# The Investigation of Grammatical Errors in Grade 10 Students' Expository Essays at Ura Central School, Bumthang District in Bhutan

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**Abstract:** Errors are common and inevitable for foreign language learners. Errors are committed either because the learner failed to learn or educators missed the opportunity to teach their learners. In this study, the researcher considers discovering the causes of grammatical errors in expository writing. This particular study adopted the surface strategy taxonomy of Krashen, Dulay and Burt [1] following the error analysis procedure of Ellis [2], [3]. The result of the study showed that the Bhutanese foreign language learners committed errors both intralingually and interlingually. The analysis from this study aims to help teachers to include error correction strategies in their daily teaching lesson plans to deal with the problems believing in the reduction of errors in foreign language learners. In particular, the findings of this research will be helpful to English language teachers who focus on the common field of grammatical errors of the learners in classroom teaching. This study's findings are similar to the findings of previous studies in many ways and concluded that the students' errors are inevitable because of the complexity of the English language, or that learners are not aware of or inept in their knowledge of English grammatical rules, and the interference of the mother tongue.

**Key words:** *error, intralingual, interlingual, foreign language, Bhutanese foreign language learners*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyze grammatical errors committed by Bhutanese students in acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL learners around the world commit errors such as lexical, grammatical, discourse, and pragmatic errors. Grammatical errors are seen frequently in the academic writing and other work of Bhutanese English learners. The main intention of this study is to investigate common grammatical errors and their sources in expository essay writing of Bhutanese learners.

English is truly a global language and its importance in international communication is unquestionable. In many countries, English is used either as a second language (L2) or as a foreign language (FL) beside their own mother tongue (MT). English is used primarily as a FL in Bhutan. Rennie and Mason [4] stated that English has already assumed the status of the L2 in Bhutan before 1998 although the term 'second language' is not used officially even now. The importance of English in Bhutan is more than merely a means of FL communication. English is used as a medium of instruction to teach different subjects in schools, colleges and training institutes while Dzongkha, the national language subject is taught in the national language, thus maintaining bilingualism.

However, the performance of Bhutanese students in English is relatively poor and this affects their overall academic result. Students tend to produce many grammatical errors while they write essays and do other academic work. Gajmer and Maxwell [5] conducted an action research study on enhancing the use of articles, prepositions, and tenses from the Trainees of Primary Bachelor of Education in English for Communication Module. They found the trainees have maximum

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difficulty in articles, prepositions, and tense usage and discovered none from ten participants secured pass percentage (40%).

Bhutanese children start to study the English language and grammar when they are first admitted to the formal school. Students at middle secondary school level are expected to produce academic writing with fewer grammatical errors, but it has been observed that many students commit various grammatical errors in their academic writing which leads to them scoring lower marks in examinations. Yet, none of the Bhutanese researchers or teachers have conducted research to analyze the causes of these grammatical errors in the academic writing of Bhutanese students.

## Purpose of Study

This study aims to examine Bhutanese learners' common grammatical errors and their causes in the expository essay writing. In order to fulfill the purposes of the study, the researcher uses following questions to analyze errors found in expository essays:

1. What are the common grammatical errors produced in expository essay writing by Bhutanese learners?

2. What is the explanation of the common grammatical errors?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Error and Mistake

Errors can be systematic errors and nonsystematic errors. Brown [6] and Richards [7] pointed out that systematic errors are expected from anyone learning English as FL. Errors under the category of systematic errors seem to occur in the case of which learners reveal more incorrect language consistency in producing the foreign language because they are not sure about the correct forms. On the contrary, FL learners also seem to make non-systematic errors. Errors are sometimes confused with the term mistake in foreign language learning. Mistakes can happen as a result of intense excitement or tiredness respectively in different conditions though they are aware of correct forms and patterns. It can be considered as carelessness and is sign of non-systematic error.

### Error Analysis

Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues established a new theory called error analysis (EA) in the 1970s and he came to be known as the father of this theory. EA theory emerged to identify, describe and explain errors in the process of acquiring an FL. As Corder[8] noticed that errors of learners are noteworthy for the researcher as it gives how learners learn a dialect and procedures they include learning it.

Errors are normal and unavoidable to the FL learners. Therefore, to uncover the learner's concept of language, errors are considered as an important tool in the language learning. Analyzing of errors was found on the advantage side for both teachers and researchers. Teachers can use errors as a device to understand the problem with the learners and to design suitable teaching-learning techniques to suit their learning. On the other hand, errors provide a platform for researchers to analyze the kinds of errors made by English learners in different situations and come to the conclusions, proposing effective teaching-learning measures.

