





AN ANALYSIS OF COMMON ERRORS IN ESL DESCRIPTIVE WRITING AMONG CHINESE PRIVATE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

 Subadrah
Madhawa Nair^{1*}

 Liang Lok Hui²

¹Lecturer, Faculty of Education and Languages, HELP University, Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: +60164982439

²Master Student, Faculty of Education and Languages, HELP University, Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Tel: +60176302681



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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The first objective of this study is to identify the types of errors made by students in their ESL writing. The second objective is to compare the types of errors (overall, spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, sentence structure and lexical) in descriptive writing, according to gender. The third objective is to explore an ESL teacher's views on how to minimize students' errors in their ESL descriptive writing. This descriptive study has used the QUAN-qual model whereby the quantitative data was collected using a descriptive writing test while the qualitative data was collected through a face-to-face interview with the ESL teacher. The sample of this study comprised 102 senior one students (47 males and 55 females) from a Chinese private school in Kuala Lumpur. The findings from quantitative data revealed that female students made significantly less errors than male students in their overall writing, spelling, grammar, sentence structures and lexical items. However, the difference in errors between male and female students in the area of mechanics and coherence was not significant. The findings of the qualitative data support the quantitative findings which indicate that students made most errors in the areas of grammar and sentence structures. On how to minimize students' errors in writing, the teacher opined that giving more exercises in grammar and sentence construction can enhance students' writing skills. This study therefore has crucial theoretical, pedagogical and practical implications for both ESL students and teachers alike.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated error analysis in ESL descriptive writing among Chinese private school students in Malaysia. The findings suggest that ESL teachers should employ appropriate pedagogy to minimize students' errors in the area of grammar and sentence structures.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is looked upon as a global language because there has never been a language that has been so widely used as English. Many countries have made English their official language. As a result, English is of utmost importance in the field of education, for both educators and students around the world. In fact, English language teaching (ELT) is one of the major growth industries around the world (Reddy, 2013).

According to Yamat *et al.* (2014) lack of English language competency among Malaysian students has always been an obstacle in achieving success at the university and at efforts in securing a job. Naginder (2006) and Jalaludin and Bakar (2008) also stressed that there are many Malaysian students who do not attain reasonable English Language literacy even after learning English in school for 11 years.

Writing is also very important for students. It is one of the language skills that students need to master in both primary and secondary school education. In fact, public examinations in Malaysia such as the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) assess students' English Language writing skills. [Biscontini \(2016\)](#) pointed out that being able to write well is important for students to be successful both in school and in working life. Good writing communicates messages well but bad writing can cause misinterpretations and create bad impressions ([Biscontini, 2016](#)).

In Malaysia, English functions as an official language. It is also a major language of law and a language that has great importance in education, government, business and the media. For students, English is a pre-requisite for entry into universities ([Yamat et al., 2014](#)).

According to [Graham and Perin \(2007\)](#) good writing skills are a necessity for young people. These skills decide whether a person can achieve success in academics and also whether a person is able to participate in civic life and the global economy. [Lim \(2013\)](#) pointed out that the importance of writing is beyond the classroom context as writing is more than merely a section that is tested in a standardized examination. However, according to [Cole and Feng \(2015\)](#) writing is one of the obstacles that ESL learners constantly face. [Nesamalar et al. \(2001\)](#) also stressed that writing is the most difficult skill for many students when acquiring a new language and writing is always the concern of English Language teachers.

Poor writing skills are also a problem faced by ESL learners in Malaysia. A research by [Ghabool and Kashef \(2012\)](#) highlighted the poor writing skills of Malaysian ESL students. Their study showed that students faced difficulties in writing, especially in language use and punctuation. They also concluded that first language interference can be clearly observed in students' writings. [Thulasi et al. \(2015\)](#) showed that Malaysian ESL students have writing skill deficiencies. They also stressed that students' errors in writing have become a concern among both academicians and parents.

A study by [Darus and Subramaniam \(2009\)](#) exhibited the difficulties faced by Malaysian students in writing. They did a study on error analysis in a national school in Semenyih town and 72 Form Four students from three classes were involved in the study. The researchers found that this group of students frequently made errors in singular and plural forms, verb tenses, word choice, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and sentence construction.

There are other studies that have identified frequent errors in Malaysian students' written essays, such as the study by [Manokaran et al. \(2013\)](#) that identified errors in the past tense auxiliary 'be'. Earlier, [Stapa and Izahar \(2010\)](#) identified errors in subject-verb agreement and later [Botley and Dillah \(2016\)](#) identified errors in mechanics and spelling.

