

# Analyzing errors in students' paragraphs: The case of first year biology students at Bahir Dar University

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## Abstract

*Writing is a complex, cognitive process that requires recursive procedures of prewriting e.g. brainstorming, outlining, drafting, evaluating and revising. Basic Writing Skills is one of the most difficult, and tough subject even to teach particularly in an EFL context like Ethiopia. More recently, error analysis has become an important field of research. This investigation is an outcome of the researcher's concerns and efforts to identify areas of difficulty in the writing skills among students and to work out remedial procedures to help them overcome their weaknesses in the future. By using quantitative, and qualitative techniques (descriptive in nature), this study aimed at identifying, categorizing, and analysing the major errors in the written paragraphs of 30 Biology department students at Bahir Dar University in 2015/16 academic year. The instrument used for this study was participants' written argumentative paragraphs in English language. All of the errors in these paragraphs were identified and classified into different categories. The frequency of errors was calculated as percentage. The results show that all these students in this study committed twelve common errors. These errors committed were punctuation, spelling, capitalization, missed/wrongly used word, word choice, number, subject-verb agreement, verb-tense, preposition, article, sentence fragment, and word order. But the most common errors committed were punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and missed/wrongly used word respectively (accounting more than 66% of the total errors committed). Finally, based on the findings of this study, a number of recommendations, and implications for future studies, that will help to reduce the students writing problems in the future are given.*

**Keywords:** writing, error, error analysis

## Background of the Study

Nowadays, all aspects of modern life such as government, education, industry, commerce, healthcare, to name just a few, depend not only on oral interaction but also on written communication (West, 1988, as cited in Geremew, 1999). Regarding this, Geremew (1999) points out that one must write in order to meet persistently changing social demands and peruse the personal interests. In a related line of argument, Guth (1989) emphasizes that students are judged mainly by their ability to put ideas down on paper. Thus, students at university level need to write notes, assignments, term papers, reports and different types of essays. To accomplish these writing tasks successfully, they are required to develop their writing skills in the instructional language. Jordan (1997) also supports this view, contending that writing skills are a prerequisite for the completion of academic writing tasks and university study. However, in the researcher's experience, the reality in Ethiopia falls short of these objectives; university students writing performance is not satisfactory.

Error analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. It is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by second/foreign language learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors. Error analysis is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make. It consists of a comparison between the errors made in the target language (TL) and that target language itself, Corder (1974). Corder is considered as the "Father of Error Analysis." It was with his article entitled "The significance of Learner Errors," Corder (1967) that Error Analysis (EA) took a new turn. Error analysis is a branch of applied linguistics that studies and analyzes errors made by second-language learners was established in 1970 by Corder and his colleagues. So, from this we can infer that compared to the second language learners, the issue has become an agenda for foreign language learners recently.

Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that learners use to acquire a language. The investigation of errors can be at the same time diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's state of the language at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell the teachers, and the course organizers to reorient language learning materials based on the learner's current problems.

For learners themselves, errors are 'indispensable,' since making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn. In 2001, Gass and Selinker (as cited Sun, 2010) defined errors as "red flags" that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the second language. An error may vary in magnitude. It can include a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a sentence or even a paragraph. Due to this fact, errors can be viewed as being either global or local (Sun, 2010)). Global errors hinder communication and they affect the structure of the entire sentence such as missing essential parts of the sentence's subject or verb. They prevent the message from being comprehended. On the other hand, local errors do not prevent the message from being understood because there is usually a minor violation of one segment of a sentence that allows the reader or the hearer to guess the intended meaning.

Being good at writing is an important aspect of foreign language learning, and it helps not only to be holistic in a foreign language, but it plays also a very great role to understand the other subjects across different disciplines. That is one of the rationales why Bahir Dar University offers "Basic Writing Skills" as an independent course almost for all departments of the university. Fortunately, the researcher was assigned to teach Biology department students Basic Writing Skills during the second semester of 2013/14 academic year. While he was teaching the course, he found that the majority of the students had difficulties in writing. Some of these difficulties were problems related to grammar and vocabulary at sentence level, and how to organize sentences into a larger unit like the paragraph. Besides these problems, their academic writings lack unity and coherence, and many of the difficulties on their writing looked to have similar in type though it varied in frequency. The perpetuation of these problems almost throughout the semester motivated the researcher, to conduct a research on the topic "Analyzing Errors in Students' Paragraphs: The case of First Year Biology Students at Bahir Dar University"

## Statement of the problem

The last three and four decades have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of error analysis. However, widely conducted research works have consistently shown that students have not attained an adequate understanding of how to reduce errors in writing. Writing in English can be a challenging task especially for students who learn English as a foreign/ second language. Some EFL students' social and cultural background prevents them from writing about subjects they consider taboo, like politics or religion. Students may also experience difficulties with, morphology, vocabulary and syntax that are different in English and their native language (Brown, 2000).

