



APPRAISAL OF COMMON ERRORS IN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN ENGLISH AMONG 400 LEVEL STUDENTS OF GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This work looked at common errors in both spoken and written English committed by students of tertiary institutions with specific attention on 400 level students of Gombe State University. The piece brought out the errors committed through the examination of questionnaires to 100 students drawn from the various departments cutting across three faculties in the institution namely: Faculty of Education, Faculty of Science and Faculty of Arts and Social Science. The work also made an attempt to correct the errors and suggested ways by which students' use of English can be improved upon.

Keywords: *Error, Spoken and Written English.*

Introduction

There is no doubt that English language today is one of the indispensable subjects that is taught in Nigerian schools. It has attained a high stage of importance in the country because of the vital function it plays. English language plays a key role in the political, economic, social, educational and religious life of Nigerians as they interact and remain as a nation (Sabe, 1995). The importance of English language to Nigerian students especially those who are at higher level cannot be overemphasized. English is a significant subject in the school's curriculum and in fact, it is a compulsory requirement for admission into tertiary institutions.

Sabe (1995) argues that for a student to be able to communicate properly in English, he/she must have a linguistic competence of the language, not only in

oral or verbal form but also in the written aspect of the language .The student is expected to be able to speak or articulate the English Speech sounds well, in such a way that he/she can be understood well by his/her audience, whether they are English native or non-native speakers. In the written aspect of the language, the student is expected to put down his/her ideas or thought in a meaningful and correct grammatical way.

Statement of the problem

In Nigeria today, most students of tertiary institutions find it difficult to pronounce some of the English words mainly because of their mother tongue interference and lack of proper exposure to the language; they also find it difficult to write the correct spelling of most of the words perhaps because of their educational background and exposure to the language. Therefore, the students are fond of making use of articles, prepositions, tenses, punctuation and the likes wrongly. In fact most of the words, spellings, sentence constructions, and pronunciation etc, produced by students are unintelligible and ungrammatical. Such incompetence or inability of the students of course leads to poor performance in examinations since they are required to write in English language.

Errors

Linguistically speaking, the term errors refers to as systematic deviation from the conventional acceptable or standard English linguistic pattern found in the student's writing and speech.

Spoken English

These are the ways in which the English language is transmitted through a conventional system of sounds. David Crystal(2009) says Spoken English is the more natural and widespread mode of transmission, though ironically the one which most people find much less fashion-presumably because it is so much difficult to “see” what is happening in speech than in writing.”

Written English

The ways in which the English language is transmitted through conventional system of graphic signs or letters. The earliest forms of written English were primarily the transition of Latin works into English in the ninth Century.

Concept of Errors and Errors in Spoken and Written English Examined

The word “error” has different meanings and usages relative to how it is conceptually applied. As there are different kinds of people with different backgrounds, environment, experience, traditions and religions. So, there are different sorts of errors with different or peculiar name given to each, perhaps considering the context or causes of each error. In language learning, as shown in Sabe (1995) some errors do come up in language learners’ statement as a result of ignorance or partial knowledge which the learners have about the rules and norms of the language they learn, such ignorance or insufficient knowledge comes in and manifest itself as a result of the kind of exposure or nature of teaching-learning process taking place over time, such errors are called errors incompetence. While some errors occur when individual learners have the skill or knowledge on how to communicate correctly but because they are distracted by something else while communicating, such errors are called: errors in performance (Tsakuwa 2010).

Furthermore, error can simply be defined as a deviation from accuracy or correctness of known or acceptable norms of language, while a mistake is an error caused by a fault with which usually emanates from misjudgment, misinterpretation, carelessness or forgetfulness of a certain rules or norm of a language. Thus, in language, a systematic deviation from standard language norms of rules of grammar, syntax, semantics, spelling, pronunciation, punctuation etc. is referred to as an error, a mistake or slip of tongue or pen (Wikipedia).

So many researchers and language specialists believe that making errors or mistakes is an inevitable thing in the process of language learning. Hence, Headbloom argued on this by saying “it is just as unrealistic to reckon as language learning without errors as to reckon existence without sin” (1978). When talking about errors in learning of languages, Sabe on his own part affirmed that people cannot learn language without first systematically committing errors (Tsokuwa 2010).

