

ANALYSIS OF THE GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS IN JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PUPILS AND TEACHERS

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria is introduced to pupils at age's five to six or even less for those that attend nursery schools. Thus, in the process of acquiring English Language, learners are bound to make errors. This research analyzed the frequency of grammatical errors in the essays written by pupils in junior secondary schools in Awka South local government area, Anambra State. Specifically, the study analyses the errors occurring in the use English grammar by pupils, classifying the errors, determining their frequency levels and their sources. The population of the study consists of JSS 1 junior secondary school pupils in Awka South local government Area of Anambra state. The population comprised of six (6) public junior secondary schools in Awka South local government area which formed the sample frame for the study. The descriptive survey design was employed to study the research problems in the study location. The study population consists of 853 pupils. Out of this number, 505 pupils were purposively sampled for the purpose of this study. Each of the pupils was asked to write an essay, and the scripts were marked to identify all grammatical errors made by the pupils. It turns out that, out of 505 scripts that were marked, 36% of the pupils were not able to communicate their thoughts meaningfully. Out of the 500 comprehensible scripts the following errors were identified and their frequencies: wrong use of tense 22%, errors in spelling 13%, errors in the choice of words 10%, wrong use of prepositions 7%, verb addition errors 2%, preposition addition errors 6%, pronoun addition, subject-verb agreement errors, wrong use of pronouns, plural and verb omission errors all received 7% each. The study also found that a good number of errors discovered from pupils' writings were intra-lingual errors. Based on results of the findings of this research, the study recommends that the Federal Government, key stakeholders in private sector and Non-governmental organizations should organize spelling competitions to help encourage and motivate these pupils toward serious and steadfast learning. If there's already been one; enough public awareness should be put in place to embolden and make sure students' participation in such competition is worth it such as organizing and awarding abroad scholarships to emerging winners as practiced in other West African countries.

Keywords: First language; Second language; Errors; Target language; Error analysis; Language learning; Inter-language

Introduction

With the advancement in technology in the recent past, the world has become a global village. With this notion in view, communication has become a centripetal phenomenon. Thus, people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are brought together. Since language is considered as the basic instrument for communication of thoughts and ideas, language education has become a central focus in modern applied English language. Every one born into a linguistic community grows up to acquire a first language (L1). It doubtlessly holds that one's L1 (except for English and French) cannot satisfactorily enable one to communicate at the global level. It therefore becomes imperative to learn a second language (L2). L2 learning has thus become a great cause for concern in contemporary pedagogical circles. This is true particularly for a developing country like Nigeria where the need to communicate using the official language has become very important. Since Nigeria is a former British colony, English Language has been the medium of instruction in the educational system as well as the official language of the country. This means English Language both a subject of instruction and medium of instruction in our formal educational institutions. This ranges from nursery to university level. This unquestionably makes status of English Language very important among other languages used in Nigeria. It is therefore imperative that every Nigerian should learn English Language as an L2 if he/she is to communicate effectively on official functions both within and out of the country. As Nigeria strives for mass functional literacy, English Language teaching should be seen to be directed towards identifying the learning problems faced by the learner and providing solutions to those problems. This will go a long way to expedite the English Language learning process. The teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria is introduced to pupils at ages five to six or even less for those that attend nursery schools. Thus, in the process of acquiring English Language, learners are bound to make errors. Ogadinma and Obiora (2019) observed that errors should not be seen as a problem for the language learner, but as a normal and inevitable part of the language learning process. This assumption should however not be taken as an excuse for pupils who continuously make the same errors. There must be some conscious effort on the part of the teacher to help minimize the occurrence errors among learners by providing positive feedback.

This study therefore intends to focus on the errors that occur in the written compositions of pupils in their first year of Junior Secondary School education in Awka South local government area, Anambra State, Nigeria. According to Adegbite and Arabambi (2018), an error analysis approach can be undertaken to determine the sources of errors in the learner language. These errors might come about as a result of several factors such as the influence of the mother-tongue, over-generalization, induced errors etc. The role of the teacher is very

