

FACTORS IN STUDENTS' ERRORS IN ENGLISH WRITING PROFICIENCY: AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA KHOMASDAL CAMPUS

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Abstract

English is the sole medium of instruction in Namibian higher education institutions. The fact that more than 90% of Namibian students do not speak English as their home language has often been indicated as the cause of students' poor performance in English. This study investigates the English proficiency of first-year education students at the University of Namibia's Khomasdal Campus with a focus on students' written works. This study aims to identify and explain the factors that cause students' poor writing proficiency in English. Based on qualitative research perspectives, the results show that Namibian students face a range of challenges regarding written communication. Twenty-six respondents took part in the research, including four key informants, two lecturers and twenty students. Students were deliberately selected for the questionnaire to illustrate the difficulties they face when writing and speaking English as a second language. The lecturers were also deliberately selected because they were the ones teaching these students. This study used qualitative research perspectives to gather information through methods such as observation, interviews, open-response questionnaire items and document analysis. The data were gathered in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of the administration of an assignment and the collection of twenty assignment scripts as the first set of data. Phase 2 consisted of the second set of data that was gathered through unstructured interviews, class observations and a questionnaire.

Keywords: proficiency, medium of instruction, communication skills

1. Introduction

At the University of Namibia's School of Education, first-year students should participate in any activities outside of the lecture halls to succeed academically. This is intended to assist them in developing communication skills more broadly and comprehensively and allow them to fully develop their communication skills to an advanced level. Students should strive to improve their communication skills, whether oral or written, verbal or nonverbal. However, it has been observed that students struggle to produce written pieces in English as a result of the present Language in Education Policy (Mungungu, 2010; Mutimani, 2016; Ipinge, 2018; Haimbodi, 2022).

In fact, the Language in Education Policy of Namibia places English as the sole medium of instruction

at the university level. However, more than 90% of Namibian students do not speak English as their home language. This is often attributed as the cause of students' poor performance in English. This study investigates the English proficiency of first-year education students at the University of Namibia's Khomasdal Campus with a focus on students' written works.

The underlying research question of this study reads as follows: What factors cause errors in the written works of first-year students? The subsequent question is the following: How can these factors and errors be interpreted in terms of language policy and multilingualism? Hence, the study aims to identify and explain the factors that cause students' poor writing proficiency in English. For this purpose, this paper comprises several sections. The immediate section of this introduction covers the research methodology underlying this research study. Apart from the concluding section, the rest of the sections individually unpack and discuss the findings of this study.

2. Research Methodology

The current study follows the principles of qualitative research designs. The participants comprised 20 first-year students in the Education Faculty at the Khomasdal Campus of the University of Namibia (UNAM). All of them speak English as their second language. These participants were selected during their first year as Education students using a purposive sampling technique. It is understood that this sampling technique enables the researcher to extract rich information from the participants (Etikan *et al.*, 2016).

Within the data collection procedure, each student who took part in this study was required to write one essay. Therefore, 20 essays written in English served as the source of information to be analysed. The findings revealed that students' inability to construct grammatically sound sentences was clear. Both lecturers and students were concerned about this. According to lecturers, students had difficulty writing grammatically correct sentences. The students' work that was reviewed lacked organization and coherence, and the majority of the writing seemed unclear. Numerous grammatical errors, including incomplete sentences, misspelled words, incorrect punctuation, and a limited vocabulary visible in written essays. Additionally, students overused complex sentences. The purpose of this was to ascertain the issues and difficulties students encounter when writing in English. Then, a questionnaire was distributed to a selected group of these students. Students reported having writing issues ranging from spelling to sentence construction. This group comprises only students who were present during the first-class observation of the English for General Communication course. It should be noted that the English for General Communication course (ULEG2410) is a support course required for Students who received a D in English at the Namibia Secondary School Certificate Ordinary Level.

This one-year course is offered by the UNAM Department of Language Development.

In addition, four lecturers from the Department of Language Development were purposefully selected as key informants for unstructured interviews. 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, such as essays, letters, and reports.

