Analysis of errors in students' writing in EFL context: The Case of three selected secondary schools of Hawassa City

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A b s t r a c t

The purpose of this study was to analyze errors in secondary school students' writing in the EFL context. Three secondary schools were purposively selected from Hawassa Town, Sidama Region. A quantitative approach was employed to investigate the type of errors and their frequency of occurrence in students' writing. A total of 26 students with different L1 backgrounds participated in the study. Of these four-fifth were Geez-script L1 users, and the remaining one-fifth were users of Latin-script L1. Chuang & Nesi's (2006) error categorization system was adopted for analyzing errors in the paragraphs. In terms of the target language level, the categories of errors identified in the students' writing were grammatical, lexical-grammatical, and lexical. The first one was a predominant error category identified and the third one was also common in the students' paragraphs. Based on the linguistic unit they belong to, the top ten errors in order of frequency were: punctuation, capitalization, misspelling, sentence part, lexical misconception, preposition, verb, determiner, and noun. The third and the fifth categories of errors were lexical errors, while the remaining eight were grammatical errors. The most frequent errors were that of surface structure such as misselection, misformation, and commission. The findings also reveal that Geez-script L1 users and Latin-script L1 users had some differences in terms of written error categories as well as the frequency of occurrence. This can be attributed to the influence of L1 as Latin script users had the experience of using the same script for writing their L1 which may confuse when trying to use it for the target language which has an entirely different rule. It can also be due to the frequent use of L1 in learning other subjects rather than using English, the MoI, which they find difficult. It is recommended that secondary school students should be given opportunities to practice writing and to tackle their deficiency of lower-order linguistic and surface structure skills of writing. They should also be supported to strive for achieving higher-order skills. Latin script L1 users also need further support to distinguish between the use of the same script for different languages focusing on their areas of difficulty.

Keywords: *error, error analysis, grammatical, lexical, script, Geez-script L1, Latin-script L1*

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning is a process that entails committing mistakes. Mistakes and erroneous assumptions are important aspects of learning virtually any skill or acquiring knowledge. Learning to swim, play tennis, type, or read all involve a process in which success comes by benefiting from mistakes: using mistakes to get feedback from the environment, and making use of feedback for further attempts that gradually lead to the desired goals. The same applies to language learning (Brown, 2006, p. 226).

Learning a second or foreign language is a process that is similar to learning L1 in its trial-and-error character. In the process of acquisition, learners inevitably commit errors and that process will be impeded if they do not make mistakes and then profit from the various forms of feedback on those mistakes (Brown, 2006, p. 226). This indicates that the occurrence of errors is not only unavoidable in the process of language learning but is also beneficial as it can help the learners to seek and get appropriate feedback and guidance from their teachers.

Thus, as part of the language learning process, errors need to be studied to make an informed decision as to how to address them and facilitate students' learning. "The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us indications as to the learning process." (Corder, 1974, p. 125).

Error analysis (EA) is a kind of linguistic analysis that aims at dealing with the errors learners commit. Unlike contrastive analysis in which the comparison is made with the native language, EA compares the learners' errors in producing the target language (TL) and the form of the TL itself (Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 102). Error analysis entails the difficulty of the rough and zigzagging path through which a language learner travels in the pursuit of proficiency (Brown, 2006, p. 240). Errors can be considered as "red flags; they provide windows onto a system" as they are shreds of evidence of the progress level of a learner's skill in the target language. They are indicators of not merely deficient learning that teachers should complain about (Brown, 2006, 102). They rather give hints at what the teacher and the learners need to exert more effort. Learners' errors can also "provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language." (Corder, 1967, 167).

Within an error analysis framework, there are two major error types: interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual errors are those errors that can be attributed to the learners' mother tongue and involve cross-linguistic comparisons. Intralingual errors are those that occur due to the language being learned, without the interference of the learners' L1 (Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 103). While the interlingual transfer is a major source of error for all learners, the beginning stages of learning an L2 are particularly vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the native language or L1 interference. During these early stages, before the learners are familiar with the system of the second language, the native language is the only previous linguistic system from which they can draw (Brown, 2006, p. 232).

Error analysis is the systematic investigation of errors that are committed by second language learners. Learners' language began to be viewed as a linguistic system in its right worthy of description (Methcell and Myles, 2004, p. 38). Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 102) also define that an error analysis, as the name indicates, is a sort of linguistic analysis that deals with learners'

errors. It compares the errors a learner makes in producing the TL with the TL form itself, unlike contrastive analysis which compares with learners' L1. Error analysis starts from learner production of data but in contrastive analysis, the comparison is made with the native language (Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 102).

"A learner's errors ... are significant … [as] they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language" (Corder (1967, p. 167). Errors can be considered as 'red flags that serve as windows onto a system or evidence of the state of a learner's knowledge of the target language. They are not to be considered merely as a product of deficient learning, so errors are not points of complaints about teachers "to throw their hands up in the air about" (Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 102).

Research has indicated that second language errors are not manifestations of inaccurate reproduction. They rather are taken as implications of a learner's endeavour to understand some system or to familiarize the learner with the target language. They indicate a fundamental system governed by the rule. It can be said that the emphasis on an error is the beginning of second language acquisition as a discipline in its own right; it has begun to surface itself as a field of interest for the pedagogical implications that may be derived from understanding about second language learning as well as due to the theoretical implications for fields like psychology and linguistics (Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 102).

Corder (1981, p. 10) pointed out that the learner's errors have importance to the researcher as they provide evidence of the system of the learner's language use at a certain point or while the learner is learning or acquiring the target language and the strategies he employs in the learning process. Secondly, it is helpful to the teacher in that errors give him information through a systematic analysis regarding the degree of what the learner has achieved towards the goal and by way of which what remains to be learnt yet. It is indispensably beneficial to the learner as well. Given this, the researcher was initiated to conduct the study by analyzing errors secondary school students committed in EFL writing.

