INVESTIGATING THE WRITTEN ERRORS OF THIRD - YEAR STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT ULSHB

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses written errors of third - year students and considers errors as an important aspect of language learning process. It identifies and categorizes the types of errors and describes them. The frequency of each error type is also investigated. A mix-method approach is employed to collect the research data in the English Department of the University of Arts and Humanities of Bamako (ULSHB). The participants of this research are all the third year students. The data of this research were drawn from the students' copies in the final examination in bilingualism. The students were asked to give a brief account of the advantages of bilingualism. In this respect, the study used the theory of contrastive analysis, which postulates that it is possible to identify the areas of difficulty a specific foreign language will display for speakers of another language by systematically comparing the two languages and cultures. Thus, the ultimate results revealed that students' errors originate from various sources, which could be classified into several types and categories.

Keywords: Contrastive analysis, error analysis, grammatical error, inter-language, lexical error, written production.

RÉSUMÉ

La présente étude porte sur l'analyse des fautes écrites des étudiants de la troisième année et les traite comme un aspect important du processus d'apprentissage des langues. Elle identifie, catégorise et décrit les différents types de fautes commises. La fréquence de chaque type de faute a également fait l'objet d'analyse. Cette étude a employé l'approche mixte afin de collecter les données de recherche au niveau du département d'Anglais de l'Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB).

Les participants à cette recherche sont tous des étudiants de la troisième année. Les données ont été tirées des copies des étudiants à l'examen de fin d'année en bilinguisme. Les étudiants ont été invités à décrire brièvement les avantages du bilinguisme. Pour ce faire, l'étude a adopté la théorie de l'analyse contrastive qui postule qu'il est possible d'identifier les caractéristiques de la langue étrangère qui sont similaires à la langue maternelle (de l'apprenant) en comparant systématiquement les deux langues et cultures. Les résultats ont révélé que les fautes des étudiants proviennent de diverses sources, qui pourraient être classées en plusieurs types et catégories.

Mots-clés : Analyse contrastive, analyse de fautes, faute grammaticale, faute lexicale, interlangue, production écrite.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four language skills. English language learning is a process where all the skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are interrelated. This means that the involvement of all language skills is required for the development of learners' writing proficiency. In fact, students may face difficulty expressing their ideas and opinions in written production because of the differences in languages. They find English language very challenging owing to some linguistic features such as sentence building, grammar rules, vocabulary, etc. These features in their first language are different from those of the target language, thus making it difficult to express their ideas in an appropriate and comprehensible manner in writing. Richards (1987, p. 46) paraphrasing Lado (1957) affirms that "those language features that are similar to the (learner's) native language will be simple for him, and those areas that are different will be difficult".

The problem of the study is the issue of the language transfer from L1 to L2. The students of the English Department are accustomed to think in French to express ideas and map concepts in English as well. To that effect, students' linguistic competence affects their performance. The difficulties in implementing the transfer of L1 rules to the target language in written production cause them to make errors. Within the same context, Issa Coulibaly (2016, p.63) observes that the levels of students' errors were mainly grammatical and lexical whose types were substitution, omission, misordering and addition. The results of his study showed that interference from French was the main source of error.

In defining errors, Keshavarz (2012, p.16) states, "An Error is a systematic deviation from the accepted TL rules." This means that a learner who makes errors cannot self-correct. In addition, Brown (2000) confirms that an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker whereas a mistake refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. Alfiyani (2013, p.22) supports that mistakes are the wrong use of language because the user is not aware of the mistakes he makes whereas he knows the correct form of the rules. In other words, mistakes can be corrected by the user himself. Obviously, both mistakes and errors negatively impact the quality of language use. Learners make errors because they lack knowledge of the rules of the target language. Since they systematically deviate from the rules of the target language, errors are often considered as learners' mistakes. In this regard, Selinker (1972) further clarifies that when a student makes a mistake, it is not the fault of the teacher or the materials

or even the students, but it is a natural part of a learning process. As Davis and Pearse (2002, p.103) state that 'errors are integral part of language learning and not evidence of failure to learn'. In other words, the error analysis should be viewed positively because they provide insight into understanding the process of language learning. It plays a significant role in the study of foreign language in that students receive feedback from their own learning. Such a feedback could be used to find new attempts to achieve the goal of target language learning. Analysis of errors helps realize that every language is governed by its own rules and that the rules of one language cannot be reproduced on that of another.

