

USING ERROR ANALYSIS IN TEACHING ENGLISH WRITING: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN HUNG YEN PROVINCE

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Abstract. Errors serve not only as indicators of learners' linguistic challenges but also as valuable feedback on their overall writing proficiency. With the aim of helping English-as-a-foreign-language learners to be aware of the errors they make and the importance of error analysis in improving their writing, we conducted a two-cycle action research project at a secondary school. Twenty grade-nine students were chosen as participants in the study. The data was collected from the participants' answers to the pre-and post-tests, ten writing tasks in the lessons where error analysis was employed, and a questionnaire regarding their opinions of using error analysis in teaching and learning English writing. The analysis of the errors indicates that the students have made progress in their writing after ten lessons using error analysis. Additionally, the students' answers to the questionnaire show that using error analysis has enhanced their writing, notably in the areas of error awareness, habitual reviewing, and editing.

Keywords: error analysis, teaching writing, error analysis in teaching writing, action research, writing evaluation.

1. Introduction

Developing strong writing ability in English can pose various challenges for learners. According to Richards and Renandya [1], different factors make writing difficult for English-as-a-second-or-foreign language learners to master, such as brainstorming ideas, organizing ideas, and turning them into understandable language to the target reader.

Ferris and Hedgcock [2] emphasize that attending to errors influences final written work quality; Browns and Lee [3] suggest error treatment during drafting and rewriting, and it is vital for teachers to grant students time to self-correct when providing form feedback, enabling students to develop independent error noticing and correction skills.

Founded by Corder [4] in 1967, error analysis (EA) seeks to examine and characterize learners' communication output. As stated by Browns and Lee [3], error treatment can start during the drafting and rewriting phases, when it is more appropriate to take errors into account among a variety of aspects of the overall process of reacting to student writing. Therefore, EA can be a beneficial tool for teachers and learners in teaching and learning writing.

There have been a number of studies on EA as a teaching strategy; however, the main focus was on identifying and explaining what errors the participants tended to make in language production. Rusmiati [5; 21], Ciesielkiewicz [6; 119], Luu and Tran [7; 3] identified common errors in the participants' writing, and Ferris and Roberts [8; 161-184] used EA for error diagnosis

Received July 5, 2023. Revised August 12, 2023. Accepted September 2, 2023.

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but did not offer solutions. Moreover, Dirgeyasa [9] observed improvements in writing scores without specifying the aspects of writing that benefited from EA. To fill this gap in the existing literature, our action research project intended to help students improve their English writing through the implementation of EA in teaching English writing, as well as to raise their awareness of their own errors and self-correction in their writing process.

2. Content

2.1. Literature review

2.1.1. Error analysis

Corder [1] emphasized that errors are identified by any variation compared to the rules and norms of the target language and are directly related to learners' language competence. It involves the examination of learners' errors to gain insights into their language learning process. An error is a linguistic use that deviates from what a fluent or native speaker would consider correct, and it occurs when a learner is unable to self-correct due to a lack of knowledge. Researchers find errors intriguing as they may provide valuable information about language learning methods. EA aims to identify effective teaching strategies and corrective activities by analyzing learners' errors. It is a complex process that goes beyond simply identifying mistakes and involves understanding the learner's stage of language acquisition. Global errors impede communication, while local errors have minimal impact. The EA process, as summarized by Corder [1], includes sample collection, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation. It starts with the collection of language samples, followed by the identification of errors within these samples. Subsequently, errors are meticulously described, shedding light on their specific characteristics and contextual nuances. Researchers then proceed to expound on the reasons underlying these errors. Ultimately, the process culminates in the evaluation of the errors' significance, enriching the comprehension of language acquisition.

2.1.2. Error classification

Richards and Schmidt [10] propose two types of errors: interlingual and intralingual. They further divide errors into four categories: grammatical, substantive, lexical, and syntactic, with specific subcategories under each. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen [11] identify six categories of errors, focusing on specific types of errors. Burt and Kiparsky [12] and Burt, Dulay, and Krashen [10] create error taxonomies to classify errors into local and global categories, further dividing them into morphological, syntactic, and lexical errors. Richards [13] classifies errors into three categories: performance errors, overgeneralization errors, and interference errors. Our study primarily focuses on written discourse and classifies errors into morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical errors. This classification aligns with Ferris' [14] error categorization of errors.

