ERROR ANALYSIS IN ESSAYS WRITTEN BY GRADUATING 
TRAINEES WITH REFERENCE TO TEACHER TRAINING 
COLLEGES IN OROMIA REGION, ETHIOPIA: A MIXED 
APPROACH

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed at investigating the common errors made by graduating trainees in selected colleges of Oromia Regional State. To this end, four teacher training colleges were randomly chosen. The sample group of the study consisted of 200 learners; a background questionnaire and the essays they produced were used for data collection. Besides, the teachers of these chosen colleges were offered questionnaires regarding writing practice and marking essays in the target language. The results indicate that the learners made extensive errors in spelling, word choice, sentence fragment, verb form, capitalization; errors in punctuation/comma splices, word form, and run on sentences were the eight most common faults that the participants committed in their writing. These aspects of writing in English pose the most difficult problems to participants. Hence, this study may shed light on the manner in which students internalize the rules of the target language, which is English. Such an insight into language learning problems is useful to teachers because it provides information on common trouble-spots in language learning which can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials.

Keywords: Error; Error Analysis; Essays; Graduating Trainees

INTRODUCTION
Whether we are the students, teachers, or business persons, academic writing skills are necessary in today’s world. Essays, reports, presentations and research papers are just some examples of documents written in the academic style. Academic writing, when used appropriately, presents a polished and professional image.

Language is a means of communication; it is a system of sounds which is structured and is used to communicate people’s feelings, intentions, purpose, etc to the others. It is a special characteristic of human or it can also be regarded as one of human criteria, because only human beings speak a language. Language is an arbitrary sound or sequence of speech sounds used in particular area (Carrol as cited in Ramelan 1992: 10):

“Language is an arbitrary of speech sounds or sequence of speech sounds which is used in interpersonal communication by an aggregation of human beings, and which rather exhaustively catalogs things, and events in the human environment.”
After knowing the language, in order to be able to communicate, people should master the communicative competence. Johnson & Johnson (1999: 62-68) stated that communicative competence is the knowledge which enables someone to use a language effectively and their ability to actually use this knowledge for communication. Besides, people also have to know what so called language skills. These skills ease them to communicate. They are the media of communicating. They could be listening, speaking, writing, or reading.

Between the two production skills, writing is the more intriguing one because in spoken conversations, we make sense of the dialogue in a complex back-and-forth process of negotiation of meaning between speakers. In written texts; however, this back-and-forth of negotiation is not possible. Because there is no possibility of negotiating meaning of written documents, the inevitable problems of misunderstandings are exacerbated (Penman, 1998).

Writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) is considered as one of the productive skills that allow learners to discover what they produce or not. In addition, it allows EFL learners to demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency implicitly and explicitly. Speaking more specifically, writing is not only a critical language skill for EFL learners’ academic achievement but also a means of developing fluency and accuracy in the areas of other language components like grammar and vocabulary.

In composing a good writing, we should notice some aspects. Grammar is one important aspect that should be mastered in order to make a well structured writing. But, writing in different language is not always as easy as writing in our own language since there are some different rules in the writing systems and these differences sometimes make us to produce errors.

Writing involves more than just producing words and sentences. To be able to produce a piece of writing, we should be able to write a connected series of words and sentences which are grammatically and logically linked, so that the purpose we have in our mind will suit the intended readers. In this way, it is meant that the style of language used in a piece of writing designed for layman and people living in the village, for example should be different from the one designed for educated people such as students, teachers, doctors, professors, etc. Therefore, in presenting a piece of discourse we should consider the correctness of form, the appropriateness of style, and the unity of topic (Harmer, 2001: 2).

As students struggle with what to put down next or how to put it down on paper, they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their ideas. They discover a real need to find the right word and the right sentence. Raimes (1983:6, cited in Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008: 20) points out that the close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course. She identified the different components for producing a clear, fluent and effective piece of writing: content, the writer’s process, audience, purpose, word choice, organization, mechanics, grammar and syntax.

