

IMPACT OF ERRORS ON THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION STUDENTS' WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *Composition writing is a crucial component in assessing students' mastery and proficiency of English language across all levels of the Ghanaian educational system. In this study, we sought to identify the impact of errors on the student-teachers' written communication in Colleges of Education in Ghana. The study purposed to determine how the errors affected the students' written communication. A qualitative approach, with a case study design was used for the study. The study targeted second-year College of Education students in Jasikan and St. Teresa's Colleges of Education, with a total of 100 students and 5 tutors randomly and purposively sampled respectively. Text analyses and a semi-structured interview were employed to collect data and the data were analyzed thematically. It was found that these errors have significant impact on students' written communication. Student-teachers' errors transcend onto pupils in class and students' communication is often not clear.*

KEY WORDS: Error analysis, students, written communication, error types,

INTRODUCTION

Composition writing is a component of English language examination in the Ghanaians' educational institutions. This is so because it gives the examiners the opportunity to assess the level of proficiency of students' language. Composition is one area for students because it is a norm that they must write. Student-teachers receiving training at College of Education are no exception. Ezuh (2008) stated that students need to be comfortable with composition writing because it is an area where they can easily sweep all the chunks of the marks allocated in an English language examination. English language has, therefore, become an insurmountable huddle for many students in the College of Education. The progression policy of the Institute of Education, University of Cape Coast makes it explicit that student-teachers must pass all the English language courses taken at any level of their professional training to be able to progress to the next level. This requirement is compulsory for all students, including the first year students. Consequently, some of the students find it very difficult to pass their English language paper, become frustrated and are shown the exit, just because they perform poorly in the English Language. These students are fond of making grammatical errors when they answer questions in exercises, quizzes and projects. For many years of our teaching experiences in the College of Education, we observed that students' mistakes are repeated throughout their quizzes and projects. Chief Examiner's Report of 2018 has,

among other things, stated that the performance of candidates in English language was very ridiculous. The report categorically mentioned that the performance was generally very bad. It further mentioned that the most prevalent errors were faulty sentences, spelling mistakes in simple words and disregard for the use of punctuations. Most of the errors committed in the communication were grammatical or syntax errors. What is worrying is that these student-teachers, after their professional training, are posted to teach at the basic schools in Ghana, whose language of instruction is predominantly English. One would expect that the language use of these student-teachers is relatively devoid of errors in order not to have negative impact on the young learners entrusted into their hands. It is important that, once the errors are detected in students' communication, measures must be taken to alleviate or correct those anomalies. It is upon this basis that we sought to investigate student-teachers' errors committed in their written communication and how they impact on their practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Carrying out a study on students' performance, Seifried, Jürgen, Wuttke and Eveline (2010) affirm that teacher competence is a condition sine qua non for high level performance in the classroom. Nevertheless, questions of conceptualizing and measuring teacher competence have yet to be answered. They assert that students report quite a positive error climate. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between error friendliness and learning orientation. Accordingly, a positive correlation between a missing transparency of norms and error anxiety exists.

Furthermore, error friendliness is negative interrelated with both «negative» subscales, and learning orientation is negative linked with missing transparency of norms. Teachers do not always deal with learner errors constructively and do not systematically vary their error strategies according to the error situation. In many error situations insufficient encouragement was given to students to search for the solution themselves, and the teachers consistently failed to get to the bottom of the error. They assume that a teacher's competence determines his or her classroom performance and this in turn affects how students learn. This cause-and-effect chain is plausible but has yet to be substantiated empirically (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 2001; Baumert & Kunter, 2006; Desimone, 2009; Galluzzo & Graig, 1990; Kunter et al., 2007). Therefore, research leading to a concretization of pertinent qualifications, especially during teacher education, is important. This is also true of teacher error competence. In teaching-learning-research, the effect of feedback following errors is drawing increasing consideration. Reflections on whether and how one can learn from errors, what errors can be learnt from and how teachers deal with students' errors are all finding growing consideration in teaching-learning-research. The idea that errors can have a potential for learning was rarely supported at first (e.g. Weimer, 1925). However, in recent years many doubts have been raised as to whether the negative assessment and sanction of errors in pedagogical contexts is the most effective approach (Yerushalmi & Polinger, 2006).

