

A QUANTI-QUALITATIVE STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS OF ERRORS IN THE ESSAYS OF RURAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Maphefo R. Mailula & L. Junia Ngoepe
University of Limpopo

ABSTRACT

The error analysis (EA) of essays in an English first additional language (EFAL) class elevates the status of errors from being undesirable to significant because they tend to afford the educator–researcher an opportunity to identify and tackle learners’ language errors optimally. Additionally, learners deserve space to practise essay writing in an attempt to revise and possibly avoid recurring errors. This paper aims to analyse the essay writing errors of Grade 11 learners in Mopani District rural schools, in Limpopo Province (LP). The research was premised on EA; EFAL learners’ written essays were analysed and educators were interviewed about the learners’ essay writing errors. Purposive sampling was used to collect data in the form of learners’ written essays and the interview responses of the educators on EFAL essay writing errors. The findings suggest that all English language educators should work in concert to identify and analyse learners’ errors in their essays, in order to be effective, especially in rural schools in South Africa where most learners follow the EFAL curriculum.

KEYWORDS

EFAL, essay writing, error analysis, secondary school

INTRODUCTION

Errors are a conspicuous feature of learner language. English first additional language (EFAL) essay writing errors are significant because they can provide fertile ground for stakeholder research in the form of analysis and focused revision. Further, the analysis provides information that needs to be included in teaching strategies. Thus, EFAL essay writing and committing errors tend to be inextricably linked. Analysing learners’ errors is a corollary of the essay writing exercise. Therefore, learners must practise essay writing repeatedly. This paper aims to analyse the essay writing errors of Grade 11 rural learners on the cusp of exiting senior phase schooling. The research design was descriptive and a quanti-qualitative approach was followed. Error analysis (EA) was used to analyse the essay writing errors. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select educators as well as rural learners’ written essays from four circuits in Limpopo Province (LP), South Africa (SA).

ESSAY WRITING

Writing is vitally significant for one’s academic and professional career (cf. De Smet, Brand - Gruwel, Leitjten & Kirschner, 2014: 352; Meso, 2019: 39). Therefore, the development of a learner’s writing skills is a clearly formulated academic goal because writing is a composite

and challenging skill to master (cf. Ngoepe, 2007: 72; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2013: 389; Flower & Hayes, 1980: 1). Educators often express dissatisfaction with the lack of knowledge and skills necessary for essay writing among L2 English speakers. (cf. Mahmood, 2020: 59; Al-Shabanah & Maher, 2005: 2).

Errors committed by learners are highly remarkable as they are indicators of how they retain the target language (TL). Such errors are advantageous not only to learners but also to educators and researchers. For educators, errors reveal proof of learners' progress in learning while they serve as the language learning resource for learners. In this way, researchers discover evidence of how learners master and acquire the language (Fang & Xue, 2007: 53; Corder, 1967: 48). The purpose of teaching writing must be to equip learners with techniques of writing, which may include choice of topic sentence vitality, the development of paragraphs and interesting and attractive style. It is vital that learners develop the ability to communicate effectively in written English (Riddell, 2001: 1; Askes & Kritzinger, 1992: 120).

Proficient writers use more complex sentences; they use connectives such as 'however', 'who' and 'in addition'. The English educator, therefore, has the important task of showing learners how to approach writing by, for example, showing how it is organised and how ideas are 'knitted' together logically (Brown, Robson & Rosenkjar, 2001: 361; Raimes, 1983: 50). It is against this background that the study aims to analyse essay writing errors of EFAL learners in schools located in selected areas (cf. Appendix A), as explained below.

A written presentation is regarded as one of the most demanding tasks because learners are expected to construct sentences that are in a specific order and connected in specific ways (Canagarajah, 2013: 1; Harris & Cunningham, 1994:1). Kukurs (2012: 193) points out the many instances of the incorrect use of English grammatical rules in learners' writing, such as grammatically incorrect sentences like 'she is smile', 'I see beautiful flowers in garden' and 'sara is happy'. To identify and categorise such errors, using EA can be an effective tool for revision in class and thereby, reducing the number of errors in learners' work (cf. Presada & Badea, 2014: 49).

Types of essays that EFAL learners need to master include narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative, discursive and reflective essays. Steps in writing mainly include preparation, implementation and review. Therefore, the steps in EFAL essay writing are similar in that learners are expected to plan for, implement and review their essay writing in an attempt to produce texts containing minimal errors (cf. Mailula, 2021: 26).

