

Learning English for an Academic Purpose: The Errors of an English Learner

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Abstract : *The English Language can be taught to learners for a more general cause – for communication – or for a specified and special reason – for academic purposes. The latter is characterized by meeting specific needs of the learners; hence a different methodology from that of general English is employed. At a university whose medium of instruction is English, students from non English speaking countries learn intensive English in order to equip themselves with the English skills that are necessary for their academic studies. This research studied the errors that are made by such learners at Solusi University and made recommendations in order to improve English writing skills. The researcher obtained data by observation and diary recording of errors made by all the 2014 Intensive English class N= 7 (from Portuguese speaking countries) throughout that year of learning. Study and error noting of the students' progress exercise books was also done. A modified Ellis (1985)'s Error Analysis procedure was employed, that is: 1. A corpus of language was defined. 2. The errors in the corpus were identified. 3. The errors were classified. 4. The errors were explained. 5. The errors were evaluated. The study also attempted to explain the probable causes of the committed errors.*

Findings: The study revealed Lexicon and semantics errors (vocabulary and meaning); Syntax and morphology errors (words inflections, punctuation, capitalization and grammar) and Orthography errors (spellings). The study further showed that the respondents committed these errors because of mother tongue interference, incompetency in English language skills, limited English Language vocabulary, overgeneralization as well as oversimplification of grammar rules. The study finally recommended incorporation of explicit grammar instructions by lectures in the teaching of intensive English language to these new English learners so as to improve grammatical proficiency in English writing.

Keywords: *English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, English learners, writing errors*

I. Introduction

Mastering of the English Language is very essential in the life of a student in this modern world. Al-Khasawneh (2010) argued that English plays an important role in education and students are expected to communicate effectively in institutions where English is the medium of instruction. Learners have the task of mastering content area in subjects such as History, Social Studies, Geography and Biology which are taught in the target language (English). MaMhmod (2015) propounded that the skills involved in writing cover the application of correct grammatical rules, choosing exact diction, using proper punctuation and organizing ideas into appropriate sentences, paragraphs and passages.

English can be classified into a number of categories mainly due to what is taught, how and why it is taught in that English course. Examples are English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English for Academic Purposes (EAP); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); English for Business and Economics (EBE) and English for Science and Technology (EST).

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is no general English. As the name suggests, it is English which is learnt for a specified function, for this instance, for use in academic studies. It is taught to student so that they can use the English for their further studies. EAP falls under English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which has been defined by Hutchison and Waters (1997) as, "an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reason for learning". It is characterized by meeting specific needs of the learners and is centered on the language appropriate to activities of the discipline it serves in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre (Streven 1988). This means that EAP is designed for a specific discipline hence a different methodology from that of general English is employed, although it assumes some basic knowledge of the English Language system (Dudly and St John 1997).

In Zimbabwe, most universities draw their students mainly from English speaking countries. It is only Solusi and Africa University that take students even from non-English speaking countries; they teach them intensive English before they start their intended degrees. At Solusi University, English for Academic Purpose is taught to students who are speakers of other languages other than English. These students mainly come from Portuguese speaking countries, for example, from Mozambique, Angola and Sao tome. Some of them come from French speaking countries, such as Madagascar and the Democratic Republic of Congo. When they come

to Solusi University, most of them are being exposed to serious English for the first time in their lives. This is so because in their home countries, they usually do English either as an optional or general subject.

To this effect, this study conceptualized and applied error analysis based on the behaviorist theory of language learning which implies that errors are signs that a language learner have simply because she/he has not yet mastered the rules of the target language. This is also supported by (Brown, cited in Khodabandeh 2007). What is therefore important is to find causes of the errors committed so that the instructors are able to advise the learners accordingly.

