

THE IMPLICATION OF SYLLABIFICATION ON THE USE OF COMPARATIVE AND SUPERLATIVE ADJECTIVES IN ESSAY WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Adjectives are one of the main parts of speech of the English language, although historically they were classed together with nouns. Adjectives play a significant role in grammar and writing. The comparative and superlative adjectives are formed based on the word syllable. Depending on the syllables, the form may differ. Using adjectives in writing is a challenge for many ESL students. The students of the Faculty of Business Studies, Vavuniya campus, find it challenging to use the forms correctly. This paper investigates incorrect forms of comparative/superlative forms in the “compare and contrast” essays written by the students during the first-year English course. The research problem is why ESL learners find it challenging to use the above forms in their writing, although they have learned and known the relevant rules for years. The objective is to draw attention to their use. The data were collected from direct classroom observations, interviews, and structured questionnaires administered to 50 students. They were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings show that (1) the students are not aware or not clear of the demarcation of the syllabic systems such as mono-syllabic, di-syllabic or poly-syllabic because the forms of adjectives vary based on the number of the syllables, (2) they do not incorporate the grammar rules in their writing to overcome these challenges and (3) there is no knowledge of the relevant suffixes and the placement of the definite article ‘the’ in the superlative form. Further, the mother tongues, Tamil and Sinhala, do not have specific comparative, superlative markers based on the syllables as in the English language. These are some of the other reasons which have been discussed in detail in the paper for the malformations of the adjectives. Thus, this study recommends specific strategies to improve teaching and learning the degrees of adjectival use.

Keywords: *comparative and superlative adjective, compare and contrast essay, contrastive analysis and suffix*

INTRODUCTION

Adjective plays a vital role in English grammar. Basically, by definition adjectives describe nouns. Adjective factually means describing, appreciating and stating how someone or something is. It has different degrees of form as the comparative and the superlative. The formation of the English comparative and superlative degrees undergoes phonological processes. Specific morphological rules are applied to find the correct form of the adjective.

Further, comparative adjectives are used to distinguish two persons, objects, or places. Firstly, to use the correct form of the comparative adjectives, specific rules must be followed. Based on the number of syllabic words such as mono-syllabic, di-syllabic, or poly-syllabic, the forms of the comparative and superlative may vary. For instance, if the adjective is mono-syllabic, one should add (-er) at the end of the adjective according to the grammar rule. e.g. (1) 'tall'- 'taller'

Secondly, when a mono-syllabic adjective ends with a consonant, one should double the last consonant and adds (-er) as in 'tall'-'taller.' Thirdly, when the adjective ends in (-y), one needs to omit the (-y) and add (-ier), as in 'happy-happier.' Fourthly, when the adjective is di-syllabic or poly-syllabic, no matter whether it ends in (-y) or not, one should add 'more' before the adjective, as in 'beautiful - more beautiful' and 'dangerous - more dangerous.' Further, the word 'than' is used to compare two entities. For example, *Mala is prettier than Leela.*

Considering the superlative adjectives, their usage is significant in the comparison of any three things where one entity is superior or inferior to others. The superlative formation process also has a specific set of rules like the comparatives.

E.g., tiny – tinnier - tinniest (doubled, consonant)

Amazing - more amazing - most amazing

Also, "the" must be placed before the desired superlative form. Nevertheless, there are some rare forms in the comparative and superlative adjectives. For example, 'bad - worse' than" and "far - farther than," etc. and for superlatives, e.g. 'bad-the worst' and "far- the farthest," etc.

Research problem

The problem associated with this study is to find why ESL (Learning English as a Second Language) learners find it challenging to use the comparative and superlative adjectives in their writing even though, they have learned and have known the relevant rules for years.

Objective of the study

The objective is to draw attention to the use of the comparative/superlative forms of the adjectives correctly, which enhance the learners to improve their writing.