EFAL Paper 3 at National Senior Certificate (NSC) level focuses on essay writing and longer and shorter transactional texts. It is the responsibility of the educator to supervise all aspects of the essay writing process, including planning, drafting and writing the final copy (Department of Basic Education, 2018: 5). Thus, the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) expect learners to practise how to write essays. Learners are required to work through the writing process, which is about drafting, planning, editing, revising and producing a final version of the essay. The educator is provided with a guide while the learner is provided with

essay writing guidelines to assist both in working through the writing process (Department of Basic Education, 2011: 14).

The final writing stage should produce a relatively error-free essay. For example, an essay can be formal, impersonal and without using emotional language—depending on the topic chosen (Mailula, 2021: 39; Haughton-Hawksley (2012: 224). Errors can take many forms, some of which have been identified by various authors:

- Word classes are often used incorrectly but they play different roles in a sentence; they carry different meanings and help to structure sentences. Examples of word classes that are used incorrectly are nouns, adjectives and so on. If EFAL learners can be assisted in choosing and using word classes appropriately when constructing sentences, essay writing errors will be reduced (Mailula, 2021: 42; Coetzee, Holland, Anhuizen & Duffett, 2013: 146).
- All sentences should have at least one independent clause. McMillan and Weyers (2010: 105) state that sentence construction should be grammatically correct and formal. This refers to objective language which involves the use of language techniques that maintain a tone and a vocabulary that is brief and clearly expressed.
- Paragraphing in essay writing is salient as it affects logical order. If EFAL learners could grasp that paragraphs express various ideas, essay writing errors could be debilitated. Essay structure such as the arrangement of paragraphs can guide the reader on what and how the essay writer wants to present content (cf. Mailula, 2021: 66; Maake, 2019: 47).
- Houghton-Hawksley (2012: 264) points out that punctuation is marks or signs in written language that help the reader to understand how to read what has been written. Full stops, commas, semicolons, colons, exclamation marks, question marks, inverted commas and quotation marks all help to structure the meaning and make it explicit for the reader.
- Mailula (2021: 64) asserts that tense, which expresses time, tends to be confusing for EFAL learners who are L2 speakers of English. This apparent confusion could be attributed to the L1 interference where time and aspect distinctions are not the same as that of English. Educators' strategic expression of time that considers EFAL learners' L1s could help reduce essay writing errors in this area.

Errors are a conspicuous feature of learner language. Indeed, making errors may help learners to learn when they self-correct (Ellis, 1997: 15). Errors should first be identified and then be described, before being classified into types (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 18; Ellis, 1997: 18; see Appendix A). For example, Grade 11 EFAL FET rural learners in Mopani West District, LP, like other learners, experience challenges with essay writing. Next, how these learners' essays were analysed is discussed.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this paper is descriptive and the approach is mixed, that is, quantitative. Bhat (2019: 1) defines descriptive research as a method that describes the

characteristics of the phenomenon being studied. Further, a mixed approach is premised on different methods that can be brought together into a coherent whole (cf. Richards, Ross & Seedhouse, 2012: 2). The mixed approach employed in this paper began with a quantitative data collection exercise which was followed by a qualitative one (cf. Richards, Ross & Seedhouse, 2021: 308). Thus, essay writing errors of Grade 11 EFAL rural learners were collected from learners' written essays through a checklist, in line with the CAPS curriculum and face-to-face, one-on-one interviews consisting of 38 questions per session were held with educators (see Appendix A and Appendix B).

Since a sample is a subset of the population that is representative of the whole population (Dornyei, 2007: 98), the EFAL Grade 11 sample consisted of learners and educators who were selected from Mafarana, Motupa, Rakwadu 2 and Tzaneen Circuits in the Mopani West District of LP, South Africa. Therefore, the sample was made up of Molabosane, Matseke, Sekhukhumele and Mohlatlego Machaba High Schools in the circuits mentioned above. It comprised 40 written essays and four educators from the selected schools. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select 40 learners and four educators in proximity, representing the four circuits and four schools, respectively. Purposive sampling is selecting a sample based on the population and objectives of a study, to elicit data that the researcher is interested in (Mackey & Gass, 2005: 120). The mean, median and mode of the errors were determined quantitatively (cf. Mackey & Gass, 2005; Table 9) while the qualitative lecturers' responses were analysed thematically (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This paper is premised on the error analysis (EA) theory. EA is a procedure that can be used by researchers and educators alike. The process involves the collection of samples of interlanguage errors that can be identified, described and classified according to hypothesised causes. Errors are, therefore, a conspicuous feature of learner language. Committing errors may even promote learning where learners self-correct (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 1). The procedure followed involved collecting samples of EFAL essay writing errors and interviewing the learners' educators about their essay writing errors, identifying, describing and classifying the errors as well as evaluating their seriousness in context (cf. Ellis, 1985: 296).

