

## The Writing Difficulties Faced by EFL Students in Intermediate English Writing

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### Abstract

Intermediate English Writing is a compulsory course which is taken after students have passed a Basic English Writing and Pre-Intermediate English Writing course for the BA program in English. However, after undertaking this course, students were still lacking in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, and demonstrated poor understanding of grammatical structure. The purpose of this study was to investigate what difficulties university students encounter when learning to write academic English in relation to the writing development process and to classify the most common errors made in Intermediate English writing by EFL students. The participants in this study consisted of 39 undergraduate students enrolled in the Intermediate English Writing course. A checklist questionnaire was administered and semi-structured interviews were implemented for data collection. Data of the students' writing was also obtained from the writing tasks that were given to them. The overall results of the study revealed that students face many difficulties in their writing such as, difficulty in communicating ideas, difficulty with sentence structure and word order, as well as difficulty making links between paragraphs. This study has implications for English writing pedagogy, especially in effective writing instruction.

**Keywords:** Writing, Errors, English as a Foreign Language

### Introduction

In English language teaching, writing skill can be considered a priority because the students need to be able to convey ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Many studies indicate, for the beginning English Foreign Language (EFL) students, there tends to be interference from their first language in the process of writing in English (Cedar, 2004; Chen & Huang, 2003; Collins, 2002; Jarvis, 2000; Jiang, 1995; Liu, 1998; Mori, 1998; Yu, 1996). Therefore, the writing skill difficulties are one of the most significant problems that affect not only native English speakers, but also students that are learning English as a second or foreign language around the world. Mourtaga (2004) has confirmed that in contrast to many investigations among different studies which have been done on error correction and feedback in multiple areas, the ESL/EFL writing does not contain many studies on the recognition, categorization, and explanation of writing errors. However, some studies on ESL/EFL context have reported the fact that the first language interference is the main cause of many writing errors.

Writing skill is considered important to English as foreign language (EFL) students as it implies in doing written assignments, essays, research writing and examination. Students who learn English as a foreign language often face that writing is more difficult than any other skills. Yu (2008) contended that there are different aspects of writing, such as controlled composition model, built-in three- or five-paragraph model, basic organizational and informative assumptions, the simplified writing assignment, the assumption that supposes working without the help of each student or only with the instructor for comprehensive feedback, usage of grammar and handbooks

or even lectures, and the linear composition model based on “outlining, writing, and editing”. Students with writing difficulties do not only have problems dealing with spelling and forming letters, but also with “generating ideas” for writing, which often leads to negative thoughts of the actual writing. Graham & Harris (1993) argued that there are factors that affect a student’s writing ability, for example that a student does not know how to use strategies to plan written material.

An EFL student has to remember a large number of rules in the target language structure which are quite different from their mother tongue. Moreover, EFL students spend less time to write than to listen, to speak and even to listen. In any cases, they spend little of their time writing. It is clearly known that an average person spend the most for listening, the second most for speaking, then reading and finally writing. Chuo (2007) reveals that one of the most prominent problems affecting students’ success in college compositions besides language areas difficulties are the students’ attitude towards their writing task. When EFL students have to write something, they have big questions in their mind whether what they write is correct or incorrect.

Intermediate English Writing is a compulsory course which is taken after students have passed a Basic English Writing and Pre-Intermediate English Writing course. However, after undertaking this course, students were still lacking in the areas of vocabulary, spelling, and demonstrated poor understanding of grammatical structure.

## Objectives

The purpose of this study is to investigate what difficulties EFL students encounter when learning to write academic English in relation to the writing development process and to classify the most common errors made in Intermediate English writing by EFL students.

## Materials and Methods

Writing tasks in Intermediate English Writing course comprise of four types of writing as follows, Expository Writing, Descriptive Writing, Persuasive Writing, and Narrative Writing.

### 1. Instruments

This study employed both oral and written data collection techniques in order to gather in-depth information.

#### A. Checklist Questionnaire

A checklist questionnaire was introduced to collect the students’ perspectives towards what were the most difficult aspects of grammatical structure in their writing. They were also asked to identify the aspects of each difficulty regarding grammatical structure problems.

#### B. Semi-Structure Interview

Interview is a form of data collection in which questions are asked orally and the subjects’ responses are recorded. Its aim is to find out the students’ perspectives towards difficulties in English writing, the sources of errors in their writing tasks, the efforts that they might do to minimize the errors.

