

# **SQ SAALQUARTERLY**

**MICA (P) 240/10/2007**

No.83 August 2008

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# Brief Research Report

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## Students' Written Errors: A Summary of Preliminary Results

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### ABSTRACT

This one-year project involved the creation of a corpus of undergraduate and post graduate writing in the university, with the main aim of identifying and categorizing patterns of written errors made in the context of a meaning-focused writing task. A secondary follow-up aim of the project was to survey perceptions of tertiary teachers of English and other courses of the grammaticality and coherence of persistent sentence- and paragraph-level errors. The predominant types of error found in students' writing were (1) word-based errors involving collocation, preposition and idiomatic expression, (2) errors in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and typos, and (3) errors in the use of articles and determiners. In the survey, the respondents found grammar and coherence problems which impede meaning much more unacceptable than those which do not. The initial findings of the project can provide an empirically justifiable rationale for designing materials using particular types of error. Materials design in this sense is able to address the specific and relevant language needs of the students. However, the survey results pose a very interesting question for materials development as well: Which errors need most attention – those which are most frequently occurring or those which impede meaning the most?

**KEYWORDS:** Second language writing, writing errors, syllabus design, materials development

## **INTRODUCTION**

This one-year project funded by the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning in NUS involved the creation of a corpus of undergraduate and post graduate writing in the university, with the main aim of identifying and categorizing patterns of written errors made in the context of a meaning-focused writing task. A random sampling of 1000 essays yielding a corpus of about one million words in the database were collected across diverse groups of students, coded and stratified according to different parameters including faculty, nationality and entrance level language proficiency.

A secondary follow-up aim of the project was to survey perceptions of tertiary teachers of English and other courses of the grammaticality and coherence of persistent sentence- and paragraph-level errors.

This project is significant because it can provide vital and specific indications of aspects of language lacking amongst the learners. It can also facilitate a more systematic and grounded approach to the direction and design of various pedagogic programmes and it may inform the administration and implementation of certain language related policies or decisions at the university.

## **FRAMEWORK**

The project essentially used a bottom-up approach to coding data: the general framework emerged through a constant reworking of error categories through a series of encoding sessions and negotiations among 12 professionally trained teachers of English. This helped address the usual problem of “preestablished” frameworks dictating how local realities and issues must be described and understood (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 74).

There is a healthy debate and discussion on the nature of errors in second language research. From the point-of-view of interlanguage studies and SLA (Second Language Acquisition), “errors” are generally explained through the lens of first language and cultural influences, which are part of the process in mastering a second language (Leki, 1995; Ferris 2002). From the point-of-view of computational linguistics, one concern is the empirical determination of an error: when does an error become perceived as such (Schneider & McCoy, 1998)?

This project took a pedagogical approach to error recognition: what are the dominant types of errors in the writing of students as coded by teachers themselves? In the future, the project might be extended through interlanguage and computational frameworks so as to determine more accurately the nature of these predominant “errors.”

## RESULTS

### *Types of error*

In undergraduate writing (stratified according to Qualifying English Test band, nationality, course and faculty), the predominant types of errors are (1) *Wcip*, (2) *Mec* and (3) *Art or Det*. *Wcip* is a word problem category covering collocation, preposition and idiom errors. *Mec* refers to errors in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and typos, and *Art or Det* refers to errors in the use of articles and determiners. Although *Mec* may formally not be categorized as a grammatical error, it emerged as a dominant type of error during the frame-working and early coding stages.

In postgraduate writing (stratified according to language support module, faculty, and nationality), the *Wcip* category also forms the error type that most frequently occurs. The basic and intermediate English groups show more than one third of their errors consisting of *Wcip* errors compared to the advanced course scripts, which show that one quarter of the total errors are *Wcip* errors. Apart from *Wcip*, errors in *Mec*, *Art or Det* and *Nn* constitute 50% or more of the errors across all postgraduate groups.

### *Survey*

Eighty-three (83) respondents completed the online survey, 77 of whom indicated whether or not they are tertiary teachers of English or English linguistics. Of these teachers, 49 (64%) teach English (Group A) while 28 (36%) teach other content subjects (Group B).

In survey section one, respondents were asked to rate the grammatical acceptability of 15 sentences taken from the research corpus using a Likert Scale (1 for unacceptable, 4 for acceptable). In survey section two, they were asked to evaluate the coherence of two paragraphs also taken from the corpus using a Likert Scale (1 for incoherent, 4 for coherent). For each of the items in both

sections, the respondents were given the option to explain their rating.

For the first section on the acceptability of errors, all 15 sentences were rated as generally unacceptable by the respondents. However, some “sentences” were clearly much more unacceptable than others, in particular two sentence fragments. Some sentences, for example the one with a missing article, were also judged more acceptable than others. Teachers of content subjects found a sentence with a prepositional error generally acceptable.

For the second section on coherence in two paragraphs, the respondents generally found both paragraphs incoherent, but they found paragraph one more problematic than paragraph two because the former had a more holistic problem in coherence – there was no central topic – as compared to the latter, whose problem was “flow” or the lack of “relations” (a recurring word used by the respondents) between sentences and ideas.

