Exploring Language Proficiency Gaps: A Syntactic Error Analysis

Salsabilla Hassanuzin[1*], Nur Suhaila Saaidi[1], 'Ammar Khalil[1], Norhazwanie Jatin[1]

[1] English Language Department, Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: salsabilla@iium.edu.my

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Abstract: *This study identifies common writing errors among 180 students in a matriculation center in Gambang, Pahang, Malaysia. It further explores a more specific aspect of writing at the syntactic level where students produce more errors in their essays. Through a mixed-method approach, descriptive analyses were conducted to assess errors in a writing task where students were required to write an opinion-based essay. The writing errors were identified based on the writing criteria that students were assessed in, which were task fulfilment, cohesion and coherence, vocabulary and language accuracy. Among these, students recorded the highest frequency of errors in the language aspect. Further investigation indicates that students primarily struggle with syntactic errors, particularly in complex and simple sentences. These results underscore the importance of targeted interventions in syntax to enhance writing proficiency among pre-university students.*

Keywords: Error Analysis, ESL Writing, English as Second Language, Syntactic Analysis

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1. Introduction

English as a second language (ESL) learners often struggle to become proficient, particularly in writing skills, due to the first language (L1) interference in the second language (L2) learning. Gautam (2019) discusses instructional strategies for four language skills, writing is considered secondary and typically follows the acquisition of reading, listening, and speaking skills. Writing is widely acknowledged as the most complex and goal-oriented skill, demanding learners to meet specific criteria when producing content. Students often struggle with writing due to deficiencies in mechanics, such as constructing in-depth arguments, limited vocabulary range, and navigating the writing process effectively as highlighted by Baharudin, Azmi, and Rahmat (2023).

Past literatures indicate that ESL students in Malaysia face persistent challenges in English writing from primary school through tertiary levels. According to Mehat and Ismail (2021), tertiary ESL students' writing errors reveal issues including grammatical errors, improper structure (Wan Ibrahim & Othman, 2021), and rhetorical difficulties in expressing ideas clearly due to grammatical and vocabulary limitations (Ghulamuddin, Mohari, & Ariffin, 2021). Therefore, investigating these challenges in academic writing at the tertiary level can provide insights for curriculum developers to improve pedagogical approaches and develop appropriate lesson plans, materials, and assessments.

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In learning, errors are an integral part of the process. They signify the deviations from the norm in conversations and compositions (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). To identify and investigate the errors committed by ESL learners, error analysis can be utilised as a tool for this purpose. Error Analysis, pioneered by Stephen Pit Corder in 1970 with his colleagues, has become widely used for understanding and describing second language (L2) errors (Al-Khresheh, 2016). Error analysis, as introduced by Corder (1974), remains integral to second language acquisition research Error analysis involves five steps:

i. Sample Collection – Gather data and samples from learners
ii. Error Identification – Identify the errors made by distinguishing whether it is an error or a mistake. Errors happen due to lack of understanding while mistakes occur when learners failed to perform when they have the knowledge in the language.
iii. Error Description – Classify the errors made by learners to language categories like phonological, morphological or syntactical errors.
iv. Error Justification – Identify the source of errors whether it is interlingual, intralingual or other factors.
v. Error Evaluation – Asses the severity of errors whether it needs intervention.

In writing, being able to properly construct sentences is crucial for producing a good composition. Well-constructed sentences are like the firm foundation of a building. Sundari, Hidayah, Edy, and Esmianti (2021) argued that if learners cannot produce correct sentence structures in their writing, it will result in confusing sentence patterns, making it difficult for readers to understand their ideas or meanings. There are numerous types of sentences in English (Steffani, 2007), including fragmented sentences (Herman & Purba, 2021), as represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Some types of sentences in English language

