

**ANALYSIS OF ERRORS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH OF IGBO-SPEAKING SENIOR SECONDARY
TWO STUDENTS IN OWERRI EDUCATIONAL ZONE**

BY

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Abstract

The persistent poor performance of Nigerian secondary school students in internal and external English language examinations which hinders achievement of individual academic goals and national development motivated the researcher to carry out this study. This study concerned itself with the analysis of errors in the written English of Igbo-speaking SS II students in Owerri Educational Zone. The study was guided by two objectives, two research questions and two hypotheses. The study employed mixed research design and the sample comprised of 300 students drawn from six secondary schools in the Orlu/Oguta, Owerri, and Okigwe zones in the study area. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and t-test. The findings indicated that the students had problems in almost all the areas tested such as concord, spelling, pluralisation, punctuation, tense and others. Based on the findings of the study, students should be exposed to the English language through extensive reading and involvement in co-curricular activities; and teachers should use the corpus of students' error as a teaching device.

Keywords: *Errors, Written English, Igbo-speaking*

Introduction

One of the most demanding tasks that educators face is how to prepare their students to compete successfully in today's world. The world is changing rapidly, and students need to be equipped with specific skills tailored to meet the demands of globalisation. One of the critical 21st century skills that challenge various levels of interaction and information sharing is reflected in the area of communication. As a sub-skill of communication, the ability to express oneself fluently and accurately in writing remains the bedrock of one's personal and professional life. Technology has changed the way people communicate because of digital media. However, there are still many contexts in which a piece of writing must be assessed as part of the writer's competence to move on to another level of academic career, for example, writing will be viewed as an evaluation of mastery of the language; thus a great emphasis must be placed on identifying and remedying areas which need to be strengthened to acquire the necessary proficiency.

One of the marks of being an educated person in Nigeria is the ability to communicate in the English language with a great deal of competence. Accordingly, a credit pass in English is the principal criterion for admission into tertiary educational institutions and employment into the public service. It is also critical factor in international business and diplomacy where both oral and written communications are of utmost importance. However, despite the vital role English plays educationally, economically and politically, the performance of Nigerian students continues to be poor; a state of affairs which has worried stakeholders including examination bodies in the country. Recent statistics obtained from the West African Examination Council (WAEC) chief examiner revealed a dwindling pass rate of between 31.28% and 38.68% between 2014 and 2015 (Chidi-Onwuta and Ndimele, 2015), which is poor, a situation which did not change significantly in 2019 when this study was being undertaken. The situation appears to be worse in the Southeast Geopolitical zone where Igbo is the mother tongue (L1). In Imo State, one of the states in the zone, some schools are known to have recorded

alarming failure rates of 80 – 85% (Imo Coalition for Qualitative Education Newsletter, 2013 in Chidi-Onwuta and Ndimele, 2015).

The dismal performance of Nigerian secondary school students referred to earlier has attracted uncomplimentary mention in two World Bank Reports – 2001 and 2004. The 2001 report decries the deterioration of the average Nigerian graduate's skills in two vital areas, English language and technical skill, which render him/her unproductive and unfit for the labour market. The 2004 report which focused on the revitalization of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nigeria through a joint National Teachers' Institute (NTI) – British Council project, stated categorically that the performance of Nigerian students in English is poor. The report further revealed that Nigerian students performed worse than their counterparts in twenty-six other African countries. The 2004 Report specifically noted that achievement in English nationwide for primary school pupil was 25.2% and that secondary school credit pass average was less than 15% over the years (World Bank Report, 2001, 2004). A major disturbing consequence of incompetence in the English language is that Nigeria is not likely to have enough of the indigenous literate workforce that will actualize national development in the country. This is due to the fact that the country needs an educated population competent in the English language to be able to participate actively in the globalization process. It is, therefore, imperative that research efforts should be directed towards reversing underachievement in English.

