Error Analysis: An Investigation into Errors in English Writings of Nepalese Undergraduates

Gopal Prasad Pandey
Reader in English Education
Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract: This study attempted to identify, describe and categorize the errors in English committed by Nepalese BBS students. The subjects who participated in this study were 35 BBS first year students of Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. Thirty five compositions have been closely examined in order to find out the types of errors the participants committed. In this study, detected errors were classified into four types namely, morphosyntactic, lexico-semantic, spelling and punctuation and miscellaneous. The results of error analysis (EA) clearly showed that the morphosyntactic aspect is one of the major problem areas for Nepalese BBS students. The greatest number of errors observed were morphosyntactic which amounted to 52.08%. Next to morphosyntactic were the errors of lexicosemantic with 31.13%. Spelling and punctuation errors which constituted 14.92% stood third in the hierarchy. Very few errors were classified as miscellaneous errors which amounted to 1.86 %.

Keywords: Errors, morphosyntactic, lexico-semantic, spelling & punctuation

Introduction

Error Analysis (EA) emerged in the sixties as a reaction to contrastive analysis (CA) theory, which considered ‘language transfer’ as the basic process of second language learning. The EA movement can be characterized as an attempt to account for learner errors that could not be explained or predicted by CA or behaviourist theory. That is, it considered language transfer as the basic process of second language learning. “This paradigm involves first independently or objectively describing the learners’ IL (that is, their version of the TL) and the TL itself, followed by a comparison of the two, so as to locate mismatches” (James, 1998, p. 5). For Khodabandeh (2007, p. 8), “EA 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.” Error analysis emphasizes “the significance of errors in learners’ interlanguage system” (Brown, 2000, p. 215). The term ‘interlanguage’, coined by Selinker (1972), refers to the separateness of a second language learner’s system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and the target languages. It is a mental grammar that a learner constructs at a specific stage in the learning process. Nemser (1971) referred to it as the Approximate System, and Corder (1971, p. 151) used the term ‘Idiosyncratic Dialect or Transitional Competence to connote the idea that the learner’s language is unique to a particular individual, that the rules of the learner’s language are peculiar to the language of that individual alone.

Error analysis (EA) “consists of a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learner errors” (Ellis, 2005, p. 51). Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p. 139) use error to refer to “any deviation from a selected norm of language performance, no matter what the characteristics or causes of the deviation might be.” Thus, EA is the de facto study of the errors that learners make in their speech and writing. But comprehension errors are difficult to define and it is almost impossible to locate the precise linguistic sources of such errors.

Brown (2000, pp. 215-227) and Ellis (1996, pp. 51-52) gave a detailed account of and exemplified a model for error analysis offered by Corder (1974). Ellis (1997, pp. 15-20) on the other hand, gave practical advice and provided clear examples of how to identify and analyze learners’ errors. The initial step requires the selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors by making a distinction between a mistake (i.e. caused by lack of attention, carelessness or some aspect of performance) and an error. This stage involves “deciding on the size of the sample, the medium to be sampled and the homogeneity of the sample (with regard to the learners’ ages, L1 background, stage of development etc.” (Ellis, 1996, pp. 51-52). The errors are, then classified as overt and covert errors (Brown, 2000, p. 220). The next step after giving a grammatical analysis of each error, demands an explanation of different types of errors that correspond to different processes. Thus following Corder (1974), we can distinguish the following steps in conducting an error analysis: a. Collection of a sample of learner language b. Identification of errors c. Description of errors d. Explanation of errors and e. Error evaluation.
Many scholars in the field of error analysis have stressed the significance of second language learners’ errors (Corder, 1967; Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Taylor, 1975; Dulay & Burt, 1974). Moreover, according to Richards (1974, p. 15), “At the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort”. Thus, errors are believed to be an indicator of the learners’ stages in their target language development. From the errors that learners commit, one can determine their level of mastery of the language system. The investigation of errors has thus a double purpose; it is diagnostic because it can tell us learners “etat de langue” (Corder 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners’ current problem.

The Present Study

Objectives. EA is useful to indicate the learners’ stages in their language development. The investigation of errors is both diagnostic and prognostic. It reveals the problematic areas to teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers and students. A study of errors reflects the learners’ ability and competence to handle the target language structure and also to find out the learners’ need to strengthen the areas in which there are maximum errors. In view of the preceding discussion, this study attempts:

i. to identify and classify errors in the written texts of Nepalese undergraduates
ii. to find out the error hierarchy and
iii. to understand the process of learning in terms of (a) and (b)

The study has important implications for language pedagogy, helpful for devising teaching procedures to help students deal with difficulties.

