

Speaking and Writing Errors Made by Students of English Education

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Abstract: This study was based on the "controlled" speeches and term papers of students of the English Education, Sriwijaya University. The subjects were 20 students of the fifth semester, who were taking *speaking V* in the year 1994/1995. They were taken from 80 students as the population. Two approaches were employed in the study: description and analysis. The study described the kinds of errors found both in spoken and written data. Then, it analyzed the sources of the errors. It was concluded that the subjects were good as their errors did not exceed 10% in terms of the total sentences they made in speaking as well as in writing. Speaking and writing errors were relatively the same in terms of the kinds of errors and their causes. In terms of speaking, the students could be in scale 3. In writing, the students could belong to level 3, that is, *minimum professional proficiency*.

Key words: speaking and writing errors, error analysis, interlanguage, university students.

Errors in a foreign language learning and in the first or second language acquisition as well are inevitable; therefore, they should not be regarded as a sin that cannot be forgiven. They should be faced and accepted positively as they are evidence of learning process. The terms mistakes and errors are meant to be distinctive in some literature as the former is considered not so serious, unsystematic or irregular, and self-corrected while the latter

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is more serious because it deals with linguistic competence rather than performance, systematic or regular because their occurrence is predictable, and not self-corrected because the learners have not fully internalized the rule of the target language they are learning (see Corder, 1981; Littlewood, 1984). Errors are of significance to the process of language learning but not mistakes (Corder, 1981:10); therefore, errors made by second or foreign language learners need more attention and study than mistakes.

In this paper, however, the two terms are not significantly differentiated for the sake of convenience in discussing the ill-formed utterances and/or sentences made by the learners under investigation. Besides, the present writer supports to some extent what Littlewood (1984:32) asserts that "any attempt to draw a strict borderline between errors and mistakes is unlikely to be successful since it seems unlikely that they are clearly distinct in their psychological reality." Errors are significant not only to researchers but also, more importantly, to teachers and learners (Corder, 1981:10-11). To researchers, errors (hence including mistakes) are a means of knowing how language is learned or acquired by the learners in that, by analyzing the errors, they can possibly postulate new methods or modes of language teaching. To teachers, errors are even more crucial in that, if they really care for and are interested in teaching and learning issues. To learners, errors can function as reminders for them not to repeat the same incorrect forms again and again, if they really wish to improve themselves.

Speaking and writing skills as language production demand a lot of practice from the learners if they want to acquire those skills as no skills can be perfectly mastered without sufficient practice. Nevertheless, doing practice is not enough if it is done irregularly. Enough practice done regularly might still not be enough to cultivate the speaking and writing command of English without learner's high motivation and encouraging feedback from the teacher. In spite of the fact that there is a very common saying confirming that practice makes perfect, there are other factors that may determine one's success in language learning. Sadtono (1987:16-33) has summarized some factors that influence language teaching and learning, especially dealing with the teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Indonesia. The factors can be divided into linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors. The former includes the uniqueness of the target language being learned in terms of its sound system, spelling system, lexical or morphological system, and syntactical system. The relationship between the target and the source language, whether they belong to the

same family or not, and the learner's previous experience in learning other foreign languages are also important factors that should be taken into account.

The latter or non-linguistic factors include the learners, teachers, teaching strategies, materials, objectives, time allocation, big or small classes, facilities, and socio-cultural factors. Of all the factors, the most important one is the learners because they are the main key to their success as they involve many other factors including their language aptitude, motivation, attitude, dignity, memory span, emotion, age, and sex.

In the process of acquiring the two skills, speaking and writing, the learners normally commit errors which are inevitable. For example, they make errors on pronunciation and intonation in speaking, on spelling and punctuation in writing, on diction (the choice of lexical items) and grammatical aspects in both. There are some reasons for this. Two of the very common ones are that a matter of regular practice and a matter of patience. Errors are very likely to occur if the learners do not practice regularly and they do not have enough patience to keep trying correcting their incorrect expressions and utterances.

Some people believe that if a learner can speak in English remarkably well, there is a tendency that she/he is also able to write well. Why? It is because when a learner is writing, her/his language awareness is much higher compared with when she/he is speaking. She/He has much more time and is less frustrated when she/he is writing compared with when she/he is speaking.

The study aimed to describe and analyze the speaking and writing errors made by the fifth semester students of the English Education Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Sriwijaya University, in the academic year of 1994/1995. In other words, there were two things done in this study: describing the errors in speaking and writing and analyzing them in terms of their possible sources.

