

Investigating Grammatical Errors Made by the IGCSE Students (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) in Writing

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore the common types of grammatical errors made by the IGCSE students in their English writing. The study was conducted in four different international schools in Khartoum state. The most common grammatical errors which were found in the students writing included: passive voices, verb tense and form, prepositions, conjunctions and punctuation. These errors were classified and tabulated according to their number of frequency in the students writing. One hundred and fifty students sat for an English test which consisted of grammatical areas and a writing task.

On the other hand, 40 teachers participated in completing a questionnaire reflecting their attitudes and opinion towards the English writing skill and the curriculum.

The data revealed that the IGCSE students make different types of grammatical errors, and most of these errors were due to intralingual transfer.

Based on the findings, recommendations and some implications which are of significance to educators and policymakers as well as to EFL teachers are provided. At last, it is hoped that the results of this study could be of much benefit for developing the English writing skill among the IGCSE students.

Key words: Error Analysis, Contrastive Analysis, IGCSE

INTRODUCTION

Complaints about poor English results of Grade 11 students have been commonly heard from parents and teachers in most of international schools in Khartoum. The blame is either placed on teachers for not being well-prepared to teach the language properly or learners who do not want to take their learning seriously; or the education system which is perceived to be ineffective. Some people such as parents generally blame it on the problem that English is not widely spoken outside the classroom, such as at home or in public places. Poor English language proficiency is believed to be the major cause of the overall poor performance of students in international schools. These observations are confirmed by English examiners' reports every year.

One of the reasons for students' incompetence could be that they are taught in a second language. Nunan (2001:89) states that proponents of Contrastive Analysis claims that where the first and second language rules are not the same, errors are likely to occur as a result of interference between the two languages. Similarly, I have also noticed that in some cases learners from the same school or region would produce the same type of errors in their interlanguage, that is, the type of language produced by second- and foreign- language learners who are in the process of learning a language.

It is also assumed that these errors may attribute to the fault that these students focus more on the oral skills ignoring the other skills as well as the grammatical aspects which affect negatively their written work.

Therefore, this study will investigate the grammatical errors that are facing the students of the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) schools in writing, their frequency and possible causes of the grammatical errors

committed by the students and some possible solutions will be suggested to overcome them.

Objectives of the study

The important aim of this study is to find out the grammatical errors in writing that encounter the students in the IGCSE schools and to promote the awareness of the teachers employing suitable writing strategies in teaching writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to James (1998), Errors in foreign language teaching especially in English are the cases which are difficult enough to avoid. Error analysis is the process of pointing out the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language.

Richards et.al state that:

"Error analysis is an activity to reveal errors found in writing and speaking. Error analysis also is the study of errors made by the second and foreign language learners. Error analysis may be carried out in order to (a) find out how well someone knows a language, (b) find out how a person learns a language, and (c) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials. This definition stresses the functions of error analysis."

Another concept of error analysis is given By Brown (1980), he defines error analysis as the process of observing, analyzing, and classifying the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by learner. In the line, Crystal (1987) defines Error analysis as a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided

by linguistics. The three definitions above clarify that error analysis is an activity to identify, classify and interpret or describe the errors made by someone in speaking or in writing and it is carried out to obtain information on common difficulties faced by someone in speaking or in writing English sentences. Another thing which should be noticed is the procedure of error analysis.

On the other hand, Webster (1990: 340) defines errors in two terms. First, in her Desk Dictionary of Language, she states that "Errors is a deviation from accuracy or correctness or belief in something untrue." Second, in Webster's School Dictionary (1980: 304) she defines errors as:

"Errors as a deviation from a code of behaviour, an act involving an unintentional deviation from truth or accuracy, an act that through ignorance deficiency, or accident fails to achieve what should be done, the quality or state of erring, and the difference between an observed or calculated value and the true value, especially: variation in measurements, calculations or observations of quantity due to uncontrollable factors."

From those definitions, it can be concluded that an error is a deviation from what is right or correct.

While the definition of error analysis by Corder (1974) is very close to the IGCSE context: "What has come to be known as error analysis has to do with the investigation of the language of second language learners". Lim (1976), claims that:

"One of the main aims of error analysis is to help teachers assess more accurately what remedial work would be necessary for English as a Second Language (ESL) students preparing for an English Language test, so as to help these students avoid the most common errors."

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

As this study investigates the grammatical errors made by the IGCSE students in their written work, the descriptive analytical method has been followed. The descriptive method is described by scholars as a method which aims at collecting data objectively through a test, a questionnaire or an interview. Therefore, the researcher of the current study has adopted both tools of data collection; a test and a questionnaire. The researcher used an essay test to accurately observe, describe and analyze the real performance of the students in terms of grammatical errors, and a questionnaire to reflect the teachers' attitudes towards the performance of the students concerning the grammatical errors made by the students.

