Syntactic Errors in Indonesian EFL Students' Narrative Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study investigates syntactic errors in the narrative essays of Indonesian EFL students, specifically third-semester English Literature students at Universitas Teknokrat Indonesia. Writing is among the most demanding skills in language learning, requiring mastery of grammar and sentence structure in addition to idea organization. Using a descriptive qualitative design, ten student essays were analyzed and classified based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. A total of 101 syntactic errors were identified: misformation (31.7%) was the most frequent, followed by omission (28.7%), misordering (27.7%), and addition (13.9%). The results revealed that omission errors were mainly caused by interlingual transfer from Indonesian, while misformation and misordering resulted from intralingual factors such as overgeneralization and incomplete rule acquisition. These findings confirm that syntactic errors are systematic and developmental in nature, representing the learners' interlanguage progression rather than failure. Pedagogically, the study underscores the need for focused instruction on verb tense, auxiliary usage, article application, and word order, supported by contrastive and technology-assisted approaches. The study concludes that understanding learners' syntactic errors is essential for designing effective grammar pedagogy in EFL writing, allowing errors to serve as valuable indicators of language development rather than mere deficiencies.

Keywords: *EFL Writing; Error Analysis; Narrative Essay; Surface Strategy Taxonomy; Syntactic Errors*

Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that one of the most difficult skills in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is writing. In contrast to speaking or listening, writing requires precise use of language and sentence structure in addition to the creation and organizing of ideas. It requires mastery not only of vocabulary but also of grammar and syntax to produce coherent and meaningful compositions. Despite years of English instruction, many EFL students still struggle with grammatical accuracy in their written work. Such difficulties often manifest in syntactic errors that hinder clarity and coherence, reflecting deeper issues in learners' interlanguage development (Andrian, 2020; Simanjuntak, 2019).

Error Analysis, first introduced by Corder (1967), emphasizes that learners' errors are a vital source of insight into the language acquisition process. Errors demonstrate how learners internalize linguistic rules and reveal developmental stages in second language learning. Building on Corder's foundation, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) proposed the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which classifies syntactic errors into four categories: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This taxonomy allows researchers to analyze how learners manipulate linguistic structures and to understand where and why such manipulations fail. Additionally, Richards (1974) distinguishes between interlingual errors those caused by negative transfer from the first language and intralingual errors, which result from overgeneralization or incomplete rule acquisition.

Numerous studies have examined syntactic errors among EFL learners in various contexts. For example, Febriyanti and Sundari (2016) and Kuswoyo et al. (2021) found that omission and misformation were the most frequent types of errors, often influenced by interference from students' native language and insufficient grammatical competence. Similarly, Chaudhary and Zahrani (2020) and Andrian (2020) emphasized that EFL learners' limited exposure to authentic English input and overgeneralization tendencies contribute significantly to syntactic inaccuracies. These findings consistently highlight two primary sources of difficulty L1 interference and internal linguistic processing challenges rather than simply cataloguing error frequency.

While these studies provide valuable insights into grammatical difficulties faced by EFL learners, they tend to focus on general writing tasks or specific grammar structures. There remains a lack of research focusing on narrative essay writing, a genre that requires the integration of both linguistic accuracy and storytelling coherence. Narrative essays are particularly revealing because they allow students to express ideas creatively and naturally, making syntactic errors

more observable and authentic than in structured test-based writing (Utami & Listyani, 2022). Hence, analyzing errors in this genre provides a more realistic picture of students' actual language competence.

Given this background, the present study aims to fill this gap by examining syntactic errors in narrative essays written by third-semester English Literature students at Indonesian University. These students are at an intermediate stage of their studies having acquired foundational grammatical knowledge but still developing their ability to apply it accurately in extended writing. This research employs the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982) to classify errors and Richards' (1974) framework to determine their interlingual and intralingual causes. By identifying error types, frequencies, and sources, this study seeks to provide insights that can inform more effective grammar and writing pedagogy in the EFL context.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to address the following question: *What types of syntactic errors are found in the narrative essays of third-semester English Literature students?* Finding and categorizing the faults in accordance with the Surface Strategy Taxonomy and analyzing their educational implications are the goals. This study's originality resides in its targeted analysis of narrative essays written by English literature third-semester students, which offers context-specific insights into grammatical difficulties. It is anticipated that the results would advance error analysis theory and enhance EFL writing education in practice.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine syntactic errors in the narrative essays of Indonesian EFL students. A descriptive approach was chosen because it allows for a detailed investigation of errors as they naturally occur in students' writing, without the use of experimental manipulation or control variables. This design is appropriate for language studies that aim to describe patterns, types, and sources of linguistic errors rather than to test hypotheses or produce statistical generalizations.

