



An Analysis of Grammatical Errors in English Essays Written by the Undergraduate Students at Rangsit University

Nattapon Kuptanaroaj

Department of English, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

Corresponding author, E-mail: nattapon.k@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

The objective of this research was to identify the types of grammatical errors in the essays written by the students. The data in this study were gathered from cause and effect essays written by eighty third-year Thai students majoring in English at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University. Each student was assigned to write a four-paragraph expository essay comprising one introductory paragraph, two body paragraphs, and one concluding paragraph. The error analysis framework created by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) was used as a guideline to conduct this study. The process of error analysis consisted of the collection of students' essays, the identification of grammatical errors, the description of grammatical errors, the explanation of grammatical errors, and the error evaluation. The descriptive statistics used in this study were the frequency and percentage. The results indicated that there were 1055 errors categorized into eleven types of grammatical errors. According to the results, sentence fragment was found as the most frequently committed type of grammatical errors (218 errors or 20.57%). The second most frequent error was the error in the use of subject-verb agreement (168 errors or 15.85%), followed by the error in the use of noun endings (144 errors or 13.58%), while the type of grammatical errors with the lowest frequency of occurrence was the error in word order (16 errors or 1.51%).

Keywords: *Error analysis, English writing, grammatical errors*

1. Introduction

For EFL learners, writing is a vital skill which they need to utilize when they would like to communicate with both English native and non-native speakers in various ways, in addition, writing skill increase its necessity to educational aspect as well as professional aspects in non-native countries. Apart from the interaction and profession, writing skill is an important tool enhancing learners to express their knowledge and ideas in a written form. Moreover, the ability of writing skill provides learners with a great understanding of the way English is written. Writing skill provides learners with a chance to apply their linguistic system and knowledge of structure they have learned to their writing work. That is, while writing, learners are required to create correct sentences or paragraphs based on grammatical rules. Unlike speaking skills, learners are able to spend longer time to produce the language while writing. They not only use the knowledge of grammar and sentence structures but also consider what they have been learning. (Hughey, Wormuth, Hartfiel, & Jacobs, 1983; Oshima & Hogue, 1999; Harmer, 2004; Harmer, 2007)

Most undergraduate students are required to write various genres of writing, such as business writing, essay composition, etc. The reason why writing is one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners is that a good writing requires diverse components including morphology, vocabulary and sentence structures (Cumming, 2001). Grammar is also considered a significant part towards language learning, especially writing skill. Provided that language learners carelessly violate the rules of grammar, communication will suffer. Considered as a set of rules for choosing words and putting words together to make sensible sentences, grammar is a vital aspect in language learning and teaching. Grammar, furthermore, encourages learners to realize the nature of language. Therefore, without grammar, language does not exist, and people would have partial structures to express their ideas and to communicate as well (Azar, 2007; Peng, 2007; Harmer, 2007).

According to the importance of writing and grammar aforementioned, EFL learners are inevitable to encounter a number of difficulties while doing writing tasks both inside and outside classroom. However, one of the major barriers impeding learners' writing progress and performances of their writing ability is grammatical errors. Crystal (1985) defines error as a term used in psycholinguistics referring to mistakes in



spontaneous speaking or writing attributable to a malfunctioning of the neuromuscular commands from the brain. Brown (2000) also points out that an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner, while Norrish (1983) and Richards (1974) define an error as a systematic deviation occurring when a learner has not learnt some topics and consistently done those topics wrongly. Errors referring to systematic errors occur among second language learners when they produce the second language. James (as cited in Sompong, 2014) also reveals that language learners who use incorrect language are able to correct their errors after they have knowledge on the topic. Therefore, errors are unavoidable for L2 learners who learn English language, especial writing skill.

Many scholars categorize errors into different types. According to Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009), they determine the error classifications based on surface structure. There are four categories consisting of omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. Omission errors are characterized by the absence of an item that must be there in a well-formed utterance such as grammatical morphemes such as plural, past tense, etc. Opposite to omission errors, addition errors are characterized by the presence of an item which should not appear in a well-formed utterance. Misformation errors are characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure such as a wrong form of irregular verb. Misordering errors are characterized by the incorrect placement of a word in a well-formed utterance such as a wrong position of adjective modifying a noun. James (as cited in Sompong, 2014) also classifies errors into two types comprising linguistic category and surface structure taxonomy. First, linguistic category classification identifies errors in terms of linguistic categories in the overall system of the target language such as errors found in phonology, grammar, lexis, text or discourse and the forms of the auxiliary system, passive sentence complements, the class of a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, or determiner. The second type of the errors is pertinent to the surface structure taxonomy which resembles the taxonomy previously categorized by Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009). It comprises omission, addition, misinformation and misordering, whereas Odlin (1989) classifies the errors into four levels. The first level is grammar level feasibly divided into three aspects including word order, relative clause and negation. The second level is phonetic level. The third is lexical level including morphology and semantics. The last level is discourse level which is related to politeness and coherence.

Apart from the types of errors, the causes of errors are also the points language instructors should contemplate. Many linguists studying how the errors occur classify the causes of errors into two types consisting of interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer. According to interlingual transfer, Richards (1974), Brown (2000) and Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009) reveal that interlingual transfer is the system in the brain when language learners try to use the structure of their first language in order to produce the target language. This can be called mother-tongue interference (L1). Before L2 learners clearly understand and are familiar with the system of the second language, they possibly produce the target language by applying the linguistic system of L1. For example, word order is one of the errors caused by mother-tongue interference affecting the writing performance of Thai learners. According to a sample of errors investigated by Khumphee and Yodkamlue (2017), the incorrect statement, “You must read books English and watch movies English.” shows that the learner applied the rule as to word order of Thai linguistic system to English linguistic system. The corrected statement should be “You must read English books and watch English movies.” This error could occur owing to word-for-word translation from Thai into English. Erdogan (2005) points out that interlingual errors are considered as signs the learner is internalizing and investigating the system of the new language. Another cause of errors refers to intralingual transfer. Brown (2000) notes that intralingual transfer happens after learners acquire the knowledge of the new linguistic system of the target language. Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009) also point out that errors are caused by carelessness or the lack of knowledge of the rules of the language. According to Richard (1974), there are four classifications of the cause of errors including overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of the rules, and false concept hypothesized. The first cause is overgeneralization which happens when learners produce a different structure based on their knowledge of the structure of the target language. The incorrect use of irregular verb is one of the grammatical points



caused by overgeneralization. Boonrod, Tipayasuparat and Somsilp (2018) stated that learners put “-ed” at the end of most verb in past tense because they could not differentiate the differences between the regular verbs and the irregular verbs. The second cause is ignorance of rule restrictions. With reference to this cause, L2 learners do not follow the structure of the target language. They apply a rule of the target language in the context of a sentence where it is not needed. According to this statement, “The boy whom I saw him last week...”, the pronoun “him” is not necessary. The third cause is incomplete application of the rules which occurs when learners apply the rules to a context; however, the rule is not yet complete. The final cause is false concepts hypothesized which refers to faulty comprehension of distinction in the target language owing to poor gradation of teaching materials leading to the confusion. For example, learners use the present simple tense instead of present perfect tense. In conclusion, the two main causes of errors made by L2 learners are mostly due to lack of the knowledge of linguistic systems and the differences between first language and second language.

Related to the types and the causes of errors mentioned, it is imperative for the instructors to study and analyze errors found in learners’ writing tasks. There are many scholars studying errors, and they called this process “error analysis”. Brown (2000) and Corder (1981) suggest that we could observe, analyze and classify errors in order to understand and acquire the evidence of the system of the language that learners use. Norrish (1983), moreover, mentions that error analysis is considered a beneficial process for language instructors who are able to comprehend the common types of errors made by learners and also know how to help learners to avoid making errors. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) explains the process of error analysis consisting of collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors and error evaluation. The first step is collection of a sample of learner language. When collecting data, instructors should consider the purpose of the collection and collect the data pertinent to the research objective. The second step refers to identification of errors. Instructors investigate the errors and identify whether or not it is an error based on grammatical rules. The third step refers to description of errors. Instructors define the types of errors. It is possible to describe the errors based on a descriptive grammar of a target language such as verb tense, adjective, etc. Moreover, errors could be described by surface structure taxonomy such as omission, addition, etc. The fourth step is explanation of errors. This step shows the factors affecting learners to produce errors such as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, etc. The last step is error evaluation. Instructors evaluate and draw a conclusion on the gathered results and suggested which points should be taught in class.

Error analysis plays a significant role in language teaching and learning especially writing skills. Corder (1981) reveals the advantages of error analysis for instructors and researchers. For teachers, error analysis helps instructors to know the types of errors that learners encounter and understand what points learners have already learnt. Furthermore, for researchers, error analysis provides evidence of how learners acquire the target language and what strategies they use to discover the language points. Ellis (2008) indicates that error analysis is the study of the language acquisition process. Besides, it can specify the strategies used by learners to acquire language. Consequently, error analysis has become an indispensable part in EFL teaching and learning.

A number of previous research studies investigating the factors contributing to writing problems reveal that grammatical error is one of the major problems of Thai students’ writing tasks (Srinon, 1999; Chownahe, 2000; Srichai, 2002; Na-ngam, 2005; Iamsiu, 2014; Khumphee & Yodkamlue, 2017; Boonrod, Tipayasuparat & Somsilp, 2018). To improve the students’ writing skills based on grammar and to prepare the students for essay writing, it is imperative to know the major problems which the students are faced with; accordingly, the researcher conducted this research study to investigate the grammatical errors in the essays written by the undergraduate students.



2. Objective

To identify the types of grammatical errors in the essays written by undergraduate students

3. Materials and Methods

The data in this study were collected from the essays written by eighty third-year Thai students majoring in English at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University. They enrolled on ENG332 course (Writing 2), a compulsory course for all English major students, in the second semester of the academic year 2017. In this course, the students were taught how to write essays including cause and effect essays, comparison and contrast essays, and argumentative essays. The genre of essay chosen for this study was cause and effect due to the fact that this genre was the first assignment; therefore, the essays written by the students would provide the researcher with clear sources of errors for the investigation. The students were assigned to write a four-paragraph expository essay including one introductory paragraph, two body paragraphs and one concluding paragraph. These eighty cause and effect essays contained approximately 350 – 600 words. Before assigned to compose the essays, the students had been taught the elements of essay organization such as a topic sentence, a thesis statement, supporting details, an introductory paragraph, a concluding paragraph, etc.

The error analysis framework created by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) was used as a guideline to conduct this study. The process of error analysis consists of the collection of students' essays, the identification of grammatical errors, the description of grammatical errors, the explanation of grammatical errors and the error evaluation. To clarify the error types, the error classifications formed by Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009) and James (as cited in Sompong, 2014) were applied to this study. Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009), classify the errors into four categories consisting of omission, addition, misinformation and misordering. James (as cited in Sompong, 2014); moreover, categorizes the error types based on a linguistic category such as the class of a noun and verb, preposition, determiner, etc.

First, the essays written by the students were collected and analyzed in order to detect grammatical errors which were categorized into the types of grammatical points. The descriptive statistics used in this study were the frequency and percentage. After the investigation of grammatical errors, each grammatical error was explained. The types of causes of errors mentioned by Richards (1974), Brown (2000), and Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009) were used to shed light on the causes of grammatical errors in the discussion section. According to interlingual transfer, mother-tongue interference (L1) is the main factor leading to the students' errors, while the intralingual transfer is the cause of a grammatical error classified into four types including overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of the rules, and false concept hypothesized.

4. Results and Discussion

The result of the types of grammatical errors in the compositions written by the students was presented in the table below. The grammatical errors found in the cause and effect essays were categorized into eleven types comprising verb tense, noun ending (singular/plural, and possessive inflectional endings), verb form (active/passive voice, verbal phrases, finite/nonfinite verb), punctuation, determiner (articles and other determiners, word form (such as using a noun form where an adjective is contextually required), run-ons, subject-verb agreement, sentence fragment (incomplete sentence/ clause), word order and preposition.

**Table 1** Types of Grammatical Errors

Types of Grammatical Errors	Frequency	Percentage
verb tense	38	3.58
noun ending	144	13.58
verb form	129	12.17
punctuation	28	2.64
determiner	70	6.60
word form	126	11.89
run-ons	24	2.26
subject-verb agreement	168	15.85
sentence fragment	218	20.57
word order	16	1.51
preposition	94	8.87
Total	1055	100

As shown in Table 1, there were 1055 errors categorized into eleven types of grammatical errors. Among this number, sentence fragment was found as the most frequently committed type of grammatical errors (218 errors or 20.57%). The second most frequent type of errors was the error in the use of subject-verb agreement (168 errors or 15.85%), followed by the error in the use of noun endings (144 errors or 13.58%), the error in the use of verb form (129 errors or 12.17%), wrong word form (126 errors or 11.89%), the error in the use of preposition (94 errors or 8.87%) respectively. The numbers of errors in the use of verb tense (3.58%), incorrectly used punctuation (2.64%) and run-ons (2.26%) were at the low level of frequency as compared with other types of errors, whereas the type of grammatical errors with the lowest frequency of occurrence was errors in word order (16 errors or 1.51%).

The following examples are the excerpts from the students' essays which illustrate each type of grammatical errors.

1) Verb tense

Example

Incorrect: College students always had a lot of work to do.

Correct: College students always have a lot of work to do.

This example showed an error in the use of verb tense. With reference to surface structure taxonomy suggested by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), this error was categorized as misinformation because the student used past simple tense which was basically for indicating an action completed at a definite time in the past instead of present simple tense which showed something happening regularly in the present.

2) Noun ending

Example

Incorrect: Private tutor can help many student improve their English.

Correct: Private tutors can help many students improve their English.

This example contained an error of noun ending which was relevant to a singular noun and a plural noun. It was possibly classified into omission. In this sentence, the student omitted an inflectional suffix "-s" at the end of the word "student" and the word "tutor". In this case, the word "student" was modified with "many" which is used with a plural countable noun. Moreover, used as a non-specific noun, the word "tutor" needed to be completed with an inflectional suffix "-s" or an indefinite article.

3) Verb form

Example

Incorrect: Abortion is a problem that must solve.

Correct: Abortion is a problem that must be solved.

In this example, the student created a clause with an active form in spite of the fact that the clause with "passive voice" should be used instead of "active voice" for creating a sensible context. The occurrence of this error could be categorized as misinformation.

4) Punctuation

**Example**

Incorrect: Having a baby can lead to financial problems, and psychological problems.

Correct: Having a baby can lead to financial problems and psychological problems.

This example showed an error in the use of punctuation. According to this example, the student put a comma between two noun phrases, “financial problems” and “psychological problems”, where it was not necessary. This grammatical error was categorized as addition.

5) Determiner**Example**

Incorrect: There are many reasons why a university student should not own car.

Correct: There are many reasons why a university student should not own a car.

This example contained an error in the use of determiner. It was categorized as omission. The student did not place an indefinite article “a” in front of a noun “car”. An article “a” is a determiner used with a singular countable noun which is nonspecific.

6) Word form**Example**

Incorrect: BTS, one of the public transportation systems, is the most convenience way.

Correct: BTS, one of the public transportation systems, is the most convenient way.

This example contained an error in the use of word form. The student used the word “convenience” as an adjective to modify the word “way”. This error could be categorized as misinformation because the correct form of the adjective of the word “convenience” must be “convenient”.

7) Run-ons**Example**

Incorrect: The first cause of unemployment is social pressure the workers feel stressful when they are at the workplaces.

Correct: The first cause of unemployment is social pressure. The workers feel stressful when they are at the workplaces.

This example contained an error of run-on sentences which resulted from two independent clauses or sentences being connected without any punctuation or conjunction. The first clause and the second clause of this sentence must be separated. This error could be categorized as misinformation.

8) Subject-verb agreement**Example**

Incorrect: Parental pressure also cause stress among university students.

Correct: Parental pressure also causes stress among university students.

As shown in the above example, the subject and verb of the sentence did not agree. The student omitted inflectional suffix “-s” (third-person singular) in a verb “cause”. This grammatical error was categorized as omission.

9) Sentence fragment**Example**

Incorrect: This kind of behavior can lead to stress. Because they will have to work under pressure.

Correct: This kind of behavior can lead to stress because they will have to work under pressure.

This example contained an error in sentence fragment where the student began the clause with “because” which made this clause subordinate or dependent. Then, the student omitted the main clause; therefore, it was an incomplete sentence. In conclusion, it was categorized as omission.

10) Word order**Example**

Incorrect: Another effect of unemployment is a problem social.

Correct: Another effect of unemployment is a social problem.

As shown in this example, a grammatical error referred to incorrect word order. The student put an adjective “social” in the wrong order. That is, an adjective must be placed in front of a noun it modified. Consequently, this error was categorized as misordering.



11) Preposition

Example

Incorrect: It can affect to physical health.

Correct: It can affect physical health.

This example showed an error in the use of preposition. According to this example, the student put a preposition “to” between a verb “affect” and a noun phrase “physical health”, where it was not necessary. This grammatical error was categorized as addition.

According to the findings, it was apparent that fragment was the major problematic error committed by the students when they wrote the cause and effect essays (218 errors or 20.57%). Fragment sentences referred to a sentence containing only a dependent clause or any sentences without a subject or the main verb. According to the interview session, the students were asked to acquire the causes of errors. The possible reasons why fragment occurred could be the influence of intralingual transfer. According to Dulay et al. (as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009), an intralingual error arises because of the lack of knowledge of the rules of the target language. For example, according to this fragment, “Because they will have to work under pressure.”, the error in this example was due to an incomplete application of the rules. That is to say, the student attempted to construct a complete sentence with a correct structure (subject and verb); however, they added subordinating conjunction “because” to this clause, which turned this clause into a dependent clause that could not stand alone. Moreover, the student did not add an independent clause to this dependent clause; therefore, it made this sentence incomplete. Another possible cause of fragment in their essays was an interlingual transfer which is the system when learners use the structure of their first language in order to produce the target language. (Richards, 1974; Brown, 2000; and Dulay et al. as cited in Kaeoluan, 2009). According to this sentence fragment, “Many Thai students always sad when they have much homework”, the student omitted a verb “are” in this clause; therefore, it made this sentence incomplete. In English, an adjective must be placed after the verb “be” or other linking verbs such as feel, become, etc. Unlike in English, in Thai, it is not necessary to put a verb “be” before an adjective; on the other hand, in English, an adjective could not function as a verb in Thai. Therefore, the student probably omitted the main verb “be” in the sentence containing an adjectival complement.

Apart from fragments, the errors in the use of subject-verb agreement (168 errors or 15.85%) and the errors in the use of noun ending (144 errors or 13.58%) were also at the high level of frequency, compared with other types of errors. First, the errors in the use of subject-verb agreement could possibly be caused by mother-tongue interference (L1). According to the example, “Parental pressure also cause stress among university students”, the student omitted inflectional suffix “-s” in a verb “cause” as the third person singular in present simple tense; hence, the subject and the verb of the sentence did not agree. The possible reason why the student did not apply the rule of English grammar regarding third person singular in present simple tense to this sentence could be that in Thai, the addition of third person singular “-s” ending does not exist. Furthermore, this could reflect the student’s incomplete application of rules since the student did not conjugate a verb with reference to a third person pronoun despite the fact that the student tried to use a verb in present simple tense. Another frequently found error was the error in the use of a noun ending. It was possible that the errors could also arise from the influence of mother-tongue interference (L1) because there is no inflectional suffix “-s” for a plural noun used in Thai linguistic systems. Instead, Thais use numbers and classifiers to indicate the singularity and plurality of nouns. Besides, the error in the use of the noun ending was caused by intralingual transfer. In some cases, the students put “-s” to uncountable nouns which have no plural form, for example, “You should drink waters.” As shown in this statement, the student lacked knowledge of uncountable nouns by adding “-s” to the uncountable noun. This error was caused by overgeneralization.

The findings of this research were consistent with the research study conducted by Na-ngam (2005) who investigated grammatical errors in Foundation English I (FE I) written assignments made by students with high and low English Entrance Examination (EEE) scores. She revealed that the three types of errors occurring most frequently were errors in incomplete sentences, nouns, and agreement. She also pointed out that the possible major cause of errors in written work made by the students was mother tongue



interference. Some errors might have been due to the students' inadequacy of knowledge, incomplete application of rules, false concept hypothesized, ignorance of certain rules, and avoidance strategy. In addition, these findings were in line with Iamsiu (2014) who studied an analysis of grammatical errors in Srinakharinwirot University students' writing and indicated that the most frequent type of errors based on the syntactic structure that the students made was the errors in sentence structure (36.17%), followed by subject-verb agreement (13.48%). Moreover, the features of interference errors found could be categorized into word-by-word translation, using Thai construction in English and using adjectives as main verbs. Srichai (2002) who studied analysis of errors in written work by first-year business administration students at Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai Campus, also found that the second highest number of errors was errors in incomplete sentences. Khumphee and Yodkamluethere (2017) conducted an analysis of grammatical errors in English essays written by Thai EFL undergraduate students. They found that the five most frequent numbers of the types of errors fell into the use of a plural form of nouns, omission of punctuation, wrong structures of complex sentences, omission of some parts of a sentence, and fragments respectively. They also pointed out that the errors were possibly caused by the students' L1 interference.

5. Conclusion

According to the investigation of the errors in the essays written by eighty third-year Thai students majoring in English at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University, the results of this research showed that the top three grammatical errors found in the students' essays were the sentence fragment, errors in the use of subject-verb agreement and errors in the use of noun endings. These errors were considered as the major obstacles for the students who learned English writing skills. The errors, furthermore, greatly hindered the performances and the development of their writing ability. With reference to causes of errors, these grammatical errors occurred due to both L1 interference and intralingual errors.

The results of this study could lead to some pedagogical implications for teaching English writing at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and other institutions in Thailand. Based on the results, most students encountered difficulty in constructing correct sentences. Therefore, apart from teaching vocabulary, writing organization and writing process, the most problematic grammatical points should be taught in writing class and added in their lesson plans. For instance, the fragment was the most common error in their essays. Teaching how a sentence or a clause are formed is tremendously necessary. Due to the fact that the performances and perceptions of students in grammar and usage are different, mobile-assisted language learning potentially supports second-language learning by providing autonomous learning opportunities and learning independence. Consequently, online resources and mobile applications are beneficial teaching aids the teachers need to apply to their writing classes. Finally, giving corrective feedback on students' writing is also effective. On condition that the correction is clear and consistent, it will not only help students to improve their writing quality but also improve the accuracy in writing (Ferris, 1999; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Therefore, giving both oral corrective feedback and written corrective feedback are indispensably important for writing class.

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