Error Analysis of the Written English Composition of Undergraduates: A Case Study of Nigeria

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Abstract: Research findings in the writing composition always show that there are common and recurrent errors in all aspects of English and these are linguistically and communicatively affecting learners. This study, therefore, analysed errors in written English examination papers of 50 undergraduates. The students were final year undergraduates in the Department of Arts Education (English Education Unit), AdekunleAjasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. 25 male and 25 female students' examination papers were sampled.All the participants were Nigerians. The purpose of the study was to find out the types of errors that still manifested in the written work of graduating students studying English. The research instrument used for the study was the graduating students' written examination papers. All the errors were identified and classified into various grammatical categories. The results of the study show the five most common errors committed by the final year students: verb tense, spelling, subject verb agreement, preposition and capitalization. The paper provides an insight into some problems of second language learning in Nigeria and therefore concludes that more attention should be given to these types of errors in Nigerian higher institutions

Keywords: Composition, Errors, Linguistic and communicative skills, Learners' Feedback

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies in language learning show that second language learning is a lifelong process. This implies that there are seemingly challenges that appear difficult to make learning other tongues easy, especially through formal education. For instance, English has had a comparatively long history in the Nigeria educational system. Since 1960, when the country attained her independence, some forms of national educational policies on language education have been practiced. Currently, English is given the status of medium of instruction right from primary four to tertiary institutions. It is also accorded the most prestigious status among the Nigerian and foreign languages in the educational system, apart from being the official language as well as the language of the "socialites".

The undergraduates have been exposed to, at least, 12 years of learning English in primary and secondary schools before admitted into the degree programme. All the participants were Yoruba- English bilinguals who hardly use English outside the classroom; instead, it is the code-mixing and code-switching of Yoruba-English that they are always fond of. Learning English in

Nigeria, therefore, becomes more problematic in the sense that majority of the pre-service and practising teachers are trained in a variety of English characterised with some forms of Nigerian standard. Therefore, just like the saying goes "like pupils like teachers." The participants in this study were final year degree students of English\Education at the AdekunleAjasin University in Nigeria.

This paper examines the errors made in the written English of undergraduate learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in AdekunleAjasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. The subjects are pre-service teachers who upon graduation will play a significant role in the development of the nation's education system. It is therefore crucial that they be equipped with the writing skill, a tool for expression, language development and critical thinking and above all, a significant tool upon which all academic course of study in the university revolve. Moreover, the global status of English language makes it a language that all learners at the different rungs of education but particularly, university undergraduates, must learn and be proficient in so that upon graduation, they will be relevant in the global market .

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Meaning of Error Analysis

Error analysis is used in applied linguistics to study systematically the forms produced by a learner of foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics (Crystal 2003:165). It is a step-by-step process or systematic analysis of error made by language learners to determine the strategies they use to learn a foreign language and to reveal areas that need reinforcement in teaching. Corder (1967) states that errors are practical proofs that learning is taking place. Studying students' errors of usage has immediate practical application for language teacher. It provides a reliable feedback for immediate correction and designing a remedial teaching method. With the knowledge of error analysis, teachers are informed that learning a second language or a foreign language is a gradual process, during which errors are expected as part of the learning process and cognition. Richards (1971) argues that many of the learners' errors happen due to the strategies they use to internalise the rules and structures of the target language when learning is taking place, especially their L2. It is also hypothesised that "all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesising, and, even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them" (Bartholomae, 1980: 97).

In the same vein, Keshavarz (2012:168) considers analysis as a procedure used by both researchers and teachers to collect samples of learner language, identifying errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness. James (2001:62) asserts that error analysis is to the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know, and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance.

Corder (1967) identifies two main objectives of analyzing learners' errors in ESL instruction. The first is theoretical and the second is applied. The theoretical objective of error analysis is to understand what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language. The applied objective is to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by using the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes. At the same time, the investigation of errors can serve two purposes, diagnostic and prognostic.