While it is easy to agree that in learning processes mistakes might help knowledge acquisition, in working life, especially in high-risk domains such as piloting an airplane or the operation of chemical or nuclear plants, errors have to be avoided (Glendon, Clarke & McKenna, 2006). As

work is usually too complex to totally eliminate the potential for errors, dealing with mistakes at the workplace is an important strategy for workplace learning (Harteis, Bauer & Gruber, 2008). Moreover, some empirical evidence shows a positive relationship between organizational error management culture (e.g. norms and common practices in organizations such as communication regarding errors, their detection, analysis, and rapid correction) and firm performance (van Dyck et al., 2005; Harteis, Bauer & Gruber, 2008). So, constructive error management in companies requires responsive strategies (Nordstrom, Wendland & Williams, 1998). In learning processes, however, mistakes can foster understanding and knowledge building. But the actual process of learning from errors, if it really happens, is still 36 largely a mystery. As a first step, a systematic conceptualization of possible error types is necessary for every domain.

Theoretical and empirical evidence prove that teachers' reaction to student errors is crucial to the learning process (to avoid making students feel foolish, to provide a positive atmosphere for errors and to give constructive response to errors, (Spychiger et al., 1998). Even examinations at a physiological level do not paint a homogeneous picture. On one side, results point to the fact that errors have a positive effect on subsequent learning processes (Wills et al., 2007). On the other hand, some people, because of an impaired processing of Dopamin, hardly seem to learn from the negative consequences of their actions (Klein et al., 2007).

A possible basis for the modelling of error-learning-processes can be found in the concept of negative knowledge or negative expertise. Consequently, learning processes can be supported through negative experiences, in that a person will know why something does not work, and in the ideal case, also realize exactly what they do not know or are not capable of. These realisations, especially the latter, would open various opportunities to learn new things (Parviainen & Eriksson, 2006). It is also assumed that negative knowledge has a heuristic value in the sense that it gives clues as to the corresponding positive knowledge and so enables the use of regulative and adaptive strategies (Eraut, 1994). Thus, the possibility of excluding negatively coded alternatives leads to an increase in certainty (Gartmeier et al., 2008). Whether the potential connected with the acquisition of negative knowledge can actually develop and result in knowledge acquisition depends on whether deeper reasons for errors are analysed and reflected on and if constructive feedback is given on how to improve in the future.

Reflections are considered processes of reconsideration and reassessment of experiences and, therefore, should contribute to the development of competence. Teachers should be able to support such processes; but both the extent to which this is possible, and whether the necessary time and space is granted during lessons depends, above all, on the teachers' opinion of errors (flaw versus learning opportunity) and on their competence in dealing with errors. Unfortunately, students still frequently report that they perceive a negative error culture, state that they often experience errors as flaws and that learning from errors is not supported systematically by their teachers (Spychiger et al., 1998). If this is the case, future responses to errors might be to either avoid them or cover them up rather than reflecting on and learning from errors. In a negatively oriented climate with competitive goals, teams try to cover up mistakes but are willing to learn from mistakes in a positive climate with cooperative goals (Tjosvold et al., 2004). With these factors in mind, we

suggest that in order to use students' errors constructively, teachers need to be competent in three ways (three facets of professional error competence. Knowledge of possible error types: teachers have to actually recognise the specific logical flaws and false assumptions made by students. To be able to do this, teachers need domain-specific knowledge about possible learner errors.

Similarly, Demirdag (2015) argues that people have different perceptions about their errors at work places. Errors may be seen as important issues by an organization. They may cause stress, performance issues and negative climate. The way how a person deals with an error depends on the attitudes of the community and organization. Some attempt to prevent errors at all cost and some attempt to learn from errors. If people seek to learn from errors, they need to understand their own perceptions towards errors. Making errors and learning from the mistakes are the natural elements of learning process for everyone including classroom teachers. Teachers therefore employ different strategies to deal with errors that occur in the classrooms.

