

## **Learners' Errors and their Evaluation: The Case of Filipino ESL Writers**

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### **Abstract**

The present study investigated the sentence-level errors of freshmen students at three proficiency levels and the aspects of writing that raters focused on while rating the essays. It views errors as valuable information for the following: For teachers, as it clues them on students' progress; for researchers as it gives them valuable data as to how language is acquired or learned; for learners, as it enables them to reflect on their learning. The data for the present study is based on the data collected for a previous study. One hundred fifty essays written by freshmen college students on their first week of classes in five private schools in Metro Manila (30 for each participating school) were collected, word-processed, and subjected to rating and coding or errors. Most of the findings of the present study corroborate the findings of previous studies on error analysis and essay evaluation—that sentence-level errors have a significant role in essay scores. The raters still have the grammar accuracy model when checking essays, although it is just considered secondary to other aspects of writing such as the ability to address the prompt and organize the ideas logically.

### **Introduction**

#### **Areas of Writing Research**

Writing teachers and researchers have always set their teaching and research lenses on the variables that describe successful second language writing vis-à-vis unsuccessful writing. Because of this preoccupation, a plethora of research has been undertaken as regards the role of L1 in L2 Writing (Cumming, 1990; Krapels, 1991),

L2 writers' characteristics and proficiency (Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Victori, 1999; Deane et al, 2008), L2 writing process/strategies (Arndt, 1987; Becker, 2003), L2 writing feedback/evaluation (Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2002, 2003; Goldstein, 2001, 2005) L2 writing instruction (Zhang & Zhou, 2002; Liu, 2003; Chen, 2005; Coombe & Barlow, 2004) and L2 writer's texts (Zhang, 1997; Hinkel, 1997; Hirose, 2003). In the analysis of L2 writers' texts, researchers focus on the rhetorical and linguistic features that impact essay scores in different linguistic backgrounds (Becker, 2010; Gustilo, 2011). These studies are significant in that they help us in understanding the complex factors that underlie proficient and less proficient writing.

### **Emphasis on Essay Evaluation**

In assessing essays, what do raters consider as more proficient and less proficient writing? Studies have established that factors such as content, rhetorical strategy or linguistic (grammar, spelling, vocabulary) and non-linguistic features (organization, style, content, etc.) can separate less proficient and more proficient writing. These factors, however, are weighed differently by raters depending on their background and experience (Kobayashi, n.d.; Weltig, n.d., Cumming et al., 2002). According to Weltig, ESL (English as second language), EFL (English as foreign language), and ENL (English as native language) raters weigh the aspects of writing differently. On the one hand, the ENL raters put more thrust on the non-language aspects (grammar and mechanics) and consider language-related issues as secondary in judging essays. On the other, ESL and EFL raters focus more on language errors.

### **Error Analysis**

As a corollary to this emphasis on essay evaluation, there is no wonder why almost inextricable in the analysis of L2 texts is the focus on errors that learners make in relation to their writing performance (Sarfraz, 2011; Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Kitao & Kitao, 2000). Previous studies have indicated that errors do significantly affect raters' evaluation of the overall quality of essays. For instance, Sweedler-Brown (1993) attributed the low scores of L2 essays for the

original than for the corrected essays to sentence-level errors. Kobayashi and Rinnert (1993) found that the same essays gained higher overall holistic scores when the errors were corrected. Kobayashi (n.d.) also found that language use errors and coherence breaks influenced the English teachers' (both native speaker and Japanese teachers) judgment in terms of content and clarity but not the Japanese university students' judgments. The error-free essays were praised as very good, but the error-laden essays were penalized with low scores.