Types of Sentences	Definition	Example
Simple	A sentence with one independent clause with a subject and predicate. It conveys one thought.	He wants to go for a vacation.
Compound	A sentence with two or more independent clauses and joined by coordinating conjunction. The sentence has two or more subjects and a predicate.	He wants to go for the trip, but he has no money.
Complex	A sentence with one or more dependent clauses to an independent clause. The sentences are joined by subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun.	Although going on vacation is good, I would rather not.
Compound-Complex	A sentence with two or more independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction and one or more dependent clauses. This sentence is a combination of a complex sentence with a compound sentence.	Although going on vacation is good, I have too much work to do, and I would rather not.
Fragments	A sentence with incomplete independent clause. It can be a sentence with no subject, no verb, or both. sentence with no main or independent clause. It is a sentence with incomplete thought.	For example, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok

There are numerous past studies on error analysis in ESL learners' writing, but few focus specifically on syntax, particularly basic sentence structure. At the intermediate language level, learners are expected to produce clear and coherent writing. However, at some tertiary levels, the opposite is often observed. Therefore, there is a need for a study analysing sentence structure errors in pre-university institutions.

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

i. To investigate the area of writing in which students exhibit the most errors.
ii. To explore the syntactic errors made by students.

From the research objectives presented above, this study formulated research questions as follows:

i. What is the area of writing that students exhibit most errors?
ii. What are the errors omitted by the students at syntactic level?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design
This study applies a mixed-method approach to explore the language proficiency gaps. A quantitative approach was used in this study to quantify the errors found in the students' essay and categorised it into four aspects of writing: (1) Task Fulfilment; (2) Coherence and Cohesion; (3) Vocabulary; and (4) Language.

This research calculated the marks given by the class teachers based on a standardised writing rubric. The second research question utilised qualitative approach to explore the errors at syntax level demonstrated in student's writing through content analysis. Elo et al. (2014) developed a structured method for qualitative content analysis that has become one of the common methods to analyse answers to open-ended questions. Errors committed were categorised into five categories of sentence structure: (1) Simple sentence; (2) Compound sentence; (3) Complex sentence; (4) Compound-complex sentence; and (5) Fragmented sentence.

2.2 Respondents
This study applied a purposive sampling technique and 180 participants enrolled in an English language course at a matriculation centre in Gambang, Pahang, Malaysia were selected. They had previously attained the intermediate writing skill level (CEFR Band B1 and B2) in the course. The respondents were Malay students, with Malay as their first language (L1).

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis
This study adapted the Error Analysis model from Corder (1974). The steps in error analysis include data collection, categorisation, identification, explanation, and evaluation of errors. To answer the first research question (RO1), "What is the area of writing that students exhibit most error?", the researchers examined the errors exhibited in students' writing. They began the study by collecting students' essay scores graded by the class teachers based on a standardised writing rubric. To ensure reliability and accuracy of the scores, the inter-rated method was employed involving at least two raters who evaluated the essays independently. Then, the scores were recorded in a spreadsheet and analysed descriptively. The result from the analysis is presented in mean scores.

To investigate errors at the syntactic level based on the second research question (RQ2), the researchers narrowed it to specific sample. Specific sampling is a method of selecting a specific sample from the actual data to be analysed (Tanji Maruti, 2023). In this study, fifteen (15) essays were selected using judgment sampling techniques. This was because the researchers believed that selecting essay samples from the course with the highest number of errors identified in RQ1 would provide a better understanding of writing errors. The researchers conducted a content analysis to examine the essays. The essays were assessed using the inter-rater reliability method with minimum two inter-raters to ensure consistency in agreement among the researchers while examining and classifying errors into categories of sentence structure. To calculate the frequency of error, the calculation formula from Walizer and Wiener (1990) was used. The formula is presented below:

$$P = \left(\frac{f}{n}\right) \times 100\%$$

The formula reads as **P** is the percentage of error, ***f*** represents the frequency of error and ***n*** is the total number of samples.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Errors in Writing Components
The findings of descriptive analysis performed on the students' scores in writing is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean scores of writing components.

Areas of Writing	Mean Score
Task Fulfilment	5.06
Coherence and Cohesion	5.05
Vocabulary	4.96
Language	4.80

Among the four areas of writing, Task Fulfilment obtained the highest mean score (5.06), closely followed by Coherence and Cohesion (5.05), and Vocabulary (4.95). Language received the lowest score in this category (4.80), indicating that students made more errors in Language than in other categories.

