

Analysis of Syntactic Errors in the Essays of Indonesian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT: Writing is a productive skill that requires grammatical accuracy, particularly in syntactic construction. Despite prior exposure to grammar and writing courses, many EFL students still make syntactic errors in academic texts. This study aims to identify and classify the types of syntactic errors found in English essays written by third-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. A qualitative descriptive method was implemented to analyze 32 essays produced. The study applied the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay et al. (1982), which categorizes errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. To determine syntactic structures, theories from Crystal and McLachlan (2002), Finch (2003), and Morley (2010) were used. The findings reveal that syntactic errors occurred at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels. misformation and omission were the most frequent types across all levels. These results highlight the need for improved grammar instruction focused on syntactic function and sentence construction.

KEYWORDS: Syntactic errors, EFL students, Academic writing, Error analysis, Surface strategy taxonomy

I. INTRODUCTION

English is increasingly used as a global means of communication among people with diverse linguistic backgrounds. As a result, learning English has become an essential skill in many countries, including Indonesia. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The Indonesian national curriculum emphasizes the development of four English language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Akhadiah, 1993). Among these, writing is often considered the most complex skill due to the various linguistic components that involves, such as vocabulary, coherence, organization, and especially grammar.

Writing requires a solid grasp of syntactic structures in order to construct clear and coherent texts. According to Akhadiah (1993:64), writing is a complex activity because it demands accuracy in spelling, vocabulary choice, effective sentence construction, and coherent paragraph development. In the context of English language education, grammar plays a fundamental role in developing syntactic accuracy, which is essential for effective written form of communication.

However, despite years of instruction in grammar and writing, students often continue to struggle with constructing grammatically correct sentences. Many learners still commit various types of syntactic errors, even after taking grammar courses and essay writing classes. This phenomenon has become particularly evident in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar, where students are expected to acquire the competencies required to become professional English teachers. The inability to write accurate syntactic structures poses a concern, particularly because writing is one of the core skills that must be mastered by pre-service teachers and later and later taught to their own students.

The errors made by students are not only indicative of their individual challenges but also reflect broader issues in instructional practices and materials. One significant approach to addressing these challenges is through error analysis, which identifies and classifies language errors to better understand the underlying difficulties faced by learners. Dulay et al. (1982:138) argue that errors are valuable in second language acquisition research, as they provide evidence of the learners' internal processing and can help reveal the learning strategies they use.

This study employs the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay et al. (1982:154–163) to identify and categorize syntactic errors. This taxonomy classifies errors into four main types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Each of these reflects different cognitive strategies used by learners as they attempt to construct sentences in a new language. For example, omission involves the absence of necessary grammatical elements such as auxiliary verbs or articles (e.g., "He going to school"), while misformation involves using incorrect forms (e.g., "He eated the chicken" instead of "ate").

Syntactic errors can occur at various levels, including the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels. Finch (2003:76) defines syntax as the system that governs the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. In EFL writing, students often

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struggle to form complete clauses or maintaining correct word order, particularly when translating from their first language. These challenges are even more pronounced when students rely on literal word-for-word translation from Indonesian, which may lead to structurally incorrect English sentences.

Given these challenges, the aim of this study was to analyze the types of syntactic errors found in the English essays of third-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. Understanding the nature of these errors is essential for designing more effective instructional strategies that target students' specific weaknesses. This research is also intended to contribute to the field of applied linguistics by offering empirical data on learner difficulties in syntactic construction, which may guide future pedagogical decisions.

Therefore, the research question addressed in this study is: "What types of syntactic errors are found in students' essays?" By answering this question, the study provides insight into the syntactic problems faced by EFL students and offers implications for improving grammar instruction in academic writing courses.

II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the types of syntactic errors found in the essays of third-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. A total of 32 handwritten essays comprising definition and cause-effect types were collected from 16 students who had previously completed grammar and writing courses. These essays served as the primary data source for identifying recurring syntactic issues. The analysis focused on classifying errors using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy developed by Dulay et al. (1982), which categorizes errors into four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Each essay was examined manually, and syntactic errors were identified, marked, and categorized based on these four classifications. In analyzing the syntactic structures, the study also referred to the theoretical frameworks proposed by Finch (2003) and Crystal & McLachlan (2002), which define syntax in terms of word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels. The findings were presented both quantitatively in tabular form and qualitatively through descriptive explanation to illustrate the frequency and nature of each error type. This methodological approach allowed for a detailed understanding of the syntactic errors produced by EFL students in academic writing contexts.

