

## ANALYZING SYNTACTIC AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN EFL LEARNERS' SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION: AN INTERLANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE FROM INDONESIAN TERTIARY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*This study examines syntactic, grammatical, and conjunction-related errors made by Indonesian EFL learners in constructing English sentences during a Sentence Building mid-semester examination. Employing an error analysis framework and an extended IMRaD structure, the research analyzes the performance of 18 third-semester students enrolled in the Tadris English Department at STAI RAKHA Amuntai. Ten sentence-construction items—comprising five simple sentences, three compound sentences, and two complex sentences—were used to assess structural competence. A total of 90 errors were identified from 180 student responses. The findings show that simple sentences yielded the highest error frequency (48.89%), followed by compound sentences (32.22%) and complex sentences (18.89%). Syntax errors constituted the largest proportion (42.2%), followed by grammar errors (34.4%) and conjunction errors (23.4%). The study reveals that fundamental sentence-level difficulties persist among learners, despite their university-level status, and that interlanguage development and L1 interference are significant contributing factors. The findings underscore the need for pedagogical strategies that emphasize explicit, contextualized grammar instruction and targeted error-based feedback. Implications for teaching, curriculum design, and future research are also discussed.*

**Keywords:** error analysis, syntactic errors, grammatical errors, sentence construction, interlanguage, Indonesian EFL learners.

### A. INTRODUCTION

Mastery of sentence construction is a fundamental indicator of a learner's grammatical competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Sentence-level accuracy acts as the foundation for coherent writing, speaking, and academic literacy skills. In Indonesian higher education, particularly within English teacher-training programs, sentence construction is a crucial skill that supports students' development of academic writing, translation, and pedagogical performance. However, despite having been exposed to grammar instruction for several years, many Indonesian EFL learners continue to struggle with constructing accurate English sentences.

The Sentence Building course in the Tadris English Department at STAI RAKHA Amuntai is designed to reinforce students' understanding of English syntax, sentence patterns, and clause relationships. Yet classroom observations and formative assessments suggest that students frequently produce syntactic misordering, incorrect verb forms, and

inappropriate conjunction usage. These recurring errors indicate persistent gaps between students' grammatical knowledge and their ability to apply rules in practice.

The mid-semester examination of the course provides a unique opportunity to analyze students' sentence-construction competence. The test consists of jumbled-word items that require students to arrange words into well-formed sentences. Because the items vary across simple, compound, and complex sentences, they allow a comparative analysis of students' performance across structural levels. Error analysis, as proposed by Corder (1967, 1974), provides a powerful methodological framework for identifying and interpreting learners' errors, and for understanding the internal processes underlying second-language acquisition.

Previous research in various EFL contexts, including Malaysia (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009), Jordan (Al-Khresheh, 2010), Thailand (Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008), and Indonesia (Hasyim, 2002; Sari, 2020; Putri, 2022), has consistently reported that learners face challenges with word order, verb form accuracy, and the proper use of conjunctions. These findings indicate that sentence-level difficulties are a persistent issue across different EFL settings. More recent studies conducted between 2020 and 2024 further confirm these patterns. For example, Ningsih (2020) identified frequent subject-verb agreement errors among Indonesian undergraduates, Suparman and Yuwono (2021) found that syntactic misordering remains predominant in EFL writing, Hasanah (2022) linked conjunction misuse to learners' limited discourse awareness, and Rahmawati (2023) highlighted that L1 interference continues to be a major source of grammatical errors. Despite this body of research, relatively few studies have systematically compared errors across different sentence types using controlled sentence-construction tasks, which constitutes the methodological advantage of the present study.

This study addresses the need to investigate sentence construction errors among Indonesian EFL learners by examining which sentence type is most problematic and what linguistic factors contribute to these errors. The findings are expected to contribute to applied linguistics research and to inform effective grammar pedagogy for tertiary EFL learners.

