Malaysian Tertiary ESL Students' Writing Errors and Their Implications on English Language Teaching

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Abstract: Errors, either in writing or speaking, are common in second language production. Researchers have long been investigating English as Second Language (ESL) learners' errors because they may produce different kinds of errors than native speakers. The purpose of this study was to identify errors made by adult ESL learners and to examine the L1 interference in writing errors. Writing samples were collected from 30 students enrolled in the academic writing class in Universiti Putra Malaysia, and the errors were identified, recorded, and analyzed to determine whether they were intralingual or interlingual ones. The study results showed that most of the errors were in subject-verb agreement and verb tenses, which could be caused by first language (L1) influence. The findings of this study would shed light on the types of errors these ESL learners make and their weaknesses in using the English language. Besides, the findings could support instructors, curricula creators, and textbook writers to create and offer materials that could help learners enhance their command of the English language.

1.   Introduction

Writing can be one of the most challenging tasks for students, especially in learning a second language (L2), and one of the contributing factors is the first language (L1) interference in second language production. Generally, writing is an active skill of language usage. Thus, many studies have been investigating writing errors produced by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to improve their written work. In Malaysia, most subjects are taught in English at the tertiary level. Therefore, being able to write well in English is important. As an L2 speaker, being competent in all four skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—is vital. A competent language user would be able to write in English without errors. Urdaneta (2011) highlighted that to acquire a second language, the role of the first language has to be taken into account as L1 can induce the acquisition of L2 positively or negatively.

However, acquiring English skills is laborious and protracted (Mencias & De Vera, 2018) and hindered by L1 interference (Yang & Yu, 2019). But errors can be advantageous for both learners and teachers because errors, weaknesses, and strengths in English writing can be identified and improved upon (Ab Manan et al., 2017). Due to this, many researchers are interested in investigating errors made by ESL learners. But errors are not caused entirely by L1 interference because they could be developmental errors (or intralingual errors) that students make during the acquisition process. According to Touchie (1986), developmental errors originate from factors such as simplification,

overgeneralization, hypercorrection, false teaching, fossilization, avoidance, inadequate learning, and false concepts.

Over the past few decades, many studies have been conducted to investigate writing errors among ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Rahmat & Coxhead, 2021). Some of these studies focused on the types of errors, while others targeted the roots of the problems. However, there is scarce research on error analysis among adult ESL learners in Malaysia, especially in the context of academic writing. Thus, the study aims to determine the problems faced by Malaysian ESL learners in academic writing, to determine whether L1 interference occurs in L2 written structure at tertiary level, and to identify the most common writing errors caused by L1 interference.

Errors should be analyzed carefully to provide insights into how far the learners have progressed in acquiring the language and how much more they need to learn (Sermsook et al., 2017). Since errors also show the process of language learning, they do help students' writing proficiency and teachers' pedagogical techniques. Investigating writing errors will create new ideas for teachers, especially those teaching ESL at the tertiary level, to improve their pedagogical methods. The application of error analysis in this study may provide useful information for educators, syllabus designers, and the Ministry of Education to devise appropriate materials, courses, teaching strategies, and techniques to cater to learners' needs.

2. Literature Review

This study used Corder's Error Analysis (1971) and Richard's (1975) Causes of Errors as its conceptual framework. In the L2 acquisition process, errors can assist teachers to provide feedback, devote special care, and emphasize the teaching process to overcome or avoid the predicted difficulties faced by students (Puspita, 2019). Many studies focused on ways to handle error correction (e.g., ESL or EFL classroom context). These are helpful as students can improve their command of the language from this feedback and errors. However, it is still an exciting topic to tackle because L2 learners make specific mistakes (Shanti & Jaafar, 2021). Difficulties in producing an error-free piece of writing among L2 learners have prompted ESL practitioners and researchers to find the causes of this issue, considering that writing is the most challenging skill to master. Studies have found that ESL and EFL learners find correct grammatical forms difficult when it comes to writing. The mother tongue influence in L2 learning has been widely investigated in the Asian context (Nguyen, 2014). The different first languages were also found to contribute to different types of errors in second language production. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate whether L1 influences the errors made by Malay speakers.

