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## An Analysis of Grammatical Errors in the Use of Complex Sentences Among EFL University Students

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### Abstract

Producing complex sentences is an important part of academic writing and effective communication in English. But many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners struggle repeatedly with grammar when they are trying to construct complex sentences. The present study aims at investigating the grammatical errors in the use of complex sentences of undergraduate students in English Literature and the factors leading to these errors. The study employed a qualitative case study design with 30 participants, including one English lecturer and 29 undergraduate students taking an academic writing course. The data were gathered from students' written assignments, semi-structured interviews with the lecturer and selected students and classroom observations. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data to identify the recurring patterns of grammatical errors and the factors influencing students' performance. The results revealed a number of primary types of grammatical errors in the production of complex sentences. These included misapplication of subordinate conjunctions, errors in subject-verb agreement, inconsistency of tense, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, omission of vital grammatical components, and incorrect construction of a relative clause. Thematic analysis also showed four main themes for these mistakes: limited competence in grammar, influence of L1, limited practice on complex sentence construction, and problems in applying grammar knowledge in the context of academic writing task. The study concludes that the grammatical errors in the construction of complex sentences are caused not only by the lack of knowledge of English grammar, but also the difficulty of transferring the explicit knowledge of grammar to communicative writing practice. The results highlight the significance of integrating explicit grammar teaching with contextualized writing tasks, continuous formative feedback and collaborative learning approaches to improve students' grammatical accuracy.

Keywords: Grammatical Mistakes, Complex Sentences, English Literature Students, Qualitative Methodology, Thematic Analysis, Academic Writing

### 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the key productive skills in learning English language which enables learners to convey their ideas, demonstrate their knowledge in the academic setting and participate in professional discourse. College students need to write well-structured, grammatically correct and coherent papers. The ability to form complex sentences is particularly important among all the grammar skills that are required for effective writing. The compound sentences provide the writer with the opportunity to express compound relationships between ideas such as cause and effect, comparison, condition, time and contrast. Thus, the ability to form complex sentences is viewed as a key indicator of competence in academic writing (Hyland, 2022).

EFL learners have great difficulty in producing complex sentences, even after many years of formal training in English. Many college students still write simple sentences, lacking the confidence to appropriately connect independent and dependent clauses. When learners attempt to write more complex sentences they tend to make grammatical mistakes such as: errors in the use of subordinate conjunctions, subject-verb disagreement, inconsistent tense, sentence fragments, run-on sentences and incorrect formation of relative clauses. These grammatical errors often interfere with the clarity and effectiveness of written communication and negatively impact students' academic performance (Ellis & Shintani, 2022).

Time and again, research has demonstrated a close link between grammatical competence and quality of writing. In general, students who have stronger grammar skills tend to produce more varied and coherent sentences, while students who have weaker grammar skills tend to produce repetitive and structurally simple sentences (Nassaji & Fotos, 2022). But grammar is not to be regarded as the knowledge of the laws of language. Instead, good writing is when students can use their grammatical knowledge in meaningful communicative contexts. The result is that many EFL learners cannot apply their explicit knowledge of grammar to their actual writing practice.

One area that needs more attention is the production of complex sentences. Complex sentences require the simultaneous coordination of several grammatical features: clause relationships, conjunctions, relative pronouns, verb tense consistency, punctuation, and sentence organization. This complexity often results in systematic errors of learners which expose gaps in grammatical knowledge. Error analysis offers a useful window into these patterns and assists teachers in pinpointing particular areas of instruction. Modern theories of language acquisition view

