Common Errors Made in English Writing By Malaysian Chinese Primary Year 6 ESL Learners At A Tuition Centre In Puchong, Malaysia

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to identify the common errors made in English writing by Malaysian Chinese primary year 6 ESL students and to determine the extent of the influence of the first language, Mandarin in ESL writing. The Mandarin language uses a logographic writing system while the English language is written in alphabetic scripts. The difference between the two language systems makes it challenging for Chinese ESL learners to master the English language. In this study, which employed a qualitative approach, 15 ESL students from primary year six were chosen as participants for the writing tasks which formed the first part of the study. Completed writing tasks of ten participants were chosen for analysis. Interviews were conducted with three participants to obtain their perceptions on their grammar proficiency. The highest and most prominent grammar errors revealed in the analysis were in the area of tenses, object pronouns, plurals, auxiliary verbs, prepositions and articles. These errors were found to be caused by the influence of the mother tongue through direct translation from the Mandarin language. To conclude, errors are inevitable but they are crucial for ESL learners to make progression in their English writing skill. The results obtained in this study serve as vital knowledge and information for ESL educators to enhance ESL learners' grammar accuracy in writing.

Keywords: Errors, ESL Learners, English Writing

1.   Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural nation which makes it a natural context for producing students who are proficient in more than just one language. The English language currently has the status of second language in the country. In accordance to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) plans to reinforce and strengthen the proficiency of the English language among Malaysian students. Although this plan was never finalised, there was even a time when the MOE considered making the English language subject in the Malaysian Certificate of Education or *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) paper a compulsory pass. There are also ongoing debates on the reversal of the decision on the medium of instruction for the subjects of Mathematics and Science and the possibilities of this decision being changed. Among the main

objectives of the education blue print is to ensure that Malaysians are proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and English as the second and international language.

The MOE has developed two sets of Curriculum and Assessment Standards Documents (*Dokumen Standard Kurrikulum dan Pentaksiran* /DSKP) as a teaching guideline. One of them is developed for primary school students in accordance to the Primary Schools Curriculum Standards (*Kurrikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* /KSSR) while the other for secondary schools is called (Secondary Schools Curriculum Standards. (*Kurrikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* /KSSM). In accordance to DSKP in the KSSR syllabus, the few most important objectives are when the students reach the end of Year 6, they should be able to use the English language for communication with peers and adults suitably with confidence in both formal and informal situations. Apart from that, it also stresses the importance of students being able to use correct and suitable rules of grammar in speech and writing. Moreover, it wants students to be able to use appropriate language, style and format for different purposes via a wide range of media. As for KSSM, the DSKP's main objectives are that when students arrive at the end of their secondary school year, they should be able to communicate ideas, feelings, opinions and information cleverly in English on familiar topics. Other than that, it requires students to be able to communicate effectively by using appropriate language, style, form and communication strategies. By looking deeper in the KSSR and KSSM objectives, they both mainly share a similar trait which is the communication in English is greatly focused upon. Hence, both verbal and written skills in English will be taught in schools and will be closely monitored. Due to the value and importance of the English language, the education ministry has issued a circular on 14th of April 2019 to propose for all English language options teachers to sit for the Malaysian University English Test, MUET to gauge and elevate the teachers' English language proficiency as well as their pedagogical skills. The directive is also in-line with the requirements established in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025. In a nutshell, while Bahasa Malaysia is set as a compulsory subject in Malaysia as a way to unite the multicultural and multilingual society of the nation, the English language, serves a functional role due to its high use as an international language for the purpose of communication in the economic world. As a result, it has a definite role in influencing the education system (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Therefore, in order for students to have better prospects in their future, they have to be proficient and competent in the English language by being able to write well (Saadiyah & Khor, 2007).

Based on the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, raising the nation's mastery of the English language is one of the major objectives. This goal seems to be falling back as in accordance to the EF English Proficiency Index, EPI, Malaysia has dropped 9 spots in English language proficiency ranking for non-native speakers. In year 2017, Malaysia English proficiency was previously standing at rank 13 and has dwindled to rank 22. Learning the English language in Malaysia is challenging because the nation is made up of different races and cultures which each having their own first language or mother tongue and there remains the possibility that their first language could interfere with the acquisition of the second language. The most prominent language mechanism in the English language that will be affected by language transfer is grammar. Grammar is regarded as the most useful aspect for ESL learners to learn the language. It is imperative for students in Malaysia to be skilful in English grammar knowledge as the language is used broadly as a medium of instruction in public secondary schools prior to the replacement of the Malay language in year 1981 (Singh, Jageer Singh, Abd Razak & Ravinthar, 2017). Writing skill is regarded as the most difficult task compared to other skills such as listening, speaking and reading, as writing skill requires ESL learners to be able to master both vocabulary and grammar concepts and use them to construct sentences accurately and appropriately. Therefore, teaching the writing skill is an undeniable challenge for ESL teachers (Zafar, 2016). This is because writing in ESL has been affected by the learners" interference of the mother tongue. Over the years, many researchers have conducted studies on the role of the mother tongue in ESL writing and its occurrence of negative transfer that causes ESL learners to commit errors in sentence structure, grammars, etc. Errors caused by the interference of the first language are perceived to be an inevitable hindrance that all ESL writers have to confront. This has resulted in incompetent writing (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2012). Thus, error analysis is an important branch of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies and researchers can

analyse common errors made by ESL learners by conducting studies based on contrastive analysis. Researchers compare the second language errors made by ESL learners with those in their mother tongue. According to the study conducted by Mansourizadeh & Abdullah (2014), it was revealed that teachers' corrective feedback on errors made by ESL learners either orally or in written form effectively made improvements in their writing accuracy compared to the group of students who do not receive the feedback. Zafar (2016) also agrees that error corrections can enhance students' writing skills. The findings indicated that the 37 students in the research who were given remedial lessons on correction of errors produced fewer errors in tenses in their writing assignments due to first language interference. Zafar (2016) also indicates that positive written feedback can raise students" motivation to make improvement in their writing skills.

