The Relationship Between Teacher Factors and Malaysian Undergraduates' Grammatical Errors in Writing

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse grammatical problems in writing encountered by undergraduates in Malaysian University English Test (MUET), and to determine whether teachers' teaching backgrounds and teaching methodologies had any impact on the undergraduates' errors in writing. 335 writing scripts were analyzed in order to identify students' grammatical errors. Additionally, to analyse the relationship between various teacher factors and students' grammatical errors in writing, questionnaires were administered to fifteen full-time English teachers in a Malaysian university. The analysis of the scripts revealed that the undergraduates had the most problem in using verbs, followed by nouns, pronouns, prepositions and sentence patterns. Statistical analyses indicated that teachers' teaching experiences, academic qualifications and teaching approaches had significant impact on the undergraduates' grammatical problems in writing, to a certain extent. Based on the findings of this study, language teachers are suggested to vary their teaching approaches according to the types of grammatical items and expand the contexts while teaching grammar. It is also recommended that teachers at all levels require retraining periodically for professional development.

Keywords: grammar, writing, error analysis, teaching backgrounds, teaching methodologies

Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) in Malaysia has occupied a prominent and sometimes controversial position for decades, both before and after independence. The language policy adopted by Malaysia places Malay (or *Bahasa Malaysia*) as the national language and English as the most important second language. This effort continues in the latest language policy of 'Upholding the Malay language; Strengthening the English language' (*Dasar Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris*) implemented by the Ministry of Education Malaysia starting in 2010. The policy aims at making the Malay language as the medium of national unity and the instructional language in national schools; and at the same time, enhancing students' fluency and accuracy in the use of English (Ministry of Education, 2014). With its designation as the official language, Malay remains the dominant language in the education system and government administration; whereas English is widely practised in various professions, including tertiary education sector (Zuraidah, 2012).

Despite there is such concern in students' mastery of language, there have been swings for and against the teaching of grammar in the Malaysian ESL classrooms over the last forty years. There was a stage where, according to interpretations of the Malaysian Upper Secondary Schools' syllabus, no grammar was needed to be taught at all as it was to be integrated into the lesson. Nevertheless, teaching of grammar has made its return in the new school curriculum beginning with Year 3 through Year 6 (primary level) and Form 1 through Form 5 (secondary level) with effect from 2011. This move has, then, led to another argument with respect to its effectiveness in making students to internalise the knowledge of grammar.

In the scenario of ELT in Malaysia, although English has been offered as a compulsory subject across all levels of education, it is never made a compulsory pass in the public examinations particularly at the primary and secondary levels of education. Additionally, the entry requirements to most of the programmes offered in university do not take into consideration students' performance in English. Due to this inadequate emphasis, university students are found to be unable to write with competence, and they tend to make grammatical errors in their writing (Asmah, 1992; Charanjit, et al., 2017). Grammatical errors which are frequently committed in their academic writings are found unintelligible and indecipherable, causing the intended meaning being distorted. This situation is also reported by Maros, et al., (2007) in a study on the errors of 120 scripts, whereby only 60 scripts were analyzable as the other 50% were simply incomprehensible and the scripts could not put in any categories of error. This study also found learning English grammar being the

major difficulty faced by many students. Likewise, another instance is related to Malaysian ESL students' grammatical problems in the writing performance in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

Literature Review

MUET is a test of English language proficiency specifically adopted as the benchmark for university admissions and partial requirement for graduation. This test is set and administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council (MEC) with the main objective "to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education" (Chan & Wong, 2004, p.35). Also, the test is viewed as the primary tool through which changes in teaching and learning practices of English at the tertiary level could be improved. In other words, the ultimate goal in implementing MUET has been to use it as a lever of change (Zuraidah, 2012). However, it is seemed that students' performance failed to move along with the intended change, especially in writing ability. Results obtained from previous sessions at national level depict that writing seems to be the most difficult component in the MUET. According to a report tabulated by the MEC (2009) on the MUET performance from the year of 2002-2006, the writing component scored the lowest with a mean mark of 36.07 as compared to the other three components/skills – listening (57.16), speaking (45.82), and reading (53.45). As presented in the report, the poor performance in writing is attributed to students' level of language proficiency, which is largely determined by the knowledge of grammar. Thus, the underlying reasons of the students' poor performance in the writing section of MUET or particularly their grammatical errors are considered a critical matter.

