ERROR ANALYSIS OF PARAGRAPH WRITING BY ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS: INSIGHTS FROM THE INTERLANGUAGE THEORY

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Abstract: This study determined some common writing errors experienced by English-major students at the intermediate level to understand some factors related to second language acquisition (SLA). The study used a qualitative approach through descriptive-exploratory, which focused on students' paragraph writing from a sample of ten students from a selected public university. Document analysis was used to construct a taxonomy of errors, including grammar, lexical, syntactic, mechanical, developmental, and interlingual which was grounded by The Interlanguage Theory by Selinker (1972). Findings indicate that that the majority of all the errors that occur are grammatical, followed by mechanical, lexical, syntactic, developmental, and interlingual errors. On the other hand, the proportions of specific error items showed the highest proportion of verb tenses and articles; meanwhile, the lowest rank was occupied by word order. The study's findings have shown a remarkable gap in the English writing skills of the students; therefore, clear instructional methods are required to close this gap. The study also had several limitations, and further studies were recommended to be undertaken to improve the students' writing and overall language competence.

Keywords: Error analysis, paragraph writing, The Interlanguage Theory by Selinker (1972).

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu phân tích các lỗi viết phổ biến của sinh viên tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học công lập, sử dụng phương pháp định tính với cách tiếp cận mô tả - khám phá. Dựa trên Lý thuyết ngôn ngữ trung gian của Selinker (1972), các lỗi được phân loại thành: ngữ pháp, từ vựng, cú pháp, lỗi cơ học, lỗi phát triển và lỗi liên ngôn. Kết quả chỉ ra lỗi ngữ pháp chiếm tỷ lệ cao nhất, tiếp theo là lỗi cơ học, từ vựng, cú pháp, lỗi phát triển và lỗi liên ngôn. Trong đó, lỗi về thì của động từ và mạo từ là phổ biến nhất, trong khi lỗi trật tự từ ít gặp hơn. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh khoảng cách đáng kể trong kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên, gợi ý sự cần thiết của các phương pháp giảng dạy hiệu quả để cải thiện chất lượng viết. Mặc dù cung cấp thông tin hữu ích, nghiên cứu vẫn tồn tại hạn chế, đòi hỏi các nghiên cứu tiếp theo nhằm tối ưu hóa việc giảng dạy và nâng cao năng lực viết của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: Phân tích lỗi, viết đoạn văn, Lý thuyết ngôn ngữ trung gian của Selinker (1972).

1. INTRODUCTION

Error analysis (EA) is indispensable in understanding second language acquisition (SLA). Mistakes do not occur by chance, but a normal occurrence as mistakes are developmental in nature of a learner [7]. In contrast to occasional mistakes, errors are consistent in absent or incomplete knowledge of L2 target language or L2 gap and provide details of how learners acquire language. This is closely related to the interlanguage theory [9], which explains that errors are a feature of

development within the language system being learned. Mistakes are also considered part of the process of acquisition, as they allow for an emphasis on the specific focus that was affected [7]. Investigating errors facilitates instructors' understanding of the learner's progression and helps adjust teaching techniques.

Regarding writing, EA assists teachers in pinpointing areas of common difficulty among L2 learners. Writing involves a high level of complexity, as learners must articulate their ideas in words and sentences that are grammatical and structural [4]. In the case of paragraph writing, students experience difficulties communicating their ideas effectively, along with grammatical and syntactical norms of the target language [4, 11]. Such errors are common as learners often experience L1 transfer, adhering to familiar language constructions when engaging in L2 text production [8]. This study investigates the ten English-major students' paragraph writing errors. The researcher sought to answer the research question: *What are the common types of errors in English paragraph writing among English-major students?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical framework

As constructed by Selinker (1983), "*interlanguage*" is one of the basic concepts in SLA [9]. It refers to the stage of construction of an L2 that is available to the learner and develops during the process of acquiring an L2. In this case, it is neither L1 nor L2 in its completeness, which suggests that interlanguage is created at a point in time but changes over time to fit more closely to the language being learned. It exhibits persistent and consistent patterns of error, which are not the result of chance but of the attempts by the learner to apply language principles. Language transfer from L1, rule overgeneralization from L2, and communication strategies are some factors associated with language interlanguage.

2.2. Error and error analysis

In SLA studies, errors have been considered important in tracking and understanding learners' progression. According to Ellis (1997), language errors can be defined as an aberration from norms [15]. Corder (1967) stressed that it is necessary to differentiate between errors and mistakes and explains that errors are produced because of a lack of knowledge, while mistakes are a failure to use known knowledge correctly [16]. Mistakes have been noted to be temporary errors that learners may be able to correct themselves, while errors expose a certain linguistic deficiency in the learner that cannot be self-corrected [11, 14]. At this point, EA can also be utilized professionally and academically since it assists fluent speakers in establishing the lapse in their students' knowledge, which requires correction [16].