### **Error Analysis in Second Language Learning**

Error analysis, conceptualized by Corder (1967, 1974), identifies learner errors as evidence of developing interlanguage—the learner's internal linguistic system. Rather than viewing errors as mere failures, error analysis perceives them as indicators of progress, reflecting learners' hypotheses about the target language. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) categorize errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering, providing a framework for analyzing structural accuracy.

Richards (1971) differentiates between interlingual errors (influenced by the first language) and intralingual errors (resulting from incomplete acquisition of target-language rules). Meanwhile, Ellis (1997) emphasizes that errors reveal systematic

patterns, showing how learners' linguistic knowledge evolves over time. Recent research (e.g., Zhao, 2019; Purnawati & Emilia, 2021) affirms the relevance of error analysis for diagnosing sentence-level deficiencies in EFL contexts. These studies highlight that syntactic and grammatical errors remain widespread among Asian EFL learners, including Indonesian undergraduates.

### **Interlanguage Theory**

Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory explains how second-language learners construct interim linguistic systems influenced by L1 transfer, overgeneralization, simplification, and communication strategies. Interlanguage develops gradually, leading learners through stages, each marked by distinct error patterns. In Indonesian contexts, the differences between Bahasa Indonesia (flexible word order, lack of inflection, minimal tense markers) and English (rigid SVO order, tense-aspect system, morphological agreement) create significant challenges for learners.

### **English Sentence Construction**

According to Azar (2002), English sentences are formed through the combination of clauses based on specific syntactic rules. There are three major types:

- a. Simple sentences: one independent clause.
- b. Compound sentences: two or more independent clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions.
- c. Complex sentences: an independent clause combined with one or more dependent clauses introduced by subordinating conjunctions.

Complexity increases from simple to compound to complex sentences, requiring mastery of clause relationships, conjunctions, and syntactic ordering.

## **B. METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design supported by quantitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of students' sentence construction errors. The procedures of error analysis proposed by Corder (1974) were used as the main analytical framework to identify, classify, and interpret the errors made by students. The participants of this study were 18 third-semester students enrolled in the Sentence Building course at STAI RAKHA Amuntai in the Academic Year 2025/2026. The data were obtained from the Mid-Semester Examination (UTS), which functioned as the research instrument. The test consisted of 5 simple sentences, 3 compound sentences, and 2 complex sentences, all of which required students to arrange jumbled words into grammatically correct sentences.

For data collection, students' answer sheets were gathered, carefully transcribed, and systematically coded. Each student response was categorized based on sentence type and the type of error identified. The data analysis followed the stages of error analysis suggested by Corder (1974), which include error identification, error classification (covering syntax, grammar, and conjunction errors), error description, error explanation,

and error evaluation. In addition to qualitative analysis, quantitative techniques were applied to calculate the frequency and percentage of each type of error, allowing for a clearer depiction of the distribution and dominance of errors in students' sentence construction.

## D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Error Frequency Across Sentence Types

THE ERROR FREQUENCY ACROSS SENTENCE TYPES

No	Sentence Type	Total Items	Responses	Errors	Percentage
1	Simple	5	90	44	48.89%
2	Compound	3	54	29	32.22%
3	Complex	2	36	17	18.89%
	<b>Total</b>	10	180	90	100%

Based on the table, the findings indicate that the highest number of errors occurred in simple sentences. Out of 180 student responses, a total of 90 errors were identified, with 44 errors (48.89%) originating from simple sentence constructions. This result suggests that, despite being structurally less complex, simple sentences still posed considerable difficulty for students in terms of grammatical arrangement. Compound sentences accounted for 29 errors (32.22%), while complex sentences produced the lowest number of errors, totaling 17 errors (18.89%). These findings imply that sentence complexity does not necessarily correspond to a higher frequency of errors.

Although simple sentences are generally regarded as the most basic grammatical structures, the findings of this study demonstrate that they generated the highest error rate among students. This result indicates that learners have not yet achieved sufficient mastery of fundamental grammatical components, such as word order, subject–verb agreement, and article usage. These elements form the core of sentence construction in English; therefore, persistent errors at this level suggest that students' grammatical competence remains fragile. Rather than reflecting carelessness, the high frequency of errors in simple sentences points to deeper problems in internalizing essential syntactic and grammatical rules, which are crucial for developing more advanced writing skills.

