

# A STUDY ON INFLECTIONAL MORPHEME ERRORS MADE BY ARTS UNDERGRADUATES AT THE SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

A.M.M.Navaz<sup>1</sup> & F.R.Fathima Sama<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>English Language Teaching Unit  
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka  
*navazamm@seu.ac.lk, samaseusl@gmail.com*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper investigates the inflectional morpheme errors made by the students in the Faculty of Arts & Culture (FAC) of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Writing has been a difficult skill to master for the undergraduates irrespective of their faculties. Since, writing is being regularly tested as part of the end-semester examinations for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, it is important for students to master the skill. It is believed that writing skills can be improved by identifying and analyzing the more prominent errors the learners make. Forty five first year students of the FAC were given different writing tasks that included free writing compositions and grammar-based activities. At the end, the errors in their writings were identified, categorized and analyzed. Special attention was paid to inflectional errors. The study revealed that the most prominent errors in free writing were the use of third person singular inflections. The students made considerable errors in writing past tense form too. The majority of the students added the past tense 'be' form along with the past tense verb. In addition, the students made other errors like noun-verb (past tense 'be' form) agreement or missing 'be' form completely. The study also revealed that the students' grammatical knowledge of noun and adjective/adverb inflection was weaker, mainly in using possessives for irregular plural forms and abstract nouns as well as using comparative and superlative forms. A post-test follow-up focus group discussion was held with the students to find the reasons for making such errors. However, they were unable to give a satisfactory explanation. In this study, attempts were also made to analyze the cause of the errors as intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. A study of this nature, it is envisaged, will shed light for future research and help make changes in the instructional methodology, especially in teaching writing skills.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis, Inflectional Errors, Intra-lingual Errors, Inter-lingual Errors, ESLwriting Difficulties.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the Inflectional Morpheme (IM) errors made by the students in the Faculty of Arts & Culture (FAC) of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. This faculty was established along with the establishment of the university in 1996 and at the beginning Tamil, which is one of the National languages of Sri Lanka, was the medium of instruction. At South Eastern University of Sri Lanka there are six faculties including the newly established Faculty of Technology. Of those faculties, the Faculty of Arts & Culture and Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic conduct classes in the mother tongue for the majority of the students. Presently English is also used as a medium of instruction for special degrees in the FAC. English as a second language is taught as a compulsory credit course for the students throughout their academic study. That is, the students learn English for three years (six semesters) for a general degree while the special degree students learn for four years (eight semesters). A pass in English is a pre-requisite for the awarding of degree. End-semester examinations are held along with Continuous Assessments (CAs). Testing of writing skill is a part of both end-semester examinations and CAs. Other testing components are reading and grammar skills. Testing of speaking or listening at the end-semester examinations is practically impossible because each year around 300 students are enrolled, except for the special degree in which around 60 students are enrolled.

The experience of being language teachers in the university make us to understand that writing is the most difficult skill to master for the students irrespective of their faculties, yet it is more pronounced at the FAC. The students admitted to the FAC are weaker in English.

Many of them come from rural areas of the Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Amapara districts and Northern peninsula. Even though exclusive data is not available at the GCE A/L (General certificate in Education Advanced Level), which is the entry level examination for university, only around 40% have passed the General English examination in the island (Department of Examination, 2015), of them what percentage secured admission to university is not known. Only around 20% of the GCE A/L qualified students secure admission to university (Sri Lanka University Grants Commission, 2016).

Dealing with learner errors has been a problem for all second language teachers either in schools or universities. Our personal acquaintance with the enormous errors undergraduates make in their writing has been a concern in the process of investigating the learner errors in this small scale study. Identification and understanding the underlying reason behind an error is equally important for a language teacher as well as making the students rectify the errors. Corder (1967) argues learner errors inform teacher how far learner has progressed towards the learning objective and consequently what remains to be learnt. The errors also inform the researchers '[...] evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language.' (ibid: 167)

