FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMMON GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN PARAGRAPH WRITING AT NAM CAN THO UNIVERSITY, VIETNAM

Tran Trieu Huyen[i],
Tran Minh Khuyen
Faculty of Foreign Languages,
Nam Can Tho University,
Vietnam

Abstract:

Grammar plays an important role in EFL writing. However, many first-year students struggle with grammatical accuracy due to various factors. This study aims to identify common grammatical errors in English paragraph writing among first-year English majors at Nam Can Tho University in the Mekong Delta by analyzing sixty students' written paragraphs. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students who made the most grammatical errors to gain insight into their perspectives on the causes of the errors. The findings indicated that students frequently made errors related to collocations (32.95%), word form (17.90%), prepositions (15.63%), subject-verb agreement (9.09%), sentence structure (9.09%), omission of "to be" (8.52%), verb tense (3.98%), and articles (2.84%). Among these errors, word form and collocations were considered to have the most significant impact on their ability to express an idea clearly. The interview results revealed that the main causes of these errors were reported to be mother tongue interference, lack of grammar knowledge and practice, lack of proofreading skills and time constraints.

Keywords: EFL paragraph writings, grammatical errors, first-year English majors, error analysis

1. Introduction

In recent years, English has played an increasingly important role globally, especially in key domains such as education, science and economics (Crystal, 2003). As a result, teaching and learning the English language have received significant attention in many countries, including Vietnam, where English is increasingly integrated into formal education at all levels. For English majors at the university level, mastering the four

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[i] Correspondence: email tthuyen@nctu.edu.vn

language skills (including listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is important for both academic success and future professional development (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2015).

Among these skills, writing is widely considered the most challenging for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners since it requires the integration of vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and the ability to organize ideas coherently (Nation, 2009). Numerous studies have revealed that EFL students commonly make grammatical errors in their writing, including incorrect verb tense usage, subject-verb disagreement and misselection of articles (Ferris, 2004; Darus *et al.*, 2009). In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen (2019) and Pham (2022) have found that Vietnamese EFL students often make errors related to prepositions, plural nouns and sentence structures, all of which negatively affect the clarity and quality of their writing.

First-year students, in particular, often struggle to adjust from the high school context to the more demanding academic environment of university, which requires greater autonomy and linguistic accuracy. As a result, many of them frequently make grammatical errors without being aware of them and lack the strategies needed for correction (Bitchener *et al.*, 2012).

While several studies have addressed grammatical errors in EFL student writing, there is a noticeable lack of research focusing specifically on first-year English majors in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. This gap underscores the need to find out the common grammatical errors among first-year English Majors in their writing at Nam Can Tho University, one of the recognized universities in the Mekong Delta. Such an investigation may contribute valuable insights toward enhancing grammar instruction and improving students' academic writing skills in English.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of first-year students at Nam Can Tho University regarding common grammatical errors in paragraph writing. The research also seeks to explore the underlying causes of these errors through semi-structured interviews with five students who produced the highest number of errors. By integrating written text analysis and qualitative insights, this research hopes to better understand students' awareness of grammatical rules, the challenges they face, and their suggestions for improving grammar instruction. The findings are expected to inform more targeted teaching strategies and contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of English writing instruction for EFL students in the Mekong Delta.

2. Research Aims and Research Questions

2.1 Research Aims
This present study aims to investigate and analyze the perceptions of first-year students at Nam Can Tho University regarding common grammatical errors in paragraph writing.

2.2 Research Questions
This study attempts to investigate the first-year students' perceptions at Nam Can Tho University regarding common grammatical errors in paragraph writing and to explore

the underlying causes of these errors. Therefore, the study was designed to find out the answers to the following questions:

1) What are the common grammatical errors made by first-year English major students at Nam Can Tho University in their English paragraph writing?
2) From the students' perspective, what are the main causes leading to grammatical errors in paragraph writing?
3) What solutions can be proposed to help first-year students improve their grammatical accuracy in paragraph writing skills?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Definitions of Writing Skill

According to Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams (2011), "*writing is one of the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Writing and speaking are productive skills*" (p.37). They also described writing as the process of communicating a message through written symbols. Additionally, to write effectively, a learner needs to have something to say, an intended audience, and the ability to form letters and words, as well as organize them into coherent sentences and paragraphs (Spratt *et al.*, 2011). Byrne (1997) defined writing as the use of graphic symbols arranged according to language conventions to produce a sequence of sentences that are logically ordered and coherently linked. It was also viewed as a cognitively demanding task that involves the simultaneous control of various elements, including content, sentence structure, vocabulary, grammar, and audience awareness (Bell & Burnaby, as cited in Nunan, 1989).

