

A Study of Error Analysis of Written English at College Level: Female Teachers' perspective

**Dr. Muhammad Iqbal*

**Professor, Grand Asian University Sialkot*

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ABSTRACT

Errors and mistakes are inevitable parts of the learning process. For an overall mastery of language all the four skills are important but for Pakistani students, and specially for the students of degree level, writing skill is more important as the students' linguistic competence in the examination is assessed through writing only. Our examinations are writing oriented and although more time and attention is paid to writing skills yet even after so much coaching and care the performance of our students remain very poor. Students keep committing grave errors in large number and remain unable to write even a few sentences in grammatically correct English. Many students at college level fail simply because of the subject of English and many leave their education for good because of repeated failure in this subject. Therefore, the researcher felt a dire need to see into the nature, causes and frequency of errors in written English at degree level with a view to making suggestion to minimize these errors and hence help the teachers as well as students to improve the situation. The aim of the research was to highlight the weak areas of the students while writing English as well as to determine the attitude of the students and the teachers towards written errors. For this purpose, interviews of Five female teachers from different districts of Punjab were conducted for qualitative data and analysis. In the end, on the basis of the findings, conclusion is drawn and suggestions are given for the rectification of errors.

Introduction

Literature Over the years it has been a serious concern of education authorities and English language teachers to enhance the linguistic competence of the students, especially at degree level. Unfortunately, the university results have been quite disappointing for the last many years. A large number of students at degree level fail in English and many cannot continue their education just because of English.

For complete mastery of a language all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are equally important. But writing has assumed a greater importance in our educational set up because our examination system is writing oriented. It has been observed that even after many years of instruction our students keep on committing errors and mistakes both in spoken and written English. It is with this thing in mind

that the researcher has decided to investigate into the problem.

Writing Skills

Writing skills are a very important area of language learning. It is very essential that our students of degree level become proficient in writing essays, letters, reports, paragraphs, dialogues, précis, and other texts, especially related to functional English. Many of our students, after graduation, have to do office correspondence in written English; and if they are not proficient in functional English, they will be at a loss how to do their job satisfactorily. Writing has great importance from psychological point of view as well. It gives confidence to the students who find a tangible proof of their abilities in the form of their own written work. It is also a proof of a student's linguistic competence, proficiency

and knowledge. Besides this, effective communication at the international level is the need of the time as our students will need these skills in the world which is fast changing into a global village.

Research Questions

1. What are the causes of errors committed in written English by the students at degree level in Pakistan?
2. What types of errors are usually committed by the students of degree level in Pakistan?
3. Is negative L1 transfer / interference the major cause of errors in the English writings of Pakistani students at degree level?
4. What is the attitude of the teachers and the students towards errors?

What is an Error?

Hendrickson (1978: p.387) defines an error as "An utterance, form or structure that a particular language teacher deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use or its absence in reading discourse." Richards (1972), Dulay, Burt and Krashan (1982), Norish (1983), Corder (1967) and Klassen (1991) also see errors as deviations from a standard form of the language. James (1998: p.78) defines error as being an instance of language that is unintentionally deviant and is not self-correctable by its author.

Mistake

A mistake can be the result of carelessness, rashness or lack of concentration on the part of the learner. According to Brown (1980:p.165) a mistake is a performance error, "that is either a random guess or a slip in that. It is a failure to utilize a known system correctly." Usually the inconsistent deviation is called 'mistake'. Sometimes a learner 'gets it right' but sometimes he makes a mistake and uses the wrong form (Norish 1987:p.8). According to James (1998:p.78), a mistake is

either intentionally or unintentionally deviant, but self-correctable.

Error Analysis and its Importance

Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors made by the learners. It is a process based on analysis of learner's errors with one clear objective: evolving a suitable and effective teaching learning strategy and remedial measures, necessary in certain clearly marked-out areas of foreign language. It is a multidimensional and multifaceted process which involves much more than simply analyzing errors of the learners. A sound knowledge of errors and EAS can help a lot to minimize the errors committed by learners at degree level.