Shortly, correct language, punctuation, mechanics, and logical content are considered important to communicate in written work; the close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course.

Learning to write and writing to learn are two of the most important activities for graduate students. Yet, academic writing is far from a natural ability. In fact, as Bartholomae (1985) argues, students writing in the university have to learn “the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing” (p. 134) that defines the discourses of the academic community. While Bartholomae’s chapter mainly addresses undergraduate education, his observations seem to hold equally true for graduate students at both master’s and doctoral levels. In order to facilitate the socialization process of graduate students, an increasing number of studies have been undertaken on different aspects of students’ acquisition of advanced writing (Cheng, 2006; Dysythe, 2002; Ferenze, 2005; Petric, 2007; Riazi, 1997; Yeh, 2007).
The structure differences between students' mother tongue and English could make students make some grammatical errors. Brown (1980), states that an error is a noticeable grammar from the adult grammar of native speaker reflecting the inter-language competence of the learners. These errors occur because of many things. Richards (1974: 124) distinguishes three sources of competence errors:

(1) Interference errors occur as a result of the use of element from one language while speaking another. An example might be when a German learner of L2 English says, “I go not” because the equivalent sentence in German is “Ich gehe nicht”.

(2) Intralingual errors reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.

(3) Developmental errors occur when the learner attempts to build up hypotheses about the target language on the basis of limited experience.

People tend to acquire spoken language easier than the writing language. This is because people first know the spoken before they know the written one, and a human child always speaks a language first before he is accustomed to the writing system of his language.

The explanation above does not imply that writing or written language is less important than the spoken one. The more cultivated and more technologically advanced a man is the more he involved in a written form of a language. It means that writing also plays an important role in a modern society. In other words, writing language is getting more and more essential today, so it should be mastered in order to be literate.

It is argued, however, that students’ perspectives offer important insights into how they interpret writing tasks and grapple with the difficulties involved in the writing process. In addition, research into student experiences should enable academic language learning and teaching professionals to better provide more informed and closely targeted support including specialized courses and programs and/or personalized instruction.

As it is known, Ethiopian students learn English as a foreign language. Therefore, English is a new language so that they get some difficulties and they also need much time to learn. But, students commonly have only little enthusiasm for their writing tasks. Every time they have writing tasks, they feel it is difficult to do. But, they should have strong foundation for their writing skill before entering a higher level of education. So, it is crucial for them to master this skill. To this end, error analysis can be helpful for structuring syllabus design and teaching techniques in ways that minimize the occurrence of errors. Having this concept in mind, this study emphasized on evaluating the trainee teachers’ errors in essay writing and look at possible sources of such errors.

OBJECTIVES

In general, the study was aimed at analyzing the type of errors committed by trainee teachers in writing English essays, and the specific objectives had been executed in the following ways:

1. To investigate the common errors committed by the students in writing English essays.
2. To find out the possible causes for which they undergo the errors during writing English.
3. To show the level of trainees writing proficiency.
4. To identify the possible causes of learners’ errors in writing

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants: A total of 200 graduating trainee teacher and 10 instructors from four different colleges in Oromia regional state were participants in this study. All trainees had their primary and higher education in Oromia region, in which Oromo language is the medium of instruction at elementary level, and as a subject course at secondary level as well. English is taught a as an additional subject
within the school curriculum at elementary level, but it is the medium of instruction both at secondary and tertiary levels country wide. All of these trainee teacher participants have experienced approximately the same number of 10 years of education through the primary and secondary education system. And almost all of the participants speak Oromo language at home except for few students who speak Amharic and other languages at home. Out of the total of 200 trainees, 190 (101 girls and 89 boys), participated both in writing the essay test and completing the questionnaire, and it was this number of participants which was used in the final analysis in the present study. Specifically, the respondents were from Jimma, Nekemet, Assela and Chiro teacher training colleges.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Essay Writing Test: Essay writing test was used as a major data gathering instrument which helped the researchers to find answers for the pre identified research questions. Hence, 190 legible and complete essays were collected, coded and analyzed. The test was administered under controlled examination conditions which helped the researchers to get spontaneous samples of student’s written language; samples that reveal their idiosyncratic ways of using English as a foreign language in academic writing context. Not only this but also collecting data in such a way is useful to avoid plagiarism and to maintain the validity of the data to be obtained. Moreover, the reason for choosing this tool is to give chance for students to produce sample essays so that the errors they commit could be identified and their ability of writing can also be measured. Trainee graduates and their corresponding English instructors were also respondents for the questionnaire as well. The SPSS was utilized to analyze the errors and the questionnaire.

