

ERROR ANALYSIS: A DIAGNOSTIC AND REMEDIATION TECHNIQUE FOR COMMUNICATION SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN WRITING

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Abstract

The study is on error analysis, a diagnostic and remediation technique for communication skill development in writing. It sought to diagnose, analyze and remedy the errors that occur in the writing of polytechnic fresh students. Two research questions were used for the study. The subjects for the study were twenty (20) year one national diploma students from a Federal Polytechnic. The students were given five different essay topics to select the one they would prefer to write. Forty minutes were given to them to write the topic of their choice. The essay scripts written by these students constituted data for the present study. The result shows that students need lessons on punctuation, syntax, concord and tenses.

Introduction

Writing is an act, which anybody who wishes to be reckoned with must indulge in. It is one of the major ways of assessing students' learning outcome. It is considered to be important if a student wishes to survive in his/her academic pursuit. Writing is equally used if the student hopes to communicate his thoughts and ideas to audience far a way.

Omojuwa (1979) assets that writing is an important area of language work that can only be avoided at both the teacher's and learner's peril. Aboderin (1990) opines that writing is published for external scrutiny. Writing is published not only for external scrutiny, but also for other people to benefit from. Since writing is published for the benefit of other people, there is every need to write carefully. This will help to reduce the errors that occur, so that effective communication can take place.

In an attempt to communicate through writing, students commit a lot of errors, which reflect how far they have been able to learn the target language. It will be wise at this juncture to explain what an error is. Headbloom (1979), defines error as a systematic deviation from the target language by non-native speakers. He goes further to say that it is different from simple mistakes, slips of the tongue and oversight in writing. Olaboopo (1999) defines errors as systematic deviations, which are characteristic of the learner's linguistic system at a given stage of learning. He distinguished between errors and mistakes, which he said, are deviations due to performance factors, such as memory limitation, as shown in sequence of tenses, agreement of tenses, spelling, punctuation and other performance factors including fatigue and emotional strain. Proponents of contrastive analysis see errors as transfers. Transfer has to do with the influence of the learners' previous language(s) on his present learning. If the languages have similar rules or concepts, there will be a positive transfer of learning.

The first two definitions tend to differ widely from the last because of different theoretical orientations. The first two definitions are from the theoretical perspective of error analysis, while the last reflects the theoretical view of contrastive analysis.

At this juncture, one question that must be answered is: "why do we need to study students' errors?" We need to study students' errors for two primary reasons. The first is to give the students the most relevant help they need in learning the target language. The second is to plan programmes for future groups of student who have similar background with the present group of students. Since the topic under discussion is, *Error Analysis: A Diagnostic and Remediation Technique for Communication Skill Development in Writing*; there is the need to explain why error analysis is more appropriate for this study. One is that the time for the study is too short. Two is that a full-scale piece of research into the errors of a particular group is complex and time - consuming, and this can only be done through contrastive analysis. Therefore, the study sought to diagnose, analyze and remedy the errors that occur in the writing of polytechnic fresh students. The aim is to know the type of programme to plan for them.

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Research Questions

1. Will fresh students commit errors that show faulty application of the rules of English Language in writing'-'
2. Will error analysis be able to show the areas where students have problems in learning English?

Review of Related Literature

This section deals with the presentation of all the related literature covered in this paper. The areas covered are as follow: Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Methods of Error Classification.

Contrastive Analysis

One of the earliest linguistic theory of second language teaching and learning that needed to be discussed in this paper is contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis deals with comparing languages, predicting areas where second language learners will have problems in learning a target language and also suggesting problematic areas to concentrate on in teaching. Contrastive analysis drew most of its theoretical support from the field of psychology. Psychology as the study of behaviour, deals with behaviour, which can be observed. As a result of its influence on contrastive analysis, language is seen as verbal behaviour, which can be tested and defined. They discuss learner's errors in terms of transfer from the mother tongue to the target language. They believe that if languages have similar rules or concepts, there will be positive transfer of learning; while on the other hand, if there are differences in the languages, there will be negative transfer of learning. Proponents of contrastive analysis indulge in structural descriptions of languages in order to predict areas where second language learners will have difficulty in learning the target language. They predicts that where the structure of the MT is similar to that of the target language, students will find it easy to learn those structures. On the other hand, where the structures of the MT differs form that of the target language, students will find it difficult to learn such structures.

