AN INVESTIGATION INTO COMMON TYPES AND CAUSES OF ESSAY WRITING ERRORS AMONG SECOND-YEAR AND THIRD-YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT DONG A UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

This study investigates common types and causes of essay writing errors among second-year (K24) and third-year (K23) English majors at Dong A University, Da Nang, Vietnam. Employing a mixed-methods Error Analysis (EA) approach, data were collected from 60 students' mid-term examination essays and 50 valid questionnaire responses. Errors were classified according to James (1998) four-category taxonomy: grammatical, mechanical, lexical, and organizational. Results reveal that grammatical errors are the predominant challenge across both cohorts, while mechanical errors decline significantly with academic progression. A cross-cohort comparison highlights a developmental shift in error gravity - from surface-level orthographic errors in second-year students toward complex syntactic and lexical errors in third-year students - alongside evidence of "fossilization" of basic grammatical and spelling patterns. Three underlying causes are identified: (1) interlingual transfer from Vietnamese L1; (2) cognitive constraints in idea generation and AI tool overdependence defined by Yan (2023) as the habitual use of AI tools to perform core composing tasks including generating ideas, drafting, or organizing essays rather than using AI solely for post-draft revision; and (3) pedagogical and environmental shortcomings including insufficient corrective feedback and limited supervised writing practice. The study offers targeted implications for students, writing instructors, and curriculum designers at Dong A University.

Keywords: *error analysis; EFL writing; interlanguage; writing errors; fossilization; Dong A University; second-year students; third-year students*

Introduction

Writing is considered one of the most cognitively demanding skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike everyday communication, academic essay writing requires the simultaneous management of grammatical accuracy, appropriate vocabulary use, coherent organization, and mechanical conventions - creating a complex, multi-dimensional challenge even for advanced learners (Nunan, 2003; Hyland, 2003). At Dong A University in Da Nang, despite completing foundational writing courses (Writing Skills 1 and Writing Skills 2), many English-major students continue to produce essays containing grammatical errors,

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inappropriate lexical choices, and weaknesses in organization.

The motivation for this study is driven by three main reasons. First, although an increasing number of Vietnamese EFL studies have examined writing errors (e.g., Tran & Nguyen, 2023; Le, 2024; Do & Le, 2023), no prior research has specifically focused on essay writing errors at Dong A University. Second, most existing studies examine only a single group of learners, leaving unanswered the developmental question of whether error patterns change as students' progress from the second to the third year, or whether certain errors become fossilized. Third, the increasing reliance of students on AI-based writing tools represents an emerging concern that has not yet been systematically explored in Vietnamese Error Analysis research, despite its significant implications for writing development.

In this context, the present study investigates the types, frequency, and underlying causes of essay writing errors among second-year (K24) and third-year (K23) English majors at Dong A University, and examines whether there are significant differences in error patterns between the two groups. By triangulating objective textual evidence from mid-term essays with students' self-reported perceptions, the study aims to provide findings that are both theoretically grounded and practically applicable within the specific institutional context.

Previous studies

Table 1 synthesizes five key international and Vietnamese studies on EFL writing errors that directly inform the present investigation

Table 1. Summary of Related Previous Studies on EFL Writing Errors

Study	Context / Participants	Methodology	Key Findings	Error Distribution
Khatter (2019)	Saudi female EFL students (n=50 essays)	Essay error analysis	Punctuation (32%), spelling (28%), grammar (25%) dominant	Interlingual + intralingual transfer
Enesi & Trifoni (2023)	Albanian freshmen (n=80 essays)	Mixed methods	Mechanical (35%), verb tense (22%), prepositions (18%)	Grammatical/orthographic persistent
Tran & Nguyen (2023)	English majors, An Giang University (n=45 essays)	Essay analysis + questionnaire	Grammar (38%), vocabulary (29%), organization (22%)	L1 interference + poor cohesion
Le (2024)	Non-majors, Vietnam (n=60 essays)	Error classification	Articles (25%), sentence structure (32%)	Vietnamese structural transfer
Do & Le (2023)	Vietnamese EFL learners (n=100)	Corpus collocation analysis	Verb-noun (42%), adj-noun (31%) misuse	Literal translation habits

