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ya Thuto ya Dipuo
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'What do we do in the meantime?' (Ferris 2004): Language errors and scaffolded intervention strategies in the writing of distance education students

Abstract

The ongoing theoretical debates on the value of error correction and the attention that should be accorded to language accuracy have overlooked the needs of teachers 'at the chalkface'. Yet, effective teaching strategies are vital in multi-lingual South Africa, particularly given the under-performance of South African students evidenced in international comparative studies. Based on a Master's dissertation entitled 'A critical review of the language errors in the writing of distance education students' (Ward-Cox, 2012), this article interrogates linguistic competence and investigates the language 'errors' made by a heterogeneous group of 100 entry-level distance education university students with the aim of improving academic writing. The research follows a process of error identification and statistical analysis and reviews intervention strategies. The implications of the bimodal pattern of distribution in the review findings and its link to school background are discussed. Scaffolded intervention strategies are presented in response to Ferris's (2004) question to teachers: "… what do we do in the meantime [while the academic debate rages]?"

Key words: language errors, error correction, distance education, academic writing skills, intervention strategies, scaffolding.

1. Introduction

Language accuracy in writing is important in the academic environment. While the theoretical debate on how to judge students' work rages unabated in research journals, (Truscott, 1996, 1999; Ferris, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Yates & Kenkle, 2002; Chandler, 2003, 2004; Spencer, 2005, 2011; Truscott & Hsu, 2008; Bruton, 2009) the fact remains that students are penalised for inaccurate language use, especially when intelligibility is compromised[1]. The problem is aggravated in the case of students whose home language is not the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) of the institution at which they are studying. These students are frequently at a linguistic disadvantage due to their inadequate mastery of the language of instruction and academic discourse, and this adversely affects their academic progress. It follows that these students require assistance in attaining accuracy in the use of the conventions of the target language in order to further their academic goals.

The research originated from the researcher's observations and concerns as a tutor at the Parow Learning Centre of the University of South Africa (Unisa), and arose from the desire to assist students who encounter difficulties in their attempts to master academic writing in a distance education[2] (hereafter DE) environment. English is an additional language for the majority of the target group. The target student body comprised distance education students of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Unisa. These entry-level students were registered for the module *Language and Learning Skills* (LSK0108) which was designed to improve students' academic reading and writing skills in English.

2. Aim of the study

The error review aimed to pinpoint problem areas in the written language usage of students, and to suggest possible ways of addressing these effectively. With this aim in mind, the study examined a corpus (n=100) of student assignments in order to identify and classify language errors[3] made by the target group.

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1   In the case of the target group, the marker's rating scale cites communication breakdown as the distinguishing criterion between scripts that pass and those that fail in the linguistic competence category

2   Holmberg et al. (2005:166) describe distance education as "a form of teaching and learning which is not under the supervision of teachers present with their students in lecture rooms or generally on the same premises, but which benefits from the support of a tutorial organisation".

3   For the purposes of this research, Louw's working definition of error as "language use that is in violation of the conventions of the target variety" (2006:33) is adopted, the target variety being the standard academic English to which the students aspire in the given context.

These errors, as defined by the study, were described and classified as a basis for fostering the development of academic writing skills. The findings gave rise to a number of suggestions for possible intervention, which included the formulation of effective feedback strategies to improve students' academic writing. It was envisaged that the review would provide a stepping stone to further error treatment and intervention strategies, and provide answers to Ferris's (2004) question to teachers: 'What do we do in the meantime?'.

3.   Theoretical background

The research examined previous international and national studies, including those that dealt with the teaching of second language (L2) students at tertiary institutions in South Africa. Research in the DE environment also informed many of the observations made in the course of the review. The contentious error correction debate formed the background of the review but is not the focus of the current article which discusses the suggested interventions arising from the findings with a view to assisting educators at the 'chalkface'. However, reference is made to this debate since it formed the starting point to the recommended interventions. Similarly, the results of the error classification, as well as the process that was followed, serve as indications of the type and frequency of errors made by the target group with a view to intervention strategies within the specific context of the review.

3.1   The error correction debate

During the study of this debate, it became obvious that research is ongoing and inconclusive. The question asked by Ferris (2004) ("… what do we do in the meantime?") is key.

The principal proponents of the error correction controversy are Truscott (1996, 1999) who argues vehemently against error correction, and Ferris (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) who argues forcibly in favour of the practice. Despite the ongoing international debate sparked by Truscott and Ferris, it would seem that this issue is far from resolved and, in fact, that it is doubtful if a solution will ever be found. Currently, educators and researchers are faced with a "catch-22" dilemma (Ferris 2002:16). The problem described by Ferris is that a short-term study cannot indicate long-term improvement, while long-term research is subject to a number of unrelated variables that can invalidate the result. A further dilemma identified by Ferris (2004) is that however relevant the error correction debate is, the fact remains that "in the meantime" there are students to be educated and that interim strategies are therefore essential to meet the exigencies of the academic course and students' expectations.

The debate on the effectiveness of editing was examined as an extension of the error-correction debate. Despite the compelling arguments in favour of having students revise and edit their own work (Parisi, 1994: Axelrod et al., 2001; Russel & Spada,

2006; Guenette, 2007), counterarguments note the lack of evidence of any long-term improvement (Truscott & Hsu, 2008; Bruton, 2009). The problem reiterated by Ferris (2006) is that long-term improvement cannot be tested by a single revised draft, while a long-term study can be nullified due to the number of divergent variables influencing the result.

