



A Systematic Categorization of the Grammatical Errors Exhibited in Ethiopian EFL First Year University Students' Expository Paragraphs

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ABSTRACT

Identifying and categorizing the types of grammatical errors committed by EFL learners is of immense importance so as to provide targeted and patterned corrective feedback. However, in the context of Ethiopia, no attempts have been made to systematically identify and categorize the grammatical errors exhibited in EFL students' writings. This descriptive study endeavored to identify and categorize the grammatical errors exhibited in Ethiopian first year university students' expository paragraphs, to rank order these errors based on their frequency and to determine the grammatical accuracy level of the students. Data were gathered from 144 expository paragraphs written at 3 writing occasions by a randomly selected class of first year university students (N=48) who were taking a Basic Writing course at university in Ethiopia. The results showed that the students' paragraphs were full of grammatical errors which covered about 23.75% of the total words in the first paragraph, about 21.04 % in the second paragraph and about 20.59% in the third paragraph. Besides, it was revealed that the grammatical errors committed by the students could be categorized into 16 error categories which, in descending order, were Verb Formation, Word Formation, Punctuations, Prepositions, Sentence Fragment, Articles, Word Choice, Wordiness, Pronouns, Connectors, Omission, Spelling, Word Order, Possessive's, Awkward, and Quantification. This was proved to be consistent in the 3 compositions. It would, therefore, be possible to suggest that the more frequent an error is, the more attention it needs from teachers and syllabus designers to plan for any remedial actions.

Key words: attitudes towards language learners' errors; error categorization; grammatical errors; measures of writing accuracy; significance of errors; writing accuracy

INTRODUCTION

Through the ages, scholars' attitudes towards errors committed by foreign and second language learners have varied. There had once been times at which errors were considered bad habits, and hence, attempts were made to avoid them. This had been driven by the behaviorist theory of learning. However, later on, with the coming of the Cognitivist theories of language learning, this view was refuted and errors were begun to be seen as important and unavoidable parts of language learning. The Interlanguage Theory, a component of the Cognitivist theory, considers errors made by foreign or second language learners as evidence indicating the development of linguistic competence. Regarding this, Takac (2008:31) notes that, "What must be accentuated is that errors are not considered to be an extremely negative side-effect of learning, but a manifestation of efforts invested by the learner in organizing the language input."

However, language learners' errors should be used as opportunities by language teachers to help the learners become more accurate writers by providing corrective feedback. Although there are still some disagreements, most scholars in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) agree that English language teachers, especially those who are teaching writing skills, need to provide corrective feedback on their students' grammatical/linguistic errors. There are several research findings which indicate that corrective feedback has brought about significant improvements in the students' written grammatical accuracy (Bitchener et al, 2005; Ellis et al, 2009; and Sheen et al, 2009).

Nevertheless, to provide corrective feedback which is of some advantage, the EFL writing skills teachers need to know the types of grammatical errors that are committed by their students. In other words, the teachers need to focus on patterns of errors rather than unsystematically hunting for every individual

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error. If they know the types/patterns of grammatical errors, they will be able to provide targeted corrective feedback interventions, with clearer information for their students. Besides, when the teachers identify the types of errors, they will be in a position to know the most common ones. Identifying the patterns of errors will also help teachers decide whether to select only some types of errors for correction or all of them. Above all, if we can identify, through research, the types of grammatical errors in students' productions, we will provide vital empirical evidence for EFL teachers, teacher training institutions and ELT material writers regarding which aspects of the language need to get more attention in a particular language syllabus.

Bearing this in mind, this study mainly tried to categorize the grammatical errors committed by 1st year Ethiopian university students when writing expository paragraphs. The study specifically endeavored to:

- ✓ Determine the accuracy level of the students
- ✓ Identify and categorize the grammatical errors into different error categories,
- ✓ Determine the most frequent grammatical errors,
- ✓ See whether the students produce similar grammatical errors in subsequent compositions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic Errors and their Importance

The term 'error' has been difficult to define. What one considers as an error might not be considered so by another. When an EFL student writes, he/she feels that he/she is writing correctly, but when a teacher is correcting what the student has written, he/she finds that the student has committed errors. In other words, the 'error' is in the teacher's or researcher's mind.

