

## **Writing English words difficulties Experienced by Dongolese EFL Learners**

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### **Abstract**

The present study aims at investigating writing English words difficulties experienced by Dongolese EFL learners. The purpose is to investigate how writing English have been affected by Dongolese language and colloquial Arabic. The method used in the study is the error analysis (EA) and contrastive Analysis (CA) approaches. The subject of the study consist of Dongolese students in North Sudan, the researcher used the composition test for gathering data. It has been found that, colloquial Arabic and Dongolese language while learning English have affected most of Dongolese learners tested.

## 1. Introduction

Errors and mistakes are indispensable and mile stone in learning EFL. In addition, they have a mutual rapport of linguistic competence and performance. This study aims at investigating errors made by Dongolese learners in order to facilitate the process of foreign language learning and teaching. The researcher proposes that Dongolese English learner's stereotypic error are originated due to the inter language that indicates the process of approximative system of mother tongue's effect on the target language; besides, learners deviated from target language's norms by constructing their own way to master the target language.

A lexical unit can be made up of a single word or morpheme (e.g. *table*) or of several words (e.g. *take up, rush hour and to kick the bucket*). Phrasal verbs, adverbial phrases or idioms are also considered to be words or lexical items. A further distinction is usually made in the literature between lexical and grammatical words. The former group is made up of words belonging to the class of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, whereas prepositions, articles and conjunctions make up the latter group. Lexical errors will affect lexical words, while errors that affect grammatical words will be studied as grammar errors (Celaya & Torras, 2001; Hemchua & Schmitt, 2006).

Identifying and isolating lexical errors is not always an easy task. Lexical competence refers not only to semantic knowledge but also to morphological, syntactic and pragmatic knowledge. Thus, 'knowing a word' means knowing how to use it appropriately in context, in combination with other words (collocation) and in particular communicative situation and texts (i.e. style and pragmatic force) (Ambroso, 2000: 58). Therefore, in order to spot a lexical error, the communicative and situational context (interlocutor, mode and style) must also be taken into account. Lexical errors also serve a very important purpose in research about second language (vocabulary) acquisition. Lexical errors have proved to be objective setters of quality criteria, and as such they have been repeatedly used as measures of overall language proficiency, in general, and as indicators of lexical progress, in particular.

Teaching can also benefit from the results of this study by providing learners with word lists of problematic lexical items and the lexical errors that affect them. Doing exercises will help reduce the number of lexical errors, and thus improve the quality of students' written tasks, in

addition, Lexical errors are considered to be very damaging to communication, because they affect the meaning of the message. Furthermore, it can help teachers, educators and syllabus designer comprehend the major sources of errors among Dongolese learners aiming at finding out the appropriate pedagogic and linguistics remedies.

Although several researches have been conducted in discussing the various errors committed by learners of English in Sudan, there has been little discussion in the area of lexical errors among local Sudanese language.

### **1.1. Statement of the problem**

This research will attempt to investigate lexical errors experienced by Dongolese EFL in Sudan in order of facilitate the process of teaching and learning English among Dongolese communities and to give Dongolese learners an insight about their problematic areas while learning English, in addition the researcher would like to contribute to his community by facilitating learning English among Dongolese learners. Moreover, lexical errors are considered to be of the most serious type, even students believe that of all error types, those having to do with vocabulary are the most serious one.

### **1.2 .Questions of the research**

The researcher raises a number of important questions whose answers, hopefully, provide a valuable insight into the issue of errors committed by Dongolese learners while learning English

1. To what extent does the Dongolese language in Sudan affect learning English?
2. What kinds of errors are experienced by Dongolese learners while learning English?
3. In which aspect of language are these errors noticeable?

### **1.3. Research objectives**

1. To find out the kinds of errors committed by Dongolese learners.
2. To determine the aspect of language that has been affected by these errors.

### **1.4. Hypothesis of the research**

The researcher hypothesizes that:

1. Dongolese learners of English experienced different types of lexical errors while learning English.

2. These errors are due to mother tongue interference as a major cause of difficulty, and other factors besides.

### **1.5. Significance of the Learner's Errors**

This research is hopefully expected to be a significant contribution to English language teaching and learning of Nile Nubian groups in NS in general, and Dongolese groups in particular. The study will provide new insights into Dongolese lexical errors while learning English, so the coming researcher can benefit from it, when they conduct studies relevant to error of Dongolese in English. From the finding of this research Dongolese learners of English will have an insight about their problematic areas in English. Teachers who teach in Dongolese communities will have an idea about their students' errors in English language. Errors are means of feedback to the teacher reflecting how effective his/her teaching style and what changes he had to make to get higher performance from his learner. Moreover, this research on lexical errors are significant data for syllabus designs as they show what items are important to be included or which items needs to be recycled in the syllabus. Syllabus designers might modify the syllabus to meet the needs of these local languages not only Nile Nubian groups but also local languages in Sudan in general.