Various justifications are linked to students' performance in learning grammar. Apart from the dilemma in grammar-teaching methodology, it must be pointed out at this juncture that qualifications of language teachers raise another issue of concern in ELT in Malaysia. Students' weak performance is associated with the inadequacy of qualified English teachers. This was revealed in the study executed by the MEC (2009) on the MUET performance. It was reported that the percentage of students who obtained at least a Band 3 and were taught by teachers majoring in TESL/ TESOL was higher (two folds) than the performance of students who were taught by non-TESL/TESOL specialized teachers – 45.70% and 20.77% respectively. Therefore, teacher's expertise in the subject matter is considered one of the crucial factors in students' writing and grammar performance.

Teaching grammar at tertiary level has been claimed a daunting and challenging task (Gunawardena, 2014). This is largely due to its methodology. The existing argument on the methodology of grammar-teaching has always

been bogged down by the issue of whether it should be taught explicitly or implicitly. Since the history of language teaching has experienced numerous pendulum swings (Richards & Renandya, 2002), the assumption lies in the teaching of grammar and learners' learning effectiveness has certainly been a worthwhile discussion topic. It begins from teaching formal grammar rules to a more communicative and discovery approach to teach grammar in context (Gardner, 2008), and then it goes back to didactic and teacher-fronted approaches. Although there is no one best method of teaching grammar, it is crucial for educationists to investigate the effectiveness of the many different techniques advocated by methodologists since practicing teachers need to know what constitutes sound approaches to the teaching of grammar. Methodology in this study covers teaching approaches. Since language is one of the main concerns of every educator and assessor, students' language errors need to be studied and teacher's approaches need to be reviewed in order to promote effective learning and teaching.

In a comparative study on the impact of contextualised grammar teaching on students' writing attainment, Myhill and Jones (2011) have suggested the use of embedded grammar teaching for its positive effect on students' writing performance. Besides that, another important finding was reported in which teachers' subject knowledge of grammar had significant effect on student writing performance and the explicitness of the teaching schemes. Myhill and Jones's (2011) study, thus, demonstrate the effect of grammar teaching methodology and teacher experience on learners' writing performance.

In previous research on grammar instruction or grammatical error analysis, although studies with respect to ESL/EFL learners' errors in language production are abundant but research which investigates error production in association with variables such as teacher's pedagogic practices and teacher's background is still limited. Therefore, this study was undertaken to investigate the impact of teacher's backgrounds (e.g. teaching experiences and academic qualifications) and pedagogic practices in the teaching of grammar on students' writing performance in the MUET. To be specific, apart from grammatical error analysis, the objective of this study is to determine to what extent teachers' experiences, educational levels or academic qualifications and methodologies give an impact on the students' English grammatical problems.

Research Context

In this study, the students' MUET essay examination scripts were obtained from the Malaysian Examination Council (MEC) with permission. The essay question required respondents to write a discursive essay of no less than 350 words within 50 minutes on the title *"In an arranged marriage, the choice of a husband or wife is made by parents or elders. What do you think of this practice*

in today's society? Discuss". The total mark allocated is 60 and of which equal weighting of 30 marks is awarded for task-fulfilment which covers the content and maturity of ideas whereby the second 30 marks are for language which includes vocabulary, grammar, sentence-structures, coherence and cohesion. Forty of the scripts had been moderated by two examiner leaders appointed by MEC to ensure rating consistency of the first examiner(s).

Subjects and Data Collection Procedures

There were two groups of subjects involved in this study: undergraduates and English teachers. The former comprises 375 final year undergraduate students from five faculties in a state university in Malaysia. All of them sat for MUET as a requirement to graduate. All the 375 scripts were selected for grammatical error analysis in the first phase of the study. The scripts were first sorted out and arranged according to bands (Band 1 – the lowest and Band 6 – the highest). For the descriptive analysis of errors, however, 335 marked scripts (89.3%) that fall into bands 5, 4 and 3 (no candidate obtained Band 6) were selected for coding and analysis purpose. The remaining 40 scripts (10.7%) were the scripts that fell into band 2 and band 1. These scripts were excluded for analysis because they were unintelligible and undecipherable due to multiple-word errors in every sentence and short of word counts. These 40 scripts were discarded because they would contribute very little data and would affect the reliability and validity of the study (Reynolds, Livingston & Wilson 2010). Errors in the essays were identified and classified into eleven categories namely, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, word order, sentence patterns and direct/indirect quotations. The errors were then coded and tabulated to form a statistical presentation of their frequency of occurrence (of high and low frequency).

