

## Investigating Errors in Sentence Structure and Punctuation in Non-English Department Students' Writing: Cause and Remedies

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### A B S T R A C T

Writing accuracy is a vital component of academic communication, especially for students in non-English departments who are required to produce written texts in English despite limited linguistic training. This study investigates sentence structure and punctuation errors in the writing of non-English Department students at Sriwijaya University, identifies the causes of these errors, and suggests possible remedies to improve students' writing competence. Using a qualitative descriptive research design, the study analyzed narrative and descriptive essays written by 20 undergraduate students from four non-English study programs in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education. The analysis was conducted using Corder's (1974) Error Analysis framework, which classifies errors into omission, misformation, misordering, and addition. To enrich the findings, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with selected students to explore their writing experiences, perceived difficulties, and strategies for dealing with writing problems. The findings show that sentence structure errors occurred more frequently than punctuation errors. Misformation errors were the most dominant type of sentence structure errors, particularly involving incorrect verb forms, tense misuse, and subject-verb disagreement, followed by omission errors such as missing subjects or auxiliary verbs. Punctuation errors mainly included the omission of periods at the end of sentences, misuse of commas, capitalization errors, and incorrect use of apostrophes. Interview data revealed that limited grammar mastery, first language interference, insufficient writing practice and feedback, and psychological factors such as low confidence and time pressure were the main causes of these errors. Overall, the study concludes that sentence structure and punctuation errors among non-English Department students are influenced by a combination of linguistic, instructional, and psychological factors, highlighting the need for grammar-integrated writing instruction, focused feedback, and continuous writing support to enhance students' academic writing accuracy and clarity.

**Keywords:** *Errors, Sentence Structure, Sentence Punctuation, Non-English Department, Writing Skill, Cause, Remedies.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Writing is a fundamental component of academic communication and plays a critical role in students' overall academic performance. For students in non-English departments those who do not specialize in English language and literature, writing in English often presents significant challenges, especially in terms of sentence structure and punctuation. These elements are crucial for clarity, coherence, and the effective delivery of meaning in written communication.

Students continue to struggle with grammar and punctuation in writing, as evidenced by several recent studies. Several studies in recent years have highlighted the persistent difficulties students face in constructing grammatically correct sentences and applying proper punctuation (Al Fadda, 2020; Alhaysony, 2022; Richards, 2015; Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). These issues are even more prominent among non-English majors, who often lack formal instruction in advanced English grammar and writing conventions. As a result, their writing

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may suffer from syntactic errors such as sentence fragments, subject-verb disagreement, and misplaced modifiers, along with punctuation problems like comma splices, misuse of apostrophes, or lack of end punctuation.

Students in non-English departments often struggle with writing accuracy due to structural gaps in their language education. One major cause of these errors is the limited exposure of non-English department students to English writing contexts and insufficient emphasis on grammar instruction in their curriculum (Rahman & Darus, 2021). Additionally, mother tongue interference where students transfer grammatical rules from their native language into English is another key factor influencing their writing difficulties (Kharusi & Al-Said, 2020). Other contributing factors include a lack of reading habits in English, inadequate feedback from instructors, and the absence of sustained practice in writing.

Importantly, sentence structure and punctuation are not only grammatical concerns but are also closely tied to writing quality and readability. Poor control over these elements can hinder a student's ability to express ideas clearly, persuade effectively, and engage the reader. As Hyland (2019) suggests, academic writing proficiency is increasingly recognized as a predictor of academic success, making it vital to address the common writing challenges faced by students outside the English discipline.

Remedial strategies have been proposed and tested in various contexts, ranging from grammar focused instruction and peer review activities to the integration of digital tools like Grammarly or online writing labs (Owusu & Adade-Yeboah, 2020). These interventions have shown promise in reducing writing errors and improving students' grammatical awareness and editing skills. However, most of these approaches are still underutilized in non-English departments, where writing is often taught as a secondary skill.