1.1 Related Researches

A number of researches associated with the learning of English language especially as a second or foreign language have been carried out. Mahmud (2015) studied “errors” in foreign language writing of the grade VIII students in order to explore why and what sort of errors they commit in writing. One hundred and twenty respondents from twelve non-government schools of Dhaka city were involved to render the errors with the association of writing composition test as well as focused group discussion. By using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods, the study revealed that respondents mostly undergo the errors of tense, spelling, article, subject-verb agreement, preposition and miscellaneous errors. The findings also revealed low English writing competence of the respondents mainly as a result of poor grammar knowledge of target language, interference from mother language and limited vocabulary size.

Abdul; Goh and Wan (2004), in a similar study in China, identified and classified comprehensible and incomprehensible errors committed by the respondents at a school set-up, and attempted to explain the probable causes of such errors. Findings revealed that most of the errors committed by the respondents were comprehensible ones, particular wrong use of verbs, prepositions and spellings. The researchers suggested that the errors committed by the respondents were mainly due to over-generalization and simplification. They, therefore, recommended the incorporation of precise grammar instructions by English as a Second Language teachers so as to help the learners improve grammatical competence in English writing.

Holling (2004) also studied the errors made by 8th graders in Texas, USA. The main errors were spellings (some of which were to have been mastered at that level, hence they were likely to irritate the rater). Punctuation, syntactic, preposition and verbal errors were the significant errors of the study.

In a similar study, Takagi (1982) analyzed article errors made in written English by Japanese students of English as a Foreign Language. The study concentrated on the types of article errors that troubled the learner most. The omission error was prevalent mainly due to first language interference. The study also showed that the group which was in the higher grade in school was not always the ones which made fewer errors.

Mark (2014) carried a study whose findings provided evidence of transfer across situations in EAP contexts, that is, (a) instruction can result in transfer, and such transfer can (b) involve various kinds of learning, (c) have a positive impact on the quality of students' work, (d) occur in situations that place minimal demands on students' memories and in situations that place greater demands on students' memories, and (e) occur across varying distances.

At university level, Al-Khasawneh (2010) studied the errors made by Arab post grad students and the study exposed that the students faced problems in relation to vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling and referencing. Basrah (2013) studied grammatical errors committed upper secondary school learners in writing. In the study, learners' errors were recorded and classified based on types and forms of errors. Findings revealed wrong and inappropriate use of parts of speech like, nouns, verbs, adjectives and tenses.

Hussein and Mahmoud (2011) conducted a study in order to investigate and classify the grammatical errors in the writings of 62 students of the Department of English Literature and Translation at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan. The study revealed that the category that included the largest number of errors was the errors of prepositions, which comprised 26% of the total errors. Other errors included morphological errors, articles, verbs, active and passive and tenses.

In the literature review above, it can be seen that very little research has been done in Africa, let alone Zimbabwe, hence the relevance of this study.

1.2 Research Problem

Speaker of other Languages have to learn English Language when they are enrolled at an institution whose medium of instruction is English. Teaching English to these students for Academic Purposes has proved to be difficulty. Learners produce errors of various linguistic and non-linguistic kinds. Some of these errors reveal anomalies in the English Language while others are simple due to students' inadequacies in the new language. This study wanted to expose the errors produced by such learners.

1.3 Research Questions

- Which types of errors are made by Intensive English learners at Solusi University?
- What are the possible causes of these errors?

- Which recommendations can be given to curb this problem?

II. Materials and Methods

The study employed the qualitative research methodology. The researcher obtained data by:

- Observation and diary recording

The researcher, who was also the lecturer for intensive English courses, observed and recorded the errors made by the 2014 Intensive English Class (N=7) throughout the year of Intensive English learning.

- Study of students' progress exercise books

At the end of 2014, a corpus study of the students' progress exercise books was done. Errors were noted and recorded by the researcher.

The obtained data was ready for analysis and the following error analysis procedure was employed:

- The language errors were defined.
- The errors were classified.
- The errors were explained.
- The errors were evaluated.

