



RESEARCH PAPER

Errors in English Writing Composition at Secondary Level in Abbottabad

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ABSTRACT

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The current study explored the nature of incorrect structures produced by the students learning English as a second language and their written compositions were selected to point out the causes of these errors and suggest suitable remedial measures. Being action-based research it was a mix-method inquiry to analyzing the learners' errors. Ellis's (1985) approach to analyze learners' errors was applied to probe into the faulty structures produced in the written composition. The current research was conducted in a government secondary, Abbottabad, and all the students studying English at the secondary level were assigned the task to compose an essay on an already decided topic. These handwritten scripts were manually computed in Microsoft word format and online software, Grammarly, was utilized to find the errors to investigate the nature of errors that most commonly occur in learners' writing in L2. The findings of the study highlighted the written compositions of the students contained a variety of interlingual and intralingual or developmental errors. The study also recommended some of the feasible corrective measures especially individual corrective feedback to overcome these errors

Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) is consistent practice and demands active involvement of L2 learners and to gain the proficiency in the second language, the learner is desired to be sufficiently exposed to all the receptive (listening and reading) and productive (reading and writing) skills of the second language (Brown, 2000). In the local context of Pakistan, the teaching of the English language currently emphasizes the instruction and erudition of the aforesaid receptive and productive skills. On the other hand, regardless of learning the English language for several years at school, the standard of English language competence among the students is marching towards decline. Being weak in almost all the aspect of the

English language, students are lacking behind in writing skills and they produce a lot of faulty structures in their written compositions. Therefore, it has been hypothesized in the present study that English language learners commit several errors in their written compositions.

In the past, there were many studies conducted on the error analysis of ESL learners, especially in written compositions. It has been revealed that the writings of the ESL learners are full of mistakes and learners are weak in grammar, produce incorrect spellings, and use inaccurate vocabulary (Lim HoPeng, 1976, James, 1988, Khan, 2005 and Vahdatinejad, 2008). In the background of the present study, it was noted that no such study was conducted in the regional context of Abbottabad and it was much needed to investigate the errors in the local context.

Learning a second language is widely acknowledged as a steady course of action. In this process, erroneous structures are likely to be produced at all stages of learning and these errors will not be removed by merely pointing them out to the learner Gràcia et al. (2015).as in the natural process of learning, students are bound to commit errors and these faulty structures produced during the process of learning a second language are desired to be responded with a positive note.

Second language teachers have to seriously consider that “learning ability varies from person to person” and “all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and, even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them” (Bartholomae, 1980: 97). Thus, error analysis (EA) is one of the most appropriate methods which can be utilized to categorize and explain errors committed by the speakers of other languages. In the context of the current study, error analysis (EA) was applied to uncover the nature and basis of the errors committed in the written composition of the students learning English language at the secondary level in Abbottabad. The current research helped to explore the kinds and frequency of errors concerning chain and choice.

As the main focus of the current study was error analysis so it examined the nature and causes of erroneous structures produced by the students of the English language in their written composition. The sole concern of the present research was to investigate the students learning English language at the secondary level and explore the nature of errors committed by these students in their written composition, to highlight the causes of these errors, and to propose the possible corrective measures to remove these errors.

Understanding Error Analysis

According to Gray (2014)., error analysis is as a method based on principles and procedures to diagnose, segregate, and systematically interrupt the undesirable forms produced by second language learners. It is a technique to measure the occurrence of the errors, distinguish them based on their types, and highlight the reasons for these errors resulting in the production of faulty language (James, 1998). The present study considered the error analysis as “a procedure used by both researchers and teachers

involving the collection of samples of learners' language, identifying the errors in those samples, classifying those errors them according to their nature and causes and, evaluating their seriousness" (Keshavarz, 1999, p. 168).

The analysis of the errors is achieved through a four-step process based on identification, description, explanation, and evaluation Dockrell et al. (2015). Errors and mistakes are two different things as errors occur because learner fails to know what is correct and thus reflects gaps in the learner's knowledge. While mistakes occur when the learner is unable to perform in a particular instance and it reflects occasional lapses in his performance (Ellis, 1997).

