



Analysis of Errors in Written English of Tertiary Institution Students: A Case Study of Students of College of Education, Billiri, Gombe State

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ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis of errors in written English of tertiary institution students: a case study of students of college of education, Billiri, Gombe state. Error analysis is an important branch of applied linguistics which deals with errors committed by second or foreign language learners. The study's objectives were to identified the errors committed by students, the common types and their analysis. The Quantitative and Qualitative research designs was utilized. A sample of 140 students participated in the study comprising NCE I, II and III students of the College of Education, Billiri, Gombe State in the 2023/2024 academic session. Two instruments namely: Students English Writing Test (SERT) and English Error Analysis Questionnaire (EEAQ) were used to collect data for the study. Data collected was analyzed using frequency and percentage quantitatively. In addition, the error analysis was used on gualitative data. The findings of the study highlight that the most of the students commit grammatical errors in sub-verb agreement due to intra-lingual as well as inter-lingual factors. Moreover, subject-verb agreement errors occurred most frequently followed by spelling, capitalization, wrong form of verb and wrong word order.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that English language today is one of the indispensable subjects that are taught in Nigerian schools. It has attained a high stage of importance in the country because of the vital function it plays. English language plays a key role in the political, economic, social, educational and religious life of Nigerians as they interact and remain as a nation (Sakuwa, 2017). The importance of English language to Nigerian students especially those who are at higher level cannot be overemphasized. English is a significant subject in the school's curriculum and in fact, it is a requirement for admission into tertiary institutions.

Sakuwa (2017) argues that for a student to be able to communicate properly in English, he/she must have a linguistic competence of the

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language, not only in oral or verbal form but also in the written aspect of the language. The student is expected to be able to speak or articulate the English Speech sounds well, in such a way that he/she can be understood well by his/her audience, whether they are English native or nonnative speakers. In the written aspect of the language, the student is expected to put down his/her ideas or thoughts in a meaningful and correct grammatical way.

In Nigeria today, most students of tertiary institutions find it problematic to write the correct spelling of most of the words perhaps because of their educational background and exposure to the language. Therefore, the students are fond of making use of articles, prepositions, tenses, punctuation and the likes wrongly (Qasim, 2019). In fact, most of the words, spellings,

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sentence constructions, etc, produced by students are unintelligible and ungrammatical. Such incompetence or inability of the students of course leads to poor performance in examinations since they are required to write in English language.

Students are expected to master the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Olaofe, 2013). Listening and reading are referred as receptive skills (relating to inputs which are comprehended by students when learning English). Meanwhile, speaking and writing are referred as productive skills (relating to outputs or products which are produced by students after getting inputs from listening and reading activities). However, all of the skills are to be improved upon in the process of teaching and learning English. Among the four language skills, writing is the most difficult for students to learn. Writing needs broad knowledge and deep-thinking process to produce words, sentences, and paragraphs using good English grammar.

Alfiyani (2013) states that writing is difficult to learn because the writer should involve a process that includes planning, organizing, and revising to present meaning in words or sentences. This implies that writing requires capability at organizing and combining information into cohesive and coherent paragraphs and texts in order to be understandable. Writing is not simple and easy; a lot of practice is required to produce a readable and meaningful text.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Every individual has a first language. This mother tongue tends to interfere with the second language usage due to the structure of the first language. Onyinyechi (2017) affirms it by asserting that language transfer may affect the spoken or written English of students who are learning English as second (ESL) resulting into error. This problem has greatly affected the written English of students in Nigeria, resulting to errors in written English. The errors are seen in sentences, paragraphs and body of composition made by students. Errors in written English among student teacher in training has a lot of implications if not checked and corrected. This is because the students are expected to become teachers who will in turn teach other learners. Consequently, a vicious circle is created resulting in a generation of people who cannot write well in English. Since English is an important language in Nigeria, there is a need to analyze these committed by student teachers with a view correcting the malady. This study seeks to analyze the errors in written English of students of College of Education, Billiri, Gombe State.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1. To identify the errors students, commit in their written English.
- 2. To ascertain the common errors and their analysis.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

- 1. What are the errors committed by students in written English?
- 2. What are the common errors committed and their analysis?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is dedicated for review of related literature to the present study which is made up of those work on concepts as well as empirical reviews backed with the theoretical reviews in the study.