Significance of the study

This study contributes to improving teaching and learning of the degree of adjectives by identifying the learners' common, frequently made errors and the problems students face in applying the correct forms of the comparative and superlative adjectives. The reasons behind the poor performance in the use of the comparative and superlative adjectives can be identified and improved. Error analysis is useful in second language learning because it reveals the problematic areas to teachers, syllabus designers, and textbook writers. Therefore, it is needed for teachers to identify these frequently appearing errors, and remind students of these errors as often as possible so that they can make a more significant effort to avoid them and improve their writing. Limited investigation was done in this area in the Sri Lankan context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, an adjective is defined as a word used to modify the noun. 'Adjectives are problematic in almost every language. Unlike nouns and verbs, adjectives cannot be characterized in terms of a prototype (Thomas 1997).

Mohammad (2008) investigated errors in the use of adjectives in the EFL writings of Sudanese university students. The data of the study were collected from a test that covered eight areas in the use of adjectives to examine students' abilities in all applications of adjectives. Regarding the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, the study revealed that the students made errors in 35%, which indicates that they do not master such areas in adjectives. The results also indicated that the students' errors occurred mostly in the irregular adjectives as well as the multi-syllables adjectives. The students applied the rules of er/est – more/most in a situation where it was inappropriate. They extended the regular rules to the irregular adjectives.

According to Mohammad (2008), these errors can be attributed to a lack of proper classroom techniques and insufficient materials provided by teachers. In the same vein, Ibrahim (cited in Mohammad 2008) found that the students' errors in adjectives were in the area of comparison; the students generalized the rule by adding –er and –est to all adjectives indiscriminately.

In an attempt to examine the common grammatical mistakes made by Albanian students during the EFL learning process, Kaçani (2014) found that the use of the incorrect comparative and superlative forms of the adjectives is a common mistake of these learners.

Students use the adverb 'more/most' before one- and two-syllable adjectives in addition to the use of the comparative or superlative morpheme –er or –est. For example, the participants of the study were found to use forms like: '*this is more easier / more easy than... / the most funniest*', '*drive more faster*' instead of '*this is easier than... / the funniest*', '*drive faster*'. In order to explain this result, Kaçani (ibid) posited that the Albanian language influences the learners.

Recently, corpus linguistic approaches have confirmed the effect of several root syllables using statistical measures (Hilpert 2008; LaFave and Guy 2011) and revealed additional features that influence the form that comparatives take.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Fifty first-year undergraduates from the Bachelor of Business Management Programme were selected as a sample for this study. The subjects were all between the age-group of twenty-one to twenty-three years. The subjects came from different livelihood backgrounds as remote to metropolitan.

A convenience sampling method was used. The significance of the sample selection of this study has two primary purposes as the students' arrival to the university was right from the secondary education, and they were quickly accessible to the researcher who conducts sessions regularly for this batch of students. The students are native speakers of Tamil and Sinhala, and many of them belong to various parts of Sri Lanka. Further, it was confirmed that all the subjects taken into this study had studied English in their schools as a second language. The medium of instructions in the campus is only English for their academic programs.

The students were given an essay on the topic of ‘compare and contrast Vavuniya town with your home town’. The writing assignment aimed to test their ability in the use of the comparative and superlative adjectives naturally while focusing on the content of the essay. The word-limit was 250 words. After the allocated time of 30 minutes, the compositions were collected. The collected data were used for error analysis.

Further, the data were collected from some direct classroom observations, interviews, and structured questionnaires administered to 50 students. A structured type of questionnaire was distributed among the first-year undergraduates of the BBM program to find the students' problems and their personal views and suggestions regarding the teaching and learning of the comparative and superlative adjectives in their writing. The data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The collected data were under the error analysis, and the erroneous sentences are put into the table given below.

DATA ANALYSIS

The error analysis, and the erroneous sentences

Table 1 Erroneous forms of comparative in sentences of the Students

Serial No.	Erroneous sentences in the comparative forms
1	Vavuniya has very hot weather more than Anuradapura
2	My home town weather is good and cool compare to Vavuniya
3	Kegalle has more rain than Vavuniya
4	In Vavuniya, I felt more wind than my home town
5	Vavuniya is a hot place than our town.
6	Comparing my home town with Vavuniya, it is a difficult place for me.
7	My home town weather is more hot than Vavuniya
8	Vavuniya has dry weather than Gampaha
9	Vavuniya is hot than my village, and my village has a soft climate than Vavuniya. The water in Vavuniya is hard than the water in my village.
9	Morning time is very hot
10	I think Vavuniya weather is more than hot in our town.
11	Vavuniya weather is very hot than Monaragala
12	Vavuniya is a very hot place than my home town ..Because of that, it is a cold place than Vavuniya.
13	Vavuniya is very hotter than Badulla.

