



## COMMON WRITING ERRORS OF FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

ANDY BACCAY RAMOS, LPT, MAT English Instructor, Isabela State University

### ABSTRACT

*The study investigates the errors committed by the first year students in writing English. A total of fifteen students are instructed to write an essay on a given topic. The data gathered were analyzed through the number of error occurrences. The results of the study show that most of the errors committed by the students in writing are on sentence construction. This reveals that students' sentence construction is poor.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

One approach the learners engage in the learning process is to use the second language in speech or writing. This provides evidence of what the learners know about the target language they are trying to learn. In the course of writing or speaking, errors are committed.

Errors in second language performance are easy to observe, and undoubtedly serve as good indicators of a learner's level of second-language knowledge. Thus, they are an integral component of language learning. The phenomenon of error has received the interest of researchers, though traditionally has been regarded as the linguistic phenomena deviant from the language rules and standard usages, reflecting learners' deficiency in language competence. Hence, many teachers simply correct individual errors as they occur, giving little concern to identifying patterns of errors or to uncovering causes other than learner ignorance. However, interpreting what the cause of these errors has been a major concern for linguists, as well as classroom practitioners. In this respect, Steinberg and Sciarini (2006), state that the systematicity of most errors is the result of the application of certain strategies when relevant second-language knowledge is not available or incomplete. Conscious resort to any of these strategies is definitely a cognitive exercise, the results of which are various deviations of the linguistic norms, sentence patterns and grammar rules that put the language components together to produce linguistic moulds embodying composites of thoughts.

In the study conducted by Masangya and Lozada (2009) on the relationship between the language exposures and errors in English essays of High School Students in the southern part of Luzon in the Philippines, students with high English exposure have significantly less



frequency in their errors in wrong case, fragmentation, parallelism, punctuation, and verb tense. However, some errors such as wrong verb form, preposition and spelling were of higher frequency for students with high English exposure.

With the development of linguistics, applied linguistics, psychology and other relevant subjects, attitudes toward errors changed greatly. Instead of being problems to be overcome, errors are viewed as an evidence of the learners' stages in their target language (TL) development. It is through analyzing learner errors that errors are elevated from the status of "undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process", (Ellis,1995, cited by Nassaji & Fotos, 2004, at <http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/dinaalsibai/ReviewGrammar.PDF>).

The foregoing gave the interest to the researcher to conduct the present study due to the errors of the students in writing. Identifying errors is of help to know the areas of focus in teaching grammar especially to the young language learners.

### **Statement of the Problem/ Research Question**

The researcher had conducted a study to determine students' common errors in writing.

### **Significance of the Study**

Investigating grammatical errors provide English as a Second Language teachers valuable insight into the language learning process. Once the causes of committing such errors are discovered, then it is probable to conclude and decide the remedy. The findings of this study provide more insights into the acquisition of English syntax by the language learners. Ranganayki (1983) points out that "the errors are not problems to be overcome or evils to be eradicated", they are simply a part of the language learning process. Thus, no one can achieve competence in any language without committing errors.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In spite of the many criticisms on error analysis, such as the disagreement on what constitute an error, how to identify an error, and how to classify errors, error analysis (EA) still remains the most systematic approach to investigate learner errors.

Over the decades, many researchers have attempted to define what an error is. For example, James (1998) defined an error as an unsuccessful bit of language; and Lennon (1991) regarded an error as a linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same



context and under similar conditions of production, would not be produced by the speakers native speaker counterparts. Apparently, what is in common of these definitions is that they all define errors as a linguistic deviation. Recently, researchers have ventured to take a broader definition of an error to suit specific research purposes. For example, Zhang, Wu, Wang & Zhang (1995) identified both linguistic errors and rhetoric errors, thus including not only grammatical problems but discourse problems in their study.

As cited by Masangya and Lozada (2009), an investigation conducted by Chen (2002) on the problems of the university EFL writing in Taiwan sampled freshmen and sophomore Taiwanese students' recounted vocabulary (60.7%) and grammar (50%) as problem areas in writing. Meanwhile, Al-Hazmi and Scholfield's (2007) study on Saudi university students' enforced revision with checklist and peer feedback in EFL writing indicated that the difficulties their samples experienced in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing were basic English language problems as well as discourse organisation, paragraphing and cohesion. Salem's (2007) research on student errors lexico-grammatical continuum on the other hand, categorized written difficulties made by Hebrew-speaking EFL learner respondents as word dependent, lexical and grammatical.