As evidenced in Table 1, grammatical and mechanical errors consistently emerge as the most prevalent error types across diverse EFL writing contexts (Khatter, 2019; Enesi & Trifoni, 2023; Tran & Nguyen, 2023). First language interference, particularly from typologically distant languages such as Arabic and Vietnamese, is recurrently identified as a primary causal factor (Do & Le, 2023; Le, 2024). A notable gap across these studies, however, is their reliance on single-cohort designs, which precludes examination of how error patterns develop or fossilize across academic years. The present study addresses this gap by adopting a cross-cohort comparative design.

Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to investigate the types and causes of essay writing errors made by second- and third-year English-majored students at Dong A University, with the purpose of improving the quality of teaching and learning academic English writing. In order to accomplish this aim, the research includes the following objectives:

- Identify the common types of essay writing errors made by second- and third-year English majors.

- Analyze the potential causes of these errors.

- Compare error patterns between second- and third-year English majors in terms of types and frequency of errors.

Research questions

The study addresses three research questions:

- What are the common types of errors that occur in the English essays written by second- and third-year students of the English Language Major at Dong A University?

- What are the underlying causes contributing to these writing errors?

- Are there any differences in the types and frequency of errors between second- and third-year students?

Significance of the study

The findings of this study are expected to raise students' awareness of their common writing errors, enabling them to recognize their weaknesses and develop greater linguistic accuracy and textual coherence in essay writing. The results will provide valuable insights into the types and causes of students' writing errors, thereby assisting teachers in designing more effective writing instruction, incorporating targeted error correction, and adopting error-based pedagogical strategies to enhance students' writing competence

Informants and research methodology

Informants

The informants comprise 60 English Language Major students from the Faculty of English Language and Culture at Dong A University during the 2025-2026 academic year: 30 second-year students (K24 cohort) and 30 third-year students (K23 cohort). These cohorts were strategically selected as they represent critical transition stages in the curriculum - K24 having completed foundational academic writing courses (Writing Skills 1 and Writing Skills 2) and K23 advancing to specialized research writing.

Research Methodology

To accomplish its objectives, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data. Data were collected through two primary instruments. First, a student questionnaire consisting of 10 Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions was administered to 60 English Language major students to explore common error types and students' perceived causes of essay writing difficulties. However, only 50 responses were deemed valid and included in the analysis (25 from K24 and 25 from K23). Second, a corpus of 60 mid-term examination essays (30 from each cohort) was analyzed to provide objective evidence of actual error patterns in students' writing.

The data analysis process was conducted in three main stages. First, the study identified and examined the common types and frequency of essay writing errors among second-year and third-year English majors at Dong A University. Second, it analyzed the underlying causes of these errors and compared error patterns between the two cohorts to identify developmental differences. Finally, the study synthesized the findings to draw conclusions and propose pedagogical recommendations for students, writing instructors, and curriculum designers.

Quantitative data from the essays were analyzed using frequency counts and percentage distributions calculated separately for each cohort. Qualitative responses from the open-ended questions underwent thematic analysis following a six-phase process of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To ensure reliability, all 60 essays were double-coded by the researcher and the supervising instructor using James's (1998) four-category taxonomy. Inter-rater agreement was calculated at 90%, which is considered acceptable in qualitative educational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until full consensus was reached.