Scholars like Corder (1981) have tried to make a distinction between mistake (failures in performance) and an error (failure in competence). Gass and Selinker (2008) state that mistakes are similar to slips of the tongue, and therefore, they are generally one-time-only events whereas errors are systematic. This means learners are able to recognize mistakes and correct them, if they get another chance, while errors are not recognized as a wrong form, and hence, cannot be corrected by the learner. Another characteristic of errors is that they occur repeatedly.

As indicated above, the view of considering language learners' errors as bad habits is not currently accepted by most scholars in the field. Rather, there is a consensus among scholars that errors are inevitable, unavoidable and important parts of language learning. Corder (1981: 10) argues that "A learner's errorsprovide evidence of the system of the

language that he is using (i.e. has learnt) at a particular point in the course." The errors are indicators that the learner is using some system although it is not yet the right system. Corder (Ibid) further states that language learners' errors are significant in the following three different ways:

First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learnt or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. It is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.

Measures of Grammatical Accuracy in L₂

Compositions

According to Polio (1997), Hatrshorn (2008) and Pongsirwet (2001), measuring accuracy in students' written work is very complex because of several factors. One of these factors is the absence of a universally agreed up on formula to measure grammatical accuracy. In the literature, we find different approaches to measure grammatical accuracy which are discussed below.

Holistic Scoring

One approach to writing assessment is holistic scoring which aims to rate the overall proficiency level reflected in a given sample of student writing. In a typical holistic scoring session, each writing sample is read quickly and then judged against a rating scale, or scoring rubric that outlines the scoring criteria. Holistic scoring rubrics generally consist of different levels or bands, each of which corresponds to a score and a set of descriptors.

Holistic scoring is reported to be economical regarding time since readers are required to make only one decision (i.e., a single score) for each writing sample. Besides, researchers in L₂ writing generally agree that holistic scoring is reliable provided guidelines pertaining to rater training and rating session administration are faithfully adhered to (Polio, 1997). For this reason, holistic scoring is commonly used in large-scale assessments of writing. However, it has some serious disadvantages for the fact that the single score which gives useful ranking information does not give details. That is, holistic scoring cannot provide useful diagnostic information about a person's writing ability as a single score does not allow raters to distinguish between various

aspects of writing such as control of syntax, depth of vocabulary, organization, and so on.

Analytic Scoring

Analytic scoring procedures involve the separation of the various features of a composition into components for scoring purposes. Depending on the purpose of the assessment, texts might be rated on such features as content, organization, cohesion, register, vocabulary, grammar, or mechanics. Because of this, analytic scoring schemes provide more detailed information about a writer’s performance in different aspects of writing.

Generally, it has been reported that analytic scoring is preferred over holistic schemes by many writing specialists for a number of reasons. To start with, it provides more useful diagnostic information about students’ writing abilities. That is, it provides more information about the strengths and weaknesses of students, and thus, allows instructors and curriculum developers to tailor instruction more closely to the needs of their students. In addition, analytic scoring is particularly useful for L2 learners who are usually heterogeneous in their abilities at different aspects of writing (e.g., some L2 learners may have excellent writing skills in terms of content and organization, but may have much lower grammatical control; others may have an excellent control of sentence structure, but may not know how to organize their writing in a logical way). Moreover, it is easier to train raters (especially inexperienced ones) to use analytic scoring schemes as they may find it easier to work with explicit and specific textual features. Finally, the explicitness of analytic scoring guides offers teachers a potentially valuable tool for providing writers with consistent and direct feedback. Nevertheless, analytic scoring is also reported to have some limitations. For instance, it takes longer than holistic scoring. Besides, measuring based on sub-skill scores might diminish the interconnectedness of written discourse. Furthermore, sometimes, scorers find it difficult to assign numerical scores based on certain descriptors (Hamp-Lyons (1989), as cited by Polio (1997)). Thus, qualitative judgments about

coherence, style, and so on are not always easily accommodated by analytic scoring methods.