Brown (2000:217) defines error as 'a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of native speaker.' He differentiates errors from mistakes – a slip of the tongue or a performance error. While errors, according to Brown, exhibits a kind of competency a learner has achieved. Hence, differentiating between mistakes and errors need a systematic procedure (ibid).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies that systematically investigate errors the second language learners make were conducted from the 1980<sup>s</sup> with the study of Pit Corder (1982). Previously the second language acquisition (SLA) theories were influenced by behaviourists' view that it considers SLA as an imitation of adult language. The behaviourists believed that when the patterns of language in the learners' first language (L1) are similar to the second or foreign language (FL) which the learner intends to learn a positive transfer takes place. On the other hand, when the patterns of the SL or FL are different from that of learner's L1 a negative transfer takes place. That is, the learning is easier when positive transfer takes place and learning will be difficult when negative transfer takes place (Yordchim and Gibbs, 2014). When behaviourists' view was not accepted as adequate, an alternative explanation was required – the error analysis tends to replace the behaviourist' view. Thus error analysis supersedes the contrastive analysis. The latter gives explanation for errors based only on negative transfer (Brown, 2000). Contrastive analysis hypothesis explains that the main barrier to SLA is the interference of the first language system with the second language system and that 'a scientific, structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe which are problems and which are not.' (Fang and Jiang, 2007: 10).

According to Corder (1967), better techniques should be developed for the identification as well as the description of errors. Traditionally errors are described 'superficially' which Corder assumed as inadequate. Those kinds of classifications are:

- I. Errors of omission where an element is omitted which should be present.
  - II. Errors of addition where an element is present which should not be there.
  - III. Errors of selection where the wrong item has been chosen in place of the right one.
  - IV. Errors of ordering where the elements presented are correct but wrongly sequenced.
- (Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982)

This is a kind of description only, while there are other categories too like global vs local. According to Burt (1975) 'global' errors hinder communication and prevent the learner from

comprehending the message conveyed. 'Local' errors only affect a single element of a sentence, but do not prevent a message from being heard.

In addition to identifying the categories of errors, sources of errors are also important. Brown (2000) presents four sources of errors: Interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, communication strategies, of them two main sources are given below.

### 1) Interlingual Transfer

This type of errors occur as a result of interference from the learners' L1 (first language). According to Brown, 'The beginning stages of learning a second language are especially vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the native language, or interference.' (224). Hence, if the teacher is familiar with the learners' L1 he or she can analyse the error in the second language (L2) in terms of the L1.

### 2) Intralingual Transfer

This type of error occurs when the learners develop their L2 to a certain extent, mostly occurs as a result of partial learning (Brown, 2000). Overgeneralization is a source of this error where the learners apply the rules of the L2 in a faulty situation. "He goed to the market" is an example of such a situation. Here the learner adds 'ed' for an irregular verb. According to Richard (1971) ignorance of rule restriction (e.g. *The man I saw him*) also causes this kind of error.

Even though these categories are basic they were unable capture all kinds of errors second language learners make. At this juncture, an analysis of inflectional morphemes has a role to identify and categorize the errors too. Inflectional morphology has been identified as a problematic area to learners of English as a second language when there are no overt inflectional markers in the mother tongue of the learners (Akande, 2003). Many of the works on error analysis revolved around these inflectional morphemes (e.g. Richards, 1971; Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Akande, 2013; Yordchim and Gibbs, 2014) though in different overseas contexts.

The eight inflectional morphemes can be divided into three categories (Ballard, 2013):

1. Noun inflections: Nouns can be inflected to show plurality and also to indicate possession.
  - I. Plural markers
  - II. Possessions
2. Verbal inflections:
  - III. Third person singular or subject-verbal concord
  - IV. -ing participle – continuous tense
  - V. -ed inflection for past tense
  - VI. -ed inflection for participle
3. Adjective and Adverb inflections:
  - VII. Comparative form – er
  - VIII. Superlative form – est

Studies that focused on error analysis in general and inflectional morphemes have been conducted in different contexts.

Akande (2003) examined the use of the eight inflectional morphemes and errors in the use of morphemes among the senior secondary students in a Nigerian school. Those inflectional morphemes are listed above. The study revealed that the most occurring errors were the past tense and the plural markers. Also, the pupils generally had very poor competence in the use of the past participle, possessive inflection, past tense inflection and plural inflection as these four had higher percentages of errors of occurrences.