This research is limited to students (third class secondary schools) who lived in Dongla city and the rural areas around it. It focuses on lexical errors experienced by those students in written English.

The following terms will be used throughout the study and have therefore defined procedurally as follows:

**Dongolese language:** Is one of Nubian languages family and it is the language spoken in the NS by Dongolese groups.

**Colloquial Arabic:** A language used in conversation, but not in the formal speaking or writing in almost all parts of Sudan.

**Standard Arabic:** Ancient in its form and no longer used in spoken form, it is used in formal speech or writing (Oxford Advanced learners dictionary, 2002).

**Lexical errors:** Is a deviation in form and /or meaning of a target language lexical word. In other words it is the incorrect choice of lexical item.

**Inter lingual:** It refers to errors that are caused by the learner's mother tongue.

**Intra lingual:** It refers to errors that are not caused by the learner's mother tongue.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Frame work

#### 2.2. What is an Error?

Error has literal and conceptual meanings. Error as a word in a dictionary means something, which is wrongly done. In spoken or written language, error is the use of a linguistic item in a way a native speaker regards as faulty or incomplete communication. Errors occur when the learner uses her/his intelligence in constructing a new utterance; while some errors are evidence of rule ignorance. Dulay (1982) stated that errors are the flawed side selection norm of mature language behavior. While Klossen (1991) has noted that errors are forms or structure that a native speaker regards unacceptable because of their inappropriate use.

According to Corder (1973:277), errors fall into four main categories:

*"Omission, Addition, Selection, and Misordering"* .

Four main areas for describing these four main categories are: phonology, morphology, syntax and lexical. We will be dealing only with morphology errors, phonological errors and lexical errors, since it is related directly to research questions.

#### 2.3. Omission

Omission happens in morphology. Learners often dropout the third-person singular morphemes the plural markers and the past tense inflection. Learner might say, for example '*A strange thing happen to me yesterday*' which signal a problem with his/her control of the past tense.

#### 2.4. Addition

In morphology, learner often over uses the third person singular morphemes and the plural markers. A learner could say '*I thinks and the books is here*' instead of '*I think and the book is here*'. At the lexical level the learner may, add an unnecessary word, for example '*I stayed there during five years ago*', instead '*I stayed there for five years*'.

#### 2.5. Selection

An error can be committed in morphology as a result of a selection of a wrong morpheme. For example, the learner can use "er-est" for comparative, producing a sentence like

*'My friend is oldest than me'*. At the lexical level learners sometimes select words which do not entirely convey their intended meanings. For example "Arobin" may simply be referred as a bird. This type of error is prompted by the strategy of approximation (Tarone 1977).

Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) used the term misformation instead of selection. misformation is the use of wrong form of a structure or morpheme

*'I seen her yesterday'*.

*'He hurt himself'*.

*'I read that books'*.

## **2.6.Misordering**

At the morphological level, misordering of bound morphemes in English is perhaps less frequent, however, in the example *'He's get upping now'* attaching the inflect 'ing' to the particle of the two-word verb get up by the learner. At the lexical level, the learner may reverse elements of a compound word. For example *'Car key'* may become *'Key car'*.

.James (1998) adds a fifth category which he called Blends

## **2.7. Blend**

According to James (1998) blends is one of the category that complements the picture of learners' errors. It is typical of contexts where there is not just one well – defined target, but two. The learner is undecided about which of these two targets he has 'in mind' in such situations the type of error that materialize is the blend error, sometimes called the contamination or cross-association or hybridization error.