Writing is hard work in one's own language let alone in a second/foreign language. We communicate orally and/or in writing. In spoken conversations with others, we make sense of the dialogue in a complex back-and-forth process of negotiation of meaning between speakers. However, in written texts, this back-and-forth negotiation is not possible; there is only one pass; the sentence is written and it is read. Since there is no possibility of negotiating meaning of written documents, the inevitable problems of misunderstanding will be aggravated.

Xu (2004) states that trained and sophisticated language teachers have undoubtedly applied error analysis to one degree or another for decades since applied error analysis came into being. These groups of teachers have studied their students' recurring errors, classified them into categories, and used them as the basis for preparing lessons and materials designed to remediate such errors.

The study of errors would be significant to teachers, to researchers and to learners as it involves error identification, categorization and analysis. These three interrelated activities help especially the teachers not only in order to understand errors, but also in order to use what is learned from error analysis and apply it to improve language competence. Only if the teacher is aware of them and able to make use of them in the teaching process appropriately that findings of error analysis function as facilitator in language teaching in many ways (Erdogan, 2005).

Lightbown and Spada (2000, 176-192) argue that when errors are persistent, especially when they are shared by almost all students in a class, it is useful for teachers to bring the problem to the students' attention. Corder (1974, 125) notes that Error Analysis (EA) is useful in second language learning

because it reveals the problematic areas to teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers. This also works for foreign language learning too. Errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So, students' errors are valuable feedbacks.

Many instructors (especially, English language instructors) at Bahir Dar University have complained that most students are weak in writing courses, namely in Basic Writing Skills, and Advanced Writing Skills. This problem is invariably reflected in many departments of the university. These problems are observed in students' different continuous activities of other subjects, besides English language courses, which request writing activity such as in examinations and in assignments. This makes evaluating students' assignments, tests, final examinations, lab reports etc. one of the toughest activities. Generally, writing needs hard work in one's own language let alone in a foreign language like the case in Ethiopia. As a result, it is necessary to investigate this problem and find, the remedial procedures that can elevate the students' writing level so that their overall achievement can be improved.

## Objectives of the study

Fluency and correctness of one's language expression can be fully detected in a composition, which represents one's English ability. Generally, the primary objective of this study is to explore the kinds of errors which are made by first year Biology department students' paragraph writing at Bahir Dar University. And specifically, the research is intended to:

1. identify the different errors of the students' written paragraphs,
2. categorize, the different errors of the students' written paragraphs, and
3. analyze the different errors of the students' written paragraphs.

## Research questions

1. What are the most common linguistic errors that students made in their written paragraphs?
2. How frequent do these errors occur in their written paragraphs?

## Significance of the study

This study mainly will provide an insight into the major errors that Biology department students commit when they write. This in turn has different significances from different perspectives. For example, it may help the English language teachers to be aware on the major error areas to be focused during teaching Basic Writing Skills Course. And it has the following major significances.

Error analysis enables teachers to get an overall knowledge about the students' errors, to obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teach or in development of teaching materials, to carry on their studies in accordance with what the learner needs to know and what part of the teaching strategy to change or reconstruct, to devise appropriate materials and effective teaching techniques, and to construct tests suitable for different levels and needs of learners.

Learners' errors can help them identify their linguistic difficulties and needs at a particular stage of language learning so that they can avoid different kinds of errors in writing and they can look for appropriate remedy, which will resolve their problems and allow them to discover the relevant rules for greater improvement.

The errors enable the other language researchers to gain new evidence to understand how language is learned and acquired, what strategies the learners use, and what is the nature of foreign language learning among students on the basis of which they can conduct further research for the formulation and establishment of better theory of foreign language learning.

