

# Writing Errors of EFL Undergraduate Students in the Online Writing Course

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## ABSTRACT

Writing is considered the most difficult skill for learners especially for those who learn English as a foreign language. This study aims to explore the sources of errors that occur in the writing of EFL undergraduate students in the online environment. The data were collected from a questionnaire and 10 essays for the final examination composed of 10 Thai students studying English at one Thai university. The essays were coded and classified into different categories and themes. The findings revealed that errors made by Thai students came from their less effectiveness in the use of language. Their errors included not only word choice, verb tense, preposition, and pronoun but also their lack of understanding of the writing process. In addition, their writing skills and accuracy of language forms did not meet the criteria as expected. This study provides implications for EFL teaching staff at the university level in which they should promote more writing practice and pay more attention to the writing errors of students in any online courses.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a second or foreign language has long been a challenge for Thai students in any level. The Thai government, therefore, has taken more steps to boost Thai people to improve English proficiency. However, the data reveals that English scores of Thai people are among the lowest in Asian region according to The English Proficiency Index 2023 by language institute EF (2023), leading to the need to improve English proficiency which a focus on writing as the most difficult skills for learners who study English as a foreign language (EFL).

In addition, the situation where learning is taught online, there is the limitation to employ effective teaching instruction which can affect the learning outcome. Therefore, the use of technology and online materials should be well prepared to ensure the quality of education. For the writing course, teachers need to ensure that the course is delivered systematically, especially when giving feedback to students. According to the study by Kiatkheeree (2024), regular feedbacks are a key to enhance students' learning. For the writing course, feedbacks should be given to promote students' writing skills.

However, the current study found that EFL learners made significant writing errors because writing is seen as a difficult task either when they study onsite or online. This is because a good

writing requires understanding in syntax and morphology including knowledge of vocabulary and written forms (Cumming, 2001).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Second language learning**

The term “second language (L2 or SL)” refers to any language other than the first language (L1 or NL) and “second language acquisition (SLA)” refers to “the acquisition of any language after acquisition of the mother tongue” (Ellis, 2008, p. 6). In the study of SLA, the concept of the second language commonly links to the terms “foreign language (FL)”. For example, according to Cook (2011), a language learnt by immigrants in the host country for immediate use in daily life is considered second language learning while a language, other than the native language, learnt by students in a language class in their home country with no use outside classroom is considered foreign language learning.

The concept of second language is also associated with the term “interlanguage (IL)” and “target language (TL). A second language learned by speakers of other language is considered a “target language”. However, along with the process of learning the target language, second language learners are believed to develop “interlanguage”, a separate language system which is different from either learners’ first language or target language, but influenced by both languages (Tarone, 2006).

### **2.2. English writing and errors**

Writing involves generally four types consisting of expository writing, narrative writing, descriptive writing, and persuasive writing (Morin, 2015). For expository writing, it is used in everyday of life to give facts and information about the topic. A narrative writing is then used to tell a series of events with a definite beginning, middle, and end along with the use of transitions, especially time relationship.

The third, descriptive writing is a written work that creates a vivid mental image to describe people, places, or objects by using sensory details such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and textures. The last, a persuasive writing aims to give the writer’s opinion on the topic and try to get the reader to agree with it.

In this study, participants were taught all four types of writing while syntax and all related linguistic features were considered. According to Na Phuket and Othman (2015), writing errors caused by Thai students fell into 16 categories namely verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, article, preposition, modal/auxiliary, singular/plural form, fragment, verb form, pronoun, run-on sentence, infinitive/gerund, transition, subject-verb agreement, parallel structure, and comparison structure. Importantly, learners’ native language, Thai, affected the errors in every type of written texts.

### **2.3 Review of Related Literature**

Writing problems seem to be common among EFL learners. Derakhshan and Shirejini (2020) conducted research with 120 Iranian EFL learners from Golestan University, Iran, where participants filled out a reliable and validated questionnaire. The study the most common factors that made the writing task difficult included grammar, spelling, punctuation, choice of words, organization, and familiarity with genres and rhetorical structures, negative transfer from Persian to English, and idiomatic expressions and collocations.

Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn (2017) analysed 104 pieces of writing written by 26 second-year English major students who enrolled in the Writing II course. The research revealed that punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragment, respectively including interlingual interference, intralingual interference, limited knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, and carelessness of the students were committed errors among learners.

This is in accordance with the study by Fareed, Ashraf and Bilal (2016) conducting research with an aim to investigate problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners’ writing and factors that

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hinder their writing skills. The study employed focus groups of Pakistani English language teachers' and undergraduate ESL learners along with writing samples from 30 ESL undergraduate Learners. The findings showed that insufficient linguistic proficiency (including command over grammar, syntax, and vocabulary), writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1 and weak structure organization were seen as challenges and problems among learners.

The study by Akbari (2015) found the EFL writing problems of EFL students who were asked to write a 250 – 300 words piece of writing about their hometown or village. The results revealed that students had problems with spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. It is recommended students to use dictionaries to correct spelling mistakes. Also the study suggested EFL learners to read extensively to promote writing ability.