Demirdag noted that there is no significant difference among teachers' perceptions on all factors of the Error Orientation Questionnaire (EOQ) including error competence, learning from errors, error risk taking, error strain, error anticipation, covering up errors, error communication and thinking about errors. He further asserts that teachers have different perceptions about how to deal with their errors occurring in the classrooms. In addition, the perceptions of elementary school teachers, middle school teachers and high school teachers about their errors occurring in the class were compared based on eight factors. Factor 1: error competence Factor 2: learning from errors, Factor 3: error risk taking, Factor 4: error strain, Factor 5: error anticipation, Factor 6: covering up errors, Factor 7: error communication, and Factor 8: thinking about errors. The study investigated the perceptions of classroom teachers about their errors and how such perceptions differed from one another among elementary school teachers, middle school teachers, and high school teachers. Analyzing the perceptions of classroom teachers about their errors, the findings showed that there was no significant difference among teachers' perceptions on all factors of the EOQ including error competence, learning from errors, error risk taking, error strain, error anticipation, covering up errors, error communication and thinking about errors. Although classroom teachers had different perceptions about their own errors, none of these perceptions were meaningful. This result indicates that schools may have similar error management cultures.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative method to describe in detail the responses received from participants through interview. The design used in this study is a case study. In a case study, the data collected is mostly described (Creswell, 2013). The researchers conducted semi-structured interview questions to answer the research question. In this study, the researchers chose the second-year students of both Jasikan and St. Teresa's Colleges of Education as their population. The topic under study was "*Errors in communication of students' writing*". The researchers have taught these students for at least a year and have identified some errors in their written communication. This formed the basis for which the researchers chose them as the target population. In all, the total population of these students at both colleges summed up to 460 out of

which a sample size of 250 was chosen for the study, using Krejcie and Mogan (1970) table of sampling. The technique adopted and employed by the researchers was simple random for students. The sampled students wrote two different types of essays out of which errors were drawn.

Again, five tutors were selected through purposive sampling. This is because they were the tutors who had been teaching the English language and their experiences in the teaching of the language and students' errors are essential for the study.

To collect data, the researchers adopted an interview guide which was prepared with questions to indicate that all areas of the topic were covered. However, interviews in this research were designed to deepen understanding. In the interview process, a semi-structured interview guide was used to make sure that all interviewees were asked questions that are relevant. The interview was conducted for one week. An average of 45 minutes was used for an interview section. The responses during the interview were all recorded by the researchers and later analyzed. The purpose of the interview was to find out what types of errors are committed in students' written scripts. Theme-by-theme approach was used for the analysis. The researchers organized data across all respondents and their answers to identify similarities and differences. In the analysis, the links and relationships among responses were explored.

ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to identify how the errors that students commit affect their writing in communication. Broadly speaking, a lot of responses have been received from the respondents through the interview guide. Some respondents were very frank that though errors were identified and corrected in the student's essay, they could not make time to discuss such errors with students. A possible effect of these lapses is that similar errors would keep on occurring in student's writing and communication. It is worth of note that, when such errors persist for so many times, it then becomes a language norm for the students.

The impact of the errors on the student

Findings from the analysis of the students' essays revealed that tense concord is one of the areas students demonstrate their ignorance of. It is an undeniable truth that there is possibility of it having a great impact on the students' academic record. Again, students who lack knowledge about punctuation, may not be able to write any proper and grammatically correct sentence. The students would end up committing a lot of errors by way of constructing clumsy sentences, and in trying to use it to communicate, the sentences may not be clear. If the students write sentences that are full of ambiguity and concord problems, the message in their communication may not be clear. One of the legacies of communication is to make sure that there is a feedback from the receiver. In relation to this, Kouadio (2014) asserts that the consequences of errors are that they could generate, communication breakdowns in students' essays. Excerpt from interview:

“The errors affect meaning and these make them score low marks when they write essays both in English and other courses”

