An Analysis of Students' Grammatical Errors in Undergraduate Degree Programs

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Abstract

This study examines the grammatical errors made by undergraduate students at University of Mataram, focusing on identifying patterns, understanding causes, and suggesting pedagogical implications. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study analyzed 41 grammatical errors across categories such as subject-verb agreement, prepositions, punctuation, articles, and parallel structures. Subject-verb agreement errors were the most frequent (17%), followed by punctuation errors (22%) and auxiliary verb errors (17%). The findings highlight that first language interference, overgeneralization of English grammar rules, and inadequate instructional emphasis contribute significantly to these errors. The study underscores the importance of integrating explicit grammar instruction with communicative approaches to foster fluency and accuracy. These insights aim to enhance teaching strategies, promoting improved language proficiency among students. Future research is recommended to explore broader populations and the role of technology in grammar learning.

Keywords: *Grammatical Errors; Undergraduate Students; English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*

Introduction

Grammar is a fundamental aspect of language, as it establishes the rules and structures necessary for effective communication. According to Harmer (2015), English language learners should prioritize key elements of grammar such as words, verbs, nouns, noun phrases, adverbs, and adjectives, as they are crucial for mastering the language. The debate on grammar teaching in second language acquisition remains ongoing, with scholars exploring various approaches to balance traditional and communicative methods. While some argue for a shift from rigid to flexible teaching, others emphasize the continued importance of grammar instruction. Dean (2011) highlights the changing attitudes towards grammar instruction, with a shift away from a strict right-or-wrong mentality towards a more contextualized approach. It is crucial for students to have a strong grasp of grammar, not only for academic achievement but also for effective communication in both professional and social settings. Proficiency in grammar improves comprehension and coherence, making it a vital component of clear communication in academic, professional, and social contexts (Normawati & Nugrahaeni, 2024)

The debate over whether grammar should be explicitly taught or acquired through natural exposure has been ongoing for decades. However, recent research indicates that both methods have their

advantages, with explicit instruction potentially speeding up the learning process when it aligns with the natural order of acquisition (Taylor, 2022). It is important to integrate grammar instruction with communication rather than teaching it in isolation, as this can help develop both fluency and accuracy (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

Over time, different approaches to teaching grammar have emerged. The Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method and the Bilingual Method have been found to have their own advantages and disadvantages (Golda, 2019). The Grammar-Translation method emphasizes formal language structures, while the Direct method promotes natural language learning, and the Audio-lingual method focuses on habit formation (Qingqing Liu & Jin-fang Shi, 2007). The current trend in language teaching advocates for a balanced approach, combining elements from various methods to address diverse learner needs and goals (Vireak Keo & Bunrosy Lan, 2024).

Error analysis plays a crucial role in language teaching and learning, providing valuable insights into learners' understanding of grammatical concepts (Corder, 1967, as cited in Farah Chaudary & M. Moya, 2019). It helps identify areas where learners struggle, allowing educators to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly (Agsa Jobeen et al., 2015). Errors are not viewed as failures, but rather as opportunities for growth and learning. By analyzing learners' errors, teachers can develop more effective remedial work and promote language awareness (Farah Chaudary & M. Moya, 2019).

This study examines the grammatical errors made by students in undergraduate degree programs, with a focus on identifying patterns, understanding causes, and evaluating implications. By analyzing grammatical errors made in written assignments, the study aims to provide insights into the progression of students' grammatical errors, highlight areas where additional instruction on specific grammar rules is needed, and enhancing the refinement of pedagogical approaches.

Literature Review

L2 acquisition in Indonesia is influenced by a blend of cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors, with various theories providing insights into the learning process. Behaviorist, cognitive, and interactionist approaches each offer unique perspectives on how learners acquire a second language, particularly English, amidst their native Indonesian language. The interplay of these theories shapes the interlanguage phenomenon observed in Indonesian learners.

Errors in L2 learning are common and can be classified as interlingual (due to L1 influence) or intralingual (due to incorrect internalization of L2 rules). For example, Indonesian learners might say *"I have 25 years"* due to L1 interference (since in Indonesian, age is expressed using "have"), or overgeneralize grammatical rules, like saying *"goed"* instead of *"went."* Research has shown that errors are an essential part of the learning process, as they reflect the learner's developmental stage in acquiring the target language.

