

# AN EXAMINATION OF COMMON ERRORS IN ESSAYS WRITTEN BY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAWI: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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## **Abstract**

*This study aimed at analysing errors in essays written by Malawian students who were learning English as a Second Language (ESL). Its specific focus was three-fold: to analyse errors using Corder's (1974) five-stage approach to Error Analysis, to assess sources of the errors and to identify measures that could be applied to help students attain proficiency in English. The study utilised qualitative and quantitative designs. The participants in this study were students and teachers. The former were required to write essays which were analysed using Corder's (1974) five-stage approach to Error Analysis while the latter were interviewed to establish sources of errors and ways to overcome them. The study has revealed that the following were the most frequent errors: tense, spelling, subject-verb agreement, articles, nouns, capitalisation and fragment. The study has further revealed that inter-lingual and intra-lingual interferences were the main sources of errors. The study has further demonstrated that other factors such as a lapse in reading culture, carelessness and social media's writing style influence students' errors. This study has shown that Error Analysis is helpful to teachers because it enables them to identify specific and common problems. Teachers can, therefore, focus more attention on the identified problems. The findings have pedagogical implications for ESL teachers because they would employ appropriate pedagogy to minimise students' errors in the area of grammar and sentence structures. The findings also have practical implications in the sense that some platforms could be organised in order to grill teachers on how to improve their content and pedagogical skills in ESL writing. Teachers could also use these platforms to share their experiences with fellow teachers and map the way forward to improve their instruction skills.*

**Keywords:** *Corder's Error Analysis, English as a Second Language (ESL), Inter-lingual Interference, Intra-lingual Interference*

## **Introduction**

English is well known as an international language. Most Malawians learn it as their second language. According to the language census which was carried out from 2006 to 2009 (Centre for Language Studies, 2006; 2009), English is used alongside fourteen other indigenous languages that are spoken in the country. It serves as Malawi's official language alongside Chichewa, one of the dominant languages in Malawi, which also serves as Malawi's national language.

When Malawi became a British protectorate in 1891, the language policy recognised a few local languages such as Chinyanja, Chiyawo and Chitumbuka as media for instruction in elementary classes. After independence, Chinyanja which became known as Chichewa in 1968, was declared the national language because it was the only indigenous language, which was used as the medium of instruction in primary school from Grade One up to Four. Thereafter, that is from Grade Five onwards, English took over as the medium of instruction. Since then, English is taught as a subject from Grade One up to tertiary level

The teaching of English language is, therefore, prioritised in primary and secondary schools in Malawi. The curriculum for English in Malawi highlights the following core elements: reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking and reasoning and, structure and language use. Due to technological development and exposure, most students living in the urban areas manage to master some of the core elements with ease while those from rural areas encounter some challenges. The grammatical errors committed by students from rural areas are comparatively more than those committed by students from urban areas. There are several factors that contribute to these differences some of which will be highlighted in this paper.

## **Rationale for the Study**

Teachers can become efficient when teaching grammar if they know their students' level of knowledge of the English language. It is crucial for teachers in Malawi to know how skilled their students are in as far as the core elements highlighted above are concerned. For instance, the teachers need to know which grammar points to focus on and how to teach them. Once they know the level of knowledge of their students, they would be able to devise appropriate strategies that could help students who still lag behind to master competence in the language. Teachers, mostly, know what their students are capable of accomplishing through various exercises that they give them. The exercises enable them to highlight common grammatical errors that students commit. It is from these errors that they are able to select appropriate grammar points to teach. This is the reason why it is necessary to identify and analyse essays written by Malawian secondary school students in order to identify common grammatical errors that they commit. Once the errors are identified, the next step would be identifying the right approaches to help them improve their English which would eventually lead to their mastery of grammatical competence.

Identifying grammatical errors and finding the right approaches to use in order to assist students is part of the goal of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. SLA research aims at describing learners' linguistic or communicative competence. It also

aims at explaining how and by which means learners acquire and develop competence in a second language (L2) (Ellis, 1994). To achieve these aims, SLA researchers have to examine learners' knowledge by collecting and analysing what learners manage to do through oral or written exercises.