The above extract shows that students’ errors affect clarity of their communication and ends up affecting their grades. Observing critically, errors students of Jasikan College of Education commit have great impact on them. The errors will be tackled one after the other and later deal with the impacts they have on the students. In the first place, one of the serious errors which emerged from the data was possessive error. It is an error where the students ignored or neglected the use of apostrophe entirely or did not use it at all. This is a case of something belonging to somebody, so if the students ignore the possessive marker, it brings different meaning or makes the sentence unclear. The understanding or meaning in the sentence becomes very blur. For instance, if you want to show that the phone belongs to Dr. Ofori you must apply the apostrophe to Ofori, else the meaning in this sentence would not be clear if you say: 1. “Dr. Ofori phone” is different from 2. “Dr. Ofori’s phone”. From the above, statement one, has possessive error while sentence two is correct. Therefore, statement two communicates a clear message than sentence one. The students would not be able to communicate well if they had problem with the use of the possessive case. In many cases, if the student has no possessive error it will improve his or her writing, thereby making his or her communication better

Interestingly, findings further revealed another error from the student’s data. This is ambiguity error. Ambiguity is when a statement poses a challenge to understand: usually, when the statement is open to more than one interpretation. When the student is faced with this type of challenge, he or she cannot be clear cut. What exactly does the student want to communicate? For example, in the following sentences:

1. *Visiting parents can be very embarrassing*
2. *Dangerous curves remain in low gear*

When we critically observe the above sentences, we would realize that the student committed an error. The exact information he wanted to convey is not understood here. This made the communication unclear. Sentence one above has more than one meaning. This is so because it could mean that when parents visit their wards without any prior notice, can be embarrassing, or, when children visit their parents, it would be embarrassing. However, if the sentence reads: when parents visit their children it can be very embarrassing, or when the children visit their parents, it can be embarrassing, meaning could be clearer. Consequently, the second sentence also poses another ambiguity error. Instead, the sentence should have read there are dangerous curves on the way, drivers should remain in low gear throughout, or there are more dangerous curves, therefore, remain in low gear, drivers.

Once the student lacks knowledge or is ignorant about these errors, he goes on committing them all the time. It therefore implies that it would affect the student in diverse ways. Academically, the student will not progress. If the student does not qualify well in English as a core subject, there is no way he or she can further his or her education. On the other hand, he or she cannot express

himself by way of simple communication. Since he or she cannot communicate well, it would affect his transaction with other people thereby hindering him.

Also, it implies that students would be better off when they do not have any error problem. In case the ambiguity error is not part of those students, their language would be improved. It would also improve their communication activities with people around them and beyond. There would be improvement in their other academic disciplines. As it is being said and as an underlining truth that English is the medium of instruction in all Ghanaian schools, the pupils they are going to teach would also benefit as well. Those who have the command over the medium of instruction, have better way of delivering as well.

Spelling error is another thing worth discussing. Students normally violate grammar when they write a particular word wrongly. Mostly, this error is as a result of 79 inter-lingual problem, where there is an influence of usually other languages, variant pronunciations and other historical reasons. The English spelling system which has become inconsistent is very complex. (Gowere et al, 1995).

Spelling therefore, is a language sub-skill under writing. It is an essential skill of writing that has to be mastered by all learners and users of the English language for the purpose of good communication in the written form of the language. Since students who commit a lot of errors under spelling cannot do well in English, it means that their language would be affected greatly. If students want to write out the noun “sea” but end up, in writing “see”, this would affect the meaning of what they intend writing. Serious spelling errors hinder communication. This is due to homophones where the words are same in pronunciation but different in spelling.

However, if students’ native languages do not influence their spelling, and also when they are able to do well by overcoming homophones and other problems associated with spelling, their language improves and becomes better. If they have full command over the language and writes exceptionally, in short, their messages are communicated more clearly.

Spelling error can also cause students’ failure in English language performance. It also makes students unable to express themselves in flawless writing. Furthermore, it makes students’ work untidy. This is so because, students are not sure of their spellings. They write and cancel almost all the time, therefore, their writings become very clumsy. As a result of cancelling all the time and not even sure of what they are writing, they waste more time at the expense of other things. Students end up scoring very low marks because of the spelling errors. Out of the ten marks allocated for mechanical accuracy in students essay writing some of them sometimes score nothing there at all. All the marks are swallowed up by spelling errors. Most students do not have interest in writing essays, therefore, ended in poor performance.

