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## Error Analysis in Essays Written by Graduating Trainees with Reference to Teacher Training Colleges in Oromia Region: A Mixed Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aimed at investigating the common errors made by graduating trainees in selected colleges of Oromia Regional State. To this end, four teacher training colleges were randomly chosen. The sample group of the study consisted of 200 learners; a background questionnaire and the essays they produced were used for data collection. Besides, the teachers of these chosen colleges were offered questionnaires regarding writing practice and marking essays in the target language. The results indicate that the learners made extensive errors in spelling, word choice, sentence fragment, verb form, capitalization; errors in punctuation/comma splices, word form, and run on sentences were the eight most common faults that the participants committed in their writing. These aspects of writing in English pose the most difficult problems to participants. Hence, this study may shed light on the manner in which students internalize the rules of the target language, which is English. Such an insight into language learning problems is useful to teachers because it provides information on common trouble-spots in language learning which can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials.*

**Key words:** error, error analysis, essays, graduating trainees

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### INTRODUCTION

Whether we are the students, teachers, or business persons, academic writing skills are necessary in today's world. Essays, reports, presentations and research papers are just some examples of documents written in the academic style. Academic writing, when used appropriately, presents a polished and professional image. In this specific chapter, we, in one way or another, are going to present topics related to academic writing skills: background of the study, statement of the problem, objectives, merits and limitations of the study.

#### Background of the Study

Language is a means of communication; it is a system of sounds which is structured and is used to communicate people's feelings, intentions, purpose, etc to the others. It is a special characteristic of human or it can also be regarded as one of human criteria, because only human beings speak a language. Language is an arbitrary sound or sequence of speech sounds used in particular area (Carrol as cited in Ramelan 1992: 10):

*"Language is an arbitrary of speech sounds or sequence of speech sounds which is used in interpersonal communication by an aggregation of human beings, and which rather exhaustively catalogs things, and events in the human environment."*

After knowing the language, in order to be able to communicate, people should master the communicative competence. Johnson & Johnson (1999: 62-68) stated that communicative competence is the knowledge

which enables someone to use a language effectively and their ability to actually use this knowledge for communication. Besides, people also have to know what so called language skills. These skills ease them to communicate. They are the media of communicating. They could be listening, speaking, writing, or reading.

Between the two production skills, writing is the more intriguing one because in spoken conversations, we make sense of the dialogue in a complex back-and-forth process of negotiation of meaning between speakers. In written texts; however, this back-and-forth of negotiation is not possible. Because there is no possibility of negotiating meaning of written documents, the inevitable problems of misunderstandings are exacerbated (Penman, 1998).

Writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) is considered as one of the productive skills that allow learners to discover what they produce or not. In addition, it allows EFL learners to demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency implicitly and explicitly. Speaking more specifically, writing is not only a critical language skill for EFL learners' academic achievement but also a means of developing fluency and accuracy in the areas of other language components like grammar and vocabulary.

In composing a good writing, we should notice some aspects. Grammar is one important aspect that should be mastered in order to make a well structured writing. But, writing in different language is not always as easy as writing in our own language since there are some different rules in the writing systems and these differences sometimes make us to produce errors.

Writing involves more than just producing words and sentences. To be able to produce a piece of writing, we should be able to write a connected series of words and sentences which are grammatically and logically linked, so that the purpose we have in our mind will suit the intended readers. In this way, it is meant that the style of language used in a piece of writing designed for layman and people living in the village, for example should be different from the one designed for educated people such as students, teachers, doctors, professors, etc. Therefore, in presenting a piece of discourse we should consider the correctness of form, the appropriateness of style, and the unity of topic (Harmer, 2001: 2).

As students struggle with what to put down next or how to put it down on paper, they often discover something new to write or a new way of expressing their ideas. They discover a real need to find the right word and the right sentence. Raimes (1983:6, cited in Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008: 20) points out that the close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course. She identified the different components for producing a clear, fluent and effective piece of writing: content, the writer's process, audience, purpose, word choice, organization, mechanics, grammar and syntax.

Shortly, correct language, punctuation, mechanics, and logical content are considered important to communicate in written work ; the close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing a valuable part of any language course.

Learning to write and writing to learn are two of the most important activities for graduate students. Yet, academic writing is far from a natural ability. In fact, as Bartholomae (1985) argues, students writing in the university have to learn "the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing" (p. 134) that defines the discourses of the academic community. While Bartholomae's chapter mainly addresses undergraduate education, his observations seem to hold equally true for graduate students at both master's and doctoral levels. In order to facilitate the socialization process of graduate students, an increasing number of studies have been undertaken on different aspects of students' acquisition of advanced writing (Cheng, 2006; Dysthe, 2002; Ferenze, 2005; Petric, 2007; Riazi, 1997; Yeh, 2007).