Questionnaire: The other tool used in the study was a questionnaire. It consisted of close-ended and structured items, and it was piloted, revised and validated by research experts before it was administered. This instrument was used as a supportive tool, and it enabled the researchers to get further information about students’ attitude toward the writing skills, their motivation and perception, participants’ English language background, strategies and approaches they use in learning the writing skill, and also to obtain relevant information on common difficulties they face in writing in English. It also helped the researchers to support and cross check the results gained through essay writing test, and identify possible sources of students writing errors. Accordingly, the data obtained through questionnaire was computed using SPSS 16.0 version, and then it was analyzed quantitatively. Then, the number, percentage, means and standard deviations of the results were displayed using frequency tables.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

First, the researchers made clear the objective of the study and obtained confirmation from the college deans to collect data. Then, assisted by two trained data collectors and instructors in the selected colleges, the researchers met participants, and participants were administered a writing test that involved English essay composing on any one of the five topics provided by the researchers. They were required to write an essay of three paragraphs on the topic they have chosen within a period of 150 minutes and a minimum of 300-350 words. The test was a free writing test with alternative topics to choose from. On the other hand, regarding the questionnaire, trainees were asked to fill in the questions immediately after they had taken the writing test and respond to the questionnaire items. Finally, out of 200 essays and questionnaires, 190 legible and complete essays and questionnaires were collected, coded and analyzed.

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

The data gained through essay writing was analyzed in two ways, and used for two purposes. First, all of the essays were examined in terms of their syntactic accuracy; sentence structure, morphological, and lexical error. And these were labeled, identified, categorized and explained adapting a five step procedure developed by Corder (1974). Thus, in the first step, the errors were identified and then computed using SPSS. Then statistical description and explanation of the errors were made which would help the researchers to display the types, the number and percentage of errors commonly
committed, and to explain their possible sources as well. In the second phase, ignoring the syntactic errors which were already analyzed in the first phase, the researchers, assisted by two experienced EFL teachers, marked and scored every essay using an adapted rubric developed by Jacobs et.al’s (1981) EFL Composition Profile. Using this profile, a score was assigned to content (25points), organization (20points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (10 points), which resulted in a maximum possible score of 100 for each essay. Then, test results obtained in such a way were used to assign participants into three groups of writing ability: ‘high writing ability’ (test scores above 70%), ‘medium writing ability’ (test scores between 40% and 70%), ‘low writing ability’ (test scores below 40%) groups. This helped the researchers to evaluate trainee teachers’ writing ability and suggest possible remedies to tackle the problems observed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After collecting and analyzing the data, it was found that there were a number of errors committed by the respondents, and those errors are classified based on a pre identified Error Taxonomy which consists 16 error types. In addition, the errors revealed by examining the compositions stated bellow in a hierarchy of random order along with the error count, percentage and mean.

Trainees' Common Errors in Essay Writing: Essay writing may seem to be a trivial task that doesn’t require a lot of expertise and may be performed by anyone who has at least basic understanding of principles along which the English language works. This assumption, however, ends when one encounters an actual necessity of writing an essay – the task turns out to be much more difficult, than it seemed to be. That’s why it is a good idea to know what the common mistakes students make when writing them are, to try and avoid repeating them. Hence, the following section deals with such problems.

