

A Study of Morpho-Syntactic Errors in Written English Essays of Part Four ESL Students of the University of Maiduguri

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Abstract

This paper investigates morpho-syntactic errors in the written English essays of final year ESL students of the Department of English, University of Maiduguri, with a focus on identifying the most common error types and exploring the underlying factors that contribute to these errors. The study adopts Keshavarz's (2012) method of error classification. A sample of 100 written compositions were randomly collected from the final year students for the analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the ESL students struggle with various morpho-syntactic structures in the written compositions. These are, word order, subject-verb agreement, tense error, errors in verb structure, pronoun/adjective/adverb Structure, word/Morpheme, addition of word/morpheme, omission of word and use of informal words. The study further explained the plausible causes of these errors as; student's native language transfers and inability to master the target language, incomplete rules application and mother tongue interference. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that a morphosyntactic analysis of ESL students' written compositions can provide valuable insights into their language learning processes. By understanding the types of errors that ESL students make and the factors that contribute to these errors, educators can develop more effective instructional strategies to support the language development of ESL learners.

Keywords: Morpho-syntactic, Error Analysis, ESL Writing,

Introduction

Learning a second language is always subject to erroneous structures. Thus, writing in a second language is one of the challenging tasks students face in classes. According to Harmer (2004), the spoken language is naturally acquired by contact and exposure, while the written one

is intentionally learned. Academic writing therefore, involves conscious attempt and practice in writing, building, developing, and analyzing ideas (Myles, 2002). Essay writing in English as a Second Language (ESL) is difficult for many students who repetitively make mistakes of one or the other kind and hence struggle to get their target band score in writing. Richard and Schmidt (2002), assert that an error is the use of a word, speech act or grammatical items in such a way it seems imperfect and significant of an incomplete learning. They further assert that writing covers three main cues which are semantic, syntactic and graphophonic.

This study is prompted by seeing a lot of errors made by part four students in their written essays; especially, at the level of morpho-syntax. At this level, it is expected that these final year students must have mastered the writing skills and therefore, such errors are not expected in their writings. This paper therefore, investigates morpho-syntactic errors made by ESL students of the Department of English, University of Maiduguri, in their written English essays. Thus, the study is highly needed to establish these errors and to offer pedagogical implications to overcome the problem and for a better writing performance. The study identifies, classifies and explains the various morpho-syntactic errors in the written essays.

Literature Review

This section reviews related literatures and works done on errors.

Norrish (1983) views error as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something, and consistently gets it wrong. However, the attempts made to put the error into context have always gone hand in hand with either language learning or second-language acquisition processes. In Addition, Hendrickson (1987) mentioned that errors are ‘signals’ that indicate an actual learning process taking place and that the learner has not yet mastered or shown

a well-structured competence in the target language. An error is a form in a learner language that is inaccurate, meaning it is different from the forms used by competent speakers of the target language.

There are two main theories related to language learning errors. They are the Behaviorist Learning Theory and the Mentalist Learning Theory. Ellis (1997), posits that the Behaviorist Theory is the prevailing theory of the fifties and the sixties. It claims that language learning involves habit formation. That is, a habit is stimulus-response connection. Later, the Mentalist Theory came as an alternative to Behaviorism. It claims that human language is innate. Furthermore, it asserts that input is used only to activate the process of the language acquisition device. Besides, they can generate an infinite number of constructions. Thus, during this process, errors may occur but they are considered as natural and part of the learning process (Ellis, 1997).

Corder (1981) further identifies three types of errors, these are: (a) interlingual errors, which are caused by first language interference; (b) intralingual errors, which are caused by the learners' overgeneralization of grammatical rules; and (c) errors which are caused by faulty teaching techniques.