In the light of the preceding discourse, this investigation set out to analyse errors in the written English of Igbo-speaking senior secondary II students. The choice of this type of investigation is informed by the fact that written English has a far-reaching relevance to academic activities and communication at the national and international levels. Thus it is in recognition of writing as a cognitive activity that students must possess the linguistic skill to enable them produce a wide range of texts for a variety of purposes across a range of communicative functions in globalized environment. The aim of the study was to analyse errors in the written English of Igbo-speaking senior secondary two students in Owerri Educational Zone. It set out to achieve two specific objectives:

- i. To determine the type of errors that are prominent in the written English of SS II Igbo-speaking students.
- ii. To determine the extent to which these errors are attributable to the system of L2 (English).

The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What error types are prominent in the written English of Igbo SS II learners?
2. How much of these errors are attributable to the system of L2?

The study formulated two hypotheses (tested at 0.05 level of significance) to direct it:

- 1) There is no significant relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking students' types of error and their performance in English,
- 2) There is no significant relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking students' errors and the system of second language (L2).

Literature Review

English language teaching has undergone many changes in the last forty years. This is evidence of the concern for a viable approach to ensure success in the teaching and learning of the language. In addition, one notes that the goals of acquiring English have changed from being a language of acquiring privileged status in society to being the language of a globalized community in which technology plays a key role. In the 70's, Chomsky's theories of language emphasized linguistic competence and performance, and so the teaching of writing followed strict patterns of familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and then free writing. The teaching and learning of the writing processes were teacher-centred and aimed at avoiding errors and developing correct writing habits (Richards, 2002). Error analysis came to the forefront at this time because it offered some unique advantages. It could be used as a basis for determining the kinds of errors students were making with a view to creating a needs analysis towards remedying these errors.

While it must be acknowledged that errors occur because of interference or transfer according to the contrastive analysis hypothesis, other sources of errors exist, according to the error analysis paradigm. Richard (1971) suggests three broad categories namely: Interlingual, Intralingual and Developmental errors. Keshavarz (2012) defines intralingual and developmental errors as “errors caused by the mutual interference of items in the target language, i.e. the influence of one target language item upon another”. To him, intralingual and developmental errors are the same. In a similar vein, Tomlinson and Ellis (1988) listed eight error causes that are relevant to this investigation including faulty modelling of an item by the teacher; poor teaching; interference in the learning process by the systems of the learner’s L1; mistranslation from the target language to the L1 and vice versa; false assumptions based on knowledge of the target language; exposure to common errors at school, home and from the mass media; attempting to use items which have not been taught and using items which have been learned but forgotten as a result of infrequent need to use them. The authors submit that some learners are often affected by these factors from a very early stage. The significance of the Tomlinson and Ellis category is to emphasize that ESL errors are not solely caused by L1 interference.

In the late 80’s, research focused on the more popular learner-centred theories which focused on communicativeness of expression and paid attention to fluency at the expense of accuracy (Allerton, 1990). This approach focused on the process of writing in which the purpose of the writing was clearly determined; the audience, information gathering, organization of ideas, the opportunity to write, edit and review first and second drafts before turning in the writing, were also given attention. This writing process had the uniqueness of being collaborative, emphasizing the fact that students could effectively learn from each other. This writing method which gained popularity during the 90’s relegated error analysis to the background. However, the new method still did not solve the problem of poor performance which Nigerian students were still experiencing in their English language examinations. Therefore, other factors still had to be carefully investigated. One of such factor is the linguistic mismatch hypothesis (UNESCO, 1953) which states that a mismatch between the language of the home and the language of education leads to academic retardation. UNESCO, quoted in Ngara (1982), argued that it is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his/her mother tongue. However, while MacNamara’s (1967) research on bilingualism in Irish primary schools and Fafunwa’s (1970 – 75) Ife Six-year Primary Project support the hypothesis, Cumming’s (1982) exposes its inadequacies noting that the success of immersion programmes in Canada, US and Ireland are clearly inconsistent with the perspective of the hypothesis.

