



Common Mistakes in Sentences in the Writing of Fresh Year Students in English Language and Some Suggestions for Improvement of Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT:

Writing is a challenging ability for EFL students, particularly for those who are just beginning to study academic writing, such as first-year students. In order to identify sentence writing faults in the works of first-year English majors at a university in Hanoi, the author conducted a short study. Using 26 samples, the study was carried out in a writing class for language majors. According to research findings derived from a quantitative analysis of 26 writings, prevalent faults include those involving verb tenses, verb forms, conjunction usage, and sentence fragments. The author then makes some suggestions to aid pupils in developing their writing abilities.

Keywords: Writing skills, sentence writing errors, paragraph writing, error correction

1. Introduction

English instruction at all educational levels, including university levels, has garnered attention in Vietnam in recent years, and this has improved both teachers' and students' awareness of the subject. Students are working harder to attain the intended learning outcomes and are becoming more conscious of how important it is to study English. But learning English has never been easier, particularly when it comes to useful abilities like writing. Writing is a challenging ability for first-year English majors as, in order to pass tests, students typically concentrate solely on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension throughout high school without honing their writing abilities.

As a result, many students may find it challenging to begin learning writing techniques at the university level. The university's Writing Skills module 1 serves as a starting point for students to learn the concepts and abilities needed to write paragraphs in a variety of text genres. Not only does this help professors understand the challenges that first-year students are facing and come up with solutions, but it also makes students aware of the prevalent sentence faults that they are making in their writing. to focus more intently when writing in my work. Thus, in the second semester of the 2022–2023 academic year, the author of this article carried out a modest study to identify frequent errors made by first-year English language students when composing sentences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Writing skill

Definition and components of writing skills

Nunan (1991), when referring to Writing skills, summarized the concept of Writing skills as follows: "Writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity, in which the writer must demonstrate simultaneous control of many tasks. side. At the sentence level, they include control of content, form, sentence structure, vocabulary, spelling, and letter formation. Beyond sentences, writers must be able to structure and integrate information into paragraphs and texts in a coherent and closely linked idea. Fakha Naveed (2016) also believes that "writing is a means of communication carried out through graphic symbols, arranged according to certain conventions to form words and in turn arranged to form sentence. Sentences are connected together logically and grammatically to form a paragraph.

That said, learners must know how to apply many different skills and knowledge to complete a paragraph or an essay. In terms of knowledge, learners must grasp grammar rules to form a grammatically accurate sentence. Furthermore, knowledge of vocabulary is also an indispensable part to create a good article and convey the correct idea that the author wants to convey. Not only that, knowledge related to the structure of paragraphs and essays is also very important to contribute to creating a successful essay. In terms of skills, writers need to have the skills to analyze the topic and synthesize ideas

because ideas are the core of the article. If they cannot analyze the topic, come up with ideas and select ideas, the article will fail. Writing cannot meet the requirements even when the remaining elements of knowledge are guaranteed. In addition, in order for the ideas in the article to be closely linked and coherent, the writer must also cultivate logical thinking and know how to arrange ideas appropriately.

There are many authors around the world who have researched Writing skills and made different comments about the components that make up this skill. According to author Baker (2011), Writing is a combination of factors: Grammatical skill, Compositional skill, and domain knowledge. Andi & Hidayah (2017) believe that Writing skills include 5 elements: Structure, Vocabulary, Content, Organization, and other mechanical elements, such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization... (mechanic). Heaten (1995) also proposed 5 basic elements that make up good writing: language use, mechanical elements, content, and stylistic skill. , judgment skill. In general, the authors share some common elements such as how to use language (including how to select vocabulary and apply grammatical knowledge to create complete sentences), Creative skills Collaboration (which includes considering content, arranging ideas in a certain structure, choosing appropriate style), other mechanical elements such as linking words, capitalization, punctuation sentence.

2.1.2. Common mistakes in writing sentences

As mentioned above, language skills, or in other words, applying knowledge of vocabulary and grammar to write a text, is one of the components that make up Writing skills. For a person learning English as a foreign language, making mistakes related to vocabulary and grammar is inevitable, especially for beginner level learners. Making these mistakes significantly affects the clarity and coherence of the text, hindering the reader's reading comprehension.

In the book "Writing Academic English" by Oshima & Hogue (2006), common errors in writing sentences include:

2.1.2.1. Sentence Fragments:

A sentence segment is an incomplete sentence, or in other words, a part of a sentence that is not yet a sentence. For example, the following cases are sentence segments:

- *Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of lessons.*

Error: The above is just a subordinate clause starting with the conjunction "because". It does not express a complete thought because it lacks a main clause.

Edit: (1) add a main clause to the sentence: *Because some students work part-time while taking a full load of lessons, they have very little free time.* (2) Omit the link from "because": *Some students work part-time while taking a full load of lessons.*

- *Teacher who gives too much homework.*

Error: This is a noun phrase consisting of the root noun "teacher" and the modifier "who gives too much homework".

