Analysing and Attending to Higher Secondary Students' Errors in Essay Writing

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Abstract
Learning a Second Language (L2) is a lifelong process and it is often a challenging experience for L2 learners. Malaysian ESL students are still weak in English, especially in their writing skills. They still seem to commit errors in all aspects of language. With that in line, this study aimed to identify the problems frequently faced by ESL students in essay writing, create an intervention plan to improve their writing skills and suggest some possible ways to overcome the writing problems faced by Malaysian ESL students. This study employed pre- and post - tests methods in collecting the data. Subject Verb Agreement, Past Tense, Lack of Vocabulary and Sentence Structure were the identified errors. Intervention was planned and conducted for 6 weeks. Students post-test scores showed a great improvement in their writing. By identifying the common errors made by the students, the teachers can be well versed to assist the students to minimalize and overcome their language problems in writing. Therefore, all teachers are suggested to deeply give attention to their students' errors and practice innovative methods to face these complexities' in writing classes.
Keywords: Error Analysis, Secondary Students, Writing, Intervention

Introduction
Learning a Second Language (L2) is a lifelong process and it is often a challenging experience for L2 learners. English has become the L2 after it was introduced to Malaysia during colonization. In general, Malaysian students have been exposed to eleven years of learning English in primary and secondary schools.

English has the status of a L2 in the Malaysian education system in both primary and secondary schools. However, learning English as a L2 is not an easy task. In order to master the English language, learners have to be adequately exposed to all of the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing (Brown, 2000). Language teaching in Malaysia is currently focusing on the teaching and learning of these four language skills. However, the standard of English among Malaysian students in schools is on the decline despite learning English for several years (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). Malaysian students are still weak in

English, especially in their writing skills. They still seem to commit errors in all aspects of language.

The written works of Malaysian ESL learners have shown that their writings are full of errors. Of the four English skills, writing has been found to be the most difficult for L2 learners to master, especially in Malaysian secondary schools where English is mainly taught as a compulsory subject.

Individuals with writing problems may have difficulties in one or more aspects of writing skill such as proper use of grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basic and initiating aspects of writing. It is also an unpleasant piece of work for both teachers and L2 learners in ESL classes. This subject of study is provoked not only because of the researchers' interests as a teacher in the second language field, but also due to interest as researcher who is engaged in ESL class in order to identify the cause of these problems faced by the L2 learners in ESL classes.

Errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary are the most common and frequent type of errors that are committed by L2 learners. The learners usually face difficulties in learning the grammatical aspects of the English Language, such as in subject-verb agreement, the use of connectors, articles and the use of correct sentence structure. Thus, restoration of interest in the area of learner errors can be considered as a wisely move. Teachers who can analyze and treat errors effectively are better equipped to help their students become more aware of their errors.

The use of Error Analysis and Data Driven techniques can aid to an effective teaching and learning of English. Mistakes are expected in all stages of teaching and learning, but teachers who can analyse and treat the errors with good interventions are well prepared in helping their students to be aware of the mistakes that they made. This shows that, errors are a tool to aid us and it should be viewed positively.

Objective
This leads to the objective of the study, which is to investigate the types of errors made by Form Four students in Kuala Pilah in their written work. This study had three main objectives. First, it aimed to identify the problems frequently faced by ESL students in essay writing. Second, it intended to create an intervention plan to improve their writing skills and third, to suggest some possible ways to overcome the writing problems faced by Malaysian ESL students.

This is an approach in helping teachers design pedagogical interventions that foster cycles of student improvement. This initiative helps students to prepare for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) Examination and to develop reflective practitioners committed to fostering cycles of student improvement through responsive, student-centered pedagogy. This will help the teachers to adopt this approach and infuse it in their lessons.

Motivation and Contribution of the Study
This paper is significant in its subject matter of this study. The findings of this study provide the knowledge about different types of errors committed by the students and at the same

time the guidance in addressing those errors. This study also attached some effective Lesson Plans for Upper Secondary teachers as a reference in order to tackle the errors committed by the learners.

Theoretical Framework
The Error Analysis (EA) approach was used in this study. The field of Error Analysis studies were prominence in the 1970s by S.P Corder. Error Analysis has five different steps in the process namely Collection of the sample, Identification of errors, Description of Errors, Explanation of errors and Evaluation of errors.

