

Error Analysis of L2 Learners' Writings, a Case Study

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Abstract. This study seeks to identify and analyze errors by means of error analysis procedures in two types of writings. It looks at the types and patterns of errors in the two types of writings examined. They are the narrative and descriptive essays which students of the lower secondary schools are expected to write correctly and accurately. In this study, analyzing the type of errors and the frequency of occurrence would cast insights into reasons underlying the instances in which errors are committed. The study sets out to look at 30 students from secondary school aged fourteen. The students' writings were analyzed via checklists in order to identify the types and patterns of errors made. The findings of the study show that errors are unavoidable. Gaining insight into errors made would therefore throw light into areas of difficulties faced by students in L2 writing. It is suggested that students must have adequate exposure and practice in the L2 to be able to internalize language rules and reduce the tendency of committing errors in their writings. Teachers must therefore contribute effectively to ensure students' ability in using the L2, accurately and fluently in writing.

Keywords: errors, narrative and descriptive essays, L2 (second language), accuracy and fluency, and error analysis.

1. Introduction

One of the most important components in English language is writing skills. The ability to write well is not an inborn skill. It is usually learned through a set of instructional practices. It involves formulating new ideas and transforming information, which by itself is a complex process. By doing this, a learner engages in a two-way interaction between developing knowledge and developing text (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). A good command of writing is an undeniable advantage that every student in schools strives to achieve.

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill. It is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narration or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Perhaps it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical on formal aspects of "writing down" on the one hand, to the more complex act of composing on the other end (Hadley, 1993).

Having the ability to convey messages in writing effectively is not an easy task to master. In fact, it is an intricate and complex task. In the process of mastering English language, many mistakes are made by these students. In addition, it is crucial for students to learn how to write compositions accurately and fluently, especially in their writing tasks and even examinations. Writing, in other words, plays a very important role for students in order for them to be successful in their studies. This is even more important for students who will be sitting for public examinations like the Lower Secondary School Examination or PMR (Penilaian Menengah Rendah) in Form Three at the age of fifteen, Malaysian Certificate of Education or SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) in Form Five at the age of seventeen or even MUET (Malaysian University

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Entrance Test) in Form Six at the age of nineteen where the ability to write flawless essays is the ultimate goal.

As L2 learners, interference of their mother tongue is one of the factors affecting their English language proficiency, and it is unavoidable. Corder (1974) stated that the level of interference in the learning of English language (L2) is correlated to the types and amount of mistakes made by these students. This is evident, especially in the early stages of learning English language.

2. Methodology

This research presents descriptive data which identified and analyzed errors in L2 learners' writings. This study is aimed at determining the types of errors made by L2 learners in their writings. It is quantitative in terms of the procedure for data collection and analysis. The analysis of the study is basically interpreting data obtained from learners' writings. A checklist for recording errors made by learners in their writings is drawn up, whereby the data obtained via the checklist were analyzed and quantified in terms of numbers and percentages. The types and frequency of errors made in the writings are recorded in a checklist. From the data obtained errors are analyzed to determine the type and pattern of errors committed by the L2 learners in the respective writings. The findings are then discussed and explained in terms of factors influencing the occurrence of errors in writings.

3. Findings

The findings of the study comprise two sub-sections. The quantified data collected via checklists are discussed in this section. This section presents checklists with classified types of errors made by subjects in two types of writings. Both the narrative and descriptive essays were written by subjects during their lessons in the English class. The findings are feedback based on the analysis of errors made in their writings.

The data obtained in this research were mainly based on two checklists pertaining to two different types of writings. The data obtained from the checklists were analyzed and quantified according to categories of errors found common among the subjects in both narrative and descriptive writings. This section is therefore sub-divided into two different parts. The first part shows the results obtained from the checklist pertaining to subjects' narrative writing while the other part presents findings from subjects' descriptive writing. After marking the scripts, the types of errors made in the narrative compositions were short listed and analyzed or classified based on the types and frequency of occurrence in all the written scripts.