The structure differences between student's mother tongue and English could make students make some grammatical errors. Brown (1980), states that an error is a noticeable grammar from the adult grammar of native speaker reflecting the inter-language competence of the learners. These errors occur because of many things. Richards (1974: 124) distinguishes three sources of competence errors:

- (1) Interference errors occur as a result of the use of element from one language while speaking another. An example might be when a German learner of L2 English says, "I go not" because the equivalent sentence in German is "Ich gehe nicht".
- (2) Intralingual errors reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply.
- (3) Developmental errors occur when the learner attempts to build up hypotheses about the target language on the basis of limited experience.

People tend to acquire spoken language easier than the writing language. This is because people first know the spoken before they know the written one, and a human child always speaks a language first before he is accustomed to the writing system of his language.

The explanation above does not imply that writing or written language is less important than the spoken one. The more cultivated and more technologically advanced a man is the more he involved in a written form of a language. It means that writing also plays an important role in a modern society. In other words, writing language is getting more and more essential today, so it should be mastered in order to be literate.

It is argued, however, that students' perspectives offer important insights into how they interpret writing tasks and grapple with the difficulties involved in the writing process. In addition, research into student experiences should enable academic language learning and teaching professionals to better provide more informed and closely targeted support including specialized courses and programs and/or personalized instruction.

As it is known, Ethiopian students learn English as a foreign language. Therefore, English is a new language so that they get some difficulties and they also need much time to learn. But, students commonly have only little enthusiasm for their writing tasks. Every time they have writing tasks, they feel it is difficult to do. But, they should have strong foundation for their writing skill before entering a higher level of education. So, it is crucial for them to master this skill. To this end, error analysis can be helpful for structuring syllabus design and teaching techniques in ways that minimize the occurrence of errors. Having this concept in mind, this study emphasized on evaluating the trainee teachers' errors in essay writing and look at possible sources of such errors.

### **Statement of the Problem**

English occupies the status of a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Ethiopian education system in general terms. And learning English as a Foreign Language is not an easy task. According to Brown (2000), in order to master the English language, learners have to be adequately exposed to all of the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Language teaching and learning in Ethiopia is currently focusing on the teaching and learning of the four language skills. However, the standard of English among Ethiopian students is on the decline despite learning English for several years. The students, for instance, attending colleges and universities, are still weak in English, especially in their writing skills. They still seem to commit errors in all aspects of the language.

A Study on written works of university learners has shown that their writings are full of errors. Demis (2012) in a research carried out among 357 Second Year University students found that most of the students are weak in composing an essay of three paragraphs. He stated that there are several general types of recurrent errors in learners such as word choice errors, wrong use of prepositions and articles, sentence fragments, confusing use of structural verbs, concord and tenses.

According to James (1988), errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent type of errors that are committed by learners. Since grammar is seen only as a means to an end, some learners tend to re-emphasize its importance and in the process, they make many more errors. The learners usually face difficulties in learning the grammatical aspects of the Target Language (TL), such as in subject-verb agreement, the use of preposition, articles and the use of correct tense. Such errors can be seen clearly in the learners' written performance (Nik Safiah 1978). The problems that the students are bound to encounter would be weak vocabulary, inappropriate use of grammar in sentences etc. Thus, regenerating interest in the area of learner errors can be considered a timely move. Teachers who can analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students become more aware of their errors.

The use of Error Analysis and appropriate corrective techniques can aid effective learning and teaching of English. It is understood that learning a FL is a gradual process, during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. Mistakes will not disappear simply because they have been pointed out to the learner, contrary to what some language learners and teachers believe (Ferris, 2002).

In fact, making mistakes is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. As a result, errors must be viewed positively. Teachers have to recognize that "learning ability varies from person to person". In addition, "all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and, even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them" (Bartholomae, 1980: 97).

Therefore, Error Analysis is the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages. By investigating students' written work, it will provide a means to help Ethiopian teachers to recognize the importance of errors as one of the challenging areas in teaching English.

Corder (1967) claims that the information arrived at through error analysis could be useful to textbook writers, teachers and learners. For instance, analysis of grammatical errors offers significant insight into the nature of difficulties in writing faced by foreign/second language learners. According to Selinker (1972: 220), the use of the present instead of the past is the result of a "learning strategy" of simplification, a tendency on the part of the learner to avoid grammatical formatives such as the past tenses forms. Similarly, Wyatt (1973) mentions that 2.5 percent of all errors (106) in tenses related to the use of present simple in a past context or of the past simple in a present context.

