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UNDERGRADUATE WRITING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXT: ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH INTRA-SENTENCE ISSUES

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Abstract

This descriptive study investigates English intra-sentence writing challenges of undergraduate students in public educational institutions in Ghana. To achieve this, analyses of responses given in a short English language test administered to final-year undergraduate students studying English in four tertiary institutions are presented. The items constituting the test derived from intra-sentence deviations that featured prominently in 500 essays written by 250 undergraduate students between 2015 and 2017. The items involve topics that undergraduate students are assumed to have covered during their pre-tertiary education but which are areas of challenge to them. Test item analysis tables were devised to determine facility indices of the items and to ascertain the students' implicit and explicit knowledge of the language features investigated. The study reveals that students pursuing undergraduate programmes in English Departments in Ghana have varied degrees of familiarity with defined intra-sentence writing issues. Additionally, the students' implicit knowledge weightings of the topics investigated far outstrip their explicit knowledge values. Finally, the study suggests that the quantity of intra-sentence writing challenges of students from each of the institutions investigated is fairly congruent. These findings have pedagogical implications for the contents of the communication skills programmes mounted for all fresh undergraduate students in Ghana.

Keywords: L2 context, student writing, intra-sentence, implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge.

1.0 Introduction

In Ghanaian tertiary institutions of learning, the business of knowledge production and dissemination is carried out mainly through the medium of English. In view of this, a certain appreciable level of familiarity with writing in English is required of all entrants no matter their intended fields of academic or professional pursuits. Therefore, tertiary institutions of learning in Ghana have constantly ensured that all their students attain the required degree of proficiency in English writing (Agor, 2014:178). Yet, another motivation for this resolve comes from both the nature of the multilingual context of Ghana and the status accorded the English language within the borders of the country. Ghana, a post-colonial country with about forty-five indigenous languages (Dakubu, 1988:10) formally adopted English as her sole official language on attainment of independence from Britain in 1957. (Refer to Sackey, 1997 for a historical perspective of the development of English as a second language in Ghana). So, although the English language was implanted into the multilingual community of Ghana, it has become the language for educational placement and career advancement in the country.

In spite of the assurance that applicants who are offered admission into undergraduate programmes in public tertiary institutions in the country have satisfied the English language requirement for entrance, some researchers and examiners, including Dako (1997:261), Owusu-Ansah (1997:23), and Sackeyfio (2008:3), have held the view that English (oral and written) competence demonstrated by students in tertiary institutions some time past (in the 1940s and the 1950s) was higher than the levels demonstrated about half a century later. Unfortunately however, no empirical study supports this comparison yet. For example, the studies published on undergraduate students' use of English in Ghana including Tandoh (1987), Yankson (1994), Dako (1997), Dako, Denkabe, and Forson (1997), Gogovi (1997), Odamtten, Denkabe, and Tsikata (1997), Adika (1999), Arhin (2009), and Hyde (2014) investigated proficiency levels at a point in time; they did not compare students' levels of competence in the language at different points in time. In other words, there is no study, so far, that has evaluated written English proficiency levels of students in tertiary institutions in Ghana on an era (e.g. 1951-1970; 1971-1990; 1991-2010) basis.

So, no empirical study supports this comparison yet: the view that English competence demonstrated by students in tertiary institutions some time past was higher than the levels demonstrated today. In recognition of this lack, Anyidoho (2002:59) asks: "Was proficiency in English among pupils and students in some time past higher

than it is now?” She explains that without such evidence, it would be argued that “the so called ‘falling standard’ in English exists in the imaginations of the older generations of Ghanaians, who ... always view their own performance ... to be better than that of the succeeding generation” Anyidoho (2002:59). So, comparisons of students’ performance cannot be made at this present time because the available relevant data are insufficient for this task. To be able to make informed comparisons in the future about undergraduate students’ levels of competence in English, it is imperative to continuously monitor and to keep records of their use of aspects of the language so that adequate data for such comparisons in the future would be guaranteed.

Therefore, the ultimate aim of this study is to investigate intra-sentence writing issues of students in selected public tertiary institutions in Ghana. The rationale is to add to the repertoire of empirical research on undergraduate students’ levels of proficiency in English writing. This undertaking is consonant with University of Ghana (1969:78) which instructs that “a complete reappraisal of the language study and language use” be made “in the total educational system in Ghana”. This assertion is contained in the statutory instrument that established the University of Ghana Language Centre in 1970. The instrument also mandates the Language Centre to embark upon a certain amount of remedial work to enable undergraduate students to use the English language with the expected degree of proficiency. The contents of the remedial English language programme are to derive from empirical research on students language use. One latent purpose is to reenergize the interest of language acquisition researchers in students’ use of English at the tertiary level of education.

In order to achieve the ultimate aim indicated above, the following three objectives were pursued.

- i. To scrutinise 500 undergraduate essays and to extract sentences that contain intra-sentence deviations for further investigation.
- ii. To administer a short test to verify whether the deviations recognised in the 500 essays could be confirmed or refuted as undergraduate students’ actual intra-sentence writing challenges.
- iii. To compare performances of the students on the test on an institution basis, on an individual basis, and on a gender basis.

Five research questions guided the realisation of the objectives listed above.

- i. What are the actual English intra-sentence writing issues that challenge students pursuing undergraduate programmes in English Departments in public tertiary institutions in the country?
- ii. Is the number of intra-sentence writing challenges of students representing the four institutions fairly congruent?
- iii. Do the students investigated have the same level of familiarity with the defined intra-sentence writing issues?
- iv. Does the explicit knowledge of the students investigated correspond with their implicit knowledge in terms of defined intra-sentence writing issues?
- v. In the context of second language learning, which gender (male or female) is likely to outperform the other in the more linguistic side of English?

