

# Several prevalent errors in the English paragraph writing of the first-year students specializing in English Language Studies at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University

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**Abstract:** *Enhancing writing skills and minimizing errors during the writing process remain a formidable challenge for English language educators. The present study investigates the common errors encountered by English Language majors at Thai Nguyen University's School of Foreign Languages in their paragraph writing assignments, collected during mid-term and final examinations. An in-depth analysis of 80 essays by first-year students specializing in English Language revealed that the students frequently committed errors related to grammar, punctuation, spelling, and native language interference.*

**Keywords:** *Error Analysis; Writing Skills, Grammatical Errors; Causes; Solutions.*

## 1. Introduction

In the context of learning foreign languages in general, and English in particular, among the four basic skills - Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing - students often find Writing to be the most challenging, especially for first-year students. Good Writing skills enable students to communicate messages clearly and accurately. In reality, it takes a long process for learners to master grammatical knowledge, accumulate a rich vocabulary, and from there, write well and fluently. Hence, students often cannot avoid making mistakes in Writing. This article will focus on identifying and detecting errors in the writings of first-year students majoring in English language. Based on the teaching experience of the English Writing 2, the author observes that although students majoring in English Language are aware of the importance of writing skills for their studies and future careers, many do not achieve high grades or the desired level of proficiency. Some students fail to meet the Writing skill requirements in the English course final exams at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University.

This article aims to analyze the errors commonly made by the first-year students majoring in English Language when writing paragraphs, to identify the most frequent errors in writing, and to propose solutions. Accordingly, the research seeks to answer two questions: 1) What are the most common errors

made by first-year students when writing short paragraphs?; 2) What are the causes of these writing errors among students?

## 2. Concept of Error

According to the Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1992), a “mistake” occurs due to the learner’s lack of attention or carelessness. Such mistakes can be self-corrected if pointed out. On the other hand, “errors” result from incorrect language use by the learner, who often does not realize what and how they are mistaken, hence cannot self-correct [Lenon, 1994]. Moreover, errors are considered a natural part of acquiring a foreign language. Therefore, errors should not be viewed negatively in the foreign language learning process.

### 2.1. Identifying and Classifying Errors

Identifying and classifying errors is essential. Errors tend to recur, and learners often do not or find it difficult to recognize them [Jame, 1998]. Common errors in writing include: omission of words, addition of words, substitution of words, and word order errors. James (1998), types of errors include: grammatical errors (prepositions, articles, reported speech, singular/plural, adjectives, relative clauses, irregular verbs, tense, and possessive adjectives); syntactic errors (conjunctions, sentence structures, nouns, pronouns, and word order); word choice errors; and sentence construction errors (punctuation, capitalization, spelling, etc.).

## 2.2. Some Studies on Errors

Numerous researchers globally and domestically have analyzed errors made by students in their writings. Nuruzzaman et al. (2016) studied 90 essays written by non-language majors from three universities: the College of Medicine, College of Computer Science, and College of Architecture at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The research data consisted of paragraphs that students were asked to write, ranging from 100-150 words. Employing a quantitative methodology combined with Corder's (1967) analysis approach, the study identified and described various error categories, revealing that grammatical errors were the most common.

## 2.3. Content

### \*Methodology

The data comprised 100 paragraph writings ranging from 70-100 words by first-year language majors at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, completed as part of their English course at level 3/6 during the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. These writings were mid-term tests of the students in the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. This was complemented by discussions with the teachers directly involved in teaching and our teaching experience.

The error analysis was conducted in five steps according to Corder (1967): (1) collection of writings; (2) identification of errors; (3) description of errors; (4) explanation of errors; (5) evaluation of errors. Specifically, each paragraph was examined word by word, sentence by sentence to identify the types and number of errors. Then, the errors were categorized into Corder's (1978) error categories including grammatical errors, lexical errors, semantic errors, and structural (sentence) errors. Finally, the frequency of student errors was calculated in percentages.

### \*Survey Results

#### *Errors Uncovered in the Paragraph Writing of Students*

The analysis revealed a variety of errors made by students in their short paragraph writings. Table 1 below displays the types of errors, their quantity, and the percentage of common errors made by students.

#### *Error Categories, Types, Quantities, and Percentages*

Grammatical errors such as incorrect tense usage, word order errors, incorrect use of noun forms, relative clause errors, subject-verb agreement errors,

and sentence structure errors were identified. Lexical errors and some punctuation and spelling mistakes were also noted. Errors due to native language interference were observed.