Studies on English grammar errors among Indonesian EFL learners consistently identify verb tense usage as a major challenge. Purba et al. (2023) reported difficulties with complex tenses like past perfect continuous and future perfect. Listia and Febriyanti (2020) corroborated these findings, noting that students struggled most with past perfect (61%), past perfect continuous (61%), and future perfect continuous (67%) tenses. Word order errors were also prevalent, attributed to mother tongue influence (Baiatun Nisa, 2018). Other common errors included subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, and plurality (Baiatun Nisa, 2018; Febriyanti & Sundari, 2016). These errors stem from first language interference, lack of practice, and difficulty applying tenses in context (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020).

Studies on English grammar errors among Indonesian EFL learners consistently highlight verb tense usage as a significant challenge. Research by Purba et al. (2023) and Listia and Febriyanti (2020) demonstrates that learners particularly struggle with complex tenses such as past perfect continuous and future perfect, with error rates as high as 67%. Additionally, word order errors, often influenced by the learners' first language, and other common issues like subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, and plurality are frequently observed (Baiatun Nisa, 2018; Febriyanti & Sundari, 2016). These errors are attributed to first language interference, insufficient practice, and difficulties in applying tenses appropriately in context (Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). Addressing these challenges through targeted instruction and practice can help improve learners' grammatical accuracy in English.

Methods

This research used a descriptive qualitative method to gain a deeper understanding of a grammatical errors. The participants were students from the English Education Department and International Relation Department who had attended English courses and had experience in both learning and speaking English. They were selected for their familiarity with grammar concepts and their involvement in English language learning. The participants were of diverse ages and backgrounds, with English being a second or foreign language for all of them.

Tabel 1. Participants of the study

No	Name	Background of Education	Age	Language Background
1	N.A	English Department	22	Dompu, Indonesia
2	N.H.P	International Relation Department	22	Dompu, Indonesia

Findings and Discussion

1.Findings

Fifty questions were shared to the students who joined the intermediate English course at Mataram which include 10 errors grammatical types. The findings of the study indicated that there were total of 41 instances of mistakes.

آیا فیگور باشد بهتر نیست؟؟؟ Table 1. Types of Grammatical Errors in Student
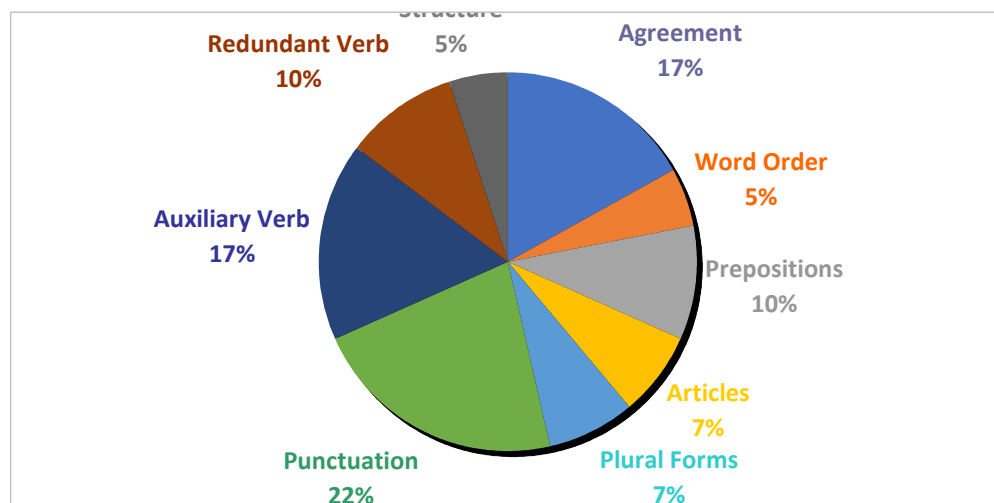
The percentage of students with grammatical errors in their questionnaire responses can be seen in chart 1 above.

The findings indicates that students made seven errors (17%) in using subject-verb agreement, two errors (5%) in word order, four errors (10%) in prepositions usage, three errors (7%) in the article's usage, three errors (7%) in plural forms, nine errors (22%) in punctuation, seven errors (17%) in the use of auxiliary verb, four errors (10%) in redundant verb, and two errors (5%) in parallel structures usage. The distributions of these errors were displayed in the following tables.

