Writing Proficiency and English Language Errors in Context

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Abstract: This qualitative study titled "Writing Proficiency and English Language Errors in Context", employing conceptual content analysis was conducted at Mater Dei College, Tubigon, Bohol. Thirty (30) literary analysis outputs were evaluated to measure the writing proficiency of the participants, and the same outputs were subjected to analysis, following Corder's Error Analysis to extract the errors in semantics, morphology and syntax present in the outputs. The units of analysis chosen were in phrases, clauses and sentences. Sub-categories for errors in semantics, morphology and syntax were specified. A priori coding was done based on James' taxonomy of errors. After errors have been categorized and tabulated, coding for frequency was done to identify the most common language errors in context. The results revealed that more than half of the participants were at their developing level of writing proficiency. Among all sub-categories of errors, misselection, omission and subject-verb agreement errors were the top three common errors identified. Among all the three major categories of errors, syntax errors, emerged to be the most common language errors in context from the participants' outputs. Majority of the participants had inadequate writing skills in English, signifying the need to address such dilemma based on the emerging language errors in context identified from their outputs. It was generalized that the participants lacked immersion in the English language. Hence, the participants were recommended to immerse themselves in the English and language and learn it in context. The role of grammatical competence must not be ruled out in English classroom instruction. Even if there was only a minimum frequency for semantic and morphology errors, both students and teachers must not tolerate such errors to prevent fossilization. The English macro skills and micro skill needed to be taught holistically, not in isolation. To improve the participants' writing skills, the English teachers needed to engage students with constant writing activities. The teachers, too, had to address the identified problems of the participants, making sure to provide immediate and adequate feedback to the students written works. There was a need to teach the learners to develop both accuracy and fluency, so they could achieve communicative competence.

Keywords: English language errors, semantic errors, syntax errors, morphology errors, writing proficiency.

1. Introduction

In the interest of investigating the crux of the consecutive decline of Filipinos' English proficiency as revealed in the English Proficiency Index (EPI) ranking from 2018-2020, news reports on the poor linguistic competence of the Filipino graduates, and recorded problems in English classrooms where learners struggled in their English fluency and accuracy, the researcher investigated the writing proficiency of the English language learners and identified and analyzed the common language errors reflected in their English-written outputs. Determining their writing proficiency while analyzing the language errors would yield meaningful results that would aid the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies to help the learners achieve enough writing proficiency in the English language since writing, being a productive skill, would reveal the students' current language competence in their language continuum.

The present study was established primarily in the tenets of Selinker's interlanguage theory, Lado's contrastive analysis, Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Corder's model of error analysis. The types of errors are based on James' taxonomy of errors. This qualitative study, utilizing conceptual content analysis, determined the Grade 9 English learners' writing proficiency level, analyzed the common English language errors in context in their written outputs, and discussed the implications of these language errors in English language teaching and learning.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted at Mater Dei College, Tubigon, Bohol in the Academic Year 2020-2021. Using cluster sampling, the study had thirty (30) literary analysis outputs of the Grade 9 students, which were evaluated by two external raters to measure the writing proficiency of the participants. The same outputs were subjected to analysis, following Corder's Error Analysis to extract the language errors in semantics, morphology and syntax and explain their significance and implication in English language teaching and learning.

The researcher compiled the written files of the learners on their literary analysis outputs submitted online as the language corpus for the analysis. Then, the errors in the texts were identified by the external raters. A coding process in categorizing the language errors identified from the learners' written outputs was conducted. There were two external raters who identified the language errors in context present in the text.

In rating the outputs, the raters used the analytic rubric developed by the researcher. The content of the rubric was

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based on the criteria used by some related studies in measuring writing proficiency. The researcher consulted the statistician to test the reliability of the writing proficiency levels evaluated by the two raters.

