

Full Length Research Paper

Verb-form errors in EAP writing

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This study was conducted to identify and describe the written verb-form errors found in the EAP writing of 39 second year learners pursuing a three-year Diploma Programme from a public university in Malaysia. Data for this study, which were collected from a written 350-word discursive essay, were analyzed to determine the types and frequency of verb form errors. The subjects' verb-form errors were identified and categorized under four category types: omission, addition, misformation and ordering. The findings revealed that the subjects made the most number of errors in the omission verb-forms in the area of the third person singular verb (-s/-es/-ies). This occurred when they tried to make the verb agree with the singular subject or plural subject by dropping the -s inflection from the third person singular verb or making the verb plural by adding the -s inflection, respectively. The frequencies of errors of addition and misformation were almost the same while verb-form errors of ordering had the least number of errors. The copula "be" verb was a major problematic area. The subjects tended to over-generalize and, hence, either omitted the "be" verb or used it wrongly. Errors in writing will affect the readability and quality of the piece of work. So, in this light, the subjects' verb-form errors have to be identified so that they can be equipped with the basics of producing error-free writing.

Key words: EAP writing, errors, omission, addition, misformation, ordering.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia is the dominant language and is also the medium of instruction in all schools. English which plays an important role in the country is taught only as a second language. As a result, the Malaysian English learners including the subjects in this study are more exposed to the redundancy-reduced variety of the English Language used locally. George (1979) points out that, "For the Malay and Chinese students, their verbs are not inflected for tense or person". Even though it is unrealistic to aim at perfect native competence for these learners, their level of proficiency should be reasonably good to ensure effective international communication and intelligibility.

"Teaching English Language is a big challenge in this country" (Malaysia) (Jalaluddin, 2008). This research seeks to explore the verb-form errors encountered by the learners who are now in a tertiary institution in Malaysia and who have been introduced to the English Language early at their kindergarten or primary school days. According to Article 152 of the Malaysian constitution, English has been accorded as the second language which these learners study until they reach Form 5. However, even after 11 to 13 continuous years of learning English, these learners' proficiency level is not satisfactory and they have not yet mastered the basic grammatical rules. The quality of a piece of writing is often evaluated by the number of errors so the numerous verb-form errors made by the learners inevitably contributed to the poor quality of writing produced.

Every learner needs to acquire basic grammatical knowledge in order to communicate fluently and effectively in English whether in the written or spoken form (Tan, 2005). However, this proves to be an area of great difficulty for many students, and the students in this university where this study was conducted were no ex-

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Abbreviations: EAP, English for academic purpose; L1, first or native language; L2, second language; SVA, subject-verb agreement; ETAS, English tense-aspect system.

ception. A number of studies have been conducted in the area of errors made and it has been revealed that verb-form errors contributed to the highest percentage of errors that students made.

Bhatia (1974) conducted an error analysis study at the University of New Delhi. The subjects were second year Bachelor of Arts students aged about 17, with Hindi as their mother tongue. They wrote a 250-word free composition for their regular class work which showed that verb-forms and tense sequence made up 40% of the errors. Elliot (1983) examined and identified errors in descriptive (non-scientific) writing of Singapore's Nanyang University graduates in science and mathematics. The 20 candidates wrote two essays of 150 words each. There was a control group of 20 candidates from the University of Singapore. The situation in Singapore is similar to that in Malaysia. Learners attempt to learn the correct form of the second language (L2) in an environment where the first language (L1) and a deviant form of L2 are used. The standard form of L2 exists only in the classroom. As such, the non-standard English that is used by the majority of the population has an influence on the standard form of L2. "In Singapore, communication in English is often achieved without the grammatically correct use of verbs" (Elliot, 1983). The two groups surveyed by Elliot showed difficulty with verbs. This situation is similar to that faced by the subjects in this present study.