2.1.3. Teaching writing and error analysis in teaching English writing

The writing process involves planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Revising is important for improving writing quality, and students should check for errors during this stage. Teachers should guide students in revising their work and here comes the role of error analysis in the process of language learning and self-correction. When feedback is given on student writing, minor errors should be indicated but not corrected, and comments should focus on clarity, supporting ideas, word choices, and cohesion. EA is a suitable method for teaching writing and encourages students to recognize their own errors.

EA serves two functions in teaching and learning: monitoring the process and determining the need for remedial measures. It offers advantages such as assessing learning objectives, understanding students' learning methods, and using errors as learning resources. The procedures of EA, according to Corder [1] involve gathering samples, identifying, describing, explaining, and evaluating/correcting errors. EA follows systematic steps of identifying,

describing/classifying, interpreting, correcting, and reinforcing errors.

The procedures in any normal EA research, according to the linguist Corder [1] include gathering samples of learner language, identifying errors, describing errors, explaining errors, and evaluating/correcting errors. Selinker [15] suggests that EA as a typical teaching and learning method analyzes the students' errors through the use of systematic steps such as (1) identifying, (2) describing and classifying, (3) interpreting, (4) correcting, and (5) reinforcing for remedial. In this research, the steps recommended by Corder [1] were adopted and adapted, as follows: gathering samples of learner language; identifying errors; describing errors and explaining errors; and evaluating/correcting errors.

2.1.4. Previous studies

Previous studies on error analysis as a teaching strategy have primarily focused on analyzing errors made by students. The participants were college students, whose levels of English proficiency were good enough to help them understand the term error analysis. Rusmiati [4; 21] pointed out some common types of errors their participants made in language production. The results illustrated some common types of errors the participants made, including omission, misformation, addition, and misordering. However, the main concern that the researcher focused on was about verb tenses. Luu and Tran [6; 3] investigated the use of conjunctions among 100 tenth-graders at a public high school in Hanoi, Vietnam, and found that omission and misformation were the two most common errors. Ciesielkiewicz [5; 119] investigated common errors made by Spanish Bachillerato students in ESL works, identifying categories such as spelling, vocabulary, grammar syntax, and punctuation. The findings highlighted frequent errors including spelling mistakes, inappropriate comma use, preposition use, lexical meaning errors, issues with articles, noun numbers, subject-verb agreement, adverb usage, word order, and verb tense. Dirgeyasa [7] proved that EA could help improve the learners' writing scores; however, the proof of which aspect of the writing has been improved thanks to the help of EA was not described. The only evidence for the improvement of the participants' writing was their writing scores. In their study, Ferris and Roberts [8] used EA to diagnose the students' errors for later treatment; however, EA was merely the tool to identify the problems and errors; it was not used as the tool for solution.

Further research is needed on the use of EA as a teaching strategy for middle school students, particularly in contexts where EA is unfamiliar to students. It is essential to explore the specific aspects of English writing in which EA can be beneficial and employ appropriate methodologies for thorough examination. Investigating the effectiveness of EA in students' language learning is crucial as it encourages reflection on language production and promotes greater accuracy.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to inform and benefit educators, students, and educational institutions by promoting error awareness, self-correction, and reflective practices so that the quality of English-as-a-foreign language teaching and learning is enhanced.

2.3. Methodology

2.3.1 Aim and objectives of the study

This action research project is intended to help participants improve their writing with the implementation of EA as a writing teaching strategy. To achieve that aim, the study had the objectives as follows:

- to improve the students' writing; and
- to raise their awareness of the importance and practice of self-correction in their writing process.

2.3.2. Research questions

To achieve the aim and objectives of the research, the researcher attempts to answer the following questions:

Question 1: To what extent can Error Analysis as a teaching strategy affect students' writing?

Question 2: What are students' opinions on using error analysis in teaching and learning English writing?

