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AN ANALYSIS OF VERB PHRASE ERRORS IN STUDENTS' WRITING

**T. INDRANI CHITTY A/P V. TAIVENAIGUM
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**LANGUAGE FACULTY
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS**

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STUDENTS' WRITING**

T. INDRANI CHITTY A/P V. TAIVENAIGUM CHITTY

**A PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION**

**LANGUAGE FACULTY
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS**

2009



DECLARATION

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

09.10.2009

T. INDRANI CHITTY A/P V. TAIVENAIGUM CHITTY
M20072000561





DEDICATION

Specially dedicated to my dearest dad and mum, Mr & Mrs V. Taivenaigum Chitty;
For always being there for me.....

Specially dedicated to my beloved husband, Mr. Gunasegeran Kuppusamy;
For always being supportive.....

Specially dedicated to my lovely children, Dinesh, Umahbhalen & Yeschindha;
For always being obedient.....

Without them this project would not have been a success.





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Lastly, my special thanks to all my truly friends especially to Suma Devi Sathasivam who has always been kind and supportive. I always appreciate and value the friendship.

THANK YOU.





ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti kesalahan bahasa khususnya kata kerja yang dibuat oleh para pelajar dalam penulisan karangan Bahasa Inggeris. Penulisan merupakan wadah utama dalam menentukan darjah atau tatatingkat penguasaan pelajar dalam aspek tatabahasa. Bagi mengenalpasti kelemahan penguasaan ini, pengkaji telah menjalankan satu analisis kesalahan kata kerja dalam penulisan karangan yang ditulis oleh lima belas pelajar Tingkatan Lima dari sekolah A.



kerja yang dilakukan oleh pelajar dalam penulisan mereka. Analisis yang telah dibuat dan perbincangan mengenai pelbagai kesalahan kata kerja serta contoh-contohnya sekali telah juga dilakukan dalam latihan akademik ini. Pengkaji juga telah mencadangkan beberapa perkara untuk dibuat kajian mengenai analisis kesalahan kata kerja ini pada masa akan datang.

Semoga natijah daripada kajian ilmiah ini dapat membentuk sesiapa sahaja yang membacanya dan menjadi insan yang berilmu.



ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the verb phrase errors that students make in their written composition. Writing good sentences is not a skill that comes easily and automatically. Instead, it must develop slowly, over time, through practice. And through writing too, educators especially teachers are able to gauge their students' ability and level of proficiency.

Hence, to meet the purpose of the study, the researcher conducted an analysis of verb phrases errors found in the written composition of fifteen Form Five students of school A.

This study is also carried out to identify the possible causes of verb phrase 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 produced by the respondents concerned. In addition, the researcher discussed various interpretations of the study's results and suggested a number of recommendations for further research in the field of error analysis.

It is hoped that the study would benefit any readers of this study for the sake of knowledge.

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE NO.	TOPIC	PAGE
Table 2.1	Surface Strategy Taxonomy of Errors	21
Table 3.1	Demographic Profile of Sample	31
Table 3.2	Eight Verb Forms in the basic paradigm of the Simple Verb Phrase (Palmer, 1980)	36
Table 3.3	Frequency Distribution of Verb Phrase Errors	41
Table 4.1	Distribution of Verb Phrases used in Essay 1 and Essay 2	44
Table 4.2	Distribution of Error Categories in Essay 1	45
Table 4.3	Distribution of Error Categories in Essay 2	46
Table 4.4	Distribution of Selection Errors in Essay 1 and Essay 2	48
Table 4.5	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors	49
Table 4.6	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Simple Present	51
Table 4.7	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Simple Past	52



TABLE NO.	TOPIC	PAGE
Table 4.8	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Present Progressive	54
Table 4.9	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Past Progressive	55
Table 4.10	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Present Perfect	57
Table 4.11	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Past Perfect	58
Table 4.12	L1 and L2 Language Structure Comparison	59
Table 4.13	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Present Perfect Progressive	60
Table 4.14	Distribution of Verb Tense Selection Errors of the Past Perfect Progressive	61
Table 4.15	Distribution of Omission Errors	65
Table 4.16	Distribution of Addition Errors	67



LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE NO.	TOPIC	PAGE
Figure 2.1	Process of Interlanguage (Selinker, 1972)	18
Figure 2.2	Psycholinguistic Sources of Errors (Ellis 1994, p. 58)	21
Figure 3.1a	The Research Design	32
Figure 3.1b	The Research Design	33
Figure 4.1	Frequency of Selection, Omission and Addition Errors	47
Figure 4.2	Distribution of Selection Errors	49
Figure 4.3	Distribution of Omission Errors	64



LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

L1	First language
L2	Second language
EA	Error Analysis
CA	Contrastive Analysis
BM	Bahasa Melayu

Grading Symbols for Writing Errors

Sv	Incorrect subject-verb agreement
Art	Incorrect or missing article
Num	Problem with the singular/plural noun
Wc	Wrong word choice
Wf	Wrong word form
Vt	Incorrect verb tense
Vf	Verb incorrectly formed
ss	Sentence without errors
*ss	Sentence with errors
unclear	Unclear message
cap	Capitalization
coh	Coherence – one idea does not lead to the next
frag	Incomplete sentence – fragment
sp	Spelling error
^	Omission

Source: Lane and Lange, 1993.



