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RESEARCH PAPER

Errors in English Writing Composition at Undergraduate Level: A Case Study of Private Universities, Lahore, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research study focuses on the errors made by students who are learning English as a second language in their written compositions. Its primary objective is to uncover the nature of these erroneous structures, pinpoint the reasons behind these mistakes, and propose effective corrective measures. The study adopts an action-based research approach, combining various research methods to analyse the errors made by the learners. To achieve this, it utilizes Ellis's (1985) framework for error analysis, which offers a structured approach to categorizing and understanding the types of errors found in the students' written work. Data for the study was collected from three private universities at Lahore. All undergraduate-level students taking English were tasked with writing essays on predefined topics. These handwritten essays were then transcribed into Microsoft Word for further examination. For the analysis phase, the study employed Grammarly, an online software tool, to detect and categorize errors in the students' compositions. The findings of the research highlight a variety of errors in the students' writing, including interlingual errors, which stem from interference from their native language, and intralingual errors, related to their ongoing language development in English. The study concludes by recommending practical measures to address these errors, with a particular focus on providing individualized corrective feedback to help students improve their writing skills.

| **Keywords:** | English, Errors, Essay Writing, Private, University |

Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) is a continuous process that requires active participation from L2 learners. To achieve proficiency in the second language, it's essential for learners to be adequately exposed to both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) of the second language (Brown, 2000). In the Pakistani context, English language instruction emphasizes the development of these receptive and productive skills. However, despite years of learning, students' English language proficiency is on the decline. They struggle in various aspects of the language, with particular weaknesses in their writing skills, often leading to the production of error-ridden written compositions. Therefore, the current study hypothesizes that English language learners make numerous errors in their written work.

Historically, many studies have examined error analysis among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, primarily in the context of written compositions. These studies have consistently shown that ESL learners frequently make grammar mistakes, misspell words, and use inappropriate vocabulary (Lim HoPeng, 1976; James, 1988; Khan, 2005; Vahdatinejad, 2008). In the backdrop of the present study, it was evident that no such research had been conducted in the regional context of Abbottabad, and it was imperative to investigate errors specific to this area.

Learning a second language is an ongoing process, and errors are an inherent part of this learning journey. Merely pointing out errors will not eliminate them, as students are bound to make mistakes during the natural course of language acquisition (Gràcia et al., 2015). Second language teachers must recognize that learning abilities vary among individuals, and language acquisition relies on consistent exposure, hypothesis formation, testing, and reinforcing these ideas (Bartholomae, 1980). Hence, error analysis (EA) serves as a suitable method to classify and explain errors made by non-native speakers. In the context of this study, error analysis was applied to uncover the nature and causes of errors in the written compositions of secondary-level English language learners in Abbottabad. The research aimed to identify the types and frequency of errors related to sentence structure and word choice.

The primary focus of this study was error analysis, with the aim of examining the nature and origins of erroneous structures in the written compositions of English language learners at the secondary level. The sole objective was to investigate students learning English in this context, explore the nature of the errors in their written work, identify the root causes of these errors, and propose potential corrective measures to rectify them.

Comprehending the Analysis of Errors

As per Gray (2014), error analysis can be defined as a method grounded in principles and procedures used to diagnose, categorize, and systematically address undesirable language forms created by second language learners. It serves as a technique for assessing the frequency of errors, categorizing them based on their types, and uncovering the underlying reasons for these errors, which lead to the production of incorrect language (James, 1998). In the current study, error analysis is perceived as "a process employed by both researchers and educators involving the collection of language samples from learners, identification of errors within those samples, classification of these errors according to their nature and causes, and assessment of their significance" (Keshavarz, 1999, p. 168).

The analysis of errors follows a four-step process, which encompasses identification, description, explanation, and evaluation (Dockrell et al., 2015). It's essential to differentiate between errors and mistakes, as errors occur when learners lack knowledge of the correct form, highlighting gaps in their understanding. In contrast, mistakes happen when learners fail to perform correctly on a specific occasion, indicating occasional lapses in their performance (Ellis, 1997).