14	Vavuniya is so hot than my home town
15	Vavuniya sky is very beautiful than our home town.
16	Vavuniya is the hot than my village.
17	Weather of vavuniya is hot more than Deniyaya.
18	Vavuniya is very hot more than our home town. Our home town small town, more than Vavuniya.
19	Vavuniya has more than hot from kuliyapitya.
20	The climate of Vavuniya is too hot than my home town.
21	The weather of Vavuniya is hot than my hometown. Vavuniyahas good windy than my home town.
22	Vavuniya is a hot area than Anuradhapura. Anuradhapura water clean than Vavuniya. Vavuniya is a dry place than Anuradhapura.
23	.this area is very heavy than my home town.
24	Embilipitya is cool than Vavuniya. But Vavuniyais hot than Embilipitiya.
25	Temperature in Matala is low than Vavuniya temperature.
26	It is good than Vavuniya climate ...But they are less than Vavuniya.
27	Chilaw's drinking water is good for better than Vavuniya Vavuniya city is a very hot more than my village. I feel that Vavuniya is very hot than my home town.

Table 2 Erroneous forms of superlative in sentences of the Students

Serial No.	Erroneous sentences in the Superlative forms
1	This time is biggest hot period in Vavuniya
2	These towns are mostly hot
3	...in Srilanka therefore, always hottest temperature.
4	My village weather is beat better than Vavuniya
5	...Vavuniya area is very hottest.
6	... But our area water is best most than Vavuniya.
7	..Among them, Vavuniya and Monaragala are most important towns.
8	..It is nearest the Vavuniya town.
9	Weather is hot nowadays, but Vavuniya weather is most hot

10	It is mostly different from Vavuniya.
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FINDINGS

Analyzing the questionnaires gave the following relevant findings. Figure 1 shows the students' pre-knowledge in adjectives. 90% of students learned, and only 2% of them did not learn adjectives. Though 90% of the students have formally learned the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, their overall performance level is unsatisfactory.

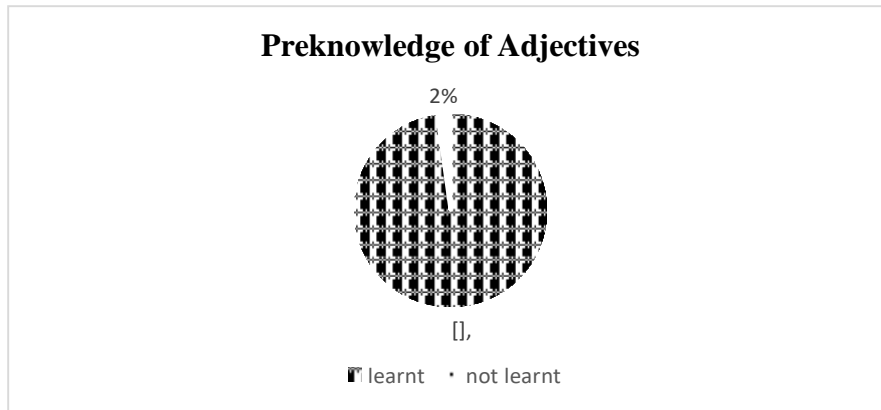


Figure 1: The pre-knowledge in adjectives

Many of them seemed to have problems using the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. This indicates that the students are not motivated to incorporate their learnt grammar in their writings. As a result, the students face challenges in writings in their day to day classroom activities.

