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ERROR ANALYSIS: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN EFL LEARNERS

Ali Al-Halawani (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, alihalawani@iium.edu.my

Abstract

Error analysis is a very significant area of applied linguistics as well as foreign language learning. This study was to identify, describe and explain the errors made by EFL tertiary-level learners in tackling a translation assignment from Malay into English. A class of 38 undergraduate students of the 3rd and 4th levels constituted the subjects of the study. A period of one week was given to complete the translation task. The answers were thoroughly examined and analysed. Based on the first reading of the answers, it was clear that nearly all types of errors were made. The study focused more on the errors in written English, be it grammatical or collocational, rather than those of a translational or equivalence-based nature. It is hoped that when EFL teachers understand the different types of errors learners make, they will be better able to help learners improve their writing skills and acquire grammar accuracy. Results and implications of the findings are to be discussed further.

Keywords: Error Analysis, EFL, Writing Skills, Error Taxonomies, Grammar Accuracy..

1. Introduction

Writing is not an easy task, neither in the mother tongue nor in a foreign language. Many mistakes and errors are made when learners write or translate into foreign language(s). These errors violate the established rules of grammar and thus are regarded incorrect. They are deemed defective forms of utterances and appear regularly in the learners' performance, be it in writing or speech.

Various linguists use different terms to refer to such defective forms, such as Nemser (1971) who sees them as products of an 'approximative' system because the errors change as the learners' competence changes due to their progress in the learning process. Selinker (1972) used the term 'inter-language' to denote the structures used by the language learner due to interference from his native language before he becomes fluent in the foreign language. George (1972) described these errors as 'unwanted forms' because course designers and teachers do not like them. Allen and Corder (1974) defined them as 'idiosyncratic dialects', while Dulay and Burt (1972) visualized them as 'goofs' which indicate deviations from the standard grammatical forms. Furthermore, James (2013) described them as 'unsuccessful bits of language'.

Though errors are described as 'goofs', 'unsuccessful bits of language' or 'unwanted forms', Giri (2010) does not regard them as 'bits of crime'. Contrarily, he regards them as being significant, as far as language teaching and learning are concerned, as they are indicators of the progress learners are making in their constant learning process. Error analysis is vital for educators, EFL teachers, linguists, researchers, and EFL learners as well. Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis have been the two major approaches to the study of learners' errors as deemed by Keshavarz (1999), who stated that the latter emerged as a remedial approach to the former which was prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s. Error analysis revealed that learners' errors can be traced back to mother tongue interference and that they also reflect some universal learning strategies by such learners, as deemed by Boss (2005) and Mackey (1965). But this view is not correct, as sometimes some errors which have no parallel in the mother tongue are made. Moreover, different learners using the same mother tongue make different mistakes, as deemed by Khansir (2012). In general, Error Analysis has several implications for both the teaching and learning of foreign and/or second languages. This study is a continuation of the same trend as it endeavours to investigate the errors made by EFL tertiary-level learners in tackling a translation assignment from Malay into English. Errors are to be identified, described, and explained; and the main focus of attention will be the grammatical and collocational errors rather than the translational ones.

Many a research has been conducted on error analysis, especially in writings about EFL learners. However, what makes this study unique is that it was not based on a creative writing task–as many other studies were–but on a translational task, specifically from Malay into English. The reason behind this was to encourage students to concentrate on the translation process and problems, thereby allowing them to use the English language more naturally and inattentively. The researcher believed that this might help pinpoint recurrent errors they tended to make without them intentionally trying to avoid such errors. The results as well as recommendations of this study can be of use to teachers, educational institutions, learners of English, and others who are concerned with the teaching and learning of English as a foreign or second language. It should be mentioned that the results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the boundaries of the sample.

As was stated earlier, many research works have been conducted on error analysis from different angles and perspectives. Here are some of the studies the researcher was able to acquire and thoroughly investigate. The role as well as significance of error analysis for the teaching and learning of English was emphasized by Corder (1987) as they tell the teacher about the progress of the learner: what he has acquired already and what remains for him to learn. To the researcher, error analysis provides evidence of how language is learned and the strategies and procedures employed to achieve this goal. Similarly, they are useful for the learner himself who becomes aware of his own errors and, thus, can better his performance. Richards (1971) developed Corder's theory by adding intralingual and developmental errors in the learning process to interlanguage/interference errors. Tse and Yau (2014) endeavoured to detect the grammatical errors made by tertiary-level students and proposed ways to help them avoid making such errors. He analysed 60 samples of paragraphs written by students of language and linguistics and was able to detect 797 errors that fell into six main categories. "Process writing" and "peer correction" were recommended to help students avoid making such errors. Idris and Ariffin (2007) focused on the students' ability and strategies in identifying and correcting pre-determined errors in specific texts, rather than the students' own written production.

