

ERROR ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN ENGLISH COMPOSITION: A CASE OF BASIC LEVEL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Error analysis is an important branch of applied linguistics which deals with errors committed by second or foreign language learners. The present article is about error analysis that aims to investigate the frequency, types and causes of errors committed by basic level students. To accomplish the objectives, the researcher adopted positivist philosophical approach and survey research design. The researcher collected the data from two schools of Palpa and two schools of Rupandehi consisting ten students from each school. Writing composition was the main tool for data collection and the collected data were categorized into different categories such as verb tense, subject verb agreement, inappropriate use of article, wrong use of preposition. The frequency of occurrence of errors and their causes were analyzed. The findings of the study highlight that the most of basic level students commit grammatical errors in sub-verb agreement and they are caused due to intralingual as well as interlingual factors. This study can play a pivotal role for improving writing skills of students.

Keywords: systematic deviation, surface strategy, linguistic levels, interlingual and intralingual errors

Introduction

The field of error analysis is a very essential area of applied linguistics and the foreign or second language learning. It provides the inputs for the understanding of the process of language learning and language acquisition (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). It is a significant mechanism for improving both speaking and writing skills of the students. It equally provides us with a picture of linguistic development of a learner and may provide us a direction to our learning process.

Errors are the deviations or wrong forms of a language reflecting the competence of the learner. There can be various causes of errors. One of the major causes of errors is the ignorance of appropriate rule in the foreign language (Corder, 1999). Errors are actually deviations from adult grammar of a matured learner. More often, errors and mistakes are used synonymously in the field of applied linguistics. Whereas errors are those mistakes committed by non-native language learners, but mistakes are committed by both native and non-native language learners. They are caused by non-linguistic reasons like lack of attention, negligence, fatigue and mental stress. When s/he becomes conscious, they are self-corrected (James, 1998). However, the learners do not self-correct the errors but they do for mistakes (Brown, 2007). So, mistakes are random deviations and unrelated to any systems.

Error analysis is the systematic study and analysis of the errors committed by second language learners (Richards & Schmidt, 2008). It is a kind of linguistic analysis that is related to the errors (Gass & Selinker, 2008). EA not only deals with identifying and detecting errors but also explaining the reasons for occurrence of them. Error analysis is a method applied to analyze second/foreign language learners' speech or written performance (Amiri & Puteh, 2017). It focuses the significance of errors in the learner's language system. EA is a technique for identifying, classifying and interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language (Crystal, 2008). It is a process of observing, analyzing and classifying between the learners' language use and that of standard language (Brown, 2000). EA is a procedure used by both researcher and teachers which involve collecting samples of learner language, identifying errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness (Corder, 1967).

In Nepal, most of the school students tend to commit different types of errors in English writing. It is essential task for a teacher to study such errors and provide remedies. Error analysis is one of the domains of applied linguistics which investigates the causes and remedies of the errors committed by the learners. So, the present study intends to identify the types and frequency of errors, and their reasons committed by basic level students.

Method

The researcher adopted the positivism as a philosophical approach and survey research design under quantitative method so as to fulfil the objectives of the study. Positivism is an epistemological position, focuses on the importance of objectivity and evidence in searching for truth. In positivism, the facts and values are distinct, thus making it possible to conduct objective and value free inquiry (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Here, the researcher should distance from any impact on their research findings. Similarly, survey research is a kind of research which can study both large and small population by selecting and studying sample from the total population. Survey research attempts to identify attitudes and events at a single point of time (Nunan, 1992). The total population of this study were the basic level (8th grade) students of Nepal. However, only students from two schools of Palpa and two schools of Rupandehi district (i.e. 10 from each) were randomly selected. The students were asked to write a composition on different titles such as computer, favourite festival, my school, games and sports. Finally, the data were described and analysed following Brown (1980), Corder (1974); Lennon (1991).

Results and Discussion

The main purpose of present study was to identify frequency, types and causes of errors. Here, errors have been analysed in terms of frequency and their types: identification, description and explanation. No description can be made without identifying the errors. Once the data is collected, the errors have to be identified.