In a study of response to student writing in the South African distance-teaching context, Spencer (1997:46) points out that "teacher intervention does not guarantee improvement, but it affords the learner an opportunity to practise, and in the process, reassert control over the text". Spencer suggests that students edit their own work because "by insisting on multiple drafts the teacher invites the student to clarify and refine meaning" (Spencer, 1997:46). This viewpoint was later confirmed and developed by Pienaar (2005) who stresses the need to empower the students to take ownership of and responsibility for their writing. Editing has therefore been promoted as an effective strategy for improving writing skills as well as fostering students' sense of ownership of their written work. A further challenge is to avoid focus on form and the "discrete item, surface level approach" (Sheppard, 1992:103) at the expense of organisation and content, while still paying the necessary attention to language issues.

Thus, having studied the debate for the purpose of assisting the target group, the researcher concurs with Ferris (2002, 2004, 2006), as well as with Yates and Kenkle (2002:30), that error correction should be continued until or unless it is demonstrated to be ineffective. The consequences and ramifications of a decision to implement an unproven theory, especially a radical one that advocates no error correction, could be very serious and far-reaching, impacting on the future of students. This is of particular importance in the case of DE students who rely almost exclusively on written feedback.

As implied by the previous comments, the "catch-22" situation also applies to the editing debate. Although it seems impossible to prove long-term improvement, the researcher shares the belief that having students edit their own work is an effective strategy for consciousness-raising, "clarifying and refining meaning" (Spencer, 1997:46), fostering interaction with the marker, and promoting student autonomy. Furthermore, editing moves away from the narrow skills-based approach criticised by Boughey (2013) while ("in the meantime") complying with the as yet unchanged exigencies of the skills-based target module.

3.2   Error classification

On the value of error analysis and classification, Wu and Garza (2014:1256) argue that "English leaners' errors should be analysed carefully because errors show the process of learning a language". Wu and Garza believe that errors provide indications "for teachers to understand what grammar is difficult" for the students, and which errors can therefore be emphasised in teaching. Explicit instruction on specific errors is frequently necessary and it is important that teachers "provide a context where fluent and accurate language use" is "modeled to the learners". Furthermore, errors provide insight into the progress of the learner and indicate how much more instruction is needed (Ringbom, 1987:60). In

a South African context, error classification and treatment by Wissing (1987), Mhundwa (2003) and Louw (2006, 2009) provided an impetus for the study of errors in the South African environment, but in this case in a different *milieu* – namely, that of distance education.

Louw (2006:36) points out the pedagogical purpose of error classification, noting that there are

> …numerous classifications of errors that try to order errors on the grounds of **why** they occur. This is very difficult and often very subjective. In some instances it is very useful to know why errors occur, but for the purposes of providing feedback it is more important to classify errors in terms of the categories they fall into, so that something can be done to correct the problems in that specific category.

It can be argued that in some cases the source of the error can be helpful in explaining why the error was made and thus formulating relevant pedagogical policy, although it is admitted that these reasons are secondary to the primary objective of assisting educators to focus on errors that are found in the writing of their own students in a South African context.

With these considerations in mind, it was hoped that a classification of the errors (as defined by the relatively narrow field of standard written academic English) made by this group would assist the beleaguered educator at the 'chalkface' in designing appropriate intervention strategies. In this context, the review endeavoured to highlight errors made by the heterogeneous LSK0108 target group and made recommendations based on these findings as well as on previous research.

4.   Target group: demographics

Not only are Unisa students from a diversity of demographic backgrounds, but in most cases English is an additional language and their difficulties are exacerbated by the minimal lecturer-student contact and lack of day-to-day classroom interaction.

These demographics reflect the increasingly heterogeneous nature of student populations at Unisa, as well as at other universities locally and internationally. The distribution of the home-language groups of the participants in this study is reflected in the following percentages:

Table 1: *Distribution of reported home languages of participants (n=100)*

Home language	% of total
Xhosa (X)	52
Xhosa/English (EX)	2
Afrikaans (A)	18
Afrikaans/English (EA)	16
Sesotho (SES)	2
Sesotho/English (SESE)	1
Zulu (Z)	1
Shona (SHO)	5
Shona/English (SE)	2
Russian (RUS)	1

The largest group in the study comprised South African students whose communicative command of English was generally poor, possibly due to various socio-economic and political factors such as poverty and other consequences of the apartheid system (Lephalala & Mackoe, 2012). This was particularly true of speakers of Xhosa, Xhosa/English, Sesotho, Sesotho/English and Zulu (despite the fact that some of these groups claimed English as an extra 'home' language). In combination, these groups comprised 58% of the total number of student essays surveyed.

5 .   Research method

The study used the classification and analysis of errors as a basis for designing relevant intervention strategies, and took the form of a primarily quantitative study of data combined with qualitative elements in the form of the study of sources. The errors were categorised as morphological, lexical, syntactical and mechanical errors as adapted from the research of Ferris (2002).

