



Research Article

Factors Associated with Errors in English Simple-Sentence Writing: A Case Study of Grade 12 Students at Nampula Secondary School

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Abstract

This article derives from a monograph that investigated the factors affecting the incorrect writing of simple sentence structures by 12th-grade day-shift students at Nampula Secondary School. The overall aim was to identify the factors that lead students to write simple sentences incorrectly in English. Eighty-seven subjects took part in this descriptive, single-site study, namely 85 students (45 male and 40 female) from four 12th-grade classes and 2 English teachers. A pragmatic paradigm and a mixed-methods approach were adopted, using a written test, semi-structured interviews and lesson observation as data-collection instruments. Performance on the written test was weak and declined with structural complexity: 42.4% of students produced correct declarative sentences, versus 24.7% for negative declaratives, 20.0% for interrogatives and 10.6% for negative interrogatives. Interviews and classroom observation indicated infrequent explicit teaching of simple-sentence structure (5.5% of coded intervals) relative to unsystematic error correction (55.5%). These patterns are associated with, and are interpreted here in relation to, limited grammatical instruction, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and low reported motivation, in a context where teachers reported not addressing the topic systematically despite its inclusion in the 12th-grade syllabus. Because the design is descriptive and confined to a single school, these associations should not be read as established causes. Controlled and free-practice activities for teaching simple-sentence structure are proposed, together with greater student exposure to English inside and outside the classroom and continuous teacher training, as directions warranting further, more rigorous research.

Keywords

Simple Sentence Structure, Factors, Incorrect Writing, English Language Teaching, Mozambique

1. Introduction

Much of the information we deal with today circulates in written form school textbooks, short stories, notices and messages of various kinds. A well-written sentence is one that obeys grammatical rules; when sentence structure is incorrect, the text can become impoverished and drift away from the

meaning it is intended to convey [28]. Writing therefore requires mastery of the grammatical relations between words, that is, the ability to identify the function of each word noun, verb, adjective, adverb — from the position it occupies in the sentence.

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The problem addressed by this study emerged during Teaching Practice, when it was observed that most 12th-grade, day-shift students at Nampula Secondary School were unable to write grammatically correct sentences, in particular failing to respect third-person singular agreement and Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) order. Given that these students have studied English since the 6th grade that is, for at least seven years his difficulty gave rise to the study's guiding question: what factors affect students' incorrect writing of simple sentence structures?

The overall aim of the study was to identify the factors affecting students' incorrect writing of simple sentence structures. The specific objectives were: (i) to describe how teachers motivate students to improve the writing of simple sentences; (ii) to identify the types of activities and procedures used by teachers to teach simple sentence structure; (iii) to identify the activities that students practise outside school; and (iv) to explain the frequency with which teachers assign simple-sentence writing activities in the classroom.



Source: author's own elaboration (2024).

Figure 1. Nampula Secondary School.

The study was carried out at Nampula Secondary School, a public general secondary education institution located in the city of Nampula, capital of the province of the same name, in northern Mozambique. Like other public secondary schools in the country, the institution operates in shifts (day, afternoon and evening) and includes English as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum from the 6th grade, taught continuously through to the 12th grade. The school enrolls students from different neighbourhoods of the city and its surroundings, which results in large, linguistically heterogeneous classes in which Portuguese coexists with Bantu mother tongues (notably Emakhuwa, the predominant language in the region) — a factor that, as discussed in the literature review, has direct implications for learning English as a foreign language. The study focused specifically on four 12th-grade, day-shift classes, since this is the terminal level of general secondary education, at which students are expected to have already mastered basic grammatical structures before moving on to higher

education or the labour market.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sentence and Structure

Aarts [1] defines a sentence as a sequence of words that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, used to express a state of affairs in the world, whereas Devine [2] describes it as the expression of a complete thought, composed of a subject and a predicate. Wekker and Haegeman [3] distinguish declarative sentences, used to provide information, from interrogative sentences, used to request it. As for structure, Burton-Roberts [4] emphasises that it presupposes elements that can be divided into constituents, organised in a specific way and each with a determined function within the whole.

2.2. The Structure of the Simple Sentence

According to Devine [2] and Tallerman [5], a simple sentence corresponds to an independent clause with a single predicate (a finite verb), capable of expressing a complete idea and of standing on its own. In this study, the term is used broadly: interrogative and negative transformations of a base clause are still treated as simple sentences, since they remain single-clause constructions, while sentence type (declarative, negative, interrogative, negative-interrogative), clause structure, word order, auxiliary use and subject–verb agreement are analysed as distinct, though related, dimensions. Harmer [6] describes the simple sentence through the elements Subject, Verb, Object, Complement and Adverbial, illustrating this with the example “The dog bit the man”, in which the subject, verb and object can be clearly identified. Word order in English is, according to Tallerman [5], relatively fixed, following the SVO pattern.