2.3.3. Research design

This study's design was based on the Action Research paradigm developed by Kemmis and McTaggart [16] with four main stages, namely planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. It focuses equally on transforming the culture of the groups, institutions, and communities to which the participants belong, as well as the individuals who make up those groups.

In this study, the problem was described as the need for improvement in students' writing, and the attempt to apply EA in teaching writing aimed to help the students not only to make progress in their writing but also to become more cautious in their writing, revising and editing their writing products.

2.3.4. Research setting

The research was carried out at a private school in Hung Yen province, where the practice of teaching and learning English is paid close attention to and the requirements for constant improvement are present. Twenty ninth-grade students whose English proficiency levels range from B1 to B2 were chosen as the participants of the research.

2.3.5. Data collection

The data for this research was collected through pre-test and post-test error analysis, 10 writing lessons with EA implementation, and a questionnaire about the students' opinions. Error analysis was conducted as part of the research to compare the pre-test and post-test performances of the participants. The aim was to examine any improvements or changes in the participants' writing skills after the implementation of error analysis (EA) as a learning activity. The analysis involved identifying and categorizing the errors made by the students in their writing samples.

In addition to the error analysis, the research utilized 10 writing lessons that incorporated the use of EA. These lessons were designed to provide students with opportunities to engage in error analysis activities and practice error identification, correction, and self-reflection. The purpose of these lessons was to help students develop a deeper understanding of their writing errors and enhance their ability to identify and correct them independently. In the first five lessons in cycle 1, students engaged in individual work on another student's writing for error analysis, and then in the second cycle, students formed groups of four and analyzed the other three students' writing pieces.

To gather further insights, a questionnaire was administered to the participants to obtain their opinions on the use of EA in teaching and learning English writing. The questionnaire aimed to assess the students' perceptions of the relevance, practicality, and effectiveness of EA as a teaching tool. It also sought to gather feedback on their experiences, challenges, and levels of interest in utilizing EA during the writing process.

By combining the methods of error analysis, writing lessons with EA implementation, and the questionnaire, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of EA on students' writing skills and their attitudes toward its use in the classroom. The data collected through these methods would contribute valuable insights into the effectiveness of EA as a pedagogical approach and its potential benefits for enhancing students' writing proficiency.

2.3.6. Data analysis

The pre-test data was analyzed for errors in students' writing, categorized into morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical errors. The students' writings were evaluated in terms of such criteria as content, task achievement, organization, structure, range, and accuracy, based on an analytical rubric from the coursebook. A fellow teacher who had been trained in EA was invited to take part in the error analysis process where he independently analyzed and assessed the student writings. A similarity was witnessed between the researchers and the teacher. The same procedure

was applied to the post-test to measure students' progress and answer the first research question. The questionnaire results were tabulated and visualized into charts to communicate the participants' attitudes towards EA and its benefits in reviewing/editing writing.

2.4. Findings and discussion

2.4.1. Improvements in the participants' writing after using error analysis as a strategy in teaching English writing

A comparison between the student's scores in the pre-test and post-test shows that after 10 writing lessons with the error analysis method, the number of errors in the students' writing dropped significantly, which means the accuracy in students' written production has been improved. In the pre-test, out of 372 errors, morphological errors (44.9%) and syntactic errors (33.1%) were the two most common types of errors that the students made, and the students did not make too many mechanical errors (only about 2.7 % of the total errors). The data shows that the total number of errors made by the students in the post-test was 231 errors, which was much smaller than that in the pre-test (372 errors). The similarities that could be drawn were the ranks of the most common errors to the least ones: Morphological errors ranked first, syntactic errors ranked second, lexical ranked third and the last position was mechanical errors. These four types of errors are reduced in number but at different levels. In the post-test, a significant and notable improvement was observed in the participants' language proficiency, specifically in terms of morphological, syntactic, and mechanical terms. These types of errors displayed a drastic reduction, indicating that the learners had made significant progress in their understanding and application of grammatical rules and structures in writing. The students demonstrated a higher level of accuracy in utilizing appropriate word forms, sentence structures, and punctuation.

