

Beyond Linguistic Errors: Communicative Variation in Malaysian ESL Undergraduate Writing

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ABSTRACT

This study qualitatively analyses recurrent patterns of linguistic errors and communicative writing variation of Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) undergraduates by examining two functional composition tasks: an informal email and an opinion essay. While previous studies on ESL writing have often focused on grammatical mistakes, surface language deficiencies, or overall competence issues, the present study adopts an in-depth exploration of not only the recurring errors but also the differing communicative approaches and writing tendencies reflected in ESL learners' written responses. Ten sets of handwritten scripts containing twenty written responses were purposively selected from a larger pool of assessment scripts. The assessment was classroom-administered without allowance for digital access or AI-based writing aids, providing a more authentic reflection of learners' independent writing. This study drew on the theories of Error Analysis (Corder, 1967), the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), and communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hyland, 2007). The major error patterns identified at the surface level of the students' written responses included sentence construction, verbs, lexis, organisation, and overall communicative effectiveness. Some persistent errors were identified but, more importantly, there was considerable variation as to how the students sought to write communicatively for different audiences using varying strategies for organising and elaborating their ideas and being socially aware in their writing. Students, even at the same level of proficiency, were found to write in different ways. An evaluation of ESL writing solely in terms of grammatical accuracy is, therefore, incomplete, as students of similar levels of proficiency may employ different strategies in their attempt to communicate meaningfully in writing. The study provides insights into how ESL writing cannot be assessed comprehensively based on linguistic fluency and grammatical precision alone. Hence, the study emphasises the multidimensional nature of ESL students' writing development, highlighting the rationale for pedagogical approaches recognising both their linguistic competence and communicative potential.

Keywords: Linguistic errors, communicative variation, error analysis, writing tendencies, ESL writing

INTRODUCTION

At the tertiary level of education, mastering linguistic accuracy in writing tasks is one of the most challenging skills to achieve. ESL students in Malaysia have undergone extensive writing instruction for years. However, many still struggle with aspects of writing, such as sentence and grammar construction, vocabulary choice, and the organisation and coherence of their writing (Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2023; Rahmat, 2024). Prior research in writing has often emphasised identifying linguistic inaccuracies and superficial grammatical errors, such as tense inconsistencies, subject-verb agreement, lexical misuse, and inaccurate sentence construction (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Musa et al., 2012). Even if those studies are useful, writing performance can't be assessed purely based on correct grammar. Learners with relatively similar limitations in linguistic skills, in many cases, will vary significantly in terms of their effectiveness, organisational ability, awareness of the audience, and

rhetorical engagement (Hyland, 2007; Ortega, 2009). In the current technology-driven era, which enables AI-assisted writing and language learning through digital tools, it is crucial that a student's authentic writing be assessed. Supervised handwritten writing in the classroom setting provides in-depth insight into various challenges faced by students in making meaning, organising their ideas, engaging the audience and expressing their intentions in the written work.

Therefore, the three primary objectives of the study are:

1. To identify recurring linguistic error patterns in Malaysian ESL undergraduate email and opinion writing tasks
2. To examine communicative and organisational features demonstrated across the two writing genres.
3. To explore emerging learner writing tendencies reflected in the students' written performances.

As an exploratory qualitative investigation, the study prioritised analytical depth over statistical representativeness. While the findings are not intended to be generalised to the wider population of Malaysian ESL undergraduates, they provide analytically transferable insights into recurring linguistic patterns and communicative variation demonstrated in authentic classroom writing. Future studies involving larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions and writing genres may extend and validate the patterns identified in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ESL Writing Difficulties and Error Analysis

Writing has consistently been identified as one of the most challenging skills, especially in tertiary education where learners are expected to demonstrate grammatical accuracy, coherence, and communicative effectiveness simultaneously. There have been studies over the years which identified the problems that ESL writers faced, especially in sentence writing, in using the correct tenses, agreeing the subject and verb, selecting the correct vocabulary and using it appropriately, and organising ideas to create coherent written texts (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Musa et al., 2012; Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2023).

Error Analysis is one of the methods used to measure students' language production. According to Corder (1967), Error Analysis is a useful tool for the researcher as it reveals the aspects of learners' language development instead of their errors in using the target language. In addition, the Surface Strategy Taxonomy introduced by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) also aid researchers in analysing errors made by the learners in written texts based on omission, addition, misformation, and misordering, enabling systematic examination of recurring linguistic patterns.

