

First Year Fijian Undergraduate University Students Academic Essay Writing Error Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The assessment of English essay writing errors at university undergraduate level has been achieved in several countries but a study using error analysis is the first to be conducted in the Pacific Island nation of Fiji. The purpose of the present study was to examine errors of written academic essays of Fijian undergraduate pre-service and in-service students at the Fiji National University Lautoka campus. This paper analyzes pre-service and in-service undergraduate students' essay writing papers which is a new dimension and knowledge to existing literature. The study mainly focused on eighteen errors as classified and adapted from Darus & Ching (2009) with the top six errors discussed in this paper. Twenty writing samples were analyzed with the top errors for pre-service students being mechanics, subject verb agreement, redundancy, prepositions, tense and vocabulary choice while in-service students had errors in mechanics, redundancy, tense, articles, incomplete structures, word form and clarity. The authors found that carelessness and failure to recognize important words in the sentences as the main reasons for the errors. The paper recommends that remedial lessons on usage of articles, word formation and preposition are required in the course curriculum to improve upon the errors mentioned.

Key words: Academic Writing, English Essay, Undergraduate Students, Grammatical Errors, Error Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The English language has been dominant in the Fijian education system after the 1969 Report of the Fiji Education Commission appointed by the colonial government recommended that English be the medium of instruction from Grade 4 (Goundar, 2016, p.694). This was put into effect when Fiji became independent in 1970 and has been the guiding policy up to the present time. In higher education, it is crucial that a learner is equipped with adequate English language skills. In Fiji, students enrolled in higher education institutions need to undertake a mandatory English course i.e., English for Academic Studies/Purposes. At the Fiji's only national university; Fiji National University, students pursue English for Academic Studies (LNG501) in the first year of undergraduate degree program. Further, majority of the assessments in the course are based on written submissions. As the English language is L2 for Fijian students, writing can be a challenging task for them.

Moreover, writing can be classified as a highly complex task. Writing in the second language makes the task more difficult as it requires sufficient command over the second language to fulfill all the formalities; composing, developing logical ideas, which are essential for a written text to be comprehensible (Sarfranz, 2011, p.30). Students are required to successfully complete the mandatory English for Academ-

ic Studies course as all the courses delivered in Fiji use the English language as a medium of instruction unless it is the vernacular course i.e. Hindi and i-Taukei. This adds pressure on the students to obtain proficiency level in English so that they are able to complete their program of study effectively. As part of the summative assessment, the students sit for the final examination which comprises of one written academic essay of 800-1,000 words.

During the semester, students also submit an academic essay as part of the formative assessment. However, there has not been a recent study conducted on the type of errors that L2 learners in Fiji make, which can be analyzed so that the lecturers are able to address these in the curriculum taught in the English for Academic Studies course at Fiji National University. Lecturers who can analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to engage their students to become more aware of their errors (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009, p.486). In using Error Analysis (EA) and appropriate corrective techniques as an effective tool, it can assist in the learning and teaching of English. Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate and compare errors in academic essays written in English by first year undergraduate Bachelor of Science and in-service Bachelor of Education students at Fiji National University, Lautoka, Fiji. The study will seek to answer the following research question: What are the six

most common errors in first year undergraduate Bachelor of Science and in-service Bachelor of Education students academic essays written in English? It will also add to the literature about Error Analysis in Fiji's higher education. The results from this study will also add to the literature about Error Analysis in Fiji's higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will examine relevant literature and is subdivided into a review of the problems of learning English as a second language and previous studies of error analysis of L2 students including sources of errors found in other research.

Error analysis (EA) is instrumental in helping the English language teachers in identifying the problematic areas of language learning by providing a deep insight into learner's second language acquisition process (Sarfranz, 2011, p.38). The field of EA was established in the 1970's by Corder and colleagues (Darus & Subramanian, 2009, p.487). EA has two objects: one theoretical which is to understand what and how a learner learns when he studies an L2 and another is applied that deals with enabling the learners to learn more efficiently by using the knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes (Corder, 1967). According to Sarfranz (2011, p.38), "by studying the changes that take place in the errors of L2 learners in their continuous learning process, the teachers can predict the likely errors and can prepare the instructional materials accordingly".