3.1. Types and Frequency of Errors in Narrative Writing

Eleven categories of errors were found to be most common which concerned articles, possessives, prepositions, pronouns, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, verbs, infinitive "to", word choice and spelling. After analyzing the data, overall only one subject had difficulties in all the language areas classified, with a total of 22 errors. The rest of the subjects were found to have committed errors in at least five to nine types of errors. The five language areas which posed problems to majority of the subjects include articles (30 subjects), singular/plural (29 subjects), prepositions (28 subjects), tenses (28 subjects) and choice of words (22 subjects). These language areas are determined by the number of subjects who made at least one error in each of these error types. Seven to fifteen subjects had at least 1 error in the remaining six types of errors. Comparatively, more subjects had problems with tenses, articles, prepositions, the singular/plural and making the right choice of words in written sentences.

The total number of errors made by the thirty subjects is 665. This includes all the eleven types of errors of which tenses contribute the most number of errors. In errors related to tenses, a total of 229 errors were made by 28 subjects. The second highest total sum of errors is the one related to articles. The results indicated that all 30 subjects contribute to a total of 92 errors in the use of articles. This is then followed by a total of 88 errors made by 28 subjects in aspects related to the use of prepositions. The last of the most significant types of errors found to be common among majority of the subjects concerns the singular and plural of nouns which shows a total of 73 errors made by 29 subjects.

Other types of errors which demand some attention from subjects as well as the English language teacher include errors in spelling which show a total of 54 errors being committed by 22 subjects. Word choice is

also seen to hinder accuracy in most of the subject's writing where 22 of the subjects contribute a total of 33 errors. The rest of the error types namely possessives, pronouns, S-V Agreement, verbs and the infinitive "to" are less crucial judging from the total number of errors made as well as the number of subjects who committed errors in this aspect of language.

After analyzing the data by SPSS, it can be seen that there are eleven categories of errors found to be most common among the subjects. This can be seen from the total number of errors made by the subjects collectively as well as the number of subjects involved under each category of errors. There are six categories of errors which indicate significantly high percentages in the number of subjects committing errors. They include prepositions, singular/plural, tenses, word choice and spelling. The percentage range is between 73.3% for errors in word choice and 100% for errors involving articles.

Errors involving tenses are seen to have the highest percentage, 34.4% from the overall percentage of errors made in all eleven categories. The mean or average errors made by subjects under this category, is 8.17. This means that each subject makes approximately 8 errors of tenses in their narrative writing. This applies to all 28 subjects under this category who had difficulties in using tenses correctly.

It is also obvious that all the subjects had problems with articles and the mean for errors made by each subjects is 3.06. However, this is much lower compared to the mean for tenses. This also implies that subjects would need more practice in tenses as compared to using articles to help them write accurately and correctly for this type of writing. It could also be due to the nature of the composition which required subjects to use the past tense of verbs to narrate their experience in the past.

3.2. Types and Frequency of Errors in Descriptive Writing

It was found that there were eleven types of errors committed by subjects. The categories include the singular/plural with a total of 64 errors, articles (59), verbs (28), SVA (26), spelling (24), tenses (22), prepositions (21), pronouns (17), possessives (16), word choice (16) and the infinitive 'to' (7). A total of 300 errors were made by all 30 subjects. The differences lie in the total number of errors made by each subject in each category. Overall, 19 subjects were found to commit a total of 9 to 11 errors each. Ten subjects had a total of 10 to 17 errors each. Nevertheless, the types and number of errors made by subjects differed. Example, 2 students had almost the same number of errors, 17 and 6 respectively but the number and types of errors made in each category are not the same.

