errors, which includes such errors as comma splices, missing apostrophes in possessives and unnecessary commas between subjects and verbs, was also created in addition to the classification proposed by Touchie (Ibid).

2. Methods

21 English non-major undergraduate students attending the English preparatory programme at a state university in Turkey participated in this study. The programme in concern was designed to offer education of 24 class hours a week during a semester comprising of 16 weeks. The weekly schedule includes the following courses: Main Course (18 hours), Speaking (4 hours) and SAC (Self Access Centre) (2 hours). SAC classes on which the present study is concentrated are held in a computer lab under the supervision of an instructor. During the classes, the students were supposed to log in Moodle, an online learning platform designed with the primary purpose of reinforcing the newly learnt language items in MC and Speaking classes. Figure 1 provides a screenshot of the website in question.

Figures

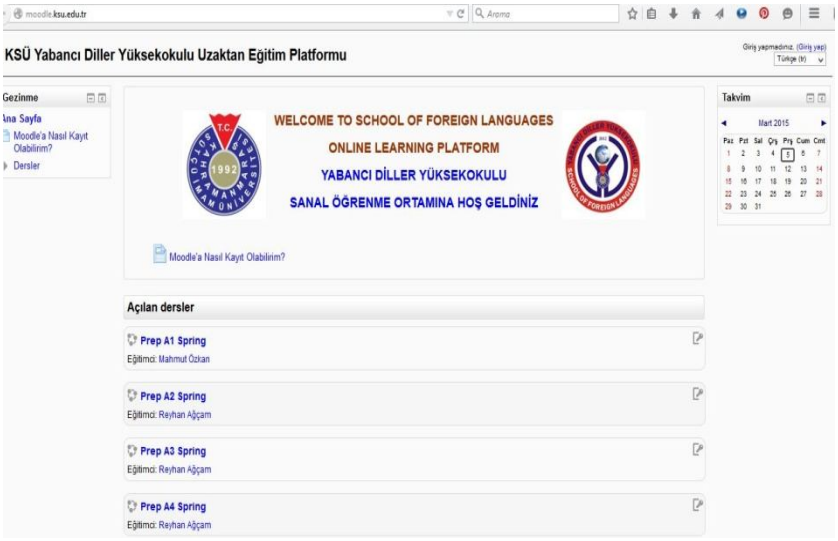

Figure 1: Online learning platform in SAC classes (moodle.ksu.edu.tr)

The platform not only offers activities to improve students' core linguistic skills (i.e. grammar, listening, reading, speaking, vocabulary and writing) but provides feedback on their own progress.

It is noteworthy that all the activities were arranged and uploaded to the system by the researchers taking into consideration the educational objectives identified in the curriculum. Due to the exam schedule and the portfolio assignments throughout the semester, the students were given a writing task every couple of weeks rather than once a week. The topics ranged from introducing oneself to daily routines and future plans which were stated in the related annual plan. The texts uploaded by the students were compiled by the researchers on a weekly basis, and analysed using a computer programme to track their progress regarding word count, word variety, lexical density, and readability of the texts. In a subsequent session, texts were analysed to reveal what types of errors were committed by the students.

During error analysis, basically, the classification proposed by Touchie (Ibid) was adopted, and the errors were categorized into the following groups as phonological, morphological, lexical (wrong word use, L1 use), syntactic (missing word, word order) and punctuation. The following section offers related findings and discussion on lexical density, readability, and word variety of the text as well as errors committed by the students across them.

3. Findings and Discussion

In accordance with the recordings on the system, slight fluctuations were observed across weeks with respect to the number of the words produced by the students. A similar tendency was observed in the statistical results of word variety across tasks. Figure 2 displays the related results.

