

## Grammatical Gender Misselection and Related Errors in French Writing by Malaysian Students

Hazlina, A. H.<sup>1\*</sup>, Normaliza, A. R.<sup>2</sup>, Mohd Azidan, A. J.<sup>1</sup> and Adi Yasran, A. A.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Languages,

<sup>2</sup>Department of Malay Language,

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM,

Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

\*E-mail: nina@fbmk.upm.edu.my

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify grammatical gender misselection errors made by Malaysian students in learning French as a foreign language with regard to writing skills. The study utilized quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Data analysis was done by applying the definition of misselection errors by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982). A total of 40 subjects participated in this study after 100 hours of learning French. The task consisted of writing two short essays by the subjects, in which they contained different elements of grammatical gender. The results showed that students made misselection errors of French prepositions, verbs, adjectives, articles, and lexis.

**Keywords:** Misselection errors, writing, French as a foreign language, grammatical gender

### INTRODUCTION

The language produced by foreign language (FL) learners almost inevitably contains errors of various types (Hemchua and Schmitt, 2006). This is a part of the language learning process. Thus, using error analysis in language learning can predict the learners' type of errors, as this is useful for developing teaching materials and selecting teaching methods (Kitao and Kitao, 2000). Furthermore, the results of such analysis could be used as indicators of the learners' achievement. Most learners view error correction as part and parcel of acquiring competency in the language learnt. Leki (1991) in her study on second language written production found that 93% of her first year college students felt that it was very important

that grammatical errors be pointed out so that they could try to correct the non-native language in their production.

According to Yarmohammadi (2002), learners may make errors rooted in their mother tongues in the writing process. Richards (1974) defined this type of error as interlingual errors. As indicated by Swan (1997, p. 161), if an English L1 learner of French confuses *fenêtre*, *vitre*, *vitrine*, and *vitrail* (words for different types of window), it is questionable whether this is due to interlingual causes since the English system does not offer so many forms, or intralingual, because the French lexical system is complicated and there is in fact no English term to transfer.

Whether it is interlingual or intralingual, one of the errors is misformation, which Dulay,

---

Received: 17 December 2009

Accepted: 1 July 2010

\*Corresponding Author

Burt and Krashen (1982, p. 108-109) categorized as the use of wrong form of the morpheme or structure. James (1998) called this type of error misselection, since the error was caused by selecting the wrong words, and not by using the wrong form of words. Duškova (1969) refers to this type of error as 'distortions', while Ringbom (1987) calls such errors 'hybrids'. This type of error was made by learners when they tailored the L1 words to suit the syntactic requirements and/or rules of the L2.

Errors in various forms are important sources of information about second language acquisition, because they demonstrate conclusively that learners do not simply memorize the target language rules and then reproduce them in their utterances. They indicate that learners construct their own rules on the basis of input data, and that in some instances at least, these rules differ from those of the target language learners (Ellis, 1985a, p. 9).

#### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The French language is linguistically different from most of the main languages in Malaysia, namely Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil, and among the striking differences are the grammar and pronunciation (Hazlina Abdul Halim *et al.*, 2009a). Thus, "due to the incomplete knowledge", learners will make errors which is "the use of a linguistic item (a word, a grammatical item, a speech act, etc.) in a way a native speaker regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning" (Richards *et al.*, 1992, p. 127).

It is important to note that grammatical gender is the most difficult part of French language to be learnt and taught for Malaysians, since in their mother tongues and dominant languages, the structure is limited to either animate nouns or none at all. Thus, the incomprehension of the French grammatical gender rules has led them to make errors in French.

#### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this study was to identify and analyse the misselection errors (also called misformation errors) made by Malaysian non-native speakers of French as a foreign language with regard to expressing grammatical gender in their writing.

#### **LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

This study only focused on the misselection errors of the application of grammatical genders by Malaysian students as well as the misselections errors of choosing grammatical gender elements. It did not include other types of errors, such as additional errors and omission errors. In addition, this study did not take into consideration how the differences and similarities affected the choice of the writing strategies used.

