



## Analyzing Grammatical Errors: A Case Study of Virtual University of Pakistan

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**Abstract:** *The current study investigated an overview of the grammatical errors committed by the students of Virtual University of Pakistan (VoU) particularly in the English courses. These students were mainly from the computer science and management sciences programs. However, the learners fail to concentrate on the grammatical errors, which are the important part of their writing skills. The researchers selected a stratified random sample of ninety-nine students through the random number technique by using T-Yamani's method of selecting a sample for descriptive cum statistical analysis from online creative writings in thousands of Graded Discussion Board (GDB). These GDBs are part of the internal exams system of VoU. The study points out the most common grammatical errors committed by the graduate and post-graduate students of the Virtual University of Pakistan and suggests some remedial measures to correct those errors. Moreover, the research also provides facilitation for the teachers and students for further research in this area.*

**Key Words:** Grammatical Errors, Virtual University, Graded Discussion Board (GDB), L1, L2

### Introduction

The current study aimed to provide assistance to the learners of the Virtual University of Pakistan in their writings. For this purpose, students' short essays on the Graded Discussion Board (GDB) from four English courses in the Virtual University of Pakistan will be studied; the most commonly occurring errors will be identified and evaluated. The top twenty to twenty-five commonly occurring errors will be selected for further study to find out solutions to improve students' writings. Strategies for the virtual teachers and the students will be suggested to correct these errors for the improvement of students' written expressions in the virtual model of education. In order to fix the problem of errors, various approaches like contrastive analysis (CA), interlanguage, and error analysis (EA) were devised by linguists to improve language learning. The difference between errors and mistakes was highlighted. Behaviorists and Mentalists influenced the study of errors as language learning was considered as habit formation and innate ability—personal and professional relationships based on proper language use. Language tells about the personality of man as it is a well-known statement that style is the man itself. You could not utilize your abilities your talents properly if you were not careful in the use of language. Your use of language is just like your passport to move around, and it is up to you how you use the gift of language as an asset or a liability by meeting the common standards of correctness.

If we make a comparison of three skills i.e. listening, reading, and speaking, writing is a highly obscure and comparatively pain-taking skill. Concentration, a conscious effort, and practice are necessary things to acquire this. Words disappear quickly in speaking skills, but a permanent record is maintained in writing skills, and comments leave a permanent record on paper. It is not a linear process rather a spiral one.

The graphical and grammatical system of a language is presented through visuals. It is a process of both coding and encoding the expressions working in the writer's mind. [Leki \(1991\)](#) makes a difference between first and second language writers: "Second and foreign language writing tends to be more

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constrained, more difficult and less effective than writing in a first language." This study points out the most common grammatical errors committed by the graduate and post-graduate students of the Virtual University of Pakistan and suggests some remedial measures to correct those errors. Moreover, the research also provides facilitation for the teachers and students for further research in this area.

The fact that writing is a difficult skill is not surprising as writing ability involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the knowledge of genres and discourses, the recognition of writing techniques and strategies, as well as the awareness of social and cultural factors, all of which are intertwined ([Burns & Siegel, 2018](#)). Moreover, it requires writers to take control of various elements fundamental to the writing process, such as content, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics ([Nuruzzaman, Islam, & Shuchi, 2018](#); [Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Bidin, 2016](#)). Due to the lack of emphasis on grammar during primary and secondary education, a number of students come into an academic writing class at the tertiary level without sound knowledge of grammar that will allow them to produce grammatically correct sentences in their written assignments. Without a systematic inquiry into these errors, most teachers can roughly and intuitively perceive which errors are more predominant than others, but only through a systematic investigation of errors like Error Analysis (EA) can teachers truly discover the most frequently made errors or the grammatical elements that many of their students find the most challenging to produce with accuracy. The awareness teachers have of the recurrent errors can allow them to prevent them from recurring in the future ([Al-Sobhi, 2019](#)). This is an important role Error Analysis plays in a writing class.

