

## Errors and Variations of TESL Students' Written Description

Touran Ahour<sup>1\*</sup> and Jayakaran Mukundan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of English, Tabriz Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Humanities and Language Education,  
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,*

*43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

*\*E-mail: torahour2@yahoo.com*

### ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was to highlight different kinds of errors and variations that emerge in the writings of ESL students. The participants of the study were twelve TESL undergraduate students from the Faculty of Educational Studies at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Students' written descriptions on a picture stimulus were collected and qualitatively analyzed. Then, the emerging errors in their descriptions were categorized into the linguistic and surface structure taxonomies. The findings revealed different grammatical errors in their writings which were basically related to the categories of verb phrases and noun phrases in either simple or compound/complex sentences that resulted in giving misinformation, one of the categories in surface structure. Some variations were also found in the word choice of the students in the three ethnic groups of the study, whereby these choices might be the reflections of their cultural background and world view. The results could help material developers to develop the necessary tasks and exercises and teachers to devise the best teaching strategies for overcoming these kinds of errors in ESL learners' writings.

**Key words:** Grammatical errors, linguistic taxonomy, noun phrase, surface structure, variation, verb phrase, second language learners

### INTRODUCTION

Variation in language, specifically in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), has been the subject of studies for years. Language is a dynamic system and SLA is not a matter of conformity to uniformity (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2003). Due to the fact that variation and fluctuations are important characteristics of dynamic systems (Thelen & Smith, 1994; Van Geert & Van Dijk, 2002), highlighting the different levels of variation in the language of second language learners is of prime importance. Many research studies have been conducted on language variation from different linguistic and

communicative perspectives. Most of them rely on phonology (Labov, 1991), hierarchy of acquisition (Krashen, 1977), as well as syntax and morphology (Dulay & Burt, 1973; Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Young, 1991; Van Patten, 1996). In this regard, more studies have been carried out on the oral production of learners (e.g. Dulay & Burt, 1974; Tarone & Liu, 1995), and a few studies have been conducted on the variation in the written production of learners (e.g. Larsen-Freeman, 2006). This could be due to the fact that written language is considered as more challenging to be analyzed. It is also believed that the issue of finding a suitable methodology with which to capture the 'fuzziness' (Van Geert

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\*Corresponding Author

& Steenbeek, 2005) and dynamism of language development is a challenging one (Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

Some studies have more focus on error analysis and learners' interlanguage (Corder, 1967, 1981; Ho-Peng, 1976; Khazriyati Salehuddin, Kim Hua & Maros, 2006; Richards, 1971; Selinker, 1972). For example, Richards (1971), in the study of learners' second language, found that some intralingual and developmental errors happen in the oral production of students. Similarly, Ho-Peng (1976) found some interlanguage (e.g. "\* Ahmad returned last week from Ipoh"), intralingual (e.g. "\*Ali didn't saw the man") and developmental errors (e.g. "\*You do not yet answer my second question") in the language of Malaysian ESL learners. These kinds of errors could be expected from anyone learning a second language because they are typical of systematic errors in English usage. Picture stimuli were also employed in the studies on error analysis. Dulay and Burt (1974), for instance, used a series of pictures to elicit a range of basic syntactic structures orally. Likewise, Makino (1979) studied the order of morpheme acquisition through written data based on picture stimuli. Makino found that the order of morpheme acquisition is the same as the natural order, but different from the order in textbooks.

Learners' productions are inherently variable and this variability is evident in the errors they make (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Tarone & Liu, 1995). Recent studies reflect the interest in the analysis of written production of the second language learners (Adams, 2003; Hinkel, 2002; Liu, 1996; Nelson, Bahar & Van Meter, 2004). Most of the studies in this area have separate focus on the oral or written production of the learners. Very few studies have emphasized on both types of production. Larsen-Freeman (2006), for example, studied on the emergence of complexity, fluency and accuracy in the oral and written productions of five Chinese learners of English. Variability in learner's interlanguage may be random in part (free variation) but is largely systematic (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Hence, there is much more necessity to investigate the written production

of the second language learners to investigate the different kinds of errors and variations in their writings, which will in turn assist teachers in finding the best ways for overcoming the problematic areas in students' writings. In this regard, the present study sought to find out the answer to the following question:

- What are the errors and variations in the written production of Malay, Chinese and Indian TESL students?