#### **MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES**

This study utilized both the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The subjects consisted of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year foreign language students from different fields of humanities and social sciences at Universiti Putra Malaysia. A total of 40 subjects aged between 20 and 24 participated in this study after having 100 hours of learning French. Note that factors such as gender and race were not controlled in this study. The instrument used in the study was the completion of two writing tasks by the subjects. The first essay consisted of writing activities in the past, and in the writing, the students were to be a male. For the second essay, the same topic was given, but this time, the students were to be a female. The purpose was to see whether the students correctly use grammatical gender in the adjectives and past tenses. It was also due to the initial observations by the researcher that the two topics (which was the utilisation of adjectives in French and past tenses) were the main areas where Malaysian students made a considerable number of misselection errors in applying the French grammatical gender.

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

Overall, 800 sentences were analyzed and these represented 400 sentences from Essay 1 and 400 sentences from Essay 2 (a rough estimation on the minimum sentences for the two essays (20 sentences) multiplied by the number of respondents, i.e. 40). The researcher observed that 90% of the sentences made by the students in the two tasks were sentences with simple gender application (which involved nouns and adjectives but with only one application of grammatical gender) and only 10% were sentences with complex grammatical applications (which involved nouns, adjectives, prepositions etc. and with more than one application of grammatical gender to be considered).

Listed in *Fig. 1* are the results of the two writing tasks given.

The study found 17.1% of misselection errors of grammatical gender application. These were the most dominant errors in this study. The misselection errors involved were the errors involving the use of nouns, preposition and adjectives.

*Misselection Errors on French Prepositions*

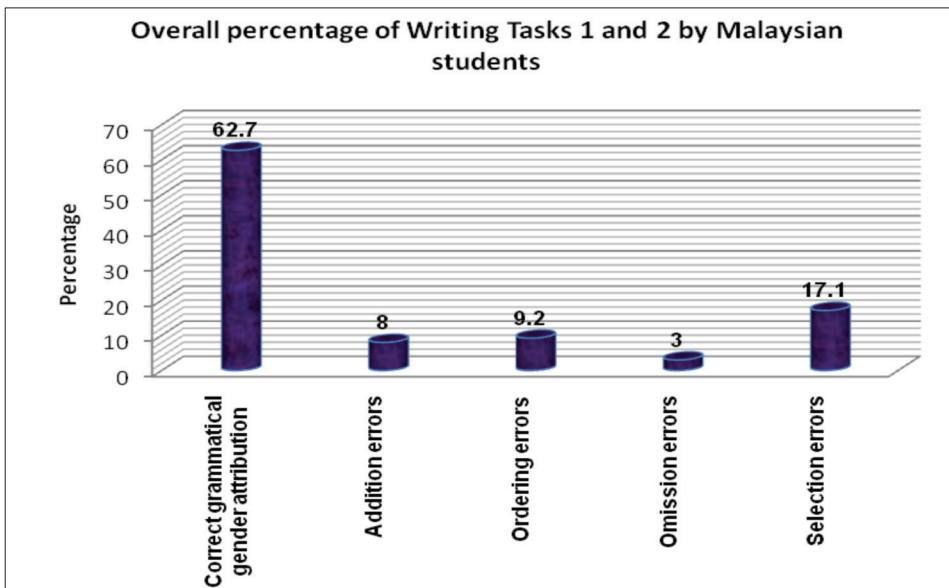
Table 1 shows few examples of the misselection errors of the French prepositions made by Malaysian students.

Most of the misselection errors were in the forms of French prepositions, the noun articles of a country and the mode of transport in French. The errors occurred when the students generalised the utilisation of prepositions for the countries in the same manner as they applied them to other places (for example the name of the roads, building names, etc.).

