ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE CHALLENGES OF MECHANICAL ACCURACY AMONG SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is a known fact that the English language has established itself firmly in Nigeria, its importance therefore, cannot be over emphasized. Students with learning glitches are exasperated in their efforts at written expression because of problems with the mechanical accuracy aspects of writing. Problems with spelling, punctuation, and handwriting may draw attention away from the writer's focus on ideas. A teacher, therefore, needs effective ways of assisting students in overcoming the mechanical obstacles to writing. A total of 200 (two hundred) senior secondary school students were selected for the study which adopted S.P. Corder's approach on Error Analysis (EA). The result showed that most of the students had problems in the areas of spellings; punctuation errors and capitalization errors. The study recommended, among others, that teachers should adopt effective methods for helping students with learning problems overcome the mechanical obstacles to writing.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Mechanical Accuracy, Secondary School Students, Delta State

Introduction

Error analysis as an approach in language study has aroused the interest of several scholars because of its importance. According to Vahdatinejad (2008) error analysis can be imparted and it offers the essential data concern whatever is deficient in the student's capability. Vahdatinejad makes a difference among errors and lapses. He said, lapses are made also by indigenous users, and could be fixed by those who make them. On the spot rectification is recommended instead of remediation which is needed for errors. Olasehinde (2002) agrees that making

errors by learners is unavoidable. He also suggested that errors are inevitable and an essential part of the scholarship curve.

Mitchéll and Mylés (2004) claim that errors, if learned, can divulge an evolving structure of the student's second language and this structure is active and exposed to variations and reorganizing of limitations. This opinion is maintained by Stark's (2001) research, which reveals that instructors have to see students' errors confidently. Teachers ought not to take errors as the students' inefficiency to comprehend the rubrics and constructions but rather as a procedure to learning. Stark, keys to the notion that errors are usual and unavoidable characteristics of learning and are therefore an essential condition of learning.

In a study by Sarfraz, (2011) to examine the errors produced by fifty Pakistani students in essay writing, the research revealed that the widely held errors are caused by mother tongue interference. Darus and Subramanian (2009), with Corder ideal on error examination, scrutinized errors in seventy-two written essays by seventy-two Malaysian learners. It was discovered that the learners' errors existed in areas of the singular and plural forms of verbs, verbal tense, word-choices, prepositional, concord and word arrangement.

Abisamra (2003) examined examples of work written and collected from ten learners in class nine in an Arabic speaking community and categorized the written errors in 5 groups, viz., syntactic (prepositionals, articles, adjectivals, etc.); grammar (co-ordination, sentence pattern, word-order etc.); vocabulary (word choice), semantic and constituent (punctuations, capitalizations, and spellings); and dialogue errors. The outcomes showed that 1/3rd of the learners' errors revealed transferral errors from the indigenous language, and the utmost figures of errors existed in the classes of meaning and lexical. The remaining errors (64.1%) point to errors on over-generalization. In a similar study, Sawalmeh (2013) also investigated 32 Arabic-speaking Saudi learners of English and he identified 10 general errors, namely errors of verbs usage, words arrangement, singular and plural formation, concord, dual negations, spelling, capitalisation, article, structure breakage and prepositionals. The result of the study revealed that the highest frequency of errors was on verb tense. He concluded by saying that "most of the errors can be due to L_1 transfer" (p. 14).

Ridha (2012) studied written composition scripts of eighty EFL school students then characterised the errors based syntactical, vocabulary and meaning, mechanical and lexical arrangement types of errors. The outcomes revealed that utmost of the learners' errors could be seen as a result of first language transferal. Ridha discovered that some of the students depended on their MT in communicating their thoughts. She adds that though the grading procedures revealed that the subjects' articles comprised dissimilar kinds of errors, the syntactic errors and the mechanics were the utmost seriously and recurrent ones.

