

AN ERROR ANALYSIS IN THE DESCRIPTIVE ESL WRITINGS OF DIPLOMA II STUDENTS OF KANO STATE POLYTECHNIC

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to explore the major sources of errors that occurred in the descriptive ESL writings of Diploma II students of English and Applied Linguistics, Kano State Polytechnic. The objectives were to investigate and analyze the types of errors committed by these students and to find out which of these errors occurs more frequently. The research is a qualitative research and was conducted under the theoretical framework of error analysis. Based on the study so far conducted, results showed that grammatical errors presented the highest number constituting 68.2% of the total number of errors found in the descriptive ESL writings of KSP students. Lexical errors constitute 18.2% while mechanical errors constitute 13.6% respectively. It was established that these errors originated from two sources: inter-lingual and Intra-lingual. Results of this study showed that 72.7% of the total errors identified were from the intra-lingual source; this is a result of insufficient knowledge of the rules of the target language. While on the other hand, 27.3% of these errors were from the inter-lingual source; that is, they are caused by negative transfer from the L1. The study will enable students as well as teachers of ESL to know the weakness area of the students in ESL writing. It will serve as a guide in realizing common errors found in ESL students' writing. Findings in error analysis can be used to determine what a learner still needs to be taught. It is hoped that, with error analysis, learning of English will be strengthened.

Key words: *Kano State Polytechnic (KSP) Students, Error analysis, Descriptive ESL writing, Grammar, Lexis, Writing Mechanics.*

INTRODUCTION

Each individual has a particular mother tongue in a society. Example, a Hausa native speaker has Hausa as his/her mother tongue. A second language (L2) on the other hand is the language that is acquired after the first language (L1) or mother tongue. In Nigeria, English is usually the language acquired by individuals after their mother tongue. This is because it is the official language and language of instruction.

Learners of a second language produce utterances in speech which are erroneous or ill formed as judged by rules of the second language. This paper analyzes the errors made in construction of English sentences by students of English and Applied Linguistics, Kano State Polytechnic.

According to Corder (1967:167), the errors made by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners are significant because “they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures is the learner employing in the discovery of the language”. James (1998) agreed to this idea by addressing that “the learners’ errors are a register of their current perspective on the target language.

This paper is aimed at investigating how selected students of English construct English sentences and to find out the level of errors in their sentence construction. It also finds out the reasons for the occurrence of these errors. James (2013) defines Error Analysis as “the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language.”

Syntax is concerned with the ways in which words are combined to make sentences and semantics deals with meaning (Brown and Miller, 1991). Syntax is a field of analysis which is employed to describe the relative positions of words put together to form a grammatical sentence. Carnie (2006) maintains that syntax is a level of study that mediates between words that have been produced into utterances (phrases, sentences) and their meanings. Thus, it concentrates on the grammatical arrangement of words to form expressions. The syntactic word order of a simple sentence is SVO; consisting of two (2) segments in order of subject and predicate. The subject contains a nominal phrase (NP), while the predicative segment comprises a verb phrase (VP) which further projects into a nominal slot and a complement (Yusuf 2011; Galadanci 1976) among others. There are rules that govern the inclusion of constituents in a phrase structure. A constituent is a group of words that functions as a unit; and a unit is identified by the word class for which it functionally appears (Carnie, 2006).

In the course of this research, the researcher used a descriptive method to find out what is actually happening in a particular interaction. Qualitative method was also applied to collect data within the domains of natural setting as they are objective by looking at the perspective of individual respondents.

Forty (40) students out of the students of English and Applied Linguistics, Kano State Polytechnic were selected. These students were basically Hausa native speakers. The respondents were engaged in writing; where they were instructed to write a descriptive essay on the topic “School of General Studies”. The researcher found some errors as well as the causes of such errors.

Contrastive analysis has been a well-known theory in the field of second language learning. The main assumption of the theory was that L2 learners’ errors are due to negative interlingual interference from their mother tongue. Al-Khresheh (2016) points out “the main criticism of contrastive analysis was that interlingual interference from first language is not

the only reason for the occurrence of errors on second language learning”. As a result of this criticism, Error Analysis theory occupied the mainstream in the field of second language acquisition research.

The research therefore, was conducted within the theoretical framework of error analysis because it plays a fundamental role in investigating, analyzing and categorizing errors made by L2 learners. Error analysis was established by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the late of 1970s and became very popular approach for describing L2 errors. Corder is the father of this theory.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The general consensus in the 1950s and 60s was that learners’ errors could be predicted by comparing and contrasting the grammars of their L1 and that of the target language; where there were differences, there was likely to be error (Benson, 2002). Learners of a second language believe that their knowledge of the rules of their L1 would help them to acquire proficiency in the target language. Selinker (1971), Seliger (1988) and Ellis (1997) admit that learners construct their interim rules using their knowledge of L1 in the process of learning their target language. Ellis (1997) refers to interference as transfer. He says it is the influence that the learners L1 exert over the acquisition of L2.