Permission to collect data was sought from Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC), the district director of Mopani West District, the respective managers as well as the four identified schools in Mafarana, Motupa, Rakwadi 2 and Tzaneen Circuits. Additionally, consent letters were written and distributed among parents of participating EFAL learners who were underage in line with the Children's ACT 2018 but learners above the cut-off age signed for themselves (cf. Mailula, 2022: 75; Appendix C).

FINDINGS

The findings emanate from data collected through a checklist of essay writing errors (see Appendix A) and interviews with educators (see Appendix B), respectively, in line with the CAPS curriculum.

Checklist for identifying learners’ essay errors

One of the most significant contributions of EA is that it can elevate the status of errors from not being desirable to that of a guide to how the language learning process works (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 53). Researchers provide evidence which emphasises errors as an effective means of first improving language teaching and consequently, learning (Khansir, 2013: 363).

In line with the CAPS essay writing guidelines, learners were instructed to choose a topic they would like to write on, draw and edit their mind maps, ensure that the essay has an introduction and conclusion and stick to the stipulated length of an essay. Educators took turns monitoring learners while they were writing essays.

Structural errors

All the learners (100%) in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 were allocated one hour for essay writing, which they finished in time. Learners in the four schools chose descriptive types of essays. Thus, this type of essay was common in all four schools—indicating its popularity.

Table 1: Mind maps submitted per school

School	Yes	No
1	10	0
2	5	5
3	10	0
4	2	8
Total	27	13

In Table 1, the number of learners who submitted mind maps in line with the research checklist is presented (see Appendix A). Learners were instructed to submit mind maps as a guideline for planning their essays. Equal numbers of learners, totalling ten each in Schools 1 and 3 submitted mind maps. However, five learners in School 2 submitted mind maps, while only two in School 4 did. Thus, 67% of the learners planned their work while 33% did not. This suggests that they could have planned for their essays and their imagination could have been stimulated. It is, therefore, encouraging that most learners planned for their essays and this could lead to a reduction in essay writing errors. It could be argued that if learners were not requested or instructed to submit a mind map, then those who submitted were technically not following instructions.

Table 2 presents the number who edited their mind maps.

Table 2: Edited mind maps

School	Yes	No
1	10	0
2	5	5
3	10	0
4	2	8
Total	27	13

An equal number of learners, that is, ten in Schools 1 and 3 had edited their mind maps. However, five learners in School 2 edited mind maps, while only two learners in School 4 did so. Thus, 67% of the learners planned their work, while 33% did not. This suggests that learners who did not edit their mind maps per the checklist, gave the reader a poor idea about planning their essay writing. This could have resulted in poorly written essays due to a lack of planning. Following on from this, EFAL educator instructions should be monitored for clarity. Instructions should be clear and guidelines regarding whether a learner should provide a mind map and/or a first draft should be provided in advance.

Since it is generally required of learners to submit drafts, this aspect was also checked and the result can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Submitted 1st drafts

School	Yes	No
1	10	0
2	1	9
3	1	9
4	0	10
Total	12	28

Table 3 depicts that all the learners (ten) in School 1 submitted their 1st drafts. However, one learner each in Schools 2 and 3 submitted their 1st draft and none of the learners in School 4 did. Thus, 30% of the learners drafted their work while 70% did not. This suggests that some of the learners' ideas on specific topics could not be refined. These could not be traced back to their original thoughts for further assistance by their educators. Additionally, it may suggest

that the educators could not intervene in time, given the research checklist circumstances (cf. Appendix A).

One would expect learners to draft and revise, essentially submitting more than one draft. This happened in some cases, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Total drafts submitted

School	Yes	No
1	10	0
2	1	9
3	0	10
4	0	10
Total	11	29

All the learners in School 1 submitted 1st and 2nd drafts and one learner in School 2 submitted both drafts. Further, no learner submitted a 1st draft in Schools 3 and 4. Thus, 28% of learners who wrote two drafts could probably improve on their essays timeously before writing the final essay. The rest, that is 72% of the learners, did not write two drafts. This suggests that the learners missed an opportunity to refine their essays, which possibly contained more errors.

In support of the above, there is a need to evaluate errors for purposes of an EA, in order to help learners learn an L2. In this context, some errors can be considered more serious than others as they tend to interfere with the intelligibility of sentences (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 19; Ellis, 1997: 19).

One such syntactical error that causes much confusion, is when learners' sentences are incomplete and this error occurred in all the schools.

