



## COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: THE TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

**Gino G. Sumalinog**

Cebu Normal University

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### Abstract

The teaching of grammar has been a constant struggle for many teachers in the different parts of the world. This is due to its complexity in form and structure. This study investigated the common errors that students encountered as they study English, especially the case of the second language learners. With the use of qualitative research design, specifically conducting interviews and focus group discussion. The study involved fifteen (15) high school teachers who have served for at least ten (10) years. The data were analyzed following the Colaizzi's seven steps method. Findings showed that students have difficulty using prepositions, observing noun-pronoun antecedent, distinguishing English spelling variations, determining the plural and singular forms of foreign nouns, using correct verb tenses, observing the agreement of subject and verbs and writing active and passive sentences. As a result, students' performance has been greatly affected. As conclusion, students have not mastered some of the competencies despite the repetition of these lessons in previous grade and year levels. Recommendations include using strategies that are technology-based and suited to the learners.

**KeyWords:** Teachers' perspectives, grammar ability and English competency.

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### Introduction

#### Rationale of the Study

Learning the complexity of grammar through writing has continuously remained a problem to many students especially the second and foreign users of English. In majority of the countries all over the world, the English variations – British and American are regarded as models, and the choice of usage greatly depended on whether the country was colonized by either the Americans or the British people [1]. In the Philippines, the American English language is used in majority of the disciplines especially in schools. This means that Filipinos, though second language learners only, have learned the basic skills and other conventions of English. However, Filipinos have not fully learned all the competencies. Others did, but are limited only to those taught in school. Even the ones taught are not fully applied in the classroom writing context. Thus, errors in grammar occur. Grammar enables expressions and it aids the person in eloquently expressing thoughts and concepts. Grammar is the life of all the sentence within a paragraph, so correctness in writing leans on grammar. More reasonably, grammar constrains the writers, but it does not stop them from writing. It only sets rules in order for the writers to achieve clarity, coherence, sense and conciseness in meaning. You use grammar every time you write speak and text a simple phrase or even fragment. In general, grammar is the system that creates harmony between the reader and the writer in terms of sense and meaning in the quest for successful expression [2].

However, errors are inevitable in learning to write especially for second and foreign language learners. Many considered it a natural phenomenon as the learner gradually progresses towards developing his or her communicative competence. As students learn, they commit writing errors that speak of their level of competence in the use of English as medium. Commonly, even minor errors in grammar cripple the meaning of the communication being engaged into. When errors persist, misunderstanding comes in, causing delays in comprehension, that further results to failure in the part of the sender as he sends the intended message to the receiver. As a result, the teachers' effectiveness and efficiency are being doubted. Though intelligibility and comprehensibility of what is written are to be primarily observed over grammatically accurate phrases and sentences, the need of mastering the complexity of grammar must be addressed especially that English has been



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globally used in almost all transactions. Consequently, the ability to use English correctly and acceptably has now become an edge over others [3].

From the mentioned reasons above, the need to examine the grammar lapses of the Filipinos, who are learning the grammar of the English language, should be given emphasis. So, this study was conducted to investigate the common grammatical errors that students committed inside the classroom during writing activities in order to address the students' grammatical difficulty.

### **Related of Related Literature and Studies**

The incorrect usage of grammar in writing for second and foreign language learners is caused by their lack of awareness on the rules of English. It was discovered that the students' difficulty was influenced by the way the language was taught. In some cases, the source of the mistakes was the influence of the native tongue of the learners, the many rules and complexity of the language and the students' partial or lack of knowledge. Most of the errors that constrained the learners were their inability to apply the rules in the vast aspects of grammar. Students are still incapacitated in constructing grammatically correct sentences despite the fact that they were taught about it before. They are still confused in letting the verb and the subject agree, deciding which among the prepositions in, on and at should be used and remembering that nouns also have irregular forms. The English learners also have struggle using the right antecedent for some nouns [4].