Writing is not a one-step activity but a recursive process that typically includes planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 2004). Mastery of these stages enables learners to refine their ideas and improve accuracy. In particular, grammatical control is a key micro-skill that supports clarity and coherence in writing, especially in academic contexts (Brown, 2004).

3.2 Definitions of Paragraph Writing

Paragraph writing is a basic and important skill that helps writers communicate ideas clearly and coherently in writing (Collins *et al.*, 2007; Oshima & Hogue, 2006). An effective paragraph should ensure unity, meaning that all sentences in the paragraph relate to a main topic, and it must have adequate development to clarify the idea (Oshima & Hogue, 2006).

Richards *et al.* (2010) defined a paragraph as a clearly structured unit of language, usually starting with a topic sentence and developed through supporting sentences. In written texts, paragraphs are often presented with indentation to help readers recognize the structure of the writing. Harmer (2004) described the basic structure of a paragraph as consisting of a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence.

In addition, cohesion between sentences in a paragraph, emphasized by Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1999) and Halliday *et al.* (1976), plays an important role in ensuring the

paragraphs' coherence. Hedge (2005) and Tribble (1996) argued that paragraph writing skills reflect learners' language proficiency and ability to organize ideas, serving as the foundation for developing longer written texts.

Hyland (2003) emphasized the role of paragraph writing practice in developing critical thinking and academic writing skills, while Nation (2009) argued that practicing writing paragraphs helps strengthen learners' vocabulary, grammatical structures, and expressive abilities.

3.3 The Role of Grammar in Second Language (L2) Writing Development

Grammar plays an important role in the development of second language (L2) writing skills by enabling learners to express their ideas clearly, coherently, and accurately (Celce-Murcia *et al.*, 1999; Hedge, 2005). Within the context of academic English learning, grammatical competence is not only fundamental to constructing well-formed texts but is also considered a key indicator of overall language proficiency (Hyland, 2003). The accurate use of grammar helps create strong cohesion between sentences within paragraphs, thereby enhancing the overall coherence of writing (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Additionally, research indicates that grammatical proficiency assists learners in avoiding misunderstandings and increases their confidence when writing (Ferris *et al.*, 2014; Zimmerman *et al.*, 1994).

Nevertheless, writing in an L2 is a complex process that requires learners to simultaneously manage idea generation, content organization, and accurate grammatical usage, imposing significant cognitive demands (Kellogg, 1996; Ellis, 2006). Consequently, grammar instruction integrated with practical writing exercises and targeted corrective feedback is essential for improving writing skills (Ferris, 2003; Ellis, 2008). This is especially important for first-year students whose paragraph writing is required to be not only grammatically accurate but also the effective use of sentence structures and cohesive devices to enhance academic communicative effectiveness (Hyland, 2003).

3.3 Common Grammatical Errors in EFL Learners' English Writing

In developing English writing skills as a foreign language (EFL) process, learners frequently commit grammatical errors at the paragraph level, which negatively affect accuracy and coherence. Classifying and analyzing these errors helps educators better understand learners' difficulties and design effective teaching strategies (Le, 2023).

3.3.1 Classification of Grammatical Errors

Research commonly categorizes EFL learners' grammatical errors into major groups such as verb tense errors, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, sentence structure, and word form errors (Dulay *et al.*, 1982; Ferris, 2002). Corder (1967) differentiates between systematic errors-caused by knowledge deficits-and random errors-due to external factors. Such classification aids in identifying error sources and severity, supporting pedagogical adjustments (James, 1998; Richards *et al.*, 2010). Among first-year English major students in Vietnam, errors are often influenced by first language (L1)

interference and interlanguage developmental stages (Ellis, 2008). Effective error analysis should align with writing objectives and learners' proficiency to accurately assess challenges and develop appropriate teaching methods.