For descriptive writing, the category having the most errors is the singular/plural which accounted for 64 errors. The second is articles with a total of 59 errors, verbs with 28 errors, 26 in SVA, 24 for spelling, 22 in tenses, 21 for prepositions, 16 for both word choice and possessives and 7 for the infinitive 'to'. More subjects had difficulties in the singular/plural (28), the articles (26) and the verbs (20) compared to the other types of errors. Nevertheless, errors in the categories should also be given emphasis since more than half of the total number of subjects contributed to the total number of errors made in each category.

After analyzing the data by SPSS, the significance of errors classified could be seen in terms of its percentage from the total errors made by subjects. Errors involving the singular/plural comprise 21.33% of the total errors made. Errors involving articles are quite significant comparatively, the percentage being 19.67%. The percentages of the rest of the categories shown, still demand some attention even though they are not that significant.

It can be seen that there are two types of errors made by subjects. The two types of errors where the average is the highest, the singular/plural and the articles with an average of 2.28 and 2.26 respectively. This implies that each subject who committed errors involving articles and singular/plural, made an average of approximately 2 errors in their descriptive writing. It can be seen from the table that each of the subjects involved made at least two errors in both language areas.

The findings indicate that most subjects made errors related to the singular/plural when they were required to describe or write about 'A market' which is obviously, a singular noun. Most of them were not clear that they were expected to write about one particular market. The confusion occurred when describing things sold at the market. Most of the subjects used the singular form for vegetables, fruits and so forth. This confusion further led to incorrect use of articles.

Overall, it can be seen that that tenses rank first (most errors) in the narrative writing but not in the descriptive writing. In descriptive writing, errors in singular/plural rank first (most errors) but in narrative, they rank fourth. There are three types of errors which ranked the same in both types of writing. They are articles, spelling and pronouns which ranked second (few errors), fifth (average number of errors) and eighth placing (many errors).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The number of errors committed was therefore found to vary between types of writing and subjects. More errors were made in the narrative composition compared to the descriptive composition. The total number of each type of errors made by subjects also differed. The areas, which posed the most problems to the subjects, were reflected by the total errors quantified in the checklists. Students seemed to do better in the narrative compared to the descriptive due to a number of reasons. Students were able to avoid errors in the narrative since they were only required to use the present tense of verbs throughout their task. The subjects were familiar with the content but had problems in using the singular/plural nouns as well as articles. The length of words written was limited to not more than 150 words.

The narrative 'A journey by Bus' had more errors since subjects were required to use the past tense of verbs to relate things of the past. The students were expected to write about their personal experience with the help of short notes and important points discussed earlier with the teacher. The teacher discussed how the content should be structured. The students seemed motivated to write on this topic and attempted to express themselves by narrating their own experience using the linguistic knowledge that they have. This was considered a real test of their language ability. Due to the nature of this type of writing, subjects tend to commit more errors in an attempt to express themselves.

Basically, errors are unavoidable and they do occur for some reasons or other. L2 learners are non-native speakers of English who are strongly bound to the social and cultural aspects of their unique existence. From the errors analyzed, majority of the students had problems with the tenses in their compositions where it concerned relating something of the past. There was some confusion involving the past tense of verbs among the majority of them who were Malays due to the fact that in the Malay language, verbs do not change with time.

Based on the discussions, it could be assumed that the types of errors made by subjects in their writing were results of difficulties in certain language areas. In general, the errors were made due to the mother tongue interference, overgeneralization of language rules as in singular plural, lexical avoidance, medium transfer and so forth. Errors could therefore be analyzed to provide useful feedback in helping L2 learners acquire a certain level of linguistic or grammatical competence in the L2.

To conclude, the researchers believe that errors in L2 learner's writings are unavoidable. The types and number of errors made by the students vary accordingly. To address the first research question, it was found that from the analysis conducted, there exists a particular pattern that could be observed in the types and number of errors made by subjects. In view of the occurrence of the various types of errors, factors like mother tongue interference, instability of the learner's linguistic knowledge, uncertainty or inconsistency in handling a linguistic system have given rise to different types of errors involving tenses, articles and so forth as discussed earlier.

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