Analyzing Errors in Formative Assessment: The Case of Pakistani ESL Undergraduates

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Abstract

The current study endeavors to probe into the possible intricacies of English language errors committed by the undergraduate students after assessing their academic assignments and compositions. In Pakistan, English is not the native language but is mandated as a compulsory subject within educational institutions. Therefore, ESL learners often engender linguistic errors. The primary objective of this scholarly investigation was to elucidate prevalent linguistic errors inherent in undergraduate students' academic assignment. Therefore, the research framework of Error Analysis, pioneered by Corder (1979), was embraced. The scope of this research was only confined to the public sector universities. The researchers meticulously amassed and scrutinized all undergraduate students' assignments to quantify the frequency of errors therein. Consequently, a gamut of eight distinct error categories was identified, among these errors, punctuation and capitalization errors were registered with the highest incidence. Evidently, this study also uncovered a dearth of cognizance for the accurate use of grammatical rules. This study can serve as a pivotal resource for the learners, educators, and researchers to the linguistic errors as per the prowess of undergraduates in Pakistan. Furthermore, this work furnished prescriptive recommendations for both ESL learners and teachers for ameliorating language errors.

Introduction

The propensity for committing error is an intrinsic facet of human nature. Pakistan magnifies the likelihood of errors in its acquisition and application by ESL undergraduate learners as English is not their native language. A mass of factors can underlie these linguistic errors. Within the pedagogical sphere, "Error Analysis" emerges as a pivotal instrument, empowering teachers to identify student errors and suggesting solutions to mitigate such vulnerabilities. According to Michaelides (1990), Error Analysis plays a pivotal role in language education by providing valuable insights and benefits to teachers, students, and researchers. Error Analysis serves as a bridge between theory and practice in language education. It offers practical insights into the classroom dynamics and learning process, helping educators make informed decisions to optimize language learning outcomes.

For students, Error Analysis provides a means to recognize their areas of weakness and improve their language skills. By understanding their own errors, students gain awareness of their language limitations and can work towards overcoming them. The undergraduate ESL learners are in dire need to master the comprehensive knowledge of English; including phonology, morphology and syntax, pragmatics, etc., but remained partially attainable (or unattainable) by them. The main objective of this research is to probe the recurrent errors in the formative assessments of undergraduate students of BS English and MA English at public universities in Pakistan. This study also extends

an opportunity for the undergraduates to identify their linguistic weak points and devise some solutions to rectify their shortcomings.

Background of the Study

Stephen Pit Corder, a luminary linguist, is well renowned as the founder of the framework of Error Analysis (1960s). Prior to the emergence of Error Analysis, a number of scholars and linguists approached second language acquisition (SLA) with a behaviorist approach by ignoring linguistic errors. They adopted the Contrastive Analysis approach to analyze the native language with the target language and identified the second language errors. Later, drill exercises were used to deal with various error categories encompassing interlanguage issues.

The important term "Interlanguage" was coined by Selinker in 1972, invigorating the interest of other linguists in probing new strategies that could ameliorate the challenges confronted by second language learners in their pursuit of a target language. In 1967, Corder significantly elevated the stature of Error Analysis through his seminal work "Error Analysis and Interlanguage" and subsequently it catalyzed a proliferation of scholarly work in this sphere by various researchers (James, 2013). Earlier (1960s-1970s), the scope of Error Analysis kept constrained due to the limited sources which restrained other researchers to work with a compact corpus, focused only on some specific linguistic aspects, and left other facets unexplored (Kotsyuk, 2015). Later, there appeared a number of advances in methodologies and technology which broadened the horizons in the realm of Error Analysis and helped contemporary scholars with substantial research contributions by facilitating them with electronic tools for error analysis.