CONTENT

	PAGES
DECLARATION	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
ABSTRAK	v
ABSTRACT	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS	x
CONTENT	xi

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Background of the study	
1.1.1 The role of English in Malaysia	2
1.2 Statement of problem	3
1.3 Purpose of the study	6
1.4 Research questions	6
1.5 Definition of terms	6
1.6 Significance of the study	9
1.7 Limitations of the study	9
1.8 Summary	10

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction	11
2.1 Definition of errors	11
2.2 Historical background	12
2.2.1 Contrastive analysis	14
2.2.2 Error analysis	15
2.2.3 Interlanguage	17
2.3 Identification and description of errors	18
2.4 Sources of errors	20
2.5 Limitations of error analysis	24
2.6 Related studies on the English verbs	24
2.7 Summary	28

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction	29
3.1 Sample of population	30
3.2 Research design	32
3.3 Research instrument	34
3.4 Data collection procedures	34
3.5 Definition of terms	35
3.6 Data analysis procedures	38
3.6.1 Collection of data	38
3.6.2 Identification of errors	38
3.6.3 Categorization of errors	38
3.6.4 Quantification of errors	41
3.6.5 Analysis of source of errors	41
3.7 Summary	42

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction	43
4.1 Distribution of verb phrase errors	44
4.2 Selection errors	47
4.2.1 Verb tense selection errors	49
4.2.2 Verb tense selection errors of the simple present	50
4.2.3 Verb tense selection errors of the simple past	52

4.2.4	Verb tense selection errors of the present progressive	54
4.2.5	Verb tense selection errors of the past progressive	55
4.2.6	Verb tense selection errors of the present perfect	57
4.2.7	Verb tense selection errors of the past perfect	58
4.2.8	Verb tense selection errors of the present perfect progressive	60
4.2.9	Verb tense selection errors of the past perfect progressive	61
4.2.10	Subject-verb concord selection errors	62
4.2.11	Verb form selection errors	63
4.3	Omission errors	64
4.4	Addition errors	67
4.5	Summary	68

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

5.0	Introduction	69
5.1	Discussions	69
5.2	Implications and recommendations	72
5.3	Suggestions For Further Research	73
5.4	Conclusion	74

REFERENCES	75
------------	----

LIST OF APPENDICES	82
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Appendix A	Distribution of Error Categories
Appendix B (a)	Exercise 1 - "My most unforgettable experience at school"
Appendix B (b)	Exercise 2 - "The person I admire"
Appendix C	Holistic Scoring Method
Appendix D	Students' Written Essays



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY



Errors in writing made by students in their process of learning a second language have been studied by researchers, and, we know that, historically, teachers have been fastidious about error identification in writing (Williams, 1981). Errors in writing are a necessary part of writing improvement, and identifying and correcting errors may actually be detrimental to writing development (Haswell, 1988).

Tarone and Yule (1996) stress the importance of identifying and correcting language errors;

“Correcting learners’ errors help them to discover the functions and limitations of the target language. Consequently, if any errors did happen to occur, they had to be corrected immediately”.

(Tarone and Yule, 1996, p. 102)

Studies in language errors made by students in their process of acquiring and learning a second language have always been the interests of many linguists and language teachers. Since the 1940s and up to the mid-1960s, errors were regarded solely as the products of first language habits. Language errors were believed to be the result of





established first language habits interfering with the learning of the second language (Lado, 1957). This formed the basis of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. However, a shift of thought from linguists resulted in the Error Analysis Approach Hypothesis, which analyzed actual errors students made. Errors made by second language were not totally considered as interference of first language habits but as evidence of an underlying rule-governed system the learner had of his second language (Corder, 1967).

It is believed that a teacher's familiarity with the student's errors would be a valuable guide to determine the sequence of language instruction specifically geared towards the linguistics difficulties of the students. This study is thus an attempt to identify verb phrase errors made by fifteen Form Five students of School A in their essay writing. It also attempts to identify the possible causes of the errors so as to provide a better understanding of the nature of these errors.

1.1 THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA



English was introduced in Malaysia through the British colonial education system and was the medium of instruction in all national type English schools, as well as the main language of government, administration and commerce (Wong and Thambyrajah, 1991). Knowledge of English was an asset and English medium schools provide avenues to higher education and better job opportunities.

