

ERRORS IN FORMAL LETTER WRITING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Writing a good formal letter is a skill that must be mastered. This study aims to find out the errors that undergraduate students make in writing a formal letter when no guidance is given. Thirty undergraduate English language proficiency course students from the University of Malaya were given an assignment to write a formal letter. The letters were marked using a writing evaluation criteria table which was designed based on marking written work for over 15 years. In the letter format, around 30% performed poorly while 43% performed averagely. Overall, their organisation of their letters was good. Most of them chose the modified block style with indented paragraphs. Their grammar performance was average with the highest number of errors made in the omission of auxiliary verbs and articles, and the second highest in the wrong use of verb forms. For mechanics, the highest number of errors was in spelling followed by capitalisation. Overall, their use of vocabulary was good as they were able to use the correct choice of words to express their ideas. For students to excel in formal writing, proper guidance and practice must be given in class.

Keywords: formal letter, format, block style, modified block style, errors, grammar

Introduction

A letter is basically a written message from one person (the sender) to another person (the recipient). There are two types of letters, which are informal and formal. Informal or personal letters are usually written to siblings and close friends and are usually for internal audiences. On the other hand, formal letters are written to address external audiences. Usually in formal letter writing, according to Smith-Worthington and Jefferson (2005), one has to be careful in choosing the right words and the right tone, and focus on the purpose of the correspondence. Furthermore, letters for special circumstances such as dismissals, promotions, recommendations or disciplinary matters should have a higher level of formality because of the importance of the message and the legal implications.

In everyday lives, students have to write formal letters to their teachers and lecturers when they are absent or need to take leave to participate in important co-curricular activities during class hours or for other important family events. Also, formal letters are written when applying for jobs or when writing to organisations to get information, or to inform another person of an important occasion, to complain about a service, or to enquire a facility and so forth.

Quite a number of studies have been done on formal letters, for example, Yap (1999). The aim of Yap's study was to understand strategies used and problems encountered by weak ESL learners in the process of writing business letters. The strategies found based on an interview after the written task showed that cognitive strategies were used more frequently for the management of task comprehension requirements while metacognitive strategies were used for the production of ideas in the written process, and social strategies were used to express their negative emotions. Some students were able to identify the problems in their writing accurately while others were not able to do so and this affected their range of strategies used in their writing process. The study suggests possible links between the use of higher order cognitive reading strategies such as summarising and making connections with writing effectiveness. However, the present study does not look at strategy use but investigates the surface structures produced in the writing process, and an analysis of the errors committed by the undergraduates in writing formal letters to their lecturers.

Another study by Geok (2007) was a discourse analysis of readers' letters published in the education supplement of a leading local English newspaper. It studies the significance of semantics, social relationship, underlying rationale and hidden agenda of letter writers, target readers, and also the media itself. The vocabulary, grammatical, linguistic, and textual features present in the letters are examined to uncover the mentioned concerns. However, the present study is different as it looks in-depth into the writing performance of 30 University of Malaya students in writing formal letters, and investigates what is lacking in their letter writing performance and the types of errors they make in writing formal letters.

Aim of the Study

The present study aims to find out the errors that undergraduate students make in writing formal letters to their lecturers. This includes the errors they make in the format, organisation, grammar, mechanics and vocabulary in their formal letters to their lecturers.

Research Questions

The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What are the errors students make in the format of their formal letters?
2. How is the organisation of their formal letters in terms of paragraphs and content?
3. What are the types of grammar errors made in their letter writing?
4. What types of errors do they made in the mechanics that include punctuation, spelling and capitalisation?
5. How is their choice of words?

Limitations of the Study

This study was only limited to a sample of thirty undergraduate students doing a proficiency course in English language at the University of Malaya.

The study did not differentiate between a mistake and an error. Ellis (1997, in Bhela 1999, p.23) said that errors reflect gaps in the learner's knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes, he suggests reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. A mistake is not a competency error but could be due to carelessness. As this study dealt with written letters, all mistakes were also counted as errors because this work was given as homework to the students, so they should have checked and edited their work before submitting to the researcher who was also their lecturer.

This study was based on only the written performance of the participants in writing a formal letter. It did not take into consideration other language skills such as speaking, listening and reading.

