



Analysis of Higher Education Students' Errors in English Composition Classes¹

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyse the freshman students' errors in written composition tasks and in this way to show how important the analysis of errors of students' written compositions to guide the educators which methods and techniques should be applied. In the study, the written exam papers of 60 freshman students studying at a state university in 2023-2024 were analyzed. This study was conducted by using descriptive qualitative method. Study group was determined using convenience sampling method. The collected data were classified and the errors and their frequencies were identified. As a result of the error analysis process, it was observed that the students made four types of errors. These errors include omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. A total of 663 errors were made; 311 were misinformation errors, 209 were omission errors, 113 were addition errors, 30 were misordering errors. Misinformation errors were the most frequent error of the students with 46.91%. This study showed that writing in English was difficult for students. English teachers can use the information of students' types of errors to assess of their learning skills in English. Teachers' awareness of the errors made by the students in writing helps teachers to identify the difficulties students face. Thus, lecturers can change their teaching methods and techniques in the classrooms.

Keywords: *Social emotional learning skills, computer game addiction, middle school students*

Article History: Received: December 20, 2023 Accepted: May 28, 2024 Published: June 30, 2024

Article Type Research Article

Recommended Citation: Karcı Aktaş, C. (2024). Analysis of Higher Education Students' Errors in English Composition Classes. *International Journal of Excellent Leadership (IJEL)*, 4(1), 1-11.

¹ Presented in 3rd International Congress on Excellence in Education, which was held on 15-17 December, 2023.

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language has become a necessity in order to communicate in social, political, cultural and economic areas all over the world (Karcı Aktaş & Gündoğdu, 2020). In our country, just as in the other parts of the world, great attention is paid to foreign language teaching/learning, which begins at primary school and continues till the end of higher education (Çelebi, 2006; Gökdemir, 2005). Universities are the educational level where foreign language education is given the most intensely and foreign language learning is attached the most importance especially in prep classes and departments teaching in foreign languages (Karcı Aktaş, 2018).

In higher education, four skills of language are focused on including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these skills, speaking and writing are the skills that are productive skills in which students produce sentences and paragraphs (Özkayran, 2019). Writing is the most challenging task for language learners (Samur, 2018). Thus, making errors during the writing process in foreign language is inevitable. During this process, analysing the errors plays an important role in order to understand why students make errors and determine how lecturers can facilitate to correct these errors. Thus, error analysis is used as a tool to understand the errors in written tasks of students (Corder, 1974). In this way, classification of the errors also plays an important role.

Errors have been classified into different categories by different researchers (Samur, 2018). Ellis (1997) described learner errors as errors of omission, overgeneralization and transfer errors. Another classification cited in Brown (2006) suggested by Lennon (1991) categorized errors as domain and extent. This classification is based on linguistic units: ‘domain’ is the rank of linguistic unit from phoneme to discourse that must be taken as context in order for the error to be understood, and ‘extent’ is the rank of linguistic unit that would have to be deleted, replaced, supplied or reordered in order to repair the sentence. It is noteworthy that proper categorization of learners’ errors should be identified so that students can get aware of which areas to be improved, given learners’ errors can be different. If the teachers specify errors categorically, it would be easier for the learners to correct their errors quickly (Karim et al., 2018). According to Dulay et al. (1982)’s Surface Strategy Taxonomy, errors can arise from misinformation, omission, addition and misordering. In Surface Strategy Taxonomy, misinformation means choosing the wrong word, e.g. It was readed, omission is leaving out necessary parts of words, morphemes, or auxiliaries, e.g. I going, addition is adding some unnecessary or redundant parts of words, e.g. I can to go, misordering is an incorrect order of words in a sentence, e.g. I go usually to school at 6. There are many articles on the implementations of Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al. (1982).

One of those articles was written by Mustafa et al. (2017), which was on the recount texts produced by nineteen junior high school students who were known to make errors in writing. The data were analyzed by calculating the percentage of errors based on the total cumulative errors for surface strategy taxonomy, but based on the number of attempts in the same grammatical elements for linguistic category taxonomy. The results of data analysis showed that the dominant errors for surface strategy taxonomy were misinformation (72%) followed by omission (14.4%).