Research Method
Context of the Study
The location of the study was a secondary school, SMJK Chung Hua which is in the heart of Kuala Pilah town. This school is approximately 35 kilometers away from Seremban. The school runs in single teaching session. There were 497 students and 49 teachers in this school. Kuala Pilah is a sub-urban with small number of population. It has a sizeable Chinese community that has existed since the early British rule. This community today engages in trading and providing essential services such as workshops, coffee shops and saloons. There are limited numbers of entertainment outlets for the community to visit. Coffee shops and internet cafes that sprouted in 1990's are the main source of entertainment for the locals.

Participants
A number of 15 Form Four students participated in this study. All of them had their primary education in Chinese Vernacular schools, in which Chinese was the medium of instruction. English was taught as an additional subject in line with the Education Ministry policy to foster English language in this country. The respondents are from Form 4 Harmoni class comprising of 7 boys and 8 girls. All of the participants have experienced approximately the same number of 10 years of the education through the primary and secondary education system. All of the respondents speak Mandarin at home except for one student who speaks English at home.

Procedure
A.   Pre-Test
The student participants of this study were selected from a secondary school in Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan. First, the consent of the Principal of the secondary school was obtained for the research to take place in the school. The teacher arranged a meeting between the teacher and student participants after schooling period. During the meeting, a thorough explanation was provided on the journey of this study. The objectives of the study were also explained to the student participants to give a wider perspective to them about the study.

The teacher selected 4 Harmoni students because the teacher is teaching that particular class and it is easier to conduct the study without any other physical interference. Examination sheets were given to the students in classroom to write the essays immediately. They were required to write an essay entitled "The Person I Admire". They were given estimated one hour to complete their essays. The essays were immediately collected. Then, the essays were examined by the teacher. Teacher focused on the stages of writing process: brainstorming, outlining, development of paragraphs, editing and grammatical errors, while examining the essays.

Data provides evidence to help teachers to identify the gaps in students understanding of the language. The teacher tabulated the errors made by the students according to the number of student participant and the specific errors made by the students. From the table, the teacher identified the most common types of gaps revealed by the student participants' data. To unpack the gaps emerged commonly among the students, the teacher prioritized four major types of gaps that were revealed through the table. The four major types of gaps that were identified to be unpacked were listed in the table below:

STUDENTS	COMMON ERRORS	SVA	PAST TENSE	LACK OF VOCABULARY	SENTENCE STRUCTURE
SS1		/	/	/	/
SS2		/	/	/	/
SS3		/			
SS4			/	/	/
SS5		/	/		
SS6			/	/	
SS7		/	/	/	/
SS8		/	/	/	/
SS9		/	/	/	/
SS10		/	/	/	/
SS11			/	/	/
SS12		/	/	/	/
SS13		/	/	/	/
SS14		/	/	/	
SS15		/	/	/	/
TOTAL		11	14	14	11
%		73	93	93	73

Table 1: The Pre-Test result

Next, the teacher transferred the data into a graph form. Graph 1 shows the analysis of errors based on the types of errors, number of errors and percentage of errors committed by the student participants.
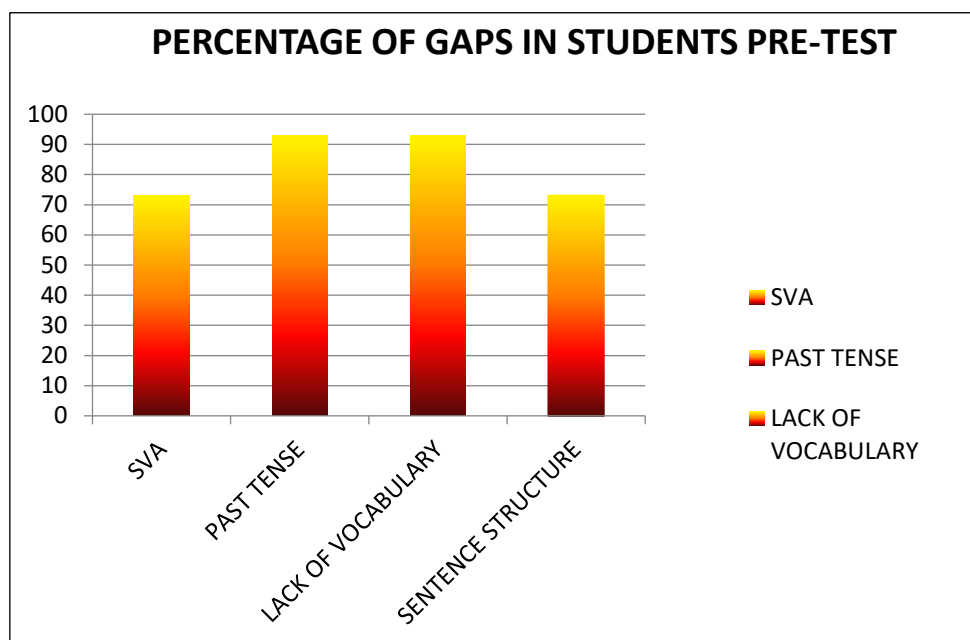
Graph 1: The Percentage of Gaps in Students Pre-Test