2.3. Factors Affecting Students' Incorrect Writing

The literature reviewed points to five recurrent factors: (i) motivation defined by Harmer [7] as the inner drive that leads an individual to pursue a goal, which may be integrative, instrumental [8], intrinsic or extrinsic [9]; (ii) personality Stern [10] associates an extroverted profile with greater ease of learning through contact with the L2; (iii) exposure understood as the total amount of time a student spends in contact with the target language, both inside and outside school [11, 29]; (iv) the student's mother tongue transfer of structures from the L1 to the L2 can be positive or negative, depending on the structural proximity between the two languages [12, 13]; and (v) aptitude a natural capacity that varies from student to student, associated with different learning styles: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile.

2.4. Teaching Methods and Frequency of Practice Activities

The way teachers conduct the teaching of sentence structure and the regularity with which they propose practical writing activities are identified by recent literature as key determinants of student performance. Richards [14] argues that the effectiveness of language teaching depends less on the theoretical approach adopted and more on the consistency with which the teacher integrates structured practice and communicative practice throughout the school year, warning that the absence of a routine of explicit grammar practice tends to produce error fossilisation.

Along the same lines, Nation and Newton [15] argue that the development of foreign-language written production requires a balance between accuracy activities, focused on form, and fluency activities, focused on meaning, both of which should occur regularly rather than occasionally. Harmer [16] adds that the correction and feedback methods used by the teacher immediate or delayed, individual or collective directly influence students' retention of the correct form, with the frequency of controlled practice (drills, substitution, gap-filling) being especially relevant at levels where the basic structure is not yet consolidated, as is the case with many of the 12th-grade students observed in this study.

These positions are consistent with the data collected, which reveal a very low frequency of explicit teaching of simple sentence structure (5.5% of the observed intervals) and of its typologies (3.7%), alongside a high but unsystematic frequency of error correction (55.5%) and feedback (51.9%) — suggesting a reactive rather than a preventive teaching model, in which errors are corrected after the fact rather than the structure being taught before the error occurs.

2.5. The Influence of the Mother Tongue and Portuguese on English Learning

In multilingual contexts such as Mozambique's, students learn English (L3) after having already acquired a Bantu mother tongue (L1) and Portuguese as a second and schooling language (L2), which multiplies the possibilities for linguistic transfer. Jarvis and Pavlenko [17] define cross-linguistic influence as the positive or negative effect that prior knowledge of one language exerts on the learning and use of another, an effect that can manifest at the lexical, morphosyntactic and discursive levels.

Ndamba [12], in a study on African languages in school settings, points out that when the structure of the mother tongue diverges significantly from that of the target language as occurs between SVO-order Bantu languages, with their own distinct verbal agreement marking, and English transfer tends to be negative, generating systematic errors of subject–verb agreement and verbal inflection, precisely the errors most frequently reported in the test applied in this study (omission of the third-person singular -s ending and omission of the

do/does auxiliaries in negation and interrogation). Cook [18] adds that Portuguese, as a schooling language already mastered by Mozambican students, functions simultaneously as a source of cognitive support and as an additional source of interference, insofar as students frequently resort to direct-translation structures from Portuguese into English (L2-to-L3 transfer), which may help explain, for example, the tendency to place the negative adverb immediately after the subject, without the corresponding auxiliary. It should be noted that the present study did not collect data on individual students' first languages, Portuguese proficiency, or contrastive error analyses; transfer is therefore offered here as a plausible interpretation of the error patterns observed rather than as a demonstrated causal mechanism, and is proposed as a hypothesis for confirmation in future research.

This reading is reinforced by Ellis [19], for whom the learning of an additional language is always mediated by the linguistic repertoire already available to the student, so that the teaching of simple sentence structure in English would benefit from an explicit contrastive approach that highlights the structural differences between the mother tongue, Portuguese and English, rather than ignoring them.

2.6. Exposure to and Contact with English outside the Classroom

The quantity and quality of contact with the target language outside the formal teaching environment are recognised as one of the most robust predictors of success in foreign-language learning. Sundqvist and Sylvén [20], within the framework of the concept of “extramural English”, show that informal contact with English through music, films, digital games, social media and recreational reading contributes significantly to the development of vocabulary, fluency and, indirectly, grammatical accuracy, even when such contact is not guided by a teacher.

