

Error analysis of the freshmen criminology students' grammar in the written English

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Date received: March 30, 2017

Date accepted: May 29, 2017

Date published: December 16, 2017

ABSTRACT

This study identifies the various syntactical errors of the fifty (50) freshmen B.S. Criminology students of the University of Mindanao in Davao City. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following: (1) What are the common errors present in the argumentative essays of the respondents? (2) What are the reasons of the existence of these errors? This study is descriptive-qualitative. It also uses error analysis to point out the syntactical errors present in the compositions of the participants. The fifty essays are subjected to error analysis. Errors are classified based on Chanquoy's Classification of Writing Errors. Furthermore, Hourani's Common Reasons of Grammatical Errors Checklist was also used to determine the common reasons of the identified syntactical errors. To create a meaningful interpretation of data and to solicit further ideas from the participants, a focus group discussion is also done. Findings show that students' most common errors are on the grammatical aspect. In the grammatical aspect, students have more frequently committed errors in the verb aspect (tense, subject agreement, and auxiliary and linker choice) compared to spelling and punctuation aspects. Moreover, there are three topmost reasons of committing errors in the paragraph: mother tongue interference, incomprehensibility of the grammar rules, and the incomprehensibility of the writing mechanics. Despite the difficulty in learning English as a second language, students are still very motivated to master the concepts and applications of the language.

Keywords: *Error Analysis, Essay, Grammar, English, Philippines.*

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English language is highly recognized because of its many uses not only in the academe but also in various industries. Zawahreh (2012) noted that English is one of the most dominant languages in the world. It is used widely in many fields and industries such as politics, science, arts, tourism, and economics. To understand what is happening in the world, one should learn the English language.

Apparently, the importance of English should not be underestimated because it allows a person to become competent. Brown (2000) highlighted that languages consist of four main skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. Learners should be exposed to the all mentioned skills to successfully master English language. It is true to that in the writing skill, learners produce sentences in a particular order and connected together in specific ways. However, according to Harris and Cunningham (1994), "Learners encounter many difficulties when trying to produce sentences or to write English paragraphs. Therefore, written production is one of the most difficult tasks for many ESL/EFL learners."

Writing is not a simple task being done in the classroom. Students must have the knowledge and skill that are actually required in succeeding a writing activity. Murcia and Olshtain (2000) claimed that writing skill requires a high level of language control, problem-solving form, generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring, and assessing what has been produced. Thus, writing skill is still

rated to be a hard task for most first and foreign language learners (Ingels, 2006). Considering all of these, Hammad (2012) pointed out that it is important to understand the students' problems in writing skill in order to improve the quality of ESL/EFL writing.

Al-Khasawneh (2013) revealed that in Jordan, English is highly considered as a foreign language in the Jordanian education system in both primary and secondary schools and it is a compulsory subject for all university students. However, the English proficiency among Jordanian students is relatively low despite learning English for many years. Jordanian students are still weak in English, particularly in their writing skills. The same problem also exists in Saudi Arabia. According to Sawalmeh (2013), "Further research are suggested and some pedagogical implications which might assist ESL/EFL teachers with some helpful suggestions and teaching strategies that will reduce existing problems regarding writing English essays among Arab learners must be highlighted."

In the Philippines, Alinsunod (2014) conducted a study on common writing errors which primarily focused in identifying the writing errors of the Engineering students. She found out that the difficulties experienced by the ESL students are hard to escape. The sampled actual writing problems and self-reported writing difficulties only prove the existence of language learning problem. There is much to be regarded with the writing skills of ESL learners. The difficulties reported by the students simply shows how this skill at times maybe disregarded by others.

Aliweng (2008), in her study entitled *Writing Proficiency Level of Freshman Students at BSBT College, Baguio City*, showed that the common errors committed and the writing proficiency level of freshman students at BSBT College are on grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics. Findings showed that the common errors on grammar are on the past form of the verb, subject-verb agreement, misuse/omission of conjunctions and prepositions, and order of words. Under sentence structure, the data showed that the students wrote incorrect or overload sentences and fragments. Thus, grammatical problems in writing activities still exist.

Because of the existence of these problems, conducting a study with regard to error analysis of the students' written English is deemed important. This study did not only simply identify the frequently existing errors in the students' paragraphs but also, through the findings, identified problems were then classified. Specifically, this paper determined the various syntactical errors of the freshmen Bachelor of Science in Criminology students of the University of Mindanao in Davao City who are enrolled in the English 101 (Grammar) class. To create a more meaningful interpretation of the study, reasons or sources of the common errors were also tackled.