B.   Intervention Plan

The students with language impairments often have difficulties in many areas of language, but grammar is particularly affected. Thus, there is a need to establish the best ways to help the students with language impairments to improve their proficiency. So, the best approach to achieve this by developing an intervention plan. The ultimate goal of intervention plan is to establish which method or activity is the most effective way to rectify the types of gaps identified from the pre-test.

In order to solve these impairments, teacher created a six weeks intervention plans based on the four types of gaps revealed through the pre-test data. The interventions were designed to treat gaps ranked first four in the prioritized list. Teacher designed awareness activity before introducing a new type of gap to raise awareness of gaps in the student participants' knowledge and skills through whole-class feedback. Teacher incorporated student data in his intervention strategies to make the exercises more relevant and authentic for the student participants. The errors used were the authentic sentences or passages extracted from students' previous works. Teacher prepared a series of lesson for each type of gap. The lessons created were to unpack the gaps and as part of helping student participants to prepare for the post-test.

The activities were conducted based on the intervention plan provided below:

WEEK	GAP IN KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL	CURRICULUM SPECIFICATIONS. LEARNING OBJECTIVE AND SUCCESS CRITERIA	ACTIVITIES	RESOURCES
1	**Past Tense**	Curriculum Specification: (Reading&Writing) 3.1.2 Understand specific details and information in simple longer texts on a range of familiar topics. Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Identify past tense correctly. Success Criteria : 1. Identify at least 5-6 errors made and correct at least 5-6 errors by using the correct form of Past Tense.	CREATING AWARENESS ACTIVITY ACTIVITY: STICKY NOTES (30mins) 1. On the walls of the class, teacher put up some sentences containing errors from pupils' essays. 2. Teacher asks pupils to work in pairs and give each pair a number and as many sticky notes. 3. Teacher asks students to walk around the classroom, read the sentences containing the errors, and discuss how to correct them. Teacher asks students to write the correct version on the sticky note together with their number, and stick it next to the sentence. (Gallery Walk) 4. Teacher takes sentence number one and asks the class as a whole to discuss the error.	Student's work - Sticky notes -Students Essay.
1	**Past Tense**	Curriculum Specification (writing) 1.1.2 Presenting information in non-linear forms including tables, graphs, diagrams, charts. Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Complete the timeline based on the questions and other events. 2. Write a short paragraph using the timeline. Success Criteria : 1. Complete the timeline by using at least 5-6 questions given.	INTERVENTION PLAN 1.Pupils are divided into group according to their level. 2.Teacher asks pupils to complete a timeline based on the questions. 3. using the same information, teacher asks pupils to write the date on the bottom and the event on top of the timeline. 4. Teacher asks pupils to think of other event for example their years in school, and chart it on a timeline. 5. Pupils create 4-5 simple sentences using the timeline. 6. Classroom discussion.	Worksheet 1 (Make a Timeline)

		2. Create a timeline based on other events. 3. Write 4-5 sentences based on the timeline.		
2	**Past Tense**	Curriculum Specification (Reading & Writing) 3.1.2 Understand specific details and information in simple longer texts on a range of familiar topics Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Fill in the blanks with appropriate Past Tense verbs Success Criteria : 1. Fill in at least 3-6 appropriate Past Tense verbs in the short passage given.	INTERVENTION PLAN 1.Individual Work- Each pupil is given a short passage on Past Tense. 2. Pupils are required to fill in the blanks by using appropriate Past Tense verbs 3. Peer Marking- Teacher selects a few pupils to give out their answers (correct them if necessary) and pupils mark their friend's answers. 4. Pupils take back their worksheet and teacher discuss with the whole class.	Worksheet 2
2.	**Subject Verb Agreement**	Curriculum Specification (Reading) 3.1.2 Understand specific details and information in simple longer texts on a range of familiar topics Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Rearrange and identify the correct pattern of sentences. Success Criteria : 1. Rearrange at least 1-3 jumble up words to form a correct pattern of sentence	CREATING AWARENESS ACTIVITY ACTIVITY: REARRANGE JUMBLED UP WORDS (20mins) 1.Group work- Pupils are asked to sit in groups according to their level 2.Each group is given an envelope containing jumbled up words. Pupils need to rearrange the words to form a correct pattern of sentence. 3.Classroom discussion	

| 3. | **Subject Verb Agreement** | Curriculum Specification (Reading & Writing)

