

## Investigating the Quality of Indonesian EFL Essay Writing at the University Level

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### Abstract

This study examines common writing errors among EFL students at an Islamic institution in Indonesia, focusing on 11 second-year and 20 third-year English Education students. Using descriptive quantitative analysis, the research identifies patterns in subject-verb agreement, article usage, and misplaced modifiers by analyzing student essays. A total of 31 students were selected to complete an essay task, with errors categorized and analyzed through a predefined checklist. The results reveal that incorrect article usage was the most frequent error (27%), followed by subject-verb agreement and misplaced modifiers. Errors in verb tense and spelling were also noted, though to a lesser extent. These errors negatively impacted writing quality, emphasizing the need for pedagogical strategies that focus on functional grammar in practical writing contexts. The study suggests addressing both grammatical accuracy and psychological factors like writing anxiety to enhance student performance.

**Keywords:** EFL Students, Misplaced Modifiers, Writing Errors, Writing Quality.

### INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a critical skill for university students, particularly those studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It encompasses competencies essential for crafting essays, research papers, and theses, which are pivotal for academic success (Ratnawati et al., 2018). Research has indicated that grammatical complexity, lexical choice, and syntactic variation all of which improve the overall quality of written essays are frequently the source of common writing errors made by these learners. (Oh & Seo, 2024) In settings where scholastic achievement and future career aspirations are strongly correlated with English competence, the significance of resolving these difficulties becomes critical. Past studies on automated writing evaluation (AWE) programs, like Grammarly, show that while these programs are useful for identifying basic problems like grammar and spelling errors, they frequently fall short when it comes to more complex evaluations of academic writing (Abu Qub'a et al., 2024). This has sparked questions about how well these tools work to help students write essays that are cohesive and well-structured, especially in academic contexts. Big language models, like GPT-4, have also demonstrated promise in supporting educators in marking and commenting on essays. By looking at several linguistic aspects, these models provide a more thorough evaluation of the quality of essays (Pack et al., 2024).

These results point to the necessity of more focused interventions to deal with these enduring problems. And last, one more important thing to think about is how task representation affects writing performance. According to Taye and Mengesha's (2024) analysis and identification of typical writing challenges faced by undergraduate students, these impediments may lower the general caliber of their academic output. Cheong, Liu, and Mu (2024) looked into the relationship between students' performance in argumentative writing and their task representation. Their findings indicated that teachers should place more emphasis on task comprehension as part of writing instruction because it has a beneficial impact on writing outcomes. However, Indonesian EFL students face significant challenges in essay writing, including issues with grammar, coherence, and organization (Toba et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown that while some Indonesian EFL students exhibit proficient writing skills, others struggle due to limited exposure to effective teaching methods and writing strategies (Nirwanto et al., 2024) Even though these researches have shed light on typical writing difficulties,

automated assessment systems, and L2 writing development, more research is still required to determine how these elements affect academic writing performance across linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By investigating analysis mistake in essay writing, this study seeks to expand on previously published research.

Several studies have shown how common writing errors are among college students. According to Baker (2021), students frequently make grammatical errors, syntactic problems, and organizational difficulties in their writing. These mistakes can lessen the coherence of students' ideas and the impact of their essays. The creation of focused writing instruction that targets certain deficits can be informed by an understanding of the kinds of errors that students typically make. According to Wang et al. (2024), EFL students frequently struggle with argumentative writing, where factors such as subject, community, and rules significantly influence their performance in a blended learning context. These issues often manifest in grammatical mistakes, improper sentence structure, and lack of coherence. Murphy (2019) also highlights frequent errors like subject-verb agreement and run-on sentences among EFL learners, which can reduce the quality of their essays. Addressing these challenges is essential for improving writing outcomes and academic success.

Writing errors among EFL students can significantly hinder their overall writing performance and academic success. Kormos et al. (2024) found that while creativity plays a role in writing tasks, it can also lead to lower writing quality if not balanced with other essential writing skills. Common errors often arise from a lack of grammatical complexity, improper lexical choices, and syntactic issues, which collectively detract from the clarity and coherence of their essays. Additionally, the emphasis on creative expression may sometimes overshadow the fundamental mechanics of writing, resulting in a disorganized presentation of ideas. Addressing these writing errors through targeted pedagogical interventions can enhance students' academic writing proficiency and boost their confidence in expressing their thoughts effectively. The structural arrangement of essays, which is crucial to good writing, is one area of interest. Ransdell and Levy (2019) discovered that a lot of students have trouble writing essays that are well-structured; they frequently struggle to come up with strong thesis statements or cohesive paragraphs. The essays' readability as well as the general caliber of the arguments made by the students are impacted by this lack of structural integrity. Through quantitative analysis of these organizational problems, teachers can gain a better understanding of the particular areas in which pupils require assistance.

