

ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS' ERRORS IN WRITING AT THE HIGHER TEACHERS' TRAINING COLLEGE IN N'DJAMENA

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Abstract

This paper set to carry out an experimental study on ten students who were randomly selected and divided into two groups: control group (CG) and treatment group (TG). After being taught, the control group was asked to write a composition. The treatment group was also asked to write a composition on the same topic. This paper then compared their results. The findings in the study of the control group indicated that the most common errors committed by the learners were spelling errors which recorded the highest percentage with 24.24%, followed by word choice errors with 15.15%, and adjective related errors having 12.12%. Finally, this article indicates that the writing of learners of English as a foreign language was not free from errors even though they were appropriately taught.

Keywords: comparative study, error analysis, learners, teaching

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Etymologically, error comes from a Latin word *errare*, meaning “stray”, “mistake”. It can be applied to language learning. Most researchers in the field of language teaching and learning hold the view that an error is a deviation from the norm of the language that the learner is learning, be it a second language or a foreign language, written or spoken (Weinreich, 1953; Brown, 2007; Ellis, 2008).

Research in the errors made by the learners of a second or foreign language in their writing has been gaining ground even though Error Analysis has been a controversial topic among linguists, teachers, and researchers. Errors committed by the learners of English as a foreign language and their solutions by the researchers and teachers play an important role.

The learning of English in a non-native setting like Chad has been a big challenge for the learners. By carrying out the research on errors made by undergraduate students of the higher teachers’ training college of N’Djamena, the students’ writing has been tested, and the linguistic areas found to be problematic have been identified and analysed, and consequently, solutions provided.

Literature review

Sokeng (2014) investigated grammatical errors made by 250 bilingual level 1 Francophone students in the Department of Bilingual Studies of the University of Yaoundé I studying English. She used test as an instrument for her research. She marked the students’ scripts, identified, classified and explained the causes of errors encountered by the students.

From the findings, most students made grammatical errors which concern verb tense and form which indicated the highest percentage (23%), subject-verb agreement recorded 22%, preposition, 18%, word order with 13%, plurality scored 9%, articles 5%, passive voice 5%, auxiliaries 3%, and double negation 2%. The researcher discovered that the sources of these errors were found to be intralingual transfer and interlingual transfer. She concluded that the teaching of English languages should be reinforced and effective from primary school, secondary school, college and university, but she did not specify what should be taught.

Ngadda and Nwoke (2014) have also studied errors in the written English of undergraduate Engineering students at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University in Bauchi State. To carry out their study, they used examination tests and term papers. They analysed their data adopting error analysis procedure. The findings of the study showed that grammar recorded the highest percentage: 29.5% in term paper, 31.35% in continuous assessment test and 29.72% in examination scripts, followed by errors related to expression, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary and connectives. Both researchers attributed the causes of these errors to interlingual difficulties, intralingual difficulties, lack of much exposure to the target language, faulty teaching and learning, and forgetfulness.

Therefore, on the basis of the errors that they analysed, they recommended some pedagogical ways of solving error problems such as drama and the use of audio-visual materials, the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, expression, spelling and punctuation, proper pronunciation of words by the teacher, observation of behavioural and personality problems, thinking in English, exposing learners to a wide range of experiences, writing practice, relaxation, efficient teaching techniques and materials as well as conducting research based on students' errors.

Theoretical framework

Corder (1984) distinguished between the errors of performance which are not systematic and the errors of competence which are systematic. For a better understanding, "it will be useful therefore hereafter to refer to errors of performance as *mistakes*, reserving the term *error* to refer to the systematic errors of the learner from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date, i.e. his *transitional competence*" (Corder, 1984, pp. 24-25). In language learning, committing errors is more important than making mistakes, because if a learner makes errors, "his errors could be taken as evidence not of failure but of success and achievement" (Richards and Sampson, 1984: p. 4), while "mistakes are of no significance to the process of language learning" (Corder, 1984, p. 25).

Ellis (1997) made the distinction between errors and mistakes clearer by pointing out that errors are caused by gaps in the learner's knowledge, because he or she is unable

to differentiate between what is correct and what is incorrect; mistakes are due to lapses in performance, because, occasionally, the learner uses what he or she knows incorrectly. Mistakes are believed to be made by L1 learners, while L2 learners commit errors. Brown (2007), however, argued that mistakes are made by everybody. But when the same mistakes are made persistently by the learner, and he cannot correct himself, they are therefore considered to be errors.

