Grammatical Errors In Spoken English of University Students In Oral Communication Course

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Abstract

The present study examines the grammatical errors in spoken English of university students who are less proficient in English. The specific objectives of the study are to determine the types of errors and the changes in grammatical accuracy during the duration of the English for Social Purposes course focussing on oral communication. The language data were obtained from the simulated oral interactions of 42 students participating in five role play situations during the 14-week semester. Error analysis of 126 oral interactions showed that the five common grammar errors made by the learners are preposition, question, article, plural form of nouns, subject-verb agreement and tense. Based on Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) surface structure taxonomy, the main ways by which students modify the target forms are misinformation and omission, with addition of elements or misordering being less frequent. The results also showed an increase in grammatical accuracy in the students' spoken English towards the end of the course.

Keywords: grammatical accuracy, grammatical errors, oral communication, spoken English

Introduction

Achieving effectiveness in communication requires communicative competence which is the mastery of the knowledge of language and the ability to use the knowledge in actual communication (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). The knowledge of language, or linguistic competence, encompasses mastery of lexis, grammar and the sound system of the language. While linguistic competence needs to be complemented by sociolinguistic,

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strategic and discourse competencies for effective communication to take place, excessive gaps in linguistic accuracy can compromise meanings made.

Studies on linguistic accuracy in written texts have focussed on the sources of the errors, among which is L1 (first language) interference. For example, Bennui (2008) found L1 interference at the level of words, sentences and discourse in the study of paragraph writing of 28 third-year English-minor Thai students at Thaksin University. Bennui reported that the lexical interference takes the form of literal translation of Thai words into English whereas the interference at the sentence level involves structural borrowing from Thai language such as word order, subject-verb agreement and noun determiners. At the discourse level, "the wordiness or redundancy style of Thai writing appeared in the students' written English" (Bennui, 2008, p.88). By situating paragraphs in the context of texts produced for a particular purpose, Henry and Roseberry (2007) showed that there is a relationship between the types of errors and the move-strategy or the way in which a genre move is realised in content. Henry and Roseberry (2007) analysed a short tourist information text written in English by 40 Malay-speaking students at the University of Brunei Darussalam in terms of grammar and usage errors, and found that "by the time an English learner is ready to enter university, grammar is no longer the major linguistic problem" (p.185). In their paper, grammar error is defined as "one in which there is violation of a productive rule of language", for example, omission of an article or demonstrative preceding a singular countable noun in English (p.176). On the basis of their findings, Henry and Roseberry (2007) recommend that, among others, university students need one-to-one attention to help them with usage error which is a violation of an arbitrary but universally accepted pattern or association.

Although the Brunei university students in Henry and Roseberry (2007) did not exhibit major grammar errors in their tourism brochure, the Form Four Malaysian students in Rosli Talif and Malachi Edwin's (1989) study made many grammatical errors. Error analysis conducted on 80 scripts indicated that students from rural schools with lower proficiency in English found verb forms more difficult than other grammar items encompassing articles, plurality, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and pronouns. Out of 64 errors identified in the compositions of the rural students, it was found that 56.25% were verb form errors. In contrast, for the urban students, only 36.96% of 46 errors were verb form errors, indicating that while they were able to learn correct use of tenses, they still had difficulties with other grammar items, particularly with subject-verb agreement. For the rural students, article errors ranked second, after tenses. The studies reviewed thus far are error analysis of written student texts, and indicate some frequent types of grammatical errors but there is no common pattern across groups of learners with different characteristics (see also Abdul Rashid Mohamed et al., 2004; Haja Mohideen bin Mohamed Ali, 1996).

