

A CORPUS-BASED LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICAL ERROR
IDENTIFICATION: L2 LEARNERS ACADEMIC WRITING

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DEDICATION

There is no other way to express my gratitude and appreciation upon the completion of this PhD thesis, but to dedicate this thesis to my loved ones specifically to my lovely wife Zaharah Binti Mohd Amin and my four lovely children Haziq, Haikal, Haizie, and Hazim for their patience and encouragement in making the completion of this thesis a success endeavour. It is to them that I am obliged and indebted indeed. Thank you my dearest family for believing in my ability to complete this thesis even though there were times I told all of you that I wanted to quit such a challenging and painful undertaking, and at times it seemed impossible to accomplish. However, your encouragement and tender loving care as well as my individual conscience to lead by example and to have a better life have made me to think otherwise. Indeed, you are all my special individuals and my inspiration and I am blessed to have all of you in my family. Thank you all once again and may Allah bless you.



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ABSTRACT

Writing in English has never been an easy task to many second language (L2) learners. Many of them perform poorly in their English academic writing where numerous lexical and grammatical errors are found in their report. Therefore, this thesis investigates the difficulties faced by UTHM learners involved in academic writing by identifying and analyzing errors made by them with the application of error analysis procedures. This research attempts to find out the types and patterns of errors in which it focuses on the frequency of the lexical and grammatical errors of the L2 learners in their writing. Errors were investigated and identified based on students' 36 progress and final reports which were assembled from first year engineering students; named as the Learner Corpus Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia(LCUTHM). The LCUTHM was analyzed by means of linguistics Natural Language Processing tools (NLP) such as CLAWS 5 tag set, Markin Version 4 and categorized by MonoConc Pro II in the form of word lists. Data were also analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software to determine the major errors learners committed in learners' written work. The findings reveal that the major lexical and grammatical error categories made by learners were "Missing Word", "Repetition", and "Verb Form". Finally, the integration of technology and the linguistics Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools can provide a fast and more effective method in assisting teachers in identifying errors, and designing syllabus in improving the language skills and achievement of L2 learners in their academic writing.



ABSTRAK

Menulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris bukan satu tugas yang mudah kepada pelajar yang mempelajari bahasa kedua (L2). Sebilangan besar dari mereka menunjukkan prestasi buruk dalam penulisan akademik Bahasa Inggeris dengan melakukan banyak kesalahan leksikal dan tatabahasa dalam penulisan berbentuk laporan. Oleh itu, tesis ini mengkaji kesukaran yang dihadapi oleh pelajar UTHM yang terlibat dalam penulisan akademik dengan mengenal pasti dan menganalisa kesilapan yang dibuat oleh mereka dengan menggunakan prosedur analisa kesalahan. Penyelidikan ini cuba untuk mengetahui jenis dan corak kesalahan di mana ia memusat kepada kekerapan kesalahan leksikal dan tatabahasa pelajar L2 dalam penulisan mereka. Kesalahan diselidik dan dikenal pasti berdasarkan 36 laporan kemajuan dan laporan akhir pelajar yang dihimpunkan dari pelajar tahun satu kejuruteraan; dinamakan sebagai Learner Corpus Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (LCUTHM). LCUTHM dianalisa dengan alat linguistik Pemprosesan Bahasa Asli (NLP) seperti CLAWS 5, Markin versi 4, dan dikategori oleh MonoConc Pro II dalam bentuk senarai kata. Data juga dianalisa menggunakan perisian Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) untuk menentukan kesalahan utama yang dilakukan oleh pelajar dalam penulisan mereka. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa kategori utama kesalahan leksikal dan tatabahasa yang dilakukan oleh pelajar adalah “Missing Word”, “Repetition”, dan “Verb Form”. Akhirnya, penyatuan teknologi dan alat linguistik Pemprosesan Bahasa Asli (NLP) dapat memberikan kaedah yang cepat dan berkesan untuk membantu guru mengenal pasti kesalahan dalam penulisan pelajar serta merancang kesesuaian silibus bagi membantu meningkatkan kemahiran berbahasa dan pencapaian pelajar L2 dalam penulisan akademik mereka.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BNC	–	British National Corpus
CA	–	Contrastive Analysis
CAH	–	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
CALL	–	Computer Aided Language Learning
CLAWS	–	Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System
CPD	–	Continuous Professionalism Development
DDL	–	Data-Driven Learning
EA	–	Error Analysis
EFL	–	English Foreign Language
ESP	–	English for Specific Purposes
FE	–	Final Examination
FR	–	Final Report
GE	–	General English
GPA	–	Grade Point Average
ICLE	–	International Corpus of Learner English
ICT	–	Information Communication Technology
IL	–	Interlanguage
L1	–	First Language
L2	–	Second Language
LCUTHM	–	Learner Corpus Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
LSP	–	Language for Specific Purposes
MUET	–	Malaysia University English Test
MBMMBI	–	Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris
MT	–	Mother Tongue
NLP	–	Natural Language Processing
POS	–	Part of Speech
PR	–	Progress Report



