COMMON SENTENCE PROBLEMS IN ACADEMIC WRITING COMMITTED BY VIETNAMESE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH: SITUATION, CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

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SUMMARY

At university level, academic writing has always been more critical for English majors. At this stage of learning, errors in academic writing are sometimes unacceptable. As can be seen from the results of some academic writing tests at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TUE), most of English majors at TUE have great problems in writing English - the students have many difficulties while producing sentences in English. Therefore, the ultimate objective of the study is to investigate common sentence problems of English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TUE) in academic writing as well as causes of these errors. It will also expose the writing problems thanks to error analysis in students' academic writing. In this paper, the questionnaire part would present both the perspectives of teachers and students regarding this issue. Our study may assist teachers to find out why students make these errors and how these errors can be avoided. Finally, our research has an intention to figure out some efficient and necessary solutions to these problems so that both teachers and students can achieve their goals relating to writing skill development.

Keywords: *academic writing; common sentence problems; English majors; Error analysis; writing skill*

INTRODUCTION

In many different types of studies in writing, errors have been discussed regularly. John C. Mellon's (1975) National Assessment and the Teaching of English [1] is a source in which the frequency of error found in the writing of students at various levels was described in detail. In this book, he lists the common writing problems such as, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, fragments and run-ons, awkward constructions, agreement, and word choice. Other researchers have chosen to concentrate on some common written errors so as to study them in more detail. The most common writing problems are listed as follows:

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences or parts of sentences. They are very popular errors that learners make while writing academic English.

Run-on sentences are sentences in which two or more independent clauses are written one after another with no punctuation.

Comma splices are errors which happen when two independent clauses are incorrectly joined by a comma without a coordinating conjunction.

Choppy sentences are sentences that are too short.

Stringy sentences are sentences with too many clauses, usually connected with *and*, *but*, *so*, and sometimes *because*.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers used survey questionnaires as the first data collection instrument. Two questionnaires were briefly designed, one for the learners and the other for the teachers. Mixed questionnaires, in which questions are both close and open ended, were employed to discover data regarding teachers' and learners' experience of academic writing, their attitude to academic writing, sentence problems and their causes as well as error correction. The participants are English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education in their second year and third year, who have studied

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academic writing at university. The total number of student participants is 50 and that of teacher participants is 20. Most of the students' level of English proficiency is intermediate although several students have lower or higher level.

The study also utilized writing analysis for more authentic information. We collected 50 academic writings which were written by the 50 English majors investigated under the survey. These papers were written in the diagnostic test in the IELTS format at the beginning of the 2016-1017 academic year at TUE. The goal of analyzing these writings was to find the types and frequency of sentence problems in students' academic writing. Then, we compared them with the results from the questionnaires before drawing a conclussion on the common sentence problems which were committed by English majors in academic writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers and students' attitude towards sentence problems in academic writing

The first part of the questionnaires required the teachers and students to show their attitude towards sentence problems in academic writing on a 4-point scale: very concerned, quite concerned, a little bit concerned, not concerned at all. The results showed that most of the teachers are concerned about their students' sentence problems. Actually, 70% of the teachers feel very concerned about sentence problems while their students do any academic writing in English. The rest are quite concerned, and hardly any teachers belittle their students' errors. The above figure means that teachers have a very responsible attitude towards students' sentence problems.

Students' attitude to common sentence problems in academic writing is contrary to that of teachers. Indeed, it is clear that more than half of English majors (52% exactly) only concern a little bit about their errors. Nearly 4% of them stated that it is not necessary to worry about sentence problems. On the other hand, the figures for the participants who are quite concerned and very concerned about their errors are low, at about 30% and 14% respectively. It can be concluded from the data that most of the English majors at TUE do not have the right attitude towards errors in academic writing.

Frequency of committing these types of error by English majors at TUE

When asked to put a tick for each type of sentence problems according to the frequency of committing by students on a 5-point scale: very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never, most teachers agreed that their students very often make errors related to all types of sentence problems in different academic writing papers. On the other hand, English majors claimed that they sometimes commit these types while producing sentences in English. Thus, there is disagreement between teachers' and students' perspective.

Data analysis from students' writing

In order to have more accurate information about common sentence problems in academic writing by English majors at TUE, the researcher collected 50 academic papers written at the beginning of the 2016-1017 academic year. Each paper consists of one academic report and one academic essay in the IELTS format. The academic writing tasks fall into "line graph" report and "cause and solution" essay and are confined to 60 minutes to be completed. The researcher counted the sentence problems in each paper to figure out which type is the most frequent.

