Errors Made by Students of English at Hama University While Using Anaphora

Abstract

This research analyses errors that Syrian EFL undergraduate students of Hama University make while using English anaphors. The study attempts to examine the students' competence level in anaphoric relations in English and their ability to recognize the correct interpretation and structures in various contexts. The data of the study are collected through a multiple-choice test covering various areas of anaphoric relations in English. This test aims at determining the overall level of the learners' knowledge of anaphora and analysing their performance in using anaphors. Thirty third-year students of English were involved in this research. After analysing the collected data, some solutions and strategies are presented to account for the students' way in understanding and using anaphoric relations. Finally, some pedagogical implications on how to teach anaphoric relations in English are presented, and some recommendations for further research are offered.

Keywords: anaphors , anaphoric relations, coreferenciality,

الأخطاء التي يرتكبها طلاب اللغة الانكليزية في جامعة حماة عند استخدام الضمائر العائدة

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الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث المشكلات والأخطاء التي يواجها طلاب اللغة الانكليزية في المرحلة الجامعية الأولى أثناء استخدام الضمائر العائدة في اللغة الإنجليزية، وتحاول الدراسة فحص مستوى كفاءة الطلاب في فهم العلاقات بين الضمير وعائده في اللغة الإنجليزية وقدرتهم على التعرف على التفسيرات والتراكيب الصحيحة لهذه العلاقة في اكثر من سياق، وتسعى الدراسة إلى تقييم معرفة المشاركين الشاملة والمتقبلة للضمائر العائدة. يتم جمع بيانات الدراسة من خلال اختبار الاختيار من متعدد الذي يغطي مجالات مختلفة من العلاقات العائدة باللغة الإنجليزية بهدف تحديد المستوى العام لمعرفة المتعلمين عن الضمائر العائدة والعلاقة التي قد تبدو معقدةً وبسيطةً تارةً اخرى.

شارك في هذا البحث ثلاثون طالبًا في السنة الثالثة من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها بجامعة حماة، و بعد تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها ، تمّ الوصول إلى بعض النتائج والاستراتيجيات لتسهيل طريقة الطالب في فهم واستخدام الضمائر العائدة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، تم تقديم بعض التوصيات التربوية حول كيفية تدريس العلاقات العائدة باللغة الإنجليزية. أخيرًا ، تقدم الدراسة بعض التوصيات لمزيد من البحث مستقبلاً.

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this section is to introduce the topic of this research as a whole. It starts by presenting a general background that is closely related to some relevant academic standards. Then the objectives and the significance of the study are introduced. Moreover, the section puts forward some of the questions that need to be answered in the coming sections. Finally, it ends by stating the extent and restrictions of this research.

Syntax is one of the well-acknowledged domains of linguistics. It plays a significant part in comprehending the English language since Modern English has a fairly fixed word order and has lost most of its inflectional system, which existed in Old English.

Any native speaker of any natural language would acknowledge the fact that there are special relations known as 'anaphoric relationships' which exist between certain pairs of expressions in the language. However, it is not always that simple. This topic has proven to be more complicated than it

may appear for students learning English as a second language. They might find it rather difficult to fully comprehend this relation between the pronoun and the antecedent. Learning only the basic elements of the target language is simply not enough to achieve competence in that language. Learners must understand the syntactic structure of the language to know the rules which govern the logic of sentences, and the relationship between certain elements within these sentences to form an understood sentence.

2. Statement of the Problem

It is evident that students of English seem to have some difficulty in processing anaphoric structures. In this study, I attempt to investigate the phenomenon of anaphora as can be seen in the performance of the students of the Department of English at Hama University taking into consideration the following questions:

1. Which items/expressions are likely to be coreferential?

3. What kinds of sentences/phrases are structurally obscure?

4. What type of structures of anaphora is most difficult?

3. Significance of the Study

The research to be undertaken here is of great importance on multiple grounds. First, it contributes to the understanding of the procedures conducted to simplify and shorten sentences for smoother communication, to know when there is an anaphoric relationship between a pronoun and antecedent, and when it is not possible for such relationship to occur.