Ramelan (1992) says that most of learning problems are caused by different elements found between the two languages (native and target languages). Therefore, the learners will be able to learn the elements of the target language which are similar to those with their own more easily than those which are not found in their native languages.

Moreover, the kinds of texts which are colored by various communicative objectives, arrangement of parts of the text, and certain linguistics features should be noticed by every language learners. It means that the learners can not only create English sentences in isolation, but also arrange them to become texts that are accepted by the native speakers.

Errors, of course, are natural for foreign/second learners of English language. Errors hamper communication, which is the main function of language. There might be a number of reasons that brought about such a lag behind in students' language performance. Sometimes errors committed by foreign/second language learners are due to mother tongue interference. This means, when someone learns a foreign language, he/she often faces interference, where he/ she apply his/her mother tongue or first language structure to structure of the target language, which is different from native language. Another reason for learners' errors is due to, what Richards (1971) mentions: ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, false concepts hypothesized, developmental errors, and over generalization.

Similarly, in composing a good writing, we should notice some aspects. Grammar is one important aspect that should be mastered in order to make a well structured writing. But, writing in different language is not always as easy as writing in our own language since there are some different rules in the writing systems and these differences sometimes make us commit errors. So, it is very necessary to study the errors and, if possible, offer some suggestions for the improvement of the performance of students in English. Therefore, an error produced by the foreign/second language learners has been the central concern of every applied linguist.

As pointed out by Demis (2012), learners commit a number of errors both in their speaking and writing, and they stagger and fail to express themselves accordingly, so that they hardly communicate in English. This scenario shows the level of the use and development of English language which is not as much promising as it should be.

To this effect, error analysis can be helpful for structuring syllabus design and teaching techniques in ways that minimize the occurrence of errors. Moreover, language teachers should demonstrate correct and standard use and structures of both the written and spoken forms of the target language so that their students can easily master the language and use it when needed. But if the language teachers themselves fail to do so, their students will not be able to express themselves using the language. In light of this, this study was intended to analyze trainee teachers' errors in writing essays in English and their writing performance. In particular, this study focused on the identification and analysis of types of errors committed by trainees and possible sources of such errors. Thus, the points addressed in this study are listed as follows.

- (1) What common types of writing error are made by the trainee teachers?
- (2) What are the possible causes or sources of those errors?
- (3) How is the level of writing ability of trainees?
- (4) How trainee teachers perceive the errors they commit?
- (5) What should be done to minimize and/or alleviate such problems?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### What is Error?

Various definitions of errors have been presented by experts. Basically these definitions contain the same meaning while the differences lie only on the ways they formulate them. Two definitions of errors are given here. First, an error is a systematic deviation; when a learner has not learnt something and

consistently gets it wrong (James, 1998: 77, cited in Bahri & Sugeng, 2008: 3). Second, an error is a systematic deviation from the norms of the language being learned (Corder in Gass & Selinker, 2001: 78). Errors in various forms are important sources of information about foreign language acquisition, because they demonstrate conclusively that learners do not simply memorize the target language rules and then reproduce them in their utterances. They indicate that learners construct their own rules on the basis of input data, and that in some instances at least, these rules differ from those of the target language learners (Ellis, 1985: 9).

Firstly, errors can be accepted as a kind of learning activity taking place in the learner. Corder uses the term 'erroneous' to mean those utterances which are either superficially deviant or inappropriate in terms of grammar. He distinguishes between mistakes, lapses, and errors. They correspond to what he calls pre-systematic, post-systematic and systematic errors. Pre-systematic errors are those committed by learners while they are trying to come to grip with a new point. Post-systematic errors occur when learners temporarily forget a point that has been previously understood. Systematic errors are those which occur when learners have formed inaccurate hypotheses about the target language.

Secondly, some problems prevent the proper description as the learners' mind. Corder (1971), states that an objective of the error analysis is to explain errors both linguistically and psychologically in order to help the learners to study. Systematic errors should be looked for, so that the rules can be observed. This is a difficult task because learners may be highly inconsistent in their errors.

Thirdly, explanation is still largely speculative because of a limited knowledge of the psychological and neurological process involved in language learning. The same errors can be looked based on various points of view. For example, a learners native language have only one way of referring to the future time while the target language has three ways of referring to the same. Learners gets problem to arrange the sentence and finally they commit some errors.

Corder (1973) classifies the errors in terms of the difference between the learners' utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way, errors fall into four categories: omission of some required element; addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element; selection of an incorrect element; and disordering of the elements. He includes the linguistics level of the errors under the sub-areas of morphology, syntax, and lexicon.