### **Terms and Definitions of Errors**

Making errors is one of the most unavoidable things in the world. In language acquisition, learning, and teaching, error has been referred to and has been defined in many ways. Catalan (n.d.) reviewed the terms and definitions of error in Error Studies and consolidated these definitions using the communicative event framework (addresser; addressee; code, norm, and message; and setting). From the perspective of norm or well-formedness of a sentence, error is regarded as "an infringement or deviation of the code of the formal system of communication through which the message is conveyed" (Catalan, n.d. p. 66). Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982 p. 139 as cited in Catalan) corroborates this definition by saying that error is the "flawed side of learner speech or writing that deviates from selected norm of mature language performance" (p. 7). Errors are alterations of the rules of the accepted norm and are termed as surface errors which may be further classified as omission errors, addition errors, misformation errors, wrong order, spelling error, systems error, and the like. Also the terms overt and covert errors (Corder, 1973, Faerch, 1984, & Medges, 1989 as cited in Catalan, n.d.) may be added in the list. The former refers to errors that are not observable within the surface but implied in the message, and the latter refers to those that are clearly identifiable in the surface (Catalan n.d., p. 8).

## **Benefits of Error Analysis**

Error Analysis (EA) is concerned with the analyses of the errors made by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors (James, 1998). Stephen Pit Corder's (1967) seminal work "The Significance of Learner's Errors" has given EA a significant turn in that it views errors as valuable information for three beneficiaries: for teachers, it clues them on the progress of the students; for researchers, it provides evidence as to how language is acquired or learned; for learners themselves, it gives them resources in order to learn (Corder, 1967 as cited in Maicusi, Maicusi, & Lopez, 2000, p. 170). With this approach errors are regarded as resources for learning and teaching rather than as "flaws" which connote failure in the acquisition process and, therefore, needs to be eradicated. Despite the criticisms against EA such as complete reliance on errors per se and not seeing the whole picture of the learners' linguistic behaviour by looking also at the nonerrors (Gass & Selinker, 1994; Maicusi, Maicusi, & Lopez, 2000), EA has contributed comprehensively to Second Language Acquisition Theory and second language writing instruction.

## **Aim of the Study**

The present study aims at investigating the sentence-level errors of freshmen students at three proficiency levels and the aspects of writing that raters focus on while rating the essays. Specifically, the present study aims at providing answers to the following research questions:

1. Do writers with higher levels of writing proficiency commit the same errors that low proficiency writers do?
2. Are there significant differences in the frequency of errors committed by low, mid, and high proficient writers?
3. Which of these errors significantly decrease essay scores?
4. What aspects of writing that affect essay scores did the raters focus on while rating the essays?

## Method

### The Essays

The data for the present study is based on the data collected for a previous study. One hundred fifty essays written by freshmen college students on their first week of classes in five private schools in Metro Manila (30 for each participating school) were collected, word-processed, and subjected to rating and coding or errors.

### Rating

Three independent raters who are trained ESL teachers rated the essays using a holistic scale patterned after the TOEFL writing section and SAT scoring guides (Gustilo, 2011). Kendall's Tau coefficient of concordance (.71,  $p < .05$ ) indicated that the raters highly agreed on the ratings they gave on the essays. An average score was given to each essay, which was the basis for classifying the essays into different levels of proficiency (Karasawa, 2003). Essays with 1 and 2 scores were placed in level 1 or low proficiency; essays with 2 and 3 scores in level 2 or mid proficiency; essays with 3 and 4 scores in level 3 or high proficiency.

### Survey Questionnaire

The raters were asked to fill out open-ended questions regarding their focus while rating and their perspectives on the different aspects of writing that impact essay scores. Their replies provided data on the qualitative analysis of essay evaluation for the present study.

### Coding/Error Categories

Another three English teachers (two ESL teachers and one is a native English speaker) coded the sentence-level errors found in the essays. I prepared a list of errors based on the findings of previous studies (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1996; Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Kitao & Kitao, 2000); but the list expanded as more errors were

identified by the coders. The coders had to discuss some of the tricky structures before they were coded as errors.

### **Trial Sessions**

Both the rating of essays and the coding of errors underwent trial sessions during which disagreements or questions regarding the rubric used to rate essays and the list of error types were discussed. The raters and the coders also acted as the validators of the instruments used for the present study.