Ananda, Gani, and Sahardin (2014) conducted the study with 44 first graders from a high school in Banda Aceh in their writing of English. The study revealed five types of fragmented sentences: the absence of a subject, the absence of a verb, the absence of both a subject and a verb, the absence of a verb in a dependent clause, and the absence of an independent clause in written tests for a descriptive text entitled "My school" of 120-140 word length.

To write a well-developed piece of writing, students need to go through several stages. Therefore, in the present study, the focus is very explicitly on the writing errors in the 5-paragraph essay which is the most difficult task of EFL learners.

### **3. METHOD**

The study involved two phases. The first phase was conducted with a questionnaire to gain preliminary data of second year students majoring in English in the Faculty of Education at one public university in Thailand. The questionnaire contained three parts: Part 1 consisted of four items asking for their demographic information, Part 2 consisted of five items asking for their general writing information (course and experience), and Part 3 consisted of 5 items asking about their writing difficulties. The questionnaire was distributed both offline and online versions to students with 32 respondents. Then the researcher selected 10 second year students enrolled in the online writing course who agreed to share their written essays for the study.

The second phase involved the analysis of 10 essays from the participants. The topic was chosen by the instructor and it allowed the students to compose the essays in any forms of writing. The topic of the essay was appropriate to students' ages and their background knowledge. In the process of writing, students were asked to write a five-paragraph essay in which each paragraph contains at least five sentences. This written essay was a part of their final examination of the course. To be more specific, written samples came from the writing course which students had to study for 4 hours a week for 15 weeks. So, it could be said that students had experienced in the writing process.

To analyse data, the researcher as also an English lecturer gathered all information and detected all errors. Each written work was analysed for errors individually. Then all 10 written essays were categorised for specific themes.

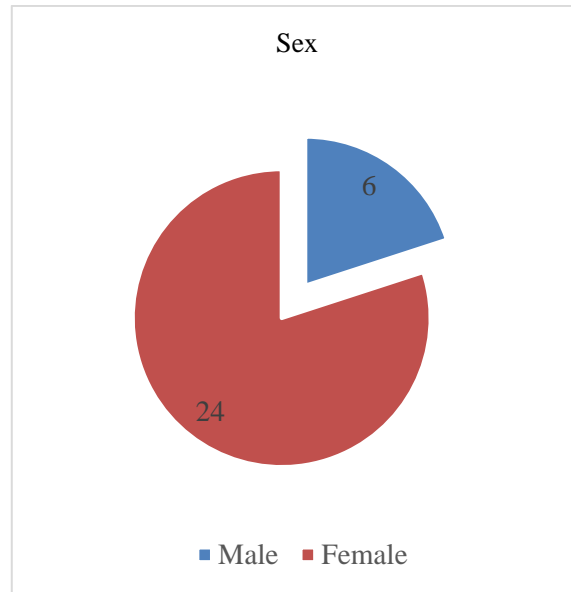
### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The first phase of the study came from the questionnaire containing demographic data, students' perception about writing, and their difficulties in writing.

#### **Part 1 Demographic data**

Data obtained from the participants who were a group of students from one public university indicated can be seen in the chart below.

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*Figure 4.1.* General information of respondents

As can be seen from the figure, the total number of respondents were 30 students. They were 6 male students (20%) and the majority were 24 female students (80%)

Although all participants studied in the same level (second-year) in the same programme, their ages were a bit different ranging from 19-25 years old and their educational backgrounds seem a bit different as can be seen in the table below.

*Table 4.1.* Educational background

<b>Educational background</b>	<b>Number N=30</b>	<b>(%)</b>
High school	28	93.33
Bachelor's degree	1	3.33
High vocational certificate	1	3.33

According to the table, the data showed that two of 30 students had different educational background. However, the differences of educational background were not the focus of the study.

#### Part 2 Writing experience

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their writing experience in their higher education institution. When asked how many writing courses they enrolled, they replied that they have one called a writing course. However, data showed that their other courses involved writing process so they felt writing was part of their learning in any courses.

When asked whether they had extra writing courses outside classroom, all respondents stated that since they studied at the university, they did not take any writing course except a preparation course for standardised test provided by the university usually held during weekends or after class of weekdays.

The results of this part can imply that students did not have much writing experience apart from their university course which may result in the lack of understanding about advanced writing and it may affect their writing proficiency.

### Part 3 Writing difficulties

The data from the questionnaire did ask respondents about their writing difficulties which can be seen in the table below.

*Table 4.2. Writing problems*

Items	(%)
Grammar	85
Vocabulary	90
Punctuation	45
Spelling	72
Expression	65
Time allocation	55

Regarding the table, it showed that respondents found vocabulary, grammar, spelling as the top three problems when writing (90%,85%,75% respectively). The results revealed that EFL learners did have the difficulties in learning other languages as the words, grammar, and structure, and letters were totally different from their mother tongue, Thai. Also, their L1 may affect their writing process and that can answer why they ranked time allocation for writing as one of the top five problems they encountered when writing. Another one factor, expression was seen as one of difficulties which was the result of their few experiences in writing in English (studied only one writing course for the degree programme).