Khansir (2012) examined in detail the three most influential error theories: Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage theory. He concluded that all of the three theories can be regarded as important factors in second language acquisition. Heydari and Bagheri (2012) discussed fundamental background studies conducted in the field of error analysis. Cheng (2015) gave preference to interlanguage-based error analysis rather than the previous traditional L2 acquisition research which lacked systematic theoretical guidance as regards error analysis and research. This is because it provides suitable guidelines to improve EFL instruction in higher vocational and technological colleges. Setyowati (2015) described different types of corrective feedbacks, especially those that are effective in reducing learners' errors in L2 writing based on the research findings, and how these feedbacks should be used to promote writing effectiveness. Ridha (2012) explored EFL learners' writing difficulties by analysing the nature and distribution of their writing errors as well as investigating the relationship between learners L1 and their writing in the L2, namely English. They examined English writing samples of 80 EFL college students and categorized the errors found according to the following categories: grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanics, and word order errors. Phuket and Othman (2015) explored the main sources of errors made in EFL learners' writings. They investigated, collected and analysed the types of errors in 40 narrative essays composed by Thai tertiary-level students. Results showed that most errors belonged to word choice, verb tense, preposition, and punctuation.

2. Problem Statement

English is considered as a second language in Malaysia. It is taught both in the primary and secondary schools. This should be reflected in the proficiency level of undergraduate students. However, as a teacher of English linguistics and translation studies in Malaysia for more than three years now, I have noticed that this is not the case, even with students of the 3rd and 4th tertiary levels. The errors they make both in their writing and translation assignments reflect a relatively poor proficiency, especially when it comes to choosing the appropriate term or expression to be used. Consequently, the students' employability

opportunities may be negatively affected by this. Therefore, a study was carried out to help the researcher identify, describe, and explain the errors made by EFL tertiary-level learners upon tackling a translation and/or a writing task. The study examined the answers of a translation task from Malay into English that had been given to Malay undergraduate students. The main focus of the research was the errors in written English, be they grammatical or collocational, rather than those of a translational or equivalence-based nature. An adapted classification of errors was based on Dagneaux et al.'s (1996) explanation of the different codes used in the corpus annotation. Similarly, the study adopted Allen and Corder's (1974) procedure to analyse the data collected for the study, which consists of: a sample of learners' language collection, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation. When the different types of errors learners make are understood, EFL Teachers will be better able to help learners improve their writing skills and acquire grammar accuracy.

3. Research Questions

For the objectives of this study to be achieved, the researcher attempted to answer the following questions:

3.1. Do EFL tertiary-level students in Malaysia make grammatical and collocational errors?

3.2. What type of grammatical errors do they make when using English?

3.3. Why do they make such errors?

3.4. What pedagogical implications for teachers and educational institutions can be drawn from the findings of this study to help students deal with such errors?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aimed at investigating the errors made by EFL tertiary-level learners in tackling a translation assignment from Malay into English. The errors the study sought to identify, describe and explain were grammatical and collocational rather than translational. As there must be a number of reasons for making such errors, the study attempted to unfold these reasons and develop some recommendations that may help teachers and educators understand the types of errors learners make. This will enable teachers help learners improve their writing skills.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Sample of the Study

A class of 38 undergraduate students from levels 3 and 4 who were taking the Translation Studies Course (ENCO 4106) in the English for International Communication program, Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, IIUM, were selected to be the subject of this study. They were assigned a translation task from Malay into English and their answers were meant to help the researcher identify, describe and explain the errors made by EFL tertiary-level learners upon tackling a translation and/or writing task. The main focus of the research concerned the errors in written English, either grammatical or collocational, rather

than those of a translational or equivalence-based nature. Table 1 below shows the basic information of the participants regarding their sex, age, level of study and nationality.

Table 01. Basic information of the students

Sex		No.
	Male	10
	Female	28
Age		
	20-24	38
Level of Study		
	3rd level	9
	4th level	29
Nationality		
	Malaysian	38
	Non-Malaysian	None
Total no. of Participants		38

5.2. Sampling Procedures

The translation assignment was given to all 38 students whom were given a period of one week to complete the work. All students submitted their answers on time.

5.3. Instruments of the Study

A passage in the form of a news story written in Malay was specifically chosen from www.bernama.com to be rendered into English in order to serve the purposes of the present study. The title of the news story reads, *Rayani Air Digantung Tiga Bulan – DCA* (English: *Rayani Air Suspended for 3 Months*), dated April 11, 2016. It consists of 235 words in total. Following the receipt of the answers from the students, the researcher started a process of identification, description and explanation of the errors. The study adopted a classification adapted from Dagneaux et al. (1996) explanation of the different codes used in corpus annotation, which resulted in a new classification suited for the types of errors made by the subjects of the study at hand. Likewise, the study adopted Allen and Corder (1974) procedure used in analysing the data collected for examination, which consists of: a sample of the learners' language, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation.

