

A Syntactic Errors Analysis in the Malaysian ESL Learners' Written Composition

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the English syntactic errors occurred persistently in the Malaysian ESL learners' written composition in the Politeknik Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. The subjects were 50 multilingual students who speak their own dialect, Malay as their second language and English as their third or foreign language. Data were collected from the written discourse in the form of descriptive essays. The subjects were asked to write in the classroom within 45 minutes. Fifty-one categories of errors were classified to find out the causes of syntactic error, types of frequent errors, weakness areas and problems tend to occur in written composition. The findings of the study showed that the syntactic errors were due to learners' mother tongue interference, lack of grammatical knowledge, lack of vocabulary knowledge, repetition, redundant lexical choice, bad sentence formation and developmental errors.

Keywords: errors analysis, syntactic analysis, English as a second language, ESL writing

INTRODUCTION

The vital goal of teaching the English language as a second language is to make learners proficient in some or all of the basic language skills, including reading, speaking, listening and understanding the language phrases and sentence structures (Hemabati Ngangbam, 2016). As second language learners gradually move towards deeper understanding and mastery of target language, they progress throughout the interlanguage (Abdulmir Alamin & Saswan Ahmed, 2012). According to Corder (1975), interlanguage occurs during the initial stage where learners do not achieve proficiency and emphasise what they know about the target language. Interference from the mother tongue is believed to be the major source of learning problem in the target language. Moreover, interference is a negative transfer or influence of a language to another

language in the bilingual or multilingual situation. Therefore, learning problems or errors may have various types based on the interference degree of the native language.

As a second language learner in Malaysia, writing in the English language is one of the toughest tasks to accomplish. Many ESL learners have experienced the difficulty in producing a piece of writing in the English language. The errors occurred in ESL writing are significantly due to the interference and negative influence of learners' first language. Writing itself is not a simple process and it even becomes a more complicated process when it is learned as a foreign or second language (Hemabati Ngangbam, 2016), especially in Malaysia. Writing errors due to interference has attracted the interest of many researchers Cedar (2004), Chen & Huang (2003), Benson (2002), Collins (2002), Seyyed (2012), and Jarvis (2000). Learners of English as a second language in Malaysia were expected to experience the impact of first language interference in their ESL learning.

Error analysis is an applied linguistics approach used to identify the areas of difficulty for second language learners by applying a formal system to differentiate the distinction between the learners' first language and target language which is the L2 (Corder, 1967). An error analysis study also attempts to analyse errors committed by the learners in relation to the target language (Corder, 1971). In English language writing context, the written message is understood if the sentences are constructed according to the rules of syntax. Therefore, any disagreement with the syntactic rules is called syntax errors. In writing, syntax complexity is defined as the ability to produce writings that present the ideas and the large chunks of information blended together with the use of subordinate and embedded subordinate clauses (Susana, 2007). Syntax complexity is one of the most difficult elements for ESL learners in writing. Atawneh (1994) examined the English syntactic problems persistent in the performance of educated Arabs living in the United States. Results indicated performance problems in the areas of (1) tense agreement; (2) relative clause construction; (3) indirect questions; (4) perfective tenses; and (5) use of prepositions. Atawneh (1994) furthermore explained that the degree of deviation in these areas depends on both amount of time spent in the United States and their educational level. Another similar study conducted by Zughouli (2002), had showed that noun phrase errors were second to verb phrase errors, and the most frequent noun phrase errors were in the use of articles, ordinals were used interchangeably, and quantifiers were confused as to their use with count / noncount nouns. Meanwhile, Al-Khasawneh, (2010), in his studies, aimed at investigating the academic writing problems of the Arab postgraduate students of the College of Business at University Utara Malaysia providing solutions to these problems. The findings of the study revealed that the students faced problems in relation to vocabulary register, an organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing.

It can be concluded that certain difficulties were specific to second language learners. It can be seen that second language learners tend to overuse coordinate clauses, at the same time, learners also have difficulties in tenses, verb formation, articles, concord,

prepositions, language use (grammar) and punctuation, vocabulary register, and organisation of ideas, spelling, and referencing lexical errors and semantic errors.

Thus, this study attempts to bring a broader discussion on syntactic errors in ESL writing focusing on second language learners of English in a Community College of Penampang, Sabah. This study also helps to figure out the continuing growth of syntax in the most effective discourse either in written or spoken. Therefore, it reflects the features that distinguish the Malaysians English performance variety development where English stands as a second language. Investigating the syntax errors may help to reduce the writing errors demonstrated by Malaysian learners of English as a second language.

