

## Error Analysis in Academic Writing: A Case of International Postgraduate Students in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the different types of writing errors performed by 16 international postgraduate students undertaking an intensive English course at a public university in Malaysia. It was mandatory for international postgraduate students who obtained less than IELTS Band 6 to undertake an Intensive English Course (IEC) offered by the University, prior to entering their respective faculties' academic programs. The students were required to write a 3-5 page term paper assignment on a topic related to their field of study. Mixed methodology approach was employed to examine and analyze corpus of students' term papers. The errors in the term papers were identified and classified accordingly. The results of the study revealed that four most common English language errors committed by the participants were sentence structure, articles, punctuation and capitalization. This study also shed light on the manner in which students assumed the rules of English to that of their native language. Such insight is useful for both instructors and students because it provides significant information on the building blocks experienced by English language learners in academic writing.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing in English is accounted as a complex process for English as a foreign language learners and committing errors in writing are found as an inevitable part of language learners' writing. Ellis (1997) pointed out to the lack of fossilization of learners' grammar in first language acquisition, rather its' importance in second language acquisition. Corder (1967) considered errors as the evidence of the learners' inherent syllabus which demonstrated how first and second language learners advance an independent system of language. Therefore, the analysis of errors has turned to be an imperative arena of linguistics. This arena of language teaching value from the outcomes of linguistics in various cases comprising error analysis. Hence, investigating language learners' grammatical knowledge through analyzing their writing has become essential in order for teachers and instructors to assist the students. In addition, the analysis of language learners' grammatical knowledge enables the language teachers and instructors to predict and conquer problems of errors encountered in the process of language learning. Corder (1967) further noted that classifying the errors committed by the learners helps the researchers to learn a great deal about the second language acquisition process through identifying the strategies that language learners employ. He also regarded the functions of errors are indispensable since errors are considered as a device the learners use in order to learn.

Error analysis is described as a set of procedures to identify, describe and explain learners' errors (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). Error Analysis not only deals with identifying and detecting errors but also explaining the reason for occurrence of errors. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), samples of the learners' productive English comprise the best technique to investigate second language acquisition. This study uses the term papers written by Iranian international students taking IEC in order to conduct an error analysis on international postgraduate students' writings. This study is significant because it embraces the error analysis in learning context focusing on language use for postgraduate studies. The study would provide a clear linguistic feature analysis on term papers based on students' own research interest for educators and researchers.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Error analysis is a method applied to analyze second/foreign language learners' speech or written performance. Researchers approached error analysis from different perspectives. For example, Corder (1967) and Brown (2000) pointed out to the importance of study of language learners' errors as it displays the state of the learners' knowledge. Corder (1967) regarded the importance of error analysis as something beyond merely eliminating them. He also noted that students' errors should

be taken seriously as these errors show development features for language learners. Corder (1981) highlighted the significance of error analysis from various stakeholders' perspectives. For teachers, it would manifest students' current level of learning. For researchers, it would reveal the way language is learned and structured. For students, these errors can be utilized as a learning device to improve language proficiency. Therefore, it merits a continuous process to examine more cases in English foreign language contexts.

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) outlined the process of error analysis in four steps including: a) collection of a sample of learner language; b) identification of errors; c) description of errors; and d) explanation of errors. Richards (1971) cited in Heydari and Bagheri 2012 classified errors into three major categories: 1) interference errors that occur when the language learners use their mother tongue to create a sentence in target language, 2) Intralingual errors: errors reflecting general characteristics of the rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply, and 3) developmental errors: errors occurring when learners attempt to build up hypothesis about the target language on the basis of limited experiences.

