

Selected Common Errors Committed by Third Year University English Students

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ABSTRACT This paper examines certain negative trends identified in language usage by English Second Language (ESL or L2) third year university students. It is therefore, intended to identify these errors, pinpoint their causes, classify and analyse them. In this paper, the researchers used quantitative research design. An extract with commonly-made errors was administered to twenty third year English L2 students in order to evaluate their competence in the target language. The extract contained errors caused by carelessness, overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incorrect application of rules, false concepts hypothesized and fossilization. The findings revealed that the majority of the students committed few errors in aspects relating to overgeneralization, fossilization and carelessness errors. However, the majority committed many errors with regard to ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules and false concepts hypothesized. It is recommended that lecturers devote more time to assisting students in eradicating the tendencies which lead to the commission of these errors.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural country where eleven official languages are accorded equal status in the Constitution. However, English plays a dominant role compared to the other official languages because it is the preferred language of communication in most sectors of South African society. For instance, it is the language commonly used in the workplace, business circles and in metropolitan areas where it tends to be the language of everyday communication. Moreover, English is learned as a First Additional Language (FAL) subject at schools and used as a medium of instruction both in schools and institutions of higher learning. Nonetheless, there are a few instances where the medium of instruction is Afrikaans.

Despite exposure to the language at various schooling levels students continue to experience difficulties in mastering the basics of English proficiency. It may be argued that the students' constant use of their primary languages contributes significantly to the difficulties experienced by students in the correct usage of English.

Mostly English Second Language (ESL/L2) students do not find themselves in an environment conducive to English language usage/learning except in the classroom. Furthermore, the students are regularly exposed to incorrect English language usage in avenues such as the media and mass gatherings. Given these contexts, it is inevitable that students will continue to commit mistakes and errors in their endeavours to communicate in the target language.

Error Analysis Explained

Error analysis is an activity which involves the exposure of errors that occur when people write and speak, especially in the target language. Corder (1967) defines error as incorrect utterances by English Second Language learners which occur during the process of acquiring language as part of transitional competence. He further explains that errors made by L2 or foreign language learners refer to systematic incorrect statements which reflect their underlying knowledge of the aspects of language acquired up to a particular point. Dulay et al. (1982) are of the view that the concept error refers to an organised and non-conformity to a particular standard or conventional rules in a language. In other words, both authors concur that an error is a systematic process which reveals cer-

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tain difficulties encountered by speakers of a target language.

L2 students often find themselves committing errors in one way or the other, hence the concept of error analysis is important in this regard in order to effectively deal with the habit. Error analysis is the methodical study of irregularities from target-language rules in the process of second-language learning, particularly in relation to the learner's development of inter-language (Dictionary.com 2016). Brown (1980), Sur-nadi (2002) and Kittiporn (2013) assert that error analysis is the way in which observation, analysis, and classification of the divergences of the rules of the second language are scrutinised and thereafter expose these as wrong structures used by the learners.

Richards (1973) further explains that error analysis is the study of errors committed by the second and foreign language learners. Basically, it is a kind of phonological or morphological analysis which pays attention to the errors learners make. It comprises of a comparison between the errors committed in the target language and that target language itself. Although errors are regarded as something negative to language learning, they are useful in that they serve as a prediction of difficulties involved in acquiring a second language. This is supported by Ellis (1994, 2002) who argues that once the errors are identified they may serve as diagnosis for remedial grammar instruction. Therefore, error analysis can be regarded as a pointer and forecast of the challenges of learners. In essence, errors provide significant evidence and an opportunity for lecturers to give their students necessary corrections and materials to support their learning. In turn, that can lead to the improvement of learners' proficiency, accuracy as well as supplementing the development of fluency among L2 speakers. Additionally, Richards and Sampson (1974) concur that error analysis is a critical tool for teachers to assess learners' learning ability in order to solve learners' difficulties from the most frequent errors made. For that reason, it is imperative that errors that learners make are classified and attended to.

Classification of Causes of Errors

Researchers categorize errors in different ways. For instance, Norrish (1983) classifies causes of errors into three types namely; carelessness, first language interference, and translation.

Carelessness Errors

Carelessness errors are caused by L2 learners less motivated to learn the second language and thus find the material used in the classroom uninteresting and as a result do not pay enough attention. This makes them less enthusiastic in striving to use the language appropriately. For these learners chances of being competent in the target language are diminished. It is also important to note that carelessness errors can be committed by first language speakers of any language.