important in determining the sources of errors among learners and finding ways of correcting such errors whenever they occur. Through error analysis, applied linguists have discovered that errors can be attributed to two factors, namely the inter-lingual and the intra-lingual factors (Gabriel & Bruce, 2019). The intra-lingual refers to those factors that are part of the system the learner is learning; while the inter-lingual refers to those factors that result from the influence of the L1 over the target language. Errors can be said to occur in the learner language as a result of the interaction of both factors. According to Senaparty and Fagbemi (2020), learners attempt to produce the target language in the L2 learning process; he/she (the learner) constructs an interim grammatical system as he progresses towards the proficiency level of the native speakers of the target language. Ogunyemi and Adewale (2020) used the term inter-language to refer to the said grammatical system the learner constructs as he approximates the target language. It is this inter-language that carries the L2 learners' errors. Most of the earlier research works on contrastive and error analysis lay much emphasis on those areas that contribute to committing of errors, with little or no reference to those areas that might lead to a faster learning of the target language. Mohammed and Umar (2021) noted that learners' grammar is transitional. Learners change their grammar from one time to another by adding rules, deleting rules and restructuring the whole system. "In the process of restricting the rules of the target language, learner often tend to over generalize some the rules they have learned. This is very common among learners of English especially in the use of verb tenses, forming the plural of nouns etc. Errors according to Babatunde and Ogunwusi (2018) therefore occur when learners attempt to add to the rules, delete the rule and restructure the whole system. Odoh and Atilola (2022) defines the concept of error analysis as a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics." A more recent version of the definition has been produced by Michael and Gaius (2019) where he says that error analysis is a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involved collecting samples of learner language, identifying errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes and evaluating their seriousness. This is just about the approach adopted in this study. This approach is adopted because it helps researchers and teachers to be able figure out the nature of the errors produced by the learners, their causes as well as proffering pedagogical interventions so as to remedy the problem learners encounter while in the process of learning the target language.

However, prior to the Error Analysis approach in the L2 learning, the Contrastive Analysis Hypotheses was formulated by Fries in 1945 and defines contrastive analysis as "a set of procedures for comparing and contrasting the linguistic system of two languages in order to identify their structural similarities and differences". Second language learning involved

at least two systems, the acquired system, which is the L1; and the learned system, which is the target language. Language acquisition is all about habit formation drawn from Skinner's Behaviorist Theory in learning. Acquiring a first language means acquiring a set of linguistic habits; and learning a second language means learning a new set of habits which might or might not conflict with the old sets of habits already acquired. This however depends on how similar or different the two habit systems are. Bush and Bright (2019) summarized the main assumptions of the contrastive analysis hypotheses as follows:

- i. First language acquisition and foreign language learning differ fundamentally especially in those cases where the foreign language is learnt later than a mother tongue and on the basis of the full mastery of that mother tongue.
- ii. Every language has its own specific structure. Similarities between the two languages will cause no difficulties (positive transfer), but differences will, due to negative transfer or (interference). The pupils' learning task can therefore roughly be defined as the sum of the differences between the two languages.
- iii. A systematic comparison between mother tongue and foreign language to be learnt will reveal both similarities and contrasts
- iv. On the basis of such a comparison it will be possible to predict or even rank learning difficulties and to develop strategies (teaching materials, teaching techniques etc.) for making foreign language teaching more efficient (Bush & Bright, 2019).

The strong version of the CAH claimed that errors occurring in the L2 learner language could be attributed to the interference of L1 habits. In the mid and late 1970s however, the claim could no longer be sustained due to empirical evidence gathered during that period. It was pointed out that many of the errors that were predicted by contrastive analysis hypothesis never occurred in the learner language. Similarly, some errors occurred in the learners' languages that were never predicted by contrastive analysis. In other words, some errors were under predicted while others were over predicted. During this period a number of Scopus research studies showed that many errors can be explained better in terms of the learners' attempt to discover the structure of the language being learned rather than an attempt to transfer patterns of their L1. Furthermore, the research goal of this period was to discover what learners really know about the target language i.e., their errors reflect their current understanding of the rules and patterns of the target language. This gave rise to the error analysis approach. The error analysis approach did not set out to predict L2 learner errors like the contrastive analysis hypotheses (CAH) did, rather it aimed at discovering and describing different kinds of errors in an attempt to understand how learners process the L2. Frank and Julius (2018) reported that the majority of errors that children make reflect the influence of the target second language more than the influence of the Childs' first language. In other words, errors occurring in the learners' language are more of the

intra-lingual nature than the inter-lingual. This contradicts what was popularly claimed by the contrastive analysis hypotheses (CAH). Thus, error analysis does not limit errors to the influence of the L1 but to other factors such as the learners' incomplete knowledge of the target language systems.