Many studies were conducted to analyze students' errors in the English as a second or foreign language context in providing insights for teachers, researchers and students as mentioned earlier. Katiya et al., (2015), for instance, examined and analysed a corpus of Chemistry first year students' essays. The researcher discovered that mother tongue interference, punctuation and spelling errors, misapplication of essay construction rules and syntactic and morphological errors compromised the quality, meaning and rhetorical aspect of the contents. Taher (2011) investigated most frequent errors performed by Swedish junior high school students. Common errors included verb tense, verb inflection and subject-verb agreement. The author reasoned the errors due to lack of grammatical knowledge and incorrect transfer from Swedish into English. Heydari and Bagheri (2012) provided comprehensive review of sources of second language learners' error. The authors presented the taxonomies of the common errors performed by second language learners, interlingual and causes of intralingual errors made by Iranian students and other nationalities. Iranian students' errors are found to be caused by complexity of the English language, the interference of conversational English into written English, students' incomplete knowledge or ignorance of certain structures, the transfer of training, unfamiliarity with the requirements of written English, lack of sufficient practice informed writing, lapses of memory, and pressure of communication were among the major causes of errors. In a similar vein, Izadi Agha (2007) assumed:

*“interference of conversational English with written English, interference from Persian, the students' inadequate knowledge regarding certain structures, the sheer complexity of the English language, the transfer of training, lapses in memory, insufficient practice in formal writing, lack of familiarity with the rules regulating written English, and the overwhelming pressure placed upon students to focus their*

*efforts and energy primarily on communication at the expense of grammar.” (P.1).*

The review of literature reveals that there is a plethora of research on error analysis of writings produced by second or foreign language learners in different contexts. However, most of these studies focus on various forms of essays which are short in length and written in class for the purpose of exam or certain research. This study, however, looks at post-graduate students' term paper which is related to thesis topic and is longer in length. In addition, term papers are developed based on participants' comparative summary on extensive readings. Therefore, it is assumed that errors committed in term papers are slightly different from errors committed in essay writing in terms of lengths, content and relevance to the students.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 16 Iranian international students taking IEC at a public university in Malaysia. It is mandatory for international postgraduate students who obtained less than IELTS Band 6 to undertake the IEC offered by the University, prior to entering their respective faculties' academic programs. This course is designed to equip students with the language for postgraduate studies. The course focuses on consistence application of writing bibliographic entries, critical reading and analyzing academic texts, summarizing and paraphrasing and writing term paper. By the end of the course, students are expected to be able to write bibliographic entries in a consistent manner, write a comparative summary of academic text and write a term paper related to their own research interest.

### Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The term papers were collected and marked by class lecturer. Table 1 displays the mark allocation to the term papers.

The above four categories were determined in terms of mark allocated by the English course lecturer who marked the students' term papers. Basically, two samples of text from each category were chosen (content, language, organization and format, and Bibliography list) to determine the types of errors made.

For the purpose of data analysis, steps of error analysis specified by Corder (1974) were followed. First, each essay was examined word and word and sentence by sentence. Coding categories were generated the based on all writing samples. Second, the numbers of errors were counted and converted into percentage to examine the occurrence. Table 2 displays the error analysis regarding the language aspect. For other aspects of performance indicator (content, organization and format, bibliography list) as specified in Table 1, interpretive practice was deployed. Categories in Table 1 were determined in terms of mark allocated by the class lecturer who evaluated the term papers. A few samples of sentences from each category were chosen to highlight the categories.

**Table 1.** Level description and mark allocation

| Performance indicator      | Description of category                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Content 20%                | Discussion of the topic, developing ideas, linking content and information with the main idea and supporting details clearly provided, mature treatment of the topic, and staying focused on the topic |
| Language 20%               | Accuracy of the language and spelling errors, use of verity of sentence structure, appropriate and varied vocabulary, and linking ideas through the use of cohesive devices and transitional links     |
| Organization and format 6% | Unity of paragraph show and evidence of planning, organization of written work containing: introduction, body and conclusion sections                                                                  |
| Bibliography list 4%       | Bibliographic entries are recorded for the sources referred for the term paper, and punctuation for the bibliography list                                                                              |

