An Analysis of English Grammatical Errors in the Written Essays of the First Year English Students of Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the grammatical errors in the written essays of the first year English students of Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. These errors include misinformation, omission, punctuations, capitalization, concord, lexical, spelling, parts of speech, syntactic and articles. Data were collected from 200 first year English students' essays from the Faculties of Arts and Education out of which 50 of the essays were purposively selected for analysis; twenty-five of which each represent the two faculties (i.e Arts and Education). Frequency and percentage were used for data analysis. Findings in this study showed that the most frequent errors made by the students, out of the 393 errors in the data, were spelling 71 (18.07%), lexical 51 (12.89%), punctuations 49 (12.47%), capitalization 48 (12.21%) and parts of speech 46 (11.70%).

Keywords: *Grammatical errors, error analysis, written essays, second language acquisition, first year English students.*

1. INTRODUCTION

University students are required to employ the English language whenever they communicate either through spoken or written form when it comes to academic endeavours. More importantly, students of English are expected to strictly consider rules of grammar anytime they engage the English language in their communicative activities; otherwise, there would be communication problem. According to Batstone (1994), using language without considering it's "grammar would be chaotic and cause the same communication problem, such as grammatical errors in writing and speaking." Grammar, apart from being the rules for ordering words, it is also a resource for good communication (Halliday and Hasan, 1989 in Hyland, 2002).

The focus of this study is on first year second semester students of English of Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. First year second semester English undergraduates are students who have been exposed to basics of English grammar not only in their first semester in the university but at various times or the other in their post-primary school days. Therefore, they are expected to have internalised some basic rules of the English grammar. In their essay writing, they are expected to have attained a certain level of competence. In other words, there are some grammatical errors that are not expected to be committed at their level. The writing competence includes correct use of punctuations, arrangement of words in a sentence and a good aptitude about grammar (Hyland, 2002).

The main purpose of teaching English is to help second language speakers achieve a level of communicative competence. Kittiporn (2013:116) claims that:

The goal of teaching English is to develop learners' communicative competence consisting of grammatical or linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980). Linguistic competence is knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Sociolinguistic competence is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Discourse competence is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Strategic competence is knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context.

One of the important elements to develop the ability of learners to use language correctly and appropriately is grammatical competence. Skehan (1996) argues that inadequate grammatical instruction could lead to fossilization, classroom pidgins and negligible accuracy.

In learning the second language, making grammatical errors is a common phenomenon; these errors have been referred to as systematic errors (Corder 1967; Kekere-Ekun 2010). These errors are systematic because in the process of acquiring a second language, incorrect utterances still manifest in the speech of learners which is a reflection of their level of linguistic development at a particular point in time. These grammatical errors could be found in both oral and written forms of communication.

Scholars have identified various causes of grammatical errors. For example, Maicusi and Maicusí (2000) in their study of the errors in the second language acquisition maintain that in learning process, errors have always been regarded as a negative occurrence which must be avoided like a plague. And because of this, teachers have a propensity to show a cruel attitude to their students. Errors, on one hand, are regarded as a failure of teaching process and on the other hand, they are seen as a natural result that can hardly be avoided, so we should deal and learn from them. Consequently, errors can be a very helpful means in learning a foreign language (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005).

Selinker (1972) identifies five sources which are language transfer, transfer of training, approach of language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization of the target language linguistic materials. In their own opinion, Richards & Sampson (1974) advance seven reasons that can be responsible for grammatical errors, viz: language transfer, intralingual interference, the effects of sociolinguistic situation, the modality of exposure to the target language and the modality of production, the age of the learner, the instability of the learner's linguistic system, and the effects of the inherent universal hierarchy of difficulty of the particular item being learned.

This paper focuses on the students' grammar in essays written by first year second semester English undergraduates. As second language students, errors are bound to occur (Myles 2002). Despite their exposure to the basic rules of the English grammar, many students still have problems concerning their use of English language. Therefore, the outcome of this study would

be of great help for English teachers to find out their students' ability to apply those basic grammatical rules they have been exposed to in the correct usage of English.

2. METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

The population for this research consisted of 200 first year English students from the Faculties of Arts and Education studying ELS 104 (Basic Grammar and Usage) in the second semester of 2017 academic year at Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. The students were asked to write an essay of not more than 250 words in English about themselves in twenty-five minutes under examination conditions. Then, the essays were collected from them for error analysis. For the purpose of this study, fifty of the essays were purposively selected for analysis; twenty-five of which each represent the two faculties (i.e Arts and Education).

Error Analysis, as proposed by Corder (1974), was adopted by the study for its analysis. The errors were identified, characterised and analysed.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the results and the analysis of grammatical errors found in the written essays of first year English students from the Faculties of Arts and Education studying ELS 104 (Basic Grammar and Usage) in the second semester of 2017 academic year at Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti.

S/N	Types of Errors	Number of Errors	Percentage of Errors
1.	Misinformation	37	9.41
2.	Omission	26	6.62
3.	Punctuations	49	12.47
4.	Capitalization	48	12.21
5.	Concord	23	5.85
6.	**Lexical**	**51**	**12.98**
	6.1 Word selection	35	8.91
	6.2 Word formation	16	4.07
7.	Spelling	71	18.07
8.	Syntactic Errors	24	6.11
	8.1 Sentence Structure	16	4.07
	8.2 Ordering	8	2.04
9.	Articles	18	4.58
10.	**Parts of Speech**	**46**	**11.70**
	10.1 Nouns	14	3.56
	10.2 Pronouns	10	2.54
	10.3 Verbs	7	1.78
	10.4 Adjectives	3	0.76
	10.5 Prepositions	12	3.05
	Total	**393**	**100**

Fig.1 Grammatical Errors in the Written Essays of 100 Level English Students from the Faculties of Arts and Education Studying ELS 104 in 2017

From the table above, 393 errors were found in the written essays of 100 Level English students from the Faculties of Arts and Education studying ELS 104 (Basic Grammar and Usage) in the second semester of 2016/2017 academic year at Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. The results in the table indicated that misinformation is 37 (9.41%), omission 26 (6.62%), punctuations 49 (12.47%), capitalization 48 (12.21%), concord 23 (5.85%), lexical 51 (12.89%), spelling 71 (18.07%), syntactic errors 24 (6.11%), articles 18 (4.58%), parts of speech 46 (11.70%).

(i) Misinformation

This occurs as a result of wrong construction of a sentence whenever a writer or a speaker does not make correct choice of words. When such happens, it leads to miscommunication. For instance, in attempt to say that 'I am prone to correction' (i.e having a tendency to correction) and I say 'I am prune to correction', I have misinform my listeners or readers because 'to prune' is to remove excess leaves from a tree. Also, if I say 'I have a junior brother', this is not Standard British English (SBE). The correct statement should be 'I have a younger brother'. Many of these misinformation statements are common in the data. Some of them are exemplified below.

- I am **prune** to correction.
- My **wildest** dream is to become a mechanised farmer.
- I have a **junior** brother.
- My best **foods are egg and bread.**
- My **hubby** is to read write and play game**.**
- I **inspire to be a lecturer** in **the** future.
- I have three **brothers at my back**.
- I was **given** birth to 16 years ago **by mother of 36**.
- I am one of the **choir** in my church.

Taking a look at the examples above, miscommunication errors occur regularly in verbs and nouns.

(ii) Omission

The omissions of lexical items in the essays of the students appear to be as a result of their carelessness (slip of the fingers) in writing. Some of the examples are revealed below.

- It took me a long * to admission to the university.
- I'm * female.
- * am dark in complexion.
- I attend Ekiti State University and * in department of English Education.
- The name of my primary * is Christ International Nursery and Primary School.
- The name of my secondary * * victory city college.... (*is* and *School* are missing).

(iii) Punctuations

The punctuations referred to here are basically the comma, periods and alphabetism. These three categories of punctuation errors were found in the data. The periods is either arbitrarily used, (e.g '...sleep everyday**.** am a christen') or totally omitted (e.g 'My name is ... B * I am 19 years old').