Moreover, anaphora helps to bridge the gap of communication and, in some cases, combines potentially long sentences together for a smoother flow of speech; thus, this study is important as it describes potentially the best method that speakers use to minimise redundancy for smooth communication.

In addition, this study is significant for English students as it reinforces not only their syntactic competence, but also their pragmatic competence as it shows the different strategies used by speakers to establish an anaphoric correlation among

sentences and how to make sure that these sentences are interpreted correctly. Finally, this study is also important because it explores the way Syrian students of English at Hama University interpret coreference between pronouns and their antecedents as well as the errors they encounter with anaphora.

4. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to find out the areas where students of English at Hama University seem to be confused in detecting the intended coreferenciality between an anaphor and a potential antecedent. Furthermore, it tackles the phenomenon of anaphora as being an essential property of linguistic expressions. Thus, the research seeks to review this phenomenon which many researchers have attempted to undertake in the past years. Moreover, it aims to recommend some strategies that may help teachers who try to help students acquire some skills to comprehend anaphoric structures and perform easily understood and logical sentence constructions through various procedures

5. Research Questions

This research raises several questions about anaphora and aims to propose answers to these questions. The questions include:

First of all, do these learners fully comprehend the different obscurities of anaphoric relations? Second, do these learners have the ability to make accurate decisions about the relationship between the pronoun and the antecedent in different complex structures? Third, do these students depend on the context when they analyze coreference? Finally, doq they stick to one judgment for such relationships? In other words, do they interpret the pronoun−antecedent to have only one meaning or more?

6. Limitations of the Study

This study has three limitations:

1. Limitation of time: The study is conducted in one academic year.
2. Limitation of place: The study is conducted at the Department of English Language and Literature at Hama University. This excludes students of other majors or of other universities in Syria.

3. Participant limitation: The study analyzes the errors and difficulties that third-year students of English as a Foreign Language at Hama University make while using anaphoric structures, and attempt to provide possible solutions that may help them avoid these errors and enhance their abilities to comprehend and build more meaningful sentences. In addition, the research proposes some strategies from which teachers of English may benefit. It also excludes students from other years at the department.

7. **Literature Review**

This section concentrates on the relevant terms, definitions and classifications of anaphoric relations in English. It also reviews some studies that investigate anaphoric relations errors in English.

7.1 Precede-and-Command relation

The sole constant in the debate of the last few years concerning anaphoric coreference relations has been the assumption that whatever the regulations are they are to be noted based on the relation precede-and-command. This relation was added to account for a hassle which is impartial

of the unique hypothesis one adopts regarding the status of anaphoric relations.

Any definition of anaphora has to account for the fact that a pronoun cannot be related arbitrarily to any full NP in a sentence. In other words, as stated by Reinhart (1976), it is no longer enough that the context, the semantics of the sentence, or the state of affairs in the world would permit two NPs to be anaphorically related. A certain structural domain of the two NPs impose similar restrictions on their coreference options in a given sentence. Therefore, not in all of the following sentences can *Sarah* be coreferential with *she*:

1)   a. *Sarah* denied that *she* met John.

    b. *She* denied that *Sarah* met John.

2)   a. The man who toured with Sarah denied that she met John.

    b. The man who toured with her denied that Sarah met John.

In (1b) *she* and *Sarah* can only be interpreted as referring to different persons.

That the restriction on anaphora, as shown by Reinhart (1976), is no longer so simple as to say that the antecedent has to precede the pronoun is indicated by acknowledging the fact that in (2b) coreference is viable although the pronoun precedes the antecedent. Sentences like (2b) are perhaps not usually fully normal on the coreference reading and their appropriateness may additionally rely on the context of their utterance. The fundamental point, however, is that while there are contexts which allow coreference in (2b), no discourse would ever allow a coreference reading in (1b).

7.2 Condition A

This section discusses cases where a sentence does not follow condition A of the binding as outlined by Chomsky (1982). These cases include cause clauses and conversion clauses, as we will see in the next two subsections. It is worth noting that condition B and C will not be mentioned here because only condition A is concerned with the concept of anaphora.