A search of literature on error analysis of spoken texts in English indicated a near-absence of attention in this domain. Studies on spoken English tend to deal with areas such as speaking skills (Josephine Lourdunathan, & Sujatha Menon, 2005; Ramesh Nair, Rajasegaran Krishnasamy, & Geraldine De Mello, 2006), students' reluctance to speak in English classes (Zaidan Ali Jassem, & Jassem Ali Jassem, 1997) and features of

Malaysian English (e.g. Karen Kow Yip Cheng, 1995; Norrizan Razali, 1995). Linguistic accuracy of spoken language may be more difficult to study because of the nature of speech. McCarthy (1998) writes about real dialogues which do not look neat with well-formed sentences. According to Bartram and Walton (2002), accuracy in spoken English refers to "utterances as near as to a native speaker's as possible" (p.32). Brumfit (1984) refers to the accuracy of the language content: grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. However, the grammatical accuracy in spoken language is different from written language. Beattie (1983, p.33) states that "spontaneous speech is unlike written text. It contains many mistakes, sentences are usually brief" (cited in Halliday, 1985, p.76). Brown (2003) highlights the inappropriateness of requiring students to use complete sentences when they speak and points out why the notion of utterances rather than sentences are used for describing spoken discourse. Brown (2003) went on to stress that the grammar of spoken colloquial English does not impose the use of complete sentences, making utterances such as "Your family?" and "Ya wanna come along?" appropriate. Despite the adjustments which need to be made in studies in grammatical errors in spoken language, such research would serve a pedagogic purpose by showing educators what learners have learned and what they have not yet mastered in spoken English. Such studies would also contribute to literature on linguistic properties of spoken language for materials development.

Purpose of the Study

The present study examines the grammatical errors in spoken English of university students who are less proficient in English. The specific objectives of the study are to determine the types of grammatical errors and the changes in grammatical accuracy during the duration of the English for Social Purposes course focussing on oral communication. This paper maintains the use of the term "error" as we did not set out to differentiate whether the errors are systematic or merely mistakes.

Materials and Method

The oral interaction data for this study are derived from 126 simulated interactions in role play situations produced by 42 students, with Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Bands 1 to 3, enrolled in an English for Social Purposes course at a Malaysian university. During the 50-hour course, emphasis was placed on oral communication for purposes ranging from talking about schedules and interacting with lecturers to extending hospitality and describing people and procedures. The emphasis on accuracy and fluency in different parts of the units was in accordance with the teaching-learning cycle of the genre-based approach (see Derewianka, 1991; Feez, 1998). Each unit began with listening comprehension texts, which were later used as the context for teaching grammatical features relevant to the communicative purpose, and the unit ended with role plays (see Su-Hie Ting et al, 2007). The contextualised teaching of grammar was designed to raise students' awareness of pertinent language features whereas the oral

practice at the end of the unit was to give students opportunities to use the language features learnt in simulated real-life situations.

The students performed the role plays at three junctures during the 14-week semester. The first role play in Week 6 required students to describe a specified person (e.g. their mother) to the course instructor. The second role play conducted in Week 11 focussed on apologies and invitations while the third role play in the final week of the semester involved buyer-seller interactions. The second and third role plays were conducted in pairs, and students were required to swap roles, for example, first taking the role of a customer and then a shop assistant. The role plays, conducted as part of the course assessment, were audio-taped for the purpose of this study with the consent of the students, instructor and institution.

The students were from two classes taught by the same instructor to ensure uniformity in teaching methodology and teacher-student dynamics. Since there was no streaming of students into different classes, the students' proficiency in English was assumed to be similar. The oral interaction data were collected from 54 students but only 42 sets were used for analysis due to the low quality of the recorded data of six learners and missing data for some role plays.

The transcribed oral interaction data were analysed for grammatical errors using the surface structure taxonomy of Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p.50) which is based on "the ways surface structures are altered in erroneous utterances/sentences" (cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 1995, p.61). Based on this taxonomy, the four principal ways in which learners modify target form are omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. In addition, since Ellis and Barkhuizen had pointed out the less obvious practical use of this taxonomy in grammar teaching, we took up their suggestion to incorporate a linguistic description of grammatical errors. However, instead of describing errors as noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective, comparative form and subject-verb agreement, we categorised the grammatical errors into verb form, preposition, article, plurality, tense, pronoun, question and word form to reflect the common types of errors made by the students in this study. In our analysis of grammatical errors in the oral interactions, we excluded inappropriate word choices (e.g. "comment" in place of "recommend" in "But I comment you to buy this yellow colour because ...").

