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## Grammatical Problems in Essay Writing: A Case in Vietnamese University, Vietnam

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### **Abstract:**

*Errors play a significant role in second and foreign language acquisition. Analyzing the errors in the students' essays helps the students themselves as well as the teachers and curriculum designers. This study conducted with seventy-four English majored students in TraVinh University, Vietnam. Their essays were examined and the grammatical errors in the essay were figured out and analyzed. The findings showed that verb tense, noun, subject-verb agreement and article are the most common types of errors which were found in students' essays. This also revealed that conditional, modal verb and phrasal verb are the grammatical elements which the students rarely used unsuitably. The findings may have useful implications for the students and teachers' development.*

**Keywords:** Grammatical problems, grammatical errors, essay writing

### **1. Introduction**

Essay writing is one of the most challenges for EFL and ESL learners. In Vietnam, English is taught as a foreign language and essays are widely used from the exams to the real-life context. In the primary school stage, grammar is integrated into other skills as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The students have a chance to acquire grammar unconsciously as studying English. In tertiary stage, essay writing is much more focused. The students are guided to write almost types of academic essays. Error analysis is carried out carefully on each student's essay. That is because this plays a significant role in students' improvement. This gives the students an opportunity to see what they acquired and what they need to learn.

#### *1.1. Research Question*

This study aims to find out types of the grammatical errors that the EFL students usually make in the essays. In addition, the study's target is to investigate deeply the various forms of each error, especially ones in the uses of tenses. This study is conducted to answer the following question:

What are grammatical errors committed by EFL students in essay writing?

#### *1.2. Significance of the Study*

This study attempts to provide an overview of most common errors which were made by ESL students. This plays an important role in students' assessment. It helps the teachers have a general view on students' writing. Therefore, they can adjust their teaching methodology to be suitable for students. Findings from the study will enrich the literature in the field and shed light into how to enhance the effectiveness of assessment methodology to meet learners' learning needs.

### **2. Literature Review**

#### *2.1. Error Analysis*

Error analysis is one of the aspects of applied linguistics and second language acquisition (Hinkel, 2018). According to Xie and Jiang (2007), there are three major causes of making errors. Firstly, this causes by the interlingual transfer from the mother tongue. Secondly, intralingual transfer or overgeneralization happens in the intermediate level of the second language acquisition. This causes developmental errors. Finally, cultural interference plays an important role in linguistic errors and inappropriateness in the context. Error analysis contributes significantly to foreign language teaching. Errors tell the teachers what the students has acquired and what the students need to learn (Corder, 1987). According to Erdoğan (2005), "Errors are a means of feedback for the teacher reflecting how effective he is in his teaching style and what changes he has to make to get higher performance from his students". Error analysis gives supportive data to syllabus designers because they decide what items need to be added or which items need to be removed from the syllabus (Erdoğan, 2005). Hasyim (2004) had similar view and stated that error analysis illustrates which aspect in grammar is difficult for the students and how effective is in English teaching progress.

## 2.2. Errors in Essay Writing

Some previous studies have investigated grammatical challenges which the students face in their essay writing. Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) conducted their study in the Indonesian university. They found that the students have problems in grammar, cohesion and coherence. In addition, they had difficulties in paragraph organization, dictations, and vocabulary misspelling. In Malaysian context, Ghabool et al (2012) claimed that Malaysian EFL students have challenges in their writing assignments, especially in grammar and punctuation. The other study conducted in Malaysia showed that subject-verb and agreement are the most common types of errors which were found in the students' written products. Khumpee & Yodkumlue (2017) figured out the five most common types made by Thai EFL students were punctuation, nouns, prepositions, verbs and articles. In Oman, Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018) had similar findings in the students' errors. They stated that tenses, adverbs and pronouns are the three most frequency errors that the students make in their writing. Al-Shujairi & Tan (2017) found that Iraqi high school students have problems in using tenses, articles and prepositions. Prepositions, articles and tenses are also confirmed as the three most common errors in EFL students' essay writing (Hidayat et al, 2020). From those mentioned studies, tenses, articles and prepositions can be seen as the most common errors which appeared in the EFL students' essay writing.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Context