For a study to investigate gaps in English language teaching and learning between post-basic schools and universities in Oman, Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) measured the extent to which school and university students faced problems in writing. Their study found two main problematic areas as follows: ideas to write about a topic and to write an English sentence that is grammatically correct. Overall, the study concluded that both school and university students faced issues in writing essays in English, where a majority of them struggled with the linguistic and content aspects of it. Ghabool et al. (2012) found that the most frequent errors were made in language use. According to Gedion et al. (2016), on the other hand, examined English syntactic errors that occur persistently among Malaysian ESL tertiary learners' written compositions. They observed that the most frequent error was related to verbs, followed by sentence fragments and punctuation. They concluded that the errors were made due to learners' mother tongue interference and lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. The study also highlighted the teachers' role in overcoming the errors. Although many studies have identified the most common writing problems facing ESL learners in Malaysia, studies investigating the reasons for these problems are scarce.

3.   Methods

3.1.1   Participants and locations

The participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling, and all of them were ESL speakers aged between 19 and 25. The participants came from various fields of Bachelor programs in a public university in Malaysia. The participants were intermediate English users with a score between band 3-5 as reflected by their results from the national-level university English qualifying test called Malaysian University English Test (MUET). This study used a qualitative research design to identify writing errors in academic essays caused by L1 interference (interlingual/transfer error) and developmental errors (intralingual) among Bachelor students in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Corder's (1971) Error Analysis model was used to identify the errors, which consists of a sample of the learners' essays, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation (see Table 1). The analysis helped the researchers to distinguish between errors and mistakes. Thirty samples of essays written by Malay students enrolled in the *Writing Academic-Text* class were selected for the study. They were given 2 weeks to finish their essays. The students were permitted to revise their work before submitting the final essays; hence, any *idiosyncratic* vocabularies could be classified as errors because they occurred due to a lack of knowledge in the target field, such as grammatical knowledge. In contrast, in a traditional writing test, students must complete their essays within a specific period, so factors such as stress, time restriction, and anxiety can cause students to make incidental mistakes. Such a distinction allows the researchers to differentiate between errors and mistakes.

Table 1. Steps in Error Analysis

Steps		Definition of steps	Examples
1	Collect data	Written through essay writing	30 writing samples were collected
2	Identify errors	Types of errors	1. Prepositions, articles, singular/plural, nouns, pronouns, tense, articles, preposition, verb formation, subject-verb agreement, fragment 2.Word choice 3.Meaning 4.Use of punctuations
3	Classify errors	Is it an error of agreement? Is it an error in irregular verbs?	Grammatical type errors Syntactic type error Lexical type error Semantic type error Mechanics type error
4	Quantify errors	How many errors	How many errors of each feature occur?
5	Analyse source	Cause of these errors	Intralingual (development errors) Interlingual (interference errors) Intelligible error

3.2   Data analysis

The students' essays were read line by line to identify occurrences of errors due to L1 interference. In utilizing Error Analysis, the study focused on the students' syntactic errors, such as mechanics, grammar, and sentence structure. In this study, the Error Analysis approach was used to identify the errors because it aimed to analyze all errors made by students in writing (L1 interference errors, communicative strategies, quality of second language instruction, and cognitive processes as

sources of the errors), whereas Contrastive Analysis focused on analyzing errors caused by L1 interference through differences and similarities between English and Malay language structure. Error Analysis was chosen over Contrastive Analysis in this study because of errors made by negative transfer, which include and universal writing strategies. Error analysis consists of comparing errors made in the target language and that target language itself (Khansir, 2012). The percentage error calculation formula is based on Deviyana's (2017) procedure as follows:

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100$$

(P = Percentage of students' errors; f = Total number of students' errors; N = Total number of students' errors)

The Error Analysis approach allows the researchers to identify errors that mainly focus on systematic violation of patterns in the students' essays. It also indicates the learners' interlanguage or underlying knowledge of the rules in the language learned, as errors made by ESL learners may not usually occur in a native speaker's output. To analyze the data, the study employed Wu and Garza's (2014) error analysis steps adapted from Corder's (1971) error analysis steps. The first step involved examining each essay word by word and sentences to identify all errors in the language learners' essays. The data would then be tabulated into categories based on all writing samples following taxonomies such as grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order type of errors. Secondly, the number of errors would be counted and converted into percentages to examine the types and frequencies of occurrences.

4.   Results and Discussion

Error analysis carried out on 30 academic texts written by the students revealed four different types of errors, namely (*1) grammar, (2) word choice, (3) meaning, and (4) use of punctuation.* Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of errors that occurred in the essays. It shows the students had made 302 errors, and the most common were grammatical ones. The highest percentage (27%) is for subject-verb agreement, followed by verb tense (26%), while the smallest rate of error is for the use of nouns (0%).

