



## **An Analysis of the Problems in English Sentences by Francophone Learners of English; The Case of Premiere and Terminal Students of the Far North Region of Cameroon**

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DOI: 10.53103/cjlls.v3i2.91

### **Abstract**

This research work sets out to investigate on the problems Francophone learners face in an attempt to study English as a Foreign Language. Premiere and Terminale were randomly selected in the Far North Region of Cameroon for this study. Data was collected through an essay writing test administered to students. Data was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively within the framework of Error Analysis and Structuralism. The findings revealed that, the learners' problems range from omission of words, addition of unnecessary elements, mechanics, syntax, code mixing and code switching. The findings further proved that, these abysmal problems are caused by both teachers and students. It is in this regard that this article has suggested solutions which could assist both students and teachers to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: English as Foreign Language, Error, Concord, Sentence

### **Introduction**

Language is a distinctive feature of every human community. Bell (1981) believes that, by virtue of having meaning, language would require the shared knowledge of the rules of grammar by the users. It is this shared knowledge which would require a particular arrangement of words in order to create a sentence by categorizing words according to their forms such as: Nouns, verbs, prepositions, just to name but these, and functions such as: Subjects, direct objects, complements, and the list continuous. Rodriguez et al, (1998) contend that, in a language such as English, the main device for showing the relationship among words is word order. Transposing them changes their meaning. Cook, (2008) believes that, language conveys meaning from one person to another through spoken sounds, written letters or gestures. This word order is termed 'syntax'. Syntax deals with

the set of rules that determines the correct alignments of items in a sentence as far as spoken or written language is concerned. It can as well mean ‘coordination’ and ‘ordering’ together.

There are many implications in building a syntactically error-free sentence. The implications include: Capitalization, right punctuation in agreement with the type of sentence, well-positioned modifiers, post-modifiers, the SVO/C/A combinations, the proper use of coma or apposition, just to name these. Applying these rules in building a complete and error-free phrases, clauses and sentences is not an easy task. And this is true with foreign language learners of English who write sentences with dangling modifiers, without capitalizing the first words in a sentence and proper nouns in sentences, without subject-verb-agreement or missing items, fragmentation, just to name a few.

### **Literature Review**

Kanyakorn, Jiraporn & Rattineekorn (2017), carried out research on the grammatical errors made by Thai university Learners in their production of English Language. Data for this study was based on two instruments: Writing and questionnaires. Altogether, 104 scripts were analysed and the errors were recorded according to its types in an individual error record form. Secondly, the students were asked to write in the questionnaires, the sources they thought could make them commit errors in their production of written English and finally, the students were interviewed on the causes of the errors. The findings indicated that errors committed by students had more to do with punctuation, articles, subject verb agreement, spellings, capitalisation and fragments.

Hinnon (2014) investigated on the causes of errors committed by second language learners of English and came out with the conclusion that, there are three sources of errors: Negative transfer of the mother tongue, limited knowledge of the mother tongue, limited knowledge of the target language, and, the difference between words and sentence of the mother tongue and those of the target language. They concluded by emphasising on the fact that, most errors committed by EFL learners are as a result of Inter-Lingual Interferences. Jabeen et al (2015) set out to investigate on the reasons behind the failure to produce grammatically correct English sentences of Pakistani ESL and Iranian EFL learners despite the fact that English remains a compulsory school subject at all levels of their learning institutions and schools. Carried out within the framework of error analysis, their findings showed that, students lack grammatical accuracy in their writing in English due to the influence of their mother language.

In addition, Ngangbam, (2016) carried out an analysis of syntactic errors committed by students of English Language class in Mutah University’. Using essay writing as data collection method, Ngangbam discovered 15 categories of errors classified in order of frequency.