Corder (1967) proposed the concept of error analysis and underlined its significance in the process of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). He propounded that the errors of second language learners should not be labeled as right or wrong in themselves, however, the right or wrong system is confirmed through the analysis of these errors. The process of error analysis begins from the collection of the samples from the language of the learner, identification of the errors in that sample, description of these errors, their categorization concerning the hypothesized causes, and then evaluation of these errors to note their severity. Taking the context of second language teaching and learning into consideration, error analysis (EA) is a magnificent tool for recognizing, categorizing, and systematically interpreting the improper forms produced by the learners of the second language and this is accomplished by the application of the rules and regulations defined by linguistics (Khanom, 2014).

There is a difference between the utterance of the learners and the reconstructed version and this difference forms the basis for the categorization of errors (Corder, 1973) and further provides the basis to classify errors into different categories. He further propounds that faulty structures produced by the learners indicate that they omit some required elements in the composition, adds unnecessary or faulty structures, select erroneous elements, or produce disordered elements. Errors were further classified as overt and covert faulty structures. Undeniably grammatical inaccuracy at the sentence and clause level result in overt errors whereas grammatically correct structures failing to produce the desired meaning within the milieu of communication are covert errors.

Sources of Error

Richards & Schmidt (2013) explains that Interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer are the major sources of faulty structures in written compositions produced by ELS learners. The first language of the learner affects the language learning process, therefore the effect of lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic features of the first language supplies the instances of interlingual errors. Whereas, faulty or partial learning of the second language is caused due to of intralingual transfer supplying developmental errors. (Erdogan, 2005). It means that the influence of one item of the target language upon another item usually causes such type of errors. Ellis (1985) highlighted that learner apply certain strategies

which contribute to the production of faulty structures highlighting intralingual errors:

(a) Learners apply a structural rule in such instances where that is inapplicable. Certain grammatical items do not carry understandable contrast for the learners and thus they apply these rules where there is no requirement of such rules. For instance, there is routine malpractice among the learners of English as a second language that they produce the verbs like “bringed” and “goed” and noun like “foots” and “mouses”. Figuring out such a grammatical rule and then its application generally is called overgeneralization

(b) In certain cases, learners do not abide by the restrictions of the rules and apply the rules in a context where it is not applicable in case of target language usage.

(c) When the learner fails to learn the more complex type of grammatical structure he applies incomplete rules as he considers that the use of relatively simple rules can help him attain effective communication. Such an incomplete application of the rules results in to errors.

(d) Learners derive false concepts from a faulty understanding of target language distinctions and at later stages, these false concepts become a common practice if not minimized

Implication of Error Analysis on Language Teaching

There are multiple implications of error analysis on language teaching especially for ESL teachers and applied linguistics researchers. It is quite meaningful for ESL teachers to gauge the development of ESL learners and highlight the different strategies applied by the students while learning a second language, thus paving the way to further investigate the second language learning process. Error analysis is also quite helpful for second language learners as marking their errors can assist them in developing a second language with better accuracy (Karra, 2006).

Prescription of remedial courses for the improvement of writing skills greatly benefits from error analysis. It has been observed that, whether it is the first language or second language, being able to write fluently and expressively is quite tough. There are many studies conducted on error analysis to highlight the nature of errors, their causes, and remedial measures. Only a few of them are being discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

Review of Studies Conducted on Error Analysis

Error analysis has always been a favourite area for linguists to explore the causes of certain errors and furnish the possible solutions. Ijaz et al (2014) investigated the errors committed by the students learning English at the graduation level in Pakistan. During the corpus-based analysis of the written scripts these students, researchers noted that students produced a faulty subject-verb agreement in the sentences, there were spelling mistakes, they used incorrect forms of articles and preposition, and produced inappropriate verb tense forms. Researchers also noted the absence of proper punctuation and capitalization in the written composition. The use of double negation was also highlighted as a weak area in the study. Despite having a variety of errors in the written compositions, the study noted verb tense forms as the weakest area for Pakistani learners of English as it has been great in number. The factors that caused errors were learners' inability to apply the rules despite the clear understanding of the rules, lack of practice in grammar exercises, very limited exposure to the English language, and rare knowledge of language use. The study suggested specific grammatical exercises to overcome these errors.