Frequency of Errors committed by Basic Level Students

After identifying the errors from the students' written essays, they were classified into twelve categories in terms of their frequency. They were sub-verb agreement, spelling,

capitalization, word order, wrong articles, and prepositions and so on. The number and percentage of errors are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Frequency of writing errors committed by basic level students

| No. | Types of Errors | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|---------------------------|------------|------------|
| 1. | Sub-verb Agreement | 40 | 19.80 |
| 2. | Spelling | 35 | 17.32 |
| 3. | Capitalization | 25 | 12.37 |
| 4. | Singular and plural forms | 22 | 10.89 |
| 5. | Wrong form of verbs | 18 | 8.91 |
| 6. | Word order | 17 | 8.41 |
| 7. | Wrong articles | 12 | 5.94 |
| 8. | Wrong prepositions | 12 | 5.94 |
| 9. | Verb tense | 10 | 4.95 |
| 10. | Missing verb forms | 5 | 2.47 |
| 11. | Wrong adverb | 3 | 1.48 |
| 12. | Repetition | 3 | 1.48 |
| | Total | 202 | 100 |

Table 1 shows that there were 12 grammatical errors in the essays written by the students. Out of 202 recorded errors, 19.80% errors occurred in subject verb agreement. The second highest number of errors was on spelling which possessed 17.32 %. There were a similar number of errors on capitalization and singular/ plural forms. The frequency of capitalization was 12.37% and singular / plural form was 10.89%. Similarly, the forms of verbs and wrong order in sentences were similar. The former consisted of 8.91% and the latter 8.41%. The wrong number of articles and prepositions was the same i.e. 5.94%. Only 4.95 % errors were found in tense forms of the verbs. The least number of errors were there in adverbs and repetition that possessed only 1.48% errors.

The aforementioned description reveals that the most frequent errors committed by the basic level students were sub-verb agreements. The selection of wrong adverbs and repetitions of items were the least frequent errors and they were caused due to both intralingual and interlingual interference. In this connection, the present study is similar to the research of Al-Khasawneh (2014) who claimed that his students committed writing errors such as use of article, use of preposition, subject verb agreement, word order, spelling and fragment and they were caused by intralingual and interlingual reasons. Similarly, Sawalmeh (2013) identified 10 categories of errors in students' writings: verb tense, word order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spellings, capitalization, articles sentence fragments and prepositions. The total number of errors made by the thirty students was 1422. The most committed errors were subject- verb agreement errors with the frequency of 235 (16.5%) and the least committed errors were capitalization errors with the frequency of 88 (6.3 %). James (1988) 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 (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 had the frequency of 196 (33.4%). The least committed errors were with the frequency of 7 (1.2%). Moreover, Yahya et al. (2012) identified 11 categories of errors in students' writings: articles, possessives, prepositions, pronouns, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, verbs, infinitive "to", word choice and spelling. The total number of errors made by the thirty students was 665. The most committed errors were singular plural errors with the frequency of 64 (9.62%) and the least committed errors were infinitive to errors with the frequency of 7 (1.05 %). It was concluded that most of the errors occurred due to only L1 transfer.

The Common Errors and their Analysis

After collecting the written essays 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); James (1998).

Table 2. The Common Errors and their Analysis

| SN | Identifying the errors | Describing the errors | Explaining the errors |
|----|---|--|--|
| 1. | It <i>hamper</i> our study. | There is an error in sub-verb agreement (omission). With a singular subject, a singular verb is used in English. Correct form: <i>It hampers our study.</i> | This is an intralingual error. Students commit such errors due to lack of knowledge in target language elements. |
| 2. | They make us <i>engetic</i> . | There is a spelling error (omission) in this sentence. Correct form: <i>energetic</i> . | This is an intralingual error, i.e. overgeneralization. Such an error is caused due to lack of foreign language rules. |
| 3. | It can perform <i>Many</i> things. | It is an error in capitalization. Correct form: <i>It can perform many things.</i> | This is an intralingual error. Students commit such error due to lack of rules in capitalization. |
| 4. | There are about 100 <i>teacher</i> . | It is an error in pluralization (omission). Correct form: <i>There are about 100 teachers.</i> | This is an interlingual error. Such errors are caused due to the negative transfer of learner's L1. |
| 5. | We should <i>used</i> computer in our life. | It is an error in the form of verbs (addition). Correct form: <i>We should use computers in our life.</i> | This is an intralingual error. Such error is used due to lack of knowledge in target language system. |

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|-----|--|---|---|
| 6. | Games and sports in our life is importance aspects. | It is an error in word order (i.e. ordering). Correct form: <i>Games and sports are important aspects in our life.</i> | This is an interlingual error. Such error is caused due to the transfer of mother tongue over target language. |
| 7. | It was established at 2010 BS. | It is an error in the use of preposition (i.e. selection) Correct form: | This is an intralingual error. Such an error is caused due to the lack of target language rules. |
| 8. | I play a hour every day. | It is an error in the article (i.e. selection). Correct form: <i>I play an hour every day.</i> | This is an intralingual error. Such errors are caused due to lack of sufficient knowledge in target language. |
| 9. | It cannot be play by poor people. | It is an error intense form (i.e. selection) Correct form: <i>It cannot be played by poor people.</i> | This is an intralingual error. Such errors are caused due to the lack of target language rules. |
| 10. | We should importance of games | This error is in the missing form of the verb (i.e. omission). | This is an intralingual error. Such error is caused due to the lack of sufficient knowledge in English verb system. |
| 11. | I have been waiting still. | This error is in wrong use of adverb. Correct form: <i>I have been waiting for long time.</i> | This is an interlingual error. Such errors are caused due to the negative transfer of learner's L1. |
| 12. | Education gives us knowledge. It gives us ideas. It gives us skill. It gives us techniques. It gives us reasoning power. | There is an error of repetition. Correct form: <i>Education gives us knowledge, skills, techniques, and reasoning power.</i> | This is an intralingual error. Such errors are caused due to lack of sufficient knowledge in target language. |

