



Analyzing Grammatical Error Patterns in English Foreign Language Students

Dela Wahyuni^{1*}, Afzylianur Harahap², Dea Saharani³, Rosa Anjani⁴, Siti Ismahani⁵

¹²³⁴⁵Tadris Bahasa Inggris, Fakultas Ilmu Tarbiyah dan Keguruan, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

*Penulis Korespondensi: dela0304221022@uinsu.ac.id

Abstract. *This study explores grammatical errors found in descriptive essays written by five English major students at a university in Medan using a qualitative approach. The students produced texts freely, and their writing was analyzed to identify recurring error patterns and the factors that triggered them. Results show that the most common errors relate to verb agreement, tense use, sentence structure, and linking words, mostly influenced by Indonesian language interference and limited exposure to English writing. These mistakes also reflect low self-monitoring habits during the writing process. Rather than indicating failure, errors demonstrate developmental progress and the learners' attempt to construct meaning in a second language. The study suggests contextual grammar teaching supported by writing practice, authentic input, and constructive feedback. With consistent guidance, students are expected to gradually build grammatical accuracy in academic writing.*

Keywords: *grammatical errors, EFL writing, error analysis*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengkaji kesalahan tata bahasa dalam esai deskriptif yang ditulis oleh lima mahasiswa jurusan Bahasa Inggris di sebuah universitas di Medan dengan pendekatan kualitatif. Mahasiswa diminta menulis teks bebas, kemudian tulisan dianalisis untuk menemukan pola kesalahan dan faktor penyebabnya. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa kesalahan paling banyak terjadi pada kesesuaian verba dengan subjek, penggunaan tense, struktur kalimat, dan kata hubung. Kesalahan banyak dipengaruhi interferensi bahasa Indonesia serta kurangnya paparan tulisan berbahasa Inggris. Hal ini juga mencerminkan rendahnya kebiasaan penyuntingan mandiri saat menulis. Kesalahan tidak selalu menandakan kegagalan, tetapi menunjukkan tahap perkembangan bahasa kedua. Studi ini merekomendasikan pengajaran tata bahasa yang lebih kontekstual dengan latihan menulis, paparan teks autentik, dan umpan balik konstruktif agar kemampuan gramatikal berkembang bertahap.

Kata kunci: kesalahan gramatikal, penulisan EFL, analisis kesalahan

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing in a foreign language is more than a mechanical assembly of words; it is a process of shaping thought into a form that others can understand and feel (Mirhosseini & Kianfar, 2019). For many learners of English as a foreign language, descriptive writing offers a particular challenge and a particular opportunity. When asked to sketch a scene, portray a person, or capture the character of a place in words, writers must organize sensory detail, choose precise vocabulary, and, crucially, select grammatical forms that carry time, relationship, and emphasis (Burroway et al., 2022). The grammatical choices students make in such texts reveal not only gaps in knowledge but also the strategies they use to communicate (Rodríguez-Fuentes & Swatek, 2021). Reading these choices closely, therefore, is a way into the learner's mind.

This study grew out of classroom observation and a steady curiosity about patterns that repeatedly appeared in students' descriptive essays. Some mistakes were fleeting and clearly accidental; others returned across different writers and tasks as if they were footprints leading back to deeper causes. The aim here is not to tally errors for the sake of scoring, but to listen to what the errors themselves say. What kinds of grammatical constructions trip learners most often when they describe? In what ways do those constructions reflect the pull of the learners' first language, habits of thought, or gaps in exposure? Answering such questions is less about assigning blame and more about understanding the process of learning as it is lived in the classroom.

Descriptive writing demands sustained use of adjectives and noun phrases, fine-grained temporal reference, and careful placement of modifiers (Depraetere & Langford, 2025). It is therefore fertile ground for examining recurrent grammatical tendencies. The essays collected for this research were written under familiar, low-stakes conditions so that the language students produced would feel natural rather than overly polished. Each text became a small story about choice: why a writer selected one tense over another, why an adjective appeared before or after a noun, or why a preposition was omitted or added. Together these choices form patterns that can illuminate the kinds of grammatical knowledge students rely on when meaning matters more than correctness.

