



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**A CORPUS BASED STUDY ON MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' USE  
OF PHRASAL VERBS IN NARRATIVE COMPOSITIONS**

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**By**

**OMID AKBARI**

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
In fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**December 2009**



*Dedicated to:*

*My wife, Fatemeh and my son, Hossein for their love and support*



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**December 2009**

**Chairman : Associate Professor Malachi Edwin Vethamani, PhD**

**Faculty : Educational Studies**

The research investigated the use of phrasal verbs in two written tasks by Malaysian ESL learners. The data of the research was obtained from the EMAS (The English Language of Malaysian School Students) Corpus. The aim of the study was: (1) to investigate the distribution of phrasal verbs used in the students' writing, (2) to identify the types of phrasal verbs used, (3) to establish if the phrasal verbs used were accurate syntactically and semantically, and (4) to determine if any avoidance behaviour and simplification features were employed in relation to the use of phrasal verbs. The research design comprised a qualitative technique through discourse analysis supplemented with some descriptive statistics using the software Mono Conc Pro 2.2 (Barlow, 2003). The findings of the study showed that the total instances of frequency counts for all phrasal verbs used at Form 1 level were 309 compared to 677 instances at



Form 4 level. This is an indicator that the students at the higher level were more capable of using phrasal verbs. Using Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman's (1999) classification of phrasal verbs (literal, aspectual, and idiomatic), it was found that idiomatic phrasal verbs were more difficult than the other types at both student levels. It was also seen that the most inaccurate phrasal verb structures at both Form 1 and Form 4 levels were in the tense form. The findings also showed that there was a highly positive progression in the number of phrasal verbs used semantically accurate. In fact, out of a total of 309 instances of phrasal verbs used at the Form 1 level, 92% were semantically accurate and 8% are inaccurate. Also, of 677 instances of phrasal verbs used at the Form 4 level, 95% were semantically accurate and 5% were inaccurate. The findings also showed that ESL learners had adopted ways to overcome their inadequacy in the use of phrasal verbs of the English language by using avoidance behaviour, simplification features and compensation strategies. In fact, since the total number of avoided phrasal verbs at the Form 4 level was less than that of the Form 1 level, it indicated that the proficiency level was an affecting factor in avoiding different types of phrasal verbs in the students' writing. In order to prevent the problems identified in the study regarding phrasal verb structures, and to further improve the teaching and learning of phrasal verbs among ESL learners, some recommendations are proposed.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan memperoleh Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KAJIAN KORPUS TENTANG PENGGUNAAN FRASA KATA KERJA DALAM  
KARANGAN MURID YANG MEMPELAJARI BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI  
BAHASA KEDUA (ESL) MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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**Disember 2009**

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Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penggunaan frasa kata kerja dalam dua penulisan murid Malaysia yang mempelajari bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Data kajian ini diperolehi dari pada korpus EMAS (The English Language of Malaysian School Students). Kajian ini bertujuan untuk: (1) mengkaji pengagihan frasa kata kerja dalam penulisan pelajar, (2) mengenal pasti jenis-jenis frasa kata kerja yang digunakan, (3) memastikan ketepatan penggunaan frasa kata kerja dari segi sintaksis dan semantik, dan (4) menentukan sama ada murid menggunakan strategi menghindari penggunaan dan menggunakan bentuk mudah daripada kata kerja. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kualitatif melalui analisis wacana dengan bantuan statistik deskriptif menggunakan Mono Conc Pro 2.2 (Barlow, 2003). Kajian menunjukkan jumlah penggunaan frasa kata kerja adalah 309 bagi Tingkatan 1 berbanding dengan 677 bagi Tingkatan 4. Ini membuktikan bahawa pelajar Tingkatan 4 lebih mahir dalam penggunaan frasa kata kerja. Berdasarkan klasifikasi frasa kata kerja ('literal', 'aspectual' dan 'idiomatic') frasa



