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Assessing mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns in written English grammatical accuracy among English language learners at SIMAD University, Somalia

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Abstract

This study examined mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns in the written English grammatical accuracy of first-year learners at SIMAD University. Grounded in Error Analysis theory, this study used a descriptive quantitative design and analyzed 223 in-class written essays (100–150 words) to identify, classify, and quantify learner errors. An error identification checklist grouped errors into 11 types and three operational categories: mechanical errors (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling), morphological errors (tense errors), and syntactic errors (word order, fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, phrasing, prepositions, and general grammar). A total of 2,270 errors were noted. The results showed that syntactic errors were the most frequent category (49.87%), followed by mechanical errors (31.06%) and morphological errors (19.07%). The most frequent individual errors were tense errors (19.07%), punctuation (15.64%), sentence fragments (11.67%), and grammar errors (10.31%). The study concludes that targeted instruction should address sentence-level structure, tense accuracy, and written mechanical conventions separately, rather than treating all errors as either morphological or syntactic. Because the data were limited to short written essays and error counts, the findings were interpreted as evidence of written grammatical accuracy rather than broad English proficiency. Limitations include exclusive reliance on written data and a descriptive design. Longitudinal, cross-institutional, and mixed-method studies are recommended to further explore the development of written grammatical accuracy.

Clinical trial number: Not applicable.

Keywords Mechanical errors, Morphological errors, Syntactic errors, Written grammatical accuracy, Written morphosyntactic accuracy, Error Analysis, SIMAD University

Introduction

Written English accuracy in tertiary EFL contexts is best examined at the level of learners' actual written production because university students must control written conventions, word-level morphology, and sentence-level syntax simultaneously. Mechanical conventions, such as punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, guide readability and sentence-boundary marking; morphological control supports accurate tense and verb forms; and syntactic control enables learners to build complete clauses, combine ideas, and avoid fragments, run-ons, comma splices, and non-standard word order (Crossley et al., 2019; Hyland, 2019). In the present study, these dimensions were examined through error frequencies in short essays written by first-year Somali university students, and the findings were interpreted as evidence of written grammatical accuracy rather than broad English proficiency.

There is a significant disparity between the level of English grammatical accuracy expected in university academic writing and the actual written performance of Somali university students. English is predominantly acknowledged as the medium of teaching in higher education; however, students often demonstrate significant shortcomings in written grammar, particularly in morphology and syntax. Gadieva and Koffi (2025) assert that challenges such as nonsensical phrases and incorrect verb tense use persist in the output. This indicates that acquiring accurate written English grammar as a second language remains difficult for many learners of English.

Previous studies suggest that Somali learners may experience difficulty constructing English sentences in contexts where there are structural differences between Somali and English may be relevant. Jerald and Nuh (2024) reported that some learner patterns may be discussed in relation to Somali grammatical norms. In the present study, however, such language-transfer explanations are treated only as contextual background; the analysis itself does not code individual errors as interlingual or intralingual errors.

Students have limited opportunities to thoroughly immerse themselves in the target language, as Somali is predominantly used in both official and informal contexts, resulting in limited exposure to authentic English. According to Mohamed (2024), learners are less likely to encounter English in classrooms where Somali is used, and conventional lecture-based approaches do not promote active language use. In light of these contextual barriers, it is difficult for young individuals to improve their written accuracy and academic writing skills.

The learner texts suggest that students experience difficulty in developing academic writing competence within these linguistic and educational conditions. Students often have difficulties in constructing arguments, composing formal papers, and organizing sentences accurately. Gadieva and Koffi (2025), Jerald and Nuh (2024), and Mohamed (2024) indicate that learner-centered methodologies, heightened English exposure, and targeted language support are needed for Somali learners. This research, which concentrates on identifying specific mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns in students' short English essays, is particularly pertinent for English language educators in Somalia. The documented written error patterns can inform instructional adjustments focused on written conventions, word formation, sentence structure, grammar, and written accuracy. This provides descriptive evidence for refining academic writing instruction and teaching methodologies. The findings of this research will also assist curriculum developers. The study provides evidence that may help English language

materials focus on areas where students often struggle in written production. Developers may create more effective and motivating language programs by aligning the curriculum with students' actual writing needs. The study is also beneficial for scholars responsible for policy formulation. Decisions about teacher training, professional development, and the distribution of educational resources may be informed by the gathered data. Policies based on actual classroom writing challenges and student outcomes will be more relevant and effective in improving university-level English writing instruction. This project aims to enhance the quality of English language training at SIMAD University by offering guidance for pedagogy, curriculum development, and policy formulation in relation to written grammatical accuracy.

To achieve the aforementioned promises, this study seeks to:

1. identify the most common mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors in students' short English essays.
2. categorize the most common written error patterns into mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors.
3. analyze the distribution of mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns as indicators of written grammatical accuracy among English language learners.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Error Analysis Theory as originally formulated by Corder's (1967) article on the significance of learner errors, consulted in this study through its 2015 Routledge reprint; therefore, Corder is cited consistently as (Corder, 1967, 2015) to show both the original publication date and the reprinted source used. Error Analysis (EA) emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s as an approach for examining learner errors as systematic evidence of developing language knowledge rather than random failures (Richards & Schmidt, 2013; Gayo & Widodo, 2018). In its full form, EA may involve identifying, describing, classifying, explaining, and evaluating errors. However, the present study uses EA primarily as a descriptive taxonomy for organizing written errors. Therefore, it does not claim to provide a full causal explanation of the sources of learners' errors.

Ellis (1997) and Heydari and Bagheri (2012) note that error classification can illuminate learners' developing control of target-language rules. The broader EA literature also distinguishes intralingual errors, which may arise from overgeneralization or incomplete rule learning, from interlingual errors, which may arise from first-language influence. In the present study, this distinction is acknowledged theoretically but not applied as a coding category because the data consist only of written essays and frequency counts rather than interviews, think-aloud protocols, learner histories, or contrastive source-evidence for each error.

Recent EFL writing studies have shown that frequent learner errors often cluster around verb forms, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, sentence structure, and written conventions, especially when students are asked to produce academic essays rather than isolated grammar exercises (Gayo & Widodo, 2018; Issa et al., 2025; Masruddin & Nasriandi, 2022). This makes EA useful for the present study because it helps classify observable errors in authentic student writing without assuming that each error can be traced to a specific reason.

Research conducted by Gayo and Widodo (2018) and Masruddin and Nasriandi (2022) illustrates the continued usefulness of Error Analysis Theory in identifying learner difficulties and informing pedagogical responses. A full EA framework may include five stages: data collection, error identification, description and classification, explanation of possible interlingual or intralingual causes, and evaluation or correction (Brown, 2007; Corder, 1967, 2015; Dulay et al., 1982; Richards, 2015). In this study, only the descriptive stages—data collection, error identification, description/classification, and frequency analysis—were implemented; the explanatory source-attribution stage was not implemented.

Accordingly, this study should be understood as a descriptive error taxonomy study of written grammatical accuracy among first-year learners at SIMAD University. It identifies the types and frequencies of errors and provides rule-based corrections, but does not assign each error to an interlingual or intralingual source. This clarification aligns the Error Analysis framing with the study design and prevents overclaiming beyond the available data.

Empirical review

Error analysis in tertiary EFL writing

Empirical work on EFL writing has increasingly used Error Analysis (EA) to examine actual learner texts at the school and university levels. Rather than treating errors as random failures, these studies classify patterns such as tense, agreement, word order, punctuation, spelling, fragments, run-ons, and comma splices to identify the areas where learners need focused support (Gayo & Widodo, 2018; Issa et al., 2025; Masruddin & Nasriandi, 2022). This body of work is directly relevant because the present study analyzes 223 short essays written by first-year university learners and uses error frequency to describe written grammatical accuracy.