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SLA	–	Second Language Acquisition
SPM	–	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
SPSS	–	Statistical Package for the Social Science
STPM	–	Sijil Tinggi Peperiksaan Malaysia
TESL	–	Teaching English as a Second Language
TL	–	Target Language
TLSP	–	Teaching Language for Specific Purposes
UTHM	–	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

English is considered as the language of business, administration and education in many parts of the world (Hammond, 2014). In fact, due to its diverse use in people's everyday activities as spoken and written language, English has been chosen as the language preference for employers in seeking their potential employees. More and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language—Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few—in an attempt to facilitate communication and performance across geographically diverse functions and business endeavors (Neeley, 2012).

The situations described above indicate the importance of English today and for those who lack either spoken or written skills in English is expected to have extreme difficulties in finding suitable employment. In Yemen, for example, Al-Muraqab (Nov 12, 2012) said that a command of the English language has turned into a basic requirement for a majority of professional job vacancies available or offered to the qualified graduates. While, Bright (2014) stated that jobs in Australia are increasingly requiring higher levels of skills. The occupational outlook for unskilled or semi-skilled roles is relatively bleak compared to roles requiring certificates, diplomas, trades and degrees. One skill that has never been more important is English language proficiency. If your English skills are poor, you will find it challenging to be shortlisted for roles when applying, and your choices of occupation severely circumscribed. Meanwhile in Malaysia, the poor command of

English among job seekers remains among the top complaints of employers, said recruitment specialists of MyStarJob Network Sdn Bhd head Serm Teck Choon (The Star, 22 May, 2013). Choon further said this is a major problem which is happening to many young Malaysians especially among the fresh graduates.

Certainly, the above situations reveal that poor command of English has direct effect towards unemployment around the globe and Malaysia is one of those countries trying tremendously hard to resolve this problem. It has been estimated that the unemployment rate currently in Malaysia is approximately 400,000 (The Malaysian Insiders, 12 May 2015). In a report by the Department of Statistics Malaysia available in (<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/malaysia/unemployment-rate>) from 1998-2015 stated that the unemployment rate in Malaysia increased to 3.2 percent in July of 2015 from 3.1 percent in the preceding month, slightly above market forecasts. The number of unemployed persons reached 459.9 thousand, up from 449.9 thousand in June. There were 13.77 million people employed in July, down from 13.84 million in June. Labour force participation rate declined by 0.3 percentage points to 67.5 percent in July, as compared to the previous month. Unemployment Rate in Malaysia averaged 3.26 percent from 1998 until 2015, reaching an all time high of 4.50 percent in March of 1999 and a record low of 2.70 percent in August of 2012.

In relation to the situation as stated above, the then Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Abdul Wahid Omar said that graduates, who have completed their studies in six months, are among the current 400,000 unemployed individuals in the country. He further added that according to statistics, 161,000 graduates, aged between 20 and 24 years, had yet to find a job (The Malaysian Insider, 12 May 2015).

This situation indicates that Malaysians graduates are vulnerable to secure a job upon graduation. One major reason is due to their deteriorating command of English. Malaysians, especially those who graduated from local universities either from government or private higher learning institutions, are showing problems or language deficiencies specifically in their writing. Malaysian graduates must realize that "English is a worldwide spoken and written language. Its wider distribution of usage either spoken or written compared to other languages has caused English as an official language in many countries in the world. It is the most useful language to

learn for international travel.” (The Malaysian Times, August 3, 2012). In the similar article, the editor further said that the importance of the internet grows rapidly in all fields of human life, including not only research and education but also marketing and trade as well as entertainment and hobbies. Therefore, these situations that emphasize on the importance of English in our everyday activities have demanded us to give significant importance on our English language proficiency as well as competency. They also imply that it becomes more and more vital for every Malaysian to have the ability to read, speak and write well in English.

