



Error Analysis of a Sample of Kuala Kangsar University Students' English Placement Writing Test

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ABSTRACT

Error analysis is a linguistic analysis that focuses on identifying and describing the learner's error in target language learning. This study focuses on grammatical mistakes frequently made by students who took their English placement test after enrolment at Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah. Samples from the writing test were collected. The errors were identified, recorded, categorized and analyzed. The findings of this study shed light on the most frequently occurring types of mistakes made by a sample of Malaysian ESL learners of higher learning institutions. From this, the researcher can determine the learners' problem areas. It is found that the most frequently occurring grammatical errors are errors in the inflexion of verbs according to tense and number. Students also made mistakes using the past participle for the perfect tenses and passive sentences. Many of these errors were mainly technical, which did not affect the intended meanings. These errors reveal Malaysian students' difficulties in mastering the English verb forms due to the significant differences between the Malay and English verb systems. To a certain extent, participants are influenced by their native language structure and transfer them when using the L2. Lack of familiarity with exposure and usage of the target language can be attributed to the errors. Frequently occurring mistakes need to be treated with the necessary intervention by instructors, and suitable learning strategies need to be practised by students to prevent fossilization.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

According to Candling (2001), error analysis is the monitoring and analysis of language performed by students. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 184) define errors analysis as "The study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners". From these explanations, it can be concluded that error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the process of identifying and describing the learner's error in target language learning.

1.1.1 Broad categories of errors

The following are Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) classification of errors: - omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (cited in Setiyorini, Dewi & Masykuri, 2020). Errors of omission are made when compulsory elements are omitted in a word or sentence; for example, the omission of the "be" verb in the sentence, "Most of us (-) very committed." (Wee, Sim & Kamaruzaman, 2010). Errors of addition are made when unnecessary elements are present in a sentence; for example, in sentences like 'they are prefer staying at home' and 'this is happening,' the verbs be are placed before the main verbs, which is redundant (Wee, Sim & Kamaruzaman, 2010). Errors of misformation occur when the wrong forms of the verbs are

used instead of the correct ones; for example, using the present tense when describing a past event and not using the past participle in the present perfect tense in a sentence like “the students have written.” (Wee, Sim & Kamaruzaman, 2010). Errors of ordering are made when the correct elements are wrongly sequenced. This is seen in a sentence like ‘She quarrels often with her brother.’

1.1.2 Specific categories of errors

The following are the more specific types of errors in written works:

- 1) Structural (Using L1 Sentence structure and simply inserting English words into the L1 structure rather than following L2 structure.)
- 2) Vocabulary (wrong word choice and using words with wrong parts of speech).
- 3) Punctuation
- 4) Grammar (wrong forms of the verbs that need to be used according to tense and number).

1.1.3 Sources of errors

Richard (1971) divides the sources of errors into three. These include interference, intralingual and developmental errors. Interference error happens when students transfer their mother tongue structure when using the target language. The intralingual error results from the incorrect generalization of the rules within the target language. The developmental error occurs when a learner makes the wrong assumption about the target language according to their limited language ability. LatSchachtereter and Celce-Murcia (1997) state that intralingual and developmental errors are related. They both refer to the errors produced when the learner has not fully reached the advanced level of a target language (cited in Wee, Sim & Kamaruzaman, 2010).

This study focuses on the types of errors frequently made by students who took their English placement test after enrolment at Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah. Samples from the writing test are collected. The errors are identified, recorded, categorized, and analyzed. The findings of this study would shed light on the most frequently occurring types of errors made by a sample of Malaysian ESL learners of higher learning institutions. From this, the researcher can determine the learners’ problem areas. Instructors can plan for interventions to overcome these errors to improve their students’ writing when they know their areas of weaknesses.

According to Talif and Edwin (2015), error analysis provides teachers with essential information on the types of errors made by their pupils when they write, and teachers can use this information to select suitable teaching techniques to improve students’ writing (as cited in Yasmin, Melor & Harwati, 2019).

The findings of this study could support Malaysian English instructors, curricula designers, and textbook writers to create and offer materials that could help learners enhance their command of the English language.

1.2 Objectives

1. To identify the most frequent types of grammatical errors in the English Placement Writing Test of Universiti Sutan Azlan Shah students.
2. To analyze the grammatical errors in the English Placement Writing Test of Universiti Sutan Azlan Shah students.