The units of analysis were phrase level, clause level and sentence level, with errors categorized under morphology, semantics, and syntax. In every category, sub-categories were also identified. The errors were then classified. This step involved assigning grammatical description to each error identified. The classifications of errors were based on the categories of language errors according to the taxonomy of errors by James (1998). The number of errors under a specific type were quantified to identify the common errors identified. The errors were explained. In this stage of the procedure, an attempt was made to explain the occurrence of the errors based on the concept of error taxonomy elaborated by James (1998). Finally, the errors were evaluated. This stage involved assessing the seriousness of each error in order to take principled teaching decisions. The evaluation was guided by Burt and Kiparsky's concepts in identifying seriousness of the error and the need for corrective feedback through examining whether the error is a global on or a local one. In this stage, the researcher also evaluated which among the error categories were common based on their frequency. The top four (4) emerging errors were classified as the common language errors since they were the only language errors in context that achieved a double-digit percentage with respect to their frequency.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1
Writing proficiency of the grade 9 learners

Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Developing	17	56.67
Approaching Proficiency	11	36.67
Proficient	1	3.33
Beginning	1	3.33
N	30	100

Table 1 presented the data about the participants' writing proficiency levels based on the evaluation of the two raters with a moderate interrater reliability coefficient of 0.65. The participants' writing proficiency levels were measured based on the seven criteria, namely; overall impression, thesis, support for argument, organization, vocabulary usage, sentence structure, and grammar and mechanics. Based on the data revealed in Table 1, there were seventeen (17) participants categorized under developing level; eleven (11) under approaching proficiency level; one (1) under beginning level; and another one (1) under proficient level.

Based on the writing proficiency criteria used in the evaluation, the result meant that more than half of the participants' outputs were under developing level, having a fairly adequate analysis, indicating emergent yet inconsistent critical thinking skills, providing claims with less supporting details and inadequate explanation. Manifestation of inadequate level of language competence was demonstrated in their proficiency level and performance of that stage of language

learning. The point of view of their analysis had an apparent, though inconsistent thesis, and inconsistently convincing examples and evidence. Their outputs had a limited organization and focus, combined with an acceptable, but haphazard progression of ideas. Moreover, their written works showed an inappropriate usage of vocabulary, and a lack of variety of word choice; the sentences were limited in variety of structure and length. The developing level reflected that the participants committed several language errors.

The developing writing proficiency level, as revealed in the study, was an alarming concern since the participants, being language learners, were aimed at becoming communicatively competent, both in written and spoken discourse. They should have been at least proficient to indicate an acceptable degree of their fluency and accuracy in using the language. Unfortunately, the figures revealed in Table 1 supported the issue on the Filipinos' decreasing English proficiency level as reported in English Proficiency Index, where there was a consecutive slide of the Philippines' EPI rank from 13th in 2016 down to 27th in 2020. The data shown in Table 1 was an evidence that there was an urgent need to investigate the crux of the problem in order to adopt language teaching strategies and or remedial method best suited to address the learners' issues in language learning, especially in writing through analyzing their inadequacies and/ or errors.

The participants' current level entailed the need of further scaffolding from the teacher for them to be able to achieve enough proficiency in writing. The result further implied that, based on Selinker's interlanguage theory, the participants still lacked the specific inputs for them to improve their built-in syllabus or interlanguage continuum to proficiently use the language in either receptive or productive language skills. The necessary inputs were expected to be given from the language teacher, language material, immersion, or any form of activity that would allow them to learn the language proficiently. Since their developing level signified their inadequate learning and/ or ignorance of some rules in using the English language, the result, furthermore, denoted that the participants' English teacher needed to revisit and improve the participants' micro skills in the English language- vocabulary, phonics and spelling, context and grammar that would in turn reinforce their macro skills- listening and reading for receptive skills and writing and speaking for productive skills, so they could achieve both accuracy and fluency in using the English language, making them communicatively competent language learners.

In the lens of behaviorists' perspective, the developing level achieved by the participants mirrored the teachers' poor language modelling and learners' non-learning or inadequate learning of the inputs provided by the teachers through different learning stimuli. The errors they committed, which were taken for granted, were rolled over until they became fossilized. The result could also be interpreted as the participants' lack of immersion and exposure with the language. Immersion and exposure, however, were crucial in developing the target language in the achievement of proficiency as learners might be immersed and exposed to the erroneous form of the target

language. Nevertheless, the developing writing proficiency level of participants indicated the need for the giving of correct inputs, emphasizing both form and meaning of the language to develop both accuracy and fluency. A more difficult issue would arise if the learners' language inadequacies were not properly addressed as they might develop fossilization of the target language, which meant that once fossilized, the acquired learning they had of the target language could hardly be corrected or not at all.