Within tertiary EFL writing, the most useful empirical studies are those that examine written products, classroom writing tasks, and local instructional needs rather than those that examine child L1/L2 development, bilingual toddlers, brain injury, or general clinical language processing. For this reason, the literature review focuses on university- or classroom-based EFL writing research and error types that appear in the present dataset: written conventions, verb morphology, and sentence-level structure.

Somali-English contrastive context and the university EFL writing context

Somali EFL writing deserves specific attention because Somali and English differ in terms of clause organization, subject expression, auxiliary use, and sentence-boundary marking. Gadieva and Koffi (2025) reported subject-ellipsis errors in Somali L2 English writing and argued that Somali clause patterns may help explain why English subjects are sometimes omitted. Similarly, Jerald and Nuh (2024) showed that Somali university students face difficulties mastering English language skills in higher education contexts. These studies are more relevant to the present manuscript than broad psycholinguistic work because they connect English writing problems to Somali learners and tertiary education environments.

As a contrastive context, Somali commonly allows verb-final clause organization (for example, an English gloss such as “students videos watch” contrasts with standard English SVO order “students watch videos”), while English academic writing generally

requires overt subjects and explicit clause-boundary marking. These examples support the pedagogical relevance of word order, subject expression, fragments, and punctuation, but they are not used here as evidence that any individual learner error was caused by a Somali-to-English transfer.

However, the present study did not assign individual errors to the Somali-to-English transfer. The Somali-English transfer literature is used only to contextualize why errors in subject expression, word order, tense marking, prepositions, and sentence construction may be pedagogically important. This distinction keeps the empirical review aligned with the study's descriptive design.

Sentence boundaries, punctuation, and mechanical errors in EFL writing

Sentence boundaries are central to English academic writing because punctuation helps readers identify where one independent clause ends and another begins. In EFL writing assessment, mechanical errors such as punctuation, capitalization, and spelling should be distinguished from morphology and syntax because they concern the visible written form rather than verb inflection or clause organization (Crossley et al., 2019). Crystal (2018) and Heggie and Wade-Woolley (2018) also emphasized that punctuation contributes to readability and meaning organization. Therefore, this study treats punctuation, capitalization, and spelling as mechanical errors.

This focus directly responds to the error categories identified in the essays. Punctuation was the most frequent individual error type, and capitalization and spelling errors also appeared regularly. Therefore, reviewing punctuation and sentence-boundary research is more useful than reviewing unrelated studies on children's morphology, bilingual toddlers, or neurological processing.

Clause combining, fragments, run-ons, and comma splices

Clause combining is one of the main challenges in university EFL writing because learners must connect ideas without producing fragments, run-on sentences, or comma splices. A sentence fragment occurs when a dependent clause or phrase is punctuated as a complete sentence; a run-on occurs when two independent clauses are joined without appropriate punctuation or conjunction; and a comma splice occurs when two independent clauses are joined by a comma. These errors affect coherence because they weaken the relationship between clauses and make academic arguments difficult to follow (Hyland, 2019; Lunsford, 2015).

The relevance of this literature is confirmed by the present data: fragments, run-ons, comma splices, word order, phrasing, prepositions, and general grammar collectively form the largest error category. For this reason, the empirical review now emphasizes sentence boundaries and clause-level construction rather than distant work on general morphosyntactic complexity. This refocusing also supports the study's practical recommendation that instructors should teach sentence reconstruction, clause combining, punctuation, and revision strategies as separate but connected writing skills.

Integrating mechanical, morphological, and syntactic accuracy in written EFL instruction

Understanding how mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns relate to written English grammatical accuracy is key to explaining learners' written language performance. The most appropriate empirical framing for this study is a three-level

written-accuracy framework. Mechanical accuracy concerns punctuation, capitalization, and spelling; morphological accuracy concerns tense and verb-form marking; and syntactic accuracy concerns the order, completeness, and connection of clauses and phrases. This framework is consistent with writing-assessment work that separates mechanical errors from grammar and syntax (Crossley et al., 2019) and with EA studies that use error categories to guide classroom feedback (Gayo & Widodo, 2018; Issa et al., 2025; Masruddin & Nasriandi, 2022). In addition, research links grammatical principles and morphosyntactic structures with fluency, accuracy, and overall communication competence (Momenian et al., 2018; Gardner et al., 2021). Corbett (2015) further discusses morphosyntactic systems in relation to error patterns, sentence structure, linguistic clarity, and cohesion. Therefore, the present study uses error counts from short essays as indicators of written grammatical and morphosyntactic accuracy, not as a comprehensive measure of overall English proficiency.

Furthermore, morphological and syntactic features are treated as descriptive indicators of learners' grammatical correctness, fluency-related challenges, and understanding of written production. Observed patterns in morphosyntactic attributes, such as agreement and case marking, can indicate areas of difficulty in constructing accurate and contextually suitable sentences (Penke et al., 2004). In bilingual contexts, cross-language morphosyntactic patterns are relevant for describing grammatical accuracy and learner error patterns (Khan & Khalid, 2018). Difficulties in integrating morphosyntax during real-time processing may appear as observable patterns of reduced written accuracy and fluency (Hopp, 2015). Consequently, the present study treats morphosyntactic structures as areas in which learner writing may display observable patterns of accuracy and difficulty.

Methods and materials

Design, participants, and sampling

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine the mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns in the written English grammatical accuracy of English language learners at SIMAD University. Guided by Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967, 2015; James, 2013), this study identified, categorized, and quantified learner errors as indicators of written accuracy. The design did not include formal coding of error sources as interlingual or intralingual; therefore, the findings are presented as a descriptive error taxonomy rather than a causal account of the origins of errors. The target population comprised 528 first-year students enrolled in the English Skills Program at the Institute of Modern Languages (IML), as these learners were in the foundational stage of developing written grammatical accuracy. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a representative sample of 223 participants was selected. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure balanced representation across faculties, including Accountancy, Computing, Economics, Engineering, Management Sciences, Medicine and Health Sciences, and Social Sciences, thereby minimizing sampling bias and ensuring the inclusion of diverse learner backgrounds (Fraenkel et al., 2018).

The sampling frame was obtained from the official IML first-year English Skills Program enrolment list. Faculty was used as the stratification variable because students were enrolled in different academic faculties. Proportional allocation was applied

Table 1 Faculty-stratified sampling frame, sampling fractions, and sample allocation ($N=528$; $n=223$)

Faculty stratum	Population in sampling frame (N_h)	Selected sample (n_h)	Sampling fraction (%)	Sample share (%)
FACC	100	42	42.0	18.8
FASS	54	23	42.6	10.3
FECO	36	15	41.7	6.7
FENG	47	20	42.6	9.0
FMHS	71	30	42.3	13.5
FMS	104	44	42.3	19.7
FOC	116	49	42.2	22.0
Total	528	223	42.2	100.0

Note. FACC=Faculty of Accountancy; FASS=Faculty of Social Sciences; FECO=Faculty of Economics; FENG=Faculty of Engineering; FMHS=Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences; FMS=Faculty of Management Sciences; FOC=Faculty of Computing. Students within each faculty stratum were selected using computer-generated random numbers and the faculty enrolment list as the sampling frame

Table 2 Demographic data for students' written essay ($n=223$)

Variables	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	112	50.2%
	Female	111	49.8%
Age	18–20	167	74.9%
	21–24	52	23.3%
	25–29	4	1.8%
Faculty	FACC	42	18.8%
	FASS	23	10.3%
	FECO	15	6.7%
	FENG	20	9.0%
	FMHS	30	13.5%
	FMS	44	19.7%
	FOC	49	22.0%

Note: FACC=Faculty of Accountancy; FASS=Faculty of Social Sciences; FECO=Faculty of Economics; FENG=Faculty of Engineering; FMHS=Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences; FMS=Faculty of Management of Science; FOC=Faculty of Computing

by multiplying each faculty stratum size (N_h) by the overall sampling fraction ($223/528 = 42.2\%$) and rounding it to the nearest whole number. Within each stratum, eligible students were assigned anonymous serial numbers, and the required number of participants was selected using a computer-generated random number list. Replacement was not used; when a selected student was unavailable or declined to participate, the next randomly generated number from the same faculty stratum was used.