## METHOD

A qualitative content analysis of the students' writings was conducted based on the error analysis approach. As Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) stated, "content or document analysis is a research method applied to written or visual materials for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material" (p. 464). For this, the written productions of the students were analyzed sentence by sentence for the occurrence of any kind of errors and variations.

### *Participants*

The participants of the study were twelve volunteer female undergraduate TESL students in their fourth semester from the Faculty of Educational Studies at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). They were from three ethnicities, including Malay (participants R, P, T and Y), Chinese (participants E, G, H and K), and Indian (participants M, O, A and D). The participants represented the three groups of the study (i.e. Malay = Group A, Chinese = Group B, and Indian = Group C). The division into three ethnic groups was to find the similarities and/or differences in the emergent errors and variations in their writings.

### *Material*

Picture composition task was employed in this study. A picture was selected from an ELT book as a stimulus for writing (see Appendix 1). The participants were asked to describe the picture in one or two paragraphs.

*Data Analysis*

The writings of the students were analyzed inductively for any emergent errors. For this, the specific errors in the students' writings were identified and also categorized into two taxonomies, as follows:

1. Linguistic taxonomy (Politzer & Ramirez, 1973) which is based on a descriptive grammar of the target language (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). Such a grammar includes general and specific categories relating to basic sentence structure, verb phrase, verb complementation, noun phrase, prepositional phrase, adjuncts, coordinate and subordinate constructions and sentence connection.
2. Surface structure taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). This taxonomy is based on four general categories with their sub-categories, such as omission, addition (regularization, double-marking, simple additions), mis(in) formation (regularization, archi-forms, alternating forms), and misordering.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The written descriptions of Group A had short and simple sentences with present continuous tense. The sentences with asterisks indicate the incorrect sentences and the mistake in each one is underlined:

- a. \* The picture is show one family.
- b. The father is sitting on the sofa.
- c. \* He is reading newspaper.
- d. \* The mother is standing besides the father.
- e. She is holding a cup of coffee.
- f. The daughter is pointing to something.
- g. The daughter is pointing at the lamp.

In Sentence (a), there is a grammatical error which is corresponding to the verb phrase 'to be

+ v + ing' for the present continuous tense. In Sentence (c), a definite or an indefinite article (grammatical morpheme) is missing in the noun phrase, as in 'He is reading a/the newspaper'. In Sentence (d), there is an error in the prepositional phrase, whereby the preposition 'besides' has been used instead of 'beside' with the meaning of 'near' or 'at the side of'. A variation is seen in the use of preposition in Sentence (f) and Sentence (g), as in the prepositional verbs 'pointing to' and 'pointing at'. In this regard, Ho-Peng (1976) indicates that Malaysian ESL learners have problem in the use of prepositions. According to Ho-Peng, the learners either omit the prepositions (e.g., "\* The teacher discussed *about* the trip") (omit *about*) or use them wrongly (e.g., "\* Zarina has been sick *from* Sunday") (*since*), or put them where they are not needed (pp. 24-25).

Other grammatical errors emerge in Group A's writings:

- h. \* The family including three person.
- i. \* There is a father, a mother, a daughter.

In Sentence (h), the plural 's' has been omitted in the word 'person' in the noun phrase 'three person'. The use of conjunction 'and' is needed in Sentence (i) as in '..., and a daughter'. In general, the emergent variations and errors in the written production of Group A are of the following kinds:

Linguistic category and error type:

- General categories : (a) Noun phrase; (b) Verb phrase
- Specific categories: (a) Numbers (substitution of singular for plural); Determiners (omission of the article); Prepositions (misuse of prepositions); Conjunctions (omission of conjunction) – (b) Progressive tense (replacement of 'ing' by the simple verb form).

Surface structure category and error type:

- General categories: (a) Misinformation; (b) Omission
- Specific categories: (a) Regularization

The participants in Group B used both simple and complex sentences. The use of relative pronouns emerged in their descriptions. The following sentences were taken from the written descriptions of the students in this particular group:

- a. \* The picture shows three people 2 adults and 1 children.
- b. \* **However**, the girl is pointing at the man **who sits** on the armchair reading the newspaper **while** looking at the lady.
- c. The man **who** reads the newspaper looks gloomy and worried.
- d. **Therefore, to conclude**, I would say this is a family talk in the livingroom.
- e. \* The man sits in a big armchair.