### **Mistakes vs Errors**

It is vital that a clear distinction between mistakes and errors be presented as this is much concerned with error correction or what to be corrected in language teaching to be specific. Basically, there exist two widespread trends of view related to the differentiation between errors and mistakes. One states that mistakes are a cover term for errors whilst the other claims the opposite. Lee (1990), an advocate of the later perspective, sees "errors" from two different points of view namely psycholinguistics/ or Native speaker speech and Applied linguistics/ or English Language Teaching (ELT). As for the former, the term "errors" refers "more to what is known as a "mistake", or "a slip of the tongue" in spontaneous speech or writing, attributable to the malfunctioning of the brain." (Crystal in Lee 1990:18). With a view of the later, the notion of errors appears to differ remarkably from that in psycholinguistics. In the field of ELT, errors would be characterized by the deviation in the norm of language due to second language learner's competence whereas mistakes bear a more similar meaning to the term "errors" used in psycholinguistics. In the field of ELT, errors would be characterized by the deviation in the norm of language due to second language learner's competence whereas mistakes bear a more similar meaning to the term "errors" used in psycholinguistics.

Edge (1997) presents a contrasting view to Lee's. He does not put it straightforward what a mistake is, yet the concept is gradually built up during his presentation. He considers "mistakes" a broad term involving mistakes of form and mistakes of meaning. The former contains three sub-types which are slips, errors and attempts. In accordance with this taxonomy, Edge (1997: 20) provides simple definitions of each type. "If the teacher thinks that the student can self-correct a mistake, we call that mistake a slip. If a student cannot self-correct a mistake in his or her own English, but the teacher thinks that the class is familiar with the correct form, we shall call that sort of mistake an error. When the teacher knows that the students have not yet learned the language necessary to express what they want to say, we shall call their mistakes attempts."

In general, Edge regards all the deviation that leads to misunderstanding and that contradicts to standard rules of English as "mistakes"; and "error" is a corresponding sub-type of mistakes. By the same token, Rebat (2008:23) demonstrates a clear-cut borderline between errors and mistakes: "mistakes are those parts of conversations and compositions that are deviated from the selected norms of mature language performance". A mistake is produced at either the competence level or at the performance level. Technically, mistakes at competence level are referred as errors and those at performance level are

known as mistakes. To sum up, no matter how varied these schools of thoughts are, they are by nature the same in the sense that a mistake is caused by non-linguistic reasons such as fatigue, lack of attention, carelessness, haste or some other "physical defects" while an error is systematically caused by linguistic reasons. Thus, it is the error that should be the focus of attention in the field of language teaching rather than mistake.

### **Error Analysis**

The field of Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) was established in the 1970s by Corder and colleagues. A widely-available survey can be found in chapter eight of Brown (2000). A key finding of Error Analysis has been that many learner errors were produced by learners misunderstanding the rules of the new language. Error Analysis, as to Corder (1967), is a type of linguistic study that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in Target Language and within that Target Language itself. Corder (1967) presents a completely different point of view. He contended that those errors are "important in and of themselves". In his opinion, systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching.

According to James (1988), errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent type of errors that are committed by learners. Since grammar is seen only as a means to an end, some learners tend to re-emphasize its importance and in the process, they make many more errors. The learners usually face difficulties in learning the grammatical aspects of the Target Language (TL), such as in subject-verb agreement, the use of preposition, articles and the use of correct tense.

Such errors can be seen clearly in the learners' written performance (Nik Safiah 1978). The problems that the students are bound to encounter would be weak vocabulary, inappropriate use of grammar in sentences etc. Thus, rekindling interest in the area of learner errors can be considered a timely move. Teachers who can analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students become more aware of their errors.

The use of Error Analysis (EA) and appropriate corrective techniques can aid effective learning and teaching of English. It is understood that learning a FL is a gradual process, during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. Mistakes will not disappear simply because they have been pointed out to the learner, contrary to what some language learners and teachers believe (Ferris, 2002).

In fact making mistakes is a natural process of learning and must be considered as part of cognition. As a result, errors must be viewed positively.

Teachers have to recognize that learning ability varies from person to person. In addition, "all language learning is based on continual exposure, hypothesizing and, even with the correct hypothesis, testing and reinforcing the ideas behind them" (Bartholomae, 1980: 97). Therefore, Error Analysis is the best tool for describing and explaining errors made by speakers of other languages.