Rather than adopting a statistical lens, this investigation treats the texts as evidence to be interpreted. The method chosen privileges depth: close reading, careful classification of recurring constructions, and attention to contextual cues inside each essay. When a verb form is used in an unexpected way, for example, the surrounding sentence is examined to see whether the choice serves a communicative purpose or betrays uncertainty. When word order deviates from standard patterns, the analysis seeks to determine whether the deviation is systematic, idiosyncratic, or influenced by structures in the students' native language (López-Beltrán et al., 2021). This approach allows the research to move beyond a simple list of mistakes and toward a narrative about how grammatical knowledge develops in writing.

Understanding error patterns also has a practical dimension (Tabacu et al., 2020). If particular grammatical features repeatedly appear in students' texts, then instruction can be adapted to address those features in ways that connect to real writing tasks. Interventions based on isolated drills often fail because they do not align with the cognitive demands of composing. By contrast, interventions informed by close analysis of actual descriptive writing can target the forms and contexts where students most need support. The intention, therefore, is not

merely diagnostic but pedagogical: to offer insights that help teachers design activities that integrate grammar instruction into meaningful writing practice (Idris et al., 2025).

In presenting the findings, the emphasis will be on explanation rather than enumeration. Examples from the essays are used to show how certain constructions function in context, how they contribute to meaning, and how deviations from target grammar reveal learner reasoning. Attention is paid to both individual variation and recurring tendencies. The goal is to provide a readable account that captures the richness of student language while remaining analytically rigorous.

Beyond the technical observations, it is equally essential to recognize the human dimension behind every error. Mistakes in writing are often accompanied by evidence of creativity, risk-taking, and expressive desire. A clause that is grammatically imperfect may still communicate vividly; a repeated error may signal a learner experimenting with new structures (Henriksen et al., 2021). These realities temper any negative reading of errors and invite a more compassionate, constructive response from teachers and researchers alike. The subsequent sections of this manuscript will describe the data and methods used, present the patterns observed, and reflect on what those patterns suggest for classroom practice and future inquiry. An abstract summarizing the whole study will be provided at the end of the document.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using a qualitative descriptive design, a choice that arose naturally from the curiosity to understand how learners shape grammatical meaning while writing, rather than merely measuring how many errors they produce. Qualitative inquiry allowed space to look closely at the texture of students' language, to sit with their sentences, and to uncover not just where a mistake appeared but what it revealed about the writer's developing relationship with English (Butler et al., 2021). Instead of working with large numbers or statistical tools, the study relied on depth slow reading, careful reflection, and repeated interpretation of the text produced by the participants.

The participants were five undergraduate students majoring in English education at a university in Medan. All of them had completed foundational grammar and writing courses, though at varying levels of confidence. Their willingness to participate came after an informal conversation where they were told the study aimed not to judge their writing, but to learn from it. This helped create a relaxed atmosphere, and they submitted their essays with the understanding that their voices, not their mistakes, were at the center of the research. Their

identities were kept confidential, and in the manuscript they are referred to using initials to maintain privacy while preserving the individuality of their writing.

Data were collected through a single writing task focusing on descriptive composition. Each participant was asked to write an essay describing a place, person, or object that held meaning for them personally. The task was administered during a scheduled class session, without external tools such as translators or grammar checkers. The instructions were simple and open-ended: write freely, write clearly, and try to make the reader see what you see. No model text was provided beforehand, as the aim was to capture authentic language without the influence of imitation.

Once the essays were collected, the real work began. The texts were read multiple times, first for overall flow and meaning, then more slowly with attention to grammatical structure. Every deviation from standard grammar was underlined and noted in the margin, not as a point of failure but as a point of interest. The errors were then grouped into emerging categories, such as tense use, word order, subject-verb agreement, and prepositional choice. Rather than forcing categories prematurely, the classification grew organically from what the texts revealed. Some sentences required discussion with the writer to understand intention, and brief follow-up interviews were conducted informally after class. These conversations were not recorded, but notes were taken to capture key insights—moments where a student explained why a certain form felt natural or why another felt confusing.

The interpretive process was iterative. After initial coding, the essays were set aside for several days and revisited with fresh eyes. This distance helped the researcher avoid hasty conclusions and allowed patterns to surface more clearly. At times, the researcher revisited earlier assumptions, adjusting categories or reinterpreting a construction after discovering a similar pattern in another essay. The goal throughout was to understand, not to police the language.

Because this study leans heavily on interpretation, reflexivity was necessary. The researcher kept a journal during analysis, noting personal reactions—moments of surprise, recognition, or uncertainty. These reflections served as reminders of the researcher's own linguistic biases and helped maintain balance between description and judgement. In qualitative work, the researcher is not a neutral machine but a reader, an observer, and an interpreter, and acknowledging this role is essential for maintaining integrity in the process.