2.0 Studies on Language-Learner Writings

For the past two and a half decades or so, issues about students' writings have received a huge amount of attention by many researchers in language teaching across the world. Some of the discussions on student writing border on the effectiveness or otherwise of correcting students' grammar errors in second language writing classes (Ferris, 1995 1999; 2004; 2006; 2007; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Truscott, 1996; 1999; 2007; and Bitchener, 2008). Some key questions that have been asked relate to categories of corrective feedback and how these can be administered to achieve results (Bitchener & Knock, 2010a; 2010b; Ellis, 2010; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2010; and Ferris, 2010).

Yet, other issues raised in this regard concern one of the most important stages of the writing process, *editing*. In other words, the issue of how to successfully equip second language learners with the requisite knowledge and skills to edit their own writings is of great concern to both researchers and practitioners. In recent years, there has been the growing view in language teaching circles that the point in teaching grammar to second language learners is mainly to aid their writing. So, some of the discussions on student writing border on whether English grammar should be taught inductively or deductively, whether it should be taught explicitly or implicitly, and whether grammar teaching should be intensive or extensive (Ellis, 1994; 2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b; DeKeyser, 2003; Sheen, 2006; Swan and Welter, 2006). The huge level of interest shown in various aspects of learner writing implies recognition of the fact that the stages involved in student writing, which include

generating ideas, drafting, revising, and editing (errors of grammar, usage, mechanics, etc.), are all worth investigating.

To put the current study in perspective, the rest of this section reviews some studies conducted in Ghana on university students' proficiency levels in English. Tandoh (1987) investigates the written English of undergraduate students in University of Ghana using end-of-term examination essays and essay-type assignments written in 1985 as her data. Specifically, the samples for her study were obtained from first-year and final-year students of the then Faculties of Agriculture, Arts, Science, and Social Science. Instances of structures containing deviations identified in her study are categorised under four main headings namely, *the sentence and the clause, the phrase, vocabulary and expression, and spelling and punctuation*. Tandoh explains that she selected samples from first-year and final-year students 'so that any contrast might appear sharper' (Tandoh, 1987:17). The findings of her study show that out of 98,756 words read from samples written by the first-year students, 6,693 (or 6.77%) errors were detected. In the case of the final-year students, 100,047 words were read and 6,128 (or 6.12%) errors were detected. Tandoh explicates that in only three of the six groups investigated did the final-year students write less erroneous English than the first-year students (Tandoh, 1987:24) and concludes that "being at Legon does not necessarily bring about any improvement in a student's standard of English" (Tandoh, 1987:112). This observation, confirmed by Adika (1999: 8), is consistent with Agor (2014: 187).

Situated in the Error Analysis conceptual framework, Yankson (1994) investigates English writing challenges of Ghanaian and Nigerian university students and observes that concord is a major problem area for second-language learners of English in Ghanaian and Nigerian universities. Yankson's study reveals that the proficiency levels of the university students he studied were below expectation. He asserts that some errors, particularly concord errors, tend to elicit very unfavourable responses from both native and non-native speakers alike. According to Yankson (1994: xi), such errors reflect badly on the speaker's personality. Included in his work are actual malformed syntactic structures authored by the students, and he gives adequate lessons on English concord to help improve proficiency levels of students in universities in West Africa.

Dako (1997) assesses some aspects of language competence as contained in examination scripts written by final year Literature students in the English Department of a tertiary institution in Ghana. She argues that throughout their years of formal

training in English, be it at the primary, the secondary, or the tertiary level, students have had inadequate practice in the use of English, inadequate training in writing skills, and inadequate “corrective” influences from the teacher. As a result, among other inadequacies, their rate of mechanical errors is high and their active vocabulary not sufficient for the level of expression expected of a graduate in English (Dako, 1997:263). She observes “... a graduate in English in a tertiary institution in Ghana exhibits linguistic insecurity, reflected in limited structural diversity, inadequate vocabulary variation and use” (Dako, 1997:274). In Dako’s (1997:274) view, to prepare students for the requirements of the job market, be it in teaching or in the public service, or any other field, the educational system, including the universities, must attempt to enhance students’ confidence in writing skills.

Gogovi (1997) investigates the usage of intensifier + verb collocation in English among post-diploma degree English major students of a tertiary institution in Ghana and compares performances between male and female students. The study, according to Gogovi (1997: 51), reveals general poor performance of both male and female students. Gogovi (1997:51) explains that the students responded to all the items on the questionnaire and that gave the false impression that the students found the task easy. The findings suggest beyond doubt that the post-diploma degree English major students of that tertiary institution had a weak grasp of intensifier + verb collocation in English. The sad thing, according to Gogovi, was that the students were unaware of the complexities of this area of their English studies and it appeared there was no immediate hope of addressing the deficiency.

Adika (1999) investigates written texts of the 1996-97 batch of first-year students of a tertiary institution in Ghana. The study aimed at describing and accounting for aspects of discourse-level problems in the expository writing of first-year students. The researcher’s primary motivation for focusing upon written texts derived from the concerns Ghanaians had expressed over the low standard of written English in Ghanaian schools. In all, 179 texts were collected from four categories of first-year students. An integrative analytic framework was applied in the analysis of the expository texts in order to detect discourse-level infelicities. The study reveals five main areas of discourse infelicities that stem from weak handling of information relationships leading to a breakdown in communication in certain parts of the text. The five main areas identified relate to composing effective introductions, developing relevant content to suit theme-rheme relationship, anaphoric reference, conjunctive relations, and advanced labelling. To help both students and teachers to deal with these

discourse-level problems, the researcher proposes practical guidelines in the form of evaluative grids. These have the potential of facilitating how teachers evaluate students' expository discourse as well as how they help students in the general enterprise of text creation.