The eight most common errors that the participants made were in Spelling (440), word choice (390), sentence fragment (327), verb form (319), capitalization (271), errors in punctuation/comma slices (268), word form (255), and run on sentences (233). The next noticeable errors were subject verb agreement errors (219), errors in preposition (195), and article errors (189). The other faults were verb tense errors (186), singular/plural form errors (175), misplaced modifier (105), word order (67), and redundancy (65). Based on this data, we can deduce that trainees major sources of errors in writing might be attributed to failure in recognizing how to spell words correctly, lack of linguistic and vocabulary knowledge to choose words carefully, failure to construct complete and meaningful sentences, rule over generalizing and hypothesizing false concepts in verb form usage, mother tongue interference in typography, and inadequate practice in how to punctuate sentences correctly.

 Majority of the participants, 119 (62.6%), scored below average revealing that they are low writing ability groups. Others, 58 (30.5%) of them got an average point of 40-69, and assigned to medium writing ability groups whereas the few of the respondents, 13(6.8%), were high writing ability groups scoring 70 and above in essay writing. From this one can conclude that participants writing ability is very low so that they could not express themselves using the target language. Again, this problem is hazardous since these graduating trainees are going to teach English in the near future.

Moreover, majority of the participants, 105 (55.3%), replied that they had learned a lot of English grammar rules and forms in English classes they took before. Others, 48 (25.3%) of them responded that they learned very little English grammar rules and forms. On the other hand, others, 16 (8.4%) of the participants showed that they are not sure about the point in discussion. The rest, 21 (11.1%) of them answered that they never learned English grammar rules and forms in English classes they took before. This data shows that majority of the respondents have learned a lot of English grammar rules and forms in English classes they have taken before. Nevertheless, the data obtained through essay writing test revealed that many of the participants missed the very simple rules of English grammar.

Regarding how learners organize their ideas when writing, 62 (32.6%) of them replied that they sometimes think that some parts of their essays relate less well to the essay questions than other parts do. On the other hand, 65 (34.2%) of the participants responded that they sometimes constantly look
back through their essay while writing it. Regarding item number 30, 61 (32.1%), also confirmed that during the writing of their essays they sometimes have difficulty remembering what they have just written. On the other hand, 60 (31.6%) of the participants answered that they often change their mind about their essay's organization while still writing it. Based on this data, one can deduce that participants are not skillful in organizing ideas when writing essays. Again the causes of this failure might be attributed to insufficient practice and lack of employing relevant techniques to organize ideas.

Large number of the respondents, 66 (34.7%), agreed that they often receive good grades for their essays (i.e. ‘B’ or higher). Again, nearly 50 (26.3%) of them also replied that they sometimes receive good grades in their essays. Similarly, as for item number 26, significantly large numbers of the respondents, 70 (36.8%), think that instructors are often too generous in their marking. From this data, one can see that instructors are careless and also generous when marking learners’ essays.

More than 50% of the respondents asserted that they are seriously concerned about error in spelling, poor language, confused interpretation of the topic set, and irrelevant ideas. Similarly, 5 (50%), of the respondents said that they give moderate concern for untidy handwriting. Again, 8 (80) of them are also moderately concerned about inadequate reasoning, and 6 (60%) of the respondents also give moderate concern for poorly connected paragraphs. Similarly, 8 (80%) of the participants confirmed that they are moderately concerned about awkwardly expressed sentences. Others, 7 (70) of the instructors participated in the study also said that they give a moderate concern for use of the first-person; same number of respondents also answered that they are moderately concerned about sweeping or far-reaching generalizations. On the other hand, when participant instructors were asked about exceeding the suggested word length when writing essays, majority of them, 6 (60%), said that they give mild concern as for this aspect of writing is concerned. Based on this data we can deduce that some very crucial aspect of the writing skill are overlooked by the instructors when dealing with learners essays and this might also be one of the major courses of learners’ failure and incompetence in writing.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was aimed at investigating graduating trainees’ level of committing common errors in writing the academic essay. From the data collected in this study and analyzed in chapter four, it is observed that though the students were in teacher training colleges and graduating classes, they continue to have major difficulties in writing sentences. The majority of the students could not properly generate sentence, as they are not much expert in the target language. Students face serious problems in developing sentences while expressing thoughts.

