

## Oral Presentation Errors of Malaysian Students in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Course

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the errors English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students made in their oral presentations. An understanding of the types of errors made by students in EAP will enable language educators to assist students in improving their oral proficiency. The errors in oral presentations of 32 students were investigated using [1] surface structure taxonomy, which specifies four main ways by which students modify the target forms, namely, misformation, misordering, addition and omission. Findings indicate that misformation accounted for the majority of the total grammatical errors identified followed by omission and addition. In addition, verb form, word form and article were found to be the three most frequent types of errors made by the students.

**Key words:** Error analysis • Oral presentations • English for Academic Purposes (EAP) • Grammatical accuracy

### INTRODUCTION

The field of error analysis in Second Language Acquisition established in the 1970s was an alternative to contrastive analysis, an approach influenced by behaviourism, through which applied linguists sought to use the formal distinctions between learners' first and second languages in predicting errors. Error analysis deals with the learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes they make use of in recognising or coding the input they receive from the target language. The analysis of errors learners make in learning a language has therefore become an important aspect of the learning process. Knowledge of errors made will enable teachers to be better informed in working towards particular learning and teaching goals [2].

In the Malaysian context, some university students who have been exposed to the English language from their early years of primary education are still struggling to produce error-free language structures. In spite of the eleven years of English, many still display frequent errors in their productive skills (writing and speaking). As a

result, some students are unable to meet the demands of tertiary level education, which require them to use productive skills and to be communicatively competent. One of the skills that they find challenging is oral presentation skills. Oral presentations, like written reports, are essential components of faculty courses. Students are required to read, research, plan, write and present. This according to [3] provides students with the motivation to stretch their productive use of the English language beyond the skills required of them in everyday communication.

The lack of oral presentation skills among graduates has been the concern of many employers [4, 5, 6]. To address this problem many higher education institutions have made it a compulsory component of their curriculum. Even though presentation skills are highly structured and can be taught, not many studies have been conducted to investigate the linguistic errors made by L2 learners in their oral presentations. [7] state that such an analysis can help teachers identify specific language problems. This can be used as a guide for more effective teaching. Error analysis of their work will make

the students aware of the errors they make when presenting. This knowledge will help them to be more proactive in terms of self-correction.

The objective of the study is to investigate the grammatical errors made by EAP students in their oral presentation tasks. Specifically, the study sought to determine the types of grammatical errors made based on [1] surface structure taxonomy; namely, misformation, omission, addition and misordering.

**Literature Review:** Errors, according to [8], can be classified into two types; the linguistic category classification and surface structure taxonomy. The linguistic category classification specifies errors in terms of linguistic categories and where the error is located in the overall system of the target language. Errors can be at the phonological, grammatical, lexical, textual or discourse level [8]. [8] adds that language learners who do not have knowledge of the language would not be able to correct the errors. Guided revisions in the classroom help the students to recognise and correct the errors.

[1] proposed a descriptive taxonomy in describing errors. According to them, errors occur when surface structures are altered or changed in a specific or systematic way. This can be done by omission, addition, misformation and misordering. [9], however, looks at errors from a different perspective. He distinguishes three types of errors which are transfer errors, analogical errors and teaching-induced errors. In explaining errors, [10] has also included strategies of second language learning and strategies of second language communication, in addition to the three types of errors suggested by [9]. For the purpose of this study we have adopted [9]'s descriptive taxonomy in analysing the errors as their study showed that the overwhelming majority of learner errors are developmental in nature rather than interlingual. Our data indicates that the majority of learner errors are developmental in nature rather than due to transfer from the learners' native language. Some of the recent studies that adopt the taxonomy include [11-13].

There have also been many other studies on error analysis conducted in different contexts- [14-20, 12, 13] are some of the examples of the more recent studies done on error analysis in the Malaysian context. Most of these studies, however, focused on error analysis of written works. Very few focused on the spoken form of the language. These include error analysis of non-native

speakers' pronunciation as in studies by [21, 22], as well as strategy use by L2 learners to develop their oral communication skills [23-25].

Many researchers agree that conducting an error analysis of spoken language is a highly complicated and complex task [26, 27] as this requires a corpus on spoken language. Spoken language data is difficult to analyse due to regional variations, slang and idiosyncracies [28, 29]. In addition, errors committed in oral communication are often neglected because the message could still be comprehended due to contextual clues [17]. These are some of the reasons why there is a dearth of research on error analysis pertaining to spoken corpora.