Agor (2014) conducted a thirteen-week pedagogical intervention in a tertiary institution in a second language context where two classes of Level 400 students were constituted based on the students' own preferences to study *Syntax of English* or *Linguistics and Language Teaching*. An entry-behaviour test was administered the first day of lectures to both classes, in part, to establish their actual English writing needs. Specific topics in English grammar that university students are assumed to have covered in high school but which pose problems to them formed part of the contents taught the experimental group. The control group was taught the normal traditional contents. By the end of the semester, the two groups were tested. The results indicate that the difference between the exit- and the entry-behaviour mean marks of the control group ($34.8\% - 31\% = 3.8\%$) is marginal but that of the experimental group ($89.4\% - 30.6\% = 58.8\%$) is huge. The study concludes that if actual English writing needs of ESL/EFL students are injected into their syllabus contents, standards in English writing among non-native learners will be enhanced.

All the studies described above indicate the proficiency levels in English writing of students in tertiary institutions in Ghana. Each of the studies describes the students' level of proficiency in a specific aspect of English studies at a point in time. To be able to make informed comparisons in the future about undergraduate students' proficiency levels at different points in time, it is important to continuously investigate and to keep records of their use of the language on the various campuses.

3.0 Method

Data for the current study were sourced from final-year undergraduate students studying English in four public tertiary institutions in Ghana. Data were not accessed from private institutions because this study focuses on students in public institutions only. For the sake of anonymity, the four public tertiary institutions where data were sourced for the study have been named Institution 'A', Institution 'B', Institution 'C', and Institution 'D'. The study was conducted in two parts: a preliminary investigation and the main study. The preliminary investigation evaluated 500 essays written by 250

final-year undergraduate students between 2015 and 2017. In these student essays, ten intra-sentence writing issues were identified as the students' most prominent areas of challenge. This preliminary investigation stemmed from the quest for a search for specific English intra-sentence deviations that undergraduate students may not notice in their writings. The main study probed the students' familiarity with the ten language features identified during the preliminary investigation. Two hundred students (henceforth referred to as respondents) participated in the main study.

3.1 Respondents and Data Collection Instruments

The respondents from each institution numbered fifty: 25 male and 25 female. They were all Ghanaian and ranged between ages 23 and 44. Each of them gave consent to serve as a respondent in the study. The fifty students that represented each institution were the first twenty-five men and the first twenty-five women who consented to participate in the main study. The number 25 was significant in terms of the size of each cohort because the cohort with the least number of female had 25 women, and the current researcher wanted to uphold the idea of gender balance. All the respondents were functionally bilingual in English and at least one indigenous Ghanaian language.

Two main instruments were used to elicit information from the respondents: a questionnaire and a short test. The questionnaire investigated the personal and linguistic background of the respondents. The short test probed their English intra-sentence writing problem areas. The test items were attached to the questionnaire described above. The test consists of ten short sentences that are unacceptable in formal written English. All the ten short sentences are unacceptable in formal written English because they are either grammatically malformed or semantically unclear. Each of the ten sentences constituting the test is followed by two spaces numbered 'a' and 'b'. In the space 'a', the respondents were required to state whether each of the sentences is correct or incorrect in formal written English. In the space 'b', they were to rewrite the sentence correcting all errors they could detect. The questionnaire and the test were administered during lecture hours. The ten sentences contained in the test administered have been included in this paper as an appendix.

3.2 Data Analysis Techniques

Two main techniques were used to analyse the data sourced. Test item analysis tables were devised for analysing the responses supplied by the respondents. The test item analysis tables made it possible to determine figures for facility index, implicit linguistic knowledge, and explicit linguistic knowledge. Facility index refers to the easiness or difficulty level of each test item from the point of view of the respondents. It is simply the percentage of respondents who gave the right response to the item. Facility indices, also known as difficulty indices, run from 0 to 1.00 (Jacobs and Chase, 1992:16). The larger the index the easier the item; the smaller the index the more difficult the item.

A distinction is usually made between two types of linguistic knowledge: implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge. As characteristic of many concepts in second language learning and language teaching, the implicit/explicit categorisation has engendered some expected definition controversies (e.g. Robinson, 1994:161-165; Ellis, 1994:167-169). As a result, some later studies (e.g. Ellis, 2005b:216; Ellis, 2006a:95) have rather used the categories ‘procedural’ and ‘declarative’ to refer to the concepts intended to be conveyed by the terms ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ respectively. But because a definitional debate does not appear to be relevant at this point, the original implicit/explicit terminology which is far more familiar to the target practitioners would be maintained in this paper.

A language learner’s implicit knowledge of a language feature refers to a category of linguistic knowledge of that language feature which the learner has acquired but which the learner cannot set out in any tangible form. It relates, somehow, to the person’s intuitive, subconscious, tacit, or procedural linguistic knowledge of that language feature. A learner’s implicit linguistic knowledge is deeply rooted in his/her verbal behaviour and is difficult to articulate because the learner may not even be aware of what s/he knows. In the same vein, a learner’s explicit linguistic knowledge of a language feature refers to a category of linguistic knowledge of that language feature which the learner has learnt and can set out in a tangible form. It relates, somehow, to the learner’s conscious, articulable or declarative linguistic knowledge of that language feature. A learner can articulate, store, retrieve, and distribute his explicit linguistic knowledge. Krashen (1982:10) uses the terms ‘acquired knowledge’ and ‘learned knowledge’ in place of implicit and explicit knowledge respectively. Ellis (1994:167)

operationalizes the distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge in terms of ‘whether the learner is aware of what s/he knows and can articulate it’ or not.