Error Counts

In an attempt to arrive at a more objective assessment of the linguistic accuracy of the writings in their studies, several researchers have utilized error counting as a measure of accuracy. The researchers in this regard have followed two lines. In the first line, Robb et al (1986), Kepner (1991), and Hartshorn (2008) employed error-free T- units/total number of T-units as measurements of accuracy. (A T-unit is defined as an independent clause and all dependent clauses attached to it). And, in the second line, many other researchers like Kroll (1990) have employed error counts per number of total words in a written product. In a closer manner to this, Erel & Bullut (2007) and Liu (2008) employed total number of errors/ 100 words in a written text as a measure of linguistic accuracy.

As one of the objectives of this study was to determine the written grammar accuracy level of the participant students, it had to utilize either of the measures of grammatical accuracy discussed above. Therefore, the present study employed the error count method i.e., the ratio of total number of grammatical errors committed by EFL students to the total number of words they wrote to measure the written grammar accuracy level of the students. This, what is termed as the adjusted mean of the grammatical errors, was multiplied by 100 in order to get the percentage of grammar errors from the total number of words written. In doing so, most of the guidelines provided by Polio were adopted.

Categorization of Grammatical Errors

Categorizing L2 learners’ linguistic errors into some groups has been found to be extremely complex. Because of this fact, different researchers have utilized different error categorizing schemes based on the research contexts in which they have operated. Given below are some of the error categorization schemes employed by different scholars so far.

Polio (1997) categorized the grammatical errors found in EFL students’ compositions in to 38 types as given in the following table.

No.	Grammatical error category	No.	Grammatical error category
1	Whole sentence or clause obscured	20	Lexical/ phrase choice
2	Subject formation(including missing subject and existential, but not wrong case)	21	Wrong noun phrase morphology, but not word form
3	Verb missing, not including auxiliary	22	Punctuation (missing, extra, wrong - do not include capitalization

4	Verb complement, object complement	23	Two word verb (separation problem, incorrect practice)
5	Ambiguous/ unacceptable reference	24	Subject-verb agreement
6	Voice shift	25	Wrong case
7	Idiom	26	Word form
8	Wrong comparative formation	27	Preposition (incorrect, missing, extra)
9	Singular for plural	28	Plural for singular
10	Quantity words(few/ a few, many kinds of, all/the whole	29	Negation (never/ever, any/some, either/neither, misplaced negator)
11	Quantifier-noun agreement (much/many, this/these)	30	Epenthetic pronoun (resumptive pronoun in relative clause, pronominal copy)
12	Voice (incorrect voice, not incorrect formation)	31	Noun-pronoun agreement(including wrong relative pronoun)
13	Missing word (not including preposition, article, verb, subject, relative pronoun	32	Verb formation (including no auxiliary verb, lack of 'to' with infinitive, participle , gerund/infinitive problem
14	Relative clause formation	33	Extraneous words (not included elsewhere in descriptors)
15	Parallel structure	34	Wrong modal
16	Run on sentence including comma splice	35	Tense/ aspect(incorrect tense, not incorrect formation)
17	Sentence fragment	36	Gapping error
18	Dangling/misplaced modifier	37	Word order
19	Missing/ miss used's	38	Article (missing, extra, incorrect)

As one can see from the above table, Polio's categorization of errors is very lengthy and complex to apply. Rather than simplifying EFL teachers' efforts to provide targeted corrective feedback, it could add more burden as it requires both teachers and students to memorize this lengthy list of errors whenever they are providing and receiving corrective feedback. Besides, some of the errors indicated by Polio (e.g. idioms) do not happen in the present research context, for our students are believed not to possess that level of English language proficiency which allows them to use idioms.