This investigation may also help to serve as a starting point so as to conduct further investigation in related issues such as to check the presence of these problems across different departments, at different institutions, at different levels of study, etc.

## Scope of the study

The research centers its focus on Bahir Dar University, wherein the researcher teaches Basic Writing Skills, and this study is confined only at identifying, categorizing, and analyzing the errors which are found in the English language paragraphs, written by first year Biology department students of 2013/14 academic year at Bahir Dar University.

## Review of related literature

The analysis of the production of errors shows quite clearly that not all systematic errors produced by the learner can be attributed to the interference from the source language. Such errors provide evidence for a much more complex view of the teaching/learning process, in which the learner is considered as an active participant in the formation of and revision of hypotheses regarding the rules of the target language (Xu, 2004).

### **Error Analysis**

Crystal (1999) as cited in Bain (2006) defines "error analysis" in language teaching and learning, as "a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics." Errors are assumed to reflect in a systematic way the level of competence achieved by a learner; they are contrasted with "mistakes," which are performance limitations that a learner would be able to correct" (p.125).

Okuma 2000, cited in Xu (2004) states, there are three approaches to the analysis of "learners English" namely, contrastive analysis, error analysis, and transfer analysis. But all these approaches differ in focus. For example, contrastive analysis compares the structures of two language systems and predicts errors. Transfer analysis on the other hand, compares "learners English" with L1 and attempts to explain the structure of those errors that can be traced to language transfer. But, Error analysis compares "learners English" with English (L2) itself and judges how learners are "ignorant."

### **Writing difficulties to be consider as an error**

Different scholars have different suggestions concerning the natures of errors. Richards, and Schmidt (2002, 184) define an error as the use of language in a way which a fluent or a native speaker of the language regards as faulty or incomplete learning. An error refers to a systematic error of competence, both covert and overt, that deviates from the norms of the target language. They define covert errors to be grammatically correct but not interpretable within the context of communication, whereas overt errors refer to the obviously ungrammatical utterances. But they are different from mistakes. Richards, and Schmidt (2002, 184) define mistake as an inconsistent deviation, which means sometimes the learner "gets it right" but sometimes "gets it wrong." Brown (2000, 95) states that a mistake is made by a learner when writing or speaking which is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or other aspects of performance.

### **Sources of errors**

In related to the sources of error, there are one main important concept; language transfer. The term "transfer" was first technically defined by behaviorist psychologists as "the automatic, uncontrolled, and subconscious use of the past learned behaviors in the attempt to produce new responses." Positive transfer or facilitation is any facilitating effects on acquisition due to the influence of cross-linguistic similarities. On the contrary, negative transfer or interference is as cross linguistic influences resulting in errors, overproduction, and underproduction (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). Identifying errors and their types are not the only concerns of error analysis research. In general, researchers are interested in investigating the sources of these errors. Regarding sources of error, Corder (1974) classified them in to two types.

### **Interlingual errors**

Interlingual errors can be identified as transfer errors which result from a learner's first language features, for example, grammatical, lexical or pragmatic errors.

### **Intralingual errors**

Intralingual errors on the other hand are overgeneralisations in the target language, resulting from ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete applications of rules, and false concepts hypothesised.

### **Significances of error analysis**

Richards and Schmidt (2002, 184) point out that EA may be carried out in order to:

- Identify strategies which learners use in language learning,

- try to identify the causes of learners' errors,
- Obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials.

### ***Challenges of error analysis***

An error analysis investigation is one of the difficult areas in second language learning research (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, 379). This situation is worst in the context of foreign language. Since the majority of the teachers (researchers) are non-natives, there is a tendency of using "error languages" by themselves. So, the recognition of error depends crucially upon the analyst (teacher). In other words, during error analysis, it can be difficult to decide what an error is and what is not. An error in one situation may not be an error in another. For instance, vocabulary tests are generally geared to a particular set of items. Using another word with the same meaning might result the students mark for ingenuity. Even if errors count in different situations, they may have different weights. For instance, a spelling error would count heavily in a spelling test, and probably little in an extended essay. Error interpretation and evaluation really depend on the weight given to an error which varies from exercise to exercise, and from teacher to teacher.