As part of the item analysis procedure, ratings for the respondents’ *implicit knowledge* and explicit knowledge (*editing skills*) relating to the lexical, syntactic, or semantic rules applicable to each test item have been determined. For the purpose of the analysis, the respondents from each institution and their scripts were named 1, 2, 3, up to 50. The test item analysis tables made it possible for the current researcher to see the general performance of the members of each group at a glance. It also made it easier to recognise, by mere inspection, the items that were easy and those that were difficult for each respondent and for each institution. Besides, the test item analysis table designed and used provided information about the scoring and grading of the test, and also determined whether the test items were able to sort the students who had fewer intra-sentence writing difficulties from those who had huge English writing problems. Observations relating to all these have been briefly presented in the results section and interpreted in the discussion section.

The second set of techniques deployed was basic statistical procedures. These were used in analysing the scores obtained by the respondents and these have been presented in the section that follows. The rationale for accessing and processing the data was partly to get empirical information that would provide evidence of the current state of English intra-sentence writing proficiency levels on the campuses of tertiary institutions in the country.

4.0 Analysis

Responses to the questionnaire and the short test administered were retrieved from all the 200 respondents. The test component of the responses was carefully scored by the current researcher. First of all, the ten sentences contained in the test were analysed grammatically and included in the next section. This grammatical analysis brings out clearly the reasons why each of the sentences contained in the test is morphologically, syntactically, or semantically unacceptable in formal written English and, therefore, needed to be modified by the respondents. Secondly, the responses supplied by the respondents to the questions and the scores they obtained were analysed using the techniques described in the preceding section. The scores obtained by members of each group are shown using tables. Also, information on gender distinction from the performance of the respondents has been included in a later section. Even

though the test analysis tables have not been physically included in this paper because of want of space, observations that emerged from them and conclusions arrived at have been sufficiently included in the discussion section.

4.1 Grammatical Analysis of the Sentences Constituting the Test Items

The Structuralist approach has been adapted for this analysis because the contents and strategies for teaching the English language at the pre-tertiary levels in Ghana are primarily based on Structuralist views.

Sentence 1: ?The Almighty God who started with you he will end with you.

This is a dislocated construction. There are two main types: right dislocation and left dislocation. According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985:1310), right dislocation involves placing a pro-form earlier in the sentence while the noun phrase to which it refers is placed finally. For example, *He will end with you, the Almighty God who started with you*. Quirk et al. (1985:1310) refers to this phenomenon as postponed identification perhaps because the ‘antecedent’ of the pro-form performing the function of complete subject is rather postponed to occupy final position. But the structure we have in Sentence 1 is an instance of left dislocation. Left dislocation is the reverse process of right dislocation. In left dislocated constructions, the noun phrase is positioned initially and a reinforcing pronoun stands ‘proxy’ for it in the relevant position in the sentence (Quirk et al. 1985:1310). The dislocation in Sentence 1 is, therefore, caused by the presence of the pronoun ‘he’.

Quirk et al. (1985:1310) make it clear that dislocated constructions are restricted to informal spoken English. They explain that such utterances are usually spoken with divided focus. This implies that dislocation is unacceptable in formal situations, particularly, in formal written English. So, the acceptable alternative structure to Sentence 1 is *The Almighty God who started with you will end with you*.

Sentence 2: ?The lecturer said he will travel tomorrow.

This sentence is unacceptable in formal written English. The author of the sentence was unable to clearly use either direct speech or indirect speech and ended up creating a verb-verb concord deviation usually called sequence of tenses error. Sequence of tenses has to do with the consistency of finite verbs within and beyond the clause with respect to the features of tense, number and person. This item was included in the test to assess the students' ability to handle structures relating to direct speech and indirect speech. The students were expected to rewrite Sentence 2 as any one of the following:

The lecturer said he would travel the next day. (Indirect speech)

The lecturer said 'I will travel tomorrow'. (Direct speech)

The lecturer said 'he (somebody else) would travel tomorrow' (Direct speech)

Structurally, Sentence 2 above consists of two clauses: a matrix clause and an embedded clause. The matrix clause consists of three clausal elements. The subject element is '*the lecturer*'; the verb element is '*said*'; the object element is '*he would travel the next day*'. The object element is an embedded nominal clause and its finite verb '*would*' (not *will*) establishes a concordant relationship (past tense) with the finite verb '*said*' in the matrix clause. According to Campbell (1962:37), if the reporting verb is in the past, the verb in the subordinate nominal clause must be changed into the past. But if the reporting verb is in the present, the tense of the verb in the subordinate nominal clause must be maintained.

From another perspective, the reporting verb '*said*' and the verb in the reported clause '*will*' are inconsistent in tense: '*said*' refers to past time and denotes past tense, but '*will*' refers to future time and indicates present tense. According to Quirk et al. (1985:1026), "whenever the time reference of the original utterance no longer applies at the time the utterance is reported", it is necessary to change the tense form of the verb. In the same vein, when the time reference of the mental activity no longer applies at the time the mental activity is reported, it is necessary to change the tense forms of the verb (Quirk et al. 1985:1026). They indicate that such a change of verb forms in indirect speech is termed backshift and the resulting relationship of verb forms in the reporting and the reported clauses is known as sequence of tenses. Brewton, Kinnick, Peterson, and McMullan (1962:412) had earlier described the error of inconsistency of

tenses in indirect speech as unnecessary shift in tense. Furthermore, Yankson (1994:23) explains that “like most of our West African languages, English also maintains the sequence: verb/present–verb/present, verb/past–verb/past within clauses in a sentence.” On the issue of the change of the adverb ‘*tomorrow*’ to ‘*the next day*’, Campbell (1962:38) explains that, when dealing with indirect speech in English, writers need to “change adverbs and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns expressing nearness into ones expressing distance if the time and place of the speaker reporting the speech are different from the time and place of the original speech”. This is why ‘*tomorrow*’ in Sentence 2 changes to ‘*the next day*’.

