

COMMON ERRORS MADE BY THE THIRD-YEAR MAJOR STUDENTS AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY WHEN WRITING ENGLISH ACADEMIC ESSAY

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Abstract: *The goal of this study is to identify and categorize common errors in academic essays for third-year English major students at Hanoi Open University when writing two categories of academic essays: cause-effect and argument. Therefore, the aim has been to identify those difficulties from an error analysis standpoint and identify the sources underlying them. An analysis of a written corpus of fifty students' written essays was thoroughly conducted. Types of errors were categorized, and the factors that contributed to them were analyzed. The findings showed that the most frequent types of errors made by the participants were: 1) Adverb clauses, (2) Sentence structure, (3) - Word choice, (4) Relative clauses, (5) Verb form, (6) Singular/plural noun, (7) Parallel structure, (8) Article, (9) Preposition, (10) Pronoun, (11) Style, (12) Subject-verb harmony, (13) Conjunction, (14) Comparative structure. On that approach, the findings propose implications for students to minimize their writing errors and improve their English academic essay writing skills.*

Keywords: *errors, third-year students, types, implications, English academic essay writing*

I. Introduction

English writing skills, particularly academic essay writing skills, are always huge challenges for students, including language majors. The most essential reason is that throughout the writing process, students must combine and apply a wide range of knowledge in various language categories and skills, including understanding of grammatical structure and semantics. According to Weigle [17], the writing process is the process of reconstructing ideas, opinions, and relationships in the form of language, in

a specific structure and sequence; and this reconstruction process is frequently interrupted and affected when the writer has to look for a suitable structure and vocabulary. As a result, for students learning English as a second language, this process will be significantly more challenging when they lack both language knowledge and language competence. Essay writing skills are required in the curriculum of third-year students at English Faculty, Hanoi Open University. In fact, third-year students' writing skills are inadequate. According to our early

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survey, more than 60% of third-year English majors were unable to compose two academic essays: cause-and-effect and argument. This immediately impacts their test results, and more significantly, if they do not rectify common errors in their writing, a negative habit of writing skills will be created, which will influence students studying for higher English programs who are struggling with the essay writing process in the long run.

For the above reasons, we can conclude that study is required to evaluate the types of errors in various types of academic essays in the writings of third-year students at English Faculty, Hanoi Open University. Following that, we provide several recommendations to assist students in improving their writing skills and limiting errors in their writing throughout the following English courses.

II. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition of the writing essay

Despite using different words and sequences, most scholars (Beasson [1]; or Brown [5]) agree that writing is a complex process involving many elements: the writer's writing process (choosing ideas, making outlines, drafts, etc.), readers, writing purposes, word choice, article structure, grammar, content, writing techniques, and so on (mechanics: words, spelling). To write a good essay,

Kroll [11] says that a **cause - effect essay** explains the relationship between an event and its consequences, or between actions and results. There are two kinds of cause - effect essays. In one method, the focus is on the causes of something. This is called the **focus -on- causes** method. Essays that focus on causes answer the question *Why does something happen?*

In the second method the focus is on the effects or results of a cause. This is called the **focus -on -effects** method, Essays that focus on effective answer to the question *What happens when or if?*

Also, Reil [16] thinks that an argumentative essay is sometimes called a persuasive essay. This kind of essay expresses an opinion about a controversial issue. As the writer, you must take a position and persuade the reader to agree with your opinion by using strong, logical reasons to support your argument. Explain that argument essays are organized in the same overall manner as the other essays in the book: they begin with an introductory paragraph, followed by the body paragraphs, which discuss the pros and cons of the thesis statement, and end with a conclusion. Point out that the body contains a counterargument and refutation, which can strengthen the writer's argument. Provide students with an editorial from a newspaper and have them identify the parts of the essay according the definition in their book.

