

AN ERROR ANALYSIS ON ACADEMIC WRITING: A LOOK INTO THE INTERLANGUAGE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

¹Trexie O. Alawi*

Abstract

In the college or university level, competence in writing is imperative if the learners need to engage and succeed in academic discourse. However, most of the teachers in tertiary level end up frustrated with erroneous written outputs of college students such as essays, letters, précis, critical analyses of texts, discussions during written exams, and the like. Thus, this paper is an attempt to describe the interlanguage or the learners' knowledge of language by way of investigating the errors made by first-year students of Surigao del Sur State University. It intended to locate areas of linguistic difficulty in order to suggest remedial actions in terms of syllabus design, instructional materials preparation, curriculum review, and teaching strategies. The data comprised of five sets of free written compositions in English 101 (Basic Study and Thinking Skills) classes. The outputs were subjected to error analysis which focused on establishing the error density index (EDI) and error production frequency. The results revealed that, among the 18 error categories, the top three in terms of frequency production are errors in verb usage (20%), followed by punctuation (16%), and capitalization (11%). An average of 79 percent EDI was also established from the students' written compositions. The EDI shows a below-average level of writing skills expected from the students in the University. These results have been suggested to be bases of pedagogical decisions as to priorities in terms of syllabus design, instructional materials preparation, curriculum review, and teaching strategies

Keywords: applied linguistics, interlanguage, error analysis, language assessment, teaching english as a second language, action research, Philippines

*Corresponding Author: Trexie O. Alawi, trexie.alawi@gmail.com

1.0 Introduction

If English is indeed the language necessary to acquire "scientific literacy and numeracy" (Cruz, 1994), as English is considered the lingua franca of the academe, as well as access to ICT developments to be able to cope with rapid technological development, then the training for students by SUC's in the use of the English language in the classrooms especially in writing becomes even more imperative. However, Nunan (2009) advances that, in terms of skills, producing a correct and coherent extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in a language. The challenges are enormous. For college students, their linguistic competence and discourse competence are observed to be most problematic. In Canale's and Swain's term (cited in Orillos, 2008), discourse competence is the ability to produce language beyond a single sentence and to show a connection of ideas in paragraphs or compositions; while linguistic competence refers to a language learners' knowledge of the grammatical rules governing language use.

So what can the teachers do or any academic institution to improve the learners' current level of writing competence? The most tested answer to this issue is to come up with effective syllabuses, teaching methodologies, instructional materials, and curriculums. Another issue arises- what may be the bases of coming up with an effective and relevant syllabus, instructional materials, and curriculum? Thus, this paper intended to come up with that necessary data, specifically a description of the learners' interlanguage to show their level of writing competence. What this study proposes, then, is

a tool for investigating language use as it is believed that competence can only be accessed or determined through analysis of language use or linguistic output. One way of looking at their competence is through the errors the learners make in the process of learning and using a target language.

The conduct of an error analysis needs no justification (Corder, 1982). Aside from serving pedagogical purposes, that is as basis of sound decision making as to what linguistic items to prioritize in syllabuses and classroom tasks, it also serves a theoretical justification in that an account of learners' errors is also a systematic account of their language and language learning process.

Error analysis is the process of determining the incidence and nature of unsuccessful language use (James, 1998). An error is defined here a systematic deviance from the accepted practice of language use and grammar. Error, according to Zhu (2010), is the most important source of information about the nature of a learner's knowledge at present and what they still have to learn. Determining the error incidence is tantamount to determining what can still be done by an academic institution to ensure that students improve in terms of their communicative competence in general, and writing competence in particular.

In the field of pedagogical linguistics, error analysis has long been used as a methodological tool to describe learner's interlanguage. For Selinker (cited in Gass and Selinker, 2009), interlanguage is basically, a language learner's language or interim language. In this study, it refers to the knowledge of the SDSSU students on their

English writing competence.

Primarily, the study is aimed to describe the interlanguage or the English language learners' language by way of investigating the errors in their written composition. To do so, the error density index (EDI) was established and the error production frequency determined. The result of the frequency count and averaging was used to provide a clearer picture of the communicative competence, particularly the writing competence of the learners.

For the English language teachers-cum-researchers, the errors identified in this paper may guide them in planning their lessons and designing their syllabus to realign content choice and classroom tasks and tests. They may be provided with a framework and tools to account systematically for the errors the learners make in the process of language learning. Also, this could be a start of more researches that employ data from authentic language use. For curriculum planners and instructional materials developers, the result may be utilized to locate specific language areas of difficulties and to guide them in deciding for content and focus of the IM's.

This paper is a descriptive study on the learner's knowledge of their language. This knowledge was determined by identifying the errors learners made in their writing composition, with a focus on linguistic competence. There is no attempt to include here the sources of these errors. The five sets of written composition of only 105 first-year students from the College of Arts and Sciences of Surigao del Sur State University comprised the data of this study.