Results and Discussion

In this section, results of the error analysis on grammatical errors in spoken English are presented. In the excerpts from the oral interactions, * is used to indicate error and ^ is used for missing elements in the utterances. Where relevant, reference is made to related findings from other error analysis studies on grammatical errors in written English due to a paucity of research on grammatical errors in spoken English.

Surface structure descriptions of types of errors in oral interactions

An examination of the types of errors based on surface structure descriptions (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982) shows that the most frequent error is misinformation (297 errors or 38.13% of 779), followed by omission (265 errors or 34.02%) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of types of errors based on surface structure descriptions

	Role Play 1	**Role Play 2**	**Role Play 3**	**Total**	**Percentage***
Misinformation	111	107	79	297	38.13
Omission	63	86	116	265	34.02
Addition	37	58	42	137	17.57
Misordering	0	21	6	27	3.47
Severe errors	14	16	23	53	6.80
Total errors	225	288	266	779	99.99
Word count	5,938	7,475	9,704	23,117	

*Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding off error

The high incidence of misinformation errors indicates that the students were aware of the need to use a particular grammatical feature in certain parts of the utterances but made an incorrect choice, for example, "The other stall just sell it in* about eleven ringgit like that". The frequent omission of essential parts of utterances such as auxiliary verbs give rise to simplified structures, some of which are features of speech as will be described in the next section. The use of additional grammatical features (137 errors or 17.57%) or misordering of morphemes (27 errors or 3.47%) is less frequent than misinformation and omission of elements. There are also 53 instances of severe errors whereby the utterances appear un-English, for example, "How very high price do you?" These errors do not fit Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) surface structure taxonomy. The errors are more severe than uncertainty as to which of two forms is required, categorised as "blends" by James (1998) (cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 61).

Linguistic description of errors in oral interactions

Table 2 shows the frequency of errors made by students in the oral interactions, based on linguistic description of the errors. Out of the total of 779 errors, the most frequent are preposition (161 errors) and question (116 errors).

The error analysis revealed the highest frequency of preposition errors among the categories of grammatical errors (161 instances or 20.67% of 779 errors). The problem with prepositions is due to incorrect choice (73 instances), addition of prepositions when there should not be any (54 instances) or omission (34 instances), illustrated as follows:

- Misinformation: Wait for me at* this Sunday – umm – at seven a.m. (Student 33)

- Addition: I will to* buy this bag. (Student 34)
- Omission: We can go ^ watch movie together. (Student 28

Table 2: Frequency of errors based on linguistic description

	Omission	**Addition**	**Misinformation**	**Misordering**	**Total**	**%***
Preposition	34	54	73	0	161	20.67
Question	79	2	10	25	116	14.89
Word form	20	6	58	0	84	10.78
Article	35	36	11	0	82	10.53
Verb form	39	28	8	2	77	9.88
SVA[1]	0	0	55	0	55	7.06
Plural form	43	4	8	0	55	7.06
Tense	0	0	51	0	51	6.55
Pronoun	15	7	17	0	39	5.00
Negation	0	0	6	0	6	0.77
Severe errors					53	6.80
Total	265	137	297	27	779	99.99

[1]Subject-verb agreement
*Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding off error

The results indicate that the students are uncertain of the correct usage of prepositions, similar to ESL learners in other settings. In Tetreault and Chodorow's (2008) review of studies on preposition errors for the purpose of developing preposition error detection tools, they found that preposition errors account for a substantial proportion of all ESL (English as Second Language) usage errors. Bitchener et al., (2005) found that preposition errors comprise 29% of all errors made by intermediate to advanced ESL students, and the error rate is as high as 10% in Izumi et. al's (2005) Japanese learner corpora (cited in Tetreault & Chodorow, 2008). We did not examine preposition error rate (percentage of prepositions incorrectly used) but our study shows that preposition errors constitute 20.67% of grammatical errors made by the university students – and the percentage is lower than that of the intermediate to advanced ESL students in Bitchener et. al's study. The difficulty in mastering prepositions, according to Tetreault and Chodorow (2008), "seems to be due to the great variety of linguistic functions that they serve" and choices which need to be made depending on the intention of the writer (we sat at/on/near/by the beach) (p. 24).

