

## Analysis of EFL Students' Grammatical Errors in Writing Literature Review

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### Abstract

*This study aimed to identify and analyze the grammatical errors made by EFL students in writing the literature review chapter of their undergraduate theses at Universitas Negeri Makassar. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the researcher analyzed 15 theses submitted in 2024. The data were collected from the university library and examined based on Azar and Hagen's (2009) 14 types of grammatical error classification. The findings revealed that students made errors in all 14 categories, including singular-plural, word form, word choice, verb tense, omission, addition, word order, incomplete sentence, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, article, unclear meaning, and run-on sentence. The most dominant type of error was punctuation, followed by word choice and singular-plural. These results indicate that students still struggle with grammatical accuracy in academic writing. The study suggests the need for more focused grammar instruction, the integration of digital tools, and the development of effective grammar teaching strategies to improve students' writing quality.*

**Keywords:** Grammatical Errors; EFL Students; Academic Writing; Literature Review; Error Analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Writing is an essential skill in mastering English, especially for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Writing skills are specialized abilities that enable authors to meaningfully convey their ideas via words and engage readers with the content (Olimovna, 2023). It allows learners to express ideas clearly and logically while demonstrating their understanding of the language. In academic contexts, effective writing reflects not only language proficiency but also the ability to organize ideas coherently. Among the four core language skills, writing holds a vital role because it showcases a student's overall competence and directly affects academic success.

Grammar plays a fundamental role in shaping students' writing quality. Without a solid understanding of grammar, students may produce unclear or structurally weak sentences that confuse readers. Rossiter (2021) stated that any language learner who wants to go over a basic level of expression must grasp the fundamental grammar rules and concepts. Grammar ensures clarity, precision, and consistency, especially in academic writing where formal standards must be met. Therefore, mastering grammatical rules allows students to write with confidence and produce logically connected ideas, helping them communicate effectively in both academic and professional settings.

However, grammar is one of the most challenging aspects of English for EFL learners. The complex rules of English, such as subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and article usage, often differ greatly from those in students' first languages. As a result, EFL students frequently make grammatical errors in their writing. Several studies have shown high numbers of grammatical mistakes in students' essays, particularly involving verb tense, article use, and

sentence structure (Yusuf et al., 2021; Latupeirissa and Sayd, 2019; Qamariah et al., 2020). These recurring errors highlight the importance of continuous grammar instruction and analysis to help learners overcome common writing difficulties.

Mastering grammar is therefore essential for EFL students to produce accurate and meaningful academic writing. Pasaribu (2022) highlights that mastering grammar, especially tenses, is fundamental for EFL students to produce academic writing that effectively communicates their ideas. Strong grammar knowledge enhances clarity and ensures that students' intended messages are communicated precisely. In written communication, where readers cannot ask for clarification, grammatical accuracy becomes even more important. Developing this skill not only helps students meet academic standards but also supports their overall English proficiency and confidence as writers.

Academic writing, including papers and theses, requires high grammatical accuracy and coherence. In Indonesia, writing a thesis is a mandatory requirement for university students to complete their studies. Among the thesis chapters, the literature review is considered one of the most difficult to write because it requires summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing academic sources while maintaining grammatical accuracy. Many students struggle with grammar in this section, resulting in errors that reduce the clarity and credibility of their work (Sugeng, 2016). Therefore, analyzing grammatical errors in the literature review is crucial to improving students' academic writing skills.

Previous studies have investigated grammatical errors in various types of student writing, such as essays and thesis introductions (Zulfikar, 2020; Susanto & Widyaningsih, 2012; Hani, 2021). However, most of these studies used limited frameworks like Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which classifies errors into only four categories: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The present study, by contrast, uses Azar and Hagen's (2009) more detailed 14-type error classification, allowing a broader and deeper analysis of grammatical issues.

This study focused on analyzing grammatical errors in the literature review chapter of undergraduate theses written by English Education students at Universitas Negeri Makassar in 2024. By identifying the types and frequency of grammatical errors, this research aimed to provide updated insights into students' grammatical difficulties and offer practical recommendations for improving grammar instruction. The results are expected to guide teachers, students, and future researchers in developing more effective strategies to enhance grammatical accuracy in academic writing.

## **METHOD**

This research employed a descriptive qualitative design using document analysis to examine grammatical errors in the literature review chapters of undergraduate theses written by English Education students at Universitas Negeri Makassar in 2024. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide a detailed and accurate description of the grammatical issues appearing in students' academic writing, offering a deeper understanding of their language use. The setting was selected as the research site because it provides a structured academic environment where students are required to produce formal English writing. Additionally, previous studies, such as Bakir et al. (2025), revealed that many English Education students at the university still made grammatical mistakes, especially in misformation, indicating persistent grammar difficulties.

