Analysis of the Language Errors in Writing among BSEE and AB English Students

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most challenging language skills in second language learning. In fact, even for those who speak English as a first language, the ability to write requires long, intensive and specialized instruction. Errors in writing can affect not just the form but communication as well. Thus, through this condition, the researcher was challenged to pose this study to identify some language errors that are common in the composition of the English major students who take up Bachelor of Science in Education English and Bachelor of Arts in English enrolled in the 1st semester of academic year 2013-2014 of Father Saturnino Urios University, Butuan City. There were a total of 30 respondents who participated in the study and most of them were in their 3rd and 4th years in their respective programs. The descriptive method was applied by the researcher. To ensure impartiality on the data presentation, interpretation and analysis, the researcher used statistical tools such as: frequency, and percentage.

Further, this paper tries to examine and identify how these language errors affect the communication presented in their writings. More specifically, this paper tries to address the following problems:

1. What language errors are found common in the composition of the respondents?
2. How do these errors affect the meaning of the sentences? What could account for the occurrence of these features?
3. What language intervention program can be proposed to address the needs of the respondents?

From the result, it was found out that most of the respondents committed misuse and omission of punctuation marks and pronoun-antecedent agreement which marked the highest percentage of errors the respondents had difficulty to deal with. This was followed by misuse and omission of verb and misspelling being the least committed error.

Key terms: error analysis, composition writing, English major students

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most challenging language skills in second language learning. In fact, even for those who speak English as a first language, the ability to write requires long, intensive and specialized instruction. Writing is often associated with the rarefied circles, such as the literati, belle-lettrists and league of scholars and scholars. It is commonly believed as a rare genius that only the chosen few are endowed with, hence, off limits to ordinary mortals. However, within the field of second and foreign language teaching, the teaching of writing has come to assume a much more central position than it occupied twenty or thirty years ago. One of the main reasons

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is that command of good writing skills is increasingly seen as vital to equip learners for success in the 21st century.

Writing has been identified as one of the essential skills in a world that is more than ever driven by text and numerical data [1]. This is a worldwide trend. People everywhere compose texts or blogs, or post information, announcements and reactions ("like" or "share") in the social networks, e-mail and 'twit' to friends and colleagues and the like. In light of this burgeoning need, people in academe are under pressure to pay more serious attention to their writing proficiency. English rules in this brave new world of information and digital technology. Despite the more liberal attitude toward such ideals and rules as correctness or accuracy, and greater stress on meaning or communicative purposes, academics are still expected to honor and master these rules and model communicative competence, which makes much of grammatical and discourse competence, along with sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

Through this condition, the researcher was challenged to pose this study to identify some language errors that are common in the composition of the English major students who take up Bachelor of Science in Education English and Bachelor of Arts in English enrolled in the 1st semester of academic year 2013-2014 of Father Saturnino Urios University, Butuan City.

2. Framework

2.1 . Error Analysis

Error analysis is based on developmentalism (learning develops in stages as learners interact with the environment). It looks at the errors made by learners while they are learning positively and consider the errors as necessary to the development of language, be it first or second language [2].

Overall, error analysis considers L1 to be mainly of benefit to the development of L2 [2]. At first, students rely heavily on L1 structures and sometimes even vocabulary to get meaning across. As the L2 becomes internalized, the L1 is relied upon less and less as the students move toward more native like proficiency [2].

Error analysis is the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by learner. In other words, error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics [3].

The three successive stages in error analysis are given below. These are: 1) Recognition; 2) Description; and 3) Explanation. There are a number of problems which one has to face in each of these stages. A thorough understanding of these problems along with possible measures to overcome them is necessary for a proper analysis of the errors [4].