Vongthieres (1974) studied selected English grammatical difficulties of 30 advanced Thai students at Ohio State University. She analysed their informal essays and discovered that errors in the verb system accounted for the highest frequency of errors (32.4 per cent). This was sub-divided into other categories with tenses (44.8 per cent) as the highest percentage. Krairussamee's (1982) analysis of the errors made in the compositions written by 153 first year university students in Bangkok also revealed that verb-form errors were errors of the highest frequency (32.56 per cent). This was sub-divided into different categories with tense and verb-forms having the highest percentage at 55.24 per cent.

The objectives of this study are firstly to identify and categorise the types of verb-form errors that learners of English for Academic Purpose (EAP) made in their writing, and secondly, to describe these written error verb-forms.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study involved 39 second year learners from a public university in Malaysia pursuing a three-year diploma programme. Nineteen (19) of them were from the Faculty of Business Studies while another twenty (20) were from the Faculty of Accountancy. They were aged between twenty to twenty-five years and they were Bumiputeras, the native people of Malaysia. They were from different racial groups with the majority of them being Malays, and the rest were from the indigenous races from Sabah and Sarawak. Even though they were from very diverse backgrounds and spoke varied mother tongues, all of them were able to communicate in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia, and English.

All these subjects have spent more than a decade studying the language in schools. English was taught using the implicit way as the emphasis was on functional and conversational English. While in the university, the subjects had to spend their first three semesters – equivalent to one and a half years – studying proficiency-level English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The subjects in this study were taking a six-hour weekly EAP course taught by the 2 researchers when the data were collected. This course equipped them with the necessary writing skills for completing their reports and dissertations.

Data for this study were collected using a written essay test. The data were analysed to determine the types and frequency of verb form errors the subjects made in their writing. During the test, the subjects were given reading materials on a specific topic which was discursive in nature, and then they were asked to produce a 350-word essay on the topic in one and a half hours. Their essays were collected and then the verb-form errors were identified and categorized following Dulay et. al.'s (1982) classification under:

- (a) omission;
- (b) addition;
- (c) misformation; and
- (d) ordering.

Errors of omission are made when compulsory elements are omitted. These occur mainly in tense markers or number markers such as the omission of the grammatical morphemes, for example, the omissions of the -ed marker in the simple past tense verbs, such as, "Yesterday, the car knock(-) the man down" and the -s marker in the verbs after the third person singular nouns or pronouns, for example, "Student think(-)". Very often, the subjects may omit the "be" verb in a sentence for example, "Most of us (-) very weak." The -ing form may be omitted from a gerund, for example, "Swim is my hobby."

Errors of addition are made when unnecessary elements are present with the use of redundant markers, such as, putting the -s marker on verbs after the plural pronouns/nouns in the simple present tense, for example, "They likes..." and "Students wants...". Double marking refers to the marking of two items for the same feature such as in tense. The examples are "he doesn't respects," or "The student didn't plagiarized." The past tense -ed marker may be redundantly added in cases where it is incorrect to do so, for example, "She 'cuted' the fruits last night." Students may redundantly add -s, -ed or -ing after a modal verb which should be followed by the base verb, for example, "It will affects", "Students will learned" and "Some of them will using..." The 'be' verb may be redundantly placed before the main verbs, for example, "They are prefer copying" and "This is happens". An infinitive is required after the word "to" but students may put a redundant, -s, -ed or -ing after it, for example, "We have to passes..." "It is important to submitted..." and "The students like to doing ..."

Errors of misformation occur when the wrong forms of the verbs are chosen in place of the right ones. These commonly occur in cases of subject-verb agreement (SVA) when the wrong verb-forms are selected, for example, "Student are...". "The reasons is..." and "University have...". The past tense form of the verbs may be wrongly used to express present states or condition, for example, "Nowadays we knew...". Alternatively, the present tense forms may be used to refer to past actions such as, "The students always copied...". The past participle form of the verb seems difficult for the subjects and they make errors such as, "The students have wrote...". Sometimes, the subjects may use the wrong form of the word, for example, the use of the nouns instead of the correct verbs, for example, "The students plagiarism".

