

Grammatical Errors in ESL Writing: An Error Analysis

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Abstract: English is taught in Malaysia as the second language to a majority of Malaysians. Being ESL learners, it is not easy for most Malaysians to acquire the language. Therefore, teachers play an important part in helping ESL pupils to be competent in the language by determining the suitable materials and appropriate teaching methods. This can be done by obtaining information on the area of weaknesses that pupils are facing when learning the language with the help of error analysis. This study aims to identify the grammatical errors made by 77 Year 6 primary pupils from a suburban school based on a short guided essay they have written during their English class. The focus is on four word classes which have a higher frequency of errors. The findings showed that verbs are among the highest errors done by the pupils. This study suggested that a deep understanding of the problem areas of learning faced by pupils could be useful for teachers to plan an intervention to help their pupils improve in the learning of the language.

Index Terms: English as Second Language (ESL), Writing Skills, Grammatical Errors, Error.

I. INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a second language in Malaysia. It is given secondary importance compared to Bahasa Melayu, which is considered the primary importance (Yunus & Thirusanku, 2014). According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025, the Malaysian education system aspires to make sure that “every student will be proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and in English as a second language” (p.2-7) to ensure Malaysian students are successful and competitive in the increasingly globalised era (Ministry of Education, 2013). But, many Malaysian graduates who were incompetent in the use of the language (Yamat, Fisher, & Rich, 2014). The ability to write provides better grades and education achievement (Asrifan, 2015).

In Year 6, the final year in primary school, pupils will take a national exam compulsory for all Year 6 pupils, which is *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR). It is crucial for pupils to be able to write using the language to get an ‘A’ or at least pass the subject. Like any other ESL learners, Malaysian pupils also experience difficulties in writing. Writing is an important skill in language production, which is also a difficult skill to be acquired (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016; Gedion & Peter, 2016; Ismail & Mohd. Shah, 2015; Nusrat, 2016; Raimes, 1983; Sa’adiyah, 2017; Seitova,

2016). Pupils acquire the skill through language learning because when they learn a second language, they learn the grammar or rules of the language, idioms and vocabulary before being able to write in the language (Raimes, 1983). Thus, if students are proficient with their grammar rules, their language production will improve as well as their language achievement.

Error analysis provides useful information to teachers as it allows for teachers with knowledge of what kind of errors their pupils tend to make when they write using the language and which teaching method could be applied to make the teaching and learning process more effective (Talif & Edwin, 2015). Teachers can reflect on their teaching methods and plan on what kind of intervention would be practical to help their pupils to amend the errors they are making (Ho Peng, 1976). Error analysis does not stop at identifying the errors that the pupils make, but also the reasons for the occurrence of the errors (Amiri & Puteh, 2017). Many researchers have conducted studies on analysing errors made by ESL and EFL learners. Error analysis is found to be helpful for language teachers when deciding on what materials to be used when during the lesson (Ho Peng, 1976). If teachers can identify what kind of errors that their pupils make, it would be easier for them to rectify it. This study focuses on the errors made by ESL pupils in Year 6 who will be taking the UPSR exam this year. The aim of this study is to identify errors most frequently made by Year 6 primary ESL pupils when attempting to write a short essay in English. When the teachers know what kind of errors their pupils make, they can come up with interventions to help their pupils in improving their writing.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia is described as a melting pot as this is a multiracial country. Every race has their mother tongue, which is also their first language. So, English is considered the second language for most of them. As for ESL learners, writing skill is more difficult to acquire compared to the other three skills: listening, speaking, and reading (Ahmad Zaki & Yunus, 2018; Fareed et al., 2016; Ghabool, Mariadass, & Kashef, 2012; Rajeswari, Yunus, Jamaluddin, & Azlina, 2017; Sa’adiyah, 2017; Wening, 2016).

A. Error Analysis

Error analysis is an approach used to identify the areas of difficulties faced by ESL learners (Corder, 1967; Ho Peng, 1976). Moreover, error analysis also helps teachers to identify errors made by their students and for them to work towards the betterment of their teaching practice (Corder,

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1967; Ho Peng, 1976; Talif & Edwin, 2015).