Edit: Add verbs to complete the sentence: *Teacher who gives too much homework are unpopular.*

- *For example, the increase in the cost of renting an apartment.*

Error: Similar to the sentence above, in this case there is no verb to form a complete sentence.

Edit: add verb to complete: *For example, the increase in the cost of renting an apartment is one reason for people to become homeless.*

2.1.2.2. Run-on sentences and Comma splices:

A **consecutive sentence** is a sentence in which two or more independent clauses are written one after another without punctuation to separate them. The opposite case when two independent clauses are connected by a comma without a conjunction is called a **comma splice sentence**. For example:

- **A consecutive sentence:** *My family went to Australia then they emigrated to Canada.*

- **A comma splice sentence:** *My family went to Australia, then they emigrated to Canada.*

The way to correct these errors is similar:

1. **Add dots (.):** *My family went to Australia. Then they emigrated to Canada.*
2. **Add a semicolon (;):** *My family went to Australia; Then they emigrated to Canada.*
3. **Add independent clause connectors:** *My family went to Australia, and then they emigrated to Canada.*
4. **Add a conjunction to the dependent clause:** *My family went to Australia before the emigrated to Canada.*

2.1.2.3. Chippy sentences:

are usually simple sentences separated by punctuation. This creates a feeling of awkwardness when reading and is not suitable for academic writing because it does not demonstrate knowledge of sentence syntax.

Examples:

- *Wind is an enduring source of power. Water is also an unlimited energy source. Dams produce hydraulic power. They have existed for a long time. Windmills are relatively new.*

The way to correct the error of a sentence being too short is to combine two or three sentences into compound or complex sentences.

- ✓ Both wind and water are enduring sources of power. Dams have produced hydraulic power for a long time, but windmills are relatively new.

2.2. Common writing errors

2.2.1. Stringy sentences:

A sentence with too many clauses, often linked together by “and”, “so”, and sometimes “because”. This error is due to the writer's speaking skills being affected when sentences are said consecutively without punctuation. To correct this error, we need to separate or group clauses together, using conjunctions.

Example:

+ *Many students attend classes all morning, and then they work all afternoon, and they also have to study at night, so they are usually exhausted by the weekend.*

- ✓ *Many students attend classes all morning and work all afternoon. Since they also have to study at night, they are usually exhausted by the weekend.*

In addition to the errors mentioned above, some academic writing centers of leading universities in the world such as Yale University also list a number of sentence writing problems as follows:

2.2.2. Parallelism

Parallel structure means using the same grammatical form of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase or clause level. The usual way to join parallel structures is to use coordinating conjunctions such as “and” or “or”.

Example: *I like going to the beach, to go out to eat, and going to the movies.*

The phrase “*to go out to eat*” in the sentence above is not “parallel” in form with the other two phrases. The correct sentence is “*I like going to the beach, going out to eat, and going to the movies.*”

2.2.3. Coordinators and subordinators

When linking two independent clauses into a compound sentence, we need to use independent conjunctions such as “*and, or, so, but...*”. For example in the sentence: “*I'm going to learn English harder, or I will fail the exam.*”

When connecting two clauses, including a main clause and a subordinate clause, we need to use a dependent conjunction to show the emotional connection between the two clauses. Examples of subordinating conjunctions include “*therefore, although, when, while...*”. For example: “*Even though the weather was not so good, my trip was still wonderful.*”

In addition, some conjunctions are used to connect ideas between separate sentences such as “*therefore, however, As a result...*”

However, learners may make the mistake of using conjunctions incorrectly because they cannot distinguish between different types of sentences such as compound sentences and complex sentences. For example:

+ *I didn't study the lessons on the use of articles. So, I couldn't do well in my test.*

This sentence uses the word “*So*” as a conjunction to connect two sentences, not to connect two clauses. Therefore, it is necessary to replace the conjunction “*so*” with another conjunction like “*therefore*”, or combine the two sentences into two independent clauses in a compound sentence:

- ✓ *I didn't study the lessons on the use of articles. Therefore, I couldn't do well in my test.*

- ✓ *I didn't study the lessons on the use of articles, so I couldn't do well in my test.*

2.2.4. Misplaced and dangling modifiers

Modifiers should be placed next to the words they modify. When not, they can cause confusion and are considered misplaced.

For example:

+ *The boy barely saw the black kitten with his sunglasses on.*

In this sentence, the complement "with his sunglasses on" is placed after "the black kitten", which leads to a misunderstanding of the meaning of the sentence. At this point, the "cat" is the one wearing the glasses, not the "boy"

Edit:

✓ *With his sunglasses on, the boy barely saw the black kitten.*

The case where the complement cannot identify the referential component is when the subject being modified is not clearly stated in the sentence.