According to [Corder \(1967\)](#) errors made by learners can tell the teacher about the learners' progress and what remains to be learnt for the learners. Moreover, errors are also important for the learners as errors can be seen as "a device the learner uses in order to learn". [Dulay et al. \(1982\)](#) also pointed out that learners' errors can indicate to teachers and curriculum developers the part of the target language in which they face the most difficulties. [Christine \(2016\)](#) thinks that error analysis can help enhance teaching and learning of a second language or a foreign language through investigating errors made by learners. Therefore, error analysis might be one of the ways to help improve the target students' English Language proficiency.

Unlike national and international schools, almost all the students in the sixty Chinese private schools in Malaysia are Chinese. Moreover, private schools use a different curriculum from national and international schools. It is a curriculum coordinated by a committee called the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School Working Committee (MICSSWC) ([Mahyuddin et al., 2008](#)). According to the teacher of the target group in this study, English is taught as a second language in their school. There are also periods dedicated to teaching certain subjects such as Science and Mathematics in English, to prepare students for national examinations. We can see that even though English is also taught as a second language in private schools, the population of students and

curriculum are different from international and national schools, which might justify the need to conduct an error analysis in ESL writing in a Chinese private school.

A preliminary study by the researcher (face-to-face interviews with five ESL teachers) in a Chinese private secondary school in Kuala Lumpur showed that a group of 16-year-old students often made a lot of errors in their English essays. This motivated the researchers to investigate the types of errors made by students in the private Chinese high school in their essays. Studies of error analysis in descriptive writing among Chinese private school students in Malaysia are limited. As such, this study investigates the types of errors in writing among Senior One students in the Chinese private school in Kuala Lumpur. Studies on students' errors in writing according to gender are inconclusive. As such, this study also attempts to determine whether male or female students make more errors in descriptive writing. In addition, the current study also explores the views of the ESL teacher on how to minimize students' errors in descriptive writing.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To identify the types of errors made by students in their descriptive writing.
2. To compare the overall number of errors made by male and female students in their descriptive writing
3. To explore teacher's views on the approaches used to help students minimize their writing errors and improve their writing skills.

1.2. Research Questions

Based on the above research objectives, the researchers formulated the following research questions:

1. What are the types of errors made by students in their descriptive writing?
2. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in their overall number of writing errors in descriptive writing?
 - 2a. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of spelling errors?
 - 2b. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of mechanical errors?
 - 2c. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of grammatical errors?
 - 2d. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of coherence errors?
 - 2e. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of structural errors?
 - 2f. Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of lexical errors?
3. What are the teacher's views on the approaches used to help students minimize their writing errors and improve their writing skills?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to [Dulay et al. \(1982\)](#) errors are the parts of conversation and composition that "deviate from some norm of mature language performance". [Corder \(1967\)](#) suggested referring slips of the tongue or pen as mistakes and those that can "reveal learners" underlying knowledge of the language to date as errors. [Moqimipour and Shahrokhi \(2015\)](#) stressed that mistakes and errors are different in error analysis. They quoted [Richards and Schmidt \(2002\)](#) to show that errors are made due to reasons of ignorance, fatigue or lack of attention. They add that mistakes can be corrected by the person without any help. However, errors are also caused by "inadequate mastery of some target language rules".

According to [Darus and Subramaniam \(2009\)](#) errors or mistakes should be expected when learning a language and quoted [Corder \(1967\)](#) to indicate that errors show that learning is taking place. According to [Corder \(1967\)](#) studying errors made by learners not only provides significant insights into how people learn a foreign language, but also provides feedback to the teachers on the effectiveness of their teaching styles.

Furthermore, according to Corder (1967) looking into errors made by learners can serve two purposes, which are diagnostic and prognostic. The former means that error analysis can tell us the progress of the learner in language learning, while the latter means that error analysis can provide the teachers guidance to modify the lessons to meet the learner's problems.

Liu (2015) argued the importance of looking into errors made by learners. One importance mentioned is that it is useful for teachers to know the errors learners make. Another importance is that errors can actually help the learners to learn when they attempt to correct the errors they make. Zafar (2016) pointed out that errors can be minimized only if they are identified. He also stated that categorizing and analyzing the errors can indicate to students and teachers which errors occur more frequently and the reasons why they occur.