Error correction remains as 'one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language teaching profession'. Interestingly, 'the most frequent reason for not wanting correction was the negative impact on students' confidence and motivation, and the most frequent reason for wanting correction was the importance of learning to speak English correctly' [5]. Among the causes for errors, apart from the above-mentioned L1 interference, an incomplete knowledge of the target language, language complexity and error fossilization are mentioned. It is also pointed out that teacher's correction does not always work. Students often correct each other, which is very important because 'self-correction or peer correction help to focus student attention on errors and to reduce reliance on the teacher, thereby encouraging student autonomy'.
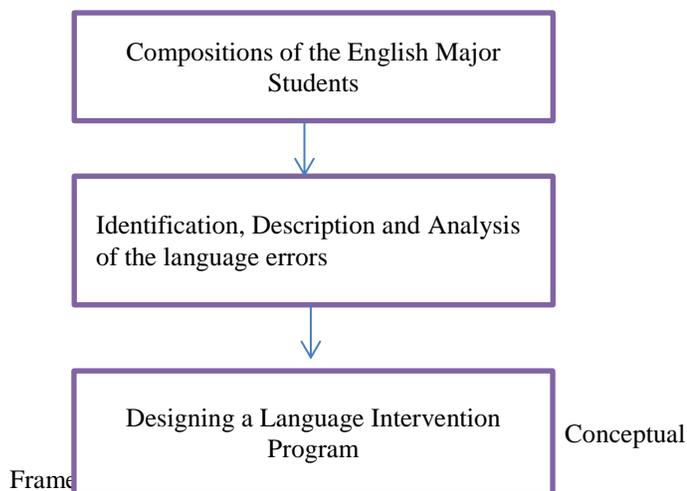
2.2. The Significance of Output

While other scholars and linguists focused overmuch on input, boldly asserting that it is the single most important causative factor behind language acquisition and learning, and virtually excluded output from consideration Swain on the other hand, called attention to the omission by taking a stronger stand about the importance of output in the language acquisition process. Thus Swain in Richard-Amato said,

Comprehensible output…is a necessary mechanism of acquisition independent of the role of

comprehensible input. Its role is, at minimum, to provide opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use, to test out hypotheses about the target language, and to move the learner from a purely semantic analysis of language to a syntactic analysis of it [2].

She strongly believed that "it is not input per se that is important to second language acquisition but output that occurs in interaction where meaning is negotiated". Simply knowing that one will eventually be expected to produce may be the "trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expressions needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning " [2].

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│  Compositions of the English Major │
│            Students              │
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│  Identification, Description and Analysis │
│       of the language errors     │
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│  Designing a Language Intervention │
│            Program               │
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Conceptual Frame

3. Literature Review

3.1. Language Assessment

Language assessment is very helpful for the language teachers to address the language problems done by the learners. It is on this way, that language teachers will be able to know what part of the language instruction is needed to focus on for the learners to master the target language. [6] Assessment of students is the way to determine if curricular content is appropriate and teaching methods are successful. They stressed further that through assessment, one can ascertain what learning has taken place.

Assessments of children's language are made to determine what they know, and what their skill levels are in a wide variety of domains [7]. They called this as "baselining". According to them, educators typically believe that by finding out "where a child is" (baselining), a foundation is laid for

determining "what a teacher should teach". Their argument is basically held on the process of diagnostic teaching that a language teacher will never know how to begin addressing the problem of the learners if he has not identify what the problem is [7].

Through assessments, teachers will be able to know if their teaching methodologies in the classroom are successful. Certainly, it would not be possible to determine if a child is making progress in the domain of language as a result of "educational intervention", if no one assesses the child's linguistic ability (competence), nor measures the same in objective terms. And, it would be tragic; indeed, if a teacher persisted with an intervention strategy thinking it was efficacious when, in fact, it was not. To be perfectly clear, teachers have the primary responsibility for facilitating language development, and as a consequence, they should take primary responsibility for knowing about the language and language learning curve of each student for whom they are responsible [7].

Dulay et al. in Pongsiriwet [8] also saw the significance of the learner's errors. They see at least two major purposes served by studying the learner's errors:

1. It provides important information from which inferences about the language learning process can be made.

2. It indicates which part of the target language is most problematic to the learner and which types of errors affect the learner's ability to communicate effectively.

3.2. Errors in Writing

Every effort to learn something is attended by lapses, slips or errors. Without committing errors, learning is incomplete and language learning is no exception. Some people are open to errors and even willing to accept them. Some may even not notice them while learning the target language. However, according to Diaz-Rico and Weed [6] many teachers typically expend much energy noting, correcting, and designing lessons to address errors when students are learning a second language [6]. To them, often, no allowance is made for the learner's age, level of fluency, educational background, or risk-taking behavior. These,

however, are significant factors to consider in determining how a teacher should regard language errors.