Significance of the Study

Writing formal letters is very important in our lives. We have to write formal letters to apply for scholarships and jobs, complain about services, enquire about something, order equipment, recommend someone for a promotion, dismiss an inefficient worker, and so forth. Therefore, a person must be able to write a good formal letter. This study is important in showing to us where and what students lack in writing formal letters, and therefore what features in a formal letter must be highlighted and taught to them so that they will be able to perform in the real world. The weaknesses in their performance can be used as pointers to highlight these features when teaching them to write formal letters. They must be informed of the importance of mastering the rules in writing formal letters which will help

them in the real world either as a student or as a future employee in an organisation.

Methodology

The sample for this study comprised 30 Malaysian undergraduate students from an English language proficiency class in the University of Malaya. The sample comprised 11 Chinese, 15 Malay and 4 Indian students.

The 30 undergraduate students (the sample) doing a proficiency course in English were asked to write a formal letter to their lecturer on the topic “How I Spent My Holidays”. This assignment was given to them as homework when they first entered the class after registration. They were given one week to complete their assignment. No advice or lessons were given on how to write a formal letter. The researcher wanted to know that upon completing their Form Six, how much knowledge they had on formal letter writing. The main aim of the assignment was to find out the errors they made when writing formal letters. The researcher hoped to find the answers to her five research questions after analysing the data. Even though the subject matter of the letter is better suited for a composition, it was used to see how students would write on a simple topic in the form of a formal letter to their lecturers.

After getting the completed 30 letters from her undergraduate students, the researcher used a writing evaluation criteria list as shown in Appendix A which was given to her by her colleague who developed it from teaching many writing courses over a number of years. The researcher added one more component that is Format, to make it relevant for marking formal letters. Thus for this study, the evaluation list comprised six categories: Format, Content/Ideas, Organisation, Grammar, Vocabulary and Mechanics (see Appendix A). For each category, the students were evaluated as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|---------|
| Poor | - | 1 mark |
| Average | - | 2 marks |
| Good | - | 3 marks |
| Excellent | - | 4 marks |

If they performed poorly, they were given 1 mark, and if they performed on the average, they were given 2 marks. Those who did well and were assessed as good were given 3 marks, and those who were almost perfect or excellent were given 4 marks.

Criteria were listed for each category. The letters were marked and an inter-rater who was also a colleague of the researcher re-marked the letters as a cross-

checker. The inter-rater was an English language specialist lecturer from a public university in Selangor. For the grammar and mechanics sections, the errors were categorised and counted, and their frequency was given in the discussion section.

Discussion of Results

Research Question1

What are the errors students make in the format when writing formal letters?

According to Smith-Worthington and Jefferson (2005, pp. 124-125), all letters have two possible styles which are the block style and the modified block style. They are of the opinion that usually business letters are written on letterhead stationery in either block or modified block style. Personal letters include return addresses instead of letterheads and like business letters, may be written in either block or modified block style. Block style letters are easy to type as all the paragraphs are not indented and every part is flushed to the left (except where there are readymade letterheads which may be centered). On the other hand, they suggest that the modified block style is difficult to type but looks more symmetrical as the dateline, return address, closing and signature line are typed at the horizontal centre of the page. Paragraphs in this style may or may not be indented.

They suggest that two punctuation styles are commonly used: open and mixed. According to them, open punctuation means no punctuation marks are used for the addresses, after the salutation and the complimentary close. Open punctuation is considered an economic style and is often used with a block format letter. When the mixed punctuation style is used, the salutation and complimentary close are followed by punctuation marks. The proper punctuation with this style is a comma after the salutation and the complimentary close.

The above mentioned criteria by Smith-Worthington and Jefferson (2005) were used when assessing the students' format. It was found that all 30 participants or 100% used the modified block style in their letters. All their paragraphs were indented and not flushed to the left as is required for block style. All used punctuation marks in their address and salutation, showing that they are not used to the modern open punctuation now commonly used in formal letters where no punctuation marks are used for the address, salutation and closing.

Eleven students or 36.7% used "th" for the dates for example, "15th July 2011". For formal letters, "th" is not used and thus this is noted as an error by the

researcher. Nine students or 30% of the sample did not write the date in their letters. Nine students or 30% of the sample did not write their own addresses as senders in the heading of the formal letter to their lecturer that is the researcher. Eight or 26.7% of the participants in this study did not write the inside address of the person to whom the letter is addressed that is their lecturer's address.