The other weakness of error analysis is a danger in giving too much attention on learners' errors. For instance, in the classroom the teacher tends to become so pre-occupied with noticing errors that the correct utterance in the foreign/second language will go unnoticed. Although the diminishing of errors is an important criterion for increasing language proficiency, the ultimate goal of foreign/ second language learning is still the attainment of communicative fluency in a language (Xie, and Jiang, 2007, 13).

Another shortcoming is the overstressing of production data than comprehension data which is equally important in developing an understanding of the process of language acquisition. Xie, and Jiang (2007, 13) claims that error analysis can be said to only deal effectively with learner production, that is speaking, and writing, but not with learner reception, which is listening and reading.

Error analysis does not account for learner use of communicative strategies such as avoidance, when learners simply do not use a form with which they are uncomfortable with. For example, a learner who for one reason or another avoids a particular sound, word, structure or discourse category may be assumed, incorrectly, to have no difficulty there with.

Error analysis can keep us too closely focused on specific languages rather than viewing universal aspects of language. Although error analysis is still used to investigate specific questions in SLA, the quest for an overarching theory of learner errors has largely been neglected (Xie, and Jiang, 2007, 13).

Though error analysis has these main drawbacks, its advantages outweighed significantly. As a result, error analysis has become an important aspect of language learning in general and second or foreign language learning in particular. Hence, it is very common to see different studies in Europe, America, and in Africa. Even this area has started attracting few Ethiopian scholars, including the researcher. Even the researcher strongly believes that there will be numerous studies in near future.

### ***Stages of error analysis***

In order to conduct error analysis studies, certain stages in the literature must be followed (Corder, 1974). He suggests three models in error analysis research, which includes three stages. These are data collection, description, and explanation. Besides Corder, Gass, and Selinker (1994 as cited in Brown, 2000) elaborate on this model and give six steps which are important during studying error analysis. These include data selection, error identification, error classification, error explanation, error evaluation, and error correction. But for the present research, the first model, which is given by Corder (1974), is applied.

## **Studies on error analysis**

### ***Error Analysis Studies in Europe***

There may be different investigations in different parts of Europe, which base error analysis (EA) as their center of discussion. But as far as the researcher's reading concerned, Llach, Fontecha, and Espinosa's 2005 investigation, which is cited in the works of Mungungu (2010), is found to be very related and relevant to the current research. These scholars investigated the quantitative and qualitative



differences in the production of lexical errors in the English written paragraphs written by young Spanish and German learners of English. And they indicated that the lexical errors production per composition was significantly higher for German participants than the paragraphs of the Spanish learners. Since this study focused mainly on the influences of the learners native language in related to making errors in a foreign language, (English) it is different from the current research.

### **Error analysis studies in Asia**

Eun-pyo (2002) conducted an error analysis study on Korean medical students' writing. The subjects in the study were 35 second year premedical students who took English writing in the third semester of their two-year English curriculum. The primary purpose of the study was to analyze what errors intermediate to advanced level learners, at a medical college, made in their writing by reviewing their formal and informal letters (Mungungu, 2010). This study is relevant to the present investigation, since both studies evaluated students' written pieces and identified the types and frequencies of errors made. The distinction lies in the fact that Eun-pyo's (2002) study focused on students who scored high marks in the Test of English For International Communication (TOEIC) test that they wrote at tertiary level, whereas, the present study focused on all beginners (first year students' performance during their paragraph writing).

### **Error analysis studies in Africa**

According to Mungungu (2010), some studies have been conducted on error analysis in different countries of Africa. Almost all of these research works had similar objectives; checking the influences of their mother tongue in related to making errors in English composition. In one way or the other, these investigations have some relationship with the current research though their depth and focus might vary.

### **Error analysis studies in Ethiopia**

As far as the researcher's reading concerned, studies in the field of Error analysis in Ethiopia are few. Fearing that it (saying there is few studies in Ethiopia) may be a mere generalization, the researcher exerted his at most effort so as to check whether there were different studies in error analysis or not. And finally, the researcher found a total of four investigations, which are conducted on error analysis.

Alamrew (2005) made an investigation having three different variables (Perception of Writing, Writing Instruction, and Students' Writing Performance). It made a kind of correlation among these variables. It did not identify, categorize, and analyze the errors made by the students writing. Hence, it is different from the current research in different perspectives.