Ferris (2002) on the other hand, shows that EA and appropriate methods could assist in operative erudition and tutoring of English for the reason that imported language learning is a continuing procedure, through which lapses are anticipated, at all stages of erudition. He further says inaccuracies would not vanish just for the reason that they have been cited out to the student, opposing to whatever certain linguistic students and tutors accept as true. In fact, he maintained that making lapses is a normal procedure of knowledge and should be deliberated as portion of cognizance. Therefore, errors should be viewed objectively.

Several studies which have examined errors in the written English composition of learners of the English language, although some of the findings differ, the causes of the errors are almost the same. For instance, Ridha (2012) and Sarfraz (2011), blame learners' errors on the mother tongue whereas Stark (2011), Ferris (2002) and Olasehinde (2002) see errors as inevitable and they also emphasize the importance of errors, saying that error should not be blamed on mother tongue interference alone. These sets of scholars believe that error made by learners is a sign that the learner is getting acquainted with the language. Therefore, this study seeks to find out the nature of mechanical errors in written composition by senior secondary school students in Warri metropolis of Delta State.

This study aims at finding out the prevalent mechanical errors made in the written English of the selected students. It also aims at identifying the causes so as to proffer solutions to those grey areas of mechanics that have not been mastered by the students. The prevalent mechanical errors are therefore considered as an index of low ability in the students' written English. The researchers were concerned with how the participants used written English to achieve certain communicative goals. Therefore, the following research questions were designed to guide the study.

1. What type of mechanical error is most frequent in the students' written texts?
2. What are the possible causes and sources of the errors?

This research is significant in the sense that it highlights mechanical errors that are peculiar to the students and attempt to proffer solutions to them. This research will also be useful to researchers and scholars of English, because it advocates approaches directed to meeting the language needs of second language learners. Teachers in secondary schools will benefit from the study by designing or planning strategies and measures in a way to help the students to overcome their errors and improve mechanical accuracy.

Concept of Mechanical Errors

Mechanical errors

Cowan and Cowan (1980, p. 676) state that mechanics are rules that standardize certain things in writing. They are simply conventions that standardize things like capitalization, spelling, comma, full stop, etc. Memering and O'Hare (1980) argue that:

> By comparison with larger matters of purpose and substance and structure, such things as punctuation, spelling, and capitalization may seem trivial. But all these mechanics of writing are tools the writer uses to signal the reader. An occasional error may be excused, but writers cannot afford to ignore the effect of mistakes on the reader. At the least, mistakes are distracting and interrupt thought; *faulty punctuation, a mistaken spelling, even a word not capitalized* may create a meaning unintended by the writer. Careful writers take pains to ensure that the effect of their words is not distorted by faulty mechanics (p. 401)

They add that mechanics can give you greater facility and maturity of expression. Then, Digest (1975) admonishes as follow:

> Don't underrate good punctuation and spelling! These "little" skills are basic tools in the writer's constant quest for clarity and accuracy. And, what's more important, they can make all the difference in whether your writing makes a favourable or unfavourable impression on others (p.338).

Regarding the explanation above, mechanical errors are errors that occur in writing which need more attention of teachers and students who engage in the writing process. Mechanical errors are as grievous as the grammatical errors. Mechanical errors in general involve the errors of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

Spelling Errors

Memering and O'Hare (1980: 423) say that misspelled words are distraction to the educated reader. They add that a poor speller's first step should be to learn to proofread composition carefully for misspellings. Many learners of English find the spellings difficult to remember. However, to spell well is something that cannot be ignored. The followings are examples for misspelled words:

Academiy for *academy*, adress for *address*, adverticement for *advertisement*, archetect for *architect*, asociate fot *associate*, autum for *autumn*, baloon/ballon for *balloon*, beleive for *believe*, betwen for *between*, braught for *brought*, curiculum/curicullum for *curriculum*, devlop for *develop*.