Furthermore, Darus & Subramanian (2009) aptly point out that the investigation of errors can serve two purposes; diagnostic (to in-point the problem) and prognostic (to make plans to solve a problem). Errors ought to be treated as visible proof that learning is occurring. Corder (1967) emphasized that errors, if studied systematically, can provide significant insights into how a language is actually learned by a foreigner.

Making mistakes or errors is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition (Ancker, 2000). Literature indicates that one of the most common types of errors found is related to grammar (Khan, 2005; Lim Ho Peng, 1976; Azimah, 1998; Vahdatinejad, 2008; and James, 1988). According to Brown (2000) there are two main sources of errors, namely, interlingual errors and intralingual errors. A research carried out by Khan (2005) among 30 Form Five students found that most of the learners were weak in grammar. Similarly, Lim Ho Peng's (1976) study found recurrent errors with learners such as spelling mistakes, wrong use of prepositions, confusing use of structural verbs, concord and tenses. In Vahdatinejad (2008), the students made errors in tenses, word choices and prepositions. Furthermore, James (1988) attested that "errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent type of errors that are committed by learners". According to Darus & Subramanian (2009, p.486), learners vastly encounter challenges in learning the grammatical aspects of the Target Language (TL), these include; subject-verb agreement, the use of prepositions, articles as well as the use of correct tense. A study was conducted by Okoro (2017) in Nigeria to identify errors made by students in written English essays.

It was found that the participants committed eleven common errors mainly spellings, tense, word choice, punctuation, number, prepositions, articles, subject/verb agreement, wrong amalgamation of words and wrong syllabification.

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) placed errors into six different categories: omission of grammatical morphemes, double marking of semantic features, use of irregular rules, use of wrong word forms, alternating use of two or more forms, and misordering. By 1998, there was a proposal of five categories of errors which included grammatical errors such as possessive, adjectives, nouns, articles, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions and verbs; substance errors for example, capitalization, punctuation and spelling; lexical errors such as word formation and word selection; syntactic errors (co-ordination/subordination, sentence structure and ordering), and semantic errors such as ambiguous communication and miscommunication (James, 1998).

One of the most important studies done in the field of error analysis was conducted by Richards (1971 cited in Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). He described three sources of errors:

1. Interference errors: errors arising from the use of elements of one language while speaking/writing another,
2. Intralingual errors: errors that reflect general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply, and
3. Developmental errors: errors that occur when learners attempt to build up hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experiences.

When Schacheter and Celce-Murcia (1977) stated that the definitions of some of the terms were confusing and overlapping, Richards (1974) categorized the errors based on their causes and divided them into two groups:

1. Interlingual errors: errors caused by mother language interference.
2. Intralingual and developmental errors: errors that occur during the learning process of the second language at a stage when the learners have not really acquired the knowledge.

There were several other studies that proposed sources of errors made by language learners (Brown, 1980; James, 1998; Penny, 2001; Karra, 2006; Heydari & Bagheri, 2012; Kaweera, 2013 and Sermsook et al., 2017) and further defined the errors into sub-categories but for the purpose of this research paper the authors have used Richards' initial description of errors focusing on interference and intralingual errors made by Fijian undergraduate students.

METHODOLOGY

This research has used quantitative approach whereby students' formative assessments were selected randomly, marked then used to formulate a table of errors. Data was compiled and analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

Participants

All the participants were L2 learners of English language from Fiji National University, Fiji. Ten students were from

the pre-service undergraduate program (Bachelor of Science) and ten students were from the in-service undergraduate program (Bachelor of Education). The ten pre-service students were females between the ages of 19 years to 25 years. Whereas from the ten in-service students five were males and five were females between the ages of 24 years to 40 years.

Writing Sample

In total, 20 writing samples were used in this research. "Writing allows writers to demonstrate their ability to construct a string of well-connected sentences that are grammatically and logically correct" (Halliday and Hassan, 1976), the participants were asked to write an academic essay. The students were given four academic essay topics to choose from and write an essay of 600-800 words. The students were given three hours to write the essay before the researchers collected them for analysis.

