A STUDY OF ERRORS IN UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH WRITING AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Rigan Mazumder

Assistant Professor of English at the Department of Humanities, Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology, Chittagong-4349, BANGLADESH.

mazumderrigan@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine errors committed in writing by first year undergraduates of Chittagong University of Engi neering and Technology, Bangladesh. To achieve the objectives, sixty (male and female) undergraduates from two departments were observed. Written compositions were used as research data. All the identified errors were classified into five main categories. Frequency and percentage were used for data analysis. The study has found grammar as the greatest category where undergraduates commit errors in writing. The study is hoped to shed light on ways in which students internalize the rules of target language and the findings are expected to aid in designing curricula for better fulfillment of the objectives of teaching and learning of English as a foreign language as well as assisting in developing effective teaching methodology.

INTRODUCTION

As cited in Chih Hsin Hsu (2013), grammar is regarded as a whole system and structure of a language. It consists of syntax, morphology, semantics, and phonology. Larsen- Freeman (1997) indicates that grammar encompasses the three dimensions of morphosyntax (form), meaning, and pragmatics (use).Grammatical errors thus mean inaccurate forms, semantic meanings, and use. L2 learners will use L2 accurately, meaningfully and appropriately after mastering these three dimensions.

Besides, Burt and Kiparsky (1972; as cited in Chih Hsin Hsu, ibid) point out that grammatical errors are linguistically morphological, lexical, syntactic, and orthographic errors.

A distinction is made by linguists (Brown, 2000; Corder, 1967) between errors and mistakes. Corder (1967) states that mistakes occur non-systematically out of chance circumstances, such as slips of the tongue, anxiety, fatigue, etc. As such, mistakes appear at the performance level. Hence they are occasional and irregular. Because learners make mistakes due to deficient attention while utilizing a known system, they can self-correct them once concentrating.

On the other hand, errors occur at the competence level, as the result of which they occur regularly and frequently in language learners' use of the target language. Errors are generated out of learners' lack of systematic understanding of the target language and can indicate a leaner's level of linguistic competence. Error studies, therefore, play a necessary role in demonstrating L2 learners' learning problems.

According to Corder (1967), it is possible to determine the areas which need reinforcement in teaching after analyzing the errors systematically. Johanson (1975) also emphasized error

analysis as the best tool for describing and explaining errors committed by learners of other languages.

According to Giri (2010), though errors are called 'unwanted forms' or 'unsuccessful bits', they are no longer seen as bits of crime. They are recognized as having their own underlying system which can be described in their own terms. The learners' errors carry a tremendous value particularly in the field of language teaching. That is why, now-a-days they are not treated negative outcomes but the most apparent proof that learners are making necessary progress in developing their system of the language they are learning.

For the last six decades, linguists have been working hard to develop approaches to analyze grammatical errors in ESL/EFL and have formulated methods like error analysis, contrastive analysis, interlanguage study, etc.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the Indian subcontinent, English proficiency has been an important factor in the academia since the British colonial era. Till the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, English had the official status of the second language. After independence, English is now learnt in Bangladesh as a foreign language. But the importance of English has tremendously grown in the academia as well as in the social arena in the post- independence era in Bangladesh. From admission into academia to recruitment in jobs, one skill that is invariably tested is the candidates' proficiency in English. Likewise, English is taught from early childhood in Bangladesh. English teachers are in high demand and English-knowing candidates are sought after in industries. In fact, over the years, English teaching and learning has grown into an industry itself. Currently some twenty million people of Bangladesh are living and working abroad. English proficiency is a deciding factor in their employability. Noteworthily, in recent years, educated and skilled people are increasingly seeking to work abroad, thanks to the globalization of the country's economy. University graduates have grown interest in receiving higher education abroad. This is evident in the ever-growing number of people taking standard language tests like IELTS, TOEFL, etc. every year.

On top of all this, English is the medium of instruction in most universities in Bangladesh. Learners' lack of proficiency in English poses a big challenge for teachers in successfully conducting their courses and there is a general dissatisfaction among teachers of all disciplines over learners' inability to use language properly. In this backdrop, a systematic study of learners' problems in using English is of utmost importance.

