

1. ENGLISH LANGUAGE ERRORS IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' WRITTEN WORKS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA

Penehafo Henok & Hugues Steve Ndinga-Koumba-Binza

Abstract

This study examined the English language errors found in undergraduate students' written works at the Khomasdal campus of the University of Namibia (UNAM). Namibian students are likely to run into several issues when writing essays in English because they are not permitted to use their mother tongue when learning English during the early years of schooling. In this qualitative study, purposeful and convenient sampling techniques were employed to select a sample of twenty (20) first-year students from the UNAM Khomasdal Campus's Faculty of Education. Data for this study were collected from essays written by the student participants. Each participant was required to write one essay based on one of the topics provided to them. Essays were examined using "thematic content analysis" and "error analysis" to determine the writing of the students' primary strengths and weaknesses. Four lecturers from the UNAM's Department of Language Development on the main campus were also purposefully selected as key informants. Students' writing issues and potential reasons for these issues were then determined using these strengths and weaknesses. The findings revealed that the students reviewed work lacked organisation and coherence, and most of the writing seemed unclear.

Keywords: written communication, English language proficiency (ELP), error analysis, Language Education Policy (LEP), medium of instruction

Introduction and Background

The Namibian Language Education Policy states that learners begin receiving instruction in English in fourth grade (Iipinge, 2013). It has been noted that when introduced to fourth-grade subjects that are more linguistically and cognitively challenging, many learners in Namibian schools fail to meet the specified minimal language competency levels in English claims (Wolfaardt, 2002, p.70). According to Wolfaardt (2002), learners frequently fall short of the minimal standard of proficiency in the English language when they enrol in junior secondary school, when they should truly be performing at an intermediate level. Jones (1996, cited in Wolfaardt, 2002, p. 70) argues, "Learners continue to fall short of their required level of language proficiency because of issues that started in primary school, and the majority never really reach the language proficiency in English that their age and school level demand." Totemeyer (2018, p.11) further argues that "a period of three years of mainly mother tongue-based learning is simply too short and results in pupils being unable to read and write properly in both the mother tongue and English".

It is critical to emphasise that the Namibian LEP (MEC, 1993b) forbids using the students' mother tongues in the classroom, which runs counter to real classroom practice (Iipinge, 2013). Therefore, this study understands that this may be another factor contributing to learners' writing difficulties. Furthermore, it has been argued that using a monolingual language strategy, like Namibia's, limits pupils' capacity to write about challenging issues (Clegg & Simpson, 2016). Based on this view, Namibian students are likely to be faced with various issues when writing essays in English because they are not permitted to use their mother tongue when learning English during the early years of schooling.

It should be noted that, in addition to the LEP, learners in Namibia struggle with writing because they are not exposed to sufficient input of the English language in their communities, where they hardly ever use or hear English spoken (Ipinge, 2013); their communities do not promote English language acquisition (Adeyemi, 2012) nor possibly facilitate English language acquisition. As a result, students would struggle to improve their writing abilities and find writing (particularly essay writing) difficult. This study addresses critical issues about the English language proficiency and communication skills of first-year Education students at the University of Namibia's Khomasdal Campus. The main focus of this study was to examine the English language errors found in the written works of undergraduate students at the UNAM's Khomasdal Campus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error Analysis, a part of Applied Linguistics, arose in the 1960s to highlight that learner errors were not just due to their native language but also reflected universal techniques. According to Richards (1971, p.1) explained "the field of error analysis may be defined as dealing with the differences between the way people learning a language speak and the way adult native speakers of the language use the language." Recent studies on second language acquisition have focused on learner errors, which can anticipate difficulty in acquiring the language. Error analysis is also significant in the teaching of second languages (Kazazoğlu, 2020). It assists teachers in understanding new teaching methods by providing feedback on errors committed by students (Liu, 2008). It is certain and understood that learners make mistakes during learning. These errors give language teachers and linguists new insights and approaches for solving language acquisition challenges. In short, mistake analysis plays a significant part in second language teaching and learning (Al-Khresheh, 2016).

Erdogan (2005) and Keshavarz (2006) classify error analysis into two branches:

- a) Theoretical Analysis of Errors: This approach identifies and investigates challenges connected to language learning, as well as the underlying structures involved. The study examined the root causes of learning errors.
- b) Applied Error Analysis: This approach involved creating remedial courses and procedures to address mistakes identified through theoretical analysis.

