The Grammar Problem in Higher Education in Cameroon

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Assessing Written Standard English among Undergraduates of the Department of English at the University of Yaounde 1

By

Miriam Ayafor

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To
Zoey, Ezra, Nathaniel, Gabrielle, Praise, Ethan, Carla, and Charis,
My grandchildren

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PREFACE

Few topics have exercised the minds of ELT specialists more over the last four decades than acceptable standards of English usage[1] in schools and colleges. Conferences have discussed the issues involved, and books, articles and dissertations have provided descriptions and offered a range of opinions. Increasingly, local vernacular Englishes have been described and, often, the errors are attributed to these varieties. Yet, even when local norms are well understood and fully accepted, standards of English usage in education circles do not seem to improve. Failure to address the problem of how to ensure acceptable language norms for tertiary-level students runs the risk of endangering the value of their degrees and limiting graduate usefulness in the workforce.

This volume marks a noteworthy stage in the exploration of standards of English among tertiary-level students in Yaoundé. It not only offers a corpus-based investigation of the problem: it goes further in two significant ways. It expounds and explores the methodologies that could be employed to eradicate habitual errors and it surveys secondary-level students in an effort to establish when and how some of the most persistent errors become established.

Dr.Ayafor has devoted a large part of her career to establishing and reinforcing acceptable norms of English usage in her home country. She has taught at all levels in Cameroon from primary school to university and has augmented her expertise by exploring related issues in several other Anglophone countries in Africa, the United States and Europe. In addition, she has native-like competence in Cameroon's two official languages, French and English; in its unofficial lingua franca, Kamtok[2]; and in a number of its indigenous languages. This background has enabled her to undertake a profound study of student English in Cameroon and to assess

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[1] Journals such as *English Today*, for example, regularly publish papers highlighting the problems of establishing and promulgating acceptable standards in many parts of the English-using world; and even the most cursory of internet searches reveals the density of materials that have been produced on the topic.

[2]Kamtok is usually described as an English-based Pidgin but it is much more than this. For some it is a Creole and for many others a second-language which is used with facility on a regular basis.

its quality. She is well aware of what is acceptable local usage and is expert at highlighting and explaining the causes of divergence from acceptable national and international norms.

There are two main thrusts to the materials presented by Dr Ayafor. The first provides and explores the data on which her book is based. It offers an assessment of error analysis, both generally and specifically; a comprehensive grouping and description of students' errors in Yaoundé, together with an evaluation of their probable causes. The second section widens and particularises the nature of her discussion. She scrutinises the continuum of Cameroon English as a likely source of certain persistent errors and offers a valuable survey of the ways and means of preventing or at least eliminating errors, even at this tertiary level. The book concludes with a chapter that summarises her findings and also points the way to further research.

The Grammar Problem in Higher Education in Cameroon will undoubtedly be of most value in Cameroon but its insights are in no way limited to one country or even one continent. In its exploration of techniques and methodologies which may help to eradicate persistent problems in Cameroon, it offers a template for other multilingual societies, including the newly multilingual communities in Britain[3].

On a personal level, I have had the pleasure of following Dr.Ayafor's career from Yaoundé graduate, through Leeds MA and on to a sophisticated study of educational issues in her doctoral thesis. She is a hard-working, reliable academic who feels she has a duty to raise standards for her students and, ultimately, for her country. She has never been content simply to share her expertise in the lecture theatres, but strives constantly for ways to ensure the quality of her students' communication skills. This book is the result of lengthy deliberation, steady in-depth research and years of mature reflection. It will not cure Cameroon student errors overnight but it may well begin the process of amelioration to which Dr.Ayafor's entire academic career has been devoted.

Loreto Todd
October 2014

[3]Because of recent inward migration to the UK, there are often as many as twenty different languages in daily use in some rural areas. Bigger cities, such as Belfast, Leeds and Cardiff have an even greater inventory. It is only a matter of time before help will be needed in guaranteeing the quality of students' English.