kata kerja 'idiomatic' didapati lebih susah bagi kedua-dua kumpulan pelajar. Penggunaan frasa kata kerja adalah semakin baik dalam pengertian yang tertentu. Frasa kata kerja yang didapati paling tidak tepat penggunaannya ialah bentuk kala (tense), baik bagi murid Tingkatan 4 mahupun Tingkatan 1. Kajian juga menunjukkan peningkatan penggunaan frasa kata kerja yang tepat dari segi semantic secara berterusan. Daripada 309 penggunaan frasa kata kerja di Tingkatan 1, 92% adalah digunakan dalam erti kata yang betul dan hanya 8% yang salah penggunaannya. Daripada 677 penggunaan frasa kata kerja di Tingkatan 4, 95% digunakan dengan betul dan hanya 5% yang salah penggunaannya. Kajian menunjukkan bahawa murid menggunakan beberapa strategi untuk menghindari daripada menggunakan frasa kata kerja, seperti tingkah laku mengelak, menggunakan fitur mudah dan strategi penggantian. Murid Tingkatan 4 didapati kurang menggunakannya berbanding murid Tingkatan 1. Ini menunjukkan bahawa kefasihan berbahasa adalah penting apabila menghindari dari menggunakan frasa-frasa kata kerja dalam penulisan. Kajian ini juga membuktikan bahawa terdapat beberapa kekurangan dalam sukatan pelajaran yang menimbulkan masalah tertentu kepada murid bahasa kedua ESL. Beberapa cadangan akan dikemukakan supaya pengajaran dan pembelajaran frasa kata kerja boleh dilaksanakan dengan lebih baik.



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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 10 December 2009 to conduct the final examination of Omid Akbari on his thesis entitled “A corpus-based study on Malaysian ESL learners’ use of phrasal verbs in narrative compositions” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

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**OMID AKBARI**

Date: 22/12/09



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>DEDICATION</b>	ii
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	iii
<b>ABSTRAK</b>	v
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	vii
<b>APPROVAL</b>	viii
<b>DECLARATION</b>	x
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	xiv
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	xvi
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background to the Study	1
1.1.1 Phrasal Verbs	2
1.1.2 Complexity of phrasal verbs	4
1.1.3 Phrasal Verbs and Malaysian English	11
1.1.4 Corpus Linguistics	14
1.1.5 Verb and Particle Use in Corpus	16
1.1.6 The English Language of Malaysian School Students Corpus ( EMAS )	19
1.2 Statement of the Problem	20
1.3 Objectives of the Study	22
1.4 Research Questions	23
1.5 Significance of the Study	24
1.6 Limitations of the Study	26
1.7 Theoretical Framework	27
1.7.1 Contextual Theory of Meaning	29
1.7.2 Interlanguage and Error Analysis	30
1.8 Definitions of Terms	36
1.8.1 Phrasal Verbs	36
1.8.2 Narrative	37
1.8.3 Concordance	37
1.8.4 Corpus	37
1.8.5 Discourse Analysis	38
1.9 Summary	38
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>40</b>
2.1 Introduction	40
2.2 English Phrasal Verbs	43
2.3 Semantic Categories of Phrasal Verbs	48



2.3.1	Literal or transparent phrasal verbs	48
2.3.2	Aspectual phrasal verbs	49
2.3.3	Idiomatic phrasal verbs	49
2.4	Syntactic Features of Phrasal Verbs	53
2.5	The Importance of Phrasal Verbs	61
2.6	Lexicon and Second Language Acquisition	65
2.7	Grammatical Features of Particles	68
2.8	Avoidance in Second Language Acquisition	70
2.8.1	Types of Avoidance	71
2.9	Avoidance of Phrasal Verbs	72
2.10	Malaysian English and Phrasal verbs	74
2.11	Simplification Features	76
2.12	Compensation Strategies	80
2.13	Corpus Linguistics and the Learner Corpora	83
2.13.1	Recent Studies Using Corpus linguistics for ELT in Malaysia	88
2.14	Summary	90
<b>3</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	92
3.1	Introduction	92
3.2	Research Methodology	93
3.2.1	The EMAS Corpus	97
3.2.2	Sampling of the Sub-Corpus	99
3.3	Data Management	100
3.3.1	Data Analysis	101
3.3.2	Discourse Analysis	103
3.4	Research Procedure	105
3.4.1	The Pilot Study	107
3.4.2	Results of the Pilot Study	110
3.4.3	Implications for the Teaching of Phrasal Verbs	111
3.5	Summary	112
<b>4</b>	<b>FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION</b>	114
4.1	Introduction	114
4.2	Research Question 1: Phrasal verbs used by Malaysian ESL Learners	117
4.2.1	Form 1 Level	117
4.2.2	Form 4 Level	122
4.2.3	Summary (RQ1)	127
4.3	Research Question 2: Types of phrasal verbs	129
4.3.1	Literal phrasal verbs	130
4.3.2	Aspectual phrasal verbs	130