Identifying errors made by pupils does not only show the progress of the pupils in language learning but a source of reference for teachers to help improve the pupils' writing skill (Corder, 1967). The errors indicate that the pupils have not mastered the rules of the language or may be having difficulties with certain aspects of the language (Corder, 1975). Corder (1967) stated that in the field of methodology, there are two schools of thoughts. First, an ideal teaching method could avoid these errors from happening. Hence, indicating flaws in the teaching techniques applied when teaching the second language. Second, it is very normal for humans to make errors knowing the fact that we are living in an imperfect world. Therefore, we should focus on how to deal with the errors when they occurred. Discussion of errors made by pupils will direct the teacher to the areas that need special attention in his teaching techniques to overcome the difficulties.

Error analysis is a basic step in assessing pupils' competence in the second language (Ho Peng, 1976). It helps teachers identify what area of difficulties faced by ESL learners and what items teachers should focus more on. With this information, teachers can decide on items to be used as materials and in their teaching to help their pupils improve in the areas that they are weak in. It enables teachers to identify the remedial work needed for ESL learners who are preparing to sit for an English Language test (Ho Peng, 1976; Talif & Edwin, 2015). Ho Peng (1976) claimed that error analysis helps language teachers to identify the types of errors most likely to be made by a certain group of pupils and think of practical ways to correct them. Teachers will have ample time helping their pupils in the correction of errors and ways to overcome them if these errors had been discovered earlier through error analysis.

B. Errors and Mistakes

Learners of English language tend to make errors regardless of which level they are. They could be in schools, colleges or even universities. Making mistakes is not related to learners' knowledge in the language. Therefore, it could be self-corrected (Nassaji, 2018). Errors, however, are deviations occurred due to lack of knowledge in the language which cannot be self-corrected (Botley, 2014; Corder, 1967; Nassaji, 2018). Nassaji (2018) cited that Corder (1967) defined mistakes as unintentional slips made by learners due to factors such as tiredness, lack of attention, and memory lapse and could be self-corrected if the learner paid attention to the production. Meanwhile, Botley (2014) defined mistakes as accidental slips made by learners caused by laziness, forgetful and insufficiently internalised rules which could be self-corrected because of the awareness that the rule is broken. Learners tend to make mistakes in the language learning process due to ignorance of the grammar (Hamid & Qayyimah, 2017).

C. Writing Skill

In today's world, the existence of competent writers are seen as necessary (Ghabool et al., 2012). Our children are expected to be proficient in the English language so that they will have a better future. Similarly, all employers expect their employees to be competent users of the language because they determine the progress of the organisation (*English*

Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025., 2015). However, Malaysian graduates are found to be underperforming in universities as well as getting a job due to their low competency in the language (Yamat et al., 2014). Therefore, it is essential for pupils to master the four skills because being able to write ensures better grades and education achievement (Asrifan, 2015). Here, teachers play a crucial part in helping students to master writing skill as the ability to write is vital for them to be able to compete in the era of globalisation (Yunus et al., 2018). However, writing skill needs to be taught to pupils as they need the knowledge of grammar or rules of the language (Krashen, 2003; Raimes, 1983). As writing is a sequential process, learners need to practice extensively to improve themselves (Kurniati, 2015; Novita Ika Nurhanifah, 2015).

Writing helps learners to a second language as they need the knowledge of grammar, idioms and vocabulary of the language. Writing allows them to reinforce the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary they have learned, be adventurous with the language and enhances their learning through the expression of ideas (Raimes, 1983). Therefore, it is imperative for them to master the skill (Kurniati, 2015; Raimes, 1983). There are many reasons for students to write. They are required to write in examinations, test, emails, messages, letters and many more (Kaur et al., 2017; Wening, 2016; Yunus et al., 2018). Following the trend of socialising through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter among others, writing skill is given even more importance (Kaur et al., 2017). During the writing process, a writer needs to brainstorm, organise ideas, review edit and others (Almubark, 2016; Kurniati, 2015; Yunus et al., 2018).

III. METHODOLOGY

In this quantitative study, purposive sampling is applied. The group of subjects are 77 Year 6 students from a suburban school in one of the states in Malaysia. The first group consists of 39 pupils from the lower intermediate class. Meanwhile, in the second group are 38 pupils from the advanced class. This way, we can see the differences in errors committed by these two groups of pupils with different levels of competency in English.

A writing task was given by the teacher to these two groups during their own English Language class. It is a guided essay where they had to write based on content points and pictures provided, just like the essay question in Section C of the English Language paper in UPSR. They had to complete the essay within 1 hour with a limit of words not more than 80.