2.0 Framework of the Study

This study is primarily anchored on the theory of performance assessment espoused by McNamara (1996) and on the theory of Interlanguage advocated by Selinker. Using performance-based or outcome-based language assessment allows learners to demonstrate practical command of skills required and not abstract demonstration of knowledge. It is believed that there is no other way to access competence but through performance (McNamara, 1996). In terms of interlanguage, or the learners' knowledge of their language, Selinker (cited in Gass and Selinker, 2008) advanced the idea that errors are a way to determine the underlying linguistic ability and knowledge, or the lack of it.

The diagram illustrates how the linguistic output from authentic linguistic data containing errors may be a way to a description of the level of learners' writing competence. An error analysis can lend investigation tools to what learners know or do not know. This knowledge of language or the interlanguage may be a basis of the teachers and language planners or administrators to realign pedagogical practices and come up with informed decisions in terms of syllabus design and content,

instructional materials preparation and curriculum review. Finally, an enhanced writing competence is believed to contribute to a higher rate of academic success and hopefully to gainful employment as well.

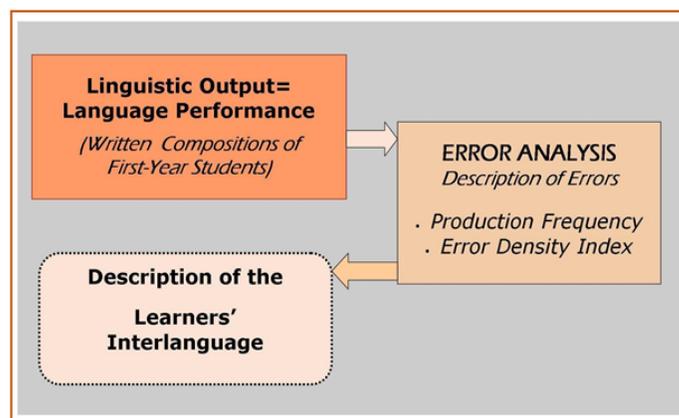


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the study

3.0 Research Methodology

Sample

The written compositions come from the 105 first-year students of Surigao del Sur State University- Tandag Campus during the first semester of Academic Year 2013-2014.

Written Composition 1: Self-Introduction. This was written during the first week of classes. The learners were instructed to limit the self-introduction to five sentences.

Written Composition 2: "Why I Chose SDSSU". The instruction was to compose one to two paragraphs only. The focus is writing using a reason as method of paragraph development. This topic was given to emphasize that coming to SDSSU was a choice made by the learners. As such, it entails responsibilities and accountabilities.

Written Composition 3: The Unforgettable Experience. The intended linguistic input for this lesson is on the use of past tense and narrative form of discourse. The learners were asked to make two to three paragraphs of a written composition.

Written Composition 4: Mother Earth: My Home. To raise awareness on environmental issues, the learners were asked to write a composition of two to three paragraphs.

Written Composition 5: Filipinos are poor, so they say. This composition aimed to raise the level of social awareness and at the same time to develop expository writing. The students were free to decide as to the length of their composition.

Profile of the Learners

A brief profile of the 105 learners is discussed whose written compositions comprise the data of this study in terms of age, language background, high school attended, program pursued in the University, and professional aim or the career path targeted by the learner. This is based

on the survey questionnaire distributed to the learners at the beginning of classes.

The age range of the learners was 17-20 years old. Ninety six students (92%) of the learners identified Visaya (Surigaonon variety) as their first language and eight percent Cebuano variety. In terms of high school attended, only three percent came from private schools; the 96 percent graduated from national high schools in Surigao del Sur. Here is the distribution of the samples per program: BA Political Science (35%), BA English (18%), BS Mathematics (14%), BA Economics (9%), BA Public Administration (11%), Midwifery (8%), BA Social Science (1%), BS Biology (2%) and BS Environmental Science (2%). As regards their professional aim, the initial survey showed the following student preferences: A. Government employee: office worker, secretary, liaison officer, and politician (32%), B. Police or army, (24%), C. Teacher/educator (20%), D. Health practitioner/midwife (5%), and E. Others: lawyer, businessman, artist, OFW, etc. (19%). These data were necessary to establish the need for communicative competence, especially writing competence, as a skill vital for gainful employment.

Data Gathering and Coding Procedure

The written composition was chosen on the basis of whether the learners were able to submit all the five compositions. If they missed a single writing activity,

they would no longer be part of the sample. This was to ensure that the learners' discourse competence was established from five writing activities.