Within the framework of error analysis, Abdullah, Yunus, & Hashmi (2019) hypothesised that, the role of teachers is very fundamental in the acquisition of language by students and it can be done by trying to know their area of weakness faced by the students. The study aimed to identify the grammatical errors made by 7 year six primary pupils from a suburban school based on a short-guided essay they have written during their English class. The findings revealed that, verbs are among the highest errors done by pupils and suggested that, more attention should be given to the problem areas faced by students in order to improve on their language

Nkongho (2021) investigated on “The structuring of English sentences by Chadian EFL learners”. The aim of her study was to investigate several kinds of deviances that occur in the structuring of sentences produced by Chadian learners of English as Foreign Language (EFL). She used corpora as a method for data collection. The data was drawn from 175 authentic narratives paragraphs written by 175 Terminale A4 students from Lycee Adoum Dallah, Moundou in Chad. She used the Interlanguage and the Error Analysis theories for her analysis. Her findings revealed that, miss elective errors were the widespread errors committed by Chadian learners of EFL as the category represented 39.17% of deviances

Elsa et al. (2015) aimed at investigating the problems of writing correct English sentences in some secondary schools in Sudan. For this study, a group of teachers from (30) governmental schools, were chosen from central state in North Madani and a group of 25 students were chosen from a governmental school in Central State, North Madani. The study applied the descriptive and the analytical methods beside the statistical tools so as to achieve the desired goals. The researcher came out with the following findings: Firstly, most of the Sudanese students at secondary schools are not acquainted with parts of speech because the periods allocated for writing skills are extremely rare and lack of motivation. There is a complete absence in teaching lessons of English structural.

Singh, and Razak, (2017) presented the grammatical errors made by tertiary students in their writings. The participants were a group of Diploma students who sat for a university entrance exam. Data for this study included one hundred and forty-four written essays of the students which were collected and analysed using content analysis. Findings revealed two major errors: That is subject verb agreement and tenses were the most common types of errors. The reasons given include amongst others that students over generalised and perceived that the tenses could be used interchangeably

Yaseen et al. (2018) set out to investigate the syntax error patterns committed by the student while engaging in speaking. To address these objectives, a qualitative research method is employed. Data was collected through audio-tape recordings and a face-to-face interview with the participants. The recorded data was transcribed and coded based on Noor Hashmi’s (1996) seven categories of error. These findings indicated that, some of the first language negative transfer fall into five out of seven categories of Noor Hashmi’s

classification. These errors were explained by interference from the L1 and other contributing factors, the limited use of some strategies such as: repetition and confirmation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Error Analysis is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors (James, 1998). For Crystal (1999), error analysis in language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language, especially a foreign language. According to James (1998), EA refers to "the study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance". As a general remark, the investigation of errors can be diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's state of the language (Corder, 1967, in Richards, 1984, p. 33) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organisers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems (Richards, 1984).

According to Richards & Schmidt (2002, p. 184), Error Analysis is "the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners". In the light of this conception, EA compares "learner English" with English (L2) itself and judges how learners are "ignorant" (James, 1998, p. 304) about the grammatical and semantic rules of the target language. Another view of error analysis is given by Brown (1980) (as cited by Hasyim (2002, p. 43)), when he defines error analysis as the process of observing, analysing, and classifying the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by a learner. Similarly, Crystal (nd) (as cited by Hasyim, 2002) proposes that, error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language.

### **The Major Steps in Analysing Learner's Errors**

The proponents of Error analysis laid down the foundation for effective research within this framework. Corder (1973), identified four major steps which guide a research:

#### **The Selection of a Given Written or Spoken Corpus**

As Corder puts it, there are two types of written material: spontaneous and controlled productions. The former refers to free compositions such as essay writings while the latter are prepared chunks of phrases, sentences, or texts on which the learner is examined. He equally asserts that spontaneous productions tend to be "error-avoiding"

while controlled ones are more likely to be “error-provoking”. In other words, when informants are given the opportunity to come up with their speech or written productions, they exhibit a high tendency of avoiding errors, while prepared texts generally contain predisposed errors.

### **Identification Or Recognition of Errors in the Corpus**

Corder (1971) recommends that, the researcher should differentiate between mistakes and errors. It is of paramount importance that the error analyst makes that distinction for he will focus only on errors, “breaches of codes” (Corder, 1973); these deviant forms or distortions which the learners cannot correct by themselves as they are systematic and constant, and not only mere slips of tongues. To better succeed in this step, Corder (1971) proposed a model for identifying erroneous learners’ productions. In this model, he begins by distinguishing between *overt* and *covert* errors. In this model, he further makes it clear, overt errors are grammatically incorrect and the flaw or deviation is visible at the surface level.