The participants consisted of ten students (aged 19–21 years) from the English Literature Department. The participants of this study were third-semester English Literature students at an Indonesian university. They had been studying English for minimum 6 years and were classified as intermediate-level learners, based on their placement results and academic performance. These students were selected because they are at a transitional stage of their academic development, moving from mastering basic grammar to engaging in more complex academic

writing. At this stage, they have acquired foundational grammatical knowledge but continue to be prone to making errors, making them an ideal group for examining syntactic challenges. Of the total 28 student links submitted as part of the academic essay writing assignment, there were 10 narrative essays that were included in the analysis because 12 links could not be accessed, 4 links did not contain narrative essays, and 2 student narrative essays were suspected of plagiarism. These essays provided authentic data that reflect students' actual writing practices.

This study applied a purposive sampling technique, as the selected essays represented authentic student work relevant to the research objectives. The selection ensured that the essays were narrative in nature and met the minimum length and linguistic criteria necessary for syntactic error analysis.

The data were collected in December 2024. The essays were obtained via links provided by the lecturer, which directed the researcher to students' published work on personal websites or online portfolios. Permission to use the essays was granted by the lecturer, and all personal identifiers were anonymized in order to maintain research ethics and protect student privacy. The data were preserved in their original form, ensuring authenticity and reliability in the analysis.

The analysis of the data followed four main steps. First, the researcher compiled the essays that met the inclusion criteria. Second, the sentences were examined to identify errors at the syntactic level. Third, the errors were classified based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), which consists of four categories: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Finally, the researcher interpreted the patterns and frequencies of the errors to provide insights into learners' syntactic competence and the pedagogical implications of their mistakes.

Although only ten essays were analyzed, data saturation was achieved as recurring error types appeared consistently across the samples. Additional essays were found to exhibit similar error patterns, confirming that the data were sufficient for identifying dominant syntactic issues

By employing this method, the study sought to provide a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the types of syntactic errors committed by EFL learners in their narrative essays. Rather than relying solely on numerical data, the descriptive analysis aimed to capture the qualitative nature of learners' interlanguage, highlighting both recurring patterns and the underlying linguistic challenges faced by students in their academic writing.

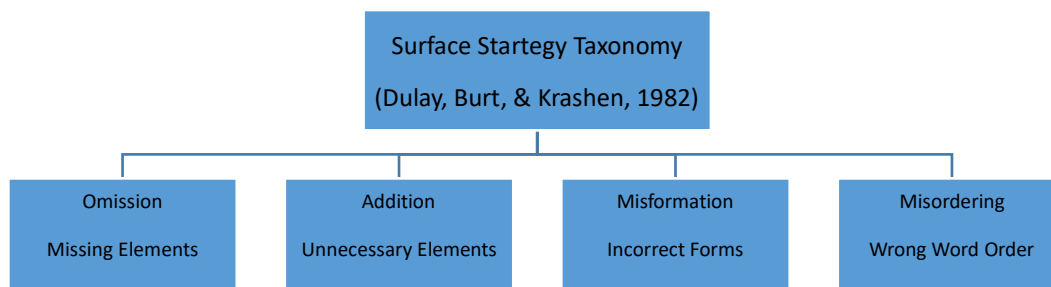**Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982)**

Figure 1. Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, et., al., 1982)

Dulay, Burt, & Krashen (1982) introduced the Surface Strategy Taxonomy as a means to classify errors based on learners' strategies of using or not using patterns of language in the target language. It includes four types:

- Omission

  Omission occurs when an obligatory element is left out of a sentence. This is a common error among EFL learners, especially with function words such as articles, auxiliary verbs, and prepositions. Omission reflects learners' incomplete acquisition or inconsistent application of syntactic rules.

- Addition

  Addition errors arise when learners include unnecessary elements in a sentence. These elements may be grammatically superfluous or redundant, often due to overgeneralization of target language rules.