Participants and procedure. The data consisted of thirty five students’ texts. Of the 35 students who participated 20 were female and 15 were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years. They had studied English at least for eight years. Thirty five compositions have been closely examined in order to find out the types of errors the participants committed. The steps followed to analyze the errors were identification and classification.

The participants used were drawn randomly from three different management campuses of Kathmandu Valley. For the selection of a corpus of language, following the guidelines offered by Ellis (1996, pp. 51-52), a sample of written work was collected from 35 students. As the elicitation instrument, an essay writing exercise was administered. The respondents were given 45 minutes to write an essay on the following question: Write an essay on “My Best Friend”. Their scripts were carefully read, identified and classified errors.

The participants used were drawn randomly from three different management campuses of Kathmandu Valley. The subjects who participated in this study were 35 BBS first year students of Tribhuvan University, Nepal drawn from the following three different campuses of Kathmandu Valley, Nepal: 1. Nepal Commerce Campus, Minbhawan 2. Padma Kanya Campus, Bagbazar and 3. Pashupati, Multiple Campus, Chabahil, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Categories of errors. The most useful and commonly used bases for the description of errors as suggested by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) are: 1. linguistic category 2. surface strategy, 3. comparative analysis , and 4. communicative effect. A linguistic taxonomy is usually based on categories drawn from descriptive grammar of the target language.

The detected errors were in this study classified into the following linguistic categories:

a) Morpho-syntactic errors
b) Lexico-semantic errors
c) Spelling and punctuation errors
d) Miscellaneous errors

The classification errors was broad and general.

Morpho-syntactic errors. Morpho-syntactic errors are those errors which result from misapplication of morphological inflection and syntactic rules. Agreement violations are good examples of maphosyntactic errors. Though none of the words in the sentence she walk home is incorrect, the sentence is ungrammatical. The types of errors delineated under this heading in this study are: plural/singular marker, sub-verb agreement, participle (present and past) ending, tense markers, comparative/superlative markers, possessive markers, tense problems, incomplete sentences, wrong construction of sentences structures, wrong use of auxiliaries, clausal problems, question form errors, -ing and to infinitives, passive construction, copulas, noun phrase, wrong use of conjunction and word order problems (misplaced adverbs, adjectives, possessives, mix-ups of ob. sub. verbs).

Moreover, morpho-syntactic errors include the errors in the article use, preposition use, pronoun use and use of quantifier.

Lexico-semantic errors. Lexical errors include incorrect word choice, incorrect due to semantic and pragmatics of word use, word from or
word collocation. Lexico-semantic errors in this study include the following.

a. wrong choice of words (incorrect due to semantic and pragmatics of word use), inaptness of words, use of verbs instead of nouns e.g., practise instead of practice

b. collocation errors
c. translation error (inappropriate use of words)
c. wrong word formations/ derivational errors
e. duplication error

Spelling and punctuation errors. These errors occur when words are misspelt. “A misspelling is a substance level production error. It is one of the four types of substance error and one of the three subtypes of writing error” (James, 1998, p.130). The other two subtypes of writing error according to Carl James are: text and discourse level writing errors.

Miscellaneous errors. Those errors which are either do not belong to 1, 2 and 3 above or those errors which belong to more than one or two categories above.

An essay writing exercise’ served as the main tool for the elicitation procedure in this study. Participants’ scripts were carefully read, identified and classified errors. EA in this study identifies and classifies analyzes the students’ errors, then, discusses the outcomes of EA. The following figure illustrates the organization of EA in this study.

