



# A Linguistic Error Analysis of ESL Written Essays by Indian Tamil University Students

Asteria Gabriel Ngaiza<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Moshi Co-operative University, [asteria.ngaiza@mocu.ac.tz](mailto:asteria.ngaiza@mocu.ac.tz)

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## ABSTRACT

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Although many ESL university students know grammar rules, most cannot write competently. Meanwhile, effective writing would affect students' overall academic performance. This article examined the written errors of the Indian Tamil learners of English as their Second Language (ESL). The study adopted a cross-sectional research design and collected data through written essays. The participants were studying Master of Arts in English second-year integrated class. The participants were purposely selected. The study assessed errors as they occurred in students' written essays. Data were descriptively analysed in which they were categorised based on the themes. The findings showed several errors, categorised as subject-verb errors, word order patterns, spelling errors, and omissions. Findings have depicted error cases in word order errors, unnecessary insertion, misplaced inversion and sentence fragment errors. The results have shown that some students made apparent errors that could be termed as negligent ones, while others could be associated with transfer from the first language. In addition, other errors are associated with the way the English language is taught. Based on the results, this study recommends that ESL teachers should focus their teaching on these problematic areas and provide the students with many writing tasks that would improve the writing of the Tamilians, whose English is their second language.

**Keywords:** Second Language, Error Analysis, Essay, Tamil Learners

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## **1.Introduction**

A good command of writing skills is essential as it equips learners to flourish in different areas of their life, academic writing inclusive. Communicating ideas and information effectively depends on good writing skills. In universities, writing is a necessary skill that students should possess to succeed academically. In applied linguistics, writing expands knowledge, allowing learners to be more expressive (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2009). Writing difficulties contribute to students' hardships when learning a second language. For example, research has found that students whose English is a second language have more anxiety writing Chaudron, (1988) and hence face challenges in second language learning. Richards and Schmidt (2010), however, believe that even speakers of the first language (L1) find it challenging to write effectively. Writing involves restating and transforming. In academic contexts, writing requires students to advance their ideas within a framework of domain or discipline and engage the reader in academic discourse Myles (2002). Academic second language writing engages the students in a wide range of writing tasks that demand cognitive and linguistic competencies and overall proficiency in the Second language (L2).

Several factors affect the learning of L2 proficiently. They include the first language, educational context, and language instructors, among other factors. That is to say, a supportive learning environment can facilitate writing well as learners will have enough exposure to the target language (Olsen, 1999). Similarly, learning to write in a foreign context is likely to impose many challenges. All these learning contexts contribute to the input and output that students receive in their second language acquisition (Reichelt, 2009).

In India, learners face some challenges when writing in a second language. One such challenge includes too little exposure to the target language. In addition, L2 teachers have received language instructions in either a foreign or second language, hence handicapping their input. These challenges could determine how the learners of a second language would experience challenges during their learning process, hence the genesis of errors in their second language repertoire and academic writing.

The current thinking recognises errors as a stepping stone when acquiring a new language. For instance, Mungungu (2010) reported several errors that ranged from grammatical to rhetorical in students' written scripts. All those errors encountered by learners were associated with learning English in a Second Language learning context. Bieńkowska and Polok (2019) state that where L1 and L2 are not the same, errors are likely to occur due to interference between the two languages. Equally, language errors would arise from the process known as language transfer (Ellis & Ellis, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987; Odlin, 1989). Behaviourists argue that transfer is the cause of errors;

cognitivism views errors as a resource that the learner actively uses to develop their interlanguage (Selinker, 1972; Zamel, 1997). On the other hand, Dulay et al., (1982) believe that when people learn a language committing errors becomes a part of the learning process. Olsen (1999) is of the same view. According to him, errors inform teachers and researchers how learners strategies their second language learning. Correspondingly, Khansir (2013) affirms that errors indicate that learners are taking a positive path towards mastering a target language. These arguments provide the background for the error analysis in the essays written by the Indian students.

Since this study analyses the written errors of Tamil students, it is worth describing the linguistic features of the two languages, Tamil and English. In this context, Tamil is the first language, and English is the second language and official language of communication of the respondents of this study. Tamil is a verb-final language with SOV (subject, object and verb) characteristics, meaning that the verb tends to come at the end of the clauses. It also has postpositions. Tamil word order permits the placement of other elements except the main verb, which comes at the final position. The nouns in Tamil are inflected so the noun can be placed before the verb predicate. According to Kumarasen (2009), in simple declarative clauses, English and Tamil syntactically differ in their basic word order of verb, subject and object. The subject precedes the main verb in English, whereas, in Tamil, they follow it. These differences triggered the researcher to do this study. Therefore, this study was conducted to analyse written errors made by Indian Tamil students.

