BACHELOR’S THESIS
English Essays Written by Czech Students: Fundamental Mistakes

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The secondary schools involved: Gymnázium, Praha 6, Nad Alejí 1952
  Gymnázium Nad Štolou
  Gymnázium Jana Keplera
  Gymnázium, Praha 8, U Libeňského zámku 1

Prohlašuji, že jsem svou bakalářskou práci zpracoval samostatně a uvedl jsem všechny použité prameny.

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**Abstrakt**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá základními gramatickými a lexikálními chybami v anglických esejích psaných českými studenty vyššího stupně gymnázií a středních škol. Práce uvádí 30 druhů chyb, které se v esejích objevovaly nejčastěji. Dále práce obsahuje základní vysvětlení těchto chyb s cílem uvědomění a pochopení těchto jevů studenty středních škol a gymnázií.

**Abstract**

This bachelor’s thesis deals with fundamental grammatical and lexical mistakes taken from English essays written by Czech students from higher forms of secondary schools. The thesis presents thirty typical mistakes that appeared most frequently in the essays. Moreover, the thesis involves fundamental explanations of these mistakes focused on the students’ perception.
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1. An introduction and the theoretical part

This bachelor’s thesis aims to present fundamental mistakes made by Czech students studying English as their first foreign language. The main focus of the thesis is on grammatical mistakes as well as mistakes in vocabulary. The thesis is based exclusively on mistakes found in English essays written by Czech secondary school students.

It should be also noted that the essays were composed on a great variety of topics in order to provide my research with a wide range of vocabulary mistakes. I have gathered more than seven hundred essays for my research. As far as the students’ level of English is concerned, the thesis concentrates more or less on the intermediate level (the level Czech secondary schools should be according to their final graduation exam). The essays are from students from the fifth, sixth and seventh forms of secondary schools in Prague.

What I am really concerned about is in presenting thirsty mistakes that appear to be the most frequent ones.

A pertinent point here is the fact that I do not intend to compare Prague secondary schools in terms of their English-language instruction. Furthermore, my thesis is not going to provide any hints concerning the assessment of the students of a particular secondary school. In other words, my intention is not to indicate which secondary schools have better students of English.

Basically, I take the essays as anonymous general instances without mentioning particular schools in concrete terms.
This bachelor’s thesis should help make it easier not only for teachers of English but also for students of English to realize and become aware of the main problems of students when writing in English.

What is more, once having put emphasis on that, the thesis should help diminish a certain number of mistakes in the students’ essays if and when read by teachers of English.

As far as the essays are concerned, the teachers of English who corrected them, corrected a considerable number of mistakes. What seems to be the problem is the fact that a substantial number of these mistakes are permanently repeated. Not only do students make careless mistakes but they also use some wrong expressions and incorrect pieces of grammar they are not so familiar with. Therefore, students and teachers ought to be acquainted with such a list of typical vocabulary and grammatical mistakes in order to prevent the students from making these mistakes and in order to make the teachers’ jobs easier – they could then focus on other facets of writing.

It would be advisable for teachers to provide their students with this list to help their students draw the attention to their mistakes and more importantly, to help them avoid or rather reduce the number of their mistakes to some extent.

This list might have beneficial effects for students to encourage them to create better essays and to develop their writing skills.
III

Sadly speaking, students at secondary schools are not sufficiently encouraged to write essays. Teachers tend to concentrate much more on grammatical and vocabulary skills, for instance, translations of already made-up sentences into English and vice versa. As a consequence, students are virtually deprived of being able to utilize their own creative abilities.

Additionally, the writing of essays might actually enable students to apply a significant number of grammatical points in their pieces of writing. All in all, the more often students use the particular point of grammar, the better grasp of it they have.

Furthermore, teachers do not seem to be so eager to ask their students to work on writing assignments very often. From my point of view, there might be two rather grim explanations. The first one deals with the lack of importance placed on the skill of writing in comparison with other areas of the English language. Unfortunately, teachers are inclined to follow this prevailing trend of neglecting a writing skill. Secondly, strictly speaking, they would like to avoid correcting such an enormous number of essays due to a shortage of time. There is no excuse for in either case – writing is an important, and basic skill.
Generally speaking, students of the English language make mistakes in English essays according to their mother tongues. In other words, it is generally known that students of different nationalities studying English have difficulties in various areas as far as the types of grammatical and vocabulary mistakes are concerned. These mistakes may vary from nation to nation. However, some of them may be quite similar.