We see that EAS is a useful way of identifying, describing and interpreting the error, discovering its cause and selecting the procedure for remedial work. This study is undertaken with a hope that it will point out some weak aspects/problem areas of ELT in Pakistan and will give recommendations to improve the writing skills of the students at degree level in Pakistan.

Attitude towards Errors

The behaviorists view error as either a symptom of ineffective teaching or as evidence of learning failure. Therefore, they are of the opinion that errors should not be allowed to be committed in the classroom. They are further of the view that if errors do occur, they should be corrected then and there. Behaviorists say that language learning is actually habit formation.

Behaviorists believe that learning a language is not different from learning anything else; it becomes habit formed by the stimulus---response---reinforcement-----repetition process. The behaviorists adopt a very strict attitude towards errors. They are of the view that the learners should not be

allowed to commit errors in the class and if errors are committed, they should be dealt with immediately. On the other hand, mentalists and the language teachers under the influence of mentalists see errors as evidence of language learning, as evidence that learners are processing the language for themselves. That is why they adopt a very lenient attitude towards the errors of learners. These are two extremes and most of the linguists now believe in a pragmatic and eclectic approach to errors. They are of the view that, at times, errors should be corrected and other times they should be left well alone. Most of the Pakistani teachers fail to make the students realize that errors play an important role in language learning. The Pakistani system is hostile to errors as in Pakistani system the errors of the students are regarded as a sign of failure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Krashen (1982: p.21), "Errors are the flawed side of the learner's speech or writing. They are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from some selected norm of mature learning performance". Klassen (1991) says that the term 'error' is used to refer to a form or structure that a native speaker deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use. Error is the use of a linguistic item in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning (Richards, 1985). In an article entitled 'Errors and second language learning strategies'

Corder (1973: p.259) refers to errors as breaches of the code. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: p.138) assert that errors are deviations. They say that "Errors are the flawed side of learner speech or writing. They are those parts of conversation or

composition that deviate from some selected norm or mature language performance."

Usually the inconsistent deviation is called 'mistake.' Sometimes a learner 'gets it right' but sometimes he makes a mistake and uses the wrong form (Norris 1987: p.8). According to Edge (1989: p.20) mistakes can be corrected by the learner himself but errors need guidance of some competent person for correction. Corder (1986: p.139) interprets performance errors as mistakes. Chomsky clarifies mistakes as errors caused by factors such as fatigue and inattention or lack of memory. He calls it performance errors too. He elaborates errors by saying that errors result from lack of knowledge of the rules of the language. He calls them competence errors. According to Miller (1966) "It would be meaningless to state rules for making mistakes. Mistakes refer to error of performance; errors refer to the systematic errors of the learners from which we are able to reconstruct his knowledge of the language to date i.e. his transitional competence."

According to AbiSamra (2003:np), "Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the target language (TL) and that TL itself." It is a process based on analysis of learner's errors with one clear objective: evolving a suitable and effective teaching learning strategy and remedial measures, necessary in certain clearly marked-out areas of foreign language.

Importance of Writing

Writing is an expressive skill and occupies a great importance in our communication in the modern world. Rehman (2002: p.124) emphasizes the same point saying that "writing is very important in the modern world. It creates a permanent record (that is, memory) in a certain language." Our

examination is writing oriented and thus writing in Pakistani institutions is an important language skill area. Besides an important examination need, writing is important in Pakistani set up as a lot of writing communication in offices, banks, courts and so forth takes place in English in Pakistan. It is thus an examination as well as a social need for the students in Pakistan. According to Mishra, writing requires intention and expression to be properly linked. It requires logic. It requires a sense of fact. It needs to be clear, concise and correct.

Research Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998: p.11), "The characteristics of qualitative research are that it is naturalistic, it uses descriptive data, it is concerned with process, and it is concerned with meaning as seen by the participants".

Nunan (2001: p.4) claims that qualitative research is grounded, meaning that theory is generated from data rather than being imposed on it, and it is exploratory in nature, expansionist, descriptive and inductive. Moreover, qualitative research is process-oriented whereas quantitative research is outcome-oriented.

