An Analysis of Writing Errors in First Draft Essays of Northern Nigerian College Freshmen

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Abstract-This research paper is a concise analysis of writing errors in first draft essays of Northern Nigeria college freshmen. Data is drawn from 70 first draft freshman composition corpus which is presented and analyzed. Among the most frequent errors found are in the use of *they, their, and there*, the use of *been and being,* and the plural/ singular *'s'* endings among others. Causative factors of errors are attributed to either careless mistakes, interlanguage development, L1 interference, overgeneralization, or language difficulty. Students come into college already using a non-standard variety of the English language, yet the form of standard English that is prescribed for use at college level in Nigeria is significantly different from those varieties that students already speak and are familiar with. This study reveals certain "errors" that emanates from students' essay which arises out of the transfer of the lingua franca forms into academic writing work. There is also the dialectical component, as majority of the study population speak Hausa/Fulfulde language. The main objective of this study is to identify those "errors" that students in north-east Nigeria make in college level writing in order to help improve pedagogy in English language at this level. This study focuses on grammatical error analysis, while keeping in mind the importance of analysis at the levels of semantics, and overall discourse. Although students' writing errors can be classified into various linguistic categories such as graphological, morphological, syntactical, lexicological and discoursal and semantic levels, this study focuses on the morpho-syntactic level errors only. A total of 70 student essays were read, graded and analyzed for morphological and syntactic level errors which are identified and marked in red and then categorized accordingly. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study and strategic random sampling method was used to select the study population. Findings from the study revealed that errors are caused by a number of overarching factors which may include group work, L1 interference, TL difficulty as well as other cognitive factors like learner's communicative strategies, leaner grammar inability, learner's lexical deficit in coining word and learners' inability to use synonyms. The study also provides suggestions and strategies for helping students to self-correct. The study recommends a fair balance between correcting errors whilst allowing natural stages of language learning to take place. When educators have a comprehensive understanding of students' challenges it will help them in guiding the students better. This will boost the students' morale and also help in the improving their overall academic performances.

Keywords: Errors, Composition, Linguistics, Dialect, Standard English, College, Lingua Franca.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background to the Study

Students gain admission into college with an already existing non-standard variety of the English language, yet the form of standard English that is acceptable and generally prescribed for use at college level in Nigeria is significantly different from those varieties that students already speak and are familiar with. Consequently, students' essays contain certain "errors" which arises out of the transfer of the lingua franca forms into academic writing work. Records shows that most students use English as a second language in their various homes. However, there is a significant difference between standard English as prescribed by formal educational institutions, and those dialects that students use informally. The major crux of this research paper is to therefore investigate this significant difference in variations across dialects and standard English use as prescribed in college. This paper will also investigate what linguistic features of informal English tend to occur in the writings of students in a West African college.

B. Statement of the Problem

Students get admitted into the university with pre-existing variety of English Language that is considered sub-standard and significantly different from the standard English that is prescribed for use at college level in Nigeria. Findings have revealed certain errors from students' essays that arose from the transfer of the lingua franca forms into standard English.

C. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to identify those "errors" that students in north-east Nigeria make in college level writing, in order to help improve pedagogy in English language at this level.

D. Research Questions

The main research question of this study is: To what extent has errors made by students in their college level writing affected their standard English?

Other research questions that were considered include:

What linguistics features of informal English tend to occur in students' writings in West African colleges?

How will identifying these errors help in improving the overall writing of college students?

E.   Justification of the Study

Although there exists substantial amount of literature on error analysis, very little research has been conducted in this region. The north-east is considered one of the educationally les advantaged states and is known to lag behind in English literacy levels (Mugambi, 2010).

F.   Scope and Limitation of Study

Although the syntactic, semantic and discourse levels of grammatical errors are equally important, this study will focus on the grammatical level errors. The 70 students' scripts analyzed in this study may not represent the entire north-eastern Nigeria, the selected study population however represents a significant size because the total college population is not up to one thousand. Worthy of note is the fact that not all the sampled students' essays were written by northerners; some of the students come from other parts of Nigeria. However, all the participating students are African.