Dulay *et al.* (1982) introduced four types of classification of errors. They maintained that errors can be categorized based on linguistic category, surface strategy, comparative analysis and communicative effect.

In this research, linguistic category taxonomy is adapted to categorize the errors identified in the writing of the students. According to Dulay *et al.* (1982) linguistic category taxonomies classify errors "according to either or both the language component or the particular linguistic constituent the error affects".

The reason why this research chose to adapt the linguistic category taxonomy is that this research aims to provide an insight into the parts of the language in which the students might face difficulties. This might help the teacher of the target students or the school to take steps to tackle the problems the students are facing. The other types of categorizations might give a more in-depth explanation as to why the students make errors, such as the surface strategy taxonomy which can tell us the logic behind the errors. However, they don't explain the parts of the language in which the students face problems.

Christine (2016) adapted both Dulay *et al.* (1982) and James (1998) categorization of errors into three levels. First, substance (misspelling & mechanics); second, text (lexical errors & grammar errors) and third, discourse (coherence & pragmatic errors). In this research, errors in substance, text and discourse levels will be identified.

2.1. Studies on Error Analysis

Stapa and Izahar (2010) did an error analysis study that focused on subject-verb agreement. The participants were 20 post-graduate teacher trainees majoring in English Language studies in a college in Malaysia. All of the participants had learned English for at least 16 years and all of them considered English their second language. To aid in the data collection for this research, the teacher trainees had to write one factual essay and one argumentative essay. They were given 40 minutes to write each essay. Interestingly, this research concluded that even at the level of postgraduate studies, ESL learners still faced difficulties in the area of subject-verb agreement.

A research by Manokaran *et al.* (2013) looked into the errors made by Malaysian ESL learners in the use of the past tense auxiliary 'be' in argumentative essays. The data for this research was collected from the Malaysian Corpus of Students' Argumentative Writing (MCSAW) developed by Manokaran *et al.* (2013). The sample of this research was Form 4 and Form 5 students and college students from three states, namely, Selangor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan. The researchers attempted to find out the types and frequency of past tense auxiliary 'be' errors found in argumentative essays written by these students. The researchers concluded that Malaysian ESL learners faced difficulties in using the past tense auxiliary 'be', including students in college.

A study carried out by Dipolog-Ubanan (2016) also investigated error analysis among students. The samples were 30 students from Mainland China whose first language (L1) was Mandarin with English as their second language. The researchers investigated the types of errors made by these ESL students through questionnaires and interviews. The students were also required to write a paragraph of 150 words in English and the researchers analyzed the errors in their writing in the areas of lexis, syntax and grammar. In addition, they also carried out interviews with the students and asked them about the difficulties they faced in writing essays. The findings showed that the most common errors made by the Chinese students in writing were in word choice, word form and

grammar. Most of the Chinese students also thought that grammar was the most difficult aspect to be mastered in learning English.

Musa *et al.* (2012) conducted error analyses and contrastive analyses in their study to investigate the types of writing errors made by 120 students from six rural schools in Pahang, Selangor and Melaka. They claimed that the main problem with Malaysian students' writing was failure to use the correct form of English grammar, which included the use of wrong articles. Students also found difficulties in the usage of the verb to-be and subject-verb agreement. On the other hand Gedion *et al.* (2016) carried out a study to investigate the syntactical errors in descriptive writing among the students in a polytechnic college. The data for this study was collected from the descriptive essays written by the students. Their data analysis revealed that students made most errors in spelling, followed by errors in punctuation, sentence fragments, syntax, preposition, and verbs.

An empirical study of spelling errors was conducted by Botley and Dillah (2016) using a learner corpus called CALES. The corpus consisted of argumentative essays collected from three public universities in Sabah and Sarawak. They found that the students made many errors in mechanics and spelling and suggested that these two areas should be given more emphasis in future curriculum planning. Mohammed (2014) did an error analysis study to investigate the problems faced by Bura English learners. The data was collected through a test, observation and unstructured interviews. The researcher found that Bura learners made errors in three main areas, namely grammar, sentence structures and mechanics.

Additionally, there are also studies which have highlighted gender differences in writing. Reynolds *et al.* (2015) conducted such a study that investigated gender differences in writing. They used a large sample of children and teenagers ranging from 7 to 19 years old. They found that girls outperformed boys on writing tasks.

Similarly, Furtina *et al.* (2016) did a study that compared the grammatical errors made by male and female students. Their sample comprised students from a high school in Banda Aceh. The findings of this study indicated that the total number of errors in female students' writing was less than the errors in male students' writing.

