COMPARING ERROR FREQUENCIES IN FIRST YEAR ESL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

There has been a considerable amount of research on the role of errors in ESL students' writing development. Recent studies generally investigated students' improvement in writing after a relatively short duration of exposure to an English course. The purpose of the current study is to analyse the error frequencies in written discourse made by one group of diploma level students at a Malaysian university throughout their first year of studies. Two writing samples were obtained from each student based on the writing assessments during their first two semesters of English core courses. The samples were keyed in into a corpus database and an analysis of error frequencies was conducted on each sample. By comparing errors made by the same students throughout their first year of study, this error frequency provides one important way to determine if there are any changes occurred in their written discourse during the chosen period of time. Results reported in this study revealed no significant changes in errors made by the same students in their subsequent written discourse. Findings are discussed in relation to the students' *L2 proficiency development and the nature of their English learning experience.*

Keywords: *ESL students, writing development, error frequency, first year*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kim and Crossley (2018) indicated that both language production and task type are important in investigating L2 writing quality. Universities expect their students to develop an excellent level of language skills, particularly in written communication, throughout their studies (Knoch, Rouhshad, Su, & Storch, 2015). Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) also expects its students not only to gain a degree, but to concurrently attain a higher proficiency in their English, especially in communication skills upon graduating. Knoch et.al. (2015) singled out the students' written communication as the main attribute students are expected to develop excellently throughout their study years in the university. As such, students' progress and achievement can be measured from their formative writing assessment and evaluation (Bromley, 2007). At the same time, according to Staples and Reppen (2016), it is also vital to address the needs of our students who are L2 writers. By identifying the needs of L2 learners, their language production skills, such as writing quality, can be further developed. To achieve that, a study on the role of errors in developing L2 writers will be quite impactful (Doolan & Miller, 2011) and helpful for the lecturers and their students as well as other stakeholders.

1.1 Problem Statement

Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) stated that L2 student essays may have numerous grammatical and lexical inaccuracies when assessed using standard academic rubrics. Even after numerous studies done on error analysis and many proposed frameworks, we still encounter the same developmental problems or lack of developmental issues in L2 students' written discourse. Results in existing studies are mixed in response to writing development as some studies reported little improvement or development while others reported no significant improvement at all. Studies which examined writing development within a short amount of period suggested learners' writing does not necessarily improve throughout their university years (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Humphreys, Haugh, Fenton-Smith, Lobo, Michael & Walkinshaw, 2012; Knoch et.al., 2015; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Staples & Reppen, 2016; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Tsang & Wong, 2000). Some studies noted some minor improvement in terms of overall band scores, word count fluency, accurate word use and sentence structure complexity (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Humphreys et.al., 2012; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Tsang & Wong, 2000). It was shown that most frequent types of errors, especially grammatical errors, persist at a high rate following a short period of instruction (Felix & Lawson, 1994; Storch & Tapper, 2009).

1.2 Objective of the Study

The present study sets out to investigate ESL students' written discourse development via comparative error analysis following their first year of studies in Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang (UiTMCPP). Specifically, the present study intended to achieve the following objective:

1) To identify any grammatical development or improvement made by selected students in their written discourse at the end of their first year.

1.3 Research Question of the Study

The present research was performed with the aim to seek the answer to the following research question:

1) Does the students' written discourse improve in relation to grammatical development following one year of studying English courses in UiTMCPP?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study will help to provide a clearer picture on L2 students writing development during their early university years. However, the study only focussed on first year students and offered results based on a limited number of papers analysed. Hence, it is not representative of their development throughout their full university years. Nevertheless, this study will pave way to more extensive and longitudinal studies to be done on error patterns in relation to L2 students' writing development.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Writing development as a result of instruction