In another study Yordchim and Gibbs (2014) tried to identify the errors made by a sample group of 83 Thai university students majoring in Business English at the end of their 3rd

academic year. A test paper was given to these students and completed by them. The results showed that inflectional errors in using nouns had the highest percentage (88.89%), followed by adjectives (83.33%) and verbs had the lowest percentage (66.67%).

Jayasundara and Premarathna (2011) identified errors made by students from Uva Wellassa University in the central part of Sri Lanka. Their study focused on both speaking and writing and they classified the errors into broad categories as Grammar, Syntactic, Semantic, Lexical, Orthography, Morphology and Phonology. These categories seem overlapping because grammar covers all kinds of errors such as morphological and syntactic errors, whereas lexical and morphological errors are related (Ballard, 2013). Neither did the researchers define their error categories. Therefore, the results were not taken into discussion in the present study. A previous action research conducted by Navaz (2016) identified errors as broad categories as wrong tense usage and spelling errors and the study was undertaken as an intervention study on improving students' writing skills at the same faculty where the present study is conducted. To the knowledge of the researchers any systematic study on errors, especially identifying inflectional errors was not carried out in Sri Lanka. Hence, observing the occurrence of abundant errors made by the students in the South Eastern University, mainly the errors in making inflectional morphemes, the present study was undertaken to systematically look into the learner errors and to find the underlying reasons.

The objectives of the study are given below:

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To identify the Inflectional Morpheme (IM) errors students make in their writing.
- To identify the most frequent types of inflectional morpheme errors and the underlying reasons behind making those errors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this study were collected by distributing worksheets, followed by a focus group discussion. For this study 45 students who are in the first year, Semester II English course of the Faculty of Arts & Culture of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka were selected. First year students have been grouped according to their ability level based on a placement test conducted at the beginning of their academic study. There are five groups in the first year and the students who participated in this study are in group 3; 1 being top and 5 being the weakest. These students have already completed their first semester of year 1 and awaiting results. At the time of the study they were at the 4<sup>th</sup> week of semester II. Each semester lasts for 13-15 weeks. English is taught as a compulsory 2 credit course for three years in the Faculty.

In the study sample, only a male student was included and all the others were female. More than 80% of the student intake to the faculty is female students. In the academic year 2013/2014 out of 597 students admitted to Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Arabic 487 students were female (UGC Handbook, 2014).

In order to identify the IM errors, the students were given worksheets containing five kinds of tasks. They were given in two classes that span over 2 weeks. The tasks are:

- I. A picture description for using present continuous tenses. Students were given a picture of an outdoor scene.
- II. A guided writing on "Write 15 sentences about a recent trip" using simple past.
- III. A writing activity for describing a routine of a friend using present simple.

IV. A gap filling activity to use correct comparative and superlative forms.

E.g. The Amazon is ..... (wide) than the Nile.

V. A gap filling activity for using possessives.

E.g. This is ..... (Peter) book.

For the last two activities an example for each was given.

Students were given nearly 30 minutes each for the activities I, II and III and for both IV and V 30 minutes only. They were asked to work independently and their identities were not obtained. The writings were collected and corrected by one of the researchers. Errors were identified based on the eight inflectional morphemes (IMs): I. Plural markers II. Possessions III. Third person singular IV. ing participle V. ed inflection for past tense VI. ed inflection for participle VII. Comparative form – er VIII. Superlative form – est. Errors were manually counted and relevant examples were also extracted from students' writings. The results were re-checked by the other researcher and adjustments were made in the identification where needed.

When the inflectional errors had been identified they were further categorized into a suitable category devised by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), which is known as "Surface Strategy Taxonomy". A surface strategy taxonomy developed by Dulay et al. (1982) presents a mechanism to identify the errors by looking at them. Learners may add any unnecessary item into a word, morpheme or sentence (e.g. peoples –unnecessary addition of 's'). They could omit certain elements (tree for trees –use singular for plural –missing 's'), use the wrong form of the morpheme/ word (mans) or even change the word order. They are known as *addition, omission, misformation and disorder*. This kind of classification, according to Dulay et al., is useful to identify the learner's cognitive processes in creating the new language.

