An Error or Not an Error?: ESL Students' Identification and

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ABSTRACT

Research has emphasised that errors can be an effective means of improving language learning, particularly grammatical accuracy. The most common practice in the field of error analysis is identifying and analysing errors in students' language production. The present study differs from the empirical ones as it focuses on students' ability and strategies in identifying and correcting pre-determined errors in given texts rather than the students' own written production. It is the assumption of the study that if students are not able to perceive the errors as errors, they will continuously commit errors which, in turn, may lead to the incessant incorrect and inappropriate use of the language. Thus, the findings of the study would allow for an in-depth analysis of students' linguistic skills and provide some suggestions for more effective instructional practice to language instructors.

Keywords: *error analysis, error correction, strategies*

Introduction

Errors are indispensable to second language learners. There has been evidence that there are learners who often make errors in their oral or written production although they have learned the language for years. Studies have shown that the major reason for this is that the learners are unable to perceive the errors as errors. Thus, they tend to repeat the same errors and this, later, becomes internalised and habitual. As a result, this causes the incessant incorrect and inappropriate language use (Tono, 2004). In contrast, when a learner is able to notice errors on their own without the instructor's help, it would lead to conscious cognition (Kavaliauskiene, 2005).

In the light of this evidence, the writers feel that examining the students' ability to recognise errors would be a paramount significance prior to analysing the errors they make in their oral or written work. This is because the students' ability (or inability) to recognise errors can be reflected in their language production. Thus, this study differs from the common practice of analysing errors employed by empirical studies (which is analysing the types and patterns of errors in students' writing). Instead, this study is more interested in finding out the students' ability to recognise and correct pre-determined errors in given texts.

This study, therefore, sets to investigate the students' ability to identify errors and the strategies used to correct the errors. This could give indication as to why a learner's linguistic profile has taken a particular form. Based on the findings, some suggestions for more effective instructional practice can be provided.

Error Analysis: An Overview

An error could be described as 'an utterance which a native speaker of the standard national form of the language would note, and might allow to pass uncorrected in a spoken standard version, but would not accept in formal written forms of the language' (Graham, 2003, p. 2). Other linguists have approached the concept from various perspectives: Corder (1981) on systematic vs. non-systematic occurrence of error; Sridhar (1981) on traditional vs. sophisticated investigation of errors; Murphy (1986) on errors of accuracy vs. errors of fluency; Lennon (1991) on global vs. local errors; Brians (2003) on prescriptionist vs. descriptionist

views on errors. In these studies, the concept of error concerns deviations from the standard use of English as judged by sophisticated users such as professional writers, editors, teachers, and literate executives and personnel officers.

Errors can be analysed in various ways. One of the common practices is identifying and analysing errors in students' written works. Another is through the students' identification and correction of pre-determined errors in given texts. In Malaysia, studies on the field of error analysis in ESL are quite replete. However, most of the studies have concentrated on the former practice (Haja Mohideen, 1984; 1991; Rosli & Edwin, 1989; Hughes & Heah, 2004; Raja Zarina, 1996; Loi, 2001; Abdul Rashid, Goh Li Lian & Wan Rose Eliza, 2004; Nor Hazani, 2005). Studies on the latter practice, on the other hand, have been scarce.

Most of the studies mentioned above investigated the types and patterns of errors made by students in their writing. The studies commonly identified the most common errors made by the students based on the frequency of occurrence. For example, Rosli and Edwin (1989) examined the errors committed by secondary school students in their English compositions. They found that the most common errors made were in the use of Present Perfect Tense, followed by Past Progressive Tense. Other common errors include plurality and articles. The study revealed that the students made the least error in the area of subject-verb agreement.

Along the same line, Haja Mohideen (1991) found that the common errors made by matriculation students in a local university were grammatical, lexical, discourse, pronunciation, orthographic, s-v concord, sequence of tenses, unacceptable collocation, reference and conjunctions.