3.3.2 Analysis of Common Grammatical Errors

Error analysis is essential to understanding the formation of learners' interlanguage systems (Corder, 1974; Selinker, 1972). This study focuses on eight common grammatical errors found in first-year students' writing: verb tense errors, subject-verb agreement errors, article misuse, preposition errors, word form errors, sentence structure errors, collocation errors, and omission of the verb "to be."

Verb tense errors are prevalent due to differences between English and Vietnamese tense systems and misinterpretation of temporal markers (Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Ferris *et al.*, 2014).

Subject-verb agreement errors frequently occur in complex sentences where learners confuse the main subject amidst intervening phrases (Swan, 2005; Yule, 2010).

Article errors stem from the absence of articles in Vietnamese, leading to misuse or omission of "a," "an," and "the." These errors are challenging to correct and impact academic writing accuracy (Ionin *et al.*, 2004; Trenkic, 2007; Master, 1997; Liu *et al.*, 2002).

Prepositional errors arise from structural differences in preposition use between English and Vietnamese, especially in phrasal verbs and prepositions of time and place (Granger, 1998; Tetreault & Chodorow, 2008).

Sentence structure errors, including run-on sentences, fragments, and punctuation mistakes, greatly affect coherence and clarity (Hinkel, 2004; Ferris, 2002).

Word form errors involve incorrect word forms or morphological errors, reducing accuracy and academic tone (Ferris, 2011; Hinkel, 2004).

Collocation errors occur when learners combine words unnaturally, diminishing the naturalness of writing despite correct grammar (Lewis, 2000; Gitsaki, 1999).

Omission of the verb "to be" is common among learners whose L1 lacks this verb, such as Vietnamese speakers, resulting in missing "am," "is," or "are" in descriptive sentences (Selinker, 1972; Celce *et al.*, 1999).

Focusing on these eight error types targets the essential grammatical difficulties students face in paragraph writing, providing a solid foundation for developing effective teaching interventions at Nam Can Tho University.

3.3.3 Causes of Grammatical Errors in EFL Learners' Writing

Grammatical errors in EFL writing stem from multiple factors. A primary cause is first language interference (L1 interference), where learners unconsciously transfer L1 grammar rules, sentence structures, or expressions into English, resulting in errors such as literal translation and incorrect word order (Richards *et al.*, 2002; Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen, 2000).

Another critical factor is insufficient or incorrect grammatical knowledge, especially regarding complex structures or rarely practiced forms, often due to passive learning and lack of frequent application (Celce *et al.*, 1999; Dao, 2008).

Inadequate writing skills and strategies, such as failure to apply planning, drafting, and revising stages properly, combined with writing anxiety, further increase error frequency (Hinkel, 2004; Hyland, 2003; Pham, 2020; Le *et al.*, 2024).

The learning environment and traditional teaching methods, which often emphasize theoretical knowledge over interactive practice, also contribute to poor grammar acquisition. Additionally, lack of timely feedback and limited learning resources reduce learners' ability to identify and correct errors (Richards *et al.*, 2010; Nguyen, 2018; Tran & Le, 2021; Trinh *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, grammatical errors in EFL learners' writing result from a complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors. Addressing these comprehensively is essential for improving English writing quality.

3.4 Related Studies

Research on grammatical errors in English writing has long been a focus in second language acquisition studies, as such errors not only affect writing quality but also reflect learners' proficiency and learning process, especially among EFL students.

Wangcharapunyarong *et al.* (2013) investigated grammatical errors among English major students and identified five frequent types: verb tense, sentence structure, word form, prepositions, and singular/plural noun use. They attributed these errors to inappropriate writing topics and L1 interference, recommending that teachers select topics appropriate to students' proficiency.

Lee *et al.* (2016) studied first-year English majors in the U.S. and found that tense errors accounted for 28%, sentence structure errors 25%, and article errors 20%. Their results showed students could identify basic errors like tense and sentence structure, but often missed more complex errors such as subject-verb agreement and article misuse. The study highlighted the importance of raising grammatical awareness for academic writing development.

Suryana (2019) reported that verb tense errors were most common among learners, while errors in word form were least frequent. He suggested focused instruction on verb tense and increased writing practice as effective measures.