In Pakistan, English has gathered the status of an international and co-official language (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973). It globally enjoys widespread use as a lingua franca and serves as a second language. Policymakers and educators were engaged perennially in the quest for pedagogical strategies to enhance the systemic along with the structured dissemination of English language education. Error Analysis served as a universal practice to pinpoint language issues. This analytical technique not solely highlighted the errors but also furnished potential remedies and solutions. Researchers employed observational and experimental methodologies to explain the weak sides of language acquisition. While existing literature reveals a lot of studies on Error Analysis limited with the focus on the students of engineering, business, secondary school, and postgraduate levels. But the corpus of English language learners in Pakistan remains scant and neglected. Therefore, this research article currently differed from convention as it scrutinized the Formative assessments of English language students at the undergraduate level i.e., BS and MA English. Rather than following the conventional approach (of assigning tasks and then dissecting the outcomes), the researchers adopted a more holistic analysis of the academic materials by providing a detailed evaluation. In essence, this investigation offered an insightful analysis to enhance our comprehension of the linguistic understanding of our students. This research study answered the following questions:

- What are the common grammatical errors committed by English language students in their academic materials submitted for formative assessment at the undergraduate level?
- What are the possible corrections to the linguistic errors committed by English students?

Literature Review

Error Analysis

Error Analysis was considered an essential domain in applied linguistics, focused on the identification of errors that emerged during the second acquisition. Corder (1967) illustrated theoretical and the practical roles of error analysis. The theoretical role pertained to elucidating the nexus between learners' grasp of the target language and the source of the acquired language and identifying the gaps in the learning process. The practical role offered remedies for enhancing the efficacy of methodologies to facilitate productive language learning and its instructions (Corder, 1981). Error Analysis assumed salience in three dimensions: it can inform teachers about (i) the attainment levels of learners and gaps, (ii) the strategies inherent in language acquisition, and (iii) it can empower learners to self-assess their linguistic knowledge to validate the acceptability of their language structures. Embedded within the domain of applied linguistics, Error Analysis aroused as a corollary to Chomsky's theory of Linguistic Competence and manifested as errors (Corder, 1967). Though, Error Analysis aims to attain linguistic competence in the target language

(Richards, 1980) but is not possible as per Chomsky's concept of competence because second language competence is built up on multiple variables and a set of rules (Corder, 1979).

According to Keshavarz (2012), Error Analysis stands in contrast to the Contrastive Analysis theory. He considers the conversion of knowledge as crucial in second language acquisition. However, Error Analysis transcends this paradigm and acknowledges the cognitive intricacies which are essential for second language learners and their engagement with their target language. It also unveils the dormant cognitive processes during language acquisition. Thereby, he illuminated areas of vulnerability in the learning trajectory of learners and proposes three fundamental canons of Error Analysis: a language could not be learned without committing errors, errors were considered important for the research, and the entire origin of committing errors is not directly related with the native language of learners.

Errors Vs Mistakes

Corder (1967) was also considered a pioneering force to distinguish the differences between "errors" and "mistakes" in the linguistic domain. He described errors as stemming from a discrepancy or incompetence, while mistakes can also arise from lapses in performance. This conceptual demarcation of competence and performance held pertinence for researchers working on the language "errors" and "mistakes". Therefore, language mistakes are often encountered in the speech of native speakers (Johnson, 1988), and may appear due to fatigue, slips of the tongue, or any emotional intensity during the spontaneous conversation. But native speakers are equipped with linguistic prowess to control these mistakes with self-correct upon recognizing their problems (Corder, 1967).

Contrarily, second language learners commit errors due to their vulnerability to linguistic rules, this necessitates the strategies for the acquisition of contextually accurate language usage for attaining language competency (Shaughnessy, 1977). Consequently, the unintentional deviations (of native speakers in casual speech) may encompass mistakes, often arising from multiple factors unrelated to knowledge.