Table 1 presents the faculty-stratified sampling allocation for the 528 first-year students and the selected sample of 223 respondents. The overall sampling fraction was 42.2% ($223/528$), and a comparable proportional fraction was applied across the faculty strata.

Table 2 presents the demographic information of the 223 respondents, including their sex, age, and faculty of study. The data indicate that the sample comprised 223 students, with a roughly equal distribution of male (50.2%) and female (49.8%) students. A significant proportion of respondents (74.9%) were aged between 18 and 20 years. A smaller proportion (23.3%) were aged 21–24, while only 1.8% were aged 25–29. In terms of faculty representation, the Faculty of Computing (FOC) had the highest percentage of

respondents at 22.0%, followed by the Faculty of Management Sciences (FMS) at 19.7%, and the Faculty of Accountancy (FACC) at 18.8%. The Faculties of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS), Social Sciences (FASS), Engineering (FENG), and Economics (FECO) had lower levels of representation. The sample was relatively young, with a balanced representation of male and female students and a substantial proportion from the Faculties of Computing and Management Sciences.

Instruments and procedures

This study utilized a written essay task as the main instrument for data collection. Each participant wrote a short essay of 100–150 words on the topic: “People are spending too much on their smartphones. Why is this? Is it a positive or negative trend?” This topic was chosen to encourage authentic language use while eliciting varied morphological and syntactic structures in the responses. Each essay was labeled with an anonymous code (e.g., P001–P223) to ensure confidentiality.

All examples presented in the analysis section were extracted from the anonymized learner corpus rather than constructed as handbook examples; the examples are reported without personal identifiers and retain the learners’ original wording as far as possible.

An Error Identification Checklist was developed based on established Error Analysis and writing-assessment frameworks (Corder, 1967 ; 2015; Dulay et al., 1982; James, 2013). It categorizes errors into 11 observable written-error types: punctuation, tense, fragment, grammar, spelling, capitalization, word order, phrasing, preposition, run-on, and comma splice. These were further grouped into three operational categories: mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors. The checklist was used to classify visible written forms and did not include source labels, such as interlingual or intralingual.

Operational definitions and coding categories

To provide defensible operational definitions, this study adopted a level-based coding framework. Mechanical errors were defined as surface-level written convention errors that affect the visual form and readability of a text rather than the internal grammatical structure of a word or clause; these included errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Morphological errors were defined as word-level errors involving tense and verb morphology; these were coded under a single category of tense. Syntactic errors were defined as phrase-, clause-, or sentence-level errors involving the arrangement, connection, or completeness of grammatical units, including word order, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, phrasing, preposition use, and general grammar errors. On this basis, punctuation and capitalization were not coded as syntactic errors, and spelling was not coded as a morphological error.

Where an error could plausibly overlap categories, the coding decision was based on the primary linguistic level affected in the sentence. For example, a missing full stop or comma was coded as mechanical because it concerns written sentence boundary marking, while a sentence fragment was coded as syntactic because it lacks an independent clause. A misspelled word was coded as mechanical unless the error changed an inflectional form; tense and verb-form errors were coded as morphological because they involve word-level grammatical marking. This procedure ensured consistent classification across the 223 essays and strengthened the methodological validity of the analysis.

For replicability, the unit of analysis was an error instance, defined as one observable deviation from the target written form within a learner's essay. Word-level errors, including spelling, capitalization, preposition, and tense errors, were counted once for each affected token. Clause- or sentence-level errors, including fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, word-order errors, phrasing errors, and general grammar errors, were counted once per affected clause or sentence instance rather than for every word in the clause or sentence. Punctuation errors were counted as separate mechanical instances; each missing, unnecessary, or incorrect punctuation mark was counted once. However, one sentence-boundary problem was not double-counted as both a punctuation and a run-on sentence or comma splice unless the same sentence contained an additional distinct punctuation error. When a correction required more than one change, only the primary error type was counted unless the changes affected different linguistic levels. Accordingly, the reported frequencies and percentages were based on error instances, not on the number of words affected by errors.

Coding rule for frequency reporting: one observable deviation was counted as one error instance; word-level errors were counted per affected token, clause- or sentence-level errors were counted per affected clause/sentence, and sentence-boundary problems were not double-counted across punctuation, run-on, and comma-splice categories unless a separate additional error was present.

After coding, the frequency tables were audited to verify that the 11 error types were mutually exclusive and that the category totals matched the overall total. Tense inconsistencies and verb-tense/form errors were consolidated under the single tense category ($n=433$; 19.07%). Run-on sentences ($n=119$; 5.24%) and comma splices ($n=115$; 5.07%) were retained as separate syntactic subtypes because a comma splice specifically involves two independent clauses joined by a comma alone, whereas a run-on sentence lacks appropriate punctuation or coordination. The audited totals were mechanical errors = 705 (31.06%), morphological errors = 433 (19.07%), and syntactic errors = 1,132 (49.87%), yielding 2,270 errors (100.00%).

Accordingly, this study uses a three-category classification scheme rather than a binary morphological-versus-syntactic comparison. Because mechanical errors were counted as an independent category, they were not redistributed into morphological or syntactic totals. Therefore, the defensible headline distribution is syntactic/structural errors = 1,132 (49.87%), mechanical errors = 705 (31.06%), and morphological errors = 433 (19.07%), rather than a two-way syntactic-versus-morphological percentage.

In applying Error Analysis, the study implemented four descriptive procedures: (1) collection of learner language samples, (2) identification of observable errors, (3) description and classification of errors into operational categories, and (4) quantification of frequencies and percentages. It did not implement the explanatory/source-attribution stage of the EA; therefore, no error was coded as interlingual or intralingual. The item-level 'Error Explanation' sections below explain the target-language rule involved and the correction required, not the psycholinguistic or first-language origin of the error.

The data collection process was systematic and structured. Initially, approval and coordination were obtained from the IML administration and lecturers to facilitate in-class essay writing. Participants were then oriented to the study's objectives and voluntarily signed consent forms to confirm their participation. Subsequently, each participant completed an essay task under controlled classroom conditions within a 45-minute

timeframe. The collected essays were anonymized, transcribed, and analyzed. Using a predefined checklist, each essay was carefully marked/examined, and all instances of mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors were identified, coded, and recorded in a data sheet. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, two trained raters independently analyzed 20% of the essays, and any discrepancies between their evaluations were resolved through consensus discussions, thereby maintaining consistency and accuracy in data analysis.

Inter-rater reliability was reported using two statistics: Cohen's kappa and percentage agreement. Before independent coding, the two raters were trained on the Error Identification Checklist and completed a calibration discussion using sample errors to clarify the 11 coding categories: punctuation, tense, fragment, grammar, spelling, capitalization, word order, phrasing, preposition, run-on, and comma splice. The raters then independently coded 45 essays, representing approximately 20% of the 223 essays in total. The reliability results showed Cohen's kappa = 0.82 and percentage agreement = 88.9%, indicating substantial agreement across the 11 error categories. After the reliability check, all disagreements were reviewed item by item, discussed against the operational definitions, and resolved through consensus before the final adjudicated codes were entered into the dataset.