The questionnaire used in this study aimed at finding out the views of teachers about the teaching of English and other points relevant directly to the questions of the study. It was designed to a total sample of 40 ELT teachers in some international schools in Khartoum State. It consisted of two parts: the first part contained personal information about the participants while the second part contained 18 statements assessing ELT teachers' views about the kind of grammatical errors facing students when they practise writing.

Validity and Reliability of the instrument

To test the reliability and validity of the staff questionnaire 10 questionnaires were randomly selected, then manipulated using the features of Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS), through Pearson Coefficient Factor Test (for the validity of the questionnaire) and Alpha Cronbach's (for the reliability of the questionnaire). The following tables illustrate the results of this procedure.

Omara Elimam Mohamed Ahmed- **Investigating Grammatical Errors Made by the IGCSE Students (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) in Writing**

Table 5: Validity test for the staff questionnaire

Dimension	No items	Coefficient factor with dimension	Coefficient factor with Total
First dimension	Grammatical errors related to English grammar arise probably from structural patterns.	0.72	0.68
	The teaching of grammatical items based on context is likely to help students in writing.	0.78	0.60
	Teaching grammatical rules should not be separated from the teaching of writing.	0.73	0.58
Second dimension	IGCSE students ignore the use of grammatical items.	0.70	0.64
	Students improve their writing skills when dealing with grammar	0.80	0.58
	Grammar teaching based on writing is likely to help IGCSE students to write effectively.	0.73	0.61
	Learning English grammar helps students to learn languages.	0.38	0.43
	Teaching students grammar is useful in improving creative writing.	0.73	0.63
Third dimension	Teaching grammar through writing is likely to improve students' writing.	0.81	0.74
	Learning of grammar, though difficult, is essential to the writing skill in English language.	0.71	0.62
	Guiding questions in writing help students in writing.	0.51	0.40
	It is important to ask students to write activities based on grammatical items.	0.80	0.68
	Writing short activities based on grammatical items improve writing skill.	0.72	0.59
Fourth dimension	The method teachers use to teach grammar at Int. schools are suitable for students.	0.43	0.45
	Teaching grammar materials for learning English language are available.	0.70	0.66
	Grammatical items in Cambridge curriculum help students to practice the writing skill effectively.	0.82	0.57
	Writing composition in Cambridge curriculum gives the opportunity for students to work with the language. i.e they ask questions about grammar.	0.75	0.51
	Writing in Cambridge curriculum helps a lot in understanding the grammar items.	0.80	0.51

As shown in Table 5, all the values of Pearson Coefficient Factor between items and total of the dimension and with the total of the questionnaire are positive and greater than 0.20, which indicate good validity for all the items of each dimension of the questionnaire for answering the questions of the current study.

Table 6: Alpha Cronbach's Test for measuring the reliability of the staff questionnaire

Dimensions	No of items	Cronbach's Alpha based on Standardized items	Cronbach's Alpha (Internal validity)
First dimension	3	0.79	0.89
Second dimension	6	0.77	0.88
Third dimension	5	0.75	0.87
Fourth dimension	4	0.81	0.90

According to results in Table (6) Alpha reliability factor for the first dimension = (Cronbach's Alpha based On Standardized items): 0.79, thus Internal validity = (Squire Radical of Alpha

reliability factor) = 0.89; for the second dimension, Alpha = 0.77, thus Internal validity = 0.88; Alpha for third dimension = 0.75, thus Internal validity = 0.87. Alpha factor for the fourth dimension = 0.81, thus Internal validity = 0.90.

As it has been evident from the data above the items of each dimension of the staff questionnaire has attained high level of reliability and internal validity. Accordingly, it is valid to answer the questions of the current study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

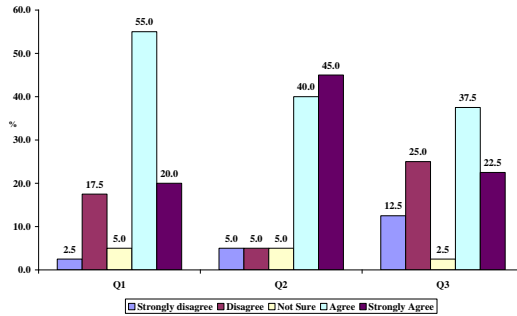
In this section, the results that obtained from the questionnaire that was handed to the ELT teachers aimed at assessing the students of the IGCSE in different grammatical areas. This section was designed by the researcher to cover different areas of difficulties in English grammar. The questionnaire items included statements that measured the ELT teachers' point of views about the students' performance in their English written works, the curriculum and ways of teaching grammar that are adopted by some teachers.

Question 1: What kind of main grammatical errors are facing the students of the IGCSE?

