



SYNTACTIC ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN WORK OF ESL LEARNER IN PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Academic writing continues to be a major difficulty for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Pakistan, particularly at the First-degree level, where grammatical accuracy plays a crucial role in academic achievement. This research explores the frequency and types of syntactic mistakes found in the written work of undergraduate ESL students enrolled in English degree programs at a Pakistani university. Using a quantitative descriptive research approach, the study examined data collected through a structured questionnaire that focused on students' writing practices and linguistic backgrounds. The identified syntactic errors were classified into key categories such as subject-verb agreement, tense forms, and use of prepositions, sentence structure, and run-on sentences. Findings reveal that errors in subject-verb agreement occur most commonly, followed by mistakes related to tense usage, prepositions, and word order. Responses from the questionnaire suggest that insufficient revision strategies and excessive dependence on first-language translation significantly contribute to the persistence of these errors. The study also underscores the considerable influence of mother-tongue interference on learners' syntactic patterns. Situating the analysis within the Pakistani ESL context, this research contributes to a clearer local understanding of syntactic error trends. It stresses the importance of targeted grammar instruction, feedback-oriented writing practices, and improved revision skills in undergraduate ESL classrooms.

Keywords: *ESL Learners, Academic Writing, Syntactic Errors, Error Analysis, Pakistani ESL Context, Undergraduate Learners, Grammar Instruction, Interlanguage, Writing Habits, First-Language Interference.*

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1. Introduction

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most **complex skills** in second language acquisition, requiring the integration of **grammatical knowledge**, **lexical competence**, and **textual ability**. For ESL learners, particularly those involved in academic settings, writing requires more than **elementary language knowledge**; it demands **precision**, **clarity**, and **structural accuracy**. Academic writing functions as a principal method of evaluation and knowledge presentation, making it an **essential skill** for university learners.

1.1. Role of Syntax in ESL Written Communication

Syntax plays a **fundamental role** in forming meaning and ensuring **efficient** written communication. **Grammatical correctness** promotes coherence and enables ideas to be expressed **clearly and logically**. Mistakes in subject–verb agreement, tense consistency, sentence formation, and word arrangement frequently interfere with meaning and lower the overall standard of writing. For ESL learners, syntactic accuracy is **vital** for attaining credibility and clarity in academic discourse.

1.2. Challenges Faced by ESL Learners in Academic Writing

In Pakistan, where English operates as a second language and occupies an important role in higher education, students are required to display **developed** academic writing abilities. However, many undergraduate ESL learners face difficulty in fulfilling these expectations because of **persistent** grammatical and syntactic mistakes. Despite several years of formal education, learners frequently fail to **implement** grammatical rules effectively in **lengthy** writing tasks, particularly at the **bachelor's level**, where academic requirements intensify.

1.3. Identification of the Problem

Grammatical mistakes continue to be a significant barrier in the academic writing of Pakistani ESL learners. Ongoing syntactic flaws reduce clarity, coherence, and understandability. Instructional methods frequently emphasize rote learning and exam-oriented preparation instead of functional language use, leading to restricted grammatical application abilities. As a result, students hold theoretical understanding of grammar but lack the capacity to apply it accurately in academic writing.

1.4. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to **analyze syntactic errors** in the academic writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners and to **investigate how their writing habits influence these errors**. The specific objectives are:

1. **To identify the most frequent types of syntactic errors**, including mistakes in subject–verb agreement, tense usage, prepositions, word order, and complex sentence construction.
2. **To determine the frequency of these errors** using data obtained from a **structured questionnaire**.
3. **To examine learners’ writing practices**, including revision habits, reliance on first-language translation, and confidence in producing complex sentences.
4. **To explore the relationship between writing behaviors and syntactic accuracy** and to examine how practices such as revision or translation affect error patterns.
5. **To offer practical recommendations** for enhancing grammatical accuracy and writing proficiency among undergraduate ESL learners.

