Assessing Students' Oral Errors in Classroom Presentations: Bahir Dar University Postgraduate Diploma Program Students in Focus

Birhanu Simegn[1]

Abstract

Analysis of communication problems in second/foreign language education has been considered as one way of assessing language learning needs of students in the course of designing and instructional materials. Assessing language errors of students also provides teachers with more information about their students' language development and help teachers direct their instructional focus.   The current study examined language errors that two sections of postgraduate diploma students committed during their classroom presentations. Making two oral presentations individually was part of the course offering. Thus, the oral presentations of two groups of students (Math and Physics) were observed and the data were transcribed to analyze language errors. The result shows that the students committed more grammar and lexical errors such as tense, voice, diction, agreement and missing auxiliaries that created significant barriers of communication. Besides, the three students interviewed acknowledged that they committed such language errors, and they felt that the problem resulted from limited classroom oral presentation practice. Finally, it is recommended that students have to go through intensive language learning activities and practices that strengthen not only their communication skills in general but also their grammar and lexical knowledge.

Keywords: Communication difficulties, oral presentation, grammar and
       lexical errors, language   error analysis

Background of the Study

Nowadays, proficiency in English language has become mandatory for everyone who intends to exchange scientific ideas and skills for socioeconomic development. Richards (2008) also underlines the importance of English proficiency by relating it to a country's overall participation in the global economy where English plays a significant role in marketing and exchange of goods and services.   The Ethiopian government, thus, seems to acknowledge the essential role of English in facilitating and promoting quality education that determines the country's sustainable economic transformation. English has been taught as a

[1]Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia; Email: brshgnsh@gmail.com

subject starting from grade one, and it is used as a medium of instruction from grade nine onwards. Students at each educational level are required to attend English lessons at least once on each working day. Moreover, students' exam success in secondary school leaving English exam is mandatory for joining higher education. A student or a person with a degree of any kind who has reasonable level of English proficiency is usually invited to jobs of more benefits and opportunities. Generally, the role of English in academic and non-academic contexts has become more prominent as the world largely requires anyone to have a reasonable command of English for business and academic exchanges. The need for having communication competence in English language, thus, has recently been recognized by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, and educational institutions are supposed to practice English teaching in a way students develop the required level of communication skills that enable them to carry out academic discourse (MOE, 1994).

Textbooks at all levels of public schools have been revised to facilitate classroom interaction among students, and teachers have been trained and directed to implement communicative focused English language instructions. Students are required to use language items for expressing their ideas inside and outsides classrooms. Only understanding and analyzing the structure of the language are not sufficient for students to use English for communication, they have to go beyond this and more classroom communication practices are encouraged. Despite this intention of the Ministry of Education and the revision of textbooks, most schools do not seem to teach English in the form of using English for interaction or practicing communication in the language. Most of secondary school classroom teachers conduct their English lessons based on analysis of the language structure and communication contexts (Birhanu, 2012). Creating meaningful contexts for students to use the language items for interaction in the classroom is uncommon in instructions of most teachers (Beyene, 2008; Yemane, 2007). This is mainly because the teachers themselves lack the required English language command that can be used for organizing activities and exercises in the way students benefit from experimenting with the language and practice communicating in the target language. Unfortunaately, presenting a lesson with clear and simple language of students' level is rare in most teachers as they are not well proficient in the language. They merely depend on reading the given textbook exercises and activities and asking students to respond to each item of the exercises. There seem to have few opportunities for meaningful communication among teachers, textbook exercises and students.

Based on my personal experience as an instructor, at college and university, the practice of English teaching seems to change its approach in that individual students are required to use the language for communicating his/her ideas. Classroom oral presentations are also common in communicative English course, but most students do not manage such instructional tasks and activities though instructors try to motivate students with some assessment and evaluation mechanisms now and then. Even students do not seem to take up communication tasks and activities for developing their English communication in academic and non-academic contexts. They took college and university English classroom experiences as something irrelevant and do not overcome their English language communication problems which are mainly reflected in students' language errors.

According to Brown (2007), language errors are signs of students' progress and effort for using the language in their communication. The author defines an error as a wrong use of language items as judged by educated native speakers of that language. Based on degree of communication barrier, errors can be classified into two major categories: global and local errors (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972; Kelerman, 1974). Global errors are forms of deviations of usage where comprehension of message becomes much more difficult. While local errors of learners hardly affect the basic information exchange between the native speakers and user or learner of the language. Thus, errors create communication problems with varying degree of interference. Of course, analyzing students' errors of language gives a way of understanding the language learning needs individual students have to acquire for effective use of the language. In fact, the status of students' language proficiency is largely understood by the type of errors they commit in their communication. However, students must be made aware of their errors so as to increase their efforts in minimizing communication problems. Understanding students' specific English language status or errors may help everyone concerned take measures for improvement.

