
ISSN:

Print - 2277 - 078X

Online - 2315 - 747X

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Journal of
Humanities, Social
Sciences and Creative
Arts

ASSESSMENT OF ERRORS IN THE WRITINGS OF SELECTED UNDERGRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a skill that is highly relevant to every aspect of scholarship. Despite its importance, students rarely accord it its due. The study set out to find out the effects of two years' teaching of Communication Skill in a Nigerian university. An assessment in a formal letter of application was given to the students. Twenty students were randomly selected from each of the six Departments that took the course. Qualitative research method was used to analyse the findings of the study. The result indicates that the students committed a total of 980 errors in the essay, with orthographic errors being 522, followed by 233 syntax errors. These show that the students have not sufficiently mastered the rules governing the syntax and general rules of the English language. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that university undergraduates should take communication skills in writing throughout their course of study in the university.

Keywords: *Evaluation, Inaccuracies, Syntax and Communication*

DOI:

INTRODUCTION

English language is a global language that is recognized and spoken in all the continents of the world. One's versatility in the English language marks one out as urbane and open to change, wider knowledge and communication with the rest of the world. A nation with English language as her official language is at best open to technology and world politics. The prestige that English language enjoys makes it a language of choice to all countries of the world either as a mother tongue, foreign or second language (Francis & Ryan, 1998). Thus, everyone especially the second language learners of English must obtain a mastery of the lan-

guage to attain a certain level of competence for trade, global politics, technology and most importantly, communication.

Competence in English language is based on the four basic communication skills: listening, speaking reading and writing. The listening and reading aspects of the language are receptive skills that lead to the output skills of speaking and writing. Listening and reading skills are both fundamental to the development of speaking and writing skills (Popoola & Osikomaiya, 2021).

The mastery of the output skills of the language can be very daunting to a second lan-

guage learner of the English language because of its complex and dynamic nature. A lot of reasons have been adjudged as the cause of the lapses observed in speaking and writing. However, while errors could be tolerated to a certain extent in speaking because of the level of spontaneity involved in it, such errors cannot be overlooked in writing, because writing is not spontaneous (Bamgbose, 2016) and such errors render their communication meaningless and un-impactful. Another reason why errors in writing are not tolerated is because it is the final stage of learning and the formal and final determinant of competence in the target language.

Writing is a skill that involves a lot of reflection, syntactic and grammatical considerations, permanence of record before a final statement is made. It is a communication tool purposely designed to convey thoughts and messages in a particular syntactically cohesive form (Syam and Sangkala, 2014). Most researchers are of the opinion that writing competence is a major factor in language learning (Tarango, Juan, Mastro-mateo, 2017). So, one can infer that writing skill determines competence in language. Fluency is considered important in speaking so speakers do not have much time to consider their speech as a result of the degree of spontaneity attached to speech before they articulate it. Unlike speaking, writing makes error detection and correction easier without altering the flow of thought. This is because, speaking is spontaneous and mistakes made may be as a result of carelessness on the part of the speaker who is aware of the grammatical rules of the language. However, errors are borne out of unawareness of the syntactic requirements of the target language. Thus, speaking contains mistakes, while writing contains errors

and so makes for an ideal competence measure. Therefore writing is adjudged the best means of studying second language learners' errors.

The methods proffered for error analysis are three: interlanguage theory, contrastive analysis, and error analysis. A lot of factors are responsible for language errors between the mother tongue and the target language and it may be necessary to carry out a contrastive analysis of the mother tongue and the target language with a view to locate the sources of the identified errors.

The Interlanguage theory is about the transition period between the mother tongue and the target language, when the learner is still trying to master the rules of the target language. In such a situation, the learner transfers the rules of the mother tongue to the target language learning. Darri (2016) believes that interlanguage rules are shaped by the transfer of the mother tongue acquisition rules or principles to L2 learning. Learners, therefore tend to simplify and over generalize strategies of second language communication.

The third theory, Error Analysis, which is the focus of this study, is the process of examining errors learners make while mastering a second language. Such errors could be identified and classified to determine the areas of difficulties and make necessary suggestions that would help in overcoming the observed lapses.

