

Morphological Errors Made by Secondary School Learners and their Effect on Writing in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper examines the morphological errors made by students in secondary schools and how these errors affect the quality of learners' writing. These are the underlying issues that emerged out of a research conducted in Migwani Sub-county of Kitui County, 2012-2013. The study was based on Ellis (1994) Error Analysis Model, which outlines four major steps in error analysis namely: selection of corpus identifying errors, classifying errors and explanation of the different types of errors. The study focused in form one learner's in secondary schools. It employed purposive, stratified and random sampling techniques. Teacher questionnaire and learners' essays were used to collect data. The data collected was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively through the use of numbers, descriptive statistics and presented in frequency tables and percentages. The study revealed that morphological errors affect learners' quality writing; most learners used the present tense where the past tense should have been used, they also attached the past tense marker to an infinite, they also had affixation and prefixation errors and finally wrong plural formation errors. The study recommends: Teachers should pay more attention to writing to help learners to develop skills in producing standard language. This can be done by giving more frequent writing assignments at least once a month. Teachers of English need also to carefully go through the KIE English syllabus and the KNEC essay marking scheme. This will make them realise how seriously morphological errors are taken and allow them to guide their learners from an informed position.

Key Words: Morphological Errors, Effect, Writing, Learners

INTRODUCTION

According to Corder (1967) when people are learning a second language, they already have a first language. The first language has rules that the learners have learnt and understood and they therefore tend to use these rules on the second language resulting into errors. Kutz *et al.* (1993) state that the nature of academic writing often confuses and disorients students, particularly those who bring with them a set of conventions that are at odds with those of the academic world they are entering. Hedge (1999) asserts that writing is essentially a creative process which involves students in a learning process, motivates, builds their confidence, and gives them an opportunity to explore the language, and to look for the best ways of self-expression.

Writing in English as a Second Language

Writing is not a natural activity, so explicit instructions are required for learning this skill (Aronoff & Rees- Miller, 2007, p. 11). According to Allen and Corder (1974) writing is an intricate and complex task and it is the most difficult of the language abilities to acquire.

Myles (2002) indicates that students' writing in a second language is faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. Learners may continue to exhibit errors in their writing for the following social reasons: negative attitudes toward the target language, continued lack of progress in the L2, a wide social and psychological distance between them and the target culture, and a lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning. Most Form One learners who are the subjects of this study lack the ability to express themselves in written English and are not motivated enough to want to excel in English and most learn it because it is compulsory.

Hedge (1999) argues that writing is more of a recursive activity in which the writer moves backwards and forewords between drafting and revising, with stages of preplanning in between. Rewriting gives learners the chance to think further about the content. He assumes that writing is essentially a creative process which involves students in a learning process, motivates, builds their confidence, and gives them an opportunity to explore the language, to communicate and to look for the best ways of self-expression.

Morphopogical Errors in Writing

A learner's first language plays a complex and significant role in L2 acquisition. For example, when learners write under pressure, they may call upon systematic resources from their native language for the achievement and synthesis of meaning (Widdowson, 1990). Research has also shown that language learners sometimes use their native language when generating ideas and attending to details (Friedlander, 1990). The main concern of this study is the effect of morphological errors made by learners as they write an exam which can be considered writing under pressure.

Morphological errors are errors that result from the misapplication of the morphological rules in the formation of words. Hsieh, Tsai, Wible, and Hsu (2002) and also Akande (2005) maintain that morphological errors indicate the learner's miscomprehension about the meaning and function of morphemes and about the morphological rules. According to these scholars, morphological errors include: wrong use of affixes, wrong plural formation, wrong tense formation, wrong use of possessive markers and compounding errors.

Theoretical Issues

This study was based on Ellis (1994) Model of Error Analysis. The basic principles of this model are: selection of a corpus, identification of errors, classification of errors and explanation of the different types of errors. The study adopted this model because the initial step in error analysis requires the selection of a corpus of language, after language

selection the next step is the identification of errors then followed by the classification of the errors and lastly the model demands an explanation of the different types of errors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted mixed research design quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed. This design was appropriate for this study as Shohamy (1989) notes; it is useful whenever an investigator is concerned with discovering or describing language phenomena in its natural context. This study analyzed the morphological errors in the essays of form one learners in Migwani district.