### Definition of Error Analysis

Gass and Selinker [2001, p. 67, as cited in 9] define errors as "red flags" which symbolize the signal of warning about the status of FL learners' knowledge in the target language (TL). Likewise, James [2001, p. 62, as cited in 10] refers to EA as "errors reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge; that is to say, those errors may occur because the learner does not know what is accurate". Thus, EA is the investigation of linguistic unawareness, the examination of what learners are ignorant of and how they effort to handle their ignorance. In short, errors are systematic for EFL learners as it is not their first language or they failed to learn everything about English.

### Procedure of Error Analysis

Ellis [2], [3] proposed the procedure of EA. According to the model, errors should be first identified, described, explained and evaluated. He explains the analysis of errors in following five successive steps.

### 1. Learner Language Sample Collection

As the researchers are not same to each other in their methods of data collection for their study, Ellis[2] states that this factor is very important in gathering a definite example of language from learners, so that particular explanations can be made in regards to the sorts of errors created by the learners in different situations.

## 2. Identifying Errors

According to Corder [8], the identification of error in every sentence is regarded as idiosyncratic. His framework makes a distinct amongst "overt and covert". It is regarded as overtly idiosyncratic if it is ill-formed sentence as per the rule of TL whilst it is called covertly idiosyncratic if the sentence is well-formed superficially according to the rule.

## 3. Describing Errors

After the identification, a researcher has to distinguish the errors before making any interpretations. As indicated by Ellis [3], omission shows up when a learner leaves something required out of a sentence, whereas the addition is the inclusion of avoidable components, ultimately, misordering appears when the learners place elements in wrong places or losing elements that are necessary in a sentence.

## 4. Explaining Errors

In general, FL/L2 learners' errors may be ascribed to various causes or linguistic issues that influence the procedure of learning English, such as the impact of L1 (interlingual) or the TL itself (intralingual). These linguistic variables are considered noteworthy that may adversely influence acquisition of FL/L2 [6, 7, 11].

## 5. Error Evaluation

Since the reason for the error investigation is to help learners to learn a FL, it is extremely important to assess the errors. A few errors can be viewed as more genuine than others since they could obscure the meaning that the writer/speaker intends to put across.

## Grammatical Error

Grammar is the base of a language that decides the organization of a set of words and phrases into a complete sentence to give meaning. English grammar narrows down to different areas that has different sets of rules to produce correct forms of usage by learners. To produce standardized forms and structures in FL writing, learners have to understand the basic rules and usages of English grammar. The failure to apply the rules and usage of English grammar makes learners commit errors, and researchers categorize it as intralingual errors. The forms and structures of grammar are different in different languages. It informs learners how languages work in their own system and English learners have to pay attention to it. Missing to find

differences in grammatical forms and structures of L1 and L2 results in committing errors, and it is claimed as interlingual errors.

## Related Research Studies

Barzanji [12] conducted a study to identify the most common errors in 58 English major Saudi University undergraduate students' persuasive and comparison or contrast essay. The findings showed missing or unnecessary errors (17.86%) was frequent, followed by errors of spelling (15.66%), wrong choice of words (14.00%), article (7.68%), and wrong noun forms (6.68%).

Khan and Khan [13] conducted a study on error analysis in English paragraph writing (answer scripts of a final examination) of 120 students of four leading colleges of Jazan University. The findings suggested that verb tense and form were the most common errors followed by word order, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, auxiliaries, and spellings. The data proved that the Saudi students' prominent errors were due to intralingual transfer than interlingual factors.

Jobeen, Kazemian and Shahbaz [14] studied the role of error analysis in the teaching and learning of L2 and FL. In this study, the writing assignments of Pakistani ESL and Iranian EFL university students and intermediate English learners were analyzed. The result indicated that errors in writing were committed because of students' lack of confidence and accuracy in English grammar. The study concluded that the rules of L1 highly influenced L2 and FL learning.

Sawalmeh [15] analyzed errors in English essays written by 32 Arabic speaking learners. The researcher identified verb tense, word order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spellings, capitalization, articles, sentence fragments, and prepositions were the ten most common errors committed by Arabic speakers.

In conclusion, the findings of these studies conclude that FL and L2 learners committed errors in similar linguistic areas either caused by intralingual or interlingual interference.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher employed purposeful sampling to collect data for the error analysis. A technique of purposeful sampling is used commonly in qualitative research to identify and select information-

rich cases that the researcher thinks will serve the purpose of the study [16].

## Participants

The participants for this study were 57 grade 10 students of Ura Central School in Bumthang District who were from two sections comprising 25 males and 27 females. Ura Central School in Bumthang district is located in the central region of Bhutan. It is a government school and English is taught by the national teachers with different years of experience. These students studied the same national curriculum developed by the Royal Education Council of Bhutan when they started their formal schooling. They learned to write an essay since they were in upper primary level (fifth year in the school).

