

Evaluation of Second Language Learners' Syntactic Errors in ESL Writing

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Abstract

Writing is considered varied with context and cannot be distilled down to a set of abstract cognitive or technical abilities. It always involve a combination of talent and skill and that makes it complex yet writing becomes more complex for ESL learner when they write using the second language in the academic context. With the growing interest in linguistic accuracy in relation to L2 writing pedagogy, this study generally aimed to evaluate the second language learners' syntactic errors in ESL writing. Data extracted from the fifty-four (54) third year and fourth year ESL students reveal that the ESL learners are seldom exposed in writing. Their predominant errors along syntactic structures are on tense, pronoun-antecedent agreement and faulty parallelism. Those who are in the higher year level tend to commit lesser syntactic errors. Furthermore, year level and writing exposure highly relates to their incidence or occurrence of syntactic errors in ESL writing.

Keywords: Evaluation, Syntactic Errors, Second Language Learners, ESL Writing

Introduction

The current condition in the world have corresponding significance in the issues of bilingualism and the important role of the English language. The fundamental aim of teaching a language is to make the learners proficient in some or all of the basic language skills. Researchers have paid increasing attention to the structural and functional language changes.

Representation of syntactic structure is a core area of research. A text is determined legal by the language of syntax and the disagreements with the syntactic rules are called syntax error. This judgment can easily be detected by one's knowledge of language but one purpose of a theory of syntax is to possess the structural sentence as acceptable or not. As writing is a continuous complex process of expressions. It is not itself a simple process with its native language and rather even more a complicated process if the language is a foreign language. This is especially true to Filipinos who learn English as a second language. A number of studies conclude with the impact or interference of their first language during the process of writing in English.

Syntax complexity is one of the most difficult structural elements for students not to exempt college students. This may be highly regarded to the veracity that English is not the country's first language.

The ability to write effectively is very important in second language acquisition. Good English writing competence is widely recognized as an efficient skill for educational reasons. Writing is a difficult process which demands cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis. It is twice harder to learn to write in a foreign language, and it takes time and effort to become well competent in the proper and accurate usage of foreign language.

Mohamed and Darus (2012) believe that writing is an indispensable skill. It is in this aspect that learners are able to develop autonomously, promoting themselves towards intellectual maturity especially in the case of language learning. In addition, they claimed that the most difficult of all the macro skills for all language users regardless of whether the language in question is a first, second or foreign language is learning to writing fluently

and expressively.

Competence in Writing can be assessed through one's ability to properly organized thoughts using appropriate structures. Good writing consists not only of a string of varied, correctly-structured sentences. The sentences must also lead from one to the next so that the text is cohesive and the writer's ideas are coherent.

Wang and Wen (2002) on the other hand, professed that L2 writers obviously freeze when writing in the target language because of their mother tongue which directly impedes the use of the second language. Consequently, the transfer of language or syntactic which is merging the schemes of the two languages in their L2 writing, as stated by Watchrapunyawong and Usaha (2013), was found to be an alarming issue. Moreover, Weigle (2002) also states that because of the constraints of limited second-language knowledge, the students see L2 writing as hampered because of the need to focus on language rather than content. She claims that it is impossible for L2 students to write in a second language properly without linguistic knowledge regarding grammar and vocabulary. In research findings, Sattayatham & Honsa (2007) found that less proficient learners had a higher number of grammatical, orthographic and syntactic and lexical errors.

As locals, who are used and exposed of various ethnic dialects being spoken and practices in the daily life means of communication, and as per personal experience, students taking up the discipline of English as secondary language, these students encountered malpractice of the functions and structures of the said foreign language which leads the students to derive errors upon coming up a certain ideas in the outputs or products. These unnoticed confusions were brought by how ethnic dialects being affects the student practices. These were the underlying reasons why the researcher prompt to study the students' errors on syntactic structure.

Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate the syntactic errors of second language learners in ESL writing. Specifically, it aimed to determine the profile of the students with respect to sex, age, mother tongue, year level, available resources at home and frequency of utilization; identify the written exposures of the ESL learners; and examine the syntactic errors committed by the second language learners in their ESL writing. It shall also measure whether there is a significant difference on the syntactic errors committed by the second language learners when grouped according to profile. Finally, it shall examine the significant relationship between the second language learners' syntactic error, their profile and written exposure?

