AN INVESTIGATION INTO COMMON MISTAKES IN PARAGRAPH WRITING OF THE FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY IN CAN THO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Since English is the Second Language (L2) that English-majored students at Can Tho University (CTU), the Mekong Delta Region, Vietnam, have to learn, writing seems to be the most difficult area in the four skills for the English language learners. The present study focuses on common mistakes in writing paragraphs of the first-year students majoring in English at Can Tho University¬, in the academic year 2013-2014. The relevant data for the study was collected from the students' written products and the in-depth interviews. The students were asked to write a free paragraph about "Your new life in Can Tho University" in English. The time allowed to do the test was 30 minutes. Each of the students made a paragraph of at least 120 words. The total number of papers to be analyzed was 60, and all of the mistakes in the paragraphs were identified and classified into thirteen categories. The results reported that the number of the "Word Formation", and "Word Choice" mistakes in participants' writing were the most serious or frequent, whilst the least commonly made mistakes were "Subject/Verb Agreement", and "Word Order". The interviews analysis also revealed that there were apparent connections between analyzed data from participants' papers and teachers' responses as well as students in the interviews. From these results, some implications are suggested to help students reduce grammatical mistakes in their papers as well as help English teachers who will give positive influence to their students' needs

Keywords: Common Mistakes, Paragraph Writing Performance, English Majored Students

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Languages are of four skills. The English language is not an exception. It consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to Brown (2000), in order to master the English language, learners had to be adequately exposed to all of the four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, in English teaching and learning, writing is considered as a difficult knot for both teachers and students. In fact, students in Vietnam in general and in Can Tho University in particular have learnt English for several years, but they are still weak in English, especially in committing mistakes in all aspects of writing a paragraph. A few studies had been conducted on the variation in the written production of Jordanian learners, Karala (1986); Mukattash (1990) stated that the written performance of Jordanian students showed a high percentage of mistakes. In a case study on written English errors in Teacher Training Colleges and the University of Dares Salaam, Qorro (1988); Msanjila (1990) pointed out that students had writing problems in expressing themselves systematically and logically. This could be due to the fact that writing is a complicated process.

Despite the explosive growing in the field of English language writing, teaching writing to learners remains a challenge in Can Tho University, Vietnam. This study provides a description of the aspects of writing quality in the first semester at the Can Tho University that the level of English language proficiency of students is not high because this skill was not well written in high schools. Although the educational structure in Vietnam is featured by five years of primary education, four years of secondary education and three years of high education, there are still a large number of students who do not get a good grasp of the English writing skill as they have entered an university. The problem is revealed when students have produced grammatical errors relating to organization, and spelling, etc.

The fact is that errors or mistakes are unavoidable in the process of English language learning. Therefore, analysis of learners' errors has become an essential need in field of language teaching and learning. These errors will provide information about learners' major writing difficulties. A study by Ellis (1997) on analyzing errors that the identification of errors helped us in diagnosing learners' language problems at a given stage of learning, and another study showed that correcting students' grammatical errors would lead to little improvement in their language (Köhlmyr, 2003, p.341). Similarly, analyzing EFL learners' errors in their written production can also be a great help for teachers who will correct students' errors and improve the effectiveness of their teaching. Watson, (1980, p.321) stated that "Knowing the reasons for errors, the teacher could also adjust the teaching to overcome the weaknesses". Michaelides (1990, p.30) agreed that the systematic analysis of student's errors could be of great importance in order for teachers to help learners improve. Thus, the Error Analysis Approach is employed in

this research so as to find out the causes and work out possible solutions to overcome the problems.

Aims and significance of the study

In the process of mastering English language, many mistakes are made by these learners, and students in Can Tho University are not an exception. As an effort to address these problems, the main purpose of this study is to investigate all of areas of grammar, spelling and organization produced by the first-year English majored students in their written production. In addition, the study may provide some suggestions and recommendations to help students in Can Tho University with their academic writing in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English is one of the second languages in Vietnam, which has become a language of teaching and learning in higher education. However, learning English as a L2 is not an easy task. In all, writing often seems to be the hardest of the skills, even in the first language. Allen (1965); Corder (1974) stated that in ESL "writing is the most difficult of the language abilities to acquire". Alamargot and Chanquoy (2001) believed in order to write, one "needs a coordinated implementation of a large set of mental activities." However, Pierpont (1991) also pointed out some of the benefits of writing, that is "writing skills are specific abilities which help writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message."

What is writing in English?

Various researchers define the term "Writing" in different ways. Sawsan (as cited in Al-Mutawa & Kailani, 1989, p.129) firstly stated that writing was a process, which began with simple copying and ended with free expression. Kutz, Groden, and Zamel (1993) also held the same view regarding the definition of writing and that writing was as "a creative discovery procedure characterized by the dynamic interplay of content and language: the use of language to explore beyond the known content." From another view, writing could be seen as "a process that occurs over a period of time, particularly if we take into account the sometimes extended periods of thinking that precede creating an initial draft" (Harris, 1993, p.10). In other words, writing is a complex process that involves time and effort to become a skillful writer. Basically, these definitions contain the same meaning while the differences lie only on the ways researchers formulate them.

What is paragraph writing?