- Misformation

  Misformation involves the use of an incorrect form for a linguistic item. In contrast to omission, where something is left out, misformation shows that the learner knows a rule is needed but applies it incorrectly.

- Misordering

  Misordering refers to the incorrect placement of words or elements in a sentence. These errors often interfere with sentence meaning and occur due to the learner's unfamiliarity with standard English word order.

Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of ten narrative essays written by third-semester English Literature students. A total of 101 syntactic errors were identified and classified according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Before presenting the tables, a brief summary of the quantitative

distribution and qualitative interpretation is provided to offer a clearer overview of the data trends.

Table 1. Distribution of Syntactic Errors in Students' Narrative Essays

No.	Essay Title	Omission	Addition	Misformation	Misordering	Total
1	*Treasure Island*	3	2	2	2	9
2	*Miss My Mom*	2	2	2	2	8
3	*Travel to the City of Bandar Lampung*	2	2	2	2	8
4	*Unexpected Experience*	2	2	3	4	11
5	*My Sister Gave Birth to Her Daughter*	3	2	4	4	13
6	*The Unexpected Journey*	4	0	3	4	11
7	*Flood*	4	0	5	5	14
8	*Gap Year Means a Lot*	5	0	7	3	15
9	*Moving Schools in Primary School*	2	2	2	1	7
10	*Golden Memories*	2	2	2	1	7
	Total	29	14	32	28	101

The results show that misformation errors indicate difficulties in mastering grammatical forms such as verb tenses and auxiliary usage. Omission errors often involved missing articles or auxiliary verbs, while misordering errors reflected direct translation from Bahasa Indonesia. Addition errors, though least frequent, demonstrated redundancy or overgeneralization of grammatical rules.

Error Severity and Pattern Interpretation
Errors were further categorized by their impact on comprehension:
- Minor errors (e.g., article omission, redundant words) slightly reduced grammatical accuracy but did not distort meaning. *He has car → He has a car* (article omission).
- Moderate errors (e.g., verb tense misformation, adverb misordering) sometimes affected clarity. *She goes always to school → She always goes to*

school (adverb misordering).

- Severe errors (e.g., incorrect clause order, missing auxiliary verbs) significantly hindered sentence interpretation. *He not like go school → He does not like to go to school* (auxiliary and infinitive omission).

Severe errors were prevalent in essays featuring longer, more complex sentences (Essays 3, 6, and 8), while shorter essays contained mainly minor or moderate errors. The distribution of error types showed varying tendencies:

- Essay 1: Dominated by omission, especially in tense and auxiliary verbs.
- Essays 2-3: None of the four categories dominated, suggesting better grammatical awareness but simpler syntax.
- Essays 4–6: Featured frequent misordering due to L1 interference.
- Essays 7–8: Displayed the highest overall number of errors, indicating active syntactic experimentation but weaker grammatical control.
- Essays 9–10: Contained fewer total errors, mostly omissions, addition, and misinformation suggesting better grammatical awareness but simpler syntax.

The Surface Strategy Taxonomy diagram (Figure 1) was improved for readability and is now explicitly referenced in the discussion section. Figure 2 below presents the percentage distribution of the four error types for clarity
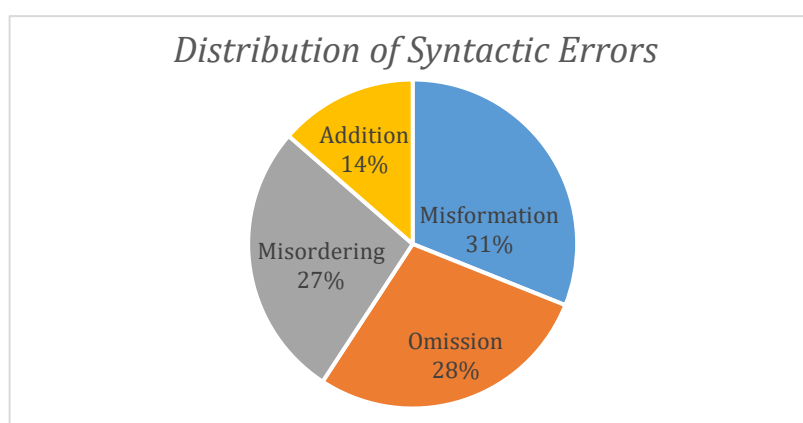

Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of Syntactic Errors

Overall, misformation errors were the most frequent, followed by omission, misordering, and addition. As shown in Figure 2, misformation dominates with (31.7%) of errors indicate that students struggled primarily with verb tense and word form accuracy, while omission errors (28.7%) reflect difficulties in applying obligatory syntactic elements such as articles and auxiliary verbs. Misordering (27.7%) often resulted from first-language (L1) interference, and addition (13.9%)

appeared mainly as redundancy or overuse of certain forms. In general, the errors varied in severity from minor errors that only affected form (e.g., article omission) to more serious ones that impaired comprehension (e.g., verb misformation and word misordering).