Although there have been many error-specific studies which provided solid evidence of learners' ability in writing, it is not adequate to measure students' writing ability by only the number of accurate and correct written texts they produced. Instead, the aspect of writing should also be measured by other performance metrics (Hyland, 2003). In addition, writing is a process of negotiation between writers' intentions or purposes, writers' uses of rhetoric, and the audience's expectations of writers to communicate effectively with them. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) agreed with the above statement, as errors made by learners in their written texts also indicate the different stages of second language acquisition and the learners' language development to express themselves adequately in the target language.

Communicative Competence and Genre-Based Writing

Communicative competence is more than correct grammar. Canale and Swain (1980) introduced the so-called four competence model of communicative competence, which comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. The application of this perspective on writing is characterised by an awareness of the audience as well as of aspects of coherence, elaboration,

organisational features of texts and a suitable tone. From a genre-based writing perspective, communication in writing is determined by the writer's intentions and the audience's expectations for text in specific situations (Hyland, 2004). Hence, for example, e-mails are written in a conversational style in order to be practical for the reader, while opinion writing involves elaboration and argumentation.

Writing as Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; Lea, 2017) positions writing as a socially situated meaning-making activity. Students draw on their identities, experiences and the social discourses or areas of life's wider social communication when engaging in different aspects of communication in writing. As such, students' writing is not simply a matter of linguistic ability but also of how they are making meaning in writing and the range of social communications with which they are engaging.

Learner Variation and Writing Tendencies

Contemporary research into second language writing has shown that there are many differences between writers, even when all are at roughly the same level of linguistic control or proficiency. Importantly for this view, writers of the same grammatical proficiency may nevertheless demonstrate substantial variation in fluency, elaboration, communicative engagement, and rhetorical experimentation (Ortega, 2009).

Larsen-Freeman (2018) has also offered a perspective on language development as highly variable language use by different individuals at different times. In consequence, a writer in general is pursuing various goals in his/her communicative interactions and utilises different organisational strategies for constructing meaning in his/her writing.

The points of view presented above are particularly relevant in this study as it moves beyond identifying and tracking language errors, and also attempts to examine some of the emerging features of communication approach and writing tendencies that surface in the writing tasks administered in classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research approach. It sought to identify and describe some recurring linguistic error types, communication features, and emerging writing features found in Malaysian ESL undergraduates' writing. In addition to identifying error types in the participants' written responses, the study attempted to provide insights into how meaning is negotiated and communicated in writing, how they organised and structured written information, and what features of written communication emerged in their writing.

Specifically, this study employed qualitative document analysis of authentic handwritten ESL writing. In contrast to much prior research on learner writing, the written documents analysed in this study were produced by learners without access to digital technology (e.g., computers, smartphones), grammar checking software, online reference materials and resources, and any form of AI-assisted writing support.

Instead of concentrating on quantifying error frequency, this study highlighted the various linguistic tendencies, communicative features and learner writing characteristics depicted in and through the data sets.

Theoretical Foundation and Analytical Framework

In an attempt to understand the writing performance of tertiary ESL learners, the study is grounded in the Error Analysis framework by Corder (1967). As its primary purpose, Error Analysis studies the errors made by language learners to find out more about their interlanguage or developing language system. Thus, learner errors are not merely seen as deficiencies, but as meaningful indicators of language development and interlanguage formation.

To categorise the identified errors, this data was then further analysed using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy created by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982). This taxonomy identifies four major errors that language learners

use: omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. These types of errors were found to occur frequently in the learners' writing scripts in terms of sentence construction and other aspects such as subject-verb agreement, tense usage, articles, prepositions, and lexical formation.

However, it was discovered that the writing of several learners contained more than just expressions of their various grammatical errors. Also, there were noticeable differences in their communicative effectiveness, audience control, organisation of their writing, and the extent to which they elaborated on their basic messages. The communicative competence model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) was employed to investigate the students' communicative attempts to communicate with their readers. In other words, their attempts to convey meaning, engage audiences and fulfil various communicative purposes through writing.

The combination of these frameworks was used to analyse the students' writing responses from a linguistic point of view as well as from a communicative perspective.