The concept of errors in L2 acquisition can best be described by trying to distinguish errors and mistakes. Adams and Jacob (2020) made the distinction when he mentioned that errors are on the one hand systematic, rule governed and appear as a result of the learners' incomplete knowledge of the target language. He further maintained that errors are indicative of the learners' linguistic system at a given stage of the language learning process and that they occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner. On the other hand, mistakes are random deviations unrelated to any system but rather representing the same types of performance lapses that might occur in the language of native speakers. According to James and Stephen (2019), mistakes can result from performance lapses such as slips of the tongue; slips of the ear; false starts; non-linguistic factors like fatigue, strong emotions, lack of concentration etc. Such factors he said exist in the language of both native and non-native speakers. Summarily it can be established that errors occur when the deviation arises as a result of lack of adequate competence, while mistakes occur when the learner fails to perform his competence. The distinction between learners' errors and mistakes has always been problematic for both teachers and researchers. According to Elijah and Bulus (2020), the frequency of occurrence is regarded as the distinctive point: errors which have a rather low frequency are considered mistakes or performance errors while those with high frequency are considered systemic errors.

As mentioned earlier, the error analysis approach of Arthur and Bright (2018) was adopted in the study due to the failure of the contrastive analysis approach to explain why some errors occur in the learner language. Arthur and Bright (2018) identified six steps to be followed in conducting an error analysis:

- i. Collection of data – This is typically done with written data, but oral data can also serve as a basis
- ii. Identification of errors - What is the error? e.g., incorrect sequence of tense, wrong verb form, singular verb form with plural subjects etc.
- iii. Classification of errors – Is it an error of agreement? Is it an error of irregular verb? etc.;
- iv. Quantifying errors – How many errors of agreement occur? How many irregular verb forms errors occurs?
- v. Analyzing the source of the error;

Vi. Remediation – Based on the kind of frequency of an error type, pedagogical interventions are carried out.

The above steps will provide a comprehensive analysis of learners' errors including pedagogical interventions. This study adopted the above steps in the analysis of the errors collected from the language samples of the research subjects.

According to Ajibade and Adelaja (2018), The L2 learners' errors can be significant in three ways:

First, they are significant to the teacher in the sense that they tell him how far towards the goal his learners have progressed and consequently what remains for the learners to learn. Secondly for the researcher, they provide evidence of how language is learned or acquired i.e., what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly and perhaps the most important, errors are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner can use in order to learn. This study therefore aimed at discovering the nature, types and sources of errors made by junior secondary school pupils in some selected junior secondary schools in Awka South local government area, Anambra State in their attempt to learn English as a second language. The purpose of this study is to carry out an analysis of the written composition of pupils in the first year of the Junior Secondary School in selected secondary schools in Awka South, local government area, Anambra State Nigeria. What are the errors occurring in the written compositions of junior secondary school pupils in Awka South local government area of Anambra State?

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is a descriptive research design. Descriptively, the researchers were able to figure out the nature of errors occurring in the learner language by identifying the categories of errors using descriptive statistics. All errors collected from the scripts were however quantified in terms of their frequencies and distributed according to the categories of errors identified. According to Corder (1974), there are factors to consider when collecting samples of learner language. Since the study of errors involves the language and the learner, Corder identified those factors along those parameters. In terms of the language, one factor to consider is the medium - the topic the learner is communicating about; next the genre i.e., the form the learners' production may take such as a lecture, an essay, a letter etc., and then the content i.e. the substance: what the topic is about. In terms of the learners, we consider the level -- whether elementary, intermediate or advance; the mother tongue i.e., the L1 of the learners. The study targeted JSS I pupils in five junior secondary schools in Awka South local government area, Anambra State. This

population was selected on the basis that these are considered to be at the beginner level at the secondary school. They have just completed their primary education, and as such the researchers wanted to see the kinds of errors they make. The target population were 853 JSS I pupils across the six (6) targeted junior secondary schools, out of these number, 505 pupils were purposively and randomly selected for this study. A purposive random sampling method was adopted in which 85 pupils from each school were randomly selected. The data collected for this research came from the scripts of a composition from the sample of the population. This was done through the assistance of the class teachers who helped in organizing the pupils to write the composition. The pupils were asked to write a composition on the topic “My First Day in Secondary School”. This topic was carefully selected due to the fact that, that year being the students’ first year of secondary school, they are likely to remember most events that transpired on their first day at secondary school, and therefore would be able to write the essay. The exercise was conducted in a relaxed atmosphere as the research subjects were told from the beginning that the exercise was not any form of examination. On completion of the exercise, the research subjects were asked to go over their work and correct any mistakes that might have occurred in their scripts. The continuous writing scripts produced by the research subjects served as the instrument of the research as the researchers used these to collate the errors occurring in the language of the learners for further analysis in the subsequent section of this section.

Results and Discussion

The following findings came out from the analysis. First, the scripts were categorized into two, namely, comprehensible and incomprehensible, depending on whether or not the research participants were able to comprehensibly communicate their thought.

