


Grammatical Errors in the English Writing of Lower- and Higher-Achieving Learners

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ABSTRACT

For a lot of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, writing is perceived to be the most challenging skill despite the fast development of technology in learning. This study was aimed at revealing types of grammatical errors made by lower- and higher-achieving learners in their writing. This qualitative study analyzed the essay writing of 19 lower-achieving learners and 42 higher-achieving learners from a private university. The writing was assigned in the classroom without any help of digital tools. The findings revealed that both levels of learners made morphological, syntactic, lexical, and functional errors. No group of learner demonstrated a tendency of producing a certain type of errors, meaning that both lower- and higher-achieving learners made similar errors. The errors were probably caused by the interference of learners' first language (Indonesian), lack of knowledge and practice, and the complex English writing system. The findings of this study imply the need to employ strategies in giving feedback to learners' writing and to enhance learners' awareness about morphological, syntactic, lexical, and functional aspects in their writing.

Keywords: *grammatical errors; EF learners; writing.*

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fast development of technology that can assist learning, writing has been perceived as the most challenging skill for a lot of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. It is because they have to deal with among others, lexical and syntactic knowledge (Ceylan, 2019; Jabali, 2018; Wang, 2021). More specifically, they must deal with grammar and sentence structure, vocabulary limitations, spelling and punctuation, and organization and coherence. For non-English department students who get little exposure of English writing practice, grammar has been a serious issue. It is indicated by their poor performance of writing and lower TOEFL score, especially at the structure and written expression section. While understanding grammatical errors produced by lower achieving learners help teachers tailor their teaching strategies to resolve persistent issues, identifying errors made by higher achieving learners can help in improving further teaching methods to enhance their proficiency.

Error Analysis (EA) offers a comprehensive theoretical framework wherein the types and sources of grammatical errors in writings are understood. It highlights obvious error patterns like omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Aziz et al., 2020; Yusuf et al., 2021). This framework can be

applied to both lower- and higher-achieving learners to find out special problems faced by them. Intralanguage will be an important aspect of error examination, considering that it refers to the ever developing linguistic system that the learner is creating. This is something that provides insights as to how and when learners conduct hypothesis testing and understanding about the target language (Matwangsang et al., 2025). This part suggests how both lower and higher achievers need to improve, in addition to their developmental stages.

Conducting research on EA has practical pedagogical implications because it helps in the learning about the adoption of the methodologies for teaching. Teachers must then emphasize those difficult rules through direct grammar instruction as those techniques tend to be useful in teaching writing skills. Such rules are critical in example in case a higher achiever may be good at few grammar areas in spite of general proficiency (Khaleghi et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2021). An understanding of unique pattern errors of different learners can develop different targeted teaching strategies. For instance, the lower-achieving learners have to use most basic structures of grammar, while higher-achieving learners encounter a degree more complex problems pertaining to sentence syntax and usage (Lahuerta, 2018; Yusuf et al., 2021)

There have been many studies which revealed various types of grammatical errors performed by EFL learners when demonstrating their writing skill. Omission is, perhaps, the most common error in which learners delete some significant grammatical elements. Omission errors are commonly found among Chinese EFL learners. These errors appear through omissions of other essential grammatical elements such as articles and prepositions in sentences. Articles and prepositions, for example, are often omitted by Chinese EFL learners. (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Aziz et al., 2020; Bi et al., 2024). Chinese EFL learners frequently omit articles (e.g. "a," "an," "the") in their writing. To some extent it is caused by the nonexistence of articles in the Chinese language, which make it difficult to understand the necessity and correct usage in English (Bi et al., 2024; Sun, 2014; Suraprajit, 2021).

Errors which are prevalent is verb usage, such as incorrect verb tenses and subject-verb agreement. This is apparent among college students and Yemeni learners (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Fitrawati & Safitri, 2021). Errors in verb tenses and subject-verb agreement are often made by Yemeni EFL learners in the English language. Interlingual transfer accounts for the differences between verb conjugation and inflectional morphemes in Arabic and English, causing confusion. Omission errors, that is, leaving out necessary verb forms, are particularly rampant, making up 58.71% of the total errors recorded. (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023). Among college students, errors in verb tenses and subject-verb agreement are also prevalent. For instance, Chinese learners often misuse verb forms, such as using the past tense or past participle incorrectly in infinitive constructions (e.g. "to did" instead of "to do") (Xia, 2012).