**Table 2.** Analysis of errors

| Item | Type of errors              | No. of errors | Percentage |
|------|-----------------------------|---------------|------------|
| 1    | Sentence structure          | 128           | 32.90      |
| 2    | Articles                    | 51            | 13.11      |
| 3    | Punctuation                 | 46            | 11.82      |
| 4    | Capitalization              | 45            | 11.56      |
| 5    | Word Choice                 | 26            | 6.68       |
| 6    | Prepositions                | 23            | 5.91       |
| 7    | Verb Form                   | 21            | 5.39       |
| 8    | Singular/plural noun ending | 14            | 3.59       |
| 9    | Redundancy                  | 9             | 2.31       |
| 9    | Word form                   | 8             | 2.05       |
| 10   | Subject-verb agreement      | 7             | 1.79       |
| 11   | Word order                  | 6             | 1.54       |
| 12   | Possessive                  | 3             | 0.77       |
| 13   | Verb tense                  | 2             | 0.51       |
|      | Total                       | 389           |            |

## RESULTS

### Content Errors

Students' writing exhibits intralingual and developmental errors. Although the students show awareness of discussion of topic and development of ideas, there were a number of errors exhibited. For example, following extract demonstrates thesis statement written by student:

*"This paper attempts to analyse the problems caused by the increased number of private cars on Malaysian roads. It will also provide the solutions on how to solve the problems caused by the high volume of private cars in Malaysia"*.

In the second and third paragraphs, she discussed on problems caused by increased number of cars and another three paragraphs offers solutions to introduced problems. Unexpectedly, the student diverted away from the topic and in the last paragraph, she compared the public transportation in Iran and Malaysia and concluded her discussion by stating:

*"Finally, the above example is what I have experienced during my living in Tehran, so when I compare these two cities I make believe that..."*.

The student was trying to develop her ideas by providing example, but she failed to stay focused on the topic and

linked the contents with the main idea. This shows that the student had limited experience in academic writing. This is clearly an intralingual error reflecting general features of the rule in which the student failed to apply the rules completely, identified the conditions under which the rules could be applied and committed faulty generalization.

The common errors identified in students' writing in regards to the content based on the lecturer's comments included: a) meaningless or unclear statements; b) sentence fragmentation; c) failure to provide clear detailed information regarding the topic under discussion; d) integration of irrelevant information to the topic under discussion; e) failure to separate additional ideas into different paragraphs; f) instances of plagiarism and copy and paste.

### Language Errors

Table 2 presents the analysis of errors based on two types of analysis; 1) type of errors, 2) number and percentage of errors.

The results indicate that four common errors that the students performed were: Sentence Structure (32.90) followed by Articles (13.11), Punctuation (11.82), and Capitalization (11.56). The four more common errors and their examples form the corpus are illustrated in Table 2.

The next noticeable errors were Word Choice (6.68), Prepositions (5.91), and Verb Form (5.39) respectively. Next were Redundancy (2.31), Word Form (2.05), Subject-Verb Agreement (Subject-Verb Agreement), and Word Order (1.54). Other errors that amounted less were Possessive (0.77) and Verb Tense (0.51).

Table 3 exhibits the three categories of errors such as interference, intralingual and development error. In general, students' errors particularly in sentence structure reveal that in the process of paraphrasing, the students tend to translate the target language into their mother tongue at the sentence and paragraph levels in order to understand the text. Later, they translate it back to English in order to paraphrase. Therefore, they have committed various grammatical, lexical, semantic and mechanical errors which have generated interference, incomplete rule application, overgeneralization, and development of false concepts as indicated in following examples:

1. *When an unauthorized user to a computer Login and this effort will The host-based IDS is better than any other security elements such events are detected.*