According to Keshavarz, (2012), there are four major linguistic based classification of errors. These are: orthographic, phonological, lexico-semantic and morpho-syntactic. However, this study focuses on morpho-syntactic errors. Morpho-syntactic error is further classified into the following: wrong word order, subject-verb agreement, verb structure, noun/adjective/adverb structure, word/morpheme addition, word/morpheme omission and informal words, and wrong use of modal auxiliary. Keshavarz (2012) further states that errors have generally been attributed to cognitive causes, i.e., evidence of the learner's psychological process of rule formation.

The following reviews show current studies on error analysis. Tizazu (2014) studied linguistic errors that occur in the written productions of Arba Minch University (hereafter AMU) students. The study examines the nature of the errors that AMU students make in expressing their ideas in writing. A sample of paragraphs was collected for two years from students ranging from freshmen to graduating students. The sampled compositions were then coded, described, and explained using error analysis method. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that almost all components of the English language (such as orthography, morphology, syntax, mechanics, and semantics) in learners' compositions have been affected by the errors. The study identified two causes which triggered the learners' errors: intralingual and interlingual. However, most of the errors are attributed to intralingual causes which mainly resulted from the lack of full mastery of the basics of the English language.

In the work of Amnuai (2020), identified writing errors in English abstracts written by Thai undergraduate students by collecting and analyzing forty research project abstracts at the sentence, word, and mechanics aspect. Word choice, prepositions, sentence construction, singular or plural forms, and quotation marks were the five most common error types, ranked from most to least frequent. The results provide insight into students' writing skills and the challenges they encounter when composing abstracts. Additionally, the mistakes discovered in the work's abstracts have pedagogical ramifications for learning English, especially in writing classes. The paper further state that the results will help educators create instructional resources that will help students avoid mistakes when writing abstracts in English and enhance their academic writing abilities.

In addition, Amiri and Puteh (2017) examined the different types of writing errors performed by 16 international postgraduate students undertaking an intensive English course at a public university in Malaysia. The students were required to write a 3-5-page term paper

assignment on a topic related to their field of study. Mixed methodology approach was employed to examine and analyze corpus of the students' term papers. The errors in the term papers were identified and classified accordingly. The results of the study reveal that four most common English language errors committed by the participants were sentence structure, articles, punctuation and capitalization. The study also explicates on the way in which students assumed the rules of English to that of their native language. Such insight is useful for both instructors and students because it provides significant information on the building blocks experienced by English language learners in academic writing. This present study analyses final year essays of ESL students of the Department of English, University of Maiduguri.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Keshavarz's (2012) method of error classification in order to account for the errors in the students' written compositions. Keshavarz (2012), asserts that after errors are identified, it is necessary to group them according to their linguistic specifications. In this way, it would be possible to build up a clear picture of the features in the target language that might cause problems for the learners. Based on his assertion, Keshavarz (2012), classifies error as follows: linguistic-based classification (further sub classified as: orthographic errors, phonological errors, lexicosemantic errors, and morpho-syntactic errors) and process-based classification (further sub classified as: omission, addition, substitution and permutation). This study however, focuses on the morpho-syntactic errors further classified as follows: wrong word order, subject-verb agreement, verb structure, noun/adjective/adverb structure, word/morpheme addition, word/morpheme omission and informal words, and wrong use of modal auxiliary

Methodology

The data for this study were obtained through simple random sampling. An essay writing task was administered to the part four students. A topic was given to the students that is: How I spent My Last Holiday, during their ENG 408 (Speech Writing) class. The topic was given to the students to write the essay purposely for this research. The essays were written and submitted within an hour. A total number of 150 essays were collected but for the purpose of this study, a simple random sampling was used to select 100 out of the 150 essays for the analysis. The morpho-syntactic errors were identified, classified and explained the plausible causes of these errors.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses the data. The data are first presented in statistical tables showing the frequency and percentage of occurrence of each and analysis of the information contained in each table is carried out. The remaining tables, that is, tables two to seven present samples of each of the error types and their corrections.

