

Grammatical Errors in ESL Writings: A Comparison of Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels in Muzaffarabad

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Abstract

This study examines the errors committed by ESL learners at two educational levels in district Muzaffarabad Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The main purpose of the study is to investigate different types of errors in English essays of ESL learners. It also aims at revealing the most and least frequent errors of these learners in their writing. It further intends to compare these errors at secondary and higher secondary levels to determine whether the grammatical errors increase, decrease or remain same at these two levels. For the collection and analysis of data, Gass and Selinker's (2008) Model for Error Analysis has been replicated. To find statistically significant differences among the learners of both levels, an independent t-test was used. The results reveal that ESL learners commit verb, tense/aspect, concord, word-order and infinitive errors in their writings. The frequencies of these errors vary at secondary and higher secondary levels. Significant differences have been found among secondary and higher secondary level learners in concord, tense/aspect and word order errors. On the other hand, no significant difference exists among the learners of these levels in verb and infinitive errors.

Keywords: Grammatical Errors, Error Analysis, Significant, Concord

1. Introduction

In the state of Azad Jammu & Kashmir, English is taught from Grade one to graduation as a compulsory subject. In spite of learning language for so many years, the learners do not gain proficiency in English. Faulty teaching methods, teacher centered classrooms and lack of infrastructural facilities along with many other factors are responsible for this poor performance of the learners (Shah, 2023). Most of the institutions practice the traditional Grammar Translation Method neglecting the communicative aspect of the language and creativity among learners. This sort of approach is detrimental

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and encourages cramming among learners as they learn English only to pass their examinations (Butt & Rasool, 2012; Fayyaz, 2017; Gillani, 2019).

Learners are usually hesitant in using English as it is something frightening for them. Errors are not tolerated at all and considered a sign of failure in our institutions. Despite all this, writing occupies a prime position in language learning among all language skills in our educational context (Sarfraz, 2011; Ishaq, 2018). Learners in AJK come across many problems and commit grammatical errors in their written productions. The situation is worse in Public sector institutions as these institutions lack teaching resources and other facilities which are available in private institutions.

2. Errors and Mistakes

The ultimate goal of language is communication through either writing or speech. Learners communicate via speech facilitating their communication by using intonation, gestures and body movements, etc. On the other hand, they have only one modality, language itself, for communication while using writing as a channel of communication. Due to this single modality, errors are seen as a common feature of writing in their language production of ESL learners.

According to Corder (1971), errors result from the failure of performance. In the similar way, Norrish (1983) considers an error a deviation from the norms and rules of a language. This deviation is the result of learner's incomplete comprehension of the target language rules. Thus an error is a deviation from correctness or accuracy. It occurs systematically since learners do not possess the knowledge of that particular rule. According to Vahdatinejad (2008), learners are not capable of correcting an error by themselves. Contrary to errors, mistakes are less serious and may result from lack of concentration, illness, exhaustion, drowsiness, carelessness, etc. Learners can self-correct their mistakes, but correcting the errors is beyond their ability of self-correction (Brown, 1980; Corder, 1974; James, 1998).

2.1 Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA), a dominant and influential theory, has supplanted Contrastive Analysis (CA) in second language acquisition (SLA) research (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). The focus of CA was to compare learners' first language (L1) and the target language (TL) with a view to finding out areas of difficulty. L1 and L2 differences were thought to be the main causes of learner's errors. CA focused on accounting for the learners' errors and enabling teachers to identify the difficulties. But, many of the errors anticipated to occur by a CA did not occur and some unpredicted errors did occur. As a result, EA gained popularity and became an important framework for researchers to carry out research in second language acquisition.

