Language Errors Produced by Teachers of English: A Study Based on the Teachers Pursuing a Bachelor of Education Degree in Sri Lanka

Anoma Abeywickremasinghe Gunawardana*

Department of Language Studies, University of Vocational Technology, No.100, Kandawala Road, Ratmalana, 10390, Sri Lanka

Corresponding Author: Anoma Abeywickremasinghe Gunawardana, E-mail: anoma_ya@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Errors are a reflection of competence level of language users. Therefore, with the purpose of understanding the competence level of teachers of English, the present study analyzed errors produced by twenty three non-native English speaking teachers pursuing a Bachelor of Education degree in Sri Lanka. Employing qualitative content analysis method, examination answer scripts and written compositions were scrutinized to identify, classify, describe and explain errors. The findings of the study revealed that these participants commit more errors than mistakes reflecting a lower competence in English. They require more improvement in grammar skills than other levels of English. Sub levels of language which need to be improved mainly are articles, prepositions, verbs, punctuation, compounds, lexical verbs and nouns and sequencing of words in sentences. Direct translations, inability to distinguish between formal and informal use of language and use of colloquial features of spoken Sri Lankan English in writing were three main reasons for producing errors and they were observed mainly in errors of articles, prepositions, lexical noun and verb phrases and sequencing of adverbial and prepositional phrases in sentences. However, the overall results of the study indicated that the participants commit errors due to interference from both first language and target language. Evaluation of overall errors produced by the participants showed that they produce more local errors which affect only the grammar of the sentences without affecting the understanding of the utterances produced. These findings mainly imply that these teachers of English still need to improve their knowledge of English and it is also possible that these errors could impact the competence level of their learners when learning the target language.

INTRODUCTION

English Language Learning (ELL) and English Language Teaching (ELT) in Sri Lanka is a heavily researched area which has received significant attention in mainstream education during the last few decades. Recent studies have explored English education in the country in different angles. At present, research based on English as a Second Languagee (ESL) teacher is viewed as an important factor which has a strong impact on teaching effectively to ELLs in classrooms. In addition to teaching the language, ESL teachers are expected to be proficient and qualified to contribute to the improvement of standards of overall English. For instance, many teachers of English from all most all schools in the country still use their first language (L1) to teach English in the classrooms in Sri Lanka. Therefore, in order to develop learners' language proficiency, language teachers should be well equipped with a good practical command of the target language (TL). Otherwise improving students' language proficiency would be a very difficult task to accomplish. Further the teachers' find difficulties in handling especially the English materials in advanced classes effectively due to their language level and pedagogic competence. According to this view, language proficiency of ESL teachers is a crucial factor which directly affects the competency level of learners and the achievements in the English education system of the country.

At present, professional development of language teachers in Sri Lanka is given more emphasis through several projects by both local and global authorities. Despite this significance attached to professional skills improvement of language teacher, an understanding of language proficiency of ESL teachers still remains a highly overlooked area of research in the field of ESL teacher improvement in Sri Lanka. Consequently, this prevents us from understanding areas of language competencies ESL teachers should develop and how their low language competencies affect their teaching practices and learners' language achievement in classrooms. Understanding language weaknesses of ESL teachers is a significant area of study in any second (L2) and foreign language (FL) scenario in the world. A study from the World Bank (as cited in Liyanage, 2010) reports that "improving the English language capabilities of teachers could yield

broad benefits to students" (p. 217). In this context, it has been felt important to investigate the level of writing competence of ESL teachers by analyzing the errors they commit in their academic writing. Analysis of errors produced by the teachers of English in their writing will provide evidence for their in-built knowledge or how they have internalized the language, thereby provide remedial measures to help them overcome errors. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated for this study.

1. What type of deviant utterances do participants produce more in their academic writing?
2. To what levels of language do errors belong when they are classified?
3. To what sub levels of language do the errors belong when they are classified?
4. What is the nature of the majority errors committed by the participants?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Error Analysis is a popular method among the researchers and scholars in the field of language learning and teaching, which is applied to analyze the written and spoken performances of leaners of L2 and FL. Although an error is considered a negative characteristic of language learning which should be avoided or eradicated by tradition, the more recent acceptance of such errors is established with the viewpoint that it assists learners and teachers to gain an insight into how language learning takes place. Further, it is expounded as a tool which provides evidence for active learning progress of the student in learning the new language. One crucial point Corder made in 1967 (as cited in James, 2013) about errors of learners was "errors are evidence of the learners' in-built syllabus, or of what they have taken in, rather than what teachers think what they have put in: output should not be equated with input" (p. 12).

Error Analysis

Stephen Pit Corder is the famous linguist who presented the theory of EA and it is a result of reactions made towards the severe criticisms Contrastive Analysis (CA) received in 1960s. David Crystal (as cited in Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011) defined EA in language teaching and learning as the study of unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a FL. James (2013) described EA as the "study of linguistic ignorance". He further stated that this is an attempt to examine what learners do not know about the learnt language and how they manage to cope with their ignorance. Similarly, Al-kreshen (2016) views errors as important units that the FL teachers should identify and evaluate to "understand linguistic reasons" for committing such errors. Being aware of types of errors leaners produce when learning the TL would help teachers to gain an insight into the knowledge level of the learner and this "could be a first step to introduce L2 teachers to the knowledge of learners' language" (p. 49). Therefore, the Error Analyst's objective is to investigate "the L1 learner's ignorance of the TL" (p. 62).

EA has also been defined in terms of an attempt to investigate how learners understand underlying rules of the TL. For instance, Gass & Selinker (2008) described EA as a process which focuses more on the field of L2 acquisition highlighting its contribution towards research related to pedagogy, language learning and theory, the psychology & linguistics (p. 102). In support of the same notion, Gass & Selinker (2008) stated that one major goal in carrying out an EA is pedagogical remediation. They highlighted errors as "red flags" and they considered them to be providing evidence to understand the "state of a learner's knowledge of the L2". They further said that errors should not be considered as "products of imperfect learning" and to be ignored by teachers, but consider them as important language units to understand the language learning process of the students (p. 102). Hence, in the discussion of language acquisition, EA is often viewed as one major methodology investigating learner language and L2 acquisition and it could be used as a tool through which teachers and instructors could assist learners in their learning process as well as predict and take measures to help overcome errors.

Ellis (1994) also presented the significance of EA which was highlighted by Corder relating it with the teacher, researcher and the learner as follows. Firstly, the EA provides the teacher important information about the knowledge level achieved by the leaner and it is identified as a traditional role of EA. Secondly and thirdly, the researchers could gather evidence to analyze how the leaner learns the language and the learners could realize how the rules of the TL function. Therefore, EA plays a new role with the researchers whose main interest is to analyze the process of L2 acquisition (p. 48). In addition, this is an important approach to be practiced in teaching and learning ESL at any context as it helps reveal several problematic areas in learning and teaching the TL to teachers, researchers, syllabus designers, text book writers, etc. (Wijeratne & Jeyaseelan, 2015).

