Mechanical Accuracy and Ambiguity in English for Academic Purposes among Students of Babcock University in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper is a study of mechanical accuracy and ambiguity in English for academic purposes among Babcock University students. With the background information on the poor performance of university students in communication in English generally and, writing in particular, this paper delved into students' written essays in order to find out their level of mechanical accuracy in writing in the English language. Three non-English major departments, Accounting, Economics and Nursing, were involved in the study. Three hundred students, one hundred from each of the departments, in 100 Level constituted the sample for the study. Data was collected from the essays written by the students on 'My First Day in Babcock University', with particular attention to the students' spellings and tenses in the English language and were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools. The findings revealed that some of the students could not correctly apply writing mechanics and so were unable to express themselves clearly and unambiguously in the English language. As a result of this, it was recommended that the teachers can help to resolve the problems by finding and utilizing more effective strategies to improve students' English writing mechanics.

Keywords: ambiguity, mechanical accuracy, academic purposes

1. Introduction

The importance of language in human interaction cannot be underestimated. Language is the life-wire that binds every society together as there has never been any society without a form of communication. Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation with about 509 indigenous languages shared among 250 tribes (Ethnologue, 2019). This brought about adopting English for the purpose of effective communication and interaction nationally and internationally. Consequently, English became the Nigeria's second, official as well as the language of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria thereby making communication possible among the diverse ethnic groups in the country (Jolayemi, 2006; Akinjobi, 2013).

Many Nigerian students, generally, perform woefully in examinations written in English. For instance, the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSCE) Chief Examiner's Report on the 2018 May/June Examination in English language observed, among others, the following weaknesses in the students' scripts:

1. poor paragraphing;
2. poor expression as a result of wrong concord, poor punctuation marks, wrong use of tenses, poor use of prepositions and articles;
3. inability to construct simple and correct sentences;
4. wrong use of the first person pronoun "I";
5. poor vocabulary and organization of thoughts;
6. spelling errors;
7. poor knowledge of the basic rules of English grammar; and
8. the use of text message abbreviations such as "u" for "you", "d" for "the", and "ur" for "your".

This has become a great concern for both the teachers, examiners and the other literate elite in the society. The undergraduate students are not left behind in the poor performance, as many of them perform below the expectation in using written English to communicate effectively with their audience. In many cases, they find it difficult to express themselves in written English without committing unhealthy errors of mechanics.

Written and spoken activities in English have changed over the past few years. The way it is taught and learnt has also changed with the increase in the utilization of technological devices such as computers and mobile phones. Writing is moving from 'clausal embeddedness' to simpler sentence structures. The ability to produce cohesive and comprehensible written text is essential to academic success. In the past, the focus on English teaching and learning was on the teaching and learning of spelling and punctuation rules, but in today's English language classroom, attention has shifted to the content of writing (Demir, 2014). Perhaps this shift has led to the students' inability to write effectively with the necessary mechanics of writing in English.

This study is grounded in the theory of Contrastive Linguistics, simply referred to as Contrastive Analysis (CA). It is a theory that has been applied to Language teaching and learning since World War II especially to users of English as a foreign and or second language. When the need arose for the United States military to communicate with its allies as well as enemies (Keshavarz, 2012), it became important to teach these sets of people the English Language. The advent of linguists like Lado (1957), a modern Linguist, popularized and gave structure to the theory by developing its working prototype. This prototype provides insight into CA as being able to assist L2 learners by comparing and contrasting the L2 with the Target Language (TL). In doing so, he states that similar structures between two different languages will, essentially, be easy for the L2 learners while the points of difference in structures may pose difficulty for learning the TL. Thus, he asserts that: "the student who comes in contact with a foreign language finds some of its features easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". This is referred to as the Strong Hypothesis of CA.

Criticisms of this hypothesis gave rise to another theory, Error Analysis (EA). The EA theory has become the most prominent theory in the field of second language acquisition/second language

learning. The kernel of the theory is that errors in learning a Target Language (TL) are occasioned by the initial acquisition of learners' Mother Tongue (MT) and the habits already formed which may differ from that of the target language. Errors which are not explained based on this assumption however, are often underestimated. The main assumption of this theory is that, second language learners' errors are due to negative interference from their mother tongue. Error analysis (EA) theory occupied the mainstream in the field of Second Language Analysis (SLA) research because of its contributions to language learning.