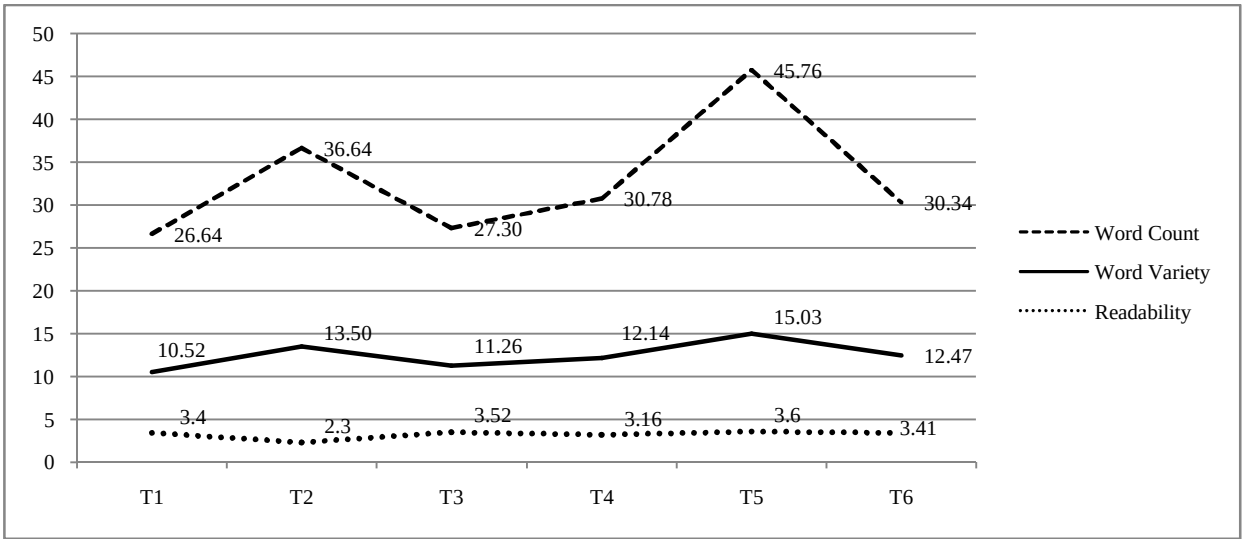

Figure 2: Word count, word variety and readability across tasks

Not surprisingly, the students tended to produce a relatively higher number of words in their writing within the course of time. Namely, they were able to produce texts comprising an average of 26 and 45 words in the first and fifth tasks, respectively. The fluctuations observed in the third and sixth tasks might have stemmed from the more complex nature of them. As for lexical density, it tended to increase steadily from the second task on even though it slightly decreased in the fifth task. It was measured 62%, 86% and over 82% in the first, third and lasts tasks, respectively corresponding to an increase of 32.3% within the semester. In the phase of error analysis, errors were identified and classified by one of the researchers, and the cross-checking was conducted by the other researcher. Overall, it has been revealed that all types of errors were found in the texts uploaded by the students to the online platform. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of error types excluding punctuation errors across tasks.