II.   REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A.   Error Analysis

To begin we shall be looking at some recent studies in the field of error analysis. Myles Johannes (2002;1), looks at error in students' written texts and compares their L1 writing to their L writing. His findings reveal that students transfer their L1 writing methods to their L2 writing tasks. Myles prescribes that teachers should be aware of students' L1 writing models as well as their L1 culture, so as to predict what errors students are likely to make and therefore curb or stop these errors on time. He also recommends that learners should be exposed to standard English both in high quality and quantity, as this will help in improving their L2 writing. "Writing ability is more closely linked to fluency in and familiarity with the conventions of expository discourse." (Myles 2002:1). In a similar vein, (Ken 2000, quoted in Myles), believes that a teacher must expose learners to content as well as language structures and vocabulary.

Apart from language interference, other researchers have found social and cognitive factors as additional causes of language learner errors in writing. Kogen 1986, p.25, quoted in Myles, enumerates some of these factors as: level of motivation to learn, attitude toward learning, and attitude toward achieving goals such as graduating, and getting employed. On the social factors affecting the attainment of target language competence, students who perceive acceptance by the target language speakers tend to perform well in the target language because this acceptance is perceived as reducing psychological distance between the native speakers and the learners. More importantly are cognitive factors which include the learner's aptitude to learning, as well as his/her intelligence and ability to succeed in the target language learning task. The cognitive theory is especially crucial to students' performance in academic writing tasks.

Owing to its nature, academic writing involves complex cognitive processes around the topic, scientific terminology, use of technology, information gathering, critical thinking, and so on.

According to Anderson 1985 qtd in Myles; Rod Ellis; Selinker 1972, interlanguage studies have shown that in the process of creating meaning in academic writing, L2 learners tend to move back and forth along the L1-L2 continuum in search of suitable style and acceptable rhetorical style, in three distinct stages which are, the information gathering and brain storming stage, the creative stage in which the learner transforms that information into a meaningful message for the reader, and finally the production stage where the learner completes his/her text through editing and revising it and then distributing it. (Anderson 1985 qtd in Myles; Rod Ellis; Selinker 1972).

Selinker (1972) defined Interlanguage as "a linguistic system independent of the L1 or L2 but influenced by both. Rod Ellis called it "Idiosyncratic Idiolect", while S. Pit Corder refers to it as "transitional competence" and Saville-Troike (2006:40) the "language learner language". Anderson prescribes the need for teachers to focus on both the content and form of student writing (Snow 2001 qtd in Myles). In so doing, the teacher should ensure that learners set clear writing goals which in turn will speak to the organizational pattern, as well as aid the learner in creating cohesion at the sentence level and coherence at the discourse level. On receiving teacher/peer feedback on the text, the learner faces new cognitive challenges in revising it. At the revision stage, the learner is faced with the task of reading and interpreting the teacher's /peer remarks and then merging his/her intended meaning, with that provided in the feedback.

Furthermore, Anderson considers some difficulties posed through socio-cultural and environmental factors such as cross-cultural communication in diverse classrooms, especially in team and group work. Learner errors can also escalate based on emotional stress in test taking situations.

Additional major causes of errors in students' writing as explained by other researchers include   psycholinguistic factors known as L1 interference. "Transfer is defined as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (Odlin, 1989 qtd in Myles). There are proponents of language interference who argue that it is both negative and positive. A learner who writes well in his/her first language is likely to transfer positive knowledge into their L2 writing task. Contrastive analysis studies have also contributed greatly to knowledge about learner writing errors.

However, findings from studies have shown that the language learner is not passive but active in formulating the L2 system, in relation to what languages he/she already knows. We

should therefore see interlanguage as a language development process rather than be focused on correcting learner errors.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is hinged upon the notion raised by Selinker (1972), that a language learner in the process of attaining the target language develops what is known as an interlanguage. The interlanguage can be defined as a system of language that is different from both the learner's first language and the target language as well. Interlanguage tends to rely on the L1 in the process of hypothesis formation about the target language linguistic system. It also shows certain feature that have been said to be major causes of student writing errors such as the overgeneralization of target language linguistic rules, derailment (Shaughnessy 1997), and fossilization, (Eric Lennenberge 1967; and Bright and McGregor 1970:236 qtd in Myles). Some of the first proponents of the concept of interlanguage were S.Pit Corder who in 1967, referred to this idiolect as "Transitional competence", and 1971 "Idiosyncratic dialect," then Nemser (1971) who termed it as "Approximate system". More recently, it has been referred to as the "Language Learner Language" by (Saville-Troike 2006:40).