Errors of ordering are made when the correct elements are wrongly sequenced, for example, in the use of phrasal verbs such as, "I pick up her," instead of "I pick her up." Moreover, the subjects are often confused when they use reported or indirect speech as

Table 1. Classification of learners' verb-form errors in writing.

Classification/ Identification of errors
Omission
Addition
Misformation
Ordering

they tend to follow the same word order as used in direct speech or question form when they are reporting, for example, "They asked me where was the girl." The subjects sometimes use the wrong word order for questions such as, "Why most students do plagiarise?" "Why some of the lecturers didn't take any actions?"

For this study, the researchers identified the errors under the four categories of omission, addition, misformation and ordering as is shown in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentage of the different errors made that is omission, addition, misformation and ordering. Errors of omission had the highest number of occurrences, that is, 141 times or 46% of all the errors made. Errors of addition were 84 times making up 27% of the errors. The number of misformation errors was 77 times making up 25% of the total errors, and errors of ordering were the least, at 6 times consisting of only 2% of all errors. Figure 1 shows the percentages of the four types of errors made in descending order from the highest to the lowest.

In terms of omission verb-form errors shown in Figure 2, the most number of errors was found to be omission of the third person singular *-s/-es/-ies* and *be* verb at 65 and 55 times, respectively. The omission of the *-ing* and *-ed* forms were minimal at 8 and 13 times, respectively. This was because the nature of the discursive essay elicited mostly the present tenses. Celce-Murcia and Larson-Freeman (1983) identified this problem on the omission of the third person singular inflection as one of the four problems on SVA forms in their checklist of troublesome cases. Meanwhile, Pilleux (2003) rationalized that learners sometimes commit this type of errors when they omit the *-s* inflection from the third person singular verb in their attempt to make the verb agree with the singular subject like the subjects in this study using "he make..." and "it seem...". Alternatively, they also overuse the *-s* inflection as plural marking by trying to "pluralise" the verbs by adding the *-s* inflections to make them agree with the plural subjects such as "we starts..." and "they likes..."

In English, it is a mandatory rule that the verb must agree with the subject. A singular subject takes a singular verb whereas a plural subject takes a plural verb. Take for instance, the third person pronouns such as "he, she and it" taking a singular verb with the *-s* inflection as in "The boy//He/She/It eats". On the other hand, the plural subject

Table 2. Frequencies and percentage of verb-form errors in subjects' writing.

No.	Classification of SVA error forms	Number	Percentage
1	Omission	141	46
2	Addition	84	27
3	Misformation	77	25
4	Ordering	6	2

and pronouns such as "I, We, You and They" take the stem form of the verbs. The conditions for using the third person singular *-s/-es/ies* inflection are complicated because the students have to simultaneously identify the relevant contexts for number distinctions and manipulate the elements that affect the number agreement relationship.

First, the subject must be in a certain person and number and the predication has to be in a certain mood and tense. It is not easy to explain the rule, for example, if the lecturer tells the subject that the *-s/-es/ies* inflection is used in the verbs after the third person singular, this may be misleading. There are many instances when this is not so, for example, the use of questions that begins with "does". The *-s/-es* inflection precedes the subjects and the stem forms follow the subjects, for example, "Does he copy?" The main verbs that come after "does not" in the negative forms are also in the infinitive, for example, "He does not copy." For the third person singular present tense that comes after the use of the modal auxiliary, the infinitive form is also used such as "She can write." If lecturers give the wrong explanations or make contradictory statements, the learners may get even more confused. In English, there are many exceptions to the general rule such as the use in question and negative forms as well as its use after the modal verbs. In addition, the influence of the mother tongue and the national language which does not require any marking of person or number makes it difficult for the subjects to master the subject verb agreement forms in English. The findings in this study support George (1972) who stated that, "In practice, the stem + s" form gives a lot of trouble to teachers and learners in classes where the learner's mother tongue does not have verb inflections. Though the learner experiences its occurrence very frequently and it is drilled to excess, its lack of significance often prevents its acceptance into the learner's permanent memory store as a third person singular subject association."

