

A Study on Identifying Writing Errors Pertaining to Number Agreement

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Abstract

This study investigated errors committed by first year undergraduates pertaining to number agreement. The study examined the corpus of 60 test papers written by 30 participants. Through the study, the types of errors were identified in relation to number agreement and were classified into various categories. The most common errors committed by the participants were number agreement issues with the use of nouns, pronouns and subject and verb. The study is important to educators and study material developers who should become aware of the kind of errors that their target learners make, so that they are in a better position to put appropriate intervention strategies into place. For learners, error analysis is important as it shows the areas of difficulty in their writing. The limitations and some pedagogical implications for future studies are included at the end of this research paper.

Key words: errors, undergraduates, second language, number agreement, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

For many years, there have been many studies in the process of the first language acquisition and second language learning. Findings about first language acquisition have been adapted to second language learning and it has been concluded that second language acquisition occurs in a similar way that children learning their native mother tongues since making plenty of mistakes is a natural section of language acquisition process. They lack great deal of information about subject-verb agreement. As they got feedback from adults, they learn how to produce grammatically and semantically acceptable sentences in their native language. What a second language learner does in operating on the target language is not different from that of a child acquiring his first language. It is inevitable that all learners make mistakes and commit errors. Mostly they use the number distinction in their expressions, both spoken and written, incorrectly. However, the process can be

impeded through realizing the errors and operating on them according to the feedbacks given. Identifying the steps through proper analysis that learners follow to acquire their second language would be helpful for the researcher and language teachers realize the mistakes and errors of language learners in constructing the new language system.

Error analysis enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and take pedagogical precautions towards them. Thus, the analysis of learner language has become an essential need to overcome some questions and propose solutions regarding different aspects. This study focuses on the types of error analysis and the frequency of their appearance in the learners' writings. Accordingly, the study aims to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the types of errors the ESL students make pertaining to number agreement in their writings?
2. How frequent do these errors occur in their English L2 written work?

There are internal and external factors that influence a learner's performance in a second language. Unlike previous studies which have paid more attention to diverse areas in error analysis, very little attention has been paid to the errors that are made due to number distinction. The findings can contribute to eliminate the errors learners make in relation to number distinction since the teachers can also be made aware of the types and patterns of errors in relation to number distinction which would encourage them to come up with new strategies for teaching. Further it's a clearly known fact that errors in writing can contribute to less number of pass rates in examinations and even less growth in both academic and professional fields. This is really a very alarming situation and everyone should pay attention to this grave problem. Having realized this big issue, this study explores the main reasons that caused the learners to make errors in relation to number agreement in English language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English is one of the mandatory subjects a student has to pass during various stages in tertiary education. English is considered as an international language which is more essential to be learnt by students. The importance of English Language is highly discussed with relevance to each and every subject. Based on the previous error analysis done, it can be identified that there are many issues and difficulties which can affect the errors learners make in relation to number distinction in English language. The present study deals with the errors committed by first year undergraduates of an institute providing tertiary education in Sri Lanka. It tries to explore the weak areas of students' language use in written form. It draws light on the importance of doing an error analysis-based on number distinction. It provides various strategies to the language teachers for using in language classrooms. This study would analyze different categories of errors in relation to number distinction committed by the first year students. It would focus on the frequency of the errors and would also make the students aware about the mistakes that they made in the process of language learning and would explore the underlying processes that are involved in language learning. The focus of this study is to identify the errors that learners make in applying agreement rules pertaining to number distinction and the frequency of the types of errors they make.

This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework in relation to error analysis. It discusses the theories presented by various scholars such as Skinner, Corder, Chomsky and Ellis. It also discusses the studies that have been done on error analysis based on Sri Lankan context. Further this chapter provides extensive details of the rules that come under the area of error analysis in English language.

In the past, the field of error analysis was highly influenced by the behaviorist learning theory of language, and the learner's errors were considered the result of the existence and interference of the rules of the first language. It was considered that language learning is a process of habit formation and once the habits of one language are being formed, they put resistance in learning the rules of the second and foreign language.

Behaviorist Approach

One of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition was provided by Skinner. As one of the pioneers of behaviorism, he accounted for language development by means of environmental influence. Skinner argued that children learn language based on behaviorist reinforcement principles by associating words with meanings (Skinner, 1976). Correct utterances are positively reinforced when the child realizes the communicative value of words and phrases.

Universal Grammar

However, Skinner's approach was soon heavily criticized by Noam Chomsky. In the spirit of cognitive revolution in the 1950's, Chomsky argued that children will never acquire the tools needed for processing an infinite number of sentences if the language acquisition mechanism was dependent on language input alone.

Consequently, he proposed the theory of Universal Grammar: an idea of innate, biological grammatical categories, such as a noun category and a verb category that facilitate the entire language development in children and overall language processing in adults (Chomsky, 2015). Universal Grammar is considered to contain all the grammatical information needed to combine these categories, e.g. noun and verb, into phrases.