In many languages, the fundamental unit of compositions is paragraphs, which plays an important role in communicating writers' meaning to readers. Many researchers have given out definitions of a paragraph with different points of view. According to Al- Hamash and Younis (1985, p.175), "A paragraph is a group of sentences concerned with one idea." In other words, Oshima and Hague (1999, p.17) further indicated that "A paragraph is basic unit of organization

in writing in which a group of some related sentences develop one main idea. A paragraph can be as short as one sentence or as long as ten sentences. The number of sentences is unimportant. However, the paragraph should be long enough to develop the main idea clearly." It was also supported by Langan's theory (2000, p.5), "A paragraph is a short paper of around 150-200 words. It usually consists of an opening point called a topic sentence followed by a series of sentences which support that point." In academic English, besides the elements of unity and coherence, a paragraph has three principal parts. These three parts are the topic sentence, the body sentences, and the concluding sentence. One can see this structure in paragraphs whether they are narrating, describing, comparing, contrasting, or analyzing information. The researcher will talk briefly about details in paragraphs below. A well-organized paragraph supports or develops a single controlling idea, which is expressed in a sentence called the topic sentence. Feist (1996, p.17) stated that a topic sentence must be the controlling idea of the paragraph. In other words, the topic sentence is the sentence that tells the main idea of the whole paragraph, and this sentence is usually the first sentence in the paragraph. The second part of the paragraph is the body, which has sentences with information that supports the main idea of the paragraph. That is, several facts, arguments, analysis, examples will be provided, and all of the sentences in the body must relate to the specific topic of the paragraph and help explain it more clearly. Feist (1996, p.23) also stated that the supporting sentences were the sentences, phrases, and these included the ideas related to the topic. Therefore, it is important that these sentences should be organized in the best possible order. The concluding sentence comes after all the details have been discussed in the body of the paragraph.

What are mistakes in paragraph writing?

Type of description allows a detailed description of specific mistakes and for a quantification of a corpus of mistakes. Corder (1967) classified sources of mistake into: omission, addition, substitution and permutation (disordering). On the other hand, Richards (1971); Abbott (1981) classified sources of mistake into two general categories: those which resulted from mother tongue interference, that was, the negative influence of the mother tongue of learners; and those which resulted from within L2 interference system itself, that was, the negative transfer of items within the target language. Ellis (1996) established two broad classifications of mistake: covert and overt mistakes. Covertly erroneous utterances were grammatically correct and well formed at the sentence level, but overtly erroneous utterances were ungrammatical at the sentence level and they were easy to identify in the surface structure of a sentence. Harefa (2006, p.122) classified mistakes based on transpositions or substitutions, or additions of a speech sound or morpheme, word, phrase, or some sort of blend of these. In short, in error analysis, it is a difficulty to assign sources of error, especially as many errors seem to have multiple origins.

According to James, (1988) errors in writing such as tenses, prepositions and weak vocabulary were the most common and frequent type of errors that were committed by learners. Huang (2001) also conducted an analysis on Taiwanese learners' errors concerning the grammatical system. The results revealed that grammatical errors were the most frequent error type in the entire database. Similar to Radwan (1988); Vahdatinejad (2008) found that students committed many errors in tenses, word choices and prepositions. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) carried out an analysis on Malaysian students' errors in their writing. The results of this study revealed that most common errors committed by the participants were preposition, relative pronoun, article, and tense respectively. It is also important to shed the light on some of the studies conducted on student's mistakes in Vietnamese context where English is considered as one of the most primary language. In a case study on grammatical errors committed by Vietnamese EFL students in their translation production, Pham (2004) discovered that the use of tenses, preposition, noun inflection, article, subject-verb agreement and punctuation were the most committed errors respectively. In another study, Lam (2010) carried out a study on errors made by the first-year English majored students in Soc Trang Community College, Vietnam, in their written production. Her finding showed that "the most common errors that the students committed in their narrative paragraph writing are grammatical, syntactic errors, and errors in substance, whilst the least commonly made errors are lexical and semantic errors." Lately, Nguyen, and Le (2012) also investigated students' perceptions of coherence and its use in essays written by students at Quang Binh University, Vietnam, the results of their study revealed that the participants were often weak in connecting ideas in each paragraph and the whole essays by using inappropriate linking words, and their sentences were sometimes incomprehensible by misusing or overusing linking words.

Students and their backgrounds

English has played a remarkable role that helps Vietnam make faster progress on the way of industrialization and modernization. On a smaller scale, that is universities and schools, the teaching and learning English are also very important and have great influence on the success of students' academic. Of the four skills; however, the ability to write effectively in English seems to be the most difficult. As we can see that writing in a second language is a complex process involving the ability to communicate in L2 and the ability to construct a text in order to express one's ideas effectively in writing. In Can Tho University, it is essential for students in general and English majored students in particular to be fluent in writing English because some courses or programs require them to write essays, reports and research papers in English. Besides, these students can also learn through writing. Raimes (1991) stated, "First, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabularies that we have been teaching our students. Second, when our students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learnt to say, to take risks.

Third, when they write, they necessarily become very involved in the new language; the effort to express ideas and the constant use of eyes, hand and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning".

At Can Tho University, English- majored students conduct paragraph writing in the first semester because it is one of the fundamental and basic writing skills. In other words, paragraph writing is the background for them to learn other writing skills in the next terms. However, it is the fact that the first-year English majored students at CTU still get many difficulties in paragraph writing. They are often anxious, unconfident to express what they want to say in a comprehensible way. Tribble (1996, p.3) indicated that it was quite difficult for students to produce ideas and organize them into an intelligible/ comprehensible piece of writing. In addition, these students also make mistakes when they do writing. There are some reasons why these students face a number of problems when studying paragraph writing. First, most first-year students are not familiar with paragraph writing. For a long time, the teaching and learning of writing skills of schools in Vietnam focus on objective-type questions of the writing. In this approach, students are provided such kinds of exercises as sentence ordering, sentence inserting or sentence deleting, etc. Owning to the characteristics of the tests, teachers pay much attention to grammar rules only. The primary concern of the teachers is to help their students get good marks at written achievement tests and even at the national examination. The fact is that these students rarely practice the kinds of writing tasks that develop knowledge-transforming skills, so when they enter CTU and are asked to write a paragraph, they make many mistakes of vocabulary, grammar, organization as well as the way of idea expression. Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987) advocated that the practice of scripting and performing texts was to sensitize students to the many ways that they would interact with writing tasks.