Initially errors were calculated activity-wise (i.e. Free writing). Within each activity the total sentences that are error laden, errors connected to the IMs were taken into consideration. Hence, within the scope of this paper focus was paid on errors of IMs only. Attempts were also made to identify the causes of the errors from the students' point of view and based on the form/nature of error. Students were met in the same group and the reasons for making errors were found from them.

## FINDINGS

IM Type	Numbers present
Plural markers	32
Possessions	129
Third person singular	172
'ing' participle	47
'ed' inflection for past tense	151
'ed' inflection for participle	3
Comparative form – er	87
Superlative form – est	80
<b>Total</b>	<b>701</b>

Table 1: Types of IM Errors made by students

The tables below describe the errors found in different writing tasks of the students and they are presented according to the corresponding inflectional morphemes. Even though there are numbers and percentage they should be treated with a precaution as given in the discussion section. Table 1 describes all types of IM errors, while tables 2 and 3 classify them according to types of activities students were given. As there are two different activities the percentage of errors were calculated according to the activities because the activities that tested on possessions and comparative & superlative forms were just test items designed for the purpose, while other errors were identified from writing tasks. Hence, it can be predicted when grammar is directly tested, students may make several errors but it may not occur in a free writing which is closer to real situations.

**Table 2: Errors in free writing**

IM Type	Numbers present	Overall percentage	Rank Order
Plural markers	32	8	4
Third person singular	172	42	1
'ing' participle	47	12	3
'ed' inflection for past tense	151	37	2
'ed' inflection for participle	3	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>405</b>		

**Table 3: Errors in grammar based activities**

IM Type	Numbers present	Overall percentage	Rank Order
Possessions	129	44	1
Comparative form – er	87	29	2
Superlative form – est	80	27	3
Total	296		

Overall results indicate that students find difficulties in using correct inflectional morphemes. Students made higher number of errors in making third person singular and past tense. Similarly their knowledge regarding the possessions, comparative and superlative forms were also weaker. The lowest category was 'ed' participle but it does not inform us that students have mastered those rules but, in reality, students did not have to use this inflectional morpheme in their writing. Only on three occasions they had attempted to use the 'ed' participle for perfect tense and all three were erroneous.

Each individual IM errors are given below.

### **Errors in Plural inflection**

Most of these errors occurred as a result of addition, omission and misformation.

Students have used plural morphemes with singular subject. e.g. There is a big trees in this picture. Also, they have added 's' for people and children. E.g. All peoples are sitting under the tree. These errors can be considered as addition errors.

They have also omitted (omission errors) plural morphemes where they are required.

*There are two tree in the picture.*

There are errors of misformation too. *Two mans are on the grass.* (for men)

There are two leafs. (for leaves)

### Errors in Possessions

There were 129 errors identified where students had done errors in using wrong possessive forms. But they were tested using a gap filling activity in which they needed to use the correct possessive form of the given words. Had this activity been a free writing students wouldn't have used many possessive forms and the number of errors would have been lower. The identified errors were classified into two: Omission and Misformation. Students completely avoid using the apostrophe (omission error) or use it in a wrong way (misformation).

Examples for omission:

*Smith* (for Smith's) *Children* (for Children's)

Examples for misformation:

*Childrens'* (for Children's) *Mens'* (for men's) *Boys'* (for Boy's)

### Third person singular

There were 172 errors in this category apart from 31 errors for wrong tense usage. As shown in figure 1 below, most of the errors in this category were omission errors. Students have used the base form of the verb without making inflectional changes for the third person singular morphemes.

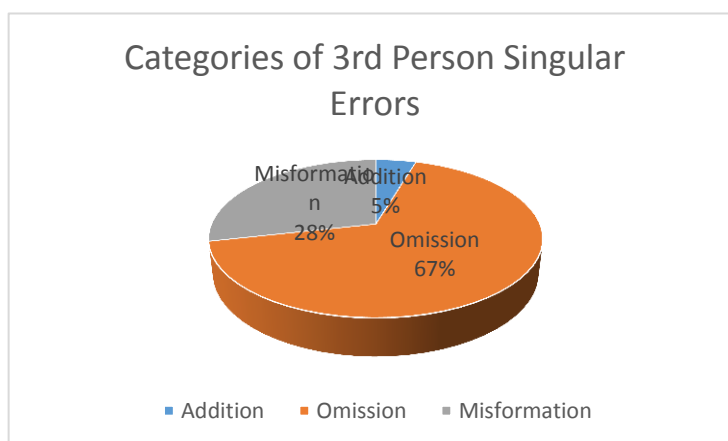


Figure 1: Categories of third person singular errors

E.g.

