GRAMMATICAL ERRORS COMMITTED BY ONLINE STUDENTS: CASE STUDY OF VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Writing is connected to grammatical understanding inasmuch as it is a process of combining words into sentences and arranging sentences to construct paragraphs. Yet, the fact that the first and foreign languages' rules are dissimilar seems to cause learners to commit errors in English writing. The paper explores the grammatical errors committed by the online students in English course, i.e. Business and Technical English (ENG201) of Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP). These students mainly focus on the concepts of management sciences and computer sciences. Consequently, they fail to concentrate on the grammatical errors which are the important part of their writing skills. The data have been collected from 200 students of Business and Technical English (ENG201) Course during the Fall 2018. The random sample technique has been utilized for descriptive analysis from online creative writings in the Graded Discussion Boards (GDBs) conducted in the internal examination system of Virtual University of Pakistan. The researcher identified and evaluated the errors committed by the students and presented these with the help of tables and bar charts. The majority of the students has committed top six errors which are (1) missing comma after introductory element error, (2) wrong tense or verb error, (3) capitalization error, (4) wrong word/ phrase, (5) fused Sentence, (6) missing comma in a compound sentence. Moreover, top six errors are up to fifty nine percent and on the students' side majority of the students commit three to four errors. Finally, certain recommendations have been put forward for effective writing skills to the students and the teachers in virtual mode of education.

Keywords: Grammarical errors, Graded discussion Board (GDB), writing skills, L2 learners, Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP)

INTRODUCTION

As writing is a complex skill connected to many aspects, it then becomes a challenge to learners of second or foreign language. In composing writing, grammar is one of the essential aspects which should be noticed as it is the fundamental element of the language. According to Lynch and Anderson (2013), to express ideas correctly and appropriately in writing, writers are required to master the primary rules of a language, which is grammar. By following the grammatical rules, foreign language learners are likely to write a correct language. Moreover, grammatical aspect is one of the needs of the good writing. Boehme (2004) indicated that writers start to figure out what good writing is all about as they understand the part of the sentence and how they work together to determine the meaning and the impression of the sentence. In brief, writing is considered understandable when the sentences that form the writing are organized based on the grammatical rules of the language.

The importance of grammar in writing an essay encourages the thought that grammar should be taught from the beginning because the error may obscure meaning. To avoid grammatical

errors and that a sentence is good and true, also can convey the intended message correctly, a sentence must pay attention to the rules of grammar to avoid bias meaning (structural ambiguity).

The grammar is a set of standards in language structure. Language structure that includes fields sound system, grammar forms, word order, syntax and grammar and meaning. In other words, the language includes the fields of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Connecting words are words that are used to connect the word with the word. From this sense, the conjunctions are necessary to clarify the sentence, because conjunctions are signs of written language influential in making a sentence or essay. A bouquet of description would be difficult to understand if the essay description is not spiked conjunction. Students often lacking in understanding of conjunctions in an essay, but every day they are in school would have to meet with the writing and reading activities, be it writing textbook. One reason according to standard grammar is not recognizing the strategy of making sentences.

The study explores the grammatical errors of online learners of of VUP. Their common grammatical problems will be focused to improve their writing expressions. For this purpose, students' short essays on GDB from English course in VUP will be studied; most commonly occurring errors have been identified and evaluated. The most commonly occurring errors has been selected for further study to find out solutions to improve students' writings.

Generally errors have always fascinated the researchers and language teachers. According to Corder (1967) errors seems to be a problem to be addressed soon. In spite of that errors are considered now as an aid in the process of learning. Moreover, errors provide precious guidance on the learning techniques of learners. Error is the wrong use of linguistic items of the expert or native speaker of a language. Thus, practicing the technique of error analysis is to analyze the errors committed by learners. To determine the reasons of these errors such kind of analysis is conducted to provide the remedy for future reference.

