DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM EFL STUDENTS' ERRORS

Erasmus A. Msuya[22]

Abstract

This article is a product of a study that sought to analyse errors committed by a small group of EFL first year students (totalling 34) in their second semester of study of the 2006/07 academic year. This was achieved by reading through students' scripts, which were of a range between one paragraph and to three pages of A4 paper size. The task was on making evaluation of a language skills course that was taking place during the long vacation of the 2008/09 academic year, and they were participants. The errors that were noted were highlighted and labelled. They were then isolated into separate spread sheets bearing the five linguistic levels – morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic-pragmatic, and orthographic. The findings show that there is prevalence of orthographic errors, followed by errors of lexical types, then syntactic errors. The fewest errors are of semantic-pragmatic category, which is closely preceded by morphological errors. Generally, only a few errors are of the types which would either render the message non-communicative or render it different from what was intended by the writer.

Key words: language, errors, grammar, writing, EFL learners

1.0 Introduction

It is argued that to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, 'correct' grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness. Valdés and Figueroa (1994:34) argue that "knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involves a mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place". In other words, it is about having linguistic competence, which is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning. Linguistic competence thus involves the knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure and linguistic semantics. It is worth noting that linguistic competence is an integral part of communicative competence as "it is impossible to conceive of a person being communicatively competent without being linguistically competent" (Fearch, Haastrup, & Philipson, 1984:168).

[22] Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam.

However, for second or foreign language learners, errors are part of learning as they are said to be serving both diagnostic and prognostic purposes. At diagnostic levels, errors tell us the learner's *tat de langue* (Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic level they tell course organisers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems. Debate exists, nonetheless, about errors, with Chomsky (1965) and his nativist adherents, seeing them as signs of learning and not failure. Others, however, building from linguistic behaviourism, see errors as deviation. Corder (1973), for example, refers to errors *as breaches of the code* (emphasis not original). In other words, errors deviate from what is regarded as the norm. Thus, foreign language learners commit errors largely because of what some applied linguists refer to as the paucity of their knowledge of the target language (Lengo, 1995). However, some other applied linguists argue that the errors by foreign language learners are mostly accounted for in terms of their learning stages and cannot be termed non-standard because learners do not belong to a particular geographical or social group in the target language; consequently, their utterances are tested against the norm for the standard variety of the target language.

The theoretical position taken up in this study is that of *interlanguage hypothesis* of second language acquisition[23], in which errors are seen as indicative of the different intermediate learning levels and are useful pedagogical feedback (Spillner, 1991). Selinker (1992) summarises two highly significant contributions of errors in L2 acquisition: that the errors of a learner, whether adult or child, are (a) not random, but are in fact systematic; and (b) are not 'negative' or 'interfering' in any way with learning a TL but are, on the contrary, a necessary positive factor, indicative of testing hypotheses.

In carrying out error analysis of L2/FL learners, the three steps suggested[24] below guided the researcher.

i) ***Where is the problem?*** This is a stage identification of error, done by reading through the students' scripts and singling out ill-formed structures or lexemes.

---

[23] The term 'second language' is used in a sense of a language acquired after the acquisition of one's mother tongue. It does not therefore refer to a sociolinguistic perspective which uses the same term to refer to the status of a language in a multilingual society. Thus, while English is sociolinguistically a foreign language in Tanzania, Tanzanians are said to have acquired or learnt it as a second language.

[24] *From* http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/call/frameset4.html

ii) ***What is the type of problem***? This is about definition and classification of error, which involves stating type of error and classifying the type of error. Type of error would include, for example, part of speech (verb, article, noun, adjective, adverb, and preposition); while error classification would include omission, over-generalisation and wrong combination (e.g. **He are hungry*). According to Corder (1973), errors fall into four main categories: *omission* of some required element, *addition* of some unnecessary or incorrect element, *selection* of an incorrect element, and *misordering* of elements. Errors can also be classified as *productive* and *receptive*. Productive errors are those which occur in the learner's utterances, and receptive or interpretive errors are those which result in the listener's misunderstanding of the speaker's intentions (Lengo, 1995). Another classification which was adopted in this study is based on the type of linguistic item that is involved in the error. Linguistic categories of such a classification would include phonology/pronunciation, syntax and morphology/grammar, semantics and lexicon/meaning and vocabulary[25]. Such a classification is of use to curriculum developers in the organisation of units in language learning course books.

iii) ***How can you explain the problem?*** This is a stage of explanation of rule and exemplification, which involves stating the language rule which has been violated.

The theoretical position above is valid to this study as it is both comprehensive in going through the methodological details involved in studying second learners' language errors and realistic in the sense that it sees learners' competence at one point as being a manifestation of their transitional competence in approximating the ideal native-like proficiency.

Empirical researches in this area are numerous. Some are longitudinal, for example, Wieden and Nemser (1991) conducted a longitudinal study on the acquisition of English in Austria, at phonological level. The study involved 384 Austrian school children in grades 3-11 (two classes in four regions at each age).The results indicated a difference between sounds that the learners gradually improved on and sounds for which they showed no progress. For instance, /u/ in 'boat' was pronounced correctly by only 55% of beginners, but improved over time till 100% after eight years; /ə/ in 'finger', however, showed no improvement even after eight years. This phonic aspect of language is

---

[25] *From http://upload.1318class.com/MANTOMAN/article/5/20050829/this_n_that_58(DavidShaffer).htm*

however outside the scope of this study. Some studies are synchronic, focussing on one group of learners in a particular time-frame. For example, in her studies using a communicative taxonomy, Burt (1975) studied four aspects of grammar: basic word order, sentence connectors, psychological predicate constructions, and sentential complements. They were all found to be global errors, (i.e., errors that affect the overall organisation of the sentence and hinder successful communication), and it was recommended that all should receive early and special attention in the classroom. Also, Chiang (1993) examined error types of 160 compositions written by senior high school students in Taiwan. The low proficient group wrote mainly in simple sentences. As far as global errors were concerned, the three most commonly made errors were conjunctions, run-on sentences and subjects-objects-complements. In the area of lexical-semantics, Liu (1999) conducted a study of lexical and grammatical collocational errors from 127 copies of students' final examination papers and 94 copies of students' compositions. The majority of the errors were attributable to negative interlingual transfer and four kinds of intralingual transfer, among which ignorance of rule restrictions resulted in more errors than the other three.