Methodology

The descriptive-correlational method of research employing the survey and correlational techniques was used in this study. Descriptive was used as the study determine the profile of the students and their reading and writing exposure. Correlation method was also employed as the study evaluated if there exist a significant relationship between the students' committed error and their profile variables and writing exposures.

The study was conducted at the College of Teacher Education (CTE) of the Cagayan State University, Maura, Aparri, Cagayan for the School year 2017-2018. Cagayan State University-Aparri is one of the satellite campuses of the University situated 2-3 kilometer east of the town proper. Currently, its total enrollment is approximately 5,332 students. Moreover, CSU is one of the public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Northern part of the Philippines and College of Teacher Education is one among the eight colleges in the campus. CTE offers Bachelor in Secondary Education major in English, Mathematics, and Physical Science. It also offers Bachelor in Elementary Education. It has 14 total numbers of Permanent Teachers

The respondents utilized in this study were the third year English major students of the College of Teacher Education duly enrolled for the school year 2017-2018.

The main tool which was used in gathering the data is a survey questionnaire which was divided into two. Part I of the survey dealt with the demographical characteristics of the students. The information included age, sex, Mother tongue, available resources at home and average grade in English. Part II dealt on the exposure of the students on reading and writing. To gauge the syntactic errors of the ESL learners, an essay test was given to them which required the construction of a maximum of 200 words composition on the topics of their choice. Frequency, percentage counts, percentage distribution, means and standard deviations were the descriptive statistics utilized to describe the profile variables and number of syntactic errors committed by the English major students.

Moreover, the inferential statistics, the Pearson Product moment correlation was employed to determine if reading and writing exposure is related to their syntactic errors. Furthermore, t-test was used to determine the

difference between the syntactic errors committed when grouped according to profile. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also used to determine the difference on the syntactic errors when grouped according to age, mother tongue, available resources at home, average grade and reading and writing exposure.

The data gathered were analyzed with the use of Statistical Software (SPSS) at 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

After careful content investigation of the survey instrument with the written outputs of the ESL learners, the following presents the thorough results and discussion of the analysis of the specific objectives.

Profiling

Sex

Table 1 shows the distribution of the students in terms of sex. The table reveals that 36 or 66.7 percent of the students are females which comprise the majority while only 18 or 33.3 percent of the students are males. This is supported by the enrollment data of the college that there are more female enrollees as compared to males. Moreover, this finding is also supported by the findings of 2008 functional literacy, Education and Mass media Survey (FLEMMS) on the statistics on Filipino women and men's education which reported that school attendance was higher among females than among males.

As exhibited from the data, it can be deduced that the English major ESL students of the College of Teacher Education are predominantly female.

This finding means that majority of those who took teaching course are female. As such, this finding implies that there is feminization in the teaching course as it overwhelmingly attracts female.

Table 1. Distribution of the students in terms of sex

| Sex | Frequency (n=54) | Percentage |
|--------|---------------------|------------|
| Female | 36 | 66.7 |
| Male | 18 | 33.3 |

Age

As per regards to the age of the students, Table 2 evidently shows that majority of the students which constitute a frequency of 44 or 81.5 percent have age ranging from 18 to 20 years old. Seven or 12.9 percent of the students have 21-23 age range while three or 5.56 percent of them are aged 24-26.

This finding indicates that most of the addressed second language learners fall into teenage group as concretized by the mean of 19.72 and a standard deviation of 2.03. This finding means that they are generally youngsters.

Table 2. Distribution of the students in terms of age

| Age (in years) | Frequency (54) | Percentage |
|----------------------|--------------------|------------|
| 18-20 | 44 | 81.5 |
| 21-23 | 7 | 12.9 |
| 24-26 | 3 | 5.56 |
| Mean = 19.72 | S.D. = 2.03 | |

Mother Tongue

The distribution of the students in terms of mother tongue is presented in Table 3. for the respondents' first language or mother tongue, Iloco tops two other languages in the list that includes Ibanag and Tagalog. Iloco

is the mother tongue of 42 or 67.7 percent of the students. Eight or 14.8 percent of them are tagalogs while only four or 7.40 percent of them are ibanags.