Hasan and Munandar (2018) made a study called “Grammatical Errors Produced by UGM English Department Students” and the findings reached are 97 misinformation errors (54.49%) became the top. When we look at the percentage of errors in Samur’s (2018) article, the most three common errors were faulty structures (11%), spelling (10 %) and wrong or missing prepositions.

As a result of Özkayran’s (2019) study, the writing questions of the exam papers of 57 preparatory class students studying at a state university in 2017-2018 were analyzed. A total of 381 errors were made; 113 were misinformation errors, 92 were omission errors, 65 were addition errors and 11 were misordering errors. The reasons of why errors occur may be the scarcity of vocabulary students know and interlanguage errors. Interguage errors are known as errors caused by the interference of mother tongue. Firstly, we, as teachers, have to understand what are the causes of errors and through facing the problems we have to facilitate the learning process.

In Keumala and Idami's study (2022) "Using Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) in Analyzing Students' Errors in Conducting Recount Paragraph", to decrease the errors, the teachers and instructors should facilitate and expediate EFL classroom with more appropriate and various ways of recount text material learning process.

As a result, there are many reasons why students make errors so that some undesirable situations can occur. Though, these situations can be evitable. These can be avoided by teachers by taking some actions. These actions can be applying various teaching method and techniques, conducting remedial or enrichment classes to students who have serious problems in writing.

The objective of this study is to analyse the freshman students' errors in written composition tasks and in this way to show how important the analysis of errors of students' written compositions in order to guide the educators which methods and techniques should be applied. In this study, students studying engineering in English make many errors in their writing compositions and it is urgent to identify this problem and find solutions accordingly. In accordance with the purpose, the research problem was determined as follow;

1. What are the errors made by the freshman students in writing tasks?

Method

Research Model

This study is a descriptive qualitative study as it aims to find out the common errors in students' writings. Descriptive research is defined as a research method used to describe the existing phenomena as accurately as possible. Since studies about learners' errors in their language production are descriptive, these studies may be covered under the term descriptive research (Atmowardoyo, 2018).

Study Group

In the study, written papers of 62 students who attended faculty of freshman engineering classes at a state university during the first term of 2023-2024 academic year were examined. Two of the students were excluded as neither of them had any errors. Consequently, 60 papers were analyzed in the study. The study group was determined using convenience sampling method. Students were different fields of engineering faculty and from different genders.

Data Collection Tool

Data were gathered through document analysis, which is one of the qualitative research techniques. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. Error analysis is used to investigate the errors of freshman engineering students' writings. Students were given two options in mid-term written exam papers. They were asked to write 100-120 words for each paragraph in 45 minutes. Students were not allowed to use dictionaries.

Data Analysis

While analyzing the errors, three steps of error analysis specified by Corder (1974) were followed: (1) Collection of sample errors; (2) Identification of errors, and (3) Description of errors. The obtained data were classified and the errors and their frequencies were identified. The types of errors and their frequencies were transferred to tables.

Validity And Reliability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested a trustworthiness framework focusing on four major areas.

1- Credibility: In order to test the reliability of analyzed data, the opinions of several experts should be consulted. In order to measure the reliability of written exam papers, 60 midterm written exam papers of students were analyzed by two researchers, who were English lecturers. Then in order to measure

the reliability level, the researchers came together to discuss and come to an agreement about different codes. For the exam papers coded by the researchers, the reliability formula suggested by Miles and Huberman, namely $(\text{Reliability} = \text{Consensus} / (\text{Consensus} + \text{Dissidence}) \times 100.00)$ was used for calculating the reliability of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Reliability rates were found to be 93% as a result of the analysis. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the rate is valid for the reliability of the research when it is over 70.00%.

2- Transferability: Transferability is the ability to apply research findings to similar contexts (settings). The study, which was conducted in Aydın Adnan Menderes University Faculty of Engineering, offered an example within broader groups of students in various contexts.