This study analyses the sentence constructions of Indian Tamil students to find out the types of errors made. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), error analysis may be carried out to find how well someone knows a language, learns a language, and finds out difficult areas in language learning. This study would show which errors are made, helping the teachers improve the English language teaching as a second language.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

The theories of the Process Approach for writing by Flower and Hayes (1981) and Error Analysis by Corder (1967) are the theoretical bases that guided this study. The theory of process approach advocates for students to take power over their texts; in other words, it advocates giving learners suitable learning opportunities. The theory has two camps, namely, the expressivists and the cognitivist. This study adopted the expressivists camp, which considers the teacher as the facilitator of students' writing. The main task of the teachers of this camp is to promote classroom activities that produce writing fluency and power over the writing act. This theory has been adopted

as ESL teachers must ensure that the student gets enough tasks to help the learner. At the same time, the theory of Error Analysis has been used to judge students' written assessment in the form of compositions based on the agreed standard of the target language. Error analysis has been long used to describe learners' version of the target language with the English language. The description would decide whether the learners have produced the agreed target language.

## **2.2. Empirical Studies**

Several studies have been conducted in second language writing and error studies. For instance, Ridha (2012) found that the more problematic errors in a sample of 80 EFL college students were syntactical and lexeme. The most significant errors were mechanical errors, that is to say, the errors that could have been avoided. Ya (2014) investigated the writing of Chinese students' essays. The researcher found that some common errors students committed were the use of cohesion and coherence in essay writing in terms of the second part of IELTS academic writing. Findings revealed five significant types of cohesive devices in these writings. They involved reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

Regarding the frequencies of occurrences, reference was the highest, followed by the conjunction and lexical cohesion, while substitution was the lowest among the five types of cohesive devices and ellipses cases were insignificant. Ilonga (2019) investigated subject-verb agreement and the use of articles as the common errors committed by first-year university students in Tanzania. The author reported that most of these errors resulted from a lack of exposure to writing lessons in English as a second language. He further recommended that students be enrolled in intensive writing classes and that these tutorials should start from the lower education levels.

According to Mungungu (2010), error analysis in both written and oral is helpful in second-language learning. The author suggested that error analysis would help the curriculum designers and teachers, authors of L2 material, find the problem areas for learners and teachers. It is through errors that teachers will know the progress made by the students. They can also inform them what remains for them to learn. Therefore, students' errors are valuable feedback. Essentially, it is through valuable feedback that ESL teachers would create an environment that will enable the learners to master writing by providing the students with enough work to interact well with others and produce well-formed sentences.

A study by (Macho-Stadler et al., 2007) reported that writing skills from L1 were observed in students writing L2 written works. The author believes that these features were the helping tools for learning a second language. Accordingly, these features can be utilised and transferred when learners have

reached a certain point of language skills or mastery. Thus, the higher the L2 proficiency of learners, the higher the chances of applying the knowledge in L2 writing. Similarly, a study by Hussain et al. (2021) reported L1 error cases among O-level students in Pakistan. The study analysed 150 essays among the group of students. The result showed that the most frequent errors emerged due to ineffective teaching methods, translation from the students' first language and poor error treatment methods. The study recommended that ESL teachers improve their teaching methods. For him, learners receive rich input when teaching methods are improved, hence a few errors.

On the other hand, Wang (2003) reported that novice learners are likely to produce more errors in the first language. Nevertheless, these scholars believe that the influence of L1 can also be observed at advanced levels. Alike, Error Analysis (EA) is significant as a mechanism for improving writing skills. Studies (such as Gass et al., 2020; Pawlak, 2014; Richards & Schmidt, 2010) demonstrate how EA can improve writing skills. According to them, errors are the strategies the learner uses to learn a second language.

Celaya and Torres (2001) reported evidence of transfer in the writing production of beginner learners. Their study compared beginners and higher learners, and the findings showed L1 interference to be more significant to beginner learners. The results also reported that most student work errors resulted from L1. Other studies (Hashimoto, 2004; Olsen, 1999), on the one hand, also confirm errors in language learning. These studies, however, reported that not all errors committed resulted from cross-linguistic effects. Their studies reported several similar errors committed by learners whose English was their native language. Data from this study may provide insights into errors committed by Indian university students and possible causes of such errors while guided by the process approach to writing and EA.