III. Results and Discussion

There were many errors committed by the respondents. Occurrence of more than one error in a sentence was a common phenomenon. As a result, the researcher at times used just words (and not sentences) to point to these errors for clarity's sake. Errors found were: morphology errors (wrong inflectional forms and other omissions); syntax errors (in complete sentences, punctuation, capitalization and grammar); lexicon and semantics errors (vocabulary and meaning) and orthography errors (spellings).

3.1 Morphology and Syntax Errors

Jackson (2007:19) described grammar in terms of morphology and syntax; "A sub-discipline of linguistics concerned mainly with the structure of words (morphology) and sentences (syntax)". This shows the centrality of these two linguistic components in grammar. The following are the errors under the above category that were done by the respondents.

a) Incomplete words

A number of respondents often wrote incomplete words when writing sentences, for instance:

1. Our Father in even (for heaven in the Lord's Prayer)
2. vigilantizing instead of invigilating

Although Abdul; Goh and Wan (2004) attributed morphological errors to over-generalization and a simplification strategy on the learners' part, it can be argued that such errors are likely to be caused by wrong hearing (especially by novice language learners) who can fail to distinguish sounds especially from a different accent from what they are used to. For this instance, it should be noted that English accent (the target language) is different from the Portuguese (the respondents' language). This tally with Mahmud (2015) who argued that writing as one of the four language skills, in real world contexts, is not a solitary enterprise but a social act; neither is it an activity in its own right but one which serves the other skills. This means that writing has a strong relation with reading, listening and speaking.

A lecturer should therefore put effort to make his/her pronunciation clear and voice audible for the learners to grasp the concepts correctly.

b) Reversals

Closely linked to the above problem, there was a problem of reversal. Some respondents confused not the usual m/w or the b/d but m/n.

For example:

1. moun for noun
2. mam for man
3. homest for honest

It may possibly because of the pronunciation of m, for instance the word sim in Portuguese is pronounce /sing / and fim, /feeng.

Again, in the Portuguese alphabet, some sounds are different from the English sound, for example "a" /ah/ is very similar to the way "r" is pronounced in English. This can confuse a Portuguese speaking English learner.

c) Missing words

It was also common for respondents to omit some vital words (different parts of speech) when writing sentences. Some examples are given below.

1. Cow is a domestic animal.
2. People could not go to work normally because were afraid to be taken by whitemen.
3. I liked that moment because was so good.
4. We remember the drama because were delighted. (we omitted)
5. The most expensive meal I have eaten is redfish. (ever omitted)

In number one, a (an article) has been left out at the beginning of the sentence, while in number two to five, the omitted words were supposed to be inserted between the italic words, for instance, in number two, they (pronoun) was omitted while in number three, it (pronoun) was also omitted.

On putting a wrong article or omitting a necessary one, one can agree with Muhmud (2015) who proposed that it can be caused by failure to differentiate definite from indefinite articles. This is so because in the Portuguese vocabulary, for instance, a porta meaning "the door" is not the same as saying uma porta meaning "a door", o dia (the day).

| Portuguese | English |
|------------|------------------------|
| A | the (definite article) |
| O | the (definite article) |
| Uma | a (indefinite article) |

Referring to the examples above, the meaning of "a" in Portuguese and English are different and this could have caused confusion among the respondents.

The other reason can be that, in Portuguese, unlike in English, nouns are usually written with their definite articles, for example o dia (the day), thus omission of articles when writing in the English Language can occur.

d) Incomplete sentences

An outstanding syntax error committed by the respondents was the writing of incomplete sentences.

Examples:

1. Because we all like different things.
2. Which are found in the countryside.

The above are clauses and not full sentences. This showed that there was a tendency of wrongly taking phrases and clauses as complete sentences by the respondents. It could have been caused by inadequate knowledge of syntactical aspects which then cause English learners to overgeneralize and oversimplify construction rules, thus mixing up the clause and sentence construction rules.

e) Punctuation

Omission of punctuation marks at the end of sentences was common at all levels of intensive English learning. Some examples include:

1. What do you recommend for breakfast (omission of a question mark)
2. He was as tall as a tower (omission of a full stop)

Omissions on hyphenated words/phrases and contracted forms, for instance, Im for I'm was also rampant among the respondents.