It is essential to analyse oral presentation as it presents a good opportunity to study spoken L2 English. Such studies related to the spoken language are seen in works done by [11, 3, 30, 31, 3], for example, looked at five categories of errors in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) student's presentations in the areas of vocabulary, pronunciation, morphological and lexical errors, disfluencies and sentence boundaries [3]. Vocabulary, morphological and lexical errors were two categories of errors that have been examined in detail. Among others, the findings revealed that the academic word list, representing the words non-native speakers should know for successful studies at an English-speaking university, accounted for the smallest share of words (2.4%). It was also found that the students' morphological and lexical errors accounted for 1.5% of the corpus, indicating that their speech can be categorised as grammatically fairly correct [3].

A recent study on spoken language in the Malaysian context conducted by Ting *et al.* (2010) looked at grammatical errors in spoken English of Malaysian university students in an oral communication course [11]. Their research on oral interaction of 126 role-play oral interactions of 42 students concluded that the five most common errors are preposition, question, articles, plural form of nouns, subject verb agreement and tense. When they used surface structure taxonomy, the main categories of errors were misformation and omission [11]. The language data in their study were obtained from simulated oral interactions of students participating in role play situations.

In view of the dearth of research in the area of oral presentation skills, studies done on written work could also benefit the current study. For instance, a study done on the written work of 50 Malaysian ESL learners found that the most common errors were under the

category of misformation [12]. She claims that tense aspects system and subject verb agreement were the most difficult areas for Malay students to master. In another study of 39 Malaysian learners in an EAP writing course by [13], most errors found were on third person singular verb forms followed by errors on addition and misformation. They suggested that these errors could be attributed to the non-existence of the features in their native language.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The subjects for this study were 32 students in an EAP class taught by one of the researchers. Of these students 26 were females and 6 were males. They were the third and fourth year students from the faculties of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Science, Law and Economics. EAP is a compulsory university course where students are required to produce a 2500-word faculty-related argumentative research paper. One of the objectives of this course is to enable students to synthesise faculty-related information from academic and Islamic sources. Prior to writing the research paper students are required to present their arguments orally in front of the class and they would be assessed based on language, content and presentation skills.

The subjects were selected based on convenience sampling as they were available, accessible and willing to participate in the study. Each student's presentation of 10 -15 minutes totaling to about 200- 300 minutes was audio-taped and later transcribed. The data was analysed based [1]'s surface structure taxonomy which categorises errors into four types; omission, addition, misformation and misordering.

Errors of omission are made when compulsory elements are omitted. These occur mainly in tense markers or number markers such as the omission of the grammatical morpheme "be" in a sentence. An example would be "Mary ^ the president of the new company". Errors of addition, on the other hand, are made when unnecessary elements are added to the word, such as, putting the-s marker on verbs after the plural pronouns/nouns in the simple present tense. An example is "He doesn't know<sub>s</sub> my name". Errors of misformation occur when the wrong forms of the verbs are used, for instance, "The dog eated the chicken". Errors of misordering are made when the correct elements are wrongly sequenced, for example, "He is all the time late," instead of "He is late all the time".

The more detailed linguistic description of grammatical errors were categorised into verb forms, preposition, plurality, subject-verb agreement, article, pronoun, tense, question and negation. The choice of these eight linguistic categories is based on studies on errors on Malaysian students [32, 12, 11].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the error analysis of EAP students' oral presentations. The presentations were tape recorded and transcribed. The symbols, \* is used to indicate errors and ^ is used for missing elements in the utterances. In the course of discussion references are made to relevant findings from other error analysis studies on grammatical errors in both written and spoken English.

### **Students' Grammatical Errors in Their Oral Presentation:**

An examination of the errors revealed that the most frequent category of error made by the students was misformation (411 errors or 50.24%) followed by omission (198 errors or 24.21%) and addition (196 errors or 23.96%) (Table 1). The percentage of errors in the category of misordering is negligible and it amounts to only 1.59% of the total type of surface structure errors.