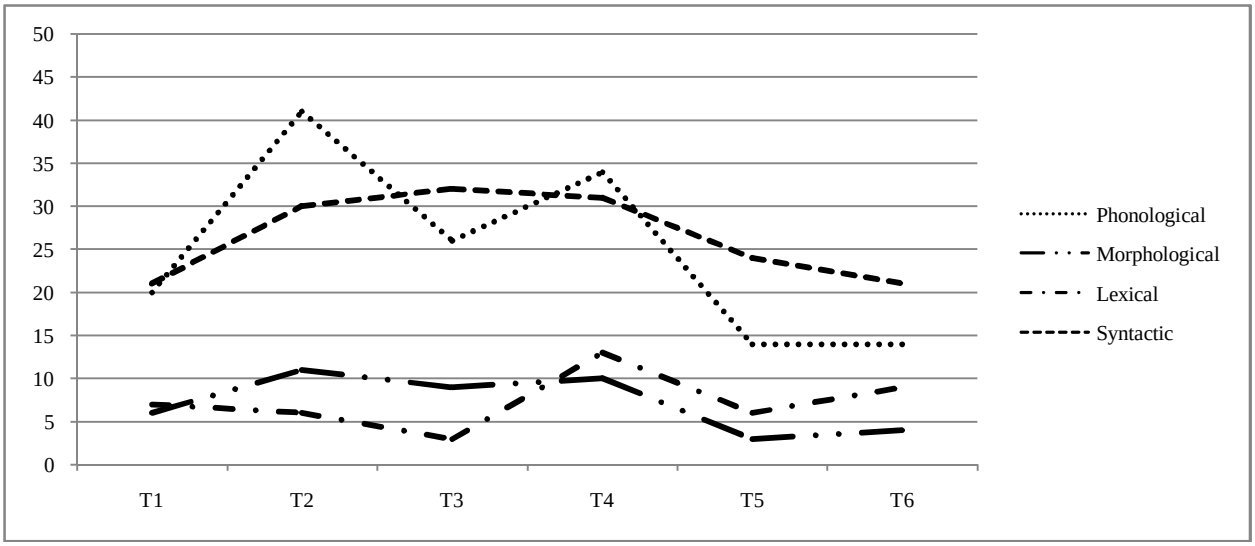

Figure 3: Error types across tasks

From the first task onwards, it was observed that the students committed phonological errors stemming from the incorrect writing of words (e.g. spelling errors), making it the most frequented error type among five categories occurring in the texts of students. The following are taken from related corpus to exemplify these errors.

1. (a) **I speak türkish.*
(b) **He ıs from Şırnak*
(c) **I don't have a girl friend*
(d) **We have egg, tomates, chees, chocolate for breakfast.*

The errors illustrated in these statements might be attributed to the transfer of students' L1 phonological knowledge as it includes such letters as /ü/ and /ı/ which do not exist in their L2, as in (1a) and (1b), and their L1 requires them to write particular compound nouns separately like 'kız arkadaş' (girlfriend), as in (1c). Likewise, the incorrect spelling of tomatoes was likely due to singular form of its Turkish counterpart in (domates), and those of cheese might be attributed to the writing system of Turkish, which is written exactly as it is pronounced; thus, it is not all that surprising to see the word chees, which is pronounced /'ʧi:z/ in English, was written by Turkish-speaking students lacking the letter /e/. Despite increasing in the second and fourth tasks, this group of errors significantly decreased toward the end of the semester. Nevertheless, it is considered that they might be overcome by raising phonological consciousness of the students drawing their attention the fundamental differences between phonological and writing systems of their L1 and L2.

Syntactic errors also appeared in the texts approximately as frequently as phonological errors. The difference was that the former tend to fluctuate less than the former. Nonetheless, the number of syntactic errors committed in the first task remained the same at the end of the semester, which might be attributed to the fact that the subject matters were prone to become more challenging toward the end of semester due to more parametric differences between the two languages involved in the process. The following are presented to display errors falling into this category.

2. (a) *I *am speak English.* (Tense, voice, modality)
**He does a student.* (Tense, voice, modality)

**Yesterday, I am bad because I lost my keys*. (Tense, voice, modality)
**We were play football.* (Tense, voice, modality)
**I sometimes cooking.* (Tense, voice, modality)

(b) **Inside my bag there is a mobile phone, a credit card, glasses, and wallet*. (Subject-predicate disagreement)

(c) **We and friends in the party*. (Missing determiner)

**They had party last night.* (Missing determiner)

(d) **I want to late get up.* (Word order)
(e) **I can perfect play football.* (Word order, Part of speech)

The errors exemplified in (2a) evidently stem from the incorrect use of tense, voice and modality, that in (2b) from subject-predicate disagreement, and those in (2c) from missing determiners, which might be attributed to students' insufficient knowledge of L2. The error resulting from the use of wrong word order in (2d), and wrong word order and the part of speech error in (2e) might be attributed to students' transfer of L1 knowledge to their productions in L2. That is, their L1 requires adverbs to precede the main verb in a sentence, and it allows the certain words to function as an adjective and an adverb at the same time. Namely, the adjective good and the adverb well in English have a unique counterpart in Turkish (iyi). The syntactic errors identified so far could be overcome through the use of consciousness raising activities as well as activities designed to reinforce the students' L2 knowledge.