Then, the teacher collected the essays to be analysed by the researcher. The researcher marked the essays and underlined the errors made by these pupils. The data of the 77 pupils are divided into two groups, according to their classes. The types and frequency of errors made by each pupil are presented in the form of a table. The word classes listed are nouns, verbs, prepositions and articles. The number and percentages of pupils who made errors for each word class are presented in a table of frequency, and a graph chart. Discussion of findings is based on the tables, and also examples of errors taken from the pupils' essays.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This section will address the data and results found in this study through the essays written by the 77 Year 6 pupils after marking them. The findings are presented in two sections. The first section presents the results of the short essays and the second section presents the examples of errors made.

A. Analysis of Essays

The 77 pupils wrote a short essay in not more than 80 words based on guided words and pictures within one hour. After that, the researcher marked their essays and categorized the errors made by the pupils. The researcher only discusses on nouns, verbs, prepositions and articles. The results are presented in the tables below.

Table 1. Frequency of Errors Made by Pupils in Their Short Essays (Group 1)

Sample	Noun	Verb	Preposition	Article
Pupil 1	1	2	3	0
Pupil 2	1	4	0	2
Pupil 3	1	2	0	0
Pupil 4	3	2	0	0
Pupil 5	0	1	0	0
Pupil 6	1	3	0	0
Pupil 7	2	2	0	0
Pupil 8	2	2	0	1
Pupil 9	1	2	2	0
Pupil 10	0	1	0	0
Pupil 11	0	3	1	1
Pupil 12	1	2	1	0
Pupil 13	2	1	0	0
Pupil 14	2	2	0	0
Pupil 15	2	3	0	0
Pupil 16	2	4	2	0
Pupil 17	1	2	0	0
Pupil 18	1	2	0	0
Pupil 19	0	2	0	0
Pupil 20	2	3	0	0
Pupil 21	0	4	0	0
Pupil 22	2	5	0	0
Pupil 23	1	2	1	0
Pupil 24	2	3	0	0
Pupil 25	2	3	0	0
Pupil 26	0	2	0	2
Pupil 27	2	2	0	2
Pupil 28	0	2	0	1
Pupil 29	1	2	1	0
Pupil 30	1	2	0	0
Pupil 31	0	5	1	0
Pupil 32	2	0	0	0
Pupil 33	1	2	1	0
Pupil 34	1	1	0	0
Pupil 35	1	1	0	0
Pupil 36	1	2	0	0
Pupil 37	3	2	0	0
Pupil 38	1	1	0	0

In Group 1, the lower-intermediate class, a majority of sixteen pupils only made one error for nouns. Twelve pupils making two errors followed it. Next, two pupils made three errors. Lastly, eight pupils did not make any errors in the usage of nouns.

As for verbs, a majority of twenty pupils made two errors

followed by six pupils making one error and the other five making three errors. A total of three pupils made four errors for this word class and, two pupils made five errors. The results show that one pupil did not make any errors at all in the usage of verbs.

For the usage of prepositions, a majority of twenty-nine pupils did not make any errors when using them in their essays. Six pupils made only one error and two pupils making only two errors when using prepositions. There was one pupil who made three errors.

A majority of pupils which is a total of thirty-two did not make any errors in the usage of articles. However, three pupils made one error, and the other three made two errors.

Table 2. The frequency of Errors Made by Pupils in Their Short Essays (Group 2)

Sample	Noun	Verb	Preposition	Article
Pupil 39	4	2	0	1
Pupil 40	1	3	0	0
Pupil 41	1	1	0	0
Pupil 42	1	5	0	0
Pupil 43	2	3	1	1
Pupil 44	2	3	0	0
Pupil 45	1	3	0	0
Pupil 46	1	1	1	0
Pupil 47	1	2	0	0
Pupil 48	0	1	0	0
Pupil 49	2	1	0	1
Pupil 50	1	0	0	1
Pupil 51	2	1	0	1
Pupil 52	1	2	0	0
Pupil 53	1	3	0	0
Pupil 54	2	1	0	0
Pupil 55	2	2	0	0
Pupil 56	1	2	0	0
Pupil 57	1	7	0	0
Pupil 58	3	2	0	1
Pupil 59	1	1	0	0
Pupil 60	0	2	0	1
Pupil 61	0	3	0	1
Pupil 62	0	3	0	0
Pupil 63	1	4	0	0
Pupil 64	3	1	0	0
Pupil 65	1	0	0	1
Pupil 66	2	1	0	0
Pupil 67	0	2	0	0
Pupil 68	0	3	0	1
Pupil 69	1	3	0	0
Pupil 70	1	2	0	0
Pupil 71	1	0	0	1
Pupil 72	0	1	0	0
Pupil 73	0	1	0	0
Pupil 74	1	2	0	0
Pupil 75	1	2	0	0
Pupil 76	1	2	0	2
Pupil 77	0	3	1	2

