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Common grammartical errors in English writing - A case study with second-year students of information technology at HAUI

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Article info.	ABSTRACT
  Keywords 	*This study is conducted to find out common grammatical errors in English writing paragraphs made by the second-year Information Technology students at Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI). Quantitative method was used with data collection instruments including survey questionnaires for seven teachers and 667 students, and 125 randomly chosen students' weekly paragraph writings in the study. The findings revealed four most common grammatical errors, namely verb tense, sentence structure, verb form and subject-verb agreement. Besides, the data analysis results also indicated some causes and suitable error correction types to help students avoid these kinds of errors. This paper hopes to provide useful information for those who would like to find out effective ways to eliminate grammatical errors in writing in general and in writing paragraphs in particular.*

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

English is the most commonly used language among foreign language speakers, particularly in the context of globalization and integration. Among four English skills, namely speaking, listening, reading and writing, the last one is considered as a difficult skill requiring much energy and practice for almost second language learners if they aim to master it. To achieve the target of communication, writers are expected not only to write coherently and cohesively, but also perform the rules of grammar and syntax. Hence, writing is considered as the most complex and difficult skill to master.

In the writing process, it sounds undeniable that writing in a foreign language cannot be separated from making errors. In Vietnam, it can be seen that Vietnamese learners commit a great number of errors, especially in grammar when they write in English regardless of their level (Bui Thi Tram, 2010). Students often confront with difficulties in using tenses, articles, sentence structures and so on (Nguy Van Thuy, 2010; Nguyen Thi Duyen, 2011). However, they seem to pay inadequate attention to grammatical error correction in writing English, which might affect their writing seriously next times.

Similar problems appear to be confronted by non-English majored students in Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI). This study focusing on common grammatical errors in writing paragraphs faced by the second-year Information Technology students at HaUI will contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning writing in English for teachers and students there.

1.2 Literature review

So far there have been numerous definitions of writing. According to Byrne (1997) "writing is producing a sequence of sentences arranged in a particular order and linked together in certain ways". In other words, a writing or a text includes sentences arranged in a coherent and grammatical way to connect the ideas together. As for Carroll and Wilson (2007), writing is defined as the act of expressing ideas, thoughts, and feelings to other people in writing symbols so that readers can understand the ideas conveyed. Nunan (2003:p.88) has the same viewpoint with these two scholars above and claims that writing is a mental act of inventing ideas and thinking about how to express and organize them into statements and paragraphs that will be comprehensible to a reader. In short, despite numerous writing definitions, it can be understood in the simplest way that writing is an activity of arranging words, phrases, and sentences in papers to express writers' ideas, emotion or anything that exists in their head. Besides, coherence and cohesion are important aspects of academic writing. Craik (2000: p.117) states that an effective paragraph needs consistently to contain four elements namely a topic sentence, unity, coherence, and sufficient development. In this sense, a well-written paragraph needs to feature a clear topic sentence, of a topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. It conveys only one main idea, and should be arranged logically and coherently (Bednar, 2014). It is difficult for the second language learners, especially Vietnamese learners, to produce sentences correctly by means of well-structured and understandable sentences in English. Therefore, making errors, typically grammatical errors in paragraphs, seems unavoidable.

There are few studies on grammatical errors in Vietnam. Most of them show that grammatical errors are the most common among written errors such as style, expression, word choice, lexical items and so on. For example, according to Nguy Van Thuy (2010), preposition, article, verb tense, verb form, pluralization and subject-verb agreement errors are the most common types of errors made by first-year students at Nghe An Economics and Technology College. Interestingly, they all belong to grammatical errors. Bui Thi Tram (2010) illustrates that English grammar is problematic for the first-year mainstream students at the Faculty of English language teacher education, Hanoi University of International Studies and Foreign Languages due to the dominance of grammatical errors in writing. Similarly, Nguyen Thi Duyen (2011) also reveals that English

majored students at Hung Yen University of Technology and Education make a great number of errors in writing with high frequency. They often commit common grammatical errors, including the use of verbs, pronouns, articles, and sentence structures, particularly correct verb forms and verb tenses. It can be found out that Vietnamese students tend to struggle with grammatical errors compared to other written errors. It is really true to the non-English majored students in general and the Information technology sophomores in particular at HaUI. It is because their English ability is limited, and even a lot of students did not learn English in secondary or high schools. That is the reason why grammatical errors were classified into six types, namely verb tense, verb form, subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, article and pluralization, which are adapted from both Nguy Van Thuy's research (2010) and Nguyen Thi Duyen 's (2011).

