Common Errors in Second Language (L2) Speakers' Written Texts. A Case of First Year First Semester (L1:S1) Arts students at Midlands State University: An Error Analysis Approach by Fungai Mutema and Itayi Mariko

Common Errors in Second Language (L2) Speakers' Written Texts. A Case of First Year First Semester (L1:S1) Arts students at Midlands State University: An Error Analysis Approach.

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Abstract

The acquisition of English as a second language among Africans cannot be over emphasized as this has become a part of the African child from the nursery school right up to university. During the process of second language acquisition (SLA), errors are bound to be made and these are witnessed in performance activities like writing and speaking. This paper focuses on the errors common in Midlands State University students' written texts during their first year first semester session. The investigation was done through the use of observations, questionnaires administered to students and interviews with lecturers. It was observed that some errors can be accounted for by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis which states that errors are a result of mother tongue interference whilst others can be accounted for by Error Analysis Hypothesis which assumes that errors occur due to gaps in knowledge of second language rules. It was observed through the investigation that students display quite a number of errors and these include; overgeneralization, omission, misinformation and misordering among others. For the acquisition process to be effective at university, the Communication Skills Department and lecturers in general may assist learners in reducing errors through the provision of effective error correction in oral and written form**.**

Key Terms

Mother Tongue / First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Target Language

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Introduction

The advent of colonialism saw the introduction of formal education in most African countries and in particular Zimbabwe. English, French and Portuguese became the second languages (L2) for most African states. In Zimbabwe English became the L2. Thus the English language being the target language to a people who had their own mother language, there are bound to be challenges in the learning and ultimate production of this target language. Psycholinguists believe that language acquisition is at its best between twelve months and five years of a child's development. In Zimbabwe most students are exposed to the L2 from about the age of five. As a result they are bound to make some errors in the process of acquiring and producing the target language. Therefore, this research focused on the errors common in students' written texts and then make an analysis of the typology, patterns and possible solutions. It is an expectation that on reaching university level, a student should have almost reached target language-like stages in L2 usage. However, this has been noted not to be generally so. The written texts produced by first level first semester at the Midlands State University have greatly proven that L2 learning is quite challenging as demonstrated by error riddled texts which they produce. This is the issue which triggered this research. Given this background the aim of this research is to establish the nature of errors made by students when writing academic texts.

The domain of errors by L2 learners is a contentious area which led to the founding of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and eventually the error Analysis Hypothesis as approaches to determine the source, types and patterns of errors. Thus the Error Analysis Approach, which is regarded as a weaker version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, is employed in this research so as to determine the source types and even possible solutions to the errors. Mclaughlin (1987) states that the Error Analysis Approach seeks to determine the source of errors in order to learn more about interference and development, while the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis is concerned more about finding the nature of learner errors. In view of this,

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a study on errors common in students' written texts will help to determine whether the errors will be a result of interference or development.

Linguists have discovered that errors can be attributed to intra-lingual (developmental) and inter-lingual (influence of L1) factors, (Mclaughlin 1987). Errors are also said to be a result of the interaction of both factors. Selinker (1969) coined the term inter-language to refer to the interim grammars constructed by L2 learners as they approximate the target language and this inter-language is riddled with errors.

 In support of this, Ellis (1997:33) says,

> The learner's grammar is transitional. Learners change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules, and restructuring the whole system.

As a result, when learners add, delete or restructure their grammatical constructions, errors occur.

Selinker et al (1975) carried out a research in an English elementary school in Canada and discovered three main errors made by learners during L2 learning. They discovered transfer overgeneralization and simplification errors. Ellis also researched on types of errors and came up with similar findings. He also discovered errors of omission, misinformation and misordering.

This study is meant to benefit the L2 teacher, from high school right up to tertiary level. The findings will help the L2 teacher in assessing the students' work and also in coming up with methodologies suitable for assisting the L2 learner to become highly proficient and competent in using the L2. Ellis (1997) argues that classification of errors helps us in diagnosing learners' language problems at any stage of their development. The identification of errors is also essential in the sense that it becomes easier on the part of the teacher to help correct the errors after identifying their various types.

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Linguists will also benefit from this study in that they will have some guidelines on the errors typical among L2 learners. This is essential for further studies in the field.

Furthermore, the L2 learners will also benefit from this study through identifying common errors in students' texts. The study will help the student in making self evaluation and then engage in self correction as a way of perfecting one's use of the target language.