Table 1: Summary of Morpho-syntactic Errors found in the Student's Essays Including their Frequencies and Percentages

Types of Errors	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage of Occurrence
1. Word Order	9	21.95%
2. Subject-Verb Agreement/ Verb Structure	11	26.83%
3. Noun/Adjective/Adverb Structure	6	14.63%
4. Word/Morpheme Addition	7	17.07%
5. Word/Morpheme Omission	5	12.20%
6. Informal Words	3	7.32%
Total	41	100%

The Table above shows the frequencies and percentages of the morpho-syntactic errors found in the learners written English essays. These errors are; word order, subject-verb agreement/ verb structure, noun/adjective/adverb structure, word/morpheme addition, word/morpheme omission, short forms/abbreviations, and informal words. However, the result revealed that the most recurrent error type was subject-verb agreement/ verb structure which represents twenty-six-point eighty-three (26.83%) percent; followed by word order error which stands at twenty-one-point ninety-five (21.95%); then word/morpheme addition with seventeen point zero seven (17.07%) present; noun/adjective/Adverb structure has fourteen-point sixty-three (14.63%) percent; and word/morpheme omission with twelve point twenty (12.20%); finally, informal word usage has the lowest percentage of seven point thirty-two (7.32%) percent.

Tables two to seven below present the analysis of samples of errors found in the student's essays.

Table 2: Samples of Word Order Errors

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Word Order	<p>1. First and am I Auwal Muhammad...</p> <p>2. You have wanted to know about the how I have spent my last summer vacation.</p>	<p>1. Firstly, I am Auwal Muhammad...</p> <p>2. You want to know how I spent my last summer vacation.</p>

	3. Me and my family members went to church...	3. My family members and I went to the church...
	4. In my last summer vacation...	4. ... During my last summer vacation...
	5. It takes 4 hours by car journey...	5. It was a four hours' journey by car...
	6. We want church and came back...	6. We went to the church and came back...
	7. My husband's anty's favorite is egusi soup.	7. My aunt's husband's favorite soup is egusi.
	8. And after before new year celebration my sister gots married.	8. And after the new year celebration, my sister got married.
	9. ...and there was I , in Kano with them...	9. ...and there I was , in Kano, with them...

The table above shows that the students have a lot of problems with word order. That is, they have problems with the rules of the English Syntax. In addition, it is noticeable that several errors are found within the same sentence. Examples 1 to 9, show wrong word order or syntactic structure. Other errors found in the sentences are; faulty verb structure and error in the use of article 'the', (ex2) omission of the article 'the', (ex3), wrong selection of subject pronoun, (ex3), and

wrong use of preposition (ex 4 and 5) and redundant use of certain elements (ex 1 and 2). Thus, the plausible causes of these errors can be linked to the student's native language transfer and inability to master the target language.

The next difficulty that the final-year students have in writing is at the level of subject – verb agreement. This is clearly revealed in the following table:

Table 3: Samples of Subject-Verb Agreement and Tense Error

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Subject-verb Agreement and Tense Error	<p>1. They care for me and makes sure I feel very well.</p> <p>2. My last holiday is one of the best.</p> <p>3. I also working on my project.</p> <p>4. ...after a long time of been away from each other...</p> <p>5. I keep myself busy...</p> <p>6. he always took me to wherever he go...</p> <p>7. I am so happy for seeing them.</p> <p>8. I was been giving a chance...</p> <p>9. ...I have to worked hard as the eldest...</p>	<p>1. They cared for me and made sure I feel better.</p> <p>2. My last holiday was one of the best.</p> <p>3. I also worked on my project...</p> <p>4. ...after a long time of being away from each other...</p> <p>5. I kept myself busy...</p> <p>6. he always takes me to wherever he goes...</p> <p>7. I was so happy to see them.</p>

