

A Study of Grammatical Errors in 200 Level University Students' Writings in North-Western Nigeria

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Abstract

Abusing grammar rules in the students' writing is becoming prominent among the undergraduates of tertiary institutions in recent years. This study is an attempt to analyse some grammatical errors in the writing of 200 level English students of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto and Federal University Gusau. The study adopts Corder's 1967 and 1974 Error Analysis in analysing 50 essays of students taken from their end of semester 2016/2017 examination answer booklets. The findings of the study reveal that the errors of the students in question can be grouped into ten categories which were found to be prevalent in their writings. The researchers' investigation also reveals that some of the courses taught to the students focus on theories which are not being put into practice. This approach affects students' mastery of grammar. The research suggests that, basic rudiments of grammar should be given priority at the undergraduate level so as to take care of this menace among students. This is because English students are prepared to serve as models to the general public after graduation especially in writing correspondences.

Keywords: analysis, grammar, error, students, university.

Introduction

Grammar according to Olaofe & Kasim (2013) is the "systematic structuring of words and sentences to convey meaning. It includes the way words are developed into phrases, clauses and sentences". It is obvious to state that, grammar plays an important role in the English language teaching and learning. Good users of every language are expected to be able to express themselves in both spoken and written language. Indeed, writing is thought of as a great challenge to some students and teachers as well. In their own part, many students view writing as a difficult task and this notion needs to be changed so as to handle the problems being faced in learning English language.

Scholars provide different definitions of concord in different domains. Concord, according to Abdulmumini (2017), is ‘a syntactic feature that establishes harmonious relationships between divergent grammatical elements in a sentence’. The roles and functions of English language in our day to day activities cannot be under estimated. This is because of the increasing usage by different communities especially in Africa where most of the countries are multilingual in nature. On the other hand, grammar, which forms the basis of constructing acceptable sentences in the language, has a significant role to play in this direction. Unfortunately, from the researchers’ observation, the sentences constructed by many English students in the selected North-Western Nigerian universities are full of grammatical errors.

Learning a language is not an easy task especially in second language contexts. According to Chukuegu (2004:87) ‘learning a second language is necessarily a difficult activity especially if the learners are not taught with an appropriate approach’. English language remains the language of instruction, with which the academic activities are carried out in Nigeria’s tertiary institutions. The roles English play in the life span of Nigerian students from the beginning to the end cannot be over emphasised. Against this background therefore, this study investigates the grammatical errors in students’ writings in two selected universities in the North-Western Nigeria. The universities are Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto (UDUS) and Federal University Gusau (FUGUS).

Review of Some Related Works on Grammatical Studies

Grammarians at different levels have carried out studies on the use of English language and the problems associated with it. This section of the paper reviews some of the studies carried out on grammatical errors. Mireku-Gyimah (2014) analyses final year students’ errors in English at the University of Mines and Technology, Ghana. The author detected frequency of errors in wrong register, wrong choice of words, awkward expressions, ambiguity, wrong concord, wrong punctuation and capitalisation etc. The research centers on final year students and the mode of her analysis was analytical. There is a gap left by this research because some aspects of grammar are not fully analysed and the research was also domiciled in only one university.

Ngadda & Nwoke’s (2014) study is an analytical study of errors in the written English of undergraduate Engineering Students of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi. The research reveals that there are errors of grammar, expression, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and the use of connectives in

students' writing. The major weakness of this research is that it deals with engineering students of a particular university. The current research deals with English students in two universities and is expected to be detailed and comprehensive for having insights from two different institutions. Bodunde & Sotiloye (2013) made a critique of undergraduate students' writing skills in an ESL setting drawing samples from the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Nigeria. The study compares the writing skill in English Language of eighty 100 level students and forty 500 level students of Agricultural College who were randomly selected for grammatical assessment. The research was carried out after both groups had gone through English and Communication Skills courses. The results show that students have problems with almost all aspects of grammar – tense, punctuation, spelling, concord, abbreviation, and preposition. The study also shows that at 100 level, tense and spelling errors were the most frequent while punctuation and tense errors were most prominent in 500 level scripts. Tense errors were common to both groups as a result of negative transfer from the first language (L1), though the environment in which they occurred differ. This research is also domiciled in a particular university and science students serve as the population of the study. This reason calls for the need of the current study.