The second group of subject consists of 15 full-time English teachers who taught the students grammar in proficiency English courses. The teachers' age ranges from 26 to 47 years old, and for this study they were classified under five groups according to their experience as qualified English teachers. The grouping within the range of age corresponds with the government staff employee promotional scheme.

Instruments

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design. Apart from the marked scripts collected from the MEC, the present study also employed a survey to collect the intended data. First, the 15 English teachers were invited to complete a questionnaire focusing on their backgrounds (teaching experiences and academic qualifications) and methodologies (including instructional

techniques) to teach English grammar. The questionnaire was adapted from Brown (2001), Nunan (2000) and Bygate, et al., (1994) with regard to the teaching of grammar. The questionnaire was piloted with five English teachers from another public university before administering it to the teachers in this study. Based on their comments and suggestions, a few teaching techniques were omitted as they were rarely executed in the local ESL classrooms.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was conducted at three levels utilizing SPSS 16.0 for Windows. First, descriptive analysis was performed to tabulate the data obtained from error analysis. Second, analysis of variance was performed to examine if lecturers' (i) teaching experiences in four categories (0-5 years; 6-10 years; 11-15 years; more than 20 years), and (ii) application of drills (choral repetition; individual repetition; choral drill before individual; individual drill before choral drill; no application of drills) differ significantly from each other against the students' grammatical errors in the MUET extended writing. This was followed by two independent sample *t*-tests to determine if there is any significant difference in the mean scores of students' grammatical errors in relation to (i) teachers' academic qualifications (bachelor's degree holder and postgraduate degree holders) and (ii) teachers' teaching methodologies (deductive and a combination of deductive and inductive approach).

Results

Error Analysis: Description of Students' Errors in MUET Extended Writing

The error analysis performed on the 335 students' extended writing recorded 11931 errors (table 1). Among all the grammatical categories, errors in the verbs category were of the highest frequency (35.36%). The errors of the second and third highest frequency were nouns (10.71%) and pronouns (7.66%), respectively. This was followed by preposition (7.34%), sentence patterns (7.35%) and articles (7.14%). Word order was ranked 7th (6.19%), followed by adjectives (5.31%). Error in the use of conjunctions (4.91%) was ranked 10th and adverbs (2.95%). The errors of the lowest frequency were in the use of direct and indirect quotations (0.02%).

Table 1: Distribution of students' grammatical errors

Category	Number of Errors	Percentage of Errors	Rank Order
Nouns	1278	10.71	2
Articles	852	7.14	6
Verbs	4219	35.36	1

Prepositions	881	7.38	4
Conjunctions	587	4.91	10
Pronouns	914	7.66	3
Adjectives	633	5.31	8
Adverbs	352	2.95	11
Word Order	739	6.19	7
Sentence Patterns	877	7.35	5
Others	597	5.00	9
Direct/ Indirect Quotation	2	0.02	12
Total	**11931**	**100**	

Teachers' Experiences and Students' Grammatical Problems

In order to measure the correlation between teachers' teaching experience and their students' performance in the MUET writing, the top five grammatical items with the highest frequency of errors (verbs, nouns, pronouns, prepositions and sentence patterns) were chosen for analysis focus as errors made by the students were abundant (see Table 2). From the descriptive analysis, it was found that students who committed the highest number of errors in four of the grammatical items were taught by teachers who possessed 6-10 years of teaching experience. In other words, this group of teachers had the highest mean in the overall grammatical errors as compared to others. This was followed by the teacher group with 11-15 years of teaching experience. The four grammatical items' error mean scores according to these two teacher groups were tabulated as: verbs (M=13.29, SD=2.57; M=13.05, SD=2.70), nouns (M=4.71, SD=1.93; M=4.60, SD=1.92), pronouns (M=4.47, SD=2.00; M=3.10, SD=1.65) and sentence patterns (M=3.35, SD=1.22; M=3.22, SD=1.42).