<p>Errors in Verb Structure</p>	<p>10. I was spend my last holiday in Chibok...</p> <p>11. I have not being for about two years old.</p>	<p>8. I have been given a chance...</p> <p>9...I have to work hard as the eldest...</p> <p>10. I spent my last holiday in Chibok...</p> <p>11. I have not been there for two years.</p>
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Table 3 shows errors made by the students at the level of subject - verb agreement, errors in the use of tense and wrong construction of verbs. This clearly shows that the students do not assimilate the rules that verbs must agree with their subjects in person and number. That is, if the subject is singular, the verb must be in singular form and the same applies to the plural form. In addition, in the case of tense errors, the examples in (ex 2, 3,5 and 7) provide a clear indication that the final year ESL students do mix up tenses while writing. That is, they use present tense instead of past tense and in some cases, use present continuous tense instead of past tense (ex 2,3, and 7). The learners also made errors related to the structure of the verb while trying to write the past perfect tense and the infinitive form (ex 7,8 and 10). The aforementioned examples revealed that the students lack the mastery of the use of English tenses. So, these errors could be attributed to incomplete rules application.

In addition, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs seem to be troublesome for final year ESL students. This is clearly shown in the table below:

Table 4: Samples of Pronoun, Adjective and Adverb Structure Errors

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Pronoun, Adjective and Adverb Structure	1. ...the holiday was very interested ... 2. ...the bridesmaid and the groomsmen who made the event color with their different styles. 3. ...I have not being for about two years old . 4. I met my cousins and some of our family members who also went their to spent their holiday. 5. ...but they later changed there mind... 6. There welcome me well...	1. ...the holiday was very interesting ... 2. ...the bridesmaid and the groomsmen who made the event colorful with their different styles. 3. ...I have not been there for two years... 4. I met my cousins and some of our family members who also went there to spend their holiday. 5. ...but they later changed their mind... 6. They welcomed me well...

Table 4 reveals that the participants face a problem with English pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs.

That is, they tend to mix between them. The students also generate wrong constructions as seen in (ex 1, 3, 4 and 5). This could be attributed to overgeneralization of rules and constructions.

Furthermore, the participants seem to confuse the use of noun with adjective (ex 2) and third person pronoun with demonstrative pronoun (ex 4,5 and 6). These errors are due to the learners' inability to master the word group and so they could not differentiate one from another. In addition, the

learners wrongly assume that some linguistic components behave in the same way and they do not make distinctions between them.

Another problem found in the students' writings is related to word or morpheme addition. As seen in the following table:

Table 5: Samples of Word and Morpheme Addition Error

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Word and Morpheme Addition Error	1. My grandmother she was so happy to see her grandson. 2. ...my sisters wedding which took placed on the 30 th December... 3. I have to worked hard... 4. During the holiday I am usually help my parents. 5. First and am I Auwal Muhammad... 6. You have wanted to know about the how I have spent my last summer vacation. 7. People from far places came to celebrates with our family.	1. My grandmother was so happy to see her grandson. 2. ...my sister's wedding which took place on the 30 th of December... 3. I have to work hard... 4. During the holiday, I usually help my parents... 5. Firstly, I am Auwal Muhammad... 6. You want to know how I spent my last summer vacation. 7. People from far places came to celebrate with our family.

In the table above, the participants wrongfully add extra morphemes such as ‘/d/’, ‘/f/’, and ‘/s/’ as seen in (ex. 2,3,4, 6 and 7). In addition, it also shows inappropriate intrusion of certain words such as, ‘she’, ‘am’, ‘and’, ‘have’, ‘about’ and ‘the’ as seen in (ex. 1, 5 and 6). These errors could be attributed to incomplete application of rules. Furthermore, the replacement of the letter ‘p’ with ‘f’, can be attributed to mother tongue interference in (ex. 4).

The table below demonstrates how the final year ESL students omit some morphemes in words during their writing processes.

Table 6: Samples of Word and Morpheme Omission Error

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Word and Morpheme Omission	1. It was so sweet and want have a taste of it again.	1. It was so sweet that I want to have a taste of it again.
	2. We went church...	2. We went to the church...
	3. It was really fun cause...	3. It was really funny because ...
	4. ... nothing bad happend ...	4...Nothing bad happened ...
	5. He took me and his children outing...	5. He took me and his children for outing...