Collection of Data

Data for the present research was taken from the Government colleges affiliated with University of the Punjab. A sample of five female teachers from three govt. women colleges were interviewed for the analysis. The interviews were conducted in the following order:

1. Government College for Women, Wazirabad. (District Gujranwala)
2. Government Post graduate College for Women, M.B.Din. (District Mandi Baha ud Din)

3. Government Post graduate College for Women, M.B.Din. (District Mandi Baha ud Din)
4. Government Post graduate College for Women, Jhelum. (District Jhelum)
5. Government Post graduate College for Women, Jhelum. (District Jhelum)

Interviews of the Teachers

The researcher conducted the interviews of the teachers teaching at degree level to have an access to their views about the actual practice of correction of the errors committed by the students at degree level. The researcher felt great need for the views of the teachers because they are directly related to the teaching and learning process, and can provide firsthand information about the issues related to the teaching and learning of English.

Presentation and Analysis of Data of Interviews

For the purpose of analysis of data, the interview was categorized into four types of questions, each type having 4 to 6 questions.

Type 1 was related to current practices.

Type 2 was related to the problems of the teacher.

Type 3 was related to the teacher's viewpoint.

Type 4 was related to overall suggestions.

Presentation and Analysis of Data of the Interviews: Type 1

The following six questions were included in this part, type 1 of the interviews of the teachers.

Q1. How often do you check/ correct the written work of your students?

How do you deal with the errors of your students?

- Q3.** What do you think are the benefits of correcting the errors of students, the way you correct them?
- Q4.** Do you analyze the errors of your students according to Error Analysis System?
- Q5.** Do you ever try Contrastive Analysis for teaching certain items while doing remedial work?
- Q6.** Do you get feedback from the students after correcting their written work? What is their response to the correction?

Question no.1 was: How often do you check/correct the written work of your students? This was a very vital question to the whole activity of correction of errors in the class. And the responses to this question can be divided into three categories. In category no.1 we can place interviewee no. 2 and 4 who said that they seldom checked the written work of their students. Category no. 2 consists of interviewee no. 5 who claimed that he daily checked the written work of her students. To the researcher this seems impossible as checking the written work of more than a hundred students daily, and that also within 40 minutes is not possible. Naturally in very large classes it is not possible to correct the written work of every student. Also, there is the problem of maintaining discipline in the overcrowded classes when the teacher is busy in correcting the written work of the students. Besides this why should a teacher undertake an extra burden when it can be avoided easily? Even when some teachers claimed to correct the written assignments of the students, it was not practicable to do so in such a limited time. When the researcher, after the interview, discussed this issue with her, she confessed that occasionally when some student came to her, she would correct it.

In response to question no.2 of type 1 mostly it was the practice to do correction in the class on the black board. Interviewee no. 1, 2 and 5 confessed that they didn't use any specified strategy for the correction of errors. Interviewee no. 3 and 4 said that they used blackboard to deal with errors. Interviewee no. 5 also said that she used the traditional method of dealing with the errors. If we critically look at the situation, we shall come to know that most of the teachers used the traditional method for the correction of errors. Sometimes students were asked to come and do the required correction on the black board. This was an easy way to deal with correction of errors. So, there was very little participation of the students in the process of dealing with the errors. That is the reason that the students are not motivated in the teaching learning process and as a result they show poor performance in their writings.

The response to the question relating to the benefit of correction was invariably "YES". After all they must believe in the system they follow in the classrooms. According to all the teachers there are a lot of benefits of correcting errors. All the teachers believed in correction and to them all the errors were important. This response was very significant because if they believed in correcting all the errors, it meant that there was no priority of errors before them. This shows that the teachers are not aware of the priority of errors while dealing with different kinds of errors. This is also because of their traditional approach towards errors, and it is also indicative of their lack of training and lack of information about the latest developments in the field of Error Analysis. Most of the teachers were not familiar with the terms Error Analysis System and Contrastive Analysis and when the researcher explained these terms to them, they said that they followed these systems for the purpose

of correction of errors in the class. According to 6 teachers, they used both EAS and CA for the purpose of correction of errors. Two teachers said that they usually used EAS and rarely used CA and the other two teachers said that they used only EAS for the purpose of correction of errors.