As already noted, my bachelor thesis focuses predominantly on the types of mistakes Czech students make.

Judging by general awareness of the areas where Czech students come up against problems, let me make a brief preliminary estimate of some of these mistakes.

There is no doubt that articles prove to be one of the most complicated areas in the English language for Czechs, since there are no articles in the Czech language.

Equally, what seems to be immensely challenging for Czechs is the countability and the uncountability of English words. Basically, many uncountable English words turn out to be countable in Czech and vice versa. As a result, Czech students seem to be rather confused. They mix them up quite frequently.

Last, but definitely not least, Czechs have difficulties using similar words such as weather vs whether; think vs thing, etc.
And now, a comment on the structure of the main body of this bachelor’s thesis – it will present a list of the top thirty mistakes according to their frequency, based on the essays.

Each entry for these thirty mistakes consists of three parts. The first part includes my own designation of the particular mistake as a headline. It is followed with an incorrect sentence involving the mistake corresponding with the sentence from one of the essays. The third section is composed of a few pieces of information regarding that particular mistake with the complement of a few sentences with the correct usage of that expression.

Here, I would like to point out directly that this thesis is not going to deal with a thorough explanation of the grammatical and vocabulary mistakes. As already noted, what my thesis lays emphasis on is the list of mistakes. For further and more essential items of information relating to the grammar points, students and teachers are advised to focus on comprehensive grammar books.
2. The practical part

2.1 Articles

Articles are among the most frequent mistakes. The essays were full of these types of mistakes. However, this section will deal only with four examples that appeared extremely often.

a) the article *the*

a: I saw a wonderful film yesterday.

*b: How did you like a film?*

The speaker mentions a film in the first sentence. The listener asks him/her a question about that film. The film has already been mentioned. Hence, there is no other alternative but the definite determiner *the, this*.

a: I saw a wonderful film yesterday.
b: How did you like the film?

Other examples:

A man came up to a policeman and asked him a question. The policeman didn’t understand the question, so he asked the man to repeat it (Swan 69).

b) the article *a*

*Boy and girl were sitting on the bench.*

In this particular case, there is the first mention of two people. Moreover, both subjects are countable and singular. Therefore, the articles *a* must be inserted.
A boy and a girl were sitting on the bench.

Other examples:

I have lost a button (Swan 68).
There is a letter for you (Swan 68).

c) the article *a* in front of a noun that is modified with an adjective

*This is interesting opportunity to become a lawyer.*

The expression *opportunity* is singular and countable in this sentence. Furthermore, it is modified by the adjective. Countable and singular nouns that are modified by an adjective must have the determiner *a/an*.

This is an interesting opportunity to become a lawyer.

Other examples:

We live in a small house (Swan 66).
It was a good concert (Swan 65).

d) special cases of using articles in an incorrect way

*She was first one.*

Ordinal numbers are used with definite articles (Quirk et al. 143).

She was the first one.

*the Germany, the Italy...
Countries are generally not used with articles with the exception of countries such as: The United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, the Czech Republic, etc (Dušková et al. 77).

Germany, France, Italy…

2.2 Subject-verb concord

a)
*She enjoy dancing with her boyfriend.

Students have difficulties with subject-verb concord of 3rd person singular. A singular subject such as he, she, it, Paul, a cat, his mother, etc. requires a singular verb. The ending s/es is placed at the end of the singular verb form.

She enjoys dancing with her boyfriend.

Other examples:

She sees her analyst twice a week (Swan 496).
So this guy comes into a pub and orders a beer (Swan 496).
My father watches TV after supper.

b)

*He don’t speak Czech.

Similarly, the auxiliary verb must have the structure does/doesn’t.

He doesn’t speak Czech.

Other examples:
Rice doesn’t grow in cold climates (Murphy 4).
He doesn’t do anything to help me (Murphy 5).