Table 2: Descriptive analysis on teachers' teaching experiences on the top five grammatical errors in MUET writing

Grammatical items	Lecturer groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Verbs	0 to 5 years	12.42	2.801	.185
	6 to 10 years	13.29	2.568	.623
	11 to 15 years	13.05	2.696	.348
	more than 20 years	12.61	5.547	1.048
Nouns	0 to 5 years	3.50	1.735	.114
	6 to 10 years	4.71	1.929	.468
	11 to 15 years	4.60	1.924	.248

Grammatical items	Lecturer groups	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
	more than 20 years	4.21	3.833	.724
Pronouns	0 to 5 years	2.51	1.515	.100
	6 to 10 years	4.47	2.004	.486
	11 to 15 years	3.10	1.654	.214
	more than 20 years	2.68	1.982	.375
Sentence patterns	0 to 5 years	2.41	1.389	.092
	6 to 10 years	3.35	1.222	.296
	11 to 15 years	3.22	1.415	.183
	more than 20 years	2.57	2.133	.403
Prepositions	0 to 5 years	2.60	1.181	.078
	6 to 10 years	2.53	.943	.229
	11 to 15 years	2.92	1.565	.202
	more than 20 years	2.36	1.638	.310

Besides that, it is also interestingly noted that the lowest mean scores for errors committed in the four grammatical items were found in the group of teachers with 0-5 years of teaching experience. The tabulated scores are: verbs (M=12.42, SD=2.80), nouns (M=3.50, SD=1.74), pronouns (M=2.51, SD=1.52) and sentence patterns (M=2.41, SD=1.39). This group of teachers is defined, in the educational context, as novice or beginning teachers with around or less than five years of teaching experience (Kim & Roth, 2011). This finding reveals that students who were taught by this group of teachers performed better in the use of the four types of grammatical items in MUET writing.

On the other hand, the lowest mean for errors in prepositions (M=2.36, SD=1.69) was associated with teachers who had more than 20 years of teaching experience. Prepositions have been claimed one of the most problematic language areas which constitutes an immense hurdle for English language learners to master (Abdulmoneim, 2011; Lorincz & Gordon, 2012). Primarily, it is due to its' 'polysemous' nature (Lorincz & Gordon, 2012) and thus their usage varies greatly according to contexts, which "often causing negative syntactic transfer" (p.1). Teachers often find prepositions difficult to teach (Delija & Koruti, 2013) because they are also "hardly addressed in the current teaching methods" (p.124). Due to the complexity system of prepositions in English, teachers' vast teaching experience and ability to contextualize 'loose' prepositional meanings or rules (Abdulmoneim, 2011) could be the critical solution for this matter. This could also be a plausible reason as to why fewer students committed errors in prepositions under teachers with more than 20 years of teaching experience.

As discussed above, certain groups of teachers were found to have

associated with students' high or low frequencies of errors committed in the five grammatical items. Nonetheless, in an analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed to examine if teachers with various teaching experiences differ significantly from each other against the students' grammatical errors in the writing, only nouns, pronouns and sentence patterns errors show significant difference (p<0.05) among the teacher groups. However, both verbs (p-value at 0.410) and prepositions (p-value at 0.216) do not indicate any significant difference (p>0.05). This depicts that teaching experience is not the only factor that contributes to the abundant errors in the use of verbs and prepositions made by the students.

Teachers' Educational Levels and Students' Grammatical Problems

For the purpose of analysis, the teachers' educational levels were categorized into two categories: Bachelor's degree holders (BDH) and Postgraduate degree holders (PDH). An independent samples *t*-test was run to compare the degree to which teachers of different educational levels were associated with students' grammatical errors in writing. First, the results of the analysis showed that there was a significant difference in the mean of students' errors in 'articles' between BDH (*M*=2.76, *SD*=1.38) and PDH (*M*=2.42, *SD*=1.61), with P<0.05. Similarly, significant difference was also found in students' erroneous usage of 'pronouns' in writing between BDH (*M*=3.09, *SD*=1.75) and PDH (*M*=2.53, *SD*=1.59), with P<0.05.

Table 3: Independent samples *t*-test for the BDH and PDH groups on the students' grammatical errors in articles and pronouns

Items	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Articles	3.684	.056	1.918	333	.046	.335
Pronouns	.465	.496	3.016	333	.004	.566

Besides articles and pronouns, there was no significant difference found for other grammatical errors irrespective of what the teachers' educational levels are. From the results it can be contended that academic qualifications of teachers do not give a negative impact on students' grammatical problems in their writing as opposed to teachers' years of teaching experience. This suggests that other variables such as teachers' teaching strategies, techniques or methodologies might contribute to students' grammatical errors in writing. This assumption was examined in the next section.