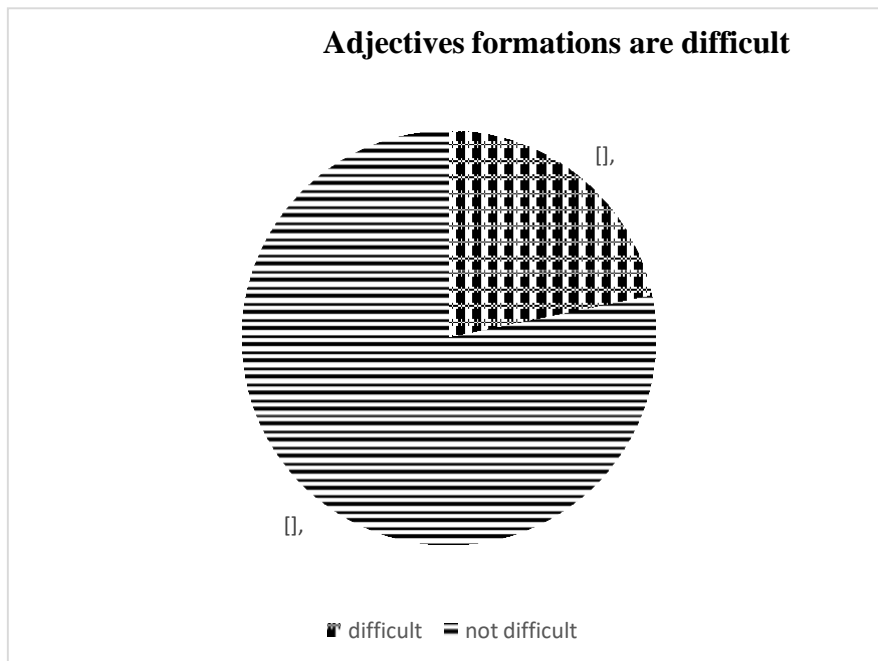


Figure 2: Students' understanding adjectives

Figure 2 gives an essential finding that 72% of the students responded that they found it difficult to understand the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, and only 28% of students responded that they had understood them.

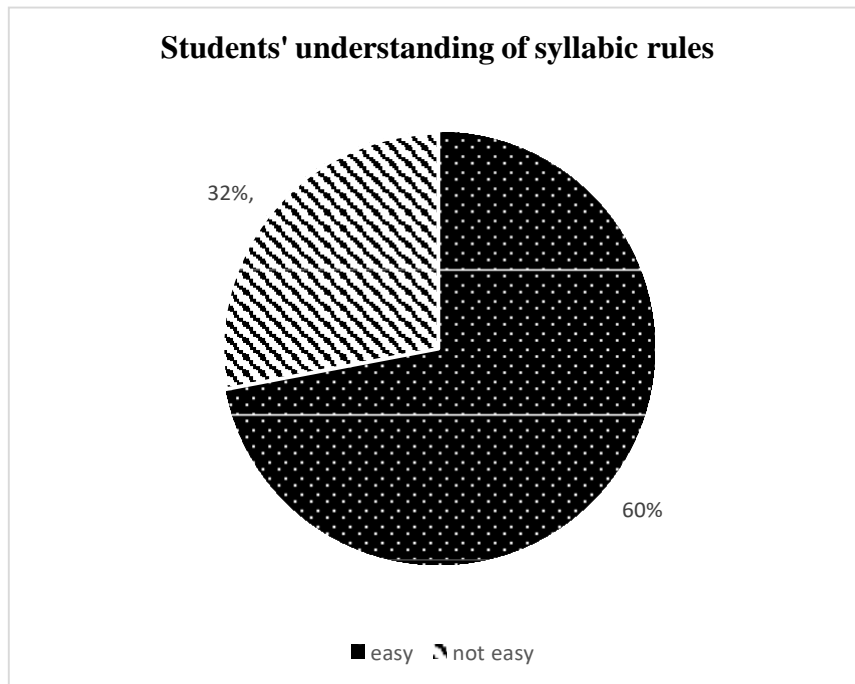


Figure 3: Students' understanding of syllabic rules in adjectives

The comparative and superlative adjectives are formed based on syllables. According to the pie chart in Figure 3, thirty students (60%) mentioned that they do not know or have no clear concept about these two degrees of an adjective. Hence, they find it difficult to form the correct comparative and superlative forms. They apply the forms in random without having concrete knowledge in this grammatical concept. Depending on the number of syllables, the formations of the comparative and superlative vary. Only sixteen students (32%) responded that they could understand the formations of adjectives.