People do commit errors while communicating because of one reason or the other. Thus it is not and it would never be a surprising thing seeing students (especially those who learn English as second Language and third Language) making one or two errors, mistake or slips of tongue or pen when

communicating in the language, thus is because the students are still in one of language learning phase or the other, developing their skills and knowledge about the rules systems of the language to the struggle to have mastery in the language to communicate meaningfully. Therefore, errors such as addition, omission or subtraction of speech, sound, words, phrases, or even clauses are bound to occur.

Going through the literature, it is found that language researchers, writers, and authors of language textbooks use various terminologies which all refers to or substitute the concept “errors”, or erroneous, stutters, goof, gaffe, fault, few and oversight among others. The most common ones which are mostly used interchangeably are errors, mistakes, and slip of the tongue or pen (Sabe, 1995). The use of the term “error analysis” came from a rationalist theory of language learning in the 70s and one of its prominent proponents was S.P Corders. Headbloom (1978) said that according to the view of error analysis, errors are regarded as potentially facilitative rather than inhibitors in the languages process. Unlike errors analysis, contrastive analysis came up from Audio-Lingual theorists such as Osgood, Schinker, Schater among others who draw their stance of language learning on the view that it involves the acquisition of set of habits and hence the acquisition of L2 is simply the acquisition of another set of habits in which the already learned habits (L1or NL) would have interfered with or influenced the acquisition of the new language (L2 or TL). Error analysis proponents propose that the second Language (L2), in this sense, he uses errors to test hypothesis about the language he learns, there by learning from them by ‘trial and error’ method. Thus, the errors which he makes should select in his learning process rather than the first language.

As the study is build on and concerned directly with error analysis, the researchers therefore, focuses more on its stance. Error analysis mainly deals with the second language learners’ error when trying to learn and communicate in the target language. The errors made would be analyzed and classified to see if there is any commonality among them, and if the cause of error can be explained with the aim of adopting proper and pertinent strategy in to second language pedagogy. Hence, the task of error analysis basically as Corder (1974) says cited in Sabe (1995) is dealing with the investigation of the language of second language learners’ errors. The investigation here refers to as sound

academic interpretation of errors made by the students especially their written communication in English which is the second or target language, so as to determine how well they progress in the acquisition of the target language, what are the problems they encounter in the language and sort of errors do they commit along the way. All these could be done in successful tracing and circumstances in which the errors occur with the aim of offering possible and proper correction.

Sources/Causes of Errors in Spoken and Written Language

A good understanding of sources/causes and nature as well as types of errors has become an imperative task before talking of a logical means of correcting the errors. Of course, many factors could be considered responsible for the second language learners' errors which could either be sources which make the learners to be committing errors when they communicate in the second language. However, errors analysts believe that errors definitely emanate from the target language but there is no doubt here that the view of contrastive analyst could also be useful if really teachers want to appreciate fully the sources and causes of the errors, the circumstances involved and their types as well. Thus, the issue of mother tongue (MT) or first language(L1) interference and transfer of learning or habits can be discarded.

Headbloom (1979) reveals that error analysis proponents try to distinguish the errors which occur inter-lingually and those which are intra-lingually induced in nature. Thus, considering Headbloom (1979) Eke (1991) and Sabe (1995) errors could be basically be sourced or caused by inter-lingual, intra-lingual, developmental, analogical and redundant factors these could be named as Group 'A' errors sources/causes. However, carelessness, or orthographic inconsistency, overgeneralization and ignorance or rules restriction, mis-teaching/mis-learning could also be among the factors responsible for learners' errors and they are named as Group 'B' errors sources/causes. Though, these factors seem to be encompassed by the former one's or be derived from them but they can stand independently on their own as discussed below.

Interlingual factor, this is also referred to as cross-linguistic influence (Sabe2009). It is a great source of errors in second language communication because mother tongue or first language interferes almost at every moment

when second language learners communicate in the second language. In fact, contrastive analysts believe in Eke (1991) that almost all errors have their origin in the mother tongue interference. Eke (1992) said that errors are generally brought about by the interference of the mother tongue (interlingual interference). This is because as contrastive analysts argue, learning a second language is the same as learning a new set of habits (L1) must definitely interfere in the new ones (L2) in the process of acquisition . Lado (1957) summarizes the issue and their mire light on the interlingual interference in his words saying “when learning a foreign language, we tend to transfer our entire native language system in the process, we tend to transfer to that language our phonemes and their variants, our stress and rhythm pattern, our transitions, our intonation patterns and their interaction, with other phonemes (Sabe 1995).