In the case of the subjects who speak mainly the Malay Language which is the medium of instruction in Malaysia, there is no SVA form in the language, for example, "Ali pergi ke pasar" (Ali go to the market) and "Mereka pergi ke pasar" (They go to the market). The stem forms of the verbs are often used in all contexts regardless of tense or number. "Most Asian languages use the stem forms of nouns and verbs in all contexts so that both the inflec-

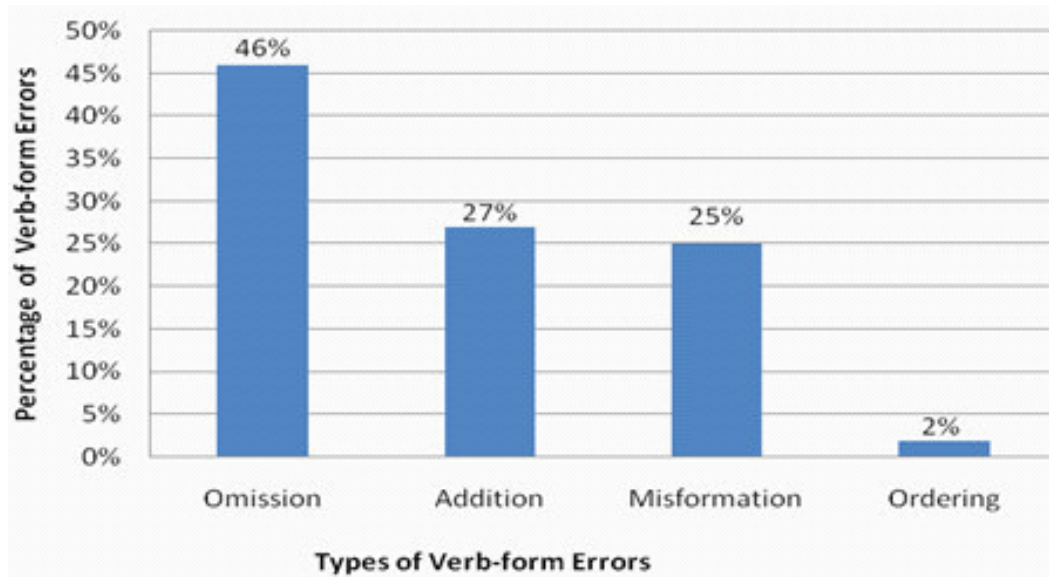


Figure 1. Classifications of verb-forms errors in subjects' writing.