First Language Interference

Learning an L2 does not only require effort; it is a matter of habit formation. The challenge however, is that the target language learner has previously fully learned his/her mother tongue (L1) and so interference is inevitable in the sense that entrenched behaviours disturb new ones. Some researchers refer to this concept as language transfer of the mother tongue (Selinker 1972; Richards and Sampson 1974). Therefore, this leads to an error of first language interference. This is supported by Owu-Ewie and Lomotey (2016) who state that such errors are mostly evident in the cases of the misuse of: verbs, prepositions, articles, plural/singular agreement, adjectives, and conjunctions.

Translation

Translation is another factor that leads to L2 learners committing errors. As each and every language has its own idiomatic expressions, L2 learners have a tendency to translate their primary language sentence or figurative expressions into the language being learnt literally (Amelia 2013). In one such instance, a guest on television was asked a question about progress regarding service delivery, to which he responded by saying '*The matter will be gone into this month*' instead of saying '*the matter will be dealt with or addressed later this month*' (eNCA 2016). Also, Owu-Ewie and Lomotey (2016) found that high school students in Ghana suffered the same fate of literal translation when using English as a second language. In such instances the speaker unknowingly directly translates phrases, sentences and idiomatic expressions from their L1 into L2.

Apart from the classifications outlined in the preceding section, errors are also considered to stem from: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized (Richards and Sampson 1994).

Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization is a practice where a person over-uses the rule in contexts where the rule is irrelevant. In other words, a speaker applies a grammatical rule in cases where it is not relevant. This practice may involve different aspects such as semantic, syntactic, morphological, or behavioural (Al-Baldawi and Saidat 2011). Although overgeneralization is often associated with language acquisition by children, a similar trend can also be found among most L2 speakers. In addition, Touchie (1986) asserts that overgeneralization is the application of one system or construction in one context and expanding of its use to other contexts where it should not apply. For instance, adult L2 speaker may overgeneralize the morphological rule for making plural nouns: using *tooths* instead of *teeth*.

The research findings by Lambani and van Niekerk (2014) and Ngangbam (2016) reveal that even non-mother tongue English speakers experience difficulties in the use of irregular past tense form. They could not respond appropriately to the question relating to the past tense form of the verb '*teach*'. Instead a few of them came up with these responses: '*She teachd them last year* and '*She taught them last year*'. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find that L2 learners/students experience similar difficulties. Also, there are several observed instances such as where the L2 learners/students misuse the irregular past tense form of the verb '*put*' as '*putted*' and for '*take*' as '*taked*', resulting from overgeneralizing the regular past tense marker '*-ed*' and '*-d*'. In other instances, the L2 speaker may omit the third person singular '*s*' under the heavy pressure of all other endless forms – such as '*he go*' or '*he sing*' instead of '*he goes*' and he '*he sings*'. In these examples, it should be understood that simplification and overgeneralization are used in order to lessen the L2 speaker's linguistic burden.

Overgeneralization mostly refers to the formation of an irregular structure in place of two regular structures, for instance, '*She may comes*',

'*They are believe*', '*It is means*'. Other examples of overgeneralization occur when speakers over-use grammatical forms in sentences for example, putting a preposition when it is not needed. These examples were taken from interviews on local radio station where guests had to respond to questions about their future plans: '*I plan to go to overseas later this year and I am going to sit down and discuss about that with my manager*' (Garda 2016).

In addition, Khansir (2012) posits that overgeneralization involves occurrences where learners form an unusual structure based on their experiences of the structure of the target language. For instance, the overgeneralization may apply where someone is being showered with well-wishes: '*Happy birthday to you*' and replies by saying '*same to you*' instead of simply saying '*thank you*'. In this case the overgeneralization arises from the usual response to this statement: '*Compliments of the new season*' where one responds appropriately by saying '*same to you*'. Foreign language speakers often fall prey to such errors because of lack of exposure to the target language.

Ignorance of Rule Restrictions

Richards (1970) explains that ignorance of rule restrictions is the use of rules in inappropriate situations. Hasyim (2002) asserts that the error of this nature involves inappropriate transfer and application of a rule mastered previously, in a new context. In addition, YAN Lidong (2004) states that in such a situation, some rule restriction errors are likely to take place. In other words, L2 learners may commit this type of error because of faulty analogy, rote learning, and limited exposure to the target language. In this context, the learners attempt to apply rules where they detect similarities due to the analogy and assume that the rules are suitable for both instances. The use of the question tag is one area where this may occur: '*I believe you will come back tomorrow, don't I?*' instead of '*won't you?*' In this case the L2 students would have internalized the rule that for a question tag one focuses on the initial subject verb or auxiliary verb and its negative form (Zhang 2010). In this case, the tag is unsuitably formulated from the speaker's personal expression and not from the statement itself.