## The Instrument

The research instrument is a measurement tool designed to collect data on the specific topic of interest from the participants in the study. The instrument was consisted of an open-ended question. It was administered to the grade 10 students. A first draft expository essays of 200 to 300 words were written for their writing portfolio. When the students reach grade 10, they already know how to write narrative, descriptive and expository essays. Moreover, the teacher (researcher) explained the outline and structure of the expository essay before they responded to the question that was given for this study.

## Expository Essay Writing

An introduction to the essay presents an opening remark to grab the reader's attention with a sentence or two and set a clear thesis statement at the end of the introduction. Here, readers will be informed about what is going to happen in the latter part of the essay with a brief statement of organizational strategy.

Each body paragraph should have a topic sentence that develops a subtopic with enough evidence supporting the thesis statement and a conclusion to wrap up each paragraph. It is also necessary to have a good transition between paragraphs to demonstrate one idea links to another to support the writer's position.

The conclusion normally re-asserts the thesis statement summarizing the main points, citing a remarkable quotation or leaving a question for the reader and completes the essay. It is the part of an essay where the writer should create a lasting impression on the readers.

## Data Collection and Analysis

After the collection of data, the essays were read thrice by the researcher and were scrutinized for grammatical errors. Errors in the same sentence were counted as one base on its serious impact on the whole sentence for analysis in this research.

The common grammatical errors were categorized, counted the number of frequencies appeared in the essays and converted into percentages as shown in table 1. Further, with the use of "surface strategy taxonomy" by Krashen, Dulay and Burt[1], as shown in table 2, the sources of errors were classified into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Each classification is explained with examples of the errors from the participants' essays.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The researcher analyzed expository essays from the students of Ura Central School and identified the most common grammatical errors and their sources.

Q1. What are common grammatical errors produced in expository essay writing by Bhutanese learners?

| Grammatical Areas | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Verb | 73 | 14.5 |
| Misspelling | 61 | 12.1 |
| Word order | 52 | 10.3 |
| Preposition | 46 | 9.1 |
| Pronoun | 43 | 8.5 |
| Plural | 35 | 6.9 |
| Article | 32 | 6.3 |
| Adjective | 32 | 6.3 |
| Word choice | 29 | 5.8 |
| Conjunction | 29 | 5.8 |
| Adverb | 25 | 5.0 |
| Tense | 24 | 4.8 |
| Noun | 23 | 4.6 |
| **Total** | **504** | **100.0** |

Table 1 Frequency distribution of common grammatical errors

As shown in the table 1, Bhutanese students' most frequent common errors were the verb (14.5%) followed by misspelling (12.1%), word order (10.3%), preposition (9.1%), pronoun (8.5%), plural (6.9%), article and adjective (6.3%), word choice and conjunction (5.8%), adverb (5.0%), tense (4.8%), and noun (4.6%).

Q2. What is the explanation of the common grammatical errors?

The researcher adopted "surface strategy taxonomy" of Krashen, Dulay and Burt [1] to investigate the causes of errors. This taxonomy shows that learners omit essential elements, add needless items, and misform/misorder necessary items in sentences. The analysis of errors from the perspective of this taxonomy embraces promising concerns for the researcher to underlie the identification of cognitive procedures in the reconstruction of FL/L2 learners' new language. Errors of TL learners are not the consequence of sloppy thinking or laziness, but of the learners' use of the provisional principle of producing a new language.

| Classification of Errors | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Omission | 81 | 16.1 |
| Addition | 147 | 29.2 |
| Misformation | 179 | 35.5 |
| Misordering | 97 | 19.2 |
| **Total** | **504** | **100.0** |

Table 2 Frequency distribution of sources of errors according to surface strategy taxonomy

### 1. Omission

Errors of omission are characterized as a result of the lack of essential element that must present in a pleasing expression. Any grammatical item plays important role in their respective place at a particular time. The overall omission error consists of 81 items (16.1%). Example: *"A special day * them"* (A special day for them). In this sentence, the participant omitted to mark the indirect object with the preposition 'for'. *"No * in the world is * special person as our parents"* (No one in the world is the most special person as our parent or No one in the world is a special person as our parent). Here, EFL learner omitted to mention complete pronoun 'no one' and the superlative adjective 'the most' in the sentence.

### 2. Addition

An addition is considered when there is inclusion of pointless item in a pleasing statement. According to Krashen, Dulay and Burt[1], an error of addition typically occurs in the later phases of FL/L2 acquisition when the learners already learned some rules of TL. In total there are 147 additional error items (29.2%). Example: *"Then we came back and *we ate lunch"* (Then we came back and ate lunch). There is an unnecessary addition of plural first person pronoun 'we' as a subject of the sentence. We do not repeat the same pronoun in the second part of the sentence when we combine two sentences in English. *"Root of education is bitter but the fruit *of the education is sweet"* (Root of education is bitter but the fruit is sweet). The participant did not know the TL rule of skipping repeated words in second part of sentence when they join two sentences. *"It is very wonderful *day and interesting day"* (It is a very wonderful and interesting day). It is similar to the previous two errors, but with the repetition of the object 'day.'