Ahmed et al (2016) analyzed the errors of Pakistani ESL learners in their written compositions and highlighted that learners' errors are mainly related to agreement-errors, spelling errors, word choice, or contextual errors. The other category is based on a miscellaneous group of errors which included errors based on adverbs, abbreviations, capitalization, articles, possessive nouns, and prepositions. The study noted that interlingual errors were in majority and the interference of the first language of the learners has been highlighted as the main cause of their errors. Whereas, language transfer has not been the main source of these errors as some of the errors were the sign of learners' poor knowledge of the English language.

Due to this reason, learners put their efforts to spell and apply verb tense more like Sindhi structure of language. The study also highlighted the contribution of the intralingual factor and noted that ESL learners learning the English language at government schools lacked desired exposure and communication in the target language. The research suggested grammatical exercises and dictation to overcome these errors. Although, there is a reasonable amount of studies conducted to explore the writing problems of the students learning the English language at the tertiary. However, no such study has been conducted so far at the secondary level in tehsil Havelian of district Abbottabad. The present study considered that the students learning the English language at the secondary level in Abbottabad needed intensive care and significant attention as they have to move ahead to the next stage of their life, academic or practical, with adequate writing skills in English, therefore, the current study aimed to explore the nature of errors committed by the students learning the English language at the secondary level in government secondary school in Abbottabad and analyzed their written composition, highlight their causes and suggested possible remedial measures to remove these errors.

Material and Methods

The current study was action research and mixed methodology was applied. Ellis's (1985) approach to analyze learners' errors was applied in the present research and that approach is summed up in Figure 1.

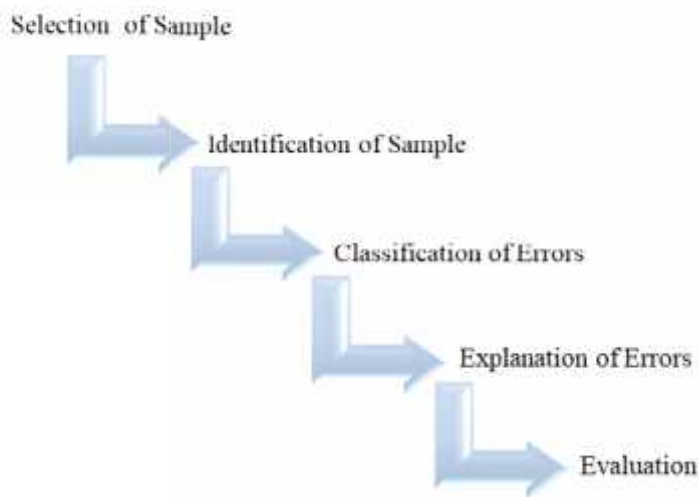


Figure 1 Summary of Research Approach

According to the above diagram, during the procession of the selection of the sample, the size of the sample and the medium to be sampled is to be taken into consideration. Once the size and medium are decided then errors would be identified from mistakes and a grammatical description should be assigned to each error. In the end, all the errors are to be evaluated in terms of their seriousness to take principled teaching decisions.

Data for the current study were gathered from ninety (90) students studying in class X a government secondary school in Abbottabad. The identity of the research population is being hidden in order to ensure the ethical considerations of the research. The data collection process was involved in the four phases. In the first phase, the research participants were asked to select a range of topics with respect to their preference, and based on their rating one topic was finalized for the study. The main purpose behind the selection was to select the general topic that all the students could write on. In the next stage, students were assigned the task to compose an essay on the selected topics and it should be of around 250 words. The rationale behind this was to gather the realistic sample of the written transcript produced by the research participants so as to evaluate the real nature of errors. In the third phase, collected data was written in Microsoft word to utilize online software, Grammarly, to find the errors. In the last phase, errors were manually categorized. The rationale behind this phase was to study the nature of errors that most commonly occur in learners' writing in L2.

Results and Discussion

Within the dimensions for error analysis as proposed by Ellis (1985) already elaborated in the methodology, it turned out to be quite visible that ESL learners having similar linguistic exposure and identical academic background were having a similar phase of progress in their expertise in the writing of texts in the English language.