Research aim

This study aims to examine the English syntactic errors occurred persistently in the Malaysian ESL learners' written composition particularly in the Politeknik Kota Kinabalu Sabah, Malaysia.

Research questions

The researchers have postulated the following research questions in order to fulfil deeper analysis of this study.

1. What are the causes of these syntactic errors?
2. What types of syntactic errors frequently occur in written compositions?
3. What are the problems that learners tend to experience in writing compositions?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

For the purpose of this study, a set of syntactic categories has been postulated and analysed as suggested by Hemabati Ngangbam (2016).

- Adjectives and adjectives phrases errors.
- Adverbs and adverbs phrases errors.
- Noun-phrases errors.
- Sentence structure errors.
- Word order errors.

This study aims to describe and explain the syntactic errors that occur naturally without any intervention and data were collected from a group of participants. This study also involves a qualitative aspect of research tradition where things are observed and studied in their natural settings. This study has a limited number of participants and written documents of the ESL learners are used.

Sample and population

Fifty ESL learners involved in this study. They are currently studying Communicative English 1 course in semester 1, Diploma of Accountancy programme in the Politeknik Kota Kinabalu Sabah, Malaysia. The participants have to attend English class two hours a week for over fifteen weeks in a semester. They are required to take Communicative English course as a requirement to graduate in Diploma programme. All participants have different L1 because they belong to have different ethnic groups. Malay is used as a language medium of communication and interaction in formal education. Meanwhile, the English language is learned formally during respective classes in school. However, learners observed are still struggling to translate words and phrases from Malay to English even in tertiary education. They also memorised a big amount of English vocabulary and sentence structures but seldom apply them in real life habitually.

Data collection method

The data for this study is collected from the descriptive essays composition of 50 ESL learners. Learners were given a list of descriptive essays topics. With the chosen topic, learners were required to write and develop the topic into 200 to 250 words. The essay writing activity was conducted during one of the English language classes. The learners were instructed to accomplish the writing composition in 45 minutes the essays were collected for data analysis purposes.

Data analysis

All the data collected were analysed to examine the learners' performance in composing English syntax. Therefore, the following procedure was taken to analyse the data obtained (Huang, 2002)

- Data collection
- Identification of errors
- Classification of errors into error types
- A statement of error frequency
- The method of collecting data

The entire data were collected from the written discourse in a form of descriptive essays. The participants were asked to write during the English class in a time limit of 45 minutes. The completed samples were hand-collected to ensure the validity of the samples. Errors of the collected data from the writing samples were identified and classified into different errors categories. All errors were classified into nine different errors categories as suggested by Horney (1998). There were 15 categories of errors which were classified and analysed in this study.

RESULTS

Based on the analysed data, the most frequent errors found in the learners' writing samples was associated with the verbs 18.90%. The second highest was spelling

(11.86%) and third was the sentence fragments (10.56%). The fourth highest ranking error found was the use of punctuation in writing (9.93%). The error rates with conjunction, articles, nouns, pronouns and preposition had moderate error frequency and percentage whereas, the least predominant error committed was found with adjectives with 64 frequency and 2.37%.

Table 1. *Error categories, frequency, and percentage of errors*

Error categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Order rank
Spelling	320	11.86	2
Sentence fragments	285	10.56	3
Syntax	266	9.85	5
Adverbs	102	3.78	8
Punctuation	268	9.93	4
Verbs	510	18.90	1
Lexicon	245	9.08	6
Subject omission	120	4.44	7
Conjunction	92	3.40	10
Articles	89	3.29	11
Nouns	98	3.63	9
Pronouns	85	3.15	13
Preposition	86	3.18	12
Capitalisation	68	2.52	14
Adjectives	64	2.37	15

DISCUSSION

From the result of the study presented in Table 1, it indicates that the frequency of error committed by the ESL learners in their writing is probably due to many factors and attributes. The result also shows the interference of the first language in interpreting or translating to the second language. In Lin (2002), Kao (1999) and Kambal's (1980) studies, they mentioned that second language learners were found experiencing difficulties in learning and mastering the second language. The difficulties experienced were varied in different aspects.

Basically, although these ESL learners have been learning the English language for more than eleven years before they come to tertiary level, they are still unable to express spoken and written English discourse properly. Learners are still struggling to translate words and phrases from Malay to the English language. Besides that, they always show anxiety when speaking in the English language. On top of that, learners are also facing difficulties in composing English sentences. The lack of writing proficiency skills always leads to the readers' difficulty in comprehending their writing samples.

The salient features in syntactic error in this study were discussed the following sources (Hemabati Ngangbam, 2016):

- *Malay interference*
- *Failure in separating meaningful sentences*

- *Performance errors*
- *Developmental errors*
- *Overuse*

Malay interference

Malay interference is one of the major sources in committing the syntactic errors. The learners have directly translated the Malay words into English words which led to malformation of the sentences. The following are some of the samples.

