WRITTTEN ERRORS OF FIRST YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the influence of English as a global language, the teaching of English in Vietnam has focused on the learner-centered teaching with the teacher as facilitator who supplies with creative contexts for English language learning. Among the four skills integrated in learning English, writing seems to be the most challenging to students. The study aimed at edentifying lexical, suntactical, morphological, and mechanical errors commited by students at Thai Nguyen College. First year non-English major students were randomly selected from three classes during the school year 2022-2023 to be respondents in the study. In the context of second language teaching and learning, errors in written discourse are normally considered as a mark of inadequacy that have to be deliberately investigated to give rise to their correction and remediation through error analysis which in the light of the study could provide a clear and comprehensive picture on the appropriate remediation and instructional interventions to address the weaknesses of the students.

Keyword : - *written eorrors, non-English major students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the trend of globalization, the increasing importance of English is also acknowledged in university level education in Vietnam. English is now compulsory in universities as mentioned above about 330 hours. To be proficient learner of English, students need to have access to a wide range materials and to be good at integrating the four language skills: speaking listening, reading and writing. This seems to be a reasonable long-term goal. It is difficult to reach this goal as freshmen students receive virtually almost no training in such skills.

Among the four skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing is an important avenue for the learners to cope with their studies by expressing their ideas through the power of the paper and the pen. It is then one of the most difficult skills to be developed because there are components of the English language that are intertwined to come up with a written output. It requires a developed scheme to choose words that would represent best the ideas of the writer. This pronouncement is seconded by several writing analysis such as Negari (2011), Khoii (2011), and Barkaoui (2007). In addition, Tangpermpoon (2008) opined that this is so because language learners need to have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge about the rhetorical organizations, appropriate language use or specific lexicon with which they want to communicate to their readers. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), the difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text. Furthermore, Pearsall and Cunningham (1988) and Emmons (2003) advocated that writing is definitely "hard work".

Taking these empirical observations into account, it is manifestly true that writing presents an uncertain weight of problems to the learners, as it is a skill difficult to become proficient at. Thus, it is a common scenario when teachers discuss students' writing dilemmas and meticulously look into their writing competence.

Written communication is very much different from oral communication. In written discourse, the writer has to be knowledgeable on the morphological, lexical, syntactical and mechanical components of grammar to come up with a good written output or to be considered as proficient in written communication. Any deviation from the rules of the components of grammar would result to errors. If these errors are not taken into consideration, it may affect the development of language competency on the part of the learners.

One of the important aspects of formal language teaching then is knowing how to handle errors. Brown (1987) emphasized that the importance of errors should not be neglected in the teaching process of language.

Conducting error analysis gives a basis for identifying grammatical strengths and weaknesses of students. Ezza (2010) regarded writing as a dilemma among tertiary students and Mourtaga (2010) stressed that Palestinian EFL learners are weak writers. In the study conducted by Jdetawy (2011), it was found out that Arab EFL learners keep committing errors in syntax, morphology, pronunciation, and spelling. Examining the list, majority is classified under the writing skill, with pronunciation as a point of exclusion. Khasawneh (2010) added that the postgraduate department is not spared from this linguistic matter; Arab EFL learners still face a number of problems in their writing tasks. These include vocabulary, grammar, organization of ideas, spelling, and referencing.

With the increasing interest in the field of error analysis and the lingering serious writing quandary, the academic side of the Gulf region has been drawn closer to them while recognizing them as indispensable units for language study. An analysis of the errors in students' written outputs is highly necessary to obtain an acceptable understanding of how to reduce such errors with the hope of improving their use of English language and to eventually produce teaching and learning materials that can be utilized in achieving both ends.

It is in the light of the aforementioned issues why this study was conducted to find out what types of errors are derived from the Vietnamese students and what feasible enhanced writing program can be proposed to help address the students' writing problems.

2. SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The study made use of descriptive-correlational research design. To elicit data, first year college students were randomly selected from three classes during the school year 2022-2023. The students were given questionnaire to fill out for their profile. They were also asked to write a short composition to answer a given question. This served as their output in the controlled writing. For the second composition, the students were free to choose a topic to write. This served as their output in free writing. Data were analyzed using the mean standard deviation, frequency count and percentage, and weighted mean.