Error analysis

Using some of the principles, concepts and procedures offered by linguistics, error analysis according to Lee (2016), is a method of classifying, defining, and systematically interrupting the inappropriate forms generated by someone studying a foreign language. James (2018) describes error analysis as a process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language. Error analysis is also described as a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learners' language, identifying and classifying errors according to their

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nature. Further, it also seeks the causes and evaluation of the errors among students.

Benson (2017) identified four key steps in error analysis, these are: identification, description, explanation, and evaluation. A distinction is also made between mistakes and errors. 'Errors' reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge which occur because the learner does not know what is correct. On the other hand, 'mistakes' reflect occasional lapses in performance, which occur when the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows.

Types of errors

Errors are natural for second or foreign learners of English language. Table 1 shows some types of errors and their occurrence.

S/No	Type of Error	Occurrence
1	Developmental	when faulty hypotheses are built in L2 like the errors very much similar to those made by children while acquiring L1.
2	Interlingual	interference of errors arising out of L1 dominance
3	Intralingual	errors produced as a result of applying language rules incorrectly or incompletely, syntactic overgeneralization, grammatical simplification and ignorance of grammar rules owing to the impartial or faulty learning of L2.
4	Simplification	errors that are caused by simplifying or leaving out some elements such as using the present for the past
5	Overgeneralization	errors that are caused by trying to use a rule in a context where it does not belong
6	Avoidance	Ignoring those features of L2 which they conceive difficult

Source: Richard's (1971)

Error analysis has many implications for pedagogy, teachers, and researchers. First, error analysis demonstrates students' development and progress. Second, they demonstrate how a language is learned and what techniques learners employ and finally, it enables learners learn from their mistakes and improve their language (Karra, 2006).

Studies on error analysis include: Quibol-Catabay (2016) who reported that the most common errors committed by students are the wrong use of punctuation; wrong use of verb tense for grammatical category and the use of sentence fragments in the structural category. Another study by Kumala, Aimah and Ifadah (2018) found out that errors committed by students in their writing are 'omission errors', 'mis-formation errors', and 'misordering errors' which are caused by carelessness, first language interference, translation, teacher's explanation and students' incomprehension about grammar. Yet, a study by Shakir (2020) observed that four types of errors in students' writing namely: spelling errors, grammatical errors, which include articles, agreement of verbs with subjects, and singular/plural. The errors were attributed to L1 interference, intralingual interference, individual variation in monitor use and performance.

Other studies such as Nurmalia and Nuraeni (2021), errors committed by students are in their spellings, fragment, use of punctuation, adjective, subject-verb agreement, preposition, capitalization, tenses, verbs and literal translation. Moreover, Hasnain and Farheen (2022) errors committed by students are partly due to the effect of first language (L1) on second language (L2) and partly due to word by word translation either from the mother tongue (Pashto) or the national language (Urdu) to English. This study relates to these studies by examining the errors students commit in writing with respect to the English language. The reasons why students commit errors in writing varies as reported by literature.

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METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed research design (Quantitative and Qualitative design). This was because it employed the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018. The population of the study comprised all NCE I, II and III regular and part time students of the College of Education Billiri, Gombe State. Using the Research Advisor Table for sampling determination, a sample of 140 students were chosen to participate in the study. Consequently, the sample for the study comprised of NCE I (45), II (50) and III (45) students.

Two instruments namely: Students English Writing Test (SERT) and English Error Analysis Questionnaire (EEAQ) were used to collect data for the study. SERT is a writing composition test made up of three questions from which the students are expected to answer two questions for 100 marks. EEAQ is a five point Likert type questionnaire to elicit information from the students on types of errors in their writing and how it affects their writing. The questionnaire would also reveal if the students are aware of these errors and why they commit them. Data collected was analyzed quantitatively using frequency counts and percentage while qualitatively data was analyzed using error analysis procedure of identifying, classifying and correcting errors made in written essays of students.

RESULTS

The results are presented in line with the objectives of the study in Tables followed by a report and discussion.

Types of Errors committed by the Students in their Writing

The type of errors committed by the students in their writing are identified in Table 3.