Secondary school students learning in the study area, Sidama Region, received their primary education in their L1 and used English as a foreign language (EFL) and medium of instruction (MoI) beginning from grade five. However, due to the low level of proficiency, they have to follow the lesson using English MoI, upper primary and even secondary education is conducted using L1 or there is excessive use of L1 translation in the class. As a result, the participants of the current study who were secondary school students in the Sidama Region can be considered at an early stage of L2 proficiency where more errors can be committed in their EFL use in general and writing in particular. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze students' writing to identify the dominant errors and determine the frequency of occurrence of the errors.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

English language, which is in the status of a foreign language, serves several functions in Ethiopia. It is a working language in private and some government organizations and has a vital role in education. As Amlaku (2010) notes, although Ethiopia is a multilingual and multiethnic country, English has more dominance and importance in education, business, and administration. It has wider usage as a medium of instruction in business and trade interactions and transactions as well as the medium of communication. International organizations and

most government public and private organizations in Ethiopia use English along with Amharic, the federal working language, or as a sole working language in transboundary communications (Amlaku, 2010, p. 12). Its most significant function, however, is its use as a medium of instruction beginning from primary education in some private schools, some public secondary schools, and all higher education institutions in the country. This indicates the essential role it is playing in the educational success of Ethiopian students.

However, students' proficiency in the EFL literacies is below the standard as a result of which they are struggling to use English as MoI in higher education, let alone in secondary schools. Studies show that students find the transition to English MoI very challenging. Grade 8 study (HSRC, 2006, cited in Heugh, et al., 2007) in South Africa compares mother tongue education (MTE) and L2 students' achievement in literacy/language and mathematics. This study reveals that there is a significant gap between academic literacy in L2 when assessed as a MoI across the curriculum, and the academic literacy in the mother tongue as a subject. Moreover, the study shows us that academic language needed for subjects across the curriculum is more difficult than the academic language required of language as a subject. Thus, the use of L2 for subjects across the curriculum increases the level of difficulty of these subjects considerably (Heugh, et al., 2007, p. 35).

The above researchers further explain the implications of various studies they reviewed. According to them, before students are ready to switch to L2 MoI, they need at least 6 years of MTE in well-resourced situations while they are simultaneously taught the L2 by highly proficient (near-native-like users) of the L2. Moreover, in less well-resourced conditions, students can likewise achieve well where they have 8 years of MTE supplemented also with very good teaching of the L2 as a subject. Under these provisions, students could have a good transition to English medium education and achieve well in secondary school (ibid).

African language speaking learners who shift to English MoI from MTE by Grade 5 understand and can use only around 10% of the required English vocabulary and sentence structure they need for the curriculum at that level (Macdonald, 1990, cited in Heugh, et al, 2007, p. 34). In such situations there is neither adequate resource for using the mother tongue efficiently nor is EFL taught with proficient users of the language, which results in poor performance of learners who use English as MoI.

Similarly, many Ethiopian secondary school students have difficulties in learning the English language. They have developed the attitude that they cannot easily understand the subject and tend to make less effort to practice the use of the language. Given the less proficient English teachers and poorly equipped language classes, there is little opportunity to change the students' attitudes and improve their language skills. Added to this is other subject teachers' excessive use of L1 instead of English, which is a MoI. English is a foreign language in Ethiopia, so students have little opportunity to use the language outside the classroom. The only access they have is the classroom, but they are losing this opportunity and this deteriorates the status of students' EFL proficiency in general.

Due to the mentioned multifaceted problems, students have an apparent deficiency of English language skills of which writing skill is the major one. To work on their deficiency, it is important to show the gap to be filled by the current study; here is a short review of the most recent studies. Amoakohen (2017) explored the errors in a corpus of 50 essays written by first-year students of the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS) and found out that students

had serious challenges of writing error-free texts after going through the Communicative Skills program for two semesters. Out of the 50 scripts analyzed, he detected 1,050 errors of which 584 (55.6%) were related to grammatical errors, 442 (42.1%) were mechanical errors and 24 (2.3%) were linked to poor structuring of sentences. Similarly, Javaid (2017) analyzed essays written by students in government and private schools in Southern Punjab. He analyzed essays of hundred students using Pit Corder's (1967) model and categorized students' errors into different types, i.e. verb tense, subject-verb disagreement, inappropriate use of an article, wrong use of preposition, etc. He also discussed the frequency of occurrence of different errors as well as the possible sources of errors. The findings highlighted that students of government schools commit more errors than that of private. Moreover, the findings also suggested that students committed errors not only due to their mother tongue influence but because of other reasons.

A study by Nwigwe and Izuagba (2017)sought to determine errors made by students undergoing the Professional Diploma in Education Programme. The students comprised 50 graduates who studied a variety of courses in different Nigerian tertiary institutions. In this study, document analysis was done to detect the grammatical errors in these students' written essays in English. A further classification of the errors was made based on their types and sources, and the percentage was employed in the analysis. The results of the study revealed that there were errors dominantly in the areas of spelling, tense, concord, use of prepositions, punctuation, and plural and singular forms.

Most of the studies cited above are error analysis studies conducted on students of higher education context, but Javaid's (2017) was a study on secondary school students. Similarly, the current study was conducted on secondary school students of Hawassa Town, Sidama Region, Ethiopia.

However, to the knowledge of the researcher, there were a few local studies conducted on error analysis of secondary students' writing in general and in the study area in particular. Among the local studies, Dawit and Demis (2015) investigated the common errors made by graduating students in selected colleges of Oromia Regional State. Four teacher training colleges were randomly chosen and the sample of 200 learners filled in a background questionnaire and produced essays for data collection. The teachers in these colleges also filled in questionnaires regarding writing practice and marking essays in the TL. The findings of the study revealed that errors in spelling, word choice, sentence fragment, verb form, capitalization, punctuation/ comma splices, word form, and run-on sentences were the eight most common faults that the participants committed in their writing. This study is different from the current study not only because of the study area but also the level of the students.