2.3 Misspelled words

Several words appear to be particularly difficult for Czech students. Here is the list of some of them:

necessary
success
to think x thing (mentioned later in more detail)
tomorrow
description
weather x whether (mentioned later in more detail)
to receive
foreign
rubbish
quite x quiet (mentioned later in more detail)
interesting
habit
business
knowledge
than x then (mentioned later in more detail)
2.4 Word order in indirect questions and reported speech

*Can you tell me when do we have lunch?
*He asked me how many languages do I speak.

A question has an inverted word order. E.g: What do you do (Murphy 98)?
Could you say that again (Murphy 98)?

If the question begins with e.g.: Can you tell me; Do you know; Do you have any idea etc. the word order of what follows this question is different from a simple question.

E.g.: Can you tell me what time it is?
   Do you know how I can get to the station?
   Do you have any idea where I am?

There is a declarative word order in a question placed after, e.g.: He asked…, They told us…

E.g.: He asked how many languages I speak.

2.5 Easily confused words (1)

to think x a thing

*I thing somebody will help us.
*This think can happen to anybody.

To think is a verb. It means to have a particular opinion or to believe that something is true.
E.g.: I think that you’re being unfair (Longman Dictionary 1724).
   Do you think I should call him (Longman Dictionary 1724)?
A thing is a noun. It means an idea, action, feeling, or fact that someone thinks, does, says, or talks about, or that happens.

E.g.: It was a horrible thing to happen.

    The first thing to do is to give them food and shelter (Longman Dictionary 1723).

I think somebody will help us.

This thing can happen to anybody.

2.6 Easily confused words (2)

few x a few

Without an article, few usually has rather negative meanings. They often suggest ‘not as much/many as one would like or expect’, or a similar idea.

E.g.: Few people can speak a foreign language perfectly.

A few is more positive: its meaning is closer to ‘some’. It often suggests ideas like ‘better than nothing’ or ‘more than expected’.

E.g.: You don’t need to go shopping. There are a few eggs in the fridge.

Compare:

His theory is very difficult; few people understand it (Swan 238).

His theory is very difficult; but a few people understand it (Swan 238).
2.7 Easily confused words (3)

than x then

*My little brother is taller then my mother.
*Than it started to rain again.

After comparative adjectives and adverbs, we use than.

E.g.: You make me laugh more than anybody I know (Swan 597).

Then is used to mean next, after that, at that time.

E.g.: I got into the bath and then the telephone rang (Swan 597).

My little brother is taller than my mother.
Then it started to rain again.

2.8 To look forward to -ing

* I look forward to see you soon.
* I am looking forward meeting you.

To look forward to is a phrasal verb. It means to be excited and pleased about something that is going to happen. The -ing form is after to.

E.g: My mother says she’s looking forward to meeting you (Longman Dictionary 957).

I look forward to seeing you soon.
I am looking forward to meeting you.
2.9 To want to do

* My dog didn’t want eat last week.

To follows after the verb to want when we continue with another verb.

E.g.: I always wanted to become an actor.
    She wants to sell her car.

My dog didn’t want to eat last week.

2.10 Easily confused words (4)

whether x weather

* The whether is fine so far.
* She didn’t know weather to help him or not.

Whether is used when talking about a choice you have to make or about something that is not certain.

E.g.: She was uncertain whether to stay or not.
    I didn’t know whether to believe him or not.

Weather is a noun. It means the temperature and other conditions such as sun, rain, and wind.

E.g.: What is the weather like today (Longman Dictionary 1880)?
    The weather turned bitterly cold (Longman Dictionary 1868).
The weather is fine so far.
She didn’t know whether to help him or not.

2.11 Superlatives without the

*My brother Jan is youngest in our family.
*She thinks that she is most beautiful girl in the world.

Students forget to insert the definite article the in front of the superlative form.

My brother Jan is the youngest in our family.
She thinks that she is the most beautiful girl in the world.

Other examples:

Mont Blanc is the highest peak in the Alps (Swan 142).
Your accent is the worst in the class (Swan 143).
You are the most annoying person I’ve ever met (Swan 144).

2.12 Mistakes in expressions such as a lot of, lots of, plenty of

*There were lot of people in the cinema last night.
*A lots of new products appear on the market nowadays.
*I could see a plenty of cars coming to Prague in the evening.

