

Error Analysis of Business College Students' Academic Essays: A Case Study

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Abstract

Bhutanese ESL students struggle in English despite studying it as a major subject from pre-primary through their schools and colleges. However, little is known about the errors that business college students make in their written academic essays. Thus, Corder's (1974) procedural error analysis was adopted to examine errors in 217 academic essays written by the freshmen of a business college. Careful identification of the errors revealed four commonly recurring errors in the essays. These errors were collected, identified, described and explained with relevant findings obtained from the previous studies. The findings of this study are expected to inform the English language teachers of the types of errors that college students make and the sources of these errors. Based on the findings, the researchers recommend English language teachers to design exercises that can address these errors. However, as the study was restricted to a business college, it may not be possible to generalize the findings to other in-country colleges under the Royal University of Bhutan.

Keywords: academic essays, errors in written academic essays, business college students, error analysis

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Introduction

Edge (1989) categorizes mistakes into three types: slips, errors, and attempts. *Slips* are those mistakes that students can easily correct on their own. *Errors*, however, are mistakes that students cannot correct without the help of their language teachers. Richards (1971) classifies errors as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized (pp. 206-213). Finally, *attempts* refer to situations where a student is unable to convey the intended meaning through a well-structured sentence. Unlike slips and attempts, errors reflect systematic shortcomings in second language learners and, as such, are of particular interest to second language researchers.

Thus, error analysis (EA) is an important part of second language acquisition (Seitova, 2016) because it seeks to examine learners' language to understand how they acquire a second language (Lee, 2006). It describes learners' "interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972), also referred to as "approximative system" (Nemser, 1971), "transitional competence" (Corder, 1967), or "idiosyncratic dialect" (Corder, 1971), and investigates the errors made by English as second language (ESL) or English as foreign language (EFL) learners. In other words, EA is an approach in applied linguistics that collects, identifies, describes, explains, and evaluates the errors (Corder, 1974) detected in the writings of the learners.

All learners make errors in their writings (Brown, 2000, 2007; Ghani & Karim, n.d.; Harmer, 2001) including those ESL or EFL learners. According to Brown (2000), Ellis (1994), and Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), learners make errors in both comprehension and production. Because detecting errors is easier in the latter than in the former (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1994; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), many scholars have investigated the errors in students' writings such as essays (Phuket & Othman, 2015; Tashi, 2018) and compositions and translations (Seitova, 2016).

Scholars such as Dulay and Burt (1974), James (1998), and Richards (1971) suggest different sources of errors, which are classified under two broad categories of interlingual (or interference) and intralingual errors. The former stems from the influence of learners' mother tongue while the latter originates within the target language itself (Shrestha, 1979). According to Kaweera's (2013) review in the Thai-English context, interlingual errors comprise lexical, syntactic, and discourse errors while intralingual errors contain false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, redundancy, overlooking co-occurrence restrictions, hypercorrection, and overgeneralization.

In the contexts of EFL and ESL, both interlingual and intralingual interferences appear to be the sources of errors. For instance, both Phuket and Othman (2015) and Sermsook et

al. (2017) attribute the sources of the errors observed in their Thai EFL students' writing to both interlingual and intralingual interferences. Similarly, in the Bhutanese ESL context, the errors in the students' writing of both Polsky (2018) and Tashi (2018) were seemingly influenced by these interferences. While Polsky attributed these errors to the influence of Indian English, Tashi identified them as resulting from both interlingual and intralingual interferences.

Because errors are an obvious sign of the learning (Brown, 2000; Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994, 1997; Harmer, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 1999, 2006), they are often examined to understand both the causes and the sources. Consequently, such examination assists learners to self-correct their errors (Ellis, 1997) with prompt in-class assistance from the teachers. Also, it aids teachers in exploring alternative teaching pedagogy (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Given that error is a "deviation from the norms of the target language" (Ellis, 1994, p. 51), analysis of learners' target language errors is an important part of classroom teaching. Corder (1967) posits three reasons. First, errors provide teachers with understanding of learners' progress in language acquisition, emphasizing areas where improvement is needed. Second, they offer researchers insights into the language acquisition process, revealing the strategies and methods learners use. Finally, as errors are essential for learners themselves, they allow learners to test hypotheses and refine their understanding of the target language.

