



Grammatical Errors of ESL Learners: A Disruption in Professional Writing

M. S. M. Rizwan¹

¹Department of English, Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE), Hardy Advanced Technological Institute (HATI), Ampara, Sri Lanka.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the grammatical errors that took place in the learning activities of Professional Writing subject in the programme of Higher National Diploma in English (HNDE) at the Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE). A quantitative experimental research design was deployed for this study. The study consisted of 150 samples randomly selected. To identify the grammatical errors, a pre-test was administered to the samples. In line with the Professional Writing subject, the pre-test comprised writing paragraphs, letters, invitation cards, notices, memos, fax, email, agenda, and dialogues. The grammatical errors found in the given texts were analyzed by using the Error Analysis method whereas test scores were analyzed using SPSS Statistical Software. Errors were identified from the collected samples for describing and classifying them according to their nature and cause and errors were evaluated. For the analysis of grammatical errors, Keshavarz's theory was used descriptively. The finding of the study showed that the constant correction of learning activities along with constructive feedback just after the correction made a positive change to minimizing grammatical errors in the Professional Writing subject. The results further revealed that the errors of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering are the prominent and prevalent errors found in the written learning activities of Professional Writing subject. Especially, most of the errors occurred in writing paragraphs, letters, and dialogue. The factors causing the above errors were due to incomprehension of the lecture, incompetence in grammar, translating from L1 to L2, carelessness in applying linguistic rules, MT interference, copying others, and low level of exposure to the target language. The study suggests that the academic members in the Department of English should focus on the cause of the above errors in order to minimize grammatical errors in the context of Professional Writing.

Keywords: Error, Grammar, Learning Activity, Linguistic, Professional Writing

Background of the study

Writing skill is the most important skill to be acquired by students in higher education. Everyone faces writing tasks in his/her academic career. Consideration of writing skills is an essence for the advancement of the profession. This might become a major lack among students. Second language learning becomes difficult since the learners are unaware of the second language grammar. Learners of English have to comprehend the grammatical structures properly and clearly. Mainly these problems are faced by second language learners. Because the errors are closely associated with the learners' native language. During the writing task, learners face many grammatical errors in their writing such as in paragraphs, letters, invitation cards, notices, agenda, emails, memos, and dialogues. Grammatical errors of ESL learners become a disruption in Professional Writing subject. Professional Writing is one of the core subjects in the programme of the Higher National Diploma in English conducted at the Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education. The prime objective of this study was to examine the grammatical errors found in the learning activities of the Professional Writing subject.

L2 learners tend to preposition errors, pronoun usage, subject/verb agreement, sentence fragments, errors in word order, multi-purpose errors, and vocabulary errors. Grammatical errors can make the readers inconvenience and it makes it harder to communicate with each other effectively. According to Wulandari & Harida (2021), grammar organizes language so that a sentence's meaning can be clear and simple to understand. When utilized as a form of communication, language has both form and meaning. Words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and even discourse or text, which is a higher level of subdivision, can all be broken down into individual parts of the language. Therefore, understanding grammar is the fundamental skill required to learn a language.

According to Mickan (2001), grammar examined how sentences function in writing because writing was one of the abilities people used to express their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions on paper. The grammar of Harmer, which was mentioned in Heryanti, Sucipto, and Makmur (2017), serves as an illustration of how words are changed into different forms and then put together into sentences. Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are the four language skills, and mastering grammar can help lay the groundwork for these skills, according to Fithriani, (2018). It goes without saying that having a solid understanding of grammar is crucial to the development of EFL communicative competence as it directs students in how to utilize the language effectively in both written and oral communication. Suwastini & Yukti, (2017) also looked at the mistakes made by students learning English as a second

language in a vocational school in Bali and discovered that misrepresentation and omission were the most typical faults made in the students' short-biography writing. According to Ellis (2014), mistakes were created as a result of pupils' incorrect interpretations of certain grammar. They do not know they are doing it wrong, and they do not know how to fix it either.

Grammatical mistakes in writing become a major problem, especially for EFL students. According to Garner (2012), a grammatical mistake is a term used in prescriptive grammar to describe an instance of erroneous, atypical, or disputed usage, such as an improper verb tense or an improper placement of a modifier. According to Hernandez (2011), grammatical mistakes involve flawed structures that may include erroneous verb tense, inappropriate verb forms, and syntax issues. A usage error is another name for it. Grammar mistakes can occur with verbs, pronouns, diction, articles, spelling, word order, prepositions, and sentences, among other grammatical elements. Additionally, Karani (2007) asserted that grammar mistakes are the most typical ones that high school students make when writing recount narratives. When utilizing past tense with both regular and irregular verbs, it is encountered by students. Because of the way the material is organized, students may have trouble writing texts that are coherent and cohesive. There are more difficulties in the content, vocabulary, and spelling portions.

