

ERROR ANALYSIS: INVESTIGATING THE PARAGRAPH WRITING OF MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS

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Manuscript received 30 September 2022

Manuscript accepted 20 June 2023

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<https://doi.org/10.33736/ils.5031.2023>

ABSTRACT

The study investigates an impromptu writing task administered to diploma students studying in one of the technical universities on the East Coast of Malaysia. In particular, it identifies grammatical errors in one-paragraph writing in terms of overall errors, most errors and least errors. The samples were 49 students undergoing the Preliminary Semester taking English as one of the subjects in the particular semester. The study found that students made errors to a certain degree in using articles, tenses, and subject-verb agreement (SVA), among others. More specifically, the highest number of errors students made were in tenses, SVA, and word choices, while the least errors were in possessive and attributive structures, gerunds, and infinitives. The results indicate that assigning students impromptu writing contributed to their performance errors. Despite their low vocabulary knowledge, it also made them less expressive when writing under such conditions.

Keywords: errors analysis; impromptu writing; paragraph writing; grammar errors

Introduction

Writers to express their thoughts, opinions, and emotions in texts they produce. Nevertheless, many students do not prefer writing activities due to the demanding and complicated tasks they must endure (Vejayan & Yunus, 2022). Yet, they cannot avoid the daunting tasks since writing serves as a means for developing language, fostering critical thinking and extension, and facilitating learning across all fields (Burk, 2022). According to Geiser and Studley (2002), producing an extended text is one of the best indicators of success in coping with university life. However, despite its importance in second language (L2) learning, it remains a challenging topic that many teachers feel uncomfortable teaching, and students are uninterested in learning it.

Like other productive skills, that is, speaking that requires L2 learners to demonstrate good intonation and tone (Ali et al., 2022), writing ability necessitates vocabulary and precise syntax when putting a narrative or experience into a paragraph. This means that students must put more effort into writing than other skills since the activity requires them to think harder than other language activities. Failing to think about the assigned topic in depth will result in errors when writing. Hendrickson (1980) states that errors during language learning are signs of learning processes that are taking place but have yet to be mastered. The prominent writing theorist, Richards (1971), proposes that errors occur due to learners' strategies for learning a second language. He attributes errors to overgeneralization owing to first language interference and simplification through omission and addition (Richards, 2015). The notion of systematic versus non-systematic errors is also critical in the realm of writing (Corder, 1975). According to Corder (1975), in second language acquisition, systematic errors are referred to as "errors," whereas non-systematic errors are referred to as "mistakes."

Given the importance of writing in English as a second language (ESL), learners' errors should be investigated and classified to be addressed in teaching practices (Dabaghi, 2012; Nair & Hui, 2018; Richards & Schmidt, 2013). This is important because learners' errors give teachers recommendations and directions on how language is learned and how learners perform developmental errors, such as integrating instructions (Ellis & Ellis, 1994). Thus, it is critical to understand the progress of language learning; and for learners to comprehend their errors.

The aim of the research is to examine grammatical errors made by Malaysian technical university students when assigned to write a one-paragraph essay. The findings are expected to assist educators and decision-makers to implement more learner-centred teaching techniques to help students improve their ESL writing abilities. The research aims to address the following questions:

1. What are the errors made by the students in writing the paragraph?
2. Which kind of errors is most common among the students?
3. Which do the students make the least errors in writing the paragraph essay?

Review of Literature

Error Analysis (EA)

EA is a useful method used to help English learners to learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ESL. It helps instructors to identify learners' writing difficulties and improve their teaching methods (Nor et al., 2015). There are several categories of errors according to Corder (1975):

1. Missing sentence elements;
2. Element addition is not required;
3. Improper selection of sentence elements; and
4. Errors in the placement of the order of sentence elements

James (1998) classifies the errors into five categories:

1. Grammatical errors (specifically in adjectives, adverbs, articles, nouns, possession, pronouns, prepositions and verbs);
2. Substance errors (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling);
3. Lexical errors (word formation and word selection);
4. Syntactic errors (coordination/subordination, sentence structure and ordering); and
5. Semantic errors (ambiguous communication and miscommunication).