Table 5: Learners who used full sentences

School	Yes	No
1	5	5
2	4	6
3	4	6
4	5	5
Total	18	22

An equal number of learners, five each in Schools 1 and 4 used full sentences while an equal number of learners in Schools 2 (four) and 3 (four) did not. It is implicit that more learners used fragmented sentences, rendering their essays difficult to understand and not reader-friendly.

All the learners in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 presented their essays in paragraphs. However, none of the learners in any of the schools employed cohesive devices. This implies that linking devices were not used to connect sentences and paragraphs in their essays. Additionally, only one learner in School 4 (3%) used sequence words in their essays while 39 learners (97%) in Schools 1, 2 and 3 did not.

Although all the learners from Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 wrote an introduction for their essays, some did not conclude their essays, as shown in Table 6 below. This suggests that the majority of the learners did not write full sentences and others did not use linking expressions. Further, an argument could be made that more explicit instructions should be given around essay writing.

The rubrics that are used for essay writing in Grade 12 require that essays are concluded appropriately.

Table 6: Concluding an essay

School	Yes	No
1	9	1
2	9	1
3	10	0
4	9	1
Total	37	3

According to Table 6, ten learners in School 3 concluded their essays while an equal number of learners (nine each) in Schools 1, 2 and 4 provided a sense of closure. Thus, the majority of learners concluded their essays. This indicates that EFAL learners in all four schools are aware that a conclusion must be included in an essay.

All learners in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 wrote essays within the confines of their classrooms. Implicitly, none of the learners in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 wrote essays as homework. This finding suggests that essay writing was formally timed (cf. Appendix A) as it was written during EFAL allocated slots under the supervision of the educator.

Table 7: Appropriate length of essay

School	Yes	No
1	1	9
2	4	6
3	3	7
4	6	4
Total	14	26

The number of words required to submit an acceptable essay ranged between 250–300 words. Based on the above results, only 14 (35%) of the learners in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 met the minimum requirements when writing their essays, while 26 (65%) learners did not. This suggests that most of the learners did not follow instructions on the appropriate length of a given essay because they failed to present essays in line with the stipulated length (see English guidelines for teaching and writing essays and transactional texts, 2020). This also indicates that EFAL learners need more practice in this regard.

Table 8: Marks allocated per structure, content and language

School	Yes	No
1	2	8
2	10	0
3	10	0
4	10	0
Total	32	8

Based on Table 8, the educator allocated marks for essays according to the following format: structure, content and language. Two essays in School 1 and an equal number of essays (ten each) in Schools 2, 3 and 4 were marked according to the stipulated format. Thus, 32 of the marked essays reviewed in all the schools were correctly marked in line with the above-mentioned format while for 20% of learners in School 1, marks were not allocated according to structure, content and language on the script. This implies that the marking guidelines were not strictly followed in School 1. It suggests that the subject head at the said school should strategically intervene and redress the significance of marking guidelines and the use of rubrics, in line with the CAPS guidelines.

All the essays submitted in the four schools were marked out of a total score of 50. Therefore, it could be implied that the CAPS rubric helped to standardise essay marking for different schools in the district.

The total number of learners in Schools 1, 2, 3 and 4 were 63, 152, 22 and 250, respectively. Further, all the learners in the four schools were given feedback when the scripts were returned to them. Implicitly, on the whole, the learner–educator ratio is high. The high number of EFAL learners accommodated in one class makes it difficult for educators to give individual attention essential for essay writing.

Grammar errors identified in the sampled schools

Errors can have different sources. Learners commit errors of ‘omission’, ‘overgeneralisation’ and ‘transfer’; they can omit articles ‘a’ and ‘the’ or the -s off nouns in plural form; they may use ‘eated’ instead of ‘ate’ and they may make use of their L1 knowledge (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 19; Ellis, 1997: 20). Grammar errors expose learners’ strengths and weaknesses regarding essay writing. The identified errors inadvertently provide a window of opportunity for the redress of teaching and learning challenges. Hence, a discussion of grammar errors in the sampled four schools.

In second language acquisition (SLA), EA is one of the most influential theories. Stages involved in EA include recognition, description and explanation. Recognition of errors depends on the interpretation of the learner’s intention. Description begins when recognition has taken place while explaining errors is regarded as a linguistic activity which deals with accounting for why and how errors come about (Fang & Xue, 2007: 10; cf. Findings - Interviews with educators). The researcher has recognised errors committed by learners when they write essays. Thus, EA developed into a preferred tool for studying second language analysis (Okoro, 2017: 65; Choon, 1983: 1). The errors are described, explained and classified below in Table 9.