Analogical factor is another source of errors in learning process of second language learners. Most of the time, especially at initial phase of learning second language, learners do draw some similarities between their first language and second language, by so doing, analogical factors appear in between the two languages and it is very powerful language learning tool in L2 acquisition, because it increases learning ability by helping learners to see and use important equivalence of some rules in the languages and decreases rate of time to be spent in memorizing relevant and useful rules of the second language (L2).

Also, some verbs in English language are regular verbs and many more are irregular. The regularity and irregularity of the verbs cause learners to get confused, over generalize rules and over extents inflexions to model verbs such as can, could, must, may etc. which do not have inflection. Other errors which come up are of course brought by analogy in lexicons as noted by Headbloom in aspect of homonym, homophony, synonyms, antonyms and polygene. These cause difficulty to the learners in distinguishing some English words and their classes, thereby making them to commit errors.

Developmental factors, this is considered to be one of the factors that cause students’ errors in second language. Learners commit errors in communication because of the formation of false or wrong information gotten about certain rules of the languages in the process of their L2 acquisition. In this developmental process, the students get or build up hypothesis (incorrect ones

mostly) about the L2 (English language) from their limited experiences they had during the course of interaction in class or from textbooks written by unqualified authors. Thus, developmental errors come out as a result of overgeneralization of rules mis-teaching and mis-learning of the target language.

Overgeneralization is another strong factor that cause error in students' verbal and written statements. It refers to the over-extension of certain rules of language to some features of aspects of the language which are exemplified or exclusive from the rules. Such overgeneralization happens on the grammatical, phonological and morphological rules in terms of singularity and plurality of nouns, verbs and tenses inflection among other.

Ignorance of rules restriction also plays a serious role in production of second language learners' error. It refers to failure or inability to know and observe the condition of applications some language rules when communicating. A learner might know about the rules, but ignore to observe their restricted usage and exceptions, English language as mentioned earlier, has a lot of exceptions in terms of regularity and irregularity of nouns and verbs. These inconsistencies lead students to over-simplify some rules of the language by creating new forms for instance, in the case of reflexive pronoun, a student may invite myself, yourself, herself etc. he invites "his self" instead of "himself" because he knows the rule of reflexives pronoun and possessive pronouns such as mine, yours, her, his, as he was exposed to, but because he is unable to observe the restriction and exception of the rules he goes on writing "his self".

Orthographical factor, English is a language that has great problem and ambiguity in orthography because of the influence of some world language and its dynamism. The problem is mainly in the consistency of English words spelling especially with the coming of American English. Spelling serves as a big source of students written errors. Obiseson (2003) in a paper titled "spelling errors and spelling techniques" reveals that the inability of students to spell English words correctly when communicating in writing is borne out of the irregularity of English spelling and inadequate knowledge of basic rules for English language words. Likewise, Orshagher (2002:12) claimed that if there is any area that gives pain to some learners of English, spelling is one of such

areas. The problem is that some words in English sound similar, so learners tend to be confused by them, what is spoken is largely not what is written down.

Mis-teaching and mis-learning certainly are some of the greatest sources of errors written by student. When talking about teaching, Lee (1968) in Eke (1991) says “regular exposure to incorrect usage to teachers faulty pronunciation or grammar, for example-Lampers rather than helps the growth of that creative ability which is so important on aspect of linguistic competence of students”.

Mis-learning might be either as a result of the teachers’ fault, especially if the English teacher happens to be untrained or half-baked or as a result of using textbooks which the students mostly use written by “hungry authors”. Still, mis-learning might be as a result of different varieties of English such as British English, American English, Nigerian English among others to which the learners are taught with or have come to live and have been living from the mouth of those who are not English teachers or do not speak the “standard” and “intelligible” English.

Classification of Errors

The system by which errors are put or arranged according to their different classes or type is very significant in error analysis exercise. Certainly, after understanding some of the sources/ causes that are responsible or taken into account when talking about second language learners’ writing and spoken errors, there is need to classify or group the errors into several classes. So many educationists and researchers have come out with a number of error taxonomies in their different reports and articles. According to Eke (1991) written errors can be grouped under the following linguistic area.

- Abbreviation
- Adjectives
- Adverbials
- Agreement
- Apostrophe
- Article: a, an
- Articles (omission)
- Articles (unnecessary, but inserted)

- Articles (wrong one used)
- Capital letters
- Comparison conjunction
- Noun (countable and uncountable)
- Sequence of tenses
- Pronouns
- Spelling preposition (Tsakuwa 2010).

