A Study of Lexical Errors in ODL Students' Writing

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of an investigation of lexical errors in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students' writing at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The study made use of tagged sample essays to find out the frequency and types of lexical errors in different registers of guided writing administered to randomly selected 300 and 400 level students undergoing the BA English programme in the university. These categories of students were selected because the university regulation stipulates that all their examinations have to be manually written. The findings of the study reveal that ODL students in the BA English programme in NOUN committed lexical choice errors more than lexical form errors. Lexical choice includes individual and combined choice of lexical items. Lexical form involves derivational errors and spelling errors. There are broadly two kinds of errors including interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Transfer errors mean a failure to keep a conceptual separation between L1 and L2. They represent interlingual errors. Transfer errors are different for each L1-L2 pair, while intralingual errors are the result of inadequate knowledge of the second language. The study postulates that simplification and overgeneralization errors might be made by any language learner based on low L2 proficiency. It then concludes that lexical errors are a natural and a necessary phenomenon in language teaching and learning and they benefit learners immensely, especially as they will try to avoid committing such errors in subsequent writings. Indeed, teachers/facilitators should not prevent students from making errors but should always find ways to identify and correct them in the ODL classroom.

Keywords: Lexical Errors, Simplification and Overgeneralization errors, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), L1-L2 Proficiency, Language Teaching.

Introduction

There are over 100 universities in Nigeria with more than 5.000.000 students enrolled in these universities. Of these students, more than 500,000 are registered in the National Open University of Nigeria which is the largest of the universities that provide distance education in the country.

Open and Distance Learning is the combination of on-line learning (E-learning) and other distance education delivery methods. It is the introduction, utilisation and application of ICT to enhance Open and Distance education thus implementing open and distance learning policies in order to

make learning activities more flexible and enable these learning activities to be distributed among many learning venues. It is an amalgam of two approaches to different forms of education that focus on expanding access to learning. It is a sort of blended and distributed learning, which incorporate elements of tutor mediated and self-directed and resource-based learning process.

The pedagogical shifts from face-to-face traditional way of teaching or even the traditional distance education (called correspondence education) to on-line education is what Open and Distance Learning is all about. It represents significant changes in the assumptions on which teachers, learners and support staff go about their business and to the technological infrastructure and skill base that support the moves.

According to Reju (2007), this type of education is characterised by two factors: its PHILOSOPHY and its use of TECHNOLOGY. The Open and Distance Learning Philosophy aims at removing barriers to education allowing students to study what they want, when they want and where they want. In summing up the Open and Distance Learning Philosophy, it aims at increasing educational ACCESS and increasing educational CHOICE of students.

English is the main emphasis - as regards the language used for writing the course materials used by the students of NOUN. As a programme of study being run in NOUN, the B.A English course is often tested in examinations (at the 300 and 400 levels) using the 'Pen-on-Paper' technique. For the first two years of the programme, the method of examination testing is the E-exam platform. Students therefore have to prepare to write essay answers at the 300 and 400 levels of the programme. Our experiences of marking students answer scripts show that the students concentrate on memorizing information contained in their course materials for purposes of reproducing same in the written examination. Their answers therefore tend to display an average knowledge of textbook content while lacking imagination, creativity or good communication skills. In the case of English acquisition, many of the students regard the language as a compulsory subject rather than as a communication tool and lack motivation in learning it well. Their instrumental motivation of learning English as an examination subject together with their rote-learning strategy, tend to decrease their willingness to explore and use English outside the ODL classroom where such exist.

Motivational Factors in language learning

Motivation in language learning has always correlated highly with success in language learning. Conversely, serious difficulties in language learning affect motivation adversely. A distinction commonly made is between intrinsic and instrumental motivation. 'Intrinsic motivation' means a desire to learn the language while 'instrumental motivation' refers to more practical reasons for language learning like getting a job or passing an examination (Richards 1998). 'Strategies associated with instrumental motivation [focus on] achieving a goal and on the literal aspects of a task and requirements of the syllabus' (p.307). Some studies have found that it is intrinsic motivation which correlates highest with success in language learning. Lin and Detaramani (1998) showed that the lower the intrinsic motivation, the more there was a feeling of being forced to learn, the lower was English attainment. Besides motivational factors, other factors that may affect language learning including consecutive trial and error learning. It has been observed in many research studies that children's acquisition of the first language is easy and almost effortless but they always find problems and make mistakes when learning a second language.

