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Error Analysis of Turkish EFL Learners: A Case Study

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Abstract

What foreign language learners can do and cannot do could reveal important messages to language teachers about what is happening in their interlanguage. Therefore, this study aims to find out the types and frequency of learners' written errors in the final examination of the English course at a state university research center. The participants were 32 elementary level students who participated in English courses for three months. They were taught certain lexico-grammatical structures in each unit and given a writing assignment related to the vocabulary and grammatical structures taught. In the final exam, there were three different topics and the students were expected to choose one of them and write a paragraph. The participants' errors in the final examination were identified and the interview data questioning their feelings about their writing assignments and the feedback sessions were analyzed with content analysis while demographic variables were analyzed with SPSS 16. The error categories include prepositions, verbs, articles, sentence structure, punctuation, gerunds, pluralism, possessives and word choice. In addition, the categories were divided into sub-categories like omission, overuse and misuse. The results offer important insights into what kind of errors Turkish EFL learners make and their attempts to make inferences about the target language. Interview results also promote various perspectives for English language teachers how to treat learner errors.

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1. Introduction

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Both L1 and L2 learners make mistakes when they try to convey a message in written or spoken language and they can correct them with the feedback they get (Corder, 1967). It is natural that all learners make mistakes but

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commit errors while learning a language because both L1 learners and L2 learners can produce incorrect language samples and with the feedback they get from the interlocutors they can process the new language rules. What teacher should do about errors is to find the sources and take measures (Erdoğan, 2005).

Whether it is native language or a non-native language, people could produce incorrect language pieces. While learning foreign languages, people may also make systematic errors and these are the signs of progress (Farrokh, 2011; Montrul, 2011). As learners see more language samples, they can enhance their metalinguistic knowledge, which according to Sharwood Smith (2004), is "the type of knowledge to which we all have access to a certain extent and which we can make more sophisticated by consciously studying" (p. 269). Conducting error analysis is considered as a good alternative to describe and explain errors made by ESL/EFL learners since the errors could shed light on the sources of the errors. If these error sources are clearly understood, foreign language teachers could be informed about how to overcome the errors and how to treat them better (Alhaysony, 2012).

To contribute to the understanding and treatment of learner errors, this study aims to find out the types of errors elementary students make in their writing in the final examination and provides practical solutions to handle errors in Turkish EFL context where exposure to the target language could be limited.

2. Review of Literature

Committing errors is seen as a sign of improving language competence and as a facilitating factor in second language learning. As language learning consists of certain steps, errors are one of the steps in this process because educators could see what kind of difficulties learners have and what strategies they use to produce language (Mungungu, 2010). Learner errors were undesirable before the 1960s when behaviorism was the dominant language learning move but it was Chomsky's (1957) "Universal Grammar" that brought out an important change in the treatment and understanding of learner errors as a means of hypothesis formation (Farrokh, 2011). In Second Language Acquisiton (SLA) research, there are lots of studies about error analysis. According to Corder (1967), errors should be eradicated as soon as possible but errors are now regarded as a tool which could help understand the learning process (Alhaysony, 2012) and provide evidence of the learner's level in the target language (Gass & Selinker, 1984) so contrastive analysis and error analysis emerged to explain learner errors.

Contrastive analysis (CA) is grounded in behaviourism and structuralism but error analysis (EA) is a different type of linguistic analysis which is concerned with learner errors focusing on both the learner and the language being learnt. Therefore, error analysis has attracted a lot of attention among linguists and researchers since the 1970s (Magnan, 1983 & AbiSamra, 2003 as cited in Alhaysony, 2012). Contrastive analysis compares languages to identify certain errors so that teachers could know what has been learnt by learners and what needs to be learnt. It is thought that language learners could transfer the rules and structures of their mother tongue into the target language (Antón-Méndez, 2010; Gass, Behney & Plonsky, 2013). Unlike contrastive analysis, error analysis makes comparsions between learner errors in target language and the target language forms. Erros are regarded as red flags since they give us clues about the learner's internal system and L2 knowledge (Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013). Besides, error analysis is defined as the analysis of the errors made by second language learners and examines errors made by L2 learners. However, there is a distinction between errors and mistakes in that a mistake is seen as an inconsistent deviation (Norrish, 1987: 8) and may be caused by lack of attention, fatigue, or carelessness but producing the incorrect language piece constantly is regarded to be error.