1.1 Objective of this study

While studies in these other contexts have indeed revealed the relationship between mother tongue interference and errors made by ESL learners, not enough research has been done in the Malaysian Chinese Primary school ESL learners whose first language is Mandarin. There are also not enough studies which have come up with a comprehensive list of types of errors that are made by them during their ESL writing tasks. This study therefore aims to find out the extent to which the mother tongue, Mandarin, of ESL primary school learners influences the errors in their ESL writing. Identifying these errors and instances where mother tongue interference has caused these errors would allow for remedial actions and programmes to be developed in a more strategic and structured manner.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is conducted based on the following research questions:
1) What types of errors do Malaysian Chinese students commit in their ESL writing?
2) How does the mother tongue, the Mandarin language influence the students in their ESL writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Error Analysis

Errors analysis serves as a vital tool for educators to explore the differences between two or more languages. It enables educators to teach contrastive analysis to second language learners so that they will be aware of the differences between their mother tongue and the second language to avoid committing errors during language transfer. In accordance to Jabeen, Kazemian & Shahbaz (2015), error analysis expresses the different strategies that learners use to learn languages. It also examines the impacts that error analysis has in the language learning process as well as helps to determine the challenges that learners will face during the language learning process. According to Febriyanti & Sundari (2016, p. 240), errors made by L2 learners could provide clues about their internal learning process. Other than that, it aids teachers to design various methods to support language learners. Error analysis is regarded as one of the most prominent theories of second language acquisition. (Maros et al 2007. It concentrates on the analysis of errors made by L2 learners by making comparisons between the learner's acquired norms and the target language norms as well as aids to provide explanations pertaining to the discovered errors.

2.2 Common Errors Committed by L2 Learners

Errors made by Malaysian students are usually grammatical such as singulars, plurals, articles, prepositions, adjectives, subject-verb agreements as well as tenses. There is a total of 797 errors discovered in the study conducted by Yau, (2014). Singh, Jageer, Abd Razak and Ravinthar (2017) found that Malaysian ESL students commonly make nine types of errors in writing. They

are also grammar related errors such as subject-verb agreements, verb tenses, adverbs, articles, prepositions, adjectives, nouns, pronouns and conjunctions. Grammar related errors are not only made by primary and secondary school ESL learner but these errors are also not uncommon for postgraduate students who majored in English studies. They find it difficult to grasp subject-verb agreement elements like the subject-verb agreement of person, number, subject, coordinated subject as well as the notional agreement and proximity (Stapa & Izahar, 2010). More than that, the study also reveals even postgraduate students are still puzzled with the usage of pairing plural nouns or subjects together with plural verbs and to affiliate singular nouns or subjects with the singular verbs. According to Manokaran, Ramalingam & Adriana (2013), their findings reveal that Malaysian ESL learners are continuously facing difficulties in past tense auxiliary 'be' since schooling days until college. In addition, the study has discovered seven types of errors made by the participants in their writing of argumentative essays. The errors include tense shifts, agreements, omission of auxiliary 'be', wrong verb form usage, addition and misinformation as well as misordering. In the research conducted by Hong, Rahim, Hua & Salehuddin (2011), it is revealed that Malaysian English learners make preposition errors in writing narrative essays. The few most common and obvious prepositions errors made are superfluous prepositions, using the wrong prepositions and omission of prepositions. Other than that, the study also indicates that ESL learners tend to overuse prepositions although they are uncertain about the accuracy of the preposition usage. The utmost problematic prepositions for ESL learners are 'in','to' and 'into'. Learners are unsure about which prepositions are the appropriate and correct usage and they tend to commit a great deal of errors.

It is not only Malaysian ESL learners who commit the mentioned errors, but ESL learners of other nations also tend to make similar errors. In the study conducted by Saadiyah & Khor (2009), it is revealed that Chinese students often make four most common errors. They consist of the language mechanics of preposition, subject-verb agreement, tenses and writing. In accordance to the study by Watcharapunyawong & Usaha (2013) on 40 second year English major students in Thepsatri Rajabhat University, Thailand, it is revealed that a high frequency of errors was made in verb tenses in narrative writing. In descriptive writing, errors were made in articles, singulars, plurals and subject-verb agreements. Students made similar errors in singulars, plurals, word choices, articles, subject-verb agreements as well as sentence structures in the compare and contrast writing. Hence, the study concludes that writing genre is closely linked with the types of errors committed by ESL learners. Jabeen, Kazemian & Shahbaz (2015) claim that incorrect usage of verb tenses are the most common errors found in Iranian ESL students. The study also reveals that the Iranian students' writing examination shows a lack of subject verb agreement usage. Furthermore, they tend to over-generalise past indefinite rules while writing past perfect sentences. In the study conducted by Pangaribuan, Haddina & Manik (2018) on 40 senior high school students from Pematang Siantar, Indonesia, the study shows that the students made conjunctional errors such as „since", „in case", „as" and „because" in constructing complex sentences. The subordinate conjunction „as" was the most noticeable error made in writing complex sentences by the students.

