

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

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Abstract:

This study aims at investigating grammatical errors encountering the IGCSE students in writing skill. The study adopted the descriptive and analytical methods of research. The researcher designed an English test to 150 IGCSE students. The test consisted of two parts. The first part was on some grammatical areas and the other part was a writing task. A questionnaire was distributed to 40 ELT teachers. The writing composition test aimed measuring the students' abilities in dealing with the difficulties posed by grammatical errors in writing composition.

Key words: Error Analysis, Contrastive Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The idea of International Schools in Sudan (ISS) emerged at the beginning of the 20th century which was first presented by Unity International School in 1902. This school was originally founded by the Coptic community and began life as an all-girl school (Staff Unity High School web page, Retrieved 26 January 2015).

The ISS provide the students with high English educational system that goes with the international standards. The students in these schools are prepared to sit for the

International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) qualification as well.

The ISS accept students who come from different English speaking countries. These students generally do not have oral problems, but they sometimes suffer from some grammatical problems which affect negatively their writing skills. Therefore, this dissertation intends to look closely into the common grammatical errors that encounter the international school students in Sudan.

Academic writing is fundamental to students' academic survival at the IGCSE level education, yet at the same time, it is the most difficult skill to master since it requires both disciplinary knowledge (knowledge of the subject-matter) and linguistic knowledge (knowledge of appropriate language use). Academic writing is not a given skill even for students whose first language is English. As these students are highly competent in their linguistic abilities, they still need to learn and adhere to the specialized language and conventions of the academic discourse, and to interact with the several contextual factors that are found in their institutions. Discussing writing instruction in the American higher education context, Charles Fries (1983) state that both native and non-native speakers of English are required to take a compulsory course of one or two terms of writing as an essential component of their degree study.

Writing is a complex skill and is even considered by many linguists as the most difficult of all the four skills (Corder, 1974, p.177). It is difficult for both native and non-native speakers. However, writing is a real problem to most of ESL learners such as the Sudanese learners who study in the International Schools in Sudan. The sources of difficulty arise from the fact that non-native speakers think on their own native language (Arabic) when they write in English. Since good knowledge of grammar is one of the basic requirements of effective writing,

learners must acquire proper use of grammatical rules and structures.

This study will attempt to investigate grammatical errors in secondary school students' writing and find out the causes of the grammatical errors encountered by the students in IGCSE. The researcher will also suggest some effective techniques that are hoped to improve students' ability in writing composition and to suggest some practical ways to solve these grammatical difficulties.

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

Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of two languages so as to identify their structural differences and similarities. This term was used widely in the 1960s and early 1970s as a means of explaining why some features of a Target Language were more difficult to learn than others. Researchers at that time were encouraged by the idea of being able to identify points of similarity and difference between native language and target language. There was strong belief that a more effective pedagogy would result when these were taken into consideration. Charles Fries (1945: 9) one of the pioneer applied linguists of that day, said:

"The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner"

According to the behaviourist theories, language learning was a matter of habit formation, and this could be strengthened by existing habits. Therefore, the difficulty in acquiring certain structures in a second language depends on the difference between the learners' mother language and the target language they are trying to learn.

In this point, Lado (1977) claims: *"those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult"*. This involves describing the languages (using structuralist linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning difficulties ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second language acquisition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_language_acquisition), July 2016). Therefore, language comparison helps in the process of language learning and teaching. Moreover Larsen- Freeman & Long (1991: 53) add: *"Where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur: where they were different, negative transfer or interference, would result"*

The goals of Contrastive Analysis are: to make second language teaching more effective, to recognize the differences between the first language and the target language based on the assumptions that: (1) foreign language learning is based on the mother tongue, (2) similarities facilitate learning (positive transfer), (3) differences cause problems (negative transfer/Interference). Via contrastive analysis, problems can be predicted and considered in the curriculum. However, not all problems predicted by contrastive analysis always appear to be difficult for the students. On the other side, many errors that do turn up are not predicted by contrastive analysis. Larsen, et al (1992: 55) states that: *"predictions arising from were subjected to empirical tests. Some errors it did predict failed to materialize, i.e. it over predicted."*

This prediction failure leads to the criticism to the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis.