Apart from the personal factors just mentioned, teachers need to be aware of the types of errors their students are making [6]. Errors can occur in two general categories: systematic (appearing with regularity) or random (caused by memory lapse, inattention, or inadequate rule acquisition) [6]. The teacher can observe systematic errors in the class and discuss them with the class, with small groups who display the same error, or with individuals. By observing systematic errors, the teacher will recognize that random errors do not need to be corrected.

In order to analyze learners' errors in a proper perspective, it is crucial to make a distinction between "mistake" and "error". [9] Mistake as a generic term that applies to a number of categories of incorrect use or forms: slips which a student can self-correct; errors which a student cannot self-correct, but where it is clear which form the student wanted to use, and where the class is familiar with that form; and attempts, where students have no real idea how to structure what they want to mean, where intended meaning and structure are not clear to the teacher. In this construct, there is a big group known as mistakes of form which occur when the speaker's English departs from standard English [9]. He also distinguished between two sorts of mistake: the mistake that occurs when a speaker uses a correct piece of language (linguistic form) that does not mean what the speaker wanted to mean, and the mistake that occurs when the speaker uses a correct form which, unfortunately, is socially inappropriate or unacceptable. Corder [4] explained at length his view of error correction in language teaching:

Language learning is not parrot learning; we do not 'learn' or 'practice' examples. They are the data from which we induce the system of the language. Skill in correction of errors lies in the direction of exploiting the incorrect forms produced by the learner in a controlled fashion [4].

4. Methodology

4.1. Design

The study made use of the descriptive method in assessing the language ability of the English major students in their compositions. This research study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative research design which made use of non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling. This was done to design a language intervention program for the betterment of the program and to produce quality and competitive English major graduates. The idea of this study came only when the researcher at the same time the instructor of these student-respondents conducted a writing activity in his class. After reading all the compositions written by his students, he was prompted to subject them in a language error analysis since he found out that these students committed language errors in the composition writing.

4.2. Respondents

From the population of the English major students of Father Saturnino Urios University, Butuan City enrolled in the 1st semester of 2013-2014, the researcher selected only those who are in the third and fourth year levels to join the study as respondents. These were the students who were in their third and fourth years in Bachelor of Science in Education English and Bachelor of Arts in English Language in Father Saturnino Urios University, Butuan City. The choice of the respondents by the researcher was due to his accessibility to them since he handled major subjects from which these student-respondents were enrolled.

The essay writing was done on four time schedules considering the class schedules of these respondents in their major class; that is one time slot for the 3rd year BSE English, 4th year BSE English, 3rd year AB English and 4th year AB English.

The researcher then started to identify, tabulate, present and analyze some language errors contained in the compositions of these respondents. After the process of identifying, tabulating, presenting and analyzing these features, crafting of the intervention program followed to address the language need of the respondents.

Table 1.Total number of 3rd and 4th year students who were enrolled and participated in the study

Respondents	Total number of students enrolled	Number of student-respondents
Third Year		
BSE English	8	8
AB English	13	13
Fourth Year		
BSE English	9	6
AB English	4	3
Total	34	30

Table2: errors found in the compositions of the student-respondents

Grammatical Features of the Language	Frequency	Percentage
Punctuation (omission/misuse of comma)	15	16.30
Pronoun-antecedent Agreement	15	16.30
Misuse/omission of verb	12	13.04
Subject-verb Agreement	11	11.97
Sentence Fragment	9	9.77
Word choice	9	9.77
Run-on sentence	7	7.61
Misuse/omission of Article	5	5.43
Parallelism	3	3.27
Misuse/omission of Adjective	2	2.17
Misuse/omission of noun	2	2.17
Misuse/omission of Conjunction	1	1.09
Spelling(misspelled)	1	1.09
	92	**100**

Table 2 shows the language errors found in the compositions of the student-respondents. It also shows the frequency counting of errors and their corresponding percentage.