The results of our analysis of English majors' academic writing pieces are unveiled in the following pie chart:

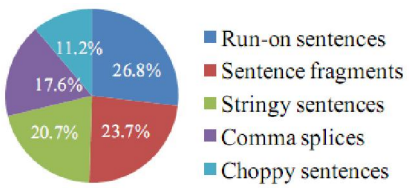

Figure 1. *Students' frequency of committing sentence problems in academic writing*

The pie chart shows the data on the frequency of committing different types of sentence

problems by English majors at TUE in academic writing. Run-on sentences are by far the biggest problem faced by the students when writing as it represents 26.8% of the total sentence problems committed. Sentence fragments and stringy sentences are fairly balanced, accounting for 23.7% and 20.7% of the total errors, respectively. The figure for comma splices is 17.6%. The number of errors related to choppy sentences is the lowest, accounting for just 11.2% of the total errors committed.

Compared with the results attained from the questionnaires, it is clear that teachers' perspectives are consistent with our writing analysis. It means that teachers are aware of their students' errors and the frequency of committing sentence problems by their students in academic writing. A majority of the teachers are very concerned about their students' sentence problems. On the other hand, students' perspectives are inconsistent with our writing analysis. In fact, according to the writing analysis, run-on sentences, sentence fragments and stringy sentences are big problems faced by the students when writing. Nevertheless, in the survey questionnaire, most students claimed that they rarely committed these types of problems. This means that students are unaware of their errors, and they are not very concerned about the errors they made in academic writing. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why English majors at TUE often commit sentence problems in academic writing.

The causes of making errors

In another question item both the students and the teachers are required to select the causes of errors.

As can be seen in Table 1, the largest number of the teachers (95%) agreed that the primary reason for making errors related to sentence problems in academic writing is lack of practice. As perceived by teachers, lacking practice has a great impact on the quality of academic writing papers. Lack of materials relating to sentence structures and sentence problems is the second cause leading to students' committing errors in academic writing. Up to 75% of teacher participants claimed that their students commit sentence problems due to lack of teachers' correction. Only a few of the surveyed teachers (35%) stated that English majors make errors because of lack of motivation.

Table 1. *Causes of making errors*

The causes	Perceived by teachers	Perceived by students
Lack of materials	84%	76%
Lack of teachers' instruction	41%	28%
Lack of teachers' correction	75%	85%
Lack of practice	95%	100%
Lack of motivation	35%	38%
Other causes	8.3%	16%

Meanwhile, all of the students indicated that they commit sentence problems because of lack of practice, which has a principal effect on the quality of academic writing. Lack of teachers' correction is the second reason leading to their errors in different pieces of academic writing. Most of the students in the study (76%) agreed that the additional reason for making errors is lacking materials relating to sentence structures and sentence problems. Only 28% the of participants claimed that they commit sentence problems on account of lack of teachers' instruction.

It is noticeable that a teacher who has in-depth knowledge about writing issues indicated that English majors make errors due to first language interference. Indeed, it is known as one of the most common causes leading to learners' written errors. Abort et al (1981) [2] indicates that whenever the differences in structures of the mother tongue and the target language exist, problems in the process of learning occur. In other words, the more differences there are, the more difficulties there would be. When people do

not know how to express an idea in the target foreign language, they usually use words and structures from their own language and translate them into English.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

Provide English majors with a full account of sentence problems

As students claimed that they lack learning resources related to sentence problems, teachers should give a full explanation of sentence problems such as definition of errors, examples of sentence problems and suggested methods for correcting them.

Encourage more practice

There are many different types of practice to help students avoid these sentence problems. They can be arranged in an increasing degree of difficulty. For example, teachers can ask students to find out errors and correct them in some single sentences or give students a passage consisting of sentence problems and require their students to find out errors and correct them. Moreover, teachers should require students to sit in pairs or groups, exchanging their works and proofreading them to find and correct errors. This would lead to an increase in students' awareness of errors and cooperation among students.

Encourage students to self-correct their mistakes

Applying this technique supplies students with many advantages. It can make students become more independent and more responsible in their work. Moreover, self correction may help students avoid being directly criticized by teachers in front of the class. Students will be more likely to bear in mind errors which they make in academic writing, and errors of the same types are more likely not to be repeated.

Apply peer correction

Students can work in pairs or groups to exchange academic writing papers with each other and proofread them to find and correct errors. For teachers, they can walk around, examine students' practice and assist where there are any disagreements or questions in pairs or in groups. Applying this technique does offer us various benefits. It can make the atmosphere in the class become free and unstressed. Besides, students can learn from each other's errors. Furthermore, this technique might stimulate cooperation among students. Particularly, when no one in the group can find out errors and correct them, they can seek help from more advanced students until they can get the satisfactory answer.

Teachers help students correct their mistakes

Teachers should give students a full explanation of what they want to express by the erroneous sentences and ask them what these sentences mean. If students' explanations are wrong, teacher will try to make them accurate and explicit. There are some advantages if teachers apply this technique to correct their students' errors. When correcting students' mistakes in their academic writing papers, teachers can see whether students succeed or fail to express themselves. As a result, teachers will have more appropriate treatments for their students' sentence problems. For students, an appropriate amount of teacher correction can stimulate them to express what they do mean by writing it down. Moreover, teacher correction provides them with opportunities to study accurate models of the language.

