A Corpus-Based Analysis of Students' Composition Writing

Bernadette C. Almejas and Emmanuel A. Arago

Abstract— This study analyzes the syntactic errors of students' writing composition. Results of the study reveals the following: (1) the profile of second year English major students shows that 2 or 12.5% of them graduated valedictorian in high school, 8 or 50% graduated as honorable mention, and 6 or 37.5% graduated with special awards; and 14 or 87.5% preferred English, and 2 or 12.5% preferred Filipino as the media preference of the respondents; (2) the syntactic errors made in the students' writing composition reveals that 17 or 42.5% choppy sentence errors is the highest, followed by sentence fragment errors which is 12 or equivalent to 30.00%, then run-on or comma splice errors which is 9 or 22.5%, and 2 stringy sentence errors which is 5%; and (3) students' profile and types of errors shows a significant correlation in terms of media preference. The study employs qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Keywords— cognitive writing, error analysis, syntactic errors.

I. INTRODUCTION

WRITING is an intricate cognitive activity necessitated by a number of processes and strategies. The use of strategy is a purposeful cognitive action (Flavell, 1979). When drawn out for a conscious verbalization, it is of importance for what it discloses about the way writers process and generate texts. The set of writing processes underlying them were initiated by the pioneering work of Emig (1971), who carried out the first study by observing school children as they wrote. These insights were then formalized by Hayes and Flower (1980) in an "explicit" model of the constituents of the writing process.

Early research on writing was inspired by psychological research on problem solving. This provided a conceptual language for categorizing the mental processes involved, a set of methods (verbal protocol analysis in particular) for examining these processes, and a body of empirical findings from research on problem solving in general which could be applied to understanding writing. It led to the development of a general model of the processes involved in writing, and to a theory of writing expertise (Hayes & Flower 1986).

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In today's society, the act of writing is ingrained in every aspect of our lives and will continue to shape human interaction as we head full force into the 21st century. The ability to write articulately gives one the power and opportunity to share and influence thoughts, ideas, and opinions with others, not only in day-to-day situations, but across time and space. As Mary Heller writes, "The value that we place on reading and writing arises out of our shared need

to be literate people, this is a function of our society and of our culture" (1991, p.13). This is a challenge for language teachers to teach and develop students' writing skills.

Apparently, students lack the competence to write a syntactically correct sentence as reflected in the study of Chen (2006), as cited in Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014). The results showed that the most common errors were in sentence structures (30%), followed by wrong forms of verbs (21%), fragmented sentences (15 %), and wrong use/choice of words (15 %), respectively. Similarly, Chen (2006) in Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014) also found some run-on sentences in Taiwanese students' writing. These two findings correlated with Oshima and Hogue's statement (1991, 1999). They stated that the four sentence problems that students often make are fragmented sentences, run-on or comma splice sentences, choppy sentences, and stringy sentences.

Oshima and Hogue (1991, 1999) in Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014) contend that major sentence problems, namely, fragmented sentences, run-on or comma splice sentences, choppy sentences, and stringy sentences frequently appear in students' writing. Likewise, Feigenbaum (1985) says that comma splice and run-on sentences commonly occur in one's own writing.

It is in this light that the author would like to analyze the types of syntactic errors made in the students' writing composition. Through error analysis, the language teacher would be guided on what to teach and how to teach. As Hasyim (2002) stipulated, "Error analysis is carried out in order to: (a) find out how well someone knows a language, (b) find out how a person learns a language, and (c) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials."

Corder (1974) stressed out that "The study of error is part of the investigation of the process of language learning. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a

learner and may give us indications as to the learning process".

A. Theoretical Background of the Study

This study assumes that second year English major students' writing composition has syntactic errors such as choppy sentence errors, run-on or comma splice errors, sentence fragment errors, stringy sentence errors. This assumption is anchored on Hayes and Flower (1981) Cognitive Writing Process Theory as used in the study of Aberion (2014).