The last question of type 1 was also confusing to many of the teachers as they were unable to understand the meaning of 'feedback'. However, reluctantly they said that they got feedback from the students and that the students were very happy with the teachers for helping them in the correction of errors. Three of the teachers said that the response of the students towards correction was passive, and two of the teachers said that they rarely got any response from the students. This is again the result of lack of training on the part of the teachers and following the beaten track of traditional teaching without any innovation.

Presentation and Analysis of Data of the Interviews: Type 2

The following four questions were asked in this part, type 2 of the interviews of the teachers.

- Q1.** Do you think that time allotted in time table is sufficient for teaching English? Explain why for 'yes' or 'no' response.
- Q2.** What are the difficulties in teaching writing in college classes and ...Why do students find it difficult to overcome their errors even after college studies?
- Q3.** What is the role of teacher's competence/ incompetence in causing errors in the writing of students?

- Q4.** How far do you find L1 interference as a cause of errors in written English of students?

Most of the teachers was of the view that the time (40 minutes per period) was not enough to teach and complete syllabus of English. However, there were some teachers who said that the forty minutes were sufficient for the teaching of English, although they complained of the large size classes and that about ten minutes were wasted in shifting of classes and taking the roll call of such large classes. Keeping in view the large size of the classes, some teachers were of the opinion that the period for teaching English should be of one hour instead of forty minutes.

In response to question no.2 of type 2 almost all the teachers claimed that the students they got for teaching were very weak in English. Seventy percent of the teachers complained that the base of English of the students was very weak. According to them the teachers at school level did not improve the language of the students and ultimately the students remained weak in English in the college as well. According to the most of the teachers, school teachers are responsible for the poor or weak base of English language of the learners. This finding can also be confirmed by the research of Hassan (2004:244) who claims, "Language deficiencies generated and hardened at school, act as a stumbling block to performance at higher levels." Whatever may be the reason of weak background of English of the learners, now it becomes the responsibility of the college teachers to do everything possible to improve the situation. The college teachers will have to take into consideration the individual differences as well as the difficulty level of every student and then devise ways to help them overcome

their difficulties in learning English language.

To the next question every interviewee replied that the competence of the teacher plays a great role and is really important in helping the students improve their English. Four teachers said that L1 interference was responsible for causing errors in the written English of the students. They asserted that L1 had a strong impact on the bearing of the learners and that even the teachers who used GTM (Grammar Translation Method) were also responsible for this sad state of affairs. This is another thing that most of the teachers use GTM for teaching English even at degree level. When the majority of teachers complain that the students of degree level have very poor knowledge of the basic grammatical rules of English, how can they use the Direct Method or Communicative Approach for teaching them English? Besides this, most of the teachers are not trained or highly qualified for teaching English language at different levels. The easy way out for them is to use GTM for teaching English. And they do not follow any proper system while teaching correction of errors. Only twenty percent of the teachers were of the opinion that L1 interference was not a problem in learning English as a second language but they were unable to support their point of view when they were questioned in the later discussion.

Presentation and Analysis of Data of the Interviews: Type 3

Type 3 of the interview consisted of the following six questions.

Q1. To what extent, do you believe, is correction of errors important? And what are the main causes of written errors?

Q2. What type of errors do you find are really problematic for your students?

Q3. Are you satisfied with the methodology and ELT materials being used at degree level? Your comments please.

Do you believe in more remedial teaching or more exposure to the target language? Why?

How can motivation factor and interest of students in writing minimize written errors?

Do you feel all errors are equally important and need to be corrected at the same time? What particular approach do you adopt for the correction of errors? Why?