From the study, it was found that the errors were due to the influence of the students' mother tongue (Malay) or their second language (English). In both languages, we could observe that the prepositions *to* (in English) and *ke* (in Malay) are the same for countries and places. For example, in English, the preposition *to* is used as follows:

1. I went *to* Italy last week
2. I went *to* Petaling Street last week

In French, for names of countries, one has to take into account the grammatical gender



*Fig. 1: The overall results for Writing Tasks 1 and 2 by Malaysian students*

TABLE 1  
Examples of misselection errors on French prepositions

<u>French sentences by Malaysian students</u>	<u>Appropriate phrases in French</u>
1. Je vais à l'école <b>au</b> vélo. (I went to school <b>by</b> bicycle)	Je vais à l'école <b>à</b> vélo.
2. Je suis allé <b>au</b> train. (I went <b>by</b> train)	Je suis allé <b>en</b> train.
3. J'habite <b>à</b> Thaïlande. (I live <b>in</b> Thailand)	J'habite <b>en</b> Thaïlande.
4. Je suis allé <b>à</b> Indonésie en décembre. (I went to Indonesia in December)	Je suis allé <b>en</b> Indonésie en décembre
5. Après, nous ont mangés à restaurant <b>dans la KLCC</b> (Later, we ate at a restaurant in KLCC).	Après, nous ont mangés <b>au</b> restaurant <b>à KLCC</b>
6. Nous allons <b>à</b> marché. (We go to the market)	Nous allons <b>au</b> marché.

of the countries in order to determine which preposition to be used. A feminine country (e.g. Malaysia) will use the preposition **en** to indicate **to**, similarly for the masculine countries, in which the preposition **au** is used. For proper names such as the names of buildings and roads (in most cases), the gender will not be taken into account. As such, the prepositions **en, au, aux** and **à** are used to indicate **to**. Below are some examples of this usage:

From the examples shown in Table 2, we can see that in both Malay and English languages, the same prepositions (**to** and **ke**) were used to indicate 'to'. This was the reason why Malaysian students made misselection errors in French prepositions, i.e. they reverted to their knowledge of the English or Malay language.

TABLE 2  
Some examples of the prepositions of places in French, Malay and English

French	English	Malay
Je suis allée <b>en</b> Italie la semaine dernière (feminine)	I went <b>to</b> Italy last week	Saya pergi <b>ke</b> Itali pada minggu lepas
J'irai <b>au</b> Portugal demain (masculine)	I will go <b>to</b> Portugal	Saya akan pergi <b>ke</b> Portugal esok
J'ai voyagé <b>aux</b> Etats-Unis la semaine dernière (plural, no gender form)	I travelled <b>to</b> the States last week	Saya melancong <b>ke</b> Amerika pada minggu lepas
Je suis allé(e) <b>à</b> Petaling Street la semaine dernière (masculine/ feminine)	I went <b>to</b> Petaling Street last week	Saya pergi <b>ke</b> Petaling Street pada minggu lepas

*Misselection Errors of the French Verbs*

Table 3 shows a few samples of the misselection errors of verbs in French.

The misselection errors of the French verbs made by Malaysian students were closely related to the usage of the French simple past tense or *passé composé*. In more specific, the errors made by the students involved choosing the right auxiliary to go with the second component of the *passé composé*. In the first error example, the choice of auxiliary *être* for the verb *passer* in the sentence “Je **suis passée** un bonne journée” makes the sentence grammatically wrong. In French, the meaning of the verb *passer* in past tense is dependent on the choice of the auxiliary used. If it is combined with the auxiliary *être*, the meaning would be the action of *passing-by* an area, whereas if it is combined with the auxiliary *avoir*, it brings the meaning *to spend* (as in Example 1).