As for Group 2, the advanced class, a majority of twenty pupils made only one error in the usage of nouns. Nine pupils did not make any errors using nouns in their essays. There is a total of seven pupils who made two errors; meanwhile,



two pupils made three errors. Only one pupil made four errors in the usage of nouns.

A majority of twelve pupils made two errors in using verbs when writing their essays. Eleven pupils made only one error, and a total of ten pupils made three errors. Only three pupils were able to use articles correctly in their essays. Based on the results, one pupil made four errors, one pupil made five errors, and one pupil made the most errors, seven.

Meanwhile, in the usage of prepositions, a majority of thirty-six pupils did not make any errors at all. Three pupils only made one error when using prepositions to write their essay.

Lastly, the majority of twenty-six pupils did not make any errors in the usage of articles. Eleven pupils made only one error using articles in their essays, and only two pupils made two errors.

Based on the two tables, verbs have the highest frequency of errors. Group 1 with a total of eighty-six and Group 2 with a total of eighty-one. Following verbs is nouns with a total of forty-six for Group 1 and a total of forty-four for Group 2. The third is articles. Group 2 states a higher frequency of fifteen compared to Group 1 which only has only nine. Last but not least, prepositions. Group 1 has a higher frequency of thirteen compared to Group 2 which has only three.

Table 3. Frequency of Errors of Group 1 and Group 2

Types of Errors	Number of Pupils (Group 1)	Number of Pupils (Group 2)
NOUNS	30 (79%)	30 (77%)
VERBS	37 (97.4%)	36 (92.3%)
PREPOSITIONS	9 (23.7%)	3 (7.7%)
ARTICLES	6 (15.8%)	13 (33.3%)
TOTAL	n=38	n=39

Table 3 shows that in both Group 1 and Group 2, there is an equal number of thirty pupils who made errors using nouns in their essays. Most of the pupils had difficulty with plurality and misused of pronouns. As for the usage of verbs, Group 1, the lower-intermediate class, more pupils made errors compared to Group 1, which is a total of thirty-seven pupils compared to thirty-six. Most of the pupils had problems with tenses and auxiliary verbs, some with misused participle tense and a minority with modal verbs. Group 2 has a higher number of pupils who made errors in the usage of prepositions compared to Group 1 which has only three compared to nine pupils in Group 2. It is due to pupils from Group 2 attempted to write longer sentences compared to pupils from Group 1. Unexpectedly, thirteen pupils from Group 2 made more errors when using articles in their essays compare to Group 1 which has only six. Most of the pupils tend to misuse articles, and there is a minority who tend to omit articles before the nouns.

B. Examples of Errors

The researcher focused on only the four word classes with a higher frequency of errors made by the 77pupils. Below are examples of errors taken from the essays written by the

pupils according to the four word classes: nouns, verbs, prepositions, and articles.

Nouns

A total of 77.9 per cent of the pupils from Group 1 and Group 2 made errors in the usage of nouns. The most frequent errors made were in plurality and pronouns. The English language teachers have taught countable and uncountable nouns and pronouns to these pupils since the lower primary.

1) *Plurality*

- a. You can * checkups every six month* * free.
- b. You don't * to bring much money because the treatment* are free.
- c. The treatment* are free.

2) *Pronouns*

- d. i) (They) are many free treatment* like free demonstration everyday on correct method to brush teeth.
- e. ii) I (write) this email to tell (your) about * types of treatment provided at Berjaya Dental.
- f. iii) (It) will be free demonstration everyday on correct method to brush teeth.