7.2.1 Exempt Anaphora

According to Chomsky (1981), the formal formulation of Condition A states that an anaphor must be bound in its binding domain [1], which can corresponds to the smallest clause containing it[2], as in (3):

 3) a. The moon spins on itself.

   b. * [3] The moon influences people [who are sensitive to itself].

In (3a), the anaphor *itself* is within the binding domain for its antecedent the *moon*, and as such, satisfies Condition A. In (3b), Condition A is not satisfied because the reflexive

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[1] Domain is a sentence that usually contains the anaphor.

[2] see Charnavel and Sportiche (2016) for detailed discussion.

[3] Itself is an anchor but it doesn't have an antecedent, therefore, it is ungrammatical. It should be bound to the antecedent. In other words, the moon refers to X then itself should refer to X too.

pronoun *itself* is outside the binding domain of its antecedent *the moon*.

Nevertheless, as has long been recognized, reflexive anaphors like *herself* also exhibit obvious exemption from Condition A in specific contexts (Ross, 1967), Pollard and Sag (1992), Reinhart and Reuland (1976)). In (4a), the anaphor *herself* is not c−commanded by 'Sarah', its antecedent. In (4b), the anaphor, *himself* is not in the local domain of *John*. The contexts that permit such exemption are argued to be those that in some sense represent the perspective of their antecedent. These contexts have been termed 'logophoric' (see Sells (1987), Charnavel (2019)).

The following examples are taken from Pollard and Sag (1992:264) and Ross (19970:230).

4) a. The portrait of herself on the front page of the Guardian made

Sarah's statements seem kind of absurd.

b. John was never aggressive to Raymond who couldn't understand

what physicists like himself were trying to prove.

Let us now consider Causal clauses, adjunct clauses followed by *because* and *since* in English, might   include exempt anaphors, as well. An anaphor in a causal clause can be bound long distance by an antecedent in the superordinate clause. This is demonstrated in (5). Here, *Sarah*, the matrix subject, can bind the reflexive *herself* occupying the adjunct clause. Charnavel (2019) asserts that causal clauses, like the one in (5), develop perspectival contexts. The causal relation must be verified by some reasoning individual.

Additionally, when an exempt anaphor is permitted in a causal clause, the antecedent must also believe that the causal relation implied by the adverbial clause holds. In (5), *Sarah* herself must believe that the photo going around is the reason that she left the party. Compare this to (6), where the anaphor has been replaced by a pronoun.

5) Sarah left the party because there was an embarrassing photo of herself going

   around.

6) Sarah left the party because there was an embarrassing photo of her going

   around.

Here, *Sarah* may or may not believe the photo going around to be the cause of her leaving. She may believe the photo had nothing to do with her leaving. (Charnavel 2019:5)

7.2.2 Concession Clauses

The analysis exempt anaphora in Charnavel (2019) can be extended to include concessive clauses containing *even though* and *although*. These clauses are a normal expansion of the hypothesis of exempt anaphora in Charnavel (2019). Initially, they are argued to be anti−causal semantically, and may accordingly resemble causal clauses syntactically (Konig and Siemund 2000). Secondly, fairly little is known about the syntax of these clauses.

 Rutherford (1970) claims that *although−clauses* are syntactically greater than *even though−clauses,* as *although−clauses* have speech act modifying uses, but *even though−clauses* do not. If Rutherford (1970) is accurate that *although−clauses* attach greater than *even though−clauses,* we might anticipate a difference similar to that of because and *since−clauses.* In other words, exempt anaphora could be expected to be available for *even though−clauses* but not *although−clauses.* To test this, Lund, & Charnavel, (2020)

experimented the empirical claim in Charnavel (2019) that exempt anaphors are acceptable in eventive *because–clauses* but not evidential *since–clauses*. They discovered that *even though–clauses* did allow for exempt anaphors, but *although–clauses* did not.

7) a. Alex prosecuted the newspaper because it published an awkward

　　picture of herself.

　b. Ted went on vacation since there was a photo of himself at a beach

　　on Facebook.