III. THEORY

This section is divided into two parts: a review of previous literature relevant to this study and an explanation of the theoretical frameworks used.

A. Literature Review

Seven previous studies have addressed syntactic errors in student writing, highlighting a range of linguistic challenges across different contexts. Winarta and Rahmanu (2020) investigated syntax errors made by elementary school students in constructing English conversations. Their findings revealed frequent omission of articles (a, an, the), auxiliary verbs (be), and prepositions, indicating students' limited understanding of basic grammatical structures. Arvian (2020) analyzed adjective clauses written by fifth-semester English majors and found that students commonly misused relative pronouns, misordered elements within clauses, and showed weak control over clause embedding, suggesting difficulties with complex sentence construction. Dawa et al. (2020) examined Indonesian-language opinion columns and identified numerous syntactic errors at the sentence level, including incorrect phrasing, verb misuse, and ambiguous expressions. Although focused on Indonesian, the study underscores broader challenges in syntactic control that are transferable to foreign language learning. Kamal et al. (2021) focused on recount texts written by Indonesian EFL students and discovered that verb misformation such as incorrect tense or verb form was the most dominant error type, followed by structural inconsistencies that interfered with meaning clarity. Kuswoyo et al. (2021), in their analysis of university students' spoken academic presentations, noted that sentence-level misordering and confusion in subject-verb agreement were the most frequent issues, especially in spontaneous oral production. Amalia and Markhamah (2021) investigated syntactic errors among Thai students learning Indonesian and found that language transfer from the students' mother tongue contributed significantly to sentence ambiguity, illogical structure, and the misuse of function words. Finally, Apriliandi et al. (2023) studied personal narrative writing by high school students and categorized syntactic errors into ten distinct types, including missing subjects or predicates, use of unnecessary punctuation, and lack of sentence parallelism. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the persistent nature of syntactic difficulties across learner levels and languages. The present study builds upon this foundation by examining syntactic errors in academic essays written by third-semester Indonesian EFL students, focusing on a wide range of structural levels word, phrase, clause, and sentence and identifying the error types.

B. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the types of syntactic errors in students' essays, this study applies the Surface Strategy Taxonomy developed by Dulay et al. (1982:154–163). This taxonomy classifies grammatical errors based on the way surface structures of sentences are altered. It includes four major categories: (1) omission, which refers to the absence of necessary linguistic items such as auxiliary verbs or articles; (2) addition, the presence of unnecessary elements in a sentence; (3) misformation, where incorrect forms of

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morphemes or structures are used; and (4) misordering, involving incorrect word order in phrases or clauses. Dulay et al. emphasize that these error types help identify the cognitive processes learners use when constructing sentences in a second language.

In addition, this study uses the syntactic framework as defined by Miller (2002:76), which states that syntax refers to the rules governing how words are arranged into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Syntax operates at multiple structural levels, including word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), phrases (noun phrase, verb phrase, etc.), clauses (subject-predicate structures), and full sentences (simple and complex). These categories were used to specify the linguistic levels at which errors occurred. Furthermore, in identifying the types of syntactic structures that appear in the essays, this study refers to the works of Crystal and McLachlan (2002), Finch (2003), and Morley (2010). This theoretical approach allows the study to not only categorize the errors structurally but also to interpret them within the broader linguistic system of English, which is essential for understanding learner difficulties in academic writing.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings and discussion aimed at answering the first research question, which concerns the syntactic errors found in essays written by third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati. The data consist of 32 student essays, produced by learners who had previously completed grammar and writing courses. To classify the syntactic errors, the study adopts the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay et al. (1982), which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The identification of syntactic structures within the essays is guided by syntactic frameworks from Crystal and McLachlan (2002), Finch (2003), and Morley (2010).

A. Errors at the Word Class Level

In English, word classes are divided into lexical and grammatical categories. Lexical classes include words with meaning independent of context such as nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Grammatical classes, on the other hand, consist of words that function within syntactic structures, such as prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs. Errors in word class usage can cause words to appear in the wrong category, leading to unstructured sentences and grammatical inconsistencies. The following section presents syntactic errors related to word class found in students' essays