### **3. Method**

Data for this study were collected from Master of Arts (MA)-English students who studied at Annamalai University in Tamil Nadu, India. The students were in their second year of the study programme. The informants were purposely selected since they were attending an MA programme hence thought to be a relevant sample for this study. The participants were seven in number, three male and four female students. The selection of participants was based on the fact that they were studying English as their major course. The duration of exposure of these participants made the researcher believe they were suitable participants, so it could be easy to get the data. Data were collected in November 2020 through written essays. The informants were given six topics from the list of given essays. The researcher allowed the informants to select only one topic among the given topics, allowing them to

choose one was to provide them with freedom of the subject matter. The six essay questions had the following topics; love and arranged marriage; ‘accident they had ever witnessed’; ‘an interesting book they had ever read’; ‘the movie they had ever watched and liked’; and the essay on ‘the wedding they had ever attended’. The researcher and their class teacher guided the students on the task. The students were given 20 to 40 minutes to complete the essays.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

The results of this study are categorised based on error groups. No one framework is used to classify errors. Instead, the errors are grouped considering the standard conventions of the target language, in this case, how the native speakers would consider it grammatically correct. Errors are grouped as subject-verb agreement, spelling and orthographic errors, word order errors, unnecessary insertion, omission of words and misplaced inversions.

#### 4.1.1. Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

The findings on this error category are presented in Table 1, which shows the errors committed and the correct form required. For example, the construction ‘Love marriage are mostly in city side only’ indicates that the student has failed to realise that the singular subject ‘love marriage’ requires a singular verb ‘is’ hence creating in disagreement in the sentence structure. This result is in line with the theory of error analysis that dictates that errors should be assessed by looking at the conversion of the English language. Another example, ‘This are the question’, shows that students were doing more guesswork. The structure that needed a singular subject was interchanged and vice versa. Another finding, ‘*the approval of elders are not sought in India*’. The prevalence of the interchange of singular and plural subject and their verbs suggest that the students still need more practice.

**Table 1.**

*Subject-Verb Agreement Errors*

<b>Subject-verb agreement errors</b>	<b>The correct form</b>
i. Marriage are not a new thing in the society	<i>Marriage is not a new thing in the society</i>

ii.	There are no elderly supervision	<i>There is no elderly supervision</i>
iii.	The approval of elders are not sought in India	<i>The approval of elders is not sought in India</i>
iv.	This are the question	<i>These are the questions</i>
v.	Love marriage are mostly in city side only	<i>Love marriage is mostly in cities</i>
vi.	Fake love spoil their life	<i>Fake love spoils their life</i>

#### 4.1.2. Spelling and Orthographic Errors

The findings depicted several spelling errors. They were among the most common error types in students' works. From the findings, see: '*Arranged merrege is different in religen*'. Findings have depicted how English learners violated the English language's orthographic conventions. Similarly, these findings suggest how the students were trying to comply with the English pronunciation; the way these words were written was more like how they ought to be pronounced. These spelling errors usually occur when students fail to realise there is no rational connection between spelling and how the word should be pronounced. At this point, Celaya and Torres, (2001) believe that errors are generally generated due to learners' difficulties in coping with the 'English encoding system'. Olsen (1999) and Llach (2011) assert that spelling errors contribute to poor results among learners, so it is worth examining the processes behind misspellings. See more examples in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

#### *Spelling and Orthographic Errors*

Spelling errors	The correct form
i. I have seen many love maries but my <i>favarit</i> is....	I have seen many love marriages but my favourite...
i. I have <i>afaction</i>	I have affection
i. <i>Some peoples we love others</i>	Some people love others
v. Arranged <i>merrege</i> is different in <i>religen</i>	Arranged marriage is different in religion
v. Arranged marriages end in <i>divorsce</i>	Arranged marriages end in divorce
i. Love marriages has (sic) high <i>saccess</i> maximum	Love marriages have a high success rate
i. I spoke^my vice <i>principle</i> regarding your request	I spoke to my vice principal regarding your request

It is intriguing to note that some errors were extreme cases and uncalled for at this level of education. It is somewhat correct to assume that these students are, to some extent, careless or termed to be in a hurry. For example, the way the noun 'religion' is written also suggests the same. Mungungu, (2010) reported similar findings among the three groups of Namibian learners, the Afrikaans, Oshiwambo and Sozi speakers of the English Language. The author believed wrong spelling was a significant learning difficulty for the three groups and that some spelling errors resulted from sloppy writing rather than a lack of knowledge.

