Writing Skill and Categorical Error Analysis: A Study of First Year Undergraduate University Students

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Abstract

This study identifies and analyses the common errors in writing skill of the first year students of Azad University of South Tehran Branch in relation to their first language (L1), the type of high school they graduated, and their exposure to media and technology in order to learn English. It also determines the categories in which the errors are committed (content, organisation/discourse, vocabulary, mechanics, or syntax) and whether or not there is a significant difference in the percentage of errors committed and these categories. Participants of this study are 190 first year students that are asked to write an essay. An error analysis model adapted from Brown (2001) and Gayeta (2002) is then used to evaluate the essay writings in terms of content, organisation, vocabulary, mechanics, and syntax or language use. The results of the study show that the students have greater difficulties in organisation, content, and vocabulary and experience less difficulties in mechanics and syntax.
Keywords: **Writing Skill Development; Error Analysis; Second Language Learning and Teaching; Pedagogy in Writing Skills.**

1. Background of the Study

English, as the universal language, seems to be becoming more important than any other language. Not only is it used as a common language when people with different languages speak to one another, it is now the language in the global market, in systems of transportation, computer networking, telecommunications, and scientific and medical endeavours (Grandin, 2006). Furthermore, it is a tool for learning in the various disciplines since it is the language commonly used in instruction and

in books, journals, magazines, and other printed media. For non-English countries, however, learning English as a second language (ESL) presents itself as a challenge to overcome since it creates language problems caused by social and cognitive factors such as negative attitudes toward the target language (TL), continued lack of progress in the second language (L2), a wide social and psychological distance between the learner and the target culture, and a lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning (Myles, 2007). Other causes of language difficulties include limited interaction, which Allwright (1983) argued as 'the fundamental fact of pedagogy' and lack of opportunities for pushed output or production with precision, coherence, and appropriateness (Swain, 1985 as cited in Ellis, 1992).

Achieving English language proficiency can mean developing the four macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among the four, writing enjoys a special status as it is via writing that one can communicate a wide range of messages to close or distant, known or unknown reader or readers (Olshtain, 2001). Moreover, students can express themselves more clearly and effectively through writing since it gives them more time to organise their ideas. It also enables them to explore new knowledge and reflect on their lives as undergoing through the writing process (Fulwiler & Hayakawa, 1994). That is why writing is closely associated with learning (Applebee, Langer, & Mayher, 1987).

2. Introduction
Learners whose first language (L1) is not English, face greater challenges in writing in English than those who are native speakers (NSs). Apart from learning the mechanics and techniques in writing, the former must also take the conventions of language into consideration (Fulwiler & Hayakawa, 1994).

Language teachers, authors, and experts often note poor performance of students in writing. Leland (2002), for instance, reported that students are increasingly less certain about basic elements of English grammar and usage and about the peculiarities that arise when the prose they are writing is creative rather than critical. Difficulties in writing may ultimately result in errors. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) define errors as morphological, syntactic, and lexical deviations from the grammatical rules of language that violate the intuition of NSs. They postulate that focusing on these errors rather than on style and addressing them appropriately and constructively through instruction and strategy training can be beneficial to learners. One way to address morphological, syntactic, and lexical difficulties to learners is through error analysis, which consists of three stages: 1) identification of errors, 2) classification of errors, and 3) identification of the causes of errors (Ferch, Haastrup, & Phillipson, 1984). The main objective is to enable ESL writers to analyse their weaknesses and impose control when they write. It prepares the writers to assess and edit their own work and find strategies that work for them in reducing their errors (Lane & Lange, 1999).

This study is, therefore, conducted to obtain bases to enhance the basic organisational, judgmental, and mechanical writing skills of the students and to enable the writing teachers to plan some curriculum and activities that can help develop the writing ability of the students more effectively.