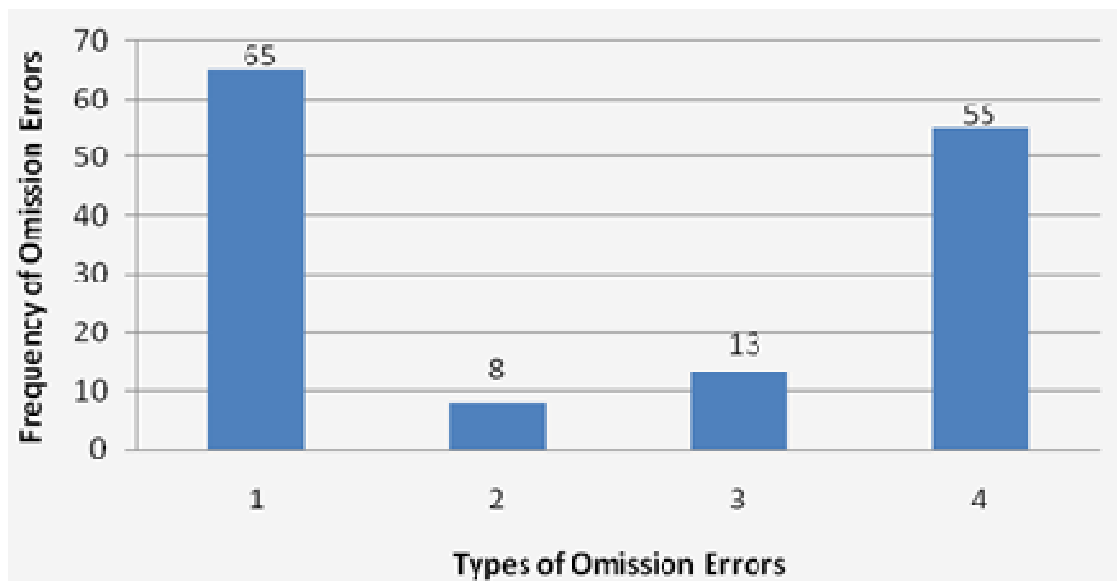


Figure 2. Frequencies of subjects' omission verb-form errors. Omission of the third person singular "-s/es/ies"; Omission of "-ing"; Omission of "-ed"; Omission of be-verb.

tions of English and the concepts behind them seem to convey redundant information" (George, 1972). This was further supported by Nair (1990) who stated, "In English, the insertion or non-insertion of -s to show number in the verb structure is redundant. To the Malay student, this rule in English does not hinder his communicative ability to any large extent." This would explain why the subjects in this study made gross errors in their use of the SVA forms as during the process of writing, interference from the mother tongue and the medium of instruction in

schools that is, the Malay Language, would affect how they used the SVA forms correctly.

It must be noted in the case of these EAP subjects, good writing requires them to produce grammatically error-free pieces of work as surface errors distract readers. This means that they have to be equipped with the basics of writing grammatically correct sentences which will in no way mar or distort the meaning of their writing.

It was noticed that the subjects often used the stem

forms of the verbs in order to simplify the target language rules. This reduced the linguistic burden or learning load. The subjects used this simplification process that increased the generality of rules by extending their range of application and dropping rules of limited applicability. They tried to construct an optimum grammar, that is, grammar in which the least number of rules did the maximum amount of work. Thus, it is not surprising that most of them did not master the verb forms in English. The rule for the third person singular present tense in English is redundant and unnecessary for communication since it does not affect the meaning of the sentence if it is omitted. So, this rule is often not applied by ESL learners. Richards (1985) pointed out that over-generalisation may be the result of the learners reducing their linguistic burden. With the omission of the third person -s inflection, over-generalisation removes the necessity for concord, thus relieving the "learner of considerable effort". Duskova (1969) explains, "since all grammatical persons take the same zero verbal ending except the third person singular in the present tense, which is the only verbal form with a distinctive verbal personal ending (apart from the anomalous "am"), omission of the -s in the third person singular may be accounted for by the heavy pressure for all the other endless forms". Rashid et al. (2004) maintained that this could probably explain why their learners omitted the third person singular subject verb and focused on the verb stem which held the intended core meaning; in order to store their English linguistic items for later retrieval. This released the learners from the burden of having to remember both the singular and plural verbs but inevitably caused them to make errors in concord as the stem form was the one most likely to be used.

Moreover, it was not easy for the subjects to master the use of the copula verb "be". The "be" verb was often omitted and if it was used, it was not done correctly as is shown by the examples given. The verb "be" is difficult to use because it exists in eight different forms (am, is, are, was, were, be, been and being). Five of these forms do not resemble the stem form and it must agree in person, number and tense with the subject. Thus, many students are confused with its use as there are various conditions to be met to enable the appropriate forms to be used. Dalrymple (as cited in Kusutani n.d.) also discovered that the same problem of missing copula "be" occurs amongst Japanese students who were not familiar with it. For the verb "have", it has three forms: "have, has and had". "Have" is often inflected in the third person singular present tense and becomes "has" but this inflected form is often rejected for "have" which is the stem form. Ho (1973) pointed out that "lack of subject-verb agreement often involves forms of "be" and "have" functioning either as full or auxiliary verbs. This has been traced to the fact that both have irregular forms." In this present study, the subjects came up with errors like, "Student have..." "It have..." and "They has..."