James (2013) identified EA as one of the most suitable schemes that can be used to handle the errors of "relatively advanced learners". He further stated that "this is far from the truth, and the scope of EA is wide and widening. EA is of relevance to a good many important and vexatious issues" (p. 25). It is presently used as a research method to discover learners' acquisition of L2 showing signs of a come – backs. Therefore, EA is identified as one of the best approaches that can be used to describe and explain errors which ultimately help ascertain "the sources of these errors and the reasons behind their continued occurrence year after year with different groups of learners" (Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 97).

Error Analysis Procedure

The original EA approach introduced by Corder in 1974 evolved since decades with several inputs into its procedure of analyzing errors by many scholars. An extensive study on previous research based on EA approach revealed that the steps of the procedure differs according to the four explanations by the four scholars namely Ellis, (1994), Brown (2007), Gass & Selinker (2008) and Corder (as cited in Richards, 1974). Accordingly, Corder's EA approach (as cited in Richards, 1974) consists the three steps: identification of

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errors, description of errors and explanation of errors. Error identification process includes the "recognition of idiosyncrasy" as the primary step where the overtly and covertly deviant utterances are recognized separately. Description of errors is done linguistically by comparing the two language forms identified. They are described by considering a "common set of categories and relations". "A better description of errors contributes directly to an account of what learners know and do not know at that moment in his career" (Richards, 1974, p.170). Corder's (as cited in Richards, 1974) explanation of errors is psycholinguistic as it is an attempt to identify reasons for the nature of the errors produced. He has highlighted the importance of explanation of errors mentioning that the errors committed by learners will not be of much importance to help improve teaching of the language unless the reasons for committing errors are understood.

Gass & Selinker (2008) introduced the EA approach utilizing the six steps, collection of data, identification of errors, classification of errors, quantification of errors, analysis of source of errors and remediation of errors. In this procedure the step used by Corder to describe errors is excluded. According to Gass & Selinker, data for the analysis should be collected first either orally or in writing, then all erroneous utterances should be identified. Next, the types of errors should be identified by classifying them into grammatical categories such as agreement and irregular verbs. Subsequently, errors classified are presented quantitatively by calculating error frequencies and percentages. Finally, after identifying error sources remedial measures should be introduced through pedagogical interventions.

Ellis (1994) introduced five steps to carry out an EA, based on the three step procedure introduced by Corder in 1974. They are; collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and evaluation of errors. In addition to the three steps of Corder's EA approach as explained in Richards (1974), the two steps; collection of a sample of leaner language and evaluation of errors are additions to the approach explained by Ellis (1994). Evaluation of errors is the final step of the process through which analysts find out how errors affect students. Ellis mentions that the studies on EA do not consider this step as it is an issue which should be handled separately.

Brown (2007) explained Corder's three step EA approach in two steps; identification and description of errors and determining the sources of errors. The first two steps in Corder's three step approach are explained under one step as identification and description of errors. Explanation of errors is renamed as determining the sources of errors. In addition to the two sources of errors explained by Corder; inter-lingual and intra-lingual factors, Brown (2007) identifies two other sources of errors namely context of learning and communication strategies.

Hence, considering the steps of EA process explained hitherto, the researcher adapts the three step process identification, description and explanation of errors introduced by Corder in 1974 (as cited in Richards, 1974). In addition, the third step of the EA process; classification of errors which

was introduced by Gass & Selinker (2008) will be incorporated into the three step process, thereby the process of EA of the current study will be based on the four steps; identification, classification, description and explanation of errors.

Errors Produced by Advanced Learners of English in Sri Lanka

In the discussion of Sri Lankan studies on analyzing errors, lack of proficiency in English at university level is often viewed as one major concern among many L2 researchers (Abeywickrama, 2010; Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011; Navaz, 2017; Samaranayake, 2017; Sanmuganathan, 2017; Wijeratne & Jeyaseelan, 2015). According to these studies, one of the primary concerns is even though English is taught for nearly 13 years at school level in Sri Lanka, errors committed by majority of undergraduates in universities are numerous both in writing and speaking. "Some of these students have been studying English for their whole lives and still, their errors are numerous" (Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 99). Jayasundara & Premarathna (2011) also supported this observational finding when they said, "most of the undergraduates have not gained the proficiency in English language and they use erroneous English in their academic writing as well as in their oral performances. Even though they have been learning English for number of years, errors they commit are numerous" (p. 01). As a result, recent research has explored various errors committed by students specially undergraduates in universities which further highlight the significance of analyzing adult language proficiency in Sri Lanka. However, even among the existing research on EA, only a very few studies have investigated in detail the distinction between errors and mistakes. Further, these research cover a wide variety of leaner groups. However, EAs based on teachers of L2 and FL are hardly available and lack of such research hinders the understanding of the impact of teacher competence on learners' acquisition of L2 and FL. Therefore, research which observes and examines teachers' language competence level is of vital importance for all learners, teachers, researchers and policy makers for further improvement of language learning and teaching process.

Language Competencies of Teachers of English in Sri Lanka

When drawing our attention to the competence levels of non native English speaking (NNES) teachers in the Asian countries that have affected the learners' low L2 and FL skills, Matsuda & Matsuda (as cited in Braine, 2012) explains that nearly 80% of English language teachers in the world are Non native Speakers (NNS) of English. Therefore, their teaching as well as other traits as teachers significantly impact on the students affecting every aspect of the field of ELT (p. 210).

Bachman (as cited in Braine, 2010) defines language proficiency as "knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it has been acquired" (p. 81). Although the competence level of teacher matters in deciding learners' knowledge

level, research studying teachers' language competence and its impact on students are hardly available. Jayasundara & Premarathna (2011) points out that the teachers' knowledge of grammar and how they use it practically determines the effectiveness of the learner in learning the language. Braine (2010) with his experience reports that the proficiency level of Sri Lankan English teachers has alarmingly dropped. Reasoning out this statement he stated that the habit of reading in English among teachers is one of the least practiced. The only instance they use English is in the classrooms for teaching. "An experienced teacher trainer in Sri Lanka once told me that some of her trainees spoke Pidgin English. The situation is similar in other countries. The proficiency level of the majority of English teachers in peripheral EFL countries would shock many of us" (p. 78).