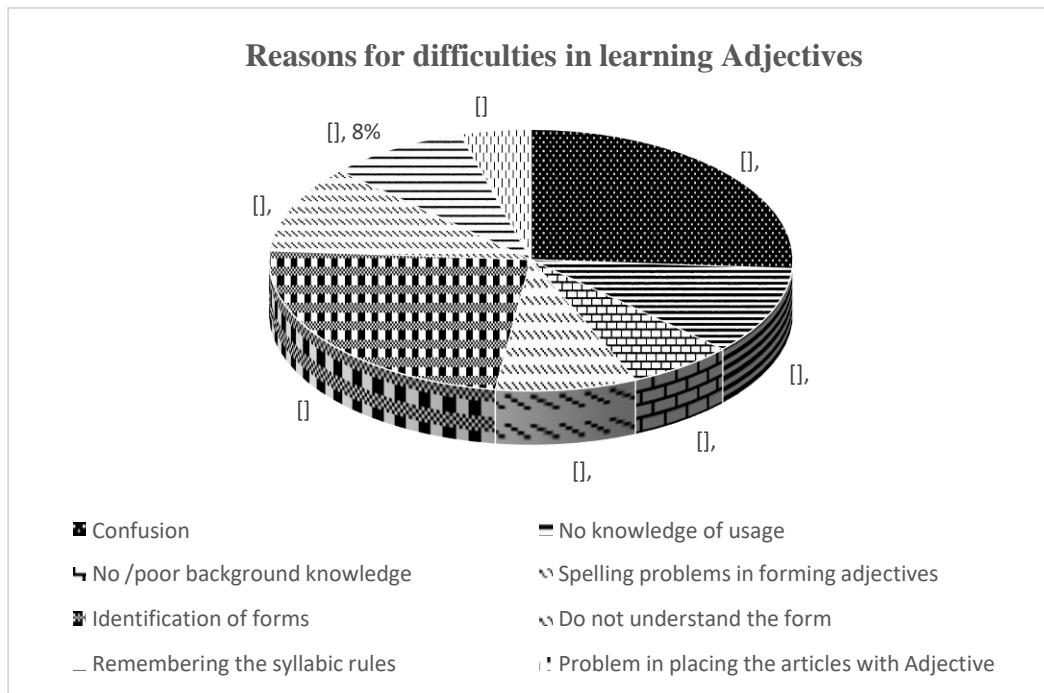


Figure 4: The reasons for the difficulties in using adjectives correctly

Figure 4 indicates the reasons for the students’ problem in using adjectives. For various reasons, the students face challenges in using correct forms of the comparative and superlative adjectives in their writings. According to Figure 4, 24% of the students have confusion; 10% of the students do not know the usage; 6% of the students do not have the background knowledge; 8% of them have spelling problems in writing the adjective forms; 22% of the students have the problems in the identification of the forms of adjectives; 10% of them do not understand the forms; 8% of the students have the problems in remembering the grammar rules; 4% of the students have problems in articles which associate with the forms of the superlative adjectives.