METHODS

Locale

The study was conducted in the University of Mindanao-Matina Campus located at Matina, Davao City, specifically in the College of Criminal Justice Education.

Participants

The participants of this study were fifty (50) freshmen Bachelor of Science in Criminology students of the University of Mindanao. Only those freshmen enrolled in the English 101 (Grammar) course of the 1st Semester of S.Y 2015-2016 were considered for data-gathering purposes. Participants were chosen purposively by the researcher considering that they are currently enrolled in the B.S. Criminology program and in the English 101 course of the academe.

Procedure

The following steps were undertaken as part of the procedures in the conduct of the study. The study was divided into four phases.

Phase 1: *Asking Permission*. The researcher himself wrote a letter addressed to the College of Criminal Justice Education dean or program head asking permission to conduct the study. *Student Briefing/Study Orientation*. Students were oriented on the purpose and aims of the study. This is one way to make sure that the participants would give their utmost cooperation in the conduct of the study.

Phase 2: *Paragraph Writing Session 1*. Students wrote an argumentative essay affirming or negating the statement “Boys are smarter than girls.” There was no limit on the time and number of words/sentences so that there will be no pressure to the side of the students. Through this way, students would have a natural flow of ideas since no constraints in writing would be experienced. *Feedbacking on the 1st Output*. Collected paragraph were checked. Mistakes were encircled but no corrections of these were made. The students would have to find out the reasons why a specific word or sentence in their paragraph was encircled. Thus, the students themselves corrected their mistakes. After this, papers were returned to the students for revision. *Revision of the 1st Output/Second Writing Session*. Students were given enough time to rewrite their paper. This time, students corrected the encircled mistakes. They would have to use their understanding of the basic English grammar rules that were previously discussed in the class. *Feedbacking on the 2nd Output*. Again, corrections made by the students were checked. Consistent mistakes were encircled. Still, no comments or suggestions were provided. Papers were returned to the participants for the final write-up. *Final Writing Session*. Students would have to make sure that their paragraphs are flawless. By considering all the encircled mistakes, the paragraph ought to be written well. Attached with the first and second draft, the final draft was submitted which was subjected for error analysis.

Phase 3: *Error Analysis*. Comparing the first, second, and final drafts, consistent mistakes were considered as errors. These errors were categorized based on Chanquoy’s (2001) Classification of Writing Errors. Frequency per error was tallied. *Administering of Checklist*. Participants filled out a check list that would gather responses on the reasons of their errors in the argumentative paragraph. Checklists were retrieved for the tallying of results.

Phase 4: *Focus Group Discussion*. Results based on the checklist were discussed with a sample taken from the total number of the population; i.e., the standard sample size is six to ten participants. This is to verify and get further details on the answers stipulated in the checklists. Responses were written and/or recorded. *Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Data*. Data taken from the error analysis and checklist were tabulated and presented graphically. Careful analysis and interpretation were also done as part of the last procedure.

Tools

Three research tools were used in this study. First were the 50 argumentative essays taken from the participants. These essays were subjected to an error analysis. Second was the checklist which asked the participants to check the boxes of some identified possible reasons of the existence of the syntactical errors. This modified checklist was adapted from Hourani (2008). Third were the guide questions for the focus group discussion.

Analysis

The technique of data analysis that was used in this research is descriptive analysis technique (percentage) which is described in the table of percentage. The formula is $P=f/N$; where: P= percentage, f= frequency, and N= number of population. Also, this study used the mean which is computed by: $\sum_{i=1}^n xi / n$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Categorical distribution of errors committed in the essays

Figure 1 shows the categorical distribution of errors committed in the written compositions under each specific category. Fifty research participants have committed a total of 308 writing errors that are

generally categorized as errors in spelling, punctuation, and in grammar. These errors are comprised of 17 spelling errors (5.52%), 89 punctuation errors (28.9%), and 202 grammatical errors (65.58%).