Over the years, SLA research has changed considerably. In the early years of SLA studies, researchers focused on examining learner's errors using Corder's Error Analysis (EA) (Hinkel, 2005). Although SLA research has developed over the years, many researchers still consider Corder's EA as the appropriate method when investigating learners' L2 acquisition (Hinkel, 2005:265). There are different views on whether or not SLA research can provide teachers with useful information on how to teach an L2. Some researchers argue against SLA research and claim that it does not provide teachers with information on what to teach but rather serves as a guide on how to teach. However, SLA research is still of great importance as it provides information on how learners acquire an L2. Naturally, some L2 learners learn faster than others, but it is still of interest to investigate SLA in order to find different methods that can be used to make L2 learning more efficient and effective. As mentioned earlier, by investigating and learning more about students' grammar knowledge, a teacher would be able to provide and help students to improve their learning of an L2.

### **Statement of the Problem**

English plays an important role not only in the educational system of Malawi but also in the running of official businesses. Because of the nature of its importance, it is necessary for students attending secondary school to master the language so that they pass the national examinations and use it proficiently in their daily encounters, especially those involving official settings. Mastering the English language entails being able to write in it proficiently. However, most secondary school students find it difficult to write proficiently in this language. A case in point is the way students find it challenging to write compositions in the English language. Composition writing is one of the requirements for national examinations in English subjects. Above all, a secondary school certificate known as the Malawi School Certificate Examination (MSCE), which is obtained after completing four years of secondary education is only given when a student passes six subjects including English. Because secondary school students are required to master composition writing, teachers try their best to ensure that students write compositions that are free of error. However, students are still writing compositions, which contain errors of various types. The questions worth asking are: why do students still struggle with composition writing? What sort of errors do they commit in their compositions? What are the sources of these errors? How can these students be helped effectively so that their writing improves? In other words, what strategies should teachers adopt so that students' composition writing skills improve? It is important to intervene in the areas that students are struggling with because if the quality of English used in students' English compositions remains poor; it will have a huge impact on their career, especially bearing in mind the important role that is played by English in official settings.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed at analysing common errors in essays written by students in selected secondary schools in Malawi. The study further explored measures that could be applied to assist L2 students attain proficiency in English.

The study focused on the following objectives:

1. To analyse errors using Corder's (1974) five-stage approach to Error Analysis;
2. To assess sources of the errors; and
3. To identify measures that could be applied to help students attain proficiency in English.

## **Error Analysis**

Error Analysis (EA) was coined by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues in the 1960s. The EA consists of 'a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors' (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). James (1998), for example, proposes that EA is the analysis of learners' errors by comparing what the learners have learned with what they lack. It also deals with giving an explanation of the errors in order to accurately reduce them. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) state that the analysis of errors is the method used to analyse errors made by EFL and ESL learners when they learn a language. Not only does EA help reveal the strategies used by learners to learn a language, but also assists teachers as well as other concerned people to know what difficulties learners encounter in order to improve their teaching.

Similarly, Brown (2007) defines an error as an identifiable alteration of the grammatical elements of a native speaker, presenting the learners' competence in the target language. Errors are viewed as the non-native outcomes of the learners' inadequate linguistic knowledge. Corder (1973:260) defines an error as 'those features of the learner's utterances which differ from those of any native speaker.' Lennon (1991:182) supports Corder's definition by referring to an error as 'a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would not be produced by the speakers' native speakers counterparts'. Furthermore, 'errors in language learning occur systematically and repeatedly without any notice by the learners' (Gass & Selinker, 2008:102). The errors are identifiable only by teachers or others who possess an accurate knowledge of the grammatical system.

According to Corder (1981), learners' errors are significant in three ways: firstly, they give information about the language a learner is using; secondly, they provide information on how a language is learnt and finally, they provide information to the learner himself or herself since errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. Error Analysis also has pedagogical benefits because it gives useful input for designing and carrying out the teaching and learning process.

