ERROR ANALYSIS ON ENGLISH COMPOSITIONS AND PARAGRAPHS OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore the writing errors in English compositions and paragraphs of Vietnamese students at a university in Vietnam and to compare the shared common errors made in their writings. This intended to see whether students with different levels have the same errors. The study used a corpus of 36 Vietnamese students' composition writings and 36 paragraph writings. The data committed were categorized into three different error types by the framework of Chanquoy (2001). The results showed that the three most frequent writing errors were spelling, subject-verb agreement, verb tense and form respectively in paragraphs and compositions. Results revealed the three most shared errors involved spelling, subject-verb agreement and verb tense and form; nevertheless, there is no significant difference between the number of errors. It is suggested that intensive knowledge of language teaching in vocabulary in spelling and English grammar, especially subject-verb agreement should be paid close attention. In light of the results obtained, implications and recommendations were provided to teachers to assist their students in writing and limit common errors among Vietnamese students.

Keywords: *Writing error; error analysis; writing compositions in English; writing paragraphs in English; Vietnamese students*

PHÂN TÍCH LỖI TRONG VIẾT LUẬN VÀ ĐOẠN VĂN TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu hiện tại tìm hiểu các lỗi viết trong các bài viết luận và đoạn văn bằng tiếng Anh của sinh viên tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam và để so sánh các lỗi phổ biến trong các bài viết của sinh viên. Điều này nhằm mục đích xem sinh viên với các cấp độ tiếng Anh khác nhau có cùng một lỗi hay không. Nghiên cứu đã sử dụng 36 bài luận và 36 đoạn văn của 72 sinh viên học tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu đã được phân loại thành ba loại lỗi khác nhau theo khung của Chanquoy (2001). Kết quả cho thấy ba lỗi viết thường gặp nhất là chính tả, sự phù hợp giữa chủ ngữ, động từ và hình thức câu tương ứng trong đoạn văn và bài luận; và không có sự khác biệt về tổng số lượng lỗi của hai nhóm sinh viên. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu, tôi đề xuất giáo viên dạy viết Tiếng Anh nên chú ý đến chính tả và ngữ pháp, đặc biệt là phù hợp giữa chủ ngữ và động từ của sinh viên để hỗ trợ sinh viên viết và hạn chế các lỗi phổ biến ở sinh viên Việt Nam.

Từ khoá: *Viết lỗi; phân tích lỗi; viết luận tiếng Anh; viết đoạn văn tiếng Anh; sinh viên Việt Nam*

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1. Introduction

In the Vietnam context, English is considered as a foreign language and a compulsory subject for all university students prepared before entering specialized subjects. Students are required to master four skills to pass every single level in the curriculum. Vietnamese students find writing skills difficult to master and complete since backward and forward ideas and grammar structures. Besides, students today usually appeal for technology as the foremost learning practice by the reason of software support, but the number of common writing errors seems to appear repeatedly on final exams. Therefore, Vietnamese students' writing problems need to analyze in order to improve the quality of teaching and understand students' common errors to raise their awareness.

To analyze the database of writing, Error Analysis, first established in the 1960s by Corder and his colleagues, is a preferred tool to concentrate on. According to Corder [1], correcting learners' errors is substantial in three crucial ways as telling the teachers about their learners' progress; supplying evidence of how a language is acquired and what strategies the learner employs in language learning; and as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

Numerous studies in writing have been shown the different types of errors committed by students with paragraphs, sentences or compositions. However, the research has not yet investigated into students' writing errors between students' paragraphs and students' compositions in the two sequential levels. Consequently, the current study narrows empirical gap on errors by 36 pre-intermediate Vietnamese students in writing paragraphs and 36 intermediate Vietnamese students in writing compositions to identify the types and the frequency of errors.

As a result of the significance of students' errors themselves, English teacher in this case as a researcher, needs to find out what types of common errors made by students' paragraphs and students' compositions in two different levels in order to find out common errors to apply strategies in language teaching effectively by the taxonomy of Chanquoy [2] produced by students.

1.1 Research question

1. What types of writing errors are (if any) frequently found in Vietnamese students' English compositions and paragraphs in two sequential levels?

2. Is there any significant difference between Vietnamese students' compositions writing errors and students' paragraphs writing errors?

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to enhancing teaching and learning the English language to encounter in the process of English Second Language (ESL) learning.