For data analysis, 'thematic content analysis' (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016) and 'error analysis' procedures were used. The purpose was to identify students' writing problems and possible causes of written communication skills. The data collected from lecturers were analysed using the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to break down audiotape transcriptions into units of meaning. The themes were created by categorizing transcribed data according to meaning. Following data collection, unstructured interview data were transcribed into data coding and analyzed using thematic and content analysis.

The findings and the discussion of these findings are unpacked in more detail in the sections to follow. The study findings may have some educational implications.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Mother Tongue Influence and Mother Tongue Preference

Students spoke with zeal, but for some, their accents and pronunciation were influenced by their mother tongues. We have different mother tongue influences, for example, Otjiherero-speaking students cannot pronounce chair, they say "share", boy=mboy, again, for example, 'I am stundying' instead of I am studying', Oshiwambo students have /r/ and /l/, instead of saying 'pleasure' they say 'pressure' and vice versa. *One of the lecturer further continued, "Their mother tongues influence their speaking, but it is better than their writing. Their writing is not very good; it could be better." Afrikaans speakers have /f/ and /th/ instead of saying 'with' they say 'wif' etc.*, Lecturer 1 stated. The speaking is influenced by their mother tongue, but it is better than their writing 'pleasure instead of pressure and vice versa'.

According to the results, ten out of sixteen students said they preferred speaking in their native tongue because it gave them more freedom to express themselves. These students also stated that they preferred speaking in their mother tongue when they were with peers who spoke the same language as them. Four students asserted that they used both English and Afrikaans to speak with their peers

outside of the classroom. The students' mother tongues did differ, after all. It was brought up that the two students' mother tongues were different from those of their friends. As a result, they could only speak English with their friends. Additionally, despite coming from different countries, these students believed that since English was the official language, they should communicate in English, although they are coming from different language groups.

The majority of students reported using both their native tongues and English outside of the classroom. Students who indicated that they spoke English with their peers to improve their English proficiency benefited from this process, as opposed to those who claimed that they preferred to speak in their native tongue because it allows them to express themselves freely. They forfeited a chance to improve their English by doing so. The four language skills are intertwined, so if students do not practice speaking the language at all times, their writing will be affected negatively.

This is in line with a study conducted in Namibia on LOLT by Harris (2011). The purpose of Harris' (2011) research was to gain a better understanding of how those who work in the field of education view their mother tongue, take into account how policymakers view the challenges posed by mother-tongue education, and investigate tactics for encouraging the use of mother tongues. Harris' (2011) study also includes 167 students from 19 schools, 138 teachers from 20 primary schools, 40 parents, and 38 educators (e.g., regional educational directors, inspectors of education and language policymakers).

According to Harris (2011), 61% of teachers reported that their students struggled with English proficiency. Therefore, it is not surprising that a sizable percentage of students struggle with the second language (English) they are being taught. They want to perform well in school in general and in English in particular, but they have trouble understanding their subjects due to language barriers. The fact that the students have explicitly stated that they do not understand the course material or their instructors must be emphasised. As a result, "it is understandable why they appear uninterested and unmotivated" (Harris, 2011:58).

Additionally, according to Harris' (2011) research, 83% of students preferred teachers to instruct them in their native language, and 87% of students preferred conversing with them in their native language. Finally, the study found that consistent use of the native tongue leads to better results. The study found that "in order to prevent learners from failing in the future and to consider how policymakers might view the difficulty of mother tongue learning and encourage its increased use to improve educational outcomes, a thorough review of language policy was required" (Harris, 2011:7). According to the author, it is also important to acknowledge that English is not widely spoken or used outside of the context of schools (Harris, 2011). Even though English must be the primary language of instruction

in most Namibian schools, Mwindi and Van der Walt (2015) argue that the language is hardly ever heard or used in rural communities. Thus, introducing English as LOLT to fourth-grade students is never an easy task.

3.2 Explicit Grammar Instructions and Lack of Communicative Approach

An important takeaway from the classroom observations is that explicit grammar instructions predominate over all else in ESL lessons. The topics of the day were all based on grammar; a sentence, and concords in both of the two lessons observed. During the first lesson visit, the lecturer mentioned that they had finished all of the parts of speech and would begin the new topic on that day. The lecturer then assigned students classwork containing several words related to a sentence, to have students define those words and explain how they relate to the topic of the day, 'The sentence.' These are the words: (i) clause (ii) phrase (iii) subject (iv) object (v) verb (vi) adverbial and (vii) compliment.