Paragraph Writing

The paragraph is without a doubt the most crucial element to discuss when it comes to the structure and organisation of a text. Words are combined to form sentences, and sentences are combined to form paragraphs (Siddiqui, 2020). And when writing paragraphs, writers need to ensure that they include fundamental elements of paragraph writing that are a topic sentence, one or more supporting phrases or details, and a conclusion (Tran, 2021). In writing, they must ensure that sentences in the essay involve only a theme (Misra, 2021). A subject sentence is a statement that expresses the primary concept of the entire paragraph and is typically placed first in the paragraph. It is then followed by supporting sentences that offer information in a way that appropriately supports the core notion. The final sentence of the paragraph, which may be a restatement of the main phrase or a summary of the entire paragraph, brings the paragraph to a close (Kemper et al., 2018).

According to Brown and Marshall (2012), the beginning paragraph of an essay must persuade the reader to keep reading and demonstrate the legitimacy of the remaining content. Chicho (2022) argues that a paragraph with coherence connects the supporting details that hold the main idea. She analysed factors influencing EFL writing and found that students' paragraph writing has coherence problems due to the inability to analyse literary and to use lexical chain.

Grammar and Writing Skills among Malaysian Students

In writing, grammar is an essential aspect of learning to write in a second language. Chin (2000) states that it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety, and usage in writing than to approach the topic by teaching isolated skills. When students revise and edit their writing, teachers can make comments on their sentences to help them identify and correct errors (Chin, 2000). For example, if many students have problems with misplaced modifiers, then the teacher can provide a mini-lesson on this concept, using erroneous use of modifiers from student writing in the lesson (Chin, 2000).

Jiang et al. (2022) showed that international students studying in Malaysia needed grammar books to learn the parts of speech of the word to ensure coherency in their writing. Grammar rules can be taught to students to help them acquire appropriate language components (Adnan & Sayadi, 2022). Naim et al. (2020) found that providing students with the chance to team up with peers who had good grammar skills helped them to improve their writing skills.

Ways to Reduce Errors in the English language Teaching Environment (ELT)

Reducing errors is a crucial aspect of ELT, as errors can hinder learners' ability to communicate effectively in the target language. There are some key strategies for reducing learners' errors in an ELT environment. Explicit instruction involves providing learners with clear explanations of language rules, structures, and patterns to show them how to apply this knowledge in practice. According to Ellis and Shintani (2013), explicit instruction can help learners identify and correct errors in their language use. Focusing on form involves highlighting specific language features, such as grammar and vocabulary, in the context of communicative tasks. This approach helps learners notice errors in their language use and correct them as they arise. According to Doughty and Long (2008) focusing on the form can improve learners' accuracy and fluency in the target language.

Moreover, corrective feedback involves providing learners with information about their errors and how to correct them. Feedback can be provided through direct correction, recasts, or metalinguistic feedback, among other techniques. According to Lyster and Ranta (1997), corrective feedback can help learners reduce errors in their language use. Communicative language teaching emphasises the use of language for communication rather than just as a set of rules to be memorised. By engaging learners in communicative tasks that require the use of the target language, this approach can help learners notice and correct errors in their language use.

Uses of Technology to Reduce Writing Errors

With the advancement of information and communication technologies, various Internet-based tools are currently evolving which offer a social and interactive platform on which L2 learners have more opportunities to practise their writing and get immediate feedback (Tsai, 2019). In addition, the editing features in the

automated writing evaluation tool helped student in their writing (Parra & Calero, 2019). Students benefited from the immediate feedback, allowing them to attend to their corrections.

Another tool, Machine Translation, can serve as a supplementary platform that can be used by L2 learners to minimise errors in their writing. The tool can translate technical jargon, phrases and collocations and is more effective to be used compared to the dictionary or other electronic tools (Lee, 2020). Moreover, it is also able to develop lexical knowledge among the students. On a different note, writing simple sentences enables readers to understand the meaning that needs to be conveyed. Tsai (2019) employed Google Neural Machine Translation in his study and found that the new version of Google Translate assisted L2 learners. Specifically, it assisted them in getting simple sentences translated with fewer translation errors.