Gajadeera (2003) shows the dearth of English experts and competent English teachers in the education system as the greatest obstacle for these failures. Further, Raheem (as cited in Wijeskera, 2012) says that teacher inadequacies arising from the lack of experience, ill-developed pedagogical practices and the lack of proficiency are the challenges that have to be interceded through massive re-skilling of teachers. However, as Pasternak and Bailey (as cited in Braine, 2010) explained many NNES teachers possess sufficient knowledge but not skills, thereby making errors in speaking and writing. (p. 82). According to Braine (2010) writing in English is the biggest challenge to NNS as many of them are not good writers.

Therefore, it is important that language teachers possess a higher competence level as they are the teachers of that language and exemplar for students. ESL teachers are also required to engage in continuous language improvement activities because majority of NNES teachers "appear to be stagnating in terms of their language proficiency because they have ceased to acquire the language" (Braine, 2010, p. 84). Therefore, it is essential to analyze teachers' language skills and make them aware of their weaknesses, suggest remedial measures to help them improve their skills which will otherwise directly affect the skills acquired by the learners. Hence, through this study the researcher attempts to analyze the errors produced by thrity two ESL teachers in their academic writing.

METHOD

This study was also carried out with the objective of identifying types of errors produced by the participants after analyzing the written compositions. Therefore, this study mainly made use of the qualitative method and to collect qualitative data, examination answer scripts, written compositions and task sheets given to attempt correcting errors were analyzed. To represent gathered qualitative data, quantitative method was utilized.

Research Design

Utilizing the qualitative method, this study made use of in-depth qualitative content analyzing approach (Dornyei, 2007, p. 246) which is usually utilized to analyze "written,

verbal or visual communication messages" (Elo & Kyngas, 2007, p. 107) with the objective of identifying types of errors produced by the participants after analyzing the written compositions.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The target population of the study was ESL teachers employed in public sector schools in Sri Lanka possessing diploma and certificate level qualifications in ELT. The accessible population was all the ESL teachers pursuing the B. Ed. in ELT degree at the University of Vocational Technology, Sri Lanka. Sample was thirty two ESL teachers pursuing the weekend B. Ed. in ELT degree program and selected by using the criterion sample method (Dornyei, 2007, p. 128). These teachers teach English to secondary school students studying in ninth, tenth and eleventh grades and the schools are located in different regions of the country. Moreover, these teachers belong to diverse age groups possessing ESL teaching experience from 02 to 25 years and they are absorbed to the public school system to teach ESL considering the diploma and certificate level qualifications they have earned. According to the Ministry of Education (2017), the percentage of graduate teachers in Sri Lankan public school system is 44.2%. The rest 55.1% of teachers are non-graduate trained teachers qualified either with a diploma or certificate in ELT. Hence, the selected sample is a representation of the majority teachers in the country. In addition, the mother tongue of thirty one participants was Sinhala and one participant was Tamil.

Instrumentation

Instruments used in the study were examination answer scripts, written compositions, and task sheets given to attempt correcting errors. In addition to examination answer scripts, natural and spontaneous written compositions were collected through an experimental elicitation done "cross – sectionally with the primary objective of analyzing those to identify errors committed by the participants. After a careful scutinization of the examination answer scripts and essays, thirty two task sheets were prepared including the deviant utterances produced by the participants. They were given to respective participants to attempt correcting their own errors with the purpose of distinguishing between errors and mistakes. Finally, the dentified errors were analyzed using the EA procedure adapted to find answers to the research question number 2, 3 and 4.

Collection of Data

Data collection procedure under each instrument is explained in the following sub sections.

Examination answer scripts

As one primary source of data, samples of examination answer scripts of the participants were examined to identify deviant utterances produced by them. Sixty four answer

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scripts were selected for this purpose. One essay type answer was selected from each script.

Written compositions

Next primary source of data for this study was samples of written compositions collected from the participants. A topic was given to them to write an essay of about 300 words. The topic "Time Management" was selected with the objective of providing the participants a simple essay topic that they are familiar with. This topic is one of the five essay topics taught to students in ninth, tenth and eleventh grades in Sri Lankan public schools aiming the English language paper in the second national level school examination G.C.E. Ordinary Level Examination. The participants were provided sufficient time for writing and all thirty two participants participated in this activity actively.

Task Sheets Including Deviant Utterances

Examination answer scripts and written compositions were examined sentence by sentence and word by word to find deviant utterances produced by the participants. Then separate task sheets were prepared including only the deviant utterances for participants to attempt correcting them. This was steered with the objective of distinguishing between errors and mistakes they commit. The participants were given ample time for this activity.

Analysis of Data

Based on Corder's EA procedure as explained by Richards (1974) the selected content from the examination answer scripts and written compositions was analyzed qualitatively. Data gathered qualitatively were analyzed quantitatively using Minitab 19. Tables, pie charts and Pareto Charts were designed for the representation of data.

Identification of Errors

Firstly, each essay was examined word by word and then sentence by sentence and the utterances that deviated from the rules of the TL were identified and highlighted for the convenience of the researcher. As the first step, the deviant utterances were identified separately as overt and covert utterances. Next, utilizing the error identification procedure introduced by S. P. Corder in 1967, the sentences that could be interpreted within the context meaningfully were identified separately and they were reconstructed into well-formed utterances in the TL. Subsequently, the original utterances and the reconstructed utterances were compared to identify the rules that deviated from the TL. Utterances which could not be interpreted within the context meaningfully were translated into L1 of the participants in order to identify whether they could be interpreted in the context with a meaning. The sentences which could be translated into L1 were translated back into the TL and the rules that deviated from the TL were identified. Following this procedure, the total number of deviant utterances was identified. Finally,

errors and mistakes were identified separately. For this purpose, task sheets were prepared using deviant utterances produced by each participant and given to them to attempt correcting the deviations. The deviant utterances which were corrected by the participants were identified separately as mistakes and the utterances which were not attempted were identified as errors.

Classification of Errors

Classification of errors was done by dividing the utterances into levels of language as explained by Brown (2007). The levels of language were further classified into sub levels of language with the purpose of gaining an in-depth understanding of language difficulties encountered by the participants. Levels of language and sub levels of language were decided based on the explanations provided by Brinton (2000) and Yule (2010).

Description of Errors

To describe errors, six levels of language and a selected number of sub levels of language under each level of language were considered. Three criteria were followed to select sub levels of language for the description of errors. Firstly, the sub levels of language which represented above 50% of the total errors under each level of language were selected for the description. Under this criterion, punctuation which represented 53%, word order which represented 52% and compounds which represented 81% were selected. Secondly, under grammar and lexical levels, the sub levels of language which represented the highest number of errors were selected because none of the sub levels under grammar and lexical represented above 50% of the total errors. Hence, the three sub levels of language: prepositions, articles and verbs under grammar and the two sublevels: verbs and nouns under lexical were selected for the description of errors. Thirdly, all errors under semantic were described because semantic did not comprise any sub levels. Utilizing these three criteria, nine sub levels of language were selected for the description of errors.