Table (1)

Questions	Strongly Disagree		Agree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Q1	1	2.5	7	17.5	2	5.0	22	55.0	8	20.0
Q2	2	5.0	2	5.0	2	5.0	16	40.0	18	45.0
Q3	5	12.5	10	25.0	1	2.5	15	37.5	9	22.5

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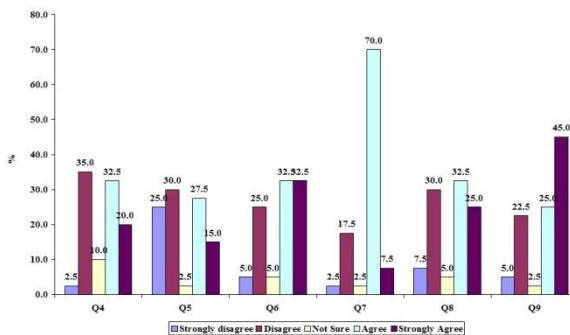


Regarding the kind of main grammatical errors facing the students, the results in above Table and Figure showed that the majority of the teachers agreed on these errors based on their answers questions 1, 2 which agreed on by 55%, 40% and 37.5% respectively. This gives the answer to question 1.

Question 2: What are the frequent grammatical errors in writing facing the students of the IGCSE?

Table (2)

Questions	Strongly Disagree		Agree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Q4	1	2.5	14	35.0	4	10.0	13	32.5	8	20.0
Q5	10	25.0	12	30.0	1	2.5	11	27.5	6	15.0
Q6	2	5.0	10	25.0	2	5.0	13	32.5	13	32.5
Q7	1	2.5	7	17.5	1	2.5	28	70.0	3	7.5
Q8	3	7.5	12	30.0	2	5.0	13	32.5	10	25.0
Q9	2	5.0	9	22.5	1	2.5	10	25.0	18	45.0

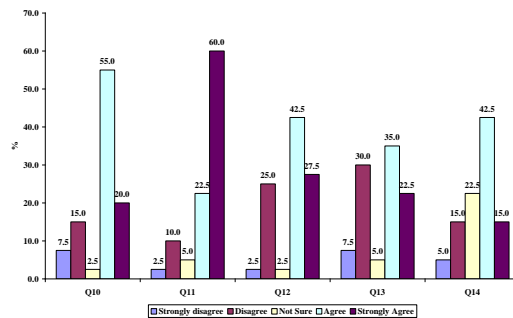


Regarding the frequent grammatical errors facing the students, the results in above Table and Figure showed that the majority of the teachers agreed on these the frequent errors 4, 5, 6,7, 8, and which agreed on by 32.5%, 27.5%, 32.5%, 70%, 32.5% and 25% respectively.

Question 3: What are the possible causes behind the grammatical errors that made by the IGCSE students?

Table (3)

Questions	Strongly Disagree		Agree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Q10	3	7.5	6	15.0	1	2.5	22	55.0	8	20.0
Q11	1	2.5	4	10.0	2	5.0	9	22.5	24	60.0
Q12	1	2.5	10	25.0	1	2.5	17	42.5	11	27.5
Q13	3	7.5	12	30.0	2	5.0	14	35.0	9	22.5
Q14	2	5.0	6	15.0	9	22.5	17	42.5	6	15.0

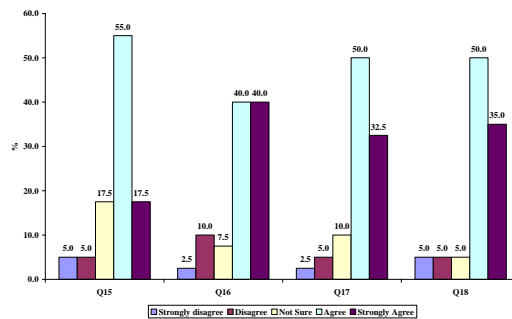


Regarding the possible causes of grammatical errors that made by students, the results in above Table and Figure showed that the majority of the teachers agreed on the causes 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14 which agreed on by 55%, 22.5%, 42.5%, 35%, and 42.5% respectively.

Question 4: What are the possible strategies that can be used to overcome these problems?

Table (4)

Questions	Strongly Disagree		Agree		Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Q15	2	5.0	2	5.0	7	17.5	22	55.0	7	17.5
Q16	1	2.5	4	10.0	3	7.5	16	40.0	16	40.0
Q17	1	2.5	2	5.0	4	10.0	20	50.0	13	32.5
Q18	2	5.0	2	5.0	2	5.0	20	50.0	14	35.0



Regarding the possible strategies that can be used to overcome grammatical errors that made by students, the results in above Table and Figure showed that the majority of the teachers agreed on the strategies 15, 16, 17, and 18 which agreed on by 55%, 40%, 50%, and 50% respectively.

Conclusion

The results of the ELT teachers' questionnaire showed that participants generally agreed that the difficulties related to grammatical items aroused from complex characteristics.

Results, as could be seen from the students' performance of the writing composition test revealed students' lack of grammar. As indicated by the responses of the ELT teachers, this lack of grammar was due to lack of practice of writing in the students learning environment.

It was found out that the negligence of writing in the language curricula led to their negligence writing grammar in the context of teaching. Teachers, however, agreed that

teaching writing based on providing context support and etymological information might facilitate the understanding of writing.

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