

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

relatively little change in their attempt to follow capitalisation rules.

The use of a lower key *i* when referring to the first person singular seems to gain popularity as well. The problem is worsened as it is emerging as a typical feature of sms spelling, where writers generally use lower key for their messages.

5.1.1.3 *mb*, *nd*, and *ng* errors

The letter combinations *nd* and *mb* are very common in the African vernacular languages. They can occur at the beginning of a word or within a word, but not at the end. In Otjiherero, for example, the letter or the sound /b/ as used in English does not exist. This language uses /mb/, which is a merged sound of /m/ and /b/, but pronounced as one sound. As /m/ and /b/ share the same place of articulation, they sound very similar, except that /m/, which is a bilabial nasal sound, is added. There is thus a tendency to pronounce the English /b/ as /mb/, and, as a consequence, it is transferred onto writing as well. The same applies to *nd*. An /n/ precedes /d/ in pronunciation in the mother tongue, is transferred to the pronunciation in English and further to the spelling. This particular error suits Swan's (2000:186) description of written pidgin, in which the spelling is adapted to suit the pronunciation.

The following are examples of errors which appear in students' writings: *promblem*, *Zimbambwe*, *provinding*, *we all dividedd*, *presindent*, *stundents*, *stagnation*, *Octomber* and *elengance*. This kind of error is commonly found among Otjiherero speakers. It could be explained by the fact that voiced consonants in the medial position in Otjiherero are always preceded by the bilabial nasal, "m" or "n".

Interestingly, the opposite phenomenon is also observed when the consonant /m/ before /b/ or /d/ is omitted, such as in *remeber* or *tedency*.

5.1.1.4 Adding a consonant

The very common error of spelling the suffix *-ful* as in the misspelled adjectives *wonderfull* or *beautifull* can be accounted for ignoring the basic rule that the adjective *full* has a double *-ll* but when it is used as a suffix the correct spelling is *-ful*. Another common double consonant is found in *tommorrow* and *writting*. In some words, however, the double consonant is frequently left out when it is needed. The following words, for example, are often spelled wrongly by leaving the second consonant: *accommodation*, *professional*, *dilemma*, *dissatisfied*. There is no clear reason why these misspellings occur. Some of these examples seem to follow the pronunciation. Some seem to be made based on assumptions of spellings of other forms of the word.

5.1.1.5 Confusion of letters

This type of error seems to be more common among Oshivambo speaking students. In their vernacular the letter /r/ is not used in writing. The letter /l/ however is used, but can be pronounced as the English letter /r/ or /l/ or some sound in between.

As a result the following misspellings can be observed: *arleady* instead of *already*, *corroborate* instead of *collaborate*, *learly* instead of *really*, *rular* and *rulal* instead of *rural*, *regural* instead of *regular*, etc. The same was observed by Swan (2000:198) with Swahili speakers. Swahili uses similar consonants as English, except /r/, which in Swahili is an alveolar trill, and, in addition has a number of dialectical variations. As a result, /l/ and /r/ are often confused and *road* would be pronounced *load*.

Another common confusion of letters occurs in the spelling of *think* and *thing*. More commonly observed is the use of *I thing* when the actual intention is to write *I think*.

A frequently spotted error is *becouse* for *because* or *of cause* for *of course*. The similar pronunciation of these words *cause/course* seems to be the reason for the error in writing. In the same way we find the spelling of *then*, referring to time, being substituted with *than*, which is used for comparison.

5.1.1.6 Omission/addition of -s

Generally it can be stated that a plural -s is time and again added to words that do not require a plural -s such as *informations*, *anythings*, *cattles*, *sheeps*, *advices* or *furnitures*. Interestingly the letter -s is added to certain words and omitted in others. In addition, one might be greeted with a warm *hellows* or *good mornings*, whereas, on the other hand, *alway* and *nowaday* show the omission of the required -s found in written texts. The most common omission of -s is the plural indicator-s, such as in *many student*.

5.1.1.7 Plural ending -ves

The rule for plural irregular form -ves is not always adhered to in students' written work, as in the following examples: *lifes* for *lives* and *themself* for *themselves*, *ourself* for *ourselves*.

1.1.1.8 Homophones

A number of misspellings arise from the pronunciation of the word. The examples given demonstrate that if the pronunciation is of similar nature the spelling is equally confused by the writer. The English language has quite a large amount of homophones, words which have exactly the same pronunciation, but whose spelling and meaning are different. Such words are referred to as homophones. Errors with regard to homophones are usually not observed as much as words whose pronunciation is similar and the writer therefore fails to differentiate between the different spellings.