Sentence 3: ?One of the people who tells lies about lecturers has been exposed.

This sentence is ungrammatical. The deviation in this sentence is known as discord of number in an embedded clause and was included in the test to assess the students’ knowledge of concord rules and their ability to put this knowledge into practice. This type of deviation usually occurs when the writer does not realise that the subject of the post-modifying clause is a relative pronoun. The alternative form that the students were expected to produce was *One of the people who tell lies about lecturers has been exposed*.

Structurally, the sentence consists of a matrix clause ‘*One of the people has been exposed*’ and an embedded relative clause ‘*who tell lies about lecturers*’. This relative clause has both a subject ‘*who*’ and a finite verb ‘*tell*’. It is important to state here that it is the finite verb that changes its form to establish agreement relations with its subject. Unfortunately, however, the number of the subject ‘*who*’ is temporarily indeterminate because, usually, the subject ‘*who*’ can count as singular and can also count as plural depending on its antecedent. The antecedent of the pronoun ‘*who*’ in Sentence 3 is ‘*people*’ a plural noun. Therefore, the subject ‘*who*’ in the sentence under discussion, counts as plural and requires the plural form of the verb ‘*tell*’.

The rule applicable to Sentence 3 is straightforward. When the subject is a relative pronoun, the verb agrees with the antecedent of the pronoun. Buscemi, Nicolai, and Strugala (1998:235) declare, “...you can have problems with agreement if you do not understand the number of the subject or if you choose the wrong word as the subject”.

Sentence 4: ?Either the directors of education or I are to blame.

This construction is ungrammatical because it violates the principle of proximity concord. This type of concord deviation occurs when a writer fails to recognise a closer noun phrase as the controller of the finite verb in the clause. The principle of concord applicable in this situation is what is referred to as proximity concord. This refers to agreement of verb with a closely preceding noun phrase head in preference to agreement with the noun phrase head that appears first in the clause. Yankson (1994:xi) says, many subject-verb agreement errors “may be attributed to the principle of proximity, ... Another principle, notional concord, can also create errors when applied wrongly”. Therefore, the students were expected to rewrite Sentence 4 as *Either the directors of education or I am to blame*. The rule applicable here is simple and clear. When one of the two subjects joined together by ‘or’ or ‘nor’ is singular, but the other is plural, the verb agrees in number and person with the closer subject.

Sentence 5: ?After considering the proposal for two hours, it was rejected by the directors.

This sentence is unacceptable in formal written English. It is structurally defective and semantically unclear; it sounds awkward and absurd. This item is an example of unattached non-finite clauses and the deviation is known as dangling modification. The sentence was included in the test to assess the students’ ability to detect and correct dangling modifiers in what they write and what they read. Quirk et al. (1985:1121) state that “it is considered to be an error when the understood subject of the clause is not identifiable with the subject of the independent clause”. Certainly, it is not ‘*the proposal*’ that was considering the proposal. The implied subject of the clause is presumably ‘*the directors*’. So, a modifying unit (for example, an adverbial phrase or an adverbial clause) must clearly and sensibly modify a word in the sentence. When there is no word that the modifying unit can sensibly modify, the modifying unit is said to dangle.

There are several ways of correcting the deviation. One way is to maintain the non-finite clause and to introduce the independent clause with ‘*the director*’ as subject. For example, *After considering the proposal for two hours, the directors rejected it (eventually)*. Another way is to invert the ordering of the two clauses as follows: *The directors rejected the proposal after considering it for two hours*. So, it is important that students observe that non-finite clauses should always be attached to the subject of the superordinate clause.

Sentence 6: ?The meeting was held to arrange for the football match in the office.

This sentence is syntactically acceptable but semantically unclear; it is an instance of misplaced modification. Certainly, the football match is not meant to be played in the office. The modifying phrase ‘*in the office*’ is misplaced. A modifying unit should clarify or make more definite the meaning of the word it modifies. Therefore, if the modifying unit is placed too far away from this word, the effect of the modifier may be either lost or diverted to some other word. The best way of correcting misplaced modification is to relocate the modifying unit closest to the word it modifies. So, the sentence was to be rewritten as *The meeting was held in the director’s office to arrange for the football match*. Misplaced modification may lead to ambiguity. Quirk et al. (1985:652) confirm this when they state that ‘the misplacement of adverbials is particularly serious where the result happens to be a perfectly acceptable and comprehensible sentence, but not with the meaning that was intended’.

Sentence 7: ?It is strange that the shooting of the armed robbers provoked the politicians.

This sentence is semantically unclear because it conveys two different meanings. Who did the shooting and who were shot? It is not clear whether it was the armed robbers who did the shooting or the armed robbers were rather shot? The deviation in this sentence is known as ambiguity. The item was included in the test to assess the students’ ability to detect and correct ambiguities in their own writings and in the writings of others. The students were expected to rewrite the sentence in such a way that the sentences they construct will convey only one clear meaning. Below are some of the several ways to disambiguate the sentence:

It is strange that the shooting by the armed robbers provoked the politicians.
It is strange that the shooting at the armed robbers provoked the politicians.