Using t–tests like in (7) to calculate the results, Lund, G., & Charnavel, I. (2020) discovered that participants inferred because–clauses with exempt anaphors to be a lot better than since–clauses. This supports the claim that eventive because–clauses allow for exempt anaphora but evidential since–clauses do not. Now , we move to the next section where we talk about the methods used to analyse and collect the data.

8. Methodology and Data Collection

This section is primarily concerned with the collection of data that will be used in order to investigate how third−year students of English at Hamah University interpret several anaphoric forms. In other words, it provides details about the methodology that has been adopted to collect and analyse data on anaphoric relations in English in an attempt to find answers to the research questions mentioned in page 5.

8.1 Participants

The sample chosen for this research includes 30 third−year students of English at Hamah University. The choice of third−year students is based on the assumption that these students should have accomplished great competence in English, which enables them to exhibit good performance too. Linguistic competence is an indicator of speakers' linguistic knowledge, whereas performance reveals how these speakers use their linguistic knowledge in real−life situations (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2011). it is worth noting that the gender of the

participants is not taken as a factor, all that matters is their linguistic knowledge, particularly their syntactic knowledge which should be good enough for third−year students of English because they have almost completed all their grammar courses, and they would not have more anaphoric knowledge whatsoever.

8.2 The Test

This test is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with multiple−choice questions. I have chosen multiple−choice questions to find out how our participants comprehend Coreference restrictions with anaphora. Ten multiple−choice questions were given to the participants. Each question of this part shows a different element that relates to anaphora coreference, and a true or false questions.

The participants at this stage of the test are required to choose the correct answer.

We can deduce some answers to the following questions:

I. How do these participants infer syntactically obscure coreference?

2. What are the possible interpretations that they recognize?

3. Are these learners able to comprehend the fact that in some cases, coreference could be possible while in others blocked?

4. Do they just give one interpretation of each item?

To ensure that the results would be precise, I provided four multiple−choice interpretation answers for each question. One of the choices reflects one interpretation of the sentence. Another choice shows another interpretation. The third choice shows that both of the previous interpretations are possible. The last choice indicates an incorrect rendering of the sentence in the question given. The reason for including the wrong choice is to make sure that students analyze the choices carefully and to make sure they concentrate on the structure of the sentences given in order to discover the correct interpretation of each sentence.

8.3 Procedures of Data Analyses

In this paper, I concentrate on lexical and structural anaphora by using Ullmann's (1977) theory, kinds of words, phrases

and sentences by using Crystal's (2008) theory, as well as labelled and bracketed sentences/phrases by using Yule's (1985) theory. The data of this research is taken from several questionable constructions given to a number of third-year students of English at Hama University.

The data is analyzed in terms of percentages of the students' responses to each question in the research tool. The detailed percentages are presented in tables, whereas the overall ones are presented in the form of two pie diagrams.

9. Data Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The purpose of the test is to explore the students' weaknesses regarding the process of understanding their performance regarding anaphoric relations in English. In addition, the test should help in finding out how one can establish beneficial methods for helping students overcome the difficulties in using anaphora. This section statistically analyses the data and discusses the results in relation to reasons and factors which might contribute to the development of learners' competence of anaphora.

9.1 Data analysis

The data were obtained from the comprehension performance of students in the given test. After reviewing the data, a quantitative analysis was conducted to provide the frequency and percentage of students responses. Moreover, the results were analysed in view of participants' knowledge of anaphoric relations in English. Grammatical errors were not taken into account because the purpose of this study is to investigate the learner's anaphoric competence. The data used in this study consist of a two-parts test, namely,a multiple-choice test, and a true or false test.

The test was a very valuable tool and a source of rich information for the researcher because it not only reflects students' efficiency in using and comprehending anaphors but also shows the strategies they resort to, as well as the difficulty they encounter in producing, understanding, and comprehending them. Error analysis is used as a method to identify the factors behind the participants' errors, and this method will be clarified later in this section. After conducting the test, the researcher marked the collected data (papers of

30 students) as correct or incorrect. After that, the researcher developed a content analysis sheet that was modified several times in line with the students' varied responses.