There is a variety of reasons why learners commit grammatical errors. Researchers provide different causes of grammatical errors due to their distinctive perspectives of error classification. In Ancker's English Teaching Forum (2000: 20-25), he states that the learners often make errors because of the interference from the native language, overgeneralization, incomplete knowledge of the target language and its complexity. Brown (2000: 218) agrees with Ancker about causes of grammatical errors, but he classifies into two main types of causes: interlingual – interference from the first language and intralingual – difficulties coming from the second language. Richards (as cited in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005:232) divides intralingual interference into four groups as follows: over-generalization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concept hypothesized. Unlike those researchers, Norrish (as cited in Yulianti, 2007) thinks that non-native English learners make errors because of three main causes, namely carelessness, first language interference, and translation. All in all, each scholar has different ways to explain causes of errors. It was noted that students are more likely to use word-for-word translation for expressing their ideas. For instance, numerous students tend to write as follows "I very like it" instead of "I like it very much". Or regarding the rule "adding "s" after verb if the subject is the third person singular" in English, some students make such errors as "it help me a lot in studying" instead of right form which is "It helps me a lot in studying". In this study, therefore, causes of the students' grammatical writing errors were analyzed as the way Brown and Richards do.

Error correction is also an important stage in writing process. Research evidence on error correction in the second language writing classes shows that error correction can assist students to acquire their accuracy in a short term. As correction is a way to remind students of the English standard forms, it will help them be aware of what errors they have made, in order to avoid similar ones next time (Ashwell, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Brown & Rodgers, 2002; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). Numerous studies on the effectiveness of error correction types have been done. Mangelsdorf (1992), for example, investigating freshman in an American university, found that peer correction is useful for organizing, revising content, and sharing ideas. Self-correction increases the sense of audience awareness and student autonomy (Leki,1991). Meanwhile, Zhang (1995), Ferris & Roberts (2001) and Chandler (2003) all prove that the students still preferred teacher correction which allows them to identify their own errors and improve their writing skill in the target language. In general, there are three common kinds of error correction including teacher correction, peer correction, and self-correction. Each kind is advantageous to some extent. This study is expected to discover the effective error correction technique(s) to help the target students avoid committing grammatical errors in their writings.

1.3 Aim and objectives of the study

The general aim of the study is to investigate common grammatical errors in writing paragraphs made by the second-year Information Technology students at HaUI. The study objectives include:

− To examine common grammatical errors in paragraphs;

− To find out the factors leading to these grammatical errors;

− To investigate type(s) of suitable error correction to eliminate students' grammatical errors.

In order to achieve these objectives, three following research questions will be addressed:

(1) What are common English grammatical errors in writing paragraphs faced by the second-year Information Technology students at HaUI?

(2) What are causes of grammatical errors in writing paragraphs?

(3) What type(s) of error correction is considered as most effective to help them avoid grammatical errors in writing paragraphs?

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative method was used in the study. Collection instruments include survey questionnaires for students and for teachers) and students' weekly writings.

The students have ten weeks for online and offline English lessons, therefore, so data collection was conducted within week 8 and week 9 of the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic year (from February 25 to March 09, 2019). In fact, there are 757 second-year non-English majored students at HaUI taking a course in English for Information Technology 4. Copies of survey questionnaires for students (including 10 questions) were prepared to deliver to students at 25 different classes. However, only 667 (88.1%) students officially joined this study because of 51 students' absence and 39 students' invalid answers. Their English level is expected to reach A2 according to CEFR-VN at the end of the course. In this study, they were asked about the importance of writing skill, the frequency of making grammatical errors, their common types of grammatical errors, causes of errors, and their view on the effectiveness of error correction techniques and how often they get techniques from their teachers.