Meshesha and Endale's (2017) study analyzed the common grammatical errors in the written paragraphs of the first-year students of Wolaita Sodo University (WSU) in the academic year 2015/6. The participants were 400 students selected from a population of 3320 students using a systematic random sampling technique. The data were collected using students' written paragraphs. The findings of the study revealed that first-year students of WSU commit errors in tense, voice, preposition, article, and the usage of adjectives and adverbs.

Another study was conducted by Tizazu (2014) which reports the dominant linguistic errors that occur in the written productions of Arba Minch University (AMU) students. Participants of his study ranged from freshman students to graduating class ones and data collection had taken two years. Sample paragraphs were collected, coded, described, and explained using the

error analysis method. His findings revealed that learners' paragraphs were affected by almost all components of the English language errors (orthography, morphology, syntax, mechanics, and semantics). The study identified two causes that resulted in learners' errors: intralingual and interlingual.

Birhanu's (2013) study analyzed the written errors of pre-engineering students in writing an argumentative essay. Argumentative essays of forty-five students were analyzed and evaluated. The findings of his study indicated that the major errors in their written essays were spelling, word choice, and subject-verb agreement.

Yeshitila (1999) conducted a study on spelling errors among Oromo learners of English at Asella Teachers' Training Institute (TTI). In his study, the participants were 160 trainees (80 from Asella TTI and 80 from Dessie TTI), who were native speakers of Oromo and Amharic respectively. Five English teachers, three from Asella and two from Dessie, whose L1 was Afan Oromo & Amhharic respectively, were also participants of the study. To elicit the possible spelling errors from the above subject groups, composition and dictation tests were administered. The results of the study indicated that most of the spelling errors (about 74.1%) committed by trainees of Asella TTI were intralingual misspellings. Phonetic spellings and errors of analogy with target-language spelling patterns were also found to be the most recurrent errors among the intralingual misspellings. It was also found out that trainees of Asella TTI committed interlingual spelling errors (about 25.8%) in their writings. In this type of error, errors of analogy with native language spelling patterns were found to be dominant. The data obtained from the teachers' writings, however, showed fewer spelling errors both in the composition and dictation as compared with the trainees' errors.

Gebi (2007) investigated the current ability of students' English in written composition, the overriding causes, and some working solutions of second-year Asella Teacher Education College Oromoo students' deviant EFL expressivity from the standard English norm. Using systematic random sampling and purposive sampling techniques, the data were collected from 72 English learners. 143 spontaneously written essays were collected from them. Eventually, the major findings were that their overall current learning conditions of grammar in writing context was inadequate. While learning-induced errors had a prominent impact in their writings, L1 Afaan Oromoo error influence, and overgeneralized English rules were the most predominant causal impacts to their perception.

Most error analysis studies abroad and locally are conducted on students at higher level (HE students), but the researcher believes that errors that students commit as beginner writers at the school level should be studied. In the case of the current study, the sample secondary school students in Hawassa Town were not able to produce meaningful text that can be used for analyzing their errors; however, an attempt was made to assign them a guided paragraph writing task. This was done with the intention that identifying students' errors earlier would contribute to the efforts of improving students' writing proficiency by minimizing the possibility of fossilization, which according to De Wit (2007, p. 3) is "persistent erroneous forms and usages of the target language which are strongly resistant to change". Calve (1992) also notes that there is an appropriate real concern that errors, if not corrected, will become fossilized. Consequently, this study attempted to analyze the students' written paragraphs to identify the predominant errors and determine the most frequent ones.

1.2. Significance of the Research

Learning EFL writing skill is a complex endeavour that calls for a painstaking struggle and demands continuous practice. This can be more effective when it is supported by teachers providing appropriate feedback. Teachers need to have a better understanding of the errors and the possible sources of such errors in the process of EFL writing so that they could distinguish specific areas of students' difficulties in learning the language. It will also help them to employ appropriate teaching strategies to help EFL students learn better. Therefore, the result of this study can be significant in that it is hoped to contribute to teachers by highlighting students' areas of difficulty to be addressed by using appropriate remedial work. It can also help students by indicating their weaknesses so that they can make more effort to improve their writing skills. It may further contribute as a source of information for further research in the same and related areas.

1.3. Research Questions

This study is hoped to address the following research questions:

- What are the predominant EFL writing errors of secondary school students in Hawassa Town?
- Which category of errors is the most frequent in the students' writing?
- Are there differences in the type and frequency of errors between students of different language backgrounds?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this section, a description of the study area, subjects of the study, design, and methodology of the study as well as data management and analysis are discussed.

Southern Nations Nationalities People Region (SNNPR) is one of the largest regions in Ethiopia. It accounted for more than 10 percent of the country's land area (http://www.rippleethiopia.org/page/snnpr). The region was populated by extremely diverse (80) ethnic groups in the country, out of which over 45 (56 %) are indigenous to the region (CSA 1996). These ethnic groups are characterized by different languages, cultures, and socioeconomic setups. The major ethnic groups in the SNNPR are the Sidama (17.6 percent), Wolayta (11.7 percent), Gurage (8.8 percent), Hadiya (8.4 percent), Silite (7.1 percent), Gamo (6.7 percent), Keffa (5.3 percent), Gedeo (4.4 percent) and Kembata (4.3 percent) (Hogan & Betemariam, 2003).However, of the major ethnic groups in the region, the Sidama which had been organized as Sidama Zone has established its regional state since November 2019 referendum.