This finding indicates that the population of English majors at the College of Teacher Education is dominated by students whose native language is Iloco. The data in this table insinuates that most of the Ilocano parents still transmit the Iloco language to their children by teaching it as first language. This attitude reflects the loyalty of the parents to their language.

Moreover, this is further attributed to the fact that Cagayan State University at Aparri does not only cater to students from the place but largely with students from the neighboring towns as majority of the English major students are from Allacapan, Buguey, Camalaniugan, Camiquin Lal-lo, and Sta Teresita which are consensually Iloco speaking towns.

Table 3. Distribution of the students in terms of mother tongue

| Mother Tongue | Frequency (n=54) | Percentage |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Tagalog | 8 | 14.8 |
| Ibanag | 4 | 7.40 |
| Ilocano | 42 | 67.7 |

Year level

Apparent in Table 4 is the distribution of the students in terms of year level. The table exposes that 29 or 53.7 percent of the students belong to fourth year class followed by 25 or 46.3 percent who are third year. This finding means that majority of the students belong to fourth year class as attributed to the general observation that they are the year level with the highest populace.

Table 4. Distribution of the students in terms of year level

| Year Level | Frequency (n=54) | Percentage |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Third | 25 | 46.3 |
| Fourth | 29 | 53.7 |

Available Resources at Home

Shown in Table 5 is the distribution of the second language learners in terms of available resources at home. The table reveals that dictionary is the most available reading resource at home with complete frequency of 54 followed by English books (49); internet (43); newspapers (36); magazine (34); thesaurus (32); novels (25) and pamphlets (13) which ranked second to eight.

This finding means that the students have enough available resources at home. This finding implies that they have sufficient resource and reference materials at home for language related consultations. This finding further denotes that they have available materials which are considered to be great contributories for language acquisition especially on the correct construction of the structures of English.

Malone (2007) stated that literacy can only be maintained if there is an adequate supply of reading materials. On informal interviews, the learners revealed that some of these materials available at home are built-in installed in their cellular phones. Students specified that they have applications of Webster and Merriam Dictionary. They also have English books in pdf format through WPX application or if not on e-books.

Table 5. Available Resources at home

| | Frequency* | Rank |
|---------------|------------|------|
| Dictionary | 54 | 1 |
| English books | 49 | 2 |
| Internet | 43 | 3 |
| Newspapers | 36 | 4 |
| Magazine | 34 | 5 |
| Thesaurus | 32 | 6 |
| Novels | 25 | 7 |
| Pamphlets | 13 | 8 |

*multiple-response

Frequency of Utilization

Table 6 shows the frequency of utilization of the available resources at home. The table reveals that the students often used internet with a mean of 3.57. They further reported that sometimes, they used their English books with its computed mean of 2.98. Seldom do the students used the newspapers (2.09) and thesaurus (2.01). Meanwhile, magazines (1.77), novels (1.22) and pamphlets (1.12) are never utilized.

This finding means that while these print educational materials are available at home. The students seldom utilized them as evidenced by its overall weighted mean frequency of 2.25 with a descriptive value of seldom.

Alvarez (2016) found that the more a student reads in English, the better writer, he or she becomes. This is because reading provides models of English sentence structure that have a positive influence on one's written work.

Table 6. Frequency of Utilization of the available resources at home.

| | Mean | Descriptive Value |
|---------------|------|-------------------|
| Dictionary | 3.31 | Sometimes |
| English books | 2.98 | Sometimes |
| Internet | 3.57 | Often |
| Newspapers | 2.09 | Seldom |
| Magazine | 1.77 | Never |
| Thesaurus | 2.01 | Seldom |
| Novels | 1.22 | Never |
| Pamphlets | 1.12 | Never |

Legend:

| Statistical Limit | Descriptive Value |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 4.20-5.00 | Always |
| 3.40- 4.19 | Often |
| 2.60- 3.39 | Sometimes |
| 1.80-2.59 | Seldom |
| 1.00-1.79 | Never |

Writing Exposure

The writing exposure of the second language learners is presented in Table 6. The table reveals that as reported, the ESL learners are extremely exposed in reflection making with a computed weighted mean of 4.67. They were found to be very exposed in essay writing obtaining a weighted mean of 3.76; lesson planning (3.50); poem writing (3.50) and journal making (3.40). More so, the learners are moderately exposed in reaction making (2.93) and story making (3.18). This is generally accounted to the fact that such exposures are part of their academic requirements for their course curriculum. The students are slightly exposed with diary with the least mean of 2.01. This may be accounted to the veracity that Diaries are no longer practiced because of social media intervention.

