

Poor English Language Performance of Distance Learners and its Effect on Doing Essay Item Tests

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I. Introduction

1.1 Background

Language is the major tool for any process of teaching or learning to take place. Without using language, it is too difficult to receive or impart any sort of knowledge. Among the four language skills, writing is the most difficult skill because it requires an orderly and accurate production.

In countries like Ethiopia, where the medium of instruction is a foreign language, (English), poor English language performance remain the major challenge. In such countries, students have to face two challenges, the subject matter and the language. Rebecca, 2005 was cited that nonnative speakers of English language learners need to focus on English language acquisition than the subject matter acquisition.

When we take this case to distance learners, the problem is more serious because distance education is self-learning and requires reading and understanding without close help of a teacher or an instructor. Most of the time it is unthinkable to ask a teacher or an instructor or any other individual who has got at least some knowledge of a subject matter to ask for a clarification in many parts of the remote areas of our country. On the other hand, Chun, 1989, Dreeben and Gamoran, 1986 indicated that remediation would bring low performing students up to par with the rest students.

For the problem to be worse, most of the distance learners are individuals who are adults with many responsibilities, departed from education for many years and have no access to reading and/ or reference materials.

In spite of the fact that the modules prepared by St. Mary's University, College of Open and Distance Learning and distributed to students won the preference of many students and admired by many professional in education with its pedagogical approaches, because of poor English language performance, many students fail to understand instructions and questions in their exam papers and as a result of that they fail to perform well specially in subjective item tests (essays). Therefore, this study focuses on the major challenges the students face with the language and try to indicate possible remedial ways to assist students.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that many distance learners fail to understand instructions in subjective item tests and concepts of such test items. They usually give responses which are completely unrelated to the requirement by instruction or to the concept of the question.

Example 1: Let us take a question from the course 'Sophomore English' (a course for degree program).

Question: Write a cause and effect essay on the title “Land Degradation”

N.B. Your essay should be coherent, unified and well punctuated.

First, many students do not know what “cause and effect” and land degradation” are. Second, because of their failure to understand those words, their answers do not fit the requirements of the instruction or the question. They may start to answer this question saying, “Cause and effect is....(try to explain what cause and effect is rather than writing an essay on the topic given)

Example 2: Let us again take a question from the course Introduction to Language and Linguistics (a course for degree program)

Question: Analyze the constituents of the following sentence using the method “**Labeled** tree diagram. The farmer ploughed the land”

Responses of some students:

1. They know what tree is and draw picture of a tree.
2. They know what farmer and plough the land and they draw a picture of a farmer plough the land.

Example 3: Many subjective questions of many courses are usually left unanswered because of the students’ failure to understand either the question or the instruction. . It is also usual for distance learners to return empty papers which they are provided to write on. These all problems, as to the assumption of the researcher, might be caused by not getting sufficient tutorials and failures to get orientations how to do subjective item tests depending on their instructions.

1.3 Research Questions

This study will seek answers to the following questions.

1. What things should be done to at least support students to understand what they are required to do in their subjective item tests?
2. How and at what interval should tutorials be given?

1.4 Objective of the study

1.4.1 Major Objective

The major objective of the study is to investigate the kinds of problems, challenges and sources of problems students face in answering subjective item tests and arrive at the possible remedial actions that the university could use to solve the problems.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- Examine students' exams (one of the major assessment tools in the case of St. Mary's University, College of Open and Distance Learning) and identify the students' language performance level.
- Identify the specific and very serious problems that need immediate solutions.
- Forward possible recommendations helpful to at least minimize the problem.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the problematic areas that our distance students face in doing subjective item tests and arrive at possible solutions to be applied so as to assist students perform better.

1.6 The Scope of the Study

The study is limited to the St. Mary's University, College of Open and Distance Learning, Departments of Languages and Business.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The researcher believes that the result of this study will contribute a lot in identifying problematic areas of distance learners in doing subjective item tests (essays). The researcher also believes that the result of this study will show the University the areas to work on and help its distance learner so as to achieve its Mission, Vision and Goals satisfactorily.

II. Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used in this study. The study will give much focus to the qualitative method since the researcher's major aim is to carefully scrutinize students exam papers which will be helpful to understand the extent of the students' challenges with English language and its impact on the academic performance of learners of College of Distance Learning. In addition to this, questionnaires will be prepared and distributed to students in the selected centers.

2.1 Sampling, Instrumentation and Data Collection

In this study sample centers of the St. Mary's University, College of Open and Distance Learning will be selected and students' sample exams will be selected from the terms (2005 I),

and scrutinized in order to investigate the kinds of mistakes students do or the kinds of misunderstanding created etc.

For this purpose:

- Twenty out of the total 50 centers of St. Mary's University, College of Open and Distance Learning will be selected.
- Department of Languages and Business will be taken and exams of the term (2005 I) will be examined.
- Three course form Language Department and two courses form Business Department will be selected and will be taken as a sample of the study.
- In addition, questioners will be distributed to students in the selected centers.