This study was conducted in a new-born university in the Mekong Delta, the south of Vietnam -Tra Vinh University. The English-majored students are taught with organized curriculum from the basic English skills as Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading to the advanced subjects as Syntax, Pragmatics and Translations. Grammar is taught with communicative approach in the first and second semester with two sections: Communicative Grammar 1 (60 hours) and Communicative Grammar 2 (60 hours). Writing is taught from the first to the sixth semester with six sections. The total hour for this skill is 330 hours. In the first writing section, students are taught how to write some kinds of paragraphs as descriptive paragraphs, narrative paragraphs, example paragraphs, process paragraphs and opinion paragraphs. From the second writing section onwards, the following kinds of essays are taught as descriptive essays, opinion essays, comparison-contrast essays, cause-and-effect essays and narrative essays. This study was conducted when the students were in the second writing section. In this section, the students were taught three types of essays as descriptive essays, narrative essays and opinion essays. In each unit, the students were equipped with elements that assist students in their essay writing as organization, grammar and vocabulary.

### 3.2. Participants

This study involved 74 students (51 females and 23 males) who were in the first year at university. Their average age is about 19. They were on the progress of the second writing section. At that moment, the students were studying how to write some kinds of essays as mentioned.

### 3.3. Data Collection

After the students had studied three kinds of essay as descriptive essay, opinion essays, comparison-contrast essays, the students had the 60-minute test. There were three questions focused on those genres. The students were allowed to select one question and write a well-organized essay to answer. The researcher examined the students' answers. The students' errors were synthesized and analyzed.

## 4. Findings

Item	Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Verb Tense	56	20.4
2	Noun	47	17.1
3	Subject- Verb Agreement	38	13.9
4	Article	34	12.4
5	Preposition	25	9.1
6	Adjective	24	8.8
7	Relative clause	23	8.4
8	Comparative and superlative	11	4.0
9	Model verb	7	2.6
10	Phrasal verb	6	2.2
11	Conditional	3	1.1
	Total	274	100.0

Table 1: Grammatical Errors Made by EFL Tertiary Students in Essay Writing

Table 1 illustrates eleven types of errors identified based on the students' essays, which include verb tense, subject-verb agreement, article, preposition, adjective, relative clause, comparative and superlative, model verb, phrasal verb and conditional. Seventy-four student' written reports were collected and analyzed. The findings were figured out with a total of 274 errors. The four most common errors that the students made in their essays were in verb tense (20.4

%), noun (17.1%), subject- verb agreement (13.9%), article (12.4%). The errors of preposition, adjective and relative clause were appeared at similar frequency with 9.1%, 8.8% and 8.4%. The next noticeable error type was comparative and superlative (4.0%). The three least frequent errors were modal verb (2.6%), phrasal verb (2.2%) and conditional (1.1%).

#### 4.1. Verb Tense

This kind of errors was found in most students' written reports. They used wrong form of verb tense, especially past and past participle forms. For example,

- In fact, my uncle grown watermelon very well.
- A kind of fruit I ate in my childhood is watermelon.
- I have selects the ones that are the best.
- When I drank the coconut, it tastes fresh and good.

Moreover, they often used to be with the bare form or two bare forms at the same time. The following sentences were taken out from the students' essays.

- Banana is love by many people.
- Apple is help to remove toxic chemicals.
- It is has a lot of black seeds.
- I try eat it every day.
- I am really like ice creams.

Lacking to be in the progressive tenses was also found in the students' writing products. When using those tenses, they only used V-ing form. For example,

- I studying at University.
- At 2p.m. yesterday, I shopping with my mother.

#### 4.2. Noun

This is the second most common errors in this research. The students often forgot to add "s" or "es" in the plural form. This is obviously shown in the following examples.