James (2013) explained that errors were unintentional deviations in language use, originating without any deliberate intention and intractable by the initiator. Conversely, Mistakes can be either deliberate or unintentional and are adaptable by the initiator. Within the language learning process, mistakes may hold a limited number of pedagogical imports. Yet, it is also considered a great conundrum if a learner discerns various mistakes and errors in their communication and necessitates a meticulous analysis of these terms because these are often employed interchangeably (Corder, 1967).

Research in the field of Error Analysis

Nzama (2010) investigated the English language errors and underlying causal factors in the speech of Isizulu speakers. She scrutinized the essays written by 10th, 11th, and 12th-grade second language learners. The errors culled from these compositions were: discrepancies in the singular and plural form of the nouns, wrong use of auxiliary verbs in the past tense, incorrect tense selection, inappropriate use of articles, incorrect use of prepositions and pronouns, mother tongue interference, and vague use of infinitives. Especially, among these errors a pivotal factor is pedagogical shortcomings, qualifications of educators, trainings, and experience in English language teaching were found inadequate. Additionally, the shortage of libraries in rural areas schools was another addition to these challenges.

Amiri and Puteh (2017) conducted rigorous research on postgraduate students' errors prevalent in their academic written activities. The participants were given the task to craft assignments in their respective disciplines. Data analysis revealed 389 errors: sentence structure errors comprised 32.90% of the total errors which is considered a larger chunk, along with these errors in punctuation, articles, and capitalization prominently manifested in those academic assignments.

Meanwhile, Talpur (2017) presented a case study, "Error Analysis of the English Essays of Undergraduate Engineering Students in Pakistan." It was experimental research where students were asked to write essays in 200-300 words. The data analysis and conclusion of the study highlighted the high rate of grammatical errors that emerged in the written scripts of undergraduate engineering students. Furthermore, frequent spelling mistakes and word order discrepancies were notably identified within that written corpus.

Research Framework

The data collection and analysis for this research employs Corder (1975) approach to error analysis comprising of the following stages:

- Classification of errors.
- Evaluation of errors.
- Explanation of errors.

This method focuses on the types of errors learners make in their language production. It's a simple and tangible way to categorize errors based on the nature of the mistake.

The first phase of the Error Analysis is classification of errors. A researcher can classify errors in different ways. This method focuses on the types of errors learners make in their language production. It's a simple and tangible way to categorize errors based on the nature of the mistake. According to Corder (1972), this approach organizes errors according to different linguistic levels, such as orthography (spelling), phonology (pronunciation), morphology (word forms), syntax (sentence structure), and vocabulary. This method provides a more detailed understanding of the specific linguistic aspects learners struggle with. It's often used in more in-depth error analysis studies and can help identify patterns related to specific language features.

The second step involves evaluation of the errors. Corder (1975) talks about two rationales to justify the significance of the evaluation of errors. According to him, evaluating errors aids in identifying areas of weakness where learners need improvement. Once educators understand the specific errors learners are prone to, they can design targeted remedial plans. These plans can include focused instruction, practice activities, and strategies to address the identified issues. Explaining errors goes beyond surface analysis. It delves into the underlying cognitive processes that learners undergo while acquiring a second language. These processes are complex and often involve the transfer of structures from the native language, overgeneralization of rules, and more. Understanding the reasons behind errors provides insights into how learners are grappling with these challenges and adapting to the new language system. Corder (1975) emphasizes the importance of identifying the root causes behind errors. This allows educators to formulate targeted strategies for addressing these causes. Whether it's through additional practice, focused lessons, or incorporating different teaching techniques, understanding the causes helps educators make informed decisions about how to best support their learners.

Population and Sampling

The Undergraduate ESL students from two public sector universities in Lahore, Pakistan served as sample for this particular study. Due to limited time and resources, 50 assignments of undergraduate students of BS English were taken as samples. This research employed simple random sampling technique for the collection of samples.

Data Collection

The spontaneous procedure was used to collect data for this research. Spontaneous procedure is a method of data collection that gathers data from learners when their focus is more on the content rather than the grammatical style. For instance, academic assignments, examination papers, and essays can serve as sources for data collection. For this research, the researchers collected 50 academic assignments of the students. The topics of the assignments were different because they were collected from different teachers.