In addition, the errors belonging to the sub levels of language under grammar, lexical, syntax and mechanic selected for the description were divided into the four general categories omission, misinformation (substitution) and misordering as explained by Ellis (1994) and addition as explained by Brown (2007). Errors belonging to the sub levels of language under morphology and semantics were divided into categories based on type of word class and sentence structure.

Explanation of Errors

Errors described will be explained based on the two major sources of errors: inter-lingual and intra-lingual.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

All possible measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants during each stage of this study. Firstly,

required permission was taken from the authorities to collect examination answer scripts. Secondly, with regard to the written compositions for the qualitative content analysis all thirty two participants read and signed an informed consent form which guaranteed that their identities would be kept confidential. Further, the participants were made aware of the objectives, instrumentation, and procedure of the study, Further, pseudonyms were used to refer to the participants in data analysis and result discussion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Identification of Errors

Firstly, the deviant utterances identified from the examination answer scripts and the written compositions were classified into overtly and covertly deviant utterances. Next, the overtly and covertly deviant utterances were fed through the error identification procedure and analyzed further to distinguish between errors and mistakes.

Overtly & Covertly Deviant Utterances

After a careful examination, a total of 1209 deviant utterances produced by the participants were identified. Majority of the deviant utterances were overt producing ungrammatical utterances at "sentence level". They totaled 1201 representing 99% of the total deviant utterances. The least common type of deviant utterance was covert producing grammatical utterances at "sentence level" but unintelligible at "discourse level". They recorded a total of 8 representing only 1% of the total deviant utterances.

Errors and Mistakes

After analyzing all the task sheets which were given back to the participants to attempt correcting the deviant utterances, a total of 248 mistakes out of the 1209 deviant utterances were identified. It was only 20.5% of the total deviant utterances. According to Figure 1, 79.5% of deviant utterances are errors which total 961 out of the 1209 deviant utterances. These errors were difficult for the participants to self – correct.

Classification of Errors

One of the main objectives of this research was to identify the levels of language the errors committed by the participants belong to. Firstly, the errors were classified into levels of language, and then each level of language was classified into sub levels of language.

Classification of Errors into Levels of Language

Number of errors identified represented 79.5% of the total number of deviant utterances found in the essays. When they were classified into their respective levels of language, six levels were identified. They are, grammatical, morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and mechanical.

As given in Figure 2 the Pareto Chart, the highest number of errors, indicating 57% of the total was reported under grammar. Mechanical errors were identified as the second highest level of language with errors exhibiting 20%. Lexical and syntactic levels reported 9% each while morphological and semantic levels collectively reported 5% as the categories with fewer numbers of errors committed by the respondents. Semantics was the level of language comprising the least number of errors. In these results, 77.7% of the total errors are from grammatical and mechanical levels of language. Over 94.8% of all errors belong to the first 4 levels of language: grammar, mechanic, lexical and syntactic.

Classification of Errors into Sub Levels of Language

Identified errors were further divided into thirty four levels of language. Grammar being the level of language with the highest number of errors was further classified into sixteen sub levels. The nine parts of speech; pronouns, determiners, verbs, prepositions, nouns, conjunctions, articles, adverbs and adjectives, four other traditional grammar functions; number, tense, voice, agreement as well as subject and object of sentences were included in this category (Brinton, 2000; Yule, 2010). Mechanical (Kraichoke, 2017; Polio, 1997) errors usually comprise the orthographic deviations: spelling and capitalization as well as punctuation. In addition, the researcher included use of contractions under this category as they are not appropriate to be used in formal
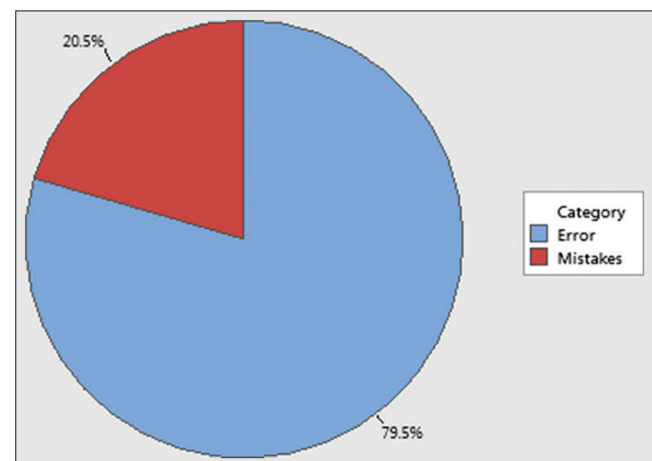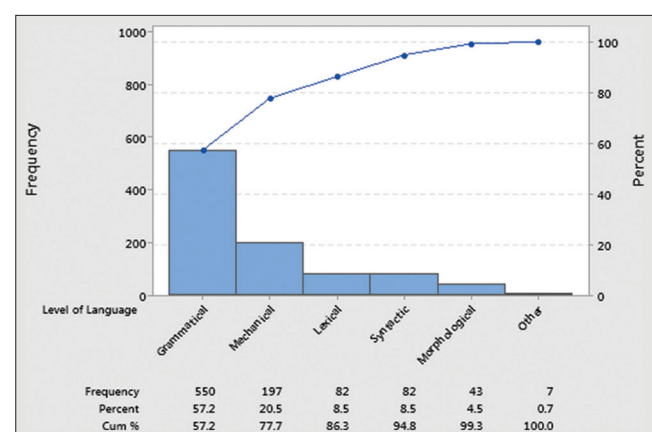

Figure 1. Errors and mistakes

Figure 2. Classification of errors into levels of language

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and academic writings. Hence, mechanical errors recording the second highest number of errors comprised four sub levels altogether. Representing 9% of the total erroneous utterances, syntax was further classified into two levels as word order and sentence structure. Errors committed while placing words and phrases in an orderly manner producing unusual sentence structures were included under these two categories.Lexical errors where phrases and sentences do not conform to lexical rules of the TL were divided into the nine sub levels; subject, verbs, nouns, adverbs, pronouns, object, conjunctions, adjectives and determiners. Morphology con-

tains erroneous structures used to form words in the TL. Hence, compounds and affixes were included in this category. Phrases and sentences carrying "odd" (Yule, 2010, p.113) meaning which deviate from the context of the writing were classified under semantics. This category was not divided into any sub levels of language. In summary of classification of errors into levels of language and sub levels of language, Table 1 illustrates the frequency of errors under each sub level of language and their percentages. This reveals that the participants commit more errors in using grammar and mechanics in their writing.

