

## **Error Analysis on the Malaysian Students' Writing for ESL Classroom**

Wan Khairunnisa' Wan Ibrahim

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600, Selangor, Malaysia

Zarina Othman

Pusat Pengajian Citra Universiti (School of Liberal Studies), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 43600, Selangor, Malaysia

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### **ABSTRAK**

English has been regarded as one of the core subjects in the Malaysian Certificate of Education or known as the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM). There has been a concern over the writing components in the English language papers at the SPM level. Writing requires students' competence in syntax, coherence, developing and arranging ideas, mechanics in writing and appropriate use of vocabulary. A concern over students who produce very limited number of words in their essays has resulted in the lack of content to be assessed which then led to low scores. This paper presents an error analysis focusing on the types of errors found in students' written test scripts to identify the weaknesses of students' writing abilities. The study adopts a qualitative approach where the students' written assessment texts were collected. A total of 18 upper secondary Year Four students (aged 16 years old) were selected as the research participants. The selection of participants was carried out in a secondary school in one of the states in Malaysia. The students' written tests were analysed to identify the emerging categories of language use, focusing on language and grammar inaccuracies. It is found that students have the idea on how to write the answers to the task but seem to have difficulties putting the ideas in the correct structure.

*Kata Kunci:* ESL Writing, Language use, Error Analysis, Student Written Ability

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

English is a globally recognised language. In many parts of the world where English is not the mother tongue, English evolves either as a foreign or a second language in the country. Whether it is a foreign or second language, most education system will offer the teaching of English language in its education system; both in schools and at the tertiary level of education. The inclusion of the English language in the Malaysian education curriculum is necessary as English is the second official language after *Bahasa Melayu* (the Malay language). One of the many concerns is that proficiency attainment is not an assurance despite being taught the language as early as six years old (Azman, 2016). In light of this, the Malaysia Ministry of Education has documented the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2015 to help strengthen English language teaching and learning in both primary and secondary

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\*Correspondence to: Zarina Othman (email: [zothman@ukm.edu.my](mailto:zothman@ukm.edu.my))

schools. This is hoped to position English as one of the core subjects in the Malaysian Certificate of Education or known as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM). There has been a concern over the writing component representing 85 marks or 54.84% in the English language paper at the SPM level where students have difficulties securing good grades in their English papers. Lim, Yunus and Embi (2017) pose that writing is an unfavourable skill in English as a second language (ESL) classroom as it requires an integration of wide vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing and revising. Students who are less proficient in the mentioned areas may give little concern to the writing section. Chaudhary & Zahrani (2020) also mentioned that motivating second language learners on the importance of writing skills is challenging despite knowing that good writing skills would benefit them professionally.

Writing skills are essential for second language learners as they could provide physical text of knowledge. This skill enables students to communicate their ideas and knowledge by producing written essays when they are responding to tasks in an assessment (Raooft, Behmandi & Rahmani, 2017). Through writing, students convey pieces of information in narratives, for example, or transfer the information into an argumentative writing. Students may find writing difficult as this skill involves complex composing instead of a mere writing down of information (Myles, 2002). Writing skills require the students to express opinions and work on the sentence structures simultaneously. While being cautious with their writing, they may commit grammar errors, depending on the students' level of proficiency. Wu and Garza (2002) in their study on English writing errors listed 22 errors which were later categorised into four types namely grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics and intelligible errors.

Abdullah (2021) poses that Malaysian pupils being ESL learners, find it difficult to write using the language and that it is a challenging skill to master. Khaldieh (2000) mentioned that successful learners would use wider range of vocabulary and a variety of sentence structures meanwhile low proficiency learners tend to make errors when answering writing tasks. In the Malaysian public examination, it is observed that many less proficient students gave very little attempt on the writing component and some made no attempt at all. In this examination, students' writings are assessed on tasks fulfilment, language functions used for different purposes and their ability to write different essays based on given topics with relevant content and adequate discussion. Students who produce very limited number of essays do not provide enough material to be assessed, leading to low scores. It is an ongoing concern where students who have been taught English as the second language for 11 years are still incapable of producing adequate input for their written scripts (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009).

