

Article

English First Additional Language Writing Errors of IsiZulu-speaking Learners in FET Writing Classes in KwaZulu-Natal

Berrington Ntombela^{1,*}, Nomalungelo Ngubane²

¹Department of Languages, University of Limpopo, Sovenga 0729, Limpopo, South Africa

²Academy of Multilingualism, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein 9300, Free State, South Africa

*Corresponding author: Berrington.Ntombela@ul.ac.za

Abstract: Error analysis presupposes a distinction between two languages. This distinction was primarily concerned with how the two languages facilitated or hindered learning of the target language. In its original premise, the juxtaposed languages were considered facilitative if they were similar but restrictive if they were different. This gave rise to the notion of transference where it was viewed either negatively when it hindered acquisition of certain structures or positively if it facilitated acquisition. This approach developed into a new focus of studying errors and analysing them. At first such an analysis focused on mother tongue interference but later developed into interlanguage where errors were viewed as a natural phenomenon that demonstrates the progress of learning. This paper is therefore grounded on error analysis where errors in writing of high school learners are analysed in order to interrogate where second language learners are in internalisation of English structures. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to identify common errors committed by isiZulu-speaking learners in their English First Additional Language writing in order to come up with pedagogical interventions. The study employs a qualitative approach where a sample of 7 randomly selected learners' writing texts from 40 student writing texts across 15 writing classrooms in 5 schools in Pinetown District is analysed. The sampled texts are subjected to error analysis. The analysis covers grammatical aspects such as morphology, syntax and semantics. The findings indicate that learners' errors range from word and phrase level to sentence level. At word level errors of morphological constructions and spelling were committed and at phrase level, errors were caused by the complexity of the noun and verb phrases. At sentence level, there were errors in sentence construction. The study has implications for the teaching of writing especially since some teaching approaches do not incorporate the teaching of grammar whilst the common errors are grammatical errors.

Keywords: error analysis, interference, morphology, semantics, grammatical errors

Introduction

It has been argued that writing remains one of the most difficult skills to master among second language learners, especially in South Africa (Blease & Condy, 2015; Dombrack & Artwood, 2019; Julius, 2013; Makalela, 2004; Nzama, 2011; Ngubane, Ntombela & Govender, 2020). This is because these learners are writing in a second language, the one they are not competent in. Many scholars have also alluded to the fact that writing involves multi-faceted skills such as organisation of ideas, drafting, revising and editing and for these reasons many second language learners find it difficult to comprehend these complex writing skills (Badger & White, 2000; Nunnan, 1999; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Ngubane, 2018). As result, second language learners spend most of their writing time searching for appropriate linguistic features for them to produce a coherent, cohesive and well-organised piece of writing. For most learners these linguistic elements are not readily available in their linguistic knowledge and consequently, their writing is negatively affected (Badger

& White, 2000). What remains less explored in literature, especially in South Africa, is errors in writing of learners who speak isiZulu as their home language. Ellis (1997) argues that errors are important markers in the process of second language acquisition and development. As a result, they are unavoidable. "Errors provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language" (Corder, 1967, p. 167). James (1998) echoes Corder's (1967) idea by stressing that learners' errors are a record of learners' current depth on the target language and therefore are an important area of second language writing. Based on these arguments, this study explores errors in writing of isiZulu speaking learners in English First Additional Language (EFAL) Further Education and Training (FET) writing classes. The study is guided by a research question: What are common writing errors of isiZulu speaking learners in English First Additional Language FET Writing classrooms?

Literature Review

1. Errors in Second Language Writing

Many scholars argue that writing errors are inevitable for second language learners (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 2008; Khatter, 2019; Nzama, 2011). This is so because these learners encounter many linguistic difficulties when they write in their second language. "Writing in a second language is complex and demanding" (James, 2013, p. 7). In most cases, second language learners bring linguistic features of their first language when they write in a second language. As a result, they make errors despite many years of learning to write in a second language (James 2013). Regardless of negative effects of errors on learners' writing, Corder (1967) maintains that errors inform teachers of learners' current linguistic development of the target language. In fact, Corder (1981) asserts that errors are significant in second language writing as they mark the process of language acquisition and development. Corder (1967) identified language interference as the major source of errors among second language learners. However, later studies (Richards, 1971; Ellis, 1997) recognised interlingual and intralingual errors in the writing of second language learners.