Schools → Errors ↓	School 1 (n = 10)	School 2 (n = 10)	School 3 (n = 10)	School 4 (n = 10)
informal language	3	1	8	3
concord errors	6	3	10	11
noun errors	10	10	11	11
adjective errors	11	10	12	10
paragraphing	11	12	14	8
adverb errors	13	10	14	10

verb errors	14	18	14	10
determiner errors	15	10	10	10
conjunction errors	16	10	11	11
preposition errors	17	10	10	11
word-order errors	18	15	12	16
spelling errors	24	12	22	17
tense errors	29	11	20	17
punctuation errors	66	42	46	69
Total Errors	253	164	200	214

The findings presented in Table 9 revealed that in School 1, a few learners (three) used informal language and slightly more learners (six) made concord errors. Noun errors, pronoun, collocation, incomplete and logical connectors were relatively more, accounting for ten errors each and were followed closely by adjective and paragraphing errors (11). There were 13 adverb errors, 14 verb errors, 15 determiner errors, 16 conjunction errors, 17 preposition errors and 18 word order errors, respectively. The number of spelling errors (24) was high, tense errors were slightly higher (29) and punctuation errors were the highest (66) of all.

Furthermore, in School 2, one learner used informal language. Two equal numbers of learners, three and three, respectively, made contraction and concord errors. Another set of equal numbers of noun, determiner, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, collocation and logical connector errors (ten) were committed. A slightly higher number (11) of pronoun, incomplete sentence and tense errors were made. Further, a reasonably higher number of spelling (12) as well as paragraphing errors (12), word order errors (15) and verb errors (18) occurred. A much higher number of punctuation errors (42) were committed.

Moreover, in School 3, eight errors involved informal language use and another eight pertained to the construction of incomplete sentences. This was followed closely by an equal number of pronoun, concord, determiner, preposition, collocation and logical connector errors, which accounted for ten errors each; succeeded by noun and conjunction errors, totalling 11 errors each. There were 12 adjective and word order errors and 14 verb, adverb and paragraphing errors. Tense errors were slightly higher (20), followed by spelling errors (22). Punctuation errors were the highest (46) in this school.

In School 4, three ‘use of informal language’ errors and eight paragraphing errors occurred. An equal number of verb, determiner, adjective, adverb, collocation, word order and logical connector errors, accounting for ten each, were made. A slightly higher equal number (11) of noun, preposition, concord and conjunction errors occurred, respectively. However, a relatively higher number (16) of incomplete sentence errors were made. The number of tense errors (17) was equal to that of spelling errors (17). However, many more punctuation errors (69) were committed in this school.

In sum, relatively few learners at the four sampled schools committed errors concerning the ‘use of informal language’, paragraphing and incomplete sentences in their essays. This was followed closely by a reasonable number of noun, pronoun, determiner, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, collocation and logical connector errors. EFAL learners made slightly more spelling and tense errors while punctuation errors were the highest in all the schools.

Table 10: Mean, median and mode of the checklist

Key Items in the four schools	Mean	Median	Mode
Number that submitted mind maps	7	5	10
Marked mind maps	6.8	5	10
Drafts submitted	3	1	1
Full sentences	2.8	1	0
Essays with conclusions	9.3	9	9
Appropriate length	3.5	3	6.5
Marks allocated for structure, content and language	8	2	5

Table 10 above presents the wide-ranging mean, median and mode values of the checklist for identifying Grade 11 learners’ essay writing errors (cf. Methodology). The table depicts the condensed version of the learners’ essay errors identified through a checklist (see Appendix A). The highest mean was 9.3, the median 9 and the mode 10, respectively. However, the lowest mean was 2.8, the median 1 and the mode 0, respectively. This skewed distribution of the values suggests that EFAL learners have varying abilities. Similarly, their educators vary in their ability to teach different types of essay writing.

Interviews with educators

Responses of educators consist of biographical details, essay writing exercises and EFAL learners.

Biographical details

Two educators indicated that they hold Honours degrees in Education Management, one stated that he had a Senior Teachers Diploma (STD) and the fourth one stated that he had a Bachelor of Arts Degree (BA) as their highest qualifications.

Regarding teaching experience, all four educators only mentioned the number of years they had taught but did not mention the number of months. Two educators stated that they had taught for 24 years, one explained that he had taught for 20 years and the other one said that she had taught for 27 years. This suggests that all educators had a teaching experience of longer than 20 years.

As regards their highest English language teaching qualification, the third educator mentioned that she had a first-year university English course while the other three said that they had attained a C symbol in English, a Senior Teachers Diploma and Honours in Education Management, respectively.