Error analysis became a common method of getting information about the learners' language during the early 1970s as an alternative method to contrastive analysis which was based on behaviourist theories. The proponents of EA, therefore, claimed that the

difficulties in mastering certain structures in a second language (L2) were only based on the differences between the learners' first language (L1) and the second language (L2). For decades, EA has received a great deal of interest from a number of scholars in the field of second language acquisition. It is still considered a useful tool for gathering information about learners' language. Erdogan (2005:262), for example, states that 'error analysis enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and take pedagogical precautions towards them.' Mahmoud (2011) explains that EA constitutes a link between language learning and teaching that can be exploited in initial as well as remedial teaching. As illustrated by most scholars, EA can become a useful tool to improve language teaching and, consequently, student learning.

According to Corder (1974), EA has two objectives. The first objective is theoretical in nature; it deals with what and how learners learn a language. The other objective is practical; it focuses on how to help learners learn a language by making use of the knowledge they have already gained. Corder (1974) proposes a five-stage process of (EA) which consists of the following: collection of errors, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors (Corder, 1974).

### **Common Errors Committed by L2 English Speakers**

Scholars categorise errors that L2 English speakers commit in terms of their frequency. Findings from most studies reveal that grammatical errors are the common type of errors committed by L2 English speakers. From the studies that they conducted, James (1998) and Darus (2009) found the following as the most frequent errors committed by L2 English speakers:

- a) Incorrect use of the plural 's' form;
- b) Incorrect use of verb tenses;
- c) Limited word choice as a sign that participants lack appropriate vocabulary;
- d) Incorrect use of prepositions;
- e) Difficulties in applying the subject-verb agreement rule; and
- f) Sentence structures, which do not contain objects, subjects, and at times, verbs.

Zawahreh (2012) investigated why errors of the categories listed above were frequently committed by mother tongue speakers of Arabic. His analysis revealed that Arabic language does not have a subject-verb agreement in its system; hence, it is likely for L2 English speakers to commit errors of this category. Regarding prepositions, Arabic and English are similar in that they both have several types of prepositions. However, according to Zawahreh, prepositions in Arabic are used differently from the way they are used in English.

Scholars (see Brown, 1994; Connor, 1996) consider two categories of the sources of errors. The first category includes errors that result from L1 interference. Interference errors are caused by inter-lingual transfer, that is when L1 interferes with L2. According to Brown (1994), a learner relies heavily on the linguistic system of the L1 in the early stages of the learning of the L2. This happens as a result of the learner's familiarity with the

L1. Some linguistic features or patterns typical of the L1 are traced in the L2. According to Ho (1973), there is positive transfer from L1 to L2 when parallel features of the two languages correspond exactly and when they do not, there is negative transfer hence, interference. Some of the errors that are classified as inter-lingual include grammatical, lexical and pragmatic errors (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

The second category of errors is intra-lingual and developmental errors. It is important to note, however, that some scholars consider intra-lingual and developmental errors as two distinct categories. According to Ho (1973), intra-lingual and developmental errors are committed as a result of inadequate learning of the L2 rules, ineffective teaching strategies and learners' confused thinking, among other things. The early stages of learning are dominated by inter-lingual transfers. Intra-lingual errors normally occur when a learner employs a false hypothesis about the L2 as a result of their limited knowledge of rules. These errors are usually overgeneralisations in the target language, resulting from ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete applications of rules and false concepts hypothesis (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

## **Methodology**

In this section, we provide information pertaining to the following: research design that guided this study, geographical area of the study, sampling technique and sample size, data collection methods and procedures, data analysis and ethical consideration.

## **Research Design**

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Both approaches enabled the researchers to get insights into grammatical errors students commit in their essays. The qualitative research design was useful, especially when examining sources of errors and measures that could be used to help students attain proficiency in English. On the other hand, quantitative research design allowed the researchers to quantify the errors and analyse possible relationships among the different categories of errors.

## **Geographical Area of the Study**

The research was conducted in four community day secondary schools in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. The schools are located in remote areas of the city which fall under the educational district known as Lilongwe Rural East. The study targeted schools in rural areas other than those in urban areas because students from rural areas, as already pointed out above, are the ones who struggle most when it comes to essay writing skills. The results of this study would help us explore the kind of assistance that would be ideal for such students.

