

ERROR ANALYSIS OF FORM FOUR ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Error analysis is an invaluable source of information to teachers. It provides information on students' errors which in turn helps teachers to correct students' errors and also improves the effectiveness of their teaching. The study of errors by themselves would have been misleading; the study of errors in contrast to the number of correct responses gives a good picture of which items are being mastered and which are not. Therefore, this study hopes to enlighten teachers on the errors that require remedial work so that time is not wasted on teaching grammar items which pose little or no problems to the majority of the students in relation to writing compositions.

The definition of error analysis by Corder (1974) is very relevant to the Malaysian context: "What has come to be known as error analysis has to do with the investigation of the language of second language learners."

In line with the emphasis on examinations in the Malaysian education system, Lim (1976), stated:

One of the main aims of error analysis is to help teachers assess more accurately what remedial work would be necessary for English as a Second Language (ESL) students preparing for an English Language test, so as to help these students avoid the most common errors.

Corder (1981), also held the same view regarding the function of error analysis and that there are two justifications for studying learners' errors: its relevance to language teaching and the study of the language acquisition process. He mentioned that:

... the pedagogical justification, namely that a good understanding of the nature of error is necessary before a systematic means of eradicating them could be found, and the theoretical justification, which claims that a study of learners' errors is part of the systematic study of the learners' language which is itself necessary to an understanding of the process of second language acquisition.

As this study analyzes learners' errors, it is appropriate to define what is meant by errors. The terms "mistake and "error" are often used interchangeably. However, there is a clear difference between the two. The following definitions of errors and mistakes are applicable to this study.

Norrish (1983) made a clear distinction between errors and mistakes. He stated errors as "a systematic deviation when a learner has not learnt something and consistently 'gets it wrong." He added that when a learner of English as a second or foreign language makes an error systematically, it is because he has not learnt the correct form. Norrish defined mistakes as "inconsistent deviation." When a learner has been taught a certain correct form, and he uses one form sometimes and another at other times quite inconsistently, the inconsistent deviation is called a mistake.

METHODOLOGY

In this article, we hope to highlight the findings of a study that was conducted for Universiti Pertanian Malaysia. The aims of the study were as follows:

- a. to indicate some of the grammar items that have been mastered by Form Four students;
- b. to indicate some of the grammar items that have not been mastered by Form Four students;
- c. to investigate if there is any significant difference in the percentage of errors in relation to grammar items between rural and urban students.

The main purpose of this study is to categorise and evaluate the types of errors that students make in written compositions. This study, therefore, does not set out to investigate the factors that contribute to the students' errors. Although an investigation of the contributing factors may seem related to this study, it is deemed that such an investigation would require a separate study as it is a large field to be dealt together with this report.

This study is also restricted to the following grammar items: verb forms, passive voice, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, pronouns and plurality. It was felt that these were among the important grammar items emphasized in the KLSM syllabus and also important in the writing activities for Form Four students. Verb forms, future progressive, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive and future perfect progressive were not studied as they were not found in any of the students' compositions.

This study examines the errors that were made by Form Four students in their English compositions. A random sampling of four secondary schools and their students in Selangor Darul Ehsan was done. One class was randomly selected from each school. The four schools were: Sekolah Menengah Assunta, Petaling Jaya; Sekolah Menengah (L) Bukit Bintang, Petaling Jaya; Sekolah Menengah Methodist, Banting; Sekolah Menengah Sultan Sulaiman Shah, Batang Berjuntai. An equal number of scripts were obtained from these schools for the study. The data was tabulated according to rural and urban schools. This was to see if there were any differences in the data between them. The data were then combined to give an overview of the errors made by the students.

Eighty scripts (31.2% of the sample) were analyzed as it was felt that a smaller sample would be more effective because a more detailed study could be done. The students were asked to write a composition. They were allowed to write on any topic as it was felt that if certain topics were set for them, this might restrict their ability to express themselves. The students were informed that one of the aims of the study was to find out how well they could express themselves in English. The

exercise was not treated as an examination and the students were allowed to ask questions. However, the students were not aided in any way in the writing of the compositions.

