ERRORS IN WRITTEN COMPOSITION OF STUDENTS IN ENGLISH: INPUTS FOR A DEVELOPMENT OF MODULES IN WRITING

Jesus Perry L. Caudilla[1]

[1]University of Makati

[1]Makati City, Philippines

Abstract: **This study investigated frequently committed grammar errors in written composition of students in English. The study analyzed errors in a corpus of 150 essays written by purposively selected third year students of Pitogo High School who were enrolled in English III during the School Year 2013 - 2014. This study is important to educators and learning material developers who should become aware of the kind of errors that their target learners make, so that they are in a better position to put appropriate intervention strategies into place. For learners, error analysis is important as it shows the areas of difficulty in their writing. Quantitative method was used in this study. Adequate and accurate interpretation of the existing phenomenon was performed with the use of percentage as the statistical method. Errors were identified and classified into various categories based on Analysis Model of Ferris. This study pinpointed specific types of global and local errors. Based on the findings, it was concluded that the errors committed by the students in their written composition served as evidence that the respondents lack mastery of the English language system. This study recommends that the most frequent errors committed by the students should be given emphasis in designing and developing modules in writing that would scaffold students' ability to write compositions with high level of grammatical correctness.**

Keywords: **Error Analysis, Global Errors, Local Errors, Errors in Written Composition.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Language teachers and researchers have always considered English writing an issue of great concern. A considerable number of language learners still remain inept in writing despite their eagerness to write well in English. Both students and teachers increasingly feel dissatisfied and grumble about the quality of the students' written composition in English.

The errors committed by students in their written composition have become a serious problem to language teachers. In fact, many teachers, including this researcher, could not bear the conspicuous errors in the compositions written by their students that they point out again and again over the years, seemingly without noticeable positive effects on their students. With experience, the teachers are able to conjecture the types of errors students will commit in their written composition, but they only have a rough idea of the frequency of these errors. As a result, they concentrate only on some errors which are predominant and skim over others which are practically infrequent.

Students feel disappointed when they see innumerable errors in their essays. Similarly, teachers feel frustrated to see those errors committed by their students. Yet, teachers still need to know why students continuously commit errors and how they can remedy the situation.

Errors were once considered "unwanted forms" or "flaws" that needed to be eradicated. But the way errors were previously considered was changed when Corder (1967), considered as "forerunner" of Error Analysis in his "The Significance of Learner Errors" contended that those errors are "important in and of themselves."

Since errors are believed to contain valuable information, they have become the subject of many investigations. These investigations have involved not only identifying, describing, categorizing and analyzing errors but also the frequency of occurrence of these errors and their significant relationship with one another. In addition, these investigations have been conducted in order to produce instructional materials intended to develop the writing skills of second language learners.

The extent of error may vary. It can include a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a sentence or even a paragraph. Due to this fact, this study viewed errors as being either global or local as advocated by Brown (2000). Global errors hinder communication and they affect the structure of the entire sentence, such as a missing essential part of the sentence - subject or verb. They prevent the message from being comprehended. Global errors are categorized as morphological (verb tense, verb form, subject-verb agreement) or syntactic (articles/determiners, noun endings - plural/possessive). On the other hand, local errors do not prevent the message from being understood because there is usually a minor violation of one segment of a sentence that allows the hearer to guess the intended meaning, and they are those which affect only the constituents in which they appear. Local errors are categorized as lexical (word choice, word form, informal usage, pronoun usage, preposition) or mechanical (punctuation, spelling, capitalization). In Ferris' (2005) classification, morphological and syntactic errors are considered global errors. Mechanical and lexical errors, on the other hand, are local errors.

Errors provide evidence of the learner's current knowledge of the second language. Several studies on errors have been conducted because researchers are interested in errors which "are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language." Moreover, according to Richards (2000), at the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will continue to provide one means by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future effort.

The studies written on this field of research and reviewed by the researcher revealed that students commit many different types of errors in writing English compositions. In view of the foregoing, the following assumptions have been considered:

1. All learners make errors irrespective of the language they are learning. The types of errors made by subjects in their writing are results of difficulties in certain language areas. Olasehinde (2002) explained that it is inevitable that learners make errors and that errors are unavoidable and necessary in the process of learning.

