

Analysis of Grammatical Errors in the Writings of Undergraduate Students in University

Myat Myat Moe

University of Computer Studies, Pang Long
myatmyatmoe17.tgi@gmail.com

Toe Toe

Technological University, Taunggyi
toetoegtc2013@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is aimed to present the investigation and classification of grammatical errors, to examine the error sources and to do the evaluation of those errors made by the students at the University of Computer Studies, Panglong and Technological University, Taunggyi. This study is done to survey what the most grammatical errors the students made are in writings and how much the analysis could provide the teachers to develop the competence of students' language in teaching. For the study, 30 written samples of the students were collected for the data and the errors were identified, categorized and analyzed. Due to the result, most of the errors that the students made are subject- verb agreement, incorrect use of tenses, word order of sentence formation, limited knowledge of vocabulary, preposition. The finding highlights that the teachers need to give adequate feedbacks on students' errors in writing so that the students can avoid the errors by learning their mistakes.

Key Words: grammatical errors, investigation
Classification, analysis, feedback

1. Introduction

The productive skills; writing and speaking are focused to teach the senior students at Universities. Writing skills are so challenging that students find difficulties in writing because of one of the weakness areas of grammar. The insufficient grammar knowledge and writing practice make them anxious about writing something in English. It also leads them to concern about errors. The students' error will be an indication of whether the students make progress or not in the specific area of language learning when a systematic analysis of those errors is done. Awareness of the students' errors and understanding better the error sources will help the teachers to know the weakness and difficulties of students learning and teaching process. The students themselves know their weak point in language learning through their errors they made.

Identifying students' errors and analyzing those errors enable the teachers to make a decision whether they proceed to next lessons. Moreover, it highlights the weak areas of students' language in writing. The errors that the students made and giving feedbacks on the tasks reflect the teachers to assess students' needs and wants.

2. Literature Review on Error Analysis

Error analysis is a work of linguistic analysis on the error's learners made applying theory. The purpose of Error Analysis is to find what the learner has acquired and does not acquire and to ultimately supply the right source of data to structure a more adequate perception of target language rule. Error Analysis can notify important data to syllabus designers to design teaching materials that includes important area of language depending on the current problems of the learners. Richards et al (1992) states that error analysis can make teachers able to identify strategies which learners use in language teaching, identify the causes of learner errors, and provide information about usual difficulties in teaching language. Error Analysis is supporting to reorganize teacher's point of view and reconsider methodology for filling the requirement of the students. It is an indicator of learners' L2 knowledge; a pointer for the learners to learn the L2 rules. Thus, grammatical error analysis can support teachers to implement an efficient teaching plan of a particular grammar concept. Error analysis will be a help for teachers to design remedial programme and restructure activities or tasks for the benefits of students. Furthermore, teachers can achieve benefit by developing approaches in order to help students tackle their difficulties and progress their language performance (Muhari & Wan Mansor, 2008).

2.1. Grammar in Writing as a Basic of Analysis

Grammar in writing means that different meaning of ideas are arranged to form words which are into sentences and sentences into paragraph applying grammar rules. Learning grammar and writing connect closely each other.

Without a complete knowledge of grammatical rules, learners tend to have difficulty in constructing a sentence or choosing the correct words to express their thought exactly. So learners need to be acquainted with certain principles and rules in language learning. Furthermore, Writing takes more time to think than they do in activities of speaking. Writing is not just only arranging words and sentences. It is a process of choosing many different words which are linked grammatically and logically to make sentences. Even a native speaker finds difficulties to produce a good piece of writing. Therefore, when presenting something written in English, the correct form, the appropriate style, and the unity of topic should be considered. In order to do remedial action, teachers need to be

conscious of the causes why they made errors. The separation of grammar instruction from writing does not make improve writing competence of students. Through detailed studies, Shaughnessy (1977) recommends that students should be encouraged to check their grammatical errors in their writing. Inconsistencies of grammar and mistakes in grammar blur the meaning of written work and cause confusion in the mind of reader.

