

Common Grammatical Errors in Written English Among Undergraduate ESL Students: Literature Review

Ameer Hamza ¹ Isha Tariq ² Muhammad Asghar³

Article History

Received
26-10-2024

Accepted
06-11-2024

Published
10-11-2024

Abstract & Indexing

ICJ WORLD of JOURNALS



ACADEMIA



REVIEWER CREDITS

Abstract

This study investigates the common grammatical errors made by undergraduate students in their written compositions, with a focus on sentence structure. By analyzing essays written by 30 students from the BS English Linguistics program at Islamia University of Bahawalpur, the research identifies recurring issues in verb tense, syntax, spelling, prepositions, and article usage. The study adopts a qualitative approach, using content analysis to classify errors based on grammatical categories. The findings reveal that mistakes in tense agreement, noun-verb relationships, and sentence cohesion are prevalent, largely due to factors such as overgeneralization, first language interference, and inadequate vocabulary.

This research highlights the importance of understanding error patterns in language acquisition, offering insights into how educators can better support students in overcoming these challenges and improving their writing skills. The study's implications extend to enhancing both the teaching and learning process, emphasizing targeted grammatical instruction at the undergraduate level.

Keywords

Error Analysis, Sentence Structure, Grammatical Errors, Language Learning, Tense Errors, Syntax.

¹MPhil English linguistics, University, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.
hamzatareen1234@gmail.com

²MPhil English linguistics, University, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.
ishaawan555@gmail.com

³MPhil English linguistics, University, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur.
asgharchandiablouch@gmail.com

Literature Review

1. Language:

Language is a way of communication for human beings, a structured system that uses conventional ways to speech, gesture, sign, or write. It's a source to express or show someone's feelings more accurately. Language differentiates human beings from animals as they cannot speak like humans do to express certain emotions. By considering the exact value of language, linguistics is difficult to explain. Linguistic is the scientific study of a language that focuses on the system and structure of the language that includes words, morphemes, phrases, and sentences. It identifies, explains the units, and patterns of the sound system.

1.2 What is Error Analysis in Language?

Error analysis, a branch of applied linguistics, is the analysis of error or written mistakes in language - especially foreign language - the identification, classification, and study of unacceptable forms by a person while learning. It is difficult to learn a native language without making mistakes. Thus, error analysis is made to figure out the strategies that students use while learning a native language, identify the causes of errors, and get information about the difficulty in learning a specific language.

1.2.1 Error Analysis is originally a Mentalist Approach:

Error analysis – a mentalist approach – focuses on the errors that learners make while learning a second language. In the previous audio-lingual school of thought, errors were dejected but later, when mentalists stated errors as a sign of learning, a new interest was developed to perceive and comprehend the child's language. Teachers started to see errors as a sign of attempt to learn a new language. Non-natives face many difficulties and confusions while learning the second language and their partial understanding of the new language is called an inter-language stage – it can lead to the freezing of transition from L1 to L2. These errors work as a window in the minds of the learners and mentalists did a systematic study on errors made by learners while learning the second language.

2.2.2 Five Stages of Error Analysis:

i. Recognition:

In the very first step, the teacher recognizes the errors.

For example, “**A large number of people is sick**”.

ii. Interpretation:

The second step involves the interpretation of the wrong sentence. For example, in the sentence “**A large number of people is sick**” the learner made a wrong combination of the subject and verb.

iii. Reconstruction:

The teacher reconstructs the wrong sentence.

Incorrect: “**A large number of people is sick**”.

Correct: “**A large number of people are sick**”.

iv. Understanding the Cause:

The teacher understands the learner's confusion on applying the grammar rules/vocabulary, for example, the learner confused ‘**a number**’ that is strictly singular, with ‘**a number of**’ or ‘**a large number of** – meaning more than one – that always implies ‘**are**’ with it. That means, a singular subject has a singular verb and a plural subject has a plural verb.

v. Classification:

The teacher classifies the error, whether it is due to overgeneralization or L1 interference. In this case, the error made by the learner was classified as **local error**, which is due to the mother tongue or L1 interference.