Hartshorn (2008), on her part used 6 broad error categories and 21 sub-error categories to track the occurrence or disappearance of different grammatical errors in different student compositions. Hartshorn's categories of Linguistic errors are:

1. Determiner errors (article use, possessive nouns/pronouns, numbers, indefinite pronouns, demonstrative pronouns).
2. Vocabulary Errors (Word Choice (spelled correctly but wrong word), Word Form (spelled correctly but wrong form of an appropriate word), Prepositions (spelled correctly but wrong)
3. Mechanical Errors (.Spelling, Capitalization, New paragraph,. Non-sentence level punctuation)

4. Verb Errors (Verb Tenses, Subject-verb, other verb form problems)
5. Numeric shift errors (Count-non-count, Single-plural)
6. Semantic Errors (Unclear Meaning, Awkwardness, Word order, Insertion/omission)

Liu (2008), on the other hand, employed only three broad grammatical error categories as a procedure for marking student compositions. These categories are: Morphological errors: all errors in verb tense or form; plural or possessive ending incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary; subject-verb agreement errors; article or other determiner incorrect, omitted, or unnecessary. Semantic errors: errors in word choice, including preposition and pronoun errors; omitted words or phrases, unnecessary words or phrases. Spelling errors included only if the (apparent) misspelling resulted in an actual English word and Syntactic errors: errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, and comma splices), word order, and other ungrammatical sentence constructions.

Jia & Benglan(2010), on their part, employed the following 6 error categories to assess the errors in their subjects' compositions.

1. The discourse organization (The logic coherence between paragraphs; the way a text makes sense to the readers through the

- organization of its content, and the relevance and clarity of its concepts and ideas.)
2. The sentence's coherence (The coherences between sentences; the grammatical, lexical and logical relationship between different sentences.)
 3. The grammatical errors (Verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, preposition errors, wrong form, word order, subject-verb agreement, pronoun errors.)
 4. Word choice (Redundancy, repetitions, inaccurate words, over-general word, unidiomatic use.)
 5. Sentence pattern (Errors in sentence/clause boundaries (run-ons, fragments, unidiomatic sentence construction).
 6. Punctuation, capitalization, spelling (Comma splices, title capitalization, the first-letter capitalization, wrong word form, word division)

On the other hand, Erel & Bullut (2007) have categorized the errors in the students' compositions in to 18 categories as :punctuation, capitalization, spelling, word formation, singular-plural form, subject-verb agreement, tense, missing, article usage, connector, preposition, pronouns, possessive's, extra wording , inappropriate word, rewrite the underlined part ,unclear expression, and word order.

The above discussion about measures of linguistic accuracy and ways of categorizing grammatical errors is meant to inform readers that different researchers use varied measures and categorizations. A researcher may use one of these, a combination of these, or a modification of these, or he/she may devise his/her own measure and categorization based on the context he/she is operating in. The researchers mentioned above report that their error categorization was modified from different previous researchers.

This study aspired to categorize Ethiopian 1st year university students' grammar errors as exhibited in their expository paragraphs. In doing so, it tried to utilize the strengths of previous researchers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and methods

The study employed a descriptive research design and both quantitative and qualitative research methods. A descriptive research design was put into use because the major purpose of the study was to describe what was there in the participant students' paragraphs.

Subjects and Samples of the Study

The subjects of the study were first year students at Wollo University who were taking the course Basic

writing skills. A class of students (N =48) was randomly selected as participants of the study.

Data Gathering instruments

To gather the necessary data for the study, 3 expository paragraphs written by the sample students at 3 different occasions in a 42 days' time were used. The paragraphs were written after the necessary introductory input for writing was provided in the form of lectures by the classroom teacher: The lecture input included parts of a sentence, types of the English sentence, sentence combination techniques, qualities of effective sentences (unity and coherence, wordiness etc), what a paragraph is, qualities of a good paragraph, types of paragraph development methods. The writing topics were: advantages of modern technology, the situation of library service at Wollo University, and advantages of learning writing skills at a university. These topics were selected in consultation with the instructor who was offering the writing course for the target students.

