Common English Mistakes Made by Turkish Secondary School Students: A Comprehensive Analysis.

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Abstract- This research paper investigates the common English mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students, to understand the underlying causes and provide pedagogical suggestions to improve their English language proficiency. The study employs a qualitative approach, using error analysis to examine students' written and spoken productions. The paper also discusses possible reasons behind these mistakes, including interference from the mother tongue, inadequate exposure to English, and ineffective teaching methods.

Index Terms- Common English mistakes; Turkish secondary school students; Grammatical errors; Lexical errors; Pronunciation errors; Second language acquisition; Error analysis; First language interference; Inadequate exposure to English; Ineffective teaching methods; Pedagogical recommendations.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

English is considered a global language and is widely taught as a foreign language in many countries, including Turkey. As a result, proficiency in English has become a crucial skill for students in the Turkish education system. However, Turkish students often struggle with various aspects of English, making mistakes that can hinder their language acquisition process. These mistakes can be attributed to factors such as mother tongue interference, limited exposure to authentic English, and teaching methods. By analysing these common mistakes, educators can identify areas of difficulty and develop targeted strategies to improve students' English language proficiency.

1.2. Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:
- To identify the common English mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.
- To explore the possible factors contributing to these mistakes, such as first language interference, inadequate exposure to English, and ineffective teaching methods.
- To provide pedagogical recommendations and strategies for addressing these common mistakes and improving the English language proficiency of Turkish secondary school students.

1.3. Significance of the study

This research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on second language acquisition, particularly in the context of Turkish students learning English. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the common mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students, the study helps educators understand the challenges faced by this specific group of learners.

Secondly, the findings of this study have practical implications for English language teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in Turkey. By highlighting the areas where students struggle the most and suggesting targeted teaching strategies, the study aims to facilitate the development of more effective English language instruction methods.

Lastly, the study may also benefit Turkish students themselves by raising awareness of their common mistakes and encouraging them to become more self-reflective learners. This awareness can lead to more effective self-assessment and, ultimately, better language learning outcomes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Second language acquisition and error analysis.

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex process that involves multiple factors such as age, motivation, learning environment, and individual differences (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Researchers have explored various aspects of SLA and one of the most prominent approaches is error analysis. Error analysis, which emerged as an alternative to contrastive analysis, focuses on identifying, classifying, and explaining errors made by second language learners (Corder, 1967). It provides valuable insights into learners' interlanguage development and helps educators identify areas that require attention (Ellis, 1997). Error analysis has been used in numerous studies to investigate the common mistakes made by learners from different linguistic backgrounds, including Turkish learners of English.

2.2. Common English mistakes made by Turkish learners.

Several studies have documented the common mistakes made by Turkish learners of English. These mistakes can be categorized into three main areas: grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation errors.

Grammatical errors: Turkish learners often struggle with subject-verb agreement, tense and aspect, and the use of articles, prepositions, and pronouns (Genç & Bada, 2014). These mistakes may result from the differences between the grammatical structures of Turkish and English.

Lexical errors: Turkish learners may face difficulties with false friends, collocations, and word choice (Yılmaz, 2015). False friends are words that look or sound similar in Turkish and English but have different meanings. Collocations refer to the natural combinations of words in a language, which may not have direct equivalents in Turkish. Inappropriate word choice can result from learners' limited vocabulary and overgeneralization of certain words.

Pronunciation errors: Turkish learners may have challenges with consonants, vowels, and stress and intonation patterns (Topkaraoğlu & Dilman, 2016). Common pronunciation mistakes include the confusion of certain consonant sounds and the omission or mispronunciation of vowel sounds.

2.3. Factors contributing to the mistakes.

Several factors may contribute to the common English mistakes made by Turkish learners:

First language interference: Many mistakes made by Turkish learners can be attributed to the influence of their mother tongue (Genç & Bada, 2014). Differences in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation between Turkish and English can lead to negative transfer, causing learners to make mistakes based on their native language patterns.

Inadequate exposure to English: Limited exposure to authentic English input, both inside and outside the classroom, can hinder Turkish learners' language development (Yılmaz, 2015). This lack of exposure may result in inadequate acquisition of grammar rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation patterns.

Ineffective teaching methods: Some mistakes may be attributed to teaching methods that do not adequately address the specific needs of Turkish learners (Topkaraoğlu & Dilman, 2016). Traditional teacher-centred approaches may not provide sufficient opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback on their language use. Additionally, some teaching materials may not effectively target the common areas of difficulty faced by Turkish learners.

In summary, the literature reveals that Turkish learners of English face various challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, which can be attributed to factors such as first language interference, inadequate exposure to English, and ineffective teaching methods.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 50 Turkish secondary school students, aged between 12 and 16, from two urban public schools in Turkey. The students were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure the representation of different genders, age groups, and proficiency levels. The students were enrolled in English as a foreign language class and had been studying English for at least three years. Before the study, consent was obtained from the students, their parents, and the school administration.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected using a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The following instruments were used for data collection:

1. Written test: A written test consisting of open-ended questions, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and sentence transformation tasks was administered to assess students' grammatical and lexical competence. The test was developed based on the topics covered in the student's English curriculum and was piloted with a group of students of similar age and proficiency level.