Here, the subjects also made numerous errors in the concord of number between subject and verb which according to Pilleux (2003) and Rashid et al., (2004) has been considered as the most important type of concord in English. The subject of the sentence determines the concord, and hence, the verb-forms that allow a distinction between singular and plural forms are dependent on whether the subject is singular or plural. Jarvie (as cited in Rashid et al., 2004)) explains that with concord, there is unity among all the grammatical units. This means that in concord, a singular subject will always precede a singular verb, and a plural subject will precede a plural verb. The subjects were unable to use this form of SVA correctly and they made errors such as "lecturer mark...", "student speak...", "students writes..." and "people says...". It is important for language teachers and lecturers to teach the use of the third person singular in the simple present tense. However, they must be aware of the danger of hypercorrection, for example, over-emphasis and drilling intensively. This usage may cause students to use it inappropriately in cases where it is incorrect to do so, for example the insertion of -s/-es to verbs after the plural pronouns or nouns, such as, "They goes to school by school bus." and "The passengers likes to ride in his taxi" (Wee, 1995).

In the case of addition errors shown in Figure 3, the subjects made the most errors for addition of -s/-es/ies to verbs after the plural nouns (26 times), addition of the "be" verb (23 times) and addition of the -ing forms (16 times). Examples of addition of the "be" verb include, "The students are prefer...", "It is happens..." and so on.

Wiener (1981) suggested that "those who violate the system of agreement will require instruction in the differences between the -s/-es inflection for the verb and for the noun, and will need to develop a sense of when to use the -s inflection at the end of the verbs. A good syllabus provides instruction in subject-verb recognition so you have a foundation in key grammatical concepts upon which to build."

For the misformation errors shown in Figure 4, the wrong forms of the verbs are used, for example, the use of "are" for "is" was 15 times, the use of "is" for "are" was 8 times. In addition, it was not easy for the subjects to master the use of the copula verb, "be". They made mistakes like "The lecturer are...", "Plagiarism are...", "Students is..." The comparatively high number of the wrong use of the "have" form also shows that the subjects have not mastered the rule of concord or agreement in number between the subject and verb. It is interesting to note that 8 out of the 39 subjects used the wrong word form in this case the noun, "plagiarism" for the verb form, "plagiarise". It could be because they found that the word was difficult for them and they did not understand its meaning. Similarly, Abdul Rashid et al. (2004) found misformation errors in their Chinese subjects' due to over-generalisation which has taken prominence in the subjects' use of the perfect verb tense for the past verb