Given these challenges and the significant role of writing in academic development, it is essential to investigate the types and causes of sentence structure and punctuation errors in non-English department students' writing. This research aims to provide insights into the root problems and suggest practical remedies that can be implemented by educators to enhance students' writing competence.

In many educational institutions, English is used as a medium of instruction even for students who are not enrolled in language or literature programs. This increasing reliance on English across disciplines has elevated the need for students to develop effective writing skills. However, writing instruction in non-English departments often takes a backseat to subject-specific content, resulting in limited opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback on their writing. Consequently, students develop writing habits riddled with structural and mechanical errors that persist throughout their academic journey.

The issue of sentence structure is particularly problematic, as it directly affects the syntactic arrangement of words and phrases to create meaning. Errors such as sentence fragments, comma splices, fused sentences, and incorrect word order are common in the writing of non-English major students (Tuan, 2020). These mistakes often stem from a lack of understanding of English grammar rules and limited proficiency in distinguishing between different sentences types (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex). Additionally, these structural issues often interact with poor punctuation, further obscuring the meaning of a text.

Punctuation, while sometimes viewed as a minor detail, plays a crucial role in the organization and readability of writing. Misplaced or missing punctuation marks can alter the meaning of a sentence or disrupt the flow of ideas. For example, the misuse of commas, periods, apostrophes, and semicolons is not only a common issue among non-English majors but also a persistent one, often overlooked due to the prioritization of content over form in their disciplines (Ngangbam, 2021).

Another contributing factor is the lack of targeted writing support for these students. English language instruction in non-English departments is frequently general in nature and does not focus specifically on academic writing or common error patterns. In some contexts, the writing tasks assigned are minimal, depriving students of the opportunity to practice and internalize correct writing conventions. Compounding this problem is the limited availability

of language support services, such as writing centers or dedicated remedial programs, especially in institutions where resources are scarce.

Furthermore, technological advancements have introduced both challenges and opportunities. While some students rely heavily on tools such as grammar checkers, these tools are not always accurate or educational. Many students use them passively, accepting corrections without understanding the reasoning behind them. This reliance, combined with a weak foundation in grammar, leads to a cycle of repeated errors and superficial revisions (Zhang & Hyland, 2018).

Therefore, investigating the sentence structure and punctuation errors in non-English department students' writing is essential for improving their academic communication. Understanding the root causes be they linguistic, instructional, psychological, or technological will enable educators to develop more effective teaching strategies and interventions tailored to their specific needs. Moreover, identifying practical remedies and instructional reforms can empower students to become more competent and independent writers, ultimately contributing to their success not only in academia but also in their future professional lives.

## METHOD

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate sentence structure and punctuation errors in the writing of non-English Department students. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe naturally occurring linguistic phenomena in detail without manipulating variables. The focus of the study was not to test hypotheses but to provide a clear and systematic description of the types of errors produced by students and the contexts in which those errors occurred. By using this design, the research captured authentic writing problems as they appeared in students' academic tasks.

The participants of the study were undergraduate students from four non-English study programs within the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Sriwijaya University. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants had prior experience in writing English texts and had completed a general English course. Data were collected through students' written narrative and descriptive essays, each consisting of approximately 150–200 words. These texts were analyzed using Corder's (1974) Error Analysis framework, which involves identifying, classifying, explaining, and evaluating errors. Errors were categorized into omission, misformation, misordering, and addition, focusing specifically on sentence structure and punctuation.

To support and validate the findings from the writing analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants. The interviews aimed to explore students' perceptions of their writing difficulties, the causes of their errors, and the strategies they used to improve their writing. The interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes related to writing challenges. By triangulating data from writing tests and interviews, the study enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of students' writing errors and their underlying causes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings from Writing Tests

#### Findings of Sentence Structure Errors

Based on the analysis of 20 students' writing tests, a total of 453 sentence structure errors were identified. These errors were classified into four categories: omission, misformation, misordering, and addition.

