

# **A Pilot Study to Identify the Errors in Email Writing: With Reference to Selected First Year Commerce Undergraduates**

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## **1. Introduction**

Language is essential for both direct communication through conversations and indirect communication via platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and email. In Sri Lanka, English is taught as a second language and is integral to the national curriculum. Due to significant linguistic differences, learning English involves considerable effort. With technological advancements, email has emerged as a key communication tool in educational and professional settings, making the teaching of email writing skills increasingly important. Proper email etiquette, or netiquette, is vital for effective digital communication, minimizing misunderstandings, and enhancing perceptions, particularly in formal and academic contexts. Understanding the distinction between errors and mistakes is crucial in language learning. Errors are systematic and result from gaps in a learner's knowledge of second language rules, while mistakes are random deviations occurring when learners haven't fully mastered a grammatical form. Error Analysis (EA) is a process used to identify, describe, and explain these errors by collecting and analyzing language samples. Various EA models offer different approaches to analyzing learner errors. Some models focus on surface structures, categorizing errors into omission, addition, and misformation (Dulay et al. (1982)). Others provide comprehensive frameworks for error identification, categorization, and analysis of underlying causes (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Corder, 1981). This study utilizes Corder's (1981) model, effectively offering targeted classroom feedback.

Research on email writing errors has identified issues such as unclear writing and the necessity for formal training to enhance effectiveness. Further errors in email writing can be categorized as linguistic errors and formatting errors while email can be grouped as formal email and informal email. Studies have noted frequent errors in grammar and politeness, especially in student-teacher interactions. In Sri Lanka, while research on EA has largely focused on writing and speaking errors among university students, there has been limited focus on email writing. Hence, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the email writing errors of first-year undergraduates and answering the following research question: what types of errors do the students commit in writing formal emails?

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The study used a mixed-method research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, and involved 50 purposefully selected first-year undergraduates from the University of Kelaniya's Department of Commerce and Financial Management. Informed consent was obtained via e-consent forms, ensuring participants' respect, confidentiality, and anonymity. The study was conducted over four weeks with two-hour sessions each week. Questionnaire is distributed on the first day in order to identify the students' awareness and practices of formal email writing. Furthermore, a pre-test email writing task was given to identify initial errors and the students practice in sending formal emails. Students then received instruction on effective formal email writing techniques while incorporating errors that were

identified through the pretest and wrote two sample emails during the sessions for the given formal scenarios. A post-test formal email writing task was administered to assess improvements. Data were analyzed using Corder's (1981) EA model, which involved qualitative content analysis for error identification and description, and descriptive statistical analysis to tabulate findings.

### 3. Results And Discussion

By following the methods mentioned in the methodology section, the errors were classified and analyzed the errors using the qualitative content analysis method using Corder's model.

#### ***Email Script 5:***

*Subject: To arrange a meeting*

*Dear mam,*

*My Student no is XXX, I am fourth year student in university of kelaniya, I have to prepare a progress report, so i have many problems about it, so can you please arrange a meeting next week to discuss this with you.*

In the email script 5, several errors were identified. The salutation "Dear mam" should be corrected to "Dear madam," a contracted form error. Capitalization errors include "university of Kelaniya," which should be "University of Kelaniya," and "i" instead of "I." Punctuation errors are present, as commas were used at the end of sentences instead of periods. Additionally, the article "the" is missing in the phrase "in University of Kelaniya." The email's body also lacks a proper conclusion and signature block, and the student used only a few sentences as one paragraph, which affects the overall structure.

#### ***Email Script 25:***

*Subject: DEAR MADAM*

*WORKING OUR INTERNSIP SO ASKING ARRANGE MEETING*

*I AM XXX. MY STUDENT NUMBER IS XXX. I AM STUDING IN KELANIYA UNIVERSITY, 4<sup>TH</sup> YEAR UNDERGRADUATE WORKING OUR INTERNSHIP DISCUSS MEETING*

*THANK YOU*

*YOURS SINCELERY*

*XXX*

Email script 25 contains several notable errors. Firstly, the entire email is written in capital letters, which can be interpreted as expressing anger or dissatisfaction and is generally considered unprofessional. Additionally, there is a mix-up between the subject line and the salutation, with the salutation incorrectly used as the subject line and vice versa. The email also features incorrect or missing prepositions, such as in "asking arrange a meeting" (asking to arrange a meeting) and "I am studying in Kelaniya University" (I am studying at Kelaniya University). Spelling errors are present, including "internsip" (internship) and "sincelery" (sincerely). Furthermore, the email suffers from word order issues, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding the writer's intended message.