Other immediate suggestions like the lack of adequately trained teachers, inadequate facilities, large class sizes and dysfunctional school calendar are easily cited as being substantially contributory to a situation where little effective teaching and learning happen. However, Tollefson (1991) posits that “inadequate language competence is not due to poor texts and materials, learner’s low motivation, or inadequate learning theories and teaching methodologies as commonly believed. Instead, language competence remains a criterion to employment, further education and economic wellbeing as a result of political forces, as well as social and economic systems which require certain kinds of language competence. Tollefson’s view resonates largely with the ESL context in Nigeria where access to quality primary and secondary education is determined by such variables as socio-economic status, gender, and location of schools. The students who cannot attend adequately resourced schools are bound to be woefully deficient in written and spoken English and are therefore denied access to higher education and job opportunities.

It is note-worthy to recognize that in search for newer perspectives and approaches to teaching writing, error analysis was not left out (Adogwa, 1992). As a matter of fact, when it came to teaching English as a second language, the immediate thinking was that regarding language acquisition, areas of contrast between both first and second languages were likely to pose problems for the learner. An error analysis (EA) should, therefore, be the first point of call for any serious researcher to have an idea of his/her students’ areas of weakness in the language. Error analysis is the road map for remedying linguistic deficiencies towards the production of a fluent and grammatically accurate piece of writing by the student for whom English is a second language (Adetuyibi, 1994).

Theoretical Framework

Learning theories serve as the basis of this study and they are concerned with general methods of learning in the society. Among these theories and in line with the objectives of this study, the study adopted the Error Analysis Theory as its theoretical basis. Error analysis was first propounded by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the late 70's and it immediately became a popular approach for describing L2 errors. EA theory came up as a result of the criticisms which Contrastive Analysis (CA) received. It mainly focuses on actual errors that foreign language (L2) learners make. The concern of EA is determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language (James, 1998). According to Dulay et al (1982) in Al-Khreshah (2016), EA serves two main purposes: the first is to "provide data from which interferences in the nature of the language learning process can be made" and the second indicates to researchers and curriculum developers which part of the target language (TL) students have most difficulty producing correctly and which error types detract most from a learner's ability to communicate. Since nobody learns language without "goofing" (Yankson in Mbaeze, 2012), error analysis can be used to determine what a learner still needs to be taught as it provides the necessary information about what is lacking in the learner's competence.

Methodology

Although English is the language of education from primary to the tertiary level in Nigeria, it is not widely used by indigenous population as the language of the home. Therefore, second language teaching aims at preparing the learner for full participation in a different social group or in some language community other than his/her own. Faulty and unacceptable language prevents the learner from communicating effectively with members of that language community. This study intended to address such challenges by analysing errors in written English among learners of English as L2. To achieve this, the study adopted the mixed research design which can equally be referred to as a mixed method design. It is characterised by a combination of at least one qualitative and quantitative research design method where the researcher collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study, which is, using numeric and narrative data and analysis (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2007 in Chidi-Onwuta and Ndimele, 2015). Mixed method is really about heightened knowledge and validity. The ex post facto, as one of the research design is a method in which groups with qualities that already exist are compared on some dependent variables. Known also as "after the fact", ex post facto design is considered quasi experimental because the subjects are not randomly assigned; rather, they are grouped based on characteristics or traits. It is considered ideal for conducting social research when it is not possible to manipulate the characteristics of human participants (Simon and Goes, 2011). To further strengthen the causal characteristics of this study, a survey design was also carried out on other significant individuals particularly the ESL teachers directly related to the research.

A total of 6,164 senior secondary two (SS II) students of Igbo speaking extraction drawn from 365 secondary schools across the three geopolitical zones (Orlu/Oguta, Owerri, and Okigwe) in Imo State constituted the population of the study. Sample for the study was drawn from six schools in Owerri zone – three from the urban area and three from the rural area – using stratified sampling technique. Specifically, the proportional stratified random sampling was used in the selection of the sample. Using an online sample size calculator tool provided by CheckMarket (n.d), it was determined that a sample size of 300 students would produce a margin of error of 4.58% at a 95% confidence level.