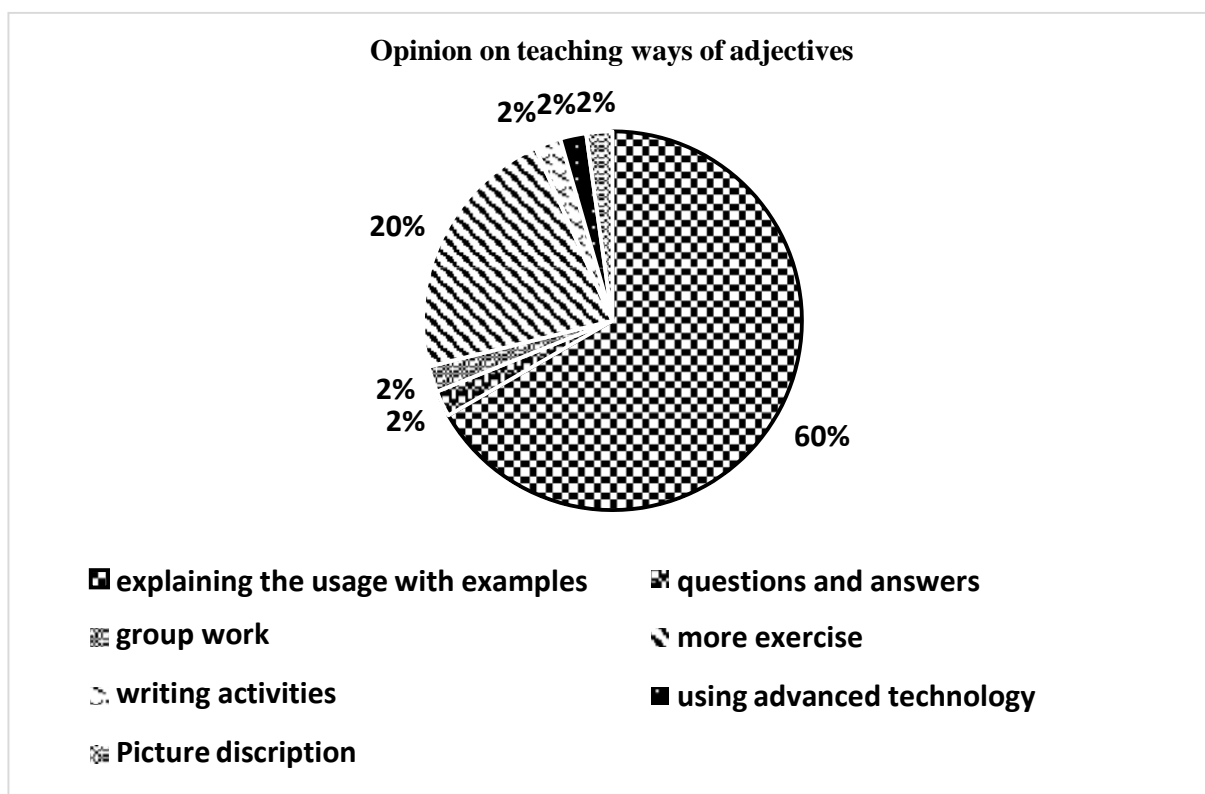


Figure 5: Students opinion on teaching ways of adjectives

The figure 5 shows that 60% students prefer the students' different expectations of teaching methods: explaining the usage with examples method; 2% of the student prefers group work; 20% students prefer writing activities; 2% students prefer picture description method and question, and 2% student prefers answers method; more exercises are necessary (4% students); using advanced technology method is preferred by 2% student.

DISCUSSION

Considering the mal-formed comparative forms, the students use 'than' without understanding and incorporating the correct concept of the grammar; because, based on the principle of the comparative adjective formations, *than* is used to compare two things, but it is observed that the students overused indiscriminately the word *than*. Almost it has become the fossilization. The students wrote it *Vavuniya is a hot place than our town* instead of *Vavuniya is hotter than our town*. This type of error shows that the students do not know that *than* has to be accompanied only with the comparative form, 'hotter.' Strikingly, some students wrote as *more hot* where the adjective *hot* falls in the category of mono-syllabication. The word *more* is a comparative word used in the di- and multi-syllabic words, as in the example: *more beautiful*. Further, many students used *very* or *too* rather than using the superlative or comparative forms with the suffixes *-er*, and *-est*.

This is one of the strategies handled by the students when they lack confidence in any of the grammatical area in writing or any skills at the learning stage of their target language. Moreover, the use of the degrees of the adjectives written by many students is vague, or they hardly aware of the irregular forms of the comparative and superlative forms. As a result, they are confused with the forms of the adjectives in their written applications. Some of the students used the adverb, ‘very’ as **very hotter than...** Such errors indicate that the students deviate from the grammar rules of forming the comparative and superlative adjectives. Notably, in the use of the superlative forms, one crucial fact is drawn that many students wrote omitting the article **the** which is a must in the formation of the superlative as shown in the example: **The tallest tower in the town**. However, surprisingly, the students wrote. *Among them, Vavuniya and Monaragala are most important towns in Srilanka. Therefore, always hottest temperature..* Some students used the adverb **very** with the superlative form, as in the example **very hottest**. In this sentence, the students used the comparative form in the wrong way. It is **good than Vavuniya** climate. The adjective ‘good’ has the irregular comparative and superlative forms as **better** and **the best** but the students without realizing, they used as **good than**, which is an erroneous form.