In short, it is essential to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in the achievement of the students. Thus, the researcher chose to focus on the first-year English majored students' mistakes in their written paragraph in order to determine the potential difficulties that they could experience during the composing process.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was implemented to find the answers to the following research question:

"What are the mistakes in Paragraph Writing of the first-year English majored students in Can Tho University?" with its research objective: investigating some common mistakes in paragraph writing of the first-year English-majored students.

Design of study

The design of the study was mistake-analysis research using quantitative results from students' written production and qualitative findings from interviews. Besides, the key aim of the research was to investigate some common mistakes in paragraph writing of the first-year English

majored students. There were two groups of participants in the study. One group was from sixty first-year English majored students who were asked to write paragraphs. The other group was nine students selected from the group of sixty students, and two English teachers at Can Tho University, these participants would be asked to give answers to three questions in the interviews. The study was conducted in seventeen weeks. The data collected in the study was written by freshmen on their first week of classes. To be along with written products, interviews were also conducted on the second week. Later on, the researcher analyzed data to give the answers to the research question.

Participants

There were a total of 60 first-year English- majored students of the academic year 2014-2015, at Can Tho University in the project. The reason for choosing first-year students was due to that most of them had just recently entered the university from school or pre-university level; therefore, their English writing would change after they had learnt some writing courses later in their undergraduate program. In other words, they have not been passed English writing courses including paragraph development, and academic research writing. The selection of the participants for this case study was based on their willingness to participate, and the length of their English learning. All of the participants have experienced approximately the same number of 12 years of the education through the primary and secondary education system. The division into year of school groups is to find the similarities and differences in the emergent errors and variations in their writings.

Instruments

A. Paragraph writing test

The data collected in this study was from sixty paragraphs written by 60 freshmen students on their first week of classes in Can Tho University. The respondents were asked to make a paragraph from 100 to 150 words, without the aid of dictionaries. The topic was "*Write a paragraph to describe your new life in Can Tho University*" These paragraphs are handwritten and produced in 30 minutes. The selection of the paragraph writing for this case study was to measure the students' writing ability and English proficiency. Darus and Ching (as cited in Hassan, 1976) stated that "Writing allows writers to demonstrate their ability to construct a string of well-connected sentences that are grammatically and logically correct". In fact, the number of sample is limited, but this study will still provide some information about the errors and why they are produced.

B. Interview performances

In addition, an interview was also used as an instrument for this study, which would be carried out after all the writing tasks had been completed. Wray and Bloomer (2006, p.163) stated that interviews enabled the researcher to get hold of information which otherwise could have been difficult to obtain by for example questionnaires. The interview was structured

in nature with three open-ended questions, which will obtain a better understanding. The participants of the interview were two English teachers, and nine students who would be divided into three groups according to their grades in written production: good, middle, and bad respectively. The interview was given in English and Vietnamese with careful and clear instructions to make sure that the respondents could easily understand and give appropriate answers. Admittedly, this interview was developed to collect data concerning students' experiences in writing paragraphs in English as well as to uncover problems in writing process. In fact, their replies provided data on the qualitative analysis of paragraph evaluation for the present study. The procedure of the research started with collecting data from the written production and the interview. All written production (papers) were first corrected by the supervisor. Then, errors including verb mistakes, spelling mistakes, punctuation, etc. were identified and grouped into according to their types, and at last they were analyzed and rated analytically to provide answers to the research question in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Common types of mistakes

This section presents the results of the study. Since this was a quantitative study, the focus was on the collection of the specific errors which had been provided by paragraphs from different levels. For a particular purpose, some of the different error categories would be posed in numbers depending on their frequency in the analyzed material so as to give an overview about participants' problems in their written production. When analyzed through the categories, each type of error in the Table 1 (below) was described and then illustrated by some examples which were cited as they were written.

Table 1 Errors in classifications

Item	Type of Error	No. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean (n=60)
1.	Word Formation	367	23.99	0.40
2.	Word Choice	326	21.31	0.36
3.	Spelling	129	8.43	0.14
4.	Organization	110	7.19	0.12
5.	Verb Tense	107	6.99	0.12
6.	Punctuation	106	6.93	0.12
7.	Missing Word	104	6.80	0.11
8.	Preposition	82	5.36	0.09
9.	Capitalization	74	4.84	0.08
10.	Verb Formation	55	3.59	0.06

Item	Type of Error	No. of errors	Percentage (%)	Mean (n=60)
11.	Article	52	3.40	0.06
12.	Word Order	12	0.78	0.01
13.	Subject/Verb Agreement	6	0.39	0.00
	Total	1530	100.0	

It could be seen that in Table 1 there were thirteen categories of errors found to be most common among the participants. The total number of errors made by the sixty participants is 1,530, which give about 25.5 errors per essay. Table 1 also demonstrates that it was the Word Form which seemed to be the most difficult item for all the participants, the weakest area. In errors related to Word Form, there was a total of 367 errors were made. The second item of mistakes that caused problems to respondents was Word Choice. The results indicated that it was a total of 326 errors in the Word Choice. This was then followed by a total of 129 errors related to Spelling. The fourth item of difficulty was Organization, which showed a total of 110 errors committed. The problem of Verb Tense ranked the fifth in the hierarchy in terms of raw frequencies. Totally, 107 errors were found in this study. Errors involving Punctuation, and Missing Word were significant comparatively where there was a total of 106, 104 errors respectively. The rest of the error types namely Preposition, Capitalization, Verb Form, Article, Word Order, and Subject & Verb Agreement still demanded some attention even though they were of no significance (0.39% compared to the total errors made. In the next section, examples of errors were identified from the paragraphs which would be selected as samples for this investigation. These examples of sentences only show the errors in the area specified. Other errors in the sentences were not taken into consideration.