Error analysis emerged in the late 1960s as an alternative to CA to treat learner errors as a feedback opportunity for the researcher to determine learning strategies. In this sense, learner errors do not occur just because of L1 interference (negative transfer) but also because of L2 system, that is, the causes of errors could be interlingual or intralingual (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). According to Corder (1973), L2 learners' errors could inform the teacher about the strong and weak points of their teaching style and in light of errors teacher can make changes in their practices to serve students' needs better. In Corder's (1974) model, there are three stages in error analysis; data collection, description and explanation.

Errors could be divided into interlingual (transfer errors) or intralingual (overgeneralizations) errors. Interlingual errors may occur at different levels like transfer of phonology, morphology, grammar and lexis from the native language into the target language. On the other hand, intralingual errors result from wrong or partial learning of the target language (Erdoğan, 2005). Intralingual errors, that is overgeneralizations, were identified in Kırkgöz' study

(2010) where negative transfer of language items and incomplete application of rules were highlighted to be the main sources of errors. If learners are continually provided with corrective feedback during their classes and oral feedback sessions, their writing habits could be improved and their errors may be lessened. Therefore, this study aims to find out the errors committed by elementary level learners who were systemtically provided with written and oral corrective feedback on their weekly writing in Turkish EFL context. In sum, the study aims to find out:

- 1. What kind of erros do Turkish EFL learners commit in their writing?
- 2. What are the most and least common kinds of errors in Turkish EFL learners' writing?
- 3. Are Turkish EFL learners' errors due to interlingual or intralingual factors?
- 4. What are Turkish EFL learners' perceptions about the feedback they get about their writing assignments?

3. Methodology

The study is a case study, the case consisting of a specific learner group at elementary level in Turkish EFL context and it was conducted in approximately 4 months. The participants were 32 university students at Gazi University Turkish Language Learning, Research and Application Center. There were 32(100%) participants in the study, 22(68.75%) being female and 10(31.25%) being male.

There were two types of data collection instruments. The first one is the writing part taken from the final examination and the second one is the written interview form given at the end of the term to elicit participant responses on the written corrective feedback, feedback sessions and their suggestions. The participants' responses were in Turkish due to their low level of English so the items of the interview form and participant responses were translated into English by the researcher and another coder. The two coders translated the data seperately and then compared their translations. This was done to clarify any misunderstanding or ambuguity and have interrater reliability in the study. SPSS 16 was used to analyze demographic variables of the participants while content analysis, which examines written texts to search the presence of various language units like words, phrases or grammatical strutures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Dörnyei, 2007), was applied to analyze learner errors and intweview data. The coders also followed the steps identified by Ellis (1997): Collecting data—Identifying errors—Classifying errors—Analyzing errors—Explaining errors.

Errors in the writing part of the exam were shared with the second coder. The errors were identified and counted seperately by the two coders, one being the researcher, for inter-rater reliability and their categories were compared and discussed till there was complete agreement. In addition, both coders first coded and categorized the written interview answers and error types on their own and after about three weeks they examined the previously formed categories and themes and made some revisions to ensure intra-rater reliability.

3.1. Procedure

The course content includes improvement of the four basic language skills since it is a general English course. Learners are taught certain lexico-grammatical structures in each unit and are assigned a writing assignment in each unit related to the specific vocabulary and grammatical structures. First students are provided with writing genre examples which they can take as their model and then they are required to produce their own writing assignments.

There were ten units and ten different writing tasks. The researcher gave direct correction on students' writing assignments and held oral feedback sessions to discuss the corrected form of the assignments. The feedback sessions were held every week after the collection and correction of the writing assignments and the sessions lasted for 10-15 minutes. Then students produced the second draft in light of the feedback and kept them in their portfolios. In the final exam, there were 3 different topics that students chose to write about in 60-80 words.

- a- Tell us your daily routine
- b- What are your plans for summer holiday?
- c- How was your weekend?

