



GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN ACADEMIC WRITING OF ENGLISH SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS

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Abstract:

The study aimed to analyze the common grammatical errors of students in academic writing. Mixed-method research was implemented for this study. The study team gathered 110 essays from learners in the Writing Course 4 – Social Texts classroom. Then, the researchers conducted interviews with 23 learners in order to ascertain the reasons behind their grammatical errors in writing and provide suitable remedies. Participants in this research were second-year students majoring in English Studies in the Department of English Language and Culture's High-Quality Program at a Vietnamese university. The findings revealed that the errors that made up the biggest percentage of all errors were those involving the articles (25,5 %), prepositions (14,2%), and plural/singular forms (13,7 %). On the other hand, tenses (7%), passive voice (3,8%), and subject-verb agreement (1,7%) errors had the respective lowest percentages. The results of the interviews with 23 randomly selected students in this course showed that students struggled with academic writing on a number of different levels, with the root causes being a lack of vocabulary knowledge, carelessness, and uncertainty about basic grammatical structure.

Keywords: academic writing, causes, grammatical difficulty, grammatical errors, grammatical error analysis

1. Introduction

Christiansen (2015) commented that the majority of people around the world use English as a second language. It is regarded as the medium of teaching in higher education and the language of communication, commerce, trade, and diplomacy. For speakers of second languages, the English language is ranked top in the world. Walsh (2010) explained that

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English is now a prerequisite for education and employment in nations where it is spoken as a second or foreign language due to its widespread use internationally. Writing is the most crucial of the four English language skills since it is prevalent in higher education and professional professions. Indrilla and Ciptaningrum (2018) supplied that English language proficiency is essential for writing assignments, reviews, research, and many other academic tasks that all call for highly developed writing abilities. One of the linguistic skills that must be cultivated while studying English is writing. It may be a medium for writing down a person's ideas, feelings, and opinions, and the outcome can be valuable for the writer and/or for others. On the other hand, Tuan (2010) supported academic writing as one of the most complex English abilities to learn and was frequently taught as the final of the four-language skills.

Tarigan et al. (2019) highlighted that writing is a difficult talent to master. A good piece of writing must be supported by an extensive vocabulary and a good mastery of grammatical rules, in addition to mastery of the components of texts is required by the type of texts targeted because it would be difficult for readers to read and understand a piece of writing without proper sentence constructions. Pham (2018) confirmed that modules to teach academic writing skills are frequently included in English training programs in Vietnam. Many studies are now being conducted in Vietnam to investigate prevalent grammatical errors in academic writing. Concerning the source of grammatical errors committed by students in their writing text by Suwastini and Yukti (2017). Following that, Megantari and Budasi (2018) identified native language interference as the main source of students' grammatical errors. Budiarta, Suputra, and Widiasmara (2018) found that the difference between the grammatical rules of the target language languages and the native language was the main cause of students' errors. Meanwhile, Suwastini and Yukti (2017) discovered that interlingual transfer was the most common cause of grammatical errors in students' short biographical texts. Brown (2000) stated that errors may arise during the process of language learning and acquisition while Ling and Stapa (2011) explained errors are inextricably linked to the learning process.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Grammatical Error

2.1.1 The Definition of Grammar

Wulandari and Harida (2021) asserted that grammar structures language such that a sentence's meaning can be apparent and straightforward to comprehend. Language has both form and meaning when used as a medium of communication. Language forms can be broken down into components like words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, and even discourse or text, which is a higher degree of subdivision. Therefore, the foundational knowledge needed to effectively learn a language is grammar.

According to Mickan (2001), grammar analyzed the way sentences work in writing because the writing was one of the skills which are used by people to communicate their ideas, thoughts, feeling, and emotions in words and paper. Harmer, who was referenced in Heryanti, Sucipto, and Makmur (2017), grammar is an example of how words are

converted into various forms and combined into sentences. Fithriani (2018) mentioned learning grammar can assist in setting the stage for the four language abilities: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is no doubt that good grammar knowledge is inevitably important in developing EFL communicative competence as it guides learners to use the language appropriately both in written form and in oral language skills.