Mistakes in Word Formation

The findings indicate that there were several mistakes with the cases of Word Formation occurred in some of the participants' paragraphs, and with the most frequent one 23.99% among mistake's categories shown in the Table 1. The mean or average of the mistakes made by participants under this category was 0.40. Here was an example caused by the incorrect formation of words: *There are so many bicycle, motorbike, and car. Etc.*

A noun is defined as a word that is used to name any person, animal, thing, idea, state, or quality (Russell, 1993). In the above example, the mistakes involving countable plural nouns plural where the "-s" morpheme are left out. The two researchers Jain (1974); Tan (1978) stated that those morphological mistakes like the above example have attributed to over-generalization and over-simplification strategy of learners. A possible explanation of the above mistakes is the ignorance of rule restrictions. When regarding the formation of plural nouns, there seems to be a tendency of generalizing the rule. This means that in order to simplify

things, most of the participants are often prompted to inflect countable nouns into uncountable nouns and vice versa. The inclination to use the singular form in the above example could also be since the student was still unsure when he should apply the plural form: *I put my first **foots** into Can Tho University…*

While some participants were inclined to leave out the "-s" morpheme in plural countable nouns, others fully intended to insert the "-s" morpheme in singular countable nouns as well as uncountable nouns. A possible reason for the above failure to construct the plural noun's form probably is due to so many differences between English and Vietnamese language regarding the number of nouns. In Vietnamese language, there is no any plural marker for nouns, but there is a big difference in classifying countable and uncountable nouns in English. For this reason, problems often arise when the grammatical rule requires a plural form in English, but the realization of plural forms in Vietnamese students in general and the participants under this study in particular is unable as proved in the above example. This is common in most of the participants, which suggest that plural formation has not mastered. Kölhmyr stated that the mistakes occur when L1 has count nouns and L2 non-count nouns (2003, p.262).

The above example showed the mistake where the student used a plural noun form with the word "**foot**" creating a word that does not exist "**foots**". In English, there is a singular form "**foot**" and a plural form "**feet**". In this case, the student added the morpheme "-s" even on the irregular noun. In other words, the morpheme "-s" is only applied to plural countable nouns as in "**houses**"; for example, and cannot be used with plural uncountable nouns as in the above example. In Köhlmyr's study showed the same result, with noticeable mistakes of Word Formation investigated in the learners' written production (2003, p.43). In Köhlmyr's viewpoint, language transfer was relatively obvious when carefully examining the category of plural nouns' form.

Mistakes in Word Choice

The second highest tagged mistake was Word Choice or Lexical, which we can see that most of the participants had a great difficulty choosing correct or appropriate words to express their ideas clearly. Some of the sentences in their paragraphs were too difficult to understand due to incorrect word usage. This finding was similar to Chen's study (2001) on 89 EFL students, who included that these students got full of problems to express their ideas freely because of their insufficient vocabulary and phrases. An example of using a wrong word taken from a paragraph is as follows: *I can learn **much** nice thing…* Many times there have been problems with the use of appropriate words in participants' paragraphs. Typically, the student in the above example displayed confusion about the use of the word "**many**" and "**much**", so he used these two words simultaneously. When it comes to Word Choice, the most perfectly

plausible explanations, which need giving as to why most of the participants have written like the above example, are from two primary sources: vocabulary and over-generalization.

Vocabulary is going to be discussed first. These participants had seemed to pick up several words without thinking about collocation. Presumably, students learning English as a second language in general and the participants under this study in particular do not often have a tendency to look in usage for a word, but to look up the word's meaning only, then try to memorize the key translation, and apply this translation regardless of context. Therefore, most of the times when they need to choose a correct collocation, they do not know which one it is. The fact shows that most of the participants are unable to see whether there is something wrong with their sentences or not regarding Word Choice. Thus, that is the reason why mistakes keep repeating in their writings. In the example, the student seemed not to understand the differences in usage of the word "**many**" used with a plural countable noun and the word "**much**" followed by a plural uncountable noun, and therefore mixed them up. Obviously, the usage of English words does not come easily.

Besides, another probable explanation for doing the mistake in the above example can also be related to over-generalization. To some of the participants in this study, the struck sense of Word Choice is too complicated to remember, so they have reduced their linguistic burdens by not applying the rule completely.

Mistakes in Spelling

Wrong Spelling is another serious problem ranked third in hierarchy (8.43% out of the total mistakes) and noted in this study. Spelling is defined as the action or process of forming words correctly from individual letters (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 1995). The following are some of the common spelling problems cited in the corpus.

I must face with a lot of **difficulties**...., *I can learn everything but* **high** *school I don't know, or In the new* **environment**, *I know I will be...*

It is strongly believed that wrongly spelled words as in the examples may be arisen as a result of phonetics perception and carelessness realized through phonological mistakes. The fact shows that most of the participants tend to spell out the words based on the sound of those words, so in that way, spelling mistakes are caused because so many words in English have the same sound but with different meanings and different spelling. In the above examples, the students wrote words "**difficulties**" as "**difficulties**", "**high**" as "**high**", and "**environment**" as "**environment**", which seem to depict their carelessness as some of the sounds are omitted or added which are not really necessary for the words. As a result, they make the words which are too difficult for readers to decipher the intended meaning. The problem of wrongly spelled words can only be minimized, and we cannot say with certainty that it can be completely eradicated. Thus, the problem of spelling is a persistent problem in writing even appearing on professional writers and academics.