Objectives of the Study

This study had two objectives:

1. To assess the types of errors postgraduate diploma students of English commit during oral presentations.

2. To examine the progress students make after a series of oral presentations.

Research Method

This research is a descriptive survey study that analyzed students' language errors committed during two consecutive oral presentations. The participants of this study were students who had a first degree either in Math or in Physics. These groups of students were selected for this study because the students were required to have a strong command of English language that would be used for communicating scientific ideas with their students at the teachers' work place.

Participants

Forty-nine students who had a first degree in either math or physics (25 math -3 females and 22 males; 24 physics-4 females and 20 males) were selected for this study. In other words, 25 Math students and 24 Physics students were involved in this study. They sought to take a postgraduate diploma in pedagogical science, and they were given an English language course titled "English for Secondary School Teaching". The course was intended to help students develop communication skills that were needed for their future career. Most of the tasks and activities of the course were designed based on classroom teaching and learning contexts that address instructional discourses, lesson presentation, evaluation and feedback. Every student was required to participate not only in classroom discussions and activities but also in oral presentations designed for evaluation purposes.

Instruments

Two instruments were used for collecting data on students' language errors. These were classroom observation notes and interview. Since the concern of the research was students' oral presentations, making observation notes as a means of data collection could be possible. The researcher took notes while individual students were making oral presentations. Three students were also interviewed. Assesseing the students' language proficiency was made to see how the students perceive their own language problems during the presentation.

Procedures

Approaching students at their regular classrooms was not difficult for the researcher as he was one of their teachers who taught the course, "English for Secondary School Teaching". As mentioned earlier, the students were required to involve in classroom activities and exercises carried out for students to develop their communication skills. A series of exercises on language patterns in the contexts of opening a lesson, giving

instructions, providing feedback and closing lessons were done as part of the course offering. The students were also given feedback on each lesson area with some suggestions for further individual study and practice. Moreover, the students were required to make two oral presentations as part of their evaluation. The first oral presentation was on talking about personal academic and family background. While the second, was about presentation of a short classroom instruction on the area of their subject matter. Therefore, the researcher notified the students about the focus of the oral presentation and the evaluation criteria, and the fact that individual students needed to take more time for preparation so as to get good marks. Thus, individual students' oral presentations that were expected to last for ten to fifteen minutes were observed by taking quick notes. After each oral presentation the students were given feedback on their language and related communication problems. At the end of each observation, three students (one female and two males) were asked about difficulties they faced during the oral presentations. The collected observation data were tallied and counted in terms of percentages. The collected data were presented based on students' department in order to see if there were differences between the two groups. Besides, the interview data were analyzed thematically and organized into major concepts.

Results

Students' Language Errors

The students' English language errors committed in the two consecutive oral presentations are presented one by one based on their groups, i.e. physics and math.
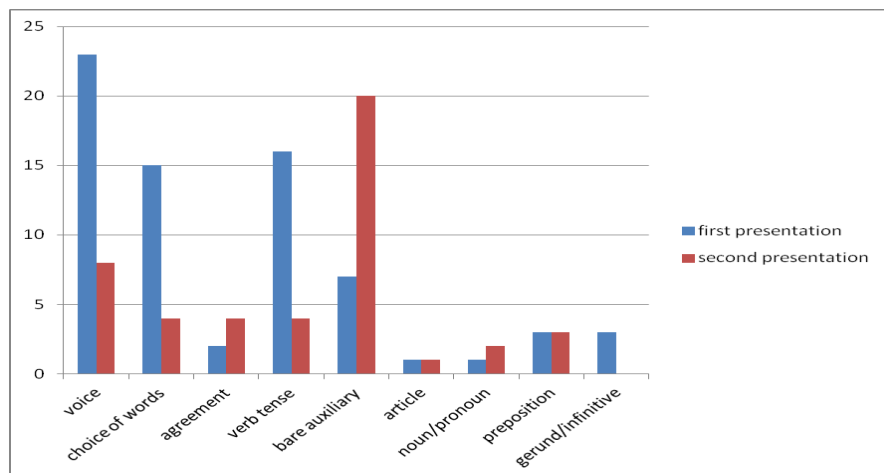
Figure 1: Language error of physics students