Regardless of its popularity, it is not without limitations. It has been questioned by many scholars for its lack of predictive power as well as the subjectivity of its interpretation of learners' errors (Al-khresheh, 2015). However, no matter their shortcomings, the insights offered by CA as well as EA are apt and applicable till date and are the theoretical bases for the current study.

Al-khresheh (2015) noted the importance of error analysis in investigating one type of word order errors, within the simple sentence structure. Similarly, Absamra (2013) reported the different types of grammatical, syntactic, semantic and lexical errors among learners of English following the EA approach. She discovered that most errors occur within the sentence structure of foreign and second language learners. The present study therefore reviews and discusses Error Analysis theory as an alternative approach to Contrastive Analysis theory, exploring its role in describing and explaining learners' errors in the process of English as a Second Language acquisition.

Despite over fifty years of using English as Nigeria's official language and language of education, there are still many aspects of the English language that are not used appropriately and effectively. The inference drawn from this different-difficult continuum of the CA theory lends credence to the present study. The poor and inappropriate use of the mechanics of writing is traceable to the difference in the structures of English as the TL and the learners' MT.

In the words of Lado (1957):

> Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture, both productively when attempting to speak the language and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language …as practiced by natives (p. 2).

The above issues raised by Lado are probably the cause of Nigerian students' tendencies to apply the mechanics of English writing inaccurately and inappropriately thereby leading to ambiguities in their academic writings. Different scholars have viewed ambiguity in various ways. Ambiguity in the words of Nwala and Umukoro (2017) is an attention grabbing linguistic trend due to its importance in human communication. According to them, ambiguity means double or multiple interpretations which may come as a result of the presence of a word with more than one meaning in a sentence, leading to lexical or structural ambiguity. In their earlier research into the concept of ambiguity, Degani and Tokowicz (2013) asserted that a word in a given language may capture multiple related senses and when this happens, it results in polysemy which may carry over to another language in a way that a single word in the target language also captures these same multiple related senses.

Ambiguity leads to undercut of the intended value of the information of a discourse which may assign the reader with the task of having to comprehend multiple possible interpretations as a result of getting meaning out of a text (Nwala, 2015). Ambiguous words or statements can be translated wrongly as a result of attracting many interpretations and this, may cause misinformation leading to misunderstanding. Supporting this view, Eddington, Degani and Tokowicz (2014) in their investigation on translation ambiguity, found that 40% of 562 words in English language were translated ambiguously in that, they elicited more than one translation across participants in one or both directions of translation. This will definitely change the purpose of communication as intended meaning would have been tampered with.

Also, of importance is the use of mechanical accuracy. It refers to the writer's ability to use the mechanics of the English language like punctuation marks, correct spellings, good tenses and syntax

efficiently and effectively. By implication, our use of English should be free of errors. Mechanical accuracy seems to be the Achilles tendon of many users of the English language in Nigeria. For example, many of them worry too much about the difference between colon and semi-colon. Some of the very common grammatical mistakes or errors that are committed by students include wrong use of tenses and this can take the form of wrong tense sequence, subject-verb agreement, misuse of article or omission of articles (a, an, the), wrong use of prepositions, wrong comparisons of adjectives: For example: "I am more better" today instead of "I am better today"; and issues of dangling and misplaced modifiers.

Shuaibu (2011) has found that spelling is the least exhibited writing skill among the subjects of his study. Although there are certain general rules about spelling that are worth learning, there are some three hundred common words which are frequently mis-spelt but not covered by any English spelling rule. This has clearly shown that spelling is one of the most critical aspects of mechanical skill which needs to be researched into with a view to coming up with possible solutions. It has been discovered that many tertiary education students use mechanics like spelling of words, punctuation and even tenses very poorly (Shuaibu, 2015 and Aliyu, 2006). In effect, written English is a critical skill for learning, it is highly challenging for the Nigerian learners as users of English as a second language. It is a difficult task for many students and even for some teachers to write efficiently and effectively in English language as they make myriads of errors especially in the mechanics of writing. Writing is a complex and difficult process and, because of this complexity and necessity to write grammatically, writers commit avoidable mistakes while writing in English language. There is need to find out the kind of errors of mechanics that university students commit so as to find ways of mitigating the problem.

