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EXPLORING ERROR FREQUENCY AND TYPES IN A2 LEVEL WRITING: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF HUMG STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN KET PART 9

Abstract

This study investigates the frequency and types of errors in A2-level writing produced by first-year English Enhancement students at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology (HUMG) in the Cambridge A2 Key (KET) Part 9 writing task. A quantitative error analysis was conducted on 146 writing samples using Corder's Error Analysis framework. Errors were classified into four categories: grammar, vocabulary, format, and content. The findings indicate that format errors were the most frequent (87.6%), followed by grammar (76.1%), content (61.5%), and vocabulary errors (35.2%). Missing or incorrect closings, subject - verb agreement, word count, and spelling were the most common problems. The results suggest that students require more explicit instruction in writing conventions, basic grammar, and task requirements. Practical teaching recommendations are proposed to improve students' performance in KET Part 9 writing.

Keywords:

error analysis; A2 Key (KET); guided writing; writing errors;
English as a foreign language; teaching implications.

1. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency, particularly the A2 Key (KET) certificate, plays a crucial role for first-year university students at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology (HUMG), as the KET test serves as the university's English placement test for incoming students. Within the KET test structure, Part 9 - Guided Writing requires test-takers to write a short message (25-35 words) responding to three specific content points, assessing basic written communication ability (Cambridge English, 2012).

Despite its apparent simplicity, students frequently make various errors in Part 9, ranging from grammar and vocabulary to format and content. Analyzing these errors is essential as it helps teachers understand students' difficulties and provides empirical data for designing effective remedial activities. This study examines errors in 146 writing samples from first-year English enhancement students at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology (HUMG), using the Part 9 Test 3 prompt from KET 3 (Cambridge English, 2006). The task requires writing a note to Gary Jones answering questions about selling a bicycle. The aims are to identify common error types and their frequency and propose recommendations.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach using Error Analysis (EA) (Corder, 1967) to identify, classify, and interpret errors in learners' writing samples. The participants were 146 first-year students from seven English enhancement classes at HUMG, all at A2-KET level. Data consisted of writing samples from a periodic test using the KET Part 9 prompt (Test 3, KET 3), with 15 minutes allocated and no external resources permitted (Cambridge English, 2006).

The analysis followed four steps: (1) identifying all errors as deviations from target language norms; (2) classifying errors into four categories - Grammar (subject-verb agreement, tense, articles, punctuation), Vocabulary (spelling, word choice), Format (missing/incorrect closing, missing name, no greeting), and Content (missing required information, word count errors); (3) calculating frequency and percentage of each error type; and (4) interpreting patterns to suggest teaching recommendations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of 146 writing samples from first-year English enhancement students at HUMG revealed four main error categories. Format errors were most frequent (87.6%), followed by grammar errors (76.1%), content errors (61.5%), and vocabulary errors (35.2%).

Table 1

Error Categories

Error Category	Sub-categories	Percentage
Grammar	Subject-verb agreement (25.0%), Tense (9.4%), Articles (18.8%), Punctuation (22.9%)	76.1%
Vocabulary	Spelling (29.2%), Word choice (6%)	35.2%
Format	Missing/incorrect closing (43.8%), Missing name (32.3%), No greeting (11.5%)	87.6%
Content	Missing required information (7.3%), Word count errors (54.2%)	61.5%

3.1. Grammar Errors (76.1%)

Subject-verb agreement errors were most common (25.0%), with students failing to match verbs with singular/plural subjects. Examples include: "I using it for 2 year" (number 2 with singular noun), "It is one years old" (number 1 with plural noun), and "It cost \$50" (singular subject without "-s"). Punctuation errors (22.9%) included missing spaces after periods ("My sister gift me a bicycle.I sell"), misplaced commas ("Bye , Linh"), and missing capitalization ("dear garry i have"). Article errors (18.8%) involved omission of "a/an" ("I have bicycle to sell", "This is mountain bike") or misuse of "the" without prior reference. Tense errors (9.4%) showed confusion between tenses, such as "I using it for 2 years" (present continuous instead of present perfect), "I bought it since 2020" (past simple with "since"), and "I was bought this for 2 years ago" (incorrect passive).

3.2. Vocabulary Errors (35.2%)

Spelling errors (29.2%) were predominant, with common mistakes including "seel" (sell), "bought" (bought), "verry" (very), "messeage" (message), "watting" (waiting), "plase" (please), "afternoon" (afternoon), "moring" (morning), and "hane" (have). Students also misspelled recipient names ("Garry Joner", "Garry", "Line" instead of "Gary/Garry Jones"). Word choice errors (6%) included incorrect verb usage ("My sister gift me" instead of "gave"; "You can take it" instead of "see it"), incorrect nouns ("It was bought coat" instead of "cost"; "I have a by motor" instead of "bicycle"), and unnatural expressions ("My bicycle has a price" instead of "costs"; "It is one years ago" instead of "is one year old").