As shown in the above sentences, the uses of relative pronoun (e.g. 'who') and transition words (e.g. 'however', 'therefore', 'to conclude') are found in their descriptions. In Sentence (a), there is an error in the use of plural noun 'children' in place of singular noun 'child' to show the agreement between the preceding singular number as in '1 child' not '1 children'. This sentence should be accurately written as: 'The picture shows three people, two adults and a child'. In Sentence (b), faulty parallelism is found between the verbs throughout the sentence when the student writes:

- ... is pointing at ... sits on ... reading ... looking at ...

In Sentence (e), there is an incorrect use of preposition in the prepositional verb 'sits in' for 'sits on'. Therefore, the errors in the written descriptions of Group B can be classified under the following types:

Linguistic category and error type:

- General categories: (a) Noun Phrase; (b) Verb Phrase
- Specific categories: (a) Number (substitution of plural for singular); (b) Progressive tense (omission of 'be'

and replacement of 'ing' by the simple verb form); Prepositions (misuse of preposition).

Surface structure category and error type:

- General categories: Misformation
- Specific categories: Regularization

Group C used longer and compound sentences, with conjunctions 'and' and 'but' appeared in their descriptions. The following sentences were extracted from their writings:

- a. \*The father might be so tired after working **and** he is taking rest.
- b. \***And her** daughter need to tell something to her father **but** he seems not to care about it.
- c. \*She try to tell **and** wants her father listen to her.
- d. **And** the mother in the picture seems try to tell her daughter that the father will talk to her later.
- e. \*As a mother she carry a lot of responsibilities.

In Sentence (a), an article is required to be used before the word 'rest' as in 'taking a rest'. In Sentence (b), there is an incorrect use of the verb 'need' instead of 'needs' to correspond to the subject-verb agreement for the subject 'her daughter'. In this sentence, the use of possessive adjective 'her' in the noun phrase 'her daughter' is wrongly used for 'his daughter', which does not reflect the correct referent.

Confusion of gender-based pronouns is one of the most prevalent problems in Malaysian L2 learners, and this is simply because the linguistic norm in the Malay language and the mother tongue of these learners are different from that in the English language. For example, the Malay words '*nya*' and '*dia*' are used for both the English possessive adjectives 'his' and 'her', while for the noun phrases 'his daughter' and 'her daughter', one word '*putrinya*' is used. This is an interlanguage error that results from the interference of learners' first language.

Interlanguage errors were also reported in the findings of Ho-Peng (1976) among ESL learners in Malaysia. Ho-Peng referred to the students' errors in word order which resulted from the interference of Bahasa Malaysia, as in "She saw there several people from Penang" instead of "There she saw several people from Penang" (p. 25). This area requires a contrastive analysis of both languages by the teachers in order to highlight the problematic areas to the students and help them overcome interlanguage errors.

In this regard, Khazriyati Salehuddin *et al.* (2006) carried out a contrastive analysis of the use of determiners between the Malay language and English. They examined a corpus of 873 sentences which were collected from 51 essay samples from Malaysian secondary school students who were learners of English as a second language. The occurrences of errors were 175 out of 826 for the uses of determiners. The researchers also found different aspects of incorrect uses of determiners, which are the reflections of the Malay grammar. These errors are related to specific places of location (e.g., "\*Sometimes I bring it to \_\_ park to play"), instruments (e.g., "\*My hobbies are cycling, playing \_\_ computer, playing football, and reading novel"), countries as adjectives (e.g., "\*I want to be like "Khalid Jamlus", the striker of \_\_ Malaysian football team"), name of subject (e.g., "\*I also like \_\_ science subject because this subject discusses ..."), agreement to the noun (e.g., "\*All this countries lost their property"), possessive forms (e.g., "\*During I leisure hours, I collect the stamps"), and cardinal numbers (e.g., "\* She was born on \_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> October 1992") (pp. 26-29).