**Table 3.** Most common errors and examples of errors

| Definition and error classification | Extract from the term papers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Correct sentences and explanation of rules                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Sentence structure               | 1. Consequence of secure software irony is software engineers that progress buggy or feeble security measure thus the environments that software developer necessity to study requirement engineering<br>2. The surveillance of the relationships between computers causes the NIDS detection and intrusion detection element in the effectiveness and efficiency are considered | Completely unclear and meaningless                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 2. Articles                         | 1. For example, infant Industry Theory was the basis of U.S. trade policy after gaining its independence from Britain<br>2. How technology helps the communication...                                                                                                                                                                                                            | 1. For example, the infant Industry Theory was the basis of the U.S. trade policy after gaining its independence from Britain<br>2. How technology helps communication...                                                                                                            |
| 3. Punctuation                      | 1. According to David (1996) since early human inhabited earth thousands of years ago, the concept of trade was developed<br>2. How technology helps the communication, such as network graphics...                                                                                                                                                                              | 1. According to David (1996), since early human inhabited earth thousands of years ago, the concept of trade was developed<br>2. How technology helps the communication such as network graphics...                                                                                  |
| 4. Capitalization                   | 1. According to price to parking price increasing, parking rate structure and parking tax are examples of such instruments<br>2. HID is more of the system log, audit log and Event Log operating system and various applications for reporting or alerts based on the user's system                                                                                             | 1. According to price to parking price increasing, parking rate structure and parking tax are examples of such instruments<br>2. HID is more of the system log, audit log and event log operating system and various applications for reporting or alerts based on the user's system |

2. *One of the reasons that effect on the results of these researches is [the] method of measurement intellectual capital and components of it. There are about 28 methods for measuring intellectual capital that if scholars choose each of them, they may be obtained different results.*
3. *Why are not tied to any particular operating system or applications that act on the packet level [.] They also run and get-the result they need to have licenses, passwords, operating system and applications is not.*

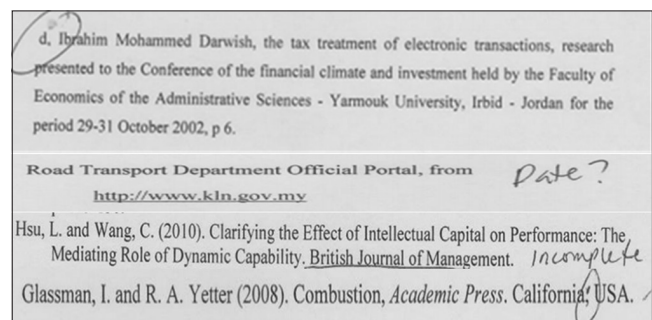
However, it should be highlighted that the main reason for occurrences of errors at this level is students' lack of experience in academic writing.

### Organization and Format

Students' term paper indicates that they are aware of different sections in academic writing that include introduction, body and conclusion. However, some writing samples demonstrate deficiencies in developing coherent paragraphs or using appropriate cohesive devices. As mentioned earlier, students may stray away from points stated in thesis statement, provide detailed and information irrelevant to topic sentence or introduce a new idea in the conclusion section. The reason for such occurrences is intralingual and developmental errors.

### Bibliography List

Figure 1 exhibits some examples of students' bibliography list. Similar to organization and format errors, bibliography list shows elements of intralingual and developmental errors



**Figure 1.** Bibliography list

that include: the listing does not follow the format, provision of insufficient details; inconsistency in referencing style, incorrect and incomplete recording of the bibliographic entries and punctuation errors committed by the students.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of errors made by the IEC students in their term paper writing provides insights into how the academic language proficiency of students reflects important issues in academic writing namely their writing challenges and progress made in learning various academic English skills. Error analysis categorisation (interlanguage, intralingual and developmental errors) introduced by Corder (1974) was used to identify, classify and determine the impact these errors may have on students' performance and their ability to communicate meaning in writing term papers. The study provides feedback for the lecturers on how writing errors can affect the teaching and learning practices. In addition, Ira-

nian international students starting thesis writing in English medium may be more aware of areas need to be considered. Based on the collected data, the students demonstrated the greatest difficulty in content and language when they developed meaningless sentences, applied random use of articles, punctuation and capitalization. The possible explanation is the influence of their first language in general and lack of experience in academic writing in particular. The results of this study accentuate Katiya et al., (2015) study in that two prevailing errors identified are intralingual (incomplete application of rules, faulty generalisation and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply) and developmental errors (making hypothesis about the target language based on the limited experience). It also is in line with Ahmadvand (2008) cited in Heydari and Bagheri (2012) that regarded mother tongue as a source of Iranian students errors.

The study also revealed without the eradication of linguistic and conceptual difficulties the students will find it demanding to write their thesis successfully. For the pedagogical implications of the present study, it is worth mentioning that IEC courses should emphasize more the content and aspect of grammatical errors in academic writing.

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