



An Investigation into Linguistic Problems in writing English business complaint letters. A case Study at Universal Petroleum Viet Nam Joint Stock Company

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Abstract – In the global economy, business correspondence is crucial to the communication of multinational corporations. The information flow inside a corporate or business environment is facilitated by well-written business letters. English business letter plays an essential written text used for international business communication and it has its own features of a text. However, well-written skills in English business complaint letters are also the skills that Vietnamese office workers face the most obstacles. The current research aims to investigate the linguistic problems of Import-Export employees in writing English business complaint letters at Universal Petroleum Viet Nam Joint Stock Company. The study employed a mixed-method design, combining qualitative and textual analysis. The sample was 16 Import-Export employees and 90 Draft English business complaint letters. The research findings indicated that morphological errors (38.0%) were the most prevalent, followed by mechanical (25.5%), syntactic (18.3%), and lexical errors (18.2%). These results lead to several implications for targeted training programs to enhance employees' proficiency in writing professional and accurate English business complaint letters.



Keywords— linguistic problems, errors analysis, English business complaint letters, Import-Export employees, writing skills.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous growth of commerce and industry, Vietnam is gradually keeping up with the economic development speed of other countries in the world. Business communication can be taken in the form of face-to-face meetings or written communication known as business correspondence. (Danet, 2001). Effective business correspondence is vital to building and maintaining positive relationships with customers, partners, and other stakeholders. It created the first impression of the receiver on the sender and also help the writer achieve the purpose of business communication.

In the current digital era, “Letters are formal documents that are typically used to convey information to communication partners outside the organization”(Robert

Insley, 2016). Especially, writing English business letter (EBL) in general and English Business complaint letter (EBCL) in particular through the genre-based approach, concepts such as knowledge of content, purpose of writing and certain text features are adopted (Agesta,2017). According to Dolidze (2016), states that employees writing in a second language usually face challenges due to their limited background knowledge of second language acquisition. Employees who do not know how to express their ideas in writing would be unable to communicate effectively with the other person or anyone else (Walsh, Harrison, Young, 2010). Besides, the common linguistic errors specifically morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical errors, prevalent in EBCL can significantly hinder effective communication. These errors can lead to

misunderstandings, undermine customer satisfaction, and ultimately damage the company's reputation.

Moreover, communication purpose is the decisive factor to set apart different genres (Askehave & Swales, 2001). Having to deal with various genres in writing EBCL is one of the challenges that employees often face. They need to be aware of the use of particular genre conventions and deal with its own distinct characteristics, such as goal, conversational style, and attitude. It requires the writer to understand and describe the problem politely and skillfully to avoid making unnecessary mistakes (Oxford Handbook of Commercial Correspondence by Ashley, 2005). This makes it challenging for Import-Export (IE) employees to write EBCL effectively with partners. Among the various difficulties in writing English business letters (EBL), perhaps the most significant one faced by employees is writing EBCL.

Given the scarcity of research on this topic, this study aims to fill the gap by investigating into Linguistic Problems in writing English business complaint letters of Vietnamese office workers. The researcher believes that this study will not only explore problems related to varying levels of English proficiency and their impact on employees' writing skills, but also offer a broader perspective on linguistic challenges for English language education in Vietnam.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Common Linguistic Errors in Writing Business Complaint Letters (EBCL)

Employees in Import-Export (IE) roles often struggle with linguistic errors when writing business complaint letters in English. These errors including morphological, lexical, syntactic, and mechanical mistakes which can hinder effective communication, reduce professionalism, and harm a company's credibility impact clarity, professionalism, and overall effectiveness.

Morphological errors arise from misunderstandings of word structures, affecting verb conjugation, noun formation, and article usage (Ramadan, 2015). Verb-related errors include incorrect tense, subject-verb agreement, and preposition misuse, leading to ambiguity (Nurjanah, 2017). Similarly, noun errors involve incorrect singular and plural forms, often compounded by misused articles and quantifiers. These mistakes hinder comprehension and reduce professionalism.