The results indicate that 50% (411 out of 818 errors) of the errors was in the category of misformation. This reflects that the majority of the students had problems in this category where the rules of word formation are different from their native language. The following is an excerpt of their presentation:

- *We always referred\* Genetically Modified Food as GM food.*

**(Student 1):** In the example, the student has incorrectly used the wrong form of the morpheme "referred" instead of "refer". Clearly in this instance, the student has not been able to make a distinction between the use of simple present tense and the past tense.

As shown in Table 1, the second highest category of surface structure error is omission (24.21% or 198 out of 818 errors). An example is:

- *It depends on ^ employer whether he wants to fire or sack you.*

Table 1: Categories of Surface Structure Errors in Students' Oral Presentations

Type of surface structure	Total	Percentage
Misformation	411	50.24
Omission	198	24.21
Addition	196	23.96
Misordering	13	1.59
Total errors	818	100.00
Word count	29137	

**(Student 2):** In this instance the student has clearly omitted the determiner “the”.

The third most frequent category of error in surface structure is addition (23.96% or 196 out of 818 errors). An example from the excerpt is as follows:

- *I move on to for\* my argument...*

**(Student 6):** The student has added the preposition “for” in his utterance, an unnecessary addition to the structure.

The errors in the category of misordering accounted for only 1.59% of the total errors (13 out of 818 errors).

- *It not just will show...*

**(Student 11):** The excerpt above shows that the student was not able to place the modal verb ‘will’ correctly, instead of “it will not just show”.

The overall results show that misformation is the most frequent category of error made. [12, 11]s’ studies on Malaysian students also found misformation to be the most frequent category of surface error. The percentage of misordering category of errors in this study is even lower than that of [11]’s. This could be due to the differences in the proficiency levels of the subjects in both the studies. The subjects in [11]’s study were of a lower proficiency level, having obtained Bands 1 to 3 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), compared to the subjects in this study, who had attained a minimum level of Band 6 in the in-house English Placement Test.

While the data for this study was collected in a naturalistic context, data in [11]’s study was collected in the course of role-plays which were simulated. Studies based on simulations are by its very nature well-planned, whereas the EAP presentations, though planned, were more impromptu presentations. The students were told to prepare only the main points but not the script for the entire presentation. They were not allowed to read from their notes. In addition, this study was a monologue with intermittent questions by the teacher, whereas [11]’s study involved interactive role plays. Further, their study looked at basic communication focusing on English for social purposes.

Table 2 presents the frequency of errors in the oral presentations based on the linguistic descriptions of errors. As shown in the table, there are eight linguistic categories. There was a total of 818 linguistic errors and of these, the three most frequent language errors were verb form (151 instances or 18.46%), word form (122 instances or 14.91 %) and article (118 or 14.43%). These three types of language errors accounted for almost 50% of the total errors.

**Verb Form:** A closer look at the errors in verb form reveals that the most frequent error fell in the category of misformation (96 instances). The instances of omission and addition of verb forms were 26 and 21 respectively. There were 8 instances of misordering of verb form. Examples of verb form errors from the data are as follows:

**Misformation:** *We cannot guaranteed\* that the doctor will limit himself...*  
(Student 12)

**Omission:** *It ^ stated in this verse ...*  
(Student 1)

**Addition:** *... children may happen\* to see\* to\* develop behavioural or ...*  
(Student 18)

Table 2: Linguistic Descriptions based on Surface Structure Categories

	Omission	Addition	Misformation	Misordering	Total	%
Verb form	26	21	96	8	151	18.46
Word form	7	6	106	3	122	14.91
Article	55	50	13	0	118	14.43
SVA	2	0	112	0	114	13.94
Preposition	22	58	28	1	109	13.33
Pronoun	20	51	19	1	91	11.13
Plural form	65	10	13	0	88	10.76
Tense	1	0	24	0	25	3.06
Question						
Negation						
Total	198	196	411	13	818	100.00

This study found that about 18.46% or 151 errors were verb form errors. Students seemed to have difficulty in producing the correct verb forms. This is evident based on the 64% misformation errors. The errors were basically confined to misformation of the correct form of the verb when using the perfect tenses, for example;

- *'has been existed' and 'have been stayed'*

It is interesting to compare this study with that of Ting *et al.*'s (2010) where the percentage of the errors for verb form is only 10% of the total number of errors. The errors made by her students were, however, mainly on copula 'be'. This may not be surprising considering her subjects were of lower proficiency and had not undergone any intensive English proficiency courses.

