

# An Analysis of Errors in Resumes and Job Application Letters: The Study of Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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**Abstract:** *Writing a resume and cover letter is essential, especially for fresh graduates, as these documents are crucial for pursuing their desired careers after completing their studies. The unemployment rate in Malaysia, coupled with the economic downturn brought about by COVID-19, is set to increase competition between new graduates and more experienced job seekers. The formatting of these documents, which must be correctly formatted and without errors, is critical because employers usually review resumes and cover letters as an initial screening for candidates. In developing the checklist for the corpus analysis for this research, the researchers adopted the Error Analysis (EA) framework by Corder (1973). The present study addresses this issue by examining the errors in resumes and cover letters produced by Malaysian undergraduates. The research employed the corpus linguistics approach by gathering 60 resumes and 60 job application letters to identify errors using the Error Analysis (EA) framework. The findings showed that students' common errors were misselection, addition, omission, blends and misordering. The most prominent error found in the data was misselection. In the context of intense job competition among recent graduates in Malaysia, this study emphasises the significance of impeccably crafted resumes and cover letters. It offers valuable insights into making job applications more effective and practical. The findings of this research have the potential to serve as a valuable guide for undergraduate students, which will allow them to develop compelling and relevant content for job applications.*

**Keywords:** resume, cover letter, error analysis, undergraduates

## 1. Introduction

A resume and cover letter are the most important documents needed in the job hiring process, especially among graduates in Malaysia. With job seekers increasing after college and university graduation, the competition to secure a job becomes more challenging. Based on the data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022), the percentage of graduates in Malaysia increased by 4.7 per cent, with 5.61 million graduates in 2021 compared to the previous year, which was only 5.36 million. From this figure, 4.1% of them are unemployed. Many have sent numerous job applications to many companies but still failed to secure any position.

Ryan (2020) and Tomaska and Nosek (2018) argued that a resume is essential as it is the first-stage filter for determining whether the applicant will be called for an interview. Errors such as in spelling, sentence structure, grammar, formatting and selection of what to be included in the resume and cover letter may not only reflect the applicants' skills and proficiency level but

also indicate their personality and attitude, such as paying attention to details and being attentive in completing a task (Crosby, 2009; Ogden, 2016). A study showed that spelling errors can affect the chances for an employee to be hired, even with high experience levels (Martin-Lacroux, 2017). In addition, recruiters and human resources widely use the Applicant Tracking System (ATS) to filter the overwhelmed applications. The existence of errors in the job application documents when writing incorrect words can jeopardise the applicants' chance to pass through the first stage of the hiring process, especially when many applicants are applying for the same job position. With the importance of a resume and cover letter in initiating one's chance to land a job, it is pertinent to explore the errors made in these two documents thoroughly. This provides room for future improvements and increases job seekers' chances of being called for an interview by sending error-free resumes and cover letters (Nasr & German, 2020).

Various studies have used the Error Analysis (EA) framework proposed by scholars such as Corder (1981), Ellis (1994), and James (2013) to explore learner language in discussing the errors made by second language learners in Malaysia (Ang et al., 2021; Satake, 2020). Even though many studies have been conducted using the EA framework, many only focus on academic writing instead of professional writing related to resumes and cover letters. This allows researchers to examine the language errors undergraduate students commit in their job application documents. This research explores students' proficiency in English and gives more emphasis on the students' writing skills. This is because writing skills will be the first dexterity used to impress potential employers and enable the graduates to stand a chance for an interview (Risavy, 2017). Therefore, focus has been given to determining how well the students can write and analyse the errors made in writing, particularly in grammar and sentence construction.

## 2. Literature Review

Errors in language manifest from complex language interaction, mainly when there are differences between the native language and the target language of the second language learner (Corder, 1981). According to Ellis (1994), error occurs because of a learner's lack of knowledge of the system of their target language. As the learners are still constructing the language system of the target language, interlanguage occurs. It describes the linguistic system learners create while learning a new language. Learners rely on borrowing the first language system, which results in language transfer (Selinker, 1972). Language transfer, intralingual and faulty teaching techniques or materials are also primary causes of errors that learners commit in their writing (Corder, 1975). It also results in fossilisation; one who speaks a particular first language tends to keep his interlingua at the specific target language. Four different ways in which the errors occur are addition, omission, misordering and misselection (Dulay et al., 1982; James, 2013).