Punctuation, on the other hand, refers to the ability of an individual to employ the use of both the internal and the end punctuation marks in the written material. Correct punctuation of any written discourse is very essential for the intended meaning to be clearly conveyed and understood; poor or wrong punctuation could result in absurdity or awkwardness of the intended meaning. In the choice and placing of punctuation marks, the sole aim should be to bring out more clearly the author's thought. These general principles governing the use of punctuation suggest that, punctuation marks are generally bound to communication and not the rules in both the formal or informal contexts. In formal punctuation, the writer uses all punctuation marks not expressly forbidden, and in informal punctuation, the writer omits the punctuation marks not definitely required (Shuaibu, 2015).

Capitalization is another important aspect of mechanical skill in written English. It is the ability of the writer to use the capital letter where it is appropriate. According to Aliyu (2006), capitalization is required in three main areas: beginning of a sentence, proper nouns and adjectives, and titles.

Syntax is another important aspect of writing mechanics. According to Jowitt (1991), syntax is the arrangement within sentences of grammatical categories and of lexical items as realization of those categories. Syntax often deals with the structure, use and meaning as well as with the combinatorial properties of such words and so trespasses upon the territory of morphology, lexis and semantics. This means that syntax includes not only the word order in a sentence but also the internal organization of the words in a sentence, showing how the choice of one item influences another. After spelling, capitalizing and punctuating the sentence, the writer must ensure that his sentences are grammatically correct. In their observation, the West African Examination Council (2014) identified series of errors in grammar usage of school leavers whose next level in academics is the tertiary level. Such errors were omission of an essential sentence element (e.g. subject, predicate, complement), wrong tenses, misuses of model operators (may/might, can/could etc., misuse or omission of articles, confusion or ambiguity in the use of pronouns, misuse of countable/uncountable nouns, wrong prepositions, misuse of relatives, subordinators and conjunctions, errors in concord, misrelated participles intransitive verb for the transitive and vice versa, active for passive, and vice versa and errors in comparative constructions.

A serious problem with mechanical accuracy is ambiguity. Being ambiguous means accidentally expressing more than one meaning in a phrase or line, as in: *"Women like chocolate more than men."* Does this mean that, given the choice between a nice Fazer chocolate bar and a man, a woman will prefer the chocolate? Or do you mean that *"Women like chocolate more than men do"*?

This is a serious problem in English Language writing which can render effective communication difficult. This problem has led to the phenomenon of syntactic variations in Nigerian English (NE) found in noun usage, as well as in the classification of nouns.

Dadzie (2004) asserts that in Nigerian English, the general rules of nominal behaviours are followed. However, there are some tendencies, which depart from the norm. Some of these are:

(a) Omission of appropriate article before nouns where they are otherwise mandatory in British English. For example,

NE/SBE He received award/ He received an award

NE/SBE   I have headache/I have a headache

The rule in English syntax specifies that "a" must come before all countable nouns whose pronunciation begin with consonant sounds and that "an" to modify all singular countable nouns or an article that its pronunciation begins with vowel sounds. These rules cause problem for some learners of English as a second language. Some examples of the omission of articles include- "get contract", "give chance", "have bath", "make effort", "make mistake", "take bribe", "take excuse", "tell lie", "tie wrapper", etc. Similarly, the definite article is omitted where it is expected to be used in SBE, particularly with proper nouns of description as well as names of institutions, newspapers as in

NE: Principal travelled to village.

SBE: The Principal travelled to the village.

NE: University magazine is on sale.

SBE: The university magazine is on sale.

There are many nouns in everyday use which NE, unlike SBE, treats as countable. These nouns include accommodation, advice, behaviour, blame, chalk, cutlery, damage, equipment, evidence, furniture, grass, information, machinery, money, permission, personnel, staff, stationary, bread among many others. Jowitt (1991) observes that most of these nouns are (i) pluralized by Nigerians (e.g. equipments, machineries, etc.). (ii) Preceded in the singular by 'a' or 'an' (an information, an evidence, etc.). (iii) Preceded in the singular by 'another' instead of 'more' (another money, etc.). Also, singular words that end with 's' are often preceded by 'a' in NE, for example we have 'a news', 'a measles', 'a Physics book'. On the other hand, some nouns with plural forms have a tendency to be given singular counterparts in NE for example, words such as pants, scissors, pliers, etc. Also in SBE, the nouns can be made singular by the use of a pair of…as in the pair of scissors is sharp; the pair of trousers is torn.