3.3 A Scarcity of Opportunities to Speak

Students were not given opportunities to communicate in the targeted language, particularly in the online English Communication and Study Skills course. For example, they were not given activities or meaningful tasks that encouraged oral communication (such as discussion, brainstorming, and reporting). As a result, no observations were made in this course. It is a concern that students require more practical work to improve their English proficiency. Informant 1 said *'English Communication and Study Skills is available entirely online, and this was the case prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. It is not a reaction to the outbreak; it has been completely online; however, what I have noticed, including other courses that have gone online as a result of COVID-19, is that only some students have the self-motivation to drive their own education. Some students still want someone to watch them and calling them out to do their homework or focus on their studies. You may discover that you have 100 students enrolled in a course but only 30 of them are completing the task. At the end of the day, poor performance occurs not because students did not master what they were taught, but because they did not complete their work'*.

Students who are given the opportunity to verbally express their knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes have the chance to continually improve their language skills in addition to helping lecturers reach their various students. The lecturers did not place much importance on this type of evaluation. Students were not given more opportunities to communicate in the target language, particularly in the entirely online English Communication and Study Skills course. They did not, for instance, engage

in meaningful tasks and activities that promoted oral speaking (such as discussion, brainstorming, and reporting). Some students expressed concern over this and claimed they needed more practical experience to improve their English.

Because English is a second language for the students and because student English proficiency in Namibia is so low, the institution was not resolving the problem, rather, it was making it worse. Both the study guide and the online delivery method left out speaking instruction. If the department wanted to improve the students' language skills, it should have used communicative language teaching strategies. For instance, instructors should have incorporated real-world scenarios into their communicative language instruction when teaching second language acquisition. According to Amineh and Asl (2015), "social constructivism emphasizes the learner's social interaction with knowledgeable members of society" (14). The course outlines omit several activities that might improve students' written and verbal communication abilities, particularly in longer pieces of writing and presentation skills. The time allotted for English for General Communication was sufficient. This cannot be said of the one-semester, entirely online English for Communication and Study Skills course. A barrier to learning English and acquiring adequate communication skills may be enrolling in a distance learning course. Such students are not exposed to "face-to-face" instruction, or instruction that happens in a classroom where students pay attention to lecturers, take part in class discussions, finish various assignments, and ask questions when they are unclear about something.

Students who sign up for a distance learning English course run the risk of failing the course because they are required to complete the work without the assistance of a lecturer. This ought not to be the case in a country like Namibia where many of the students speak English as a second, third, or even fourth language. Some of the students who attend different schools have been instructed by teachers who are not fluent in the language being used. The level of these students' English proficiency continues to be low, and they have poor written communication skills. The information in this data is consistent with information from key informant and lecturer interviews, student surveys, and student written work.

3.4 A Lack of Solid English Foundation

According to the lecturers, the main issue with students' English proficiency is a lack of a solid English foundation. One of the lecturers stated that *"We have poor reading culture back at school level. So, we cannot expect students to come perform miracles at the university. First students need to start loving reading. They were not instilled the love of reading at their schools. I know there are libraries at schools and so forth, maybe the teachers are not doing enough also. Number one cause of poor English*

proficiency is poor culture of reading among Namibian students. Students do not read. They do not even love reading." The love of reading or the culture of reading must be promoted or instilled in our students so that when they arrive at university, they can read but do not enjoy reading. Another lecturer in agreement asserts, *"With reading they need to be forced to read. They are not eager to read on their own and in this course is where we encourage extensive reading, to improve their vocabulary, reading skills and improve comprehension of different types of texts.* The only way to get them to reach mastery/proficiency in reading is to instil a love of reading in them at an early age. *"One of the causes could be a lack of preparation from the schools they attended. If they received poor instructions from their previous school, it may have contributed to their poor communication skills when they arrived at (here) UNAM,"* one lecturer elaborated.

