DEFINING CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN MALAY STUDENTS' ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to put forward the errors made by Malay students and to analyze the errors made with relation to cultural influences. The word culture, which means "the ideas, beliefs, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a society" (Longman Dictionary, 2001), is derived for the word "cultivate" which means, "to develop a particular skill or quality in yourself". The question being probed is how do lecturers differentiate whether an error in a student's essay is influenced by the first language, or a result of cultural effect?

Keywords: culture, errors and error analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers in English language learning like Brown, Leech and many others have stated that in order to learn something new, we tend to make mistakes. Thus, it is rather common for students to make mistakes in pursue of learning. However, when errors become fossilized, this is when difficulties arise in language teaching.

'Linguistic acquisition' is the phenomenon of linguistic development, however, it boils back to a grammar – the mental system that allows people to speak and use language. Children acquire grammar rules for their L1 from their surrounding where as second language learners gain this knowledge from grammar classes.

Cross-Cultural Perspective: Understanding The Nature Of Written Discourse Patterns In Other Cultures

The notion of cultural differences in style of discourse and rhetoric originates with the people (Kaplan, 1987). Errors tend to occur, among other reasons, when there are differences in rhetoric and presentation of ideas. This section will focus on how cultural differences may affect students' academic writing, resulting in differences in style and presentation of ideas.

In terms of rhetorical systems and discourse organization, cultural differences should be appreciated when evaluating and assisting students with academic writing. This is to acknowledge creativity in thinking and writing style. However, such variation of styles must be guided to avoid errors, which may originate from ignorance of the L2 system or overgeneralization of the L1 system.

Aside from grammar, vocabulary and syntax, this culture variation in thinking and logic can also be seen in paragraph organization and overall coherence. Often, culture plays a distinct influence on the organization of ideas in writing, very much like the discourse structure, and it reveals fundamentally the different ways of understanding events. Some languages seem to display certain preferences for particular forms of organization. Wierzbicka (1990:43) has expressed the inter-relationship of language and culture when she states: "Differences in the ways of speaking prevailing in different societies and different communities are profound and systematic, and reflect the different cultural values."

When discussing this issue, caution should be exercised in ascribing particular features to all members of a particular culture or language background. The discourse features that will be described later in this paper are trends, which are provided as an illustration of the variation possible in written discourse. They are not absolutes.

The organization and presentation of ideas and their orientation to the readers differs from one language to another. The preference in English language written form mode is due to fact that the discourse of academic writing in English is "linear" where the main point is stated near the beginning. The purpose is so that the focus and direction of the work is clear. This linearity of English might be deemed as rude or lack of emphasis to Arabic and Semitic languages speakers. Their language may contain a complex series of parallel constructions. The main points tend to be over-emphasized and exaggerated, resulting in redundancy. This style of writing might be awkward and refraining clear communication to English language speaker.

Traditional writing of Chinese and Japanese language are usually indirect and circular which is another example of a non-linear language. The subject matter is discussed from a number of different angles but never directly as their culture have great tolerance for ambiguity. The responsibility to determine the relationships between the parts of the essay and the essay as a whole is at the readers' mercy. English readers, however, would regard such presentation of a paragraph as clumsy and inefficient. Russian language introduces and tolerates digressions, although they do not contribute to the central idea of the paragraph. This may result in "the content" being lost or hidden by irrelevant or redundant details.

Different languages have variation of discourse characteristics that affect paragraph development and this shows that the ways arguments can be developed and concluded vary across cultures. Such essays may take longer to be evaluated even if the tutor is aware of the cultural differences is present in the writing.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Errors And Error Analysis.

Errors are forms of structure that native speakers consider unacceptable or inappropriately used. In second language learners' learning process, errors are regarded as clear signs of students' attempt to construct grammar rules and are therefore acceptable (O' Grandy, 1993). Errors too can be classified as structures inadequately learnt by students, and lapses or mistakes (a slip of the tongue/pen or typing errors). The former requires correction and feedback whilst the latter is unlikely to be fossilized even if not corrected.