The findings have also indicated that morphological errors (e.g. omission/ misuse of plural ending –s, omission/ misuse of possessive –s, and incorrect word forms) and lexical errors were found in students' texts, as exemplified in the following statements obtained from the corpus.

3. (a) **I have two sister.*
(b) **My parents names are Behlül and Koçer.*
(c) **I am going to study at Public Administration Section.*
(d) **There names are Nevzat and Ayhan.*
(e) **A little of me name is Serket.*

The error in (3a) stems from the omission of plural ending –s from the word sister which was supposed to be in plural form as there is more than one of it. A similar error appears in (3b) including the word name in singular form even though there are two of it. Another morphological error identified in this statement results from the omission of possessive –s from the word parents.

The errors in both statements might be due to transfer of students' L1 lexical knowledge as Turkish neither allows attaching plural –s to the end of a noun once it is preceded by a number nor requires an apostrophe in order to express possession. In the statement (3c) and (3e), the inconvenience is caused by the use of wrong words the students transferred from their L1 lexical knowledge. Namely, they were supposed to use the word department rather than section, both of which carry the same meaning in Turkish, and a little of me instead of my younger sister/ brother to convey the intended meaning, indicating that the student producing the statement thought in his/ her L1 rather than the target language. As for (3d), it is understood that the wrong word there was used instead of their, which might be triggered by the phonological similarity between the words in concern. All in all, morphological and lexical errors constituted the least frequented error types found in students' texts throughout the semester. In spite of slight decreases and increases in certain tasks, they remained in the minority at the end of the semester. Punctuation errors were evaluated separately as they are considered relatively more superficial and subtle than the above-mentioned groups of errors proposed by Touchie (Ibid). Their distribution over tasks is illustrated in Figure 4.

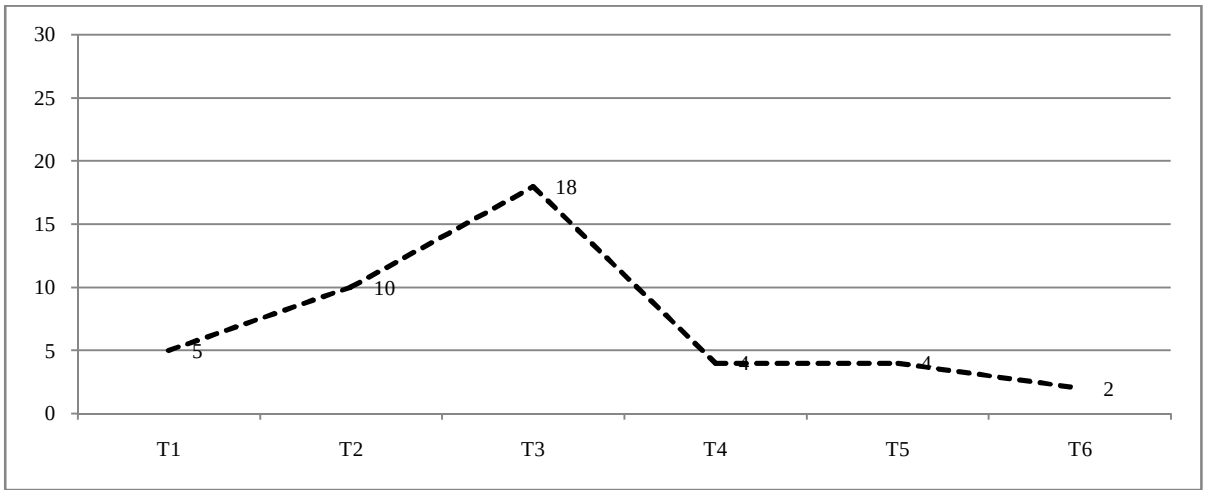

Figure 4: Punctuation errors across tasks

In spite of dramatic increases in the second and third tasks, punctuation errors were rarely seen throughout the semester, and almost disappeared at the end of it. The following are provided to exemplify the most common punctuation errors produced by the students.