Teachers can identify areas of difficulty for their students and prioritize them accordingly. Error Analysis is a sort of linguistic analysis that examines learners' errors. The process involves comparing errors in the target language to the language itself. Error analysis highlights the importance of learning errors in a second language. Interference from the learner's mother tongue is not the only reason for errors in their target language (Ridha, 2012). Richards (1971) identified the following errors when learning English as a second language:

- a) Overgeneralisation, covering instances where the learners create a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structure of the target language;
- b) Ignorance of rule restriction, occurring as a result of failure to observe the restrictions or existing structures;
- c) Incomplete application of rules, arising when the learners fail to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences;
- d) False concepts hypothesised, deriving from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language.

Some errors are caused by memory deficits or failures (Gorbet, 1979). According to the notion of error analysis, when learning a language, individuals develop a set of "rules" based on the language data they encounter. This system allows them to utilize the language effectively. Sharma (1980) suggests that error analysis can enhance remedial education by identifying both successes and failures during the program.

Dulay et al. (1982) define "error" as a systematic deviation from a selected norm or collection of norms. Error analysis is beneficial in second language learning as it helps teachers, syllabus designers,

and textbook writers identify trouble areas. Remedial exercises can be designed to target problem areas. According to Corder (1974, p.125), "The study of errors is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. In this respect it resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process." According to Richards et al. (1992), studying errors helps identify strategies used in language teaching, causes of errors, and common difficulties in language learning. This information can then be used to develop teaching materials (Khansir, 2008).

Myles (2002) proffers that analysing second language learners' errors can indicate their linguistic issues and demands at a specific level of learning. Error analysis has multiple implications for dealing with student errors in the classroom, including:

- a) Developing corrective measures
- b) Creating a sequence of target language items in classrooms and textbooks, with more difficult things following after easier ones.
- c) Making suggestions about the nature or strategies of second language learning employed by both first and second language learners.

The present study examines the English language errors found in undergraduate students' written works at the Khomasdal Campus of the University of Namibia (UNAM). It attempts to investigate weaknesses in students' written language use. It highlights the significance of providing mistake analysis-based feedback to students. There are various reasons for the errors made by learners. Language instruction can be hindered by insufficient materials for language teaching or the lack of teachers in language teaching. Some other causes of error analysis given by the researchers are listed below:

- a) Language transfer involves learning one language alongside another. According to Selinker (1972) and Richard (1974), linguistic similarities can positively impact language learning, whereas language disparities can hinder second and foreign language learning.
- b) Overgeneralization occurs when one linguistic form or rule takes precedence over others. Overgeneralizing specific forms can lead to language acquisition mistakes. This effect is also noticed in children as they learn their first language (James, 1998, pp. 178-179).
- c) Simplification occurs when learners eschew complex structures and choose simple forms. This can also lead to errors.
- d) Fossilization refers to the circumstance in which linguistic or grammatical progress in certain areas is halted while the student continues to develop his or her knowledge in others. This could also be the source of learner errors.
- e) Lack of knowledge of the rules is also one of the major reasons for learners' errors. One of the most common causes of errors among learners is a lack of knowledge of the rules.
- f) Sometimes learners lack sufficient knowledge of the rules of the language, which leads to linguistic errors and mistakes and impedes language development.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design. Purposeful and convenient sampling techniques were employed to select twenty (20) first-year students from the UNAM Khomasdal Campus's Faculty of Education. The data were collected from essays written by the selected participants. Each participant was required to write one essay based on a topic they selected from a range of predetermined and provided by the researcher. The essays were examined using thematic content analysis and error analysis to determine the writing of the student's primary strengths and weaknesses. The students' writing issues and potential reasons for these issues were then determined using these strengths and weaknesses. Four lecturers from the Department of Language Development

on the main campus were purposefully selected as key informants. The information gathered from lecturers included their views and personal experiences on a range of subjects pertaining to students' communication skills, teaching English to first-year students from different English proficiency backgrounds, and, in particular, their students' writing challenges when writing longer pieces in English. Class observation was also one of the data collection methods. Students and their lecturers were observed during the lectures.

Results and Discussion

Research shows that a significant number of Namibian students find it difficult to write lengthy pieces of writing, such as essays, as a result of the current LEP. The Namibian LEP states that pupils start learning English in the fourth grade (lipinge, 2013). According to Wolfaardt (2002), many students in Namibian schools do not satisfy the minimal requirements of language competency standards in English when they are introduced to fourth-grade courses that are more difficult linguistically and cognitively. In this study, essays were analysed through 'thematic content analysis' and 'error analysis' to establish the major strengths and weaknesses of students' writing. These results were then used to determine students' writing problems and identify possible causes of these writing problems, as presented below.