2.2 Data Analysis

After careful study of students' papers carried out, and the administration of questioners, the results of responses will be organized, tabulated and analyzed. Finally, the summary of the findings and conclusions will be made based on the data analysis.

III. Review of Related Literature

3.1 Effects of Common Errors on Meanings

3.1.1 Dangling Construction

In Davis and Less (2004), it is defined that dangling construction is a phrase or clause that either modifies nothing in the sentence or that seems to modify a word to which it is not logically related. This kind of modifier modifies what is implied but not actually stated in a sentence. The result of such sentences is usually an unintended meaning.

Example: While smoking a pipe, my dog sat with me in the hours. Here, due to the dangling construction, the meaning is changed. According to this sentence, the dog was smoking the pipe.

It should be:

- A. While smoking a pipe, I sat with my dog in the house. Or
 - B. While I was smoking a pipe, my dog sat with me in the house.
- (Taken from SMU Sophomore English. M.1)

3.1.2 Sentence Fragment

It is common to observe very much errors of such type in marking distance learners exams (SMU). Mayer and Savage (2006), defined sentence fragment as "A word group that lacks a

subject or a verb and that does not express a complete thought is a fragment.” Students write such types of sentences as though they have written a complete sentence.

Example: A Little man in a big hat. (Taken from SMU Sophomore English. M.1)

3.1.3 Run-on Sentences

A run-on occurs when two complete sentence are run together with no adequate sign given to mark the break between them. Yohannes (2008) defined it as “*A run on is two or more sentences incorrectly joined*” .

Example: Two suspects were arrested last week one of them was a woman.

It should be:

Two suspects were arrested last week; one of them was a woman.

3.1.4 Comma Splice

Comma splice is a kind of faulty sentences in which two independent clauses are connected by a comma. A comma splice occurs when a comma alone connects two whole sentences. When two whole thoughts appear in the same sentences, they need to be joined by specific connectors. (Savage and Manger (2007), Davis and Less(2007), Yohannes (2008)

3.1.5 Faculty Agreement

Faulty agreement is also one of the most common types of error in sentence construction committed by D.L (SMU) Davis and Less (2007) states its definition as “*It is an error in the grammatical relationship between a subject and a verb, a pronoun and its antecedent, or a demonstrative adjective and the word it modifies*”

3.1.6 Faulty Parallelism

According to Savage and Shafi (2007), parallelism is saying similar things in a similar way. Words in a pair or series should have a parallel structure. By balancing the items in a part or a series so that they have the same kind of structure, sentences can be made clearer and easier to the reader.

Example: Tola enjoys hunting socializing with friends and to read fiction.

It should be: Tola enjoys hunting socializing with friends and reading fiction.

(Taken from SMU Sophomore English M.1)

3.2 Errors in Grammar, Punctuation and Capitalization

Writing is completely impossible without the knowledge of correct grammar, punctuation and capitalization. An error which seems minor can affect the message to be transmitted and can misinform the reader. It may also be a source of disinterest on the side of the reader if such mistakes/ errors happened. Savage and Shafie (2007) cited that a writer needs to take care of such mistakes. Unless, such mistakes/ errors can generally affect the message. That is why it is highly recommended to proof read and edit a piece of writing after one accomplishes his/her writing.

3.3 Writing Effective Paragraphs

A paragraph is said to be effective if it has unity, if it is coherent and, complete.

3.3.1 Unity

Alice and Patricia (2006) states that: effective writing must have unity. A paragraph has unity when all the sentences support one single idea. The paragraph must have one controlling idea in the topic sentence. Otherwise, the paragraph loses focus. The supporting sentences must support, demonstrate, prove, or develop the main idea in the topic sentence. If they do not, they will be irrelevant or off-topic and destroy the unity of the paragraph. The concluding sentence should restate the idea in the topic sentence to reinforce the main idea for the reader.

3.3.2 Coherence

As cited in Alice and Patricia (2006), "Coherence in a paragraph means that the ideas have a logical flow: the relationship between the sentences is clear and one idea connects to the next. One way to achieve coherence in a paragraph is to use a pattern of organization, such as time order, spatial order or order of importance." Completeness is relative. How much explanation an idea requires depends on how much the reader needs. This is a decision the writer must make out of knowledge of the subject and the audience. It is wrong to give either too much explanation or not enough. Giving a reader unnecessary explanation may be boring, but giving too little may block communication.

3.3.3 Paragraph Structure

It is usual to see lacks the correct structure of paragraph construction (main idea, supporting sentences and conclusion) when marking exams of D.L. They may start from the details and fail to raise the main issue. They may also fail to support the main idea with the supporting details. Most paragraphs may be left without conclusion.

It is most common that paragraphs are made up of topic sentences, a series of supporting sentences and concluding sentence(s).