S/No	Types of Errors	Frequency	%	
1	Sub-verb agreement	40	20.0	
2	Spelling	35	17.0	
3	Capitalization	30	15.0	
4	Wrong form of verb	22	11.0	
5	Wrong word order	18	9.0	
6	Wrong articles	17	8.0	
7	Wrong prepositions	12	6.0	
8	Verb tense	12	6.0	
9	Wrong adverb	10	5.0	
10	Singular and plural forms	5	2.0	
	Total		100.0	

Table 3: Writing errors committed by students

From Table 3, ten (10) type of grammatical errors were identified to have been committed by the students in their writing. The frequency and percentage of errors comprised of subject verb agreement (40, 20.0%), spelling (35, 17.0%), capitalization (30, 15.0%), wrong form of verb (22, 11.0%), wrong word order (18, 9.0%), wrong articles (17, 8.0%), wrong prepositions (12, 6.0%), verb tense (12, 6.0%), wrong adverb (10, 5.0%), singular and plural forms (5, 2.0%).

The results in Table 3 reveals that most frequent errors committed by the College of

Education, Billiri students were sub-verb agreements and the least was singular and plural forms caused by both intra-lingual and interlingual interference. This finding corroborates with Quibol-Catabay (2016), Sawalmeh (2013), AlKhasawnch (2014) and Onyinyechi (2017) who claimed that students committed writing errors such as use of article, use of preposition, subjectverb agreement, word order, spelling and fragment and they were caused by intra-lingual and inter-lingual reasons. Similarly, Sawalmeh (2013) identified 10 categories of errors in

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students' writings: verb tense, word order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spellings, capitalization, articles sentence fragments and prepositions. The most committed errors were subject- verb agreement errors at 16.5% and the least committed errors were singular and plural errors at 2.49 %. Johnson (2018) has also drawn similar results. He further states that errors in writing such as tense, preposition, and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent type of errors and the learners usually face difficulties in learning grammatical aspects of target language such as subject verb-agreement, the use of preposition, articles, and use of correct forms.

In contrary, Onyinyechi (2017) identified punctuation, spellings, tense, word choice, syntax

Table 4: The Common Errors and their Analysis

(sentence structure), number, prepositions, subject/ verb agreement, articles, wrong splitting of words and wrong amalgamation of words. The most committed errors are punctuation errors which was 33.4%. The least committed errors had a frequency of 7 (1.2%).

The Common Errors and their Analysis

After collecting the tests of the students, the errors were identified, described and explained in a systematic way. First of all, the researcher identified the errors. Then, they were classified on the basis of Corder's (1974) surface strategy model: omission, addition, selection and ordering, and explained them following Brown (1980), Darus & Subramaniam (2009), Ellis (1995), Jabeen et al. (2015)

S/N	Identifying the errors	Describing the errors	Explaining the errors
1	He walk every morning	There is an error in sub-verb agreement (omission). With a singular subject, a singular verb is used in English.	This is an intra-lingual error. Students commit such errors due to lack of knowledge in target
		Correct form: He walks every morning	language elements.
2	I am looking for a good accommodation	There is a spelling error (omission) in this sentence.	This is an intra-lingual error, i.e. overgeneralization. Such an
		Correct form: <i>I am looking for a good accommodation.</i>	error is caused due to lack of second/foreign language rules.
3	<i>musa</i> travels to his village weekly	It is an error in capitalization. Correct form: <i>Musa travels to his village weekly</i> .	This is an intra-lingual error. Students commit such error due to lack of rules in
4	I had been working on my paper since 6am	It is a verb-form error.	capitalization. This is an inter-lingual error. Such
		Correct form: 1. I have been working on my paper since 6am	errors are caused due to the negative transfer of learner's L1.
5	I am happy to live in a democracy country	It is an error in wrong use of adverb.	This is an intra-lingual error. Such
		Correct form: I am happy to live in a democratic country	error is used due to lack of knowledge in target language

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S/N	Identifying the errors	Describing the errors	Explaining the errors
6	The teacher bought a blue new car last week	It is an error in word order (i.e. ordering).	system. This is an inter-lingual error. Such error is caused due to the
		Correct form: The teacher bought a new blue car last week	transfer of mother tongue over target language.
7	Janet promised to be <i>on</i> my office this morning.	This an error in the use of preposition (i.e. selection)	This is an intra-lingual error. Such an error is caused due to the
•	4 - 1 100 1	Correct form: Janet promised to be in my office this morning.	lack of target language rules.
8.	 The little boy gave his sister <i>a</i> orange She is friendly person 	 It is an error in the use of wrong article It is an omission of article 	This is an inter-lingual error. Such errors are caused due to the
			negative transfer of learner's L1.
9	Have you ever think?	It is an error in tense form (i.e. selection)	This is an intra-lingual error. Such
		Correct form: Have you ever <i>thought</i> ?	errors are caused due to the lack of target language rules.
10	The house has three bedroom	It is an error in pluralization (omission).	This is an inter-lingual error. Such
		Correct form: The house has three bedrooms	errors are caused due to the negative transfer of learner's L1.