The following procedure was used to tabulate each grammar item and for each script examined:

- a. frequency of usage was counted;
- b. frequency of correct attempts was counted from total usage;
- c. frequency of errors was counted from total usage;
- d. correct attempts and errors were tallied and converted into percentages.

FINDINGS

Below is the data that was tabulated based on the procedure mentioned earlier. The data was first compiled according to rural schools and urban schools. They were then combined to give a holistic picture of the study. The items in the following tables are categorised into verb forms and other grammar items and they are also ranked according to the percentage of errors. Table One shows the data for rural schools while Table Two is for urban schools and Table Three provides the combined data.

Table I
DATA ON RURAL SCHOOLS

	Total Attempts	Errors	Correct Usage	Percentage of Errors
Verb Forms				
Past Progressive	3	3	NIL	100%
Present Perfect Tense	2	2	NIL	100%
Past Perfect Tense	2	2	NIL	100%
Passive Voice	1	1	NIL	100%
Present Progressive	4	3	1	75%
Simple Past Tense	36	19	17	53%
Simple Future Tense	2	1	1	50%
Simple Present Tense	19	5	14	26%
Other Grammar Items				
Articles	16	12	4	75%
Plurality	6	4	2	67%
Prepositions	30	6	24	20%
Subject-Verb Agreement	98	6	92	6%
Pronouns	10	NIL	10	0%

Table One shows that rural students have serious problems with verb forms. The students who attempted to use the past progressive, present perfect tense, past perfect tense and passive voice were totally incapable of using them correctly. After these tenses, articles was the area with the highest percentage of errors (75%).

This was followed by plurality (67%), and simple past tense (53%), simple future tense (50%), simple present tense (26%), prepositions (20%) and subject-verb agreement (6%). The students demonstrated that they were competent in the use of pronouns as all their attempts were correct.

TABLE II
DATA ON URBAN SCHOOLS

Items	Total Attempts	Errors	Correct Usage	Percentage of Errors
Verb Forms				
Simple Future Tense	5	4	1	80%
Present Perfect Tense	3	2	1	67%
Present Progressive	5	3	2	60%
Past Progressive	5	3	2	60%
Passive Voice	4	2	2	50%
Past Perfect Tense	4	1	3	25%
Simple Past Tense	23	2	21	9%
Simple Present Tense	17	NIL	17	0%
Other Grammar Items				
Plurality	29	5	24	17%
Prepositions	52	5	47	10%
Pronouns	66	5	61	8%
Subject-Verb Agreement	225	13	212	6%
Articles	56	1	55	2%

As in the case of rural students, the urban students too have problems with most verb forms. Surprisingly, the simple future tense ranked the highest (80%). This is followed by present perfect tense (67%), present progressive (60%), past progressive (60%), passive voice (50%) and past perfect tense (25%). Urban students also had a relatively high percentage of errors for plurality (17%). The grammar items with a lower percentage of errors were: prepositions (10%), simple past tense (9%), pronouns (8%) and articles (2%). Simple present tense was the only grammar item where urban students made no errors.

The present study shows that there is a difference in the percentage of errors for the items studied between the rural and urban students. The percentage of errors for the rural students was much higher than those of the urban students in most of the items: past progressive (rural students 100%; urban students 60%), present perfect tense (rural students 100%; urban students 67%), past perfect tense (rural students 100%; urban students 25%), passive voice (rural students 100%; urban students 50%), present progressive (rural students 75%; urban students 60%), simple past tense (rural students 53%; urban students 9%), simple present tense (rural students 26%; urban students 0%), articles (rural

students 75%; urban students 2%), plurality (rural students 67%; urban students 17%), prepositions (rural students 20%; urban students 10%). The rural students had a lower percentage of errors for the following: simple future tense (rural students 50%; urban students 80%) and pronouns (rural students 0%; urban students 8%). The only item for which both rural and urban students had the same percentage of errors was for subject-verb agreement (6%).