3.2 Error Analysis at Syntactic Level
To further investigate the errors under language category, a content analysis of student's writing was done at syntactic level. It was found that there are errors occurred in construction of simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, compound-complex sentence and there are also fragmented sentences found.

Table 3: Number of Error Occurrence at Syntactic Level

Types of Sentences	Total No. of Error Occurrence	Percentage (%)
Simple Sentence	49	21
Compound Sentence	29	12
Complex Sentence	106	45
Compound-Complex Sentence	43	18
Fragmented Sentence	6	3

Table 3 illustrates that the highest number of errors occurred in the construction of complex sentence which made up 45% of the errors found. This is followed by errors found in simple sentence (21%) and compound-complex sentence (18%). There are a small number of errors found in compound sentence (12%) and fragmented sentence (3%).

3.3 Errors in Complex Sentence Structure
It was found that the errors in complex sentence structure dominated in students' writing.

Table 4: Tabulation of Errors in Complex Sentence Structure

Type of Sentence	Frequency of Errors (%)	Example of Errors	Example of Correction
Complex Sentence	45	Next, some seller in the shopping website are selling item directly from industry, its make the item more cheaper than the shop because theres no tax including to the item.	Next, some online sellers are selling items directly from factories, which makes these items cheaper than in store because there is no tax included in the price.
		They are also have many voucher when you buy something in online they will give you a vouchers that will never get it when you go to shop or mall.	There are also many vouchers when you buy something online as the sellers will give you discounts that you will never get in physical stores.
		There are too many disadvantages if we rely on online purchase too much, so it is better to buy it in shop than online shopping, as one of the reason is because customers get scammed a lot nowadays in purchasing their item.	There are too many disadvantages if we rely on online purchase too much, so it is better to shop traditionally than online. One of the disadvantages is customers tend to get scammed when purchasing items online.
		Other than that, online shopping activity are not reliable because that the quality of the item or material are different from the looks on the apps like Shopee or TikTok shop.	Other than that, online shopping is not reliable because the quality of the item is different from what is shown on online shopping apps like Shopee or TikTok shop.
		Shopping is fun for majority of people as they can buy items that is needed or wanted.	Shopping is fun for majority of people as they can buy things that are needed or wanted.

Errors in complex sentences exhibited the highest percentage of occurrence which is 45%. The examples provided in Table 4 illustrate some of the most glaring errors, including incorrect use of singular or plural nouns. Phrases like '*some seller* and *many voucher'* are incorrectly used as the nouns in these phrases are countable nouns and when preceded by quantifiers like '*some'* and '*many'*, should be in plural form. Thus, the correct phrases should be '*some sellers'* and '*many vouchers'*. Another example is the phrase '*one of the reason',* which should be corrected to *'one of the reasons'* because the rule requires a plural noun after the phrase '*one of the'*.

Subject-verb agreement errors can also be found in students' writing. To illustrate, the clause '*some seller in the shopping website are selling items directly from factory*' has a subject and a verb that disagree as the subject *'seller'* is singular (but incorrectly used) and the verb *'are'* is plural. If the student had used the plural noun form of the word *'seller'*, this sentence would have been correct as the verb is plural, which means the subject and the verb would have agreed. Other examples of subject-verb agreement errors are clauses like *'online shopping are not reliable'*, which should be corrected to *'online shopping is not reliable'*, as well as the clause *'as they can buy things that is needed or wanted'*, which should be changed to *'as they can buy things that are needed or wanted'*.

Another type of error that can be found is run-on sentences. A run-on sentence is a sentence with two independent clauses that are not properly joined. One example from the table is the sentence *'They are also have many voucher when you buy something in online they will give you a discount that will never get it when you go to store or mall.'* This sentence has two independent clauses: one is *'They are also have many voucher when you buy something in online'* and another is *'they will give you a discount'* and they are improperly joined without a punctuation or suitable conjunction.

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3.4 Errors in Simple Sentence Structure

Similar to complex structure, errors in subject-verb agreement can also be found in simple structure from the students' composition.