Both groups of respondents articulated similar problems with paragraph two but Group A tended to ask for a more explicit connection between sentences and ideas, while Group B tended to isolate the source of incoherence and then to look beyond the paragraph itself in order to make sense of its own coherence. Group B, therefore, would try to “resolve” problems of coherence by relating the paragraph to the rest of the content of the essay. Group A tended to see coherence as more self-contained within the paragraph itself.

In general, the respondents found grammar and coherence problems which impede meaning less acceptable than those which do not.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING**

The initial findings of the project can provide an empirically justifiable rationale for designing materials using particular types of errors. Materials design in this sense is able to address the specific and relevant language needs of the students. Moreover, the very little time students have in their English language proficiency courses in NUS might be utilized more effectively as teachers and coordinators are now more able to empirically focus on errors which are more predominant than others.

However, the survey results pose a very interesting question for materials development as well: Which errors need most attention – those which most

frequently occur or those which impede meaning the most?

The answer(s) to this question can, of course, only make the teaching of English in the university more meaningful and valuable to students.

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## In Other Publications

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### Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics: Responsibilities to Colleagues

British Association for Applied Linguistics, UK

Self-interest and personal factors should not be allowed to interfere with a commitment to the production and dissemination of knowledge in applied linguistics, and interaction with colleagues should contribute to a positive working environment. When they are acting as employers, applied linguists have a duty to implement fair practices and to promote equal opportunities in appointments, appraisal and promotion.

**Referring to the work of others.** Applied linguists should not knowingly misrepresent the work of others. They should never present other people's work as their own; they should acknowledge in full all those who contributed to their research and publications; and they should clearly identify and reference any material which comes from other authors' publications or from personal communications.

**Reviews and references.** Applied linguists are involved in a wide range of review processes. They review books, book proposals, manuscripts, and research grant applications, and they are involved in the accreditation of courses, the examination of theses, the writing of references, and in appraisal and promotion procedures. There is general responsibility to provide an honest evaluation of the work in question. More specifically, it is important to:

- avoid conflicts of interest. It is not good practice to review work when there is a personal connection with its author;
- protect confidentiality. Confidential material, reviews and personal references should not be discussed with colleagues unless there is a *good professional* reason for doing so;

- refrain from drawing on the ideas in the unpublished manuscripts or articles being reviewed;
- supply requested references or reviews promptly;
- encourage practices which favour equality of opportunity (e.g. anonymity for both reviewer and reviewed).

**Distribution of work.** In departments or groups where responsibilities are shared, it is important to *try* to ensure that work is distributed fairly. In higher education, academics frequently have the three responsibilities of teaching, administration and research. The distribution of involvement with each of these activities should be worked out through careful and explicit processes of negotiation.

**Negotiating roles and responsibilities.** When working in collaborative or team research with other researchers, research assistants, interpreters, clerical staff or students, applied linguists should make everyone's ethical and professional obligations clear. Care should be taken to clarify the roles, rights and obligations of team members in relation to:

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- the division of labour and responsibilities;
- workload;
- access and rights in data and field notes;
- access to travel and conference expenses;
- publication;
- co-authorship in publication.

**Working in other countries.** When working away from one's own locality, it is important to consider the interests of local scholars and researchers. In locations away from the UK, matters such as the disparity of resources or access to publications may need to be handled with sensitivity. The status of "visiting expert" can also be problematic, although seeking the active involvement of local applied linguists may help to avoid this.

**Applied linguists as employers.** When employing other staff, it is important to ensure that all employees are properly informed of the terms and conditions of their employment. The potential for casualisation in both teaching and research can lead to an increasing reliance on part-time and contract staff (including interpreters and transcribers) who together constitute a particularly vulnerable

group. Care should be taken not to underpay part-time staff or to use either them or secretarial staff for duties for which they are neither adequately qualified nor paid. Attention should be paid to the career development of all such staff participating in a project.

**Safety at work.** Applied linguists share responsibility for the safety of their colleagues in the conduct of their research. Safety issues may relate to, amongst other things, provision of suitable workspaces, workload, stress, field visits.

Acknowledgement: This article is taken from a chapter in *Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics* published by BAAL News No. 88-  
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# Abstracts of Conference Presentations

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## Reflective Journaling and the Teaching of PhD Thesis Writing

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Paper presented at the 33rd Annual Congress of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA), Sydney, Australia, July 4 – July 6, 2008.

Reflective journaling has been used widely in various educational contexts, with special focus on the improvement of learning on the part of learners, including teacher trainees, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and professional apprentices such as trainee nurses and therapists. While reflective practice has gained a seemingly indispensable role in many of the teacher training syllabi, it has been used mostly by teachers and trainers to understand what is happening in the work of their students and trainees. The use of reflective practice through journal writing on the part of the reflective teachers themselves, however, has relatively been little explored. This exploratory study examines the writer's own reflective journals written during the last three semesters of teaching thesis writing to final year PhD students from different disciplines. A number of issues are raised as seen from the perspective of the practitioner and are discussed with reference to current practices in the teaching of the specific genre. It is believed that a close examination of a reflecting teacher's own journals, subjective as it may be, not only helps the teacher proper in disentangling the complexity of teaching and enhancing his or her teaching satisfaction, but also helps the larger community in understanding what is actually happening in a specific teaching situation.