Ni *et al.* (2022) analyzed errors from midterm and final exams, finding that omission of sentence components (44%) was the most frequent error, followed by sentence formation errors (31%), redundancy (23%), and word order errors (2%). They proposed strategies to address these common errors.

In Vietnam, Tran (2015) examined grammatical errors in the academic writing of English majors at a university in Ho Chi Minh City. The study found verb tense errors highest at 32%, followed by article errors (21%), verb form errors (18%), and preposition errors (15%). Despite basic grammar knowledge, students struggled with application due to weak self-editing skills.

Nguyen (2018) reported similar findings, with tense errors at 30%, missing subject or predicate errors at 22%, and conjunction errors at 16%. This study emphasized the role of students' awareness and detailed teacher feedback in enhancing self-correction. Nguyen (2020) highlighted students' tendency to overlook minor errors and undervalue correction, limiting improvements in writing quality over time.

Le *et al.* (2024) identified vocabulary limitations and difficulties in sentence construction and outlining as key challenges for English majors at Hanoi University, recommending tools such as Quizlet and Grammarly to support writing.

Generally, these studies confirm that grammatical errors remain significant obstacles for English majors, especially freshmen adapting to academic writing. However, research on students' awareness of grammatical errors is still limited, especially in local contexts like the Mekong Delta region.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Research Instruments
In this study, English-written paragraphs and semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect the information to answer the research questions.

4.1.1 Written Paragraphs
According to Brown (2004), using essay writing as a quantitative tool allowed for a systematic and detailed assessment of students' grammatical awareness and writing abilities. The written paragraphs served as a quantitative data source, where 60 first-year English major students were asked to write a 120-180 word essay on the topic "My best childhood memory" within 40 minutes. This topic was carefully chosen to encourage the use of diverse grammatical structures based on personal experiences, minimizing copying and enhancing authenticity (Hyland, 2003; Tribble, 1996). Additionally, the topic prompted reflection on past events, which typically involve a variety of verb tenses, articles, and sentence structures, aligning well with the research's focus on grammatical error analysis. Instructions and prompts were written in English, while explanations were provided in Vietnamese to ensure that students fully understood the content and requirements of the writing task.

Collected essays were analyzed using a pre-established grammatical error framework covering eight main error types: verb tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, word form, sentence structure, collocations, and omission of the verb "to be." To guarantee reliability, two experienced English teachers independently evaluated the essays. Any discrepancies between their evaluations were resolved through discussion and mutual agreement. Each identified error was coded by type, enabling frequency counts and percentage calculations for comprehensive statistical analysis.

4.1.2 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were employed as a qualitative tool to collect data. This approach combined pre-prepared open-ended questions with flexibility, allowing for in-depth insights and a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences (Kvale, 1996; Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014).

Therefore, this study employed semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese with five students who made the most grammatical errors, aiming to explore the causes of these errors and potential solutions for improving their grammar in writing. The interviews consisted of five main questions:

1) What grammatical errors do you often make in writing?;
2) What do you think causes these errors in your writing?;
3) How do these errors affect the clarity of your ideas?;
4) How do you address errors in your writing? Do you correct them yourself or seek help?;
5) Could you give any suggestions for teachers or the university to reduce these errors?

4.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 60 first-year English majors (42 females and 18 males) at Nam Can Tho University during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. All participants were enrolled in an English writing course, with a pre-intermediate level of proficiency as determined by an entry test and instructor evaluation.

The participants were randomly selected, with a focus on those in the early stages of developing academic writing skills in English. They were asked to write a paragraph on the same topic, which was then analyzed for grammatical errors. Based on this analysis, five students with the most errors were invited for semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions and the causes of their mistakes.

These five students, from diverse backgrounds and varying proficiency levels, exhibited recurring grammatical errors, making them suitable for qualitative research. Before participating, all students were informed of the study's purpose and procedures.