2. Oral interviews: Semi-structured oral interviews were conducted with each participant to evaluate their pronunciation skills and identify common pronunciation errors. The interviews lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and were audio-recorded for further analysis. Interview questions were designed to elicit a range of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation features.

3. Classroom observations: The researchers observed four English lessons for each class to gain insights into the teaching methods and materials used in the schools. Field notes were taken during the observations, focusing on the interaction between teachers and students, the types of activities, and the feedback provided on students' language use.

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out in several stages:

1. Error identification: The students' written tests and transcribed oral interviews were analyzed to identify grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation errors. Errors were marked and categorized based on an error coding scheme adapted from previous research (e.g., Genç & Bada, 2014; Yılmaz, 2015).

2. Error frequency and patterns: The frequencies of each error type were calculated to determine the most common mistakes made by the participants. Additionally, the patterns of errors were analyzed to identify potential relationships between different error types and proficiency levels.

3. Factors contributing to the errors: The data from classroom observations, combined with the error patterns identified in the written tests and oral interviews, were used to explore possible factors contributing to the students' mistakes. This included an examination of first language interference, inadequate exposure to English, and ineffective teaching methods.

4. Qualitative analysis: Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the field notes from classroom observations and identify common themes related to teaching methods, materials, and classroom interactions. This information was used to provide context for the quantitative findings and generate recommendations for improving English

language instruction for Turkish secondary school students.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Common grammatical mistakes

4.1.1. Subject-verb agreement.
The analysis revealed that Turkish secondary school students frequently made errors in subject-verb agreement. Students often failed to correctly match singular subjects with singular verbs and plural subjects with plural verbs. These mistakes could be attributed to the differences in subject-verb agreement rules between Turkish and English.

4.1.2. Misuse of articles.
Another common error was the misuse of articles (the, a, an). Students either omitted articles when they were necessary or used them incorrectly. This could be due to the absence of a direct equivalent of articles in the Turkish language.

4.1.3. Prepositions.
Students struggled with the appropriate use of prepositions, often using the wrong preposition in a given context or omitting them altogether. This could be explained by the fact that prepositions in English often do not have direct equivalents in Turkish, leading to confusion for learners.

4.1.4. Tense and aspect.
Errors in tense and aspect were also common, with students frequently confusing past, present, and future tenses, and misusing progressive and perfect aspects. This might be due to the differences in the way tense and aspect are expressed in Turkish and English.

4.1.5. Pronouns.
Pronoun errors, such as the incorrect use of subject and object pronouns and the confusion of possessive pronouns, were also prevalent. This could be attributed to the different pronoun systems in Turkish and English.

4.2. Common lexical mistakes

4.2.1. False friends.
Students often made errors with false friends, using words that appeared similar in Turkish and English but had different meanings. This indicated that students relied on their native language knowledge when encountering unfamiliar words in English.

4.2.2. Collocations.
Errors in collocations were common, with students struggling to use the correct combinations of words. This could be due to the lack of exposure to authentic English input and the differences in collocation patterns between Turkish and English.

4.2.3. Word choice.
The inappropriate word choice was another common error, with students using words that did not fit the context or were too general. This could be attributed to limited vocabulary knowledge and overgeneralization of certain words.

4.3. Common pronunciation mistakes

4.3.1. Consonants.
Students had difficulties with certain consonant sounds, such as /θ/ and /ð/, which do not exist in Turkish. They often substituted these sounds with more familiar consonants, like /t/ or /d/.

4.3.2. Vowels.
Vowel errors were also prevalent, with students struggling to produce the correct vowel sounds or omitting them altogether. This could be due to the differences in the vowel systems of Turkish and English.

4.3.3. Stress and intonation.
Students frequently misplaced stress in words and had difficulties with English intonation patterns. This might be attributed to the differences in stress and intonation between Turkish and English.

4.4. Factors contributing to the mistakes.

4.4.1. First language interference
Many of the mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students could be attributed to first language interference. The differences in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation between Turkish and English often led to negative transfer and confusion for learners.

4.4.2. Inadequate Exposure to English
Limited exposure to authentic English input, both inside and outside the classroom, contributed to students' difficulties in acquiring the target language. This lack of exposure resulted in inadequate acquisition of grammar rules, vocabulary, and pronunciation patterns.

4.4.3. Ineffective teaching methods.
Some mistakes were found to be related to teaching methods that did not adequately address the specific needs of Turkish learners. Traditional teacher-centred approaches often dominated the classroom, providing insufficient opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback on their language use. Additionally, some teaching materials did not effectively target the common areas of difficulty faced by Turkish learners.

In conclusion, this study identified common grammatical, lexical, and pronunciation mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students and explored factors contributing to these errors, such as first language interference, inadequate exposure to English, and ineffective teaching methods. By understanding these common mistakes and their underlying causes, educators can develop targeted strategies and interventions to help Turkish students overcome their challenges and improve their English language proficiency.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Targeting specific areas of difficulty.
Educators should develop lesson plans and activities that specifically target the common areas of difficulty identified in this study. For example, they can design exercises that focus on subject-verb agreement, prepositions, or tense and aspect. By addressing these issues directly, teachers can help students develop a better understanding of English grammar and avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly.