The other study was made by Dumessa, and Miressa, (2011). This study investigated the causes of grade nine students' spelling errors at Donbosco High and Preparatory School in Batu town (Orimia regional state). Similar to the previous work, this is also different from the current research. For example, its main focus was only in spelling errors, and identifying the different factors which made the students to commit spelling errors.

The third investigation on error analysis was made by Ferede, and Tefera (2012). This research examined the perception about writing and the practice of teaching the skills among English language teachers at preparatory schools in Jimma Zone (Orimia regional state). And the findings show that, due to teachers' failure to put into classroom practice, their beliefs about the nature of writing and how it should be taught, writing is given little attention and is taught inappropriately. In other words, the study demonstrated that teachers' perception of writing and their practice of teaching the skills are loosely correlated. Here again, it is too easy to understand that this research work is quite different from the current research.

Recently, there is an investigation, which is conducted by Birhanu (2013). There are many things in common between these two investigations. For example, both investigations are conducted in the same institution (Bahir Dar University). Above all, both investigations had more or less similar objectives i.e. identifying, categorizing, and analyzing, different errors, which are committed by the students during their English paragraph writing.

The current research has two major differences from Birhanu's investigation. The participants of Birhanu's research were pre-engineering students, who are assumed to have better educational background than students, who are enrolled in other faculties like Science faculty, Birhanu (2013). As the

government has given more emphasis towards Engineering and Technology, these groups of students are expected to have better command of English language, especially in writing skills. Besides these, one of the major differences between these two investigations lay in terms of frequency in which different error types occurred. For example, Birhanu's investigation revealed that the students' written texts are dominated by errors of spelling (25.47%), word choice (21.65%) subject/verb agreement, (11.46%), and punctuation (8.9%) respectively. Whereas, the present research shows that students made more number of errors in punctuation (24.6), spelling (17.5), capitalization (12.3), and missed/wrongly used word (12.3) respectively. So, there is very clear discrepancy between these two investigations not only in terms of frequency of errors student made, but also in the type of errors they made. And even the current researcher believes that there is a need to make still another investigation across faculties and even departments so that the problem could be clearer to make the appropriate remedy.

## Methods

As it is mentioned earlier, this investigation was aimed at identifying, categorizing, and analyzing the errors which were found in the English language paragraphs. To achieve its purpose, the researcher used both quantitative (descriptive), and qualitative research designs. These research designs were preferred since they can allow the researcher to achieve his very goal successfully; identifying, categorizing, and analyzing errors that occurred in the English paragraphs written by first year Biology department students at Bahir Dar University in 2013/14 academic year.

### ***Participants and sampling techniques***

The subjects of this study were first year undergraduate Biology department students (n =30, 4 males, and 26 females), at Bahir Dar University during the second semester of 2013/2014 academic year. The rationale for choosing these students as a subject for the study was since the researcher was assigned to teach them Basic Writing Skills course in the earlier mentioned academic year. As the very nature of this course, writing many paragraphs, it was more suitable to conduct the study, which focused error analysis of written paragraphs. At the time of selecting the participants of the present study, available or comprehensive sampling technique was used as their numbers were manageable.

### ***Data gathering instrument***

The major data gathering instrument the researcher used to answer the basic research questions of the study was the written paragraphs of all the participants. Hence, the data analyzed for this study were the errors in students' written paragraphs. The test was administered after these students learn Basic Writing Skills course throughout the second semester. This is because, at the end of the semester, they were expected to write coherent, organized and error free paragraphs as they had practiced throughout the lesson period of the course.

### ***Data collection procedures***

As part of their assessment, the students were ordered to write an argumentative paragraph, which could contain 100 to 150 words within the given 40'; this task was done under examination conditions. This examination was not a part of students' assessment, but to increase the validity of the result, the researcher did not inform them. The researcher administered the test himself, normally after the time of the semester was over, where students were supposed to write as error free paragraphs as possible. Students could write an argumentative paragraph deliberately to give those different alternatives, three different topics or titles were given as an alternative. These were, "Abortion should be allowed legally", "Knowledge is better than money", and "The importance of globalization is greater than its side effects." These topics were chosen deliberately because it seemed likely that most students would have a strong opinion on these matters, and it was unlikely to favor any student over another.