5.1   Research instruments and data-collection techniques

The research assignments were written in the classrooms and, in some cases, the offices of the Parow Learning Centre of Unisa. The activities were carried out as far as possible in the course of either the normal classes or the students' initial scheduled visits to the Learning Centre. It should be noted that attendance at tutorial classes is voluntary

and that, for various reasons, not all students avail themselves of this opportunity. Thus in order to obtain a large enough sample of scripts, it was necessary to harvest data over a period of three semesters, namely at the beginning of the second semester of 2009, and the first and second semesters of 2010[4].The purpose of the research (an analysis of language errors made by students in assignments) was explained to the students and written permission was given by all participants to include their assignments in the study. Separate from the informed consent, institutional ethical clearance for the study was obtained.

Convenience sampling (defined as a sample of subjects taken from a group that is conveniently accessible to the researcher) was used to choose the cohort from the student target population of the (LSK0108) module at the University of South Africa. Participating students were attending tutorial classes at the Parow Learning Centre where the researcher is a tutor. The advantages of convenience sampling are ease of access, a good chance of a high response rate (participants are often known to the researcher and interested in the purpose of the data collection), and the fact that the process is relatively inexpensive. Disadvantages are the limitations to the degree to which results can be generalised to the population as a whole, and that sampling bias that can occur as a result of the exclusion of large numbers of the population.

Despite the limitations, convenience sampling was chosen because the researcher was a tutor of LSK0108 at the Parow Learning Centre and therefore the advantages of convenience sampling (namely, ease of access, chances of high response rate, and relatively low cost) applied to the situation.

While it is acknowledged that there are limitations to the degree to which one can generalise from a sample such as this to the whole population, it should be pointed out that the aim of the research was pedagogical in nature and does not claim to extrapolate the findings to the population as a whole. The purpose of the project was to identify the language 'errors' of this group (as defined by the study) with a view to intervention. An important factor instrumental in the choice of the research topic was concern about the challenges encountered by students of LSK0108 in developing academic writing skills.

All the students submitted a piece of writing on the same topic *("Should the death penalty be reinstated?"*). In order to obviate any influence that the tutorials or any other intervention by the Learning Centre might have had, the research took place at the beginning of the semester. Students would therefore have received instruction in writing skills at school-level only.

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4   The average registration of all students enrolled nationally for the module LSK0108 over the three periods covered (first and second semester 2009 and first semester 2010) was 3176.

The assistance of two markers was enlisted for the purposes of ensuring reliability and accuracy. Both markers had extensive teaching experience, at both secondary and tertiary level, and were in possession of post-graduate degrees in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Each marker received unmarked copies of the essays and marking was carried out independently, after initial consultation. Each essay was first read through, and then the first 100 words of the essay were thoroughly marked for language errors, using a coding grid, as adapted from the research of Ferris (2002). If an error was repeated in the script, it was counted as a separate error. After an interval, the essays were reread, checked and alterations to the marking were made where necessary. During the marking process, consultation took place in order to clarify the definition and scope of certain error categories.

5.2   Raw Data

After all the errors had been noted, the raw data were recorded and then statistically processed in order to reflect an accurate picture of the distribution of errors as observed by the markers. For example, the number of errors per group was calculated in terms of an average score (mean) per student. The mean, in this instance, was obtained by dividing the number of errors per language group by the number of respondents in that language group. This prevented misinterpreting the data by considering merely the raw number of errors identified. Thus the number of errors per language group was calculated to indicate the average score per student in each language group.

Tables 2 and 3 contain the raw data of the total number of errors recorded for the various error types indicated by markers 1 (M1) and 2 (M2). A key to the tables follows after the results of marker 2.

Results of marker 1

Table 2: *Total number of errors M1*

Lang	Error Type																	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
X	53	67	24	146	24	2	189	29	45	12	15	135	48	9	224	137	1	1160
EX	0	1	1	7	1	0	9	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	6	6	0	35
A	9	16	17	11	6	6	40	8	21	1	8	27	7	9	61	37	0	284
EA	1	8	2	7	1	7	29	7	16	0	3	17	6	4	54	33	0	195
SES	4	2	2	6	1	0	10	1	0	1	0	4	5	0	3	4	0	42
SESE	1	0	0	4	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	2	4	0	17
Z	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	6	0	0	16
SHO	3	0	3	6	2	1	26	4	3	0	3	12	4	0	19	7	0	93
SE	0	0	0	2	0	1	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	4	0	19
RUS	0	0	1	4	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	3	0	1	2	3	0	18
Total	71	94	50	196	36	17	316	50	85	14	29	207	74	23	381	235	1	1879

Results of marker 2

Table 3: *Total number of errors M2*

Lang	Error Type																	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
X	60	64	32	153	25	1	209	17	53	17	21	93	34	8	237	143	1	**1168**
EX	1	0	1	7	1	0	10	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	6	7	0	**37**
A	9	18	16	12	4	6	32	8	19	3	8	18	8	7	62	38	0	**268**
EA	2	13	4	6	2	7	33	7	16	1	5	14	7	3	50	32	0	**201**
SES	4	2	2	6	2	0	10	1	0	0	0	4	4	0	3	4	0	**42**
SESE	1	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	2	3	0	**16**
Z	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	6	0	0	**16**
SHO	3	1	3	6	3	0	32	4	2	0	4	12	4	0	18	7	0	**99**
SE	0	0	0	1	0	1	8	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	4	0	**20**
RUS	0	0	1	4	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	2	3	0	**17**
Total	**80**	**98**	**59**	**202**	**38**	**15**	**339**	**39**	**90**	**22**	**38**	**154**	**61**	**19**	**389**	**241**	**1**	**1884**