Two or 6.7 % of the sample had no salutation in their letter. The researcher who was the lecturer of the course had given them her exact name and had told her students that they must address the letter to her. However, surprisingly 22 or 73.3% had their salutation wrong. The common errors were, “*Dear,*Dr, *Dear Madam, *To My dearest lecturer:, *Mrs., *MR/MRS, *Madam, *Dear Sir, *Dear Madame, *Dear Prof., *Dr., *Madam.

Five or 16.7% of the sample had no closing in their letter. Closings are needed to give an ending to a formal letter. The common closings used by the participants were, “Yours sincerely, Yours truly, Sincerely, Yours faithfully, and Faithfully.” Thank you should not be used to end a formal letter. Seven or 23.3% ended their letter with thank you and this is considered an error in a formal letter. All formal letters must be signed followed by the full name of the sender. Only four or 13.3% did not sign but write their names. Generally, the majority (26 or 86.7%) know that all formal letters must be signed followed by their full name but they did follow this rule.

Based on the writing evaluation criteria as shown in Appendix A, the participants' performance in the category of Format is as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|------------------------------------|
| Poor | - | 9 students or 30% of the sample |
| Average | - | 13 students or 43.3% of the sample |
| Good | - | 7 students or 23.3% of the sample |
| Excellent | - | 1 student or 3.3% of the sample |

This shows that the participants need more training in writing the proper format for formal letters as a total of 22 students or more than half (73.3%) made numerous errors in the writing of the different parts of their formal letters that such as errors in heading, inside address, salutation, closing and signature line.

The subject line is optional according to Smith-Worthington and Jefferson (2005). In the sample, fourteen students or 46.7% of the sample did not write the subject line. As it is optional, this was just an observation.

Research Question 2

How is the organisation of their formal letters in terms of paragraphs and content?

Generally speaking, their organisation was good as most of them wrote in paragraphs which were indented, that is, they chose the modified block style. Some had even chosen to number their paragraphs. Their narration in the form of a letter to their lecturer was organised fairly well. Their performance in their organisation according to the writing evaluation criteria in Appendix A is as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|----------------------|
| Poor | – | 0 or 0% |
| Average | – | 4 students or 13.3% |
| Good | – | 22 students or 73.3% |
| Excellent | – | 4 students or 13.3 % |

For content or ideas, the researcher wanted to assess whether what they were writing was relevant to the topic or not (topic given was “How I Spent My School Holidays”), and whether there were sufficient details given which were elaborated and well-developed; Furthermore, whether their sentences were coherent to each other and to the topic given.

Their performance in content/ideas based on the writing evaluation criteria given in Appendix A is as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|------------|
| Poor | - | 0 or 0% |
| Average | - | 4 or 13.4% |
| Good | - | 18 or 60% |
| Excellent | - | 8 or 26.7% |

From their performance, the researcher noted that all of the students were able to write well. Most of them were able to express what they did during the holidays. All the students had something to say in their letters as the topic was easy and interesting. However, only eight students wrote really cohesively and scored excellent marks.

Research Question 3

What are the types of grammar errors made in their writing?

The types of errors made in grammar in their letter (the body) by the students are as shown in Table 1. The errors detected from the participants’ letters were classified as omission, incorrect verb form, wrong pronoun, wrong preposition, insertion, singular for plural or plural for singular and subject-verb agreement errors.

Their performance in grammar based on the writing evaluation criteria given in Appendix A is as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|
| Poor | - | 3 or 10 % |
| Average | - | 21 or 70% |
| Good | - | 6 or 20% |
| Excellent | - | 0 or 0% |

Table 1
Types of Errors in Grammar

| No. | Categories | Total No. of Errors | Percentage |
|-----|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| 1. | Omission | 188 | 38.6 |
| 2 | Incorrect Verb form | 129 | 26.5 |
| 3 | Wrong pronoun usage | 8 | 1.6 |
| 4 | Wrong preposition | 40 | 8.2 |
| 5 | Insertion | 56 | 11.5 |
| 6 | Singular/Plural errors | 65 | 13.4 |
| 7 | Subject-verb agreement errors | 1 | 0.2 |
| | | 487 | 100% |

The basic types of errors made in their grammar as shown in Table 1 are omission, incorrect verb form, wrong pronoun usage, wrong preposition, insertion, singular/plural nouns and subject-verb agreement. As shown in Table 1, the highest frequency of errors is omission totalling 188 or 38.6%. Generally, the students left out the auxiliary verbs such as *am, is, was, were*, and articles such as *a, an* and *the*. The reason could be because of mother tongue interference of the participants because Chinese, Tamil and Malay languages do not have these structures. In English, the auxiliary verbs are compulsory as they are needed to form grammatical sentences.