Lightbown and Spada [3] argue that when errors are persistent, especially when they are shared by almost all students in a class, it is useful for teachers to bring the problem to the students' attention. Corder [4] notes that Error Analysis (EA) is useful in second language learning because it reveals the problem areas to teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers. Errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. Therefore, students' errors are valuable feedbacks to assist teachers identify systematically the specific and students' common language problems so that they can deliberate on these types of errors. The significance of this study is to inform educators and teachers about the kind of errors and further reveals the errors' frequency of occurrence. If educators and teachers become conscious of likely problem areas that face specific writing error groups, they would be in a better position to put appropriate intervention strategies into place.

This study is also valuable to learners. Researchers such as Kaplan [5] and Nunan [6] have reflected that learners' errors are systematic, rather than random, and many learners tend to commit the same kinds of errors during a certain stage of language learning. Consequently, the obligation of teachers to summarize these frequently appearing errors and remind students of these errors as often as possible so that they can make greater effort to avoid them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical framework

2.1.1. Error Analysis (EA)

Error analysis is a type of approach to analyze learners' speech or written performance in different settings and has been received a great number of concerns in the field of second language acquisition.

Previous studies have been provided with different definitions of EA. Dulay, Burt and Krashen [7] state that the analysis of error is the method to analyze errors made by EFL and ESL learners when they learn a language. James [8] points out that EA refers to "study of linguistic ignorance, the investigation of what people do not know and how they attempt to cope with their ignorance." (p.62)

Brown [9] highlighted the importance of learners' errors because it shows the state of learners' knowledge. The study of error is a part of the investigation of the process of language learning. It provides us with a picture of the linguistic development of a learner and may give us an indication as to the learning process [4]. From Corder [10], teachers can understand students' current level in learning and can let teachers prepare accurate and precise teachings which are suitable for students. According to Hasyim [11] EA may be carried out in order to: (a) find out how well someone knows a language, (b) find out how a person learns a language, and (c) obtain information on common difficulties in

language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials.

EA not only helps teachers identify the types of errors committed by learners to assist them and employing appropriate strategies in language teaching but also helps students reduce errors and be aware of errors which are borders in their language learning process.

2.1.2. Classification of errors

Corder [12] classifies the errors as the errors of competence and the errors of performance. According to [6], errors are categorized into six: omission of grammatical morphemes, double marking of semantic features, use of irregular rules, use of wrong word forms and alternating use of two or more forms.

James [13] proposes five categories of errors including grammatical errors, substance errors, lexical errors, syntactic errors and semantic errors.

Chanquoy [2] classified these errors into three main types including spelling errors that deal with the errors related to orthography errors; the grammatical errors that discuss the errors related to gender and number, agreement of nouns, verbs and adjectives, and subject-verb agreement; and the punctuation errors that deal with punctuation and capitalization errors. The taxonomy was based on various resources and therefore, it was well suited to the research questions and study focus.

2.2. Previous studies

Research studies have been investigated a comparison between the different groups of students. Ulkersoy, Genc and Darmaz [14] examine types of errors in writings of Turkish EFL learners by comparing freshmen and sophomore student's writing performance based on Kroll and Schafer's [15] classification. The result revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups of students in terms of word count and number of errors. Among the four categories of errors, sentence

structure errors, verb-centred errors and word-level choice errors are the most observed error types. Another investigation into three groups of students, Computer Science, Engineering and Medicine and Translation revealed the common errors namely grammar, lexis, semantics and mechanics [16].

Similar results in the grammatical structure were observed in a number of studies. Lin [17] examined 26 essays from Taiwanese EFL students at the college level. The results of this study indicated that the four highest error frequencies were sentence structures (30.43%), wrong verb forms (21.01%), sentence fragments (15.94%), and wrong use of words (15.94%). Likewise, another grammatical error that is frequently found in Taiwanese EFL students' compositions was the misuse of English articles from Chen [18]. They can learn English grammatical rules such as the correct use of articles and apply the rules with no interference from any prior knowledge. Similarly, Kao [19] studied 169 compositions from 53 Taiwanese college students who were English major students. A total of 928 errors were found, among which grammatical errors occurred with the greatest frequency, 66%, semantic errors occurred 18% of the time, and lexical errors occurred with the least frequency, 16%. Amoakohene [20] explored the errors in a corpus of 50 essays written by first-year students of UHAS. The findings showed that 584 (55.6%) of these errors were related to grammatical errors, 442 (42.1%) were mechanical errors and 24 (2.3%) of the errors detected were linked to the poor structuring of sentences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study aims at analyzing the frequent writing errors in students' English compositions at a university in Vietnam. The study adopts both quantitative and qualitative research design in order to achieve objectives.