Homophones:

Brake/break

Misspelling of words because of similar pronunciation

tired for *tarred* (road)

witch for *which*

where for *were* and vice versa

then for *than* and vice versa

there for *their* and *they* are

1.1 Articles

English, unlike African languages, relies heavily on articles. These are the indefinite articles "a/an" and the definite article "the". The general principle for the use of articles is: ARTICLE + NOUN (ART + N), for example *a goat* (indefinite) and *the goat* (definite). The errors detected in the scripts included omission of the article and use of the wrong article.

1.1.1 Omission of articles

Sentences become ungrammatical when articles are omitted. Some of the wrong sentences which candidates produced include the following:

He saw man stealing money. (He saw **the** man stealing money.)

Maria gave me orange to eat. (Maria gave me **an** orange to eat.)

... get in shop (...get in **the** shop).

5.2.2 Wrong article

In the following sentences, wrong articles were used and the result was ungrammatical sentences.

His mother bought him a exercise book for school. (His mother bought him **an** exercise book for school.)

In our village, was the man called Shooya. (In our village there was **a** man called Shooya.)

1.1.1 Singular/plural errors

Generally it has been found that our students have problems distinguishing between

singular and plural forms of nouns.

Structures that contained singular and plural errors were many in the collected data. Some of them included: *I found 50 dollar on the table.* (I found **50 dollars** on the table.); *All the mens and womans sat on the ground.* (All the **men** and **women** sat on the ground.) Other errors included *anythings* (**anything**); *every days* (**every day**); *fumitures* (**furniture**); *good mornings* (**good morning**); *cattles* (**cattle**); *giving me advices*, (giving me **advice**), *their brother's and sister's* (their brothers and sisters); and *sheeps* (**sheep**).

Richards (1996:23) cites the following nouns as some of the common ones learners use as plurals: *fumitures*; *traffics*; *informations*; *luggages*; *sceneries*; *advices*; *equipments*; *homeworks*; *machineries*; *punctuations*; and *electricities*.

Richards also argues, "Although the distinction between mass and count nouns in English is not an arbitrary one, it is often hard for a learner of English to see why certain nouns should be mass rather than count, or vice versa" (p.23).

The nature of this type of error varies and can also be described as omission of plural – s, or wrong adding of –s. The more common one is the omission of the –s as in *two goal*, one of the soccer *player*, *fifty dollar*, one of the *reason*, *many student*, etc.

In some cases the writer might have been aware of the plural –s, but not of the exceptions to the rule, such as in "mens" instead of "men". Other examples include *brother's* instead of **brothers**, *sister's* instead of **sisters**, etc.

However, the most common mistake is the omission of the plural –s. This type of error might originate in the mother tongue, as some vernaculars which are a Bantu language add a prefix to the stem to indicate plural, not a suffix as in English. In addition this prefix acts as a marker and denotes the class the noun belongs to (Swan 2000:195). Students might not have learned that the adding of –s is a plural indicator and this rule is therefore overlooked and the –s left out. As to the second type of error, it is rather difficult to determine where it originates, as it should not have been taught to the student at all. It seems to be an assumption of the writer that the plural can be indicated by apostrophe –s: ('s).

1.1.1 Pronouns

Pronouns are used to prevent the repetition of nouns, and to simplify speaking and writing by making it less wordy. The correct use of pronouns rests on the realisation that the pronoun should match the **number** and **gender** of the noun they replace. An analysis of students' writing proved that the use of reflexive and demonstrative pronouns is particularly problematic.

1.1.1.1 Reflexives

The major problem in the use of reflexive pronouns occurred when candidates used a singular reflexive when they meant the plural. Examples included: *People must ask themselves ...* (People must ask *themselves*...), *themselves* which is completely awkward and "...ourselves" (*ourselves*).

1.1.1.2 Demonstrative pronouns

There were many cases in which students used the pronoun 'this' when they meant 'these'. For instance, *This days you find young people drinking.* (*These days you find young people drinking.*) and *This poor people...* (*These poor people...*).

1.4 Adjectives

Adjectives take three forms: the basic form, the comparative form and the superlative form. Most of the problems with adjectives arise because students do not know the rules for forming the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective. Adjectives with more than one syllable form their comparative and superlative forms by the addition of **more** and **most**.

5.5.1 Comparatives and superlatives

In most cases, comparison can be achieved by using the word 'more' or the inflectional morpheme '-er' in English. Candidates showed some confusion in the use of these two morphemes ('more' being a free morpheme and '-er' a bound morpheme).

Examples of wrong comparatives:

She is beautifuler than Mary. (She is **more beautiful** than Mary.)

I find English to be more easy than Mathematics. (I find English to be **easier** than Mathematics.)

Others: *more cleaner* (**cleaner**); *more better* (**better**)

The superlative was also used wrongly.

Examples:

It was the terrifying experience I have ever had in my life. (It was the **most terrifying** experience I have ever had in my life.)