Discussion

The analysis of ten narrative essays demonstrates that syntactic errors remain a persistent challenge for third-semester EFL students. While the earlier dataset of ten essays revealed misordering as the most frequent error type, the expanded dataset of ten essays shifts the dominance toward misformation. This change highlights the dynamic nature of learners' interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), in which errors evolve depending on linguistic exposure, developmental stages, and instructional input.

1. Misformation (31.7%)

    Misformation errors primarily tense inconsistencies ("I go to school …" instead of "I went …"), incorrect lexical choices (thing instead of alarm), and spelling errors (introduong instead of introducing) signal that learners are still in the hypothesis-testing stage of language learning (Ellis, 1994). Students appear to have acquired partial knowledge of grammatical rules but fail to apply them consistently. This supports Corder's (1967) claim that errors are "systematic" and reflect learners' internal grammar rather than random slips.

    Pedagogically, this suggests that students require focused corrective feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Explicit instruction on verb tense patterns, along with contrastive analysis exercises comparing Indonesian and English, could help reduce fossilization in tense usage.

2. Omission (28.7%)

    Omission errors, such as missing articles ("Damri bus" instead of "the Damri bus") or auxiliary verbs ("His nose buried …" instead of "was buried"), align with negative transfer from Indonesian, a language that does not employ articles and has flexible auxiliary usage. These findings corroborate previous studies (e.g., Sermsook et al., 2017) showing that article omission is among the most persistent errors among Asian EFL learners.

    Such errors are critical because they directly affect grammatical accuracy and comprehension. For instance, omission of tense markers may obscure temporal reference, while missing articles may alter specificity. Corrective strategies must therefore combine form-focused instruction with meaning-based tasks, so learners not only recognize missing forms but also understand

their communicative value.

3. Misordering (27.7%)

    Misordering errors—such as "you're 2 years gapyear surely …" demonstrate the influence of Indonesian's more flexible word order. English requires strict adherence to Subject–Verb–Object patterns, while Indonesian allows greater syntactic fluidity. This structural interference underscores the difficulty learners face in restructuring their syntactic processing system to accommodate English norms.

    These errors highlight the importance of syntax-focused exercises that explicitly address word order (e.g., adverb placement, modifier ordering). Task-based activities where students reformulate disordered sentences could strengthen syntactic awareness. Furthermore, consistent misordering suggests that teaching should extend beyond grammar drills and incorporate noticing strategies (Schmidt, 1990), encouraging learners to observe authentic English sentence patterns in reading and listening activities.

4. Addition (13.9%)

    Although the least frequent, addition errors (e.g., "Bude Ndut Canteen" instead of "Bude Ndut") indicate overgeneralization and lack of stylistic awareness. Such redundancy often arises from learners' attempts to emphasize or clarify meaning but results in unnatural expressions. While addition errors may not severely impair comprehension, they negatively impact fluency and stylistic appropriateness, key features in advanced academic writing.

The dataset analyzed in this study consisted of ten narrative essays, consistent with the number reported in the *Method* section. These essays were selected after excluding ineligible or inaccessible data, as explained earlier.

The findings show that misformation and omission errors dominate the learners' writing, accounting for 60.4% of the total 101 syntactic errors. This pattern indicates that learners are in an intermediate stage of interlanguage development, where grammatical structures have been partially internalized but are not yet consistently applied.

Misformation errors such as *"He goed"* or *"She don't like"* demonstrate overgeneralization, a common intralingual process in which learners extend one rule to contexts where it does not apply. Meanwhile, omission errors such as *"She going to market"* suggest incomplete knowledge of obligatory grammatical elements such as auxiliary verbs or articles. These findings are consistent with those of Andrian

(2020) and Febriyanti & Sundari (2016), who reported similar tendencies among Indonesian EFL learners.