5.4. Validity and Reliability of the Test

The students were asked to translate the passage from Malay into English and their translations were marked. Each of the 38 answers was given a mark out of 20 with all errors highlighted. Each error type was given a specific number. A re-examination of all the errors was conducted to quantify, describe, and classify

them under appropriate units and categories of grammar. An adaptation from Dagneaux et al. (1996) classification was adopted as was mentioned earlier.

6. Findings

Based on the research findings, it was noted that the highest number of errors concerned *word selection or collocational clash* (32.08%) followed by *word order or use of awkward expressions* (12.74%), and then *verb tenses* (11.85%). Another group of errors surfaced, which were related to *word spellings* (8.49%) and *use or deletion of prepositions* (7.07%). All remaining errors were below a frequency of 40 and a percentage of (5%), with the least frequent being *conjunctions,* which achieved a frequency of 3 and a percentage of (0.53%). Table 2 shows a full description of all error types along with their frequency and percentage.

Table 02. Representation of the errors found in the students' manuscripts as adapted from Dagneaux et al. (1996)

No.	Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Word selection or collocational clash	181	32.08%
2.	Word order or use of awkward expressions	72	12.74%
3.	Verb tenses	67	11.85%
4.	Word spellings	48	8.49%
5.	Use or deletion of prepositions	40	7.07%
6.	Punctuation	27	4.77%
7.	Auxiliaries	24	4.24%
8.	Singularity or plurality	23	4.07%
9.	Omission or incorrect use of articles	19	3.36%
10.	Word redundancy	17	3.05%
11.	Word omission	16	2.83%
12.	Subject-verb agreement	9	1.59%
13.	Verb to be	7	1.23%
14.	Omission or incorrect use of pronouns	4	0.70%
15.	Verb voice	4	0.70%
16.	Incomplete sentences (fragments)	4	0.70%
17.	Conjunctions	3	0.53%
	Total	565	100%

Following is a pie chart representing the errors made by students upon tackling their translation assignment.
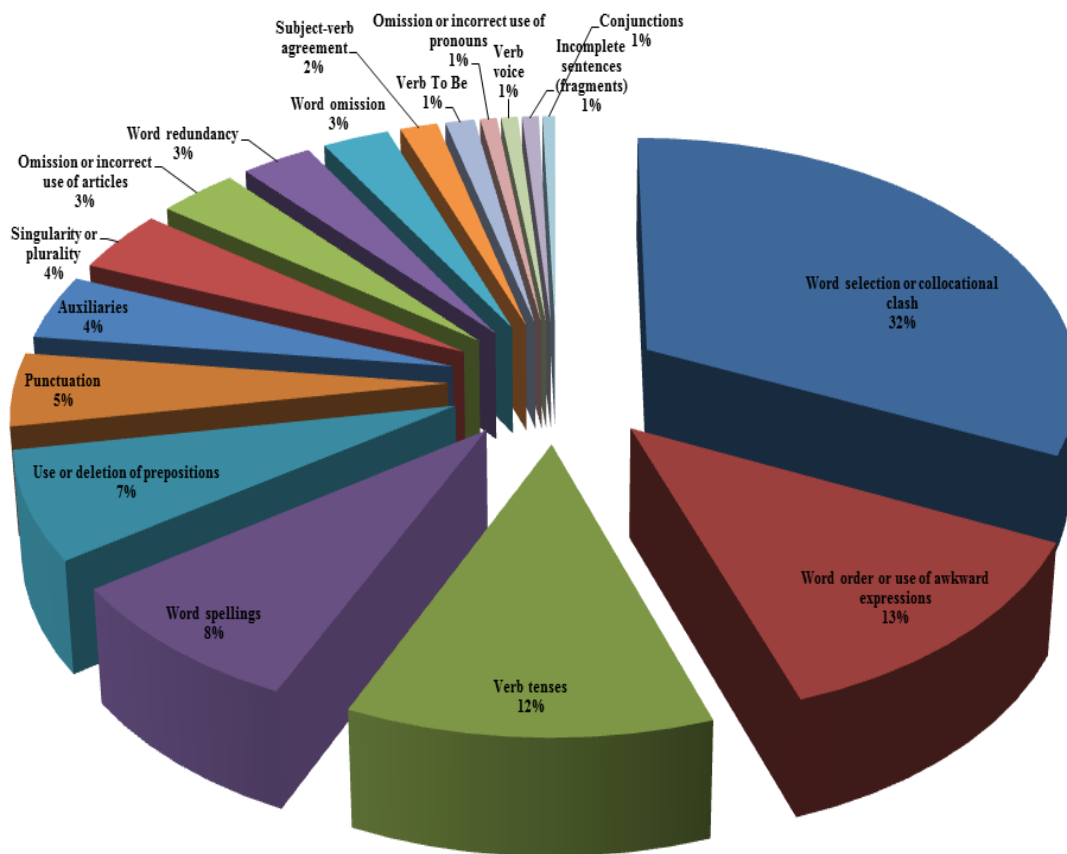
Figure 01. Pie chart representing students' errors