Data analysis and ethical consideration

The data obtained from students' essays were analyzed using descriptive quantitative methods, where errors were identified, categorized into mechanical, morphological, and syntactic types, and analyzed using frequencies and percentages. Therefore, the analysis reported only frequency and percentage distributions, rather than essay-level error-rate-per-100-words statistics. No statistical or qualitative procedure was used to determine whether individual errors were caused by interlingual transfer, intralingual overgeneralization, teaching input or other learner variables. Content validity was ensured through expert evaluation of the instruments, and reliability was confirmed through inter-rater agreement exceeding 0.70. Ethical procedures followed social science IRB standards: SIMAD University approval was issued by the Centre for Research and Development Ethics Committee (Approval ID: EC000160) on November 12, 2025, before the essay task was administered on November 17, 2025, and all participants provided voluntary informed consent, with confidentiality and anonymity maintained throughout the study.

Results

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis and interprets the findings on mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns observed in learners' written English grammatical accuracy. Data were derived exclusively from the written essays of 223 first-year university students.

General error identification

Table 3 presents the general error identification that comprised 11 categories of errors identified in participants' essay writing tasks: punctuation, capitalization, grammar, word order, preposition, fragment, run-on sentence, tense, comma splice, phrasing, and spelling. The predominant individual categories were tense errors (19.07%), punctuation problems (15.64%), and sentence fragments (11.67%). Importantly, punctuation,

Table 3 General error identification

No	Error Type	Symbol	Frequencies	percentage
1.	Capitalization	Cap	165	7.27%
2.	Comma splice	CS	115	5.07%
3.	Fragment	Frag	265	11.67%
4.	Grammar	Gr	234	10.31%
5.	Phrasing	Ph	138	6.08%
6.	Preposition	Prep	120	5.29%
7.	Punctuation	Punc	355	15.64%
8.	Run-on	R-O	119	5.24%
9.	Spelling	Sp	185	8.15%
10.	Tense	T	433	19.07%
11.	Word Order	WO	141	6.21%
Total			2270	100%

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 4 Mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors

Category	Constituent Types	Frequency	Percentage
Mechanical Errors	Punctuation, Capitalization, Spelling	705	31.06%
Morphological Errors	Tense	433	19.07%
Syntactic Errors	Word Order, Fragment, Run-on, Comma Splice, Phrasing, Preposition, Grammar	1,132	49.87%
Total	Total	2,270	100.00%

Source: Field Data (2025)

capitalization, and spelling were interpreted as mechanical errors because they concern written conventions; tense errors were interpreted as morphological because they concern word-level inflectional forms; and fragments, run-ons, comma splices, word order, phrasing, preposition use, and general grammar were interpreted as syntactic because they concern phrase-, clause-, and sentence-level organization.

Mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors

Table 4 compares the occurrence of mechanical, morphological, and syntactic errors in the written essays of English language learners. The statistics indicated that syntactic errors were the most frequent category (1,132 errors, 49.87%), followed by mechanical errors (705 errors, 31.06%) and morphological errors (433 errors, 19.07%). This distribution shows that learners experienced the greatest difficulty with sentence construction, clause linkage, word order, and structural arrangement, while also showing substantial weaknesses in written conventions and in tense accuracy. This classification is methodologically important because punctuation and capitalization are not treated as syntactic errors, and spelling is not treated as a morphological error. The general implication is that the results describe written grammatical accuracy through clearly defined error levels rather than through an unsupported binary distinction between morphology and syntax.

Analysis of the findings

This section analyzes the 11 errors listed in Table 3. The errors were organized according to the operational framework used in this study: mechanical errors (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling), morphological errors (tense), and syntactic/structural errors (comma splices, fragments, general grammar, phrasing, prepositions, run-ons, and word

order). The subsections provide a grammatical description of each error type, rule-based explanation, and corrections. These explanations describe the target-language rule that was violated; they should not be read as claims about interlingual or intralingual error sources. Each subsection below reports the corpus frequency and percentage for the relevant error type based on the 2,270 coded error instances reported in Table 3.

Capitalization

Corpus frequency: Capitalization errors occurred 165 times (7.27% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as mechanical errors according to the study's operational classification rules.

Error description Capitalization is a crucial element of written language. It displays proper nouns, opening words of sentences, and highlighted terms. In English academic writing, proper nouns, such as individuals, locations, and organizations, conventionally begin with capital letters. The first word of a sentence is also capitalized to signal the beginning of the new thought. Errors in capitalization may cause misunderstandings, reduce professionalism, and hinder readability. To ensure clarity, readability, and formality in academic and professional writing, adherence to capitalization norms is essential.

For example:

- I. smartphones have revolutionized the way people communicate.
- II. smartphones have become an essential part of people's lives. how have they affected society?"

Error explanations In Example I, an error occurs because smartphones appear at the beginning of the sentence. In English academic writing, sentence-initial words are conventionally capitalized; therefore, smartphones were revised to Smartphones. Example II contains two related capitalization errors: smart phones begins the first sentence, and how begins the second sentence. Therefore, both words are capitalized to mark clear sentence boundaries and improve readability. The corrected form is: Smartphones have become an essential part of people's lives. How have they affected society?

Error correction The errors were corrected by capitalizing the first word of each sentence: (I) Smartphones have revolutionized the way people communicate. (II) Smartphones have become an essential part of people's lives. How have they affected society? In addition, the two-word form smart phones was standardized as smartphones, which is the more common spelling when referring to mobile phone. These corrections have made the sentences clearer, more formal, and more consistent with English writing conventions.

Comma splice

Corpus frequency: Comma splice errors occurred 115 times (5.07% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors under the study's operational classification rules.

Error description A comma splice occurs when two independent clauses, each with its own subject and predicate, are incorrectly joined by a comma. This weak connection dis-

rupts the logical flow of ideas. A comma splice can be corrected by using a semicolon, a coordinating conjunction (and, but, so, yet), or by dividing the clauses into two sentences. Another option is to use a subordinating conjunction to show the relationship between the clauses. Correcting comma splices improves clarity, coherence, and professionalism, which are essential in academic writing.

For example:

- I. "People are spending too much on their smartphones, this is a growing concern in society."
- II. "Smartphones are integral to modern life; they have transformed communication."

Error explanation In Example I, the clauses People are spending too much on their smartphones and this is a growing concern in society are both independent clauses because each contains a subject and complete predicate. A comma alone cannot grammatically join two complete sentences. The error can therefore be corrected by using a semicolon, a period, or a conjunction: People are spending too much on their smartphones; this is a growing concern in society; People are spending too much on their smartphones, and this is a growing concern in society; or People are spending too much on their smartphones. This is a growing concern for society.

Example II contains the same problem because Smartphones are integral to modern life and they have transformed communication, which are independent clauses joined only by a comma. A clearer correction would be: Smartphones are integral to modern life because they have transformed communication. This revision removes the comma splice and makes the logical relationship between the two ideas explicit.

Error corrections The corrected versions of Example I are as follows: (1) People are spending too much on their smartphones; this is a growing concern in society. (2) People are spending too much time on their smartphones, which is a growing concern in society. (3) People spend too much time on their smartphones. This is a growing concern for society. Each version correctly separated or connected the two independent clauses.

The corrected version of Example II is: Smartphones are integral to modern life because they have transformed communication. This correction shows that in standard academic English, two complete clauses are normally connected with a semicolon, period, coordinating conjunction, or subordination rather than with a comma alone; the choice depends on the intended relationship between ideas.

Fragment

Corpus frequency: Fragment errors occurred 265 times (11.67% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description A sentence fragment refers to an incomplete sentence that is punctuated as if it were a complete sentence but lacks one or more essential grammatical elements, such as a subject, finite verb, or independent clause. In English academic writing, a complete sentence must express a full idea and contain structural elements necessary for grammatical independence. For example, "Went to the library" is a fragment because it lacks a subject, while "Because she was late" is also incomplete because it is a dependent

clause that requires an independent clause to complete its meaning. Such errors weaken sentence clarity, interrupt the logical flow of ideas, and reduce the overall coherence of students' writing. To correct sentence fragments, the missing grammatical elements should be supplied or the fragments should be joined to a related independent clause. For instance, "Went to the library" can be revised as "She went to the library," while "Because she was late" can be corrected as "She missed the bus because she was late." These corrections transform incomplete structures into grammatically complete and meaningful sentences.