Description of Errors

Description of errors identified was based on the sub levels under each level of language as shown in Table 2.

Description of Grammatical Errors – Articles

When errors in articles were divided into definite and indefinite articles separately, majority belonged to errors in definite article. It is 72% of the total number of errors in articles. Indefinite articles represented only 28% of the total errors identified in articles. When classified into the four general categories; omission, substitution, misordering and addition, the errors in articles belongd only to the categories; addition, omission and substitution. Description of erroneous articles mainly involved the addition of the definite article. The participants have overused the definite article which is inappropriate when compared with the rules of the TL.

According to Figure 3, the highest number of errors in definite article belonged to additions representing 48% of the total errors in articles. When 23% of errors in definite article were omissions, only 1% was recorded under substitutions. Although the errors in definite article recorded additions as the highest, majority of errors in indefinite articles were omissions. It represented 20% of the total errors in articles produced by the participants. Addition of indefinite articles represented only 5% of the total errors in articles. Substitutions recorded the lowest number of errors in indefinite articles similar to substitution of the definite article representing only 1% of the total errors in articles.

Table 1. Frequency of rrors under each sub level of language and their percentages

Levels of Language	Sub Levels of Language	Frequency	Percentage%
Grammar	Articles	96	17.5
	Prepositions	92	16.7
	Verbs	80	14.5
	Word choice	36	6.5
	Number	35	6.4
	Adverbs	33	6.0
	Noun	32	5.8
	Conjunctions	27	4.9
	Tense	21	3.8
	Agreement	20	3.6
	Determiners	20	3.6
	Adjective	17	3.1
	Subject	17	3.1
	Voice	10	1.8
	Pronouns	9	1.6
	Object	5	1.1
Mechanic	Punctuation	104	52.8
	Spelling	57	28.9
	Contractions	24	12.2
	Capitalization	12	6.1
Syntax	Word Order	43	52.4
	Sentence Structure	39	47.6
Lexical	Verbs	32	39.0
	Nouns	17	20.7
	Adverbs	14	17.1
	Adjectives	7	8.5
	Determiners	5	6.1
	Subject	3	3.7
	Pronouns	2	2.4
	Object	1	1.3
	Conjunctions	1	1.2
Morphology	Compounds	35	81.4
	Affixes	8	18.6
Semantic	Meaning	7	100.0
Total		961	

Table 2. Sub levels of language considered for the description of errors

Level of Language	Sub Levels of Language
Grammatical	Articles
	Prepositions
	Verbs
Mechanical	Punctuation
Lexical	Verbs
	Nouns
Syntactic	Word Order
Morphological	Compounds
Semantic	Meaning

Description of Grammatical Errors – Prepositions

Another difficult sub level of language for the participants of this study was the use of prepositions. When errors in prepositions were classified into the four general categories omission, substitution, misordering and addition, only errors of addition, omission and substitution were recorded. All three categories shared equal importance with slight differences in terms of number of errors produced. The analysis of prepositional errors was mainly based on how prepositions collocate with other language items in the sentence or how prepositions are often being used together with other words in a sentence in a way that happens more frequently in English language. As Figure 4 indicates, highest number of errors was recorded under substitutions representing 42% of the total errors in prepositions. Additions were the second highest category representing 34%. Omissions represented 24% of the total errors in prepositions reporting a significant influence on producing erroneous utterances.

Description of Grammatical Errors –Verbs

Classification of erroneous verbs also recorded only under the three general categories omission, substitution and addition. Although the number of errors under each category differed slightly, they were equally significant in causing erroneous utterances in essays. The highest number of errors in verbs was recorded under substitutions. As indicated in Figure 5, 43% of errors were committed due to substitution.
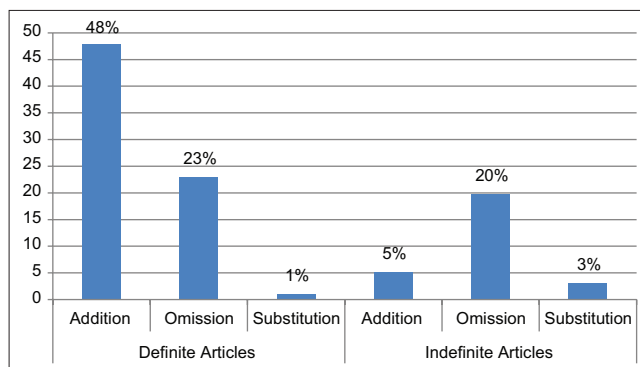
When 30% of errors belonged to omissions, 28% belonged to additions.
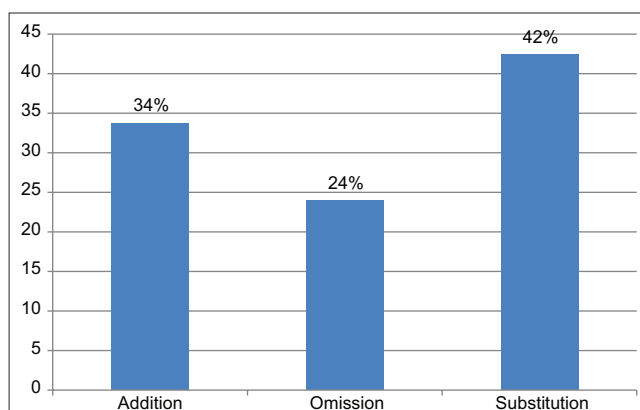
Description of Mechanical Errors – Punctuation

The sub level of language which recorded the highest number of errors under mechanics was punctuation. Classification of punctuation errors recorded three types of error categories. They are omissions, additions and substitutions. According to Figure 6, 87% of errors in punctuation were recorded under omissions as the category with the highest number of errors in punctuation. When 13% represented additions, substitutions represented only 1% as the least category of punctuation errors produced by the participants.

Description of Lexical Errors – Verbs

This section describes the errors committed by the participants while deciding the most appropriate verb to imply the exact meaning based on the context of the essay which will produce a well – formed sentence. Analysis of errors in lexical verbs is mainly about substitution of the most appropriate verb with an inappropriate verb. Therefore, out of the four general categories of errors addition, omission, substitution and misordering, all errors in lexical verbs belonged to substitutions. A close observation of errors of lexical verbs revealed that they could be classified into three different categories considering the type of substituted verb. As shown in Table 3 they are the main verbs, verb phrases and homophones.

