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# Grammatical Errors Made By Grade 10 Learners When Writing English Descriptive Essays

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | The aim of the study was to investigate grammatical errors made by learners when writing descriptive essays. 57 Grade 10 learners were purposively sampled to participate in the study. A preliminary assessment was conducted to inform the researchers' selection criteria, and to ensure the selection of an information-rich learner sample that possessed participant qualities methodologically sought after by the researchers. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to allow the researchers to investigate the learners' grammatical errors through a strategic administering of a descriptive essay writing task to elicit qualitative data from the sampled study participants. The sampled high school served as the case study site where an in-depth investigation of the grammatical errors made by Grade 10 learners when writing descriptive essays was carried out. To collect data from the 57 sampled learners, a descriptive essay writing task was administered, whereby learners were required to write an essay of 500 words under invigilated classroom conditions. Corder's Error Analysis model and Ellis's Procedural Analysis were jointly applied to analyse the collected data. Results of the study revealed that the participants committed grammatical errors that were categorised as sentence fragments, verb tense errors, concord errors, the use of contractions, sentence-initial conjunction, and inappropriate use of personal pronouns. These errors were mainly attributed to the influence of both the learners' Sepedi home language and their activity on social media platforms.<br><br>**Keywords**: Descriptive essays; grammatical errors; English First Additional Language; Sepedi home language; Social media. |

## 1. Introduction

Adherence to rules of grammar has always been problematic to school learners all over the world (Sumalinong, 2018), more so in a South African context where majority of learners speak or study English as a second or even third language. As part of their language learning experience, learners commit language errors when using English for academic purposes. As Demir and Erdogan (2018) emphasise, the errors that learners make when they learn a language are very common, and they form a vital part of their language learning process. However, as the learners flout basic grammatical structures in the interim, their demonstrated competence in producing grammatically sound and coherent sentences when producing English texts is negatively affected. Their ability to generate and organise ideas is also compromised by these grammatical inadequacies, as they have trouble in transforming conceptualised information into written ideas. Since English is used as a vital means to gain knowledge through reading, these errors have a bearing on the learners' language literacy as oral and written English language users. Due to their inadequately developed language monitoring and error detection system, learners are not consciously sensitive to and aware of the errors they commit, hence, they fail to recognise and self-correct their committed grammatical errors. To shed some informed light on the learners' errors, the study at hand sought to generate new insights into the matter under investigation by studying the patterns of the grammatical errors they commit and logically elaborate on possible sources of origin.

According to Miko (2018), errors are part of students' interlanguage, which is the version of the language which a learner has at any stage of development, and which is continually reshaped as he or she aims towards full mastery (Emvula, 2020). Similarly, Nazalia (2018) asserts that making errors is an integral part of the language learning process, and an error takes form in a manner that its maker deviates from standard rules and norms for oral and written forms of a language. Moreover, Ruminar (2018) believes that interlingual competence of a speaker advances more if some grammatical errors are committed and corrected. As such, the mastery of grammar is a crucial skill that can help students thrive competently in academic circles where their success depends heavily on how well they can express themselves in writing. According to Khairunisa, Nadrun and Rachmania (2018), grammar rules stipulate how words are changed to effect different meanings, and how they combine into sentences. In a classroom context, learners can swiftly develop writing skills if they are conscious of their own language errors and are encouraged to work on them for improvement. It, therefore, becomes crucial for teachers to understand the nature of the errors made by their learners to devise appropriate intervention strategies to address the problem. As Haryudin and Argawati (2018) correctly state, people who study and eventually understand grammar often speak and write more effectively and vividly than those who do not or have less knowledge about grammar.

## 2. Literature review

Error analysis has been a prominent area of interest amongst researchers. The baseline for most of research initiatives were based on Ho's (2005) taxonomy of errors, according to which errors that learners make can be classified into nouns, noun groups, verbs, verb groups, prepositions, and errors regarding sentence structures. In addition, Dean (2020) identifies further categories of grammatical errors that are common amongst English learners. These include the incorrect use of articles when formulating sentences, incorrect use of prepositions, using incorrect word order when asking questions, and the '-ing' and '-ed' suffix confusion. This list does not deviate much from what Azlan, Shaharuddin, Berhanuddin & Berhanuddin (2015) identify as the five common grammatical errors learners make, namely, misusing prepositions, errors when using pronouns, spelling errors, confused word order and errors when using adjectives. As Sumalinog (2018) postulates, making grammatical errors is inevitable for learners that are in the process of learning English, especially those who do not speak English as a home language.