Results and Discussion

Common Types of Writing Errors

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of writing errors identified in the analysis of 60 mid-term essays, classified according to James's (1998) four-category taxonomy.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Writing Errors by Cohort

Errors Categories	K24 (Second Year)		K23 (Third Year)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Grammatical	42	45%	35	44%
Mechanical	33	35%	20	25%
Lexical	14	15%	18	22%
Organizational	5	5%	7	9%
Total	94	100%	80	100%

As shown in Table 2, while grammatical errors are the dominant error type across both cohorts, error profiles differ substantially between year levels: K24 students exhibit high rates of both grammatical (45%) and mechanical errors (35%), reflecting cognitive overload characteristic of novice writers (Flower & Hayes, 1981), whereas K23 students' reduced mechanical errors (25%) but persistent grammatical errors (44%) indicate a developmental shift consistent with interlanguage restructuring (Selinker, 1972). For K24 students, these errors are primarily associated with basic morphosyntactic violations, particularly subject-verb agreement (e.g., "She don't understand the lesson") and incorrect use of simple tenses (e.g., "I learn English for a long time"). These patterns can be attributed to the absence of inflectional morphology in Vietnamese as the learners' first language. These results are consistent with previous studies such as Khatter (2019) and Enesi and Trifoni (2023), which also report grammar as the most frequent source of error among EFL learners. Similarly, the continued presence of lexical and organizational issues aligns with the findings of Tran and Nguyen (2023), who highlighted learners' difficulties in vocabulary use and idea development.

Furthermore, consistent with Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive process model, the simultaneous occurrence of high grammatical and mechanical errors suggests that K24 students experience cognitive overload during drafting, as attentional resources devoted to surface-level concerns such as spelling limit capacity for monitoring grammatical accuracy.

In contrast, grammatical errors among K23 students tend to occur in more complex syntactic structures, including subordinate clauses and passive constructions. This pattern is consistent with intralingual developmental errors, which arise from the overgeneralization of partially acquired grammatical rules (James, 1998).

Spelling errors show the most noticeable decline between the two cohorts, decreasing from 35% (K24) to 25% (K23), suggesting improved orthographic automatization over time. However, qualitative analysis of K23 essays reveals the persistence of spelling errors in high-frequency academic vocabulary - for example, "technolagy" instead of "technology" or misspellings of "accommodation." This indicates that certain mechanical errors may have become fossilized rather than fully resolved (Selinker, 1972).

Lexical errors show a slight increase from 15% (K24) to 22% (K23), which may reflect K23 students' attempts to use more advanced academic vocabulary - a risk-taking strategy aligned with interlanguage development (Selinker, 1972). This observation is further supported by the U-shaped developmental curve documented in SLA research (Ellis, 2008), wherein temporary increases in error frequency may reflect the integration of partially acquired forms into more complex structures, rather than a decline in overall competence. Common issues include collocational violations (e.g., "do a decision" instead of "make a decision") and register mismatches (e.g., "book grab" instead of "engagement"), both of which can be traced to direct semantic transfer from the first language to the target language (Do & Le, 2023).

Finally, organizational errors also increase from 5% (K24) to 9% (K23), reflecting the higher discourse-level demands placed on third-year academic writing.

Table 3 presents the mean scores for each survey item, grouped by cohort (n = 50).

Table 3. Students' Self-Perceived Writing Difficulties (Likert Scale 1-5)

Error Categories/ Survey Items	Mean K24(2ND-year)	Mean K23 (3RD- year)
Grammatical Errors		
Q1: Verb tenses	3.45	2.50
Q2: Subject-verb agreement	3.30	2.45
Lexical Errors		
Q3: Word choices	3.65	3.40
Q4: Collocations	3.20	3.25
Mechanical Errors		
Q5: Spelling	3.00	2.30
Q6: Punctuation	2.80	2.15
Organizational Errors		
Q7: Topic sentences	3.10	3.15
Q8: Cohesive devices	3.40	3.20
Underlying Cause		
Q9: L1 Translation	4.15	3.95
Q10: Lack of practice, feedback	4.05	4.20

The most theoretically significant finding in Table 3 is the notably low self-

reported difficulty levels among K23 students in the areas of grammar (Q1: M = 2.50; Q2: M = 2.45) and writing mechanics (Q5: M = 2.30; Q6: M = 2.15). However, objective essay analysis reveals that these are precisely the domains with the highest error rates, with grammatical errors alone accounting for 44% of the total errors in this cohort. This clear mismatch between perception and performance strongly aligns with Ellis's (2008) distinction between explicit knowledge (awareness of language rules) and implicit knowledge (the ability to apply those rules accurately in real-time language use). While students demonstrate solid metalinguistic awareness in the questionnaire context, they struggle to apply this knowledge automatically under the cognitive pressure of timed writing tasks.