Key to the tables

Vertical axis (Language)			Horizontal axis (Error type)	
X	**=**	Xhosa	1.	Tense
EX	**=**	English/Xhosa	2.	Form
A	**=**	Afrikaans	3.	Subject-verb agreement
EA	**=**	English/Afrikaans	4.	Article/determiners
SES	**=**	Sesotho	5.	Noun endings (plural)
SESE	**=**	Sesotho/English	6.	Noun endings (possessive)
Z	**=**	Zulu	7.	Word choice
SHO	**=**	Shona	8.	Word form
SE	**=**	Shona/English	9.	Informal usage
RUS	**=**	Russian	10.	Idiom error
			11.	Pronoun error
			12.	Sentence structure
			13.	Run-ons
			14.	Fragments
			15.	Punctuation
			16.	Spelling
			17.	Miscellaneous

5.3   Interrater reliability

A first consideration was the agreement and relative bias between the two markers (henceforth M1 and M2 respectively). In the following graph (Figure 1), variables TotalM1 and TotalM2 are respectively the total number of errors recorded by the two markers. There are 100 pairs of TotalM1, TotalM2 values.

Figure 1 is a plot of TotalM1 against TotalM2. The straight line in this graph passes through the origin and has slope=1. The points cluster around this line with no indication of systematic deviation. The graph indicates a high correlation between the two variables; the correlation coefficient is 0.958, thus very high.
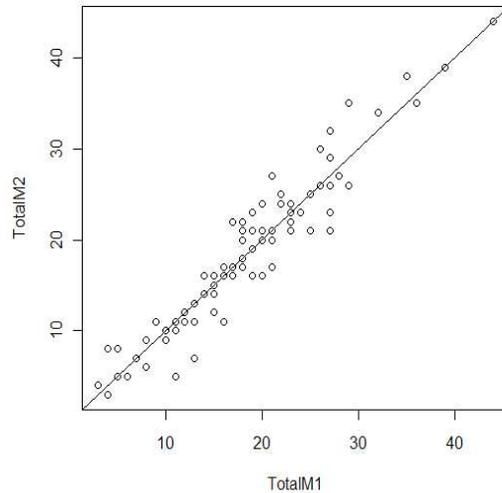
Figure 1: *Plot of total errors identified by M1 and M2*

The clustering of points around the (0, 1) line indicates that there is little bias between the markers. This can be tested more formally by means of a one-sample t-test of the mean of the pairwise differences (TotalM1-TotalM2). The mean difference is -0.05, standard deviation 2.350, t (99) =0.213, p=0.832; so, the mean difference is not significantly different from zero, thus indicating very little bias.

5.4   Home language groups

The three largest groups of participants were home language speakers of Xhosa, Afrikaans, and English/Afrikaans. It was decided to pool the English/Xhosa group as it was extremely small (2 students) and it was ascertained that Xhosa was the dominant language of these students. Thus the numbers of the three groups were calculated as Xhosa and English/Xhosa pooled (54), Afrikaans (18) and English/Afrikaans (16). Students of other language groups (12) were placed in a common category labelled 'Other' because of the relative small numbers of participants in different categories.

Given the strong agreement between the two markers, it is possible to use Total= (TotalM1+TotalM2)/2 as variables characterising total errors. Table 4 gives a basic summary of the statistics for TotalM1 and TotalM2 as well as the totals. As mentioned, in this case, the smaller languages groups have been pooled into one called 'Other', and the two cases of English/Xhosa have been incorporated into the Xhosa group.

Table 4: *Summary of statistics for mean of Total-M1 and total M2 as well as the total means per home language group of participants*

Home language groups	Afrikaans	English/ Afrikaans	Xhosa	Other
Number of Scripts	18	16	54	12
TotalM1 mean	15.78	12.19	22.13	17.08
Standard deviation	4.45	6.89	7.91	4.44
Total M2 mean	14.89	12.56	22.31	17.50
Standard deviation	3.98	7.42	8.42	4.87
Total mean	15.33	12.38	22.22	17.29
Standard deviation	4.13	7.10	8.06	4.57

The question is whether the observed mean differences between home language groups are statistically significant. As a first step, a one-way analysis of variance with response variable Total and group variable Home Language Group was performed. The result is an F-statistic [$F_{(3, 96)}$ =10.42, P=0.001], showing that there are statistically significant differences between the means.

It was felt that the home language group standard deviations are sufficiently different from one another to cause doubt about pairwise comparisons in the usual way – that is, assuming homogeneous variances. Thus pairwise Welch t-tests were performed to see which means could be considered statistically significantly different. The result is that the Xhosa mean is statistically significantly greater than all three of the other means. The Other mean is statistically significantly greater than the English/Afrikaans mean, but not with the same convincingly small P-value.

In many instances, the findings demonstrated significant differences between the means of the various home language groups, and implied a bimodal distribution pattern. This gave rise to speculation that factors other than home language could influence this finding. It was decided to investigate one of these possible factors, namely schooling.