The second most frequent grammatical error for the less proficient students in this study is related to the question form (116 errors or 14.89%). For the analysis, we concentrated on Role Play 2 and Role Play 3 which involved students asking each other questions in given situations. Role Play 1 was essentially a monologue in which students described a specified person to the course instructor, thereby making the use of questions irrelevant. The analysis revealed that the main types of question errors are omission of auxiliary

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verb (79 instances) and misordering (25 instances) rather than misinformation (10 instances) or addition (2 instances), illustrated as follows:

- *Omission: How much ^ it it it cost? (Student 42)*
- *Misordering: So, you are* really free today? (Student 10)*
- *Misinformation: Are* you remember my birthday party on this Thursday? (Student 39)*
- *Addition: May I know what* the colour you would like? (Student 37)*

In the error analysis, we did not consider utterances reflective of spoken language such as "What time?" or "How to go?" as errors, following Brown's (2003) assertion that the grammar of spoken colloquial English does not warrant the use of complete sentences. We also found 25 utterances similar to the example of "Ya wanna come along?" cited by Brown (2003) as appropriate in spoken English. These are utterances with the structure of affirmative statements said with a questioning intonation, and responded to as questions by the interactant. These utterances are categorised as misordering of elements in our error analysis as the structure is not that of a question, and partly to show the frequent appearance of such occurrences in spoken English. However, we would argue for allowances to be made for the exclusion of misordering of elements in questions as errors in error analysis of spoken English as they are appropriate in the context of oral interactions. Another feature deserving attention is the omission of the auxiliary verb from questions (79 instances or 68.10% of total question errors). Although the omission of the auxiliary verb from questions is frequent among the less proficient students in this study and may be a common feature of their spoken English, we would maintain this as a type of question error because the ungrammaticality of the utterances is obvious (e.g. What ^ the problem? Can I know what the reason ^ ?).

The analysis of grammatical errors made by the less proficient students in the role plays show that word form error is the third highest in frequency (84 errors or 10.78% of 779). Errors of word form include incorrect use of noun, adjective, verb and adverb forms of the morpheme, for example, using "beauty", "beautiful" or "beautify" when the correct form is "beautifully", illustrated in this excerpt taken from the role play of Students 25 and 26:

Student 25:	*Oh ... Okay. I'll receive your invited. And I understand for your assignment to do. Thank you for your inviting.*
Student 26:	*Yeah, thank you.*

Instead of "invited" and "inviting", Student 25 should have said "invite" or "invitation" depending on intended formality of usage. With word form, the main type of error is misinformation (58 errors), followed by omission of essential nouns or verbs (20 errors) and there are also six addition errors. To address some of the difficulties students have with word form, a grammar section on conversion between nouns and adjectives was added to the unit on describing people in the oral communication course (Su-Hie Ting et al., 2009a).

Articles rank fourth among the grammatical errors made by the students in their role plays in the oral communication course (82 errors or 10.53%). The students either added articles unnecessarily (36 instances) or omitted them when they should be used (35 instances) but there are fewer instances of misinformation errors (11 instances). In Lightfoot's (1998) study of the usage of the English article system by Japanese second-language learners, it was found that the most frequently occurring error type is omission and this tendency is likely to have been caused by direct interference from the article-less Japanese language. In our study, omission and addition of articles are equally frequent.