In a pertinent study, Putri and Dewanti (2014) investigated grammatical errors made by students when they write narrative texts for English Diploma Program. The study found that the most common errors learners make involve omission of suffixes such as '-s', '-es', '-ed' and '-ing'. Furthermore, errors involving the use of verbs and verb groups were found to be the most repeated errors (39.07 %). These were followed by the miscellaneous errors involving nouns and noun groups, preposition and sentence structure errors. Similar discoveries were made in a study by Victoria (2009) which revealed that the most common grammatical errors that learners make when writing relate to nouns, verbs, sentence structure and prepositions, in the descending order of frequency. In addition, Alnefaie's (2023) study on grammatical errors involving fifth-year students at Santa Theresia II revealed that most students had challenges regarding the correct use of auxiliaries. In a similar study, Kirkgoz (2010) evoked the theory of taxonomy of errors originally espoused by Brown (1980) in analysing errors made by Turkish adult English students when writing English texts. The study revealed that there were 220 grammatical mistakes made by the study participants, with the use of article error as the most frequent grammatical error detected. Similarly, Sa'diyah (2010) sought to research about grammatical errors by engaging research respondents in a competition to review a bilingual magazine. When conducting the research, Sa'diyah (2010) adopted Burt and Kiparsky's (1974) theory of error analysis according to which four categories of grammatical errors exist, namely morphological errors, syntactic, lexical errors and semantic errors. Among the four types of grammatical errors identified, the study found faulty construction of English clauses to be the most prevalent error.

The current study was underpinned by the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Error Analysis (EA) espoused by Robert Lado in 1957 (Al-Sobhi, 2019). The CAH is the comparison of the linguistic system of two or more languages, and it is based on the main difficulties in learning a new language that are caused by interference from the first language (Ara, 2021). The relevance of CAH in language learning is that very often the first language system is likely to be dominant during the process of learning a second language by a learner who has already been exposed to a home language (Dost and Bohloulzadeh, 2017). According to Emvula (2020), the CAH theory is significant for language error analysis but is not sufficient to be applied alone as it needs to be supplemented with other theories in language education, such as Error Analysis (EA). The EA theory was invented by Pit Corder in the 1960s and its significance in language learning is that it assists to explain different types of second language learners' errors such as syntax, grammar and phonological errors (Emvula, 2020). In line with the EA theory, errors made by learners should not be considered as negative but rather as beneficial to teachers and learners (Nndwamato, 2017). The significance of language errors was initially highlighted by Corder as a positive step in the language learning process (Chaundary and Moya, 2019). Accordingly, an error is conceptualised as a systematic deviation from which both the teacher and the learner draw significant lessons. Moreover, EA assists educational practitioners understand why learners make certain errors and institute appropriate corrective intervention measures.

## 3. Research Method

The aim of the study was to investigate grammatical errors made by learners in writing descriptive essays. 57 Grade 10 learners were purposively sampled to participate in the study. Purposive sampling is described by Berndt (2020) as a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. This includes identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Thottoli, Thomas, and Ahmed, 2019). Accordingly, the 57 Grade 10 learners were selected because of their proneness to commit grammatical errors when writing English grammatical essay. To this effect, a preliminary assessment was conducted to inform the researchers' selection criteria, and to ensure the selection of an information-rich learner sample that possesses the qualities methodologically sought after by the researchers.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process to understand a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of participants, and conducted in a natural setting. A qualitative approach explains and interprets the comprehension underlying the reasons, sentiments, and motivations of the collected data. The adopted research design allowed the researchers to investigate grammatical errors made by learners in writing descriptive essays through a strategic administering of a descriptive essay writing task to elicit qualitative data from the study participant. Furthermore, the investigation took the form of a case study defined by Sileyew (2019) as a method that the researcher uses to explore in depth a programme, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals. For the study, the sampled high school served as the case study site where an in-depth investigation of the grammatical errors made by Grade 10 learners' when writing descriptive essays was carried out.