Purposive sampling was used to select form one students. This is because Form One is the beginning of the four year secondary school course, there is enough time for the learners to be helped out of their errors and hence attain good performance in the KCSE examination if their errors are studied and the effect of these errors on the quality of learners' writing.

Purposive sampling was also used to select the teacher respondents. The sample population for the teachers of English was 20 out of the 41 teachers of English in the district. The sample population was drawn from ten different schools. The schools were selected through stratified sampling, two boys' boarding schools, two girls' boarding schools, two mixed boarding schools, two mixed day and boarding schools and two mixed day schools. In total ten schools were selected for the study. This sample was considered to be representative enough for the intention of the study. The teacher participants were two teachers of English per school while the number of learner respondents was 15% of the total Form One population in each of the ten schools. In total 100 students took part in the study. This small sample was chosen in order to allow for in-depth investigation and data analysis (Tridgill, 1973). Furthermore, Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) state that a sample size of 100 is acceptable for a descriptive design.

The data collection instruments were a questionnaire and an essay. The questionnaire was for teachers of English. It was merely meant to collect views, opinions, perceptions, feelings and attitudes that would help explain learner errors. The questionnaire method was deemed appropriate since the target population comprised people who are able to read and write on their own. Orodho (2005) asserts that this method reaches a large number of subjects who are able to read and write independently. Data to answer the research questions was collected through the administration of a task to the learners. This was in form of an imaginative composition which would allow the learners express themselves freely and therefore makes as many errors as they could possibly make

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Morphological Errors

In this study ninety five (95) essays written by the learners generated a total of six hundred and ninety two (692) morphological errors. Each error was given a linguistic category and the frequency and percentage of occurrence determined. The categories were based on the literature of (Corder, 1974; Richards, 1974; James, 1998; Selinker,

1972 in Richards, 1974; Richards & Sampson, 1974). According to them morphological errors fall into the categories of tense, affixation, plural formation, possession and compounding errors. Using this classification, the KIE Secondary School English syllabus and the KNEC English paper 101/3 marking scheme the researchers came up with the following categories to cover the morphological errors found in learners' essays in this study.

- i) Wrong use of affixes
- ii) Wrong plural formation
- iii) Wrong tense formation
- iv) Wrong use of possessive markers
- v) Compounding errors

Table 1. Linguistic categories of morphological errors

Type of error	Frequency	Percentage
Tense Errors	203	29.3%
Affixation Errors	196	28.3%
Plural Formation errors	161	23.3%
Possessive Marker Errors	106	15.3%
Compounding Errors	26	3.8%
TOTAL	692	100%

As table 1 above shows, the leading category of morphological errors as committed by the participants in this study were tense errors at 203 (29.3%) followed closely by affixation errors at 196 (28.3%). Compounding errors were least committed 26 (3.8%). The many tense errors could be because tense is carried by verbs and as every English sentence has to have a verb (whether main or helping), more verbs were used in the learners writing as compared to other constituent parts of the sentence hence the many errors.

These findings confirm what Mungungu (2010) found in her study that each of her participants committed at least a tense and an affixation error. Similarly, Kao (1999) found in his study that grammatical errors occurred with the greatest frequency, 66%. Compounding might have generated the least errors in this study because most of the learners did not use compound nouns in their essays. Those who used compound words used the common place ones for example blackboard and staffroom. Each of the error categories is discussed in details in the next section in order of prevalence.

Tense Formation Errors

In this study wrong tense formation was the leading morphological error. It accounted for 203 (29.3%) of the total morphological errors. This agrees with Gabrys-Barker (2008) who argues that L2 learners of English should have the most trouble with past tense if their L1 both lacks a tense system and is highly constrained in terms of final consonants and consonant clusters.

The participants in this study have diverse L1 and although this study did not investigate the tense system of the participants L1, it is likely that some of the participants L1s' lack it. Most of the learners seemed not to understand the crucial function of a verb in a sentence and how carefully a verb tense should be chosen to convey the precise meaning. They seemed to concentrate more on content that they wanted to put across than on the appropriate language that they should use to express the message. Most of the tense errors were as a result of:

- Wrong Verb Form where the correct tense was used but the verb form was wrong.
- Using Present Tense instead of Past Tense and vice versa.
- Attachment of the Past Tense Marker to an Infinitive.
- Use of auxiliary with the past tense.

