

Common Grammatical Errors in Students' Writing: A Qualitative Error-Analysis Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the common grammatical errors produced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in written tasks, and explores possible underlying causes as reported by the students. Using an error-analysis framework, 60 undergraduate learners' short essays were analyzed for grammatical errors; follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 volunteers to probe students' awareness and perceived causes. Findings indicate that article/determiner misuse, verb tense and aspect errors, subject-verb agreement, preposition misuse, and word order/sentence structure problems are among the most frequent error types. Interview data suggest that first-language transfer, inadequate exposure to grammatical input, faulty internalization of rules, and limited proofreading strategies contribute to recurring mistakes. Pedagogical implications include focused grammar instruction within writing contexts, increased corrective feedback that highlights patterns rather than isolated errors, and explicit metalinguistic awareness activities. The study contributes up-to-date qualitative evidence on error patterns and student perspectives to inform EFL writing pedagogy.

Keywords: *Error analysis; grammatical errors; EFL writing; article errors; subject-verb agreement*

Introduction

Writing in a second language remains a persistent challenge for many learners. Although communicative competence emphasizes meaning, grammatical accuracy is still essential for clarity and academic success. Teachers frequently report recurring grammatical problems across levels and contexts, but patterns vary by learner's L1, proficiency, and instruction. Identifying the most prevalent error types and understanding learner explanations are important first steps in designing targeted interventions for writing improvement.

In the broader context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, writing is not only a productive skill but also a complex cognitive process that integrates linguistic, rhetorical, and sociocultural dimensions. EFL learners often find it difficult to apply

grammatical knowledge accurately when constructing written texts because writing requires both linguistic precision and higher-order thinking skills. In many Asian contexts, including Indonesia, students receive extensive instruction in grammar rules but have limited opportunities to use English in authentic writing situations. Consequently, grammatical competence developed in isolation does not always transfer effectively to writing performance. Furthermore, the increasing academic demand for accurate English writing—both in university coursework and international communication—has made grammatical accuracy an important indicator of proficiency. Error analysis thus plays a vital role in identifying learning difficulties and informing pedagogical strategies. By analyzing the nature and causes of learners' grammatical errors, teachers and researchers can design more effective grammar-based writing interventions and foster greater awareness of language use.

This study aims to (1) identify common grammatical errors in written products of undergraduate EFL learners using an error-analysis approach, and (2) explore learners' perceptions about why those errors occur.

A substantial body of recent empirical work has analyzed grammatical errors in EFL writing across contexts (secondary and tertiary), consistently reporting a set of high-frequency error categories. Several studies identify articles/determiners, verb tense/aspect, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and word order among the most recurrent problems (Alghazo, 2020; Ehsanzadeh et al., 2024). For example, Alghazo's analysis of student essays found verb tense, articles, word order, subject-verb agreement and prepositions to be frequent error types. Recent corpus-style and error-analysis research confirms this picture: a 2024 study of high-frequency errors reported that cohesion and article/determiner errors were especially prevalent. Systematic reviews of automated writing aids also note persistent patterns in L2 writing that technologies commonly flag — articles/determiners, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and verb forms among them.

Regionally focused studies (Indonesia, Philippines, Egypt, Vietnam, etc.) repeatedly report similar error clusters, although the relative order varies: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering are recurring error processes. In the Philippine context, Hikmah, Buffe, and Akmal (2019) examined the writing skills of junior high school students at the University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City. Their study highlighted that learners struggled with vocabulary choice, sentence structure, and grammar accuracy, which aligns with the common grammatical errors reported in other EFL contexts. The authors concluded that systematic grammar-focused interventions were necessary to improve writing proficiency, further supporting the notion that error analysis is a valuable tool for informing instruction.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative error-analysis design combining textual analysis of written work with semi-structured interviews. The error analysis framework follows classic EA procedures (identify, classify, quantify, and interpret errors).