Example:

+ *Having finished the assignment, the TV was turned on.*

In the above sentence "Having finished" is a participle expressing action, but the person performing the action is not "the TV". Because the person performing the action is not stated clearly in the sentence, the participle phrase "Having finished the assignment" is called a complement without reference.

2.2.5. Subject-verb agreement

When the subject and verb are not compatible with each other in number, we say the sentence has an error in agreement between subject and verb.

For example:

+ *Alice go to the store each day.*

The subject "Alice" is a singular subject, so the verb when conjugated in the simple present must add "es".

2.2.6. Verb tenses and verb forms

Verb tense is one of the basic grammatical knowledge that learners have been exposed to and practiced a lot since they first became acquainted with English. However, when there is a change in tense in the same text, the writer will sometimes get confused and choose the wrong verb tense. For example:

+ *When she goes to the store, she forgot what she went for.*

The above sentence has two clauses, the first clause is divided into the simple present tense, the second clause is divided into the simple past tense. Thus, two clauses of the same sentence do not have tense agreement with each other. To edit, we need to put the two clauses into the same tense: "When she went to the store, she forgot what she went for."

Misuse of a verb form is when a writer incorrectly uses the "to V" or "Ving" form of a verb when it comes after another verb. For example:

+ *I asked him clean the floor.*

✓ *I asked him to clean the floor.*

3. Methodology

The author conducted an error analysis study based on collecting data from the writings of first-year English major students. The research subjects are 30 first-year students studying English Writing subject, module 1-semester 2 of the 2022-2023 school year. The data collection tools were passages written by 30 students in individual tests. Writings must be at least 150 words long and should be written in 30 minutes. During the data analysis process, the author eliminated 4 writings because they were less than 150 words in length, so the number of writings used for this study was 26.

Based on the theoretical research on errors in sentence writing as presented in the "Concepts" section, the author performs coding of errors (E). Specifically:

E1	Sentence Fragments	E5	Parallelism
E2	Run-on sentences and comma splice	E6	Coordinators and subordinators
E3	Choppy sentences	E7	Misplaced or dangling modifiers
E4	Stringy sentences	E8	Subject-verb agreement
		E9	Verb tense + Verb form

Table 1. Errors in sentence writing

After creating a coding table of errors, the author analyzed the writings and counted errors by classification and performed a number of statistical calculations such as calculating the average value and standard deviation.

4. Data analysis and discussion

The analysis results showed that in a total of 26 writings, 162 sentence errors were found (Table 2). The average error value of all writings is 6.2. Thus, on average each lesson has about 6 sentence errors. Compared to the total number of words in the writing (about 150 words), the number of such errors is quite a lot. However, it should be noted that the difference in the number of errors between writings is quite high because the standard deviation of the total number of errors is 3.3. Looking at the number of errors in each article, we can easily see that there are writings with only 2 errors (writing 10, 11, and 22), but there are also writings with up to 15 errors (writing no. 19).

Writing number	E 1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	Total
1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	3
2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	6	8
3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	5
4	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	6
5	0	4	0	1	0	1	0	0	3	9
6	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	6	8
7	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3	5
8	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
9	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
10	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
11	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
12	1	0	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	6
13	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	9	12
14	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	6
15	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6
16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	13
17	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	5	8
18	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	5	7
19	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	11	15
20	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	6
21	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	6
22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
23	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	6
24	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	4
25	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	1	7
26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Total	11	15	7	3	0	26	1	5	94	162
Percentage (%)	6.79	9.26	4.32	1.85	0%	16.05	0.62	3.09	58.02	100
Average	0.4	0.6	0.3	0.1	0	1	0.04	0.2	3.6	6.2
SD	0.7	1.1	1.2	0.3	0	1.2	0.2	0.4	3.3	3.3

Table 2. Summary of the number of errors in the writings of first-year students

Comparing the number of sentence errors found in paragraphs, error 9 (wrong tense and verb form) is the error with the highest number, almost every writing has this error, accounting for about 58% on total errors. On average, each test has about 3.6 errors, but the standard deviation is also quite high at 3.3. Therefore, there is a large difference in this error between writings. Through specific analysis of the writings, the author found that many students are still confused when choosing tenses. While the question asks to recount an event that happened in the past, there are writings that use all verbs or a few verbs divided into present tenses. In addition, many writings make mistakes about verb forms. The sentences in the table below are some examples of this error.

