

GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN ESSAY WRITING: A STUDY BASED ON ESL STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Grammatical knowledge plays a crucial role in the process of Writing. Most ESL learners encounter several grammatical errors in their writing skills. For this reason, they produce different grammatical errors, particularly in their essay writing. This present study attempts to analyze the dominant grammatical errors and the causes of the errors committed by the ESL students of the English department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The study was conducted by collecting authentic data on this topic. The data was gathered from the sixteen chosen ESL students by distributing a Google form, conducting an interview, and administering an essay writing test to assess their errors. After finishing the data collection, the grammatical errors were classified into eleven categories based on the distribution of the questionnaire and the essay writing test. Those identified grammatical errors were capitalization, spelling, punctuation, article, preposition, verb tense, question, subject-verb agreement, word order, word choice, and pluralism. The current study investigated that the causes of errors were first language interference, lack of vocabulary knowledge, unawareness of tenses, poor speaking skills in the English Language, and less writing practice. Meanwhile, the dominance of the first Language was considered the major cause of the students' errors in Writing. At the end of this study, some beneficial suggestions suggested that the lecturers and students must make some efforts to reduce grammatical errors in Writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

A language is a communication tool used by everyone in their daily life to convey information and arguments to others (Rabiah, 2018). It is the ability to acquire and use complex communication systems, particularly the human ability to do so (Banga et al., 2015). There are 7102 languages in the world (Sanjayan, 2018). However, only six languages are recognized by the United Nations, with English being one of them (United Nations, n.d.). English is the first Language in the United States, Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, New Zealand, and Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, English is also one of the official languages of international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee, as well as official languages in various countries, such as South Africa, Belize, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Ireland, Canada, Nigeria, Singapore, and so on. Rizvi et al. (2021) are one of the international languages used worldwide (Wulandari & Harida, 2021) and a link language in Sri Lanka. It plays an essential role in various capacities of people in their day-to-day lives. Compared to Sri Lanka, English is taught as a second language in government and non-government schools and universities. In order to make students master the English Language, four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, writing, and reading, are challenging in Sri Lanka.

Writing is one of the four main skills. Moreover, it is a method of representing Language in visual form. Moreover, Writing also facilitates a person to think better. When students learn how to write, he or she becomes more capable of analyzing what they read, interpret and think. When the students first write something down, they have already been thinking about what they will say and how they will say it. Okpe & Onjewu (2017) identified essay writing as one of the most beneficial things to do because it can improve day-to-day communication, obtain good grades, and make a person a better professional. However, learning to write and succeeding at it is usually problematic. Most students often encounter several difficulties in Writing, and they consider it challenging to carry out due to the various instructions they need to respect. In this regard, making mistakes is common for Sri Lankan learners when writing an essay in a foreign language. In order to figure out many of the problems facing ESL students at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, these students make some grammatical errors when they indulge themselves in Writing. In particular, there are several errors detected in their essay writing. Creating an essay without committing errors seems to be a huge issue for ESL students in the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Learning grammar is essential to creating a piece of writing accurately. The student can create an essay writing component if the grammar rules are followed correctly.

There are major errors committed in essay writing due to the native Language's dominance, inadequate knowledge of grammatical concepts, and considering Essay writing a massive challenge. Therefore, based on the explanation above, this paper aims to investigate the types of errors made by the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. This study aims at investigating the following objectives:

1. To recognize the most grammatical errors, the ESL students make in the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.
2. To explore the sources that impact the Essay writing skill of ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.
3. To suggest proper recommendations for this issue, hoping to improve students' Writing.

1.1. Statement of The Problem

The English Language's importance is part and partial to the 21st century. The English language requirement has intervened in all sectors, especially in the educational world. Thus, the significance of the four main skills of English is highly emphasized in second language learning. Nevertheless, the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka are finding several errors in their essay writing. According to the English language rules, creating a clear, proper piece of Writing is challenging. These difficulties in essay writing can be seen in practice. Because creating a piece of writing in a non-native language is very problematic. As a result, students are used to committing errors in their essay writing. Hence, this present study attempts to identify the issues encountered by the ESL students of the English department when they create an essay in their second Language.