In contrast, vocabulary (Q3-Q4) and organization (Q7-Q8) are rated as more difficult by K23 students, reflecting their increased engagement with more complex academic writing demands. Notably, the highest-rated items across both cohorts are Q9 (direct translation from L1: K24 M = 4.15; K23 M = 3.95) and Q10 (lack of practice/feedback: K24 M = 4.05; K23 M = 4.20). These results indicate that students possess strong awareness of the negative effects of L1 transfer from Vietnamese and recognize pedagogical limitations - particularly insufficient practice and feedback - as key contributors to their writing difficulties.

Underlying Causes of Writing Errors

The most pervasive cause of both grammatical and lexical errors is the negative transfer of Vietnamese linguistic structures into English. High mean scores on Q9 across both cohorts, supported by open-ended responses in which students explicitly reported direct translation as their default composing strategy, confirm the central role of this factor. A representative response illustrates this clearly: "Definitely yes. For example, 'I learn English for a long time' - it means 'Tôi học Tiếng Anh rất lâu rồi.'" This example reflects a typical case of negative interlingual transfer, where the learner applies the Vietnamese simple present structure to an English context that requires the Present Perfect ("I have learned / I have been learning English for a long time"). Similarly, collocational errors such as "harm with" (instead of "harmful to") arise from literal mapping of Vietnamese prepositional usage onto English structures, a pattern also documented by Do and Le (2023).

Table 4 presents the thematic analysis of responses to the open-ended Question 11, in which students identified their most significant writing challenges.

Table 4. The biggest challenges students face when writing English essays. (Open-ended Q11)

Theme	Quantity	%	Classic Example
Generating Ideas	14	30	"Generating ideas because... so little ideas for a particular topic"; "Tìm ý tưởng, bởi vì... khía cạnh mình chả hiểu mô tê gì"
Vocabulary	10	21	"Vocabulary"; "Từ vựng và ngữ pháp"; "Lacking... vocabulary amount is pretty bad"
Grammar	9	19	"Grammar, I'm bad at grammar"; "Ngữ pháp khó học thuộc"
Organization	7	15	"Organizing the essay"; "Bố cục bài viết (nghiên cứu chưa thật sự đủ sâu)"
Multiple / Other	7	15	"Grammar & idea"; "Cái nào cũng khó"; "Kết nối giữa từ vựng và mẫu câu"
Total	**47**	**100**	

Findings from the open-ended questions reveal that idea generation, rather than grammar or vocabulary, is the most frequently reported challenge in writing, accounting for 30% of responses (n = 47). Students indicated that a significant portion of their cognitive resources is consumed by understanding the task and mentally translating ideas from Vietnamese into English, leaving insufficient attention for monitoring grammatical accuracy. This pattern aligns with the cognitive process model of writing proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981).

A particularly noteworthy and timely finding is the overreliance on AI tools. Many students admitted that their frequent use of tools such as ChatGPT for daily writing tasks has hindered the development of their ability to generate and organize ideas independently. As a result, when required to write without technological support under exam conditions, they experience difficulty in producing and structuring ideas. This creates a serious pedagogical concern that has not been previously documented in Error Analysis (EA) research in the Vietnamese context.

Table 5 summarizes students' responses to Question 13, which invited participants to describe the types of instructional support they believed would most effectively address their writing difficulties.