Table 5: Tabulation of Errors in Simple Sentence Structure

Type of Sentence	Frequency of Errors (%)	Example of Errors	Example of Correction
Simple Sentence	21	It also conviniece to females as a housewife.	It is also convenient for housewives.
		Nowadays, with the technology access, everything are easy.	Nowadays, everything is easier with technology.
		They are also an Apps to shopping online without to worry to dressed up.	There are also apps to shop online without the need to dress up.
		It is usually take time around 4 to 5 weekdays to arrived.	It usually takes around 4 to 5 days to arrive.
		They provide various selection from many source of shops and stores.	They provide various selections from many different shops and stores.

From Table 5, the sentence *'Nowadays, with the technology access, everything are easy'* has an error in the verb form used. Since the subject *'everything'* is singular, the correct verb should be *'is'* which is singular as well. Another error similar to the previously discussed complex structure is error in indicating plural nouns and this can be seen in the example *'They provide various selection from many source of shops and places'*, where the noun *'source'* should be plural as it is preceded by the quantifier *'many'*.

Other than that, sentences with missing verbs and incorrect word form used are also found like the example *'It also conviniece to women as a housewife'*. In this sentence, the verb *'is'* is needed after the subject *'It'* for the sentence to be complete and the noun *'convenience'* should be changed to the adjective *'convenient'* instead. Other errors involving verbs are found in the sentence *'It is usually take time around 4 to 5 days to arrived.'* The be verb *'is'* is not needed as the main verb *'take'* does not need an auxiliary verb and should instead, be changed to the singular verb form *'takes'*. An infinitive should also be used after *'to'* at the end of the sentence, therefore the correct form is *'to arrive'*.

3.5 Errors in Compound-Complex Sentence Structure

Errors in compound-complex structure makes up 18% of the total errors found and the types of errors are also similar to the previous structure discussed.

Table 6: Tabulation of Errors in Compound-Complex Sentence Structure

Type of Sentence	Frequency of Errors (%)	Example of Errors	Example of Correction
Compound - Complex Sentence	18	Secondly is we do not need to spend our time to make up just to go out to shopping because on online shopping, we just need to search what we want on the online shopping apps and we just need to order and wait for it to arrived.	Secondly, we do not need to spend our time dressing up just to go shopping because with online shopping, we just need to search for what we want in the online shopping apps, place an order and wait for it to arrive.
		For the example, if we feel hungry, we can order the food on the apps like Shopee Food and just need to wait for it to arrived at our home.	For example, if we feel hungry, we can order food on apps like Shopee Food and we just need to wait for it to arrive.

		But, in my opinion, traditional way of shopping also good because it can make us walk a lot and can make we spend time with our friends or family.	But in my opinion, the traditional way of shopping is also good because it can make us exercise and spend time with our friends and family.
		There are many website that offer you with diffrent style and materails of things and if you didn't feel satisfied with the style you can browse other website.	There are many websites that offer you various options and if you are not satisfied with these options, you can browse other websites.
		Moreover, through online method, the things that being sold is way a lot and some of that we can't even find in the physical stores out there.	Moreover, there are a lot of things being sold online and some of these things cannot even be found in the physical stores.

From Table 6, the errors in compound-complex structure make up 18% of the total errors found and the types of errors are also similar to the previous structure discussed. An example of errors in subject-verb agreement can be found in the sentence *'... the things that being sold is way a lot and some of that we can't even find in the physical stores out there'*. Since the subject 'the things' is plural, the verb should be 'are' instead of 'is'. Also, a be verb is missing from the continuous verb form 'being sold', making the sentence incorrect. Other than errors involving verbs, the structure of the second clause of the sentence also needs improvement as it seems to be directly translated from the student's first language.

Other errors include missing verbs, as can be seen in the example *'traditional way of shopping also good because it can make us exercise'* where the verb *'is'* is required after the subject *'traditional way of shopping'*, as well as incorrect verb form after *'to'* like the examples *'...we just need to order and wait for it to arrived'* and *'...and just need to wait for it to arrived at our home'*, where the infinitive *'arrive'* should be used instead.

