

Unveiling Syntactical Errors in SHS Students' Position Paper

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing has always been one of the hardest skills to develop as it requires mastery of the language. With the unforeseen pandemic, developing the said skills of the learners in this generation has become harder as new modes of instruction that are unfamiliar to both teachers and students emerge. With that, this study aims to identify the types and frequency of errors the students commit in writing academic papers in an attempt to provide the best possible interventions to remediate them. To achieve these objectives, 15 position papers were collected and analyzed from 15 Senior High School students. This research employed a quantitative descriptive approach in identifying the prevalent syntactical error among the students' written works. Error analysis designed by Gass and Selinker in 2008 was applied. In the end, results have been tabulated in descending sequence in which grammar appeared as the most frequent error (73) followed by formatting (31) and coherence (17) as the third on the list. With the findings mentioned above, strategies such as the use of AI in checking grammar and interventions, such as giving feedback and drafting, are recommended to further develop the learners' writing skills.

Keywords: *academic paper; error analysis; shs; syntactical errors*

Introduction

Writing has always been the hardest skill to develop as it requires full mastery of the target language. In countries where English is a second language, such as the Philippines, one major misconception is the learners' competency in terms of using the language. Although Filipino learners were exposed to the target language at a very young age, lack of practice and differences in cultural background made it hard for the students to master the language. Not only that writing skills are hard to develop, with the teachers not understanding which method best fits teaching the skill and the rarity of giving feedback to the students every time a writing activity is done (Salebi, 2004; Faisal, 2013 cited in Al-Ghabra & Najim, 2019 Rajagukguk, 2023), the said skills of the learners declined.

Several researchers over the decade have found out and explained the sources as to why the errors occurred. One of the reasons is the students' lack of exposure to the target language (Catabay, 2023) in terms of the skill itself. Writing activities are rarely done inside the classroom given the fact that the classroom session only lasts for 45 to 90 minutes. In the said study, Error Analysis by Corder (1974) was utilized in which the errors were discussed in five stages, namely; collecting

of data containing the errors, classification of errors, identification of errors, disclosure, and evaluation of errors. In addition, errors in subject-verb agreement were also a recurring observation which was, as cited in Dolba in 2023, brought upon by the well-formed speech habits of Filipinos that are very different from the English language in terms of form, meaning, and distribution. The study was anchored in the theory of Bergmann and Senn which argues that competence in the target language stems from the mastery of its grammatical rules. Although some studies support this claim, stating results in which learners' mastery of the grammatical rules is said to be at a competent level and satisfactory (Sagal & Potane; Rodriguez, 2023), confusions in terms of verbs regarding the appropriateness of the tenses to use are still observed (as stated in Manuel, 2022). These data only show the dedication of the researchers in constantly identifying the learners' errors in academic writing and finding the sources of these errors. However, in today's generation and with the availability of tools such as AI and technology in general, it is safe to say that the information previously shared by other researchers needs to be updated. In line with that, most of the studies conducted are confined to identifying the errors as suggested by Corder's Error Analysis. Only a few proceed with providing a solution to

the challenges that have been identified. Thus, this study will focus on identifying the common errors of students in 12th grade in writing academically, as well as, suggest possible interventions to remediate, if not eradicate the errors found. With this goal in mind, Error Analysis by Gass and Selinker in 2008 is employed in analyzing the 15 academic papers produced by the learners as it has been used to discover errors, correct errors, and avoid errors and is considered the most influential process in second language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Alhaysony, 2012 cited in Hussain, 2019). The results of this study are expected to be of benefit not only to the students who are having difficulties in academic writing but also to the teachers teaching English for Academic and Professional Purposes since the suggested interventions can be used in their respective classes and be further improved.

The purpose of this quantitative study is to develop possible interventions for the common errors found in the written papers of Grade 12 - TVL students. As writing is the hardest skill to learn due to its complexity (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018), this research seeks to identify the common errors learners commit in writing academically and understand the reasons for the said inconsistencies to occur.

Hence, this study will focus on how learners of this generation write academic papers. Specifically, this research aims to answer: 1) What is the most prevalent syntactical error made by the students? 2. What possible interventions must be done to remediate the errors found? As with the majority of studies, the design of the current study is subject to limitations. The data gathered were all coming from one single institution thus, may limit the generalizability of the findings from other institutions. Due to time constrain, all recommendations and insights are coming from the analysis only. It is suggested to employ other data-gathering procedures such as interviews and focused group discussions for both the subject teachers and students to understand the underlying reasons why these errors occurred in the first place.