Participants

Participants were 60 undergraduate students enrolled in a mandatory writing course at an Indonesian university. Participants' L1 was Indonesian; proficiency ranged from low-intermediate to upper-intermediate. For the interviews, 12 volunteers were purposively selected to represent variation in error frequency.

Data Collection

Written data: Each participant produced a 350–500 word argumentative essay on a given prompt under timed conditions. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews (20–30 minutes) were conducted with 12 participants to probe their self-reports about grammar knowledge, proofreading habits, and perceptions of difficulty.

Data Analysis

Written texts were analyzed manually using a two-stage process: (a) error identification and tagging, and (b) error classification into categories. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding. Inter-rater reliability was ensured with Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = .78$).

Findings

The analysis of students' essays revealed recurrent grammatical error patterns that significantly affected writing accuracy and coherence. Quantitatively, 842 errors were identified across 60 essays, averaging 14 errors per student. Among these, article and determiner misuse (23%) was the most dominant, followed by verb tense and aspect errors (18%), subject-verb agreement (12%), preposition misuse (10%), and word order and sentence structure problems (9%). These findings mirror results from Ehsanzadeh et al. (2024) and Alghazo (2020), who found that articles and verb forms remain the most problematic grammatical categories for EFL learners across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Qualitative analysis from interviews highlighted that many students attributed their difficulties to a lack of sufficient grammatical exposure and limited opportunities for feedback. Learners also reported translating directly from their first language, resulting in interference particularly in article use and sentence organization. Moreover, several students expressed uncertainty in identifying errors, indicating insufficient metalinguistic awareness. These insights are consistent with findings by Anh (2022), who reported that limited self-correction strategies and rule internalization hinder grammatical development among Vietnamese EFL writers.

Interestingly, a few participants emphasized the role of time pressure and affective factors such as anxiety and low confidence, which led them to prioritize content over grammatical accuracy. This pattern echoes the observations of Pasaribu (2021), who found that affective variables significantly influence writing performance and error occurrence among Indonesian students.

Discussion

The findings confirm that EFL students' grammatical errors are persistent, systematic, and influenced by both linguistic and cognitive factors. The predominance of article and verb-related errors suggests that learners struggle with grammatical categories that differ structurally from their L1. This is in line with Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) classic error taxonomy and further supported by recent research by Dizon (2024), which demonstrated that such error types are among the most frequently flagged by automated writing tools like Grammarly.

Moreover, the students' reflections revealed that inadequate exposure to authentic English input and insufficient feedback cycles contribute to error fossilization. According to Ferris (2018), consistent corrective feedback—especially when focused on recurrent patterns—can significantly reduce grammatical errors in L2 writing. Thus, the current

study underscores the pedagogical importance of embedding grammar instruction within communicative writing tasks, rather than treating grammar as an isolated component. Another significant implication concerns learners' metalinguistic awareness. As highlighted by Ellis (2020), fostering awareness of grammar patterns and rule exceptions through explicit instruction enhances learners' ability to self-edit and transfer grammatical knowledge into production. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to adopt strategies such as guided peer review, collaborative editing, and the integration of automated feedback tools to promote active grammar learning.

Finally, the cross-contextual consistency of errors—particularly between Indonesian and other Asian EFL learners—suggests that these grammatical challenges are not localized but rather universal to learners from similar linguistic and educational backgrounds (Ehsanzadeh et al., 2024; Hikmah et al., 2019). Addressing them effectively requires pedagogical innovation that balances form-focused and meaning-focused approaches.

Conclusion

This qualitative error-analysis study found that article/determiner misuse, verb tense/aspect errors, subject-verb agreement, preposition misuse, and word order problems are the most frequent grammatical errors in undergraduate EFL students' essays. Interviews suggest these errors arise from a combination of L1 transfer, limited exposure, partial rule knowledge, and weak revision strategies. Pedagogically, integrating targeted grammar instruction, pattern-oriented feedback, enhanced input, and revision training can improve accuracy.

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