3. Method
3.1. *Participants of the Study*
The participants of this study were 190 out of 363 total population of first year students

of Azad University of South Tehran Branch. This sample size was determined using Slovin's formula that is given as follows:

$n = N / 1 + Ne^2$

Where: n = sample size

N = population size (363)

e = desired margin of error (.05)

The elements were chosen through systematic sampling. Thus every 2nd in the array was selected.

3.2. Data Elicitation Instruments

The study sourced its data from the 190 written compositions of the first year university students. The written essays were all based on the same topic and title. An error analysis model adapted from Brown (2001) and Gayeta (2002) was used to evaluate the essays in terms of content, organisation, vocabulary, mechanics, and syntax or language use.

The above-mentioned categories were further divided into some subcategories. Each subcategory was rated using a rubric of 1-to-6 scale or criteria. Compositions rated 3 to 6 are considered as *with errors* while those rated 1 to 2 are regarded as *no error*. Errors that exceed fifty percent are regarded as *common errors*.

3.3. Procedure

The researchers drafted and validated the prompts; they then conducted the essay writing and performed the error analysis of the participants' writings. In analysing and interpreting the data gathered from the error analysis, the researchers used the frequency and percentage distribution to describe the profile of the participants, the common errors in writing committed by each group, and the category in which they committed the most number of errors. The researchers also computed Chi-square in order to determine the significant differences in the errors in the different categories.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Profile of Participants

As shown in Table 1, most of the participants speak *Farsi* as their L1. *Farsi* speakers comprise 144 (75.79%) of the total population.

Table 1. *Profile of the First Year University Students in Terms of L1 Dialects Spoken*

L1 Spoken	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1. Azari	17	8.95
2. Lori	4	2.11
3. Mazani	11	5.79
4. Farsi	144	75.79
5. Kordi	11	5.79
6. Others (Gilaki,	3	1.58

Most of the students graduated from public high schools, comprising 156 (82.11%) of the population. Only 34 (17.89%) graduated from private high schools.

Table 2. *Profile of the First Year University Students in Terms of Type of High School They Graduated From*

Type of High School	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1. Public	156	82.11
2. Private	34	17.89
Total	190	100

N=190

Students are exposed to TV/VCD/DVDs. Those exposed to these media and technology constitute 177 (93.16%) of the population. Those exposed to internet comprise the least number, with only 80 (42.11%) out of the total population.

Table 3. *Profile of the First Year University Students in Terms of the Media and Technology They are Exposed to*

Media Exposed To	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1. Radio/Cassette	141	74.21
2. TV/VCD/DVD	177	93.16
3. Computer	93	48.95
4. Internet	80	42.11
5. Books/ Journals/ Magazines/Newspapers	128	67.37

N=190

4.2. *Common Errors in Writing*
4.2.1. When Grouped According to L1 Dialects Spoken

In terms of content, all of the groups committed common errors in *thesis statement*. Among the groups, *Lori* and *other L1* speakers committed the most errors, with 100% and *Mazani L1* speakers committed the least errors with 82% of them recorded to have made errors in their thesis statement.

As regards *related ideas*, all groups also commonly committed errors in this subcategory. Among the groups, the *Kordi* and *other L1* speakers committed the most errors. One hundred percent (100%) of the participants in these groups committed errors. The *Lori* speakers committed the least errors, with only 75% of them who committed errors in this subcategory.

As for *development of ideas*, 100% of five (5) out of six (6) groups and 98% of the *Farsi* participants committed errors in this subcategory. This goes to show that in terms of content, the participants committed the most serious errors in *development of ideas*.

In *consistency of focus*, only four (4) groups commonly committed errors. Among these groups, the *Mazani* speakers committed the most errors, with 82%

having committed an error. *Kordi* and *other L1* speakers did not commit common errors in this subcategory, having less than 50% of the participants to have committed an error.

The data shown in Table 4 point out those common errors in terms of content are committed by all groups in all subcategories. The most errors the participants committed are errors in *development of ideas*. Errors in *consistency of focus* are the least among the subcategories. These results imply that all subcategories should be focused in teaching writing skills and also development of ideas should be the first priority since more errors are committed in this subcategory.