2.3. The process of error analysis

EA is the systematic examination of the learner's language to establish what went wrong at the time of production and why it is so. Corder (1967) regarded this process to consist of certain sequential acts, including obtaining a learner language corpus, error recognition, error description, error causation, and error evaluation [16]. Firstly, collection involves the selection of actual language that a learner would use in real situations, which may depend on variables such as competency level, language of the transcript, production environment, etc. [16]. These possibilities, however, might influence the kind and distribution of the errors posted.

Corder (1967) deemed the process of comparison a process where learner errors are cross-examined with native speaker utterances [16]. This process focuses on two main steps: determining the types of errors existing within a language and the frequency of these errors. James (1998) also argues about the necessity of a systematic classification when he addresses the issues of error descriptions [1]. The two main taxonomies in common use are linguistics and surface structure. A linguistic taxonomy is based on traditional grammatical categories, whereas a surface structural taxonomy emphasizes the kind of alterations a learner makes on target forms. Dulay et al. (1982) differentiated four groups of surface errors: omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering [5].

2.4. Error analysis in writing skills

One of the most common kinds of mistakes that students make is connected with grammar. Students ' works find errors to grammatical categories such as tense, article, preposition, and verb tense forms are fouling, postgraduate students from Iraq made the most mistakes with prepositions, accounting for 22.1%, which is prominent in students whose first language is completely articulated differently from English [13]. Similarly, Salehi and Bahrami (2018) found other common grammatical errors in using articles and prepositions and the subject-verb agreement among Iranian students [12]. Such errors highlight that students can absorb the rules of English grammar at an advanced level, which is still very difficult.

Other issues that emerge during students' written productions are errors of word choice on the lexical level. For instance, Abebe and Deneke (2015) demonstrated that students in Oromia often made word choice errors, which may adversely affect the construction of their writing [2]. Salehi and Bahrami (2018) similarly presented that Iranian students who authored scientific articles tended to use some words incorrectly, thus lowering the quality and integrity of their scientific writing overall [12].

Another frequently found category of errors is related to sentences and word order, called syntactic errors. Amiri and Puteh (2017) observed that international postgraduate students in Malaysia found it hard to develop sentence structure, rendering their writing poorly organized [3]. Salehi and Bahrami (2018) also identified word order errors as one of the persistent problems in writing. Such types of mistakes can break the continuity of writing, and hence, the meaning intended by the author is lost for the reader [12].

Mechanical errors involving punctuation, capitalization, and spelling can also be found in student writing. For example, excessive punctuation and capitalization errors were observed in postgraduate students writing in English as an additional language [3]. Likewise, spelling and capitalization errors among students of Yogyakarta State University were factors in general writing errors [10]. Even though mechanical errors are minor, they are serious flaws that greatly impact the overall professionalism and clarity of writing.

Finally, developmental or interlanguage transfer lapses caused by the first language are also widely observed. Alfiyani (2013) has pointed out that students' essays at Yogyakarta State University are the most common mistakes made in developmental errors, followed by interlingual transfer [10]. They are errors that indicate the stage of English acquisition students are in and the application of the native language in English composition.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

Qualitative research design serves as a rich

lens that creates a window into the intricacies of language acquisition, with particular attention paid to writing errors [6]. Such a perspective is especially useful in comprehending the cognitive and linguistic factors producing errors. Through thematic analysis, researchers study language learners' approaches toward writing and find out how they deal with the language barriers posed by L2 in a foreign context. In addition, qualitative research is about contextualizing people's activities to explain the origins of writing errors, which in this case would imply the writer's first language, the writer's level of education, and the use of English grammar and syntax.

3.2. Setting

The participants of this study were ten third-year English major students of one of the public universities that has branches in Hanoi and Nam Dinh. All the participants are taking the Writing 3 class in Hanoi, working with the course book Great Writing 3, National Geographic Learning. The group comprises 60% females and 40% males, aged about 20-22 years, and have studied English for 5-9 years. Their writing papers were chosen from the pool of active class test papers. Regarding the students' writing in English, about 40% often write, 30% sometimes, and 30% hardly ever. This discrepancy in writing intensity is rather important as it may determine the errors in the students' written paragraph writing and the number of errors in the students' written paragraph writing. A bold figure of 90% of these respondents claimed class work as the primary objective of writing in English, with only 10% indulging in writing for content creation.

3.3. Data collection instrument

Students' language and writing competencies can be evaluated and interpreted through the systematic assessment of the document analysis. Students were expected to write a paragraph of some 150 words in 20 minutes as a paper-based test. This tool aimed to capture how students wrote their paragraphs with time constraints and, therefore, portrayed their writing competence. Document analysis permits an exploration of language, its organizations, and coherence, which is a prerequisite to understanding the cultural aspects that are the core of the students' thought processes.