Over the past decade there have been an increasing amount of researches on second language writing development (Knoch et.al., 2015). However, the measurements used in writing development differ greatly from each other. Some employed band descriptors while others opted for discourse analysis. Studies such as Storch and Tapper (2009) used a series of measures to evaluate developments in second language writing discourse at the university level. Storch and Tapper (2009), using discourse measures, concluded that there were mixed outcomes in students' development following 10 to 14 weeks of instruction with improvements in accuracy and lexical complexity but found no change in fluency and syntactic complexity. This contradicted Tsang and Wong's (2000) study which showed a substantial increase in similar discourse measures following 14 weeks of instruction. Felix and Lawson (1994) found that grammatical errors persisted following four weeks of instruction and this was supported by Storch and Tapper (2009) in which their study suggested most frequent types of errors persist following 10 weeks of instruction.

2.2 L2 written error patterns and performance

Kim and Crossley (2018) studied on the lexical, syntactic and cohesive features produced in the writing task to see the relationship between language use, task type and L2 writing quality. They summarised that writing quality, in assessment contexts, generally aligns with the fit of test-takers' essays to their assessment context, which is usually reflected by scoring rubrics (Kim & Crossley, 2018), hence, L2 writers' grammatical and textual knowledge are unlikely to change when sequentially completing different writing tasks. Students are likely to make the same grammatical mistakes even after several weeks of instructions. Doolan and Miller (2011) pointed that error-making has played a significant role in attempts to gauge L2 writing proficiency and effects of writing instruction.

2.3 L2 writing development after less than one year

The bulk of research on second language writing development has focused on development following one semester of study in the L2 medium university (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Humphreys et.al., 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Tsang & Wang, 2000) and their results suggested some improvement. Staples and Reppen (2016), in their study on investigating the language used (vocabulary and grammar) by students in their first year of writing, suggested these students are developing the skills needed to package information effectively and concisely. A small-scale study by Tsang and Wong (2000) reported that fluency of the L2 students increased significantly following 14 weeks of language instruction. On the contrary, Storch and Tapper (2009) showed that L2 students did not increase significantly in their fluency following 10 weeks of language instruction. Similar mixed findings are evident about accuracy and lexical complexity. Knoch et.al. (2015) found no improvement in composition after one year of study, suggesting little improvement over time for L2 writing development with the exception of fluency.

In a study of list of errors made by ESL university students in California, Ferris (2006) listed sentence structure as the error most frequently made by students. This was followed by word choice, verb tense, noun endings, verb forms, punctuation, articles/determiners, word form, spelling and pronouns (in order of highest to lowest frequency). Subject-verb agreement errors were listed as the least frequent error made by students.

Doolan and Miller's (2011) study on generation 1.5 written error patterns listed verb error as most frequently made by students. This was followed by wrong word choice, prepositional phrase, spelling, word form, and determiner (in order of highest to lowest frequency). Again, subject-verb agreement errors were also listed as the least frequent error made by students in the study.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The present study employed a mixed research design utilising the essays written by first-year students during their first and second semester of English course.

3.2 Participants/Respondents

A class of 14 Electrical Engineering diploma students aged between 18-19 years old from UiTMCPP participated in the research as the respondents who contributed to the data of the study. The respondents were the students who were completing their first year of diploma program at the university during the period of the implementation of this study. Their demographic details such as their gender, age or fields of studies were not the variables investigated or measured in the study, thus such data was not utilized for the discussion of the research question posed. L2 writing quality was generalisable across gender and learning contexts (Kim & Crossley, 2018) and task complexity had no effect on fluency, accuracy and syntactic complexity (Forough & Fazilatfar, 2016).

3.3 Materials and procedures

Data collection began during the 2017 interim semester (June to August 2017). As required in their academic plan, first semester students were required to take ELC121 Integrated Language Skills I during their interim semester. The duration of the course was 7 weeks (8 hours per week) and students were required to sit for two written essay tests based on short narratives as part of the course assessment. During their second semester on March to August 2018, students were required to take ELC151 Integrated Language Skills II. The duration of the course was 14 weeks (4 hours per week) and they were required to sit for another two written essay tests similar in nature as their first semester.