Ambiguities occur very often in English. They may either be intentionally planned or they may occur unintentionally. Intentional ambiguities are intended to achieve desired results. They usually reveal careful planning and artfulness. But unintentional ambiguities are considered deviations and are unacceptable in formal written English.

Sentence 8: ?I think our son is now matured to marry.

This sentence is unacceptable. The form of the predicative adjective used ‘*matured*’ is the source of the error. The category of the word ‘*mature(d)*’ as used in the sentence is adjective. Therefore, the error in the original sentence is known as category restriction rule deviation because, in English, adjectives do not express tense; the word category that expresses tense is verbs. The students were expected to rewrite the sentence as *I think our son is now mature to marry*. Only 22% of the total respondents were able to rewrite the sentence correctly. The rest may not have noticed this deviation.

Sentence 9: ?All the students were compelled to vacate from the hall.

This sentence is grammatically unacceptable. This is a case of redundant preposition. The preposition ‘*from*’ which has been inserted between the verb ‘*vacate*’ and its object ‘*the hall*’ is the source of the deviation. The verb ‘*vacate*’, as used in the original sentence, requires a direct object, not an object of preposition. There should be no intervening preposition between the verb and its object. Therefore, the students were expected to rewrite the sentence as *All the students were compelled to vacate the hall*. Very often, the occurrence of redundant prepositions results from false analogy. For example, on the analogy of the structure *The students were ejected from the hall*, some second language learners of English wrongly compose structures like Sentence 9.

Sentence 10: ?I thought a good university degree would enable me get a good job.

This sentence is ungrammatical. There is an omission of the obligatory preposition ‘*to*’ that follows the object of the verb ‘*enable*’. So, the source of the deviation is that the verb ‘*enable*’ requires an obligatory preposition ‘*to*’ immediately after its object ‘*me*’, but only 35 out of the 200 students realised this. This item was included in the test to assess the students’ knowledge of the use of the verb ‘*enable*’. The students were expected to rewrite Sentence 10 as *I thought (that) a good university degree would enable me to get a good job*. The sentence consists of three clausal elements: the subject element ‘*I*’, the verb element ‘*thought*’, and the object element ‘*that a good university degree would enable me to get a good job*’. The object element is structurally a nominal that-clause. The conjunction ‘*that*’ is put in parenthesis here

to indicate that it is droppable. In Sentence 10, the conjunction ‘*that*’ was omitted to see if the students would insert it in their modified sentences. However, none of the 200 final-year university students altered this part of the sentence, and they should be commended. Quirk et al. (1985:1049) state that, when the ‘that-clause’ is direct object or complement, the conjunction ‘that’ is frequently omitted leaving a zero-that clause.

4.2 Analysis of Student Responses

The contents of the responses that the 200 students provided were carefully examined, graded, and analysed. This subsection presents statistical analyses of the scores they obtained. The scores obtained by members of each cohort are shown using tables. The analyses are presented on an institution basis.

4.2.1 Institution 'A'

The distribution below shows the scores obtained by 50 final-year students of the English Department of Institution 'A' administered by the present researcher. The results indicate that none of the students scored 25% or less. The lowest mark recorded by this cohort is 30% and only one student obtained that mark. The highest mark recorded is 85% and only one student scored that mark. Find below a tabular presentation of the data.

Mark (x)	Frequency (f)	fx	Cumulative Frequency (cf)
30	1	30	1
35	2	70	3
40	4	160	6
45	6	270	14
50	9	450	24
55	10	550	32
60	6	360	38
65	5	325	43
70	3	210	46
75	2	150	48
80	1	80	49
85	1	85	50
Total	50	2740	

Table 1: Tabular Presentation of Institution 'A' Scores

From the distribution above, the most frequently occurring score (mode) is 55% and the real average mark obtained by the group (mean) has been calculated as follows:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum(\text{fx})}{\sum(\text{f})} = \frac{2740}{50} = 54.8\%$$

4.2.2 Institution 'B'

The distribution below shows the scores obtained by 50 final-year students of the English Department of Institution 'B'. The lowest mark recorded by this group is 30% and only one student obtained that mark. The highest mark recorded is 85% and only one student obtained that mark. Below is a tabular presentation of the observation.

Mark (x)	Frequency (f)	fx	Cumulative Frequency (cf)
30	1	30	1
35	2	70	3
40	3	120	6
45	5	225	11
50	7	350	18
55	12	660	30
60	10	600	40
65	4	260	44
70	3	210	47
75	1	75	48
80	1	80	49
85	1	85	50
Total	50	2765	

Table 2: Tabular Presentation of Institution 'B' Scores

The most frequently occurring mark from the distribution above is 55%. The arithmetic average has been calculated as follows:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum(fx)}{\sum(f)} = \frac{2765}{50} = 55.3\%$$

4.2.3 Institution 'C'

The distribution below shows the scores obtained by 50 final-year students of the English Department of Institution 'C'. The lowest mark recorded by this group is 30% and only one student obtained that mark. One student obtained 90%, the highest observation. The range of 60 indicates that the students have varied degrees of competence in relation to English intra-sentence writing skills. The following is a tabular presentation of the distribution.

Mark (x)	Frequency (f)	fx	Cumulative Frequency (cf)
30	1	30	1
35	3	105	4
40	4	160	8
45	4	180	12
50	5	250	17
55	7	385	24
60	9	540	33
65	6	390	39
70	4	280	43
75	3	225	46
80	2	160	48
85	1	85	49
90	1	90	50
Total	50	2880	

Table 3: Tabular Presentation of Institution 'C' Scores

From the distribution above, the most frequently occurring mark is 60%. The real average mark obtained by the group has been calculated as follows:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum (fx)}{\sum (f)} = \frac{2880}{50} = 57.6\%$$

4.2.4 Institution 'D'

The distribution below shows the scores obtained by 50 final-year students of the English Department of Institution 'D'. Nobody scored below 30%. The lowest mark recorded by this group is 30% and two students obtained that mark. The highest mark recorded is 85% and only one student obtained that mark. Find below a tabular presentation of the data.