Description of Lexical Errors – Nouns

This section describes the errors committed by the participants while deciding the most appropriate noun that could be
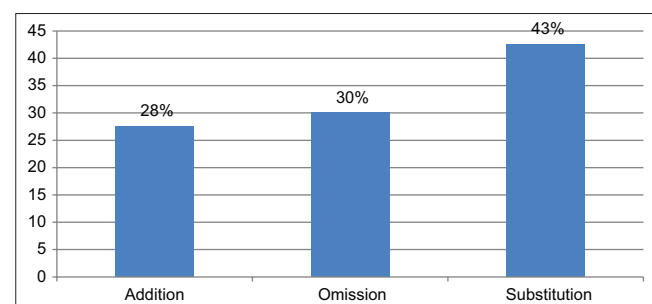

Figure 3. Description of article errors
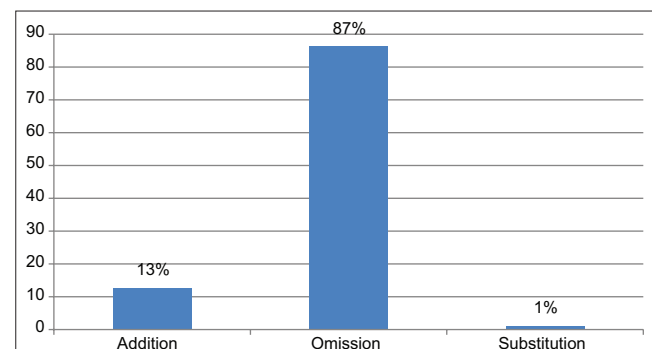

Figure 4. Description of prepositional errors

Figure 5. Description of verb errors

Figure 6. Description of punctuation errors

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used to produce a well – formed sentence. All errors in lexical nouns also belonged only to substitutions. The analysis classified these errors into three different categories considering the type of substituted noun. As shown in Table 4 they are the nouns, noun phrases and homophones.

Description of Syntactic Errors – Word Order

Errors committed while arranging language items of a sentence in sequence is described under word order. Hence, errors of word order in sentences uniquely represent misordering. These errors were classified into five categories based on word classes. They are adverbs, prepositional phrases, determiners, adjectives and nouns. In addition, errors committed when placing subject and object of sentences in wrong order were also identified. According to Table 5, the highest number of errors was recorded under misordering of adverbs representing 42% of the total errors in word order. When prepositions recorded 30% as the second highest category of errors, nouns represented 14% as third highest category of errors. Errors under determiners, adjectives, subject and object collectively represented only 13% of total errors in word order.

Description of Morphological Errors – Compounds

Compounding is the process of combining words together to produce a word with a new meaning. As a productive word formation process, the participants have used numerous compounds in their writing. However, they find difficulties in the formation or the combining process of these words. Errors in compounds cannot be classified under the four general categories addition, omission, misordering and substitution. Therefore, they were classified into five categories based on the type of word class to describe the manner in which the errors are produced. They are nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions. Table 6 presents frequencies and percentages of errors belonging to each word class. The most common error which has indicated more than half of the errors were reported under compound nouns exhibiting 54%. Errors under compound verbs, adjectives and adverbs indicated almost equal numbers representing 11%, 14% and

14% respectively. Errors of compound prepositions were the least in number indicating 6%.

Description of Semantic Errors

Semantics is the category identified with the least number of errors. It represented only 1% of the total erroneous utterances. These erroneous utterances were well formed syntactically, but interpreting them in the context of the essays was not possible. Semantic errors also cannot be classified under the four general categories addition, omission, misordering and substitution. Therefore, they were classified into three categories based on the structure of the erroneous utterances. They are words, phrases and sentences without meaning. Two sentences, three phrases and two ambiguous words which do not imply any meaning in the context of communication were identified.

Explanation of Errors

Several prominent features were identified from the indepth anysis of the errors produced by the participants. Analysis of the nature of errors in articles under grammar showed the use of definite article as the most challenging for the participants. The definite article was heavily overused as a modifier especially with abstract nouns, specific areas of study or practice and nouns in general as in "*Time management means allocation of the time effectively.*", "*We can understand how the people get that much famous*" and "*There are so many ways to practise the time management*". When compared with similar studies on local context conducted with the participation of ESL learners, it was revealed that they tend to overuse both types of articles as they are not aware of the exact place where the articles should be used (Abeywickrama, 2010; Alhaysony, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Premawathie, n.d.;

Table 3. Classification of lexical verbs into error categories

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Main verbs	26	81
Verb phrases	4	13
Homophones	2	6

Table 4. Classification of lexical nouns into error categories

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Nouns	12	71
Homophones	3	18
Noun phrases	2	12

Table 5. Classification of errors in word order into types of errors

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Adverbs	18	42
Prepositions	13	30
Nouns	6	14
Adjectives	3	7
Determiners	1	2
Subject	1	2
Object	1	2

Table 6. Classification of errors in compounds into word classes

Word Class	Frequency	Percentage
Nouns	19	54
Adjectives	5	14
Adverbs	5	14
Verbs	4	11
Prepositions	2	6

Rifamahroof, 2014; M. Samaranayake, 2017; Sun, 2016). Omission of indefinite articles preceding adjectives which modify nouns was another major error category observed under errors in articles. For example, *"Teacher has to make realistic plan to achieve his/her objectives.", "If the task is more important you should give prominent place for that.", "Everybody should plan to work to plan."* and *"On the other-hand as a leader of institute…"*

Both Sinhala and Tamil language structures lack the distinct system of articles, thereby the rules of article usage in English is complex. As a result, acquiring proper usage of articles is a difficult task for ESL learners committing errors resulting from intralingual interference and developmental assumptions. At such instances learners attempt using TL forms with assumptions due to lack of knowledge. Due to failures in understanding the contexts the rules should be applied, they tend to arrive at faulty generalization and apply incomplete rules (Wijeratne & Jeyaseelan, 2015) as in overuse of the definite article with uncountable nouns. However, certain error categories of articles especially omissions are features of "informal colloquial Sri Lankan English" which should not be used in formal written contexts (Meyler, 2007). For instance, omission of indefinite articles with collective nouns and definite article with specific nouns are two such features specific for ESL learners in Sri Lanka.