Corder (1967) points out two objects of error analysis: theoretical and applied. According to him, understanding what and how a learner learns a second language is the theoretical aspect of EA. On the other hand, enabling the learner to learn more efficiently for pedagogical purposes is the applied object of error analysis. Corder (1974), James (1998) and Ellis (2008) have proposed the five steps of error analysis. The first step involves the collection of a sample of learner's language which can be in spoken or written form. The identification of errors is the second step which is done by making a comparison between learner's production and what speakers of English would use in the same context. A deviation from the native speaker's norms on the learner's part depicts an error. The next step is the description of errors. In this step, the deviant uses are specified and categorized in terms of the violated TL categories. The explanation of the errors is the fourth step in the error analysis methodology. The source of each error is identified in this step by the researchers. Mother-tongue influence and the TL complexity are considered to be the two major sources of learners' errors. The relative seriousness of errors is measured in the final stage with an important pedagogical purpose. It is for the benefit of teachers and educators as it provides them an insight regarding the language learning of their learners. This helps them adopt the right measures in their instruction to make teaching learning process more effective and efficient. It also provides learners feedback regarding their progress and helps them improve their skills.

The present study is an attempt to investigate some of the grammatical errors committed by ESL learners in their English essays at secondary and higher secondary levels in district Muzaffarabad.

2.2 Grammatical Errors

Different grammatical errors in ESL writings have been identified by the researchers (Abbasi & Kariminnia; 2011; Butt & Rasool, 2012; Gulzar, 2009; Hourani, 2008). However, the focus of the current study is on the following five grammatical errors.

2.2.1 Subject-verb Agreement /Concord

One of the common errors found in ESL writings is Subject-verb agreement. There is always an agreement between the verb and the subject according to number and person. Different studies (Fayyaz, 2017; Gillani, 20019; Hussain et al., 2013; Khannom, 2014) have claimed that ESL learners face a lot of difficulties in subject-verb agreement. For example;

1. He as well as I am going there.
2. Haste make waste

In both these examples, the verb does not agree with the subject. In the first example, two subjects differing in number have been connected by using a conjunction 'as well as'. In such a case, the verb must agree with the first subject which is 'he' in this example. So the verb must be 'is' instead of 'am'. In (2), the subject is an abstract noun 'haste' which needs a singular verb. Hence, both of these sentences are ungrammatical because of the absence of concord between the subject and the verb.

2.2.2 Word-order

Sequence of words plays a vital role in the construction of clauses and sentences. A noun phrase (NP) plus a verb phrase (VP) makes a clause. This sequence of words is called word-order. The word order of English is very strict since disturbing the word order results in the ungrammaticality of sentences. ESL learners commit errors in word order also. Such errors are often the result of the interference of mother tongue. (Butt & Rasool, 2012; Gillani, 2019; Fayyaz, 2017; Murad & Khalil, 2015; Sarfaraz, 2011; Shah, 2023). For example,

3. Ayesha meal cooks
4. He letter wrote

The ungrammaticality of both these sentences is the result of wrong word-order which seems to be the interference of mother tongue as the word-order in English is different from Urdu and other South Asian languages.

2.2.3 Tense/ Aspect

Traditionally, tense refers to time of an action or an event (Thomsan & Martinent, 1986; Swan, 2005). However, tense is considered as the inflection on the verb phrase by most of the modern grammarians. It is the main verb which shows the tense when the verb phrase has only a main verb. However, the auxiliary marks the tense when the verb phrase has an auxiliary and main verb (Biber, Cornard &Leech, 1999). Aspect, on the other hand, refers to progressiveness or completeness of an action. Hence, there can be progressive, perfect and passive aspects in English. ESL learners are often found to commit errors in the correct use of tense and aspect. (Fayyaz, 2017; Khansir, 2013). For example,

5. Ali has written a book last year
6. She flies a kite now.

The first sentence needs a past tense as the 'last year' is a definite past time. The use of present perfect here brings ungrammaticality to (5). Similarly, for an action which is in progress at the moment of speaking, progressive aspect is required. Therefore, the use of simple present in (6) is wrong.