In the same vein, Abdul Rashid, Goh Li Lian and Wan Rose Eliza (2004) examined the errors committed by ESL Chinese learners in their writing based on eight selected grammatical items, namely, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, articles, adverbs, modal verbs, prepositions, and spelling. They found that errors in verbs topped the list in terms of frequency of occurrence, followed by prepositions. Among possible reasons offered for the errors committed are the overgeneralisation of the grammar rules and the influence of mother tongue in their ESL writing.

Last but not least, Maros, Tan and Khazriyati (2007) in their analysis of errors committed by students from rural areas also attested to first language interference as the main reason for the occurrence of errors in their writing. In the study, they found that determiner, subject-verb agreement and copula 'be' were the most problematic grammatical areas

that students faced. The analysis revealed that a large number of incorrect usage of these grammatical items was largely due to the students' mother tongue, i.e Malay, grammar influence.

The Study

As discussed in the previous section, most studies examined the errors made by learners in their writing. The identification and analysis of the errors were made by the researchers who are the experts in the language aspects examined. The learners, on the other hand, may not perceive the errors as wrong. Holding the view that learners will not commit errors if they recognise them as errors, this study seeks to find out whether the learners are able to identify and correct the errors themselves. It also examines the methods and strategies used by the learners when correcting the errors which could give some indication of the grammatical items being mastered or not.

The research questions, thus, can be expressed as follows:

i. Are the learners able to identify the errors in the texts?
    - what are the types of errors that learners are able to identify?
    - what are the types of errors that learners are not able to identify?
ii. Upon identification of errors, are the learners able to correct them?
iii. What are the strategies used in correcting the errors?

Methodology

A total of 30 undergraduate students from a local university participated in the study. All of them had studied English for at least eleven years prior to coming to the university. However, to ensure validity of the results,

Table 1: Types of Errors

Types of Errors	No. of Errors				
	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5
Articles	2	2	2	2	2
Subject-Verb Agreement	2	2	2	2	2
Tenses	2	2	2	2	2
Propositions	2	2	2	2	2
Spelling	2	2	2	2	2

only those in the second semester of the English Language course were selected as they must have at least received the same amount of instruction and exposure of English grammar in the first semester.

The data were collected through the error identification and correction task and post-interview. Five texts of sixty to seventy words with pre-determined errors in the grammatical categories, namely, articles, subject-verb agreement, tenses, spelling and preposition were used as the source of the main data. The following table shows the types and number of errors in the texts.

The participants were asked to identify and correct the errors in a controlled situation for two hours. Controlled situation here means that they were not allowed to leave the room until they finished all the tasks. In addition, they were not allowed to discuss with the others or refer to any notes or materials.

An informal post-interview was later conducted to complement the participants' response to the task. In addition, it is also to gauge the strategies used by the participants when attempting the task. This is to explore any potential strategies used for effective pedagogical instructions.

The task-based data were analysed based on three patterns of error identification and correction: i) unable to identify errors; ii) able to identify errors but unable to correct them, and iii) able to identify and correct the errors. On the other hand, the interview data were analysed according to the strategy patterns described by the participants.

Findings

The research questions clearly spelt out the main focus of the study: i) participants' ability to identify errors; and ii) strategies in correcting the errors. Thus, the analysis of the data is reported and discussed under these main areas.

Students' Ability to Identify Errors

The analysis of the data saw the emergence of three main patterns: i) inability to identify errors; ii) ability to identify errors but unable to correct them; and iii) ability to identify and correct errors. The following section discusses the findings in more detail.

Table 2: Unable to Identify Errors

Errors	Number of Unidentified Errors				
	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5
Articles	27	20	13	28	20
Subject-Verb Agreement	10	20	5	10	12
Tenses	5	15	12	27	5
Prepositions	27	25	24	26	25
Spelling	29	24	30	24	29

i.   *Unable to Identify Errors*

The data in Table 2 clearly show that the most problematic grammatical areas faced by the students were spelling, followed by articles and prepositions. The majority of the participants failed to identify misspelt words in the texts such as 'dissaproving', 'assesment', 'aproppriate', and 'recomendations'. It seems that they were unable to detect the wrong spelling of words that involve consonant doubling like 'disapproving', assessment, 'appropriate' and 'recommendations'.