3. FINDINGS

The following are the findings of the study:

3.1. Students' profiles

Table 1 presents the profile of the students according to their age and sex. As indicated in the table, majority of them with 77.8 percent are 18 years old, while 8.9 percent of them are in 17 years old. The rest are older, with 6.7 percent at age 20 years old and 4.4 percent has age of 22 years old. The mean age is 18.29 with a standard deviation of 1.10, indicating that the students are at the right age for first year level in college.

As regards their sex, 10 or 22.2 percent of the students are males and 35 or 77.8 percent of them are females with total of 45 participants who are first year college students. The findings reveal that most of the students are dominated by females as reflected in the frequency of 35 or 77.8 percent.

Table 1. Profiles of the college students in terms of age and sex.

Age	Frequency (n = 45)	Percent
17.0	4	8.9
18.0	35	77.8
20.0	3	6.7
21.0	1	2.2
22.0	2	4.4
Mean Age = 18.29 SD = 1.10		
Sex	**Frequency (n = 45)**	**Percent**
Male	10	22.2
Female	35	77.8

3.2. Linguistic Errors Committed by Students

Morphological Errors

Students were asked to write a composition using both controlled and free composition. Table 2 shows the morphological linguistic errors of the students which include errors in the use of verb, pronoun, noun, and preposition.

There are five variables which are apparent in the controlled writing composition likewise in the free writing composition: wrong verb tense, singular verb with plural verb and vice versa, incorrect form of verb phrase and vice versa, use of singular noun for plural and vice versa and wrong use of preposition.

As shown in the written compositions of the students, the most common error in verb tense is the will structure and the do/did structure. In the *will structure*, the future signal will is paired with the past form of the verb. The following are the examples to this error:

  - *I will never stopped;*
  - *I will asked.*

In the *did structure*, the students connect the past form of the verb to did signal. The following exemplify this error:

  - *I didn't attended an interesting party long time ago,*
  - *How did you met a famoust person?*

The *do structure* is just like the *did structure*. The students add the base form of the verb to signal do such as the examples that follow :

  - *Who do he works for?*
  - *Whatever he do and say.*

The second highest error in the morphological linguistic error is error in the singular verb with plural verb and vice versa. The following are example for this error:

  - *I asks him,*
  - *the questions that bothers him.*

Also, the following are examples of do + singular verb structure:

  - *She doesn't knows the needs of others,*
  - *Does he likes?*

It can be observed from the data, that the wrong verb tense and singular verb with plural verb and vice versa are the common morphological mistakes of the students both in controlled writing or free writing.

This result has something to do with the interference of the first language notion of the students when they are exposed with a second language. The verb formation in the English language, which is the second language used in the school has a great difference with the verb formation of their first language which is their dialect or the national language which is Vietnamese. In English language, changes in verb tense occur in different ways. Regular verbs differ with the irregular verb in the shift of tense.

The tense in Vietnamese will only take three inflections such as the past, the present and the future. The inflection is the same regardless of the number of person and this is simpler than in English. If it is in English, the verb takes many inflections. The number of person is considered in the present tense because the verb has to agree with the number of person, its spelling also changes in the simple past and in the perfect tenses. For example: The verb "*mua* – means *buy*"

  - In the present tense: Tôi *mua* thức ăn hàng ngày, nhưng anh ấy chỉ *mua* thức ăn 1 tuần 1 lần. (Means: I *buy* food everyday, but he *buys* food once per week.)
  - In the past tense: Hôm qua, tôi *đã mua* thức ăn ở siêu thị, nhưng anh ấy lại *mua* thức ăn ở nhà hàng. (Means: Yesterday, I *bought* food in the supermarket, but he *bought* it in a restaurant.)

These inflections in verb then give confusion to the students, since the characteristics of verbs in Vietnamese are different with the characteristics of verb formation in English.

Finally, the least errors of students are the use of *which* and *who* and confusion on the use of *its* and *it's*. ESL learners do not find these variables difficult since there is explicit difference on how they are used.

Table 2. Morphological errors committed by the students.