3.6 Errors in Compound Sentence Structure

Compound sentence is a sentence that has two independent clauses, stiched together using coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) or a semi-colon.

Table 7: Tabulation of Errors in Compound Sentence Structure

Type of Sentence	Frequency of Errors (%)	Example of Errors	Example of Correction
Compound Sentence	12	For instance, people just need to scrolling apps and search for their needy products and purchase it from their trolly.	For instance, people can just scroll from the apps and search for the items needed.
		Shopping online give a big impact to the new generations and even oldery to buy things online.	Online shopping has influenced both the younger generation and elders to make purchases online.
		Besides that, TikTok officially created TikTok shop for TikTok user and offer a cheaper price too same as Lazada	Besides that, TikTok has officially launched TikTok shop for its users, offering goods at cheaper prices similar to Lazada.
		These give the opportunity for to the buyer think carefully and be more wise in buying thing they want.	This makes the buyer to think carefully and wisely before buying things.
		You don't need to make up, dress well to go shopping	You do not have to put on makeup and wear nice dress to go for shopping.

Based on Table 7, there are 12% occurrence of the errors committed under compound sentence structure. Examples provided reveal inconsistencies in word form, within compound sentences. For example, the first error example from in the table reads: '*For instance, people just need to scrolling apps and search for their needy and purchase it from their trolly.*' This sentence has inconsistent verb form '*scrolling*' after the infinitive '*to,*' where it should be '*scroll*' only.

Another inconsistent verb form found in the third example that reads: '*Besides that, TikTok officially created TikTok shop for TikTok user and offer a cheaper price too same as Shopee.*' The word '*offer*' is inconsistent in tense with '*created*'. However, changing '*offer*' to '*offered*' would change the meaning of the sentence. Thus, this sentence is not suitable as a compound sentence. A complex sentence structure would better capture the idea while maintaining the correct verb forms. The correct sentence is '*Besides that, TikTok has officially launched TikTok shop for its users, offering goods at cheaper prices similar to Shopee.*'

There are some compound sentence errors that demonstrate a missing conjunction. In the third example from Table 7, '*You don't need to make up, dress well to go shopping*' the coordinating conjunction '*and*' is missing, failing to connect the ideas '*do not need to make up*' and '*do not need to dress.*' The correct form of the sentence is '*You do not have to put on makeup and wear nice dress to go for shopping.*'

3.7 Fragmented Sentences
A fragmented sentence is a sentence that has incomplete idea. From the essays examined, there are 3% fragmented sentence found and the sentences have a missing subject.

Table 8: Tabulation of Fragmented Sentence

Type of Sentence	Frequency of Errors (%)	Example of Errors	Example of Correction
Fragmented Sentence	3	either traditional way or online shopping?	Do people prefer to shop in stores or on online platforms?
		Why? Because people can just click on their cellphone to buy items	This is because people can just click on their smartphone to buy things
		For example, Instagram, Whatsapp and TikTok.	For example, people tend to spend more time browsing social media like Instagram, Whatsapp and TikTok.
		such as shoppee Lazada and the lastest and most famous is TikTok Shop.	The famous digital platforms for online shopping are Shopee, Lazada and TikTok Shop.
		Firstly, convenience.	Firstly, one of the benefits of online shopping is its convenience.

The first example from Table 8 that reads: '*either traditional way or online shopping?*' This fragment started with conjunction '*either…or*' which was misused to function like a Wh-question tag as the subject. The correct sentence should be added with a complete subject, for example, '*Do people prefer to shop in stores or on online platforms?*'

A similar pattern can be seen in the second example as it reads, '*Why? Because people can just click on their cellphone to buy things.*' This sentence uses the Wh-question at the beginning to function as a linker from the previous idea. At the same time the student did not write down a complete subject in the sentence after the word '*Why*'. The correct sentence is '*This is because people can just click on their smartphone to buy things.*'