In sum, the methodology rested on authenticity, careful observation, and respect for the student voice. Five essays may seem a small number, yet each one opened a window into the learner's journey through grammar, revealing struggles, strengths, and creative attempts to express meaning. Instead of treating the texts as error-filled products, this study treated them as evolving expressions of language learning. The methodology allowed space to see grammar not only as a system of rules but as a lived experience reflected in every stroke of the keyboard or pen.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Finding

The analysis of the five descriptive essays revealed patterns that were both expected and unexpectedly personal. Each text carried its own rhythm and personality, yet across them certain grammatical tendencies began to echo one another. The findings in this section present what emerged from that close reading without interpretation or theoretical comparison. What follows is simply what was found in the writing itself, as plainly and honestly as it appeared on the page.

The most noticeable pattern lay in the way verbs were handled. All five participants demonstrated the ability to form sentences with clear ideas, but the consistency of tense was often unstable. In several essays, sentences began in the present and slipped into the past, as if the writer was still negotiating how to anchor memory in time. One participant began describing his childhood house using the present tense. The house is small, the tree is big behind it, and only a few sentences later shifted to The house had a big window, we played there every afternoon. These shifts were not signs of confusion as much as traces of thought moving between memory and description, yet they still formed patterns of grammatical deviation. Another participant used present continuous forms where simple present would have been more appropriate, suggesting an attempt to create immediacy in description, although the form did not align perfectly with English conventions.

Another recurring feature was subject-verb agreement. The errors were subtle, often appearing when the subject was followed by a long descriptive phrase. In a sentence like The girl with long black hair and a shy smile walk to the class every morning, the verb walked alone against the intended agreement. This tendency was present in three of the five essays, particularly in sentences where the writer added descriptive detail between subject and verb. It

gave the sense that meaning took priority over form, as though the student's attention was captured by adjectives while the grammatical structure held itself together only loosely.

Word order presented its own set of findings. In English, adjectives typically precede nouns, yet in some essays the noun came first, followed by its modifiers in a pattern more natural to Bahasa Indonesia. A sentence such as *She has eyes brown and warm* appeared more than once, suggesting that the students carried familiar syntactic habits into English. Adverbs too occasionally drifted into unusual positions, sometimes at the end of sentences where in English they would normally sit before the verb. These choices did not obscure meaning, but they produced a slightly different cadence, as if the English sentence had been tuned to a different linguistic melody.

Prepositions emerged as a delicate area. In descriptions of places students occasionally omitted prepositions entirely or selected one that sounded right rather than one demanded by convention. Examples such as *I sit the chair* or *We went in the beach* showed an effort to locate action in space without full confidence in the correct connector. In other moments, prepositions were doubled, perhaps as a safety measure, as in *I looked at to her*. These tendencies were not constant, but consistent enough to mark prepositions as an area where certainty wavered.

Articles appeared with both absence and excess. Some participants wrote *the house* even when the reference was first introduced, while others omitted articles altogether, writing *I saw beautiful cat* instead of *I saw a beautiful cat*. The essays with the richest vocabulary sometimes displayed more article-related errors, suggesting that lexical creativity and grammatical precision do not always grow in tandem.

Despite these points of deviation, it must be said that the essays were far from incoherent. The writing carried emotional weight and clear intention. One student described her late father's jacket with such tenderness that the grammatical imperfections faded behind the image. Another painted a vivid picture of a quiet river he used to visit alone, the grammar bending under the effort to capture something almost too personal for language. These moments mattered because they reminded the researcher that errors do not define the text; they coexist with meaning.

What the findings show, at their core, is that the students possess a functional grasp of English grammar, yet the finer details of tense consistency, agreement, word order, articles, and prepositions remain fluid in practice. The patterns surfaced naturally from the data, not as failings, but as footprints left by learners still shaping their command of English through

writing. The findings stop here as observation alone, without judgement or explanation. The next section will move beyond description, exploring what these patterns may reveal about the learners and how they can guide instruction more thoughtfully.