3.3.3.1 A Topic Sentences

A topic sentence states the main idea of a paragraph. It is usually placed at the beginning of a paragraph. If it is at the beginning of a sentence, readers can immediately know what the paragraph is all about.

3.3.3.2 Supporting Sentences

Supporting sentences explain or develop what is stated in the topic sentence. The purpose of supporting sentences is providing information that is related to the main idea.

3.3.3.3 A Concluding Sentence

A concluding sentence summarizes the supporting sentences and brings the paragraph to an end.

3.4 Kinds of Essay

Different scholars have classified essays in to different parts. The most common types of essays are cause and effect , argumentative , process analysis , descriptive , narrative , opinion essay , comparison-contrast , definition and example. It is necessary for students to identify the kinds of essays and methods of essay development so as to write according to the instruction in their tests. Without knowing the kinds of essays and methods of essay development, it will be impossible to write an effective essay.

IV. Results and Discussions

4.1 Findings from Observation of Students' Exam Papers

4.1.1 Common Errors in Sentence Construction

Table 1: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *Advanced Composition*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No /less errors	5	10 %
Medium /tolerable errors	7	14%
Much errors /Ineffective sentences to convey message	28	56%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Advanced Composition” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As it is shown in the table, among the total 50 sample exam papers, only 10% of the paper is free from the common errors in sentence construction. In the other 14% of the paper, medium/tolerable errors in sentence construction are observed. In 56% of the paper, the common errors in sentence construction are too much and the sentences are ineffective to convey messages because of such errors. 20% of the papers are left unanswered in this exam.

From the above data, it can be conclude that only 24 % of the students have at least attempted the question appropriately and the rest 76 % of the students have failed to meet the intention of assessor, which on the other hand, is an indicator of the poor English language performance of the students.

Table 2: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *African Literature in English*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No less errors	3	6%
Medium /tolerable errors	6	12%
Much errors /In effective sentences to convey message	21	42%
Empty papers	20	40%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “African Literature in English “ in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As can be observed in the table, 6% of the students have written sentences free from the common errors in sentence construction. 12% of them wrote sentences with some errors but tolerable and do not hindering the message to be conveyed. In 42% of the sample exam papers, much error in sentence construction and ineffective sentences to convey message are observed. The rest 10% of the paper are returned empty. One can see from this data that 18% of the students have at least tried to write the essay appropriately. The rest 82% of the students were unable to respond to the essay part.

Table 3: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *English Morphology and Syntax*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No less errors	6	12%

Medium /tolerable errors	5	10%
Much errors /In effective sentences to convey message	16	32%
Empty papers	23	46%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “English Morphology and Syntax in the term 2005 I, is observed.

The above table indicated 12% of the students have written sentences free from the errors and 10% of them have constructed sentences with fewer errors. In the other 32% of the papers, the sentences are ineffective to convey a message because of the much error in sentence construction. The rest 46% of the paper are returned unanswered.

From the above result, it can be concluded that the majority of the students (78%) have failed to answer correctly and this directly shows the inability of the students to write using English because of their less command (lack) of the language.

Table 4: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of Import and Export Policy and Procedure

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No less errors	7	14%
Medium /tolerable errors	8	16%
Much errors /In effective sentences to convey message	22	44%
Empty papers	13	26%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Import and Export Policy and Procedure in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As it can be seen in the above table, the essay of 14% of the sample exam paper is written with sentences free from the common errors. The other 16 % of the essay of the sample papers is written with sentences with same but tolerable errors in sentences construction. In the 44% of the paper, the essays are written with much error in sentence construction. The rest 26% of the paper is returned answered. This shows that only 30% of the students have at least tried the essay part appropriately. The rest students, (70%), are failed to respond to the essay part which indicates the inability of the students to command the language.

Table 5: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *Introduction to Management*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No less errors	4	8%
Medium /tolerable errors	19	38%
Much errors /In effective sentences to convey message	17	34%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Introduction to Management” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

It is indicated in the above table that 8% of the students have written the essay appropriately. The sentences they have written are free from the common errors in sentence construction. The other 38% of the students have written sentences with medium/tolerable errors. In the 34% of the paper, much error in sentence construction is observed and the sentences are ineffective to carry a message. The rest 20% of the paper are returned unanswered.

From this data, one can understand that except the 46% of the students who have appropriately written the essay or at least tried it, the rest 54% are failed to respond to the essay part appropriately. This can be one of the ways in which students’ inability to express what they know using the language. This can also be an indicator that the students are lacking the English language to express certain idea or to respond to certain instruction correctly.

4.1.2 Qualities of Effective Paragraphs

Table 6: Quality of Paragraphs Written for *Advanced Composition*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Coherent, complete and unified	5	10%
Lack coherence, completeness and unity	7	14%
Not coherent , complete and unified	28	56%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table the extent to which coherent, complete and unified paragraphs by the students who took exam of the course “Advanced Composition“ in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 6 shows that in 10% of the exam, the paragraphs were coherent, complete and unified. In the 14% the essay, one or two of the qualities of effective paragraph (coherence, completeness and unity) is violated. In 28% of the papers, there is no coherence, completeness or unity of paragraphs. The rest 10% of the paper are returned empty.