In Bhutan, English is a compulsory subject in schools and has long served as the primary medium of instruction in both schools and colleges. Despite this emphasis, many Bhutanese students still face challenges with written English as reported by the Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment [BCSEA] (2015, 2019), and the Royal Education Council [REC] and Education Initiatives Private Limited [EIPL] (2011).

Specifically, from the two language skills, receptive and productive skills, grade ten students faced difficulties with productive skills such as writing (BCSEA, 2013), partly due to poor reading habits, which strongly corresponds to writing skills (Harmer, 2001). However, little is known about business-college students' writing in English after achieving the required benchmark (i.e., 40% of 100) in grade 12 English examination.

This body of literature shows that both EFL and ESL learners face similar difficulties in their productive skills. Therefore, a careful examination of errors students make in their written discourses is deemed necessary considering that errors are related to language and grammar. However, there is little evidence of any study on error analysis being conducted in a Bhutanese business college. This study, therefore, investigated the errors business college students make

in their academic essays. Because EA is both diagnostic and prognostic (Ellis, 1997; Seitova, 2016), the findings from this study should inform English language teachers of the state of learners' language and the errors they make in their writing activities. Consequently, the English language teachers would be able to adapt or design materials and adopt relevant pedagogies that would eventually reduce interlingual or intralingual errors through in-class teacher-led discussions and practices. Such interventions might then positively influence their future academic and professional prospects besides improving their ability to “. . . participate meaningfully in a knowledge-based society” (REC, 2012, p. 38).

Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of errors that the business students make in their academic essays; and
2. To determine the sources of errors present in the academic essays of the business students.

Research Questions

1. What types of errors do business students make in their academic essays?
2. What are the sources of the frequently observed errors in the business students' academic essays?

Research Methods

This study adopted Corder's (1974) procedural error analysis method. He suggests five steps for analyzing the errors in student-generated writings. However, from those steps, the step that requires the evaluation of errors was not adopted in this study, and this decision was made based on Ellis's (1994) justification. Ellis considers it as a separate method of enquiry. Thus, the other four procedural steps of error analysis adopted in this study are as follows:

1. Collection of a sample
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors

Participants

The study targeted 495 freshmen enrolled in a business college. Based on the sample size determined by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the researchers selected a sample of 217 students for this study. To ensure that each student in the population had an equal chance of selection (Creswell, 2003; Kish, 1965), the researchers employed a simple random sampling technique. Following Israel's (1992) guidelines, each student was assigned a unique number. The sample was then generated using Excel's RANDBETWEEN function, which selected students randomly to achieve a representative sample.

Data Source and Procedure

Data for this study were obtained from the participants' hand-written academic essays. To make the participants hand-write and submit one of any length on a topic of their choice, the randomly selected participants were instructed to gather in the examination hall on a Saturday morning. Once everyone was seated, they were allotted a three-hour or more free writing time, which was inclusive of prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. In order to encourage their participation, the participants were informed of the availability of cash prizes for the first five best essays which were to be decided by the researchers and the two English language lecturers. Electronic devices such as laptops and phones were strictly prohibited in the hall.

The reason for choosing hand-written essays over computer-typed essays was, unlike in the latter, the students could not auto-correct their errors. Moreover, the hand-written academic essays were more likely to contain their actual English, which were edited and proofread by themselves with no assistance from either humans or online tools such as *Grammarly*. This corpus of academic essays, therefore, allowed an in-depth analysis of the errors. In addition, as Ellis (1994) and Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) note, the researchers could easily collect, identify, describe, and explain the errors detected in their academic essays.

Data Analysis Technique

All academic essays were analyzed using a technique called Error Analysis (EA). According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), EA is "the study of errors that learners make in their speech and writing" (p. 51). Richards and Schmidt (2002) also define it as "the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners" (p. 184).

All errors identified in the participants' hand-written academic essays were recorded and analyzed by strictly following the steps suggested by Corder (1974). First, the academic essays written by the participants were collected. Next, all the essays were read and re-read to identify all the errors. To ensure that all errors were accurately detected and noted, two additional English language lecturers were recruited to assist the researchers for this purpose. Then, the errors were described by strictly following the error taxonomies defined by previous researchers (e.g., Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; James, 1998). Finally, based on the identification and description of errors, the sources of the errors were explained.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the four categories of errors observed in the academic essays of the freshmen of the business college. It also discusses the sources of errors observed in their academic essays.