It is crucial for students to be able to write communicative texts because the writer's aim and the information delivered in a written text would be taken into account during the marking process. As stated by Bahaziq (2016), what is written in the essays should be in unity with the reader's knowledge so that the message would come through and the text would be comprehensible. He further explained that a language could be grasped differently depending on the circumstances and context the discourse occurs.

There are several perceptions on the difficulties that Malaysian students face when attempting to use English. Firmansyah (2015) mentioned that they might be a) facing difficulty with certain phonemes, that it is taking the student some time to eliminate certain L1 interferences, b) using a

very narrow range of vocabulary, c) requiring to work further on inversion for questions, d) expecting more fluency-oriented practice, that the student needs to develop a greater tolerance of ambiguity to deal with the differences between his L1 and the L2, etc. Some concerns that could be identified when assessing students' written scripts.

In the English language paper for *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), the exam paper on writing consists of two sections; (i) directed writing and (ii) continuous writing. In the directed writing section, students are given a structured guide on the format they are expected to write and twelve content points. Students are required to write an essay with a correct format layout that carries a maximum of three marks and build meaningful sentences for every content point that carries a maximum of twelve marks. In the continuous writing section, students are required to choose one question from five structured questions. The written scripts would be assessed according to clarity of language used, including choice of words and sentence structure.

Based on a pilot research which was carried out by one of the researchers, who is also a teacher, students are categorised as advanced, intermediate and weak based on the item analysis carried out after a summative assessment at the school level. Students who are weak in writing tend to make many grammatical errors. Majority commit errors in the use of tenses and subject-verb agreement. Due to these, the researchers have decided to carry out an error analysis on English written texts produced by 18 students of the upper secondary school level. This paper presents an error analysis on the Malaysian students' written scripts to identify the types of errors students make when writing in English. It observes a) the language inaccuracy in the written texts and b) the grammar errors frequently committed by the students in their writing. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide English language teachers with some insights while planning their writing lessons in ESL classrooms.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Writing and Written Text in the English Language**

Mohammadi & Mustafa (2020) pose that the study of writing errors is considered essential for improving students' writing. Writing skill is always seen as a difficult skill to acquire, especially among those who learn English as the second language, and students often encounter many challenges in writing (Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, 2016). The significance of the skill grows when the English language is used to facilitate the spread of knowledge globally. As a result, written texts have become a platform for demonstrating critical and creative writing abilities. usually reflects the writer's thoughts and ideas through discussion written in the texts. Students would show limited responses to the topic given if they only depended on their knowledge and did not think critically (Boon and Gek, 2015). Students do not learn the nature of writing due to the fact that the skill is often taught as part of teaching and learning grammar when the skill could be developed among students at an early stage of language learning (Paltridge, 2018). With reference to seven perspectives of poor writing skill identified by Boon and Gek (2015) in their study, many of them face challenges in the perspective of writing complexity, writing proficiency and literacy in the English language.

Writing assessment carries distinctive challenges as well as offers opportunities (Deane & Quinlan, 2010), which has made writing skills vital to students' achievement in school and beyond. It has become the main focus in language instruction and assessment. For example, an aspect that can be focused on a student's written text is how well the text is developed. Deane & Quinlan (2010) further explained that a well-developed written text can be seen from features such as the fluency of ideas and language accuracy in the text produced. Besides, the length of the sentences and vocabulary occurrence in the written text are also some features that could be viewed in a written text. Other than linguistic and cognitive ability, written texts produced are merely influenced by the students' schemata and personal interest in the topics. In addition, writing skill involves forming letters into word spelling and meaningful sentence construction (Cook, 2001) where it requires time and effort to learn. This could contribute to poor performance in writing as written texts in English need accuracy in the structure. According to Awal *et al.* (2007), in their eleventh year of learning the English language, many Malaysian students are unable to grasp the knowledge, and they have listed the six most common errors frequent in the written texts which are singular and plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order where most of the time, the order is influenced by their L1. Many of them have poor literacy skills to write in the English language as the written texts produced in Malaysian public examinations are marked holistically and the high density of grammar error would bring down the marks. Deane and Quinlan (2010) mentioned that holistic marking requires examiners to give an overall impression on the quality of a written text. It is seen as a difficult task as examiners need to refer to the scoring criteria as a guide. An effective student would produce a written text with a solid argument, clearly organised, attention-grabbing, and use of varied vocabulary as well as portray mastery in the mechanics of writing (Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, 2016).