Obiseson (2003) in Tsakuwa (2010) set out ten different classes of students errors in English language. They are:

- Phonological errors
- Punctuation errors
- Errors in the use of question tags
- Errors in spelling
- Errors in the use nouns
- Errors in the use of idiomatic expression
- Errors in the use of pronouns
- Errors in the use of articles
- Errors in the use of adjectives
- Errors in the use of verbs

METHODOLOGY

This research work involved a total of one hundred (100) students randomly selected from three Faculties in the University.

In order to find out the errors made by students in both spoken and written English, the researcher used two methods in collecting information from the students. Apart from the questionnaire used in the research, personal observation was involved.

In analyzing the data, the researcher used the following formula in calculating the percentage of the results.

$$\frac{F \times 100}{N}$$

Where F = Frequency of errors in each type

N = Total number of all occurring errors

After administering the questionnaire, the 100 questionnaires distributed were duly completed and retrieved as the researcher collected every completed questionnaire instantly without allowing the respondents to leave with them. This decision was taken to ensure that the number of questionnaires shared was retrieved completely do not reduce in number. The results are presented thus:

Tables 1: Use of tense

Test item No.1

Test items	Frequency	Percentage %
The boy likes oranges	40	40%
The boy like oranges	60	60%
Total	100	100%

Source: Questionnaire Administered by the Researcher, 2012.

The table above reveals that 40% of the respondents chose the sentence “the boy likes oranges” while 60% went with the wrong sentence “the boy like oranges”. This could be as a result of the fact that the students were not properly exposed to the rules of concord in English.

Table 2: The use of conjunction

Test item No.2

Test items	Frequency	Percentage %
The house if beautiful and small	45	45%
The house is beautiful but small	55	55%
Total	100	100%

Source: Questionnaire Administered by the Researcher, 2012.

The table above indicates that 45% of the respondents went for the sentence “the house is beautiful and small” while 55% ticked sentence which is the correct sentence. Although, the result above still shows that some of the respondents are still not conversant with the use of the proper conjunction in English and this could be as a result of their poor background in English.

Tables 3: The use of pronouns

Test items No.3

Test items	Frequency	Percentage %
The three friends love each other	53	53%
The three friends love one another	47	47%
Total	100	100%

Source: Questionnaire Administered by the Researcher, 2012.

The above table reveals that 53% of the respondents chose sentence A while 47% of the respondents went for sentence B which is the correct sentence. The result reveals that most of the respondents are having problem with the use of pronoun in a sentence which can be attributed to inadequate exposure to the language.

Table 4: The use of punctuation

Test item No.4

Test items	Frequency	Percentage %
The house setup a three man committee	26	26%
The house setup a three man committee	74	74%
Total	100	100%

Source: Questionnaire Administered by the Researcher, 2012.

The above shows that 26% of the respondent's ticked sentence A while 74% went with sentence B (the wrong sentence). The result points out that majority of the respondents are having problem in the area of punctuation. One of the reasons behind this might be that the respondents were taught by incompetent teachers.

Table 5: The use of verb

Test item No.5

Test items	Frequency	Percentage %
I sought for his advice yesterday	33	33%

I seeked for his advice yesterday	67	67%
Total	100	100%

Source: Questionnaire Administered by the Researcher, 2012.

The table above reveals that 33% of the respondents ticked sentence A while 67% went for sentence B (the wrong item). The result indicates that most of the respondents are still lagging behind in the area of verb (regular and irregular verbs) which may have been caused by the frequent use of their mother tongue (LI) against the English language. It may also be caused by teachers' incompetence.

Table 6: Pronunciation

S/N	Test items	Correct transcription	No. of correct responses	No. of wrong responses	% correct	% wrong
1.	Bomb	/bom/	18	82	18	82
2.	Castle	/ka:sl/	9	91	9	91
3.	Listen	/lisn/	25	75	25	75
4.	Receipt	/risi:t/	13	87	13	87
5.	Debt	/det/	11	89	11	89
6.	President	/prezident/	72	28	72	28
7.	Hostler	/hosla(r)/	12	88	12	88
8.	Debris	/dabri/	21	79	21	79
9.	Psychology	/saikaladzi/	87	13	87	13
10.	Church	/tsz:ts/	23	77	23	77

Source: Questionnaire Administered by the Researcher, 2012.