In relation to this, Hadley (1993) argues that writing is a complex skill as such one should be exposed to environments which enhance this skill especially those writing in the L2. Such learners should be exposed to more practice in academic writing in the L2 and making sure that the errors existing in their work are identified, corrected and then, the learner takes note of them and tries to improve on them.

Methodology

The study focused on errors common among Midlands State University First year First Semester (L1:S1) students in the Faculty of Arts. A sample of a hundred respondents was randomly drawn out of six hundred and forty five first year first semester Arts students. A random sample is more representative of the whole population and findings can be easily generalized to the whole population. Both qualitative and quantitative research designs were used. Creswell (2009) argues that these two research designs are not polar opposites in fact they complement each other. Qualitative design accounts for the descriptive part of the research brought about by interviews and observations. The use of questionnaires is accounted for by the quantitative research design in which numbered data obtained from questionnaires administered to learners was analysed. The Case Study strategy of enquiry was also used, whereby the researchers only focused on MSU first year, first semester students in the Faculty of Arts.

This enabled the researchers to explore in depth the envisaged problem. Observations were used in analysing the students' written texts (only texts written in English) and as a way of

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triangulation, questionnaires were also administered to students. Interviews were held with ten lecturers in the Communication Skills Department.

Theoretical Framework

The Error Analysis Approach was employed in this study. The Error Analysis Approach is regarded as a weaker version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis which arose as a counter argument of the assertions made by Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. It is concerned with finding out more about the nature of learner errors. This is why it was chosen for this study because it helps in the identification of errors and how they could be corrected.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) was formulated by Charles Fries in 1945 and was later popularized by Robert Lado in the late 1950s. According to Ellis (1997:38) Contrastive Analysis is "a set of procedures for comparing and contrasting the linguistic systems of two languages in order to identify their structural similarities and differences." The hypothesis draws from the behaviourist perspective which regards language learning as involving habit formation and therefore according to scholars of this view, when one acquires his or her first language (Mother tongue/L1), he or she acquires its linguistic habits, for example sounds and when that person tries to learn a second language, it would mean that the second language will contend with the first language as the linguistic habits of the L1 will be transferred to the L2. CAH predicts that learning of a second language will be influenced by the first language which will facilitate acquisition of the second language where similarities in structure exist which is termed transference. On the other hand, it is predicted that where differences occur, the first language is said to interfere with the learning of the second language as it is assumed that the second language learner will encounter problems in acquiring the target language in such a situation.

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CAH assets that errors are a result of the L1 interference and assumed that elements of the second language that are similar to the L1 will be simple for learner to acquire but elements which are different will be difficult and will cause a learner to make errors.

Error analysis hypothesis is regarded as a weaker version of CAH and arose as a counter argument of the assertions made by CAH. The hypothesis seeks to find out more on the nature of the learner errors. It studies the patterns of errors so as to explain their courses. Researchers in this field include Corder (1976), Dulay and Burt (1972) among several others. According to Dulay and Burt (1972) in McLaughlin (1987:67) '…the majority of errors that children make reflect the influence of the target second language more than the influence of the child's first language'.

This shows that errors are not merely a result of L1 interference as predicted by CAH but are evidence of the 'gaps in learners' knowledge of the target language' (Ellis 1997:139). Error Analysis Hypothesis does not pin down error causes on L1 interference but regards error making as 'an inevitable and positive part of language learning as the learner gets creative in the construction process' (Hedge 2000:15). The language produced by a learner in the process of acquiring the second language is referred to as the interlanguage which is a term coined by Selinker in (1969) to refer to 'the interim grammars constructed by second language learners on their way to the target language. Interlanguage is riddled with errors as the learner tries to reach target language-like forms and errors are regarded as development rather than caused by interference of the L1. Error Analysis thus tries to identify and describe errors in a learner's interlanguage.

Error Analysis Hypothesis has met a number of criticisms from different scholars. Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) argue that it is difficult to be certain precisely what type of error a second language learner is making or why the learner makes it'(McLaughlin 1987:68). They assert that the same error can be attributed to developmental errors as those found in the acquisition of the

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first language as well as to factors reflecting the influence of the learner's first language. Another point of argument against Error Analysis has been that most studies in the field are based on cross-sectional samples in which data are gathered at a single point in time from many subjects with different degrees of proficiency' (McLaughlin, 1987:68). He argues that longitudinal studies on Error Analysis are very few yet they might offer important information as they examine whether specific errors are prevalent at specific points in time or whether certain errors persist longer than others'. This means therefore that a longitudinal study should be carried out on this case study over the students' university learning period in order to establish whether error correction would have taken place at the end of their various degree programmes.

