

## A Morphosyntactic Analysis on Malaysian Secondary School Students' Essay Writing in English Class

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### Abstract

Morphosyntactic issues are part of our competence debates in the shape of written form which reflects our ignorance about language rules or misconception about the domain. This paper investigates the morphosyntactic issues and grammatical errors in English written essays of Malaysian secondary school students in English course. It analyzes ten students' essays (50 pages) in the light of Chomsky's (1995) the Minimalist Program using X-Bar theory to represent the tree diagram. The research paper aims to focus on the morphosyntactic issues that lead to the grammatical errors which take place in the English writing of Malaysian secondary school students. The findings suggest that the Malaysian students are not fully aware how to use the plural mark 's' as well the '3<sup>rd</sup> singular' in present tense. Moreover, they cannot build a simple sentence due to the different word-order and sentence structure between Malay language and English in term of morphology and syntax.

**Key Words:** Second language acquisition, Syntax, Morphology, Academic writing, Minimalist Program.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Background of the Study

For the last 50 years and onwards, linguists and scholars have conducted many researches in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (Gabrys-Barker, 2008). Many of these researches have studied the relation between acquiring a language and native-like issue (see: Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam (2009), Munoz (2008), Singleton (2005)) in that they studied the relation between age and SLA and then the relation between native-like and SLA. However, some others have focused on the grammatical errors which the language learner makes (see: Gabrys-Barker (2008), Erdogan (2005), Zainal (1990)) in that they have searched upon the errors which a learner makes in his academic activities such as spelling, sentence structure, word formation and word semantics. Since this paper handles the morphosyntactic errors for second language learner hereinafter definitions for the basic terms concerning the research topic:

*Language* is but a set of sentences formed in logical syntactic structure or combination (Chomsky, 1957). Furthermore, Finch (2000) argued that languages like English deal with word order, however some other languages do from the words *per se*. Meanwhile, Chomsky's (1965) Universal Grammar (UG) stated that all languages share common basic features. However, Borsley (1999) discusses that problems of syntax are due to the fact that languages are not 'clearcut objectives'. The linguistic definition of *morphology* is "the mental system involved in word formation or the branch of linguistics that deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed" (Aronoff & Fudeman (2011: 2)). Moreover, they believe that morphology should not be only a secondary data source in theories for analyzing other language elements but it has to be handled in its own as a subject of study.

*Syntax* "is a term used for the study of rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences" (Finch, 2000: 77). Hence, syntax is concerned with the way that sentence is structured. Similarly, Bell (1991) states that syntax is the knowledge of manipulating sentence elements in the chain and choice of the system within the proposition semantic unit. He defines syntactic knowledge as a "matter of knowing what elements exist in a language and how they may be legitimately combined" (ibid: 207). We have mentioned earlier in this paper that many researches have been conducted to investigate SLA issues. Among these issues is the morphosyntactic issue which is the focus of the current paper.

The main subject of such researches is that learners of second language who are in advance educational level continue making grammatical errors in terms of morphology (word formation) and syntax (sentence structure) in their written productions even they have mastered the target language rules and then there is a big gap between SL learners and native in this sphere (Gabrys-Barker, 2008). Accordingly, linguists distinguished between linguistic competence and performance. Linguistic competence is the knowledge in a man's brain (Chomsky: I-language), however, linguistic performance is the actual use of this knowledge (Chomsky: E-language) (Gabrys-Barker, 2008). Thus, SL learners might have the knowledge of a language rules but their writing activates still have many errors! This issue is a product of the first language (L1) influence on the performance of the learner in the use of the second language (L2). Herein the similarities and differences between both L1 grammar system and L2 rise up. Linguists called this phenomenon 'cross-language'. Gabrys-Barker (2008) argued that "L2 learners of English should have the most trouble with past tense if their L1 both lacks a tense system and is highly constrained in terms of final consonants and consonant clusters" (ibid: 81-82).

