



ANALYSIS OF GRAMMATICAL AND MECHANICAL ERRORS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS OF POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF ISA MUSTAPHA AGWAI 1 POLYTECHNIC, LAFIA

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ABSTRACT: *This research work analyzed errors in English written compositions of Higher National Diploma students of Isa Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic, Lafia, Nasarawa State. The study has become necessary for the fact that students' performance in English is generally on the decline in spite of its being the country's official language and the most regularly studied in the curriculum and medium of accessing knowledge globally. The study applied the Error Analysis approach to analyze 200 randomly selected scripts of HND students who take Communication in English course in the Department of General Studies in Isa Mustapha Agwai 1 Polytechnic, (IMAP), Lafia. The study did not examine the entirety of errors in English but the grammatical and mechanical which are central for language production. The study proffered solutions to the identified errors by suggesting ways through which students' competency in English could be enhanced.*

KEYWORDS: Errors, Error Analysis, Grammatical Errors, Mechanical Errors Communicative competence.



INTRODUCTION

English is a world language because it is more widely spoken and written than any other language. According to Clyne and Sharifian (2008) and Mamuda (2008), approximately 380 million people speak English as their First Language (L1) and Second Language (L2) today. They maintain that more than 1 billion people speak it as a L2 to communicate with other L2 users with whom they do not share a cultural and linguistic background. Therefore, people who come from English Speaking countries constitute a small percentage of English users. Furthermore Clyne and Sharifian (2008), assert that “over 80% of the English users throughout the world today are non-native speakers”. In Nigeria, most Nigerians use it as a L2 in addition to their L1. Additionally, English serves as the language of education, business, legislature, judiciary, medicine as well as the media. As a language of education, English is taught as a subject beginning from primary school, secondary school and is the medium of instruction in tertiary institutions. Students are therefore expected to have a good command of it. According to National Policy on Education (NPE, 2008), students are required to have good command of English language and communicative competence. However, since English is not acquired from native speakers' environment in Nigeria, students face many difficulties or challenges in acquiring it. Such challenges include L1 interference, socio-cultural differences, sentence structures, spelling, among other factors. These contribute a lot to its falling standard in Nigeria as many polytechnic students lack competence in both its spoken and written forms. This situation has become so worrisome that many observations and researches abound on them. For instance, Sahe (1995) asserts that, for a student to be able to communicate fluently in English, he or she must have a linguistic competence both in its oral and written aspects. Therefore, in an effort to tackle the problem, the NBTE included Use of English and Communication Skills in the polytechnic education curriculum as courses to be studied all through the duration of some ND and HND programmes.

Statement of the Problem

English is the main medium through which other courses are taught and learned in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Therefore, to attain competence in it, the students need to acquire the language and communication skills - writing, reading, speaking and listening. This is however, not the case as evident in their compositions and in the embarrassing situation where some graduates find it difficult to converse confidently in English with their colleagues. This situation calls for serious concern or attention by all critical stakeholders to the recurrent and alarming rate of their poor performances. This study is therefore, set to examine the cause or causes of the errors they commit in writing and to proffer solutions in order to enhance their competence in language acquisition and use.

Objectives of the Study

The sought to achieve the following:

- i. To identify, categorize, and discuss the errors in the written compositions of polytechnic students in Nigeria with particular reference to IMAF, Lafia;
- ii. To assess the negative impacts of the errors to effective acquisition and competence in communication in English; and
- iii. To proffer solutions or recommendations to the errors.



Justification of Study

Many research works have been carried out all over the world by linguists and scholars aimed at improving the standard of English usage in Nigeria, the aim of which is to minimize errors students commit. It should however, be noted that it is not easy to analyze all the errors students commit in their English language usage. It is for this fact that this study is centred on only grammatical and mechanical errors and not on the entirety of the errors students commit. The study will therefore, serve as an enlightenment or a feedback that will be of immense value to both the students and teachers of English language, since they are the foundation layers of language learnings. The study is also imperative not only in Nigeria but also in most regions of non-native speakers of English, the world over. As at present, no such an investigation or study to the knowledge of these researchers has been carried out or undertaken by any researcher or scholar using the HND students of IMAP, Lafia, Nasarawa State.