To collect data from the 57 sampled learners, a descriptive essay writing task was administered, whereby learners were required to write an essay of 500 words under invigilated classroom conditions. After the one hour allocated for completion of the writing task elapsed, the essay scripts were collected as generated secondary documents for analysis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define data analysis as the categorising and summarising of data to obtain answers to the research questions. It involves breaking up of information into understandable links and themes (Kent, 2020). This involves a process whereby researchers read and interpret raw textual data to develop concepts and themes to enable interpreting of the data (Bergin, 2018; Ravindran, 2019). The data generated through the essay writing task were analysed and vigorously interpreted by the researchers to hand out a voice and meaningful views around a researched topic (Frey, 2018). Corder's Error Analysis model and Ellis's procedural analysis were applied in fusion to explore the evidence of errors made by the learners when completing the descriptive writing task. As per Ellis' (1994) model, this analytic procedure was carried out in four stages, namely, collection of samples of learners' language, identification of errors, description of errors, and evaluation of the identified errors.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The 57 descriptive essays written by Grade 10 learners were analysed and the following categories of errors were identified:

### 4.1.1. Sentence fragments
According to Mailula (2021), sentence fragments occur when students write sentences that are incomplete and lack necessary linguistic features. Conventionally, a sentence should be well punctuated, be meaningful and adhere to basic grammatical rules applicable to a particular language. When analysing the sampled descriptive essays, it was found that all the 57 contained sentence fragments of some sort. These included grammatically incomplete sentences or ideas and absence of punctuation. There were instances where learners did not punctuate their content, and this made their sentences to be incomplete. For example, they would write the prepositional phrase *'on my way home'* and noun phrase *'the events of Teddy Mson's A Mercy in the 90s'* as stand-alone sentences. These constitute fragmented 'sentences' since they do not contain finite verbs, making them incomplete sentences. As Emvula (2020) remarks, the kind of fragments that learners write in their essays is a true reflection of what they understand about syntax. Therefore, the presence of sentence fragments in the learners' essays hints at their inadequate knowledge of sentence construction rules and possible word combinations applicable in the English language.

Furthermore, Mailula's (2021) study found that misuse of prepositions and typographical errors were among the dominant grammatical errors made by learners when they wrote English descriptive essays, resulting in an array of fragmented sentences. This finding negatively impacted the learners' ability to present well-narrated stories and produce coherent creative writing pieces. This is because sentence fragments usually interfere with the reader's ability to understand a written text and also cloud the writer's sense of self-expression. In a related study, Mao and Yeukai (2021) conducted error analysis involving Zimbabwean learners and found that almost 90 percent of learners did not know what a sentence fragment was, while 100 percent of the learners committed sentence-fragment errors. Similarly, a study conducted in China by Songsukrujiroad, Xin and Kaewyod (2018) revealed that most learners did not know the meaning of a sentence fragment and how to avoid it. Thus, the

study found that learners always constructed fragmented sentences when they wrote because they were not aware that sentence fragments are grammatical errors. A similar frequency of sentence-fragment errors was reported by Sasi and Lai (2021), revealing that learners could not even understand why sentence fragments were considered grammatical errors, and therefore, maximising their chances of committing sentence-fragment errors when writing academic essays.

### 4.1.2. Verb tense errors

Based on the analysis of the 57 essay manuscripts, only 19 scripts (33%) contained verb and tense errors. For example, the participants used inconsistent verb tense representations as in '*I will eat chicken for lunch and drank water*', where the future tense and past verb tenses were inappropriately co-used. Participants also used incorrect verb forms to express verb tenses, for example, they wrote 'I eated my food and drinked juice during the break', instead of 'I ate my food and drank juice during break'. However, on aggregate, most learners (67%) were able to handle the use of verb tenses quite competently. This in alignment with findings by Mailula (2021) which confirmed that learners made grammatical mistakes than grammatical errors regarding the use of verb tenses, and that they were able to correct incorrect verb tenses if they proofread their essays. Moreover, Xie (2019) found that learners only struggled to use irregular verb forms which do not take the -ed ending when written in past form, such 'read', 'fight' and 'write'. Similarly, Amiri and Puteh (2017) found that learners did not use the correct verb tenses when required to write sentences with complex structures. This partly explains why learners commit fewer tense errors when writing open-ended essays since they have the latitude to avoid using complex sentence structures.

### 4.1.3. Concord errors

Findings of the study at hand revealed that 74% of the participants struggled to adhere to the English subject-verb agreement rule when constructing sentences. Only a small minority of learners (26%) demonstrated relative competence in this regard. The participants' poor mastery of concord was discernible from the following cited examples: 'Johannes like going out'; 'She state that they come to school everyday'; 'The child attend school with us'. As revealed in the examples, the participants committed concord errors when using singular subjects, such as 'Johannes', 'She' and 'The child'. This error could be traced back to the learners' Sepedi home language where the singular-plural distinction is not explicitly inflected through variation of the verb formation. For example, the sentences 'The child likes coffee' and 'Children like coffee' would directly translate into 'Ngwana o rata kofi' and 'Bana ba rata kofi' respectively. The verbs 'likes' and 'like' translate into the undifferentiated verb 'rata' which is paired with both singular and plural subjects in the sentences. As such, Sepedi-speaking learners tend to carry over this home language structure when formulating English sentences, resulting in non-differentiated verb formations to reflect concord. This finding is in line with results of Kim's (2018) study where it was found that the study participants did not correctly apply concord rules to ensure agreement between the verb and the subject in sentences. The respondents based their communicated meaning more on contextual clues than concord markers. In addition, Nndwamato (2017) also discovered that subject-verb agreement was a challenge to the majority of the studied participants. All learners in the cited study committed concord errors of varying degrees.