Incomplete Application of Rules

Incomplete application of rules takes place when students are unable to substantially develop a particular structure necessary to produce appropriate sentences (Kendall 2006; Khan-sir 2012). Richards (1970) explains that second language learners' incomplete application of rules takes place when a learner has not fully mastered the correct structure to produce appropriate sentences. This may occur where a learner uses the statement form instead of the question form, assuming that this would simply translate into a question.

Research findings by Lambani (2015) reveal that the majority of undergraduate university L2 students could not report questions when the reporting verb was in the past tense form. The participants were unable to apply all the rules pertaining to the reported speech question form. This often happens in situations such as this produced by the L2 students: '*He asked me where am I?*' instead of '*He asked me where I was*'. In this context, the learners neglected the rule about the word order and the past tense form as the reporting verb was in the past. This tendency underlines the severity of the problem because it can be assumed that by the time the students reach third year level they have already been taught, repeatedly, both reported speech and tenses in general.

False Concepts Hypothesized

False concepts hypothesized occur as a result of poor gradation of teaching items. Touchie (1986) and Bui Thi (2010) explain that errors committed by many learners can be attributed to wrong assumptions about the target language. In this regard, this practice may derive from incorrect understanding of different grammatical rules in the target language, described by Richards (1970) as the misunderstanding of differences in the target language. It is therefore, important for L2 teachers to go back to the basics, to remember that in teaching one starts with the simple and then proceeds to the complex or difficult aspects. For example, it would be a mistake to teach reported speech past tense before learners have mastered all the tenses; the natural progression should be to teach simple present tense, future tense, past tense and then perfect tenses.

There are instances where L2 learners fail to conceptualize certain rules such as the use of a

past participle form together with a helping verb '*to have*' when dealing with perfect tenses and instead come up with this statement: '*I have came*' in place of '*I have come*'. The problem in this case arises from faulty understanding of the perfect tense rules in relation to the simple past tense. In other words, the speaker presumes that '*came*' is a marker of the past tense in all circumstances.

Fossilization

Fossilization refers to the process in which incorrect language becomes a habit of the L2 speaker and cannot be easily corrected. Skehan (1996) argues that this tendency derives from insufficient grammar teaching and it results in fossilization, classroom pidgins and low level of accuracy. This occurs primarily because the learner is not simply learning a language but relearning it, however, by this stage L1 habits are already formed and so L1 interferes with L2. Touchie (1986) highlights this in stating that certain errors, specifically errors in pronunciation, continue for an extended time and tend to be quite challenging to deal with. In addition, Xinguang and Xiuqin (2015) describe fossilization as a common practice among L2 learners which results from inter-language. Furthermore, Ellis (1994) asserts that language transfer and communication among second language learners cause fossilization. Language transfer is a process in which an L2 learner uses mother tongue rules to learn the target language. It comprises of two kinds, namely; positive transfer and negative transfer, the latter being problematic. It is a barrier to second language study because it might prevent learners from improving their skills of learning a second language. This often happens in situations such as this produced by the L2 students: '*two week*' instead of simply saying '*two weeks*' or '*Eight back of cement*' instead of '*Eight bags of cement*'. These types of errors are made by foreign speakers, whose knowledge of the target language is limited and cannot be successfully corrected as they are old and have already fossilized.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers used quantitative research design because of the need to analyse the gram-

matrical errors and quantify these by means of statistical methods.

Population

The research population comprised of twenty university undergraduate English L2 students specializing in Media Studies. The students were in their third year of study and for this reason were considered ideal for the study since they had already been taught English usage at university for more than two years. At this stage the students were expected to be fully competent in English given that they were on the verge of graduating and thus venturing into the workplace.

Objectives

The aim of the paper is to identify, classify and analyse grammatical errors committed by third year English L2 students specializing in Media Studies.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was adopted for the research paper. This was done because the participants possessed the trait of interest in that it was certain that they were going to work in the print industry, radio and/or television, platforms which would put them in the public spotlight where competence in English is a key ingredient.

Research Instrument

Data were collected from the twenty participants through a task which involved giving cor-

rect forms of selected sentences with common errors.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were given an extract / passage with ten grammatical errors to identify and correct in thirty minutes. Thereafter the extracts were collected for error identification, classification and analysis. The analysis entailed explaining the errors as well as their underlying causes.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion in this section will take the form of a narrative but will also be illustrated in Table 1.