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The first person I want to acknowledge here is my senior colleague and friend, Professor ManyakaTokoDjockoua, for her constantly urging me to write a book. If this lady had not been so persuasive in her encouragements, I may not have written one. Thank you, my dear friend. You are more than a sister to me.

My sincere gratitude also goes to Mr. George Atanga, Mrs. Esther Mbinda, Dr. Bonaventure Sala, Professor John Nkengasong Nkemngong and Mr. Valentine Tamen who graciously shared with me their points of view concerning the causes of grammar problems among university students, and who also suggested solutions to the problems. These are my Interviewees 1 to 5 in that order. I cannot thank them enough for their contributions. The eight undergraduate students of the Department of English, the University of Yaoundé1 who also accepted to be interviewed for the same purpose are hereby recognised. Their points of view were also of great help to me and I am grateful to them.

Furthermore, I am highly indebted to the students of the Department of English of the University of Yaoundé1 for the academic years 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 whose letters of complaint, test papers and examination scripts served as material for my data collection for this research. Their errors led me to write this book so they need to be acknowledged.

I could not have succeeded with the transcriptions of the recorded interviews without the help of Roland Minang. He deserves my many thanks.

Finally, I do not know how to thank my teacher, mentor, friend, MA dissertation supervisor, PhD thesis supervisor -- Professor Loreto Todd -- for having inculcated in me the desire to achieve high goals in life and not to allow the fact of being a woman deter me from academic excellence. I am grateful that she accepted to take up her precious and well-deserved resting time to write the preface for this book. I thank God for you, Loreto!

INTRODUCTION

The English language skills of students of the Department of English where I teach have been of great concern to me. It is expected that students who have decided to pursue an academic career in English in such an institution of higher learning as the university would have acquired a certain level of competence in the language from their secondary schools. By secondary schools here, I mean the seven years of post-primary education which is completed in two phases: first by the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level (OL) certificate after five years of post-primary learning, and second by the Advanced Level (AL) certificate after two more years of study. English language as a subject on the school curriculum is taught in the first cycle only, that is, up till the fifth year of secondary school. After students write the GCE OL, no formal tuition is given for English language. It is therefore assumed that teachers of literature and other art subjects would continue to improve upon the language skills of their students. The students in the case study for this book all had English language taught to them only up to Form Five.

There are many academic fields of study in our country and in the world at large: studies in the Arts and Humanities, in the Sciences, in Law, in Economics, Accounting and Finance, and in so many other domains of life. In our secondary schools, students are usually or generally grouped into two camps: Arts or Science students, by the time they reach form four, that is, one year before they write the OL Certificate examination. Competence in particular subjects on the school syllabus lead to various different fields of study in higher education. One would therefore expect that students who decide to further their education in the Arts and Letters, and particularly in the English studies, would have a certain level of competence in the language itself, just like students who would want to study medicine would have a certain level of competence in biology by the time they leave secondary school. However, when one discovers that so many students in the English Department have very low English language competence, one wonders what had been their motivation for choosing such a department for further education. One may not be very surprised if students in a non-native English environment studying geography, history, biology or mathematics performed poorly in English language. When in

secondary school, I remember that when a fellow student made certain kinds of errors in spoken English when expressing him or herself, the rest of the class would say he or she is a science student, in a kind of pleasant joke. This joke continued when I became a secondary school teacher of English. "He's a science student!" was to be an excuse for poor performance in English language. What can one say, then, when Arts students, and especially those who choose to pursue a degree in English, perform very badly? What would be their excuse, if at all there should be excuses for science students?