The current study thoroughly investigated the answers attempted by the students and noted that there were sixteen types of frequent errors in the written scripts produced by the research participants. The detailed analysis of the data helped to further categorize these errors within the dimensions proposed by Ellis (1985). Among these errors were interlingual errors which highlighted the problem of subject-verb agreement and mixing up between genders i.e., "he" and "she". Apart from that, it was noted that the written scripts contained the errors of pluralization and omission or misuse of articles. Moreover, there were common errors of capitalization, omission, or misuse of preposition and the students were found choosing the incorrect word from a word family, be + verb stem for verb stem. In addition to these errors, students were found using inaccurate tense forms, making incomplete sentences, and producing spelling mistakes. Furthermore, the written scripts also highlighted that the students have problems with the formation of questions, writing of reported speech, correct use of the possessive pronoun, and transition markers. The entire detail of the errors produced by the students in terms of percentage is presented in Figure 2

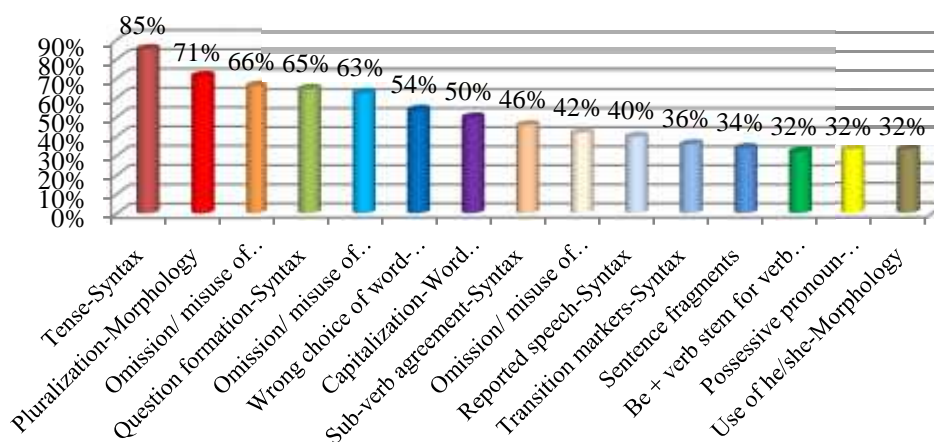


Figure 2 Nature of errors

The above figure furnished a comprehensive view of the frequency rate of errors ranging from thirty-two percent to eighty-five percent. It entailed that the written script of almost every student contained one or the other error. The higher percentage of errors of the students learning English at the secondary level was quite alarming as these students were to be evaluated by their writing skills only.

The data also highlighted that students' scripts not only contained the errors of grammatical rules but also indicates that students lacked the basic knowledge of what successful writing involves as described in Nunan (1989).

The present study noted a variety of errors produced by the learners in their written compositions. The current study revealed that the maximum errors noted in the written composition were about incorrect tense formation (85%), improper pluralization (71%), misuse of the preposition (66%) improper question formation (65%) , omission of the article (63%) word (54%) and incorrect capitalization (50%) , faulty subject-verb agreement structures (46%), improper use of auxiliary verbs (42%), improper forms of reported speech (40%) errors of transition markers (36%) , production of sentence fragments (34), faulty be+verb stem (32%), incorrect possessive pronouns (32%), and improper use of he /she (32%). All these findings of the current study are in line with the findings of English Ijaz et al (2014) who noted eight common types of errors committed by Pakistani learners and highlighted that tenses were the most problematic area for Pakistani learners of English as verb tense errors have been great in number. Ahmed et al (2016) also noted the similar findings.

The entire data presented an alarming situation of the written composition produced by the students learning English at the secondary level, however, grammatical accuracy is frequently desired at this level. The entire statistical data answered the reason behind the unsatisfactory scores of students in the public examination. The frequent occurrence of such common errors, being undesirable at the secondary level, marked the quality of writing skills at its decline. It is pertinent to mention that all the errors, highlighted in the above figure were noted as a major hindrance in getting good grades in the written examination. The current study highlighted the nature of errors committed by the ESL learners in their written composition and the probable causes of these errors are summarized in Figure 3