Research Methodology

This study is descriptive in nature. It is designed to use a qualitative research approach of Corder (1974) by detecting, describing and analyzing grammatical and mechanical errors in students' written compositions.

Research Instrument

The students who take the Communication in English course in the School of General Studies and Pre-ND supplied data for this study. They were asked to write a composition of between 300 and 350 words on the topic: "My First Day at Isa Mustapha Agwai Polytechnic, Lafia, as a Student". The topic was set in this manner for its subject matter to be interesting to the students which will in turn, enable them to generate free flow of expressions or creative ideas. It was required of them to remain focused (have a single clear central idea); support and expand the central idea of the paper in well structured and developed paragraphs in generally standard English and be error-free. The grammatical and mechanical errors they would commit were to be identified, categorized and analyzed and solutions proffered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Reviews

Error

Many scholars have said a lot about the concepts "error and error analysis". Dulay and Burt (1974), for example, consider errors as "those instances of deviation from the norms of a language". For Crystal (1999), an error is "unacceptable form of language use produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language". He goes further to differentiate "error" from "mistake". According to him, a "mistake" is an error caused by a fault which usually emanates from misjudgment, misinterpretation, carelessness or forgetfulness of a certain rule or norm of a language. In other words, a mistake is a deviation made by a learner who has not mastered the rules of the target language. A mistake or mistakes can be corrected by a learner if attention were drawn to them. Generally, errors emanate from the target language as the learner is yet to master its features or norms. Adejare (1996) corroborates the above



statement when he asserts that “errors are an inevitable outcome of the English as Second Language (ESL) learning process”. It should be noted that all L2 learners commit a number of errors mostly from L1 interference. Generally, errors are of types and peculiar to each of the four language skills. In this study, the errors in writing are our major focus.

Writing

Writing is the representation of language in a textual medium through the use of a set of signs and symbols. It is one of the most productive skills in language teaching and learning. It also plays a significant role in the conveyance of knowledge from one generation to another and the most demanding of all the language skills. Ramadan (2019) corroborates this fact when he says writing is the most difficult of the language skills for all ESL learners. However, as a skill, it entails competence which can only be achieved by learners when the basics like grammar and mechanics are mastered. Therefore, in assisting the students to successfully acquire the writing skill, the analysis of errors and the understanding of their sources become very necessary.

First Language (L1)

A first language generally refers to a person's mother tongue or the language he acquired.

Second Language (L2)

Second language refers to a language that is learned for utilitarian purposes in addition to the L1.

Foreign Language (FL)

A foreign language refers to that language which is studied to know the life of another nation and its people.

Target Language (TL)

This is the new or targeted language a person is learning.

Empirical Review

Error Analysis can be defined as the process of determining the nature and causes of unsuccessful language. In other words, error analysis leads to an understanding of the reason behind the occurrence of inconsistencies by a speaker or learner of a L2. Many scholars have in various approaches or ways explained the concept more deeply. For instance, Corder (1974) maintains that error analysis is a means to understanding learning processes or a methodology of investigating and analyzing language learning in order to find out the nature of these psychological processes. He further contends that errors made by language learners make it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching and learning a language. Brown (1980) in the same view considers error analysis as the process of observing, analyzing and classifying the deviations of the rules of the L2 and then revealing the systems operated by learners. Gass and Selinker (2008) consider error analysis as a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. Risha (2012) investigated the errors in English essay writing of Iraqi ESL College students. The errors were categorized according to grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanical and word order. The grammatical errors were the most serious and frequent ones. This is a pointer to the fact that in the process of L2 acquisition, errors in



grammar are most common. Furthermore, Liu (2013) analyzed syntactic errors made by Chinese University students in their English essays. The findings showed that errors in tense, voice and modality occurred most frequently and the major sources of the errors were students' carelessness and L1 interference.

From the discussion above, it is evident that there are still many students or learners of the English language who have difficulties in understanding grammar. This is because apart from its numerous rules, there are also exceptions. The grammatical errors the students commit in writing include: errors of concord, tense, plural and singular among others. Errors arising from concord are the commonest by students and other learners today. A mastery of grammar, for example, will contribute to a large extent in helping learners in the acquisition of English as a L2.