Punctuation errors are usually done by learners who are not yet competent in the target language.

f) Capitalization

Capitalization was sometimes ignored where it was necessary. It could be at the beginning of sentences, for instance,

1. he will speak to them tomorrow.

Or, within a sentence, for example,

1. May i see you now.
2. I am Abel, i 'm 26years old.

There was also a recurrence of the use of a small letter for proper nouns, for example, god for God and february for February.

Again, starting a quotation with a small letter was common, for example'

1. He said, "take care".

In most of the punctuation errors, the respondents failed to realize that some rule application can be overridden by others, for instance, while learners may get that capital letters are put at the beginning of sentences, the letter I is always written in a capital form even within a sentence. The same applies to a quotation that always starts with a capital letter.

g) Wrong prepositions

Jackson (2007) described a preposition as a member of a word class that is used to connect a noun (phrase) to other elements of a sentence. As the name suggests, the prefix pre- means before, hence, preposition means preceding position; prepositions usually come before the words they complement. Some of them show how two parts of a sentence are related in terms of time or space. Respondents' preposition errors included:

1. I am a student in Solusi University. (Instead of at)
2. Would you come to lunch tomorrow? (Instead of for)
3. People were taken in Africa to America. (Instead of from)

Holling (2004) argued that previous researches (that is, before 2004) had not really addressed why preposition errors are frequent among English language learners. He however suggested that it might be that English has several phrasal verbs that contain a verb and a preposition; the prepositions that may have a meaning in the phrasal verb but does not necessarily match the meaning of the preposition alone.

For this study, one can argue that preposition errors could have been caused by ignorance in rule restriction, for instance, where one general preposition can be used in Portuguese, three specific ones are used in English as in:

De (Portuguese) - from, of, about (English)

Em (Portuguese) – in, on, at (English)

Considering the situation above, a Portuguese speaker, is therefore likely to make mistakes in the target language.

h) Wrong word order

A grammatical sentence is one whose words are placed at the appropriate position. However, some of the respondents could twist the appropriate order, thus compromising the meanings of their written sentences, for example;

1. My mother named is Lubinda. for My mother is Lubinda.
2. Why he is afraid of everything? for Why is he afraid of everything?
3. I don't know what are they watching on television. for I don't know what they are watching on television.

Such errors can be caused by interference errors from the learners' first language.

i) Subject-verb-agreement

The agreement in phrases, clauses and sentences, which is also known as concord, is an important grammatical rule that permits the harmonious unit of the different grammatical units. Mahmud (Undated) propounded that the agreement between subject and verb is influenced by the subject form, that is, whether it is singular or plural.

Respondents were making such errors:

1. All the students was surprised at the announcement.
2. They was singing happy birthday songs for me.

As a rule, a plural verb is always preceded by a plural noun.

Hollin (2004) argued that such errors are common to English Language learners who are not yet competent in the language.

3.2 Lexicon and Semantics errors

Chapman (2011) explained that the semantics of a language determines the meanings of the words and the sentences of the language, that is, the literal meaning. On the same note, Kearns (2011:1) propounded that semantics "deals with the literal meaning of words and the meaning of the way they are combined, which taken together form the core of meaning, or the starting point from which the whole meaning of the particular utterance is constructed". This means that wrong words can affect the meaning of a given phrase, clause or sentence.

a) Wrong word

Appearance of wrong words in the respondents' written work was common. Some of them are given below.

1. Prepare vegetables without watching them. (Instead of washing)
2. That year I gave my effort because I wanted to pass. (Instead of put)

The error in number one was due to mother tongue (Portuguese) interference; in Portuguese, ch has the sound /shh/ and not /tch/. As a result an English learner can easily make the error in number one.