In terms of organisation, all of the groups commonly committed errors in all of the subcategories in organisation. They committed most errors in *connecting words* and *introduction* with an average of 93.83% and 93.50% errors, respectively. The group with *other L1s* (Gilaki, Taleshi) committed more errors compared to the other groups with 100% of its participants to have committed errors. These results imply that all of the subcategories in organisation should be given emphasis in teaching writing and teaching *connecting words* and elements of *introduction* should be given priority. Further, *other L1s* (Gilaki, Taleshi) should pay more attention to this category since they committed more errors than the other groups.

In terms of vocabulary, all of the groups also commonly committed errors in all of the subcategories. It could, however, be seen that all of the groups committed more errors in *word choice* than in *idiom form and usage*, having an average of 90.00% to have committed errors in *word choice* compared to 71.33% in the other subcategory. It could also be seen that among the groups, the *other L1* (Gilaki, Taleshi) speakers committed the most errors, with 100% of them having committed errors in all of the subcategories. The implication of these results is that

vocabulary, especially *word choice*, should be focused in teaching writing since all groups commonly committed errors in this category.

In terms of mechanics, all of the groups commonly committed errors in *punctuation* (63.17%), *margins* (77.50%), and *handwriting* (87.83%). Among these subcategories, it is in *handwriting* that the groups committed more errors, having an average of 87.83% of the participants to have committed errors. As a whole, among the groups, only the *Kordi* and *other L1* speakers committed common errors in mechanics, both groups having more than 50% of the participants to have committed errors. The results imply that *punctuation*, *margins*, and *handwriting* should be prioritised in teaching mechanics and *Kordi* and *other L1* speakers have greater need to pay more attention to the mechanics in writing than the other groups.

In terms of global errors in syntax, generally none of the groups committed common errors in syntax (global errors). If each subcategory is, however, to be analysed, it could be seen that common errors are committed by the participants in sentence structure, with an average of 70.67% of them to have committed errors in the said subcategory. These results imply that sentence structure should be emphasised in teaching syntax since it is in this subcategory that the students committed common errors.

In terms of local errors in syntax, it is only in *preposition* (61.17%) and *fragment* (52.17%) that the groups committed common errors. Remarkably *Azari* and *other L1* speakers have, however, high percentage of errors in *subject-verb agreement*, having 65% and 67%, respectively. It is also worth to note that *Lori* speakers have a high percentage of errors in the subcategory *unclear*, with 100% of them to have committed errors. Generally, only the *other L1* speakers showed common local errors in syntax. The

results imply that emphasis should be given to *preposition* and *fragment* in the teaching of writing. They also imply that *Azari* and *other L1* speakers need to give attention to *subject-verb agreement* and *Lori* speakers have to prioritise *unclear* in dealing with their difficulties.

4.2.2. When Grouped According to Type of High School They Graduated from

In terms of content, students from both public and private high schools commonly committed errors in all of the subcategories in content. Further, it is revealed that both groups committed the most errors in *development of ideas* and *related ideas*, having the percentage of errors 99% and 98.50%, respectively. In general, the two groups have almost equal percentage of errors in all of the subcategories. This implies that all of the subcategories ought to be given equal emphasis in the teaching of writing to remediate the students' difficulties.

In terms of organisation, both groups commonly committed errors in all of the subcategories and have almost equal percentage of errors in each subcategory. This implies that all of the subcategories in organisation should be given equal emphasis in the teaching of writing since both groups commonly committed errors in all of them.

In terms of vocabulary, the two groups commonly committed errors in the two subcategories but they committed more errors in *word choice* as shown by the higher percentage of errors in the said subcategory, which is 89.50% compared to 61.50% of *idiom form and usage*. This implies that the students have difficulties in both subcategories but more emphasis should be given to *word choice* since the students find more difficulty in this subcategory.