Mistakes in Organization

The errors in paragraphs' organization which have an outstandingly high percentage (7.19% out of the total errors) are mainly of ineffective unity of the ideas in a paragraph. According to Kramer et al. (1995), the unity of a paragraphs is generally expected to have a unified topic, to avoid jumping from topic to topic, whatever a genre the writing might be. In the present study, errors in paragraph unity are defined as failing to show a controlling idea which doesn't really control all the ideas in a paragraph, or supply unrelated information to what is needed to explain the topic. The following is an example cited from the participants' writing.

"I am Hoa. When I went Can Tho and began to learn in Can Tho University, my life was differently. I have friends new, they are friendly. I like it, but I remember my parents very much. I don't think, I can stay 4 years in that. Can Tho University is beautiful and big. I will try to learn because I need job in the futures."

So many things can be said about the sentences quoted above. The student of this paper did try to explain the sentence *"**When I went Can Tho and began to learn in Can Tho University, my life was differently**"*, which could be perceived as the topic for the paragraph. When having a read on this sentence, readers might expect to know how her life has changed. And the following two sentences explained that she was so happy because of having new friends, and she also felt homesick due to without the parents beside her. The next sentence showed that she did not know whether she could stay at Can Tho University for four years or not since there were so many changes in her life. However, the last two sentences suddenly changed their directions, beginning to state something quite differently from the first sentence, which appeared as new topics or ideas. Thus, it can be seen that the paragraph generally covers three ideas. To strengthen this paragraph again, the student needs to give another topic sentence, which will cover the three ideas above, or develops each of the ideas in a new paragraph, so she will totally have three paragraphs separately.

Mistakes in Verb Tense

The fifth common mistake is Verb Tense which has a high percentage, 6.99% from the overall percentage of errors made in all thirteen categories. In this study, the confusion of tenses can be seen when the participants do not apply the correct tense to the verb in paragraphs.

Mistakes in Verb Tense can be attributed to the mother tongue interference and incomplete knowledge of the rules since there are several differences between Vietnamese and English verb system. In English, there is indication of time with present, past, and future, etc. tense whereas Vietnamese verb itself does not indicate time. In other words, in Vietnamese, there are no any changes of verb form according to time aspect. However, English verbs can inflect for present, past, and future tense. Let's have a look at these sentences (English-Vietnamese):

1. *He went to the hospital for treatment. Anh ấy đã **đi** đến bệnh viện để chữa bệnh.*

2. *He goes to the hospital for treatment. Anh ấy **đi** đến bệnh viện để chữa bệnh.*

3. *He will go to the hospital for treatment. Anh ấy sẽ **đi** đến bệnh viện để chữa bệnh.*

The same verb form "**đi**" is used in three sentences for present, past, and future setting. To show the different to what the time aspect is, some of the auxiliary verbs is employed such as "**đã**" for the past tense, and "**sẽ**" for the future tense. Due to the differences between L1 and L2, it is too difficult for participants to grasp the English notion of tense. Examples of wrong application of verb tense are shown below: (1) *This is the fifth day I **live** in Can Tho City. (have lived)*, and (2) *Today is the first day I **meet** all of my friends. (have met)*. It is obvious that most of the participants show a tendency to produce deviance in verb tense, which the verb is replaced by another verb in a different tense form. In the two sentences (1), and (2), the two students used the simple present tense for all cases. They seemed to be ignorant of other tenses, (3) *I **lived** in Ca mau City. (live)*, and (4) *When I was in high school, teachers told me everything I **have** to do. (had)*. The two other examples that clearly show participants' confusion regarding the use of tense are in the sentences (3), and (4). These examples showed that, on the whole, the two students switched from present tense to past tense and vice versa.

Mistakes in Punctuation

The mistakes in punctuation also add up to the total number of mistakes in mechanics. The results show that 6.93% of the participants under study have difficulties in using punctuation marks, and it comprises mainly of addition, incorrect use, and omission. Punctuation problems may be a result of inadequate teaching, and students' carelessness indicating the fact is that some of the participants do not grasp how to use the punctuation marks correctly because the same punctuation marks with similar functions are also used Vietnamese writings. This kind of mistakes is often found in the participants' works. The first is concerned with a comma splice. An example of this mistake is as follows: *There are many classmates but I find difficult to talk to someone.* Commas is used extensively to help the readers understand the intended meaning in a long sentence. In the above example, the mistake occurs when no comma is used between the first sentence and the second sentence separated by conjunction "but". Thus, the sentence should be "There are many classmates, but I find difficult to talk to someone". It is a full stop which is used to show an adequate idea. However, a commas was unnecessarily inserted in between words "place" and "therefore" instead of a period producing the following a mistake: *...an absolutely strange place, therefore, I will face.*

Mistakes in Missing Words

Missing Word is another especially notable common mistake, and this tendency can be seen in more than 6.80% of the cases. From the participants' writing, the researcher observes

that some mistakes relating to missing words are categorized into three main kinds namely: be omission, verb omission, and object/subject omission. However, in this case it should be mentioned that the omitting of main verbs in sentences has occurred more frequently than the others. The analyzed data in this study shows the same result to Chen's (2004) investigating into the learning of 513 Taiwan college students. The findings revealed that most of the students were inclined to be undetectable null verbs in their sentences. When asked to write a paragraph, it seems that participants' first reaction is to freely translate Vietnamese content coming in their mind into English. All the same, it has occurred many times in their paragraph, and below follows a more in-depth analysis of verb omissions with more examples: *The school very large…, Everyone very friendly, and helpful, or The new life in Can Tho University very difficult…* The three above sentences show mistakes of omission of the main verb "**be**". In fact, some of the participants often produce this type of construction, but they are unaware that their sentences are lacking something. A possible explanation of this type of mistake is obvious interference from mother tongue. The verb's rule in Vietnamese differs from English. Syntactically, verbs play a prominent role in English grammatical relations. Thus, it is required to use a verb, as can be seen above this has been omitted.