Instrument

An error classification scheme used by Darus & Ching (2009) was adapted in this study in order to identify the different errors that students made in their academic essay. The original scheme consisted of 18 types of errors as follows: tenses, articles, subject verb agreement, other agreement errors, infinitive, gerunds, pronouns, possessive and attributive structures, word order, negative construction, incomplete structures, lexical categories (preposition), other lexical categories, word form, mechanics, word choice, verb to be, and Malaysian typical words. The present scheme only used 17 (Darus & Ching, 2009) however, the current researchers have added a new error type 'clarity' (in place of Malaysian typical words) in classification of errors making the total 18 again. The researchers have further amended the categories by removing 'Other Lexical Errors' and replacing it with 'Redundancy'. Also, 'Lexical Categories-Prepositions' was amended to 'Prepositions' as well as 'Word Choice' to 'Vocabulary Choice'.

Research Procedure

The first step of the research procedure was to provide four topics to the students after which, they were allowed three hours in the class to complete the write up. Thirdly, after the essays were collected, they were marked by the researchers who then classified the errors using the adapted scheme of Darus & Ching (2009).

FINDINGS

Q1: What are the six most common errors in first year undergraduate Bachelor of Science students' academic essays written in English?

Top Six Errors of Pre-service Students

This section of the paper discusses the results and findings of the research. The figures are presented first followed by explanation of selected category of errors from the top six.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentages for the top six errors that were made by the pre-service students in their academic essay.

Top Six Errors of In-service Students

Q2: What are the six most common errors in first year undergraduate in-service Bachelor of Education students' academic essays written in English?

Figure 2 illustrates the percentages for the top six errors made by the in-service students in their academic essay.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The following discusses about the findings of the common errors made by pre-service Bachelor of Science students.

Errors in Mechanics

The research revealed that 30% of errors that were recorded fell in the mechanics category. This category includes errors in spelling, capitalization and punctuation errors. It was the highest category in the pre-service students' errors in the essay. Some of the examples of these errors include:

1. for example, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide.... (Capitalization)
2. ...due to constant coast flooding and salt water intrusion (missed out period after intrusion)
3. Thu, it risk the lifes of individuals that are located near the coastal area. (Spelling: Thus, risks, lives)
4. ...faced by most of the pacific islanders. (Capitalization)
5. Also, rubbish beans need to be placed... (Spelling)

In the study conducted by Darus & Ching (2009) again mechanics recorded the largest number of errors from all the categories (19%). They attribute spelling errors to 'phonetics perceptions and careless' (p.248). The researchers of the

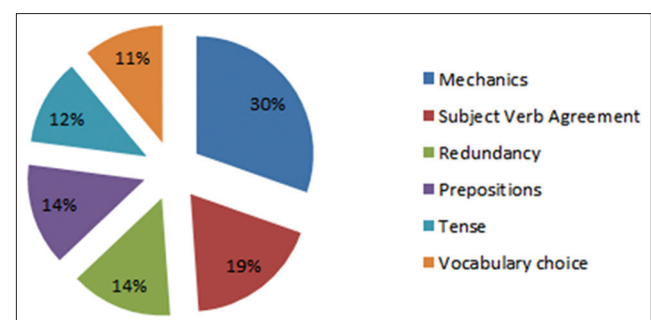


Figure 1. Top six errors in percentages-pre-service students

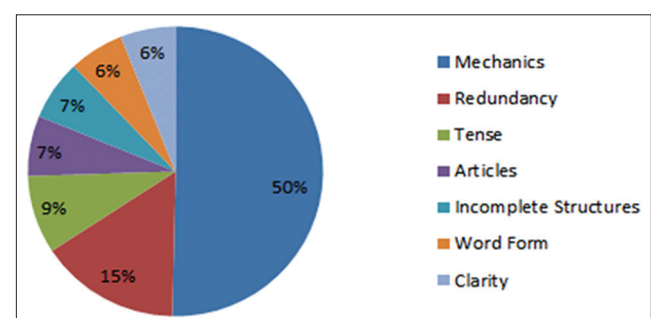


Figure 2. Top six errors in percentages

present study also attest to the views of Darus & Ching as students in the first year are usually careless not only with spelling but with punctuation as well as capitalization. They tend to be unsure of when a word needs to be capitalized. This could be addressed by including a lexical category component on concrete, proper and abstract nouns.