From the total collection of 217 hand-written academic essays, a total of 400 errors were identified and subsumed under four categories of errors. As can be seen in Table 1, 250 (62.5%) of them were related to subject-verb agreement while the remaining errors concerned the usage of articles (14.3%), singular/plural nouns (13.8%), and redundancies (9.5%). While the first three categories were grammatical errors, the fourth category comprised the use of two or more words that have the same meaning.

Table 1 Errors in students' academic essays

Category of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Subject-verb Agreement	250	62.5
Articles	57	14.3
Singular/plural nouns	55	13.8
Pleonasms	38	9.5
Total	400	100

In the first category, the respondents were found using verb(s) not in agreement with the noun(s) or subject(s), and examples of such observations along with their corrected versions are given in Table 2.

Table 2 Subject-verb agreement errors

Sl. No.	Erroneous sentence	Corrected sentence
1	<u>Some people still argues</u> that self learning is not a good practice without the effort of lecturers.	Some people still argue that self learning is not a good practice without the effort of lecturers.
2	<u>Every obstacles becomes</u> . . .	Every obstacle becomes . . .
3	<u>Assignment are</u> numerous . . .	Assignments are numerous . . .
4	These challenges helps us to grow . . .	These challenges help us to grow . . .
5	<u>The lecturer have</u> to give a brief introduction about topic.	The lecturer has to give a brief introduction about topic / The lecturers have to give a brief introduction about the topic.
6	<u>Academic problems is</u> also other challenges . . .	Academic problems are also other challenges . . .
7	<u>The student do not</u> . . .	The student does not . . ./The students do not . . .
8	<u>The student have</u> to . . .	The student has to . . ./The students have to . . .
9	<u>Each one have</u> their own . . .	Each one has their own . . .
10	<u>Each students/subjects are</u> subject to . . .	Each student/subject is subject to . . .
11	<u>Every people face</u> . . .	Every person faces . . .

Considering the amount of time allotted for writing and revising the essays, the researchers and the two English language lecturers unanimously categorized them as errors. As these errors could have resulted from their poor knowledge about subject-verb agreement, the English language teachers may need to provide students with more in-class exercises and explanations. Although Dulay and Burt (1974) suggest no “explicit instruction and correction of incorrect structures” (p. 135), Bhutanese ESL learners may need familiarization of the rules, which would assist them to apply this theoretical knowledge to their writing tasks. More importantly, such interventions may diminish these errors from repeating in the corpus of business college students’ written assignments such as academic essays.

This finding substantiates the findings of Phuket and Othman (2015), Polsky (2018), Seitova (2016) and Sermsook et al. (2017), whose studies also noted subject-verb agreement errors in their participants’ writings. Similarly, Yahya et al. (2012) found more subject-verb agreement related errors in the descriptive than narrative essays of their 30 lower secondary school students. However, no such errors were observed in Amiri and Puteh (2017).

As in Yahya et al. (2012), incorrect use of articles before nouns was another commonly recurring error in most of the academic essays. In all of the 57 cases noted in Table 1, the indefinite articles (a/an) were either inserted or omitted. For example, in most of the students' academic essays, the articles – a or an – were often incorrectly placed before nouns without considering the singularity or plurality of the following nouns. Neither were the initial sounds of the nouns considered when placing indefinite articles before them. Samples of such erroneous sentences and their corrected versions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Erroneous use of articles

Sl. No.	Erroneous sentence	Corrected sentence
1	Challenges I faced as <u>a freshmen students</u> ...	The challenges I faced as a freshman . . .
2	We get <u>a senses</u> of worth and satisfaction.	We get a sense of worth and satisfaction.
3	Many students in <u>a colleges</u> are asked to write a assignment.	Many students in colleges are asked to write an assignment.
4	When writing a assignment, the students find difficulties in locating resources in a <u>electronic device</u> like phone, computer or laptop.	When writing an assignment, the students find difficulties in locating resources in an electronic device like a phone, computer or laptop.
5	The researcher needs to identify gaps . . . <u>A researcher</u> can then plan and conduct a study on it.	A researcher needs to identify gaps . . . The researcher can then plan and conduct a study on it.