In terms of mechanics, the two groups committed common errors in *punctuation* (55%), *margins* (84%), and *handwriting*

(86%). Taking the category mechanics as a whole, however, results reveal that both groups did not commit common errors in this category. This implies that both groups do not have serious difficulties in mechanics but due attention should be given to the three categories mentioned to enhance their writing.

In terms of global errors in syntax, results show that common errors are committed in *verb form* (54.00%), *dependent clause* (61.50%), and *sentence structure* (53.50%) by the two groups. Results also show that students from private high schools commonly committed errors in *verb tense* (56%) but students from public high schools did not. This implies that both groups have difficulties in *verb form, dependent clause*, and *sentence structure* but only those from private high schools have difficulties in *verb tense*. Thus, both groups should prioritise *verb form, dependent clause*, and *sentence structure* as they deal with their difficulties in writing. Moreover, those from private high schools should add *verb tense* to their list of priorities.

In terms of local errors in syntax, none of the two groups commonly committed local errors in any subcategory in syntax. This implies that in teaching writing, syntax will still be taught but it will be given less emphasis compared to the other categories where the students committed more errors. Reynolds and Satariyan (in press), however, purport that writing skill pedagogies should be associated with both teaching micro (i.e. syntax) and macro skills (that is, structure of an academic essay) and they view these two modes as the productive lenses in teaching writing skills.

4.2.3. According to Type of Media and Technology They are Exposed to

In terms of content, all groups commonly committed errors in all of the categories with almost equal percentage of errors in each category. This implies that all of the subcategories in content should be given emphasis in the teaching of writing since it is apparent that common errors are committed in all of them regardless of the type of media and technology the students are exposed to.

In terms of organisation, results reveal that all groups commonly committed errors in all of the subcategories relating to organisation and discourse. The results therefore imply that all of the subcategories in organisation should be given priority in teaching writing (see Table 4).

In terms of vocabulary, all groups also commonly committed errors in all of the subcategories. More errors, however, are committed in *word choice* since 89.80% committed errors in this subcategory while only 66.20% committed errors in *idiom form and usage*. This implies that both subcategories should be given emphasis in the teaching of writing but *word choice* should be the first priority.

In terms of mechanics, all groups commonly committed errors in *punctuation* (57.60%), *margins* (87.00%), and *handwriting* (90.20%). In addition to this, results reveal that all groups have almost equal percentage of errors. These results imply that all groups have similar difficulties in terms of mechanics, namely, *punctuation*, *margins*, and *handwriting* and these difficulties should be prioritised in teaching writing.

In terms of global errors in syntax, common errors are committed in only one subcategory, *sentence structure*, with a percentage of errors of 54.80%. This implies that the study syllabus and curriculum for all groups concerning syntax (global errors) should focus *on sentence structure*.

In terms of local errors in syntax, common errors are committed only in the *use of prepositions* with a percentage of errors of 51.00%. The implication of this result is that syntax will still be taught but

will be given less emphasis compared to the other categories. In teaching syntax, it is important to facilitate students how to use the correct form of the words and put them together to make a correct sentence and hence the use of prepositions and collocations in sentence should be prioritised (Mohseni & Satariyan, in press).

4.3. Categories Where Errors are Commonly Committed

As revealed in Table 4, the categories where common errors are committed are *content*, *vocabulary*, and *organisation/ discourse*, having a mean of 84.50, 89.25, and 75.00, respectively. These results imply that in teaching English, these categories should be prioritised. Although the rest of the categories will still be taught, more time and activities should be allotted to these three categories.

In content, the students committed the most errors in development of ideas, committing 187 (98%) errors. Examples of errors in development of ideas are given below.