Overgeneralization of the past tense formation rules. In the English language, there are verbs that form their past tense by the addition of -ed, for example *play-played*. These verbs are called regular verbs. Because the regular verbs pattern applies to most of the verbs, students extend this rule to other types of verbs, that is, irregular verbs, for example, *eat-eated*. The following examples taken from the learners' scripts illustrate this.

1. The big boys *beated* me until I cry. (beat)
2. I *thinked* secondary school was bad.(thought)

Example 1 and 2 indicate that the student regularised irregular verbs and substituted the Past Tense of *beat* with *beated* and *think* became *thinked*. This resulted in erroneous constructions. This confirms research findings, by Carson (2001) and Kutz, Gorden & Zamel (1993:879-903) who suggested that learners tend to over-generalise the rules for stylistic features when acquiring new discourse structures.

Use of Present Tense instead of Past tense. The subjects of the study seemed not to have a clear understanding of when to use the present tense and when to use the past tense. This Ellis (1996) explains as —false concepts hypothesised. False concepts hypothesised according to Ellis occur when learners do not completely understand a distinction in the target language. Participants in this study used the present tense where the past tense should have been used and vice versa. Examples 3 and 4 illustrate this.

3. I *talked* to her and she also *talk* to me. (talked)
4. The teacher *has given* us work that I *finished*. (*had given*)

The two sentences above show that the learners know that because the events they are narrating happened in the past then the past tense has to be used but they were not consistent because they just expressed one verb in past tense and the others in were expressed in present tense. Example 3 is a case of using the first verb 'talked' in the past tense and the second verb 'talk' in the present tense while in example 4 the first verb 'has given' is in the present participle while the second verb 'finished' is in the past tense. This is considered to be a grammatical error in the usage of tenses because it causes confusion to the reader.

Use of past tense and infinitive. From the learners' essays, it was clear that the learners had a problem with the past tense and the infinitive. They attached the past tense marker to an infinitive. It seems all what the learners were concerned with was putting the verbs in the past tense because they were talking about past events which should be reported in the past tense. They seemed not to know that the past tense marker cannot be attached to an infinitive.

The following examples illustrate this.

5. I use *to cried* every day.(cry)
6. I wanted *to stopped* him from taking my shopping. (stop)
7. I went *to reported* that boy.(report)

The sentences in example 5, 6 and 7 are all erroneous because the learners attached an infinitive (to) to the past tense marker (-ed).

Use of Auxiliary with past tense. The use of the auxiliaries after the verbs suggested that learners had not yet mastered how the English past tense operates and that the use of auxiliary verbs changes the tense. This is illustrated by example 8 and 9 below.

8. Because my father *was died*.(dead)
9. When I *am finished* primary school. (I finish)

The examples above show that the learners did not know that verbs in their past tense form don't take auxiliaries.

Affixation Errors

Greenbaum (1996) states that prefixation and suffixations are types of affixation (or derivation) that differ most obviously in positioning but also in another important respect. And that while prefixation is class-maintaining in that it retains the word class of the base for example ripe/unripe. Suffixation tends to be class-changing for example happy /happiness, although there are exceptions in both directions.

In this study, the participants generated one hundred and ninety six (196) affixation errors which accounted for 28.3% of the total morphological errors committed. They were the second most prevalent errors after tense errors. This compares with (Akande, 2001) whose study revealed that suffixation and prefixation posed the greatest difficulty to the subjects in his study. In this study affixation errors were put into categories informed by Corder's (1974) classification of errors. In Corder's taxonomy, errors fall into four main categories: *omission* of some required elements; *addition* of some unnecessary or incorrect element; *selection* of an incorrect element; and *misordering* of elements. These categories were modified by the researcher to cover the affixation errors found in this study.

Wrong use of prefixes. Prefixation errors were quite common in the learner essays. These errors arose as a result of learners making use of prefixes incorrectly while trying to create new words or give antonyms of particular words. It could also be that the

participants made the errors by blindly applying the general rule in which the opposites of most words are formed by affixing (un-) before their roots (e.g. unhappy, unaccompanied just as the opposite of some are formed by placing (mis-) before them (e.g. misuse and misunderstand). Curiously, all the learners who used the word *'inconvenience'* wrote it as *'misinconvinience'*. This brings to mind what Hawkins (2001) says that ESL speakers find some grammatical morphemes difficult to acquire regardless of their length of exposure to English. The sentences below exemplify prefixation errors.