9.2 Error Analysis

The methods adopted to analyze the errors are based on Corder (1967). Depending on the contrastive approach of analysis between L1 and FL learners. Analysis of errors revealed that contrastive analysis was incapable of predicting a great majority of errors, since its main priority was dedicated to the study of language transfer and ignored other kinds of errors.

Khansir (2012) indicates that this approach is not based on the assumption that the learners' mother tongue interference is not the main and only reason for making errors. Rather, they also occur due to some common strategies in a framework hypothesis of errors in second language acquisition addressed by contrastive analysis.

9.3 Test Analysis and Discussion

This is a multiple-choice question test. This test was given to 30 third-year students majoring in English language and literature at the Department of English. It contains 30 sentences and each sentence contains a different type of anaphora. The participants are asked to choose the correct interpretation of each sentence out of four options. It is worth noting that in the second part of the test, the participants are asked to choose whether the sentences are coreferential, might be coreferential or none coreferential. The second part is more like a true or false type of exercise Thus, the objective of this test is to investigate the participants' receptive skills of anaphora, i.e. their ability to comprehend anaphoric relations in English even when they encounter this relation between a pronoun and an antecedent in complex situations. Table 1 shows the percentage of the correct and incorrect interpretations for each question.

Questions	Correct Interpretations	Incorrect Interpretations
1. It shocked Sarah that she lost the race,	80%	20%

although she had no reason to believe she would win.		
2. So many people wrote to Ben that he couldn't answer them all, although they did not know him.	20%	80%
3. Sarah denied that she met John.	80%	20%
4. Though it was unlikely that she would pass, Sarah still decided to take the exam.	50%	50%
5. The man who toured with Sarah denied that she	86.66%	13.33%

met John.		
6. We sent him to West Point in order to please Ben's mother.	20%	80%
7. A girl came in who looked very threatening, although the office was officially closed?	23.33%	76.66%
8. Near him, John saw a wolf.	36.66%	63.33%
9. How offensive to his friends, Benjamin is!	43.33%	56.66%
10. Near John, he saw a wolf.	76.66%	23.33%
Average	51.66%	48.33%

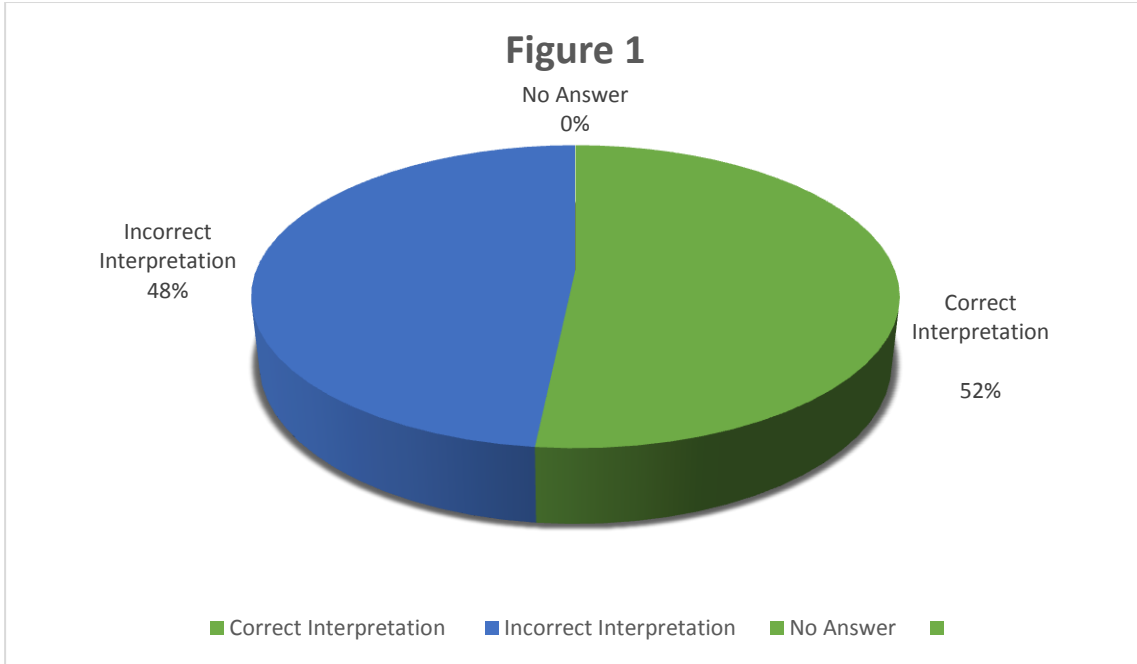Table 1. Percentage of the correct and incorrect interpretations in the multiple choice test.

