

Error Analysis: The Main Writing Errors of EFL Learners Task 2 IELTS Academic Essay

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study sought to examine and analyze the frequency of writing errors and determine the causes behind such errors made by first time test takers of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) academic writing essay-Task 2. The four criteria specified for the IELTS Writing Band Scores (British Council, 2019) were taken into consideration. A corpus of Japanese adult learners academic writing Task 2 essays in an Intensive Writing Course were carefully examined to determine the main writing errors following the procedure for Error Analysis proposed by Corder (1967). The research adopted an analytical descriptive approach. The findings revealed that verb tense, article errors, spelling and subject verb agreement were the most common writing errors made by learners. With regards to cohesion, coherence and lexical resource, poor progression in paragraphs, parts of the essay being incomprehensible, vague topic sentences, poor use of transition signals and incorrect use of target lexical items were the most common categories of errors. According to the results it is revealed that male learners made more written errors in comparison to female learners. Based on the findings recommendations and suggestions that are of significant importance to educators, EFL learners and policy makers are presented in detail.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Academic Writing, Writing Errors, IELTS Writing, EFL Learners, Language Testing

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Introduction

Commercial language testing has developed into a customary practice among language students in Japan. This test-taking phenomenon is embedded in what is now classified as a “testing culture” where an individual attributed societal value is established on test results, resulting in severe competition (Otomo, 2016). The IELTS test is one such test among other common tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and EIKEN. Outside of Japan a growing number of institutions recognize the IELTS test results for international admission. The IELTS test has become widely established to the point of becoming a crucial factor for individuals to secure work in English-speaking countries (Green, 2007). Candidates therefore seek out preparation courses or intensive courses in an effort to practice the various tasks and receive corrective feedback on their written essays in order to achieve an exceptional Writing Band Score of 6.5 or higher.

The analysis of writing errors has become an essential part of the second language teaching learning process. Hasyim (2002), defines error analysis as the practice of observing, analyzing, and classifying the irregularities of the rules of the second language and then to disclose the systems activated by the learner. Crystal as cited by Hasyim (2002) proposes that error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language. Language teaching benefits tremendously from the outcomes of error analysis. Therefore, investigating the types and frequencies of learner errors that occur during the L2 learning process and identifying the causes of these errors for different learners can according to Corder (1974) allow teachers and language practitioners the ability to define targeted areas of L2 learners that's requires additional support in the teaching process. The aim of this study is to examine and analyze the frequency of writing errors and determine the causes behind such errors made by first time test takers of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) academic writing essay-Task 2.

Error Analysis

The type and frequency of errors made during second language acquisition as a pedagogical approach has attracted many researchers (e.g., Yin & Ung, 2012; Yazdani & Ghafar, 2010; As to the theoretical underpinnings of error analysis which were advocated by Corder (1967) and his colleagues in the 1960's, the errors made by students occur in three considerable stages with the first being able to provide valid data about language application from the learner, providing data on when a language is learned and lastly providing data to the learner of the errors made so as to initiate remedial action. Similarly, error analysis has potential advantages such as pedagogical gains in curriculum development and the instruction /learning process.

Error analysis (EA) examines and analyses the errors second language learners make in various tasks (Richards and Schmidt , 2002). EA compares “learner English” with English (L2) itself and judges how learners are uninformed (James, 1998) about the linguistic and semantic rules of the target language. Hasyim (2002) postulates that error analysis is conducted so as to: (a) discover how well a learner is familiar with a particular a language, (b) to know how a person learns a language, and (c) acquire

information on collective errors in language learning, as an aid in curriculum development and instruction.

Overview of IELTS Writing Task 2

IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, is designed to assess the language ability of candidates who want to study or work where English is the language of communication. The results and qualifications from the IELTS test are used for multiple purposes, from meeting eligibility requirements for entry into educational programs to selection criteria for the assumption of professional employment.

The IELTS Writing Task 2 requires candidates to write at least 250 words. They will be presented with a topic and will be tested on their ability to respond by giving and justifying an opinion, discussing the topic, summarizing details, outlining problems, identifying possible solutions and supporting what they write with reasons, arguments and relevant examples from their own knowledge or experience. Responses must be in a formal style. (British Council, 2019). Sitting the IELTS writing task test can create extreme pressure for many candidates (Issitt, 2008). This is a result of the limited time allotted to complete both tasks along with the unpredictability of the tasks topic along with the formality of the tasks and its assessment criteria. In the Writing Task 2, there is a detailed assessment rubric. As O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth (2003) reports learner familiarity with the assessment rubric could highly influence how they approach the task and eventually their performance.

IELTS Writing Task 2 Assessment

Candidates essays are assessed by trained IELTS examiners using the four criteria (Task 2 Band Descriptors) which is summarized in Table 1. The public version of this rubric is available online.