## 2.2 Analysing Students' WrittenText

In practice, many students find it difficult in writing comprehensible essays with accurate use of English language where they need to have good control on diction and grammatical rules (Karjono, 2018). Alsaawi (2016) explained that the need to analyse written discourse can be seen as important, and supported by Kashiha (2018) who mentioned that many linguists have been interested in the area because the findings could contribute to understand how language is used in different academic fields. This is because learning writing in ESL is a step-by-step process where errors and mistakes would commonly appear during the process. An issue that non-native English language learners would always have is the inability to produce comprehensible written texts. This happens when the consistency of ideas in written texts is disjointed, either in the same sentences or from one paragraph to another.

In second language acquisition, analysing students' errors in writing through a discourse analytical approach could provide insights to teachers as teachers could identify students' weaknesses (Fitria, 2018) and later, plan interventions to assist students in second language acquisition. Through such analysis, teachers could identify the writing patterns applied by students and also the errors repetitively. The writing patterns used by them can be figured out by looking at a deeper aspect, for example, how an idea is argued in the text. The outcome of the analysis could provide reliable

opinions on the quality of the written texts and how well the writing skill has developed as it applies the operational scoring assessments.

Although writing in the English language may be taken as a difficult skill to be acquired, students need to possess good writing skills in different fields (Hyland, 2004 in Kashiha, 2018) so as to have an opportunity for an established career and build positive value.

### 3.0 METHOD

The design of this study is qualitative, where the researchers analyse sampled written texts to collect the data. A qualitative research is chosen because this method ensures the data collected would be accurate (Fitria, 2018). The selection of participants was carried out in a secondary school, where one researcher is teaching.

The data comprises students' writing of a short essay of total about 350 words. Even though there is no specific number for sampling in qualitative studies, it is important for the researchers to have purposeful sampling as it would help to gather enough information related to research questions (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). In this study, the researchers analysed 18 students' essays by 18 Year Four students. All the participants spoke Bahasa Melayu as their first language (L1) and they learn English as their second language in school. The students were chosen as they were at the first level of the upper secondary level. These students are in the transition phase, moving from a standardised summative assessment known as PT3, to another public examination, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*. Both assessments have different question formats and scoring criteria. All of the participants have gone through the similar number of years in learning English language, and they all come from non-English speaking background. As to align with the research objectives, students' answer scripts from a district standardised summative assessment for first semester carried out in school were used as the instruments for the purpose of the study.

Since the written texts were produced during a standardised summative assessment in school, the examination rules were obeyed. The students were given five topics to be chosen, and they were only required to choose one topic. Then, they were given one hour to write the essay. The researcher marked all the 18 written texts, and errors identified were recorded before being classified. The analysis focuses on i) the use of vocabulary and ii) the sentence structure in the students' written scripts. These two categories of errors were sub categorised into more detailed analysis. As for vocabulary, there were three types of errors namely spelling, translation from L1 and choice of words. Meanwhile, three types of errors identified for the use of language were sentence structure or subject-verb agreement (SVA), tenses and part of speech.

### 4.0 RESULTS

#### 4.1 Types of Errors

The findings were based on the error analysis made on students' written texts. The texts were first

assessed using the marking scheme for English SPM Paper 1. Table 1 shows the most identified errors in students' written texts. The errors were categorised into two major errors which are errors in vocabulary and errors in language use.