2. Errors, in the process of learning a second language, are not only natural and inevitable, but they are also significant. Investigation on the least and the most frequently committed errors committed in written composition of respondents provides evidence for those areas of grammar teachers need to focus on.

3. Errors provide evidence of the student's current knowledge of the second language. Since errors are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language, they can be used as basis in developing learning materials for the enhancement of the students' grammatical correctness in their written composition.

Objectives of the Study. This study was conducted to analyze the errors in written composition of third year students of Pitogo High School in School Year 2013 – 2014. Specifically, this study aimed to determine the global and local errors committed by students in their written composition and which of these errors are the most and the least frequently committed, and use the results of this error analysis in designing and developing a module for writing to improve the students' written composition.

Significance of the Study. This study is important to English teachers and learning material developers who should become aware of the kind of errors that their target learners make, so that they are in a better position to put appropriate intervention strategies into place. Error analysis will permit teachers to obtain lucid discernment about the students' errors, to obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teaching or in development of teaching materials, to carry on their studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what part of the teaching strategy to change or reconstruct, to formulate effective teaching techniques, and to construct assessments suitable for different levels and needs of students. For learners, error analysis is important as it shows the areas of difficulty in their writing. The students' own errors can help them identify their grammatical difficulties and needs at a particular stage of language learning so that they can avoid different kinds of errors in writing. Consequently, they can be prodded to look for appropriate remedy, which will solve their problems and allow them to discern the relevant grammar rules for greater improvement.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study made use of the descriptive quantitative method as it required a thorough, careful and exhaustive analysis in identifying and categorizing the errors in the written composition of Pitogo High School third year students enrolled in School Year 2013 - 2014. The researcher utilized the purposive sampling technique. Because the respondents belonged to the same year level, they had been exposed to the English language for an equal period of time. They were selected based on their having similar characteristics because such characteristics were of particular interest to the researcher.

The instrument the researcher used in gathering data was an essay test in the form of written composition of the respondents. A written composition is an essay test in that it is a piece of writing in which the students' points of view in a certain question are gathered and evaluated. It is a test that allows original responses and response patterns and requires students to structure a rather long written response up to several paragraphs. As an essay test, the written composition in this study used extended or free response topic which put no restriction as to the points the students would discuss and the type of organization they would use.

The value of written composition in this study is emphasized by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) when they stated that the best method to investigate second language acquisition is by collecting samples of the learner's productive English. The written production reveals the learner's grammatical knowledge and provides evidence of how much the learner really knows which makes essays a perfect sample.

The written compositions used were non-revised first drafts. It is vital to note that the error analysis used in this study focused especially on grammatical errors regardless of respondents' writing skills such as idea expression, organization, coherence and cohesion.

After collecting all the written compositions of the purposively selected respondents, the researcher started reading the essays. However, before the written compositions were actually analyzed, the Error Matrix was prepared based on the Analysis Model of Ferris (2005) to guide in tallying the errors. The abbreviations used in the Error Matrix were also used as Error Codes listed in the following table.

Table 1: Error Codes

Error Code	Error Explanation	Error Code	Error Explanation
VT	Error in Verb Tense	WC	Error in Word Choice
VF	Error in Verb Form	WF	Error in Word Form
S-V A	Error in Subject Verb Agreement	IU	Error in Informal Usage
Art/Det	Error in Article/Determiner	Pron	Error in Pronoun
NEnd	Error in Noun Ending (Plural/Possessive)	Prep	Error in Preposition
WO	Error in Word Order	Punc	Error in Punctuation
Run-on	Error in Run-on Sentence	Spl	Error in Spelling
Frag	Error in Fragment	Cap	Error in Capitalization

Table 1 shows the codes used by the researcher in identifying and categorizing individual errors in the written composition of the respondents.

Using the Analysis Model of Ferris (2005), the errors in the written composition were individually identified and categorized. Ferris' "common ESL writing errors" fall into four categories: morphological errors, lexical errors, syntactic errors, and mechanical errors. This model is based upon the "description of the major error categories" which covers verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, wrong word, and sentence structure.