Table 5. Types of Teacher Support, Practice, and Feedback to Improve Students' Essay Writing Skills (Open-ended Q13)

Theme	Quantity	%	Classic Example
Detailed Feedback	22	48	"Detailed feedback... point out grammar mistakes and suggest better vocabulary"; "Chấm chữa kĩ càng và nghiêm khắc"; "Feedback right after finishing"
More Practice	12	26	"Regular writing practice"; "Thực hành viết bài trên lớp trong mỗi buổi học"; "Give more practices"
Model Essays / Examples	8	17	"Sample essays"; "Teachers can give some structure"; "Đọc sample essays"
Instant / Timely Feedback	5	11	"Instant feedback in the classes"; "Feedback anytime"
Other	6	13	"Kèm cặp chỉnh sửa thật chi tiết"; "Gentle feedback để không tự ti"

As shown in Table 5, the most frequently requested form of support is detailed corrective feedback (48%, n = 22), with students specifically requesting that errors be identified, explained, and accompanied by suggested improvements. More practice opportunities rank second (26%, n = 12), followed by access to model essays (17%, n = 8). These findings confirm that students are not passive recipients of instruction but rather active agents with clear metacognitive awareness of their learning needs, a finding consistent with the pedagogical literature on learner-centered writing instruction (Long, 1996).

Responses to Q10 and the open-ended question Q13 identify the lack of guided in-class writing practice and the absence of systematic corrective feedback as key factors contributing to the persistence of errors. Consistent with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, limited exposure to model academic texts deprives students of the necessary input to internalize academic style, conventional collocations, and discourse norms. These pedagogical limitations play a central role in the fossilization patterns observed among K23 students, aligning with interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972) and the interaction-based perspective on feedback and language development (Long, 1996).

Differences in Error Types and Frequency Between Two Student Cohorts

It should be noted that, given the cross-sectional design, the observed differences between cohorts reflect variation at a single point in time rather than confirmed longitudinal development. With this caveat in mind, the shift in error gravity and the emergence of productive risk-taking represent a significant finding that reflects students' interlanguage development. The transition from a high proportion of mechanical errors in K24 (35%) to a lower rate in K23 (25%), accompanied by the continued dominance of grammatical errors (44%) and an

increase in lexical errors (22%), reveals a theoretically meaningful developmental trajectory. As students progress, cognitive resources previously devoted to surface-level concerns such as spelling and punctuation are gradually reduced, allowing greater attention to be allocated to more complex syntactic structures and advanced vocabulary - areas that are inherently more error-prone. This pattern is consistent with Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory: risk-taking behavior, even when it results in new types of errors, should be interpreted as a positive indicator of language development rather than regression. This observation is further supported by the U-shaped developmental curve documented in SLA research (Ellis, 2008), wherein temporary increases in error frequency may reflect the integration of partially acquired forms into more complex structures. Rather than relying on simple and "safe" sentence structures, third-year students at Dong A University demonstrate a clear willingness to experiment with complex sentences and academic vocabulary. This suggests that their interlanguage system is actively restructuring and moving closer toward the target language norms.

At the same time, qualitative analysis of K23 students' essays provides clear evidence of fossilization. The study identifies the persistent occurrence of basic spelling errors in high-frequency academic vocabulary errors that should reasonably have been corrected after years of instruction and feedback. A typical example is the misspelling of "technology" as "technolagy," even at the third-year level, suggesting that such errors have become entrenched writing habits. The continued use of informal register and collocational violations - such as "book grab," previously observed among second-year students - further reinforces the presence of fossilization. In the absence of timely and systematic corrective feedback, these non-target language forms appear to have stabilized into habitual writing patterns that resist self-correction. The coexistence of progressive interlanguage restructuring and fossilized error patterns highlights both the complexity of EFL writing development and the critical need for targeted pedagogical intervention.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This study provides a systematic, evidence-based account of essay writing error patterns among English majors at Dong A University. By applying James's (1998) four-category error taxonomy within a cross-sectional, mixed-methods design, the analysis of 60 mid-term essays and a questionnaire survey administered to 60 students (50 valid responses) yields three key conclusions.