The other type of errors is related to the misuse of preposition which is influenced by learners' native language, as found in some studies (Kaçani, 2014; Monaikul & Di Eugenio, 2023; Yildiz, 2016). Prepositional errors are, in most cases, influenced by the learners' native languages. For example, Persian semantic interference often causes

Iranian learners of French to misapply prepositions (Kamali, 2015). Similarly, Spanish speakers learning English tend to make prepositional errors due to direct translation from Spanish (Monaikul & Di Eugenio, 2023). Incorrect use of articles is another frequent error, especially among Turkish and Arabic EFL learners (Kazazoğlu, 2020), and also lexical errors including incorrect word choices and spelling (Kazazoğlu, 2020; Pardo, 2021; Qadir & Bostanci, 2023).

Despite the diverse research on EFL grammatical errors, there is a notable lack of research that analyzed grammatical errors made by both lower- and higher-achieving EFL learners. Most research only focused on scrutinizing errors produced by lower-achieving learners, especially among Indonesian EFL learners. To fill the gap, this research was aimed at identifying errors made by EFL lower- and higher-achieving learners in an Indonesian tertiary context. Therefore, the question of this research is “What type or grammatical errors are made by lower and higher achieving EFL learners?”

METHOD

In this study, a qualitative research design for error analysis was used to investigate into the area of grammatical errors in students' writing. The purpose of this research was to identify certain common error patterns and investigate the underlying causes of such errors. The subjects of this study were 42 students of a non-English department at a private university who took one English class as part of their compulsory curriculum. They were divided into two levels of achievement. 19 students were identified as lower-achieving learners (those whose TOEFL score is below 450) and 23 of them are higher-achieving learners (those who have a TOEFL score of 450 or above). Data were collected through analyzing students' handwritten final paper completed in the classroom without assistance from digital tools or the Internet. The type of writing assigned to the students was essay writing, which provided ample opportunity for grammatical usage in a variety of contexts. The analysis was conducted qualitatively, and errors were examined in their context in a qualitative way to determine possible reasons for such errors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings in this study revealed that the lower-achieving learners (LAL) and higher-achieving (HAL) EFL learners made various types of errors in their writing, i.e., morphological errors, syntactic errors, lexical errors, and functional errors.

Morphological errors

There are three types of morphological errors found in the learners' writing: verb forms, plural forms, and misuse and omission of articles. The first problem deals with verb form errors as shown in the following data.

I will always **learning** to achieve it (LAL)

I must study hard to **graduated** (LAL)

If you buy it, you will **helping** the economic growth of that country (HAL)

With internet technology that **spreading**.....(HAL)

The data samples above show that both lower- and higher-achieving learners made verb form errors. The data reveal that EFL learners tend to misuse the -ing form when using a verb. It may indicate that EFL learners tend to overgeneralize grammatical rules they have learned. For instance, they might apply the progressive aspect (-ing form) more broadly than appropriate, associating it with activities even when it is not contextually correct (Muñoz & Gilabert, 2011). This over generalization can lead to errors like "I will always learning." Overgeneralization in verb-ing usage may occur when learners tend to always use verb-ing. A study revealed that overgeneralization among adult learners can be caused by a decrease in cognitive factors such as memory and rules confusion (Mahmud & Erizar, 2024).

The second type of morphological errors is plural form. There are three errors in using plural forms as seen in the data below.

I must read many **book** in library or internet (LAL)

But since I got more **informations** about..(LAL)

...because they get more **customer** (HAL)

The data show that learners failed to add plural form of 's' in the words 'book' and 'customer'. On the other hand, one higher-achieving learner used incorrect plural form by unnecessarily putting 's' in the word 'information.' This fact indicates that EFL learners, both lower- and higher-achievers, still have a confusion in understanding and applying plural form rules. This finding echoes previous studies which found that misuse of plural forms frequently occurs among EFL learners, particularly among those from different linguistic backgrounds (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Zhan, 2015).