Researchers have identified different sources of errors. Richards (1971), Hadley (1993) and Brown (2004) categorise sources of error within two domains namely: interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. Interlingual errors occur because of language transfer-transfer from the learners' first language. This type of errors may occur at different levels – transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical and lexical-semantic elements of the native language into the target language. In Nigeria for instance, Yoruba speakers do not have letter "v" in their language alphabet. Therefore "v" is replaced with "f" as in words such as 'very' (pronounced as ferry), 'van' (pronounced as fan) etc.Intralingual errors (also called developmental errors) are those that the learners encounter in the target language as overgeneralizations and false analogies. It is assumed that when a learner learns more of the L2 more and more, intralingual transfer will always occur. According to Richards (1971)and Keshavarz (2003, 2006, 2012) causes of intralingual errors include: interference, overgeneralization, ignorance of rules of restrictions, incomplete application of rules, performance errors, mistakes of transitional competence, strategies of communication and assimilation, and false concepts hypothesized and these include misleading explanations from the teacher. Others are faulty presentation of a structure in a textbook, confused vocabulary items because of contiguous presentation, inappropriate formal forms of language. Also, the communication strategies used by learners to get their messages across can constitute sources of error. This is prevalent in this era of digital literacy where different forms of abbreviations are used in chat messages. So, coinages, false cognates, circumlocution, and prefabricated patterns do constitute errors.

According to Keshavarz (2012), competence in a language is of two kinds: receptive and productive and these competences do not develop in individual at the same rate. Errors made by learners can either be classified as receptive or productive. Receptive errors occur when a listener misunderstands the speaker's intention, while productive errors are those which occur in the language learner's utterances. Keshavarz observes that productive errors are much easier to analyse than receptive errors. Analysis of productive error is based on learners' utterances, while in investigating receptive errors, one will need to take cognizance of factors such as people's reactions to orders, requests, and compliments. In other words, people may understand your intention and yet pretend not to.

Wilkin (1972:199) identifies two types of transfer. These are positive and negative transfer. The transfer is considered justified because the structure of the MT and L2 share similar features. In this instance, it is positive transfer or facilitator. Wilkin maintains that the transfer is proved unjustified because the structure of the two languages are different, in which case it is negative transfer or interference.

Generally, it seems that no model of error analysis is exhaustive and inclusive as they are ideally supposed to be. Therefore an error analyst usually adopts his own model of classification.

2.2 Between Error and Mistake

Corder (1973:261-262) distinguishes between error and mistake as follows.
Errors are:

a. Systematic, governed by rules and appear because learners' knowledge of the rules of the target language is incomplete, since they follow the rules of the learners' inter-language,

b. Indicative of learners' linguistic system at a given stage of language learning i.e his/her transitional competence or inter-lingual development; and

c. Occurring repeatedly and not recognised by the learner, in the sense that only teachers and researchers can locate them,
Mistakes are however regarded as random deviations unrelated to any system and instead representing the same types of performance mistakes that might occur in the speech or writing of native speakers. These include:

a. Slips of tongues or Freudian slips such as: 'You have hissed all my mystery lectures' instead of 'You have missed all my history lectures'.

b. Slips of the ear as in 'great ape' instead of 'gray tape'

c. False starts, lack of subject-verb agreement in long complicated sentences etcetera

d. Non-linguistic factors such as fatigue, strong emotion, memory limitation or lapses, lack of concentration.
The focus of this paper is on error and not on mistake.

2.3 Significance of Error Analysis

There is the consensus of opinion among researchers that it is a natural phenomenon to commit errors and that committing errors is not limited to only First Language (L1) but that it occurs also in the second language. Olasinde (2002:112) maintains that it is inevitable that learners commit errors. Noam Chomsky (1957), one of the proponents of the mentalist school of thought argues that errors are unavoidable and are a necessary part of the learning process. Perhaps in agreement with Chomsky, Corder (1981) believes that if errors produced by L2 learners are studied systematically, they can provide significant insights into how language are actually learned and acquired, and the strategies or procedures that the learners employ in discovering the language. Also, errors are indispensable to the learner because it is a device that the learner uses in other to learn. Thus, we can see from Corder's stand

that analysis of learners' errors has linguistic, psycholinguistic and pedagogical implications.

2.4 Models of Error Analysis

Different scholars have come out with different models of error analysis. The model propounded by Corder (1973) has three stages which are: data collection, description and explanation (the ultimate object of analysis). Ellis' (1995:51) model is an elaboration of Corder's model. The stages are: the selection of a corpus of language, the identification of errors, classification of errors and finally, explanation of different types of errors.