In Malaysia, English has been widely used as a second language and taught to students since primary school. Early exposure to the language is hoped to provide a solid basis for using it. However, Dahlmeier, Ng and Wu (2013) discovered that Singaporean learners tend to make prepositions, determiners/articles and mechanics errors. Another study by Ibrahim (2015) found that mechanical mistakes such as spelling, capitalisation, and punctuation were commonly identified in students' academic writing. Findings of another study suggested that tertiary-level students also have problems in using tenses, subject-verb agreement and sentence construction, especially complex sentences (Singh et al., 2017). Liong, Melor and Harwati (2019) revealed that school students produced most errors in verbs, tenses, nouns and pronouns. Similar findings are also found in a study by Ang, Tan and Lye (2020), in which lower

secondary school students have problems with subject-verb agreement. Linguistically incorrect use of basic parts of speech and phrases in the written word could pose a significant problem, as it plays an essential role in accurately describing events and helping readers to understand them. (MacMillan, 2017).

Regarding professional and business writing, linguistic error signifies a deficiency in the workforce's professionalism (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012). Similar to Pradono (2011), Octaviani and Arumsari (2021) also conducted a study to find the errors made by college students in writing job application letters based on Corder's model. The students were given some examples of English job application letters from the internet and needed to produce their letters afterwards. Findings suggest that even though the students were equipped with references, they still made grammatical mistakes in writing their sentences. Making errors showed that the writers failed to proofread their job application documents before sending them to the recipients. Furthermore, employers perceive producing free-error writing as an essential writing communication skill an employee should possess (Coffelt et al., 2019). Spelling errors in resumes are associated with lower applicant ratings, hiring chances and proposed starting salaries (Shore et al., 2021). Graduate resumes containing many spelling errors have a lower interview probability than error-free ones (Philippe et al., 2023).

According to these findings, the problems have been in place since the school years and have persisted until they reached the tertiary level. Therefore, it is unsurprising that graduating students and new graduates need assistance when applying for employment as they must write the appropriate applications (Jobstreet, 2015). This study analyses the surface structure taxonomy errors in resumes and Malaysian undergraduates' cover letters. The research question of this study is:

- a. What errors can be found in undergraduates' resumes and job application letters?

### **3. Methodology**

Using a corpus linguistics approach, the researchers analysed 60 resumes and cover letters written by final-year undergraduate students. As a branch of linguistics, corpus linguistics involves the systematic study of observing and analysing authentic language data (Hajar & Ang, 2019). In this qualitative research, researchers will develop a new set of corpus to suit the objective and purpose of the research (Reppen, 2010). This is necessary because no corpus collection of resumes and job application letters, especially in Malaysia, is available for linguistic analysis. For this research, data collection procedures and steps were adapted from Corder (1974) for data collection, error identification, analysis, and interpretation. The coding system for types of errors will be based on the Error Analysis framework design by Dulay et al. (1982) and Corder (1973).

Hence, for this study, the researchers analysed the data by using the coding system in line with the Error Analysis framework proposed by scholars Corder (1973) and Dulay et al. (1982), in order to explore the types of error. A new corpus to meet the objective and purpose will be developed. This study aims to look into faults in resume and job application letters written by second-English language learners who are perceived as less proficient compared to native speakers (Kazazoglu, 2020). It will look at the types of error that learners commonly make known as omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Learners may omit necessary items; any morphemes or words, add unnecessary ones, misform or misorder them (Ang et al., 2020; Mohammad Azannee, 2014; Rika Arista et al., 2015). Omission errors are categorised by leaving out items required for grammatical correctness. Addition errors mean that the

presence of an item that must not appear in well-formed utterances. While for misinformation errors, errors will be identified based on the inaccurate use of one grammatical form instead of another, and the last one is misordering, where the errors are labelled when putting words in the wrong order.