2.1.2. Definition of Error

From the perspective of Kusumawardhani (2017), an error was a variation from the grammar of a native speaker that reflects the interlingual proficiency of the learners. Likewise, Brown (2007) defined error as demonstrating the learners' proficiency in the target language because it was a recognizable change in the grammatical features of a native speaker. Alanazi (2017) gave the next definition of error that it was a necessary and unavoidable aspect of learning a second language. However, Phuket and Othman (2015) stated that errors used to be recognized as undesirable problems which teachers tried to prevent. Additionally, Suwastini and Yukti (2017) examined the errors made by students learning English as a second language in a vocational school in Bali and found that misrepresentation and omission were the most frequent mistakes made in the students' short-biography writing. According to Ellis (2014), errors were made because students had the wrong perception of a particular grammar. They are ignorant that they are making errors, and they are also unsure of how to correct them.

2.1.3. Definition of Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors become a significant writing issue, particularly for EFL students. According to Garner (2012), a grammar error is a concept used in prescriptive grammar to refer to a case of incorrect, unusual, or contentious usage, such as a misplaced modifier or an unsuitable verb tense. Hernandez (2011) stated that grammatical errors involve faulty structures which may include wrong verbal tense, incorrect verbal forms, and syntax problems. It is also called a usage error. Grammatical errors can be in various grammatical aspects such as verbs, pronouns, diction, article, spelling, word order, prepositions, and sentences. Furthermore, Karani (2007) claimed that grammatical errors are the most common errors high school pupils make when producing recount texts. Students encounter it when using past tense with both regular and irregular verbs. Students may experience difficulties writing coherent and cohesive texts because of the text's arrangement. The content, vocabulary, and spelling sections all have further issues.

2.1.4. Grammatical Difficulty

Al Fadda (2012) found that ESL students encounter many difficulties distinguishing between spoken and written words, and they struggle with grammatical issues such as subject-verb agreement and how to correctly combine sentences to write a paragraph. Likewise, Farooq (2020) also asserted that ESL students have difficulty with grammar, which is seen to be the most difficult part of writing. When learners correctly compose sentences, structures, and paragraphs, they often encounter a variety of difficulties. A group of sentences, the usage of different sentence forms, subject-verb agreement,

parallel construction, the placement of modifiers, and tense agreement are all examples of grammar skills.

2.2. Error Analysis

Following the given definitions of error, Jobeen, Kazemian, and Shahbaz (2015) stated that error analysis was then very important for foreign language learning to clearly understand the process of the language. Error analysis is very useful for teachers or lecturers to measure learners' competence in the target language, especially for second or foreign-language learners. Ellis (1994) explained that error analysis was one of the first methods used to investigate learners' language. It achieved considerable popularity in 1970 and there have been many attempts to make the procedure of error analysis systematic work. In order to evaluate the use of grammar, there are some procedures that can be used to analyze errors. Kharmilah and Narius (2019) also emphasized error analysis is an activity to identify, classify and interpret or describe the errors made by someone in speaking or in writing and it is conducted to acquire information on common difficulties people have when speaking or writing English sentences.

2.3. Grammatical Error Types

There are many previous studies related to the analysis of types of grammatical errors. Likewise, Na-ngam (2005) also used error taxonomy to categorize grammatical errors. It included 23 different types of grammatical errors, including incomplete sentences (fragments and omissions), run-on sentences, comparison, word order, there-be, tenses, voices, agreements, infinitives, gerunds, nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, modals, and auxiliaries, possessives, conjunctions, prepositions, articles, punctuations, capitalization, and spelling. Khansir (2013) investigated five types of Iranian and Indian written errors such as paragraph, punctuation, articles, spelling, and conjunction. Khansir (2012) examined syntactic errors in Iranian and Indian students' writing, including auxiliary verbs, passive voice, indirect form, preposition, tag questions, relative pronouns, WH-question, and tense.

2.4. The Causes of Grammatical Errors

Some errors identified in the paragraphs written by the Saudi students were defined by Nuruzzaman (2018), in his study, as belonging to this category since they could be related to Arabic, the student's first language. Since a noun must come before an adjective in Arabic, the student committed this error by using L1 (Arabic) word-order knowledge, not L2 word-order knowledge (English). Likewise, Gass et al. (2013) considered that intralingual errors refer to those that are not caused by L1 but by the language being learned. Pongsukvajchakul (2019) and Promsupa (2016) deeply analyzed the further categorizing intralingual errors into four categories (originally proposed by Richards, 1974), these categories are overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized. According to Sari's research (2019), students' grammatical errors can be attributed to three factors: carelessness, first language use, and translation with translation are the most frequent. The researcher also

identified a lack of vocabulary and a lack of grammar as contributors to grammatical errors.