### 4.1.4. The use of contractions

Findings of this study revealed an overwhelming use of contractions by participants. According to Mailula (2021), contractions refer to a shortened version of a written or spoken word by leaving out other letters or speech sounds. Based on the results of the current study, the use of contractions was identified from 38 of the 57 scripts sampled for analysis. The findings revealed that majority of learners (67%) used contractions when writing descriptive academic essays. These included contractions such as 'wouldn't', 'couldn't', 'isn't', 'shouldn't', 'don't', 'wasn't', 'didn't', 'wanna', 'gonna' and 'they'd', as exemplified in the following sentences: 'I didn't like talking to him'; 'I wanna go home'; 'I wouldn't like to go home'. This finding is consistent with results of the study conducted by Mailula (2021) which also found a predominant use of contractions in the participants' academic writing, which could be attributed to social media influence the learners are perpetually exposed to. The participants were reported to use contracted informal forms of spoken language when producing formal written academic texts, such as 'they'll', 'don't' and 'didn't', which indicated that most of them experienced a challenge differentiating between formal and informal language structures. Moreover, the finding offers credence to Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory according to which language acquisition is largely influenced by environmental factors (Kim, 2018). The main source of environmental influence, in this regard, was the learners' exposure to social media. As Nndwamato and Lambani (2018) insinuate, sometimes learners reach a stage where their everyday language interferes with learning a second language.

### 4.1.5. Sentence-initial conjunction

According to Kuya (2020), sentence-initial conjunction refers to using a stylistic choice of conjunction to start a sentence that can be used to add emphasis, create a more conversational tone, or connect the new sentence to the previous one. In simple terms, sentence-initial conjunction is when a person starts a sentence with a coordinating conjunction. Examples of sentence-initial conjunction are: 'And they lived happily thereafter' and 'But I couldn't stop thinking about it'. The respective use of the coordinating conjunctions 'And and 'But' at

the beginning of the cited sentences creates a sense of continuation and subsequence. The use of this category of conjunctions to introduce a sentence is mostly regarded as inappropriate in academic writing. As Bell (2007) correctly states, conjunctive adverbs, such as, 'moreover', 'furthermore' and 'however' are more appropriate to use when initiating a sentence. Results of the current study showed that 24 participants (42%) used coordinating conjunctions to start sentences. Such instances include sentence examples such as: 'However, feeding schemes in public schools would help poor children'; 'Furthermore, it would even help poor parents to save money to help their children to buy study guides for school'. However, it was notable that most of the respondents (58%) did not use coordinating conjunctions to initiate sentences. They demonstrated a clear concept and knowledge of syntax and the associated use of conjunctions. This finding is consistent with results of studies by Saha (2018) and Deviyana (2018) which also found that participants did not use coordinating conjunctions even when it was appropriate and necessary to do so to establish coherence between sentences and ideas.

### 4.1.6. Inappropriate use of personal pronouns

According to Kaufman and Straus (2021), personal pronouns are pronouns that allude to the speaker or author or to a gathering that incorporates the speaker or essayist. The study revealed that 22 learners (39%) committed errors when using personal pronouns, as in the following example: '*I hate it when a customer doesn't know what they want*'. In this cited example, the plural noun 'they' is incorrectly used to refer to a singular noun (customer). However, majority of participants (61%) were able to use pronouns correctly in their essay writing. Studies by Saneka and De Witt (2019) and Emvula (2020) support the findings of this study as they also found that most learners did not tend to use personal pronouns incorrectly This implies that most learners do not have notable challenges with regard to using personal pronouns.