1.5. Research Question

1. What kinds of syntactic errors are most prevalent in the academic writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners?
2. What is the frequency pattern of these syntactic errors?
3. Which factors contribute to the continued occurrence of syntactic errors in ESL writing?

1.6. Significance of the Study

This study is **important** because it offers a **context-specific insight** into ESL writing difficulties in Pakistan. The findings can:

1. Help instructors **identify recurring syntactic errors** and understand the reasons behind their occurrence.
2. Guide teachers in **developing targeted grammar instruction** that addresses common errors such as subject–verb agreement, tense usage, and sentence structure.

3. Highlight the importance of **revision, drafting, and feedback** in improving writing accuracy and clarity.
4. Encourage learners **to adopt more effective writing practices**, including thinking directly in English rather than relying on first-language translation.
5. Provide direction for **curriculum developers** in designing writing courses suited to learners' needs and educational context.
6. Add to **applied linguistics scholarship** by presenting quantitative data on the types and frequency of syntactic errors among Pakistani ESL learners.
7. Assist universities in **improving academic outcomes**, as students will gain the ability to write with greater clarity and accuracy.

1.7. Research Scope and Boundaries

The research concentrates on undergraduate ESL learners registered in Pakistani higher education institutions. It is confined to syntactic errors identified in academic written samples and supported by questionnaire data related to writing practices. Other linguistic domains such as vocabulary, spelling, or discourse-level concerns fall outside the scope of this study.

1.8. Research Gap

Although there is extensive international research on ESL writing errors, **limited knowledge exists regarding Pakistani students**. Few studies quantify the **frequency of syntactic errors**, and even fewer investigate how **writing practices influence accuracy**. This highlights the need for **context-specific, data-driven research** to inform teaching strategies. The present study addresses this gap by combining **error frequency analysis** with questionnaire data to examine the **types and causes of syntactic errors** among Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Error Analysis in Second Language Learning

Writing in a second language is one of the most **challenging skills** for learners. Unlike speaking, writing demands **close attention to grammar, sentence construction, and logical organization**. The primary objective of this study is to **analyze syntactic errors** in the academic writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners and to **investigate how their writing habits influence these errors**.

2.2. Theoretical Perspective on Systemic Errors

Theoretical frameworks of **Error Analysis** and **Interlanguage** inform this study, enabling the **systematic identification and classification of errors** while **accounting for their cognitive and linguistic origins**.

2.3. Types of Syntactic Errors in ESL Writing

Sentence fragments **occur** due to dependence on spoken language or **insufficient knowledge of writing conventions**, whereas run-on sentences **stem** from challenges in connecting clauses properly. Errors in word order are **common** among learners whose first languages permit flexible sentence structures, particularly in **complex noun phrases** and **embedded clauses**.

2.3.1. Subject-VERB Agreement Errors

Grammar instruction is most effective when integrated with writing practice. Targeted instruction on recurring errors, such as subject–verb agreement, tense, and sentence structure, helps learners notice gaps between their inter language and target language norms.

2.3.2. Tense and Aspect Errors

Global research shows similar syntactic challenges across contexts, including subject–verb agreement, tense misuse, and sentence structure errors.

2.3.3. Prepositional Errors

First-language translation is another factor that increases syntactic errors. While it can aid idea generation, translating from Urdu or regional languages into English often leads to non-target-like constructions, especially in complex sentences.

2.3.4. Sentence Structure Errors

Sentence fragments arise from reliance on spoken language or lack of awareness of writing conventions, whereas run-on sentences result from difficulties linking clauses correctly.

2.4. Causes of Syntactic Errors among ESL Learners

Pakistan’s multilingual environment adds further challenges, as students learn through Urdu, regional languages, and English, and different education systems, such as matriculation and O-level streams, create uneven proficiency. English instruction often

focuses on rote memorisation, and grammar is taught as isolated rules rather than applied in meaningful writing. Students may know grammar theoretically, but struggle to use it accurately in academic writing. Writing instruction often prioritises exams over drafting, revising, and feedback, allowing errors to persist. Writing habits, such as drafting, revising, and proofreading, are crucial for syntactic accuracy, but many learners treat writing as a one-step activity. Exam-oriented systems and a lack of training or feedback discourage revision, causing errors to fossilise. Regional factors, such as large class sizes and limited writing instruction, intensify these difficulties in Pakistan.