This study uses the Gas and Selinker Model because it is an improvement upon the earlier models. Gas and Selinker (2008:103) identify 6 stages which are as follows:

1. Collection of data: although this is typically done with written data, oral data can also serve as a base,

2. Identify errors: what is the error (e.g incorrect sequence of tenses, wrong verb form with plural subject),

3. Classify errors: is it an error of agreement? Is it an error in irregular verbs?

4. Quantify errors? How many errors of agreement occur? How many irregular verb form errors occur?

5. Analyze error,

6. Remediate: based on the kind and frequency of an error type, pedagogical intervention is carried out.

While analyzing errors, teachers should not correct all errors committed by their students. Teachers should give room for students to correct themselves. They should also find out if what students wrote or said is just a mistake and if it is a local or global mistake. Ubahakwe (1979), Brumfit (1992), and Erdogan (2005) counsel that error analysis should not focus attention on trivial aspects of language learning but rather, teachers should devote more attention to the value of communication acts. Stern (1995) too maintains that teachers should focus mainly on correcting three types of errors which will ultimately be useful to L2 learners. These are errors that impede or distort the communication flow of the speaker; errors that have highly stigmatizing effects (or irritating effects) on the listener or reader (talking about the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning), and errors that occur frequently in students' speech and writing.

It is also important that teachers prioritize the correction of some errors and not others because of class syllabus (Carla,2013; Hadley, 1993; and Brumfit,

1993). For example, if the lesson is on past tense morphemes, then the teacher can prioritize correction of past tense morphemes in learners' speech. Or if the focus of the lesson is on the correct use of the prepositions, the teacher should not emphasize the correction of errors involving articles, demonstratives or present perfect tense. By prioritizing error correction, the students' attention will not be distracted from the focus of the lesson. Also, the teacher can prioritize the correction of errors that no native speaker (L2) would ever make in social context or geographical region. That is, less attention or correction is placed on errors that native speakers make in casual contexts. Essentially, teachers should focus mainly on errors relevant to a pedagogical focus and generally, correction of errors should be on activities that focus entirely on meaning and communication.

However, some scholars have emphasized that even though communication should be the focus in error analysis, a student must learn the grammar of the language so as to conform to the patterns of the accepted model. Bright and McGregor (1981:238) maintain that "we cannot be contended with communication however clear the pillar sense if it carries depressing messages to the reader about the writer's level of literacy". Every learner must not only be able to use the language for communicative purposes, he must in addition master the structures of the grammar. Indeed, continuous error correction of pre-service teachers in the university becomes imperative if needed manpower that Nigeria craves for in this global era is to be realized at this level.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the fact that English language curricula at all levels of education in Nigeria are robust and well-organised to reflect the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, the standard of English among Nigerian students is on the decline (Amuseghan 2007).

Research findings in the written composition always show that there are common and recurrent errors in all aspects of English. These errors have affected negatively both linguistic and communicative competencies inside and outside classroom communication activities. Every year the public examination bodies such as West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO) record mass failure in English as well as Mathematics, which scientists regard as the foundation language of science.

Educated parents, inspectors of schools from the Ministry of Education, employers and teachers complain bitterly on the poor performance of students, often using the poor English performance as the general evaluative yardstick and judgement. Similar studies in other countries have also shown that students written works are full of mistakes (Khan, 2005; Azimah, 1998; James, 1998, Nik Safiah, 1978).

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

The objective of the study is to investigate errors and their types made by undergraduates in AdekunleAjasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria. The study, therefore, sought to answer the following questions:

a. What are the common errors in the undergraduate written compositions?
b. What are the linguistic reasons for these errors?
c. How are they corrected ?

5. METHODOLOGY

Fifty undergraduates were administered a guided English composition topic: "Environmental Sanitation Day at AdekunleAjasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria" with an instruction to limit themselves to about 250-300 words within 30 minutes. After the assignment, all the 50 composition scripts were marked, using the following three steps of Error Analysis (EA) specified by Corder (1975): collection of samples, identification of errors, description of errors. The errors were also classified and corrected. The analysis of errors based on type of error, number of errors and percentage of errors committed by the participants was carried out.

5.1 Instrument

Data were collected from 50 undergraduates' guided written composition: titled 'Environmental Sanitation Day at AdekunleAjasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria under strict examination conditions.

6. RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the following errors were identified in the students'compositions with the appropriate corrections:

Table 1. Most Common Errors and their Examples.