5.2. Encouraging exposure to authentic English materials
To help students develop a more native-like command of English, teachers should expose students to a variety of authentic English materials, such as books, newspapers, podcasts, movies, and videos. This exposure can help learners acquire a better sense of natural language use, including collocations and idiomatic expressions. Teachers can also encourage students to engage with English speakers outside the classroom through language exchange programs or online platforms.

5.3. Implementing effective teaching strategies

Instead of relying on traditional teacher-centred approaches, educators should incorporate more interactive, student-centred teaching methods, such as group work, role-plays, and problem-solving activities. These methods can provide students with more opportunities to practice their English skills and receive feedback from their peers and teachers. Furthermore, teachers should adopt a more communicative approach to teaching English, emphasizing the development of speaking and listening skills alongside reading and writing.

5.4. Promoting peer and self-assessment.

Encouraging students to engage in peer and self-assessment can help them become more aware of their language use and identify areas for improvement. Teachers can create activities that require students to evaluate each other's work or reflect on their performance. For example, they can have students record themselves speaking in English and then analyze their recordings to identify pronunciation errors. By engaging in this type of self-reflection, students can become more self-directed learners and take greater responsibility for their language development.

In summary, addressing the common mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students requires a combination of targeted instruction, increased exposure to authentic English materials, effective teaching strategies, and the promotion of self-assessment. By implementing these recommendations, educators can help Turkish learners overcome their challenges and enhance their English language proficiency.

VI. CONCLUSION.

6.1. Summary of the findings.

This study aimed to investigate the common English mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students and the factors contributing to these errors. The findings revealed that students faced challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, with specific difficulties in subject-verb agreement, misuse of articles, prepositions, tense and aspect, pronouns, false friends, collocations, word choice, consonants, vowels, stress and intonation. The study identified first language interference, inadequate exposure to English, and ineffective teaching methods as the main factors contributing to these mistakes. Pedagogical recommendations were provided to address these challenges and enhance students' English proficiency.

6.2. Limitations of the study.

While this study provides valuable insights into the common English mistakes made by Turkish secondary school students, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to students from two urban public schools, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the study relied on written tests and oral interviews to assess students' language skills, which may not fully capture their abilities in real-life communication situations. Finally, the classroom observations were limited to a small number of lessons, which might not provide a comprehensive picture of the teaching methods and materials used in the schools.

6.3. Suggestions for further research.

Based on the limitations of the study, the following suggestions for further research are proposed:

1. Expanding the sample size and including students from different regions and types of schools (e.g., rural schools, private schools) could provide a more representative picture of the common English mistakes made by Turkish learners.
2. Employing additional data collection methods, such as language portfolios, journals, or naturalistic observations of students' interactions outside the classroom, could help gain a deeper understanding of learners' language use and the factors influencing their performance.
3. Longitudinal studies tracking students' progress over time could provide insights into the development of their interlanguage and the effectiveness of specific interventions in addressing their common mistakes.
4. Investigating the role of individual differences, such as motivation, aptitude, and learning styles, in the development of common English mistakes could help identify additional factors that contribute to student's challenges and inform tailored instructional approaches.
5. Comparing the common English mistakes made by Turkish learners with those of learners from other linguistic backgrounds could provide a broader perspective on the challenges faced by second language learners and inform the development of more effective language teaching methods and materials.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample tasks and materials used for data collection.

1.   Written test: A written test consisting of open-ended questions, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and sentence transformation tasks designed to assess students' grammatical and lexical competence.

Example: Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb "to be."

a) She _____ at school yesterday.

b) They _____ not here last week.

2.   Oral interview: Semi-structured oral interviews with questions designed to elicit a range of grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation features.

Example: Can you describe your favourite vacation? Where did you go, and what did you do there?

3.   Classroom observations: Field notes taken during classroom observations, focus on the interaction between teachers and students, the types of activities, and the feedback provided on students' language use.

Appendix B: Coding scheme for error analysis

1.   Grammatical errors

2.   a. Subject-verb agreement

3.   b. Misuse of articles

4.   c. Prepositions

5.   d. Tense and aspect

6.   e. Pronouns

7.   Lexical errors

8.   a. False friends

9.   b. Collocations

10.   c. Word choice

11.   Pronunciation errors

12.   a. Consonants

13.   b. Vowels

14.   c. Stress and intonation

Appendix C: Sample student responses and error analysis

1.   Written test response:

Original sentence: She is study English every day because she want to go to England.

Error analysis:

a. Subject-verb agreement: She want -> She wants

b. Tense and aspect: is study -> studies

c. Word choice: everyday -> every day

Corrected sentence: She studies English every day because she wants to go to England.

2.   Oral interview response:

Original sentence: I goed to the cinema last week with my friend.

Error analysis:

a. Tense and aspect: goed -> went

b. Pronunciation: cinema (incorrect stress)

Corrected sentence: I went to the cinema (correct stress) last week with my friend.