In each alternative, students were expected to use a different grammatical structure, namely Present Simple Tense, Future Tense and Simple Past Tense respectively. Providing learners with alternatives was thought to help

students to write about a topic they like and have information about. It also helps to elicit detailed responses from participants. 25 participants chose topic a, two participants chose topic b and five participants chose topic c. As is seen high majority of the participants chose topic a to talk about their daily routine. Each participant was given a code, that is a number, to ease coding and ensure anonymity. Which topic they chose was also given near the related code.

4. Results

There were ten categories that emerged from the data. The errors included tenses, prepositions, verbs, articles, sentence structures, punctuation, gerunds, pluralism, possessives and word choice. The categories were also divided into sub-categories like omission, overuse and misuse. First, research questions will be restated one by one in order, then the findings will be interpreted and exemplified for detailed discussion.

Research Question 1: What kind of erros do Turkish EFL learners commit in their writing?

There are ten main error categories that have emerged from the data as is seen in Figure 1. In addition to main erros, there are several sub-categories of these erros.

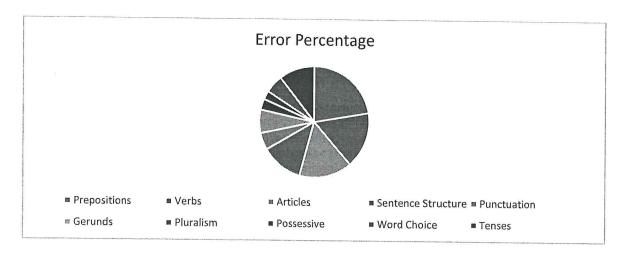


Figure 1. Percentage of error occurrence.

The errors include prepositions, verbs, articles, sentence structure, punctuation, gerunds, pluralism, possessives, tenses and word choice. As is seen in Figure 1, there are mostly lexical and grammatical errors.

Research Question 2: What are the most and least common kind of errors in Turkish EFL learners' writing?

When we look at the frequencies and percentages of the errors made by the tparticipnats, there were 270 errors. To exemplify, There were 63(23.33%) preposition errors, 46(17.03%) verb errors, 44(16.29%) article errors, 35(13%) sentence structure errors, 14(5.18%) punctuation errors, 7(2.59%) gerund errors, 9(3.33%) pluralism errors, 7(2.59%) possessive errors, 15(5.55%) word choice errors and finally 30(11.11%) tense related errors. As is seen prepositions form the majority of the errors amounting to quarter (23.33%) of the total errors and this is closely followed by the verb errors (16.29%). Article errors also have high frequency among other errors with 16.29%. Sentence structure (13%) and tense related errors (11.11%) are approximately close to each other. Gerund and possessive errors have the same percentage with 2.59% and are the least comitted errors.

Research Question 3: Are Turkish EFL learners' errors due to interlingual or intralingual factors?

In light of the learners' written errors, it can be said that learners go through certain stages while learning a non-native language and try to make inferences or guesses about the target language structure either by referring to their mother tongue or considering L2 properties, which could result in interlingual or intralingual errors or both. Let's

look at the examples.

"We are speak than football". Here there are two errors in this sentence, one being the overuse of the verb to be and a sign of making inference about how L2 works (intralingual) and the other includes L1 transfer (interlingual) because the participants tries to explain "Futboldan konuşuyoruz" in Turkish and directly transfer "-dan" from Turkish into English as "than" which is transleted into Turkish as "-dan/den". Here we see the effect of native

language on the target language.

"I weared trousers and sweat last weekend." Here the participant wants to explain his/her past actions so she uses simple past form of the verbs but she uses "weared" instead of "wore". We see confusion of regular and irregular verbs, which can lead to overgeneralization of regular and irregular verb forms (intralingual). Coplexity of the target language structure could also result in errors. In sum, we can suggest that elementary level learners' errors in Turkish EFL context could result from both interlingual and intralingual factors.

Research Question 4: What are Turkish EFL learners' perceptions about the feedback they get about their writing assignments?

When we look at written interview responses, it is seen that learners value the writing assignments and feedback sessions. Participant responses were interpreted and numbered according to the order in the written interview form. The parcipant responses cover all the three questions in the written interview form. The fist question was about the writing assignments, the second question was about the feedback sessions, and the third question was about their suggestions about the writing assignments and feedback sessions.