Table 1: *Analysis of the categories of scripts collected*

<i>Scripts</i>	<i>Number of Scripts Analyzed</i>	
	N	%
Comprehensible Scripts	320	64
Incomprehensible Scripts	180	36
Total	500	100

Source: Field Survey (2023)

Table 1 illustrates that (36%) scripts were not comprehensible at all. This means that the pupils at this level of Junior Secondary School lack the ability to express themselves in the

English Language. However, a greater percentage (64%) of the scripts were comprehensible, which means the students were able to express themselves in the English Language.

Research Question: What are the errors occurring in the written compositions of junior secondary school pupils in Awka South local government area of Anambra State?

To provide answer to this research question, errors were extracted from **320** scripts which were labeled comprehensible scripts. The table below shows the categories of errors extracted from the comprehensive scripts.

Table 2: *Analysis and identification of the errors occurring in the written compositions of junior secondary school pupils in Awka South local government area of Anambra State*

Identified Errors	N	%
Error in the use of tense	98	22
Wrong Words Error	67	15
Spelling Error	55	13
Wrong Preposition Error	30	7
Verb Omission Error	30	7
Wrong Structure Error	46	10
Plural Error	25	6
Preposition Addition Error	27	6
Wrong Pronoun Error	10	2
Verb Addition Error	10	2
Agreement Error	14	3
Pronoun Addition Error	17	4
Others	11	3
Total	440	100

Note that errors identified as “others” include: article omission, subject omission, preposition omission, object omission, pronoun omission, quantifier addition, structure addition, article addition, wrong comparison, wrong participle and conjunction error.

Source: Field Survey (2023)

Table 2 shows that out of the total number of **320** comprehensive scripts written by the pupils, a total of **440** errors were recorded. The analyses of the errors recorded are discussed in the next section of this subsection.

Discussions

Of the 440 errors recorded about 98% of those errors resulted from the wrong use of the tenses. This study agrees with the study conducted by Ayangalu and Adeyanju (2019) in terms of the error frequency, where tense errors receive the highest frequencies. The following are some examples extracted from the pupils' compositions:

Errors in the Use of Verb Tenses:

"... that I meet in school..." when he meant to say "...that I met in school..."

"...I was taken to the principal office." When he meant ..."

I was taken to the principals' office..."

"...one teacher come to our class..." which would have been ..." one teacher came to our class..."

"I coming to school to have..." when he meant to say "I came to school to have..."

"My fist day in school is my fist day I atten Saint Monica's to learn knowledge."

This pupil in question actually wanted to write "My first day in school was the first day I attended Saint Monica's Secondary School to gain knowledge."

"I enter in Saint Monica..." when he meant "I entered Saint Monica..."

Wrong Word Errors

The second type of error that occurred most frequently is the wrong word errors, i.e., using words inappropriately. This accounts for 15% of the errors extracted in the compositions of the pupils. This result is consisted with study conducted by James and Stephen (2019) who found higher proportion of wrong words in the written compositions of pupils in Ghana

This comes about partly as a result of the influence of the "pegin English". For instance, in one of the scripts a pupil wrote:

"I tock in my hart" when he meant to say "I said in my heart"

In another script, a pupil wrote:

"me and my father we went" inseed the wall"

whereas he would have said „my father and I went inside the hall" since "me" is a first person objective case pronoun in English, the pupil used "me" for "I".

Also, most of the wrong word errors occurred as a result of the learners' inability to spell correctly. For example, learners produced such words as:

"order" for "other"
"are point" for "appoint"
"we" for "will"
"live" for "leave" "her" for "are"

Because these words are similar in pronunciation, and the learners cannot pronounce well, therefore they write the words as they pronounce them.

Spelling Errors

Out of the 440 errors extracted 13% were found to be spelling errors. Most of the spelling errors are phonic i.e., pupils have difficulty in matching sounds to letters, this result corroborates the studies conducted by Bush and Bright (2019) as well as Adams and Jacob (2020) who found significant proportion of spelling errors in the written compositions of Junior Secondary Students. For instance, pupils made the following errors:

'soubjselt' for Subject; 'wen' for when
'grite' for greet;
'ded' for did 'Becose' for because;
'inter' for enter 'wonte' for want;
'wet' for with 'inter' for enter;
'hart' for heart 'os' for us;
'mouch' for much 'tode' for told;
'plobike' for public 'tock' for talk or said; 'feal' for feel

Wrong Preposition Errors

Next in rank in terms of frequency are the wrong preposition errors. Of the errors extracted 7% of them are the wrong use of prepositions, this result is also in line with study conducted by Michael and Gaius (2019) who also found higher percentage of prepositional errors in the written composition of junior secondary school pupils in study conducted in Mali. In the scripts, samples of the following wrong preposition errors were found:

'whene I came in Saint Monica...' for 'when I came to Saint Monica...' ... '2019 I came in school...' for '... 2019 I came to school...' 'In the first day I come in school...' for 'On the first day when I came to school...' 'I started to attend in 4th ...' for 'I started attending on the 4th...' 'I feald happy to come in this school...' for 'I feel happy to come to this school...'