Punctuation

Cowan and Cowan (1980, pp. 660-661) state that punctuation is very important in indicating the writer's purpose. It is a series of rules that are applied in sentences. They add that correct punctuation is effective punctuation. The more the writer writes, the more they will discover that punctuation marks can work for them in directing the readers in the same way.

Digest (1975: 339) says that punctuation lends a carefulness to our writing, gives it clarity, and conveys to the readers exactly the meaning we intend. Punctuation is of considerable importance to our writing, its clarity, and its effectiveness. Memering and O'Hare (1980, pp. 401-421) state that one of the best tools a writer has is punctuation. They add that with a very small signal, the writer can tell the reader how to interpret the ideas on the page and how to understand the relationships among them. There are dozen significant marks in the punctuation system, they are: *comma, semicolon, colon, parentheses, dash, bracket, italics (underlining), apostrophe, quotation marks, abbreviations, etc.*

Example:
  i.   Period (.): *Open the window, please.*
  ii.   Question mark (?): *Is he a student?*
  iii. Exclamation mark (!): *Be careful!*
  iv.   Comma (,): *Mary, by the way, received your mail last night.*
  v.   Semicolon (;): *The pianist was very ill; therefore, the concert was cancelled.*
  vi.   Colon (:) *The following words are conjunction: and, but, or, ...*
  vii. Quotation mark ("..."): *"I am going for a walk," she said.*
  viii. Apostrophe ('): *Can't you run faster?*
  ix.   Parentheses ((...)): *If it rain (and we hope it doesn't), the picnic will be cancelled.*
  x.   Dash (---): *There are four skills in English—listening, speaking, reading, and writing.*
  xi.   Triple dots (...): *The most important part of speech is the verb ...*
  xii. Hyphen (-): *Forty-three plus twenty-nine equals seventy-two.*

Sometimes learners produce two patterns that exemplify over-generalization of the *"of"* form; for example, *"The car of my friend is new"* and *"My friend car is new"*. Both sentences are wrong, they should be *"My friend's car is new"*.

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Capitalization

Memering and O'Hare (1980: 438) say that the basic rule, to which there are very few exceptions, is to capitalize "first" words and words that are considered proper names or titles. The followings are some rules of using capitalization as quoted from Cowan and Cowan (1980: 676-677):

a. Capitalize the first word of every sentence.

Example: *"The University of Calabar is one of the most famous universities in Nigeria."*

b. Capitalize proper nouns:

1) Names of persons

Example: *"John Fred Happiness"*

2) Names of places

Example: *"Washington, D.C."*

3) Events and periods

Example: *"the Civil War"*

4) Names of vessel

Example: *"Apollo 8"*

5) Monuments, museums, buildings, etc.

Example: *"the Library of Congress"*

c. Capitalize name of deities.

Example: *"Krishna"*

d. Capitalize titles before and after names.

Example: *"Dr. John Smith, Ph.D."*

e. Capitalize the first word and all other words except prepositions, conjunction, and articles in the titles of literary works, movies, and works of art.

Example: *"I Will Marry When I Want"*

f. Capitalize name of recognized groups and organizations.

Example: *"West African Examination Council"*

g. Capitalize specific course names.

Example: *"Semantics 411"*

h. Capitalize direction when they refer to specific geographical areas.

Example: *"She's from Northern Nigeria"*

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework for this study is derived from the fundamentals of Halliday's Systemic Grammar and Corder's Error Analysis. They are adopted because they provide the description of the English forms that may be found in the texts because they account for forms of English expressions in a second language environment. Systemic Functional Grammar, propounded by M.A.K Halliday owes allegiance to Firth who was Halliday's teacher. Eka (2004) noted that this grammatical model is sometimes referred to as Neo-Firthian grammar because of the influence of Firth's scale and category as a component of the model. And also, because the model, like Firth's grammatical model, is concerned about context of situation.

