

ANALYSIS OF ERRORS IN THE ENGLISH WRITINGS OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

Ronald Candy S. Lasaten,

Faculty,
Mariano Marcos State University
College of Teacher Education, Laoag City, Philippines.

ABSTRACT

Using the qualitative research design, the study aimed to analyze the common linguistic errors in the English writings of teacher education students. This paper specifically sought to identify and describe the prevailing linguistic errors in the English writings of the students. Moreover, it investigated the possible causes of these errors and drew out implications to language learning and teaching. Using random sampling, the written compositions of the students were subjected to error analysis using the Taxonomy of Errors patterned after the model of Darus and Ching (2009.)

The study found out that *errors in verb tenses* are the most common linguistic errors of the students, followed by *error in sentence structure, punctuations, word choice, spelling, use of prepositions* and *articles*. These errors fall under the grammatical, mechanics/substance and syntactic aspects of writing English. Majority of these errors are caused by learners' poor knowledge of the target language (English), specifically ignorance of rule restrictions. Others are attributed to the learners' carelessness, first language transfer or interference and limited vocabulary in the target language.

Through this study, language teachers are guided to assess their own teaching methodologies and identify their students' ability in writing and to choose the strategies and topics that are best suited to their students.

Keywords: Error Analysis, linguistic errors, linguistic skills, language transfer.

INTRODUCTION:

For years, there have been many studies on the process of first language (L1) acquisition and second language (L2) learning. Findings about L1 acquisition have been adapted to L2 learning and it has been concluded that the process works in a similar way. Because of the intricacies about L1 acquisition and L2 learning, several linguists and language researchers have been greatly interested to study errors made by L2 learners. They believe that learners' errors hold a significant role in improving language teaching-learning process.

Studying how English language learners acquire and learn their L1 is as important as studying how they learn their L2. That is the greatest concern of language teachers, specialists and researchers. While it is true that Chomsky (1965) claimed the existence of a mysterious innate property of language, a "little black box," called *language acquisition device* (LAD) to explain the learners' mastery of their L1 in such a short time despite the highly abstract nature of the rules of language, but still learners normally commit linguistic errors, especially in the learning of L2.

Several linguists and language researchers have been greatly interested to study errors made by second language learners. It is believed that learners' errors hold a significant role in improving language teaching-learning process. The learners' errors are manifested in the four linguistic tasks. Compared to speaking, reading and listening, writing is the most dominant manifestation of errors for writing is the most intricate and most complex task. It is the most difficult of the language abilities to acquire (Allen & Corder, 1974). Its level of difficulty varies between native speakers (NS) who think in the language used (in this case it is English) and non-native speakers (NNS) who think in their own L1 (in this case it is Iloko or Ilocano). While writing, non-native speakers have, in general, to think about all those rules they need to apply, rules that native speakers are supposed to have automatized. Therefore, non-native speakers are more prone to making mistakes and/or committing errors.

Concepts on linguistic errors are attributed to *Transfer Theory*. The term *transfer* is a general term describing the carryover of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning. Positive transfer occurs when the prior knowledge benefits the learning task – that is, when a previous item is correctly applied to the present subject matter. On the other hand, negative transfer occurs when the previous performance disrupts the performance on a second task. The latter can be referred to as *interference*, in that previously learned material interferes with subsequent material – a previous item is incorrectly transferred or associated with an item to be learned (Brown, 1994). In the sense of L2 learning, errors are evidences of interference (negative language transfer) of the L2, leading to negative interlingual transfer. Interlingual errors are the result of such form of language transfer (Myles, 2003). Aside from L1 transfer and interference, other possible causes for these linguistic errors include poor knowledge of the target language, overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, simplification, and incomplete application of rules (Huang, 2001).

Meanwhile, there has been decided shift in the approach to analyzing errors. In Contrastive Analysis (CA), the theoretical base of which was behaviorism, errors were seen as bad habits that had been formed. The response was based on the stimulus. It was assumed that interference of the L1 was responsible for the errors made during the transitional period of learning the L2. However, much recent research points to the contrary.