Several researchers questioned L2 students directly through questionnaires or interviews to determine what causes them to make errors. Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Bidin (2016) discovered that verbatim translation, the usage of bilingual dictionaries, and inadequate knowledge also contributed to the learners' errors from five English majors from two institutions that participated in in-depth interviews.

2.5. Previous Studies

Numerous studies have been completed on grammatical errors to assist learners in their writing skills. There are those that have focused on the ESL writing process such as the studies done by Cambria & Guthrie (2010); Yahya, Ishak, Zainal, Faghat and Yahaya (2012) identified and analyzed secondary school students' errors in narrative and descriptive essays in Malaysia. Heydari and Bagheri (2012) provided an overview of almost all the previous research in the field of error analysis, hoping that EFL teachers and educators could become more familiar with students' errors and thus utilize appropriate teaching strategies along with their colleagues and learners. Zafar (2016) conducted an empirical study that used Error Analysis (EA) as a treatment, she first analyzed errors frequently made by her business students, and verb tenses were found to be the most problematic ones. After a two-month writing training focusing on the accurate use of verb tenses, her students had an apparent improvement.

3. Research Methodology

This chapter addresses the research design, participants, data collection, and data analysis.

3.1. Research Design

The study aimed at analyzing the common grammatical errors of students in writing by employing a mix-method research approach. Mixed-method research was a type of research that uses data, techniques, and methods from both qualitative and quantitative research. All the characteristics of two opposing schools were mixed in this study. This design was suitable for studies using mixed data (numerical and textual data) as well as related processing methods (statistical processing and text analysis). The understanding gained from the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research provides a better and expanded understanding of the research topic. First of all, the research team collected 110 essays in an Writing Course 4 – Social Texts course (based on IELTS writing task 1 standard) from the University's second-year English language students (High-quality program) course 46. The samples used in this study were essays written by students within one semester, which were analyzed by statistical methods (as percentages) and descriptive analysis methods. Afterwards, the research group set up an interview panel to survey those 23 students to find the causes of their grammatical errors in writing and offer appropriate solutions. The researchers decided to employ a mixed

research approach because this method will strengthen the research. Besides, using these research methods will help to study a process or an issue from many sides. Furthermore, using different approaches also helps focus on a single process and confirm the accuracy of the data. The mixed studies supplement results from different types of studies, and they will not miss any available data.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were second-year students (course 46) studying English Studies major (High-quality Program) in the Department of English Language and Culture at a university in Vietnam (hereafter referred to as “the University”). All of them are native Vietnam speakers, and in the semester in which the data were gathered, the participants were enrolling in the Writing Course 4 – Social Text.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Materials

The data was gathered from a total of 110 essays via Google Forms in the form of images, and Microsoft word (MS) from sophomores (course 46) studying English studies (High-quality program), who attended the Writing Course 4 – Social Texts (Writing Task 1 of IELTS test). A sample of this essay was analyzed and contained about 150 words. The essays included many types of maps, processes, and various charts, which illustrated the alternative places, areas, or the implementation process of a production activity or the working mechanism of a specific system or machine.

In any form of a graph, the Task 1 essay always has a requirement such as: “Summarize the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where prevalent”. As a result, the writer only needs to concentrate on stating the prominent features, and comparing or describing the data based on the given information. In addition, in writing Task 1, the writer has to complete the following essay with 4 main parts, namely: an introduction, an overview, body paragraph 1, and body paragraph 2 respectively. The topic was randomly given to the students by their teacher during the writing classroom. The teacher had given the students about 20 to 30 minutes in order to finish the writing task individually.

3.3.2. Interview

The data for this study were audio recordings and academic writings over a semester of interviews with the participants (23 participants). To make it easier to collect interview information, the author used 2 types of interviews, including face-to-face meetings and using the Google Meet application to communicate with the participants and record. The researcher asked each interview question in turn and asked the participants to answer all the questions prepared.