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There were also fragments found on illustrations of examples. From Table 7, the sentence '*For example, Instagram, Whatsapp and TikTok*' and '*such as shoppee Lazada and the lastest and most famous is TikTok Shop*' has subject omissions hence, making the sentence to have incomplete idea. With addition of a subject, the sentences will be a complete simple sentence. The correct sentences are '*For example, people tend to spend more time browsing social media like Instagram, Whatsapp and TikTok'* and '*The famous digital platforms for online shopping are Shopee, Lazada and TikTok Shop.*'

3.8 Analysis of the Result

It can be observed that, at the tertiary level, students are expected to write more complex ideas, which are translated into their writing using different sentence structures masterfully. It is inevitable for students to commit errors while writing since English is not the respondents' first language (L1) (Baharudin et al., 2023). Most of the errors found across five types of sentences can be further categorized into three common errors:

  i.   Misuse of Singular and Plural Subjects
 ii.   Subject-Verb Agreement Errors
iii.   Missing and Incorrect Verb Forms

The misuse of singular and plural subjects stems primarily from L1 interference. In Malay, the grammar rule for marking plural subjects is different from English, which adds suffixes (-s or -es). Instead, Malay uses reduplication of the word (*orang-orang, buku-buku*) or quantifiers that follow a singular subject (*ramai orang*, *banyak buku*). Examples from Table 4, where students wrote phrases like '*some seller'* and '*many voucher,'* illustrate how Malay learners tend to follow Malay grammar rules when forming plurals. Consequently, students are inclined to omit plural markers or use them inconsistently when constructing sentences in English.

The rule of subject-verb agreement does not exist in Malay grammar, and its absence often leads to errors when Malay students write in English, which requires verb conjugation to match the subject. For example, the sentence from Table 5, '*Nowadays, with the technology access, everything are easy,*' reflects the influence of Malay grammar on students' understanding of English subject-verb agreement (SVA). SVA errors, such as 'some seller in the shopping website are selling items directly from factory' (Table 4) and '*they provide various selection from many source of shops and places*' (Table 5), frequently occur at multiple sentence levels. These recurring errors suggest that they are becoming ingrained or fossilized in students' writing.

Errors related to missing and incorrect verb forms were identified in students' writing across all sentence levels. These errors often involved the omission of auxiliary verbs or the use of incorrect verb forms. For instance, the sentence '*Besides that, TikTok officially created TikTok shop for TikTok user and offer a cheaper price too same as Shopee*' (Table 7) demonstrates the omission of the morpheme '-ed' in the word offered, disrupting verb tense consistency in the sentence. This omission reflects the influence of Malay grammar, which does not use morphemes to indicate tense as English does. Another example from Table 6 reads: '*Traditional way of shopping also good because it can make us exercise.*' Here, the verb is is missing, resulting in an incomplete sentence. A similar finding was reported by Hassan and Ramani (2023), where an investigation into primary-level students' writing revealed that students with Malay as their first language struggled to use the copula be correctly or omitted it entirely. In Malay, auxiliary verbs are not required to form grammatically correct sentences. Instead, the language employs modal verbs (e.g., *boleh, perlu, mesti*) to express ability, necessity, or permissibility, and aspect markers (e.g., *sedang, sudah, belum*) to indicate the

timing of an action. This linguistic difference explains why students often omit elements like auxiliary verbs or tense markers in their English writing.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights the challenges faced by ESL learners in mastering various aspects of writing, particularly at the syntactic level. The data revealed that students exhibited the highest number of errors in complex sentences, followed by simple, compound-complex, compound, and fragmented sentences. The analysis of student errors, particularly in complex sentence structures, indicates a significant struggle with singular-plural nouns, subject-verb agreement, inconsistent word form and incomplete sentences. These findings suggest that while students may have a functional understanding of sentence construction, they often lack the deeper grammatical knowledge required to produce error-free writing.

The results of this study are significant for curriculum developers and educators. Aligning the English language curriculum to the CEFR framework has shown promise in setting clear, achievable goals for students. However, the persistent grammatical errors in writing indicate a need for enhanced teaching strategies that emphasise syntactic accuracy and address these specific grammatical challenges. Incorporating more detailed grammar instruction and practice into the curriculum could help students achieve the proficiency levels expected by the CEFR.

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