In cognitivists' viewpoint, the result could be interpreted as the participants' failed attempts in their hypothesis-testing to produce the right output in the target language. The participants failed in some of their hypothesis-testing, where they experimented on the language forms that they used in expressing their thoughts in the target language as their strategy to write in English. The process of hypothesis-testing might have led the learners to commit errors in the second language as there were factors they considered in testing their hypothesis – their native language, the rules they learned in the second language, the language they acquired from their environment, the forms taught by their teachers and the communication process, which in this study was the instruction in writing of literary analysis.

Moreover, based on the results presented in Table 1, it could be inferred that the differences between the participants' first and second language, which, according to Contrastive Analysis founded in Transfer Theory, might have affected the learners' performance in the second language since the degree of difference between the two languages also correlated with the degree of difficulty. The fact that Cebuano language structure was far different from English structure, it was expected that negative language transfer would happen as the learners applied the language mechanisms in the first language into the second language. There was a failure to abide by the principle that "No two languages are the same."

There were eleven participants who achieved approaching proficiency level. This result meant that only eleven of the total number of participants presented an analysis with sufficient and consistent critical thinking skills, providing well supported claims and an adequate explanation of their argument. Only 36.67 percent of the participants manifested a solid organization and focus with appropriate progression of ideas in their outputs. They demonstrated an attempt to use varied use of vocabulary in their outputs and use of a decent range of sentence structures, with few language errors. Since approaching proficiency level was a gateway towards achieving the proficient level, the teachers needed to address the language gaps of these writers in order for them to become proficient.

In general, the results presented in Table 1 confirmed with the reported concerns on the Filipinos' English Proficiency, as presented in the EPI ranking and in TOEIC results, which strongly suggested a need to identify the inadequacies of the participants in order for them and the teacher to address the concerns as soon as possible for the participants to improve their proficiency level.

The results of the present study supported the claims presented in the study "Writing Skills of Junior High School of the University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City, Philippines" by Nur Hikmah, Ahmad Dahla and Fancia T. Buffe which revealed that the learners were poor in grammar. The learners had more errors in grammar aspects such as subject-verb agreement, proper use of verb tenses, and in mechanics.

Table 2 presented the categories of errors identified from the participants' outputs. The language errors were only tallied once with respect to their units of analysis, which were phrase, clause and sentence levels to avoid overlapping of frequency. From among all the fifteen (15) specific categories of language errors, misselection, omission, subject-verb agreement and verbosity errors were the top three common language errors identified. All the first three sub-categories belonged to syntax while the last one was a semantic error.

The language errors identified from the participants' outputs were not new. They were those features that were totally or partially absent in the native language. They were old-aged lapses in using a target language that remained unsolved and rolled over their current level due to poor language modelling in their elementary years. If these errors were not addressed correctly, they would fossilize in the learners' interlanguage

Table 2
English language errors in context

Error Categories	Frequency			Total	Percentage (%)
	Phrase	Clause	Sentence		
Syntax					
Misselection	15	16	32	63	19.81
Omission	5	13	24	42	13.21
Subject-Verb Agreement	6	13	21	40	12.58
Coordination	6	4	21	31	9.75
Overuse	10	4	13	27	8.49
Misordering	1	1	6	8	2.52
Semantics					
Verbosity	2	3	29	34	10.69
Confusion of Sense Relations	10	5	13	28	8.81
Collocation	0	3	4	7	2.2
Morphology					
Verb Morphology	5	5	8	18	5.68
Noun Morphology	5	1	2	8	2.52
Pronoun Morphology	4	2	1	7	2.21
Adverb Morphology	0	1	1	2	0.63
Adjective Morphology	0	0	3	3	0.94
Total Errors	69	71	178	318	100

continuum. Moreover, the results implied that the language learners spoke English as a translation to the native language, which defied the principle "If you speak in English, think in English because no two languages are the same." Lack of focus on the ultimate goal of teaching English, which is communicative competence, has been missed by most English language teachers. The errors implied that there was a failure for the English language teachers to completely immerse the students in the language and to teach the language in context by teaching English language as a whole, not in isolation since language is used a whole never in parts. Language immersion is not optimized.