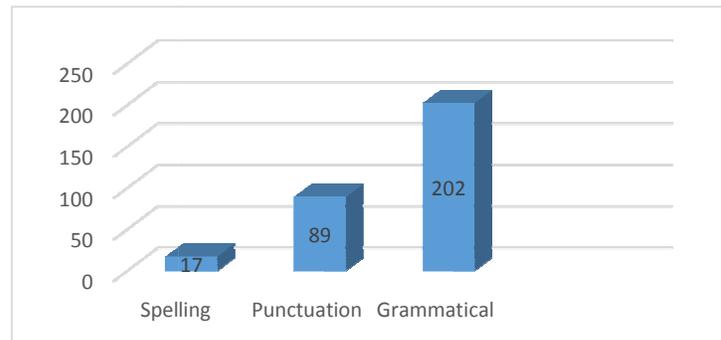


Fig. 1. Categorical distribution of errors

Punctuation mark errors

It is noted that 28.9 % of the total number of errors is attributed to errors related to the use of punctuation marks. Observably, there were numerous errors in the argumentative essays of the respondents in terms of the use of punctuation marks. Majority of punctuation mark errors is on the proper use of comma (.). Respondents were not able to use comma in their sentences which resulted to run-on sentences. Also, commas were missing after introductory words/phrases and transitional devices such as *therefore, but, although, and so* among others. Table 1 shows some of the errors in terms of punctuation mark use.

Table 1. Sample errors in punctuation mark use

Sample erroneous sentences due to improper use of punctuation marks

- *For instance; for boys and girls, there have different strengths and weaknesses...*
- *They are capable of bearing hard work; such as...*
- *Although as I observed, girls are serious...*
- *...they are serious about it and also I observe that...*
- *...and as you can see there are a lot of famous and all of them are boys.*
- *No, because it depends to them boys are not too studied...*
- *...mathematicians and experts are men's in other words men always use their brain...*
- *According to Science men's brain are bigger than the woman's...*
- *Sometimes the girls are being selected...*
- *All people are smart. because in reality, God created humans and no one are stupid...*
- *According to social media men smarter than girls..*
- *The smarter person, who has an ability to do anything...*
- *In fact, it truly depends on the person; boys do exceed and girls too.*
- *Apparently, Im convinced and I would say that boys...*
- *...many ways to solve or move on, So for me boys are smarter than girls.*
- *But the boys are laizy to work...*
- *So for me I can't tell that boys are smarter...*

Spelling errors

It is shown in the findings of the study that the least frequent error committed by the respondents in writing their argumentative essays is on orthography or spelling. It is noted that spelling errors comprises the 5.52% of the total number of errors. This denotes that college students committed few errors and that they have sufficient knowledge on the correct spelling of words. Table 2 shows some of the misspelled words found in their compositions.

Table 2. List of misspelled words

<i>Misspelled Words Found in the Essays</i>
<i>hard wourking; confious</i>
<i>ricognized; egnore</i>
<i>embarrasment; what ever</i>
<i>becaus; possitive</i>
<i>competitive; strick</i>
<i>ediot; sorroundings</i>
<i>laizy; habbit</i>
<i>compaired; entelligent</i>
<i>reapet</i>

Grammatical errors

The last type of error committed by the respondents is on the grammatical aspect of their composition. It is found out that 65.58 % of the total number of errors is attributed to grammatical errors. Grammatical errors committed by the respondents are primarily those errors related to noun pluralization, pronoun choice, pronoun- antecedent agreement, verbs (tense, wrong auxiliaries and linkers), subject-verb agreements, preposition, coordinators, and subordinators. Added to these are those errors in terms of the use of articles or determiners, capitalization, and word contraction. These three are considered to be grammatical errors since they also affect the meaning of the sentence.

Figure 2 tells us that majority of the errors are attributed to verbs. Of the 308 identified errors in the compositions, 68 of them are attributed to verb errors. Second most frequent grammatical errors are on the comparative degree of adjectives and preposition use which both have a frequency of 17. Most of the respondents did not use the comparative degree of some adjectives even if the sentence call for a comparison of two entities. Third most common grammatical error is on the use of pronouns, specifically, on the choice of pronoun used in the sentence. Here, pronouns are inappropriate to be used in the sentence. Fourth most frequent error is on the number of nouns, particularly on the pluralization of nouns. Based on the compositions, there were some who were not able to provide the correct plural forms of some nouns. Last type of errors are on pronoun-antecedent agreement which deals on the use of pronoun that does not agree with the antecedent, wrong use of adverbs, and inappropriate use of coordinators and subordinators. Verb errors are the most prevalent forms of grammatical errors. These verb errors are primarily composed of subject-verb agreement issues, wrong tense, missing auxiliaries and linking verbs, and inappropriate use of auxiliaries. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of verb errors committed in the written compositions of the respondents.