Theoretical Framework

Krashen's (1987) second language acquisition is employed to inform and guide the current study. It consists of five main hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, the Monitor hypothesis; the Input hypothesis; the Affective Filter hypothesis; and the Natural Order hypothesis. However, the Acquisition-Learning hypothesis is the most fundamental of Krashen's (1982) second language acquisition theory. The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis claims that language acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language in which speakers are concerned with the messages they are conveying and understanding, not with the form of their utterances.

Using the hypothesis in practice, when a student receives L2 input that is one level beyond their current stage of linguistic competence, they are said to improve and progress according to the natural order. Therefore, the key to improving students' writing skills is the natural communicative input, as it ensures that each student will receive some "i + 1" input appropriate for his/her current stage of linguistic competence. Moreover, speaking and writing skills progress and mature as continual comprehensible input through one's receptive listening and reading skills (Abukhattala, 2013). Therefore, educators can make language input comprehensible through various strategies, such as linguistic simplification, realia, visuals, and other current technological-based strategies to help students acquire language naturally rather than learn it consciously. Using technology like digital board games can be a starting platform for students to enrich their vocabulary and, as a result, become better writers (Ali et al., 2018).

Method

The study involved the analysis of students' errors in a one-paragraph essay. The types of errors analysed were tenses, articles, SVA, infinitive, gerunds, pronouns, possessive and attributive structures, word order, incomplete structure, word choice, and the verb "to be".

The paragraph was written by 49 diploma students studying in one of the technical universities in Malaysia. Participants were between 18 and 19 years old.

Over half of the students were male, while the remaining were female students. All of them were undergoing Semester Zero or the Preliminary Semester when the study was conducted.

The students were given four essay topics and asked to choose one topic to write one paragraph. The topics were about their experiences at the university, the reasons that make them like studying at the university, and the things they like about the university or any topics that explain their feelings about the university.

For the data collection, students were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntary participation. Moreover, the WhatsApp text distributed to the participants' instructors provided the same information about informed consent. Participants who were willing to participate were given two weeks to complete the writing task using Google Forms. Data were saved in Google Sheets after the forms were closed.

Selected evaluators checked the students' writing and identified grammatical errors. Frequencies were calculated to determine overall errors, most common errors and least errors.

Results

Errors Made by the Students in Writing Paragraph

The research analyses these common errors in the writing activity. There are tenses, articles, SVA, infinitives, gerunds, pronouns, possessive and attributive structures, word order, incomplete structure, word choice, and the verb "to be". Table 1 shows the classification of errors that the students made.

Table 1

Frequency of Errors Made by the Students

Types of errors	Frequency
Word choice	69
Tenses	67
SVA	60
Articles	36
Word order	27
Incomplete structure	21
Verb 'to be' error	17
Pronouns	12
Infinitives	6
Gerunds	2
Possessive & attributive structures	0

Students' errors in writing are reported according to three categories. These are (1) the highest number of errors, (2) the average number of errors (3) the least number of errors. For the first category, that is, the highest number of errors, they had difficulty choosing the right words in their writing. Sixty-nine occurrences were

reported as errors in this category. Other common errors they made were in the use of tenses (n=67), and SVA (n=60).

For the second category on average number of errors, the results showed 36 occurrences of improper use of articles. Students they could not arrange words used in sentences (27 occurrences of word order). There were 21 incomplete sentences.

For the final category, the students did not have make much errors in infinitive (6 occurrences) and gerunds (2 occurrences).

The Most Common Errors Made in Writing Paragraphs

The most common errors made by students in paragraph writing are word choice (69 occurrences), tenses (67 occurrences), and SVA (60 occurrences).