Correspondingly, in Sentence (c) and Sentence (e), there are similar kinds of errors as in Sentence (b) with regard to the subject-verb agreement and the use of plural verb instead of the third person singular. Ho-Peng (1976) indicates that a deviant structure of this kind is the result of overgeneralization which leads to intralingual errors. In this case, the learner tries to reduce his/her linguistic burden (e.g., omission of the third person -s) (Richards, 1971). In Sentence (c), there is another error in

the use of two main verbs, whereby the first verb 'wants' is followed by the bare infinitive 'listen', while an infinitive with 'to' is required in this structure. The types of emergent errors in the written descriptions of Group C are as follows:

Linguistic category and error type:

- General categories: (a) Noun Phrase; (b) Verb Phrase; (c) Verb-and-verb construction.
- Specific categories: (a) Determiners (use of wrong possessive); (b) Subject-verb-agreement (disagreement of subject and number); (c) Omission of 'to' in the verb and verb construction.

Surface structure category and error type:

- General categories: (a) Misformation; (b) Omission
- Specific categories: (a) alternating forms; regularization

#### *Variations in the Word Choice*

Considering the participants' word choice, different words were employed for the same referents by the groups of the study. For example, two participants in Group A used the word 'sofa' and two participants in Group B used the word 'armchair' for the same referent.

- R: The father is sitting on the **sofa**.  
 Y: The father reads the newspaper on the **sofa**.  
 E: \* The girl is pointing at the man who sits on the **armchair**.  
 H: \*The man sits in a big **armchair**.

The use of the words 'cup' and 'mug'; 'coffee' and 'hot beverage' for the same referents were also found in the descriptions of the three groups:

- A: She is holding a **cup** of **coffee**.  
 B: The lady is holding a **mug** with **hot beverage** in it.  
 C: She has a **cup** of **coffee** in her hand.



In the same line, Group A and Group C described a family and used some related words including ‘family’, ‘father’, ‘mother’, and ‘daughter’ regularly in their written descriptions, whereas Group B used the words ‘people’, ‘man’, ‘lady’, and ‘girl’ to refer to the same referents in the picture. The following sentences were found in the descriptions of the participants in three groups:

Group A

- \* The picture is show about one **family**.
- \* There is a **father**, a **mother**, a **daughter**.
- The **father** is sitting on the sofa.
- \* The **mother** is standing besides the **father**.
- The **daughter** is pointing to something.

Group B

- \* The picture shows three **people**, 2 adults and 1 children.
- The **lady** is holding a mug ...
- However, the **girl** is pointing at the **man**...

- The **man** who reads ...
- I do feel that the **man** has just lost his job.

Group C

- The **father** might be so tired after working...
- \* And her **daughter** need to tell something to her **father** but...
- And the **mother** in the picture seems try to tell ...
- \* As a **mother** she carry a lot of responsibilities.
- The **mother** looks very kind.

Table 1 shows a summary of the errors found in the written descriptions of the students who took part in this study. The correct equivalents of the errors are provided based on the descriptive grammar of the target language (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972; Quirk *et al.*, 1985) in the reconstruction column. The table incorporates both the linguistic categories (Politzer & Ramirez, 1973) and surface structure categories (Dulay *et al.*, 1982).

TABLE 1  
Types of the emergent errors in the students’ written descriptions in the three groups

Group	Error	Reconstruction	Linguistic description	Surface structure description
	...three person	... three persons	Noun phrase; Number; Substitution of singular for plural	Misinformation-regularization
	... is show...	... is showing ...	Verb phrase; Progressive tense; Replacement of ‘ing’ by the simple verb form	Misinformation-regularization
A	... reading newspaper	...reading a/ the newspaper	Noun phrase; Determiners; Omission of an article	Omission
	...is standing besides the father.	...is standing beside the father.	Prepositional phrase; Preposition; Misuse of preposition	Misinformation-regularization
	... a father, a mother, a daughter	... a father, a mother, and a daughter	Noun phrase; Conjunctions; Omission of conjunction	Omission

Table 1 (continued)