The misselection error which ranked first, obtaining 19.81%, with a frequency of 63, included the wrong choice of preposition, article, pronoun, quantifier and verb form. Such result signified the participants' inadequate learning in the functions and specific applications of the conventions of the mentioned grammatical categories. Moreover, the misselection errors revealed the learners' difficulty in distinguishing the specific use of a particular lexicon in a particular context, signifying poor communicative competence. The error on misselection also reflected the participants' lack of immersion with the language and their inadequate learning in the target language. Participants misselecting pronouns, quantifiers, prepositions, etc. in forming their sentences reflected their ignorance to some rules and rule restrictions. This error also showed the participants' false hypothesis in attempting to express their ideas in the target language. As they engaged in hypothesis-testing to communicate effectively in the target language, their outputs turned out erroneous. Hypothesis-testing happened once they had inadequate learning in the target language.

The misselection errors identified included the wrong selection of preposition, pronoun, quantifiers, verb form and article. The erroneous utterances were identified, namely; ' hurt a person's feelings' instead of 'hurt a person's feeling' since there was an article 'a' that needed a singular noun to be modified; 'spend time of the happy prince' instead of 'spend time with the happy prince'; 'stay to the happy prince' instead of 'stay with the happy prince'; 'stay on harmony and peace with my neighbors' instead of ' stay in harmony and peace with my neighbors'; 'If I were Swallow, I will' instead of using 'would', which was the right verb form to use in forming a second type conditional; and 'stop practices that promote inequality to other people' instead of 'stop the practices that promote inequality among other people'.

The expression 'less fortunate than him' showed an error in selecting pronoun since the participant used the objective case 'him' when he/she should use 'he', the nominative one. This specific error on pronoun case was mirrored by the common expressions heard and observed among teachers and learners alike, who, used objective case instead of nominative one. This error could be explained by the participants' false analogy and/or overgeneralization and ignorance to some rule restrictions.

All these misselections on the use of prepositions and pronouns denoted the participants' inadequate knowledge on the use of prepositions in English, which further meant that they were unfamiliar with the appropriate use of different prepositions in different contexts. In this case, the participants' language errors (misselection) were triggered by the difficulty of the second language, categorized as intralingual cause of errors, manifested due to the participants' ignorance of rule restrictions or undifferentiation and inadequate learning.

Moreover, omission error ranked second, having a percentage of 13.21and a frequency of 42. This error signified the dropping of significant prepositions, articles, verb, and conjunctions in constructing complete and comprehensible sentences. The errors on omission identified from the participants' outputs were shown in the expressions, ' If anything Wilde maybe highlighting the selfishness of those in authority', 'And the other day there a young man living in an attic', ' social issues that still happening', ' is to have peaceful life', 'fight all criminals', etc. Such error of omission reflected the participants' inadequate learning on the conventions of sentence construction. It further indicated the participants' avoidance of complex constructions, which led them to oversimplification, which happened when they omitted the necessary and correct word/s to express their ideas in the target language.

The errors on omission, however, did not affect the comprehensibility of the phrases. However, if these errors persisted, there would be a danger that the participants might commit global errors in omitting necessary lexicons or phrases in their utterance. More importantly, the omission errors were clear manifestations of the participants' inadequate learning in the second language, which further implied that they might oversimplify and misanalyze sentence constructions, leading to a problematic grammatical competence.

The third in rank was the error on subject-verb agreement, indicating that the participants committed errors in maintaining agreement between the subject and the verb, making the utterance ungrammatical. Committing such error signified the participants' ignorance to rules, overgeneralization of rules, overlooking cooccurrence restrictions and false hypothesis, which were all manifestations of inadequate learning. Ignorance to rules meant the learners' lack of knowledge in a particular rule. Overgeneralization might have also been the cause of their errors on subject-verb agreement as they experimented on some previously learned communication rules in new contexts, influenced by the attempt of reducing linguistic burden. Overgeneralization involved the creation of one deviant structure in place of two regular structures. Such cause was also associated with ignorance of rule restrictions, where the participants failed to observe the restrictions of the existing structures, applying rules to contexts where they were not applicable. Moreover, false analogy happened when the participants wrongly assumed that the new context behaved like the other contexts.

Verbosity errors, identified as the fourth common English language errors in context, reflected the students' poor vocabulary. Majority of the semantic errors committed by the participants were errors on verbosity, where they overelaborated the expression of one idea; they had to use

several words in expressing an idea that could have been expressed in a shorter and simpler way. Such error reflected the participants' limited vocabulary, lack of immersion in the language and inadequate learning.