Researchers have found that L2 writing errors are caused by language interference and interlanguage fossilization, as well as developmental errors that are common to all learners despite the structure of their L1. Recent studies of error analysis in students' writmicing have emphasized the importance of improving learners' competencies in English language writing particularly for acades. Stuat Ungan in "Analysis of expression errors in the writings of Primary School Students in Terms of Certain variables," explains that competency in writing aids a person in all aspects of life including making an impact in society and succeeding in education and employment. Some of the errors that he found in Turkish student's writing included "grammar errors, missing subject, active-passive disagreement among verbs, clause errors, missing adverbial clause of place, missing object, missing verbs or auxiliary phrase errors, subject-verb disagreement and punctuation errors" (Ungan;193). She concludes that "knowing what errors students make can be considered as the first step towards correcting them."

IV. METHODOLOGY

A.   Research Design

This study adopted the qualitative research method. The qualitative research design focuses on observation, data collection and qualitative explanation and analysis. The researchers also conducted face-to-face interviews to get responses from the selected 70 students on some of the causative factors responsible for errors in their writing.

B.   Study Population

The population of the study consisted of freshmen who study academic writing at the American University of Nigeria. The population size consisted of the 70first draft composition scripts that were analyzed for errors in their writing as well as an analysis of the levels of semantics from L1 to L2.The selected scripts were read and graded for morphological and syntactic level errors, which were identified, marked in red and then categorized.

C.   Sampling and Sampling Technique

Systematic random sampling was adopted to pick the 70 students scripts used for the study. A total of 70 scripts representing over 80 percent of the freshmen population was analyzed.

D.   Data Analysis

The data collated was then interpreted and properly analyzed as presented in the results and findings.

V. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results and findings of this study.

Table 1: Showing the demographic information of sample size

Gender	Number of Scripts	Percentage (%)
Males	46	68%
Females	24	32%
Total	70	100%

Source: Fieldwork, January 2020

As shown in the table 1 above, a total of 46 scripts representing 68% of the sampled population, were academic writings by male students while 24 scripts representing 32% were by females. Writing errors were discovered on both male and female scripts.
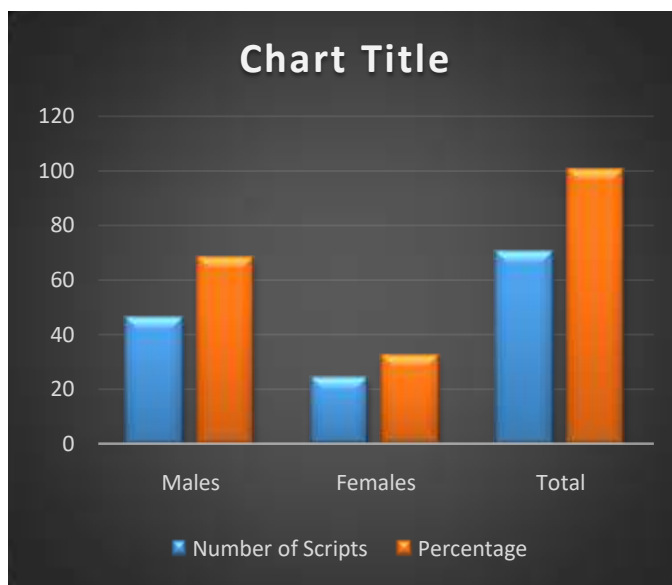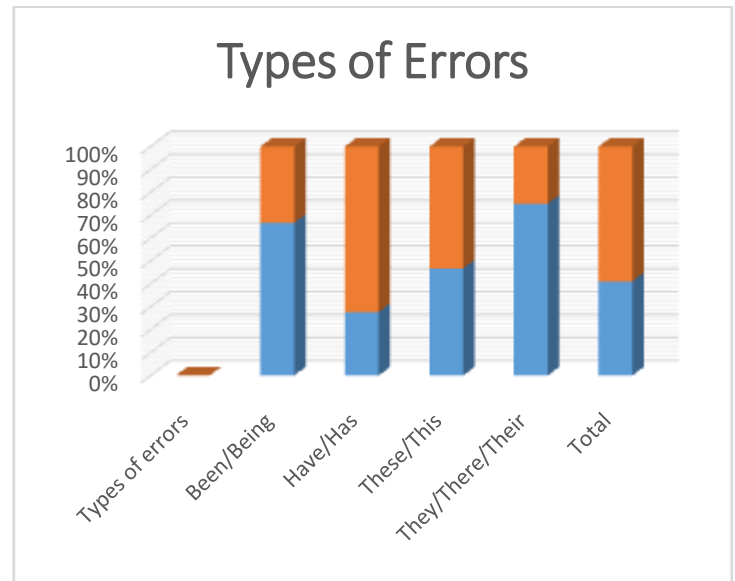

Source: Fieldwork January, 2020

Figure 1 showing the demographic information of respondents.