From the above data, it can be understood that the majority of the students lack the appropriate command of the language (76%). Only 24% of the students tried what they are intended to do.

Table 7: Quality of Paragraphs Written for *African Literature in English*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Coherent, complete and unified	3	6%
Lack coherence, completeness and unity	6	12%
Not coherent , complete and unified	21	42%
Empty papers	20	40%
Total	50	100%

In the above table the extent to which coherent, complete and unified paragraphs by the students who took exam of the course “African Literature in English " in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 7 indicates that in the sample exam papers observed 6% of the paragraphs of the essays are coherent, complete and unified. In the 12% of the papers, the essays lack one or two of the qualities of effective paragraphs afore mentioned. In 42 % of the papers, the essays are not coherent, complete and unified. The rest 40 % of the paper are returned empty.

In this data, the number of the students who have tried according to the instruction is only 18% and the rest 82% of the students failed to respond accordingly. This clearly indicates that students are lacking the minimum command of the language sufficient to their educational level.

Table 8: Quality of Paragraphs Written for *English Morphology and Syntax*

	N ^o of Students	Percentage
Coherent, complete and unified	6	12%
Lack coherence, completeness and unity	5	10%
Not coherent , complete and unified	16	32%
Empty papers	23	46%
Total	50	100%

In the above table the extent to which coherent, complete and unified paragraphs by the students who took exam of the course "English Morphology and Syntax" in the term 2005 I, is observed. Table 8 shows that 12% of the students have written coherent, complete and unified paragraphs in their essays. 10% of the students have written paragraphs lacking one or two of the qualities of effective paragraphs aforementioned. The other 32% of them have written paragraphs which are not coherent, complete and unified. The rest 46% of the students didn't write anything in this part. In this course, only 22% of the students have done or at least tried what they are required to do and the rest 78% of the students have failed in this part.

Table 9: Quality of Paragraphs Written for *Import and Export Policy and Procedure*

	N ^o of Students	Percentage
Coherent, complete and unified	5	10%
Lack coherence, completeness and unity	10	20%
Not coherent , complete and unified	22	44%
Empty papers	13	26%
Total	50	100%

In the above table the extent to which coherent, complete and unified paragraphs by the students who took exam of the course "Import and Export Policy and Procedure" in the term 2005 I, is observed.

In this table it can be seen that 10% of the students were able to write effective essay which are coherent, complete and unified.20% of the students have written essays which lack one or two of the qualities of effective paragraphs aforementioned and the other 44% of the students have failed to write effective essays. The rest 26% of the students have returned empty papers.

In this table, from the total number of sample papers, it is only in 30% of them that the question is answered or at least attempted appropriately. In the rest 70% of the papers, it is shown that the students have failed to respond appropriately.

Table 10: Quality of Paragraphs Written for *Introduction to Management*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Coherent, complete and unified	4	8%
Lack coherence, completeness and unity	19	38%
Not coherent , complete and unified	17	34%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table the extent to which coherent, complete and unified paragraphs by the students who took exam of the course “Introduction to Management” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As it is shown in table 10, among the papers observed, only 8% of them are responded correctly. In 38% of the papers, the paragraphs lack at least one of the qualities of effective paragraphs. 34% of them are not completely coherent, complete and unified. The rest 20% of the papers are returned empty.

From this data one can see that the number of the students who able to write a coherent, complete and unified paragraph and the number of the students who have at least tried to meet one or two of the qualities of effective paragraphs is only 46%. The rest 54% of the student (above the average) have failed to respond appropriately according to the instruction.

4.1.3 Errors in Grammar, Punctuation, Capitalization

Table 11: Errors Observed Exam Papers of *Advanced Composition*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No/ less errors	5	10%
Medium /tolerable errors	9	18%
Much errors /Ineffective sentences to convey message	26	52%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Advanced Composition” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As it can be seen in the above table, among the exam papers observed, 10% of them are written in correct grammar, appropriately (fairly punctuated and rule of capitalization of fairly followed.) In 18% of the paper some errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization is observed but not affecting the message. In 52% of the paper much of such errors are committed and because of these errors the sentences (the paragraphs) become ineffective to convey a message. The rest 20% of the paper is returned unanswered.

From the above result, it can be concluded that only 28% of the papers are proved to be the papers correctly answered or at least attempted. 72% of the students are failed to respond appropriately, which can be the implication for the inability of the students to use the language appropriately.

Table 12: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *African Literature in English*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No/ less errors	4	8%
Medium /tolerable errors	5	10%
Much errors /Ineffective sentences to convey message	21	42%
Empty papers	20	40%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “African Literature in English” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As it can be seen in the above table, 8 % of the papers are well punctuated and capitalized. The students have taken care of the appropriate grammar in their essays. 10% of the papers are well punctuated and rules of capitalization are used but slight mistakes were observed. Much error in grammar, punctuation and capitalization is observed in 42% the papers. The rest 40% of the paper is returned unanswered.