Corder (1967) introduced the concept of error analysis and emphasized its importance in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) process. He argued that the errors made by second language learners should not be inherently labeled as right or wrong; instead, the correctness or incorrectness of the language system is determined through error analysis. The error analysis process begins with the collection of language samples

from learners, identifying errors in those samples, describing these errors, categorizing them based on hypothesized causes, and evaluating their significance.

Considering the context of second language teaching and learning, error analysis (EA) serves as a valuable tool for recognizing, categorizing, and systematically interpreting the incorrect forms produced by second language learners. This is achieved by applying the linguistic rules and regulations defined within the field (Khanom, 2014).

A discrepancy exists between the learners' utterances and the reconstructed versions, forming the foundation for categorizing errors (Corder, 1973). This discrepancy further enables the classification of errors into different categories. Corder suggests that faulty structures created by learners indicate omissions of required elements in their compositions, the addition of unnecessary or incorrect structures, the selection of erroneous elements, or the production of disordered elements. Errors can be further classified as overt and covert faulty structures. Overt errors result from grammatical inaccuracies at the sentence and clause levels, while covert errors involve grammatically correct structures that fail to convey the intended meaning in a communicative context.

Identifying and Mitigating Sources of Error in Written Composition

Richards and Schmidt (2013) contend that the primary culprits behind flawed structures in written compositions by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners are interlingual and intralingual transfer. The learner's native language significantly influences the language acquisition process, leading to instances of interlingual errors stemming from the lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic features of their first language. Conversely, intralingual transfer, resulting from imperfect or partial acquisition of the second language, gives rise to developmental errors. This means that errors often occur when one element of the target language influences another element. Erdogan (2005) adds that learners employ specific strategies that contribute to the production of flawed structures, highlighting intralingual errors:

(a) Learners sometimes apply a structural rule in situations where it is not applicable. Certain grammatical elements lack clear contrasts for learners, leading them to apply these rules where they are unnecessary. For example, many ESL learners often produce verbs like "bringed" and "goed" or nouns like "foots" and "mouses." This process, known as overgeneralization, involves identifying a grammatical rule and incorrectly applying it.

(b) In certain instances, learners fail to adhere to the rule's restrictions and apply it in contexts where it is not suited for the target language usage.

(c) When learners struggle with more complex grammatical structures, they resort to using incomplete rules, if the application of simpler rules will facilitate effective communication. This incomplete rule application results in errors.

(d) Learners may derive misconceptions from an erroneous understanding of distinctions within the target language. Over time, these false concepts can become commonplace if not addressed.

Enhancing Language Teaching through the Application of Error Analysis

Multiple implications arise from error analysis in the realm of language teaching, particularly for ESL (English as a Second Language) educators and researchers in

applied linguistics. These implications hold significant meaning for ESL teachers, as they enable the assessment of ESL learners' progress while shedding light on the diverse strategies employed by students during the second language acquisition process. This, in turn, provides a foundation for deeper exploration of the intricacies of second language learning. Error analysis also proves invaluable for second language learners, as it allows them to identify and rectify errors, leading to a more accurate and effective development of their second language skills (Karra, 2006).

Furthermore, the prescription of remedial courses aimed at improving writing skills derives substantial benefits from error analysis. Regardless of whether it pertains to the first or second language, achieving fluency and expressiveness in writing is undeniably challenging. Numerous studies have been conducted in the domain of error analysis, with the specific intent of uncovering the nature of errors, their underlying causes, and proposing effective remedial measures. In the following paragraphs, we will delve into a select few of these studies.