## Literature Review

American linguist [Lado \(1957\)](#) started a systematic study of errors. Different theories were devised about errors. Charles Fries is the first person who formulated the Contrastive Analysis approach in 1945, which was used by Robert [Lado in the 1950s](#). Contrastive Analysis (CA) theory was the first technique that studied language errors; the main concern of the theory was "the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of languages in order to determine both the differences and similarities between them ([Ferris, 2002, p. 1](#))". The contrastive analysis focused on the interference of the mother tongue, which affect different levels of language: phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic. According to [Ellis \(1998:38\)](#), Contrastive Analysis is "a set of procedures for comparing and contrasting the linguistic systems of two languages in order to identify their structural similarities and differences." Error analysis is called the collection, studying, and classification of errors. It provides not only causes but also solutions to the errors. Psychologists believe language learning is just like a bicycle riding (e.g. [Chastain 1998](#)). The other idea is that language is the product of mental faculty ([Brown, 1994](#)).

According to the behaviorists, untreated errors will be the cause of fossilization, and these need immediate correction if we want to remove bad habits (Skinner, 1992). The Mentalists consider errors as the process of continuous learning. According to [Corder \(1967\)](#), errors are a sign of progress, while [Selinker \(1972\)](#) stated errors to be a factor of developing interlanguage naturally.

[Ferris \(2004\)](#) took a different position on this issue, he regarded this debate as incomplete and without solid conclusion; moreover, Truscott has underestimated the positive research about error correction in ESL classroom, and as he described in his 1996 article, if students ask for correction, teachers should avoid that. Therefore, it is strange to reject students' offer about error correction.

[Truscott \(1996\)](#) states in his paper that he is convinced with grammatical accuracy. He considers feedback in error correction an important thing and lays stress on the importance of guided response to students' writings. He considers error correction in the sense of improvement of the students for the purpose of accuracy.

On both sides, observations and experiments are present in favour and against the grammar correction. Truscott has presented a different opinion that is why his idea appealed to the people dealing the second language learners, but in spite of that, there is a dominant view for error correction to learn a second language.

[Ferris \(2004\)](#) talks about the reliability of studies against error correction by the school led by Truscott. He raises the question that there are only a few studies about the students who have received the correction. He suggests that the scale of these studies should be enlarged to find the actual picture

for error correction, keeping in mind the actual stance of students with error correction and students without error correction over a period of time. Such researches are very rare in reality as the majority of the teachers feel that students will not be confident enough to write freely without error correction, and they will require positive feedback from the teachers.

[Ferris \(2004\)](#) further states that these studies have a discrepancy regarding the use of research design, and it was shocking to see that studies were different from each other in various parameters. Christopher Hichens (n.d.) puts it: "What can be ascertained without evidence can be dismissed just as easily". Now the question is how students' errors should be corrected by the teacher. Where teacher's feedback is necessary? Teachers should fix all the mistakes, or there should be some relaxation at the start of error correction. In finding the answers of these questions, error analysis has an important role. The teacher's job is to determine the nature of errors found in students' writings and then to decide about its treatment. Whether students themselves correct the error or need a teacher's help or error correction will hamper students' creative thought and the timing of error feedback; all these will be decided by the teacher. Error correction is not just teaching rules of correction through practice drills again and again to have improvement for later writing; rather, it requires an eclectic approach by the teacher to use appropriate remedies and help the learners to discover the relevant rules. Reasons for error are the main things for error correction for the teacher. [Harmer \(1998\)](#) recommends three things for the teacher: he should know the problems of the students by listening to them, then select the problems and lastly apply techniques for the remedy of these problems. [Corder \(1973\)](#) states that the starting point of error correction is mere the awareness about the error.