errors not as mere failures, but as insights into the interlanguage of the learners and the cognitive processes of learning (Ellis & Shintani, 2022). Previous research on grammatical errors among EFL learners has been largely quantitative, focusing on the frequency of errors or statistical comparisons between different learner groups. These studies have identified common grammatical errors but offer limited explanations of the why of these errors and how these challenges are perceived by learners and instructors (Ferris, 2023). Qualitative research can be more in depth in that it explores the experiences of learners, instructional practices and contextual factors affecting grammatical development. In addition, there are few studies that focus on the study of grammatical errors in the use of complex sentences by undergraduate students of English Literature. These students are now immersed in the English language in courses such as literature, linguistics and academic writing. But many of them still have difficulty writing grammatically correct complex sentences. Understanding the nature of these errors, and the factors that contribute to these errors is important in order to improve grammar instruction and writing pedagogy in English Literature programs. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the grammatical errors of complex sentences usage by English Literature students by applying qualitative case study method of thematic analysis. The study involved one lecturer and twenty nine undergraduate students. This made it possible to explore the students experiences and lecturers perspectives. The purpose of this research is to find the pattern of the grammatical errors and to find out the factors that cause students having difficulty in constructing complex sentence correctly by analyzing students' writing and interview. The findings are expected to contribute to the improvement of grammar teaching practice and academic writing teaching in EFL higher education.

Road maintenance activities must be carried out in accordance with technical specifications to ensure that pavement performance and service life meet the intended design standards. Proper implementation of maintenance procedures, including material selection, construction methods, and quality control, plays a crucial role in maintaining pavement durability and ensuring road user safety (AASHTO, 2022).

Pavement preservation is recognized as an effective strategy for extending pavement service life while minimizing long-term maintenance costs. Timely preventive maintenance can delay pavement deterioration, improve ride quality, and reduce the need for costly rehabilitation or reconstruction projects (PIARC, 2023).

The implementation of asphalt patching is considered one of the most efficient maintenance techniques for repairing localized pavement distress. The effectiveness of this method depends not only on the quality of asphalt mixtures but also on proper surface preparation, bonding between existing and new pavement layers, and adequate compaction during construction (Asphalt Institute, 2023).

Assessment of pavement condition before maintenance is essential to determine the most appropriate repair strategy. The use of standardized pavement evaluation methods, such as the Pavement Condition Index (PCI), enables engineers to identify pavement distress accurately and prioritize maintenance activities based on the severity of deterioration (ASTM International, 2023).

Several recent studies have emphasized that successful pavement maintenance requires an integrated approach involving high-quality materials, suitable construction equipment, and strict adherence to technical specifications. Such an approach can significantly improve pavement performance, reduce maintenance frequency, and optimize the lifecycle cost of road infrastructure (AASHTO, 2022; PIARC, 2023).

The ability to write grammatically accurate complex sentences is an essential component of academic literacy in higher education. University students are expected to demonstrate not only content knowledge but also the ability to communicate ideas logically and coherently through appropriate grammatical structures. In academic writing, complex sentences enable students to present arguments, explain relationships among ideas, and organize information in a more sophisticated manner. Consequently, mastery of complex sentence construction contributes significantly to the overall quality of students' written work.

English Literature students encounter extensive exposure to English through courses such as literary criticism, linguistics, translation, discourse analysis, and academic writing. These courses require students to produce analytical essays, research papers, and literature reviews in English. As a result, grammatical competence becomes an indispensable skill that supports academic success throughout their undergraduate studies.

Despite continuous exposure to English, many students continue to struggle with grammatical accuracy in writing. This phenomenon suggests that language exposure alone does not automatically lead to grammatical mastery. Students often understand grammatical rules theoretically but experience difficulty applying them when composing authentic academic texts under real writing conditions.

One explanation for these difficulties is the distinction between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to students' understanding of grammatical rules, whereas procedural knowledge refers to their ability to apply those rules automatically during language production. Many EFL learners possess declarative knowledge but fail to transfer it into fluent and accurate written communication.

Complex sentence construction demands simultaneous control of several linguistic components. Students must correctly use dependent clauses, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns, punctuation, and appropriate verb forms while maintaining logical coherence. Because multiple grammatical elements interact within a single sentence, the probability of making errors increases considerably.