According to Corder (1967), Error Analysis has two objects: one theoretical and another applied. The theoretical object is to understand what and how a learner learns when he studies an L2. The applied object is to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by using the knowledge of his/her dialect for pedagogical purposes. At the same time, the investigation of errors can serve two purposes: diagnostic (to in-point the problem) and prognostic (to make plans to solve a problem). Corder (1967) says that it is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's grasp of a language at any given point during the learning process. It is also prognostic because it can tell the teacher to modify learning materials to meet the learners' problems.

Error Analysis research has limitations of providing only a partial picture of learner language; and having a substantive nature in that it does not take into account avoidance strategy in foreign/second language acquisition, since Error Analysis only investigates what learners do. Learners who avoided the sentence structures which they found difficult due to the differences between their native language and TL may be viewed to have no difficulty. This was pointed out by Brown (1994) and Ellis (1996).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***Population***

The present study focused on graduating trainee teachers studying for a Diploma in English in some selected Teacher Training Colleges in Oromia region. Trainees are usually admitted to colleges through region-wise college entrance parameters which include recruitment of trainees based on the result they obtained in EGSLCE and other relevant criteria. After the recruitment, trainees are given chance to select the department they want to join. For instance, during their three years stay in colleges, those trainees who joined the languages field are expected to take three language courses, namely English, Oromo language, and Amharic. However, a student is expected to focus on one of these languages as a major field

or focus area. Therefore, the participants of this study were third year graduating trainee teachers who were focusing on English language for Diploma in English language. To this end, four Teacher Training Colleges were selected randomly using lottery method, and then after from these colleges, all third year English major graduating trainees were taken purposively from among the third year trainees.

### ***Participants***

A total of 200 graduating trainee teacher and 10 instructors from four different colleges in Oromia regional state were participants in this study. All trainees had their primary and higher education in Oromia region, in which Oromo language is the medium of instruction at elementary level, and as a subject course at secondary level as well. English is taught as an additional subject within the school curriculum at elementary level, but it is the medium of instruction both at secondary and tertiary levels country wide. All of these trainee teacher participants have experienced approximately the same number of 10 years of education through the primary and secondary education system. And almost all of the participants speak Oromo language at home except for few students who speak Amharic and other languages at home. Out of the total of 200 trainees, 190 (101 girls and 89 boys), participated both in writing the essay test and completing the questionnaire, and it was this number of participants which was used in the final analysis in the present study. Specifically, the respondents were from Jimma, Nekemet, Assela and Chiro teacher training colleges.

### ***Research Instruments***

#### ***Essay Writing Test***

The present study focused on identifying and analyzing students' writing errors; therefore, essay writing test was used as a major data gathering instrument which helped the researchers to find answers for the pre identified research questions. Hence, 190 legible and complete essays were collected, coded and analyzed. The test was administered under controlled examination conditions which helped the researchers to get spontaneous samples of student's written language; samples that reveal their idiosyncratic ways of using English as a foreign language in academic writing context. Not only this but also collecting data in such a way is useful to avoid plagiarism and to maintain the validity of the data to be obtained. Moreover, the reason for choosing this tool is to give chance for students to produce sample essays so that the errors they commit could be identified and their ability of writing can also be measured. Trainee graduates and their corresponding English instructors were also respondents for the questionnaire as well. The SPSS was utilized to analyze the errors and the questionnaire.

#### ***Questionnaire***

The other tool used in the study was a questionnaire. It consisted of close-ended and structured items, and it was piloted, revised and validated by research experts before it was administered. This instrument was used as a supportive tool, and it enabled the researchers to get further information about students' attitude toward the writing skills, their motivation and perception, participants' English language background, strategies and approaches they use in learning the writing skill, and also to obtain relevant information on common difficulties they face in writing in English. It also helped the researchers to support and cross check the results gained through essay writing test, and identify possible sources of students writing errors. Accordingly, the data obtained through questionnaire was computed using SPSS 16.0 version, and then it was analyzed quantitatively. Then, the number, percentage, means and standard deviations of the results were displayed using frequency tables.

#### ***Data Collection Procedure***

First, the researchers made clear the objective of the study and obtained confirmation from the college deans to collect data. Then, assisted by two trained data collectors and instructors in the selected colleges, the researchers met participants, and participants were administered a writing test that involved English essay composing on any one of the five topics provided by the researchers. They were required to write an essay of three paragraphs on the topic they have chosen within a period of 150 minutes and a minimum of 300-350 words. The test was a free writing test with alternative topics to choose from. On the other hand, regarding the questionnaire, trainees were asked to fill in the questions immediately after they had taken the writing test and respond to the questionnaire items. Finally, out of 200 essays and questionnaires, 190 legible and complete essays and questionnaires were collected, coded and analyzed.