Students are familiar with the meaning of these particular words, but they tend to write them incorrectly. Especially, they are inclined to misplace the indefinite article a.
There were a lot of people in the cinema last night.
Lots of new products (are) appear(ing) on the market nowadays.
I could see plenty of cars coming to Prague in the evening.

Other examples:

We have played lots of matches this season, but we haven’t won many (Swan 393).
A lot of my friends are thinking of emigrating, but I don’t suppose many of them will in the end (Swan 393).
He’s got plenty of men friends, but he doesn’t know many girls (Swan 393).

2.13 The mistake something/-everything/-anything/-all what

*I saw something what you should know.
*This is something what makes me angry.

In this case students are influenced by the Czech language and as a result, they use the incorrect structure something/anything what quite often.
What is never placed after expressions everything/-something/-anything/-all. Use that instead or in some cases you can omit it completely.

I saw something that you should know. / I saw something you should know.
This is something that makes me angry.

Other examples:

I will do anything you wish (Swan 37).
All that I own is yours (Swan 37).
Everything I need is a cup of coffee (Swan 37).
All I want is a room somewhere (Swan 37).
2.14 Incorrect plural forms

*lifes
*womens
*mens
*childs

Nouns such as a *life, a man, a child and a woman etc.* have irregular plural forms.

The plural forms:

lives
women
men
children

2.15 *To be interested* connected with a wrong preposition
to listen to

a) *to be interested in*

*My boyfriend is interested about cars and music.*
*What are you interested about?*

The verb *to be interested* is associated with the preposition *in.*

My boyfriend is interested in cars and music.
What are you interested in?

Other examples:

All she is interested in is clothes (*Longman Dictionary* 849).
I have always been interested in music (Longman Dictionary 849).

b) to listen to

*She listens the radio very frequently.

To listen is never followed directly by a noun. It must be followed by to and then a noun or a clause (Longman Dictionary 944).

She listens to the radio very frequently.

Other examples:

Listen to what I say (Longman Dictionary 944).
We sat around listening to music (Longman Dictionary 944).
I wish I’d listened to Dad (Longman Dictionary 944).

2.16 The mistake: the way how

* I didn’t like the way how he did it.
* There was no way how to get to the hotel in time.

The expression way cannot be followed with how. It can be followed by a to-infinitive structure or by of + -ing. There is no important difference between the two structures (Swan 621).

I didn’t like the way he did it.
There was no way of getting to the hotel in time./
There was no way to get to the hotel in time.
Other examples.

There’s no way to prove he was stealing the money (Swan 621).
Can you think of any way of getting in touch with her (Swan 621).
I don’t like the way he treats his subordinates (Dušková et al. 624).

2.17  until x by

* I waited for him by midnight.
* She told me to be at home until 5 o’clock.

Until is used when we talk about a continuing situation or state that will stop at a certain moment in the future (Swan 612).

By is used to talk about an action that will happen at or before a future moment (Swan 613).

I waited for him until midnight.
She told me to be at home by 5 o’clock.

Compare:

Can you repair my watch by Tuesday. (Action)
No, I will need to keep it until Saturday. (Continuing state)

Other examples:

He is usually in his office until midday (Swan 612).
You will have to leave by Monday (Swan 613).
He didn’t start to read until he was ten years old (Quirk et al. 744).
2.18 Incorrect prepositions

*She is the best cook on the world.
*I saw it in TV last night.
*Let’s meet in 4 o’clock.
*He was with his girlfriend in the cinema last night.
*It was lovely to swim on the afternoon.

AT

at 7 o’clock, at that moment, at that time, at the end of the year, at midnight, at Christmas, at the door, at the station, at the hotel, at the shop, at the theatre, at home, at school, at university, etc (Swan 87).

IN

in June, in 1998, in (the) autumn, in the morning, in the garden, in the water, in the picture, in the world, in the mountains, in the country, in bed, in hospital, etc (Swan 88).

ON

on Monday, on my birthday, on Friday afternoon, on New Year’s Day, on the table, on page seven, on the map, on the road, on the left side, on holiday, on TV, on the radio, on a business trip, etc (Swan 89).