As shown in the table above, pronoun-antecedent agreement and omission and misuse of punctuation marked the highest number of errors in the composition of the respondents. They both have a total of 15 errors. This was followed by misuse/omission of verb with a frequency of 12. The least number of errors was seen in spelling/misspelling and the misuse and omission of conjunction.

It is clear from these figures where the greater linguistic problem of the respondents lies – grammar or the assembling of constituent parts of a construction into phrases, clauses and sentences. The preponderance of grammatical errors was also noted in a number of earlier studies [8]. Pongsiriwet [8] examined errors committed by Iranian freshmen in their compositions in which tenses, word order, articles and prepositions counted among the most frequently occurring errors. El-Sayed in Pongsiriwet [8] focused on syntactic errors in compositions of Saudi students, and found verbs and verbals as the most problematic aspects. Yang [10] who conducted an inquiry on the writing errors made by ESL learners and found grammatical or syntactic errors the most serious among four types of errors made by the subjects; and Habash [11] who studied common errors in the use of preposition in the written pieces of UNRWA students in Jerusalem. A more recent case study done by Saadiyah Darus [12] with Malay high school students as participants identified mostly syntactic errors as the most common type seen in the essays examined, such as verb tense and word order.

5. Results

5.1. Identification, description and analysis of Language Errors

Table 3 shows the language errors with their corresponding corrections committed by the respondents in their written composition:

Error	Correction
Five years from now I want to be with the person that knows how to bear with me.	Five years from now, I want to be with the person who will be there for me.
I would probably be at places, will eating more and more lasagna.	I would probably be at places where I would eat lasagna.
I would probably be a teacher, will have a paycheck every month.	I would probably be a teacher who will have a paycheck every month.
I want to be with my father and my grandfather because they are the only person in my life.	I want to be with my father and my grandfather because they are the most important persons in my life.
Person that is capable of guiding me through my journey as I grew up molding myself as a responsible person.	A person who is capable of guiding and molding me as a responsible person as I grow up…
When I was in highschool	When I was in high school…
They picture theirselves	They picture themselves…
To have a husband in the future is the best feeling, especially you love each other.	To have a husband in the future is a fulfillment especially if you love each other.
It really help us to find an easy money to the future.	It really helps us in the future to find a better job.
What I have always think is I can do things.	What I have always thought is I can do things…
I myself pays to the Lord.	I myself pay to the Lord.
After everything put into places.	After everything is in place…
Seeing myself ten years from now I'm rest assured that I am already stable with my career.	Rest assured that seeing myself ten years from now, I will already have a stable job.
People around me, my sorrounding and the rest will	People around me, my surrounding and the rest will
not be the same anymore.	never be the same again.
As an English major I always set an goal setting.	As English major, I always set a goal.
I know everyone of us thinking what would be our lives 10 years from now.	I know every one of us thinks what will be our lives 10 years from now.
I know by God's grace I'll be seeing him in the near future.	I know by God's grace, I'll be seeing him in the near future.
Definitely I will choose to be with my girl now.	Definitely, I will choose to be with my girl now.
In life there is a choice to be made.	In life, there is a choice to be made.
5 years from now I probably say I want to be with my parents.	Five years from now, I probably say I want to be with my parents.

Errors are mostly traceable to the inability or failure of the learner to master the second language. This finding also calls to mind the study of Aiyewumi et al. in Onike [13] in which L1 interference, L2 idiosyncrasies and inappropriate learning and application of rules were named as the major causes or sources of errors. Inadequate knowledge or lack of mastery of the grammatical rules of the TL as a cause or source of errors is rivaled only by language transfer or L1 interference/influence. Considering the simplicity of the case, one is inclined to charge the errors to a performance variable, most likely carelessness. The writer may have only committed typographical errors, or what is being called as a slip or lapse which the writer, given time, should be able to correct on his own.

Corder's [4] pre-systematic errors, which are committed by the learners while he or she is trying to come to grips with a new point, or at the stage where the learner is ignorant of a particular rule and makes a random guess which goes wrong, obviously must not be considered as a possible description or cause for the errors just analyzed, since the writers are just students, and are therefore must be in the groping stage. It is unflattering to suppose that their use of the target language depends on guesswork or random choices, rather than being the deliberate process that it should be.