2.2. An overview of error analysis

2.2.1. Defintion of errors/ mistakes

Olsen [14] thinks a mistake refers to a performance error in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly whereas an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner. Reil [16] reveals the criterion that: A mistake can be self-corrected, but an error cannot. Errors are 'systematic,' i.e., likely to regularly happen while mistakes are defined as the 'inconsistent deviation.' In agreement with the same view, Weigle [17] as cited in Andrian (2015) explains that a mistake is less serious since it is the retrieval that is faulty, not the knowledge.

2.2.2. Steps to identify errors

There are some rules for error identification. First, you should be well-versed with the parts of speech, such as adverb, adjectives, conjunctions, nouns, interjections. Second, Make sure the sentence is grammatically appropriate, where the **subject must agree with the verb.** Next, there should be no parallelism within the sentence. Various words in the sentence should follow the same concept where all are written in the same tense. Also, a modifier is something which should come after subject as it modifies the subject. The sentence can be wrong if the modifiers are placed before the subject. The sentence must not include repetitive words or redundancy. Added to this, several grammatical, punctuation, and spelling details or knowledge is a must have for the people appearing for error identification test. Finally, use of correct words at correct places is important. It may also help you find a logical replacement of the word in mind through which you can identify that the sentence has errors to be replaced.

2.2.3. Causes of errors

The reason behind mistakes depends on the performance of a person, and they can be self-corrected. Error is considered more severe as compared to mistakes. The mistake is less severe, and people commonly make mistakes. Error is the wrong action, which is the result of the lack of knowledge or skill. For example, making tense mistakes, grammatical mistakes, skipping any word from a speech, etc. are all errors. The mistake is a wrongly made a choice and is usually accidental. For example, “Coming to this place was a mistake. We only wasted our time.” The word ‘error’ originated

from the Latin word ‘errorem’ or ‘errare,’ meaning ‘to wander or stray.’ The word mistake is rooted in the old Norse word, ‘mistaka,’ which means ‘wrongly taken.’ The word error is a more formal word and is not used in daily speech.

2.2.4. Error corrections

Dai & Shu [8] consider that error correction is the process of detecting errors in transmitted messages and reconstructing the original error-free data.

Error correction ensures that corrected and error-free messages are obtained at the receiver side.

2.2.4.1. Error Analysis (EA)

Error analysis is one of the methods used by researchers to analyze and categorize different types of errors. The EA method, according to authors Mitchell and Myles [12], investigates the types and causes of errors based on the language competence level, such as errors in word omission and repetition, errors in language knowledge or language skills owing to the influence of the first language. Many authors apply the EA method in the study, and it is also assessed from a variety of perspectives. According to Dai and Shu [8], utilizing EA in teaching helps lecturers assess students’ current language competence level and researchers better understand the learning process and language formation. Understanding the structure of their own errors will help learners improve their language skills.

2.2.4.2. Difficulties with second language learners’ writing skills

Olsen [14] discovers that second language learners frequently experience numerous challenges in writing properly owing to their limited knowledge and language skills, and this limitation also

causes them to be confused between the structure of the first language and the second language. At the same time, Weigle [17] argues that the foregoing limitations will be a significant impediment in the writing process if the writer concentrates solely on language and expression rather than content or essay structure. Thus, while learning a second language, writing is a particularly difficult skill to obtain if the two languages have significant structural and grammatical differences.

2.2.4.3. Mistakes and errors

Brown [4] defines mistakes as errors produced by learners when speaking and writing using grammatical structures. That means learners might learn about language structure but struggle to apply it to their speaking and writing skills. Meanwhile, errors are described as errors made by learners when they do not comprehend or understand the grammatical structure or vocabulary. Errors thus relate to aspects of language knowledge that are still deficient, such as when learners do not recognize the distinction between correct and incorrect usage. On the contrary, errors indicate a lack of ability to use acquired language knowledge while speaking and writing.