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## Building Names in Singapore: Multilingualism of a Different Kind

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Department of English Language and Literature

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Paper presented at the Twenty-third International Congress  
of Onomastic Sciences, Toronto, Canada, 17-22 August, 2008.

There has been much discussion about the ideological or political underpinnings of toponyms, e.g., Faraco and Murphy (1997) on Spain, Cohen and Kliot (1992) on the Israeli administered territories, Nash (1999) on the Irish Republic or Yeo (1992, 1996) on Singapore. The Israeli, Irish and Singaporean examples are different from the Spanish one in that the struggle is also expressed linguistically through the form of the names chosen. Yeo (1996) notes the preference for street names based on the Malay language in the 1960s as an expression of Singaporean political independence. In this paper, I examine the names given to residential buildings (condominiums) in Singapore: what kinds of names are used and the reasons for any patterns discerned. While street names are usually tightly controlled by municipal boards, building names are usually given freer rein, although they would still need governmental approval. Building names would therefore reflect the attitudes of the commercially powerful rather than those of the politically powerful. In the context of the Singaporean state ideology of multilingualism (Singapore has four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese and Tamil) and multiracialism (and therefore multiculturalism), it might therefore be expected that the multilingual nature of the community might also be expressed in the building names accorded. Preliminary analysis however indicates that although there is evidence of multilingualism, this includes languages such as French and Spanish which do not form a part of the normal linguistic repertoire of a Singaporean.

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## **Unpacking Evaluation in Virtual World: The Case of Pre-tertiary Students in Second Life**

*Caroline Ho & Amilyn Ong*

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore  
Paper presented at Fourth International Conference on  
Multimodality (4-ICOM): “From Print to Interactive Digital Media:  
Technology, Multimodal Representation and Knowledge”  
Singapore Management University, 30 July-1 August 2008.

This paper is an exploratory study of a larger investigation into participants’ interactive behaviour and communication within an immersive virtual environment. Specifically, it focuses on the construction of evaluative expressions, and the linguistic resources for their realization within a community of 17-18 year old Singaporean participants in the Second Life virtual world. Drawing on Martin and White’s (2005) schematic framework of Appraisal, the investigation delves into how participants overtly encode through linguistic means the specific virtual roles or selves which they enact (Jenkins et al, 2006) as they challenge, critique, defend or persuade each other where appropriate. Participants’ evaluative meaning-making practices are reflective of the argumentation process at work through the enactive role-play. The study also examines paralinguistic cues adopted by participants. Form-function analysis of features such as facial expressions, head movements, body gestures in the virtual dialoguing offers a study of the interplay of these modalities as strategic devices which enhance to varying degrees the nuances of evaluative meaning-making among participants in the virtual environment. Pedagogical implications of our findings are discussed.

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## SAAL NEWS

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### The 23<sup>rd</sup> SAAL Annual General Meeting

Dear members,

The 23<sup>rd</sup> SAAL AGM will be held on 6<sup>th</sup> September (Saturday), 2008 at 10.00am. Please look out for details in mid-August and join us for the AGM. We will be electing our new SAAL Exco for the 2008-2010 term. Hope to see you there!

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### SAAL Exco Member Lawrence Zhang Invited to Serve on *TESOL Quarterly* Editorial Advisory Board

Associate Professor Lawrence Jun Zhang of the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, received an invitation in January 2008 from the current *TESOL Quarterly* Editor, Professor Suresh Canagarajah of Pennsylvania State University, USA, to serve on the Editorial Advisory Board for a term of three years (2008-2011). As a leading journal in the field, *TESOL Quarterly* is read by millions of English teachers and researchers around the world. It is the first time that a scholar from Singapore has been invited to serve on the *TESOL Quarterly* Editorial Board. Part of the invitation runs as follows:

“As you may know, *TESOL Quarterly* serves an important educational role, not only through what is published, but also through the constructive criticism offered to authors of manuscripts not accepted for publication. For this reason we encourage full and constructive critiques of manuscripts. While some manuscripts will clearly not merit more than a paragraph or two, very often you

will find that to justify your reservations about a manuscript or to outline the revisions that you believe should be made, a considerably longer critique is necessary. I have also initiated a practice of mentoring new scholars from non-traditional settings when they submit articles that you find promising in your review. Mentoring would involve making yourself available for consultation by unsuccessful authors. Here, again, I will see to it that you mentor only one scholar at a time. The Editorial Board also serves as an advisory body to the editor. In that capacity, the Board reviews the editorial policy and procedures of *TESOL Quarterly*. The Board meets once during the TESOL Convention to review *TESOL Quarterly* activities of the previous year, to set policy, and to advise on issues concerning the future.”

SAAL congratulates Professor Lawrence Zhang on this great honour.

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## Book Notice

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## **SAAL Executive Committee Members 2006-2008**

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