The table above reveals that most of the respondents cannot properly pronounce some English words. In the table above, words like bomb, castle, listen, receipt,

debt, hostler, psychology etc. all have silent sounds in one syllable or the other. In the course of pronunciation, the sounds represented by such letters are not pronounced for instance, in the word “bomb”, the last letter ‘b’ is silent as thus /bom/.

These findings show that most of the respondents do not have adequate exposure to the words of the language as they often use their mother tongue at home and even in school. The problem of mother interference can be attributed to be one of the causes too as words like psychology and president were pronounced by some of the respondents as “Pisikology” and “Fresident” etc.

Recommendations

In order to bring to an end or reduce the commitment of such errors discovered among Nigerian University Undergraduates’, written and spoken English, a great work should be done by all stakeholders and each class of the people should contribute its quota whole heartedly to ensure proper and conducive environment for teaching and learning the target language in the country. The following recommendations are put forward.

Government/Ministry of Education

To realize the targeted goals of education and improve teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria, the government should put the following recommendations into consideration.

1. More qualified and trained English language teachers should be employed to teach at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.
2. Government should provide in-service training for more teachers to ensure improved teaching and learning.
3. Seminars, workshops and symposia should be organized frequently by ministry of education in order to keep the language teachers and others well abreast with the current development in the area of teaching and learning of English language.
4. Government should consider teachers’ condition of service and improve on their welfare

Textbooks Writers and Publishers

1. English textbooks writers should take into consideration the developed curriculum in writing their books.

2. They should always bear in mind, the linguistic differences and similarities between the Nigerian learners' mother tongues and the English language in adapting and adoption of the English language curriculum.
3. The Association of Nigerian Authors and Publishers should be very vigilant as there are many hungry authors whose books end up creating more confusion to the readers (learners).

Teacher/School Management

It is said that no society's education can grow above the level of its teachers. Therefore, the researcher recommends that:

1. English teachers should adopt a pragmatic approach in teaching the language and use relevant theories during teaching.
2. Teachers should design their lessons to stimulate students' participation; they should therefore select and adopt materials from the textbooks to suit the background and developmental level of their learners.
3. The teachers should ensure frequent drills, verbal and written exercises so that the rules learnt can be retained and practicalized by the students.

Parents/Society

The role of parents and the larger society in proffering solution to the spoken and written errors committed by students in English cannot be over emphasized. In this view, the researcher puts forward the following suggestions.

1. Parents should ensure that their children/wards go to school regularly and punctually.
2. The parents can also serve as evaluators by checking at the students, books texts and assignment scripts so as to monitor their progress.
3. Parents should provide their children/wards with all the necessary materials needed for learning. These materials include textbooks, dictionary, schools bags and a lot of others.

Students/Learners

All the collective efforts that could be given by the government, curriculum planners/developers, textbooks writers, teachers and the society at large cannot

be meaningful and useful enough unless if the students display seriousness in learning the target language.

Therefore, the researcher opines that:

1. The students should be punctual and regular in school.
2. Attentive ears should be paid during lessons.
3. Every student should be encouraged to own a good English dictionary and textbooks.
4. The students should be encouraged to read newspapers, novels, journals, and others.
5. Students should be part of school clubs like debating, press clubs etc.

Conclusion

Finally, the paper has shown that 400 level university undergraduates commit various types of spoken and written errors in the use of English.

So, the results of the study reveal that commitment of errors by the undergraduate emerges as a result of many factors which include Interlingua factors and inadequate mastery of the English language rules of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling and among others. Such errors found in the students' speech and writing signal that most of the students have a poor foundation in English and it therefore reveals that the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria today is in a very pathetic and disheartening situation. The study therefore, provides invaluable information to teachers, textbooks writers, curriculum planners/developers and the like on the areas that require special educational attention and reinforcement and as such, time and energy will be devoted more on the areas. Though the students made errors in all the areas investigated by the researcher, but it is important to note that certain areas pose more problems to the students than others.

In order to reduce or totally eradicate such errors committed, the government should put more money in acquiring relevant teaching and learning materials for English language. The students also should work hard to get proficiency in English language and be able to speak and write it well.

Moreover, the students should take care or be discouraged from all non-quality and uncensored English textbooks produced by hungry-authors/writers publishers in the Nigerian book markets. When all these are successfully done,

the Nigerian educational system which has a poor and failing state can be revived and speaking and writing as two important productive language skills can restore and maintain their position as excellent bedrock of formal education and the best mediums of communication in English language, a language that is lingua and language of National Unity in Nigeria.

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