Mark (x)	Frequency (f)	(fx)	Cumulative Frequency (cf)
30	2	60	2
35	2	70	4
40	4	160	8
45	6	270	14
50	7	350	21
55	9	495	30
60	7	420	37
65	6	390	43
70	4	280	47
75	1	75	48
80	1	80	49
85	1	85	50
Total	50	2735	

Table 4: Tabular Presentation of Institution 'C' Scores

From the distribution above, 55% is the mode mark. The arithmetical average (mean) has been calculated as follows:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum(fx)}{\sum(f)} = \frac{2735}{50} = 54.7\%$$

5.0 Results

The analyses in the preceding section were evaluated to see whether the English intra-sentence writing challenges of the respondents vary from institution to institution, and the findings are summarised in the succeeding paragraph. Also, figures stemming from the test item analysis tables showing disparities in the respondents' implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge of the language features they were tested on have been indicated in this section. Additionally, information showing variations in performance between the male and the female respondents have been included in this section.

The highest scores recorded from Institutions 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' were 85%, 85%, 90%, and 85 respectively. The average scores were 54.8%, 55.3%, 57.6%, and 54.7 respectively. The lowest scores were 30%, 30%, 30%, and 30% respectively. The highest scorer obtained 90% and came from Institution 'C'. The average marks recorded from the four institutions range between 54.7% and 57.6%, and this is very close to the mean score of 55.6%. So, the range of the average scores recorded from the various institutions ($57.6 - 54.7 = 2.9$) is minimal.

Indices for all the 10 items from all four institutions indicate that the figures for implicit knowledge are higher than figures for explicit knowledge. For example, the implicit knowledge figures from Institutions 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D' in respect of test item 5 are 13, 15, 77, and 10 respectively but figures for explicit knowledge in respect of the same item are 1, 2, 7, and 0 respectively. Even with the test item that the respondents found easiest, figures for the two concepts are far apart. For all the items put together, the implicit knowledge figures from Institutions 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D' are 71.4%, 67%, 71.4%, and 66.2% respectively whereas figures for explicit knowledge are 35.8%, 41.2%, 43.8%, and 41% respectively.

In the area of gender variations, the highest scores recorded from male students studying English at Institutions 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' were 85%, 85%, 90%, and 85% respectively. The highest scorers from all the institutions happened to be male. The highest scores recorded from the female students were 80%, 80%, 85%, and 80% respectively. The average scores obtained by the male respondents were 55.0%, 55.4%, 58.2%, and 55.1% respectively. The average scores obtained by the female respondents were 54.6%, 55.2%, 57.0%, and 54.3% respectively. The lowest scores recorded from the male respondents were 35%, 30%, 35%, and 30% respectively while those obtained by their female counterparts were 30%, 35%, 30%, and 30%.

6.0 Discussion

This section is propelled by the five research questions stated in the introduction section. In response to the first research question, the study identifies and confirms ten intra-sentence writing areas that undergraduate students in public tertiary institutions in Ghana do not essentially notice. These problem areas are *left dislocation*, *sequence of tenses*, *discord in an embedded clause*, *principle of proximity concord deviation*, and *dangling modification*. The rest are *misplaced modification*, *ambiguity*, *category restriction rule deviation*, *redundant prepositions*, and *omission of a preposition*.

From the point of view of the students investigated, the ten areas of challenge listed above were the most confusing intra-sentence writing issues to them. Figures from the computations made in this study indicate that only 4% of the 200 final-year English students recognised, for example, that Test Item 5 is structurally unacceptable and semantically unclear and therefore needed to be ameliorated. Also, only 10% of them noticed that Item 7 is semantically unclear and needed to be disambiguated. The post-test content discussions revealed that the respondents did not notice the deviations because their attention had never been drawn to these linguistic features. One implication of this revelation for pedagogy is that, in their institution-wide communication skills enhancement courses, undergraduate students should be given the opportunity to revisit contents that involve the topics listed above.

The second research question relates to whether or not the intra-sentence writing challenges observed are comparable on an institution basis. In other words, is the range of scores observed in any one of the institutions similar to that observed in the others? It is noted that, at the institutional level, the general performance of the four cohorts is comparable. At least, one participant from each institution scored 85% or more, and the lowest scores recorded from all the four institutions is 30%. Additionally, the average marks recorded are very close. So, the difference in the overall performance from the various institutions is marginal and this indicates that the level of intra-sentence writing challenges in English among students from the four institutions is fairly congruent.

Another key observation is that each of the cohorts investigated consisted of members who could be described as heterogeneous in relation to their knowledge of the ten language features identified and investigated. This suggestion answers the third research question. In each cohort, the respondents obtained scores ranging from 35% to 85%. Indeed, in all the four institutions, some respondents obtained 30% and in one

institution a respondent scored 90%. The wide range of scores recorded in this regard reflects the students' varied levels of familiarity with the issues investigated. So, in terms of their familiarity with English intra-sentence writing skills, the respondents had different levels of competence.

The fourth research question asks whether the explicit knowledge of the students investigated corresponds with their implicit knowledge in terms of the ten English intra-sentence writing issues investigated. Indices from the test item analysis tables indicate that the explicit linguistic knowledge held by undergraduate students studying English as a major or a combined subject in respect of the ten topics investigated does not correspond with their implicit knowledge of the same topics. Their representative indices with regard to implicit and explicit knowledge of the topics investigated are 0.69 and 0.40 respectively. It was expected that, as intermediate second language learners of English who acquired and learnt the language mainly in the formal setting, undergraduate students would ensure that their implicit knowledge on the one hand and their explicit knowledge on the other hand essentially coincide.