The students' first language has caused negative transfer in the learning of the second language in these levels, words and sentence. More often than not, students rely on their mother tongue by translating from their mother tongue into English when they write. The errors of the learners fell into these categories: a) letting the subject and the verb agree; b) including fragmented sentences in their writing; c) forming the plural forms of nouns incorrectly; d) identifying the singular forms of the nouns; e) observing correct tenses of verbs; and etc. [5]. Learners have problems in using conjunctions, prepositions, semantics and sentence patterns [6]. On the other hand, the present perfect progressive and present progressive tenses show a high frequency of error [7]. In addition, the frequently committed errors in the part of the students were articles, prepositions, verb tenses and the singular and plural forms of nouns. In contrast, forming the past tense of irregular verbs, forming the possessive forms of nouns and identifying adjectives were the least committed errors [8]. Another grammatical lapses in the writing pieces of students were: form and tenses of the verb, agreement of the subject and the verb, proper usage of prepositions, order of words in the sentences, articles, singular and plural forms of the verb, passive voice construction, double negation and auxiliaries [9].

However, correcting students' errors is as good as giving credit to the positive points that students do in class. This calls for effective strategies from teachers in order to reinforce and address learning difficulty. Teachers may initiate activities using the errors of the students for them to be ready for the next level of difficulty of the lesson [10]. This means, corrective strategies of the teachers should not be threatening in the part of the students. Teachers may use complete sentences when they talk to give the students more exposure of the English language. They may also provide variety assessments such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. For problems on the perfect tenses of verbs, teachers may use exercises that show the difference among past perfect tense, present perfect tense and future perfect tense, since students tend to overgeneralize the usage of these tenses.

To further combat the phenomenon, it was recommended that English language teachers go through a rigid training on the use of varied and advanced teaching methods in class to aid the students in understanding the system of the English language [12]. However, there is also a need for the government to intervene. The state may begin the move of letting the school allocate more time in teaching English. It is also an urgent need to recruit more qualified teachers and it is also important to treat accent as a basic skill to learn, which can be addressed through listening, speaking, writing and reading.

Consequently, teachers, in general, should not only focus on errors solving errors involving linguistic view alone, but also on understanding the different reasons why the errors occur. Teachers need to further investigate the weaknesses of the learners and aid them with the most appropriate interventions.

**Methodology****Research Site and Respondents**

The researcher conducted the study in five public schools in the province of Cebu, Philippines. The involved participants were the fifteen (15) public school teachers who have already served for ten (10) years and still continuing. They were purposively chosen due to their years of experience as English teachers. It was believed that their length of service would be a good basis for their evaluation on the common errors that most Filipino learners of English committed.

**Instrument and Data Gathering Procedure**

The researcher used a semi-structured interview questionnaire and individually interview the respondents. Since these teachers were graduate students of only state university, the researcher had the chance to conduct a focus group discussion. The study used a qualitative research design. The data from the respondents were analyzed using Colaizzi's method.

**Results and Discussions****Profile of the Respondents**

For the purpose of accuracy, the researcher gathered the respondents who fitted to the criteria set from the onset of the study. It was believed that the longer the teachers were exposed to the phenomenon, the richer their knowledge on the errors that most English learners committed became.