The first aim of this book is to provide an in-depth description of the errors that students commit in their written English, with Standard British English as a measuring rod. Indeed, while many people (including all my colleagues in the Department) complain about the poor standards of English among university students of our day, there are few detailed descriptions of specific kinds of errors students make to justify the general cry. SimoBobda's (1992?)*Common Deviations in Cameroon English* and Ayafor's (1993) *Falling Standards of English in Cameroon* are among the few that exist. No recent error description has been done. The second aim is to identify the areas in which the students' grammatical weaknesses are most acute so that solutions to the problem - such as remedial teaching - could be proposed. Thirdly, in the light of New Englishes in general and Cameroon English in particular, the aim of the study is to see whether the errors students make could be considered mere deviations from SE and so understood and accepted as part of the evolutionary process of the language in harmony with its new ecology, away from native–English Britain (Achimbe, 2005; Mbangwana and Sala, 2009).

Therefore a descriptive error analysis approach to the study of the written English of university students of the Department of English has been taken, with the following research questions in mind:

1. What are the errors students make in their written performance?
2. Can these errors be categorised into groups and if so, which groups of errors are most frequent?
3. What may be the causes of poor English language skills among university students?
4. Can these errors be considered mere deviations/variations from Standard British English, and do they then follow the pattern of a New English (Cameroon English) and so fit into the ecology of Cameroon?
5. What solutions can be found to the English grammar problem of students in higher institutions of learning in Cameroon?

To answer these questions, a longitudinal study was carried out with the same group of students for a period of three years, representing the three years of a degree programme. The sample of students for this research was taken from the Department of English of the University of Yaoundé 1. Written material from these students in their first, second and third year of studies were examined. For Year One, students' letters of complaint about wrong entries of their examination or test marks have been used. These letters are dated November 2009 and are complaints concerning mistakes in the publication of results for the September repeat session of examinations or what was sometimes called third semester examinations. The students in question had just gone through their first year of studies in the Department and the September examination session is their final examination permitting them to go to the next level, if they pass. English language test papers for June 2010 were the next set of written material examined from the same group of students who were then towards the end of their second year. Then in March 2011, a written examination in English literature was studied. These were third year students of the same enrolment class. It was a deliberate choice of the researcher to use three different types of written material to get students' language performance: free individual letters of complaint where students express different needs or complaints, a test paper in language, and an examination paper in literature. In this way, a variety of styles could be explored for better evaluation of language competence in a Department of English at university level. Errors from all this material were examined, analysed and conclusions drawn.

The appendix for this book is huge. This is because it was thought necessary to include the entire corpus from which material for analysis was obtained. Therefore, all of students' sentences that contained errors were included. This has been done in a systematic manner, though, classifying corpora into error types so as to facilitate reference and to make their reading more meaningful and, it is hoped, enjoyable. Then all the interviews conducted have also been transcribed and included in the appendix for verification of information described in the body of work. An unedited tape of the interviews has been attached too. It will be noticed, when listening to the tape and comparing it with its written version, that the transcriptions included have left out the introductory and concluding parts of the interviews such as greetings and goodbyes. This is just to reduce the space that would be occupied if every single transcribed word were included.

Having introduced this work, we will now proceed to the first chapter which deals with the concept of error analysis for second language teaching.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ERROR ANALYSIS APPROACH

The literature on error analysis dates back to three decades ago and beyond. It seems as if most linguists and teachers of English language have given up on error analysis as a means of helping learners of the language, especially second language (L2) learners, make progress in their acquisition and competence. Over the years, there have been strong recommendations for changes in teaching methods, with a view to improving on standards of English especially among L2 learners and users of English. In the late 50s, it was contrastive analysis that was recommended. This was succeeded by error analysis in the 60s and 70s. Then the communicative approach to second language teaching and learning took over and is still being practised. Error analysis as a means of bringing awareness to both the teacher and the learner about the latter's needs was discontinued because of some criticism it received. However, I believe that those criticisms were not strong enough for the approach to be completely rejected, and that is why in this book I revisit the approach and try to use it for the description of students' errors. I am of the opinion that both teachers and learners would be able to improve upon their teaching and learning methods and materials if learners' errors were analysed.