### ***1.2. Statement of Problem***

In the process of acquiring and learning a second or foreign language, a learner is going to make a mistake or an error. A learner might make a mistake because he does not master a language rule. However, an error might be a product of unawareness of a language rule. As many researchers claim, making errors is an unavoidable problem in foreign and second language acquisition (see: Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982), Brown (2000), Zainal (1990) and Aronoff & Fudeman (2005)). However, a student in secondary school level of education in country which English is a second language is anticipated to have enough linguistic competence in English which can be seen in his performance in the academic field. Nevertheless it has not been given its due as a subject of study, nor has it received enough critical attention from scholars or students of language in terms of morphological and syntactical analyses.

### ***1.3. Significant of the Study***

The significance of this study might be considered as a self-justified. It shows without saying it in words that this genre of study will contribute to generative linguistics in terms of morphological analysis on one hand and syntactic analysis from the other hand. Morphologically, the research will determine the morphological errors that are committed by the Malaysian secondary school students. Syntactically, it will analyze and explain the sentence structure of those students.

### ***1.4. Research Objectives***

This study attempts to (1) determine the morphosyntactic errors operating on the essay writing of the Malaysian secondary school students; (2) analyze the morphosyntactic errors operating on the essay writing of the Malaysian secondary school students, and (3) explicate to what extent the morphosyntactic errors operating on the essay writing of the Malaysian secondary school students affecting the whole clause structure.

### ***1.5. Research Questions***

1. What are the morphosyntactic errors operating on the essay writing of the Malaysian secondary school students?
2. To what extent the morphosyntactic errors operating on the essay writing of the Malaysian secondary school students affecting the whole clause structure?

### ***1.6. Scope***

This study intends to cover the morphosyntactic errors operating on the essays writing of the Malaysian secondary school students and how these errors affect the whole clause structure. Mainly it makes use of, random sample, ten (10) selected students' essays (50 pages) from a Malaysian secondary school. As for the analysis, a morphological and syntactic analysis is carried out in terms of Chomsky's theory (1995) the Minimalist Program (MP) using X-Bar theory to represent the tree diagram.

## 2. Literature Review

Zainal(1990) stated that there are two classes of errors created by Malaysian students in their essays. The first class of errors belongs to morphological errors which include the drop of grammatical morphemes, such as 's' and 'es' in subject-verb agreement and the apostrophe 's' in the possessive sentence structure. The second class of errors belongs to syntactical errors, such as past tense agreement and auxiliaries. These structures do not exist in Malay, resulting in the leaning for the students to drop these structures in their essays. Darus & Subramaniam (2009) examined a corpus of 72 essays written by 72 Malaysian secondary schools students in Malaysia. The results showed that six most common errors that the students made were in Singular/Plural form 13.3%, Verb Tense 11.2%, followed by Word Choice 10.5%, Preposition 9.3%, Subject-Verb Agreement 7% and Word Order 7%, however, word form came in the ninth rank by 5%. As well they found out that many students errors were produced due to students misunderstanding of the English writing rules.

Erdogan (2005) stated that second language learners' mistakes are not avoidable in the process of learning a second or foreign language. And then he posed the question why do students make the mistakes which teachers have pointed them out in prior time? He pointed out that some students correct themselves and do not repeat the same mistake in the time that some others do repeat the same mistakes. Thus, he suggested that this phenomenon should be studied by language teachers and linguists carefully. The findings showed that: morphologically, "Turkish students tend to omit the plural suffix at the end of the word as Turkish does not put it in adjectival phrases indicating numbers" (ibid: 265). Finally he emphasized on that importance of the students errors in word order of the sentence which make the sentence comprehensible for the readers. Meanwhile, for him, pluralization, tenses and use of articles are less important.