Based on the experience of learning the first language, it is always beneficial to analyze the influence of the first language on the second language acquisition, which may ultimately facilitate the teaching and learning processes. As stated by Corder (1981), 'efficient language teaching must work with, rather than against, natural processes, facilitate and expedite rather than impede learning' (p.77).

In fact, 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 (Dulay, 1982; Gorbet, 1979). Coder (1981) even believes that learners' errors should be categorized and analyzed, and the psychological process of how learners commit such errors should be studied. Error analysis therefore plays an indispensable role in understanding second language acquisition. It is therefore necessary for teachers to understand and try to explain why learners are making errors (Allen & Corder, 1975).

Among various language skills, efficient retrieval of vocabulary is of vital importance in timed writing examinations. Therefore, this study is mainly concerned with analyzing lexical errors occurring in the written samples of ODL students' examination answers in the NOUN, and aims at throwing a spotlight on both the theoretical development and practical teaching methodology in the area of error analysis.

Literature Review

It is very useful for a student to master the specific features of the English lexical system when learning English as a second language. Two main categories can be found in the lexical characteristics of English. They are the lexical form and lexical meaning (Robinett 1978, p. 113-127). This study will be based on these two lexical characteristics to investigate the lexical error in ODL students' essay answers in the 300 and 400 level B.A. English examinations in NOUN.

Studies of Second Language Acquisition

Two levels of second language behaviour for the students should be trained: firstly, to be able to write grammatical sentence with confidence, and secondly, to be able to express their own meaning in the writing (Rivers 1972, p.13-17). The lexicon is the major meaning-carrying element in language so that its acquisition is an integral part of learning a second language

Lexical learning is an on-going process (McNeill 1990, p. 141). Lexicon acquisition is also a "mental discipline with memorization of vocabulary lists" (Robinett, 1978; p.162) under traditional teaching method. Both first and second language learning attach great importance of vocabulary leaning for a number years within the language teaching program. The format of the mental lexicon is different from L1 to L2. From the relative stability of responses to word association is indicated in monolinguals, but it is not found in L2 learners. Meanwhile, the second language mental lexicon is only different from the first language lexicon as the former has a far smaller amount of words and "does not (yet) need the sophisticated storage and retrieval faculty of the L1 mental lexicon" (McNeill 1990, p. 143).

According to Ellis and Tomlinson (1980), second language lexicon acquisition is related to the students' ability to recognise vocabulary. Active and passive vocabularies come from different levels of recognising the lexicon. On one hand, learners' passive vocabulary includes the total

number of lexical items that they can understand correctly. A new lexical item seldom accumulated straightly into the learners' passive vocabulary, but it usually passes a transition stage of partial understanding. Students increase their understanding for a new word when they read the word more often. On the other hand, students' active vocabulary consists of the total number of lexical items that they can accurately use in speech and writing. McNeill (1990) also agreed that the "receptive control" of words recognizing a word gained by students is earlier than the "active control" of the vocabulary items being able to use the word (McNeill 1990, p.142). Therefore, many lexical items never come to the part of the productive capacity and left in the part of receptive competence. However, both the receptive and productive lexical items do not include specialized vocabularies which are used for a particular job or profession.

Learners are encouraged to learn together with the job or profession itself. For example, English for Special Purpose (ESP) or Scientific and Technical English (STE) are connected to the specialised lexical items with various professional or technical fields (Robinett 1978, p. 132).

Second language acquisition also involves many interrelated factors. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) identify four broad features of the environment which may affect not only the rate but also the quality of second language acquisition. They are the naturalness of language, the learner's role in communication, the availability of concrete referents to clarify meaning, and the target language models.

Whether a language environment is natural depends on where the focus of communication is. If the speaker's focus is on the content of the message communicated, the language environment is natural. Studies show that second language learners in a natural language environment where the focus is on communication achieve overall better results than those who study in a formal environment where the focus is on acquiring linguistic rules. Bernard Spolsky (1989) claims that second language learner needs opportunities to 'match his own knowledge with that of native speakers' (p.169). An ideal situation for learning a second language is therefore a total immersion situation or a real-life situation (Hall, 1973).