The languages spoken in the SNNPR can be categorized into four linguistic families. There are Omotic, Cushitic, Semitic, and Nilotic. The family of Omotic language comprises the majority of the ethnic groups in the region, whereas the Nilotic language family includes mostly minority ethnic groups. The Gamo, Goffa, and Wolayta, which are among the largest ethnic groups, are members of the Omotic linguistic family. While the Hadiya, Kembata, and Sidama are from the Cushitic linguistic group, the Gurage and Amhara belong to the Semitic language family (Hogan & Betemariam, 2003). These different language groups can be classified into two major groups based on the writing system or scripts they use. These are Ge'ez-script and Latin-script. The Semitic language, particularly Amharic, Tigrinya, Sebat-Bet, and other Gurage languages

of Ethiopia use "alphasyllabic scripts" using Geʼez symbols. In the Geʼez-script, sometimes called Ethiopic, symbols are called fidels and represent mostly syllables (depending on whether open or closed syllables are represented)" Piper & Ginkel, 2016, p. 3) whereas other Cushitic and Omotic languages, such as Sidamuafoo, Afan Oromo, Wolaitigna, etc "use an alphabetic script with letters as in English or Spanish, often referred to as Latin letters" (Piper & Ginkel, 2016, p. 3).

Based on Census conducted by the CSA about a decade ago, Sidama Zone which has become a region had a total population of 2,954,136, and a population density of 451.83 with an area of 6,538.17 square kilometers. The three largest ethnic groups reported in this zone were the Sidama (93.01%), the Oromo (2.53%), and the Amhara (1.91%). All other ethnic groups accounted for the remaining 2.55% of the population. First language speakers of Sidamu afoo accounted for 94.23% of the inhabitants, 2.14% speak Amharic, and 2.07% Afan Oromo; the remaining 1.56% were speakers of all other primarily reported languages (CSA, 2007).

2.1. Study Participants

The participants of the current study were students of grades 9 up to12 in different schools of Hawassa Town. These students attended their primary first cycle education (1-4) using local languages. They have been learning English as a subject since grade one and using it as MoI since grade five.

2.2. Study Design

This study adopted a quantitative approach to investigate the type of errors and their frequency of occurrence in students' writing. The quantitative approach to an empirical inquiry involves the collection, analysis, and presentation of data in numerical rather than narrative form (Given, 2008, p. 713). A quantitative research design was believed to be appropriate for this study because it enabled quantifying the data regarding the type and frequency of errors in students' writing. As Kruger (2003, pp. 18-19) notes, quantitative methods let us summarize a large amount of data and make comparisons across categories easier.

The sample students were selected from secondary schools of Hawassa Town. Three secondary schools were selected for this study. The schools were selected using the purposive sampling technique so that students of heterogeneous language groups can be included. This is because the study seeks to identify the type and frequency of errors committed by students of different language backgrounds. From each school, 10 students were selected using a stratified sampling technique. "This guarantees that the sample included specific characteristics that the researcher wants are included in the sample" (Creswell, 2012, p. 144). Accordingly, this study sought to include students from different L1 speakers in the region. The total number of sample students was 30. The languages spoken by the sample students include Sidamu afoo, Wolaitigna, Kembatigna, Afan Oromo, Tigrigna, and Amharic. In this study, these five languages were grouped into two based on their scripts. That is, the first four languages are Latin- based script users whereas the last two languages are Geʼez script users for writing.

2.3. Study Methodology

In this study, primary sources of data were used to find relevant answers to the research questions. These sources were grades 9-12 students in three schools of Hawassa Town in the

Sidama Region. To analyze the students' written discourse and identify dominant errors in their EFL writing, a guided paragraph writing task was employed through which relevant primary data were collected. Furthermore, various published literature sources and articles were reviewed to get more insight into the area and contextualize the issue at hand.

2.4. Writing Task

Topic-based paragraph writings task was administered to the sample students of the study. The writing task was designed by considering the familiarity of the topics and was piloted on five selected students before using it in the actual data collection. The pilot result indicated that some students found the task too difficult to manage and the researcher was forced to completely change the topics and modify the way the task was designed. Therefore, in addition to giving the least demanding topics to write about (writing about oneself, ones' family, a simple self-description, etc.), the researcher tried to give additional explanations about what was required in the paragraph writing task.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

First, the writing task was designed and piloted with about five students. After the appropriateness of the writing task and its level of difficulty had been checked, the required modifications were made based on the results of the pilot study. Next, the selected sample students were contacted in different ways. Most of them were contacted in person for getting their consent. After ensuring their consent, an appointment was made for the actual administration of the task. However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the task was not easy to manage. Therefore, different strategies were used to contact the individual students by going to their own houses and by using phone calls. By applying the required precautions for preventing the pandemic, most of the students' writings were collected in pieces of paper handwritten, and some were collected through telegrams. When collecting data for this study, a significant number of students withdrew after they had given their consent and received the task. They claimed that they had no experience of doing such a task on their own. Five of the collected paragraphs already submitted were also found to be copied from other sources although a thorough explanation and orientation were given for each student about the purpose of the study and the requirements of the task.

2.6. Data Management and Analysis

The data collected through students' paragraph writing tasks were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics, which refers to describing, aggregating, and presenting the variables of interest or associations between these variables (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The students' paragraphs were thoroughly analyzed, predominant errors were identified, categorized into different types, and quantified using percentages. Following this, the most frequent errors were identified in terms of category as well as specific errors. Finally, the error frequency of students of different language backgrounds was examined.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After the paragraphs were collected they were checked for appropriateness, and five of them were rejected due to originality problems. The remaining 26 were considered for analysis. The analysis process involved the following steps: careful reading, error identification, classification, and quantification. Chuang and Nesi's (2006) error categorization system was adapted for analyzing errors in this study.

