

Grammatical Error Analysis in Narrative Essays of Secondary Students in Perak: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The results of the English SPM examination, a game-changing assessment for secondary students in Malaysia, indicated a notable decline in performance in the language, particularly in the extended writing section. This section included narrative writing, a genre praised for providing young minds a platform to express creativity in a safe and calm environment. Despite the advantages of narrative writing, students demonstrated a decline in this genre, which was attributed to inadequate language proficiency, especially in grammar. Previous research reported poor performance and provided limited insight into error types. Consequently, this study investigated the error types in narrative essays among students with high language proficiency, minimising the impact of first language interference, which had been identified as a primary cause of Malaysian students' grammar errors. A total of 180 narrative essays were collected from 60 Form Five students across four secondary schools in Perak, and the essays were analysed using the adapted Error Analysis framework. Four English teachers and Grammarly were used to analyse the essays for grammar errors. The results revealed that students struggled with correctly using determiners, vocabulary, prepositions, and tenses, challenging past research that identified subject-verb agreement as the main issue for Malaysian students. Both inductive and deductive teaching methods for these grammar components can significantly enhance students' writing, contributing to improved examination performance.

Keywords: Grammar errors, SPM English, narrative writing

INTRODUCTION

English, recognised as the second language in Malaysia, significantly influences many facets of Malaysians' lives due to its widespread use throughout the country. From employers aiming to hire capable employees to students striving for academic excellence across various ages, proficiency in the English language is an essential requirement. In recognition of its significance, the Malaysian Education Ministry has designated English as one of the core subjects for primary and secondary students in all types of Malaysian schools; achieving a passing grade in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia - SPM) English Language paper is crucial to obtain an overall pass for the examination (Wan Ibrahim & Othman, 2021). Without this overall pass, Malaysian students will be unable to further their education at the tertiary level, thereby impeding their academic journey.

The SPM English examination, divided into four papers, assesses listening, speaking, reading, and writing in each component. However, Malaysian students have been noted for their poor

performance in the writing section, which is examined in Paper 2 (Ahmad Ghulamuddin et al., 2021). The writing component is divided into three parts: testing students in email writing, directed writing, and extended writing. Past research indicates the inability of Malaysian students to perform well in extended writing (Chua, 2024), which requires them to write a 200-250-word essay in the form of a review, report, or narrative. Previous research also recorded the Malaysian students' inadequate English grammar knowledge, negatively affecting their English writing of any genre (Chandra Segaran & Hashim, 2022; Govindarajoo et al., 2022; Ong & Tengku Mahadi, 2022; Singh et al., 2017), including narrative writing (Jaafar Sidek & Ismail, 2021).

Narrative writing has been lauded as a space for students of all ages to demonstrate their creativity, and noted for its popularity among teenagers for allowing them to tap into any story of their preference; every person has a story to tell, and narrative writing allows the students to tell their story in a safe environment, alleviating students' performance anxiety in English writing (Mariano, 2025). Nevertheless, as reported earlier, Malaysian secondary students' substandard achievements in narrative writing invite closer investigation of their writing problems and errors. Britton (2023) averred that Malaysian students' main language problem was grammar, producing narratives that lacked impact. However, past studies scarcely provided insights into the students' grammar error types in narrative writing, which is significant for the teachers, students and the curriculum planners to overcome the problem.

Therefore, this study examined the grammatical errors in Malaysian secondary education students' narrative essays to address the gap in the existing literature about enhancing English writing. Exploring the grammatical errors will provide insights into the common mistakes students make, which can assist language teachers and curriculum developers in tailoring lessons to enhance students' English narrative writing.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