Furthermore, in Nigeria today, a good number of learners find it difficult to spell out some English words correctly due to their L1 interference. Perhaps, this may be because of their educational background or lack of exposure to the L2. Spelling is therefore, another serious aspect of language learning mechanism that poses an intractable challenge to learners or writing. For example, homophones (words that have same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings) like, "axes/axis"; "chews/choose"; "'mail'/'male"; "bread/bred": "troop/troupe" among others. It should be noted from the foregone discourse that, for effective learning or acquisition of English as L2 to take place, teachers should be encouraged to, understand that no matter how bad the errors may be, it is more beneficial to correct and avoid them in subsequent repetition to enhance students' communicative ability and overall competence in it.

Sample Population

The sample population for this study is 200 students drawn from four departments: Mass Communication, Public Administration, Estate Management and Valuation and Science Laboratory Technology from the Schools of Communication Studies, Administration and Business Studies, Environmental Studies and Science and Technology, respectively.

Challenges in Learning English Language in Nigeria

Nigerian students who learn English as a L2 or FL face different challenges in the process. Some of these challenges include:

Problems inherent in English language itself

English has peculiar features or characteristics that make its learning generally challenging to the non-native teachers and students. The peculiar patterns and features include: its numerous rules and their exceptions in word formation, spelling, sentence morphology, orthography, pronunciation, idioms, cultural nuances, large vocabulary, and dialectal variations (British English, American English, Australian English, Canadian English, South African English, Brazilian English, Nigerian English, among others) different from most other languages in the world. This situation is so pervasive that a Swiss linguist and philosopher, Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), could not help but described the English language as "an edifice of confusion, inconsistencies and monstrosities".



Interlingual interference

Interlingual interference in language use is an error caused by the influence of the L1 on the production of the target language or a transfer of learners native language habits into the target language or L2.

Intralingual interference

This is an error that originates within the structure of the target language. In other words, they are the inconsistent transfers of words inside the target language.

DATA COLLECTION, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The students supplied data for this study through a written composition entitled “My First Day at Isa Mustapha Agwai Polytechnic Lafia as a Student” written between 300 and 350 words. They were allowed 50 minutes within which to complete and proofread before handing in.

The findings of the study showed that, of all the 200 marked scripts, none was error-free. Most of them were as a result of insufficient knowledge of the target language (English). The findings also revealed L1 interference as one of the main causes of omission errors. Therefore, the study suggests that emphasis should be placed on these aspects of language learning. Based on the research questions of the study, it is clear that students of IMAP, Lafia, lack fundamental knowledge of the English language rules for effective communication. From the study, errors of grammar and mechanics, inter and intra-lingual appeared more frequently. From another dimension, it is evident in their compositions that some of the students did not take the work seriously as their compositions were not legible and sensible.

Error Discussion and Interpretation

Errors of Concord

singular/plural or subject/verb agreement

In an error of concord situation, the choice of one element triggers off the use of a particular form of another element. For example, the subject and verb within a sentence structure need to agree with each other in number. Only the subject affects the verb. That is the verb conjugation has to match the subject's number and grammatical person.

- i. Each student **have** (has) done their work ('Each student'-singular subject, “has” singular verb).
- ii. John **like** (likes) eating fish. (“John”, singular subject, “likes”, singular verb).
- iii. The polytechnic **have** (has) two schools. (“Polytechnic”, singular subject, “has” singular verb).



Tense Errors

Tense is the form a verb takes to show the time of an action. It could be present, past or future.

- i. The first place I **go** (went) to was the Administrative Block (Past tense: went/was).
- ii. I will **ate** (eat) before 10am. (past tense “ate” (wrong) present tense “eat” correct .
- iii. Neither the students nor the lecturer **were** (was) present at the scene (concord by proximity).
- iv. I walked to the store and **buy** (bought) some biscuits (past tense: walked/bought).

3.Omission of connectors/wrong use of articles and prepositions

- i. I walked to (**the**) bank (article)
- ii. It was in (**on**) that fateful day (omission of preposition).
- iii. I first checked the names on (**the**) notice board (omission of article).
- iv. He said he cannot agree to (**with**) me. (wrong use of collocation).
- v. I met the registration officer in (**at**) the office (wrong use of preposition).