Table 1: Pre-test vs Posttest Frequency of errors

No	Type of error	Pretest		Post-test	
		Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
1	Adverbs	9	1.6	8	2.9
2	Capitalization	50	8.6	14	5.1
3	Conjunction	27	4.7	15	5.4
4	Contracted forms	59	10.2	20	7.2
5	Definite/ indefinite articles	16	2.8	19	6.9
6	Errors related to tense	34	5.9	11	4.0
7	Genitive's	10	1.7	4	1.4
8	Missing subject line	19	3.3	9	3.3
9	No introduction or conclusion	27	4.7	12	4.3
10	No sender information	21	3.6	9	3.3
11	Prepositions	14	2.4	7	2.5
12	Punctuation	55	9.5	24	8.7
13	Repetition	12	2.1	5	1.8
14	Singular-plural forms	42	7.2	25	9.1
15	Spelling	102	17.6	56	20.3
16	Subject-verb agreement	23	4.0	10	3.6
17	Verb related errors	45	7.8	21	7.6
18	Word order	15	2.6	7	2.5

Table 1 compares pretest and posttest error frequencies, revealing learner progress trends and persistent difficulties. Spelling errors remained the most common, with a slight percentage increase despite a decrease in total numbers. Singular-plural errors decreased in frequency but increased in percentage, indicating continued challenges. Punctuation errors also declined in number but only slightly in percentage. Improvements were noted in verb-related and contracted form errors, while errors with definite and indefinite articles increased in frequency and percentage, suggesting these became more problematic. Capitalization and conjunction errors decreased significantly, though conjunction errors saw a minor percentage rise. Errors related to tense, subject-verb agreement, and omission of sender information improved overall, while less frequent errors such as those with the genitive case, missing subject lines, and word order showed reduced frequency but stable percentages, highlighting ongoing issues in these areas.

Table 2: Frequency comparison between questionnaires and actual email writing gathered data

Criteria	Pre-test		Post-test	
<b>Use of formal greeting</b>	Formal Greeting	29	Formal Greeting	35
	Informal/ without greeting	21	Informal/ without greeting	15
<b>Use of formal closing</b>	Formal closing	27	Formal closing	35
	Informal/ without closing	23	Informal/ without closing	15

<b>Concise and clear email</b>	Concise and clear	25	Concise and clear	35
	Not Concise and clear	25	Not Concise and clear	15
<b>Formal tone</b>	Formal tone	20	Formal tone	35
	Informal tone	30	Informal tone	15
<b>Self-introduction and contact information</b>	Yes	20	Yes	35
	No	30	No	15
<b>Subject line</b>	Missing Subject line	4	Missing Subject line	2
	Body in the subject line	3	Body in the subject line	2
	Vague subject line	29	Vague subject line	32
	Correct subject line	14	Correct subject line	14
<b>Body paragraph</b>	Few sentences	7	Few sentences	5
	One whole paragraph	33	One whole paragraph	15
	3 paragraph structure	10	3 paragraph structure	30

Table 2 highlights notable improvements in email writing practices over time. The frequency of formal greetings increased from 29 to 35, and formal closings rose from 27 to 35. There was also a significant increase in responses indicating conciseness and clarity, from 25 to 35, and a formal tone improved from 20 to 35. Self-introduction and contact information remained consistently high at 35 responses. Subject line accuracy improved slightly, and the email body structure advanced from a single paragraph to a well-organized three-paragraph format. These changes reflect a positive trend toward better adherence to formal email standards and overall email quality.

The study analyzed email writing errors among students using EA methods and SPSS, revealing that spelling errors were the most noticeable in both the pretest and posttest. In the pretest, errors in contracted forms were the second most noticeable, followed by punctuation, capitalization, verb-related, singular/plural, and tense-related errors. In the posttest, singular-plural errors became the second most noticeable, with other significant errors including prepositions, verb-related issues, contracted forms, articles, and capitalization. Adverbs were the least noticeable in the pretest, while the genitive "s" was the least noticeable in the posttest. These findings align with previous research, such as Konuk's (2021) and Adhikary's (2022) studies, which also identified common errors in email writing like poor style, carelessness, lack of clarity, and issues with spelling and punctuation. Other frequent problems included informal language, poor paragraph structure, and inadequate email etiquette. Despite some awareness of academic email conventions, students' actual email practices often reflected these deficiencies.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study underscores a gap between students' understanding of email writing norms and their practices, highlighting frequent spelling, grammar, and formality errors. Educators should provide feedback to motivate improvements and offer early guidance on formal communication. The study's limitations include a small sample size of 50 first-year undergraduates from one department, which may affect the generalizability of the results.

Future research could benefit from a larger sample and additional data collection methods. The researcher also recommends investigating gender differences in Error Analysis (EA) within tertiary education. In conclusion, the study calls for a stronger emphasis on teaching email communication conventions in Sri Lankan tertiary education. It suggests addressing its limitations to enhance future research in this field.

### **5. Keywords**

Email writing, Error analysis, First year undergraduates

### **6. References**

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