Word Choice

Word choice error was due to the students' inability to find the right words to express their thoughts as they had limited English vocabulary. The following sentences revealed how students used other words that are inaccurate to represent what they wanted to explain:

- (1) I like sports mostly (especially) Sepak Takraw.
- (2) They serve (provide) an air conditioner in each room at the hostel.
- (3) In my opinion, this university is good (well-known) in engineering.
- (4) This university is the only one university that offered short period (duration) for diploma (programme).
- (5) My experience as a student studying in UMP with online class is very stress (stressful).
- (6) I have so many subjects to rush in (handle) this week.
- (7) This university also offers a lot of cost (courses) that can attract the interest

In Sentence 1, the correct word should be “especially,” a degree adverb suitable in this context. In Sentence 2, “provide” should be used rather than “serve,” which may be synonymous but unsuitable for this context. In Sentence 3, the word “good” should be replaced with “well-known,” an adjective phrase preceding a noun, and is a more accurate word to be used in this context. In Sentence 4, the word “period” is not an appropriate word choice. The word denotes time-based values (seconds/nanoseconds) whereas “duration” denotes date-based values (years/months). The example in Sentence 5 shows the wrong use of the word “stress” which needs to be replaced with “stressful”. In Sentence 6 “rush in” shows the act of moving with an urgency that is inappropriate in the context of the sentence. Using “handle” is more proper to explain the situation of attending the hectic class schedule. The use of “cost” in Sentence 7 is a wrong word choice as “cost” and “course” have different meanings.

It was also found that students were confused with English words that are similar in spelling or sound but with different meanings, which led them to make errors in word choice as in the following sentences:

- (8) This is the quietest atmosphere to realize (release) stress.
- (9) Now, I am proceeding (pursuing) my studies for a Diploma of (in) Manufacturing Engineering Technology at UMP.
- (10) Learning offline will be able (available) as before

In Sentence 8, students may be confused as “realize” pronounced /ʃi.ə.laɪz/ sounds very similar to “release” pronounced /rɪˈliːs/. The word “realize” is irrelevant in this context. It should be replaced with “release,” the common verb preceding “stress.” In Sentence 9, the word “pursuing” should replace “proceeding,” and in Sentence 10, “available” is an adjective that is more suitable than “able” in this context. It was also observed that students use popular texting abbreviations in their written work, as in the following sentences:

- (11) Other than that, I felt a lil (little) bit difficult.
- (12) Studying online is kinda (kind of) hard.
- (13) It is sorta (sort of) different from other universities.
- (14) ... as it was my ambition since I was a kid (child).
- (15) Not gonna (going to) lie.

Tenses

Next, tense was the second most frequent error. The students misused tenses in their written work as they had problems deciding which tense to use. The following sentences show the errors made by students in their writing. For instance, the students misused simple present tense instead of the present perfect tense, as in the following sentences:

- (16) We still have not meet (met) them face to face.
- (17) Because I still don't go (have not been) there.
- (18) I haven't get (gotten) the chance to meet my new friends.

In Sentence 16, the correct word should be “met” instead of “meet.” Meanwhile, “have not been” should replace “don't go” in Sentence 17, and “gotten” should replace “get” in Sentence 18. The misuse of tenses could be due to the influence or interference of the student’s first language, as Bahasa Melayu and Mandarin do not have tenses like the English language. For example, in Bahasa Melayu, modifiers indicate time instead of tenses.

It can be observed from the following sentences that students failed to change the verbs into past tense forms when describing an event that has taken place:

- (19) I decide (decided) to accept the offer. So, here i am as a student of University Malaysia Pahang.
- (20) I don't (did not) take the subject in secondary school.
- (21) I don't (did not) want to accept the offer but my family encourage (encouraged) me to do it.

In Sentence 19, the word should be “decided”, which is the past form of “decide”. Meanwhile, in Sentences 20 and 21, the term “did not” should replace “don’t” for the sentence to be grammatical. Furthermore, there are a lot of exceptions in English tenses, which makes it even more challenging for the students to master; thus, tenses can still be a problem even for advanced learners of English in Malaysia.