Figure 1: Percentages of participants' performance in the first part of the test.

The results of the second part of the test where students are asked to decide whether the sentences are grammatical (coreferential) or ungrammatical (none coreferential) are shown in table 2.

Questions	Correct	Incorrect
1.It was easy for him to please the woman who admired	56.66%	43.33%

Ben.		
2.The portrait of herself on the front page of The Guardian made Sarah's statements seem absurd.	63.33%	36.66%
3. I told you that it would upset Sarah that you smoke, and upset her that you smoked it certainly did!	73.33%	26.66%
4. Sarah left the party because there was an embarrassing photo of her going around.	80%	20%
5. In John's flat he smoked weed.	30%	70%
6. Laura's cookies, she sent to the homeless man.	40%	60%
7. The moon spins	90%	10%

on itself.		
8. What annoyed him was the photograph of Ben's mother.	40%	60%
9. He was rejected by the woman Ben loved.	53.33%	46.66%
10. We all bet that Laura would kick someone, and kick his sister Sarah thinks the girl Ben loves did.	30%	70%
11. The old man whose faith in them the woman who lived next door to the Fishers didn't share has learned to be less trusting.	70%	30%
12. The woman who admired Ben was easy for him to	73.33%	26.66%

please.		
13. The woman he loved betrayed a man I know.	20%	80%
14. The criminals drew his gun.	60%	40%
15. She found a scratch in Jake's picture of Laura.	13.33%	86.66%
16. Men who hunt them will tell you that bears are smelly beasts.	53.33%	46.66%
17. The portrait of herself on the front page of The Guardian made Sarah's statements seem kind of absurd.	10%	90%
18. If you are looking for it, you'll never find the fountain of youth	80%	20%

because It is so well hidden.		
19. He is fond of the girl Ben kicked yesterday.	50%	50%
20. Realizing that Ben was a failure upset him.	50%	50%
Average	49.83%	50.16%

Table2: Percentage of the correct and incorrect answers to the second part of the test.

An error analysis was conducted in the second part of the test, which is basically a true or false type of questions where the participants were asked to choose whether the sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical to find out the reasons behind the students' errors.

The percentage of the errors made in the second part of the test was 50.16% where the students wrongfully deemed the sentences to be grammatical or coreferential. These errors refer to the students poor knowledge of anaphoric relations in English.