1.2. Research Questions

This study is designed to answer the following research questions to recognize the grammatical errors of the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

1. What are the common grammatical errors made by the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka?
2. What are the sources of errors made by the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka?
3. What are the suggestions and proper recommendations for this issue, hoping to improve students' Writing?

1.3. Significance of The Study

The study entitled "Grammatical errors in Essay writing" presents a brief account of the grammatical errors committed by the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. The ESL students require more practice and exercises in their writing skills. They need to be trained more to minimize the grammatical errors they make, particularly in Essay writing. Essay writing is one of the essential parts which carries more marks in the examination. In the case of ESL students, the answers to the questions need to be systemized by way of Essay writing.

Moreover, the teachers should duly recognize the errors and rectify them. Then only this kind of error commitment will be reduced in their Essay writing. Therefore, it is strongly believed that this study would be very beneficial to minimize the identified issues and provide the proper suggestions to create Essay writing in an efficient, effective way.

1.4. Literature Review

Contents, organization, and language skills will be essential components of excellent Writing. However, this will become a complex and difficult task in the mother tongue (Richards et al., 2002). English language deficiency may occur in students who learn English as a foreign language. Many researchers mentioned that students who lack grammatical knowledge would make common mistakes in English writing (Promsupa et al., 2017). Based on existing literature, it is evidenced that English grammar is the difficult central area that most students face (Shaari, 1987). The students who use English as their secondary Language are hardly ever using English in their home or outside. Thus, they have weak performance and face difficulties in Writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills.

Further, this barrier will continue until examinations. Students cannot write essays without grammatical errors (Maros et al., 2007). Many researchers identified that students using English as a second language would make many errors (Myles, 2002). Further, he stated that Basic English grammar is the major lacking area of every student. When non-

native writers make grammatical errors, it will reduce not only simple word confusion but also complex sentence building through incorrect usage (Chodorow & Leacock, 2000). Sometimes students do not make grammar errors intentionally; those errors will occur when students do not grab English grammar well (Muhsin, 2016).

Further, he stated that when a teacher does not recognize those grammar errors, then students will produce those errors repeatedly without any correction. When analyzing existing literature based on grammatical errors in essay writing, many researchers emphasized that grammar can be identified as many students' weak points. Students make grammatical errors when they are writing sentences. Those incorrectly written sentences will not provide any meaning to readers (Kumala et al., 2018). Students may not be concerned about basic principles in English grammar.

Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005) explained that there are five categories of grammar errors: additions, omission, misinformation, disordering, and blends. Based on existing literature, it is evidenced that there are two common grammar errors that many students make, including omissions and disordering—research (Nonkukhetkhong, 2013) mentioned that students who have sound grammatical knowledge make errors in their English essays. Thus, it is evidenced that students should focus on grammatical rules when writing essays (Limengka & Kuntjara, 2013).

2. METHODS

The study "Grammatical Errors in Essay Writing" was carried out using primary and secondary data collection methods. The primary data was collected from the essay writing test, distributed among 50 male and female students in the academic year 2017/2018 randomly from ESL students of the English department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. There, students were asked to write an essay about the topic "The most beautiful place I have ever visited." In addition, an interview was conducted with those selected sixteen ESL students to recognize the grammatical errors they committed in their writing skills. The secondary method consists of books, research articles, and web articles. In order to obtain accurate scientific results, qualitative and quantitative methods are used in deriving the test using MS Excel.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this session, the final results and findings of the study are presented. There were eleven types of grammatical errors found. The bar chart below elaborates on the classification, and the precise analysis of each type of error found through the questionnaire survey.