3.1 Understand a variety of texts by using a range of appropriate reading strategies to construct meaning

<u>Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to</u>
1. Identify singular and plural nouns.
2. Identify singular and plural verbs.
<u>Success Criteria :</u>
1. Complete a short paragraph by fill in the blanks with at least 6-7 the correct verbs.
2. Complete a parallel writing by filling in blanks with at least 6-7 correct verbs in relation to substituted subjects | <u>INTERVENTION PLAN (PARALLEL WRITING)</u>

1. Pupils are given worksheet 3.
2. Teacher asks students to complete the worksheet by fill in the blanks with correct verbs.
3. Pupils should copy the paragraph on a piece of notebook paper and make correction among their peers.
4. Teacher distributes worksheet 4.
5. Teacher substitutes the subjects in worksheet 2.
6. Teacher asks pupils to fill in the blanks with correct verbs in relations to the substituted subjects.
7. Classroom discussion. | Worksheet 3

Worksheet 4 |
| 3. | **Subject Verb Agreement** | <u>Curriculum Specification (Reading & Speaking)</u>
2.3.1 composing, revising and editing drafts; and checking accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar.
<u>Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to</u>
1. Identify the form of singular and plural nouns.
<u>Success Criteria :</u>
Complete at least 8-9 moves with correct forms of singular and plural nouns. | <u>INTERVENTION (RACE TO THE FINISH)</u>
1. Pupils sit in pairs.
2. Pupils are given worksheet 5.
3. Teacher explains the rules of the game :
Move 1 space for correct singular nouns.
Move 2 spaces for correct plural nouns.
4. Pupils fill the blanks with correct singular and plural nouns on their turn.
5. The player who lands on finish is the winner.
6. Pupils then orally share the answers with the whole class. | Worksheet 5 |

4.	**Sentence Structure**	Curriculum Specification (Reading & Speaking) 2.3.1 composing, revising and editing drafts; and checking accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar. <u>Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to</u> 1. Identify form of sentence structure correctly. <u>Success Criteria :</u> 1. Identify at least 5-6 errors made and correct at least 5-6 errors by using the correct form of sentence structure.	<u>CREATING AWARENESS ACTIVITY (Tic-tac-Toe)</u> Teacher divides the class into two groups of noughts and crosses. Teacher draws a 9 square grid on the board large enough to write sentences in each square. Teacher explains the rules of the game Teacher writes sentences with the errors pupils need to clarify. Teams take turns choosing a square and correcting the error, getting a nought or cross for each successful attempt. Classroom discussion.	
4.	**Sentence Structure**	<u>Curriculum Specification (Reading & Writing)</u> 3.1.2 Understand specific details and information in simple longer texts on a range of familiar topics <u>Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to</u> 1. Correct by creating two sentences. 2. Correct by creating compound sentences. <u>Success Criteria :</u> 1. Fill in at least 2-3 compound sentences using appropriate conjunctions. 2. Fill in at least 2-3 correct by two sentences.	<u>INTERVENTION (RUN-ON SENTENCES)</u> 1.Individual Work- Each pupil is given worksheet 6 on run on sentences. 2. Pupils are required to fill in the blanks by using appropriate conjunctions, creating two correct sentences and compound sentences. 3. Peer Marking- Teacher selects a few pupils to give out their answers (correct them if necessary) and pupils mark their friend's answers. 4. Pupils take back their worksheet and teacher discuss with the whole class.	Worksheet 6
5.	**Sentence Structure**	<u>Curriculum Specification (Reading & writing)</u> 2.3.1 composing, revising and editing drafts; and checking accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar. <u>Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to</u>	<u>INTERVENTION (RUN-ON SENTENCES)</u> 1. Pupils are given worksheet 7. 2. Teacher asks students to complete the worksheet, identifying the correct sentences by putting a check beside each sentence.	Worksheet 7 Worksheet 8