5.5   Schools

For various reasons (such as the non-payment of fees and therefore the cancellation of the student's registration), the researcher experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining the academic records of all the students surveyed; consequently, a smaller group of 34 students (the students attending classes for the second semester of 2010) was examined. Despite the relative smallness of the group, there was reason to believe that insights could be gleaned from the data in relation to the schools attended.

Data on these students, extracted from Tables 2 and 3, were analysed with the view to determining whether a relationship exists between the school attended and the number of errors per student. Schools were divided into the following broad categories:

1.   Rural;

2.   "Township" (which included schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas on the outskirts of both cites and smaller towns);

3.   Urban schools close to the City Bowl (schools previously under the auspices of the House of Representatives – abbreviated in the following tables to Urban-ex-House of Rep.);

4.   Schools in more affluent areas, previously catering for white pupils (popularly labelled 'ex -Model C schools');

5.   FET (Further Education and Training) colleges;

6.   Independent (private) schools; and

7.   Schools outside the borders of South Africa.

Initially, a summary was made of the numbers of observations in the School*Language categories. However, because of the small number of known results for schools, pooling of categories was necessary in order to obtain reasonably clear indications of trends. Therefore, a further process was followed in order to obtain a better idea of the School*Language intersection, namely:

1.   The data of only the Model C, Rural and Township schools, Afrikaans, English/Afrikaans, and Xhosa home language groups were extracted from the information provided in Tables 2 and 3. These made up 25 of the 34 known schools.

2.   The Township and Rural groups were pooled.

3.   The Afrikaans and English/Afrikaans home language groups were similarly pooled.

Table 5 shows the numbers of the combined groups. The corresponding means are in Table 6. The means were calculated as for the home language groups (5.2).

Table 5: *Numbers of the combined groups for home language groups and schools*

School	Afr. and Eng./Afr.	Xhosa
Model C	6	2
Township/Rural	4	13

Table 6: *Means of observed errors for the combined groups for home language groups and schools*

School	Afr. and Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Means of observed errors
Model C	14.500	12.500	14.000
Township/Rural	18.625	21.500	20.824
Means	16.150	20.300	

The sample numbers are small (see Table 5) and there must be reservations about their representativeness. Consequently, the trends suggested by Table 6 should be treated with caution. However, it is clear that Township/Rural means of observed errors are greater than the corresponding Model C means of observed errors. This result raises the possibility that observed differences between the means of errors observed in the larger sample may be attributable to schools attended by the participants.

The bimodal pattern of distribution with statistically significant differences between the types of schools attended by participants found in this study is similar to that reported in other studies (Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005; Mullis et al., 2007; Fleisch, 2008; Howie et al., 2008; Pretorius, 2008). Based on the analysis of errors made in assignments as defined in this study, and the meta-analysis of data related to home language groups and schools attended by participants, one can infer that the schools attended by participants seem to relate to the number of errors observed by the markers. Due to the nature of school arrangements in South Africa – e.g. home language instruction in grades 1 – 4 and arrangements necessary to offer grade 12 languages at home language level – schools tend to focus on selected home languages. This implies that there is a relationship between 'home language' and types of schools because the system is structured that way.

6.   Implications of the findings

The findings suggest a need for urgent intervention, especially in the case of Xhosa home language students from rural and township schools that participated in this study. The data suggest that participants from rural and township schools where an African language was catered for as a home language had statistically significantly more errors in the essays analysed in this study.

7.   Intervention strategies: What can be done "in the meantime"?

Having examined the errors made by the target group, the next step was to establish a link between the project's findings and the development of relevant intervention strategies. Many of the proposals made are not new – as is evidenced in the references to existing methods – but have been adapted to the specific context of DE, which is characterised by minimal (and often non-existent) face-to-face interaction between stakeholders. It should also be noted that, due to space constraints, the vast topic of computer assisted language learning options (CALL) is not discussed. However, it is acknowledged that CALL is particularly powerful, especially in the case of scaffolded learning, and that ideas discussed in this article could lend themselves to adaptation to the electronic and computer-assisted media. It should also be noted that despite recent innovations at Unisa (including e-learning facilities such as online tutoring), many students, particularly those in the rural areas, do not have easy access to the internet and rely almost exclusively on hard copies of learning materials in the form of study guides and tutorial letters, as well as on written feedback to their assignments. The following section of this article thus focusses on error treatment and materials designed for the DE context.

7.1   Error treatment

While a focus on form to the exclusion of content and organisation of ideas is actively discouraged, students need to be assisted with the language features that they find problematic. In fact, research has found that students expect and desire such assistance (Spencer, 1998:208; Louw, 2006:7), particularly when the goal is to master academic English.

An important factor to be considered when dealing with language errors is whether communication is impeded. However, another aspect to be borne in mind is the context of academic writing, a language variety that requires a greater degree of accuracy than in more informal communication, and where errors (even those that do not directly impede meaning) can have a negative effect on the image that the students project in their written work and the ultimate marks they receive (Van der Walt, 2001:7-8; Jenkins, 2006:175). Thus a system of prioritisation of errors should be adopted, with errors that obscure meaning being given the most attention in the marking process and learning

materials, while not ignoring errors that do not directly affect meaning, but affect the impression made by the writing. For ease of marking, codes may be used to indicate the type of error (Spencer, 1998, Louw, 2006). Markers could also direct students to the sections of the learning material that they feel would assist them in overcoming their difficulties with various language features. This would address to problem pointed out by Hyland (2001), who expressed concern that students may overlook the institutional support that is offered and thus jeopardise their chances of passing.This is of greater concern in distance education, especially in skills-based subjects such as LSK0108, where study material comprises guidelines, and knowledge of the content of this material is not directly tested.