First, while grammatical errors remain the dominant error type across both cohorts, error profiles differ substantially between year levels: K24 students exhibit high rates of both grammatical and mechanical errors, reflecting cognitive overload characteristic of novice writers (Flower & Hayes, 1981), whereas K23 students reduced

mechanical errors but had persistent grammatical errors indicating a developmental shift consistent with interlanguage restructuring (Selinker, 1972).

Second, multiple interacting factors contribute to writing errors at Dong A University. These include negative L1 transfer from Vietnamese, cognitive overload during idea generation, overreliance on AI writing tools, and pedagogical as well as environmental limitations such as insufficient corrective feedback and lack of guided writing practice.

Third, the coexistence of developmental progress and fossilized error patterns among K23 students confirms that writing improvement is neither linear nor automatic. Sustainable development requires targeted, systematic instructional support tailored to the specific error profiles of each cohort.

Importantly, a clear gap between perception and actual performance is identified: K23 students tend to underestimate their grammatical difficulties despite such errors accounting for up to 44% of all identified errors. This finding carries a critical implication that students cannot be expected to rely solely on self-monitoring for effective error correction. Systematic external corrective feedback is essential to disrupt fossilized error patterns and facilitate continued interlanguage development beyond the current plateau.

Recommendation

To improve essay writing skills, students need to develop greater awareness of language transfer by training themselves to think directly in English from the outlining stage, rather than translating from Vietnamese. At the same time, they should internalize accurate syntactic structures through regular exposure to authentic academic texts. In addition, reducing overreliance on AI tools is essential. Students are advised to use such tools strategically primarily for post-writing revision after producing their own drafts in order to rebuild their ability to generate ideas and construct sentences independently. Furthermore, students should actively engage with instructor feedback by maintaining a personal "error log." This practice helps transform passive correction into active self-monitoring, which is particularly effective in addressing fossilized errors that are otherwise resistant to change. Finally, prioritizing reading as a foundation for writing, in line with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, can significantly support writing development.

To enhance teaching effectiveness, instructors should adopt coded corrective feedback based on James's (1998) error classification system. This approach enables students to actively identify and self-correct their errors rather than passively receiving fully corrected forms. Such feedback should be provided promptly after task completion and accompanied by brief explanations of relevant language rules, thereby strengthening the link between error recognition and learners' self-regulation processes. In addition, increasing guided in-class writing practice is essential. Regular

short activities - such as timed paragraph writing or peer review sessions - create a structured learning environment while reducing students' reliance on AI tools. Finally, instructors should integrate contrastive analysis activities into their teaching to highlight key differences in structure and collocation between Vietnamese and English. This helps students develop the metalinguistic awareness necessary for effective self-monitoring and for overcoming L1 interference.

At the curriculum level, the findings suggest several structural changes. First, the writing curriculum should include a focused module on contrastive grammar and collocation, introduced at the beginning of the second year (K24), before students' error patterns have had time to become fixed habits. Second, curriculum designers should increase the use of process-based writing assessment instead of only product-based tests. Asking students to submit drafts, receive feedback, and produce revised versions helps match the writing process model of Flower and Hayes (1981), develop revision skills, and reduce over-reliance on AI-supported writing. Third, a structured error correction component should be included, where students keep and regularly review personal error logs across writing courses.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study acknowledges four main limitations. First, the sample was limited to one educational institution, which reduces the generalizability of the findings to other EFL teaching contexts in Vietnam. Second, the use of midterm essays as the primary data source may not fully represent students' overall writing ability across different tasks and conditions. Third, the cross-sectional design, conducted at a single point in time, prevented the tracking of individual language development over time. Finally, students' self-reported perceptions may not always accurately reflect the actual error patterns identified in their writing.

Based on these limitations, future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that follow the same group of students across several semesters in order to provide more robust evidence of developmental changes and error fossilization. In addition, comparative studies across different universities in Vietnam are strongly recommended. Experimental research examining the impact of AI tools on writing quality and learner autonomy would also be highly valuable. Furthermore, incorporating process-oriented methods such as think-aloud protocols, learning journals, and in-depth teacher interviews would offer richer qualitative insights.

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