Basically, errors and mistakes are words that are concerned with the inaccurate usage of language that results in lexical, semantic, syntactic/grammatical, and phonological problems. So, the term *errors* can be taken as a synonym for *mistakes*.

Presented below is the framework for error analysis established by Ellis (1997) and adopted for this research.

Data collection

This step is based on the collection of data from learners or informants by means of such various research instruments as interview, questionnaire, observation, or test. For the present study, composition and questionnaires were used to obtain written data.

Identification of errors

The identification of errors is a situation where the researcher has to recognise and categorise errors. In other words, he has to distinguish between what can be said to be an error and what cannot be said to be an error.

Description

The description model of error analysis involves a comparison of the learner's idiosyncratic utterances with a reconstruction of those utterances in the target language. Errors are described on the basis of linguistic categories: lexical errors, grammatical/syntactic errors, morphological errors, phonological errors, semantic errors, pragmatic errors. These categories can also be subdivided into sub-categories according to the classes of words and their functions, for instance, subject-verb agreement, tenses, prepositions, adjectives, etc. Ellis (2008) states this step gives a detailed description of specific errors and a quantification of errors as well.

Explanation of errors

According to Ellis (2008), the explanation of errors is a step which consists of establishing the sources of L2 learners' errors, that is to say, finding out why learners have made errors with a view to explaining the second language learning process on the basis of established principles.

Evaluation of errors

The evaluation of errors is motivated by a desire to improve language pedagogy. So, it takes into consideration the effect that errors can have from the point of view of the person who deals with the errors. In fact, error evaluation measures the effect that errors committed by the learner of a second or foreign language may have on the evaluator. This effect can be gauged either in terms of the addressee's comprehension of the learner's meaning or in terms of the addressee's affective response to the errors (Ellis, 2008: 56). However, the evaluation was not taken into consideration in this study.

Method

This research has been conducted at the Higher Teachers' Training College of N'Djamena. Data were collected from the students of the department of English of the then school. A sample of 10 students out of 80 was used in the experimental study. In other words, an experiment of two groups of students selected randomly was presented: five students in a control group taught writing for thirty hours, they were also asked to write compositions on the topic, *private schools are better than public schools. Discuss.* Another group of five students called treatment group was not taught, but given the same topic the same day, and in the same venue to write on with a view to evaluating the effectiveness teaching writing. This was to see if there was a noticeable difference between the two groups in terms of performance in writing as a result of the teaching.

Practically, the presentation of the analysis of errors looks like this:

- Presentation of the results according to error categories and types.
- Introduction of example(s) of the error types found in the students' compositions.
- Analysis of the error
- Proposition of correction (reconstructed version)

Relative Frequency Percentage Formula to analyse the data was then used. This consisted of dividing the number of times each error category or type occurred in the compositions by the total number of frequencies. This formula leads to simple statistical analysis. The formula is as follows:

$$\text{Relative Frequency } \mathbf{RF} = \frac{f}{n} \times \frac{100}{1} \%$$

Where,

f = frequency of the number of the error type occurred for all levels.

n = Total number of the students' compositions for the intended levels.

Results and discussion

Results have been tabulated. Only examples of errors with the highest percentage are given.

Table 1

Errors of Mechanics

S/N	Error types	Number		Percentage		Ranking	
		CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
1	Spelling	8	6	24.24%	17.64%	1	2
2	Punctuation	1	2	3.03%	5.88%	5	5
3	Broken word	-	1	-	2.94%	-	6
TOTAL		9	9	27.27%	26.46		

Table 1 presents error of mechanics. Among the errors of mechanics, spelling error has been described as having the highest percentage (24.24%) followed by errors of punctuation with 3.03% in the CG. In the TG, it can be seen that spelling errors indicate 17.64% followed by errors of punctuation that have 5.88%, and a broken word representing 2.94%.

Spelling

A spelling error is identified in the following example:

“**Money**” is wrongly written as “**many**”. The cause of this error can be traced back to the lack of distinction between the vowel sound /ʌ/ and the letters “**a**” resulting into “**many**” instead of “**money**”. This type of error does not allow a proper understanding of the message.

Proposed correction: The money that they invest.