It can clearly be seen that the use of tenses is a major problem for the students. The percentage of errors for each tense also shows which tense needs to be further reinforced. The types of errors that surfaced will be discussed later.

Another point to note is the low frequency in the use of all other tenses besides the simple present tense and the simple past tense. When these other tenses were used, the frequency of errors was high. Students seemed to manage quite comfortably with the simple present and simple past tenses without resorting to the other tenses. However, when they attempted to use the other tenses, more errors surfaced and meaning was often confused.

The highest percentage of errors in the combined data of rural and urban schools is in the use of verb forms. The present perfect tense ranks the highest (80%); this is followed by past progressive (75%),

Table III

COMBINED DATA OF RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOLS

Items	Total Attempts	Errors	Correct Usage	Percentage of Errors
Verb Forms				
Present Perfect Tense	5	4	1	80%
Past Progressive	8	6	2	75%
Simple Future Tense	7	5	2	71%
Present Progressive	9	6	3	67%
Passive Voice	5	3	2	60%
Past Perfect Tense	6	3	3	50%
Simple Past Tense	59	21	38	36%
Simple Present Tense	36	31	5	14%
Other Grammar Items				
Plurality	35	9	26	26%
Articles	72	13	59	18%
Prepositions	82	11	71	13%
Pronouns	76	5	71	7%
Subject-Verb Agreement	323	19	304	6%

simple future tense (71%), present progressive (67%), passive voice (60%), past perfect tense (50%), simple past tense (36%) and simple present tense (14%).

In the case of the other grammar items, plurality ranks highest (26%). This is followed by articles (18%), prepositions (13%) and pronouns (7%). Subject-verb agreement has the lowest percentage of errors (6%).

Verb Forms

The tense most commonly used was the simple past tense which was followed by the simple present tense. This was largely because most students described some events that had happened in their lives and there were those who wrote stories. These compositions required the use of the simple past tense. The use of the simple present tense could be justifiable as some of the students wrote about

themselves, their families, their hobbies and their ambitions. Besides these two tenses all the other tenses were used occasionally and they were often used wrongly.

The Simple Present Tense

It is interesting to note that the lower secondary syllabus does emphasize on the use of the simple present tense. Fourteen units in the syllabus incorporate simple present tense. The simple present tense has the lowest percentage of errors (14%).

Examples of errors in the use of the, simple present tense

Use of the simple present tense for simple past tense

a. to describe past action:

- i. He asked me to follow the other workers to work. I do* so,
- ii. Yesterday I come* (to) school at 7.15.
- iii. After half an hour, we stop* swimming because we are* hungry.

* Denotes an error.

() Letters or words within brackets are corrections made by researchers for the purpose of clarity.

The Simple Past Tense

The simple past tense had the second lowest percentage of errors (36%). It is incorporated in ten units of the syllabus.

Examples of errors in the use of the simple past tense

Use of the simple past tense for simple present tense

a. to show routine or habit:

- i. From my house to school is about 4 km. I went* to school by bus.
- ii. Early (every) morning, Ahmad and his wife went* to his farm.

b. to show present situation:

- i. was* in Form 4A2 (referring to present class).
- ii. My mother worked* in this primary Methodist School (present place of work).

The Simple Future Tense

The simple future tense was both the least commonly used simple tense and the one with the highest percentage of errors (71%) among the simple tenses.

Examples of errors in the use of the simple future tense

Use of simple future tense for simple present tense

a. to make statements of facts:

i. Smoke from the factories will make* the air dirty.

b. to show probability:

i. Some people will take* the water for drinking or cooking.

In the two examples given above, the students were attempting to make statements of facts or probability and not predictions as they seem.

c. to show likes or dislikes:

i. I will like* to listen to song(s).