At first, the writer wished to compare the two kinds of errors using statistical analysis in order to assert which kinds of errors were more global or more serious, the speaking or the writing one. However, due to the nature of the data used for this study, the former plan could not be carried out.

The first problem was that the data on speaking could not be compared on one-to-one basis with the data on writing in spite of the fact that Laufer (1991:285) suggests that kinds of lexical correspondence can be categorized

between language which would facilitate or impede learning. The second reason for considering it inappropriate to compare the two kinds of errors in this study was that in fact speaking and writing skills were very much different from each other in some ways. For example, the aspects to be tested in the two skills are quite different although it cannot be ignored that some are the same. Sako (1980:496-497) claims that in a speaking test aspects like pronunciation, vocabulary knowledge, grammatical control, and fluency should be the focus while in a writing test aspects like lexical items, structural items, accuracy and speed should be the emphasis. Another important difference between them is that they have different kinds of audience: direct audience in speaking versus indirect audience in writing. In speaking, the speaker faces the audience so that non-verbal signals might help a lot in transmitting the messages to the listener, while in writing, the writer does not face the audience directly so that the punctuation of writing instead of the non-verbal signals definitely helps a great deal in transferring the messages to the reader. Halliday (1985) and other authors including Milroy and Milroy (1986) are of the same opinion that spoken or written language are different due to different medium.

However, there is one thing which is the same between the two skills when we, teachers, wish to evaluate our students' performance in speaking and writing. That is, the grading system which is highly subjective. There are some hints given by experts to help teachers evaluate and grade their students' oral performance rather objectively (Littlewood, 1984; Sadtono, 1987) and score their writing performance (Palmer and Kimball, 1981), but there are still a lot of inevitable holes that make the evaluation quite subjective.

METHODS

The subjects of this study were twenty students of the fifth semester at the English Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, who were taking *peaking V* in the academic year of 1994/1995. These subjects were taken from 80 students as the population.

From the twenty subjects, two kinds of data were collected. The data on speaking consisted of 316 sentences collected from their brief or mini talks (2-3 minutes) on the topic given, i.e. *How to give a good speech*. The twenty speeches were audio-tape recorded, transcribed, observed to identify the errors made, analyzed, and discussed. The students were given one week to prepare their speech before delivering it in class.

The data on writing consisted of 2111 sentences taken from twenty term papers written by the same twenty subjects on speaking. The titles for their writing were not given but the topic was related to *teaching and learning speaking* as they were taking *Speaking V* course. The students were given a month to finish the paper, typed double-spaced between 10 and 15 pages including the references.

These two kinds of data may be considered "controlled" to reflect the students' Indonesian-English interlanguage. Ellis (1985) calls this type of data "a careful style," assuming that the subjects or the samples pay much attention to the language form in addition to meaning. This term is quite relevant to the present data since the subjects were given a certain period of time to prepare their speeches and to write their term papers.

Two approaches were employed in the study: description and analysis. That is, the study described the kinds of errors found both in spoken and written data. Errors may deal with phonology (pronunciation and spelling), morphology (diction), and syntax (word order, agreement). Then, it analyzed the sources of the errors.

The study had the following limitations: (1) it merely tried to describe the kinds of errors (focusing on grammar) made by the twenty sample students in their speaking and writing assignments and to analyze some possible causes or sources of the errors, (2) it dealt only with data from the fifth-semester students and the results may not extend to other levels of students of different study programs and universities, (3) since the data were based on the given titles, it did not cover the errors that might occur in impromptu speeches and composition.

RESULTS

As the title suggests, errors found in the data will be described in terms of speaking and writing, each of which will be presented in the following in turn. In speaking, out of 316 sentences taken from twenty mini talks on the same given title, there were 42 errors or about 7%. The errors can be classified into some categories. First, some errors deal with the use of parts of speech such as the misuse of adverbs, verbs, nouns, prepositions, and articles. Among these errors, there are six errors dealing with omission of verbs and subjects. Here are some examples representing each kind.

- 1.* *Wereal* make the audience bored. (adverb)
→ We *really* make the audience bored.
- 2.* We ask to ourselves what is the purpose of our speaking.
(preposition)
→ We ask *ourselves* what the purpose of our speaking is.
- 3.* We have to *limited* our speaking too. (verb tense)
→ We have to *limit* our speech, too.
- 4.* *Beside* that there are many other steps to make good speech
(prep., article a)
→ *Besides* that there are many other steps to make *a* good speech.
- 5.* They get nervous and forget what to say that stumble over words. (missing subject)
→ They get nervous and forget what to say that *they* stumble over words.
- 6.* But one thing they should know the purpose of this speech.
(missing verb)
→ But one thing they should know *is* the purpose of this speech.