Studies regarding errors are conducted to improve teaching or the improvement of teaching materials through identifying (1) learning strategies, (2) cause of errors, and (3) similar error problems (Richards et al.1992). The above two points support the third one, which is the process of error analysis because language teaching cannot be separated from EA. Teachers, syllabus designers, and test developers have always shown interest in students' errors which became the cause of effective teaching materials and teaching techniques based on different kinds of tests to fulfill the requirements of the learners. Therefore, language teachers' and syllabus designers' points of view will be more important as far as the implications of EA are concerned.

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## Research Questions

- What are the ratio and frequency of most common grammatical errors among students of Virtual University of Pakistan?

## Research Design

The method of this study is both qualitative and quantitative. [Corder's model \(1967 & 1973\)](#), [Ellis suggestions \(1998, pp. 51 – 52\)](#) and James' point of view for error analysis would be utilized for the current study with some contextual adaptability. For sample selection, T- Yamani's method of selecting stratified random sample for descriptive analysis will be used. Through this technique, a sample of 99 students

will be selected from different strata of courses with proportional allocation, i.e., by generating a random number technique from the strength of 5169 students. Data will be taken from a secondary source. For statistical analysis, mean, median, mode will be drawn to check the skewness of the data, and SPSS 20 will be used for one sample "t-test" to find the value of "t".

The data has been taken from a secondary source of the spring 2012 semester. Stratified random sample from different strata with proportional allocation has been selected by generating a random number technique to select 99 students. In a stratified sample, the population is in the form of different portions which are called strata. Each stratum is homogeneous. This technique reduces sampling error and often improves the representativeness of the sample. The sample is selected randomly from each stratum. The detail is as follows.

Strength of Courses in Graded Discussion Boards

ENG 001= 350

ENG101 = 1468

ENG201 = 2306

ENG301 = 1045

There are 350 students in Elementary English (ENG001), 1468 students in an English Comprehension course (ENG101), 2306 students in Business and Technical English (ENG201) and 1045 students in a Business Communication course (ENG301).

### T-Yamani (Method of Selecting Sample) for Descriptive Analysis

T-Yamane (1967:886) provides a simplified formula to calculate sample sizes. This formula was used to calculate the sample sizes.

$$n \cong \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

N= Total Population = 5169

e= Margin of Error (Level of Significance) , e=10%

$$n \cong \frac{5169}{1 + (5169 \times 0.01)} = 98.102 \cong 99 = \text{Sample Size}$$

### Stratified Selection of Random Sample with Proportional Allocation

#### ENG001

$$n1 \cong \frac{N1}{N} \times n$$

$$n1 \cong \frac{350}{5169} \times 99 = 6.703 \cong 7$$

#### ENG101

$$n2 \cong \frac{N2}{N} \times n$$

$$n2 \cong \frac{1468}{5169} \times 99 = 28.11 \cong 28$$

#### ENG201

$$n3 \cong \frac{N3}{N} \times n$$

$$n3 \cong \frac{2306}{5169} \times 99 = 44.165 \cong 44$$

### ENG301

$$n4 \cong \frac{N4}{N} \times n$$

$$n4 \cong \frac{1045}{5169} \times 99 = 20.014 \cong 20$$

Through T-Yamani's method of selecting a sample for descriptive analysis, a stratified sample of 7 students from ENG 001, 28 from ENG101, 44 from ENG201, 20 from ENG301, and a total of 99 students was taken from the four courses. Essays were reviewed carefully; errors were highlighted and categorized in MS Excel 2010 version on the x-axis, and students were placed on the y axis. Mean, median, and mode were calculated to see the skewness of the data. We calculated the mean of the data by using SPSS 22 version. The various test was used to data, and the result was compared with the other mean. It was found that both the means are equal and the bar graph is slightly positively skewed.

### Data Analysis

Table: 1 demonstrates the number of errors committed by the students of VoIP has been drawn in Excel Sheet. The sample of 99 students has been evaluated, which shows the total number of errors committed by the students within the whole population from where sample has been taken.