This finding means that the ESL learners are exposed into variety of written tasks responsive to the development of their syntactical applications as concretized by the overall weighted mean exposure of 3.37 with a descriptive value of moderately exposed.

Hyland (2002) states that teaching writing is a process and thus, ESL students should be exposed to write as much as possible. This might help students improve their writing fluency and quality.

Table 7. Writing exposure of ESL learners

| Writing Exposure | Weighted Mean | Descriptive Value |
|------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Essay | 3.76 | Very Exposed |
| Poem writing | 3.5 | Very exposed |
| Reflection | 4.67 | Extremely exposed |
| Reaction | 2.93 | Moderately Exposed |
| Stories | 3.18 | Moderately Exposed |
| Lesson Plan | 3.5 | Very exposed |
| Journal | 3.40 | Very Exposed |
| Diary | 2.01 | Slightly |
| Overall Weighted Mean | 3.37 | Moderately Exposed |

Legend

| Statistical Limit | Descriptive Value |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4.20-5.00 | Extremely Exposed |
| 3.40- 4.19 | Very Exposed |
| 2.60- 3.39 | Moderately Exposed |
| 1.80-2.59 | Slightly Exposed |
| 1.00-1.79 | Not at all Exposed |

Syntactic Errors

Shown in Table 8 is the syntactic errors of the students that the most committed syntactic error is along tense (35) which ranked first followed by Pronoun-antecedent agreement (27), faulty parallelism (24); subject-verb agreement (20); fragment (18); fused-sentence (5) and three cases of redundancy which ranked second to seventh. Verb tense is the most reoccurred error on the ESL students' written discourse.

To note, the following are excerpts lifted from their ESL writing. Our teachers smile at us even we *done* wrong; we often *have judging* our teachers by merely looking for their bad deeds; *They'll be* deposit long term knowledge that would soon invested by the learners to gain profit. They just don't *go* to school to waste their time but to make time productive and *giving* what they give to others.

As regards pronoun-antecedent agreement, students wrote the following, “Teachers possesses dispositions and skills to approach all aspects of *his or her* work reflectively.” Being a teacher is *one of the hardest profession* in the world handling 50 unordinary mischievous learners for a school year half of *your* lifetime.

As to subject verb agreement, ESL learners wrote “the outputs and learnings of their students *depends* on the positivity of their ways of teaching.”; “...at the end of the day, we must not forget the ones who stood there 8 hours in front of the class, the one who made us laugh *during* the class starts to get dull, the one who yelled, who got angry and who *shooked* us not because she wanted everyone to know that we are failures but because she *want* our wrong doings *to make it* right and guide us to the right path whenever we tend to make a left turn.” “They are *a living proof* of heroism and “Teachers are like *a candle*”.

More so, they also used the following sentences in their composition, “Teachers gear towards *everything is the persistence they have*”. “Where are the medical practitioners? Without or living heroes?” “We are truly bless to have them to our lives the best things about a teacher is they are act like our best friends. “ They reconstruct our wrecked life, *shields* us from unwanted manmade phenomena and *lights* us from our dim path”; “They also give words of wisdom and *teaches* us how to overcome trials in our lives.” “They *have’d* to be jailed inside a classroom the whole day explaining everything under the sun and that *would’ve* worth thanking of, for they never think of quitting”

“Their existence are what learners needed to be more of” “being second parents to the students”; “It’s about their wildest dream and being true and kind just to help others and bring change to help the world that is full of bloody realities.” Their ability to inspire is not just a just because we cannot label it. Nowadays or currently, in the midst and middle of..; roam around.

Table 8. Syntactic Errors

| | Frequency | Rank |
|------------------------|-----------|------|
| Tense | 35 | 1 |
| Pronoun Antecedent | 27 | 2 |
| Faulty Parallelism | 24 | 3 |
| Subject-Verb Agreement | 20 | 4 |
| Fragment | 18 | 5 |
| Fused Sentence | 5 | 6 |
| Redundancy | 3 | 7 |

Difference on the Syntactic Errors Committed when Grouped according to Profile

The study hypothesized that there is no significant difference on the syntactic errors of the students when grouped according to profile variables.