The first educator stated that besides Grade 11, he also taught all the FET Grades, English FAL and geography, the second mentioned Grade 12 history, the third indicated Grade 12 English and the fourth said that they had obtained Senior Phase grades. Thus, this suggests that all the educators were responsible for Grade 12 learners and had additional teaching responsibilities.

The four educators indicated that the total number of learners in Grade 11 was 63, 152, 22 and 250, respectively. They also stated that they experienced a heavy workload. Except for one school, the educator–pupil ratio was much higher at the participating schools.

Three of the four educators stated that they had progressed learners in their grades. These are learners who have been retained in the senior phase for four years or more and are likely to be retained again in the second phase for four or more years. They are supposed to receive the necessary support in order to progress to the next grade.

All four educators confirmed that they had progressed learners in Grade 11. Two indicated that they had 12 and three learners, respectively, while the third and fourth stated that the number needed to be confirmed.

The essay writing exercise

The responses to questions about the essay writing exercise were categorised into three themes: structure, marking and errors.

Essay structure

Regarding the number of essays learners write per term, two educators said that they gave learners one essay each; one educator indicated that he gave learners two essays while the fourth educator indicated that he gave learners about six to eight essays in a term.

Regarding the types of essays common among learners, all four educators indicated that learners chose the narrative essay type. However, at the fourth school, the educator added that learners also chose the expository essay over the narrative one. This suggests that the total number of essays written per term differed from school to school. It was also found that the learners preferred writing narrative types of essays.

The educators explained that learners in the four schools chose experience-based storytelling. However, in the fourth school, the educator agreed that learners in the sciences preferred to solve problems.

Out of four schools, two educators said that the length of an essay was 250 to 300 words, one educator mentioned 250 words and the fourth educator stated one and a half pages, which is about 250 words.

Based on the results, essay structure was regarded as text they needed to mark. Three educators mentioned the topic, introduction, body and conclusion. However, the third educator regarded a mind map and paragraphs as text. Further, the fourth educator argued that the structure of an essay included planning and brainstorming. This implies that educators held different views regarding what an essay structure should look like.

All the educators agreed that learners' ideas were expressed in paragraphs and three of the four stated that essay topics were suitable for the assessed grade. However, one of the three educators regarded some of the essay topics as suitable. Based on the results on the unambiguity of the instructions, three educators concurred that instructions to learners were unambiguous while one said that they were sometimes unambiguous.

When responding to the question of whether or not learners introduced essays appropriately, one of the four educators indicated that a few learners introduced their essays appropriately. However, another educator stated that most learners did not while the third indicated that some did. The fourth mentioned that the learners did not introduce their essays appropriately. Further, all educators concurred that they allowed learners to draft essays. Only two of the four educators indicated that they allocated marks for drafts. The rest indicated that they did not. Thus, drafts tend to help learners edit their work before making a final submission. In addition, only one of the four educators responded that learners did not finish writing in time. Therefore, the rest indicated that learners finished in time. However, one educator explained that learners wrote slowly while the rest indicated that the question was not applicable. Therefore, an assumption could be made that most educators in this paper were not concerned about the time limit. All four educators explained that the assessed essays were suitable and in line with CAPS standards.

Marking

All the educators agreed that essay questions covered low-, medium- and high-order thinking skills and were unanimous that the correct marking rubric was used. Furthermore, two educators indicated that they did not penalise learners for spelling mistakes. Instead, they used marking symbols and highlighted misspelt words. Additionally, the third educator stated that he followed instructions from the rubric while the fourth educator indicated that it depended on the rubric. Educators collectively stated that they tackled spelling mistakes through passage reading, dictation, classwork, underlining misspelt words and provided the correct spelling for mistaken words.

In terms of the duration of marking an essay, two educators stated that it took them two to three days to mark their learners' essays. However, one educator stated that it took her two months to mark learners' essays and the last one said that it depended on the time available. All the educators stated that they gave feedback after marking learners' essays.

Regarding errors, two educators stated that learners used linking devices, one indicated that learners did not use linking devices and the fourth educator mentioned that some learners used them. Additionally, all four educators gave irrelevant answers regarding word classes. They also indicated that the majority of learners used the correct tense.

EFAL learners

The four educators identified major challenges for EFAL learners' essay writing as follows: Learners interpreted topics incorrectly, they did not understand a topic, there was no logical flow or arrangement of ideas, paragraphing was incorrect and vocabulary seemed lacking. This implies that challenges differed from one school to the next.

