



Research Consortium Archive

P(ISSN) : 3007-0031

E(ISSN) : 3007-004X

<https://rc-archive.com/index.php/Journal/about>



ANALYZING GRAMMATICAL AND SYNTACTIC ERRORS IN ESSAY WRITING BY ESL LEARNERS AT NUML PESHAWAR

Muhammad Saad Khan

MS English Linguistics Scholar, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology, KUST, KP, Pakistan. EN320232007@kust.edu.pk

Dr. Syed Azaz Ali Shah

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology, KUST, KP, Pakistan. Corresponding Author: Azazali@kust.edu.pk

Sabia Abid

MS English Linguistics Scholar, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology, KUST, KP, Pakistan. Sabiaabid98@gmail.com

Publisher : EDUCATION GENIUS SOLUTIONS

Review Type: Double Blind Peer Review

ABSTRACT

This study addresses two main objectives, viz. to identify the grammatical and syntactic error patterns in ESL essay writing at NUML Peshawar, KP, Pakistan and to investigate the underlying causes of these errors from the students' perspectives. Correspondingly, while providing the scarcity of localized research in the arena of Error Analysis (EA), especially at the intermediate level, the study in hand contributes significantly to ESL teaching pedagogy and assessment practices prevailing in the peculiar context of Pakistan. Likewise, this study intends to examine the grammatical and the syntactic errors in the essays written by intermediate-level ESL students at NUML Peshawar. The study finds typical error patterns, including problems with verb tense and aspects subject-verb agreement, inappropriate usage of articles, sentence structure, and word order among others while using a randomly chosen sample of students' essays. More crucially, in this study, focus groups have also been held to get better understanding of learners' viewpoints and identify potential causes behind these errors for instance, first language interference during the instructional design processes, lack of interest in reading for writing and the constraints of vocabulary. The results of the study reveal that persistent syntactic and grammatical errors hinder textual communication and ultimately break proficiency in writing competence. In same line, the current study provides pedagogical recommendations, suggestions and practical implications for teachers and language practitioners in ESL context in order to have investigation of errors and to provide remedies for the rectification of errors simultaneously, in students various types of creative writing at different levels.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, the ability to write clearly and correctly, free from errors and mistakes in English has become one of the key skills, particularly in academic and professional contexts in the domains of academia and intelligentsia. Similarly, for second-language learners in ESL context especially those in multilingual societies like Pakistan, India, China, English writing is particularly a daunting challenge. Despite extensive classroom instructions, numerous students struggle with producing grammatically accurate, appropriate and syntactical sound texts. Correspondingly, writing, unlike speaking skills, offers no immediate feedback or opportunity for correction, making errors more prominent and consequential. These persistent issues not merely hinder students' academic achievements/accomplishments and professional excellence but also affect their confidence and prospects in higher education and employment (Sabih-Ul-Hassan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, language acquisition in Pakistan operates within a complex sociolinguistic landscape where students often grow up in speaking regional/local languages like Pashto, Hindko or Punjabi

at their homes, Urdu as a national lingua franca, and English as an academic or aspirational language. In Pakistan, English is essential for upward mobility and access to global opportunities while gaining lucrative jobs, yet students frequently fail to acquire adequate proficiency in writing skills. According to Bell and Burnaby (1984) writing requires simultaneous control over multiple elements syntax, grammar, vocabulary, and structure which makes it the most demanding of the four major language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). This aligns with the reality of Pakistani classrooms, where learners often receive instructions in multiple languages, compounding the complexity of English acquisition.

Academic writing proficiency becomes even more critical at the intermediate level, where students are expected to express abstract ideas, construct coherent arguments, and demonstrate mastery over essay writing skills. However, students at institutions like NUML Peshawar often exhibit a high frequency of grammatical and syntactic errors, reflecting not only language difficulties and complexities but also deficiencies and lacking in instructional methods and curriculum design. Despite efforts to teach essay writing through textbooks and exercises, the gap/gulf between instructional content and student output remains considerable. Therefore, this research seeks to bridge that gap by systematically analyzing the types and causes of errors found in ESL learners' essays, thus offering pedagogically actionable insights.

Likewise, the study draws upon Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework, which emphasizes the diagnostic and prognostic values of learner errors. Corder posited that errors should not be viewed merely as failures but as windows into the learning processes. Identifying, classifying, and understanding these errors can help educators to refine and enhance their teaching methods, tailor curriculum design, and foster better learning outcomes. Moreover, by engaging with learners through focus group interviews, this research captures students' perceptions of their own difficulties, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the error-making process.

