

Error Analysis on Argumentative Compositions of Advanced ESL Learners

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Abstract — This research investigated the categories and frequencies of errors committed by advanced ESL learners in their argumentative compositions. A sample of nine (9) 3rd year English major students from Concepcion Holy Cross College, Inc. was asked to write an argumentative composition. The written compositions were analyzed using error analysis as a method to find the frequency of errors that students make. The results indicated that 11 grammatical errors were found and these were categorized under errors of addition, omission and selection. There was no found error under ordering. These findings held the assumption that advanced ESL learners still manifest errors in their second language writing.

Keywords — Error Analysis, Advanced ESL Learners, Addition, Omission, Selection, Ordering

I. Introduction

Writing is one of the skills which students further developed and enhanced in school. However, students consider it as a taxing one. It is a complex process because it is the application of the other three skills: listening, speaking, and reading. Undeniably, it is a challenge to write in the foreign language. The Philippines is recognized globally as one of the largest English-speaking nations, with the majority of its population having at least some degree of fluency in the language. English is one of the country's official languages. It is the language of commerce and law, as well as the primary medium of instruction in education (Cabigon, 2013). However, Filipino students' scores on the annual international student performance tests in Math and Science were the lowest in the world. Some education policy experts believed that the problem lies in the language being used for instruction: English. In the Philippines, the English subject is a major and a compulsory one. It is part of the curriculum starting from the primary level. However, students do not master simple rules in the language thus committing errors. This observation led the researcher to investigate on the errors committed by advanced ESL learners.

The man behind the process of analyzing errors is Pit Corder. Corder (1967) defined error analysis as a procedure used by both researchers and teachers which involves collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors, classifying them according to their nature and causes, and evaluating their seriousness. Indeed, various researchers have conducted studies concerning learners' errors.

Errors could happen to anyone. Given that one is a novice, intermediate or an advanced learner, errors are still manifested in using the target language. In this paper, advanced ESL learners were utilized in identifying errors. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986) cited in Brown (1994) have come to defined the learners who are in the advanced level. They are characterized as their ability to converse in a clearly participatory fashion; initiate, sustain and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks; satisfy the requirements of school and work situations; narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse; can communicate facts and talk casually about topics of current public and personal interest using general vocabulary.

There have been researches concerning error analysis of learners however very few are in the field of examining the errors committed by advanced ESL learners. Even if they are already adults and are more exposed to the English language, it is still assumed that errors are manifested in their written works. As an English teacher, the researcher personally experienced instances where students write erroneous compositions. Worst is, some students do not really know how to write simple paragraphs. The same case is also experienced by other teachers. This was the reason that prompted the researcher to conduct this study.

Literature Review

Error analysis is an activity to reveal errors found in writing and speaking. Richards et.al (1985) stated that error analysis is the study of errors made by the second and foreign language learners. Error analysis may be carried out in order to (a) find out how well someone knows a language, (b) find out how a person learns a language, and (c) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials. This definition stresses the functions of error analysis. Another concept of error analysis was given by Brown (1980). He defined error analysis as the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by learner. It seems this concept was the same as the one proposed by Crystal (1987) i.e. error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics. The three definitions above clarify that error analysis is an activity to identify, classify and interpreted or describe the errors made by someone in speaking or in writing and it is carried out to obtain information on common difficulties faced by someone in speaking or in writing English sentences.

Corder (1967) was the first to advocate the importance of studying errors in student writing. According to Corder (1967), learners' errors are important in and of themselves. For learners themselves, errors are indispensable, since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. Gass and Selinker (2001) defined errors as "red flags", that means they are warning signals, that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the L2. According to Corder (1974), error analysis has two objectives: one theoretical and another applied. The

theoretical objective serves to “elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language.” (Corder,1974). The applied objective serves to enable the learner “to learn more efficiently by exploiting our knowledge of his dialect for pedagogical purposes” (Corder, 1974). The investigation of errors can be diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner’s state of the language (Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems (Richards, 1985).

Candling (2001) stated that L2 learner’s errors are potentially important for the understanding of the processes of Second Language Acquisition. Olasehinde (2002) also argued that it is inevitable that learners make errors. He also suggested that errors are unavoidable and a necessary part of the learning curve. Sercombe (2000) explained that error analysis serves three purposes. Firstly, to find out the level of language proficiency the learner has reached. Secondly, to obtain information about common difficulties in language learning, and thirdly, to find out how people learn a language. Vahdatinejad (2008) maintained that error analyses can be used to determine what a learner still needs to be taught. It provided the necessary information about what is lacking in the learner's competence. He also made a distinction between errors and lapses (simple mistakes). According to him, lapses were produced even by native speakers, and can be corrected by themselves. They called for on the spot correction rather than remediation needed for errors.

As with great emphasis, error analysis is indeed a great way to know and improve the language learning of students. Moreover, looking and analyzing errors do not mean emphasizing students’ errors but only to help them improve.