The second phase of the study was from the data obtained from 10 essays of the respondents. These essays were a five-paragraph essay. The topic of the 10 essay was about their expectation. The time allocated was 4-hour session. However, the researcher did ask the lecturer of the writing course who indicated that students can only spend two hours to complete the task as it was their final examination task. Students then have 15 minutes extra time to ask for proofread before submission. The sample sentences of selected essays were shown below.

*Table 4.3. Writing samples*

Essay 1	Everyone have a dream, whether richer or something them want.
Essay 2	I believe everyone has a dream.
Essay 3	When I was young, I had a variety of dreams in different time periods.
Essay 4	Dream are words we have often heard throughout our lives.
Essay 5	My dream might be a little weird, it made me relize that I loved my father very much
Essay 6	When I was a child, My first dream was i want to be a singer.
Essay 7	My dream is I met someone I want to meet and the person was a deceased relative.
Essay 8	I believe that everyone in the world has a dream.
Essay 9	Eevryone in this world has their own dreams.
Essay 10	Everyone chid or person has their own dreams.

The samples came from the first sentence of the introduction part and it could be said that students made writing mistakes since the beginning whether the grammar, the expression, spelling, or vocabulary.

For example, sentence from Essay 1,

student had difficulty in part of speech of noun which led to the wrong use of 'Everyone have' because their L1 everyone means 'many' not a total number of people like English. Also, the written sample show the fragmented sentence with incorrect grammar as can be seen in the clause 'whether richer or something them want'.

A sentence from Essay 6 also showed their mistake for the use of pronoun 'My' in the sentence, and 'i'. These mistakes showed that a student did lack understanding of the basic English.

Another frequent error students often made is spelling. This can be seen from the sentence of Essay 10, this work used the word 'chid' for 'child'. This happens the same in Essay 5 which the word 'realized' was misspelled.

The last one mistake found among these writing samples is choppy sentences. According to Oshima and Hogue (1991) and Ananda, Gani, and Sahardin (2014), choppy sentences or the the use of simple sentences in writing can be considered as a poor writing style. Even though, Ananda, Gani, and Sahardin (2014) found only a few numbers of choppy sentences in their study, the present study showed a significant number of choppy sentences. There are many factors influenced the results whether these written essays were a final examination product in which students got a limited time to finish the work (only 2 hours), or they may get stressed of using the wrong grammar so they chose to write a simple sentence to avoid making mistake.

Clearly, the written sample showed a problem about how to write a comprehensive sentence. The results showed that participating students had the difficulty in writing and made the errors as they were influenced by their native language. In other words, students did not have much chances to use English in their daily life and that later affected their English writing proficiency.

Little chances to use experience in everyday of life led the participating students to produce written works with many errors. For example, one work showed the frequent errors of pronoun like them', not they. Another presented the 'I' instead of 'I'. These two examples clearly stated the lack of understanding of simple and basic components of English.

In addition, one significant error noted by students' essays was subject-verb agreement. Students used 'she see...' instead of 'she sees'. And errors of subject-verb agreement appeared in all 10 essays. This clearly led by Thai language interference where verb is used the same. These results is consistent with the findings by Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn, (2017) who conduct research with Thai EFL learners. Their study revealed that punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragment were the most frequently committed errors made by Thai EFL students.

The significant problem found in the essays is word choice. This is known to be the error that occurred regularly influenced by their mother tongue language. For example, the word 'make' was used as 'to do something' in any sentences without considering the context. So, the sample showed that students wrote 'It make[s] me happy' rather than 'I am grateful'.

The last type of error is spelling. Misspelling is regarding as one of the most frequent errors among EFL students. Adding or omitting space in a single word, insertion of an extra letter, or using incorrect letter occurred across the 10 essays. For example, one student wrote 'stoped' for 'stopped'. Another inserted 't' for 'nothing' while some used incorrect letter like 'frist' for 'first'. It can be said that students when writing about the English essay were not aware of language use which may be the result of their native language having none of characteristics like English. This is in accordance

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by the work Nyang' Au Bernard (2014) who found that poor spelling is one of the problems of ESL students and this can cause anxiety for learning writing.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is appeared that English writing is the most difficult task for EFL students even though English is taught as a compulsory subject in every level of Thai education. When considering the essay, writing errors occurred and affected the overall work. The results state the students experienced grammatical difficulties and these seem to be normal for EFL learners. This study yielded findings consistent with many studies (Ananda, Gani, & Sahardin, 2014; Derakhshan, & Karimian Shirejini, 2020; Khan, 2011; Sermsook, Liamnimitr, & Pochakorn, 2017). It is suggested that teaching and learning process need to adjust to ease the problems. Teachers, in the writing course, may need to provide more practices focusing on grammatical features. Also, it is recommended students to read more as this can help them to memorise better for vocabulary and know more variety of words in different contexts.

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