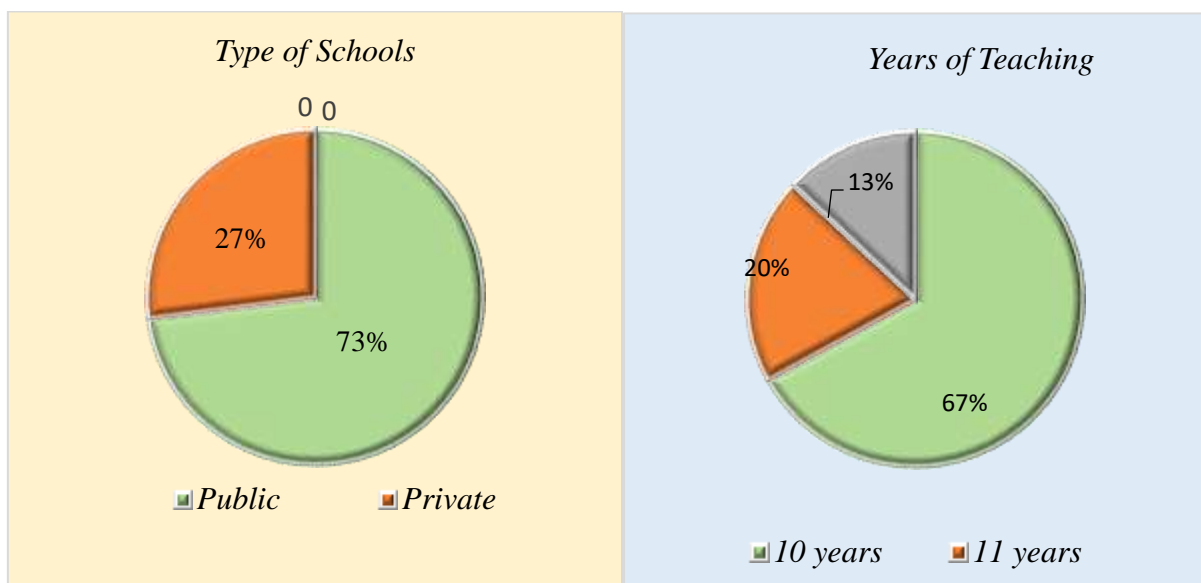


Figure 1. Profile of the Respondents

Based on the table, majority of the teachers have already served for ten (10) years and more. This meant that these English teachers already had enough exposure to the many cases where students failed to observe correct grammar usage. In addition, their conclusion from their entire 10 years could be a valid evidence as to where the students went wrong in their writing, where they mostly have confusions, which part they repeatedly got mistaken, which grammar rules they often had difficulty remembering and which grammar points they failed to apply. The teaching experience that teachers accumulated over time greatly enhanced their capabilities as employees. Focusing at the context of education, the experience of the teacher is one of the factors that promotes effectiveness



## Common Grammatical Errors of the Students

**a. Using the prepositions in, on and at**

Prepositions were almost present in all form of writings, yet they were sometimes hard to observe especially when used. As mentioned by the participants, who were teachers, prepositions could be too tricky for English learners. They attributed the difficulty to the many specifications as to when to use these short words – prepositions. Among the many, they pointed out that the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* were interchangeably used when referring to surface, place or location in a place. Example, students would write, *in my desk* or *at my desk* instead of *on my desk* since the idea referred to a surface.

**b. Observing the correct noun-pronoun antecedent**

In writing, students have problems in using pronoun referents. They shift from one singular pronoun referent to plural pronoun referent even if not necessary. This resulted to disagreement between the pronoun or the pronoun referent and the nouns. Example, “*Everyone has their own right to vote.*” In the sentence, the student wrote *their* instead of *his or her* because of the misconception that everyone was plural.

**c. Determining the singular and plural forms of foreign nouns**

Since some nouns of the English language came from foreign origin, many Filipinos have difficulty observing their singular and plural forms. The worst, they mistakenly paired the nouns with incorrect verb forms. Example, “*This is the criteria for judging.*” In the sentence, students really thought that the word *criteria* was singular, not knowing that *criterion* was its singular form. Other most confusing forms of foreign nouns were these:

<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
bacterium	bacteria
criterion	criteria
datum	data
alumnus	alumni

**d. Spelling of foreign words including spelling variations (English and British)**

Many students who were not aware of the variations between the British and American English spelling sometimes thought that either of the two was wrong. As per the teachers, the respondents, these were the common words:

	<i>American</i>		<i>British</i>
<i>er</i>	Center	<i>re</i>	centre
	theater		theatre
<i>or</i>	Color	<i>our</i>	colour
	labor		labour
<i>m</i>	program	<i>mme</i>	programme
<i>g</i>	catalog	<i>gue</i>	catalogue