The second highest frequency of errors was in the category of incorrect verb form. Here the students were not using the correct tenses or the correct inflections of the verb for example using *learn* when it should be *learnt*, or *have* when in the context it should be *having*, and *spend* when it should be *spent*. The researcher came to the conclusion that the students were weak in their use of past tense and the correct inflections for the verbs to show progressive, past and present tenses.

Next highest is the errors made in singular and plural nouns (13.4%). The students were not sure of using the singular or plural, and they made a number of errors in their writing such as using picture for pictures, some of the *performer*, all of the *student*, many of the *shop*, etc.

The fourth highest at 11.5% are insertion errors. They inserted words in a sentence when they should not have. Examples include, “Anyway I will go with my family members who **are** consist of my parents and six siblings include **of** me.”, “I **have** meet more new friends **at** there.”

The fifth highest number of errors is in the category of using the wrong prepositions which amounted to 8.2%. Some of the students were not sure of which preposition to use and made errors as follows:

*I went there with my family **at** morning.

*We get holiday **during** 3 month.

*My holidays were started when I come to my hometown with my family **at** Malacca.

They have learnt in the English language about pronouns and are confused in how to use them correctly. Also in the Chinese language, there are no pronouns and so the Chinese participants used them wrongly as they had not mastered the correct use of them in English.

Wrong pronoun usage amounted to 1.6% of the errors. Some of the participants mixed up the use of the pronouns *he, she, we, our, it* etc.

Subject-verb agreement errors are the lowest at 0.2% only as most of the participants knew the rules and were able to apply them correctly.

Research Question 4

What are the types of errors made in the mechanics that is punctuation, spelling and capitalisation?

Table 2 shows the errors made in the mechanics that is punctuation, spelling and capitalisation.

Table 2

Errors in Mechanics – Spelling, Punctuation and Capitalization

| No. | Categories | Total | Percentage |
|-----|-------------|-------|------------|
| 1 | Spelling | 41 | 51.3 |
| 2 | Punctuation | 18 | 22.5 |

| | | | |
|---|----------------|----|------|
| 3 | Capitalisation | 21 | 26.3 |
| | Total | 80 | 100% |

The highest frequency of errors in the mechanics section is spelling which comprise 51.3%. Some examples of the spelling errors made by the participants were as follows (wrong spelling for a word marked with an asterisk - *):

- *Felling for feeling
- *Hiatory for History
- *Hoidays for holidays
- *Limestone hills for limestone hills
- *Jungle treckking for jungle tracking
- *Offered letter for offer letter
- *Sometime for sometimes
- *Kristal mosque for Crystal Mosque
- *Fassion for fashion
- *Study for studies
- *Lease for least
- *Subjec for subject
- *greated for greeted
- *breath for breathe
- *studing for studying
- *possibble for possible
- *chip for cheap
- *even thought for even though
- *u for you
- *wonderfull for wonderful
- *unic for unique
- *Shoping for shopping
- *futher for further
- *tittle for title

The researcher is of the opinion that the above spelling errors could be due to mother tongue interference, SMS (short message service) writing influence, and pronunciation problems. For example, a Malay student spelt “Kristal for Crystal” which shows that generally the Malay students who used phonetic spelling in their mother tongue tried to impose the phonetic spelling into the English language which does not practice the phonetic spelling but uses the alphabetic spelling system. Sometimes when they pronounced the word wrongly, then they spelt likewise too for example “even thought for even though”, “chip for cheap”. Also, some of them were not sure when to use double consonants and when not to use it and so they made errors in spelling such as “wonderfull

for wonderful”, “tittle for title”. SMS influence was also seen, for example writing “u for you” because they forgot that they must not use this kind of spelling when writing formal letters.

Capitalisation errors are the second highest number of errors amounting to 26.3%. Here some of the participants constantly used the small “i” when they should be using the capital “I”. Some of them did not use capital letters for proper nouns and names of places, so this category of errors is rather high after spelling errors.

Punctuation errors are the third highest in mechanics. Here, some of the participants did not know how to use the apostrophe mark correctly. Some of them did not use commas after transition markers, some did not put full stops after sentences and some did not put question marks for questions. This amounted to 22.5% of the errors.