For example:

- I. "Because he was tired."
- II. "Running down the street."

Error explanation The researchers found that students frequently produced dependent or phrase fragments that failed to express complete ideas. In the first example, *Because he was tired* is a dependent clause introduced by the subordinating conjunction *because*, which requires an independent clause to complete its meaning. Adding a main clause, such as *He went to bed early because he was tired*, resolves the incompleteness and provides a clear cause-and-effect relationship. In the second example, *Running down the street* lacks both a subject and a finite verb. Including these elements transforms it into a grammatically correct sentence, as in *She was running down the street*. These adjustments ensure syntactic completeness and enhance sentence coherence.

Error correction To rectify the first fragment, the sentence was revised to *He went to bed early because he was tired*, which joins dependent and independent clauses to express a complete idea. The second fragment was corrected to *She was running down the street*, adding both the subject and verb necessary for grammatical accuracy. These examples demonstrate how the inclusion of missing elements or proper clause integration produces complete, coherent, professional academic sentences.

Grammar

Corpus frequency: General grammar errors occurred 234 times (10.31% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors according to the study's operational classification rules.

Error description Grammar refers to the system of rules governing how words combine to form meaningful and coherent sentences (Quirk et al., 1985). It determines how linguistic elements, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions, interact to produce structured and comprehensible expressions (Bauer, 2003; Crystal, 2018). Accurate grammatical usage ensures clarity, coherence, and precision in communication, particularly in academic contexts where linguistic formality is essential (Swan, 2005).

For example:

- I. People spends too much time on social media and they often ignore their real-life responsibilities.
- II. Many users spending long hours in social media that can affect their mental health and studies.

Error explanation The researchers observed that the first example demonstrates a subject–verb agreement error, as the plural subject *people* is paired with the singular verb *spends* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). In English, verbs must agree in number with their subjects; therefore, the correct verb form should be *spend*. Failure to maintain subject–verb agreement reduces grammatical accuracy and impairs clarity (Leech & Svartvik, 2013).

In the second example, the verb *spending* appears without an auxiliary, rendering the structure incomplete (Azar & Hagen, 2016). The appropriate base form should express habitual action, as in *Many users spend long hours on social media*. Additionally, the preposition *in* is incorrect; English collocation requires *on social media* to express digital engagement (Quirk et al., 1985). These combined inaccuracies distort the meaning and reduce sentence cohesion.

Error correction To address the first example, the sentence was revised to ensure subject–verb agreement: *People spend too much time on social media and often ignore their real-life responsibilities*. This correction maintains the grammatical consistency and enhances the readability. The second example was amended to include proper tense and preposition use: *Many users spend long hours on social media, which can affect their mental health and academic performance*.

Phrasing

Corpus frequency: Phrasing errors occurred 138 times (6.08% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description Phrasing refers to the organization and articulation of words and clauses to convey meaning clearly, coherently, and naturally in both spoken and written communications (Celce-Murcia et al., 2016). It involves the deliberate selection of vocabulary, syntactic structures, and rhythm to ensure logical flow and readability (Biber & Conrad, 2019). Effective phrasing enhances transitions, maintains coherence between ideas, and aligns tone and style with communicative intent (Biber & Conrad, 2019); (Celce-Murcia et al., 2016).

For example:

- I. Spending many hours on social media, people lose track of their studies and also they feel stressed sometimes.
- II. Social media can be positive because you can learn new things and also there is many entertainment options available.

Error explanation The researchers identified that both examples demonstrated weaknesses in sentence construction, redundancy, and agreement. In the first example, the phrase *and also they feel stressed sometimes* disrupts sentence balance and parallelism, resulting in awkward phrasing (Biber & Conrad, 2019). In the second example, *and also there is many entertainment options available* combines redundancy with grammatical inaccuracy, as the verb *is* does not agree with the plural noun *options* (Quirk et al., 1985). Moreover, excessive conjunction use and a lack of cohesion impede the natural flow of ideas, reducing overall clarity (Swan, 2005).

Error correction The sentence *Spending many hours on social media, people lose track of their studies and also they feel stressed sometimes* was revised for conciseness and coherence: *Spending many hours on social media, people lose track of their studies and feel stressed*. This correction restores the parallelism and fluency. The second example was restructured to remove redundancy and ensure subject–verb agreement: *Social media can be positive because it allows users to learn new things and offers many entertainment options*. These revisions demonstrate that precise diction, structural balance, and grammatical accuracy are essential features of effective phrasing in academic writing (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Celce-Murcia et al., 2016).

Preposition

Corpus frequency: Preposition errors occurred 120 times (5.29% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description According to Celce-Murcia et al. (2016), prepositions are terms that illustrate the relationships between nouns, pronouns, or noun phrases, and other components of a sentence. They may indicate direction, location, time, reason or method. A prepositional phrase consists of a noun or pronoun and functions as an adjective or adverb. It links words and sentences to provide context and enhance their clarity (Bauer, 2003). Understanding prepositions involves attention to idiomatic expressions and their use in various circumstances. Correct use ensures that writing is clear, cohesive, and grammatically precise (Quirk et al., 1985).

For example:

- I. He is addicted with browsing content online every day.
- II. Many users spend too much time in social media, which affects their sleep and productivity.

Error explanation In Example I, the preposition “with” is inappropriate after the adjective “addicted.” In standard English, “addicted” is normally followed by “to” when referring to regular involvement or dependence, as in “He is addicted to browsing content online every day” (Celce-Murcia et al., 2016). Bauer (2003) notes that non-standard preposition use may make a sentence awkward and reduce clarity. Replacing “with” with “to” improves grammatical accuracy and readability.

‘Many users spend excessive time on social media, which impacts their sleep and productivity.’ The preposition ‘in’ is incorrect here, since ‘on social media’ is the appropriate expression in Standard English for indicating someone’s use of digital platforms. The sentence seems peculiar and may not be as evident if ‘on’ is substituted with ‘in.’ This may perplex readers and impede their understanding of your intent. Careful preposition use in academic or formal writing supports grammatical accuracy, coherent sentence structure and clarity of content (Bauer, 2003; Celce-Murcia et al., 2016).

Error correction The first example, “He is addicted with browsing content online every day,” contains a preposition error because “addicted” normally takes the preposition “to.” The corrected form was: “He is addicted to browsing content online every day.” This cor-

rection improves grammatical accuracy and clarity (Bauer, 2003; Celce-Murcia et al., 2016).

The second example is erroneous because of the use of an incorrect preposition." A multitude of people excessively engage with social media, adversely affecting their sleep and productivity. Celce-Murcia et al. (2016) assert that "on social media" is the appropriate preposition to use, since it indicates engagement with digital platforms. The term "in" complicates the readability and comprehension. "Many individuals excessively engage with social media, which significantly impairs their sleep and productivity" (Bauer, 2003).

Punctuation

Corpus frequency: Punctuation errors occurred 355 times (15.64% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as mechanical errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description In written compositions, punctuation marks help writers convey their intended meaning, organize their ideas, and guide readers through the text. Individuals sometimes misuse punctuation marks or neglect their usage entirely, resulting in unclear language or unintended meanings. This significantly influences the efficacy of these materials. For instance,

- I. *For me less negative for example children spending too much time on their phone can risk their future.*
- II. And we are going to talk about if that thing is bad or good, negative or positive.

Explanation Punctuation marks are essential in written language because they support comprehension, convey meaning, and organize the ideas. These markers are intentional; writers use them to regulate the information flow and maintain clarity. Text without appropriate punctuation may obscure the meaning by conflating ideas and words. Appropriate punctuation helps writers organize their thoughts and communicate their messages clearly (Qub'a et al., 2024).