Error analysis has become an interesting task for the teachers teaching writing as it helps them identify their own teaching methodologies and their students' ability in writing and to guide them in choosing the strategies and topics that best suit the students' capacity (Richards, 1992). Pit Corder is the "Father" of Error Analysis (the EA with the "new look"). It was with his article titled, *The Significance of Learner Errors* (1974) that EA took a new turn. Errors used to be *flaws* that needed to be eradicated but Corder presented a completely different point of view. He contended that those errors are important in and of themselves. For learners themselves, errors are indispensable, since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. In fact, Gass and Selinker (2001) defined errors as *red flags* that provide evidence of the learners' knowledge of the L2.

In EA, there has been a change from looking at the product (error) to the process (why students make errors). EA has been the focus of much research, which has led to changes in the attitudes toward errors, evident in a less obsessive avoidance of errors. This cognitive approach sees errors as a clue to what is

happening in the mind. In this approach, errors are seen as a natural phenomenon that must occur as acquiring L1 or learning L2 takes place, before correct grammar rules are completely internalized.

With EA, teachers are relieved to find a more realistic attitude toward errors. Errors are no longer reflection of their teaching methods, but are, rather indicators that learning is taking place, evidence that the mysterious Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is working. So, errors are no longer “bad” but “good” or natural – just as natural as errors that occur in acquiring L1.

In the tertiary level, errors made by English language learners in their productions are so frequent that they could turn heads of so many specialists and language teachers, especially those who are at the front. More noticeable are the errors observed in learner’s written productions that are more eye-catching for they are non-transitory, considering the permanent nature of writing. These errors still exist despite the fact that the students are exposed to the language in almost all of their academic subjects.

It is in this context that the researcher was encouraged to conduct an error analysis to the English writings of the teacher education students of the Mariano Marcos State University College of Teacher Education since the students are not excused from the said prevailing linguistic phenomenon.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

This study benefits language teachers and students. The results of the study provides relevance to language teaching, particularly in correcting linguistic errors in the classroom, providing grammatical explanations, improving curricula, and developing programs and instructional materials. The study provides relief to language teachers to find a more realistic attitude towards errors. For the students, they are given the true picture of what they need to learn, focusing on how to overcome the linguistic difficulties they manifest. Moreover, they may be given insights as to how they can improve their strategies for language learning.

STUDY OBJECTIVES:

This study aimed to analyze the prevailing linguistic errors in the English writings of the teacher education students. Specifically, it sought to: 1) identify the common linguistic errors committed by the students in their English writings; 2) describe the linguistic errors committed by the students; 3) investigate the possible causes of the students’ linguistic errors; and 4) draw out implications of the identified errors to language learning and teaching.

METHODOLOGY:

The study used the qualitative research design. It focused on the English writings of the teacher education students of the Mariano Marcos State University College of Teacher Education (MMSU CTE), who are pursuing Bachelor in Secondary Education (BSEd) and Bachelor in Elementary Education (BEEd). The respondents were second year students, who had already taken English I (Study and Thinking Skills), English II (Writing in the Disciplines) and English III (Speech Communication). Notably, these students, whose first language and second language are Iluko and English, respectively, were enrolled in Literature 2, one of the literature subjects offered in the General Education Program.

To demonstrate the students’ ability to construct a string of well – connected sentences that is grammatically and logically correct; with the congruence to Halliday and Hassan (1976, as cited by Darus & Ching, 2009), the students were asked to write their own composition or short essay about the greatest decision they have ever made in their lives, as one of their tasks in the lesson, *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, from their Literature 2 subject. They were advised to observe the Standard English when writing their compositions. Likewise, they were instructed to write their compositions of not less than 400 words, but not more than 500 words. They were given sufficient time to write. The process of writing was followed. The students started with an outline, then a first draft and a final draft. In a random sampling technique, 100 (50 compositions from each degree program, enough to represent the population) sample written compositions of the students were subjected to error analysis.