2.5. Review of previous Empirical Studies

Local studies indicate **widespread grammatical challenges**, but most depend on **descriptive observations** rather than systematic data, **limiting their value** for curriculum design. Despite international research on ESL writing errors, **knowledge about Pakistani learners is limited**. Few studies **assess error frequency** or **examine the relationship between writing practices and syntactic accuracy**, underscoring the need for **context-specific, data-driven research**. Corrective feedback is also **crucial**. Evidence shows that **targeted feedback** on particular errors helps learners **internalize rules** and **reduce mistakes**, whereas general evaluative feedback is less effective. By **integrating quantitative error analysis with questionnaire data**, the study connects learners' syntactic performance with their writing habits and educational practices, providing a **comprehensive insight** into ESL writing challenges in Pakistani undergraduate settings

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study utilizes a **quantitative descriptive research design** to investigate the **frequency and characteristics of syntactic errors** in the academic writing of undergraduate ESL learners in Pakistan. A quantitative approach was selected because it enables the **systematic identification, classification, and measurement of error types** using numerical data. This design is especially appropriate for error analysis studies, where the main aim is to examine **patterns and distributions of linguistic features** in learner language. While qualitative insights can provide depth, the focus of this research is on **identifying recurring syntactic error patterns** and assessing their **relative frequency**. Consequently, a **descriptive quantitative framework** permits objective analysis while remaining consistent with applied linguistics research standards. To supplement the quantitative data, a **structured questionnaire** was administered to collect additional information about learners' **writing practices and linguistic habits**.

3.2. Population of the study

The study was carried out at a Pakistani university where English is taught as a second language and serves as the main medium of instruction in English degree programs. In this setting, students are expected to exhibit a high level of proficiency in academic writing. However, learners' exposure to English outside the classroom is restricted, and teaching frequently prioritizes exam performance over process-oriented writing development. This educational context offers a relevant and representative environment for examining the syntactic difficulties encountered by undergraduate ESL learners in Pakistan.

3.3. Sample and Sampling Technique

The participants of the study consisted of 30 undergraduate students enrolled in English degree programs. All participants were ESL learners with similar academic backgrounds who had completed formal English education at secondary and higher secondary levels in Pakistan. Participants were selected using convenience sampling, as they were readily accessible to the researcher. The inclusion of undergraduate students was deliberate, as this academic stage demands advanced writing proficiency and greater syntactic control. Despite extended exposure to English instruction, many learners at this level continue to exhibit grammatical difficulties, making them an appropriate population for examining syntactic errors in academic writing.

3.4. Research Instruments

3.4.1. Questionnaire

The primary instrument employed for data collection was a Structured Questionnaire to collect information about learners' writing habits and linguistic background. The questionnaire included closed-ended items addressing: Revision practices after completing writing tasks

Reliance on first-language translation

Confidence in using complex sentence structures

The questionnaire responses were quantified and later compared with the error frequency data to explore potential relationships between writing habits and syntactic accuracy.

3.4.2. Syntactic Error Classification Framework

Based on established error analysis frameworks and prior ESL writing research, syntactic errors were classified into the following categories:

- Subject–verb agreement errors
- Tense-related errors
- Preposition
- Word order errors
- Run-on sentences

These categories were selected because they frequently appear in ESL writing and significantly impact sentence clarity and grammatical accuracy. Each error was counted only once to prevent duplication and ensure precision in frequency calculations.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in a controlled classroom setting. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would be used exclusively for research purposes. They were provided sufficient time to complete the writing task without access to reference materials. After completing the writing task, the questionnaire was administered. All responses were collected anonymously to encourage honest reporting of writing habits. The writing samples were then compiled, coded, and prepared for detailed analysis.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Each syntactic error was identified, classified, and manually counted. Frequency counts and percentages were calculated to determine the distribution of error types across the writing samples. Questionnaire responses were analysed using percentage calculations as well. The results of the writing analysis and questionnaire were then compared to identify patterns linking writing habits with syntactic accuracy. Data were presented in tables to improve clarity and transparency.