In Tanzania, Brock-Utne (2002) conducted a study focusing on the level of understanding of the subject matter taught in English in some Dar es Salaam secondary schools. She observed a Form II class that was having a commerce lesson with a male teacher. The teacher made frequent use of Kiswahili to make students understand. He would say the sentences in English very slowly first and then repeat what he had said more quickly, but in Kiswahili this time. On one occasion, when he had not translated, one of the students asked him a question in Kiswahili and he answered in Kiswahili and at some length. On the chalkboard he wrote *dailly sales* four different places and always with two 'lls'. Criper and Dodd (1984) also carried out a study that investigated the English proficiency level in Tanzanians students. Their findings showed that the level of English proficiency among students had dropped down so drastically that it hindered learning to an alarming extent. Furthermore, NECTA's[26] (1993) analytical study of examination results of candidates' responses to 1993 CSEE[27] showed that students' answers were poorly expressed due to lack of English proficiency. In 2000 Malekela conducted a similar study using the 1991 - 1995 form four national examinations results and came up with similar findings (Malekela, 2000).

---

[26] NECTA – National Examinations Council of Tanzania – an official body for setting up and coordination all examinations except for Tertiary Education.

[27] CSEE – Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations – centrally coordinated by the National Examinations Council of Tanzania.

At university level, studies back in the 1980s inform of existing problems in students' quality of linguistic output in their essays. For example, Obston (1982), cited in Rubagumya, Ishumi and Swilla (2003), identified 284 grammatical errors in 16 student term papers of first year Engineering students, the most prevalent being in the areas of grammatical words and inflectional words (articles, noun number and crypt forms). Three years later, Numi (1985), also cited in Rubagumya, Ishumi and Swilla (2003), explored the magnitude of writing problems among students in the Faculties of Commerce and Management (now University of Dar es Salaam Business School) and Engineering (now College of Engineering and Technology). He noted that the most serious syntactic errors were those related to concord, adverbial of purpose, result clauses and relative clauses. Another study was that by Puja (2002) who in her study of University of Dar es Salaam students noted that most of the university teachers she interviewed stated that most of their students were not competent in either spoken or written English. She further noted, during class observations and during her visits at the three University campuses, that most students (male and female) did not speak in class (where the medium of instruction is English).

All the above studies point to the fact that errors show lack of mastery of rules of the target language but are a sign of developmental competence, on the one hand, and limit the communicative quality of linguistic output of language users, on the other. The present study is yet another empirical submission pointing to the two issues.

2.0 The study

2.1 Participants and methods

In the present study, 34 participants were involved. The choice of such a small number of participants follows the argument that the study of second language errors is not essentially about the number of learners but about learner individual idiosyncratic competence at one point in time. In that sense, the smaller the sample the better, if one is to get into depths of each learner's errors.

The first task was to find out the types of errors that were found prevalent across all 34 participants. To achieve this, the researcher read through students' scripts, which were of a range between one and three paragraphs, making a page or less of an A4 paper size. The errors that were noted were highlighted and labelled. They were then isolated into separated spread sheet bearing the

five linguistic levels (morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic-pragmatic, and orthographic) and one group of mechanics in writing.

Having isolated and classified the errors, frequencies of the concurrencies were established against each errors type. Then the total of all errors were made. Statistics were then computed to arrive at percentages by dividing the total frequencies of all errors (taken as numerator) by the total frequencies of the error type (taken as denominator) the product of which was multiplied by one hundred. The resulting statistics were presented in Tables and Figures. Some actual ill-formed structures were presented as examples. Explanatory account of the errors is also provided soon after the presentation of each error types such that there is no separation between error classification, description and explanation.

2.2 The findings

As already pointed out, the errors that were noted were isolated and classified into five linguistic levels (morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic-pragmatic, and orthographic) and one group of mechanics in writing, the general findings of which are as detailed in Figure 1.