Table 1

Task Response	Coherence and Cohesion	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy
Being able to full address the task, developing ideas clearly and supporting them	Being able to clearly and skillfully organize ideas in a paragraph whilst using referencing and cohesive devices	Being able to use a variety of vocabulary that is uncommon whilst making limited spelling and word formation errors.	Being able to use a variety of grammatical structures and punctuation with minor errors.

Table 1: An adaption of the public IELTS Writing Task 2 Band Descriptors

Methodology

A corpus of 30 Japanese adult learners academic writing Task 2 essays in an Intensive Writing Course were carefully examined to determine the main writing errors following the procedure for Error Analysis proposed by Corder (1967). The research adopted an analytical descriptive approach.

Participants

For the purpose of this study thirty (30) students in an IELTS Preparation Course were selected . All the participant were native speakers of Japanese. English was considered a foreign language for all the participants. The participants were all first time test takers ranging from ages 18-60. (M=12 and F= 18). There were twelve male participants and eighteen female participants. The youngest participants within the selected sample were six 18 year old's and one 60 year old as the oldest.

Instruments

A total of 2 samples of IELTS Writing Task 2 were taken from each participant constituting a total of 60 writing samples as the materials being used in this study for analyzing errors . The written tasks were obtained during December 2019.

Procedure

Two sample sets of Writing task 2 essays were marked by the researcher (lecturer). Each essay was carefully examined word by word and sentence by sentence coding categories were then generated based on all the writing samples. The number of errors were then calculated into percentages to analyze the frequency.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was divided into 3 parts:

1. The errors were analyzed based on the four criteria of the IELTS Academic Task 2 (**IELTS BAND DESCRIPTOR**).
 - Task Response
 - Cohesion and Coherence
 - Lexical Resources
 - Grammatical range and accuracy
2. The type and frequency of errors made by each participant
3. The causes behind such writing errors

Findings

The findings revealed that verb tense, article errors, spelling and subject verb agreement were the most common writing errors made by learners. With regards to cohesion , coherence and lexical resource, poor progression in paragraphs, parts of the essay being incomprehensible, vague topic sentences, poor use of transition signals and incorrect use of target lexical items were the most common categories of errors.

Table 2

Type of Errors	Number of Errors	%
Verb Tense	95	34.92
Article Errors	82	30.15
Spelling	55	20.22
Subject Verb Agreement	40	14.71
Total	272	

Table 2: The frequency and percentage of grammatical errors

Table 3

Main Causes of Writing Errors	
1.	Inadequate Academic Writing practice
2.	Translation from Japanese to English
3.	Intralingual and Developmental mistakes

Table 3: The Main causes of student errors

Table 4

Error Classification	Examples from Task 2 Writing
Verb Tense	“Like idioms or <u>phrase</u> that related to regions and cultures...” “Hence, this <u>will</u> might <u>leads</u> to a...”
Article Errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...living in <u>an</u> another country.” “... To begin with, there is <u>an</u> communication problem.” “...it only brings <u>a</u> unfavorable influence.”
Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “... this will highly increase their <u>curiocities</u>” “...I <u>personaly</u> think that both are important.” “...Chinese and Japanese their <u>caractors</u> are similar due to historical background.”
Subject Verb Agreement	“Many foreign friends of <u>mines</u> travels to China.”

Table 4: Error Classification and Examples

Discussion and Conclusion

A detailed analysis of the findings indicated that four common errors made by students were: verb tense, article errors, spelling and subject verb agreement as outlined in Table 2. Based on the findings it is clear that verb tense was the common error made by participants with a total of 95 errors listed. The results may suggest that the inappropriate use of verb tenses is one of the main learning challenges of students in this study. According to the results it is revealed that male learners made more written errors in comparison to female learners (N=140).

According to Corder (1974) error analysis categorization (interlanguage, intralingual and developmental errors may impact students writing tasks. The influence of their first language (Japanese) and the fact that they are first time test takers highlights their weaknesses in coherence and lexical resource, poor progression in paragraphs, parts

of the essay being incomprehensible, vague topic sentences, poor use of transition signals and incorrect use of target lexical items.

The study is important to educators and study material developers who should become aware of the kind of errors that their target learners make, so that they are in a better position to put appropriate intervention strategies into place. For learners, error analysis is important as it illustrates the areas of difficulty in their writing. The data trail that is eventually generated by each student will allow prefectures and Boards of Education (BOE) to acquire a better understanding of the individual behavior of students (test takers) therefore giving insight into how students learn.

The information from this study can inform stakeholders:

- to provide customized programs, syllabus and curriculum for improving student's efficiency and results on the IELTS Writing Task 2 essay
- to identify where the global education is failing students
- to recognize which learning programmes are most successful, and why some students score better than others overall in testing, all with the aim of improving students' chances of success on the IELTS Writing Task 2 essay.

Acknowledgments: The very helpful feedback from the anonymous reviewers is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks to Catherine Johnson for the motivation to complete this study and Mr. Dwayne Coulthurst for all the support throughout this study.

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