The system had two kinds of taxonomy: a linguistic category taxonomy, which is used to describe errors in terms of the linguistic units they belong to, and a surface strategy taxonomy, which is used to describe errors in terms of their surface structural deviances. Each error category was clearly defined and distinguished from other categories. Chuang & Nesi's (2006) linguistic category taxonomy used a hierarchical code structure comprising of one major category code and a sequence of sub-codes. The major code signified the target language level which is grammatical, lexical-grammatical, or lexical and the sub-code refers to the linguistic unit the error belongs to. As defined by Chuang and Nesi (2006) grammatical errors were morphosyntactic errors of a word class mainly at the sentence level. Lexical-grammatical errors refer to errors committed due to violation of the morpho-syntactic properties of words (Granger et al., 1994 cited in Chuang & Nesi, 2006). The error subcategories were identified concerning five features: the nouns being countable, the transitivity pattern of verbs, the attributive/ predicative function of adjectives, the special syntactic pattern of a word, and the association of a preposition with a verb, a noun, or an adjective were modified to suit the study having only the last two excluding the first three as no cases were found in the current study. The third category was lexical classification which consisted of "misspellings, non-existent L2 words (i.e. incorrect word coinage and borrowing), lexical misconceptions (i.e. misconceptions concerning the denotative or referential meaning of words) and collocation errors" (Chuang and Nesi, 2006:6).

Chuang and Nesi's (2006) system of surface errors taxonomy consisted of five categories: omission, over-inclusion, misformation, misselection, and disordering. An omission error was a missing word or a group of words that would have appeared in a grammatical sentence, but inflected morphemes (e.g. -s and -ed) were not considered as omission errors. An overinclusion error was a redundant or unnecessarily inserted word or a group of words that would not have appeared in a well-formed sentence. The over-included item had to be a whole word; redundant, inflected morphemes (e.g. +s, +ed) were not considered as over-inclusion errors. Misformation was used to refer to a mechanical error that involved the use of the incorrect form of a morpheme (e.g. an incorrect past tense form of a verb) whereas the term misselection was used when the selection of the incorrect item entailed a more complex conceptual judgment (e.g. the incorrect choice of tense/aspect). A disordering error involved the incorrect placement of an item in a sentence. These specifications were preferred as they helped to improve the mutual exclusiveness of error categories. Accordingly, errors were identified, coded, and categorized into the relevant class as specified above. Furthermore, under each broad category-specific instances of errors were listed for further discussion. Therefore, each error code structure comprised three aspects: language level, linguistic unit, and surface alteration of the error.

3.1. Analysis of Language Errors

A total of 26 paragraphs were considered for analysis in this study. About three-fourth of these paragraphs were written by Ge'ez-script L1 users whereas the remaining one-fourth were written by Latin-script L1 users. For the sake of ease of expression, Ge'ez-script L1 users were coded as group G and Latin-script L1 users are coded as group L throughout the following discussion.

Table 1: The relative frequency of errors for each language level

Language level	Number of occurrences			Total errors
	Geez-script L1 users	Latin-script users	L1	
Grammatical errors	435 (80%)	149 (75%)		584 (78.9%)
Lexical-grammatical errors	17 (3%).	7(3.5%)		24 (3%)
Lexical errors	90 (16.6%)	42 (21%)		132 (17.8%)
Total	542	198		740

As depicted in Table 1 above the total errors committed in the 26 paragraphs were 740 which implies that on average each paragraph has around 28.5 errors. When we consider the three major linguistic categories, both Geez-script users (group G) and Latin-script L1 users (group L) committed the highest number of grammatical errors 80% and 75% respectively, and the least number of lexical grammatical errors. However, the two groups had a considerable difference in the number of lexical errors (16.6% and 21% respectively). Group L had more lexical errors than group G. Besides, the two groups had a substantial difference in the average number of errors they committed per paragraph (group G = 27, group L = 33).

Table 2: Analysis of grammatical errors

No	Grammatical category	No. of errors (Frequency %)		Total
		Geez-script L1 users	Latin-script L1 users	
1	Punctuation	106 (24.3%)	27 (18%)	133 (22.8%)
2	Capitalization	99 (22.7%)	15 (10%)	114 (19.5%)
3	Sentence part	36 (8.2%)	15 (10%)	51 (8.7%)
4	Preposition	31 (7.1%)	9(6%)	40 (6.8%)
5	Verb	31(7.1%)	17(11.4%)	48 (8.2%)
6	Determiner	28 (6.4%)	12 (8%)	40 (6.8%)
7	Noun	28 (6.4%)	12 (8%)	40 (6.8%)
8	Tense and aspect	18(4.1%)	6 (4%)	24 (4%)
9	Conjunction	17 (3.9%)	6 (4%)	23 (3.9%)
10	Auxiliary	14 (3.2%)	8 (5.4%)	22 (3.8%)
11	Adverb	3 (0.6%)	1(0.67%)	4 (0.6%)
12	Pronoun	5(1.1%)	7(4.7%)	12 (2%)
13	Adjective	8 (1.8%)	6 (4%)	14(2.4%)
14	Voice	4 (0.9%)	3 (2%)	7 (1.2%)
15	Modal	3(0.6%)	-	3(0.5%)
16	Infinitive	3 (0.6%)	2 (1.3%)	5 (0.85%)

17	Gerund	1(0.22%)	-	1 (0.17%)
18	Transitional phrase	-	3 (2%)	3 (0.5%)
	Total	435	149	584

As shown in Table 2 above, one of the major categories of errors in the students' paragraphs was a grammatical error. A total of around 18 specific aspects of linguistic errors were identified in the paragraphs of the two groups of students; of which, the ten most frequent errors in order of frequency of occurrence were punctuation (22.8%), capitalization (19.5%), sentence part(8.7%), verb(8.2%), preposition (6.8%), determiner (6.8%), noun (6.8%), tense and aspect(4%), conjunction (3.9%) and auxiliary (3.8%). There were slight differences between the two groups in terms of the order of frequency of these errors. While the top two errors in group G were punctuation (24.3%) and capitalization (22.7%) followed by a wide variation by sentence part (8.2%), preposition (7.1%) and verb (7.1%), and that of group L students were punctuation (18%) and verb (11.4%) closely followed by sentence part (10%) and capitalization (10%). The total grammatical errors of group G per paragraph on average was 21.8 while that of group L was 24.8.