For the purpose of this research, the data were given statistical treatment using percentage. This was used to get the percent of global and local errors committed by the students in their written composition.

III.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problem 1. Errors Committed by the Students.

The respondents of this study committed various types of global and local errors in their written composition. These errors fall into the following categories: (a) Morphological Errors such as verb-related errors that include verb tense, verb form and subject-verb agreement; noun ending errors that include incorrect, omitted or unnecessary plural and possessive ending; incorrect, omitted or unnecessary article/determiner; (b) Syntactic Errors that include incorrect word sequence, run-on sentence, comma splice and fragment; (c) Lexical Errors or wrong word-related errors that include incorrect word choice and word form, non-customary language usage, pronoun and preposition; and (d) Mechanical Errors that include misuse of punctuation, unnecessary capitalization and non-capitalization of letter and misspelling. Generally, these errors could be categorized into omissions, additions, faulty substitutions, inappropriate use of words and phrases, non-compliance to usage rules and overgeneralization of rules.

Problem 2. Least and Most Frequent Errors Committed by the Students

Global Errors. The following table displays the frequency distribution of morphological errors and syntactic errors in written composition of the respondents.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Global Errors in Written Composition of the Respondents

Global Errors				
Major Categories	Subcategories	f	%	Least/Most Frequent
Morphological	Verb Tense	380	17.36	Most Frequent
	Verb Form	358	16.35	
	S-V Agreement	273	12.47	
	Article/Determiner	267	12.20	
	Noun Ending	270	12.33	
Syntactic	Word Order	198	9.05	Least Frequent
	Run-on	240	10.96	
	Fragment	203	9.27	
	Sub-Total	2,189	100	

It can be gleaned from Table 2 that global errors garnered a sub-total of 2,189 errors. Among the eight global errors, morphological error verb tense which constituted 380 or 17.36% of sub-total errors was the most frequent error committed by the respondents in their written composition. On the other hand, the table shows that syntactic error word order which constituted 198 or 9.05% of sub-total errors was the least frequent error committed by the respondents in their written composition.

Local Errors. The following table displays the frequency of lexical errors and mechanical errors in written composition of the respondents.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Local Errors in Written Composition of the Respondents

Local Errors				
Major Categories	Subcategories	f	%	Least/Most Frequent
Lexical	Word Choice	271	12.27	
	Word Form	228	10.32	
	Informal Usage	189	8.56	
	Pronoun Usage	247	11.18	
	Preposition	561	25.39	Most Frequent
Mechanical	Punctuation	309	13.99	
	Spelling	180	8.15	Least Frequent
	Capitalization	224	10.14	
	Sub-Total	2,209	100	

It can be gleaned from Table 3 that local errors collected a sub-total of 2,209 errors. Among the local errors, lexical error preposition which constituted 561 or 25.39% of sub- total of errors was the most frequent error committed by the respondents in their written composition. On the other hand, the table shows that among the local errors, mechanical error spelling which constituted 180 or 8.15% of sub-total errors was the least frequent error committed by the respondents in their written composition.

Over-all Frequency of Errors. Table 4 displays the over-all frequency of errors committed by the respondents in their written composition.

Table 4: Overall Frequency Distribution of Errors in Written Composition of the Respondents

General Categories	Major Categories	Errors			
		Subcategories	f	%	Least/Most Frequent
Global Errors	Morphological	Verb Tense	380	8.64	2nd Most Frequent
		Verb Form	358	8.14	3rd Most Frequent
		S-V Agreement	273	6.20	
		Article/ Determiner	267	6.07	
		Noun Ending	270	6.14	
	Syn- tactic	Word Order	198	4.50	3rd Least Frequent
		Run-on	240	5.46	
		Fragment	203	4.62	
Local Errors	Lexical	Word Choice	271	6.16	
		Word Form	228	5.18	
		Informal Usage	189	4.30	2nd Least Frequent
		Pronoun Usage	247	5.62	
		Preposition	561	12.76	1st Most Frequent
	Mecha- nical	Punctuation	309	7.03	
		Spelling	180	4.09	1st Least Frequent
		Capitalization	224	5.09	
		Overall Total	**4,398**	**100**	

Table 4 shows the overall frequency distribution of errors which totaled to 4,398 errors. It can be garnered from the table that among the errors committed by the respondents in their written composition, the three most frequent ones were preposition (561 or 12.76% of overall total), verb tense (380 or 8.64% of overall total) and verb form (358 or 8.14% of overall total) in that order. Similarly, the table depicts the three least frequently committed errors, namely spelling (180 or 4.09% of overall total), informal usage (189 or 4.30% of overall total) and word order (198 or 4.50% of overall total) in that sequence.