Another survey questionnaire including 8 questions were given to seven lecturers of English for Information Technology 4 with the purpose of collecting their view about the importance of writing skill, students' grammatical errors, causes as well as their suggestions on what should be done to help students avoid grammatical errors. These lecturers have ever been teaching the student participants; therefore, they probably have a good understanding of students' grammatical writing errors. The results gained from the survey questionnaire for teachers will contribute greatly to the feasibility and effectiveness of the study.

Both types of survey questionnaires are adapted and edited from Nguyen Thi Duyen's thesis (2011).

In order to achieve desired results and deal with the three research questions, 125 paragraph writings with teachers' correction were randomly collected from 25 different classes (five writings of each class). These are weekly writing tasks, for which students were asked to themselves write short paragraphs (100-120 words) about different topics in their sample papers at the end of each online unit, and submit their work to their teacher at the beginning of the next lesson.

SPSS was used to calculate and convert the data. They were transferred to numerical form or percentage and displayed in figures and tables for analysis and discussion.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Common grammatical errors (in writing)

In order to answer the first research question, the results gained from survey questionnaires and students' writings collected weekly will be discussed below.

When being asked about their opinions on what types of grammatical errors made by students, surprisingly teachers and students have a dissimilar look on the most common error. In terms of students' perceptions, the proportion of verb form errors accounted for the largest percentage, followed by verb tense. Remarkably, the rate of students committing sentence structure errors was the lowest. In comparison with students' opinion, all teachers affirmed that verb tense and sentence structure were the most serious errors.

Table 1: Teachers' and students' view on students' common grammatical errors

Grammatical error	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Sentence structure	87	6.3	7	22.6
Article	126	9.1	2	6.4
Subject-verb agreement	252	18.2	5	16.1
Verb tense	310	22.4	7	22.6
Verb form	439	31.7	6	19.4
Pluralization	171	12.3	4	12.9
Total	1,385	100	31	100

To find out an accurate answer for the first research question, the results will be compared with data analysis of students' weekly writings. All errors in their randomly collected writings were examined and categorized into 17 types of error, which were presented in the table below:

Table 2: Comparative data about written errors made by students

No.		Types of error	Students' weekly writings	
			Number	Percentage
1		Pluralization	49	7.4
2		Subject-verb agreement	79	12
3		Sentence structure	96	14.5
4		Article	12	1.8
5		Preposition	25	3.8
6	Grammar	Verb form	83	12.6
7		Verb tense	115	17.5
8		Singular/plural noun	21	3.2
9		Pronoun	7	1.1
10		Run-on sentence	64	9.7
11		Comparison	7	1.1
12		Relative clause	27	4.1
13		Possession	5	0.7
14		Spelling	9	1.4
15		Expression	36	5.5
16		Word choice	24	3.6
		Total	659	100

Table 2 shows that the most common error in these papers was grammar occupying nearly 90%, 10 times higher than that of three other types of written errors. The common errors in their writings were verb tense, sentence structure, verb form and subject-verb agreement in descending order, and they all belong to grammatical errors. Table 3 is a specific description of typical examples of grammatical errors in students' writings.