Subject-Verb Agreement

Two participants made seven errors (17%) in subject-verb agreement. Here are a few examples:

Table 1. Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
The dog run fast every morning.	The dog running fast every morning	The dog runs fast every morning
She have a meeting at 2 PM.	She have to meet at 2 PM.	She has a meeting at 2 PM.
The students is studying for the final exam	The students is studying for the final exam	The students are studying for the final exam
My brother and I was at the park yesterday	My brother and I was at the park yesterday	My brother and I were at the park yesterday
The teacher and the students was excited about the event	The teacher and the students was excited about the event	The teacher and the students were excited about the event

Word Order

There were two (5%) of two participant had problems with word order. Here are a few examples:

Table 2. Word Order Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
She always the teacher listens carefully	She always listens the teacher carefully	She always listens carefully the teacher
Every morning he drinks coffee	He drinking the coffee	He drinks coffee every morning

Prepositions

There were four (10%) of two participant had problems with prepositions. Here are a few examples:

Table 3. Prepositions Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
She is interested of learning French.	She so interested of learning French.	She is interested in learning French.
She is afraid from the dark	She is afraid at the dark	She is afraid of the dark

Articles

There were three (7%) of two participant had problems with articles. Here are a few examples:

Table 4. Articles Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
She is a best player in the team	She is best player in the team	She is the best player in the team.
He is studying to become the doctor	He is studying to become the doctor	He is studying to become a doctor

Plural Forms

There were three (7%) of two participant had problems with plural forms. Here are a few examples:

Table 5. Plural Forms Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
There are many childs in the playground	There are many childrens in the playground	There are many children in the playground
He has three tooth problems.	He has three tooths problems.	He has three teeth problems.
The deers were spotted in the forest	The deers were spotted in the forest	The deer were spotted in the forest

Punctuations

There were nine (22%) of two participant had problems with punctuations. Here are a few examples:

Table 6. Punctuations Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
Lets eat Grandma!	Lets eat Grandma!	Let's eat Grandma!
I have two dogs, a cat and a rabbit.	I have two dogs, a cat and a rabbit	I have two dogs, a cat, and a rabbit
I love going to the beach especially in the summer	I love going to the beach especially in the summer	I love going to the beach, especially in the summer

Auxiliary Verb

There were seven (17%) of two participant had problems with punctuations. Here are a few examples:

Table 7. Auxiliary Verb Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
She will going to the office later	She will go to the office later	She will be going to the office later
They has finished their homework already.	They already finished their homework	They have finished their homework already
We was watching a movie when you called	We was watching a movie when you called	We were watching a movie when you called

Redundant Verb

There were four (10%) of two participant had problems with punctuations. Here are a few examples:

Table 8. Redundant Verb Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
She repeated again the instructions	She repeated again the instructions	She repeated the instructions
He went back again to the store.	He went back again to the store	He went back to the store
She completed the task in a very quick time	She completed the task in a very quick time	She completed the task quickly

Parallel Structure

There were two (5%) of two participant had problems with punctuations. Here are a few examples:

Table 9. Parallel Structure Errors

Questions	Error	Correction
She likes swimming, running, and to bike	She likes swim, run, and bike	She likes swimming, running, and biking
He studied hard, played well, and winning the game	He studied hard, played well, and winning the game	He studied hard, played well, and won the game

2. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a notable prevalence of grammatical errors among undergraduate students, with significant issues in subject-verb agreement, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, punctuation, and redundant verbs. These errors highlight the complexities faced by learners in mastering English grammar and underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions.

Analysis of Key Errors

The frequent subject-verb agreement errors (17%) point to a common challenge in applying English grammar rules, particularly when influenced by students' first language (L1). Indonesian lacks grammatical concord, relying instead on notional agreement, while English requires grammatical agreement in person and number (Supardi & Jabal, 2023). For example, errors such as "She have a meeting" demonstrate a direct translation approach rather than an understanding of English syntactic

rules. These findings align with Jobeen et al. (2015), who emphasized the role of explicit instruction in reducing mistakes of subject-verb agreement such persistent errors.