2.1 Types of Mistakes in Language:

All native or non-native make mistakes while learning a specific language. For non-natives, the condition is a little different as they cannot recognize the language errors as natives can.

2.2 Overt and Covert Mistakes:

Overt Mistakes:	Covert Mistakes:
These mistakes are due to syntactical errors and false consideration of the sentence grammar. These are grammatical errors in a sentence that fails to define its proper structure. These are easily identified because of a clear deviation from the original content.	These types of mistakes are grammatical error-free but cannot convey a proper meaning in a sentence. It makes it difficult to understand what does the content mean? It presents a different meaning of what the learner intended to say.
e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She is plays. (Correct: She plays.) • I happy. (Correct: I am happy.) 	e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was stopped. ('what stopped'? is a question to be answered)

Now, there are further two kinds of covert mistakes:

• Inter-lingual Mistakes	• Intra-lingual Mistakes
Inter-lingual mistakes occur when the first language overlaps the second language creating a difference between the two languages. In other terms, L1 (first language) interferes with L2 (English language). For example, the learner says, 'I'm a child second from three brothers' that implies the wrong use of words 'child second' while the correct words are 'second child'.	Intra-lingual mistakes are occurred among second language learners, these are the errors of a single language. They don't transfer one language to other like in inter-lingual error, but it is faulty in learning an exact langue properly.

2.3 Global and Local Mistakes:

A local mistake is just a part of a sentence/phrase/clause while the global mistake is the unjustified meaning of the whole sentence. If we consider the following statements;

i. I sad.

ii. Sitting at the main gate, a snake stung him.

In the first one, the missing helping verb incompletes the sentence meaning and in the second one, there is inappropriate usage of participle and by re-correction it, it is written as, 'A snake stung him while he was sitting at the gate' and 'I sad' should be written, 'I am sad'.

2.4 Causes of Mistakes in Learning a Language:

1. Poor vocabulary
2. Material-induced mistakes.
3. Overgeneralization.
4. First language interruptions with the second one.
5. Inappropriate application of language rules.
6. The hypothesis of false concepts (hypothesized deceptive concepts)

2.4.1 Poor Vocabulary:

Some students are good at speaking English but fail when it comes to writing about a specific topic. They lack the vocabulary to convey their message accurately. Students use the wrong words for meaning a specific sentence. For example;

Wrong: Karlee talked with Ali and I.

Correct: Karlee talked with Ali and me.

Wrong: Ali and me talked to Sara.

Correct: Ali and I talked to Sara.

(Reason: 'Ali and I' are preferred as subject, and 'Ali and me' work as object in a sentence).

2.4.2 Material Developed Mistakes:

These mistakes occur in writing, speaking, and grammar classes that can be minimized by an appropriate, well-maintained, and useful selection of the content provided by teachers. To overcome these problems, material should be designed with the main focus on students' needs and easy understanding. So, they can easily grasp the English Grammar Rules.

2.4.3 Over-generalization:

These mistakes cannot be avoided. They rely on using the general grammar rule's incorrect use, like using 'ed' at the end of a sentence to convert it into the past participle. e.g. converting 'eat' to 'eated' instead of 'ate'.

Another example is writing, "Where he did yesterday?" instead of writing "Where he went yesterday?" changes the structure of a sentence.

2.4.4 Interference of Mother-tongue:

It is estimated that 70% of mistakes are due to mother language interruption while learning the second language (L2). Learners make a mistake by applying their mother language rules while learning the second language. For example, use of Urdu grammar rules over English grammar rules.

Example:

Iran attacked on India. (**Incorrect**)

In this above given example, we have seen that Urdu learner may use the preposition "on" due to inference of the Mother Tongue word (), has what learner finished that he has assigned the concepts of one language into another.