Faezeh & Ali-Asghar (2013) conduct a research on gender-based analysis of Iranian EFL learners' types of written errors. The study is on 100 Iranian advanced EFL learners' written errors (50 male learners and 50 female learners), which presents different classifications and subdivisions of errors, through analysis. Their findings reveal significant differences between error frequencies of the two male and female groups. This research was conducted as a comparison between male and female students in Iran focusing on gender comparison. Theodore (2013) explains that second language acquisition is a developmental process, in which the learners are inevitably making errors which should be treated as an integral part of learning.

Amoakohene (2017) conducts an error analysis of first year students' essays using qualitative research design because the analysis was purely descriptive in nature. The research was on analysis and discussions of errors that were identified in the essays of first year students of the University of Health and Allied Sciences in Ho, Volta Region, Ghana. After carefully going through the 50 scripts that formed the data for the study, it was revealed that students were not able to significantly internalise the rules of the usage of the English language despite the fact that they

had gone through the Academic and Communicative Skills programme for two semesters. These errors really impeded easy comprehension of ideas that were advanced by students in their essays. The findings of the study reveal that nine types of errors, which can be grouped into three categories as identified in the students' essay. The research centers on freshmen students, which means they are not used to the university system.

Despite the number of works done on grammatical errors in students' writings, little was done to investigate errors in the writing of English students in universities in north-western Nigeria. Hence, this study seeks to fill this gap. It examines the grammatical errors in the end of semester examinations of 200 level English students of Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto and Federal University Gusau.

Pedagogical Implications of Error Analysis (EA)

EA has been defined by James (1998:1) as "the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language". According to Mahmoodzadeh (2012), EA could be defined as a procedure used to identify, categorise, and explain the errors committed by L2 learners. It is considered as the most appropriate tool for analysing learners' errors. Error analysis is an instrument used by the EFL teachers in order to find solutions to the problems that influence their learners. Brown (1994) states that Error analysis (EA) is important in classroom research at all levels. The systematic analysis of errors made by L2 learners makes determining areas which need reinforcement in teaching possible (Corder, 1974).

Language teaching cannot stand away from the findings of EA. Analysis of learners' errors have some positive effects on teaching-learning process. EA studies are carried out first, to identify strategies which learners use in language learning, second, to recognise the causes of learners' errors and third to obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teaching or in development of teaching materials (Richards *et al*, 1992). By analysing learners' errors, teachers can come to a better understanding of the problem areas for learners, and they can evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching techniques and materials as well. Therefore, using more efficient teaching techniques and strategies, they can focus on these problematic areas. EA can provide good information for syllabus designers and material developers. Considering students' difficulties and errors, syllabus designers can concentrate on these parts.

A pedagogical implication of error analysis to students is error correction and attitudes towards errors. Types and sources of errors determine the kind of feedback and treatment and also help teachers employ efficient teaching strategies when facing an error. Harmer (1998) suggested three steps to be followed by the teacher when errors occur: first listening to the student, then identifying the problem and third putting the error right in the most efficient way. Erdogan (2005) suggested that a hierarchy of errors should be established so that teachers can focus on the errors which may affect communication and cause misunderstanding. In a nutshell, efficient teaching techniques and strategies as well as proper material are needed to remove students' problems in learning. For this reason, problem areas must be examined and investigated carefully and clearly which shows that error analysis is relevant.

Yaghoubi (2009) is of the view that, not only teachers but also learners need some strategies to face the errors so that teachers can correct learners' errors properly and learners can trace their own errors and use proper strategies in the domain of error monitoring and error orientation. EA fills the gap between language learning and teaching, and contributes to learner-centered language pedagogy by making the teaching techniques closer to the learning strategies (Mahmoud, 2011).

Even though EA is considered as a tool used by the ESL teachers in order to find solutions to the problems that influence their learners, it has its own shortcomings. Jiang (2009, p. 118) reveals that "during the 1970s, EA was criticised in that it only presented a

partial picture of what a learner produces, namely, the errors." It has been criticised due to the following reasons:

- i) EA neglects correct sentences because it mainly focuses on sentences with errors. In other words, it was unable to see the full picture of the learners' language because it is extremely restricted to errors. To get the complete and right picture of the learner's competence, there is a need to make an investigation into non-errors as well. Therefore, it was not very successful by only looking at areas where L2 learners were competent (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Brown, 2000; Gass and Selinker, 2001).
- ii) When L2 learners face difficulty to use certain grammatical or syntactic structures, they try to avoid using such structures. Hence, these avoided

structures cannot be studied because the main focus of this approach is on errors (Schachter & Celce-Murcia, 1977)

Methodology

The data of the study were sourced from the first semester examination administered to the 200 level English students of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto and Federal University Gusau in the 2016/2017 academic session. The examination scripts made up of comprehension and essay questions. In order to carry out a proper analysis of data, the researchers used the subjects' data as examples of sentences.