### **Classification or Description of Errors Got from the Corpus**

The classification or description of errors is the most tedious task. It requires that the errors identified in the data be classified. There is a plethora of views as far as types of errors are concerned. Corder (ibid) identifies four types of errors, namely *omissions*, *additions*, *selection* and *misorderings*. Omission occurs when the learner unconsciously fails to put a letter, a word or a phrase which is supposed to appear in the sentence.

### **Explanation of the Causes of Errors**

Corder (1973) and other researchers pinpoint some sources of errors analysis which are much related in terms of similarities. Some of the causes Corder has pointed out include interference, overgeneralization, partial knowledge of the language, lack of effective learning and teaching of the L2 and finally what Corder (1974) calls false cognates which according to him are “the physical resemblance which leads to analogical overgeneralization”.

### **Structuralism**

According to Saussure (1916), language deals with a combination of different Elements. He argues that, a language can or could also be studied at a particular point in time with a focus on how different parts of a language interact. In this theory, we shall

adopt Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) Model of Analysis of verb phrase and Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) Model of Structural Grammar. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973, 2010) have presented several patterns through which the verb phrase can be looked at. This structural model is not focusing on the verb phrase only, but also provide insights on the noun phrase (NP), the prepositional phrase (PP), and other sentence components; which is the core of this research.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study was collected from the essays administered to the students and marked by the researchers. For objective purposes, all these learners were given the same task. This is so because, the programs of both *Première* and *Terminale* are almost the same and that of *Terminale* is a continuation of the one of *Première*. The choice of these classes was based on the fact that while many students enter the job market after their secondary education, some pursue university studies where English is highly used as the language of instruction. The choice of writing stems from the fact that learning a language consists of active and productive skills. Writing is generally considered to be one of the active or productive skills of language usage. It is considered active and productive because learners have to apply many aspects of language, such as: General knowledge, vocabulary, and grammar in this subject. Writing is also considered very important in every curriculum of university because it is believed that this skill can act as a tool for language development, for critical thinking, and for learning in all disciplines.

This test was made up of a single essay question for both levels. To ensure that learners understood what was expected of them, the setting followed the recommendations of the competency based approach (CBA) system of teaching and testing, whereby the tester enumerates the various facets of the issues to be discussed to the testees. Again, the choice of topic was carefully selected because it was the period for legislative and municipal elections and the students were exposed to various campaign speeches.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

The data for this research was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. It is classified into the following sub headings: problems of agreement, incorrect sentence structure, omission of items, problems of mechanics, wrong word choice, and addition of unnecessary elements.

#### **Problems of Agreement**

Agreement within a sentence is the relationship that words tie with one another.

For example, a verb must agree with its subject, a pronoun must agree with the noun which stand as the subject, the determiner shows the number of the word it determines. Also, a verb must agree with the auxiliary it follows and words that it comes after them like prepositions. From the data collected from test papers, the following table states the different errors and the correct forms.

The following table highlights the different types of errors relating to agreements as extracted from students' test scripts. This element is analysed from the view of Quirk and Greenbaun (1973) who consider lexical verbs under two heads: regular (such as call) and irregular (such as drink). In all of them, the -s form and the -ing participle are predictable from the base form. They differ in that the -ed; and the -ed: forms in irregular verbs cannot be predicted from the base.

Table 1: Problems of agreement

I have <b>'pass'</b> 25 years in politics.	I have <b>passed'</b> (spent) 10 years in politics.
I have <b>study</b> in the university	I have <b>studied</b> at the university
During the campaign the candidate <b>sensitize</b> the population	During the campaign, the candidate <b>sensitizes</b> the the population
I can <b>said</b> i have some experience the political system	I can <b>say</b> I have some experience in the political system
I want to <b>developped</b> my country	I want to <b>develop</b> my country

Here, we realized that students have problems of agreement. This is because they cannot identify primary auxiliaries in sentences. They also have difficulties to differentiate between regular and irregular verbs. Examples are:

- 'I have study to the university' instead of 'I have studied at the university'.