From this analysis it can be observed for most erroneous use of the preposition, the preposition “in” appears most in the pupils’ writing. Prepositions are difficult to use. In the studies conducted by Ozkayran and Yilmaz (2020) involving higher Education students, discovered that the most frequent errors that occurred in the language of Nigerian students is on the use of the preposition. In the present study, errors on prepositions constitute 12.99% of the total errors – wrong preposition (24), preposition addition (15) and preposition omission (1).

Conclusion

Findings from the study pointed out that a good number of pupils at the Junior Secondary School level (one) are unable to express themselves meaningfully in English. This means that Language Arts teachers teaching English at this level have to up their effort to ensure that they employ all the language teaching strategies they have acquired to help these pupils. Out of the errors identified so far, 23 different types were identified in the pupils’ scripts which made a total of 440 errors. A good number of these errors were on the verb tenses. As verbs are inevitable in English sentences, Language Arts teachers should pay more attention to this aspect of English grammar when teaching Language Arts. Spelling errors received the second highest frequency. Pupils find it difficult to match sounds with letters. This is common among English Language learners in Awka South local government area of Anambra State especially at the beginner level. This is possibly as a result of the inconsistency of the English spelling system. Wrong word errors occur partly as transfer errors and partly due to pronunciation problem. All errors that have to do with preposition wrong preposition and preposition addition has to do with the preposition “in”. Only a small percentage of errors were transfer errors.

Pedagogical Implications

This study involved the error analysis of JSS 1 pupils in six junior secondary schools in Awka South local government area, Anambra State Nigeria. These pupils were at beginner level in English Language learning. From the research findings, the following pedagogical implications can be made. The fact that about 36% of the pupils’ scripts studied were found to be incomprehensible means that the Junior Secondary School teachers have a lot to do to ensure that these pupils are able to express themselves meaningfully in English. Errors occurring in the learner language must not be seen as a problem for the learner, but as a means of diagnosing the learners’ use of the target language. Errors are significant to the researcher, the student and the learner himself (Corder, 2018). To the researcher, they provide evidence of how language is learnt – what procedure the learners employ in his/her language learning process; to the teacher, errors serve as a feedback mechanism which

indicate how far his/her learners have progressed; and to the learner, errors are indispensable because they are the devices learner use to learn. Findings from this study are meant to provide a way forward for Junior Secondary School teachers to focus on specific aspects of the grammar of English taught to pupils at this level. It is evident from the research findings for example that learners at this level make errors more on the use of the verb tenses. This means that the teachers need to focus on the teaching of verbs and verb tenses. The verb is a crucial item in the English Language, as every sentence in English must contain a verb. This is perhaps the reason students at this level hardly write two sentences without making an error. This is due to their inadequate knowledge on correct verb usage. Apparently, this study serves as an eye opener to teachers of English to pay more attention on the areas identified as problem areas in the learning of English among Junior Secondary School pupils. Since this study involved learners at the Junior Secondary School level, there is need to study the error analysis of learners at the senior secondary school and university levels. This will help to find out whether the errors diminish or reduce as the pupils' progress to higher classes.

Recommendations

Based on the result of the findings of this research, the study recommends that:

- i. Pupils should be encouraged and restricted to use English Language more often, since proficiency in any language of which English Language is not an exception comes with constant practice.
- ii. Pupils must learn the rules of spelling rigorously to master them.
- iii. Pupils must develop the habit of reading extensively novels or story books of different kinds to improve their vocabulary power and spelling abilities.
- iv. Pupils must maintain a habit of looking up the spelling of words in the dictionary for correct spelling and stop assuming the forms of words.
- v. Teachers must try and identify problematic areas of students and engage students in more spelling drills or contests to help them to overcome the flaws in spelling.
- vi. Federal Government, key stakeholders in private sector and Non-governmental organizations should organize spelling competitions to help encourage and motivate these pupils toward serious and steadfast learning. If there's already been one; enough public awareness should be put in place to embolden and make sure students' participation in such competition is worth it such as organizing and awarding abroad scholarships to emerging winners as practiced in other West African countries.

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