### ***Data analysis procedures***

Preliminary analysis of the data involved the separation and classification of errors to identify their type (the most frequent errors) as spelling errors, punctuation errors, subject-verb agreement errors etc. Initially the test was given to 30 students, and out of the 30 selected students for the study, only 23 students' text (76.6%) were taken for analysis. This is because the remaining 7 student's paragraphs (23.4%) were found to be irrelevant for the study due to different reasons. Such as their contents were

non-related to the given topics, they wrote about very different issues at a time, and some of them were not readable at all.

After getting the required data, its analysis went through the stages of collection of the data, following the stages proposed by Corder (1967). These are, identifying and labeling of errors according to standard norms of usage, classification of error categories, and determination of the frequency of errors with their descriptions. As it is stated in the research design sub-sections of this study, the data were analyzed quantitatively, and qualitatively. In identifying the written errors, besides the researcher, an expert, who has taught the course (Basic Writing Skills) for more than nine years was involved.

## Findings

### Analysis of texts

In this chapter, the data collected through the major instruments of the research (students' writing exam) from the participants of the study are analyzed and discussed, and it is presented quantitatively, and qualitatively. The quantitative data are analyzed followed by the qualitative data analysis, and then discussions are made at the end. Since the aim of error analysis is to describe and explain errors committed by the foreign language learners while writing in the language, the current researcher strongly believes that the analysis reveals for the teacher about the areas of difficulties, where the learners need more careful explanation and guidance.

In this section, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study in light of its objectives. First, the errors made by the students are identified, second the errors made by the students are classified, and finally, some of these errors made by the learners are corrected as examples. The following table (Table 1) shows the descriptions, and frequencies of errors, which were committed by the participants, with their percentile, and mean values.

Table 1: *Descriptions, and frequencies of the errors, found in the students' paragraphs*

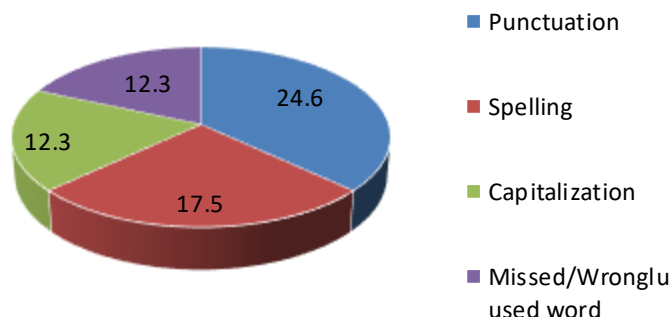
Type of error	Frequency of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean
Punctuation	142	24.6	6.1
Spelling	101	17.5	4.3
Capitalization	71	12.3	3.1
Missed/Wrongly used word	71	12.3	3.1
Word choice	45	7.8	1.95
Number	40	6.9	1.73
Subject-verb agreement	26	4.5	1.1
Verb-tense	25	4.3	1.08
Preposition	18	3.1	0.78
Article	17	2.9	0.73
Fragment	14	2.4	0.60
Word order	7	1.2	0.30
<b>Total errors</b>	<b>577</b>	<b>100</b>	

As it is depicted in the above table (table 1), the researcher found a total of 577 errors within average error rate of (25.8) among the samples. It is indicated that the students made more number or errors in punctuation 142 (24.6%), and with an error rate of 6.1, spelling 101 (17.5%), and with an error rate of 4.3, capitalization 71 (12.3%), and with an error rate of 3.1, and missed/wrongly used word 71 (12.3%), and with an error rate of 3.1 in their written paragraphs. These results show that many of the errors (66.7%) were attributed to punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and missed/wrongly used word respectively. From these figures, we can infer that the students were not aware of the uses of different punctuation marks at different contexts, they are not able to spell words (even common words) properly, they are not differentiated when to capitalize letters, and it is also found that the students have a problem of either missing of words or wrongly using of a word. All these major and the other minor problems of their writing had made teaching the course very tough as there were many situations where reading, and evaluating their written texts were too difficult to do. For the sake of ease of



understanding, the students' major errors distribution (punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and missed/wrongly used word) is summarized in the following pie chart.

Figure 1: The distribution, and frequency of the students' major errors



The pie chart below is a summary of the above table (Table 1) and depicts all the error types recorded from all the participants' written paragraphs. Though the message it conveys is similar to what is stated in the table, the researcher believes that it can clearly demonstrate the frequencies of all the errors distributions.