Students were given an open-ended question and a total of 60 minutes to write their answer in essay form. Each question required them to recall certain examples from the short narrative to support their point of view as well as to think about how to apply them in real life. This provides ample opportunities to test students' usage of tenses.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The first essay test during the students' first semester (named LIRA 1) on 22 June 2017 and the second essay test during the same students' second semester (named PRL 2) on 2 May 2018) were chosen for the purpose of this study. Both essays were collected, rated and coded manually by the researcher. Unlike similar past studies, the students' essay scores will not be analysed as the marking rubrics of the two courses are different. For the purpose of this study, the researcher will only look for errors made by the L2 writers in certain forms as given below:

1) Word choice
2) Verb tense
3) Noun endings
4) Verb form
5) Punctuation
6) Articles and Determiners
7) Word form
8) Spelling
9) Subject-verb agreement
10) Sentence structure

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students' fluency and frequencies of errors

Subject	LIRA 1 - Word count	LIRA 1 - Total error made	LIRA 1 - Word per error	PRL 2 - Word count	PRL 2 - Total error made	PRL 2 - Error per word
Female A	232 words	15	16 words	316 words	23	14 words
Female B	235 words	32	7 words	250 words	23	11 words
Female C	181 words	7	26 words	358 words	18	20 words
Male A	177 words	15	12 words	287 words	30	10 words
Male B	160 words	21	8 words	314 words	40	8 words
Male C	183 words	13	14 words	299 words	30	10 words
Male D	157 words	27	6 words	270 words	30	9 words
Male E	251 words	30	9 words	303 words	37	8 words
Male F	162 words	22	7 words	266 words	20	13 words
Male G	202 words	6	34 words	309 words	17	18 words
Male H	214 words	22	10 words	532 words	41	13 words
Male I	334 words	42	8 words	250 words	20	13 words
Male J	190 words	9	21 words	275 words	14	20 words
Male K	261 words	10	26 words	363 words	18	20 words

Table 1.1

The research question asked whether the students' written discourse improve in relation to grammatical development following one year of studying English courses in UiTMCPP. Referring to Table 1.1, all students with an exception of one student improved in terms of fluency (essay word count) given the same time limit to write each essay. The findings supported Tsang and Wong's (2000) and Knoch et.al.'s (2005) studies on positive fluency development by students after a short duration of study and contradicted Storch and Tapper's (2009) study.

However, almost all students committed more grammatical errors in their second essay test. In addition, the frequencies of error made by each student did not show drastic changes with the exception of Male G who made almost twice the error at the end of their second semester (first year). Overall analysis showed lack of improvement in each student's written discourse after one year of their studies. The findings followed many studies mentioned earlier that there is no significant change in students' written discourse development in relation to grammatical improvement. Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) supported the findings stating error-intensive feedback was demonstrably unsuccessful in helping reduce error frequency in subsequent student writing.

This study also found that majority of the errors made by the students were word choice and verb errors (tense and form). This is furthered supported by Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) who stated that L2 writers frequently struggle with a range of issues related to verbs. The findings also echoed Doolan and Miller's (2011) study on frequency of error patterns made by Generation 1.5 learners as well as among the top frequent errors made by university students in Ferris' (2006) study.

The findings also discovered many students tend to omit words (which counted as word form or other types of errors depending on the word missing) in their essays. This type of error pattern was not mentioned in any studies in relation to L2 learners. This could be a new separate variable to add into the list of errors made by L2 learners. As the L2 group included in the current study was rather small, future research would benefit from identifying and analysing the frequency and influence of this type of error in students' written discourse. The short duration in which the current study is based on can also paved way to longitudinal study of essays written by students throughout their university years as well as a more in-depth error analysis study on frequencies of error patterns made.

Despite the limitations, the current study advances our understanding of L2 learners' written discourse by identifying patterns made and grammatical development of students within a short duration of instruction.

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