II. Methodology

Research Design

This study is quantitative in nature. The researcher’s main focus is to investigate the errors committed by advanced ESL learners in their argumentative compositions as well as the frequency of these errors. According to Nunan (2001), quantitative methods are research techniques that are used to gather quantitative data-information dealing with numbers and anything that is measurable.

This research aim is to find out the errors and their frequencies; thus, qualitative approach will not be ideal to use as this does not focus on the reasons behind those errors.

Sampling

The researcher used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique in which researcher relies on his or her own judgment when choosing members of population to participate in the study. According to Sicat (2009), the purpose of the study dictates a very minimal number of samples. Thus, the researcher could easily identify them and a complete enumeration

of the sampling frame may still be too minimal. Purposive sampling may be the only appropriate method available if there are only limited number of primary data sources who can contribute to the study. The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best answer the research questions. Participants are selected according to the needs of the study. The participants are nine (9) 3rd year Education English major students in Concepcion Holy Cross College, Inc. They are between 17-18 years old. Since they are English major students, the participants receive English language instruction and are enrolled to different English and Literature subjects.

Research Instrument

The instrument used to obtain the necessary data in this study is the written argumentative compositions of the nine participants of the chosen college. The participants gave their point of view on the proposition: *Women are better leaders than men.*

Data-Gathering Procedure

All nine participants were asked to write an argumentative composition about the proposition given. They were asked to write approximately 200-300 words within one hour. The students were informed to follow the writing process. They had to start with pre-writing and complete the process with proofreading.

The nine written compositions were read and analyzed by the researcher to get the necessary data. Researchers on error analysis including Ellis (1997); Gas and Selinker (2001); Hubbard et. al (1996); provided the processes used by the researcher to analyze the data. The following was followed: 1.) Data Collection; 2.) Identification of errors; 3.) Classification of errors into error types; 4.) A statement of error frequency.

For this purpose, the selection of a corpus of language was done and then the identification of errors. Next, the researcher classified the errors according to their grammatical features. After categorizing each error, the researcher counted and quantified the frequency of occurrence of different types of errors.

A total of 11 error categories according to their grammatical features were selected for analysis based on their relative seriousness and frequency of occurrence. These are the following:

- Articles
- Spelling
- Punctuation Marks
- Capitalization
- Diction (Word Choice)

- Pluralization
- Subject-Verb Agreement; Verb-related errors
- Pronouns
- Word Omissions
- Infinitives
- Parallelism

These errors were seen frequently and they affect the grammaticality of sentences. After analyzing all errors from the argumentative compositions, these were categorized which type of error they were. Corder (1967, 1971 & 1974) classifies the errors into four different categories. The researcher divided the errors found into four types of errors which will be presented below:

- a. Addition
- b. Omission
- c. Selection
- d. Ordering

Statistical Treatment

As soon as the pertinent data were gathered, these were counted, analyzed and categorized. They were subjected to statistical treatment to answer the question posed on this study.

The following statistical tools were employed:

1. Frequency Distribution

A frequency distribution is an arrangement of the values that one or more variables take in a sample. Each entry in the table contains the frequency or count of the occurrences of values within a particular group or interval, and in this way, the table summarizes the distribution of values in the sample.

In this study, the researcher noted the frequency of errors found in the argumentative compositions of the subjects.

2. Percentage Distribution

According to Dayrit, B., Turqueza, A., & Ymas, Jr, S. (2007), the percentage distribution shows the percent of the total number of observations in each class.

In this research, the errors found in the argumentative compositions of the advanced ESL learners were subjected to percentage distribution.

The formula is:

$$\frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

where f= frequency; n= total no. of samples

III. Results and Discussion

This section presents the most common errors committed by the advanced ESL learners which were categorized depending on their frequencies on the analyzed materials. Examples of errors will also be presented.

1. What are the most common errors according to grammatical features committed by advanced ESL learners in their argumentative compositions?

The subjects used in this study are all advanced ESL learners and it was assumed that they still manifest errors in their written works. The result of the study held this assumption as true.

The error categories according to their grammatical features found in the compositions of the advanced ESL learners are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Errors According to Grammatical Features and Some Examples

Grammatical Error	Examples
1. Articles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × ...women can't be better from the men × ...a reasons/...a better leaders/ ... a nations/ ...a qualities × a one nation/ a one country × when the leader is () man × men will always be the better.

2. Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × to think there movies. (their) × decission × strick × disciple × apperance × the only one whose entitled (who's)
3. Punctuation Marks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × In USA () × the father can think concrete idea to fix their problems () the mother × It^s just because.. × The best example is the leadership in our country(,) (.) every six years we elect our president.. × Isn't a woman should entitled as superwoman(.) (?) × As men(,) are more stronger
4. Capitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Women are better leaders than men (Title) × On the other hand, We × i'm a woman × In short, Men
5. Diction (Word Choice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × She can even lend (borrow) × passionable(passionate)
6. Pluralization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × gentlemens × women are better leader × one of the quality × many man
7. Subject-Verb Agreement; Verb-related errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × Man are very important × Man are always × It show(s) how strong × We are better leader(s) × I am strongly agree × Isn't a woman should () entitled as superwoman × Women can be and became a leader × What matter() is, × Because they have more superior × We () used to it. × Women doesn't have × Some people are still prefer
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × It is our mother who do × A child that felts × It is not depend