Many linguists and theorists in the field of error analysis have concentrated on the importance of second language learners' errors. Corder (1967) indicates that errors are important in three different ways. First to the teachers, in that they tell them how far towards the goal the learners have progressed and what remains for them to learn as a result. Second, they provide researchers with evidence of how language is acquired, what procedures the learners are applying in their learning of the language. Thirdly, they are absolutely necessary to the learners themselves, because errors could be a device that the learners use in order to learn.

A research has provided empirical evidence pointing to emphasis on learners' errors as an effective means of improving grammatical accuracy (White et al, 1991; Carroll and Swain, 1993). Indeed, as Carter (1997:35) notes: *"Knowing more about how grammar works is to understand more about how grammar is used and misused"*.

Dulay (1982: 138) states that studying learners' errors serves two major purposes: 1. It provides data from which inferences about nature of language learning process can be made, and 2. It indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language students have most difficulty producing correctly, and which error types detract most from learners' ability to communicate effectively.

Students have to recognize the importance of errors which occur in their writing so as to fully grasp and understand the nature of the errors made. This demands English language teachers to be better equipped, more sensitive and aware of the difficulties students face with regard to grammar. In other words, it is a way the learners have for testing their hypotheses about the nature of the language they are learning. Taking these ideas into consideration, this study attempts to identify the grammatical errors which students make in their written English work in order to help teachers of English to solve the

problem and to reveal the points of weakness in English writing.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Sample of the Study

The sample of this research is regarded as a purposive convenient sample as it focuses on the students of grade ten at different international schools in Sudan. It is regarded as a convenient sample because those students come from different academic backgrounds. It is significant to mention that they are males and females. The total number of these students was 150.

Validity and Reliability of the instrument

The tests are believed to have content validity as they aimed at evaluating the students' achievement in writing skill. The tasks required in the tests were comparable to those students who write grammatical items through writing composition. In addition, the test instructions were written clearly in English. The test was validated by a group of experts who suggested some valuable remarks about the tests and the researcher responded to that. For the test reliability, the study used the test –retest method to verify the reliability of the test which was first administrated on 20 students selected later from the sample of the study and then administrated once again on the same group two weeks later . The following formula for the Person Correlation Coefficient {r} was used to correlate subjects scores in the two test.

$$r = \frac{\sum XY - (\sum X)(\sum Y)}{\sqrt{(\sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2)(\sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2)}}$$

Results were also processed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) program and the scores of the subjects in the first test were correlated with those in the second test using Pearson Correlation coefficient was 0.664 which was quite adequate for the test reliability.

Cronbach's alpha was also used to measure the internal reliability of the scores obtained in the two tests. The coefficient reported was 0.7648 which proved that the test was reasonably reliable.

The validity of the research was calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{Validity} = \sqrt{\text{reliability}}$$

$$\sqrt{0.664} \text{ (using Pearson Correlation Coefficient)}$$

Upon considering all the validity and reliability coefficients of the subjects of the pilot sample which reported more than 50%, the test was of adequate validity and reliability that it would help in obtaining acceptable statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results that obtained from the test (part one) 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 test items included questions that measured the students' abilities of dealing with tenses, propositions, passive voice and conjunction.

Table 4.19 Section (A) on English grammar

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Pass	64	42.7
Failure	86	57.3
Total	150	100.0%

The table above shows that the distribution of the sample by section (A) of the test on English grammar is Pass by (%42.7) and Failure by (%57.3).

The first part of the test on English grammar is an effective way to collect information about errors in students' writing at same areas that suggested by the researcher (tenses, passive voice, prepositions, punctuations and conjunction).

The table above shows that the distribution of the sample by Second test on English grammar is Pass by (%42.7) and Failure by (%57.3) The first part of the test on English grammar is an effective way to collected information about errors in students' writing at same area (tenses , prepositions, conjunctions, punctuation and passive voice) .

According to the table above it is obvious that the students face more difficulties in writing when they write grammatical items through writing composition and that for several reasons:

Firstly, some teachers teach grammar in isolation without context. Secondly, students are accustomed to answering grammatical questions easily, because they are very simple and need only formation of rules, recalling the recognition of time and aspects. But in composition writing, students' are asked to give meaningful, connected ideas. They need to arrange the paragraphs using sentence formations. To compose a sentence students need a lot of skills, so have to master all aspects of language. Students find difficulties in thinking in English, then form the ideas and write these ideas correctly in meaningful sentence and correct grammar. Students learn grammar explicitly and not in context. They are not accustomed to learning grammar in context, so they can't contextualize that in composing situational sentences and so situational paragraphs that form composition.

