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AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF VERB TENSES IN THE WRITING OF FORM FOUR STUDENTS

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this project paper is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Writing good sentences is not a skill that comes easily and automatically. Instead, it must be developed slowly and steadily through a lot of practice. The purpose of this study is to identify the verb phrase errors that students make in their composition. In order to meet the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted an error analysis on verb tenses in the essays of twenty Form Four students of School A.

This study is also carried out to identify the possible causes of verb tense errors and to provide a better understanding of the nature of these errors. A systematic analysis of the types and frequencies of verb phrase errors was discussed and illustrated with examples of errors that were committed by the participants concerned. In addition, the researcher discussed various interpretations of the results of the study and suggested a number of recommendations for future research in the field of error analysis.



ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti kesalahan tatabahasa khususnya kata kerja yang dilakukan oleh para pelajar di dalam penulisan karangan Bahasa Inggeris. Penulisan merupakan wadah utama di dalam menentukan tingkat penguasaan pelajar di dalam mempelajari sesuatu bahasa. Bagi menentukan kelemahan penguasaan ini, pengkaji telah menjalankan satu analisis kesalahan kata kerja dalam penulisan karangan yang ditulis oleh dua puluh pelajar Tingkatan Empat dari Sekolah A.

Di samping itu juga kajian ini cuba untuk mengenalpasti punca kesalahan kata kerja yang telah dibuat oleh pelajar di dalam penulisan mereka. Analisis yang telah dibuat dan perbincangan mengenai pelbagai kesalahan kata kerja beserta contoh-contoh juga telah dijalankan. Pengkaji juga telah mencadangkan beberapa perkara untuk dibuat kajian mengenai analisis kesalahan kata kerja ini pada masa akan datang.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In every language learning experience, learners are bound to make errors, one way or the other. According to Kroll and Schafer (1978), errors are natural occurrence in the learning process. Learners make errors due to overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete rule application, and hypothesizing false concepts (in Weaver, 1996). Back during the heyday of the behaviourists, errors were regarded as a sign of failure in the learning process. Kroll and Schafer (1978) in Weaver (1996) also stated that errors are regarded as “bad”. As much as possible, teachers would try to eliminate errors in various ways like the implementation of methods such as repetition and drilling. Teachers would strive for perfection from their students and there was no room allowed for any single error to emerge.

In the awakening of the constructivists’ learning theory, errors are seen in a new light. They are no longer associated with students’ failure of internalizing the concepts learned. Instead, errors are considered as a sign of learning. The attitude towards errors is more positive in the sense that teachers are more flexible and accommodating when it comes to dealing with students’ errors. Students are given continuous support and encouragement to learn from their errors as compared to the behaviourists’ approach where students tend to feel discouraged and demotivated when they make errors as it is a reflection of them being failures in learning.





Errors are deemed as important in showing the developmental process of students' learning (Corder, 1967). Teachers analyse students' errors to gain insights into their understanding of the lesson taught. In terms of learning a second language, error analysis is significant to reveal the students' thoughts, strategies and development in mastering a language. It also sheds light on the manner in which students internalise the rules of the target language. The studies of learners' errors will be able to aid teachers in finding and developing effective methods of teaching and learning the English language.

1.2 NEED FOR THE STUDY

This study is significant to provide teachers with an insight into the common grammatical errors committed by secondary school students in their writing. Error Analysis (EA) conducted in this study will reveal the students' thinking and in some cases, indicator of the students' growth in mastering the structures and conventions of written English (Weaver, 1996). The analysis will assist teachers in determining how effective their teaching strategies and methods are and the next steps to be taken in helping the students to become better writers. Interestingly enough, the findings will also reveal the progress that the students have made since they first started learning English in Year One until now that they are in Form Four.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Writing imposes great demands on the students to create meaning for the text (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Despite numerous attempts in teaching students to write, teachers still fail to bring out the skills needed for the students to produce a good writing. This scenario is





common among the ESL teachers and it baffles them as to how do they teach their students to acquire the necessary skills they need to write well. Teachers are often frustrated and in despair over the students weakness in producing a good writing. According to Saadiyah Darus (2009), the standard of English among Malaysian students is declining over the past years and they are still weak especially in their writing skills.

Studies conducted by various researchers in Malaysia on the Malaysian ESL learners show that there is not much difference in terms of the common errors these students made in their compositions. The studies carried out by Lim Ho Peng (1976), Azimah (1998), Khan (2005), and Vahdatinejad (2008) found that most of the students are weak in grammar and they committed recurring grammatical errors in their writing. Their findings concluded that most of the errors were tenses, prepositions and subject-verb agreement (Saadiyah, 2009).