(S1) *As a first year student here in University of South Tehran Branch, I can really say I am blessed for I have been enrolled in this University. At first I found it very unpleasant because honestly, I don't love my course. But then, I learned to love it the way that I should, during the early weeks of study. I found my professors very good, and the school, a very lovely place to stay and study. Yes, this university may have insufficient facilities but I really do appreciate the administration for trying to meet the needs of the students.*

In this example, the writer, Student 1 (S1) is able to discuss the topic logically, providing evidence that supports his claim that he is blessed to be enrolled in University of South Tehran Branch. However, the evidence he presented was limited. He did not elaborate what made his professors very good and what made the school a lovely place to stay and study. He furthermore failed to discuss the measures taken by the administration to meet the needs of the students. In addition to these, the pieces of evidence he gave were dull and trivial, making the essay less interesting.

(S12) *One of the things that I like in this university is the faculty. The school chose efficient and effective teachers who can help producing future globally competent teachers. They share their knowledge; some experiences enable to help students learn new things and insights. They really do their responsibilities as teachers. They know how to interact with students and separate personal and academic matters.*

In this example, S12 is able to provide details that support his claim that the faculty is one of the things he likes in the university. He presented these details deductively. The information he gave, however, is limited in breadth and range in the sense that he failed to expound each idea. He did not, for instance, explain what made the faculty efficient and effective and how do they help in producing competent would-be-teachers. Moreover, his ideas are trivial. The reasons he gave are common traits of teachers that do not exactly set the university faculty apart from other teachers.

In vocabulary, the participants committed the most errors in word choice, with 167 (88%) errors. Hereunder are examples of errors in word choice.

(S1) *Speaking of University of South Tehran Branch, there's no doubt of liking it. This University offers high quality education. I like this faculty not just of its cheap tuition fee, but of the competitive and well-trained teachers.*

Besides syntactical errors, it could be seen that the writer committed an error in word choice in the sense that he used "tuition fee", a classic case of redundancy.

(S13) *Going to university may mean another 4 or more years of great challenges, efforts, sacrifices, another hard-working days....*

Table 4. *Categories Where Errors are Commonly Committed*

Categories	Subcategories	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
Content	Thesis statement	177	93	
	Related ideas	179	94	
	Development of ideas	187	98	
	Consistent focus	101	53	
				84.50
Organisation/ Discourse	Introduction	183	96	
	Unity and Coherence	139	73	
	Transitions	180	95	
	Conclusion	179	94	
				89.25
Vocabulary	Word choice	167	88	
	Idiom form and usage	118	62	
				75.00
Mechanics	Spelling	65	34	
	Punctuation	105	55	
	Capitalization	30	16	
	Margins	161	85	
	Indention/Paragraphing	50	26	
	Syllabication	11	6	
	Handwriting	175	92	
				44.86
Syntax/ Language Use	*Global errors*			
	verb tense	94	49	
	verb form	87	46	
	use and formation of modal	17	9	
	use and formation of conditional sentences	13	7	
	use and formation of passive voice	4	2	
	use and formation of dependent clause	57	30	
	sentence structure	105	55	
	word order	24	13	
	connecting words	15	8	
				24.33
	Local errors			
	subject-verb agreement	84	44	
	use of article	51	27	
	number of noun	66	35	
	word form	69	36	
	preposition	87	46	
	comma splice	49	26	
	dangling modifier	15	8	
	fragment	59	31	
	pronoun reference/agreement	70	37	
	run-on	35	18	
	unclear	67	35	
				32.27

In this example, it could be seen that S13 used an inappropriate adjective (hardworking) to describe the days he would be spending in university. The adjective he used is suitable for describing a person, not days.

(S73) The most thing I admire about him is in his self-confidence and self-determination.

In this sentence, the writer, S73, used the word *most* instead of the word *best*. Aside from this, he used the term self-determination when in fact the correct word is only determination.

In organisation, the participants committed the most errors in introduction with 183 (96%) errors. Examples of errors in this subcategory are shown below.

(S1) University life is really different from that of high school; new environment, new faces to deal with, everything just seems new. There are a lot of adjustments, as expected, more complicated tasks and more serious challenges.