Many of the misordering and omission errors can be traced to interlingual interference, where learners apply Indonesian syntactic structures to English. For example, the phrase *"Beautiful dress she wears"* mirrors the Indonesian word order *"Gaun indah yang dia pakai."* Such structural transfer illustrates the deep influence of L1 grammar on learners' interlanguage construction.

At the same time, intralingual errors such as *"He not like go school"* demonstrate incomplete mastery of auxiliary verb rules in English. This combination of interlingual and intralingual influences confirms that learners' errors are not random but systematic, representing cognitive processes in second language development (Ellis, 1994; Schmidt, 2001).

The predominance of misformation and omission errors in this study aligns with findings from Wijayanti & Azizah (2021) and Simanjuntak (2019), who identified verb inflection and article usage as persistent issues among Indonesian EFL students. However, the proportion of misordering errors (25.7%) in this study is slightly higher than in earlier works, suggesting that the narrative genre may encourage more flexible sentence construction and thus more syntactic variation.

This context also highlights genre sensitivity: while narrative essays emphasize storytelling and temporal progression, argumentative or expository essays may elicit more complex clause structures and logical connectors, potentially leading to different error profiles. Future research could therefore expand the dataset to include multiple writing genres for comparative analysis.

The findings carry several pedagogical implications for EFL instruction, especially in grammar and writing courses:

1. Focused Grammar Workshops: Teachers can design targeted sessions on tense and auxiliary usage, emphasizing irregular verb patterns and sentence transformation exercises.
2. Contrastive Analysis Activities: Classroom activities comparing Indonesian and English sentence structures can raise students' awareness of L1 interference.
3. Peer Editing and Feedback: Encouraging students to review one another's work helps them recognize grammatical errors in context and develop metalinguistic awareness.
4. Technology-Integrated Feedback: Digital tools such as Grammarly or Write & Improve can provide immediate automated feedback, supporting individualized grammar correction outside classroom hours.

These strategies can bridge the gap between error recognition and grammatical accuracy, fostering students' long-term writing competence.

This study has several limitations:

First, it analyzed only ten essays from a single institution, which limits generalizability to broader EFL contexts. Second, the data were restricted to narrative writing, excluding other genres that may exhibit different syntactic characteristics. Third, participants were all intermediate-level learners, so findings may differ for beginner or advanced proficiency levels. Finally, the study relied on manual coding of errors, which although verified by a second rater still involves subjective interpretation.

Future studies could expand on this research in several directions:

- Comparative Genre Analysis: Include argumentative or descriptive essays to identify genre-specific error tendencies.
- Proficiency-Based Studies: Compare error types across beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners.
- Longitudinal Analysis: Observe the evolution of learners' syntactic accuracy over multiple semesters.
- Technology Integration: Examine the impact of automated feedback systems on reducing syntactic errors over time.

Such studies will enrich understanding of EFL learners' grammatical development and inform more adaptive teaching strategies.

Conclusion

This study analyzed syntactic errors in ten narrative essays written by Indonesian EFL students, focusing on the four categories of the Surface Strategy Taxonomy: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. A total of 101 errors were identified, with misformation (31.7%) emerging as the most frequent, followed by omission (28.7%), misordering (27.7%), and addition (13.9%). Compared to the earlier dataset of ten essays, which showed misordering as dominant, the expanded data highlights a shift toward misformation, suggesting that students' challenges evolve as their interlanguage develops.

The findings reveal that omission errors primarily stem from interlingual interference the influence of Indonesian grammatical patterns while misformation and misordering are largely intralingual, reflecting learners' internal processing challenges such as overgeneralization and incomplete rule mastery. Addition errors, though least frequent, indicate learners' tendency toward redundancy and stylistic inaccuracy.

These results affirm that syntactic errors are not random mistakes but reflect systematic stages of interlanguage development (Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1967). Errors thus serve as indicators of progress, showing that learners are actively constructing their linguistic competence. For teachers and curriculum designers, this highlights the need to view errors as diagnostic tools rather than failures.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of Indonesian EFL students' syntactic difficulties, reinforcing the importance of explicit grammar instruction, awareness of L1 interference, and data-driven pedagogical interventions to improve writing accuracy.

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