7.2 Materials development using cognitive apprenticeship/scaffolding techniques

It should be stated from the outset that it is not the intention of this study to address the complex field of materials development. The focus of the recommendations remains the problems identified by the error review and the purpose is to offer suggestions that can be incorporated into learning material designed for this and similar target groups, bearing in mind the exigencies of the distance education environment. A contextualised, communicative approach to language learning, supplemented by notes and exercises dealing with specific language features for the learning materials, is recommended. As is the case for feedback, errors could be prioritised, with those errors (such as sentence structure) that frequently obscure meaning being given the most coverage, while not ignoring frequent errors, such as mechanical errors, that often do not obscure meaning but detract from the image created by the writing. Assignment markers could refer students to relevant language notes and exercises found in the materials, and, in the course of revision, students could also choose to study specific features that they feel need attention. The marker's feedback would thus guide the individual student through the material by pointing him/her to the section in the materials that would assist with features that he/she finds problematic. It was hoped that this would cause students to engage meaningfully with the materials.

Students should also be encouraged to edit their own work, possibly by instructing them to submit drafts as well as a final version of their assignments (Spencer, 1997:46; Pienaar, 2005). However, if students are to derive optimal benefit from editing their own work, they should obtain adequate training. This can be achieved by means of exercises of increasing complexity provided in the learning materials, following the cognitive apprenticeship framework examined by Westbrook (2009). This approach is described by Westbrook (2009:143) as drawing on "schema theory with the emphasis on explicit teaching (modeling), guided practice (scaffolding), and literacy strategies (heuristics) that allow students to internalize new information". In the context of this study, scaffolding is viewed as a means to provide concrete support to additional language learners of English from disadvantaged school backgrounds as they tackle courses requiring abstract and challenging language skills.
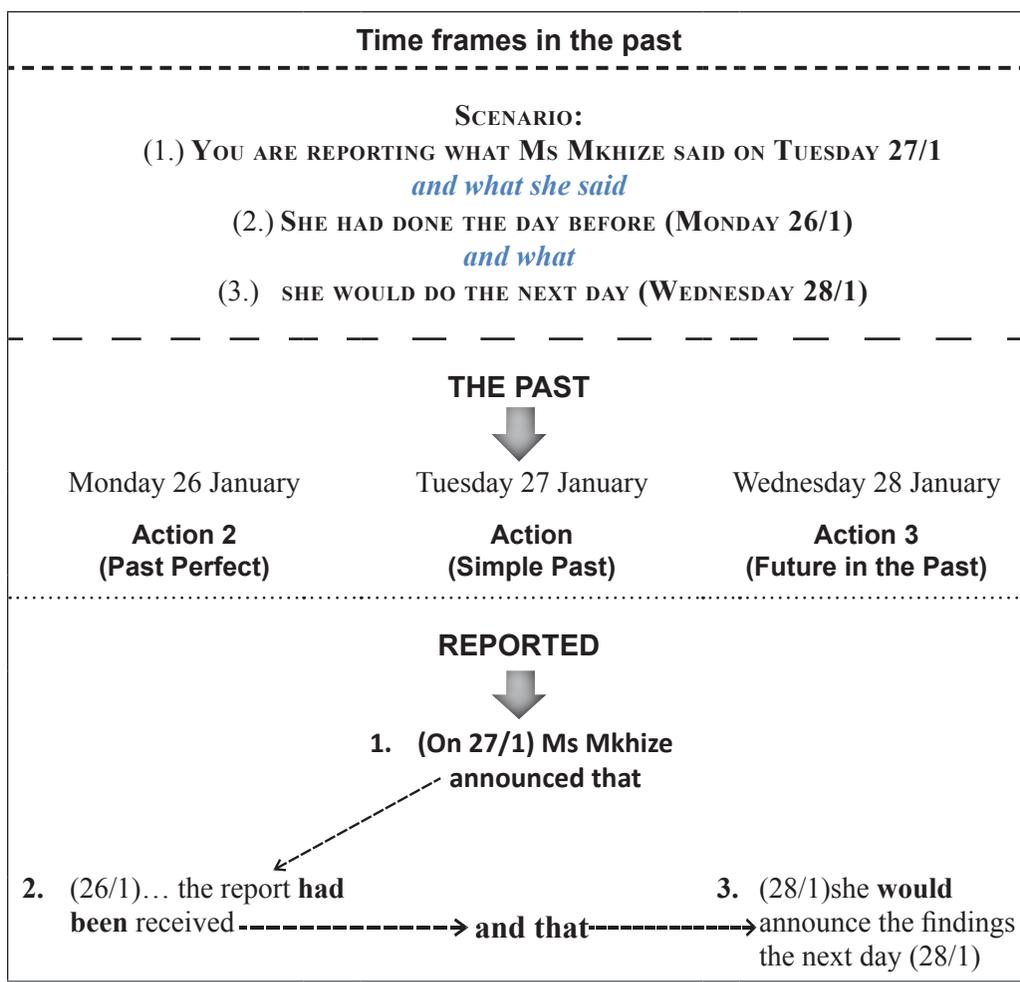
Westbrook (2009:29) avers that "when students have to stretch and struggle with new concepts, they learn – but they must be supported in that struggle". She adds that the "teacher can serve as both a source of support as well as a model for developing and internalizing new information or concepts" (Westbrook, 2009:29). This support is known as scaffolding (Westbrook, 2009:56) and is one of the stages of the framework for the cognitive apprenticeship paradigm advocated by Collins et al. (1991). The framework can be described as a pedagogical model based on the historical apprenticeship system of "transmitting knowledge from expert to novice in many crafts and trades" (Westbrook, 2009:56). Collins et al. (1991:1) posit that "cognitive apprenticeship is a model of instruction that works to make thinking visible". The paradigm adapts features of traditional apprenticeship to the modern learning situation. These features are "modeling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching" (Collins et al., 1991:2).