Figure 1: Language error of physics students

The above figure shows language errors that physics students committed in their first and second oral presentations during regular course offering. In the first presentation, considerably more students made errors such as voice, choice of words and verb tense (23, 15 & 15 students respectively). More than fifty percent of the students did not use active and passive voice, diction and tense correctly in their oral presentations. The students in their second presentation seemed to minimize the errors they made during the first presentation. However, the majority of the students experienced another error called bare auxiliary (20 students). More than eighty percent of the students could not use auxiliaries or linking verbs such as 'is', 'are', and 'be' in their second oral presentation. Of course, more students could be expected to make errors in the first presentation, as they may not have previous presentation practice. The low number of students who committed the same errors in the second presentation could be due to the result of the preceding presentation practice. The students' use of 'bare auxiliary' in the second presentation despite their first presentation practice may be because the students faced a type of communication that demanded auxiliary-based interaction that was different from their first oral presentation. In both instances, the majority of the students failed to employ 'auxiliaries' in their oral presentations. Surprisingly, the students did not make improvements in

using 'agreement' and 'noun/pronoun' correctly; they rather showed more errors of such kind in their second presentation.
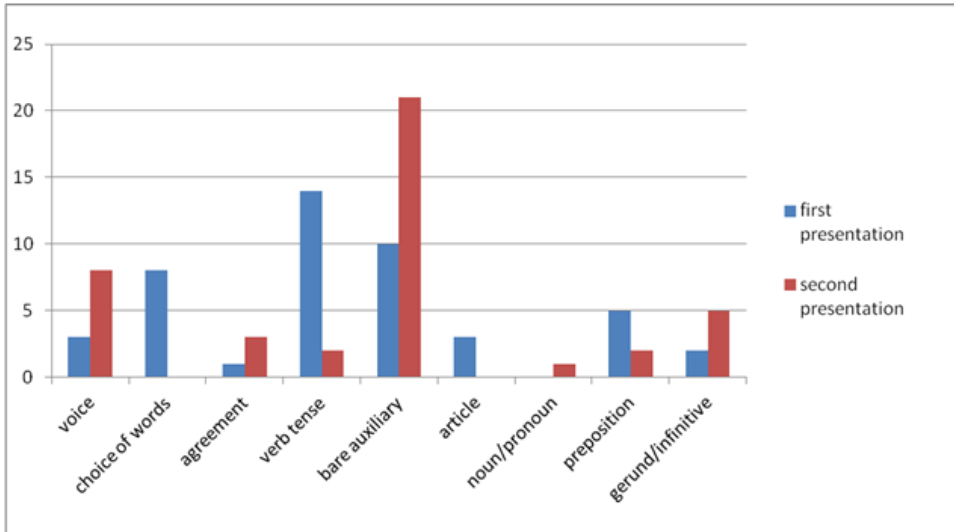

Figure 2: Language errors of math students

Figure 2 above shows math students' language errors experienced during their first and second oral presentations in the normal course offering program. In the first presentation, around 15 students made an error of verb tense and considerable number of students (10 students) made bare auxiliary errors. Compared with the physics students, a fewer number of students committed errors of except errors related to verb tense and auxiliary. Surprisingly, in the second presentation, the majority of the students made the bare auxiliary error that was also common to the physics students.

Another important consideration in this figure is that the students failed to show progress in minimizing their errors such as voice, agreement and gerund/infinitive; they even performed worse in the stated language elements. However, considerable improvement in the second presentation was shown in use of prepositions. One possible justification for such inconsistent improvement and failure is that the students were not provided with specific grammar and related practices during the first presentation. Besides, the students might not be more aware of and determined to improve grammar and related problems they faced after the first oral presentation.

Table 3.1 Sample error excerpts

No.	Expressions	Error types	Corrected version
1	*I born October 1988 Dangila*	*Missing auxiliary, preposition, adverb sequence*	*I was born in Dangila on October 6, 1988.*
2	*I learn my primary education*	*Diction/choice of words, verb tense*	*I attended my primary education*
3	*I am graduated university Mekele*	*Passive/active voice, word order, verb tense*	*I have graduated from Mekele university*
4	*I have not job experience*	*Auxiliary missing, diction*	*I do not have any work experience*
5	*How learning treating you?*	*Diction,*	*How is life? / how do you?*
6	*Energy measure the work done something*	*Agreement , diction, preposition*	*Energy is used to measure the work done of something*
7	*Gravitational force several advantage*	*Missing verb, agreement*	*Gravitational force has several advantages*

The above table shows common language errors the students made during their oral presentations. A few of these linguistic deviations are very serious and they could create communication barriers. For example, if we take the expression 'energy measure the work done something', one could not understand whether the word 'energy' is considered as a means of measurement or is the one that is going to be measured. On the other hand, expressions like 'gravitational force several advantage' may be merely understood despite the grammatical errors such as a missing verb and subject-verb agreement. These students' language expressions, in general, reveal two major points. First, the students' command of English needs much more improvement; otherwise, communication using the language in the context of classroom instruction could be very difficult. Secondly, academic communication basically needs formal language and appropriate communication context where educated individuals are expected to share scientific ideas and innovations from around the world.