#### ***Data Analysis Techniques***

The data gained through essay writing was analyzed in two ways, and used for two purposes. First, all of the essays were examined in terms of their syntactic accuracy; sentence structure, morphological, and lexical error. And these were labeled, identified, categorized and explained adapting a five step procedure developed by Corder (1974). Thus, in the first step, the errors were identified and then computed using SPSS. Then statistical description and explanation of the errors were made which would help the researchers to display the types, the number and percentage of errors commonly committed, and to

explain their possible sources as well. In the second phase, ignoring the syntactic errors which were already analyzed in the first phase, the researchers, assisted by two experienced EFL teachers, marked and scored every essay using an adapted rubric developed by Jacobs et.al's (1981) EFL Composition Profile. Using this profile, a score was assigned to content (25points), organization (20points), vocabulary (20 points), language use (25 points), and mechanics (10 points), which resulted in a maximum possible score of 100 for each essay. Then, test results obtained in such a way were used to assign participants into three groups of writing ability: 'high writing ability' (test scores above 70%), 'medium writing ability' (test scores between 40% and 70%), 'low writing ability' (test scores below 40%) groups. This helped the researchers to evaluate trainee teachers' writing ability and suggest possible remedies to tackle the problems observed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### *Results of Trainees' Common Errors in Essay Writing*

Essay writing may seem to be trivial task that doesn't require a lot of expertise and may be performed by anyone who has at least basic understanding of principles along which the English language works. This assumption, however, ends when one encounters an actual necessity of writing an essay – the task turns out to be much more difficult, than it seemed to be. That's why it is a good idea to know what the **common mistakes students make when writing** them are, to try and avoid repeating them. Hence, the following section deals with such problems.

**Table 1: Analysis of Participants' Writing Errors**

Item	Type of Error	No. of Errors	Percentage (%)	Mean	Rank
1	Singular/Plural Form	175	28.0	10.93	13
2	Verb Tense	186	29.7	11.6	12
3	Word Choice	390	62.4	24.3	2
4	Preposition	195	31.2	12.1	10
5	Subject/Verb Agreement	219	35.0	13.6	9
6	Word Order	67	10.7	4.1	15
7	Article	189	30.2	11.8	11
8	Run on sentences	233	37.2	14.5	8
9	Word Form	255	40.8	15.9	7
10	Spelling	440	70.4	27.5	1
11	Verb Form	319	51.0	19.9	4
12	Capitalization	271	43.3	16.9	5
13	Sentence Fragment	327	52.3	20.4	3
14	Misplaced Modifier	105	16.8	6.5	14
15	Redundancy	65	10.4	4.0	16
16	Punctuation/Comma Splice	268	42.8	16.7	6
	<b>Total</b>	3704			

Table 1 shows the analysis of errors based on type of error, number of errors, percentage and mean (rank) values of errors committed by the participants. Taking the mean values of errors, the result show that the eight most common errors that the participants made were in Spelling (440), word choice (390), sentence fragment (327), verb form (319), capitalization (271), errors in punctuation/comma slices (268), word form (255), and run on sentences (233). The next noticeable errors were subject verb agreement errors (219), errors in preposition (195), and article errors (189). The other faults were verb-tense errors (186), singular/plural form errors (175), misplaced modifier, (105), word order (67), and redundancy (65). Based on this data, we can deduce that trainees major sources of errors in writing might be attributed to failure in recognizing how to spell words correctly, lack of linguistics and vocabulary knowledge to choose words carefully, failure to construct complete and meaningful sentences, rule



overgeneralizing and hypothesizing false concepts in verb form usage, mother tongue interference in typography, and inadequate practice in how to punctuate sentences correctly.

**Results of Participants Scores and their Ability in Essay writing**

**Table 2: Summary of Participants' Writing Ability**

Scale	No	%	Writing Ability
≥ 70	13	6.8	High
40-69	58	30.5	Medium
≤ 39	119	62.6	Low

As can be seen, majority of the participants, 119 (62.6%), scored below average revealing that they are low writing ability groups. Others, 58 (30.5%) of them got an average point of 40-69, and assigned to medium writing ability groups whereas the few of the respondents, 13(6.8%), were high writing ability groups scoring 70 and above in essay writing. From this one can conclude that participants writing ability is very low so that they could not express themselves using the target language. Again, this problem is hazardous since these graduating trainees are going to teach English in the near future.