Hayes and Flower's model distinguished between three basic processes: planning, which included generating ideas, organisation and goal setting as components; translating plans into text; and reviewing, which included reading and editing as components. These processes operated upon two kinds of information: a representation of the task environment, which consisted of the writing assignment and the text produced so far; and knowledge stored in long-term memory, which consisted of such things as topic knowledge, a model of the audience, the writing plan, rules for grammar production and knowledge of text standards. Grammatical changes and conventional editing occur during the revision or editing stage (Ballator, Farnum, & Kaplan, 1999; Flower & Hayes, 1981).

B. Statement of the Problem

This study analyzes the syntactic errors of second year English major students' writing composition. Specifically, it intends to answer the following:

1. The profile of second year English major students in terms of:
1.1 honors/awards received; (valedictorian, salutatorian, honorable mention, and special awards) and
    1.2 media preference (English or Filipino).

2. The syntactic errors made in the students' writing composition in terms of:
2.1 choppy sentence errors;
2.2 run-on or comma splice errors;
2.3 sentence fragment errors; and
2.4 stringy sentence errors.

3. Determine if there is a significant relationship between students' profile and types of syntactic errors.

C. Significance of the Study

This study would directly or indirectly be beneficial to the following:

Academe. The result of this research may provide insights that would entice to improve task-based writing activities and the quality of language teaching.

Language Teachers. It will further provide ideas about the structure of language that could give some implications in preparing writing activities in English.

Researchers. This serves as a contribution to the study of language, linguistics and literature. The findings may serve as basis for another research.

Students. It will aid the learners in honing their competence in writing syntactically correct sentences.

D. Scope and Limitations

This study focused on the syntactic errors of BSED second year English major students of Eastern Samar State University Main Campus. The syntactic errors analyzed are choppy sentence errors, run-on or comma splice errors, sentence fragment errors, and stringy sentence errors.

E. Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used in the study:

Choppy Sentences. According to Oshima and Hogue, (1991), "choppy sentences are sentences that are too short. They are the result of using too many simple sentences".

Error Analysis. Error Analysis (EA) examines errors made by L2 learners. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define it as "The study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners."

Media Preference. This refers to the language of media preferred by the respondents such as English movies, documentaries, TV show/program, radio broadcast, novels, newspapers, and magazines, or Filipino movies, documentaries, TV show/program, radio broadcast, novels, newspapers, and magazines.

Run-On or Comma Splice Sentences. Run-on sentences are sentences consisting of two independent clauses that are not linked by a semicolon (;) or by a coordinating conjunction (and, as, but, etc.) (Oshima & Hogue, 1991; 1999).

Sentence Fragment. A fragmented sentence is a structurally incomplete sentence or part of a sentence (Oshima & Hogue, 1991; 1999).

Syntactic Errors. It refer to the major sentence problems, namely, fragmented sentences, run-on or comma splice sentences, choppy sentences, and stringy sentences.

II. METHOD

The study employs qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach is used in describing and analyzing data to find out the distinctive features of English paragraphs written by the students in terms of the sentence errors committed. On the contrary, the quantitative approach is useful for determining the percentage of some linguistic errors. Total enumeration is utilized because all the second year English major students are included as respondents of the study.

A. Research Locale

The study is conducted at Eastern Samar State University main campus, Borongan City, Eastern Samar, Philippines.

B. Sources of Data

The main source of data is the writing composition of second year BSED English major students. These students were instructed to write a composition about the topic "*Why Did You Choose English as Your Major?*" with a minimum of ten sentences.

C. Respondents of the Study

The second year BSED English major students served as the respondents in this study, who are officially enrolled for the first semester for school year 2016-2017. All of them were tasked to write a composition.

D. Data Gathering Procedure

In gathering data for the study, it involves four stages:
1) Giving of instruction and the topic to the students to write a paragraph of not less than 10 sentences with the title "Why Did You Choose English as Your Major" within 30 minutes;
2) Identifying the types of errors from the compositions using a tally sheet;
3) Discussing with the students the errors and ways to correct them; and
4) Revising the syntactic errors through peer editing.