However, there was a notable number of cases (54%) where the participants used pronouns inappropriately to construct double-subject references. According to Farman (2019), double-subject reference occurs when a pronoun is inserted directly after the subject it refers to in a sentence. Examples of such sentences are: 'My teacher he speaks very fast'; 'People they like to fight'. The pronouns 'he' and 'they' appear in the proximity of the nouns they represent, which are 'teacher' and 'people' respectively. This is a structural feature characteristic of how sentences are constructed in the learners' Sepedi home language. For example, a directly translated version of the sentence 'Bana ke dimpho go txwa go Modimo' would be 'Children they are gifts from God'. As such, the learners' use of double-subject references when constructing English sentences reflects their inability to recognise structural discrepancies and incongruities between Sepedi and English syntax conventions.

## 4.2. Discussion

Considering the nature of language errors committed by the study participants when writing English descriptive essays, it can be deduced that the errors are attributable to two possible factors, namely, the learners' home language influence and the impact of social media. According to Mahan (2018), home language influence involves using home language patterns and structures when producing texts in the target language. This includes transferring grammatical rules and language structures from the home language into the target language (English). In this study, it was found that the participants outsourced language patterns and structures from their home language to express themselves in the English language. This finding is in collocation with results of Emvula's (2020) study, which affirmed the participants' overreliance on their home language when constructing sentences and conveying ideas in English. In the cited study, the participants' use of verbs and tenses reflected language patterns that were applicable in their home language, resulting in concord errors and faulty verb tenses. For example, in the participants' Sepedi home language, the sentence 'Mma o ruta bana' directly translates into 'Mother she teach children'. Because of this structural incongruency between the two languages, learners tend to produce English sentences that contain double subject inflections and poorly coordinated subject-verb agreement. This was evident in extracted examples such as: '*people they are happy*'; '*the teacher he is effectively teaching*'; '*Aristotle he state that...*'. Such language errors are due to learners' direct translations and transfer of grammatical structures from their Sepedi home language into English without considering orthographical differences between the two languages. Therefore, Sepedi as the learners' home language also contributed to some grammatical errors they made when writing English academic essays. This provides substance and credibility to Chomsky's UG theory and the EA theory assertions about the influence or interference of mother tongue or home language in learning a second language (Kim, 2018).

Furthermore, the learners' grammatical errors are a subtle showcase of the influence that social media exerts on the learners' linguistic repertoire and tendencies. Popular social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Blogger, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp, and they serve a variety of functions, such as communication, collaboration, education, entertainment, and social networking. Although the learners under study did not exhibit an explicit use of social media influence by using gross social media lingo such as emoticons as documented by Songxaba,and Sincuba (2019), and word shortenings such as 'plz', 'thnx' and 'b4', as observed by Jabeen, Tandon, Azad, Islam, and Pereira (2023), their use of sentence fragments can be interpreted as a social media derivative. When communicating on social media platforms, obsession is mainly with conveying the message in as fewer words as possible without mauling over the grammatical integrity and

compliance of sentences. Moreover, punctuation becomes redundant and obsolete since social media communities are able to decipher meaning from poorly punctuated sentences with relative ease. However, when these writing habits are migrated into formal academic writing, they generate language errors like those encountered in the 57 descriptive essays sampled for this study. This negative impact of social media on academic writing was also confirmed in studies by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) and Chugh and Ruhi (2018), wherein study participants produced academically inferior written texts due to their pervasive use of social media lingo.

## 5. Conclusion

The study sought to investigate grammatical errors made by Grade 10 learners when writing English descriptive essays. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that a range of specific grammatical challenges exist among this group of learners. The prevalence of sentence fragments, verb tense errors, concord errors, the use of contractions, sentence-initial conjunction, and inappropriate use of personal pronouns indicate the need to address these issues within the English First Additional Language (EFAL) curriculum. The identification of sentence fragments as a common error suggests that learners tend to struggle with constructing complete and coherent sentences, potentially impacting the overall clarity and coherence of their written work. Moreover, the presence of verb tense errors and concord errors highlights difficulties in maintaining consistency in verb usage and subject-verb agreement, which are fundamental aspects of grammatical accuracy in English writing. The frequent use of contractions, sentence-initial conjunctions, and inappropriate personal pronouns suggests that learners also struggle with adapting their language use to formal written contexts, indicating a need for explicit instruction on appropriate register and style in academic writing. These findings have important implications for EFAL teaching and learning. It is evident that a targeted focus on sentence structure, verb tense agreement, and register appropriateness is necessary to support learners in developing greater grammatical accuracy and sophistication in their writing. Therefore, by shedding an informed light on specific grammatical challenges faced by EFAL learners in their essay writing, the onus lies with language educators and other relevant practitioners to dedicate time and effort towards improving the learners' writing skills and language proficiency. Further empirical research, in this regard, may be vital in assisting to develop appropriate intervention strategies to ameliorate the problem.

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