2.3 The Interference of the Mother Tongue in the Learning of English

The interference of the mother tongue also known as language transfer occurs when a second language learner relies on the first language knowledge to learn a second language. Some languages share similar mechanics resulting in positive language transfer while some languages have their differences. Due to the differences in language mechanics, there is an existence of negative transfer which will cause ESL learners to commit errors when they attempt to either speak or write sentences in the second language.(Arsad N.A, Munchen, L. ,& Razali, F 2021) Over the years, many SLA researchers claimed that the interference of the mother tongue mainly caused ESL learners to make errors as both the first language and the targeted second language have their own unique language mechanisms. This can be supported by the study conducted by Jabeen, Kazemian & Shahbaz Mustafai (2015), ESL students lack grammatical accuracy in English writings because they are greatly influenced by their first language rules. According to

Shukur (2014), subject-verb agreement errors made by the 30 ESL learners in the research were caused by their mother tongue interference and intralingual factors. Furthermore, the frequency of negative language transfer occurs higher in low level language learners as they rely on their native language in terms of certain language rules and structures. They tend to over-generalise the target language rules during sentence constructions (Febriyanti & Sundari, 2016). The differences in syntactics between two languages have been shown to be one of the main causes for ESL learners to acquire the English language. An analysis of 300 ESL learners from a rural secondary school in Kulai, Johor, revealed that common errors are affected by the syntactical intra-lingual interference from the mother tongue (Abu Bakar, Abdul Hamid, Mat Awal & Jalaluddin, 2007). ESL learners also make persistent errors because of the incomplete formation of the linguistic rules and transfer from the first language (Sudhakaran, 2015). According to the study conducted by Tati, Gedion & Yong (2015), it is revealed that the first language has caused the errors of word orders, sentence constructions and the use of English present continuous tenses and subject verb agreements. According to Guo, Liu & Chen (2014), their findings reveal that the Chinese students' mother tongue contributed to the negative transfer in learning the English language. Apart from that, the differences of thinking modes of the English and the Chinese led the learners to have non-standard, pidgin-like, Chinglish expressions as well as other grammatical errors. Wang & Wang (2015) conducted research on two groups of students to write the ending of a story in English. One group was given a Chinese version of the story while the other was given in English. The study revealed that the students made fewer errors in the English version as they extracted and used more lexical items from the original story. On the other hand, the Chinese version induced more L1 transfer errors as the task had activated the students' L1 contextual knowledge which had caused the occurrence of self-alignment.

2.4   ESL Learners Lack of Knowledge of English Grammar

In order to reduce negative language transfer while acquiring the second language, it is imperative for ESL learners to have high understanding of the English grammar rules in terms of how to use them correctly. This is also referred as being knowledgeable in metalinguistics as this plays an important role in mediating and guiding learners to understand the grammar concepts of the second language extensively. In addition, metalinguistic knowledge serves as a tool in problem solving and helps learners to make effective reasoning to explore form-meaning relationships of the second language's concepts (Harun, Abdullah & Zainuddin, 2017). However, SLA researchers discovered that the lack of grammar knowledge of the second language causes ESL learners to continuously make errors. (Srichanyachon, N., 2012). According to Asni, Susanti & Sulistiyo (2018), the data obtained from their study indicates that most of the learners made grammar errors in their English written test due to the lack of the understanding of the grammar rules in terms of past tense materials. They also memorised the formula of past tense wrongly. Furthermore, they found it challenging to differentiate between regular verbs and irregular verbs. This can be supported by Jabeen, Kazemian & Shahbaz Mustafai (2015) as well. The analysis of their data also suggests that students are unsure of their grammar accuracy in their writing and they are also uncertain of how to apply grammatical rules correctly in their English writing.

2.5   Theoretical Framework

These theories that underpin this study are based on Piaget's (1936) cognitive psychology, on the theory of Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky (1978) and Krashen's (1981) hypotheses of second language acquisition. According to Piaget's theory of developmental change through schemas, when a person is exposed to new knowledge, assimilation occurs as new information is being added to the existing cognitive structure. (McLeod, S. 2018). Subsequently, the brain accommodates the existing schemata to comprehend the newly received information. In simple terms, the person uses his or her prior knowledge and experience to adapt and solve a similar problem. When this happens, equilibrium is achieved by organising and adapting to the schemata. The next theory is the Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD. ZPD refers

to the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In simple terms, ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do without assistance and what the individual can do with guidance and reinforcement from a skilled person. The skilled person such as the teacher or the more experienced friend will be responsible for scaffolding for the learner. Krashen's theory indicates that input must be meaningful for learners in a low anxiety situation in order for optimum second language learning to occur. This is because when a person perceives his learning to be meaningless, stressful and combined with low self-confidence and motivation, the affective filter will arise. As a result, the affective filter causes learners to repel input. Second language writing is a cognitively strenuous work of constructing meaningful texts in the second language (Singh, Abd Razak & Ravinthar, 2017). It requires the combination of social-cognitive and cognitive exertion to be able to pen grammatically correct sentences in the second language. Thus, teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge of error analysis on common grammar errors made by ESL learners in order to provide them with guidelines to be aware of the common errors and how to avoid making or repeating them. Teachers also need to encourage diverse learning strategies among their ESL learners to help mitigate or improve their grammar skills. (Halim, N., Mohd Arif, M., & Supramaniam, K. 2020). When their grammar skills have made a significant improvement, they would be able to make progression in their language proficiency as they develop their writing skill. (Xie, J., & Huijser, H. 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