   Mistakes in Preposition

   The total number of prepositional mistakes in the participants' written production is 82, making up 5.36% of the total number of mistakes found. According to Swan and Smith (2001:33), prepositions are in general regarded as a common source of mistakes in language learning. Jarvie (1993) defined prepositions that they were words like **on**, **in**, **for**, **to**, **at** and **of**. As the name suggests ("pre[ceding] position"), prepositions usually come before the words they complement. For an analysis purpose, they show how two parts of a sentence are related in time or space. In this study, prepositional mistakes are classified into three types namely: Omission which is not used as it is required in a sentence; Wrong Selection which is used inappropriately; and Addition which is used needlessly. However, the most frequent prepositional mistakes are prepositions' misuse which often caused either by uncertainty in the selection of prepositions and by influence of the mother tongue. This is an indication that participants are still influenced by their mother tongue, and that they have not yet mastered the use of prepositions. An example which reflects Vietnamese interference in learning the English language like: *New life in Can Tho University is different **with** my life before.*

   The occurrence of the mistake above is strongly believed to be a result of ignorance of rule restrictions. In the example, the preposition might have been transferred from Vietnamese into English since the student literally translated to what it is said in Vietnamese "khác với". Thus, he wrongly used the preposition "**with**" where is should be "**from**". An example of intralingua mistakes is in a sentence like: *I don't have the help of teacher like **in** high school.* Kölhmyr also pointed out another reason for mistakes, namely when L1 has zero

preposition and L2 requires a preposition (2003, p.253). As some Vietnamese learners have no frame of reference in Vietnamese for English prepositions, they tend to be incapable of choosing appropriate English prepositions for the contexts or they may make analogy of what they have learnt and apply it in new situations. It can be noticed that in the above example, the preposition "**in**" is used wrongly instead of the preposition "**at**". This mistake in the sense is that the student may over-generalize the use of the preposition "**in**" to areas where they should not be used.

Mistakes in Capitalization

Capitalization also constitutes a significant problem in the students' writings noted in this study. The corpus reveals that many participants (4.84%) use capital letters instead of small letters and vice versa, and it ranks ninth out of thirteen. Many of the mistakes in capitalization involved proper nouns that are not capitalized and common nouns being capitalized. Let's see the two following examples: *Can Tho **university** have very interesting things…, Further, **Because** of staying far school.* In the first sentence, the word "**university**" is written beginning with a small letter "**u**" where it should have been written as "**University**"- a capital letter. For the second example, the anomaly of using a capital letter "**Because**" in the middle of the sentence is also typical. It appears that the source of these mistakes is neither from the mother tongue nor from L2 interference. In other words, mistakes in capitalization may be a result of participants' carelessness or bad handwriting. Obviously, using capital letters correctly is a writing norm which is required in both languages, Vietnamese and English. It is a pedagogical problem which can be handled appropriately by professional teachers in schools.

Mistakes in Verb Formation

Another weakness of the participants in this study is to have a tendency to commit mistakes involving the Verb Formation where makes up 3.59% of the occurrences or mistakes. An example of this type is: *"I will try to learn and **had** a good life".* The mistake in the sentence (1) is an example of incorrect application of grammar rules. This sentence began with the future tense but followed with the verb in the simple past, which caused faulty parallelism to the sentence. This is a mistake because the student uses past tense form instead the present form should be applied. The example proves that most of the participants have not mastered the sequence rule of tenses. This type of mistake can be attributed to intralingua interference mainly incomplete knowledge of the rules: *"I **hided** a room near CTU very easy".* Another mistake that can be seen to result from over-generalization is the application of the past tense form (-ed) to irregular verbs. In the second sentence, the student had the intention to generalize the rule of past tense formation by adding –ed (**hided**) instead of "**hid**". The example shows that this student has over-generalized certain rules for forming the simple past tense. In other words, this participant has applied a rule in the area where it is incorrect or appropriate. This is where the problem begins as Selinker (1972) stated that some of the mistakes may be the result

of the over-generalization of specific rules in a target language. As one can be seen in the two sentences, participants do not always use the form of verbs correctly.

Mistakes in Article

It is also obvious that some of the participants have problems with English articles, and the percentage for mistakes made by each participant is 3.40. However, there is an indication that articles are less troublesome than other mistake categories for participants in my study. Three types of article mistakes are found namely: Absence of articles occurring when an article is not used before a noun (concrete noun), Insertion of articles occurring when an article is added unnecessarily, and Misuse of articles occurring when an inappropriate article is put before a noun (concrete noun). According to Russell (1993), an article is a kind of adjective. There are two articles- the definite (***the***), and the indefinite (***a***, or, preceding a word beginning with a vowel, ***an***). In this research, article mistakes occur because of the differences in the grammatical structures between the foreign language and the native language. This is true not only for definite articles but also for indefinite one. In most of the incorrect sentences cited from paragraphs, there are more mistakes than just articles; however, only the articles are focused on. Let's consider the examples below, which show the omission of the definite article: *Schoolyard is clear... or University opens a new world to me.* The definite article is not only overused, it is also omitted in most of the times which is the situation with concrete nouns. The above examples are typically in Vietnamese language as articles are not used in Vietnamese in these situations. It seems that the students directly translated from Vietnamese to English, and they could not identify that there was something lacking in their sentences. The reason for the mistakes is probably transfer from L1 found in many sentences like this one. In the above examples, both of the students dropped the definite article "the" before "Schoolyard" and "University". This mistake can be attributed to the fact that Vietnamese language does not have this article, so participants avoided using it in most sentences where it should be used. Another common mistake with the use of articles by some participants is the confusion between definite and indefinite articles: *I try me best to get **the** high mark in order to get a good job.*