In the research study of Bui Thi Tram (2010) on Common Written Errors Committed by the First year students at the English Language Teacher Education reveals six types of common written errors made by the students. They are grammar, style, general items (language style and expression in particular), syntax, mechanics and lexical items. It comes as a surprise that grammatical errors make up the highest portion among common errors detected. The study conducted by Cruz and De Juan, et.al.(2007)on identifying the errors of language students shows that the students committed more errors in English usage (1.48) than in English structure (1.28). Of the five types of errors in English structure, the run-ons appeared to be the most common (48.36%) while the least was coordination/subordination (10.66%). Among the usage errors, the subject-verb agreement was the most common (67.21%).

As reflected in the study of Izzo (1999), the most common problem category was sentence development and other high-frequency categories, in descending order of occurrence, including subject-verb and number agreement, paragraph development, use of



articles, and verbs. Khasawneh (2010) found out that Arab students encountered related to organization of ideas, grammar and spelling.

The Study of Wee and Sim, et al. (2010) on the verb- form errors in writing, the subjects' verb-form errors were identified and categorized under four category types: omission, addition, misformation and ordering. The findings revealed that the subjects made the most number of errors in the omission verb-forms in the area of the third person singular verb (-s/-es/-ies). This occurred when they tried to make the verb agree with the singular subject or plural subject by dropping the -s inflection from the third person singular verb or making the verb plural by adding the -s inflection, respectively. The frequencies of errors of addition and misformation were almost the same while verb-form errors of ordering had the least number of errors. The copula "be" verb was a major problematic area. The subjects tended to over-generalize and, hence, either omitted the "be" verb or used it wrongly. Errors in writing will affect the readability and quality of the piece of work. So, in this light, the subjects' verb-form errors have to be identified so that they can be equipped with the basics of producing error-free writing.

The study of Darus (2009) on error analysis of the written English essays revealed that six most common errors committed by the participants were singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement, and word order. These aspects of writing in English pose the most difficult problems to participants. This study has shed light on the manner in which students internalize the rules of the target language, which is English. Such an insight into language learning problems is useful to teachers because it provides information on common trouble-spots in language learning which can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials.

It can be noted that most errors as stated from the studies discussed, highlighted grammar as a main concern in writing competency. Moreover, the reason second language learners need to resort to learning grammar is that it provides some general and systematic guidance on the structure and syntax.

### **Writing in General**

Writing is a big responsibility for a writer because writing is not only a hobby but it is also considered a profession. Writing is also a form of communication that people use to



communicate as long as they are literate. One needs to be efficient in writing in order to be an effective communicator. For a writer to be able to write effectively, he or she must be able to aim his/her writing at the needs of the target group. Thus, this requires different skills such as academic writing or narrative writing skill (Tindal & Marston, 1990). Furthermore, when a written piece of work is considered good writing, the product should also be able to show the development of knowledge and suitability of language register according to the discipline and the level of target readers. Development in writing involves the presentation of ideas, the correct use of language, grammar, elaboration and the ability to develop them into a paragraph (Kementerian Malaysia, 2000).

Clarity, coherence and focus of the writing are also elements of good writing, and many writers, especially students, failed in their writing due to lack of these elements (Carroll, 1990). Faridah, et.al.(2001) in their study with a group of secondary school students evaluating narratives in terms of the dimensions of ideas, organization, voice, word choice, fluency and writing convention, indicated that students have problems in writing conventions but did better for ideas and organization.

Another reason why students are unable to write to the expected benchmark set is the lack of general knowledge in order to expand and elaborate the issue discussed in their writing (Jamaludin, et.al. 2006) and this is due to students' lack of reading. Even if students are writing in their mother tongue or in their instructional language, such as Malay language, the language of instruction in the Malaysian education system, it can be seen that those students are not proficient in their writing (Zamri & Zarina, 2001; Bukari Kadam, Sabariah Samsuri, Rosmini Md. Salleh & Zamri Mahamod, 2008). The obvious problems faced by students are related to language accuracy including spelling, punctuations, morphology and syntax.