As the study aimed to determine the extent to which the participants' mother tongue Mandarin influenced the errors made in their ESL writing, both an analysis of their writing performance as well as their in-depth responses were needed. To best suit the purpose of the study, the researchers had to employ a qualitative research method. (Creswell, 2003, Mason, 2002, Merriam, 2009, Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2011) Responses from interviews and analysis of the errors made in their writing tasks were used to gather the data that was needed.

3.2 Participants

The sample participants were selected in accordance to the convenience of access to the researcher. The participants in this research consist of 15 Malaysian Chinese Primary 6 students studying in a tuition centre in Puchong, Selangor. The participants were all from a local Chinese school. They are between the ages of 11 to 12. The participants have been formally taught the English language since they were in Primary 1. Hence, they currently have 5 to 6 years of exposure and formal training in the English language. They were taught comprehension skills, writing skills and grammar rules based on the KSSR syllabus that prepares them to sit for the UPSR examination at the end of Year 6. The English proficiency of the 15 chosen participants was at above average level. They were selected based on their school's mid-year English examination results. All of them had a score of between 60 to 80 marks in their English composition paper.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for the study were obtained from two writing tasks and through interviews.

Interviews: The data on the perceptions of the interviewees were obtained via face-to-face interviews. Questions about their perceptions on grammar strengths, weaknesses, grammar awareness, writing mistakes and importance of teacher's feedback were asked in the interview session.

Writing Tasks

Task 1: The students were each given a narrative passage in Mandarin. They were tasked to rewrite the same narrative passage in English. The passage had to be written in past tense. They were given 20 minutes to complete this task.

Task 2: A note-expansion writing task was chosen in this study. The note-expansion had to do with the writing of someone's biography and it had to be written in present tense. The task consisted of three short paragraphs with key words given in each paragraph to guide them in their writing. 20 minutes were allocated for this task.

Both writing tasks were graded and analysed for the errors. The errors made by the participants were categorised into the respective grammar types. Next, Contrastive Analysis (CA) or Error Analysis (EA) was applied to study the interference of L1 in the ESL writing. The language mechanism in terms of sentence structure rules and grammatical rules of the mother tongue, Mandarin and the English language were both analysed to determine their similarities and differences in order to understand the reason why ESL learners would commit such errors in their writings.

3.4   Data Analysis

The writing tasks collected were typed using computer software to ensure readability. The data obtained from the writing tasks were identified by using the Markin 3.1 software (Holmes., 1996 -2004). The mentioned software was selected to analyse the data as it helps researchers to get precise categorisations and statistical analysis of errors. The data was tabulated in a descriptive manner in a table form. The data analysis of grammar errors was separated into categories in terms of the types of errors and its frequency. As for the analysis of the interference of the L1, each line of the collected passages was analysed to determine the errors made by L1 interference to categorise the errors.

4.   Results and Discussion

4.1   Perceptions of the Participants on their English Grammar Proficiency

The data obtained from the interviews conducted with three participants were coded and the themes were formed. The participants reflected that they were quite competent in the English language since they had been studying the English language in a formal classroom for six years. Each participant claimed to be good in certain grammar topics. Furthermore, all of them claimed to be able to identify the difference between present and past tenses quite well except for just one participant who admitted having trouble in determining past tense sentences.

4.1.1   Preposition Errors as a Result of the Differences in Language Mechanism between the Mandarin and the English Language

All the participants of the interview acknowledged that they could use independent prepositions well as these prepositions are direct and unfixed. All the participants revealed that they find it difficult to use dependent prepositions correctly. The dependent prepositions of time 'in', 'on' and 'at' should be memorised as their usage is bounded as a grammatical rule and there is no logical explanations as to why they are used in a such a way. Unlike independent prepositions, these prepositions can be used freely to describe spatial or temporal relations as well as to mark many types of semantic roles. The participants also realised that the errors made in using Preposition in the English language are caused by the interference of their mother tongue. In the Mandarin language, some prepositions are not used to link verbs with nouns.

For instance:

Table 1.1

English	I am listening to music
Mandarin	我正在听音乐 *(I am listening to music)*

With reference to the example given in Table 1.1, the preposition 'to' is not used in the Mandarin language to link 'listening' and 'music' together in a sentence. Thus, this caused errors of prepositional omission in constructing English sentences.

Participant B revealed that he makes a lot of prepositional mistakes as these mistakes are caused by the mother tongue. The participant also realises the types of common prepositional errors that are usually committed.

> 'I always make mistakes like not sure when to use 'on' and 'at or in' and 'under'
> (L204, Participant B, 3rd July 2019).

4.1.2 English Collocation Errors

The Mandarin language has its own set of collocation rules. One of the participants felt that errors of English collocations are caused by the mother tongue. The arrangement of Noun + Noun collocations between the Mandarin and the English language are at the complete opposite. For example: Mandarin English 咖喱鸡 (Curry chicken) Chicken curry. Two nouns are combined with the wrong arrangement. The participant also reveals that this error was committed due to the result of direct translation from the Mandarin language.