Mistakes in Word Order

In this study, the total number of 12 mistakes in the participants' written production is connected with Word Order. However, this problem is not as common as other mistake's categories, and the frequency of this mistake's type is relatively low, only 0.78%, but it corresponds with Köhlmyr's result (2003:207). English having a relatively fixed word's order which is normally (Subject-Verb-Objective) (Svartvik and Sager 1977:408). In connection to this, misordering is mainly considered to be the incorrect placement of words or groups of words in a sentence. One of the most complicated area is related to the placement of adjectives. According to Köhlmyr, the adjective's position was more problematic, sometimes causing

difficulties in deciding whether the placement was correct or not (2003:197). Two below examples will illustrate this (English-Vietnamese):

*...teacher, friend come from many place **different**......giảng viên, bạn bè đến từ các nơi khác nhau.....Can Tho University is a university **big** ... in Vietnam. Đại học Cần Thơ là một trường đại học lớn...ở Việt Nam.*

The two above English examples are typical incorrect sentences caused by the inaccurate order of the adjectives and the nouns. In the above sentences, the students placed the words "**different**" and "**big**" where they should not be. These two adjectives should be moved to their correct position before the words "**place**" and "**university**" respectively. The nature of the incorrect sentences indicates that the mistakes are accompanied by Vietnamese interference. In other words, the above mistakes are attributed to the differences in the composition of words between English and Vietnamese language. When comparing the English sentences with the Vietnamese translations above, the interference of the mother tongue is easy to see.

Mistakes in Subject/Verb Agreement

In the present study, only 0.39% of all mistakes found in the participants' paragraphs relates to subject-verb agreement or concord, which is also the least common type among mistake categories. According to Jarvie (1993), "agreement or concord is a rule that ensures the harmonizing of different grammatical units. Number concord is the most important type of concord in English, and ensures that a singular subject is always followed by a singular verb, and a plural subject by a plural verb". From this study, agreement or concord mistakes are defined as a sentence lacks agreement between a subject and a verb. In other words, a plural subject is not followed by a plural verb form, and a singular subject is not come after by a singular verb form. Agreement mistakes indicate that some of the participants have not mastered how concords work. In other words, a subject and a verb, in some cases, appear in different clauses which have resulted in students making concord mistakes, let's consider the following example: *I start my new life in Can Tho University which **help** me...*

In this example, the student did not follow the grammatical concord rule as he could not identify the predicate appearing in another clause than its controller. A distance between subjects and verbs is one of the implicit factors, which are often problematic for some of the participants regarding agreement. The word "**which**" tricked the student into believing that the verb "**help**" must be treated as plural when the word "**which**" stood for the whole phrase. As mentioned earlier, this type of construction, the distance between a subject and a verb, can easily make learners forget the number of the subject. Thus, it is too difficult for them to keep in mind the number of the subject when there is no immediate contact between deciding parts of sentences: *Can Tho University is very large and it **make** me...*

The example shows another simple way that some of the participants can make subject-verb agreement mistakes, which sometimes occur due to the fact that they have not grasped the use of 1st person singular and 3rd person singular/plural. In this example, the student used the wrong form of the verb "**make**" instead of "**makes**" to correspond to the subject-verb agreement for the subject "**it**". This mistake could be attributed to a case of over-generalization where the student extended the rules because of his incomplete knowledge of rules. Thus, the student used "**it**" as a subject in the simple present and did not add "-s" singular to the main verb "**make**" where it should be. The omission of the third person "-s" was an over-generalization because it removed the necessity for concord.

Results of Interviews

This part reports statistical responses collected from interviews from nine learners in three proficiency levels and from two English educators at Can Tho University. In other words, there were three students who were representatives of the high proficiency level (Group 1), three students of the average proficiency level (Group 2), and the remaining of the low proficiency level (Group 3). This division is done to ensure that every sector of the levels is represented and also to find out whether there is any significant difference in learners' perception. Besides that, two English teachers, who used to teach writing at the first period "Paragraphs", were also selected as respondents so that the whole teacher population could be represented in this research. All of the participants were asked to give answers to three questions regarding their perception of writing paragraphs in English as well as to uncover learners' problems in a writing process. The interview's finding again corroborated the various types of mistakes appearing in the participants' paragraphs, and all respondents' qualitative responses on the questions would be presented in the form of tables.

Here are three questions distributed to students: Question 1. *Do you recognize whether Word Form is the weakest area in writing accurately or not*, Question 2. *Do you agree whether your marks in writing paragraphs are influenced by Missing Word in an average level or not*, and Question 3. *Do you think whether mistakes in Subject/Verb Agreement have the least effect on your written production or not*.

Table 2 The response of learners' interviews

	G1	G2	G3	Total	
				No. learners	Percentage
Question 1	3	3	3	9	100%
Question 2	3	3	3	9	100%
Question 3	3	3	3	9	100%

The qualitative results of the survey provided information and evidence supporting the findings in the quantitative analysis of paragraph-level mistakes. As seen in the above responses, the three proficiency levels shared almost the same mistake categories as a whole, but the significant difference is that the number of mistakes occurs among them. The analyzed-data from the paragraphs was actually supported by the learners through the interviews. As can be seen from Table 2, the considerable number of respondents 9 (100%) confirmed that Word Formation was in fact most common among their English writing. Consistent with this, the survey data also revealed that 100% of the respondents strongly agreed with the second question. In other words, they often failed in making complete sentences showed through missing words in sentence's structure norms. As for the last question, there was an inclination for respondents to strongly hold with (100%), which reflected that most of the participants hardly ever made mistakes concerning Subject/Verb Agreement. An overall review of Table 2 shows that many respondents do have the same ideas to the mistake frequency occurring in their own writing.