3- Dependability: Dependability is the detailed description of each stage of the research. In the study, this issue was addressed by describing and explaining the processes of the study in detail.

4- Confirmability: The findings and interpretations obtained as a result of the research show that the participants reflect their views and experiences fully and accurately. This issue was achieved by basing the findings of the study on the students' written exam papers and taking the sentences directly and putting them into the tables. They were all in consistence with literature and methodological stages. The results of the study were decided on together with two other researchers.

The Role of the Researcher

Evaluators are divided into two groups; internal and external evaluator (Christie, Ross and Klein, 2004; Fitzpatrick, Sanders ve Worthen, 2004). Researcher is the internal evaluator in the study. She is the one who teaches writing, makes the exams and checks the exam papers. Researcher has been working at the same institution for several years and familiar with the organizational culture and context. She has already built a relationship with the students and thus communicates more easily with them.

Ethical Information

The trustworthiness of a research study heavily depends on the researcher's ethical practices and the methods he or she uses in conducting a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is therefore important for the qualitative researcher to know and use ethical information appropriately. In the study, researcher gave the importance to students' voluntary participation obtained their consent orally. Researcher made sure participants' privacy was protected. Thus, the names of the students were not stated in the study directly. Instead, each student was named as S1, S2, and so on.

Findings

In this section, tables were created from the data obtained from the errors of the students' written exams. Nicknames were given to each student; S1, S2, S3, and so on. The analysis of errors found a total of 663 words and phrases containing errors. Of all these errors, misinformation was the most common type of error found in the students' exam papers according to Surface Strategy Taxonomy of errors. This was followed by omission and addition, whilst misordering was found the least.

Table 1

Number of Errors based on Surface Strategy Taxonomy of Errors

Types of Errors	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Misinformation	311	46.91%
Omission	209	31.52%
Addition	113	17.05%
Misordering	30	4.52%
Total Errors	663	100%

As seen in Table 1, the most common type of error in Surface Strategy Taxonomy found in the study was misinformation. They were concerned with wrong usage of words and phrases. These types of errors related to misinformation, excluding errors below the number of 10 can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2*Number of Errors related to Misinformation*

Types of Errors in Misinformation	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Misspelling	62	19.94%
Word Choice	51	16.40%
Preposition	42	13.50%
Tense	39	12.54%
Word Form	26	8.36%
Gerund-Infinitive	18	5.79%
Pronoun	14	4.50%
Verb	12	3.86%
Subject-Verb Agreement	10	3.22%
The others (Capitalization, Article, Singular-Plural, Conjunction, Verb to be, Adjective, Active-Passive)	37	11.90%
Total Errors	311	100%

According to Table 2, the most common cause of misinformation errors is wrong usage of misspelling. Below is the example of misspelling:

S1: He is a little *jeleous* (jealous).

The second cause is wrong word choice. Below is the example of word choice:

S2: He has both good and bad *quantities* (qualities).

The third cause is wrong usage of preposition.

S3: She is very successful *on* her academic life (in).

The forth cause is wrong usage of tense.

S4: He *is helping* me all the time (helps).

The fifth cause is wrong usage of word form.

S5: She is *carefully* (careful).

The sixth cause is wrong usage of gerund-infinitive.

S6: His character doesn't change after *become* famous (becoming).

The seventh cause is wrong usage of pronoun.

S7: He has good personality. I want to write about *her* (him).

The eighth cause is wrong usage of verb.

S8: He didn't *say lie* (tell).

The ninth cause is wrong usage of subject-verb agreement.

S9: She usually *smile* (smiles).

Among the tenth errors are capitalization, article, singular-plural, conjunction, verb to be, adjective, active-passive. Below are some examples of these errors:

S10: He lives in *nevşehir* (Nevşehir).

S11: He is *an* university student (a).

S12: He is the most interesting *people* (person).

S13: She went to mountain *because* feed dogs (in order to/to).

S14: His eyes *is* black (are).

S15: She *knows* as a kind person (is known).