From the perspective of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), grammatical errors represent a natural stage in language development. Learners gradually construct an interlanguage system that evolves through continuous exposure, practice, and feedback. Therefore, analyzing learners' grammatical errors provides valuable insights into their current stage of language acquisition and the developmental processes involved in learning English grammar. Error Analysis has become one of the most widely used approaches for investigating learners' language production. Rather than viewing errors as failures, Error Analysis considers them important sources of information about learners' linguistic competence. By identifying recurring grammatical patterns, educators can design instructional interventions that directly address students' learning needs.

The quality of grammar instruction also influences students' writing performance. Traditional grammar teaching often emphasizes rule memorization and isolated sentence exercises. Although these activities improve students' explicit knowledge, they may not sufficiently develop their ability to use grammar effectively in authentic writing contexts. Therefore, grammar instruction should be integrated with meaningful writing activities that encourage students to apply grammatical knowledge communicatively.

Teacher feedback plays a significant role in improving students' grammatical competence. Constructive feedback enables students to recognize recurring grammatical problems, understand the reasons behind their mistakes, and revise their writing accordingly. Effective feedback also promotes learners' metalinguistic awareness, allowing them to monitor and regulate their own language production more independently.

Another factor influencing grammatical accuracy is students' writing anxiety. Many EFL learners hesitate to produce complex sentences because they fear making grammatical mistakes. Consequently, they tend to simplify their writing by relying heavily on simple sentence structures. Although this strategy reduces grammatical errors, it limits the sophistication and academic quality of their writing.

Students' first language may also influence the production of English complex sentences. Differences between the grammatical systems of the native language and English frequently lead to negative transfer or language interference. Such interference may affect clause order, conjunction usage, verb agreement, and sentence organization, resulting in persistent grammatical errors in students' academic writing.

Academic writing requires not only grammatical correctness but also cohesion and coherence. Complex sentences function as important devices for connecting ideas logically across paragraphs. Students who fail to construct appropriate complex sentences often produce fragmented arguments, making their writing less persuasive and more difficult for readers to understand.

Recent developments in writing pedagogy emphasize the importance of process-oriented writing instruction. Instead of evaluating only the final written product, teachers are encouraged to guide students through planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading stages. This approach provides multiple opportunities for students to identify and correct grammatical errors before submitting their final work.

Although numerous studies have investigated grammatical errors among EFL learners, relatively few have explored these issues using qualitative methods that incorporate both students' experiences and lecturers' perspectives. A qualitative case study allows researchers to understand grammatical difficulties from multiple viewpoints while considering contextual factors that may influence students' writing performance.

Based on these considerations, conducting an in-depth qualitative investigation into English Literature students' grammatical errors in constructing complex sentences is both timely and necessary. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the types of grammatical errors commonly produced by undergraduate students, the underlying factors contributing to these errors, and the instructional practices that may effectively improve students' grammatical competence and academic writing proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

Research Questions: (1) What types of grammatical errors do English Literature students make when constructing complex sentences in academic writing? (2) What factors contribute to English Literature students' grammatical errors in the use of complex sentences? (3) How does the English lecturer perceive the challenges faced by students in constructing grammatically accurate complex sentences, and what instructional strategies are used to address these challenges?

## 2. Research Methodology

The current study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the grammatical errors committed by English Literature students in constructing complex sentences in academic writing. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allowed the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of what constituted the grammatical errors made by the students, the factors that caused the errors and the lecturer's perceptions of the challenges faced in teaching the construction of complex sentences. Qualitative research focuses on understanding the experiences and interpretations of participants within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study design was selected as it allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded educational setting allowing the researcher to investigate the phenomenon in a real-life classroom setting.