This study attempts to identify the common errors the students in the TVL strand commit in writing academically. Although English is considered a second language in the Philippines, Filipino learners still struggle in the said language both verbally and in written form. This issue has been brought upon by the students' diverse cultural backgrounds and lack of exposure to the target language. The writing competence of the said

students also declined further due to the pandemic that happened in the year 2020 as there was a sudden shift of learning modality that both students and teachers are not prepared for. This study hopes to find innovative ways to remediate if not, lessen the frequency of the identified errors found in students' written papers. From the result of this study, institutions may implement interventions and remediation programs regarding the common errors in learners' written works. Moreover, as the study provides an overview of the common errors in academic writing, it can be of help to future researchers serving as data for future discussions relating to the said topic.

The research focuses on ESL learners' academic writing skills. While the learning strategies and styles recommended may have been relevant to other aspects of English language teaching and learning, it is imperative to note that this specifically concentrates on the common errors the learners make in writing academically. Future research may explore other locales, as well as, work on understanding reasons why such errors occur.

English is one of the Philippines' official languages. It is being taught to students even during their primary years. With that, it may seem that Filipinos are already masters of the said language however, that is not the case. Studies show that Filipino learners still struggle with subject-verb agreement (Daing & Sahagun, 2020) which affects the overall quality of their written text (Pablo & Lasaten, 2018). It is said that the errors with word usage and grammar were due to the learners' limited range of vocabulary (Pablo & Lasaten in 2018 as cited in Martinez, 2019). These studies have been further supported by Fareed as cited in Rivera (2022) stating that it is a common difficulty for ESL learners in terms of academic writing. Aside from that, due to a lack of full understanding of the target language, errors in vocabulary or choice of words also are evident (Calderon, 2021; Alghazo, et. al., 2020 stated in Gildore, et. al., 2023). However, these difficulties are deemed not only due to the students' lack of mastery but also the teachers' unclear instructions (Chou, 2011 in Portillo-San Miguel, 2021) and the way of teaching the skill itself. Dinamika and Hanafiah in 2019 even claimed that feedbacks were not given to students therefore they do not have any idea about the errors they made.

These difficulties aforementioned even became more evident as the pandemic happened in the year 2020 (Agustini & Sipayung, 2022). Due to the sudden shift in the mode of instruction, from

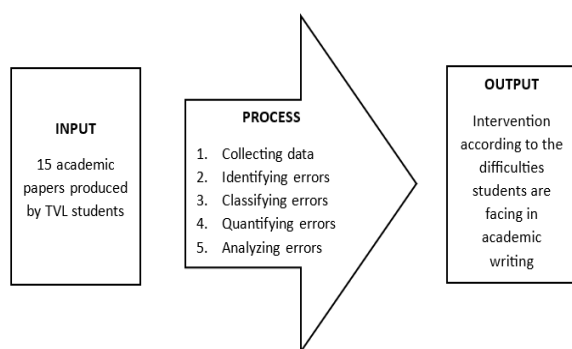
face-to-face to online, both teachers and students had a hard time adjusting to the new normal. Writing as a skill has been affected since, according to Martinez (2019), to develop the said skill, the active involvement of both participants, which were the teacher and student, should be observed. With that, it is undeniable that the mode of instruction, whether online or face-to-face, plays a vital role in fostering the writing skills of the students.

Method

This research will employ a quantitative descriptive approach in identifying the syntactical errors prevalent in the selected position papers submitted by Grade 12 Technical-Vocational-Livelihood track (TVL) students. The descriptive research design is aimed to characterize and describe the phenomenon under observation. Dolba (2023) describes this research design as one that is concerned with the processes that are going on, the effects that are being felt, or trends that are developing. Moreover, it represents a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena (Manuel, 2022). As this current study's primary objective is to determine the prevalent syntactical errors in the written output, a position paper, submitted by the students, a quantitative descriptive design is the most appropriate design to utilize in the study. All because data are gathered, tallied, and used to describe and a basis for making generalizations.

The researchers will apply Error Analysis designed by Gass and Selinker in 2008 as it provides a complete procedure of EA namely, collecting data, identifying errors, classifying errors, quantifying errors, analyzing errors, and remediation (as cited in Dinamika & Hanafiah, 2019). Error analysis will be an instrumental tool in the study since it was designed to identify errors in the written outputs of the students.