Literature Review

Error analysis has perennially captured the fascination of linguists, serving as a prime domain for delving into the origins of specific linguistic mistakes and proffering viable solutions. In the study conducted by Ijaz et al. (2014), the focus was on scrutinizing the errors made by students at the graduation level in Pakistan who were learning English. Employing a corpus-based approach to analyze written scripts, the researchers identified several areas of concern. Notably, the students exhibited issues related to faulty subject-verb agreement, spelling errors, misuse of articles and prepositions, and the production of inappropriate verb tense forms. Additionally, lapses in proper punctuation and capitalization were evident, as was the use of double negation. Within this array of errors, the study identified verb tense forms as the most problematic for Pakistani learners of English, given their prevalence.

The underlying factors contributing to these errors were multifaceted, including learners' difficulty in applying rules despite understanding them, insufficient practice with grammar exercises, limited exposure to the English language, and a rudimentary knowledge of language use. To address these issues, the study recommended specific grammatical exercises.

In a parallel investigation by Ahmed et al. (2016), errors in written compositions by Pakistani ESL learners were analyzed. The study underscored that learners' errors primarily related to agreement issues, spelling errors, word choice, and contextual errors. Another category of errors encompassed a range of miscellaneous mistakes, including adverbs, abbreviations, capitalization, articles, possessive nouns, and prepositions. Notably, interlingual errors predominated, with the interference of the learners' first language identified as a significant cause. Language transfer did not emerge as the primary source of these errors, as some were indicative of the learners' limited grasp of the English language.

Consequently, learners often exerted efforts to spell and structure verb tenses resembling the Sindhi language. The study also emphasized the role of intralingual factors, highlighting that ESL learners in government schools lacked sufficient exposure and communication opportunities in the target language. The research proposed the use of grammatical exercises and dictation as strategies to mitigate these errors.

Although various studies have explored writing difficulties faced by students learning English at the tertiary level, none have specifically addressed the secondary level in Tehsil Havelian of District Abbottabad. The present study recognized the significance of providing robust support and attention to students learning English at the secondary level in Abbottabad, as they must progress to the next stage of their academic or practical life with strong English writing skills. Thus, the current study aimed to investigate the nature of errors made by students learning English at the secondary level in a government secondary school in Abbottabad, analyze their written compositions, identify the root causes of these errors, and propose viable remedies to rectify them.

Material and Methods

The present research employed an action research design and incorporated a mixed methodology approach. In this study, Ellis's (1985) method for analyzing learners' errors served as the analytical framework. During the process of selecting the sample, careful consideration was given to determining the sample size and the medium from which to draw the sample. Once the size and medium were established, errors were identified by scrutinizing mistakes, and each error was assigned a grammatical description. Ultimately, all errors were assessed based on their significance to inform pedagogical decisions.

Data for this study were collected from ninety (90) students enrolled in class X at a government secondary school in Abbottabad. To uphold ethical standards, the identity of the research population has been concealed. The data collection process encompassed four phases. In the initial phase, research participants were tasked with selecting topics of their preference, and based on their preferences and ratings, a single topic was chosen for the study. The primary objective behind this selection was to identify a general topic that all students could write about. In the subsequent stage, students were assigned the task of composing essays on the selected topics, with each essay being approximately 250 words in length. This approach aimed to assemble a realistic sample of written transcripts produced by the research participants to assess the actual nature of errors. In the third phase, the collected data was transcribed into Microsoft Word to facilitate the use of online software, Grammarly, for error identification. In the final phase, errors were manually categorized, with the rationale being to investigate the prevalent types of errors commonly found in learners' writing in their second language (L2).

Results and Discussion

In the context of error analysis dimensions outlined by Ellis (1985), as previously explained in the methodology, it became evident that ESL learners with similar linguistic exposure and identical academic backgrounds exhibited comparable stages of progress in their English text-writing proficiency.