2.2.4.4. Types of errors due to the influence of the first language

Many studies have been conducted to examine the structure and system of writing errors caused by the influence of the first language, and the results demonstrate that the structure and error system change between languages and interactions. Bhela [3] noticed errors made by students from several nations, including Cambodia, Italy, Spain, and Vietnam. Students make the greatest errors in the following categories when writing essays: (1) Adverb clauses, (2) Sentence

structure, (3) - Word choice, (4) Relative clauses, (5) Verb form, (6) Singular/plural noun, (7) Parallel structure, (8) Article, (9) Preposition, (10) Pronoun, (11) Style, (12) Subject-verb harmony, (13) Conjunction, (14) Comparative structure. According to Chan [7], students frequently make mistakes in the following five areas: linking verbs (“to be”), adverb placement, using “there be,” utilizing relative clauses, and using intransitive and transitive verbs. Another study, by another author, Bennui [2], discovered that, in addition to the impacts of sentence structure and word usage, Thai students are also impacted by style, ways to write and express ideas, such as paragraph structure, writing style, and idea expression.

As shown, there have been several scientific studies conducted on the impact of mother tongue on the process of writing in a second language. However, there are relatively few studies of these types in Vietnam to assist lecturers in predicting errors that students may make during essay writing.

III. Methodology

The subjects selected for the study were 100 essays of 50 third-year students of English Faculty, Hanoi Open University. Selected students must satisfy the prerequisite that students must pass the previous 5 basic writing modules. Vietnamese is the first language of all selected students. Each essay must be written in class in 40 minutes, and no dictionaries or documents may be used by the 50 students. These are two different types of essays submitted by 50 students during a two-week period.

In each article, the author will collect and list errors, group and analyze errors using the error analysis (EA) method.

Using the EA method, students' writings are reviewed and analyzed line by line to find errors. Errors will be counted and categorized. The error classification was consulted by the author and consulted with 5 other lecturers who also teach academic writing. Descriptive statistics will be based on descriptions of occurrence frequency, mean score, and percentage.

IV. Findings and discussion

4.1. Students' errors in cause-and-effect essay

There are 14 categories of errors caused by the effect of Vietnamese in 100 academic essays. According to Bennui [2], singular/plural noun, verb form, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, pronoun, conjunction, subject-verb harmony, parallel structure, comparative structure, adverb clauses, relative clauses and style are examples of error categories. Although the two types of essays contain the same error categories, the frequency of recurrence of each type in each form of essay differs significantly, as seen in the table below.

Table 1. Students' errors in cause-and-effect essay

Types of errors	Frequency	Average	Percentage
- Adverb clauses	190	5.80	18.04
- Sentence structure	167	5.34	14.69
- Word choice	130	3.60	13.51
- Relative clauses	110	3.20	12.34
- Verb form	131	1.62	7.70
- Singular/plural noun	90	1.20	6.46
- Parallel structure	95	1.90	5.58
- Article	88	1.76	5.17
- Preposition	79	1.58	4.64
- Pronoun	77	1.54	4.52
- Style	70	1.40	4.11
- Subject-verb harmony	35	0.70	2.06
- Conjunction	15	0.30	0.88
- Comparative structure	5	0.10	0.29
Total	1,282	30.04	100

The adverb clause is the most common error type in the cause-and-effect essay (18.04 %), and students often struggle with expressing ideas using relative clauses (12.34 %). This is due to the fact that when writing a cause-and-effect essay, students must utilize a variety

of clauses and must understand how to shorten clauses to express cause-and-effect relationships. However, sentence structure, word choice, and verb structure were among the most common errors made by students, with error rates of 14.69%, 13.51%, and 7.70 %, respectively.