Educators from the four schools indicated that the spelling patterns of their respective learners tended to follow pronunciation patterns. This suggests that learners think that there must be a correlation between the articulation of English words and how these learners spell and pronounce words. For example, one educator stated that learners tended to omit some letters when they spelt words; presumably letters that were not pronounced in speech, e.g., the *k* in *knee*.

One educator indicated that learners would write 'were' instead of 'where' and 'scool' instead of 'school'. This happens due to a lack of knowledge since English is not a phonetic language. Another educator supported this by arguing that learners spell words in their mother tongue; the way they pronounce them was the way they would write them. For example, learners would write words the way they say them, such as 'phictures' instead of 'pictures' and this would lead to words that are misspelt. The third one indicated that unorganised paragraphs, spelling and vocabulary were contributing factors while the fourth educator mentioned that many learners were unable to arrange facts logically. One of the educators added that a learner would talk about two things in a single paragraph or one matter in two paragraphs.

All four educators confirmed that learners in the four schools chose descriptive type essays. Thus, this type of essay was common in all four schools. This suggests that learners like describing things or experiences and that their writing is based mostly on their ability to create an account of a particular experience. The fourth educator added that learners preferred to write expository essays.

Three educators said that their instructions to learners were to write a 250- to 300-word essay while one educator required a 250-word essay. Although the four educators asserted that their learners assumed responsibility for tasks given in the classroom, they indicated that their learners' reactions to criticism or failure differed. Two stated that their learners appreciated criticism and one of them added that learners highlighted areas of improvement while others showed no interest at all. One educator said that she did not criticise her learners, but rather guided and supported them. The fourth educator mentioned that science and commerce learners set targets for themselves and competed with one another.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The checklist revealed that although most learners submitted mind maps, they committed paragraphing errors, they did not submit draft essays or conclude their essays in line with CAPS curriculum essay writing guidelines. The grammar errors they committed pertain to the use of informal language, incomplete sentences, word classes, concord and punctuation. In Addition, the incorrect use of nouns might cause as much confusion as the incorrect use of pronouns. Incorrect spelling will not be as confusing as the incorrect use of tense. However, the incorrect use of adjectives, as well as the incorrect use of adverbs, will not help to clarify the meaning of sentences constructed by EFAL learners when they write essays.

The findings of the interviews were that some of the educators did not have the relevant qualifications to teach EFAL even though all the educators' teaching experience was more than 20 years. All the educators seemed overloaded with work due to the relatively high learner-educator ratio. Additionally, the presence of progressed learners in EFAL classes presupposed more hard work for the educators. Drafts were edited by the learners themselves in three of the sampled schools. Some educators penalised the learners for spelling errors while others did not. The learners also got feedback from their educators. Challenges experienced by the learners included selecting wrong topics, wrong paragraphing and a lack of vocabulary.

This analysis of the essay writing errors of Grade 11 rural learners affords educators a timely window of opportunity into this significant level consisting of EFAL learners who are on the cusp of exiting the senior school phase. The essay writing errors and the educators' input attest to the plight of this cohort of learners. The reality of the situation should galvanise the stakeholders in question into more effective ways of dealing with essay writing errors.

It is indispensable that stakeholders, namely, learners and educators in this context, collaborate and cooperate in this essay writing enterprise. Additionally, the exercises ought to be perennially set and evaluated to benefit EFAL learners optimally.

Moreover, if stakeholders were to tackle essay writing errors in concert, in line with the CAPS curriculum such as providing learners with immediate feedback, educators consolidating and agreeing on the specific rubric to be used, the prospects of successful self-correction would grow exponentially among the learners. So would autonomous learning and by extension, critical thinking coupled with the learners' affect while in the senior school phase.

The envisaged essay writing experience brings rural EFAL learners' knowledge of grammar rules and the application thereof under closer scrutiny. Implicitly, the correct use of grammar structures is key to effective written communication such as essay writing. Further, formative exposure to different types of essays as well as relevant approaches could ideally help bring about a solid foundation essential for essay writing with all possible expedition.

The monolingual rural setting reminiscent of English L2 learners' environment presupposes more support for the learners but more hard work for EFAL educators in an English medium learning context, irrespective of their grammar structure challenges as revealed by the findings.

Although Noam Chomsky claims that the input to which learners are exposed is insufficient to enable them to discover the rules of the language they are attempting to learn (Ellis, 1997: 66), more research into the EFAL essay writing phenomenon coupled with educators' short term intervention strategies seem imperative. Synergies between the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the English language advisory division and educators—guided by the CAPS curriculum—will help the teaching fraternity to make informed decisions and reduce writing errors apparent among LP learners.