**Results of Background Information of Participants'**

**Table 3: Participants' Educational Level**

Education level	Frequency	Percent
10+3	190	100.0

Table 3 shows that all the participants are at same educational level, i.e. 10+3. This shows that all of them have the same educational level, and they joined teacher training colleges after the completion of their high school education, grade 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Table 4: Age Level of Participants**

	Frequency	Percent
17-20	88	46.3
21-25	97	51.1
>25	5	2.6
Total	190	100.0

As can be seen, 88 (46.3%) of the participants' age is 17-20 years. Others, 97 (51.1%), of the participants' age is in between 21-25 years. On the other hand, very few i.e. 5 (2.6) are above 25 years old. This data depicts that majority of the respondents are in between 21-25 years old.

**Table 5: Participants' Gender**

	Frequency	Percent
Male	89	46.8
Female	101	53.2
Total	190	100.0

As can be seen, 89 (46.8%) of the participants are males whereas many of the participants are females, 101(53.2). Based on this data one can conclude that female students are dominant college students in this particular area of study.

**Table 6: Participants' Mother Tongue**

Mother Tongue	Frequency	Percent
Afan Oromo	183	96.3
Amharic	6	3.2
Other	1	.5
Total	190	100.0

Table 6 illustrates that significantly large number of the respondents L1 is Afan Oromo, whereas a few, i.e. 6 (3.2%) of the respondents' mother tongue is Amharic. On the other hand, the L1of the remaining, very few, 1 (0.5%) of the participants is of other language background. From this it can be deduced that almost all the participants are Oromo language background.

**Table 7: Participants' Age Level when they get introduced to English Language**

Age Level	Frequency	Percent
=8	80	42.1
9-12	86	45.3
13-14	8	4.2
>15	16	8.4
Total	190	100.0

As can be seen, 80 (42.1%) of the participants introduced to English when they were 8 years old. On the other hand, others, 86 (45.3%) of them begun to study English when they were 9-12 years old. Very few of the participants, 8 (4.2%), were introduced to English when they were 13-14 years old. The remaining 16 (8.4%) of them begun to study English when they were above 15 years old. Thus, this data shows that many of the respondents encountered English in their early age. However, as the data obtained through essay writing test reveals that majority of the participants are failed to construct simple but meaningful sentences in English.

**Table 8: Where participants did Learn English?**

	Frequency	Percent
Formal Instruction	178	93.7
Exposure to English	8	4.2
Self-thought	4	2.1
Total	190	100.0

As table 8 shows, many of the respondents, i.e. 179 (93.7%), first introduced to English in a formal instruction at school. Others, 8 (4.2%), did learn English through their exposure to the language. The remaining, 4 (2.1%), of the participants replied that they learned English by themselves. From this one can see that majority of the participants introduced to English in a formal schooling, and therefore they are with same English background. This also implies that lack of exposure to English language may negatively impact learners' English language ability.

### Results of Participants' Grammar Knowledge

**Table 9: Whether Participants have ever learned any English Grammar Rules or Forms (noun, verb, preposition, etc.) in English Classes they have taken before or not?**

	Frequency	Percent
Yes, a lot	105	55.3
Very little	48	25.3
Not sure	16	8.4
Never	21	11.1
Total	190	100.0

Table 9 demonstrates that majority of the participants, 105 (55.3%), replied that they had learned a lot of English grammar rules and forms in English classes they took before. Others, 48 (25.3%) of them responded that they learned very little English grammar rules and forms. On the other hand, others, 16 (8.4%) of the participants showed that they are not sure about the point in discussion. The rest, 21 (11.1%) of them answered that they never learned English grammar rules and forms in English classes they took before. This data shows that majority of the respondents have learned a lot of English grammar rules and forms in English classes they have taken before. Nevertheless, the data obtained through essay writing test revealed that many of the participants missed the very simple rules of English grammar.

**Table 10: Whether or Not an English Teacher Ever Told them that they have Problems with any Grammar Rules**

	Frequency	Percent
Nouns-plural endings	8	4.2
Articles	19	10.0
Verb tenses	78	41.1
Verb forms	24	12.6
Subject-verb agreement	30	15.8
Word choice	9	4.7
Sentence structure	22	11.6
Total	190	100.0

As can be seen, 8 (4.2%) of the participants showed that their teacher told them as they have problems with noun-plural endings. Similarly, 19 (10%) of them replied that they are told as they have problems with articles. Majority of the respondents, 78 (41.1%), replied that their teacher had shown them that they face difficulties with how to use appropriate verb tenses. On the other hand, others, 24 (12.6%), answered that they are told by their teacher that they commit subject-verb agreement errors. Some others, 9 (4.7%) of the participants showed that word choice problem is a challenge for them. Similarly, Sentence structure errors are found to be the other difficulties for the remaining 23 (11.6) of the respondents as they were told by their teacher. Based on this data, one can infer that verb tenses are the most challenging grammar aspect for the learners in this study. These kinds of inadequacies might be bridged by providing learners with compressible grammar inputs focusing on verb tenses.