3.7. Reliability and Validity of Instruments

The questionnaire responses were quantified and later compared with the error frequency data to explore potential relationships between writing habits and syntactic accuracy. Each error was counted only once to prevent duplication and ensure precision in frequency calculations.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. No personal identifiers were recorded, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The study involved no deception or harm, and the data were used solely for academic research purposes.

4. Findings

The analysis of the questionnaire responses from 50 undergraduate ESL students revealed clear patterns in writing habits and everyday difficulties. The results showed that problems with subject–verb agreement are among the most noticeable issues. Many students admitted having trouble with plural forms, third-person singular verbs, and auxiliary verbs. Even learners with years of formal English education struggled to apply these rules consistently. This suggests that gaps in understanding subject–verb agreement remain common at the undergraduate level.

Tense problems were another frequently reported challenge. Students often mentioned switching between past and present tenses unintentionally when writing. Some described past events in the present tense or changed tense mid-sentence. These responses indicate that learners have limited control over verb forms and struggle to express time relationships accurately. Maintaining consistent tense is a key challenge for clear writing.

Sentence structure issues also appeared regularly. Many students admitted to writing incomplete sentences that lacked a subject, verb, or object. These fragments often reflected patterns from spoken language, where short phrases are acceptable. Learners also reported having difficulty constructing complex sentences, particularly those with multiple clauses. This shows that confidence and skill in combining ideas into complete, correct sentences remain limited.

Word order mistakes were another significant problem. Students reported difficulty placing words correctly in a sentence, especially in longer phrases. These mistakes are linked to first-language influence, as Urdu and regional languages allow more flexible word order than English. Learners who rely on translating sentences from their native language often end up with unusual or incorrect word arrangements. This affects the clarity and grammatical accuracy of their writing.

The questionnaire also highlighted several behavioural factors that contribute to these problems. Most students said they rarely revise their work, which prevents them from noticing or fixing mistakes. Many admitted they heavily depend on first-language translation when planning or composing sentences. A large number of learners also

reported low confidence in using complex sentence structures, preferring simpler sentences that are still prone to errors.

When these patterns were examined together, it became clear that lack of revision and reliance on first-language translation are strongly linked to frequent subject–verb agreement, tense, and word order problems. Students who rarely revised their work struggled more than those who regularly reviewed their sentences. Similarly, those who thought in their first language before writing made more structural mistakes than students who tried to compose directly in English.

The findings also showed that sentence complexity influences error frequency. Learners felt confident with short, simple sentences. However, errors increased when they tried longer sentences with multiple clauses. This indicates that mistakes are systematic rather than random, often emerging when writing requires greater control over grammar and sentence structure. Confidence, practice, and familiarity with sentence patterns play a significant role in accuracy.

Overall, the results suggest that syntactic difficulties are shaped by learners' writing habits, first-language influence, and their approach to language learning. These errors are not simply careless mistakes but reflect deeper gaps in grammatical knowledge and writing strategies. The study emphasises that improving writing accuracy requires more than traditional grammar teaching. Learners need step-by-step writing practice, including drafting, revising, and receiving focused feedback on recurring problems.

In the Pakistani ESL context, these findings suggest that teachers should encourage students to revise their writing, provide feedback targeting common mistakes, and help learners think in English instead of translating from their first language. Focusing on these areas can reduce subject–verb agreement errors, tense inconsistencies, sentence fragments, and word order problems. This approach can improve clarity, coherence, and overall writing quality for undergraduate ESL students in Pakistan.