### **Data Analysis**

Frequency counts, standard deviations, MANOVA and ANOVA results, and data from regression analyses were used to answer research questions one to three. Excerpts from the essays were used to qualitatively exemplify the errors in three levels of proficiency. Survey replies were used to answer research question four.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Research Question 1: Do writers with higher levels of writing proficiency commit the same errors that low proficiency writers make?**

The top five most frequently occurring errors that are distributed in three different levels of writing proficiency are comma (unnecessary or missing comma, missing comma after an introductory clause or phrase, missing comma before a nonrestrictive clause) 16.6 %, Word choice (wrong word form/word choice) 13.5%, Verbs (S-V Agreement, verb tense, verb form) 11.8%, Capitalization 11.3 %, and punctuation and sentence structure (fragment and run on sentences) 9.4 %. All three levels have errors on these aforementioned categories. However, out of the 28 error types identified in the essays, only 24 types appeared in level 3 essays. Level 3 essays have no errors in pronoun-antecedent agreement, wrong punctuation (e.g. question mark instead of a period), missing hyphen, and unnecessary

word. Below are sample sentences with errors. The errors are indicated by an underscore or italics.

<i>Errors</i>	<i>Sample sentences from Level 1 essays</i>	<i>Sample sentences from Level 2 essays</i>	<i>Sample sentences from Level 3 essays</i>
<b>Comma</b> <i>Unnecessary or missing comma</i>	I cannot understand the people there, because they communicated in their native language.	I spoke in my native language even though, I know how to communicate in English	English is important in one's academic, professional and personal life.
<b>Missing comma after an introductory clause/phrase</b>	For many years, English has been used in the Philippines as a second language.	After ten years of education using English as the medium of instruction, we are expected to show ease in using English.	When you have mastered the basics of English grammar, you will gain confidence in writing and in speaking the English language.
<b>Missing comma before a non-restrictive clause</b>	They study in a language center, which is operated by noneducators.	I need to have a good command of the English language, which has been my goal ever since.	My English teacher emphasized to us that we need to master English, which is our tool in achieving academic success.
<b>Word choice/form</b>	Writing and speaking in English is very <i>difficulty</i> .	The people there take English lessons <i>irregardless</i> of the cost.	We need English so that we can <i>expand</i> ourselves to other people.
<b>Verbs</b> <i>SV Agreement</i>	My classmates <i>speaks</i> in Tagalog all the time.	My teacher <i>teach</i> us the basics of the language	Those who have been studying the English language <i>is</i> expected to have already gained higher levels of competence.
<b>Verb tense</b>	Last year, I enrol, in this school because I want, to be successful in my future career.	He <i>taught</i> us everyday, with patience and dedication.	Yesterday, Mr. Laroza <i>assigns</i> us a big task.
<b>Unnecessary Shift</b>	I concluded that English was very important and <i>is</i> significant in the life every individual.	We wrote reflections and <i>make</i> a role play once in a while.	My high school teacher told us to keep our goals in mind, and he

<i>Cont.</i>			<i>emphasizes</i> that we need to be proficient in English.
<b>Verb form</b>	I was <i>suppose</i> to submit the essays on time.	My teacher was not <i>satisfy</i> with my essays.	I have <i>overcame</i> the stress that goes along with learning it.
<b>Capitalization</b>	For what I saw from my experience, <i>english</i> is just part of our lives.	So <i>i</i> conclude that <i>english</i> is just like our water and food because we need every single part of our life.	Needless to say, <i>english</i> rules!
<b>Punctuation and sentence structure: run on and fragment sentences</b>	Some things are better said in English, <i>it</i> sounds formal.	The usage is different, <i>it</i> shows a different structure.	Speaking in English is important. <i>Because</i> it brings you a lot of benefits.

## Research Question 2: Are there significant differences in the errors committed by low, mid, and high proficient writers?