Participation was voluntary, and all personal information was kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

4.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Sixty first-year English majors (42 females, 18 males) at Nam Can Tho University were asked to write an English paragraph (120–180 words) on the topic "My best childhood memory" within 40 minutes. The topic was chosen to encourage students to express their ideas naturally while demonstrating their grammatical skills in a realistic context. All students were enrolled in the English Writing course and were at a pre-intermediate proficiency level, as determined by their placement test results and classroom assessments. The writing task was completed under the supervision of the course

instructor, who was also one of the researchers, ensuring the accuracy and independence of the data collection process.

The grammatical errors in the students' writings were analyzed over a two-week period, using established theoretical frameworks from Corder (1974), James (1998), and Selinker (1972). This allowed for the identification, categorization, and quantification of common grammatical errors, such as verb tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, word forms, sentence structure, omission of the verb "to be", and collocations.

After analyzing the written data, five students with the highest number of grammatical errors were invited for semi-structured interviews to explore their perceptions of these errors. Each interview, conducted in Vietnamese with the participants' consent for audio recording, lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. The interviews focused on understanding the causes of grammatical errors, students' error-correction habits, and suggestions for improving their grammar skills. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically using the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), which provided deeper insights into the students' awareness and attitudes towards their grammatical errors.

5. Results and Discussion

Research question 1: What are the common grammatical errors made by first-year English major students at Nam Can Tho University in their English paragraph writing?

After analyzing sixty English paragraphs written by first-year English majors at Nam Can Tho University, a total of 352 grammatical errors were identified. The analysis revealed eight prevalent types of grammatical errors, with a focus on interlanguage and language transfer phenomena. The detailed results are presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Common Grammatical Errors in English
Paragraph Writing by First-Year English Majors

Grammatical Error	Number of Errors	Error Rate (%)
Collocations	116	32.95
Word Form	63	17.90
Prepositions	55	15.63
Subject-Verb Agreement	32	9.09
Sentence Structure	32	9.09
Omission of "To Be"	30	8.52
Verb Tense	14	3.98
Articles	10	2.84

It can be seen from Table 5.1 that the most common grammatical errors were collocations (32.95%), word form (17.90%), and prepositions (15.63%). These errors are typically linked to the use of complex verbs, word forms, and vocabulary-related structures,

suggesting that students face challenges in accurately applying formal grammatical rules and structures.

Collocation errors were the most frequent, accounting for 32.95% of all errors, including inappropriate word combinations, such as when a student wrote "*big rain*" instead of "*heavy rain*" to refer to "*mưa lớn*". These errors are closely related to students' vocabulary and their ability to use words appropriately in context. Collocation errors reduce the naturalness of writing and make it difficult to convey precise meaning. These findings align with Do *et al.* (2023) research, which identified collocation errors, especially those involving adjective + noun and verb + noun combinations-as some of the most common mistakes in Vietnamese students' English writings, negatively affecting fluency and naturalness. In addition, the students usually use "*do a mistake*" instead of "*make a mistake*" because of their habit of translating from Vietnamese and their lack of knowledge of natural word combinations in English (Do *et al.*, 2023). It is noteworthy that most of the students interviewed in this study admitted to frequently hearing phrases like "*do a mistake*" or "*make a test*," mistakenly assuming they were using them correctly. This supports the observation by Le *et al.* (2020) that even advanced students struggle to recognize and apply correct collocations, a problem that persists due to a lack of clear feedback or direct guidance from their teachers.

Word form errors accounted for 17.90% of the total errors. These errors involve the confusion in the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, accounting for about 17.90% of the total errors, as illustrated by the incorrect use of "*she was beauty*" instead of "*she was beautiful*" This highlights a gap in students' understanding of word form and proper usage within sentences. The research by Nguyen (2019) also confirmed that word form errors are one of the common problems among Vietnamese students due to the structural differences between Vietnamese and English.

In fact, many students often confuse adjectives and adverbs, such as "*he runs fastly*" instead of "*he runs fast*", or use verbs instead of nouns, as in "*a describe of the picture*" instead of "*a description of the picture*". These errors reflect students' unfamiliarity with the morphological variations of words and how they are used in specific contexts. According to James (1998), word form errors often arise when learners do not fully understand the grammatical functions of words in sentences or when their native language has similar words that do not change form. For instance, "*đẹp*" in Vietnamese can be an adjective or a noun, but in English, "*beauty*" and "*beautiful*" must be differentiated.