Data Source and Sampling

The data for this study were derived from written scripts of a group of ESL undergraduate students in a Malaysian higher education institution. The writing tasks were carried out manually during a supervised classroom assessment without the aid of any technological devices or the Internet. From a larger pool of assessment script sets, ten sets were purposively selected for in-depth, qualitative analysis. Each set consisted of two writing tasks: 1. an informal email, and 2. an opinion essay (Total: 20 written responses).

In writing the email, the students' task was to advise a friend who was thinking of joining a gym to keep fit as part of a healthier lifestyle. This task primarily encouraged interpersonal communication, audience engagement, practical advice-giving, and conversational expressions. The second task was writing an opinion-based essay on the causes of debt among young employees, suggesting effective strategies for managing personal finances. As opposed to the email, the second task required the learners to outline and present an argument in an organised manner. They had to elaborate, explain and be persuasive using suitable reasons and evidence.

The selected scripts demonstrated a variety of writing abilities, communication approaches and language use. Through repeated cross-case analysis, recurring linguistic and communicative features were identified and analysed in depth within and across the data set.

To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the scripts before analysis, and the scripts were anonymised for this study. Students were coded from 1 to 10 and were referred to by their code numbers in the cross-case analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of the scripts was conducted through iterative coding. An initial open coding process revealed frequent linguistic errors and communication features. Similar codes were grouped into several analytical categories. These categories were formed with reference to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, communicative competence, and learner variation. Decisions made during the earlier coding process were repeatedly revisited by comparing each participant's scripts across their script sets. It was not until consistent patterns and features of individual writers had emerged that the categories were reduced to a set of conceptually sound and data-based categories.

As this study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, the emphasis was placed on analytical consistency and interpretive rigour rather than statistical. The manual coding process within the study involved the analysts returning to the students' individual scripts numerous times for close analysis. The coding process involved constant comparison of the instances produced by 10 individual students of a total of 20 writing responses. The initial codes which were elicited from the data were refined during the analysis of the data and then grouped into categories of similar features which were drawn from a range of theoretical positions, namely Error Analysis (Corder, 1967), the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982), communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hyland, 2007) and learner variation (Larsen-Freeman, 2018; Ortega, 2009). Examples

of students' writing from the study are included in the findings to allow the reader to evaluate the analysis provided of that data, thus enhancing the credibility and transparency of the analysis.

The analysis was conducted in several stages as illustrated in Figure 1 and described in the following paragraphs:

Figure 1: Data Analysis Procedures

Handwritten Classroom Scripts



Verbatim Transcription



Error Identification



Error Categorisation

(Surface Strategy Taxonomy)



Communicative Feature Analysis



Cross-Case Comparative Analysis



Emerging Learner Writing Tendencies

All the handwritten scripts were transcribed verbatim in the first stage of data collection, in which learners' spelling, grammar, punctuation, choice of lexemes and sentence structures were left as they were in the original scripts. No attempts at correction were made during this transcription process to maintain the authenticity of the data.

In the second stage, the linguistic strategies and their errors were identified and categorised in several areas such as sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, tense and verb forms, other errors as well as errors with lexical and collocational means, with articles and prepositions, with spelling as well as with register. The errors were analysed according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which categorises errors based on surface structure.

In addition to these external features of written communication, the investigation of the individual learners' writing also revealed several internal features. In particular, qualitative analysis of the written text data of individual learners was used to investigate their awareness of audience, organisation of written text, communicative fluency, elaborative reasoning, persuasiveness, provision of practical advice, and social awareness.

In the final stage of analysis, the scripts were compared across cases to identify trends, similarities and differences in their writing performance. By comparing the learners' writing within and across cases, some learner writing tendencies emerged inductively from the data. Four main tendencies described the way in which learners communicated through writing: they were communicatively effective writers, linguistically ambitious writers, structurally fragile but conceptually engaged writers, and procedural communicators. These tendencies for describing learners' writing were categorised using a coding categorisation, informed by a broadly based interpretation of studies of learner variation and of communicative competence (Larsen-Freeman, 2018; Ortega, 2009).

These learner writing tendencies were seen as qualitative communicative patterns and therefore did not have to be limited to the typically used levels of proficiency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organised according to the three research questions guiding the study. The analysis first presents recurring linguistic error patterns identified across the learners' writing scripts, followed by communicative and organisational features demonstrated across the two writing genres. The final section discusses the emerging learner writing tendencies observed throughout the qualitative analysis.

