Error Analysis in Fifth-semester Students' Written Texts *

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Abstract

This article reports the results of a qualitative research study, embedded in a classroom action research method carried out at a public University in Tunja. This research study aimed to characterize and describe fifth semester students´ errors in written texts. The research question that guided the research study was what do fifth semester students´ written texts reveal about the writing process? The findings showed that students make errors of omission, verb conjugation, and spelling in writing, but this type of errors does not necessarily affect meaning; the reader can understand what the learner wanted to express. Likewise, it let researchers notice the importance of teacher's English level in order to correct students' mistakes and provide meaningful feedback. Furthermore, it revealed that the student's level, by means of receiving appropriate feedback, moved forward and let students understand the nature of their error in writing.

Key words: error analysis, written texts, second language learning.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de investigación cualitativa, enmarcado dentro de un método de investigación acción en el aula, llevado a cabo en una universidad pública en Tunja. Este estudio de investigación tuvo como objetivo caracterizar y describir los errores encontrados en los textos escritos por estudiantes de quinto semestre. La pregunta de investigación que guió el estudio en mención fue la siguiente: ¿qué revelan los textos escritos por estudiantes de quinto semestre, en relación con el proceso escritural? Los resultados mostraron que los estudiantes tienen errores de omisión, conjugación verbal y deletreo, pero este tipo de errores no necesariamente afectan el significado; el lector puede entender lo que el alumno quiere expresar. Del mismo modo, permitió que los investigadores se dieran cuenta de la importancia que tiene el nivel de inglés de los maestros, con el fin de corregir los errores de los estudiantes y proporcionar realimentación significativa. Además, se concluyó que el nivel de lengua de los estudiantes, mediante la recepción de realimentación apropiada, avanzó y del mismo modo, permitió que los estudiantes comprendieran la naturaleza de sus errores en la escritura.

Palabras clave: análisis de errores, textos escritos, aprendizaje de un segundo idioma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, learning a foreign or second language has become a commonplace and vital issue in the life of human beings. Therefore, improving and developing all language skills is necessary. Sometimes, there is a disparity in terms of the language level among students in a course. From this, some students have certain strengths and weaknesses regarding language skills. Through conversations and students artifacts, it was found that students have some difficulties when writing. In some cases, students struggle a lot when expressing complete ideas or writing them within a grammatical acceptability. Then, the nature of this study is focused on the skill of writing.

In the same line of thought, feedback plays an important role in the learning process. In order to move forward in terms of any of the language skills, receiving feedback is a crucial aspect. In this sense, having in mind the experience regarding language learning, we can state that errors are highly produced because of the lack of feedback. At beginning levels students are more likely to make errors, but the feedback provided by professors is meaningful to the extent that the student takes advantage of it. Hence, autonomous learning is a crucial aspect that prevents learners from making errors because learners overcome the gap related to the scarcity of knowledge. In general, at the beginning of the learning process, the majority of mistakes are made not only in production, but in comprehension. Then, some types of errors and mistakes are overcome with experience and exposure to language practice.

Sometimes, teachers focus their attention on identifying student's errors in order to provide feedback to achieve some advancement, but the positive comments are ignored or even not considered at all. From this, the nature of the errors is not analyzed in depth. In this study, we aim to provide feedback on the identified errors, and at the same time, highlight student's success. Similarly, error correction may be the most important component that contributes to their success as writers (Ferris, 2003). It is in that sense that the field of second language (L2) learning is broad and has been a fertile field for researchers. Error analysis in particular is one of the aspects of L2 learning processes that have received much attention from researchers regarding global contexts, but it is necessary to approach this topic in a more local one. Hence, this research study focuses on fifth semester students at a public university. There, students have an intermediate English language level, but they have some difficulties when writing academic papers. In this sense, this study will contribute to students in the way that once they realize, analyze, and discover the nature of the errors they make, they will correct them and improve their writing skills.