Schachter (1973), examined restrictive relative clause formation in four unrelated languages: Persian, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese. She predicted that Japanese and Chinese students will have greatest difficulty in using restrictive relative clauses in English while Persians and Arabs students will have less. Error analysis predicts that Persian and Arab students would need more help in restrictive relative clause formation in English Language. The result showed that Chinese and Japanese students made fewer errors but also avoided using restrictive relative clause as much as possible.

Mulvey, (1992) conducted a research to find out if Japanese students would transfer the Japanese rhetorical strategies to essays which they wrote in English Language. The result revealed that the Japanese students transferred the Japanese rhetorical strategies which did not rhyme with that of the English Language to English.

Error Analysis

As a result of the inability of contrastive analysis to account for all the errors that occur in second language learning, Error Analysis emerged. Proponents of error analysis believes that a different process should be applied in studying errors. Some error analysts believes that the second language learner indulges in a creative reconstruction process in trying to acquire a new language, (Dulay and Burt, 1974). Others suggests that the learner employs specific strategies to aid in his language learning (Richards, 1971).

The second language learner, according to error analysis is not a passive recipient of language, rather, he is an active manipulator of language. This is because, he is constantly testing the new language, making rules, and then altering and refining these rules (Headbloom, 1979). They compare second language learners with first language learners by the similarity of errors both groups makes in writing. They believe that second language errors are systematic and uniform, regardless of the first language involved. They maintain that the errors the learner makes are inherent within that language system and that not all of them are caused by mother tongue interference.

Dulay and Burt, (1974a) used error analysis to test the validity of the contrastive hypothesis that the knowledge of the mother tongue affects the learning of a new language. They stated that prepubertal children would make errors in their second language syntax, which will resemble errors

made by children learning the language as a first language. They went further to state that these errors would not reflect transfer from their native language. The result shows that 87% of the errors represents first language developmental errors while less than 5% errors represents native language interference errors.

Olsson, (1974a) examined English passive formation among fourteen year - olds in their fifth year of English Instruction. The purpose of the experiment is to find out the source of errors they commit in using passive English sentences. The source of errors could be mother tongue interference or mtra-lingual errors. The result shows that the greater percentage of the errors are as a result of Intra-lingual interference while others are as a result of mother tongue interference.

The findings of these two studies lends empirical support to the claims of the validity of error analysis as opposed to contrastive analysis. The foregoing section has discussed error analysis. The next section will attempt to present a discussion on methods of error classification.

Methods of Error Classification

The first series of work to be done in error classification is: to identify the errors, interpret them, reconstruct them and classify them. There are many ways of classifying errors. It is advisable to use whatever system or combination of systems most useful and enlightening to the purposes of the analysis.

Errors are classified according to their assumed causes. For example, if errors are classified under: errors of hypercorrection; errors of cross - association; errors of false analogy and so on, the analysis is using the assumed causes of the errors. This method of error classification is not very helpful to the teacher because it tends to speculate what was causing the errors. The speculation may be right or wrong.

Errors can be classified linguistically as follow:

- Omission: Goat is a domestic animal
- Addition: He came on last Wednesday
- Substitution: Ojo was angry on me
- Mis-ordering: Nneka asked her what time was it.

This method of classification is not sufficient. This is because it provokes questions such as: What is it that was omitted, added, substituted or mis-ordered. The teacher cannot at a glance understand the areas where students need help.