Figure 2: The frequency, and distribution of all the students' errors

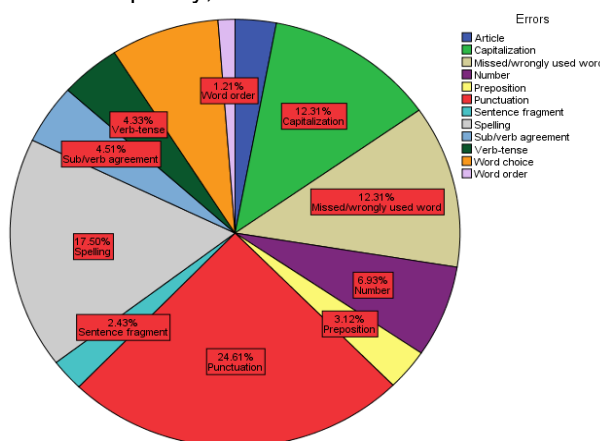


Table 2: Sample students' transcribed punctuation errors

Code No.	The texts with punctuation errors	Correction
01	He doesn.t save that money.	He doesn't save that money.
03	If we have money we can get knowledge	If we have money, we can get knowledge.
05	However I argues money is better than knowledge:	However, I argue money is better than knowledge.
011	In addition they beLieves thatwithout knowledge it is imposible to get money	In addition, they believe that without knowledge it is impossible to get money.
15	As a result through the process of knowledge ,We can get money...	As a result, through the process of knowledge we can get money...

\* 'Code No' refers to the code which is given to the texts being analyzed.

\* There are certain texts which may contain more than one type of error.

Table 3: *Sample students' transcribed spelling errors*

Code No.	The texts with spelling errors	Correction
01	Knowleg	Knowledge
03	Beacause	Because
06	Meny	Money
021	Sthle	Style
23	Langth	Learn

\* Code No here refers to the code which is given to the texts being analyzed.

\* There are certain texts which may contain more than one type of error.

Table 4: *Sample students' transcribed capitalization errors*

Code No.	The texts with capitalization errors	Correction
03	....in my Idea money Is better than knowledge.	....in my idea, money is better than knowledge.
09	these importance things are prepared by knowledge.	These important things are prepared by knowledge.
016	money is Important than knowledge	Money is important than knowledge.
018	...to import and Export and to connect World people.	...to import and export and to connect world people.
024	Some people argue that The pmportance of globalization..	Some people argue that the importance of globalization...

\* Code No here refers to the code which is given to the texts being analyzed.

\* There are certain texts which may contain more than one type of error.

Table 5: **Sample students transcribed missed/wrongly used word errors**

Code No.	The texts with missed/wrongly used word errors	Correction
026	...for the citizenns that they live.....	...for the citizens who live.....
028	However money has good characteristics it has side effects.	Though money has good advantages, it has side effects.
010	..Ethiopian people good relationship.	..Ethiopian people have good relationship with foreign people.
015	In my opinion knowledge is more better	In my opinion knowledge is better.
017	Without money there is no need basic things.	Without money, there are no basic things.

\* Code No here refers to the code which is given to the texts being analyzed.

\* There are certain texts which may contain more than one type of error.

As a result of analyzing the texts, which were written by the selected students, the researcher found that the students made different errors. Some of the students writing contained a great deal of ambiguous sentences, which even prevented the researcher from analyzing the errors. This clearly shows us their level of English language proficiency or their major areas of language difficulties such as punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and missing/using wrong words. Besides this, it also reveals that the teachers should give more concentration on these items when they teach Basic Writing Skills course, especially, when they teach paragraph.

## Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to analyze the students error committed when they write paragraphs in English, and specifically it had the following two main objectives:

1. Identifying the most common linguistic errors that students made in their written paragraphs?
2. Identifying how frequent do these errors occur in their written paragraphs?

This study involved 23 students' written texts and the results highlighted the presence of a preponderance of different types of errors though these errors occurred at different rates of frequency. Totally

577 errors of different types were found. This investigation revealed the most frequent type of errors committed. These were punctuation (24.6 %), spelling (17.5 %), capitalization (12.3 %), missed/ using wrong word (12.3 %), word choice ( 7.8 %), number (6.9 %), sub/verb agreement (4.5 %), verb-tense (4.3 %), preposition ( 3.1 %), article (2.9 %), sentence fragment (2.4 %), and word order (1.2 %) respectively were among the common language errors, which were observed almost in each of the participants writing (from the highest to the lowest frequency).