Second, there are fourteen errors dealing with syntactical matters like word order, parallelism, and agreement. Look at the three examples below, each of which represents one kind of syntactical errors.

- 7.* You must know the audience, who *are they*. (word order)
→ You must know the audience, who *they are*.
- 8.* Maybe you want them to bring new candidates or *offering* a new imported drug. (parallelisms)
→ Maybe you want them to bring new candidates or offer a new imported drug.
- 9.* There are *some possible way* that can take the pain out of speech making. (agreement)
→ There are *some possible ways* that can take the pain out of speech making.

Third, real errors on diction or the choice of lexical items are very few. Other errors that can be grouped in this category are the ones dealing with incorrect use of word forms in that the speaker used noun instead of verb, cardinal instead ordinal number, adjective instead of verb, noun with -ion ending instead of noun with -ing (gerund). Observe the following examples.

- 10.* After reading this article, I can *get* some steps on how to give a good speech. (choice of word)
→ After reading this article, I can *learn (know)* some steps on how to give a good speech.
- 11.* If you have been asked to *speech* in front of people sometimes you get trouble. (noun used as verb)
→ If you have been asked to *speak* front of people sometimes you get trouble.
- 12.* The *five* step that I have arranged also for other students who want to know to make a good speech. (cardinal used as ordinal number)
→ The *fifth* step that I have arranged is also for other students who want to know how to make a good speech.
- 13.* We just remember that we have to *brave* and self confident. (adjective used as verb)
→ We just remember that we have to *be brave* and self confident.
- 14.* They can use simple vocabulary and expression in order to help them avoid *confusing*. (ING-ending noun used instead of ION ending noun)
→ They can use simple vocabulary and expression in order to help them avoid *confusion*.

Fourth, other errors deal with relative pronouns, conditionals and passive forms. Errors in this group are very few in number. This does not indicate that the students have mastered those syntactical matters but this is because those patterns are seldom used by them. They are assumed to have used avoidance strategy (see Schachter, 1974), that is in order not to commit errors on those grammatical points they just avoid using them in their speech. Observe the three examples below representing each kind.

- 15.* The most important one is we have to be brief. (missing relative pronoun)
→ The most important one is *that* we have to be brief.
- 16.* We asked to give a lecture or a point about an idea. (missing verb—passive voice)
→ We *are* asked to give a lecture or a point about an idea.
- 17.* Don't talk too much *because we are as the moderator* (conditional)
→ Don't talk too much *if you are the moderator*.

Errors in writing can be classified into three categories: orthographic, morphological, and syntactical. Out of 2111 sentences taken from twenty term papers on the same given topic, there were 167 errors or about 7.9% all together. Among these, the last category is more prominent in that there are 99 errors or 59.3% found dealing with grammatical aspects, 62 errors or 37.1% dealing with orthography or word spelling and only 4 or 2.4% errors found dealing with diction problems.

The syntactical errors include errors dealing with parts of speech, agreement, passive construction, tense,, redundancy, diction, word order, and parallelism. The following are examples of errors representing those grammatical aspects.

- 18.*The aim of teaching English should *be enable* our learners to communicate in that language. (verb used as adjective)
→ The aim of teaching English should *enable* our learners to communicate in that language.
- 19.*This speech usually *taken* in the formal situation. (missing verb, diction)
→ This speech *is usually delivered* in the formal situation.
- 20.*Once you clearly identify why *is* you need to speak, you can better prepare yourself. (verb addition)
→ *Once you clearly identify why you need to speak, you can better prepare yourself*
- 21.*Public speaking is a *vehicle* for conveying a message to an audience. (article with mass noun)
→ Public speaking is a *vehicle* for conveying a message to audience.
- 22.*As a teacher or student of ESL should *aware* that language is a tool to convey and communicate ideas (missing subject, missing be)
→ As a teacher or student of ESL, *one should be aware* that language is a tool to convey and communicate ideas.
- 23.*The *listener farthest* from we can hear we clearly.(word order, pronoun)
→ The *farthest listener* from us can hear us clearly.
- 24.*In either to *speech* to inform or the *speech* to convince, it is necessary for the speaker to hold the listener's attention.(noun used as verb)
→ In either to *speak* to inform or the *speak* to convince, it is necessary for the speaker to hold the listener's attention

