

ERROR IDENTIFICATION OF WRITTEN DISCOURSES OF ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS: AN UNDERPINNING FOR A PROGRAM STUDY

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Abstract

Error analysis has long been employed to determine how far the learners have progressed toward their final goal. In this study commonly committed grammatical errors of English major students were investigated. Further, gender, language spoken at home/first language, reading material preferences, and attitudes toward writing were correlated to students' errors, classified into morphological, syntactic and lexical using Hendrickson's Model. Frequency count, percentage, rank and weighted mean, Friedman test and ANOVA were used to treat the data. Most common errors occurred in verb forms, misused/omitted preposition and misused/ omitted verb. The variables did not reflect any bearing on the errors. Implications for a program of study for these kinds of learners were also discussed.

Key Words: error identification, written discourses, English majors

Introduction

The conduct of error analysis for different sets of learners of English as a second language has preoccupied researchers. Some studies collected and analyzed students' errors as markers that would point to the areas of English where additional teaching and instruction is needed to

be able to participate in their courses (Antić, 2010; Khansir, 2013; Wang, 2013).

However, as markers for poor performance, errors are already seen as inevitable and provide evidence that acquisition is, in fact, taking place (Ellis, 1990). In classroom second language learning, errors are avoided and corrected (Corder, 1967).

Among the four macroskills in the English language, writing skill is the most likely to be corrected by teachers as the majority of outputs are written. Syntactic errors are also seen in students writing (Sanavi, 2014), but grammatical and lexical errors equally pervade in students' writing (Wang, 2013).

Different factors are attributed to errors existing in learning. In writing, lack of vocabulary, poor spelling, first language (L1) or the mother tongue interference and a poor understanding of grammatical structure (Farooq, et al 2012). On the other hand, personality traits have not been found to be significant in learners' writing (Hajimohammadi and Mukundan, 2011).

As in many error analysis studies, the interference of the mother tongue poses as a reason for committing errors. The negative transfer of the L1 greatly affects the acquisition of the target language (Kaweera, 2013; Wang, 2013). This study, however, considers the addition of possible factors.

Precisely, the research addresses that gap as to error studies focusing on different sets of learners or students who specialize in English. Also, other factors such as reading material preferences and attitude towards writing are accounted for. After identifying the errors, the baseline data present implications for a possible program of study for these kinds of learners.

The study sought to determine the grammatical errors in the essays of third year English majors. Specifically, it searched for answers to the following questions: What are the commonly committed grammatical errors in the essays of third year English major students? What are the effects of the following variables on the grammatical errors committed?

- a. Gender
- b. Language Spoken at Home
- c. Reading material preferences
- d. Attitude towards writing

Methodology

The study was conducted at a state university in the northern Philippines. Respondents included 89 third year English Major students, expected to become student teachers and eventually, professional teachers. They took basic subjects in English and other major subjects giving them additional knowledge and skills in writing.

The students wrote two essays each. A questionnaire was administered to gather the variables (gender, languages spoken at home, reading material preferences and attitude towards writing of the study. The grammatical errors were identified, classified and tallied according to Hendrickson's 1979 Model of Local Errors.

To determine the commonly committed linguistic errors, frequency count, percentage, rank and weighted mean were used. To test the significant differences between the errors committed, Friedman test was used, while to describe the variables, frequency count, percentage, rank and weighted mean utilized. The test on proportion was used on the effects of gender on the errors, while ANOVA on the effects of the other variables.

Results and Discussions

A. Grammatical Errors

1. Morphological Errors

These errors refer to deviation in subject-verb concord, verb forms and plural marker.

Out of the 362 total morphological errors, verb forms had the highest number with 155 errors (42.82%) and a mean of 2. Errors in subject-verb concord ranked second with 128 errors (35.36%) and a mean of 1. The least committed morphological error was plural marker with 79 errors (21.82%) and a mean of 1. Examples of the errors are as follows:

1.1. Verb Forms

Example. Education cannot be steal by others.

The verb *steal* should be *stolen* because the sentence is in the passive voice so the verb should be a past participle. The sentence should be: **Education cannot be stolen by others.**

1.2. Subject-Verb Concord

Example. The flowers blooms like her beauty.

