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Language and Mechanical Errors in English Writing by Malaysian Tertiary Students

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ABSTRACT

Since writing is a challenging skill that requires knowledge of grammar, language structure, orthography, and vocabulary, this study aims to examine the error patterns made by tertiary-level students in their written English compositions to identify the types of errors and, consequently, the difficulties encountered by them. This study focused on the English language and mechanical errors in the written performance of 107 first-year tertiary students in the Bachelor of English Language and Literature (BENL) programme at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Data were collected from a written discourse in the form of a 300-word descriptive essay. Thirteen categories of errors were identified to determine the type, frequency, and causes of the errors committed by these students. The findings of the study showed that erroneous verb and prepositional phrases, faulty spelling and punctuation, redundant/incorrect lexical choice, and run-on sentences were among the errors made by most of the students. These errors stem from a lack of grammatical knowledge, lack of sentence formation knowledge, and students' literal translation from their first language. These findings conclude that the recurring language and mechanical difficulties observed among Malaysian tertiary students highlight the urgent need for targeted grammar instruction and greater awareness of first-language interference, thereby contributing to more effective ESL writing pedagogy.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Writing is a demanding activity for any student, particularly for those who are second-language learners. In the Malaysian context, where English serves as a second language, ESL learners often encounter challenges related to language accuracy in their written compositions. Producing a piece of writing is a significant challenge for them despite having 11 years of English education in schools. To be proficient in writing, one needs a mastery of the target language, a sound knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and a good understanding of English syntactic structure. Writing

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sophisticated sentences can be daunting for some students as they lack syntactic complexity. They often struggle to produce correct sentence structures with proper grammatical arrangements. Constructing a piece of writing with intricate structures that are error-free by manipulating syntactic complexity can be a struggle.

While English is crucial for academic and professional success in Malaysia, ESL students continue committing language and mechanical errors in their written English. Existing research has identified standard error types, often attributed to first-language interference or general syntactic complexity. However, this surface-level understanding fails to address the underlying cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that perpetuate these errors, hindering learning progress and impacting communication clarity. Students translating directly from their L1 to L2 and grammar rules that are not fully mastered, are some of the underlying cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that need to be researched in-depth. Understanding these mental and language-related challenges can help students become more aware of their writing difficulties and simultaneously, help teachers create better lessons that support their students more effectively. Given these cognitive and linguistic challenges, this study aims to examine the language and mechanical problems first-year Malaysian tertiary students at IIUM encounter by identifying the errors in their writing composition.

Despite extensive studies on language and mechanical errors among ESL learners, most research has focused on general grammatical categories without systematically distinguishing between specific error types such as verb usage, prepositions, and punctuation. This gap limits the pedagogical insights available for Malaysian tertiary contexts, where first-language interference and intralingual challenges remain persistent. Addressing this issue is significant because accurate identification of error hierarchies can inform targeted teaching strategies, improve writing instruction, and enhance students' academic performance. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the types and frequency of language and mechanical errors in the written compositions of first-year Malaysian tertiary students, with the aim of identifying recurring difficulties and providing evidence-based recommendations for improving English writing pedagogy.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Writing and Error Analysis

Writing is a vitally important skill for tertiary students since to excel academically, students need to develop strong academic writing skills that require grammatical accuracy, syntactic clarity, and appropriate vocabulary usage. However, writing in English as a second language is challenging, as students need to be familiar with the nuances of English, as well as the writing conventions, which can differ from their first language, making it difficult for learners to navigate the structural differences between L1 and L2. As a result, even tertiary-level ESL students continue to encounter persistent writing errors, affecting overall clarity and quality.

