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Dealing with Writing Deficiencies at Tertiary Level

Shabbir Ahmed *, Naheeda Ahasan^a

**Universiti Malaysia Sabah- Labuan International Campus
Jalan Sungai Pagar, 87000, W.P. Labuan, Malaysia
aUniversiti Malaysia Sabah- Labuan International Campus
Jalan Sungai Pagar, 87000, W.P. Labuan, Malaysia*

Abstract

Errors in students' written scripts at the tertiary level may lower grades as well as posing challenges to language teachers for checking scripts and offering corrective feedback. At the worst, students fail to develop essential skills, remaining inefficient in writing. 108 students took part in the study. This paper looks into the grammatical errors of selected genres of written tests, while acknowledging the successful language aspects. A qualitative analysis was used to comment on the quantitative data. Results show that errors made were twofold: at the word level and at the sentence level. Discussions based on the findings in the data highlight their pedagogical implications. An action plan is suggested to improve overall learning and teaching outcomes for tertiary students.

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1. Introduction

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987, p 12), a learner in writing engages in two-way interaction between developing knowledge and developing a text. Hadley (1993) believes that the writing process probably is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the mechanical formal aspects of "writing down" at the one end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-016-582-3086; fax: +6-087-460-497.
E-mail address: shabbir@ums.edu.my or shabbir142005@gmail.com

However, errors are common occurrences in writing, no matter how hard the students try to keep their text error-free. The writing deficiencies of learners at the tertiary level in this paper are focused on two different but commonly occurring features of their written scripts: mistakes and errors. ‘Mistake’ according to Brown (2000) refers to a performance error that it is a failure to follow a known system correctly. However, an “error” is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. Corder (1967) refers to writing shortfalls by two labels. Mistakes are “performance errors” and like the slip of pen to him. Learners can correct it later, since these are not the result of unawareness. Conversely, genuine errors are ignorance of rules that learners cannot correct by himself or herself. They show learners ‘transitional competence’. The distinctions between the two are as follows:

- Errors are the result of ignorance whereas mistakes are result of stress.
- Errors of a learner have a definite pattern: mistakes, on the other hand, do not demonstrate a clear pattern.
- Errors cannot be corrected by the language user, but mistakes may be.

English occupies the status of L2 in the Malaysian education system. However, learning English as a L2 is not an easy task. According to Brown (2000), in order to master the English language, learners have to be adequately exposed to all of four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Language teaching in this country is currently focusing on the teaching and learning of these four language skills. Nonetheless, the standard of English among Malaysian children is on the decline, despite the years committed to learning English. Malaysian students are still weak in English, particularly in their writing skills. Students face difficulty in handling a topic and writing about it, following the process. Hence errors in various forms at different parts of the genre (any text type, e.g. Paragraph or Essay) are quite common occurrences. These errors seem to be costly for both parties, teachers and learners. First of all, pupils lose significant marks for any such mistakes, ultimately lowering their grades in English, as it does in other subjects. Their teacher, on the other hand, spends significant amount of time checking and offering corrective feedback to them. This is frustrating for the teacher, as well as demotivating for at least some language learners. If they do not overcome these errors, they may remain poor in academic and personal writing. This study looks at the errors and mistakes of learners, finding two major sources of transfers: interlingual and intralingual. A similar finding is reported in Brown’s study (1980).

1.1. Interlingual errors

This type of error occurs at the primary stage of target language learning. According to Brown (1980), a learner draws on his/her L1 as a sole linguistic system before becoming familiar with the second or target language system. So, the first language of the learner interferes with the use of the target language, at least in three major areas: the use of grammar, prepositions and lexicon (or words).

1.2. Intralingual errors

This second source of errors refers to the negative language transfer within the target language, especially when learners internalize these rules: e.g., a learner fails to use the rule of the third-person singular marker in a sentence of the target language in a given situation due to overgeneralization (Richards, 1974).

To orient the learner’s learning process with their thinking process, Error Analysis is important. The value of EA is supported by Jack Richards in Corder’s observation: “Learners’ correct sentences do not necessarily give evidence of the rules of the new language and the rules he has developed at given stages of the language development”. This can only be done by the errors made. Teaching can start teaching after this lesson. Hence, errors and their analysis are regarded an inevitable part of the teaching and learning of any language.

To deal with learners’ errors in English academic writing, a language teacher must complete Error Analysis, with the objective of finding the number of errors made, their frequencies, the genesis of errors and finally measures to minimize errors as quickly as possible. That is why EA is the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages. Investigating students’ written work will provide a means to assist Malaysian teachers recognize the importance of errors as a challenging area in teaching English. Most importantly, EA will create awareness among language users about the norms of the writing deficiencies that they produce, what they have missed in their piece, and the ways of improving their present writing, using the corrective feedback from the concerned teachers. Yasemin (2010) suggests the same in a similar study on Turkish adult learners’ writing errors.

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