- 'I have pass 60 years in politics' instead of 'I have passed...'

The results of the various types of agreement errors observed above are related to the theoretical constructs of the Structuralist theory where Greville and Corbett (2006:78) state that agreement morphology is the prerequisite for agreement. If the target does not have the means to realize the agreement features, then we have no evidence for agreement". As of the Case of the English language, agreement is not only marked by affixes (prefixes and suffixes) but also by the complete change in word form.

### Incorrect Sentence Structure

Structure deals with how elements are arranged to form a meaningful sentence. Generally, we look at sentence structure at the level of subject-verb-object arrangement and modifiers placement. Modifiers, normally, come before the words they modify but learners deviate from these norms as presented in the table below. The table below gives

the wrong structure in the first column and the correct structure in the second column. The following table presents the various problems related to sentence structure.

Table 2: Incorrect sentence structure

To be of nationality Cameroon	To be of Cameroonian nationality
Organise to the campaign	To organise the campaign
Party political	Political party
I am since in politics 10 years	I am in politics since ten years.
I have be in politics for a long time	I have been in politics for a long time
I have be fighting the corruption	I have been fighting the corruption
Election presidential	Presidential election
Development political	Political development
Cooperation international	International cooperation
Men political	Political men
Integrity moral	Moral integrity
I have the experience high to accomplish your proposition.	I have the high experience to accomplish your proposition.
I want offer to many job in my society.	I want to offer many jobs in the society.
The vote this is a right civil to the citizen in this country.	The vote is a civic right to the citizens in his country.
The importance of voting is many.	The importance of voting are many
Voting help in the developement the ur country.	Voting helps in the development of our country.
I have much experiences in political parties.	I have much experience in political parties.
I have study science political in the university.	I studied political science in the university.
If you can voting for me, I will construct hospitals; and the schools.	If you can vote for me, I will construct hospitals and the schools

First of all, we discover that learners have problems of syntax. They don't know how to arrange or put the words in order. That is why they have problems of classifying Subject+Verb+Object; Subject+Verb+Complement; Adjective+noun etc. Examples are as follows: 'Men political' instead of 'Political men'. Coupled with other problems as listed above, it is clear that the learners have a poor mastery of sentence structure. In Error Analysis, Ellis (2005, p. 710) posits that errors occur when learners yield deviant structures based on the structures of other languages, while ignorance of rule restrictions refers to the application of rules to inappropriate contexts. Ellis (1994, p. 710) further claims that incomplete application of rules arises when learners fail to develop a structure fully, while

false concepts hypothesised occur when learners do not completely understand a distinction in the target language.

### **Omission of Items**

Omission deals with leaving out the required elements of the sentences. In English language the absence of one element within a sentence can obscure the meaning of that sentence. Erdogan (2005, p. 264) as cited in Mohammad H. Al-Khresheh (2016, p. 52) in his classification of errors mentions omissions, he mentioned morphological and syntactic omissions. Sometimes, articles, prepositions and other words are deliberately added in a sentence. So, such an error has been identified in the students' essays as listed in the table below. In the left column are omission errors and in right the required items are provided in the sentences at the right places. The following table illustrates problems linked to omission of items. The spaces provided in the first row represent the missing or omitted items.

Table 3: Omission of items

Before every.... we have a member of political party	Before everything, we have a member of political party.
Organization ...the campaign	Organisation of the campaign.
The amelioration ....our country	The amelioration of our country.
I want..... develope my country	I want to develop my country
Construction ....the hospital	Construction of the hospital
Elimination .... poverty	Elimination of poverty
Collaboration of..... population	Collaboration of the population
The principle..... democracy	The principle of democracy
A campaign .... presidential election	A campaign for presidential election
I want to be ....ideal president and the Head of state	I want to be the ideal president and the Head of state
I am..... member of a political party.	I am a member of a political party.
Voting is not .....Obligation.	Voting is not an obligation.
Construction.... the hospital	construction of the hospitals
.....Evening everybody	Good evening everybody!
I.... 36 ....old	I am 36 years old.
I am a member of .....political party	I am a member of a political party.
Firstly, ..is a right.	First, it is a right.
Contribution of..... citizen	Contribution of a citizen
In country	In a country
I want you.... Choose	I want you to choose
Contribution..... the democracy	Contribution to the democracy
The citizens..... the country	The citizens of the country

In the above table, we discover that learners omit prepositions and articles in their sentences. These articles are indefinite articles (an, a) and definite article (the). The former shows uncertainty of an idea while the latter shows specificity. "An" is used before words beginning with a vowel sound such as an hour, an obligation. "A" is used before words beginning with a consonant sound. Eg: a house, a bag.