Definition and Error Classification	Identification of errors	Correct sentences and explanation of rule
1. Error of mechanical skills: wrong use of capital letters	The president of the club and *i* visited Akungba-*akoko*…	The president of the club and *I* visited Akungba-*Akoko*…
2. Verb Tense: mistakes with verb tenses	…president of the Environmental Sanitation Club *organise*a meeting and *having* meeting with Dean of Students Affairs.	…*organised*…and *had*…
3. Misuse of words	…washing and cleaning the *ground* every morning to make it clean and *hygienic*…	…the *floor*… clean and *safe*
4. Subject-verb agreement: wrong combination of subject and verb	…a large number of students *was* absent and some staff *was* unhappy.	…*were* absent and some staff *were* unhappy.
5. Singular/Plural: A mistake with number.	…inadequate number of rubbish <u>bin</u> on the campus.	…*bins*…

(1) Error of mechanical skills (wrong use of capitalisation).

The respondents displayed apparent lack of knowledge that the initial letters of all proper nouns must be written in capital letters. Hence, the proper noun in the following sentence was wrongly written.
''The president of the club and I visited Akungba-akoko.''

The respondents did not follow hyphenation rules – the initial letters of the two proper nouns (Akungba and Akoko) that have been hyphenated to become one word should still be written in capital letters. Hence the correct word should be:
''Akungba-Akoko''. The grammatical rule says that a hypen is used to link two nouns that modify another noun: The California-Nevada border, The Mento-Atherton train station.

(2) Verb Tense

The respondents did not use the correct tense of the verbs in the sampled sentence in the table. This is an indication that they are incompetent in the rules governing the past tense of those verbs. Although the respondents do know that some verbs do have their present and past continuous forms, they did not apply the grammatical rules correctly. Hence, instead of supplying the past tense of the verb "had," they wrote "…having…" which was not applicable in the sentence.

(3) Misuse of Words

The respondents lack appropriate diction for the sentences this shows their weak vocabulary base. For example the words "floor" and "clean and safe" ought to have been used instead of "…ground and…hygienic" in the sampled incorrect corpus.

(4) Wrong combination of subject with verb

The subject in the sentence "…a large number students was absent and some staff was unhappy" is "a large number of students" and it is a plural subject which requires a corresponding plural verb "are". In the same vein, "…some staff is a plural noun the correct sentence should have been "a large number of students were absent and some staff were unhappy". This is in keeping with the rules of grammatical concord.

(5) Singular/plural-a mistake with number

The grammatical concord rules that applied in the preceding section are also applicable here. Therefore the sentence "…inadequate number of rubbish bins". This is in keeping with the correct use of number be it in singular or plural form.

Table 2. Analysis of Errors.

Items	Types of error	No. of errors	Percentage (%)
1	Error of Mechanical Skills: Wrong use of Capital letters	106	20.46
2	Verb Tense	98	18.92
3	Wrong/Mis-use of words	59	11.39
4	Subject-verb agreement	56	10.81
5	Singular and plural form	54	10.42
6	Preposition	51	9.85
7	Article	48	9.27
8	Spelling	46	8.88
	Total	518	100%

The results in table 2 show the analysis of errors based on types, number and percentage of errors committed by the respondents. As can be seen from the analysis, the percentages of the errors committed by respondents are in descending order. Errors of mechanical skills (capitalisation) were 108 (20.46%), verb tense, 98 (18.92%); Misuse of words, 59 (11.39%); subject-verb agreement, 56 (10.81%); singular and plural form (error with number), 54 (10.42%); preposition, 51 (9.85%); and Article, 48 (9.27%).

As can the seen the most errors and those with the higher percentages are the first three types of errors.

7.   CONCLUSION

The analysis of errors committed clearly shows that grammatical errors are basically common. The participants also had a relatively weak vocabulary and their expressions were somehow semantically deviant. We can conclude that these participants had problems in learning and using correct grammatical rules in English. These errors have provided an insight into the language learning problems or common trouble-spots in language learning which can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials so that remedial teaching method could be provided.

8.   RECOMMENDATIONS

In learning a second or foreign language at the early stage, errors are part of the language acquisition process. There are not problems as perceived by some people outside the pedagogical practice. Even the native speakers have to pass through this process of language learning. Errors provide the necessary feedback for

language experts, teachers or linguists. Therefore, language teachers should focus their attention mainly to relevant pedagogical errors which serves as feedback for remedy. It is recommended, based on experiences in the classroom, that an appropriate error analysis model should be used to correct the learner's errors in the classroom.   Also, English textbook writers should adopt an error analysis approach in writing course books for different strata in the school system.

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