Our city is the most cleanest in Namibia. (Our city is the **cleanest** in Namibia.)

In some cases, there was redundancy in the use of the superlative, for example:

One of the most best soccer players ... (One of the **best soccer players**...)

The most best thing... (The best thing ...)

1.1 Verbs

It was found that students made significant errors with a variety of basic verbs. Errors are found not just in concord of tenses but also in tenses, passives, affirmative and negative use of verbs.

6.1.1 Concord error

This type of error is one of the most common examples that can be found. On the one hand there is the error of not applying the third person –s rule in affirmative as well as in negative sentences. On the other hand, cases were observed where an –s was added even if the subject was plural.

Here are some examples of not applying the third person –s:

No one pay...

God have...

Each person have...

He/she belong to...

It cause...

One need to know...

It have...

He always make...

Every person need...

God don't exist

Where one belong...

This include

Conversely, the adding of an –s to the verb when the subject is plural is much less frequent, but does occur:

What people likes and dislikes...

We was....

They tells us...

1.2 Tense errors

Students struggle with English tense forms as can be seen from our analysis.

6.2.1 Past tense errors

The past tense is used to talk about completed actions in the past. They have no connection to the present, nor do they continue into the present. This tense form expresses that what happened in the past is no longer happening.

The phrase *used to* is particularly applied to express that a past activity is no longer practised. This phrase is not used in the present tense, however.

The examples below show the use of *used to* for a repeated present activity. The writer intends to express a habit in the present and adapt the phrase *used to* to a look-alike present tense "use to".

They use to kill...

I use to live in...

In the two examples below the past participle is incorrect. In the first example the past participle ending *-d* is missing. In the second example the writer uses a regular past participle ending. He seems to be unaware of the irregular verb form of the word "beat".

They were suppose to....

They were beated...

As Swan (2000:201) observes with Swahili and other Bantu languages, present, past and future are indicated by certain markers. These markers can be a syllable only, as in Swahili for example, *-na* for present progressive tense, *-li* for past tense and *-ta* for future tense. When carried over into English it results in many tense errors in direct and indirect speech. Thus we find examples such as *I go to town yesterday*.

Below are some typical Namibian tense errors:

Then we change our team... (Then we changed our team)

He find out how suffer Namibian people... (He found out how Namibian people suffered)

This man lead SWAPO party... (This man led the SWAPO party...)

I took out my uniform and go in the kitchen... (I took out my uniform and went into the kitchen)

6.2.2 Present tense errors

The choice of the correct tense form can be a real challenge. On the whole, some Namibians have a tendency to use continuous present tense forms in spoken and written English, especially with frequently used verbs such as *have* and *make*.

I am having only ten dollars (I have only ten dollars.) NB: It is quite correct to use "having" when the sense is "experiencing", as in "I'm having a problem staying alert."

They are making a lot of noise (They make a lot of noise) - general statement

I am passing my subjects (*I passed/will pass my subjects*)

A very common error is the inserting of "is" in front of a verb, such as, *my friend is go* or the *minister is talk* so as to indicate present tense. It seems that the auxiliary here is seen as a tense marker as is the case for past tense (*I did go to town yesterday*).

6.3. Active/Passive voice

English language, like any other language, has rules that govern the use of verbs in their various forms. For instance, a verb form for the passive voice is expressed differently from a verb form showing the infinitive form. In addition, irregular verb forms are different from the regular forms when it comes to expressing tenses like the past tense. This section illustrates errors candidates made in the passive, infinitive and irregular verb forms.

6.3.1 Passive

Crystal (1991:252) defines the word 'passive' as "a term used in grammatical analysis of voice referring to a sentence, clause or verb form where the grammatical subject is typically the recipient of goal of the action denoted by the verb." There are various ways of expressing the passive voice in English¹. The most common one is when the verb is followed by 'by' plus an agent (by +AGENT), for example:

ACTIVE: "The boys milked the goats."

PASSIVE: "The goats were milked by the boys."

Students experienced a problem in constructing the basic passive sentence. The examples below illustrate this:

The thief arrested by police. (The thief was arrested by the police.)

... to helped by other people (... to be helped by other people)

When dog is catch by a certain disease it have ... (When a dog catches a certain disease, it has ...).

¹ The different passive verb-forms are explained in details by Swan (1990: 458-465).

A clear understanding of the functions of the grammatical relations, SUBJECT and OBJECT is fundamental to the correct construction of active and passive sentences (Akmajian et al. 1995:166-167).

6.4.1 Infinitive

The infinitive consists of the word 'to' plus a verb in the present simple tense, for example, 'to' plus 'jump' = 'to jump'. It is the base form of the verb that serves to construct other forms used to express different actions in various tenses.