2.4.5 Imperfect Application of Language Rules:

Language mistakes occur when the learner thinks he has learned the proper rules, structures of a language, and he starts using untypical forms without thinking about the target language rules. Mostly, learners use declarative sentences where interrogative sentences need to be used. For example, they say 'you want to go?' instead of saying 'do you want to go?'

2.4.6 Hypothesized Deceptive Concepts:

Mainly, it is due to poor teaching grades. Thinking has a basic role in cognitive science and language - for its development - is completely dependent on thoughts. It is believed that thoughts have a mental language and are a representation of the mental structure that means sentences are structured in the head and deceptive concepts can make sentences complex and difficult to understand thus leading to the reader's confusion. It can downplay the truth and avoid responsibility.

2.5 Omission of Articles

There are a lot of problems faced by Pakistani students while using articles the reason is that there is no usage of article in Urdu.

Hence, the students not are able to copying the articles accurately...

For example:

Old man was walking slowly. (**Incorrect**)

The old man was walking slowly. (Correct)

In above mentioned example there is no usage of article that's the reason the student do not use article in these kind of sentence in English.

2.6 Wrong Use of Preposition

Wrong use of preposition another error makes by mostly students. In the both languages, English and Urdu there are different preposition weal and for that there is no strict rule. This situation makes a lot of issues for the students.

Her house is behind the street. (**Incorrect**)

Her house is across the street. (Correct)

2.7 Incorrect Implement of Tenses

There is a lot of dissimilarity between English and Urdu language hence, due to lack of understanding in its difference students make error.

Mistake in Structure

The reason behind most of the faults make by the students is the lack of

Understanding	/ uncertainty
The differences In the	in sentence structure
English and Urdu	of English and Urdu
Structure	language

For Example:

I asked **that** what she was saying? (**Incorrect**)

The above sentence is incorrect as because we do not use “that” in interrogative sentences.

2.8 Idioms Mistake

It is reality that language is the main determinant of every culture and specific language specifies the relevant culture.

Hence, idioms considered as a culture act to describe the relation of person with different culture and this is the point where students make errors.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze errors in tenses at under graduation level.
2. To explore the significance and causes of errors made by students.
3. It will be helpful for teaching/learning process.

Methodology

The following points are explained in this chapter:

- Research design
- Procedure
- Participants
- Instruments
- Data collection procedure

To answer research questions, methodology Researcher did qualitative research to collect reliable and authentic data. A complete research investigation was based on a deep analysis of the study content and people who had various characteristics regarding age, thoughts, and skills in the concerned department. This study involves the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester, who committed mistakes while writing an essay on an assigned English topic. Their grammatical mistakes were collected from the essay and recorded accordingly by the group of researchers.

3.1 Participants:

A comprehensible approach - convenience sampling - was performed over 30 students of age 19-20, from the Undergraduate Students of the Islamia University of Bahawalpur of BS English Linguistics 3rd Semester, these students were taught report writing and grammar rules at the secondary school level but their expertise was moderate level.

3.2 Data Collection:

Essays written by 30 students of the concerned department were used as samples for research.

3.3 Tests:

Every student had to write one essay on the topic “Myself” within 30 minutes in the English language. All the thirty essays were collected and after evaluation by using content analysis, grammatical mistakes were marked in several categories such as the structure of the sentence, vocabulary, and article. Content analysis - a descriptive approach - evaluates the content in any kind of recorded information such as written material, video, or film but researchers focused

on written content in their research methodology. Essays were read three times to count the number of mistakes and then mean score values of mistakes were marked.

Data Analysis

By using the descriptive analysis, data obtained was arranged in tabular form including the terms and types of mistakes.