	... and 1 children	... and a child	Noun phrase; Number; Substitution of plural for singular	Misinformation-regularization
B	...is pointing at the man who sits on ...	...is pointing at the man who is sitting on ...	Verb phrase; Progressive tense; Omission of 'be' and replacement of 'ing' by the simple verb form; Substitution of the simple present tense for the present progressive tense	Misinformation-regularization
	... sits in ...	... sits on...	Verb phrase; Preposition; Misuse of preposition	Misinformation-regularization
	... he is taking rest	... he is taking a rest	Noun phrase; Determiners; Omission of an article	Omission
	... her daughter...	... his daughter...	Noun phrase; Determiners; Use of wrong possessive	Misinformation-Alternating forms
C	... her daughter need...	...her daughter needs...	Verb phrase; Subject-verb-agreement; Disagreement of subject and number (singular)	Misinformation-regularization
	She try ...	She tries...	Verb phrase; Subject-verb-agreement; Disagreement of subject and number (singular)	Misinformation-regularization
	...wants her father listen ...	...wants her father to listen...	Verb-and-verb construction; Omission of 'to'	omission

Although the surface structure categories indicate almost identical types of errors, the linguistic categories and their subcategories reflect various types of errors among the participants in the three groups of the study. This verifies the variability (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Tarone & Liu, 1995) and dynamicity of the language, specifically the SLA process (Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Thelen & Smith, 1994; van Geert & van Dijk, 2002). Some errors were found in simple sentences, some in compound or complex sentences. The main types of the errors were in the noun phrases and verb phrases and their sub-categories in the taxonomy.

The students had linguistic problems in the use of number (e.g. substitution of plural

for singular or vice versa), determiners (e.g. omission of articles and use of wrong possessive), prepositions (e.g. misuse of prepositions), noun phrases and progressive tense (e.g. replacement of 'ing' by the simple verb form, and omissions of 'be' and 'ing' and replacing them with simpler form of the verb), subject-verb agreement (e.g. disagreement of subject and number), and verb-and-verb construction (e.g. omission of 'to') in the use of verb phrases. The findings of this study are in agreement with some of the results by Ho-Peng (1976) and Khazriyati Salehuddin *et al.* (2006) from Malaysian ESL learners.

The results of this study revealed that all the participants, regardless of their ethnicity, produced linguistic and surface structure errors.

The participants' first language is Malay and it may be one of the causes of error occurrences in their second language. Meanwhile, the participants' cultural background may also be another cause for the variation in the use of words for the same referents. In this regard, it was found that the Malay and Indian participants used similar words in some cases (e.g. father, mother, daughter, cup, coffee), while the Chinese participants used different words (e.g. man, lady, mug, hot beverage). One possible interpretation for this might be related to their family culture and how they view the situation in totality based on their worldview and the real-world experiences.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of the study indicate that second language learners produce different kinds of errors in their writings. The study verifies the idea that a learner's interlanguage is variable (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Although the participants of this study were all second language learners in their fourth semester, they had different kinds of linguistic errors in their writing. In addition, their choice of words also differed in some situations and for some referents. The findings of the study also reflect the problematic areas in their writings. The students had problems in the surface structure of the sentences, such as misinformation and its subcategories (regularization and alternating forms) and omission. Their errors were mainly linguistic and grammatical in nature. Some variations were found in the choice of words that might be a reflection of their world view. For example, the Malay and Indian participants referred to the family members using specific relevant words (e.g. father, mother, daughter), while the Chinese participants employed more general words (e.g. people, lady, man, girl) for the same referents shown in the picture.

This study was limited to the results from the content analysis of the writings of 12 TESL students on a picture stimulus. The findings are in line with the findings of some previous researchers in the area (e.g. Ho-Peng, 1976;

Khazriyati Salehuddin *et al.*, 2006). This area still requires further research using a larger sample size and more writing stimuli. More studies are also needed to examine the effect of ethnicity on the lexical variations in the writings of ESL students.

The results of this study revealed the areas of the target language the ESL learners might have difficulty to produce correctly. These problematic areas can be best identified and thought through the contrastive analysis of the first and second languages. The findings can help material developers to create the necessary tasks and exercises, as well as teachers to devise the best teaching strategies for overcoming these kinds of errors in the writings of ESL learners.

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### APPENDIX 1

#### Picture stimulus for students' writing

-Look at the following picture and describe whatever you understand from it. Write your description in the provided space below.