The data source consisted of 15 theses selected from 90 English Education students' theses submitted in 2024. Only the literature review chapters were analyzed, as this section

requires students to demonstrate higher levels of grammatical and academic writing competence. The researcher used a grammar error analysis table based on Azar and Hagen’s (2009) 14 error classifications, which include singular–plural, word form, word choice, verb tense, omission, addition, word order, incomplete sentence, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, article, unclear meaning, and run-on sentence.

The research procedure followed the stages of Corder’s (1974) error analysis framework: data collection, error identification, error description, error evaluation, and conclusion. The researcher collected and reviewed the theses, identified and categorized all grammatical errors, and analyzed their frequency to determine the most dominant types. Through this process, the study provided insights into students’ common grammatical problems and offered recommendations to improve grammar instruction and writing skills in EFL academic contexts.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

Based on Azar and Hagen’s (2009) 14-type error classification, the researcher identified that grammatical errors occurred across all categories. This shows that even at the university level, students still face difficulties in applying grammatical accuracy in academic writing. The total number of errors found was 837, indicating that grammatical mastery among students still needs significant improvement and that students continue to struggle with both structural and mechanical aspects of writing.

Types of Errors	Students' Theses															Total	Percentage
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15		
Singular-Plural	2	12	24	2	2	2	4	2	3	7	5	7	5	3	9	89	10.6
Word Form	3	0	4	1	0	1	1	2	2	0	1	2	0	5	1	23	2.7
Word Choice	7	10	20	5	3	8	11	5	3	6	8	7	1	8	16	118	14.1
Verb Tense	1	4	26	1	3	1	0	2	2	3	0	6	2	17	2	70	8.4
Omission	2	6	4	1	5	2	3	5	1	1	4	9	1	2	4	50	6.0
Addition	3	1	14	0	4	6	4	8	2	2	3	7	3	11	14	82	9.8
Word Order	1	1	3	2	1	0	2	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	4	17	2.0
Incomplete Sentence	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	0.5
Spelling	1	0	2	3	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	1	19	2.3
Punctuation	9	18	38	16	34	6	16	9	3	11	7	11	8	12	9	207	24.7
Capitalization	2	1	17	1	8	1	3	1	8	1	0	6	0	6	0	55	6.6
Article	2	13	26	8	3	2	3	1	1	4	1	4	2	7	5	82	9.8
Unclear Meaning	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	0.5
Run-on Sentence	0	4	1	1	4	0	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	17	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 Overview of Grammatical Errors

The first major finding concerned the types of grammatical errors, which include singular-plural, word form, word choice, verb tense, omission, addition, word order, incomplete sentence, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, article, unclear meaning, and run-on sentence errors. Each of these appeared in varying frequencies, demonstrating that students experience challenges in maintaining grammatical accuracy, sentence structure, and writing mechanics.

The singular-plural errors were frequent, as students often used incorrect forms of singular and plural nouns or failed to match singular and plural verbs properly. This shows that number agreement remains a persistent issue. The word form errors appeared when students used the wrong grammatical form or part of speech, such as using a noun instead of an adjective, leading to ungrammatical or awkward sentences. Word choice errors were also common and included the misuse of words, incorrect prepositions or pronouns, and

inappropriate collocations. Many of these mistakes occurred due to direct translation from Indonesian to English or insufficient vocabulary mastery.

Verb tense errors were also frequent, especially the use of incorrect tenses or failure to maintain consistency throughout a paragraph. Some students also confused active and passive voice forms, which made their writing unclear and grammatically inaccurate. Omission errors occurred when students left out necessary grammatical elements, such as articles, verbs, or prepositions, making the sentences incomplete or grammatically incorrect. In contrast, addition errors appeared when students inserted unnecessary words or grammatical elements that disrupted sentence clarity.

Word order errors reflected students' difficulty in arranging words correctly within a sentence, often resulting in unnatural English sentence structures influenced by their first language. Incomplete sentence errors occurred when students wrote fragments without a clear subject or predicate, making the meaning hard to understand. Spelling errors were found in many theses, showing a lack of careful proofreading, while punctuation errors were the most dominant type, including incorrect or missing commas, periods, and parentheses in citations. These punctuation mistakes often interfered with sentence clarity and overall academic readability.

Capitalization errors appeared when students failed to capitalize the first word of a sentence or proper nouns, while some used unnecessary capitalization for common words. Article errors were another common issue, as students struggled to distinguish when to use a/an or the, leading to confusion in specificity and reference. Unclear meaning errors showed that some sentences were too vague or confusing, reflecting poor sentence construction and lack of lexical precision. Lastly, run-on sentence errors occurred when two or more independent clauses were joined without proper punctuation or conjunctions, making the sentences difficult to follow.