In addition, the data also reveal that the participants were not able to identify the wrong use of articles and prepositions. This is probably due to the lack of articles and the less number of prepositions in their mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia (BM), compared to English. Furthermore, the participants seemed to have overlooked articles and prepositions as they are little and small words. Thus, they might have paid more attention to words that they thought would carry meaning to the sentences.

The analysis reveals similar findings to the study done by Rosli and Edwin (1989) in terms of subject-verb agreement. The participants seem to have less problem in this area. The participants also scored well in the tenses area. Except for the large number of unidentified errors in Text 2 for the former and in Text 4 for the latter, the participants scored better in the other texts. An explanation of this could be due to extra attention paid to these areas by instructors in their grammar instruction which, in turn, could lead to the participants' awareness on these areas when attempting the tasks. In addition, the items tested on these areas are only basic grammar which do not involve high level of grammatical structure. Thus, the participants might not encounter much problem in identifying the basic errors.

ii. *Able to Identify Errors but Unable to Correct Them*

The analysis shows that there were participants who were able to identify the errors. Nevertheless, the corrections that they suggested for these errors were incorrect. The following table shows this finding.

Table 3: Able to Identify but Unable to Correct

Errors	Number of identified errors with wrong corrections				
	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5
Articles	1	0	2	0	0
Subject-Verb Agreement	2	1	5	0	4
Tenses	3	0	1	2	5
Prepositions	0	1	1	0	0
Spelling	0	0	0	0	0

As can be seen from Table 3, some participants were able to identify the errors in the areas of articles, subject-verb agreement and tenses. The data in the table confirms the earlier finding that the participants had fewer problems in identifying the subject-verb agreement and tenses errors. The data show that more errors in these two areas were able to be identified by the participants compared to those in the other areas. Unfortunately, however, they failed to correct the errors. This shows that the students could perceive the errors but they did not have adequate grammatical knowledge to correct them.

iii. *Able to Identify and Correct Errors*

The analysis shows that the participants found that they were more able to identify and correct the errors in the subject-verb agreement and tenses areas compared to prepositions, articles and spelling. This is shown in the following table.

As can be seen from the table, participants could easily identify and correct errors in tenses, followed by subject-verb agreement. Perhaps, as mentioned earlier, this is due to the emphasis given by the teachers when teaching grammar.

Table 4: Able to Identify and Correct

Errors	Identified and corrected errors				
	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5
Articles	2	10	5	2	10
Subject-Verb Agreement	8	9	20	10	4
Tenses	22	15	17	1	20
Prepositions	3	4	5	4	5
Spelling	1	6	0	6	1

Strategies in Correcting Errors

The interview data reveal a neat pattern of strategies that participants employed when attempting the tasks. First, the students claimed that they could identify the errors because they knew the grammar rules. Thus, they just applied the knowledge that they have when identifying and correcting the errors. In order to confirm their claim, they were asked to justify the answers that they gave for the tasks. Some of them demonstrated a very firm knowledge of grammar rules especially in the subject-verb agreement and tenses areas. This could explain why the participants were able to identify and correct the errors in these two areas successfully. For those who were able to identify but not able to correct the errors, they claimed that they, too, knew the grammar rules. However, they did not know how to correct the errors. Thus, they were only able to perceive the errors as wrong. Some, however, claimed that they thought they had given the correct answers. Thus, they had to admit that their understanding (on the topic) has been incorrect all this while.

As expected, most of the students, especially those who were not able to identify the errors, employed the guessing strategies. When asked what the basis of their guesses was, they mentioned about connecting the words to the context. They said that the number of subjects, or the time phrase mentioned could help them in their guessing. Thus, it could be implied here that the participants did not simply make any empty guesses. Instead, they relied on the grammatical knowledge to make their guesses.