The Present Perfect Tense

The present perfect tense has the highest percentage of errors (80%); it is also the least used tense. In the syllabus, five units give special attention to the present perfect tense. Students, however, do not seem to know how to use this tense.

Examples of errors in the use of the present perfect tense

Use of the present perfect tense for past perfect tense

a. to show the sequence of two actions which happened in the past:

- i. Naturally, they were not allowed to meet each other for the maiden's father has promised* her hand in marriage to a brutal, ugly man who was suitable to be her father.
- ii. Last Saturday, my father has promised* me to bring my family and I to Port Dickson.

Use of the present perfect tense for simple past tense

a. to describe past action:

i. So on the day before Sunday, we have prepared* a lot of drinks and food.

The Past Perfect Tense

The past perfect tense, though not frequently used, is better handled. Two units in the syllabus are devoted to the past perfect tense and the percentage of errors was fifty percent.

Examples of errors in the use of the past perfect tense

Absence of the past participle form of the verb:

i. I am very please(d) that my mother had gave* me her love.

Use of the past perfect tense for present perfect tense

a. to show something that is still carried out:

- i. It is usually very quiet at that time because everyone had gone* to sleep.
- ii. The organization had launched* many campaigns to encourage youths to do more useful things (the organization still launches campaigns).

The Present Progressive

The high percentage of errors in this grammar item indicates that the students are still not proficient in the use of the present progressive. As there is only one unit devoted to the present progressive in the syllabus, this may account for the high percentage of errors (67%).

Examples of errors in the use of the present progressive

Use of present progressive for simple present tense

a. to describe condition of things:

- i. The basket looking* dirty.

b. to describe an action which is carried out over an extended period:

- i. She is teaching* us history.
- ii. I also changing* stamps with my pen-pal.

c. to describe perception:

- i. Some are thinking* that English is not important in Malaysia.

Use of present progressive for simple past tense a. to describe a continuous action:

- i. Gagau was sad, then he flying* out from the tree.

The Past Progressive

Though the past progressive is dealt with in four units of the syllabus, the percentage of errors is rather high (75%). Students do not seem to be able to apply the rules regarding its function.

Examples of errors in the use of the past progressive

Use of two verbs in the past progressive when one verb should be in the simple past tense

a. to show two things happening simultaneously:

- i. Halim was calling* to the police-man, I was going* after the man.

Use of the past continuous tense for simple present tense

b. to show routine or habit:

- i. My father was working* in Henry Gurney School (present place of work).

The Present Perfect Progressive

Although this verb form is taught in Unit Seventeen of the syllabus, it was not found in any of the sample scripts. This could be due to insufficient exposure of the students to the usage of this verb form.

Another possibility for the lack of use of this verb form is that the students may not require this verb form in their compositions because of their choice of topics (as stated earlier).

The Future Progressive, The Future Perfect Progressive and Past Perfect Progressive

These verb forms were not found in any of the students' written compositions. These verb forms are not taught in the syllabus.

The Passive Voice

It is important to note that seven units of the syllabus give attention to the use of the passive voice; however, this is hardly used. There is the possibility that the type of compositions written by the students did not require the use of the passive voice. But what does show from the analysis of the errors of those who used the passive voice is that the percentage of errors is relatively high (60%).

Example of errors in the use of the Passive Voice

Absence of the present participle form of the verb:

- i. The pandan extract has many uses, it can be use* for various (types) of cakes, jelly, cendol and drinks.

Subject-Verb Agreement

This was the area with the highest sampling with a total of 323 attempts. It is interesting to note that this item had the lowest percentage of errors (6%) in this study. Although the students still make errors, they do have a basic understanding of subject-verb agreement.

Examples of errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

a. plural subject does not agree with singular verb:

- i. My hobbies is* playing football, (rugby) and fishing.
ii. They've told me that when I was born they wants* to put my name Zabidi.

b. singular subject does not agree with plural verb:

- i. She have* a very good family.
- ii. My father work* in Dengkil School.