(S2) I never had an idea why am I here. I just woke up one day and saw myself in a new place, a new environment. Unknowingly, I was already walking down the road going to the orientation. I was amazed with the attitude of the one who sat beside me and I hadn't feel I'm out of place from that day on. And then, I began liking the university, the new place where I am in.

(S123) Vacation is a remarkable day. You got many experience and friends. It's nice to have a vacation, to relax and set you free in all trouble. You can also learned many things I your vacation day.

The errors in grammar adversely affect the clarity of these introductory paragraphs. Further, the writing style and the lack of striking and novel ideas in the paragraphs lessened their interest and effectiveness. They do not motivate the readers to continue reading the other paragraphs.

4.4. Test of Significance of Difference in the Percentage of errors Committed by the Students According to the Categories

As revealed in Table 5, the computed x^2-value of 134.08 is greater than the x^2-critical value of 11.07 at 0.05 level of significance, which is the probability that an effect is not due to just chance alone. Hence, there is a significant difference in the percentage of errors committed by the participants according to the categories. This implies that the percentage of errors of the categories may be ranked in order to identify the most common and serious errors.

4.5. Ranking of the Percentage of Errors in the Different Categories

As revealed in Table 6, organisation ranks first with a percentage of errors of 90.53. Content ranks second with a percentage of errors of 85.26. Vocabulary follows content, with a percentage of errors of 74.74. Mechanics ranks fourth with a percentage of errors of 44.36. Syntax follows mechanics with a percentage of errors of 31.64 for global errors and 31.49 for local errors. The implication of this result is that

Table 5. *Significance of Difference in the Percentage of Errors Committed by the Participants According to the Categories*

Categories	Percentage of Errors						f	x^2-value	x^2-critical value
	Content	Organisation	Vocabulary	Mechanics	Syntax (Global Errors)	Syntax (Local Errors)			
Observed	85.26	90.53	74.74	44.36	31.64	31.49		134.08	11.07
Expected	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00			

emphasis and priority ought to be given to those categories that rank higher through greater time allotment and more intensive lessons and activities because students find more difficulties in those areas.

Table 6. *Ranking of the Percentage of Errors Committed by the Participants in the Different Categories*

Categories	Percentage Of Errors	Rank
Content	85.26	2
Organisation	90.53	1
Vocabulary	74.74	3
Mechanics	44.36	4
Syntax (Global Errors)	31.64	5
Syntax (Local Errors)	31.49	6

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

No matter how they are grouped, the participants committed similar errors. In content, organisation, and vocabulary, they had errors in all of the categories. In mechanics, on the other hand, they only have difficulties in punctuation, margins, and handwriting. In syntax, they have difficulties in sentence structure, prepositions, verb form, and use and formation of dependent clause.

When the categories were ranked, results revealed that the students had the most difficulties in organisation, content, and vocabulary and experienced fewer difficulties in mechanics and syntax. This could be because classroom instructions usually deal with the teaching of language rules which of course includes syntax. More concerned with accuracy rather than fluency, the teachers of writing neglected to develop the students' thinking skills, which are necessary in organising contents of written outputs and failed to enrich the learners' repertoire of words in their writings.

More attention should be given to the use of language (Mohseni & Satariyan, in press); therefore, more writing practice exercises be given to students instead of constantly drilling them with grammar rules. In addition, error analysis should be done regularly to provide learners feedback regarding their writing performance. Teachers should, however, be knowledgeable in providing feedback, especially in marking errors. Satariyan and Reynolds (in press) concur that students can become more empowered with their own learning if teachers apply some particular strategies in their writing pedagogy. Thus, giving feedback or feed forward should be done in a facilitative and constructive way. Furthermore, engaging students into the writings and informing them of how to use the vocabularies and their collocation rules in sentence can be a way to develop students' metacognitive strategies to become self-editors of their own writings and compositions (Reynolds & Satariyan, in press; Mohseni & Satariyan, in press).

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