2.2. The Difference between Errors and Mistakes

A distinction between “mistake” and “error” is that error is a sign that learners had not been proficient at the rules they were taught. Error can be defined as a deviation from the norms of the target language. Error caused by inadequate knowledge of the target language cannot be either recognized or self-corrected but a mistake can be self-corrected. Learners fail to perform their competence so that learners need to acquire repeated explanations. Errors indicate the difficulties of the learners in certain aspects of language which could be explained by the persistent habit of mother tongue and the transfer to the new language. Efficient learning would not make errors. There are different definitions about errors and mistake. Errors are a result of lack of language competence but mistakes not. According to Brown (2000), a “mistake” refers to a performance error in that it fails to use an acquaint system correctly. Hendrickson (1987:357) mentioned that errors are ‘signals’ that indicate an actual learning process taking place and that the learner has not yet mastered or shown a well-structured competence in the target. Errors occur repeatedly and cannot be recognized by the learner. Hence, only the teacher or researcher could locate them. While mistakes according to Yuksel (2007) are not a result of deficiency in competence.

2.3. Cause and Reason of Errors

Insufficient materials and insufficient language teachers are one of the causes of students’ errors. The other reasons why students make errors are that

(a) Simplification It occurs when learners reduce a complex aspect of grammar to a much simpler set of rules and reflects a process that is used when messages need to be conveyed with limited language resources. They do not have enough knowledge about language rules so that they try to use simple structure instead of complex structures.

(b) Language Transfer It is an interference or language transfer of first language of learner that interferes and obstructs from acquiring the second language. This error called “interlingual errors” influence greatly on the language proficiency of learners, (Corder, 1987). In this transfer, it is easier for learners to learn language and does not lead to errors. Negative transfer or interference refers to using a native-language rule or pattern inappropriately in the target language.

Mother tongue interference

For example; In Myanmar language, it is often said;

ခုံကျိုးနေသည်။
ကလေးစိုက်ဆာနေပြီ။
တံတားကျိုးနေသည်။

When these sentences are directly translated into English, Myanmar students will misuse present progressive tense. In fact these sentences are translated into English as follows:

The chair has broken.

The baby is hungry

The bridge has broken

(c) Fossilization The term fossilization in linguistics reflects a process in which a person uses a new language permanently with incorrect linguistic features. Here are a few examples of fossilized errors. Fossilized errors are not likely to affect comprehension although they might be stigmatized due to the fact that they often reflect errors that are typical of very basic-level learners.

E.g. She never play games but she like watching TV

Last night she watch TV till 2 am.

(d) Lack of the knowledge of the rules is also one of the major reasons of learners’ errors. Sometimes, learners do not have sufficient knowledge about the rules of the language, and this phenomenon results into the errors and mistakes in language and hinders the language learning.

2.4. Classification of Errors

All of the errors were classified as subject-verb agreement, tenses, parts of speech, participial phrases, relative clauses, passive voice, parallel structure, punctuation, run-ons and fragments.

This study is analyzed depending on four different types of errors such as Addition, Omission, Selection and Ordering.

(a) Omission: that the required linguistic item in the sentence is omitted causes errors.

E.g. When I washing clothes and doing my homework, I listen to the music.

Here is the omission of auxiliary verb “be” that was required for the correct construction of the sentence. The correct construction is:

When I am washing clothes and doing my homework, I listen to the music.

(b) Addition: An error is occurred when any unnecessary grammatical item is added.

E.g. Listening to the music is it the best way to refresh my mind

Here is the addition of “it” with that is not required. The correct construction is: *Listening to the music is the best way to refresh my mind.*

(c) Selection: this error problem is wrong selection of the certain forms.

E.g. When I'm boring reading books and listening to music is the best way to reduce to refresh my mind.

It is an example of wrong selection of the ing- adjective ‘boring’ instead of ed-adjective ‘bored’.