A huge number of the errors found in NE syntax and morphology appear to come under the heading of faulty classification: A word which in SBE belongs to one class is shifted to another class since it is given the syntactic characteristics of that class. The most common type of shift is the reclassification of a noun or an adjective or an adverb as a verb. Common examples of Nigerian English shifts to the verb class include the following: endings such as – ed are added, the auxiliaries 'do' and 'have' are put in front which results in false verbs. Examples include: NESBE 'She backed the baby'/'She is carrying the baby at her back'. 'He pregnanted her'/ 'He made her pregnant'. 'I was not opportuned to see you'/ 'I didn't have the opportunity of seeing you.'

The current study therefore has its focus on how the wrong use of mechanics of writing in English for academic purposes can lead to ambiguity which can cause breakdown in communication as exemplified by the writing of 100 level students in selected programmes in Babcock University, a foremost private university in Nigeria. Also, the study is designed to find out which of these errors are committed by the students in their writing.

Following the above stated problem, the following specific objectives shall be pursued:

2. Objectives of the Study

1. to investigate if the students of Babcock University commit errors in their essays;
2. to examine the frequency of the errors committed by the students of Babcock University in their essays.

3. to identify the types of errors committed by the students of Babcock University in their essays.
4. Thus, the following research questions were raised to guide the study:

3. Research Questions

- Do the students of Babcock University commit errors in their essays?
- What is the frequency of the errors committed by the students of Babcock University in their essays?
- What is the typology of the errors committed by the students of Babcock University in their essays?

4. Methodology

According to Jowitt and Silas (1985), there are many ways of carrying out a survey of Nigerian English (NE) syntax. One could take each grammatical category of parts of and examine the common variations from the standard British English (SBE) that occur in each of these areas. This could be assigned into two broad groups which are 'wrong insertions and omissions and, wrong selection and wrong ordering. Every language works within a system which is peculiar to it. Second-language speakers of English, like Nigerians, learn the language after acquiring their first language, so the natural habit is to learn through the application of logic. For this reason, areas of variations in Nigerian English syntax will be studied using the standard British English as the model.

The survey research design was adopted for this study. The population of the study was made up of all the 500 students in the departments of Accounting, Economics, and Nursing; they were all 100 Level students. From this population, a sample size of 300 students was drawn, which was made of 100 students from each of the selected departments at Babcock University in Nigeria. The rationale for the choice of 100 Level students was that, the students just came into the university from their different secondary schools and were expected to have a good knowledge of the English language in order to perform well in their academics as well as relate effectively with people in their environment. But, have they really mastered the language especially the mechanics of writing which often lends itself to ambiguity when used wrongly? That is the focus of this study.

The research instrument used for the study was students' essays on: 'My First Day in Babcock University'. The purpose was to find out how well and effectively the students applied the mechanics of writing particularly, the effective use of English tenses and spelling.

The study adopted the model of Corder, which was later modified by Ellis (2015). According to them, the initial step requires the selection of a corpus of language followed by the identification of errors. The errors are then classified into error types (for instance, errors of concord, articles, and verb forms). The next step is the analysis and explanation of the different types of errors as they relate to different sources. Such sources include language transfer, method of second learning, overgeneralization, inconsistencies in the spelling system of the target language, wrong use of punctuation and capitalization. Finally, the relative negative impact to effective communication caused by the errors and the frequency of their occurrence were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the findings from the collected data; it also analyzes the results of the findings.

1. Do the students of Babcock University commit errors in their essays?
2. What is the frequency of the errors committed by the students of Babcock University in their essays?

Emphatically yes, the students of the Babcock University committed errors in their essays. This is shown in the analysis of the errors and their frequencies below. A critical examination of the results

as seen in Table 1 shows that 258 (86%) of the students committed spelling errors; 245 (81.7%) committed past tense errors, 248 (82.7%) committed past participle tense errors; 262(87.3%) committed past continuous tense errors; 273 (91%) committed errors of past perfect tense; 283 (94.3%) committed the errors of tense and times relations and 280 (93.3%) committed plural errors. From this analysis, it is revealed that the error committed most is of tense and times relations.