To enhance analytical consistency, the coding process involved repeated review of all scripts, constant comparison across cases, and continual refinement of categories until internally consistent patterns were achieved. The coding framework remained closely informed by the theoretical constructs underpinning the study, thereby strengthening interpretive consistency.

To provide a contextual overview of the dataset, Table 1 presents the estimated writing bands and dominant learner writing tendencies identified across the selected script sets.

Table 1: Estimated Writing Bands and Dominant Learner Writing Tendencies

Student	Estimated Writing Band	Dominant Learner Writing Tendency
S1	Band 2	Basic Structural Writer
S2	Band 3	Fluent-but-Unstable Writer
S3	Band 4	Communicatively Effective Writer
S4	Band 4	Linguistically Ambitious Writer
S5	Band 4	Functional Communicative Writer
S6	Band 3	Structurally Fragile but Conceptually Engaged Writer
S7	Band 4	Linguistically Ambitious Writer
S8	Band 3	Procedural Communicator
S9	Band 3	Structurally Fragile but Conceptually Engaged Writer
S10	Band 4	Communicatively Effective Writer

Note: The writing bands above represent approximate qualitative writing performance tendencies based on overall communicative effectiveness, organisational control, and linguistic accuracy observed across the writing tasks. They are not intended as official proficiency classifications.

Recurring Linguistic Error Patterns in ESL Writing

Most salient in both the email and the opinion writing were instances of linguistic inaccuracy. However, the inaccuracy found was not random. Instead, many instances were a manifestation of a stable set of error types that are reproduced consistently across the dataset. Thus, as exemplified in Table 2, in the writing of these learners, there is often an instability in sentence structure, errors of subject-verb agreement, and inconstancy of tense, lexical and collocational usage, and written language conventions.

Table 2: Summary of Recurring Linguistic Error Patterns Across the Dataset

Error Category	Representative Examples	Students Involved
Sentence Structure Instability	“there is not know to manage my time”, “This issue always faced”	S1, S2, S6, S7
Subject-Verb Agreement	“young people does not have”, “There is many activities”	S1, S2, S4
Verb Form / Tense Errors	“you can joined”, “want do this thing”	Most students
Lexical / Collocational Inaccuracies	“committing gym”, “participate the gym”, “living lifestyle”	S3, S5, S7
Spoken-Language Influence	“Haha, I’m joking”, “love you”	S2, S8
Spelling and Word Form Errors	“nowdays”, “feature”, “bancrypt”	S1, S2
Article and Preposition Usage	“a emergency”, “join with me”	S1, S4

This recurrence of linguistic patterns shows that grammatical instability remains a persistent challenge among Malaysian ESL undergraduates despite many years of exposure to formal English instruction. However, the findings also indicate that linguistic inaccuracies alone did not necessarily prevent learners from conveying meaning or fulfilling communicative purposes effectively.

Sentence Structure Instability

Sentence structure instability emerged as one of the most dominant linguistic patterns across the dataset. Many learners demonstrated difficulties constructing grammatically stable sentences, particularly when attempting longer or more elaborated explanations.

For example, Student 2 wrote:

“Before I’m joined a gym, there are many challenges that I faced, especially there is not know to manage my time with properly.”

Similarly, Student 6 stated:

“This issue always faced by young people because they want do this thing without thinking carefully.”

The above instances show instability in clause construction, incomplete sentence formation, and awkward syntactic organisation. These patterns became more noticeable as the learners attempted to elaborate ideas, justify opinions, or explain cause-and-effect relationships. However, interestingly, sentence instability was observed not only among lower-band learners, but also among more rhetorically ambitious writers such as Students 4 and 7. Their attempts at longer sentences, a greater use of different word order and more subordination, to develop their comments, are notable. Their communicative ambition to elaborate on their ideas of develop them in more detail, is greater than that of students in the lower bands, however the lack of grammatical control needed to support their elaboration of idea is exposed.

This is in line with findings from previous research into the writing of ESL speakers and writers (Hyland 2007; Richards 2023). Students write with the linguistic resources they have at their disposal even where these do not yet include full control of the grammar to support the elaboration of ideas that they can write.

Subject-Verb Agreement and Verb Form Errors

Subject-verb agreement and verb form usage represented another highly recurrent category across the writing scripts. Many learners demonstrated uncertainty involving auxiliary verbs, tense consistency, and singular-plural agreement.