Contrastive Analysis

The contrastive analysis was formed for understanding the errors committed by the learners in the light of the rules of both languages. On the basis of similarities of the rules of two languages, when there was a positive and constructive effect on the learning, it was considered the positive transfer, and on the basis of difference of rules, when there was resistance in language learning, it was considered the negative transfer (Ellis, 1994).

Teachers and linguists focused on contrastively analyzing two languages. And the errors of the learners were taken into account based on contrastive analysis of languages. However, the contrastive analysis could not define all the causes of the errors and it was realized that the process is not as simple as elaborated by contrastive analysis, rather there are various underlying processes

that are working behind the language learning. Language learning is a very complicated and complex phenomenon and error analysis is basically the linguistic analysis.

Evolution of Error Analysis

It was realized that the errors are not only the result of the interference of the mother tongue rather many other universal and underlying structures are responsible for the errors of the learners. The cognition of the learner and many other factors are responsible for the errors and mistakes of the learners. According to linguist Corder (1981), the following are the steps in any typical error analysis research:

1. Collecting samples of learner language
2. Identifying the errors
3. Describing the errors
4. Explaining the errors
5. Evaluating/ Correcting the errors

Corder distinguished two kinds of elicitation which are known as clinical and experimental elicitation. Clinical elicitation involves getting the informant to produce data of any sort, for example by means of general interview or writing a composition. Experimental elicitation involves the use of special instrument to elicit data containing the linguistic features such as a series of pictures which had been designed to elicit specific features.

Later on, Chomsky's nativist theory gave the new direction to the study of error analysis and language learning. According to that theory, language learning is not simply the process of habit formation rather there is a universal grammar and learners have the capacity of learning any language rules. This theory proposed that there are many cognitive processes that are involved in language learning. In this perspective, Corder points out that some of the learning techniques and strategies that are being used by the second and foreign language learners are the same as the learners of the first language used during the process of first language acquisition (Corder, as cited in Richards, 1971).

This is a brief overview of the area of error analysis. Now, the current study would take into account of all these reasons and causes of error analysis in relation to number distinction and would analyze the errors made by the first year undergraduates in National Institute of Business

Management, Kurunegala. This study attempts to throw light on the significance of identifying errors pertaining to number distinction that would be helpful in teaching and learning a second or a foreign language.

METHODOLOGY

This empirical study was conducted at National Institute of Business Management, Kurunegala with the sample of 30 students (both males and females). The researcher conducted two tests to gauge the levels of proficiency of English of the students and the errors that students make in relation to number distinction.

Then the researcher has done a quantitative analysis in each essay tracing errors they have done in terms of number distinction in their writing. The papers were analyzed separately and then compared and contrasted to see the similarities and differences of errors they had made. The main purpose of the research is to examine the reason as to identify the types of errors they make pertaining to number distinction and the most common errors the learners make out of them.

This chapter is mainly devoted to outline the research design and methodology applied in this study. The main aim of the study is to identify the writing errors the undergraduates make in relation to number distinction. Moreover, it is designed to identify the demands of the writing population, to address their language needs and requirements. And then the analysis is done in order to recognize their requirements. Finally, the researcher addresses them in a logical manner.

Total target population of this study was first year students following a management degree program at National Institute of Business Management, Kurunegala. The age range of the research sample was from 20 to 22. Among the thirty participants, 19 were females and 11 were boys and they all were from diverse social backgrounds ranging from Kurunegala to Anuradhapura.

Test Paper 01

The multiple choice question section consists of ten questions where the participants had to select the correct answer by underlining it from the choices of answers provided. The multiple choice question set was created with the intention of measuring the participants' understanding of the diverse aspects of grammar knowledge in English language.

The structure of the multiple choice question paper is given in Table 01.

Table 01: Structure of Test Paper 01 – Section 01

Question no.	Grammar Component
01	Indefinite Pronouns
02	Punctuations
03	Tenses
04	Adverbs
05	Tenses
06	Prepositions
07	Nouns
08	Phrases
09	Conditionals
10	prepositions

The section 02 of the test paper 01 was a writing task where the participants had to write paragraph containing 50-60 words. The task provided in the paper is mentioned below

Write a paragraph on one of the following topics in the space given below. (50-60 words)

- Facebook and younger generation
- Peace in Sri Lanka
- Education – is it necessary?
- Tele dramas in Sri Lanka

Test Paper 02

The test paper 02 was provided to the participants to identify the errors they make in English language in relation to number distinction and frequency of errors they make in relation to them.

The paper consisted of four sections and it has been described below.