Question no. 1 of this type had two parts. To the first part of the question, all the teachers replied that correction of errors was important. To the second part of the question the majority of teachers replied that the students had a weak base of English and English grammar was their main hurdle for writing good English. Some teachers pointed out that parts of speech were difficult for the students to learn and they committed so many errors while writing English. To question no. 2 of type 3, again they said that parts of speech, especially verb, preposition and pronoun were the weaknesses of the students. It is interesting to note that most of the teachers stressed that the students were mostly weak in grammar and had problem with the parts of speech. They further said that the usage of verb was the problematic area of grammar for the students. Sixty percent of the interviewees were not satisfied with the ELT materials being used for teaching English at degree level. Twenty percent interviewees were of the opinion that the syllabus and the methodology were out worn and needed up gradation and improvement. Forty percent of the interviewees (interviewee no. 1 and 2) expressed their satisfaction with the ELT materials and said that they used both GTM

and the Direct Method of teaching. Question no.4 was difficult for the teachers to understand as many teachers could not properly understand the meaning of 'remedial work' and 'more exposure to the target language'. After some explanation on the part of the researcher, fifty percent of the interviewees answered that exposure to language was more important than correction of errors. Thirty percent teachers said that both correction of errors and greater exposure to the target language were equally important. However, twenty percent teachers spoke in favour of correction of errors and said that correction in the target language was more important than further exposure to language. All the teachers were of the view that motivation and interest in learning positively affected the teaching learning process and hence were helpful in minimizing the errors. Most of the teachers were of the opinion that all the errors were equally important and mostly they would prefer their correction then and there.

Presentation and Analysis of Data of the Interviews: Type 4

The following five questions were included in type 4 of the interviews of the teachers.

Q1. What do you suggest to minimize the written errors of your students?

Q2. What should be the place of remedial work or re-teaching in ELT programme at degree level?

Q3. What suggestions do you offer regarding ELT materials and policy of correction of errors?

Q4. What should be the attitude of the learners and the teachers towards errors?

Q5. What suggestions do you offer to improve the overall ELT situation in Pakistan?

It is important to mention that in this part of the interview, the interviewees' response was slack and they passed general remarks as they were a little bit tired of answering the questions in English. It was a prestige issue for them to answer in English language as they were English language teachers. It also added to the pressure of responding to the question using English language. Some responses were mere repetitions of their former responses to other questions. They suggested that the students should improve their grammar and increase their readability. In response to question no. 2 of type 4, sixty percent of the teachers suggested that more and more practice of written work on the part of the learners would minimize their errors. Other thirty percent of the interviewees suggested that grammatical learning was required to minimize the errors. All the teachers were of the opinion that there should be some sort of remedial programme to help the students correct their language. The response for question no. 3 was a mixed one as to some teachers the material for teaching English at degree level is good and suitable while some said that they would like a change in the materials of teaching. Two of the teachers suggested that attention should be paid to the need of functional English. About the attitude towards English, they would put a good word for the positive attitude towards English although some confessed that they felt really angry at the errors of their students. There was a great variety of responses for the last question which invited suggestions to improve the overall situation of ELT in Pakistan. Interviewee no. 1 proposed that there should be reasonable size of the classes and syllabus should be revised. They further suggested that refresher courses should be made compulsory for the teachers, and the students should be given more practice on written work. Two teachers (interviewee no. 2&3)

spoke on the need of creating a suitable environment conducive to promote the cause of teaching and learning. According to two interviewees AV aids and other attractions should be introduced to make the lecture interesting and effective. Interviewee no.5 suggested that the syllabus from primary to degree level should be revised.

are making their own grammatical rules for the target language.

Conclusion

English teachers were of the view that L1 interference, large classes, and lack of motivation were responsible for the greater number of errors. They suggested that eclectic approach should be adopted for the correction of errors, and the base of the students from school level should be improved. Above all the interviewees were of the view that the teachers must have more and more teachers' training courses.

The study further revealed that students had basic problem with parts of speech, and that the use of verb, preposition and pronoun were the weak areas of the students. Also, students had a lot of problem with spellings and punctuation.

The interviewees suggested that eclectic approach should be adopted for the correction of errors and the base of English language of the students from school level should be strengthened. Most of the teachers followed traditional method of correcting the errors and had no information about the latest approaches in the field of EA. Teachers should adopt a lenient attitude towards errors and at the same time must realize that we live in an imperfect world where committing errors during the learning process is inevitable. Teachers should recognize errors as indicative of some kind of learning activity taking place in the learners. Errors are an inevitable part of learning as they indicate that learners are in the process of learning and

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