As seen in Table 1, the most second common type of error in Surface Strategy Taxonomy found in the study was omission. They were concerned with not using necessary words and phrases in the sentences. These types of errors related to omission can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Number of Errors related to Omission

Types of Errors in Omission	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Preposition	53	25.36%
Verb to be	45	21.53%
Singular-Plural	37	17.70%
Pronoun	34	16.27%
Article	29	13.88%
The others (Verb, Conjunction, Modal, Adverb, Phrasal Verb)	11	5.26%
Total Errors	209	100%

According to Table 3, the most common cause of omission errors is not using preposition in the sentence. Below is the example of missing of preposition:

S16: She was there to *listen me*. (listen to me).

The second cause is missing of verb to be. Below is the example:

S17: *He like* Aziz Sancar (He is like).

The third cause is missing of singular-plural.

S18: He plays *game* in his free time (games).

The fourth cause is missing of pronoun.

S19: Last *Tuesday called* me (Last Tuesday he called me).

The fifth cause is missing of article.

S20: She *is best* friend in my life (She is the best...).

Of the sixth errors are missing of verb, conjunction, modal, adverb, phrasal verb. Below are some examples of these errors:

S21: *We good* time together (We have good time together).

S22: *After, he* is very smart (After that, he is very smart).

S23: *You do* the same thing if you were him (You would do the same ...).

S24: His eyes *are sea* (His eyes are like sea).

S25: *We didn't get eachother* (We didn't get along/on well with eachother).

The most third common type of error in Surface Strategy Taxonomy found in the study was addition. They were concerned with not adding unnecessary words and phrases into the sentences. These types of errors related to addition can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Number of Errors related to Addition

Types of Errors in Addition	Frequency of Errors	Percentage of Errors
Article	38	33.63%
Singular-Plural	31	27.43%
Preposition	30	26.55%
The others (Verb, Conjunction, Modal, Adjective, Verb to be)	14	12.39%
Total Errors	113	100%

According to Table 4, the most common cause of omission errors is adding article into the sentence. Below is the example of addition of article:

S26: There is *a one* person (There is one or a person).

The second cause is adding plural -s which is unnecessary. Below is the example:

S27: *Peoples* love several friends. (People love ...).

The third cause is addition of preposition.

S28: We went to Alaçatı *in* last summer (We went to Alaçatı last summer).

S29: People need *to* Mercan (People need Mercan).

Among the forth errors are missing of verb, conjunction, modal, adjective, verb to be. Below are some examples of these errors:

S30: We have *been* gone through so many things together (We have gone through ...).

S31: She used to *be* want to be a physicist (She used to want to be a physicist).

S32: He can *be* rest (He can rest).

The least common type of error found in the exam papers was misordering. Only 30 of these errors were found amongst the 663 errors (4.52%). It suggests that only a few students with this type of Surface Strategy Taxonomy error. Some of these errors are as follows:

S33: My father *is name* Ahmet (My father's name is Ahmet).

S34: She has *brown straight* hair (She has straight brown hair).

S35: I love *so much him* (I love him so much).

S36: She never thinks what *should she wear* (She never thinks what she should wear).

S37: We will *all the time be friends* (We will be friends all the time).

S38: My father *grew up us* (My father grew us up).

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to analyse the freshman students' errors in written composition tasks and in this way to show how important the analysis of errors of students' written exam papers in order to guide the educators which methods and techniques should be applied.

The analysis of errors found a total of 663 words and phrases. Of all these errors, misinformation (n=311) was the most common type of error found in the students' exam papers according to Surface Strategy Taxonomy of errors. Omission (n=209), addition (n=113) and misordering (n=30) are the types of errors found successively. On the one hand, there are similar findings which had the errors in the same order. Mustafa, Kirana and Bahri (2017) has a study which had the same order of error types and its findings were found misinformation (72%), omission (14.2%) and addition (10.8%). In Miko's (2018) study, the types of errors were found misinformation (n=144), omission (n=107), addition (n=68) and misordering (n=18) successively. On the other hand, there are some findings which were not in parallel with this study's. One of them is Alfiyani's (2013) study, whose order of error types were omission (n=281), misinformation (n=189), addition (n=119) and misordering (n=6) successively. The other one is Tiarina's (2017) study, in which error types were different from this study in the sense of order as it started with omission (n=27) and continued with misinformation (n=16), the others were addition (n=12) and misordering (n=2). Hasan and Munandar's (2018) study, in which the least common type of errors were misordering (n=38) and addition (n=20). In the study of Keumala and Idami (2022), 30 female students of the tenth grade of a Senior High School in Aceh made the errors in the form of misordering for 29.4%; errors in omission for 27.5%; errors in addition for 21.8%; and errors in misinformation for 21.3%.