Subject-verb Agreement (SVA)

SVA error ranked as the third most common error made by the students in paragraph writing. They made numerous SVA writing errors because English differs from Bahasa Melayu. Frequently, the students tend to think in their first language, Bahasa Melayu, and face difficulty writing in English. For instance, the subject does not agree with the verb, as in the following sentences:

- (22) It is one of the well-known technical university (universities) in Malaysia.
- (23) They tell a lot of interesting story (stories).
- (24) In my three days as a UMP students (student), I made some new friends.
- (25) Most of the universities that offers (offer) my dream course are all far away
- (26) The campus and facilities in this university looks (look) gorgeous

Sentences 22, 23, and 24 show that students could not differentiate between countable and uncountable nouns. Some students are unaware that the plural form using the suffix “s” must be applied to the countable plural nouns. For instance, in Sentences 22 and 23, the correct nouns should be “universities” and “stories” respectively. Both phrases “one of the” and “a lot of” are placed before the nouns and should give enough hints to the students that the noun should be in the plural form. In contrast, for Sentence 24, the suffix “s” was mistakenly added to “student”, although it only referred to one person. These errors are attributed to students’ poor understanding that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. Likewise, students make mistakes in the use of the singular and plural nouns in Sentences 25 and 26. It seems that the students were not aware of this grammar rule in that plural nouns take plural verbs in these sentences.

Another common error in students' written work is using the “verb to have” in a particular context. This shows that students still have difficulty understanding the concept of “verbs to have” as shown in the sentences (27)-(29):

- (27) This university have (has) too many facilities.
- (28) The Gambang campus have (has) many faculties that are interesting.
- (29) Besides that, UMP also have (has) new facilities and (a) lab that I would like to visit.

Sentences 27-29 demonstrate that students use the plural verb “have” for singular nouns (“university” and “campus”). Lastly, there are also exceptions in English that may confuse ESL learners, for example:

(30) The staffs (staff) and students are friendly.

In Sentence 1, students added “s” suffix to the word “staff” as they overgeneralised that the “s” suffix needs to be added to indicate plurality.

The Least Errors Made in Writing Paragraphs

The results indicate that students make the least errors in a few aspects of their writing. These are gerunds (2 occurrences), and infinitives (6 occurrences) in the paragraph they wrote. There were no errors in possessive and attributive structures, which could be because they did not form their sentences using this structure. There were some errors in the use of gerunds. Students were not able to use gerunds, as shown in these sentences:

- (31) This tower also shows the true identity of UMP, which is to produce excellent engineer (engineering) students.
- (32) This is because it bringing (brings) me to get new friend, lecturers and new experience.
- (33) It's a different vibe when lectures teaching (teach) you more than (a) teacher when I was in middle school.
- (34) It's easy for me to contact and asking (ask) the lecturer things i didn't understand in class

A gerund is a form of a verb that ends in the suffix “-ing”, which functions as a noun in a sentence. In Sentence 31, the student did not use the gerund “engineering”, although it is required as the verb “engineer” is used as a noun in this context. Meanwhile, in Sentences 32 and 33, students used gerunds, although they were not required to follow the grammar rules in these contexts. While in Sentence 34, the student did not realise the use of “to” requires a base form of a verb.

Finally, students made some errors in using infinitives in their written works. Infinitives are the primary form of a verb without an inflection binding it to a particular subject or tense. They are not as complicated as other grammatical structures, and we can assume that this is not a problem for most ESL learners as not many errors were made in using infinitives. Below are the sentences where these errors were found:

- (35) I have the most comfortable environment to studies (study).
- (36) It is easy for me to contact and asking (ask) the lecturer.
- (37) First of all, I would like to thank to (omit to) UMP.

Students made the same error in Sentences 35 and 36 by adding unnecessary inflections instead of using the basic form of a verb after the infinitive “to.” In Sentence 37, the infinitive “to” is redundant as it is not required in this context.

