

GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN TERTIARY STUDENTS' ESSAY WRITING

Umimah Hasanah Anwar & Zairil Azmir Zaiyadi

*Faculty of Management and Muamalah, International Islamic University College Selangor
umimahhasanah96@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

This study examined the grammatical errors found in essays produced by diploma-level students at Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS). Twenty (20) student essays were analysed in order to identify and categorise the grammatical errors. From the analysis it was found out that there were nineteen (19) types of grammatical errors made by the students and out of these there were four (4) most common grammatical mistakes committed by the students and these were countable-uncountable nouns, subject-verb agreement, articles and determiners and also stem (base form) verbs. These findings show that grammatical errors are still a common occurrence found in students' essays. Thus it will be helpful for the language teachers or instructors to identify these errors and find ways to minimise them in their students' writing.

Keywords: Grammatical Errors, Essay Writing, Diploma-level Students.

Introduction

Grammar is central in teaching the basic knowledge and learning language effectively. According to Goh, (2007) grammar plays an important role in language learning. Byrd, (2003) explains grammar is difficult aspects of language to teach as well as to learn. While Mickan (2001) says, grammar analyses the way the sentences work in the writing because writing is one of the skills which is used by people to communicate their ideas, thought, feeling and emotions into words and paper.

In the process of learning a foreign language, making errors is a common thing to happen when writing an essay. One necessarily needs the knowledge of grammatical rules. Errors may occur because learners often over-generalize them. An error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlingual competence of the learner (Dulay & Burt, 1974; Brown, 1994; Ancker, 2000)

Past Research on Grammatical Errors

A lot of studies have been conducted as to identify the cause why students are not able to do well in writing for instance, Jalaluddin et al. (2008), Maros et al. (2007) and Salim (2013) pointed to grammatical errors. Meanwhile Basir, et al. (2015) pointed to lexical errors as the cause while Zaiyadi et al. (2016) on the other hand dictated that it was related to the students' thinking skills.

Studies Among Secondary Level Students

Maros et al. (2007) conducted a study among form one students from 6 rural schools in three different states of Malaysia. The students were selected from the intermediate proficiency group. The students were asked to do a for free writing activity. The students were given the liberty of selecting the topics but it was found to evolve around 'My best friend' and 'My

family'. The length of the essays ranged from 56-385 words. Based on the kinds of errors observed, determiner, subject-verb agreement and copula 'be' are the three most problematic grammatical categories among the learners.

While, Jalaluddin et al. (2008) conducted a study in three schools in Johor, the southern state in Malaysia. A total of 315 students from urban, sub-urban and rural schools were involved. The schools involved are Sekolah Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra (STARP) an urban school, Sekolah Menengah Senai (Senai) categorized as sub-urban school and Sekolah Sultan Alaudin (SSA) as rural school. All the students are in form two and hence they would have had seven years of learning English. The findings show that the most obvious weakness of the students lay in the area of the grammar, particularly in the aspects of morphology and syntax. Some of the problematic grammatical categories are affixes, adverbs, adjectives, plural forms, copula 'be', subject-verb agreement. This contributes 60% of the total mistakes committed by the students.

Studies Among Tertiary Level Students

Marzuki and Zainal (2004) investigated errors produced by students when writing reports. For this purpose, 59 examination scripts produced by students from the Faculty of Science, UTM were analysed. Common errors were coded to determine the frequency of occurrence of these errors. The findings show that students tend to produce grammatical errors such as subject-verb-agreement, active/passive construction, singular-plural and the use of past participles, to name a few. Grammatically, all the errors were found to be structural ones and these had resulted in the construction of flawed sentences.

Meanwhile, Hamzah (2012) aimed at providing the explanation on the taxonomy of the grammatical errors made by university students in their writing in English. The data were obtained from twenty Indonesian students studying writing. There were 691 errors made by the students. The study reveals that the errors can be grouped into fifteen categories ranging from severe errors to mild errors. The categories for severe errors are word choice, verb choice, verb group, article, preposition, plurality and spelling. The other categories are subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement and relative clause, possessive, copula omission and mechanic.

Basir et al. (2015) studied the most frequent lexical errors committed by 19 diploma-level students who were from a Malaysian University English Test (MUET) preparatory class at Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS). In the sampled guided academic essays analysed, the lexical errors found are wrong word choice, omission/incompletion and misspelling.

Research Methodology

The research method utilised is qualitative. Data are obtained by analysing students' essays from semester two, Diploma in English Language Studies (DELS).

The population in this research is the semester 2 students of DELS programme. There were a total of 56 students in this cohort but the researcher had only collected 20 samples from this population.

The samples taken were the essays produced by the students as part of the assessments for skills for MUET course (MDLS 1072) and Intermediate English Proficiency (MDLS 1063).

Upon receiving the essays from the course instructors of MDLS 1072 and MDLS 1063 for analysis purposes, the researcher went through the essays in order to analyse and scan the errors in the students' writing. The researcher only focused on looking for grammatical errors and ignored other errors like spelling, syntax and mechanics.