2.2.4 Verbs: Main and Auxiliary

Verbs show action or states and are the central element of a clause. Main or Lexical verbs, primary verbs and auxiliary verbs are some important categories of verbs (Biber, Cornard &Leech, 2010). The function of lexical verbs is that of main verbs while primary verbs have dual function. They can function both as main and helping verbs. English has only three primary verbs: do, be and have. Unlike lexical and primary verbs, auxiliary verbs are always used with a main or lexical verb to serve different grammatical functions. These verbs always function as helping verbs. The use of main and auxiliary verbs is also problematic for ESL learners and they are found to make errors in the use of these verbs (Gillani, 2019; Murad & Khalil, 2015; Shah, 2023). They use incorrect form of the main verb or the auxiliary. Moreover, auxiliary inversion is also problematic for them. For example,

7. He has goed to school.

8. The woodcutter fell the tree yesterday.
9. Ayesha am going abroad.

In (7), overgeneralization of the TL rule of past formation has resulted in the wrong verb form. In (8), the choice of the form of the verb is inappropriate as it must be 'felled' in this context. In (9), the use of auxiliary is incorrect as the pronoun 'she' needs a third person singular auxiliary 'is' in this context.

2.2.5 Infinitives

An infinitive is a verbal which functions as a noun, adjective or adverb. An infinitive can be full (to+V1) or bare (V1). Yahya et al. (2012) claims that errors ESL learners commit errors in the correct use of infinitives finding it hard to distinguish between a bare and full infinitive. Consider the following examples:

10. I had better to stay at home.
11. He agreed help me
12. You made us to cry.

In (10), the use of full infinitive is incorrect as the phrase 'had better' needs a bare infinitive. The use of bare infinitive in (11) is incorrect as the verb 'agree' needs a full infinitive after it. Likewise, the use of full infinitive after 'made' is ungrammatical in (12) because the verb 'make' requires a bare infinitive in active voice.

3. Research Questions

The current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Which grammatical errors do the secondary and higher secondary level ESL learners make in their English essays?
2. What is the frequency of these errors at two different levels?
3. How far do the secondary and higher secondary ESL learners differ in committing grammatical errors in their essays?

3.1 Subjects

In Muzaffarabad district, there are public sector institutions separately for boys and girls in both rural and urban areas. For the present study, five male and five female public sector institutions for each level were selected using convenience sampling. The students of grade X and XII of these institutions

were asked to write an essay on any one of the four given topics. The rationale behind asking these students to do so is that they have to attempt this particular question in their terminal board examinations. Most of these students were having Hindko as their first language (L1) with a smaller number of students whose L1 was Pahari, Gojri, Kashmiri or Urdu. Twenty essays from each institution were selected randomly using RANDBETWEEN function of Microsoft Excel (MS Excel). Thus a sample of 200 essays for each level was selected for the collection of data to analyze the grammatical errors of ESL learners at secondary and higher secondary levels in district Muzaffarabad.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Gass and Selinker's (2008) Error Analysis Model was replicated for the data collection and analysis. This model is considered to be the latest model for error analysis. The model consists of the following steps:

1. Collection of data
2. Recognition and Identification of errors
3. Classification and categorization of errors
4. Quantification of error
5. Analysis of the sources of errors
6. Remedial measures and suggestions to minimize the errors.

3.3 Research Tool

For the identification of grammatical errors, an essay writing test was used for data collection. The participants were asked to write an essay of 300-400 words on any one of the four given topics which were expository, narrative, descriptive and argumentative essays. The rationale behind conducting the test is to get the spontaneous samples of students' written language.

The inter-rater reliability was used for measuring the reliability of the test scores. RANDBETWEEN function of Microsoft Excel was used to select ten percent of the marked scripts .to get them marked from another ELT expert with a teaching experience of more than 15 years at secondary and higher secondary levels. The scores of these tests were compared using a series of Spearman's rho Correlation tests. The results of the correlation

tests showed that there was a very high agreement between the two raters in the identification of errors.

4. Discussion and Findings

This section presents the data obtained from the Secondary and higher secondary level ESL learners by administering an essay writing test. The main purpose of this test was to identify the grammatical errors and their frequencies. However, the present study was confined to the investigation of only five grammatical errors namely; Subject-Verb Concord, Word-order, Tense/Aspect, Verbs and Infinitives.

