ESL and English: Some Key Differences

What are the key differences between errors made in ESL (English as Second Language) students’ and native English speakers’ writing?

Some of the most common serious errors found in the writing of native speakers of English (those for whom English is their first language) are the following:

• **Sentence fragments:**

  Which is why I prefer to take public transportation. Although no one really seems to notice. The reason being that technology is constantly changing.

• **Run-ons and comma splices:**

  I am enjoying my classes so far, they are both interesting and challenging. Josh is a big baseball fan he never misses a televised game.

• **Subject-verb agreement:**

  There is a lot of things we can do to make our world a better place. Time management and money issues is the most difficult challenge for college students.

• **Spelling/confusion of “sound-alike words”**

  My parents are really looking forward to there vacation. Their going to France this year. Its essential to apologize to someone when you know your wrong.

• **Shifts in verb tense (particularly between past and present):**

  Yesterday, I found a wallet on the ground. I pick it up, and it has money in it. I know it belongs to someone, so I turned it in to the police.

• **Various errors in punctuation (including misuse or omission of commas, apostrophes, and semicolons).**

Non-native speakers (those for whom English is not their first language), occasionally make some of the errors noted above, but they also make a number of other types of errors not found in native speakers’ writing. Some of the most common serious errors made by non-native speakers are the following:
• **Verb form/verb tense:**

Non-native speakers tend to make verb form/tense errors that extend beyond the verb tense shifts commonly found in native speakers’ writing. These errors generally arise because many verb forms and tenses that occur in English *do not* occur in other languages (i.e. modal auxiliaries -- “She *could not have finished* her homework so quickly.”). As a result, non-native speakers may have difficulty understanding the differences between verb tenses, thus they may combine different verb forms and tenses, create their own verb forms and tenses, or omit a particular verb form or tense from their writing altogether. A few examples:

I did not wanted to go to work today.
John was go to the mall.
Math is becomes very difficult for her.
You should been there by now.

• **Word forms:**

Non-native speakers often choose vocabulary or word forms that are not natural choices for native speakers. They may have difficulty understanding the differences between the various parts of speech (i.e. noun, verb, and adjective); thus, they may use these interchangeably, resulting in confusion for the reader. They also might confuse words that are semantically similar but that are not exactly the same in meaning. Or, they may not understand the difference between countable and non-countable nouns. Some examples:

The rollercoaster was very scare.
I learn my children good manners.
He is easy to make a mistake.
Mary is very success.
By stop pollution we can save our planet.
He gave me many information.

• **Word order:**

Non-native speakers make some errors, such as errors in word order, because they attempt to transfer structures to English writing that, while correct in their own native languages, are not correct in English. In many languages, for example, adjectives are placed *after* the nouns they describe, while in English the opposite is true. These errors often occur when students attempt to translate directly from their native languages to English. Some examples:

He is a man very tall and handsome.
Goes John to school every day at 9:00.
Why are ESL Classes/Labs a good place to address grammar/sentence issues in non-native speakers’ writing?

The grammar of every language is a mental system, and native speakers of English implicitly understand that system and generally use it correctly. Where native speakers have trouble, it involves issues outside that mental system (such as spelling and punctuation) as opposed to issues of structure (word order, word forms, etc.) Non-native speakers, on the other hand, don’t understand the English grammar system because they are in the process of learning it. As mentioned in the examples above, non-native speakers often try to apply the structures of their native languages to their writing in English, thus resulting in errors when those structures do not translate into correct English. ESL instructors, due to their training in applied linguistics and language acquisition, can often identify these structures and explain to the students how to structure clearer, more correct sentences in English. ESL classes/labs focus not only on application of rules of English grammar and usage, but on the actual acquisition of the English language by non-native speakers.