As in the earlier cases, the academic essays also contained 55 samples of erroneous sentences where morpheme “s” was added to nouns irrespective of their singularity or plurality. Examples of such sentences and their corrected versions are given in Table 4. This finding supports the observations Polsky (2018) made in the writings of her students of College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS). As in this study, she also noted pluralization of certain words such as luggage, staff, and faculty by adding morpheme “s”. Although it may be a consequential impact of migration of Indian English to Bhutan (Polsky, 2018), its source was seemingly overgeneralization or intra-lingual in nature.

Table 4 Erroneous singularity and plurality

Sl.No.	Erroneous sentence	Corrected sentence
1	The books are the primary source of <u>informations</u> and <u>knowledges</u> .	The books are the primary source of information and knowledge.
2	<u>All informations</u> are available online.	All pieces of information are available online.
3	All <u>staffs are</u> well-trained in their areas of specialization.	All staff are well-trained in their areas of specialization./All members of staff are well-trained in their areas of specialization.

Of the four errors observed in this study, three of them were grammatical errors. One possible cause of these grammatical errors may be the isolated approach to teaching grammar in schools, which does little to improve students' productive language skills such as writing (Ur, 2011). Since most in-class activities are exam-oriented, English language teachers rarely use prescribed literary texts as a resource to teach grammar points (Tshomo & Sherab, 2017; Tshomo et al., 2019). This is because of two reasons. First, teaching grammar through literary texts is believed to be difficult among teachers (Royal Education Council (REC), 2018). The other is the need to focus only on delivering the content of the literary texts and four language skills (Tshomo & Sherab, 2017) so as to guarantee that their students perform better in English language examinations. However, Tshomo et al. (2019) advocate the use of literary texts as a means for teaching grammatical functions. Another may be the decline in extensive reading habits among learners as students' attitude towards reading has been found to decline with maturity and academic progression (McKenna et al., 1995; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Neither were the students given opportunities to practice reading, writing and use of dictionary in English classes, which may have culminated in difficulties in developing productive language skills (BCSEA, 2013). Finally, as indicated in Jamtsho et al.(2018) and Yangdon (2019), Bhutanese students also receive little or no in-class conversational training in English owing to teacher-centered and text-book guided practices (Tshomo & Sherab, 2017; Tshomo et al., 2019). Moreover, most conversations outside the classrooms are usually conducted in Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, or other local vernaculars depending on their socio-cultural backgrounds (Jamtsho et al., 2018).

Table 5 Erroneous pleonasms

Sl.No.	Erroneous sentence	Corrected sentence
1	<u>Each and every</u> smart student . . .	Each smart student . . . / Every smart student . . .
2	When students <u>returned back</u> from the vacation . . .	When students returned from the vacation . . . / When students are back from the vacation . . .
3	Challenges I faced as a <u>freshmen students</u> . . .	Challenges I faced as a freshman . . . / Challenges I faced as a student . . .

Pleonasms were the final forms of errors noted in the academic essays of the participants of this study. As shown in Table 5, pleonasms are words or expressions that simply contributed to wordiness in their submissions. As presented in Table 1, it comprised 9.5% of the total errors noted in the samples of business students’ academic essays. This finding, therefore, confirms the finding of Polsky (2018) who found overuse of words in the writings of the students of CLCS. Considering the commonality of these redundancies in college students’ written English discourses, it is safe to attribute their origin to Indian English as most of the subjects in the beginning of modern education system were delivered by teachers from India.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Error analysis was performed on 217 academic essays written by the freshmen of a business college. The collection of 400 errors was grouped into four categories (1) subject-verb agreement, (2) articles, (3) singular/plural nouns, and (4) pleonasms. The first three were grammatical errors while the fourth one was related to the use of two or more words that have the same meaning.

Since business-college students primarily struggled with grammatical errors, it is recommended that English language teachers focus on addressing these issues. Besides explicit explanations and reinforcements, teachers may design exercises that demonstrate situational language forms and encourage discovery learning through intensive in-class activities. Those commonly recurring but incorrectly used redundancies in Bhutanese English may also be identified, noted and addressed during the classroom teaching.

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