The study seeks to find the most common grammatical errors committed by the students in writing. Undoubtedly, many errors from various aspects of grammatical form will occur but the focus here is on verb tenses. It is definitely important for teachers not only to identify the errors in students' writing but also to come up with a solution to this problem. As it is, teachers will not gain much from error analysis alone unless they utilise it to improve their students' performance in writing. Saadiyah (2009) states that teachers who are able to analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students become more aware of their errors.





1.4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the types of verb tense errors committed by Form Four students in their writing. The study seeks to analyse these errors in the hope of using the findings to assist teachers in employing effective strategies and methods to improve their students' performance in writing.

1.5 Research Questions

1.5.1 What are the verb tense errors committed by students in writing?

1.5.2 Which types of verb tense error is the most prevalent among all the errors in the writing?



1.6 DEFINITION OF TERMS

1.6.1 Error

Error can be defined as a form of structure that a native speaker deems unacceptable because of its inappropriate use (Klassen, 1991) or the use of linguistic item in a way in which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning (Richards, 1985) in Teh Geok Choon (1993). Corder (1974) categorizes errors of performance as mistakes and the systematic errors of the learner or his transitional competence as errors (p. 25). Corder (1973) also classifies errors in terms of the difference between the learners' utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way, errors fall into four



categories: omission of some required element, addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element, selection of an incorrect element and misordering of the elements. Error is further divided into two by Corder; overt and covert errors. “An overt error is easy to identify because there is a clear deviation in form. A covert error occurs in utterances that are superficially well-formed but which do not mean what the learner intended them to mean (Corder in He Dan, 2007).

1.6.2 Error Analysis

The field of Error Analysis (EA) in Second Language Acquisition has long been established by Corder and his colleagues in the 1970s. EA is a type of linguistic study which focuses on the errors learners make. It deals with the learners’ performance in terms of the cognitive processes learners use in coding the input they receive from the target language.

Keshavars (1997) in Erdogan, (2005), on the other hand, suggests that error analysis can be divided into two branches; theoretical and applied. Theoretical is concerned with the process and strategies of language learning and its similarities with first language acquisition and it tries to decode the strategies of learners such as overgeneralization and simplification. Applied error analysis is concerned with organizing remedial courses, and devising appropriate materials and teaching strategies based on the findings of theoretical error analysis.

The purpose of error analysis is to seek “what the learner knows and does not know” and to “ultimately enable the teacher to supply him, not just with the information that his hypothesis is wrong, but also, importantly, with the right sort of information or data for him to form a more adequate concept of a rule in the target language” (Corder, 1974, p.170).



1.6.3 Verbs and verb groups

A verb is a word which describes what a subject does or what happens to it. A verb group is a main verb with one or more auxiliaries, a modal or a modal and an auxiliary which describes what a subject does or what happens to it (Lin Ho, 2004). For example;

1. The patient *fainted*.
2. I *am* going home now.
3. The runners *are* tired.

1.6.4 Writing

Writing is the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process, which is one of gradually developing a text. It involves a number of activities: setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it, then revising and editing. It is a complex process and is seldom mastered by the students especially the second language learners (Hedge, 2000:302). In the context of this research, the writing focuses more on writing correct sentences rather than the whole process of completing the essays.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results from this study can be applied by teachers in finding, changing and creating innovative strategies and methods to assist their students in becoming effective writers. Error analysis conducted at the beginning of the study will highlight some of the





major grammatical errors made by the students in their writing. This will help teachers to focus on gaining students' understanding where these errors are concerned. With the task of identifying the main errors performed, this study will inevitably provide teachers with the insights that they need in regard to the students' progress in writing.

1.8 SUMMARY

Writing has always been the most difficult aspect of the English language in terms of teaching and learning. Considering the fact that most ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers in Malaysia are non-native speakers, it is quite hard for them to assist the students in the writing process. Error analysis conducted in this research is one of the ways to aid teachers in their quest to understand the students' thoughts and strategies in writing. The findings from the analysis are significant for the teachers to become effective where teaching writing is concerned. This study comprises of five chapters. The first chapter clarifies the purpose and need for the study as well as the research questions for the investigations. In the second chapter, literature reviews of every aspect of error analysis are presented and discussed. Chapter III seeks to describe the methodology used in this study including the information about participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Chapter IV presents the results while Chapter V offers a summary of the main findings and theoretical and educational implications.