Preposition errors were also significant, accounting for 15.63% of the total errors. Common mistakes included using the wrong preposition or omitting a necessary preposition. A student wrote in his paragraph "*sit on the bike*" or "*depend of my parents*" instead of "*sit in the bike*" or "*depend on my parents*". When asked about these errors, they explained they were influenced by the direct Vietnamese equivalents - "*on*" being translated as "*trên*", mistakenly assuming that "*depend of*" is equivalent to "*phụ thuộc vào*" in Vietnamese. Such errors highlight the structural differences between English and

Vietnamese in the use of prepositions, particularly in collocations and fixed expressions (Thai *et al.*, 2017).

Many students also reported that they were unsure which prepositions to use after certain verbs such as *"listen"*, *"talk"*, *"believe"*, or *"worry"*. This indicates that the errors were not only caused by grammar knowledge, but also by a lack of exposure to verb-preposition combinations in real-life contexts. For instance, a student wrote *"I believe him"*—a literal translation of the Vietnamese sentence *"Tôi tin anh ấy"*—instead of the more appropriate *"I believe in him"*. According to James (1998), preposition errors are a form of *"interlingual errors"*, arising from negative transfer from the mother tongue. In this case, because Vietnamese does not require prepositions in structures where English does, the student left it out in English as well. This shows how differences between Vietnamese and English grammar, especially in the use of prepositions, can lead to confusion and errors in writing.

Subject-verb agreement errors made up 9.09% of the total mistakes. An example of this error is the sentence, *"I often takes a nap to hang out with my brother and Tan"*, where the subject-verb agreement should be *"I often take a nap"*. This error arises because students often fail to grasp how verbs change based on the singular or plural form of the subject. This type of error is also commonly encountered in English writing by Vietnamese students (Nguyen, 2020). Subject-verb agreement errors directly affect the grammatical accuracy of sentences and reduce the professionalism of academic writing. According to Tran (2017), these errors are a major reason why student writing lacks coherence and clarity, making it difficult for readers to understand.

Sentence structure errors accounted for approximately 9.09% of the grammatical mistakes found in students' paragraph writing. These errors involve incorrect sentence organization and improper word order, resulting in grammatically incorrect or unclear sentences. For instance, one student wrote *"This can memories happen"* instead of the correct form *"This memory can happen"*. As Nguyen (2020) emphasized, sentence structure errors are a significant barrier to effective writing, particularly for students who are just beginning to develop their academic English skills. These issues indicate learners' struggle to apply grammar rules when constructing coherent and accurate sentences.

A contributing factor to this problem is the lack of foundational grammatical knowledge. When students have not yet fully grasped sentence formation, they are more likely to make errors such as word inversion or omitting essential sentence components. These kinds of errors reduce the clarity of the message and weaken the cohesion and coherence of the paragraph, making it difficult for readers to follow the writer's intended meaning (Bui, 2018). Therefore, strengthening students' understanding of sentence construction and providing consistent practice opportunities should be prioritized in writing instruction.

The omission of the verb "to be" accounted for 8.52% of the errors. This issue is particularly evident among Vietnamese learners, as the Vietnamese language does not require the *"to be"* verb in many situations. For example, students might write *"When I 5 year old"* instead of *"When I was 5 years old"*. This finding aligns with Le (2024), who noted

that omitting the verb "to be" is a distinctive grammatical feature of Vietnamese learners when studying English. The absence of the verb "*to be*" leads to incomplete sentences, affecting the clarity and accuracy of the writing. Nguyen (2019) also pointed out that omitting "*to be*" not only causes grammatical errors but also reduces the cohesion and coherence of written texts.