Errors	Controlled Writing			Free Writing		
	No.	Mean	SD	No.	Mean	SD
Wrong Verb Tense	45	2.96	1.52	45	2.44	1.47
Singular verb with plural verb and vice versa	44	2.30	0.76	41	1.59	0.50
Incorrect form of verb phrase and verbal	42	1.74	0.70	33	1.18	0.39
The use of wrong case of pronoun	32	1.19	0.40	15	1.00	0.00
Disagreement of pronouns with	33	1.46	0.56	20	1.05	0.22

their antecedents						
Confusion of its and it's	12	1.00	0.00	6	1.00	0.00
Use of which for who and vice versa	5	1.00	0.00	3	1.00	0.00
Use of the singular noun for plural and vice versa	35	1.60	0.60	25	1.24	0.44
Omission of the Article	10	1.70	0.95	7	1.43	0.53
Use of wrong article	28	1.25	0.44	18	1.00	0.00
Wrong use of preposition	39	1.51	0.56	26	1.12	0.33
Omission of preposition	15	1.00	0.00	10	1.00	0.00
Total Morphological Errors	45	13.22	3.52	45	8.02	2.13

Lexical Errors

Table 3 shows the lexical errors of the students. The lexical errors include errors in diction which are word shortening, wrong choice of word and lack of precision of choice of words. Students are not aware that a word also agrees with the level of the person they are referring to. This is shown on the following lexical errors of the students on the wrong choice of words:

- **I *want* to know the answer *straight* from him;**
- **I would like to *assess* him.**

The person they are referring to in their composition is Uncle Ho, the great leader of Vietnam. The students use words which they think can be applied to any persons. They are not aware that there is a modification of words depending on the level of person they are addressing.

Another group of lexical error of the students on wrong choice of words is on literal usage of words such as on the following examples:

- **to *refill* the hunger of the people;**
- **scandal *bloom*;**
- **I want to *mingle* with her ideas.**

The given examples show that the students thought in their first language then transferred it in English.

The students are not aware that if there is modification in lexicon, there is a change in language. As Aronoff (1989) stated, modification reflects cultural changes that introduces novel objects and notions. In English language, there are many word formation processes that can be employed in response to the need for new lexical items. With this, ESL learner finds it difficult since English language culture is quite different with their first language.

Aside from this, as revealed in Table 3 (reading materials at home) most of the reading materials of the respondents at home are related only to their school work. It is then implied that lack of exposure of the students to the ESL culture is one of the reasons why they commit more errors in lexicon.

The common lexical error of the students is in consonance with their self-assessed writing difficulties that fall under lexical errors which is *wrong choice of words*. This again proves that the students know what and where their weaknesses in writing are.

The second lexical error of the students is on *word shortening*. The following are the examples of errors of the students on word shortening: **without to *w/out*, and to &, because to *bec*, etcetera to *etc*,** and **example to Ex.** Based on the word shortening mistakes of the students, the shortening that they committed can be attributed to the practices of some teachers when they write on the board using those shortened words. The students thought that those shortened words are acceptable in the written communication since they are also used by the teachers.

Table 3. Lexical errors committed by the students.

Errors	Controlled Writing			Free Writing		
	No.	Mean	SD	No.	Mean	SD
Word shortening	40	2.10	0.96	36	1.47	0.61
Wrong choice of word	39	2.74	1.79	39	2.00	1.38
Lack of precision of choice of words	36	1.86	0.80	29	1.38	0.49

Total Lexical Errors	41	5.78	3.31	40	3.84	2.16

Syntatical Errors

Table 4 shows the syntactical linguistic errors of the students. Syntactical errors include error in incompleteness, arrangement of parts, and errors in the use of conjunction.

The data show that most errors of the students fall in *incompleteness, subordinate clause for sentences and missing word, subject or verb.*

Most of the sentences of the students start with *because, if,* and *for that.* The errors in incompleteness maybe attributed to the exposure of the students to technology which they have at home such as cellular phone. With the use of this technology, sentence completeness is not so much observed particularly in SMS, wherein they greatly affect sentence structure. The students are already affected with the way they communicate using the cellular phone when they write text through SMS and mostly they often use code switching of code mixing. They carry on this practice when they already write composition.

