

SCIENCE LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WRITING ERRORS IN STUDENTS' ESSAYS

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Abstract

Many students in the sciences believe, and often claim, that writing accuracy is not important for them; that only the subject content of their answers is. To query this misconception, a paragraph containing errors typically found in an average student's essay was given to lecturers of agricultural science subjects at the Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (BUAN), with the aim of finding out if the lecturers shared the same view. Following the error analysis theory, this paper analyses the lecturers' reactions to the quality of writing in the text, and reveals what kinds of writing errors concern them in a student's submission. It appears that grammatical, orthographical typographical as well as referencing errors do concern them. The findings of this investigation will be valuable to lecturers as well as students in the Communication and Academic Literacy course at BUAN and elsewhere, and may influence both perception and pedagogy.

Key Words: *Writing errors, Error-free writing, clean writing*

Introduction

Botswana falls in the group of countries classified as English as a second language (ESL) countries. An ESL country is one where English is by policy an official language and is the language of education, of the church and of the law (Carter and Nunan 2001). Consequently, virtually all tertiary institutions in the country require students to have a good command of English upon admission; a requirement which is nestled on the standards set in the local primary and secondary schools (Nesbitt 1989; Nyati-Ramahobo 1999). To this end, English must be among the best six subjects qualifying them for admission. Best subjects are those in which a student has obtained a credit (grade C or better). To make English a prerequisite among the best six is clearly a measure to check whether the students would be able to cope with their studies by expressing themselves well in the language of instruction, as well as to carry out research in it.

Background

Notwithstanding the requirement that English must be among the best six subjects, most tertiary institutions have an introductory course that both supports the students' language needs, as well as introduces them to higher studies in terms of introduction to research and to academic writing. At the Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (BUAN) this course is the Communication and Academic Literacy Skills, coded COM 141 and COM 142, spanning both semesters in the first year. The course covers wide areas of personal development in these topics: motivation and goal setting, time management, oral presentation skills, academic writing and research skills. It also focuses on building reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in English essential to tertiary level study. Covering academic writing skills and study skills, COM is a support course for the students in all programmes. The students at this university are enrolled in Bachelor of Science (Bsc) programmes in areas

such as Animal Science, Crop Science, Food Science and Technology, Range Science and Agricultural Mechanization among others. Lecturers in the COM course are most appropriately placed to examine issues of the students' communicative effectiveness. The scope of the course allows them to find ways of improving the students' language skills, thus improving academic literacy and research skills for academic, professional and social contexts. The students' communicative efficiency is expected to improve accordingly, to match the challenges of this level of study.

Statement of the problem

The negative attitude of many science students at the Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources towards writing accuracy could account for their incompetency in writing. Both the attitude and the incompetency are a cause for concern, given that the majority of the students still exhibit a disturbing frequency of writing errors in their essays (and shorter texts) in English. There is a need to find out whether their lecturers in the science subjects are indifferent to this quality of writing. The discovery can be applied to change mindsets, and hopefully improve writing accuracy.

Objectives of the paper

- i) To determine whether lecturers outside of the communication skills course do spot elements of bad writing (or writing errors) in a given text.
- ii) To classify the kinds of errors that they spot in the given text.
- iii) To make a general statement (based on the discovery from the above two objectives) what writing issues concern them (or not) in a piece of writing.

Significance of the study

The findings of this investigation will be valuable to lecturers as well as students in the Communication and Academic Literacy course, and will influence both perception and pedagogy.

Limitations

There was a low response rate to the task given, reducing the researcher's ability to collect more of the needed feedback. A bigger response rate from the lecturers would have revealed more whether they are indifferent to writing errors. The analysis would be even more objective than from fewer responses.

The text given represents a subset of the wider problem area. However, a longer text would have generated even fewer responses.

Definition of terms

Target Language (TL): This refers to the language of instruction. In this case English/the British standard variety. The term is interchangeable with second language, or L2 (Carter and Nunan 2001; Isabelli-García & Lacorte 2016).

Orthography: An orthography is a set of conventions for writing a language. It includes norms of spelling, punctuation (eg hyphenation, capitalization, emphasis) and word breaks (Katamba 2005).