2. Common Errors in Second Language Writing

Richards (1971) identifies two major common writing errors among second language learners: interlingual and intralingual errors. According to Richards (1971) interlingual errors are caused by native language interference. They occur when second language learners apply their native linguistic rules and elements to the target language spoken or written occurrences (Richards, 1971). When learners encounter a new language, they consciously or unconsciously draw connections between the rules of the language they already know and those of the new language. When there are greater differences between the learners' native language and the target language, learners find it difficult to comprehend and they begin to transfer knowledge of their native language to the target language (Ellis, 1997). Interestingly, Sattari (2012) found that the degree of difficulty depends on the degree of similarity, which means that the more similar languages are, the more difficult the target language will be. Nevertheless, language interference mostly affect learners' writing at various linguistic levels of their writing. Ellis (2008) noted that linguistic interference mostly occurs at phonological, morphological, grammatical, syntax, lexical and semantic levels as observed among the writing of EFAL FET learners.

Intralingual errors, on the other hand, result from incomplete learning of the second language linguistic features (Richards, 1971). As a result of insufficient knowledge of linguistic rules of the second language, learners are unaware of restrictions of the rules and they make faulty application of the rules (Richards, 1971). In this way, intralingual errors are not just dependent on language interference but have more to do with ineffective learning of the target language rules as Kaweera (2013, p. 13) asserts that "[i]n the language learning process, these errors [occur] normally when learners have acquired insufficient knowledge". Similarly, Richards (1971) expounds that "developmental errors are the errors that occur when the learner attempts to build up hypothesis about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom" (p. 209). It may be assumed that errors in writing produced by EFAL FET could be a result of incomplete acquisition of their second language.

3. Studies on English First Additional Language Errors

Errors of second language learners have been explored globally (Dada, 2015; Kaweera, 2013; Ntombela & Riyaz, 2015; Phuketh & Othman, 2015) and in South Africa (Makalela, 2004; Maruma, 2017; Nzama, 2011; Sethole, 2015; Ward-Cox, 2012). However, less is known about errors committed by learners of English First Additional Language (EFAL) FET writing classrooms, especially among isiZulu speaking learners.

Nevertheless, the few studies highlighted in this section provide a glimpse of research on error analysis among second language learners in South Africa. Maruma (2017) explored errors in essay writing of grade 10 EFAL learners in Mapadi Secondary School, Limpopo province. The study identified errors committed by learners with a focus on the causes and strategies to eliminate them. The revealed ten types of errors committed by the learners in their EFAL essays are omission of the letter vowel; omission of an article; omission of preposition; insertion of wrong article; insertion of an incorrect pronoun; use of singular instead of plural or vice versa; use of sms lingo; vowel substitution; consonant substitution and inaccurate double consonant. Mother tongue interference, partial learning of English language and learners' use of technological devices were identified as the main sources of errors (Maruma, 2017).

In Pretoria, Sethole (2015) investigated the nature and the extent of mother tongue interference of Sepedi/Setswana languages in the EFAL essay writing of students at the Tshwane University of Technology. Assignments of students studying Information Technology foundation programme were used to collect data. From the students' assignments, the study found pronoun errors, incorrect use of tenses, spelling errors, prepositional errors and incorrect verb forms. Ward-Cox (2012) conducted a critical review of language errors in the academic writing of 100 bilingual entry-level distance education university students. Findings indicated errors in the sentence structure, word choice, verb tense, verb form, lexical errors, mechanical errors, run-ons and fragments, subject-verb agreement, articles, and incorrect use of apostrophe (Ward-Cox, 2012). An empirical study of error analysis of writing EAP students was conducted by Makalela (2004) at the University of the North. The purpose of the study was to test a classroom observation on the persistent gap between writing and spoken proficiencies among learners of English as a second language. Samples of written composition and oral presentation samples of 50 first-year students taking EAP course were randomly and purposively selected for data collection from a pool of 500 students registered for the EAP course. Findings revealed a higher proportion on non-standard morpho-syntactic forms in the learners' written texts while a smaller proportion was found in the oral presentations. On the contrary, more non-standard discourse forms were identified in the learners' oral presentations and less in the samples of their written texts.

Another study related to this study is the one by Nzama (2011) who examined writing errors of isiZulu speaking learners in rural and urban schools in Zululand District. The aim of Nzama's quantitative study was to conduct an investigation into errors committed by learners and observed by educators. Questionnaires were used to collect data from learners and educators of English as a second language. The focus of the questionnaires was on the factors influencing errors in learners' writing. Results of the study pointed to factors such as shortage of libraries and library books, and lack of training in the structure of English as a subject. Findings from the study prompted Nzama (2011) to recommend training of teachers in writing strategies to minimise English errors among learners.

