

An Exploratory Approach to the Description of First-Year Criminology Students' Writing Problems in English

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Abstract

This study explored and analyzed errors in descriptive essays written by one hundred (100) first-year students enrolled in the course Purposive Communication. The respondents, comprising both male and female students from two sections of the Criminology Department, were selected from Tuesday and Thursday class schedules. Data were gathered through students' written English essays, supplemented by recorded feedback from interviews and focus group discussions. Identified errors were examined and classified into grammatical and cognitive categories. Findings revealed thirteen recurring error types: improper capitalization, incorrect verb tense, missing or incorrect punctuation, inappropriate word choice, spelling errors, missing or incorrect prepositions, sentence fragments, faulty parallelism, missing or incorrect conjunctions, pronoun errors, spacing issues, use of shortcuts, and incorrect article usage. From the students' perspectives, three major factors contributed to these writing difficulties: incomplete application of grammar rules, lack of motivation, and limited exposure to the English language. Overall, the results indicate that first-year criminology students experience challenges in both the structural and cognitive aspects of academic writing, with the community language environment emerging as a significant influencing factor. The study recommends further research to identify effective instructional strategies and to examine the relationship between degree programs and learners' interest in language learning.

Keywords: Cognitive Problems, Error Analysis, Essays, Grammatical Problems, Writing

Introduction

Writing has long served as a fundamental means of human communication, enabling individuals to record ideas, transmit knowledge, and engage in social interaction across time and space. From early writing systems such as hieroglyphics to contemporary alphabetic scripts, writing has consistently played a central role in intellectual, cultural, and academic development. In modern educational contexts, writing is recognized not only as a medium of expression but also as a critical academic skill essential for learning, assessment, and professional preparation.

As one of the core macro-skills in language learning, writing requires learners to integrate multiple linguistic and cognitive components, including grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, organization, and coherence. Effective writing skills are therefore indispensable for students in meeting academic demands and future workplace requirements. However, despite its importance, many students struggle to communicate ideas clearly and accurately in written form. These difficulties are often manifested in grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary use, weak sentence construction, and poor organization, all of which hinder effective communication.

Writing in a second or foreign language presents additional challenges. Learners must simultaneously generate ideas and apply unfamiliar linguistic rules, making errors a natural part of the learning process. Previous studies have shown that students commonly encounter difficulties related to verb tense usage, punctuation, word choice, and sentence structure, particularly when English is used as a second language. Such challenges may be influenced by limited exposure to English, first-language interference, inadequate mastery of grammatical rules, and affective factors such as motivation and confidence.

Within the Philippine higher education context, instructors have consistently observed that many college students experience persistent writing problems, especially in academic tasks such as essay writing. At Mountain Province State Polytechnic College, instructors have noted frequent grammatical and mechanical errors in students' written outputs, as reflected in quizzes, examinations, and written activities. These observations suggest a need for systematic investigation into the nature and sources of students' writing difficulties, particularly among learners enrolled in non-language degree programs.

In response to this concern, the present study explored and described the common writing problems of first-year criminology students in English. Anchored in error analysis theory, the study focused on identifying recurring grammatical and cognitive errors in students' descriptive essays and examining the factors that contribute to these difficulties from the learners' perspectives.

This study contributes to the field of social sciences and language education by providing a discipline-specific analysis of academic writing problems among criminology students, a group that has received limited attention in existing Philippine-based writing research. By integrating error analysis with students' perceived factors affecting writing performance, the study offers empirical evidence that links linguistic difficulties with contextual and motivational influences. The findings extend existing literature by highlighting how community language environment and degree-program orientation shape students' academic writing practices. Moreover, the results provide practical insights for curriculum developers and educators in designing targeted writing interventions for non-English majors, thereby contributing to more inclusive and responsive language instruction in higher education.

Review of Related Literature

Writing and Its Role in Academics

Writing is widely regarded as a crucial language skill that supports students' academic success and personal development. Mukulu et al. (2006), as cited in Nyasimi (2009),

emphasized that writing strengthens learning, critical thinking, and reflection. Competence in writing enables students to perform effectively in academic programs and prepares them for professional and research-oriented roles.

Scholars agree that writing is fundamentally a cognitive activity. Rahmat (2011) described writing as a process that involves continuous creation and evaluation of ideas, while Durga and Rao (2017) highlighted its significance as a dominant mode of communication in academic and professional settings. Writing skills involve planning, drafting, revising, and editing—processes that require sustained practice and instructional support.

Writing Difficulties

Writing difficulties may stem from learners' attitudes, beliefs, and perceived challenges related to the writing task. Khasawneh (2010) noted that negative perceptions about writing can significantly affect students' performance. Similarly, Canisi (2014) reported that many college students feel uncomfortable with writing due to difficulties in idea generation, organization, and expression. These challenges are compounded in second-language contexts, where learners must navigate unfamiliar grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Previous Studies on Writing Problems

Several studies have documented common writing errors among second-language learners. Khansir (2013) found that punctuation errors were the most frequent, while spelling errors occurred least often. Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) reported that vocabulary limitations and fragmented sentences were major sources of writing difficulty. Local studies conducted in Mountain Province have similarly identified persistent problems in grammar, diction, sentence construction, and organization among college students.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Error Analysis Theory, which views learners' errors as a valuable source of information about the language acquisition process. Corder (1981) emphasized that analyzing errors helps educators understand learners' interlanguage development and design appropriate instructional interventions. Distinctions between mistakes and errors, as discussed by Brown (1994), further guide systematic analysis of learners' written output.

Methodology

The study employed an exploratory-descriptive research design to identify and describe the common writing errors of first-year criminology students. The respondents were one hundred (100) freshmen enrolled in Purposive Communication at Mountain Province State Polytechnic College during the first semester of SY 2019–2020. Data were collected through students' descriptive essays, interviews, and focus group discussions. Frequency counts, descriptive analysis, and error classification were used to analyze the data.

Results and Discussion

The findings revealed thirteen types of recurring errors in students' essays, with improper capitalization, incorrect verb tense usage, and punctuation errors emerging as the most frequent. These results indicate persistent difficulties in applying basic writing

conventions, suggesting a need for sustained grammar instruction and writing practice. Students also reported that limited exposure to English, lack of motivation, and incomplete mastery of grammatical rules contributed to their writing problems.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that first-year criminology students experience significant grammatical and cognitive challenges in academic writing. Addressing these difficulties requires targeted instructional strategies, increased exposure to meaningful writing tasks, and greater emphasis on discipline-specific language needs. The findings underscore the importance of integrating writing support into non-language degree programs to enhance students' academic competence and professional readiness.

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