		1. Identify the form of sentence structure correctly. Success Criteria : 1. Complete at least 8-9 run on sentences with correct forms of sentence structure.	3. Pupils should rewrite the run on sentences as two sentences in the lines provided. 4. Teacher distributes worksheet 8. 5. Teacher asks pupils to fix the run on sentences. 6. Classroom discussion.	
5.	**Sentence Structure**	Curriculum Specification (Reading & writing) 2.3.1 composing, revising and editing drafts; and checking accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Write an accurate sentence. Success Criteria : 1. Complete the tables with at least 2-3 interesting sentences by using different components of a sentence (adjectives, verbs and adverbs)	INTERVENTION (DRESSING UP A SENTENCE) 1. Pupils sit in their respective groups. 2. Teacher provides each group with a laminated "Dressing up sentence" template. 3. Teacher asks pupils to take simple, boring sentences from the box. 4. Teacher instructs pupils to write the boring sentences on top of the template. 5. Pupils required filling up the template which will guide them in how to add the sentence. 6. Teacher asks pupils to share their interesting sentences. 7. Classroom discussion.	Worksheet 9
5.	**Vocabulary**	Curriculum Specification (Speaking) 4.2 Communicate with appropriate language, form and style 4.2.4: Use register appropriately (according to the topic) Learning objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Identify the use of adjectives correctly.	CREATING AWARENESS ACTIVITY 1. Pupils are given a sample of their essay. Some of the words which are inappropriately used in the sentences are highlighted 2. Pupils are given a new set of adjectives to replace the words highlighted	

		Success Criteria : 1. Replace at least 3-5 words from the essay sample with adjectives given	3. Pupils replace the highlighted words with a new set of adjectives 4. Pupils then orally share with the whole class.	
6.	**Vocabulary**	Curriculum Specification (Reading & writing) 2.3.1 composing, revising and editing drafts; and checking accuracy of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Learning Objective: Pupils will be able to 1. Identify the adjectives correctly. Success Criteria : 2. form at least 9-10 jumbled up words. 3. Identify the adjectives and fill in the blanks with 8-9 correct answers.	INTERVENTION PLAN (DESCRIBING PEOPLE) 1. Teacher distributes worksheet 10. 2. Activity 1: Teacher asks pupils to correctly spell the jumbled up letters whereby the first letter of the words are underlined. 3. Activity 2: Teacher reads the sentences aloud. Teacher asks the pupils to fill in the blanks with the words they use in activity 1. 4. Classroom discussion.	Worksheet 10
6.	**Vocabulary**	Curriculum Specification (Listening & Writing) 1.1 Obtain information for different purposes by 1.1.1 listening to spoken texts such as talks, speeches and viewing television, documentaries and multimedia; 1.1.2 interviewing and using questionnaires Learning Objectives: Pupils will be able to 1. Identify appropriate adjectives that suit the character traits. 2. Write a short paragraph using the adjective and character traits given. Success Criteria :	INTERVENTION PLAN (CHARACTER TRAITS) 5. Teacher distributes worksheet 10. 6. In 15 minutes, pupils are to interview their classmates and identify the character that suits with the description. 7. Pupils then are asked to match the description with adjectives given. 8. Teacher asks the pupils to use the information from worksheet 8, to write a short paragraph by elaborating on their own character trait.	Worksheet 11

		1. Gather information and acquire knowledge to write a descriptive essay by interviewing their classmates. 2. Identify at least 6-7 adjectives that suit the character traits appropriately. 3. Write at least one short paragraph by using as many words listed previously as possible.		
7	Post - test	MY IDEAL BOYFRIEND / GIRLFRIEND		

While completing all the activities in this intervention plan, the teacher informally assesses the student participants. At the end of each type of gap, teacher asked the student participants to write a short excerpt based on the gap that they learnt. Teacher examined the excerpts to identify the level of improvements showed or produced by the students. These short writing tasks were given to the students as an individual work. The errors and the length of the excerpts help the teacher to measure the improvement in the students' grammar impairments.

The intervention plan prepared by the teacher was too ambitious in relation to the students' performance. Teacher made slight changes with the worksheet prepared earlier. The student participants were mixed-ability students. To cater all type of students, the difficulty level of the worksheets was lowered. This is to suit the weaker students in the class. In addition, group works were assigned while the students' participants involved in the activities. By conducting group activity, the advanced students will able to assist the moderate and weaker student participants. This is to assist the students with low self-esteem as they are weak in English.