Even though the above studies were conducted to provide some insights into types, sources and causes of errors committed by second language learners in EFAL writing classrooms, not enough has been done to expose writing errors of second language in South Africa, especially second language learners. There is a need for qualitative studies on writing errors among isiZulu language speakers, especially in secondary schools. Consequently, this study explored common errors in writing of isiZulu-speaking learners in EFAL FET writing classrooms and, thus, sought to make a contribution to the limited literature.

Methodology

After addressing all ethical issues, 15 EFAL FET writing classrooms across 5 schools in the Pinetown District participated in this study. All learners and teachers who participated in this study were isiZulu home language speakers. A sample of 7 texts analysed in this study was randomly selected from 40 marked written texts across the 15 EFAL FET, i.e., grades 10, 11 and 12.

These written texts were provided by the teachers. The written texts had been submitted by learners for assessment purposes and they were already graded when they were collected for research purposes. The names of the learners, the names of the teachers and the names of the schools that provided these written texts were kept confidential for ethical reasons.

The collected texts consisted of different types of writing including narrative essays, friendly letters, formal letters, directions, obituaries, diary entries and interview dialogues. Error analysis was used to identify common errors in writing committed by isiZulu language speakers in EFAL FET writing classrooms.

Error analysis was done qualitatively; that is, there was no quantification or any consideration of the number of times the error was committed. This allowed the researchers to explain the errors in depth. Findings from the study are presented in the following section.

The Findings and Discussion

As stated, a total of 7 texts were sampled for analysis. These ranged from letters, directions, to essays and interviews. Each text is analysed in terms of the errors that occurred with a comment and a correction of the error. A discussion of errors follows the analysis. Repeated errors are discussed only once.

Text 1. A letter

| # | Error | Comment/Correction |
|----|--|---|
| 1 | Noun Phrase is missing in the subject line: am writing this letter...) | <i>Although this is underlined as a subject line, it is actually the opening sentence which states the purpose of the letter: I am writing this letter to thank you...</i> |
| 2 | Spelling: luckily | <i>Adverb: luckily – the morpheme for the formation of adverbs -ly is well-captured but the student has generalised on the spelling of adverbs such as badly, greatly, strangely etc.</i> |
| 3 | Punctuation: comma splice – ...sick at the same time, I was always praying for them... | <i>There should be a major punctuation (either a semi-colon or full-stop) between 'time' and 'I'.</i> |
| 4 | Wrong structure: ...that may god... Punctuation: god | <i>The modal should precede a verb unless it is a question. In this case, it should be '...that God may keep them...'</i> |
| 5 | Paragraphing: each paragraph is sentence long. | <i>Part of the problem is the incorrect use of punctuation such as comma splices.</i> |
| 6 | Wrong word: then | <i>The correct word is that: ...so that maybe if they pass away...</i> |
| 7 | Preposition: at | <i>The correct preposition is ...in town.</i> |
| 8 | Wrong form: arrive back | <i>Either, 'when they arrived' or 'when they came back'</i> |
| 9 | Wrong expression: was having asthma | <i>The correct expression should be 'My aunt had asthma...'</i> |
| 10 | Spelling: diesses, spreying, | <i>Correct spelling: diseases, spraying.</i> |
| 11 | Wrong form: her's child | <i>The correct form is her child.</i> |

The missing noun phrase (#1) might indicate that the student has not internalised the obligatory constituents of a sentence which is noun phrase and verb phrase (Greenbaum, 1991; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973). However, it could also be a confusion regarding the conventions of writing a formal letter where a subject line is expected versus the opening sentence that states the object of the letter. The subject line need not be a complete sentence, which could be why the student left out the noun phrase. The problem however is that the underlined 'subject' of the letter is in the form of an opening sentence, except that the noun phrase is missing.

The spelling error (#2) could be a result of overgeneralization. The student is aware that adverbs take the suffix -ly but does not seem to have noted the spelling differences of various words that take -ly. Some words simply take -ly without any changes whilst others introduce a vowel 'i' before -ly. In this case, 'luckily' behaves the same as momentarily, happily, etc. The convention in this case is that if the adjective ends with a

semi-vowel ‘y’, when you suffix -ly, the ‘y’ changes to ‘i’, e.g., lucky = luckily, happy = happily, momentary = momentarily etc.