Table 4.1 Sentence Structure Errors Based on Corder's Framework

No	Types of Errors (Corder)	Forms of Errors	Quantity	Percentage
1	Misformation	Incorrect verb forms, tense misuse, subject-verb disagreement	287	63.36%
2	Omission	Missing subject, verb, or auxiliary ( <i>to be</i> )	109	24.06%

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3	Misordering	Incorrect word order in sentences or clauses	46	10.15%
4	Addition	Unnecessary addition of words or auxiliaries	11	2.43%
<b>Total</b>			<b>453</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Misformation Errors*

Misformation errors were identified when students used incorrect grammatical forms, even though the required elements were present in the sentence. This type of error was the most frequently found in the data, especially in the use of verb tenses, verb forms, and subject-verb agreement.

An example of misformation error can be seen in the sentence "I have take lessons to win the competition." The student incorrectly used the base form *take* instead of the past participle *taken*. The correct sentence should be "I have taken lessons to win the competition." This error shows that students are aware of tense usage but have not yet mastered the correct grammatical forms. The table shows that misformation errors were the most dominant, accounting for 63.36% of the total sentence structure errors.

*Omission Errors*

The second most frequent type was omission errors (24.06%), Omission errors occurred when students omitted essential elements required to construct complete and grammatically correct sentences. In this study, omission errors mainly involved missing subjects, auxiliary verbs (*to be*), or main verbs, which resulted in incomplete sentence structures.

For example, one student wrote "Because I happy." In this sentence, the auxiliary verb *am* is omitted. The correct form should be "Because I am happy." This error indicates that students still have difficulties in forming basic English sentence patterns, particularly nominal sentences.

*Misordering Errors*

Misordering errors (10.15%) occurred when students arranged words in an incorrect order that does not follow English grammatical rules. These errors often reflect the influence of students' first language, where word order is more flexible than in English.

For example, one student wrote "Very happy I was at that time." The correct word order should be "I was very happy at that time." This type of error indicates negative transfer from Indonesian sentence structure to English.

*Addition Errors*

Addition errors (2,43%) were found when students added unnecessary words or grammatical elements to their sentences. These additions often resulted in redundancy and reduced sentence clarity.

For example, the sentence "I very really really hate him." contains excessive use of intensifiers. The sentence can be simplified into "I really hate him." This error suggests that students tend to overemphasize meaning without considering grammatical appropriateness.

Overall, the findings show that students still experience difficulties in applying correct English sentence structures. The dominance of misformation and omission errors suggests that students need more practice and instruction in grammatical accuracy, particularly in verb usage and sentence construction.

**Findings of Punctuation Errors**

In addition to sentence structure errors, punctuation errors were also identified in students' writing tests. A total of 80 punctuation errors were found and categorized into omission, misuse, capitalization errors, and apostrophe errors.

Table 4.2 Punctuation Errors in Students' Writing

No	Types of Errors	Forms of Errors	Quantity	Percentage
1	Omission	Not using periods at the end of sentences	29	36.25%
2	Misuse	Incorrect use of commas	26	32.50%
3	Capitalization	Incorrect use of capital letters	17	21.25%
4	Apostrophe Error	Incorrect use of apostrophes	8	10.00%
<b>Total</b>			<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Omission of Punctuation Marks*

Omission errors (36.25%) occurred when students failed to use necessary punctuation marks, particularly periods at the end of sentences. This type of error was the most frequent punctuation problem found in the students' writing.

For example, a student wrote "I was very happy that day" without placing a period at the end of the sentence. The correct form should be "I was very happy that day." The absence of a period may cause confusion and lead to run-on sentences, reducing the clarity of written communication.

#### *Misuse of Punctuation Marks*

The second most common error was comma misuse (32.50%), Misuse errors were found when students used punctuation marks incorrectly, especially commas. In many cases, commas were either placed unnecessarily or omitted where they were required.