Here are three questions distributed to English teachers: Question 1. *Do you recognize whether Word Form is the weakest area of students in writing accurately or not*, Question 2. *Do you agree whether students' marks in writing paragraphs are influenced by Missing Word in an average level or not*, and Question 3. *Do you think whether mistakes in Subject/Verb Agreement have the least effect on students' written production or not*.

Table 3 The response of lecturers' interviews

	No. Lecturers	Total (%)
Question 1	2	100
Question 2	2	100
Question 3	2	100

As indicated in Table 3, depending on teachers' replies, it can be seen that there are same feelings about the problems in writing paragraphs among their students. The analyzed-data from the paragraphs is again supported by the respondents through the self-reports in the interviews. As shown in the Table 3, 100% of the respondents reported that Word Formation was the most difficult field for their students. Besides, the survey data also showed that there was a significant percentage of strong agreement for the second question with the total of 100% respondents. This proved that their students indeed had challenges in Missing Word. Finally, they all acknowledged the fact that Subject/Verb Agreement was the less important factor causing low marks for their students. In short, the results of the mistake analysis have addressed the common types of mistakes that first-year English majored students made in their written production, and the main linguistic causes of these mistakes have been discussed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

When starting this study, the researcher aimed to reflect the problematic areas made by first-year English majored students in their writing at Can Tho University. The results would then contribute to giving an idea of how much students know about the mistakes in their writing as well as their perception towards the mistakes.

From this study, it was found that most of the participants got a poor mastering of a number of aspects in writing an English paragraph. Most of the time, they had problems in the surface structure of sentences which were mainly linguistic and grammatical in nature where EA could be used to identify systematic manners in details and explain the causes of these mistakes. From the 60 analyzed paragraphs which were written by the participants under controlled conditions indicate that a total of 1530 mistakes were made according to the type of mistakes. The findings showed that the type of mistakes and the occurrences which were found in writing English paragraphs made by the participants as follows: Word Formation with 367 mistakes (23.99%), Word Choice with 326 mistakes (21.31%), Spelling with 129 mistakes (8.43%), Organization with 110 mistakes (7.19%), Verb Tense with 107 mistakes (6.99%), Punctuation with 106 mistakes (6.93%), Missing Word with 104 mistakes (6.80%), Preposition with 82 mistakes (5.36%), Capitalization with 74 mistakes (4.84%), Verb Formation with 55 mistakes (3.59%), Article with 52 mistakes (3.40%), Word Order with 12 mistakes (0.78%), and lastly Subject/Verb Agreement with only 6 mistakes detected (0.39%).

It is crucial to know the causes of mistakes in order to ensure effectiveness in learners' performance and teachers' professional demands. Basically, the above mistakes are unavoidable and they have occurred for some reasons which are mainly attributable to limited vocabulary size, poor grammar knowledge and the mother tongue interference and so forth. These factors contribute not only to reducing the writing skills but also to lowering the participants' interest in writing. After the in-depth discussion obtained from the students and teachers' interview, the results reveal that most participants know the types of mistakes they have made, and the frequent of mistakes has occurred. Although they are aware of their mistakes, they still repeat the same mistakes in their future writing. This is a serious problem which needs a quick solution for dealing with. Even though this is a small study, I hope, on a personal level, this study is useful for future teachers majoring in teaching English writing skills, and gives an insights into what grammatical mistakes that Vietnamese learners in general and first-year English majored students at Can Tho University in particular tend to make the most in a paragraph. Also, it can also make a little contribution to material developers to create the necessary tasks and exercises, as well as educators to adopt a better class methodology for minimizing or overcoming their students' learning problems. All in all, it needs a great effort on both the teacher's and learner's side for there to be an effective learning.

Implications

Basing on the findings of the study, the researcher will suggest some solutions for English teachers and students as follows: First, learners should grasp as many learning strategies as possible and apply them accurately and creatively into new contexts to produce good and acceptable sentences. Besides, learners should have a self-awareness attitude towards learning, they should use most of their spare time in reading English books and newspapers to enrich their knowledge of language. Finally, they should have a habit of thinking, writing everything in English, and avoid literal translation from L1 so as to minimize the negative influence of the mother tongue. It seems that teachers should give more effective strategies to their students. First, teachers should have oral discussion with their students in writing English, which should be in the form of problem solving activities. Teachers should identify and record their students' mistakes, which are serious or frequent like in the fields of "Word Formation", "Word Choice", "Spelling", "Organization", and "Verb Tense" in order to prevent the formation of bad habits. Besides, teachers can also enhance their students' ability in writing by giving learners opportunities to practice with specific activities that can make learners' future writing easier and more accurate.

Limitations

No matter how good the findings are, the present study suffers from some limitations that should be noted before making some recommendations. The first limitation originated in the topic of the participants' writing. Since the results of the study were extracted from a specific topic only, it was uncertain whether the collected writing papers could give enough conclusive evidence regarding students' ability in writing English. Besides, mistakes in subject-verb agreement were less frequent in the participants' written production. Even though the low number of these mistakes was found in the study, it did not mean that these students had good knowledge of this grammatical point. A possible explanation might be that if students get difficult to identify a particular noun or a noun in the noun phrase, they would simply avoid using this grammatical structure.

Recommendations for further research

Although the present study suggests some strategies which are beneficial to college students in general and students in Can Tho University in particular, there are areas that need to studying further. First, more future research should be conducted at level of languages' differences. In other words, contrastive studies of the English and Vietnamese language should be carried out to help learners more successfully in using English. Politzer (1972, p.96) stated that "pseudo-parallel constructions" in L1 and L2 should be utilized frequently in students' learning process. Besides, the findings of the present study cannot indicate all aspects of the English grammar, so more research should be done with a larger sample size, and a wide variety of topics in written production to generate more general ideas.

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