#### **4.1.3. Word Order Errors**

Findings depict some cases of misplaced constituents in students' sentences. Word order is the correct placement of a morpheme or group of words in an utterance. Carnie (2010) defines constituents as words that function as units. The English language relies on word order to express grammatical relationships within constructions. In this study, findings show that the students were mis-ordering some constituents. Observe the following example; *'Parents are becoming thoughtful of their children's feelings the biggest'*. This example depicts the violation of standard English regular word order. Normal word order is for the adjective to modify the noun and not for the noun to modify the adjective. These could be said to be challenges associated with language learning in a foreign language context. See more examples in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

*Word Order Errors*

<b>Word order errors</b>	<b>The correct form</b>
i. <i>Parents are becoming thoughtful of their children's feelings the biggest</i>	Parents are becoming thoughtful of their children's biggest feelings
ii. <i>Why(sic) dear feeling bad?</i>	Why are you feeling bad, dear?
iii. <i>Human beings only^allowed to marry</i>	Only human beings are allowed to marry
iv. <i>Now all we love some other people</i>	We all love some people

#### **4.1.4. Unnecessary Insertion**

In students' essays, there were cases where students inserted the words in places where such words were not supposed to be. The significant insertions were mostly the prepositions. For example, in the essay, the sentence *'I am going home tomorrow'*, the insertion of the preposition 'to' was unnecessary. The noun home never requires any modification; however, the student decided to include the preposition where it was not supposed to be. The preposition



insertion did not distort the sentence’s meaning but created an ungrammatical sentence. Another example from Table 4 is the sentence: ‘*I want to enjoy to life*’... This finding, on the one hand, suggests that learners have insufficient knowledge about the second language or the capacity to activate the appropriate second-language sentence structures. These students’ level of exposure to ESL instruction would suggest that the students were proficient enough, but the results provided a different picture. See more examples in Table 4.

**Table 4.**

*Unnecessary Insertion Type Errors*

	Unnecessary insertion	The correct form
i.	He is ready to write <i>for</i> one question	He is ready to write one question
ii.	I am going <i>to</i> home tomorrow	I am going home tomorrow
iii.	I am <i>in</i> outside the house	I am outside the house
iv.	I want to enjoy <i>to</i> life	I want to enjoy life
v.	<i>Now</i> all we love some <i>other</i> people	We all love some people

**4.1.5. Word Omission Errors**

Another error this study found in students’ essays was word omission. The study found that Tamil students omitted some words that must be included in a sentence. These findings suggest that students lacked the knowledge to realise the importance of the existence of such words in sentences.

More examples from the findings include: ‘*I spoke... my vice principle (sic) regarding your request*’. In this construction, the student omitted the preposition ‘to’. In other examples, as they appear in Table 5, words that were omitted include helping verbs such as *is* and *are*, both indefinite and definite articles ‘*a*’ and ‘*the*’. These constructions suggest that students were unaware of the required structure of the English sentences, hence creating ungrammatically correct sentences. Table 5 presents more examples as witnessed in students’ essays.

**Table 5.**

*Omission of Words*

Omission of words errors	The correct form
i.Sivaranjani...always obeying the guidance of her elders	Sivaranjani <i>is</i> always obeying the guidance of her elders

ii. The instances of love marriage in India ...prevalent	The instances of love marriage in India <b>are</b> prevalent
iii. Rajesh...also coming Kumbakonam	Rajesh <b>is</b> also coming <b>to</b> Kumbakonam
iv. Why^dear feeling bad?	Why <b>are</b> you feeling bad?
v. Love is^awesome feel^ humans	Love is <b>an</b> awesome feeling <b>of</b> humans
vi. I spoke...my vice principle (sic) regarding your request	I spoke <b>to</b> my vice principal regarding your request
vii. Love is not^bad thing	Love is not a bad thing
viii. Love is^greatest force of heart	Love is the greatest force of the heart
ix. But^reality is ^world is full of fake love	<i>The</i> reality is, <i>the</i> world is full of fake love

#### 4.1.6. Sentence Fragment Errors

Findings have shown several fragment errors in student essays (Table 6). In this study, the following cases of fragments were observed: '*And they are untrustable*'. This type of dependent fragment has created incomplete or unclear meaning. Another example is '*Very important is full of parents support*'. This construction suggests that the student considered this fragment a full-meaning sentence. These errors need to be corrected so they do not distort the meaning. Albright and Langan (2020) suggest that the students need to be taught to correct dependent-word fragments by attaching them to the sentence that comes after it or the sentence that comes before it. Likewise, (Myles, 2002) suggests that students need exposure to written texts that are native-like models. By so doing, students may not persist in committing similar errors.