From the above data, it can be understood that the majority of the students (82%), have failed to be abide by the rules of grammar, punctuation and capitalized which is an indicator of poor performance of English language.

Table 13: Errors from Exam Papers of *English Morphology and Syntax*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No /less errors	5	10%
Medium /tolerable errors	6	12%
Much errors /Ineffective sentences to convey message	16	32%
Empty papers	23	46%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “English Morphology and Syntax” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 13 shows that 10% of the students have written sentences free from grammar, punctuation and capitalization errors. 12% of them have written sentences with only slight and tolerable errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization. 32% of the students have written sentences which are full of grammar, punctuation and capitalization errors as a result of which their essay become ineffective to convey the intended message. The rest 46% of the students’ papers are returned without being attempted.

From the above data it can be concluded that the majority of the students who took this course (78%) have failed to respond appropriately to the question which in another way indicates students’ weakness of use of the language.

Table 14: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *Import and Export Policy and Procedure*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
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No/ less errors	9	18%
Medium /tolerable errors	9	18%
Much errors /Ineffective sentences to convey message	19	38%
Empty papers	13	26%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Import and Export Policy and Procedure” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

As it is shown in the table 14, 18 % of the students have used the appropriate grammar and applied rules of punctuation and capitalization correctly. The other 18% of the students have written the essays with some tolerable errors in grammar, capitalization and punctuation. In 38% of the papers, much grammatical errors are observed and rules of punctuation and capitalization is violated. The rest 26 % of the paper were returned without being attempted.

From these data, one can conclude that in this course too, the majority of the students (64%) have failed to write effective essay. This shows that their command of English is too poor to their educational level.

Table 15: Errors Observed in Exam Papers of *Introduction to Management*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
No less errors	5	10%
Medium /tolerable errors	11	22%
Much errors /In effective sentences to convey message	14	28%
Empty papers	20	40%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the errors in grammar, punctuation and capitalization in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Introduction to Management” in the term 2001, is observed.

Table 15 shows that 10% of the students have written effective essays using appropriate grammar and have applied punctuation and capitalization rules correctly in their essays. The other 22% of students have attempted to write effective essays with correct grammar, capitalization and punctuation with some tolerable errors. In 28% of the papers much error in grammar, capitalization and punctuation has been observed and the essays become ineffective. The remaining 40% of the students have returned their paper without writing anything in the essay part.

From these data it can be seen that the majority of the students who took the exam (68%) have failed to do well in the essay part. This indicates that it is because of their poor command of English language.

4.1.4 Paragraph Structure

Table 16: Structure of Paragraphs Written for *Advanced Compassion*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correct structure (Main idea, supporting details and conclusions)	3	6%
Lack appropriate structure	37	74%
Indented	10	20%
Un-indented	30	60%
Empty papers	10	20%

In the above table, the errors committed in the structure of paragraph in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Advanced Composition” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 16 shows, only 6% of the students were able to write paragraphs correctly structured (i.e main idea, supporting details and conclusion). The rest 74% of the students have failed to structure their paragraphs correctly. Concerning indentation, the number of students, who have the concept of indentation and able to use in their essay were 20%. 60% of the students have no idea of indentation and failed to indent their paragraphs. The rest 20% of the students have returned empty paper in this exam.

From the above data, it can be understood that only 6% of the students know how to start writing a paragraph, how to support it with the supporting details and finally how to conclude their ideas in their paragraph. The rest 94% of the students have no idea about such issues and failed to do so.

Concerning indentation, it is only 20% of the students who have indented their paragraphs and the rest 80% of the students have failed to do so.

Table 17: Structure of Paragraphs Written for *African Literature in English*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correct structure (Main idea, supporting details and conclusions)	2	4%
Lack appropriate structure	38	76%
Indented	7	14%
Un-indented	33	60%
Empty papers	10	20%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “African Literature in English“ in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 17 show that 4% of the students have written their paragraphs with the correct structure (Main idea, supporting details, and conclusion but 76% of them have written paragraph lacking the above quality.

Among the papers observed,14 of the paragraphs are indented and 66% of the paragraphs are un-indented. The rest 20% of the paper are returned empty.

From this data, it can be understood that the students’ concept concerning writing skill is very low. This, on the other hand implies the students poor English language performance.

Table 18: Structure of Paragraphs Written for *English Morphology and Syntax*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correct structure (Main idea, supporting details and conclusions)	11	22%
Lack appropriate structure	16	32%
Indented	5	10%
Un-indented	22	44%
Empty papers	23	46%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “English Morphology and Syntax“ in the term 2005 I, is observed.