They also omit prepositions like 'of, to'. So, they come up with incomplete expressions. Examples are: "the amelioration our country" instead of "The amelioration of our country", "Before everything, we have a member of political party". From these examples, we have the omission of 'of' and "...thing" respectively.

Other omission errors are viewed as in: "the citizens the country" instead of "the citizens of the country", "construction the hospital" instead of "construction of the hospital", "contribution the democracy" instead of "contribution to the democracy".

### Wrong Word Choice, Code Switching and Code Mixing

Every word in language has its proper meaning when used in context. When used mistakenly, a word can hinder the meaning of the sentence. In case of lack of vocabulary, learners tend to use strings of words or phrases from their first language into English. This is referred to as code switching. As defined by Lightbrown (2012), code switching is the systematic alternating use of two language varieties within a sentence. At some levels, they insert only lexemes of a different language (French in this case) into the English language. This is known as code mixing. According to Sridhar (nd.) code mixing is the transition from using linguistic units (words) of one language when communicating in another language. From the findings, the table below stipulates the different wrong word choice errors and the code switching errors, and the corrected forms.

The table below highlights the errors learners produce by code mixing, code switching as well as using wrong words. Wrong word choice is denoted by 'ww' while code switching is marked by 'CS'. As for code mixing, we give it the label 'CM'. as far as this aspect is concerned, we shall analyse using error analysis. According to Corder, as cited in Richards (1992, p. 22). In his view, Corder states that for learners to use a language effectively, they must establish the similarity and difference between native languages and target ones in order to improve pedagogy. This gave birth to the theoretical framework of Contrastive Analysis, a theory that postulated the existence of positive transfer, resulting from similarity between languages, and negative transfer (or language interference), stemming from difference between languages. The notions of code mixing and code switching in this regard stem from negative transfer.

As for wrong word choice, we shall analyse using Bloomfield (1933) model of structuralism. Bloomfield's view rests on the premise that language learning is rule based. He believes that language can be best acquired by individuals by showing how well they have mastered the way units and elements are interrelated, proving that language can be studied as 'empirical descriptive'. Description in Bloomfieldian context means thorough and good presentation of patterns including the way in which they are knitted to form long units, as language learning, is centred on structure (rules) in order to produce meaningful utterance.

Table 4: Wrong word choice, code switching and code mixing

Wrong forms	Corrected forms
I like que* (CM)	I want that
Sensitize in* the importance for* (ww)	Sensitise on the importance of
The gestion (CM)	The management
Contribute for the democratic (ww)	Contribute to the democracy
Yours should me voters (ww)	You should vote for me

In political (ww)	In politics
I have 25 years (ww)	I am twenty five years old
I have l'intégrité moral (CM)	I have the moral intergrity.
I favorite the principe (CM)	I favour the principle...
Crea the l'emploi aux jeunes (CS)	... create employment for youths.
In the chomage (CM)	Unemployed youths
Voting is not obligation to* the citizen (ww)	Voting is not an obligation for the citizens.
All that* I took* is true (ww)	All what I said is true.
Verify* to* the internet (ww)	Check on the internet.
I received the best education to* my parent (ww)	I received the best education from my parents.
Promes to*of the last president (CM)	Promise of the last president
Participate of* voting (ww)	Participate in voting
It is not one* obligation (ww)	It is not an obligation.
I would like to speak* you (ww)	I would like to tell you...
I have one* experience (ww)	I have an experience...
A* expression (ww)	An expression
I am to* expert in politics (ww)	I am an expert in politics
Experience superior* (ww)	High experience
'Juste' that i cannot do it alone	Just that I cannot do it alone
Plan d'action (CM)	Plan of action
To come president (ww)	To be president
An construction of the school (ww)	A construction of the school
Thank your* for your kind attention (ww)	Thank you for your kind attention
The vote is my contribution is my country (ww)	The vote is my contribution for my country.
In the political (ww)	In politics
I have many experience(ww)	I have much experience
Many works (ww)	Much work
Many thinks (ww)	Many things
Voting is importance (ww)	Voting is important
The voters have free of choice (ww)	The voters have freedom of choice.
Why the should vote for me (ww)	Why they should vote for me.
Impôt public (CM)	Public taxes
I am year today (ww)	I am here today...
I am an candidate for the upcoming election (ww)	I am a candidate to the upcoming election.