Knowing that improving the literacy skill of all Malaysians seems imminent based on several situations as stated above, “the government of Malaysia has begun implementing new curriculum to help boost the English language learning as a means of pushing the younger generation towards being better able to compete with the global community. The government has begun cultivating the interest among the students to learn English language” (The Malaysian Times, August 3, 2012). The readers must be wondering as to why the government of Malaysia is emphasizing the importance of Malaysians to be well verse in English. A simple but very logical answer is that industrialization, the influx and the investments of many international foreign companies have caused “most employers prefer their staff to be able to speak and write in English fluently. These multi-national companies in Malaysia who need Malaysian work force are on the lookout for those who are proficient in English, as they are going to deal on the international level” (The Malaysian Times, August 3, 2012). Therefore, it is obvious that good command of English in speaking and writing is certainly highly demanded for graduates who will be working for multinational organizations because these companies usually are involved in global operation and production as well as competitions. However, limited vocabulary (Normazidah, Koo, & Hazita, 2012) is found as one of the factors which have contributed to the low English language proficiency among the English language learners, which would lead to lexical and grammatical errors in their speech and writing. Thus, realizing the urgency of English proficiency and competency especially in the employment sector, it is high time for Malaysian government to introduce English subject that can cater this requirement or design an English course that can be very useful and applicable in assisting the students to be proficient in their speaking and writing. To assist graduates to excel at their potential working place, the introduction



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of English for Technical Purposes (ETP) at Universiti Tun Hussein, Malaysia (UTHM), which is specifically designed to fulfill these needs and requirements, is the answer to satisfy the language skills asked by the employers. In other words, there is a strong need for specially designed English syllabuses, courses, subjects, and the like, tailor made for the purpose of these students who will be hunting for jobs upon graduation. It is also equally important to consider the implementation and the suitable approaches in the teaching of these specially designed syllabuses, courses or subjects to fulfill the requirements of the learners.

1.2 Academic English

Many students can be very confident in using English in everyday situations because these situations happen informally. However, when students need to describe an object or situation, describe a process or how something works, explain or write about a subject, or even expressing the relationship between ideas, they need to employ the kind of English they need for study. This is where these students must use the type of English known as academic English. This type of English is different from everyday English where it requires students especially in expressing their thoughts and ideas to be as clear, precise and simple as possible. Students must also know that to write in an academic style is something they must learn and develop as part of their university requirement. It is difficult to give overall rules on the way to write for a university course, as academic subjects vary in their vocabulary and expressions. The types of text used for instance essays, reports, research articles or summaries, and how these texts are structured and organized made the acquisition of academic English can be challenging to students.

Therefore, academic English can be described as the necessity for students to acquire in improving their oral, written, auditory, and visual language proficiency required to learn effectively in universities and academic programs. Hence, this subject demands students to be proficient and able to use English to make and communicate meaning verbally and in writing. Such proficiency is vital to ensure students are able to cope and have the very best chance of success in their studies. Academic English also entails students, usually in a higher education setting, to use language appropriately for study (Wikipedia). This type of English is important to

college and university students as it helps the students to become academically proficient in English. Furthermore, this type of English exposes and enhances students ability to the skills of learning such as reading, speaking and listening, while employing evaluating and sharpening their skills of reporting, researching and writing skills for college and university environment.

Thus, Academic English is essential in assisting students in enhancing their writing skills through academic writing. Simultaneously, with the enhancement of their Academic English skills, students marketability in the job market will increase and their possibility of better career advancement can be expected.

1.3 Academic English in UTHM

English for Technical Purposes (ETP) is one of courses offered by many higher learning institutions around the globe. In many parts of the world, this course is offered to assist and improve students language skills in the form of acquiring the skills and knowledge of Technical English to be applied in the technical sectors.