In modelling, the instructor gives explicit instructions and shows the students what to do, thus helping them to "build a conceptual model of the processes that are required to accomplish the task" (Collins et al., 1991:2). The students are then given a similar task during which the instructor or educator provides them with any support they need (scaffolding). Westbrook (2009:57) states that "supports can be suggestions or graphic organizers that provide an 'intermediary step' the student needs to complete the task".

For instance, students participating in the review experienced problems with tenses, especially the simple past tense form and the sequencing of tenses. Past-tense markers presented the greatest number of errors in this category, particularly among Xhosa-speaking students. Typically, the past tense was not marked, either by the suffix '-ed' or by changes required by the past tense of irregular verbs. Confusion about the sequence of tenses also was particularly noticeable in the essays of Xhosa-speaking students, possibly as a result of home language influence.

Notes on time frames can be presented graphically as in Figure 2 below.

The sentence to be discussed is 'Ms Mkhize announced that the report had been received and that she would announce the findings the next day'.

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                    Time frames in the past                        │
├ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┤
│                          SCENARIO:                                │
│   (1.) YOU ARE REPORTING WHAT MS MKHIZE SAID ON TUESDAY 27/1      │
│                     and what she said                             │
│        (2.) SHE HAD DONE THE DAY BEFORE (MONDAY 26/1)             │
│                          and what                                 │
│     (3.)  SHE WOULD DO THE NEXT DAY (WEDNESDAY 28/1)              │
│ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─   │
│                          THE PAST                                 │
│                            ⬇                                      │
│                                                                   │
│  Monday 26 January     Tuesday 27 January    Wednesday 28 January │
│                                                                   │
│     Action 2               Action                Action 3         │
│   (Past Perfect)       (Simple Past)         (Future in the Past) │
│...................................................................│
│                         REPORTED                                  │
│                            ⬇                                      │
│                                                                   │
│              1.   (On 27/1) Ms Mkhize                             │
│                   announced that                                  │
│                      ⟋                                            │
│                  ⟋                                                │
│  2. (26/1)… the report had                3. (28/1)she would      │
│     been received ----------→ and that ------→ announce the       │
│                                                findings           │
│                                                the next day (28/1)│
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 2: *Graphic representation of three past-tense forms*

Another frequently made error (that does not usually impede meaning but that needs to be addressed in the narrow context of academic writing as it detracts from the impression created) is that of subject-verb agreement (concord). Mhundwa (2003: 229) states that the "frequency of occurrence of errors in this category poses a great problem to teachers at tertiary level because although the errors might be classified as local or types that do not lead to serious communication breakdowns, they are likely to get fossilised".

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Errors of concord were widespread among the target group, possibly as a result of home language influence. Neither of the two main home languages represented (namely, Afrikaans and Xhosa) have rules of subject-verb agreement similar to those of English. To assist students, notes on concord could be presented graphically as follows:

> **Note to student:** Be aware of concord. In other words, make sure that the verb agrees with the subject of the sentence [a brief explanation of these terms can be given here].

Examples of shorter sentences, followed by longer sentences as shown in the graphic presentation below) could then be given.

> **Note to student: Be careful of longer sentences in which the subject is separated from the verb by a number of words, for example:**
>
> The <u>students</u> **(SUBJECT)** at the very stormy protest meeting, which started much later than expected and was not attended by the vice chancellor, <u>were</u> **(VERB)** angry that their grievances were not addressed.

Figure 3: *Graphic representation of an example of subject-verb agreement*

Similar examples could be given to demonstrate other language features. Graphic presentations of this nature could be developed and incorporated into computer-assisted learning (for the use of e-tutors, for instance), podcasts and PowerPoint presentations.

Muddled syntax was widespread and gave cause for grave concern as meaning was frequently impaired. A similar finding was made by Mhundwa, 2003:231-232. This gave rise to a consideration of factors beyond the sentence level. Some guidance on cohesion and coherence is thus necessary in this area, although the study focussed primarily on errors made within the sentence.

Using top-down (macro) and bottom-up (micro) approaches, the educator could help the students to understand how short stretches of discourse are constructed. For example, students could explore the functions of various referential links in the sentence. Thus the educator could venture beyond the sentence level to show the students how a paragraph 'hangs together'. For instance, cohesion could be demonstrated using the following graphic representation.

The following extract shows some of the links between the different words in a paragraph. Study it carefully. What other connectors can you identify?

