RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE RURAL MADURAI UNDERGRADUATES' ENGLISH WRITINGS: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Learning to write is a complex process yet a pre-requisite for a personal and professional achievement. The ability requires continued practice and informed guidance. To a rural learner proficiency in English language is often a nightmare or an unconquered dream. The present paper analysis the written productions of the rural Madurai tertiary learner administering free composition as a testing tool to find the learners' written competence in English. The samples are selected from the rural Madurai students irrespective of the geographical locale and interpreted. The paper concludes with suggestion for pedagogical implementation.

Keywords: communicative competence, error analysis, source of errors

INTRODUCTION

English and English Language teaching seems ubiquitous in the world, playing a role everywhere from large-scale global politics to the intricacies of people's lives (Pennycook, 1994: 5). Macaulay's recommendation of 1835 brought English education to India soil to create a band of clerks, "who may be interpreters between us and the millions who we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions and morals and intellect…" (Kachru, 1983: 22). But today the language enjoys a special place in India it is more than a second language and "in independent India, the continued use of English and the preference for the democratic form of Government have now become part of the national consciousness" (Sheorey, 2002: 13). Though, English language in India has more the two century association, English teaching is a 'tragic tale' and the written productions remain unsatisfactory.

Language competency enables the user to achieve target and receive expected response from the listener. Habermas observes (1979)

"Communicative competence involves communicating in accordance with that fundamental system of rules that adult subjects master to the extent that they can fulfill the conditions for a happy employment of sentences in utterances". Of the four language skills, writing is an "intricate" and complex task; it is the "most difficult of the language abilities to acquire" (Allen & Corder, 1974: 177). In spoken conversations negotiation of meaning is possible. Written communication provides little possibility for negotiating meaning of written words and the problems of misunderstandings are exacerbated. Even the native speakers are no exception. The focus of this paper is on the written part.

Theoretical background

Error analysis, as an application of linguistics, has pedagogical relevance to the study of second language learning. It focuses on the errors learners make and consists of a comparison between the errors made in the Target Language (TL) and that TL itself. Researchers such as Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) claimed that by analyzing

contrasts between native and target language, the grey areas might be identified. Further, Lado claimed that learners tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language to the target language (2). Corder (1967) observed that learner's error provide a window into the learner's linguistic knowledge. Systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching (Corder, 1974).

Model for Error Analysis

Corder's (1967 & 1974) model of error analysis included Data collection: Recognition of idiosyncrasy; Description: Accounting for idiosyncratic dialect; and Explanation, the ultimate object of error analysis. Brown (1994: 207-211) and Ellis (1995: 51-52) elaborated on this model. Ellis (1997: 15-20) and Hubbard et al. (1996: 135-141) gave practical advice and provided clear examples of how to identify and analyze learners' errors. The initial step requires the selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors. The errors are then classified and after giving a grammatical analysis of each error an explanation of different types of errors are demanded. The present investigation has adopted the model proposed by Gass & Selinker (1994: 67) which identifies six steps to be followed in conducting an error analysis: Collecting data, Identifying errors, Classifying errors, Quantifying errors, Analyzing source of error, and Remediating for errors. The errors in written productions are categorized based on Ferries' description of major error categories (2005: 92). According to James (1998: 95), an error analysis model should be "well developed, highly elaborated, and self explanatory" and Ferries model perhaps fulfills these requirements. The present study decided to ignore putative errors since the learners struggle even with the fundamentals of English language, and a focus on the stylistic features would be too much to ask for.

Sources of Errors

Though the researchers have identified various potential sources for the errors, there is no uniformity in the finding. However one can certainly establish common features in the findings. Selinker (in Richards, 1974: 37) reported five sources of errors: Language transfer; Transfer of training; Strategies of second language learning; Strategies of second language communication; and Overgeneralization of TL linguistic material. Corder's (in Allen & Corder, p. 130) classification of errors echoes the previous mentioned: Language Transfer, Overgeneralization or analogy, & Methods or Materials used in the Teaching (teaching-induced error). Richards and Simpson (1974) exposed seven sources of errors: Language transfer; Intralingual interference; Sociolinguistic situation; Modality; Age; Successions of approximative systems; and Universal hierarchy of difficulty; this factor has received little attention in the literature of L2 acquisition. James (1998: 178) exposed three main diagnosis-based categories of error: Interlingual; Intralingual; and Induced errors. According to Dulay & Burt (1974), there are four types of "goofs": Interference-like goofs; L1 Developmental goofs; Ambiguous goofs (either interference-like or L1 developmental goofs); and Unique goofs (neither interference-like nor L1 developmental goofs). All these sources may be classified as: Interlingual; Intralingual; Context of Learning; Communication Strategies (Brown, 1987: 178-180).