Results indicated that the students found the verb form more difficult than other grammar items such as articles, plurality, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and pronouns. This was also the case in a study on written errors by [33] on Malaysian secondary school students. Their study showed that both rural and urban school students made more verb form errors compared to other errors, which was substantially higher than the ones made by students in this study. This could again be due to their lower level of English proficiency. The verb form, especially the third person singular, was also a problem to the 39 EAP students in [13]'s study. This difficulty could be attributed to the different ways English expresses time, which are indicated by the specific grammatical inflections.

**Word Form:** The second most frequent linguistic errors made by the students were on word forms that was 14.91%. Almost all the errors on word form were confined to the category of misformation (106 instances) with omission having only seven instances while there were six errors under the category of addition and three under the category of misordering. This is consistent with [11]'s study who found misformation to be the predominant category of error.

Errors of word form in the study included incorrect use of noun, adjective, verb and adverb. An excerpt from the presentation is given below:

**Misformation:** *...and in Malaysia cases rating for domestic violent\* was governed by the Act.*  
(Student 15)

The errors in misformation include incorrect use of noun, adjective, verb and adverb forms of the morpheme. In the above case, for example, the adjective 'violent' was used in place of the correct form of the word, 'violence' which is a noun. The difficulty here is in the recognition and conversion of the word form, between a noun and an adjective.

**Articles:** Errors in articles ranked as the third most frequent errors students made in their presentations, accounting for 14.43% of the total errors made. Students made almost equal number of errors in both omissions (55 instances) and additions (50 instances) of articles, while fewer errors were made in the category of misformation (13 instances). No error was found in the category of misordering. [11]'s study also resulted in the same findings. The following examples illustrate the errors in articles:

**Addition:** *...brought them to the \* Malaysia.*  
(Student 17)

**Omission:** *...one who is not entitled to make any claim against ^ government.*  
(Student 2)

**Misformation:** *...it is true that our country is the\* constitutional monarchy...*  
(Student 15)

This is consistent with the study done by [14] on Japanese second language learners, where omission was found to be the most frequently occurring error category in the use of articles. This could be due to direct interference of the article-less Japanese language, as supported by [30]. It is not surprising that there are very few instances for misformation as articles are free morphemes.

**Subject-verb Agreement (SVA):** The fourth most frequent grammatical error made by students pertained to SVA (114 errors or 13.94%). Almost all the errors were again in the category of misformation (112 instances) while there were only 2 instances in the category of omission. There was no error in addition and misordering. An excerpt from the presentation is as follows:

**Misformation:** *... some opponents of current genetic engineering has\* realised that the use of ...*  
(Student 30)

In many studies, SVA has been one of the most frequent errors made [20, 34, 11]. [21] again indicated that misformation seems to be the main type of SVA error. [20] also identified many SVA errors in the term papers written by students enrolled in an EAP course in a Malaysian university. The reason given for the difficulty was that there were no rules on subject-verb agreement in their mother tongue. [12] and [35] found SVA problematic to the Malaysian EAP as well as postgraduate students. This type of errors was also found to be problematic among the academicians [34]. SVA, according to [34], is one of the common errors found in papers submitted for journals by non-native writers of English.

**Preposition:** Errors in the use of prepositions is the next most frequent error, making up 13.33% of the error type. Most of the errors were in the category of addition (58 instances) followed by the categories of omission (22 instances) and misformation (28 instances). There was only one error under the category of misordering. Compared to [11]'s and [15]'s studies who found more than 20% preposition errors, only 13.33% of linguistic errors were made by the students in this study. While 45% of the errors in [11] study fell under the category of misformation, most of the errors in this study was under the category of addition. This means that the subjects in this study tended to add prepositions when in fact they were not needed. The following excerpts illustrate these types of errors:

**Addition:** ... *and should not be legalised because of\* it is not in the best interest...*  
(Student 31)

**Omission:** ... *they acquired the status of citizenship after independence ^ 1970.*  
(Student 10)

**Misformation:** ... *teach English as it will enhance the positive attitude to\* the students.*  
(Student 31)

The difficulty in mastering prepositions, according to [36] can be attributed to the varieties of linguistic functions that they serve and choices which need to be made depending on the intention of the writer.