An example of this error is "I was tired, but I still finish my assignment", where the comma placement does not appropriately separate clauses. Incorrect use of commas can interrupt sentence flow and affect readability.

#### *Capitalization Errors*

Capitalization errors (21.25%) occurred when students failed to use capital letters appropriately, such as at the beginning of sentences or in proper nouns. This type of error appeared frequently throughout the students' writing.

For instance, a student wrote "i went to campus in the morning." The pronoun *I* and the first letter of the sentence should be capitalized. The correct sentence should be "I went to campus in the morning." This error indicates students' lack of attention to basic writing conventions in English.

#### *Apostrophe Errors*

Apostrophe errors (10.00%) were identified when students incorrectly used apostrophes to show possession or form contractions. These errors included missing apostrophes or incorrect placement.

For example, a student wrote "my fathers advice helped me a lot." The sentence should be written as "my father's advice helped me a lot." Incorrect apostrophe usage may lead to misunderstanding and shows limited mastery of English punctuation rules.

### **Summary of Writing Test Findings**

This section summarizes the main findings obtained from the analysis of students' writing tests. The findings focus on sentence structure and punctuation errors made by non-English Department students in their written texts.

The analysis revealed that sentence structure errors occurred more frequently than punctuation errors. Among sentence structure errors, misformation errors were the most dominant type, followed by omission errors, misordering errors, and addition errors. This pattern indicates that students experienced significant difficulties in using correct grammatical forms, particularly in verb tense, verb form, and subject-verb agreement, even when they were aware of the grammatical elements required in a sentence.

In terms of punctuation, the most frequent errors involved the omission of periods at the end of sentences, followed by misuse of commas, capitalization errors, and apostrophe errors. These findings suggest that students tend to pay less attention to punctuation rules and writing mechanics while focusing on expressing ideas in written form.

Overall, the results of the writing test analysis demonstrate that students still face challenges in applying English grammatical rules and punctuation conventions accurately. These findings provide important insights into students' writing difficulties and serve as a basis for discussing the causes of errors and possible remedial strategies in the following chapter.

### **Findings from Interview**

Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts, multiple themes emerged concerning students' experiences, challenges, sources of errors, and approaches for addressing issues related to sentence structure and punctuation. The interview data were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns within participants' responses.

### **Students' Experiences in Writing English Texts**

Most participants characterized their experience of composing texts in English as demanding and time-intensive. Students indicated that, although they comprehended the concepts they wished to communicate, they frequently encountered difficulties articulating them effectively in English. One participant explained that composing in English was challenging because he needed to carefully consider how to articulate ideas to ensure that readers could comprehend his intended meaning.

Another participant indicated that composing a single paragraph could be time-consuming due to indecision in selecting appropriate words and sentence structures. This reluctance resulted in frequent interruptions throughout the writing process and diminished overall fluency.

However, the degree of difficulty was not uniform among all participants. One participant expressed that she felt comparatively confident in writing in English owing to her previous learning experience and interest in the language, although she continued to face challenges related to grammatical accuracy.

These findings indicate that students' writing experiences differ based on their upbringing, familiarity with English, and level of confidence. Nonetheless, composing texts in English was broadly regarded as a challenging endeavor, particularly when precision was prioritized.

Based on the interview data, students generally perceived writing English texts as a difficult and demanding activity. One participant explained that although he had ideas in mind, expressing them in English was challenging:

*"Sebenarnya idenya ada, tapi pas mau nulis dalam bahasa Inggris itu bingung, takut salah susunan kalimatnya."* (Participant 1)

Another participant stated that writing English texts required more time compared to writing in Indonesian because he had to carefully think about grammar and sentence patterns:

*"Kalau nulis bahasa Inggris itu lama, soalnya mikir dulu grammarnya, takut salah tense."* (Participant 1)

However, one participant reported a more positive experience in writing due to familiarity with English:

*"Saya lumayan nyaman nulis bahasa Inggris, tapi tetap masih sering ragu di grammarnya."* (Participant 3)

These statements indicate that students' writing experiences varied, but most of them associated English writing with difficulty, hesitation, and fear of making grammatical mistakes.