In short, this study addresses two main objectives, viz. to identify the grammatical and syntactic error patterns in ESL essays at NUML Peshawar, KP, Pakistan and to investigate the underlying causes of these errors from the students' perspectives. Given the scarcity of localized research in this arena especially at the intermediate level this study contributes significantly to ESL pedagogy in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Writing in a second language has been widely acknowledged as a cognitively complex and instructionally challenging task (Alfaki, 2015). The field of Error Analysis (EA) established by Corder (1967), remains a cornerstone of second language acquisition (SLA) research. Corder argued that analyzing learners' errors provides

vital insights into their internalized language system and the interlanguage they are developing. His model of EA involves three primary steps: identifying errors, describing them linguistically, and explaining their causes. Numerous studies have since adopted and expanded this framework to explore error patterns in various L2 writing contexts.

Darus and Subramaniam (2009) conducted a seminal study on Malaysian secondary school students and identified frequent errors in subject-verb agreement, verb tense, prepositions, and articles. Their findings resonate with Sawalmeh (2013), and Gul et al., 2023 who analyzed writing samples from Saudi university students and Pakistani students writing composition, and they found tense and article errors to be particularly prominent. Both studies highlight the influence of L1 transfer and insufficient grammar instruction as major contributors to error frequency. Similarly, Hasanah et al., (2023) and (Gul et al., 2022(a) & Gul et al., 2022 (b) used Dulay's surface strategy taxonomy to analyze students' grammatical errors in Indonesia, finding a predominance of mis formation and omission errors underscoring again the universality of certain error types across ESL contexts.

In the South Asian context, there is a growing body of work examining English writing challenges among Pakistani learners. Bashir et al., (2021) analyzed morphosyntactic errors among O' Level students in Lahore and found high error rates in tense, word order, and punctuation. Mahmood et al., (2021) and Habib et al., 2025, noted that integrating literature into English instruction enhanced writing skills, suggesting that stylistic exposure could mitigate syntactic and lexical errors. Despite these insights, localized research on foundation-level learners, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on urban centers like Lahore or Islamabad, ignoring region-specific linguistic and educational dynamics (Ali et al., 2022).

In error analysis, the distinction between interlingual and intralingual errors is critical. Interlingual errors arise from the interference of the first language, whereas intralingual errors are attributed to incorrect generalizations of L2 rules (Ellis, 2008). For instance, Urdu-speaking learners often omit articles or misuse prepositions because these linguistic elements function differently in Urdu and English. Brown (2007) further classified error sources into communication strategies, context of learning, and language transfer. Understanding these categories enables a more nuanced diagnosis of ESL writing difficulties (Sajjad et al., 2023).

Another relevant contribution is the study by Sermsook et al., (2017), which explored grammatical errors among Thai university students. Using both writing samples and student interviews, the authors revealed that error frequency was strongly linked to lack of practice and limited vocabulary. This dual-method approach parallels the current study's methodology, which combines essay analysis with focus group interviews. Furthermore, Abide et al.,

(2022) in their study of Libyan EFL learners found that more than 70% of writing errors were intralingual, reflecting limited mastery of English rather than mere L1 interference. This highlights the importance of examining the learner's stage of development, not just the linguistic contrast between L1 and L2.

In Pakistan, a key challenge is the inconsistency in English teaching practices across regions. Many teachers rely on translation methods or rote memorization, which fails to cultivate writing fluency. As observed by Haq (2015), this approach discourages experimentation with language, leading to fossilized errors. Moreover, curriculum constraints often limit writing practice, and feedback is rarely individualized or formative. As noted by Ferris (2002), simply correcting errors is not sufficient; teachers must engage learners in understanding the logic behind their mistakes.

While error analysis has been conducted in various global contexts, there is a dearth of research focusing on intermediate ESL learners in NUML Peshawar. The few existing studies in Pakistan have generally overlooked the unique sociolinguistic and instructional challenges faced by students in this setting. Therefore, this study fills a critical research gap by providing empirical data on the types and causes of writing errors in this under-researched group.

By analyzing essays written by NUML Peshawar students and discussing the results with them directly, this study extends the literature on second language writing, providing fresh perspectives from a Pakistani context. The findings offer theoretical and pedagogical implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and student support strategies in ESL writing instruction.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the grammatical and syntactic errors made by ESL learners. The quantitative aspect involves analyzing essays written by intermediate-level students at NUML Peshawar, focusing on error frequency and type. The qualitative aspect includes focus group interviews with the same students to explore the underlying causes of their writing errors. This triangulated approach ensures both breadth and depth of understanding and supports both diagnostic and pedagogical implications.