Ethical Considerations

Research ethical considerations were kept in mind for this research. Consent forms were obtained from students, Head of the Department and faculty members of all the concerned universities. The participants' personal details were kept confidential and they were told clearly about the purpose of the research. The participants were given the choice to deny taking part in the research whenever they wanted. The participants were not criticized for their linguistic competence or the education system of the selected population.

Data Analysis and Findings

The frequencies and percentage of each category of errors are given in the following table:

Table 1: Most common errors committed by the students.

Serial No.	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Punctuation and Capitalization	289	31.6%
2	Articles	164	17.9%
3	Tense and Subject-verb agreement	154	16.8%
4	Preposition	81	8.87%
5	Singular/ Plural form	79	8.6%
6	Redundant words	64	7.009%
7	Wrong spellings	58	6.3%
8	Pronoun	24	2.6%
	Total	916	100%

The above table organizes errors into specific categories, including punctuation and capitalization, tenses (including subject-verb agreement), and articles. These categories represent the linguistic aspects in which students are struggling the most. The table presents quantitative data by indicating the number of errors within each category. This allows for a quick comparison of the prevalence of different types of errors. Based on the data, the table points out that punctuation and capitalization, tenses (including subject-verb agreement), and articles are the top three error categories. These are the areas where students are making the most frequent errors in their writing. The visual format of the table makes it easy to understand and interpret the distribution of errors. This format can facilitate discussions, presentations, and communication of the findings to various stakeholders.

Punctuation and Capitalization

Findings reveal that the students committed punctuation and capitalization errors the most i.e. 31.6%. Some of the examples of this category, taken from the sample are as follows:

1. *Sr, iqbal* is a great teacher, mentor and counsellor.
2. *Above all* he gives lessons enthusiastically.
3. Students are very *obedient formal and respectful* towards teachers.
4. Students *Use* nonverbal Language when important.
5. In this *category* those friends are included with *Whom* we meet occasionally.
6. I speak *Frankly* with my close friends.
7. My family speaks *punjabi and urdu* and Arabic at home.

Corrections:

1. *Sr. Iqbal* is a great teacher, mentor, and counsellor.
2. *Above all,* he gives lessons enthusiastically.
3. Students are very *obedient, formal, and respectful* towards teachers.
4. Students *use* nonverbal language when important.
5. In this *category,* those friends are included with *whom* we meet occasionally.
6. I speak *frankly* with my close friends.
7. My family speaks *Punjabi, Urdu* and Arabic at home.

Articles

Data analysis showed that the second most committed error is that of articles i.e. 17.9%. Some of the examples as highlighted from the assignments are as follows:

1. Survey is *an* tool to collect data.
2. There is *encoder and decoder* in this process.
3. Ms. Tahira is *a* best teacher.
4. Studying at university was *a* best experience.

5. Ms. Sidra is *an* enthusiastic about her teaching.
6. Teacher serves as *a backbone of a* society.

Corrections:

1. Survey is *a* tool to collect data.
2. There is *an encoder and a decoder* in this process.
3. Ms. Tahira is *the* best teacher.
4. Studying at university was *the* best experience.
5. Ms. Sidra *is* enthusiastic about her teaching.
6. A teacher serves *as the backbone of any* society.

Tense and Subject-verb Agreement

The students committed 16.8% of the errors in this category which was related to the sentence structure. Some of the examples taken from the assignments of the students are as follows:

1. Ms. Tahira *make* a balance between her lecture and activities.
2. The students *completes* their tasks.
3. A lot of teachers *has* taught me.
4. We will not be *abled* to pass Maths subject.
5. She is a person who *help* people to learn.
6. I will *be show* obedience to my teachers.
7. My sister had to *borrowed* a book.