4.1.3 Fewer Occurrences of Grammar Errors in Multiple Choice Questions Compared to English Sentence Construction.

According to the interviewees, they manage to answer grammar questions effectively with high accuracy if the grammar questions are given to them in multiple-choice. This is because the questions are prominent in testing learner's knowledge and the directness of the grammar questions stimulates learners' grammatical awareness. Thus, this causes them to be alert in terms of identifying correct grammar usages. On the other hand, writing grammatically correct English sentences poses a challenge for ESL learners. This is because while constructing sentences, ESL learners need to focus on generating sentence structures with the correct word arrangements as well as choosing the right choice of words to form correct English sentences. As a result of the many factors involved in writing, the grammar awareness in terms of grammatical accuracy is greatly reduced. This will cause ESL learners to make English sentences with the correct sentence structures, but they often contain grammar errors. The participants admit that they make unconscious grammar errors while constructing sentences. They reveal that the errors that they usually make are incorrect dependent prepositional usage and forgetting to apply plural noun rules in writing. Participant C reveals that sometimes she makes mistakes in writing plural nouns in English sentence construction. She tends to 'forget to add s'. Moreover, she could not provide a reason for the forgetfulness when she was prompted for the cause. Nevertheless, the participants claim that not all types of sentences that they construct will contain grammar errors. They are able to construct grammar error free sentences in writing short, simple sentences as opposed to writing longer, compound and complex sentences as these sentences involve many grammar elements with their own sets of complicating rules.

4.1.4 Selective Grammar Accuracy Awareness Causes the Lack of Practice in Grammar Awareness in Writing

According to the data obtained from the interviews, the participants are found to be extrinsically motivated by their academic achievements. They will only check for grammar accuracy in writing sentences depending on the situation. They claim to pay high attention to their grammar accuracy in examinations as they are highly driven to get high marks for their English language examination results. This is because a lot of marks will be deducted if they make grammar errors in constructing English sentences in the KSSR examinations. As for homework, two out of three of the participants admit that they pay no attention to grammar accuracy in doing their homework as it does not affect their grades. Their perception of homework is to just get the task done and hand in without bothering about the accuracy of their answers. In terms of informal contexts such as sending text messages, chatting online and posting on social media sites. The participants concentrate more on getting their intended messages across accurately to their receivers. One of the participants states that 'They will understand.' although the messages sent contains grammar errors. All three participants reveal that they do not care whether their sentences are free of grammar error as they claim that their receivers will be able to comprehend what they are trying to tell them. Due to the participants focusing on grammar accuracy only during exams, this factor has caused them to lack conscious practice of grammar awareness in writing English sentences. Writing grammatically correct sentences require writers to be highly aware of their grammar accuracy in their writing and this skill should be practiced consistently in order to develop the awareness of grammar accuracy in the construction of English sentences.

4.1.5 The Reliance on the Mother Tongue to Solve Problems Prior to Translation

Problem solving falls under the category of Higher Order Thinking Skills, HOTS. In accordance to Bloom's Taxonomy, the higher order thinking skills range from Application skills, Analysis Skills, Evaluation Skills and Creation Skills. The difficulty of the thinking skills gets higher in accordance to the position of the skills in the Bloom's Taxonomy Pyramid. Due to the high demands of cognitive requirements, it is mentally challenging for an individual to think critically. Thus, ESL learners sometimes tend to solve problems by using their mother tongue which they are comfortable with in order to find the solutions internally before focusing on translating the solutions into the English language. Participant A reveals that 'I translate it to English after I have found the answer in Mandarin.' This method was also used by all the interviewees of the research. They do this unconsciously to try to figure out the solutions to the questions that require them to think critically especially during an examination. The participants also claim that they would check for grammatical errors in their constructed sentences and correct them to reduce any unwanted errors in examinations.

4.1.6 Perception of the Participants towards the Relationship between Writing Genres and Grammar Errors

According to the interviews, two out of three participants prefer to write informative writing as they claim that they will make fewer mistakes in grammar. This is based on the assumption that the tenses in informative writing are mostly fixed, unlike narrative writing. Narrative writing such as composing a story requires high knowledge of accurate use of tenses as stories can be written using a combination of Present and Past tenses depending on the situation in the story. Thus, only one of the interviewees prefers narrative writing as the participant claimed that he could write whatever he liked based on his own ideas and creativity and no one would bother unlike informative writing which was mostly factual writing and this required the information in the composition to be accurate. The participants who preferred narrative writing added, "Because, I can just think whatever and write whatever I want. Nobody cares ".

4.1.7   The Importance of Feedback to Future Grammar Errors

Feedback regarding grammatical errors made in the construction of English sentences and ways to avoid them are valued by the participants. They find feedback given by their English teachers to be useful as they would like to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the near future. The participants reveal that they record the feedback and techniques taught by their teachers in their notebooks. Mistakes are valuable for learning to take place. When a mistake is committed, learners should make amendments to rectify the mistakes. This causes progression in learning as future similar mistakes can be avoided. According to Mansourizadeh & Abdullah (2014), students who receive meta-linguistic feedback showed the highest percentage of accuracy improvement and they out-performed the group of students without the intervention. Other than that, regardless of which methods are used, it is imperative for teachers to give clear feedback by showing students examples of how they can use them to make improvement in their writing (Srichanyachon, 2012). In commenting on the usefulness of feedback, one of the participants said, 'I can discuss it with my friend to correct my mistakes and the others.'