Participants of the Study

The target population consists of intermediate-level ESL students enrolled in English courses at NUML Peshawar. A random sample of 30 students was selected, ensuring diversity in language backgrounds, educational experiences, and writing proficiency. These students are representative of a larger population of ESL learners in Pakistani higher education institutions.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: Essay Writing

Each participant was given a writing prompt titled “The Role of Social Media in Youths’ Lives” and instructed to compose a 250-300-word essay without external assistance. This topic was selected to ensure students could relate to and reflect on their everyday experiences, thereby eliciting natural language production.

Phase 2: Focus Group Interviews

Following essay analysis, focus group interviews were conducted in small batches of 6-8 students. Students were encouraged to discuss their challenges with English grammar, sentence construction, and classroom learning practices. Questions targeted student perceptions of their writing problems, instructional feedback, classroom environment, and the influence of their first language.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is based on Corder’s (1967) model of Error Analysis, comprising three steps: error identification, description, and explanation. Errors were categorized into:

- Tense Errors
- Subject-Verb Agreement
- Sentence Structure
- Word Order
- Article Usage
- Prepositions
- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Capitalization

To ensure accuracy, tools like Grammarly and Quill Bot were used for triangulation. Qualitative data from interviews were thematically coded and analyzed to correlate perceived causes with identified error patterns.

Findings and Discussion

Error Frequency and Types

In total 424 grammatical and syntactic errors were recorded across 30 essays written by intermediate level students. The most frequent error types were noticed are given in Table No.1

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Tense Errors	82	19%
Subject-Verb Agreement	61	14%
Sentence Structure	59	14%
Word Order	55	13%
Article Errors	52	12%
Prepositions	39	9%
Punctuation	35	8%
Spelling	29	7%
Capitalization	12	3%
Total	424	100%

The predominance of tense and sentence structure errors reflects ongoing difficulties with core grammatical features. These are consistent with the findings of Darus & Ching (2009) and Sermsook

et al. (2017), who reported similar issues in various ESL contexts.

Discussion on the Types of Errors Error Types

Tense and Subject-Verb Agreement: Many students misused past and present forms or applied incorrect auxiliary verbs. For example, “Cyberbullying is became a serious problem” indicates interference from L1 structures and limited practice in English verb conjugation.

Sentence Structure and Word Order: Students often produced fragmented or awkward sentences, such as “Instead of talking face-to-face, they prefer texting and chatting with always.” This demonstrates difficulty in organizing syntactic units coherently.

Article and Preposition Errors: Omission of articles (“He is going to school by car” → “He is going to school by car”) and misuse of prepositions (“He is good in English” instead of “good at English”) were common, often traceable to L1 transfer.

Spelling, Punctuation, and Capitalization: Although less frequent, these mechanical errors still impact clarity and indicate insufficient editing strategies or feedback mechanisms.

Insights from Focus Group Interviews

Interviews revealed several contributing factors to students’ writing challenges:

Curriculum Gaps: Students highlighted that English is often taught with an emphasis on memorization rather than application. Essay writing is not consistently practiced, and grammar instruction is often outdated.

Teacher-Centered Methods: Many students reported that teachers focus on translation and lecture-based instruction. Feedback on written work is rare or superficial.

L1 Interference: Almost all students acknowledged difficulty in translating thought from Pashto or Urdu into English due to structural differences in sentence formation.

Low Writing Confidence: A significant number of students avoid writing unless required, citing fear of being judged for mistakes.

These findings corroborate prior research by Hijjo (2013) and Huwari & Al-Khasawmeh (2013), emphasizing the critical role of pedagogical context in shaping ESL learners’ writing development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the grammatical and syntactic errors in essays written by ESL learners at NUML Peshawar and examined the causes of these errors. The results show a high frequency of tense, agreement, and structural errors, largely rooted in L1 interference, insufficient writing practice, outdated instructional methods, and lack of constructive feedback.

Pedagogical Recommendations

Curriculum Revision: ESL curricula should integrate continuous writing practice with task-based grammar instruction.

Teacher Training: Educators must be trained in modern error correction techniques and interactive writing instruction.

Student-Centered Pedagogy: Encourage peer editing, writing workshops, and digital tools for grammar reinforcement.

Contrastive Linguistic Instruction: Highlight structural differences between Urdu/Pashto and English to reduce transfer-related errors.