E. *Data Analysis*

The data elicited from the respondents were tallied, computed and treated using the appropriate statistical measure.

For the profile of the respondents and the types of errors, the frequency and percent was computed.

To test whether there is a significant relationship between students' profile and types of errors, Cramer's V Coefficient Correlation was computed. A computerized statistical analysis was employed to facilitate statistical computation.

III. RESULTS

Based on the objectives of the study that focuses on: (1) the profile of second year English major students; (2) the syntactic errors made in the students' writing composition; and (3) determine if there is a significant relationship between students' profile and types of syntactic errors, the results are discussed descriptively.
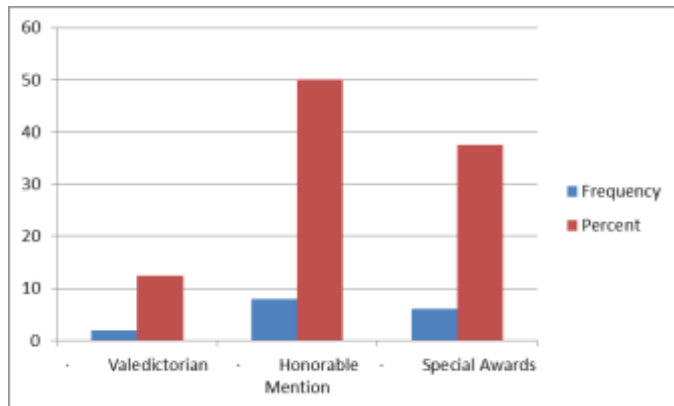

Fig. 1(a) The Profile of English Major Students in Terms of Honors/Awards Received

Fig. 1 presents the honors/awards received by the students where 2 or 12.5% of them graduated valedictorian in high school, 8 or 50% graduated as honorable mention, and 6 or 37.5% graduated with special awards.
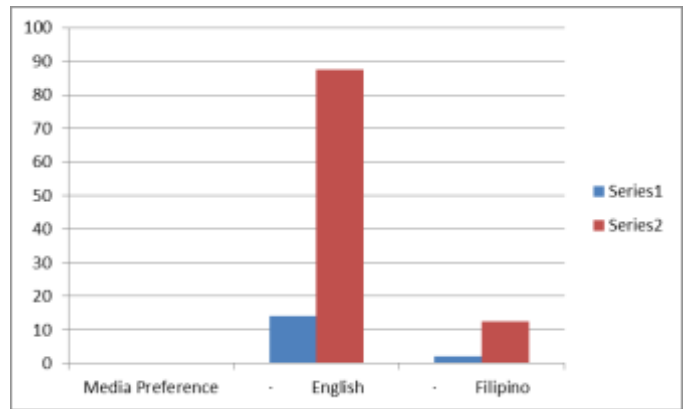

Fig. 1 (b) The Profile of English Major Students in Terms of Media Preference

As to media preference of the respondents, 14 or 87.5% preferred English, and 2 or 12.5% preferred Filipino.

In accounting the types of syntactic errors, Oshima and Hogue's (1991, 1999) framework is employed as cited in Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014). Syntactic errors consist of sentence fragments, run-on or comma splice, choppy, and stringy sentence errors, (Oshima & Hogue, 1999).
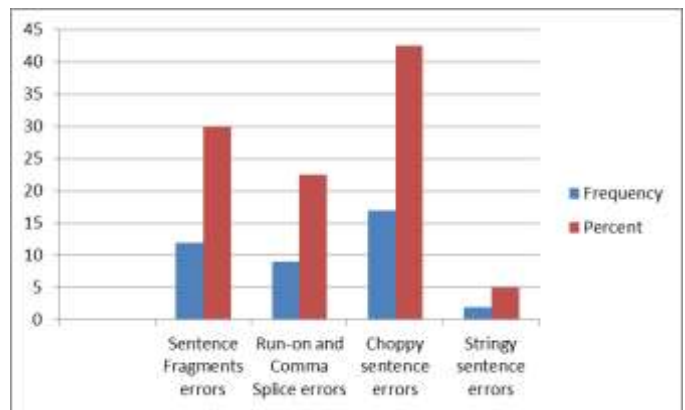