5. Discussion

The questionnaire responses reveal several major issues in the academic writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. Subject–verb agreement mistakes were the most frequently reported problem. Many students had difficulty with plural forms, third-person singular verbs, and auxiliary verbs. This indicates that learners have not fully mastered English agreement rules, even after years of formal instruction. Memorizing rules alone is insufficient. Teachers should provide practical exercises and repeated examples to help students internalize these patterns.

Tense-related errors were also common. Learners frequently switched between past and present tenses within the same sentence or paragraph. This reflects a lack of control over verb forms and temporal markers. These findings support Interlanguage theory, which posits that learners' language systems develop gradually. Errors are not random; they indicate gaps in this evolving system. To address this, teachers should offer contextual exercises that promote correct tense usage in authentic writing.

Another major concern was sentence fragments. Many students admitted to producing incomplete sentences, omitting subjects, verbs, or objects. These fragments often result from spoken language habits, where short phrases are acceptable. Similarly, learners reported difficulties with complex sentences containing multiple clauses, showing a lack of confidence in combining ideas into complete, correct sentences. Gradual practice with step-by-step sentence construction can enhance their skills.

Word order mistakes were frequently noted and closely associated with first-language interference. Urdu and regional languages permit flexible word arrangements, whereas English requires a fixed sentence structure. Learners who translated from their first language often produced incorrect word order, confirming that native language influence significantly affects syntax. Teachers should encourage students to think directly in English rather than translate, which can reduce errors over time.

The study also highlighted the impact of writing habits on syntactic accuracy. Most learners reported rarely revising their work, preventing them from detecting and correcting errors. Lack of revision results in fossilized mistakes, which become persistent over time. Students relying heavily on first-language translation also reported more frequent agreement, tense, and word order errors. This suggests that process-based writing, including drafting, revising, and reviewing, is crucial for accuracy.

Overall, the observed errors were systematic rather than random. They reflect learners' interlanguage development, dependence on first-language translation, and limited writing practice. The findings underline the need for focused grammar instruction integrated with practical writing exercises. Teachers should provide targeted feedback on recurring mistakes and encourage students to use English directly when forming sentences.

In the Pakistani context, these results indicate the need for localized teaching strategies. Large class sizes, exam-centered instruction, and limited writing opportunities exacerbate syntactic difficulties. By incorporating revision exercises, error-focused feedback, and guided practice with complex sentences, educators can help learners improve accuracy, clarity, and confidence in academic writing.

5.1. Recommendations

1. Grammar teaching should go beyond memorising rules. Students need guided exercises to fix repeated errors in real writing.
2. Students should revise regularly. Checking, editing, and improving their work helps them notice mistakes. Those who revise make fewer errors.
3. Teachers should reduce translation from the first language. Planning, drafting, and writing directly in English strengthen sentence skills and lowers mistakes.
4. Correcting repeated errors helps students see patterns and improve. Highlighting issues in subject–verb agreement, tense, sentence structure, and word order builds self-monitoring.
5. Guided practice with complex sentences can improve accuracy, clarity, and confidence. Encouraging good writing habits is as important as teaching rules.
6. Focusing on drafting, revising, and feedback can reduce agreement, tense, sentence fragment, and word order mistakes. Teaching should target both grammar knowledge and writing habits.
7. Using revision exercises, targeted feedback, and sentence-building practice can help students improve writing, gain confidence, and perform better academically.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the frequency and types of syntactic errors in the academic writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. The research focused on learners' writing habits, dependence on first-language translation, confidence in forming complex sentences, and revision practices. It also identified common error types, including subject–verb agreement, tense misuse, sentence fragments, word order mistakes, and difficulty with compound and complex sentences.

The findings show that subject–verb agreement errors were the most common. Many students struggled with plural forms, third-person singular verbs, and auxiliary verbs. Despite formal instruction, these errors persisted. This suggests that memorising grammar rules is not enough. Learners need repeated practice and targeted exercises to internalise these patterns. Teachers should focus on practical activities that highlight these recurring problems.