Meanwhile, the results also presented the fragment '*enjoying music*' as it appeared in this finding, making it challenging to comprehend what this student was trying to communicate. This fragment had a missing subject or the doer of the action. A fragment like this would cause misunderstanding to the message's recipient, especially if the recipient is a native speaker of the English language.

**Table 6.**

*Sentence Fragment Errors*

Sentence fragment errors	The correct form
i. Enjoying movie only	I enjoy movies...
i. But human only are allowed to marry	Only human beings are allowed to marry

ii.	Very important is full of parents support	It is very important to have full parental support
iii.	That to love marriage	Love marriage...
iv.	<i>And they are untrustable</i>	They are not trusted...
v.	But they are strong in love	They are strong in love

#### 4.1.7. Misplaced Inversions

Findings have depicted several cases of misplaced inversions. Examples of misplaced inversion from our results (Table 7) include the following; ‘*you got an invitation?*’ This construction tempts us to say that the question mark replaces an inversion at the end of a declarative sentence. This suggests that the students assumed that placing a question mark makes the sentence a question. This finding also indicates that language transfer might contribute to this error. Although this study did not attempt to trace errors from their L1, it is apparent that the Tamil language contributed to this error. This is to say, the standard word order is usually an SOV; placing the verb at the end is a common practice, unlike the SVO structure of the English language.

**Table 7.**

*Misplaced Inversions*

	<b>Misplaced inversions</b>	<b>The correct form</b>
i.	What I do, dear?	What do I do, my dear?
i.	You got ^ invitation?	Did you get an invitation?
i.	Your friend is living in Chidambaram?	Is your friend living in Chidambaram?
v.	You sent ^ email to my address?	Did you send an email to my address?
v.	Why dear you are feeling bad?	Why are you feeling bad, my dear?

Table 7 presents more examples of the misplaced inversion ‘*What I do dear?*’ This construction will likely create confusion and misunderstanding since it looks like a statement with a question mark at the end. Findings from previous researchers (Amara, 2015; Hashimoto, 2004) propose that the errors that hinder communication are the most important to correct; they are known as global errors. Global errors impede communication, resulting in a misunderstanding of the message, most especially by native speakers. These findings, on the other hand, suggest that students were trying to take control of their writing and that errors could not stop them from sharing their life experiences.

## **4.2. Discussion**

Findings showed that Indian Tamil students committed several errors in their essays. These errors become one of the sources of students' difficulties in their use of English for writing. Some of the errors suggest cases of L1 transfer. Other error types seemed to result from students' negligence. This observation is reported based on the level of the students. The findings of this study are similar to previous research by Amiri and Puteh (2017) that showed several causes of errors among advanced students. They further concluded that teachers should be part of the learners' learning process of developing their language, as writing is a process rather than an outcome.

Additionally, the results showed that the errors were associated with the complexity of the English language, incomplete knowledge or ignorance of some structures, the transfer of training, and unfamiliarity with the requirements of written English, among others. Similar findings were reported by Ilonga (2019), who argued that most of the students' errors indicated a lack of knowledge. The author concluded that students' previous language and writing practice needed a recheck. Assessing this case in the Indian context, English is the medium of instruction for the lower levels of education.

Subjecting these findings through the mirror of the process approach theory for writing, ESL teachers should focus on these areas and provide the learners with valuable learning opportunities.

The findings also cannot be separated from how the English language is instructed. These results are consistent with Mungungu (2010). He says other errors committed by learners resulted from input from their instructors. At this point, Ellis (1994) proposes that it is through analysis of learners' errors that we lift "the status of errors" from that of not wanted to the desired learning tools for language learning proficiency.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

Through the lenses of EA and the Process approach in writing, the study concludes that some errors that the Indian Tamilian university students made were mainly mechanical such as spelling and grammatical errors. Some of these errors could probably be corrected by students through editing and avoidance of negligence. Logic errors could be overcome through enough meaningful writing assignments and close supervision of the teachers.

In addition, the study concludes that ESL teachers should provide learners with valuable learning opportunities, including many writing assignments. Writing is indeed a process that needs the collaboration of many actors; teachers, students, and a supportive environment. Because of these findings,

there is a need to improve language pedagogy and for learners to play a significant role in improving their writing. Along the same line, teachers should focus their teaching on those problematic areas to reduce the prevalence of errors. By so doing, students as learners of English as a second and foreign language can reach their full potential.

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