In addition, this study aims to contribute to teaching and learning practices regarding English as a foreign language. In this sense, this study focuses not only on identifying the type of errors students make in written texts, but also on the reasons behind those errors. The later aspect is a tool not only to raise awareness regarding the writing process, but also to find opportunities to overcome the affecting factors. In this sense, Lightbown and Spada (2000) argue that when errors are persistent, especially when they are shared by almost all students in a class, it is useful for teachers to bring the problem to the students´ attention. Throughout the development and implementation of this research study, it is one of the target objectives to fulfill.

Likewise, Corder (1974) notes that Error Analysis (EA) is useful in second or foreign language learning because it reveals the problem areas to teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers because errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. Thus, it not only helps students, but professors in the sense of reflecting and acting upon the teaching and learning process. From this, professors are more aware of the importance of providing meaningful feedback as it was mentioned before and Xie and Jiang (2007) affirm that students' errors are valuable feedbacks to professors. In this sense, this study seeks to inform teachers and students about the most frequent and recurrent mistakes made by students when writing.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

What do fifth semester students' written texts reveal about the writing process?

3. OBJECTIVES

3.1. General Objective

To describe what students' written texts reveal about errors regarding the writing skill as a process.

3.2 Specific Objectives

To identify the errors made by students in written texts.

To analyze the nature of identified errors in the written texts.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we will describe some supporting theories and studies related to the underpinning constructs set up in this current investigation. The theories will include the theoretical constructs that support and provide the basis of this research study. The first one entails some theories regarding second language acquisition. The second one encompasses what an error is. This includes a concept, some types of errors, and methodologies to analyse errors. The last one is related to the writing skill.

4.1 Second Language Acquisition

Acquiring a second language it implies that people are exposed to the formation of habits. From a psychological perspective it accounts for learning any kind of behavior on the notions of stimulus and response (Ellis, 1994; Mitchell & miles, 2004). Hence, a person repeats this behavior as output of a stimulus, which will lead to the formation of habits, the way to learn the language is first through the imitation and the repetition and the learners follow the same structure time after time. In this sense, it is crucial to develop different written tasks in order to acquire the habit of writing, and thus, enhance such skill. According to Chomsky (1959) learners create new sentences that they have never learned before and they are able to create new sentences by internalizing rules rather than a string of words. Therefore, the writing process requires the learner to internalize some rules in order to achieve grammatical and acceptable statements. Then, the more the learner writes, the better way the rules are appropriately used.

Krashen's model consists of five hypotheses that we only take into account with writing. The first hypothesis is the acquisition and language learning. Language acquisition takes place when children unconsciously absorb their first language and this happened during earlier stages of their language development. Then, language is utilized for real communication. Hence, language learning happens during the process in which students study the rules of the target language. According to Krashen (1984), Leki, (1992) the distinction between acquiring and learning a language suggests that the students ability to write fluently and accurately is acquired through exposure to the texts in a natural process of communication rather than through studying grammatical and syntactic rules of the language. It implies that through practice it is that writing skills can be enhanced.

The monitor hypothesis asserts that the rules a student learns contribute very little to the other's language ability because language rules are primarily used to facilitate the student's language output and comprehensible input. Consequently, Major (1988) says that those who neglect the importance of grammatical competence tend to ignore errors completely as long as students' written

output is comprehensible. This is because students often produce communicative, but grammatically incorrect sentences. From this, the purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of grammatical competence in written texts. In such a way, the importance is presented by means of meaningful feedback.

Subsequently, Culmmins (1979) distinguishes between two language acquisitions: Basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language. The first one entails the language that students acquire easily, particularly through immersion within an environment where they can interact with native speakers on a daily basis. The second one accounts for the basis regarding student´s ability to handle various academic demands, in this case, writing skill demands. Krashen (1982) states that basic interpersonal communicative skills are acquired through the immersion within the second language environment and for cognitive academic language, it is developed by studying grammar rules through formal language instruction, but through practical activities.