The quality of language academicians used could determine their access and degree of dominance of their scientific ideas and innovations. Therefore, faulty language expressions usually not only create communication barriers but also reduce the dissemination and domination of novel ideas.

Data from Interview

The three students interviewed agreed on the point that they had serious communication problems. For example, one of the interviewees said "I always feel that I do not have the language proficiency for talking about my academic background and work experience which is commonly asked in job interviews …" All of the interviewees acknowledged the language deficiencies they faced in expressing their ideas. However, two of the students did not want to be accountable for their language problems; they rather felt that the schools or the educational institutions failed to create language learning opportunities such as books in the libraries, audio and video materials in and out of classrooms. The other student, on the other hand, believed students themselves did not make the required effort for improving their language. Hense, he said, "When we find a student who uses English outside the classroom, we label him/her as braggart … we do not encourage individuals to use English for their social communication purpose".

Generally, the students seemed to acknowledge the communication difficulties they faced in oral classroom presentations, and they felt that the language is very essential for their communication. The question of what must be done for further communication improvement, however, was not clearly addressed by each interviewee except putting the blame on themselves and on the educational environment.

Discussion

This study reveals that bare auxiliary and verb tense are the common language errors of both physics and math students committed during their oral presentations. The students indicated considerable progress in minimizing their difficulties of using correct tenses in the second oral presentation. However, the students failed to improve their use of bare auxiliary expressions in their second oral presentations, and they rather committed more errors of bare auxiliary. Of course, communicating ideas in English without using correct auxiliaries is common for those who do not have adequate exposure of the language. Even illiterate people are usually heard uttering English words like "food", "money", "cow" when they find foreigners. The students' oral presentations, in one way or the

other reflected their low level of English proficiency that demands much more effort and resources from governments and other concerned bodies in general and individual students themselves in particular. A similar low level of English proficiency was observed in Kannan (2009) research report that most rural-based students faced a serious English communication difficulty when they joined universities and colleges. The author noted that the students considered this seven-letter word, 'English' as magical and mystical word. Besides, El Enein's (2011) study on students' oral presentation difficulties indicated that most of the students failed to appropriate transitional words and signals in presenting their papers. Generally, the results of this study seemed to reflect other international students' difficulties in communicating their ideas in the academic world, and more emphasis on students' accuracy practice should be given.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study assessed the status of postgraduate diploma students' English language communication during two oral classroom presentations. The observation notes and interview data indicated that the students had significant language problems as reflected by common errors such as missing auxiliary, verb tense, diction and voice. Therefore, it could be concluded that the students' language capacity did not enable them to communicate their ideas clearly and effectively. Besides, the students' communication improvement as a result of their previous oral presentation did improve significantly.

Hence, it is recommended that students' communication difficulties should be addressed with more access of language learning resources and more learning practices and a closer follow up. Besides, students should be made aware of the language problems or errors they usually make during classroom oral presentations. Second, the students should be directed and encouraged to make their own efforts to develop their English language proficiency by creating different mechanisms like making the work environment English demanding and competitive. The school administrators, higher education institutions, employment agencies should consider English proficiency as one basic criterion for competition of any kind.

References

Beyene Gebru. (2008). Perception and Classroom Practice of Communicative Language Teaching by High School EFL Teachers and Learners: The case of Some Selected High Schools

in Addis Ababa. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Addis Ababa University.

Birhanu Simegn. (2012). A Study of Secondary School EFL Teachers' Pedagogical Beliefs and   Classroom Practices. Unpublished PhD. Thesis, Addis Ababa University.

Brown, D. (2007). *Principles of Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burt, M., & Kiparsky, C. (1972). *The Gooficon: A Repair Manual for English*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers.

El Enein, A. H. (2011). Difficulties Encountering English Majors in Giving Academic Oral Presentations during Class. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Al-Aqsa University.

Kannan, R. (2009). Difficulties in Learning English as a Second Language. *ESP World*, 5 (26).   www.esp-world.info.

Kelerman, E. (1974). Elicitation, Lateralization and Error Analysis. In J. N. Green & R. O. Strauch (eds), *York Papers in Linguistics, 4*. University of York: Department of Language. pp. 416-189.

Ministry of Education (2003). *Teacher Education System Overall (TESO) Handbook.* MoE, Addis Ababa. URL: www.tei.edu.et.

Richards, J. C. (2009). Second Language Teacher Education Today. *RELC Journal*, 39, 158-177. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0033688208092182