Table 2: showing types of errors and the correct versions

Type of error	Sample and correct version
Tense/ Present Perfect	Been: I have been waiting for you since 9 O'clock.
Conditional phrase	If
Stative verb not used in the continuous in first person. form e.g. (I know(s) you Confused with state of being in the third person, (He knows you)	
Simple past tense regular and irregular	'ed' endings You got a B in English
Yes no questions in the past tense	Did Aisha do it? Did Aisha did it?
Irregular Verbs: Present, past, past participle	Be/was/were/been I have never been to Italy
Genrund verb (ing ending)	Being ill stresses her. Driving is allowed
ERROR TYPE	EXAMPLE
Omission/misuse of Preposition	This could result to a great loss…" " Cast blind eyes to.."
Avoidance of continuous tense	"Another factor that prove that…" "Before they get to know and understand the rule of politics is already too late which might affect the people under him/her." "On the other hand, there are a lot of peer pressure influence. It will be like, his friends and people will start to control their mind…"
Omission of "s" endings	"…when young adult reach the age of 18-20 they began
Runons/ lack of punctuation marks.	"it therefore means that bills are laws which are yet to be executed and one very of such bills is the "not too young to run" bill which will allow citizens to contest for political office from a certain acceptable aga of twenty-one"
Been/Being confusion	"Most especially in Nigeria we the youths are the future of tomorrow according to what we have…told since our primary school"
Have/Has confusion	"Selfishness, greed and lack of experience has weakened the ability of young people to uphold a position in the governemnnt
These/ This	"With this statistics, it is now clear that majority of the youths…" These analogy will lead to my next poing."
They/There/ Their	"But they are issues preventing us to achieve that title, "we are the future of tomorrow"

Source: Fieldwork January, 2020

Table 2 above shows some of the common errors that were discovered from the freshmen essays. Sample of the correct versions were also displayed alongside, so the errors could be easily identified.

Source: Fieldwork January, 2020

Figure 2: showing types of common errors found on students' scripts

VI. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The most common grammatical errors observed in freshman composition in the selected sample include use of prepositions; 'on', 'to', 'in', 'of', 'from'. In this case, students are not certain when to choose which one of the prepositions to use. Tenses also cause an array of difficulties and in some cases, students avoid using them whenever they can, in order to get away with it in their writing. "Be, Being and Been" are often confused in their use, as are "have and has." These/There/Their are another lot of words that students cannot tell apart. These might be confused because in spoken language they sound similar. In writing, students may not examine the spelling differences and that error will affect the meaning of their sentences.

Our findings reveal that it is difficult and thus speculative to suggest that the major cause of errors can be explained through psycholinguistics. Contrastive analysis has suggested that errors could be caused by language interference, yet in practice, this notion is difficult to prove. From our findings, we have been able to establish that errors are caused by a number of overarching factors which may include one or many of the following: working together, L1 interference, TL difficulty (cognitive factors), learner's communicative strategies, leaner inability, lexical deficit on the part of the learner (where learners have been found to coin words, anglicize an L1 word or use a synonym).One critique of error analysis is that it dwells on the negative evidence and fails to recognize the learners' active intellectual effort to develop knowledge of the language that he/she is learning.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, the researchers were able to come to the following conclusions:

- This study presents several examples of errors made by students in freshman composition.
- The data deduced from this study would be useful to teachers of writing in the north-east region of Nigeria.
- The study encourages teachers to find a fair balance between correcting errors and allowing for natural stages of language learning to take place.
- Another observation from this study is that leaners can "backslide" into new forms and old forms in their interlanguage.
- Findings from this study also shows that English language and writing teachers must pay attention to errors which result in illogical or confusing written essays.

Recommendations

- When students' essays are corrected fairly by teachers, it encourages them, boost their self-esteem and improves their overall academic performance.
- Correct and proper use of English grammar is very crucial and critical in the academic setting; correcting grammatical errors will help the students to thrive.
- Policy makers in the government circles can key into findings from this study, to intervene and implement recommendations that will minimize writing errors amongst students; thereby, improving the overall quality of graduates in the country.

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