

An analysis of errors of English letters written by first-year English major students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment

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Abstract: This study aims to identify and analyze the common errors found in the English letters written by first-year English major students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment. The analysis focuses on errors at both the sentence and word levels, such as punctuation, subject-verb agreement, articles, and spelling. The data were collected from 24 written letters, and the findings reveal that most errors stem from interlingual interference, intralingual interference, limited knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, and carelessness. The study provides pedagogical implications for improving students' writing skills, emphasizing the need to address both linguistic knowledge and writing habits.

Keywords: Error analysis, English letter writing, first-year students, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Writing in English is often considered one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners, particularly among the four core language skills. In the context of Vietnamese higher education, first-year English major students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment (HUNRE) face significant challenges when learning to write formal letters. Despite being introduced to letter writing in their first semester, many students struggle with grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use, and organizing their ideas effectively. These difficulties lead to incoherent and unclear writings, as students lack sufficient opportunities to practice writing, which is crucial for developing proficiency.

Research has consistently shown that errors in writing are common among EFL learners and that understanding the sources of these errors can inform better pedagogical approaches. Given this context, this study aims to analyze the errors found in the English letters written by first-year English major students enrolled in the Reading and Writing 1 course during the 2023–2024 academic year at HUNRE. The study seeks to provide insights that can help educators refine their teaching practices and enable students to improve their writing skills.

2. Literature review

2.1. Error Analysis (EA)

Error Analysis (EA) examines language forms that deviate from the target language. Corder (1967)

categorizes EA into theoretical, which explores how learners acquire a language, and applied, which aims to enhance learning effectiveness. EA involves five stages: collecting, identifying, describing, explaining, and evaluating errors. Ultimately, EA helps teachers understand error patterns and guide students toward more accurate language use.

2.2. Sources of Errors

Errors generally stem from two main sources: interlingual and intralingual interference (Richards, 1974). Interlingual errors occur when learners apply rules from their native language to the target language. Intralingual errors arise from learners overgeneralizing target language rules based on incomplete knowledge.

2.3. Previous studies

The recent studies provide a foundational understanding of common errors in EFL learners' writing and form the basis for identifying, analyzing, and addressing errors in the present study. Lin (2002) highlighted four key areas where errors occur most frequently: sentence structure, verb forms, sentence fragments, and word usage. This framework for analyzing the grammatical and structural issues in writing provides a clear basis for categorizing errors made by first-year English major students at HUNRE.

Al-Khasawneh's (2010) focus on vocabulary, organization, grammar, and spelling challenges supports the comprehensive nature of error analysis

at both the sentence and word levels. His findings suggest that EFL learners may struggle with organizing their ideas and using accurate vocabulary, both of which are critical components of coherent letter writing.

Liu (2013) draws attention to the significant influence of first-language transfer, particularly when learners face difficulties with articles, word order, and punctuation. This study demonstrates that errors in writing are not only due to language interference but also due to incomplete mastery of the target language itself, referred to as intralingual interference.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research questions

The present study aims at finding the answers to the following questions:

1. *What types of errors are found in first-year students' English letters at HUNRE?*
2. *What are the sources of errors?*

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 24 first-year English major students at an English-majored class at HUNRE. They are 3 males and 21 females. They have learned English as a foreign language for at least seven years.

3.3. Data collection procedures

All 24 participants were given a 30-minute writing assignment requiring them to write a complaint letter about a product they purchased online, with a minimum word count of 100 words.

3.5. Data analysis

All pieces of the student's written work were marked by the researcher. Each sentence was examined word by word. Each error was recorded according to its type.

4. Findings

The analysis of errors in first-year English major students' writing at HUNRE reveals several patterns of mistakes, particularly at the sentence and word levels. Sentential errors commonly included punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and capitalization. For instance, students often omitted or added punctuation incorrectly, as seen in the example: *"Last week I bought a camera at your company"* (corrected: *"Last week, I bought a camera at your company"*). Similarly, subject-verb agreement issues were frequent, such as *"I have to say that this headset*

don't work" (corrected: *"I have to say that this headset doesn't work"*). Careless capitalization was another common mistake, for example, *"I bought this camera on saturday"* (corrected: *"I bought this camera on Saturday"*).

At the word level, students frequently misused articles, prepositions, and word choices. For example, the sentence *"Shop gave me size 37, and it did not fit me"* should be corrected to *"The shop gave me size 37, and it did not fit me."* Spelling mistakes were also prominent, such as *"Curently, this camera is not working"* (corrected: *"Currently, this camera is not working"*).

The main sources of these errors were identified as interlingual interference, intralingual interference, limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and carelessness. Interlingual interference, where students transferred Vietnamese language structures into English, was a major cause, as in *"My name is Truong Quyen, who purchased online a shoes from your shop"* (corrected: *"My name is Truong Quyen, who purchased a pair of shoes from your shop"*). Intralingual errors occurred when students overgeneralized English rules, leading to mistakes such as *"Please exchange another crate for me, if you can't please refund my money"* (corrected: *"Please exchange another crate for me. If you can't, please refund my money"*). Limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge contributed to these mistakes, while carelessness, such as forgetting capitalization or spelling rules, further exacerbated the issue. Raising students' awareness of these errors and focusing on language instruction targeting both grammatical and structural differences between English and Vietnamese would help reduce these mistakes.

5. Pedagogical implication

The findings from this project offer several pedagogical implications for improving writing instruction. Learners' errors serve as key indicators of their language learning progress and can reveal serious writing issues that need to be addressed. Teachers can utilize these errors as opportunities to help students refine their writing skills. The first language plays a significant role in language development, influencing students' writing habits both positively and negatively. Therefore, it is

essential to evaluate the differences and similarities between the learner's first language and the target language. The study also highlights the importance of grammar and vocabulary knowledge in producing coherent writing. The analysis suggests that a lack of proficiency in these areas is the primary barrier preventing students from writing effectively in English. Consequently, well-structured courses that focus on common errors in grammar and vocabulary can substantially improve students' writing skills. Finally, students' carelessness, which often leads to avoidable mistakes, should be addressed in English writing lessons to encourage more accurate and thoughtful writing.

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4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1. Conclusions

The data that collected from T-test has clarified the impacts of the out-of-class activities on students' speaking skills. The benefits were shown through the marks compared in T-test. Before applying the out-of-class activities, the low scores were much, the high scores were little. However, after applying the out-of-class activities, the problem became different because of the increase in average marks and good marks and the decrease in bad marks. The implementation of the out-of-class activities has proved to make positive.

Based on the findings of the students' surveys, this activity received positive replies, and they appreciated speaking courses using out-of-class activities because they could communicate their thoughts, were daring to talk, and could practice English well. Furthermore, several students said that they had overcome their fear of speaking since they had spent a significant amount of time just speaking in the target language.

According to the research results, students have received a lot of positive results, providing interesting experiences, such as teacher-student interaction, collaborative work, discussion, and teacher evaluation. It can be argued that being guided through the use of the out-of-class activities can help students learn English faster, especially

with more time to study theory and practice revision exercises. and build for students the spirit of independent research in knowledge compared to normal classroom teaching methods. Therefore, the writer concludes that the out-of-class activities have a significant positive effect on the speaking ability of students at Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry.

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