4. Wrong use of collocation (a word/phrase that is frequently used near or together with the target word)

- i. I prefer Maths **than** (to) English.
- ii. I aimed **to** (at) it but missed.
- iii. He was equal **with** (to) the task.
- iv. **I and my friend** (My friend and I) were present .
- v. We were not happy **of** (about) the situation.
- vi. The hall was full **by** (of) students.
- vii. That was my first day **in** (on) the campus.
- viii. The students stared **on** (at) me.
- ix. I didn't travel **in the** (at) night.
- x. Students that don't work hard are liable **for** (to) fail.

5. Interlingual errors (These errors are caused as a result of ignorance of the rules of the L2)

- i. **I heard** (perceived) smell of a rotten egg.
- ii. He **ate** (embezzled) our money.



- iii. My friend said he would not **put his mouth** (intervene) in the matter.
- iv. I want to **reach** (travel to) Abuja tomorrow.
- v. My **senior** (elder) brother is a police officer.
- vi. I saw the rector with my eyes (**I saw the rector**).
- vii. We went out to drink air (**freshen up**).
- viii. The **book of John** (John's book) was missing.
- ix. He asked me to **borrow** (lend) him my ruler.

Mechanical Errors

"Mechanics" of writing refers to the rules of written language such as punctuation, capitalization and spelling.

6. Punctuation

Punctuation adds clarity and precision to writing. An error in it creates a distortion in meaning. Errors in punctuation:

1. Failure to capitalize proper nouns and pronouns

- i. I arrived **lafia** (Lafia) on **tuesday** (Tuesday).
- ii. **i** (I) was born on **friday** (Friday), 12th **december** (December), 2000.
- iii. My best subject is **geography** (Geography).

7. Wrong spelling (omission or insertion of wrong letters)

- i. **Accomodation** (Accommodation) is cheap at Ombi 2.
- ii. A **fair** (fare) from Ombi 2 to the polytechnic gate was **fourty** (forty) naira only.
- iii. To me, it was a **priviledged** (privileged) information.
- iv. We **use to** (used to) study together in secondary school.
- v. He was **distopping** (disturbing) us.
- vi. The study of **grammer** (grammar) is a must for all of us.
- vii. I told him that I am an **indigine** (indigene) of Obi Local Government Area of Nasarawa State.
- viii. It was a **raining** (rainy) day.
- ix. The **water system** (water cistern) in our toilet was broken.
- x. The **lectural** (lecturer) was in the class when I arrived.



xii. We have **qulified** (qualified) lecturers.

xiii. I took **permition** (permission) before I left.

xiv. We were encouraged to enroll in the nearest **extra moral** (extra mural) lesson centre.

9. Errors resulting from joining two separate words as one

i. The heat was **toomuch** (too much) for us to bear.

ii. My **coursemates** (course mates) were already seated when I arrived.

iii. My **roommate** (room mate) was John.

iv. **Infact** (in fact) I was very happy that day.

v. The **cybercafe** (cyber cafe) was full to capacity.

vi. My **cellphone** (cell phone) was stolen that very day.

vii. The **diningroom** (dining room) was stuffy.

10. Errors from wrong or misuse of words

i. My **curse** (course) of study is Public Administration.

ii. I resumed one **weak** (week) after admission list was released.

iii. I didn't **no** (know) where to attend my first lecture.

iv. My parents bought **knew** (new) clothes for me.

vi. I woke up early on that **faithful** (fateful) day.

vii. I later went to **meat** (meet) my **formal** (former) **classmate** (class mate).

viii. At 10am, we were **axed** (asked) to go for **brake** (break) fast.

11. Errors of wrong syllabification

i. Respo-nsible.....Res-pon-si-ble

ii. Dep-artme-nt.....De-part-ment

iii. ma-y.....May

iv. Compreh-ens-ion.....Com-pre-hen-sion

v. accid-ent.....ac-ci- dent

12. Wrong spelling due to failure to distinguish between the noun and verb forms.

i. My **believe** (belief) about polytechnic education changed.

ii. My parents **adviced** (advised) me to work hard.



- iii. All we need is **practise** (practice) to excel.
- iv. The lecturer also advised us to always be **patience** (patient).

13. Errors from inability to distinguish use of homographs (words that have same spelling, same pronunciation but different meaning).

Bear

- (i) A wild animal.
- (ii) She cannot tolerate children.
- (iii) She is barren.
- (iv) she cannot tolerate children.