Brown [7] states that "...errors can be observed, analysed, and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learner..." Errors are significant in ESL learning as they can highlight the learning process or evidence of the learner's system that is differentiated from mistakes that are 'unsystematic' [10]. Errors were initially regarded as an indication of the learner's inefficient learning of the language rules. However, they were later viewed, as proposed by Lado [23], as the difficulties faced by learners in certain aspects of the language due to the interference of the first language. Contrastive analysis, which compares the structure of the first and target languages, could predict the learner's problems and identify steps that can be taken to remedy or minimise the interference. However, this strong predictive version of contrastive analysis may not be realistic [40] and does not apply to all errors [13]. Corder [10] introduced error analysis as a more comprehensive approach to

understanding learners' errors rather than limiting the explanation of errors to contrastive analysis only.

Other views on the significance of errors have emerged over the years, including the notion of 'interlanguage' [32] and Processability Theory [29]. 'Interlanguage' refers to the cognitive aspect of second language learning where errors represent an intermediate stage between the learners' mother tongue and the target language system. Processability Theory, on the other hand, predicts developmental stages of learning by perceiving morphosyntactic errors as the learner's unreadiness to produce certain structures at certain stages. While any approach to analysing errors or theory related to errors is useful in ESL contexts, the present study is more interested in the accurate usage of language and mechanics rather than the theoretical or developmental aspects of errors. As such, the classic error analysis as proposed by Corder [10] is adopted in this study.

1.2.2 Previous Studies on Errors in Writing by Tertiary Students

There have been a number of relatively recent studies on error analysis of writing by students at the tertiary level in different contexts. Al-Ghabra and Najim [4] analysed paragraph writing of female students from the Department of English at a University in Iraq by examining recognition and arrangement errors. They found errors committed in both types, specifically grammar, capitalisation, spelling, punctuation, formatting, handwriting, and coherence. Mireku-Gyimah [26] studied the errors in comments written in a questionnaire used for assessing lecturers' teaching performance by final-year university students in Ghana. The most frequent errors involved those in the register, awkward expressions and ambiguity, punctuation, capitalisation, and subject-verb agreement, while the least frequently occurring errors relate to incorrect use of prepositions, tenses, adjectives, adverbs and pronouns as well as the addition of indefinite articles and omission of definite and indefinite articles. Özkayran and Yilmaz [28] analysed paragraphs written in an examination by university students in Turkey. The types of errors were classified according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering [17]. The most frequent error types were the incorrect use of prepositions, followed by the incorrect use of verbs "to be", misspelling, incorrect use of articles, singular/plural forms, word forms, tenses, word choices, subject-verb agreement, capitalisation, verbs, pronouns, word order, and other errors. The errors were mainly misformation errors, followed by omission, addition, and very few misordering errors.

Unlike the three studies mentioned above which focus on paragraph writing, Waelateh et al., [39] studied English essays of different genres written by Thai university students whose L1 was Arabic and L2 was Thai. The errors were mostly syntactic-level errors, with spelling having the highest frequency, whereas the misuse of 'until', misuse of pseudo passives, under generation of passives, disordering of constituents in indirect questions, and duplicated comparatives or superlatives had zero frequency. The other errors included lexical, discourse, and morphological errors. Yosef [43], who also focuses on academic essays, studied Japanese undergraduates who were non-English majors. The drafts of the essays in various types were saved on a course learning management system, forming a corpus of expository essays. The students were allowed to use online dictionaries but were not permitted to use generative AI, translators, or a cloud-based typing assistant. The final drafts were submitted with a non-plagiarism declaration. Using Quibol-Catabay's [30] framework, the errors were classified into three broad categories: mechanical, grammatical, and structural. The most frequent errors were grammatical errors. These errors, from the most frequent to the least frequent, were in subject-verb agreement, prepositions, articles, and countable and uncountable nouns. The second most frequent errors were mechanical errors, with inaccurate verb forms being the most frequent in this category and the second-highest errors as a whole. This is followed by

inaccurate use of punctuation and capitalisation. Structural error category was less frequent, with fragments being the most common, followed by ambiguity.