1. She always study at this time.
2. She go to temple early morning.
3. She brush and wash her face.
4. Santhiya play with her puppy.

Apart from these errors, there were errors in misformation too.

*Sharmila cookes before she goes to work.* The student has added 'es' instead of 's'.

### 'ing' participle

Majority of the 'ing' errors were misformation errors. Students did not know the rules of adding 'ing'. Sometimes they doubled the last letter before adding 'ing' where it was not needed.

*Boil – boilling* (instead of boiling).

In other cases they did not double last consonant where it was required.

*Sit – siting* (instead of sitting)

Sometimes they added 'ing' to the past form too. *Tooking* – instead of taking.

### Past Tense –'ed' inflection

In forming the past tense morphemes, students had committed different kinds of errors and the errors are categorized into different types as given below in table 4, though a possible overlap should be taken into consideration too. The majority of errors occurred through addition where students have attached a present or past 'be' form with either past form of the verb or present form of the verb. Though students have used correct inflectional form the sentence becomes wrong due to this addition.

**Table 4: Categories of past tense errors**

Error category identified	Number of errors identified	Examples
1. Addition- Add 'was' or 'were' with past verb	55	We were expected the food. We were organized a small trip. We were went first to temple.
2. Addition- Add 'are' with past verb.	26	We are visited our friend's house. We are ate lunch in the temple. 'is' – not
Addition- Add 'was' or 'were' with present verb	30	We were go to parliament We were arrange... We were ran.... I was forgot that a trip in my life We was sang many songs
3. Misformation	10	We saws .. We broked and falled ..... see Dulay et al. (1982)
4. No inflection	20	We enjoy.....
5. Others	10	Infinitive – to went
<b>Total</b>	<b>151</b>	

### Past participle –'ed' inflection

There were only 3 sentences written using present perfect tense (past participle verb form) and all three were erroneous. The activities given may not have required the students to use the perfect tense or the students may be reluctant to use it because they were not familiar with the past participle verb form.

E.g. *I have understanding my friends in the trip.*

*I have visit many places.*



### **Comparative form ('er')**

There were 87 errors identified, belonged to two categories: omission and misformation. Testing of comparative and superlative forms were done using individual grammar tasks. Students used the same form of the adjective instead of the comparative form (big-big). Also, they made the misformation errors by adding wrong forms. (*big – bigger, wide-widest, far – farer*).

### **Superlative form ('est')**

In the superlative form also there were errors similar to the comparative form. But higher number of misformation errors were present (73), while there were seven (7) omission errors which occurred when items that should appear in a well formed structure are absent.

*Easy – easy (for easiest)*

The misformation occurred when the students gave wrong form of the words. Most of the time they have used the comparative form instead of superlative form.

e.g. *good – better (for best); easy – easier (for easiest)*

Students presented a wrong form too.

After the errors from students' writings have been identified a focus group discussion was held with them in order to identify the reasons or causes of making such errors. Though students did not give any plausible explanations, it was found that they have misconceptions about forming past tense. For example, they assumed by using 'be form of past tense' + present tense verb (go) they can form the past tense (E.g. was/were + go = went). In addition, the results and the focus group discussion revealed that students have not mastered the grammar rules, especially for making inflections for irregular nouns, verbs and adjectives.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study focused on the inflectional errors only. Nevertheless there were so many other errors in writing that do not come under inflectional categories and also this study did not take into consideration the spelling errors or wrong sentence order. The results of this study should be considered in light of the following discussion.