Findings have also revealed that another serious error that students usually commit in their communication is punctuation error. The exact features shared by spelling are similar to the punctuation. Punctuation marks fall under mechanical accuracy. It is an area where students perform poorly, thereby losing important marks. As a result of this, they fail flat in their English language paper section B which is the writing of essay. Carrot and Wilson (1995: 191) stated

clearly that, students' writings encounter punctuation problems, as there are universal rules of punctuation.

In fact, if students fail to apply and place the punctuation marks at where they should be placed, it weakens and affects the meaning of the sentence one has written. For example, if a student writes a very long sentence without punctuation marks, it does not make any sense. It becomes very difficult to make difference between simple sentence and compound sentence and then complex sentence. A sentence of such nature needs comma, semi colon, colon, full stop and many more. The baseline for any writing is to communicate among ourselves, the society, community and beyond.

Before communication is completed, there must be a feedback from the receiver. If the meaning is not clear, there may not be any feedback to indicate that the receiver understands what the message is about. Punctuation error greatly depends on the students' communication. It turns out that, there is no meaning in whatever the writer is communicating. If our communication is not achieved, then there is no progress in our world.

Another area of concern to the research is capitalization error. This type of error also has great impacts on students' communication. Capitalization, according to Kroll (1991) is where capital letters are useful for sentence initials, the beginning of an important word, in topic heading etc. However, learners have problems in using capitalization properly. There are reasons for students' problems in using proper capitalization. The rules of capitalization are universal and classifying nouns, as proper nouns and common nouns is difficult for students. (Gowere et al., 1995).

Capitalization is one of the areas which affect students. It is very simple but cause the students a lot. In most cases, before you begin a sentence you must begin with a capital letter. When a noun is a proper noun, wherever it is found in the sentence it must begin with a capital letter. When writing and capitalization is applied wrongly, it affects the students greatly. Sometimes, what students intend to communicate is totally absent. Also, grammatically, the students are not able to do well. Since the student loses mark under mechanical accuracy point, the indication is that his performance will be very poor.

In cases where students display the wrong usage of lexical items, the impact felt is very great. For example, the sentence: "the feature leaders of this country are the youth." The word "feature" is wrongly chosen, it renders the sentence meaningless. It therefore hinders the communication. The message the student is communicating is not clear, hence, the performance of the students is very poor.

Another case of wrong choice of the word is that, the student does not learn the difference in word classes or parts of speech. For example, the students have been "advised" to study hard for excellent performance. From the above example, the word "advised" has wrongly been chosen by the student because he lacks knowledge of word class. The students used "advised" instead of

“advised.”, the noun instead of the verb. Because a different class is used, it changes the meaning of the sentence totally.

Prepositional error is another serious area where students commit errors. Most chose and apply prepositions wrongly. Others also fail to apply it thereby omitting it completely. When this happens, it affects the grammatical rule beyond the construction. In most cases, when these rules are violated, the beauty in the language is lost. Since we all know that grammar is the silver lining of every language. Also, grammar is the melody in a language. When the melody of a song is lost, it does not please the ear. When beauty of grammar is lost, the language is not pleasant to the ear. The students’ inability to construct sentences with correct grammatical arrangements gives a rise to the students’ poor performance in the language. Prepositional errors pose serious language problems and bring gaps in communication. However, since your language affects your communication, it indeed affects your totality as a person. Since communication is the tool to the development of every nation, the students would develop weak base for pupils in the country. In short, if a student’ performance in the English language paper is very poor as well as his communication, then his students who are faced with prepositional error problems cannot express themselves well in the English language. When the grammar of a language suffers, it descends down heavily and greatly on the said language.

Furthermore, another area identified after going through the data is semantic error. This area of the language poses wrong ordering of words and omission of words. In most cases, minor word classes are omitted making the sentence very clumsy to understand. Under semantic error, where there is omission of a word, it eventually leads to concord problem. For example, a statement like this:

“Religious are of the concern that...” When we examine the above statement or phrase closely and critically, there is an omission between the adjective “religious” and the auxiliary verb “are” The word omitted, of course, is a noun. Observing the above well, it is clear that is also geared towards unclear meaning of a sentence. When students lack the knowledge about this error, or ignorance they construct meaningless sentences which end up in producing weightless and immature language. Also, it could lead to misinformation on the part of the student since ambiguous statement will be created and would also lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

Pluralization error is where students demonstrate their ignorance by committing this error. As a result of this, the students grossly construct a lot of incorrect sentences. Once students do not perform well, it reflects on their language worldwide. Also, once the students perform very poorly in English language, their language generally is never good at all. There is total misinterpretation because what is supposed to be plural is interpreted as singular. Let us consider this sentence: “Many university “teacher” do not do their work”. Closely observing the sentence indicates that the sentence is in the plural form but the main noun in the sentence is in singular form.