This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by Sari (2020) and Suparman and Yuwono (2021), who found that Indonesian learners struggle most with basic sentence patterns due to L1 transfer, especially the flexible structure of Bahasa Indonesia. Their studies highlight the influence of first language transfer, particularly from Bahasa Indonesia, which allows relatively flexible word order and does not require strict verb agreement or article usage. As

a result, learners often transfer these L1 characteristics into English sentence construction that lead to persistent errors even in structurally simple sentences. The present study reinforces the argument that instructional emphasis should be placed on strengthening learners' foundational grammatical awareness to mitigate the effects of negative L1 transfer and improve overall sentence accuracy.

## 2. Error Type Distribution

ERROR TYPES DISTRIBUTION

No	Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
1	Syntax	38	42.2%
2	Grammar	31	34.4%
3	Conjunction	21	23.4%
	<b>Total</b>	90	100%

Furthermore, the table reveals that syntactic errors were the most prevalent type of error. Of the 90 total errors, 38 errors (42.2%) were categorized as syntactic, indicating significant problems related to word order and sentence structure. Grammatical errors ranked second with 31 occurrences (34.4%), followed by conjunction errors, which accounted for 21 errors (23.4%). This distribution highlights that students' primary difficulties lie in syntactic organization rather than in grammatical accuracy or the use of conjunctions.

The highest proportion of errors (42.2%) involves syntactic misordering, such as: *Teacher presents always ideas interesting*. Learners often applied Indonesian sentence logic to English structures. These errors primarily involved incorrect word order and inappropriate arrangement of sentence elements. The prevalence of syntactic errors highlights a fundamental issue in students' understanding of English sentence structure, particularly the rigid word order rules that differ from those of their first language. Such difficulties indicate that students may rely heavily on native language patterns when constructing English sentences, resulting in syntactic transfer errors.

Moreover, grammatical errors accounted for 34.4% of the total errors, followed by conjunction errors at 23.4%. While these error types were less frequent than syntactic errors, their presence still reflects substantial challenges in applying grammatical rules and cohesive devices accurately. Grammatical errors often involved tense usage and agreement, whereas conjunction errors indicated problems in linking ideas logically within compound and complex sentences. This finding is in line with research by Hasanah (2022) which learners struggle to establish logical relationships between clauses. Collectively, these findings suggest that students' primary difficulties lie in sentence organization and

structural accuracy, emphasizing the need for instructional strategies that focus on syntax awareness, guided sentence-building practice, and explicit feedback on sentence-level errors in academic writing instruction.

The errors observed in this study can be understood through the lens of interlanguage theory (Selinker's, 1972), which explains the transitional linguistic system that language learners create as they progress toward full proficiency. First, L1 transfer plays a significant role, where learners' native Indonesian syntax influences their English word order, resulting in constructions that may seem unusual in standard English but reflect underlying patterns from their first language. Second, overgeneralization occurs when learners apply a single grammatical rule too broadly, such as using the same verb form in contexts that require exceptions, demonstrating their attempt to create a systematic linguistic framework. Third, simplification is evident in learners' production of incomplete or truncated clause structures, often omitting necessary elements to reduce cognitive load while communicating. Taken together, these patterns indicate that the learners' errors are not random mistakes but are instead systematic and developmental, reflecting predictable stages in second language acquisition as learners gradually refine their interlanguage toward target-like English competence.

## E. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students' writing errors are most frequent in simple sentences, which account for 48.89% of all errors, indicating that learners struggle even with basic syntactic structures. Among the types of errors, syntax errors are the most common (42.2%), followed by grammar errors (34.4%) and errors in conjunction use (23.4%). These errors largely stem from interlanguage development and interference from the learners' first language, revealing that students do not yet have firm control over English word order, clause boundaries, and verb morphology. Based on these findings, it is recommended that instruction place greater emphasis on explicit grammar teaching, structured sentence-combining exercises, and error-based feedback to help learners systematically improve their writing competence.

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