Error Analysis is a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness (Keshavarz, 2012, p. 168). Taylor (1997, p.3) states that "error analysis is the study and evaluation of uncertainty in measurement". This implies that an error has a positive role in language learning since it is the sign that a language learner does not learn the rules of the target language effectively. To that end, Erdogan (2005) emphasizes that "error analysis deals with the learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they make use of recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language". Therefore, a primary focus of error analysis is on the evidence that learners' errors provide an understanding of the underlying processes of second language acquisition. From the definitions above, it can be elucidated that error analysis is an activity to identify, classify and describe the errors committed by the learners in their language production. Such an analysis is significant in determining the learners' difficulties and error sources. It is important in shaping the teachers' teaching methods and techniques and researchers' theory development.

After the identification and classification of errors, there arises the issue of why some types of errors are produced and what learning strategies underlie those errors. It is clear that the sources of errors cannot be always identified. However, knowledge of the source of errors helps both the teacher and the researcher to understand "how the learners' cognitive and affective processes relate to the linguistic system and to formulate an integrated understanding of the process of second language acquisition" (Brown, 2007, p.263).

Within the framework of the source of errors, some authors differentiate the following sources: interlingual and intralingual interferences, the context of learning and communication strategies. Richards (1971, p. 205) defines interlingual errors as 'errors caused by the interference of the learners' mother tongue.'' Interlingual errors occur during the beginning stages of learning a target language. This is so because the learners refer to their first language, which is the sole linguistic system. However, intralingual errors, which are also called developmental errors, are independent from learners' mother tongue, and occur frequently during the learning process of the target language. According to Richards (1974, p. 4) "Intralingual interference refers to items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but overgeneralization based on partial exposure to the target language". This implies that errors of this kind are not necessarily related to those due to the influence of the first language. Rather, they are to be found within the structure of the target language itself. Intralingual interferences include but are not limited to homophone confusion, overgeneralization and incomplete application of rules.

Having defined errors, made the distinction between errors and mistakes, established what error analysis is, and the sources of errors, we shall proceed to the methodology of the study. The main objective of the research is to explore errors in students' written production. The study specifically aims to identify, categorize, and describe the types of errors and their frequencies. The following research questions are appropriate to guide the study: i) What are the types of errors made by the students in their written production? ii) What are the categories of these errors and their frequencies?

2. METHODOLOGY

This research made use of a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) approach giving primacy to the qualitative method (Gay and Airasian, 2003:184). In order to gain in-depth understanding of an issue, qualitative research methodology is best convenient. It used testing as a research tool and quantified the test copies for analysis. The research was undertaken at the English Department of the University of Arts and Humanities in Bamako.

Participants of this research are Licence three (L3) students from the English Department. The participants were selected on the basis of the level of their English proficiency since they are at the end of their university training.

This study used both structured and random sampling models. In fact, there were twelve groups of L3 students during the school year 2018-2019. Of these groups, three were selected to serve as a sample. The researchers randomly chose the first twenty copies in each of the three groups, which correspond to 60 copies. It should be noted that the figure 60 also reflects the average number of students per group. Data for this research were collected by administering a written test to three groups of L3 students who wrote freely on the same topic.

This research focuses on lexical and grammatical errors, which is closely related to the data analysis adapted from Dulay et.al. (1982) who characterized errors into two categories, Morphology (indefinite article, possessive case , third person singular, and past participle) and Syntax (noun phrase, verb phrase, verb and verb construction, word order, some transformations). The data were analyzed using the Sphinx software.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings have displayed two types of errors from the students' written production: grammatical (471) and lexical (125), making a total of 596.

3.1. Grammatical Errors

From the data, the researchers identified up to 14 categories of grammatical errors. These errors include tense, subject, verb, preposition, conjunction and other words to make sentences, etc**.** The table below provides the number and percentage of each error category.