According to Fadda, (2012), ESL students have a hard time telling the difference between spoken and written words. They also have trouble with grammatical issues including subject-verb agreement and knowing how to properly join sentences to form paragraphs. Farooq (2020) also claimed that ESL students struggle with grammar, which is thought to be the most challenging aspect of writing. When students correctly construct sentences, structures, and paragraphs, they frequently run across a number of challenges. Grammar abilities include things like a collection of sentences, the use of various sentence structures, subject-verb agreement, parallel construction, the placement of modifiers, and tense agreement.

As a result of the definitions of mistake provided, Jabeen and Kazemian (2015) claimed that error analysis was crucial for learning foreign languages in order to comprehend the language's structure accurately. For professors or lecturers to gauge their student's proficiency in the target language, especially for second or foreign-language learners, error analysis is a very important tool. Error analysis was one of the earliest techniques used to examine learners' language, according to Ellis (1994). In an effort to make the process of error analysis work systematically numerous attempts have been made since it attained significant popularity in 1970. There are certain approaches that can be utilized to analyze errors in order to gauge how well grammar is being employed. According to Kharmilah and Narius (2019), error analysis is a process used to recognize, categorize, and interpret or characterize mistakes that individuals make when speaking or writing, and it is carried out to learn about the most frequent problems speakers and writers of English sentences encounter. Khansir (2013) looked into five categories of grammatical, punctuational, article, spelling, and conjunction problems in Iranian and Indian writing.

Khansir (2012) looked at grammatical issues such as auxiliary verbs, passive voice, indirect form, prepositions, tag questions, relative pronouns, WH-question, and tense in the writing of Iranian and Indian pupils. These categories—overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized—were originally proposed by Richards in 1974. Pongsukvajchakul (2019) and Promsupa (2016) conducted a thorough analysis of the further categorization of intralingual errors into these four categories. According to Sari's research (2019), there are three reasons why students make grammatical mistakes, with carelessness, using their first language, and translation with translation being the most common. The study also noted that poor grammar and a limited vocabulary were causes of grammatical errors.

To find out why they make mistakes, several researchers interviewed or administered questionnaires to L2 students. In-depth interviews with five English majors from two different institutions led Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Bidin (2016) to determine that verbatim translation, the use of bilingual dictionaries, and a lack of expertise also contributed to the learners' errors.

Objectives

This study aimed to examine the grammatical errors that occurred persistently in the learning activities of the Professional Writing subject.

Research Design/Materials

A quantitative experimental research design was used throughout the study. The error analysis method was deployed to analyze the grammatical errors found in the learning activities of the Professional Writing Subject. Written answer scripts of Pre-test and post-test were used as the primary data for this study.

Methods

The present study was carried out using quantitative experimental research methods. The instruments of the research were pre-test, and post-test with regard to the Professional Writing subject in the context of the Higher National Diploma in English Programme conducted at Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education. A written pre-test consisting writing of paragraphs, formal/informal letters, invitation cards, notices, agenda, emails, memos, and imaginative/creative dialogues was used as the primary data for this study. After the intervention programme, a post-test was administered to be considered as data for the study. Samples were pre-tested based on the concept of a professional writing subject. The focus was to examine the grammatical errors that persistently occurred in professional writing contexts. According to the standard marking criteria, the answer scripts were corrected by the researcher, and marks were awarded. Errors were identified from the collected samples of learner language for describing and classifying them according to their nature and cause and errors were evaluated. For the analysis of grammatical errors, Keshavarz's theory was used descriptively.

Written answer scripts were used to examine grammatical errors found in the professional writing context. Using the error analysis method, the grammatical errors were analyzed.

The collected data were analyzed quantitatively along with the descriptive summaries emphasizing objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, and numerical analysis of data collected through pre-test and post-test by manipulating pre-existing statistical data using the SPSS statistical software. It focused on gathering numerical data and generalizing it across the samples or explaining a particular phenomenon. In view of the background of English language learning in the context of Professional Writing subject. During the intervention Programme, the samples were grouped as controlled and experimental. The methods of presenting the lessons were PPT presentation by sharing the slides as pdf files via WhatsApp group using smart technologies which aroused the entire enthusiasm of the students towards improving professional writing. Most of the lessons were conducted via Zoom technologies and some of them were onsite classes due to the covid-19 pandemic.