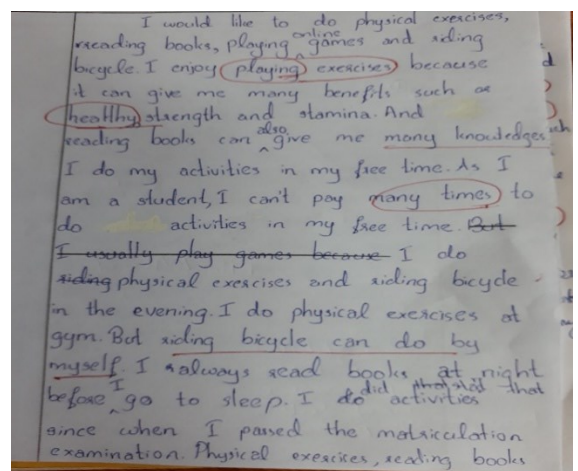
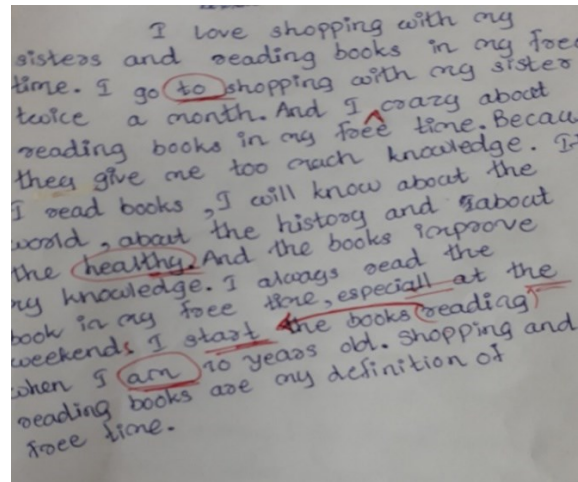
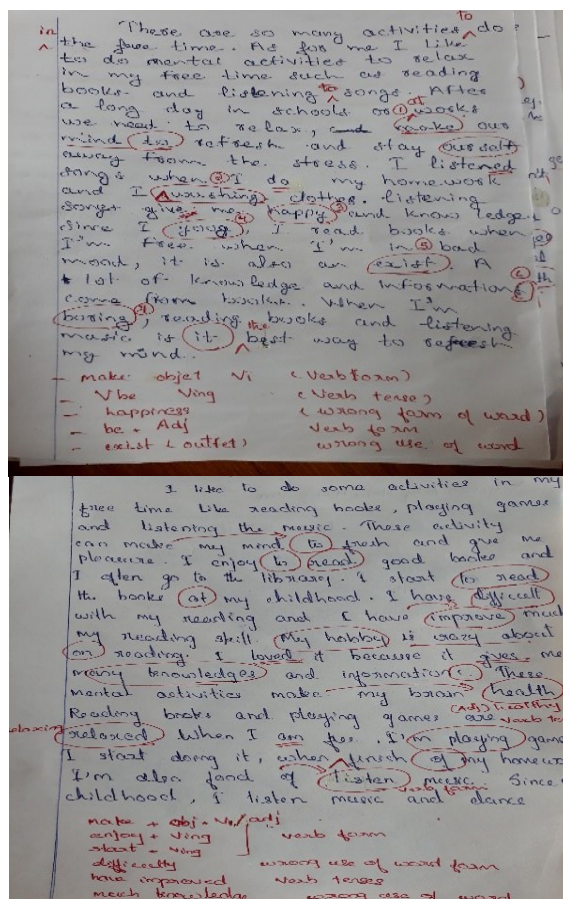
(d) **Ordering:** those errors occur when the words are put in wrong order in the sentence.