Furthermore, accuracy in writing is also caused by writing strategies used by students. When students write, they have a tendency to change, transfer, sentence structure, morpheme, and words that are inappropriate in their writing (Corder, 1981) and those in turn, will lead to errors in their writing. Committing errors is a part of the process in writing that is experienced by all language learners before they become competent writers. Therefore, it is important to analyze the students' writing errors to understand areas they are weak at so that educators can help students to develop their writing skills.



## **Errors in Writing**

Errors in language learners' performance including writing process have long become the subject of interest among teachers, linguists and syllabus planners. The linguists particularly are preoccupied in finding reasonable explanations for occurrence of errors and their implication towards the learning and teaching of a language.

Lieu and Wang (2011) stated that English writing, along with other basic skills (listening, reading and speaking), has always been an issue of great concern to EFL teachers and researchers. Despite the strong desire to write well in English, quite a number of Chinese university students still remain incompetent in English writing. Both students and teachers increasingly feel frustrated and complain about the quality of the learning outcome.

Errors, among all other English writing problems, have become the biggest headache to all sides that are involved: learners, teachers, raters or any other readers. Learners simply hate errors, believing that their writing would be better if without any errors. Teachers are not happy to see the errors made by their students either. But still, they want to know why students have made the errors and how they can help to improve the situation. Just like symptoms which are often used by doctors to diagnose a disease, the errors can also be deployed by teachers, researchers or even learners themselves to assess learners' writing in English. Instead of hating the errors, teachers and/or researchers usually choose to examine them to find out where the problem is. To be fair, errors actually provide teachers and/or researchers with a unique opportunity to gain insight into the mysterious process of L2 writing in the same way that symptoms contribute to the discovery of how the human body functions. Meanwhile, paper raters and the employers have been voicing their complaints about the large number of errors in the written English of college graduates, which clearly harms the fluency and clarity of the written pieces. As a result, errors, though much researched, still remain one of the most concerned issues in both SL/FL writing and acquisition.

Darus and Ching's (2009) study on common errors in written English essays of Chinese students show four most common errors made by the Chinese students- mechanics of



writing, tenses, prepositions, and subject-verb agreement. In teaching writing, teachers need to be aware that students have difficulties in these areas of the English grammar. These errors are caused by interference of first language (L1) and inadequate understanding of grammatical rules of English. These factors are elements categorized under inter-lingual, intra-lingual and developmental errors. Because of the interference of the L1, students tend to refer to their L1 whenever they face difficulties when they write. They also encounter problems due to their exposure to Malay as it is a language that is used in many subjects. Thus, the students will construct sentences with errors because of the differences of grammatical rules of all the languages: their L1, Malay and English. Intra-language errors refer to the application of incorrect strategies while acquiring English. This proves that L1 plays a considerable role in causing students to make errors when they write in English

Brown (1994) and Connor (1996) group errors into two categories. These are those errors that result from L1 interference which are external, and those which result from interference from the L2 system itself. The first category is caused by inter-lingual transfer. Inter-lingual transfer errors are errors caused by the interference of the learners' L1. Brown states that especially in the early stages of learning a L2, before the system of the L2 is familiar; the L1 is the only previous linguistic system upon which the learner can draw. The error occurs as a result of familiarity with the L1. Therefore, there is a transfer effect whether directly or indirectly of the L1 to the new language. When parallel features of the two languages correspond exactly, there is a positive transfer from L1 to L2. When they do not correspond exactly, there is a negative transfer, that is, interference.

Intra-lingual and developmental errors are the second category of errors. These errors may be caused by inadequate learning, difficulties inherent in the TL itself, faulty teaching, confused thinking or lack of contrast of both languages. Brown (1994) stated that early stages of language learning are characterized by a predominance of inter-lingual transfer, but once learners have begun to acquire parts of a new system, more and more intra-lingual transfer is manifested. Intra-lingual errors are also those "which reflect the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions for rule application, the learner attempting to build up hypothesis about English from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook."