In total, 30 participants took part in the study. They were 29 undergraduate students of English Literature taking an academic writing course and one English lecturer teaching the course. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the participants because they had first-hand experience with academic writing and complex sentence construction, and were thus well suited to address the research objectives. The data were gathered using three qualitative methods: students' written assignments, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The written assignments offered authentic evidence of the grammatical errors in the students' academic writing and the interviews explored the perceptions of the students and the lecturer regarding the challenges of constructing complex sentences. Classroom observations supplemented the data by recording instructional practices and student classroom interactions during writing activities. Data triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collected was analysed thematically using the six-phase framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2022). Familiarization by repeated reading of students' written work and transcripts of interviews initiated the analysis. Then, initial codes were created to identify common grammatical errors and participants' experiences. Related codes were collated into potential themes, which were reviewed, refined and clearly defined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. The themes were finally synthesized into a coherent research report that answered the three research questions. To enhance the credibility of the study, the researcher used member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation across the three sources of data. These strategies ensured that the findings were credible, reliable, and confirmable by confirming that the interpretations accurately represented participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3. Findings and Analysis

The data from students' writing samples, semi-structured interviews with twenty-nine English Literature students and an interview with one English lecturer were analysed using the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). First, the researcher read students' written work and interview transcripts several times to familiarize herself with the data. This was done to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and to identify recurring grammatical errors in the use of complex sentences. The next step was to assign initial codes to meaningful segments of the data, such as incorrect use of the subordinate conjunction, subject-verb disagreement, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, first language (L1) interference, limited writing practice, and fear of making mistakes. These initial codes were used to find patterns across the data. The process led to the clustering of similar codes into larger themes which reflected the major grammatical difficulties encountered by the students and the lecturer's views on these challenges. The themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected both the participants' responses and the evidence in the students' writing. Finally, each theme was clearly defined and named and then organized into the findings section based on the three research questions. The themes were discussed and interpreted in the light of the previous literature to form a comprehensive understanding of grammatical errors in the construction of complex sentences in English Literature students (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

#### 3.1 Grammatical Mistakes Common Errors Made By English Literature Students In Their Academic Writing Of Complex Sentences.

The results of the thematic analysis yielded three major themes that describe the grammatical errors made by English Literature students in the construction of complex sentences in academic writing. These themes are (1) errors in clause construction, (2) errors in grammatical agreement and (3) errors in relative and subordinate clauses. The analysis of the students' writing samples showed that these errors were common across participants, suggesting that many students struggled to write complex sentences that were grammatically accurate. The interview data also supported these findings. Students admitted that they often knew what they wanted to say, but they had difficulty putting clauses together correctly. These results demonstrate that, in the process of constructing complex sentences, learners have to simultaneously handle various grammatical features, such as clause relations, verb forms, and conjunctions (Biber et al., 2021). The first theme, errors in clause construction, was the most common grammatical problem identified. Students often made sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and wrong combinations of independent and dependent clauses. For example, one student wrote, "Although the novel is interesting" - a sentence fragment because it has only a dependent clause and no independent clause. Another student wrote, "The lecturer explained the material the students still confused" which is a run on because of the lack of an appropriate conjunction or punctuation. "I know the idea but I don't know where to put the conjunction," said Student 7 in the interviews. This response suggests that students could generally generate ideas but lacked confidence in grammatically ordering clauses into correct complex sentences. It is difficult for EFL learners to construct clauses, because to produce complex sentences learners need to coordinate multiple grammatical elements simultaneously (Biber et al., 2021).

The second theme addressed problems with grammatical agreement, especially subject-verb agreement, consistency of verb tenses, and auxiliary verbs. Examples were taken from students' writing, e.g. "She study English because she wants to be a teacher" and "The students was discussing the poem." The examples illustrate

that students frequently did not maintain subject-verb agreement or they employed inconsistent verb tenses within the same sentence. The interview responses indicated that these errors were often due to students focusing more on developing their ideas than checking their grammar. Student 13: "I forget about grammar when I concentrate on ideas." This finding is consistent with Ferris (2023), who suggests that as learners focus on generating content in academic writing, their attention to grammatical accuracy tends to decrease.