3.4. Data Analysis

After data collection, the researchers used two prominent methods to analyze data, comprising: quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, the methods of collecting

documents (writing task 1 essays in IELTS context), which were corrected and feedback by teachers, and supported by the Grammarly application to find out basic grammar errors and interviews. In particular, four instruments were used to obtain the data: writing tasks, a table of errors identification checklist, and interview guides. The process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting interview data in the form of text was applied to clarify data, and the direct interview was applied to find out the causing factors of the errors. This study applied the formula to calculate the percentage of error types:

$$P = \frac{n1}{\sum N} \times 100\%$$

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings from Material

4.1.1. Grammatical Errors

The focus of this chapter was relevant to the outcome and interpretations of the results based on the gathered materials (110 essays). Statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages were provided for each study variable in order to discuss these results. On the basis of the conventional English grammar notion, the errors were categorized. There were 424 grammatical errors, and these were how they were categorized:

Table 1: Student's grammatical errors

Grammatical Errors	Number	Percentage
Articles	108	25,5%
Prepositions	60	14,2%
Plural / singular form	58	13,7%
Word form	53	12,5%
Spelling	49	11,6%
Word choice	43	10,1%
Tense	30	7%
Passive voice	16	3,8%
Subject-verb agreement	7	1,7%
Total	424	100%

Elements of the aforementioned Table 1 were used to discuss the findings of this hypothesis because they revolved around the same topic: the outcomes of the student's written test and the effect of grammar structure on the target students' English writing abilities, which was only apparent in their writing content. When errors were expressed as percentages, the findings revealed that the participants made 424 errors in the articles (108 errors), prepositions (60 errors), word form (53 errors), plural/ singular forms (58 errors), spelling (49 errors), word choice (43 errors), tense (30 errors), passive voice (16 errors), and subject-verb agreement (7 errors). The inaccuracy in the article occurred the most frequently. This fact demonstrated that article errors provided the most challenges when students wrote one essay. Additionally, from the descriptions of each error, it was

possible to spot a trend in the grammatical errors that students with poor writing skills consistently make.

4.2. Findings from Interview

4.2.1. The Cause of Errors

According to the outcomes of the interview, the majority of participants had more than one reason for their grammatical errors, comprising: forgetting and uncertain knowledge, lacking vocabulary leading to repetition errors, and uncertain knowledge, or careless and unchecking the completed essay because the given time did not enough.

Out of a total of 23 participants, 14 individuals understood that the problem stemmed from they had not retained or had forgotten what they had studied, including the vocabulary and grammatical structures (past tense, present tense, future tense, passive voice or preposition, etc.) in the introductory grammatical course in the previous semesters. Second, careless errors often made during the writing process were the main cause of grammatical problems, seven out of the 23 respondents indicated that carelessness was one of the most frequent errors they committed due to variables like distractions, limited time, or influencing external factors. In addition, other causes of grammatical errors were found that word-by-word translation, from Vietnamese to English structure, and a lack of vocabulary, particularly the usage of synonyms to prevent repetition in academic writing, among 23 participants, 3 of them usually got these errors. The findings from the sophomore English major students indicated that the articles (25,5 %), prepositions (14,2 %), and plural, singular form (13,7%) errors accounted for the highest proportion of total errors. On the contrary, tenses (7%), passive voice (3,8 %), and subject-verb agreement (1,7%) errors had the lowest percentage respectively after the researchers had analyzed 110 essays. In particular, after doing the interviews with 23 randomized learners in this course, the result designated that students had multiple struggles in academic writing, the original reason came from uncertainty of basic grammatical structure, carelessness, word-by-word translation, and inadequate vocabulary knowledge.