Umarlebbe et al., [38] focussed specifically on morphosyntactic errors in the final examination answer scripts of male Sri Lankan engineering diploma students and compare the errors committed by students who were native Sinhala speakers and those who were native Tamil speakers. The errors identified were then categorised based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy [17]. Ordered from the highest to the lowest in the hierarchy of errors were prepositions, verb tenses, articles, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary and modal verbs, relative pronouns, pluralisation, sentence fragments, active-passive verbs, adjectives, possessives, connective, and other inflections. The study also found errors in adverbs, word order, pronouns, redundancy, run-on, and comma-spliced sentences. Misformation errors were the highest in percentages, followed by omission errors, addition errors, and lastly, misordering errors. Sinhala-speaking students committed more errors than Tamil-speaking students.

Wulandari and Harida [42] studied errors found in essays written by students in the English Department in Indonesia. Most of the errors were grammatical while some were categorised as 'factor causing' errors. The grammatical errors from the most common to the least common were determiners, nouns, prepositions, tenses and aspects, adjectives, conjunctions, pronouns, verbs, and adverbs. The rest were 'factor causing' errors, most of which were caused by carelessness followed by errors in translation and interference of the first language.

Similar studies have been conducted on Malaysian tertiary students. Ahmed and Ahasan [1] studied errors in test scripts of written examinations by Malaysian Malay, Indian and Chinese as well as International Chinese. The errors were categorised as interlingual or intralingual transfer. It was found that grammatical interference was the most common type of interlingual error, followed by prepositional interference and lexical interference. In the intralingual category, the use of articles had the highest frequency, followed by overgeneralisation, spelling and lastly, redundancy. Mohideen [27] analysed the most frequent types of grammatical errors in the English Placement Writing Test of students at a Malaysian university using Keshavarz's [22] model of error analysis. The most common type of error was in the use of verbs, nouns, prepositions, adjectives, and articles. Additionally, there were other errors, like those in punctuation and vocabulary. Singh et al., [34] also examined common grammatical errors in examination essays by Diploma in English students. The categories of errors that emerged from the essays were subject-verb agreement followed by verb tenses, nouns, prepositions, adjectives, articles, pronouns, adverbs, and conjunctions.

Ali et al., [3] studied a one-paragraph essay of diploma students at a Malaysian university to identify the most, moderately, and least common errors among the students. The errors from the highest to the lowest frequency were word choice, tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, word order, incomplete structures, verbs 'to be' errors, pronouns, infinitives, and gerunds. There were no errors in possessive and attributive structures. Based on Lunsford and Connors' [24] study, five previous Malaysia-based studies on error analysis, and also interviews with five lecturers from the Department of English Language and Literature at a Malaysian university, Altabaa and Zulkifli [5] categorised errors in the final chapter of undergraduate theses in literature into ten categories. The frequency of error occurrences in descending order is as follows: word choice, punctuation, verbs, prepositions, plurality and singularity, articles, pronouns ambiguity, adverbs, and subject-verb agreement.

Hassan et al., [21] coded errors in the essays of diploma students at a Malaysian public university based on specific parts of speech. The errors, from most common to least common, were verbs, nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions, and determiners. Mehat and Ismail [25] studied essays written by students from various Bachelor's programmes who were enrolled in an academic writing class at a university in Malaysia. The students were given 2 weeks to

complete the essays and could revise their work before the final submission. The most common errors were grammatical errors, specifically subject-verb agreement, followed by verb tenses. The second most common errors were lexical errors, with the use of prepositions as the most frequent errors. The mechanical errors were the third most common alongside punctuation and capitalisation as the most frequent errors. The last type of errors were semantic errors which included word choice as the only item.

As observed in the studies described above, the classification of errors varies from study to study. Some employ broader, general categories such as grammatical categories, while others analyse more specific categories like subject-verb agreement, or sometimes both. Generally, it is reasonable to conclude that among the broad categories of errors, grammatical categories, if examined, tend to be the most challenging for ESL or EFL students. However, the specific types of errors considered most difficult vary across studies. In the Malaysian context, the majority of studies have found that verb errors in general and subject-verb agreement in particular are the errors most frequently committed by Malaysian tertiary students. To gain a broader insight into the hierarchy of errors made by Malaysian tertiary students, this study therefore classifies errors based on established language forms, namely different word classes, syntactical structures, and mechanics of writing in English.