Verb tense errors accounted for 3.98% of the total mistakes. These errors often occur when students fail to apply the correct tense, especially the simple past tense, in narrative writing. For instance, a student wrote, "*This can memories happen a first time in my old secondary school*" instead of "*This memory happened for the first time in my old secondary school*". In this case, the student used the modal *"can"*- which expresses present or future possibility - instead of the simple past tense *"happened"* to describe a past event. This reflects a misunderstanding of how verb tenses function to convey time reference, particularly in narrative contexts where accurate past tense usage is essential for coherence and clarity. Another student produced "*I was sit on the bike*" instead of the correct form "*I sat on the bike*". When asked about this error, the student explained that she could not recall the past form of the verb or the correct past tense structure. As a result, she assumed that using "*was/were + verb*" was an acceptable way to express the past tense. This shows students' difficulties in mastering the English tense system, which has been highlighted as a significant challenge for Vietnamese learners (Nguyen, 2020). As English tenses are more complex than the tense system in Vietnamese, students often struggle to use the correct tense in context. Additionally, research by James (1998) suggested that the error could result from the "*language simplification*" strategy, where learners default to using the simple present tense instead of correctly changing tenses in various contexts.

Article errors accounted for 2.84% of the total mistakes. These typically involve the omission of articles "*a*", "*an*", or the incorrect use of "*the*". For example, a student wrote "*I saw dog on street*" instead of "*I saw a dog on the street*". To explain this error, the student expressed confusion about article usage and tended to translate directly from Vietnamese into English, resulting in the omission of articles. The main cause of this error is the lack of a system of articles in Vietnamese, making it difficult for students to correctly identify and use articles in English (Nguyen, 2019). Research by Celce *et al.* (1995) and Ellis (2008) also found that article errors are often influenced by the learners' first language and the lack of practice in real communicative contexts. Thus, teaching articles should focus on context-specific exercises, with detailed instructions to improve students' awareness and proper use of articles in both communication and academic writing.

In summary, the analysis reveals that collocations, word form, and prepositions constitute over 65% of the total grammatical errors, highlighting the significant challenges students face in mastering English grammar in writing. While less frequent, other error types also have a substantial effect on the accuracy and effectiveness of their writing.

Research question 2: From the students' perspective, what are the main causes leading to grammatical errors in paragraph writing?

When asked about the causes of their errors, students identified four main reasons. First, most of the interviewed students agreed that mother tongue interference was seen as the most common cause of their grammatical errors. As one student explained, "*Also, when I write, I try to translate my ideas from Vietnamese, piecing together English words. This leads to incorrect word order and forgetting singular/plural noun forms*". The word-for-word translation phenomenon is often found in students' writing because sentence structures in Vietnamese differ significantly from English, which results in structural and grammatical errors. This finding is similar to Nguyen (2019)'s study. The author emphasized that the structural differences between Vietnamese and English often lead learners to transfer their native language patterns, resulting in grammatical errors. Moreover, James (1998) highlighted that language transfer and simplification strategies are common sources of errors among second language learners, which aligns with students' difficulties in applying English tense and article systems correctly.

Second, many students admitted they lacked grammar knowledge and had limited opportunities to practice writing that integrates grammar. One participant shared, "*I think it's because I don't remember the tense rules well, and I haven't practiced much. It's really hard for me to remember grammatical structures. Also, I often feel pressured by time when writing and worry I won't finish in time, leading to errors in tenses, like in the writing task we did last time.*" Students specifically mentioned struggles with verb tenses, sentence structure, and the use of articles and prepositions.

Third, time constraints were another major factor. One student explained, "*I think it's the time pressure and also the fact that I'm not good at grammar. Even though I can do grammar exercises separately, when I have to write a full piece under time pressure, I get nervous and forget the grammar rules. I just try to finish quickly, even if the grammar is wrong.*" The need to rush through tasks led to more errors. Similarly, Le (2024) and Tran (2017) supported that the impact of limited practice and time constraints on error frequency. Specifically, the authors noted that learners tend to make more mistakes when writing under pressure and when lacking sufficient grammar instruction integrated with writing practice. Additionally, a lack of proofreading skills prevented students from detecting and correcting errors. One student remarked, "*I usually just finish writing and submit it right away; I don't have time to review or correct mistakes. I just think that once it's written, it's done, and I don't pay attention to checking it again.*" Another shared, "*I often write quickly, focusing more on the ideas than the grammar. I don't go back to check for mistakes because I feel like I'm already running out of time.*"

In conclusion, the semi-structured interviews revealed that the grammatical errors in students' writings were primarily caused by four factors: mother tongue interference, lack of foundational grammar knowledge, lack of proofreading skills, and time constraints. The consistent findings with previous research confirm that the challenges faced by first-year English majors at Nam Can Tho University are reflective of broader

issues encountered by Vietnamese EFL learners. These issues hindered their ability to write accurately and fluently.