Jones and Myhill (2007) also did a study to investigate gender differences and similarities in relation to language competence in writing. Their sample was teenagers ranging from 13 years to 16 years old. One of the findings in their study was that boys tended to face more difficulties in ensuring coherence in their writing.

The study by Ahmadishokouh and Parviz (2015) focused on the gender differences and lexical errors in the writings of a group of EFL learners. There were 25 male students and 25 female students from two secondary schools in Khorramabad, Iran involved in this study. One of the findings revealed that the female students outperformed their male counterparts in the writing tests.

Muhammad and Subadrah (2017) also did a study to investigate the level of pragmatic competence in the ESL writing skills of a group of Nigerian undergraduate students. They took the approach of looking into the students' errors in mechanics, grammar and sentence structures. They found that female students made more errors in all these three aspects compared with their male counterparts.

Boroomand and Rostami (2013) carried out a study to investigate the relationship between gender and errors in writing. Writing by 100 Iranian advanced EFL learners, including 50 male learners and 50 female learners, were chosen randomly for analysis. They found that male students made fewer errors compared with female students in both processing errors and syntactic errors. Similarly a study by Alhaisoni *et al.* (2015) revealed that female learners made more spelling errors than their male counterparts.

Nosrati and Nafisi (2015) carried out a study to identify the frequent grammatical, coherence and cohesion errors made by the IELTS candidates in speaking and writing. They also compared the performances of male and female candidates in these areas. One of their findings was that female candidates made more errors in coherence and cohesion, but made less errors in grammar than male candidates in writing and spelling.

The study by Tesfaye (2004) aimed to investigate the gender variation in writing. Twenty male and twenty female students were selected and data was collected through writing assignments. The researcher discovered that

male students made more errors than female students in their writing, including errors in punctuation and capitalization. Since findings from the literature is inconclusive on error analysis according to gender current study will also focus on error analysis between the male and the female students.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a descriptive design using the QUAN-qual model (Gay *et al.*, 2006). In this design, quantitative data was first collected, followed by the qualitative data. The quantitative data was derived from students' overall errors in their descriptive essay writing and errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, sentence structures and lexical items. The qualitative data was collected through face-to-face interviews with an ESL teacher on how to minimize students' errors in writing.

3.1. Sampling

The sample of this study is made up of 102 Senior One students (55 female students and 47 male students) studying in a Chinese private school in Kuala Lumpur. The population of Senior One students in that school is 560 students. Students from two average classes were chosen as this study uses purposive sampling. Mandarin is the medium of instruction in the school and English is taught as a second language. The ESL teacher, teaching the students was also the sample in this study.

3.2. Instruments

Two types of instruments were used in this study. The first was the descriptive writing test for students and second was semi-structured interview questions for the ESL teacher. The students were given a descriptive writing test of 350 words to be completed within 90 minutes. The descriptive writing task was distributed to the students and collected by the researchers with the help of their class ESL teacher.

The second research instrument was semi-structured interview questions. This instrument consisted of six semi-structured questions formulated by the researchers to gauge the ESL teacher's views on why students make errors in descriptive writing and how to minimize the errors.

3.3. Reliability, Validity and Pilot Test

In order to obtain the validity of the writing test, the researchers gave the descriptive essay question to a senior ESL teacher who has over ten years of experience in teaching, to verify the essay question. The teacher verified that the question was valid in terms of content validity and language, suitable for the level of Senior One students in the private school.

Prior to the actual study, a pilot test was conducted in a different Chinese private high school in Kuala Lumpur. This private high school had similar characteristics with the school involved in the study, in terms of location (urban), academic achievement and the population of students. The descriptive writing test was given to a group of 40 Senior One students. The findings of the pilot test indicated that the students did not encounter any problems in understanding the question and the time given to complete the test (90 minutes) was sufficient. As such, the findings of the pilot test indicated that the writing test prepared by the researchers were reliable and could be used for the actual study.

In addition, the researchers also piloted the interview questions on an ESL teacher from a different Chinese private school. The findings of the pilot interview indicated that the interview questions were comprehensible and the researchers could obtain sufficient qualitative data to answer research question three (RQ3).

3.4. Research Procedure

A writing test was conducted in School B to collect quantitative data. The essays written by the students in the writing test were collected with the help of the ESL teacher of both classes involved in the study. The essays were marked to identify the number of errors made by the students in their descriptive writing and the errors were categorized accordingly to answer the research questions. The overall number of errors was obtained by adding the errors made by students in spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, sentence structures and lexical items. After collecting the quantitative data, the researchers collected the qualitative data through a face-to-face interview with the ESL teacher. Similarly, the qualitative data was analyzed based on emerging themes to answer the research question 3 (RQ3).