Almost 10% of the grammatical errors made by the less proficient students in this study are verb form errors (77 errors or 9.88%). There are more errors of omission (39 instances) and addition (28 instances) than misinformation (8 instances) and misordering (2 instances). Examples are given below:

- *Omission: Yes, never mind. You can also have the New Straits Times. It ^ also good for – for our reading. (Student 5)*
- *Addition: I would like to buy a newspaper, The Sun, umm – which is* I heard has an interesting article about Siti Nurhaliza. (Student 23)*
- *Misinformation: Oh, no wonder it – have* sold out because it has an interesting article about Siti Nurhaliza. (Student 36)*
- *Misordering: But <u>you don't</u> forget I – I – I bring your – my secret admirer too. (Student 37)*

The omission and addition errors are mainly related to the use of the copula *be*. The omission of the copula *be* which functions as the main verb in affirmative statements makes the utterance ungrammatical in English. A similar effect is brought about by the addition of inappropriate forms of the copula *be*. The analysis of verb form errors was confined to utterances with the form and function of affirmative statements. Utterances with the structure of affirmative statements but which functioned as questions and responded to as questions by the interactants were categorised as question errors rather than verb form errors to obtain better insight into the difficulties related to constructing questions.

Subject-verb agreement errors identified in the oral interaction data are of the misinformation type (55 errors or 7.06% of 779). The less proficient students in this study tended to use the base form of the verb in spite of the singular subject, for example:

- *Yes, she <u>drive</u> a car. (Student 1)*
- *My sister – umm – quite pretty. She <u>wear</u> a scarf. (Student 5)*

In these examples, the final "s" is omitted from the verb in the third person singular in the present tense. Sometimes a plural verb is wrongly used with a singular subject, for example, "It's not too expensive. Umm – I'd like to buy your fruit. Here <u>are</u> your money" (Student 27). On other occasions, some students used a singular verb is used with a plural subject, as in "I know some people – umm – <u>buys</u> denim t-shirt" (Student 10). Similar

types of subject-verb agreement errors were also identified by Surina Nayan and Kamaruzaman Jusoff (2009) in their analysis of term papers written by students enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes course in a Malaysian university. In fact, subject-verb agreement errors are made not only by students but also academics attempting to publish in refereed journals. Flowerdew (2001) cites subject-verb agreement as one of the common surface errors in papers submitted by non-native writers of English, as pointed out by the journal editors interviewed for the study. While we accept discord in subject-verb agreement as a grammatical error often made by non-native speakers of English, our attention was drawn to the possibility of a specific type of the subject-verb agreement error being a feature of spoken English in informal settings. The use of the base form of the verb for singular subjects (e.g. she drive a car) may appear to be a subject-verb agreement error on the basis of the surface structure. However, this type of error may be a case of "past tense and present tense being not morphologically marked" (Bautista & Gonzales, 2006, p.135). The absence of morphological marking for tense was listed as a feature of Singapore English. Although Bautista and Gonzales did not include this among the features of informal Malaysian English, it has apparently surfaced in the usage of the less proficient university students in our study and could be a feature of spoken English even of proficient English speakers – an inference which needs future investigation.

Table 2 shows that errors in using the correct plural form of nouns are also found to some extent in the oral interactions of the students. Out of 55 errors in plural form, a majority are omission errors (43) in which the "s" marking for plurality is left out, with fewer errors of addition (4) and misinformation (8). Examples of these types of errors are given:

- *Omission: We have many other <u>colour</u>. You can – you can choose blue, red or white. (Student 8).*
- *Addition: It's at the bottom of – the second <u>rows</u>. (Student 18)*
- *Misinformation: But we have <u>a</u> yellow colour. (Student 3).*

The difficulty with plural form may be due to L1 influence – a conclusion reached by Marlyna Maros et al. (2007) based on their contrastive analysis of 120 English essays written by Form One Malay students. Nik Safiah Karim et. al stated that in Bahasa Melayu, the number or status of the subject does not affect the verb structure in the predicates (cited in Marlyna Maros et al., 2007, p.1). In Bahasa Melayu, for instance, plurality is expressed by using *kata bilangan* (e.g. *dua tugasan* and *banyak tugasan*) and *kata majmuk* (e.g. *tugasan-tugasan*).