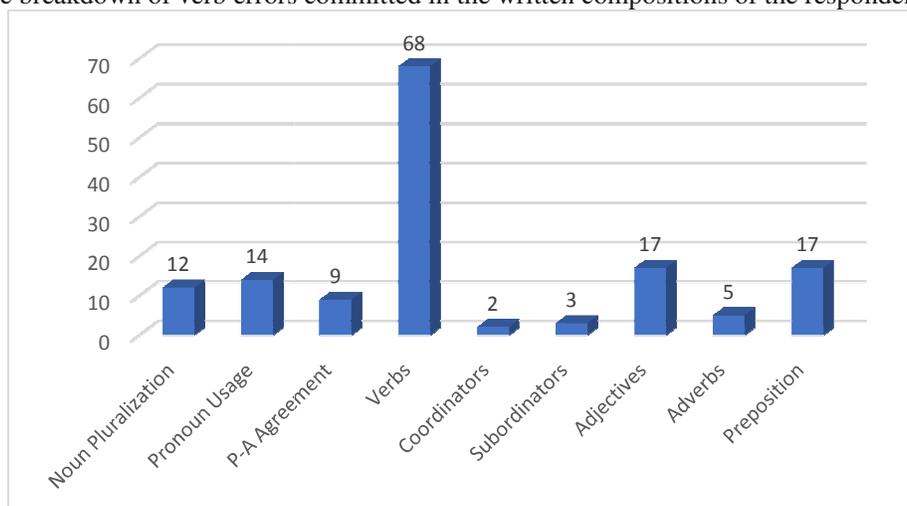


Fig. 2. Grammatical errors (parts of speech)

Figure 3 denotes that among the 68 errors related to verbs, 33 or 48.53% are on verb tense. It is observed in the composition of the respondents that there is an inconsistency in the verb tenses. Also, most of the respondents wrote the verb in past tense form even if it should be in the present form. Moreover, some respondents also were not able to correctly provide the past tense form of some irregular verbs which is also included in the counting of errors under this category. Second most prevalent verb error is on the subject-verb agreement in which the subject of the sentence does not agree with the verb being used. This verb error composes the 22.06% of the total number of verb errors. Other errors that are least committed by the respondents are on the auxiliary usage and missing auxiliary and linking verbs.

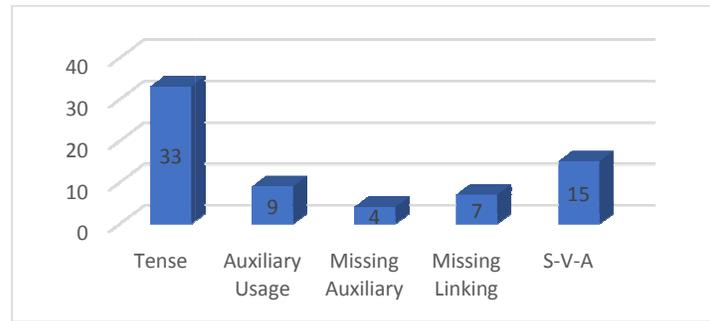


Fig. 3. Verb errors

Besides the errors related to the parts of speech in the English language, it is also noteworthy that errors related to contractions, articles/determiners, and capitalization be included in the presentation of data. These are deemed significant because they form part of the sentence structure in which, errors in these aspects would result to different interpretation of the sentence or syntactically anomalous statements. Figure 4 shows the frequency of errors related to articles, contractions, and capitalization. It is revealed that there are 31 errors (15.35%) related to the capitalization of the words. In this type of error, respondents did not capitalize the proper nouns, and some of them also capitalize some words like common nouns that are not supposed to be capitalized. Meanwhile, there are 12 recorded errors (5.94%) in both the use of articles/determiners and contraction of words.