The comma splice (#3) is responsible for paragraphing errors in this piece of writing. A comma splice occurs when a major punctuation is replaced by a comma (Lee, Yeung & Chadorow, 2014). This again points to the student’s lack of internalisation of sentence construction where a complete thought must be terminated by a full-stop if it is declarative, an exclamation if it is an interjection, and a question mark if it is interrogative. Comma splices could also be a result of orality where the length of a pause is not governed by the completeness of a thought. This is transferred to writing where students treat pauses in writing the same way they do in speech.

The misplaced modal ‘may’ (#4) also indicates that the student has not internalised the function of operators. An operator is the first or the only auxiliary in a sentence. Operators are essential for forming questions and negatives out of declaratives (Brennan, 1993; Greenbaum, 1991). This is done by switching the position of the operator with the subject. Therefore, when the operator precedes the subject, the sentence becomes interrogative. And when it is interrogative, it is terminated by a question mark. The problem therefore with the student’s sentence is that it takes the form of an interrogative but is neither terminated by a question mark nor intended to be a question. On the other hand, in terms of modality, ‘may’ would precede a noun to express a wish, e.g., ‘May God bless Africa’, which is usually expressed as ‘God bless Africa’. This is the most probable intended meaning but could have been expressed more accurately with ‘may’ preceding the verb or elided altogether.

The use of prepositions is usually a challenge to students because prepositions tend to be more idiomatic (Tyler, Mueller & Ho, 2011). Since prepositions are only prepositions when there is an object of preposition normally a noun phrase, some prepositions do not collocate with certain nouns. For example, we do not ordinarily have expressions such as, ‘*to home’, ‘*in home’, ‘*on home’, but we have ‘at home’, or simply ‘home’. Similarly, we do not have ‘*at town’ (#7), but we have ‘in town’.

The other challenge that students face has to do with the use of stative verbs versus dynamic verbs (Palmer, 2014). Dynamic verbs are easily expressed in terms of time progression which make them take the form of progressive aspect. In that respect, ‘have’ is stative in that it expresses the state of possessing something and cannot be expressed in terms of time progression. Progression implies that there is a time when something starts and it progresses unto the time when it ends. For example, the verb ‘rain’ can be expressed in progression because rain starts at a particular time and ends at another time, e.g., ‘It was raining hard this morning’. This means it is not raining at the moment of writing. However, verbs like ‘have’, ‘love’, ‘like’ are stative because they do not express progression in time. For instance, the expression ‘I love my wife’ simply captures the state I am in at the moment of writing and cannot express continuity in terms of time. This is why there is a problem with the student’s sentence ‘My aunt was having asthma’ (#9) because the state in which the aunt was in was characterised by the presence of asthma disease.

The last challenge has to do with possession which is handled by the genitive case in nouns (Lyons, 1986). This is done by suffixing an apostrophe ‘s’ for singular nouns or simply an apostrophe for plural nouns that end with ‘s’. For example, ‘car’, ‘animal’ become ‘car’s’ and ‘animal’s’ respectively. However, pronouns do not take an apostrophe to indicate possession. For example, ‘This boy is hers’ not ‘*This boy is her’s’ (#11), or ‘This car is theirs’ and not ‘*This car is their’s’. Students therefore generalise on the formation of the possessive case in nouns and incorrectly transfer it to pronouns.

Text 2. Giving directions

| # | Error | Comment/correction |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | The writing is riddled with errors that impede meaning: In the playground the direction that you can Mrs Khumalo you make the right grosing this playground near to it take go long and will see the... | <i>It is not clear whether the direction is being given to Mrs Khumalo or whether the direction is to Mrs Khumalo’s place.</i> |

¹ An asterisk (*) is used to show ungrammatical or unacceptable structure.

Sometimes the level of writing is so low for some students that they can barely construct one correct sentence. This is sometimes caused by the fact that writing differs from speaking in that speech is governed by utterances whilst writing is governed by sentences (Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2011). Sentences come in different forms such as simple sentences, compound sentences and complex sentences (Demirezen, 2013). Simple sentences have one main (or independent) clause; compound sentences have two main clauses, and complex sentences have one main clause and a subordinate (or dependent) clause. The example of a simple sentence is 'I eat fish'. Compound sentences are joined together by coordinating conjunctions such as 'and', 'or', 'so', etc. For example, the sentence 'I eat fish' can be joined together by a coordinating conjunction 'and' with the sentence 'Themba drinks beer' to form the compound sentence 'I eat fish and Themba drinks beer'. Complex sentences are joined together using subordinating conjunctions such as 'because', 'since', 'while', etc. For example, 'because' can be used to join a subordinate clause with the main clause, e.g., 'Because Themba likes alcohol, he drinks beer'. It is advisable to progress from simple sentence to compound sentence and then to complex sentence because the level of difficulty also increases with complexity. Students are therefore expected to at least be able to write correct simple sentences.