Research question 3: What solutions can be proposed to help first-year students improve their grammatical accuracy in paragraph writing skills?

From the students' perspectives, they offered several suggestions to reduce grammatical errors in their writing. Firstly, they expressed the desire for additional grammar lessons specifically focused on writing skills, as one student shared: "*I think we really need more grammar exercises focused on writing. It would help us understand how to use grammar correctly in real writing, not just in separate grammar lessons. In this way, we can improve both our grammar and writing skills at the same time.*".

Moreover, most of them believed that error correction sessions would be very helpful if the teacher explained things in more detail, as another student mentioned, "*It would be really helpful if we could have more error correction activities, where the teacher provides detailed feedback on our mistakes. I feel that when we only get general comments, it's hard to know exactly what went wrong, but with detailed explanations, we could understand our errors more clearly and know how to fix them. This kind of feedback would definitely help us improve our writing skills.*".

Additionally, many of them also emphasized the importance of having a learning environment that promotes collaboration and peer support. As one student shared, "*I think it would be really useful to have more group activities where we can work together to correct each other's mistakes. In a supportive environment like that, I believe we can learn a lot from our peers, and it would give us the chance to explain things to each other, which might help us understand the grammar rules better. Plus, it would make learning feel less stressful and more collaborative.*"

The students' proposed solutions correspond well with the recommendations found in prior studies. Nguyen (2019) and Bui (2018) both stress the importance of integrating grammar instruction with practical writing exercises to improve grammatical accuracy, which resonates with students' desire for more grammar-focused writing lessons. Moreover, the call for detailed error correction and feedback aligns with Celce *et al.* (1995) and Ellis (2008), who emphasized that specific, context-based feedback helps learners become more aware of their mistakes and how to correct them effectively. Furthermore, the students' preference for collaborative learning environments echoes Johnson and Johnson's (1999) research, which demonstrates that peer interaction and cooperative learning facilitate language acquisition and error reduction. Overall, these consistent findings suggest that implementing grammar-integrated writing instruction, targeted feedback, and collaborative learning strategies could effectively support Vietnamese learners in overcoming common grammatical challenges.

To conclude, the analysis results from the students' perspective showed that they proposed a number of solutions to reduce grammatical errors in their writing, including the need for grammar-focused writing lessons, detailed error correction activities, and collaborative learning environments.

6. Recommendations

Further research is recommended to include students from different academic years and compare English majors with non-majors to better understand the development of writing skills. Furthermore, future studies should explore various writing genres to identify a broader range of common grammatical errors made by Vietnamese students. In addition, investigating teachers' perspectives on the integration of grammar instruction in writing classes is necessary to enhance the effectiveness of teaching programs.

7. Conclusions

This study explored the common grammatical errors made by first-year English majors in paragraph writing, combining text analysis with student interviews. The most frequent errors involved collocations, word form, prepositions, verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, omission of "to be," and sentence structure. These errors reflect students' struggles with both grammar and vocabulary usage, particularly due to differences between English and Vietnamese, limited exposure to authentic input, and a lack of writing practice. The interview data further revealed that these errors were mainly caused by mother tongue interference, insufficient grammar knowledge, lack of proofreading skills, and time pressure. Many students are admitted to translating word-for-word from Vietnamese and rarely revising their work due to limited feedback or writing strategies. These findings are consistent with previous studies in Vietnam, which also highlight persistent grammatical issues among EFL learners. However, this study offers additional insight by focusing on learners' perspectives, emphasizing the need for greater instructional support.

Overall, the study suggests that grammar instruction should be more closely integrated into writing classes, with a focus on contextualized practice, detailed feedback, and peer collaboration. This approach may help students gradually build grammatical accuracy and confidence in academic writing.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Ms. Tran Trieu Huyen is a lecturer of English at Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam. She is passionate about teaching practices. She has been interested in teaching productive skills and linguistic courses to English majors.

Ms. Tran Minh Khuyen is a lecturer of English at Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam. She is interested in the field of teaching and learning English. She has been particularly involved in teaching various courses for English-majored students.

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