Use error correction code

Harmer (2001) [3] suggests coding as a technique of feeding back. Here are the most universal symbols in the correction code:

?	Not clear
WO	Word order
P	Wrong punctuation
RO	Run- on sentences
CS	Comma splice sentences
Frag	Sentence fragments
InComp	Incomplete sentences

Teachers apply codes and placing codes either in the left or right margin of the writing paper or the body of the writing. By doing this,

when students look at these symbols, they can comprehend quickly what the problem is. Furthermore, it is extremely convenient for teachers to simplify the evaluation of academic writing instead of giving comments or marks.

Use remedial work

Abbort and Wingard (1981) [2] regard remedial work as one of correction methods. Remedial work is necessary when there are errors made by a large percentage of the class. The researcher points out 3 stages of teachers in remedial work: defining the problem area; giving correct substitutes; and practicing correct usage through various types of exercises.

Design a handbook about sentence problems in academic writing

In this handbook, teachers should give a full explanation of sentence problems such as definition of errors, examples of sentence problems, suggested methods for correcting them and many tasks. Then, they will deliver these handbooks to each student in order to help students remember the knowledge that they forget. Moreover, teachers can require students to study in groups with the contents covered in the handbook, and teachers choose a gifted student in each group to become a leader guiding the others.

Encourage students to write in diaries

It is visible that a diary comes from daily writing, which means writing day by day. Progoff (1975:87) [4] considers diaries as "typically a notebook, booklet of blank pages, or any source for students to record thoughts, reactions to learning experiences, and even inner most fears about a learning activity". Writing in a diary is a way to establish a writing routine. It helps students to become more and more self-confident in academic writing. In fact, the technique is applied successfully in the study "Using diaries as practical tool to improve writing skills" by Ms. Amel OUAZETA (2009) [5].

CONCLUSION

Based on the results from the survey questionnaires and the writing analysis, it is obvious that teachers' perspectives are coincident with our writing analysis. In other words, teachers are aware of their students' errors and the frequency of committing sentence problems by their students while producing any sentences in English. Most of the surveyed teachers are very concerned about their students' sentence problems. Nevertheless, students' point of view is inconsistent with the writing analysis. This means that some students are unaware of their errors, and they do not have a responsible attitude toward errors in academic writing.

In the second place, the primary causes of committing errors are lack of practice, materials and teacher correction. Thus, teachers should provide their students with necessary materials in academic writing. In addition, they ought to give students more tasks to practice writing skill. Then, teachers should correct their students' exercise carefully and exactly.

Last but not least, there are many useful techniques which can be applied to correct students' sentence problems. Almost all teachers and students voted for more practice, and they believe that it is the most effective technique to help students avoid sentence problems in academic writing. Besides, teacher correction and peer correction are techniques which are quite effective.

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TÓM TẮT

NHỮNG LỖI VỀ CÂU THƯỜNG GẶP TRONG BÀI VIẾT TIẾNG ANH HỌC THUẬT CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH: THỰC TRẠNG, NGUYÊN NHÂN VÀ GIẢI PHÁP

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Ở bậc đại học, viết tiếng Anh học thuật rất quan trọng đối với sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh. Ở giai đoạn này, những sai sót trong viết tiếng Anh học thuật đôi khi không thể chấp nhận được. Kết quả của một số bài kiểm tra kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh học thuật cho thấy hầu hết sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên đều có những vấn đề lớn trong kĩ năng viết, đặc biệt sinh viên gặp nhiều khó khăn khi viết câu. Vì vậy, mục đích của nghiên cứu là nhằm tìm hiểu những lỗi câu thường gặp trong các bài viết học thuật của sinh viên chuyên ngữ cũng như nguyên nhân gây ra lỗi, cách tránh lỗi và sửa lỗi. Thông qua việc sử dụng bảng hỏi cho giáo viên và sinh viên, nghiên cứu đã khảo sát được quan điểm của giáo viên và sinh viên về vấn đề mắc lỗi câu trong bài viết tiếng Anh học thuật liên quan đến các khía cạnh như nhận thức về lỗi, tần suất mắc lỗi, nguyên nhân mắc lỗi và cách sửa lỗi. Đặc biệt, nghiên cứu đã sử dụng phương pháp phân tích bài viết của sinh viên để thu thập được thông tin chính xác về thực trạng mắc lỗi câu, từ đó nhóm tác giả đã đề xuất một số giải pháp hiệu quả và cần thiết để giúp sinh viên chuyên ngữ khắc phục cũng như tránh được những lỗi về câu trong bài viết tiếng Anh học thuật.

Từ khoá: *viết tiếng Anh học thuật; lỗi câu thường gặp; sinh viên chuyên ngữ; phân tích lỗi; kĩ năng viết*

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