Figure 1

Organisation of EA

Analysis and Discussion of Results

Nature of compositions. Collecting a sample of learner language provides data for EA. The students who participated in this study were 35 BBS first year students of Tribhuvan University, Nepal. It should be noted that the nature of the sample that is collected may influence the nature and distribution of the errors observed (Ellis, 2005). The data presented below consists of texts of 35 BBS students who were in their first year at Tribhuvan University, Nepal. The participants were drawn from three different campuses of Kathmandu. It is necessary to provide full and explicit descriptions of the learner compositions that make up the sample. For this reason, the total number of words, the total number of sentences, the average length of compositions, number of erroneous sentences, number of error free sentences etc. are shown statistically in the table given below. The following table provides the explicit description of the nature the compositions collected from selected participants.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of students’ compositions</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of sentences</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Of sentences/ composition</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>16.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of words</td>
<td>2412</td>
<td>3003</td>
<td>5415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words/sentence</td>
<td>10.76</td>
<td>9.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words per students</td>
<td>160.08</td>
<td>150.15</td>
<td>154.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of erroneous sentences</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages of erroneous sentences</td>
<td>76.33</td>
<td>60.27</td>
<td>66.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of error free sentences</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages of erroneous sentences</td>
<td>23.66</td>
<td>39.72</td>
<td>33.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of errors</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morphosyntactic errors</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>594/35 = 16.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexicosemantic errors</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>5415 words</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As is evident in the table mentioned above, the average length of a composition (in terms of words) is 154.71 words per composition which is relatively short. The average length of 160.08 words per compositions in the case of male participants and 150.15 words per composition in the case of female students show indicate that male students can write more than their female counterparts. The average number of sentences in all 35 compositions is 16.97. The mean of sentences of male students is 14.93 while the mean of sentences per composition in their female counterparts is 18.5. This shows that female students can write slightly longer compositions in comparison to their counterparts. In addition, total number of errors in male students’ compositions is 296 while female students’ composition consists of 401 instances different sorts of errors. The number of error free sentences are 53 and 147 respectively in the compositions of male and female.

**Data analysis and discussion.** The table below presents the five category classification of errors and number of errors in each subcategories committed by 35 participants in their respective compositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (N=35)</th>
<th>Morphosyntactic</th>
<th>Lexicosemantic</th>
<th>SPL. &amp;Punct.</th>
<th>Mis.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F. Count</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>52.08</td>
<td>31.13</td>
<td>14.92</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Morphosyntactic errors.** The table shows that the highest percentage of errors committed was morphosyntactic errors. Most importantly, morphosyntactic errors result from the misapplication of morphological inflection and syntactic rules. The total occurrence of morphosyntactic errors was 363 (out of 697). It can be inferred from that result that the most prominent type of errors Nepalese BBS students make is morphosyntactic ones. Below are some examples from their compositions to illustrate these errors.

- She like Chinese. (agreement)
- My friend name is Janak. (possessive marker)
- He is a my best friend. (article)
- His ambition to be good doctor. (aux.)
- First day we talk about informally subject. (WO/tense)
He always remember to his friend. (agreement/Prep.)

Why we need friends? Construction-Q. form

He likes more cricket...... (WO)

so I am affect by friend........... ( passive construction)

We can defined a friend.... (Tense)

She is popular for teachers. (Prep.)

She loves dancing and sings.... (-ing)

Morhosyntactic errors included errors in the use of different facets of grammar namely: Agreements (30.02%), prepositions (13.49%), tenses (10.74%), auxiliaries (10.19%), sentence construction of different kinds (e.g., interrogative, indicative) (6.88%), word order (5.50%), possessive markers (4.95%), articles (3.58%), conjunctions (2.47%), -ing and infinitives (2.47%), pronouns (2.47%) noun phrases (2.20%) numbers (1.65%), clauses (1.10%), modals (0.82%) and miscellaneous (1.37%). The highest percentage of errors observed were agreement errors which accounted for 30.02%. Next to agreement errors were the errors of prepositions which had 13.49% of instances. Preposition errors were followed in order by tense, auxiliary, sentence construction, word order, possessive marker, article, conjunction, -ing and infinitive, pronoun, noun phrase, number, miscellaneous, clause, and modal, errors. The hierarchy of errors made by the participants in different facets of morphosyntactic aspects can be stated as follows:

I. 29-31% = Agreement
II. 12-14% = Prepositions
III. 10-12% = Tenses and auxiliaries
IV. 5-7% = Sentence construction, word order
V. 3-5% = Articles and possessive markers
VI. 1-3% = Conjunctions, -ing and infinitives, pronouns, noun phrases, numbers, clause structure and miscellaneous errors
VII. 0-1% = Modals

**Lexical errors.** Lexis sharply differs from grammar. Grammar is said to be organized in closed systems, to be systematic and regular. Grammar is “that part of a language which can be described in terms of generalizations or rules while lexis appertains to all the particular facts about language...those which can not be generalized into rules” (Leech, 1981, p. 179). Lexis is, by contrast, said to consist of open systems, to be irregular and unsystematic. Lexis involves the vagaries of individual words. However boundaries between lexis and grammar are seen to be less clear cut. Morphological aspects of words which can be treated as part of grammar, can as well be viewed as part of words: this is particularly true of derivational morphology, whereby words of different form classes can be derived from the same root; adjective bright- noun brightness – adverb brightly.