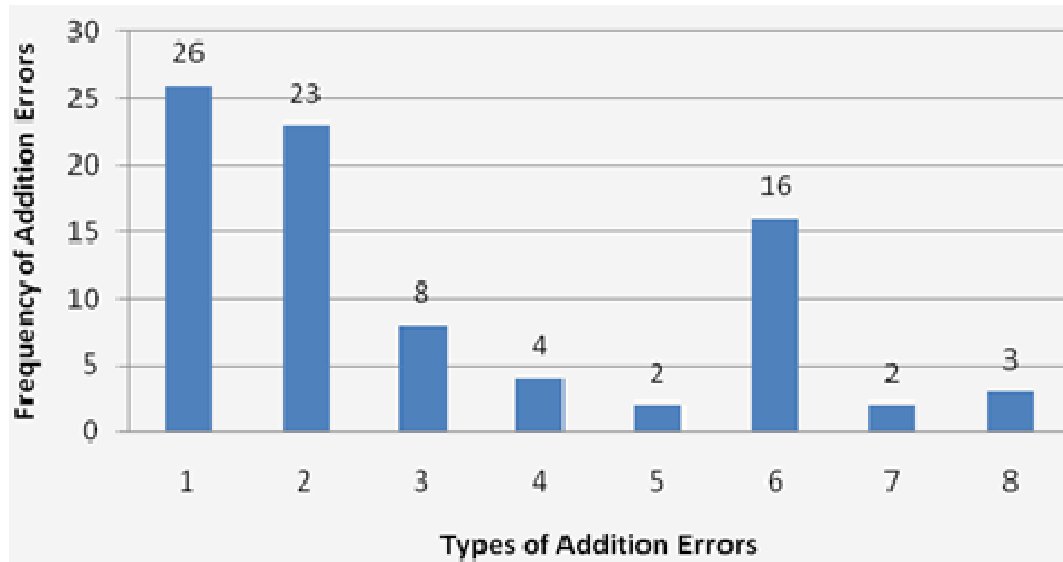


Figure 3. Frequency of subjects' addition verb-form errors. Addition of “_s” to verbs after the plural nouns; Addition of be-verb; Addition of “s/es/ies” after auxiliary verbs (may,will,can); Addition of –ing form after auxiliary; Addition of –ed form after auxiliary; Addition of –ing form; Addition of –s to verbs after to; Addition of ed to verbs after to.

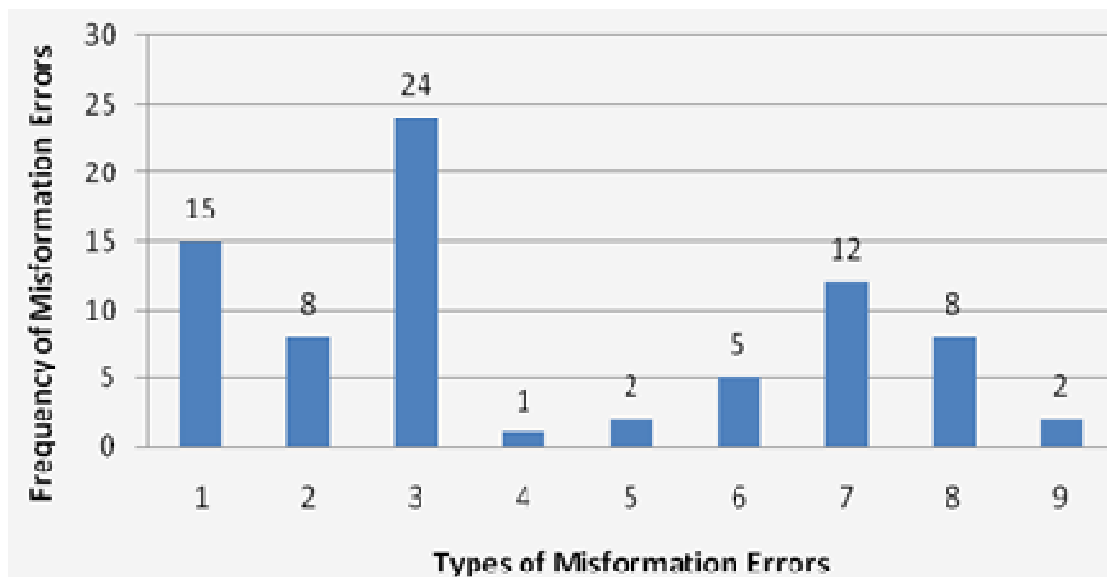


Figure 4. Frequencies of subjects' misformation verb-form errors. The use of are for is; The use of is for are; The use of have for has; The use of has for have; The use of the past tense for the present tense; The use of the noun form for the verb form; The wrong use of the past participle form; The use of the wrong part of speech; The use of the wrong tense.

tense, which could be a resultant of the Chinese simple tense system. By way of over-generalisation, their subjects had simplified their learning pertaining to the English tense system. These subjects had also extended their over-generalisation tendencies to include the simple past tense, past continuous tense and the perfect tenses for any past actions. According to Richards (1971), “faulty

comprehension of distinctions in the target language” and “poor gradation of teaching items” where the form “was” was “interpreted as a marker of the past tense” could also lead to errors with the verb-forms of “has/have” and “was”.