Table 3: Typical examples of grammatical errors in students' writings

Grammatical errors	Examples
Preposition	Listen music. You spend too much time to surfing internet.
Articles	It has six-axis sensing system. LG KG320 is a input device I like most.
Verb form	I have to studying a lot of subjects. It is used for program.
Pluralization	It is compatible with most hardwares and application softwares.
Verb tense	When the connection failed, no one can work. You must very patient to fix bugs.
Sentence structure	When used it I feel it run fast. I like the most is USB.
Subject–verb agreement	It also have some constrains. Networks is popular with everybody.
Possession	It's color is black.
Singular/plural noun	I must study a lot of subject. There are different type of network.
Pronoun	Being a software engineer is not easy, you must write programs, then test it.
Run-on sentence	I really like it because it is very great and vivid color but this screen has delay with 14ms so it's not suitable for playing games.
Comparison	I usually use my laptop so the OS is the most.
Relative clause	Computer networking has become one of the most successful way of sharing information, where all computers or other devices are wirelessly linked together.

In sum, the data analysis results from the two survey questionnaires and 125 students' weekly writings are quite similar in terms of common grammatical errors confronted by the Information Technology sophomores at HaUI. Verb tense, sentence structure, verb form and subject-verb agreement were the students' most common grammatical errors in their weekly writings. It could be deduced that the students' grammar knowledge is limited and needs to be improved.

3.2 Causes of grammatical errors in writing paragraphs

Data collected from the two survey questionnaires revealed that both the teachers and students considered interference from the mother tongue as the main reason for grammatical errors in writing paragraphs.

Table 4: Teachers and students' viewpoint on causes of grammatical errors

Causes of grammatical errors	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Mother tongue interference	633	49.6	7	36.8
Overgeneralization	76	6	1	5.3
Ignorance of rule restrictions	284	22.3	5	26.3
Incomplete application of rules	145	11.4	3	15.8
False concepts hypothesized	137	10.7	3	15.8
Total	1,275	100	19	100

As can be seen in Table 4, all seven teachers choose the first option, and nearly a half of the students agreed with their teachers' assessment. This was also demonstrated clearly in students' weekly writings. The students tended to comply with Vietnamese grammatical rules to write in English. For example, a student wrote: "The first problem, it requires an expensive setup" to express disadvantages of network. In this sentence, the student made a verb tense, which was corrected by the teacher as follows "The first problem is that it requires an expensive setup." Another example is that "I very like it, I use

it to play video games." It can be said that students have a tendency to translate their ideas word-by-word, which resulted in grammatical errors such as verb tense, verb form and sentence structure.

In brief, it is necessary for them to know how to avoid those grammatical errors, and it is worth for teachers at FFL (HaUI) to find out useful methods to support students in solving their grammatical errors.

3.3 Suitable error correction techniques to help students avoid grammatical errors in writing paragraphs

The results from data collection of two survey questionnaires indicated that the seven teachers often underlined errors and corrected them in order to assist students in eliminating grammatical errors in writing. This also was demonstrated obviously the teachers' feedback in students' writing portfolios where students' errors were underlined or circled by red color and then corrected quite carefully. Therefore, it is truly proved that a significant proportion of students (74%) asserted they often got teacher correction (Fig.1).
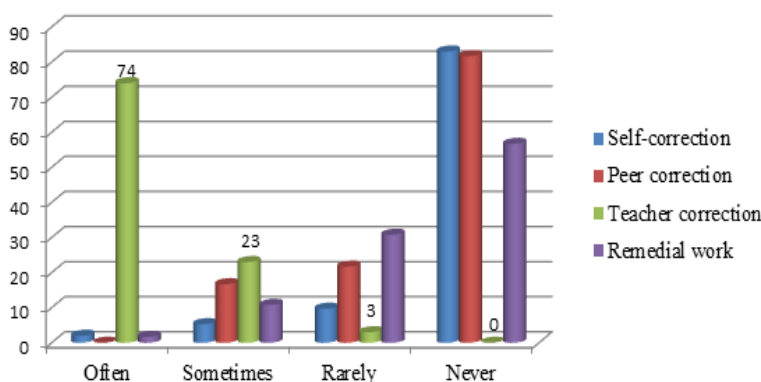

Fig. 1: Students' view on the frequency of using types of error correction

When receiving writings with teacher correction, most of the students also gave the answer that they looked at the marks and errors indicated by teachers; a small percentage of them (17.7%) examined all errors and self-corrected them; and a very small proportion of them (8.9%) looked at the given marks; and only 4.1% examined all errors, compared with classmates' work and corrected them together respectively. This will be displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Students' reaction to grammatical errors

Students' reaction	Number	Percentage
Only look at the given marks	67	8.9
Look at the marks and errors indicated by teachers	525	69.3
Examine all errors and self-correct them	134	17.7
Examine all errors, compare with classmates' work and correct them together	31	4.1
Total	757	100

It seems that the writings with teacher correction are helpful for the students. They might know where exactly mistakes are, thereby drawing out beneficial lessons to write better next times. That might be the reason why both of the teachers and students gave the greatest interest in teacher correction with the rate of 36.8% and 69.6%, respectively when being asked about what error correction technique(s) can be considered effective to help eliminate grammatical errors in writing. Besides, 31.6% of the teachers also highly appreciated the importance of remedial work in correcting and improving the students' writings, whereas only 13.1% of the students chose this option. Surprisingly, none of the students and only two teachers answered that self-correction is a good technique to help reduce grammatical errors (Table

6). The researcher quite totally agreed with their opinions. Self-correction can partly improve students' writing skills, but she makes sure that few students have their own awareness of doing it, and few can find and correct their grammatical errors by themselves. This might be due to their limited English proficiency, particularly their grammatical knowledge.

Table 6: Students' and teachers' view on effective error correction technique(s)

Types of error correction	Students		Teachers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Self-correction	0	0	2	10.5
Peer correction	166	17.3	4	21.1
Teacher correction	667	69.6	7	36.8
Remedial work	125	13.1	6	31.6
Total	958	100	19	100

In general, both teachers and students regarded error correction, especially teacher correction, as the most effective type to improve students' writing skill and limit grammatical errors. The students recognized the significance of teacher correction, which its percentage made up the highest rate as opposed to the remaining error correction techniques. When teachers scored students' writing, 100% of them underlined errors and corrected them. They also put an emphasis on remedial work, but a small number of students examined all errors, and wrote again after getting the teachers' feedback about writing errors. Clearly, it is necessary to ask students to give the second version to the teacher in the hope that their writing skill will be improved.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

The study is in an attempt to investigate common grammatical errors in writing paragraphs confronted by the second-year students of Information Technology at HaUI. The data analysis results of survey questionnaires and students' writings show that grammar was the most common error in the students' writings. The four most serious grammatical errors are verb tense, sentence structure, verb form and subject-verb agreement. These results partly match with those from Nguy Van Thuy's study (2010) and Nguyen Thi Duyen's (2011) mentioned above. The data collected from the students and teachers' questionnaires demonstrate that the interference of mother tongue was the main reason for these grammatical errors. This was shown clearly in the students' writing as above described. They often obeyed Vietnamese grammatical rules to write in English, which resulted in silly grammatical errors in writing. Moreover, an incomplete application of rules and ignorance of rule restrictions were also negative impacts on students' writing. It was also found that all of the participants agreed that teacher correction is regarded as the most effective technique to help students avoid grammatical errors, thereby improving their writing competence.

It is hoped that this study will be a useful source for teachers to have an outlook on students' common grammatical errors and causes of their students' poor writing proficiency so that they will know what should be done to assist students to write effectively by means of making use of appropriate error correction techniques. For students, the study is expected to be an advantageous reference to understand what grammatical errors they often have in writing process. Then, they will be aware what they need to do to avoid these types of error, thereby improving their writing skills.

4.2 Pedagogical implications

To help students minimize grammatical writing errors, it is necessary for the teachers to require students to have remedial work or write the second or final draft of their writing. This greatly increases the effectiveness of teacher correction. In addition, writing teachers in general and teachers belong to Division of Non-English major at HaUI in particular can deploy teacher correction, peer correction and remedial work in an attempt to correct students' writing errors by creating classes in Google Classroom where teachers can create and organize writing tasks quickly, provide feedback efficiently and communicate with their classes easily.

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