Methods of Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed by using different data analysis methods depending on the specific objectives the research set to achieve. While the data about the first 3 specific objectives were analyzed by using descriptive statistics (like frequencies, percentages, and means), those focusing on the last specific objective were analyzed by entering them into SPSS and applying correlational and reliability analysis. In addition, qualitative analysis was employed to describe the meanings of the different error categories which the study has come up with.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are presented and analyzed by following the specific objectives of the study step wise.

The Accuracy Level of the Paragraphs

The study first tried to determine the grammatical accuracy level of the students. The table below presents the accuracy level of the students in the three paragraphs. To this effect, the grammatical errors exhibited in the three compositions were identified and counted. Then, the proportion of total number of errors to the total number of words written by all the students in each writing occasion was calculated to find the writing accuracy level of the students. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Grammatical Accuracy Level of the Students in the 3 Writing Occasions

Compositions written by the students (N=48)	No. of words	No. of Errors	Prop. of No. of errors to No. of words X 100
Composition 1	5,324	1,270	23.85
Composition 2	4,893	1,058	21.62
Composition 3	4,449	918	20.63
Sum	14,666	3246	22.13

As the data on the above table show, the students wrote 5,324 words during the first writing occasion in which 1,270 grammatical errors were identified. This shows that about 23.85% of the words written by the students were grammatical errors. This became to be about 21.62% in the second writing and about 20.63% in the third writing occasion. And in average, about 22.13% of the words in the 3 compositions were grammatical errors.

From this finding, one could understand that our university students' writings were having very poor grammatical accuracy level. If we add errors in content, organization and layout, this situation could be even worse. All this tells us about the challenges English language teachers are facing. As teachers, EFL teachers have the responsibility of providing corrective feedback on their students' written errors. The question is, can they correct all these errors? And if they try to correct all these errors, can they manage it? The results also show that our university students might not be able to communicate their ideas in writing clearly, the presence of too many grammatical errors could block meanings from reaching the receiver as intended by the writer.

Categorization of Students' Grammatical Errors

In this sub-section, the grammatical errors which were identified above are put into different grammatical error categories. As indicated above, some researchers (e.g., Polio, 1997) categorized

grammatical errors into 38. It is felt that this kind of a very detailed error categorization is difficult to work with as a researcher is required to recall all those to put a certain grammatical error into a category. Besides, it seems impossible to utilize that categorization when we want to provide corrective feedback to a larger group of students, like the situation in our country, Ethiopia. Candler (2003) used 24 error categories). Bitchener et al (2005) categorized students' grammatical errors into 26. Some scholars (Ferris, 2004) support the utilization of fewer categories while others (Polio, 1997) seem to favor the use of a detailed categorization of errors. On the other hand, some researchers like Liu (2008) used only 3 categories (morphological, semantic, and syntactic) which was very broad. This kind of a very broad categorization of grammatical errors might not be helpful for students as it could not give them specific information to deal with their errors.

These examples show that there may be different approaches of categorizing linguistic errors in different contexts. Put another way, the employment of either fewer or detailed categorization of linguistic errors seems more of a subjective issue. Researchers utilize different categorizations based on their own philosophies and on their specific research contexts. Bearing this in mind, in this study, the grammatical errors committed by Ethiopian 1st year university student writers during the 3 writing occasions were categorized as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Categorization and Weight of the Grammatical Errors in the Students' 3 Compositions

No.	Gram. Err. type	No. errs (Comp.1)	No. errs (Comp.2)	No. errs (Comp.3)	Tot. errs (the 3 comps)	% of errs to tot. No. of errors
1	Verb Form	214	227	196	637	19.62
2	Word Form	249	204	136	589	18.15
3	Punctuation	197	139	142	478	14.73
4	Preposition	112	77	58	247	7.61
5	Sentence Frag.	94	59	63	216	6.65
6	Article Use	60	54	51	165	5.08
7	Word Choice	62	60	31	153	4.71

