

AN ANALYSIS OF COMMON ERRORS IN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' WRITTEN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Ability to write error-free English is a prerequisite for academic success and a credit pass in English which is a condition for admission into any higher educational institution. Unfortunately, majority of the secondary school students do not possess this ability. This makes their written English error-riddled. This paper discussed Errors, Contrastive Analysis, Errors Analysis, causes of errors and types. It later made a number of recommendations and a conclusion.

The English Language is the second language to most Nigerians who learnt it through contact with the whites or as a result of acquisition of Western Formal Education. It is now being used in the areas of politics, commerce and administration (Adepoju 2004). Before exposure to the English language, most Nigerians had acquired their indigenous languages (LI) which they used for communicative purposes. Nigerians' encounter with English, therefore, makes them to be bilingual – that is they are able to use two languages.

Farinde and Ojo (2000) view bilingualism as

...a situation whereby two languages co exist within a speech community. The concept becomes relevant where an individual in society makes use of two languages for the purpose of communication.

As already discussed, most secondary school students already had their first language before being exposed to English (L2) which gives room for overlapping of the two languages which causes linguistics interference. Littlewood (1984) opined that interference occurs when

...the learner uses his previous mother-tongue experience as means of organising the second language data.

Linguistic interference is the chief cause of errors in second language learning (Adepoju, 2004). The English language that is highly exalted in our society should not be left to suffer from careless errors because of the negative implications it will have on the socio-economic life of the country.

What Are Errors?

Errors are common in daily activities of man, English language inclusive. Benneth (1973) is of the opinion that the best way to avoid errors is do nothing. Errors are peculiar in second language situation. Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964) opine that:

Any error in English can be described with complete accuracy by reference solely to the description of English, without taking any account of the student's native language or even knowing it at all.

In other words, errors are deviations from the English language. This is any description/production that does not conform to the laid down rules in English is termed as an error. They are different from mistakes in the sense that they occurs at a higher frequency.

Contrastive Analysis (CA)

James (1980) avers that Contrastive Linguistics began with *Lado's Linguistic Across Cultures*. This is a traditional theory of analyzing errors. The theory compares two languages – the mother-tongue and the second language with a view to finding out areas of similarities and dissimilarities so as to predict areas of difficulties that the learners will come across (Igbonuchi, 2000). It is the belief of Contrastive Analysis (CA) that by comparing two languages areas of dissimilarities could be used to predict areas that learners will commit errors. Halliday et al (1964) aver two reasons for predicting errors. In the first place, errors are predicted in order to prepare teaching materials. Also, errors are predicted in order to know how to prepare remedial classes. The inadequacies of Contrastive Analysis led to the emergence of Error Analysis.

Error Analysis

Error Analysis, unlike Contrastive Analysis, does not predict errors but analyses errors actually committed by learners while trying to produce the second language. It helps to classify errors and identify causes of errors with a view to designing pedagogical strategies (Headbloom, 1979 and Jibowo, 1997)

Types of Errors

Omojuwa (1979) categorized errors into three:

- i. Errors the learner can identify and correct
- ii. Errors which the learner cannot identify but can correct if his/her attention is called to it.
- iii. Errors which the learner can neither identify nor correct.

In his own contribution, Headbloom (1979) indentifies three errors based on their causes.

- i. **Interlingual Errors:** These errors are caused by the interference of the mother-tongue.
- ii. **Intralingual Errors:** These errors are caused by the nature of the second language.
- iii. **Developmental Errors:** These errors are caused by false comparison.

Causes of Errors

Secondary school students commit errors because of the following reasons:

1. **Linguistic Interference:** This occurs when a user of English uses the experience acquired in the mother-tongue to organise the second language. Most errors committed in a second language situation are caused by linguistic interference. This is more pronounced when the interference is retro-active interference that is negative transfer.