Table 2. Errors made by students

	Error categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Grammatical errors	Verb tense	80	26
	Sentence structure	3	1
	Coordination	6	2
	Relative clause	2	1
	Singular/plural	44	15
	Verb omission	8	3
	Subject omission	3	1
	S-V agreement	82	27
Lexical errors	Noun	0	0
	Pronoun	10	3
	Verb	8	3
	Adjective	7	2
	Adverb	4	1
	Article	2	1
	Preposition	19	6
	Word form	10	3
Semantic errors	Word choice (meaning)	3	1
Mechanics errors	Punctuation	4	1
	Capitalization	4	1
	Spelling	1	1
	Citation	2	1
Total		302	100

4.1   Subject-verb agreement

The majority of errors made by the students in their writing were in subject-verb agreement, indicating a lack of competence in this area. In their study, Tafida and Okunade (2016) also found violations of subject-verb agreement in both writing and speaking. They emphasized that the worst mistake a user could make in spoken and written English was the lack of agreement between words in a sentence. Even coherent writing is compromised if there is a violation of the subject-verb agreement. One who speaks or writes in English without errors in the subject-verb agreement is often considered an experienced and competent language speaker. Therefore, teachers often give great emphasis to teach subject-verb agreement with the hope of producing proficient ESL students.

As aforementioned, the data show that students in the study scored the highest frequency of errors in subject-verb agreement. One possible reason is the interference of their native language, which is Malay. In the Malay language, verb tenses and plurality do not undergo any word derivation. Therefore, the Malay language does not have rules for subject-verb agreement. Hence, it can be difficult for Malay ESL learners to apply this in their writing and speaking.

Over the past few decades, researchers have been investigating ESL learner errors and their causes, and this topic still sparks interest among linguists and academicians. Even with great efforts to reduce these errors, they remain a serious concern for Malay ESL learners. Examples of the subject-verb agreement errors from the writing samples are as follows:

1. Most computer games train your mind to be logical thinking and *increase problem-solving* ability.
2. Many parents are very concerned especially when their children *play* long hours of video games…
3. Sexual health also *involves* a positive and respectful approach that works both ways.

All of the examples above show that students are aware of the subject's plurality or singularity. However, due to the complex structures of the sentences, they appeared to neglect the rule. The confusion can be identified as an interlingual type of error because the Malay language is not concerned with the plurality or singularity of verbs. Still, it exemplifies tense, nouns, or pronouns. For instance: Verb=*panggil* (call)

The root word is "panggil", which means call, and with the addition of prefix pe-, the root word changed from a verb to a noun, but with the addition of the prefixes *di-* and *me-* the word changed to a verb again. Since word derivation in Malay is not concerned with subject-verb agreement rules, unlike in English, such differences can cause students to apply the same structures in Malay when writing in English.

Karim et al. (2015) identified three types of subject-verb agreement errors: (i) plural subject and plural verb, (ii) *singular subject with a singular verb, and (iii) relative pronoun's verb and its antecedent*. However, in this study, most errors were related to the singular and plural forms, and there were fewer errors in the relative clause. This could be due to the students' writing strategy of using few relative clauses. In academic writing, sentences are more direct and straightforward, and students tend to be brief in their sentence construction. However, a different result might be found in the writing genre, such as narrative writing or creative writing.

4.2   Verb Tense

Errors with verb tenses registered the second-highest frequency in the study. It shows that the respondents have problems applying tense rules in their writing. Discussions and further research should be conducted to understand the sources of such errors. Common errors found were the use of past tense verbs as this is argumentative academic writing. Students were required to cite from previous studies and report the findings to provide support for their arguments (Hamzah et al., 2021). Maniam and Rajagopal (2016) acknowledged that ignorance of rule restriction is one of the types of ESL speakers' errors. They mentioned that students might have the knowledge but blundered due to a lack of understanding. Grammar rules often have exceptions, which may confuse students, and that is when errors such as omission or over generalization occur.

4.3   Plural vs Singular

This section focuses on the plural and singular forms of subjects in sentence construction. Data collected showed that students would use correct verb forms but the wrong subject plurality or singularity. It means they were able to identify the singularity or plurality of the verb but not the subject.