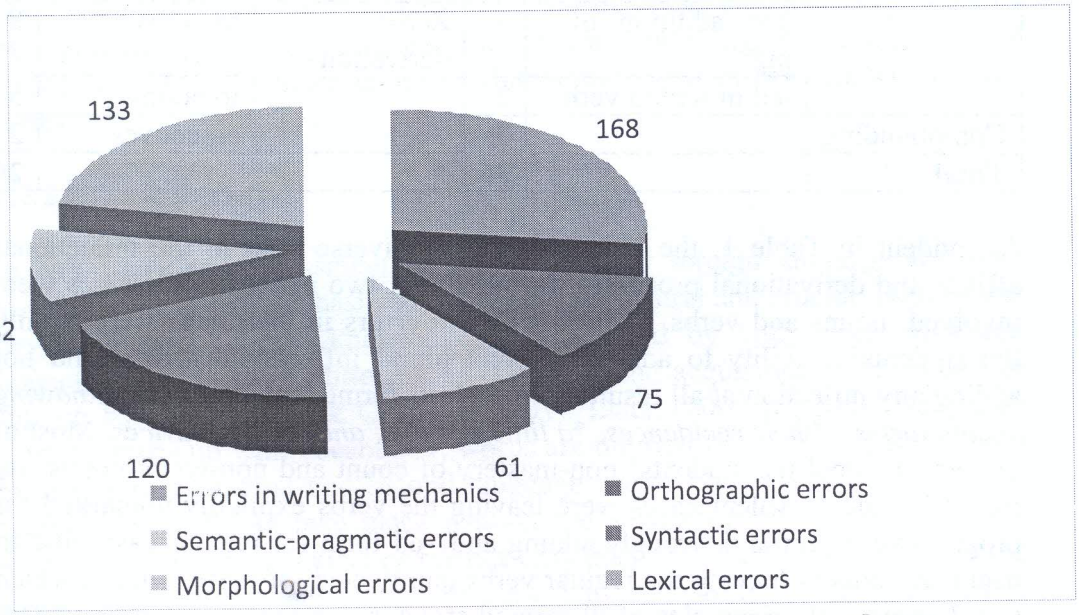


Figure 1: Error types of University of Dar es Salaam EFL students

A total of 619 errors were identified out of which 163 (27.1%) were of writing mechanics type followed by 133 errors of lexical type (which is 21.5%) and the third in magnitude were errors of syntactic type, the frequencies of which stood

at 120 (19.4%). The least errors type was of semantic-pragmatic category, with a total of 61 frequencies, closely preceded by morphological errors. These error types are described in the sections that follow.

2.2.1 Morphological errors

In the field of language, morphology means the structure of words (how words are formed), and how the parts fit together[28]. In that sense, if one gets the wrong morpheme, that is, word part, in the wrong place, one is said to have committed a morphological error. The subjects in this study committed a total of 62 morphological errors, 36 (58%) inflectional and 26 (42%) derivational, the details of which are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: EFL Learners' morphological errors

Inflectional type			Derivational type		
Nominal	plural affixes	13	Nouns	from verbs	2
	possessive	1		from adjectives	4
	un-inflecting	3	Adjectives	from verbs	2
Verbal	wrong addition of -ed	7	Verbs	nouns	3
	non addition of -ing	7	Zero derivation	to verbs	8
	-ed in wrong verb	2		to nouns	5
Compounding		3		adjectives	2
Total		**36**			**26**

As evident in Table 1, the errors were very diverse both in the inflectional affixes and derivational processes. In inflection, two major word classes were involved: nouns and verbs. The inflectional errors in the nouns were mainly the students' inability to add the correct plural inflectional affixes and not adding any inflection at all resulting in such ill-formed structures as: **knowing vocabularies, *their recidences, *a little benefits, and *better advices*. Most of the errors signal the students' non-mastery of count and non-count nouns. As for verbs, the prevalent cases were leaving the verbs explicitly unmarked for progressive aspect and wrongly adding and –ed form for regular past tense to irregular verbs or leaving the regular verbs uninflected for tense, both of which had 7 cases each. Examples of ill-formed structures in that regard were: **This program was well runned, *...that they have teached us.., *they have reach good level, the time-table should be change.. *those who introduce (referring*

[28] http://www.english-test.net/forum/ftopic21590.html accessed 2010-06-11.

to past) this course..;... course should be lengthen...; *it is good because of make us...,* and **I am fully acknowledge...* Generally, most candidates seem to have acquired the regular past formation but they tended to overgeneralise it to irregular verbs while for *'-ing'* progressive, it was mainly the verbs that are preceded by prepositions like *of, by, before, after*, which, as a rule, take *–ing* form.

The derivational errors were concentrated in the candidates' applying zero derivation where they should have added appropriate affixes in the formation of verbs (8) (e.g **...to length the time.. *,..to analysis...,* to fast the lesson*; nouns (5) (e.g. **our coming fellow, ..*to find more sponsor, *...how to pronunciation words*, and adjectives (2) (e.g. *to be compete.* All these were in addition to adding wrong derivates in formation of nouns from verbs, e.g **...as follow, *one lecture said..,* and nouns from adjectives e.g. **relevance books*, and **...leave more time for structural*, just to give but a few examples.

Many of morphological errors committed by second language learners, especially when the language they are acquiring is a foreign language like the ones in the present study, suggest difficulties in rules governing formation of words from other words within the same language, and, most importantly, abiding to inflectional rules governing grammaticality of words and word usage. Elsewhere, studies have been done, for example, David (1984), of errors by non-native speakers of Spanish. He noted that interlingual errors (choice of tense) were slightly more common than intralingual errors (choice of verb form).

2.2.2 Lexical errors

In any study and assessment of second and /or foreign language learning, vocabulary is one of the basic components both central and crucial, because the development of lexical knowledge is considered by both researchers and language classroom practitioners as central to the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Read & Chapelle, 2001). Llach (2005:46) adds: "language learning starts up with vocabulary, words are the first linguistic items acquired by the learner (in first and second language acquisition) ... and no language acquisition at all can take place without the acquisition of lexis". Thus, the study and analysis of lexical errors not only play a relevant role in the second language vocabulary acquisition process, but they are also among the most numerous types of errors in second language learners' performance. The aforementioned introductory discourse serves as justification for this subsection. In this study, lexical errors are those errors that have involved wrong or at least an approximate rather than the actual target words

(technically a mis-selection), wrong coinages resulting in the creation of non-words and the wrong selection conditioned by homophonic similarities between the word selected and the target word.

The first task was to examine the scope of distribution of lexical errors in terms of the word classes involved. The findings show that virtually all word classes (both major and minor word classes) were involved in the erroneous linguistic outputs by the candidates, though at varying degrees (See Table 2).