3.5. Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS program for Windows (Version 24). The Independent samples T-test was used to compare the number of errors made by male and female students in descriptive essay writing. The interview was transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. The qualitative data was then triangulated with the quantitative data before writing the research report.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Research Question 1 (RQ 1)

What are the types of errors made by students in their descriptive writing?

Table-4.1. Comparing the types of errors made by male and female students in descriptive essay writing

	Spelling	Mechanics	Grammar	Coherence	Structure	Lexical
Mean	.75	2.17	16.33	.37	3.1	1.86
SD	1.05	2.07	8.38	.78	2.64	2.01

Source: Our data analysis

According to the findings in table 4.1, the students made the highest number of grammatical errors (mean=16.33, SD=8.38) in descriptive essay writing compared with other types of errors. This is followed by structural errors (mean=3.1, SD=2.64), mechanical errors (mean=2.17, SD=2.07), lexical errors (mean=1.86, SD=2.01) and spelling errors (mean=.75, SD=1.05). The students made the least errors in coherence (mean=.37, SD=.78). These findings answer research question 1 (RQ1).

The findings of the current study have revealed that students make errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, structure and lexical items in descriptive essay writing. These types of errors have been identified in ESL essay writing in several studies, such as those by *Gedion et al. (2016)* and *Botley and Dillah (2016)* who identified errors in spelling; *Mohammed (2014)* and *Muhammad and Subadrah (2017)* who identified mechanical errors; *Darus and Subramaniam (2009)*; *Manokaran et al. (2013)* and *Stapa and Izahar (2010)* who identified grammatical errors; *Christine (2016)* and *Ahmadi and Parhizgar (2017)* who identified errors in coherence; *Darus and Subramaniam (2009)*; *Stapa and Izahar (2010)* and *Musa et al. (2012)* who identified errors in sentence structures; *Darus and Subramaniam (2009)* and *Dipolog-Ubanan (2016)* who identified lexical errors. The English teacher interviewed in this study also agreed that her students made these types of errors in their ESL essay writing.

4.2. Research Question 2 (RQ 2)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the overall number of errors in their descriptive essay writing?

Table-4.2. Comparing total number of errors made by male and female students in descriptive essay writing

	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t-value	Df	p value
Male	29.60	12.82	9.29	4.63	2	.00
Female	20.31	7.95				

Level of significance at $p < 0.05$.

The findings in table 4.2 show the overall errors made by students in their descriptive essay writing, according to gender. The male students made more errors (mean= 29.60, SD=12.82) compared with the female students (mean= 20.31, SD=7.95) in their descriptive essay writing. The results of the Independent samples T-test revealed that the female students made less errors compared with their male counterparts ($t=4.63$, $df=2$, mean difference=9.29, $p=.00$) and the difference is significant. Therefore, the findings in table 4.2 answer research question 2 (RQ2).

In terms of overall errors, the current study found that female students made significantly lesser number of errors and performed better than their male counterparts in their descriptive essay writing. The English teacher also agreed that male students tend to make more errors in their writing compared with the female students. These findings support Scheiber *et al.* (2015) findings that females have advantages over males in writing, but contradict Boroomand and Rostami (2013) who found that male students performed significantly better than female students in ESL writing.

4.3. Research Question 2a (RQ 2a)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of spelling errors in their descriptive essay writing?

The findings indicate that male students' made more spelling errors (mean=.98, SD=1.29) compared with the female students (mean=.56,SD=.74) in descriptive essay writing. The results of the Independent samples T-test show that female students performed significantly better in the area of spelling in descriptive essay writing compared with their male counterparts ($t=2.03$, $df=2$, mean difference=.42, $p=.04$). Therefore, the findings in table 4.3 answer research question 2a (RQ2a).These findings support the findings by Reynolds *et al.* (2015) that indicated females outperformed males in spelling, but contradict with findings by Alhaisoni *et al.* (2015) that showed females made more spelling errors than males.

4.4. Research Question 2b (RQ 2b)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of mechanical errors in their descriptive essay writing?