Box

- (i) Strike repeatedly.
- (ii) Metal container.

Right

- (i) It is not right (it is wrong).
- (ii) It is not a right (it is not lawful).
- (iii) Turn to the right(direction/preposition).

Fine

- (i) She's fine(well, not sick).
- (ii) He incurred a fine (a penalty)..

Bow

- (i) A gesture of conveying respect.
- (ii)A piece of equipment.

Bank

- (i) A financial institution.
- (ii) The land alongside a river or lake.

Errors caused by homophones

- i. The **hit** (heat) was overwhelming.
- ii. I **leave** (live) with my uncle in Lafia.



- iii. The registration officer gave us **guard**(guide) lines to correctly fill in our forms.
- vi. We all joined the **cue** (queue) for orderliness.
- v. There are many **stationary** (stationery) stores on the campus.
- ix. A **home aid** (homemade) bomb exploded near our hostel.
- ix. Many students were **their** (there).

14. Redundancy

Redundant words we need to delete from our expressions are enclosed in brackets.

- i. First (**of all**), I went and collected my admission letter. (When you say: “first”, you automatically imply that it is first among all the rest.
- ii. Past (**history**). If an event took place in history, then you would need to specify that it took place 'in the past'
- iii. I went to an ATM (**machine**) and withdrew some money. (The full form of ATM is “Automated Teller Machine”. Therefore, there is no need to add “machine” again).
- iv. I gave a brief (**summary**) of my achievements.' Brief' is redundant as it repeats the meaning of the word 'summary'.
- v. We were asked to come back (**at 8am**) in the morning the next day. Both “am” and 'in the morning' have the same meaning.
- vi. We were attacked by (**armed**) gunmen'. (A “gunman” is by definition “armed”. So “armed gunmen” is a repetition.
- vii. The (**outcome**) result was successful. An “outcome” is a result and is therefore, by implication, “final”.
- viii. Peter and John are tight (**bossom/close/intimate**) friends.

CONCLUSION

This study examined ways of improving students' performance in written English language through an error analysis approach. Therefore, the researchers highlighted the situations in Nigeria where English language is acquired and used as a second language (L2). The result further revealed that despite the concerted efforts by teachers, students, and curriculum designers, the goal of inclusion of English language in the syllabus of the polytechnic education system in Nigeria has not been adequately achieved judging from their general abysmal performance level in it. The result indicated that the commitment of the errors by the students is based on intralingual and interlingual interferences, grammatical and mechanical challenges and above all, the nature of English language itself. Though it is discovered that errors by students are numerous and it is quite difficult or impossible to correct them all, they should not be overlooked or tolerated as they serve as sign-posts or feedback to students to



enhance their proficiency in English language usage. It could be emphasized from this study that writing skill poses the most difficult task for students because the students have not attained competency and mastery in its vocabulary, rules and usage.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

It is important to state that this study has not been able to delve into everything that is associated with grammatical and mechanical errors in students' written compositions in English language with particular reference to IMAP, Lafia, Nigeria. It is therefore, limited in scope for the fact that only one tertiary institution is involved and this is not considered adequate to generalize the outcome of its findings. These researchers have therefore suggested a future research to find out other causes students find difficult to be competent in English. The present study shall therefore, serve as a reference material for other researchers who may wish to investigate this similar topic more deeply and in detail. The researchers also recommend that another research study be carried out on students' performance in English language on private and public polytechnics in Nigeria so as to establish, if any, the different performance levels of students in different polytechnics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from the analysis of data collected, the study recommends the following measures to safeguard and improve the teaching and learning of English language as a L2 in Nigeria:

- i. The English language should be made a compulsory subject of study at all levels of educational institutions in Nigeria and must be taught only by qualified English language teachers.
- ii. There should be a conscious and methodological teaching of English grammar and mechanics to achieve communication competence among students in Nigeria.
- iii. In-service training must be guaranteed for every teacher of English. That is, the teachers need to be properly groomed, monitored and assisted to grow confidence while performing their duties.
- iv. The teacher-education curriculum should be reviewed to integrate areas of contrastive and error analysis in students' written works.
- v. Students must be given orientation on the need to be serious in order to improve on communication skills.
- vi. The issue of large classes should be addressed so that the English language can be taught effectively and functionally.



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