COMMON ERRORS IN ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG LEARNERS WHOSE FIRST LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH: FREQUENCY, SOURCES AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract. Academic writing is one of the most demanding skills for university students who learn English as a foreign language. Even students with good general proficiency often make repeated errors in grammar, vocabulary and academic style, which can lower their grades and hide the quality of their ideas. This study aims to identify, explain and reduce the most common errors in the academic writing of [L1]-speaking students at an international university. It draws on Error Analysis, Interlanguage theory and research on written corrective feedback. The study will use a mixed-methods design in three phases. The study is expected to provide teachers with a clear, evidence-based picture of their students' writing difficulties and practical suggestions for teaching and materials design. It will also add a less-studied learner group to international research on second language writing.

Keywords: error analysis, academic writing, EFL learners, first-language interference, interlanguage, written corrective feedback

Introduction

Writing is often the hardest skill for university students who learn English as a foreign language. In international universities, students must write essays, reports and research papers in English from their first year. Many of them reach a good level in speaking and reading, yet their written work still shows repeated errors in grammar, vocabulary and academic style.

These errors matter. They can lower grades, hide good ideas and reduce students' confidence. Teachers also spend many hours correcting the same mistakes again and again, often without knowing why they appear.

I teach English at an international university and see these patterns in my students' writing every week. This study grows out of that classroom experience. It aims to describe the most common errors in students' academic writing, explain where they come from, and suggest practical ways to reduce them.

Problem statement and research gap

Error analysis has a long history in applied linguistics, and many studies have looked at the writing of Arabic, Chinese, Spanish and other learner groups. However, far fewer studies focus on [L1]-speaking university students writing academic texts in English.

Three gaps stand out in the existing research. The first concerns the learner group itself: there is little published evidence on the specific errors of [L1]-speaking students, so teachers often rely on general textbooks written with other learners in mind.

The second gap concerns genre. Many earlier studies analyse short, general essays rather than the academic texts students actually write at university, such as argumentative essays, reports and research papers.

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The third gap is the move from description to action. Many studies count errors but stop there, without explaining where the errors come from or testing which teaching methods help students improve.

This study addresses these gaps by combining a systematic error analysis with interviews and a classroom feedback intervention.

Aims and research questions

The study has one main aim: to identify, explain and reduce the most frequent errors in the academic writing of [L1]-speaking university students.

Research questions

1. What are the most frequent grammatical, lexical and discourse-level errors in students' academic essays?
2. To what extent can these errors be explained by first-language interference, and to what extent are they developmental?
3. Do error patterns differ between students at different proficiency levels or years of study?
4. How do students and teachers explain the causes of these errors?
5. Does focused written corrective feedback reduce the frequency of the most common errors over one semester?

Literature review

The review will move from classic theory to current debates in four parts.

It begins with Contrastive Analysis. Lado (1957) argued that learners' difficulties can be predicted by comparing their first language with the target language. Later research showed that this predicts only some errors, but the approach remains useful for explaining first-language interference.

The second part covers Error Analysis and Interlanguage theory. Corder (1967) changed the field by treating errors as evidence of learning rather than simple failure[1], and Selinker (1972) proposed that learners build their own developing system, which he called interlanguage. Richards (1971) then distinguished interference errors from intralingual and developmental ones. James (1998) and Ellis [2]and Barkhuizen (2005) provide practical procedures for collecting, classifying and explaining learner errors, and these will guide this study.

The third part turns to second language academic writing. Hyland (2003, 2006) shows that academic writing demands much more than grammar from L2 students, including control of genre, authorial voice, hedging and cohesion. Learner corpus research (Granger, 1998; Dagneaux, Denness and Granger[3], 1998) has also shown how computer-aided error tagging can make error analysis more systematic and reliable[4].

The final part examines the debate on written corrective feedback. Truscott (1996) argued that grammar correction is ineffective and may even be harmful, while Ferris (1999) replied that well-designed feedback does help learners. Later studies, including Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener[5] and Ferris [6](2012), found evidence that focused feedback can improve accuracy over time. This debate provides the framework for the study's fifth research question.

Methodology

The study uses a mixed-methods design (Creswell[7] and Plano Clark, 2018) in three phases.

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The participants will be about 120 to 150 undergraduate students at an international university, from the first to the third year of study, together with 8 to 10 English teachers. All participants will give informed consent, and ethical approval will be obtained from the university before data collection begins.

In the first phase, I will collect 150 to 200 argumentative essays written under the same conditions. Each error will be coded by category (grammar, vocabulary, discourse and mechanics), and error frequencies will be calculated per 100 words. A second coder will check a sample of the essays to ensure reliability. This phase answers the first three research questions.

In the second phase, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with about 15 students and 8 teachers to understand how they explain the causes of these errors. The interviews will be analysed thematically, and this phase answers the fourth research question.

In the third phase, two groups of students will take part in a one-semester intervention. One group will receive focused feedback on the most frequent errors, while the other will receive the usual feedback. Both groups will write essays before and after the intervention, and their error rates will be compared using statistical tests to answer the fifth research question.

The error categories will follow the frameworks of James (1998) and Dagneaux, Denness and Granger (1998). Each error will also be labelled as likely interference or developmental, based on a comparison of [L1] and English structures.

Significance

The study will give teachers evidence-based knowledge of which errors their students make most and why. It will produce a classified error list and practical teaching suggestions that can be used in writing courses and materials. It will also add a less-studied learner group to international error analysis research.

Table 1.

Proposed Research Timeline

Period	Work
Year 1	Full literature review, final research design, ethics approval, pilot study
Year 2	Essay collection, error coding, interviews, feedback intervention
Year 3	Statistical and thematic analysis, writing the thesis, defence

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