Concepts of Error

Mistakes versus Errors

All students make mistakes, even when they are using their mother tongue. Ellis and Tomlinson (1980, p. 259) defined an error as "when a language learner unconsciously breaks the unwritten rules of the target language as a result of faulty learning, he/she makes an error." Our experiences in teaching ODL students have shown that the reason why the ODL students commit errors is habitual and systematic. Most of them are affected by peers, the mass media and a personal unwillingness to regularly communicate in correct, intelligible and functional English within and outside the classroom environment.

The classification between errors and mistakes is hardly identified. Ellis and Tomlinson (1980, p. 259) postulate thus, "if students often use a lexical item correctly but get it wrong once, it is obviously a mistake. On the other hand, when the students use the same vocabulary wrongly (regularly) then they are almost certainly making errors". However, in the present study, mistakes and errors would not be differentiated. In other words, all mistakes will be counted as errors. Although in everyday life the term "mistake" and "error" may sometimes be used interchangeably

especially when they are referring to the same language phenomenon. But then, there are differences in meaning between the two terminologies. While a mistake can be self-corrected and thus not a consistent language phenomenon in learner performance, error is necessarily a more persistent and consistent phenomenon in L2 performance since the occurrence of errors accompanies his development of L2 proficiency. The more proficient he is, the less frequent the errors he will make. However, the frequency of mistakes and errors any L2 learner will make as his L2 proficiency improves is hardly predictable. Error is of utmost importance among the marking for students' writing.

Teachers are intent to begin their markings with error (Harris 1997; Kline 1996; Greenbaum et al, 1981 & Bamberg, 1981). Their holistic impressions and judgments of students' compositions always connected to the errors. They usually remain more spaces for marking and correcting the errors. Meanwhile, teachers focus on the surface errors in the writing of students. Haswell (1988, p.479-494) has defined eight surface errors, such as:

* Misinformation of possessives: mistakenly add or does not add an apostrophe after nouns or pronouns

* Faulty predication: when main verb(s) do not agree in number with the subjects

* Fault pronoun reference: when the pronoun and references its immediate antecedent does not agree in the number or gender

* Faulty syntactic parallelism: when different grammatical classes, for   example   noun   and adjective are put together

* Mispunctuation of final free modifiers: when final modifiers are preceded by no punctuation, a semicolon, or a full stop

* Sentence fragments: when grammatically dependent fragments are punctuated as a complete sentence

* Common splices: when two dependent clauses are linked only by a comma or by no punctuation

* Misspellings: spelling errors

According to Connors and Lunsford (1988, p.400-401), there are more than forty items of "formal errors" and "mechanical errors" that can be identified in students' writing. All the formal error items are divided into a more detailed one when comparing with the "eight surface errors". This however, depends on relatively more error patterns and the patterns of how the teacher marks the errors. Two factors determine how language teachers mark errors: "how serious or annoying the error is perceived to be at a given time for both teacher and student, and how difficult it is to mark or explain." Interestingly, many language teachers do not necessarily mark every single error in students' written work.

Many teachers and researchers treat errors as the most important factor in language learning, since they believe that error reduction leads to improvement (Bright and McGregor 1970, p.130; Broughton et al p.133-138 and Haswell 1988, p. 480-481). After teachers mark the error, their

students correct it. From this trial-and-error experience, the more error they made, the more they would learn.

Category of Errors Investigated

Engber (1995, p.145-146) asserts that lexical errors are more likely to be investigated because of lexical item acquisition which implies that the learners understand both its meaning and form. This study is based on the lexical errors applied in Engber's research, including lexical choices and forms. Lexical choice includes individual and combined forms of lexical items error. Individual lexical items error mean single lexical item were selected wrongly, that is semantically unrelated or closed. Errors concerning combined lexical items also represent multiple lexical items. Those that included two or more lexical items and phrases were selected. Lexical forms involve derivational and spelling errors. Derivational errors are caused by incorrect lexical form between different word classes. Therefore, spelling errors include words which may not be phonetically related, semantically irrelevant, and terribly distorted in the written work presented for assessment.

Methodology

This study adopts a corpus-based approach and investigates the frequency and classification of lexical errors in groups of ODL ESL students in the National Open University of Nigeria. Corpus-based approach looks at spoken or written data found in everyday life (Biber, Conrad and Reppen, 1998). It aims at enhancing our understanding of second-language acquisition, collecting data for the other perspectives on lexical errors, such as interlanguage and non-standard target lexis.