1.3 Research Question

What are the most frequent types of grammatical errors in the English Placement Writing Test of Universiti Sutan Azlan Shah students?

2. Literature Review

Errors can be analysed depending on which linguistic area a researcher is interested in. The linguistic areas of error analysis are at the lexical, syntactic and grammatical level.

2.1 Errors at the Lexical Level

Wan Khairunnisa and Zarina (2021) found that a large percentage of students’ errors are vocabulary related. These are 10% spelling, 23% vocabulary translation from L1 and 21% are errors in choice of words. According to them, the students were replacing Bahasa Melayu words with the English vocabulary they have known and did not pay much attention to restructuring the sentences into correct English language structures. This has caused two types of errors to appear simultaneously which are direct translation from L1 and incorrect sentence structure. An example of this can be seen in a sentence like ‘*I very happy because my sister can to come to the house.*’

2.2 Errors at the Syntactic Level

Fragment: A sentence fragment is a structurally incomplete sentence that lacks a subject or a verb. Some of them have been disconnected from the main clause which make them unable to function independently. Yaqin (2020), in the study of sentence fragments in students' writing, found that 44.04% of the fragments was the absence of verb. It means that the absence of a verb was the most dominant error made by students. The second most frequently occurring error that appeared in students' writing was the absence of a subject with 29.76%. The absence of a verb indicates the students are still confused to determine the subject in writing descriptive text. The third most frequent error was the absence of subject and a verb with 23.80%. The absence of a subject and a verb in the students' writing showed that students were not able to make sentences with clear meaning or no ambiguity. The fourth error was the absence of a subject in dependent clause 2.40% (Nurwahida, 2022).

Comma splice: A comma splice is a common grammatical error in English. A comma splice is when two independent clauses are incorrectly joined by a comma to make one sentence as seen in the sentence 'The word globalization includes a lot of meaning, it can be defined as the process by which ideas, knowledge, information, goods and services spread around the world' (Meriam Webster, 2023).

Errors at the morphological level: Morphological errors in the English language are affixation-related; that is, the misuse of either prefixes or suffixes. One type of morphological error is the error in grammatical inflections such as not using the -s inflection for plural nouns, the -ed for past tense and the past participle (-ed or -en form) for past participle. Dian (2019) has classified morphological errors according to four-word classes, which are noun morphological errors, verb morphological errors, adjective morphological errors, and adverb morphological errors.

Grammatical errors: Che Hassan et al (2019) found that the highest percentage of errors was in verbs, at 33%, the second highest was in nouns, at 19% and the third was in adjectives at 12%. A study by Singh et al (2017) which analyzed grammatical errors made by ESL tertiary students in writing found that among the total of 744 grammatical errors, the highest frequency of the errors, 258 (34.7%) was on Subject Verb Agreement. The second highest frequency, 226 (30.4%) was on the Verb Tense. As with Che Hassan et al's study, most of the grammatical errors were verbs related. Certain types of errors persist in high-proficiency learners. Mahdun et al (2022) analyzed the use of passive sentences among higher proficiency students and the results indicated the main errors committed were related to the be-auxiliary and the past participle verb form, which are non-existent in their L1.

All the types of errors mentioned above need to be addressed by instructors when treating students' errors in writing. This study focuses on grammatical errors in students' writing after years of schooling. A thorough and deep qualitative analysis of errors in verbs and affixes needs to be done to find out what influenced them and how to overcome them.

3. Method

Since this research aims to identify the most frequent types of errors, a sample of students' written work is studied. Students' written work provides an authentic source for analysis. Keshavarz's model of error analysis was used. It is a quantitative study that involves collecting samples of language produced in written work, identifying the errors in the sample, describing these errors and classifying them according to their nature and causes (Keshavarz, 1999). Qualitative method is also used where the researcher analyzed and explains the students' errors in-depth. Mixed-mode research is chosen for this study to ensure that the data collected would be accurate (Fitria, 2018).

3.1 Subjects

The population of the study includes all the new students who are enrolled for their intake. The participants are from various parts of Malaysia and have various social and language backgrounds.

The proficiency of the learners is not known because all new students regardless of their SPM results for English will have to undergo the test. 55 of them were fresh out of school and 133 of them were pursuing their degree programme.

Purposive sampling was done to get the most relevant participants for this study, which is to identify the common language problems of students who are newly enrolled to find suitable treatments during their English language training. Purposeful sampling would help to gather enough information related to research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015).

