CHAIN RULE ERRORS IN COMPOSITE FUNCTION DIFFERENTIATION

*Siti Balqis Mahlan[1], Maisurah Shamsuddin[2] and Fadzilawani Astifar Alias[3]
*sitibalqis026@uitm.edu.my[1], maisurah025@uitm.edu.my[2], fadzilawani.astifar@uitm.edu.my[3]

[1,2,3]Jabatan Sains Komputer & Matematik (JSKM),
Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Examining mathematical errors in the application of the chain rule highlights specific areas of student difficulty, such as improper differentiation of composite functions and inconsistent application of the rule. This study investigates the common errors students make in applying the chain rule in calculus. Using a sample of 22 students, the researcher employs an observation to explore the mistakes observed in classroom assessments. The findings reveal that a significant number of students continue to make fundamental errors when performing chain rule calculations. These errors include misidentifying the outer and inner functions, incorrect differentiation of these functions, and mishandling the multiplication of derivatives. The study highlights the need for targeted instructional strategies to address these misconceptions and improve students' proficiency in applying the chain rule. Recommendations for teaching practices and further research are also discussed to mitigate these persistent issues.

Keywords: errors, chain rule, calculus, descriptive analysis, misconceptions

Introduction

The chain rule is a fundamental concept in calculus, used to find the derivative of a composition of functions. Despite its importance, many students and professionals often encounter difficulties and errors when applying this rule. Understanding the types of errors and their sources is crucial for improving mathematical instruction and learning outcomes. Over the past few years, research has focused on identifying common mistakes and misconceptions associated with the chain rule. For example, studies have highlighted that students frequently struggle with recognizing when to apply the chain rule and how to decompose a composite function into its constituent parts correctly. These errors can stem from a lack of conceptual understanding or procedural knowledge, indicating a need for better instructional strategies and tools. In 2019, a study by Tall and Watson explored how cognitive load impacts students' ability to apply the chain rule correctly. They found that high cognitive load can lead to increased errors, suggesting that instructional methods should aim to reduce unnecessary complexity when teaching the chain rule (Tall & Watson, 2019).

Subsequent research by Martinez and Torres (2020) examined the effectiveness of visual aids in teaching the chain rule. Their findings indicated that students who used visual representations, such as function diagrams, made fewer errors compared to those who relied solely on algebraic manipulation.

This highlights the potential benefits of incorporating diverse teaching methods to enhance comprehension (Martinez & Torres, 2020). Further investigations by Nguyen and Park (2021) identified students' misconceptions about the chain rule. They found that many students mistakenly believe that the chain rule is a simple multiplication of derivatives without understanding the need for function composition. This study underscores the importance of addressing fundamental misconceptions in mathematical education (Nguyen & Park, 2021).

A more recent study by Smith and Lee (2022) analysed the impact of digital tools on learning the chain rule. They discovered that interactive software and online resources can significantly reduce errors by providing immediate feedback and allowing students to practice independently. This research suggests that integrating technology into the curriculum could improve mathematical proficiency (Smith & Lee, 2022).

Additionally, Brown and Evans (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of various teaching interventions aimed at reducing errors in calculus. The study synthesizes data from multiple sources to evaluate the effectiveness of different instructional strategies, focusing on both conceptual understanding and procedural proficiency. Key findings suggest that targeted interventions, including explicit instruction, formative assessment, and feedback mechanisms, significantly improve student performance and reduce errors in calculus applications. They concluded that a combination of visual, interactive, and traditional teaching methods was the most effective in minimizing mistakes and enhancing students' understanding of the chain rule.

Chen and Liu (2021) advocate for the use of visual aids, such as function trees and diagrams, to help students better understand the relationship between outer and inner functions. By visually mapping out the differentiation process, students can more easily grasp the need to differentiate each component correctly. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of fostering a deep conceptual understanding of why the chain rule works, rather than just memorizing steps.

Johnson and Taylor (2023) suggest incorporating active learning techniques, such as group problem-solving and peer teaching, to engage students in learning. These methods encourage students to articulate their understanding and correct each other’s mistakes, leading to a deeper comprehension of the chain rule. They also recommend providing timely and specific feedback on assignments and quizzes to address errors promptly and guide students toward the correct methods.

Overall, these studies highlight the persistent challenges students face when learning the chain rule and suggest various strategies for mitigating these difficulties. By understanding the sources of errors and implementing targeted instructional techniques, educators can enhance students' comprehension and application of this essential mathematical concept. Future research should continue to explore innovative teaching methods and tools to further reduce errors and improve learning outcomes in calculus.

Methodology

There were 22 students involved in this study in all. It focuses on students' frequent mathematical errors on assessment (tests). Students were required to answer five questions. According to the observation of each question, the chain rule is one of the topics that obtained a higher mathematical error. Among the mistakes in solving the chain rule discussed in this study are improper differentiation of composite functions., inconsistency in applying the chain rule, and mishandling the multiplication of derivatives.