Such errors and the deviations strongly show that the students do not have a clear concept of the grammar related to the comparative and superlative formations. Most interestingly, some students wrote as *Weather is hot nowadays, but Vavuniya weather is most hot*. The word ‘hot’ is monosyllabic, but the students used the superlative form of **most hot**, which is considered as a wrong form according to the grammar rule.

Some students have problems associated with spellings such as **hoter, hotest**; this exemplifies that they do not know the rules of spelling relevant to the comparative and superlative forms. Students learned the grammar at schools and universities for many years; however, they failed to incorporate the essential grammatical elements correctly in their writings. It is a standard and frequently seen the error in the ESL environment.

The SPSS package was used to find the following results regarding the students’ errors and performance in general.

Table 3 Frequency of errors

		Errors	Performance
N	Valid	50	50
	Missing	0	0
Mean		3.94	2.86

Median	4.00	3.00
Mode	4	2
Std. Deviation	2.014	1.325
Variance	4.058	1.756
Range	6	4
Minimum	1	1
Maximum	7	5

The mean value of the errors (3.94) indicates evidently that the students did not master the comparative and superlative adjectives.

Table 4 Performance of the students

Correct answers	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
5 out of 5	6	12.0	12.0	12.0
4 out of 5	9	18.0	18.0	30.0
3 out of 5	6	12.0	12.0	42.0
2 out of 5	12	24.0	24.0	66.0
1 out of 5	5	10.0	10.0	76.0
0 out of 5	2	4.0	4.0	80.0
not used	10	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Out of these 50 students, ten did not use the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives in their writing. However, twelve students used the adjectives correctly two times out of five, and nine students used four times out of five. Six students used them properly, but another six students correctly used them three times, and the remaining five students used correctly only for once.

Table 5 Performance of the students

Types of errors	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
comparative suffix	9	18.0	18.0	18.0
superlative suffix	14	28.0	28.0	46.0
comparative and superlative	8	16.0	16.0	62.0
omission of articles	13	26.0	26.0	88.0
spelling	6	12.0	12.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

In order to analyze the performance of the students, the researcher has divided the errors into six types such as the comparative suffix, superlative suffix, comparative and superlative suffix, the omission of the definite article ‘the’ in the superlative form and spelling errors such as doubling the consonant (hot hotter* hotter) and changes in the vowels (easy, easier*, easier*) associated with the comparative superlative forms. Out of these 50 students, 26% omitted the article, ‘the’ when they used the superlative form (“biggest town” correct form is “the biggest town”), 18% of students made the spelling errors in doubling the words (e.g., tall-taller: *taler, *biger) and another 18% of students did not have the knowledge of the comparative forms, and 28% of students did not have the knowledge of superlative form. 10% of the students did not have much knowledge regarding both the comparative and the superlative, numbering eight.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results also indicate that the students’ errors occurred mostly in using the irregular adjectives and the multi-syllable adjectives. The students applied the rules of er/est – more/most in a situation where they are inappropriate. Most peculiarly, one student wrote as *dangerousest during the classroom exercise. They extended the monosyllabic rules to the di- or polysyllabic adjectives. Kaçani (2014) found that the use of incorrect comparative and superlative forms of the adjectives is a common mistake of these learners. Students use the adverb 'more/most' before one- and two-syllable adjectives in addition to the use of the comparative or superlative morpheme –er or –est. It is in line with Mohammad (2008) and Kaçani (2014). Further, the result of this study also shows similarity with Ibrahim (cited in Mohammad 2008), who found that the students’ errors in adjectives were in the area of comparison; the students generalized the rules by adding –er and –est to all adjectives indiscriminately. This study

recommends to give awareness of the suffix –er/-est at the primary and secondary levels as the students are at the age of 7-14, their language acquisition device acquires the grammar rules well compared to their later ages like 22 or 23. By that time of learning at their tender age, the students should be introduced and taught the syllables of the words and the syllabic criteria behind the adjective formation. Moreover, students should be given essential linguistic awareness. Since their mother tongue, Tamil and Sinhala have no such visible syllabic based comparative, superlatives variations in forming the adjectives, the error making possibilities are higher in the target language. The curriculum revision is needed at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels to rectify these types of language errors, which are fossilized profoundly, and it is difficult to correct at the tertiary level. At this adult level, it has become a linguistic habit.

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