3.4. Procedure of the study

The Error Analysis Model proposed by Corder (1967) with five distinct steps, namely collection, identification, description, explanation, and evaluation [16].

The study of 10 paragraphs written by English-majored students through the Error Analysis framework is conducted more or less structured. It commenced with gathering coherent data from the adolescent young adults' composed paragraphs in the same given timeframe. Then, the researcher assessed the presence of errors as outlined in rubrics that were constructed prior to the study, then proceeded to describe these errors in terms of grammatical, vocabulary, and content concerns. Next, the focus was shifted to elaborating the faults, considering the aspects of L1 transfer and some aspects of the L2 gap in vocabulary potential. In the last stage of the study, the errors were also judged in terms of the level of writing clarity, which was distorted by these errors.

3.5. Data analysis

The analysis consists of examination, coding, and theme categorization of the writing papers to find different types of errors. Grammatical mistakes were grouped into problems with tenses, articles, prepositions, verb form usage, and respondents' knowledge of English grammar abilities. Lexica was addressed, and

mistakes were made regarding words and collocations, which implied vocabulary selection and appropriateness difficulties. Syntactic mistakes were made concerning sentence making and word placement, which showed an inability to write meaningful and grammatical sentences. Other mechanical errors were also considered, such as punctuation marks, capitalization of the first letter of a word, and spelling of the words, to see how the students paid attention to detail and other aspects of writing. Also, developmental and interlingual errors were analyzed to determine the extent to which the students' first language interfered with English composition.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Overall types of errors made by students in their paragraph writing

Figure 1 indicates the overall types of errors made by the participants in their writing paragraphs. In reviewing, grammatical errors are the most frequent, comprising 34% of all errors. This finding is consistent with Salehi and Bahrami (2018); and Subakir et al. (2015), which also identified grammar as a significant challenge [12, 13]

The frustration with low lexical resources is corroborated by the high lexical errors (21%). These errors could be reiterated further, including word choice; however, syntactic errors would reasonably take about 10%, an accepted trend, as Amiri and Puteh (2017) noted [3]. Amiri and Puteh (2017); and Alfiyani (2013) reinforced these results, with 26% of mechanical errors caused by punctuation and capitalization errors and their mention of the high prevalence of such errors [3, 10]. Developmental and Interlingual errors stand at 9%, which are associated with language interference by the mother tongue and correspond to the theory of interlanguage. There is, hence, a correct understanding as these patterns indicate that errors are systematic in the sense that they are the development of language competence among learners [7].

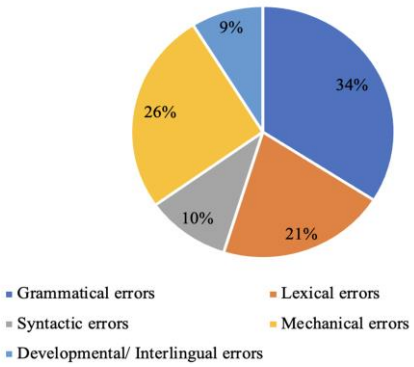


Figure 1. Overall types of errors made by students in their paragraph writing

As such, this paper finds it imperative to further assess students' errors by looking closely at the overall types of errors students make. Figure 2 also identifies the individual erroneous aspects under different categories.

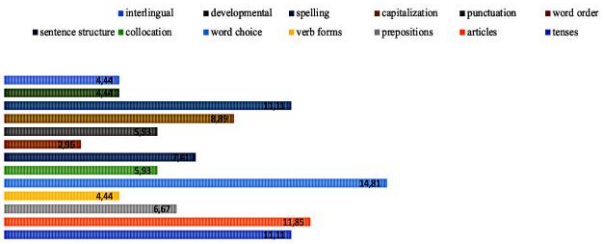


Figure 2. Particular error types in each categorization

Tense errors were the highest (14.31%), thus showing the most difficulty with verb usage. On the other hand, very few common errors were made, such as word order (2.96%), verb form, collocation, interlingual, and developmental errors (4.44%, respectively). Other article errors included errors with articles (11.85%), prepositions, punctuation, and incorrect word use (11.11%), which have been equally problematic. The next part will elaborate and illustrate the examples related to specific categories of errors.

4.2. Specific categories of errors made by students in their paragraph writing

Grammatical errors

The analysis of grammatical errors in student writing reveals several underlying causes compared to the literature. Tense errors such as *"Vietnam get liberation"* suggest difficulties with verb conjugation and overgeneralization of present forms or influence of the students' native languages [15]. Prepositional errors, for example, *"in 2/9/1945"* instead of *"on 2/9/1945"* demonstrated the students' difficulty with spatial and temporal prepositions. Such errors were what Subakir et al. (2015) identified in interlingual conflicts experienced by learners of different languages [13]. The same difficulty with irregular verb form mastery, such as *"independent"* for *"became independent,"* is a typical problem attributed to the overgeneralization of regular conjugation patterns.