Maroset al. (2007) studied the interference effect on rural Malay secondary school students' grammatical errors in their English essays writing. Their data were 120 students from six schools in three Malaysian states. They followed Norrish (1992) theory in Error Analysis in their data analysis. They found that students who have studied English for six years did not master English grammar yet. Their findings showed that there are three main and frequent errors which students make: 1) the use of copula verb (be), 2) the use of articles and 3) subject-verb agreement.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Theoretical Framework (Chomsky's 1995)

To find out answers for the research questions, we are going to apply in our framework the Minimalist Program (MP). The MP is a major line of inquiry that has been developing inside Generative Grammar and done by Noam Chomsky and that Radford and Adger shed light on it in their books: (Radford, 2009 & Adger, 2002). If we can sum up, the Minimalist Program, according to Zwart (1998) is "a collection of four articles, 'The Theory of Principles and Parameters' (written with Howard Lasnik, 13-127), 'Some notes on Economy of Derivation and representation' (129-166), 'A Minimalist Program for linguistic theory' (167-217), and 'Categories and transformations' (219-394)". Moreover, the MP, as Lotfi (1999) argued, "it assumes that the language faculty consists of a cognitive system (a computational system and a lexicon) responsible for storing information, and performance systems (the "external" systems A-P and C-P interacting with the cognitive system at two interface levels of PF and LF respectively) responsible for using and accessing information". Thus the MP main function is to explain the grammaticality and ungrammaticality issues of sentences in all languages.

**X-bar theory** is employed in the Minimalist Program in order to be able to describe the structure of phrases, clauses and sentences whatever the order of a language may have adopted SVO, VSO, or OVS. Figure 1 illustrates The X-Bar theory structure:

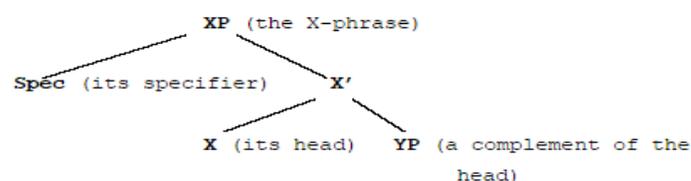


Figure 1: General Structure of X-Bar Theory.

- $XP \rightarrow (YP) X'$       Specifier rule  
 $X' \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} YP \quad X' \\ X' \quad YP \end{array} \right\}$  Adjunct rule  
 $X' \rightarrow X (YP)$       Complement rule

The X-bar theory correctly represents constituents smaller than XP, and bigger than X. It also distinguishes syntactically among complements, specifiers, and adjuncts. Moreover, it makes cross-categorical generalizations.

### 3.2. Data and Data Collection

We are applying a qualitative methodology in our analysis on the morphosyntactic issues which occur in the Malaysian secondary school students. To be more specific, we are going to analyze the word form and the sentence structure of ten students (50 pages) with a reference to selected texts from their written works. The analysis will be done by employing Chomsky's Minimalist Program and using X-bar theory.

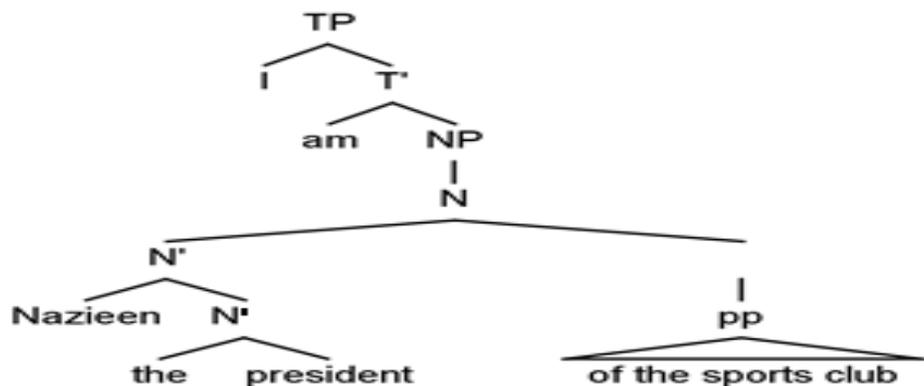
### 3.3. Data Analysis

For the first glance, although of the non-well handwriting in some students' writings, we notice many grammatical errors which all of the ten students committed. Such as orthographic mistakes, informal expressions, active/passive construction, the use of past participles, the use of past simple tense instead of the present simple tense, the misuse of 's' as a plural mark or a '3<sup>rd</sup> singular' mark, correlation, add or omit morphemes, subject-verb-agreement, words combination, word structure, punctuation, sentence structure and singular-plural form. However, we are not going to analyze and explain all of the errors and the issues but the ones relate and touch the morphosyntactic analysis:

#### 1. Syntactically

Punctuation is a way to help the reader to understand well the writing. It helps us to know when the sentence begins, when it ends and that means the idea is complete. As well they show us when there is an explanation, when there is an example and so on. So punctuation has two function related to each other; semantic function and syntactic function.

For example: student no 8: "I'm Nazieen who the president of the sport club wanted talking at all of you about sports week in our school." Indeed it is two sentences; the first one is: *I am Nazieen, the president of the sports club.* The second one is: *(I) want to talk to all of you about (the) sports week in our school.* The following tree diagram presents the syntactic structure of the sentence:



**Diagram 1: TP Syntactic Structure**

Accordingly, the tree diagram shows that the sentence structure headed by tense phrase (TP) which means we have a full sentence. However in this sentence we do not have verb phrase (VP) because of verb to be 'am' which considered as verb copula. Then there is sisterhood relation between noun phrase (NP) 'the president' and the preposition phrase (PP) 'of the sports club'.

## 2. Morphologically

**Table (1) shows some selected phrases that present the errors in plural form and subject-verb agreement**

Student no 1	The objectives of the programm is also to identify talents...
Student no 2	All the student must go...
Student no 3	I want to give you about some of the objective of the sports week.
Student no 4	The objectives of the programm is...
Student no 5	There is a few activities...
Student no 6	He organizes this activities...
Student no 7	As you all knows. &It promote active...
Student no 8	The objectives of this program is to promote active.
Student no 9	...who join this activities...
Student no 10	...sometimes a students....

**Table 1: A Morphological Analysis**

Moreover, the students are confused in using 'ed' as a mark of past simple tense and as a mark of passive form. Such as in the writing of student no 3; 'had finished their studied' instead of saying 'had finished their studies'. As well, student no 1 says; 'I want to married. Student no 2 states: 'and also like to kidnapped children'. So he generalized the idea of adding 'ed' to verbs.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research are fully agreed with the ones of the two previous studies which we reviewed earlier. Since that the Malaysian students commit many morphological and syntactical errors in their writing. Morphologically, they do not use the plural mark 's' in a proper way and they do not differentiate between 's' as plural mark and 's' as a '3<sup>rd</sup> singular' mark. As well they, sometimes, generalize the idea of adding 's' in both cases; as a plural mark and a 3<sup>rd</sup> singular mark. However, the addition and omission of the morpheme 's' in both cases do not affect the general meaning of the phrase or sentence. Because the problem is focalized within the word, these errors can easily be indicated to the students. We can explain that by stating that the linguistic knowledge of the student is not fully developed yet. Besides that, syntactically Malaysian students are not fully aware how to build a phrase or a sentence in English. They write more than one verb in a phrase or a sentence which does not need but one. As well they are not sure about word order in English and how to build a simple sentence. We can explain that by saying that all these forms do not exist in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language), resulting in the tendency for the students to omit or add these forms in their essays. Finally, in a general sense, the morphological errors do not affect the sentence structure or the whole meaning of the phrase or the sentence. Moreover, the erroneous construction of the sentence does not lead to ambiguity in the whole meaning of the phrase or the sentence; the meaning can be fully understood through the context.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper we analyzed and explained the morphosyntactic issues on Malaysian secondary school students' essays writing. We found that some errors are due to the lack of knowledge of the English grammar system and some others are due to nonexistence of the English grammar rules in the Malay system. As well some others are due to the misapplying of the rule; the student applies the English grammar rule in the wrong way and place. However, we suggest that English schoolteachers of all educational levels should focus on these errors and issues to reduce their occurrence by applying more exercises and practices. After that teachers should discuss the students' writing output with them and give them feedback.

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