Writers adeptly transition between concepts, indicate pauses, and emphasize important points. Punctuation signs, such as periods, commas, and question marks, delineate ideas, establish tone, and capture the reader's attention (Heggie & Wade-Woolley, 2018). Punctuation is essential for effective communication because it ensures that writing is clear, engaging, and comprehensible. Clarity and organization in writing are essential; otherwise, thoughts may become obscured and disordered (Crystal, 2018).

Error correction The first example starts with the phrase "For me" to set the context and introduce the statement. In English composition, a comma can separate an introductory phrase from the main clause. This improves the flow and clarifies the sentence structure. Omitting the comma may make the statement difficult to comprehend. The corrected version is presented below:

- I. *For me, it is less negative. For example, children spending too much time on their phones can risk their future.*

In the second example, the issue is treated as a matter of register and cohesion rather than a categorical ban on sentence-initial conjunctions. Sentence-initial conjunctions such as 'And' and 'But' can occur in English, including for emphasis or stylistic effect; however, in formal academic writing, learners are usually advised to use this pattern sparingly and to ensure that the sentence is complete and coherent. In this example, removing the initial 'and' improves cohesion and the formal register. Moreover, 'whether' is more suitable than 'if' because the clause presents an alternative or choice rather than a condition. Thus, 'whether' is the preferred term in this context.

II. *We are going to talk about whether that thing is bad or good, negative or positive.*

Run-on

Corpus frequency: Run-on errors occurred 119 times (5.24% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description A run-on sentence arises when two or more distinct clauses are improperly connected and lack sufficient punctuation or coordinating conjunctions. This inaccuracy diminishes the clarity of the text by conflating distinct ideas into a disordered structure, making interpretation challenging. Academic writing sometimes contains run-on sentences that may disrupt the flow of thinking and obscure the connections between concepts. Authors may rectify these errors by using a period or semicolon, or by utilizing conjunctions to appropriately link or divide sentences (Celce-Murcia et al., 2016). In academic writing, avoiding run-on sentences generally strengthens the accuracy, professionalism, and coherence (Hyland, 2019).

For example:

- I. "Students spend hours browsing social media they fail to concentrate on their studies."
- II. "Many people spend too much money on online subscriptions they forget to budget for essentials."

Error explanation For instance, the first example lacked a conjunction and appropriate punctuation, merging the two distinct lines, "Students spend hours browsing social media they fail to concentrate on their studies" into a single sentence. Integrating both without separation would result in a run-on sentence that lacks coherence and is difficult to comprehend, as both represent whole concepts. Strunk and White (2007) assert that these deficiencies make academic writing less lucid and difficult to comprehend. A run-on sentence occurs when two distinct phrases are improperly connected. This makes the sentence difficult to comprehend.

"Many individuals expend excessive funds on online subscriptions, neglecting to allocate resources for essential expenses," is a run-on sentence since it amalgamates two whole clauses without appropriate conjunction or punctuation. When assembled improperly, each component becomes an independent idea that alters the whole structure. This is particularly detrimental to academic writing because it impedes comprehension and disrupts the logical progression of ideas (Lunsford, 2015). Correcting punctuation and conjunctions ensures grammatical accuracy, coherence, and clarity of the text.

Error correction The first sentence, “Students spend hours browsing social media; they fail to concentrate on their studies,” is a run-on sentence due to the absence of a conjunction or appropriate punctuation between the two independent clauses. Run-on sentences arise when two complete ideas are improperly fused, making the statement challenging to comprehend. The phrases “Students spend hours browsing social media” and “They fail to concentrate on their studies” are juxtaposed without punctuation or conjunction. To address this, we may include a period to divide the phrases into two distinct sentences: “Students allocate considerable time to social media.” They are unable to concentrate on their studies because of this. Students devote extensive time to social media; thus, they neglect their academic pursuits. “Students allocate excessive time to social media, detracting from their academic pursuits.” The last step is to use a coordinating conjunction, such as “and,” to link the sentences. These modifications enhanced the clarity and grammatical accuracy of the sentences.

The statement “Many individuals expend excessive funds on online subscriptions, neglecting to allocate resources for essentials,” constitutes a run-on mistake in the second example due to the improper connection of unrelated clauses without appropriate punctuation or conjunctions. A run-on phrase lacks appropriate syntactic markers, resulting in the conflation of two distinct concepts, hence complicating the reader’s comprehension. The lines “Many people spend excessive amounts on online subscriptions” and “they neglect to allocate funds for essentials” should not be conflated. A more effective formulation may be, “Many individuals allocate excessive funds to online subscriptions,” using a period to delineate the two statements. They exclude essentials from their budgets. Numerous individuals spend excessive funds on Internet memberships, neglecting to budget for essential needs. “Numerous individuals allocate excessive funds to online subscriptions, and they neglect to budget for necessities.” The run-on issue has been resolved, resulting in a statement that is now more comprehensible and is grammatically accurate.

Spelling

Corpus frequency: Spelling errors occurred 185 times (8.15% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as mechanical errors according to the operational classification rules of the study.

Error description Spelling is a system of conventions used to arrange letters to form words in a language. It involves following a language’s orthographic conventions to represent spoken sounds through written symbols. Therefore, spelling is a component of orthography. Some learners did not consistently follow English spelling conventions in their written essays. For example,

- I. *Spending to much on their smart phones.*
- II. *Peopel are spending too much on their smart phones.*

Error explanation The word “to” is incorrectly used in the first sentence. In this instance, “to” does not function as a preposition indicating direction or manner, but as an adverb denoting the extent of expenditure. Instead, the term “too,” signifying “to a considerable degree.” Individuals often err in this regard because of the orthographic similarity between “to” and “too,” despite their distinct grammatical meanings.

The term “peopel” is formed by erroneously transposing the characters “e” and “o” and o. The proximity of the keys “e” and “o” on the keyboard facilitates this error. Individuals often commit such errors when they are rushed or insufficiently attentive. When writing rapidly, especially without meticulous care, the likelihood of transposing adjacent letters increases significantly. Furthermore, such errors may remain undetected in the first text, perplexing the reader. Misspelling a term, such as “peopel,” diminishes the credibility of the information and impedes comprehension of the text. Identifying and rectifying errors is crucial to ensure that the work is coherent and remains faithful to its assertions.

Error correction The example mentioned above is investing excessive funds in mobile devices. In this context, “too” is replaced with “much,” therefore, the phrase signifies “excessive expenditure on cellphones.”

In the second example II, “People” is the correct term, not “peopel,” which is a frequent typographical error that transposes the “e” and “o” sounds. This error may occur when typing rapidly. Please employ correct spelling and punctuation to ensure that your work appears professional.

Tense

Corpus frequency: Tense errors occurred 433 times (19.07% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as morphological errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description Grammar employs tenses to indicate the temporal occurrence of events: past, present and future. It can be articulated in several forms, including simple, progressive, and perfect tenses. The inappropriate use of tense in academic writing may confuse readers and diminish coherence (Biber & Conrad, 2019).

Verb tense indicates the timing of an event. The simple present (“She works”) and the present progressive (“She is working”) tenses are used to describe actions occurring now or habitual activities. The simple past (“She worked”) and the past progressive (“She was working”) are both methods for describing events that have occurred in the past. (Quirk et al., 1985) assert that there are two approaches to using the future tense to discuss forthcoming events: the simple future (indicating “She will work”) and the future progressive (indicating “She will be working”). When conversing with an individual, it is essential to choose the appropriate tense to eliminate any potential ambiguity regarding the sequence of events (Celce-Murcia et al., 2016).

Below are the examples:

- I. “Many people will spending too much time on the internet.”
- II. “She is spending too much time on scrolling last night.”
- III. “I spent too much time on browsing for two hours yesterday.”
- IV. “She has spending too much time on scrolling last night.”