Table 2
Grammatical Errors

S/N	Error types	Number		Percentage		Ranking	
		CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
1	Adjectives	4	4	12.12%	11.76%	3	3
2	Tense	2	2	6.06%	5.88%	4	5
3	Subject-Verb Agreement	1	-	3.03%	-	5	-
4	Possessive Case	2	-	6.06%	-	4	-
5	Pronoun	1	-	3.03%	-	5	-
6	Plurality	1	3	3.03%	8.82%	5	4
7	Preposition	1	1	3.03%	2.94%	5	6
8	Article	1	-	3.03%	-	5	-
9	Adverb	-	3	-	8.82%	-	4
10	Verb form	-	1	-	2.94%	-	6
TOTAL		13	14	39.39%	41.16%		

Table 2 shows that the area of difficulties identified in the scripts of the students in the control group are grammar. The grammatical errors concerned adjectives which registered the highest percentage in this category of errors, that is to say, 12.12%. In the second position, are errors relating to subject-verb agreement, pronoun, plurality, preposition, and article which scored each 5% followed by tense and possessive case error with 4% each. In the TG, the same table reveals that the percentage of errors of adjectives is the highest in this category with 11.76%. This type of errors is followed by errors relating to plurality and adverb, having each 8.82%, Tense errors is in the third position with 5.88%, and errors about preposition and verb form scoring each 2.94%.

Adjectives

There is a wrong use of adjective in the following example:

Example: Overcrowded number of students

Overcrowded is an adjective which is used about a place with too many people. Therefore, the “**number of students**” cannot be overcrowded again. This error is due to the lack of understanding of the meaning of **overcrowded**. The teacher may understand what the student meant, but this error can affect the composition of the student. “**Classroom**” should be used in place of “**number of students**”, the adjective that could be used in place of “**overcrowded**” would be “**great**”. Then, example 1 will look like this: **overcrowded classroom** or **great number of students**.

Proposed correction: An overcrowded classroom

Table 3*Lexical Errors*

S/N	Error types	Number		Percentage		Ranking	
		CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
1	Unnecessary words	2	3	6.06%	8.82%	4	4
2	Word choice	5	8	15.15%	23.52%	2	1
3	Borrowing	2	-	6.06%	-	4	-
TOTAL		9	11	27.27%	32.34%		

Table 3 reveals that among lexical errors, word choice related errors indicate 15.15% representing the highest percentage. Unnecessary words and borrowing occur in the second position scoring each 6.06%. In the TG, two types of errors, unnecessary use of words with a percentage that corresponds to 8.82% and word choice errors with the highest percentage (23.52%) are shown.

Word choice

Example: Reason why the **level** of public schools are very **down**

Concerning word choice errors in example 3, the words “**level**” and “**down**” are not used in their correct place. They may give a different interpretation of the sentence. The literal translation of the French words, “*niveau*” and “*bas*” into English might be the cause of this error. Again, the learner might not know that a word in the source language may have several contextual meanings in the target language. For example, another meaning of “*niveau*” in English is “**standard**”, and “*bas*” is “**decline**”. From this view, example 3 could be read: “**that is why the standard of public schools is indeed on the decline**”.

Proposed correction: that is why the performance of public schools is very poor

Table 4*Semantic Errors*

S/N	Error types	Number		Percentage		Ranking	
		CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
1	Meaningless sentence	1	-	3.03%	-	5	-
TOTAL		1	-	3.03%	-		

Table 4 reveals that in semantic errors, a meaningless sentence has been identified as can be seen, indicates a percentage of 3.03% while students in the TG have not committed errors related to semantics.

Example: “the problem of education **born the they and they**”. “**born the they and they**” has rendered the sentence meaningless. This type of error is difficult to explain, and therefore, the proposed correction is impossible to reflect the intention of the student.

Table 5*Syntactic Errors*

S/N	Error types	Number		Percentage		Ranking	
		CG	TG	CG	TG	CG	TG
1	Infinitive	1	-	3.03 %	-	5	-
2	Sentence fragments	-	3	-	8.82%	-	4
3	Omission	-	6	-	17.64%	-	2
4	Parallelism	-	1	-	2.94%	-	6
TOTAL		1	10	3.03 %	29.4		

Table 5 shows that a syntactic error at the level of the infinitive scores 3.03%. In the TG, omission scored 17.64%, followed by segment fragments with 8.82%, and parallelism that shows 2.94%.

Omission

In the following example, there is an omission of a word which should be “**differences**”. Without this word, the sentence is not comprehensible. The reason behind the omission could be forgetfulness.

Example: So, what are the \wedge between private schools and public schools?