Analysis of errors made by second language learners is important to the second language teacher in that it provides information as to how the learner has progressed towards the goal of second language acquisition. The learner can also analyse errors so as to self correct and researchers can also analyse errors to determine how a second language is learned. Errors bring out the psychological state of the learner and thus Error Analysis is of great importance as it provides factual data to base preparation of teaching material and methods rather than relying on theoretical speculation.

A learner does not always recognize his or her errors and even when his or her attention is drawn to them, he or she may fail to correct them and might, in trying to correct them, commit more errors. Error Analysis is therefore vital as it enables the teacher to know how the learner makes these errors and provide corrective feedback which enhances learning and acquisition of the appropriate rules. Error analysis also provides the language teacher with information as to whether what has been taught has been well grasped or not. The hypothesis is of paramount importance to this study as the teacher has to determine the source and patterns of errors a learner makes so that he or she provides appropriate error correction that enables the learner to identify the errors and be able to self correct.

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A number of researches have been carried out in relation to this hypothesis and these include some by Corder (1976) and Dulay and Burt (1972) among several others. Dulay and Burt in Mclaughlin (1987:67), say that "…the majority of errors that children make reflect the influence of the target second language more than the influence of the child's first language." Errors are not merely a result of first language interference as predicted by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, but are evidence of, "gaps in learners' knowledge of the target language." This hypothesis also regards error making as, "…an inevitable and positive part of language learning, as the learner gets creative in the construction process" (Hedge (2000:15). However the Error Analysis Hypothesis has met with a number of criticisms from different scholars. Schachter and Celce-Murcia (9177) agree that it is difficult to be certain what type of error a second language learner is making or why the learner makes it. They argue that the same error can be attributed to developmental errors as those found in the acquisition of the second language as well as to factors reflecting the influence of the learners' L1.

Facts and Discussion

Types and causes of errors

Errors are an inevitable part of language learning as they indicate the learner's level of proficiency in the target language. A teacher's role is to assist the learner to work on reducing his/her errors so as to produce students who according to Rivers (1993) in the end are capable of effectively communicating at a high level in the target language, in this case, English. It is vital therefore to study the patterns of errors students make so as to help them achieve higher levels of competence. From this research of errors common in first year, first semester Arts students at the MSU, it was gathered that the most prevalent errors are as Ellis (1997) and Selinker et al (1975),

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noted, that is, errors of transference, misinformation, overgeneralisation, misordering and other miscellaneous type of errors such as punctuation and use of informal language.

It was noted that predictions of CAH are evident in the errors students make. Transference errors are a result of L1 interference where a learner falls back on the knowledge of his/her L1 to express him/herself through applying that knowledge to the target language. 44% of the observed scripts showed that L1 tends to interfere with L2 learning. As an example, one student said, "…meet the demands politely even if it does not mean to solve their problems but at least partial is better than nothing." This was literally translated from the Shona equivalent, "kuitira vanhu zvakanaka kunyange zvisingapedzi matambudziko avo, zviri nani kuvaitira zvishoma pane kushaya zvachose." The learner was trying to say, "It would be better if the employer partially meets the demands of the employees than failing completely.''

Another example is, "this happens when there is noise of the people from the outside environment." In Shona and Ndebele which are the L1 of most students at MSU, "noise of the people" when translated would be grammatically accurate yet in English "of" makes the utterance grammatically wrong but "by" would be more befitting. This type of error as CAH predicts, is a result of there being differences in grammatical structure between L1 and L2 as exemplified above.

Table 1: Errors of Misinformation

Types	Percentage (%)
their, there, they	53
Were, where	51
Other homophones	35

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Articles	27
Consistence	43

Errors of misinformation are a common feature in students' written texts. Ellis (1997) states that this type of error occurs when a learner lacks knowledge of the appropriate language forms. Unlike transference errors which can be accounted for by CAH, errors of misinformation can be accounted for through EAH which shows that errors are evidence of gaps in knowledge of the target language rather than merely being L1 interference or transference.

Hedge (2000) noted that this type of error is a result of the fact that some language teachers have limitations in their competence of the L2. This is the case with the majority of Zimbabwean teachers especially in relation to pronunciation issues as evident in the confusion of the use of words like "there", "their" and "they" as well as "were" and "where". Of the observed scripts, 53% had problems with the use of "their", "they" and "there", 51% confused "were" and "where", while 35% confused the use of other homophones as shown in table 1 above. Gaps in knowledge tend to be passed on from the teacher to the learner to the extent that a student can reach university level bearing the gaps as seen in the majority of the students' written texts at MSU.