Table 4 indicates 10 erroneous sentences with their nature, corrected versions and reasons for committing such errors among students. Errors observed are: subject verb, spelling, capitalization, verb-form, wrong use of adverb, word order, use of preposition, wrong use of article, tenses and pluralization. These errors are common to students in their writings especially where English is L2.

They had the errors in omission, addition, ordering and selection. However, the most of the errors were committed in the forms of omission and selection. When the second or foreign language learners often omit words and produce ill form, it is known as the errors in *omission* (e.g. He *walk* every morning). When the learners add unnecessary words and commit an error, it is known as errors in *addition* (e.g. I had been working on my paper since 6am.). If the learners

select wrong alternatives, it is known as *selection* errors (e.g. The little boy gave his sister a orange) *Ordering* errors are committed when the learners cannot order the words correctly to form a sentence (e.g. The teacher bought a blue new car). However, these errors need minor corrections and explanations.

The first and most important cause of error is *inter-lingual* or *transfer*. It is very complex notion which is best understood in term of cognitive rather than behaviorist models of learning (Sani,2018). Here, interlingual refers to the situation in which one language is learned with the presence of other language. It is defined as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (Marvin,2019). If two languages are similar, it has a positive effect on language learning. If two

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languages are different, it hampers the second or foreign language teaching (Richards, 2016). However, there are few errors committed through this process.

On the other hand, Intra-lingual error refers to the situation in which one form of the language is over generalized over the other form. So, it is also known as overgeneralization where learners use the previously available structure in the new situation (Richards, 2016), Almost all the errors in the present study were due to intralingual errors. This idea is further forwarded by different researchers. In this context, Ridha (2014) categorized the errors as grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The results showed that most of the students' errors can be due to L1 transfer. Furthermore, she found that most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their idea. Some other researchers identified some different reasons for errors analysis. Writing errors are committed due to lack of knowledge in second or foreign language in one hand and lack of practicing English writing on the other. Writing practice can enhance students' performance in English writing.

Amiri and Puteh (2017) also found the prime reasons for committing such errors were due to mother tongue interference, intra-lingual interference and overgeneralization. Further, some errors committed by foreign language learners are due to other reasons such as simplification, induced errors, inherent difficulty, Simplification refers to the situation in which learners avoid the use of complex structure and prefers to use very simple forms. Sometimes, this also results in the forms of errors. Induced errors "result more from the classroom situation than from either the student's incomplete competence in English grammar (intra-lingual errors) or first language interference (inter-lingual errors). They are of material induced errors, teacher-talk induced errors, exercise-based induced errors and errors induced by pedagogical priorities. It is related to the inherent difficulty for man of certain phonological, syntactic, or semantic items or structures. Some forms may be inherently difficult to learn no matter what the background of the learner is. Krashen (1982) in Sakowa (2017) suggests that the acquisition of grammatical structures follow a 'natural order' which is predictable. *Sociolinguistic situation* is a situation in which there is an interrelation between society and language. If a society is bilingual, the members have degrees of competence in more than one language. When there are different social settings, there we find different degrees of language learning.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that students of College of Education, Billiri, Gombe State commit errors in written English. There are errors of subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, articles, preposition, word order and so on. The analysis indicated that subject-verb agreement errors occurred most frequently followed by spelling, capitalization, wrong form of verb and wrong word order. Some of the essays were badly constructed and lack basic grammatical structure of the English Language. Different factors are responsible for this worrisome situation: they include intralingual factors, interlingual factors, lack of mastery of the rules that govern the basic skills of English Language, incompetent teachers and unconducive environment among others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. Students should practice more on English grammar, and increase their vocabulary bank by
- 1. reading wide. Students should identify and use good reading sources that would help to improve on their sentence construction pattern.
- Spelling of words should be taught well right from elementary schools. Emphasis should be placed on phonics which basically determines how words are spelt. This will help to build the right foundation for effective writing.
- General Studies English teacher should expose the students to a wide variety of experiences by which unfamiliar words

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and concept can be developed. This can be done by giving them a lot of exercises, giving them constant practice of list of words and giving them incomplete sentences to complete with appropriate words and so on. In this way, student's vocabulary errors could be remedied.

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4. Colleges of Education should review their General Studies in English curriculum and ensure that they produce graduates that are fluent in oral and written English.

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