The verb blooms should be bloom because the subject is plural. The correct sentence should be: **The flowers bloom like her beauty.**

1.3. Plural Markers

Example. Every time she tells stories to us, there are always negative reactions.

The plural form of the noun reaction (reactions) should have been used. The sentence should be: **Every time she tells stories to us, there are always negative reactions.**

2. Syntactic Errors

These errors refer to misused or omitted articles, prepositions, coordinators, subordinators and pronouns. Out of the 267 errors, prepositions had the largest number with 101 errors (37.83%) and a mean of 1. Second were errors in pronouns with 69 errors (25.84 %) and also a mean of 1. Next were errors in articles with a total of 56 errors (20.97%) and a mean of 1. The errors in subordinators with 23 errors (8.61%) and coordinators with 18 errors (6.74%) ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. Examples of these errors are as follows:

2.1. Misused/ Omitted Preposition

Example. After months of suffering, my mother got well after taking some prescribed medicines of her doctor.

The sentence should be: **After months of suffering, my mother got well after taking some prescribed medicines from her doctor.**

2.2. Misused / Omitted Pronouns

Example. Every person have their own ambitions in life.

The pronoun their is misused. If a sentence has the word every, then the verb and pronoun should be in the singular form. The sentence should be: **Every person has his or her own ambitions in life.**

2.3. Misused/ Omitted Article

Example. Her round dark eyes... resemble with that of Indian.

There is an omission of the article an in the sentence and misuse of that for the antecedent eyes. The sentence should be: **Her round dark eyes... resemble those of an Indian.**

2.4. Misused/ Omitted Subordinator

Example. I made up a story that I saw her once that looking in her notes while answering our quiz.

“That” is misused in the sentence. The sentence should be: **I made up a story that I saw her once looking in her notes while answering our quiz.**

2.5. Misused/ Omitted Coordinator

Example. She was abandoned by her husband, she’s strong enough to carry the responsibility of a mother at the same time a father.

The sentence should be: **She was abandoned by her husband but she’s strong enough to carry the responsibility of a mother at the same time a father.**

3. Lexical Errors

These refer to misused/omitted noun, verb, adjective, adverb, diction and word order. Out of the 212 errors, those related to verbs ranked first with 86 errors (40.57%) and a mean of 1. This was followed by errors in diction with 33 errors (15.57%). The errors in nouns ranked third with 26 errors (12.26%), those in adjectives came next with 37 errors (17.45%). Noted errors (10.38%) in word order, and eight errors (3.77%) in adverbs ranked fifth and sixth, respectively.

3.1. Misused/ Omitted Verb

Example. This style thought me how to think if what I’m doing is right or wrong.

The sentence should be: **This style taught me how to think if what I’m doing is right or wrong.**

3.2. Misused/ Omitted Adjective

Example. When I was in third year high school, my most enemy was favored.

The sentence should be: **When I was in third year high school, my worst enemy was favored.**

3.3. Errors in Diction

Example. They always advise us that we should do our best in our studies because it's the only heir they can give us.

The sentence should be: **They always advise us that we should do our best in our studies because it's the only inheritance or legacy they can give us.**

3.4. Errors in Word Order

Example. They are telling her that she should not support me because we're not the same of the blood.

The sentence should be: **They are telling her that she should not support me because we're not of the same blood.**

3.5. Misused/ Omitted Adverb

Example. I have a part time job where I'm getting my pocket money in school so I'm happy because I lessen the burden of my parents. Now, I often ask financial support for my needs in school.

The word often should be changed to hardly or sometimes because it contradicts the idea in the first sentence. The sentence should be: **I have a part time job where I'm getting my pocket money in school so I'm happy because I lessen the burden of my parents. Now, I hardly/sometimes ask financial support for my needs in school.**

B. Effects of Variables

1. Gender

Some 12 males (13.5%) and 77 females (86.5%) were involved in the study. For morphological errors, males had 50 errors while females had 312 errors. In lexical errors, males had 46 errors, while females had 196 errors. For syntactical errors, males had 58 errors, while females had 209 errors. In summary, males had 154 grammatical errors, while females had 687 grammatical errors.

The probability values of the morphological errors (0.0908) and lexical errors (0.065) are higher than 0.05, rendering the variables insignificant to imply that male- and female-related errors are not significantly different.