Figure 1: Respondents' Distribution by Department
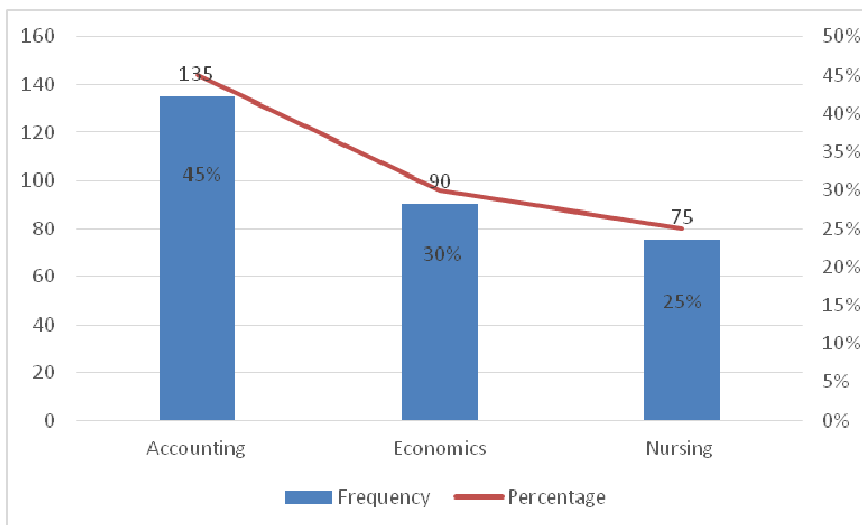
Source: From the Present Study

Figure 1 shows that majority of the respondents representing 135 (45%) who were in 100 level from Accounting Department committed more errors and were closely followed by students from the Department of Economics with 90 (30%) and then students from the Nursing Department at 75 (25%).

1. What are the types of errors committed by the students of Babcock University in their essays?

The third objective of this study was interested in the identification of the types of errors made by the research respondents, as indicated in the RQ 3 above.

This section presents the results and an analysis of the error types in the essays of the three hundred (300) sampled students.

Table 1:   Error Types Committed by the Study Samples

S/N	Type of errors	Number of times error occurred	Percentage
1	Spelling error	258	86
2	Error of Past tense	245	81.7
3	Error of past participle	248	82.7
4	Error of past continuous	262	87.3
5	Error of past perfect	273	91
6	Error of tense and times relations	283	94.3
7	Error in plural formation	280	93.3

Source: The Present Study

Table1 reveals the type of errors committed by the students, which range from spelling error 258 times to misused past tense (254 times), past participle (248 times), to past continuous (262 times). Other errors committed are: Past perfect misuse (273 times), tense and time relation errors (283), and errors in plural formation (280). In all, as can be seen in Table 1 above, seven different types of errors were found to have been committed.

6. Discussion of the Findings

The findings from this study are not necessarily surprising although its magnitude is stunning. The respondents used for this study were the university students who had been exposed to the study of English right from the primary school level. These students were expected to have attained a certain level of competence since they had completed the secondary school and were already in the second semester of their first year in the university. This means that they have been learning the English language for over twelve (12) years. It is therefore surprising that their performance is a confirmation of the cry by the stakeholders that the standard of English language-use has fallen. The quantum of errors found in the sample essays of the students, confirm the low proficiency level of English language usage among this level of students.

The errors found in the sample essays range from wrong spelling of words to syntactic errors. The essay topic given to the subjects is a narrative essay about their 'First Day in Babcock University'. A narrative essay is an essay that tells a story of what has happened or imagined to have happened. It is regarded as the simplest type of writing because it does not need any technical definition of concepts or scientific analysis; there is no systematic argument or logical proof to be made; what is needed is a coherent and logical presentation of experience. It is therefore amazing that some of these students could not correctly express their experience in the English language. With the exception of very few, these students are still ignorant of the basic rules of grammar. Many sentence patterns used were highly influenced by the students' Mother Tongues. There was evidence of wrong spelling; and even of the inappropriate use of the lower case letters such as **i**, and **g**od, instead of: I, and God. Extracts of these obvious errors are grouped into two in Table 2 below, namely inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors:

Table 2: Examples of Mechanical Accuracy Errors

Inter-lingual Error (InterE)	Intra-lingual Error (IntraE)
2017 was the year **i** will not forget in my life.	I thank **god** because my parents love me.
When I **get** to the gate of the school the security welcomed me very well.	(**i**) quickly **park** my things.
I was **fery** happy.	I wept **biterly** and my mom begged me.
They are calling you ("you" is an older person).	The only **tin** that I will remember Babcock for is there food.
She just said "I'm **coming**" (When: "Just a minute" would have been more appropriate).	The only thin that I will remember Babcock for is **there** food.
Everybody in the home **were** happy.	All of us **qued** inside the sun
	Registration in Babcock is very **tidious**.
	I just relaxed in my bed, and from **their** I slept of.
	I just relaxed in my bed, and from there I slept **of**.