Table 1  
*Means of Error Categories in Three Proficiency Levels*

Error Categories	Proficiency Levels					
	Level 1		Level 2		Level 3	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Noun endings	1.52	1.55	0.97	1.11	0.87	0.89
Articles	1.68	1.47	1.91	1.86	1	1
Subject Verb Agreement	0.947	1.137	1.095	1.1	0.85	0.89
Verb Tenses	1.23	1.53	1.94	2.14	1.14	1.06
Shift in Verb	0.6	1.68	0.17	0.65	0	0
Verb Form	0.97	1.6	0.78	1	0.57	0.53
Word form	1.6	2.5	0.93	1.67	0.42	0.78
Word choice	<b>3.92</b>	<b>3.67</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>3.02</b>	<b>2.57</b>	<b>1.9</b>
Preposition	2.3	2.03	2.43	2.31	1.7	2.21
Pronoun Antecedent Agreement	0.28	0.69	0.27	0.8	0	0
Pronoun shift Intersentence	0.92	0.99	0.83	1.14	0.42	0.78



*Cont. Table 1*

Pronoun shift						
Intrasentence	0.23	0.63	0.26	0.65	0.14	0.37
Subject omitted	0.026	0.16	0.15	0.67	0	0
Capitalization	4.92	5.73	4.19	5.1	1.57	2.14
Apostrophe	0.39	0.78	0.31	1.07	0	0
Hyphen	0.36	1.19	0.2	0.5	0	0
Spelling	0.92	1.17	0.97	1.22	0.42	0.78
Fragment	1	1.54	1.18	1.6	0.85	0.37
Run on	1.78	2.29	2.04	1.97	1.42	1.61
Comma	0.6	1.02	0.73	1.1	0.85	1
Comma intro clause	3	2.7	3.96	3.19	1.14	0.89
Comma nonrestrictive	1.47	1.98	1.51	2.1	1.14	1.46
Parallelism	0.39	0.49	0.43	1.21	0.2	0.48
Word order	0.5	0.92	0.43	0.81	0.42	0.53
Wrong pronoun	0.026	0.16	0.047	0.32	0.14	0.37
Wrong punctuation	0.28	0.73	0.26	0.81	0	0
Missing word	0.73	1.08	0.54	1.13	0.28	0.48
Unnecessary word	0.26	0.75	0.28	0.81	0	0

As shown in Table 1, the means of level 3 errors are smaller compared with the means in level 1 and 2 errors. For example, in the word choice category, level 1 essays have the biggest mean (3.92), level 2 essays have 3.65, and level 3 essays have the smallest mean. However, the MANOVA results indicated that the three proficiency levels do not significantly differ on error categories as a whole,  $F(60)=1.15$ , n. s.

### **Research Question 3: Which of these errors significantly decrease essay scores?**

The data were analyzed by multiple regression, using as regressors are the factors of error categories. The regression was a rather poor fit (adjusted  $R^2 = 12.40\%$ ), and the overall relationship was not significant,  $F(30, 104) = 1.63$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). With other variables held constant, essay proficiency levels were positively related to word choice and cap, decreasing by 0.21 for every extra point of word choice, by 0.35 for every extra point of cap. The effect of word choice

and cap were significant,  $t(104) = 2.28$ ,  $t(104)=3.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Word choice and errors in capitalization significantly decrease essay scores (See Appendix A for the results of regression analysis).

It is interesting to note that, overall, sentence-level errors did not conclusively predict essay scores. This finding is, perhaps, explained partly by the raters' survey replies which indicated that, for them, sentence-level errors are secondary factors that influence their ratings of essay. As for the individual error types that emerged as having significant effect on essay scores, this too may be partly corroborated by the survey data—two out of three raters indicated that they tend to focus on word choice and punctuation and mechanics (along with other factors) while rating essays.