B. Discussion

The findings presented earlier indicate that grammatical errors made by university EFL learners are not random mistakes that appear without cause. They reflect deeper patterns of how learners think, process language, and transfer linguistic habits from their mother tongue into English writing. This discussion elaborates on those results, connects them with the nature of second language acquisition, and interprets what the data suggest about current learning conditions, instructional approaches, and practical implications for classroom practice. The purpose is not only to highlight what was discovered, but to make sense of why it happened and how similar situations might be addressed in the future. Before breaking down the interpretation into three main themes, it is necessary to reflect briefly on the atmosphere that surrounded the writing process itself. Many students approached their writing task enthusiastically, yet the text they produced revealed hesitation, interference, and a sense that grammar was something external rather than internalized. These subtle details help shape a fuller understanding of the results.

1. The Influence of Mother Tongue Interference

A large portion of identified errors can be traced back to the influence of Indonesian grammatical patterns. This appeared strongly in verb agreement errors, omission of the third-person singular -s, misuse of to be, and confusion between past and present forms. Indonesia does not modify verbs according to subjects, and tense marking in daily speech is often indicated through adverbial context rather than inflection. Thus, when students wrote in English, their sentences often followed Indonesian logic even though the vocabulary was English. Instead of "She walks to campus every morning," many wrote "She walk to campus every morning." On paper, the difference seems simple, but cognitively it requires breaking habits that have existed for years.

During the writing session, several learners showed confidence while composing their paragraphs, yet later admitted that they had never thought about verb agreement consciously. This indicates that grammatical knowledge might be stored as memorized rules rather than intuitive language behavior. Such conditions create a gap between what students know and what they actually produce. They understand the formula, but their real-time language

processing still defaults to L1 structure. The findings therefore suggest that mother tongue interference is not merely a technical error, but a mental pattern that remains dominant in early-stage academic writing.

Interestingly, interference also appeared in sentence structure. Some students constructed English sentences using Indonesian order, making expressions sound unnatural or fragmented. This was especially visible in narrative texts when students tried to describe sequences of events. While creativity was evident, the linguistic structure felt transferred directly from Indonesian storytelling style. This reinforces the idea that bilingual learners negotiate two systems simultaneously, and unless given sufficient exposure, the first language tends to shape the second in subtle but persistent ways.

2. Limited Exposure and Low Self-Monitoring in Writing

Another pattern emerging from the findings is the indication that students do not regularly engage with English writing beyond classroom assignments. The absence of punctuation control, inconsistent capitalization, and long unstructured sentences reveal limited reading and writing exposure. Students tend to write as they speak, resulting in paragraph flow that lacks pauses, connectors, and grammatical rhythm. For example, some narratives stretched across multiple lines without a single full stop, giving the sense that students were pouring ideas quickly rather than constructing them thoughtfully.

This phenomenon is linked to self-monitoring. When learners rarely re-read their work critically, errors remain unnoticed. A number of participants submitted drafts without revising them, suggesting that writing is viewed as a one-step process rather than recursive practice involving reflection and improvement. This emphasizes an instructional gap. Learners may have been told to “write,” but not guided through stages of planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Without a habit of self-checking, grammatical slips accumulate and become a typical feature of student writing.

Exposure also influences grammatical accuracy. Students who regularly read English texts tend to internalize grammar patterns unconsciously through repeated input, while those who rely solely on classroom instruction struggle to activate those patterns in writing. The findings hint that grammar is not solely a matter of explicit teaching, but also of immersion. The more students interact with authentic English materials, the more natural their writing becomes, reducing their dependency on rules and increasing intuitive production.

3. Instructional Implications and the Need for Contextual Grammar Learning

The results lead to an important reflection on how grammar is taught in university EFL settings. Many students demonstrate partial understanding of rules, yet their writing does not reflect full mastery. This suggests that grammar instruction may remain rule-based and test-oriented rather than meaning-driven. If students only encounter grammar in drills or theoretical lectures, they may memorize structures without internalizing their functional purpose. Writing then becomes separate from grammar rather than supported by it.

The classroom may benefit from approaches that weave grammar into meaningful writing tasks instead of treating it as an isolated subject. When students revise their writing with assistance, compare incorrect and correct forms, or analyze authentic texts, grammar becomes alive and contextual. Feedback, especially personalized and consistent, could serve as a bridge to awareness. In the current research setting, corrections given to students sparked curiosity and occasional surprise. That reaction itself is evidence that students are willing to learn when feedback is delivered clearly and constructively.

Integrating peer-review activities could also reduce anxiety toward grammar. When students read each other's work, they not only help peers but also learn through noticing what feels incorrect. This reflective environment gradually sharpens their grammatical sensitivity. The findings show potential for growth because most errors were not complex, but rather foundational. With proper scaffolding, learners could move toward more accurate writing with steady progress.