This model is relevant to this study because the theory in the words of Halliday, consists of a scheme of interrelated categories which are set up to account for the data, and a set of scales of abstraction which relate the categories to the data and to each other. The data being observed is language events as codified in writing and which for the purpose of linguistic description is viewed as a text.

This work also adopts Pit Corder's (1967) Error Analysis Model in describing and analyzing the written work of the students. The initial phase during the time spent examination of errors is the identification of mistakes. As indicated by Corder's model, any sentence expressed and hence translated can be examined for error.

Corder (1973) makes a noteworthy refinement amongst "obvious" and "undercover" errors. "Plain" mistakes are said to be obviously ungrammatical expressions at the sentence level, while "clandestine" are expressions that are linguistically all around framed at the sentence level however not interpretable inside the setting of correspondence. These two major forms of errors covered by extension errors of addition, omission, substitution and ordering which are useful in analysing the grammatical errors in second language writing tasks.

Method of Data Collection

The participants for this research were 200 Senior Secondary School students who were in class 3 from ten (10) selected government owned schools in Warri, Delta State. Simple random sampling technique was used to pick out twenty (20) students each from the ten (10) schools making a total of two hundred (200) students. The students were given three essay topics; from which they were to choose one to write on. The essay type of written work was used for the analysis because it is a task that gives the students room for free self-expression, freedom in the choice of vocabulary and the benefit of presenting facts clearly in written English.

The topics consisted of an argumentative essay, a formal letter and a narrative essay.

The essay topics are:
1. You are the chief speaker in a debate on the topic "Education is not as important as riches". Write your argument for or against the topic.
2. Write a letter to the minister of education in your country discussing, at least, three ways through which the quality of education could be improved.
3. Write a story to illustrate the saying. "The devil makes work for the idle hands".

The researchers together with English teachers of the various schools administered and supervised the essay writing in a relatively conducive classroom environment. The questions were written on the chalkboard and answer booklets distributed. The students were to write the essay within 45 minutes. The data generated were subsequently analysed and discussed.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Mechanical Accuracy
This research focused on the following four sub-areas: spellings, capitalization, full-stop and the use of comma by the students under study. Mechanics, according to Eka (2004), is a term derived from "the operations of a worker on machines: he has to employ his skill in the manipulation of nuts, bolts and parts in the right places if the machine is to function efficiently. The employment of the right nuts, bolts and parts may be likened to appropriate capitalization, spelling, punctuation and among others" (p.3). The absence of mechanical elements in a sentence may result either in a change of an intended meaning or a total lack of sense in writing. In this study, we shall first of all consider the use of capitalization by the students.

Capitalization
Capital letters are used to begin proper names, names of specific offices, institutions and words after a fullstop. However, the students did not observe this rule of capitalization in all the scripts.
79.   * ...lord almighty
80.   *Adams memorial secondary school...
81.   *11th march 2016
82   *distination. and again, when...
83   *mr. john omodeka...

84	*what is education, education is the...
85	*...two ibo men who...
86	*...Ese Grace, i am here...
87	*...i would like to...
88.	*...you see a Graduate in...
89.	*...simple english, you...
90.	*...to be easier. there is a...
91.	*...even the bible...
92.	*...Nigeria today. our country.
93.	*...every child. through education...
94.	*...west africa examination council...
95.	*...And Adequate teaching...
96.	*...avoid child Abuse...
97.	*...to the students. please sir...
98	*...education Is the act...
99.	*...were thought In school...
100.	*...Subjects are agricultural sciences, home economics
101.	*...determine to work hard. without education...
102.	* ...unkept and peter ask...
103.	*Tiger efeona faith...
104.	*...every thing that Λ Going on in The surrounding...
105.	*...yours sincerely
106.	*...the mystery Anymore. We did all...
107.	* ...into the university of Nigeria

Examples;