Errors can also be classified linguistically by assigning them to various levels of linguistic descriptions such as: Phonological (both speaking and listening), Orthographic (spelling and punctuation), Syntactic (grammatical), Lexico-Semantic (Choice of vocabulary which in turn affects meaning). Assigning errors using levels of linguistic description is quite straightforward but there is need to break them into linguistic system so that the teacher will know the areas where to focus his attention while teaching. This brings us to another level of linguistic classification of errors, which is classifying errors according to linguistic system.

Classifying errors according to linguistic system means placing the errors to the parts of speech, which the errors belong.

However, for the purpose of tins write-up, classifying errors tinder levels of linguistic description and levels of linguistic systems are adopted. These two are adopted because they are clearer and straightforward. They are also easier to understand.

Methods

The subjects for the present study are twenty (20) year one national diploma students from a Federal Polytechnic. The students were given five different essay topics to select the one they would prefer to write. Forty minutes were given to them to write the topic of their choice. The essay scripts written by these students constituted data for the present study.

Presentation of Result

Table 1

Linguistic classification of errors according to levels of linguistic description.

Table of Error	Number of times it occurred
Phonological errors (Listening and speakin g)	3

Orthographic errors (Spelling and Punctuation)	42
Lexico - Semantic errors (choice of vocabulary)	48
Syntax (Grammatical)	92

Table II

Classification of errors according to Linguistic system, parts of speech

Type of Error	Number of times it occurred
Verbs	96
Nouns	36
Pronouns	8
Adjectives	4
Preposition	12
Conjunctions	4
Interjections	-

Discussion and Recommendation

Research Question One

Will fresh students commit errors that show faulty application of the rules of English language in writing?

The answer to this question is Yes. The result as presented in Table one shows that most of the errors committed by students fall under the category of faulty application of the rules of English language in the area of orthographic errors (spelling and punctuation) Lexico-semantic errors (choice of vocabulary) and syntax (Grammatical).

Research Question Two

Will error analysis be able to show the areas where students have problems in learning English? The answer to this question is Yes. The use of error analysis is able to show the areas where students have problems in learning English. See Tables one and two.

The result of error analysis in the present study shows that the subjects of this study needs more lessons in the area of syntax. A detailed look at the scripts reveals the trend of the errors. These errors are found mostly in the use of agreement between subjects and verbs and also in the use of verb tenses. The subjects tend to over - generalize the rules of concord and tenses in English Language. The subjects also need to read more in order to acquire enough vocabularies for effective communication. There are many instances where wrong words are used for expression. Also, most orthographic errors committed by students involve omission of commas. The subjects also need more lessons in the use of punctuation marks.

From the on-going discussion, one can see that analysis of students' errors in English Language is important because it directs the teacher on where to pay closer attention in teaching.

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Appendix I

A Few Examples of Errors and the Category Where They Belong

- 1) How are *doing* over there (Wrong choice of verb omission of second person pronoun and no full stop)
- 2) *I predict* that all is well with you (wrong choice of word).
- 3) I can that the last time you visit my country, really you fail in love with us, mostly, our culture, colour, *tongue*, *perceiving* that long to marry from my village (auxiliary verb omitted, wrong verb tense many instances of wrong spelling and pronoun omitted).
- 4) The family call the lady to *confirm*, (auxiliary verb omitted and wrong spelling).
- 5) If there are other lady in that family, he will call them too. (wrong tense and wrong singular form).
- 6) He is a kind of teacher that have interest on his study academic performance (Concord, preposition substitution, possessive case omitted, and wrong spelling).
- 7) But once day, he noticed that I does not understand Igbo; so, since that day, any time he *see* me he would call me "mgbati - mgbati" (many instances of no punctuation marks and lack of agreement between subject and verb).
- 8) Anytime he *entered* the class and does not see me, he *would* ask my friends *after* me. (wrong tense and preposition substitution).
- 9) Her parents *stay* at Oko. (wrong choice of word).
- 10) My best friend *talk* fast, walk fast and her smile *is* broad (two instances of lack of concord between subjects and verbs. D