An error analysis, on the other hand, is the identification and description of errors either in spoken or in written form. The complexity of EA lies in one's ability to isolate variability in responses, such as differentiating true errors from "mistakes", something which is normally ignored when using simple "correct/incorrect" paradigms (Carl, 1998). To him, an error is "an unsuccessful bit of language" (p.1). Carl (1998) also outlines some typologies for understanding language norms based on geographical and historical constraints. This issue is taken up with respect to native speakers as well as non-native speakers of English, and conversely how over-enthusiasm while using the second language can unintentionally result in content loss.

Different Conceptions Of The Essay

The root of the word essay lies in the active verb "to try", that is, essays are essentially concerned with trying out ideas and arguments supported by evidence. When there is linguistic and cultural diversity, there will also be complexity in the range of problems encountered by students as they learn to cope with the demands of academic study. In a multicultural learning environment, students may have different definitions as well as approaches to essay writing (Hounsell, 1984). It can be an expression of a distinctive point-of-view, or a random display of ideas and facts in response to a question or task set. It can also be a presentation of facts or even an argument that is supported by evidence. Research has shown that the conception of essay as an argument reflects a deep approach to learning and a concern with constructing meaning through active engagement with the subject matter (Hounsell, 1984).

The diverse cultural backgrounds of students mean that there are major differences in expectations and approaches to study (Ballard & Clancy, 1991). Such differences cannot be ignored when assessing students from different cultural backgrounds so that students can meet the requirements of assessment tasks. In order to help students to improve their writing skills, McLoughlin (1995) mentioned that it is important for teachers to increase the comprehension of the practices and processes in essay writing. It is also important to consider what forms of thinking are involved, to explain the influence of culture with some examples of the variation, and to highlight aspects of assessment, which can pose problems for students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper will be looking at various levels of mistakes such as spelling, syntax, and semantics. At spelling level, one attempts to see whether pronunciation affects students' spelling system. At syntactical level, areas that will be analyzed are such as word choice, subject verb agreement, word order, tense, usage of preposition, usage of articles, models and pronouns. At semantic level, the aim is to understand why students tend to write aimless sentences, which are sometimes rather confusing and almost impossible to comprehend. With that, one hopes to be able to use such findings to help students in general to use the English language correctly.

For this research, semester one students from two classes taking BEL100 English paper were asked to write a descriptive essay during a two-hour class period. The subject of the essay is on one's favorite vacation/ tourist spot in Malaysia or abroad. Twenty samples were taken from these two classes to represent the UiTM semester one students, that is, 10 samples taken at random from each class. Each paper was marked/checked in detail, paying close attention to areas that have been identified earlier.

FINDINGS

These are the errors that have been identified and are compared to cultural influences.

Table 1: Summary Of Findings: Number Of Errors Occurrences

GRAMMAR COMPONENTS	# OF OCCURENCES
SPELLING	5
WORD CHOICE	27
SVA	42
SVO/WORD ORDER	31
TENSES	31
PREPOSITION	37
ARTICLE	39
MODEL/AUXILARY	4
PRONOUN	3
CONFUSING SENTENCES	8

1. *Spelling mistakes*
   For example: exspecially (especially), bot (boat), chaley (chalet), jety (jetty), seafoot (seafood).
2. *Word Choice*
   For example:
   i-   The misused of the word "look" and "see";
         "I was seeing at the flowers."
         "I can look many beautiful views at there."
   ii- In words; "story" and "tell"; "I will story you my experience there."
   iii-"The visitors will be carried to Pulau Perhentian."
   iv-"In concluded,........."
   v- "It is become, at there have several facilities."
3. *Subject-Verb- Agreement.*
   For example:
   i-   "Many tourist from others country."
   ii- "...tree that make the view greeny."
   iii- "Cherating not just have a beautiful view."
   iv- "At night, we goes to edge beach for fishing."
4. *Word Order/ Subject- Verb- Object*
   For example:
   i- "Tourist also can take fresh breath..."
   ii- "In Fraser Hill, have a beautiful view."
   iii- "It located in Kuantan, Pahang."
   iv- " At the lake, have a jety."
   v- "There have a shop too."
   vi- At Ulu Bendul, there have much stones."
5. *Tenses*
   For example:
   i- "Fraser Hill was free from air pollution. The air is fresh."
   ii- "The people will enjoyed with their ..."
   iii- "I saw a beautiful beach and peoples will be sunbathe."
   iv- " I leaved the place at 10 o'clock."