Corrections:

1. Ms. Tahira *makes* balance between her lecture and activities.
2. The students *complete* their tasks.
3. A lot of teachers *have* taught me.
4. We will not be *able* to pass Maths subject.
5. She is a person who *helps* people to learn.
6. I *will show* obedience to my teachers.
7. My sister had to *borrow* a book.

Prepositions

Data analysis revealed that students faced difficulty in using the correct preposition in the sentences. Some of the examples of such errors are as follows:

1. We met them *at* a park.
2. You should call each other *from* name.
3. Friends can share, scold, and *laugh each* other.
4. What are the reasons for language *change time* to time?
5. Our elders are respected *from* us.
6. A teacher should never show biasness *in* any student.

Corrections:

1. We met them *in* a park.
2. You should call each other *by* name.
3. Friends can share, scold, and *laugh at* each other.
4. What are the reasons for language *change from time* to time?
5. Our elders are respected *by* us.
6. A teacher should never show biasness *towards* any student.

Singular Plural Form

This research findings exhibited that the students committed errors in quantifying the verbs as singular and plural. Some of the examples of this category of errors in students' work is as follows:

1. All the *teacher* in this university are amazing.
2. How can students show different kind of *thinkings*?
3. One should speak to the teachers in a respectful *manners.*

4. One of the *childrens* have been crying.
5. One of my *friend* did not complete her assignment.
6. All the student were present today.

Corrections:

1. All the *teachers* in this university are amazing.
2. How can students show different kinds of *thinking*?
3. One should speak to the teachers in a respectful *manner.*
4. One of the *children* has been crying.
5. One of my *friends* did not complete her assignment.
6. All the *students* were present today

Redundant Words

Analysis of the data highlighted that some students used those words which are not necessary to use in sentences. Following are some of the examples of such errors:

1. Many teachers teach in their *own* particular way.
2. We were *really really* happy that day.
3. When it comes to our parents we behave *very, very, very* much formally.
4. The research question *can be quantitative or it can be qualitative*.
5. So, *personally I believe* that we should dress up properly.

Corrections:

1. Many teachers teach in *their particular* way.
2. We were *really* happy that day.
3. When it comes to our parents, we behave *very f*ormally.
4. The research question *can be either quantitative or qualitative*.
5. So, I believe that we should dress up properly.

Wrong Spellings

This study findings showed that students can misspell a few words such as below:

1. For *exampe*, you are not allowed to say bad words.
2. Her *writting* is too bad.
3. We *mis Mdm* sidra.
4. Two important reading *startegies* are *skiming* and scanning.
5. All the students were *exited* about the party at university.

Corrections:

1. For *example,* you are not allowed to say bad words.
2. Her *writing* is too bad.
3. We *miss Madam* Sidra.
4. The two important reading *strategies* are *skimming* and scanning.
5. All the students were *excited* about the party at university.

Pronouns

Analysis of the data also revealed that students made use of wrong pronouns in some sentences. A few examples are given below:

1. My mobile broke while I was working on *my mobile*.
2. A teacher should motivate *their* students for active learning in the classroom.
3. In the novel, Emma proposes Harry but *she* refuses to marry *him.*
4. The teacher does not like when students don't complete *her* work.
5. I know a teacher *that* is very passionate about her profession.

Corrections:

1. My mobile broke while I was working on *it*.
2. A teacher should motivate *her* students for active learning in the classroom.
3. In the novel, Emma proposes Harry but *he* refuses to marry *her.*

4. The teacher does not like when students don't complete *their* work.
5. I know a teacher *who* is very passionate about her profession.