According to the statistics, grammatical errors were the most prevalent (58.9%), with tense errors constituting 12.7%; word order and noun usage errors were 14.3%; subject-verb agreement errors were 23.3%; errors in using relative pronouns and sentence structure had similar rates (4.2% for relative clauses and 5.4% for sentence structure errors). Additionally, form-related errors were present, such as spelling errors (11%), incorrect capitalization or omitted capital letters (7.5%), and punctuation errors (6.8%). Errors due to native language interference accounted for 15.8%.

### 1. Inappropriate Tense Usage

It is essential to use the correct verb tense according to the context.

Example:

(Incorrect) I went to my school yesterday and we play soccer.

(Correct) I went to my school yesterday and we played soccer.

(Incorrect) Everyday I get up at 7 a.m. Then I had breakfast with my family.

(Correct) Everyday I get up at 7 a.m. Then I have breakfast with my family.

### 2. Lack of Subject-Verb Agreement

The most frequent error among English learners might be the mismatch between the subject and the verb. The verb must agree with the subject in a sentence.

Example:

(Incorrect) Reading books make me broaden my horizon.

(Correct) Reading books makes me broaden my horizon.

(Incorrect) 5 dollars are not too expensive to buy this book.

(Correct) 5 dollars is not too expensive to buy this book

### 3. Errors stemming from native language interference

Errors stemming from native language interference are a common challenge faced by learners of a second language. This phenomenon occurs when the grammatical structures, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions of a learner's first language influence their use of the second language,

leading to mistakes that are not present in the target language. For example, a learner might directly translate phrases or apply the syntax of their native language to English, resulting in awkward or incorrect constructions. Such errors can manifest in various aspects of language use, including verb tense and aspect, article usage, prepositions, and sentence structure. Overcoming these errors requires awareness and understanding of the differences between the languages, as well as targeted practice and exposure to authentic language use in the second language. Addressing native language interference is crucial for achieving fluency and accuracy in a second language.

### **Causes**

Several factors contribute to the common errors encountered by students in learning the Writing skill in English among specialized students at Thai Nguyen University. Some main reasons include:

Lack of solid basic grammatical knowledge: “Not having a firm grasp of basic grammatical knowledge poses many challenges for students in using tenses, structures, and style when writing a short English communication letter,” (Teacher’s opinion).

Influence of the native language, leading to word usage errors. These errors often occur when the writer does not fully understand the meaning of a word in its context or misidentifies the word form like noun, adjective, adverb, or verb. Therefore, when looking up a word in the dictionary, it is advisable to use an English-English dictionary, not just an English-Vietnamese one, to understand the correct usage.

Due to limited vocabulary and lack of knowledge about English culture, “students tend to translate word by word instead of using English sentence structures in their writings. This makes the writing lengthy, incoherent, and sometimes causes the reader to misunderstand the writer’s ideas,” (Teacher’s opinion).

### **Recommendations**

Students should be motivated to enhance their writing skills through engaging with diverse online platforms. Utilizing English grammar correction websites or apps is a savvy strategy to optimize your learning process. Here are some reputable sites you should consider for correcting grammatical errors:

#### 1. Ginger

For those seeking an English grammar correction tool, Ginger is an indispensable resource. Available

as a browser extension, it’s easily accessible. To check for grammatical errors, simply enter text, and the site will highlight mistakes in your sentences. It provides markers to indicate grammatical errors in various contexts, helping you understand and correct them.

#### \*Grammarly

Similar to Ginger, Grammarly features a convenient utility that checks grammar as you type. What sets this website apart is its accuracy in identifying grammatical errors. With a user-friendly interface, Grammarly ensures user satisfaction through its simplicity. Errors are marked in red, with suggestions provided to correct grammar in context, making it an invaluable tool for improving written English.

#### \*PaperRater

PaperRater is an excellent tool that supports online error checking and correction directly on the website. With its visually appealing and user-friendly interface, learners can easily navigate and quickly rectify grammatical errors. This enables users to understand the deficiencies in their essays or communicative texts and make necessary improvements.

### **3. Conclusion**

This article aimed to identify the various errors frequently encountered by first-year English Language majors at the School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University, particularly in their paragraph writing, a common task in mid-term or final exams. We have cataloged these errors and their frequencies. The findings reveal that students commonly make four types of errors: grammatical errors, punctuation and spelling mistakes, and errors influenced by their native language. The outcome of this study hopes to contribute to the error remediation efforts for students.

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