4.3.3	Idiomatic phrasal verbs	130
4.3.4	Literal Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 1	131
4.3.5	Literal Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 4	133
4.3.6	Aspectual Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 1	135
4.3.7	Aspectual Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 4	139
4.3.8	Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 1	142
4.3.9	Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 4	146
4.3.10	Summary (RQ2)	151
4.4	Research Question 3: Syntactic accuracy of phrasal verbs	153
4.4.1	Accurate and Inaccurate Phrasal Verb Structures	155
4.4.2	Syntactically Inaccurate Phrasal Verbs at Form 1	157
4.4.3	Syntactically accurate Phrasal Verbs at Form 1	163
4.4.4	Syntactically Inaccurate Phrasal Verbs at Form 4	165
4.4.5	Syntactically accurate Phrasal Verbs at Form 4	170
4.4.6	Summary (RQ3)	172
4.5	Research Question 4: Semantic accuracy of phrasal verbs	175
4.5.1	Semantically Accurate and Inaccurate Phrasal Verb Structures	176
4.5.2	Form 1 Level	178
4.5.3	Form 4 Level	183
4.5.4	Summary (RQ4)	188
4.6	Research Question 5: Avoidance behaviour and simplification features on phrasal verbs	190
4.6.1	Form 1 Level	193
4.6.2	Form 4 Level	197
4.6.3	Summary (RQ5)	201
4.7	Summary	202
<b>5</b>	<b>SUMMARY, GENERAL CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH</b>	<b>205</b>
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>227</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>245</b>
	<b>BIODATA OF STUDENT</b>	<b>272</b>



## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1.1	English Particles Used to Form Phrasal Verbs	6
1.2	Common English Verbs Used to Form Phrasal Verbs	7
1.3	Some localised words and expressions in Malaysian English and the standard equivalents	9
2.1	Types of Multi-Word Combinations	44
2.2	Multi-Word Combinations (Type one)	45
2.3	Multi-Word Combinations (Type two)	45
2.4	Multi-Word Combinations (Type three)	46
2.5	Multi-Word Combinations (Type four)	47
3.1	“The Happiest Day of My Life” Essay (Arshad et al., 2002)	108
3.2	“Picture-Based” Essay (Arshad et al., 2002)	109
3.3	Phrasal Verbs for “Picture-Based” (PB) and “The Happiest Day of My Life” (HD) Essays	110
4.1	Frequency Counts of Phrasal Verb Use in Form 1 Essays	118
4.2	Frequency Counts of Phrasal Verb Use in Form 4 Essays	123
4.3	Distribution of Top 10 High Frequency Count Phrasal Verbs in Both Essays	128
4.4	Top 10 High Frequency Counts of Literal Phrasal Verbs at Form 1	131
4.5	Top 10 High Frequency Counts of Literal Phrasal Verbs at Form 4	133
4.6	Frequency Counts of Aspectual Phrasal Verbs at Form 1	136
4.7	Frequency Counts of Aspectual Phrasal Verbs at Form 4	139
4.8	Frequency Counts of Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs at Form 1	142
4.9	Some Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs and Their Meanings at Form 1	144
4.10	Some Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs and Their Meanings at Form 1	145
4.11	Frequency Counts of Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs at Form 4	146
4.12	Some Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs and Their Meanings at Form 4	147
4.13	Some Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs and Their Meanings at Form 4	149



4.14	Aggregated Counts of Three Types of Phrasal Verbs Use in Both Essays	152
4.15	Aggregated Count of Accurate Phrasal Verb Structures Found in the Essays	156
4.16	Phrasal Verbs with the Highest Frequency Counts Used in Syntactically Inaccurate Sentences	157
4.17	Phrasal Verbs with the Highest Frequency Counts Used in Syntactically Inaccurate Sentences	165
4.18	Frequency Counts of Inaccurate Phrasal Verb Structures According to Category	173
4.19	Aggregated Count of Semantically Accurate and Inaccurate Phrasal Verbs at Form 1 and Form 4 Levels	177
4.20	Semantically Inaccurate Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 1 Level	178
4.21	Semantically Inaccurate Phrasal Verbs Used at Form 4 Level	183
4.22	Semantically Accurate and Inaccurate Count of Phrasal Verbs at Form 1 and Form 4 Levels	189
4.23	Frequency of the Avoided Phrasal Verbs at F1 and F4 According to the Type	191
4.24	Strategies in Avoiding Phrasal Verbs at F1 and F4	193





## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure</b>		<b>Page</b>
1.1	Theoretical Framework	34
2.1	Tree diagram of a sentence with verb and particle next to each other	58
2.2	Tree diagram of a sentence with the particle separated from the verb	59
2.3	Oxford's Compensation Strategies	81
3.1	Research Design for Study of Phrasal verbs	106



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the Study

In 1989, a China Airlines flight, flying in zero visibility, crashed into the side of a mountain shortly after takeoff. On the voice recorder, the last words of the Chinese pilot to the co-pilot were, “What does pull up mean?” Why a pilot, presumably trained in the international English used for aviation, would not understand a command from the tower. On investigation, it became apparent that the official term used in “control tower” talk is climb. However, the warning system built in to U.S.-made planes issues the message “Pull up!” when altitude drops or an object looms ahead (Thrush, 2001: 289).