Meanwhile, the errors for the verb *aller* (to go) in the French simple past tense mainly involve the incomprehension of the rule of applying the past participle to the verbs which need *être* as an auxiliary. In French, the application of the auxiliary *être* in the simple past tense (*passé composé*) involves 14 verbs (excluding the reflective verbs), including the verb *aller* as used by the respondent in the sentence. In the application of this verb, whenever the verb *être* is used, one will have to take into consideration the grammatical gender that is related with the subject pronoun used.

Example:

Il **est allé** au magasin hier (he *went* to the shop yesterday)

Elle **est allée** au magasin hier (she *went* to the shop yesterday)

From the example given, if the subject pronoun is masculine (in this case *il*), the past participle used will have be the masculine participle (*allé*). Likewise, if the subject pronoun is feminine (here, it is *elle*), the past participle will follow the feminine form, and thus, one will have to add *e* to the participle (*allé* → *allée*).

In Sentence 2 (Table 3), the error made by the student was the misselection of the auxiliary *avoir* combined with the verb *aller* and not the auxiliary *être*, as it was supposed to be. The application of the auxiliary *avoir* (where the grammatical gender of the subject pronoun was not considered) was the reason for the misselection error of the grammatical gender for the participle used.

Based on the error produced, the researcher concluded that the respondents understood the concept of grammatical gender attribution for the 14 verbs which used the auxiliary *être* for the past tense. Nevertheless, this comprehension was not applied to the choice of the auxiliary for those verbs. The error was due to the “ignorance of rules restrictions” and also an “incomplete application of rules” as elaborated by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, p. 156).

TABLE 3  
Some example of the misselection errors of French prepositions

<u>French sentences by Malaysian students</u>	<u>Appropriate phrases in French</u>
1. Je <b>suis passée</b> un bonne journée. (I spent a good day)	J'ai <b>passé</b> une bonne journée
2. Pendant les dernières vacances, <b>j'ai allée</b> à Terengganu. (During the last holidays, I went to Terengganu)	Pendant les dernières vacances, <b>je suis allée</b> à Terengganu.
3. <b>J'ai allé</b> Kuala Lumpur la dernière semaine (I went to Kuala Lumpur last week)	<b>Je suis allé</b> à Kuala Lumpur la semaine dernière

*Misselection Errors of the French Adjectives*

Table 4 presents some of the French adjective misselection errors made by Malaysian students in their writing.

In the sentence “Kuala Lumpur est **beau** ville”, it was observed that to get the message across, the student used interlanguage. The misselection error of the adjective is also traceable to the influence of their second language (English). In this sentence, the student adapted the adjective *beautiful* in English, without being aware that the adjective was associated to the noun *ville* (town) which is feminine. The correct adjective to be used should be *belle* which is the feminine of the adjective *beau*. The researcher felt that it might be due to the fact that the student did not know that the noun *ville* is actually feminine, and therefore, the feminine form should be used. It may also be due to the approximation of the noun form to English, and in this case *beau* is closer to beautiful than the adjective *belle*.

The error on the adjective *jolie* (pretty) was due to English language or the respondent’s mother tongue influence, which associates the adjective *pretty* with a feminine noun. With this in mind, the additional –e to the adjective ‘*jolie*’ by the respondent did not take into account the gender of the noun it is associated with. In both

languages, the said adjective is associated, and in most cases, with a noun that is feminine.

*The Misselection Errors of the Articles and Prepositions*

Table 5 shows a few examples of the errors of the French articles and prepositions by Malaysian students.

The misselection errors of the French articles by Malaysian students were mainly due to over-generalisation of the rules from their L1 and L2, for which Yarmohammadi (2002: 27) pointed out that “under the influence of the mother tongue the differences between L1 and L2 are transferred into the learner’s language – i.e. interlanguage – hence, interference is created and certain deviant structures are generated.”