Effects of Deductive and Combination of Deductive and Inductive Approaches on Students' Grammatical Problems

There are a lot of controversies on the approaches used for teaching of grammar – whether deductive, inductive or combination of both. Recent literature has highly valued the application of inductive approach over deductive approach as the core principal to teaching of English grammar. This study concentrates on deductive and combination of both deductive and inductive approaches as none of the teachers opted for solely inductive approach in their teaching. The survey indicated that four out of fifteen teachers (26.7%) used the deductive approach whereby the remaining used a combination approach. The results of an independent samples *t*-test (table 4) demonstrated that there was a significant difference in the mean of errors for 'word order' between teachers who used deductive approach (*M*=1.76, *SD*=1.63) and a combination approach (*M*=2.42, *SD*=1.50), with P<0.05. On the contrary, there was no significant difference found between the two approaches for other types of grammatical errors in the writing.

Table 4: Independent samples *t*-test on the effects of the use of deductive and a combination approach on students' grammatical errors in word orders

Item	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Word orders	.543	.462	-3.664	333	.000	-.659

Effects of Drills on Students' Grammatical Problems

Another variable being examined in the study is on the use of drills by the teachers in teaching grammar to the students. Grammar practice is often associated with drills (Ellis, 2006) and the efficacy of drills is concerned with accuracy and fluency of language use. Drills in this study refer to a variation of techniques such as (i) chorus repetition, (ii) individual repetition, (iii) chorus drill before individual drill and (iv) individual drill before chorus drill. These four techniques were employed by the teachers in this study. Overall, the ANOVA test results showed that there was a significant difference for most of the grammatical items, and students whose teachers practised individual drill and individual repetition had better understanding on the use and functions of

nouns, adjectives, conjunctions and verbs as compared to teachers who did not practise drilling in their teaching.

In a further analysis to determine which type of drill or drills differ significantly from other techniques, a Post Hoc Multiple Comparison test was performed on the top five grammatical items (verbs, nouns, pronouns, sentence patterns and prepositions) with the highest frequency of errors. First, for errors in nouns, it was found that 'individual repetition' differed significantly from 'chorus drill', 'chorus drill before individual drill', and 'no drill practice' ($p<0.05$). It can be presumed that individual repetition reduces the number of noun errors among the students. This indicates that individual repetition is a better drilling technique compared to chorus repetition for teaching of nouns. Theoretically and pragmatically, it is claimed that one of the few disadvantages of chorus repetition is that some students do not genuinely participate (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) as opposed to individual repetition, whereby students' responses are well heard and perhaps corrected. Second, as for teaching of verbs, individual drill was found the most effective. Third, the use of individual repetition and individual drill gave a positive impact in reducing students' errors in pronouns. Fourth, the test result shows that individual repetition was a more effective instructional technique to teach sentence patterns.

However, there was no significant difference found between the use of various types of drills and errors in preposition. Previous studies (Hazita, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002) have reported the problems learners face in the use of prepositions in writing. Prepositions are classified under function words. Thus, it should be taught in various contexts to show its association with the intended meanings because the choice of one grammatical form over another is determined by the meaning a speaker or writer wishes to convey. To conclude, students who learned via individual repetition and individual drill techniques had better understanding on nouns, pronouns, verbs and sentence patterns.

Conclusion

Grammar is not merely about forms and rules, and teaching of grammar should involve exploring meaning in context which would affect communicative language use (Gunawardena, 2014). In light of the idea of teaching grammar using multiple contexts, it is suggested to include a review of the grammatical point(s) relevant to a topic of discussion when writing is executed (Myhill & Jones, 2011). For instance, when teaching argumentative topics, one should focus on the use of modal verbs to create different levels of assertion. Teachers should also consider discussion about writing choices and the effects in order to determine whether making connections between particular linguistic structures and particular writing tasks support the development of students' writing.

Besides the knowledge of grammar, teachers' knowledge in various subject matters is fundamental to the successful teaching of contextualized grammar. In relation to this, principles and concepts underpinning various approaches to teaching of grammar need to be acquired so that teachers would be more aware of how to make conscious connections between particular grammar features with an essay topic.

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