<i>There are a lot of fish, shrimps, and crabs in the pond. We are glad we don't have to buy food for dinner.</i>
<i>I have never imagined that I would fell cold in the middle of summer.</i>
<i>I stayed in my bed and chat with my friends.</i>
<i>I ran as fast as I can just to saw her.</i>

Table 3. Examples of verb tense and verb form errors

The second most common mistake is error number 6- Error about independent conjunctions and dependent conjunctions. This error accounts for 16.5% of the total errors. Some writings use independent conjunctions such as "And", "So", "But" to connect two sentences. On average, each writing has this error (average value = 1). For example:

<i>So every morning, I wake up feeling and deep emotion.</i>
<i>So I went to café with them.</i>
<i>But, after a while, I felt nervous.</i>
<i>But, today is an unusual morning.</i>
<i>And I found a book.</i>

Table 4. Examples of errors using conjunctions

The third largest number of errors is error number 2 - The error of using consecutive sentences without punctuation or the error of using commas to connect two clauses incorrectly. This error accounts for 9.26% of the total errors. Although the average value of this error is only 0.6, the standard deviation is quite large (SD=1.1). Thus, there are quite a few writings that have this error and there are also many writings that do not have this error. For example, problem number 5 has 4 errors in number 2, but problem number 2 does not have this error.

<i>I am very sensitive so I think weather is one of the factor that made me feel bad.</i>
<i>The novel made me has a long time to think about my life and I think the novel give me a deep impression that I never forget.</i>
<i>We assigned each of us a task to prepare the picnic so every one got up very early.</i>

Table 5. Examples of errors using consecutive sentences without punctuation or using comma splices

Error number 1 - Errors in using sentence segments ranked fourth with 11 errors corresponding to 6.79%.

This error does not appear often in writings, the average value is 0.4.

<i>Next to me that my friend.</i>
<i>The roses are in bloom and the sunrise in the early morning.</i>
<i>So many various thinkings on my mind.</i>

Table 6. Examples of errors using sentence segments

The remaining errors include error 3- choppy sentences, error 4-stringy sentences, error 7- misplaced or dangling modifiers, and error 8-subject-verb agreement, which are errors with a much smaller number than the mentioned errors. mentioned before. Specifically, error 3 accounts for 4.32% (Average=0.3); Error 4 accounts for 1.85% (Average=0.1); error 7 accounts for 0.62% (Average=0.04); Error 8 accounts for 3.08% (Average=0.2)

Especially in students' writings, no errors in parallel structure were found (Error 5-parallelism).

<i>It was a rainy day. I went to school with my younger sister. We wore raincoats and rode the bike.</i>	Error 3- Choppy sentences
<i>I was moving at the side of the road, but since it was foggy, and the car was at high speed, the driver missed seeing the cow crossing the road to save the collision.</i>	Error 4- Stringy sentences
<i>Having overcome a lot of terrible events, my morning has become unusual because of deep feeling.</i>	Error 7- Misplaced or dangling modifiers
<i>Human are living in such a rush and fast- tempo world that we sometimes forget that kindness is so essential.</i>	Error 8- Subject-Verb agreement

Table 7. Example of Error 4 (Stringy sentences), Error 7 Misplaced or dangling modifiers), and Error 8 (Subject-Verb agreement)

From the results of the study, the author found that first-year students majoring in English still make many errors related to sentences when writing paragraphs. In particular, errors in verb tense, verb form, errors in the use of independent conjunctions and dependent conjunctions, and errors in the use of sentence segments are very common.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

First-year students are new to paragraph writing skills. Unlike high school, most students mainly practice grammar or writing discrete sentences but have not been exposed to connecting sentences to form paragraphs. Therefore, when practicing writing under time pressure, due to many factors that may be psychological or not mastering the knowledge of writing sentences, students will make basic sentence errors as above. To help students improve their mistakes when forming sentences, teachers can apply some of the following measures:

- Regularly assign short writing assignments in class:

Short writings will help students focus more and make it easier to adjust their sentences than a long article. Some mixture of in-class writing, outside writing assignments, and tests with open-ended questions will help students practice improving their writing skills..

- Helps students have ideas and language to put into their writing:

Lecturers can begin the lesson with an activity that helps students generate language and ideas for their writing. This is a top-down strategy that will allow students to activate their previous knowledge and personal experiences related to the topic. Lecturers can combine readings related to the writing topic, directing students' attention to the ideas of the reading and some good language in the article, or some grammatical phenomena that students have. can be learned from the reading.

- Require students to create a learning profile:

Writing is a multi-step process, in which editing is very important. While writing under time pressure, students will hardly have the opportunity to look back and review their writing. Do you have any mistakes or not? Therefore, instructors should create a habit of reviewing students' writing and correcting errors by letting students write many different versions of the same topic. The following version is a more complete version after students have edited the errors, and the lecturer will read the final version for comments to the students.

- Distinguish the difference between spoken English and written English.

Instructors need to help students learn the difference between written and spoken English. In their writing, many students still use informal language that is not suitable for writing. Therefore, instructors need to guide students, especially first-year students who are just starting to learn writing, to recognize the different ways of using words between speaking and writing.

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