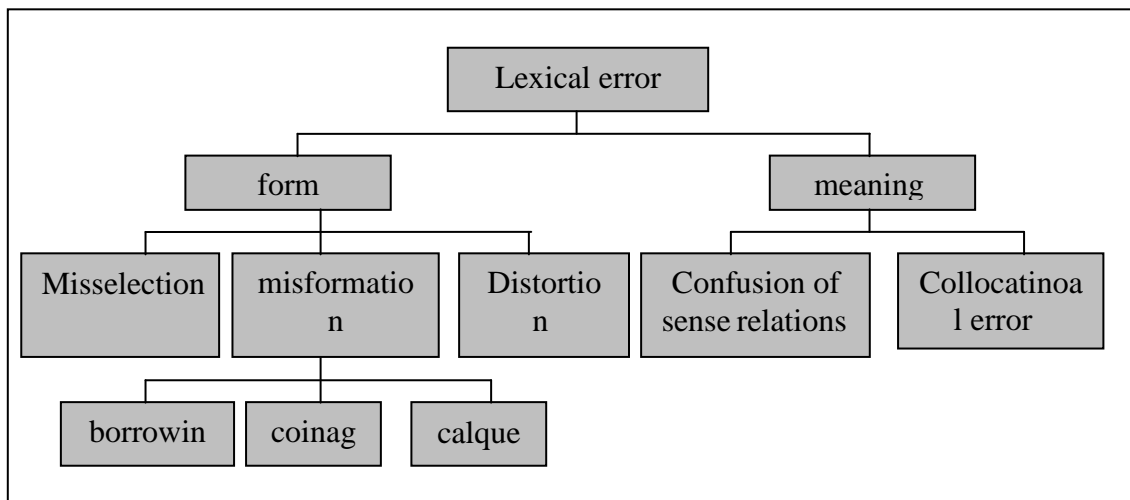
## **2.8 Error Classification:**

The classification of lexical errors proposed by Hemchua and Schmitt (2006) is based on James (1998). They distinguish 24 categories of lexical errors divided into the major types of misselection, misformation and distortion among formal errors, and confusion of sense relations, collocation errors, errors in connotative meaning and stylistic errors.

Carrió Pastor (2004), following James (1998: 142), distinguishes six different types of lexical errors:

- (a) Formal errors which derive from the confusion of two similar words;
- (b) Wrong word formation, which includes the following:
  - (i) Word invention.

- (ii) Borrowing from the L1,
- (iii) Relexification or adaptation of an L1 word into the grammatical conventions (orthographic, phonetic and morphologic) of the L2, and
- (iv) Linguistic calque;
- (c) Lexical distortions because of the following:
  - (v) Omission,
  - (vi) Addition,
  - (vii) Wrong ordering of letters within the word, and
  - (viii) Wrong choice of two similar words;
- (d) Use of base words (hyponym) instead of superonym (more specific word);
- (e) Collocation errors;
- (f) Wrong lexical choice because of semantic relatedness.



**Figure 1** lexical error types in James (1998: 142)

Dongolese language (language under study) a member of the Nile-Saharan family. They belongs to the eastern sudanic branch to which the Nubian group affiliates. The Nubian group includes: Nile Nubian, Hill Nubian and Darfur Nubian, which are distributed, as proposed by Bell, H, and C (1973) .

In a study entitled "Errors Analysis of the written English Essays of Secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study" Written by Darus, S. (2009). This study examines errors in a corpus of

72 essays written by 72 participants. The participants are from four Malay students who are studying at a secondary school in Malaysia; 37 males and 35 females. They have experience approximately the same numbers of years of education through primary and secondary education in Malaysia. All of the participants come from non-English speaking background and hardly communicate in English outside the school. The instrument is used for this study was participants' written essays and markin software. All of the errors in the essays were identified and classified into various categorizations. The results of the study show that six most common errors committed by the participants were: singular / plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject- verb agreement and word order. These aspects of writing in English pose the most difficult problems to participants. This study has shed light on the manner in which students internalised the rules of the target language, which is English. Such an inside into language learning problems is useful to teachers because it provides information on common trouble – spots in language learning which can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials.

In a study entitled " Differences in the Written Production of Young Spanish and German Learners: Evidence from Lexical Errors in a Composition". Written by Pilar, M. And Liach, A. (2005). This study investigates quantitative and qualitative differences in the production of lexical errors in the English written performance by young Spanish and German learners of English. The essays produced by the subjects were analysed and lexical errors identified, classified, and quantified. A test was performed on the data. Result revealed that Spanish learners commit significantly fewer lexical errors than their German counterparts,  $t=2.94$  at a significant level  $p.01$ . Despite quantitative differences, both language groups obtained similar results regarding the lexical error types. Our findings suggest that lexical transfer is an important lexical error source in German, as well as in Spanish informants.