However, the errors are only transitional and dynamic and disappear when the learner internalizes the rules fully through sufficient exposure to the correct forms of the target language. Since these errors occur after the learner has mastered the language, at least to a reasonable level, these errors are often misconstrued as slips, lapses or mistakes, which is patently wrong [14].

The errors above only showed that the language of the student-respondents has already been fossilized. Fossilization according to Selinker & Lamendella in Pongsiriwet [8] often means that certain aspects of the language were learned incompletely or incorrectly, such as grammatical features like conjugating verbs in the wrong fashion or using the wrong vocabulary, in such a manner that they cannot be unlearned and replaced with correct usage.

5.2. Proposed Language Program

Based on the findings of this study, there is really a need for an Intensive Summer Course on Grammar and Composition for the English Major students especially those who will be enrolled in their fourth year in the next academic year. Aside from the fact that, good command of the English language is a vital tool for communication, it is also needed for these students to get a good job in the future. Thus, there is an urgent need to implement the action plan that was designed to address the language problem revealed in the study.

The proposed program is an intensive summer course on grammar and composition which will be implemented during every summer of the coming academic years. Students should be able to complete 120 hours of attendance and should have a minimum grade of 2.0 at the end of the course to qualify for the admission and retention in the BSE and AB English programs. This intensive course is intended for those English Majors who are about to enroll in their fourth and final year in the university. The grammar topics included in the seminar-workshop were based on the result of the error analysis made in this study.

Course Outline for Intensive Summer Course on Grammar and Composition

Course Description:

This course is a 120-hour of intensive study on the basic and advanced grammar with composition. It is implemented every summer of each academic year for the English Major students who will enroll in their fourth and final year in the university. It deals with the topics on sentences, phrases, clauses, parts of speech, tenses, subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreements, modals, verbals, voice of the verb, punctuations and manner and method of writing composition.

Course Objectives:

At the end of the course, the students are expected to;
1. understand and work with the basic concepts and methodologies of linguistic science,
2. discuss language issues in an informed way;
3. increase their consciousness of the importance of correct usage and grammar of the English Language;
4. increase their level of confidence in using English for communication through group activities;
5. use correct and good grammar through practice exercises;

Course Requirements:

1. compilation of written exercises in class
2. Language Research of any Language Topics
3. Reaction Paper on Language issues
4. Major Exams

Grading System

Class work

40%

Quizzes

Recitations

Seatwork

Requirements

Major Exams

60%

Credits: 20 hours/week (6 weeks)

45

Table 4 shows the course outline of the proposed intensive summer course on grammar and competition.

Week	Topics
1	1. Parts of Speech
	2. sentences
(20 hours)	a. kinds of sentences
	b. run on
	c. fragment
	3. phrases
	4. clauses
2	1. Tenses
	a. verb forms
(20 hours)	b. simple tenses
	c. progressive tenses
	d. perfect tenses
	e. perfect progressive tenses
3	1. subject-verb agreement
	2. pronoun-antecedent agreement
(20 hours)	3. modals
	4. punctuations
4	1. verbals
	a. gerund
(20 hours)	b. participial
	c. infinitive
	2. voice of the verb
	a. passive
	b. active
5	1. manner and methods of writing
(20 hours)	
6	1. Final assessment
(20 hours)	

6. Conclusions

The language problem of the selected English major students of FSUU can always be remediated through a proposed language program designed to address the problem.

The program presented in this study can be of some help if implemented because it focuses on, or target the problematic areas found in the body of texts subjected to error analysis. With the proficiency problem of the selected English Major students of FSUU revealed, something concrete and explicit needs to be done. If this language problem is ignored or is not seriously dealt with, these faculty members will remain fossilized or stagnant at their low proficiency level. The negative impact of this on their students is a foregone conclusion. The vicious cycle is set off, with these faculty members transmitting their inadequacies or weaknesses to their students, and the latter handing down the inherited weaknesses to their own students. The perpetuation of this cycle must be stopped or arrested.

There is really a need for an intensive study on the basic and advanced grammar with composition so that English major students would learn the correct usage for clear and effective communication.

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