She is the best cook in the world.
I saw it on TV last night.
Let’s meet at 4 o’clock.
He was with his girlfriend at the cinema last night.
It was lovely to swim in the afternoon.
2.19  To belong

*She belongs to the most beautiful people in the world.

In this case Czech students are influenced by the Czech language. This sentence is not correct in English. The verb to belong is used only in specific cases such as:

If something belongs to someone, they own it (Longman Dictionary 125).

E.g.: The book belongs to Dan (Longman Dictionary 125).

To be a member of a group or organization (Longman Dictionary 125).

E.g.: He belongs to the golf club (Longman Dictionary 125).

To be related to something or form part of it (Longman Dictionary 125).

E.g.: Cars that belong to a different era (Longman Dictionary 125).

She is one of the most beautiful people in the world.

2.20  The plural form of a hundred/-a thousand/-a million

*It must have cost six hundreds crowns.

*There were at least two thousands people at the concert.

In English the ending s is not used in these sentences. If the expression hundred/-thousand/million is preceded by number two and more, there is no s at the end of hundred/-thousand/million etc.

It must have cost six hundred crowns.
There were at least two thousand people at the concert.

It is possible to insert s at the end of these words in the particular cases such as:

E.g.: hundreds of people (Dušková et al. 137)
    thousands of demonstrators (Dušková et al. 138)

2.21 Forget x forgot, choose x chose, spend x spent

a) forget x forgot

* Unfortunately my father forget to send me the things I needed.
* Don’t forgot your passport.

Students tend to confuse forget and -forgot very frequently.

Unfortunately my father forgot to send me the things I needed.
Don’t forget your passport.

To forget means not to remember to do something that you should do (Longman Dictionary 631).

Forget – present simple tense

E.g.: How can you forget where you’ve parked the car (Longman Dictionary 631)?

Forgot – past simple tense

E.g.: She forgot all about their anniversary (Longman Dictionary 631).
b) choose x chose

*They wanted to chose the right man for the job.
*She choose the best alternative yesterday.

Choose and chose seem to be slightly difficult for students.

They wanted to choose the right man for the job.
She chose the best alternative yesterday.

To choose means to decide which one of a number of things or people you want (Longman Dictionary 260).

Choose – present simple tense

E.g.: You can choose from a wide range of vehicles (Longman Dictionary 260).

Chose – past simple tense

E.g.: They chose Donald to be their leader (Longman Dictionary 260).

c) spend x spent

*She spend a wonderful time with her mother in the mountains last month.

Spend – present simple tense

E.g.: Mum never spends any money on herself (Longman Dictionary 1592).

Spent – past simple tense

E.g.: She spent the night at a friend’s house yesterday (Longman Dictionary 1592).
She spent a wonderful time with her mother in the mountains last month.

### 2.22 Uncountable nouns

**a)**

*I can’t remember so many informations.
*Our teacher gave us two homeworks.
*My grandma used to give me a lot of advices.

Words such as *information, homework, advice* etc. are uncountable. It means they have no plural. Moreover, they are not used with the indefinite article *a/an.*

If we want to use these uncountable words in plural, we have to insert expressions such as *pieces of/-items of/-bits of,* etc.

I can’t remember so many items of information.
Our teacher gave us two pieces of homework.
My grandma used to give me a lot of pieces of advice.

**b)**

*The news are every day.*

Single uncountable nouns (i.e. without the expressions such as *pieces of/-items of* etc.) are connected with the singular verb form.

The news is every day.

Other examples of uncountable nouns that are complex for Czech students:
2.23 To suggest + -ing

*Her mother suggested me to buy a flower for her.

To suggest is not used with an object + infinitive structure. It can be followed by an -ing form or a that-clause (Quirk et al. 836, 850; Swan 584).

Her mother suggested that I should buy a flower for her./
Her mother suggested (my) buying a flower for her.

Other examples:

Ian suggested going to the cinema (Murphy 104).
Ian suggested that we went to the cinema (Murphy 105).
She suggested going for a swim (Murphy 104).
2.24 To regard sb as

*He regarded me to be his friend.

To regard can be followed by an object and an as construction. This is common in cases when we say how we see somebody, or how people describe them (Swan 81).