My name is Adam an my party is CDPC. (ww)	My name is Adam and my party is CDPC.
... Citizens who have years to vote...(ww)	... Citizens who have the age to vote..
I want you to choice me because...(ww)	I want you to choose me because...
I school' my primary school in Yaounde, my secondary school in maroua 'who' I obtained leving A4 to LYCEE an my univerty to Douala. (ww)	I attended my primary school in Yaounde, my secondary school in Maroua where I obtained my O Level and my higher studies in the university of Douala.
School of formation (ww)	Training school
Me have the experience. (ww)	I have the experience.

From the findings in the table above, most foreign learners of English language face problems of expression. This is because of inadequate vocabulary. To surmount this obstacle, most of these tend to employ French lexemes. Eg: 'I like que, the gestion, I intergrite moral, Create the emploi aux jeunes, plan d' action'. When these words are placed in wrong places in a sentence, they make the sentence to be wrong. These errors occur because the learners do not master the different functions a word can have within a sentence. Eg: "me have the experience." instead of "I have the experience." "Voting is importance" instead of "voting is important". In the first example the pronoun "me" can be placed as a subject but rather, they place it at an object position in a sentence. In the second example, the word "importance" cannot be placed as a complement complementing the subject. With ll these problems, communication becomes a serious problem to these learners.

### **Addition of Unnecessary Elements**

Adding elements where they are not needed within a sentence makes the message to be wrong. The following table gives the reasons of addition of unnecessary items. This aspect is analysed based on Bloomfield (1933) model of structuralism. According to Bloomfield (1933), language learning is quite inherent to grammar, that is, rules. He believes that language can be best acquired by individuals by showing how well they have mastered the way units and elements are interrelated, proving that language can be studied as 'empirical descriptive'. Description in Bloomfieldian context means thorough and good presentation of patterns including the way in which they are knitted to form long units, as language learning, is centered on structure (rules) in other to produce meaningful utterance. Contrarily, when these unnecessarily elements are added, the meaning is thwarted.

Table 6: Addition of unnecessary elements

Wrong addition	Corrected forms
The first I want to descrip.	First, I want to describe...
It is a very important to participate	It is very important to participate...
A voting is very important	Voting is very important.
To have been address to you	To have been addressed to you..
The vote is a very very important	The vote is very important.

From the table above students add articles and double some words that are not needed at all. Some glaring examples include: 'the first I want to descrip'. Instead of 'First, I want to describe'. 'It is a very important to participate' Instead of 'It is very important to participate'. 'To vote is a very very important. Instead of 'the vote is very important and many other errors. From these errors, we realise that learners do not master the use of determiners and articles. This makes their sentences highly problematic as they fail to communicate the desired meaning.

### Conclusion

Therefore, understanding students' learning difficulties and designing suitable programmes and schemes is the key to effective teaching for EFL teachers. In the course of teaching, it is important for teachers to establish what the error is, the possible sources of errors, to explain why the errors occur. This is important because a full knowledge of the causes of errors enables the teacher to work out a more effective teaching strategy to deal with them and finally to decide how serious the mistake is to have a remedial work. It follows from this point that learners of English need also to be taught about the English text awareness rather than transferring. This can be done by guiding learners to look critically and analytically at English texts written by native speakers of English which in turn support their own writing. When these strategies are applied, the learners will improve their general language proficiency by following these strategies. However, this study dealt with a limited number of the linguistic aspects involved in writing due to the limitations of space and time. Clearly, there is a great deal of work to be done in this area in the future.

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