
COMMON ERRORS IN COMPOSITION WRITING BY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Gianinna Elaine M. Labicane, Ricky Michael Morales Oliva

Romblon State University, Romblon, Philippines

E-mail: gianinnalabicane@gmail.com

Received: 2022-02-07

Accepted: 2022-06-08

Published: 2022-06-28

Abstract

The alarming decline in the English language proficiency of Filipinos in recent years calls for further exploration into the challenges encountered by learners across the four macro-skills, particularly in writing, being the macro-skill met with the most challenge alongside speaking. Hence, this study aimed to identify the common writing errors of college students from the Marinduque State College in writing recount text and attempt to determine the reasons behind these writing deficiencies. Twenty (20) recount texts written by third-year Social Work for their World Literature course were subjected to analysis. The results revealed that punctuation use, selection of correct verbs and prepositions, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, and selection of appropriate pronouns were the areas in writing that the participants were most challenged with. These composition errors may be attributed to a lack of focus on grammatical rules in L2 learning and the strong influence of the native language. Hence, intervention on these identified writing deficiencies must be implemented immediately in order for the learners' communicative writing skills to be at par with global standards for English communicative competency.

Keywords: *Error analysis; Recount text; Composition errors; Composition writing*

1. Introduction

English is widely recognized as one of the most powerful languages in the world as it is the language of economic advancement, academic pursuits, and globalization (Koo, 2018; as cited by Macababbad, Bagonio & Pinpin, 2019). In the midst of rapid international development, developing proficiency in a language of such influence has long become imperative to cope with the global competition. English has concretized its position as a national language in the country since the entry of Americans in the 1900s.

Over a century later, the Philippines is now among the largest English-speaking nations worldwide, ranking fourth behind the United States, India, and Pakistan (Brooks, 2017). It has held its position as one of the best English-speaking countries around the world for a considerable amount of time. However, in more recent years, there has been an alarming decline in English language proficiency in the country, with the Philippines falling from the 20th to the 27th spot in the 2020 English Proficiency Index (Baclig, 2020). This decline has been since 2016. The most notable causal factor is the absence of effective policies towards English proficiency in the Philippines has allowed other nations to rise past. (Valderama, 2019).

In order to maintain, or better, improve the Philippines' standing in the use of the English language, notable gaps and issues regarding the quality of ESL education in the country has to be addressed (Cabigon, 2015). As a start, understanding the learning needs and language deficiencies of students across the four macro-skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking, must be first undertaken. In 2018, research by Estacio, Valdez & Pulido revealed that developing writing skills has been met with most challenge, alongside speaking. Vocabulary, organization, spelling, and grammar are few among the most prevalent English writing problems of Filipinos. Furthermore, the influence of the native tongue has also been identified as a strong factor working against effective use of the English language in composition (Eslit, 2019). In view of the aforementioned, this textual analysis aimed to identify the common errors in writing recount texts made by Bachelor of Science in Social Work students in the Marinduque State College. It specifically sought to describe the students' most common errors and classify which one are most prevalent.

2. Literature Review

Writing, alongside speaking, is a productive macro-skill that involves transferring ideas into words and sentences, and arranging them in a concrete and cohesive manner (Mustafa & Kirana, 2017). It is apparent that effectively teaching writing does not only mean focusing on mastery of grammatical rules, but also integration of logic and/or emotional appeal. The process of writing involves several steps, beginning with pre-writing. It focuses on the selection of a subject matter, brainstorming and researching. Drafting follows thereafter, which involves writing down continuously with initially no concern over organization or mechanics. Revising of the written work comes afterwards, and this focuses on refining and polishing the output. Editing and Proofreading comes last, which deals with ensuring that the output is free of writing errors.

Mustafa and Kirana (2017) state that there are three components in writing: content, mechanics and organization. This paper mainly focuses on errors made by the students in terms of mechanics. In the aforementioned study, selection, addition, misordering, and omission are the four errors under mechanics. Selection is concerned with choosing the incorrect word or word forms (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982 as cited by Mustafa & Kirana, 2017). It occurs with the selection of a word instead of the proper and correct word, or with the errors in choosing the right phoneme, morpheme or vocabulary item.

On the other hand, addition occurs with the incorporation of an unnecessary morpheme or vocabulary item in writing. Omission, in contrast, involves deletion of needed morphemes or vocabulary items. In an experiment cited by Mustafa and Kirana (2017), it was determined that grammatical morphemes, such as verbs, articles, nouns, prepositions, inflections, are often omitted than the content of morphemes which carries the meaning. Misordering is more concerned with errors in syntax; this is often associated with the influence of one's native tongue in second language learning, as a student is most likely to adapt the sentence structure of L1 with L2 in assumption that the structure of the L2 is similar.

Other common errors in writing involve capitalization, which is typically manifested when the first letter of nouns, acronyms, and other relevant words are not capitalized. Errors in punctuation may also occur in composition. According to Glencoe (1976; as cited in Pohan, 2017), the different types of punctuation include the period (.), which is used to indicate the end of a sentence. A comma (,) is used between the main clauses in a

compound sentence, while a question mark (?) is used at the end of a question. Meanwhile, a colon (:) is used for various reasons; starting a list or for writing time, while a semicolon (;) is used separate main clauses that are joined by and, but, or, nor, yet and for. Errors in punctuation use occur when these are not used according to purpose.