Lexical errors, or word choice mistakes, result from second-language acquisition difficulties and native language interference (Anggreni & Bochari, 2021). Employees may translate words literally, misuse synonyms, or fail to distinguish between General and Business English.

Collocation errors—such as incorrect adjective-noun or verb-noun pairings—are also prevalent due to insufficient knowledge and overgeneralization (Harta et al., 2021; Shitu, 2015). Even when using a collocation dictionary, employees struggle to choose the right terms, leading to unscientific and unclear sentences (Ridha & Al-Riyahi, 2011).

Syntactic errors disrupt sentence structure and clarity. Many employees struggle with complex sentence construction, making their letters difficult to understand (Ngangbam, 2016). A weak grasp of English grammar leads to frequent mistakes in sentence formation, affecting professionalism. Since syntax dictates word arrangement and governs sentence rules (Ramlan, 2011), errors in this area significantly impact communication. Poor syntax diminishes the effectiveness of EBCL and weakens the company's credibility.

Mechanical errors include spelling, punctuation, and capitalization mistakes (Yuliah, Widiastuti & Meida, 2019). Employees often overlook spelling checks, leading to frequent misspellings. Incorrect punctuation, particularly with commas and periods, disrupts sentence flow and clarity. Additionally, capitalization errors—such as failing to capitalize names and sentence beginnings—undermine professionalism. While these errors may seem minor, they can negatively affect the company's image and lead to misinterpretations of complaints.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research site

The research site was conducted at Universal Petroleum Viet Nam Joint Stock Company with the participants majoring in the Import-Export department. The company was established in 2001 and is currently located at Lot N, Road 26, Song Than II Industrial Park, An Binh Ward, Di An Town, Binh Duong Province, Vietnam.

3.2. Sample and sampling procedures

The study incorporates two distinct types of samples to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis. The type is the document sample, which was 90 English business complaint letters from 2021 to 2023 because it is considered to be reliable in terms of results. These letters were selected through purposive sampling from the company's documentation, focusing on their relevance to common business complaints.

The rationale for these sample sizes was twofold: the 90 letters were deemed sufficient for identifying patterns of linguistic errors and establishing trends over time, while the 16 employees represented the entire staff engaged in writing such letters, ensuring that the study captured diverse

perspectives and practices across the department. This comprehensive sampling approach enhanced the validity and transferability of the findings. For data organization and analysis purposes, the 16 Import-Export employees were coded from E1 to E16, with "E" serving as an abbreviation for "employee." This coding system facilitated anonymous reporting while maintaining systematic data management throughout the research process.

3.3. Research instruments

Due to the limited number of participants, employing qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, was determined to be the most appropriate approach for this study. The semi-structured interview served as the primary research instrument to gather in-depth insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in writing English business complaint letters.

3.3.1 Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was conducted to explore participants' experiences and challenges to collect their deep insight into the problems that they were facing in writing English business complaint letters. The interview began with opening questions to gather information about the participants' work experience and the frequency with which they wrote English business complaint letters. Core questions then delved into the specific problems and challenges they faced during the writing process, such as lack of vocabulary, limited grammar proficiency, improper writing mechanics, unconventional organization, and difficulties in conveying the appropriate formal tone.

Follow-up questions focused on the strategies participants used to overcome these challenges and their perceived needs for improvement. The interview was concluded with closing questions, inviting participants to share suggestions for enhancing their English business complaint letters writing skills, such as training programs, resources, or organizational support. Specific questions were mentioned in the appendix.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure that participants could express their thoughts and experiences fully and comfortably. This methodological approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic barriers faced by Import-Export employees at Universal Petroleum Vietnam Joint Stock Company, ultimately providing insights that informed practical recommendations for improving business communication skills.

3.4. Data collection procedures

The data collection process was conducted in two distinct phases to ensure a comprehensive and systematic approach,

including document collection procedures and semi-structured interviews procedures.