## **Sampling Technique and Sample Size**

Participants in this study were only Form Four students and teachers. Systematic sampling was used to select students from three of the four schools. However, no sampling technique was used to select students from the fourth school because all the students participated in the study. In order to select teachers, purposive sampling was used as the researchers were

looking for teachers of English subject. For this reason, only one teacher from each of the schools participated in this study. Overall, 80 students (20 from each of the schools) and 4 teachers participated in this study.

### **Data Collection Methods and Procedures**

Two data collection methods were utilised in this study: essay writing and interviews. The sampled students were assigned a class where they wrote their essays entitled ‘my family.’ Afterwards, teachers who taught the English language in the sampled schools were interviewed. The interviews were recorded and, thereafter, transcribed accordingly.

### **Data Analysis**

The students’ essays were analysed using Corder’s (1974) five-stage approach to Error Analysis. The following procedures were followed in the analysis: errors were collected, identified, described, explained and evaluated. The errors were also arranged into different categories accordingly. Once this whole process was done, the errors were statistically analysed using SPSS so that we could get frequencies and their percentage representations.

The rest of the data that was collected through interviews was transcribed and analysed. Our analysis was guided by the research objectives, because apart from the error analysis, we also wanted to find the sources of the grammatical errors and measures that teachers could put in place to help students attain proficiency in English.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Ethics are concerned with the beliefs about what is wrong and right. In research, ethics refer to proper ways of dealing with participants which we adhered to in this study. To ensure confidentiality, the participants were assured that their names and names of the schools would not be revealed in the research report. In view of this, the schools are referred to as A, B, C, and D respectively. Other ethical issues included allowing the participants to participate on voluntary basis and signing a consent form to acknowledge their willingness to take part in this study.

### **Results and Discussion**

The presentation in this section is guided by the study’s research objectives. In the first place, we present and discuss errors that students committed in their essays. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of results pertaining to sources of errors and measures that could be applied to help students attain their proficiency in English.

### **Errors Committed by Students in this Study**

The results of this study revealed that the students committed fourteen categories of errors in their essays as revealed in Table 1. However, the focus in our discussion is on errors in the following categories: tense, spelling, subject-verb agreement, articles, nouns, capitalisation and fragments because these errors occurred more frequently than the rest of the errors.

**Table 1: A summary of Different Categories of Errors Identified from Students' Essays in Terms of Frequency and Percentage**

ERROR TYPE	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B	SCHOOL C	SCHOOL D	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Tense	104	230	317	303	990	15.23
Spelling	132	134	491	113	870	13.38
Subject-verb agreement	128	130	209	219	686	10.55
Articles	122	154	38	118	432	6.65
Nouns	19	213	140	47	419	6.44
Capitalisation	121	82	112	98	413	6.44
Fragment	120	128	74	90	412	6.34
Prepositions	13	151	94	134	392	6.03
Punctuation	18	40	123	176	357	5.49
Word order	16	120	181	39	356	5.48
Literal translation from Chichewa	12	147	8	129	296	4.55
Word choices	111	65	73	17	266	4.09
Adjectives	51	50	101	55	257	3.95
Pronouns	8	39	65	82	194	2.98
Transition words	8	112	30	9	160	2.46
<b>TOTAL</b>	1019	1796	2056	1629	6500	

### Tense Errors

The findings revealed that tense errors were more dominant than the rest of the errors. It was established that out of 6500 errors, tense errors had a frequency of 990 representing 15.23 per cent of the total errors students made. With respect to this type of errors, it was further established that the students struggled with the correct use of simple present tense as such errors represented 49.4 per cent of all the tense errors. Present continuous tense errors, past continuous tense errors and present perfect tense errors represented 21.2 per cent, 18.7 per cent and 10.7 per cent of all the tense errors respectively. Examples of such errors are given in Table 2.