Fifty students were randomly selected from the study population. Approximately, 200 sentences are collected from the examination scripts. The secret behind using students' examination scripts is to get the natural data. This is because if the students know that their scripts would be used for this purpose they may adjust their expressions and constructions. The researchers identified the errors, classified them and later corrections were made by the authors. There are about two hundred (200) errors made by the students and over 100 are on grammatical concord. The identified errors are counted based on their frequencies. The proportional stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure an equitable representation of the sample group members in order to avoid bias.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds Error Analysis of Corder (1967) as a relevant theoretical framework because it effectively deals with second language productivity especially in written aspects of English language which this research focuses on. Error analysis of Corder (1967) is carried out in three stages which include, collecting samples of language usages, identifying errors in the samples, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness. Similarly, Corder (1981) adapts the notion of Chomsky (1965), and explains 'errors' as 'Errors of Competence' which are the result of the application of the rules which do not tally to the target of standard language. It occurs when learners do not know the rules of target language adequately. Similarly, Corder (1974) suggests five procedures which include the selection of corpus of language, identification of the errors, the classification of the errors, the explanation of the errors and their evaluation. EA, therefore, serves as the guiding theoretical framework for this study as well as statistical analysis.

In the classification level, the errors are tabulated and classified into the following categories: concord, spelling, tense, capitalisation, preposition, tautology, ellipsis, determiner, number and auxiliary. Each error is identified by underlining in order to make it appear clear to the readers. Then, from this tabulation, the frequency of errors and the percentage for each category is calculated to see their distribution and severity. For each error, the correct version is provided by the researchers.

Data Presentation

Excerpts from Federal University Gusau

The table below captures some of the expressions found in the 200 level English students’ written essays of Federal University Gusau. The expressions used in the data analysis are extracted from the data through random sampling.

<u>The verb in idiom is often have</u> different meaning from its original meaning.
Most <u>plant</u>
It <u>serve</u>
<u>for</u> one to understand <u>the idiom</u> <u>need to know</u> the <u>culture of the language an idiom</u> came from.
<u>pharasal</u> verb is the <u>combinet</u> of verb and preposition.
<u>catch phrases</u> are the <u>phrases which has a context</u> meaning.
<u>the</u> meaning of what is said <u>it quite different with</u> special meaning.
<u>in</u> English language, most idioms are regarded as a chishes.
<u>idioms</u> sometimes <u>means</u> opposite of what you have said.
<u>pharasal</u> verb is the <u>combinet</u> of verb and preposition.
<u>catch phrases</u> are the <u>phrases which has a context</u> meaning.
<u>the</u> meaning of what is said <u>it quite different with</u> special meaning.
<u>in</u> English language, most idioms are regarded as a chishes.
<u>idioms</u> sometimes <u>means</u> opposite of what you have said.
<u>Many reaction</u>
For <u>stored</u> of indigested food where will be pass out
ATP generation, oxidation reaction convert...
When our body <u>gots</u> injured they play their role
Plasma synthesised and <u>sectret</u> them (antibody) to a specific antigen
This can be defined <u>when a body produces antibody</u> ...
Some of them you <u>can found</u> ...
Taxonomy is the science of classification of <u>organism</u> and goal of identifying <u>organism</u> and relationship among the organisms.

Table 1: FUG Excerpts Source: field work, 2017.

Excerpts from Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto

The table below captures some of the expressions found in the 200 level English students’ written essays of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto. The expressions used in the data analysis are extracted from the excerpt through random sampling.

Sociolinguistics is a very essential field because <u>it use</u> to determine language and society and their classes.
Spoken variety: is a situation in which language is <u>being use</u> and communicated verbally.
Written variety: this is where a written language is <u>being use</u> without communication to the hearer verbally.
A written variety <u>it has</u> the absence of speaker and listener.
Are <u>release</u> in ATP
Stomach is where food <u>can store</u>
Is the end point of protein digestion are amino acid
Organism <u>captuve</u> food
<u>spoken</u> language is more <u>clarified</u> in terms of human voice, inspiration and pattern.
<u>geographical</u> origin of a person can be deduced from the way <u>he/her</u> speakers.
<u>dialects</u> as a <u>socio linguistics</u> phenomenon deals with the <u>difference that arises</u> in the use of language due to regional differences.
<u>language</u> is defined as the non-instinctive <u>methods</u> of communicating symbols.
<u>in communication</u> there two main ways in which language is <u>been used</u> .