Furthermore, the development of technology has changed how writing is taught and practiced. Digital tools like grammar checkers and spell checkers can give instant feedback, but they can also result in a shallow comprehension of writing mechanics (Miller & Dwyer, 2020). Pupils risk becoming unduly dependent on these resources and failing to interact with the basic principles of writing. An examination of the influence of technology on writing skills from a quantitative perspective can provide valuable information on how it affects student performance. Writing mistakes have consequences that go beyond a student's academic achievement; they can also have an impact on their anxiety and sense of self. According to research by Smith et al. (2022), students who have trouble writing may also be more anxious when it comes to writing, which can impede their ability to write and their desire to complete writing assignments. This psychological component emphasizes how crucial it is to handle writing errors as a matter of course as well as a factor affecting students' overall educational experience.

Motivation is a key driver in educational achievement, particularly in challenging areas such as writing for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. According to Limeranto and Mbato (2022), motivation influences not only students' engagement in learning activities but also their performance outcomes, especially in skills that require sustained effort, like essay writing. For Indonesian EFL students, low motivation can hinder writing proficiency, making it essential to understand and foster motivational factors. The study found that both external factors, like teaching methods and teacher attitudes, and internal factors, such as linguistic competence, impact students' motivation levels (Limeranto & Mbato, 2022). Thus, enhancing motivation could be a promising strategy to improve writing achievement in EFL contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the common writing errors made by Indonesian EFL university students. By analyzing the students' essays, we determined which linguistic faults were common and how much they detracted from the overall quality of the students' writing. This study provided insightful information on the pedagogical approaches needed to rectify these mistakes, improving students' writing ability and academic achievement. The participants in this study consisted of 60 EFL students at an Islamic university in Indonesia. However, only 11 second-year students and 20 third-year students were available to join. The random selection aimed to ensure a representative sample of the overall student population. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants signed consent forms prior to their involvement. Each participant completed an essay writing task based on a relevant topic from their coursework (e.g., a 500-word argumentative essay). This task allowed for an authentic assessment of their writing skills. The essays were submitted both electronically and in hard copy. The collected essays were analyzed based on the predefined error categories. The errors were coded and sorted according to the checklist. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to determine the most common errors.

The results were presented in tables and charts, offering a clear visual representation of error frequency. Statistical analysis software such as JASP was utilized to ensure accuracy in data interpretation.

### Error Checklist and Categories by Murphy, R. (2019)

- a. Subject-Verb Agreement
- b. Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices
- c. Incorrect Use of Articles (A, An, The)
- d. Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers
- e. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement
- f. Confusion Between "Its" and "It's"
- g. Incorrect Verb Tense Usage
- h. Confusion Using Adjective and Adverb
- i. Double Negatives
- j. Misspelling

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the essays revealed a total of 33 errors across 10 paragraphs, categorized according to Murphy's (2019) linguistic error checklist. A total of 33 mistakes were found in the 10 paragraphs that the participants submitted, according to the analysis. These mistakes were divided into various categories of linguistic errors. The following is a breakdown of these errors:

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Results of the Writing Frequency

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

	How often do you write essays as practice before a Writing class?	Did you ever get any specific guidance or feedback from the lecturer on how to improve your essay writing?	How much interest do you have in writing essays in English?
Valid	35	35	35
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	2.114	2.486	2.400
Std.	1.022	1.121	0.695

*Descriptive Statistics*

	How often do you write essays as practice before a Writing class?	Did you ever get any specific guidance or feedback from the lecturer on how to improve your essay writing?	How much interest do you have in writing essays in English?
Deviation			
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	4.000	4.000	4.000

## 1. Incorrect Use of Articles

The incorrect use of articles emerged as the most prevalent type of error among learners, accounting for 27% of the total mistakes identified in their writing. The most frequent mistake, accounting for 27% of errors, was the incorrect use of articles, reflecting students' struggles with this unique aspect of English grammar, as also observed by Taye and Mengesha (2024).