- Section 01 – Multiple choice questions
- Section 02 – Essay writing
- Section 03 – Picture description

Section 01 – Multiple Choice Questions

The section 01 of the paper consisted of 14 multiple choice questions which have been created based on the rules that are available in English language in relation to number distinction.

Multiple choice questions are often called fixed choice, selected response or multiple choice items because they are not always questions, and they require students to select from among various options that are presented to them.

The structure of the multiple choice question paper is mentioned in Table 04. **Table**

02: Structure of Test Paper 02 – Section 01

Question no.	Grammar Component
01	Subject verb agreement
02	Use of 'and'
03	Collective nouns
04	Indefinite pronouns
05	Indefinite pronouns
06	Indefinite pronouns
07	Verb following the noun
08	Collective nouns
09	Collective nouns
10	Subject verb agreement
11	Quantity nouns
12	Relative pronouns
13	Proper nouns

Section 02 – Essay Writing

Essay questions require students to write answers to statements or questions. To complete a successful essay exam, one needs to be able to recall relevant information and to organize it in a clear way, generating a thesis and building to a conclusion.

The focus of this task provided in the paper was to identify the errors the learners make in relation to number distinction when they produce language in writing and how often these errors are made by them.

Section 03 –Picture Description

Picture Description allows the participants to describe a given picture with the use of their imagination. The focus of this task provided in the paper was to identify the errors the learners make in relation to number distinction when they produce language in writing and how often these errors are made by them.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. Although the present sample is sufficient for exploratory research, future research should aim for a large sample size. Because the findings of the research are limited to that particular area when it comes to small sample size.

Also the research was conducted basically based on students' perception. Therefore, it cannot be identified the way that teachers' perception regarding the particular research problem. Therefore, it can be suggested that future research should analyze the teachers' perception regarding above problem.

Furthermore, this study is based on one particular institution and its target group was taken from only one discipline and it will bring limited information to the reader and further research should pay more attention to have a larger sample size and it will be highly beneficial if the sample consists of learners from diverse disciplines.

Except these unavoidable limitations, other issues were attempted to be resolved with the expectation of deriving solid and accurate conclusion based on the sample.

ATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The participants were provided two test papers: the first paper was provided with the intention of identifying the error types students commit due to the violation of number agreement rules and the second paper was provided to identify the frequency of the errors relating to number agreement that occur in L2 writing of the study participants.

The proficiency test paper consisted of two sections : It included a set of multiple choice questions and paragraph writing. The results of the test paper 01 aided to find out the most commonly made error types due to number and those areas are subject verb agreement, the use of coordinating conjunction ‘and’, collective nouns, indefinite pronouns and relative pronouns.

The test paper II consisted of three types of questions such as multiple choice questions, picture description and essay writing. By analyzing the performance of participants, it was noted that their awareness in the usage of the conjunction ‘and’ is quite good since 90% of the participants were capable choosing the correct answer and further there were not any noticeable errors with the use of the conjunction ‘and’ in relation to number agreement in question no.2 and 3 where they had to produce language in written form.

However in relation to the use of different types of nouns according to the number agreement rules, it is clearly understandable that the participants’ understanding in the use of nouns is varied. For instance, in the section where multiple choice questions were provided, it was noted that 93% of the participants were able to choose the correct answer which indicates that majority of them have a fairly good knowledge on the use of plural nouns as a title where the verb is conjugated in the singular form. Nevertheless, only 16% was able to identify the correct use of relative pronoun and only 7% was able to select the appropriate form of the verb in relation to the number agreement of collective nouns. Further in the sections where the learners had to produce language, in the essay writing section, 60% of the errors were based on the use of nouns whereas in the section where they had to describe a picture, 24 % of the errors were made based on the use of nouns and it is important to note that all the errors made in relation to the use of nouns in number agreement have

been based on the use of indefinite pronouns. Further as a whole, 76% of the errors have been made in relation to the subject verb agreement errors in the picture description section and 32% of the errors in the essay section have been made due to subject verb agreement errors as well.

CONCLUSION

In second language teaching and learning, errors tend to be viewed negatively. Errors are usually considered to be a sign of inadequacy of the teaching and learning. However, it is now generally accepted that error making is a necessary section of learning and language teachers should use the errors with a view of improving teaching.

This study identified errors in the participants' written work, but did not stipulate reasons why these errors were made. My first recommendation is that this study be extended to investigating the origin of certain error patterns found in L2 written work.

This study also did not look into the areas that discuss the strategies the learners use to acquire and learn L2. Thus, in order to learn more about L2 writers' usage of language I would recommend that further research be conducted in this area

Finally, I concede that research of this nature is on-going and therefore no definite conclusions can be made because teaching and learning are both complex processes. While the results of the present study have given an insight into what types of errors are made by different participants and their frequency of occurrence, the findings can only be considered as suggestive and I am hopeful that the findings would benefit both the learners and the world of academia.

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