Intra-lingual errors are also defined as errors that originate within the structure of English itself, as a result of misinterpretation of English grammatical rules.

In most past researches in analyzing problems of writing in English, the researchers' aims were to identify errors that occurred, analyze the errors to find out the cause and work out possible solution to overcome the problems. Lim (1990) analyzed grammatical errors made by Mandarin speaking students from a private year two community college in Kuala Lumpur. Fifty ESL compositions produced in a test were used as the main source of data. The researcher used free writing and guided writing tasks to compare the results. Similar to previous studies, the errors made were classified under eight grammatical categories, namely: tenses, articles, prepositions, spelling, pronouns, wrong choice of words, singular and plural forms, and agreement. Two major factors that contributed to the presence of errors in students' written work were inter-lingual transfer and intra-lingual transfer.

## **RESEARCH SIMULACRUM**

Writing a paragraph or essay is not easy and in some way, more difficult than speaking. It is more complex which attest the student's ability to use the language and the ability to express ideas. Student needs to write not only coherently but correctly, which requires more time and effort. This difficulty of writing leads students to be more susceptible in producing errors.

Various definitions of errors have been presented by experts. Basically these definitions contain the same meaning while the differences lie only on the ways they formulate them. Two definitions of errors are given here. First, an error is a systematic deviation; when a learner has not learnt something and consistently gets it wrong (James, 1998). Second, an error is a systematic deviation from the norms of the language being learned (Corder in Gass & Selinker, 2001). Errors in various forms are important sources of information about foreign language acquisition because they demonstrate conclusively that learners do not simply memorize the target language rules and then reproduce them in their utterances. They indicate that learners construct their own rules on the basis of input data, and that in some instances at least, these rules differ from those of the target language learners.

Errors in writing are needed to be identified, described, and explained. Firstly, errors can be accepted as a kind of learning activity taking place in the learner. Corder uses the





term “erroneous” to mean those utterances which are either superficially deviant or inappropriate in terms of grammar. He distinguishes between mistakes, lapses, and errors. They correspond to what he calls pre-systematic, post- systematic and systematic errors. Pre-systematic errors are those committed by learners while they are trying to come to grip with a new point. Post-systematic errors occur when learners temporarily forget a point that has been previously understood. Systematic errors are those which occur when learners have formed inaccurate hypotheses about the target language.

Secondly, some problems prevent the proper description as the learners’ mind. An object of the error analysis is to explain errors both linguistically and psychologically in order to help the learners to study. Systematic errors should be looked for, so that the rules can be observed. This is a difficult task because learners may be highly inconsistent in their errors.

Thirdly, explanation is still largely speculative because of a limited knowledge of the psychological and neurological process involved in language learning. The same errors can be looked based on various points of view. For example, a learners’ native language have only one way of referring to the future time while the target language has three ways of referring to the same. Learners gets problem to arrange the sentence and finally they commit some errors.

Errors had been classified in terms of the difference between the learners’ utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way, errors fall into four categories: omission of some required element; addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element; selection of an incorrect element; and disordering of the elements. He includes the linguistics level of the errors under the sub-areas of morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

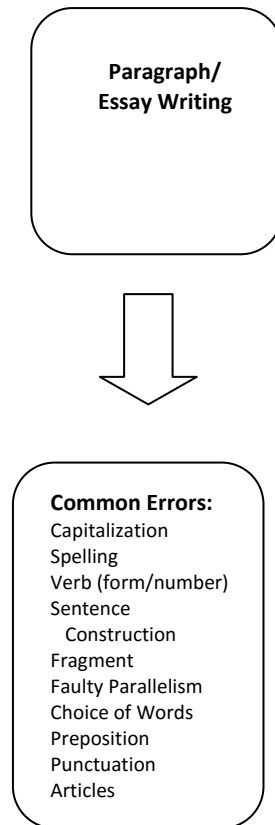


Figure 1: The schema of the conceptual framework.