8	Unnecessary	63	39	47	149	4.59
9	Pronoun Use	40	67	32	139	4.28
10	Connector Use	34	29	63	125	3.85
11	Omission	50	16	35	101	3.11
12	Spelling	32	27	16	75	2.31
13	Word Order	25	22	20	67	2.06
14	Possessive 'S	12	26	6	44	1.36
15	Awkward	14	11	15	40	1.22
16	Quantification	12	2	7	21	0.65
Sum.		1270	1059	918	3246	99.98

As the data in table 2 show, the grammatical errors exhibited in expository paragraphs of the participant 1st year university students could be categorized into 16 error categories. This number of error categories is not too detailed or too narrow. The categorization is basically a modification of Polio's (1997), Hartshorn's (2008), Chandler's (2003), Bitchener et al (2005) and Erel & Bullut's (2007) categorization. However, some categories from these researchers' categories were omitted (e.g., capitalization) because they are considered to have no or negligible effect on communication. Also, some other categories (e.g., sentence structure) were omitted because they could be included under other categories like punctuation, word order or faulty parallelism. An attempt was made to avoid overlaps of categories. It is hoped that this categorization benefits from the strong sides of the two extremes (too detailed and too narrow categorizations).

It could also be understood from the table that some grammatical errors were committed more frequently than others. For example, the first six grammatical errors (verb formation, word formation, punctuation, preposition, sentence fragment, and article) accounted for about 71.84% of the total errors. This has a very huge implication for our teaching as well as syllabus design and textbook preparation practice. This result suggests that providing more attention to some of these most frequent errors would effectively improve the students' grammatical accuracy level.

This was how the grammatical error categories were operationalized in this study. There were several examples of each error category, but that could not be included in an article of this type.

- 1. Word Choice Errors:** These are errors when a student fails to use a word (excluding articles, prepositions, pronouns, connectors) or a phrase appropriate/correct to a given context.
- 2. Sentence Fragment:** Where a subject or predicate or both are missing from a string of words. Also, a construction which has a subject and predicate but introduced with a subordinator is taken as a fragment when it is happening on its own without any independent clause attached to it.

- 3. Preposition Errors:** Where a preposition is missing, wrongly used, or unnecessarily used.
- 4. Article Errors:** When an article is missed where necessary, used where it is unnecessary, or a wrong article is used.
- 5. Punctuation Errors:** Where a wrong punctuation mark is used, a punctuation mark is unnecessarily used, or not used where necessary.
- 6. Verb Formation Errors:** This grammatical category was operationalized to encompass several errors in word formation including: Errors in auxiliary verb usage (where an auxiliary verb is omitted, unnecessarily used, or an incorrect one is used), Errors in subject-verb agreement, Errors in progressive formation, infinitive, simple past or past participle formation, Errors in tense usage, and Errors in voice construction
- 7. Word Formation Errors:** (Doesn't include verb formation) These are errors which happen when students fail to use the appropriate form of words in different contexts. These include errors in plural, noun, adverb, and adjective formation.
- 8. Spelling Errors**
- 9. Errors in Pronoun Use:** Where a pronoun is used unnecessarily, a pronoun is not used where necessary, a wrong pronoun is used, or where a pronoun that doesn't agree with its antecedent is used.
- 10. Unnecessary/Wordy:** Where a word or a phrase (excluding article, preposition, pronoun, connector) which is not necessary to complete the meaning of a sentence is used. This basically included errors of unnecessary repetition of words and phrases. The unnecessary part was counted as one word, despite its length.
- 11. Omission Errors:** These are errors where a word, a phrase, or a clause which is necessary to complete a sentence is missing. This category doesn't include omission of a subject, a predicate, an article, a preposition, a pronoun, a connector as these had their own categories. The missing part was counted as one error, despite its length.
- 12. Errors in Quantifier Use:** Where a student uses a quantifier which does not go with the noun to be quantified. This included errors in using quantifiers

of countable nouns for uncountable ones and vice versa.

13. **Errors in Connector Use:** Where a connector necessary to link ideas is missing or where a wrong connector is used.
14. **Errors in the Use of Possessive's:** when the 's is missing where necessary, used where unnecessary, wrongly used
15. **Word Order Errors:** Where a word or a phrase is wrongly placed in a sentence. Here, the whole phrase was counted as one error.
16. **Awkward/Unclear:** A word, phrase, clause, or sentence which is unclear from the point of view of the context in which a student is composing. Here,

the whole phrase, clause, or sentence was counted as one error.