2. **Overgeneralization:** Overgeneralization occurs when a rule that belongs to a particular set is applied unknowingly to another set. For example, “we saw two mans”.
3. **Simplification:** This occurs when learners produce simple version of the second language. They reduce sentences to their simple forms.
Littlewood (1980) gave these examples among other:
 - i. Wash hand
 - ii. He champion
4. **Teaching Method:** There are some errors cause by faulty teaching material and methods (Littlewood, 1980). For example, if the difference between two items are not well explained, problems might arise. For example, if the difference between the minimal pair are not well taught, the learners might encounter some difficulties.
 - i. sheep – ship
 - ii. chin – shin
 - iii. cease – seize(Williams, 1990)

Levels at Which Error are Committed

Mechanical Level

Oluikpe, Anasiudu, Otagburuagu, Onuigbo and Ogbonna (1991) highlight mechanical error as follows:

- i. Spelling errors
- ii. Punctuation errors
- iii. Capitalization errors
- iv. Prepositional errors

Syntactic Level

Syntactic errors are committed by students in the following areas:

- i. **Shift in Voice:** the students might shift from active voice to passive voice which is grammatically wrong. For example, the student wrote the examinations and the results were pasted by the principal instead of the student wrote the examination and the principal pasted the results.
- ii. **Wrong Use of Tense:** this occurs when the appropriate tense is not used. For example, *I come here yesterday to mean I came here yesterday.* Oluikpe et al (1991).
- iii. **Concord Errors:** Here the students violate the rules of concord that is subject-verb agreement. For example, *He come here every day to mean he comes here every day.*
- iv. **Errors in Reported Speech:** The present tense in the reported speech must be changed into past tense. For example;
 - a. Shall into should
 - b. Will into would

Lexical Level

Some students confuse similar word-writing. For example, *hole for whole, their for there* and so forth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify common errors in secondary school students' written English with a view to identifying their causes and providing remedial strategies.

Research Instrument

The researcher gave the students a composition title "My Best Food" to write which he marked and identified their errors.

Study Sample

Twenty five secondary school students were randomly selected from each of eight schools making a total of two hundred students.

Scope of the Study

The researcher limited the research to Senior Secondary School (2) in Ondo East and West Local Government Areas of Ondo State.

Research Questions

- i. Do secondary school students commit lexical errors?
- ii. Do secondary school students commit mechanical errors?
- iii. Do secondary school students commit syntactic errors?

Data Collection

The researcher gave a familiar exposition topic titled "My Best Food" to the students to write after which he marked and identified their errors and categorized them.

Data Analysis

The researcher used simple percentage and descriptive analysis to analyze the data.

Table 1

A Table Showing Lexical Errors Committed

School	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	20	9.8
2	21	10.2
3	25	12.3
4	25	12.3
5	27	13.2
6	22	10.8
7	33	16.2
8	31	15.2
Total	204	100%

An Analysis of Common Errors in Secondary School Students' Written English

It can be seen from table 1 that a total number of two hundred and four (204) lexical errors were committed.

Table 2
A Table Showing Mechanical Errors Committed

School	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	28	11.9
2	26	11.1
3	30	12.8
4	30	12.8
5	31	13.2
6	29	12.3
7	33	14
8	28	11.9
Total	235	100%

It can be seen from table II that a total number of two hundred and thirty five mechanical errors were committed.

Table 3
A Table Showing Syntactic Errors Committed

School	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	69	14.6
2	40	8.5
3	44	9.3
4	53	11.3
5	72	15.3
6	68	14.4
7	70	14.9
8	55	11.7
Total	471	100%

It can be seen from table III that a total number of four hundred and seventy one syntactic errors were committed.

Table 4
A Table Showing Comparison of Lexical, Mechanical and Syntactic Errors

Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lexical	204	22.4
Mechanical	235	25.8
Syntactic	471	51.8
Total	910	100%

Discussion

It can be seen from table IV that a total number of nine hundred and ten (910) written errors were committed by the sampled students. The highest are syntactic errors which account for about four hundred and seventy one (471), followed by mechanical errors which account for about two hundred and thirty five (235) and lexical errors account for about two hundred and four (204).

This shows that syntactic errors are the highest. This represents about 51.8%, that is more than half the errors committed. This finding corroborates Adepoju (2004) which discovered about one thousand, eight hundred and sixty three syntactic errors among secondary school students. The inference to be drawn from this is that secondary school students are more prone to syntactic errors than other errors.

Conclusion

It has been discovered that the written of our secondary school students are error-riddled. Therefore, efforts should be made by all stakeholders to minimize them.

Recommendations

- i. Secondary school students should be exposed to written English as early as possible.
- ii. English language teachers should be well groomed in the fields of Contrastive and Error Analyses.
- iii. Errors committed by students should be corrected as soon as they make them.
- iv. Standardized teacher-made test should be used to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of students.
- v. English language textbooks should be made available by governments and non-governmental organizations.
- vi. Written competitions should be organized among Secondary School Students.

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