3.2. Participants

Thirty-six pre-intermediate preparatory students and thirty-six intermediate preparatory students participated in this study by writing paragraphs and compositions for final exams. The students' age range is from 18 to 20 years.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

To collect the data of compositions writing, 36 intermediate participants were asked to write an essay of 250 words in 40 minutes on one of the two topics "Genius should be treated differently from normal people" and "Robotics technology will play a big role in the future" on an online platform. Students provided accounts to log in and finished on their own computers. Then, 36 written compositions were saved to be analyzed.

Similarly, 36 pre-intermediate participants were asked to write a paragraph of 120 words on advantages of reading online and then 36 written paragraphs were saved to be analyzed.

3.4. Data Analysis

Writing errors were coded, using the following scheme developed from the framework from Chanquoy's [2] classification of writing errors presented so far.

There are three main types of writing errors illustrated in Table 1 including spelling, grammar and punctuation. The data was based on this taxonomy to code the errors.

After data collection, the following steps of EA by [4] were followed. Firstly, each composition writing was counted number of errors examined according to the coding scheme. After that, quantifying and analyzing errors were applied with inter-coders.

In order to ensure the reliability of coding, 20% of the entire data was coded by two independent coders. The coders agreed on 90% of their coding, suggesting that the data were coded with strong consistency. Then, the pair sample t-test was applied to find out the significant difference between the two groups' writing errors.

Table 1. *Writing errors coding scheme with definitions from [2]*

Type of writing errors	Explanation
Spelling error	
spelling	the act or process of writing words by using the letters conventionally accepted for their information
Grammatical error	
subject-verb agreement	wrong combination of subject and verb
verb tense and form	error of constructing a verb
singular and plural form	a mistake with number (singular or plural)
word order	syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence, clause, or phrase
preposition	the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence
articles	used with a noun to indicate the type of reference being made by the noun
fragment	the sentences miss a verb or a subject, so it becomes disconnected
Punctuation error	
capitalization	writing with a word with it is first letter as a capital letter and the remaining letters in small letter
punctuation	he marks, such as period, comma, and parentheses, used in writing to separate sentences and their elements and to clarify meaning.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Frequent types of writing errors found in Vietnamese students' English compositions

The analysis of the writing errors on compositions indicated that 164 (25.6%) was spelling, 137 (21.4%) was the subject-verb agreement, 109 (17%) was verb-tense and form and 58 (9.1%) was fragment error.

Table 2 below shows the result of the most frequent writing errors occurring in English compositions were grammatical error category with 380 (59.4%) and the second one in spelling category with 164 (25.6%).

Table 2. *Frequency of writing errors committed by writing compositions*

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rank
Spelling error			
Spelling	164	25.6	1
Grammatical error			
Subject-Verb agreement	137	21.4	2
Verb tense and form	109	17.0	3
Singular and plural form	37	5.8	7
Word order	12	1.9	9
Preposition	3	0.5	10
Article	24	3.8	8
Fragment	58	9.1	4
Punctuation error			
Capitalization	47	7.3	6
Punctuation	49	7.6	5
Total	**640**	**100**	

4.2. Frequent types of writing errors found in Vietnamese students' English paragraphs

The errors from paragraphs showed that subject-verb agreement was ranked the highest with 130 (21.1%), the second one was verb tense and form with 127 (20.6%) and the third one was spelling with 94 (15.3%) illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. *Frequency of writing errors committed by writing paragraphs*

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rank
Spelling error			
Spelling	94	15.3	3
Grammatical error			
Subject-Verb agreement	130	21.1	1
Verb tense and form	127	20.6	2
Singular and plural form	35	5.7	8
Word order	49	8.0	4
Preposition	24	3.9	9
Article	23	3.7	10
Fragment	44	7.1	6
Punctuation error			
Capitalization	42	6.8	7
Punctuation	48	7.8	5
Total	**616**	**100**	

Table 3 above shows that grammar classification was most frequently observed with 432 errors (70.1%) in comparison with the second most common spelling errors 94 errors (15.3%).

4.3 Significant difference between students' compositions writing errors and students' paragraphs writing errors

Table 4 shows the three common errors as spelling, subject-verb agreement and verb tense and form in students' compositions and paragraphs. However, there is one highlighted difference between the two groups was word order. The group of compositions writing, word order placed the ninth while the group of paragraphs writing placed the fourth.