4.2   Analysis of Errors Made in Writing

Data from Task 1 and 2 were analysed and the writing tasks of ten 10 participants were selected for in-depth analysis as their data showed prominent common errors made by many ESL learners. The other five participants' works were not chosen as there was not much error found. These participants were found to have developed a higher level of English proficiency and competency and regularly used the English language at home. However, the English language was still considered their second language and so they were still able to be participants as second language learners in this study. The data obtained from the ten selected participants' work has produced results of the common errors made by the participants as a result of direct translation and influence from their mother tongue, the Mandarin language. The English language uses the alphabetic system while the Mandarin language uses logographic writing system. Due to that, there are differences in their language mechanism in terms of the function of grammar rules and the syntactic structural rules. Therefore, it is quite common for the existence of common errors in writing made by ESL learners. The common errors made by the participants are as follows.

4.2.1   Errors of Tenses

One of the most prominent errors made in the writing tasks is the wrong use of tenses. Present and past tenses are used at the same time in the writing of the same paragraph without abiding by grammar rules. This reveals that the participants are not aware of the rules in using tenses in their writing. They focus highly on trying to construct understandable sentences with their intended meaning but fail to be aware of the accuracy of grammar. The following example is adapted from one of the participants' writing tasks:

Little deer felt under the weather, the horn on his head change into white, he is very sad.

The above extract shows that the participants are not sure of whether to write the sentence in either present or past tense. This error is made due to the result of translation from the mother tongue. In the Mandarin language, present or past tense verbs do not exist. The participants need not think of using present or past tense verbs in constructing Mandarin sentences. However, in English, there are rules for using the right tenses. Present tense is found to have the highest count of errors compared to past tense. They have their own sets of rules. In past tense, the suffix either „d" or „ed" has to be added to regular verbs while irregular verbs have some slight changes in the spelling in order for the verbs to be regarded as past tense verbs. On the other hand, the rules of using present tense verbs are more complex as the verbs may be required to add the suffix either „s", „es" or „ies" according to the nouns that appear before the verbs. Refer to the following extract from one of the participants' tasks.
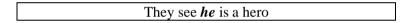
> *At the weekend, Dr Avelyn also go to the orphanage and treat the orphan. He also give free medical services for the children.*

The verbs from the extraction should be changed to „goes", „treats" and „gives" in accordance to the rules of present tense. The participant was not aware of applying this rule while constructing the above sentence.

4.2.2   Errors of Object Pronouns

In the matter of English personal pronouns, they are divided into two branches called subject pronouns and object pronouns. They have different rules of application in a sentence. Chinese ESL learners tend to make this error especially in the case of object pronouns. This is because in the Mandarin language, there are only subject pronouns and there are only a few of them unlike many European languages that have inflections on pronouns to indicate whether they are the subject or object of a sentence. Thus, subject pronouns are more frequently used by ESL learners in constructing English sentences, instead of object pronouns. The following extraction shows the error in use of pronouns by one of the participants.

Based on the extract, the object pronoun „him" should be used instead. This is because the participant relies on the Mandarin language to construct this sentence. In the Mandarin language, the word „他 (he) is used regardless of it being a subject pronoun or an object pronoun.

They see *he* is a hero

Other than that, the effect of plural nouns will affect the correct choice of object pronouns in a sentence. The extraction below shows the wrong usage of object pronoun that is affected by the plural noun.

> *One day, a bird found some dry grass and branches and put it above his head.*

The object pronoun „them" should be used to indicate the plural nouns „dry grass and branches" instead of using 'it'.

4.2.3   Errors of Plural Nouns

In the Mandarin language, the plural form of nouns stays the same as singular nouns. Meaning that, the noun stays the same. However, in the English language, plural nouns can be categorised into three types. The suffix 's, 'es' or 'ies' will be added to the nouns to indicate them to be plural nouns. Due to the complexity of the grammar mechanisms in English, Chinese students tend to make mistakes in plural nouns. They tend to be unaware of the need to add the suffixes to the nouns to change them into plural form. This is because the nouns in the Mandarin language stay the same whether they are singular or plural. In Mandarin, either plural markers, collective nouns or numerals are placed beside the nouns to indicate the quantity of the nouns. As a result, plural suffixes are often omitted by Chinese students in constructing English sentences.

The following extractions show the omission of plural suffixes.

After that, the bird found some *flower* and put it on Xiao Lu's head.
At the end, they became best *friend*.
The little deer went out when it's sunny so the bird's *feather* dry fast.

The above nouns in the sentences are in plural form. Thus, the suffix 's' must be attached to the nouns to show that they are more than a single unit. Another difficult part of English plural nouns is that the original lexicon of the singular noun is changed to become a plural noun. The following sentence is extracted from one of the participants of the study.

After that, the bird *founds* some flower and put it on Xiao Lu's head.
At the end, they *becames* best friends.
The little deer *wents* out when it's sunny so the bird's *feather* dry fast.