Table 2: Classification of Errors according to Word Classes

Word Class	Frequency	Word-class Category
Nouns	31	major
Lexical Verbs	26	major
Adjectives	7	major
Adverbs	1	major
Articles	6	minor
Prepositions	17	minor
Conjunctions	1	minor
Modals	2	minor
Auxiliaries	1	minor
Quantifiers	1	minor

The findings in Table 2 show that the major word classes were more affected than minor word classes, with nouns taking the lead with 31 occurrences (33%) followed by lexical verbs, with 26 occurrences (28%). The least in the major word category was the adverbs, with only one occurrence. This has serious implication for the communicative competence of learners. This is because, over time, second language acquisition researchers have come to recognise the central or even pre-conditional role of the lexical dimension for fluent language use, whatever skill is concerned. Many applied linguists have demonstrated, for instance, that the nature of the language threshold for reading is largely lexical. Laufer (1989, 1992) showed the importance of having a vocabulary large enough to provide coverage of 95% of the words in a text in her contention that learners whose target vocabulary is not large enough to have 95% coverage do not reach an adequate level of comprehension of the texts and are unable to transfer their reading skills from their L1 to their L2. Ellis (1997) has also shown that vocabulary knowledge is indispensable to acquire grammar. Knowing the words in a text allows learners to understand the discourse, which in turn allows the grammatical patterning to become more transparent.

As for minor word classes, five word classes were involved, with errors involving prepositions taking the lead with 17 occurrences (18%) followed by articles with six occurrences (6%).

If we take all word classes as a whole, the pattern of error distribution is as illustrated in Figure 2, in which nouns and lexical verbs have the highest frequencies of 31 and 26, respectively. Conversely, adverbs, auxiliaries, conjunctions, quantifiers and modals, all of which (except adverbs) are minor word classes, had only one occurrence each. This means the learners' were committing errors that were involving major word classes than minor word classes.

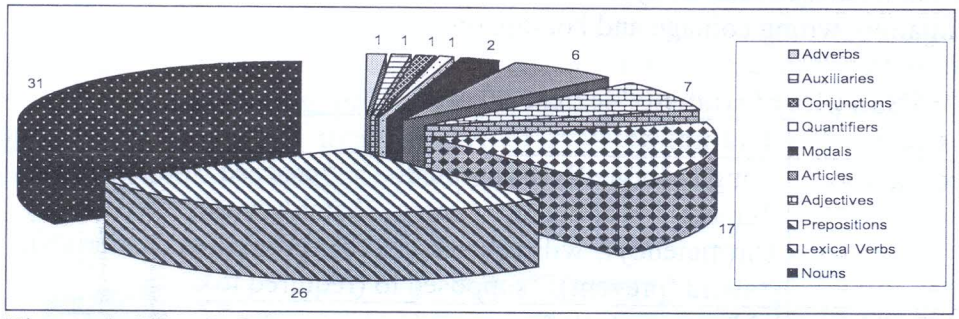


Figure 2: Word classes involved in students' errors

In terms of the types of errors involving lexis, there were nine kinds of such errors, totalling 113 in all, though with varying degrees of density as illustrated in Figure 3.

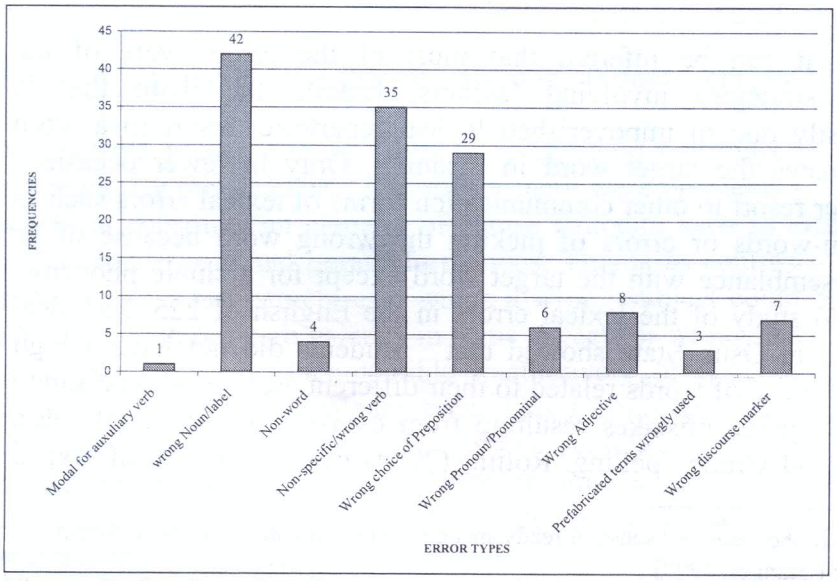


Figure 3: Students' lexical error types

The highest was the wrong choice of nouns or labels for the notion or idea that was expressed. This had 42 occurrences, followed by non-specific or too generic or even totally unrelated choice of verbs (with 35 occurrences), then wrong choice of prepositions (29). The least in the group is the use of pre-fabricated terms[29] but used in out-of-context situations most probably because of the writer's lack of appropriate term due to shallow vocabulary base or poor lexical repertoire. This had only 3 frequencies and this was followed, upscale, by the wrong coinage of words resulting into non-words (which had 4 frequencies).

Table 3 summarises chosen examples of specific errors which, regardless of error types identified and analysed in Figure 3, could be subsumed into three: approximation, wrong coinage and homophones.

Table 3: Examples of students' lexical errors

Word Class	Examples*
Approximation	*ought (urgently ask you to..); *proceed (to continue); *create (introduce); *entry (batch/group); *efficiency (proficiency); will (must/have to); properties (materials); *avoid (prevent), *supposed to (required to);
Non-word/coinage	..blaseness, teated,
Homophones	*fleshers (fresher); *stationary (stationery); *at list (at least);

*erroneous words given are un-bracketed while possible target terms are bracketed.