Fig. 2. Types of Syntactic Errors

This figure shows the syntactic errors of the respondents with 17 or 42.5% choppy sentence errors as the highest. This is followed by sentence fragment errors which is 12 or equivalent to 30.00%, then run-on or comma splice errors which is 9 or 22.5%, and 2 stringy sentence errors which is 5%.

This conforms to what has been contended by Oshima and Hogue (1991, 1999) in Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014) that major sentence problems, namely, fragmented sentences, run-on or comma splice sentences, choppy sentences, and stringy sentences frequently appear in students' writing.

In correcting sentence fragments, it can be done three ways: 1) attach it to an independent clause if the sentence fragment is a dependent clause; 2) rewrite the sentence so that it has a verb in case there is no verb; and 3) add a subject and change the participles to verbs, or attach the phrase to an independent clause. (Oshima and Hogue, 1991, 1991).

TABLE 1
COMPOSITIONS WITH SENTENCE FRAGMENTS AND STUDENTS' REVISIONS

Compo-sition	Sentence Fragments	Students' Revisions
1	A better one who fancies words, grammar, etc. When I am in high school, the same in college.	*It's better to fancies words, grammar, etc.* *When I was in high school, the same in college.*
2	And try to find the meaning of that word and use it in a sentence.	*I try to find the meaning of that word and use it in a sentence.*
4	Never thought that this would be our fate as English major.	*I never thought that this would be our fate as English major.*
7	To speak well enough and be courageous in conveying my ideas using the English language.	*To speak well and be courageous in conveying my ideas using the English language.*
8	And that bothers sometimes.	*Research is hard and thinking of it bothers me sometimes.*
10	Not also good in Science, seems like a cousin of Math.	*Seems like a cousin of Math, not also good in Science.*
11	First of all is research. Was the one who advised me to take up Education and English as my major.	*First of all is research. That gave us headache and sometimes fever.* *My mother was the one who advised me to take up Education and English as my major.*
14	In the sense that it is hard, yet enjoyable.	*I choose English as a major in the sense that it is hard, yet enjoyable.*
16	The fact that sometimes I can't speak or articulate well. To learn more and to improve on how I should speak.	*I need to learn and study more on English because of the fact that sometimes I can't speak or articulate well with the use of English language.* *To learn and improve more on how I should speak English.*

Of the 12 sentence fragments found in students' compositions, they were able to revise correctly 7 sentence fragments by supplying a subject. However, in terms of dependent clauses, they failed to attach it to an independent clause, so most of the revisions made by the students are still sentence fragments. In composition 1, the sentence fragment, "When I am in high school, the same in college", and in the students' revision, it's the verb tense that was changed, "When I was in high school, the same in college". And instead of attaching the phrase "To speak well enough and be courageous in conveying my ideas using the English language", the students revised this by simply omitting the word 'enough', "To speak well and be courageous in conveying my ideas using the English language", which is still a sentence fragment.

In composition 10, "Not also good in Science, seems like a cousin of Math", the students revised it by simply reversing the phrases, "Seems like a cousin of Math, not also good in Science", instead of supplying a subject, "I'm not also good in Science, seems like a cousin of Math." In composition 11, "First of all is research. That gave us headache and sometimes fever", the students add another dependent clause instead of making 'research' as the subject. So the revision would be, "I have encountered a lot of challenges being an English major, research as the most challenging". Most of the fragmented sentences have no subject while others have no independent clause. Similarly, the study of Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014) also revealed the same findings that most of the fragmented sentences are due to the absence of a subject, and the absence of an independent clause.