In this study, 51 tense errors were identified from the oral interaction data of the less proficient students. To resolve gray areas in the identification of tense errors, subject-verb agreement and verb form errors, we settled on these guidelines in our error analysis. If the activity described is that of a third person in the present, as in "He plant a dragon fruit", the error is classified as a subject-verb agreement error rather than a tense error. If a main verb or auxiliary verb is omitted from an utterance, the error is classified as a verb form error (described earlier). In our analysis, we categorised the tense errors into use of wrong tenses (33 instances) and the wrong construction of the tenses (18 instances).

Mixing up the use of present tense, past tense and future tense occurred in various contexts in the data set but a common type of tense error is using the base form of the verb in place of:

- *the participle form: "I had ask her about it" (Student 6)*
- *the continuous tense (-ing) form: "I'm not cancel the birthday party" (Student 23)*
- *the past tense form: "I plant a dragon fruit" (Student 33)*

In the first two examples, the tenses are correct but the forms are wrongly constructed. In the third example, present tense is used in place of past tense. Tense errors were also frequently found in the writing of Form Four Chinese students in the study by Abdul Rashid Mohamed et al. (2004). Students obtaining grades A and B for the English paper in the Lower Secondary School Examination (*Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah, PMR*) made fewer errors than the grade C students. The English tense system seems more difficult compared to languages such as Chinese and Bahasa Melayu in which words are added before a verb to situate the time of the action. For example, "Siti *telah makan sebiji epal*" is written in English as "Siti ate/has eaten an apple". If this is considered a case of negative transfer from other languages, then sensitising learners to the source of the error might help them in noticing the incorrect form. This is assuming that the learners are familiar with the past and participle forms of regular and irregular verbs.

Pronoun errors account for 5% (or 39) of the 779 grammatical errors made by the students in the five role plays in the oral communication course. There are more misinformation errors (17 instances) and omissions of pronouns (15 instances) than addition (7 instances). The pronoun errors involve certain types of pronouns:

Incorrect use of personal pronouns to refer to gender:	*My – umm – my brother is so handsome and – umm – he's very tall. And – umm – he's also – not fat. Umm – she – she just has a job – as a auditor and now had a job at Kampung (Student 4)*
Incorrect form of reflexive pronouns:	*Umm – he – His body is – umm – tall and look – umm – handsome also [laugh] and at the same time he introduce his, hisself. (Student 26)*
Incorrect use of relative pronouns for human and inanimate objects:	*I have a group of friends which – umm – which very love football very much. (Student 11)*
Addition of relative pronouns:	*Do you know that how to solve the calculation of statistics? (Student 36)*
Omission of possessive pronouns ('s):	*Ah? Who are they? Umm – My cousin. My cousin^ friend. (Student 9)*

As the data for this study are in the form of speech rather than written text, some lapses in correct use of personal pronouns to refer to gender might be expected but the other types of pronoun errors are more serious. These four types of pronouns (personal, reflexive, relative and possessive) are also listed among the common errors made by Malaysians in Hughes and Heah's (2006) grammar reference. In addition, Anthony Seow and Grace Tay (2004) found that "possessive pronouns are consistently more difficult for both groups of students to acquire than personal pronouns [e.g. me, we, you], and that, within the possessive pronouns, those with the nominal function (e.g. mine, yours, ours) are generally more problematic than those with the determiner function (e.g. my, your, our)". This is an experimental study conducted on the instructional effect of formal (i.e., focused on rules and drills) and informal (i.e., communicative) classroom learning environments on 67 Primary Two students in Singapore. Admittedly, the study by Anthony Seow and Grace Tay (2004) involved primary school students but some of the university students in our study are still grappling with correct use of possessive pronouns.