The Namibian LEP states that students begin studying English in Grade 4 (Iipinge, 2013). According to Wolfaardt (2002) "many Namibian students fall short of the necessary levels of English language proficiency when they are exposed to fourth-grade subjects that are more challenging in terms of linguistic and cognitive demands" (70). It might be the case that students are not native English speakers. *"They speak different languages and they are coming from different backgrounds, so students face double barriers, the first barrier is to learn the language, which is English and the second barrier is to learn in English"* he added again. Students have to master the language itself first and then learn through it. It could be that when they are going to learn through it and learn the language, it could cause poor communication skills especially speaking and writing. Their teachers or lecturers went through the same thing. *"English is not our mother tongue, so we (teachers and lecturers) could still be teaching them and struggle with the language here and there ourselves,"* stated one respondent.

When students begin the junior secondary stage of their education, they should be performing at an intermediate level (Wolfaardt, 2002). Further, "because of issues that began in primary school, the majority of students never truly achieve the language proficiency in English that their age and academic level require" (Wolfaardt, 2002:70). Tötemeyer (2018) claims that three years of learning that is primarily based on the mother tongue is simply not enough time for students to learn how to read and write properly in both their native language and English" (11).

English was not sufficiently taught to their students during their secondary school and possibly even primary school years, according to lecturers. Informant 3 said, *"Five years ago, the Ministry of Education conducted a study on the proficiency of teachers throughout the country. The findings were concerning. I believe that the teachers' English proficiency contributes to the learners' poor performance. Another issue could be the curriculum or English syllabus, and how it is structured. We are constantly changing the curriculum, and it has now been improved. Previously, the curriculum did*

not place enough emphasis on reading. Not only to pass a test or an exam, but also for pleasure; for example, the number of novels, poems, newspaper articles, and so on is insufficient for me."

According to Informant 4, *"One of the causes of poor performance is the lack of receptive skills-based activities in the curriculum."* In 2012, Namibia had about 24 660 teachers, 1208 of whom lacked teacher preparation, and about 3000 were underqualified (Hanse-Himarwa, 2016). The junior primary phase is where the majority of unqualified and underqualified teachers are employed (Hanse-Himarwa, 2016). Hanse-Himarwa (2015) regrets that Namibia cannot expect the best outcomes unless the government prioritises early childhood development and primary education. As lecturers noted in the interviews, poor students' limited English proficiency is probably one of the main causes of their difficulties with English writing. Students would not have a solid foundation in English because the Namibian LEP allows them to switch to English before they have mastered their mother tongue (Tötemeyer, 2010).

These results support earlier research that showed that some teachers have difficulty teaching in the official language, even though English has been the language of instruction in the majority of Namibian classrooms from Grade 4 to Grade 12 for almost three decades (Kisting, 2012). It is also covered in every subject in the curriculum. Not in the students' native tongues, but in English, all subjects are taught and evaluated. The teaching language had not been effective in fostering widespread competence (Kisting, 2012). Besides, the exam results for students and teachers who speak poor English are directly correlated (Frans, 2016).

In 2011, the University of Namibia conducted an English proficiency test for the Namibian government. The main objective was to determine what additional training in-service teachers needed. There were almost 23,000 teachers who took this test. Only a few teachers, according to Kisting (2012), passed the exam, the others were rated as advanced, intermediate, or pre-intermediate. Additionally, the research showed that 98% of Namibian teachers lacked proficiency in fundamental mathematics (Kisting, 2012). More than 70% of senior secondary school teachers struggle with basic English reading and writing (Kisting, 2012).

These unexpected results were influenced by several variables. One of them is the fact that the majority of educators graduated from colleges and universities before English was declared the primary language of instruction. Due to their poor communication skills and lack of proficiency in the language of instruction, disadvantaged students are further marginalised when they are required to learn in that language by their teachers (Republic of Namibia, 2003). The quality of the instruction learners receive determines how proficient they are in English (Cummins, 2007). If learners receive a lot of comprehensible input, they are likely to become more proficient in English; however, if they

receive little input, they will have to put in a lot more effort.

3.5 A Lack of Exposure to the English Language

Lack of exposure to English, as evidenced by a challenge finding reading material in the language. This observation is further supported by Namibia's low English-speaking population. The government decided to use English as the medium of instruction in schools even though only 0.8% of the population speaks it because it did not want to favour one indigenous language over the others, breaking with colonial tradition and uniting the country (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir 2001; Pütz, 1995).