6. *Preposition*

For example:

i- "<u>In</u> the journey,...."

ii- "We can look many fishes <u>from</u> the clean clear water."

iii- "Fraser Hill is good vacation place <u>for</u> spent holiday."

iv- "Many foreigner, like to come <u>in</u> this island."

v- "In the morning, you can see also the sun rises <u>in</u> the earth.

7. *Article*

For example:

i- "It also have <u>a</u> mist."

ii- "In short, the Pulau Perhentian is <u>a ideal</u> gateway."

8. *Model / auxiliary*

For example:

i- "In there, we <u>can found</u> many souvenir shop."

ii- "We also <u>can seen</u> the variety of fishes."

9. *Pronoun.*

For example:

i- "...protect <u>we</u> from sunburn."

ii-" <u>If want</u> to go to the lake......"

10. *Confusing sentences.*

i- "It also have <u>spot less place</u>."

ii-" They came to get <u>information anything about ground under a stretch of water.</u>"

iii- "During <u>to climb a stairs, can listen</u> a short sharp sound made by a small bird."

iv- "Then we swimming <u>with funny</u> and we can saw many little fish in a big groups and a beautiful corals <u>from</u> the water."

vii- "But you may <u>don't went to</u> out from there because there <u>is so best place at there</u>."

DATA ANALYSIS

Causes And Reasons For Making Errors

By looking at the patterns of each spelling error, one can see that each mistake is due to spelling pronunciation where students tend to spell according to how they pronounce the words and this has influenced their spelling system. Obviously, their spelling is tainted by their first language pronunciation-spelling system.

Spelling errors tend to become fossilized if not corrected. When a person is used to spelling a word the way he pronounces it, he will generalize the spelling system. Partly, these errors are due to the spelling system in their first language, which is Bahasa Melayu. In Bahasa Melayu each word is spelled according to how it is pronounce. For example: For example, the word "boat" in English is spelled as "bot" because in Malay language it is pronounced as [bot]. Spelling errors occur further in borrowed words for example the borrowed word "deklarasi" - "declaration".

In terms of word choice, the errors made are partly due to interference from first language (L1) and also transfers from L1. The students tend to generalize that a word in English would have the exact same meaning in English and that every word found in the thesaurus can be used interchangeable. For example : look and see. Direct translation from their native language is also a reason to consider. Students usually think that words like "stairs" would have the same meaning with "jungle tracks

or steps" as the word "tangga" in Bahasa could refer to steps or ladder or even stairs in English.

Most mistakes under word order (S-V-O), tenses, articles and such are because they do not have such similar rule in their native language (Bahasa Melayu). Not all sentences in Bahasa require the subject-verb-object order. For example: "Kepulangannya dinantikan." Thus, students tend to over generalize the S-V-O rule in English sentences.

In tenses, Bahasa Melayu does not require affixes to show the definition of time. Words like "telah", "akan" and "sedang" can be used in any form. So, students tend to forget that in English there is a totally different concept. However, when they are over conscious of such rules, they tend to over-generalize it. For example; past tense of "leave" is "left" not "leaved".

In Bahasa Melayu there are no articles too. Therefore, it is difficult for the students to understand the need of articles in English. After a few explanations, that without an article, a noun would be rather formless, students still make the same mistakes as they are not used to the system. Overgeneralization of systems / rules are also very common among students. For example, the use of the adjective: "beautiful", therefore they come up with the word "greenful."

At syntactical level, areas such as word choice, subject-verb agreement, word order, tenses, usage of preposition, usage of articles, models and pronouns occurred mostly due to transfer from L1. At spelling level, spelling pronunciation does affect the students spelling system. Semantically, I found out why students tend to write aimless sentences, which are sometimes rather confusing and almost impossible to comprehend. This is due to the fact that the majority of the students tend to translate thoughts or sentences in Bahasa Melayu to English. These produce inappropriate choice of words and unstructured sentences. Generally, these errors made by students can be due to these reasons: (1) overgeneralization, (2) incompetent rule of applications, (3) hypothesizing false concepts, (4) ignorant of rule application and (5) transfer form the first language.