However, when it came to lexical errors, the decrease was relatively less pronounced compared to the other error types. This finding suggests that while the participants had acquired a certain level of basic grammar skills, such as verb tenses and forms, their acquisition of lexical knowledge and vocabulary was not as strong. The participants seemed to encounter difficulties in accurately selecting and utilizing appropriate words and expressions in context.

The reason behind this disparity in error reduction can be attributed to the learners' previous language learning experiences. While they had been exposed to and learned basic grammar rules, such as verb forms and tenses, their acquisition of this knowledge might not have been thorough enough. The participants lacked a comprehensive understanding of how these grammar structures functioned within the broader context of communication. Consequently, their ability to apply the learned grammar rules in real-life situations was limited.

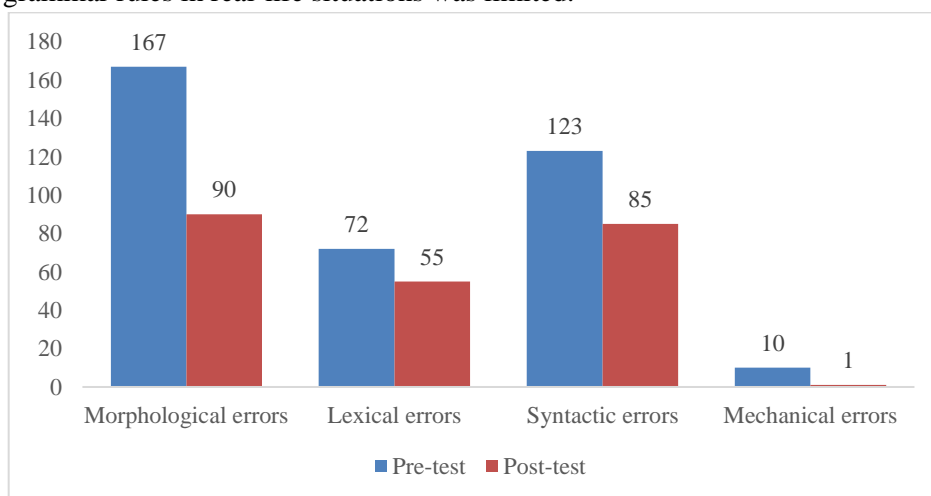


Figure 1. Comparison of the total errors in the pre-test and in the post-test

Fortunately, the post-test phase provided an opportunity for the participants to address these language difficulties and focus on further improvement. This is where EA can play a crucial role. By engaging in systematic error recognition and identification, the learners could gain insights into their specific language errors, including both grammatical and lexical aspects. EA allowed the learners to pinpoint the patterns and sources of their errors, enabling them to develop a better understanding of their language gaps and weaknesses.

The improvement of the participants' writing has also been supported by the increase in their results in the post-test compared to those in the pre-test. Of the five criteria used in the evaluation (namely content, task achievement, organization and structure, range, and accuracy), accuracy increased the most, which was greatly thanks to the reduction in the number of errors. Through the application of EA, students were taught how to identify common errors and linguistic patterns in their peers' writing, enabling them to provide targeted feedback to their peers. By addressing specific errors and guiding students in understanding the underlying rules and conventions, EA facilitated a deeper grasp of the language structures and enhanced the students' ability to produce accurate written work. Moreover, the process of analyzing errors helped the students become more conscious of their own linguistic weaknesses and empowered them to self-correct. As the students engaged in regular EA-based activities, they developed greater attention to detail, refined their grammatical and lexical choices, and enhanced their overall writing accuracy. This approach seemed to foster a supportive and proactive learning environment, allowing the students to continually improve their writing and build confidence in their language abilities. Ultimately, the integration of EA in English writing instruction proved instrumental in nurturing the students' accuracy and proficiency in written expression.

With the help of error analysis, the learners could embark on the path of self-correction. By recognizing and identifying their errors, they became more aware of their linguistic shortcomings. This awareness empowered them to take ownership of their language development and make more informed decisions regarding error correction and language improvement. Error analysis, thus, could serve as a catalyst for better self-correction, leading to enhanced language proficiency over time.