Table 2: UDUS Excerpts

Source: field work, 2017.

S/N	Error Type	Error Occurrence (UDUS)	%	Error Occurrence (FUGUS)	%
1	Concord	37	60.65	22	50
2	Spelling	7	11.47	4	9.09
3	Tense	3	4.92	5	11.36
4	Capitalisation	6	9.84	4	9.09
5	Preposition	3	4.92	3	6.81
6	Tautology	3	4.92	0	0
7	Ellipsis	1	1.64	2	4.54
8	Determiner	0	0	2	3.27

9	Number	1	1.64	1	2.27
10	Auxiliary	0	0	1	2.27
TOTAL		61		44	

Table 3: Frequency of Occurrence of Errors.

The above table shows that there are ten categories of errors commonly made by the 200 level English students in the two selected universities. The distribution of these errors is shown in table 3. The figure shows that the most prevalent error is concord with 60.65% and 50% for UDUS and FUGUS respectively. The data also shows that the occurrence of errors is committed more by the students of UDUS even though it is a first generation university while FUGUS is a third generation university. The researchers' target is not to discover which university students commit more errors than the other. Rather, to know the peculiar reasons behind committing such errors among students in the two institutions involved and offer possible recommendations that if adopted can go a long way in providing solutions to them.

The second place is errors on spelling with the occurrence of 11.47% and 9.09% in the first semester examination. Errors on tense occupy 4.92% and 11.36% of the errors tabulated. Meanwhile, errors on capitalisation are 9.84% and 9.09%. The fifth on the list is preposition with the occurrence of 4.92% and 6.81% respectively. It is followed by errors on tautology with 4.92% and 0%. Using the ellipsis has 1.64% and 4.54% for the two universities. While determiner occupies 0% and 4.54% of the errors for the two institutions surveyed. Number has the occurrence of 1.64% and 2.27% respectively. The item with the least error is auxiliary with 0% and 2.27% occurrence respectively.

Discussion and Interpretation

As shown in table 1 above, concord is the area where the students make a lot of errors. The frequency table shows 60.65% UDUS and 50% for FUGUS respectively. So, the margin is not too much as both schools commit no less than 50% of the errors. This clearly indicates that the students have problem with regards to grammar. This can also be as a result of the Nigerian languages in which the subject-verb agreement does not exist much. See the table below for some expressions extracted from the students' examination scripts with grammatical errors which are subjected to analysis:

Ungrammatical Expressions	Error Classification and corrections
1. Most <u>plant</u>	Grammar: Subject-verb concord. Most plants.
2. It <u>serve</u>	Grammar: Subject-verb concord It serves.
3. Many <u>reaction</u>	Grammar: Subject-verb concord Many reactions.
4. Stomach is where food <u>can store</u>	Grammar: incomplete statement. Stomach is where food can be stored.
5. Are <u>release</u> in ATP	Grammar: wrong tense Are released in ATP.
6. <u>spoken</u> language is more <u>clarified</u> in terms of human voice, inspiration and pattern	Grammar: wrong punctuation and spelling. Spoken language is more cleared in terms of human voice, inspiration and pattern.
7. <u>Is the end point of protein digestion are amino acid</u>	Grammar: reverse sentence. Amino acid is the end point of protein digestion
8. Organism <u>captuve</u> food	Wrong spelling and. Organism captures food.
9. ATP generation, oxidation reaction convert...	Grammar: omission of conjunction. ATP generation and oxidation reaction convert...
10. <u>Pharasal</u> verb is the <u>combinet</u> of verb and preposition	Grammar: wrong spellings. Phrasal verb is the combination of verb and preposition.
11. <u>in</u> English language, most idioms are regarded as a <u>chishes</u> .	Spelling mistake. In English language, most idioms are regarded as a clichés.
12. This can be defined <u>when a body produces antibody</u> ...	Grammar: wrong construction. This can be defined as a process of the body producing antibody...
13. Some of them you <u>can found</u> ...	Consider reversing the sentence. You can find some of them ...
14. Taxonomy is the science of classification of <u>organism</u> and goal	Grammar: wrong punctuation. Taxonomy is the science of classifying

of identifying <u>organism</u> and relationship among the organisms.	organisms, identifying their goals and the relationships that exist among the organisms.
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Table 4: Errors & corrections

Source: field work, 2017.