Overgeneralization

The findings show that ninety percent of the participants were competent in avoidance of the use of the double negative. Only a few, ten percent, committed the error of double negative; this was caused by overgeneralization of the negative grammatical rule. Due to this, they could not identify the error in the phrase '*You will not receive nothing*'. In this case, the students misunderstood the positive sense brought about by the two negatives within the phrase. In order to get the full meaning of the phrase they needed to understand that where it says '*not*' the appropriate adjective should be in the positive that is '*anything*' as in '*you will not receive anything*'. Alternatively, the speaker should use '*nothing*' without '*not*', as in '*you will receive nothing*'. Ninety percent of the participants

Table 1: Number of L2 identified errors and their causes

Error type	Error	Cause of error	Number of errors in percentages
Double negative	You will not receive nothing	Overgeneralization	10
Tautology	To can be able	False concepts hypothesized	40
Tautology	Discuss about the matter tomorrow	False concepts hypothesized	85
Pronouns as antecedents	The doors have broken handles, it need to be replaced.	Ignorance of rule restrictions	5
Concord	She go there every day	Fossilization	
Preposition	They will discuss about the matter tomorrow.	Ignorance of rule restrictions	5
Irregular past tense	He has ate his food already.	Overgeneralization	40
Irregular plural	buy the lab equipments	Overgeneralization	40
Article	It is a interesting place to visit	Carelessness errors	5
Word order	I did not know how difficult is a test.	ncomplete Application of rules	70
Noun-verb confusion	I am still waiting for your respond.	False concepts hypothesized	75

committed an error relating to the overgeneralization of the irregular plural form of the noun 'equipments' instead of 'equipment'. They could not realise that the word 'equipment' is a non-count noun or mass noun. The findings are consistent with Touchie's (1986) assertion that speakers use one form of construction in one setting by expanding its use to other instances where it is not applicable.

In another instance of overgeneralization, sixty percent of the participants were able to identify the error regarding use of irregular past tense in the phrase '*He has ate his food already*'. However, forty percent of the participants were incompetent in this regard. In this instance students should have detected that the helping verb '*to have*' works hand in glove with the past participle form of the verb, in this case '*eaten*'. The finding is consistent with what Lambani and van Niekerk (2014) and Ngangbam (2016) found that L2 non-native English speakers were unable to identify the error of the irregular past tense. Nevertheless, at this level all the L2 students are supposed to have mastered the aspects relating to the double negative and irregular past tense.

Considering the fact that the students are at the threshold of being exposed to the public media, these types or errors should be avoided.

Ignorance of Rule Restrictions

On identifying the error in the phrase '*The doors have broken handles, it need to be replaced*', ninety-five percent of the participants were competent. Only a few, five percent, committed this error; this was caused by ignorance of rule restriction. This suggests that most participants have mastered the correct use of concord especially in using the pronouns as antecedents, and so could identify the error of using the pronoun '*it*' in relation to '*handles*'.

However, on the use of the proposition '*about*', forty percent of the participants could recognize the incorrect usage of the preposition together with the verb '*discuss*' in '*They will discuss about the matter tomorrow*'. They were aware of the fact that the preposition '*about*' is correct when used with the verbs '*talk*' and '*speak*'. The majority, at sixty percent, were not familiar with the rule as it relates to the verb '*discuss*'. This is compounded by the fact that the practice of incorrect use of the phrase '*discuss about*' is prevalent even among most pro-

fessionals, including L2 teachers and those who teach other subjects. These findings are congruent with Hasyim (2002) and YAN Lidong (2004) who assert that this results from a type of incorrect transfer of a rule learnt previously in a new situation, resulting in the occurrence of the rule restriction error.

Incomplete Application of Rules

On the use of the word order it transpired that thirty percent of the participants were competent in the application of the rule regarding word order. They could detect an error in use of the phrase '*I did not know how difficult is a test*'. The majority of the participants, seventy percent, however, did not notice that the word order was incorrect. The problem arises out of the L2 students confusing the word order in the sense that they do not understand how a question is reported. For instance, they are not aware that in such circumstances the noun '*test*' should appear before the verb '*was*'. In this case the participants managed to correctly apply the rule of reporting in the past tense but could not use the correct word order. The correct version should have been '*I did not know how difficult a test was*'. The findings are supported by Richards (1970) and Khansir (2012) who maintain incomplete application of rules arises when learners are unable to fully grasp or master a particular structure to produce appropriate sentences. Furthermore, Lambani (2015) found that the majority of undergraduate university L2 students could not report questions when the reporting verb was in the past tense form. Indeed word order and reporting in the past tense pose a challenge to most L2 students because they tend to use a question form instead of a proper statement form.