Literature Review

To address the question of whether lecturers are indifferent to writing errors, one needs to put into perspective what writing errors are, and what *indifferent*, in this context, means. Different researchers have addressed themselves to this topic of writing errors (Corder 1973; Corder 1981; Fox and Wilkinson 1993; Ellis 1994; Al-Khasawneh 2014, Carr 2016). All these contend that writing errors include both grammatical and orthographic errors. Grammatical errors are those that indicate a breach of the grammar of the target language (Corder 1973 Add recent source). Examples include syntactic errors such as those involving subject verb agreement, wrong word order, prepositional as well as tense errors. Orthographic errors are those that breach the writing conventions of a language Add source. These include errors in spelling, punctuation and word separation (Burton and Humphries 1992; Fox and Wilkinson 1993, Katamba 2005). In this paper I shall include errors that occur during typing, which affect the ‘aesthetic’ presentation of a paper. Furthermore, when one discusses writing errors at tertiary level, it is inevitable to include errors of referencing since referencing is a feature of academic writing (Cottrell 2003; Modubeki and Chilambampani-Moatlhodi 2017). In the context of this paper, therefore, writing errors are errors of grammar, orthography, presentation (typographic) as well as referencing. Together, these constitute bad writing. The word *indifferent* will be viewed from a very simple perspective. It means without interest; not concerned or caring about. Indifferent lecturers will tend to be unconcerned about writing errors but only with the content of the answer, in that way being indifferent to bad writing.

Grammatical errors

As already established, grammatical errors are a deviation from the norms of the target language. An error is determined by comparing the error under scrutiny with a standard written dialect (James 1998). In the case of Botswana students, this dialect is the British standard variety. In their essays, students have to obey the structural rules by which sentences are formed in that target language. The students should reflect an understanding of how the various systems of the English language operate. They should be able to apply inflectional and derivational morphemes correctly, to modify the form of a word so that it can fit into a particular syntactic slot (Katamba 1993). Awareness of word order and of clause elements is required (Leech and Svartvik 1975; Thorne 1997; Sinclair 2003). The syntax of a sentence deals with acceptable sentence structure and when important sentence elements are missing, this constitutes ungrammaticality (Burt and Kiparsky 1972 as cited in Dulay et al. 1982; Gass and Selinker 2001). It is against such a background that grammaticality will be judged. “It is the grammar (not you or I) who decides whether something said by a learner is grammatical... Appeal to grammaticality is an attempt to be objective” (James 1998:65). Within the scope of this paper it will be sufficient to refer only to the surface characteristic of an error (error description), showing in what way a structure is ungrammatical.

2.2 Orthographic errors

At the level of the students, they are expected to spell, punctuate as well as separate words correctly in writing, according to the orthography of British standard English. Reference to a relevant dictionary, to the mental lexicon (Katamba 2005) and to Microsoft word should be sufficient. At this level, students should be competent to recognize, and apply, the orthographic word, which is easy to recognize as it is preceded by a space and followed by a space (Katamba 2005). Put more simply, they should know where individual words separate, and also not write separately what should be a single word.

2.3 Errors that occur during typing (errors of presentation)

These errors are included because they are deemed to affect the quality of writing and may contribute to bad writing. Based on various online sources (Sweeny 2010; Southampton Solent University 2012; Wyatt 2016), typographical errors (typos) include errors which occur due to mechanical failure or slips of the finger, but exclude errors of ignorance, such as spelling errors. Most typos involve simple duplication, omission, transposition, or substitution of a small number of characters. Typographical errors also involve how much space is allowed between words themselves, and between words and punctuation marks.

Referencing errors

Referencing is acknowledgement of the sources used in one's academic work, and it is mandatory (Cottrell 2003; Modubeki and Chilambampani-Moathodi 2017). Students should be aware that different universities use different referencing styles and should be consistent with the referencing style used in their university. Referencing prevents plagiarism. A student has to apply, accurately, the referencing system that has been recommended by his institution. This means following all the guidelines as stipulated in the relevant referencing manual.

Importance of clean, error-free writing

Language is the tool that we use to communicate. According to Fox and Wilkinson (1993), each language has agreed conventions which allow it to be used by large groups of people. "...using the accepted conventions will help you to get the message across to the reader in the most efficient way" (p50). This helps to achieve good writing which, they state, is effective writing. Effective writing, in their view, is writing that makes its message clear. "Correct conventions cannot be emphasized enough. It is terribly important that spelling, punctuation and grammar are correct, not because someone out there says so, but because they are an aid to meaning. They are the good table manners of written language..." (p24). Clearly, it is important for anyone wishing to communicate effectively to abide by applicable writing conventions.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 The sample