Knowing phrasal verbs is sometimes of vital importance in conversational interactions. Expressions such as pull up, which are called phrasal verbs or two-word verbs, are often very difficult for ESL/EFL learners because they are idiomatic; that is, their meanings cannot be derived by knowledge of the individual words. “Pull up” once corresponded to the physical action of a pilot in pulling the control lever that adjusted the degree of ascent or descent of the plane. Now, however, most controls in a modern jetliner consist of dials and buttons—there’s no “pulling” involved. It is understandable that someone not familiar with the expression “pull up” would not be able to derive an accurate meaning for it and therefore he is not able to communicate with others.



Since the most important means of human communication is language, the structures of language have to be understood in terms of how they facilitate communication. This includes the knowledge of grammar as without it communication will fail. Huddleston and Pullum (2002:3) define grammar as the principles or rules governing the form and meaning of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. As such, it interacts with other components of language: the phonology, the graphology, the lexicon, and the semantics. Grammar, as prescribed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE, 2003) is a set of rules which speakers of a language use to make meaning. Phrasal verbs have always been an important part of English language grammar.

### **1.1.1 Phrasal Verbs**

A phrasal verb is usually defined as a structure that consists of a verb proper and a morphologically invariable particle that functions as a single unit both lexically and syntactically (Darwin and Gray, 1999; Quirk et al, 1985). In the Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs, Cowie and Mackin (1993) state that When a verb + particle is a unit of meaning, it is a phrasal verb. Also, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) state that a phrasal verb is made up of two parts that function as a single verb. They are sometimes called two-word verbs.

Various attempts have been made to classify phrasal verbs. Some researchers have looked at the relationships between the verb proper and the particle (e.g., Fraser, 1976), whereas others have focused on the semantics. Cornell (1985) observed that large



numbers of phrasal verbs are nonidiomatic it means that their meaning is easy to deduce if the verb element is known. For example, if the meaning of *rush* or *throw* is known to the learner, it would not be hard to understand *rush away* or *throw off*. In two studies of the avoidance of phrasal verbs, Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993) approached the classification with different terms but the same nature. Dagut and Laufer (1985: 74) divided the phrasal verbs used in their study into three types:

(a) literal—phrasal verbs whose meaning is a straightforward product of their semantic components: E.g. *go out*, *take away* and *come in*;

(b) figurative—in which a new meaning has resulted from a metaphorical shift of meaning and the semantic fusion of the individual components: E.g. *turn up* and *let down*;

(c) completive—in which the particle describes the result of the action: E. g. *cut off* and *burn down*.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen Freeman (1999) also identify three types of phrasal verbs: first, literal, or *transparent*, in which the sum of the two parts equals the meaning of the whole phrasal verb; i.e. *stand up*, second, aspectual, in which the meaning is not literal, but is not completely idiomatic either, as the particle retains a consistent aspectual meaning; i.e. *run on*, *carry on*, *hurry along* where the particles *on* and *along* have a continuative property, and third, idiomatic, in which the meaning is nearly impossible to determine by the sum of the two parts; i.e. *run out* as in to exhaust one's supply.



Similarly, Armstrong (2004) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993) worked with three types of phrasal verbs: semantically transparent (the meaning of the whole verb particle combination can be derived from the meaning of its parts), e.g. *John pulled up the anchor.*, semitransparent (those that are transparent when put into context), e.g. *John locked up the office.*, and figurative or “semantically opaque”, which have lexicalized meaning, e.g. *John put up the guests.* The figurative, or idiomatic, phrasal verbs were considered semantically more difficult than other types of phrasal verbs.

In this study, the phrasal verbs classification made by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) which is generally agreed upon was adopted. They identify three types of phrasal verbs as literal, aspectual, and idiomatic. Thus, using this classification, the researcher of the present study investigated the use of English phrasal verbs in Malaysian ESL learners’ narrative compositions.