### 3. Misformation

Either the incorrect usage of the morpheme or sentence structure or both is characteristic of misformation errors. Misformation showed the highest number of errors which consists 179 items (35.5%). Example: *"Departing from our parents is so *hardful to them"* (Departing from our parents is so painful for us). The Bhutanese EFL learners committed errors because of the mismatch of the subject 'our' and object 'them', and inappropriate use of the preposition 'to' in place of 'for'. The use of 'hardful' is not appropriate in this sentence. *"We *gained our happiness through family and friends"* (We gain our happiness through family and friends). The wrong formation of regular verb 'gained' because the learner referred to happiness experienced in the past. *"Happy to *bron in this *beauty country"* (Happy to born in this beautiful country). The spelling of 'born' could be a mistake because of some emotion. The error in this sentence is misformation of the noun 'beauty' in the place of an adjective 'beautiful'. This error is committed because they did not know that they should use an adjective which tells about the quality or describes noun (country).

### 4. Misordering

The characteristic of misordering is recognized when a learner places a morpheme or group of morphemes in an incorrect place in an utterance. Misordering showed the lowest error with 97 items (19.2%). Example: *"There is such meaning like me getting my father's name to me"* (There is meaning in my nickname). *"Some people in losar they are playing archery, khuru, etc"* (some people play archery, khuru, etc. in Losar). Here, the Bhutanese EFL learners committed misordering errors because they forgot to apply rule of simple sentence like; S+V+O, S+V+Adv, or S+Adv+V+O as it has in the TL.

The errors of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering are caused by the result of the TL itself and it is referred to as intralingual errors. MT does not play any significant role in the production of such errors in L2. Jiang [17] mentions intralingual errors are independent of learners' L1, rather they are caused by the influence of negative interference within the TL. More specifically, Brown[18] stated that "it is now clear that intralingual errors, or intralingual interference – the negative transfer of items within the target language, or, put another way, the incorrect generalization of rules within the target language – is a major factor in second language learning."

In this study, the participants also committed few interlingual errors. Richards [7] confirm that the interlingual errors are influenced by MT in learning TL. In EA, interlingual transfer is not considered as the perseverance of an old habit rather as a significant source for language learners because the learners investigate and internalize the new language system.

The majority of interlingual errors are plural which led to misformation of sentences. This is because, in Dzongkha, the plural is formed either by adding a number after the items or listing the items; *"at dinner the *dish was emadatsi, shakam, momo ..."* (at dinner the dishes were emadatsi, shakam, momo …), the plural cannot be formed by adding a morpheme at the end of the words; *"she was not happy with her *mark"* (she was not happy with her marks), and Dzongkha do not have the exact plural words; *"that time all of my family *are gether and enjoying eating and watching"* (at that time, all of my family gathered together and enjoyed eating and watching sports). The past tense in Dzongkha cannot be formed either with a regular or irregular verb like in English, rather is formed by mentioning time expression or adjective in front of the main verb; *"we frist *meet at Tencholing"* (we first met at Tencholing).

## CONCLUSION

The present study is an attempt to analyze common errors made by grade 10 students of Ura Central School, Bumthang District in Bhutan. After discussing the findings of this study, it was found that the common grammatical errors were mostly intralingual errors that led the Bhutanese FL learners to commit errors of misformation, addition, misordering, and omission. But at the same time, the results also showed some interlingual errors.

Although this group of participants learned English grammatical rules in their preceding years, they lack in their proficiency because of lack of TL practice and application other than classroom academic writing. There are some errors that indicated the participants' carelessness in writing an essay that showed their lack of motivation in English. Learners often feel discouraged and develop a negative attitude to the TL and it is a common phenomenon in FL/L2 learning.

However, the findings from this study will be helpful to the Bhutanese English language teachers to include corrective strategies in their daily teaching lesson plans focusing on the common field of grammatical errors of the learners in classroom teaching to deal with the problems believing in the reduction of errors in FL learners.

The findings of this research study are similar to the findings of the previous empirical studies in many ways. One reason for the learners' errors is that they inaccurately applied the rules of English grammar. This may be due to a lack of experience in the use of English as a medium of communication.

In general, this study believed that the learners committed systematic errors while learning English. The researcher concluded that the FL learners' sources of the errors were because of the complexity of the English language, students' incomplete knowledge of grammar, and the interference of their mother tongue in learning English. FL learners' errors are inevitable while learning the TL.

The results from this may not be promising to generalize to all Bhutanese EFL learners due to the small sample. Further study using a similar test in more schools could indicate whether the results could be applied in other schools and what the outcome is likely to be.

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