Similarly, it is important for learners to know the four types of sentences, i.e., declarative for making statements, interrogative for making questions, imperative for commands, and exclamative for exclamation (Bloomfield, 2010; Crystal, 2008). This is because different kinds of writing resonate with specific types of sentences. Narratives would be normally dominated by declarative sentences. Interviews would be dominated by interrogatives and directions would be dominated by imperatives. This means that the learner should have a good grasp of how to write imperative sentences in order to give accurate directions.

Text 3. A letter to the Editor

| # | Error | Comment/correction |
|----|---|---|
| 1 | Wrong word and form: look | <i>The correct word and form is 'watched': ...some that are not watched by children.</i> |
| 2. | Wrong word: put | <i>The correct word is 'shown': ...the film that is being shown...</i> |
| 3 | Missing word: ...then they what is wrong. | <i>According to the context, the missing part could be '...then they don't know what is wrong.</i> |
| 4 | Tense: will be... came to you. | <i>Tense should be consistent. In this case the future tense is mixed with past tense. It should be: I will be happy if this letter comes to you.</i> |

Sometimes learners face the challenge of choosing the most appropriate term. This is usually the case when there is only one word in the mother tongue that is used in different contexts whilst the target language (in this case English) has different words for different contexts. For example, there is only one word in isiZulu that is used for 'look' and 'watch'. This means the same word would be used in isiZulu in the context of looking at somebody or something and in the context of watching television. Although the words 'look' and 'watch' are semantically related in the sense of synonymy (Glynn, 2010), they cannot substitute for one another in all situations; that is, you watch television or sport but look at somebody, or something. 'Watch' has a connotation of expecting some outcome whilst 'look' (#1) is about seeing.

Another challenge that learners face is tense. The rule of thumb is that each sentence should at least have one tense. In English there are three tenses: the present, the past and the future. Tense expresses the time at which the event occurs which can be viewed in terms of the 'now', 'before now', and 'after now'. Interestingly, only the past tense is morphologically marked in English, i.e., the morpheme '-ed' is used to form past tense (Palmer, 2014). There is no form for present or future tense; however, the base form of the verb is used to express the present tense, and the future tense is formed from the present tense. As implied above, tense is inflected in verbs. It becomes problematic when the event occurs both 'now' and 'after now'. For example, in the extract from the learner's writing, future tense is mixed with past tense (#4). This is evident from the use of the modal 'will', which is used for future tense, and the verb 'came', which is the past tense form of 'come'.

Text 4. Covering letter

| # | Error | Correction/comment |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Expression: I am respecting or keeping time | <i>I respect or keep time.</i> |
| 2 | Tense: I even get | <i>The correct tense should be: I even got... because it happened in the past.</i> |
| 3 | Spelling: cetificate | <i>The correct spelling is 'certificate'.</i> |
| 4 | Wrong word form: being commitement | <i>The correct form is 'being committed'.</i> |
| 5 | Preposition: on | <i>The correct preposition is 'to': to my work.</i> |
| 6 | Punctuation: English | <i>'English' should start with a capital letter.</i> |
| 7 | Spelling: regret | <i>The correct spelling is regret.</i> |
| 8 | Word form: your self | <i>The correct form should be 'yourself', without space.</i> |

Sometimes learners struggle with the correct form of a word. They get the root correctly but form a wrong word class from it. In the extract (#4), the root is 'commit' which is a verb from which a noun could be formed. To form a noun you simply need to suffix '-ment', which will give you 'commitment'. However, nouns as subjects generally precede verbs in declarative sentences. What makes commitment incorrect in this context is that the construction has progressive aspect as indicated by the form of the verb 'be' [being], but there is also a sense of completion represented by the fact that the student received a certificate. This means there is also perfective aspect which in the verb is marked by the morpheme '-en' for irregular verbs or '-ed' for regular verbs. Therefore, the correct form of the verb 'commit' should be 'committed' and not 'commitment'.

Also, the way in which words are written can convey a lot of unintended meaning. When the words 'your' and 'self' (#8) are separated, they grammatically belong to adjective and noun respectively; however, when they are not separated, the word is a reflexive pronoun (Greenbaum, 1991). From the context of the student's writing, it is clear that the intended word form is a reflexive pronoun 'yourself' because its antecedent is a pronoun 'you'.