- 'She is a strong person and I very love her'... (paper 50)
- 'I see there is no dog that time'... (paper 35)
- 'The last I meet my father on Wednesday when he sends me back'... (paper 30)
- 'Each of us must have a dream'... (paper 26)

These examples show that mother tongue interference was one of the main sources of errors. Learners translated the Malay words to English equivalents based on their own understanding. Therefore, the assertion of Malay interference would one of the reasons for these syntactic errors.

Failure in separating meaningful sentences

From the result, it is revealed that learners committed errors due to failure in dividing a sentence into meaningful forms or connecting the phrases into meaningful sentences. There were often found confused and tend to divide a sentence in a wrong position. The samples of sentences are shown as follow:

- 'When I was ten years old, my parents buy me a present that is a pet, who puppy name Kiko, the price is four hundred'... (paper 5)
- 'Everyone has their lovely parents who still stay together but different to me, my parents already divorced'... (paper 42)
- 'The day that I meet someone, the most I just like to see every day, and the wonderful moment when I meet and talk about to someone'... (paper36).
- 'A room where friends, fun, and hobbies are the only words in the dictionary, and the most important place in my house is the basement'... (paper 29)

Performance error

The other reason which might have caused these syntactic errors was performance error. This kind of error leads to the error formation of sentences in writing. The following are the samples of this point.

- 'We go Makkah and Madinah to perform Umrah'... (paper 33) (are going to)
- 'There many changed happen in my hometown'... (paper 32) (There are...changes)
- 'My father as a security guard at oil factory'... (paper31) (works as...)
- 'Everyone busy working and studying'... (paper 3) (Everyone is...)

Developmental errors

The developmental error is found to be the fourth sources of errors in learners writing. According to Oller and Richards (1978), these errors were identified as systematic and may represent either a transitional stage in the development of a grammatical rule or the final stage of the speakers' knowledge. These errors were either caused by an incorrect collection of meaning similarity. The following samples are given below.

- 'I talked about my favourite person'...(paper 4) (am writing)
- 'I will talk my oldest sister, her name is Tracey'... (paper 34) (will introduce)
- '...having a house that is look alike with heaven'... (paper 28) (looks like)
- 'We don't get to see a lot of time'... (paper 37) (often)

Overuse

Overuse is the last sources of syntactic error discuss in this study. This kind of errors was also identified as overgeneralization errors. It has been found out that these errors were caused by the extension of the grammatical rules in the target language. Learners commit such errors because of recurrent grammatical weaknesses to enhance writing performance. The following are some examples.

- 'All of us went to the unity to register'... (paper 39) (committee)
- 'I get my diploma after 3 years of studying'... (paper 40) (will complete my diploma)
- 'On the final exam, I felt worry but later I am not'... (paper 38) (during)
- 'My mother not tell me anything'... (paper 41) (do not advice)

Basically, the findings of the current study give a deeper insight of understanding about the actual performance of the ESL learners. Moreover, the further discussion about the findings will help English language teachers to diagnose the areas of weaknesses and the difficulties that learners tend to have in their written composition.

From the results mentioned above, it can be stated that the most errors committed by learners were in spelling, punctuation, sentence fragments, syntax, preposition, and verbs. One possible reason for this probably due to lack of consideration, memory lapses, carelessness, physical state, confusion and late exposing of English language which eventually leads to poor background knowledge about the target language. Meanwhile, the errors like verbs, adjectives, nouns and articles were also given consideration as major grammatical errors committed by learners in written composition. These errors play a major factor in influencing to express proper and correct English sentences especially while attempting to second language writing. However, many malformation sentences could result from these neglected errors.

The learners' errors in sentence fragments, syntax, prepositions and verbs were found due to the grammatical difficulty in learning English as a second language. Some written samples showed learners' difficulty in writing complete expressions or sentences in describing a situation and condition, under sentence fragments error typology. Learners

were also observed committing errors in prepositions and verbs due to lack of knowledge in tense agreement and subject – verb agreement.

CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be concluded that the errors were found committed due to learners' mother tongue or first language interference as well as the lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. It is the role of the English language teachers to specify the differentiation between Malay and English grammar, to avoid language interference and for a more effective impact of learning English as a second language. Besides that, teachers should encourage the ESL learners to develop a positive attitude towards the English language. Further study with a wider sample of participants is recommended to be conducted. Besides that, researchers can conduct a study comparing the achievement of the learners whom taught by an experienced language teacher.

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