In the treatment group, word choice has 23.52%, followed by omission that scored 17.64%, and spelling with 17.64%. Adjectives occurred in the third position with 11.76%.

Proposed correction:

- a) So, what are the differences between private schools and public schools?
- b) So, what are the similarities between private schools and public schools?

Error similarities and differences between control group and treatment group**Grammatical errors**

In the experimental study, the findings show that in grammatical errors, control group and treatment group have in common errors relating to adjectives, tense, plurality, and preposition.

- Concerning adjective errors, the control group has 12.12% while the treatment group has 11.76%. This means that the control group has more problems with adjectives than the treatment group. Therefore, the teaching on adjectives to remedy errors has proved effective.
- With tense errors, the control group registered 6.06% compared to the treatment group that got a percentage of 5.88% meaning that the control group has not performed better in the use of tense. This is also evidence that the teaching on tenses had positive effect on the performance of the treatment group.
- In the area of plurality, however, 3.03% is an indicator that the control group has fewer difficulties with the formation of plural nouns than the treatment group has 8.82%. In this case, the teaching on the plural nouns has proven inefficient.
- Findings show that the control group that has 3.03% has more problems than the treatment group that scores 2.94 in the use of preposition. Once again, the teaching of preposition is found effective.

It should be noted that the control group has difficulties with subject-verb agreement, possessive case, pronoun, and article, but the treatment group has not registered these types of errors. This reflects the efficiency of the teaching of these aspects of grammar to the treatment group. The treatment group, however, has problem with adverb and verb form which the control group hasn't. From this comparison, it appears clearly that teaching grammar appropriately can help the learners to improve and make less grammatical errors in writing.

Lexical errors

In lexical category of errors, the findings reveal that both control group and treatment group use unnecessary words and have difficulties in choosing the correct words. However, a look at the percentage analysis indicates that unnecessary words represent 6.06% in the control group and 8.82% in the treatment group. With regards to word choice, the treatment group still passes the control group in percentage with 23.52% against 15.15%. This suggests that the treatment group has much more problem in using wordy elements and choosing appropriate words in sentences. Therefore, teaching has not help solving learners' vocabulary problems.

Errors of mechanics

Learners in control group and treatment group commit errors of punctuation and spelling errors as well. In fact, spelling errors in control group indicate 24.24% against 17.64% in treatment group. Here, the treatment group performs better than control group in terms of words' spelling. However, the percentage of errors of punctuation in treatment group is higher representing 5.88%. In the control group, errors of punctuation correspond to 3.03%. Learner in the treatment group has another error of mechanics which learner in the control group has not committed. In terms of total percentage, the control group has got 27.27% against 26.52%. There is a slight difference in percentage between the two groups with regards to spelling and punctuation errors. So, for this reason, the linguistic difficulties among the learners of the two groups are almost equal. In this case, the teaching on spelling and punctuation has no effect on the learners' writing.

Syntactic errors

Learners in control group committed one type of syntactic errors, infinitive which carried 3.03% while learners in treatment group committed three different types of syntactic errors: sentence fragments having 8.82%, omission with 17.64%, and parallelism that recorded 2.94%. So, from these results, it is obvious that the treatment group has more problem than the control group. Therefore, the effectiveness of teaching did not have considerable influence in reducing the occurrence of syntactic errors in the learners' writing.

Semantic errors

One group registered semantic errors relating to meaningless sentence with a percentage of 3.03%. This was the control group. In other words, learner in the treatment group did not have difficulty in semantics as they made meaningful sentences. Therefore, the appropriate teaching enabled the learners of the treatment group to avoid making semantic errors.

Conclusion

Despite the exhaustive research on error analysis, the experimental studies conducted on written errors committed by Chadian learners of English at higher institutions that exist are few.

As stated by Corder (1977), there are two schools of thought according to which errors occur either as a result of the inadequacy of the teaching method or the imperfection of the world. Bongaerts et al. (1984, p. 49) on their part argued that if errors occurred, in spite of the teaching, this was invariably attributed to interference from L1. In fact, many researchers in the field of English Language Teaching suggested appropriate teaching as a solution to the phenomenon of errors.

The findings from the study showed that no matter how students were taught, errors still occurred in their compositions. In terms of teaching, this research confirms the well-balanced argument of Mackey (1974, p. x) according to which “good teaching is no guarantee of good learning; for it is what the learner does that makes him learn. Poor learning can nullify the best teaching, just as poor teaching can devalue the best method”.

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