Table 4.1 Syntactic Errors at the Word Class Level

Syntactic Error Types	Data	
	Errors in the Essay	Corrections
Omission of Verb	Data 1: The teacher * very angry (NIM-0077)	The teacher was very angry
Omission of Pronoun	Data 2: if their parents ask for to do something but they don't want to do * they would say mager (NIM-0076)	if their parents ask them for doing something but they don't want to do it , they would say "mager"
Omission of Conjunction	Data 3: not other people accept when you say it * you will look like a lazy person (NIM-0076)	Some people might not accept it if you say it to them because you will look like a lazy person
Addition of Pronoun	Data 4: the air it feels more fresh (NIM-0005)	the air feels fresher
Addition of Preposition	Data 5: The first source of this hot temperature problem is from global warming phenomenon (NIM-0051)	The first source of this high temperature issue is the global warming.
Misformation of Verb	Data 6: young people please don't implementation mager (NIM-0081)	Young people, please do not implement "mager".
Misformation of Noun	Data 7: Don't be a mager people (NIM-0043)	Don't be a "mager" person.
Misformation of Adjective	Data 8: The temperature is more hot than before (NIM-0034)	The temperature is hotter than before.
Misformation of Preposition	Data 9: I have to go outside with this hot temperature. (NIM-0078)	I have to go outside in this hot weather.

The sentence in Data 1 is a nominal sentence describing the condition of the subject but contains an omission error specifically, a missing auxiliary verb needed to link the subject to its complement. Based on the student's essay, the sentence refers to a past situation from their school experience. Since the subject is a singular noun and the context is past tense, the appropriate auxiliary verb is "was."

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There is an omission of a pronoun in Data 2, resulting in an incomplete sentence structure. Specifically, the pronoun “it” is missing, which should serve as the object of the infinitive verb “to do.” The sentence lacks the object referring to “something” from the previous clause, making the sentence feel incomplete. To maintain clarity and avoid redundancy, the pronoun “it” should be added.

The sentence in Data 3 reflects the student’s suggestion that the term “mager” should only be used in informal conversations with close friends, as it may otherwise make the speaker appear extremely lazy. The sentence contains three clauses: (1) an independent clause “not other people accept”, (2) a dependent time clause “when you say it”, and (3) a dependent reason clause “you will look like a lazy person”. However, the third clause lacks a conjunction to connect it logically to the main clause. To improve coherence and express a clear cause-effect relationship, the conjunction “because” should be added.

The next is the addition of an unnecessary pronoun appears in Data 4, which appears in the concluding part of the essay discussing the importance of planting trees to provide fresh and cool air for living beings. The air is described as being most noticeable when one is near trees. In this sentence, the pronoun “it” is unnecessarily added and does not replace any noun previously mentioned. The sentence is already complete and well-structured, consisting of a clear subject, verb, and object. The added pronoun results in redundancy by repeating the same referent within the sentence.

In Data 5, the sentence discusses the cause of increasing global temperatures. It contains an unnecessary preposition that disrupts sentence structure and reduces clarity. The verb already links the subject “The first source of this hot temperature problem” with its complement “global warming phenomenon”. The addition of the preposition “from” is redundant, as it typically indicates origin or starting point, which is already implied by the subject-complement relationship. Its presence weakens the syntactic cohesion of the sentence.

Data 6 contains a verb formation error. It is an imperative sentence with a polite prohibition, marked by “please” and “don’t.” In English grammar, imperative structures typically use the base form of the verb following the auxiliary do not. However, in this sentence, the noun “implementation” is incorrectly used instead of a verb, disrupting the sentence structure. The correct word class needed is the base verb “implement.”

Data 7 demonstrates an error in noun formation within an imperative sentence that warns the reader not to become a “mager” person. The sentence includes the indefinite article “a”, which functions as a determiner for singular countable nouns. However, it is incorrectly followed by the plural noun people. This creates a mismatch in number agreement between the determiner and the noun. Since people is the irregular plural form of person, the correct singular noun person should be used to align with the article.

In Data 8, the use of the comparative adjective “more hot” is incorrect. According to English grammar rules, the adjective “hot” is a one-syllable noun, so its comparative form should be formed by adding “-er” not with “more.” Since “hot” ends with a single consonant following a single vowel, the consonant is doubled before adding “-er,” resulting in the correct form “hotter.”

The sentence in Data 9 appears in the essay introduction, describing how Bali’s hot weather increases the desire to stay indoors. However, due to school or work obligations, the writer has to go out despite the extreme heat. The sentence incorrectly uses the preposition “with” to describe weather conditions. “With” typically indicates possession or tools (e.g., “cut with scissors”) and is not appropriate here. The correct preposition is “in”, which is used to express being in a condition or environment.

B. Errors at the Phrase Level

A phrase is a group of words that functions as a single unit in a sentence but lacks a complete subject and predicate, and therefore cannot stand alone as a full sentence. In the students’ essays, errors were found in the form of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering across four types of phrases. The analysis and discussion of these errors are presented in the following subsection.