Text 5. Essay

| # | Error | Comment/correction |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Number: a big dreams | <i>The article 'a' is used with singular noun phrases. It should be 'big dreams'.</i> |
| 2 | Wrong word: flash – But that flash away like water... | <i>The correct word should be flushed: 'But that [was] flushed away like water...'</i> |
| 3 | Tense & Aspect: have started | <i>The correct tense is past: 'I started using drugs' and there should be no (perfective) aspect.</i> |
| 4 | Verb form: didn't wanted | <i>The correct form is 'didn't want'.</i> |
| 5 | Noun form: The fearing | <i>The correct noun form is 'The fear'.</i> |
| 6 | Missing word and tense: feeling I've smoked... | <i>The missing word is probably 'after' and the correct tense is past: ...feeling after I had smoked...</i> |
| 7 | Wrong word form: unknowingly | <i>The correct word form should be 'not knowing'. It is the verb 'knowing' that is negated and not the adverb 'knowingly'.</i> |

Articles in English are determiners (Greenbaum, 1991). There are three forms: 'a', which is used with singular nouns that begin with a consonant sound; 'an', used with singular nouns that begin with vowel sounds, and 'the' that is used with both singular and plural nouns. In morphology, 'a' and 'an' are allomorphs because they represent the same morpheme (i.e., article) even though they are different forms (Katamba, 2014). The main difference between 'a'/'an' and 'the' is that the former are indefinite articles and the latter is definite.

That indefiniteness is also associated with singularity to the extent that the articles ‘a’ and ‘an’ can be semantically replaced by ‘one’. This is why the article ‘a’ cannot be used to determine a plural noun (#1).

Another challenge that learners face is the choice of the verb form. This is especially pronounced when they are trying to express past tense in a complex verb phrase. A complex verb phrase is the one that would have both the lexical and auxiliary verbs (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973). Learners sometimes do not realise that tense can only be expressed by one member of the verb phrase. If the verb phrase has a lexical verb only, tense will be expressed in the lexical verb, but when there is an auxiliary, tense will be expressed in the auxiliary only. The error that students commit is to express tense in both the lexical and auxiliary verbs as is the case with the extract (#4).

Another challenge that learners face is the formation of negatives. Morphologically, morphemes such as ‘-un’, ‘-dis’, ‘-il’, etc. are used to form negatives from adjectives, adverbs, and verbs (Katamba, 2015). In syntax, the adverb ‘not’ is used to form negative sentences. This is done by inserting ‘not’ after the operator. The operator is the first or the only auxiliary in the verb phrase. The error that learners sometimes commit is to use a negative morpheme (the prefix) instead of the negative ‘not’ (the adverb). In the context of the extract, the learner was supposed to negate the verb, ‘knowing’ by inserting ‘not’ but erroneously negated the adverb ‘knowingly’ by prefixing the negative morpheme ‘-un’ (#7). What the learner wanted to communicate was that the parents did not know that he or she was taking drugs.

Text 6. A letter

| # | Error | Comment/correction |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Noun Phrase form: a 16 years hard working girl | <i>This is a complex noun phrase and should be written as ‘a 16-year hard-working girl’.</i> |
| 2 | Tense: I’ve passed; I’ve stayed | <i>The correct tense is past and should be ‘I passed’ and ‘I stayed’ respectively.</i> |
| 3 | Wrong expression: didn’t be able to afford | <i>The correct expression is ‘couldn’t afford’.</i> |
| 4 | Word form: Your faithfully | <i>The correct form should be ‘Yours faithfully’.</i> |

A noun phrase as one of the obligatory elements of a sentence can consist of only a noun but can also have modifiers (Parrot, 2009). When a noun phrase is modified, it can become too complex (Greenbaum, 1991; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973). Modifiers could be adjectives, adverbs, determiners, etc. In this complex noun phrase (#1), the modifiers are determiners ‘a’ (indefinite article), ‘16-year’ (numeral – cardinal) and adjective ‘hard-working’. ‘Sixteen’ and ‘year’ must be hyphenated to show that they are operating as one unit, and so is ‘hard’ and ‘working’.

When it comes to word form, learners sometimes confuse the adjective ‘your’ and the possessive pronoun ‘yours’. Adjectives generally modify nouns and therefore either attributively or predicatively describe the noun (Murphy, 2006). Pronouns on the other hand stand in place of a noun so much as to replace it. What makes ‘Your’ (#4) incorrect is that as an adjective, it is expected to be followed by a noun but is followed by an adverb ‘faithfully’. ‘Yours’ is therefore the appropriate word because it is the pronoun that represents the writer of the letter.