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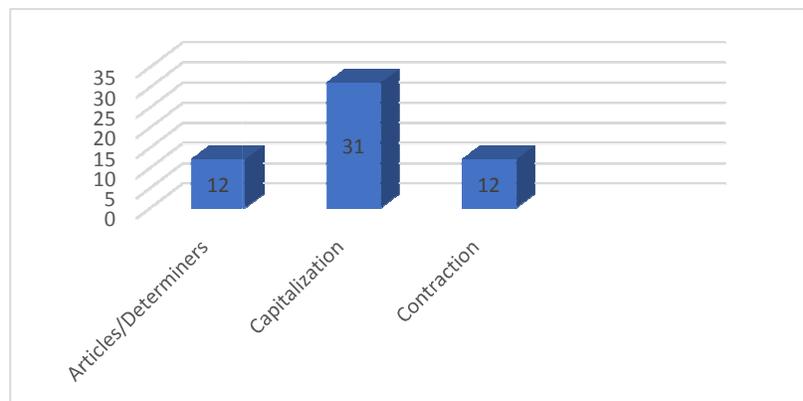


Fig. 4. Grammatical error-related (articles, capitalization, and contraction)

Common reasons of errors

This study adapted Hourani's (2008) common reasons of errors check list. According to Hourani, difficulties in English writing skills lie on the following: teaching methods in writing (TM), text books used in the class (TB), lack of writing activities and homework (LWA), incomprehensibility of grammar rules (IGR), incomprehensibility of writing mechanics (IWM), mother tongue interference (MTI), lack of motivation (LM), and lack of vocabulary (LV).

In the present study, respondents have uncommon answers with regard to the major reasons of their difficulties in the English writing skills. Figure 5 presents the responses of the participants in terms of their identified reasons of their difficulties in English. Also, these reasons are considered to be the causes why there have been errors in their argumentative essays.

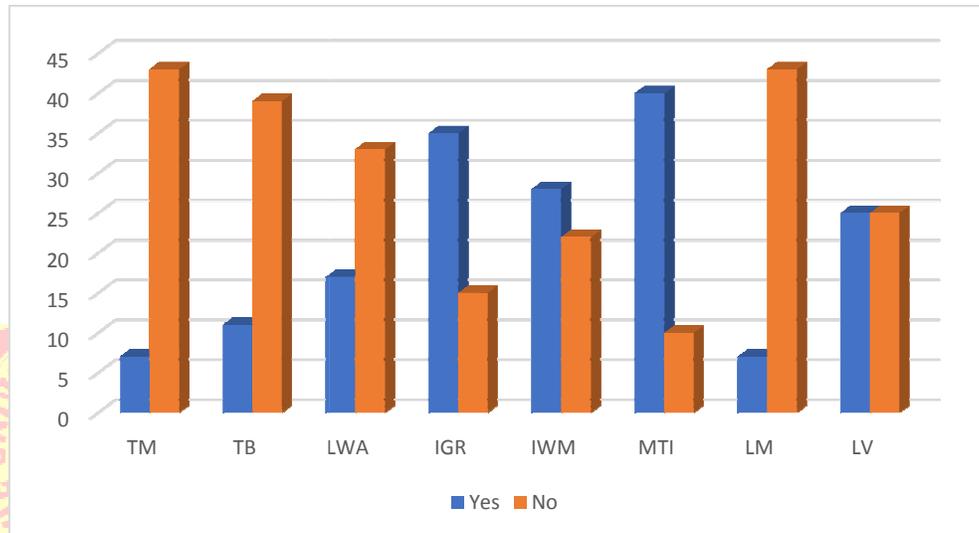


Fig. 5. Common reasons of errors

Teaching Methods in Writing (TM)

Based on the findings, seven (7) respondents believed that teaching methods in writing is one of the reasons why they have committed several errors in their essays. However, there are forty-three (43) who ascertained that teaching methods in writing is not a reason why they find it very difficult to write a flawless argumentative paragraph.

The Text Books (TB)

Findings reveal that only eleven (11) respondents believe that the text books they use in their English class is one of the reasons why they have committed many errors. However, majority of the respondents, that is thirty-nine (39) of them, believe that text books are not the reasons behind several writing errors found in the essays.

Lack of Writing Activities and Homework (LWA)

As seen on the findings, only seventeen (17) of the total number of respondents believe that they commit errors in their essays because their teachers did not expose them to a series of writing activities or drills that would improve their skills. However, it is to be noted that 33 of the respondents do not believe that lack of writing activities and homework is the reason why they have committed numerous errors in their composition.

Incomprehensibility of the Grammar Rules (IGR)

It is noted that thirty-five (35) respondents said that the incomprehensibility of the grammar rules is one of the reasons why they have committed many writing errors. Thus, only fifteen (15) respondents did not affirm that the complexity of the grammar rules is the reason of their errors in the compositions.