4.2 Errors in language learning

Regarding the term "error", Ellis (1994) points out that error is an incorrect language form produced in the target language that has been learned incorrectly and leads to misunderstanding of concepts. This type of incorrect production exists in all language skills. In this case, the errors are going to be identified, analysed and described regarding written production. Likewise, Cunningsworth (1987) concurs that "errors are systematic deviations from the norms of the language being learned" p. 87. Gass and Selinker (2001) complement the previous definition and state that errors as "red flags" p. 67. It means they are warning signals that provide evidence of the learner´s knowledge of the L2. In this sense, identifying errors and providing feedback is a process that helps students overcome those language learning difficulties, and in this particular case, the ones regarding the writing skill.

Regarding the aforementioned aspects, Kwok (1998) asserts that "language errors provide important information about the progress, or language system, of the learner" p. 12. Learning is a process that requires to be assessed. Then, through error-making and error-correction is that students

can advance in the target language. Correcting errors has to deal with the fact of understanding their nature in depth. In so doing, Nation and Newton (2001) posit that correcting error is done if there is some understanding of why the error occurred, thus error analysis is the study of errors to see what processes gave rise to them.

In the same line of thought, Richards and Schmidt (2002) state that in language learning, learners´ errors are caused by several different processes that include: borrowing patterns from the mother tongue; extending patterns from the target language; and expressing meanings using the words and grammar which are already known. The aforementioned causes are strongly related to interference, overgeneralization, and fossilization. Hence, Ellis (1996) states that overgeneralization errors occur when learners yield deviant structures based on other structures of the target language, while ignorance of rule restrictions refers to the application of rules to inappropriate contexts. Likewise, Ellis (1996) further claims that "incomplete application of rules arises when learners fail to develop a structure fully, while false concepts hypothesized occur when learners do not completely understand a distinction in the target language" p. 710.

Having in mind the classification of errors, Ellis (1996) and Brown (2002) differentiate between covert and overt errors. They define covert errors to be grammatically correct but not interpretable within the context of communication, whereas overt errors refer to the obviously ungrammatical utterances. Equally, Errors can also be classified as interlingual or intralingual (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Interlingual errors can be identified as transfer errors which result from a learner´s first language feature, for example, grammatical, lexical or pragmatic errors. On the other hand, intralingual errors are overgeneralizations in the target language, resulting from ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete applications of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Each one of the aforementioned aspects regarding the classification of errors is going to be followed by this study in order to provide solid and supported results.

In this line of thought, there is method to carry out research studies as this one. Hence, Error analysis (EA) examines errors made by L2 learners and Richards and Schmidt (2002) define it as "The study and analysis of the errors made by second language

learners" p. 184. Additionally, Corder (1967) was the first to advocate the importance of studying errors in student writing. Thereby, while exploring some research studies, it was found that there are three different approaches to the analysis of errors made by learners of the English language. Swam and Smith (1995) name them as contrastive analysis, error analysis, and transfer analysis.

Regarding the three approaches mentioned above, Okuma (2000, cited in Xiaofei, 2004, p. 1) notes that these approaches differ in focus. Contrastive analysis compares the structures of two language systems and predicts errors. Transfer analysis, on the other hand, compares "learner English" with L1 and attempts to explain the structure of those errors that can be traced to language transfer (Xiaofei, 2004, p. 1). Error analysis compares "learner English" with English (L2) itself and judges how learners are "ignorant" (James, 1998). From this, the present study focuses on Error Analysis.

In addition, it was found in some research studies that error analysis can be used to enhance writing skills. Hence, there is a research study carried out by Mungungu (2010) which was focused on errors made by second language learners in written papers. The purpose of the study was to identify, analyze, and describe the errors that students from three different ethnic groups whose languages were totally different from each other. The author arrived at the conclusion that many different errors that were classified within vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. Once students were provided with feedback in different sessions, they could improve their writing skill. This study contributes to the current one in the sense that it provides some insights in order to carry out Error Analysis Methodologies in writing.

4.3 Writing skill

Byrne (1988 cited in Ochoa, D., & Medina Peña, N. 2011, p. 65) states that "writing refers to the production of graphic symbols which have to be arranged, according to certain conventions to form words, and words have to be arranged to form sentences" (p. 98). Hyland (2003 cited in Ochoa, D., & Medina Peña, N. 2011, p. 65, p. 11) identifies writing as a process rather than a product. That is why writing constitutes a whole process of connecting specific elements to build a complete text in order to communicate.