Along similar lines, a study by Al-Zoubi [21] on the impact of exposure to the English language on language acquisition concludes that students with greater extracurricular exposure through media, technology and social interaction in English perform better on written and oral production tasks than students whose exposure is limited to formal lessons.

In the context of this study, the interview data reveal precisely the opposite: students report little or no systematic contact with English outside school, and the extracurricular activities indicated by teachers are, in most cases, limited to research assignments and written compositions, with no oral exposure or informal-immersion component.

The British Council [11] had already warned that, in contexts where English is neither an official language nor widely used in social and media spaces, the school tends to be practically the only source of exposure to the target language, which increases the teacher's responsibility to compensate for this limitation through systematic in-class practice activities —

precisely the gap identified in the classroom observations carried out at Nampula Secondary School.

2.7. Teaching and Correcting Simple Sentence Structure

Maxom [22] warns that many students do not actually understand what a sentence is, producing sequences with no finite verb. Doff [23] proposes progressive practice activities repetition, substitution, one-word-cue response, visual cues and free substitution as well as classroom writing activities such as gap-filling, word reordering and composition. Regarding the correction of written work, Doff [23] describes different teaching practices, ranging from collective oral correction to peer correction, emphasising that immediate correction, carried out while the error is still “fresh” in the student’s mind, tends to be more effective. Harmer [24] assigns the teacher the roles of motivator, resource and feedback provider, while Freeman [25] highlights the role of the student as communicator and as the party responsible for managing their own learning.

3. Materials and Methods

The study followed the pragmatic paradigm [30] and a descriptive design [26], combining qualitative and quantitative approaches (mixed methods). Data collection took place at Nampula Secondary School over three weeks, using three instruments: semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and a written test, complemented by documentary analysis of the 12th-grade syllabus and thematic lesson plan. The study population comprised the 85 12th-grade, day-shift students (45 male and 40 female) from four classes, all of whom sat the written test. A subsample of 4 students, one purposively selected per class, was additionally interviewed, together with the 2 English teachers responsible for these classes, who were also interviewed and observed across six lessons (three per teacher). The school, the four classes and the six observed lessons were selected by convenience, on the basis of the researcher’s access during Teaching Practice; selection was not random, and the term ‘sampling’ is used here in the sense of participant selection rather than probability sampling. In total, 87 participation instances are reported (85 students plus 2 teachers), with the 4 interviewed students being a subset of the 85 test-takers rather than additional individuals. Table 1 summarises the distribution of participants.

Table 1. Study participants.

Male teachers	Female teachers	Male students	Female students	Total participants	Class and shift
1	1	45	40	87	12th grade, classes A, C, D and E, day shift

Source: research data, prepared by the author (2024).

The quantitative data (test results and observation frequencies) were treated statistically and described narratively; the qualitative data (interview content) were analysed by means

of discourse analysis/narrative description. Figure 2 summarises the methodological design of the study.



Source: author's own elaboration (2024).

Figure 2. Flowchart of the study’s methodological design.

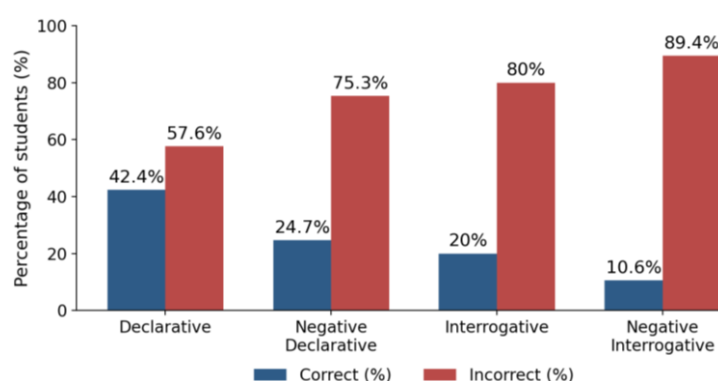
4. Results

4.1. Student Performance in the Written Test

Table 2. Results of the students' written test.

No.	Type of simple sentence	Nº of estdents assessed	Correct (n / %)	Incorrect (n / %)
1	Declarative	85	36 (42.4%)	49 (57.6%)
2	Negative declarative	—	21 (24.7%)	64 (75.3%)
3	Interrogative	—	17 (20%)	68 (80%)
4	Negative interrogative	—	9 (10.6%)	76 (89.4%)

Source: research data, prepared by the author (2024).



Source: research data, prepared by the author (written test administered to the 85 students, 2024).

Figure 3. Student performance by type of simple sentence.

The test, administered to the 85 students, assessed four types of simple sentences: declarative, negative declarative, interrogative and negative interrogative. The results show generally weak performance, which decreases as structural complexity increases, as summarised in Table 2.