Table 4.2 Syntactic Errors at the Phrase Level

Syntactic Types	Error	Data	
		Errors in the Essay	Correction
Omission in Verb Phrase		Data 10: For your condision lazi you can read novels, * house choures, take * bath, sport (NIM-0033)	To deal with your lazy condition, you can read novels, do household chores, take a bath, or exercise
Omission in Noun Phrase		Data 11: You can use * quotation, * general statement (NIM-0034)	You can use a quotation, a general statement
Addition in Verb Phrase		Data 12: When we go to riding, we can also felt hot and going sweating (NIM-0034)	When we go riding, we can also feel hot and start sweating
Misformation in Verb Phrase		Data 13: Hot temperature can make us sweating everytime (NIM-0034)	High temperatures can make us sweat every time
Misformation in Noun Phrase		Data 14: you’re so lazy to do you’re mother’s request (NIM-0029)	You are so lazy to do your mother’s request

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Misformation in Adjective Phrase	Data 15: This sentence mean is very convert to work in your place (NIM-0077)	This sentence means it is very comfortable to work at your place.
Misformation in Prepositional Phrase	Data 16: First, you gonna write the introduction in the beginning of the paragraphs (NIM-0051)	First, you should write the introduction at the beginning of the paragraph
Misordering in Verb Phrase	Data 17: deodorant also can break the ozon layer (NIM-0043)	deodorants can also damage the ozone layer

In Data 10, the student lists suggested activities to overcome laziness or “mager”. The sentence includes two verb phrases that are poorly structured. The first phrase lacks a main verb to clarify the object “house chores”, while the second phrase contains the verb take but omits the necessary determiner before the noun “bath”. The appropriate verb for the first phrase is “do”, as it is typically used to refer to routine or domestic tasks. Additionally, the term “house chores” should be replaced with “household chores”, since house refers to a physical structure, whereas household functions as an adjective describing tasks related to domestic life. In the second phrase, “bath” is a countable noun and therefore requires the article “a” to complete the phrase grammatically.

The sentence in Data 11 describes steps for writing the opening part of an essay, which may begin with a quotation or a general statement. The sentence contains an omission error in the noun phrases. “Quotation” and “general statement” are countable singular nouns, so each requires the article “a”. Since the sentence refers to general, non-specific examples, using “a” is correct.

The clause in Data 12 refers to hot weather making outdoor riding uncomfortable and sweaty. It contains a verb phrase error involving the unnecessary use of “to.” The main verb “go” should be followed directly by a gerund to indicate an activity. Adding “to” before a gerund is ungrammatical, as “to” must be followed by a noun or place, not a verb form ending in “-ing”. According to standard grammar rules, the correct structure is “go + gerund.”

Data 13 refers to a sentence in which the student explains that high temperatures can cause someone to sweat at any time. The sentence contains a verb phrase formation error involving the causative verb “make”. In standard English syntax, causative verbs like “make” are followed by an object and then a base verb not a gerund. In this case, the verb phrase incorrectly uses the gerund sweating after the object “us”. Gerunds are generally used as nouns or after prepositions, not after causative verbs. Therefore, to conform with English syntactic rules, the verb following “us” should be in its base form.

The sentence in Data 14 describes a situation where someone feels too lazy to fulfill a request from their mother, and the word “mager” is used to express that feeling. The noun phrase “you’re mother’s request” contains a formation error. “You’re” is the contraction of “you are”, which cannot be used to show possession. Since “mother’s request” indicates possession, the correct form should be the possessive pronoun “your.”

The sentence in Data 15 explains a translated expression from the essay: “Enak sekali kerja di tempatmu ya, banyak dapet gabutnya.” The adjective phrase in the English version contains a formation error. It uses “very”, which is an adverb of degree meant to intensify an adjective (structure: very + adjective), but it’s followed by the noun “convert,” which is incorrect. Since “very” cannot directly modify a noun, the correct adjective in this context is “comfortable.”

The sentence in Data 16 refers to the explanation of the introduction section in an essay. It contains a misformation error in the prepositional phrase. The phrase “in the beginning” is inappropriate in this context, as it typically refers to the starting point of a process or time. Since the sentence refers to the structured part of an essay, the correct phrase is “at the beginning,” which indicates a specific part of a structured text. Although both phrases are grammatically correct in form (preposition + noun phrase), choosing the wrong preposition changes the intended meaning.

The clause in data 17 refers to deodorants containing CFCs as a cause of ozone layer damage. The clause contains a misordering error in the verb phrase, where the adverb “also” is incorrectly placed before the modal verb. As a mid-position adverb, “also” should come after the modal verb and before the main verb. The correct syntactic order is: subject + modal verb + adverb + main verb.