Limitations of Study

The study focused solely on essay writing by intermediate students at a single campus, limiting generalizability. Future studies should expand to other regions and language proficiency levels.

Future Research Directions

- Comparative studies across different Pakistani universities
- Longitudinal research tracking improvement post-intervention
- Effectiveness of AI-driven grammar tools in ESL contexts

References

- Abied, A., Ali, A., & Ashfello, M. (2022). Error analysis of the written English essays by Libyan EFL learners: Case study of Alasmarya University EFL students. *Journal of Humanitarian and Applied Sciences*, 7(13), 425-442.
- Alfaki, I. M. (2015). University students' English writing problems: Diagnosis and remedy. *International journal of English language teaching*, 3(3), 40-52. *Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*. Vol. 5, pp. 161-170.
- Ali, A., Gul, N., & Sabih-Ul-Hassan, S. (2022). An Investigation into the Reading Comprehension Problems Faced by the Pakistani Students at University Level. *City University Research Journal of Literature & Linguistics*, 5(1).
- Bashir, A., Aleem, M., Anjum, M. A. I., & Ali, S. (2021). Analysis of morpho-syntactic errors in the narrative writings of Pakistani o'level students. *Ilkogretim Online*, 20(3). [10.17051/ilkonline.2021.03.225](https://doi.org/10.17051/ilkonline.2021.03.225).
- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learner's errors. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/iral.1967.5.1-4.161>.
- Darus, S., & Ching, K. H. (2009). Common errors in written English essays of form one Chinese students: A case study. *European Journal of social sciences*, 10(2), 242-253.
- Darus, S., & Subramaniam, K. (2009). Error analysis of the written English essays of secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study. *European journal of social sciences*, 8(3), 483-495.
- Gul, N., Ali, A., Hassan, S. S. U., & Rasheed, A. (2023). An Investigation into the Politics of English Language Assessment in Pakistan. *Journal of Policy Research*, 9(4), 84-93 <https://doi.org/10.61506/02.00130>.
- Gul, N., Ali, M., & Sabih-Ul-Hassan, S. (2022(a). An investigation into the challenges faced by the secondary level students in speaking English In district Kohat KPK Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 4(2), 1018-1027 <https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v4i2.596>.
- Gul, N., Farooq, A., & Ali, A. (2022(b). Saussure's Concept of Binary Oppositions: Looking through the Lens of the Holy

- Qur'an. *Al-Azhār*, 8(01), 111-119.
<https://doi.org/10.46896/alazhr.v8i01.355>.
- Haq, F. (2015). Common grammatical errors made by Pakistani ESL learners: A case study of university students. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 11(1), 1-14.
- Hasanah, M., Alaydrus, Y., & Umamah, A. (2023). An Analysis Grammatical Error In Argumentative Essay Of The Fourth Semester Students Of English Education Department Of Universitas Islam Malang. *Jurnal Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Pembelajaran*, 18(21).
- Hijjo, N. F. (2013). A morphosyntactic analysis on Malaysian secondary school students' essay writing in English class. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(11), 286-291.
- Huwari, I. F., & Al-Khasawneh, F. M. (2013). The reasons behind the weaknesses of writing in English among Pre-year students' at Taibah University. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 14(38), 1-9. <http://www.esp-world.info>.
- Habib, S., Ahmed, S., Gul, N., Riaz, M., & Iqbal, F. (2025). A Study of the Correlation Between Intercultural Competence and Linguistic Competence at Postgraduate Level: From Theory to Practice. *Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)*, 3(1), 631-653.
- Mahmood, R., Almashy, A., Alam, I., & Shah, A. H. Logic, (2021). Reasoning and language structures: A comparative study of literature and linguistics learners. *TESOL International Journal*, 16
- Sawalmeh, M. H. M. (2013). Error analysis of written English essays: The case of students of the preparatory year program in Saudi Arabia. *English for specific purposes world*, 14(40), 1-17. <http://www.esp-world.info>
- Sajjad, U., Hassan, S. S. U., & Gul, N. (2023). Academic Words in Discourse News: A Corpus Based Study Of Pakistani English Newspaper. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 515-523.
- Sabih-Ul-Hassan, S., Gul, N., & Imran, S. (2023). Factors responsible for wrong pronunciation of English words by students at undergraduate level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. *Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 4(1), 70-78.
- Sermsook, K., Liamnimit, J., & Pochakorn, R. (2017). An Analysis of Errors in Written English Sentences: A Case Study of Thai EFL Students. *English Language Teaching*, 10(3), 101-110. [10.5539/elt.v10n3p101](https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n3p101).