The other morphological errors deal with misuse and omission of articles. Lower-achieving learners made more errors in using articles as shown in the following data.

Now, I'm **medical student**.(LAL)

..but there is **a effect** ..(LAL)

My mother says if you want to **be doctor** you must study hard. (HAL)

These errors might be due to the absence of articles in learners' first language, which is Indonesian. This finding is in line with earlier studies which asserted that EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties with the English article system, particularly when their first language (L1) does not employ a similar structure. This can lead to persistent errors in their written English (Balenović, 2024; Barrett & Chen, 2010; Kojima & Popiel, 2023; Lee & Kang, 2018; Park, 2023; Sarker & Baek, 2017).

The learners also produced word form errors. These errors indicate that EFL learners find it confusing to differentiate word forms such as verbs, adjectives, and noun. It can be seen from the following data.

To fight my **lazy** (LAL).

I want to be a **success** doctor (LAL).

We gonna **life**. (HAL)

It will **effect**....(HAL)

In the sentence “I want to be a success doctor”, the learner used a noun (success) instead of an adjective (successful), although in his native language (Indonesian), adjectives also modify nouns. Similarly, the sentence “it will effect” indicates that learners might assume that “effect” and “affect” are interchangeable. Incorrect word choices like are issues in learners’ grammatical errors found in previous studies (Khan, 2022; Pardo, 2021).

Morphological errors produced by lower- and higher-achieving learners imply that teachers need to enhance learners’ phonemic awareness deliberately. Besides, it is also critical to give more explicit instruction and practice to mitigate learners’ confusion – for example in using word forms. Morphological errors may also indicate learners’ challenges in processing language rules. They may put meaning to be more important than form, thus ignoring grammatical errors. Besides, errors produced by EFL learners show their strategies to simplify complex rules. Rather than seen as a failure, it can indicate learners’ active learning in acquiring English.

Syntactic errors

Both lower- and higher-achieving learners also made syntactic errors in their writing. The errors include subject-verb agreement, word order, and misuse of “be”. The following data show that both types of learners are still not aware of the use of verbs that must agree with the subjects.

They have a cool hat and a hand gun which **is** amazing (LAL)

Doctor is someone who **help** many people to be healthy (LAL)

..but everything **have** their good sides. (HAL)

The store which **sell**... (HAL)

These errors might be strongly influenced by learners’ first language (Indonesian) which does not apply subject-verb agreement. It can also be caused by the complex rules of and irregularities of English grammar, which are different from Indonesian language. This finding confirms an earlier study undertaken by Arifin (2019) which revealed that subject-verb agreement is one of the challenges faced by Indonesian EFL learners.

The second type of syntactic errors made by the lower- and higher-achieving learners is word orders.

If I see **people sick** I will to help them. (LAL)

..they begin to wonder how **can they** look like that too.(HAL)

The regulations **also should**...(HAL)

Learners tendency to use incorrect word orders might be due to different rules in Indonesian language. In their native language, an adjective precedes a noun to form a noun phrase. So, the disorder in the noun phrase “people sick”, is probably a direct translation from Indonesian language “orang sakit”. Meanwhile, in the second sentence “..how **can they** look like that too”, the learner tends to apply the rule of wh-/h questions, in which they invert modal “can” with “they” after connector “how. It is probably caused by learner’s lack of knowledge. This finding corroborates the finding

in a study carried out by Shi & Pongpaibroj (2020) which revealed that English learners whose native languages are Yi and Mandarin demonstrated errors in word order, showing a strong influence from their native language.

The third type of errors is misuse of “be” which appeared in the learners’ written works. The “be” errors are both omission and addition.