After the papers had been selected, errors were identified and labeled in terms of error density and error production frequency. Error density index in the case of written composition was calculated by counting how many erroneous unit (clause or sentence) of constructions occur in a composition. This was done by counting the number of erroneous unit divided by the total number of units (may be a clause or sentence). For example, the composition has 21 sentences or clauses and 17 of these units are erroneous, the error density index is 0.809 or 81 percent. What this tells us is that 81 percent of the sentences of the learner's written output is erroneous. The error production frequency, on the other hand, is more specific in identifying the areas of concern-what linguistic units appear to be used erroneously and need attention. The number used for coding the errors corresponds to the number assignment in the taxonomy of errors patterned from the study of Hussain, Hanif, Asif and Rehman (2013).

4.0 Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the summary of error classification based on students' written composition.

In terms of error density index (EDI) calculated

Table 1. Classification of Errors

Code	Error Category	C- 1	C- 2	C- 3	C- 4	C- 5	TOTAL	%	Rank
1	Punctuation	263	296	194	161	136	1050	16.4	2
2	Capitalization	110	189	164	128	110	701	10.9	3
3	Spelling	48	187	139	65	85	524	8.2	5
4	Verb							20.5	
4.A	A. Tense	140	213	276	74	66	768	12.0	1
4.B	B. SV Agreement	5	181	29	30	20	265	4.1	
4.C	C. Conjugation/Inflection		157	51	37	32	286	4.4	
5	Preposition	114	256	112	11	13	506	7.9	6
6	Noun		56	34	1	5	96	1.5	12.5
7	Pronouns		83	28	32	48	191	3.0	9
8	Conjunction		163	80	71	67	381	5.9	8
9	Adjective	4	7		3	19	33	0.52	15
10	Article							9.5	
10.A	A. Omission	6	182	85	78	46	397	6.2	4
10.B	B. Addition		159	18	12	23	212	3.3	
11	Adverb		8	1	2	6	17	0.26	17
12	Word Choice	7	92	17	13	15	140	2.2	10
13	Redundancy	1	41	32	11	8	93	1.4	12.5
14	Translation			18	6	6	30	0.47	16
15	Negation	1	2	1	1	3	8	0.12	18
16	Verbals	2	45	15		13	75	1.17	14
17	Subject omission		35	71	3	15	124	1.9	11
18	Syntax (fragments, clauses & phrases)	88	93	138	87	83	489	7.6	7
Total							6386	100%	

by counting the total number of erroneous clauses or sentences divided by the total number of clauses or sentences in a composition, the average EDI of the 105 students is 0.79 or 79 percent. The choice of clause or sentence was based on the idea that it is the building block of discourse. This means that around eight out of ten clauses or sentences contain error in the students' written composition. This index may be used in grading written compositions in language classes if the writing exercises aim at accuracy and coherence. In SDSSU, the passing percentage of most tests is 50 percent. This index of 0.79 falls way below the standard set by the University.

In terms of error production frequency (Table 1), the labelled and classified errors from the learners' written composition reveal that the verb usage is the most problematic area comprising 20.5 percent of a total of 6386 errors. This is followed by the use of punctuation (16.4%) and capitalization (10.9%). In an ideal situation, these language areas are considered basic and should have been learned and mastered while in the elementary level. The use of articles: *a*, *an*, and *the* and the spelling are also proven problematic as they appear to be in the 4th and 5th rank.

This result validates the study of Hussain, et al. (2013) which also reveals that the verb usage, especially the proper use of tense, is the most problematic area for Iranian students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Punctuation and capitalization were also identified among the top five errors in terms of production frequency. In planning the contents of syllabus and instructional materials, these weak areas must be taken into consideration as to priority in discussion, time and assessment.

5.0 Conclusion

The writing competence of the SDSSU learners was established through identification and classification of error incidence in terms of error density index and error production frequency. The outputs subjected to the error analysis reveal the very low level of competence in basic academic writing among the first-year students. The .79 or 79 percent Error Density Index suggests that the first year students did not even reach a 50 percent passing mark in terms of correctness of language use. The most problematic areas are verb usage, punctuation, capitalization, and the use of articles as modifiers. Much needs to be done to remediate this lack of linguistic competence in the fundamentals of writing.

In the field of language, results of studies such as this may be used to validate other research studies that deal with investigation on teaching of English as a second language, on language acquisition theories, and on language assessment. Since there has been an obvious dearth of data when it comes to evidence of authentic

language use as most of the researches conducted in the University and even in the country employ perception and attitude assessment and discrete language tests only, the results and findings presented here may be an additional data to a few existing account of Filipino learners' writing competence.

Error analysis is proposed in this study as an objective methodological tool of linguistic investigation. The frequency of errors may provide language educators and planners as to syllabus content, curriculum design, instructional materials preparation, and improvement on teaching strategies and methodologies. The results here may be used as a guide to come up with informed pedagogical decisions and academic intervention measures.

It is suggested that similar studies be conducted by using outcome-based or output-based approach to linguistic assessment to provide a holistic picture of the learner's communicative competence. Collaborative researches are also encouraged to provide wide latitude of linguistic samples so that a more comprehensive assessment on the competence may be established.

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