

INSIGHTS INTO BUILDING UP WRITING SKILLS FOR NAVAL STUDENTS. A STUDY CASE AT THE NAVAL ACADEMY OF CONSTANTA

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Abstract. *This paper collects the outcomes of a research study regarding the possibilities to develop cadets' writing skills for Stanag 6001, level 2 exam at the Naval Academy of Constanta (NAC) that was conducted within the Sectoral Plan of Research and Development (PSCD - 147) during 2015-2016. It was a two-fold study based on the identification of the types of errors that had been most frequently made in the writing paper for Stanag level 2, and on the remedial actions that should be taken to improve students' writing skills.*

As such, this study is significant as it includes the error analysis in a Stanag learning context, and its objectives are to: explore the weak areas of students language use in written form; highlight the importance of giving error analysis-based feedback to the students; provide various strategies for both language teachers and learners to use in language classes; facilitate the teachers in their teaching by adopting different methodologies and materials for making their teaching more effective.

Key words: *online resources, writing skill, Stanag 6001, English Language, research study*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, in language teaching and testing instances of language use have been categorized into 4 skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking according to channel (aural vs. visual) and mode (productive vs. receptive).

Among them, writing is one of the two productive skills and also one of the most difficult skills to master. Indeed, while writing in a first language is a challenging, complex task, it is more so in a second language. It is challenging to teach it as well; therefore, mistakes are an inevitable part of this process and neither the teacher nor the student should become fixated on them. It is useful for both, however, to have an understanding of the variety of typical errors in written English, since these are the most amenable to correction.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Romania's full membership in NATO and its participation in multinational military exercises, operations, and missions call for high levels of English language competence.

Therefore, it becomes important to test the knowledge and skills of the military and civilian personnel in the Romanian Armed Forces who will take part in multinational military exercises and operations or will be employed in international military environment.

STANAG 6001 is an English language proficiency scale which contains descriptors to assess language levels (1-6 scale, with 2 – as minimum requirement) of military personnel who will take part in multinational missions or will work in international military environment. It comprises a session of examinations involving a reading, listening and writing paper and an oral interview (speaking part).

On account of STANAG exam's importance, this study seeks to explore 100 students' major writing problems by analyzing the nature and distribution of their writing errors in English through 2 written tasks.

The written performance of the military students in the Naval Academy is analyzed and different wash back effects are suggested for producing accurate and proficient English language users that will be able to get STANAG level 2.

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- facilitate the teachers in their teaching by adopting different methodologies and materials for making their teaching more effective.

In short, errors show the process of learning a language as they provide “insight into how far a learner has progressed in acquiring a language and showing how much more the learner needs to learn.” (Ringbom, 1987: 69)

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In second language acquisition (SLA), error analysis studies the types and causes of language errors. (Bussmann 1996; Spillner 1991)

Error analysis in SLA was established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and colleagues. (Corder 1967: 150-170).

According to this linguist, the following are the steps in any typical EA research:

1. collecting samples of learner language
2. identifying the errors
3. describing the errors
4. explaining the errors
5. evaluating/correcting the errors

Also, a significant distinction is generally made between *errors* and *mistakes* which are not treated the same from a linguistic viewpoint.

An **error** is a deviation from accepted rules of a language made by a learner of a second language. Such errors result from the learner's lack of knowledge of correct rules of the target language. (Ellis, Rod 1994:700).

A distinction is always made between errors and mistakes where the **former** is defined as resulting from a learner's lack of proper grammatical knowledge, whilst **the latter** as a failure to utilize a known system correctly. (Rod 1994:700)

All in all, mistakes can be self-corrected with or without being pointed out to the speaker, but errors cannot be self-corrected. (Nika 2012 :307)

4. METHOD

This study is mixed. It is qualitative in its nature and the method used for the analysis is of content analysis. This method is used for analyzing the contents of any texts and for finding out the occurrence of definite words containing certain meanings in the text.

It also adopts a quantitative approach. Quantitative methods are research techniques that are used to gather quantitative data - information dealing with numbers and anything that is measurable. (Nunan, 2001:87-92)

Furthermore, “quantitative methods allow us to summarize [vast] sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time”. (Kruger 2003:18-19)

4.1. Participants

The selected participants in this study consisted of 100 students in the 1st and 2nd year, majoring in navigation at the Naval Academy of Constanta. They speak Romanian as their first language and are learning English as a foreign language at school on a one seminar (2 hours) per week basis that is 56 hours per academic year.

4.2. Data collection procedures

The data was collected in the form of answer copies of the examinations of the students. The 100 answer copies were analyzed for the identification and description of the errors. The errors were divided into different categories, and four sub-categories such as: addition, omission, selection and ordering. In writing, errors were actually categorized in terms of content, organization, language and mechanics.

Errors in different aspects of language were found in the collected data. Two tasks were taken into account for the analysis of learner’s errors. Participants were assigned two different topics that are compulsory in the Stanag level 2 writing paper.