In order to analyse the data, the researcher used the analysis form in order to classify and late quantify the errors made by the students in the essays. Then, the data were tabulated for the analysis purposes.

Analysis and Findings

Table 1 shows the type of error produced by students in their essay writing. The most common type of error produced by students is countable/uncountable nouns with 23 percent. This is followed by subject-verb agreement (18 percent), articles/ determiners (11 percent) and stem verbs (10 percent).

Table 1: Types of errors produced by students in their writing.

No	Types of error	Frequency of Errors	Percentage (%)
1	Countable/uncountable nouns	40	23
2	Personal pronouns	7	4
3	Active/passive verbs	9	5
4	Adjectives	10	6
5	Stem (base form) verbs	17	10
6	Subject-verb agreement	31	18
7	Possessive nouns	5	3
8	Articles/determiners	19	11
9	Tenses	9	5
10	Gerunds	3	1.5
11	Noun forms	7	4

12	Conjunctions	1	0.5
13	Negative verbs	2	1
14	Prepositions	7	4
15	Copula 'BE'	3	1.5
16	Possessive pronouns	1	0.5
17	Participles	2	1
18	Affixes	1	0.5
19	Relative pronouns	1	0.5
	TOTAL:	175	100

Conclusion

The findings show that countable/uncountable nouns are the most common grammatical errors made by the students. This is followed by errors in subject-verb agreement, articles/determiners, stem verbs, adjectives, active/passive verbs, and tenses, noun forms, prepositions, personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, copula 'BE', gerunds, negative verbs, participles, conjunctions, possessive pronouns, relative pronouns and affixes.

These findings are in line with the findings of studies conducted by Marzuki and Zainal (2007) and Hamzah (2012). In these studies the subjects who were tertiary level students were also identified to have problems with the grasp of grammatical rules like subject-verb agreement and singular/ plural nouns.

It can also be seen here that the major errors produced by tertiary students are the same errors produced by secondary level students. In the studies conducted by Maros et al. (2007) and Jalaluddin et al. (2008), the secondary students studied also showed poor grasp of subject-verb agreement and the singular/plural noun forms.

Recommendations

As an implication of this finding, it is recommended that language teachers or instructors should:

- 1) give more emphasis on students' grasp of grammar rules.
- 2) make students put more attention to the use of singular, plural and uncountable nouns as well as be more aware of the agreement between the subject and the verb used in writing. .

Also, since the sample size of this research is small as it only involved one group of students, it is recommended that for future researches the number of sample should be increased and should involve different groups of students of varying levels of language proficiency.

Works Cited

- Ancker, W. (2000). *Errors and Corrective Feedback: Updated Theory and Classroom Practice*. Retrieved March 18, 2017, from <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum.html>.
- Basir, H., Abdullah, E. & Zaiyadi, Z.A (2015) *Journal of Lexical errors in English for academic purpose (EAP) students' essays. Proceeding of the Second International Conference on Management and Muamalah 2015(ICOMM 2015)*
- Brown, D.B. (1994). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching 3rd*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regent
- Byrd, P. (2003). *Teaching Grammar: The Essentials of Language Teaching*. NCLRC: The National Capital Language Resource Centre, Washington, DC.
Retrieved March 18, 2017, from <http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/grammar/grindex.htm>.
- Dulay, H. C., & Burt, M. K. (1974). *You can't learn without goofing an analysis of children's second language errors. Language Learning*, 95-99.
- Goh, Y.S. (2007). *Learning grammar in Chinese Pronunciation. Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* vol. 6, no. 1, 100-107.
- Hamzah (2012). *Journal of An analysis of the written grammatical errors produced by freshmen students in English writing. Lingua Didaktika, Volume 6 No 1*
- Jalaludin, N.H, Mat Awal, N. & Abu Bakar. K. (2008). *Journal of The mastery of English language among lower secondary school students in Malaysia: A linguistic analysis. European Journal of Social Sciences, Vol 7 No 2*
- Maros, M, Tan, K.H, & Salehuddin, K. (2007). *Journal of Interference in learning English: Grammatical errors in English essay writing among rural Malay secondary school students in Malaysia. Journal e-Bangi, Volume 2 No.2*
- Marzuki, S. & Zainal, Z. (2004). *Common Errors Produced by UTM Students in Report Writing*. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. (Unpublished Project Report.) University Teknologi Malaysia Repository. Retrieved March 18, 2017 from <http://eprints.utm.my/3775/1/SAHIRAHMARZUKI75013.pdf>
- Mickan, P. (2001) *Beyond Grammar: Text as Unit of Analysis*. In James, J.E. (2003). *Grammar in the Language Classroom*. (pp. 220-227). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Salim, E.Y, (2013). *Journal of An analysis of grammatical errors in students' essay of past narration comic*. Retrieved February 1, 2017 from *Thesis (unpublished)*

Zaiyadi, Z.A, Abdullah, E. & Muhammad, S.H (2016). Journal of *Creative Thinking in Academic Essay Writing*. Retrieved February 28, 2017 from *GLIT E-JOURNAL on Information Technology and Language Practice, Volume issue2*