4.3. Discussions

The findings of this study differed from those of previous studies. The results revealed 424 grammar errors, with article errors (108 errors), preposition errors (60 errors), word form errors (53 errors), plural/singular errors (58 errors), spelling errors (49 errors), word choices errors (43 errors), tense errors (30 errors), passive voice errors (16 errors), and subject-verb agreement errors (seven errors) being the most common. According to previous research, Singh et al (2017) found that subject-verb agreement and tenses were the most typical types of errors. Atashian et al. (2018) pointed out that tenses, adverbs, and pronouns were the most common errors made by students at the University of Nizwa in Oman. Nevertheless, grammatical errors were found in Promsupa (2017), specifically morphological errors (81.97%) and syntactic errors (18.03%). Ibrahim (2020) looked into the grammatical errors that undergraduate Sudanese EFL students made. The results showed that 137 pieces of writing by the students contained 153 errors, which were

divided into 10 categories. These errors are errors in singular/plural forms (20 errors), verb tenses (seven errors), prepositions (seven errors), subject-verb agreements (27 errors), articles (16 errors), spelling (40 errors), verb forms (seven errors), capitalization (eight errors), misuse of the term (eight errors), and missing word (13 errors).

In regard to the cause of errors, this study also investigated the causes of these grammatical errors namely uncertainty of basic grammatical structure, carelessness, word-by-word translation, and inadequate vocabulary knowledge after researchers interviewed 23 students, of course, course 46 at the university. Related to these findings, this study had a similar result to Sari (2019) concluded that grammatical errors in essays written by sixth-semester English Education Study Program students at the University of Muhammadiyah Bengkulu were caused by carelessness, first language, and translation. Other studies also investigated the cause of the error and showed different results. According to Budiarta et al. (2018), intralingual transfer (35.33%) was the main cause of errors, followed by interlingual transfer (34.50%) and learning context (30.15%).

4.4. Recommendations

4.4.1. For Students

Students should practice writing proficiency because this is an effective way to deeply remember the remarkable points of grammar in writing. After each practice, students can check carefully to evaluate grammatical errors. They will recognize their own errors first and then try to fix their own grammatical errors, with the knowledge they have learned and materials provided by the teacher. In addition, students can rely on feedback from peers and help from teachers to understand and master the rules of grammar errors that they make. In addition to approaching studying with self-awareness, learners should spend most of their free time on reading grammar books and newspapers in English to improve their language skills. Learners had better not translate Vietnamese into English. Because there are several grammatical distinctions between these two languages, they cannot apply the rules in this language to the other one and vice versa.

4.4.2. For Teachers

In teaching English related to its grammar, teachers should give more easily understood explanations to the students so that the students can minimize the possibility of making errors. The teachers should properly explain the important rules of these grammatical characteristics. Teachers may ask students to write short paragraphs on a variety of topics and ask students to carefully check for grammatical errors in their writing to form the habit of practicing writing skills. To exposure many types of errors so that students can visualize and remember more deeply the knowledge of grammar as well as build the habit of careful error reflexively checking before submitting it to the teacher.

To help students become better writers, teachers need to change their teaching strategies. The researchers also suggested that the teacher utilize peer review, which allows the students to learn by editing their friends' writing and providing honest criticism to the students.

4.3. Limitations

The first restriction stemmed from the process of gathering research data (110 essays). Researchers began gathering data in the second semester of the academic year due to the effects of Covid-19, and most students attended the course on both online and offline platforms. As a result, almost the completed essays were pre-edited and submitted via both these platforms to the teachers. Therefore, the majority of the data gathered was not very error-prone and demonstrated a disparity in the frequency of errors.

Following that, the time required to interview the pupils was the second restriction. The researchers did not interview subjects until the first semester of the next academic year because of the epidemic's effects. Because it took a long time to gather data and conduct interviews, learners may not be able to mention more than the causes of errors. The final limitation is that the study did not collect and interview all students, and as a result, the data did not describe the grammatical errors of whole learners encountered in Course 46, who specialized in English High-quality programs.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicated that the University's second-year English language majors still struggled with academic writing, which caused numerous grammatical problems. Based on the results of the study, the researcher found 9 categories of grammatical errors namely: article, preposition, plural/singular, word form, spelling, word choice, tense, passive voice, and subject-verb agreement.

Even if there were still some restrictions, the goal of this study was to identify the most common errors made by students and their root causes in order to compile helpful research resources for both teachers and students. Teachers and learners can rely on this to enhance and discover more suitable teaching and learning approaches to enhance the knowledge output quality of students. Further research should focus on finding advanced grammatical errors and synthesizing the root causes of those errors.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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