From Table 3, it can be inferred that most of the errors were of the communication strategies involving learners, lacking the word that is appropriate mostly due to impoverished lexical repertoire, resort to a word which approximates the target word in meaning. Only in fewer occasions would the learner resort to other communication forms of lexical errors such as coinages of non-words or errors of picking the wrong word because of its phonological resemblance with the target word except for a single phoneme. Obafeni's (2006) study of the lexical errors in the English of 225 Technical College students in Osun State showed that students did not have a high competence in the use of words related to their different areas of specialisation as they normally made mistakes resulting from over-generalisation of rules, wrong analogy and wrong spelling. Rotimi (2004) gives examples of lexical

[29] The term is used in the restricted sense of ready-made memorised combinations in written or spoken language (Granger, 1998).

errors involving wrong collocations, resulting into the production of such errors (sometimes amusing and humorous) as **i will now abolish my speech ; *The bus cross the road and fell down*, and * *They suppose to press the gear.* Sonaiya (1988) observes that it is in the choice of words that effective communication is hindered most.

2.2.3 Syntactic errors

Acquisition of syntax entails ability to notice, to comprehend and establish relationships that exist between the words of a target language according to rules regulating such relationships. Lack of mastery of such target language rules results into production of syntactically ill-formed language output.

In the current study, the students, in trying to communicate information in their evaluation report writing, produce a total of 168 errors, the largest in the entire set of error types. The total number of syntactic errors could be subsumed under three syntactic categories as Figure 4 illustrates.

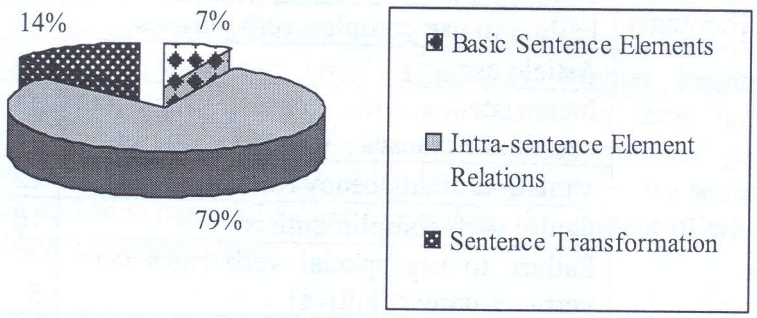


Figure 4: Syntactic categories involved in students' errors

Most of the syntactic errors (over three quarters) fall under the intra-sentence elements. By this category, it is meant there were problems in the phrasing of words to constitute an element of clause structure such as errors in nominal, verbal or prepositional phrase formations. This is as contrasted with sentence elements of clause structure in which a wrong subject could be put that does not agree with the verb valency in some aspects or wrong post-verbal elements which may also be incompatible qualitatively or quantitatively with verb transitivity category of valency type. This second type was the smallest as it accounted for 7% only. Errors involving sentence transformation such as in formation of interrogatives, passives or other sentence element movements accounted for 14% of all syntactic errors. Table 4 gives more detailed illustrations of specific syntactic error types.

Table 4: Specific syntactic error types by students

Structures Involved	Errors Committed	Freq.
i) Basic Sentence Elements	Omission of direct object	10
	Double auxiliary	3
	Wrong use of word class	10
ii) Intra-sentence Elements Relationships	Post-modification	7
	Double negation	1
	Usage of conjuncts	6
	Subject-verb agreement	73
	Omission of -ing in "-ing" structures	2
	Failure to (use used) to + bare infinitive	14
	Usage of relative pronouns/clauses	3
	Pre-modifier-head disharmony (in number)	29
	Conditional clauses used wrongly	15
	Faulty use of comment clauses	1
	Failure to use complex verb phrases	23
	Article use	18
	Inconsistency in tense usage in coordinate clauses	4
	Violation of adjacency rules	12
	Faulty verb complimentiser	16
	Failure to use special verb rules (viz. verb---+ bare infinitive)	5
	Faulty placement of adverb within a VP	1
	Faulty use of noun types (non-count for count)	3
	Failure to use perfective aspect	2
	Redundant subject (nouns and pronouns serving as subject)	8
iii) Sentence Transformation	Failure to use passive correctly	39
	Failure to use comparative adjectives	8
	Faulty inversion	1

Table 4 tells a lot in terms of amount and diversity of errors that were committed at syntactic level, with intra-sentencial errors being more prevalent both in the range of error types (20 in total) and in frequencies, the highest of which was subject-verb concord with 73 occurrences. However, there was also

in this category, cases of more-or-less of one individual each, such as double negation, faulty use of comment clauses, and faulty placement of adverb within a VP. Under sentence transformation category, failure to use passive voice correctly ranked the second highest in the overall and the highest in that group, with 39 occurrences.

Errors of grammar are not peculiar to University of Dar es Salaam EFL students. Hashim's (1996) review of most of the studies on syntactic errors made by Arabic-speaking students in learning English, showed that a lot of errors were found, and presented in seven syntactic categories: verbal, preposition, relative clause, conjunction, adverbial clauses, sentence structure, and articles. The results reveal that the influence of one's native language (mother tongue) has been found to be the most common source of these deviations. Similarly, Zahid (2006) investigated EFL Arab learners' syntactic errors and the results revealed that Arab learners were incompetent and weak mainly in verbs and prepositions. More recently, Tahanel (2010) carried out an empirical study of syntactic errors of EFL Jordanian first, second, and third year university EFL students focusing on prepositions. He discovered that there was high prevalence of errors in selecting the proper prepositions if equivalents were not used in their mother tongue; omission of prepositions if equivalents were not required in their mother tongue; and addition of prepositions if equivalents were required in their mother tongue. Thus, grammar is crucial and it is said that when students' papers are filled with errors, many teachers feel obligated to correct every sentence-level error they see and thus may fail to get focused on the content of what was meant by the essayist/ student writer.