Like in most universities of Bangladesh, English is the medium of instruction in Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology, Bangladesh. Students get admitted here on completion of at least twelve years of formal education—primary, secondary, and higher secondary. English is taught at all these levels. Hence it is quite disheartening to find students fundamentally deficient in proper language use. Universities also conduct competitive admission tests prior to intaking students into undergraduate programmes. One of the skills examined in admission tests is the use of English. Seemingly all these previous years of instruction and tests have failed to ensure that tertiary institutions have students with prerequisite skills in language use. This scenario has not escaped the attention of the present author as an English teacher. The present study also aims to examine the validity of some claims that are generally made in similar studies at home and abroad and add to the existing knowledge by suggesting more encompassing measures to be taken across academic levels.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify various kinds of grammatical errors in learners' use of English;

2. To describe and classify the grammatical errors found;

3. To determine their frequency of occurrence;

4. To find out the sources of these errors; and

5. To suggest pedagogical measures.

METHODOLOGY

This is a corpus study of students' written production following four weeks (twelve class hours) of instruction in grammar and general mechanics of writing. Most of the error categories found in the study were covered in the instruction period. The procedure followed in the error study is collection of data, identification of errors, description and classification of errors, exploring sources of errors, determination of percentage and frequency of errors, and suggestion of pedagogical measures.

Population

The population of this study consisted of sixty first semester students from two departments of CUET—Civil and Water Resources Engineering, and Mechatronics and Industrial Engineering—studying English in the 2016-17 academic year.

Data

Data were collected from the sixty students in the form of 250-300 word narrative essay writing.

Data Collection

The students were asked to write a 250-300 word English essay narrating "My Last One Month at the University" in fifty minutes. Then the essays were collected for analysis.

Statistics

The statistics used for data analysis were frequency and percentage.

Data Analysis

Two parameters have been considered in analyzing data—text-based and learner-based. The subjective written texts have been analyzed to identify and describe the corpus of errors committed. The learner-based variables have been considered to see whether learners' gender, previous location and academic background have to do with the frequency and nature of the errors they commit.

Text Based Analysis

Grammatical errors were identified and categorized into five different types as proposed by James (1998), including general grammatical errors(prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, case, verbs, pronouns, nouns, articles), substance errors(capitalization, punctuation, spelling), lexical errors(selection and formation of words), syntactic errors(sentence structure, subordination/coordination, and word order), and semantic errors(miscommunication and ambiguous communication). Errors were tallied and put into these categories.

Drawing from Ellis (1997), the errors were then exemplified to identify their characteristics under omission (leaving out grammatical elements required for sentences), misformation

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(using wrong forms of words or structures), misordering (putting phrases and clauses in wrong orders), and overgeneralization (overly using certain grammatical forms).

LIMITATIONS

1. As an error analysis, this study characteristically focuses on learners' subjective production in the target language and does not cover some other aspects like students' attempt at error avoidance. Objective tests using MCQs and questionnaires will shed more light on learners' overall knowledge level of the target language.

2. As for learner-based hierarchies of errors, separate learner-based studies should be carried out covering other variables like age, ethnicity, etc, which will tell whether group-specific teaching materials should be developed.

RESULTS

The results of grammatical error analysis of the written texts are shown below:

Type of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1. General Grammatical Errors	**193**	**41.15**
1.1. Articles	17	3.62
1.2. Nouns	19	4.05
1.3. Pronouns	07	1.50
1.4. Verbs	64	13.64
1.5. Case	23	4.90
1.6. Adjectives	11	2.34
1.7. Adverbs	10	2.14
1.8. Prepositions	28	5.98
1.9. Tautology	14	2.99
2. Substance Errors	**60**	**12.80**
2.1. Capitalization	27	5.76
2.2. Punctuation	19	4.05
2.3. Spelling	14	2.99
3. Lexical Errors	**68**	**14.50**
3.1. Word Selection	48	10.23
3.2. Word Formation	20	4.27
4. Syntactic Errors	**139**	**29.63**
4.1. Sentence Structure	79	16.85
4.2. Coordination/Subordination	29	6.18
4.3. Ordering	31	6.60
5. Semantic Errors	**09**	**01.92**
5.1. Miscommunication	03	0.64
5.2. Ambiguous Communication	06	1.28
Total	**469**	**100**

Data in the given table indicate that the two most frequent error types are syntactic errors: sentence structure, coordination and subordination, and ordering (29.63%); and general grammatical errors: verbs, nouns, case, articles, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, and tautology (41.15%).Substance errors account for 12.80% of total errors. Lexical errors constitute 14.50% of total errors and semantic errors make up 1.92%.

In terms of characteristics of the errors found in the study, errors were divided into four categories: omission, misformation, misordering, and overgeneralization.

Omission means the leaving out of elements that are formally necessary to complete the sentence; for example, no article, no finite verb, no auxiliary verb, no preposition, no punctuation, no possessive case, no object, and no subject.