Alphabetism on the other hand has two types; acronyms and words. The use of the two is violated in the data. For instance, 'C* A* C' and 'Jamb' are examples of acronyms and word respectively which are not used appropriately. They are demonstrated below.

- I wish to become...a chef in future**.** and I was....
- My name is ... B * I am 19 years old.
- ... sleep everyday**.** am a christen.
- My church is C* A* C.
- I sat for **Jamb** examination.
- I wrote WAEC and **Neco**.
- I wrote my **weac** in....

(iv) Capitalization

Capitalization in the data, rather than to begin a proper noun, reverse is the case. It is used for verbs, adjectives and abstract nouns. Some of the instances observed in the data are listed below.

- I **L**ive in No 4 ... Musari street, Lagos.
- I have two siblings, a sister and a **B**rother.
- **A**m **D**ark in complexion.
- ... and future **A**mbition.
- I am a student of **e**kiti **s**tate **u**niversity.
- The name of my best friend is **j**ane.
- I am 4.9 **F**t **T**all.
- ... a student of EKSU **From** the Faculty of **arts** ... and **literary studies**.
- ... family of **mr** and **mrs** Arogundade in the year ...

(v) Concord

Concord is the agreement between the subject and verb in a string of words. But in our data, there are a lot of disagreements not only between subject and verb but also in number, gender and pronoun. These are indicated in the examples below.

- I do not have **a best friend** because **they** always end up....
- I **likes** listening to....
- My role **models are** my **parent**.
- My best hobby **is reading and singing**.
- I talk and **finds** it very easy.
- ... a day that **mark**.

(vi) Lexical

Lexical errors involved word selection and word formation. The data reveal that unnecessary space is created between compound words, such as 'my self'; introduction of hyphen in-between morpheme and base word as in 'dis-like'; addition and subtraction of suffixes, such as 'somethings' and 'migrate' respectively; wrongly joining two root words together as in 'bookwarmer'. Words are also erroneously selected in some of the sentences in the data. For

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instance, the use of 'black' for dark in describing complexion; 'why' for while, 'were' for where etc. Some of these instances are found below.

- I am dark ... and **out spoken**.
- We do **somethings** in common.
- I have no favourite meal but I **dis-like**....
- My greatest fear in **every thing** I do....
- Write a composition about **my self**.
- I grew up in ... and **migrate** to Ekiti state.
- I was **fortunated** to be among the chosen ones.
- Always call her joker and **bookwarme**r.
- Am **black** in complexion.
- I dislike pride and **dishonestly**.
- My name is X **why** the name of my friend is....
- Parker International School ... **were** I had my primary....
- ...playing video and **heard** games.
- 5 ft tall and a little bit **bursty**.

(vii) Spelling

Spelling errors are the most common errors in the essays of the students under study. Spelling errors takes 71 (18.07%) of the total instances of errors in the data. Spelling errors can also lead to miscommunication. For example, one of the respondents wanted to say that he hates stealing, replaces the spelling of 'stealing' with 'steeling', which means 'strengthening'. The spelling error has altered the intended meaning or purpose of communication. Some of the errors are demonstrated below.

- I detest lying, **steeling** and other bad behaviours.
- I detest lies and **hypocrates**.
- I am **studing** English and Literary Studies.
- ... is robust in **starture**.
- Am dark in **complextion**.
- I am a **choirester**.
- **Composision** about myself.
- I am light in **compeletion**.
- Basic **Grammer** and Usage
- I am a **stundet**....
- I am a good **chirstian**.

(viii) Syntactic errors

Syntactic errors include sentence structure and ordering. These two aspects of errors are also found in the data. The words that make up a sentence are misleading and they are not logically arranged. For example, one of them said that he was 'born on every special day'. This is misleading as no one is born twice let alone every special day. Some of the examples are shown below.