**e. Using the perfect tenses of the verbs**

Correct usage of the perfect tenses in writing had been continually causing errors among the students. They had been struggling when to use the future perfect tense, the present perfect tense, and the past perfect tense. Oftentimes, they're confused as to which between the overlapping events, that were present in the sentences written in the perfect tense, should come first. With the present perfect tense, students had difficulty establishing a connection between the past and the present. Their confusions all came from determining the time element of the verb present in the sentence. The same thing happened with the past perfect tense, they could not easily understand that they only simply need to establish a moment in the past and then switch to the past perfect tense to emphasize that something happened before a prior past action happened. In the case of the future perfect tense, students could not grasp the idea of emphasizing an action that will be completed at some definite time in the future. In general, the coming together of the events and actions plus the use of *has/have*, *had* and *will/shall have* gave the students the greatest headache.



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**f. Determining the past tense and the past participle of the verbs**

Verb tenses had been repeatedly taught in the elementary and secondary levels, yet some students still found it hazy to remember. The most repeated mistake when using the past and past participle of the verbs was spelling out irregular verbs with the vowel “a” and “u” interchangeably. In the phrase, “*was sung*”, students oftentimes wrote “*was sang*”. Added to the examples were the following: a) *will be rang* instead of *will be rung*, *was began* instead of *was begun*, *has drank* instead of *has drunk* and etc. The students’ difficulty also included other irregular verbs which were sometimes wrongly spelled when paired with the verb be such as, *has choose* instead of *has chosen*, *was forgot* instead of *was forgotten*, *will be spoke* instead of *will be spoken*, *are gave* instead of *are given* and etc.

**g. Observing the correct subject and verb agreement**

The issue on observing the proper usage of the subject and verb agreement had been occurring over and over every time the students write. The most common mistakes were enumerated. a) The students often have confusion in determining the subject due to the insertion of the intervening words like as well as, together with, along with and with. Example, in the sentence, “*The bag as well as the other school supplies was given to Joan.*” students might answer were due to the presence of the nouns that come after the intervening words. b) Another was the difficulty in using the right verb because of the insertion of the *of phrase* in the sentence. Example, in the sentence “*One of the students were found asleep inside the classroom.*”, students mistakenly answered *were* due to the noun that comes with the *of phrase*. c) The learners also had confusion in using the right verb for indefinite pronouns since these pronouns are often regarded as plural despite their singular meaning. Example, in the sentence “*Everyone were invited*”, students incorrectly answered *were* because everyone may mean all. d) The students also found using the right verb for collective pronouns challenging because they can be singular or plural. Example, in the sentence, “*the team agrees to the proposition.*”, we regard the team as a group, so the statement should take a singular verb. As with the sentence, “*The jury disagree on the result of the pageant*”, we take the word jury into individual person in the group, so we used the plural verb.

**h. Forming sentences in the active and passive voice**

As second language learners, Filipinos, have already encountered active and passive voice lessons repeatedly since elementary. They fully understood the function of the subject. The problem was on the construction of the sentences especially with the insertion of being + the past participle verb form for present and past continuous tenses and been + the past participle form of the verb for present and past perfect tenses. These are all difficult to observe especially for ESL learners. These were the examples:

<i>Active</i>	<i>Passive</i>
John <i>is cleaning</i> my house.	My house <i>is being cleaned</i> by John.
She <i>has kept</i> the letter.	The letter <i>has been kept</i> by her.

**Conclusion**

The study, in condensed language, concluded that students struggle in remembering and applying grammar rules and patterns. Some of their mistakes were those that had been repeatedly taught to them in their previous grade levels. However, this could not fully discredit the ability of the students in adhering to the conventions since English in the Philippine was only a second language. It can also be concluded that the teachers eventually had a clear idea as regards the type of errors that students often committed with the help of their years of experience in teaching.

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