2. Methodology

Research design refers to a strategic plan implemented in a specific study, encompassing a set of methods and procedures used to measure variables within the research problem [15]. This study adopts a descriptive research design to analyse the errors in the written essays of first-year tertiary students from IIUM. Content analysis is used to analyse students' written essays by identifying, categorising, and describing the errors as identified by Corder. His error analysis methodology has been chosen for content analysis which is a systematic and rule-based approach inspired by a theoretical framework [9].

The participants were chosen based on purposive and convenience sampling. The sample size of 107 represents students from four sections of a first-year Morphosyntax course within the Bachelor of English Language and Literature (BENL) programme. In addition, they represent the general first-year BENL population by having similar demographic and educational profile: Malays aged 19 to 22, from various schools in Malaysia, had English instruction since Year 1, and had graduated from the IIUM foundation programme which included some English writing courses.

Their proficiency was between moderate to good. Based on classroom observation by the researcher, there are cases of L1 influence on L2 in both written and spoken English. For data collection, participants were instructed to write a 300-word descriptive essay detailing their families, educational backgrounds, interests, and experiences in tertiary-level studies. They were instructed to complete their essay writing in 45 minutes. At the end of the stipulated time, the researcher hand-collected the essays for data analysis. This ensures the validity of the data. After the data collection process, the data obtained were then analysed using Error Analysis to examine the students' writing performance based on English syntax. Error analysis gained recognition primarily due to Corder's contributions [12], who outlined the specific steps in research. The stages taken in examining their composition are based on the following procedure [12].

1. Collection of data

The first step in EA is to collect samples of students' writing.

2. Identification of errors

The second step is to identify, categorise and quantify the errors.

3. Description of errors

The third step is to describe the nature of errors in terms of linguistic categories (e.g., syntax, morphology).

4. Explanation of errors

The fourth step involves determining the sources of errors, which could be due to transfer from the native language, overgeneralisation of target language rules, or developmental stage.

5. Evaluation of errors

Assess the impact of errors on communication and determine which errors require attention in teaching.

The students' writing was analysed and after the errors were identified, they were categorised into type of errors with the frequency and percentage calculated. There were 13 categories of errors that were classified and analysed in this study.

3. Findings and Discussion

One hundred and seven sample compositions written by first-year tertiary students were collected and analysed. Table 1 presents a total of 1105 language and mechanical errors categorised by type, frequency, and percentage.

Table 1
Language and mechanical writing errors

Item	Type of Errors	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Verb	248	22.5
2.	Preposition	112	10.1
3.	Punctuation	108	9.8
4.	Capitalisation	95	8.6
5.	Vocabulary	90	8.1
6.	Article	88	8.0
7.	Conjunction	78	7.1
8.	Run-on sentences	70	6.3
9.	Noun	66	6.0
10.	Spelling	64	5.8
11.	Pronoun	41	3.7
12.	Sentence fragment	29	2.6
13.	Adverb	16	1.4
Total		1105	100.0

The table shows thirteen types of errors found in students' writing compositions which include verb, preposition, punctuation, capitalisation, vocabulary, article, conjunction, run-on sentences, noun, spelling, pronoun, sentence fragment, and adverb errors. These errors can be further divided into language and mechanical. Punctuation and capitalisation are categorised as mechanical and the rest fall under the language category. The verb occurs as the highest type of error students committed, followed by prepositions, punctuation, capitalisation, vocabulary, and articles. This reflects the findings of Mehat and Ismail [25], who noted verb-related issues as the most frequent grammatical error among undergraduates. Additionally, Fitrawati and Safitri [18] highlighted persistent verb inaccuracies in essay writing, and Singh et al., [34] similarly ranked subject-verb agreement as the main error category among Diploma students. However, this study does not distinguish between errors that occurred in subject-verb agreement and those that occurred in verb tense. A moderate error frequency was found in conjunctions, run-on sentences, nouns, and spelling.