Writing is a productive skill. It is one of the most difficult and frustrating subject even to teach particularly in an EFL situation like Ethiopia. It is especially difficult for nonnative speakers because learners are expected to create written products that demonstrate their ability to organize the content, to address the correct audience as well as to demonstrate their linguistic ability (vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, etc). After having analyzed the data gathered, the researcher concluded that all the participant students made almost all types of errors in their written composition. It is possible to say there was no student, who could write a standard paragraph. This reflects the need to improve their ability in English paragraph writing. Students' errors were therefore found to be indispensable and unavoidable in their learning; however, these errors can be very useful for more realistic and effective teaching. Based on the findings obtained from this research, the current researcher found that students, who participated in the study, have a poor mastering of a number of aspects in writing a paragraph in English, and students writing skills progress is below the expected.

### **Implications**

Language learning in general, and learning writing skills, in particular, is a step-by-step process during which errors or mistakes are to be expected. Errors are visible proofs that learning is taking place. Error analysis is a valuable aid to identify and explain difficulties faced by learners. Candling (2001) considers the second/foreign language learners' errors as potentially important for the understanding of the processes of language learning. Findings on error analyses can be used to determine what a learner still needs to be taught. They provide the necessary information about what is lacking in his or her competence. Similarly, the findings of the present study point out the significance of learners' errors as they provide the current status of the students' performance, as they are evidences of how language is learned and what strategies or procedures the learners are employing in learning the language.

The implication of error analysis to language learning and teaching can also be viewed from the aspects of language teachers, and syllabus designers. Findings from error analysis provide feedback; they also tell the teachers something about the effectiveness of their teaching. Error analysis serves as a reliable feedback to design remedial teaching methods and materials. Stark 2001, cited in Mungungu (2010) recommends that teachers need to view students' errors positively and should not regard them as the learners' failure to grasp the rules and structures of English, but they should view the errors as processes of learning. Errors, if studied systematically, can provide significant insights into how a second language, (in our context a foreign language) is learned.

### **Recommendations**

Considering the results obtained from this study, the following recommendations are provided:

Teachers should raise students' awareness of the importance of being able to write in English (including paragraphs) throughout their future academic and non-academic career so that students themselves could exert their effort for the betterment of their writing. This can be done with employing different techniques. Such as , with exposing the students to authentic written materials that will help them expand their vocabulary and write well organized, reasonably coherent paragraph since it will give them better opportunity to practice as they are a foreign language learners, encouraging the students to carryout self, and peer corrections in order to further their learning and regulate their language learning and language using skills as they can internalize their grammatical and lexical knowledge and utilize it for production, giving students different and frequent writing activities, and even advising the other subject teachers to give the students different activities that make the students write, and report in English when they teach their own courses, trying to correct students errors as frequently(with certain degree of flexibility) as possible, and last but not least, finding a mechanism so as to establish students writing lab. All these and other similar measures can increase the students' awareness so that they can compose less erroneous paragraphs.

Teachers should consider errors as a natural process, with giving more focus on the errors which are observed frequently, and they should include more exercises on these errors rather than being

desperate when they encounter different errors committed by the students, and in line with this, there is a need to know whether inter-lingual or intra-lingual errors are the main sources behind the students' major errors so that teachers can provide appropriate remedy in a better way.

Remedial materials or programs that are important to the needs of the students, and that can improve their competence in writing should be designed. Thus, if the university has a plan to do this, Biology department students should be first given the priority to take part in any of these programs. In related to this, the teaching materials such as students' textbooks, modules, handouts etc. should contain very brief and clear explanations, and adequate practical exercises on punctuation, spelling, and capitalization (the three most frequent errors students commit based on this study).

Different error correction techniques which can help to improve the students' ability in writing a standard paragraph should be further investigated so that not only Biology department students but also students in the other fields at Bahir Dar University can be benefited. Besides this, further research should be conducted to investigate the errors that could be made by different department students and among different batches; starting from students, majoring English language and literature.

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