Another misselection error observed by the researcher was the misselection of the French article. The researcher observed that this was due to the respondents’ dominant language, and their daily discourse. In the sentence, “*J’ai mangée un gateaux*”, the respondent might be translating the sentence “*I have eaten a cake*” or in Malay “*saya telah makan satu kuih*”, which was a common Malaysian discourse, even though what they were trying to say was “*I ate some cake*” or in Malay “*saya telah*

TABLE 4  
Example of misselection errors of French adjectives

<b><u>French sentences by Malaysian students</u></b>	<b><u>Appropriate phrases in French</u></b>
1. La cuisine au restaurant est très <b>délicieux</b> . (The food at the restaurant is very <i>delicious</i> )	La cuisine au restaurant est très <b>délicieuse</b> .
2. Le pull est très <b>jolie</b> . (The sweater is very <i>beautiful</i> )	Le pull est très <b>joli</b> .
3. L’hôtel est très <b>jolie</b> . (The hotel is very <i>beautiful</i> )	L’hôtel est très <b>joli</b> .
4. London est <b>grande</b> . (London is <i>big</i> )	London est <b>grand</b> .
5. Kuala Lumpur est <b>belle</b> . (Kuala Lumpur is <i>beautiful</i> )	Kuala Lumpur est <b>beau</b> .
6. Kuala Lumpur est < > <b>beau</b> ville. (Kuala Lumpur is a <i>beautiful</i> town)	Kuala Lumpur est une <b>belle</b> ville.

TABLE 5  
Some example of the misselection errors of the French articles and prepositions

<u>French sentences by Malaysian students</u>	<u>Appropriate phrases in French</u>
1. J'ai allé à Kuala Lumpur <b>le</b> <i>dernière</i> semaine. (I went to Kuala Lumpur <=> last week)	Je suis allé à Kuala Lumpur <b>la</b> <i>semaine</i> <b>dernière</b> .
2. Pendant <b>le</b> dernières vacances, j'ai allée voyager à Singapore. (During <b>the</b> school holidays, I travelled to Singapore)	Pendant <b>les</b> dernières vacances, je suis allée voyager à Singapour.
3. Je suis passée <b>un</b> bonne journée (I have spent <b>a</b> good day)	J'ai passé <b>une</b> bonne journée
4. Après, nous ont mangés <b>à</b> restaurant dans <b>la</b> KLCC (Later, we ate <b>at the</b> restaurant in KLCC)	Après, nous avons mangé <b>au</b> restaurant <b>à</b> KLCC
5. Je suis allé <b>à la</b> cinéma avec ma sœur. (I went <b>to the</b> cinema with my sister)	Je suis allé <b>au</b> cinéma avec ma sœur.
6. J'ai mangée <b>un gateaux</b> et bois <b>l'eau de minérale</b> . (I ate <b>some cake</b> and <b>drank</b> some mineral water)	J'ai mangé <b>du gâteau</b> et bois <b>de l'eau minérale</b> .
7. La cuisine de <b>ce</b> restaurant est excellent. (The food <b>in this</b> restaurant is excellent.)	La cuisine de <b>ce</b> restaurant est excellent.

TABLE 6  
An example of the misselection errors of the French lexis

<u>French sentences by Malaysian students</u>	<u>Appropriate phrase in French</u>
J'aime <b>le location</b> de ma maison (I like the location of my house)	J'aime <b>l'endroit</b> où j'habite.

*makan sedikit kuih*". In the French language, partitive **du** would be more suitable to be used for translating the sentence, "J'ai mangée **un gateaux** [the appropriate phrase in French is *j'ai mange un gâteau*], to convey the same meaning in English or Malay. When the respondent wrote *J'ai mangée un gateaux* [the appropriate phrase in French is *j'ai mange un gâteau*], the meaning was 'I have eaten the whole cake' or in Malay "*saya telah makan keseluruhan kek itu*", and the researcher believed that it was not what the respondent intended to say.