In a study entitled " An analysis of Lexical Errors in the English Compositions of Thai Learners" Written by Hemchua, S. and Schmitt,N. (2006). The importance of vocabulary in second language (L2) writing is widely accepted, but there has been relatively little research into the lexical errors learners produce when writing in their second language. Moreover, the error categorization frameworks used in some previous studies have addressed only a relatively limited number of lexical error categories. In this paper the authors used a more comprehensive



error taxonomy based on James (1998), with some additions from Leech's semantics (1981), to analyse Thai third-year University students' English compositions for lexical errors. The analysis revealed that (a) 'near synonyms' were the most numerous errors, followed by 'preposition partner' and 'suffixes', (b) the students had more difficulty with semantics than the forms of words, and (c) the identified sources of errors were mainly from L2 intrinsic difficulty rather than the first language (L1) transfer. The findings from the Thai students' written lexical errors have implications for L2 vocabulary teaching and learning, which should be of interest to wider English as a second language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign language.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Error Analysis and contrastive analysis method have been used by many researchers to obtain results on lexical errors about their subjects under investigation.

**3.1. Data Collection** Data have been obtained from Composition writing

**3.1.1. Subjects** The subjects that have been chosen for the present study consists of a group of Sudanese secondary schools, and their ages ranges between 16-18 years. Four schools (boys and girls) were chosen from Dongla city and the villages around it in Northern Sudan. 100 subjects were selected, 50 of the subjects are females and 50 males.

All the subjects have studied six years of EFL. Some of them speak Dongolese Language; others speak Arabic as their mother tongue. The Justification for choosing the subjects from Dongla city is that since we are looking for a real native speaker of Dongolese, it is the general belief that in NS the more you go further north the more you find people who stick to their mother tongue.

The researcher chooses the above subjects for the following reasons:

- 1) Dongla city and the village around it is the place of real native speakers of Dongolese groups.
- 2) The researcher chooses third year secondary school because students were all in a Dongolese speaking Language environment.
- 3) The researcher did not choose students from University of Dongla because students are from different parts of Sudan and it is difficult to select Dongolese groups among them.

**3.1 2. Instruments** Data have been obtained from the students' composition.

**3.1.3. Composition** The topic was to write a composition about your town or village. The instructions were given in Arabic, and the test was during the study time. Then the samples were collected, corrected, tabulated and then analyzed using the taxonomy proposed by James (1998).

## **4. Data Analysis**

### **4.1. The Composition Test**

This is the third tool used in the study. In this test participants were asked to write a composition about their towns or villages. A Hundred subjects were collected, 50 males and 50 females. All samples have been taken from Dongla city in northern Sudan and the villages around it.

In this section, the researcher identified and described the lexical errors made by the students in their English writings. The taxonomy used in this study to identify the lexical errors is based on James (1998) lexical error taxonomy. James classifies lexical errors into two main categories: formal and semantic features. Formal errors are divided into formal-misselection, misformation, and distortion. Semantic errors are classified into two categories: confusion of sense relation and collocation. James taxonomy was modified to include preposition partner and near synonym.

The total number of lexical errors that the researcher has found in the students' writing is 153 errors.

### **Types of lexical errors**

#### **Formal errors**

##### **A. Formal misselection**

Formal misselection is an error in lexical items that is characterized by using an incorrect word because the meaning looks and sounds the same.

According to the data of this research, there are errors of misselection. This formal misselection is divided into four categories they are, suffix based error, prefix based error, vowel-based type, and consonant-based type.

- **Suffixes**

Suffixes are the bound morphemes which are added to the end of a word. For example, -ly, -ness, -ion, etc. they are used in derivation, whereas the suffixes like -s, -ing, -er, -ed are used in inflection. Derivational suffix are used to make new words in the language and are often used to make words of different grammatical category from the stem. Whereas, inflectional suffix are not used to produce new words in the language but rather to indicate aspects of the grammatical function of a word.

From the above explanation about the two types of suffix, the researcher found errors in, derivational and inflectional suffixes. An example from the data *people participation in the problem* for the intended *participate*. Errors under this category showed an occurrence of 8.5 % of the total number of lexical errors handled in this study.

- **Vowel based type**

Here, the students committed errors in the vowel form of a word and this led to form another word with different meaning than the intended. One example from the data is *you can live with out feer* for the intended *fear*. Errors under this category showed an occurrence of 7.8 % of the total number of lexical errors handled in this study.

- **Consonant- based type**

Is similar to the vowel-based type. As the name of this error, consonant-based type appears because there is a wrong consonant used in a word. An example from the data *descriptive* for the intended *descriptive*. Errors under this category showed an occurrence of 5.8 % of the total errors handled in this study.