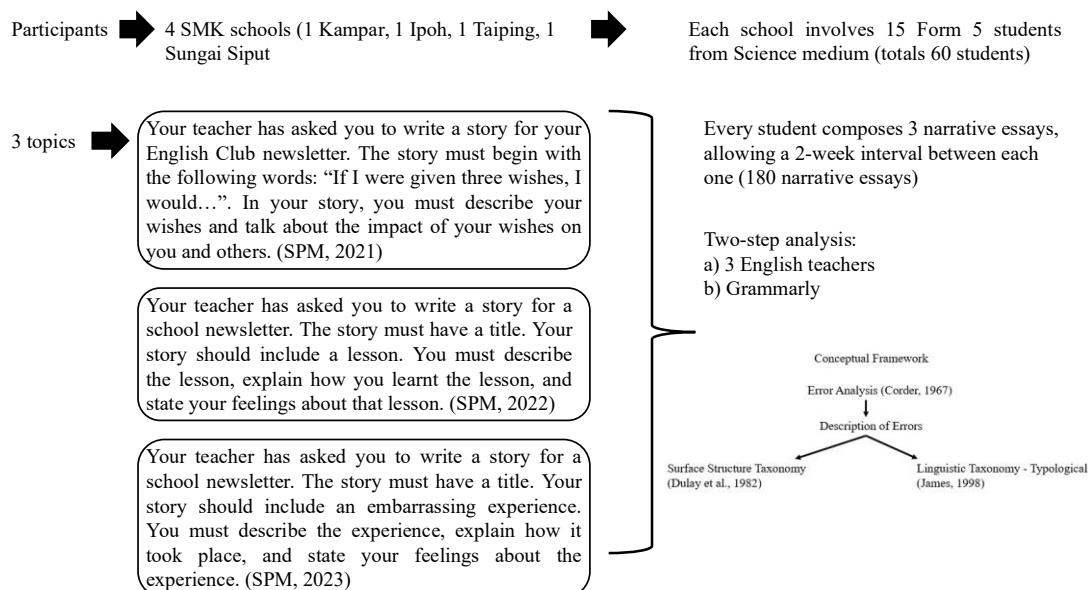


Figure 1 Pedagogical Approach Summary

Figure 1 captures the pedagogical approaches used to collect and analyse data for this research. This study involved sixty Form 5 students from four secondary schools in Perak who were enrolled in the Science medium at the point of data collection. The Science medium was targeted to create a homogeneous pool of participants in language proficiency, and the students of this medium were classified as the crème of the crop by each school. This purposive sampling allowed the researcher to focus on the errors made by even proficient Malaysian students, permitting insights into the lacunae in English grammar coverage in the Malaysian English curriculum. Additionally, the participants screened for high language proficiency minimised the factor of first language interference in grammar errors, which is cited as the most significant aspect leading to English grammar errors among Malaysian students (Govindarajoo et al., 2022; Mehat & Ismail, 2021; Nasrudin et al., 2023).

The participants wrote three narrative essays, with a two-week interval between each, as part of classroom activities. The topics were taken from the SPM English Paper 2 for 2021, 2022, and 2023. Their respective English teachers monitored the participants' work to ensure that their compositions were not influenced by discussions with friends, input from artificial intelligence (AI), or additional time to complete the tasks. Thus, 180 narrative essays were collected from 60 students for this research.

The data analysis was guided by the conceptual framework adapted from Azmi (2016), who proposed to extend the Error Analysis framework (Corder, 1967) that suggested describing the errors by including two more theories: Surface Structure Taxonomy (Dulay et al., 1982) and Linguistic Taxonomy (Plungyan, 2011). The Surface Structure Taxonomy explains the types of errors by grouping them into four categories: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (Keumala & Idami, 2022). Meanwhile, Linguistic Taxonomy, especially typological classification, delineates structural features of languages, such as grammatical structures, word order, and vocabulary (Austin, 2021).

The narratives were analysed through two processes. The participants' English teachers, who willingly participated in the research, reviewed each essay for grammatical errors. Subsequently, the essays were typed and uploaded to Grammarly to identify any remaining grammatical errors, ensuring a thorough error analysis. This two-step process minimised human error (where teachers may have overlooked inevitable mistakes) and AI misinterpretations (where it might incorrectly flag a correct element as an error). The number of errors for each component was manually counted to identify the frequency of their occurrence in the narratives.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 Analysis of Errors

	Error Types	Frequency
Highest	Determiner (Det)	291
	Vocabulary (Vc)	163
	Preposition (Pre)	142
	Tense (Tn)	98
Lowest	Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA)	21
	Adverb (Adv)	11
	Pronoun (Pro)	4

Table 1 presents the most notable errors in data, categorised into those with the highest and lowest frequency counts. Determiners, particularly the articles (zero article, a, an, the), have proven to be a challenge for students, as they often omit or add them in incorrect places within their sentences. Vocabulary was also problematic for the participants in terms of choosing the right words and spelling to express ideas. Prepositions were used in the wrong order (especially in phrasal verbs) or context (flagged as misinformation). Another prominent error was in verb tense, with verb forms not compliant with the sentence's time context.

Subject-verb agreement, adverbs, and pronouns recorded the lowest frequencies in the error analysis. The result for subject-verb agreement contradicts past research reports that labelled this grammar component as the most difficult for Malaysian students due to the high number of errors categorised under this label (Abu Bakar et al., 2007; Stapa & Izahar, 2010).

It should be highlighted that the teachers who marked the essays noted that these essays were average to above average overall, signifying that the grammar errors did not significantly impact the content value of the essays. Nevertheless, the teachers stated that avoiding these grammar errors would have placed the essays among the good pieces (eligible to score higher marks), reiterating the importance of grammar lessons in enhancing students' writing.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research emphasise the importance of mastering English grammar, especially in writing. The high number of errors in narrative writing, a genre praised for its ability to calm writers during the writing process, is a concern that should be noted, as students may produce more errors when writing in other genres. Inductive or deductive teaching of these grammar topics during English lessons in classrooms will lead to noteworthy improvements in students' writing, enhancing their writing skills and overall language achievement.

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