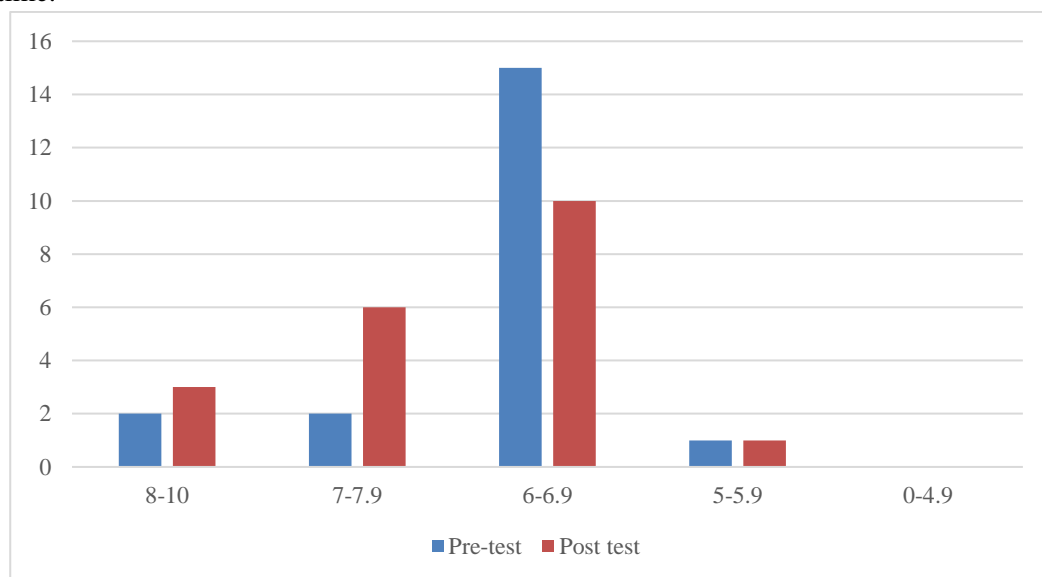


Figure 2. Score distribution in the pre-test and in the post-test

In terms of vocabulary, it was evident that the participants still needed to put in more effort. The interference of their first language likely contributed to incorrect word choices. Despite the lexical knowledge they have gained, the participants still had to continue to work diligently to

expand their vocabulary and refine their word selection skills. More time and practice are required for the students to overcome the influence of their first language and develop a more extensive and accurate lexicon.

2.4.2. Students' opinions of using error analysis in teaching and learning writing

Regarding the students' perception of the use of error analysis in teaching and learning English writing, the gathered data (illustrated in Figure 3) provide valuable insights. It is evident that the majority of the students view EA as highly relevant and appropriate for their language learning journey. They recognize EA as a valuable tool that encourages them to embrace errors as opportunities for learning and growth. By actively engaging in the identification and correction of errors, the students understand that the learning process is enhanced, and errors can actually contribute to their progress.

One noteworthy aspect of EA is its systematic approach, which guides students through a series of steps during the review and editing stages of their writing production. Students first identify the errors present in their work, then proceed to describe and explain these errors, and finally evaluate them. This structured process helps students develop their analytical and critical thinking skills as they engage in a self-reflective and evaluative examination of their own writing. This critical component of EA adds to its appeal, making it a motivating and interesting approach for fourteen participants.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of EA can be complex, and this complexity poses challenges for ten students. As a consequence, implementing EA as a regular method in the classroom may be difficult for these students. The intricacies of EA may require additional support and guidance to ensure that all the students can fully grasp and effectively apply this method in their writing practice.