The linguistic errors found in their writings were analyzed and categorized according to the Taxonomy of Errors patterned after the model of Darus and Ching (2009), which categorizes errors as to: a) *grammatical* (prepositions, articles, reported speech, singular/plural, adjectives, relative clauses, infinitives, verbs and tenses, and possessive case); b) *syntactic* (coordination and conjunctions,

sentence structure, nouns and pronouns, and word order); c) *lexical* (word choice); d) *semantic* (literal translation); and e) *substance/mechanics* (punctuation, capitalization and spelling). Describing the prevailing linguistic errors was further made.

Focused group discussion (FGD) was also carried out to selected students for the perceptive understanding about the errors they committed, particularly for possible causes of these errors. Statistical tools such as frequency count (*f*), percentage (%) and rank (*r*) were used to treat the data gathered in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Writing as one of the four language skills, in real world contexts, is not a solitary enterprise, it is a social act. It is not an activity in its own right but one which serves the other skills. One major reason for students' low achievement in writing is possibly the fact that writing is a very complex process due to the many skills involved. The skills involved in writing cover the application of correct grammatical rules, choosing exact diction, using proper punctuations, and organizing ideas into appropriate sentences, paragraphs and passage (Richards, Platt & Platt, 2002).

This section presents discussion of the results and findings of the study. Specifically, it presents and describes the common linguistic errors committed by the students. Furthermore, it investigates possible causes of these errors and discusses implications to language learning and teaching.

Table 1 shows the analysis of data that deals with the common linguistic errors committed by the students in their written compositions, including the situation of error gravity which establishes the hierarchy of errors. Evidently, there are a total number of 394 linguistic errors identified and tallied.

Table 1: Result of error analysis in the English writings of the students

| Linguistic Errors | Count of error (f) | Percentage (%) | Hierarchy (r) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------|
| A. Grammatical Errors | | | |
| Verb Tenses | 76 | 19.29 | 1 |
| Prepositions | 26 | 6.60 | 6 |
| Articles | 24 | 6.09 | 7 |
| Infinitives | 6 | 1.52 | 12 |
| Reported Speech | 6 | 1.52 | 12 |
| Singular/Plural | 4 | 1.01 | 16 |
| Adjectives | 4 | 1.01 | 16 |
| Relative Clauses | 4 | 1.01 | 16 |
| Possessive Case | 4 | 1.01 | 16 |
| Total | 154 | 39.02 | |
| B. Syntactic Errors | | | |
| Sentence Structure | 66 | 16.75 | 2.5 |
| Coordination/Conjunction | 10 | 2.54 | 9.5 |
| Nouns and Pronouns | 10 | 2.54 | 9.5 |
| Word Order | 4 | 1.01 | 16 |
| Total | 90 | 22.84 | |
| C. Lexical Errors | | | |
| Word Choice | 36 | 9.14 | 4 |
| Total | 36 | 9.14 | |
| D. Semantic Errors | | | |
| Literal Translation | 12 | 3.05 | 8 |
| Total | 12 | 3.05 | |
| E. Mechanics/Substance | | | |
| Punctuations | 66 | 16.75 | 2.5 |
| Spelling | 30 | 7.61 | 5 |
| Capitalization | 6 | 1.52 | 12 |
| Total | 102 | 25.86 | |
| Total | 394 | 100.00 | |

It is very evident that *errors in verb tenses* are the most common linguistic errors of the students with a total of 76 (19.29%) occurrences, followed by error in *sentence structure* (66 or 16.75%), *punctuations* (66 or 16.75%), *word choice* (36 or 9.14%), *spelling* (30 or 7.61%), *prepositions* (26 or 6.60%) and *articles* (24 or 6.09%).

Among all indicated linguistic errors, *errors in verb tenses* are the most common or prevailing errors of the students in their English writings, with 76 (19.29%) total number of occurrences. It was clearly observed from the students' compositions that they are not consistent in the use of verb tenses. The fact that the compositions are told in the past form of the verbs, they are not cautious of the correct verb tenses to be used. Likewise, they are not aware that verbs also indicate time of occurrence. For example:

1. *I answered and being obedient to him, I agree (agreed) to what he wants (wanted) me to take.*
2. *A year ago, I need (needed) to stop from studying because my parents cannot (could not) afford to send me to school.*

Truly, they are not conscious of the right verb tenses appropriate for the time of occurrence. Students' carelessness and ignorance on the application of rules on verb forms, particularly tenses, are the primary causes of these errors.