In the exam of the course English morphology and syntax, 22% of the students have followed the appropriate structure required by the instruction of the exam. On the other hand 32% of the students have failed to follow the correct structure. The rest 46% of the students were unable to react to this part and returned empty papers.

From this data it can be concluded that the majority of the students who took this exam (78%) have failed to react to this part appropriately and this implied the students poor command English language in addition to their poor knowledge of the subject matter.

Table 19: Structure of Paragraphs Written for *Import and Export Policy and Procedure*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correct structure (Main idea, supporting details and conclusions)	2	4%
Lack appropriate structure	35	70%
Indented	1	2%
Un-indented	36	72%
Empty papers	13	26%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Import and export policy and procedure” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

In this course only 4% of the students have followed the correct structure of paragraph writing (main idea, supporting details and conclusion) the rest 70% of the papers have lacked the appropriate structure.

Concerning indentation, 2% of the students have indented their paragraphs and 72% of them have failed to indent their paragraphs.

The rest 26% of the paper were returned without being attempted by the students.

From the above data it can be concluded that students have no concept of paragraph structure in essay writing.

Table 20: Structure of Paragraphs Written for *Introduction to Management*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correct structure (Main idea, supporting details and conclusions)	3	6%
Lack appropriate structure	37	74%
Indented	1	2%
Un-indented	39	78%
Empty papers	10	20%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Introduction to Management” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 20 shows that 6% of the students have succeeded in writing paragraphs with correct structure. In 74% of the papers, the paragraphs lacked the appropriate structure

In this course, it is only in 2% of the papers that the paragraphs are indented. In 78% of the papers, the paragraphs are unindented. Among the papers observed as a sample, 20% was returned empty.

The above figure indicates that students have very less knowledge of writing an essay which might be the result of poor performance of the instructional language.

4.1.5 Conceptual Problems

Table 21: Conceptual Problems in Exam Papers of Advanced *Composition*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correctly responded (well attempted)	5	10%
Attempted, but not satisfactorily	7	14%
Wrongly responded	13	26%
Unintended (inappropriate response to the question because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction)	15	30%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the errors as a result of concept problems in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Advanced Composition” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 21 shows the extent to which students have tried to arrive at the correct answer following the instruction. Accordingly 10% of the students have correctly responded to (Attempted well the essay part of this course.) 14% of the students have tried to react to this part but not satisfactorily. 26% of the students have provided wrong responses to this part. The other 30% of the students have given unintended/ inappropriate response to the question. They raise issues which are not required by the instruction because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction. The rest 20% of the papers are returned un-attempted.

From this figure, one can see that the students have problems of understanding and using English language.

Table 22: Conceptual Problems in Exam Papers of *African Literature in English*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correctly responded (well attempted)	3	6%
Attempted, but not satisfactorily	6	12%
Wrongly responded	11	22%
Unintended (inappropriate response to the question because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction)	10	20%
Empty papers	20	40%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “English Morphology and Syntax” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

In this course 6% of the papers are correctly responded, 12% attempted but not satisfactorily and 22% were with wrong responses. The rest 20% of the students have provided unintended/inappropriate responses to the questions because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction and 40% of the papers were returned unanswered.

From the above figure one can see that the essay part of this exam is correctly done ore at least attempted by only 18% of the students. The rest 82% of the students have failed to respond to this part and this definitely indicates students’ poor English language performance.

Table 23: Conceptual Problems in Exam Papers of *English Morphology and Syntax*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correctly responded (well attempted)	6	12%
Attempted, but not satisfactorily	5	10%
Wrongly responded	9	18%
Unintended (inappropriate response to the question because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction)	7	14%
Empty papers	23	46%

Total	50	100%
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In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “African Literature in English“ in the term 2005 I, is observed.

Table 23 indicates 12% of the students have correctly responded, to the essay part. 10% of the students have attempted the essay part but not satisfactorily. 18% of the students have provided wrong answers to the question. 14% of the students have provided unintended/inappropriate response to the question because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction. The rest 46% of the students were unable to respond to this part

The above data shows that the essay part of this course is correctly written or at least attempted by only 22% of the students. The rest 78% of the students are missed this part because of

- Lack of the subject matter knowledge
- Lack of the appropriate command of the language to write an essay
- Lack of knowledge of test taking technique

Table 24: Conceptual Problems in Exam Papers of *Import and Export Policy and Procedure*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correctly responded (well attempted)	7	14%
Attempted, but not satisfactorily	8	16%
Wrongly responded	15	30%
Unintended (inappropriate response to the question because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction	7	14%
Empty papers	13	26%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Import and export policy and procedure ” in the term 2005 I, is observed.

The above table indicates 14% of the students have written the essay correctly, 16% of them attempted the essay though it is not satisfactorily, 30% of them have wrongly respond (eg.

Though the instruction order the students to write an essay, they tried to answer in words, phrases, or bulletins). The other 14% of the students gave answers which are completely unrelated to the question, and the rest 26% of the students done nothing in the essay part.