C. Errors at the Clause Level

A clause consists of two main elements: a subject and a verb (predicate), with optional elements such as objects, complements, and adverbs. The verb plays a central role in sentence structure and is essential, while other elements may be omitted. Clauses contribute to sentence construction, especially in complex sentences where subordinate clauses provide additional context. The following section presents syntactic errors related to clauses found in the students’ essays.

Table 4.3 Syntactic Errors at the Clause Level

Syntactic Error Types	Data	
	Errors in the Essay	Correction
Misformation in Clause	Data 18: This word like bad word so carefully to use this word (NIM-0090)	This word sounds like a bad word, so be careful when using it

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Data 18 comes from a sentence in which the student suggests that the word “mager” should be avoided when speaking to parents, as it may sound like a disrespectful or inappropriate term. The sentence contains two clauses, both of which exhibit syntactic errors. The first clause, “*This word like bad word*”, is intended as an independent clause but lacks a main verb. Instead, it only contains a prepositional phrase expressing similarity. To form a grammatically complete clause, the verb “*sounds*” is appropriate, as it conveys perception. Additionally, the noun “*word*” is a singular countable noun, and therefore requires an article. The article “*a*” should be added to produce the correct phrase “*a bad word*”. The second clause, “*so carefully to use this word*”, also contains structural issues. The coordinating conjunction “*so*” typically links two independent clauses in a cause-effect relationship. However, the phrase that follows does not form a valid clause or imperative; “*carefully to use this word*” lacks a subject and a main verb. To convey a warning or suggestion more effectively, the phrase should be restructured into an imperative, such as “*be careful*”, followed by an adverbial clause to express time, like “*when using it*”.

D. Errors at the Sentence Level

Printed texts contain various sentence patterns, which can be categorized into two types: major sentences (regularly structured) and minor sentences (irregular). Major sentences consist of five elements: subject, verb/predicate, object, complement, and adverbial. In contrast, minor sentences lack a clear clause structure and follow unusual patterns. In essay writing, well-structured sentences are essential to ensure paragraph coherence. The following section presents syntactic errors related to sentence structure found in students’ essays.

Table 4.4 Syntactic Errors at the Sentence Level

Syntactic Types	Error	Data	
		Errors in the Essay	Correction
Misformation Sentence	in	Data 19: Did you ever use this word in your life? (NIM-0077)	Have you ever used this word in your life?
Misordering Sentence	in	Data 20: Lastly, read again your essay to make sure essay structured and correct (NIM-0034)	Lastly, read your essay again to make sure it is well-structured and correct.

The sentence in Data 19 appears in the introductory part of the essay as an opening question about the definition of the word “gabut”. It includes the adverb “*ever*”, which is typically used with the present perfect tense to refer to experiences up to the present. However, the use of “*did*” (a past tense marker) in the question creates a mismatch. Since the question refers to an unspecified past experience that remains relevant, the correct form should be a present perfect interrogative: Have/has + subject + past participle + object.

The sentence in Data 20 refers to the final step in writing a process essay: ensuring the essay is properly written. It is an imperative sentence but contains a misordering type of error. The correct structure for an imperative is: verb + object + adverb, so the adverb “*again*” should come after the object “*your essay*”, not before it. Additionally, after the phrase “*make sure*”, a complete clause (subject + verb) is required. The subject “*essay*” is replaced with the pronoun “*it*” to avoid repetition, followed by the auxiliary verb “*is*” and the adjective phrase “*well-structured*”.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the types of syntactic errors found in essays written by third-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Mahasaraswati Denpasar. The findings revealed that students produced a wide range of syntactic errors, which were classified using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay et al. (1982), consisting of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. These errors occurred across various syntactic levels: word class, phrase, clause, and sentence. At the phrase level, errors were found in verb, noun, adjective, and prepositional phrases, with misformation and omission being the most common types. At the word class level, students often misused pronouns, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs, indicating confusion between lexical and grammatical categories. Clause-level errors showed issues in clause construction, particularly in using verbs and linking elements appropriately. At the sentence level, misformation and word order problems were prevalent, especially in interrogative and imperative structures. These findings indicate that despite prior instruction in grammar and writing, students still struggle to apply accurate syntactic forms in their essays. The errors reflect not only gaps in grammatical knowledge but also the influence of first-language transfer and limited awareness of English structural rules. The results suggest the need for more focused grammar instruction that emphasizes functional syntax, sentence construction, and contextual usage, especially in academic writing contexts.

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