Table 3: The analysis of lexical-grammatical errors

Linguistic feature	No of errors (Frequency %)			Salient errors/ (No. of errors)	Total errors
	Geez-script L1 users	Latin-script users	L1		
Incorrect syntactic pattern of a word (noun, verb, adjective, etc)	7 (58.3%)	4(57%)			11 (57.9%)
Incorrect association of a preposition with a noun, a verb or an adjective	5 (41.6%)	3 (43%)			8 (42.1%)
Total 12(100%)	12	7			19

Table 3 above shows the lexical grammatical errors committed by the two groups of students. Just more than half (57.9%) of the errors were related to the incorrect syntactic pattern of a word (a noun, a verb, an adjective, etc.) and the remaining ones (42.1%) were related to the incorrect association of preposition with a noun, a verb or an adjective. While group G committed more than half (58.3%) of errors related to the incorrect syntactic pattern of a word and 41.1% of them related with the incorrect association of prepositions with a noun, verb, or adjective, that of Group L were 57% and 43%, respectively.

Table 4: The analysis of the lexical errors

Linguistic category	No. of errors (Frequency %)		Total errors
	Geez script L1 users	Latin script L1 users	
Misspelling	60 (63.2%)	15(35.7%)	75(54.7%)
Lexical misconception	24 (25.3%)	19 (45%)	43 (31.4%)
Collocation	9 (9.5%)	8(19%)	17 (12.4%)
Non-existent words	2 (2%)	-	2 (1.5%)
Total	95	42	137

Table 4 above depicts lexical errors in the paragraphs of the two groups of students. These errors were further categorized into four major linguistic units; of which, the highest frequency of errors (54.7%) occurred as a result of misspelling and the next majority were lexical misconception errors which accounted for 31.4% of the total errors. The remaining 12.4% of them were collocation errors. Only a few instances (1.5%) of non-existent words occurred in one group.

The two groups had shown many differences in the order of occurrence of errors. When we consider the order of frequency, in group G, the majority of the lexical errors (63.2%) occurred due to misspelling whereas, in group L, lexical misconception accounted for nearly half of the total errors (45%) followed by misspelling which accounted for 35.7% of the errors. In both cases, the third error category in terms of frequency was collocation error but its occurrence was quite different in the two groups as collocation errors in group L (19%) were double the same errors in group G (9.5%). The remaining 2% were non-existent words which occurred only in group G. When the total lexical errors were considered, there was some difference between the two groups as group L committed 7 lexical errors on average per paragraph while group G committed around 5 errors per paragraph.

3.1.1. *The Analysis of Surface Errors*

Table 5: Analysis of surface errors of the two groups

Surface Error category	No. of errors/ Frequency (%)		Total no. and frequency of errors
	Geez-script L1 users	Latin-script L1 users	
Misformation	204(37.6%)	53 (26.7%)	257 (34.7 %)
Omission	161(29.7%)	47 (23.7%)	208 (28 %)
Misselection	120 (22%)	72 (36.3%)	192 (25.9 %)
Overinclusion	47 (8.6%)	21 (10.6%)	68 (9.2 %)
Misordering	10 (1.8%)	5 (2.5%)	15 (2%)
Total	542	198	740

Table 5 above depicts the surface errors in the paragraphs written by the two groups of students with different languages background. Misformation (34.7%) was the highest error committed in the total number of paragraphs produced followed by omission (28%) and misselection (25.9%) whereas over-inclusion errors accounted for 9.2% of the errors in the paragraphs of the two groups of students. However, there was a considerable difference between the two groups in terms of frequency of errors. The most frequent error among group L students was misselection (36.3%) which was the third one (22%) among group G students preceded by misformation (37.6%) and omission (29.7%) while they were the second (26.7%) and third (23.7%) respectively among group L students.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This section discusses the major findings of the current study in line with the literature review and findings of similar previous studies. The purpose of this study was to analyze predominant errors committed in the paragraphs of sample students in secondary schools of Hawassa Town.

4.1. Major Errors in Students' EFL Writing

There were a total of 24 salient linguistic errors in the students' paragraphs of which the great majority (18) belonged to grammatical errors, four were lexical errors and the remaining two were lexical- grammatical errors. The least frequent category of errors in terms of language level was lexical- grammatical errors whereas the most frequent error category were grammatical errors in the students' paragraphs. When put in order of frequency, the top ten errors were punctuation, capitalization, misspelling, sentence part, lexical misconception, preposition, verb, determiner, and noun. Two of the ten errors (3rd and 5th) belonged to lexical errors and the remaining eight were grammatical errors which implies that students need extra support from teachers in these two areas. In terms of the three language levels, grammatical errors were the most dominant errors in the students' paragraphs followed by lexical errors and lexical-grammatical errors.

In this regard, the results of this study indicate that students experienced a serious limitation of grammatical knowledge and they had also a considerable challenge concerning knowledge of lexis. Dawit and Demis (2015) also investigated the common errors made by graduating students in selected colleges of Oromia Regional State. The findings of their study revealed that errors in spelling, word choice, sentence fragment, verb form, capitalization, punctuation/comma splices, word form, and run-on sentences were the eight most common faults that the participants committed in their writing. A study by Nwigwe and Izuagba (2017) also sought to determine errors made by 50 graduates who studied a variety of courses in different Nigerian tertiary institutions and undergoing the Professional Diploma in Education Programme. The results of the study revealed errors dominantly in the areas of spelling, tense, concord, use of prepositions, punctuation, and plural and singular forms.