Experts argued that the plurality and singularity rule is a basic rule that should be mastered by students right from the foundation level (Yang & Yu, 2019). However, in grammar rule application, ESL learners often stumble in using plural and singular forms. The rule on singularity and plurality is linked with subject-verb agreement rules because when the subject is plural, the verb should be in plural form. A simple example is as follows:

"The boy eats an apple" (singular)

"The boys eat apples" (plural)

This section discusses students' errors in adding suffixes to indicate plurality. The findings from this study revealed that students have difficulties in expressing the quantity of the subjects. They make simple mistakes by not adding a suffix to indicate quantity. In the examples below, all the sentences have the right verb forms but incorrect subject plurality or singularity forms:

i.   These dialogues wander around us and are influencing our society nowadays, especially teenagers and young *adults*.
ii.   This gender equality should be implemented in today's society as women and *men* are pillars to each other.
iii. Kodak (2007) claimed that *children* will choose positive reinforcement instead of negative reinforcement when there is an option to pick either food (positive reinforcement) or a break from their task (negative reinforcement) and the food led to greater reductions in problem behavior as they will complete their work instead of taking a break from it.
iv.   Nuclear weapons are and have always been used to stabilize the power between major countries and to protect the people's lives; however, they should be banned as they are a catalyst of war and they destroy people's lives.

In example (i), both "teenagers" and "adults" should be in plural form as the situation is real for many and not just one "young adult". Also, a quantifier is required for a singular subject or object in a sentence. The same type of error occurred in example (ii). This type of error had the third-highest frequency of occurrences in the essays collected from the study participants. The result showed that students have low competency in singular-plural rules, especially with nouns, as discussed in this section. Example (iii) shows an error with the plural form of the noun "child." The author should have removed the article in the sentence, as the succeeding pronoun "they" indicates plurality. This error overlaps with article error because if the writer had removed the article "a", this sentence would have been correct. The students' mother tongue influence could cause this error. In the Malay language, there is no addition of affixes to indicate plural or singular. In the Malay language, a quantifier is used to indicate singular and plural, whereas, in English, some words change depending on whether they are irregular and regular nouns, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Examples of irregular and regular nouns

Irregular nouns			Regular nouns		
mouse	→	mice	cat	→	cat**s**
leaf	→	leaves	book	→	book**s**
child	→	children	wish	→	wishe**s**

In Malay, to describe plural and singular, *penjodoh bilangan* (collective nouns/quantifiers) are used or *kata ganda sepenuh* (reduplication of words). In Malay, there are no word derivations to indicate plural or singular nouns. However, even if quantifiers or collective nouns are used in English, the words still undergo derivations. This difference may be the main reason why Malay ESL learners have problems in this area. This statement is supported by Stymne (2011), who identified plurality formation of words in the English language as much more complicated because it involves many spelling rules, and even though students are exposed to the idea of adding the suffix *-s* to indicate plurality, they should be aware of other infections as well. She also contended that students' lack of exposure to the words' inflection hindered them from grasping the idea of plurality in English. In the present study, it appears that the students were aware of the plurality of words, but when they wrote complex sentences that require more nouns, they did not pluralize all the nouns, as can be seen in example (i). In short, inflections could be the main reason why the students made this error. Due to the great distinction of rules between the two languages, Malay and English, students could become confused and careless. This could be one reason why Malay ESL learners still have trouble in English plurality despite their years studying it in school.

5.   Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that students at the tertiary level have writing problems in the academic genre. Based on the result tabulated in Table 1, the most common errors are subject-verb agreement, followed by verb tense. In short, most of the errors are in grammar rather than lexical or semantic. Mastering English grammar rules would be the trickiest part for students, but it would make learning more straightforward with the correct approach. Also, if students master the grammar aspect, it will automatically help them produce better write-ups, especially in the academic genre. Overall, this study provides insight and evidence for academicians, education practitioners, and students to be aware of their writing errors, and this awareness will help them overcome these shortcomings effectively. Besides, the students' pattern of errors is similar to the L1 structure, which is the Malay language, and this answered the second research question posed in the study. The interference of L1 can be the reason for these errors. The study concluded that in learning L2, the influence of L1 should be taken into consideration, and students should be taught how to tackle these errors in their writings.

Furthermore, it would help teachers plan their lessons accordingly to address issues related to these errors. Understanding the cause of the errors, such as the influence of L1 on the target language, can be beneficial to teachers and students since it helps make corrections easier in the classroom. In the future, a similar study can be conducted to analyze and compare ESL and EFL in a different context. For example, since many studies have found similar errors made by EFL and ESL learners, an in-depth study can be conducted to verify these claims. Besides, internal reliability can be established through analysis and holding discussions with language experts on these errors. Admittedly, even though an abundance of research has been conducted over the years, invigilating grammar production remains tricky because it involves one's perception and school of thought. Researchers should consider these factors for an eventual study that includes grammar production and rules.

6.   References

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