Writing Problems of Undergraduate Students

The Use of Incorrect Wording/Homophones

The writings of the students showed that they selected the wrong terms. It can be explained by a lack of resources, a lack of English at home, and a lack of appropriate reading materials, as well as a lack of exposure to the English language (lipinge, 2018). For instance, students substituted the word 'where' for 'were.' Additionally, they switched back and forth between the words 'they' and 'their.' Students also misspelt the word 'careers' as 'cereers.' Additionally, they chose the verb 'cheated' in the past tense rather than 'cheating' in the continuous form. In the English language, there are a lot of homophones, which are words that sound the same but spell and mean entirely different things (Krishnamurthy et al., 2011). Due to the identical pronunciations of the words, the pupils were unable to write the correct ones.

Lack of Grammar Accuracy/Subject/Verb Agreement

Correct grammar is expected to be used in the academic environment. However, the analysis shows that students' writing is frequently rife with grammatical mistakes. A lecturer explaining subject-verb agreement was seen as the data was being collected during class observation. During class observation, a lecturer observed explaining subject-verb agreement to the students. The lecturer explained that: *'According to English grammar rules, a writer must use the verb that is conjugated to match singular nouns when using a singular noun. A conjugated verb must be used in place of a plural noun whenever one is used by the author.'* Despite having been instructed to link the subject with the proper form of the verb before composing longer works of writing, the majority of students who produced the essay did not or could not do so. For example, some students wrote, *"Teenage pregnancy is when a woman under 20 gets pregnant" instead of writing, "Teenage pregnancy is when women under 20 years old get pregnant"*. Similarly, most students wrote, *"Students has various reasons for cheating it may not be with the aim of breaking the rules, but because they've been overwhelmed in their course works and they want to make sure their grades are not jeopardized"* instead of *"Students have various reasons for cheating; it may not be to break the rules, but because they've been overwhelmed in their course works and they want to ensure their grades are not jeopardized."*

As stated by Farooq et al. (2012), the traditional method of teaching grammar by teachers and students' lack of experience are the causes of all grammar-related issues or difficulties that students encounter when writing. Grammar errors appear to be the product of utterly insufficient learning and teaching (Msanjila, 2005). This is undesirable since essays written by students should be crystal clear, succinct, and easy to read (Barry et al., 2014). According to the author's analysis of the student's written work, a weak English background is to blame for the issue of erroneous tenses. One could contend that these pupils need more exposure to English as a result. To employ tenses effectively when writing essays, they must also be taught communicatively. Observations made in the classroom showed that standard, out-of-context grammar instruction did not help pupils use language more effectively. This observation suggests that lecturers should explain this concept to students to help them resolve subject-verb agreement problems in their writing. In addition, lecturers should ensure students have ample opportunity to practice subject-verb agreement and receive multiple exercises so that they are aware of the appropriate verb to employ when referring to singular and plural nouns. In general, subject-verb agreement can be improved through better lecturer instruction and more student practice.

According to Farooq et al. (2012), a writer must employ a verb that is conjugated to match singular nouns when using a single noun. A conjugated verb must be used in place of a plural noun whenever one is used in writing. Students wrote *"we was spending time together as a family"* instead of *"we were spending time together as a family."* Similarly, many students wrote *"we was scared of getting COVID"* instead of *"we were scared of getting COVID."* Furthermore, Farooq et al. (2012) think that the source of all, if not most, grammar-related issues that students encountered when writing was due to teachers' traditional methods of learning and teaching grammar and students' lack of experience. According to Msanjila (2005), Grammar errors appear to be the result of absolutely poor learning and teaching.

Lack of Coherence and Cohesion in Paragraphs

The analysis shows that students failed to accurately or successfully connect their paragraphs to build a logical whole. The paragraphs were also missing *"unity"*. This shows that there are no proper connectors or linking words connecting the phrases within the paragraphs. According to Hall (1988), in Fareed (2016, p. 81), a good ESL writer must produce texts that are cohesive, logical, well-organised, and neat. Students often struggle with cohesiveness and coherence, which is problematic because unorganised information is challenging to read and comprehend. Although it is reasonable that students' work lacks coherence and cohesion, it is extremely difficult to write coherently in a second language (Ahmed, 2010), especially considering the intricate nature of English logical connectors.

Coherence and cohesiveness are typically achieved in academic writing through the deliberate use of connecting devices that emphasise the flow of ideas and indicate the writer's intentions on the precise links between such ideas. Contrary to cohesiveness, coherence relates to how the text is organised overall into a recognisable order (e.g., text development from the introduction to the conclusion). Yang et al. (2011) used the term "predictive scaffolding" to refer to particular techniques utilised to produce a predictable text structure. While conceding that academic readers are likely familiar with the textual patterns of academic writings and hence find it simpler to grasp works organised in this way, proficient academic writers use such tactics to lead readers through a text.