Further, the description of major language errors revealed that the participants as ESL teachers as well as advanced learners still commit inter-lingual errors which were observable especially in the beginning stages of learning a language (Brown, 2007). This was mainly observed under prepositional errors. One major feature identified through the analysis of prepositional errors was the overuse of prepositions especially with verbs which usually stand-alone without a preposition. For instance use of *on* with the verb *affect* as in *"It directly affects on our students.",* use of *to* with the verb *affect* as in *"It will <u>affect to</u> the whole activity."* and use of *in* with the verb *face* as in *"As a result the learners may <u>face in</u> troubles."*. This is a feature of spoken Sri Lankan English (Gunesekera, 2005). Studies analyzing prepositional errors committed by ESL learners in Sri Lanka produced similar results where undergraduates used prepositions with language forms which required no prepositions (Abeywickrama, 2010; Gunesekera, 2005). The major reason for causing such errors was interference from Sinhala and Tamil which use postpositions instead of prepositions. In English, prepositions are usually used before a noun or pronoun, but in Sinhala the order is the noun followed by the preposition

Although prepositions were overused with verbs due to L1 interference, prepositions were also omitted with certain verbs which require prepositions to produce meaningful sentences as in *"Time management prevents us wasting time.", "We should focus the task at the correct time.", "Therefore, she talks an interesting topic.", "You must listen them.",* and *"…he would not have suffered stress and unsatisfaction.".* Although certain such features are unique to Sri Lankan English, a majority of omissions were results of developmental errors and false hypotheses where the learners attempt using TL forms based on assumptions due to lack of knowledge and overgeneralization of false rules.

Interference of L1 was also the reason for many erroneous substitutions of prepositions especially in place of prepositions which should be used with nouns. Appropriate prepositions which should be used with nouns in English were replaced with equivalent postpositions in Sinhala. For example, *"…you'll end up <u>in</u> no satisfaction.", "We must keep our mind <u>to</u> the task."* and *"There are many advantages <u>in</u> time management."*

Substitution of verbs was the category with the highest number of errors where erroneous verbs were substituted heavily in place of other word classes, verb forms and main verbs. Gerunds were replaced with verbs in the form of main verbs and infinitives as a result of confusion the participants encounter when choosing between a gerund and a verb. Majority of these errors belonged to gerunds which follow prepositions. Substitution of gerund which functions as the subject of the sentence shows that the participants are not familiar with the rules of using and applying gerunds in sentences of the TL. For example, *"Without <u>manage</u> the time or <u>waste</u> the time he or she can't reach to his qualified."* should be rewritten as *"Without <u>managing</u> or by <u>wasting</u> time, he or she cannot reach his or her qualifications."* Also, the sentence *"As people <u>live</u> in a competitive congested society today, they tend to suffer from stress to <u>complete</u> their load of daily works"* shoul be rewritten as *"As people <u>living</u> in a competitive and congested society, today they tend to suffer from stress in <u>completing</u> their load of daily work.".* Similarly, the participants have used infinitives, past participles and present participles interchangeably under substitution of verb forms which results from lack of knowledge of rules in the TL.

Omission of *be* and *do* auxiliaries happen mainly because *be* and 'helping verbs' do not exist in Sinhala (Samaranayake, 2017). Therefore, the participants of the study have omitted using these verbs in their writing in the TL. For instance, the auxiliary verb *be* was omitted specially in sentences written in passive voice as in *"When hardwork adjoined with good time management…"* This phrase should be rewritten as *"When hardwork **is** adjoined with good time management…"* The auxiliary verb *do* was also omitted especially when forming negative clauses as in *"The people who work on time has a good personality comparing with those who not".* The sentence should be rewritten as *"People who work on time has a good personality compared with those who **do** not."* Further, overuse of verbs, especially modal and auxiliary verbs as in *"…the teacher <u>should have</u> to get the fullest advantage…"* and *"At present, people <u>are</u> always tend to their lives…"* are false hypotheses and overgeneralizations where the learners extend the verb rules of TL inappropriately.

Highest number of mechanical errors was recorded under punctuation and the major punctuation omitted was comma mostly after conjunctive adverbs and introductory clauses placed at the beginning of main clauses in sentences as in *"First of all we must have a list of tasks…"* and *"Therefore time management has also become an important topic of discussion today."* Failure to use comma after introductory prepositional phrases such as *"For an example use of modern technology can be shown…"* used to make the utterances

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more meaningful was also a significant feature of omission of comma.This feature can again be explained as an error resulting from lack of knowledge of rules in using punctuation in the TL.

Errors of lexical, syntax, morphology and semantics are relatively very low reflecting that the participants possess a higher competency in those levels of language. Lexical level represented only a fewer number of errors representing only 8% of the total number of errors committed by the participants. When discussing the errors belonging to lexical category, the words and phrases selected are erroneous in terms of appropriateness to the context of the essays, but without harming the rules and structure of the sentence. When considering the verbs and nouns, failure to choose the appropriate word to denote the meaning the writer wants to express, burdens the reader to interpret the meaning leading them to misunderstand the message. Therefore, such verbs and nouns can be identified as errors belonging to "lexical semantics" which studies the meaning of individual words in isolation (Brinton, 2000). For instance, the underlined lexical verbs in the sentences *"Further, if we do not practise time well we may lose some scheduled work."* and *"But if we work according to schedule decided at the beginning of the day, it affects us to be face the life stress free."* have restrictions in combining them with the other language items of the sentence, but the readers could interpret the meanings denoted by the sentences considering their synonymy on surface level. "Selectional restrictions" is the rule of selecting the most appropriate word considering the semantic features and how the words "co-occur" in sentences. When this rule is violated, there is an incompatibility between the words causing "semantic anomaly". When analyzing the meanings of these words, it is evident that the participants committed these errors as a result of intralingual as well as interlingual interference. These errors are intralingual because due to limited knowledge of vocabulary, they have overgeneralized the meanings of words based on false hypotheses. These errors are also interlingual as a result of L1 interference in selecting the appropriate phrases to express ideas of the writer, especially by translating words and phrases directly from colloquial spoken Sinhala into the TL (Gunesekera, 2005). Similarly, the participants have violated the "selectional restrictions" rules when selecting the most appropriate nouns resulting in "semantic anomaly" which are also results of interlingual and intralingual interference. For example, *"...but now a days people waste their time with out doing any meaningful acts."* and *"The most important fact to manage time is molding and following a time table."* The nouns *act* should be replaced with *work* and *molding* with *preparing*.

Errors in syntax also represented only a fewer number of errors from the total (8%) and the analysis of word order under this category revealed that the participants encountered more difficulties in sequencing adverbs and prepositional phrases in sentences especially when using adverbs of manner, frequency, focusing, time and linking. The major reason for committing these errors in producing sentences is the different word patterns in the two languages. As a result,

majority of adverbs are placed in order of spoken Sinhala and Tamil sentences. For instance, the frequency adverbs and time adverbs are used erronaeously as in the sentences *"Because once we spent it, then never ever we can't take it back."* and *"So still we are having the name of "developing country.".* In English, time and frequency adverbs are usually placed in the mid positions either after the subject or verb. However, they are usually placed preceding the subject of the sentence in spoken Sinhala. Not only adverbs, but the positioning of prepositional phrases was also affected by the word order patterns of L1.