The writing activities were given to students in order to identify the errors committed by the students. The three writing tasks (I to III) are typical examples of the writing activities students undertake in the classes. Even though students were asked to use specific tense/s for writing under each task, they had used other tenses too. However, nowhere in any of the writings students had used perfect tense to identify the 'ed' inflection for participle.

Though there have been higher percentage for possessions, comparative and superlative forms, we need to consider the fact that they appeared in individual exercises on those particular topics. In real classroom writings the use of those inflections are limited, yet the higher number of errors inform us that the students had to master the rules connected with those three grammatical elements.

The errors may have occurred as a result of two broad causes (Brown, 2000). They are interlingual and intralingual transfers, as we discussed earlier. As far as these students are concerned the errors rarely showed any influence made by their mother tongue (L1). Hence, such interlingual errors more frequently occur connected with sentence order, which this study did not consider. Other than that, mostly these errors are the causes of intralingual errors or development errors. Most of the misformation errors may have been caused by

overgeneralization. For example, students added 'ed' for irregular past tense. Due to limitation of space a detailed discussion is avoided within the scope of this paper.

In this study, higher number of inflectional errors occurred in using the third person singular and past tense inflections. These findings are similar to the study by Akande (2003). In his study he found that there were higher number of errors connected to past tense. Similarly, Yordchims and Gibbs's (2014) study revealed inflectional errors in using nouns had the highest percentage, followed by adjectives. In the present study also we found there were higher number of errors in the inflectional superlative forms but we treated this result with a caution, as mentioned above.

This study is not without its own limitations. Counting errors manually is subject to making errors but checking and rechecking were done by both researchers to minimize such errors. Categorization of errors also is a problematic area. The previous studies on error analysis were used to categorize errors as *addition*, *omission* and *misformation* (e.g. Dulay et al. 1982).

## CONCLUSION

This study identified the types of errors students make, especially in connection with inflectional morphemes. Higher number of errors were identified from 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular forms and past tense forms. Equally students made several mistakes in using possessive, comparative and superlative forms. All these errors indicate that students have difficulties in mastering grammar rules especially when using irregular inflectional morphemes. Furthermore, most of these errors are caused by intralingual transfer which occurs when the students develop their grammar knowledge.

These findings inform us the gravity of the problem that prevails in the faculty and also the possible causes. It also alarms the researchers for possible remedial activities that could be incorporated into the instructional methodology as well as designing materials. In the light of this discussion it can be envisaged that this study should be treated as pre-study for an in-depth study to analyze the errors students make including errors in inflectional morphemes. Hence, future studies are needed to investigate the problems further.

## REFERENCES

- Akande, A. T. (2003) Acquisition of the Inflectional Morphemes by Nigeria Learners of English Language. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. 12(3). P. 310–326.
- Ballard, K. (2013) *The Frameworks of English*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown, H. D. (2000) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. 4th Edition, New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Burt, M. K. (1975). Error analysis in the adult EFL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 9: 53-63
- Corder, S. P. (1967) The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*. V(4). P. 161-170.
- Corder, S. P. (1982) *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Department of Examinations (2015) GCE A/L Examination 2015: Performance of Candidates. Colombo: Research and Development Branch, Department of Education.
- Dulay, H., Burt, M. and Krashen, S. (1982) *Language Two*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fang, X. Jiang, X. (2007) Error analysis and the EFL classroom teaching. *US-China Education Review*. 4 (9). p 10-14.

Jayasundara, J. M. P. V. K and Premarathna, C. D. H. M. (2011) A Linguistic Analysis of Errors Committed in English by Undergraduates. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Publication*. 1 (1). P. 1-6

Navaz, A.M.M. (2016) Enhancing the Writing Skills of Weak Undergraduates: An action research conducted at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. *A collection of Research Papers from the Sri Lankan Context*. Colombo: British Council.

Richards, J. C. (1971) A Non-Contrastive Approach to Error Analysis. *ELT Journal*. XXV (3). P. 204-219.

University Grants Commission (2014) Handbook 2014. Colombo: UGC.

University Grants Commission (2016) Handbook 2016. Colombo: UGC.

Yordchim, S. and Gibbs, T. J. (2014) Error Analysis of English Inflection among Thai University Students. *International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering*. 8 (7). P. 2177-2180.