## II. METHODS

### Participants of the Study

The participants were fifteen (15) randomly selected first year students of the BSCS (Bachelor of Science in Computer Science) of Isabela State University- Cabagan. The BSCS program is the newly offered program of the Department of Information Communications and Technology.

### Instrument and Procedure

The essay type of test was administered in the study to determine the kind of error committed by the students such as, capitalization, S-V-A, spelling, and faulty sentences, and others.



The essay test was given during their English class. Students were given a topic on “Education is the key to success” as a written activity. Students were given a standard answer sheet for their essay. The essay test was answered within 15 minutes.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher used the frequency of occurrence in determining the types of errors committed by the students in writing. Each committed errors were tabulated and classified accordingly.

### III. Results and Analysis

As identified from the participants’ paragraph, the common errors committed by the first year college students are presented on Table 1.

Table 1

#### **Common Errors Committed on Student’s Essay**

| Errors       | F         |
|--------------|-----------|
| Sc           | 31        |
| fp           | 11        |
| Vf           | 10        |
| cw           | 8         |
| sp           | 8         |
| Wn           | 6         |
| cap          | 5         |
| prep         | 5         |
| punc         | 5         |
| wv           | 3         |
| No<br>cap    | 2         |
| A            | 2         |
| wt           | 2         |
| f            | 1         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>99</b> |

*Note. See Appendix F for the meaning of the proofreader’s mark.*



The results show that most of the common errors committed by the students are on Sentence Construction (Sc). It shows that most of the errors committed by the learners are on poor construction of sentences.

The second error that is committed most by the students in writing is Faulty Parallelism (fp) which reveals that students do not observe parallelism in constructing sentences.

The third is the Verb form (vf) which reveals students errors on the subject and the verb agreement and tenses.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

It can be noted that students' most common errors in writing paragraphs are in sentence construction (Sc), faulty parallelism (fp) and verb form (vf). A Total of thirty one (31) errors were committed in the use of sentence construction. This reveals that the Students' sentence construction is poor. Teachers across all academic disciplines, even at the college level, must deal with poor writing in the form of essay exams and term papers. The sentence fragment and run- on sentence are among the most prevalent and irremediable errors found in grammatically deficient prose. Some students seem to have absolutely no feeling for the completeness of a sentence. There is very reason to suspect that the performance of poor as well as good writers has been shaped by a tendency to extract patterns and to infer rules. Poor writers may simply have misperceived examples of written language and thus have abstracted incorrect rules regarding the structure of complete sentence (Kagan, 1990).

Eleven is the total error in faulty parallelism. As shown in the study of Hasna (2010), students do not apply grammatical rules correctly that they commit faulty parallelism. Faulty parallelism often brings strange results; its effects can range from subtle to noticeable. Certain errors may be noticed only on close assessment; others may render the sentence visibly ambiguous or confusing. Several writers set up faulty parallelism out of a mistaken principle that the variety makes for more interesting reading. Once a parallel structure has been started, the reader expects it to continue. If the structure changes in



progress, readers will be confused. Writers err at a number of levels when creating a parallel sentence construction (Baugh, 1993).

Incorrect use of verb forms was committed ten times. Learners often use the wrong verb form. This error is painfully evident in written communications, since they confuse the reader and affect the tone of the message (Laissaoui, 2004).

Fromkin and Rodman (1998) states that in English and in every language, every sentence is a sequence words, but not in every sequence of the words is a sentence. Thus, one has to follow such agreement as syntax to form grammatical sentence.

Masangya and Lozada (2009) indicated that the English language often presents difficulties for many people especially for the young learners. Mastery of the basic rules in writing takes time. Despite of the resources made available for exposure of the language intended, errors or mistakes are still bound to happen. However such instances are not a clear indication of failure to language acquisition but learning should be constant and must seek other tools for improvement.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the errors committed by the participants of the study are on poor sentence construction, parallelism, and verb form. These forms of errors imply a need for mastering the grammar on the part of the language learners to lessen errors in the written works and construct sentences in a well developed manner.

The findings of the study suggest a focus on teaching grammar to students. There is also a need to improve strategy in teaching grammar. The findings of the study will also be a reference for further research on errors in writing in a larger scope where possible as a help to improve course syllabus in English.

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