The current study is related to English courses of VUP, which is a renowned university of the country. It uses the internet, television channels, recorded lectures and study materials to offer higher education programs. It is addressing the need of large population living across the country by providing them flexible time hours to study at nearest campus or at home. It is Pakistan's first University, which fulfills the shortage of qualified professors by providing affordable world class education to all the students across the country. The university has pooled the talent of top professors in different disciplines, regardless of their institutional affiliations, to deliver quality lectures, and placed these on its open courseware for open access.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To explore the effectiveness of the teaching material taught to the students with reference to grammatical awareness at a Virtual Platform.
2. To examine the outcome of the competency of learner in writing skills.
3. To interpret the writing forms created by the targeted learners systematically.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Questions for research may include the following:

1. What is the ratio of grammatical errors among students of Virtual University of Pakistan?
2. What are the most common grammatical errors committed by online students of Virtual University of Pakistan?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

An online education mode is a new technique in Pakistan and its effectiveness and importance cannot be ignored. This study would help in understanding the grammatical errors of online students. It is expected that the study would add to the current research in virtual mode of education. Utmost care would be observed that all research procedures would be within the law and in line with ethical recommendations of the appropriate academic and professional bodies. The study is aimed at the betterment of the learners and its learning community. It is expected that this study would be helpful to the researchers, teachers and learners towards the effectiveness of online teaching of the English language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error analysis is a prominent field of Applied Linguistics and its main focus is teaching English language. Researchers have done a lot of work on ELT in the past decades. EA as "the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners" (Corder, 1971). James (2013) Error Analysis compares "learner English" with English as a second language and judges the ignorance of the learners about the second language. Candling (2001) talks about that the study of EA is conducted to:

1. check the knowledge of a language,
2. see the process of leaning a language
3. gather information on similar problems in language learning to prepare teaching materials.

Brown (2000) considers EA is to observe, analyze and classify the discrepancies of second language rules through a process. On the similar line, Burt (1975) cited Crystal about EA as a method of identification, classification and interpretation in a systematic way of such forms which are not acceptable in learning a foreign language.

Pit Corder (1967) "The significance of Learner Errors" has given error analysis a new dimension by answering the question about the nature of native language and second language. Corder (1967) has put forward the following Proposal:

"The same process is used for L1 and L2 acquisition:

a. Humans are born with an innate predisposition to acquire language
b. If we don't use the mechanism by puberty (Lenneberg), we lose the ability
c. If we do use the mechanism for L1 acquisition, it will be available for L2 acquisition
d. Main difference is one of motivation"

Brown (1994) states EA has three objectives which are as follows: to determine the command of the language achieved by the learner, to find the hurldles of language learning, to find the process of language learning. Error analysis produces texts for the students free from a lot of mistakes. We classify the errors into types and this is called taxonomy. According to Chanquoy (2001) errors are classified by their linguistic type. Errors are arranged through various taxonomies. Burt (1975) states that there three main taxonomies which are surface strategy, a comparative and communicative effect taxonomy.

According to Chastain (1990) Non-native speakers use wrong language is called an error. Chandler (2003) states to violate the customs of the target language is error of competence both overt and covert. Ellis (1986) makes a difference between covert and overt errors. First one is grammatically correct, but hard to define and the second one based on such utterances which are grammatically incorrect.

There are two major reasons of errors in second language learning, i.e. mother tongue interference and the second one is interalingual factors. The first one is called interlingual errors. Till fiftees, it was the view that mother tongue influence creates a lot of problems in learning a second lanauge by (1945) and Lado (1957). But later on, the traditional view changed for interalingual and developmental errors.

Grammar is often viewed as the fundamental element of a language. Brown (2001) stated that grammar is the system of rules which manages the conventional arrangement and connection of words in a sentence. Undoubtedly, grammar is usually concerned as an explanation of the rules on how sentences are formed. Yet, grammar is not only the rules of combining words to make a correct sentence, but also the way a sentence makes sense in a language. As stated by Ur (2009), grammar controls the way language components are combined as well as affects their meaning. In view of that, grammar is regarded as the rules that determine the meaning of the language. Thus, L2 learners are supposed to apply the rules precisely in both spoken and written communications. However, the fact that several aspects of English grammar are different from those of L2 learners' first language may cause the learners to commit errors in language productions. Yahya, et al. (2012) stated that errors have generally occurred as a result of the learners' mother tongue interference. Accordingly, grammatical errors are commonly found in learners' oral and written productions.