I am really want to.. (LAL)

If **I lazy**... (LAL)

In Islam, **people prohibited** to..(HAL)

This **thing also** relevant (HAL)

Both higher- and lower-achieving learners exhibited errors in the use of “be”. These errors might be due to overgeneralization in applying the English language rules, thus resulting in a sentence like “I am really want.” Unnecessary usage of “be” verb can occur when learners apply rules too broadly. “Be” omission, on the other hand, might indicate that learners lack knowledge about when “be” verbs should be used. In “..people prohibited to..” where a “be” verb should be inserted after “people”, had changed the meaning from passive to active. “Be” verb errors in passive sentences supported the finding in a previous study (Gayo & Widodo, 2018). Learners’ syntactic errors implies that communication breakdown might occur due to clarity issues. As syntactic errors make learners’ written ideas difficult to understand, they can lead to misinterpretation. However, syntactic errors are beneficial for teachers as they can indicate learners’ language development. Teachers can recognize in which stage of language acquisition learners are, thus employ appropriate strategies to accommodate learners’ linguistic deficiency.

Lexical errors

One common errors EFL learners produced is spelling errors. This problem might occur due to the complex writing system that English language has. As Jaashan & Alashabi, (2025) maintain, English is an orthographically complicated language with no direct correspondence between sound and writing. The examples of spelling errors are as follows:

Docter is my dream job.(LAL)

They need to do **expantion**. (HAL)

And now I **relais**. (LAL)

As seen from the data above, it seems that the learners tend to write what is spoken such as in “docter” and “relais” (realize). Probably they were influenced by the Indonesian writing system, in which what is written and spoken is the same. These errors can also be caused by learners’ lower phonemic awareness. Lack of phonemic awareness can lead to spelling errors, as Donicht et al. (2019) asserted. Lexical errors matter because it can lead to reader confusion. Although some errors might still be understandable, like “docter”, others might cause different meanings such as “form” and “from.” If frequently made, lexical errors can indicate learners’ lack of proficiency in the target language. Learners’ frequent lexical errors imply that teachers should encourage extensive reading to learners, so that they become familiar with how words

are written. It also implies that the learners are still in their vocabulary development. They haven't internalized how words should be used contextually. Teachers should employ strategies to give feedback effectively to learners' writing. Feedback on their writing should be crystal clear, motivating, and aimed at assisting them to expand their vocabulary or word usage.

Functional errors

Functional errors that the Indonesian EFL learners produced included auxiliary and modal errors.

..and he **do** not have time during the week.(LAL)

People who don't **can**...(HAL)

The misuse of "do" instead of "does" in "...and he **do** not have time during the week" indicates learners' lack of understanding about the use of do/does auxiliary. It implies that compared to Indonesian, English applies a more complex system because auxiliary does not exist in Indonesian language. Similarly, a higher-achieving learner also produced an error in using "can" modal. He tended to use negative auxiliary "don't" with "can", assuming that all negative sentences, regardless with or without modals, need "don't". Contrasts between the native language of learners and English can cause confusion of modals' use. This finding echoes the findings in Al-Qudah & Yasin (2016), revealing that Arab learners of English have problems with the use of modality due to the contrasts between the modal systems of Arabic and English, and they commit errors such as the use of auxiliary "do" with modals. Functional errors produced by both lower and higher-achieving learners imply that learners' might find it hard to convey more complex ideas in writing. To higher-achieving learners, functional errors can make them less proficient than they actually are. These errors also imply that learners lack control on basic grammar concepts.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that grammatical errors made by EFL lower- and higher-achieving learners in writing include morphological, syntactic, lexical, and functional errors. Both levels of learners made the same type of errors. The errors are probably caused by the influence of learners' first language (Indonesian), their lack of knowledge and practice, and the complex English writing system. These errors indicate that teachers need to employ strategies in giving feedback to enhance learners' awareness of morphological, syntactic, lexical, and functional aspects in their writing. There is no distinct tendency of errors made by both level of learners as they produced relatively the same frequency of errors. Due to the limited samples of writing used in this study, the findings might not represent the errors produced by lower- and higher-achieving learners in a larger scale. Further research can be conducted to investigate the role of Indonesian language transfer in certain error types and how frequent the errors are made by lower- and higher-achieving learners.

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