Other minor errors include pronouns, sentence fragments, and adverbs. For the discussion, the first seven error types, each representing at least 7% of the total errors, were selected as they were the most prevalent and pedagogically significant. This focused approach ensures an in-depth analysis of the most recurring errors and less on the infrequent errors that may offer limited insight.

The prevalence of language and mechanical errors in Malaysian tertiary students' English writing can be attributed to interlingual and/or intralingual errors. In other words, errors occur due to the different language systems of the first and target languages, and the lack of knowledge in the target language. According to Dulay et al., [17], "interference is the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language." As a result of the familiarity of the first language, students commit errors in the target language. In this case, it is the interference of Malay into English. Intralingual errors arise due to the learning process of the target language which results in overgeneralisation, partial understanding of rules, or inaccurate linguistic hypotheses. The findings of the study will be discussed below in relation to these two sources of errors.

3.1 Verb

Of all the identified errors, verb inaccuracies emerge as the most frequent, accounting for 22.5% of the total. Since students' writing samples are based on their experiences, current events, and future hopes and dreams, the grammar rules in writing must reflect these details through correct tense selection. However, their writing samples indicate a failure to modify verbs correctly, resulting in frequent errors. The following sentences are two examples of the students' errors.

1. Hopefully, everything **go** well and my parents can look at me and say "that's our son and we (are) proud of him."

*Hopefully, everything **goes** well and my parents can look at me and say "that's our son and we (are) proud of him."

2. I have a deep interest in photography and cinema as both **helps** to portray reality.

*I have a deep interest in photography and cinema as both **help** to portray reality.

The above examples show the errors in subject-verb agreement. There is a mismatch between the subject and the singular/plural verb. In example 1, the verb 'go' should be 'goes' to match the singular verb 'everything'. In example 2, the verb 'helps' should be 'help', as the subject 'both' refers to a plural noun phrase. From the students' writing samples, they committed these errors due to their inability to select the correct subject-verb agreement, which is likely influenced by the absence of this grammatical rule in Malay. Besides, written or spoken language can still be understood even if the subject and verb disagree. Still, it is beneficial to understand the type of errors as Error Analysis (EA) distinguishes between 'errors' and 'mistakes.' Corder [14] claims that errors are systematic and indicate gaps in linguistic incompetence and mistakes are slips due to factors such as negligence and fatigue. Based on the students' writing samples, verb errors, particularly those related to subject-verb agreement, appear frequently and systematically. This suggests that students are not merely making mistakes but committing errors, reflecting incomplete mastery of English grammatical rules. This aligns with the observations of Fitrawati and Safitri [18], who noted persistent gaps in students' grammar competence. Furthermore, Mehat and Ismail [25] affirmed that existing grammar instruction remains insufficient in addressing subject-verb agreement complexities. Since Malay lacks subject-verb agreement, the errors that occurred could be due to first-language interference. Difficulties in applying the correct verbs could also be attributed to the second language itself. Some students may misapply learned rules, leading to tense and verb form errors. In this context, the

students' verb errors could stem from interlingual transfer, as their native language does not impose subject-verb agreement constraints.

3.2 Preposition

Prepositional errors account for 10.1% of all errors identified, indicating a fundamental struggle among students in mastering English prepositional structures. Their lack of knowledge of the use of the correct prepositions and carelessness in selecting the correct prepositions appeared to be the causes of the errors. However, the sentences can still be understood perfectly. Some of the examples include:

1. Currently, I live **at** Ipoh, Perak.

*Currently, I live **in** Ipoh, Perak.

2. Whatever happened in my life I tend to just let it be and because of that people around me tend to take advantage me.

*Whatever happened in my life I tend to just let it be and because of that people around me tend to take advantage **of** me.

3. Just one more wish to accomplish and I can graduate IIUM happily.

* Just one more wish to accomplish and I can graduate **from** IIUM happily.