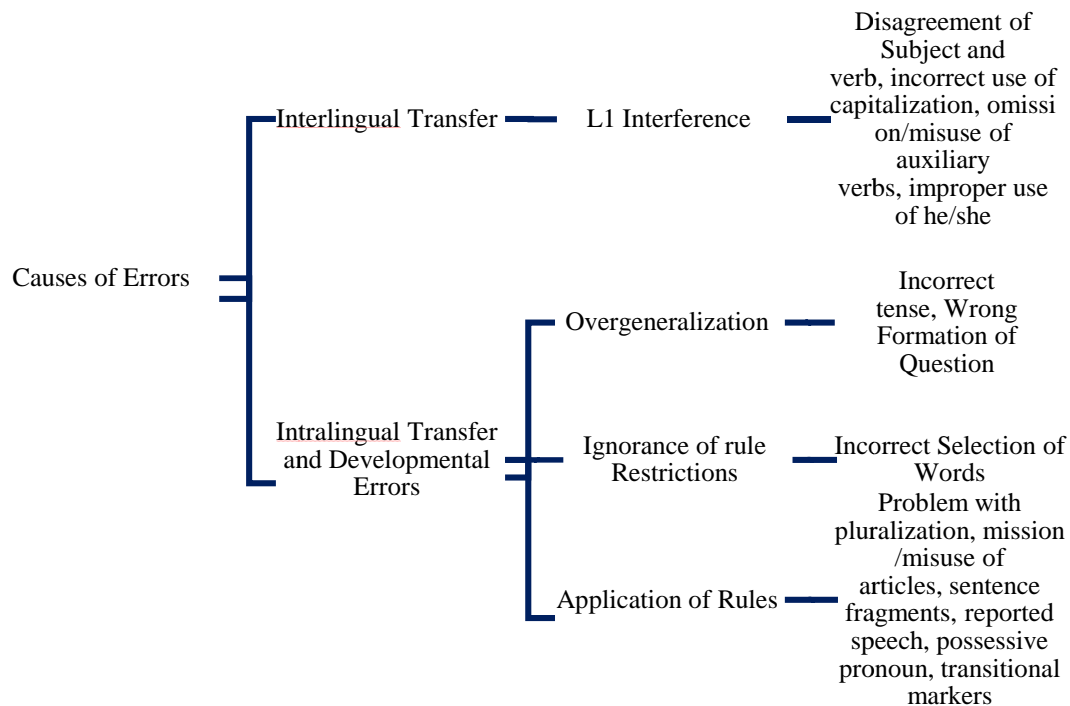


Figure 3 Causes of errors

While suggesting the remedial measures to overcome these errors, it is considered that individual corrective feedback can help learners to overcome their errors. The language teachers should frequently give detailed feedback to the students on their writing and address the common errors of their students with great sympathy. Interlingual errors, like an error of subject-verb agreement, should be given preference as their fossilization can greatly affect the learning process. Teachers are desired to treat the errors as a mark of development and let the students not to feel disinclined to learn. It is imperative to encourage the ESL learner to revise and mark their errors for themselves; however, they can also be engaged in peer checking. Moreover, corrective feedback is suggested only in that case if students are unable to mark their errors on their own. The language teachers are also desired to teach the rules and conventions of writing in the given context and that will strengthen the new learning throughout the academic session. Last but not the least, ESL teachers have to give due importance to the needs of the learners in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The main focus of the current study was to look into the nature of errors committed by the ESL learners in their written composition, highlight the reasons for these errors, and recommend some corrective measures to overcome these errors. Grammatical errors were the key findings of the study as indicated by the results. The research participants were quite weak in vocabulary and produced

incomprehensible sentences at certain times. They failed to apply correct sentence structure in the given written composition in the English language which entails that they have serious problems in acquiring common grammatical rules in English. The current study has exclusively focussed on how ESL learners internalize the rules of the English language. It further suggested that ESL teachers should utilized Error Analysis (EA) to systemically identify the specific and common errors of ESL learners and it will help them to pay more attention to the pertinent errors. The investigation of language learning problems is insightful for ESL teachers as it supplies a great amount of information on common weak areas in ESL learning and teachers can give them due consideration while preparing the teaching materials effectively. Furthermore, by being able to foresee errors to a certain degree teachers can be well-equipped to help out their students reduce or overcome their trouble in language learning.

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