### **Difficulties in Sentence Structure and Punctuation**

The interview findings indicated that sentence structure was among the most challenging aspects of writing for the majority of participants. Common challenges encompassed determining the correct placement of verbs, selecting suitable verb forms, utilizing the to be verb appropriately, and applying tense rules accurately.

One participant acknowledged difficulty in identifying the appropriate verb form to use in various contexts, especially concerning tense selection.

Along with sentence structure, punctuation also presented difficulties for numerous students. Some participants indicated that they frequently inserted commas arbitrarily or were uncertain about the appropriate placement of punctuation marks. This led to lengthy and ambiguous sentences that lacked appropriate pauses and distinct sentence boundaries.

Nonetheless, one participant remarked that punctuation did not pose a significant challenge for her, as she felt assured in her ability to apply fundamental punctuation principles. This contrast underscores that punctuation issues were not uniformly encountered by all students, yet remained prevalent among the majority of participants.

Overall, the interview findings affirm that difficulties with sentence structure were more prevalent than issues with punctuation, corroborating the results derived from the analysis of the writing test.

Sentence structure emerged as the most dominant difficulty faced by students. Participants admitted confusion in arranging sentences correctly, especially related to verb usage and tense selection:

*"Yang paling susah itu nentuin verb-nya, pake past atau present, kadang juga lupa pake 'to be'."* (Participant 1)

Another participant confirmed that sentence order was a frequent source of error:

*"Kadang susunan kalimatnya kebalik, soalnya kepikiran bahasa Indonesia dulu."* (Participant 2)

In terms of punctuation, some students revealed that they did not fully understand the function of punctuation marks:

*"Saya sering asal pake koma atau titik, yang penting kalimatnya selesai."* (Participant 1)

Meanwhile, one participant stated that punctuation was not a significant issue for her:

*"Kalau tanda baca sih nggak terlalu susah, yang bikin bingung itu grammarnya."* (Participant 3)

These findings show that sentence structure difficulties were more prominent than punctuation problems among the participants.

### **Causes of Sentence Structure and Punctuation Errors**

Multiple causes of writing errors were identified from the interview data. The most commonly cited cause was limited proficiency in grammar, particularly concerning tense usage and sentence formation. Participants recognized that their limited comprehension of grammar principles resulted in recurrent errors in their writing.

Another significant factor was the influence of first language interference. One participant explicitly indicated that he tended to translate sentences directly from Indonesian into English, leading to unnatural sentence constructions and grammatical inaccuracies. This habit rendered his writing more difficult for readers to comprehend.

Time constraints and insufficient confidence also played a role in the students' errors. Some participants experienced tension when confronted with writing assignments with impending deadlines, leading them to prioritize task completion over grammatical precision. This pressure frequently resulted in negligent punctuation and structural inaccuracies.

These findings suggest that writing errors were affected by both linguistic factors (such as grammatical proficiency and interference from the L1) and psychological factors (including tension and low confidence).

The interviews revealed several causes of students' writing errors. Limited grammar mastery was identified as the main factor:

*"Grammar saya memang lemah, jadi pas nulis sering salah tanpa sadar."* (Participant 1)

First language interference also played an important role, as one participant admitted translating directly from Indonesian into English:

*"Biasanya saya terjemahin dari bahasa Indonesia langsung ke Inggris, makanya kalimatnya kadang aneh."* (Participant 2)

Additionally, psychological factors such as time pressure and lack of confidence influenced students' writing accuracy:

*"Kalau dikejar waktu, saya fokus selesai dulu, nggak terlalu ngecek grammar sama tanda baca."* (Participant 1)

These responses suggest that both linguistic and psychological factors contributed to students' sentence structure and punctuation errors.