Table 1: *Grammatical Errors*

Number	Categories	Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Error in tense selection	94	19.96%
2	Omission of TO BE	78	16.56%
3	Addition of TO BE	53	11.25%
4	Error in composing interrogative sentences	41	8.70%
5	Error in article use	34	7.22%
6	Error in preposition use	33	7.01%
7	subject omission	30	6.37%
8	Errors in use of Conjunction	27	5.73%
9	Error in possessive case	21	4.46%
10	Misordering in adjective position	18	3.82%
11	Error in use of pronouns	15	3.18%
12	Omission of main verb	11	2.34%
13	The substitution of auxiliaries	9	1.91%
14	Error in adverb use	7	1.49%
	TOTAL	**471**	**100%**

Source: Field data

3.2. **Lexical Errors**

The study identified 6 categories of lexical errors; they concern mainly the wrong choice of words.

Table 2: *Lexical Errors*

Number	Categories	Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Inappropriate use of words in context	61	48%
2	Spelling	27	22%
3	Parts of speech	16	13%
4	False friends	11	9%
5	Use of French words	8	6%
6	Plural form	2	2%
	TOTAL	**125**	**100%**

Source: Field data

4. DISCUSSION

The errors identified in this study are collected from the written production of the English students whose official language is French. Hence, French is considered as the students' first language for the purpose of this study. The study identified two types of errors: grammatical errors and lexical errors. The results reveal a total of 596 errors. These errors are classified into grammatical errors (471) and lexical errors (125).

4.1. Grammatical errors

They involve errors in use of tenses, omission of TO BE, addition of TO BE, errors in composing interrogative sentences, errors in article use, errors in preposition use, omission of the subject, conjunction, errors in the use of the possessive case, misordering in composing adjective phrases, errors in use of pronouns, omission of main verbs, substitution of auxiliaries, and errors in use of adverbs.

- **Errors in use of tenses**

  In table 1 above, the majority of the errors (19.96%) from the grammatical or syntactical categories happen in using tenses. For example, student S4 produced the sentence below when he talked about his previous emotions.

  S 4: "We are so glad since the first year because we can speak new languages that we never spoke before"

  S4 made errors in using auxiliaries. He did not use the past form of *to be* and *can*. He rather used *are* and *can* when he was talking about a past event. Here is the correct suggestion for his sentence:

  Since the first year class, we were so happy because we could speak new language that we have never spoken before.

- **Omission of TO BE**

  As shown from table 1, some students made errors in using *to be*. The frequency of this error occurrence is 16.56%.

  Here is an excerpt from the data:

  S31: "As many African countries, Mali also a bilingual country."

  Student 31 did not put *to be* before the adverb and the adjective.

  The correct one is as follows:

  "Like many African countries, Mali is also a bilingual country."

- **Addition of TO BE** (See table 1)

  Some students made errors in adding *to be* where it is not needed. The frequency of this error occurrence is 11.25%. S46 is an illustrative sentence:

  S46: "Many parents are now prefer to send their kids to bilingual schools."

  From the example above, Student 46 put *to be* before the verb *prefer*, "*Many parents are now prefer*". In that sentence, *to be* is not needed.

  The correct suggestion is:

  S46: "Many parents now prefer to send their kids to bilingual schools."

- **Errors in composing interrogative sentences** (See table1)

Many students made errors in building up interrogative sentences. The percentage of this type of errors is 8.70%. These errors may be caused by French. In the sentence below, an error in building up an interrogative sentence was identified:

S36: with these national languages, <u>what home</u> living condition for a unilingual in Mali?

Based on the example from student *36*, he made errors in forming WH Questions. He did not put the auxiliary *to be* after the question word. Below is the revised version of the sentence:

With these national languages in Mali, how <u>is the</u> home living condition for a unilingual in Mali?

- **Errors in article use (See Table1)**

The use of articles constitutes a major problem for many non native learners of English. For this reason, it is necessary for English students to understand that the correct use of articles which are countable and uncountable is a requirement in academic English. The same would hold true for definite articles. For example, some nouns such as *informations* may be put in plural in French, but not in English. The frequency occurrence of this error type is 7.22%. Some students could not easily determine whether or not a word or phrase uses article**s** (a, an, the). S21 below is an illustration:

S21: <u>A</u> importance of Bilingualism is very large.

The correct sentence is as follows:

The importance of Bilingualism is very large.

- **Errors in use of prepositions**

It is important to note that a preposition is used to show the relationship between a noun, a pronoun and any other word in a sentence. Prepositions are not followed by a verb. In this study, the percentage of errors of prepositions used is 7.01%. There are many prepositions in English**;** sometimes the students use the wrong preposition as illustrated in the excerpt below:

S19: I have not followed a bilingual class <u>since</u> a long time.