**Table 2: Examples of Tense Errors Committed by the Students**

<b>Present continuous tense errors</b>	<b>Past continuous tense errors</b>	<b>Present perfect tense errors</b>
I lives at Mtewa village	I am write this composition to tell more about my family	Today we have not eat any food in the morning
She cook for children	When she is go to the garden, she tell us to go together	In conclusion, I have write a composition about my family
My big sister also go to Chiwamba CDSS	I take my little brother when I am go to school	I have walk a long distance from my home to here
My father is a farmer. He grow maize and groundnuts		My father have got a big garden

It appears that ESL students encounter challenges when it comes to the correct use of tenses as stipulated by other scholars such as Noor (1985) and Taher (2011). Taher (2011) who studied grammatical errors committed by junior high school students in Sweden found that tense errors were highly rated at 40 per cent. The errors committed by the students in our study could be attributed to the differences that exist between English and Malawi’s indigenous languages. In terms of morphological classification, English is a mixed language because it reflects analytical, fusional and agglutinative properties<sup>1</sup> while indigenous languages in Malawi are solely agglutinative. English is mostly analytical because it does not use many inflections compared to agglutinative languages although English words may contain many derivational affixes.

The students in this study had challenges with tenses because some verbs in an agglutinative language such as Chichewa do not necessarily change to mark tense as the tense of the verb is reflected in the tone of the word itself. For instance, *anapita* in Chichewa means ‘he went’ while *anápita* means ‘he went’ but in the distant past. Additionally, ESL learners in Malawi get confused with the changes that take place when changing irregular verbs in English from present to past tense because irregular verbs do not follow a specific pattern or rule.

### **Spelling Errors**

Spelling errors represent 13.38 per cent of the total errors committed. The spelling errors committed fall into the following categories: insertion errors, omission errors, substitution

<sup>1</sup> The following examples reveal that the English language has mixed morphological properties.

- a) ‘The boy will play with the dog’ is mostly analytical.
- b) ‘John’s cat eats mice’ demonstrates some fusional properties.
- c) ‘Antidisestablishmentarianism’ reflects agglutinative properties.

errors and transposition errors. It appears that the majority of spelling errors that ESL students commit fall into these categories as evidenced by a study that Sermsook, Liamnimit and Pochakorn (2017) conducted. The study found that Thai students used incorrect letters and omitted or added unnecessary letters to some words used in their essays. However, their students did not commit transposition errors. On the contrary, participants in our study committed this type of errors. For example, some students wrote the following: ‘form’ instead of ‘from’, ‘marreid’ instead of ‘married’, ‘singel’ instead of ‘single’ and ‘ate’ instead of ‘eat’. Further to this, students in this study also have a tendency of using shorthand writing styles when writing their essays such as ‘u’ and ‘gud’ representing you and good respectively. However, it is important to note that spelling errors are not always frequent as revealed in Sadiyah and Royani’s (2019) study. Sadiyah and Royani attribute such results to the teachers’ strictness in as far as the use of correct spellings is concerned. However, in our study, we think that the lapse in reading culture contributes to the nature of errors committed. One would expect a form four student to be able to write words such as ‘from’, ‘married’, ‘single’ and ‘eat’ without any challenges.

### **Subject-verb Agreement**

The results also reveal that students had challenges with subject-verb agreement. A total number of 686 errors were committed; this number represents 10.55 per cent of all the errors. Students failed to mark subject-verb agreement as shown in example 1.

**Example 1:** ‘My mother usually prepare food for us’.

They could also mark agreement but with a third person plural subject which does not require agreement as shown in example 2.

**Example 2:** ‘All members of the family adds up to four’.

It appears to be a challenge for ESL students to make subjects and verbs agree in terms of number and person. Such rules are difficult to internalise as revealed by Akbary’s (2017) study whose participants similarly struggled with subject-verb agreement. The explanation given above that the marking of tenses works differently in an agglutinative language also applies to examples 1 and 2. The subject-verb agreement becomes relevant when using the present simple tense. It, therefore, becomes confusing to students when they are told that marking agreement to verbs only applies when the subject is singular.