2.2.4 Semantic-pragmatic errors

Semantic (assigning of meaning) and pragmatics (the contextual relevance, appropriateness and communicability of meaning) are two distinct, but closely related sub-fields in the field of linguistics. When it comes to second/foreign language learning, these linguistic levels are very crucial since lacking knowledge of the pragmatic rules of the target language (L2) learners commonly transfer the pragmatic norms from their native language. That said, analysis was also made of semantic-pragmatic errors by students in this study, by considering the four areas of unintelligibility: redundancy, wrong denotation, pragma-linguistic anomaly and theta role. The resulting data is as summarised in Figure 5.

The data in Figure 5 shows that out of the total of 61 semantic-pragmatic errors committed, slightly above one third (37%) are errors of pragmatic-semantic

nature in which the terms chosen, which might be correct, are ill-formed in terms of rules of politeness and appropriateness. This was closely followed by learners' choice of words of which denotative meaning does not fit to the meaning of the co-occurring words in the sentence and thus rendering sentence meaning less communicative and in some cases, non-communicative. These had 21 occurrences, accounting for 35% of all errors in this category.

Related to the two aforementioned categories is a set of errors dubbed intelligibility errors, so-called because one or two of the words chosen are of wrong denotation (and possibly have conflicting meanings) or the combinations of the words in which one or more have wrong denotation and the other(s) is/are pragmatically anomalous. This category had a total of 9 occurrences (14%). The remaining two, redundancy and errors of semantic relations (theta roles, had 5 and 4 occurrences, respectively.

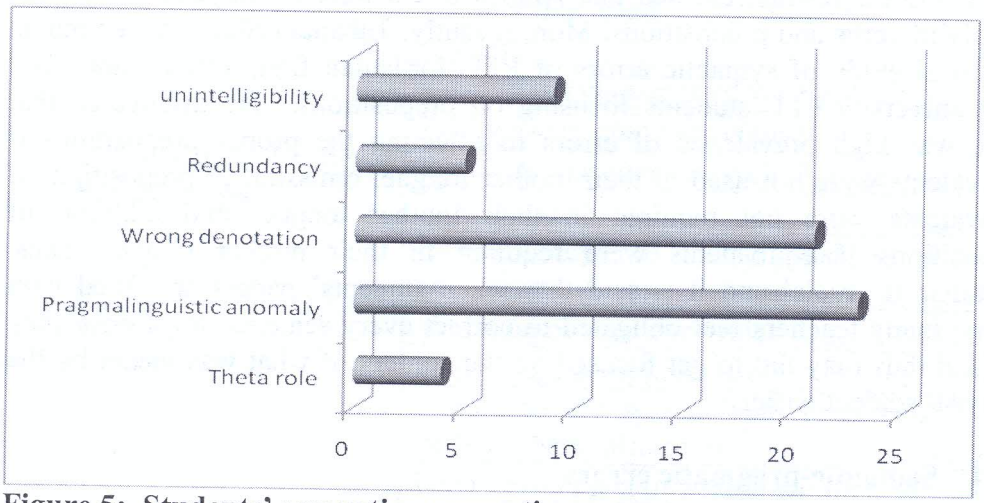


Figure 5: Students' semantic-pragmatic errors

What can be inferred from the finding above is that knowing other aspects of grammar is not enough since languages differ in how they use different speech acts (requesting, apologising, refusing, requesting, inviting, complaining, ...), so what works in one's L1 (in our context, Kiswahili language) may very well not work in the L2 (English, in our case). Therefore, problems with interlanguage pragmatics can cause serious communication breakdown. The problems persist even in comparing native speakers of two distinct language; for example House and Kasper (1981) rated directness in complaints and requests, comparing German and English native speakers, and found that on a scale from 1-8, English speakers most frequently were fairly indirect (3), while German speakers most frequently were more direct (6). Using a German strategy in an English environment would often be perceived as impolite. The

situation would be grimmer when second language speakers are measured in pragmatic competence. For example, Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) looked at the responses of EFL/ESL speakers in understanding use of polite refusals in American English. The refusal expression "I'm sorry I have tickets that night" which was meant to express regrets for failure to attend the invitation was wrongly understood as an expression of positive opinion/empathy (to higher status) and the other one, "maybe I could come by later for a drink", which had the illocutionary force of offering an alternative, was mistaken for excuse.

The findings above and the two studies just cited point to the fact that even when speakers of second or foreign language are considered 'fluent' due to their mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of that language, they may still lack pragmatic competence; in other words, they may still be unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate. As a result, EFL students linguistic production (writing, in this study) might appear inappropriate in several areas (i.e. confrontational, presumptuous, vague). To help these students achieve optimal pragmatic success, teachers need to make students aware of specific speech act sets and the accompanying linguistic features that are necessary to produce appropriate and well-received refusals, complaints, and other important speech acts.

2.2.5 Orthographic Errors

These are errors, according to Al-jarf (2010), which refer to those instances in which the misspelled word sounds like the written target word, but the written form or grapheme used for the misspelled part does not correspond with the target word or target grapheme. Instances of orthographic problems are: confusing vowel graphemes that have the same sound, confusing consonant graphemes that have the same sound, confusing vowel and consonant digraphs, deleting silent vowels and consonants, doubling of consonants or vowels, reducing double consonants or double vowels, deleting a vowel in vowel digraphs, adding or deleting final silent vowels, reversing CV and VV sequences, representing consonants with hidden sounds phonetically, and substituting a word by another homophone. The analysis of students' essays in this study produced a number or errors in the orthography of English but we restricted the error types to eight, with their prevalence given in percentages of occurrence, as illustrated in Figure 5.