Subjects

The subjects for this study were randomly selected 300 and 400 level students undergoing the BA English programme in the university. These categories of students were selected because the university regulation stipulates that all their examinations must be manually written.

Twenty students from the Abuja Model Study Centre in Abuja (FCT) were selected as the focus group for the study. No emphasis was placed on gender.

Data Collection

The data for investigating the lexical errors were the examination answer scripts for the ENG 314 (Public Speaking) and ENG 411 (English for Specific Purposes) 2018 first semester examinations conducted by the university. We assume that the students were highly motivated to write and submit good answers having prepared for the examinations.

Data Analysis

For the sample essay analysis, this study focused on the investigation of students' writing in examination conditions, comparing lexical errors in the essay answers written by students who come from two groups. Five subjects in one group with high proficiency in English, and the other group of five subjects with lower proficiency. They were all categorized based on the various

marks they scored in the examination. The study also focused on four types of lexical errors. With reference to Engber (1995, p.146), lexical errors are divided into two main categories: lexical choice and lexical form. Lexical choice includes individual and combined lexical items, while Lexical form involves derivational errors and spelling errors.

Results

Findings of Lexical Errors

The sum of lexical errors was determined by counting errors in each sample composition presented in the students' answers and adding all the errors together. Distribution of different lexical errors is plotted as a circle chart in the findings. Besides, the percentage of lexical error (%LE) is defined as the ratio of the total numbers of lexical error per sample essays to the sum of words per sample essays written by the same subject (Engber, 1995, p.147).

Considering the prediction for the findings, we observed that the majority of lexical error will be the errors of choice because it is more complex than the errors of lexical form. Meanwhile, this error is difficult to avoid, even with the aid of dictionaries, because it is concerned with the students' own knowledge of lexical items. When suitable lexical items cannot be thought of, the students would be unable to find suitable ones, even with the aid of dictionaries.

Table 1 provides the lexical error counts and percentage per student. Overall, it is obvious from Table 1 that the group of subjects with high proficiency in English and high scores in the examination committed far fewer lexical errors than the other group with lower proficiency in English and subsequent low scores in the examinations. Moreover, we also observed that the total lexical errors decreased nearly by half in percentage for the group of subjects with high proficiency in English. The total error deduction in finding is close to the prediction for total error counts from the two groups.

If we compare the mean of percentage for the total lexical errors found, we observed a slightly more complex pattern in the group of subjects with high proficiency in English. There is a relatively wide range of values in percentage for the total lexical errors from 1.34% to 3.81% among these subjects with high proficiency in English. The percentage of total lexical errors remained at around 4% for the group of subjects with lower proficiency in English.

However, from the comparison of different lexical error types, we found only one count difference between the two groups for the mean of derivational error counts. On the other hand, the mean, percentage of the individual lexical item error, combined lexical error and spelling error reveal the persistence of making more errors by the group of subjects with lower proficiency in English.

Table 1 Lexical Error Counts and Percentage

Group	Subject	Total number of	Total lexical	Individual lexical items errors	Combined lexical items errors	Derivational errors	Spelling errors

		words	errors				
High	1	1494	35 (2.34)	10 (28.57)	10 (28.57)	7 (20.00)	8 (22.86)
Proficiency in	2	2094	28 (1.34)	10 (35.71)	9 (32.14)	7 (25.00)	2 (7.14)
	3	1525	31 (2.03)	12 (38.71)	8 (25.81)	8 (25.81)	3 (9.68)
English	4	1471	56 (3.81)	12 (21.43)	13 (23.21)	17 (30.36)	14 (25.00)
	5	1662	26 (1.56)	5 (19.23)	6 (23.08)	5 (19.23)	10 (38.46)
Mean		1649	35 (2.13)	10 (27.84)	9 (26.14)	9 (25.00)	7 (21.02)
Lower	6	1070	51 (4.77)	18 (35.29)	20 (39.22)	5 (9.80)	8 (15.69)
Proficiency in	7	885	41 (4.63)	18 (43.90)	7 (17.07)	8 (19.51)	8 (19.51)
	8	1255	55 (4.38)	18 (32.73)	19 (34.55)	8 (14.55)	10 (18.18)
English	9	1392	65 (4.67)	16 (24.62)	27 (41.54)	9 (13.85)	13 (20.00)
	10	1426	58 (4.07)	12 (20.69)	12 (20.69)	18 (31.03)	16 (27.59)
Mean		1206	54 (4.48)	16 (30.37)	17 (31.48)	10 (17.78)	11 (20.37)

Numbers in brackets ( ) are the lexical error percentage and the others are the counts.