Discussion

The study showed that students made errors in all aspects of the grammar components. However, minimal errors were found in the use of possessive and attributive structures. Nevertheless, the results are likely related to the learners' condition when the study was conducted. The task was assigned to them in Week 2 of their short semester. These diploma holders might not be ready for such a task. Also, the burden of credit hours in the short semester might contribute to their inability to focus on the assigned writing task. A classical report by a prominent writer in error analysis, Richards (1971), can explain the finding. L2 often make performance errors when writing due to their interlanguage competency. Learners who are tired or hurried tend to make errors when they write and do not correct them due to lack of time (Richards, 1971).

Yet, these results corroborate the findings of many previous works in EA among Malaysian students. A study found that Chinese students in a private school in Malaysia made the most grammar and sentence structure errors (Nair & Hui, 2018). In the study, the teacher-researcher assigned them to write a descriptive essay. Grammar mistakes were reported to have the highest mean while the second error was in the students' sentence structures. The current results further support the idea of integrating grammar rules when writing, as students need to undergo the processes of editing, revising, and proofreading before submitting their writing tasks (Singh et al., 2017). However, it required the teachers to facilitate the processes by making students understand and apply correct grammar rules. In their study, it was also observed that the samples of their research were confused in using verbs and tenses – the same occurrences in the current study. According to the researchers, the diploma students' errors in using verbs were due to insufficient grammar mastery. In the use of tenses, Singh et al.'s (2017) students also demonstrated an inadequate understanding of grammar rules in writing. Therefore, they could not use correct tenses to explain facts and details in their writing. Moreover, this finding broadly supports the work of Mehat and Ismail (2021). Students in their study had issues with using SVA and tenses. These errors were also the most frequently observed along the students. However, the researcher concluded that the students struggled with comprehending English grammar, rather than with their lexical and semantic understanding.

Next the results on types of errors for Research Question 2 are discussed. For example, Manokaran et al. (2013) identified grammatical errors; Musa et al. (2012) identified errors in sentence structures; and Dipolog-Ubanan (2016) identified lexical errors. Moreover, these findings support James's (1998) "Model of Errors", highlighting the same types of errors (spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, sentence structures, and lexical items). However, he categorized the errors into three levels: substance, text, and discourse. The substance level includes spelling and mechanics; the text level includes grammar and lexical items; the discourse level includes sentence structures and coherence.

Furthermore, it should be noted that paragraph writing includes a topic sentence, supporting details and a conclusion. These basic components of writing were the issues among the students in the study. As a result, they affected their

word choices, tenses and SVA. In writing a topic sentence, for instance, students were not able to expand and elaborate on it. Moreover, a topic sentence requires the writers to accompany their ideas with opinions (Parnabas et al., 2022). In the current study, one of the sentences a student wrote, "This university have (has) too many facilities". In the sentence, it showed that she did not provide examples and specific details of the facilities at the university. Arguing on the writing of supporting details, another sentence was written by a student, "I decide (decided) to accept the offer. So, here I am as a student of University X (pseudonym)" showed that he was not able to explain the reasons as proofs of his/her points accepting the offer to study in the university. Also, many of the students did not write a conclusion as a task response in their writing. In other words, many failed to provide closure to the readers. But when they wrote, their concluding sentences were "I think that's all from me", "Oke that's all, thanks".

Conclusion

Although the study focused on a small sample of diploma students studying at a tertiary level, this study, however, revealed that the most common errors made are on tenses, articles, SVA, infinitives, gerunds, pronouns, word order, incomplete structure, word choice, and the verb "to be" error in a one-paragraph essay. Most students struggle with word choice, tenses, and SVA in writing. Since the writing task was impromptu, it was evidence that they made performance errors within the time limit given. Therefore, further research on identifying suitable approaches to teaching writing to tertiary students under conditions with and without time constraints is suggested. The study contributes to the understanding of the challenges faced by Malaysian students and provides practical recommendations for improving writing instructions. The findings will advance the second language writing field and serve as a valuable resource for educators, researchers, and policymakers in Malaysia and beyond.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The guidelines or codes of relevant ethics employing human subjects follow the Declaration of Helsinki whereby participants were informed of the nature of the research using a research protocol.

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