Error explanation The first example is incorrect since the gerund “spending” follows the auxiliary verb “will.” In standard English future-tense construction, “will” is followed by the base form of the verb rather than its gerund or present participle form. The basic form of a verb is its infinitive form without the word “to.” For instance, “spend” is the root form of the verb “spending.” “She is spending too much time” exemplifies a continuous

tense that utilizes the gerund form of “spending” to describe an action occurring now or during a specific timeframe in the past. The base form of the verb is used in the future tense because “will” already indicates that the action will occur. This produces the correct tense form “will spend.” The gerund is therefore unsuitable in this construction because it conflicts with future-tense form. The corrected wording is “Many individuals will allocate excessive time to the internet.”

The second example, “She is spending too much time on scrolling last night,” is incorrect due to the improper use of the present progressive tense. The present progressive tense is used to describe actions occurring now or anticipated to occur shortly. It consists of the auxiliary verb “is” and the present participle of the main verb (Azar & Hagen, 2016). The phrase “last night” is incompatible with the present progressive tense, since it refers to an event that occurred in the past. Employing the present progressive with “last night” results in a mismatch of tenses, contravening the principle that tenses should correspond with temporal expressions. The simple past tense is used to describe events that occurred at a certain timeframe in the past (Leech & Svartvik, 2013). The term “spent” is the appropriate simple past form to utilize when referencing an occurrence from the past, such as “last night.” This update ensures that the verb tense aligns with the temporal period, hence preserving grammatical accuracy.

The use of the past tense and the phrase “for two hours” are incorrect in this sentence. Consider the third circumstance. The expression “for two hours” needs to be used with a progressive aspect rather than the simple past tense to indicate that the activity may still be ongoing. The term “yesterday” specifically denotes “in the past,” therefore making the statement grammatically correct in the simple past. A more natural expression of length may be preferable (Leech & Svartvik, 2013).

The fourth example, “She has spent too much time scrolling last night,” has two errors: The use of the term “spending” in the present perfect tense is incorrect. The present perfect tense is formed with the past participle rather than the present participle; therefore, “spending” is revised to “spent” in this context. The present perfect tense is unsuitable for the time statement “last night,” because it indicates a particular moment in the past. The present perfect tense is used to discuss events that occurred at an unspecified time in the past or that have significance for the present. When referring to “last night,” the simple past tense is generally preferred because it pertains to a completed action in the past (Azar & Hagen, 2016; Swan, 2005).

Error correction Example I shows the incorrect use of “spending” after “will.” In standard English, the auxiliary “will” is followed by the base form of the verb. The correct wording is “Many individuals will allocate excessive time to the internet.”

In Example II, the temporal marker “last night” is improperly used with the present progressive tense (“is spending”), resulting in the erroneous statement “She is spending too much time on scrolling last night.” The standard revision uses the simple past tense rather than the present progressive tense, which denotes activities occurring now or imminently. “Spent” is the appropriate term to use, as it aligns with the past-tense construction. The revised wording that accurately reflects the situation is “She devoted excessive time to scrolling last night.”

For instance, “I dedicated two hours to browsing yesterday.” The statement is now more concise and easier to understand due to the removal of “too much time.” Nonetheless,

the activity remains in the past. In the second instance, the appropriate statement is, “She devoted excessive time to scrolling last night.” The simple past tense (“spent”) is the most effective means of discussing actions completed within a certain timeframe. In the absence of the time term, the present perfect tense is applicable: “She has spent too much time scrolling.”

Miller (2006) and Eastwood (1994) note that learners commonly experience difficulties with verb tense and aspect forms. In the present descriptive Error Analysis, these examples are used to illustrate tense/aspect error categories and rule-based corrections; they are not used to diagnose learners’ internal grammar, interlanguage stage, or the source of the error.

Word order

Corpus frequency: Word-order errors occurred 141 times (6.21% of all 2,270 coded errors) and were coded as syntactic errors according to the operational classification rules of this study.

Error description Word order refers to the syntactic arrangement of words in a sentence, clause, or phrase. In English, the basic order is usually subject–verb–object (SVO), and adverbials of time, place, and manner are normally placed after the object or at the end of the clause. Disordered words affect sentence fluency and may obscure the logical flow of ideas. For example:

- I. “People spend online too much time on social media.”
- II. “Students spent last night too much time watching videos online.”

Error explanation In Example I, the object phrase too much time should immediately follow the verb spend, whereas the place expression online/on social media should come after the object. The unnatural placement of online between the verb and object interrupts the normal English SVO pattern and makes the sentence awkward.

In Example II, the time expression last night is placed between the verb spent and the object/complement too much time watching videos online. This placement interrupts the verb–object relationship. In English, time expressions are commonly placed at the beginning or end of a sentence, not between the verb and its object (Leech & Svartvik, 2013).

Error correction The corrected version of Example I is: People spend too much time on social media. This version follows the normal English order: subject (people) + verb (spend) + object (too much time) + place phrase (on social media).

The corrected version of Example II is: Students spent too much time watching videos online last night. This correction keeps the verb and object together and places the time expression at the end of the sentence, producing a clearer and more natural-sounding English structure.

Discussion

This study sought to identify, categorize, quantify, and discuss the most common mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns committed by English language learners at SIMAD University and to examine how these error patterns reflect learners’

written English grammatical accuracy, as evidenced by short essay error counts. Therefore, the discussion is framed as a descriptive error taxonomy rather than a causal explanation of error sources.

As presented in Table 4, syntactic errors were the most frequent (49.87%), followed by mechanical errors (31.06%) and morphological errors (19.07%). This finding indicates that learners displayed greater difficulty with sentence structure, cohesion, clause linkage, and word order than with verb inflection at the word level alone. Among mechanical errors, punctuation (15.64%) and spelling (8.15%) errors were especially visible. Among morphological errors, tense errors (19.07%) remained important indicators of difficulty with English inflection. Within syntactic errors, fragments (11.67%), general grammar errors (10.31%), word order (6.21%), phrasing (6.08%), run-ons (5.24%), comma splices (5.07%), and preposition errors (5.29%) showed weaknesses in terms of clause and sentence construction. These results should be interpreted as indicators of written grammatical accuracy and not as a direct measure of overall English proficiency.

Accordingly, the interpretation of the findings is tempered: the results indicate that syntactic errors were the largest of the three predefined categories, not that all errors can be reduced to a binary syntactic-versus-morphological split.

These findings align with Error Analysis (Corder, 1967, 2015), which treats learner errors as useful evidence for describing developing language performance. In line with the study design, the present analysis implements the descriptive stages of EA—identification, description, classification, and quantification—rather than the explanatory stage of assigning errors to interlingual or intralingual causes. The revised three-category framework also aligns with writing assessment approaches that distinguish mechanical errors from grammar and syntax (Crossley et al., 2019). Therefore, this study does not treat punctuation as syntax or spelling as morphology; instead, it classifies errors according to the linguistic level at which each error occurs.

In relation to prior EFL writing studies, the pattern of errors found here is most comparable to classroom-based EA research rather than to developmental or clinical morphosyntactic studies. The high frequency of tense errors supports the need for focused practice on verb morphology, while the higher frequency of fragments, run-ons, comma splices, phrasing, word order, and preposition errors shows that sentence-level control is the main challenge in this dataset (Gayo & Widodo, 2018; Issa et al., 2025; Masrudin & Nasriandi, 2022). Because the study did not include interviews, think-aloud data, longitudinal tracking, or systematic contrastive coding, these patterns are interpreted as descriptive evidence of written accuracy difficulties rather than as proof of specific interlingual or intralingual sources.