### C.   Post-Test and Outcomes of the Intervention
After six weeks of intervention plan, a post-test was carried out on the seventh week. Teacher allocated one hour for the student participants to sit for the test. The allocated time was as the same as pre-test. Extra minutes were given to the student participants who unable to complete it within the time limit. The post-test was conducted in 4 Harmoni.
The question for the pot-test was similar to the pre-test, where student participants need to write a descriptive essay about a person. The tittle given for the post-test was "My Ideal Boyfriend / Girlfriend". This type of question was questioned in SPM examination section B: Continuous Writing. Student participants were required to write a 350 words essay.

After the examining of the post-test, the obtain results showed that the student participants did well in post-test compared to the pre-test. Even though the errors committed by the student participants shows some rapid improvement, but certain students are still making the same errors in their writing. The result of the pot-test is shown below:

| STUDENTS / COMMON ERRORS	SVA	PAST TENSE	LACK OF VOCABULARY	SENTENCE STRUCTURE
SS1				
SS2		/	/	
SS3	/			/
SS4		/		
SS5	/			
SS6			/	/
SS7				
SS8	/		/	
SS9			/	
SS10			/	
SS11			/	
SS12				/
SS13	/	/		/
SS14		/		
SS15	/		/	
TOTAL	5	4	7	4
%	33	27	47	27

Table 2: The Post-Test Result
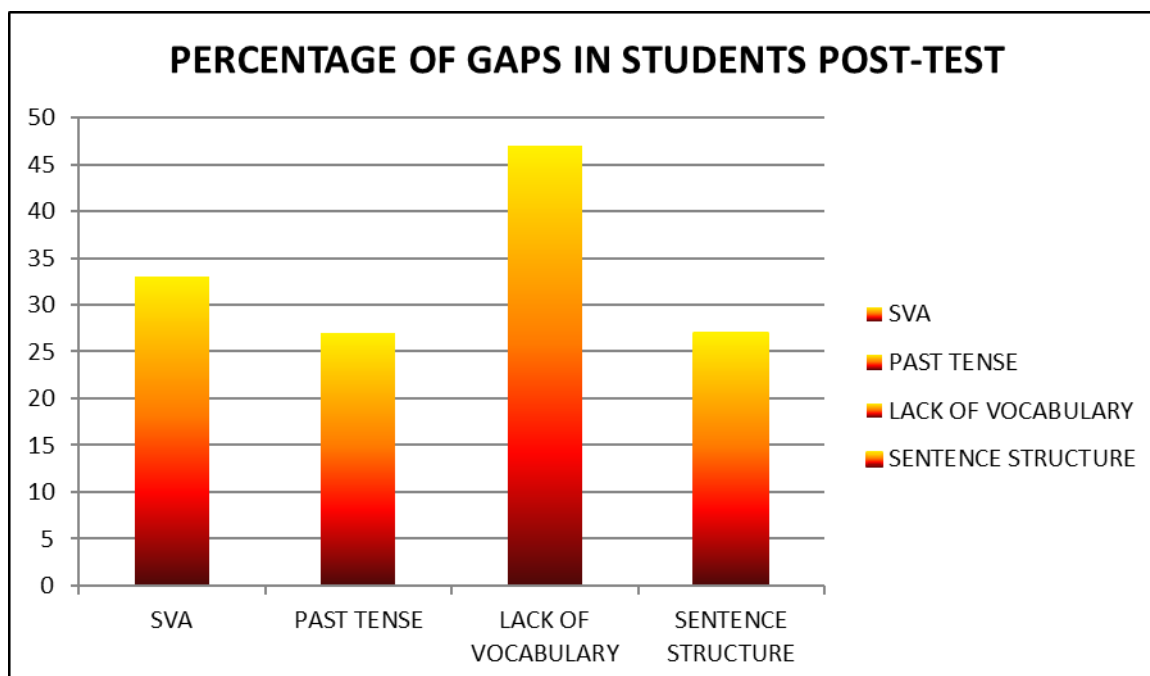
Graph 2: The Percentage of Gaps in Students Post-Test

As can be seen in Table 2 above, Student 1 (SS1) and Student 7(SS7) showed a drastic improvement in their writing. They able to unpack the four type of gaps identified which are the most common errors committed by the student participants in the pre-test. This

significant result in students writing probably shows that the intervention plan guided the students to write a good piece of writing.