Errors of misinformation also occur in relation to vocabulary consistence (subject-verb agreement), as well as application of articles. In terms of vocabulary, 35% tended to confuse homonyms and homophones like weather and whether, conservation and conversation, conduct and contact, and also words which appear to mean the same but applied to different contexts like "avoid" and "prevent" only to mention a few. Articles are also a problem with 27% of students displaying lack of knowledge as to when to use "a" and "the" for instance. 43% have a great challenge with issues pertaining to consistence especially in subject-verb agreement as shown

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below. A study by Alhaysony (2012) among the Saudi female EFL students also showed that the use of articles is really a problem, students do not know where to use "a" and "the".

i.   Peters and Robinson (1980) <u>argues</u> that …

ii.   He <u>have</u> the room to receive feedback.

iii.   If <u>one</u> opts to paraphrase, <u>you</u> should…

This shows gaps in the students' knowledge of English as a target language.

Another notable error of misinformation which seems fairly prevalent is that of incomplete sentences especially when it comes to complex sentences. Students who make this error seem not to be aware of the fact that subordinate clauses are dependent and cannot stand alone as complete statements. An example of an incomplete sentence witnessed is; "inspite of listening being a simple act on face value." This statement leaves the reader hanging as it shows that some information is missing. For the statement to be complete a main clause is needed, for example, "…it demands certain skills for it to be an effective process."

Table 2: Errors of Overgeneralisation

Types	Percentage (%)
Plural marker 's'	15
Past tense form 'ed'	28
'r'	5

As highlighted by Ellis (1997), in learning L2, a learner can over generalize some aspects of the language. This means that a learner, after learning a rule of grammar, may over-apply it to situations it should never be applied and this was also observed in the work written at the MSU. The plural marker "s", for example, was overused in that not only was it applied to appropriate

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nouns to indicate plurality but it was also used in nouns like "woman" to become "womans", "child" to "childrens", and 15% made this error. Another error that was seen to result from overgeneralisation was the application of the past tense form (-ed) to irregular verbs which was made by 25% of the respondents. For example, "lose" to "losed" or "losted"; "choose" to "choosed", "buy" to "buyed", "say" to "sayed", among others. This implies that students over-generalise this rule to apply to all verbs when put in their past tense form. Another over-generalisation error witnessed was that 5% tended to think that "r" suits more to L1 than to English, such that a word like "temporary" is written as "temporal", "literary" as "literal", "parallel" as "pallalel".

Misordering as an error was mainly seen in one sentence where the first person "I" is supposed to come last when accompanied by other nouns before a verb. 10% made this error as some tended to say "I and my friends", instead of "my friends and I".

Table 3: Misordering errors

Type	Percentage (%)
First person 'I'	10

Table 4: Punctuation errors

Type	Percentage (%)
Punctuation error	25

Punctuation is also an area where 25% showed a challenge in. Some tend to leave out full stops as they begin new sentences. Others leave out capital letters where they are necessary.

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Table 5: Informal Language

Type	Percentage (%)
Contractions	60

60% also failed to draw the line between formal and informal languages and tend to include the latter even in assignment writing. Contractions such as "can't", "don't", "wasn't"'/ etcetera are found to be prevalent in students' written texts. Some even go on to use informal jargon like the statement, "…when they are fired up and fresh", and some such statements.

There are other factors that influence language learning which might also account for differences in competence levels amongst the learners. These include environmental factors or exposure variables, for instance if a learner comes from a disadvantaged environment, he/she faces challenges in terms of resources and practice opportunities. Such a learner will perform differently from a learner who has more exposure to the target language. The former is likely to make errors than the latter.

Individual differences also account for the differences in competence and performance levels. A learner who is highly motivated has a positive attitude towards learning and thus gains more knowledge and performs better than the one who lacks motivation. Also extroverts are likely to perform better than introverts.

From the interviews carried out with lecturers, all the ten were in total agreement that error types and causes are as mentioned above. Respondents to questionnaires confirmed that they indeed have challenges in the use of L2 as they indicated different areas of difficulty which include spellings, punctuation, tenses, vocabulary and sentence construction. This confirms the classification made by Ellis (1997) and Selinker et al (1975) which are discussed above. 90% of the lecturers and 96% of the learners are of the view that L1 has an influence in performance

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though all of them agree that exposure variables, levels of motivation and attitude do play a pivotal role in L2 learning. 91% of the learners indicated that errors are a result of lack of knowledge of the L2 due to the aforementioned factors especially exposure.