There are approximately 190 newly enrolled students who sat for the English placement test. The new students come from various states across Malaysia. The results of the placement test determine which English proficiency level class they will be placed. Results found that the vast majority of the students were of elementary and intermediate level. Only a handful were found proficient and placed in a higher-level English

proficiency class. One of the components of the placement test was a writing test. The students' written answers were collected, and the errors were identified and put into categories.

3.2 Procedure

The data consists of approximately 190 answer scripts taken from the English placement writing test. In the writing test, students were to write a response in writing. This provides the source of information needed regarding the students' errors. The evaluation of the written answers was based mainly on the language command such as the use of vocabulary, the ability to construct well-structured sentences and grammatical accuracy. Data were analyzed by identifying separating and categorizing the error type.

4. Findings

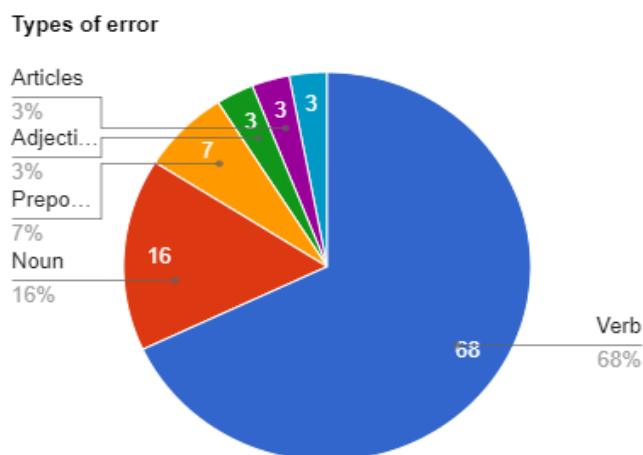


Figure 1. Types of Error

From the identification of the grammatical errors in the students' writing, it was found that the most common type of error is an error in the use of verbs. The type of verb errors was mostly, errors in subject-verb agreement, tenses, and the use of past participles in perfect tenses. The students did not follow the rules for using the verbs correctly. English learners in Malaysia face great difficulties in mastering the English verb forms because of the great differences between the verb system of English and their first language (Bahasa Melayu). This is probably because English grammar has a lot of complex rules compared to L1 in the use of verbs.

English has the following:

- 1) Two tenses (present and past)
- 2) Four aspects- simple, progressive, perfect, perfect progressive.
- 3) Two voices- active and passive

In addition to that, there are different forms of the main verbs- the root verb, the verb ending in -s, present participle, past tense and past participle. The past tense and past participle have regular and irregular forms. Some verbs in English are made of two words- the auxiliary and the main verb.

A lot of the rules in the English language such as subject-verb-agreement and tenses do not exist in the students' L1 (Bahasa Melayu). However, the gross errors of these types do not hinder communicative ability. This is probably why learners do not pay attention to their rules which are seen as redundant as long as their intended meaning is communicated. During the process of writing, interference from the mother tongue and the medium of instruction in schools they have attended, that is, Bahasa Melayu, would affect how they used the SVA forms correctly.

Moreover, it was not easy for the subjects to master the use of the verb 'be'. The 'be' verb was often omitted and if it was used, it was not used correctly. The verb 'be' is difficult to use because it exists in eight different forms (am, is, are, was, were, be, been and being). They do not resemble the stem form and must agree in person, number and tense with the subject. Thus, many students are confused with its use as there are various conditions to be met to enable the appropriate forms to be used. Dalrymple (as cited in Kusutani n.d.)

also discovered that the same problem of missing copula “be” occurs amongst Japanese students who were not familiar with it. The verb “have”, has three forms: “have, has and had”. “Have” is often inflected in the third person singular present tense and becomes “has” but this inflected form is often rejected for “have” which is the stem form. Ho (1973) reported that lack of subject-verb agreement often involves forms of “be” and “have” functioning either as full or auxiliary verbs. Errors in “be” and “have” verbs are errors that still persist even among the more proficient students. Errors in the use of past participle in the perfect tenses and passive sentences can be seen as developmental error. Students used the base form instead of the past participle form probably because they have yet to fully master the past participle. The second most common type of error was error in the noun form- most of which are errors in singular and plural forms.

The English be-verb may be confusing to L2 learners due to its inflectional variations and irregularities (Wee et al., 2010). The English be-verb has a total of eight inflections and each inflection has to be aligned with tense, number, and person. Besides that, learners might also be overwhelmed by the multiple functions of the ‘be’ verb, which can function as an auxiliary to mark progressive aspects and passive constructions.