Examples included:

“young people does not have” (Student 2)

“young employees is influenced” (Student 4)

“There is many activities” (Student 2)

“This strategies can make a devidence” (Student 1)

Such patterns indicate ongoing instability in grammatical agreement and verb control despite years of formal English exposure. Similar difficulties have been widely documented in Malaysian ESL writing contexts (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Musa et al., 2012).

Interestingly, verb errors seemed to be a persistent feature in the writing of the higher achieving students at Band 4. Their longer sentences, which were often associated with the stronger communicative and rhetorical functions, such as argumentation, may have caused the errors. It was in these longer sentences where the learners attempted to express more complex communicative functions, and as a result, encountered problems with maintaining grammatical consistency.

This suggests that grammatical accuracy does not necessarily develop uniformly alongside communicative and rhetorical sophistication.

Lexical and Collocational Inaccuracies

Lexical and collocational issues emerged consistently across learners of differing writing bands. Many learners produced understandable but unnatural lexical combinations, suggesting partial vocabulary knowledge and possible direct translation influence.

Representative examples included:

“committing gym” (Student 3)

“participate the gym” (Student 5)

“do loan on bank” (Student 2)

“increase of trend in bankruptcy” (Student 4)

“living lifestyle” (Student 7)

Many of the additionally highlighted phrases, although readable, show difficulties for learners with respect to collocational competence and the use of naturally adequate language in context. This means that, as opposed to lacking functional vocabulary, they do have appropriate vocabulary, but they lack the right combinations of words to use in different situations in an appropriate context.

Stronger learners of ESL made errors in writing not because of a lack of vocabulary, but because of them exploring language and hence not fully mastering the words and their combinations even when they were appropriate. Students 4 and 7 were using the highest level of their vocabulary in imaginative and creative ways. They were attempting to express themselves more and to use more sophisticated vocabulary. However, their command of the words they chose did not match their imaginative uses. Therefore, when evaluating writing for

“accuracy”, it is not sufficient to focus on surface grammatical accuracy, for there are “wrong” points of the kind that demonstrate learners’ attempts at effective communication and exploration of possibilities for writing.

Spoken-Language Influence and Informality

Another recurring feature observed across several scripts involved spoken-language influence and informal conversational expression, particularly within the email-writing task.

For instance, Student 2 wrote:

“Haha, I’m joking.”

and concluded the email with:

“love you.”

Similarly, Student 8 stated:

“I also have the same problem.”

These examples demonstrate how students are able to reproduce a number of speech acts from spoken interaction in written text, while at the same time indicating some sense of their audience, establishing an interpersonal relationship and attempting to convey warmth to the reader. Seen against the findings of the above examples, the email-genre prompted the learners to write more personally and to interact more with their addressees. Thus, the results of the present study are in line with a genre-based perspective on writing, i.e. with the view that writing tasks influence learners’ choices of rhetoric in communication (Hyland, 2004).

Spelling, Word Form, and Article Usage

The analysis additionally identified recurring issues involving spelling, word forms, and article usage.

Examples included:

“nowdays” (Student 2)

“bancrypt” (Student 2)

“feature” (Student 1)

“a emergency” (Student 1)

“Second factor” (Student 5)

While the errors observed indicate that there is a lack of stability or consistency in the use of written language by the students, communication or understanding of the message they have intended is not adversely affected. Many students were able to express ideas coherently and carried out assigned tasks notwithstanding the language errors.

The findings show that grammatical inaccuracy is a general feature in Malaysian ESL undergraduate students’ writing in more elaborated written discourse. Despite these emerging errors, learners in this study were able to express intended meaning and continue to communicate effectively and coherently in their writing.

Communicative and Organisational Features Across Writing Genres

Beyond grammatical analysis, the study identified substantial variation in how learners approached the two writing genres. While the email-writing task generally encouraged more interpersonal, conversational, and

practical communication, the opinion writing task elicited broader argumentative reasoning, explanation, and social commentary.