Examples:

i) They gave me advice how to live this life.

ii) Otherwise, I will not granted any food.

iii) Now it's time to come the great point.

iv) Another thing is very good, which I can say about group study.

v) One month ago I admitted in cuet.

vi) My father also with me.

vii) Now I am living a hostel.

viii) Generally I don't like lonely.

ix) It is almost one month activities.

Mis-formation is the use of wrong forms of words or structures in the sentence; for example, misspelling, incorrect word selection, wrong form of verbs, wrong form of adverbs, wrong form of adjectives, and wrong form of nouns.

Examples:

i) …because my parent's will not be with me.

ii) I strengthed myself.

iii) The most amazing thing is that we celebrate each-others birthday.

iv) I did not lost only a uncle…

v) I don't wanna memorize that moment again.

vi) Whatever the journey started.

vii) But the other is very lightful.

viii) Most of the teacher's behavior is friendly and so helpful.

ix) Usually hall life is full of freedomness.

Misordering means putting words and clauses in the wrong order; for example, incorrect placement of nouns, verbs, and modifying elements.

Examples:

i) We reached at Dhaka about at 6:00 am.

ii) Anyway, the point is how's going on in my life in the past 1 month.

iii) After a whole one-month staying away from home just a few days ago I went home.

iv) I had come to Chittagong to study alone.

v) On that day I proud myself for that now I am a cuetian.

vi) Some needed of mine I brought from phartali market.

vii) This is also helping me knowing much more what I did not know before coming here.

viii) … always there are many people stay with me.

Overgeneralization means ignoring rule restriction such as putting unnecessary prepositions, applying _ed past tense signal with irregular verbs, putting _s to signal plural of exceptional nouns, etc.

Examples:

i)   I sitted in a hall.

ii)   Then came the more hard part.

iii)   … and the person who understood the problem, he teaches us and solves the problem.

iv)   At now I follow the rules that my elder brother gave me.

v)   I was live in Dhaka city.

vi)   I hope I will make some close friend as like as family members.

vii)   Every steps can pass as mens wish.

LEARNER BASED ANALYSIS

The author also tried to examine the validity of some generally held notions in the field of EFL/ESL teaching-learning based on some learner variables. Three variables were taken into account: learners' gender (male/female), previous location (urban/semi-urban/rural) and previous academic background (Bangla Medium/English Medium/Madrasa). It is to be noted that the subjects did not offer great variety in terms of these variables.28.3 % of the participants were female, 5% hailed from semi-urban or rural areas; 5% had English Medium background and only one had Madrasa background. Most of the participants were from urban areas having Bangla Medium background.

It was noted that female learners did slightly better than their male counterparts. 28.3 % females made 23% of total errors.

The only student with Madrasa background made 2.99% of total errors, which was apparently due to their previous academic background.

5% of the total participants having English Medium background did relatively well in overall count. They accounted for 1.92% of total errors. They were particularly better in sentence construction than the other participants.

There were only three participants with non-urban background. They made 29 errors.

Considering the overall hierarchies of difficulty that this study provided, it can be said that English Medium students did the best and Madrasa students did the worst. Female students with urban background were slightly better than their male counterparts. However, particular studies covering more of these variables need to be undertaken to substantiate these observations.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

It is observed that the total corpus of errors committed by learners includes both interlingual and intralingual errors as hypothesized by Selinker (1972) and Richards & Sampson (1994). Intralingual errors refer to overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, and incomplete application of rules. Interlingual interference, also known as L1 Transfer, means the influence of learners' mother tongue. They are generally evident in learners' omission of words and misordering of words and sentences and are generally attributed to the difference between learners' L1 and the target language. More comprehensive contrastive analyses are needed to identify differences between Bangla and English to make students aware of possible areas of

L1 Transfer. To curb intralingual errors, strategies of language learning and strategies of second language communication should be redesigned based on learners' L2 errors.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of the findings of the study, the following measures are suggested for effective teaching-learning of English at tertiary level in CUET and Bangladesh.

1. Frequency and percentage counts of errors in this study suggest the varying extents of difficulty in the global hierarchy of difficulties in using/learning particular items. These items should be focused on in classroom instruction and remedial exercises.

2. More time should be dedicated to grammar instruction in the classroom. Inadequate instruction will result in persistent fossilization, classroom pidgins and low level of accuracy.

3. Orientation of syllabi should be transformed from the conventional 'teacher-generated' to the 'needs-based'. The overall process of syllabus designing should be seriously rethought so as to reflect teachers' and learners' feedback.

4. Universities should reset the prerequisite language skills for admission into tertiary education to create a precondition for students to take more care of their language at previous academic levels.

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