8. Pronouns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × the mother she is the.. × the women they have only.. × a better leader it is... × it's not just women that can do all things × ..unlike women that are too attached to something.
9. Word Omissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × ...as far () we are responsible × Many leaders in every nation () that gentlemen are better than ladies × () Father is always the head of the family × If women () leading a nation × Men will always be the better ()
10. Infinitives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × ...wise in finding ways to make their families to survive and provide for their families × Being an effective leader, you need to acknowledge the rights of others
11. Parallelism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> × It is our mother who do the laundry, cooking, cleaning, watch over us. × What matter is how you lead, handle, took care and be responsible enough. × They can cook, wash clothes, buying groceries, ironing, etc.

The researcher found 11 errors according to the grammatical features of the subjects' compositions. Problems were found in using articles; punctuation marks; spelling; capitalization; diction (word choice); pluralization; subject-verb agreement/ verb –related errors; pronouns; word omissions; infinitives; and parallelism.

2. How are these errors categorized?

After identifying the errors according to grammatical features, the researcher categorized these by the four types of errors according to Corder (1967, 1971 & 1974).

The errors according to grammatical features presented above are further categorized in Table 2.

Table 2. Error Categories

Error Category	Grammatical Features	Examples
1. Addition – It refers to the addition of any grammatical item.	1. Articles 2. Spelling 3. Pluralization 4. Subject-Verb Agreement; Verb related errors; 5. Pronouns 6. Parallelism	...a qualities decision gentlemens I am strongly agree the mother she is the.. They can cook, wash clothes, buying groceries, ironing, etc.
2. Omission -It occurs when the linguistic item that is required in the sentence is omitted.	1. Articles 2. Punctuation Marks 3. Subject-Verb Agreement; Verb related errors 4. Word Omissions	when the leader is () man the father can think concrete idea to fix their problems () the mother It show(s) how strong ...as far () we are responsible
3. Selection -It refers to the problem of wrong selection of the certain forms.	1. Spelling 2. Punctuation Marks	to think there movies. (their) Isn't a woman should entitled as superwoman(.) >(?)

	3. Diction 4. Infinitives	passionate (passionate) Being an effective leader, you need to acknowledge the rights of others.
4. Ordering -It refers to the wrong order of the words in the sentence.	NONE	NONE

The table above shows the classification of the grammatical errors. It was found out that some of these errors fall to one or more error category. For instance, the errors found in using articles are under *addition* and *omission*.

3. How frequent do these errors occur in their English argumentative writing?

Table 3. Frequency of Error Categories

ERROR CATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (100%)
Addition	33	29.73
Omission	35	31.53
Selection	43	38.74
Ordering	0	0
<i>Total</i>	100	100%

The table presented above shows how frequent the errors appeared on the writing compositions of the advanced ESL learners. Each grammatical error was counted per category to determine its frequency.

According to the findings, 38.74% of all grammatical errors were errors where the students had selected and substituted a word or a mark for another. For example, in subject-verb agreement, students had replaced are for is or are for have. Meanwhile, 31.53% were errors of students in omission. It occurs when the linguistic item that is required in the sentence is omitted. For example,

the students omitted articles or punctuation marks. The table also shows that the remaining 29.73% are errors of addition. For example, the students misspelled the word decision by putting an additional -s. Addition was also found in the subject-verb agreement errors. They put two verbs in the sentence. Conversely, there was no error found under the category Ordering.

As can be seen, the most frequent type of error was errors of selection. This was followed by errors of omission then errors of addition. Of the four error categories of Corder (1967, 1971 & 1974), three were only present on the argumentative compositions of the advanced ESL learners.

IV. Conclusion

The 3rd year English major students at the Concepcion Holy Cross College, Inc. who are considered as advanced ESL learners (as qualify by ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986) cited in Brown (1994)) manifested errors in their argumentative compositions. The grammatical errors (articles; punctuation marks; spelling; capitalization; diction (word choice); pluralization; subject-verb agreement/ verb-related errors; pronouns; word omissions; infinitives; and parallelism) fell under three (3) categories of Corder (1967, 1971 & 1974). These were the errors of selection, omission and addition.

Errors of selection were found to be the most frequent error type followed by omission then addition. There was no error found in ordering.

The results of this research show that the advanced learners are still subjected to committing errors. Pit Corder regards learner's errors as visible proof that learning is taking place. This micro study strengthens the notion that advanced learners still need guidance in the process of language learning. The findings could be used to determine what the learners need to correct or what the teachers need to teach. These errors should be regarded positively and should not be taken as learners' failure to master the rules and structures of English. This study is, therefore, significant as this inform the teachers and curriculum designers about the kind of errors that their learners make. The results of the present study give insight into what types of errors are made by the Education students. It does not mean that they are in advanced level, they are already free from errors. Teachers need to note that these errors are significant data. Both the teachers and learners need to strategize as to how these language errors be eliminated.

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