Discussion

This research finds that many ESL learners lack a strong understanding of the rules governing the English language. This lack of awareness contributes to the errors they make in their writing. The fact that students committed errors across eight different categories indicates a range of challenges in various aspects of their language usage. This could encompass grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and more. Punctuation and capitalization errors are particularly notable and extensive. This suggests that students face difficulties in accurately applying punctuation marks and capital letters in their writing. The underlying reasons for these errors can be attributed to the students' unfamiliarity with punctuation rules and capitalization conventions. This lack of familiarity leads to inconsistent and incorrect usage of punctuation marks and capital letters. Students' errors related to capitalization suggest that they might not fully understand when and how to capitalize words.

Moreover, findings revealed that the second category of error that students committed was the incorrect use of articles. ESL learners struggle with the appropriate use of articles, including knowing when to use "a," "an," or "the." This confusion can stem from differences between English article usage and that of their native language. Errors related to singular and plural forms indicate that students have difficulty understanding and applying the rules for making nouns agree with their corresponding verbs and determiners. Similarly, the incorrect use of prepositions suggests that students may not fully grasp the nuances of preposition usage and how they affect sentence meaning and structure. The presence of redundant words in their writing could indicate that students struggle with conciseness and clarity, potentially due to overcompensation or literal translation from their native language. Also, findings revealed that ESL learners often struggle with the correct usage of verb tenses. This can lead to sentences that don't accurately convey the intended time or sequence of actions. Further, errors in subject-verb agreement suggest that students face difficulties in ensuring that the verb matches the subject in terms of number and person.

Addressing these errors requires a comprehensive approach that combines instruction, practice, and targeted feedback. Teachers should provide clear explanations of the rules governing articles, singular/plural forms, prepositions, pronouns, tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and conditional sentences. They should offer practice exercises and activities that involve using these language elements in real-life contexts. This helps students understand how these elements function within sentences. There is a need to incorporate activities that encourage peer interactions and discussions, where students can practice using these language elements in spoken and written communication. By addressing these errors systematically, educators can support ESL learners in gradually improving their grasp of English grammar and usage. Consistent practice, reinforcement, and patient guidance are key to helping students develop their language skills over time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Though English is the medium of instruction in educational institutions of Pakistan but there lies a significant gap between the medium of instruction and the mastery of the English language among students in the Pakistani educational institutions. This research concluded that the frequently found errors in the assignments of the students included punctuation and capitalization, tense and subject-verb agreement, articles, singular/ plural forms, prepositions, redundant words, wrong spellings, and pronouns. Several reasons can be responsible for committing such errors in English language, out of which, the prominent one is that English is not our native language. Children who grow up in Pakistan do not get enough exposure to using English language which results in committing errors in spoken and written communication. To address these issues, some recommendations are given below:

*   Focusing on understanding and mastering the fundamental grammatical rules of the English language is crucial. This forms the foundation for effective communication and writing.
*   Encouraging students to read a variety of materials, including newspapers, books, and literature pieces beyond their course books, can significantly improve their language skills and sentence structures.

- Regular visits to libraries expose students to diverse vocabulary found in literature, which they can incorporate into their everyday language usage.
- Encouraging students to speak English for communication within the educational environment helps them gain confidence in using the language orally.
- Encouraging students to speak English for communication within the educational environment helps them gain confidence in using the language orally.
- Writing daily in English, whether journaling thoughts or documenting routines, provides consistent practice and reinforces language skills.
- Utilizing interactive classroom activities that promote English language communication helps students apply what they've learned in a practical context.
- Providing timely and constructive feedback on students' written and spoken language encourages improvement and helps them understand their mistakes.

Implementing these recommendations can contribute to bridging the gap between the medium of instruction and students' mastery of the English language in Pakistani educational institutions. It's important to recognize that language learning is a gradual process that requires consistent effort, practice, and innovative approaches. This research was limited in its scope as it was conducted on public sector universities only. For researchers, this study serves as evidence of the language challenges faced by undergraduate students. It contributes to the broader understanding of language learning difficulties and can guide future studies and instructional interventions. Future research can focus on the error analysis of the academic material of students from private sector institutes and a comparison can be drawn between students of private and public sector in this regard.

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