**Table 11: Participants' Opinion regarding what Problems they have with Using the following English Grammar in their Writing**

	Frequency	Percent
Nouns-plural endings	7	3.7
Articles	24	12.6
Verb tenses	79	41.6
Verb forms	21	11.1
Subject-verb agreement	39	20.5
. Word choice	3	1.6
Sentence structure	17	8.9
Total	190	100.0

Table 11 depicts that noun-plural endings are the major problems for 7 (3.7 %) of the respondents whereas articles are the other problematic areas for some other participants, 24 (12.6%). On the other hand, verb tenses are the most challenging grammatical aspect for the majority of the participants, 79 (41.6%). On the other hand, 39 (20.5%) of the respondents replied that subject verb agreement errors are the second major problematic areas that learners face when writing in English. A few, 3 (1.6%), of them showed that they face word choice problems. Similarly, sentence structure errors are challenging grammatical aspects for the remaining, 17 (8.9%), respondents. Based on this, it can be deduced that verb tense errors are the most challenging grammatical aspect as confirmed by the participants of this study. Therefore, instructing these grammar aspects may improve and aid learners' English language performance.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The result obtained through essay writing reveal that errors in spelling, word choice, sentence fragment, verb form, and capitalization, errors in punctuation/comma slices, word form, and run on sentences were the eight most common errors that the participants committed in their writing. The next noticeable errors were subject verb agreement errors ,errors in preposition, and article errors .The other faults were verb-tense errors, singular/plural form errors, misplaced modifier, word order, and redundancy.

Therefore, we can deduce that trainees major sources of errors in writing might be attributed to failure in recognizing and how to spell words correctly, lack of linguistics and vocabulary knowledge to choose words carefully, failure to construct complete and meaningful sentences because of lack of practice in writing siple sentences, rule generalizing in verb form usage, mother tongue interference in typography, and inadequate practice in how to punctuate sentences correctly.

Majority of the participants introduced to English in a formal schooling, and therefore they are with same English background. However, based on the data obtained through essay writing test, we can conclude that majority of the participants are failed to construct meaningful sentences in English. This also implies that lack of exposure to English language may negatively impact learners' English language writing ability. It can also be concluded that participants writing ability is very low so that they could not express themselves using the target language.

Similarly, the data obtained through essay writing test revealed that many of the participants missed the very simple rules of English grammar; verb tenses are the most challenging grammar aspect for the learners in this study. It is also found that majority of the participants practice writing in English sometimes, they have also a moderate concern for correct sentence patterns of English structures which might in turn affecting their writing proficiency

It is found to be that learners sometimes think the skills they learned at school are inadequate for writing college essays, they also find it difficult to write legibly, and they also get stuck while writing. These

results imply that learners' writing ability is not matured when compared with their educational level and this could be resulted from inadequacy of linguistics input and learners' reluctance to practice and develop their writing skills.

It is also confirmed that during the writing process, trainees sometimes have difficulty remembering what they have just written, and they often change their mind about their essay's organization while still writing it. Hence, it is concluded that participants are not skillful in organizing ideas when writing essays. And the cause of this failure might be attributed to insufficient practice and lack of employing relevant techniques to organize ideas.

It is found that trainee participants also face problems of planning and generating ideas which is a vitally crucial aspect of the writing process. And they are often reluctant to edit and revise their essays and this might greatly affect their achievement and their overall writing skills. They also perceive writing as waste of time and energy which in turn may impact their achievement and writing skill.

On the other hand, based on the data obtained from instructor's responses, it is concluded that instructors give mild concern as for untidy handwriting, for poorly connected paragraphs, and exceeding the suggested word length. Hence, these very crucial aspects of the writing skill are overlooked by the instructors when dealing with learners' essays, and this might also be one of the major causes of students' failure and ineffectiveness in writing.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made.

To start with, learners should take care of their training and education and improve their English in general and the writing skill in particular. In addition to this, learners ought to concentrate on the major failures observed and the errors committed and practice more so as to improve their writing ability.

What is more, students must practice English grammar rules and identify the specific rules of the language and use them in different situations accordingly. Besides, as writers, learners should practice how to plan, generate, organize and put pen to paper relevant ideas. On top of this, instructors should also identify their students' failures so that they could lesson those areas where the chronic loopholes observed. Once again, instructors should pay attention to the specific areas when marking students' essays so that learners writing ability might be improved and progressed. Instructors should also use appropriate teaching writing methods and also let their students approach various writing strategies.

Finally, college curriculum planners should consider their learners' needs and include relevant aspects of English writing when developing teaching materials.

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