Lexical errors

Lexical errors, such as incorrect word choice and collocation, are prevalent and can significantly impact the clarity and precision of communication. For example, making such errors as *"freedom country"* instead of *"a free country"* indicates a lack of understanding of the meanings or forms of words. Such errors might be ascribed to a deficiency in vocabulary from which some respondents suffered or were unfamiliar with words that sound alike. Abebe and Deneke (2015) reported that lexical errors are usually due to a lack of vocabulary [2]. Such errors demonstrated insufficient knowledge of idiomatic expressions in English. This weakness can be explained by the dominant language of the learner's L1 or by direct idiosyncratic translation of such phrase [3]. Such lexical discrepancies are consistent with Selinker's Interlanguage theory which posits that errors are elements of the learners' developing language system in learning and trying out new language rules in different contexts.

Syntactic errors

Syntactic errors, such as sentence structure and word order issues, are common in language learning and can hinder effective communication. For example, *"People in my country worried that the water might come to your house"* instead of *"People in my country were concerned that the water would flood the houses*." There are problems with the construction of the sentence. Such errors occur due to the lack of knowledge of the English structure and interference of the learner's mother tongue. Others refer to the correct order of constituents in a sentence, for example, *"so around by a river"* instead of *"surrounded by a river."* Learners tend to transfer L1 syntactic patterns onto the target language, which is a fact that was also mentioned by Ellis (1997), who noted that interlanguage can play an important role in second language acquisition [15].

Mechanical errors

Mechanical errors, such as issues with punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, are frequent in written language and can disrupt clarity and readability. For example, interruptive commas, in *"Almost, everyone knew,"* may create uncertainty and doubt in readers as to the sentence's intended meaning. These errors may also include failure to respect cases such as *"Include my country"* instead of *"Including my country."* Phonetic approximations may be taken to explain spelling *"accuracy,"* errors like *"Typoon"* for *"typhoon", "Jult"* for *"July." The* order of words brings complexity to syntactic errors, whereas the basic principles of writing are targeted for mechanical errors. While both errors can affect clear and effective

communication, the latter type can be easily corrected using technology and diligent proofreading.

Developmental/ Interlingual errors

Developmental and interlingual errors are significant in understanding SLA, as they offer insights into the learner's evolving linguistic competence. Examples such as *"Turned about village"* or *"The a younger"* can be considered developmental errors because they showcase the stage in language acquisition when one attempts to construct sentences using different rules of language that one has not yet fully mastered. Interlingual errors like *"People of my country"* and *"the water may come to your house"* are other errors caused by the misuse of L2, which is deeply embedded in the learner's L1. This concurs with Selinker's (1983)notion of interlanguage, which explains that during language acquisition, learners develop a language system that has two major influences from L1 and L2 [9]. It is said that errors are not random but consistent and specific to the current level of development of the learner [7]. While it is defined that errors and mistakes differently as he asserts that mistakes pertain to one-off failures to carry out something right [16]. Comprehending these errors in advance is important as they require different teaching focus. Errors that occur in L2 are mostly directly attributable to the transfer of L1, and errors that are targeted can be erased or reduced the learners' fluency and accuracy improve [8].

5. CONCLUSION

The research aims to examine some of the writing difficulties encountered by second-year students majoring in English, with special reference to the developmental and interlingual errors that fit the interlanguage theory proposed by [9]. Key findings indicate that grammatical errors were the most common, followed by mechanical, lexical, syntactic, and developmental/ interlingual errors. Regarding errors taking specific items, the results indicated the highest proportion is verb tenses and articles; meanwhile, the lowest rank is word order. The developmental and interlingual errors analysis focused on L1 transfer and traced it in students' writings as stages of their immature interlanguage system. These findings suggest that although students have considerable knowledge of English grammar and sentence structure, instructional strategies should be adopted to target specific areas of concern and improve students' writing abilities and general language skills.

Yet, there are a few limitations. The research was based on document analysis, which did not allow for exploring the reasons for students' difficulties. The lack of additional instruments, such as interviews or questionnaires, prevented understanding the degree to which cognitive and subjective aspects of writing. With these additional components, the study failed to investigate entirely other factors accounting for the errors, such as individual learning strategies or motivational factors. In such case, they suggested a broader scope of the research that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research. Furthermore, comparative examples can be attained on the relevance of L1 differences in English writing skills by expanding the number of participants to linguistics students of different L1. Such studies could generate more specific techniques and better instructional strategies would help learners overcome certain linguistic problems.

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