- 25.*The picture *by* using video tape recorder can be held still.(preposition added)
 - The picture using video tape recorder can be held still
26. When the *teacher* occasionally *have* students return to material from earlier stage of their language program (S-V agreement)
 - When the *teacher* occasionally *has* students return to material from earlier stage of their language program.
- 27.* A recorded message is more difficult to understand than a face to face message for *several reason*. (pluralization)
 - A recorded message is more difficult to understand than a face to face message for *several reasons*.
- 28.* Students are expected to present the material given by the teacher or *chosen* by the students themselves. (passive)
 - Students are expected to present the material given by the teacher or *chosen* by the students themselves.
- 29.*What is *it* technique? (redundancy – double subjects)
 - *What is technique*
- 30.*It happens because the teacher and the students *are* different individual characteristics, English abilities and need.(diction)
 - It happens because the teacher and the students *have* different individual characteristics, English abilities and need.
- 31.*At the same time employees *must to speak* to in from customers and suppliers of credit policies, store hours dates and discounts. (modal)
 - At the same time employees *must speak* to in from customers and suppliers of credit policies, store hours dates and discounts.
- 32.*The teacher should carefully *direct* each activity, *giving* the students enough format for direction, and enough room for creativity.(parallelism)
 - The teacher should carefully *direct* each activity, *give* the students enough format for direction, and enough room for creativity.
- 33.*Notice the *exchanges* possible in talking about an article of clothing. (word order)
 - Notice the *possible exchanges* in talking about an article of clothing.

- 34.* It's important to know what use the person who asks you for information. (untraceable, meaning problem)
→ It's important to know what for a person asks you for information (??).

DISCUSSIONS

Errors in speaking and in writing seem very much alike in terms of their possible sources. Based on various possible sources of errors in foreign language learning as well as in second language acquisition mentioned previously, the intralingual errors are predominant compared to the interlingual errors. Based on the examples of errors made in speaking as well as in writing described earlier, over 75% of the errors can be said to be caused by the interference of the target language systems. This error source to some extent covers or implies other sources involving some psychological factors like students' low motivation to learning and their bad learning strategies, and consequently, their monitoring does not work. In addition, the students tend to use a short cut to solve their problems, for example, by translating the source language to the target language without further consultation. This seems to be supported by Hatch and Brown (1995:127) saying that "loan translation is a common lexical process in second or foreign language learning that often leads to errors." The rest of the errors may be caused by the influence of their first language background, for instance, errors dealing with subject-verb agreement, pluralization, tense, and word order .

Other errors on pronunciation can be caused by the interference of their various native languages and errors on writing are caused by the system of Indonesian as their second language. It is generally assumed that one's first language is highly influential to his target language pronunciation. The same thing might be true that most Indonesians tend to use their knowledge of Indonesian system in expressing themselves in another language written form.

Errors on orthography are certainly not caused by the influence of first language, especially between Indonesian and English regardless more and more cognates appear in Indonesian vocabulary. Misspelled words are generally caused by learners, carelessness and negative attitude toward learning as they even feel reluctant if not lazy to look the words up in a dictionary.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the discussion above, some conclusions and possible implications can be drawn in relation to the teaching of English, especially to the English students. First, the fifth semester students of the English Education Study Programs at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Sriwijaya University, in the academic year of 1994/1995 were not too bad as their errors did not exceed 10% in terms of the total sentences they made in speaking as well as in writing. However, if the data had been collected using impromptu speeches and instant writings, the quantity of errors could have been larger. Why? Because in ungoverned speeches and writings, monitoring tends to be not in operation (see Krashen, 1980).

Second, speaking and writing errors are pretty much the same in terms of the kinds of errors and their causes. Third, generally, in terms of speaking, the students could be in scale 3 either by using NAFA (National Association for Foreign Student Affairs) or The RELC of Singapore evaluating scale (cited in Sadtono, 1987:81-82) which means that the students have been able to participate actively in the class or discussion even though they still have some problems in grammar (Sadtono, 1987:81-82). In writing, the students could belong to level 3, that is, *minimum professional proficiency*, in that they "can write paragraphs on familiar topics using basic structural patterns. Errors seldom obscure meaning" (Sako, 1980:498).

Fourth, English teachers or lecturers need to pay more attention to the common forms of errors the students make. Errors dealing with the use of open as well as closed words (parts of speech), agreement, tenses, passive constructions, conditionals, and parallelism, and word order are still the problems faced by the English students.

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