Table 2. Students' errors in argumentative essay

Types of errors	Frequency	Average	Percentage
- Adverb clauses	125	4.5	9.81
- Sentence structure	190	5.8	14.93
- Word choice	295	6.9	17.97
- Relative clauses	185	3.7	9.89

Types of errors	Frequency	Average	Percentage
- Verb form	142	2.84	7.82
- Singular/plural noun	195	3.9	8.37
- Parallel structure	10	0.2	0.48
- Article	90	1.8	4.32
- Preposition	25	0.5	1.2
- Pronoun	190	3.8	8.13
- Style	230	4.6	12.05
- Subject-verb harmony	30	0.6	1.44
- Conjunction	35	0.7	1.68
- Comparative structure	40	0.8	1.92
Total	1,782	40.64	100

According to the data table, the error structure of this article is quite similar to that of the cause-effect essay. The most noticeable difference is in the style. While style errors accounted for an insignificant rate in the previous form, in the cause-effect form 4.11 %, in this form, style is one of the five errors with the greatest percentage, with 12.05 %. This may be explained by the fact that students frequently confuse the argumentative essay form with the personal opinion essay form. As a result, when writing, students use a lot of pronouns “I,” “we,” words that reflect their own opinions, and the style is written in a dialogue style. Furthermore, with the greatest error rate of 17.97% for this type of essay, word choice presents numerous challenges for students. This is also acceptable given that students must explain their points of view and provide highly logical reasons to disprove opposing arguments for the argumentative type. Students will focus less on expressive language as a result of this process, which requires them to think in order to find ideas while writing.

4.2. Causes of errors

Certainly, there are some causes of errors. Teaching writing and encouraging students to write is quite challenging. Nevertheless, for most people writing is a process that requires motivation, training,

and specific skills. Therefore, it requires employing teaching strategies which can assure competence in writing. Students feel reluctant to write even in their first language, and they usually are not confident in their ability to write in second language. Considering the errors caused by Vietnamese language interference, the errors occurred the most frequently were: prepositions, articles, word form, verb tense, pluralization, concord, and word choice, respectively. The sources of errors included the incomplete application of foreign language rules; ignorance of rule restrictions; lack of memorization of spelling of words; ignorance of grammatical and punctuation rules; and difficulty of English article and preposition systems.

Also, writing problems arose due to the differences between Vietnamese and English in phonology, morphology, lexis, and grammatical structures. As a result of these problems, students’ effective writing in English is hampered. In the study context, teaching methods and strategies might have been inadequate. Writing examinations question types were inappropriate because they mostly included multiple-choice, short answer, and matching techniques besides providing learners with guiding topic sentences so as for them to elaborate.

Moreover, the lack of writing practice in and outside the classroom was

one source of errors. Learners experience difficulties in selecting proper vocabulary, producing and developing ideas about specific topics as well. Unfortunately, writing teachers are inclined to focus mainly on teaching students appropriate grammatical structures. Due to the gap between students' needs and teachers' conventional instructional methodology, students cannot express themselves freely and fluently in writing.

4.3. Recommendations and pedagogical implications

4.3.1. For students

4.3.1.1 The role of students' determination and motivation

Writing is a difficult task. According to Garjaka [9, p.137], "Learners must be motivated to learn. Motivation is a necessary aspect in ensuring that all of them achieve good learning outcomes". Learning motivation is influenced by a variety of factors, including learners' learning consciousness and learning goals. Also, Kroll [11] considers that to write well, learners go through a time-consuming process that cannot be encapsulated into a number of rules. In other words, it is not possible only with good grammar and sample lessons that learners can write. A process of preparation and brainstorming for the essay, drafting, obtaining feedback from others, and revising are all part of the process," the author said when discussing the role of determination in learning to write English. To put it differently, writing requires great determination of learners. However, in addition to self-motivated to learn to write, pair learning or peer writing is a really successful strategy for increasing students' writing motivation. In summary, learners must understand the role, significance, and importance of writing skills, and individual factors for advanced writing skills. However, the collective factor

is no less important, the class collective and the student union can organize group or pair English writing activities every two weeks or once a month, accompanied by additional types of encouragement. With this approach, students have the feeling that they are studying in an equal environment; each member has the same writing task and obligation to write.