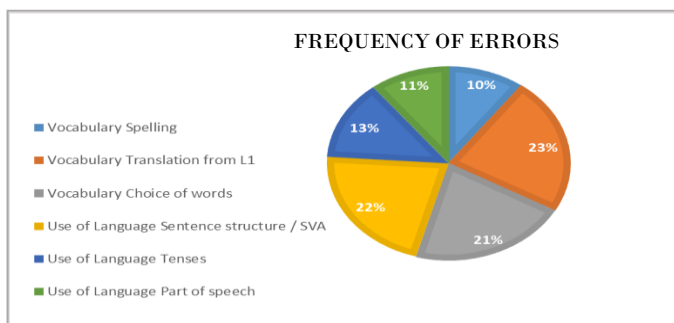
**Table 1** Type of errors identified

Item	Categories	Types of Errors
1	Vocabulary	Spelling
2		Translation from L1
3		Choice of words
4	Use of Language	Sentence structure / SVA
5		Tenses
6		Part of speech

The detailed analysis of the vocabulary aspect revealed three types of errors. They are errors made on spelling, use of translation from L1 and choice of words. In using language, students committed errors in sentence structure (SVA), tenses and parts of speech.

**4.2 Percentage of Frequency of Errors**

Figure 1 below indicates the percentage of frequency of errors based on each type of error. Taking the percentage values of errors, the pie chart in Figure 1 shows the percentage of the six most noticeable common errors.



**Figure 1** Frequency of errors

The participants mostly made errors in translation from L1 (23%), sentence structure (22%) and choice of words (21%). These are followed by errors in tenses (13%), inappropriate use part of speech (11%), and spelling errors (10%). This data is tabulated manually from the analysis of 18 sample written texts.

From the analysis, students' common error was a translation from L1. As mentioned by Song (2018), the students experience the influence of the first language, which is Bahasa Melayu, while learning English as their second language because they possessed the first language system cognitively which they predominantly use, either in informal or formal situations. As seen in the examples, the students were replacing words in Bahasa Melayu with the English vocabulary they have known and paid less attention to restructuring the sentences into correct English language structure. This has caused two types of errors to appear simultaneously which are direct translation from L1 and incorrect sentence structure. An example of this can be seen in

[T1] a: *I<sup>^</sup>/very happy/ because/ my sister/ can / to came/ to the house.*

In [T1] a, the verb to be 'was' is missing as when compared with the translated version in [T1] b, it is understood that in Bahasa Melayu, there is no rule of a verb to be such as in English. Next, the phrase 'can to came' is an incorrect sentence structure but it is a direct translation of 'can' which in Malay is 'boleh' simply to mean 'able to'. This is added with the use of 'to come', which is directly translated from 'datang ke', which as a whole, the correct sentence is meant as: "I was very happy because my sister came over to the house".

### 4.3 Most Common Errors

The analysis reveals six main classifications of defined errors with examples of errors made compared to the correct sentences. Table 2 exhibits the most common errors with selected examples to illustrate the definition of errors and error classification students committed.

**Table 2** Examples of most common errors

Definition and Error classification	Identification of errors	Correct sentences
<b>1. Sentence structure / SVA</b> <i>Wrong placement of preposition and repetition of same structures in sentences.</i>	1. On the date, I and my father go to the city for buying the book.	1. On that day, <b>my father and I</b> went to the city to buy the book.
	2. That day when schools at school my friend always smile to me. It was make my feeling weird. but I do not cara about that feeling.	2. At school that day, my friends gave me warm smiles. It was weird but I could not care about it.
	3. The best thing went go to the village of course. The very important thing. Good! Yes, good.	3. Going to the village was always good!
<b>2. Translation from L1.</b> <i>The sentence structure</i>	1. ...my grandmother stories makes me laughing with a little water get out in my eye cause very funny.	1. ... my grandmother's stories were funny and I wet my eyes.