However, English lost its status as the main language when Malaysia gained her independence in 1957 (Benson, 1990). English was adopted as an alternate official language together with Bahasa Malaysia. This change has affected the status of English not only in the government sector but also in schools. Subsequently, English Language has been taught as the official second language in the Malaysian Education System (Asmah, 1982).

At present, both English and Bahasa Malaysia play a vital role in nation building. Bahasa Malaysia is viewed as a language for establishing unity and national identity whereas English on the other hand is viewed as a language for maintaining group cohesion and political ties (Asmah, 1982). English has now become an international language and people from all walks of life use it. Mohamed Amin Embi





(2000), says that English is important for communication, in looking for employment and also in the education world. English Language is essential for the Malaysian people in order for them to succeed in the present age of information technology and increasing trends of globalization.

Being cognizant of this fact, the Prime Minister of Malaysia then, Dato' Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi has time and time again, spoken out on the need for Malaysians to acquire English Language and with that take full advantage of the opportunities available in this ever challenging world (News Straits Times, 2004). The recent call for Malaysians to focus on the learning of English by the Prime Minister then, points to the fact that English will definitely play a major role in achieving the goals of progress and development by the year 2020.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Concern over the decline of the standard of English among students of English has been reiterated by educationists as well as public figures who view this decline as a threat to the advancement of national development. In a press conference the Education Minister then, Datuk Seri Hishammudin Tun Hussein said that the standard of English among Malaysian schoolchildren has been said to be declining. Educationists have made various proposals to arrest the decline including introducing more subjects in English (The Star, 2001, p. 5). Hence in 2003, the Malaysian Ministry of Education proposed subjects like Mathematics and Science to be taught in English in schools.

Writing is one of the four English Language skills taught and tested in the education system in Malaysia. Students write a variety of text types at the upper secondary school level in compliance with the writing requirements for school and examination purposes. As such many students of English consider writing as the most arduous skill to master. These students regard writing as a complex process whereby they have to transform their ideas and thoughts into written form.

“... Many students of English consider writing the most difficult skill to master. Teachers too, face difficulties in developing their students' capability. Recent approaches to English language teaching seem to give emphasis more





on developing aural-oral skills rather than writing. Students therefore have difficulties in learning to communicate in writing on any given topic.”

(Compendium, Volume 3, 1991, p. 13)

Writing in one's mother tongue is a demanding task that calls upon several language abilities as well as upon general metacognitive abilities. These constituent abilities are in a constant interplay. Writing in a second language is even more demanding because several of these constituent abilities may be less well developed than in one's first language (Schoonen, R., Gelderen, A., Glopper, K. D., Hulstijn, J., Simis, A., Snellings, P., & Stevenson, M., 2003).

Factors such as lack of basic grammar skills, insufficient oral skills, insufficient structural guidance and insufficient reading affect the students' performance in writing. Writing exercises are given in schools in order to consolidate the learning items which are taught. Writing is extremely valuable in the classroom as a means of establishing competency and developing productive performance skills (Chastain, 1980). Byrne (1991) pointed out that writing involves encoding of a message in which we translate our thoughts into meaningful language. Therefore, it is important that students are able to put their conscious effort in constructing sentences and later paragraphs that are grammatically and structurally correct.

In the writing of compositions, a primary requisite of competence is accuracy of grammar so that communication is not hindered (Heaton, 1988). According to Higgs and Clifford (1982), students whose use of the second language contains consistent grammatical errors which are not corrected in the earlier stages of writing may become 'learning proof', that is, unable to learn the correct forms at all. And, one way of measuring competency in writing as a productive skill is through grammar.

Hence without the proficiency and competence needed, students of English will find difficulty to express their ideas in sentences without making any errors. Brown (1994) states that learners do make errors and that these errors can be observed, analyzed and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner. Errors in writing are avoided by providing learners with models to follow or by guiding





and controlling what learners write to prevent them from making errors (Richards, 1995).

Since the teaching of verbs is one of the important element in the acquisition of the grammatical items in the English syllabus, this study is therefore limited to the examination of verb phrase errors. Some of the common incorrect usage of verb phrases faced by the students are:

(i) incorrect use of verb tense

Example:

My mother bake a chocolate cake yesterday.

In the above sentence, the simple present tense (bake) is used instead of the simple past tense (baked).

(ii) incorrect subject-verb agreement

Example:

Yeschindha like to eat ice cream.

Here, the plural verb form (like) is used instead of the singular verb form (likes).

(iii) incorrect irregular verb form

Example:

He taked off his shirt because it was wet.