Incomprehensibility of the Writing Mechanics (IWM)

It is found out that twenty-two (22) respondents believe that incomprehensibility of the writing mechanics is not a reason of their errors in the compositions. Therefore, a total of twenty-eight (28) respondents agree that the complexity of writing mechanics is a reason of their errors. Thus, majority of the respondents believes that the difficulty in understanding certain writing mechanics affects the quality of a written paragraph.

Mother Tongue Interference (MTI)

Of the fifty (50) respondents, forty (40) indicated that their mother tongue is the reason of their committed errors in their composition. As a matter of fact, respondents have identified this as the truest reason of errors in a paragraph. All the interviewed respondents mentioned that their first language or mother tongue is Cebuano (Bisaya). Thus, many find it very difficult to apply English because of the complexity of its rules and structures.

Lack of Motivation (LM)

Results show that seven (7) of the respondents agree that the lack of motivation in learning English is a reason of frequent paragraph errors. This would mean that forty-three (43) respondents do not believe that the lack of motivation in learning English is a reason of paragraph errors. Most of the respondents also affirmed that they are really motivated to learn the English language. Even if they find it difficult to learn English, still they find ways on how to enjoy the learning process.

Lack of Vocabulary (LV)

Twenty-five (25) respondents believe that lack of vocabulary is a reason of the errors committed in the paragraph. On the other hand, also twenty-five (25) respondents assert that lack of vocabulary is not a reason of the frequent occurrence of paragraph errors. Respondents ascertain that their lack of vocabulary also affects the quality of their paragraph. Most of them answered that they just use simple words in their compositions because they have only limited knowledge on complex words.

Despite the many errors committed by the students, it is good to know that the students are still very motivated to learn the language. Students have realized the great importance of English in daily interactions. It is undeniable that English is very important nowadays. According to Zawahreh (2012), "English is one of the most dominant languages in the world. It is used widely in many fields and industries such as politics, science, arts, tourism, and economics. In order to understand what is happening in the world, one should learn English language." Also, students may have realized that learning and mastering English is quite difficult, but they believe that they can still enhance themselves for the sake of preparing themselves in the near future.

In addition, it is to be noted that the respondents are first year B.S in Criminology students. Having this, it must be highlighted that good command of grammar is important in the world of criminology. It is crucial to have good writing skills. This is affirmed by the Criminal Justice Institute (2001) who posited that one's skills as a police officer are largely evaluated based on his or her written reports. An officer must not only be able to do his job well and within the scope of law, but he must also be able to accurately record information concerning those activities and present it to those who were not there when the incident transpired. Thus, based on the errors which were gotten from the students' essays, a good foundation of grammar must be given to the students. Equipping the students with the needed grammatical skills with excellent writing trainings is a must for future police officers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussions, the following conclusions are drawn: (1) college students still find it very difficult to flawlessly write essays using the English language; (2) students' most common errors are on the grammatical aspect. In the grammatical aspect, students have more frequently committed errors in the verb aspect (tense, subject agreement, and auxiliary and linker choice)

compared to spelling and punctuation aspects; (3) there are three topmost reasons of committing errors in the paragraph. These are mother tongue interference, incomprehensibility of the grammar rules, and the incomprehensibility of the writing mechanics; (4) students consider mother tongue interference as a reason of errors because they usually use their first language or mother tongue, which is Cebuano, in casual conversations or informal writing; (5) students find it very difficult to familiarize all the grammar rules and writing mechanics. Thus, they frequently commit error in terms of grammar and mechanics; (6) despite difficulty in learning English as a second language, students are still very motivated to master the concepts and applications of the language.

It is therefore recommended that future researchers delve on further studies centered on identifying other aspects of error analysis and/or providing an intervention program to address these errors. Also, it is highly suggested that the institution improve its English remedial instruction to make sure that all language needs of the students are addressed. Furthermore, it is hoped that the Language Discipline of the said institution provide a concrete program that will help university's colleges address their needs in terms of upgrading the students' English proficiency skills, specifically in writing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gratitude to Dr. Milagros M. Villas for the support given to MEAL students; Ma'am Rowena C. Nuera for providing guidance and suggestions; The University of Mindanao Language Discipline, College of Arts and Sciences Education headed by Dr. Edwin L. Nebria for allowing the researcher to conduct this study; and to the active participation of the English 101 Grammar Class of the University of Mindanao.

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