He regarded me as a friend.

Other examples:

I don’t regard you as being dangerous (Swan 81).
His mother regards him as a genius (Swan 81).

2.25 Czech words wrongly translated into English.

A colonial doesn’t mean a grocery (Longman Dictionary 295).
Actual doesn’t mean at the present time (Longman Dictionary 16).

Depersonal doesn’t exist in English.

Relax is not a noun! It is a verb (Longman Dictionary 1385).

Cooker is not a person who cooks (Longman Dictionary 345).

Sympathetic doesn’t mean attractive (Longman Dictionary 1684).
2.26 Most of people/things, etc.

*Most of people saw it and so did I.

Most of cannot be used before a noun that has no determiner (article, possessive or demonstrative word). You can say most of the people, or most of these people, but not most of people. You can say most people (Swan 392).

Most people saw it and so did I.

Other examples:

I’ve read most of your books (Swan 392).
Most of us feel the same about the war (Swan 392).
I’m pretty happy most of the time (Swan 392).
Most people agree with my attitude (Swan 392).
I’ve eaten most of the salad (Swan 392).

2.27 Past simple tense x present perfect tense

a)
*I have lost my passport last week…

The past simple tense is used to talk about the past. It can refer to short, quickly finished actions and events, to longer actions and situations, and to repeated happenings (Swan 469). Moreover, the time is important.

I lost my passport last week…

Other examples:

I lived in London until I was fourteen (Swan 469).
When I was a child we always went to the seaside in August (Swan 469).
You look worried – what happened (Dušková et al. 221)?
She left a moment ago (Dušková et al. 222).

b)  
*They lived in Prague 18 years so far.*

We often use the present perfect tense to talk about actions and situations which began in the past, and which have continued up to the moment when we speak (Swan 493).

It is very often used with since and for. Since is used to say when something started. For is used to say how long something has been going on (Swan 493).

They have been living in Prague for 18 years so far.

Other examples:

We’ve known each other for a long time (Swan 493).
She has worked here since 1948 (Swan 493).
She has worked here for 35 years (Swan 493).
I have already eaten (Dušková et al. 223).

2.28 In the end/-at the end

*I am flying to London in the end of March.*

*At the end everybody managed to escape.*

a)  

In the end = finally, after a long time (Swan 486)

In the end everybody managed to escape.
The opposite of *in the end* is usually at first.

At first we didn’t like each other very much, but in the end we became good friends (Murphy 242).

Another example:

In the end, I got the job I wanted (Swan 486).

b)

*At the end* = at the point where something stops (Swan 486)

I am flying to London at the end of March.

Other examples:

At the end of the concert, there was great applause (Murphy 242).
All the players shook hands at the end of the match (Murphy 242).

2.29 Capital letters

*Prague is the capital city of the Czech Republic.*
*I have been learning English for five years.*

The names of countries and languages are written with capital initial letters.

Prague is the capital city of the Czech Republic.
I have been learning English for five years.

Other examples:

He is learning French, German, Russian and Italian (Dušková et al. 78).
The United States, the United Kingdom, etc (Dušková et al. 77).

2.30 To hear x to listen to

*He told me to hear him.
*Pavel listened that noise and went to find out what it was.

When we just want to say that sounds come to our ears, we use the verb hear. Listen to suggests that we are concentrating, paying attention, trying to hear as well as possible (Swan 287).
He told me to listen to him.
Pavel heard that noise and went to find out what it was.

Other examples:

Can you hear me (Swan 287)?
Listen carefully, please (Swan 287).
I can hear somebody coming (Swan 287).
I heard them talking in the next room, but I didn’t really listen to what they were saying (Swan 287).
3. Conclusion

This bachelor’s thesis has focused on mistakes in writing by Czech students of English from different grammatical and lexical areas. It has managed to depict a framework of the thirty mistakes that appear the most frequently. However, there is a considerable number of other mistakes that do not appear within my list owing to the length of a bachelor’s thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that the students’ writing essays have served as the major source of this thesis, that is to say, I did not integrate any common mistakes from other English language areas such as speaking activities nor grammar tests which students are examined from.

Lastly, I hope the list will come in useful for students and teachers of English to help them with their studying and teaching.