According to Troyka and Hesse (2009) writers require a combination of several elements such as topic, purpose, audience, role (as a writer), and context and special requirements". Those elements provide the reader with an understandable view about the text and the writers can organize their written reports. Now in the following section we will explain the different purposes in writing.

The first purpose is to express yourself or build connections with others. It refers to writers' feelings, thoughts, and opinions that express through the diaries; personal journals, or exploratory drafts, social networks (facebook, blogs or mails, among others). This type of purpose is less used in academic writing.

The second goal is to inform the reader. According to Troyka and Hesse (2009) the writer has to provide clear information and explain it to reader. It is sometimes called expository writing. The types of written papers are textbooks, encyclopedias, technical and business reports, manuals, nonfiction books, newspapers, and many magazines. The purpose is to educate the reader. The characteristics imply clearness, accuracy, completeness. The third one is to persuade a reader. It is also called argumentative writing which is the most common academic writing. This seeks to change the perspective of the reader through different opinions in a variety of topics. It characterizes for being clear and logic.

Diagram No 1
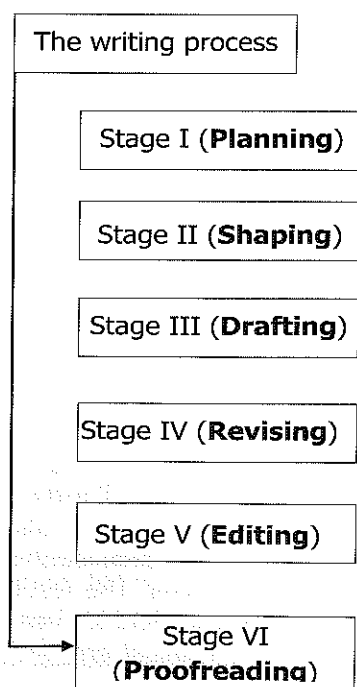### based on Troyka and Hesse created by the researchers
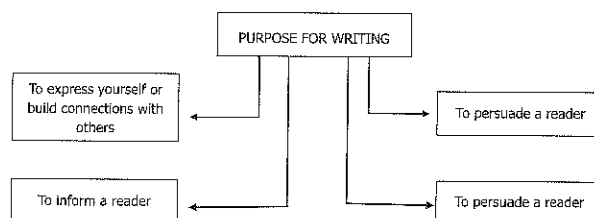
4.4 The writing process

Hyland's propose (2003, cited in Díaz, 2014, p. 34) recognized models for implementing the writing process in the classroom. Osbima and Hozue proposed the aforementioned stages.

The first stage is planning which means discovering and compiling ideas for the writing. In this part a topic is selected either by teachers or students. After that, writers begin the prewriting through brainstorming, collecting data, note taking, outlining through this process writers compose and get the ideas on the paper. In the second stage organizes the ideas. In the third stage is to write the ideas into sentences and paragraphs. In the fourth stage is revising which means evaluating your draft by teacher or peer assessment of ideas, rewriting by adding, deleting, rewording, rearranging and adjusting to the audience. In the fifth stage respond to edited which means checking and correcting the form, grammar, spelling, punctuation and the layout. Finally, the proofreading which means reading the final copy to eliminate typing or handwriting errors and publishing by class presentation, websites etc.

The writing process promotes meaningful learning by making learners more aware of cognitive processes as a central activity in writing as well as "stressing the need to develop students' abilities to plan, define a rhetorical problem, propose and evaluate solutions and produce" (Hyland, 2003, p. 10).

