Breaking Down Words: A Structural Analysis of Students' Written Outputs

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Abstract

The study structurally analyzed the written outputs of the students which were submitted online. The analyzed outputs were lifted from portion of the submitted academic requirements, quizzes, compositions and essays of the students. The evident errors committed by the respondents were classified according to the types of error. The findings of the study revealed that the university students have committed frequent errors such as absence of transitional words, punctuation errors, redundancy, incorrect prepositions, wrong used of words, run-on sentence, misplaced modifiers, error on subject-verb agreement, noun antecedent error, etc. The findings implied that the respondents have weak composition skills. They have not fully mastered grammar usage, functions and rules in using the target language. This paper has academic inferences to language teaching and learning.

Keywords –   Breaking down words, Errors, Error Analysis, Structural Analysis, Online outputs and Written Outputs

Introduction

Academic writing is a vital part of students' lives. During their stay at a university, students are expected to do compositions, write paragraphs and complete essays. They are also tasked to do various written activities, submit reports, written requirements, thesis, etc. When these university students do their expected written productions, they normally encounter difficulty and challenges. One of such problems is committing syntactical and linguistic errors which adversely affect the structure of their sentences and the idea they want to communicate. Learners' errors give insight to the professors about the learners' difficulty in their learning. Hence, they are considered essential in teaching-learning process.

Tizazu (2014) cited Brown's (2007) statement that making mistakes or errors in writing is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. Consequently, learners' errors must be studied systematically and appropriately analyzed in order to give effective remedial.

Error analysis (EA) is a model for the study of second language learners' errors. Richards & Schmidt (2002) defined EA as a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms of a language in the production data of someone learning either a second or foreign language. Such systematic analysis of errors eventually provides useful insights about the system operating in the learners' mind and reveals the learners' knowledge about the grammatical systems of the target language. By identifying what is exactly lacking in the learners' competence, EA brings the problem areas to the attention of teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers, and suggests remedial action to overcome the mismatch between knowledge of the learner and the demands of the situation.

Online written outputs are one of the major requirements of the students to complete their course most especially this time of Pandemic. The written outputs encompass the significant and insightful learning experiences and academic accomplishments of the students. Thus, these online written outputs are expected to be syntactically and structurally correct since the college students had finished already English subjects like Grammar and Composition, Speech and Oral Communication and Study and Thinking Skills during their Senior High School.

However, it was observed that not all students in the college most especially those who enrolled in English 55 are not that fully proficient in using the English language; some have not mastered the basics of English, and their written outputs are concrete evidences where the students have grammatical lapses still. Consequently, there is a learning gap. Filling this gap and solving the problem in English

proficiency of the students is one of the major concerns of the English professors and the curriculum planner.

Some of the checked Midterm online written outputs have numerous grammatical errors such as absence of transitional words, punctuation errors, redundancy, incorrect prepositions used, wrong word usage, run-on sentence, misplaced modifiers, word order, error on subject-verb agreement, noun antecedent error, sentence fragments, missing comma after introductory element, misplaced or dangling modifier, vague pronoun reference, superfluous commas, lack of parallel structure, sentence sprawl, comma splice, wrong punctuation usage and split infinitives.

This prevalent condition motivated the researchers to conduct a structural analysis on online written outputs of the students in English 55. The result of the study will serve as an enhancement in the curriculum of the said subject.

This research is anchored to MacSwane's (2017) adopted model Time-on-task Theory—for educating English language learners (ELLs), with a focus on the role of language factors in explaining achievement differences among ELLs. In this research, the said theory is employed because the researcher also focused on the present or prevailing proficiency status of the respondents particularly in composition.

Linguists have always been attempting to describe the types of errors committed by the language learners, and that is exactly the best way to start with, as it helps out the language professors in the university like the Cagayan State University to identify where the problem lies. According to Dulay et al. (1982) errors take place when the learner changes the surface structure in a particularly systematic manner. Thus, the error, no matter what form and type it is, represent a damage at the level of the target language production.

The present study has a resemblance to the study of Suryani, et al. (2014) who adhered that writer of research articles are expected to present research information in a structured manner by following a certain rhetorical pattern determined by the discourse community. Failures to keep to the writing standard and rhetorical pattern are likely to lower the acceptance rate. While producing a research article is understandably a complex task, it is even more difficult if one is writing in his or her second or third language. Even if grammatical mistakes can be ironed out by a language editor, researchers are on their own when it comes to rhetorical presentation of their research ideas.

However, Suryani's paper is different from the present study in terms of the analyzed instrument. The former analyzed research articles; while the present study analyzed the online written outputs of the students.

On the other hand, the present study is related to the study of Silalahi (2018) which focused on grammatical errors analysis in translating English texts into Bahasa Indonesia text. The results of his study showed that the errors were on: 1) 85,29% of morphological error on word formation and 14,70% of affixation errors found; 2) syntactic error on phrase (3,96%), clause (1.00%), and sentence (95.04%); and 3) the factors causing the errors in translating namely the students did not understand the context of the source language text, the students were not able to build sentence grammatically in the target language, the students were lack of grammar comprehension of source language and target language, the students did not use the dictionary and machine translation, and the students did not implement the right translation strategy. He concluded that the respondents made a lot of errors in translating English texts in to Bahasa Indonesia texts on morphology and syntactic.

The study answered the question: "What are the common errors committed by the students as reflected in their submitted online written outputs?"

Objectives

The study structurally analyzed the online written outputs of the university students in English 55. The written outputs were analyzed using the error analysis of Coder (1981).

Methodology
Research Design

The study made use of descriptive-qualitative research design since the online written outputs were described. A syntactical and structural analysis on the respondents' online written outputs were done by the researchers.