E.g. *What she is learning?*

Here the order of the sentence is incorrect and is becoming the reason of error. The correct sentence is: *what is she learning?*

3. Method of Analysis

The works for this study are focused on descriptive method as an approach which consists of procedure, participants, collection and identification of data and data analyzing and it is finalized with the evaluation of data. Firstly, students (the participants) are given a written work on a chosen topic with limited words about 200 words and time about 90 minutes for collecting data then identification of errors that is labelling the error type such as subject-verb agreement, tense form, preposition, word order and so on. Some of the written works of the students are presented below. After the identification, the frequency of errors are evaluated and the results are displayed by percentage or analyzing students' errors and explanation of errors.



3.1. Result and Discussion

Table.1 Types, Frequency and Percentage of Errors committed by Students

	Type of errors	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of errors
1	Subject-Verb Agreement	14	10%
2	Verb Tense	35	24%
3	Word Choice	24	17%
4	Preposition	16	11%
5	Article	12	8%
6	Word Order	19	13%
7	gerund	9	6%
8	adjectives	14	10%
	total	143	100%

The result of the grammatical errors as shown in table 1 describes that the most of the errors that the students made were the incorrect use of tenses with 24% and 17% of word choice was the second largest one in the table. Other resources of errors were Subject-Verb Agreement 10%, Preposition 11%, Article 8%, Word Order 13%, Gerund 6% and adjectives 10% respectively. The analyzed data highlights that the four greatest difficult

grammar areas were verb tenses, word choices, word order and preposition.

3.1.1. Verb Tenses

The following examples are the wrong selection of the certain tense form the students used in their writing.

1. I start reading books when I am 10 years old. (the incorrect use present simple 'start' and 'am' instead of past simple 'started' and 'was')

2. When I am free, I am playing games.

(Incorrect use of verb present continuous tense instead of present simple tense)

3. I have improve much on my reading skills.

(Incorrect use of verb present simple tense after Verb to have instead of past participle)

3.1.2. Word Choices

The insufficient knowledge of words in certain amount causes errors in the writing of students. The wrong selections of words of the students' written work are as follow.

1. I love to read books because it gives me **many** knowledge. (incorrect use of determiner instead of **much**)

2. Reading books and playing games are **relaxed** and reading gives **many informations**.

(incorrect use of ed-adjective, determiner and plural noun form instead of **relaxing** and **much information**)

3. I enjoy **playing** exercises because it can give many benefits such as **healthy**, strength and stamina. (incorrect use of words **playing** instead of **doing** and **healthy** instead of **health**)

3.1.3. Word Order

The followings are that the students arranged words orderly wrong in sentences.

1. I like to do in my free time physical exercise. *I like to do physical exercise in my free time.*

2. I started the books reading when I'm 10 years old.

I started reading books when I was 10 years old.

3.1.4. Prepositions

Students do not care for the smallest portion 'preposition' in a sentence. The following examples are the wrong choice of prepositions in their written work.

1. I go **to** shopping with my sister twice a week.

(The addition of unnecessary prepositions "to")

2. I am crazy singing and playing piano.

(The omission of necessary preposition "about" and article "the" instead of **crazy about** and **the piano**)

3. We need to make our mind **to** refresh and stay away from stress.

(The addition of unnecessary preposition to)

3.1.5. Subject- Verb agreement

Some students did not notice that the subject and verb they used did not match in their sentences.

1. I'm like to read books. It give me knowledge. (Addition of unnecessary verb to be 'am')

2. Doing these things give me benefits of health. (Omission of 's' in the verb give)

3. The benefits that I received is good health like physical and mental health. (The wrong choice of singular verb to be 'is')

Table 2. Evaluation Form to Assess Students Opinion on Writing and Error

	Question Item	Answer
1	How many times a week do you write in class?	once/ twice/ all week
2	What does error in writing mean to you?	progress / fail
3	Does your teacher help you when you make an error?	always sometimes never
4	You should master the grammatical rules of the target language before writing a task?	agree/ disagree
5	Do you believe that the continuous correct in the part of the teacher can raise learner's level of anxiety?	yes/no
6	Is writing in English easy/complicated?	easy/ complicated
7	Can you differentiate errors and mistakes?	yes/ no
8	Do you think that errors are important to learn English language?	yes/no
9	Errors by learners are major elements in the feedback system of teaching- learning process of language	yes/no
10	Do you feel anxious when you make errors in the L2?	always/ sometimes/ never