10. The teacher said my work was *uncomplete*(incomplete)
11. They took my book and that *misinconvinenced* me. (inconvenienced)

In example ten is that the learner uses the wrong prefix (- un) to form the opposite of the word *'complete'* instead of using the prefix *'in'*. In example 11 the learner adds the prefix *'mis'* to form the opposite of a word (inconvenience) that is already in its opposite form.

Wrong use of suffixes. These errors were prevalent in the respondents' scripts. Most of them arose from insertion of wrong or unnecessary suffixes as can be seen in the examples below.

12. I trusted that girl without knowing she was a *tricker*. (trickster)
13. The principal said *cheaters* in the exam will go home. (cheats)

Example 12 is erroneous because of using the wrong suffixes (-er) in forming an adjective from a verb (trick) while example 13 uses the wrong suffix (ers) to form a noun from a verb.(cheat) This agrees with what Mc Neill (1996) found in his study that in the course of forming adjectives from nouns, some of the subjects wrote morphologically deviant forms.

Omission of Suffixes. Omission of a suffix makes a sentence erroneous. From the following examples taken from the learners scripts, this becomes clear.

14. We were told to walk *quick* to the dining hall. (quickly)
15. We ate *fast* than the other girls. (faster)

Sentence 14 becomes erroneous because suffix *'-ly'* has been omitted. This then means *'quick'* which is an adjective is used to modify the verb *'walk'*. Clearly this is wrong because in the English language adjectives do not modify verbs. Suffix *'-ly'* added, the word would become *'quickly'* which is an adverb of manner required in this sentence to modify the verb *'walk'*. Sentence 15 uses the adverb of degree *fast* for comparison without adding the suffix *-er*. This is in breach of the English language rule that comparisons using *'than'* should take an adjective or adverb in its comparative form.

Wrong Plural Formation. The word plural means more than one in number. In most cases, most nouns form their plurals by adding *'s'* to the singular form. The plural form of a verb is the form that fits with a plural subject. There are several ways in which verbs in English form their plurals as given by the Grammar Monster (2013).

- a) To form the plural of a word that ends with a consonant followed by -y, change -y to i, and add -es. For example city-cities, lady-ladies. However to form the plural of words that end with a vowel followed by -y, simply add-s. For example turkey-turkeys, donkey-donkeys.
- b) To form the plural of most words that end with -f or -fe, simply add s. For example chief-chiefs, gulf-gulfs. However, in some cases, the plural is formed by changing the -f to -v, and adding -es for example wife-wives, knife-knives.
- c) For most words that end with -o preceded by a consonant, the plural is formed by adding -es for example potato-potatoes, hero-heroes. When o is preceded by a vowel, the plural is formed by simply adding -s as in video- videos.
- d) Compound nouns that are hyphenated or separated by spaces, form their plurals by adding -s or -es.

Wrong plural formation errors were the third most prevalent morphological errors in the study at 161 (23.3%). They ranged from using a plural marker on already formed plurals to adding the wrong morphemes in plural formation. There was also a tendency to over generalise the addition of _s' to form plurals. The participants applied this even to the irregular and collective nouns where it should not apply. This is what Selinker (1972) refers to when saying, some of the rules of the interlanguage system may be the result of the over generalisation of specific rules and features of the target language. The following examples taken from the learners' scripts illustrate this.

16. There were many *furnitures* in that room. (furniture)
17. All the *girl's* looked at me. (girls)
18. The *skirtes* were green. (skirts)

The sentence in example 16 is erroneous because the learner added the plural marker _s' to form the plural of collective nouns _furniture' which is already in its plural form. In example 17, the learner confuses possession for plural thereby adding the apostrophe before the _s' in *girl's*. The apostrophe in English is used to show possession never to form plurals. Example 18 uses the wrong morpheme _-es' instead of _s' to form the plural of *skirt*.