#### **Research Question 4: What aspects of writing that affect essay scores did the raters focus on while rating the essays?**

The three raters were asked to fill out an open ended questionnaire regarding the focus of their assessment and their perception of these aspects when rating essays. The discussion below reports their qualitative responses on the questions:

Question 1. When marking students essays what aspects of writing (based on the rubric: content, support to thesis statement/addressing the prompt, organization of ideas, language use and errors) did you tend to focus on ?

Rater 1:

I generally focused on what the student is saying about the topic and how he/she can competently organize his/her ideas; on the language part, I look at word choice, subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent usage, and sentence structure.

Rater 2

Ability to address the prompt and support the claims; choice of words and punctuation and mechanics.

### Rater 3

I focused on organization of introduction, body, and conclusion; Content-sufficiency of information; subject-verb agreement, punctuation and mechanics.

As seen in the above responses they unanimously indicated that they had focused both on language and non-language aspects of writing. On the language part, they likely focused on the following: word choice, agreement usage, and sentence structure. Punctuations were also given premium by the raters as two out of three indicated it in their replies.

Q 2: How do grammatical errors in the students' essays affect your marking?

The respondents still have the grammar accuracy model when checking essays, although it is just secondary to other aspects of writing such as the ability to address the prompt and organize the ideas logically. It appears that the effect of errors depends on whether it is grave or minor, as shown in their responses below:

Rater 1: The weight is not as much as the content and the ability to organize the ideas. But grammar has always a certain percentage in the overall rating.

Rater 2: They have a bearing on the essay score but not as much as the content and organization. It depends on the frequency and nature of errors.

Rater 3: Minor errors do not affect my rating; but when they are too many, I tend to give lower marks.

Q.3. What features or criteria do you expect to find in the students' essays for you to give them a perfect or an almost perfect score?

Again, logical organization, clarity of expression, effective use of language, ability to target the prompt and grammar accuracy are the often-repeated aspects of writing that are given emphasis by the

raters. Two out of three indicated that they still give room for grammatical errors to take place in essays, as indicated in their responses below:

Rater 1: I give high scores to essays that show good organization, good command of the language, and good content. It has to have minimal grammatical and punctuation errors.

Rater 2: Good content; coherent organization; effective use of language; correct grammar and mechanics /correct punctuation usage; effective word choice

Rater: Cohesion—good transitions and effective flow of ideas; structurally organized; enough supporting details; correct grammar and mechanics; intellectually appealing; and college-level vocabulary; minor lapses in grammar

Q. 4. Please provide an explanation why you tend to give value on the aspects of writing you focused on while rating.

The present study, unlike the previous studies, addressed the question as to why raters valued the aspects of writing they focused on when rating essays. It is interesting to note that their grammar accuracy model is evident, but their acceptance of its subsistence as an almost default thing among ESL writers enabled them to treat sentence-level language errors with leniency.

Rater 1: As long as we are dealing with second language learners, there will always be problems with language errors. So I go for their ability to address the prompt and organize their ideas more than their ability to create error-free texts.

Rater 2: Content and organization are more important to me. A student who is given an instruction on how to organize his/her essay may quickly learn how to do it. But asking him/her to undo his/her grammar errors may not be done overnight.

Rater 3. Grammar and Mechanics accuracy cannot be learnt in one setting. That is why we have to give more weight on the students' ability to address the prompt, give supporting details, and organize them into different parts of an essay.

The qualitative results of the survey corroborate some of the results in the quantitative analysis of sentence-level errors. As discussed earlier, the three proficiency levels do not significantly differ on error categories as a whole, giving us a hint that essays in higher levels of proficiency (2 and 3) seem to have shared almost the same errors with essays in proficiency level 1. This is because the raters seem to have given room for errors even in essays that were rated high. These essays meet the other criteria which are given more emphasis by the raters such as logical organization, clarity of expression, effective use of language, and ability to target the prompt. Word choice significantly decreases essay score apparently because the raters were unanimous in according it an important role in essay score.