4.1 Error Identification and Categorization

The grammatical errors detected in English essays of the learners were identified and categorized into Subject-Verb Concord, Word-order, Tense/Aspect, Verbs and Infinitives as the focus of the present study was to investigate these errors in English essays of ESL learners. The tabulation and quantification of these errors was made to find out the frequencies for the interpretation and discussion.

4.2 Frequencies of Errors at Secondary level

ESL learners of secondary level commit different grammatical errors in their writings. The subjects of the current study have also committed certain grammatical errors in their essays. Table 4.1 present frequencies of these errors.

Table 4.1: Frequencies of Errors at Secondary Level

Type of Error	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Verbs	200	0	10	2.67	2.30
Tense/Aspect	200	0	17	1.93	2.64
Word Order	200	0	17	1.78	2.30
Concord	200	0	10	1.37	1.66
Infinitive	200	0	4	.22	.57

'N' indicates the number of essays / students as every student has written one essay

Table 4.1 shows that Secondary level ESL learners' most frequent errors are in the use of verbs. They have committed errors in the use of lexical, primary and auxiliary verbs. The verb errors have the highest mean value

of 2.67 that indicates that every student has committed 2.67 verb errors on average. However, the standard deviation in table 4.1 shows the heterogeneous frequency in learners' errors. The high standard deviation (SD) value implies that some students committed a smaller number of errors as compared to other ones who committed relatively greater number of errors. The Minimum (Min) and Maximum (Max) values also depict this phenomenon. This finding is in line with some other studies (Fayyaz, 2017; Gillani, 2019) which also claim that verb errors are among most frequent errors of ESL learners. Tense/aspect, word order and subject-verb agreement errors have also been committed by the learners with mean values of 1.93, 1.78 and 1.37 respectively. Tense/Aspect and word order errors are also heterogeneous as depicted by the high values of SD and Max and Min values in table 4.1. The SD value for concord errors is comparatively low which indicates that the errors are not as heterogeneous as they are in the case of other errors.

The least committed errors are the infinitive errors with a mean value of 0.22. This mean value manifests that learners have not found it hard to use infinitives correctly. The low SD, Max and Min values also indicate that the frequency of infinitive errors is homogeneous. This may be the result of rare use of infinitives in the essays. Abbasi & Karimnia (2011) and Yahya et al. (2012) also support the finding of the present study regarding infinitive errors. Following are the some instances of the errors found in the learners' data:

13. My friend was come here before.
14. It is hailing for two hours.
15. They were receiving by them.
16. How you have reached here?
17. Pollution air pollutes
18. There was many people on the road.
19. Lahore attract people from different areas.
20. He went there to enjoys the weather.

In (13), the learner has made an error by providing the wrong verb form. Instead of using 'came', he has used 'was come' due to his mother tongue interference. In (14), the learner has used progressive aspect incorrectly since the context shows that it is the continuity of an action. Present perfect progressive is used for such actions which started in the past, but are still in

progress. In (15), the learner has used progressive aspect where he is supposed to use passive aspect as the subject of the sentence is the receiver of the action. There are word order errors in 16 and 17. The learners have used the word order of their mother tongue in the construction of these sentences. There must be the auxiliary-inversion in 16 since it is a direct question, but the learner has failed to move the auxiliary at pre-subject position. In (17), the verb should precede the object 'air', but the learner has wrongly used it by placing it after the object. The examples (18) and (19) lack subject-verb agreement resulting in ungrammaticality of both these sentences. In (20), the learner has used infinitive incorrectly due to the insufficient comprehension of TL rules. Since the subject in (20) is a third person singular pronoun, the learner has added an 's' with the infinitive 'to enjoy' which has brought ungrammaticality to the sentence.

4.3 Frequencies of Errors at Higher Secondary level

This section discusses the errors committed by Higher Secondary level ESL learners in their English essays. Table 4.2 presents frequencies of errors at this level.