Table 1: The Study Sampling Grid

Schools	Population of Students			Sample of Students		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Urban Schools:						
Emmanuel College, Owerri	334	-	334	50	-	50
Imo Girls Sec. Sch., Owerri	-	121	121	-	50	50
Young Scientists College, Owerri	67	87	154	29	21	50
Urban Total	401	208	609	79	71	150
Rural Schools:						

Emekuku High School	49	-	49	24	26	50
Emii Sec. Tech. Sch.	46	35	81	26	24	50
Obube Compr. Sec. Sch., Egbelu	71	59	130	21	29	50
Rural Total	166	94	260	71	79	150
Sum Total	567	302	869	150	150	300

Source: Field Data, 2022

To achieve the objectives of the study, data were collected through an English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT); an instrument designed by the researcher and adapted from 2000 WASSCE for May/June comprising 400 words composition on a topic related to letter writing which was within the students' competence. Diagnostic test dominated the instrument since the focus of the study was to identify learners' errors and use these errors as the basis for making suggestions for language policy implementation. Pilot study was conducted by the researcher to ascertain the effectiveness, relevance and usefulness of the instrument before the main study while experts in language teaching and testing as well as in research methodology carried out the face and content validity of the instrument. The instrument was administered to all the sampled students by the researcher and research assistants under strict examination conditions. Frequency counts, percentages, ranking and Chi-square were the statistical techniques deployed to analyse the data – research questions and test hypotheses formulated. Percentages were used to ascertain variations in the errors made across the two proficiency levels while ranking was used to place each error group in order of difficulty. Chi-square was used to determine whether there were significant differences in the errors made across the two proficiency levels and whether the two kinds of tests affected the frequency of errors made in them.

Results

Research Question 1

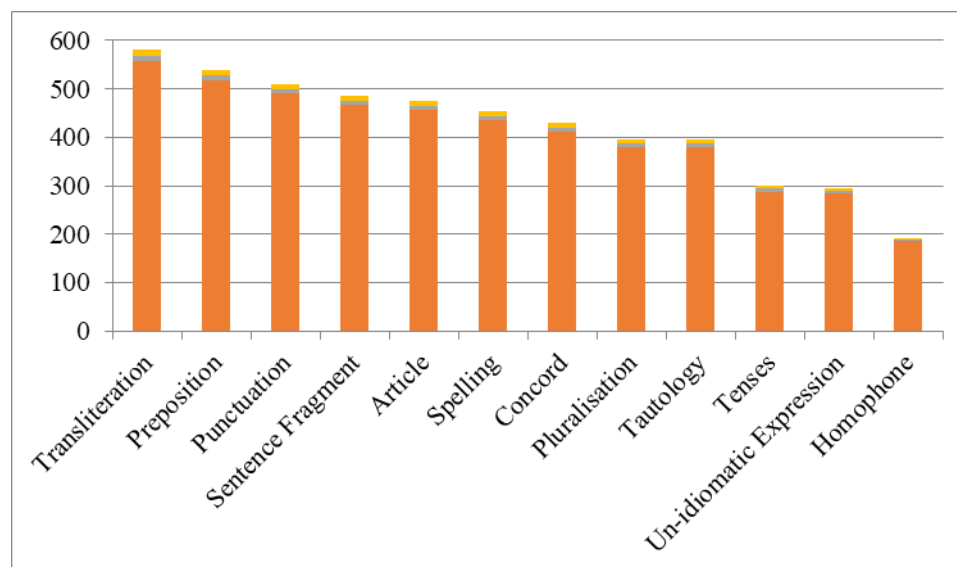
What error types are most prominent in the written English of learners at SS II level?

Table 2: Prominent Errors in Written English of SS II Learners

S/No	Error Type	Frequency	Percentage	Rank Order
1	Transliteration	557	11.48	11.48
2	Preposition	518	10.68	10.68
3	Punctuation	490	10.1	10.1
4	Sentence Fragment	466	9.61	9.61
5	Article	456	9.4	9.4
6	Spelling	435	8.97	8.97
7	Concord	412	8.49	8.49
8	Pluralisation	380	7.84	7.84
9	Tautology	380	7.84	7.84
10	Tenses	288	5.94	5.94
11	Un-idiomatic Expression	283	5.84	5.84
12	Homophone	185	3.81	3.81
Total		4,850	100	100

Source: Field Data, 2022

Table 2 above shows data obtained from the written composition in English language proficiency test which were used to answer this research question. Twelve error types were regarded as most prominent because they accounted for 100% of the total number of errors. They are by rank order: transliteration (11.48%), preposition (10.68%), punctuation (10.1%), sentence fragment (9.61%), article (9.40%), spelling (8.97%), concord (8.49%), pluralisation (7.84%), tautology (7.84%), tenses (5.94%), un-idiomatic expression (5.84%), and homophone (3.81%).