With regard to the first type of simple sentence structure, Table 2 shows that, for declarative sentences — in which students were expected to use a third-person pronoun as the subject — only 36 students (42.4%) were successful, while 49 (57.6%) were not, failing to make subject–verb agreement.

The results also show that students are unable to correctly position the particle *not*, placing it directly after the subject in SVO order (e.g., *she not go to school*), without using the *do/does* auxiliary. As Table 2 shows, only 21 students (24.7%) were successful with negative declarative sentences, against 64 (75.3%) who were not.

As for interrogative sentences, in which students were required to transform the negative declarative sentence into an interrogative one, only 17 students (20%) were successful, against 68 (80%) who were not.

Finally, only 9 students (10.6%) were able to correctly form

negative interrogative sentences, against 76 (89.4%) who were not — the lowest result in the test, in a group of students who have studied English for at least seven years (e.g., *doesn't she go to school?*).

4.2. Interviews with Teachers and Students

The interviews revealed a consistent pattern: both teachers stated that they do not systematically teach simple sentence structure or its types, claiming that the topic is “not included” in the syllabus — a claim contradicted by the documentary analysis, which confirmed that the content is present in the 12th-grade syllabus, although absent from the thematic lesson plans prepared by the teachers themselves. Students corroborated this gap, reporting that classroom activities are, in most cases, limited to reading, copying texts, comprehension exercises and compositions with no explicit focus on sentence structure. As for motivation, the teachers stated that they motivate their students, but the students' accounts contradict this perception, describing instead an environment of criticism and intimidation in response to errors made.

4.3. Classroom Observation

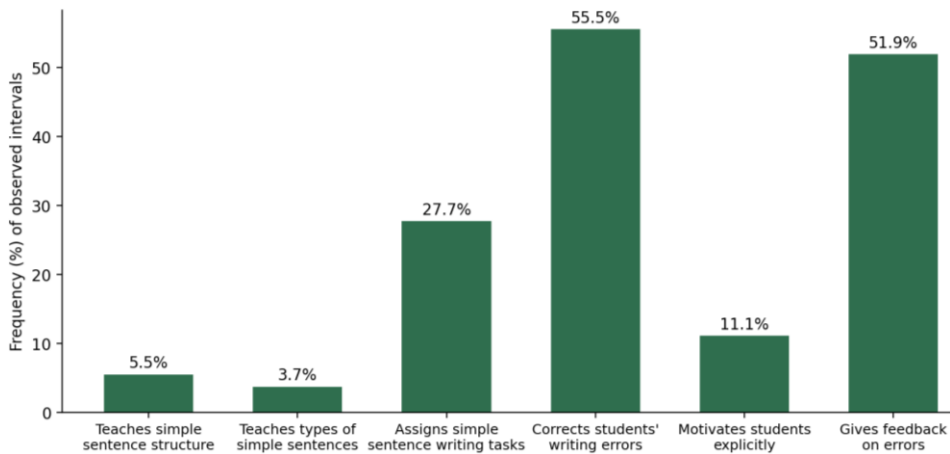
Observation of six lessons confirmed the trends identified in the interviews: explicit teaching of simple sentence structure occurred in only 5.5% of the observed intervals, and teaching of its types in 3.7%. By contrast, correction of writing errors (55.5%) and the provision of feedback (51.9%) were more frequent, although carried out unsystematically and disconnected from a structural focus as a rule centred on reading-comprehension content rather than on grammatical form.

Assignment of simple-sentence writing activities occurred in 27.7% of the intervals, and explicit motivation of students in only 11.1%. Each of the six lessons was divided into consecutive coded time intervals; the percentages in Table 3 represent the proportion of these coded intervals, across all six lessons, in which each behavior was observed, and behaviours were not mutually exclusive within an interval. The researcher coded these; a formal inter-rater reliability check was not conducted, which is acknowledged as a limitation. Table 3 and Figure 4 summarise these results.

Table 3. Results of the classroom observations.

No.	Observed behaviour	Frequency (%)
1	The teacher teaches simple sentence structure	5.5%
2	The teacher teaches the different types of simple sentences	3.7%
3	The teacher assigns simple-sentence writing activities to students	27.7%
4	The teacher corrects students' writing errors	55.5%
5	The teacher motivates students to improve simple sentence structure	11.1%
6	The teacher gives feedback on the error	51.9%

Source: research data, prepared by the author (2024).



Source: research data, prepared by the author (observation of 6 lessons, 2024).