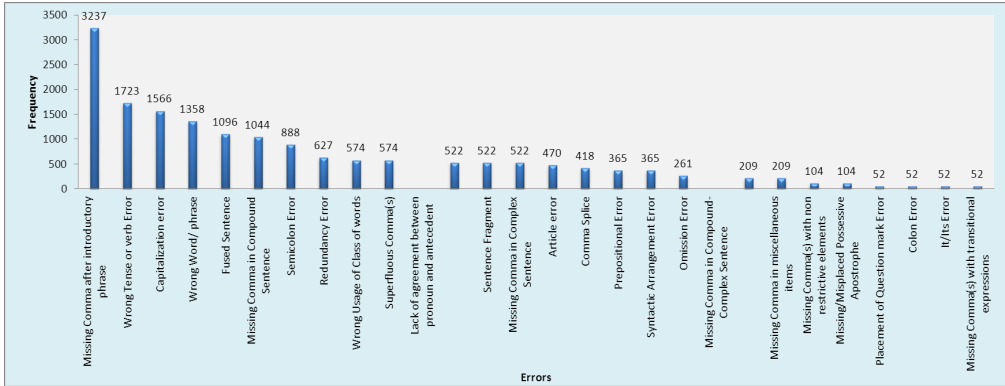
**Table 1.** Percentages of Grammatical Errors

S. No	Grammatical Errors	Frequency	Total Number of Students Committing the Error	%age	Angle	Angle %age
1	Missing Comma after introductory element	62	3237	62.63	76.96552	21.37931034
2	Wrong Tense or verb Error	33	1723	33.33	40.96552	11.37931034
3	Capitalization error	30	1566	30.30	37.24138	10.34482759
4	Wrong Word/phrase	26	1358	26.26	32.27586	8.965517241
5	Fused Sentence	21	1096	21.21	26.06897	7.24137931
6	Missing Comma in Compound Sentence	20	1044	20.20	24.82759	6.896551724
7	Semicolon Error	17	888	17.17	21.10345	5.862068966
8	Redundancy Error	12	627	12.12	14.89655	4.137931034
9	Wrong Usage of Class of words	11	574	11.11	13.65517	3.793103448
10	Superfluous Comma(s)	11	574	11.11	13.65517	3.793103448
11	Lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent	10	522	10.10	12.41379	3.448275862
12	Sentence Fragment	10	522	10.10	12.41379	3.448275862
13	Missing Comma in Complex Sentence	10	522	10.10	12.41379	3.448275862
14	Article error	9	470	9.09	11.17241	3.103448276
15	Comma Splice	8	418	8.08	9.931034	2.75862069
Total		290		292.93	360.00	

Table 2 above shows the top fifteen mostly occurred errors among students. There is the column of the percentage of errors committed by the students in a sample of 99. There is also the percentage of pie

chart column according to its circumference. The frequency of the errors shows that there are five to six common errors committed by a majority of the students.

### Total Strength of Students Committing the Errors



Graph 1: Total Number of Students Committing the Errors

### Grammatical Errors Committed by VoP Students



Graph 2: Grammatical Errors

**Table 3.** Students' Frequency of Errors

Errors(x)	Sample Frequency (f)	Total Number of Students Committing the Errors	% Students	x*f	cf
0	2	104	2	0	2
1	13	678	13	13	15
2	23	1201	23	46	38
3	25	1305	25	75	63
4	15	783	15	60	78
5	3	156	3	15	81
6	13	678	13	78	94
7	3	156	3	21	97
8	1	52	1	8	98
9	1	52	1	9	99
	99	5169		325	665

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum fx}{\sum} = \frac{325}{99} = 3.28$$

$$\text{Mode} = 3$$

$$\text{Median} = 3$$

Table 3 shows the number of the students who commit a specific number of mistakes, as Figure 5 shows. It is also observed that the mean of the data in Table 3 is higher than the mode and median of the data; this thing shows that the strength of the students is large who commit three mistakes.