The table below reveals that compositions 1, 2, 5, 10, 14, 16 have one run-on sentence errors, and it is only composition 3 which has two run-on sentence errors.

TABLE II
COMPOSITIONS WITH RUN-ON OR COMMA SPLICE SENTENCES AND STUDENTS' REVISION

Compo-sition	Run-on or Comma Splice Sentences	Students' Revision
1	It somehow disappoints me, I'll embrace whatever it is in college.	*It somehow disappoints me, but I'll embrace whatever it is in college.*
2	Other majors consider us as superior we have some of the intelligent people in our class.	*Other majors consider us as superior, because we have some of the intelligent people in our class.*
3	And I was also inspired by my English teachers during my high school years, they were the one who honed my skills, pushed my buttons in a good way and convinced me to take this path – teaching. I feel tense and jittery by standing there in front all eyes on me.	*I was also inspired by my English teachers during my high school years, they were the one who honed my skills, pushed my buttons in a good way, and convinced me to take the path of teaching.* *I feel tense and jittery when I stand in front, with all eyes on me.*
10	I've encountered a lot of challenges as an English major knowing that my classmates are intelligent stresses me so much.	*I've encountered a lot of challenges as an English major; knowing that my classmates are intelligent stresses me so much.*
14	I was seeing myself as a patient elementary teacher, I shifted and ended up as a BSED English major student.	*I was seeing myself as a patient elementary teacher, but I shifted and ended up as a BSED English major student.*
16	I chose English as my major since I'm in elementary school, I always got high grades in this subject.	*Since I was in elementary, I always got high grades in English, so I chose English as my major.*

In correcting run-on sentence or comma splice sentence, Oshima and Hogue (1991, 1999) offered four ways: 1) add a period; 2) add a semicolon; 3) add a coordinator; and 4) add a subordinator to independent clauses written one after another

with no punctuation, or incorrectly joined by a comma without a coordinating conjunction. And from the 9 run-on or comma splice sentence errors extracted from the compositions, the students are able to revise them correctly. They use a period, semicolon and coordinator in revising them as shown in these samples of revised run-on sentences in composition 2, the run-on sentence, "Other majors consider us as superior we have some of the intelligent people in our class," the students revised this by putting a comma and adding a coordinator, "Other majors consider us as superior, because we have some of the intelligent people in our class"; while in composition 5, "The next event was surprising, I won all the contests I joined, I may not be the first but I got either second or third place", the students revised it by using a period, "The next event was surprising! I won all the contests that I joined. I may not be the first placer, but I got either second or third place". And in composition 10, "I've encountered a lot of challenges as an English major knowing that my classmates are intelligent stresses me so much", the students used a semicolon in the revision, "I've encountered a lot of challenges as an English major; knowing that my classmates are intelligent stresses me so much".

The table below reveals the choppy sentence errors in composition 1, 5, and 11 with four choppy sentences, while composition 4 has five choppy sentences.

TABLE III
COMPOSITIONS WITH CHOPPY SENTENCES AND STUDENTS' REVISION

Compo-sition	Choppy Sentences	Students' Revision
1	I don't know why. Reporting really challenge me. Sometimes, I'm afraid to some of my professors. I am challenge to my own self.	*Reporting really challenge me. I'm afraid to some of my professors. I am challenge to my own self.*
4	My mom told to pursue this major. And take enrichment after I graduated. After all, English major is not that bad. My co-majors are good companions. I enjoy being with them.	*My mom told to pursue this major. English major is not that bad and my co-majors are good companions. I enjoy being with them.*
6	I'm hungry for knowledge. I'm hungry for improvement. I want to know more. I want to get more acquainted to this field I've chosen.	*I'm hungry for knowledge and improvement. I want to know more and get more acquainted to this field I've chosen.*
11	I chose English as my major for many reasons. First, it's because since elementary, I like English. I like reading short stories most especially fables. Every time our lesson is about English, I was always attentive.	*I chose English as my major for many reasons. First, it's because since elementary, I like English. I like reading short stories most especially fables. Every time our lesson is about English, I was always attentive.*

According to Oshima and Hogue, 1991, 1999), choppy sentences

are easy to correct. Just combine two or three short sentences to make one compound or complex sentence. The decision to make a compound or a complex sentence should be based on whether the ideas in the short sentences are equal or whether one idea is dependent on the other.