Diagram No 2
Based on Osbima & Hozue and created by researchers

The writing process

Stage I (**Planning**)

Stage II (**Shaping**)

Stage III (**Drafting**)

Stage IV (**Revising**)

Stage V (**Editing**)

Stage VI
(**Proofreading**)

Related to Error Analysis in writing skill we can support the importance of this factor with the investigation by Khansir (2013) who compared and examined types of written errors by EFL and ESL learners at under graduate level in English Language. The article concluded that students problems are relate to teaching and learning strategies, the student's interference in the mother tongue and the lack of knowledge in the target language. In addition, author suggested students 'practice in order to acquire a writing level. Taking into account the investigation above, this study contributes to the current one to raise awareness in the causes of Errors in writing skill.

5. METHODOLOGY

This Project is enclosed within a qualitative approach and in a classroom action research method. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), "the word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on the process and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (p. 10). Additionally, qualitative research allows the researcher to be involved at the inner experience of participants and some the questions posted for researchers can only be answered through qualitative research (Strauss and Corbin, 2008).

We borrow from, and paraphrase Nelson´s et al. (1992), as cited in Denzin and Lincoln (2005), definition of qualitative research. It is as an interdisciplinary, trans disciplinary, and counter disciplinary field. Furthermore, it is many things at the same time. The practitioners are concerned in the naturalistic perspective and about the interpretive understanding of human experience. Likewise, the work of qualitative scholars is defined as unscientific and it is rather exploratory or subjective. It is named as criticism rather than theory or science and its researchers are interested with the individual´s point of view.

The analysis of errors in this study is informed by various researches on errors in student writing (Hubbard, Jones, Thornton & Wheeler, 1996: 135-141; Ellis, 1997:15-20 and Gas & Selinker, 2001:67). Firstly, the selection of a corpus of language was done and secondly the identification of errors. Next, we classified the errors according to their grammatical features.

6. FINDINGS

Once we gathered the data by means of field notes and students' artifacts, we identified, analyzed and described the errors that were found in the written texts. Then, we set three categories that respond to the research question we had set at the beginning.

6.1 Do not write that word in that way. It is not correct.

The writing process implies a set of components in order to communicate ideas, feelings, emotions, and thoughts. One of them has to do with spelling. This aspect is very crucial in writing because it allows you to express exactly what you wanted, or it just prevents you from effective and accurate written transactions. This type of mistake in writing was one of the most frequent in students' artifacts.

*I think that war was like the main thematic, so it was evident among the movie in all the battles that the **romanes** had with the other **armys**. S2*

"...because the Warriors did not have the **posibility**.." S2

Based on the first excerpt, we can state that when the student writes "romanes", it is because first language is affecting writing in a foreign one. Then, it might be related to interference in terms of spelling. The second error in terms of spelling, it is related to overgeneralization because the student might think that all words ending in "y" require a "s" to form plural ways. Similarly, the student might be not aware of some changes when writing in a foreign language. As the word possibility in English is quite similar to the one in Spanish, interference might be a factor that can support the nature of this spelling mistake. In this sense, Mugungu (2010) highlight the importance in analyzing spelling errors in writing because they belong to semantic and substance in the text.

6.2 Learning to write the appropriate word by practicing

When you are acquiring a second language you can make some errors at the moment to acquire new vocabulary because when a learner tries recall and use the vocabulary that has been acquired previously, she or he starts to create new sentences or expressions and the learner had not used ever

before. The most common errors students in fifth semester usually make are related to spelling, prepositions, collocations, word choice, verb conjugation, among others..

The following excerpts show what has been said.

"if we are told we can't recovery" S1

It is an error in parts of speech, specially, regarding word choice. It happens when the learner changes the words like a noun for a verb. "Recovery" is a noun but "recover" is a verb. In our project we can see that example in Student 1's writing he used a word that is not suitable in to express what wanted..

Redundancies, where the students repeat or use unnecessary words in the same sentences, some of them appear after or before the main word. An example is found in Student 1's text in the paragraph three, line 8 where he used the article *the* after the word people and in this case it is unnecessary.

"The people have the freedom" S1

The latter excerpt is related to the fact of making Intralingual Errors. This type of errors account for learners' incomplete or wrong understanding of the target language rules. Since the students' Spanish knowledge is limited, when they try to generalize some language rules too much or too little, they are usually affected by intralingual factors and interference of mother tongue. We can notice that students cope with interference factors when they write their texts. An example was found when a student unnecessarily used the word *about* in English. I this case, the knowledge he has regarding his mother tongue is causing certain interferences when expressing his ideas in the target language.