A close study and critical observation indicate that many errors committed by students in their writings have very great impact on their communication. Students of 84 Jasikan College of

Education however are no exception. They also violate a lot of grammatical rules as a result of these many errors they commit in their writing when communicating. Once they have demonstrated these poor skills such as punctuation errors, possessive errors, subject and verb agreement errors and tense concord errors, they have been seen to always write very poor language. Whatever they write is not clear and most are ambiguous statements which are also meaningless and mostly their communication is not clear. Most of these students do not pass their English language paper. Also, students begin to look at the English language as a difficult subject and do not show any interest in the subject at all. Due to the ambiguous nature of their communication, it is always difficult to determine what message they want to push across. Since English language is one of the areas that are required for further studies, many students are not able to further their education.

Also, most of them trail this course to the end of their program. Some even do not pass after their course has ended and therefore, are not given their certificates. Again, English language is a language across the curriculum. This to say that, all other disciplines are taught using the English language as a medium of instruction in Ghanaian schools. Since students' background in the language is very weak and poor, understanding other subjects becomes very difficult. In the same way, the errors reflect and descend greatly into other disciplines. Academically, I will say that, it has negative effects on the students' work. This is in line with Demirdag (2015) who argued that people have different perceptions about their errors at work places. Errors may be seen as important issues by an organization. They may cause stress, performance issues, and negative climate. The way a person deals with an error depends on the attitudes of the community and organization.

Economically, there is again a negative impact on the students. When students write to seek employment in an organization, they look at the communication gap before granting one the job opportunity. He/she is denied the job when his or her performance in English language is questionable. Eventually, before you occupy an influential position in a society, it is prudent they look at your means of communication. Nobody gives you such position if you cannot communicate well. Another interesting thing on the part of these college students is that the same effect would reflect on the pupils they teach. No matter how pedagogical the students are in terms of content, the pupils will be affected. This is so because they cannot give more than they have. Once pupils learn something, it is difficult to erase it from their mind. This is discussed in the next section.

The impact of these errors on the pupils the student teachers teach

Findings have revealed that tense concord is one of the areas students demonstrate their ignorance. It is an undeniable truth that there is the possibility of it having a great impact on the students' academic record. In the first place, the students, out of ignorance, will transfer naïve knowledge to their learners. Teachers are great educators since whatever children learn from them is difficult to erase and the effect and impact will be felt more. Excerpt from interview:

“These teacher trainees, after teaching in their practising schools, give their pupils exercise. They mark the exercises which in most cases contains errors

but they do not indicate the errors. During supervision, however, these anomalies are discovered in the pupils' books”

The extract above demonstrates that the possibility of transferring these errors to learners by not being able to identify errors in the pupils' books is high. Closely related to the above issue, these errors could easily be transferred onto other academic disciplines apart from the English language. Subsequently, those that have been discussed improve the students' writing, thereby making their academic work better. Eventually, the pupils that these teacher trainees teach receive their share from these teachers at the end of the tunnel. In short, the errors will descend down on the pupils, since the trainees do not know that what some of the pupils write are errors.

Classroom Implications and Conclusion

It was found that these errors have impact on the work of students. These errors have an impact on the students' writing especially when they are communicating. The errors transcended onto pupils in class and students' communication is often not clear. The study recommends that Colleges of Education as institutions expecting language development during the course of content delivery and pedagogy will need to set clear guidelines for expectations, learning points and assessment of language. Teachers within other departments need to be more aware of what other teachers are doing and work together to see that there is continuity in how issues of language are dealt with. This will provide clear expectations across courses, so that students understand what is expected of them, and that it is not just an individual teacher who cares or otherwise about their writing skills.

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