Source: Field Data, 2022

Figure 1: Prominent Errors

Research Question 2

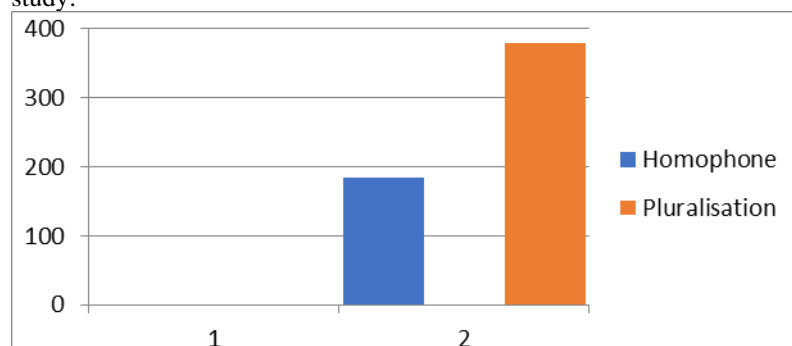
How much of these errors are attributed to the system of the target language (English)?

Table 3: Errors Derived from Target Language

S/No	Error Type	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
1	Homophone	185	32.74	32.74
2	Pluralisation	380	67.26	67.26
Total		565	100	100

Source: Field Data, 2022

As table 3 shows, the system of the target language accounts for 10.89% of the total errors. This necessitates a review of the contents of the English language syllabus. Studies in language contact such as Chidi-Onwuta and Ndimele (2015) show that the linguistic system of the English language is a major cause of errors among learners of the language. In this study, a substantial number of the errors identified in the students' written work is attributable to the nature of the L2. In the areas of morphology, for instance, English language is characterised by inconsistency. Overgeneralization by the learners results in the errors as contained in this study.



Source: Field Data, 2022

Figure 2: Errors Derived from Target Language

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking students' types of error and their performance in English.

Table 4: Showing the Relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking Students' Types of Error and their Performance in English

Error Type	Chi-square Value	df	P-Value	Decision
Transliteration	26.778a	8	0.001	Significant
Preposition	55.344a	8	0.000	Significant
Punctuation	5.434a	10	0.860	Not Significant
Sentence Fragment	43.883a	8	0.000	Significant
Article	30.997a	6	0.000	Significant
Spelling	41.281a	12	0.000	Significant
Concord	4.272a	4	0.370	Not Significant
Pluralisation	60.341a	6	0.000	Significant
Tautology	70.080a	8	0.000	Significant
Tenses	34.024a	8	0.000	Significant
Un-idiomatic Expression	31.655a	8	0.000	Significant
Homophones	7.939a	4	0.094	Not Significant

Source: Field Data, 2022

From Table 4, only three out of the twelve student types of errors are not significantly related to SS II Igbo-speaking students' performance. This infers that there is significant relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking students' types of error and their performance in English. The null hypothesis is, therefore, rejected.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking students' errors and the system of second language (L2).

Table 5: Showing the Relationship between SS II Igbo-speaking Students' Errors and the System of Second Language (L2)

Error Type	Chi-square Value	df	P-Value	Decision
Plularisation	60.341a	6	0.000	Significant
Homophones	7.939a	4	0.094	Not Significant

Source: Field Data, 2022

Based on the Chi-square value in Table 5, SS II Igbo-speaking students' errors and the system of second language is significant in the area of pluralisation and not significant in the area of homophones. This infers that intralingual errors contribute immensely to the errors made by Igbo-speaking SS II Students. The null hypothesis is, therefore, rejected.