These findings imply that deficiency of grammar and lexical knowledge is a common problem not only among high school students but also among college students. Therefore, in an attempt to improve students' communicative competence, there is also a need to emphasize these problematic areas when teaching English in high school. The ultimate goal of second language learning is the realization of communicative competence even though the minimizing of errors is a crucial criterion for enhancing language proficiency (Gass and Selinker, 2008, p. 259).

From the perspective of surface structure, on the other hand, the students' errors reveal that misformation, omission, misselection, over-inclusion, and disordering are major error categories in the students' paragraphs. Similarly, Tizazu (2014) reports the dominant linguistic errors that occurred in the written productions of Arbaminch University (AMU) students. Of the surface structure errors, he identified the addition of an auxiliary, omission of a verb, misformation in word-class, and disordering of major constituents as the major ones.

The first three were more common surface errors in the current students' writing than the remaining two. Misformation error being the first major area of difficulty, specifically students' common errors included capitalization-related errors which resulted from capitalizing words that were not necessary as well as not capitalizing sentences and proper nouns. Another very common error under this category is a misspelling of words and run-on sentences and subject-verb-non agreement errors. Secondly, of the omission errors, missing the required punctuation particularly full stop and comma, missing articles, and possessive forms are the most common errors. This indicates that the students need additional support to increase their awareness of the importance of surface structure to produce more accurate writing.

4.2. Most Frequent Errors in the Students' Writing

A close examination of the data in this study reveals that grammatical errors were the most dominant errors in the students' writing accounting for nearly four-fifths of the total errors indicating the level of difficulty students were experiencing in the area of grammar.

About the most frequent specific linguistic units of grammatical items, punctuation and capitalization were found to be the most challenging ones for the students with 22.8% and 19.5% errors respectively. An incorrect syntactic pattern of a word (a noun, a verb, an adjective, etc.) is the predominant lexico-grammatical error whereas misspelling is a highly frequent lexical error with the frequency of 57.9% and 54.7% respectively. Birhanu's (2013) study also analyzed the written errors of pre-engineering students made in writing an argumentative essay. Forty-five argumentative essays of forty-five students were analyzed and evaluated. The findings of his study indicated that the major errors the students committed in their written essays were spelling, word choice, and sub-verb agreement.

The top five errors predominantly occurring in the students' paragraphs were punctuation, capitalization, misspelling, sentence part, and lexical misconception; a detailed analysis of the data reveals that under the umbrella of these, there were salient linguistic items that were found to be very tricky for the students. Missing full stop (53.3%), run-on (24%), missing apostrophe "s' for possessive (9.8%), and missing comma (9%) were the four top punctuation-related difficulties identified in the students' writing. This implies that before they can deal with the higher-level skills of writing, they need to master these basic mechanical skills. The first two errors indicate that students lacked basic knowledge of English punctuation, particularly the commonly used sentence ending dot or full stop as well as sentence beginning capitalization. The second predominant grammatical error category is capitalization, which was manifested in three ways the majority of which was capitalizing words in sentences where it is not required (54%), not capitalizing sentences(34%), and proper nouns (11.4%). These findings imply that students had incomplete mastery of the target language rules.

The misspelling was also a very common difficulty of the student writers, the highest number of which is misspelling words in general (74.6%) and one-forth (25%) of the errors occurred due to confusion of words with similar sounds and shapes. This is a clear indication that spelling also needs to be addressed by using different strategies and giving a special focus to tricky aspects like homophones, homographs, homonyms, etc. when teaching English vocabulary.

Of the grammatical errors, the top ten ones that occurred in the current students' writing were punctuation (22.8%), capitalization(19.5%), sentence part(8.6%), verb(8.6%), preposition (7%), determiner (article) (6.8%), noun(6.8%), tense and aspect (verb) (4%), conjunction (3.9%) and auxiliary (verb) (3.8%). Similarly, Javaid (2017) analyzed essays written by students in two different schools: a government and private in Southern Punjab. He identified and categorized students' errors into different types, i.e. verb tense, subject-verb disagreement, inappropriate use of the article, wrong use of prepositions, etc.

These errors were not only committed by high school students but also students of higher education institutions. This is confirmed by Meshesha and Endale's (2017) study which analyzed the common grammatical errors in the written paragraphs of the first-year students of Wolaita Sodo University (WSU) in the academic year 2015/6. The findings revealed that first-year students of WSU committed different grammatical errors in their paragraphs. These

are errors in verb tense, voice, preposition article, and usage of adjectives and adverbs. This implies that as long as these errors are not addressed at an earlier level, they persist to higher levels. This is because prolonged misuse of the grammatical rules may lead to fossilization which may be difficult to deal with or to avoid. As De Wit (2007, p. 3) defines, fossilization as "persistent erroneous forms and usages of the target language which are strongly resistant to change". Calve (1992) also points out that there is a very real concern that uncorrected errors will become fossilized.

The lexical misconception is one of the major lexical errors in students' writing which occurred mainly in the form of misuse of a word for another one. This indicates that students lacked the adequate vocabulary to use the right words in the right context; this error can also be attributed to a lack of sufficient practice of writing as they had difficulty making use of their potential vocabulary in their actual writing production. This can only be achieved through continuous practice. Concerning this, when collecting data one of the challenges was to obtain students who were willing to write a paragraph. This is because, as many of the students claimed, they had never tried it before indicating not only that they did not have the opportunity to write but also that they missed it by letting others do their writing assignments or copying from what others did.