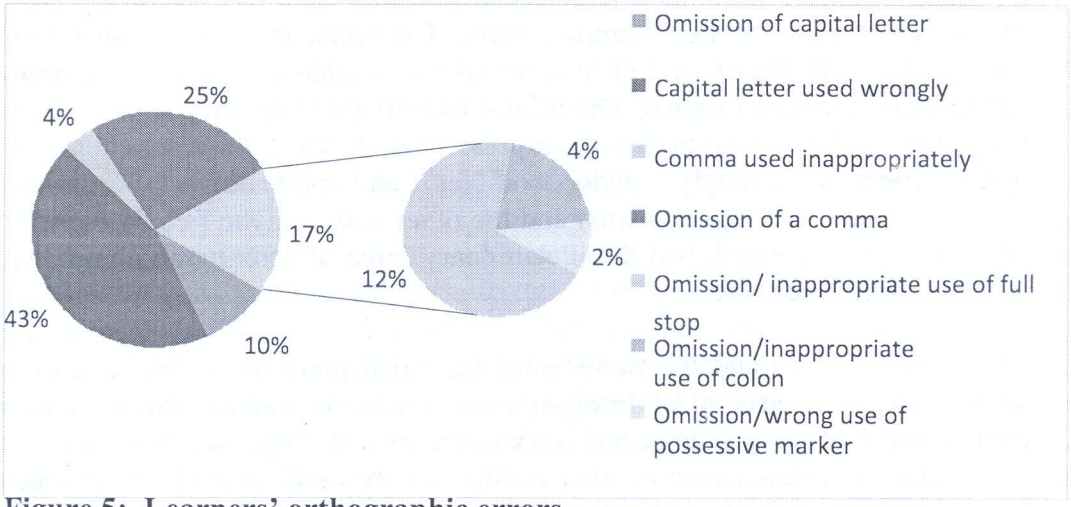


Figure 5: Learners' orthographic errors

The data in Figure 5 point out clearly that the dominant type of orthographic errors are those related to capital letters, mainly wrongly used (43%) but also, in fewer cases (10%) omitted where they should have been used. So, the over half (53%) of the 75 orthographic errors committed are those involving capital letters.

Comma usage ranked the second with non-use of comma accounting for a quarter of all the errors while the inappropriate use of the same accounted for 4%. The rest of the errors (use of colon, full-stop and possessive marker) all accounted for only 17% of all the errors.

In the spelling area, there were a total of 75 instances of errors. Of these, there was addition of letters of the alphabet to 32 (42.2%). There was also omission of letters of the alphabet to a total of 28 (37.3%) lexical items, and lastly there was an alteration or swapping positions of letters of the alphabet to 9 (12%) words. All these instances resulted into creating words either non-existent in the current English lexicon or words not fitting the general sentence meaning.

Rimrott (2005) carried out a study of spelling errors made by first and second semester students of German and found that approximately 70% of their spelling errors were competence-based (due to incomplete knowledge of the target language) as opposed to performance-based errors (accidental, unsystematic typing errors). For second-semester students, comparable to the German 102 and 103 students involved in this study, 56% of the competence errors were related to morphology. Most of these errors were in verb forms, where the learner was unsure of the correct past and part participle forms.

Juozulynas, (1994) eleven years earlier, had noted that comma errors were the most common types of punctuation errors for English learners of German. Also, Huang (2006) presented findings of 34 Taiwanese English majors' writing errors based on a web-based writing programme, which included error categories of grammar, mechanics, style, and usage. The distribution of errors was usage (55%), mechanics (20%), style (16%), and grammar (9%). Huang concluded that most of EFL students' writing errors were not due to insufficient command of linguistic complexity; on the contrary, they made a big portion of basic errors such as the subject-verb agreement or incomplete sentences.

The findings and related studies supplied above can be given a more sympathetic explanation that spelling is a complex cognitive activity in which many interrelated skills are involved. Mastering the English spelling system means learning the correct association between English phonemes and written graphemes. The fact that English spelling is more complex than that of most African languages (Swahili included), it is expected to pose several spelling difficulties for Tanzanian students particularly in the sometimes even after many years of EFL learning (at least 10 in Tanzanian case, four in primary, four in lower secondary and two in high school) spelling development.

3.0 Conclusion

The findings in this study have been as many and diverse as the learners themselves. There have been errors at all linguistic levels, most notably at the level of orthography, followed by errors of lexical types. Some of these errors fall under the traditional category of omission, addition, misanalysis, misselection and wrong analogy. A significant number of such errors are attributed to transfer from learners' LI (native ethnic languages, mostly Bantu) and from L2 due to its prevalence of use (Swahili). Some, however, are due to learners' imperfect knowledge of English (target language). The errors that the learners have committed tell a lot about the teaching of English in Tanzania, given the fact that the subjects under study were university students who had been to at least six years of using English as the medium of instruction. What militates against such situation is probably the fact that it may not be 'quite teachable' to use Trappex-Lomax's (1990) term in which he posits that a foreign language is said to be not teachable in a situation where no strong internal support exists for the sustaining of a corps of teachers linguistically proficient as well as professionally equipped to create the conditions for learning.

It is also worth noting that while such errors are seen as an interlanguage development of the learners as they tend to approximate the target structure, it is not easy these days to tell which target language variety Tanzanians are aiming at. The nation, just as is the case for the rest of the world, is doing away with adherence to RP English variety as the ideal target language variety. This has implications in terms of training of English language teachers, development of teaching materials and modes of testing and assessment.