Consistency of the Error Categorization across the 3 Writing Occasions

As indicated earlier, one of the specific objectives of this study was to check whether there was a correlation among the grammatical errors identified in the 3 writing occasions. To this effect, all the identified grammatical errors in each error category during the 3 writing tasks were summarized in the following table. The data in the table was then put into SPSS to check whether the categorization was reliable.

Table 3: Number of Gram. Errors in each Error Category in the 3 Writing Tasks

No.	Gram. Err. Type	No. errs (Comp.1)	No. errs (Comp.2)	No. errs (Comp.3)
1	Verb Form	214	227	196
2	Word Form	249	204	136
3	Punctuation Use	197	139	142
4	Preposition Use	112	77	58
5	Sentence Frag.	94	59	63
6	Article Use	60	54	51
7	Word Choice	62	60	31
8	Unnecessary	63	39	47
9	Pronoun Use	40	67	32
10	Connector Use	34	29	63
11	Omission	50	16	35
12	Spelling	32	27	16
13	Word Order	25	22	20
14	Possessive 'S	12	26	6
15	Awkward	14	11	15
16	Quantification	12	2	7
Sum.		1270	1059	918

As it could be seen from the above table, the participant students made about 1,270, about 1,059 and about 918 grammatical errors during the first, the second and the third writing occasions respectively.

The SPSS computed by entering the data in the above table resulted in the following output which shows a very strong correlation of errors identified in the 3 writing occasions.

Fig.1. Correlation of the grammatical error categories in the 3 compositions

	Err1	Err2	Err3
Err1 Pearson Correlation	1	.954**	.933**
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
N	16	16	16
Err2 Pearson Correlation	.954**	1	.940**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
N	16	16	16

Err3	Pearson Correlation	.933**	.940**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	16	16	16

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As the data from the above correlation statistics show, there was a very strong correlation between the grammatical errors identified in the 3 compositions. This was observed between composition 1 and composition 2, between composition 2 and composition 3 as well as across the 3 compositions. This might suggest that the grammatical error identification and categorization procedure followed in the study was reliable as far as expository paragraph writing is concerned. However, I suggest that this categorization should be checked by other researchers in other universities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major purpose of this study was to identify and systematically categorize the grammatical errors committed by Ethiopian first year university students when they wrote expository paragraphs. It was found that the participant students' compositions were full of grammatical errors. More than 20% of the total words written by the students were found to be grammatical errors. Unless some measures are taken by concerned bodies, the serious grammar handicap exhibited in the students' writing might damage their communication with their teachers, advisors and any other body (like employers). Are our university graduates going to request someone's assistance to write job application letters? In addition, the presence of too many grammar errors in students' written pieces might be frustrating for the EFL teacher, for it could be beyond one's capacity and patience to deal with all the errors.

A total of about 3,246 grammatical errors were identified in the 3 paragraphs written by the 48 participant students. If someone needs to take some remedial action to minimize the commission of such a huge number of grammatical errors, he/she could not be effective unless he/she finds some pattern/category in which the errors could be placed. Having this as a major objective, this study categorized the 3,246 errors into 16 error categories. This categorization was not too broad (like Liu, 2008) or too detailed (like Polio, 1997).

It was also found that some of these errors were found to be committed more frequently than others. For example, the first six grammatical error categories (verb formation, word formation, punctuation, preposition, sentence fragment, and articles) accounted for about 71.84% of the total

errors. This empirical evidence is of paramount significance for EFL teachers and syllabus designers. Therefore, concerned bodies, including English language teachers and syllabus designers, need to devise intervention mechanisms to help Ethiopian students minimize their grammatical errors in the grammar categories which were found to be very frequent. And finally, other similar studies need to be conducted in the universities across the country so that it could be possible to reach a reasonable generalization.

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