Lexical errors in this study include incorrect word choice, incorrect due to semantic and pragmatics of word use, word form or word collocation.

Only 31.13% of errors were classified as lexicosemantic errors. Given below are some of the instances of lexical errors from their scripts.

**Examples**

He is honesty boy.

He is always suggestion me.

He works very hardly.

She mentioned time and education

She is helpful, friendship and.....

Her hole family worshiped in Jesus. (Lexical similarity)

He respect to all people. (Duplication/redundancy)

She was intelligence in her class.

This finding contradicts with other earlier researches. For some learner groups, lexical errors are the most frequent category of errors. Grauberg (1971) analyzed the errors of a group of advanced learners of German with MT English and commented on “the preponderance of lexical errors.” 102 out of 193 (53%) recorded errors were lexical. Meara (1984) suggests that lexical errors outnumber other types by three or four to one (as cited in James, 1998, p. 143).

**Spelling and punctuation errors.** Out of 697 errors, there were 104 (14.92) instances of spelling and punctuation errors. Some of the errors of this category committed by the participants in their scripts were as follows.

a. His future plan is Accountain (Spelling/Punct.)

b. He is very helpful, sociable and cheerfull. (Spelling)

c. He use to Live in Morang. (Capitalized wrongly)

d. Her face is white so every on like her.

e. Her hobby is singing and dancing.... (Spelling)

**Miscellaneous errors.** Participants made in their scripts other miscellaneous errors. Out of 697 errors, there were 13 (1.86) instance of
miscellaneous errors. Below are some of the instances of miscellaneous errors from their scripts.

a. She has very weakness. (wrong use of ‘very’)

b. He helps me too much when i have been in trouble. (error in the use of ‘too’)

c. Like as, I also have a best friend. (error in the use of ‘like as’)

d. She is very enjoy in life. (error in the use of ‘very’)

Gender-Wise Distribution of Errors

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (N =35)</th>
<th>Morphosyntactic</th>
<th>Lexicosemantic</th>
<th>SPL. &amp;Punct.</th>
<th>Mis.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F. Count</td>
<td>M 151 F 212</td>
<td>M 96 F 121</td>
<td>M 42 F 62</td>
<td>M 7 F 6</td>
<td>M 296 F 401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>51.01 52.86</td>
<td>32.43 30.17</td>
<td>14.18 15.46</td>
<td>2.36 1.49</td>
<td>1.98 1.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table shows, the percentages of errors committed by the male and female participants in each category do not vary much. The differences are negligible.

Conclusions

The data consisted of thirty five students’ texts. Thirty five compositions have been closely examined in order to find out the types of errors the participants committed. The steps followed to analyze the errors were identification and classification. In this study, detected errors were classified into the following categories: morphosyntactic, lexicosemantic, spelling and punctuation and miscellaneous. The linguistic category served as a reporting tool to organize the errors. The classification errors is broad and general.

As the elicitation instrument, an essay writing exercise was administered. The respondents were given 45 minutes to write an essay on the following question: Write an essay on “My Best Friend.” Their scripts were carefully read, identified and classified errors. A study of BBS students’ errors gave us clues to their general English language ability and their specific needs in terms of language nuances and usages. The main finding of the study can be summed up as follows:

- The greatest number of errors observed were morphosyntactic which amounted to 52.08%. Next to morpho-syntactic were the errors of lexicosemantic with 31.13%. Spelling and punctuation errors which constituted 14.92%, stood third in the hierarchy. Very few errors were classified as miscellaneous errors which amounted to 1.86 %.

- The hierarchical order of errors can be arranged as morphosyntactic errors > lexicosemantic errors > spelling & punctuation errors > miscellaneous errors.

- The results of EA clearly demonstrate that the morphosyntactic aspect is one of the major problem areas for Nepalese BBS students.

- Morhosyntactic errors included errors in the use of different facets of grammar namely: Agreements, prepositions, tenses, auxiliaries, sentence construction of different kinds (e.g., interrogative, indicative), word order, possessive markers, articles, conjunctions, -ing and infinitives, pronouns noun phrases numbers, clauses, modals and miscellaneous.