Othman (2015) asserts that in the early period, the native language interference was identified as the only source of errors committed by language learners. Later, two (2) major sources of errors have been recognized:

Interlingual Errors

Richards (1971) defined interlingual errors as the errors caused by the interference of the native language. These errors are the result of the learners’ application of the native language elements in their spoken/written performances of the target language. When encountered with new language, people tend to consciously or unconsciously draw a connection between what they already know and what they do not. Learners carry over the existing knowledge of their native language to the performance of the target language (Ellis, 1997). When the linguistic principles of native language differs from that of target language, the learners find it difficult to comprehend, and they begin to apply the rules and structures of their native language in their learning process (Krashen, 1981).

Intralingual Errors

These errors are referred to as errors that occur because of the ineffective traits of learning such as application of rules and unawareness of the restrictions of rules (Richards, 1971). Richards (1971) also explained that developmental errors are the errors that occur when “the learner attempts to build up hypothesis about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or text-book”.

Identification of errors:

Erroneous sentences in the students’ essays were identified as follows’:

1. Each department varies base (based) on the way they studies (study).
From the sentence above two (2) errors were identified;
 - a. Wrong verb tense. If the subject (noun or pronoun) is in the plural, the verb tense should be in its infinitive.

- b. A ‘-d’ should be added to the verb ‘base’ to form its participle.
Therefore, the correct version of (1) is:
Each department varies based on the way they study.
2. Its (it’s) a school that has the very important department and it has a very good qualified lecturers that know what they are doing.
From the sentence above, four (3) errors were identified;
 - a. The apostrophe in (it’s) was omitted because without the apostrophe it shows possession while with the apostrophe, it means (it is).
 - b. An addition of articles (the) and (a).
 - c. Literal translation of *waxàndà sukà san àbîn dà sukèe yî* as ‘that know what they are doing’. The student should have used an adjective instead.
The correct version of (2) is:
It’s a school that has very important department and it has qualified and intelligent lecturers.
3. At the end we thank God that gave us this school and we beg him to help the school.
Here, two (2) errors were detected;
 - a. There was an omission of a punctuation mark (comma) after the word ‘end’.
 - b. There was also a literal translation of the word *ròoqoo* written as ‘beg’ in the second clause, used instead of the word ‘pray’.
The correct sentence construction of (3) shall be:
At the end, we thank God that gave us this school and we pray that He help the school.
4. School of General Studies it is place of the student and lecturers.
There is an addition of pronoun ‘it’ immediately after the proper noun ‘School of General Studies’. The pronoun should be removed because it is used to represent a noun or to avoid repetition.
The correct sentence is:
School of General Studies is place of the students and lecturers.
5.then student (students) have their own parking space that everyone kept (keeps/is keeping) his own tricycle.
Two (2) errors were identified in the sentence;
 - a. There was an omission of plural morpheme (_s) all through the student’s essay. He/she has been writing ‘student’ (singular) instead of ‘students’ (plural). Therefore, some of the sentences lack concord.
 - b. The student also used a wrong verb tense (past) ‘kept’ instead of ‘keeps/is keeping’ (present continuous).
The correct version of (5) is presented as:
...then students have their own parking space where everyone keeps his own tricycle.
6. School of General Studies they have non-academic staff.
There was an addition of the pronoun ‘they’ in the above sentence. This is erroneous because the proper noun is mentioned in the sentence.
The correct construction of (6) is:
The School of General Studies has non-academic staff.