Definition of Error Analysis

Corder (1981:51) gives a straightforward and succinct definition of this idea in the following terms:

> Error analysis is both an ancient activity and at the same time a comparatively new one. In its old sense, it is simply the informal and often intuitive activity of any teacher who makes use of the utterances of his pupils to assess whether they have, or have not, learnt the particular linguistic points that he has been trying to teach - it is, in other words, an informal means of assessing and checking on a pupil's progress.

Based on this definition, one would expect every language teacher to practise error analysis on a regular basis in the course of his or her work. However, from personal experience as a learner of English at secondary school level in the 70's and a teacher of English at the same in the 80's and 90's, error analysis has not been part of the learning and teaching approach used in schools in my country. In fact, the terminology itself was not part of the usual vocabulary of teachers, either in their classrooms or in seminars and refresher courses organised from time to time for teachers by the then Ministry of National Education (now Ministry of Secondary Education) or English language agencies like the British Council. Information from a questionnaire administered to secondary school teachers proves the fact that error analysis is not common practice among teachers of English in Cameroon, even though, as Candlin (1973), in his preface to Richards (editor, 1973: viii) says, "Error Analysis has [thus] important Applied Linguistic justification in that data from the classroom can both serve as input for theoretical discussion and, after evaluation, feed back to the design of remedial curricula." Candlin continues to emphasise the importance of error analysis when he says that from the standpoint of practical teaching, educators have become more aware of the long-term value of error analysis as a chief means of assessing pupils' learning in general and the degree of match between their learning 'syllabus' and the teachers' teaching one.

The comparatively new sense of the expression "error analysis", Corder (1981:52) explains, includes the understanding that it is not enough to merely classify students' errors in a superficial manner like grouping them into errors of commission, omission, wrong sequence, and wrong selection, but it requires a deeper analysis of the error so as to find out why an error was committed in order to go about its correction in a systematic way. He argues that if errors were committed because of poor teaching methods, then simply re-teaching as a remedial procedure will be unproductive, unless the first attempt of teaching was done hurriedly. However, if errors were a natural result of the learning process whereby learners make analogies with some earlier learned rules (analogical errors), or if errors were made because of interferences from the learner's mother tongue (transfer errors), then a deeper understanding of the learning process or a linguistic comparison of the mother tongue and target language will provide useful explanations. Both the old meaning and the newer meanings of error analysis will be applied to this study.

Linguists (like Corder, 1981; Selinker, 1972; Richards, 1981) have proposed three objectives for the practice of error analysis: Firstly, that far from there being a fundamental opposition between Contrastive Analysis

and Error Analysis, the latter serves as an important source of corroboration to contrastive linguistic analyses in their claims for predictability of error. Secondly, it is believed that the study of learner error should permit the formulation of rules for learners' inter-lingual systems, thus providing incidentally for the teacher confirmation of what remains to be learned. Thirdly, charting a learner's language development through error study has psycholinguistic importance in that it submits transfer theory (applying structures of L1 to L2) to critical observation and provides data on the nature and significance of the obstacles that lie in the path towards discovery of the target language rules. They observes that the learner's errors are indicative both of the state of the learner's knowledge , and of the ways in which a second language is learned.

Error analysis is, therefore, a very important aspect of second language teaching and learning, but this procedure seems to have been neglected in the teaching of English in Cameroon.

Some other terminologies have been used earlier in this chapter and some others will be used later so it is thought necessary to define them all as well, as they are linked in one way or the other to error analysis. They will be taken up one after the other in the next sections.

Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis

Emphasising points of contrast between two language systems is what we understand here by contrastive analysis. This arose as a field of language research in the late 50s and was deeply rooted in the behaviouristic and structuralist approaches of that period. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) that emerged as a result of comparing and contrasting data from various pairs of languages claimed:

> that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system, and that a scientific, structural analysis of the two languages in question would yield a taxonomy of linguistic contrasts between them which in turn would enable linguists and language teachers to predict the difficulties a learner would encounter. (Brown, 2007: 248).