Subject-verb Agreement Errors

The second most common errors found in this study was from the subject-verb agreement category. A total of 19% errors were noted from the sample. Selected examples of these are:

1. For instance, farmers will was not able to earn...(would not)
2. ...individuals that are located near the coastal areas and has to relocate... (have)
3. Some benefits are provides educational websites... (are that it provides)
4. ...sometimes student spent more time on social media... (students spend)
5. These helps the team or a nation... (help).

The errors occurring can be directed toward learners unable to learn the rules of irregular and regular verbs as well as identifying the subject in a particular sentence. Another reason for 19% recorded in the subject-verb agreement category error could be that drilling exercises are not carried out frequently in their lessons.

Redundancy

The category of redundancy allowed the researchers to identify repetition of words. In total 14% of errors were observed under this category. Selected examples are as follows:

1. ...one of the very factors (very)
2. ...it is also has substantial environment benefits... (is)
3. ...because of different weather patterns it is taking place. (it is)
4. Climate change is mainly caused by human activities in which it threatens the nature (in, it)
5. This affects a particular person's health and as well as their source of income. (and)
6. ...this essay will highly elaborate on the issues...(highly)
7. Climate change is nothing new where people...(where)

One of the reasons for redundancy in the students' essays is the inability to recognize the words which are of utmost importance in the sentence. Another is carelessness; students fail to proofread with a critical perspective. From the examples stated, it is clear that learners find difficulty in editing their sentences to maintain the pivotal elements of it and rather go on using redundant words.

Vocabulary Choice

The final category in the top six is vocabulary choice with 11% in total. Some of the examples include:

1. ...the most addressing issues...(incorrectly used here)
2. ...the particular season for cyclones to occur, it occurs at anytime. (unclear on its usage)

3. ...as well as their source of earning (income)
4. In summary... (conclusion)
5. This essay is going to dwel on... (discuss).

It can be concluded from the findings that students are confused between the vocabulary that is used in academic writing and spoken words which are used frequently. In academic writing, it is appropriate to use low frequency words to make an argument or discuss a point. For example, we use 'dwell upon' when participating in informal conversations or verbal discussions but not for writing purposes.

The following discusses about the findings of the common errors made by in-service Bachelor of Education students.

Errors in Mechanics

Compared to the pre-service students who recorded 30% in this category, the in-service students made more errors in this category with a total of 50%. Mechanics is the category that had most number of errors for pre-service as well as in-service students. This is an interesting finding as normally the perception is that in-service students would have better skills in academic writing than pre-service students.

Some of the examples of the errors in mechanics from in-service students are:

1. This is in line with the Government's initiative. (capitalization)
2. As mentioned by Fijis Prime Minister.... (apostrophe: Fiji's)
3. To conclude it is important to note that.... (comma after conclude)
4. The regional dangers for the Islands...(capitalization)
5. In addition, there can be any problems... (spelling: many).

Redundancy Errors

This category is defined as the use of words which are repeated in a sentence but are not required. It was the second highest category of errors that recorded a total of 15% for in-service students. Examples of redundancy errors are:

1. ...coral reefs which are home to a diverse marine organisms...(a)
2. In addition to, rising sea level causes....(to)
3. The irregular rainfall brings the intense rainfall devastating....(the)
4. COP23 provides a forward looking vision for transporting...(forward looking)
5. As the Fiji's climate is dynamic and always changing...(the)
6. Vunidogola became the nation's first community had to relocate...(had)

The samples in 5.2.2 illustrate a pattern that in-service learners have issues with the correct usage of articles 'a' and 'the'. They have used articles in sentences which do not serve any purpose. More revision classes on the use of specific and non-specific articles would assist the learners in their academic writing to avoid such errors.