Looking at phrase 1 above, one notices the use of *most* which is plural and *plant* which is singular in form. This shows that there is abuse of subject verb concord. One may begin to wonder how a university English student can commit this type of error. The same category of error is repeated in sentence number 2, where the word *it* is used which is a singular subject together with *serve* which is plural. This creates confusion to the examiners. The students in question are not expected to be committing these types of errors considering their level and course of study.

In the third sentence, the writer made use of *many* which is plural together with *reaction* which is singular in form. This is not a typographical error because the writer is not aware of the noun forms used when a singular subject & verbs and object appear in one sentence. Sentence 4 contains an incomplete statement *stomach is where food can store*. The statement is vague which is against the rule of grammar. In sentence 5, the noun *release* is used in the place of *released*. The confusion arises as a result of poor knowledge of the right tense to be used and instead a noun is used. The student in question lacks knowledge on this important area of grammar.

Sentence 6 has wrong capitalisation and spelling: *spoken* and *clarified*. The correct ones are *Spoken* with initial caps because it appears at the beginning of the sentence. The second one is *cleared*. In sentence number 7, the writer wrongly positions some words in the sentence which renders it ungrammatical: *Is the end point of protein digestion are amino acid*.

In sentence number 8, wrong spelling of the word *captures* manifests. The writer spelt the word as *captuves* which is a wrong spelling. Correction has also been made in column 8 of the same table. Sentence 9 carries an omission of a coordinating conjunction *and* between *generation* and *oxidation* which serve as subjects in the sentence. Sentence 10 also has wrong spellings of *pharasal* and *combinet*. The correct spellings are *phrasal* and *combination*.

In sentence 11, there is a wrong spelling of *chishes*. The correct spelling is *clichés*. This reveals how English language is being handled by some university

students nowadays. Sentence 12 of the sentences under study is wrongly constructed. This manifests in the way the lexical items are placed: *This can be defined when a body produces antibody...* Correction has also been made on column 12 of the table above. The same error is repeated in sentence 13. The sentence is haphazardly written without due consideration of the positioning of the words that make up the sentence: *Some of them you can found.* The correct version is *Some of them can be found.*

If one looks at sentence 14, one sees an abuse of punctuation marks. The student in question fails to apply the correct punctuations: *Taxonomy is the science of classification of organism and goal of identifying organism and relationship among the organisms.* Elements of carelessness manifests due to lack of knowledge of grammar. According to Gyimah (2014), it is not only disgraceful for a university student to commit errors involving these basic types of concord, whose rules are so clear (with few exceptions) but it creates a bad impression about the personality of the speaker as Yankson (1994) and Owusu-Ansah (1997) have observed.

Lack of commitment is one of the factors that contributed to the gravity of the errors because some mistakes are not expected to be committed by 200 level English university students. This is clearly seen in the way they commit errors that even secondary school students are not expected to commit. This also shows that English faces the risk of being misunderstood by the potential teachers and readers who are now in the university as students.

Findings

The research work identifies grammatical errors in the 200 level English students writing, and the errors are described based on the theoretical framework of Corder (1974). The major discoveries of the study include the following:

1. Subject-verb disagreement (concord) is the major problem in the students' writings.
2. The students' writings are also full of errors of spelling, capitalisation, prepositions and tautology.
3. The English word-order parameter is also violated by the students in question. This renders their writing as uninteresting and careless.
4. The students also do not even know that they are committing errors talk less of knowing how to correct them.

Conclusion

The research reveals that there are ten major categories of grammatical errors committed by the 200 level English students of selected Nigerian universities in their semester examination—concord (60.65% and 50%) for UDUS and FUGUS respectively. The other errors are spelling (11.47% and 9.09%); tense (4.92% and 11.36%); capitalisation (9.84% and 9.09%); preposition (4.92% and 6.81%); tautology (4.92% and 0%); ellipsis (1.64% and 4.54%); determiner (0% and 4.54%); Number (1.64% and 2.27%); and auxiliary (0% and 2.27%). The study equally shows that the grammar is being abused and the students do not even bother about the errors that they commit. The article suggests that priority should be given to the teaching of grammar courses to the students in place of those focusing on history at the undergraduate level which is the practice in most of Nigerian universities. The students on the other hand should change their attitude by redoubling their efforts in learning the language as future teachers who will serve as models to the general public especially in writing correspondences.

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