According to the evaluation, we found about 90% of students once a week, 10 % twice a week and no one writes all week in class. Then 85 % of students means writing as a progress and 15% a fail. 65 % of teacher always help, 35% sometimes and 10% never. 85 % of students agrees that they should master grammar rules before writing a task and 15% disagrees. 75% said that continuous correction of the teacher can raise students' anxiety level. 80% of students said that writing is complicated and 20% thinks it is easy. 85% does not know the difference between error and mistake. 70% of students said that error is important to learn language and 30% said no for this question. 80% answered no for the statement of error as a major element in language learning and teaching process. 30% sometimes feels anxious and 55 % is always and 15% is never anxious about making errors.

4. Findings and Suggestions

The result from this error analysis reflects the teacher how effective his/her teaching style and what changes he/she has to make to get higher performance from his students. Particularly, the students are not able to finish their writing within a time given. Limited time and limited language competence make students worried about writing. Teachers should be more creative to make the students become more interested and create more writing works. To improve language competence, students should be guided to apply the sentence patterns, vocabulary, writing style from their reading and listening. Giving feedbacks to the students from their assignments make them realize their weaknesses in language learning. Dealing with all the errors and focusing on those errors lose students' confidence so that teachers need to take decision which errors to address and should set a number of priority and provide selective feedbacks for better results. It is clear that students are interested in doing peer and self-correction. After doing these type of correction, students are aware of their errors and it increases student confidence so that students should be given a chance to do peer correction and self-correcting. Teachers have to provide their learners with information and hints to revise their written works so that they can discover and repair the errors before peer and self-correcting. Remedial exercise is a help for students to get sufficient knowledge of target language. So the teacher should arrange remedial exercise in advance. The consequence of the study, analyzing students' errors in writing reflects the weakness, problems and difficulties of students and teachers in teaching learning process.

5. Conclusion

Based on the studies reviewed on Error Analysis, the finding reveals that most of the error students produced are subject- verb agreement, incorrect use of

tenses, limited knowledge of vocabulary, misuse and omission of preposition and the uses of word form and word ordering. This study implies that Error Analysis has to be a useful technique in pointing out learning strategies and can be applied successfully to reflect the weakness in writing. According to this analysis, it is realized that the nature of students' errors and the possible sources of errors and analyzing those errors systematically will be a help to make teaching more effective and meaningful. An analysis based on grammatical errors gives efficient results which highlight remedial materials to be arranged. The difficult areas of grammar and the necessity of language learning at a particular stage can be identified through systematic analysis. It is clear that errors are important evidence to design syllabus providing with the needs for learning appropriately.

References

- [1] Angelis, Paul J. Sentence-Combining, Error Analysis and the Writing. (1975) TESOL Convention, Los Angeles
- [2] David.E.shaffer. (2005) Classifying Language Learning Errors. The Internet TEFL Journal
- [3] Hendrickson, J.M. (1987). Error correction in foreign language teaching
- [4] Keshavars, M.H. (1997). Contrastive analysis and error analysis.
- [5] M.H. Long & J.C. Richards (Eds.), Methodology in TESOL: A book of readings, Boston
- [6] Hsu, H. (2013). Revisiting causes of grammatical errors for ESL teachers. International Research Journals, 5(6), 513-516.
- [7] Heinle & Heinle. p. 357 Richards J. C., & Rodgers T. S. (2001). Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching. (2nd edition), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge,
- [8] James,C. (1998). Errors in Language Learning and Use – exploring Error Analysis, Edinburgh: Harlow.
- [9] S.P. Corder, (1975) Error Analysis, Inter language and Second Language Acquisition [10] Parupalli Srinivasa Rao. Error Analysis and Its Implications for EL