False Concepts Hypothesized

When it comes to the use of the infinitive verb '*can*' and '*be able*', sixty percent of the participants could identify the misuse of the phrase '*to can be able*' as erroneous. However, forty percent of the participants were unable to detect that the phrase is grammatically incorrect. Both '*can*' and '*be able*' can be used to talk about ability. In some cases they are interchangeable, and the speaker can opt to use either, but not together, since that results in tautology. The

finding is consistent with Touchie (1986) and Richards (1970) on the practice to wrong assumptions about the target language and faulty comprehension of distinction in the target language. L2 speakers tend to falsely conceptualize the two infinite verbs as working in tandem, and so use them together instead of opting for one or the other.

Another instance of false concepts hypothesized was revealed when seventy-five percent of the participants could not recognise the error in *'I am still waiting for your respond'*. The challenge stems from noun-verb confusion among most L2 speakers. In this case, the participants were unable to distinguish the **main difference** between *'response'* and *'respond'*, that ***'response'* is a noun** that refers to the **act of replying or reacting to something** whereas ***'respond'* is a verb** that refers to **replying or reacting to something**. Although the meaning of these two words is related, the grammatical form and usage of the two words differ. Therefore, it can be suggested that this type of an error can be caused by constantly hearing the confusion of parts of speech from fellow L2 speakers, this could be in everyday conversation, on radio and/or television.

Fossilization

The findings reveal that ninety-five percent of participants were competent in identifying the concord error, in the sentence *'She go there every day'*. The finding is in line with what Owu-Ewie and Lomotey (2016) found regarding the inappropriate usage of words by high school learners resulting from mother tongue interference. Nevertheless, five percent of the participants could not notice the error. The finding is in line with Skehan's (1996) argument that this habit arises from inadequate grammar teaching and it leads to fossilization. In this case the participants were level three English major students who had been taught concord numerously; hence the majority could pick up the error. It is a cause for concern that at this level there are a few L2 students who have fossilized despite their constant exposure to the correct use of English usage in the classroom. The biggest challenge in this regard would not only be establishing the causes of fossilization of the students, but coming up with strategies to prevent the fossilization before it occurs.

Carelessness Errors

On this aspect, five percent of the participants did not notice the article error in the sentence *'It is a interesting place to visit'*. Although Norrish (1983) asserts that carelessness errors are often closely related to lack of motivation, the participants in question appeared to be motivated, and their commitment cannot be faulted. Therefore, it is not easy to conclude from the finding whether the error of carelessness was the result of fossilization as the same students who showed signs of fossilization also committed the carelessness error. Similarly, it is uncertain whether to attribute carelessness or fossilization to the kind of error cited earlier on the misuse of a redundant preposition as evidenced in the *'discuss about'* response by a guest on a radio programme (Garda 2016). The fact that the majority of participants were able to identify the carelessness error shows that they are competent in this regard.

CONCLUSION

Grammatical errors were analysed and categorized into six different types, namely; overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized, fossilization and carelessness errors. Furthermore, there were sub-categories of errors which included; general grammatical errors (articles, prepositions, verbs, noun-verb confusion, concord, double negative, tautology, and pronouns as antecedents, irregular past tense and irregular plural). The errors were counted and converted into percentages. Based on these percentages, it can be concluded that the majority of the participants did not commit errors related to overgeneralization, fossilization and carelessness. However, it is a cause for concern for a few English level three major students to commit errors within these categories.

The majority of the participants suffered the fate of having falsely hypothesized English concepts, overgeneralisation and incomplete application of rules. In that regard, most of the errors they committed are ascribed to constantly listening to incorrect grammar usage beyond the classroom, such as on radio and television.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of error analysis in this paper will be used to address students' grammatical

challenges; for instance, by providing the students with assistance in identifying the errors committed in their everyday English usage. Furthermore, there is a need to alert other lecturers within the department to assist the students in eradicating the habits which lead to these errors. This can be achieved by creating a lecture room environment which does not intimidate students to practise newly learnt English structures. In addition, the students can be encouraged to be selective in deciding to listen to the radio stations and programmes with the potential to enhance their competence in the target language. This will help to promote self-correction and peer correction.

Further error analysis research should be conducted among lecturers from various departments in order to determine the extent of the negative influence of these errors on communication and to raise awareness in an attempt to reduce English grammatical errors.

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