Wrong plural formation errors were noted to cut across all schools from the district day schools to the county boarding schools. This implies plural formation has not been mastered. To master plural formation in English, a lot of practice is needed because different words in English form their plurals in different ways. From the teachers' responses, learners are not getting enough practice because 77% of the teachers said they gave an essay writing assignment not more than once in a term and this was usually as part of end term examination.

Wrong Use of Possessive Markers. Possessives in English are used to show ownership or belonging. Possessive markers refer to the morphemes we use to indicate this ownership and these morphemes are placed in accordance to some set rules (Quirk *et al.*, 1985). Depending on the placement of the possessive morpheme, a sentence can be open to different interpretations and sometimes can become ambiguous (Anderson, 2008).

In this study, only the simple possessives in which the possessor noun directly precedes the possessor, for example John's book, the double possessives, for example my sister's friend's wedding and possession using 'of' were considered. This is because the KIE English syllabus for form one singles them as what should be mastered by form ones as opposed to say the phrasal possessives. This type of morphological error accounted for 106 (15.3%) of the total morphological errors committed by the participants in this study. Most possessive marker errors occurred as a result of:

- Placing the possessive marker in the wrong position
- Possessive marker not shown
- Using a possessive marker with possessive pronouns

The following are some examples of wrong use of possessive markers as lifted from the learners' essays.

19. I was to report to a *boy's school* (boys)
20. *Mymothers* friend wished me luck. (mother's)

Example 19 is erroneous because not only is the possessive marker (apostrophe) placed in the wrong position but it also affects the meaning of the sentence. Whereas the learner intended to communicate that he was to report to a school belonging to many boys, the meaning that came out was that the school belonged to just one boy. In example 20, the learner did not use a possessive marker and therefore the sentence doesn't show any possession. In fact it brought out the meaning that the learner had many mothers. The use of the possessive marker on personal pronouns was another common error as exemplified in example 21. This shows that the learners lack a knowledge of the rule that the apostrophe is never used to form possessives of personal pronouns like *hers*, *his* and *yours*.

Compounding Errors

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, (1972), a compound word may be open when its constituent morphemes are written separately as in *tear gas* and *fire fighter*, it may be hyphenated as in *half-term* and *story-telling*, and lastly, it may be solid when the constituents are written together as in *classroom* and *blackboard*.

The Form Two KIE syllabus (2006) cautions that although compound words have specific writing conventions, these conventions keep changing and that it is necessary to check from a current dictionary when in doubt. It gives examples of compound nouns to be written as a single unit for example (greenhouse), those to be hyphenated for example (commander-in-chief) and those to be written as separate words for example take away. The researcher considered deviations as spelt out in the KIE English syllabus as errors in this study for reasons that it is the syllabus that spells out what is to be marked right or wrong in the KCSE examination.

Compound Errors were the least committed by the respondents in this study. Only 26 (3.8%) of the morphological errors identified were compounding errors. This could be because the participants used very few of them in their essays. Interestingly, most of

these few were wrongly written. Compounding is a morphological process in which at least two free morphemes combine to form a single word. For example *table* and *top* to form *tabletop*. From the learners' essays, it was clear that they lacked good knowledge on the writing conventions of compound words as shown in the examples below.

- 22. I was surprised to see girls playing *foot ball*. (football)
- 23. Even *passersby* looked at me. (passers-by)
- 24. *Infact* I feared the big boys.(in fact)

From the examples above, it is clear that the participants in this study did not have a good knowledge of the spelling conventions of compound words as some open compounds were written as solid compounds. In example 22 an error occurs as a result of writing the word *_football_* as an open compound. In example 23 an error occurs because of not hyphenating the word *_passers-by_* while in example 24 the error is as a result of writing the word *_in fact_* as one word.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has attempted to identify and explain morphological errors as committed by form one learners from selected schools in Migwani sub-County. The study revealed that these learners commit many morphological errors in their writing ranging from errors in tense, affixation, plural formation, possessive marking and compounding errors. It was also established that the most common morphological errors as committed by the learners in this study were tense errors while the least committed were compounding errors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers should pay more attention to writing to help learners to develop skills in producing standard language. This can be done by giving more frequent writing assignments at least once a month. Teachers of English need also to carefully go through the KIE English syllabus and the KNEC essay marking scheme. This will make them realise how seriously morphological errors are taken and allow them to guide their learners from an informed position.

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BIO-DATA

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