Finally, six negation errors were produced by the less proficient students as they interacted with each other in role play situations. An example of misinformation error in negative statements is "I think so not" (Student 9). The error is more complex than incorrect placement of the negating particle, *not*. Croker et al. (2003) state that one relatively infrequent error in English involves the placement of the inflection to the right of a negative rather than to the left but other error types also occur. Elliot (1983) also highlighted the infrequency and variability of negation errors in her study of grammatical errors made by Chinese second language learners of English studying at universities in Singapore. Only three negation errors were found and the errors were not of a particular type. Elliot concluded that the essays did not call for the use of negation. Mitchell and Myles (2001) affirm that contrary to the underlying systematicity[2] claimed for the development of the rules of negation, performance is seen to vary "quite substantially from moment to moment" (p.18). In view of the variability in negation errors, remedial teaching may not be as straightforward as providing and practising rules for construction of negative statements.

To sum up, based on the surface structure descriptions of grammatical errors identified in the oral interaction data, the results show that the frequent types of errors are misinformation and omission. "Missing sentence constituents (object, subject, auxiliary verb, copula, preposition) [give] the impression of phrasal 'telegraphic' speech" (p.135), according to Bautista and Gonzales (2006) in their description of Malaysian English. The results also show that the preposition and question present the greatest difficulty to the less proficient students in this study, followed by word form, article and verb form. In Abdul Rashid Mohamed et al. (2004) error analysis of essays, preposition and verb form ranked the highest among the grammatical errors for the Chinese Form Four students of different levels of English proficiency. Verb form is also a difficult grammar item for the less proficient students from rural schools in Rosli Talif and Malachi Edwin's (1984) study. Unlike these two studies which examined grammatical errors in written texts, our study focussed on spoken English. The students were required to produce dialogues in four out of the five role plays conducted in the course. It is because of the interactive

nature of the speech data we used that question errors emerged as a frequent type of error in the data set. The main features of question errors are omission of the auxiliary verb and misordering of elements in the question (using the affirmative structure as question). We argue that using the affirmative structure as question is a feature of speech rather than a grammatical error. Based on descriptions of features of Malaysian English in the literature, we also contend that the omission of the morphological marking of past tense and present tense (using the base form of the verb) may be an acceptable feature of speech. But we still maintain the omission of the plural "-s" ending as a sign of ungrammaticality rather than a feature of speech. However, the frequent misinformation errors for word form, subject-verb agreement and tense speak of the extent of students' grammatical inaccuracy. The almost equal number of omission and addition errors for articles and verb forms also point to these grammatical categories being difficult for the students. By comparison, errors in pronouns, questions and negation are less frequent.

Changes in grammatical accuracy during oral communication course

The changes in error to word count ratio indicate that there is an improvement in grammatical accuracy of the students' spoken English towards the end of the course. A computing of the error count to word count ratio for each role play revealed that the ratio is the same for Role Plays 1 and 2 (1 error in 26 words) but lower for Role Play 3 (1 error in 37 words) (Table 3). Even though the students talked more in the latter role play, they made less grammatical errors.

Table 3: Frequency and error to word count ratio for linguistic description of errors during the course

	Role Play 1		**Role Play 2**		**Role Play 3**	
	Freq	Error: Word Count	Freq	Error: Word Count	Freq	Error: Word Count
Preposition	40	1:148	65	1:115	56	1:173
Question	0	0	70	1:107	46	1:211
Verb form	36	1:165	8	1:934	33	1:294
Word form	24	1:247	31	1:241	29	1:334
Plural form	12	1:495	14	1:534	29	1:335
Article	36	1:165	26	1:288	20	1:485
Tense	10	1:594	26	1:288	11	1:882
SVA[1]	38	1:156	12	1:623	9	1:1078
Pronoun	13	1:457	17	1:440	9	1:1078
Negation	2	1:2969	3	1:2492	1	1:9704
Total errors	225		288		266	
Word count	5,938		7,475		9,704	
Error:Word count	1: 26		1: 26		1: 37	

[1]Subject-verb agreement

Based on a linguistic description of the errors, there is generally a decline in the frequency of errors across the three role plays. The students were found to make fewer errors in Role Play 3 conducted in the final week of the semester than in Role Play 1 conducted in Week 6 of the semester, with the exception of the plural form which is called into play in Role Play 3 due to the nature of the interaction involving buying and selling. A variety of countable and uncountable nouns is needed for the transaction and in the process, the students made more errors with the plural form in the third role play than in earlier role plays.