There were only 6 errors of ordering in the verb form errors as this was not of much problem to the subjects.

These errors are listed below:

Why most students do plagiarize?

The students should more learn.

The students can get done their assignments ...

They are not worry about what is the effect ...

Why some of the lecturers didn't take any actions?

They never think what the bad effect ...is

This study focused exclusively on verb-form errors as these were the major problem areas for the subjects. Huddleston (1988) defines a "verb" as "a grammatically distinct word class in a language having the following properties:

It contains amongst its most central members the morphologically simplest word denoting actions, processes or event; in predications of these types at least, the word functioning as head of the predicate expression will normally belong to the class we call verb; and members of the class carry inflections of tense, aspect and mood if the language has these as inflectional categories."

As tense and aspect are found in every sentence in English, they are the two important elements to be considered in a study of verbs. "Tense refers to a set of grammatical markings that are used to relate the time of the events described in a sentence to the time of the utterance itself...Tense is thus deictic, that is, it points either toward time now or time then...As the tense system gives information about the time of the event, the aspect system gives information about the kind of event the verb refers to. We may communicate through aspect such distinctions as whether an event is changing, repeated, habitual, complete and so forth. English has two aspects, perfect and progressive" (Richards, 1985).

Verb tenses and aspects exist as a cohesive system. If students can understand this time-aspect relationship, it is easier to understand the concept of past, present and future. Quirk and Greenbaum (1978) explain that "mood relates the verbal action to such conditions as certainty, obligation, necessity, and possibility."

The English learners in Malaysia face great difficulties in mastering the English verb-forms due to the great differences between the verb system of English and the Malay Language. The English verbs are tense ruled but in Bahasa Malaysia, verbs are affix-ruled. This study supports Nair's (1990) conclusion that the English tenses are the most difficult area in verb-forms. According to Celce-Murcia (1979), "experienced teachers will agree that the English tense-aspect system (hereafter ETAS) is one of the most difficult areas of English grammar for the non-native speaker to master." As mentioned earlier, it may be different from the learners' native language system which holds true for the subjects in this study.

Moreover, ETAS is complex and so learners will find it difficult to master, regardless of their mother tongue. Every tense in English (except for "used to" and "going

to" tenses) has more than one use. The so-called "simple present tense" can be used to show:

habit, for example, (I take breakfast at 7.00 a.m. every day) or

'real present' time (I like to eat nasi lemak) or

Future time + someone's plan, for example, (We go to Singapore next week) or

Future time without such plan, for example, "ask" in (He'll come if you ask him).

In addition, some tenses overlap in their uses, for example, "I have lived in Kuching for two years" and "I have been living in Kuching for two years" do not show any difference in their meanings (Wee, 1995). Thus, the complexity of the tenses makes it difficult for learners to master them. In addition to tenses, students also make errors in SVA. According to Wiener (1981), "For many students, errors in agreement will be the most persistent and its principles the most evanescent."

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the subjects find the most difficulties in mastering the SVA as they made the most number of omission and addition errors that show concord of having the verb agreeing with the subject. In the omission errors, the highest number was found in the omission of -s/-es/-ies and the "be" verb which also showed the most number in the addition errors which came second in terms of the frequencies. Interestingly, the most number of addition errors were also found in the use of -s/-es/-ies for the third person singular present tense followed by the "be" verb. The be verb was also difficult for the subjects as shown in the omission and addition of this verb in their language output. This proved that the third person singular present tense and the "be" verb were extremely difficult for the subjects to master, and they used a simplification process to learn the languages. Both the -s/-es/-ies inflection and "be" verb are not found in the Malay Language and are redundant to convey meaning as the Malay Language does not require the use of these two grammatical items. Knowing these areas of difficulties for the subjects has great pedagogical implication as syllabus designers and teachers can pay attention to them in order to make sure that such grammatical items are given focus and taught formally and explicitly. This may probably help the subjects reduce their grammatical errors, and hence, increase their confidence and linguistic competence in their writing tasks.

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