In data analysis, two dimensional analyses have been presented; one is student wise, and the other is error wise. In student-wise analysis, it can be observed that some mistakes are greater than other mistakes. On the other hand, the number of those students who commit three or four mistakes is higher. This means that if we correct these three or four mistakes of the students, we shall create a very positive impact on the writings of the vast majority of the students as our sample is representational and random in different strata.

It is also observed that mean of the data in Table 3 is higher than the mode and median of the data; this thing also shows that the strength of the students is large who commit three mistakes which is a good sign for improvement. As it is seen in table 2, 62 percent of students commit the error of missing comma after introductory phrase, if we see this picture in total sample of 5169, 3204 students commit this mistake. This is quite a large number of students. The next error is of tense or verb error which is 33 percent; it means that 1702 students commit this error. The percentage of comma errors like missing comma after introductory phrase, missing comma in compound sentence, superfluous comma, missing comma in complex sentence, comma splice, missing comma in compound-complex sentence etc.

## Conclusion

The most frequently found errors were errors at word level, including errors on nouns, articles, verbs, word classes, and prepositions, while mechanical errors and errors at sentence level occurred much less frequently. The present study raises three issues that deserve more attention. Firstly, students of Virtual University still make grammatical errors that impair the quality of their writing. Although errors like the misuse of singular form instead of plural form, article errors, or subject-verb disagreements might not interfere with the meanings students try to convey, they can undermine the quality of their writing, especially when they appear in large numbers. Teachers as well as readers would agree that even though a piece of writing contains clear, organized ideas and accurate vocabulary, it cannot be regarded as high-quality if it is replete with grammatical errors, as grammatical accuracy is a key element of good writing. To improve students' writing quality, teachers' attempts to keep these grammatical errors at bay or reduce their occurrences are thus crucial. Secondly, grammatical errors may prevent students from producing publishable work in the future. When students pursue higher degrees, they are required to conduct research and publish their work. Therefore, bachelor's degree programs must equip students

with the necessary writing skills that will allow them to produce writings that reach publishable standards in the future. The main concern is if students continue to make grammatical errors in their writing, the prospects of them being able to write publishable work will be bleak. To secure a better future, university teachers' determined efforts to assist students in fixing these errors are thus imperative.

Errors with highest percentage can be selected for further study. Further research can be conducted that from which level these errors are occurring, what are their reasons, how far the mother tongue and teaching methodology is involved in occurring of these errors? Why few errors are more in number than the other errors? A comparison of virtual students and traditional mode of students can be made with two samples and similarities can be traced out.

## Recommendations

- Currently, Virtual university is teaching grammar in two courses directly and three courses indirectly in which two are related to business, two are purely language courses and one is related with literature i.e. Introduction to Drama and Poetry. The university is offering courses in Computer and Management Sciences; therefore, students have a background in accounting and sciences.
- This is also a fact that the majority of the students are those who cannot get admission due to average marks, having limited financial resources or living in remote areas or they are working professionals; therefore, there is a need to make things too simple for better understanding of the students. As it is seen that face to face interaction is more necessary for effective communication and virtual education have limitation in that aspect but technology is making things possible for easy learning.
- Whatever being taught to them is through the internet, handouts, reference books and DVDs; moreover, students can clarify their problems via Moderated Discussion Boards (MDBs) and emails, but in spite of that, there is a need to improve these grammatical errors by opting more helping techniques like online quizzes specifically related with grammatical practices can be launched. The students can find their answers after solving the quizzes.
- Facebook pages can be launched to encourage better writing practices for the students. Through these pages and blogs, students can be encouraged to find solutions to their grammatical problems by sharing online helping websites for better expression.
- Virtual University is going to start a Video Web Conferencing website i.e., Big Blue Button for the facilitation of the students. On this forum, teachers can take online audio and video tutorials parallel to the number of recorded broadcasted lectures in a week. This thing will give the feeling of traditional classroom environment to virtual education system because students in thousands can participate through this facility and can ask questions; other students will listen to these questions and answers. This forum can easily be utilized to improve grammatical problems.

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