Table 2 indicates 12 erroneous sentences with their nature, corrected versions and reasons for committing such errors. 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. It hamper on study). When the learners add unnecessary words and commit an error, it is known as errors in *addition* (e.g. We should usedu computer in personal life.). If the learners select wrong alternatives, it is known as *selection* errors (e.g. I play a hour everyday) *Ordering* errors are committed when the learners cannot order the words correctly to form a sentence (e.g. Games and sports in our life is importance aspects). However, these errors need minor corrections and explanations (Lennon, 1991; Corder, 1981).

We can categorize different types of developmental errors. When the errors are committed in pronunciation, stress, and intonation, they are called *phonological errors*. However, the present study has no such errors as it is purely based on writing essays. The errors found in spelling, punctuation, use of capital letters are called *graphological errors*. Here, most of the errors were recorded as graphological errors. They are also found in the form of omission, addition, and so on. Similarly, the errors committed due to wrong selection of words in an appropriate situation are called *lexical errors*. The selection errors recorded in the table 2 are lexical errors. The errors which are committed at the level of grammar due to the ignorance of grammatical rules are called *grammatical errors*. Grammatical errors can be divided into morphological and syntactic errors. These errors can appear in omission, addition, selection, etc.

Many research works have been carried out to identify the developmental errors of learners. In this light, Ridha (2012) identified the errors on the basis of grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. She found that most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their idea. She added that although the rating processes showed that the participants' essays included different types of errors, the grammatical errors and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones.

The ultimate goal of Error Analysis (EA) theory is the explanation of the errors. Whereas the description of errors is purely a linguistic phenomenon, explanation of the errors is psychological one. So, it is concerned with establishing the sources of errors. The sources may be psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics or may reside in the discourse structure. There are the different causes or sources of errors. The first and most important cause of error is *interlingual* or *transfer*. It is very complex notion which is best understood in term of cognitive rather than behaviorist models of learning (Ellis 1995). 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 (Odlin, 1989). If two languages are similar, it has a positive effect on language learning. If two languages are different, it hampers the second or foreign language teaching (Richards, 1994). However, there are few errors committed through this process.

On the other hand, *Intralingual* 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, 1994). 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 (2012) 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, intralingual 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 prefer 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 (intralingual errors) or first language interference (interlingual 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 many 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) suggests that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows 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 and Implications

The present study was intended to identify the errors committed by basic level students of Nepal. To accomplish this, the researcher adopted positivism and objectivism as philosophical approach and survey research design as the method of the study. The data were collected from 40 students randomly selected from four schools (two schools of Palpa and two schools of Rupandehi). They were assigned to write a composition on different subjects. The learners' errors were analyzed in terms of two parameters: (1) frequency of errors, and (2) common errors and their analysis. On the basis of the first parameter, learners' errors were analyzed in terms of subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalizations, articles, prepositions, verbs, word order, and so on. Among 202 recorded errors, the most of them were on subject- verb agreement and spellings and the least of them were in adverbs and repetition. On the basis of second parameter, learners' errors were analyzed in terms of three stages of error: identifying, describing and explaining the errors. In the first stage, the researcher only recognized and listed erroneous sentences. Then these sentences were classified and described under surface strategy errors such as omission, addition, selection, ordering in one hand and developmental errors such as phonological, graphological, lexical and semantic errors on the other. The study revealed that majority of students committed the errors in omission and selection. Similarly, the third stage of error discusses about the sources of errors. Some common sources of errors are interlingual, intralingual (overgeneralization), inherent difficulty, induced errors and so on. However, the present study showed that most of the errors were committed due to interlingual as well as intralingual reasons. This study also provides a feedback for the teachers on how writing essays can affect teaching and learning practices. It can play an important role for improving writing skills of the students. This is a small scale quantitative research based on forty students. However, an interested researcher can conduct a qualitative research in the same territory using interview tool with few teachers in order to identify their views and strategies to error analysis.

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