Verbs

There is a total of 94.8 per cent of pupils made errors when using verbs. The majority of pupils made errors when using tenses. Teachers have taught the pupils present tense, past participle tense, future tense, auxiliary verbs, and modal verbs.

a) *Present Tense*

- i) *The (H)ospital open* from Monday till Saturday from 8.30 a.m till 4.30 p.m.*
- ii) *Berjaya Dental (Berjaya) (give) you free treatment*.*
- iii) *I (send) this email to tell you about the types of treatment provided at Berjaya Dental Hospital.*

b) *Past Participle*

- i) *The hospital *free vitamins (given) to prevent gum disease on visits made for checkups.*
- ii) *They * (given) * to prevent gum * (to teeth).*
- iii) *It is (open) on Monday till Saturday from 8.30 a.m till 4.30 p.m.*

c) *Future Tense*

- i) *It (will be) charges for medicine only.*
- ii) *They (will give) free treatment.*

d) *Omission of Auxiliary Verbs*

- i) *Free vitamins * given (T)o prevent gum disease on visits made for checkups.*
- ii) *Vitamins * given to prevent gum disease on visits made for checkups.*
- iii) *I hope you * well.*

e) *Misused Modal Verbs*

- i) *The doctor (can) saw free demonstration to brush teeth.*
- ii) *The hospital (can) give free vitamins on visits made for checkups.*

Prepositions

A total of 15.6 per cent of the pupils made errors when using prepositions. Although pupils had learned types of prepositions, they still made errors like the omission of prepositions or misused prepositions.

a) *Omission of Prepositions*

- i) *I hope that you * come * Berjaya Dental Hospital for treatment.*



- ii) *I hope you can go to the Berjaya Dental Hospital (at) school holidays.*
- iii) *I (write) this email (at) Berjaya Dental Hospital.*
- b) Misused of Prepositions
 - i) *The free (treatment) (on) this hospital are free demonstration everyday on correct method to brush teeth.*
 - ii) *(The) free advice * diet to prevent tooth decay and free teeth whitening *.*
 - iii) *I hope you come (at) Berjaya Dental Hospital.*

Articles

There is a total of 24.7 per cent of pupils did not use articles correctly. Most of the pupils either did not put an article before a noun, or they had misused articles. They have learned the usage of articles.

a) Omission of Articles

- i) ** Types of treatment are (,) free demonstration everyday on correct method to brush teeth and free advice on diet to prevent tooth decay.*
- ii) *See you at *(H)ospital.*
- b) Misused Articles
 - i) **(The) demonstration everyday on correct method to brush teeth.*
 - ii) *(A) Berjaya Dental Hospital (open) from Monday till Saturday from 8.30 a.m till 4.30 p.m.*
 - iii) *I hope that you are in (a) good condition.*

Based on the examples given in this section, we can see that both Group 1, that is the lower intermediate group and Group 2, the advanced group, have an equal number of frequency of errors for nouns which is thirty. Most of the pupils from Group 1 and Group 2 tend to have problems with plurality. They omitted the 's' even though it was a plural noun. They were also confused about which pronouns to be used that should be appropriate with the context. Next, findings show that Group 1 have a higher number frequency of errors for verbs compared to Group 2 which is thirty-seven compared to thirty-six. They have problems in tenses. They did not add an 's' when using a singular verb in present tense. Many pupils used participle form instead of adding 'ed' when they wrote in past tense. A few pupils added 'will be' in sentences when the context was not in future. Some pupils omitted auxiliary verbs in their sentences. Some pupils added 'can' when it was not needed. Group 1 also have a higher frequency of errors for prepositions which is nine compared to only three by Group 2. Some of them used 'at' the hospital instead of 'to' the hospital or did not use prepositions at all. Meanwhile, Group 2 made more errors in the use of articles compared to Group 1 which is thirteen compared to six. Most of them did not put any articles in front of nouns. Some added an article when it was not needed. With these findings, teachers can decide on what kind of materials and to come up with ways to help the pupils understand these four word classes better and when to use them. Teachers can also plan more effective teaching techniques to help these pupils learn grammar rules and plan suitable classroom activities to reinforce learning.

V. CONCLUSION

Analysing errors made by pupils could provide teachers with valuable information. This information can help teachers to decide on the appropriate remedial materials and methodology to help their pupils. This study identifies the

types of errors frequently made by ESL pupils. Findings are presented in tables.

It is crucial for teachers to identify errors made by their students and come up with a solution to improve their learning. In this study, it is evident that teachers need to come up with appropriate materials and methods to overcome the problems in the usage of the four word classes: nouns, verbs, prepositions and article so that these students could use them correctly when writing their essays in the future. The role that a teacher plays is important as a teacher determines the learning outcome of his students.

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