Essay Topic: “*Myself*”

Table 4. 1

Sentence: Mysilf I anam batool.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	I (missing helping verb)	I am
Spelling	mysilf	myself
Syntax	Mysilf I anam batool	I am Anam Batool.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this tab

Table 4. 2

Sentence: I am having two brathers and one sister.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	I am having	I have
Spelling	brathers	brothers
Syntax	I am having two brathers and one sister.	I have two brothers and one sister.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 3

Sentence: I does not have a laptap.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	does not	do not
Spelling	laptap	laptop
Syntax	I does not have a laptap.	I do not have laptop.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 4

Sentence: I apply BZU and got admissan.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	apply	applied
Spelling	admissan	admission
Syntax	I apply BZU and got admissan.	I applied to BZU and got admission.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 5

Sentence: My sister say my teacher is very arrogant.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Say	says
Spelling	arrogent	arrogant
Syntax	My sister say my teacher is very arrogant.	My sister says that my teacher is very arrogant.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 6

Sentence: I’m from a middal-class family of Bihar, I myself am Adnan Hameed.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	I myself am	I am
Spelling	Middal	Middle
Syntax	I’m from a middal-class family of Bihar, I myself am Adnan Hameed.	I am from a middle class-family in Bihar, I am Adnan Hameed.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 7

Sentence: I am wanted to guide and take care of other sibilnges.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	I am wanted to	I wanted to
Spelling	Sibilnges	Siblings
Syntax	I wanted to guide and take care of other sibilnges.	I wanted to guide and take care of other siblings.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 8

Sentence: I am a keen reader of novels and I has a strong interest in Arcitecture.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	I has	I have
Spelling	Arcitecture	Architecture
Syntax	I am a keen reader of novels and i has a strong interest in Arcitecture.	I am a keen reader of novels and I have a strong interest in Architecture.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 9

Sentence: I do feel happy to be a part of this great school with good friends, helpful and loving teachers and sound school administration.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	I do feel	I feel
Spelling	Addministration	Administration
Syntax	I do feel happy to be a part of this great school with good friends, helpful and loving teachers and sound school administration.	I feel happy to be a part of this great school with good friends, helpful and loving teachers, and sound school administration.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 10

Sentence: I could do all that to be a good doctor and will be sinsere to it.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Could	Will
Spelling	Sinsere	Sincere
Syntax	I could do all that to be a good doctor and will be sinsere to it.	I will do all that to be a good doctor and will be sincere to it.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 11

Sentence: One need to have yet comand of oneself before going to write something about his life.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Need	Needs
Spelling	Comand	Command
Syntax	one need to have yet comand of oneself before going to write something about his life.	One needs to have a command of oneself before going to write something about his life.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 12

Sentence: Though it is quiet hard to writing about yourself yet I have tried myself best to express all about myself.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	To writing	To write
Spelling	Quiet hard	Quite hard
Syntax	though it is quiet hard to writing about yourself yet I have tried myself best to express all about myself.	It is hard to write about oneself yet I have tried my best to express all about myself.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 13

Sentence: While my mother is a hardworking teacher at city public school whose only passion is to transforms the lifes of her students with knowledge and a good vision.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Transforms	Transform
Spelling	Lifes	Lives
Syntax	while my mother is a hardworking teacher at city public school whose only passion is to transforms the lifes of her studenta with knowledge and a good vision.	While my mother is a hardworking teacher at the city public school, her only passion is to transform the lives of her students with knowledge and a good vision.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 14

Sentence: My family is what my parents had work for, ie Completely happy and satisfeid one.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Had work	Had worked
Spelling	Satisfeid	Satisfied
Syntax	my family is what my parents had work for, ie Completely happy and satisfied one.	My family is what my parents had worked for, i.e. completely happy and satisfied.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Table 4. 15

Sentence: Luckily, I am loved, cared and most favor upon in my all family.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Favor	Favored
Spelling	Luckly	Luckily
Syntax	luckly, I am loved, cared and most favor upon in my all family.	Luckily, I am loved, cared for, and most favored upon in my family.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table. *Table 4. 16*

Sentence: I wake up early in the morning and finished all of my doings on exact time.