In the long term, stakeholder interactions should help to change attitudes towards essay writing errors for the better. Errors should be regarded as opportunities to learn through consultation, practice, interaction, collaboration and cooperation.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Maphefo R. Mailula is an EFAL educator and a post- graduate student in the Department of Languages at the University of Limpopo. Her research interests lie in the area of English language errors.

Email: maphefomailula2@gmail.com

L. Junia Ngoepe is an associate professor in the Department of Languages at the University of Limpopo, where she teaches English language. Her research foci include L2 assessment and materials development. Her fields of interest lie in transformational teaching.

Email: lucia.ngoepe@ul.ac.za OR junia.ngoepe@gmail.com

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Checklist for identifying learners' essay errors

1. Structural errors

Item(s) included in essay writing process	Yes (Y) or No (N)	Comment
1.1 Sufficient time allotted for essay writing		Stipulate allotted time _____
1.2 Essay was written		
• Narrative		
• Descriptive		
• Expository		
• Argumentative/Persuasive		
• Discursive		
• Reflective		
1.3 Mind map submitted		
1.4 Marked mind map		
1.5 1 st Draft submitted		
1.6 Total Number of drafts		
1.7 Full sentences were used		
1.8 Paragraphs were used		

1.9 Cohesive devices were used		
1.10 Sequence words were used		
1.11 Is there an introduction?		
1.12 Is there a conclusion?		
1.13 What is the total mark?		Total mark :
1.14 Essay written in class?		
1.15 Was the essay written as homework?		
1.16 Is the length of the essay appropriate?		
1.17 Marks were allocated according to structure, content and language		
1.18 Is there a total score?		Total score:
1.19 Total number of learners in class		Number of learners:
1.20 Was feedback given?		

2. Grammar errors

Probable Error	Actual Error	Frequency	Comment
2.1 Noun			
2.2 Pronoun			
2.3 Determiner			

2.4 Verb			
2.5 Adjective			
2.6 Adverb			
2.7 Preposition			
2.8 Conjunction			
2.9 Collocation			
2.10 An incomplete sentence			
2.11 Word order			
2.12 Tense			
2.13 Paragraphing			
2.14 Logical connector			
2.15 Punctuation			

3 Additional errors per essay

APPENDIX B: Interviews with EFAL educators

1 Biographical Details

- 1.1 What is your highest academic qualification?
- 1.2 Stipulate year(s) and month(s) of your teaching experience.
- 1.3 What is your highest English language teaching qualification?
- 1.4 Besides Grade 11, which other grades do you teach?
- 1.5 What is the total number learners in Grade 11?
- 1.6 Do you have progressed learners in Grade 11?
- 1.7 If the answer in 1.6 is yes, how many are they?

2 The Essay Writing Exercise

2.1 Structure

- 2.1.1 How many essays do you give learners per term?
- 2.1.2 What type of essays do you find common among those learners that write?
- 2.1.3 Please explain your answer for 2.1.2
- 2.1.4 What is the normal length of an essay?
- 2.1.5 How should the structure of an essay be?
- 2.1.6 Are learners' ideas expressed in paragraphs?

2.2 The Actual Essay Writing

- 2.2.1 Are essay topics suitable for the grade being assessed?
- 2.2.2 Are instructions to learners unambiguous?
- 2.2.3 Do learners introduce their essays appropriately?
- 2.2.4 Do you allow learners to draft an essay?
- 2.2.5 Do you allocate marks for drafts?
- 2.2.6 Do learners finish writing in time?
- 2.2.7 Please explain 2.2.6.
- 2.2.8 Does the essay writing task comply with CAPS? Please explain.

2.3 Marking

2.3.1 Do the essay questions cover low, medium, and higher order thinking skills?

2.3.2 Do you use the correct rubric when marking? Please explain.

2.3.3 Are learners penalised for spelling mistakes?

2.3.4 How do you tackle spelling mistakes?

2.3.5 How long does it normally take you to mark learners' essays?

2.3.6 What is the learners' essay class average performance?

2.3.7 Do you always give feedback after marking your essays?

2.4 Errors

2.4.1 Do the learners use linking devices?

2.4.2 Give examples of common word class errors.

2.4.3 Do they use the correct tense?

2.4.4 Do they commit punctuation errors?

2.4.5 Give examples of common spelling errors.

2.5 EFAL Learners

2.5.1 What are the major challenges for EFAL learners essay writing?

2.5.2 What type of essays do you find common among those that learners write?

2.5.3 What is the normal length of an essay?

2.5.4 Are learners' able to assume responsibility for tasks in the classroom situation?

2.5.5 How do your learners react to criticism or failure?

Thank you for your contribution.