However, the choppy sentences in composition 1, "I don't know why. Reporting really challenge me. Sometimes, I'm afraid to some of my professors. I am challenged to my own self", the students omitted the first sentence and write the succeeding sentences separately, "Reporting really challenge me. I'm afraid to some of my professors. I am challenged to my own self", which are still choppy sentences, instead of combining them to make compound or complex sentence, "I don't know why reporting really challenge me. Sometimes, I'm afraid to some of my professors, and I am challenge to my own self".

The succeeding table presents the stringy sentences where only two compositions, 2 and 14 respectively, have stringy sentence.

In correcting a stringy sentence, Oshima and Hogue (1991, 1999) suggested to divide it and/or recombine the independent clauses, remembering to subordinate when appropriate.

TABLE IV
COMPOSITIONS WITH STRINGY SENTENCES AND STUDENTS' REVISION

Compo-sition	Stringy Sentences	Students' Revision
2	I have no talent in writing but they say that it can help me as English major so now I'm keeping a journal and I'm trying to help myself in writing.	*I have no talent in writing. Now I'm keeping my journal trying to help myself in writing because they say it can help me as English major.*
14	When I saw my student number on the list I thought the luck was on me that time but really I didn't take the test wholeheartedly because I'm not really good in English and I'm not seeing myself teaching high school students' English lessons.	*I'm not really good in English nor seeing myself teaching high school students' English lessons. So by the time I saw my student number on the list, I thought the luck was on me. I didn't even take the test wholeheartedly.*

A stringy sentence error in composition 2, "I have no talent in writing but they say that it can help me as English major so now I'm keeping a journal and I'm trying to help myself in writing", is revised by the students, "I have no talent in writing. Now I'm keeping my journal trying to help myself in writing because they say it can help me as English major", and in composition 14, "When I saw my student number on the list I thought the luck was on me that time but really I didn't took the test wholeheartedly because I'm not really good in English and I'm not seeing myself teaching high school students' English lessons", is revised, "I'm not really good in English nor seeing myself teaching high school students' English lessons. So by the time I saw my student number on the list, I thought the luck was on me. I didn't even take the test wholeheartedly", where both stringy sentences are correctly revised.

The study of Aberion (2014) revealed that errors of

students' writing compositions are mostly on sentence structure. Gustilo & Magno (2012) likewise revealed that sentence-level errors of Filipino ESL writers is on sentence structure (fragment and run on sentences) which is 9.4 %. In addition, Nonkukhetkhong (2013) indicated that the first year English majors had some difficulties in using correct grammatical forms and structures. In the study of Ananda, Gani & Sahardin (2014), nearly a quarter of the errors were run-on or comma splice sentences. There were only a few choppy sentence errors and no stringy sentence errors. Consequently, most of the errors in this study are choppy sentences and two stringy sentence errors.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study and similar studies conducted, committing syntactic errors is unavoidable. Though the second year English major students graduated from high school with high honors/award, still they made errors in their composition writing such as choppy sentence errors, run-on or comma splice errors, sentence fragment errors, and stringy sentence errors.

And on media preference, it was unlikely to note that the preference of English major is Filipino. So the higher is the Filipino preference of media, the more they commit errors, since the types of errors shows a significant correlation in terms of media preference.

B. Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn based on the findings and conclusion of the study.
1. There should be an intensive screening of students with the inclusion of their profile who wishes to become an Education student.
2. The media preference of students should be considered in their admission of becoming English major.
3. English language teachers should provide more writing activities along with strategies in correcting students' errors in composition writing such as self and/or peer editing.

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