To sum up errors under the category of formal-misselection constitute 22.1 % of the errors handled in this study.

## **B. Misformation**

Misformation is a type of lexical errors which are characterized by giving or adding the word, although that word is incorrect or cannot be found in the target language. There are three categories of misformation they are, coinage, borrowing, and calque. From the data of this research the researcher found borrowing and calque.

- **Calque**

Calque refers to designing a second language word from literal translation. The learner does this unconsciously by transferring the habit system of his native language to the foreign or second language. Example from the data *there are many trees green* for the intended green trees, in Arabic *anoun* comes before an adjective and in English an adjectives comes before a noun. Error under this category constitute 9.1 % of the total errors handled in this study.

- **Borrowing**

Is the insertion of an item from first language words without any attempt to adapt it to the target language e.g. Example from the data *the students read classical kitab every morning*. Error of this kind constitute 2.6 % of the total errors handled in this study.

*In sum, errors under misformation constitute 11.7 % of the total errors handled in this study.*

### C. Distortions

The lexical error in distortion is caused by incomplete application of rules “misapplication of the target language without L 1 interference”. Distortions originating from letter omission, over inclusion (addition), misselection, misordering, and blending.

- **Omission**

The omission is characterized by giving rise to some words or letters or auxiliary verbs that do not exist in a sentence, clause, phrase or words.

Errors of omission occur when the students omit the item that should exist in the correct lexis. Generally, the students omit the vowel item or consonant item. This is because of the student’s lack of mastering English lexical items. Example from the data *betiful* for the intended *beautiful*. Errors under this category constitute the highest percent 18.3 % of the total errors handled in this study.

- **Overinclusion**

Over inclusion is the opposite of omission; here the students add the inexistent item that should not appear in the correct word. Example from the data *Errors iam live in a village* for the intended *Ilive in a village*. Errors under this category constitute 11.1 % of the errors handled in this study. This error comes third in rank of the total errors committed in this study.

- **Misselection**

Misselection occurs when the students do not choose the appropriate item to construct a well-formed sentence. Example from the data *Maraga is such as a small town* for the intended *Maraga is like a small town*. Errors under this category constitute 4.5 % of the total errors handled in this study.

- **Misordering**

Misordering errors are characterized by the incorrect placement of a sound either in vowel or consonant forms of a word that may cause the change of the word's meaning or producing words that do not exist. Example from the data *feild* for the intended *field*. Error under this category constitute 3.2 % of the total errors handled in this study.

**D. Blending**

It means there are two well defined targets words the learner is undecided about which of these two he has in mind. Blending happened only once in this study, example from the data *But I thingt (think+thought)*. This error constitute 0.6% of the total errors handled in the study.

To sum up, errors under the category of distortion errors constitute 37.7 % of the total errors handled in this study.

**E. Collocation errors**

Collocation means knowing a word by the company it keeps. Example from the data *life in city is comfortable* here the learner is intended to describe life in the city as comfortable because of the facilities. 'A comfortable thing' was actually translated from Arabic words that are equivalent to 'facilities'. Therefore, it was finally classified as a 'calque' (translation). As it is clear from the example above there is overlapping between collocation and calque. Errors under this category constitute 2.6% of the total errors handled in the study

**E. Preposition partner**

'Preposition partners, accounted for 5.2% of the total errors. In English only particular prepositions can be used with verbs, nouns and adjectives. Changing the preposition changes the meaning and therefore results in an error. These errors referred to the omission of a preposition where it was required, the addition of a preposition where it was not required and an incorrect substitution for a preposition. Example from the data *just by foot* for the intended *just on foot*.

## F. Near Synonyms

The inappropriate use of near synonyms can be grouped into three cases as follows:

1. The use of informal words instead of formal ones. For example: we can communicate with people and *get*<*gain/acquire*> knowledge from other countries by using computers. 'To get knowledge' is not entirely incorrect, but the use of 'get' seems more appropriate in informal writing. The student appears to be unaware of this register choice when engaging in formal written language.
2. The meaning of the synonym used and the appropriate synonym were not exactly identical. Thus the intended meaning was not expressed by the synonym used. For example: you will *get up*< *wake up*> in the morning because of the sound of birds. The intended meaning of the words in italics in the context was 'to become awake after sleeping' not 'to leave the bed'. Therefore, 'wake up' was required.
3. Two words were close in meaning but were different in usage. For example: Because *in the city has* < *there are*> *many hospitals*. To refer to something for the first time and to refer to a quantity as 'there are' is common usage. The student, in fact, did not mean 'to won or possess something'. Thus 'has' was used erroneously in this context. Example from the data *at the start of my town* for the intended *at the beginning of my town*.