In Malaysia, this course is also offered by many government and private higher learning institutions with similar objective. At Universiti Tun Hussein Onn (UTHM) ETP is one of the academic courses offered under the name of Academic English as mentioned in section 1.2 of this thesis. This course is offered by Centre for Language Studies under the Department of English Language Learning in UTHM. Every first year second semester students is required to take this course for their graduation requirement. The course prepares students with the skills to write reports and express ideas or opinions competently. The course also equip the students with persuasive strategies that can be applied to writing technical reports. Furthermore, the course enables the students to practise the techniques of technical report writing by drafting and collaborating to produce assigned tasks. The students are also expected to orally present their proposals and written reports before an audience or a panel of examiners. This course requires the students to be proficient in their language skills specifically in writing. At the of the course, students are expected to become academically proficient in English and thus, will help them to be successful not only in academics at their learning institution but also will improve their chancesof career advancement in the future.

A very important issue that needs to be highlighted in this thesis before further discussion can be done regarding the teaching and learning of ETP in UTHM can be elaborated is the use of Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction for Malaysians at primary and secondary school levels for most subjects taught except English subject. According to Abdullah et al. (1993), although Bahasa Melayu was implemented as the language for medium of instruction in all national schools and in the government related organizations, there was still some demand for English by both employers and employees in the commercials and educational sectors. Therefore, it is imminent to consider the actual language skills and the role of a specific academic English to cater the needs and requirements of these employers and employees in terms of English for technical purposes (ETP). It was further stated that the introduction of vocational technical schools and polytechnics in Malaysia in the 1960's and 1970's, helped the growth of ETP. This was skill-oriented English programme which was different from English programmes in the other academically-oriented schools. In fact, the polytechnics had responded to the needs of the commercial sectors by designing ETP-based English language programmes under the labels, 'English for Technical students' and 'English for Commerce students' depending on the type of students taught (Abdullah et al, 1993).

As stated in the ETP syllabus (Appendix A), it has been acknowledged that the teaching and learning of ETP is carried out in such a way that the course aims to prepare students with the skills to write reports and express ideas or opinions competently. Students will be equipped with persuasive strategies that can be applied to writing technical reports. The course will also enable them to practice these techniques by drafting and collaborating to produce assigned tasks. The students are also expected to orally present their proposals and written reports before an audience or a panel of examiners.

Furthermore, this syllabus seem to be emphasizing on the writing skill and the development of the learners individual skills. Therefore, this course is suitable to be chosen as samples for this research because the involvements of learners in as many writing activities in the English courses they are taking can give the researchers a lot of information on learners' writing ability. It is hoped that through learners' written work, the researchers are able to identify learners' problems on lexical and grammatical errors they made in their writing.

Since English is regarded as language of communication and also the language of business by many scholars, it is important for L2 learners to give special attention on the importance of proper lexical usage and grammatical structures in their speaking and writing in acquiring English as their second language. Similarly it is equally important for the teachers to think of approaches in making the learning of the language enjoyable, comprehensible and meaningful. Stevens (1992:39) said that for throughout the world, regardless of whether the norm is native-speaker or non-native speaker variety, irrespective of whether English is a foreign or second language, two components of English are taught and learned without variation: these are its grammar and its core vocabulary. There may be embellishments in the way of local vocabulary and expressions, and there will certainly be great differences of pronunciation, but the grammar and vocabulary of English are taught and learned virtually without variation around the world. Thus, it is not about the use of language variations in the teaching of English. What can be more worrying is the ability of L2 learners in improving their comprehension in acquiring the basic grammar of English and the proper vocabulary and language structure that the teachers should be emphasizing if the intention is to improve learners' writing ability of English.

Moreover, Nunn (2005) stated that linguistic competence has yet to be adequately addressed in recent considerations of English as International Language (EIL). This means that in our approach of teaching L2 learners as the target language, teachers need to teach the actual grammar and core vocabulary regardless of the increasing diversity in users and uses of English today.

With regard to the learning of English in a specific environment or learning English for technical purposes, especially for a developing country such as Malaysia, it is equally important to note that technological knowledge as well as knowing and mastering the proper vocabulary and language structure of English in their communication is another crucial factor for the country to progress. However, learning English in specific technical environment or English for Technical purposes (ETP) in academic writing is not as easy as it may seem. Many teachers have failed to effectively teach this particular subject especially at the tertiary level because they do not realize the difficulties that these L2 learner are facing. In fact, these L2 learners are not only learning English as a second language, but they are actually Learning ETP as their third language, in which the lack of English language

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