This claim was acclaimed by many language teachers and linguists (Lado, 1957; Banathy, Trager & Waddle,1966; Stockwell, Bowen & Martin, 1965), some of whom wrote linguistic books resting on the assumption that they could predict and describe the patterns that would cause difficulty in learning and those that would not cause any difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and the culture to be learned

with the native language and culture of the student. This theory did not prove to be exactly correct because it was noticed that there were more problems faced by learners of a second language than by those caused through language interference. Therefore other methods and solutions had to be sought.

Error analysis evolved from contrastive analysis. However, both CAH and Error Analysis have been laid to rest for some decades by language teachers and linguists. Error analysis was criticized for misdiagnosing student learning problems, since not all problems are exposed through students' writing or even speech. There is the phenomenon of "avoidance" of certain difficult L2 elements. That is, some difficult structures are simply avoided by students who fear that they might commit errors if they attempt using them. Such avoided structures or elements can neither be accounted for by error analysis nor by contrastive analysis. The result today is that both these methods are rarely being used in identifying L2 learner problem areas. As such, the debate over contrastive analysis and error analysis has virtually disappeared in the last ten or more years, linguists believing that error analysis and contrastive analysis are not adequate in predicting or accounting for all the numerous errors encountered in learning English (Schackne, 2002). Instead, priority has been given to other theories and approaches such as the recent Communicative Competence which, in my opinion, has not yielded good fruit in Cameroon. That is one of the reasons why, I believe, there are so many errors in students' writing today. Using an Error Analysis model for this study is an attempt at appealing to language teachers and researchers to go back to the old-time Error Analysis method of helping with second language acquisition, while not neglecting other teaching approaches.

Error Analysis and Inter-Language

The term "inter-language" was first used by John Reinecke in 1935. He always used the term to refer to a non standard variety of a first or second language, used as a means of intergroup communication. Later, linguists narrowed the meaning, using it only for second language learners. Selinker (1972) used "inter-language" to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learner's L1 and the target language. Ellis (1989:42) describes inter-language as a theoretical construct which underlies the attempts of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers to identify the stages of development through which L2 learners go on their way to L2 proficiency or near proficiency. An inter-language is developed by a learner of a second language who has not fully mastered

the new language, but who approximates it. In his or her speech or writing, s/he preserves some features of his or her first language (language transfer), over generalises target language rules, and is creative. The innovations s/he introduces in the language through creativity are most often not grammatical. Inter-language is therefore a continuum between the first language and the target language along which all learners pass (Larsen, et. al., 1992: 60). Other terminology is used by different linguists to describe the same concepts: *idiosyncratic dialects*, *transitional competence* (S.P.Corder, 1967; 1971), and *approximative systems* (William Nemser in Richards: 1973). Nemser declares that such approximative systems vary in character in accordance with proficiency level, and that variation is also introduced by learning experience (including exposure to a target language script system), communication functions, personal learning characteristics, and so on.

Discussing the phenomenon of inter-language earlier, Richards and Sampson (1972: 5-10) say that there are seven factors that may influence and characterise these new language systems: Language transfer, intra-lingual interference, the effects of the socio-linguistic situation, the modality of exposure to the target language and the modality of production, the age of the learner, the instability of the learner's linguistic system, and the effects of the inherent difficulty of the particular item being learned. In analysing learners' errors, it is important to take into consideration these influences, which, I believe, would help in both diagnosis and therapy.

Error Analysis and Transfer Theory

According to language transfer theory, it is assumed that learners' mother tongues (MT) will either positively or negatively affect their foreign or second language acquisition. If there are differences between the MT and the target language (TL), negative influence will occur. On the other hand, if the learners' MT and the TL are similar, the native language will actively aid foreign language learning. Hence the transfer would function positively. Error analysis would greatly help in detecting errors and finding out whether certain errors are a consequence of negative transfer or not.