#### C. Writing Task

Writing tasks are used to collect the data from students writing assignment. In this case, students were assigned to a narrative writing task. They had to make composition in the form of narrative text writing. The students were also required to organize their story and were forced to consider their own idea and express in their own words.

### 2. Research subject

#### A. Population and samples

The participants in this study consisted of 39 undergraduate students enrolled in the Intermediate English Writing course. However, random sampling is used to get 10 students’ writing as the sample of this research.

### 3. Procedures of data collection

#### A. Procedures of data collection

After finishing the course, a checklist questionnaire was administered and semi-structured interviews were implemented for data collection. The data of the students' writing is obtained from the writing task that was given to them.

After collecting the data, the frequency and percentage of aspects of writing difficulties marked by EFL students were calculated. The next step was to analyze students' interview responses. The last step was to calculate and classify grammatical errors made by students in the narrative writing assignment.

## Results

This chapter addresses the results from analyzing the questionnaires, semi-structure interviews and writing tasks. There are 10 students' writing assignments used as the data of this research.

### 1. The results of data analysis from questionnaire and writing tasks

**Table 1** The sum of linguistics difficulties in English writing

Items	Numbers	Frequency (%)
Punctuations	5	12.82
Spelling	4	10.25
Word choice	1	2.56
Sentence types	12	30.76
Parts of speech	6	15.38
Tenses	8	20.51
Others (articles, capitalization, plurality)	3	7.69
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 shows overall results from the questionnaire about the most difficult aspects of grammatical structure in their writing. From the analysis, it can be seen that sentence types are the most difficult aspect of writing. Participants pointed out that tenses, parts of speech, punctuation, and spelling are the secondary difficulties respectively.

Table 2 shows the classification of difficulties in English writing. The students (74.35%) stated that a semi-colon is the most difficult aspect of punctuation. The students (64.10%) also claimed that more than 3 syllables are the most difficult aspect of spelling. In the case of word choices, to write in an academic way (74.35%) was more difficult than plurality aspect. Compound-complex sentences (48.71%) and complex sentences (38.46%) were highly marked as the most difficult aspects of sentence types respectively. The students (23.07%) marked that conjunctions are the most difficult; however, there were 5.12% of the students argue that pronoun are difficult. In the case of tenses, the students (56.41%) pointed out that past tense is the most difficult. Besides, in terms of the difficulties in other aspects, articles (64.10%), plurality (23.07), and capitalization (12.82%) were marked by the students respectively.

**Table 2** Classification of linguistic difficulties in English writing

Items	Difficulties	Numbers	Frequency (%)
Punctuations	Comma	2	5.12
	Colon	8	20.51
	Semi-colon	29	74.35
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>
Spelling	One syllable	2	5.12
	Two syllable	12	30.76
	More than 3 syllables	25	64.10
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>
Word choices	Academic	29	74.35
	Formality	10	25.64
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>
Sentence types	Simple sentence	0	0
	Compound sentence	5	12.82
	Complex sentence	15	38.46
	Compound-complex sentence	19	48.71
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>
Parts of speech	Noun	3	7.69
	Pronoun	2	5.12
	Verb	5	12.82
	Adjective	7	17.94
	Adverb	4	10.25
	Preposition	7	17.94
	Conjunction	9	23.07
	Interjection	3	7.69
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>
Tenses	Present tense	9	23.07
	Past tense	22	56.41
	Future tense	8	20.51
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>
Others	Articles	25	64.10
	Capitalization	5	12.82
	Plurality	9	23.07
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 shows the sum of linguistics errors in students' writing assignments. There were 152 errors or 16.70% on subject-verb agreement. In case of tenses, there were 118 errors (12.96%). Surprisingly, there were 101 errors (11.09%) of word form on plural singular, 92 errors (10.10%) of parts of speech, and 85 errors (9.34%) of word order. Moreover, there was also a high percentage of errors on capitalization (7.14%). The lowest percentage of errors was verb form on passive voice.

**Table 3** The sum of linguistic errors in EFL students' writings

Items	Errors	Percentages
Agreement: Subject – Verb	152	16.70%
Tenses	118	12.96%
Verb form: Gerund/infinitive	35	3.84%
Passive	22	2.41%
Sentence Structure: Fragment	53	5.82%
Relative clauses	41	4.50%
Run-on	31	3.40%
Word order	85	9.34%
Parts of Speech	46	5.05%
Word form: Plural/Singular	101	11.09%
Parts of Speech	92	10.10%
Punctuation	46	5.05%
Capitalization	65	7.14%
Spelling	23	2.52%
<b>Total</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 2. The results of data analysis from semi-structure interview

The semi-structure interviews were held after the students completed their questionnaire and writing tasks. Random sampling is used to get only 10 students who were responding as the interviewees. This section came from the students' interview responses on the most difficult aspects of writing when learning to write academic English in relation to the writing development process.