The chosen rating scale was analytic (separate scores were given to different aspects of writing, such as content, organization, language use, etc.). This choice was partially based on several studies that had pointed out the reliability and cost effectiveness of analytic scoring. (Hartog et al. 1936; Cast 1939; Bauer 1980; Weir 1990, Weigle 2002)

In addition, such features as content, organization, cohesion, register, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics allow analytic scoring schemes to provide more detailed information about the test taker’s performance in different aspects of writing.

5. RESULTS

According to the analysis of the **100** pieces of writing, there were **20** categories of errors in the **first** task (description) and **18** categories in the **second** task (narration). These errors were classified and tabulated according to their number of frequency in the pieces of writing that students had produced.

Since the participants were guided with prompts for content, they only concentrated on linguistic forms; therefore, their errors were mostly **grammar**-based than content-based errors.

In the analysis of the data provided by **Task 1** (description), the highest rate of errors occurred in the **article** category. As previously mentioned, according to Corder (1974:227), 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.

The various errors that the participants made in the use of articles included: *Wrong Substitution*, *Addition (Unnecessary Insertion)*, and *Omission*.

The analyzed data from **task 1** is contained in the table below where the error types are ranked in decreasing order, from the most frequent errors to the lowest frequent ones. The descriptive statistics used in this study were frequency and percentage.

The pie chart below is a graphic summary of error categories and displays all the error types recorded in the participants' papers based on their re-occurrences.

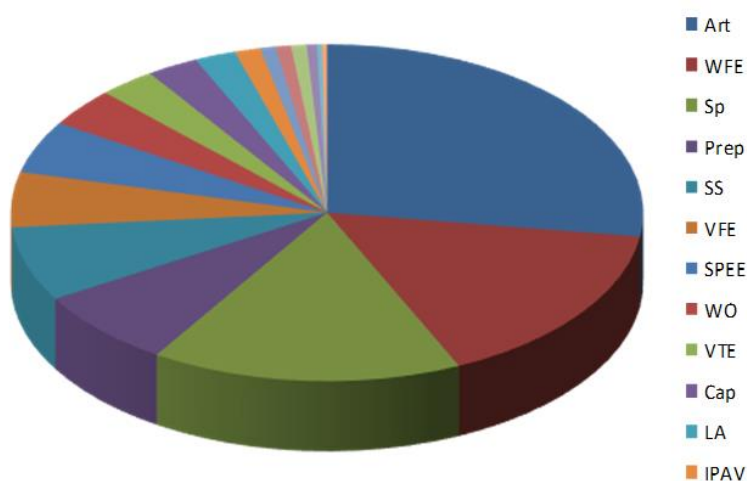


Fig. 1 Error Categories in Task 1

In the analysis of the data provided by **Task 2** (narration), the highest rate of errors occurred in the **verb form** category (VFE) – 21.12%.

The following table is the representation of the total errors that have been found in learners' written scripts.

Table 1 Total of errors in both tasks

Type of writing	Description	Narration
Task 1	390	
Task 2		213
Total number of errors	603	

Here, a comparative graph is also drawn for the presentation of the errors that are analyzed for both tasks:

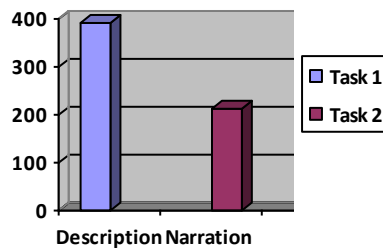


Fig. 2 Parallel presentation of errors

The above-mentioned graph shows that the frequency of errors in task 1 (description) is higher as compared to the other task (narration).

Although the 2 genres shared almost the same characteristics in terms of error categories, obviously, there was a difference in the frequency of errors.

In sum, it is reasonable to say that although there is considerable overlap in the common errors, the number of errors of specific categories varied, depending on a particular genre. In order to provide good feedback for students' writing, error categories of each text type should be taken into consideration.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the implication of error analysis to language learning and teaching is viewed from the three perspectives: language teachers, syllabus designers and students. As far as teachers are concerned, findings from error analysis provide accurate feedback for them, and also speak volumes of the effectiveness of their teaching. EA serves as a reliable feedback to design remedial teaching methods and materials.

As a result, a 28 - week writing program using online resources was devised in order to help our cadets improve their writing skills for Stanag 6001 and successfully attain level 2.

Unlike other suggested writing courses in English (general or ESP), this particular writing course that our team at ANMB puts forward actually stands out through this unique feature. It involves tapping into resources available on the web for students to practice their writing skills in a well-organized and structured manner.

This online tool seems to be one of the best choices for three main reasons.

Firstly, the unprecedented access to technology nowadays, and secondly, students' inherent interest in all technological devices and their fascination with any new online tool.

Last but not least, the online format provides course designers with more convenient options for communicating course content such as: videos, narrated animations, power Point slides, etc. to mention but a few. Thus, there is no need to create every element of the course content from scratch but advantage can be taken of the vast array of high-quality, readily available online materials.

Although writing has been always considered as the most difficult of the four English skills as mentioned in Introduction, it is feasible for L2 student writers to enhance their writing accuracy.

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