### **Articles**

With regard to articles, 432 errors were recorded representing 6.65 per cent of total errors students made. Students had challenges when using both definite and indefinite articles. One major challenge was wrong choice of articles. Students used the article ‘an’ whether with nouns beginning with consonantal sounds or with nouns beginning with vowel sounds. The use of articles is confusing to Malawian ESL learners because native languages do not utilise articles. Some of the sentences produced by the students in this study include example 3 in which the article ‘an’ is omitted:

**Example 3:** ‘I would like to write essay about my family.’

Besides errors of omission, some students inserted articles in the unnecessary slot as shown in examples 4 and 5.

**Example 4:** ‘My hope is to pass the MSCE with the better grades’ instead of ‘My desire is to pass M.S.C.E with better grades.’

**Example 5:** ‘Examples of families of the Malawi’ instead of ‘Examples of families in Malawi.’

Similar errors were also revealed in Sadiah and Royani’s (2019) study because the participants’ native languages do not use articles the way English does.

## **Nouns**

There were 419 errors related to nouns in this study. This constituted 6.44 per cent of the total errors found. Students made these errors in different ways. Firstly, they failed to assign the correct number to a noun. Students inappropriately pluralised some nouns. For example, some of the students used ‘childrens’ instead of ‘children’. Other words that were used in a similar manner include ‘maize’, ‘tobacco’, ‘man’ and ‘woman’. The students in this study also had challenges with compound nouns. The results reveal that they were not familiar with the way compound nouns are written. For instance, some students did not know that some compound words are written as one word without leaving any space in between while others are written using a hyphen in between as revealed in examples 6 to 9.

**Example 6:** ‘Grand mother’ for ‘grandmother’

**Example 7:** ‘Sister in law’ for ‘sister-in-law’

**Example 8:** ‘Ground nuts’ for ‘groundnuts’

**Example 9:** ‘Back ground’ for ‘background’

Out of 419 errors related to nouns, 297 were related to number, representing 70.9 per cent while 103 (24.6%) were related to compound nouns. 19 errors (4.5%) were due to wrong word choices.

## **Capitalisation Errors**

There were a total of 413 errors in this category. The details of the errors are as follows: failure to capitalise the first word of the sentence recorded 209 errors representing 50.0 per cent; capitalising wrong words recorded 96 errors representing 23.0 per cent. Other capitalisation errors were due to failure to capitalise proper nouns (73 errors representing 18.0%) and capitalising the first letters of some common nouns or other words belonging to various categories such as verbs that appeared within a sentence (35 errors representing 8.0%). Some of the examples include the following:

- a) The following words appeared in small letters: *kamphandira ulongwe*, *chithumba* village, *micah*, *khuzi*, *katchale*, *favour* and *kambani*. They deserved to be capitalised because they are names of people or places.
- b) Some common nouns and verbs appearing within a sentence did not deserve to be capitalised as shown in the following examples: ‘The number of children is Five’, ‘In this Family, I say ...’ and ‘We are Six children Including my parents’.

The results of a study conducted by Sermsook *et al.*, (2017) reveal that students made a lot of such errors in their essays. However, such results are attributed to the fact that there is no rule with regard to capitalisation in Thai language. On the contrary, indigenous languages in Malawi use capitalisation in a similar manner to English language. It can, therefore, be argued that students’ carelessness led to such errors. The students in this study should have utilised the similarity factor and transferred their knowledge of capitalisation rules in indigenous languages to the English language. Most students commit errors of capitalisation worldwide as revealed in Akbary’s (2017) study. However, errors of capitalisation are normally controlled because the secret behind mastering the rules is memorisation. Memorisation of capitalisation rules can be taught; it does not require learners to fully understand the complexities of the English language.

### Fragment Errors

The students in this study also committed fragment errors. A total of 413 errors were committed representing 6.34 per cent of the total errors. The identified fragment errors revealed that students were omitting some words at sentence level. Omission entails lack of knowledge in the target language. Examples 10 to 15 represent some of the fragment errors committed by students in this study.