As Error analysis is the study concerning the learners' and it provides a specific explanation on areas of errors. James (2013) designed several error taxonomies such as grammar (prepositions, articles, verb form, etc.), syntax (word order, phrase, and clause), phonology (pronunciation), semantic/lexicon (meaning and word choice), orthography (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling), and discourse (style). This research focuses only on errors from the areas of grammar named grammatical errors. The grammatical errors are divided into subcategories mentioned by James (2013) with the combination of the grammatical errors stated by Murrow (2004) and Jayasundara & Premarathna (2011). The seven grammatical error subcategories are subject/verb agreement, verb form, singular/plural form, preposition, conjunction, pronoun, and article.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Virtual University of Pakistan is using a web interface named with GDB on a website www.vulms.vu.edu.pk. This web interface is used to receive short essays from students. In each semester, few courses related or general topics are uploaded by the teacher and students open the website and upload their responses. An announcement is given one week before the starting date. The response time of these short essays is one week. Each course instructor gives a different topic from other courses according to the nature of the course or the topic can be general. Business and Technical English (ENG201) course has been selected to take the sample of 200 students from the strength of 1025 students for descriptive analysis. The data have been taken from a secondary source of Fall 2018 semester.

English courses are offered to different BS and Master Programs. Therefore, a large number of students of computer sciences, management sciences, elementary courses, diploma certificates and other BS and master programs enrolled in these courses. Students are both male and female, belonging to different areas of the country, having different age groups. These are full time students or working professionals and house wives. They are from metropolitan cities and remote areas and also living in overseas countries.

Essays were reviewed carefully; errors were highlighted. Frequency of errors was calculated, the percentages were drawn in the form of tables, bar graphs and pie charts with high frequency and percentage of students committing different errors. Furthermore, the total

number of students committing each error was also drawn with the help of total population and represented through a table. On the other side, table and pie chart were also drawn from the students committing a number of errors.
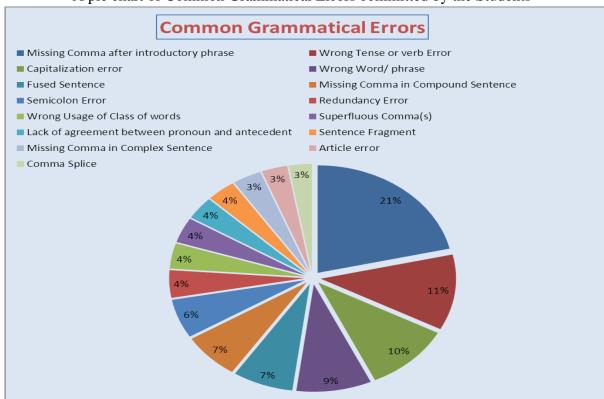
DATA ANALYSIS

The data were collected from the GDBs of students in Business and Technical English (ENG201) course. Keeping in view the results of data analysis, the researcher has drawn conclusion at the end.

Table 1. Frequency of Grammatical Errors

S. N.	Grammatical Errors	Frequency of Errors
1	Missing Comma after introductory phrase	62
2	Wrong Tense or verb Error	33
3	Capitalization error	30
4	Wrong Word/ phrase	26
5	Fused Sentence	21
6	Missing Comma in Compound Sentence	20
7	Semicolon Error	17
8	Redundancy Error	12
9	Wrong Usage of Class of words	11
10	Superfluous Comma(s)	11
11	Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent	10
12	Sentence Fragment	10
13	Missing Comma in Complex Sentence	10
14	Article error	9
15	Comma Splice	8
16	Prepositional Error	7
17	Syntactic Arrangement Error	7
18	Omission Error	5
19	Missing Comma in Compound-Complex Sentence	4
20	Missing Comma in miscellaneous items	4
21	Missing Comma(s) with non restrictive elements	2
22	Missing/Misplaced Possessive Apostrophe	2
23	Placement of Question mark Error	1
24	Colon Error	1
25	It/Its Error	1
26	Missing Comma(s) with transitional expressions	1

The table one shows the number of errors committed by students drawn with the help of excels sheet of MS Office 2010 from the sample of 200 students; the next column shows the frequency of errors committed by the students within the whole population from where sample has been taken.