Text 7. Interview

| # | Error | Comment/correction |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | Noun Phrase missing and wrong word: Great you all... | <i>It is supposed to be ‘I greet you all...’</i> |
| 2 | Wrong word: stuff | <i>The correct word is staff.</i> |
| 3 | Preposition: on | <i>The correct preposition is for: ...you are responsible for the corruption...</i> |

The words 'great' and 'greet' are not homophonous, which is sometimes responsible for the confusion between 'stuff' and 'staff'. Homophony is a semantic sense relation where words that are not related in meaning, origin or spelling are pronounced the same (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973). Even though 'staff' and 'stuff' are phonetically represented by different vowels, i.e., /ɑ:/ and /ʌ/ respectively, in the hearing of a second language speaker where such sounds are not differentiated in the mother tongue, they sound exactly the same. This is because the number of vowels in English far exceeds those in isiZulu. IsiZulu has only seven vowel sounds whilst English has eighteen. Many words would therefore sound the same, which results in confused spelling that is mistaken for wrong word choice.

Conclusion

The analysis has revealed that learners struggle with various aspects in their writing ranging from sentence construction, spelling, word-formation to verb phrases and noun phrases. There are various implications about these findings.

When it comes to sentence construction, it is evident that some students need the basics of writing simple sentences. If a student cannot construct a correct simple sentence, it should not be expected that the same student can express him or herself accurately through a compound and a complex sentence. It is therefore important that writing classes consist of the fundamentals of sentence construction so that learners get reminded and get good practice for them to move to more complex structures. Similarly, different types of writing resonate with different types of sentences. It is therefore fundamental to align these sentence types with the specific writing so that learners are assisted. For instance, a learner would need a good grasp of imperative sentences to give accurate directions.

It was also picked up that learners will benefit from the teaching and practice of the conventions of different transactional writing. For instance, learners will benefit from lessons that expose how opening sentences and subject lines are differentiated in the context of formal letters. Other aspects will include correct choice of words in ending such writings as letters. Learners will have to be taught the significance of omitting just one letter in words such as 'yours' – they must realise that leaving out the 's' immediately changes the whole meaning.

Spelling is also crucial in writing. Latheef (2012) suggested the use of e-resources to assist in teaching learners how to spell correctly. In fact, Latheef (ibid) has gone to the extent of asserting that a person who cannot spell correctly could as well be regarded as ignorant or illiterate. There is therefore a need to systematise the teaching of spelling.

Vocabulary teaching should also incorporate collocations. The analysis has shown that the incorrect use of prepositions might be caused by lack of exposure to collocations. Apart from teaching the meaning of each preposition, it is essential to also teach the idiomatic expressions that go with prepositions.

There is also a need to assist learners with how the most important phrases in the English sentence, the noun phrase and the verb phrase, behave. Once the noun phrase gets complicated due to the modification process, it is likely to cause confusion to learners. The complexity of the verb phrase adds salt to the wound. The challenges to the issues of tense and aspect can be addressed through teaching the verb phrase as the obligatory constituent of the English sentence.

There is also a need to revisit morphological processes. Errors that learners commit at word level point to challenges with derivational and inflectional morphology (Katamba, 2014). Inflectional morphology will cover grammatical aspects such as tense and number. Tense would be covered under the verb phrase, i.e., the morphemes that are used to mark tense in English. Number would be expressed in nouns in terms of singularity and plurality, and also in verbs through concord. Derivational morphology on the other hand would cover aspects where words are formed from other words such as adverbs from adjectives and nouns from verbs etc. This will assist learners with how various words behave when they receive specific suffixes.

All this can be summarised in a need to explicitly teach these various aspects to assist learners to produce writing with less errors. As stated earlier, the errors committed by these learners have indicated the areas where teaching would have to be focussed. The errors have given an indication of where support would have to be given and how pedagogy would have to be structured. In a nutshell, all is not lost.