The results reveal that male students (mean=2.51, SD=2.40) made more mechanical errors than the female students (mean=1.87, SD=1.71). However, the independent samples T-test indicates that there is no significant difference in mechanical errors between male and female students ($t=1.56$, $df=2$, mean difference= .64, $p=.12$) in descriptive essay writing. Therefore, these findings answer research question 2b (RQ2b).

The findings of this study also revealed that female students made fewer errors in mechanics than male students but the difference is not significant. The errors made by students in this area include errors in punctuation and capitalization. These findings contradict with the results by Muhammad and Subadrah (2017) that indicated that female students in Nigeria commit more errors in mechanics than their male counterparts, but supports the findings by Tesfaye (2004) that male students made more errors in punctuation and capitalization.

4.5. Research Question 2c (RQ 2c)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of grammatical errors in their descriptive essay writing?

The findings showed that male students made more grammatical errors (mean=19.11, SD=8.74) than female students (mean=13.96, SD=7.34) in their descriptive essay writing. The results of the Independent samples T-test also indicate that the female students performed significantly better than male students in their ESL descriptive writing ($t=3.23$, $df=2$, mean difference=5.15, $p=.002$). Therefore, the findings in table 4.5 answer research question 2c (RQ2c).

The current findings indicated that female students performed significantly better than male students in grammar in their descriptive essay writing. Errors in this area are found in word form, articles, prepositions and conjunctions. These findings conform to the findings by [Furtina et al. \(2016\)](#) that female students made less grammatical errors than male students in writing, but contradict the findings by [Muhammad and Subadrah \(2017\)](#) that female students in Nigeria made more grammatical errors than their male counterparts.

4.6. Research Question 2d (RQ 2d)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of coherence errors in their descriptive essay writing.

In the area of coherence the male students made more errors in the area of coherence (mean=.45,SD=.83) than their female counterparts (mean=.31,SD=.74) in descriptive essay writing. However, the results of the Independent samples T-test show that there is no significant difference between their performance in the area of coherence according to gender ($t=.89$, $df=2$, mean difference=.14, $p=.38$). Hence, the findings in table 4.6 answer research question 2d (RQ2d).

The findings of the current study indicated that male students made more coherence errors in descriptive essay writing than their female counterparts. These findings are similar to that by [Jones and Myhill \(2007\)](#) which also indicated that the males are more likely to suffer “from a lapse in coherence at sentence structure” in their writing, but contradicts [Nosrati and Nafisi \(2015\)](#) findings that female candidates made more coherence errors than male candidates in IELTS writing examinations.

4.7. Research Question 2e (RQ 2e)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of structural errors in their descriptive essay writing?

The results indicated that the male students made more structural errors (mean=4.17, SD=3.14) than the female students (mean=2.18, SD=1.65) in their ESL descriptive writing. The results of Independent samples t-test also revealed that the female students performed significantly better in the area of sentence structures in descriptive essay writing compared with their male counterparts ($t=4.08$, $df=2$, mean difference=1.99, $p=.00$). Therefore, these findings answer research question 2e (RQ2e).

Among the errors made by students in sentence structures are in terms of sentence formation (violation of SVO), incomplete sentences, lack of proper instruction style and failure in the proper utilization of compound and complex sentences. However, the current study contradicts the findings by [Muhammad and Subadrah \(2017\)](#) and [Boroomand and Rostami \(2013\)](#) which indicate that male students made lesser errors in the area of sentence structures compared to their female counterparts.

4.8. Research Question 2f (RQ 2f)

Is there a significant difference between male and female students in the number of lexical errors in their descriptive essay writing?

The findings in table 4.7 depict that the male students made more lexical errors (mean=2.38, SD=2.25) than their female counterparts (mean=1.42, SD=1.67) in their descriptive writing. The results of the Independent samples T-test also exhibit that the female students made significantly less errors in the area of lexical than the male students ($t=2.48$, $df=2$, mean difference=.96, $p=.015$). As such, the findings in table 4.7 answer research question 2f (RQ2f).

The findings support the findings by Ahmadishokouh and Parviz (2015) which also found that female students outperformed male students in the area of lexical items (word choice) in writing. However, the findings contradict the results of Biria *et al.* (2014) study which found male learners outperforming female learners in vocabulary tests.

4.9. Research question 3 (RQ3)

What are the teacher's views on the approaches to help the students minimize writing errors and improve their writing skills?

The researcher managed to do a face-to-face interview with the English teacher of the students involved in this study. Her views were sought on how to help the students minimize errors in writing. In this section, the teacher's responses to the questions are presented.