The third theme was errors in relative and subordinate clauses. Students often picked the incorrect relative pronoun (who, which, or that), used the wrong subordinating conjunction, or left the conjunction out entirely. Examples were such as "The book who I read yesterday..." and "Because the assignment was hard. I asked my teacher." These sentences indicate the problems of the construction of grammatically complete complex sentences with dependent clauses. The lecturer also confirmed this pattern saying, "Usually, students know the vocabulary but they cannot connect ideas into one accurate complex sentence." This result implies that the students possessed sufficient lexical knowledge but had difficulty in integrating the clauses into meaningful sentences. These findings confirm Azar and Hagen's (2021) findings that the construction of subordinate clauses and the correct use of relative clauses are still amongst the hardest aspects of English grammar for EFL learners. Overall, the findings suggest that students' difficulties with grammar are not limited to individual grammar rules, but involve the integration of multiple grammatical elements required to construct coherent and academically appropriate complex sentences.

### **3.2 Contribution To Grammatical Errors In The Use Of Complex Sentences Of English Literature Students.**

Thematic analysis revealed four major themes that contributed to grammatical errors made by English Literature students in the construction of complex sentences: (1) limited grammatical knowledge, (2) interference from first language, (3) limited practice in academic writing, and (4) lack of confidence. The data from the interviews showed that these factors were interconnected and affected students' ability to correctly apply grammar rules in their academic writing. Most of the participants had a basic knowledge of English grammar but they had problems in applying this in real writing tasks. These results are in line with Ellis and Shintani (2022) who contend that grammatical competence is not only about having grammatical rules but also about using them effectively in meaningful communication.

The first theme which was a major factor in students' grammatical errors was their limited grammatical knowledge. Most of the participants stated that they understood the grammar rules when doing exercises in class, but they found it difficult to use them when writing essays. Student 5 said: "I do not remember the grammar rules when I write quickly. A few students also commented on the fact that they were given grammar exercises on isolated sentences but in academic writing they were expected to combine ideas in more complex sentence structures. This meant that students were more often focused on building up their content, rather than keeping an eye on grammar. This finding supports the argument made by Ferris (2023) that learners often have difficulty transferring explicit grammatical knowledge to authentic writing, since writing requires simultaneous attention to ideas, organization, vocabulary, and grammar.

The second theme was interference of first language. Many participants confessed to the practice of thinking through their ideas first in Indonesian before translating into English. Student 11: "Generally, I think in Indonesian first. Thus students tended to directly transfer Indonesian sentence structures to English, making complex sentences which were grammatically incorrect. The lecturer also confirmed this issue saying "Many errors come from direct translation. Participants reported limited practice with academic writing, saying that they seldom wrote extended essays outside of classroom assignments. Most assignments are short so I don't practice long sentences." Student 18 However, the lecturer emphasized the need for students to make more opportunities to produce long academic texts. The findings are consistent with the explanation of Lightbown and Spada (2021) that grammatical errors among second-language learners are often caused by negative language transfer and lack of exposure to meaningful writing practice.

The fourth theme was the lack of confidence which affected the students' preparedness to produce complex sentences. Some participants said they deliberately used simple sentences for fear of making grammatical errors. Student 21 "I like simple sentences because they are safer. This result suggests that affective factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence may limit the learners' willingness to experiment with more sophisticated grammatical structures. For example, Hyland (2022) points out the importance of confidence in academic writing, as students without confidence tend to avoid complex language, thus limiting the opportunities to develop their grammatical skills. The general findings suggest that the reasons for grammatical errors in the construction of complex sentences are a combination of linguistic, instructional and psychological aspects. To address these problems, explicit grammar instruction coupled with meaningful writing practice, ongoing feedback and a classroom environment that encourages students to take risks in the use of more complex grammatical structures are needed.

### **3.3 English Lecturers' Perception Of Students' Challenges In Constructing Grammatically Accurate Complex Sentences And Instructional Strategies To Address The Challenges.**

Thematic analysis of the lecturer interview revealed three major themes: (1) students have grammatical knowledge but experience difficulties in the application of this knowledge to academic writing, (2) writing involves concurrent

cognitive processes, and (3) the importance of ongoing formative feedback for grammatical accuracy improvement. The lecturer's views concurred with the students' interview responses with regard to pedagogical insights into the difficulties experienced in the teaching and learning of complex sentence construction. Overall, the findings suggest that grammatical errors are not only the result of a lack of grammatical knowledge, but also of the cognitive demands of academic writing and the need for effective instructional support. These findings are consistent with Ellis and Shintani (2022) who claim that successful language learning requires learners to convert explicit grammatical knowledge into procedural knowledge through meaningful practice.