3.4.1. Document Collection of English Business Complaint Letters

The first phase involved obtaining management approval from U.P Viet Nam Co., Ltd to access relevant business correspondence. Criteria for selecting complaint letters were then established, focusing on factors such as relevance, clarity, and diversity of issues addressed. Additionally, a well-documented system was prepared to organize and store the collected letters effectively for subsequent analysis.

The researcher accessed the company's documentation system to collect English business complaint letters in the period from 2021 to 2023 for analysis. Letters meeting the established criteria are carefully selected to ensure relevance and consistency with the study's objectives. Copies of the selected letters were created while maintaining strict confidentiality to protect sensitive information. The collected letters were then organized chronologically to facilitate systematic analysis and provide a clear timeline of complaint handling issues. These letters were encoded and numbered from L0 onwards. L was letter. Additionally, these English business complaint letters were draft letters and were saved in both final and draft versions by the records storage department.

3.4.2. Semi-structured interview

The second phase was conducting interviews with Import-Export employees to gather in-depth insights into their writing problems. A questionnaire consisting of 16 questions was used to interview Import-Export employees. Six import-export employees who volunteered for the interview were given a list of questions prior to the session. The interviews were conducted with interviewees face to face at different times and in separate places. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese language. All interviews were note-taken and then transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility and plausibility, the interviewer asked the respondents to review and approve the interview transcriptions and translations.

The interviewees were coded as E1, E2, E3, and so forth to maintain confidentiality while allowing for systematic data organization. The findings were presented based on the research questions, including problems concerning English writing proficiency: lack of vocabulary, limited grammar proficiency, improper writing mechanics, unconventional organization, and difficulties in conveying the appropriate formal tone. Throughout the analysis process, specific explanations were provided in the findings section to interpret the meaning embedded in the collected data.

3.5. Data analysis procedures

3.5.1. Data from Textual Analysis

Manual textual analysis was employed to examine the English business complaint letters written by Import-Export employees. The analysis process involved a systematic reading of all letters to identify linguistic errors. Errors were manually categorized into four main types: morphological errors, lexical errors, syntactic errors, and mechanical errors. The frequency of each error type was manually counted and recorded, with representative examples documented to illustrate each category.

To ensure accuracy and reliability in the analysis, the researcher collaborated with an expert in English language field. This expert provided support in error identification and analysis of the error types. The researcher subsequently compared their own error identification results with those of the professional teacher, enhancing the inter-rater reliability of the findings. This cross-checking process provided a reliable basis for understanding common linguistic challenges in the data and strengthened the validity of the analysis results.

The textual analysis focused on identifying patterns of errors across the sample of 90 letters, considering both the frequency and nature of different error types. This approach enabled the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions about the most common linguistic problems faced by Import-Export employees when writing English business complaint letters.

3.5.2. Data from Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview analysis involved a systematic approach to extracting meaningful insights from the data collected from Import-Export employees. First, the researcher transcribed the full recordings of the interviews to ensure accuracy and completeness. Key content from the transcriptions was then translated into the target language for further analysis. The responses were systematically coded, enabling the identification of patterns and trends. The researcher used an Excel file to routine information according to the same theme.

These codes were subsequently organized into relevant categories to facilitate a clearer understanding of the data. From these categories, the researcher identified main themes that summarize the core findings of the interviews. To enhance the richness of the analysis, illustrative quotes were selected to highlight the perspectives and experiences of the employees, providing depth and context to the emerging themes. The researcher collaborated with an expert who is the deputy branch manager in Singapore to re-check the translations for accuracy and re-arrange the correct theme.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Morphological errors

The textual analysis of the 90 English business complaint letters revealed four main categories of morphological errors: verb-tense errors, verb-agreement errors, noun-number errors, and article usage errors.