However, syntactical errors turned out significant, with a probability value of 0.009 to imply that there were significant differences on the syntactical errors committed by females and males. Scientifically, McCarthy, as cited by Orillos (1997), theorized that girls are probably more adept with language functions as compared to boys. This has something to do with the language acquisition as related to physiological development. Biologically speaking, females are known to mature earlier, resulting to better language skills.

2. Language Spoken at Home. First Language of the Subjects

This refers to whether a respondent speaks in Filipino, Kankanaey, Ilokano, Ibaloi, Pangasinense, Kapampangan or other local dialect as first language. Some 30 students (33.8%) speak in Ilokano, 24 students (27.0%) Kankanaey, 18 students (20.2%) Filipino, and 11 students (12/4%) Ibaloi. Only two students speak Pangasinense. The Ilokanos committed the most number of errors with a total of 279

grammatical errors, followed by those who speak Filipino with 146 grammatical errors. The Ibalois came next with 42 morphological errors, while the Pangasinenses committed less than 100 grammatical errors. All probability values, however, were higher than 0.05. Thus, the effects of the first language were not significant.

3. Reading Material Preferences

With a mean of 1.99, English books, textbooks and journals were the most preferred reading materials of the students. With a mean of 2.17, English newspapers, magazines and comics came next. Filipino textbooks and journals (with a mean of 3.48) and other reading materials written in other languages (with a mean of 3.93) ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. For morphological errors, English books, textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines and comics had significant differences with computed probability values lower than 0.05. For lexical errors, all reading materials did not show significant difference. For syntactic errors, only Filipino books, textbooks and journals showed significant difference with a probability value lower than 0.05.

4. Attitude towards Writing

Most of the respondents agree on the following:

- a. They do not know a lot of English words that will help them in writing.
- b. Writing courses will help them in the future, especially in writing essays and letters, reports, memos, and articles.
- c. They lack books or reference materials that can help them in writing.

In addition, most of them disagree on the following:

- a. They just write because it is a requirement.
- b. They cannot organize their ideas and thoughts, especially for writing.
- c. They have a poor understanding of writing subjects impairing their writing skills.
- d. They find it difficult to compose essays and letters
- e. They cannot write grammatically correct essays, reports, letters for lack of skills and knowledge of grammar.
- f. They can express themselves better orally than in writing.
- g. They hate writing because of the countless guidelines, mechanics, procedures, rules and technicalities.

Most students did not have responses in Rank 1 (strongly agree). The students who had an average rating of 2 (agree) had the most errors of 474, while those with an average rating of 3 (disagree) had 319 errors. The students who had a rating of 4 (strongly disagree) had the least errors of 48. All probability values were higher than 0.05 so the effects of attitudes toward writing was considered not significant.

Implications

One of the immediate implications of the present study will be productive for second language (L2) teachers (who learned English later than their first language) on writing. The results present errors of different nature, gravity and even a certain degree of tolerance on the writing of discourse on the target language. Intervening factors such as attitude toward writing and preference for reading materials should be considered as inputs for teaching. With these baseline data, identifying

and selecting appropriate and relevant materials for writing classes become critical.

Furthermore, a program of study to focus on the structure of the target language, English, should be included to sustain pre-service teachers language skills improvement.

Conclusions

Given the above results, the following can be deduced from the study:

1. The subjects committed different grammatical errors.
2. Gender, languages/dialects spoken at home, reading material preferences and attitudes toward writing were not significant factors relative to grammatical errors.

Recommendations

Based on the results, conclusions and implications of the study, the following suggestions or recommendations are forwarded:

1. Since morphological errors ranked first among the considered grammatical errors, focus should be given in this area when teaching grammar in English classes. Besides, more activities in the area of lexicon and syntax should be given stronger focus.
2. Teachers should provide activities that will allow students to use and practice the target language more extensively.
3. Students should be given opportunities to express their ideas through writing tasks such as essays, book reports, movie reviews, and reaction papers.
4. Publications written in English could be used as additional classroom or instructional materials to further enhance the exposure of students to the target language.

5. Since this study is limited to grammatical errors, it is recommended that studies on the sources of the errors and the level of gravity of errors be also considered.

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