In addition to grammatical errors, other errors like errors in punctuation and vocabulary have also been found. In vocabulary, morphological errors have been found where students did not use the correct affixes according to the part of speech. An English root word needs to be attached with a particular affix depending on whether the word needs to be used as a noun, verb, adjective or adverb. If the wrong affix is used, the word does not fit the sentence structure.

The following are samples of students’ errors:

Table 1. Types of Errors Made by Students

No.	Type of Errors	Clauses
1	The missing verb to be/auxiliary	1) I glad to hear about your cooking skill. 2) Malacca one of the historical places in Malaysia. 3) I have written all the information that given from Miss Alia in my notebook. 4) I hope you doing great
2	Wrong Verb Be/auxiliary	1) Langkawi were the beautiful and interesting island. 2) I was so proud about your improvement in culinary.
3	Verb form (intralingual)	1) Don't worry it, I already write some important things infrom the details about this English class project to you. 2) She might knew that you aren't able join in the class. 3) I had discuss the topic with the other team 4) we must published it ourselves 5) miss Alia has did a briefing in class just now. 6) I have take notes the important point. 7) we need to comes up magazine on various topics 8) Miss Alia also know you had a fever. 9) Yes, Miss Alia has brief on the English class project today 10) I would definitely love to tried some of home-cooked meal. 11) I already noted it all down for the things that we need to done soon. 12) First thing first, we need to planning. 13) If you go there i want to sharing the car with you. 14) I must to asking my mother first 15) I can joining you to the rock climbing. 16) I am happy to heard that you join a rock climbing trip . 17) i must asking permission from my mom and my father first
4	Tense (interlingual)	1) I really enjoy my holiday in Langkawi and I have so much fun there.

		2) I apologized for not being able to be your partner for this competition. 3) Miss Alia give the briefing on the english class project today. 4) Miss Alia inform that we must create a 10 page of magazine 5) She also brief us how to do the project correctly 6) Miss Alia teach us some topic today
5	Subject Verb Agreement (interlanguage)	1) There was many interesting activities that I joined in Langkawi such as snorkelling,jetski tour and hiking. 2) The hotel have so many facilities it's The Kuala Lumpur Journal Hotel. 3) There is some requirements how to do a magazine. 4) Saiful's group want to do a topic on sports. 5) Miss Alia want to see our writing based on the interview. 6) we really enjoys doing the project. 7) if anything happen I will inform you later. 8) Miss Alia give us freedom on choosing our topic 9) I will explain to you everything once your health recover. 10) she don't want to listen any reason 11) Miss Alia understand what you're dealing with now. 12) Batu Caves have a beautiful scenery.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis, it is found that many of the errors which occur frequently are caused by L1 interference. The teaching and learning of English grammar need special attention. Teachers and learners need to draw attention to differences in the grammar of L1 and L2. Learners need to be aware of the differences in the grammar system of their L1 and the target language rather than translating their L1 grammar system. This is possible if there is more practice and interaction in the target language.

English grammar takes time to master. Therefore, it needs to be emphasized in early education. Errors need to be treated the moment they arise. Productive tasks need to be given to apply the grammar rules in speech and writing. Besides modifying teaching strategies, students need to be guided on learning strategies and be alert to their progress. Studying the grammatical rules of the English language easily serves as the best course of action for improving one's grasp of proper English structure.

Students need more exposure, practice and interaction outside the classroom. There is a wealth of online and offline resources available to improve grammar. Learners need to focus on watching and listening to channels that use standard English such as the BBC. There are plenty of great authentic reading materials such as newspapers, novels and magazines out there that can pique interest. Technology is advancing to help with self-study. It is also helpful to incorporate online quizzes and free English lessons into their self-guided studies. These instructional tools provide real-time feedback and can give a clearer overview of where one's grammar skills currently lie. It would be good to introduce an application that not only points out grammatical errors but also give feedback with the explanation. Therefore, more time should be allocated for self-study and independent learning.

6. Limitation of Study

This study addresses only grammatical errors in writing. For a more holistic analysis, other areas of errors also need to be analyzed. Further studies need to be developed to find out the cause of these errors and the possibility of fossilization because the participants are school leavers who have learned English throughout their school years, yet they still do not apply basic grammar rules.

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