Other wrong word related errors included:

1. My mother told me that when I was children.
2. The couple is having a bed time.
3. That was my waste dream.
4. I enjoyed myself these week.

Causes of such errors can be many; it can be due to incompetency in the target language, for instance, for number two and three, it is incompetence in phonemes. One can also concur with Muhmud (2015) who argued that it is due to limited vocabulary. Schmitt (2010) proposed that according to research, vocabulary size is directly related to the ability to use English in various ways.

b) Multiple errors

Multiple errors by learners were common especially during the first semester of learning. However, some learner even produced them towards the end of the year (2014). Examples are given below.

1. I singuebed and then the people is laugh me.

Some of the errors in the sentence above show mother tongue interference, that is, Portuguese; some English words are similar in spelling to Portuguese as those shown above. As a result, a learner can easily make the errors in question.

| Portuguese | English |
|------------|----------|
| Singue | sing |
| Musica | musician |
| Mente | mind |

Some of sentences were grammatically correct but semantically wrong, for instance:

2. He stood me and told me to go to the cafeteria.
3. My neighbour says his plants grow well because he talks.

Other sentences were so wrong that it was difficult to get the intended meaning, for example:

4. Mr Hall is the architect designed who my neighbor's bun.

Such errors maybe caused by thinking in vernacular and trying to write in English. Such errors have been classified by Abdul; Goh and Wan, (2004) as incomprehensible errors and they suggested that a possible explanation for their occurrence is incomplete application of rules.

3.3 Spelling Errors

One can argue that it is normal for a learner of a new language to make spelling errors. However, it is of paramount importance for the causes of such errors to be known especially by the instructor of the target language so that s/he can correct the learner accordingly.

Some spelling errors that the respondents made were a result of writing words as they sound, for example:

1. He is the captain of the ship wich will go to India tonight. (for which)
2. Egg souce (for sauce)
3. Timi (for time)
4. Tecnical (for technical)
5. Sisthematic (for systematic)

Other wrong spellings were due to overgeneralization on the part of the respondents, for instance:

1. Writting (for writing)
2. Siting (for sitting)

The two wrong spellings writting and siting show irregularities in the English Language hence the learner should be alert when it comes to spellings.

Still other spelling mistakes in the target language show mother tongue interference and overgeneralization, for example:

1. Musica (Portuguese) for music (English)

Such an error can be expected since some words, like cinema, are spelt the same in both Portuguese and English, hence some learners can overgeneralize and make errors.

More spelling errors were committed by the respondents like the one given below:

1. beautfull (for beautiful)

Such errors can be a result of generalizing rules on derivational morphology. Compound words like football are a result of just combining foot +ball without any alterations, yet this rule cannot be applied on the given example. This tally Holling (2004)'s argument that spelling errors can be expected because the graphophonemic system of English is inconsistent.

IV. Conclusion

When viewing the findings above, it can be concluded that the respondents made a number of common errors in their written work and most of them were usually made on difficult and irregular words. Mother tongue interference; incompetence in the target language and rules; overgeneralization and oversimplification of rules were the main causes of errors committed by the respondents. This means that there is need for the responsible instructors to concentrate on these raised issues rather than for them to consistently blame the curriculum specification that usually emphasizes communicative competence. For proactive and concerned instructors, it is important try to determine which facets of English writing that continues to impede students in their written work and then concentrate on such. The good news is that the learners have a potential of acquiring full grammatical competency as Chipere (2009) quoted in Miller 2011 commented.

The findings of this study have some pedagogical implications for intensive English lecturers and course designers at Solusi University and elsewhere. This study recommends the use of the findings above to develop a coherent program for intensive English to enhance grammatical skills in the problem areas. It also recommends the incorporation of explicit grammar instructions by lectures in the teaching of intensive English language to these new English learners so as to improve grammatical proficiency in English writing.

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