Referring to the above example, Chinese students tend to make this mistake. They tend to assume that by attaching plural suffixes such as 's' after a verb, the singular noun will be changed to become a correct plural noun. However, this is not always the case. In terms of irregular plural nouns, the plural suffixes cannot be attached to singular nouns to change them to become plural nouns. The original lexicon or form of the nouns will either change or remain unchanged. These irregular plural nouns require English users to memorise them instead of relying on the attachment of suffixes formulae. As a result, ESL learners who depend heavily on the mother tongue to construct English sentences will face challenges in using correct plural nouns.

4.2.4   Errors of Preposition Usage

The analysis of the two writing tasks reveals three types of prepositional errors made by the participants. These errors are also influenced by the Mandarin language.

      i)   Incorrect Choice of Prepositions: Refer to the following extractions.

Every weekend, he goes to an orphanage to give free medical services *for* the orphans
They see Dr.Avelyn *is* a hero.
Her job is treat and take care *about* the sick children.

The above are dependent prepositions which are challenging for ESL learners to master. Prepositions especially *'to*, *'for'* and '*of*' are difficult for non-native learners. Each dependent preposition has its own rules to link nouns, pronouns, phrases, etc within a sentence. The choice of prepositions will alter the entire meaning of the sentence. For instance:

Table 1.3

1.   Can you send this letter *to* David?
2.   Can you send this letter *for* David?

Referring to (Table 1.3), the first sentence indicates that David is the intended recipient of the letter while the second sentence shows that David may be the original sender of the letter. Hence, prepositions must be selected carefully to avoid changing the intended meaning of the sentence or message.

      ii)   Improper Addition of Preposition

ESL students with Mandarin as a first language may unintentionally add in unnecessary prepositions into a sentence. The following extractions are taken from the participants.

He have more than 40 patients *on* a week

> They fly towards them and build a nest ***at*** there

The above sentences show the unnecessary addition of prepositions into the sentences. This is because the participants assume that it is a must to put prepositions in front of elements of time such as days, weeks, years, etc. Most English sentences require prepositions to be placed but some sentences do not need that such as the above extracted sentences. Another reason for the unnecessary addition of preposition is, it is habitual for Chinese students to place prepositions in front of adverbs of place especially before the adverb "there". This is also caused by the influence of the Mandarin language. ESL learners who rely heavily on the mother tongue will tend to make this kind of mistake.

iii)   Omission of Preposition

The problem of omitting prepositions in sentences was also found in all the ten participants' writing tasks. This could most possibly have been caused by direct translation from the first language as well. The difference between English and Mandarin is that while some verbs in English need to be followed by prepositions there is no need for this in the Mandarin language form. Refer to the following extracts from the participants' tasks.

His job is ('to' omitted) treat and care ('of' omitted) the sick children.   他的工作是治療和照顧生病的孩子   *(His job is treat and take care the sick children)*
After that, the bird also went to find some flowers ('to' omitted) put on the deer's head   之後，小鳥還發現鹿頭上放了一些花   *(After that, the bird also found some flowers put on the deer's head)*

4.2.5   Incorrect Choice of Auxiliary Verbs

Many European languages especially English rely heavily on auxiliary verbs to be used as helping verbs to form tenses, moods as well as the voices of other verbs. On the other hand, the Mandarin language has limited auxiliary verbs compared to English which is broad and each of them has its own functions in accordance to English grammatical rules. Thus, ESL learners often get confused and would use the wrong auxiliary verbs in writing English sentences. The following extracts are taken from the participants" writing tasks.

1.	He ***was*** a paediatrician at a local hospital. *(The sentence should have been written in present tense)*
2.	Children ***was*** happy while they ***were*** see the Dr.Avelyn.
3.	So, the bird ***did*** not afraid raining.

Referring to sentence 1, if semantics alone is being looked upon, then it is correct. But if pragmatics is taken into account such as the context, then the auxiliary verb should be written in present tense, the auxiliary verb 'is' should be used instead of 'was'. This shows that the participant is unaware of either using present or past tense based on auxiliary verbs. In sentence 2, the participant made the mistake of using plural based auxiliary verbs. 'were' should be used instead of 'was' due to the noun 'children' being   plural. Other than that, the participant has added in an unnecessary auxiliary verb 'were'. Referring to sentence 3, the auxiliary verb 'was" should have been used instead of 'did'. This is because auxiliary verbs like 'am', 'is', 'are', 'was' and 'were' are suitable to be added to words that indicate feelings such as 'afraid', 'happy', 'excited, etc. All these errors are caused by the non-existence of such broad and complex auxiliary

verbs in the Mandarin language. Hence, the participants require more practice in the usage of these types of auxiliary verbs in their writing in order for them to be internalised as a general grammatical rule.

4.2.6   Omission of Articles in English Sentences

The English language relies heavily on articles to describe nouns that they precede. The system of articles in the English language is very complex and often idiosyncratic, making them particularly difficult for non-native English users to master. In the Mandarin language, there are no real articles like the English language where articles are divided into definite articles 'the"' and indefinite articles 'a'and 'an'. In most Mandarin sentences, articles are often unused unlike in English sentences. This factor causes Chinese students to often omit articles in their English writing. Refer to the following sentences in extracts adapted from the participants" writing tasks.

1.	She is *('a' omitted)* very friendly and loving doctor.
2.	He is a paediatrician at *('a' omitted)* local hospital.
3.	Dr. Avelyn will visit *('the' omitted)* orphanage.
4.	His job is to treat and care the sick children at *('the' omitted)* Paediatric Department

The omission of the indefinite article in sentence 1 was found to occur in 8 out of 10 participants' work. Furthermore, they also omitted the article 'a' while indicating a place as shown in sentence 2.