One of the strategies mentioned by some of the participants was to read the texts aloud. They claimed that they were taught by their teachers to 'feel' the sound of the sentences. If they did not sound 'nice', then,

there must be something wrong with the sentence. However, when asked, what sounded 'nice' and what did not, the participants were not able to explain it. They just said that it just did not sound nice.

Another strategy revealed by the participants was to mentally translate the texts into BM. Thus, they identified the errors based on the grammar rules in BM. Thus, when they attempted to correct the errors, they relied on the BM grammar as well.

Discussion

The task-based data reveal that the participants' grammatical understanding in English is very much influenced by the grammatical rules of their mother tongue. This, in turn, affects their ability to identify and correct the errors. For example, words in BM are spelt according to their pronunciation, and the rules of spelling are more or less regular. Thus, Malay ESL learners often find the spelling in English confusing as the rules are irregular. Hence, even though they are able to identify the errors, the corrections suggested can be incorrect as they tend to generalise the spelling rules.

Another problem attributed to the mother tongue interference is in the use of articles and determiners. Articles and determiners in BM are only restricted to 'ini' (this) and 'itu' (that) (Abdullah Hassan, 1993). The BM rule in these areas of grammar does not specify the need for certain articles and determiners for definiteness or indefiniteness and singularity or plurality of the nouns they precede. Thus, the learners might fail to see any omission of articles and determiners or their incorrect usage.

The interview data also reveal a point that could give a significant implication to language instructions in the classroom. The participants claimed that they were not able to identify the errors as they were so used to having either the errors pointed to them or corrected by the teachers every time they produced any written work. Most of the participants admitted that they usually did not look or learn from the written corrections made by the teachers. Some of the participants claimed that they felt disheartened when they saw the red marks all over their writing. Thus, if the teachers did not discuss the errors in class, they usually put the piece of writing away. As a result, they tend to commit the same errors in the future.

Pedagogical Implications

One of the most common approaches in dealing with errors is to point and correct the errors when they appear in learners' speech or writing. However, the findings of the study clearly indicate that the learners may not realise errors as errors. The errors may have become fossilized or permanent in their second language due to repeated occurrence in their language production. Thus, they may not be able to perceive an error when they see one.

Hence, this study suggests a paradigm shift in the teaching of errors. Rather than having the teachers identifying and correcting the errors, learners should be introduced to the concept of self-correction or self-editing. This could help the students to develop a deeper awareness of the language structure and devise their own strategies for accurate language production. Teachers can facilitate this by highlighting the common errors that are most likely to occur in second language. In addition, teachers can sensitise learners to learning strategies used by other learners to facilitate them in self-correction or self-editing.

Studies have shown that self-correction may be very useful to students. This is because when they correct themselves, they are more aware of the errors they make and try to be more accurate especially in terms of their grammar. As contended by Vickers and Ene (2006) 'explicit self-correction allows for greater grammatical accuracy and has important classroom implications'. In the same vein, Kroll and Schafer (1984), Lalande (1982) and Hendrickson (1978) state the importance of self-correction and emphasise on error and rule awareness. Kroll and Schafer (1984) claim that

> *when students can make sense of their errors, coming to terms with them as the result of consistent and understandable strategies, they are more likely to try to change (without demolishing their self-concept)* (p. 140).

In addition, the effectiveness of error discovery is also supported in process-oriented classroom texts for ESL learners (Raimes, 1990).

Last but not least, the lowest score in students' ability to identify and correct spelling errors suggest that the teaching of spelling cannot be taken lightly. The findings show that even at the university level, students still face problems in spelling. This suggests that the teaching of spelling should be revisited – it cannot be assumed that students have already

mastered the spelling when they enter the university. It would also be beneficial to examine the strategies used by students in spelling English words. The findings may help to explain the difficulties faced by the students in spelling.

Conclusion

This study has filled the gap in the area of research in the field of error analysis. The findings are of paramount significance to both language instructors and learners. For language instructors, the findings can provide relevant and useful information on learners' linguistic profile. This suggests for a shift in their classroom instructions. As for the learners, the findings can provide them with the value of self-reflection and self-learning.

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