4.3. Differences in the Type and Frequency of Errors between Students of Different Language Background

The participants of this study belonged to mainly two broad categories of L1 background though individual students speak different local languages. The different languages were categorized into two based on the scripts they use to write in the language. Accordingly, Geez-script and Latin-script L1 speakers participated in the study. One of the objectives of this study was to determine if there was a difference between the major errors and their frequency between the students of different L1 (in terms of script) backgrounds.

Regarding major areas of language errors, there was not much difference between the two groups. The first major and very common error in terms of language level was a grammatical error in both groups with the highest number of errors (80 % and 75%) indicating that both groups experienced very serious difficulty in grammar. The second one was a lexical error in both cases but group L had more errors than group G which implies that group L experienced more difficulty in vocabulary usage than group G. The last category of language error was a lexico-grammatical error, which was the least, and both groups had an equal number of errors.

A detailed examination of the results shows us where the differences between the two groups lie. In terms of the first level of language errors (grammatical errors), let us see the top three sub-codes or linguistic units to which the errors belong. The first and most frequent error in both cases was punctuation error, which occurred mainly due to missing sentence ending dot or full stop as well as missing apostrophe to indicate possession, so there is not much difference between the two groups indicating that this is a common error despite the students' L1 background. This indicates that students in both groups had incomplete mastery of and/ or less attention to punctuation rules. Capitalization was the second in terms of frequency of occurrence among group G students whereas it was the fourth (closely preceded by verb and sentence part) among group L students. A great majority of capitalization errors among group G students occurred due to unnecessary use of capitalization within sentences whereas no such error was committed among group L students. The less type and frequency of capitalization

error among group L students may be attributed to their familiarity with the use of Latin script in their mother tongue as compared to group G students whose L1 writing system has no such a rule at all. The Ge'ez writing system has no division between upper and lower case letters and no established cursive form (Bloor, 1995).

The third grammatical error among group G was the sentence part which was only the fourth one closely preceded by verb among group L students. However, there was not much difference between the two groups in the specific aspects of the error. In both cases, sentence fragments and incorrect choice of a group of words were common ones along with more than five other errors indicating that, despite L1 background, the students had a serious difficulty of correct and meaningful sentence production. The third error in the order of frequency among group L was verb usage, which was the fourth among group G students; it is a similarity rather than a difference. In both cases, subject-verb agreement error accounted for the highest frequency followed by the missing copula. This indicates that students lacked understanding of the correct use of verbs without which meaningful sentence writing is difficult.

On the other hand, lexical errors, being the second error category, which was common in both groups; misspelling was highly frequent among group G students whereas it was the second among group L students. The other difference was that nearly one-third of the spelling errors among group G students occurred due to words of similar sounds, but there was no such error among group L students. This implies that group G students need more support on spelling than group L students, who were already familiar with the use of the script in their L1. Moreover, group L students had more lexical misconception errors than group G students. This implies that group L students had serious difficulty using the right words in the right context. This might be due to their underdeveloped knowledge of the target language. They and their teachers tend to use their L1 when learning other subjects as it is a new development in the country as compared to its counterpart (use of Amharic.

The results of students' writing on surface errors also indicate that there are considerable differences between the two groups though both groups committed a considerable number of errors in all the five broad categories of surface errors (misformation, omission, misselection, over-inclusion, and disordering) in their paragraphs. In order of frequency, the top three error categories in both groups were misformation, omission, and misselection. However, while group G had the highest frequency of misformation errors in their writing, group L students had nearly the same percentage of misselection errors. This can be because of different factors. When we compare the two errors, misformation is easier to correct than misselection and the latter indicates a serious difficulty than the former. The possible causes of the errors can also differ. While misformation may be caused by incomplete mastery of the target language rule, misseletion can be attributed to L1 interference as well as underdeveloped knowledge of the target language. The second most frequent error among group G is omission and that of group L is misformation. There were fewer disordering errors in both groups. These findings indicate that group G students had more errors on aspects that require a complex conceptual judgment whereas group L students had more mechanical errors involving the use of incorrect morpheme. However, this does not lead us to a deduction that group L students were better in aspects that require complex conceptual judgment because the sample size was too small to generalize from the results. Another variation is that group G committed more omission errors, (missing a word or group of words which are important for a grammatical sentence) whereas group L committed more over-inclusion (inserting unnecessary word or group of words) and disordering errors (incorrect placement of an item in a sentence). This generally indicates that

both groups of students had difficulty in all the surface areas of the English language usage and they need overall support to improve their writing.

4.4. Conclusion

This study aimed at analyzing secondary school students' errors in their written production. Accordingly, sample students were selected from three secondary schools in Hawassa Town. The findings of this study indicate that the sample students had serious difficulty in writing in English which is the MoI. From these findings, it can be deduced that there are clear gaps in the teaching of English and that the teaching of the language does little in meeting its goal. This is because students in secondary schools are supposed to master most of the major grammatical items and also develop their word power at the optimum level so that they can effectively use it in the study of other subjects not only at their level but also in the future when joining HEIs. Despite the script they use in writing their L1, students had difficulty in using the language for writing which can be attributed to the incomplete mastery of the target language rule. There is also some evidences that Latin-script L1 users had more difficulty in overall use of the target language in writing. This can be attributed to the similarity of their L1 script with that of the target language which may lead to confusion in distinguishing between the usage of the two languages as well as a frequent shift to their L1 when learning other subjects which affect the development of their skill in the target language.

4.5. Recommendations

The findings of the current study call for great attention to be given to students' language improvement. Teachers are required to make extra efforts to support students so that students can cope with the major difficulties that seriously affect their language use or their writing. There is also urgency in giving proper attention to the teaching of English in schools. The practice of teaching the language in schools needs revisiting by the government and the public. In addition to the efforts being made to enhance students' use of their L1, it is also mandatory that the concerned bodies should collaborate in improving students' English language use given the significant role it is playing in Ethiopia and worldwide.

5. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest was reported.

6. FUNDING INFORMATION

No fund was received

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