Following are the findings of the qualitative data based on the five interview questions answered by the teacher:

1. What types of errors do your students make in their descriptive writing?
2. Among the types of errors in writing such as spelling, mechanics, grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary, which is the most frequent error made by students? Can you rank the errors from the most to the least?
3. Why do you think they make these kinds of errors?
4. Between male and female students, who do you think make more errors in descriptive writing? Please explain why?
5. How do you help your students to minimize the errors in descriptive writing?
6. Are the methods you use effective?

1. What types of errors do your students make in their descriptive writing?

Students make a lot of errors in their essays, especially grammatical errors... such as subject-verb agreement, tenses...including past tense and articles...

They do make spelling errors, but they improved after receiving feedback...For mechanical errors, such as punctuation and capitalization, they make fewer errors compared with other types of errors.

They are weak in term of word choice...Sometimes I feel that the words they used are too simple for senior one student. They try to reduce errors by using simple language... They avoid using words that they are not sure...

Due to grammatical errors... their sentence writing is affected. They do have problems with sentence structure...very frequently...

The teacher revealed that the students made a lot of errors in their ESL descriptive essays, especially grammatical errors. The students made spelling errors occasionally, but the number of errors was reduced after they received the teacher's feedback. The teacher also thinks that the students make very few errors in the area of coherence and mechanics. In terms of lexical errors, the teacher opined that the students made fewer errors because they avoided difficult words.

2. Among the different types of errors in writing, such as in spelling, mechanics, grammar, sentence structures, coherence and lexical items, can you rank the errors made by students from the most to the least?

The first one will be grammar... And since their grammar is bad, their sentence structure is affected. So, sentence structure is number two... Vocabulary... then spelling... then mechanical... coherence is the least.

The teacher ranked grammatical errors as the highest number of errors made by students in their descriptive writing, followed by errors in sentence structure, lexical items, spelling and mechanical errors. The teacher ranked the coherence errors as the lowest type of error made by the students in their descriptive writing. These findings are parallel with findings by Mohammed (2014) who did an error analysis study to investigate the problems faced by Bura students which indicated that Bura ESL learners made errors in three main areas, namely grammar, sentence structures and mechanics.

3. Why do you think they make these kinds of errors?

*There are differences between Chinese grammar and English grammar... such as subject-verb agreement, tenses and article are not in their mother tongue. When students are writing, they think in Chinese and write in English... The differences between their first language and English make it difficult for students to learn English grammar...
Students also hate grammar... They feel that grammar rules are difficult to memorize. They find it difficult to understand the exceptions in English grammar... During grammar lessons, students will shut off their minds and stare at me blankly...
For spelling, Chinese language is not an alphabetical language... students tend to spell English words as they sound... such as "diner" for dinner and "eliminat" for eliminate.
For sentence structure, students tend to use Chinese sentence structure while writing English essays...*

According to the teacher, the students are weak in ESL writing because English is totally different from Mandarin which is the medium of instruction in their school. Frequently, the students tend to think in Chinese and write in English. As such, they make a lot of errors in grammar, especially tenses because in Mandarin, there are no tenses. In Mandarin, modifiers are used to indicate time instead. Besides that, the teacher also stressed that grammar rules in English were tough for the students to master because there are a lot of exceptions. The teacher also highlighted that the students face difficulty in mastering sentence structures in English which are not similar to Mandarin. According to the teacher, the students are weak in their English spelling, which also contributes to their poor writing.

4. Between male and female students, who do you think make more errors in descriptive writing? Please explain why?

*I think boys make more errors... I find that girls read more novels and story books... Boys are more towards calculation... When writing, boys don't take it seriously...
Girls also tend to go through the teacher's feedbacks... They show interest in learning... They come personally to see me and ask questions on how they can improve their writing during break... When they are writing a new piece of essay, they will come to ask me if the sentences they wrote are correct...*

The teacher thinks male students tend to make more errors in descriptive essay writing than female students because female students are more interested in learning and read more books than male students. In addition, female students also pay attention to their teacher's feedback and approach the teacher personally to improve their writing skills. In contrast, male students are less interested in writing and they don't make any attempt to improve their writing.

5. How do you help your students to minimize the errors in descriptive writing?

I focused more on grammar...I choose to deal with treatable errors... The errors that students made due to lack of mastery...First, I will teach them the grammar concept...Then... I will give them error identification exercises every week...I will print out several sentences and ask them to correct the sentences. For vocabulary and spelling...I will just point out the errors and correct them for the students...