Table 4.2: Frequencies of Errors at Higher Secondary Level

Type of Error	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Tense/Aspect	200	0	27	3.37	4.066
Concord	200	0	13	3.01	2.895
Verbs	200	0	16	2.72	2.578
Word Order	200	0	10	.66	1.519
Infinitive	200	0	6	.33	.744

'N' indicates the number of essays / students as every student has written one essay

As depicted in table 4.2, the higher secondary level learners committed maximum number of errors in tense/aspect with a frequency mean of 3.37. A very high value of SD indicates that the frequency of errors is heterogeneous as some students have not committed any error while others have committed as many as 27 errors in one essay. This is also evident from the Max and Min values for tense/aspect errors. Concord, verb and word order errors were committed with the frequency means of 3.01, 2.72 and 0.66 respectively. Infinitive errors are the least frequent errors found in the productions of higher secondary level learners.

4.4 Comparison of Secondary and Higher Secondary Level Learners in Committing Errors

This section presents a comparison of secondary and higher secondary level learners in committing grammatical errors in their essay writing. This comparison has been made in order to find out whether or not there is any change in the frequency of these errors at two different levels. Table 4.3 below shows this comparison:

Table 4.3: Comparison of Frequencies of Errors between Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels

Type of Error	Secondary Level			Higher Secondary Level		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Concord	1.37	200	1.66	3.01	200	2.90
Word Order	1.78	200	2.30	.66	200	1.52
Tense/Aspect	1.93	200	2.64	3.37	200	4.07
Verbs	2.67	200	2.30	2.72	200	2.58
Infinitive	.22	200	0.57	.33	200	0.74

'N' indicates the number of essays / students as every student has written one essay

The table above shows that verb errors are the most frequent errors committed by secondary level learners, whereas tense/ aspect errors are the most dominant errors at higher secondary level. After verb errors, the secondary level learners have committed more errors in tense/aspect, word order, concord and infinitives respectively. On the other hand, higher secondary level learners have committed more errors in concord, verbs, word order and infinitives respectively. Table 4.3 indicates that all errors have been increased at higher secondary level except word order errors which have been decreased. This obviously shows that errors in essay writing have increased at higher secondary level except word order errors. An independent t-test was used to find out whether or not there exists any significant difference between secondary and higher secondary level learners in making grammatical errors.

Table 4.4: Independent t-test for Comparison of Errors Committed by Secondary and Higher Secondary Learners

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Concord	Equal variances assumed	6.971	398	.00
Word Order	Equal variances assumed	-5.746	398	.00
Tense/Aspect	Equal variances assumed	4.216	398	.00
Verbs	Equal variances assumed	.184	398	.85
Infinitive	Equal variances assumed	1.729	398	.08

Table 4.4 reveals that secondary and higher secondary and higher secondary level learners differ significantly in committing grammatical errors. The significance values of concord, word order and tense/ aspect errors indicate that there exist significant differences among the learners of secondary and higher secondary level learners in these errors. The high significance values of verb and infinitive errors imply that learners of both levels do not differ significantly in these two errors.

5. Conclusion

This section draws the conclusion based on the data analysis. The analysis of the data shows that the learners commit grammatical errors in their English essays at secondary and higher secondary levels including verb, tense/aspect, concord, word order and infinitive errors. Table 4.1 and 4.2 show the frequency of these grammatical errors at both the levels respectively. The current study also aimed at determining whether there is any statistically significant differences between the learners of both these levels in committing grammatical errors. The results of independent t-test reveal that the learners differ significantly in concord, word order and tense/aspect errors; however, there is not any significant difference in verb and infinitive errors at both levels.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study are expected to help educationists, policy makers, language teachers and learners. The policy makers can devise policies to help teachers and learners in their teaching learning process so that the learners errors could be overcome. Teachers can use the findings of the present study to get an insight into the grammatical errors committed by their learners at two different levels. They can devise their strategies and improve teaching methodology accordingly to address the needs of the learners. Learners can also get an idea of their most committed errors and may strive to overcome these errors in future.

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