7. The school gate has a two door (doors) one for vehicle entrance.....
Three (3) errors were identified;
a. The indefinite article 'a' should not be used for plural (two).
b. There is also omission of plural morpheme (_s) in 'door'.
c. A punctuation mark (;) after door is also omitted. The semi-colon should be used to show that the next statement is a result of the preceding one.
The correct construction therefore, is:
The school gate has two doors; one for vehicle entrance.....
Other examples can be seen as follows:
8. There is a main department of.....
An unnecessary use of the indefinite article 'a' is identified because it is used when the noun is not specific. This makes the sentence erroneous because the subject is specific.
The correct construction of (6) is:
There is the main department of.....
9.which the school it has so many blocks in it.
The use of 'it' in the sentence is erroneous as in (4) and (6).
The correct sentence shall be:
...which the school has so many blocks in it.
10.and the department it has former office of the HOD.
The pronoun 'it' should not be used in the sentence as in (4), (6) and (9).
The correct version of (10) is:
...and the department has former office of the HOD.
11. All these department (departments) have now.....
The sentence is erroneous because it lacks concord; a plural morpheme (_s) is omitted to pluralize the word 'department' to allow agreement between the subject and verb.
The correct construction of (11) is:
All these departments have now....
12.and how to educated (educate) the peoples (people) on what they do not know.
Two (2) errors were identified in this sentence;
a. There is an error in the verb tense. The verb should be in its infinitive (educate) because of the coming of 'to'.
b. The word 'people' is plural; it does not carry a plural morpheme (_s).
The correct version of the sentence is:
...and how to educate the people on what they do not know.
13. For that I will invited (invite) my colleagues.....
a. There was an omission of punctuation mark after 'that' (For that,).
b. Wrong verb tense was used in the sentence (past instead of future).
The word 'invited' should be written without an '-ed'.
The correct sentence shall be:
For that, I will invite my colleagues...

Analysis of identified errors

From the thirteen erroneous sentences above, twenty two (22) errors were identified as represented in the table below:

Table 1: Sources of Errors

SOURCES OF ERROR	ERROR TYPE	FREQUENCY
Interlingual	Literal translation of words/phrases	2
	Pronoun (addition)	4
	Total	6
Intralingual	Wrong verb tense	5
	Article	4
	Plurality (addition/omission)	4
	Punctuation	3
	Total	16

From the table above, six (6) out of the twenty two (22) errors committed by the learners are interlingual; caused by the influence/transfer of their L1 on the Target Language (negative transfer). Sixteen (16) on the other hand are intralingual caused by the learners' partial learning of the target language.

Furthermore, these errors are classified based on the three (3) linguistic levels of the English language: grammar, lexis and writing mechanics.

Levels of Errors

1. Grammatical Errors

This is a situation where features of grammar are not used correctly from the view point of standard usage. It is a term used to describe an instance of faulty, unconventional or controversial usage, such as inappropriate verb tense (Nordquist, 2019). Grammatical errors include errors of morphology, handling word structure such as third person singular –s, plural morpheme, -ed, -ing and handling structures larger than the word namely; phrase, clause and sentence (James, 1998:154-6). Other grammatical errors are errors with prepositions, subject-verb agreement, tenses and overgeneralization; when the learner creates a deviant structure based on the presumption on the basis of his experience of other structures in the L2. Others are addition/omission of pronoun, articles, pluralization and so on. Grammatical errors are errors that violate basic principles of English language.

2. Lexical Errors

Lexis is the analytical level of language that deals with vocabulary. Vocabulary refers to a subset of words in a language that are used in a particular context or used/known to a particular person. In linguistics, it is the set of all words and phrases in a language. Lexical errors therefore, refer to inappropriate usage of one's vocabulary. Lexical errors may include wrong word choice, literal translation and wrong positioning of words.

3. Mechanical Errors

To ensure effective written communication, an understanding of mechanics is required. Mechanics refers to the rules of written language such as capitalization, punctuation and spelling. They are conventions governing the technical aspects of writing. Mechanical errors therefore, include the wrong use of punctuation marks, omission of punctuation marks, misspelling, and use of lower case instead of capitalization, among others.

Table 2: Level of Errors

Linguistic Level	No of Errors	Percentage
Grammar	15	68.2%
Lexis	4	18.2%
Writing Mechanics	3	13.6%
Total	22	100%

Table 2 above classifies errors according to the three linguistic levels of English with fifteen (15) grammatical errors constituting 68.2% of the frequency of students' errors. Lexical errors constitute 18.2%, while Writing Mechanics constitute 13.6% respectively.

This was to find out the linguistic level that presents the highest percentage of errors. This was reached at; by dividing the number of errors at a particular linguistic level by the total number of errors found, the result multiplied by 100. Hence,

- For grammatical Errors $15/22 \times 100 = 68.2\%$
- Lexical Errors $4/22 \times 100 = 18.2\%$
- Writing Mechanics $3/22 \times 100 = 13.6\%$

Conclusion

Error Analysis has been widely used as a means to investigate the types and causes of students' errors in writing. It can also be used in checking the developmental stage of learners of English as a second Language. This paper therefore, confirms that mother tongue interference/transfer is not the only source of students' errors. Most of the errors committed were as a result of students' partial knowledge of the target language. This will allow teachers of English to focus on areas of students' linguistic errors and prepare strategies accordingly.

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