Error Analysis

Errors provide clues to students' areas of problem, it even indicates the origin of such observed lapses, when the research is carried out with utmost care. This is because it is a general belief that once an error is detected, finding the appropriate solution to it is made

easier. It is widely believed that errors include hints for researchers that will help them determine areas of difficulty and possible sources of the errors. When the mistakes and errors of language learners are analysed carefully, the process of language acquisition is understood better (Bamgbose, 2022). It is crucial to distinguish between mistake and error before moving on to the detailed study of errors. The distinction between mistakes and errors was outlined by Ellis (2003) and Brown (2007). They both agree that an error has been made if the learner repeatedly employs the incorrect form and is unable to correct it. However, it is a mistake, if the learner occasionally uses the incorrect form due to factors like excitement, carelessness, lack of focus, and exhaustion and can rectify it when necessary. An error can best be described as a regular or frequent departure from the prescribed rules of a language, probably because the learner has not mastered the rules. Since language learners can easily correct their spoken mistakes on their own, it is the errors in their writings that should be focused on to enable learners to master the requisite language skills necessary for effective communication. The major focus of error analysis is the studying of repeated errors by the learner who neither knows nor understands the applicable rules of the target language. Through such analysis, the researcher can access the root of the language deficiencies and cognitive mechanisms involved in the process of learning a language, which is otherwise hard to obtain. The discovered errors can then be used to build up the learners' skills in the target language. Error Analysis could also help the teacher to assess the level of progress made so far by the students in the second language and employ the detected and corrected errors in helping the students make necessary adjustments in

learning. When all these ideas are considered as a whole, although making errors is not desirable, it can be asserted that errors are regarded as valuable materials to be studied in the process of learning a foreign language. In the past, the errors in the process of learning a new language were regarded as faults to be overcome. Metcalfe (2017), however, had a different view on errors and pointed out that they were important indicators to facilitate the process of learning a language. Also, according to Metcalfe (2017) errors are indispensable parts of the language learning process as they serve as precious feedback for learners and feedback is the key to successful learning. Moeller & Robbert (2013) suggest that students should be encouraged to practice more in the target language in order to expedite the learning process because they will learn from their mistakes.

Second language learning is not an easy task because it is mastered after the learner has acquired his mother tongue and so taking in a second language is often a laborious feat that takes a while. In such a situation, errors and mistakes are inevitable in their output. In research, the learners' mistakes are a veritable tool for language assessment with a view to find a lasting solution to them. Therefore, the first thing language teachers do is to first identify the error, observe what causes it in order to proffer an effective solution to it.

It is a well-known fact that it may be very difficult for a second language learner to attain the native speakers' proficiency in the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of the target language, because of the learners' mother tongue interference. A non-native speaker is bound to commit even avoidable errors from time to time in any of

the language skills (Khansir, 2012). Each of the language skills has errors peculiar to them. The objective of this study is to analyse errors in the writings of undergraduates, based on lexis, grammatical errors, mechanical errors, and semantic errors. There are different types of errors peculiar to each of these skills and this study is focused on the typical errors in writing skill.

These errors can be classified as: lexical, semantic, grammatical and mechanical errors. Writing clearly without any form of ambiguity is very important in writing, to convey the intended meaning. A second language learner often erroneously borrows from his mother tongue and also commits other lexical errors while conversing or writing in the second language. (Tadulako & Bochari, 2021). The giving of wrong meanings to words, phrases and sentences are classified as semantic errors while wrong punctuation and capitalization falls under mechanical errors (Adelabu & Fadimu, 2004). Grammatical errors are usually committed in writing and such errors include syntax errors such as tense and inappropriate use of modifiers. Generally, all errors can be grouped into three: developmental, interlanguage and intra-language errors. Inter-language errors are as a result of the transfer of the mother tongue rules to the target language while the errors within the confines of the target language are referred to as intra-language errors. Developmental errors come as a result of insufficient knowledge of the structure of the target language which results in faulty or ambiguous meaning.

According to Corder, 1974 in Vasquez (2008), effective error analysis should be based on the collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors,

description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors, using three error analyses tools (comparative taxonomy, communicative effect taxonomy and surface strategy taxonomy) for effective analysis. The output of the learners' mother tongue is usually compared with that of the target language in comparative analysis, and such errors are categorized as either interlingua or developmental errors. Communicative effect taxonomy covers the effects of errors on the message reception of the receiver: it states the errors that affect and those that do not affect the intended message of the learner. The surface strategy taxonomy covers addition, omission, misinformation and mis-ordering errors.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to identify, describe and evaluate errors in students' writing,

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A diagnostic essay was attempted by the students to assess the errors peculiar to them in order to determine the type of intervention needed for improved performance in their writing.

Research Design

Qualitative research, which required research results based on codes, categories and themes by going through the data in detail, (Merriam, 1998) was used in this study.