Alarming results have been found in researches in the recent years, where it is consistently being revealed that Filipino learners are falling behind those from other nations in terms of English writing proficiency. In a 2020 article by Balinbin, data from the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) showed that writing competencies of Filipino students are significantly lower than those of Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Cambodian learners. This decline in standing in terms of writing proficiency in comparison to other countries in Asia is directly attributed to a lack of effective policies geared towards developing proficiency among learners. Namnama Lumines, a retired supervisor from the Department of Education, stated that there is observably lesser focus on developing writing skills in the new curriculum. Moreover, teachers are often unable to focus and address these problems due to the heavy workload that DepEd demands from them. Lumines further asserts this problem in the public-school curriculum through a comparison between public school and private school students, stating that because of a more controlled and focused curriculum in the latter, students demonstrate proficiency in English writing (Albano, 2019).

3. Research Method

A descriptive quantitative research design was employed for this study. Descriptive quantitative research is employed to collect numerical data and explain certain phenomena (USCLibraries, 2021). It was, therefore, deemed the best fit to be utilized for this study. The data were collected from recount texts written by 20 third-year Bachelor of Sciences in Social Work students from the Marinduque State College. The recount text was written in fulfillment of a classroom requirement for their Lit 102 (World Literature) course, wherein they were asked to recall an experience or opportunity they regret passing on or are afraid of pursuing. The outputs were submitted through Google Forms. For ethical reasons, the students were informed that their outputs will be analyzed for possible errors in composition.

Upon collection of the submitted outputs, analysis of errors in composition was conducted. The data were then tabulated to reflect the frequency and percentage of each composition error prior to analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Results show that the participants' make the most errors in punctuation use, making 39.67% of recorded composition errors. The misuse of the comma, particularly its omission, was often found in the recount texts composed by the participants. It was observed during the analysis that most participants did not separate clauses with commas. The use of period, or more clearly, the lack thereof, was also noted, as it was observed that participants often wrote run-on sentences. Moreover, errors in the selection of verbs and errors in the selection of prepositions both ranked second at 12.07%.

Subject-verb agreement errors and inaccurate use of pronouns were both ranked third at 6.03%. Some of the participants were unable to observe subject-verb grammatical rules in their outputs, while some struggled with the proper pronoun genders. Errors were also observed in the participants' selection of adverbs, omission of articles, and misspellings. Results show that errors in punctuation are the most dominant, particularly the use of

commas and periods. This is in line with the findings of Alfonso (2016) and Almejas & Arago (2017) wherein it was determined that the inaccurate use of punctuation marks is one of the most prevalent composition errors made by Filipino students in written outputs.

Errors in selection of verbs and prepositions were both ranked second at 12.07%. An example of error in selection of verb is when one of the participants wrote "I myself is" instead of "I myself am". Errors with verbs also came in the form of incorrect verb tenses. One participant wrote "I don't want to be judge" instead of "I don't want to be judged".

The participants also struggled with the selection of prepositions. For instance, one participant used "dependent to" instead of "dependent on" in his/her recount text. Another participant wrote "I hold back to everything I do" instead of "I hold back in everything I do.". In a 2018 study by Almerfors, the errors in the selection of prepositions can be attributed to the influence of one's mother tongue. This phenomenon was referred to as "negative transfer", wherein one's knowledge of native language structure is carried over to target language use. On the other hand, Abker (2021) pointed out that errors in preposition may be caused by students simply being unaware of rules in proper preposition use.

Capitalization was also observed to be a problem in the participants' compositions. Some participants did not capitalize the first letter of proper nouns in their outputs ("Even if Tita wants to fight pedro..."). These findings support that of Pathan (2021), wherein the researcher found the students struggled with properly capitalizing proper nouns. Moreover, another participant did not capitalize "I" in her submitted output ("because i am too old to be accepted..."). The first letter of the first word in some sentences were also not capitalized by some of the participants.

Subject-verb agreement errors and inaccurate use of pronouns were both ranked third among the identified writing mistakes. Some of the participants were unable to observe subject-verb grammatical rules in their outputs. For instance, P13 wrote "other people knows", with the verb in singular form whereas it should be plural, hence violating grammar rules. The same problem is observed in the recount text by P04, wherein she wrote "I am happy that our family are able to face and surpass those challenges". Al-Dubib (2018) states that cases of subject-verb grammatical rule violations are often attributed to learners not being as familiar with rules in the L2 system. Meanwhile, errors made in selection of pronouns were primarily centered on gender forms, as can be observed with P19's output, "it is forbidden so his sister married pedro." (Writer was referring to female subject; therefore "she" must have been used.). Filipino learners' difficulty with the selection of the proper pronoun in terms of gender is attributed as a direct influence of the native tongue, as pronouns in Tagalog are not gendered (Mabuan, 2019).