**Example 10:** ‘...the house can destroyed’.

**Example 11:** ‘... I am form three’.

**Example 12:** ‘The my family are not ok...’

**Example 13:** ‘He is form four but he failed exams’.

**Example 14:** ‘In this composition explain about my family’.

**Example 15:** ‘... I believe that I will go again form 4...’

According to Al-Buainain (2009), fragment errors are common to all non-native users of English. He argues that sentence structure in Arabic is different from the one used in English language. When Arabic speakers commit such errors when writing in English, it is as a result of differences in sentence structure. Similar explanations also apply to Hamzah’s (2012) findings that the essays that were written by his students were marred with a lot of fragments. Hamzah argues that the VSO, VOS and OVS sentence structures that are found in Arabic play a role in the fragment errors made by Arabic students when they are writing in English. Regarding our study, the fragment errors that the students made were as a result of lack of knowledge of rules that guide sentence structure in the English language. The students need to master these rules. Although indigenous languages in Malawi and English use a similar sentence structure (SVO), the languages are different.

As pointed out above, Malawian indigenous languages are agglutinative while English is a mixed language. When students write their essays in English, they end up omitting verbs or subjects because they think that they are already included in their fragmented sentences when they are not. They get confused because with agglutinative languages it is possible to have a sentence with one word only such as *anapita* ('he went') and *anabwelera* ('he came back').

## **Sources of Errors and Measures that would Help Students Attain Proficiency in English**

The findings of this research have established that the errors that the students committed were due to inter-lingual and intra-lingual interferences. These sources will be discussed alongside measures that would help students attain proficiency in English.

### **Inter-lingual Interference**

Inter-lingual interference appears to be the major source of students' errors. Some of the teachers indicated that students always think in their first language and translate their thoughts into English. As a result, they produce sentences that are structurally incorrect. For instance, fragment errors that the students committed are as a result of inter-lingual interference. They omit content and non-content words and end up using structures that do not make sense. Some spelling errors were also as a result of inter-lingual interference. Chichewa spelling rules may have influenced the spelling of some words such as 'marreid'. In agreement with this explanation, one of the teachers said the following:

*Because students are exposed much to Chichewa, as they, most of them, come from Chichewa speaking communities, they are familiar with Chichewa and they end up producing English sentences as if they are Chichewa sentences.*

One would have expected the students in this study to use structures that make sense because English and Malawi's indigenous languages such as Chichewa use a similar SVO structure. However, the agglutinative nature of Chichewa did not help them to transfer knowledge of structure rules in Chichewa to English. The teachers explained that students are better off when constructing simple sentence structures but they experience a lot of challenges when coming up with the correct word order in questions because the two languages use different word orders. As a result, students write essays that contain a lot of literal translations.

In order to help students minimise the use of literal translations, the teachers suggested they should utilise as their teaching points some of the constructions that students use in their essays. These can highlight the differences and similarities, if there are any, between the students' first language and the target language. They can further guide the students on how to change the word order or reorganise phrases. The teachers can also give the students regular exercises in which they would convert literal translations into proper structures.

## **Intra-lingual Interference**

Tense errors were caused by intra-lingual interference. The students did a lot of overgeneralisations by attaching the 's' form to a verb regardless of whether the subject is plural or singular. The students demonstrated lack of knowledge concerning the 's' form rule. Other errors which were committed were due to the inability to apply rules; these include spelling, capitalisation, article and noun errors. The results demonstrate that the students had limited knowledge on how compound words are written as well as limited vocabulary as far as word choice is concerned.

In order to help the students minimise errors that arise due to intra-lingual interference, some of the teachers suggested that teachers need to highlight grammatical rules that are challenging to their students. Thereafter, they should interface with their fellow teachers on how to resolve them. Similar approaches were also pointed out by Alfiyani (2013) who said that teachers must be aware of grammatical errors that students commit in their writing. They should explore best practices that can help students to master grammatical rules with ease.

## **Factors that Influence Students' Errors**

In this section, we consider factors that influence students' errors. The sources discussed above have a direct influence on the errors. However, the factors that we consider in this section have a direct or an indirect influence on the errors. Such factors include lapse in reading culture, carelessness, and influence of social media's writing style.