## 2. Subject-Verb Agreement

Students also faced significant difficulties with subject-verb agreement errors, which classified for six errors. Making sure that the subject and verb in a sentence agree in number was a common challenge for the participants. These results align with Nirwanto et al. (2024), who found that grammatical errors and a lack of familiarity with academic writing conventions heavily impacted Indonesian EFL students' writing quality.

## 3. Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Misplaced or dangling modifiers were another frequent problem; they resulted four times in the texts under analysis.

## 4. Misspelling and Verb Tense

Significant problems also included misspellings and wrong use of verb tenses, which happened four and three times, respectively. Implications of Language Learning Several important conclusions about students' essay writing habits and attitudes can be drawn from the survey data collected from 31 respondents:

## 1. Frequency of Essay Writing activities

The result shows a range of essay writing proficiency levels currently enrolled in the writing course:

- Sering (Often): 2 students (6.5%)
- Kadang-kadang (occasionally): 12 students (38.7%).
- Jarang (Seldom): 11 students (35.5%).
- There were 6 students (19.3%) who said Tidak Pernah (never).

## 2. Feedback and Guidance

Students expressed varying levels of job satisfaction with the lecturers' feedback:

- Sering (Often): 6 students (19.3%)
- Kadang-kadang (occasionally): 11 students (35.5%).
- Jarang seldom): 7 students (22.6%).
- Tidak Pernah (Never): use by 7 students (22.6%).

## 3. Interest in Writing Essays in English

The following is a sharing of the students' interest levels in writing English essays:

- Sangat Tertarik: Extremely Inquisitive 2 students (6.5%)
- Tertarik (interested) chosen by 15 students (48.4%).
- Tidak terlalu tertarik (not very interested) 11 students (35.5%).
- Tidak tertarik (not interested) only 3 students (9.6%).

## 4. Allocation of Semesters

The participants were drawn from various semesters:

- 3rd semester: 12 students (38.7%).
- 5th semester: 19 students (61.3%).

According to these findings, even though 48.4% of students say they are interested in writing essays in English, only 45.2% of them actually practice rarely or frequently, which is a conservative to low frequency. Additionally, the data indicates that there is a wide range of feedback from lecturers, with 54.8% reporting unexpected or frequent guidance. The survey data further revealed that while 48.4% of students expressed interest in writing English essays, only 45.2% practiced with low frequency. Feedback from lecturers was inconsistent, with only 19.3% of students receiving regular guidance. These findings resonate with Ratnawati et al. (2018), who highlighted that Indonesian EFL students faced challenges in academic writing due to limited exposure to structured feedback and insufficient practice opportunities. Similarly, Rostanti et al. (2019) emphasized that both internal factors (e.g., writing anxiety and low motivation) and external factors (e.g., inadequate teaching strategies) contribute to students' difficulties.

This discussion section outlines the research findings, analyzes the similarities and differences with previous studies, and connects them to relevant literature. This study explores common writing errors in essays among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students at an Islamic institution in Indonesia. Using descriptive quantitative analysis, the researcher found that incorrect article usage was the most common error (27%), followed by subject-verb agreement mistakes and misplaced modifiers. Errors in verb tense and spelling were also observed, though to a lesser extent. This study aligns with Baker's (2021) findings, which indicated that grammatical and syntactic errors frequently occur in student writing. These issues impact the coherence of essays and reduce the quality of ideas being communicated. The frequent article usage errors observed among participants in this study reflect the challenges highlighted in Taye and Mengesha's (2024) research, where students often struggled with English article usage due to differences in grammatical structure between English and their native language.

Additionally, the findings confirm Abu Qub'a et al.'s (2024) conclusion that automated assessment tools like Grammarly can identify basic errors but are less effective at evaluating the complexity of academic writing. This supports the argument that pedagogical interventions focusing on functional grammar are necessary to enhance student's writing abilities, particularly in real-world contexts. The following is a breakdown of these errors:

1. Subject-Verb Agreement:

"those the best way" should be those are the best ways for correct subject-verb agreement. For instance, in order to achieve stable agreement, the phrase "makes it look like" should have been changed to "makes it look like." The utilization of English verb complexation rules, particularly in contrast to more straightforward systems in other languages, maybe the cause of this problem. Students' efficiency in this domain would probably increase if these grammatical rules were highlighted through repetition and organized practice.

2. Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices:

"The big field of salt, makes it look like sea" → There should not be a comma between the subject and the verb. It should be: The big field of salt proper spelling of "sandcastle").

3. Incorrect Article Use

This issue is particularly pronounced for learners whose native languages do not share similar grammatical structures with English, making the acquisition of article usage more challenging. In English, the articles "a," "an," and "the" serve distinct functions that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. This discrepancy can lead to significant misunderstandings in their writing and communication. For instance, many students tend to use "the" in contexts where it is not required, or they may overlook the necessity of articles altogether. A common error is the omission of an article in phrases like "I went to beach" instead of the correct "I went to a beach." This not only affects the grammatical accuracy of their sentences but also

hinders the clarity of their ideas.

Such mistakes suggest a lack of familiarity with the rules governing definite and indefinite articles, which are essential for conveying specificity and generality in English. To address these weaknesses, it would be beneficial to implement focused exercises and instructional strategies that highlight the use of articles in various contexts. Activities could include targeted writing tasks, explicit teaching of article rules, and peer review sessions where students can identify and correct article usage in each other's work. By providing learners with ample opportunities to practice and receive feedback on their article use, educators can help solidify their understanding and improve their overall writing quality. This emphasis on article usage not only aims to enhance grammatical proficiency but also fosters greater confidence in their writing abilities, ultimately contributing to their success in academic settings.

4. Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers:

"Of I go there" → should be If I go there, as "of" was incorrect.

This kind of mistake raises the possibility that students are not fully acquiring sentence structure, specifically how to arrange descriptive phrases to best express their original meaning. Students may be able to avoid these mistakes with more detailed instruction on grammatical structure and modifier placement.

5. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement:

No major issues here, though you might want to rephrase "I and my family" to my family and I for better flow.

6. Confusion Between "Its" and "It's":

"it's famous fashion scene" → should be its famous fashion scene (correct possessive form).

7. Incorrect Verb Tense Usage:

"I really want to trying hotpot" → should be I really want to try hotpot (correct verb form).

8. Confusion using Adjective and Adverb:

"its likes so wonderful" → should be it's so wonderful (remove unnecessary "likes").

9. Double Negatives:

No major issues here.

10. Misspelling:

"kpopers" → should be K-pop fan (proper term).

Spelling mistakes and other digital tools can help identify misspellings, but students who become overly dependent on them may not comprehend the fundamentals of correct spelling. Similar to this, tense mistakes, like writing "I always have a dream" rather than "I have always dreamed," indicate a need for a deeper understanding of English's temporal markers and their correct forms. The ability to select the correct verb tense not only reflects a command of grammar but also demonstrates a student's understanding of the timeline of actions, enabling them to communicate their ideas effectively. The survey's findings list a number of pedagogical implications for enhancing EFL students' writing instruction. First and probably most important, since articles and verb conjugation are deep foundations of difficulty, there needs to be a strong focus on functional grammar. Instead of using isolated exercises, teachers should include more contextual exercises that let students practice these components in real-world writing assignments. Furthermore, giving students direct feedback on their writing could improve their comprehension and eliminate repeated errors, particularly when it comes to subject-verb agreement and modifier usage.

Besides, students might gain from teaching them sentence combining and grammar skills that highlight how to build complex sentences without using run-ons, especially since run-on sentences became less common but still present. In summary, this study shows that EFL students consistently struggle with writing errors, especially in basic grammatical categories. To help students become

more proficient in written English, these problems must be solved with specific strategies, such as grammar lessons and real-world writing assignments. According to the cumulative results for all the paragraphs, the most frequent error type was wrong article usage, which recorded for 9 out of 33 errors (27%). This assumes that during writing exercises, careful attention must be paid to the proper use of articles. The results are summarized in Table. The analysis's conclusions point to the participants' main areas of difficulty, particularly with regard to subject-verb agreement, proper article usage, and misplaced modifiers. Although many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners still struggle with these linguistic elements, they are important for creating sentences that are both grammatically correct and coherent.

The results of this study suggest that errors in article usage, subject-verb agreement, and modifiers are major challenges for EFL students. It is crucial to develop teaching approaches that focus more on functional grammar and provide direct feedback to students to help them correct these mistakes. The use of automated assessment tools such as Grammarly should be supplemented with instruction that emphasizes a deeper understanding of grammatical rules. These findings also underscore the importance of understanding task representation in writing, as noted by Cheong, Liu, and Mu (2024), who found that task comprehension positively influences writing quality. Therefore, writing instruction should include task comprehension components to help students produce more cohesive and well-structured essays.