**Pronoun:** Errors in pronoun accounted for 11.13% (91 instances) of the linguistic errors. The pronoun errors were mostly under the category of addition (51 instances)

while 20 and 19 instances fell under the categories of omission and misformation respectively. There was only one for the misordering category. Examples are:

**Addition:** ...*actually article 5 it\* mentions about...*  
(Student 19)

**Omission:** ... *should not be legalised because ^ harms the health of the woman.*  
(Student 5)

**Misformation:**...*the status of the foetus will also involve the status of women itself\*.*  
(Student 5)

In the excerpt '*...actually article 5 it\* mentions about..*' the student has added the pronoun 'it' which is not necessary in this case. This is a very common error made by students whose native language is Malay. It is very common for Malay speakers of English to have the structure: theme + SVA. For example:

*Anak saya, dia suka makan sayur.*  
*My son, he likes to eat vegetables.*

The error in this case could be a direct translation from Malay.

**Plural Form:** Plural form errors comprised 10.76% (88 instances) of the linguistic errors. Errors in plural forms were substantially in the omission category (65 instances). There were 13 and 10 instances respectively in the categories of misformation and additions. There was none for the category of misordering. Omission in plural forms could probably be influenced by the mother tongue [19]. Excerpts from the presentations are shown below:

**Omission:** *Most of the product\* sold in Malaysia are imported product\*.*  
(Student 11)

**Misformation:** ...*just this\* issues create eehh chaos in society nowadays.*  
(Student 19)

**Addition:** *As an examples\* ....*  
(Student 19)

[19] concluded that the difficulty with plural form may be due to L1 interference on L2 based on their contrastive analysis of 120 English essays written by secondary one Malay students. Errors such as the above and the ones in Maros' study were not surprising as the students' L1 (Bahasa Melayu) rules for plural forms are different from English.

**Tense:** The next most frequent linguistic error is tenses (25 errors or 3.06%). It is interesting to note that all the errors in tenses were in the category of misformation, except for one, which was in the omission category. Students who made these errors might be confused about the differences in situating time in their L1 and L2 [37]. An excerpt of the error in tenses is given below:

**Misformation:** *The people who were \* more affected by our blood is those who work at the ....*  
(Student 23)

The above excerpt shows the past tense of the verb 'be' that is, 'were' being used in place of the simple present tense. The students' errors in tenses, almost all of which were in the category of misformation, could be due to the different forms of the verbs used in associating with the different time frames. This type of errors could be minimised if students were able to comprehend the situations in which the grammatical form is expected to be used. The statement in the excerpt above is always true and therefore requires a simple present tense.

**Question and Negation:** This study did not show any errors in question forms and negation. It is interesting to note that 47 questions were posed by the students in the course of the presentations. However, none had any surface structure errors. With respect to negation, no errors in the construction of sentences were found. This is in spite of the high number of negation statements used in students' presentations (375 instances). The error-free construction for question forms could be due to the brevity of the questions compared to the construction of sentences involving other parts of speech. As for negation, the error-free constructions found in their presentations could be due to the straight forward negation rules. Another reason could most likely be that there was no real need for negations and questions in the type of academic oral presentations that the students were engaged in, as the presentations were

mostly monologues. In [11]'s study, on the other hand, students were required to produce dialogues in 80% of the role plays and this generated many questions.

## CONCLUSION

The study examined the linguistic errors in a corpus of EAP students' presentations, utilising the [1] analytical framework for surface structure descriptions together with an analysis of the students' linguistic errors. The results revealed that the most frequent errors students made were under the category of misformation, followed by omission, addition and misordering.

Based on the percentage of errors made, verb form, word form and article were the grammatical categories that most students had difficulty with. These types of English language errors have not only been found as areas of difficulty for Malaysian learners [11, 13, 20], but also common for other Asian learners [14, 16, 18, 30]. Errors made are of great concern to instructors as they are indications of what students do and do not know. Errors are also symptomatic of any problems students may have in the course of learning a target language. These errors need to be corrected and addressed to improve their language performance.

This study has provided the input that can be used to improve students' oral presentation skills. Since oral presentations in an academic setting are more structured, the language used can be identified and emphasised. Peer error analysis can be a good exercise in raising their awareness and consequently correcting their errors. Speaking practice sessions could also be another way of improving their presentation skills.

**Note:** The authors would like to thank the Research Management Centre of the International Islamic University Malaysia for funding this research.

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