CONCLUSION

The result obtained through essay writing reveal that errors in spelling, word choice, sentence fragment, verb form, and capitalization, errors in punctuation/comma slices, word form, and run on sentences were the eight most common errors that the participants committed in their writing. The next noticeable errors were subject verb agreement errors, errors in preposition, and article errors. The other faults were verb-tense errors, singular/plural form errors, misplaced modifier, word order, and redundancy.

Therefore, we can deduce that trainees major sources of errors in writing might be attributed to failure in recognizing and how to spell words correctly, lack of linguistics and vocabulary knowledge to choose words carefully, failure to construct complete and meaningful sentences because of lack of practice in writing simple sentences, rule generalizing in verb form usage, mother tongue interference in typography, and inadequate practice in how to punctuate sentences correctly.

Majority of the participants introduced to English in a formal schooling, and therefore they are with same English background. However, based on the data obtained through essay writing test, we can conclude that majority of the participants are failed to construct meaningful sentences in English. This
also implies that lack of exposure to English language may negatively impact learners’ English language writing ability. It can also be concluded that participants writing ability is very low so that they could not express themselves using the target language.

Similarly, the data obtained through essay writing test revealed that many of the participants missed the very simple rules of English grammar; verb tenses are the most challenging grammar aspect for the learners in this study. It is also found that majority of the participants practice writing in English sometimes, they have also a moderate concern for correct sentence patterns of English structures which might in turn affecting their writing proficiency.

It is found to be that learners sometimes think the skills they learned at school are inadequate for writing college essays, they also find it difficult to write legibly, and they also get stuck while writing. These results imply that learners’ writing ability is not matured when compared with their educational level and this could be resulted from inadequacy of linguistics input and learners’ reluctance to practice and develop their writing skills.

It is also confirmed that during the writing process, trainees sometimes have difficulty remembering what they have just written, and they often change their mind about their essay’s organization while still writing it. Hence, it is concluded that participants are not skillful in organizing ideas when writing essays. And the cause of this failure might be attributed to insufficient practice and lack of employing relevant techniques to organize ideas.

It is found that trainee participants also face problems of planning and generating ideas which is a vitally crucial aspect of the writing process. And they are often reluctant to edit and revise their essays and this might greatly affect their achievement and their overall writing skills. They also perceive writing as waste of time and energy which in turn may impact their achievement and writing skill.

On the other hand, based on the data obtained from instructor’s responses, it is concluded that instructors give mild concern as for untidy handwriting, for poorly connected paragraphs, and exceeding the suggested word length. Hence, these very crucial aspects of the writing skill are overlooked by the instructors when dealing with learners’ essays, and this might also be one of the major causes of students’ failure and ineffectiveness in writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made.

To start with, learners should take care of their training and education and improve their English in general and the writing skill in particular. In addition to this, learners ought to concentrate on the major failures observed and the errors committed and practice more so as to improve their writing ability.

What is more, students must practice English grammar rules and identify the specific rules of the language and use them in different situations accordingly. Besides, as writers, learners should practice how to plan, generate, organize and put pen to paper relevant ideas. On top of this, instructors should also identify their students’ failures so that they could lesson those areas where the chronic loopholes observed. Once again, instructors should pay attention to the specific areas when marking students’ essays so that learners writing ability might be improved and progressed. Instructors should also use appropriate teaching writing methods and also let their students approach various writing strategies.

Finally, college curriculum planners should consider their learners’ needs and include relevant aspects of English writing when developing teaching materials.

REFERENCES