### **Lapse in Reading Culture**

The teachers revealed that Malawi's curriculum does not include the aspect of reading for fun or reading as a hobby. If students were encouraged to read novels or stories of their choice and produce summaries for grading, there would be some improvement. Through reading for fun and summary writing, students can acquire important skills that enhance writing. Some of the teachers said that the prescribed textbooks for the English language contain stories that are not appealing to students. As a result, students read the passages to earn marks because they focus on assigned tasks and not on language use in general. In other words, students do not read for knowledge's sake but they read to pass national examinations. In view of this, some teachers appealed to their fellow teachers to change their approach to teaching language by instilling the reading culture in students.

### **Carelessness**

Carelessness is another source of errors. Some errors committed by students happen because students do not proofread their own work. One student spelled the word 'problem' correctly and incorrectly in the same essay. This was an indication that students could write certain words correctly but carelessness led to incorrect spellings. Similarly, the results of a study carried out by Hamzah (2012) revealed that the most common errors by Indonesian students are due to students' carelessness. As a result, students end up omitting letters leading to spelling errors. This study found that most of the spelling errors were due to omission, insertion as well as transposition. All these categories of spelling errors are committed due to students' carelessness.

Teachers need to utilise approaches that would curb learners' carelessness. Some of the teachers in this study revealed that teachers should give lectures on the disadvantages of carelessness. They remarked that teachers should especially emphasise that carelessness costs marks. They said that rewarding students that submit work that is edited would be another way of emphasising the importance of checking work before submission. According to the teachers, punitive measures can be applied to those students that do not care about checking their work before submission. *'If they develop this habit, it will be simple for them to write formal communications wherever they go.'*

### **Social Media's Writing Style**

The teachers revealed that social media influences students' use of shorthand writing styles and abbreviations. Students use various platforms of social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and further, which do not require strict adherence to language rules. In order to assist students, one of the teachers encouraged fellow teachers to be strict. He argued that such forms of writing should not be entertained at all and that students who use them should always be penalised. Writing using shorthand derails students' progress in their writing skills. Most of the teachers commented that social media's writing style has brought more harm than good; hence, it should not be left unchecked. One of them said that teachers should encourage their students to use standard forms of writing because language is a culture which must be perfected by practice. His argument was that if students are let free to use any form of language as they communicate with their friends, they will end up transferring this form of writing to formal settings.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study has revealed that the students from the sampled secondary schools committed fourteen categories of errors in their essays. Out of these categories, the following were considered to be more common than the rest: tense, spelling, subject-verb agreement, articles, nouns, capitalisation and fragments. Apart from examining typical errors committed by the students, this study also explored the sources of the errors and the measures that would be applied in order to help students attain proficiency in English.

The study has further revealed that there are other factors that influence students' errors such as a lapse in reading culture, carelessness and social media's writing style. Lapse in reading culture is an area that has not been highlighted by scholars who did similar studies. It, therefore, requires further investigation. Scholars need to explore the extent to which lapse contributes to students' errors in their essays because the teachers who were interviewed felt that the new generation does not capitalise on reading as a hobby which was a tendency during their time. The teachers expressed that the new generation values perusing social media as their hobby and this is impacting the students' writing skills negatively.

This study has further shown that Error Analysis is helpful to teachers because it enables them to identify specific and common problems. Teachers can, therefore, focus more attention on the identified problems. Such insights into language learning help teachers to prepare and utilise effective teaching methods and materials. Teachers can also

become well-equipped to help students overcome their learning problems. The findings of this study, therefore, have pedagogical implications for ESL teachers because they would employ appropriate pedagogy to minimise students' errors in the area of grammar and sentence structures.

The results also have practical implications. In the first place, teacher training colleges and the Ministry of Education should organise seminars and in-service training in which teachers would be grilled on how to improve their content and pedagogical skills in ESL writing. Such platforms would help the teachers explore effective ways of improving their students' writing skills. Secondly, teachers can also share their experiences with fellow teachers at the cluster level and map the way forward to improve their instruction skills.

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