4. (a) **he was born in 1976* (Capitalization, lack of a full stop)
(b) **I am a student* (Lack of a full stop)
(c) **I dont have a sister*. (Lack of an apostrophe)

The error in (4a) occurred as the student failed to capitalize the first word of the sentence. The ones in (4b) and (4c) were caused by the lack of full stop at the end of the sentence and that of apostrophe in the contracted auxiliary verb of the sentence, respectively. It is assumed that errors of such kind were most probably caused carelessness, and they are believed to have constantly decreased particularly from the third task thanks to the feedback provided by the instructor as well as their peers on the online platform.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Evaluation of Research Questions

The first question investigated whether written productions of English elementary students differ across a semester with respect to lexical density, readability, and word variety. The findings have revealed that from the second task on, lexical density of the texts has increased significantly (80%), that not a significant difference was found across the texts in terms of readability, and that the number of different words used by the students has consistently increased from the first week onwards despite slight fluctuations. The second question scrutinized types of errors found in written productions of English elementary students. It has been revealed that all types of errors (i.e. phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and punctuation errors) were committed by the students during the semester. Phonological and syntactic errors were the most frequented types whereas lexical and morphological errors randomly appeared in the texts throughout the semester.

The last question probed whether errors in written productions of English elementary students significantly differ across a semester. Despite increasing from time to time, the lexical and morphological errors drew a relatively steadier curve during the semester when compared to the phonological and syntactic errors. The most dramatic decrease was measured in phonological errors. Namely, they composed approximately half of the errors in the first task and constituted less than 29% of them in the last task.

4.2. Pedagogical Implications

Our study has indicated that the students have certain difficulties in their L2 writing (e.g. failing to write lexically poor and less readable texts, and producing errors of various kinds). To help they produce texts of higher readability and lexical density in the target language, EFL teachers might be suggested to provide them with extensive reading activities in the classroom. In this regard, texts written by the native speakers appropriate to the proficiency level of students are likely to be beneficial. For overcoming errors, especially phonological and syntactic ones caused by the students' L1 interference, consciousness raising activities might be recommended. Namely, activities designed to underline the phonological and syntactic differences between the students' L1 and L2 might be exploited by the teachers. Teachers might also be suggested to employ inductive teaching techniques to help their students become aware of such differences rather than presenting them explicitly. However, if this happens to hinder achieving the goals and objectives identified in the curriculum by taking a relatively long time, the teachers might be suggested to teach them explicitly. In doing so, they might also be advised not to avoid students' mother tongue while explaining such differences. Alternately, they might be recommended to assign the students with works requiring them to evaluate texts written by their peers in terms of identification of errors. For those who are teaching students of higher level of proficiency level in L2, the teachers might be suggested to ask them to write a report on in each other's texts underlining the problematic parts.

4.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study is limited to the analysis of data obtained from a group of English elementary students attending a state university in Turkey. So, relatively a larger number of students with more proficiency in English might be involved in a further study. It is also limited to a semester and writing tasks assigned to the students every two weeks. Therefore, the study might be extended over a longer period of time (e.g. an academic year composed of two semesters), and the tasks in concern might be assigned once a week in order to obtain and analyse more data for more reliable and generalisable results. Finally, our study is confined to the analysis of learner errors on the basis of the classification identified by Touchie (1986) and another group of errors added by the researchers. Alternatively, learners' written and/ or spoken errors might be analysed in more detail in accordance with other error classifications proposed by different scholars (e.g. Brown, Richards, Susan and Gass, and Selinker).

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