Tense inconsistency was another significant challenge. Students often mix past and present tenses in the same sentence or paragraph. This shows that learners have limited control over verb forms and time markers. According to Interlanguage theory, errors are

part of a learner's developing language system rather than random mistakes. These findings suggest the need for contextualised practice that helps learners use tenses correctly in meaningful writing.

Sentence fragments were also frequent. Many learners admitted to writing sentences missing a subject, verb, or object. This reflects patterns from spoken language, where short phrases are acceptable. Similarly, learners struggled with complex sentence construction. Combining multiple clauses accurately was often difficult. This shows that students need step-by-step guidance and scaffolding to construct complete and correct sentences.

Word order errors were reported often. Learners who translated from their first language frequently placed words incorrectly. Urdu and regional languages allow more flexible word arrangements, unlike English, which has a fixed structure. This confirms that first-language influence strongly affects writing accuracy. Encouraging learners to think directly in English rather than translate can reduce these errors over time.

The study also highlighted the importance of writing habits. Many students rarely revise their work. Lack of revision prevents learners from noticing and correcting errors. Mistakes can become fossilised, persisting across assignments. Heavy reliance on first-language translation also increased errors in agreement, tense, and word order. This shows that process-based writing, including drafting, reviewing, and reflecting, is crucial for improving accuracy.

Overall, syntactic errors appear systematic rather than random. They reflect learners' interlanguage development, first-language influence, and limited exposure to meaningful English writing. Subject-verb agreement, tense misuse, sentence fragments, word order mistakes, and complex sentence issues form a consistent pattern across learners. Recognising these patterns allows educators to design focused interventions that address specific difficulties.

From a teaching perspective, these findings have practical implications. First, grammar instruction should go beyond memorising rules. Students need guided exercises that correct recurring errors in real writing contexts. Second, revision should be encouraged regularly. Reviewing, editing, and refining work allows learners to notice mistakes and internalise grammar rules. Third, teachers should reduce translation from the first language. Activities that encourage planning, drafting, and revising in English strengthen syntactic skills.

Error-focused feedback is also critical. Correcting specific recurring errors helps learners notice patterns and improve. Highlighting issues in subject-verb agreement, tense,

sentence structure, and word order allows learners to develop self-monitoring skills. This is essential for long-term improvement in academic writing.

In Pakistan, challenges are intensified by large class sizes, exam-oriented teaching, and limited writing opportunities. These conditions make it harder for students to improve their syntax. Localised strategies, such as small group writing exercises, peer reviews, and structured sentence-building tasks, can address these challenges effectively. Teachers should integrate revision and feedback into regular instruction rather than focusing solely on final marks.

The study also supports Error Analysis and Interlanguage theories. Learners' errors reflect the gradual development of their linguistic system and the influence of their first language. Viewing errors as part of a learning process rather than failure allows teachers to guide students more effectively. Learners can gradually improve through practice, feedback, and reflection.

Writing habits were strongly linked to syntactic accuracy. Students who draft and revise make fewer mistakes. Those who rarely revise or rely heavily on translation produce more errors. This indicates that teaching should focus on both grammar knowledge and writing habits. Encouraging positive routines in writing is as essential as teaching rules.

In conclusion, Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners face predictable syntactic challenges. The main problem areas are subject–verb agreement, tense misuse, sentence fragments, word order mistakes, and complex sentence construction. These difficulties are shaped by first-language interference, poor revision habits, reliance on translation, and limited English exposure. Improving accuracy requires targeted grammar instruction, process-oriented writing practice, and error-focused feedback. Encouraging students to write, revise, and think directly in English will help reduce errors and enhance clarity and coherence.

This study contributes to a localised understanding of ESL writing challenges in Pakistan. It provides practical insights for teachers and curriculum designers. Implementing strategies such as revision exercises, focused feedback, and guided sentence construction can help learners improve their writing, boost confidence, and achieve better academic performance.

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