- Born on every special day, a day that mark an history....
- Born in a family of four excluding my parents.
- We have being friends from childhood.
- I am a native of Ekiti state.
- We walk hands in hands both in school and in the hostel.
- ... having two elder sister and third and last child in the family.
- Am a native of Ekiti State, Ijesa Isu Ekiti to be precised.
- I had my Primary and Nursery and later move to ...
- Also I loves cooking and travelling: my hobby.

(ix) Articles

Articles *the, a, an* are wrongly placed, added or absolutely omitted in the data. These are revealed in the instances below.

- I put in for Law at **the** Ekiti State University.
- I'm * female.
- Am * 100 Level student.
- I have **a** dark hair.
- I attend * Redeem Christian Church of God.
- Am of **a** average height.
- I am **a** O'Level holder.
- Attended school **at in** my early age.

(x) Parts of speech

(a) Pronouns

There is no agreement between the use of their pronouns, number and gender. This is evident in some of structures in the data as revealed in the instances below.

- I love Chelsea Club because of **their** uniqueness and outstanding players.
- I do not have a best friend because **they** always....
- Since * have gained admission into EKSU.
- My father is a farmer why my mother **she** is a teacher.
- * am a native of ....

(b) Verbs

The verb has generally been referred to as an action word in a sentence. An action could be in the past, present or future. Therefore, the type of a verb used in a sentence will determine the time the action takes place. Some of the verbs used in the data are not correct as we can see in the instances below.

- I was **regard has** most...
- I **study** English at EKSU.
- **Been** the only son.

- I **gain** admission to Secondary School.
- I **proceed** to **be** in SS1.
- 2011 I **stay** to help my parents.
- I was **fortunated** to be among the chosen ones.
- So I **process** Ekiti State University ... and now am in Ekiti State University.
- I **haill** from Orin Ekiti....
- My hobbies **is** reading and singing.

(c)   Adjectives

Some of the grammatical structures in the students' essays manifest inaccurate use of adjectives. It is either the adjectives are outrageous or ungrammatical. Examples in the data are shown below.

- She is **bursty**.
- I am the **most** best student.
- I love to be a **grammarian** educator.
- Always call her joker and **bookwarme**r.
- I love taking cold and **fizzy** drinks.
- The journey down from my childhood was **auspiciously awesome**.

(d)   Prepositions

Prepositions are said to account for the relationship that exists between words in a sentence. In the data, the wrong use of prepositions ended up in creating ungrammatical structures as we can see below.

- I am a lover **for** friends.
- My hostel is located **in** satellite phase 1.
- I am tall **in** $3^{1/2}$ feet.
- I am studying English Education **under** the faculty of Education.
- I was born **in** 24th of April, 2000.
- I decide to further **in** my education.

(e)   Nouns

In the data, some of the nouns used are confusing. Such as using singular nouns in place of plural nouns or using incorrect nouns. For example, using 'hubby' (husband) for hobby (pastime) in the statement 'My *hubby* is reading....' may be puzzling. Similar examples are listed below.

- I'm the first born of my **parent.**
- My **hubby** is reading....
- I have one **brother** and one **sister**.
- I am proud to be one of the **member** of **Kayode** family.
- ... had given lecture in many public **symposium**.

4. CONCLUSION

Findings in this study showed that the most frequent errors made by the students were spelling 71 (18.07%), lexical 51 (12.89%), punctuations 49 (12.47%), capitalization 48 (12.21%) and parts of speech 46 (11.70%). These are the major aspects of any essay writing, the violation of which would render the essay unintelligible. This performance of students studying English at the university level, who have gone through courses designed to teach essentials of grammar, such as English Language 1 and Communication in English in their first semester, leaves one wondering when exactly they would have the mastery of good expressions in English.

The most worrisome thing is the fact that after graduation, many of them will find themselves in a teaching job. What are they going to offer? Of course, you cannot give what you do not have. This is one of the causes of descent in education standard. Therefore, it is recommended that qualified English teachers should be engaged at the elementary level of education to start-up the teaching of English as this would guarantee a good foundation.

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