If you come to UNAM, you will most likely struggle with reading or understanding the English-language content. *"Sometimes students come from areas where English is not widely used in everyday communication, so you only use it in formal settings, such as going to the doctor. "It could also be where you are coming from, as you do not write frequently and writing is not part of your culture. Perhaps your learning/teaching strategies do not expose you to many writing opportunities"* one of the lecturers explained. Writing is not a skill that cannot be learned overnight, it requires practice. *"Reading materials are not a significant factor. In comparison to mother tongue materials, we have an abundance of reading materials in English at the university and school levels. They may not be grade and age appropriate, particularly in Namibia, where English is not our first language. Examples in books may be boring to students or inappropriate in their context. In comparison to mother tongue materials, we have an abundance of reading materials in English at the university and school levels. They may not be grade and age appropriate, particularly in Namibia, where English is not our first language. Examples in books may be boring to students or inappropriate in their context. For example, if students/learners read about other students going on a boat excursion, they may be reluctant to read and follow,"* one respondent asserted. *"There are plenty of materials, but we need to think of new ways to make them appealing to learners and students,"* she emphasised.

In Northern Namibian communities, English is not widely spoken (Harris 2011; lipinge, 2013). It can be difficult for teachers and students to communicate in a language they do not fully understand because most of them share the same mother tongue. Because of this, the pupils hardly ever speak English in class (English). lipinge (2018) asserts that some school libraries are inactive and lacking in books. Considering that few individuals who are learning English speak it in their communities or at their places of education and that they lack access to reading materials on the subject.

3.6 Poor Culture of Reading

Reading has received a lot of attention recently in the educational system of Sub-Saharan Africa. Reading habits and skills have been identified as a predictor of success in formal education, given the current emphasis on reading achievement as a barometer of learning on a global scale (UNDP 2016, p. 29–30). Africans do not have a literal tradition, they have an oral one. *“Our people valued oral communication, but if you do not read, you will not improve your vocabulary. When you read, you gain new vocabulary that you can use when speaking or writing,”* one of the lecturers asserts. A poor reading culture can contribute to poor English proficiency. *“Students are not motivated to read, and it is our responsibility as teachers and lecturers to motivate them. To help them improve their vocabulary and reading abilities”,* she added. Informant 2 added, *“We have a poor reading culture at school.” As a result, we cannot expect students to come to the university and perform miracles. Students must first develop a love of reading. Their schools did not instil a love of reading in them. I know there are libraries in schools and so on, but perhaps teachers aren't doing enough. The primary cause of poor English proficiency among Namibian students is a lack of a reading culture. Students are not reading. They don't even enjoy reading. It has gotten so bad that when we have libraries in schools, we expect students to use them to read, but this is not happening. The students must be empowered. The love of reading or the culture of reading must be promoted or instilled in our students so that when they arrive at university, they can read but do not enjoy reading. The only way to get them to mastery/proficiency in reading is to instil a love of reading in them at an early age.”*

A "reading culture" will encourage learning and growth in populations that have traditionally given little attention to written forms of communication. Despite ambiguous definitions of its characteristics and outcomes, the development of this "reading culture" is thought to be a necessary step for societies that are the focus of international development efforts (Smars, 2013; Nalusiba, 2010; Mwandayi, 2009).

4. Conclusion

This study sought to look into the factors causing the errors committed in their written works at the University of Namibia: The Medium of Instruction Factor. Students' written work showed that the mother tongue and mother tongue preference are among multiple elements impacting students' written work. Among the contributing causes, is a failure to connect the four language skills, explicit grammatical instructions, and a lack of a communicative approach; A lack of speaking opportunities, a weak English foundation, a lack of exposure to the English language, and a poor reading culture among our cultures. Both lecturers and students were concerned about this. According to lecturers,

students had difficulty writing grammatically correct sentences. Despite speaking English very well, there was still a ton of writing to be done. Students also acknowledged that improving their written English proficiency required mastering fundamental grammar. Students reported having writing issues ranging from spelling to sentence construction. This was also plainly visible in the written work submitted by the students, which was examined. Students failed to use proper English to write in accordance with grammar rules.

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