Table 1 Frequency of morphological errors in 90 English business complaint letters

Types of morphological errors	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Verb-tense errors	87	26.5
Verb-agreement errors	81	24.7
Noun-number errors	83	25.3
Article usage errors	77	23.5
Total	328	100

Verb-tense errors were the most frequent morphological errors, accounting for 26.5% of all morphological errors identified. These errors are primarily related to incorrect usage of verb tenses, particularly confusion between past simple and present perfect.

Examples of verb-tense errors included:

- "We **have not yet received** the shipment that **arrived** last week." (Incorrect tense usage; should be "was supposed to arrive")
- "The products **are damaged** when we opened the package yesterday." (Incorrect tense; should be "were damaged")
- "We **expect** to receive compensation by last Friday." (Incorrect tense; should be "expected")

Verb-agreement errors accounted for 24.7% of the morphological errors, primarily related to incorrect subject-verb agreement.

Examples of verb-agreement errors included:

- "Our company **have** not received the shipment yet." (Incorrect subject-verb agreement; should be "has")
- "The shipment of goods **were** delayed." (Incorrect subject-verb agreement with singular subject; should be "was")
- "The quality of the items **were** below standard." (Incorrect agreement; should be "was")

Noun-number errors comprised 25.3% of the morphological errors, primarily related to incorrect plural/singular forms.

Examples of noun-number errors included:

- "We found several **defect** in the shipment." (Missing plural marker; should be "defects")
- "The **equipments** arrived damaged." (Incorrect pluralization of uncountable noun; should be "equipment")
- "We received five **container** of goods." (Missing plural marker; should be "containers")

Article usage errors accounted for 23.5% of the morphological errors, including missing articles, unnecessary articles, and incorrect article selection.

Examples of article errors included:

- "We need **immediate response** to this issue." (Missing article; should be "an immediate response")
- "This is **the serious problem** for our company." (Incorrect article usage; should be "a serious problem")
- "Please send us **a information** about the delivery status." (Incorrect article; should be "information" or "some information")

4.2. Lexical errors

The textual analysis revealed two main categories of lexical errors: word choice errors and collocation errors.

Table 2 Frequency of lexical errors in 90 English business complaint letters

Types of lexical errors	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Word choice errors	77	49.0
Collocation errors	80	51.0
Total	157	100

Collocation errors were slightly more frequent, accounting for 51.0% of all lexical errors, involving incorrect combinations of words that do not naturally occur together in English.

Examples of collocation errors included:

- "We **do a complaint** about the poor quality." (Incorrect collocation; should be "make a complaint")

- "Please **give attention** to this matter." (Incorrect collocation; should be "pay attention")
- "We **strongly request** for compensation." (Incorrect preposition with collocation; should be "strongly request compensation" without "for")
- "We need to **solve this trouble** as soon as possible." (Incorrect collocation; should be "resolve this issue")
- "Please **make a replacement** for the damaged items." (Incorrect collocation; should be "provide a replacement")

Word choice errors accounted for 49.0% of the lexical errors, involving the use of words that did not precisely convey the intended meaning or were inappropriate for the business context.

Examples of word choice errors included:

- "We **look forward to hearing** from you soon." (Inappropriate for a complaint letter; should be "We expect a prompt response")
- "The products were **broken** during transportation." (Inappropriate term; should be "damaged")
- "We are **angry** about the delay in delivery." (Too emotional; should be "concerned" or "dissatisfied")
- "The items were **terrible** quality." (Inappropriate informal adjective; should be "of poor" or "of substandard")
- "We want to **tell** you about a problem with our order." (Informal verb; should be "inform")

The distribution of lexical errors across the three years showed a decreasing trend, with word choice errors decreasing from 38.96% in 2021 to 23.38% in 2023 and collocation errors decreasing from 37.50% in 2021 to 25.00% in 2023, suggesting improvement in the employees' lexical proficiency over time.

4.3. Syntactic errors

The textual analysis revealed two main categories of syntactic errors: sentence fragments and word order errors.

Table 3 Frequency of syntactic errors in 90 English business complaint letters

Types of syntactic errors	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Sentence fragments	79	50.0

Word order errors	79	50.0
Total	158	100

Sentence fragments accounted for 50.0% of the syntactic errors, involving incomplete sentences lacking a subject, verb, or both.