Unexpectedly, the students made noticeably more preposition and tense errors, and fewer verb form errors, in Role Play 2 than in the other two role plays. Role Play 2 involved extending, accepting or declining hospitality and invitations, which rely on the use of a variety of verbs and prepositions associated with the verbs (e.g. apologise for, replace on, promise to). In the context of an invitation, the students had to use past tense to talk about prior plans, present tense to extend/respond to invitation, and future tense to talk about future activities. In addition to the tendency to use the base form of the verb in place of the past tense, the students also used wrong tenses, for example, saying "I will apologise with* you" instead of "I apologise to you".

Apart from situation-related factors, the results show that as students progressed during the semester and were explicitly taught grammar using the genre-based approach, their grammatical accuracy increased. The findings indicate that an English for Social Purposes course focussing on oral communication can bring about an improvement in the grammatical accuracy of students. Our findings reported in another paper (Su-Hie Ting et al., 2009b) show that the less proficient students developed fluency during the course. Taken together, these findings suggest that despite the limited hours of classroom contact (about 50 hours in 14 weeks), an oral communication course can have perceptible effect on less proficient students' oral abilities.

Conclusion

The study examined the grammatical accuracy in spoken English in simulated oral interactions among less proficient ESL learners in a Malaysian tertiary institution. The findings show that the students developed grammatical accuracy towards the end of the oral communication course. In all grammatical categories examined, the students made fewer errors in the third role play compared to the first role play, with the exception of the plural form which was used more in the third role play involving transactions. Based on the surface structure description of Dulay et al., (1982), misinformation and omission account for 72% of the total grammatical errors identified, with addition and misordering of elements being less frequent. Based on a linguistic description of the errors, preposition and question are the most difficult for the less proficient students constituting about 35% of total errors, following by word form and article (about 11% each). The other types of errors are relatively less frequent: subject-verb agreement, plural form, tense, pronoun, misordering of question and negative statements. There are also severe grammatical errors in which the types of error are not easily identifiable.

This study has identified common errors for remedial teaching where spoken English is concerned. As an error analysis of spoken language, this study has contributed by identifying two grammatical categories for which allowances need to be made for features of speech, that is, the use of the affirmative sentence structure as a question, the use of the base form of the verb in place of the past tense form. While the grammaticality of these utterances is a contentious issue, the nature of spontaneous language use in speech and its resemblance to authentic language use need to be considered. Marking students down on grammatical inaccuracy for these grammatical errors might be reflective of importing an expectation of grammatical correctness akin to that of written language which is produced with time for planning and editing and which represents experience as products rather than processes (see Halliday, 1985).

Nevertheless, as this study focussed on students who are less proficient in English and did not include proficient speakers of English, we are unable to provide empirical evidence as to the authentic language use of proficient speakers in non-native English environments, apart from relying on descriptions of features of Malaysian English in the literature. Further research involving error analysis of spoken language used by proficient speakers would provide baseline data on acceptable limits of grammatical accuracy of spoken English in non-native English environments.

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Notes

[2]Mitchell and Myles (2001, p. 18) explain the underlying systematicity to the development of the rules of negation as follows: "It has been commonly found that learners start off by tacking a negative particle of some kind on to the end of an utterance (*no you are playing here*); next, they learn to insert a basic negative participle into the verb phrase (*Mariana not coming today*); and finally, they learn to manipulate modifications to auxiliaries and other details of negation morphology, in line with the full TL rules for negation (*I can't play that one*) (Examples from Ellis, 1994, p. 100)"

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