*S1: "It's really difficult to focus on the main ideas and develop the ideas organized in a logical way."*

*S2: "I have a poor vocabulary and a small number of words."*

*S3: "I always get stuck with grammar, syntax and organization."*

*S4: "I often write assignments without outlining. So, it may lead to the difficulty in making link between paragraphs."*

*S5: "The most difficulty is getting started. I am not confident in language use and introducing ideas."*

*S6: "I always introduce new paragraph without linking words. (Reading my writing will be a tough job!)"*

*S7: "I spend too much time writing assignments even though it is a short essay. I think I have a problem with critical and logical thinking."*

S8: *“For me, organizing ideas and outlining are very difficult.”*

S9: *“I need to think what I am going to write in Thai and switch it to English. I have to translate all I think, because ideas naturally come to me in my own native language.”*

S10: *“I always think what I am going to write in Thai first, and then I translate to English.”*

According to the results from students' responses, they revealed that students are faced with difficulties in various aspects of English writing. Students stated that they have difficulty in how to construct and focus main ideas as well as the organization of essay. They also said that thinking processes is one of the problems that they have faced. Besides, the difficulties of vocabulary, sentence structure, and word order were claimed.

## Discussions

The study revealed that students face many difficulties in their writing.

### 1. Difficulty in communicating ideas

Students faced problems with constructing ideas and getting started in their writing. They seemed to be unconfident in their language when used in an academic way. Students also spent too much time on their writing. It seemed to be difficult for them to construct and express ideas in their writing tasks. So, it was difficult for them to get the paper started. Introducing ideas and attitudes in English writing could play an important role for the English writing development process. This finding echoed the result of Chuo (2007) reveals that one of the most prominent problems affecting students' success in college compositions besides language areas difficulties are the students' attitude towards their writing task.

### 2. Difficulty with sentence structure and word order

English sentence structure and Thai sentence structure are different. Moreover, the first language of the students is Pattani-Malay dialect. So, the students often translate what they are thinking in their first language to Thai and switch from Thai to English. This interference occurred and could be seen in their writing assignment through sentence structure and word order. Many studies also confirmed that for the beginning English Foreign Language (EFL) students, there tends to be interference from their first language and then to the process of writing in English (Cedar, 2004; Chen & Huang, 2003; Collins, 2002; Jarvis, 2000; Jiang, 1995; Liu, 1998; Mori, 1998; Yu, 1996).

One of the more common problems seen in EFL writing is linguistic difficulties in English writing. The discussion refers to the results in the classification of errors made by FEL students. There were grammar problems on subject – verb agreement, tenses gerund/infinite, passive voice, fragment, relative clauses, and run-ons. Vocabulary problem were also found in this study such as word order, plural/singular, and parts of speech. Moreover, punctuation, capitalization, spelling were considered as mechanical problems

### 3. Difficulty in paragraphs organization.

According to the limitation of words or phrases, the students seemed to be faced with difficulties in paragraph organization and making their writing flow. The students have also struggled on the formality of essay writing and differentiation of the styles of compositions. Moreover, the results also referred to the students' difficulties on outlining and drafting. It is a very important step of writing or their assignments seem to be unorganized. This corresponds to the paper of Graham & Harris (1993) who argued that there are factors that affect a student's writing ability, for example that a student does not know how to use strategies to plan written material. Also, Yu (2008) contended that the linear composition model based on outlining, writing, and editing.



## Conclusion

This study highlights the writing difficulties faced by EFL students in an intermediate English writing course. The researchers believe that EFL students' errors made in their writing are unavoidable. It can be concluded from the findings that EFL students need more improvement on English writing in various aspects such as, constructing ideas, language use, and organization. Additionally, EFL teachers should also be taken into account, in order to improve and develop EFL students' language proficiency especially in English writing.

The study is hoped to help Thai EFL teachers understand the difficulties of English writing faced by EFL learners. This study can be a guideline to further studies related to the English writing pedagogy, especially in effective writing instruction. This study also supports the interdisciplinary and liberal arts study.

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