### **1.1.2 Complexity of phrasal verbs**

Phrasal verbs are problematic for most L2 learners of English, even for those whose L1 is closely related to English. As Darwin and Gray (1999) state “not only learners with non-Germanic native languages experience this difficulty with phrasal verbs, however, continuing the work of Dagut and Laufer (1985), Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) have shown that Dutch ESL learners also have a tendency to misunderstand or avoid English phrasal verbs even though there are similar constructions in their native language” (p.66).

The problems ESL learners have with phrasal verbs, whether syntactic, semantic, or a combination, are increased by the highly productive nature of the phrasal verbs in English. Since a single verb can combine with various particles and produce different phrasal verbs with different meanings, the nature of phrasal verbs is considered as highly productive. Although they were once thought to be common only in speech and informal writing, it is now accepted that phrasal verbs are found in all registers, from comic books and street slang to the most academic forms of the language (Cornell, 1985).

Gaston (2004) states that phrasal verbs are one of the most enigmatic structures in English for second language learners because there is no distinction in form between prepositions in prepositional verbs and particles in phrasal verbs. This similarity is demonstrated rather clearly in the example below:

- 1) Tom *ran into* the store. (verb + preposition)
- 2) Tom *ran into* Mary at the store. (verb + particle)

In (1), Tom physically ran inside a building. In (2) Tom was not running, nor did he make forceful physical contact with Mary. The two “prepositions” have the same form, but carry very different functions. The first (1) is a preposition, while (2) is a particle pertaining to the idiomatic phrasal verb *run into* meaning *to meet unexpectedly*.



Moreover, as Side (1990) reveals, phrasal verbs create special problems for students, partly because there are so many of them, but also because the combination of verb and particle seems so often completely random. These difficulties are sometimes increased by the way in which phrasal verbs are presented in course books or by teachers telling students that they will just have to learn them by heart, thereby implying that there is no system. However, if one looks closely at the particle, patterns start to emerge which suggest that the combinations are not so random after all.

According to the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs (1995) and Fraser (1976), the English language consists of 48 particles to form phrasal verbs. This is shown in Table 1.1:

**Table 1.1: English Particles Used to Form Phrasal Verbs**

aback	around	between	of	through
about	as	beyond	off	to
above	aside	by	on	together
across	at	down	onto	towards
after	away	for	out	under
against	back	forth	over	up
ahead	before	forward	overboard	upon
along	behind	from	past	with
among	below	in	round	without
apart	beneath	into		

And the following 38 verbs in Table 1.2 are commonly used to combine with different particles:

**Table 1.2: Common English Verbs Used to Form Phrasal Verbs**

break	get	lay	pull	stay
bring	give	lie	push	stick
call	go	live	put	take
cast	hang	look	run	talk
come	hold	make	send	throw
cut	keep	move	set	turn
do	kick	pass	sit	
fall	knock	play	stand	

Fraser (1976) claims that some verbs can co-exist with only one particle but not others, for example, *book up*, *flag down*, *jack up*, and *jot down*. Other verbs may form a phrasal verb with almost every particle, such as the verb *get*. He adds that in terms of syntactic features, we have almost no basis to predict which verbs can combine with which particle and which verb cannot. But he concludes that only non-stative verbs combine with a particle. In other words, stative verbs such as *know*, *want*, *hear*, *hope*, *resemble* never combine with a particle (*hear out* is an exception).



In spite of their difficulty, phrasal verbs have to be taught at some stage because they are common, the system underlying them is economical and creative, and they are an important part of the language system; indeed, as Bolinger (1971: xi) puts it, they constitute ‘an explosion of lexical creativeness that surpasses anything else in our language’. It is important that all learners develop at least a receptive awareness, which will help them decode the phrasal verbs that they encounter in spoken and written texts, while those learners would be future expert users need to be able to produce at least the more common phrasal verb combinations appropriately.

Whereas phrasal verb constructions are problematic to both first (L1) and second language (L2) speakers, first language speakers also make grammatical errors. Ferris (2002) states that if L1 speakers make errors, L2 speakers are even more capable of making the same errors and more in areas of formation of the verb phrases, passive and conditional forms, misuse of modals, gerunds, infinitives and other grammatical items. The need to recognise the errors in written discourse, as well as to have a certain amount of knowledge on how to correct those errors before imparting the knowledge to students, is important to educators (Ferris, 2002).

In his study of errors made by student writers who are L1 speakers of English, Weaver (1996) highlights issues such as punctuation of sentences, clauses, pronoun references and other grammatical items made by L1 users of English in their written work. Thus, it is possible for L2 speakers to make similar errors, as well as other grammatical errors. Ferris (2002), also holds that it is important for an ESL learner to know why the error is