Spelling which was the least frequent error committed by the respondents in their written composition could be attributed to the vocabulary of the respondents. As reflected in their written composition, they chose simple words and avoided expressing their ideas using unfamiliar and highfaluting words either because of limited vocabulary or because of fear of committing spelling errors.

Problem 3. Module in Writing That Can Be Developed to Improve the Students' Written Composition

Based on the results, the enumerated most frequent errors committed by the students should be given emphasis in developing writing modules that would scaffold students' ability to write compositions with high level of grammatical correctness.

It is necessary, however, to mention that the frequency of errors for each subcategory of errors may not automatically denote the difficulty level of the errors for the students. As stated by Darus and Ching (2009), "It is not quite appropriate to assume that lower number of errors signify less difficult point for the students studying English. Rather, the fewer number of errors may simply mean that the errors in a particular category occur in a less number of times compared to other categories." Consequently, all subcategories of errors should be included in the development of writing modules; however, more emphasis should be allotted to subcategories with the most frequent errors and less to subcategories with the least frequent errors.

Therefore, all the errors analyzed in this research should be the input for developing modules in writing.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

All the respondents incurred both global and local errors in their written composition. Evidently, committing errors become indispensable and inevitable in the process of learning a language, specifically English. Therefore, the errors committed by the respondents in their written composition serve as evidence that they lack mastery of the English language system.

Errors committed by the respondents in their written composition are not only natural and inevitable, but they are also significant. The three most frequently committed errors (preposition, verb tense, verb form) and the three least frequently committed errors (spelling, informal usage, capitalization) provide evidence for those areas of grammar that teachers and students need to focus on in the process of teaching and learning a second language such as English.

Analysis of the written composition of third year students had shown that the three most frequent errors committed should be given emphasis in developing modules in writing that would scaffold students' ability to write compositions with high level of grammatical correctness. However, because the frequency of errors for each subcategory of errors may not automatically denote the difficulty level of the errors for the students, all the errors analyzed in this research should constitute the inputs for developing modules in writing.

In the light of the findings and conclusions, the following are recommended:

1. Students should be made aware of the types of errors to avoid committing the same errors again and again in their written composition. With the teacher's guidance, they should also use this awareness in self-correction of their written composition which may result in enhancement of their writing and editing skills.

2. Teachers must help students raise their awareness of how to achieve grammatical correctness in written compositions in English by providing them with quality and sufficient amount of language instruction as well as authentic writing experience. This language instruction must be focused more on the most frequently committed errors.

3. Modules in writing that would scaffold students' proficiency specifically in grammar must be designed and developed. These modules should give more emphasis on the most frequent errors to achieve high mastery of the specific grammar areas involved.

4. Future researchers who intend to conduct a study similar to this should include analysis of causes and sources of errors committed by students in their written composition along with analysis of paragraph organization, coherence and cohesion.

REFERENCES

[1] Brown, H. D. (2000). Principles of language learning and teaching (4th ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.

[2] Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. International Review of Applied Linguistics, 5(4), 161-169.

[3] Darus, S & Ching K. H. (2009). Common errors in written English essays of form one Chinese students: A case study. European Journal of Social Sciences, 10, 242-253.

[4] Ellis, R. & Barkhuizen, G. P. (2005). Analyzing learner language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[5] Ferris, D. R. (2005). Treatment of error in second language student writing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

[6] Olasehinde, M. O. (2002). Error analysis and remedial pedagogy. In Babatunde S. T. and D. S. Adeyanju (eds.). Language, meaning and society. Ilorin: Itaytee Press and Publishing Co., Nigeria.

[7] Richards, J. C. (2000). Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition. London: Longman.