The overall error distribution revealed that the five most frequent error types were punctuation, word choice, singular-plural, addition, and article errors, indicating that most students still struggle with both grammatical accuracy and mechanical correctness in their academic writing. Punctuation errors were found to be the most dominant, particularly the misuse or omission of commas, periods, and parentheses in citations. These errors often disrupted the logical flow of sentences and weakened the readability of academic texts. Word choice errors followed closely, with students frequently selecting words that did not fit the intended context—often caused by literal translation from their first language or limited vocabulary mastery. Errors in singular-plural forms showed students' difficulties in maintaining number agreement between subjects and verbs, which is a fundamental grammatical rule in English. Additionally, article errors appeared in many cases, where students either omitted necessary articles or used a/an and the incorrectly, affecting the precision and clarity of meaning. Addition errors also occurred frequently when students inserted unnecessary words or repeated grammatical elements, leading to redundancy and confusion in sentence construction.

On the other hand, incomplete sentence and run-on sentence errors were less frequent but still noteworthy because they revealed weaknesses in students' ability to construct grammatically complete and cohesive sentences. Incomplete sentences often lacked a subject or predicate, resulting in fragmented ideas, while run-on sentences combined multiple independent clauses without proper punctuation, making the text difficult to follow. Together, these findings suggest that EFL students' challenges are not limited to mastering grammar rules but also extend to the mechanical aspects of writing, such as structure, coherence, and

formality. The persistence of these errors, even among university students who have completed formal grammar instruction, indicates a gap between grammatical knowledge and its practical application in academic writing. Therefore, these results emphasize the need for targeted grammar instruction that focuses not only on rule memorization but also on applying grammar accurately in authentic academic contexts, particularly in thesis writing where linguistic precision is highly valued.

## Discussion

The findings of this research confirm that EFL students still struggle with a broad range of grammatical issues when writing the literature review chapter of their theses. The errors spanned all fourteen categories of Azar and Hagen's (2009) classification, showing that both linguistic and mechanical difficulties persist. This result supports Guo's (2022) view that grammatical errors are a natural part of language learning, serving as evidence of learners' developing interlanguage systems. However, the high frequency of errors found indicates that many students have not yet bridged the gap between grammatical knowledge and its practical application in academic writing.

The dominance of punctuation errors suggests that students tend to focus more on content than on accuracy. Many neglected the rules for comma placement, citation punctuation, and sentence separation. Similar findings were reported by Fitria (2022) and Yuliawati (2021), who observed that punctuation errors were the most common mechanical issue among EFL writers. Punctuation mistakes often make sentences confusing and reduce academic readability. This shows the need for teachers to provide explicit instruction on writing mechanics, as these are essential for clarity and coherence.

Word choice errors ranked second in frequency, revealing that students struggled to select contextually appropriate vocabulary. Many instances were caused by direct translation from Indonesian or limited exposure to English academic texts. This aligns with Zeinali (2025), who emphasized that interlingual transfer can lead learners to select incorrect words that seem semantically close but are grammatically unsuitable. These findings highlight the importance of vocabulary enrichment and reading academic sources to improve lexical awareness in writing.

Another common issue, singular-plural and article errors, reflects the influence of the Indonesian language, which lacks plural verb forms and definite/indefinite article systems. Similar results were found by Sarasua (2021) and Khansa & Purnamasari (2024), who noted that EFL learners often confuse the use of "a," "an," and "the" or forget to mark plural nouns. These structural weaknesses indicate that learners need continued reinforcement of fundamental grammar principles, especially number agreement and determiner usage, in real academic contexts rather than in isolated grammar exercises.

Overall, the findings suggest that even advanced EFL learners tend to prioritize meaning over form. This supports Maitlo et al. (2023), who observed that students often neglect small structural details such as punctuation and verb forms when focusing on idea development. To address this issue, teachers should integrate explicit grammar practice with academic writing instruction, emphasizing revision and peer feedback to raise students' awareness of accuracy. Additionally, self-editing tools and grammar-checking applications can be used under supervision to help students recognize and correct their own mistakes.



## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings revealed that EFL students made grammatical errors in all 14 categories proposed by Azar and Hagen (2009), indicating ongoing challenges in both basic and complex aspects of grammar when producing academic writing. The most frequent errors occurred in punctuation, followed by word choice, singular–plural, addition, and article errors. These patterns suggest that students often struggle with sentence mechanics and lexical accuracy, and may still transfer structures or habits from their first language into English.

Despite having completed formal grammar instruction, students continued to make frequent grammatical mistakes, showing a clear gap between grammatical knowledge and its application in writing. This highlights the need for continuous grammar-focused instruction that emphasizes accuracy, coherence, and adherence to academic writing conventions. Strengthening students' awareness of these aspects can help them produce more precise, organized, and professional academic texts.

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