Generally, the most common errors, most especially those errors that affected comprehensibility, intelligibility and communication required immediate feedback. In this present study, the revealed frequency of the different categories of errors presented an interesting concern on the need to address the participants' grammatical competence since the errors identified from their outputs signified an issue of accuracy. There was a danger that if these errors persisted and remained uncorrected, the wrong form of language construction would fossilize in their interlanguage system as explained by Selinker (1972), making them difficult, if not impossible to correct.

The results reflected in Table 2 were supported by the findings of the study " Analysis of Syntactic Errors Committed by Learners of English Language Class in the Written Composition of Mutah University: A Case Study" by Ngangbam (2016), which revealed that the emerging errors in the participants' texts were errors in the use of nouns, articles, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, fragments, word-order, lexicon, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and omission. Although, mechanics (capitalization, included) was not covered in this study.

The results reflected in Table 2 supported the findings of Heydari's study on "Analysis of Syntactic Errors in English Writing: A Case Study of Jazan University Preparatory Year Learners" in 2012, where learners' common language errors included omission of articles, overuse of articles, misselection of articles, subject-verb agreement errors, misordering, and verb morphology. In his error analysis, it was found out that the errors identified were mainly caused by simplification, overgeneralization, oversimplification, overlooking cooccurrence restrictions, false analogy and incomplete rule application.

In summary, syntax errors were most prevalent. Just like the most common errors identified in the study of Ngangbam (2016), syntax errors emerged as the first. The result also supported the findings of Nuk Hikmah, et.al in their study "Writing Skills of Junior High School of the University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City where students were found to be poor in grammar. Such similarity implied that English language learners found more difficulty in mastering syntax, which had a volume of rules and restrictions, compared to semantics and morphology.

These consistent results were explained by the nature of English language, which contained complex conventions and a number of rule restrictions, which could confuse the learners, especially that rules were dependent in context. The learners' inadequate learning in all the aspects of syntax, one major element of grammar, concerned with the formation and interpretation of phrases, clauses and sentences could be justified by the fact that there was no fixed and exact way of learning the conventions of English due to the complexity of its rules and language system, except learning the language as a whole. Their errors could also be explained by their lack of complete immersion in the language. Their lapses in the language might be due to poor language models in their lower grades that rolled over until their present grade level.

4. Conclusion

The findings on the participants' writing proficiency and language errors in context evidently showed their inadequate learning and lack of immersion in the English language, hence wanting for comprehensible inputs to improve their interlanguage continuum as posited in Selinker's interlanguage theory, so they would achieve the proficient level, particularly in writing. Moreover, the strategies in English language teaching used by the participants' English language teachers and the participants' strategies in English language learning failed to achieve the end-goal of English language teaching and learning, which is communicative competence as reflected on their writing proficiency. Even though language errors in second language are inevitable, still they need to be addressed until proficiency is achieved.

5. Recommendations

1) The English language teachers need to engage learners with constant writing activities with timely feedback. Teachers need to address the learners' inadequacies, particularly in grammar and mechanics, organization and focus, sentence structure, and vocabulary usage through careful remediation. Class size must be regulated in order to promptly monitor the individual language performance of the students.

2) The teachers need to further immerse the students in the English language and to provide them with the comprehensible inputs to improve their interlanguage continuum through giving them authentic language materials and genuine activities that allow them to learn the language in context, thereby achieving accuracy and fluency. Language immersion includes regular reading activities with tasks before, during and after reading, listening English audios like songs, stories, poems and the like, and watching English movies. Other activities that engage the students in using the language in written and spoken discourse may include writing a summary, reaction, analysis and reflection based on a text or a movie. The participants have to use the language as often as they can in authentic communication situations.

3) The English curriculum designers of English need to realign the English language teaching methodologies, teaching-learning activities, and assessment towards the achievement of the end-goal, which is communicative competence. Students in lower grades until college must be taught to learn the language as a whole, not in parts. The entire school, administrators, teachers and students have to mandate the use of English language as they enter the portals of the school. In this way, the parts the students master in the classroom are put into practice as whole, hence, they spontaneously use the language in context, not as rules memorized.

4) The future researchers may further investigate the causes of the learners' language errors and the strategies for effective corrective feedback on the students' outputs or performances. They may also further investigate the areas of writing where students are inadequate and their corresponding causes.

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