In terms of morphological performance, the results are consistent with those of Paradis (2010) and McCutchen and Stull (2015), who showed that mastery of verb morphology and word-level grammatical accuracy develops gradually. However, the present data do not allow for a direct explanation of whether the observed tense, verb form, or sentence structure errors arose from interlingual transfer, intralingual overgeneralization, limited exposure, or other sources. Because the design did not include learner interviews, think-aloud data, longitudinal evidence, or systematic contrastive coding of individual errors, these patterns should be interpreted as descriptive evidence of written accuracy difficulties rather than proof of specific error origins.

In the Somali EFL context, structural differences between Somali and English remain relevant contextual considerations and may generate useful hypotheses for future explanatory research. English generally depends on a relatively fixed subject-verb-object word order, while Somali permits more flexible information structure and commonly places the verb later in the clause, especially when focus particles are used. English also relies heavily on auxiliary verbs, tense/aspect marking, articles, prepositions, and punctuation to signal grammatical relationships, whereas Somali expresses some of these meanings through different morphological devices, particles, suffixes, or contextual cues. For example, a Somali-like verb-final English gloss such as “students videos watch” contrasts with standard English SVO order “students watch videos,” and an omitted-subject pattern such as “because was tired” contrasts with English clauses that normally require an overt subject, as in “because he was tired.” In this study, however, these contrasts are discussed only as contextual background; the essay data were not coded to determine whether particular errors resulted from Somali-to-English transfer (Gadieva & Koffi, 2025; Jerald & Nuh, 2024).

For English teachers in Somalia, the descriptive findings can inform classroom practices. Instructors may design contrastive mini-lessons on the English SVO order, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary use, tense consistency, prepositional collocations, punctuation, and sentence boundaries. Such instructions should be understood as a pedagogical response to the observed error patterns, not as evidence that all observed errors originated from Somali transfer.

The quantitative analysis (Table 4) demonstrates that syntactic error patterns were more frequent and visible in learners’ written production than mechanical and morphological error patterns. The high frequency of fragment, phrasing, word order, run-on, comma splice, preposition, and general grammar errors reveals weaknesses in sentence-level cohesion, subordination, and clause connection. Mechanical errors, particularly punctuation, capitalization, and spelling mistakes, indicate weaknesses in written conventions. Morphological errors, particularly tense mistakes, indicate difficulties with English verb inflection. These results describe observed error frequencies in students’ essays rather than psycholinguistic constraints, broad language proficiency, or confirmed interlingual/intralingual sources of errors.

From an interpretive perspective, the descriptive taxonomy shows that learners require support across three written accuracy levels: mechanical control, word-level morphology, and sentence-level syntax. The results suggest areas for targeted instruction, but do not establish developmental stages or causal pathways without additional qualitative or longitudinal evidence.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the prevalence and nature of mechanical, morphological, and syntactic error patterns observed in the written English grammatical accuracy of learners at SIMAD University. A total of 2,270 errors were recorded, with syntactic errors (49.87%) occurring more frequently than mechanical errors (31.06%) and morphological errors (19.07%). The most recurrent individual issues included punctuation, tenses, sentence fragments, and grammar. These patterns show the distribution of observable written errors across convention-, word-, and sentence-level categories, but they do not identify the underlying sources of those errors.

Consistent with the descriptive application of Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967, 2015), the findings confirm the usefulness of identifying, classifying, and quantifying learner errors in short academic writing tasks. The results further demonstrate that syntactic errors, particularly fragments, word order, clause linkage, and general grammar, pose greater challenges to written grammatical accuracy than mechanical or morphological inaccuracies alone. Overall, this study contributes to a clearer descriptive understanding of how Somali EFL learners use English written conventions, word-level morphology, and sentence-level syntax in short academic writing tasks, while leaving formal interlingual/intralingual source analysis for future research.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings have significant implications for language pedagogy and policy at SIMAD University and similar institutions in Somalia. The predominance of syntactic errors (see Table 4) indicates a pressing need to strengthen writing instruction focusing on written grammatical accuracy, particularly in terms of clause combination, cohesion, word order, and sentence completeness. Simultaneously, the high frequency of mechanical errors shows that punctuation, capitalization, and spelling should be taught as written conventions rather than being merged with syntax or morphology.

Curriculum planners and English instructors should integrate explicit syntax-focused instruction, sentence reconstruction exercises, and feedback-based writing practice while also providing focused practice on verb morphology and mechanical writing conventions. Furthermore, teacher training programs should emphasize form-focused approaches that bridge mechanical accuracy, morphological accuracy, and syntactic fluency, ensuring the balanced development of written grammatical accuracy.

In practice, instructors should use students' actual error patterns to prepare short sentence-revision exercises. For example, learners can rewrite sentences with non-standard English word order into standard English SVO order, combine fragments into complete clauses, edit tense and verb forms, and revise paragraphs for punctuation, capitalization, spelling, prepositions, and coherence issues. This approach directly connects the descriptive error analysis results with classroom intervention without claiming that each error has a confirmed interlingual or intralingual source.

For policymakers, this study highlights the potential value of institutional language support centers or writing labs that provide remedial programs for first-year learners, so that support can target the areas of difficulty identified in first-year learners' writing in Somalia's tertiary education system.

Study limitations

Despite providing valuable insights, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, it relied exclusively on short written essays, which means that the results captured written grammatical accuracy rather than broad English proficiency, oral performance, listening, reading, vocabulary knowledge, or pragmatic competence. Second, the analysis focused on mechanical, morphological, and syntactic categories, excluding lexical, semantic, rhetorical, or discourse-level errors that may also be associated with the quality of academic writing. Third, the study used a descriptive quantitative design and did not implement the explanatory/source-attribution stage of Error Analysis; hence, it did not determine

whether errors were interlingual, intralingual, instruction-related, or caused by other learner variables.

Future research

Future studies should extend this investigation to include comparative analyses across universities in Somalia or the wider Horn of Africa to assess regional variations in the written mechanical, morphological, and syntactic accuracy. Longitudinal designs could trace how learners' control of written conventions, verb morphology, and sentence-level syntax evolves across the academic years. Moreover, explanatory EA studies could combine essay analysis with interviews, think-aloud protocols, learner background data, and systematic L1-L2 contrastive coding to determine whether particular errors are interlingual, intralingual, instruction-related, or associated with other learning conditions.

Abbreviations

CA	Contrastive Analysis
EA	Error Analysis
IML	Institute of Modern Languages
IRB	Institutional Review Board
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language

Author contributions

Mustafa Ahmed was responsible for the initial drafting, reviewing, and editing of final draft of the manuscript to ensure coherence and academic quality, in addition to managing the project. Ahmed Abdullahi conceptualized the idea and contributed to writing the literature review, the study methods, data creation, analysis, and interpretation. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research was supported by SIMAD University. No external funding was received for the study.

Data availability

The data behind the conclusions of this study may be obtained from the corresponding author upon a reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical approval

This social science classroom writing study followed SIMAD University IRB/Ethics Committee procedures for voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidential handling of student essays. The approval record was issued by the Ethics Committee of the Centre for Research and Development at SIMAD University (Approval ID: EC000160) on November 12, 2025, before the written essay task was administered on November 17, 2025. Therefore, the study is reported here as having IRB approval in place at data collection rather than as a biomedical or clinical study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. This study did not collect or use any personally identifiable information, images, or other data that would require obtaining publication consent.

Informed consent

All participants provided detailed informed consent documentation prior to data collection. The consent process was voluntary, and all the participants agreed to participate in the study. The participants were also assured that their participation would remain anonymous. The written essay task was administered on November 17, 2025, in the participant's respective classrooms, and they were given the opportunity to review the informed consent materials before proceeding. Data collection therefore complied with the approved social science ethics procedures at the time the classroom writing task was conducted.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 27 December 2025 / Revised: 9 June 2026 / Accepted: 31 August 2026

Published online: 21 September 2026

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