STUDY AREA

Higher education in India is a three year course after the successful completion of twelve years school education. A tertiary student possess at least nine years of exposure to English language before taking up the undergraduate course at tertiary level. In a state like Tamilnadu, which include Madurai, the study area, offers English language education from third standard but often English writings from this area attract the unsympathetic remark 'unsatisfactory'. The present study is to investigate why the undergraduate students from rural Madurai colleges, Tamilnadu, south India, for whom English is the second language, continue to produce several errors in their written production. What are the frequent errors the learners commit and the main reasons behind their error prone writings? The sample population consist data from six arts and science colleges from Madurai irrespective of its geographical locale. The figure.1 shows the location of the study area.
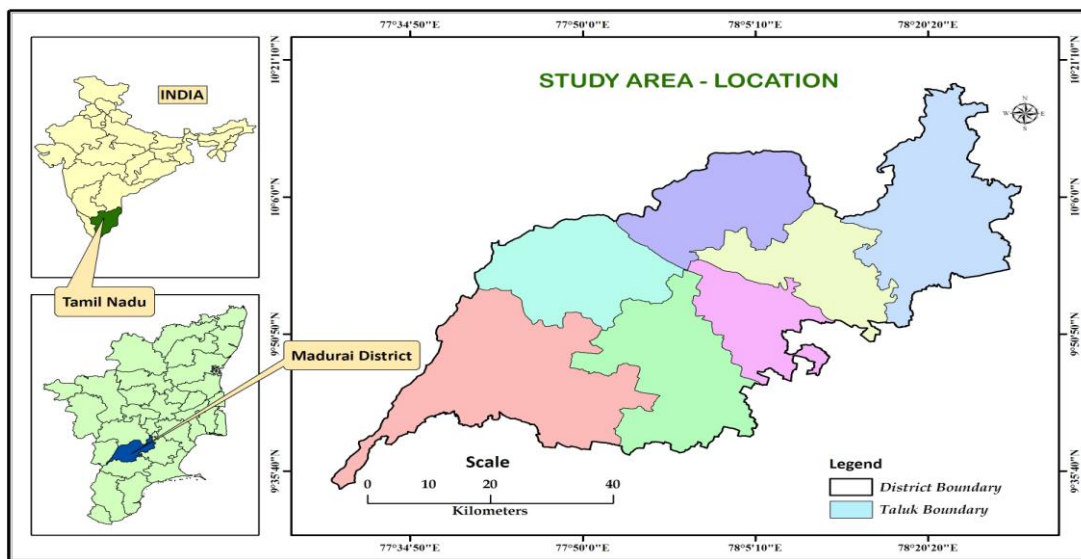
Figure 1

Investigation method

Data Collection: A sample of 165 English writings collected for investigation following the guidelines offered by Ellis (1995: 51-52) from six select colleges from Madurai district, irrespective of geographical locale. The respondents were doing the undergratuation course in the colleges. The learners possessed at least nine years of exposure to English language. Free composition as a tool was administered on the learners. The profile of the learners reveals that they share Tamil as the common language and are from homogenous socio-economic background. These students were provided with the topic *'A Memorable Day'* and were asked to write on it in 250- 300 words. They were given sufficient time to write (Ellis 1997: 114).

Error Identification & Classification:

Compiling a corpus is the initial but essential task for embarking on investigation of error analysis. Based on the literature (Corder, 1974; Richards, 1974; James, 1998; Selinker, 1972 in Richards, 1974; Richards & Sampson, 1974), a taxonomy for error analysis is prepared on grammatical**,** syntactic**,** lexical, and orthographical errors. The errors were explained in grammatical terms, and thoroughly examined to find error sources and principal areas of learners' weakness in English writings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

An analysis of the corpus of language shows that the learners produced 3192 errors in their free compositions. Based on the errors the researcher has formed an error taxonomy for analysis including the following categories and sub-categories: **grammatical** (prepositions, articles, reported speech, singular/plural, adjectives, relative clauses, irregular verbs, tenses, and possessive case)**, syntactic** (coordination, sentence structure, nouns and pronouns, and word order)**, lexical** (word choice)**,** and **orthographical** (spelling). The figure.2 illustrates the number of errors committed by the learners and the category.
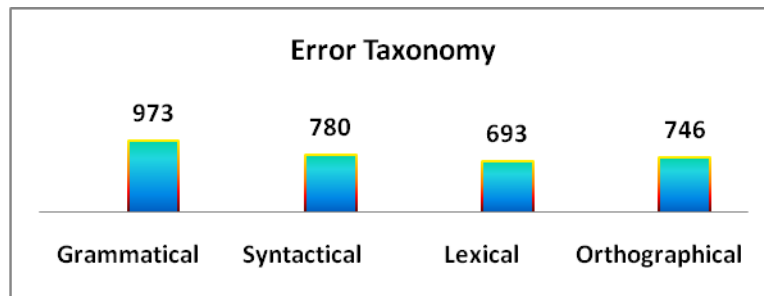
Figure 2

Grammatical Errors: English is subject prominent language in which the grammatical units of subject and predicate are basic to the structure of sentences. Failure to understand this unique feature results ESL learners commit errors in English writing. An examination of the present corpus of error brings various grammatical deviations. The followings are a few examples from the respondents' scripts.