### **Strategies Used by Students to Reduce Writing Errors**

Participants indicated employing diverse strategies to address their writing challenges. Common strategies encompassed rereading their texts, consulting dictionaries, comparing their writing with exemplar texts, and seeking feedback from peers or instructors. One participant highlighted the significance of receiving direct feedback from a more knowledgeable individual, as it enabled him to promptly identify errors and rectify them efficiently.

The utilization of digital tools such as Google Translate and Grammarly was also frequently cited. Students utilized these tools to verify sentence accuracy and reduce errors, although some participants acknowledged that these tools did not consistently provide explanations for the corrections.

Another participant emphasized the significance of utilizing grammar templates or sentence structures to facilitate writing. According to her, comprehending sentence structures is vital for producing precise and coherent texts.

Participants described several strategies to overcome their writing difficulties. One participant emphasized rereading and seeking feedback as effective strategies:

*"Biasanya saya baca ulang terus nanya ke temen atau dosen, biar tahu salahnya di mana."* (Participant 1)

The use of digital tools was also commonly mentioned:

*"Saya sering pake Google Translate sama Grammarly buat ngecek kalimat."* (Participant 2)

Another participant highlighted the importance of understanding sentence patterns:

*"Kalau sudah tahu pola kalimat, nulisnya jadi lebih gampang."* (Participant 3)

These strategies indicate students' awareness of their weaknesses and their efforts to improve writing accuracy.

### **Causes of Errors**

Based on the interview findings, the factors contributing to errors in sentence structure and punctuation can be classified into four primary categories:

#### **Restricted Proficiency in Grammar**

Students demonstrated an inadequate comprehension of tense norms, verb forms, and sentence structures.

#### **Initial Language Interference**

Literal translation from Indonesian into English resulted in improper word order and awkward sentence constructions.

#### **Insufficient Practice and Feedback**

Students indicated restricted opportunities to engage in writing practice and to obtain comprehensive corrective feedback.

#### **Psychological Aspects**

Stress, diminished confidence, and apprehension about errors affected students' writing performance and precision.

These causes align with the results obtained from the writing test analysis and the prior studies discussed in Chapter II.

### **Discussion**

The interview findings reinforce the results derived from students' writing assessments by offering valuable insights into their perceptions and experiences. The prevalence of sentence structure errors identified in the writing analysis is corroborated by students' statements concerning challenges in tense consistency, verb positioning, and sentence formation.

Furthermore, the influence of first language interference accounts for the common misordering errors observed in students' writing. Students' dependence on direct translation indicates an incomplete internalization of English syntactic principles, as proposed by Corder's (1974) interlanguage theory.

The frequent utilization of digital tools reflects students' recognition of their limitations; however, dependence on these tools without adequate grammatical comprehension may hinder sustained progress. Therefore, direct feedback, explicit instruction in grammar, and guided writing exercises are vital for effectively addressing these concerns. Overall, the triangulation of interview data and writing test analysis strengthens the validity of the findings and offers a thorough understanding of sentence structure and punctuation errors among non-English Department students.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study demonstrates that sentence structure and punctuation errors remain significant challenges for non-English Department students in academic writing. The findings indicate that sentence structure errors, particularly misformation and omission errors related to verb forms, tense usage, and subject-verb agreement, occur more frequently than

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punctuation errors. Punctuation problems mainly involve the omission of periods, misuse of commas, and errors in capitalization and apostrophe usage. These errors are influenced by a combination of limited grammar mastery, first language interference, insufficient writing practice and feedback, and psychological factors such as low confidence and time pressure. Overall, the study highlights the need for more effective, grammar-integrated writing instruction, consistent feedback, and targeted writing support to help non-English Department students improve their writing accuracy and communicate ideas more clearly in academic contexts.

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