Participants

The respondents of this study were the 85 second year Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) students who finished English 55, Teaching English Language in the Elementary Grades, last semester, School Year, 2020-2021. Total Enumeration was employed in the study in determining the respondents.

Data Collection tools

Error analysis adopted from Corder (1981) was used to analyze structurally the written outputs of the respondents.

Data Analysis

The data were categorized based on the type of errors committed and those were analyzed by adopting the Error Analysis of Corder (1981). This focus on errors that were systematic violations of patterns in the input to which the respondents have been exposed.

Results And Discussion

Table 1 shows the syntactical and structural errors committed by the respondents as reflected in their written outputs. The evident and common errors committed by the respondents were misplaced and dangling modifiers, wrong verb usage, lack of parallel structure, subject-verb agreement, run-on sentence, misspelled words, wrong word usage, referent not specified, redundant, fragment, repetitive words, wrong subject-pronoun used and fragmented sentences.

This finding implies that even if the respondents are already second year college, they still have not mastered the rules in grammar and have not fully acquired the academic writing skills and competencies. This further implies that the students have weak foundation in terms of grammar usage. Their outputs are not syntactically and structurally bounded with the standard on writing composition.

During the informal interview with the respondents which was conducted after the analysis of their written outputs, they narrated that they are not fully linguistically and communicatively competent. This can be attributed to the kind of grammar foundation and orientation they had during their senior high school.

The findings conform to the study of Silalahi (2018) where he found out that the errors of his participants were on morphological error, on word formation and on affixation errors. He also found syntactic error on phrases, clauses and sentences of the students' outputs.

In addition, the findings also conform to the findings and conclusion of Tizazu (2014) in his study. He found out in his study that omission of items that must appear in a well-formed utterance is the most persistent error type followed by addition errors. Although grammatical morphemes are more frequently omitted, a significant amount of content morphemes (nouns, verbs, clauses, etc), which influence the meanings of utterances, has also been omitted. The most disruptive of the misformation errors is using erroneous lexical items which is manifested in selecting a totally wrong word, wrong collocation, wrong syntactic category, wrong word forms, borrowing, coinage, and code-mixing. Almost all of these lexical misformations distort the meanings that learners intended to convey in their compositions. Besides, errors in word order are manifested in misplacement of verbs, objects, adverbs, and modifiers in one hand and using passive constructions for active or vice versa and wrong cleft sentence formation on the other hand. He also found out that learners' errors are systematic and regular in the sense that their addition, omission, misformation and misordering of grammatical items reveal that learners are employing some strategies, such as overgeneralization, undergeneralization, or incomplete application of rules in learning the different aspects of the English language. The interplay of intralingual and interlingual factors triggered learners' errors. The majority of the errors in his study are attributed to intralingual factors i.e not having a full mastery of the English language. L1 induced

errors, which are restricted only to the direct translation of Amharic words and sentences into the target language (English), borrowing, code-mixing and switching, have also been sorted out.

Table 1. Syntactic and Structural Errors

Sample sentences/phrases	Errors committed
Many of us suffer because of it.	referent not specified
So I thought of opening a small business to supply all my needs with the load and using it is also the reason why I transferred my cellphone to online class	missing comma after introductory element misplaced modifier / dangling modifier run-on sentence
They were when my mother died.	wrong subject pronoun used The thought of the sentence is not clear
I beg myself to worked because of this pandemic that's the reason why	Subject-verb agreement error redundant
Everything and changed especially lacking financial.	fragment
This new normal was really hard for us because we suffered from hardship, difficulties, problems, poverty	Repetitive words
As a student, on top of it is education because as we all know, due to pandemic face to face learning is substituted into virtual meetings or online classes.	Run-on sentence
And we all can be the solution as long as we cooperate to the rules and regulations that are being implemented.	Wrong word usage (abide/follow)
My experience during pandemic is absolutely differ because I cannot do the things that I usually do	Wrong word usage (different)
I'm now at home every day and it really is affecting me socially.	Wrong verb positioning
We are lucky at least to be able to continue to study and see our classmates and teachers	Lack of parallel structure
The corona virus has affected many aspect of society	Redundant
The way we live our lives looks a lot different today than it did before.	Error in the use of verb tense
I'm happy that I get to spend more time with my family	
My life during the pandemic has a bright and dark side for me.	Subject-verb agreement error
I know that everything happens for a porpuse, and every negative things has a positive side depending on how we look into it	Misspelled word Subject-verb agreement error
It made the whole world bleed and spreeding like wildfire	Misspelled word
My life and experiences during pandemic seems so strange to me. It's a little bit awkward because lots of things have change,	Subject-verb agreement error Wrong verb used (have changed)

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the light of aforementioned findings, the study concluded that students evidently committed errors in their submitted online outputs. This implies that they have not fully mastered their basic academic writing skills and competencies. As second year students, it is expected that their written outputs have limited lapses and at least somehow have met the basic standards in academic writing. The findings served as basis in English 55 content modification and enhancement.

The university should spearhead English 55-Teaching Language in the Elementary syllabus calibration where English instructors across campuses will enrich and enhance the syllabus and that grammar content should be more emphasized.

Language teachers should seriously consider the inclusion of explicit lexical instruction, which is directed at the expansion, consolidation and elaboration of the learners' lexicons, in teaching writing skills since lexical errors are considered to be the most disruptive and damaging errors in (written) communication as they affect the meaning of the message.

Likewise, language professors should conduct remediation and they should give more writing tasks to the language learners so that their academic writing skills will be enhanced. Furthermore, the calibrated syllabus and module on this subject should be learner-centered and must be performance-based. Significantly, EFL learners are encouraged to have extra mile in improving their writing prowess.

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