Random sampling was adopted and twenty essays were selected from each of the Departments involved in the study.

A written essay in the form of an application letter was used to collect data from the students offering GNS201 (Writing and Literary Appreciation) in this study. Each student

wrote an application letter to apply for the position of a Graduate Assistant in his/her alma matter. The students' written essays were collected and analysed.

The team of researchers read through each essay with great care and then, identified and categorized the errors. Twenty essays were randomly selected from the class assessment of 200 level students, who were rounding off their course in Writing and Literary Appreciation in the Nigerian university.

The purpose of the assessment was to find out how far they had gone in the mastering of the rules of writing, for future communication purposes.

Data Analysis

After the teachings on writing (for a period six weeks in the second semester), the students were given essays which were marked and recorded. In the essay, apart from the normal features of assessment in essay writing, close attention was given to mechanics such as punctuation, tenses, word choice, spelling and concord. The errors in the essays were counted and summarized. The students' errors formed the raw data for this study. Frequency counts and percentages were used in the data analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

About 980 errors were recorded from 120 students' essays, (Table 1).

Table 1. Results According to Departments

Department	No of Students	No of Errors
Mathematics	20	98
Physics	20	166
Animal Production and Health	20	186
Animal Physiology	20	60
Horticulture	20	247
Chemistry	20	223
	120	980

Field Study, 2023

Table 1. Results of Error Analyses According to Departments

Taking twenty students from each department, the Department of Horticulture had the highest number of errors (247), followed by the Department of Chemistry (223). The Department Animal Production and Health (186) and the Department of

Physics (166) came next in the number of errors committed while the Department of Mathematics had a total of 98 errors, with the Department of Animal Parasitology having the least (60) number of errors (Table 1). The difference in performance may be due to the fact that the students of the Department of Animal Physiology were more re-

ceptive to the teachings on writing skill, because all the students in the study were taught under the same condition.

Table 2. Errors According to Spelling, Grammar, Syntax and Other Errors

	Orthographic Features	Grammatical Categorisation of Errors	Syntax Errors	Other Errors
Mathematics	61	8	11	6
Animal Production and Health	104	16	47	19
Physics	132	10	17	7
Physiology	30	11	10	9
Horticulture	118	52	59	18
Chemistry	77	44	89	13
	522	141	233	72

Field Study, 2023

Table 2: Errors According to Spelling, Grammar, Syntax and Other Errors

Errors committed by the students as indicated above were orthographic errors which included spelling, capitalization, the use of small case instead of capital letters especially when writing the names of people or places, and also punctuation errors (Table 2). Next to orthographic errors are syntagmatic errors, closely followed by grammatical categories and other errors.

Examples of such errors include: “lead city university”, “physiology department” instead of Lead City University, The Department of Physiology, respectively.

Word Choice in the salutation and a formal closing which are requirements in formal letters.

Example: Best regards

Correct form: Yours faithfully,

Omission Errors

Omission of prepositions and wrong use of

WH-word

I attended FUNAAB Abeokuta for degree from 2019 to 2022 which I graduated.

Correct form: where

(i) Contraction

Examples: can’t, I’m,

Correct form

Cannot, I am

Article Omission

... post of Graduate Assistant

the position of a Graduate Assistant

Misspelling Errors

Example: opportunity, am

Correct forms: opportunity, I am

Abbreviation/Acronym

FUNAAB, HOD

Correct form: Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta, The Head of Department.

Expression: I will make a great fit for the graduate assistantship (Wrong form)

It will enable me to achieve a great feat, if I am appointed (Correct form)

I pride myself on a strong personal skill and communication skills... (Wrong form)

I believe the interpersonal and communication skills I have acquired would enhance my performance on the job (Correct form) At the outset of this study, the presenters intended to find out the level of progress the students had made, given the fact that the class was their final communication class, designed to prepare the students for the labour market. However, the outcome of the study showed that the students were still lacking in the skill bordering their preparation for advancement in writing. The results show that the students have not yet mastered the art of effective writing in the English language. This is because the intricate details of the English language (spelling, capitalization etc.) and other skills associated to writing (cohesion, paragraphing etc.) were not well handled by the students, and those factors accounted for their abysmal performance.

CONCLUSION

The potentials for students to develop writing skills along with the academic studies has not been included in the various programmes. Thus, it is recommended that students should be made to write essays regularly to develop their writing skill as against the former practice of once a month. It is also suggested that, for the development of optimal skill in writing, the University should make writing skill a course to be taken by the students throughout the duration of their course of study in the University.

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