Error Analysis and Intra-language

Intra-language is that language produced when developmental errors are committed, developmental errors being those that occur due to the

internal difficult structures of the target language and the learner trying to formulate rules albeit wrongly. These errors are independent of the native language. Hence second language learners from different linguistic backgrounds would commit the same errors in the target language. Richards (1970) referred to in Richards and Sampson (1973:6) defines intra-language interference as "items produced by the learner which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language". The learner, in this case, tries to "derive the rules behind the data to which he/she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the mother tongue nor to the target language" (ibid). Error analysis, therefore, should help the language teacher to discover which errors are committed because of internal difficulties in the target language itself and so help him or her better prepare teaching materials to suit the needs of the learners. Modern English language, for instance, is full of spelling inconsistencies due to its historical development since the fifth century AD. It is extremely difficult for an L2 or a foreign learner to master the spelling rules of the language. Other grammatical or structural inconsistencies exist so much so that any learner may commit the same errors, irrespective of his or her MT.

Errors and Mistakes

It may be necessary, at this juncture, to differentiate between errors and mistakes. Agreeing with Corder (1981:10) who makes an important distinction between "mistakes" or perfomance errors and 'true errors' or markers of the learner's transitional competence, mistakes are those slips of the tongue or of the pen that occur with native language users as well as with second language users due to memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness, and psychological conditions such as strong emotion. These mistakes are random and non-systematic, or more specifically, their systematic nature cannot be readily discerned. When they occur, the language user can correct them by him or herself with more or less complete assurance. On the other hand, errors are those occurrences that reveal the underlying knowledge of the language of the user, and they are systematic. They are errors of competence, whereas mistakes are errors of performance. Sentences containing errors would be characterised by systematic deviancy.

Paul (1993:97) also makes a clear distinction between mistakes and errors, noting that the former are by no means restricted to non-native speakers. Mistakes, he says, are made in spite of adequate knowledge of the language, whereas errors are based on inadequate or erroneous

knowledge. Brown (1993: 205) differentiates between mistakes and errors too. A mistake, according to him, refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or slip in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. All people make mistakes, in both native and second language situations. Native speakers are normally capable of recognizing and correcting such mistakes, which are not the result of a deficiency in competence but the result of some sort of breakdown in the process of production. On the contrary, learners cannot recognise and correct their errors until they have acquired sufficient knowledge of the target language. According to Selinker (1992 in Ho, 2003), errors are indispensable to learners, since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

In this book, the term *mistakes* shall be used to describe errors of performance and *errors* to describe errors of students' transitional competence or errors made because of lack of adequate knowledge or erroneous knowledge. The case study for this book are second language users, hence the justification of the use of the term *transitional*. They are people who are still in the process of learning the English language, though already at university.

Sources of Errors

Selinker (in Richards, 1974, p. 37) describes five sources of errors as follows: language transfer, transfer of training, strategies of second language learning, strategies of second language communication, and overgeneralization of TL linguistic material. In 1974 Corder (in Allen & Corder, p. 130) identified three sources of errors as follows: language transfer, overgeneralization or analogy, and methods or materials used in the teaching. Richards and Sampson (1974) explain seven sources of errors: language transfer, intra-lingual interference, sociolinguistic situation, modality, age, successions of approximative systems, and universal hierarchy of difficulty. According to Dulay & Burt (1974), there are four types of "goofs": interference-like goofs, L1 developmental goofs, ambiguous goofs (either interference-like or L1 developmental goofs), and unique goofs (neither interference-like nor L1 developmental goofs). All four (or six) authors agree on the fact that language transfer is the number one source of errors in a second language. Dulay and Burt's "interference-like" goofs are the same as language transfer, for the interference comes from the first known language. This is very significant as far as the present study is concerned. Shall the status quo be maintained in our case study?