Classification of errors in compounds was not based on the four general categories, but the type of word class to describe the manner in which the errors were produced. A majority of errors in compound words was recorded under nouns and they were erroneous as a result of using the words in compound nouns separately instead of together. For example, *"...can use a time table.", "Every one has their…", "...our work load."* and *"...target or dead line."* Major reason for committing errors in forming compound errors was the incomplete application of rules (Richards as cited in Ellis, 1994) where the participants used compound words erroneously in three different manners; use of words which should be written as one word separately, use of words which should be written separately as one word and omission of the hyphen which should be used to separate the words in the compound.

Semantics requires the least emphasis as the level of language with the least number of errors. However, it is important to avoid errors of semantics as much as possible as the participants of this study are ESL teachers. Such errors could mislead their learners completely as they explain the relationships of words and sentences with the context of the essays. Even though the sentences are grammatically correct, if they are erroneous semantically they are largely meaningless in ordinary usage.

Therefore, analysis of nature of errors reveals that the participants commit errors due to interference from both L1 and TL and they tend to either overuse or substitute language items mostly depending on their experience with the mother tongue and TL learning. Moreover, influence of L1 can be described under varieties of English where the participants have a tendency towards using specific features of Sri Lankan English in their writing which is an unconscious effort. Most of these features are informal colloquial utterances which are not acceptable in formal written English (Meyler, 2007). Evaluation of overall errors produced by the participants revealed that they produce more local errors than global errors which affect only the grammar of the sentences without affecting the understanding of the utterance produced (Touchie, 1986).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the language competency of thirty two ESL teachers who pursue a B. Ed. in ELT degree at a Government university in Sri

Lanka by analyzing errors they produce in writing English. Based on indepth qualitative content analysis, the study found a few key error categories produced by the participants who are in-service ESL teachers in Sri Lankan public schools.

As the results indicate, these participants as ESL teachers commit more errors than mistakes failing to correct most of their own errors. Based on findings and recommendations on English language proficiency from research and language education institutes, adult advanced ESL learners, especially teachers are usually capable of correcting 95% of errors produced by them immediately if they are pointed out (Ellis, 1994; Krashen & Pon, as cited in Alberto, 2008). Therefore, when compared with these findings and recommendations, it is clear that the language competency of the participants of this study remains at a lower level. This finding is also very consistent with results of previous research conducted especially in Sri Lanka with the common conclusion that one major reason for less English proficiency among learners is the lack of English proficiency among teachers (Braine, 2010; Gajadeera, 2006; Hettiarachchi, 2010; Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011; K. Perera & Canagarajah, 2010; Wijes-kera, 2012).

Analysis of errors revealed that the participants require more improvement in grammar than other levels of English, specifically, grammar components such as articles, prepositions and verbs. This is an essential requirement as the English textbook series introduced to the public schools in Sri Lanka heavily focus on improving students' writing and grammar (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011; M. Samaranayake, 2017). To help learners achieve expected proficiency in grammar, the teachers should improve their skills further. In addition, another prominent sub level of language the participants need to improve is the use of punctuation, especially the use of comma which affects the flow and precise meaning of utterances. Use of compound words, lexical verbs and nouns and sequencing of words in sentences in English are the other sub levels of language the participants need to improve further.

Compared with the results of previous research on errors produced by language learners, one surprising finding was that the participants of this study comparatively produced less number of errors under traditional grammar categories such as number, tense, voice and agreement. Learners of English usually produce more errors when using this grammar in English.

Further, these participants as NNES teachers commit a considerable number of errors due to L1 interference. Direct translations, inability to distinguish between formal and informal use of language and use of colloquial features of spoken Sri Lankan English in writing are three major reasons for producing errors. These features were observed mainly in errors of articles, prepositions, lexical noun and verb phrases and sequencing of adverbial and prepositional phrases in sentences. However, the overall results of the study indicate that the participants commit errors due to interference from both L1 and TL and they tend to either overuse or substitute language items mostly depending on their experience with the mother tongue and TL learning. Evaluation of overall errors produced by the participants show that they produce more local errors which affect only the grammar of the sentences without affecting the understanding of the utterance produced (Touchie, 1986).

Recommendations

The findings of the study mainly imply that these ESL teachers still need to improve their knowledge of English and it is also possible that these errors could impact the competence levels of their learners when learning the TL. Findings of the study also imply that the lower language competence of teachers has several other consequences such as excessive dependency on the textbooks and the use of mother tongue when teaching their learners (Karunaratne, 2008). This undoubtedly affects the quality of teaching process as well as the learning process. Hence, approaches should be adopted to help teachers overcome these linguistic barriers because possessing a good command of general English practices is vital for them to be confident to perform as teachers with quality.

In order to improve language proficiency of teachers several immediate measures are needed. First of all, an English language assessment benchmark should be introduced as a professional development tool to help teachers assess their own language knowledge level as in many developed countries. This should not assess their qualification but help them improve their language competence. This is a widely used system providing teachers' individualized evidence of their own learning. Next, the introduction of revised and improved in-service teacher training programs was one suggestion by many researchers who identified lack of English proficiency of teachers as one of the difficulties in the development of ESL education in Sri Lanka. Therefore, implementation of a policy designed specifically for the development of English Teacher Education in Sri Lanka incorporating continuous language skills development programs including continuous evaluation and monitoring is a necessity already recognized by the ESL researchers in the country. According to the results of the research by Gunawardana (2019) a considerable number of teachers rated their grammar and writing skills in English to be average while some rated it to be fair. In addition, when a higher number participants rarely engaged in activities for the continuous improvement of grammar and writing skills, a majority of participants disagreed with the comment that they are provided facilities by authorities to help improve their language skills. According to their responses, the only two programs which provided opportunities for language development were zonal level workshops, seminars and quality circles. Therefore, introduction of a language assessment benchmark along with continuous language skills development programs will undoubtedly help teachers improve their overall quality.

Also, it is essential to establish a proper mechanism to encourage all teachers to continue higher studies and engage in research work. By engaging them in these learning processes, their language skills can be improved as they will continuously engage in practicing all four skills. Motivation, critical thinking skills, and meaningful learning experiences

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can also be improved. Moreover, projects in collaboration with language institutes such as British Council should be introduced continuously with the aim of raising language skills of teachers. For example, one of the main objectives of launching the project named "The Teacher Education for English Project (TEE)" in 2018 was to improve teachers' English language proficiency from A2 to B1 in CEFR framework and develop practical skills in teaching language for communication purposes (ColomboPage News Desk, 2018).

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