In this exam the total number of the student who attempt the essay correctly or at least tried to do (though unsatisfactorily were 30% which is below the average. The rest 70% of the students were unsuccessful because of:

- Not knowing how to write an essay
- Not understanding the instruction
- Lacking the language to write an essay
- Lack of the subject matter

Table 25: Conceptual Problems in Exam Papers of *Introduction to Management*

	N^o of Students	Percentage
Correctly responded (well attempted)	1	2%
Attempted, but not satisfactorily	11	22%
Wrongly responded	19	38%
Unintended (inappropriate response to the question because of lack of understanding either the question or the instruction	9	18%
Empty papers	10	20%
Total	50	100%

In the above table, the common errors in sentence construction committed in the essay part by the students who took exam of the course “Introduction to Management” in the term 2001, is observed.

In this course, 20% of the students have succeeded in writing good essays. 22% of them have tried to write but unsatisfactorily. The other 38% of the students have responded to the essay wrongly and 18% of the students have provided unintended/inappropriate responses to the question because of lack understanding either the question or the instruction. The rest 20% of the paper is returned empty.

From this table it can be seen that only 24% of the students have done or at least attempt the essay part. The rest 76% which is above the average, were failed to do the essay part.

4.2 Findings from Analysis of Data in Student Questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire is to identify the problems students face in doing subjective parts (essays) in their exams and use their responses as an input to the struggle made to improve quality of education. 200 students have responded to the questionnaire of which 79 of them are Female and 121 are male (The questionnaires are collection from 20 different centers randomly). 65% of the respondents are from the languages department and 35% are from business department. (Essay is required more in language department then business department. The respondents are students of term3 and above.

Table 26: Guidance on Studying Modules Given to Distance Learners

		N ^o of Students	Percentage
Have you given orientation on how to use your modules on the very day of your registration or on the registration of each term?	Yes	7	3.5%
	No	193	96.5%

As indicated in the above table 26, 3.5% of the respondents said that they were given orientation on how to use their modules on the very day of their registration or on the registration of each term. The rest 96.5% of the respondents said that they have given no orientation. This shows that the university is not orienting its students except registering them, giving them the self learning materials and sending them away. This can be one of the reasons for students' low performance in their academic world.

Table 27: Guidance on Doing Assignments or Examinations Given to Distance Learners

		N ^o of Students	Percentage
Have you ever given orientation by the university on how to do assignments or exams?	Yes	0	0
	No	200	100%

In Table 27, students show that all the respondents unanimously said that the university has no strategy of orienting its students on how to do assignments and exams. This obviously is one of the sources for students' low performance in their examinations.

Table 28: Distance Learners' English Language Performance

		N^o of Students	Percentage
Do you believe that distance learners English language performance is poor?	Yes	173	91.5%
	No	17	8.5%

Table 28 shows that 91.5% of the respondents agreed to the issue that English language performance of distance learners are poor and the rest 8.5% disagreed to this issue. The data indicates that the majority of the respondents believe that they perform less in English. So, they need support in one way or another so as to improve their performance since the language is the medium of instruction.

Table 29: Reasons for Distance Learners' Poor English Language Performance

Reasons for poor English language of distance learners	N^o of Students	Percentage
A. Being detached from academic world for long time	47	23.5%
B. Being detached from Reading /lack of reading habit	13	6.5%
C. Lack of English language in put in the community	31	15.5%
D. All	100	50%
E. Other reasons: Lack of time ; Governmental influence	9	4.5%

As it is shown in table 29 for the question the respondents (Students) asked about the reason for their poor English language performance, 23.5% said that it is because of their detachment from academic world for longer times, 6.5% said that it is because of their detachment from reading (because of lack of reading habit)15.5% said that it is because of lack of English language in put in the community they are living in , 50% of the respondents agreed that all the above reason are the sources for their poor English language performance, and 4.5% of the respondents said that the source of their poor English language performance is the lack of time to study extensively and the influence by the government not to learn distance education. They explained that they have to hide themselves even from their neighbors when they study. They said that they visit their self learning materials if conditions allow them. i.e. if there is no one to hound them.

Table 30: How Well Assignments are Marked and Appropriate Feedback is Given

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	23	11.5%
Medium	62	31%
Low	115	57.5%

The reason of the researcher to present this question is from the assumption that assignments are used to force distance learners read through their self-learning materials and through that process students will learn more and prepare themselves for their exam. If assignments are marked carefully and feedback is appropriately given. Students will be learn from their mistakes and make themselves ready for the next exam accordingly.

In table 30, it is indicated that 11.5% of the students said the level of marking the assignments carefully and giving appropriate feedback is high in the university 31% of the respondents said that the activity of marking assignments carefully and giving appropriate feedback is medium and the rest 57.5% of the students said that such activities are very low in the university.

From this data, it can be concluded that the activities of marking students assignments and giving the necessary feedback is low, so, that students can't know their strengths or weaknesses and can't make themselves ready for their exam. This can also be one of the reasons for students' low performance, especially in essay parts.