5.   Discussion

Two parts of the research have been conducted in this study. The first part obtained data through interviews while the second part analysed common errors from two writing tasks. The interview data revealed that participants possessed some degree of perception of their own language proficiency including their strengths and weaknesses in mastering English grammar. Most of the participants felt that they were quite competent in the English language although they admitted to having weaknesses in grasping certain grammar concepts especially dependent prepositions where they needed to rely on their memory to be able to use them correctly. Next, all participants claimed that they were able to answer grammar questions well if they are given Multiple Choice Questions, MCQ. This ties in with McLeod's (2018) assertion based on Piaget's theory (1934) on the brain's ability to accommodate existing schemata to comprehend the newly received information. The participants had used their prior knowledge to answer the MCQ questions by using the process of elimination and adapting. However, on the other hand, the participants admitted that they could not apply grammar concepts effectively when writing English sentences. This was confirmed in the second part of the research where further information regarding common mistakes made by the participants was found. The most prominent errors in grammar centred around articles and prepositions. These two types of grammatical errors could be seen throughout the participants' writing worksheets. In terms of articles, the participants tended to omit them as they are used less frequently in the Mandarin language. Prepositions especially 'to', 'for' and 'of' were often used wrongly as they were seldom used in the Mandarin language. In addition, the participants had obvious difficulty using dependent prepositions and they themselves admitted that they were aware of this issue. This also is reflective of the previous study by Kazemian & Shahbaz Mustafai (2015) which highlighted students' own lack of certainty of grammar accuracy in their writing The other prominent error made by the participants was in the area of tenses. Based on the results of their writing tasks, more than half of the participants wrote the passages incorrectly in a combination of both present and past tense. Other than that, plural nouns seem to be a challenge for them. This is because the nouns in the Mandarin language remain the same either in singular or plural form. Errors in using object pronouns are detected in the writing tasks because Chinese ESL learners tend to replace them with subject pronouns. This strongly points to the participants being influenced by the Mandarin language as there is no object pronouns in that language. Over the years, many other SLA researchers claimed that the interference of the mother tongue mainly caused ESL learners

to make errors as both the first language and the targeted second language have their own unique language mechanisms. This can be supported by the study conducted by Jabeen, Kazemian & Shahbaz Mustafai (2015), ESL students. Next, the participants also used incorrect auxiliary verbs in determining whether the sentence was in the form of past or present tense or whether the subject was in singular or plural form. Thus, auxiliary verbs 'am', 'is', 'are', 'was' and 'were' are very challenging for Chinese ESL learners. Last but not least, improper use of punctuation such as commas and the omission of apostrophes are found in the writing tasks as well. In a nutshell, the common errors found in the writing tasks are mainly caused by the influence of the mother tongue of the participants. This again concurs with the findings of the existence of negative transfer from previous researchers including Arsad N.A, Munchen, L. ,& Razali, F (2021). There are two causes for the errors committed. The first one is caused by direct translation without carrying out Contrastive Analysis to rectify the mistakes made right after the translation. The next cause would be the lack of English grammar knowledge. This causes the participants to fall back on sentence structures in their mother tongue, when constructing sentences in English. As both languages possess their individual and distinct sets of language mechanisms, the heavy reliance on the rules of Mandarin grammar to construct English sentences results in many errors being made.

6.   Conclusion

The language mechanisms of the English and Mandarin language are different. Each has its own distinct grammar rules, sentence structures and unique ways of expressing meanings. The findings regarding common errors and the reasons behind them can be a valuable source of information for ESL teachers especially when their students' first language is Mandarin. Teachers need this knowledge to be able to guide them to devise effective teaching plans to help their students to avoid these common errors made by Chinese ESL students and how to tackle the problem. Thus, the findings of this study can also be used in teaching Contrastive Analysis skill to ESL students and this skill is recommended to be practised consistently until it becomes autonomous for students when they attempt to construct English sentences with a reduction of errors in the near future. To do this, ESL teachers must first be highly proficient in both the English language and the students' mother language in order to be able to apply Contrastive Analysis effectively in the lessons to achieve optimum learning results

7   Recommendation for Future Research

This result of this study prompts further research in the following areas. The sample size of the participants for this research may be increased in order to obtain data that is more accurate and that can be generalised to an extent. Thus, the number of participants in the study may be seen as a limitation. This study has conducted interviews which focused on student perceptions towards their strengths and weaknesses in mastering English grammar. Thus, in future research, studies should also be conducted on ESL teachers to determine their awareness towards their students' difficulties in learning English grammar. The next area of research interest is to conduct studies on different age ranges to determine the similarities and differences of English grammar errors made by each particular age range. The results obtained from each age range can help ESL educators to focus on helping their students to be aware and to avoid making the errors. The definite influence of the mother tongue on the errors made by ESL students in writing revealed in this study can be a major point of consideration for future curriculum developers and educators. Further research and comparative studies can also be conducted using ESL participants whose first language is not Mandarin. Data obtained from all these studies can be used to compare the similarities and differences of common errors made among ESL learners from a broader spectrum to provide valuable information for the ESL academic world.

8.   Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the field work, prepared the literature review, wrote the research methodology and overlooked the writeup of the whole article. Authors 2 and 3, carried out the analysis, interpreted the findings and presented the recommendations.

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