"but Arthur knew about the mission was a insane mission" S2

6.3 Do not go fast, pay attention to your writing

This category describes and explains the writing errors that emerged from students' texts. The data were identified and classified in grammatical errors into errors in the use of tenses, prepositions, articles, active voice in the sentences. The results of the analysis of the grammatical errors showed the most and less common grammatical errors that were made during the texts.

The most common type of error identified in the students' texts was the exclusion of the verb. Corder (1974) pointed out that this type of error is called Error of omission. It means that student has left out the word. The following example evidences what has been said.

"*They not equality in all*" S4

In the previous excerpt, it is shown an error of verb omission was made. In this sense, Corder (1974) describes this type of error as post systematic. He explained that a learner knows the correct target language rule, but he uses it inconsistently. In the same line of thought, Richards (1971) explained that it occurs as a result of the use of elements from one language while speaking another (p. 58). In this sentences student translated as he thought in L1.

Another variable in error is the missing word. In this case, student made Errors in different sentences in the paragraph. The student omitted verbs, prepositions, articles, among others. In consequence, it was evidenced error regarding omission as well as wrong verb conjugation and spelling. It is important to mention that they made some error in terms of verb-conjugation, but it did not affect the meaning of the sentence.

"*There are a lot of aspects that deserves be mentioned like the Church's role*" S5

In the latter example, S5 omitted *to* and added *s* in the verb. In this case, it evidences derivation in correctness which means that students do not use the correct structure in the target language. At the same time, it has to deal with the overt type of error because the derivation that student did in form is clearly to identify.

Other variable in error is related to the form and meaning. In this case, students evidenced errors at different levels. The student omitted personal pronouns before some verbs. It is important to mention that the meaning of the sentence is affected by word order and punctuation.

"*probably in that moment the war was something very common, but nowadays I think is considered an issue, and is present in a lot of places all around the world*" S6

The previous excerpt evidences that students need either change the comma or use a connector in order to make sense in the sentence. Sometimes, a learner knows the correct target language rule but uses it inconsistently. Furthermore, it is classified as a covert and overt type of error because of the form and use the language in context. In this case, one reason of the student's trouble is the Interference because he wanted to express his idea in L2 and he wrote as he states it in L1.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The student's level revealed that they need to find the style in writing. Most of them evidenced that they know in L1 what to express, but their organization of the ideas in L1 is presented with difficulty and error in L2. In consequence, they fact of making mistakes was very repetitive in their written texts. Furthermore, the omission of the words did not affect the meaning; the reader can understand what they want to say, but is terms of writing it is an error that must be avoided.

Students through their written texts, evidenced aspects of interference of mother tongue when expressing their ideas in a second language, but at the same time, they did not let the different type of errors affect the expression of the ideas they wanted to portray in their written production.

8. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As most research methods, error analysis also has its drawbacks. The majority of teachers of English are non-native speakers in this specific context: a public university in Colombia. In this sense, English is not their first language, but they speak it as a second one. Consequently, there is a likelihood of ESL teachers using some wrong aspects of the English language. In the same way, It is difficult to analyze every piece of information in written texts because there are many aspects to look at in depth. It is because writing accounts for many language aspects in order to set messages (many grammatical categories, sub -competences of communicative competence, among others).

The implementation of correction errors in the teacher's classroom as a strategy of the class is very essential because it helps students to be aware

about errors in writing and the reason why they are making them. In addition, giving students an appropriate correction and feedback in writing can reduce the number of errors because sometimes students need help from their teachers to identify and understand the nature of making errors in their written texts.

In this sense, Harmer (1998) states that correction helps students clarify their understanding and feedback regarding the written production in a second language. Thus, The teacher should use appropriate techniques and look for the best way to make correction avoiding that students get bored or demotivated about the use of the second language. Error correction and feedback are vital components that a teacher needs to master in the classroom.

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