Table 31: The Degree of Clarity of Self-Study Materials and Assessment Tools

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	28	14%
Medium	53	26.5%
Low	119	59.5%

In table 31, 14% of the respondents said they have no problem and need no help. 26.5% of the respondents said that there are situations where they need no help and there are other situations where they need help.

The rest 59.5% said that they are facing problems with their self study materials and assessment tools hence need help.

Table 32: The Degree to which Students Get Support

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	-	0
Medium	11	5.5%
Low	189	94.5%

As indicated in table 32, no respondent agreed to the ideas that students can get support from the university whenever they face challenges in their study. 5.5% of the respondents said that such opportunity exists in medium level. The rest 94.5% said that the opportunity of getting support from the university when they face challenges is low.

From the above data it can be concluded that the university hasn't prepare special offices that are assigned to help students in their academic problem. This may include: guidance and counseling ; explaining/orienting/ study techniques ; xplaining/orienting/ how to do assignments and exams etc.

Table 33: The Degree to which Tutorials are Given for All Courses

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	23	11.5%
Medium	36	18%
Low	141	70.5%

As it is shown in table 33, 11.5% of the respondents said that the level of getting tutorial for the course they are registered for is high. 18% of the respondents said that the level of getting tutorial for the course they are registered for is medium. The rest 70.5% of the respondents said that the opportunity of getting tutorials for the courses they are registered for is low.

One can understand from this point that not getting tutorials for a distance learners is one of the cause of the low performance of our students in their exams specially to our case and it affects the quality of education at language.

Table 34: The Degree to which Tutorials Benefit Students

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	112	56%
Medium	58	29%
Low	30	15%

Table 34 indicates that 56% of the students who get tutored said that they have benefited highly. 29% of the students who have tutored said that the benefit of the tutorial program is medium for them. The rest 15% of the students said that the contribution of the tutorial program for the course is low. Form the above data, it can be concluded that the majority of the respondents that they benefit from tutorials.

Table 35: The Adequacy of Explanations Given in Tutorials

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	19	9.5%
Medium	37	18.5%
Low	144	72%

In table 35, it is indicated that 9.5% of the respondents said that the extent of getting sufficient from tutorials is high and 18% of the respondents said it is medium. The rest 72% of the respondents said that sufficient explanations on the course (Module) are not being given.

This implies that students expect more tutorial time in order to get some wider explanation on their SLMS.

Table 36: The Degree to which Tutorials Prepare Students for Examinations

	N^o of Students	Percentage
High	9	4.5%
Medium	16	8%
Low	175	87.5%

In table 36, it is indicated that 4.5% of the respondents said that the degree of getting explanations on the kind and nature of exams and how to it during tutorial programs is high. The other 8% said it exists in a medium level. The rest 87% said that they are not getting explanations on the kind and nature of exams and how to do it during the tutorial program.

Tutorial Program is believed to be the only situation in which students (DL) get their instructors face to face. It is the only opportunity for the students to ask any of their ambiguities they have concerning their educational career. If this is failed to hopper, it will hurt students' performance, especially in the subjective part of the examination.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

On the basis of the results obtained from the analysis of students' exam papers and questionnaires, the following conclusions are drawn.

- The majority of the students have committed the most common errors in sentence construction and only very few of them successful in writing error free sentences.
- Almost all of the students have at least problem of writing effective paragraph taking care of its unity, completeness and coherence. Only negligible number of students has succeeded in writing effective paragraphs.
- The finding shows that the majority of the students have problem of keeping an appropriate structure of paragraphs when they write.
- It is also shown in the finding that students have problems in applying the correct grammar punctuation and capitalization in their essays.
- Result of the paper analysis showed that the number of students who fail to understand the instruction and write something unrelated to the instruction and the number of students who return empty papers without attempting it is embarrassing.
- The results from the question also indicates that they are not given orientation on how to use their materials; they are not oriented on how to deal with exams and assignments; they get no support/help in problems they might face in their educational career and they are receiving less feedback from their previous performance.

5.2 Recommendation

Depending on the findings discussed, the following recommendations are made.

- Orientation should be given to students at the registration of each term. The orientation should include:
 - How to read the materials (study techniques)
 - What to be focused on in the SLM.
 - How assignments and exams are done
 - The nature of questions in exams and assignments and how to react to each of them.
 - Providing special office that works on solving the problems students face in their educational career. The major functions of the office could be: advising/directing students ; responding to academic questions of students; guiding and counseling students.
- Giving appropriate feedback to students and assuring that they have received it.
- Giving focus to tutorials being given and giving value (mark) to it in the assessment procedure so that students at least attend the tutorial and benefit from that.
- Orienting tutors on how to show students the exam taking techniques. (eg. how essay is written)

- Providing special entrance exam that tests the minimum requirement of English Language performance of higher education.

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