In any case, from all the error sources described by the authors mentioned above, it is clear that error analysis is a crucial aspect of language teaching. If teachers neglect this, they would be neglecting a serious aspect of their job and the consequences would be undoubtedly great. The study of errors committed by students of the Department of English, the University of Yaoundé 1, will take into consideration the error sources listed above to see if they may be the sources from which the errors came, or whether the errors are caused by other factors. But before going on to that stage of the work, it is thought necessary to briefly examine two more ideas related to error analysis. First, we will look at descriptive models of error analysis and second, say something about error analysis and remedial teaching.

Descriptive Models for Error Analysis

Different models for error analysis exist and have been used by different linguists including Jack C. Richards (in Richards, 1973:172-188), M.P. Jain (in Richards 173: 189-215), Peter Paul (1993:97-107), Gass & Selinker (1994, p. 67) and H. Douglas Brown (2007:257-280). Summarising the models of these authors, we can say that the methodology of traditional error analysis follows the procedure below:

1) Collection of data
2) Identification of errors (labelling with varying degree of precision depending on the linguistic sophistication brought to bear upon the task, with respect to the exact nature of the deviation)
3) Classification into error types
4) Statement of relative frequency of error types (quantifying errors)
5) Analyzing source of error (e.g. mother tongue interference, overgeneralization, inconsistencies in the spelling system of the target language)
6) Determination of the degree of disturbance caused by the error (or the seriousness of the error in terms of communication, norm, etc.).
7) Therapy (remediating for errors)

Candlin (in Richards 1973: ix) comments that the problem of a descriptive model for error analysis becomes important if one accepts the suggestion that similarities and differences of surface structure may be more relevant to error analysis than examining deep structure relations. He goes on to pose the question of whether language teachers are well equipped to treat communicative or functional errors in addition to errors

in language form. In answer to Candlin's question, I would say that it is for that very reason of not being certain or equipped to examine communicative and functional errors that, in this book, I have opted to treat mainly errors of surface structure. And in compliance with Corder's (1981: 54) idea that "any technique which enables us to describe the learner's code at any particular point in his career will give us information of a detailed sort on which to base our remedial teaching if we consider it necessary", I resorted to a comparative study of the students' errors, which I consider their code, with their corresponding versions in Standard British English, so as to identify the differences. It is the account of the precise nature of these differences that provide information which enables any correction of errors to be made in a systematic fashion, hoping that remedial teaching would somehow take place for the corrections to be made.

Error Analysis and Remedial Teaching

If teaching is to be learner-centred, then looking at the errors learners make is important for both teachers and students. As already discussed earlier, error analysis helps in assessing a student's knowledge of the language. Once this knowledge has been assessed and the areas of weaknesses identified, it is necessary to carry out remedial teaching, depending on the level of correction needed. Corder (1981:45) declares:

> In general, we can say that remedial action becomes necessary when we detect a *mismatch* or disparity between the knowledge, skill, or ability of someone and the demands that are made on him by the situation he finds himself in. This general definition is true of all fields of human activity, not just language teaching and learning. It could almost serve as a definition of any learning situation.

Corder (1981: 54) goes on to say that the nature of this mismatch determines the nature of the remedial treatment. This cannot adequately be discovered by language tests, but requires an analysis of the situation of language use not only in terms of the nature of the language code used, but also in terms of the types of discourse functions it involves. A parallel assessment of the learner's code by means of error analysis tells us the nature of the differences between the learner's code and that of the situation, and provides us with the information on which we may base a systematic remedial course. Error analysis, however, cannot give us a clear and comprehensive picture of the learner's communicative competence; it does not enable us to predict how a particular learner will cope with the

demands of a situation of language use, though it will serve well to say how he will perform in a situation of language learning.

Taking the case of university students in general, and students of the Department of English in particular – the case study for this book – it can be understood that they need a level of competence and performance that would enable them write essays in English as answers to literature and language questions in tests and examinations, write formal letters to their lecturers and to the university administration in case of any need, write applications for jobs when they graduate, help relatives and friends write formal letters for them when asked, and to know how to write all these appropriately. But when samples of such expected writings are fraught with grammatical, lexical, syntactic and semantic errors, it grieves the heart of language instructors and the rest of the university teaching staff, for that matter.