The participants’ overall performance in mechanics was as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|-------------|
| Poor | - | 2 or 6.7% |
| Average | - | 9 or 30% |
| Good | - | 17 or 56.7% |
| Excellent | - | 2 or 6.7 % |

Research Question 5

How is their performance in vocabulary?

Generally speaking, the 30 participants in this study performed fairly well in the use of the correct vocabulary to express their intention. However there were some wrong choices of vocabulary used in their formal letters as shown in the examples below:

- *Tomorrow day for the next day
- *Visitation for visit
- *Healthy for health
- *Take a picnic for have a picnic
- *Get bath for took a bath
- *I am happy ...for I will be happy...
- *Thank for thanks
- *Strategic for strategy
- *Memorize for memorable
- *Piety for pity
- *Your sincerely for Yours sincerely
- *Much places for many places
- *Been for being
- *Sivik for Civics

- *is quite traffic jam for is quite congested
- *it's time for the time
- *to story for to tell you
- *had a trip for made a trip
- *There got a waterfall... for There is a waterfall...
- *Its for It's
- *Hear for near
- *truthly for truly

The participants' performance in vocabulary is as follows:

| | | |
|-----------|---|-------------|
| Poor | - | 0 or 0% |
| Average | - | 18 or 60% |
| Good | - | 11 or 36.7% |
| Excellent | - | 1 or 3.3% |

Conclusion

The study investigated the different errors students make when writing formal letters. The study shows that students need to be taught the correct way of writing the different parts of a formal letter that is the format, body and conclusion. A good model or specimen of a formal letter can be used to teach students on the proper way to write the different parts of a formal letter. A formal letter has its different parts such as heading or sender's address, dateline, inside address or recipient's address, salutation, subject line (which is optional), body, closing, and signature line.

The study discovered that the students were not sure of the format of a formal letter and a total of 22 students or more than half (73.3%) made numerous errors in writing the different parts of their formal letters such as making errors in their heading or sender's address, recipient's address, salutation, closing and signature line.

In the body too, they performed just fairly with a majority of them (38.6%) leaving out auxiliary verbs in their sentences, using the wrong verb forms (26.5%), inserting prepositions and auxiliary verbs in the wrong places (11.5%) and a few also did not know how to use prepositions (8.2%) and pronouns (1.6%) correctly. In the mechanics involving capitalisation, spelling and punctuation, the majority of the participants (51.3%) had errors in spelling followed by capitalisation (26.3%) and punctuation (22.5%). This could be due to their mother tongue interference where the Malays and Chinese practice spelling according to the sound of the word whereas English uses an alphabetic spelling system where the sound of a word need not be spelt according to the

sound system. They need to be taught the rules of mechanics and the importance of paying attention to the proper use of capitalisation, spelling and punctuation when writing formal letters. For vocabulary 60% could perform on the average, while 36.6% were good as they were able to use the correct choice of words in their writing.

The study may help raise awareness in teachers and lecturers that undergraduate students should be taught to write good formal letters as these are useful in their daily lives. They will need to perform well in order to secure jobs, and also be able to perform well in their employment. The study shows that without instruction on how to write a proper formal letter, undergraduates lack the knowledge and make errors in the important parts of a formal letter. Thus writing formal letters should also be included and taught in a proficiency English language course at the university level so that undergraduates are better prepared to face the world of employment when they leave the university.

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APPENDIX A
Letter Writing Evaluation Criteria

| Criteria | Excellent | Good | Average | Poor |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Format (Basic parts of a letter: heading, dateline, inside address, salutation, body, closing, signature) | All parts correct | 6-7 parts correct | 4-5 parts correct | less than 3 parts correct |
| 2 Content/Ideas | Relevant to topic | Lacks detail | Insufficient ideas | Ideas confused or disconnected |
| 3 Organization | Well-developed Well-organized | Loosely organized | Unorganized | Unable to evaluate due to lack of content |
| 4 Grammar (sentence structure, verb conjugations, agreement, articles, pronouns, prepositions) | Focused Use of complex structures with few errors | Use of complex structures with occasional errors | Use of simple structures with occasional errors | Incorrect use of simple structures |
| 5 Vocabulary (word choice) | Correct use of simple structures Variety of expressions Use of idioms | Use of simple structures with few errors Variety of expressions with occasional errors | Basic expressions Limited use of English | Meaning Confused or Obscured Frequent use of English |
| 6 Mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) | Few errors | Occasional errors | Frequent errors | No apparent understanding of mechanics |