Wrong choice of preposition could be due to several reasons as shown in Example 1. Students' lack of knowledge on how prepositions are used in English led them to select incorrect preposition. Wairimu and Ngugi [41] found that students frequently commit prepositional errors due to the complexity of the usage that does not follow a straightforward set of rules. Example 1 shows that error might be attributed to interlingual errors as the students incorrectly applied Malay prepositional patterns to English. First-language interference occurs (as Malay and English differ in prepositional usage) which may lead students to incorrectly transfer native structure. The errors in Examples 2 and 3 show the omission error of a required preposition. Corder [11] defines omission errors as omission of a required item. Dulay et al., [17] described omission errors as "the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance." The error in Example 2 shows the absence of the preposition 'of' in the phrase 'take advantage of me', demonstrates students' struggle in recognising fixed expression. Correct usage of prepositions often depends on fixed expressions, idiomatic usage and subtle nuances that students must learn over time [8]. This error stems from internal difficulties in acquiring English prepositions, which aligns with Corder's framework on intralingual errors. Prepositional errors persist because correct usage often depends on idiomatic expressions and nuanced meanings rather than clear grammatical rules. There is also a tendency for students to apply the prepositional rules of their native language to English as they are more familiar with the structures from their native language [6]. However, transferring the equivalent prepositions from one language to another can lead to errors, as the prepositions may function differently or may not exist at all in the target language. The error in Example 3 shows the absence of the preposition 'from' which affects the meaning of the sentence. Based on the samples, students apply or omit prepositions because incorrect or missing prepositions do not alter the meaning of the sentences and therefore, do not hinder understanding from the reader's perspective. Given the frequency and consistency of prepositional errors observed in students' writing, they align more closely with errors, signifying deeper learning challenges rather than momentary mistakes.

3.3 Punctuation

Punctuation functions as mechanics in writing to enable readers to understand the meaning of sentences much more easily. The persistent disregard for mechanical accuracy suggests that students perceive punctuation as secondary to the overall meaning. With punctuation errors occurring at 9.8%, the clarity and coherence of written communication may be compromised. Below are some of the students' comma and apostrophe errors in their writing samples.

1. **Currently** I'm a third year second semester BENL student and I'm from Sabak Bernam, Selangor.

***Currently**, I'm a third-year, second-semester BENL student, and I'm from Sabak Bernam, Selangor.

2. Honestly, I **dont** want to get married and have kids in the future.

*Honestly, I **don't** want to get married and have kids in the future.

Commas are essential for clarity and readability. They function by breaking up sentences into smaller fragments to help readers understand the sentences' structure and meaning [37] and to indicate pauses making the text engaging and comprehensible [35]. Based on the students' writing samples, they tend to write long sentences without commas. In Example 1, 'Currently' is an introductory element and requires a comma for clarity. Since the students' first language is Malay, the punctuation error could be attributed to interlingual error. Malay may not require a comma after an introductory element, unlike English, and this leads to students' confusion when writing in a language that requires one. Proper use of commas is essential for clear and effective written communication, as it ensures that the message is understood accurately and without ambiguity.

In addition, hyphenation links words or parts of words together. In Example 1 again, hyphen form 'third' and 'year' into third-year, and 'second' and 'semester' into second-semester, turning the individual words into compound adjectives. The two compound adjectives function as a single adjective providing clarity and precision when describing the type of student and their current academic term. By hyphenating 'third-year' and 'second-semester,' the sentence clearly means that the student is in third year and second semester. This prevents ambiguous meaning that leads to confusion arising from reading the adjectives as separate with unrelated descriptors [37]. This hyphenation errors in Example 1 may also be attributed to interlingual errors. Malay does not use hyphens for compound adjectives and the missing hyphens in English compound adjectives may be attributed to this reason.

In Example 2, the contraction 'don't' is missing an apostrophe that indicates the omission of the letter 'o' in 'not.' The missing apostrophe in 'dont' indicates students' difficulty in understanding contractions in English, perhaps due to interlingual error, as Malay does not use apostrophes in contractions. Proper use of apostrophes is essential for indicating omitted letters in contractions. This ensures clarity and precision in written communication, so that it is understood in its intended form [35].