References

Al-Jarf, R. (2010). Spelling error corpora in EFL. *Sino-US English Teaching, 7*(1), (Retrieved from *http://www.linguist.org.cn/doc/su201001/su20100102.pdf*).

Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. C. Scarcella, E. S. Anderson, & S. D. Krashen (Eds.). *Developing communicative competence in a second language* (pp. 55-94). New York: Newbury House Publishers.

Brock-Utne, B. (2002). Language, democracy and education in Africa. Discussion Paper No.14. Uppsala, The Nordic Africa Institute.

Burt, M. (1975). Error analysis in the adult ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly, 9*(1), 53-63.

Chiang, P. J. (1993). How to improve English composition teaching in Taiwan's high schools: A study of error types and learning strategies. Masters Thesis, National Kaohsiung Normal University.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL 5*, 162-169.

Corder, S. P. (1973). *Introducing applied linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education.

Cripper, C., & Dodd, W. (1984). *Report on the teaching of English language and its use as a medium of instruction in Tanzania*. Dar es Salaam: The British Council.

David, B. (1984). Syntactic and morphological errors of English speakers on the Spanish past tenses. *ERIC DIGEST, ED281369*.

Dulay, H. C., & Burt, K. B. (1974). Errors and strategies in child second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly, 8*(2), 129-136.

Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hashim, N. (1996). English syntactic errors by Arabic speaking learners reviewed. Eric. Doc 423660, Full Text.

House, J., & Kasper, G. (1981). Zur Rolle der Kognition in Kommunikationskursen (The role of cognition in communication courses). *Die Neueren Sprachen, 80,* 42-55.

Huang, S. J. (2006). A case study of EFL students' writing errors on a web-based writing programme. *The Proceedings of 2006 International Conference and Workshop on TEFL and Applied Linguistics* (pp. 139-146). Ming Chuan University Press.

Huang, S. L. (2001). Error analysis and teaching composition. Unpublished Masters Thesis. National Tsing Hua University.

Juozulynas, V. (1994). Errors in the compositions of second-year German students: An empirical study for parser-based ICALI. *CALICO, 12*(1), 5-17.

Laufer, B. (1989). What percentage of text is lexis essential for comprehension? In C. Lauren & M. Nordman (Eds.). *Special language: From humans thinking to thinking machines* (pp. 316-323). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Laufer, B. (1992). *How much lexis is necessary for reading comprehension*? In H. Bejoint & P. Arnaud (Eds.). *Vocabulary and applied linguistics* (pp. 126-132). Basingstoke & London: Macmillan.

Lengo, I. (1995). 'What is an error?' *English Teaching Forum, 33*(3), 20.

Liu, C. P. (1999). An analysis of collocational errors in EFL writings. *The proceedings of the eighth international symposium on English teaching* (pp. 483-494). Taipei: The Crane Publisher.

Llach, M. P. A. (2005b). A critical review of the terminology and taxonomies used in the literature on lexical errors. *Miscellanea: A Journal of English and American Studies, 31*, 11-24.

Malekela, G. A. (2000). The quality of secondary education in Tanzania. In: Galabawa, J. C. J., Senkoro, F. E. M. K., & Lwaitama, A. F. (Eds.) *The Quality of Education in Tanzania: Issues and Experiences*. Dar es Salaam: Institute of Kiswahili Research.

Obafeni, A. (2006). Lexical errors in the English of technical college students in Osun State of Nigeria. *Nordic Journal of African Studies, 15*(1), 71-89.

Oldin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Puja, G. K. (2002). Moving against the grain: The expectations and experiences of Tanzanian female undergraduates. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto.

Read, J., & Chappel, C. A. (2001). A framework for second language vocabulary assessment. *Language Testing, 18*(1), 1-32. Research Conference UAE, University, Al-Ain.

Rimrott, A. (2005). Spell checking in computer-assisted language learning: A study of misspellings by non-native writers of German. Unpublished Masters Thesis, Simon Fraser University.

Rotimi, T. (2004). Helping ESL learners to minimise collocation errors. *TESL Journal, X*(4), (Retrieved April 2004, http://iteslj.org/)

Rubagumya, C. M., Ishumi, A. G. M., & Swilla, I. N. (2003). Project proposal on strengthening language proficiency/communication skills of University of Dar es Salaam students. A Report Commissioned by the Chief Academic Officer, University of Dar es Salaam.

Selinker, L. (1992). *Rediscovering language.* Essex: Longman Group, UK Limited.

Sonaiya, C. O. (1988). The lexicon in second language acquisition: A lexical approach to error analysis. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Cornel University.

Spillner, B. (1991). Error analysis: A comprehensive bibliography. http://www.benjamins.com/cgi-bin/t_bookview

Tahaineh, Y. S. (2010). Arab EFL university students' errors in the use of prepositions *MJAL, 2,* http://mjal.org/Journal/Arab/*Prepositions - 112.pdf* (Accessed October 25, 2010).

Taiwo, R. (n.d.). Helping ESL learners to minimise collocational errors. Available at *http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Taiwo-Collocation.html* (Viewed last on June 15th, 2010).

Trappes-Lomax, Z. M. (1990). Can a foreign language be a national medium? In C. M. Rubagumya (Ed.) *Language in education in Africa: A Tanzanian perspective.* Philadephia: Multilingual Matters

Valdés, G., & Figueroa, R. (1994). *Bilingualism and testing: A special case of bias*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Wieden, W. & Nemser, W. (1991). *The pronunciation of English in Austria.* Gunter Narr, Tubingen.

Zobl, H. (1980). Developmental and transfer errors: Their common bases and (possibly) differential effects on subsequent learning. *TESOL Quarterly, 14,* 469-479.