The result supports the claim of Sukasame, Kantho, and Narrot (2013) that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) have so much difficulty on tense selection. According to them, though they can use all the tenses comfortably, in some situations they are not confident enough to select the correct tense for consistency.

Such claim is also true to the study of Lim (1990) revealing that English language learners know the rules of tense but when they are supposed to apply the rules, they just jumble it. She added that learners think in their L1 then translate it into English. At the time of translating into English, they feel confused in which tense form they can use specially in present and past tense like whether the sentences should be in present or past form. Limited knowledge of form of verbs and lacking in how to use auxiliary verbs make errors in tense.

Relevant to the foregoing issue, Lennon (1987) identified a total of 2455 errors in the English compositions of 12th grade Korean EFL learners. Findings showed that errors in *be* verbs and auxiliaries were most common, followed by errors in prepositions and that intralingual errors arose more than transfer errors.

Errors in sentence structure (66 or 16.75%) appear to be the next most common errors committed by the students. It was observed from the written work of the students that they could hardly identify the difference of a sentence and a fragment. Moreover, the students' sentences are run-on, making it very confusing for readers. In addition, some of the students are even fond of circumlocution. They could not express their ideas in a direct and clear fashion, leading the sentences to vague and dangling ones. For example:

1. *Myself undesirable and unwanted. (fragment)*
I am undesirable and unwanted. (sentence)
2. *... when we were together and hanging out with each other. (very wordy) ...when we were hanging out together. (simplified)*

These forms of errors are attributed to students' poor knowledge on structure of English which leads to incomprehensible statements in their writings. Hence, the need for enrichment activities on the said problem area is important. Importantly, their language teachers need to encourage and expose them to various reading materials to improve their language skills, particularly on the syntactic aspect of English.

Tied with errors on sentence structure, *errors in punctuations* (66 or 16.75%) are also indicated as most common linguistic errors committed by the students. Through the analysis made, it was

observed that most of the students omit comma before a relative clause. They use comma incorrectly. Likewise, the use of *ellipsis* was over used, when in fact the sentence can be marked with a single period only (i.e. I thought it was the end...). For example:

1. *We did things according to how we wanted it to be done...* (use of ellipsis)
We did things according to how we wanted it to be done. (period)
2. *In our relationships we encounter several struggles.* (omission of comma)
In our relationships, we encounter several struggles. (comma inserted)
3. *I met a girl who happened to be my best of friend.* (no comma before relative clause)
I met a girl, who happened to be my best of friend. (comma before relative clause)

The said prevailing linguistic phenomena, according to Corder (1974), are referred to as *addition of some unnecessary element* and *omission of some required element*, which are classifications of errors in terms of the difference between the learner's utterance and the reconstructed version. The students confessed that they have poor knowledge on the use of punctuations, making it difficult for them to use punctuations correctly and appropriately.

Fourth in rank are *errors in word choice*, with 36 (9.14%) total number of occurrences. It was observed that the students have difficulty in choosing correct or appropriate words to express their ideas clearly. Some messages are totally obscure due to incorrect word usage. For example:

1. *It makes me remember of someone.* (reminds me)
2. *I took a huge, heavy breath.* (deep)
3. *I was nearly get asleep, when suddenly... (about to sleep)*

Such finding only indicates that the students have limited vocabulary. They are not aware of increasing vocabulary. They admitted that they seldom read books, newspapers, articles, etc. Most of the male students revealed that they are engrossed to surfing the net and playing computer games. They have poor attitude towards reading. They are not well-motivated to read. Generally, most of the students admitted that they simply memorize synonyms and antonyms to improve their vocabulary.

The computed result reaffirms the study of Huang (2001) who presented an analysis of 34 Taiwanese English majors writing errors based on a web-based writing program. His study revealed major errors in word choice (55%), followed by mechanics (20%), style (16%) and grammar (9%).