Culture influence in students' essays

From the behaviorist point of view, culture is something in which, is shared and can be observed. In a language class, this concept of culture often leads to study of discrete races or institutions. The functionalist approach to culture is an attempt at making sense out of social behavior (Robinson, 1988). So, culture is basically a way of living, which affects our thinking, and walks of life. How cultural may actually affects writing products is actually through the meanings that are being constructed. Meanings, like forms, are culturally modified or determined (Lado, 1986). Therefore, culture influences in Malay students' essays are mostly seen in their style of representing their ideas, which is the meaning that is conveyed. Confusing sentences can only be understood when either it is translated in the L1 or mere understanding of the local culture.

> "Culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants" (Hall 1998:59)

Overcoming culture influences in essays.

Linguistic and cultural diversity demand students to cope with complex range of problems. In a multicultural learning environment, students may have different approaches to, and definitions of, essay writing. In order to help students to improve their writing skills, McLoughlin, C. (1995), mentioned that it is important for teachers: to increase understanding of the practices and processes in essay writing; to consider what forms of thinking are involved in essay writing; to explain how culture influences the organization of written texts; to provide examples illustrating cultural variation in writing, and to highlight aspects of assessment which can pose problems for students.

An easy way to overcome spelling errors is by helping the students to pronounce words correctly in classes. Ensure that they read and practice their spelling skills as frequently as possible. Never approve pronunciation that is influenced by their local dialects. For example, "tomorrow" should not be pronoun with nasal sound as being done by many of our east coast students. As teachers, we may need to have spelling quizzes from time to time as test and quizzes have been proven to be the best method to ensure learning has taken place. (Jones,1998)

Other methods would be peer marking / editing, selective marking, code correction, correction based on process writing, effective and specific components marking, make a checklist of limited errors, make discussion on common errors made by students in workshops. Giving responses to students is essential as it will ensure that learning has taken place. For further research on this, an article by Sharon Myers (1997) might be helpful.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Error analysis has become one of the educators' primary responsibilities. Despite the dreadfulness of the task of analyzing students' errors, and the dislike of focusing on traditionally placed errors; they diligently scan students' compositions in search of mistakes.

There are other tasks to be considered other than determining the source of an error although it does constitute a major portion of the educators' time prior to actual teaching. Errors in students' compositions need be identified, prioritized and determined which ones to be taught immediately and which ones to be discussed later. The sequencing of errors identification may affect the way in which a student responds to tutoring. Thus, it must be delicately treated. Hughes (1986) listed several points on how to teach students about other cultures. (However, the last four methods are well known to us). These methods can be manipulated and used in Malay students' context.

1- Comparison method.
   If our students are exposed to the idea that there are differences in our culture, which may affect the messages delivery, and the second language, then they may be more conscious. Students need to be made aware that the semantic and syntactic systems in Bahasa Melayu are not equivalent or interchangeable with English language. Modern Malay is said to be very simple to learn, to speak and to write. There are no definite or indefinite articles like English like English "the". "a", or no transitive verb "to be". "Buku baik" in Malay could mean "the book (buku) is a good (baik)" or "the good book". The plural from a noun is the same as the singular form, or

sometimes it is repeated as in "barang-barang" meaning English "things". The possessive case of noun is shown by placing it after the noun that it describes. The Malay verbs are not conjugated according to the present perfect, past or future tense. The tense of the verb is understood by the context of the sentence or by adding words such as "Kelmarin"(yesterday).

1- Cultural assimilators.

   Hughes (1986) defined this as " bring in a brief discussion of critical incident of cross-cultural interaction that would probably be misunderstood by the students."

2- Cultural capsule.

   In this method, the teacher gives the brief discussion, brings in visual aids which illustrate the differences between the two culture and a set of questions which will promote class discussion.

3- The cultural island.

   This is where the students are highlighted on the importance of being able to differentiate one culture over another and respect the differences.

4- Drama, 6- Audio-motor unit, 7- Newspaper, 8- Projected media.

Punishment in any form should never take place. Teachers need to be able to teach well and students, on the other hand, need to absorb what has been taught. To conclude, a teacher or a lecturer must be dedicated in his or her work. He/ she ought to teach in a well-prepared manner, ensuring that the knowledge to be given is i+1 and lastly feedback need to take place.

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