- The hierarchy of errors made by the participants in different facets of morphosyntactic aspects can be stated as follows:

  I. 29-31 % = Agreement
  II. 12-14 % = Prepositions
  III. 10-12% = Tenses and auxiliaries
  IV. 5-7% = Sentence construction, word order
  V. 3-5% = Articles and possessive markers
  VI. 1-3% = Conjunctions, -ing and infinitives, pronouns noun phrases, numbers, clause structure and miscellaneous errors
  VII. 0-1% = Modals

- The highest percentage of errors observed were agreement errors which accounted for 30.02%. Next to agreement errors were the errors of prepositions which had 13.49 % of instances. The hierarchical order of error shows that agreement is the area which needs greater emphasis. Next to
agreement were the errors of prepositions. So the texts, teaching units, exercises/practices should be devised accordingly.

This study was conducted on a limited number of participants. The data for EA consisted of compositions collected from 35 Nepalese BBS first year students. EA employed in this is based on a general and broad classification, morphosyntactic, lexico-semantic, spelling and punctuation and miscellaneous. The detailed classification of each of the categories needs to be further explored which can better reveal problematic areas to teachers, students, syllabus designers and textbook writers. Further studies can be carried out utilizing a large number of subjects and or a variety of ESP areas for example, Science and technology, engineering etc.

References


Appendix

Instances of Sample Errors from Students’ Compositions

1. KB.F
   a. My best friend name is Aausha.
   b. She was intelligence in class and other compition in programm.
   c. She was helpful, cooperate and kind person.
   d. She helps me anytime.
   e. Best friend means I viewed she helped one to another.
   f. She Reading in BBS 1st year in Padma Kanya Multiple Campus, Bagbazar, Kathmandu.
   g. She studied in hardworking and laborious, so I am affect ..........
   h. We solved the problem just together.
   i. Friendship is so long time not short time.
   j. friendship is quite and helpful other problem.
   k. friend is bad so we bad.
   l. We working in Sajha Prakashan of job.
   m. She mentioned time and education.
   n. So I am affect by friend is must important.

2. Sh.F
   a. My best friend name is Usha.
   b. She live in Chobhar.
   c. I am 22 years old studying BBS1st year from Padma Kanya Campus.
   d. She is naturely beauty.
   e. She always help each other.
   f. She’s thinking is positive.
   g. She is always loving babys.
   h. She’s face is always cover with happyness.
   i. She has never angry for me.
   j. She is good teacher.
   She’s economic is better then for me.

3. BM.F
   a. My best friend name is Meloan Rai who live in Ilam.
   b. Her face is white so every one like her.
   c. She read in M.R. Campus Ilam.
   d. Now a day computer cover large area.
   e. She takes first division in exam.
   f. She help everyone.
   g. She is famouse in our society.
   h. Her work and labour inspire to me, to be that type of girl.
   i. Nowaday , she is in Ilam but I remember her everyday. I feel she is here.

4. KT.F
   a. She is very helpfull, friendship and coordinative for others.
   b. She’s house is Pokhara. But now she Live in Kathmandu.
   c. I knew she is very friendly.
   d. She is my favourite friends.
   e. She has round of face.
   f. She is favourite colour is blue and white.
   g. She has slim body and beautiful girl.
   h. She is very kindly.
   i. She never quarrel with others because of she is very shy.

5. SG.F
   a. I have many friends. But my best friend name is preety.
   b. She was healthy.
   c. She take care them self.
   d. She is no shows his anger.
   e. Preety have one brother whose name …
   f. When Preety was 12 years old her mother was died in blood cancer.
   g. He respect his sister and brother.
   h. Preety and Biswas don’t fight together.
   i. Preety’s brother was very healthy.

6. KS.M
   a. He is very honest and help me in my study.
b. He always help handicraft person.
c. He always ware black jeans paint and short and black shoes.
d. His hobbies are play cricket, sing a song, dance, swim, making new friend, talk with new person.

e. He had long hair and ware golden chain.
f. His future plan is Accountain.
g. He always respect them who are respected.
h. But he always forget his pen in home and sometime also forget books.

7. ND.M
a. My best friend name is Janak.
b. He is very helpful, sociable and cheerfull.
c. He always used to read novel and write poems.
d. Being the helpfulness I made him best friend.
e. He always be in front of me to share ....
f. He is working hard to meet his ambition.
g. He respect all teachers.
h. My friend is similar like me.

8. KK.M
a. I am Kuamr Kharel my best friends name is Kamala Dhakal who live in Kavre Banepa.
b. She now live in New Baneshwor Kathmandu.
c. She now red RR campus.
d. Kamala is a beutifull social service honest man.
e. She has black and long curly here.
f. She habits visiting best places, Temples and picnic places.
g. She like food Chinese.
h. She have very weaknesses.
i. My best friend is kamala dhakal Lasted my life friendsheipe.