Misinformation errors can be classified as misspelling, wrong word choice, preposition, tense, word form, gerund-infinitive, pronoun, verb and subject-verb agreement in this study. Similar findings were found in Samur's (2018) study as having the most common errors in writing in this order: Faulty structure (n=60), misspelling (n=55) and wrong preposition (n=54). Quibal-Catabay's (2016) study showed that wrong word choice, tense, preposition and subject-verb agreement were the four most common errors. Karim et al. (2018) found out 431 errors in writing tasks of students, in which verb (n=82), tense (n=78), subject-verb agreement (n=56) and preposition (n=40) errors were the most common ones as grammatical errors.

Omission errors can be classified in the form of omission of preposition, verb to be, singular-plural, pronoun and article. In Özkayran's (2019) thesis, omission of verb to be (n=41), article (n=21), preposition (n=17), singular-plural (n=14) and verb (n=9) were top five errors in sense of omission. In Duygun and Karabacak's (2022) study, the number of omitted words was found at A1 level as 63 and 50 at the level of A2.

Çepni (2014) has a thesis, which found 638 errors totally in writing tasks of students. Of these errors, most common were preposition (n=131), tense (n=85) and article (n=81). According to Zheng and Park's (2013) study, among the top ten errors were verb, preposition errors, wrong sentence structure, article errors and wrong word form.

As we can understand from the common types of errors in these studies, the sources of errors are interlingual and intralingual errors. Students who learn a foreign language different from their mother tongue make an interlingual transfer mistake. Interlingual transfer is a significant source of inaccuracy for all learners (Brown, 2006). When foreign learners acquire a foreign language, the interference of their mother tongue can cause problems in foreign language learning process. In this study, students employed Turkish language to translate their sentences into English, which is incompatible with English rules and thus constitutes errors.

Intralingual transmission, on the other hand, results from overgeneralization of the rules. It happened when because the students had not fully grasped the regulation (Keumala & Idami, 2022). In this study, this source of errors is of significance. As seen in the study, the wrong usage, omission and addition of prepositions and articles are the most problematic errors. Turkish language has simpler application of prepositions while English has various prepositions such as at, on, in and so on. Thus, students may not know how and where to use prepositions and articles appropriately.

The following suggestions can be made based on the findings and comments of this study:

1. In short, we could say that making errors is usually done by the learners and it is unavoidable, either interlingual and intralingual. In order to minimize the errors or even to avoid them, English teachers and lecturers should facilitate EFL classroom with more appropriate and various ways of teaching and learning process.
2. English teachers and lecturers should emphasize lessons in improving the mechanics, grammar and sentence structure.
3. Having learned that it is those rules of English which are troublesome, students should make themselves familiar with those rules by learning and practicing rules of English grammar in the given order.
4. Since this study was conducted with a limited number of participants in a limited time, subsequent studies can be done using the same method of analysis with broader groups of learners at other levels of proficiency.
5. Also, further researches can explore the factors of errors of learners by obtaining the results of their motivation, attitude and beliefs so that teachers and lecturers can fix the problematic parts of the language during learning process.

Limitations

1. This study is limited to 60 engineering freshman students studying at Aydın Adnan Menderes University in 2023-2024 academic year.
2. The data obtained in this study is limited to the midterm written exam papers.

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Ethical Declaration and Committee Approval

In this research, the principles of scientific research and publication ethics were followed.

Proportion of the Author Contribution

The entire study was conducted by the author.