Table 4.20 English test part two (writing)

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Tenses	187	17.2
prepositions	121	11.4
conjunction	239	23.1
Punctuation	389	36.6
Passive voice	118	11.7
Total	1054	100.0%

The table above shows the frequent errors committed by the students in section (B). The errors committed by the students according to the test they sat for are: Tenses by (%17.2), prepositions by (%11.4), conjunction by (23.1), Punctuation by (%36.3) and passive voice by (11.7%).

Table 4.21 Tenses Errors

valid	Frequency	Percent
Tenses	187	17.2

As shown on the table above, %16,9 of the respondents chose wrong. The results of this question revealed that the respondents had difficulties with the tenses. The tenses mistakes are most common students' writing and the researcher noticed that most of students find difficult in differentiate between present perfect, past simple and past continuous in writing.

Here are some examples of the tense mistakes committed by the students in part two:

Incorrect: Students enjoyed their time.

Correct: Students enjoy their time.

Incorrect: If students go outside the school they would be happy.

Correct: If students go outside the school, they will be happy.

Table 4.22 Preposition Errors

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Prepositions	121	11.4

As indicated by the results from the table about %11.4 of the respondents chose wrong. The results of this question revealed that the respondents had difficulties with the use of prepositions. The preposition mistakes are most common in students' writing and the researcher has noticed that most of students find it difficult to differentiate between the different types of prepositions.

Here are some examples of the prepositional mistakes committed by the students in section (A):

Incorrect: The head teacher came into the class before the lesson.

Correct: The head teacher came into the class during the lesson.

Incorrect: The boy sat waiting before the front door until his brother came home.

Correct: The boy sat waiting by the front door until his brother came home.

Incorrect: The river ran around the field and then on the sea.

Correct: The river ran through the field and then into the sea.

Table 4.23 Conjunction Errors

Valid	Frequency	Percent
Conjunction	239	23.1

Conjunctions are link words that connect ideas and opinions. As it mentioned above, the researcher noticed that the conjunctions errors are the most common among student's writing. The table shows that 23.1 of the respondents found it difficult to join ideas properly.

A good teacher can subsumed a course focus on conjunctions words. For example:

Conjunctions showing addition as in (and, also, more and moreover).

Conjunctions showing contrast as in (but, although and however).

Conjunctions show result as in (so, such a, such that and enough to).

Conjunctions show reason as in (because, as and since).

Conjunctions show purpose as in (so, so as to).

Conjunctions show relation as in (while, who and whose).

Table 4.24 Punctuation Errors

valid	Frequency	Percent
Punctuation	389	36.6

In the above table, the punctuation errors are the most common in student's writing, and data analysis of the test approves with the majority that students at the IGCSE schools find difficulties in writing. Most of them can't use correctly (.)(.). Also they face problems in paragraphing. The table shows that 36.6 of the respondents found it difficult to use punctuation.

Teachers can avoid these problems by making more practice focus on how to use punctuations through a piece of writing.

Table 4.25 Passive Voice Errors

valid	Frequency	Percent
Passive voice	118	11.7

In the above table, the passive voice errors are common in student's writing, and data analysis of the test approves with the majority that students at the IGCSE schools find difficulties in writing and that due to their lack of interest. Teachers can tackle this problems by giving more examples on active sentences and turning them into passive. They should also drag the students' attention to the examples used in contexts.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of the study was to investigate and classify the grammatical errors in writing made by the IGCSE students learning English as a second language Khartoum State. The study supports the assumption that error analysis can provide knowledge about the development of learners' language. Accordingly, error analysis is essential for language teachers. They understand students' errors and they build the educational techniques and methods to improve the level of their students and to help students avoid most of the interference errors. As a result, the teachers shape the classroom atmosphere efficiently.

Finally, by the results of the study the researcher becomes more convinced that contrastive analysis helps very much in solving difficulties which occur during learning L2.

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