The sample used for this investigation is a written text, a short paragraph of 176 words, which has fourteen (14) errors typically found in an average student's essay. This text has also been underlined in places, by each respondent (lecturer) independently, to show where the error that he has spotted lies. Each lecturer was given an identical text and his part was to underline what, *to him*, was an element of bad writing. The actual sample that was used looked like this:

Cellular respiration and photosynthesis are the two major processes by which animal and plant cells supply themselves with energy to carry out their life processes (Hooke, 2012). Therefore they may be thought off as mirror images of each other. Together they represent a win-win situation in the game of life. cellular respiration takes a glucose molecule and combine it with oxygen. The result is energy in the form of ATP, along with carbon dioxide and water as wast products. Photo synthesis takes carbon dioxide and combines it with water, enabled by radiant energy, usually from sun. The end result is glucose, with oxygen being the waste product. According to (Schwann 1999), the two processes are similar in that there both produce energy, although in two different forms. They are different in that photosynthesis assembles the glucose molecule. While cellular respiration takes it apart. The win-win of thetwo processes is that they both provide each other with the necessary

ingredients for the process to take place: glucose and oxygen for cellular respiration, carbon dioxide and water for photosynthesis_ (adapted from Enotes 5 July 2018).

Each underlined paragraph, therefore, provided two things at once to the researcher: i) specific writing errors typical of the students at BUAN, and ii) various lecturer's reactions to the quality of writing in the paragraph. That is, how many errors by type were identified by how many of the participants. The study is quantitative in that frequency is an important part of the findings. The sample is deemed to be adequate as it was selected looking at the variety of common errors which, in researcher's observation, are most typical in students' essays at the institution.

3.2 Data collection techniques

The clinical elicitation method as described in Ellis (1994:50) was used to collect data. Clinical elicitation involves "...getting the informant to produce data of any sort, for example, by ...asking learners to write a composition". Clinical is contrasted with experimental methods, which are designed to elicit data containing selected linguistic features which the researcher wishes to investigate. The researcher was not looking for selected features, but for any that would be revealed by the responses. Thus, to elicit the data an email with a simple instruction was sent to all the lecturers, requesting them to react to the given text (shown at 3.1 above) by underlining *only* what they considered to be elements of bad writing. Bad writing was not explained to them and they were told to unpack that for themselves. The individual responses of the lecturers were then analysed according to only what *they* had underlined, for this represented what they themselves considered as elements of bad writing.

3.3 Description of data

The data thus consists of various kinds of writing errors as identified on the text and placed under different categories. The categories in question have been discussed above under 2.0 to 2.5. The data is obtained from the responses received (underlinings) from the lecturers. Analysis of these responses provides the researcher with the information that is required: a revelation of what kinds of writing errors science lecturers do spot in a given text. The analysis is based on Corder (1973) and Corder (1981), see 3.4 below.

3.4 Analysis of data

The data is analyzed following Corder's guidelines (Corder 1973:274-275; Corder 1981:35). These guidelines are also cited in Ellis (1994). Corder suggests the following steps in an error analysis exercise:

1. Collection of a sample of learner language
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors
5. Evaluation of errors (if the researcher wishes to proceed to this point. Evaluation is concerned with the effect of errors on communication).

The current research is concerned with only steps 1, 2 and 3 (collection of learner language, identification of error/spotting it, and the description of the error. Learner language is represented by the sample displayed at 3.1 above. Identification of error refers simply to spotting or locating an error on a written text (as in, here it is!). Error description goes further and states the surface characteristics of the error at different levels of language such as lexis, morphology or syntax, or in specific grammatical categories, such as articles and prepositions (Ellis 1994:69). For this paper, surface characteristics of errors will also include a breach of

orthographic conventions, as well as typographical and referencing errors as these are equally important during writing.

4.0 Results and discussion

The paragraph that was provided contained fourteen (14) writing errors. These errors fell in the broad categories of grammatical (three errors), orthographic (nine errors), typographical (one error) and referencing (one error), bringing the total to fourteen. Let me illustrate these by use of a few of the examples taken from the text above. Under grammatical errors, there is **combine it* (line 5 from the top). Here the underlining indicates an uninflected verb, an error of subject verb agreement. It should read combines it. There is also *usually from *sun.* (line 7). Here the underlining indicates absence of an article. Under orthographic errors, there is *for photosynthesis** (last line). The underlining indicates absence of a terminal punctuation mark, the full stop. There is **waist products* (line 6). The underlining indicates a spelling error. There is also **thetwo* (line 11), which indicates a word separation error. Under typographical errors there is **sun.The* (line 7). The underlining indicates a spacing error (failure to hit the space bar after a full stop). Under referencing errors, there is *according to (Schwann *1999)* (line 8). The underlining here suggests that the participant did notice two things: the absence of a punctuation mark between the author and the year of publication, something that contravenes the applicable referencing style (which is APA in the case of BUAN), as well as misapplication of brackets in in-text referencing.