3.4 Capitalisation

Capitalisation errors in the students' writing samples attributed to 8.6%, indicating gaps in their understanding of standard English writing conventions. Their writing samples demonstrated recurrent errors in capitalisation, suggesting underlying difficulties in recognising and applying these rules.

1. Do i regret what happened?

*Do I regret what happened?

2. The whole story about her winning an essay contest at 19 and how it launched her career in journalism at **vogue** magazine.

*The whole story about her winning an essay contest at 19 and how it launched her career in journalism at **Vogue** magazine.

3. **since** I am the type that is not really expressive, I also find it hard to communicate with others.

***Since** I am the type that is not really expressive, I also find it hard to communicate with others.

The correct use of capitalisation ensures sentences are clear and readable. Readers can easily identify the beginning of a sentence, titles, pronouns, and proper nouns, making the sentences comprehensible [19]. In Example 1, the pronoun 'I' which represents the first-person singular pronoun, is always capitalised regardless of its position in a sentence. The error in this example could be due to interlingual influence as there are different capitalisation conventions between Malay and English. Unlike English, Malay does not require capitalisation for the pronoun 'saya' (equivalent to pronoun 'I' in English) which may explain students' failure to capitalise 'I' in their writing. Additionally, this error could also be attributed to the influence of social media writing where punctuation is unimportant. In Example 2, the proper noun 'vogue' requires capitalisation as it refers to a specific name of a magazine. Strunk and White [36] state that capitalisation distinguishes between proper nouns and common nouns, aiding students to differentiate between general and specific references. By capitalising 'Vogue,' proper nouns are distinguished from common nouns; in this case, capitalisation distinguishes the specific fashion magazine 'Vogue' from the common adjective 'vogue.' In Example 3, a capital letter signals the start of a new sentence that consists of a new idea or statement. By capitalising the first letter of the word 'since,' readers can easily identify the beginning of a new sentence, hence, improving overall readability. Failing to recognise sentence boundaries, as shown in Example 3, may likely stem from an incomplete mastery of English grammar conventions rather than direct influence from Malay. Based on the students' writing samples, they repeatedly failed to capitalise proper nouns, sentence-initial words and the first-person pronoun, which suggests an incomplete understanding of capitalisation rules rather than isolated slips in writing. Correct use on the rule on capitalisation is essential for effective written communication, ensuring that the intended message is delivered accurately and professionally.

3.5 Vocabulary

The high occurrence of vocabulary errors (8.1%) is due to students' lack of awareness of words with multiple meanings. Their reliance on direct translations and insufficient vocabulary knowledge of contextually appropriate word choice led to words being used interchangeably as demonstrated in the following examples:

1. I cannot **talk** well or strike a conversation.

*I cannot **speak** well or strike up a conversation.

2. I was just a **normal** high school girl that strive to achieve flying colour results.

*I was just a **regular** high school girl that strove to achieve flying colours in my results.

3. I don't like to think much and I tend to **follow** with the flow.

*I don't like to think much and I tend to **go** with the flow.

In Example 1, while 'talk' and 'speak' are synonyms, the appropriate vocabulary in this context is 'speak' because it conveys the ability to articulate words clearly. Example 2 also shows that 'normal' and 'regular' are often used interchangeably. However, the word 'regular' is appropriate in this

context as it describes an ordinary or a typical high school student. Examples 1 and 2 show that understanding words with multiple meanings and their appropriate context is essential to avoid misunderstandings and errors in communication [31]. These errors may be attributed to intralingual errors as students may have overgeneralised or misinterpreted the rules or possessed inadequate vocabulary knowledge and assumed that synonyms can be used interchangeably without considering their contextual distinctions. Having a broader vocabulary helps students convey ideas more effectively as they are able to write with precision using varied expression. In Example 3, there is a misuse of the word 'follow' in the idiomatic expression 'go with the flow.' In English, 'follow with the flow' is not the standard usage. This error may stem from a direct translation from Malay rather than the correct English translation. Interlingual errors often occur when words are directly translated without considering proper usage. For effective communication in writing, students should strive for a rich vocabulary and continuously expand it so that they can produce engaging and sophisticated work. This would enhance the quality of their writing, contributing to better academic and professional communication.