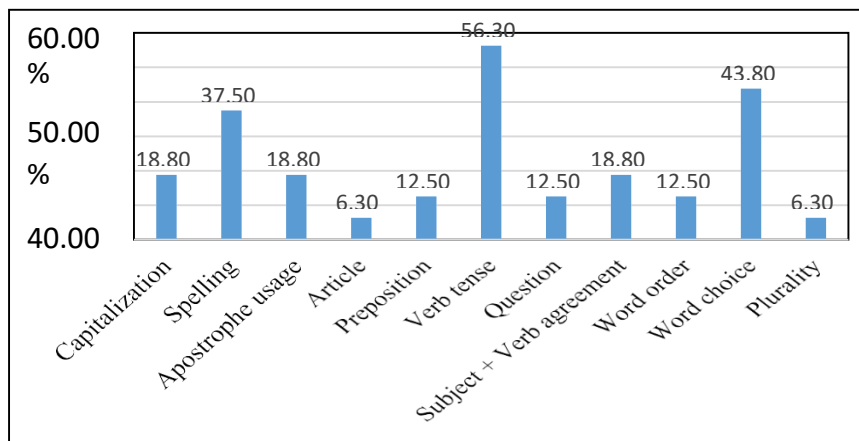


Figure 1 Error types that the ESL students make

In Figure 1, the vertical axis illustrates the percentage of ESL students in the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. In contrast, the horizontal axis elaborates on the types of grammatical errors committed by ESL students in Essay writing, such as Capitalization, Spelling, Punctuation, Article, Preposition, Verb tense, Question, Subject-verb agreement, Word order, Word choice, and Plurality. According to this bar chart, the dominant number of students commit grammatical errors in Verb tense with a percentage of 56.3%. It is the most challenging area in Essay writing. The least challenging area is Plurality and Article, with a percentage of 6.3%. In addition, errors have occurred in both areas in the same category. It reveals that fewer ESL students are only facing this problem in Essay writing. Word choice is the second most challenging area here; its percentage is 43.8%. The following equal percentage of ESL students face problems in Punctuation, Capitalization, and Subject-verb agreement with 18.8%. These three types of errors are committed by those ESL students, most probably at the same level. The rest of the students are committing errors in spelling with a percentage of 37.5%. Further, another similar percentage of ESL students are making errors in the three areas of Preposition, Word order, and question, and their percentage is 12.5%.

Moreover, students were given an Essay writing test to determine their preferences. The recognized grammatical errors in the Essay writing are categorized as Word choice, Word order, Spelling, Plurality, Question, Subject-verb agreement, Preposition, Article, Verb tense, Apostrophe, And Capitalization.

Table 1 List of the errors found in the fifteen collected Essay and supported answers.

Error types	Identification of Error	Correction
Word choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take-home exams are assessments <u>completed</u> <u>There</u> are advantages and disadvantages to implementing lockdown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take-home exams are assessments – <u>Completion.</u> <u>There</u> are advantages and disadvantages on implements locking down
Word order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is an open book test that the students <u>should complete.</u> Language is, <u>therefore</u>, an essential part of our daily lives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is an open book test that the students complete. <u>Therefore</u>, Language is an essential part of our daily lives.
Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Especially</u> in this Covid-19 pandemic, it is essential to stay home. Most of the time, teachers fail to have good <u>interactions</u> with students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Especially</u> in this Covid – 19 pandemic, staying home is essential. Most of the time, teachers fail to have good <u>interactions</u> with students
Plurality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority of the <u>student</u> agreed to take the home examination. Snowball is one of the <u>characters</u> in this novel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority of the <u>students</u> agreed to take the home examination. Snowball is one of the <u>characters</u> in this novel.

Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who <u>was it</u>? • Who <u>you are</u> to arise the question?" She asked. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who <u>was it</u>? • Who <u>are you</u> to raise the question?" She asked.
Subject + Verb agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It <u>reduces</u> the copy-paste system. • Online learning <u>makes</u> the students passive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It <u>reduces</u> the copy-paste system. • Online learning <u>makes</u> the students passive.
Preposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We do not need to pay <u>for</u> the exam paper. • At some points, it makes them inactive in their studies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We do not need to pay <u>for</u> the exam paper. • <u>At</u> some points, it makes them inactive in their studies.
Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She had been yearning for <u>the</u> beautiful tiny kitten all this year. • She gets upset when many inner thoughts are circling her. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She had been yearning for <u>a</u> beautiful tiny kitten all this year. • She gets upset when many inner thoughts are circling her.
Verb tense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the invention of television, many changes <u>have taken</u> place in hobbies. • Due to this Covid – 19, all countries must <u>implement</u> traveling restrictions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the invention of television, many changes <u>took</u> place in hobbies. • Due to this Covid – 19, all the countries have <u>implemented</u> traveling restrictions.
Apostrophe usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>It is</u> a big challenge learning via online • The majority of the <u>student's</u> opinions should be accepted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>It is</u> a big challenge learning online. • The majority of the <u>student's</u> opinions should be accepted.
Capitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>, commonly</u> online learning, has both pros & cons. • "<u>it</u> was terrific sound," she said. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Commonly</u> online learning has both pros & cons. • "<u>It</u> was terrific sound," she said.

Factors that affect the Essay writing of ESL students Identified causes for the grammatical errors through the interview with the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

3.1. First language interference

Through the interview, it is known that most of the students from the English department have received their primary and secondary education in the medium of Tamil during their pre University period. For this reason, they could not obtain sufficient knowledge in their second Language, English. In the interview discussion, they said that, due to the dominance of their native Language, Tamil, they had to provide the most

important first language Tamil during their past days. They have not given up their curiosity about their second Language. Due to their curiosity about learning their second Language, they are learning English as their second Language under the Department of English language at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. It is crystal clear that, because of the unstable background knowledge in English, they commit grammatical errors when they create a piece of writing in their higher education.

3.2. Lack of vocabulary knowledge

Knowing plenty of vocabulary is very much pivotal when it comes to writing a perfect piece of writing in an academic style. In this respect, the target group of students does not have that much adequate vocabulary knowledge. In the interview discussion, they said that when they create an essay, they face several issues, including what kind of vocabulary to be used and how far those selected vocabularies are suitable for the sentence structure. Moreover, they said, sometimes, written sentences bring the most inappropriate, non-grammatical meaning for the given topic due to improper vocabulary usage.

3.3. Unawareness of Tenses

Tense is one of the major grammar concepts that play an important role. Creating a piece of English writing in English is challenging without a clear knowledge of tenses. However, in this English department, ESL students are particularly encountering massive issues with tenses. That is to say; when they create an essay in the Present Tense, they cannot finish it off in the same Tense in which they started to create the Writing. Not only this issue but also they commit plenty of errors throughout the Essay writing in the matter of tenses. Insufficient Tense knowledge leads English department ESL students to encounter grammatical errors in their writing skills. It is one of the notable factors that affect the writing skill of the target group.

3.3. Poor speaking skills in the English Language

There are four major skills in the English Language. Speaking is one of the productive skills of the English Language, like Writing. Writing and speaking are the components used to represent the thoughts and ideas of the human being in a visual form. As a result, one of the opinions was received from the selected ESL student that they could write everything in their first Language without making errors. Because, according to their native Language, they are very much fluent in both skills speaking and writing. In the case of their target language, they cannot develop a piece of writing grammatically correct due to their poor speaking proficiency.

4. CONCLUSION

Writing is one of the four main skills and is considered the productive skill of a language. In addition, Writing is a method of representing Language in visual form. Through this productive skill of Writing, a person's language competency and accuracy can be evaluated shortly. However, Essay writing skill is problematic to students at all levels of their educational fields. The results of this study depict the type of grammatical errors committed by the ESL students of the English Department at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka and provide the appropriate suggestions to minimize those errors in the future.

Researchers suggest some suggestions overcome this issue

- Students must be motivated to read to become good academic writers in their target language.
- Students must practice by writing a piece of para and checking it.
- Eventually, the learners should be motivated to converse in English with their colleagues and teachers. Therefore, with time, they will become fluent in their target language. In the case of their target language, if their speaking skill is fluent, they will spontaneously be able to write a piece of writing perfectly in their L2.

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