Improvement from the Students
After six weeks of intervention, the student participants showed a great improvement in their writing. This is evident after the student participants engaged in this intervention plan from week one till week six. The graph below will help use to see the improvements clearly.
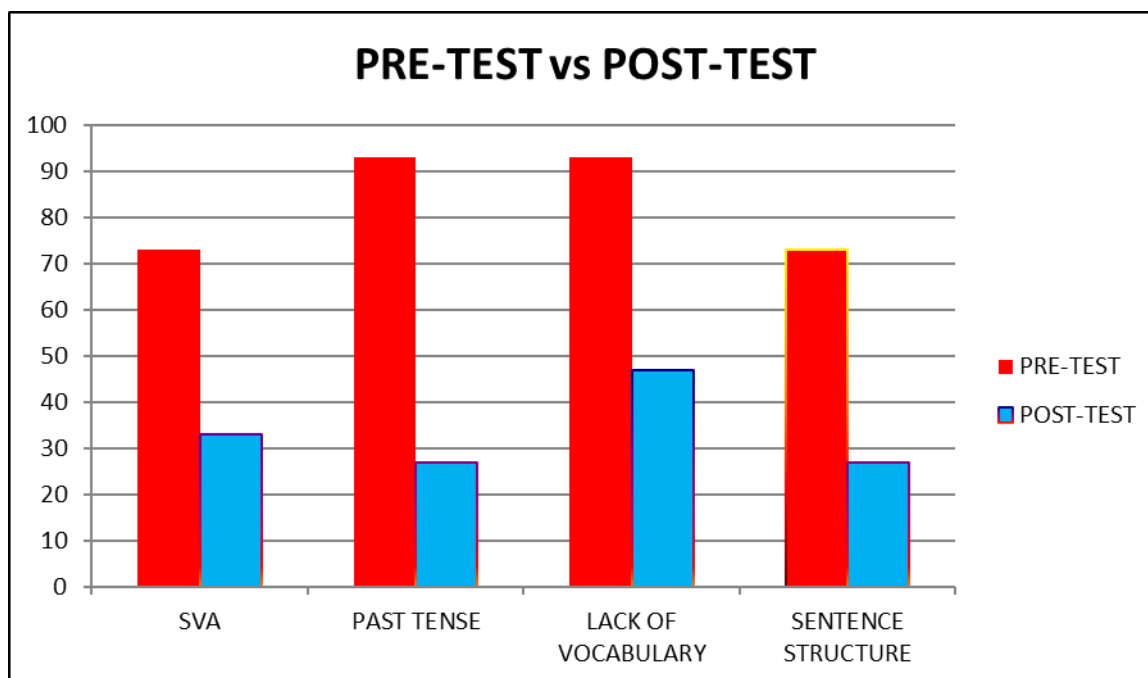
Graph 3: The Percentage Comparison Between Pre-test and Post-Test.

Based on the graph the errors in constructing sentences have decreased from 73% to 27%. Meanwhile, the usage of not accurate and the vocabulary not in context in writing have are reduced from 93% in pre-test to 47% in post-test. There was a drastic reduce in the usage of improper past tense in a sentence. The percentage dropped from 93% in pre-test to 27% in the post-test. This grammatical error showed the most significant changes among the other three types of gaps in the intervention plan. The wrong usage of subject-verb-agreement has also shown some decrease from 73% to 33%.

Apart from this, teacher also faced a number of challenges in completing this intervention. The noticeable challenge was the time constraint. Teacher could not conduct the intervention plan consequently for 6 weeks. It was because the student participants were involved in mid-term examination and co-academic activities which fall on the same week of the intervention plan. These events were unable to be avoided. On the other hand, teacher was also involved in some co-academic activities which distracted the continuity of the intervention plan.

Conclusion
This study has shed light on the manner of analyzing the students' written essay. It further shows that data-driven approach can help the teachers to identify the specific and common language problems that students have, so that they can focus and give more attention on these types of gaps. This kind of ideas of language learning problems is useful for the teachers

because it provides on the common hot-spots in language learning. Thus, this intervention can be used in the preparation of effective teaching materials such as lesson plan and worksheets. Also, by identifying the common errors made by the students, the teachers can be well versed to assist the students to minimalize and overcome their language problems in writing. Therefore, all teachers are suggested to deeply give attention to their students' errors and practice innovative methods to face these complexities' in writing classes.

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