3.6 Article

The fifth error committed by students is the misuse of articles, which accounts for 8% of errors. The students' writing samples show errors occurring only in Omission but not in Substitution and Addition.

3.6.1 Omission

1. At the age of 15, I used to aim on furthering my studies in United Kingdom.
*At the age of 15, I used to aim on furthering my studies to **the** United Kingdom.
2. Frankly speaking, I am a very shy person and introvert.
*Frankly speaking, I am a very shy person and **an** introvert.
3. Living (...) simple and happy life is enough.
*Living **a** simple and happy life is enough.

3.6.2 Substitution

No examples found.

3.6.3 Addition

No examples found.

The findings show that there were no errors related to Substitution and Addition. The students' inability to include articles in their sentences shows that there is first-language interference. The omission of articles is quite common among the Malay speakers as the Malay language does not possess definite and indefinite articles, and therefore, there is a tendency for the speakers to overlook article usage in English. Another possible reason for the omission of articles is a lack of awareness about article usage. They are ambivalent as to why and when articles are needed in English. When they construct sentences, the focus is more on meaning, rather than on the rules governing their use. Shakir et al., [33] found that omissive errors occur more frequently than substitutive and additive errors due to the influence of the native language. Alhaysony [2] also discovered that omissive errors occur the most among English language students at the University of

Ha'il in Saudi Arabia. This indicates that interlingual errors occur most commonly, suggesting a native language influence.

3.7 Conjunction

Conjunction errors account for 7.1% of the total errors. The students' writing samples indicate a lack of awareness of the functions of conjunctions as connectors of words, phrases, and clauses, and therefore, they should not be positioned at the beginning of a sentence.

Examples:

1. **And** now, I am here, in this class, ENGL 1321 section 2.
2. **But** I am not a bad guy.
3. **Because** last semester, I got 2.8 for my CGPA.

The above examples indicate that students are exhibiting intralingual characteristics through overgeneralisation of informal writing conventions. They view the writing task as an informal piece of writing involving personal experiences that positioning connectors at the beginning of a sentence is acceptable. Another reason for this error is attributed to the unchanged meaning of the sentence and therefore, does not hinder understanding from the reader's perspective.

4. Study Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. First, the sample was restricted to 107 students from one academic program (BENL) at one institution (IIUM). This limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader Malaysian tertiary student population. Second, the data was collected based on a 300-word descriptive essay. Therefore, the error types in the findings cannot be generalised to students' writing in other genres. Lastly, the study is based on a qualitative research design only and therefore, does not perform inferential statistical analysis. This limits its ability to predict error patterns across different groups of students.

5. Conclusion

English proficiency remains a critical skill for academic and professional success in Malaysia, yet ESL students continue to struggle with language accuracy in their writing. The students in this study, although able to write a relatively good essay, still made language and mechanical errors. To identify errors in their written essays, the study employed a qualitative content analysis, utilising Corder's error analysis methodology. The findings identified several errors, with verb as the most prevalent challenges faced by first-year tertiary students. Verb-related errors constituted 22.5% of all total errors emphasising significant grammatical weaknesses among students, particularly in mastering subject-verb agreement and tense accuracy.

This study's findings broadly align with the research conducted by Gedion et al., [20], Mehat and Ismail [25], and Singh et al., [34] where they identified verb-related errors as the most problematic among Malaysian tertiary students. However, there are notable methodological and contextual differences among these studies. Mehat and Ismail [25] and Singh et al., [34] separated verb errors into subject-verb agreement first, followed by verb tenses. However, the current study combined these two items as one main category i.e. verb. Furthermore, while Singh et al., [34] examined the written scripts of Diploma students under strict examination conditions, this study highlights that these fundamental verb and mechanical errors persist even among Bachelor's degree students completing a standard descriptive essay.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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