- I ate a lot of kind of fruit.
- It has many benefit.
- She grew a lot of tree.
- There are many fruit such as plum, watermelons and durian.
- There are many pizza in the menu.

The students also misused countable and uncountable nouns. This leads to wrong quantitative expressions and articles. For instance,

- There are many rice.
- They grew much apple tree in the garden.
- Just a seconds.

Besides, the students also used wrong form of irregular plural nouns such as children's, feets, womens/mens, mices, oxens, or criterias.

#### 4.3. Subject- Verb Agreement

Subject- Verb Agreement is the third common errors as analyzing the students' written work. They tended to forget adding "s/es" to the verbs that followed by third singular subjects. The following sentences visibly illustrate for this.

- It bring a lot of profit to the family.
- It help to have a good health for them.
- Every one eat at least in their life.
- Eating mango help me a lot.

The author indicated the other misusing habit when examining the students' essays. They added "e/es" to the verbs or used "is/was" with "I" and other plural subjects as "we", "they" and the like. For instance,

- I imagines that it is small like a ball.
- I am convinced that oranges is the best fruit of my life.
- We was happy.
- Can Tho people is so dynamic.
- The other places is Cau Ngang high school.

#### 4.4. Article

This is one of the most common errors which were found in the students' written reports. The students often use "a/an" before adjectives. For example, *it is a sweet and sour or it was a green*. In addition, they omitted "a/an" before singular nouns or "the" before definite nouns and the superlatives.

- It helps to have ✓ good health for them.
- You can buy it in ✓supermarket.
- This food became one of ✓ important food on Tet holiday.

Specially, the students, in some cases, used the article with misunderstanding ways. The following sentences illustrate for this issue.

- The of the jackfruit is not as yellow as other fruits.
- The is thin and smooth.

#### 4.5. Preposition, Adjective, Relative clause

Those are three categories which the students often confused in using. In term of preposition, they performed such errors.

- When you look✓ it,...
- You eat at every day.
- This food became one of important food in Tet holiday.
- The class schedule is always full from Monday to Saturday and in Sunday to extra class.
- But with TraVinh city, life is always quiet and slow.

Using adjectives in the wrong ways was appeared in the students' essays. They often used the adjectives after the nouns or added "s" into the adjectives. Almost Vietnamese people who studies English as a foreign language make this kind of errors. It can be seen in the following examples.

- You can buy pizza delicious.
- I think it is place good eat.
- This is an ideal place for those who like life slowly and peaceful.
- This food became one of food important.
- I am trying differents kind of fruit.

Relative clause errors were performed widely in the students' essays. They misapplied between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses or relative pronouns. For example,

- I discovered that people sell a lot food like that like TraVinh city.
- I asked a few people to borrow money who were very enthusiastic help me pay.
- The next one is a city that I want to live in the most, that is Can Tho, where the climate is fresh and pleasant.
- There are two places also have students who have to go to school every morning.
- Ho Chi Minh city residents are bustling and crowded like beehives because people from many places come and live in this city, which makes this city very large and densely polluted.

#### 4.6. Comparative and Superlative, Phrasal Verb, Model Verb and Conditional

Those kinds of grammar were rarely found in the students' essays. There were some errors which are demonstrated in the following statements.

- You will have a good healthier and stronger.
- Some people arefondwithdurian.
- One banana can has a lot of tastes.
- If you busy not go to Huy store you don't worry milk tea can do at home.

## 5. Conclusion

From the findings, it can be seen that grammatical errors made by Vietnamese students are similar to other students as Thai, Malaysian and Iraqi. The interlingual transfer from native language is the obvious reason for the student's errors as Xie and Jiang (2007) figured out. Using two verbs together and adjective after nouns illustrate for this reason. That happens because, in Vietnamese, it is acceptable. Carelessness and overgeneralization are other causes for performing errors. Although this study conducted in a small university with a limited number of populations, it has a massive contribution in English teaching field.

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