Table 1 below summarises the findings with regard to which types of errors were spotted (identified) by the respondents. The table also shows the number of respondents who spotted each kind of error. There were eighteen respondents in total. The third column shows how many spotted the error out of a total of eighteen people. All of the fourteen errors are in the table in column 1.

Table 1: Kinds of writing errors and number of participants who spotted each error

ERROR CATEGORY	TOTAL RESPONDENTS	No. WHO SPOTTED ERROR	% AGE	AVE %
GRAMMATICAL				
SVA	18	12	66.7	55.6
SENT FRAGM.	18	13	72.2	
ARTICLE OMIS.	18	5	27.8	
ORTHOGRAPHIC				
PUNC 1	18	7	38.9	74.04
PUNC 2	18	18	100	
PUNC 3	18	7	38.9	
SPELLING 1	18	11	61	
SP 2	18	16	88.9	
SP 3	18	15	83.3	
SP 4	18	14	77.7	
W'SEP 1	18	17	94.4	
W'SEP 2	18	15	83.3	
TYPOGRAPHICAL	18	17	94.4	94.4
REFERENCING	18	9	50	50

Key

SVA = Subject verb agreement
SENT FRAGM. = Sentence fragment / incomplete sentence structure
ARTICLE OMIS. = Article omission
PUNC. = Punctuation
SP. = Spelling
W'SEP. = Word separation

According to the results above, the survey shows that science lecturers appear to be also concerned about elements of bad writing, as they were able to identify such elements on the text that was given. For the researcher, it is very significant that there is not a single error on the text that the participants did not notice (even if the frequencies differ), covering all the categories of writing errors as discussed above. It is also significant that they interpreted bad writing for themselves. These two points immediately suggest that the science students are indeed mistaken to believe that writing accuracy is not important for them; it is as important as the subject content of their answers because as argued above (Fox and Wilkinson 1993:24) writing accuracy is crucial to achieve effective communication in any writing context, let alone academic. Although it might not be concluded that the science lecturers normally or ordinarily pick errors and point them out to students, it can be concluded that the students do not have the liberty to write anyhow since those who read their work are not indifferent to the errors that they see. Furthermore, writing errors will impact effectiveness of communication.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, this research has managed to achieve all the three of its objectives.

- i) To determine whether lecturers outside of the communication skills course do spot elements of bad writing (or writing errors) in a given text. It has been shown that science lecturers do spot writing errors in a given text.
- ii) To classify the kinds of errors that they spot in the given text. The lecturers were able to spot all the types of errors that appeared on the given text as shown on the table above. These were grammatical, orthographic, typographic and referencing errors.
- iii) To make a general statement, based on the discovery from the above two objectives, what writing issues concern them (or not) in a piece of writing.

The answer to this third objective does address the topic of this study. It has been found that science lecturers appear to be as concerned as the communication skills lecturers about any elements of bad writing that would appear on a given text. This is so because there is *not a single error* on the text that was not spotted, covering all the categories of writing errors as discussed above. What is equally significant is the fact they unpacked the meaning of *bad writing* for themselves, which shows that in spite of the fact that they are neither language teachers nor teachers of communication skills, they do possess knowledge of what bad writing is, without being assisted, and, by implication, neither accept nor support bad writing.

Based on the findings of this research, the following are recommended:

- i) That collaborations be established between lecturers of communication skills courses and lecturers of other courses in order to engage in strategies to improve the students' (and indeed each other's) quality of writing. This does not imply in any way that the lecturers would be expected to carry the extra burden of teaching communication skills. What is referred to, rather, are strategies aimed at enforcing on the students the need to produce error free writing.

This way, they would be contributing significantly to the graduate attributes desired by institutions of higher learning, as well as to the internationalization policy.

ii) That science students reconsider the misguided assumption that error free writing is not for them. The findings can be used to motivate them to write better, and to recognize the value of error free writing for what it is worth. After all, these are the same people with the potential to churn out various written resources in the future.

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