A pie chart of Common Grammatical Errors committed by the Students

The above figure shows the percentage of errors represented by a pie chart. There is overall performance of the students in the area of language grammar by which we come to know that most problematic areas for the students are the missing comma after the introductory element, tense or verb form error, capitalization error, wrong word or phrase error etc. which are 21 %, 11 %, 10 %r and 9 % respectively. However, the mistakes of the article, comma splice and a missing comma in complex sentence are quite a few i.e. 3 % each. It means, any error is committed by how many students.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This chapter discusses twenty two common errors one by one in detail. For more clarity of the reader, data tables have also been used. Moreover, it focuses on findings and recommendations. Based on analysis of data, charts and tables in the last chapter, the researcher has drawn the findings and their suggestions related to remedies of the errors in this section.

In data analysis part, we have pointed out twenty five most frequently occurring errors found in students' writings. The study identified twenty five commonly occurring errors. Now, we will analyze these error turns by turn.

In introductory words, phrases, or clauses come in the beginning of the sentence. Words like yes*, no, well, oh,* and so on are followed by a comma

Example*:* Well**,** I see you have finished your task.

Transitional words in the beginning also contain a comma.

Examples: First, a player should warm up before playing.

- **Usually,** people injure themselves by exercising too much.

- **On the whole,** exercise is a great way to stay fit and healthy.

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Introductory phrases contain two to four words as a phrase is a group of words without a subject, a verb, or both and is not a complete sentence.

Example: **Throughout his life,** Junaid was a shopkeeper.

Introductory clauses are more than four words as a clause is a group of words containing a subject and a verb.

Example: **As far as she is concerned,** Ali can take an early vacation this year.

After the devastation of the village the villagers were left with the task of rebuilding their homes and roads.

Correct expression:

After the devastation of the village, the villagers were left with the task of rebuilding their homes and roads.

The most frequently occurring error 'missing comma after an introductory phrase' is the 62 percent of the sample and 62 percent of the total population, as the above table shows.

Students' Examples in Missing Comma after Introductory Element

In my comments *vu as an online university is the best university in*

*Pakistan, Its MDB is very effect, MDB play very import roll for solving the problems in current lecture. (**Incorrect expression**)*

In my comments, VU as an online university is the best university in Pakistan. Its MDB is very effective; MDB plays very important role in solving the problems in current lecture. (**Appropriate expression**)

Nevertheless, it *is an impressive opportunity for students to complete their degree only if the online blogs are taken seriously by the students in this degree will be more fruitful if the requirements are fulfilled. (**Incorrect expression**)*

Nevertheless, it is an impressive opportunity for students to complete their degrees only if the online blogs are taken seriously by the students, for this degree will be more fruitful if the requirements are fulfilled. (**Correct expression**)

*They do not use correct grammar when they speak and many times when they write **but still** they are doing their jobs very well and communicate with the people of different nationalities. (**Incorrect expression**)*

They do not use correct grammar when they speak and many times when they write, but **still,** they are doing their jobs very well and communicate with the people of different nationalities. (**Correct expression**)

Students' Examples of Wrong Tense or verb Error

The frequently occurring error 'Wrong Tense or verb Error is the 33 percent of the sample and 33 percent of the total population.

*I **am complete agree** with distance learning education, especially through the online study. (**Incorrect expression**)*

I **completely agree** with distance learning education, especially through the online study. (**Appropriate expression**)

*MDB **mean** main discussion board. GDB **mean** grand discussion board. (**Incorrect expression**)*

MDB **means** the main discussion board. GDB **means** the grand discussion board. **(Correct expression)**

*We criticize other people and do not **changing** ourselves. (**Incorrect expression**)*

We criticize other people and do not **change** ourselves. **(Correct expression)**

*The total of Rs. 869000/- **will charges** in machine account. (**Incorrect expression**)*

The total of Rs. 869000/- **will be charged** to a machine account. **(Correct expression)**

Capitalization Error

Capitalization is to capitalize the first letter of words, sentences according to certain rules. This is a very common mistake/error.