Findings of Lexical Errors across Registers

Six different registers were collected from the two groups of subjects. Sample essay answers that required the students to discuss an issue, analyze or explain a concept, or even define and argue about a topic. The percentage of total lexical errors found exceeds 3% among the three registers. This obviously indicates a relatively high lexical error rate. These findings are similar to the prediction. The reason may be that the subjects did not get sufficient time to proof read their answers before submitting them. On the other hand, the percentages of total lexical errors decrease to around 2% for both the discursive and descriptive essay answers. The subjects may have found these questions easy to tackle during the examination.

Errors are certainly of value and are important to the learning process. Thus, teachers should feel delighted that students make errors of different types. This is because errors are the evidence of the learners' creativity. Secondly, they also present evidence for teachers to identify the progress of learners. Meanwhile, the learners' problem-solving skills are activated through the errors they sometimes make. Errors are therefore, valuable information for teachers to select which kinds of teaching materials and techniques are useful for their learners.

Spelling Errors (SPE)

These categories of errors were found a great deal in the essay answers of many of the students. The spelling of English words is difficult as the ability to spell is systematically developed across the years, and this happens only after a number of different kinds of encounters with words. There are four stages of encounters. Firstly, the pronunciation of words, that is, phonological encounters. Secondly, visual encounters the looks of words on paper. Thirdly, kinesthetic encounters which represent the feel of words as the hand moves to form them in writing. Finally, semantic encounters which indicate the meanings of words as they take their places in the contexts of sentences (Shaughnessy 1977, p.161). Therefore, students commit spelling errors easily. Besides, spelling errors are also caused when the pronunciation of words are not helpful to its spelling (Greenbaum & Nelson 2002, p. 246). Even if a speaker were to speak English in such a way as to voice every vowel and consonant and then to transcribe every sound with a letter that represented that sound, not only would his speech be tediously exact but he would still have problems with spelling, because of the unpredictability within orthographic system itself.

In the course of the study, it was observed that many of the subjects could not spell English words like 'pneumonia', 'pronunciation', 'committee', 'assessment', 'continuous' and 'conscience'.

It is important to mention that one major limitation of this investigation is related to the convenience sampling method used in the study with all the subjects from the same study centre – Abuja Model Study Centre, Abuja. Therefore, the results are not necessarily representative of the whole population of ODL students of the National Open University of Nigeria – nationwide.

Conclusion

Language acquisition is such a complicated phenomenon that no single approach or theory can truly explain it conclusively. While some methods are more effective in determining an aspect of second language acquisition, other aspects are not easily revealed. Those who are particularly interested in L1 interference may still seek the help of contrastive analysis to resolve many unanswered questions. The interference of L1 is undeniable in that some concepts are entrenched in our native language and the interpretation of such concept in L2 is inevitably related to L1.

Comparing and contrasting L1 and L2 can therefore serve as an anticipatory platform to predict and avoid errors in L2. It gives invaluable insights onto second language acquisition in terms of the effects of mother tongue interference. Preventative measures can be outlined and implemented. But since contrastive analysis cannot predict all the errors learners are likely to make, it fails to facilitate the full understanding of second language acquisition process. Other areas like the strategies learners are adopting are dealt with by error analysis. Error analyses make use of the actual errors learners committed and look into the strategies used that are related to the source of

errors. It explains the phenomena in which some strategies are more likely to invoke errors and thus gives implications to effective pedagogy. Nonetheless, it is important to note that learners learn regardless of how and when the materials are presented to them. According to Dakin (1969), it may be true that learners' strategy of learning is totally or partially independent of the methods by which he is being taught. And instead of looking at learner errors to determine what strategies invoke such errors, it is even more constructive and positive to look at the strategies adopted by successful language learners. Systematic case study of successful learner characteristics and strategies is certainly another popular trend in implementing measures in second language acquisition. Actually, transfer is one major factor shaping the learners' interlanguage competence and performance. The learner can apply things they know about the mother tongue successfully and productively to the learning of any language. However, some of this transfer is negative.

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