Table 3: Communicative and Organisational Features Demonstrated Across the Writing Tasks

Communicative Feature	Representative Evidence	Students
Audience Awareness	“Perhaps you could join my gym session for beginners.”	S3
Practical Advice-Giving	“If you feel lethargic or weak, you should just rest.”	S10
Organisational Sequencing	“First... Next... Second...”	S8
Social Awareness	references to TikTok, Shopee, and social trends	S7, S9, S10
Persuasive Tone	encouragement and motivational language	S2, S4
Elaborative Reasoning	explanation of financial behaviour and consequences	S4, S9
Conversational Style	“Haha, I’m joking.”	S2
Functional Communicative Fluency	Practical and reader-oriented responses	S5, S10

As displayed in Table 3, the findings show that the learners’ communicative effectiveness extended beyond their ability to control their written language. Occasionally, the learners demonstrated audience awareness, control of organisation and communicative engagement in their writing even where they were struggling to achieve control of written language. This finding supports the early work of Canale and Swain (1980) on communicative competence and more recent work such as that of Hyland (2007), which supports the view that effective written communication is not limited to written linguistic accuracy. Communicatively effective writers are able to negotiate meaning, realise their communicative purposes and write for their intended audience.

Audience Awareness and Communicative Engagement

Several students demonstrated clear attempts to engage readers directly through reassurance, advice-giving, encouragement, and conversational interaction.

For example, Student 10 advised:

“If you feel lethargic or weak, you should just rest.”

Similarly, Student 3 wrote:

“Perhaps you could join my gym session for beginners.”

These responses illustrate that despite occasional grammatical inaccuracies, there were attempts by the students to maintain interpersonal communication. Some of the positive features of their communication were maintained, such as the use of direct address, encouragement and the overall tone.

Some students only had moderate control of grammar; however, they had very good communicative fluency in their email messages. They effectively interacted with their audience. The following is an example of Student 2’s message to Student 3. He wrote some funny comments and included some of the students’ and his own conversational expressions that are normally found in informal interactions. For example, he wrote ‘Haha, I’m joking.’ Although linguistically informal, such expressions contributed to communicative warmth and interactional authenticity within the email genre.

Therefore, in assessing the learners' communicative competence in written communication, one should not only focus on their linguistic accuracy, and the data provided evidence in this respect. Despite the limited control of some of the grammatical features of the language, the learners were able to function communicatively in their written interactions.

Organisational Sequencing and Idea Development

The analysis further revealed variation in how learners organised ideas and structured written responses across the two writing tasks.

Several learners relied heavily on sequencing markers such as: "First...", "Second..." and "Next...", particularly when attempting explanatory or advice-based writing.

Student 8 demonstrated a highly procedural organisational style characterised by step-by-step progression throughout both writing tasks. Although grammatical inaccuracies remained frequent, the learner consistently maintained logical sequencing and communicative clarity through systematic organisation.

Similarly, stronger learners such as Students 4 and 9 demonstrated more elaborated argumentative organisation by introducing issues, explaining contributing factors, and proposing practical solutions. Their opinion writing tasks generally contained broader social reasoning and clearer progression of ideas compared to lower-band learners.

These findings indicate that organisational competence may develop somewhat independently from grammatical mastery. Learners who continued to struggle with sentence-level accuracy were nevertheless often capable of sustaining coherence and maintaining progression of ideas through sequencing and elaborative organisation.

This observation aligns with previous genre-based writing discussions suggesting that learners frequently employ compensatory organisational strategies to maintain communicative effectiveness when linguistic resources remain limited.

Social Awareness and Contemporary Cultural References

Another notable pattern involved learners' incorporation of contemporary social and digital influences into their writing.

Several learners referred to:

- TikTok,
- Shopee,
- luxury brands,
- "pay later" systems,
- Marvel characters,
- and online lifestyle trends.

For instance, Student 9 discussed: "influence by social media especially Tik-Tok." Meanwhile, Student 10 referred to: "Atome" and "pay later" culture.

These references reflected learners' attempts to connect writing tasks with contemporary youth experiences and real-world social environments. Rather than producing heavily textbook-oriented responses, several learners demonstrated awareness of current financial behaviours, online influences, and consumer culture affecting young adults.