Errors in Tense

A total of 9% errors recorded for in-service students belonged to the tense category. Selected samples are listed below:

1. ...cyclone Winston strike Fiji and leaves a major destruction (struck, left)
2. For instance, in Sigatoka Valley the farmers losing crops and vegetables....(lost)
3. Irregular rainfall is dangerous as it tend to destroy.... (tends)
4. ...the government of Fiji in 2012 begins relocating villages...(began)
5. The earth's climate nowadays are changing...(is)

Compared to pre-service (12%), in-service are better at tenses. However, the errors highlighted in 5.2.3 demonstrate that in-service students are uncertain when to use past simple, past participle and present simple tenses.

Errors in Clarity

The category of 'clarity' had a percentage of 6%. This finding was not identified in earlier researches as derived from the literature review. Another interesting point to highlight is that even though the academic essay writing was attempted by in-service students who have some years of experience in their work field, they still have difficulty in expressing clarity in their written English.

The following are selected examples from their writing samples:

1. Especially those that are related to the human development.... (the sentence begins abruptly without the subject)
2. ...threatens to low lying islands, such as exist on the coral atolls...(unclear)
3. Global warming being the highest contributing factor to climate change which represents one of the biggest threats to sustainable development. (needs clarity of the idea being put forward)
4. It brings all of us in the global community together to end all forms of poverty, fight inequality, tackle climate change and leave no-one behind, whenever they live in the planet. (needs clarity of the point being discussed)
5. Climate change has a lot of effects on the planet, will elaborate on the common effects of climate change... (needs to clarify what will be elaborated).

To sum up, in-service students are having difficulty in the usage of articles with 15% of errors in the redundancy category. Furthermore, the highest category of errors is mechanics and from the sample it was revealed that the students are confused with punctuation and capitalization. Compared to the pre-service students, in-service students have a challenge in expressing themselves in written English. This was evident by the finding of 6% of the population having difficulty in clarity which was not present in the samples of pre-service students.

CONCLUSION

The research has revealed that the top six errors for pre-service Bachelor of Science and in-service Bachelor of

Education undergraduate students are mechanics, redundancy, subject-verb agreement, preposition, vocabulary choice, tense, incomplete structures, articles, word form and clarity. Error in mechanics was the highest for both pre-service and in-service with 30% and 50% respectively. The researchers of the present study attest that students in the first year are usually careless with spelling, punctuation and capitalization. They have shown to be unsure of when a word needs to be capitalized. One recommendation is to include a component on concrete, proper and abstract nouns in their English language course. Furthermore, one of the reasons for redundancy in the students' essays is that they are unable to recognize important words in the sentences. Findings imply that learners are having difficulty in editing their sentences to maintain the pivotal elements of it; they rather go on using redundant words.

Reaffirming the purpose of this study, it can be implied that area of error analysis of L2 learning processes has been of great interest to researchers (Darus & Subramanian, 2009; Darus & Ching, 2009; Sarfraz, 2011). "The study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners (i.e. Error Analysis or EA), either in their speech or writing or both has been brought under consideration by many educators, EFL teachers, linguists, and researchers throughout the world" (Heydari, 2012). The process of understanding the errors made by students who use English as a second language helps educators and researchers identify areas of difficulty within the curriculum and which leads to improvement of teaching strategies in classrooms. Therefore, in general the findings illustrate that there is a need to address the different types of errors that undergraduate students are making in their academic writing. Remedial lessons on usage of articles, word formation and preposition is required in the course curriculum. This study provides a guide for learners as well as teachers of English for Academic Studies to focus their attention on the errors that need to be minimized in order to achieve English proficiency.

Conclusively, there are implications for future research that can be derived from the present study. The research did not look at the possibility of errors occurring due to first language (L1) interferences. For a multilingual country, Fiji has the potential of venturing into this research in the future. Another area of interest is to examine the errors of postgraduate students to discover if there is an improvement in their academic writing after graduation.

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