Based on the survey data from 31 respondents, several key insights can be drawn about students' essay writing habits, their engagement levels, and the quality of feedback they receive. The data shows a relatively low frequency of essay writing among the students, with only a small fraction (6.5%) writing essay often. A significant portion (38.7%) writes occasionally, while the majority (54.8%) rarely or never engage in this activity. This infrequency suggests that although students are enrolled in a writing course, they might lack motivation or confidence, or possibly experience limited opportunities to practice essay writing. Feedback is crucial for developing writing skills, yet the survey shows mixed results in students' satisfaction with the feedback provided by their lecturers. Only 19.3% report often receiving feedback, while a larger percentage (35.5%) receive it occasionally, and the rest receive it rarely or never. Effective feedback is essential in EFL writing to help students refine their language skills, but inconsistent feedback may lead to difficulties in improving. Research suggests that feedback frequency and clarity play a significant role in student confidence and writing development (Wulandari, 2022). This inconsistency may contribute to the low frequency of writing activities, as students could feel unsupported in their learning process.

While 48.4% of students reported an interest in writing essays in English, only a small fraction reported writing often. This gap between interest and activity suggests barriers that might prevent students from engaging in essay writing despite their interest. The survey sample includes students from both the 3rd (38.7%) and 5th (61.3%) semesters, which may impact their writing frequency and feedback expectations. Fifth-semester students might be expected to have a stronger writing habit due to longer exposure to academic writing activities. However, if these students also show low writing frequency, it could indicate persistent issues across semesters, possibly related to curriculum design or instructor engagement strategies.

These findings reveal an interesting discrepancy between students' interest in English essay writing and their actual practice frequency. While nearly half of the students (48.4%) express an interest in writing, only 45.2% engage in writing activities with conservative to low frequency. This gap suggests that, despite the motivation, there are likely barriers preventing consistent practice, possibly due to challenges like time constraints or confidence issues in writing skills. Additionally, the diversity in feedback styles from lecturers—where 54.8% of students experience unexpected or frequent guidance—indicates a lack of standardized feedback approaches. This inconsistency might affect students' clarity on expectations and progress, potentially impacting their overall writing development. Addressing these feedback gaps could provide students with more reliable support

and reinforce their motivation to write regularly.

This study has limitations due to its small sample size and narrow focus, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Further research is needed to explore how independent variables, such as linguistic and cultural background, influence academic writing outcomes. Additionally, the potential use of AI by participants, given that the essays were collected without supervision, should also be considered in future studies.

## CONCLUSION

Writing errors in essays written by EFL students at an Islamic institution in Indonesia, focusing on grammatical and syntactical mistakes. The findings revealed that incorrect article usage was the most frequent error, followed by subject-verb agreement issues and improper modifier placement. These results align with previous studies highlighting the persistent struggles EFL learners face with English grammar, particularly in areas where their native language structures differ significantly from English. The study reinforces the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that emphasize functional grammar and provide direct, meaningful feedback to students. While automated tools like Grammarly can assist in identifying basic errors, they are insufficient for addressing more complex aspects of academic writing. Therefore, teachers must integrate technology with comprehensive grammar instruction to improve students' writing skills.

However, the study's limitations, including its small sample size of only 31 participants due to time constraints and limited participant availability, highlight the need for a broader sample size, ideally between 50-60 participants. Future research should consider these adjustments and also examine variables such as linguistic background and cultural influences, which may significantly impact writing quality. Additionally, investigating the role of AI usage by students during unsupervised tasks could provide valuable insights. This study provides insight into the prevalent linguistic errors and writing habits among EFL students, highlighting challenges in areas such as article usage, subject-verb agreement, and modifier placement. These findings underscore the need for targeted grammar instruction and consistent, functional feedback from educators to address these recurring issues, which impact both grammatical accuracy and clarity in students' writing. Additionally, the discrepancy between students' interest in writing and their actual writing frequency points to potential motivational or structural barriers in the learning environment, suggesting that a more supportive and engaging curriculum could encourage regular writing practice. However, the study's small sample size and unsupervised essay collection present limitations, indicating that future research should involve larger sample sizes and explore external factors, such as linguistic and cultural influences, that may affect writing quality. Integrating such factors would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges EFL students face in developing proficient academic writing skills.

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