In the above example, the incorrect verb form (taked) is used instead of the correct verb form (took)

The above examples demonstrate some of the incorrect use of verbs in English. It is essential that students are taught correctly to understand the meaning of the usage of verbs as Palmer (1980) points that learning a language is to a very large degree learning how to operate the verbal forms of that language. This leads to the fact that verbs are the central point to which other sentence constituents are linked (Fillmore, 1968).



1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to :

- (i) identify the verb phrase errors made by students in their writing;
- (ii) identify the possible sources of the verb phrase errors made by students in their writing.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- (i) What are the verb phrase errors found in students' writing?
- (iii) What are the possible sources of verb phrase errors made by students in their writing?

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The definitions listed below apply to the terms as they are used in this study.

(i) First Language Interference

First language interference can be viewed as a situation where the learners transfer first language 'habits' into the second language (Ellis, 1995).

(ii) English as a Second Language (ESL)

English as a second language is where English is learned as a second language in countries where English is institutionalized; that is used as a medium of instruction in schools, as a language of business, law and government, and/or as a language of everyday communication (Carter, 1993).

(iii) Errors

Errors are systematic, likely to have repeated occurrences and are typically produced by language learners (Chaudron, 1986).

(iv) Error Analysis

Error Analysis is the examination of those errors committed by students in both the spoken and written medium (Corder, 1974).

(v) Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive Analysis is the procedure for comparing and identifying similarities and differences between the linguistic systems of the different languages (Nunan, 1999).

(vi) Interlanguage

Interlanguage is the language produced by learners in the course of acquiring the target language (Nunan, 1999).

(vii) Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language (Richards, 1974).

(viii) Verb Phrase

Verb phrase is a phrasal grammatical category. A verb phrase normally consists of a verb, or verb group and a complement, together possibly with adverbial modifiers. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973).

Example:

He might be writing to her soon.

**(ix) A full verb**

A full verb is a lexical verb. It is either regular or irregular. A full verb has five forms, which are the base form, -s form, past tense form, -ing form, and -en form (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973).

Example:**the -en form**

He **has written** to her. (present participle)

He **had written** to her. (past participle)

(x) An auxiliary verb

An auxiliary verb is used with a full verb as a 'helping' verb. The auxiliary verb is classified in terms of primary auxiliaries and secondary auxiliaries. The primary auxiliaries are BE, HAVE, DO and the secondary auxiliaries known as modal auxiliaries are WILL, SHALL, CAN, MAY, MUST, OUGHT, DARE and NEED (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973).

(xi) Progressive Forms

The progressive forms refer to the present progressive and the past progressive forms. The progressive is formed when the primary auxiliary BE is followed by a present participle form. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973).

Example:

He **is writing** to her. (present progressive)

He **was writing** to her. (past progressive)

He **has been writing** to her. (present perfect progressive)

He **had been writing** to her. (past perfect progressive)





1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Errors are invaluable sources of information to teachers and students in the learning of a second language. Corder (1973) claims that errors are significant to the language teacher and the learner. Language teachers are able to determine the level of mastery of the language system of their students from the errors they make. Errors provide feedback to the teachers as to how far their students had progressed.

It is hoped that the results of the study would provide significant findings and valuable insights in comprehending the nature of grammatical errors, especially in the verb phrase errors. Thus, it is vital that teachers be aware of the types of errors made by their students, the possible causes for such errors and to adapt appropriate techniques for error correction.

The findings would be a useful guide to teachers with regards to the planning of teaching strategies, implementing various learning activities and appropriate teaching materials.



The data produced would be of value to curriculum planners and serve as a basis for planning and re-orientating materials for the teaching and learning of English to students.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited in its scope and subject coverage which consists of only fifteen Form Five students of School A. As such the interpretation and conclusion drawn from the findings are limited and of a particular group. The results do not represent the whole population of the students.

The error analysis, which is carried out in this study is restrictively based on the verb phrase errors found in the students' essay writing. Thus, these errors studied are limited in scope to only those found in the corpus. Another limitation is that the types of errors found in the use of verbs could be influenced by the error collection techniques. As pointed out by Nickel (1989), different kinds of error collection techniques may produce different types of errors. Hence, the verb phrase errors elicited





in this study are not a comprehensive representation of all the possible kinds of errors found in the use of verbs.

1.8 SUMMARY

Writing is a highly specialized skill involving the ability to gather and integrate thoughts, and the language skills to put them across as logically and coherently as possible. However, in the process of learning to write well, students of English tend to make errors, which are regarded as inevitable (Corder, 1967). Shaughnessy (as cite in Teh Geok Choon, 1993) also added that when students make errors, it is because they have not learnt the correct form.

Hence, second language teachers should expect many errors from their students and should accept these errors as a natural phenomenon integral to the process of learning a second language (Brooks, 1964). It is vital that teachers be aware of the types of errors their students make as well as some possible causes for such errors so as to be able to adapt appropriate techniques for error correction.