Table 4. *Types of errors difference between students' paragraphs writing and students' compositions*

Type of Error	Paragraphs writing Percentage (%)	Compositions writing Percentage (%)
Spelling error		
Spelling	15.3	25.6
Grammatical error		
Subject-Verb agreement	21.1	21.4
Verb tense and form	20.6	17.0
Singular and plural form	5.7	5.8
Word order	8.0	1.9
Preposition	3.9	0.5
Article	3.7	3.8
Fragment	7.1	9.1
Punctuation error		
Capitalization	6.8	7.3
Punctuation	7.8	7.6
Total	**100**	**100**

Table 5. *The significant difference between writing errors in paragraphs and writing errors in compositions*

Paired samples t-test		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	total writing errors in paragraphs total writing errors in compositions	.309	35	.759
Pair 2	spelling errors in paragraphs spelling errors in compositions	2.390	35	.022
Pair 3	subject-verb agreement errors in paragraphs subject-verb agreement errors in compositions	.305	35	.763
Pair 4	verb tense and form errors in paragraphs verb tense and form errors in compositions	-.766	35	.499

Table 5 illustrates that there is no significant difference between the total number of errors in students' paragraphs and in compositions; however, spelling errors showed a significant difference (with p=.022).

The results highlighted some significant errors made by Vietnamese students when taking paragraphs writing exam, they showed considerable errors in subject-verb agreement with simple present tense most observed. Likewise, the group of higher-level, writing compositions revealed the same problem in using the subject-verb agreement. The most striking result to emerge from the data is that students with two sequential levels did not recognize this type of error.

It highlighted the three important common errors. The most considerable awareness is spelling errors. Students seem to learn phonological sequence rather than spelling practice in vocabulary learning. Consequently, when they have to test writing skill, they apply phonetics leading the majority of spelling errors. To illustrate this, "performent" was written by students when they misunderstood "perfor-mance" into "-ment". In the same way, there were a lot of words which indicated their knowledge of vocabulary practice in classroom or themselves as "havest" instead of "harvest", "convinence" instead of "convenience". Moreover, adding some unnecessary letter

was the problematic one. Most of spelling errors are from common words of usage suggesting a big question in language teaching method. Teachers seem to ignore students' errors causing the extensive problem in writing. They may think that spelling is not the primary concern comparing with ideas or other elements. However, it shows the big gap in vocabulary competence and performance. Therefore, students should change learning strategies to be sure of vocabulary spelling. Besides, teachers should create more classroom activities to teach them from competence to performance. Teaching vocabulary should change in order to let students be aware by long.

The second common error is surprising to students and teachers when it was subject-verb agreement. Most of the errors belong to simple present tense which are likely to be the basic tense to students in both levels. However, the students forget to change verb forms. They show poor knowledge of basic tense leading to the teaching and learning progress considerably change. Agreement or concord is a rule that ensures the harmonizing of different grammatical units. Furthermore, a plural subject is not followed by a plural verb form, and a singular subject is not agreed with a singular verb form. Agreement errors indicate that some of the participants have not mastered how concord works.

Verb tense and form is the third attention in learning and teaching. Students did not show great understanding of tense usage; they use base form in most cases.

5. Conclusion

The current study shows the shared errors observed in the two varied groups of students in terms of spelling, subject-verb agreement and verb tense and form. The results are consistent in previous studies since grammar is the most problematic error for EFL students. Significantly, the total number of errors between the two groups of students is not different; but spelling errors show a significant difference. There are some highlights to consider students' written performance. Teachers are centered-teaching to instruct students on the writing process. Teaching methods should be implemented to suit the outcome. Vocabulary spelling must be concerned in order to improve students' regular usage. Furthermore, frequent practice between pronunciation and writing practice should be prepared adequately under instant corrective feedback. Besides, teachers should modify and classify groups of students' errors to inform them accordingly. Having an overview of the scope of writing and learning process will be trained for teachers; besides, students' level appears not to be consistent to their performance. Teachers should not have an assumption of students' high proficiency. Practice tests before writing course should be applied.

Students should be encouraged to read more in English to be familiar with vocabulary. This also implies the lack of reading habits and limited understanding of grammar. From the list of spelling errors, they should spend time on common words, they may think of advanced vocabulary to foster or upgrade their knowledge; however, the minor errors should not be ignored because they indicated the basic proficiency.

Grammar structure, especially subject-verb agreement should be checked and inform students repeatedly whenever it occurs in writing in order to raise their awareness on this error.

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