Other notable errors were also observed in the analysis, such as errors in selection of adverbs (our respect and most specially our love for them; instead of our respect and most especially our love for them), omission of articles (to have boyfriend; instead of to have a boyfriend), and misspellings (Because many parents are slightly strick; instead of because my parents are slightly strict).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify and analyze the common errors in composition of recount text written by Bachelor of Science in Social Work students. The results of this research identified that the punctuation use, selection of correct verbs and prepositions, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, and selection of appropriate pronouns were the areas that the participants were most challenged. Supporting literature revealed that these

composition errors might be attributed to a lack of focus on grammatical rules in L2 learning and the strong influence of the native language.

Errors in writing are part of the learning process; therefore, it is inevitable that learners will occasionally make mistakes in composition. Identifying these problem areas would be greatly beneficial to English language teachers as it determines which specific aspects of language learning needs more attention and intervention. Determining writing needs must be done early on, as there are limited opportunities to correct these composition errors, especially with the new educational system for Higher Education in the Philippines. General Education subjects are no longer offered in college by the time students reach second or third year; therefore, any writing errors must be identified and addressed as early as possible. As was mentioned in literature cited for this study, policies and intervention on these identified writing deficiencies must be implemented immediately in order for our learners to keep up with global standards for English communicative competency.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their profound gratitude towards the participants of this study for having graciously extended their time to participate in the survey. They also thank the College of Education, Arts, and Social Sciences, and the Marinduque State College as a whole for having permitted the conduct of this study. Finally, they extend their gratitude towards Romblon State University for providing ample opportunities and support for their professional growth.

References

- Abker, I. (2021). Difficulties in using correct English prepositions among EFL students. *JEEs (Journal of English Educators Society)*. 6. 10.21070/jees.v6i2.1640.
- Albano, E. (2019). Handwriting, spelling skills in public schools degenerating. *The Manila Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.manilatimes.net/2019/09/19/campus-press/handwriting-spelling-skills-in-public-schools-degenerating-2/618270/>.
- Al-Dubib, D. (2018). Error Analysis of Subject-Verb Agreement in the Writing of EFL Saudi Female Students: A Corpus-Based Study. Department of English Language and Literature. Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University.
- Alfonso, V. (2016). Common Errors Committed By Freshman Education Students in their Written English Compositions and their Relationship to some Selected Variables. *International Journal of Education and Research*. Vol. 4 No. 5 May 2016.
- Almejas, B. & Alago, E. (2017). A Corpus-Based Analysis of Students' Composition Writing. *International Conference on Literature, Humanities and Social Sciences (LHSS-17)*.
- Almerfors, H. (2018). Preposition and article usage in learner English. *Karlstads Universitet: Sweden*.
- Baclig, C. E. (2020). Philippines drops further in global English proficiency rankings. Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1362951/philippines-drops-further-in-global-english-proficiency-rankings>.
- Balinbin, A. (2020). Filipino students falling behind in reading, writing levels in Southeast Asia. Retrieved 26, 2021 from <https://www.bworldonline.com/filipino-students-falling-behind-in-reading-writing-levels-in-southeast-asia/>.

- Brooks, R. (2017). Which Countries Have the Most English Speakers?. Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <https://k-international.com/blog/countries-with-the-most-english-speakers/>
- Cabigon, N. (2015). State of English in the Philippines: Should We Be Concerned?. Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <https://www.britishcouncil.ph/teach/state-english-philippines-should-we-be-concerned-2>.
- Eslit, E. (2019). First Languages and Its' Impact on the (English) Language Competency of Students. A Statistical Analysis. <https://www.grin.com/document/491327>
- Mabuan, R. (2019). An Analysis of Weblogs' Grammatical Errors of Filipino Learners of English as Second Language. DLSU Research Congress 2015. De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines.
- Macababbad, E., Bagogonio, K. & Pinpin, Z. (2019). The Impact of Learning English To The Future of Junior High School Students. Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <https://edjview.wordpress.com/2019/09/13/the-impact-of-learning-english-to-the-future-of-junior-high-school-students/>.
- Mustafa, F. & Kirana, M. (2017). Errors in EFL writing by junior high students in Indonesia. DOI: 10.5861/ijrsl.2016.1366.
- Pathan, A. (2021). The Most Frequent Capitalization Errors Made by the EFL Learners at Undergraduate Level: An Investigation. *Sch Int J Linguist Lit*, 4(3): 65-72.
- Pohan, A. (2017). Students' Errors on Writing: An Analysis Studies at Junior High School. *Dimensi*, Vol. 6, No. 2: 341-348. Agustus 2017. ISSN: 2085-9996.
- Saavedra, A. (2020). Factors that Contribute to the Poor Writing Skills in Filipino and English of the Elementary Pupils. *International Journal on Innovation, Creativity and Change*, 2020.
- The University of Kansas. (2018). The Writing Process. Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <http://writing.ku.edu/writing-process>.
- USCLibraries. (2021). Research Guides. Retrieved March 5, 2021 from <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/quantitative>.
- Valderama, T. (2019). Pinoys' English proficiency declines sharply. Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <https://www.manilatimes.net/2019/11/18/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/pinoys-english-proficiency-declines-sharply/656784/>.