For sentence structure, I will ask students to write ten sentences every month after finished teaching grammar... Then, I'll correct the sentences in detail...

For mechanical errors, I just ask students to do the punctuation exercise in the workbook and give them feedback at the end of the lesson.

The teacher claimed that she focuses on minimizing the students' grammatical errors in their writing. She first identifies the grammatical errors that reflect the students' lack of mastery in certain grammatical aspects. Then she designs error identification exercises based on the identified grammatical aspects. For weaker students, she tells them to explain their answers to make sure that they really understand the grammatical aspects that are being highlighted in their writing exercises.

She also attempts to minimize students' writing errors in sentence structures by asking students to write ten sentences every month and correcting them in detail. She wants to do this more frequently, but due to time constraint; she can only do this once a week. For the remaining types of errors, such as spelling, mechanical and coherence errors, she just points them out in the essay and corrects them for the students.

6. Do you find the methods you use effective?

I find the method I used to minimize students' grammatical errors is effective, especially for those students who really put in efforts to improve their writing... They make less grammatical errors after these exercises.

The teacher finds that her methods in minimizing students' grammatical errors are effective. She claims that the students make noticeably less grammatical errors after the attempt, especially for those students who are willing to improve themselves.

It can be concluded that the findings of the qualitative data support the findings of the quantitative data. Findings of the quantitative data in table 4.1 indicate that students make most errors in the area of grammar and least errors in the area of coherence. These findings are similar to the qualitative analysis which also indicates that students make most errors in the area of grammar and least errors in the area of coherence.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of the quantitative data of the current study revealed that students made errors in spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, sentence structures and lexical items. The findings also showed that female students made significantly lesser errors than their male counterparts in the overall number of errors as well as in spelling, grammar, sentence structures and lexical items. However, there was no significant difference between the errors made by male and female students in the area of mechanics and coherence in their descriptive writing.

The findings of the qualitative data of the current study are parallel to the findings of the quantitative data that students made most errors in grammar and sentence structures. The face-to-face interview with the ESL teacher revealed that she employed several methods to minimize her students' errors in their ESL descriptive writing. She stressed that error identification exercises are effective in minimizing students' grammatical errors and frequent exercises in writing sentences can minimize students' errors in sentence structures.

In term of theoretical implications the findings indicated that students made most errors in grammar, followed by sentence structure, mechanics, lexical items, spelling and coherence. These findings support the 'Model of Errors' by James (1998) in which he also highlighted the same types of errors (spelling, mechanics, grammar, coherence, sentence structures and lexical items). However, James (1998) categorized the errors into three different

levels, namely substance, text and discourse. The substance level includes spelling and mechanics; text level includes grammar and lexical items while the discourse level includes sentence structures and coherence.

In addition these findings also have strong pedagogical implications for ESL teachers in Chinese private schools. The findings suggest that ESL teachers should employ appropriate pedagogy to minimize students' errors in the area of grammar and sentence structures. Teachers also should utilize effective teaching materials to help the students improve their grammar and sentence structures in ESL descriptive writing (Cruz *et al.*, 2016).

In terms of practical implications, it is hoped that the findings of this study can shed some light on the difficulties faced by Chinese private school students in ESL descriptive writing. As such, teacher training institutes and the Ministry of Education should provide effective training for teacher trainees and in-service training to ESL Chinese private school teachers to improve their content and pedagogical skills in ESL writing. It is hoped that such trainings will help the teachers to improve their students' writing skills.

It is also important to note that there are limitations in the current study. First of all, it is important to note that the sample size of this study only consisted of 47 male students and 55 female students from a Chinese private high school. As such, it is hoped that future studies will use a larger sample from several Chinese private schools in Malaysia, which would be more representative in making generalizations. Moreover, this study only involved Chinese students from a private school. As such, it is hoped that future researchers will involve Malaysian students of different ethnic groups to compare the types of errors made by the students according to ethnic groups in their descriptive writing.

Furthermore, due to time constraint, only one of the genres of writing, which is descriptive writing, is analyzed in this study. It is suggested that future researchers conduct similar studies on other genres of writing, such as narrative writing, argumentative writing and factual writing to get more comprehensive data on students' errors in writing. This study only analyzed the types of errors made by students in their ESL descriptive writing and did not make any intervention to help students to improve their writing skills. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers can conduct quasi-experimental studies on the effectiveness of utilizing the process approach and the product approach to minimize students' errors in writing and enhance their writing skills.

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