Table 9 shows that the syntactic errors of the students vary when grouped according to year level as reckoned by the f-value of 4.896 and a probability of 0.00.

This finding means that while second language learners move to higher year level, their knowledge on sentence structure improve differently. This is because as students reach fourth year level, they have more complex curriculum which deals with higher English structures which shapes their thoughts and word and sentence structural perceptions which play a very crucial role in promoting their awareness and consciousness to syntax.

Table 9. Difference on the syntactic errors of the students when grouped according to profile

| Groups | Mean | S.D. | F-value | Prob.* |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| <i>Age (ANOVA)</i> | | | | |
| 18- 20 | 2.55 | 2.04 | 1.272 | 0.289 |
| 19 -23 | 1.43 | 1.27 | | |
| 24- 26 | 3.33 | 2.51 | | |
| <i>Sex (t-test)</i> | | | | |
| Male | 2.06 | 1.76 | 1.012 | 0.316 |
| Female | 2.64 | 2.10 | | |
| <i>Mother tongue (ANOVA)</i> | | | | |
| Ybanag | 3.00 | 2.16 | 0.163 | 0.850 |
| Iloco | 2.40 | 2.03 | | |
| Tagalog | 2.38 | 1.92 | | |
| <i>Year level (t-test)</i> | | | | |
| Third Year | 3.84 | 2.41 | 4.396 | 0.000 |
| Fourth Year | 1.69 | 1.21 | | |

Correlation of the second language learners' syntactic errors and selected variables

The study theorized that there is no significant relationship between the students' syntactic errors and selected variables. Result of the correlation analysis in Table 10 indicates that year level significantly relates to students' syntactic errors as reckoned by its computed r-value of -0.521 with a probability of 0.00. The null hypothesis therefore is rejected. This finding means that the lower the year level, the higher the occurrence of syntactic errors.

Moreover, writing exposure also relates with the second language learners' syntactic errors as reckoned by its computed r-value of -0.388 and a probability of 0.00. This finding means that the less exposed the students in writing, the higher the incidence of syntactic errors.

According to Heder and King (2012), giving students extensive writing during the writing course will help students improve their confidence, speed, fluency and interest in learning English.

Table 10. Relationship of the students' syntactic errors and the selected variables

| Variables | r-value | Prob.* | Statistical Inference |
|------------------------------|---------|--------|-----------------------|
| <i>Profile</i> | | | |
| Age | -0.139 | 0.31 | Not significant |
| Sex | -0.076 | 0.58 | Not significant |
| Mother tongue | -0.056 | 0.68 | Not significant |
| Year level | -0.521 | 0.00 | Highly Significant |
| <i>Educational resources</i> | | | |
| Availability | 0.134 | 0.33 | Not significant |
| Frequency of utilization | -0.046 | 0.74 | Not significant |
| <i>Writing exposure</i> | -0.388 | 0.00 | Highly Significant |

**tested at 0.05 level of significance*

Conclusion and Recommendations

The learners were found to be generally less exposed to ESL writing. More so, the syntactic errors committed by the Second Language learners in ESL writing are significantly related to their year level and writing exposure. These findings underscore the importance of writing activities to bilingual learners at a Higher Education Institution employing English as a medium of Instruction and as a second language.

Pedagogical Implications

In countries specifically, the Philippines where English is considered the medium of instruction and a second language or the foreign language, the need to revisit its educational system is indispensable.

It is important that from its basic method, remediation lessons should be conducted on sentential structures of English to which the learners need reinforcement through differentiated writing tasks and sustain skills integration so as to promote an ideal learning environment.

Second, students should take deliberate effort to improve their competence in language specifically along written compositions with the influence and guidance of the teacher.

In doing so, careful and eclectic teaching methodologies must be employed in global stance giving attention specifically to the countries where English as second or foreign language necessitates learning. On the other hand, sustained interactions between and among the teachers and the learners is suggested to be able to achieve maximum learning and to bring out extreme potentials of student-learners.

At this juncture, it is vital that other researchers in the same field must venture on the study as to whether the system's merging of two languages, the first and second or foreign language, really is a hindrance to target language learning specifically on the learners' writing skills.

Finally, similar research in wider scope and/or pertaining to other disciplines should be conducted to determine other students' syntactic errors across countries.

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