Average of both	Correct answers	Incorrect

parts of the test		answers
Part 1 + Part 2	50%	50%

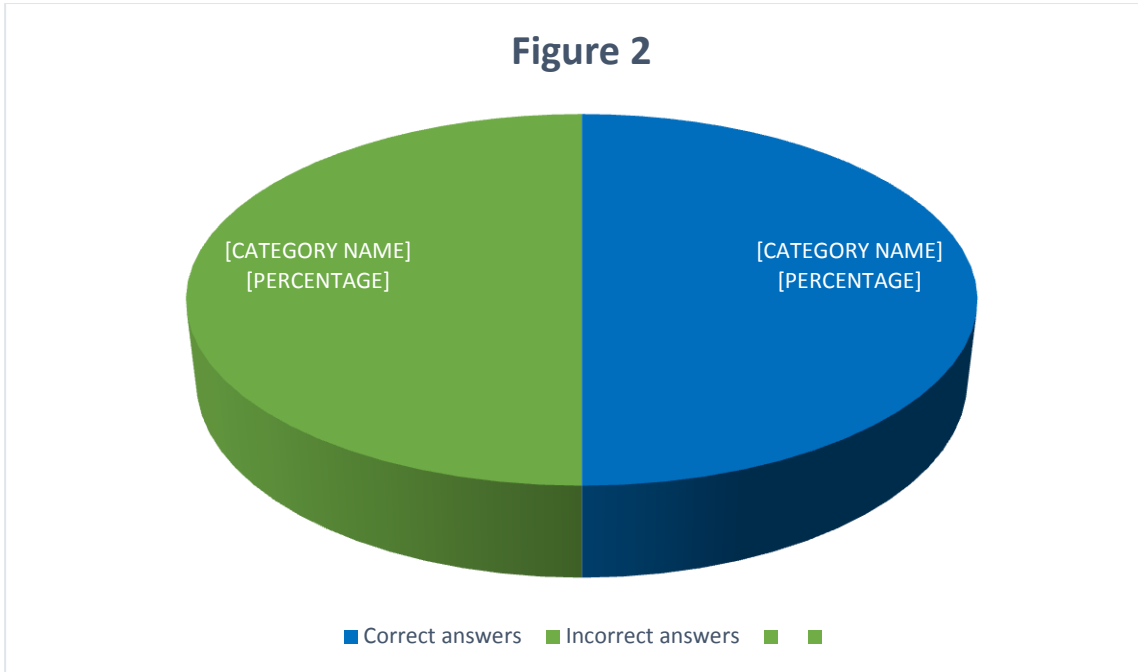**Table 3**: the total percentage of the whole test combined.

Figure2: Average percentage of both parts of the test.

10. Conclusion

This section presents the main conclusion, summarizes the findings and answers the research questions given in section 5.

10.1 **Summary of the findings**

The following points summarize these findings:

1. 50% of third-year students of English at Hama University succeed in

   comprehending complex anaphors.

2. Students of English at Hama University are confused about the case of

   anaphora as can be seen from the results of the test.

3. Lack of comprehension of grammatical constructions and contextual

   knowledge is a main issue these students encounter when they come across obscure and complex anaphors.

4. The general context of an anaphoric coreference plays a significant role

in understanding the meaning of a sentence well.

The results obtained also try to solve the problem of anaphoric relations in English on the syntactic level these students may encounter. As a result, they manage somehow to depend on the linguistic context to get the right meaning of the given complex coreference structures.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

According to the findings of the study at hand, the following pedagogical implications may be very useful to boost EFL students' ability to interpret complex and obscure anaphors.

1. Both teachers and students should be aware of anaphora as a general phenomenon in all languages of the world. Thus, teachers' cluelessness of this might result in their students unconsciously producing and being unable to interpret obscure structures when it comes to anaphora. In addition, third-year

students need to know more about anaphora to be able to recognize that some structures ought to have more than one possible coreferenciality.

2. Students have to be aware of the possible causes that may lead to questionable structures in the target language. As this research reveals, third-year students need to know more about the cases in which complex anaphors may occur.

3. Teachers should assist their students to guess the intended meaning out of context. They can also provide their students with some exercises to avoid the trap of obscurity. In other words, teachers are advised to boost their students' prediction skills.

4. Teachers of English should teach their students that English words are not always monosemous. Therefore, third-year students should depend on the linguistic context to get the proper meaning of the intended anaphoric relation in a sentence.

5.3 Recommendations for further research

Due to the limitations of the study a few recommendations can be made for future research:

1. The two parts of the test in the present study have not possibly included every single type of anaphora but surely covered most. Therefore, it would be recommended that further research could be carried out on other cases of anaphora.

2. The test has mainly focused on the syntactic cases of anaphora and not necessarily on the pragmatic ones. Hence, I recommend that a study to be carried out on the pragmatic properties of anaphora.

3. A larger number of participants in such a test is recommended since the number of participants of this research may not reflect the participants' performance regarding the case of anaphora.

4. A future study similar to this one is recommended on other EFL students of other universities to be compared with this study.

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