In this study, the majority of students were told to write five paragraphs, even though they are generally aware that a lengthy piece of writing needs at least three. According to Lecturer 1:

"Writing is riddled with misspellings and a lack of coherence. They must be forced to read when it comes to reading. They are not eager to read on their own, and this course encourages extensive reading to improve their vocabulary, reading skills, and comprehension of various types of texts. We have included listening modules in all our courses to teach students that they must listen to their lecturers when they come to university. They must listen to take notes, and they will be graded based on what they learn during lectures. It is difficult to tell if they are listening well or not. That is what they do every time in a lecture. When one person speaks, the other must listen."

However, their paragraphs do not flow or are not sufficiently linked to form a coherent whole. Furthermore, there is no coherence between sentences and paragraphs. Some students used incorrect linking words, while others did not use any at all. Furthermore, some sentences were overly long and, to some extent, meaningless.

According to the researcher's analysis of students' written work, some of them had difficulty writing introductions, body paragraphs, and conclusions. This may be because their lecturers did not teach them how to write certain components of an essay or because they decided to write based on their own understanding. This is unacceptable since effective essays must have concise introductions and conclusions (Bary et al., 2014, p.11). The correct essay format must be taught to students because effective instruction can address the issue of not knowing how to construct an essay correctly (Msanjila, 2005). Therefore, lecturers should always ensure they have taught their students how to formulate a textual structure for various written genres with meaningful introductions, bodies, and conclusions. The analysis shows that some pupils even neglected to create paragraphs in their texts. Such unstructured writing can be challenging to read, especially in larger passages, as it gives the sensation that one concept never ends. In addition to the structural problem of not providing a clear introduction or conclusion in their writing, students may show a lack of comprehension of the purpose of these texts' many components. Notwithstanding that one student included a conclusion, it was merely a verbatim rehash of the essay's body paragraphs. This study notes that there is a variety of material on students' difficulties in a collegiate academic setting to write effectively (Bizell, 1992; Orr, 1995; Radloff, 1994; Zamel & Spack, 1998).

Many studies start by noting how academic writing dominates tertiary education (and reading the writings of others). The most obvious justification for this emphasis on academic writing is that student writing is the primary method of assessment in higher education. Thus, it is required of students that their written communications demonstrate their proficiency in a particular subject of study clearly and succinctly (Butler, 2011).

lipinge (2018) argues that even if coherence and cohesion in paragraphs were not a part of their instruction, students should be taught how to compose texts that make sense to readers through the content structure (Nandago & Kamonde, 2017). Additionally, it is important to teach students how to join sentences within paragraphs and how to join paragraphs together within a single piece of writing. Finally, it is important to motivate students to read as often as possible. Reading enables students to understand how various authors structure their works, which may aid them in developing the coherence and cohesion of their own writing. Some students have trouble with English because they misread the question or lack the necessary vocabulary to understand what is being asked. They consequently misread queries and submit inaccurate answers.

Incorrect Use of Tone and Register

When writing ESL essays, students must employ the appropriate tone and register (Barry et al., 2014). This suggests that students should use suitable language and style when writing and should keep the

intended audience in mind. For instance, students should ensure that a formal and academic tone is used when writing an essay (Barry et al., 2014, p.12). The essay analysis, however, showed that some students did not employ the proper tone and register. Instead of writing "this essay discusses" or "first and foremost," students use phrases such as "I am going to talk about teenage pregnancy". All of these colloquial expressions are superfluous in academic writing because the register and tone of an essay should be formal and academic, and students are writing to academics.

As Brown (2000) points out, a different vocabulary should be used in a casual conversation with a friend compared to the one used, for instance, in a job interview with a potential employer. Students use several words that are considered colloquial and slang, which are typically not allowed in academic work. One should consider what functional purpose formal academic writing provides besides conveying a sense of seriousness, and that academics are involved in what they may view to be highly significant subjects. This is in addition to the potential for misconceptions caused by the usage of colloquialisms. The tone of academic writing, such as essays, should be formal.

Conciseness and Precision

Directness and accuracy should be prioritised in academic writing. The usage of ambiguous or unclear vocabulary terms in students' written work, like "*thing*" and "*something*" is frequently insufficiently precise in academic writing. Verbosity and repetition can bog down academic arguments and are not meant to be superficial aspects of academic writing. It is important to note that this convention runs opposite to the usual avoidance of first-person pronouns and contractions, as these structures are frequently replaced by lengthier sequences of words or letters. It is expected that students write clearly and simply.