#### 4. Findings

The resumes and cover letters produced by undergraduates were analysed, and different types of errors were identified. The categories of errors identified are omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. Based on the findings, a total of 310 errors were identified. The result for each type of error found is shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Frequency of Errors

Types of error	Frequency
Omission	40
Addition	52
Misinformation	205
Misordering	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>310</b>

The most frequent errors committed by the final-year students in their resumes and job application letters are misinformation errors with 205 errors, followed by addition errors with 52 errors, omission errors with 40 errors, and misordering with 13 errors.

##### 4.1 Misinformation errors

Some examples of misinformation in the resumes and job application letters are as follows:

(a) The enthusiasm in fashion also **brings** me to **working** with this company.

In example (a), the word **brings** should be replaced with motivates and the **-ing** forms for **working** should be omitted since the following word after infinitive ‘to’ must be the root word.

(b) **May** joining this company would grant me more experience and knowledge.

In (b), the word by and the form -ing should be used to describe how to do something or how things are processed. The modal verb **May** is more suitable to ask for, give and refuse permission.

##### 4.2 Omission errors

Below are some examples of omission errors found:

(a) I would like to Ø the opportunity to meet you and discuss about the job that being offered.

In (a), before the word ‘the opportunity’, the writer should add a verb take to make the sentence syntactically correct.

(b) I really appreciate the time that you Ø spent on reviewing my application.

The sentence in (b) should be in present perfect tense as the verb **spent** should be accompanied with have to show the action or situation in an unfinished time period.

#### 4.3 Addition errors

- (a) Therefore, I would **very much** like to discuss with GuruLab in order to schedule an interview.

The writer of (a) should omit the phrase **very much** to make the sentence syntactically correct.

- (b) You can **contacts** me at this number.

The correct sentence for (b) should omit the form 's' as 'can' is the Modal Verb and should be in base form which is contact.

#### 4.4 Misordering errors

- (a) With **Ø** cover letter I attached my resume together.

This misordering error results from word-to-word translation from the native language (Malay language), which affects the order of the words in the sentence. The correct order of the sentence is 'I attached my resume together with the cover letter'. There is an error of Omission too as an article the should be put before the word cover letter to show the specific noun.

- (b) During my free time I would conduct an English class with my colleague.

The sentence in (b) is also the result of interlanguage. 'I would conduct an English class with my colleague during my free time' is the correct sentence in the correct order.

### 5. Discussion

The findings indicate that undergraduate students had difficulty selecting appropriate words in their job application documents. Looking at the previous research by (Ang et al., 2021), misselection constituted the highest error frequency in the students' essay writing. The importance of teaching and learning grammar needs to be made clear to students. The undergraduates in the present study tend to rely on their first language when producing sentences in the target language. Commonly, the misinformation errors produced were the wrong choice of lexical, including nouns and determiners (Aziz & Don, 2019). The undergraduates also committed misinformation errors because they were confused with the correct words or terms to be included in their application. Moreover, one of the factors that makes them commit such errors is their lack of proficiency in English language grammar. Job seekers must minimise the misinformation of words in their resumes and cover letters because it is detrimental for recruiters as they negatively perceive those who are committing this type of error (Martin-Lacroux, 2017).

The results of this study provide valuable insights for teaching, suggesting ways to assist undergraduates in crafting more effective error-free job application letters that meet the expectations of potential employers and the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0). The findings of that study show the importance of EA, as it reveals what kind of errors learners make. As a result, the findings of this study can be used to determine what still needs to be taught in the English language classroom, particularly in the writing of resumes and job



application letters. In order to improve the students' English language writing skills, a refined error list with error descriptions and examples can be used.

## 6. Conclusion

This study is an experimental attempt to incorporate EA by adopting the existing EA framework by Dulay et al. (1982) and Corder (1973), given that it was considered more efficient and systematic in identifying and understanding learners' errors. Rectifying this common issue is pivotal for refining their professional profiles and ensuring a smoother transition from academia to the workforce, ultimately contributing to their career success. Hence, proactive measures are imperative for learners and educators to address errors in resumes and job application letters. Given the essential role of English language proficiency in knowledge acquisition, transfer, and effective communication, collaborative efforts among learners, teachers, educators, and curriculum designers are essential to enhance the job readiness of Malaysian undergraduates in the competitive job market.

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