Source: The Present Study

At the inter-lingual level, where MT-mediated usage manifests, errors such as 'fery' for 'very', 'I'm coming' for 'Just a minute', or 'I'll be right back', and 'were' as the verb choice for 'Everybody' show various degrees of English usage whose substrate is Kwa. The wrong choice of '**f**ery' instead of '**v**ery', for instance, quickly locates the respondent as one whose alphabet repertoire does not have the voiced bilabial fricative consonant, /v/. Some respondents also used the plural nouns to address the elderly or older persons, whereas in the English language, it is the singular noun. For example, a respondent wrote "They are calling you" when, indeed, only one person was being called at the material time. This is a clear case of inter-language error. The respondents invoked the honorific pronoun-use in their MT, as a mark of respect, to address the elderly or senior, typical of some African cultures such as the Yoruba, to construct such English sentences. The offshoot of this is foregrounded in the ambiguity of the plural-use of "they", when, indeed, the addressed was a single person. On these occasions, as in many other of such errors, direct comprehension is, somewhat, impeded, and a fertile ground for ambiguities is precipitated.

Also, most of the intra-lingual errors from the collected data show evidence of wrong selections from some sorts of the English minimal or pseudo minimal pairs, which are capable of confusing a user of low English proficiency. Examples of such are: 'park' when 'pack' is the choice, 'thin' instead of 'thing', and 'their' when 'there' should be the choice. Others are: 'qued' for 'queued', and 'of' for 'off'. The case against 'biterly' instead of 'bitterly', perhaps, is the inherent similarity in the occurrence of a singular 't' in other English words such as: 'bit', 'beat', 'bite' and 'biter'. A similar reason may be suggested also for the wrong choice, among some respondents, of 'tidious' for 'tedious' as a form of over generalization of the 'i' in words such as: till, tip, and tick.

The differences between the structural arrangement of sentences in the target language and the students' MT, most likely, led to the syntactic errors as postulated by CA and EA, some leading to ambiguities. This is in agreement with the findings made by earlier researchers like Eddington, Degani and Tokowicz (2014); Smith, Walters and Priori (2012) and Degani and Tokowicz (2013), who found that the students who have acquired their mother tongue always have problems in using a second language effectively as a result of differences between the already acquired language and the target language. Most of these lead to inter-language and intra-lingual mechanical errors, which sometimes cause ambiguities in communication.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be safely concluded that the students of Babcock University commit errors in their essays, the frequency of which range from spelling (258 times) to plural formation errors, committed about 280 times. Other types of the identified mechanical errors are: the misuse of the past tense, past participle, past continuous, past perfect, and tense and relations errors. These errors are further grouped into inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors. Some reasons adducible to the abysmal performance may be the lack of interest to further learning of English with the mind that they are now would-be professionals in Accounting, Nursing, and Economics; no more in English. Another may be because most of the respondents come from the same speech community, speaking the same MT, having no pressure to converse in English. Yet, the lackadaisical approach to teaching English by some teachers may also be adduced to this poor performance.

The identification of these errors, discovered from the data analyzed, will go a long way to help the teachers have a mental picture of the errors that are frequent in the learners' writing. This is expected to enable them to adjust their teaching methods, strategies and techniques with a view to tackling the learners' problems. For the students, using English as an official language, the following remedies suggested by West African Examination Council (2018) may suffice:

1. endeavour to improve on their vocabulary and grammar in English language through extensive reading;
2. take time to understand the exact demands of questions before attempting to answer them;
3. draw up an outline to organise their thoughts before writing their essays;
4. read through their work to correct spelling and grammatical mistakes before submitting their scripts;
5. practise essay writing constantly; and
6. converse regularly in simple and correct English expressions.

By these means, the errors of mechanical accuracy committed by the students will abate and so the emanating ambiguities that mar the communication flow, especially, of formal or semi-formal contexts.

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