Ellis (2005b:215) asserts that "instruction needs to be directed at developing both implicit and explicit knowledge". This principle emanates from aspects of such works as Bialystok (1978), Krashen (1981), Swain (1985), Schmidt (1990), Long (1991), Ellis (1994), Larsen-Freeman (1997), DeKeyser (1998), and Celce-Murcia (2002) and should therefore be adhered to in teaching English as a second language in the outer circle contexts. In other words, ample opportunities should be created for second language learners to gain both procedural and declarative competence of language features.

The final research question has to do with gender disparities. The current study suggests that there are variations in familiarity with English intra-sentence writing skills between the male and the female respondents. On the whole, the male respondents obtained an average score of 56.92% whilst their female counterparts recorded an average score of 52.5%. This result confirms established gender proficiency variation in English grammar. According to Howatt (1984:134), girls were better than boys at the more expressive aspects of English; boys, on the other hand, excelled at the more linguistic side of English. Indeed, the demand of the second part of each of the test items was "more linguistic than expressive" and that was where the male respondents out-performed their female counterparts.

From one perspective, the variation in scores obtained on the test was to be expected. The anticipation stems from the fact that the respondents were offered

admission to their current institutions from different categories of high schools and this diversity is usually reflected in their performance at the tertiary education level. High schools in Ghana have implicitly or explicitly been categorised based on various criteria. One such criterion has to do with the quality of facilities available in the school and the general academic results the students obtain in their final external examinations. So, the wide range of scores observed in the four tertiary institutions may be, to a large extent, a direct consequence of the kind of pre-tertiary institutions attended by the respondents. This observation is worth investigating further.

However, from another perspective, it is surprising that the potential intra-sentence writing issues recognised in the 500 student essays have eventually been confirmed through the responses they gave in the test administered to them as actual problem areas of final-year undergraduate students. This is surprising in three ways. First, the ten areas of challenge involved topics that the students themselves were assumed to have covered in high school. Second, the respondents were final-year undergraduate students who, in the first year of their undergraduate programmes, had studied Communication Skills or Academic Writing in order to essentially improve, among other things, their English editing skills. So, having studied these courses for one year in their respective institutions, the respondents were least expected to encounter difficulty in responding to the ten items constituting the test. Third, the respondents were studying English as a major subject or as a combined subject, and so it was difficult to defend some of the responses they supplied and scores some of them obtained on the test. This observation is consonant with Dako et al. (1997:62) who indicate that the 182 final-year English major students from two public universities they studied did not have adequate grammatical knowledge of the language they claimed to be majoring in.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate English intra-sentence writing challenges of students studying English in tertiary institutions in Ghana. This task, as indicated in the introduction, is essential for future comparative studies and is consistent with University of Ghana (1969:78). The current study reveals that final-year undergraduate students studying English as a major or a combined subject in tertiary institutions in Ghana have varied degrees of familiarity with intra-sentence writing issues. The majority of the respondents fell within the average performance bracket, but a few of them proved to have either excellent knowledge of the topics investigated or weak knowledge of those contents. The study suggests that this trend cuts across the tertiary institutions in the country.

As indicated in the preceding section, the grammar topics involving these sentence level deviations were expected to have been taught and learnt at the pre-tertiary levels of education. But until standards in English at those levels improve, the tertiary institutions have the obligation to resolve the challenge at the tertiary level. Although these intra-sentence level issues are being addressed through the English language enhancement programmes mounted in all the tertiary institutions in the country, the fact that the writings of undergraduate students still contain such infelicities serves as a reminder of the need to devise innovative ways of dealing with the situation. One of these ways is to include in the course contents the authentic and reliable English writing problem areas of students. In this way, the students should be motivated to learn from their own linguistic deviations and, possibly, their interest in the programme would be sustained. Secondly, it is recommended that, at the high intermediate and advanced levels of second language learning, efforts should be made to ensure that learners' implicit knowledge of linguistic features correspond with their explicit knowledge. Furthermore, at all levels of education, female learners should be encouraged to 'de-suggest' their fears and anxieties in pursuing the linguistic aspects of English so that the gender disparity observed would be bridged. Finally, with students studying English as a major or a combined component of their undergraduate programmes, intra-sentence deviations should be highly intolerable.

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8.0 Appendix

Test Items

In the space provided for each question:

- a. state whether the sentence is correct or incorrect in formal written English (1 mark).
- b. rewrite only the incorrect sentence correcting any errors you detect (for 1 mark).

1. The Almighty God who started with you he will end with you.
a.
b.
2. The lecturer said he will travel tomorrow.
a.
b.
3. One of the people who tells lies about lecturers has been exposed.
a.
b.
4. Either the Directors of education or I are to blame.
a.
b.
5. After considering the proposal for two hours, it was rejected by the directors.
a.....
b.....
6. The meeting was held to arrange for the football match in the office.
a.....
b.....
7. It is strange that the shooting of the armed robbers provoked the politicians.
a.....
b.....

8. I think our son is now matured to marry.
a.....
b.....
9. All the students were compelled to vacate from the hall.
a.....
b.....
10. I thought a good university degree would enable me get a good job.
a.
b.

9.0 List of Tables

1. Tabular Presentation of Scores, Institution 'A'
2. Tabular Presentation of Scores, Institution 'B'
3. Tabular Presentation of Scores, Institution 'C'
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