4.3.1.2. Learning from others

"Students must learn to write from themselves and from others," Campbell [6, p.15] thinks. Brown [5] shares the belief that children should learn to write in pairs or groups (peer writing), participate in teacher-led group discussions to generate ideas, and write comments, the purpose of learning to write in groups is not to correct each other's errors, but to find out the incompleteness to make them more complete. To encourage learning to write in pairs or groups, in class, students must form the habit of sharing ideas, contributing ideas, working in groups before working individually, students can form English writing clubs with regulations on participation rules and a specific plan of activities.

4.3.2. For lecturers

4.3.2.1 Combination of two teaching methods for writing

In general, there are two primary methods of teaching writing up to now:

- The first method (1) is the oldest method, teaching writing based on the product (product approach). This method focuses on student' writing, editing and grading students' papers, and teaching writing skills based on their writing.

- The second method (2) is teaching writing based on the process (process approach) through many stages. According to Reid [16], the writing process can be divided into the following

stages: brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading.

“In recent years, there has been a very significant change, that is, the shift from the first approach to the second way,” Kroll (11, p.247) says. To reduce the load, a process-based approach to teaching writing in which student self-study and self-correct through pair or group work is particularly beneficial, with the teacher acting just as a guide for students to write.

4.3.2.2. Combination of teaching writing and reading skills

Kroll [11] discovers two points of view: the first point is a long-held opinion that students should only be allowed to read other people’s writing (typically sample essays); the second point is a recent opinion that students should only be allowed to read their own writing.. Based on the findings of the survey and our teaching experience, we discovered that to write well, students must understand how to write, the types of essays, and the essay’s requirements. As a result of their knowledge of writing style, learners use their ideas to arrange according to a specific logic. As a result, students must be able to read other people’s writing before composing their own, necessitating the use of sample texts.

4.3.2.3. Providing writing assignments with positive feedback to students

The goal of learning to write is to practice writing, so lecturers must choose a writing topic for students to work on. Topics must be properly planned, structured, and grouped in line with the relevant writing genres: causal, illustrative, categorical, defining, and so on. Students should also be encouraged to come up with their own writing topics. Lecturers must know when to ask students to write in class (timed writing) and when to ask them to write at home in both circumstances (home writing). Lecturers can integrate

the practice of comparing relevant English and Vietnamese language structures with suitable activities during the teaching process to assist students minimize the impact of their mother tongue while writing. Lecturers must mostly provide oral feedback on students’ writing, while teachers primarily provide written feedback on homework assignments. The lecturer-student interaction is a face-to-face, two-way exchange in both forms of feedback; the lecturer is also a reader and has the right to ask the writer to answer questions linked to the writing so that the writer understands his work’s strengths and weaknesses. In a large class, however, lecturers should encourage students to self-correct each other’s work. “If students wish to understand writing as a communicative process, they must not only write frequently, but also draft and receive feedback from a range of readers,” writes Reid [15, p.46]. When students receive a large number of comments, the writer realizes that he is writing for other people to read and that he needs to improve his writing. “Many skilled writers cannot acquire a complete article at first,” says Nunan [13], “but writing is a long and difficult process, in which the complete piece frequently comes after a succession of drafts” (p.87). In brief, in addition to students writing willingly based on their abilities or interests, lecturers must regularly check students’ progress by assigning exercises that allow them to practice writing whether at home or at class. Beason [1] argues that students are more likely to expect teacher feedback, lecturer-student exchanges are typically more instructive than student-student exchanges, and students often appreciate the lecturers’ comments or requests.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has investigated common errors that students

make in their essays: 1) Adverb clauses, (2) Sentence structure, (3) - Word choice , (4) Relative clauses, (5) Verb form, (6) Singular/plural noun, (7) Parallel structure, (8) Article, (9) Preposition, (10) Pronoun, (11) Style, (12) Subject-verb harmony, (13) Conjunction, (14) Comparative structure. and proposed recommendations that students might avoid while writing the essays. With the findings of this study, we intend to help students improve their English essay writing skills while studying at English Faculty, Hanoi Open University.

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