Figure 4. Frequency of behaviours observed in the lessons.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of the Written Test Results

The declarative sentence is regarded as the first sentence type students learn, since it is used to provide information. Wekker and Haegeman [3, 25] state that “sentences can generally be used to give information, and they can be used to ask

for information; sentences used to supply information are declarative sentences”. Along the same lines, Miller [24, 27] notes that the declarative construction “reflects the idea that the speaker or writer declares something to be the case”. The results thus clearly show that most 12th-grade students have not mastered simple declarative structure. Cross-referencing this finding with the teacher interviews, it can be concluded that teachers do not systematically teach the types of simple sentences, claiming that the topic is not part of the syllabus.

Regarding negation, the results reveal the absence of systematic teaching of simple sentence structure and a lack of knowledge of how to correctly form negation. As for interrogative sentences, these results confirm that, not having mastered declarative structure the most elementary students also fail to master interrogative structures, which are more complex in terms of internal organisation. Miller [24, 27] explains that speakers who want to know whether a given event did or did not occur use the interrogative construction. From the standpoint of written production, it can be concluded that students face major difficulties in forming questions owing to a lack of knowledge of the aux+subject+verb+object/complement structure (e.g., *does she go to school?*).

The negative-interrogative result the lowest of the test confirms that this is the most complex structure type and that the root of the problem is the same across all four sentence types: a lack of grammatical knowledge.

5.2. Discussion of the Classroom Observation Findings

These findings are consistent with Doff [23], who stresses the need for teachers to regularly integrate activities such as repetition, substitution and one-word cues into the teaching of sentence structure — something the observations showed to be practically absent from the lessons analysed. Regarding correction, Doff [23] describes several strategies — correction during breaks, collective correction, peer correction and notebook exchange — which, although frequently used by the teachers observed, were not associated with an explicit focus on simple sentence structure, but rather with reading-comprehension content.

5.3. Summary of the Discussion

Taken together, the three instruments converge on the same conclusion: the incorrect writing of simple sentence structures by 12th-grade students is most strongly associated with a reported lack of grammatical knowledge, occurring alongside a reported failure to teach the content systematically, together with limited exposure to the language inside and outside school and low reported motivation among teachers. Given the descriptive, single-site design, these should be read as associated factors rather than demonstrated causes. This pattern of associations is consistent with the literature: Maxom [22] had already warned that many students do not understand what a sentence is; Magno et al. [29] and, more recently, Sundqvist and Sylvén [20] and Al-Zoubi [21] link the exposure deficit to weaker performance; Jarvis and Pavlenko [17], Ndamba [12] and Cook [18] explain the systematic agreement and negation errors through transfer from the mother tongue and Portuguese; and Harmer [7, 16, 24] and Richards [14] stress the decisive role of teacher motivation and methodological consistency in writing success. The fact that teachers acknowledged in the interviews that they avoid systematically

teaching the structure — despite it being included in the official syllabus reveals a mismatch between the prescribed curriculum and the curriculum actually taught, compounded by the absence of the topic from the thematic lesson plans prepared by the teachers themselves.

6. Conclusions

The results of the study make it possible to conclude that 12th-grade, day-shift students' incorrect writing of simple sentence structures at Nampula Secondary School is associated with three interconnected factors, within the limits of a single-site descriptive design that does not itself establish causation: a lack of grammatical knowledge of sentence structure, a lack of exposure to simple-sentence writing activities inside and outside school, and a lack of motivation to improve. These patterns appear, on the evidence gathered, to be linked to a large extent to a teaching practice that does not systematically address this content, even though it is formally included in the 12th-grade syllabus.

It is recommended that teachers review their planning techniques and attitudes, explicitly integrating simple sentence structure into thematic and lesson plans; that students be exposed to a diverse range of communicative writing activities, both inside and outside the classroom; and that motivational actions and constructive feedback be promoted, rather than reactions of criticism or intimidation in response to errors. As a practical proposal, it is suggested that controlled-practice activities be applied (role-play, structured writing correction, jigsaw-type activities, structure elicitation prior to narrative tasks, and guessing games), followed by free-practice activities (story production based on songs and creative composition), progressively linking mastery of the simple sentence to more complex forms of written expression.

This study does not exhaust the topic; further research is therefore suggested to explore, in particular, the impact of continuous teacher training and of other Mozambican school contexts on the writing of simple sentence structures.

Abbreviations

SVO Subject-Verb-Object

Author Contributions

Chibalonza Mpenda: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the outcome of this research work has been reported in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Research Field

Chibalonza Mpenda: English Language Teaching, Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, Syntax and Grammar Instruction, Foreign Language Education in Multilingual Contexts