These findings suggest that learners were not only producing language mechanically, but were also engaging cognitively with broader societal issues relevant to the writing topics. Some of the students just listed arguments for their essays. Interestingly, Students 4, 7, 9 and 10 had moved beyond simple listing of arguments for their opinion-writing assignments and tackled the topics from a more solid perspective of comment and causal explanation. In contrast to arguments that focused on the pressure of school, the influence of social media, and the consumerist pressures of modern society to spend as employees, these students wrote about the ways in which these same pressures affected young people's lives and caused them financial problems. Their use of modern social and digital references to writing, in combination with their engagement with the writing topic and the subject matter, could be seen through the lens of the concept of Academic Literacies (Lea & Street, 1998). Writing in academia is a socially situated form of meaning-making between writers and readers. It is influenced by the identities of learners, their experiences and the various sites of the world that are part of their sociocultural world (Lea, 2017; Afdal, 2023).

Genre Influence on Learner Writing Behaviour

The findings additionally demonstrated noticeable differences in communicative behaviour across the two writing genres.

The email-writing task generally encouraged:

- conversational tone,
- practical advice-giving,
- interpersonal engagement,
- humour,
- and emotionally supportive language.

In contrast, the opinion writing task elicited:

- broader elaboration,
- argumentative explanation,
- persuasive reasoning,
- social commentary,
- and more formal organisational structures.

Some of the students who had generally performed adequately in terms of communicative fluency in the email task had shown an increase in structural instability as the writing tasks moved to more elaborated forms of argumentative writing. However, in contrast, a number of the writers who had struggled to achieve adequate interpersonal fluency in the email task had demonstrated greater control of organisation, and they achieved higher scores in the opinion writing task than in the email task. These findings support a genre-based writing perspective on writing (Bhatia 1993; Hyland 2004) and show that in addition to the persistence of certain grammatical errors from earlier stages of writing, a writer's performance in different writing tasks is significantly affected by the genre(s) involved, the writer's communicative approaches, and the writer's organisational preferences in relation to the required communicative end objectives and the dominant rhetorical demands of the writing tasks.

Emerging Learner Writing Tendencies

A key insight that emerged from this qualitative analysis of learner writing was the degree of variation in how learners approached writing in general, despite frequent reference to grammatical weaknesses that many of the learners in the study seemed to share. In other words, instead of learners being either ‘weak’ writers or ‘strong’ writers, there were differences in terms of their communicative priorities as well as in the way that they made use of a range of different rhetorical strategies, organisational structures and meaning-making strategies. These learner writing tendencies were not pre-conceived in the same way as the quantitative findings were, but emerged instead from a process of repeated cross-case analysis of the communicative, organisational and rhetorical features of the writers’ use of English in the study. The various tendencies that were found to exist were categorised with reference to a broad understanding of learner variation as well as to that of communicative competence. It was recognised that even learners of approximately the same level of linguistic proficiency would differ in terms of their communicative orientations, the range of different rhetorical strategies that they would bring to bear, and the range of strategies that they would use to make meaning while writing (Larsen-Freeman, 2018; Ortega, 2009).

Table 4: Emerging Learner Writing Tendencies Identified Across the Dataset

Learner Writing Tendency	Main Characteristics	Representative Students
Communicatively Effective Writers	practical clarity, audience engagement, manageable structures	S3, S10
Functional Communicative Writers	reader-oriented responses and communicative fluency despite minor inaccuracies	S5
Linguistically Ambitious Writers	sophisticated vocabulary attempts, rhetorical elaboration, social commentary	S4, S7
Structurally Fragile but Conceptually Engaged Writers	meaningful ideas but unstable grammatical control	S6, S9
Procedural Communicators	highly sequenced and step-by-step organisational style	S8
Fluent-but-Unstable Writers	communicative fluency accompanied by recurring grammatical inconsistency	S2
Basic Structural Writers	limited sentence variety and heavy structural instability	S1

As presented in Table 4, the findings suggest that learner writing performance is multidimensional in nature. Although several learners demonstrated similar grammatical weaknesses, their communicative approaches and rhetorical priorities differed considerably across the writing tasks.

Communicatively Effective and Functional Writers

Learners such as Students 3, 5, and 10 demonstrated relatively stronger communicative effectiveness despite occasional grammatical inaccuracies. These learners generally prioritised:

- practical clarity,
- audience engagement,
- manageable sentence structures,
- and coherent progression of ideas.

For example, Student 10 consistently provided realistic and reader-oriented advice throughout the email-writing task:

“If you finish work at 5.00 p.m., you can start your workout after 7.00 p.m.”

Similarly, Student 3 maintained supportive audience interaction through suggestions such as:

“Perhaps you could join my gym session for beginners.”