Prepositional errors (10%) also reflect the difficulty in context-based learning, with misuse like "interested of" instead of "interested in" indicating a gap in understanding the functional use of prepositions. L1 interference is identified as a significant factor contributing to prepositional errors, with learners often unconsciously applying first language features to their L2 productions (Hu, 2014; Özışık, 2014). Common misused prepositions include "by," "at," "in," and "to" (Hu, 2014). Research indicates that prepositions pose significant challenges for English language learners due to their abstract nature and diverse functions (Silva Bratož, 2014). To address these challenges, researchers recommend various strategies, such as teaching prepositions through collocations, referring to dictionaries, understanding basic classifications, and accumulating prepositional phrases (Yu, 2014).

Errors in auxiliary verbs and redundant verbs (17% and 10%, respectively) indicate that students struggle with overgeneralization and unnecessary repetition. Phrases like "She will going" and "He went back again" show a lack of awareness regarding conciseness and grammatical precision. Auxiliary verb errors and redundant expressions are prevalent, indicating struggles with overgeneralization and conciseness (Shaumiwaty & Munandar, 2022). These errors stem from both interlingual and intralingual sources, with learners relying on first language transfer and overgeneralization of target language rules (Cocjin, 2021). To address these issues, researchers suggest integrating grammar instruction with contextual usage and implementing alternative feedback strategies, such as peer monitoring, to promote reflective error correction processes (Chávez Chávez & Valenzuela Ponce, 2023).

The high incidence of punctuation errors (22%) suggests limited emphasis on writing mechanics in instructional settings. Misuse such as "Lets eat Grandma!". Karami et al. (2020) demonstrate that punctuation significantly impacts sentence semantics, proposing a punctuation-aware representation model to improve sentiment classification. This study highlight the need for integrating punctuation exercises into language instruction to foster both accuracy and fluency, as punctuation proficiency appears to be a crucial component in developing effective reading and writing skills.

Pedagogical Implications

The persistent nature of these errors points to a need for a balanced teaching approach, combining explicit grammar instruction with communicative practices. As Taylor (2022) suggests, explicit teaching should focus on problematic forms like subject-verb agreement and prepositions while aligning with natural learning progressions. Additionally, incorporating error analysis sheets into the curriculum can help students learn from their mistakes and improve learning (Núñez, 2022)

Recent research highlights the limitations of traditional language teaching methods like the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) and advocates for more interactive approaches. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), along with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and learner-cantered approaches, encourages active participation and helps develop overall language proficiency (Sereyrath Em et al., 2024). Achieving a balance between fluency and accuracy is crucial, as overemphasis on one may hinder the development of the other (Yuan Zhao, 2024). While each method has unique characteristics, combining elements from different approaches can result in more effective language learning experiences (Vireak Keo & Bunrosy Lan, 2024).

Cultural and Linguistic Influences

The influence of L1 on English learning is evident in errors stemming from direct translation or the absence of equivalent grammatical structures in Indonesian. For instance, the lack of articles in Indonesian explains frequent mistakes such as omitting "a" or "the" in English. Contrastive analysis is valuable for pinpointing structural differences between languages, which can help anticipate potential

learning obstacles (Rustipa, 2012). Additionally, metalinguistic awareness—encompassing cognitive engagement and reflective capacity—fosters improved language skills and supports cultural adaptation (Pejović, 2022).

Future Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the grammatical challenges faced by students, future research could explore the longitudinal impact of targeted interventions. Additionally, incorporating a larger sample size and diverse linguistic backgrounds could offer more generalizable findings. Technology-based tools like automated grammar checkers may also play a role in enhancing learners' self-correction abilities, a promising area for further investigation.

Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of grammatical errors made by undergraduate students, offering valuable insights into the challenges learners face in mastering English grammar. The most common errors—subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, punctuation, and redundant expressions—reflect a combination of first language interference, overgeneralization of rules, and gaps in instructional emphasis.

The findings underline the importance of adopting a balanced pedagogical approach. Explicit grammar instruction should address problematic forms, while communicative practices foster fluency and practical usage. This research reaffirms that errors are not failures but opportunities for growth. By treating them as stepping stones, educators can refine their teaching strategies and create learning environments that prioritize both accuracy and meaningful communication. These efforts will empower students to achieve greater proficiency, ensuring their success in academic, professional, and social contexts.

While the study focused on a specific group of learners, its implications extend broadly. Future research should explore diverse learner populations, the impact of sustained interventions, and innovative teaching tools to enrich the field of language education.

Acknowledgment

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