Participant 1:

1- I really liked it and did my assignments thinking that they were useful. I believe in the power of written communication when people cannot express their feelings orally. Writing is easier to remember. We had writing assignments about each unit and now I can say some sentences about every topic in each unit.

2- Yes, if I criticise myself, it is very useful for me since I can remember what I hear better than what I see. Feedback sessions were like a revision of what I wrote.

3-We could have got more oral feedback if there had been more course hours.

Participant 2:

1-I think writing assignments were useful because we encounter paragraphs in proficiency tests. We see our mistakes as we write.

2-The teacher looked at our assignments and talked about the most common mistakes. I paid attention on not to

repeat them again.

3-Writing assignments could be about the current issues. Because writing something you love is important. While doing my writing homework I saw that I needed to learn more words so searched for more words. I haven't got any writing assignments so far and was insufficient in this subject. Now I started to love English.

Participant 3:

- 1- I think it contributed to my lexis. I can express my feelings even with short sentences. Some of the writing assignments were boring but it was fun to write about the interesting topics.
- 2- Yes, we became more self-confident when we started to read what we wrote.

3-We could select a book as a class and write about it.

Some paricipants stated that more time is needed for feedback sessions. This could be because of the fact that students get the opportunity to see their mistakes and learn about the correct forms. Regular face to face

discussions could guide students to enhance their writing. In addition, we can encourage pair work to look at deskmate's mistakes, discuss about them and create peer feedback among learners. If teachers help learners to notice the gap in their knowledge, learners could set more realistic goals to accomplish. Likewise, Participant 11 stated in the interview:

I-We learn whether what we have done is right or wrong and then we notice our mistakes and try not to repeat them again. This feedback is very useful for us. When we check our deskmate's assignment, we could also notice some other commonly committed mistakes and pay more attention on our writing.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to find out elementary level Turkish EFL learners' written errors in their final examination. It was found out that participants made errors in the areas of prepositions, verbs, articles, sentence structure, punctuation, gerunds, pluralism, possessives, tense structure and word choice. Preposition errors (N=63, 23.33%) and verb errors (N=46, 17.03%), together with article errors (N=44, 16.29%), formed the majority of the errors made while both gerund and possessive errors (N=7, 2.59%) were the least committed error types. Additionally, the participants were found to have positive perceptions about the written feedback they got for their writing assignments as they were informed about their strong and weak points. They stated that feedback sessions including the discussion of learner mistakes were also useful for them to clarify ambiguous points in which they had difficulty. They also suggested that there should be more time for feedback sessions in order to understand the confusing points, reinforce what was learnt before and ask more detailed questions about the written feedback.

The results of the study are in parallel with those of Alhaysony (2012) about article errors where errors occurred due to L1 interference (intelingual) and L2 features (intralingual) and omission errors formed an important part of the error data. Likewise, in this study there were 44 (16.29%) article errors and 25 of them were omisson errors. However, as the participants are low level language learners, they tend to transfer language rules of their mother tongue so interlingual errors count for the most of the errors committed as previously found by Alhaysony (2012) and Brown (1980). However, the study findings also show differences with some previous studies like Mahmoodzadeh (2012) in which the subjects under study made errors related to wrong use and redundancy of prepositions more frequently than the errors related to the omission of prepositions while translating from Persian into English because in this study preposition errors were the most frequent type of errors (N=63, 23.33%). This study findings also contrast with those of Mungungu (2010) where spelling and tense errors are the most common errors for the three language groups studied. In addition, this study findings are not in parallel with those of Rocha Erkaya (2012) in that word choice was by far the most common and serious error and the error that resulted in frequent misunderstanding. She mentioned about the local and global errors with their effect on the flow of communication as well as L1 interference because of cross-linguistic differences. However, in this study, word choice was found to have low frequency and percentage (N=15, 5.55%).