The same finding was revealed in the study of Lee (2002), who had the strong motivation to conduct an error analysis to examine what kind of errors learners of intermediate to advanced level at a medical college make in writing by reviewing their formal and informal letters. His study revealed that major errors involved were errors in word choice, followed by errors in prepositions and articles.

These findings simply mean that the students have to be encouraged and motivated to read a lot of materials to increase their vocabulary. According to Malicsi (2003), correct use of words in any language task is indispensable so as the idea conveyed is clear and understandable, especially that several words may seem to have similar meanings, but in real sense, they have different meanings. *Errors in spelling* (30 or 7.61%) also constitute a significant problem in the students' writings. Based on the written compositions of the students, many of them are confused with the correct spelling of the English words due to the interference of their L1. The L1 and the L2 of the students have different sound systems, making it difficult for them to learn and master the correct spelling of some words in English. Furthermore, these spelling errors are mainly due to phonetics perception and students' carelessness. The students spell out words by referring to the sound of the words. They admitted that they do not know how to produce a word correctly for appropriate spelling. Whenever they encounter tough word in the text, they just simply try to get it by heart that occurs incorrect spelling in write up subsequently. Students' carelessness also causes them to

make spelling mistakes. These errors in spelling are evident in the following samples:

1. *I envy my seeblings so much. (siblings)*
2. *I beleive that someday I can make a difference. (believe)*
3. *I saw him with his redish eyes. (reddish)*

It can be further gleaned from the table that *errors in prepositions* (26 or 6.60%) are considered common linguistic errors committed by the students, indicating the students' poor knowledge on the use of prepositions. From the students' written compositions, the prepositions were used interchangeably. For the students, prepositions do not affect the meanings of their sentences. Thus, they are not so particular or meticulous on the use of prepositions in their sentences. Carelessness appears to be one of the primary causes of such errors. This linguistic phenomenon is exemplified in the following samples:

1. *He wanted to go out to the room, but he was scared. (from)*
2. *I want to share it with you about my most unforgettable experience.
(no need of the preposition "about")*
3. *My mother wanted to cope up with the situations.
(no need of the preposition "up")*

Such findings are confirmed by the result of the study of Lennon (1987) and Lee (2002) which revealed that errors in prepositions are considered second most common errors committed by English language learners.

Prepositions are always followed by nouns (or pronouns) and usually indicate relationships, such as position, place, direction, time, manner, agent, possession and condition, between their objects and other parts of the sentence (Wishon & Burks, 1980, as cited by Haryanto, 2007). In using a preposition, one has to be aware because there is no certain rule for this. One has to determine which preposition should be used based on its context. Interestingly, the students confessed that they read a lot about preposition from grammar books but they seldom make use of it in practice. This only implies that the students lack drills along the said area of concern. Thus, their language teachers should provide them exercises on the use of preposition to master this said skill.

Obviously, the students used articles incorrectly in their compositions. With 24 (6.09%) total number of occurrences, *errors in articles* are also considered common linguistic errors of the students. It can be observed from the students' writings that they could hardly identify the differences and meanings embedded on the three articles (*a*, *an*, and *the*). The students are not aware that the articles carry with them corresponding meanings. Hence, they have poor knowledge in article use. They just simply use articles because they feel like using them without considering their effects in the meaning of their sentences. Some others do not even bother to use articles at all. They omit the articles because they are not sure whether they need to use them or not.

To be able to use an article properly, the students have to be sensitive in differentiating the use of definite article, indefinite article and even using no article at all. If they are not able to differentiate them, they will make errors as follows:

1. *I felt gap between me and him.
I felt a gap between me and him. (indefinite)*
2. *I don't like to hurt feelings of others.
I don't like to hurt the feelings of others. (definite)*
3. *He offered me a proposals.
He offered me proposals. (no need of articles)*

Basically, the article "*A*" is used before noun which is started by consonant and "*An*" is used for vowels. But there are some different rules in using "*A*" and "*An*" and very few students know it. According to Huang (2001), even some students do not know that there is a matter of sound in

using article like “hour” starting by consonant but before “hour” “an” should be placed. For example:

I want a honest friend, whom I can depend on. (an)

The result corroborates the study of Kim (1998) on the essay writings of 200 10th grade Korean EFL learners. He (1998) identified 2122 errors and classified them in terms of six domains and subdivided them into 22 linguistic categories. His findings revealed that errors in articles were most common (354). This can also be verified in the study of Lee (2002) which revealed that errors in articles were considered third most common grammatical errors committed by English language learners.