Lack of Appropriate Use of Evidence

In academic writing, the proper use of evidence demonstrates specific rules for how the concepts and words of authorities (other sources) are acknowledged. Although varied referencing styles are employed around the globe, academic writing (in a Western setting) shares the premise that one should explicitly acknowledge the ideas of others in their academic work. Most of the students' written work lacked references to acknowledge the work of others, and sometimes a reference list was provided, while the sources were not cited in the text.

Use of Contractions

While verb contractions such as "*it's*" and negative contractions "*it isn't*" are primarily used in conversation (spoken language), Biber et al. (1999, pp. 1128-1132) note that some contraction use can also be found in written registers like fiction and news (in their direct reporting of spoken discourse). The use of contractions such as "*let's talk*" instead of let us talk, "*it's*" instead of it is and "*can't*" instead of cannot, was observed in students' written work. According to their corpus analysis results, contracted forms are nearly never used in academic prose. It is, however, important to note that the analysis shows that students still make similar mistakes even after significant exposure to the tertiary academic setting. The incidence of this inaccuracy may be explained by variations in how this convention is used across various writing settings and disciplines.

Lack of/Incorrect Use of Punctuation Marks and Spelling Problems

The analysis shows that there were numerous general punctuation problems in the texts. One student wrote: "*addressing teenage pregnancy requires extensive education accessible healthcare, and supportive social contexts to lessen these impacts*" instead of "*Addressing teenage pregnancy requires*

extensive education, accessible healthcare, and supportive social contexts to lessen these impacts. While failure to start a sentence with a capital letter or to use full stops at the end of sentences may be a common mistake made by students, failure to utilise commas properly frequently disturbs the reading process, necessitating a second reading or complicating understanding, as seen in the example given. Additionally, there are too many/not enough spaces between the punctuation and the remainder of the sentence/new sentence.

The samples from students' written work reveal that they struggle with the 'misspelling' of words and the use of 'punctuation' marks. One of the lecturers (Informant 2) indicated that *"Some students came in with difficulties such as writing sentences without punctuation marks, although they are coming from high school. The message, however, is clear"*. The analysis shows that when writing essays in ESL, students have trouble spelling a lot of words correctly and also make mistakes with punctuation. Their general inability to speak English may be what's causing this issue (Iipinge, 2018). One may claim that writing words and punctuating sentences correctly is crucial when it comes to essay writing because a piece of writing will not have a clear meaning if it has numerous spelling errors and poor sentence punctuation.

Barry *et al.* (2014) assert that it is not necessary for the students' spelling to be accurate throughout the entire essay. On the other hand, simple and frequent terms should be spelled correctly. Therefore, students must compose essays with fewer spelling problems and ensure that their sentences are punctuated correctly to earn good marks on essay writing tasks. Spelling mistakes are unacceptable in academic settings since they typically reflect students' casual attitude toward their studies (Barry *et al.*, 2014).

Iipinge's (2018) study findings demonstrate that writing English essays presents several difficulties for learners in Northern Namibia. Given that English is their second language and that they blatantly lack English skills, this is not surprising (Harris, 2011; Iipinge, 2018; Wolfaardt, 2002). In addition to the learners' subpar English, it is critical to remember that writing is a challenging task to master. Writing is a skill that is neither easy nor natural for many second-language authors (Hedge, 2014). This is because a competent ESL writer needs to have extensive vocabulary, a command of mechanics rules, and a writing that is coherent, logical, appropriately organised, engaging, and cleanly arranged. The literature above indicates that students carry these issues with them from secondary schools to university institutions.

Lack of Expression

It is noted that students struggle to express themselves through their writing. The analysis of data from essays and additional sentences from the students' written work is used to support this. The teaching and study of English as a second language at this Campus might be enhanced, according to observations made in class. Overall, the analysis of students' written work revealed that they had language barriers. This study, which examined the English language proficiency and communication skills of first-year education students at the University of Namibia's Khomasdal Campus, elicited a set of responses using various instruments, which presented the perspectives of the students and lecturers involved. Some students have trouble writing.

Conclusion

This study found that the students' written work that was reviewed lacked organisation and coherence, and the majority of the writing seemed unclear. Numerous grammatical errors, including

incomplete sentences, misspelt words, incorrect punctuation, and a limited vocabulary, were noted in written essays. Additionally, students overused complex sentences. One strategy that lecturers might use to address particular writing issues is to create visual representations from students' individual writings and use them for self-assessment.

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