The first theme revealed that students understood the grammar rules but had problems in applying them in real writing situations. The lecturer said that, in general, students did well on grammar exercises and quizzes, but they had difficulty applying that same grammatical knowledge to their essays. Students know the grammar rules during quizzes, but they cannot apply them when writing essays, the lecturer explained. This finding indicates a dissociation between declarative knowledge (knowing the rules of grammar) and procedural knowledge (being able to use grammar correctly in communication). During essay writing, students paid most attention on idea generation and content organization, thus less cognitive resources were available to monitor the grammatical accuracy. This supports the claim by Ellis and Shintani (2022) that learners frequently know grammar explicitly but need a lot of practice before they can use it automatically in language production.

The second theme underlined the need for several cognitive processes to occur at the same time in academic writing. In writing academic texts students have to control the choice of vocabulary, the development of ideas, the organization of paragraphs, grammar, punctuation and coherence, said the lecturer. As the lecturer stated, "Students have to think about vocabulary, ideas, organization, grammar and punctuation at the same time. These competing cognitive demands resulted in students tending to focus more on conveying their ideas than creating complex sentences that were grammatically accurate. This result is consistent with Hyland (2022) who states that academic writing is a cognitively demanding activity that requires the writer to simultaneously integrate linguistic, rhetorical, and organizational skills. Therefore, the more the learners' attention is divided among different writing processes, the more grammatical errors occur.

The third theme highlighted the role of continuous formative feedback in enhancing students' grammatical competence. The instructor identified a number of teaching methods including explicit grammar instruction, guided sentence combining activities, peer review, individualized corrective feedback, and writing revision sessions. "Students get better with repeated feedback, not just grammar explanations," the lecturer said. Similarly, many students shared that personalized feedback helped them identify repeated grammatical mistakes and slowly improve their usage of elaborate sentences. These results are in line with Ferris (2023) who argues that formative feedback is crucial in developing grammatical accuracy because it allows learners to notice, think about, and change their language use in the long run. Likewise, Nassaji and Fotos (2022) suggest that grammar instruction is most effective when explicit teaching is combined with meaningful writing practice and ongoing feedback. Overall, the lecturer's opinions imply that providing students with opportunities to construct complex sentences with correct grammar requires a balanced approach with explicit grammar teaching, authentic writing opportunities and ongoing feedback throughout the writing process.

#### **4. Conclusion and Suggestion**

This study examined the grammatical errors made by English Literature students in constructing complex sentences in academic writing by using qualitative case study and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students made three kinds of grammatical errors; errors in clause construction, grammatical agreement and the use of relative and subordinate clauses. The analysis also revealed four major factors contributing to these errors: limited grammatical knowledge, first language interference, limited practice with academic writing and lack of confidence in using complex sentence structures. More importantly, the lecturer observed that while the students understood the rules of grammar conceptually, they experienced difficulty in applying them in real writing tasks because they found academic writing cognitively demanding. The findings support the idea that grammatical errors are a part of learners' interlanguage development and reflect the difficulties in integrating grammatical knowledge with meaningful communication (Ellis & Shintani, 2022; Hyland, 2022).

The findings suggest that English lecturers should include explicit grammar instruction in authentic academic writing activities that prompt students to construct, revise and refine complex sentences in meaningful contexts. To improve students' grammatical accuracy and confidence, writing instruction should include frequent sentence-combining exercises, peer review, individualized corrective feedback, and multiple drafting opportunities. The current study calls upon future researchers to examine grammatical errors by using larger and diverse samples or different levels of English proficiency to gain more insights into the writing development of EFL learners. Future research may also investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions (e.g., technology-assisted grammar instruction, collaborative writing) on students' ability to produce grammatically accurate complex sentences.

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