The students may think that all the prepositions have the same meaning. In reality, English uses different prepositions for the verb, the noun and the adjective. In fact, S19, under the influence of French, rather wanted to say *"for a long time"* (*il y a longtemps*).

I have not followed a bilingual class <u>for</u> a long time.

- **Omission of the subject (See Table 1)**

It is uncommon to omit the subject of a sentence in English. The use of the subject in a sentence would make ones English more natural. The percentage of instances of subject omission represents 6.37%. S24 is an example:

S24: "<u>I very</u> happy because can speak English and French."

The correct version proposed is:

S24: "I am very happy because I can speak English and French."

This student may have an incomplete knowledge in the application of the English language grammatical rules.

- **Errors in the possessive case use (See Table 1)**

  Possessive errors are very common in English grammar. For example, students often make confusion of possessive case (its) with the contraction. Possessive pronouns do not use apostrophes. In this study, errors in possessive case use represent 5.73%. Students made errors in their possessive case constructions as displayed in S8:

  S8: Its amusing to learn more languages.

  Correct version:

  It's amusing to learn more languages.

- **Misordering in adjective position.**

  Students make interlingual errors as a result of wrong transfer from French to English. They make such errors due to the French influence. The percentage of this type of errors in this study is 4.46%. An illustration of such an error is S22:

  S22: "students are now getting experiences fresh in the two languages."

  S22: wrote "*experiences fresh*". Errors in using adjective in a sentence are very common in students' utterances; sometimes, the adjective is placed after the noun.

  The correct version of the student's construction is:

  Now students got many fresh experiences in both languages.

- **Errors in use of pronouns (See Table 1)**

  Pronouns replace nouns. They are used to avoid repetitions in a sentence.

  Errors in using pronouns represent 3.82%.

  S54 is an illustration of this error category.

  S54 : " our spent of three years in bilingual study"

  From this example, the student used 'our', to mean the personal pronoun 'we'. '*our*' is the plural possessive pronoun. What is needed in that sentence is the subject pronoun *'we'*.

  The correct version of the sentence is:

  We spent three years in studying bilingualism.

- **Omission of main verbs (See Table 1)**

  One of the main difficulties facing foreign language learners of English is Omission. It is important for learners to need to write correct sentences in English in order to transmit clear messages to the readers. Students omit main verbs in sentences because of their incomplete knowledge in English language. The percentage of the frequency of occurrence of this type of errors is 3.18%. Some student participants wrote sentences without any verbs. S39 is an illustration:

  S39: All our teachers so skillful to explain the lectures

  In that example the student used "*teachers so skillful*" with reference to the French "*nos professeurs expérimentés*". The main verb is missing from the sentence. This error is caused by French language which is considered here as the L1.

  The correct version should read like:

  All our teachers are so skillful to explain the lectures

- **Substitution of auxiliaries** *do* **by** *to be (Cf.* **Table1***)*

  Substitution of auxiliaries in English constitutes a major concern for English learners. For example, *Do* is one of the three auxiliary verbs: *be, do, have*. A modal or an auxiliary verb + *do* can be used to substitute for a main verb. This type of error represents 2.34%. The student tends to substitute the auxiliary *do* by *to be* as displayed in S17.

  S17: All the students <u>are </u>not understand yet the role of bilingualism

  The proposed corrected version is:

  Many students still do not understand the role of bilingualism.

- **Errors in adverb use (See Table 1)**

  An adverb is a word that modifies or qualifies several types of words including an adjective, a verb, a clause, and even another adverb. A good knowledge of adverb use is important in academic writing. The percentage of this type of error is only 1.91%.S20 is an instance used to exemplify:

  S20: "We wish to spend this year <u>in very happy</u>."

  In English, a verb is modified by an adverb. Unfortunately, students 20 has used **very**. The best way to say it should be:

  "We wish to spend this year <u>happily</u>."

- **Errors in use of conjunctions**

  Conjunctions link words to other words, sentences to other sentences and clauses to other clauses. While they are very important in making sentences in English, they only represent 1.49%. S56 used to illustrate:

  S56: *there are many languages bilingual users in Mali.*

  The above example indicates that the learner ignored the English rule used to combine two clauses. The proposed corrected versions are either:

  There are many languages <u>and</u> bilingual users in Mali.