Similarly, when they communicate in oral conversation wherein the speaker may not complete the idea in words what wants to convey since s/he can make gestures to substantiate the missing words. The students fail to reconcile that in formal written communication, there are elliptical sentences that are completed with gestures and facial expressions and in texting there is a special way of expressing ideas in the shortest possible words or sometimes, it is the rule of euphony that prevails in texting. Hence,
students fail to realize that written communication particularly a formal written communication is different from oral communication and text communication.

Another contributory factor on the errors of the students on incompleteness is the self-initiated writing activities of the students. Their writing activities include: texting, writing diaries, writing poems, and writing stories. It is noted that the started writing activities of the students are written activities that allow students to write the way they want which may deviate from the writing norms of formal written composition.

Table 4. Syntactical errors committed by the students.

Errors	Controlled Writing			Free Writing		
	No.	Mean	SD	No.	Mean	SD
Subordinate clause of sentences	34	1.85	0.74	31	1.29	0.46
Phrase for sentences	27	1.52	0.51	19	1.26	0.45
Missing word, subject or verb	38	2.11	1.06	33	1.36	0.49
Wrong word order	24	1.42	0.58	16	1.13	0.34
Dangling modifier	15	1.33	0.49	11	1.00	0.00
Error in the use of conjunction	20	1.35	0.49	15	1.00	0.00
Total Syntactic Error	42	6.52	2.66	42	3.76	2.06

Mechanical Errors

Table 5 shows the mechanical errors of the students. The mechanical errors include errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

Most of the errors of the students on spelling fall under *confusion on the use of single or double letter such as: possitive, thankfull, especialy, promissing, bussiness.*

The errors which the students committed show that they are confused when to use single letter or double letter or they use word the way it is said and they do not consider anymore the spelling.

It is also noted that spelling is one of the self-assessed writing difficulties of the students. This shows again that the students are aware of their writing difficulties. This could not be attributed to exposure of the students in texting since the error in spelling is not on shortening of words but on confusion on the use of single and double letter or on the pronunciation of the words.

 This finding is similar to the result of Ngangbam's (2016) study where the highest error rate was found on the spelling mistakes committed by students of an English language class. Moreover, many researchers were conducted in Arabic context to give light to spelling errors; these include Al-bakri (1998) who conducted a study entitled *Error analysis of spelling mistakes committed by English majors at Yarmouk University* and Al-Busaidi and Ai-Saqqa (2015) who wrote *English Spelling Errors Made by Arabic-Speaking Students.* As Burns (1999) emphasized, teachers should focus on the mechanics of writing to create good writers.

Table 5. Mechanical errors committed by the students.

Errors	Controlled Writing			Free Writing		
	No.	Mean	SD	No.	Mean	SD
Omission or improper use of period	14	1.36	0.50	13	1.00	0.00
Omission or wrong use of question mark	11	1.00	0.00	8	1.00	0.00
Omission or wrong point of exclamation point	7	1.00	0.00	4	1.00	0.00
Omission or wrong use of comma	18	1.39	0.61	17	1.06	0.24
Omission or wrong use of apostrophe	9	1.11	0.33	13	1.15	0.38
Omission or improper use of colon or semicolon	8	1.13	0.35	10	1.00	0.00
At the beginning of the sentence	10	1.20	0.42	8	1.00	0.00
In the title	8	1.00	0.00	11	1.00	0.00
Wrong use of capital letters	14	1.07	0.27	22	1.14	0.35
Wrong spelling	34	1.59	0.61	29	1.24	0.44
Total Mechanical Errors	39	3.80	3.03	38	3.31	2.82

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the findings of the study, it can be concluded that students at Thai Nguyen College have linguistic errors prevalent in writing, may it be free-writing or controlled writing. However, error analysis shed a difference in the students' writing performance as they commit more linguistic errors in writing when they are controlled than when they are given freedom to write. They heavily and persistently commit mechanical and morphological errors more specifically on spelling and grammatical errors. This error persistence is mainly because of the attribution they give to the similarity of the English language to their own language, hence yielding easily to the influence of their mother tongue.

In the context of second language teaching and learning, errors in written discourse are normally considered as a mark of inadequacy that have to be deliberately investigated to give rise to their correction and remediation through error analysis which in the light of the study could provide a clear and comprehensive picture on the appropriate remediation and instructional interventions to address the weaknesses of the students.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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