Articles

The correct use of articles is emphasized in the lower secondary classes and it is taught in Unit One of the syllabus. As it is a popular testing item in the English Language paper for the Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) examination much practice would have been given in the use of articles. Therefore, it is not surprising that the percentage of errors is relatively low (18%).

Examples of errors in the use of articles

- a. redundant use of the article 'the':
 - i. My hobby is collecting the* stamps.
- b. misuse of the article "a" before words with vowel sounds:
 - i. She is a* Indian girl.
- c. omission of articles:
 - i. I am * student from Sekolah Menengah Sultan Sulaiman Shah, Batang Berjuntai.
- d. use of article for uncountable nouns:
 - i. My hobbies are listening to a* music, reading and (sports).
- e. misuse of the article "the" when making reference for the first time:
 - i. This examination is the* expedition.
- f. misuse of the article "a" for plural nouns:
 - i. My father and mother worked as a* teachers.

Prepositions

Since prepositions are another popular testing item in the multiple-choice section of the English language paper for the SRP examination, four units of the syllabus deal with prepositions. This may account for the low percentage of errors for this grammar item (13%).

Examples of errors in the use of prepositions

- a. wrong choice of prepositions:
 - i. In* the other hand, the entertainment in the country is fishing, planting, jogging and so on.
 - ii. Hope I could go there on* my third term school holiday(s).
 - iii. When I came into* this school, I felt that something was different.
 - iv. At* afternoon, I usually come to school.
- b. omission of prepositions:
 - i. I am * Form Science II.
- c. redundant use of prepositions:

- i. After that we went to* swimming.

Pronouns

This area has the second lowest percentage of errors (7%) in this study. However, there are students who have not mastered certain grammar items in the use of pronouns and make errors that should be avoided.

Examples of errors in the use of pronouns

- a. wrong use of the third person (male for female):
 - i. At that moment, Ahmad's mother was very afraid and lost his* mind.
- b. use of the wrong case (use of the subjective for the possessive):
 - i. He* parents are very poor.
- c. wrong use of reflexive pronoun:
 - i. I know that there is nothing interest(ing) about myself*
- d. error in subject-pronoun agreement; particularly when the reference goes across from one sentence to another:
 - i. Some programmes on TV are really boring. It* (have) no sense or meaning.

Plurality

Although no unit in the syllabus is completely devoted to teaching the rules of plurality, they are taught in the earlier units with countable nouns, uncountable nouns and articles. Yet, in this study, the percentage of errors in plurality is relatively high (26%).

Examples of errors in plurality

- a. omission of "s" to show plurality:
 - i. I have two elder sister.*
- b. overgeneralization of rules on plurality:
 - i. Since it (was) near the Chinese New Year festival, so I went to (a) fashion house to make a new trouser* and shirt
 - ii. After a few moment* we found a shady place under a big tree.

CONCLUSION

The study of students' errors could provide teachers invaluable information on the errors that require remedial work. Such information would be the starting point for the teacher to focus his attention on

those areas that actually need further reinforcement. As such, time and energy will not be wasted on teaching areas which pose minor problems to the students.

For instance, it is clear that in this study, the errors in the use of certain verb forms require more attention than the others. Teachers should then be more aware of these verb forms and provide the necessary follow up work to check the problem areas as discussed earlier.

The present study also shows that there is a difference in the percentage of errors for the items studied between the rural and urban students. Rural students had a higher percentage of errors in most of the areas except for simple future tense and pronouns. As for subject-verb agreement both the rural and the urban students had the same percentage of errors (6%).

Although the students made errors in all the areas which were investigated, it is important to note how well they actually did in certain areas, that is, in terms of application. In the case of the rural students, they were quite competent in their use of pronouns and in subject-verb agreement. The urban students were able to use the simple past tense and pronouns adequately. The urban students were also able to use the simple present tense and articles competently.

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