Discussion

This investigation focussed on the errors in the written English of Igbo speaking SS II students. The finding regarding the prominent errors (research question one) as summarised in Table 2 which showed the prominent errors in the written English of SS II learners agrees with the discovery of Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) that the majority of grammatical errors L2 learners make do not reflect the learned mother tongue or L1. In a similar vein, Tomlinson and Ellis (1988) listed eight error causes that are relevant to this investigation including faulty modelling of an item by the teacher; poor teaching; interference in the learning process by the systems of the learner's L1; mistranslation from the target language to the L1 and vice versa; false assumptions based on knowledge of the target language; exposure to common errors at school, home and from the mass media; attempting to use items which have not been taught and using items which have been learned but forgotten as a result of infrequent need to use them. The authors submit that some learners are often affected by

these factors from a very early stage. The significance of the Tomlinson and Ellis category is to emphasize that ESL errors are not solely caused by L1 interference.

Closely related to the prominent errors observed in the written English of SS II students is the issue of the errors attributable to the system of the target language (English) or intralingual errors (research question two). The finding showed that the system of the target language account for 10.89% of the total errors. According to Richards in Sari (2014), intralingual interference refers to items produced by learners which reflect not the structure of mother tongue but generalization based on partial exposure to the target language. Brown (2007) suggests that as the predominance of interlingual errors taper off after the early stage of learning, errors that could be attributed to the nature of L2 manifest. It is therefore clear that L1 interference is not the only reason learners commit errors.

The first category of errors which is overgeneralization, happens when a learner creates a deviant structure based on his experience of other structures in the target language. Errors of pluralisation which account for 7.33% of the total errors are examples of overgeneralization. To reflect this error, students formed plurals by adding 's' to irregular items as in child – *childs, furniture – *furnitures; or past forms by adding 'ed' as in think – *thinked, go – *goed. The second category is ignorance of rule restrictions. In this case, learners' ignorance is specific in the sense that they fail to observe the restriction of existing structures. The third categories of errors result from incomplete application of the rules, in which case the learners fail to apply the rules completely due to stimulus sentence. For example, all the teachers has *(have); the students of my school was *(were) the best. In the fourth category, false concept is hypothesised. In this case, the learners' faulty understanding of distinctions of target language items lead to false conceptualization. For example, our principle* (principal) is a woman; the whether* (weather) was clear. Apart from spelling, other errors arising from the peculiarity of the English language include tenses (5.5%), concord (7.94%), punctuation (9.45%), pluralisation (7.33%) and preposition (9.99%).

It is, therefore, evident that the predominance of inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors as well as errors of transliteration after about ten years of studying English points to, among other deficiencies, under-exposure to good English which extensive reading as well as co-curricular activities involving speaking, writing, and listening skills would, if properly organised, contribute in no small measure to improve learners' performance in English language.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that English as a second language (L2) learners have errors in their written language because of the interference of first language (L1) and such errors are attributed to their first language (mother tongue). Closely related to the foregoing is the low vocabulary stock of the students as is manifested in the predominance of errors of usage and speaking. Producing coherent written discourse with spelling and appropriate vocabulary is an effort. It is evident then that the students hardly engage in extensive reading, which research has proven enhances second language proficiency.

Recommendations

Following the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Students should be exposed to the English language as much as possible through reading and involvement in co-curricular activities in which they will have opportunities to practice the four language skills. Examples of such activities, some of which have been referred to earlier, include essay writing competition, debating, poster presentation, spelling bee, vocabulary quiz, story writing and impromptu speech. Therefore, every school should have plenty reading materials including newspapers and magazines in addition to audiovisual items like television and radio.
2. Treatment of errors is critical in language learning. When errors occur, as they inevitably do, corrections should not be too frequent or too forceful otherwise the students can lose confidence and motivation (Ferris and Roberts, 2001). Peer correction is a useful strategy but the teacher should monitor it closely. Essentially, the teacher should use the corpus of students' errors as a teaching device.

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