The implications stretch beyond the classroom as well. Future research might explore the effectiveness of writing journals, story retelling tasks, or grammar awareness workshops. Technology-assisted learning, such as grammar check tools, also offers possibilities if used as guidance rather than dependency. The essence is to transform grammar from a barrier into a tool that empowers expression. When learners feel ownership over their writing, accuracy tends to follow naturally.

Overall, the discussion of findings reveals a dynamic interplay between first language influence, exposure, and instructional design. The errors identified are not signs of failure, but evidence that learners are still navigating the complexities of second language writing. They think in one system while writing in another, balancing knowledge with habit. The most important insight from this research is that grammatical competence develops not only through explanation, but through experience: reading more, writing more, revising more, and receiving meaningful feedback. If educators create spaces where language is practiced genuinely rather

than mechanically, learners can gradually internalize grammar in a way that feels natural. The journey from error to accuracy is long, but clearly achievable, and these findings serve as a gentle reminder that writing growth is a process shaped by patience, exposure, and continuous support.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study set out to explore the grammatical errors found in the descriptive essays of five English major students at a university in Medan, focusing particularly on how their mistakes reveal patterns of learning, influence of the mother tongue, and the nature of their engagement with writing. Throughout the observation and analysis, it became clear that errors were far more than surface-level slips. They reflected cognitive habits and linguistic structures carried over from Indonesian, limitations in writing exposure, and a classroom environment where grammar is understood but not yet fully internalized. These elements interacted closely, shaping the way students produced sentences and conveyed ideas. Rather than viewing the errors as flaws, this study sees them as markers of progress, a sign that learners are experimenting and moving through necessary developmental stages in second language acquisition.

It is worth noting that many of the errors identified were foundational, which means they are manageable with consistent practice and guided feedback. The students demonstrated willingness to learn, and moments of improvement appeared even during the short writing process. This gives educators hope that with increased exposure to authentic English input, integrated grammar instruction, and opportunities to write freely while being guided constructively, these learners can develop stronger grammatical control. The findings also remind teachers and researchers to remain patient, to recognize the emotional aspect of writing, and to treat every mistake as a window into how a student thinks rather than as something to penalize.

Ultimately, this research emphasizes that writing development is a journey rather than a single achievement. Grammatical accuracy grows gradually, shaped by experience, reflection, and support. Future work may expand the participant group, apply different genres of writing, or test new instructional approaches to reinforce grammar acquisition in meaningful ways. For now, this study provides a modest yet valuable insight into the grammatical challenges faced by EFL students and the opportunities that lie within those challenges.

DAFTAR REFERENSI

- Burroway, J., Stuckey-French, E., & Stuckey-French, N. (2022). *Writing fiction: A guide to narrative craft*. University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, C. R., O'Hare, A. M., Kestenbaum, B. R., Sayre, G. G., & Wong, S. P. (2021). *An introduction to qualitative inquiry*. *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology*, 32(6), 1275–1278.
- Depraetere, I., & Langford, C. (2025). *Advanced English grammar: A linguistic approach*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Henriksen, D., Mishra, P., Creely, E., et al. (2021). *The role of creative risk taking and productive failure in education and technology futures*. *TechTrends*, 65, 602–605. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00622-8>
- Idris, F., Mohd Said, N. E., & Sulaiman, N. A. (2025). *The effects of CLIL on enhancing EFL writing accuracy and language learning motivation in an Indonesian vocational high school setting*. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 7(6). <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i6.9281>
- López-Beltrán, P., Johns, M. A., Dussias, P. E., Lozano, C., & Palma, A. (2021). The effects of information structure in the processing of word order variation in the second language. *Second Language Research*, 38(3), 639-670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658321992461>
- Mirhosseini, S. A., & Kianfar, R. (2019). Writing the World in a Foreign Language. *Changing English*, 26(1), 16–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2018.1520076m>
- Rodríguez-Fuentes, R. A., & Swatek, A. M. (2021). *Exploring the effect of corpus-informed and conventional homework materials on fostering EFL students' grammatical construction learning*. *System*, 103, 102676. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102676>
- Tabacu, L. M., Watson, S. M., Chezar, L. C., Gable, R., Oliveira, C. R., & Lopes, J. (2020). Looking for a pattern: Error analysis as a diagnostic assessment for making instructional decisions to promote academic success. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 65(1), 58–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2020.1818180>