3.3. Format Errors (87.6%)

Missing or incorrect closing was most frequent (43.8%). Students either ended abruptly without closing ("Dear Garry, I have a bicycle to sell. It is two years old. The price is \$80."), provided closing without name ("Best regards,"), or used inappropriate closings ("Love, Hương"). Missing sender name (32.3%) was also common, with students forgetting to sign or leaving "[Your Name]" unchanged. No greeting (11.5%) occurred when students began directly with content ("I have a bicycle to sell...") or used notes ("Note for Gary Jones.") instead of proper greetings.

3.4. Content Errors (61.5%)

Word count errors were most prevalent (54.2%), with many students failing to meet the 25-35 word requirement. Many writings were too short (3-17 words: "I want bicycle", "yes, i hane a bicycle to sell"), while others were excessively long (46-52 words) with irrelevant personal stories or detailed descriptions. Missing required information (7.3%) occurred when students failed to address all prompt questions: missing price ("Dear Gary Jones, I have a bicycle to sell. It is two years old."), missing age ("...It costs \$150. You can see it tomorrow."), missing viewing time ("It costs £50 and is one year old. Best, Dan"), or missing affirmative response ("Hi Gary, This bicycle is two years old and costs £80.").

4. Teaching Recommendations

Based on the error analysis findings, this section proposes recommendations organized by error category.

To avoid format errors, teachers should implement structural scaffolding. A fixed template should be provided for all KET Part 9 tasks: greeting with recipient name (*Dear [Name]*, or *Hi [Name]*), main content answering all three prompts, and appropriate closing with sender name (*Best regards, [Name]* or *See you soon, [Name]*). Students require explicit guidance on appropriate greetings and closings suitable for semi-formal transactional contexts. A pre-submission checklist is recommended, ensuring every piece includes: (1) greeting with recipient name, (2) appropriate closing, and (3) sender signature.

Concerning grammar errors, instruction should prioritize high-frequency patterns through focused practice. For subject-verb agreement, teachers should reinforce that singular subjects (*It*, *The bicycle*) take verbs with *-s/-es* (*costs*, *sells*), while plural subjects take base forms (*cost*, *sell*). For tense errors, focus should be on three basic tenses relevant to the task: present simple for descriptions (*It costs \$50*), past simple for purchase information (*I bought it last week*), and present perfect for duration (*I have used it for 2 years*). For article errors, emphasis should be placed on using *a/an* before singular countable nouns (*I have a bicycle*). For punctuation, instruction should cover capitalizing sentence-initial words and proper nouns, using periods to end sentences, placing commas after greetings/closings, and avoiding unnecessary spaces before punctuation.

In terms of vocabulary errors, teachers should adopt targeted lexical interventions. For spelling, a high-frequency word list should be created containing commonly misspelled items for this task type: "*seel*" (*sell*), "*boughth*" (*bought*), "*verry*" (*very*), "*messeage*" (*message*), "*watting*" (*waiting*), "*plase*" (*please*), "*afternoon*" (*afternoon*), "*moring*" (*morning*), and "*hane*" (*have*). Activities such as peer proofreading, dictation practice, and spelling games can reinforce correct spelling. For word choice errors, teachers should provide fixed sentence frames to avoid unnatural expressions: "*It costs [price]*" (not "*has a price*"), "*It is [number] years old*" (not "*is [number] years ago*"), "*You can see it [time]*" (not "*take*" or "*watch*"), and "*I have used it for [time]*" (not "*present continuous for duration*").

Regarding content errors, teachers should implement metacognitive strategy training. For missing information, students should use a content checklist ensuring all three prompt questions are addressed: (1) confirm bicycle availability ("*Yes, I have a bicycle to sell*"), (2) state price ("*It costs \$50*"), (3) state age ("*It is two years old*"), and (4) provide viewing time ("*You can see it this weekend*"). For word count errors, the **draft-count-revise strategy** should be taught: write initial draft → count words → add or condense content as needed → write final version. Students should be instructed to include only essential information (price, age, time) without personal stories, detailed descriptions, or emotions - demonstrating how a 52-word rambling response can be condensed to a concise 26-word version meeting all requirements.

5. CONCLUSION

This study analyzed common errors in KET Part 9 - Guided Writing among 146 first-year students from English Enhancement classes at Hanoi University of Mining and Geology (HUMG). The findings reveal that students make errors across four main categories: format (87.6%), grammar (76.1%), content (61.5%), and vocabulary (35.2%). Format errors, particularly missing or incorrect closing (43.8%) and missing sender name (32.3%), were most prevalent, indicating students struggle most with structural conventions of notes/letters. Grammar errors, especially subject-verb agreement (25.0%) and punctuation (22.9%), also pose significant challenges. Content errors, notably word count (54.2%), and vocabulary errors, particularly spelling (29.2%), further highlight areas needing pedagogical attention.

The results confirm that while KET Part 9 appears straightforward, students face multiple challenges in producing accurate short messages. These difficulties stem from insufficient familiarity with letter/note

conventions, weak mastery of basic grammar rules, limited vocabulary knowledge, and poor awareness of word count requirements. Based on these findings, this study proposes practical solutions: providing fixed format templates, reinforcing subject-verb agreement and basic tenses through focused exercises, developing spelling lists with common error patterns, and implementing content checklists with word count strategies.

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