Here are some of the chain rule questions that have been tested on assessment to the students:

1. $\frac{d}{dx} sin3\mathrm{x}$
2. $\frac{d}{dy} cos3y$
3. $\frac{d}{dx} e^{2x}$
4. $\frac{d}{dt} \sqrt{1-t}$

This question will help the researcher identify common mistakes students make when solving the chain rule.

Result and Discussion

Based on observation, most students make mistakes when solving the differentiation of composite functions. Differentiating composite functions is a fundamental skill in calculus, crucial for accurately solving problems in various fields of science and engineering. However, improper application of the chain rule, essential for differentiating composite functions, often leads to significant errors. In the questions tested on the students, it was found that 3 types of composite functions usually make mistakes, namely Trigonometric Composite Function, Exponential Composite Function, and Polynomial Composite Function.

Table 1 shows the trigonometric error of the composite function. When differentiating sin[g(x)] the chain rule requires that you first take the derivative of sin (which is cos) and then multiply it by the derivative of the inner function g(x). The derivative of cos x is - sin x. When dealing with composite functions, this negative sign must be included and multiplied by the inner function's derivative.

Table 1: Trigonometric Composite Function

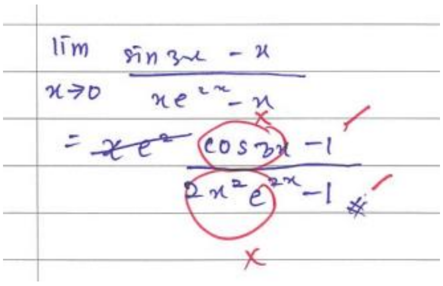
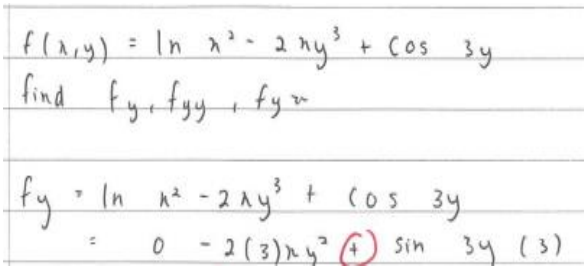
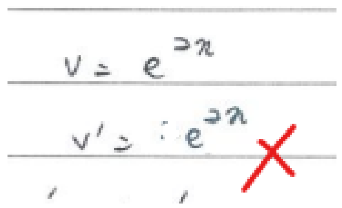
Common Errors	Correct approached
1. Forgetting to apply the chain rule to the inner function 	$\frac{d}{dx}sin3x = cos3x\left(\frac{d}{dx}3x\right) = 3cos3x$
2. Mistaking the derivative of cos x and sin x and vice versa. 	$\frac{d}{dy}cos3y = -sin3y\left(\frac{d}{dy}3y\right) = -3sin3y$

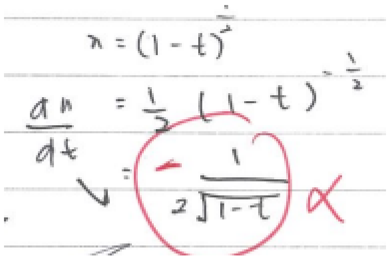
Table 2 shows the error of the exponential composite function. For $e^{g(x)}$, the derivative involves $e^{g(x)}$ itself multiplied by the derivative of the exponent g(x). When differentiating an exponential function like $e^{g(x)}$, students sometimes forget to apply the chain rule to the inner function g(x). They might incorrectly think that the derivative is $e^{g(x)}$.

Table 2: Exponential Composite Function

Common Errors	Correct approached
1. Neglecting to multiply by the derivative of the exponent. 	$\frac{d}{dx}e^{2x} = e^{2x}\left(\frac{d}{dx}2x\right) = 2e^{2x}$

Based on Table 3, mistakes are also often made for the Polynomial Composite Function. When differentiating $[g(x)]^n$, apply the power rule and then multiply by the derivative of the inner function g(x). When dealing with composite polynomials, students might differentiate each term without considering the chain rule for inner functions. For example, in a function like $(3x^2 + 1)^5$, they might ignore the inner polynomial $3x^2 + 1$.

Table 3: Polynomial Composite Function

Common Errors	Correct approached
1. Incorrectly applying power rule without considering the inner function. 	$\frac{d}{dt}\sqrt{1-t} = \frac{d}{dt}(1-t)^{\frac{1}{2}}$ $= \frac{1}{2}(1-t)^{-\frac{1}{2}}\left(\frac{d}{dt}(1-t)\right)$ $= -\frac{1}{2\sqrt{1-t}}$

Conclusion

The recurring errors in applying the chain rule to composite functions highlight a need for improved instructional strategies. By addressing these errors through structured practice, visual aids, and active learning techniques, students can develop a stronger grasp of the chain rule. Understanding and implementing the chain rule is crucial for determining composite functions. Common errors, such as neglecting the derivative of the inner function, can be mitigated through targeted practice and reinforcement of concepts. Implementing the suggested solutions can enhance students' comprehension and application of the chain rule, leading to better outcomes in calculus. Educators can better prepare students to tackle complex differentiation problems by focusing on these common issues and their solutions, strengthening their overall mathematical proficiency.

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