Acknowledgement: We wish to acknowledge the teachers of the five schools in Pinetown District who availed data that were used for this study. We would also wish to acknowledge the University of Zululand Research Office that availed funds to carry out this research.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Badger, R., & White, G. (2000). 'A process genre approach to teaching writing', *English Language Teaching Journal*, 54(2), 153–160. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.2.153>
- Blease, B., & Condy, J. (2015). 'Teaching of writing in two rural multigrade classes in the Western Cape', *Reading & Writing*, 6(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v6i1.58>
- Bloomfield, L. (2010). *Language*. Oxon: Routledge
- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. In J.C. Richards (Ed.), *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition* (pp. 19-27). London: Longman.
- Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
- Dada, E. (2015). Spelling Errors: Causes, Influence on Students' Performance in English Essay Writing and Strategies for correcting them. *Case Studies Journal*, 4(8), 66–70.
- Demirezen, M. (2013). The recognition of extended simple sentences as a teaching writing problem. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 70(2013), 560–566.
- Dornbrack, J., & Atwood, M. (2019). Teaching writing in the FET phase, *Literacy Association of South Africa*. Retrieved 21 November 2019, from <https://litasa.org.za/assets/Download/Dornbrack.pdf>.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flower, L.S., & Hayes, J.R. (1981). 'A cognitive process theory of writing', *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 365–387. <https://doi.org/10.2307/356600>
- Greenbaum, S. (1991). *An Introduction to English Grammar*. Longman: Essex
- Glynn, D. (2010). Synonymy, lexical fields, and grammatical constructions. A study in usage-based cognitive semantics. In H.J. Schmid & S. Handl (Eds.), *Cognitive Foundations of Linguistic Usage – Patterns* (pp. 89–118). Berlin: Mouton der Gruyter.
- Hurford, J.R., Heasley, B., & Smith, M.B. (2011). *Semantics: A course book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- James, C. (2013). *Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Julius, L.H. (2013). Teaching Writing to Grade 5 English Language Learners in Two Grahamstown East Schools, South Africa: A Case Study. Unpublished dissertation. Rhodes University. Grahamstown, South Africa.
- Kaweera, C. (2013). Writing error: A review of interlingual and intralingual interference in EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, 6, 9-18.
- Katamba, F. (2015). *English Words*. London: Routledge.
- Latheef, V.A. (2012). Spelling mastery through internet and e-learning. *Language in India* 12(5), 200–210.
- Lee, J., Yeung, C.Y., & Chadorow, M. (2014). Automatic detection of comma splices. *Proceedings of the 28th Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation* (pp. 551–560).
- Lyons, C. (1986). The syntax of English genitive constructions. *Journal of Linguistics*, 22(1), 123–143.
- Makalela, L. (2004). Differential error types in Second Language students written and spoken texts: Implications for instruction in writing. *Written Communication*, 21, 368 – 385.
- Maruma, M.W. (2017). Error Identification and Improvement in English First Additional Language (EFAL): A case Study of Grade 10 Essay Writing. *Gender & Behaviour*, 15(2), 8799–8806.
- Murphy, R. (2006). *English grammar in use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Ngubane, N.I. (2018). *The nature and pedagogical implications of English First Additional Language writing among FET phase learners in the Pinetown District*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa
- Ngubane, N.I., Ntombela, B., & Govender, S. (2020). Writing approaches and strategies used by teachers in selected South African English First Additional Language classrooms', *Reading & Writing* 11(1), a261. [https:// doi.org/10.4102/rw.v11i1.261](https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v11i1.261)
- Ntombela, B.X.S., & Riyaz, R. (2015). Assessing EFL proficiency through error analysis among tertiary students in a university college in Oman. *Educational Research International* 4(1), 42–53.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching & learning*. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Nzama, M.V. (2011). *Error Analysis: A study of errors committed by isiZulu speaking learners of English in selected schools*. Unpublished dissertation. University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa.
- Palmer, F.R. (2014). *The English Verb*. London: Routledge
- Parrot, M. (2009). *Grammar for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Phuket, P.R.N., & Othman, N.B. (2015). Understanding EFL Students' Errors in Writing. *Journal of Education and Practice* 6(32), 99–106.
- Quirk, R., & Greenbaum, S. (1973). *University Grammar of English*. Longman: Essex.
- Sattari, A. (2012). An analysis of grammatical errors in Iranian students' English writings. *Iranian EFL Journal* 8(2), 143–157.
- Sethole, S.P. (2014). *The nature and extent of mother tongue interference by Sepedi on the effectiveness of learning English among Information Technology foundation programme students at Tshwane University of Technology*. Unpublished master's dissertation. University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Tyler, A., Mueller, C., & Ho, V. (2011). Applying cognitive linguistics to learning the semantics of English *to*, *for* and *at*: An experimental investigation. *Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8, 181–205.
- Ward-Cox, M.W. (2012). *A critical review of language errors in the writing of distance education students*. Unpublished master's dissertation. University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.