The researcher used a four-hour writing session for full-time students and a two-hour session for part-time students once a week. The lessons were taught for a semester according to the timetable during the first semester of the academic year 2020. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher deployed the strategies as follows. Plenty of written tasks in line with the above text types were given to the sample, samples were advised to correct the learning activities by themselves first, then by peers instantly after each task was assigned. Self-correction and peer-correction techniques were deployed before the correction by the researcher. Constructive feedback was given to the samples on the identified grammatical errors in common and individual. A sociable manner of approach was practiced with each subject in order to achieve the ultimate goal of the study.

In addition, there was a culture of using the first language when the students engaged in group and individual tasks. But the researcher instructed the samples to use the target language during the discussion with their peers. The researcher monitored the practice of the samples and gave feedback then and there. The subjects were given a post-test which was designed in the same way as the assessment carried out prior to the instructional programme with evaluation. The pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using the SPSS package whereas grammatical errors were analyzed with the error analysis method.

Results

To find out whether the controlled group (Part-time students) and experimental group (Full-time students) are different from each other, the independent samples t-test was administered using the test scores of the post-test. The following table depicts the group statistics.

Table 1: Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	1	75	70.9200	2.60851	.30120
	2	75	79.5067	4.20544	.48560

As per Table 1, group 1 represents the controlled group whereas group 2 of the experimental group. There are 75 students in each group. The controlled group has a mean value of 70.9 whereas the experimental group is 79.5. The standard deviation of group 1 is 2.6 while group 2 is 4.2. In addition, the standard error mean of group 1 is .30120 whereas group 2 has .48560.

Furthermore, to analyze the mean comparison of controlled and experimental groups, independent samples t-test was used. The following is the SPSS output that reveals the comparison.

Table 2: Independent Samples T-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Score	Equal variances assumed	20.219	.000	-15.027	148	.000	-8.58667	.57143	-9.71589	-7.45745
	Equal variances not assumed			-15.027	133.896	.000	-8.58667	.57143	-9.71773	-7.45561

As per Table 2, the t-value is negative -15.027 and there are 148 degrees of freedom. The p-value of .000 implies high significance.

To identify the difference between the pre-test and post-test, a paired samples T-test was administered. The following tables show the results of the analysis.

Table 3: Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test	41.8733	150	5.51179	.45004
	Post-test	75.2133	150	5.54250	.45254

The above table depicts the paired sample statistics. The mean value in the pre-test is 41.8733 whereas 75.2133 in the post-test since there are 150 total samples. The standard deviation is 5.51179 and the standard error mean is .45004 in the pre-test while 5.54250 is the standard deviation and .45254 is the standard error mean in the post-test. In addition, the analysis of paired sample correlations is given below.

Table 4: Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 Pre-test & Post-test	150	.317	.000

The above table 4 portrays the paired samples correlations. Since the value of correlation is .317, there is a significant correlation with the value of .000 as per the analysis. The following table illustrates the analysis of paired samples T-Test.

Table 5: Paired Samples T-Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-test - Post-test	-33.34000	6.46086	.52753	-34.38240	-32.29760	-63.201	149	.000

As per Table 5, the T-Test results outline that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test with the P-value of .000 as per the output of SPSS.

Findings

The finding of the study is the constant correction of learning activities along with constructive feedback just after the correction made a positive change to minimize grammatical errors in the Professional Writing subject. The results showed that the errors of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering are the prominent and prevalent errors found in the written learning activities of Professional Writing subject. Especially, most of the errors occurred in writing paragraphs, formal/informal letters, and imaginative/creative dialogue. The factors causing the above errors were due to incomprehension of the lecture, incompetence in grammar, translating from L1 to L2, carelessness in applying linguistic rules, MT disruption, copying others, and low level of exposure to the target language. The study suggests that the academic members in the Department of English should focus on the cause of the above errors in order to minimize grammatical errors in the context of Professional Writing.

Conclusions

Since writing is one of the productive skills, the mastery of grammatical awareness is inevitable in the context of higher education. L2 learners get stuck with grammatical errors when conveying their opinions in a readable form. Though L2 learners generate ideas to express their opinions, grammatical errors become a disruption, especially in the context of professional writing. As per the findings, constant correction of learning activities and constructive comments on the identified grammatical issues would create a positive atmosphere to improve professional writing free from grammatical errors.

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