  Or: *There are many bilingual users in Mali.*

4.2. Lexical Errors (See Table 2)

Lexical errors include**:** the inappropriate use of words in context, spelling, parts of speech, false friends, French words, and the plural form.

- **Inappropriate use of words in context**

  Choosing the inappropriate words is the most common lexical error that students make in their written production. This category scores 48% of the whole lexical errors. Below are extracts used for illustration:

  S26: "Because we are on the <u>good road</u> to speak two languages."

  S37: "In Mali people <u>dive one</u> language to another because there are many languages."

  In example S26, there is a problem of inappropriate word choice. The phrase "*good road"* used in S26 appears as interference from the French phrase "*bonne voie*". It would be more appropriate to use "*right path / way*".

  Likewise, S37 displays a wrong use of *to dive*, another instance of interference from French (*sauter*). Its use is inappropriate in this construction; the student could have used *shift from*.

The proposed corrected versions are as follows:

S26:Because we are on the <u>right path/way</u> to speak two languages.

S37: In Mali, people <u>shift from</u> one language to another because there are many languages.

- **Spelling errors (under the influence of French) (See Table 2)**

Many students made errors in spelling words. The frequency of this error type is 22%. The influence of French led them to misspell some words in their writings as observed in S31.

S31: "The <u>objectifs</u> of Bilingual education are numerous.

From the example above, student 31 knows the word '*objective*' but fails to spell it correctly. He just wrote like in French while the correct version should be as follows:

"The objectives of Bilingual education are numerous.

Also, may be the student wanted to say: *the advantages of Bilingual education are numerous*

- **Parts of speech**

The correct use of word class is an issue for many students in English. This error type represents 13%. The sentence below is an example:

S4: "Many students <u>could happiness</u> to get more bilingualism courses."

Student 4 used the noun *happiness* as an adjective, thinking that the word is equal to the French adjective *heureux* while the appropriate adjective to be used is *happy*. This implies that the students do not master English word classes. In addition, as it can be easily seen from the example, the errors are not just in terms of adjective use, but also in terms of verb use.

The proposed corrected version is:

We would be happy to have more classes of bilingualism courses.

- **Use of French words**

Some students still used French words in their writings. This may be due to interlingual errors. The percentage for this error category is 9%. S42 is an illustration of such French-based constructions.

S42: "Because I like to speak the two <u>langues</u> everyday"

Based on the example, it is clear that the student 42, still uses French word in his sentence like *langue.* It should not be difficult for him to find the equivalence of this word since he is introduced to the word language in English. The correct sentence is:

Because I like speaking the two languages all the time.

- **Plural form**

In general, the plural in English is formed by adding <u>*s*</u> to the noun. However, there are cases of irregular plurals in which word forms change. For example, a mouse (singular), and mice (plural). The frequency of this error's occurrence is only 4%, so less common. S59 is an instance used for illustration.

S59: "Many bilingual <u>student</u> are not fluent in both languages."

The proposed corrected version is:

"Many bilingual <u>students</u> are not fluent in the two languages."

• **False friends**

They are not common in students' writings, but often false friends cause confusion in the students' minds. The category scored only 2%. S15 is used to illustrate this error category.

S15: <u>actually</u>, I am able to use two languages

The student considers that the English *actually (really)* means the French *actuellement (now)*. The result is error. The proposed corrected version is:

Now, I am able to use two languages

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the errors analyzed in this study were lexical and grammatical errors. The grammatical errors included errors in use of tenses, subject, verb, preposition, conjunction, possessive case, adjective, pronouns, etc. The lexical errors were related to inappropriate use of words in context, spelling, false friends, use of French words, plural form, etc. It is concluded that grammatical errors are more frequent than the lexical ones in the Malian English students' written production. On the one hand, the findings revealed that one source of their errors was the negative transfer from French; on the other hand, the incomplete application of the English language rules was another source of errors. On the basis of the findings, the pedagogical implications of the study are that although it is not always necessary to correct the learners' errors, it is significant for teachers to know the weak areas of learners' language and what errors they frequently make in their writings. So, teachers will find it easier to design various remedies for supporting the learners' learning once they become aware of the errors made and the causes of such errors in their written production. In addition, through error analysis, teachers can also understand the shortcomings of their teaching materials and methods. Besides, the results of the study are significant for students in that they can identify learning strategies and learn from their own errors.

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