The frequently occurring error 'Capitalization error' is the 30 percent of the sample and 30.33 percent of the total population.

Students' Examples in Capitalization Error (Appendix 1)

*There is difference of opinion about virtual **learning; However** it contains both advantages and disadvantages. (**Incorrect expression**)*

There is a difference of opinion about virtual **learning***; however,* it contains both advantages and disadvantages. **(Correct expression)**

*Learning is a process, **It** is human nature to learn and then use the learning for its purpose. (**Incorrect expression**)*

Learning is a process; ***it*** is human nature to learn and then use the learning for its purpose.

(Correct expression)

*in which way they are going? (**Incorrect expression**)*

In which way they are going? **(Correct expression)**

*the trip is just too dangerous. (**Incorrect expression**)*

The trip is just too dangerous. **(Correct expression)**

Wrong Usage of Class of words

It is the wrong usage of a class of words for example:

She will except your request till Friday.

Nobody advice Sara to travel in bad weather.

Students' Examples of Wrong Usage of Class of words

The frequently occurring error 'Wrong Usage of Class of words' is the 11 percent of the total sample and 11.11 percent of the total population.

*It was only a dream **describe** in poetry. (**Incorrect expression**)*

It was only a dream **described** in poetry. **(Appropriate expression)**

*Know world is global village and so we have to be update person as student, use of correct grammar gives us empower to reflect personal view to world in explicitly way. (**Incorrect expression**)*

The Known world is a global village and so we have to be an updated person as a student; use of correct grammar gives us an empowerment to reflect the personal view of the world in an explicit way. **(Appropriate expression)**

Lack of agreement between pronoun and Antecedent

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent (a thing coming earlier in the text) in person, number and gender. A pronoun usually refers to something earlier in the text to which it refers.

Incorrect Expression

If anybody wants to succeed in business, they have to know the rules of the game.

Correct Expression

If anybody wants to succeed in business, he or she has to know the rules of the game.

A pronoun should match with its corresponding noun in number, person (point of view) and gender.

- *The <u>students</u> have spent many hours studying for <u>their</u> examinations.* (Number)
- *<u>I</u> want to get <u>my</u> money back.* (Person)
- *<u>Maria</u> picked up <u>her</u> books.* (Gender)
- Do not shift pronoun points of view within a sentence unnecessarily.
- *The worst thing about <u>my</u> not writing letters is that <u>you</u> never get any back.*
- *Though <u>we</u> like most of <u>our</u> neighbors, there are a few <u>you</u> can't get along with.*
- *Whenever <u>students</u> are under a great deal of stress, <u>we</u> often go into depression.*

CONCLUSION

E-learning emerged as a challenge for education, but emerging communication technology has made it easy and affordable for the people of remote areas and working professionals. Now classroom has converted into an open world with thousands of students communicating with the virtual teacher. In Virtual mode of education, two hundred students' written expressions have been studied from 1025 students in ENG201 course. The majority of the students has committed top six errors which are (1) missing comma after introductory element error, (2) wrong tense or verb error, (3) capitalization error, (4) wrong word/ phrase, (5) fused Sentence, (6) missing comma in a compound sentence. Moreover, top six errors are up to fifty nine percent and on the students' side majority of the students commit three to four errors. These things reveal that if teacher fix few number of errors, the majority of the students' writing expressions can be improved. These errors further suggest that there are discrepancies among teaching techniques and course contents of these courses in Virtual University of Pakistan and there is a need to improve teaching activities suggested in the recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been drawn on the basis of the findings:

1. Students can be encouraged to form blogs for grammatical practices and teachers can encourage the students for solving their problems on these blogs.
2. As the results show that the percentage of comma errors is much higher as compared to the other errors; if worked upon properly with online activities, these errors can be improved and the majority of the students will be better in their writing skill.

3. Those students who commit three or four errors their number is large as compared to less number of students who commit other errors. If teachers work upon these top ten to fifteen errors, most of the students will write with better writing expressions.

4. The present era is the age of technology, which provides us access to each home. Students are using flash notes, paper tabs. Virtual university teachers can form interactive learning objects to make the learning interesting and interactive for the students so that they could easily understand grammatical problems even without the help teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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