Figure 1. IPO Model



In this study, the students are instructed to

write a 1000-word academic text. They are given options to choose any topic from the pool of topics provided. Then, the researchers will peruse fifteen (15) academic papers produced by the TVL students. Afterward, the errors will be quantified to know their frequency of occurrence. Next, the data must then be analyzed to identify the source of error. Data are categorized under two categories which are; arrangement and recognition errors. These categories are also branched out into multiple sub-categories to accurately pinpoint the most prevalent errors students commit in academic writing. Finally, a table summarizing the syntactical errors located across all scrutinized papers will then be generated.

Findings and Discussion

The 15 academic papers were respectively analyzed due to six procedures of EA. After all of the data had been analyzed thoroughly, then it came to several findings.

Table 1

The Frequency of Error Types	
Type of Error	Frequency
Grammar	73
Formatting	31
Coherence	17
Spelling	9
Punctuation	8
Capitalization	5
Handwriting	0

The common errors found in the learners' academic papers were the subject-verb agreement and missing/incorrect prepositions, capitalization and use of contractions, issues in coherence due to lack of signaling word usage, and spelling.

Table 1 shows the types of errors students have committed from the most frequent down to the least. Grammar is the most frequent error as it appeared 73 times in students' written works. Errors under grammar include 23 counts of issues with subject and verb agreement followed by the incorrect use or missing determiner with 22 counts. Aside from that, misuse of prepositions is also observed with a total of 18 occurrences. Missing/misuse of conjunctions has 5 occurrences, incorrect pronouns have 4, and lastly, 1 for nouns. These errors are said to be brought upon by differences in cultural backgrounds and students' low language proficiency (Al Badi, 2015). A good example showing how cultural background affects ESL students' grammar is the use of pronouns as the Filipino language only has the word "siya" unlike the target language which has gender-

specific pronouns. These findings are of the same results as the studies conducted by Catabay and Dolba (2023). Formatting, on the other hand, occurred 31 times in the students' academic papers. This refers to the use of contractions such as "don't", "doesn't", and "can't". As the participants are tasked to write academically, contractions such as those mentioned above are not supposed to be used. The third on the list is coherence with 17 occurrences. In this error, clarity of the intended message, redundancy, and choice of words are considered. All of which are due to a lack of exposure to the target language and low mastery. One example of redundancy is the student's statement, "Call center agent, call center agent is the best example for this argument because, when you apply for call center agent, it does not require any degree, because when you apply for call center agent, it is not about the degree that they are looking for." The phrase *call center agent* is used 4 times in the sentence alone. Not only that, *because* is also used 2 times. Right after coherence is spelling with 9 occurrences. The students tend to spell the words according to how they heard it or how it was pronounced. A few examples of these errors are "wether" and "stablished". As for the punctuation marks, only 8 errors were identified. This includes the use of period (.) instead of comma (,), missing Oxford commas, and missing punctuation marks specifically the period (.) after a sentence. Lastly, capitalization is listed as the least common error with only 5 occurrences generally due to the missing periods (.). Handwriting got 0, since students have submitted their work online as a Microsoft Word document file.

With all the information provided, it is undeniable that the most common error these Grade 12 students are having is difficulty in terms of grammar specifically, subject-verb agreement. In comparison with the studies previously mentioned in this article, there is a noticeable difference between the findings. These gaps are inferred to be brought upon by the difference between the participants in terms of their age and educational attainment. Factors such as the research instrument used can also be considered as grammar tests and writing tests were conducted separately (Sacal & Potane, 2023). Although mastery of the target language's grammar has a

strong relationship with the learners' writing skills, proper statistical treatment should still be conducted to validate the said claim.

Conclusion

Based on the error analysis conducted, it is safe to say that the 15 ESL students under the TVL strand are having difficulties in grammar, mainly subject-verb agreement and use of determiners, as well as, avoiding the use of contractions and making the text coherent when it comes to writing academically. With these results coming to light, creating or identifying the best possible interventions for the said challenges are expected to follow. In line with that statement, it is highly recommended for future researchers to conduct a study, preferably action research, in which they are to employ strategies such as; using AI in checking grammar, drafting, and providing feedback to students' written works. These interventions are idealized with the hopes of getting more desirable results in the future in terms of students' academic writing development. As the study only focuses on the data gathered from the text analyzed, information coming from both the teachers and students regarding the reasons why the errors took place and their perspectives on using certain strategies in writing may be considered to be explored by future researchers as well. Lastly, this study can be used as a reference for other researchers and educators who wish to venture on the same topic.

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