

An Analysis of English Errors Made by Polytechnic of Namibia Students

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Abstract

The focus of this study is errors made by students using English at the Polytechnic of Namibia. An investigation into errors and their causes peculiar to Namibia is significant insofar as it enables the researchers to develop a methodology in teaching to help students to avoid committing mistakes that they make normally. This study, therefore, has far reaching implications in English Language Teaching and pedagogy in the country.

Key terms: *Second Language Teaching, English as a Second Language, error analysis, native language influence.*

1.1 Introduction/Background

On the attainment of her independence, Namibia elected to make English the official language in preference to Afrikaans which was the lingua franca at that time. Ever since, English has been the medium of instruction at all levels of education in the country. The Polytechnic of Namibia, being an institution offering tertiary level education, provides English from basic to advanced level, and other courses such as various types of Business Communication. In addition, English is compulsory for all Polytechnic students because it is a service course. This means that all students joining the Polytechnic are required to take up a placement test in order to be placed into different levels of the English course.

Twenty years after independence, even though English is used in several contexts, it is still perceived as a difficult language. The level of written English expected at tertiary level has not been reached by many students who join the Polytechnic of Namibia. There are several reasons for the low level of English used in Namibia, but that is beyond the remit of this paper.

2.1 Literature Review

It was Corder (1967) who pointed out the significance of errors and the need to analyse them in order to gain a better understanding of errors that students make and to help them improve themselves. It is important and necessary to distinguish between "errors" and "mistakes". Errors are systematic and occur because students do not realise that they are wrong. However, when it comes to mistakes, they are non-systematic and could be because of a slip of the tongue or pen. Identification of errors may help teachers/researchers develop an underlying system which should eventually facilitate the remediation process. The study of errors moved from the library to observable data collection and collation in the classroom. In many cases, errors occur repeatedly and students are unaware of them. From the point of view of

teachers and researchers, these are errors, but from the point of view of students they are not errors and they are a systematic entity which forms a part of "inter language" (Gass and Selinker: 1993:67). According to Selinker (1969) interlanguage is the data which is the speaker's attempt to produce a foreign language with errors and non-errors. This behaviour is "highly structured" (Selinker: 1969:71). This moves into the area of performance. Several objections to the notion of interlanguage have been raised:

1. Concentration of morpho-syntactic development and failure to account for the semantic level
2. Failure to account for the learner's linguistic knowledge and the relevance of the learner's own standards of correctness
3. Misuse of concepts related to target language
4. Failure to specify features that distinguish interlanguages from other natural languages
5. Failure to deal with variability and, finally
6. Failure to define the concepts clearly (Spolsky:1989).

Another important area has to be taken into consideration when it comes to the analysis of errors. Within error analysis studies there is an assumption that it is possible to categorise errors belong to one or the other type. Dulay and Burt (1974b) point out that it is not possible to always assign the errors to the one or other category. To establish this category they call it "Ambiguous goofs", which they describe as "Interference-like Goofs or L1 developmental goofs"(p.115). Gass and Selinker (1993) state that error analysis cannot be a sum total of second language data because it is only a partial picture of language learning that one gathers through error analysis.

3.1 Research question/Hypothesis

The main hypothesis of this study is that students joining the Polytechnic have a low level of English. The common errors that the students make seem to be a result of mother tongue influence.

The research questions arising from this hypothesis are the following:

1. What are the main errors students make?
2. Which of these errors are more prominent among students in certain courses offered in the department?
3. What teaching strategies are in place to help students overcome these problems?

4. What role do these errors play in assessment of written work?

4.1 Research Methodology

The method used for this study was qualitative. The placement test papers of 150 students were analysed for common errors that they make. The placement test consists of three sections: multiple choice, summary and essay. This study focused on the essay section of the placement test. The errors were categorised in terms of the following: **Lexical Errors**, which included spelling errors; **Errors in the use of nouns**, such as singular/plural forms, reflexive forms, use of pronouns, use of articles; **Concord Errors, Errors in the use of prepositions, Errors around verbs**, such as tenses, irregular forms and active/passive voice. The list is by no means exhaustive.

5.1 Findings

Following are the findings of the research conducted to investigate the language errors made by students joining the Polytechnic for tertiary education. While errors abound in the students' writing, what is of specific interest to us is whether there is a reason for these errors and if so, how can we institute changes in our teaching to focus on errors to help our students?

5.1.1 Spelling errors

The most common type of error that is found in our students' written work is spelling. Some of the spelling errors can be attributed to first language or mother tongue interference, but other errors are inexplicable.

5.1.1.1 Word division

Examples of word divisions were found such as *them selves*, *self conscious*, *mis use* and *no where*. There is no obvious reason why these words are divided by the writer. Some of them, when divided, are two words which can stand on their own such as *no* and *where*. However, their meanings change as well when standing separated. In the other cases one of the two parts can stand alone, but not the other one like *them* and *conscious*, but *selves*, *self* and the prefix *mis-* cannot. Other words and phrases are combined when they are actually supposed to stand separately, such as *infront of* and *alot of choices*.

5.1.1.2 Capitalisation

Another common feature of misspellings is the use of capitalisation. Here we have to distinguish two phenomena. Firstly, there is a tendency not to use capital letters at the beginning of the sentence and, secondly, there is a frequent infringement of the rules of capitalisation for proper nouns: proper names of particular persons, places or things. Very common examples thereof are *polytechnic of namibia*, *ministry of education*, *david haufiku*, and so forth. Even when pointed out to students there is