#### *Misselection Errors of Lexis*

For the misselection error of the lexis, the selection of the noun **location** was actually a direct translation from English by the students in adapting the noun by inserting the definite article **le**. In this case, it was an interlingual error illustrating "when the required TL item is unknown and the learner borrows an L1 substitute, the consequence is an L1 transfer error" (James, 1998, p. 175). The students did not realise that the noun **location** was **faux-ami** in French. It is important to note that although

the spelling is the same in French and in English, it does not bring the same meaning in the two languages. In English, the meaning is the location of a place, but in French, it means “*hiring something*”. Therefore, the sentence “*j’aime le location de ma maison*” meant “I like the act of hiring my house” instead of the intended meaning, “*I like the location of my house*”.

### OVERALL FINDINGS

This study explored the grammatical gender misselection errors made by Malaysian students in their French proficiency writing course. The study revealed that the misselection errors were the dominant errors made by the students. Apart from the “ignorance of rules restrictions” and also an “incomplete application of rules”, the errors were also interlingual errors which were influenced by their mother tongue (Malay) and second language (English).

Lastly, the errors committed were also due to the fact that the students foreignized the lexical items from English, when a word in English was familiar or close to a French word. Hence, the students took it for granted that the meaning should be the same without any further check.

### CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study, which adopted the misselection error definition by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982), attempted to find the errors made by Malaysian non-native speakers of French in their writing. This exploratory study on error analysis is useful for both learners and teachers of French as a second or foreign language. The result of this study can assist the learners to acquire a better understanding of the target language and future studies by identifying specific errors made learners and how they should correct them by knowing, understanding and avoiding such errors. Similarly, this exploratory study is useful for teachers, as it can help them identify which point and why learners committed the specific errors. This

study can also help teachers who are involved in the important task of curriculum development as error analysis can be helpful for syllabus design and teaching (Hongquan and Kikuko, 2007). Finally, an understanding of the causes of errors will help teachers emphasize grammatical points so as to reduce chances of students making such errors.

### REFERENCES

- Corder, S. P. (1992). A role for the mother tongue. In S. M. Gass and L. Selinker (Eds.), *Language transfer in language teaching* (pp. 18-32). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Dulay, H.C., Burt, M. and Krashen, S. (1982). *Language Two*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Duskova, L. (1969). On sources of error in foreign language learning. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 8, 11-36.
- Ellis, R. (1985a). Sources of variability in interlanguage. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(2).
- Ellis, R. (1985b). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hazlina Abdul Halim, Normaliza Abdul Rahim, Mohd Azidan Abdul Jabbar and Adi Yasran Abdul Aziz (2009). The writing strategy in French language learning among Malaysian students: A qualitative approach. *International Journal of Learning*, 16-5, 445-458.
- Hemchua, S. and Schmitt, N. (2006). An analysis of lexical errors in the English compositions of Thai learners. *Prospect*, 21(3).
- Hongquan, C. and Kikuko, N. (2007). Error analysis of Japanese adjectival collocations for an error database. In the *Fourth International Conference on Computer Assisted Systems for Teaching & Learning Japanese (CASTEL-J) Proceedings*. Hawaii.
- James, C. (1998). *Errors in Language and Use*. Harlow: Longman.
- Kitao, K. and Kitao, S. (2000). Selecting and developing teaching/learning materials. Retrieved on Dec 18, 2009 from <http://www.Atech.ac.jp/~iteslj/Articles/Kitao-Material.html>.



- Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24, 203–218.
- Richards, J. (1971). Error analysis and second language strategies. *Language Science*, 17, 12-22.
- Richards, J. (1992). *Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. London: Longman.
- Ringbom, H. (1987). *The Role of First Language in Foreign Language Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Ringbom, H. (1992). On L1 transfer in L2 comprehension and L2 Production. *Language Learning*, 42(2), 85-112.
- Swan, M. (1997). The influence of the mother tongue on second language vocabulary acquisition. In N. Schmitt and M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary: Description, acquisition and pedagogy* (pp. 156-181). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yarmohammadi, L. (2002). *A Contrastive Analysis of Persian and English*. Payame Noor University Press.