Near synonyms constitute 14.3 which come second in rank of the total errors handled in the study.

To sum up, errors under the category of semantic errors constitute 27.8% of the errors handled in this study. They are classified into: near synonyms error, semantics errors, preposition partner errors using hyponym for supernym, in appropriate co hyponyms and collocation errors.

We used the above error framework to gain a quantitative overview of the lexical errors in the participants' writing samples. This entailed counting errors connected with words. However, lexical errors are not always restricted to individual words. For example, inappropriate collocations are seen as lexical errors, but operate at the phrasal level. In making our error count, individual cases of lexical error were counted at the word, phrasal and sentential levels.

**Table (9): Frequency of lexical errors**

Error types	No of errors (total 153)	%
<b><u>A : Formal errors</u></b>		
<b><i>1. Formal misselection</i></b>		
1.1 Suffix type	13	8.5
1.2 Prefix type	0	0
1.3 Vowel-based type1	12	7.8
1.4 Consonant-based type	9	5.8
<b><i>2. Misformations (interlingual)</i></b>		
1.1 borrowing (L1 words)	4	2.6
1.2 coinage (inventing)	0	0
1.3 calque (translation)	14	9.1
<b><i>3. Distortions (intralingual)</i></b>		
3.1 omission	28	18.3
3.2 over inclusion	17	11.1
3.3 Misselection	4	3.0
3.4 Misordering	5	3.2
3.5 Blending	1	0.6
<b><u>B: Semantic errors</u></b>		
<b><i>1. Confusion of sense relations</i></b>		
1.1 General term for specific one.	0	0
1.2 Overly specific term.	1	0.6
1.3 Inappropriate co-hyponyms	1	0.6
1.4 Near synonyms	22	14.3
<b><i>2. Collocation errors</i></b>		
2.1 Semantic word selection	4	2.6
2.2 Statistically weighted preferences	10	6.2
	0	0

2.3 Arbitrary combinations	0	0
2.4 Preposition partners	8	5.2

**Table (10): Rank-order Frequency of lexical errors:**

Error types	%
1. Omission	18.3
2. Near synonyms	14.3
3. Over inclusion	11.1
4. Calque	9.1
5. Suffix- base error	8.5
6. Vowel-base error	7.8
7. semantic word selection	6.2
7. Consonant-based errors	5.8
8. Preposition-partner	5.2
9. Mis ordering	3.2
11. Mis selection	3.0
12. Collocation	2.6
13. Borrowing	2.6
15. Blending	0.6
16. Inappropriate co-hyponyms	0.6
17. Using a hyponym for a superonym	0.6

As it is clear from the composition test that the majority of errors are from mis spelling (omission, overinclusion, suffix based errors, vowel and consonants based errors, and misordering), it seems that there is a real problem in writing in English; however, we can not relate this spelling errors to Dongolese language because the subjects speak the language but have no exposure to written data in Dongolese language. Another errors type that the subjects have experienced is borrowing for example (fool-nafeer- ajnabies) and caloque (loud voice) see Appendix ( ) is clearly interference from Arabic language, here the subjects resort to Arabic when



they do not know the meanings of these words in English. So, Dongolese learners experienced both formal and semantics errors; interlingual (from Arabic language) and intralingual errors while writing in English. Near synonyms appeared second in rank among errors counted, this may come from interlingual, intralingual or from the resource of target language itself, and may be caused from teaching by English language teachers, the subjects assumed for example (go and arrive) are the same in the sentence *we arrived to the Nile*. Semantics errors reflect incompetence while writing in English among Dongolese secondary school learners, and the majority of semantics errors in this study were caused by mis spelling for example *I like my village very match* for the intended *much*.

#### **4.1.1. Summary**

It is obvious from the errors above that Dongolese learners have been affected by colloquial Arabic as well as the target language while producing English. This is because Arabic language is used in everyday context (spoken and written), and Dongolese students speak the language but they do not write it, they have no exposure to written text, in addition; in schools in Dongola and the villages around it, students were told not to speak Dongolese or any other Nubian varieties during the study time.

#### **4.1.2. Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations the researcher has made:

Syllabus designer should bear in their minds the nature of local languages in Sudan when designing the syllabus.

Dongolese language should be taught optionally especially at basic level.

Students should be encouraged in whatever situations to use their mother tongue language.

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