In the example below the writer intends to use the infinitive, but connects the preposition to the past tense form of the verb not realising that the past tense is expressed with another verb of the sentence. In the second example *to* is followed by a gerund. This particular sequence is used only in rare phrases such as "looking forward *to meeting* someone".

to came (to come)

The religious are trying to upgrading. (The religious are trying **to upgrade**...)

6.4.2 Irregular verb form

Candidates experienced problems in using the correct form of some irregular verbs. The following examples show that candidates generalised the '-ed' morpheme used in regular verbs (e.g. walk = walked) to form past tenses.

I runned home. (I **ran** home.)

I swimmmed across the river. (I **swam** across the river.)

I digged a deep hole. (I **dug** a deep hole.)

... semi-final cup that will be writed in the book of Namibia soccer history. (... semi-final cup that will be **written** in the book of Namibian soccer history).

1.1 Prepositions

The correct use of prepositions proves difficult for many ESL students. Although it may not be the case for prepositions in other Namibian languages, there is a striking similarity between prepositions in Afrikaans and English. Consider the following examples to illustrate the above:

Mina kyk agter ons baba = Mina looks after our baby

Hy reis deur die land = He travels through the country.

Yet even Afrikaans speaking students often use prepositions incorrectly. The study revealed three main problems in the use of prepositions.

1.1.1 Omission or use of wrong preposition

The following errors were observed with regard to leaving out or using the wrong preposition.

To go in the classroom should be *To go into the classroom*

I waited him long time should be *I waited for him for a long time*

1.1.2 Redundancy of preposition

In other cases, however, prepositions are added when they are either not required or expected as in:

Go to abroad should be *go abroad* and in a very common phrase used as in *make somebody to do something* which should be *make somebody do something*, *I am waiting on* which should be *I am waiting for*.

1.1.3 Wrong preposition

Very frequently wrong prepositions are used, a fact also observed in East African idiomatic English (Swan 2000:209). Here are some Namibian examples:

To my point of view... (In my point of view...)

Depending to..... (Depending on...)

They rob the people off their belongings. (They rob people's belongings.)

We were beaten two goal on zero from the first half... (We were beaten 2:0 in the second half)

In other hand... (On the other hand)

8.1 Miscellaneous errors

The following errors with regard to parts of speech tend to be confused or misused because they have only one equivalent in the mother tongue or for reasons of not being aware of the various parts of speech and their respective endings in the English language.

Dogs are very importance... (Dogs are very important)

He is the best play in Brasil ... (He is the best player in Brasil)

Beautiness... (beauty)

During the colony time... (During colonial time)

My traditional does not allow... (My tradition does not allow...)

...will be of important... (...will be of importance)

...how danger it is... (...how dangerous it is)

different/difference

advise/advice

Some students did not know or realise that English etiquette dictates that individuals mention themselves after mentioning someone in a construction that includes them as subjects. One example of the error was "I and my team mates..." instead of "**My team mates and I...**"

The word 'supposed' was also wrongly used. Common structures included: *I was suppose to see her at the hospital at 10h00.* (I was **supposed** to see her at the hospital at 10h00.); *They suppose to go to South Africa next week.* (They **are supposed** to go to South Africa next week.)

The word 'depend' is followed by 'on' or 'upon'. It was common to find awkward constructions such as *It depends that I get money.* (It **depends on** whether I get money or not.) *She depended with her sister for her school fees.* (She **depended on** her sister for school fees.)

Conclusion

The reality in the ESL classroom is that all assessment of students' work considers the quality of the language they use. In all forms of written work (i.e. paragraphs, letters, essays, proposals and reports) grids are used to determine the final mark. Language and Style is one of the criteria in these grids. According to the grid the frequency of certain errors determines what mark is awarded for a piece of writing. In other types of questions (e.g. comprehension), however, penalising for every error in writing makes marking difficult, so markers conveniently decide against it. As a result students are not alerted to their problems. It is therefore crucial that teaching focuses on improving the grammar skills of students in general.

Recommendations

As the findings show, there is a large variety of basic language errors in student's written work. The reasons for making those errors are manifold. Some seem to stem from strong mother tongue influence. Others have crept in through the imitation of wrong models, and yet others through failure to apply appropriate grammar rules.

Below is a list of recommendations for consideration in the Department of Communication:

- Start the semester in lower level courses (LPA0220 and LPB0320) with a **thorough teaching and discussion** of all parts of speech, with emphasis on problem areas such as prepositions, verbs, etc.

- Include questions about parts of speech in some in-class activities and assessment tasks.
- Prescribe **compulsory** websites and online activities to be done in KEWL sessions for the lower level courses.
- Focus the attention of students in all English courses on grammar errors that are common in their writing.
- Include Error Analysis in the syllabi of all courses as well as in examinations.

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