Word selection or collocational clash, as has been shown above, represents the highest among all error frequencies and percentages. This conforms to the results taken from Phuket and Othman (2015). The reason behind this high frequency in this present study might be the wide range of errors this error type covers, as it considers both appropriate word selection and collocations. This might have resulted from the students' lack of appropriate collocational knowledge which can only be acquired through long term exposure to native usage of the language. By-and-large, students learn only separate words, rather than chunks of language, without being given either the appropriate context or the grammatical properties of such words−a matter which results in these students not knowing how or when to use such words appropriately. Just to name a few examples of this type of error from the students' manuscripts: '*In its Facebook entry*', '*DCA just practice its forces as per the significant rules*', '*The investigation will be made*', and '*…additionally mentioning that is it the cause of the strike of its pilots as a defense.*'

Similarly, the students' manuscripts are replete with errors related to *word order or the use of awkward expressions,* such as, *'*He said, facilitate examination in regards to the suspension arrange towards Rayani Air will be completed on 12 May';* and, *'*We have examined to the carrier and they effectively* all *around educated about it'.*

Remarkably, a percentage of 12.74% of the errors in the translated passage were similar to this−a matter which indicates that a more effective way needs to be adopted when teaching grammar to EFL learners. This can be achieved either by adopting a method to be used in the classroom, or by constant feedback from instructors on the students assignments throughout the academic year, as referred to in Setyowati (2015) conclusion highlighting the significance of using 'corrective feedbacks'.

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Errors involving *verb tenses* and *word spellings* came third and fourth on the list respectively. Results showed that 11.85% of the students seemed inattentive to verb tenses and made naïve mistakes, such as, '**The full service airline company is launched three months ago*'. This conforms to findings from Phuket and Othman (2015). Similarly, 8.49% of the students made spelling mistakes, although the students had recourse to spell-checkers. Remarkably, many of them were influenced by their mother tongue; thus producing such mistakes as in '*Mei*' instead of (the month of) '*May*', and '*syariah*' instead of '*shari'ah*' (Islamic Law).

The fifth and, thus, the last of the most common errors was the *use or deletion of prepositions,* which reflects the difficulty some EFL learners find upon learning EFL and also conforms well to findings from Phuket and Othman (2015). A percentage of 7.07% of the students made mistakes like the following, *'*Rayani Air suspended its operations from last Friday until further notice'*; and *'*Investigation for* Rayani *Air will be carried out on…'*

The remaining errors range between 4.77% and 0.53% and cover another 12 errors, involving *punctuation*, *auxiliaries*, *articles*, *agreement*, *voice*, *conjunctions* as well as others, as can be seen in Table 2. Though the percentage of such errors is low, they still constitute, for EFL learners, major obstacles to mastering the foreign language they are pursuing, namely English. Therefore, finding suitable solutions and/or techniques or methods that may help learners reduce these and similar errors in L2 writing is of paramount importance.

7.   Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the various errors made by EFL learners upon handling a translation assignment from Malay into English; only grammatical and collocational mistakes were noted. Four questions constituted the objectives of this study. Based on the discussion and findings of the study, one can conclude that EFL tertiary-level students of Malaysia make grammatical and collocational errors. The errors found in this present study fall under 17 types or categories. These errors are either due to mother tongue interference, lack of syntactic knowledge, or discrepancies between language competence and performance. Teachers, syllabus designers, and educational institutions are advised to adopt the teaching techniques proposed and recommended by various research works on Error Analysis in their practices in order to help EFL learners improve their competence and performance. 'Corrective Feedbacks' (Setyowati, 2015), and 'Peer Correction' and 'Process Writing' (Tse & Yau, 2014) are more examples of the methods that can help students avoid making such errors. The frequency of errors found in the students' manuscripts shows the areas where more emphasis should be put by the people concerned. A substantial gap between the competent students and many less-able students whose writings were far from acceptable was noted. Therefore, remedial programs should be designed by the concerned authority to avoid this gap becoming wider. Finally, the students should be taught how to write properly and should be given the opportunity to practice writing in both their mother tongue and the L2.

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