The table above reflects the omission of errors found in the learners written compositions.

In the first, second and fifth examples, the following words are omitted; ‘that’, ‘I’, ‘to’, ‘the’ and ‘for’ respectively. In the third example, the syllables ‘/bɪ/’ and the morphemes ‘/ni/’ are omitted in the words ‘because’ and ‘funny’ respectively. The letter ‘e’ was also omitted in the word ‘happened’. Since the ESL learners are unable to apply the rules correctly, these errors may also be attributed to incomplete rule application.

Another error found in the students' written compositions is the use of informal words. As seen in the table below.

Table 7: Samples of Informal Words

Error Classification	Error Identification	Error Correction
Informal Words	1. It takes 4 hours by car journey... 2. I didn't travel for xmas and new year... 3. My frnd was happy to see me.	1. It was a four hours' journey by car... 2. I did not travel for Christmas and new year... 3. My friend was happy to see me.

Table 7 shows informal words found in the final year ESL student's written compositions.

These are instances such as writing '4' instead of 'four', 'xmas' instead of 'Christmas' and 'frnd' instead of friend. These usages could be related to the learner's ignorance of rule restrictions where learners do not make a distinction in language use. In addition, they seem to ignore the conventions of formal writing.

Discussion

From the data presentation and analysis carried out, the findings reveal that the final year ESL students make a lot of morpho-syntactic errors in their written compositions. The identified

errors found in the student's essay writing include; word order errors, subject-verb agreement, error in verb structure, pronoun/adverb/adjective, word morpheme addition, word morpheme omission and informal word error. Thus, these errors are ascribed to the following: native language transfer, inability to master the target language, mother tongue interference mainly with Hausa language and incomplete rules application. It could also be attributed to cognitive causes, i.e., evidence of the learner's psychological process of rule formation as stated by Keshavarz, (2012). Thus, all these errors prove that the final year ESL students do not master the English morpho-syntax.

Furthermore, the result of the frequencies and percentages of occurrences showed that most recurrent error type was subject-verb agreement/ verb structure which represents twenty-six-point eighty-three (26.83%) percent; followed by word order error which stands at twenty-one-point ninety-five (21.95%); then word/morpheme addition with seventeen point zero seven (17.07%) present; noun/adjective/Adverb structure has fourteen-point sixty-three (14.63%) percent; and word/morpheme omission with twelve point twenty (12.20%); finally, informal word usage has the lowest percentage of seven point thirty-two (7.32%) percent.

Based on the findings, it is pertinent to suggest the following pedagogical implications. Emphasis should be given to the related English composition/writing skills courses. This can be achieved by using relevant textbooks and adopting good teaching methods that will facilitate the students' absorption and utilization of morpho-syntactic accuracy skill. Additionally, teachers should also put more effort into the teaching of morpho-syntax and different writing conventions in the class. This would help the students to improve their writing skills. Furthermore, students should also be encouraged to read English text to be acquainted with more vocabulary and get familiar with English structure and system. The study also suggests that teachers should improve

their teaching techniques in the class as some of the errors might be due to faulty teaching techniques.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the morpho-syntactic errors in the final year essays of ESL students of the Department of English, University of Maiduguri. As such, the paper attempted to show whether these final year students do make morpho-syntactic errors in their written compositions. In order to achieve this, the paper identified, classified and analyzed the errors found in the students' written compositions. Thus, the paper discovered that the final year ESL students do make a lot of morpho-syntactic errors due to various reasons as stated above. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that a morphosyntactic analysis of ESL students' written compositions can provide valuable insights into their language learning processes. By understanding the types of errors that ESL students make and the factors that contribute to these errors, educators can develop more effective instructional strategies to support the language development of ESL learners.

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