Items	Error	Correction
Tense	Finished (form doesn't agree with wake up)	Finish
Spelling	Exect	Exact
Syntax	I wake up early in the morning and finished all of my doings on exact time.	I wake up early in the morning and finish all of my doings at the exact time.

Three types of mistakes – tense, spelling, and syntax error – committed by the students of BS English Linguistic, 3rd Semester in writing an essay on “Myself” were mentioned in this table.

Findings

Content of these tables showed that grammatical mistakes analysis was based on the types of mistakes, errors, and corrections.

Following mistakes were found in the written essays of 30 students from BS Linguistic Department, Semester 3rd, with the major focus on spelling, tense, and syntax.

- Verb tense
- Noun
- Preposition
- Spelling mistakes
- Syntax error
- Pronoun
- Adverbs
- Conjunction

The mistakes in sentences and paragraphs were classified by the researchers into error categories with a major focus on the English grammar error category. For example,

Wrong: Allesia returned the computer after she noticed it is damaged.

Correct: Allesia returned the computer after she noticed it was damaged.

In the incorrect sentence, ‘**is**’ doesn’t agree with the verb used in past tense ‘**returned**’.

5.1 Selection of the Wrong Tense:

Verb tense error: I **walk** to the store and **bought** candies.

Correct sentence: I **walked** to the store and **bought** candies.

Walk is the present form of verb but **bought** is the past participle of verb **buy** that shows an action happened in the past. Both forms of verbs should agree with each other to show action at the same time.

5.2 Spelling Mistakes:

Numerous spelling mistakes were identified by the researchers, for example, arcitecture, siblinges, middal, arrogant, admissan, sinsere, luckily, ... etc. reason to these common mistakes were either due to the double sound of a word, the same sound of two words but different spellings, lacking clarity in words due to two or more vowel sounds that are difficult as compared to the consonant sounds or due to their urgency in writing to complete the target within 30 minutes. In some words, consonants with double sounds are confused by students, e.g. really, especially, and like. Other reasons include less knowledge about a topic or lack vocabulary.

5.3 The Syntax:

Wrong: My favorite subjects **is** mathematics, chemistry, and biology. I'm what a lot of people call a geek.

Correct: My favorite subjects **are** mathematics, chemistry, and biology. I'm what a lot of people call a geek.

Researchers rearranged the sentence after noticing the incorrect usage of is/are.

Conclusion:

English has become an international language and the language of science and technology. On an international level, it is the fundamental tool for reasonable communication. A language uses conventional ways to convey human beings' messages and emotions. It's a productive skill that every student needs to learn, especially from the subjects taught in a particular program. Non-native speakers or learners, to create/arrange the content or to address the particular audience, need to express their linguistic abilities – vocabulary, pronunciation, punctuation, or spellings.

A descriptive analysis based on the findings and discussion was performed by researchers over 30 students from BS Linguistic Department- Semester 3rd, to figure out the writing (grammatical) errors. Numerous mistakes were noted that included basic grammatical errors – syntax, noun, preposition, vocabulary, tenses, adjectives, articles, and sentence structure. It was observed that the students' weak grasp on English Grammar Basic rules was initiated at basic learning levels of the English language. Reasons behind this poor learning can be due to inaccurate method of teaching/training, lacking knowledge on a specific topic/grammar, improper selection of the subjects, or low participation and low-level interest of students in English improving activities. These problems in learning a second language can be overcome by teacher-student understanding of the abilities to learn the L2, proper subject selection, proper instructions, and application of the language rules, different and easy teaching styles, rewriting the content, repeatedly practicing, writing conferences, partnership writing, grammar short lesson, and peer response groups. It was a small-scale study but resulted in important findings and the possibility of selecting various strategies to apply purposeful grammatical concepts to improve the writing skills of students/non-natives.