As is seen, elementary level learners' errors in Turkish EFL context could result from both interlingual and intralingual factors, that is, they might transfer certain rules and structures from their native language into the target language or they may overgeneralize target language rules while making sentences. After learning a certain L2 structure, learners may produce the correct form but after a while with the coming new information about different language rules, the learner may produce the incorrect form by making overgeneralizations but then s/he uses the correct form again. Students can reduce the wrong forms with the help of feedback of the teacher and U-shaped learning takes place in this regard. Besides, when learners try to use a linguistic form, they may have dificulties because there are many cues and alternatives to choose from and a competition among the cues starts for the learner as suggested in Competition Model (Gass, Behney & Plonsky, 2013).

Since each language has its specific rules and structures, different linguistic forms are needed in different languages, which could be explained by typological universals seeking similarities and differences among the languages in the world as suggested by Greenberg (1963). We sould bear in mind that there are many factors affecting language acquisiton process like age, attitute, motivation, aptitude, anxiety and learning strategies. Only if we consider all these varibles can we get the big picture. Therefore, we can refer to cross-linguistic influence which is a broad term consisting of transfer, avoidance, language loss and rate of learning (Kellerman & Smith, 1986) while dealing with L2 learners' errors.

If learners' attention could be drawn to a linguistic structure that they do not know well or have partial information, they can focus on those forms and learn them faster (Bigelow, 2000), which could be actualized with noticing the related language item. Noticing is considered to require focal attention and awareness of the learner (Schmidt, 1993) because Noticing Hypothesis, which proposes that output plays a role in noticing interlanguage problems and stimulating language acquisition processes, puts great importance on noticing for language learning to take place (Schmidt, 1994). According to Izumi (2002), who studied the noticing function of output with respect to the acquisition of English relativization by adult L2 learners, students may not always turn input into intake all the time even if there is input provided but if learners notice the gap in their knowledge they can be encouraged to solve their linguistic problems properly within a context.

All in all, learner errors could give us clues about their internal process. Regarding the examples above we can say that learners can refer to their mother tongue as port and start from there. As a result of similarities and differences between the two languages learners may find it easy or difficult to adapt to the new language system. While constructing a new language system, learners could switch between L1 and L2. Therefore teachers may choose to provide corrective feedback for their students in their writing tasks so that students can see their progress and decide what to focus on and what to ignore. Only if language teachers both teach and test writing, can learners develop their writing skill. Therefore, language teachers should make enough time to give writing assignments regularly, assess them and give feedback so that students can see where they fail or where they are good at. Additionally, learners' writing skills could be tested in examinations or their writing assignments could be included in grading. In this way, students can see what they do is valued and can be more motivated to go on writing.