Wrong pattern	Acceptable pattern
lord almighty	Lord Almighty
Adams memorial...	Adam Memorial...
english	English
mr. john omodek...	Mr. John Omodeka
university of Nigeria	University of Nigeria
peter ask	Peter asks
bible	Bible
march	March

An analysis of the essays revealed that some words were written in small letters. For instance, head noun, and proper names are written in small initials. This is because the students' native language, that is, the Isoko language does not have an orthography that states when and where to use capital letter for proper

names. And this is what the students transfer to the target language. The above listed proper names on the left ought to have been written in capital letters. Words after the full-stop or question mark did not begin with a capital letter. These are all errors on the part of the students. The initial letters of names of parastatals ought to be written in capital letters, for example, *west african examination council instead of West African Examinations Council.

Spelling

Spelling difficulties are not limited to the second language users; however, they are more prevalent among them. Most spelling errors occur due to what Fromkin, *et, al* (2003) describe as "the irregularities between graphemes and phonemes". Eka (2004) also asserts that English spellings have often been difficult for speakers of English as a second language mostly because of this same reason of graphemes and phonemes. (p. 188).

Samples from Adams Memorial Secondary School Araya, A.M.S.S.A

WRONG SPELLING PATTERN		ACCEPTABLE
* Writting	-	writing
* Phamasis	-	pharmacy
* Chil	-	Shy
* Parnell	-	Panel
.* facillating	-	facilitating
* indence	-	Indecent/indecency
* allso	-	also
* labouratory	-	laboratory
* soch	-	such
* opporturnity	-	opportunity
* shares	-	chairs
* sopposed	-	supposed
* themselfs	-	themselves
* Fadation	-	foundation
* edution	-	education
* instrucment	-	instrument
* adoptary	-	adultery
* seten	-	Satan
* chioc	-	Choice
* penson	-	person
* arqurate	-	accurate
* distinguch	-	distinguish
* convence	-	Convince

*	fwee	-	few
*	persent	-	presence
*	Excensial	-	essential
*	Succes	-	success
*	Espect	-	expect
*	Aproprate	-	appropriate
*	Continiue	-	continue
*	Convise	-	convince
*	illetrate	-	illiterate
*	Terrourist	-	terrorist
*	Beter	-	better
*	Ranteing	-	rating
*	Spoited	-	spoilt
*	Dicided	-	decided
*	Shat	-	chat
*	Lezyness	-	laziness
*	Accrose	-	across
*	Noting	-	nothing
*	Nomal	-	normal
*	Gradate	-	graduate
*	Provied	-	provide
*	Exprince	-	experience
*	Wested	-	wasted
*	Airforces	-	effort
*	Repesent	-	represent
*	Simblings	-	siblings
*	Onlike	-	unlike
*	Benetial	-	beneficial
*	Faliuer	-	failure
*	Detamine	-	determine
*	Jouth	-	youth
*	Testbook	-	textbook
*	Misued	-	misused
*	Conduceive	-	conducive
*	milionier	-	millionaire
*	fascilities	-	facilities
*	strenous	-	strenuous
*	disscussion	-	discussion
*	scrade	-	scared
*	stirted	-	started
*	tarboo	-	taboo

*	cought	-	caught
*	honored	-	honoured
*	araud	-	around
*	comforteable	-	comfortable
*	atentive	-	attentive
*	excempted	-	exempted
*	partical	-	practical
*	commerse	-	commence
*	accomodate	-	accommodate
*	libery	-	library

The above spelling errors shown here reveal how some of the investigated students are not exposed to the accepted spelling patterns of the English language. Consequently, words are spelt as they are pronounced by the respondents.

Writting for writing
Allso for also
Accrose for across
Disscussion for discussion
Atentive for attentive
Accomdation for accommodation

Some of the errors emanated from the students' overgeneralization of the past tense formation especially with irregular verbs;
Spoited   spoilt
Builded   built
The selected spelling errors represented here were consistently used by the students.