Definition and Error classification	Identification of errors	Correct sentences
<i>are the same to the structure in L1.</i>	2. ...when the bird take the bait and haved trapped, they would be chosee by my grand father to make as pet or as dinner menu.	2. ... my grandfather would decide whether to make the caught birds as pet or to be served as our dinner.
	3. I packed my bag and tomorrow's day we go to the KLIA Airports to flight.	3. I packed my bag and <b>on the next day</b> , we <b>left</b> for KLIA.
<b>3. Choice of words</b>	1. ...my house always <u>shut up</u> until a voices...	1. ... my house is always <b>quiet</b> .
	2. I <u>make</u> them like my <u>true</u> siblings.	2. I <b>treated</b> them like my <b>own</b> siblings.
	3. <u>After</u> I open the door ...	3. <b>When</b> I opened the door
<b>4. Tenses</b> <i>Mistake with the verbs tense.</i>	1. The day <u>is</u> dark, many people was back at home.	1. As the day <b>got</b> dark, people <b>went</b> back home.
	2. The last year, I <u>forget</u> my birthday.	2. Last year, I <b>did not remember</b> my birthday.
	3. My parents just <u>give</u> me a wish only. (present)	3. My parents only <b>wished</b> [me a happy birthday.]
<b>5. Spelling</b>	1. ballon	1. balloons
	2. univercity	2. university
	3. thankfull	3. thankful
<b>6. Part of speech</b>	1. ...my grandmother stories makes me laughing	1. ... my grandmother's stories made me laugh.
	2. <u>His</u> like to catch birds...	2. <b>He</b> likes to catch birds ...
	3. ... give me <u>a</u> presents.	3. ... give me <b>[some]</b> presents.

Example 1.1 shows students' incorrect use of 'I and my father' in the sentence structure when it should be 'my father and I'. This can be influenced by L1, where 'I' (*saya*) is always placed in front. In example 2.1, the student wrote 'when schools' and 'at school', which carry the same idea. Students may want to highlight the situation at the school on that day. Students could only write 'at school' as it is enough to convey the idea of the situation at school. Example 3.1 was written in three sentences but every sentence was incomplete and failed to convey the exact idea of 'it is always good to go back to the village'.

Students' lack of knowledge in sentence structure is apparent as the students use written phrases that were translated directly from their first language. They tend to replace words with English vocabulary, which they think match the meaning when some words could give different meaning depending on the context in the sentence. The influence of L1 in the sentence has caused a



repetition of words. This could be seen in example 2.2 when the student wanted to write 'grandfather would decide to make the bird as a pet or their dinner.'

Besides the errors discussed above, students also have problems using the correct words to suit the situation in the sentence. As in example 3.3, in the phrase 'After I open the door ...', 'After' should be replaced with 'When' because something could have happened immediately right after the door is opened. Students also have good control in tenses even though some errors in verb tense were identified. Students also attempt errors on spelling when it comes to low frequency vocabulary to them. Students made spelling errors as in example 5.2 where 'university' is spelt as 'univercity'. This could be because students were overgeneralised by the spelling of 'city', hence they use the word as the suffix in 'university'.

Limited vocabulary could have contributed to a repetition of phrases and sometimes could make the essay dull. This is aligned to Chandran et. al. (2019) that writing is a difficult skill to acquire as compared to other skills. However, Song (2018) believed that errors made by the students in the process of acquiring the second language do not necessarily show their ability in language learning. He also believed that through constant practices, the students could overcome the difficulties and should be able to produce better written texts. So, interventions could be planned in order to help students to improve their writing skills by attending one error at a time. Singh et. al. (2017) suggested ESL teachers could either provide feedback after essay marking or get students to rewrite after explaining corrections to the students. By this, students would be able to make themselves familiar with the use of language instead of depending on their first language when writing in English

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

From the analysis carried out, we could conclude that students have the idea on how to write the answers to the task but they have difficulties in putting the ideas in proper structure. Hence, they tend to translate the structures from L1 without realising it could change the meaning. As learners have knowledge of both languages in their schemata, it is rather impossible to not have the influence of one language onto another (Phuket & Othman, 2015), and more dominant language would influence the second language. As seen in this study, Bahasa Melayu has more influence over English language as it is used by students daily.

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