Example of a sentence fragment:

- "Regarding the missing items in our recent order." (Sentence fragment; lacks a main verb)

Word order errors accounted for 50.0% of the syntactic errors, involving incorrect arrangement of words in a sentence.

Example of a word order error:

- "We know not when the replacement will arrive." (Incorrect word order; should be "We do not know")

The distribution of syntactic errors across the three years showed a decreasing trend, with 61 errors in 2021 (38.6%), 56 errors in 2022 (35.4%), and 41 errors in 2023 (26.0%), suggesting improvement in the employees' syntactic proficiency over time.

4.4. Mechanical errors

The textual analysis revealed three main categories of mechanical errors: spelling errors, punctuation errors, and capitalization errors.

Table 4. Frequency of mechanical errors in 90 English business complaint letters

Types of mechanical errors	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Spelling errors	76	34.5
Punctuation errors	76	34.5
Capitalization errors	68	31.0
Total	220	100

Spelling errors and punctuation errors were equally common mechanical errors, each accounting for 34.5% of all mechanical errors identified.

Examples of spelling errors included:

- "We **recieved** the damaged goods yesterday." (Misspelling; should be "received")
- "The **shipment** was delayed by two weeks." (Misspelling; should be "shipment")

Examples of punctuation errors included:

- "We would appreciate your prompt attention to this matter**,**" (Missing period at the end of the sentence)
- "Please respond to our complaint**,** and send the replacement items." (Unnecessary comma before "and")

Capitalization errors accounted for 31.0% of the mechanical errors, involving incorrect use of capital letters.

Examples of capitalization errors included:

- "we are writing to express our dissatisfaction..." (Failure to capitalize the first word of the sentence)
- "We spoke with mr. Johnson about this issue." (Failure to capitalize title; should be "Mr. Johnson")

4.5. Summary of linguistic errors

The total frequency of all linguistic errors identified in the 90 English business complaint letters is summarized in the following table:

Table 5. Summary of linguistic errors in 90 English business complaint letters

Types of linguistic errors	Number of occurrences	Percentage (%)
Morphological errors	328	38.0
Lexical errors	157	18.2
Syntactic errors	158	18.3
Mechanical errors	220	25.5
Total	863	100

As shown in Table 4.10, morphological errors were the most frequent linguistic errors, accounting for 38.0% of all errors identified, followed by mechanical errors (25.5%), syntactic errors (18.3%), and lexical errors (18.2%).

Table 6. Distribution of linguistic errors by year

Year	Number of letters	Total errors	Average errors per letter
2021	30	330	11.0
2022	30	317	10.6
2023	30	216	7.2

When analyzing the distribution of errors by year, as shown in Table 4.5, there was a decreasing trend in the average number of errors per letter from 2021 to 2023, suggesting improvement in the employees' English writing skills over

time. Particularly notable is the significant decrease in errors from 2022 to 2023, with the average errors per letter dropping from 10.6 to 7.2, representing a 32% improvement.

V. CONCLUSION

The current research revealed significant linguistic challenges, with morphological errors being the most frequent, followed by mechanical, syntactic, and lexical errors. Among these, verb-tense errors and subject-verb agreement issues were particularly prominent in morphological errors, while collocation mistakes and inappropriate word choices were the main lexical concerns. Syntactic errors were evenly divided between sentence fragments and word order mistakes, whereas mechanical errors were mostly spelling and punctuation-related.

Despite these challenges, the overall trend suggests a steady improvement in employees' writing proficiency over time. The total number of linguistic errors per letter decreased notably from 2021 to 2023, with a marked reduction in 2023. This decline indicates the effectiveness of language training efforts and highlights the importance of continued focus on grammar, vocabulary, and writing mechanics in professional business communication. Future training initiatives should prioritize verb usage, collocations, and structural clarity to further enhance the quality of English business complaint letters in a business context.

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