The full stop and comma
The full stop marks the end of a declarative sentence or an imperative sentence. While the comma separates sentence elements. It is used to separate word, phrase or clause.

11th March^2016...
However ^the last...
Secondly^ we the science...
According to the topic^ education is a...
Blessing purity^I am...
In conclusion^education
Sir^ my third reason

good day ladies and gentlemen^ accurate time keeper^ cool dibaters and my fellow student^I am...

...education brings money^ I *no it is...
Education we say^ is very importance
Firstly^ education is the ...
Dear,^ sir,
... and the Bible say^ if
With this few point of mine^ I have... (14)
To improved the education in our country^ sir
Dear sir^
Moving around the school.^ doing nothing...
Cultism has taken over the school^ now it has...
Into the computer age;^ teachers should...
And to get a job^ the people...

When punctuation marks such as comma and full stop are not properly used, the result could be a distortion of meaning. Analysis of the scripts of the respondents showed that the sentences were not properly punctuated. In most cases, the use of commas and full stops are not properly used, however, with just few exceptions. Consequently, these almost rendered some of the texts meaningless.

*11th March 2016.........................
*However the last.........................

The above phrases were written without commas. For example, * "...good day ladies and gentlemen accurate time keeper cool debaters and my fellow students". Instead of "Good day ladies and gentlemen, accurate time keeper, co-debaters and my fellow students". Arbitrary use of the full stop was also observed in the texts. Example:

*You can be rich even if... instead of, You can be rich, even if
*Education brings money I no it is... instead of, Education brings money. I know it is....
*Moving around the school. doing nothing... instead of, Moving around the school doing nothing
"My name is Blessing purity^ I am...." Instead of,... Blessing Purity. I am..."

The punctuation errors as displayed by the students, demonstrate that the students lack the knowledge of the appropriate application of punctuation marks.

It could equally stem from carelessness on the part of the students and laziness to read over their written compositions before submission.

Possible causes of these mechanical errors

1. As seen in the data, some of the students do not understand punctuations. They doubted whether they should use a full stop or comma. *(Lack of confidence)*.
2. Majority of them were unable to write the words based on the spelling rules, perhaps because they are sometimes in a hurry to write something and never consulted the dictionary. *(Lack of time)*.
3. Some of them made errors in spelling rules because sometimes they are in a hurry to write a composition and because in most cases pronunciation of English words and spellings are not the same. *(Lack of understanding)*.
4. Some have difficulties in determining the correct spelling of words especially for some long words. This is because they are unfamiliar with such words. *(Lack of understanding)*.
5. As seen in the data, they make errors when using capitalization for some nouns, but they could use the correct capitalization for people names. *(Lack of understanding)*.
6. Some of the subjects felt that capitalization was not too difficult for them because it is quite the same with their various indigenous writing rules, hence the transfer. *(Lack of understanding)*.

Conclusion

The improvement of language teaching depends on learners' awareness to the learning process. The process of committing errors is the process of foreign language acquisition and the language rules. And error analysis tries to discover and sum up some rules in language learning by analyzing learners' errors just as we did in this paper. The theory of error analysis, on the one hand, helps teachers understand the students' difficulties in learning, study the causes of their errors, and take effective measures to correct the errors. On the other hand, the theory will press teachers to adjust teaching strategy, teaching means, and develop teaching level wholly. Generally, the most dominant mechanical errors in the students' composition appear to be error in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The poor use of these tripartite aspects goes to show that most of the students were still at their primary stages of acquisition, and that there was still more to be done.

Based on the conclusions above, the researchers propose some suggestions in order to avoid the errors that students make in their writing among other things; the English teachers should guide their students to write compositions which are grammatically correct; especially exercises aimed at

mastering spellings that is the most common kind of mechanical errors that occur in their writing. Teachers should engage the students in some tasks in mastering mechanics in English writing. Also, the teachers should make some suggestions and create opportunities for the students to re-write marked compositions to achieve better results.

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