Generally, most of the findings of the present study corroborate the findings of previous studies on error analysis and essay evaluation – that sentence-level errors have a significant role in essay scores. However, the present study's finding that word choice and capitalization errors are the significant predictors of essay scores compared with other error types contradicts the findings of previous research: Sweedler- Brown (1993) concluded that article errors were more damaging in predicting essay scores; Weltig (n.d.) claimed that verb formation errors are more damaging to writing scores than any error types because they cause more problems in the transmission of meaning. More studies are needed to verify these conflicting findings.

In the meantime, ESL teachers have to focus on the troubling results of the present study. It seems that students need to be given more effective strategies on how to enlarge their vocabulary – an important aspect in surviving today's academic and global world that placed more emphasis on the use of the English language as a major medium for instruction and communication. Next, teachers need to remind students that although punctuation or mechanics errors do not greatly impede meaning in the sentence as compared with other

language aspects, they are regarded as important; and raters may find these errors irritating and damaging to the overall quality of essays.

Equally important is the understanding that although more language teachers and academicians have become open to the place of World Englishes in composition (Canagarajah, 2006) and the descriptivist approach to language teaching, the emphasis on grammar or language accuracy when it comes to the written texts should not be weakened. Although the use of local variety in writing may be allowed, familiarity with the standard usage is still beneficial. There is no harm in being competent in both codes.

Table 2  
*Multiple Regression Table Predicting Essay Scores*

	Beta	SE Beta	B	SE of B	t(104)	p-level
Noun Endings	-0.01	0.1	0	0.07	-0.06	0.94
Article	-0.09	0.11	-0.05	0.06	-0.78	0.43
Syllable	0.05	0.1	0.04	0.08	0.48	0.62
Verb tense	-0.04	0.1	-0.02	0.05	-0.43	0.66
Shift Verb Tense	-0.22	0.12	-0.2	0.1	-1.89	0.06
Verb Form	0.02	0.1	0.01	0.06	0.16	0.86
Word Form	-0.09	0.1	-0.05	0.04	-0.97	0.33
<b>Word Choice</b>	<b>-0.21*</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>-0.08*</b>	<b>0.03</b>	<b>-2.27</b>	<b>0.02</b>
Preposition	0.02	0.12	0.01	0.05	0.15	0.87
Pronoun Antecedent Agreement	-0.15	0.1	-0.19	0.12	-1.52	0.12
Pronoun						
Shift Intersentence	-0.08	0.1	-0.07	0.08	-0.75	0.45
Pronoun						
Shift intrasentence	0.13	0.11	0.21	0.17	1.23	0.21
Subject Omitted	0.09	0.1	0.15	0.17	0.84	0.39
<b>Capitalization</b>	<b>-0.35**</b>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>-0.08</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>-3.52</b>	<b>0.00</b>
Apostrophe	-0.03	0.12	-0.03	0.11	-0.28	0.77
HYP	0.16	0.12	0.21	0.15	1.31	0.19
Spelling	0.03	0.1	0.02	0.08	0.28	0.77
Fragments	0.04	0.1	0.03	0.06	0.4	0.68
Run on	-0.09	0.1	-0.04	0.04	-0.88	0.37
Comma	0.01	0.1	0.01	0.08	0.06	0.94
Comma After Introduction	-0.15	0.1	-0.06	0.03	-1.55	0.12

Cont. Table 2

Comma						
Nonrestrictive	0.15	0.1	0.07	0.04	1.47	0.14
Parallelism	0.11	0.1	0.17	0.14	1.18	0.23
Word Order	0.08	0.1	0.104	0.106	0.88	0.37
Contraction	-0.06	0.1	-0.04	0.07	-0.6	0.54
Wrong Pronoun	0.07	0.1	0.45	0.62	0.71	0.47
Wrong punctuation	-0.1	0.1	-0.16	0.16	-1	0.31
Missing word	-0.08	0.1	-0.08	0.09	-0.81	0.41
Unnecessary word	0.03	0.09	0.04	0.1	0.32	0.74

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