1) I will *must* the examination. (Erroneous use of Modals)
2) We *were* celebrated Diwali. (Redundant use of an Auxiliary)
3) I was discussing *about* Diwali. (Misuse of verb transitivity)
4) In Pongal we *wore* new dress. (Use of past tense in place of present tense)
5) My friend *breaked* the window. (Over regularization of irregular verbs)

Syntactical Errors: Syntax in English refers to the unique pattern in which the words are organized in sentences to make meaningful sentences. Researchers have reported that the ESL learners experience difficulty in specific features of English structures, especially when the syntactic conventions of English differ from their first language. In English syntax the word order plays a vital role and it is more distinct and rigid than many other languages. Word order is usually used to distinguish subject from object, nouns from verbs, adjectives from nouns, and so on. ESL learners change the word orders in a sentence due to ignorance or L_1 interference and the meaning of the sentence is changed.

1. I was submitted project
2. A memorable day in my life was visited the place Agra in Delhi.
3. We have very much enjoying the party.
4. It is the real heroism what they did.

5. He met a accident.

Lexical Errors

In the educational domain, the strong bond between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension has been identified and it has led to the conclusion that lexical development is also crucially implicated in academic success. A study of errors in lexis showed that mother tongue influence and internal confusion within the target language system were the two primary sources of these deviant structures. Based on these findings, errors which were caused by the learners attempted to carry over the linguistic structures of mother tongue to the target language, they committed errors in their written productions. And 'intralingual' errors were those which resulted from the learners' internal confusion with the statures of the language. Such errors were also caused by the learners' inadequate control of the target language. The present corpus has a lot of such errors.

1. All my friends are *sweet personalities* (kind and affectionate).
2. We both *spoke about* the cultures of the two countries (discuss).
3. He *told* another surprise (sprang).
4. He was a *fearful* man (timid).
5. It *increases* the uneducated people (breeds).

Orthographical Errors: The term 'orthography' here refers to spelling and "orthographic errors" refer to those words which are marked as spelling errors. Spelling and handwriting are the "production" skills of written language. The poor spelling is a handicap to the students and puts them far behind their peers. Generally, students with a good command of spelling move ahead. According to Allcock (2002: 6), spelling is critical for the three important reasons; 1. Skill with written language is critical in our information-based society; 2. Many assessment

procedures in primary, secondary and tertiary education rely on students' written language skills; and 3. Although spelling proficiency is not synonymous with verbal ability or intelligence, it may influence how ability is measured. The presence of even a few orthographical errors may have an adverse bearing on the writings. Croft (1983: 8) stresses the need for correct spelling: "the only possible justification for learning to spell is that accurate spelling is necessary for effective writing". The learners from Madurai districts have produced orthographical errors in the followings;

1. They gifted me *sweats* (sweet). – use of incorrect vowels
2. We were *comming (*coming).- consonants confusion
3. He *recieved* the letter (rec**ei**ved). - transposition of two letters
4. After a *brake* (break) it all started.- Homonyms confusions
5. They consulted a *sychologist* (Psychologist).- spelling based on pronunciation

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the present study report that the learners form Madurai districts produced more number of grammatical errors. The total number of grammatical incompleteness count to a total of 973 errors. The errors are mostly the result of applying mother tongue rules to English language structures. Learners' ignorance to understand that in English, verbs is the vital part. Learners need to be taught more on the grammatical part with basic focus on communicative aspects. Classroom language practices are a possible suggestion for solving the grammatical errors. The learners produced 780 syntactical errors. Such errors are the result of learners' application of mother tongue interference. Learner tries the mother tongue convention on English leads to produce wrong syntactical structures. The corpus reveals that the lexical error is the fourth major problem for the learners, next to grammatical and syntactical. A total of 693 lexical errors were found in corpus. Among the various lexical error categories identified in the studies, it is observed that the learners have committed errors due to semantic similarities, followed by errors of lexical mis-selection and overgeneralization. If the learners are provided with

clear-out in structural input with an emphasis on the usage and practice, it will help them reduce the errors. Orthographical errors were the third major difficult found in the writings. Learners committed 746 errors. Learner's failure to understand that English language has more letter alternatives to a sound than sound alternatives to a letter influence them to produce incorrect spellings. Avoidance of orthographical error is possible by knowledge of sound-letter correspondences and the storage of a large amount of word specific and morphological information regarding the actual spellings of words (Perfetti cited in Alcock, 2000, p.22).

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