Further, the result validates the study of Duskova (1969) who identified a total of 1007 errors from the writings of 50 Czech learners of English and analyzed them in terms of nine categories. The study revealed that errors in articles were the most frequent among the indicated errors of the learners, followed by errors in lexis, while there were only few errors in syntax and word order.

Meanwhile, the least common linguistic errors committed by the students in their written compositions include *errors on singular/plural, adjectives, relative clauses, possessive cases of nouns and word order*, with 4 (1.01%) occurrences each.

For the purpose of identifying the types of linguistic errors committed by the students, the errors are summarized in Table 2.

The table shows the summary of linguistic errors in the English writings of the students. It can be deemed from the table that grammatical errors (154 or 39.02%) rank first among all the linguistic errors committed by the students, followed by mechanics/substance errors (102 or 25.86%), syntactic errors (90 or 22.84%). Only few errors were observed along lexical (36 or 9.14%) and semantic (12 or 3.05) errors.

Table 2: Summary of errors in the English writings of the students

| Linguistic Errors | Count of Error (f) | Percentage (%) | Hierarchy (r) |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Grammatical Errors | 154 | 39.02 | 1 |
| Mechanics/Substance | 102 | 25.86 | 2 |
| Syntactic Errors | 90 | 22.84 | 3 |
| Lexical Errors | 36 | 9.14 | 4 |
| Semantic Errors | 12 | 3.06 | 5 |
| Total | 197 | 100.00 | |

All these indicated results imply that the students have difficulties in writing English, particularly on the grammatical, substance or mechanics and syntactic aspects.

The results of this study could help language teachers to assess their own teaching methodologies and their students' ability in writing and to guide them in choosing the strategies and topics that are best suited to their students. More importantly, this study could serve as basis in the development of a coherent program that addresses the students' difficulties and needs in writing.

Competency and proficiency in the language is very indispensable nowadays for the world needs globally competitive individuals, who can fluently and can competently use the international language – the English language.

CONCLUSIONS:

In the light of the findings, it can be concluded that the common linguistic errors in the English writings of the teacher education students were errors in verb tenses, sentence structure, punctuations, word choice, spelling, prepositions and articles. These errors fall under the grammatical, mechanics/substance and syntactic aspects of writing English. Majority of these errors are caused by the learners' poor knowledge of the target language, particularly ignorance of

rule restrictions. Others are caused by the learners' carelessness, first language transfer or interference and limited vocabulary in the target language.

Analyzing linguistic errors in students' English writings is indeed an interesting endeavor in the field of language teaching and learning. Error Analysis (EA) provides a shift or direction toward a more positive treatment on student linguistic errors in their writings. It brings changes in teachers' attitudes toward errors, evident in a less obsessive avoidance of errors. It lets language teachers picture out and understand how language learning takes place in the minds of learners. Hence, language teachers are given the opportunity to find ways on how to improve their instruction to address their learners' difficulties and needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on the findings and conclusions, the researcher offers the following recommendations:

1. A more comprehensive study on the English writings of the students has to be conducted by other research enthusiasts to validate the results of the study.
2. Language teachers have to consider the results and findings of the study in providing opportunities for students to practice and apply language structures in real contexts so as to enhance language skills in the problem areas.
3. Curriculum developers need to revisit the existing language curriculum in the tertiary level to develop a relevant and coherent program to address the foregoing students' needs and difficulties.
4. Syllabus designers need to improve their syllabi by incorporating target standards and competencies that may address students' linguistic errors in writing.

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