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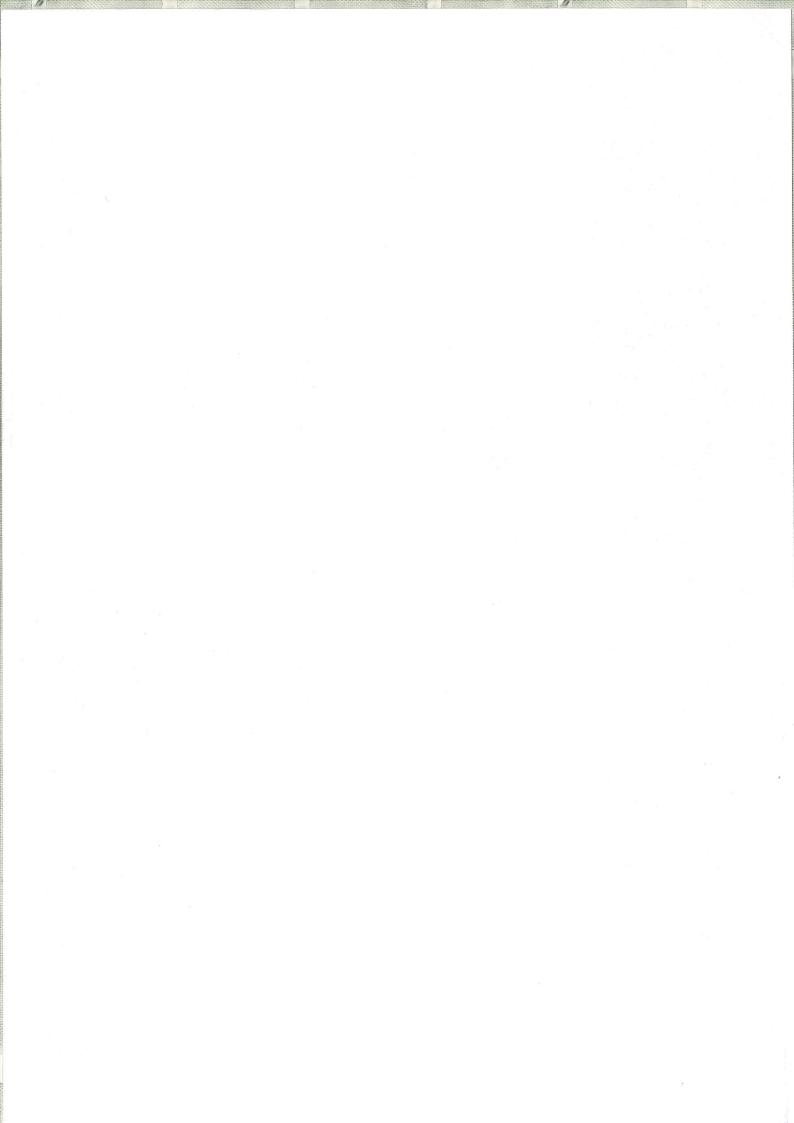
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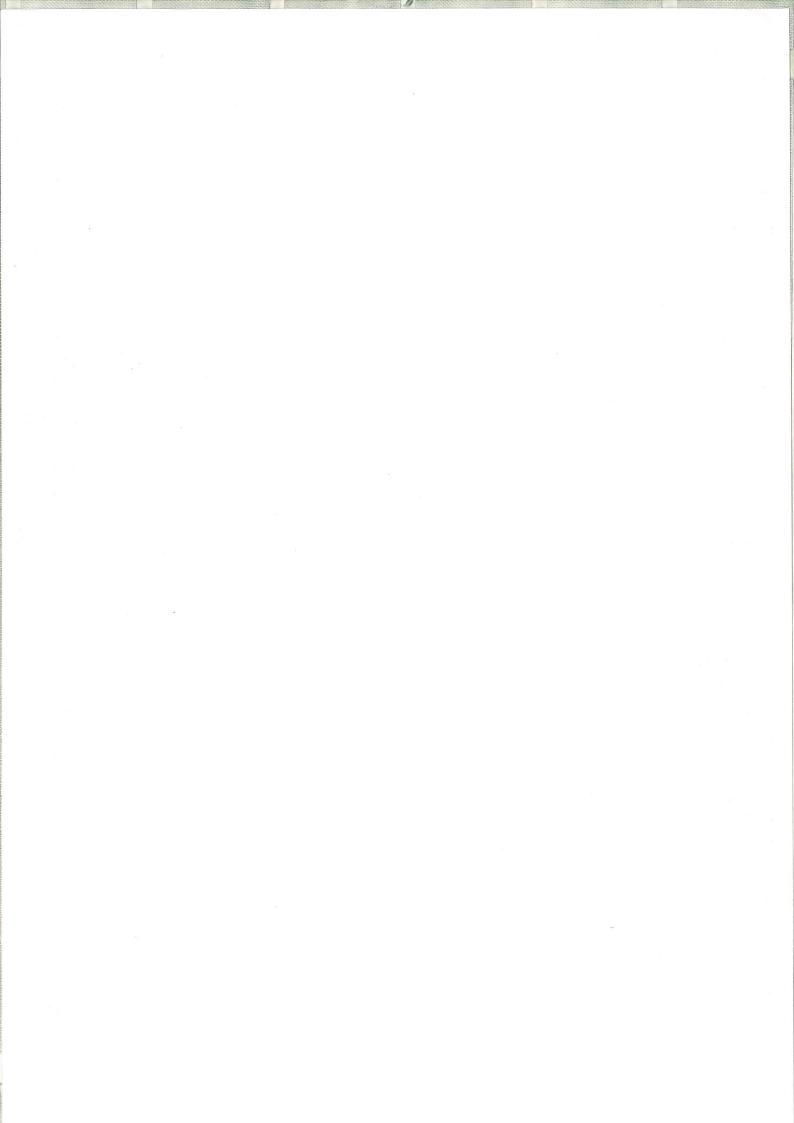
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