Informal debates and discussions have been going on in the Department of English as to how to handle this "literacy" problem, and several questions have been asked including: Should there or should there not be some kind of remedial classes for English organised in the Department for its students? Can these errors be treated during core subject periods or lessons like the lessons for Grammar and Lexicology and/or Creative Writing? Do the syllabuses and aims of study for these courses include rudimentary language structures that are supposed to have been taught and learned before reaching the university? Can a different type of language course be created and added to the existing ones on the degree programme, just to take care of language proficiency for students undergoing a degree programme in English language and literature? Would such a course be compulsory for every student in the Department up to the degree year, or would it be just for first-year students? Would it be for every first-year student or just for a selected number, after a diagnostic test has been given at the start of each academic year? What should be the title of the course: Remedial English or English Language Proficiency or English Communication? What should be the content of such a course?

Just like Corder (1981: 47-48) says, too many plans for remedial teaching fail, because they are based upon an inadequate model of a "knowledge of a language" and often lead to merely repeating, or "re-teaching", what has already been taught and possibly even already learnt, instead of being based upon a careful study of the linguistic demands of the situation. It is for this reason that the project which has given rise to this book is a careful analysis of students' errors in order to understand their knowledge of the English language. In the event of a decision taken

by the authorities that be to remedy the situation, a remedial programme could be designed based on the results of this investigation, and that would suit the needs of the students and indeed improve upon their language performance and competence.

Remedial treatment can, in theory, be applied in two directions (Corder,1981: 49): bringing the learner's knowledge up to the standard required by the situation or bringing the demands of the situation into accord with the learner's abilities in the language. It goes without saying that the case of university students is not a case where one can or should bring the demands of the situation into the learner's abilities. University studies are universal and need to be of a standard that can be accepted world-wide. The English language is also a world-wide language, despite regional differences that have given rise to post-modern New Englishes. Any attempt at watering down the level of competence in English in university students in Cameroon, and especially students preparing to graduate in English, is tantamount to making ridicule the language and the lecturers in the department. University students' knowledge of English has to be stepped up to meet the required standard for people in a tertiary institution of learning.

Having explained what error analysis is and having seen the need for remedial teaching to be carried out among our university students, the next chapter in this book will deal with the grouping and describing of students' errors, which is the third step in the usual methodology for error analysis, coming after data collection and error identification.

CHAPTER TWO

GROUPING AND DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS' ERRORS

In this chapter, an attempt is made at describing the errors found in students' writing. All errors found in the data at hand have been selected and grouped into similar kinds. Thus their frequency of occurrence among students can be examined, justifying their appellation as *errors* and not *mistakes*. All that are considered mistakes (that is, occurrences that are slips of the pen and that could be corrected by the students themselves if only they could take time to read over their work before handing it over to their lecturers) are not included in the classification.

Because the students whose work has been used as data for this research have learned English for at least 12 years, that is, seven years of primary education and five of secondary, their errors cannot be considered developmental. However, some of the students never spent five years in a regular secondary school; they dropped out of school for one reason or the other, or never went to secondary school at all. Some may have dropped out because of unwanted early pregnancies; others may have dropped because their parents could not afford to pay their school needs and provide for other school needs; others because they lost their parents and had no other sponsors; yet others were dismissed from school because of bad behaviour. Nevertheless, some of these students later managed to obtain the requirements for entry into university. This is because later in life, some of the young people matured and became more conscious of their need for academic improvement and subsequent empowerment. Having missed the opportunity to complete secondary education through a regular secondary school, they attended 'evening schools' where crash programmes of studies are offered for two or three years, depending on the choice and determination of the student, after which the General Certificate Examination (GCE) ordinary level and similar certificate examinations are written. One or two more years after passing the O'