*As life gets faster, communication gets faster. More and more people are in a hurry and **they** do not want to waste **their** time, so **they** send quick text messages, dash off emails, post on twitter or pop a new status onto **their** Facebook 'walls'. **This** kind of lifestyle is creating "media junkies", **people** who obsessively send messages which are quick and easy but often lack depth and sensitivity.*

Figure 4: *Graphic representation of an example of cohesion*

Once again, a representation of this nature would lend itself to computer assisted learning and in fact could be developed further by this strongly visual medium.

Students frequently had difficulty in using complex sentences and in combining simple sentences. Examples could be given to demonstrate the use of conjunctions in the case of subordinate clauses and to assist students with the combination of sentences, as shown in the following:

Sentence-combining exercise

Instruction to the student.

Combine each of the following groups of sentences into a single sentence using the connector in brackets.

The single forward slash ("/") marks the end of the subject.

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Example:

(**The result of**) There is something called studying. This studying is regular.   / It improves a student's thinking ability. It also improves his/her reading ability. ➡
The result of studying regularly is that it improves a student's thinking and reading ability.

Figure 5: *Combining sentences*

The student will then be required to join similar sentences, using the example as a guideline.

As the student's proficiency increases, the scaffolding 'fades' and the student assumes increasing responsibility for the task. Coaching takes place throughout the process and includes choosing tasks, scaffolding, feedback and evaluation. The learning material should make use of this framework, particularly modelling and scaffolding techniques. These techniques explain the feature and then give students support as they progress towards fluency, and ultimately gain control of their own academic writing. Examples include cloze exercises (or modified cloze exercises) and graphic representations, as demonstrated. The latter are particularly beneficial to students whose home language is not English and who may struggle to understand paragraphs of explanation in the target language. It should also be remembered that many students seem to have experienced limited exposure to written discourse, even in their own language (Pretorius, 2008).

As is currently the case, answers or suggested solutions would be provided for all exercises. Louw (2006:61) points out that the "most favoured form of correction was 'error indicated and cue for self-correction' followed by 'error and answer' and using errors as examples in the classroom". The latter, classroom option is challenging in the DE context, but self-correction could be achieved by providing exercises with answers. This would assist in motivation and consciousness-raising.

In the learning material, activities become increasingly complex, starting with discrete sentences, followed by longer passages that test the feature, and finally paragraphs containing a combination of related features (such as tenses). Answers for self-assessment are included. At the end of the learning material, students are asked to edit passages containing several features.

An example of an editing exercise involving several features is found below. These errors were typical of those found in the assignments of the target group.

Editing exercise

The crime is out of controll i think that death penalty should be reinstate people must become rensponible for there actions. Too much murder, rapes and the children neglect. We see these in a dialy bases. Many of these criminal's are coming from the rural areas were they can't find jobs and after a wile they come involve into crime, drugs and prostitution human trafiking soon it's to late to Rehabilitate them and they are lost to the society.

These guys who steal rape or comit the other crimes go to the jail if they really do for a few years and get away with it. They should go to jail for ever and never came out they can rott there people must be safe from these killers they don't care just wanna be gangstas and show of. The poeple in the communitys and even the police is terrified of them. Nothing to do about it.

Figure 6: *Editing exercise*

Westbrook (2009) applied the cognitive apprenticeship framework to a group of ESL students who exhibited "gaps in their ability to communicate critical and creative thinking and reasoning in English". Similar to the LSK0108 students in the current review, they represented a "microcosm of the diverse challenges of both language fluency and school background" presented to language educators (Westbrook, 2009:56).

Westbrook's (2009: 19) research on scaffolding techniques is "based on the assumption that English teachers have a unique opportunity to help students learn to think critically – and that students learn critical thinking by engaging in [these techniques]". Westbrook (2009:19) points out that studies such as that of Tsui (2002:748–749) corroborate this viewpoint. Tsui (2002:748–749) stresses the value of "an emphasis on writing and rewriting" as well as a related "focus on the synthesis, analysis, and refinement of ideas through the medium of writing". In the South African context, Wildsmith-Cromarty and Steinke (2014) report successful scaffolding techniques in the Read to Learn (R2L) programme for adult access students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Their findings demonstrated "a marked improvement in both reading and writing abilities at both the micro and macro levels of text" (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Steinke, 2014:40). This is heartening when one considers that Wildsmith-Cromarty and Steinke's target group, although homogenous (unlike the LSK0108 group), shares many of the socio-economic and educational challenges experienced by the target group of this study. In another South African study, McCabe (2013) controversially suggests code-switching as a scaffolding technique, but is this practical for use with the multi-lingual target group of the current study?

8.   Conclusion

In response to the findings of the review that urgent intervention seems necessary in order to assist students to attain their academic goals this article has added ideas to provide some answers to Ferris's (2004) pressing question, "… what do we do in the meantime?" It is the authors' strongly held belief that English is an invaluable national and international resource and that this implies that students have the right to know *how* and *when* to use the conventions of the target language. In order to address the needs of students from disadvantaged school backgrounds, scaffolded teaching tasks were proposed to empower students by extending their linguistic repertoire and consequently their ability to choose the appropriate variety judiciously.

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Ririmi - - Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig - Journal for Language
Teaching - Ijenali yokuFundisa iLimi - IJenali yokuFundisa
iiLwimi - Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta