

# A Study of Common Grammar Mistakes in English Composition Writing made by Ph.D Candidates of the University of Information Technology

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**Abstract - English is used as an international language and communication tool, and it plays a more and more important role in the world. However, from the four basic skills of English - listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing needs the most comprehensive knowledge, the strongest application, and the most difficult training. In order to find out the problems which exist in the cultivation of writing ability of university students, the author had a survey in candidates of Ph.D. course at the University of Information Technology in their writing. The objective of this investigation is to analyze the grammatical mistakes in English writing, explore the systematic reasons and finally put forward some corresponding solutions to improve writing. This research aimed to identify and analyze such grammatical difficulties in order to help teachers in identifying grammatical errors commonly made by second language learners of English. The two kinds of research methods such as qualitative and quantitative research are used in this paper. The result of this research shows that the major kinds of errors made by the students are related to wrong word usage, articles, verbs, and tenses. First, it is hoped that these findings show how writing might be used to enhance learning and thinking will be outlined. Second, current practices regarding the use of writing in the classroom will be described. Third, seminal studies that have addressed the links between writing and learning, and between writing and thinking will be reviewed. Fourth, studies that have specifically investigated the strategic role of writing will be discussed.**

**Keywords:** article, grammatical error, wrong word usage, tense, verb agreement

## I. INTRODUCTION

English has generally been learned by students since they were in basic levels of education. Most of the teaching processes focus on mastering the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. All of the skills are to be improved in the process of learning English. In the process of learning English, writing ability is the most difficult and complicated language skill to be learned almost by the students in every level of education. Writing needs the most comprehensive knowledge, the strongest application, the most difficult training. Within the classroom, grammar causes the student a moment of discomfort and sometimes even terror. In order to find out the problems which exist in the cultivation of writing ability of Ph.D. candidates, the author had a survey at the University of Information Technology trying to find out the problems they encounter in writing. The data have been gathered from writing assignments of all the Ph.D. candidates in first term last year. Thus, dealing with students with those problems at the university level brought the author to find out specific grammatical difficulties they encounter in their effort to learn English, especially in writing. The focus of this investigation is to analyze the grammatical mistakes in English writing.

## II. Literature Review

Prior to the early 1970s, however, Error Analysis consisted of little more than impressionistic collections of 'common' errors and their linguistic classification. The goals of

traditional Error Analysis were pedagogic - errors providing information which could be used to sequence items for teaching or to devise remedial lessons.

Error Analysis provides two kinds of information about interlanguage. The first is concerned with the linguistic type of errors produced by L2 learners. For instance, provides a list of the different types of errors involving verbs (e.g. 'be'+ verb stem instead of verb stem alone - 'They are speak French') [9]. However, this type of information is not very helpful when it comes to understand the learner's developmental sequence.

The second type of information - which is relevant to the question about the strategies used in interlanguage - concerns the psycholinguistic type of errors produced by L2 learners. Here Error Analysis is on stronger ground. Although there are considerable problems about coding errors in terms of categories such as 'developmental' or 'interference', a study of errors reveals conclusively that there is no single or prime cause of errors (as claimed by the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis) and provides clues about the kinds of strategies learners employ to simplify the task of learning a L2. [9] identifies various strategies associated with developmental or, as he calls them, 'intralingual' errors. Overgeneralization is a device used when the items do not carry any obvious contrast for the learner. For example, the past tense marker, '-ed', often carries no meaning in context, since past tense can be indicated lexically (e.g. 'yesterday'). Ignorance of rule restrictions occurs when rules extend to contexts where in the target language usage they do not apply. This can result from analogical extension or the rote learning of rules. Incomplete application of rules involves a failure to learn the more complex types of structure because the learner finds that he can achieve effective communication by using relatively simple rules.

## III. Investigation and Analysis of the Common Grammatical Mistakes of Ph.D. candidates

To write a wonderful essay means more than building up words without grammatical mistakes or misspellings. But no matter how complex the structure is, grammar is the first step. There are mainly three parts in English learning: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The famous linguist [11] said "Without grammar very little can be conveyed. Because vocabulary are some isolated parts. If you only have vocabulary but no grammar, the vocabulary is like the yellow leaves out of the trunk, they are lifeless. " As [11] said, grammar means laws in one language, and it gives the language an organized system, while the vocabulary is the material of language. Vocabulary gives language the specific content by grammar. So, grammar is the center of language. The corpus for this paper was collected from the 15 candidates of Ph.D. Course at the University of information Technology. In the first term in the school year 2018 to 2019, each of 15 students wrote 7 compositions based on seven

different ways of developing a paragraph. The topics for the compositions were as follows:

1. Your childhood memories (development by time)
2. Your ideal bedroom (development by space);
3. My classmates (development by classification);
4. Natural disasters in the world (development by example);
5. Cramming has no effect on test scores (development by cause and effect);
6. Science and Arts (development by comparison and contrast);
7. The Person I Admire Most (development by classification).

For the convenience of error analysis, the author numbers the 15 students from X1 to X15, and the 7 compositions from P1 to P7 in accordance with the sequence above. From the analysis of the corpus of college

English writing, the author finds that the students have made a lot of grammatical mistakes. Those grammatical mistakes are classified by the following 17 kinds.

### A. Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

The subject and verb of a sentence must agree with one another in number whether they are singular or plural. If the subject of the sentence is singular, its verb must also be singular; and if the subject is plural, the verb must also be plural.

Example (X13 P3) The chances of her coming is not very good.

Example (X10 P2) The antique table with three fluted legs were ordered by my mother.

Example (X5 P2) Two-thirds of the furniture needs to be repaired.

Example (X3 P1) My family always argues over television programmes.

### B. Sentence Fragment

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences that don't have one independent clause. A fragment may lack a subject, a complete verb, or both. Sometimes fragments depend on the preceding sentence to give it meaning.

Example (X15 P4): We went outside. In spite of the heavy rain.

Example (X4 P1): I passed the Matriculation Examination. Then joined the university.

### C. Missing Comma after Introductory Element

A comma should be used after an introductory word, phrase, or clause. This gives the reader a slight pause after an introductory element and often can help avoid confusion.

Example (X15 P4): In case of emergency telephone this number.

Example (X10 P1): Before she had time to think about it Susan jumped into the pool.

### D. Misusing the Apostrophe with "Its"

You use an apostrophe with it's only when the word means it is or it has. Without the apostrophe, its means belonging to it. Example (X4 P1): I believe its' the best day of my life.

Example (X8 P1): The angry cat wagged it's tail.

### E. No Comma in a Compound Sentence

A comma separates two or more independent clauses in a compound sentence separated by a conjunction. The comma goes after the first clause and before the coordinating conjunction that separates the clauses.

Example (X8 P4): The man jumped into the river and he saved the helpless child.

Example (X1 P7): She seemed invigorated full of life and energy.

Example (X12 P7): My aunt was beautiful and she was happy and she was full of life.

### F. Misuse in Articles

It means the confusion of differences between "a" and "an". When the word's first letter is a vowel phoneme, the article which modifies the word should be "an". But if it starts with a consonant, the article should select "a". "An" is usually to modify nouns whose first phoneme is a vowel.

Example (X7 P1) I saw a obedient boy who is reading in the library.

Example (X2 P1) Health is an important for everyone.

Example (X9 P1): My school is peaceful and quiet place.

### G. Mistakes in the Passive Form

A standard passive sentence's form is "sth. + be + past participle + by + sb". If the subject has been referred to in the previous sentence, it can be omitted in the next. But students always use the past participles in a wrong way.

Example (X7 P1): Sausages, bacon, chicken, French fries and some high caloric food would be prefer in a picnic.

Example (X11 P4): Many people reported to be homeless after the floods.

Example (X13 P6): Science is using at the moment.

Example (X15 P7): The injured man couldn't walk and had to curry.

Example (X8 P4): The situation is serious. Something must do before it's too late.

### H. Misplaced or Dangling Modifier

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that is improperly separated from the word it modifies or describes. Sentences with this error can sound awkward, ridiculous, or confusing. A dangling modifier is a word or a phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence.

Example (X3 P1): While we are on holiday, we met a lot of people interesting.

Example (X14 P1): After travelling for a number of days, this trip felt more exciting.

Example (X12 P4): Many people were injured in the storm seriously.

### I. Vague Pronoun Reference

A pronoun can replace a noun, and its antecedent should be the person, place, or thing to which the pronoun refers. A vague pronoun reference (including words such as it, that, this, and which) can leave the reader confused about what or to whom the pronoun refers.

Example (X10 P7): When Smith won the lottery, he bought a new house.

Example (X5 P4): When Tina finally found her lost cat, she was very happy.

### J. Wrong Word Usage

There are a variety of words and phrases that are commonly confused and misused in sentences. Using them incorrectly can change the meaning of the sentence or simply reflect carelessness on the writer's part. There are hundreds of these commonly confused words, so when in doubt, always check the definition and correct spelling of the word.

Example (X6 P1): She excepted his offer to drive her home.

Example (X7 P7): His kidneys have been effected by the disease.

Example (X4 P6): Astronauts have to adopt to zero gravity in outer space.

#### **K. Run-On Sentence**

A run-on sentence occurs when you connect two main clauses with no punctuation.

Example (X15 P2): The thief tried to sneak out of the room I saw him leaving.

#### **L. Superfluous Commas**

It's common writing mistake to throw commas around liberally when they aren't necessary. There are dozens of examples of this error, but here are a few common mistakes.

Example (X11 P5): Cramming is filling our head with too many things, at one single time, so students should avoid it.

Example (X9 P3): He wants to become an actor, or a vocalist.

Example (X2 P1): The restaurant, where we had dinner was near the post.

#### **M. Lack of Parallel Structure**

Faulty parallelism occurs when two or more parts of a sentence are similar in meaning but not parallel (or grammatically similar) in form. It often occurs with paired constructions and items in a series.

Example (X6 P3): He wanted to learn Chemist, Physics and Science.

Example (X5 P7): My teacher is kind, strict and patience.

Example (X3 P1): I love this trip because it is nice, exciting, and interested.

#### **N. Sentence Sprawl**

A sentence can become a burden to read when there are too many equally weighted phrases.

Example (X12 P1): The party had been planned for Monday, December 20, but there were some people who are not going to be available, so that they rescheduled it for Thursday, December 23, and then all people would be able to attend.

#### **O. Comma Splice**

A comma splice occurs when two separate sentences are joined with a comma rather than a period or semicolon. Writers often create comma splices when using transitional words, such as however, therefore, moreover, nevertheless, or furthermore.

Example (X1 P1): My ambition is to become a lawyer. However I decided to join the Technological University.

Example (X10 P7): My cousins and I love to go shopping, we then have lunch together when we're done.

#### **P. Colon Mistakes**

A colon is used after a complete sentence to introduce a word, phrase, clause, list, or quotation. The colon signals that what follows proves or explains the sentence preceding the colon.

Example (X6 P2): I like this room for: the view and fresh air.

#### **Q. Split Infinitives**

An infinitive is the word "to" with a verb. A split infinitive separates the word "to" and the verb with another word (often an adverb). There are no grammar rules that prohibit split infinitives, but many experts disapprove of them. If the sentence sounds awkward by correcting the split, our rule of thumb is to go with what makes the most sense in the context of your writing and for the ease of reading. (For example, "To boldly go where no man has gone before"

would sound awkward and less powerful as, "To go boldly where no man has gone before.")

Example (X9 P3): He wanted to gradually improve his speaking skill by attending English Spoken Class.

### **IV. The Reasons for Grammatical Mistakes in Writing**

The study finds that students will make mistakes in grammar in writing, especially in the use of verbs.

#### **A Mother Tongue Interference**

In Myanmar, the predicate does not need to change its form; while in English the form of the predicate changes so much. In English, if someone wants to say something is happening, he would use "be + verb + ing". If he wants to express something happening in the past, he would use the past tense. All in all, people need to use different tenses to express something happening in different times. In Myanmar, people just change temporal adverbials to express something that happens in different times. Besides, there are some differences on the verb's meaning between English and Myanmar, so it is easy for students to make mistakes in using verbs in English writing. English is the second language for most Myanmar, so the native language will inevitably have some unconscious influence on using English. It is quite common for students to carry the Myanmar grammar to English writing. When the Myanmar- English word order is consistent, this is a positive transfer. But when the Myanmar-English word order phase asynchrony, the mother tongue will interfere with the using of English, the negative transfer emerges.

Example:

My mother cooks the curry yesterday. ( in Myanmar)  
My mother cooked the curry yesterday. (in English)

#### **B. Incomplete and Unsystematic English Knowledge**

There are lots of spelling errors in students' English writing, which shows that students have an inadequate amount of vocabulary. Students should spend more time in enlarging words. At the same time, it is also necessary to learn how to use these words. And the so-called overgeneralization is to apply the knowledge which they have learned and summarized to the situations beyond rules, leading to wrong usage. For example, due to not well-grasping the regular verb, after learning "wanted, hoped, cooked, walked, etc", then put the irregular verb "taught, caught, bought, brought" summarized as "teached, caught, buyed, bringed", which are totally wrong.

#### **C. Differences in Cultural Backgrounds**

It is generalized that the thinking way of the Myanmar is circular, while the English linear. Reflected in writing, the English speakers often come straight to their points, then demonstrate their points step by step. The differences on cultures result in the different ways of thinking between Myanmar and English-speaking speakers, so it is easy to paraphrase the native culture into English. As a result, mistakes on grammar emerge. Therefore, different cultures have big influence on using the different languages.

#### **V. Finding and Solutions to the Grammatical Problems Writing**

Through the analysis of the mistakes in students' English learning, the author thinks that teachers can help

students to minimize mistakes through the following two aspects.

First of all, a lot of English grammatical mistakes are interlingual transfer mistakes. Second language learners' language should be regarded as an internal language system, and it is the interlanguage between the first language and the second language.

Myanmar students' foreign language learning process is a kind of new knowledge learning process. With the help of teaching means to acquire the language knowledge and ability, most learners learn a foreign language through class activities. The interlanguage system which is established through this process cannot be so complete and natural as a mother tongue. When they can't use the target language effectively, native language knowledge is used to fill the void, and the interlingual transfer will happen. It has a lot of inspiration for English teaching. If teachers can combine the language comparison, mistake analysis and cultural comparison and language acquisition organically, then it can help students to use the known knowledge to realize the positive transfer of Myanmar thinking to the English thinking effectively. Therefore, the teacher should pay more attention to the discourse analysis of the text. If more contrastive analysis of Myanmar and English can be introduced in the first semester in university, it will consolidate the students' ability of using English grammar knowledge.

Second, from the intralingual transfer mistakes, the author finds that students do know some of the rules of grammar. If the grammar took place in the form of multiple choice, most of the students will not have any difficulty. Thus, the nature of the problem lies in the lack of actual practice. [10] said that learners who have focused on grammar directly and have had a lot of opportunity to use grammar linking to the language environment are more likely to put the rules of grammar in long-term memory. The students' mistakes in English grammar exposed the weakness that college English grammar teaching does not have enough practice to cooperate with that. In this sense, practice does not mean that teaching material often appears as exercises, such as multiple choices, filling in the blanks, and other boring practices. In contrast, it is close to the actual output of speaking or writing practice. Therefore, English teachers should design some practice which is around the key grammar phenomenon through English grammar teaching, so that the students can learn grammar for actual use. In this way, the grammar knowledge will leave a more lasting imprint in the students' mind.

In a survey for common grammar mistakes in English Writing, the compositions of students were collected and analysed as shown in Table 1. Here are the percentage of errors made by Ph.D candidates of U.I.T. It shows the influential leading mistakes of the students with percentage and number of composition.

Table 1: The Data Analysis of Errors

N o.	Categories of grammar mistake	%	Typ es of erro rs	Numbe r of com- position
1.	Subject-Verb Agreement	27%	I&U	3
2.	Sentence Fragments	13%	MTI	2
3.	Missing Comma after Introductory Element	13%	I&U	2
4.	Misusing the Apostrophe with "Its"	13%	I&U	2

5.	No Comma in a Compound Sentence	20%	I&U	1
6.	Misuse in Articles	20%	MTI	1
7.	Mistakes in the passive form	33%	I&U	5
8.	Misplaced or Dangling Modifier	20%	I&U	2
9.	Vague Pronoun Reference	13%	MTI	2
10.	Wrong Word Usage	27%	I&U	4
11.	Run-On sentence	6%	I&U	1
12.	Superfluous Commas	20%	I&U	3
13.	Lack of parallel Structure	20%	I&U	3
14.	Sentence Sprawl	6%	D in CB	1
15.	Comma Splice	13%	I&U	2
16.	Colon Mistake	6%	MTI	1
17.	Split Infinitives	6%	MTI	1

**Remark** MTI= Mother Tongue Interference, I&U= Incomplete and Unsystematic English Knowledge, D in CB= Differences in Cultural Backgrounds

## VI. Suggestions and recommendations

The studies in this review have investigated the cognitive aspects of writing to learn without considering the underlying grammatical rules. Writing to learn appears to have been conceptualized as learning strategies under the teacher's control rather than ones that students must orchestrate, applying and adapting these to the different texts and tasks confronting them. The author uses both qualitative and quantitative research method to survey the students' needs.

According to the data from the following table, the students well understand that grammar is somewhat important in their writing. The following table shows the findings collected from the Ph.D. candidates of the University of Information Technology concerning with the English Grammar learning.

Table 2. Students' Questionnaire Responses

No.	Description	No. of Students (%)
1	I want my teachers to explain grammar rules.	47%
2	I like learning grammar by looking at examples.	27%
3	I like learning grammar by learning rules.	53%
4	I am interested in the topics I write about in class.	33%
5	I finish my in-class writing assignments on time.	20%
6	I understand the grammar of texts I read.	27%
7	I can describe my ideas clearly.	20%
8	I can use the correct vocabulary when I write.	33%

9	I can understand the meaning of a sentence even if I don't understand the grammar rules.	20%
10	I can give good reasons and examples.	13%
11	I can use grammatically correct sentences without thinking carefully about the rules.	13%
12	I can write sentences and paragraphs quickly.	13%

From the open response questions, the most common comment by far was positive remark about individual writing. Grammar instructions and activities were also popular, with 53% of students identifying those as favourite features in learning 47% of students said they liked their teacher and enjoyed in-class writing assignments. Most of the students are unable to express their ideas in writing as they are weak in constructing grammatically correct sentences. Although they have had practice in writing various text types, they may need help in editing and identifying errors that can improve the accuracy of exposure in order to write well, and participate in routine professional or social conversation.

Ability to write well is as important as oral proficiency for students at the undergraduate level. The data revealed that majority of students improved their writing skills 'by writing on a topic given by the teacher'. The data also indicated that a considerable number of students improved their writing 'by thinking and sharing their ideas in pairs/groups on a topic before they write.' Majority of students improved their writing skills by writing on a topic given by the teacher. As such writing activities 'force' the students to write something without purpose and audience in mind, less frequent use of them was desirable.

## VII. Conclusion

By using error analysis, the author finds that the students' mistakes have certain regularities, and the English teachers should adopt some effective teaching strategies in teaching to help students reduce or even avoid mistakes and call on students' attention to cultivating grammar skills.

The first thing is to strengthen the guidance of students' learning strategies. One of the important tasks of English courses is to make sure students develop some good writing habits. Teachers should consciously strengthen the guidance of students' learning strategies, let them learn and use English grammar step by step through the learning process.

The second is to strengthen the comparison and analysis of the native language and target language, pay attention to guiding students to think in English, make practice for the key sentence patterns, tenses, voices and other major language phenomena as many times as possible, and this will stimulate students' brain constantly. Using modern education technology is an important channel for students to learn and use English. Using the modern education technology can help

students input a large amount of information in a natural ways. In grammar teaching, teachers used to adopt deduction, induction, comparison and other methods. To some extent, we should change the teaching methods now, putting grammar knowledge in the context of teaching appropriately, to make students participate in the analysis of grammatical phenomena, to raise students' ability of summarizing and using English. This kind of teaching mode can improve the students' interest in learning, and it also can be better teaching effect for students.

As the objective of this research is to simply identify the difficulties the students face, the researchers would leave the questions related to factors of and predictions about the errors for further research. English teachers and researchers, however, have to be aware of the issues brought up here so that solutions might be found or emphases could be made in order to minimize the mistakes and maximize the learning process.

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