All the respondents and lecturers agreed that learners have to put more effort to know and pay attention to L2 rules to reduce errors. They all acknowledge the fact that the learner has to play his/her role in trying to self correct and gain more knowledge and that the lecturer should assist through error correction.

Therefore all these errors and factors determine levels of competence in the L2. Errors lead to incompetence which might impede accurate transfer of information from one point to another as comprehensibility might be tempered with. This shows, as noted by Rivers (1994:831) that,

> If we are to become effective communicators via (or through) language we must be able to operate through the formal systems of that particular language (phonological, morphosyntactic, pragmatic).All these systems interact to produce comprehensible and acceptable language for communicating meaning.

This indicates therefore that L2 students must be assisted by all means for them to attain native-like competence in the target language for them to communicate effectively. Error Analysis is thus important as it provides knowledge of the type and sources of errors made and this may determine error correction, that is, the kind of feedback a teacher should give to enhance learning of the L2.

Recommendations

It is important to note that errors can be corrected but this is possible where a learner bears a positive attitude towards learning and pays attention to corrective measures provided by the

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teacher. A learner's attitude is of paramount importance in error correction and the teacher should cultivate this attitude in students.

Depending on the nature of the error, the teacher should make it an obligation to correct the learner in the most appropriate manner. For instance, for a global error (those that interfere with the intelligibility of what someone says), the teacher can have an oral discussion with the learner in which he/she points out what is wrong with a learner's written statement(s) and provide ways in which the error can be corrected. This should be done mostly to correct errors caused by mother tongue interference as a learner will require a lot of explanation on why there is an error in his/her statement(s).

A teacher can also provide the correct form when a minor error occurs, but this form of correction must be applied minimally for a learner who makes a lot of errors as this might fill the learner's paper with the teacher's ink which might be really dampening to the learner's zeal to learn.

As another form of error correction, a teacher can just highlight the form of error made for example, (ww, or sp) so as to draw a learner's attention if he/she feels the learner will be able to work out the correct form(s). However, it is of great importance to note that any signs to indicate an error type for example (sp) should be explained to learners so that they know how to interpret these signs. Teachers should endeavor to provide a conclusive atmosphere for learning. This can be done if the teacher provides feedback in a friendly manner instead of in a way that intimidates or belittles the learner. Also a teacher should avoid highlighting errors made by individuals in front of the whole class as this might be regarded as victimization which might lead to a learner developing a negative attitude towards learning and improving knowledge on the second language. This is supported by Robinson and Ellis (2008:10) who highlight that "the whole educational process is deeply influenced by beliefs and attitude." This brings out the fact that both the teacher and the learner have to have positive attitudes if learning is to successfully

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occur. The teacher's role should be one of instilling motivation and highlighting the importance of attaining a high level of proficiency in English as a second language as a tool to academic success

Teachers should also take into cognisance the most effective way to deal with an error depending on whether the method will instill in the learner the motivation to self correct, whether to give the correct form or prompt self correction or whether to involve the rest of the class or not. Oral correction in the classroom should be directed to the whole class if a situation where a large percentage of learners seem to make the same type of error but names should not be mentioned at all costs. Also, to be taken into consideration in error correction and method chosen for this should be determined by how often the error has occurred.

However, since learning is a continuous process for an L2 speaker, errors should therefore be corrected. Although it is believed that an L2 speaker cannot attain complete acquisition status, at least students and lecturers should work towards target language-like competence. This is supported by a number of researchers including Ellis (1997)' Hedge (2000) and Edge (1989) who postulate that only global errors should be corrected as they cause misunderstanding between interlocutors. On the other hand, local errors which are defined by Ellis (1997) as errors that affect only a single element in a sentence should not be corrected as they do not pose any problems in meaning conveyance.

Conclusion

The study of errors in students' written texts enables the teacher/lecturer to prescribe the most suitable corrective measures so that the learner reaches a higher level of competence in the L2 which in turn will improve performance. It is crucial to know the causes of these errors so as to ensure effectiveness of the error correction method(s) to be employed. Apart from this it is also important for the teacher to have knowledge of individual learners' background so as to correct

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their errors as this gives a great influence on competence and performance. All in all it needs a great effort on both the teacher's and learner's side for there to be effective L2 learning.

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