The present study conducted an in-depth examination of the responses attempted by the students, revealing a total of sixteen recurring error types within the written scripts created by the research participants. Through a comprehensive data analysis, these errors were further classified based on Ellis's (1985) proposed dimensions. Notable among these errors were interlingual errors, which emphasized issues related to subject-verb agreement and confusion between genders, such as "he" and "she." Additionally, the written scripts displayed errors involving pluralization, as well as the omission or misuse of articles. Common mistakes encompassed capitalization

errors, preposition omission or misuse, and the incorrect selection of words from a word family, such as using "be + verb stem" instead of the correct verb stem. Furthermore, students were observed to employ inaccurate tense forms, construct incomplete sentences, and make spelling errors. Moreover, the written scripts highlighted challenges in forming questions, reporting speech accurately, utilizing possessive pronouns correctly, and employing transition markers.

This data indicated that virtually every student's written composition contained one or more errors. The notably high percentage of errors among secondary-level English learners raised concerns, as these students were to be assessed primarily on their writing skills. The data also pointed out that students' compositions not only featured grammatical errors but also suggested a lack of fundamental knowledge regarding successful writing, as expounded in Nunan (1989).

This study observed a diverse range of errors in the learners' written compositions. Specifically, the analysis unveiled that the most prevalent errors in the written texts included issues related to incorrect tense formation (85%), improper pluralization (71%), preposition misuse (66%), flawed question construction (65%), article omissions (63%), word selection (54%), and improper capitalization (50%). Additionally, the errors encompassed faulty subject-verb agreement structures (46%), improper usage of auxiliary verbs (42%), incorrect forms of reported speech (40%), transition marker errors (36%), sentence fragment production (34%), errors involving "be + verb stem" (32%), incorrect possessive pronouns (32%), and improper use of "he/she" (32%). Notably, these findings align with the conclusions of Ijaz et al. (2014), who identified eight common error types among Pakistani learners and highlighted the significant challenge posed by verb tense errors in the realm of English learning. Ahmed et al. (2016) also echoed similar findings.

The comprehensive dataset painted a disconcerting picture of the written compositions created by secondary-level English learners, a context where grammatical accuracy is commonly expected. This statistical evidence shed light on the reasons behind the subpar scores in public examinations. The frequent occurrence of these common errors, deemed undesirable at the secondary level, underscored a decline in the quality of writing skills. It is important to note that all the errors highlighted in the above figure were identified as major impediments to achieving high grades in written examinations.

When proposing remedies to address these errors, it is essential to recognize that providing individualized corrective feedback can be instrumental in helping learners rectify their mistakes. Language teachers should consistently offer comprehensive feedback to students on their writing, taking special care to address the common errors with empathy. Among these, interlingual errors, such as those involving subject-verb agreement, should be given precedence, as their persistence can significantly impede the learning process. Teachers should encourage students to view errors as part of their development and foster a positive learning environment. It is crucial to motivate ESL learners to review and identify their own errors, though they may also engage in peer assessment. Corrective feedback is recommended only when students encounter difficulties marking their own errors. Additionally, language teachers should instill an understanding of the rules and conventions of writing within the given context, which will reinforce new learning over the course of the academic session. Finally, ESL teachers must prioritize meeting the unique needs of the learners in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the present study was to examine the nature of errors in written compositions made by ESL learners, identify the underlying causes of these errors, and propose corrective measures to address them. The study's central findings revolved around grammatical errors, which emerged prominently in the results. The research participants demonstrated weaknesses in vocabulary, occasionally leading to incomprehensible sentences. Furthermore, they struggled to apply correct sentence structure in English compositions, indicative of significant challenges in mastering fundamental grammatical rules in the language.

This study exclusively focused on how ESL learners internalize English language rules. It also recommended the use of Error Analysis (EA) by ESL teachers to systematically pinpoint specific and common errors among ESL learners, enabling them to give more focused attention to relevant issues. Investigating language learning difficulties is particularly enlightening for ESL teachers as it furnishes valuable insights into prevalent areas of weakness in ESL learning, allowing educators to incorporate these insights into their teaching materials more effectively. Additionally, by having the ability to anticipate errors to some extent, teachers can be better equipped to assist their students in mitigating or overcoming language learning challenges.

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