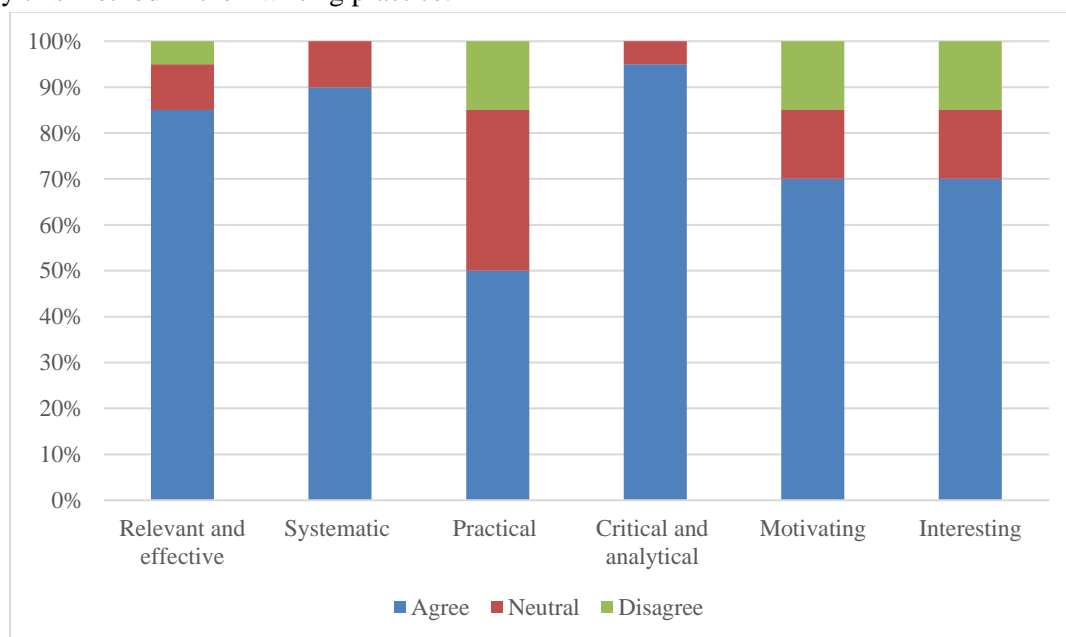


Figure 3. The participants' opinions on using EA in teaching English writing

In conclusion, the findings suggest that students generally perceive EA as a relevant and beneficial approach to improving their writing. They appreciate its systematic nature and the opportunities it provides for self-reflection. While the concept of EA may be challenging for some students, efforts can be made to support their understanding and implementation of this method in the classroom. By addressing these challenges and providing appropriate guidance, educators

can leverage the motivating and engaging aspects of EA to enhance student's writing abilities and foster their overall language learning experience.

This current study further supports the findings of Dirgeyasa (2016) and Ferris and Roberts (2001), which highlighted the positive impact of error analysis on students' writing improvement. The two mentioned studies emphasized the effectiveness of error analysis as a valuable tool in enhancing students' writing skills. The findings of this study align with this statement, reinforcing the notion that error analysis plays a crucial role in facilitating students' progress in writing. Through the identification, description, and explanation of errors, students are empowered to actively engage in the learning process, ultimately leading to enhanced writing proficiency. However, this study has not only pointed out what error types the students tended to make in their writing but also suggested EA as the solution to this problem and it has been proven effective in helping students avoid some errors to some certain extent. The area that has been improved (accuracy) has been figured out, and what types of errors have been reduced after using EA has been discussed, too.

Despite the researchers' efforts, there remain certain limitations to the study due to time constraints and limited reference materials. For one, the sample was only twenty participants, which is a relatively small size. Hence, the research findings might not be compelling. Second, the students were given the option to omit any unclear structures or terms from the data for analysis by using paragraphs from free-writing exercises. Thus, the research findings cannot accurately reflect and identify every type of error that the students might make. The majority of the errors are grammatical, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical; other problems, such as pragmatic ones, are hardly ever highlighted. Moreover, the accuracy of the production improved the most between the pre-test and post-test. The researcher must go over each criterion in the rubric used in the assessment procedure in order to evaluate it more accurately. Further studies are suggested to tackle these limitations of the current research.

3. Conclusion

In this two-cycle action research with ninth-grade students, error analysis proved effective in improving the students' writing accuracy, particularly when they had sufficient language knowledge. However, further treatment is needed for lexical errors. The students found EA relevant and motivating, but practical issues arose in error identification and explanation. Despite limitations in sample size and error identification, the study emphasizes the potential and need for ongoing refinement of EA. For future studies, it is suggested to broaden participant diversity and expand the error types studied. Additionally, incorporating varied assessment tools for a comprehensive view of language proficiency and refining evaluation criteria is advised.

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