Although minor linguistic inaccuracies were present, these learners generally sustained communicative clarity and fulfilled the intended purpose of the writing tasks.

These learners did not necessarily demonstrate the most sophisticated vocabulary or grammatical complexity. Instead, their writing strengths appeared to lie in practical communication, audience sensitivity, and controlled organisation. This suggests that communicative effectiveness in ESL writing may sometimes depend more heavily on clarity and rhetorical appropriateness than on linguistic sophistication alone.

In some instances, learners may fail to use English to its full potential, but the major feature of their writing is that the communication is clear and they have written what they set out to write. Thus, even if their choice of vocabulary and range of grammatical structures are not particularly sophisticated, the fact that their writing conveys communication effectively in some key areas of rhetoric and organisation is very impressive. Their writing reveals a range of strengths, particularly in three areas of writing: practical communication; sensibility to audience; and controlled organisation. Essentially, their writing in these areas to varying degrees indicates that in ESL writing, communication impact can be achieved by a combination of clear writing and suitable rhetoric rather than by learners' English linguistic capability.

Linguistically Ambitious and Elaborative Writers

Students 4 and 7 demonstrated more rhetorically ambitious writing tendencies. These learners frequently attempted:

- broader social commentary,
- sophisticated vocabulary choices,
- elaborated reasoning,
- and more complex sentence structures.

For instance, Student 7 discussed:

- “social media trend,”
- “luxurious lifestyle,”
- and consumer influence among youth.

Similarly, Student 4 referred to:

- “financial and spending knowledge,”
- “commercial bank accounts,”
- and broader financial management issues.

In contrast to the first group of students who preferred to keep to the topic at hand, these students were eager to extend discussion of ideas to broader social issues. However, in their attempts to express their ideas, they contained several inaccurate lexical forms, unstable collocations, and long sentences.

In trying to increase their rhetorical resources, these students were ready to take more linguistic risks than before. Instead of relying on safe structures, they were willing to try out more vocabulary, more elaboration and more argumentative strategies, even if their command of grammar was not yet perfect.

This finding supports the perspective of communicative writing that learner's language development occurs in the balance between their communicative ambition and the linguistic resources they have developed for communication.

Structurally Fragile but Conceptually Engaged Writers

Students 6 and 9 demonstrated relatively strong conceptual engagement and argumentative reasoning despite substantial grammatical instability.

These learners frequently attempted:

- explanation,
- social reasoning,
- cause-and-effect relationships,
- and broader societal commentary.

For example, Student 9 discussed the influence of social media and peer pressure on financial behaviour among young adults. Similarly, Student 6 attempted to elaborate on issues related to financial management and personal responsibility despite recurring sentence instability and grammatical inaccuracies.

Despite their struggles with accurate language in writing, most students showed a good understanding of certain contemporary social issues concerning young people. The writing provided some evidence of their awareness of issues, moving from simple statements of fact about a topic to explanation, interpretation and even evaluation of a given situation or argument. However, some learners were not able to express these worthwhile points strongly due to lack of control of the necessary language.

This finding lends weight to the definition of communicative competence which acknowledges that learners can possess high levels of conceptual and communicative maturity despite unstable grammatical performance.

Procedural and Sequential Communicators

Student 8 demonstrated a highly procedural communicative approach characterised by step-by-step sequencing and practical organisation, repeatedly relying on sequencing markers such as "First...", "Next...", and "Second..." to maintain coherence and progression of ideas throughout both writing tasks.

Even though this student displayed frequent grammatical errors, he kept consistent communicative clarity in his writing. The writing was systematically organised, containing mostly short sentences. There was no rhetorical elaboration, but procedural consistency was good.

This is how a procedural communicator goes about his/her writing: failing to produce more elaborate expressions of a message, but nevertheless organising the information and, above all, structuring the sentences in such a way as to ensure more than adequate communication of content and function.

Fluent-but-Unstable and Basic Structural Writers

Student 2 demonstrated a “fluent-but-unstable” communicative tendency characterised by relatively strong interpersonal engagement and communicative fluency despite recurring grammatical inconsistencies.

The learner incorporated:

- humour,
- conversational expressions,
- supportive interaction,
- and extended responses,

but simultaneously demonstrated frequent instability involving sentence structure, verb forms, and grammatical agreement.

This suggests that communicative confidence and interactional fluency may develop independently from grammatical accuracy.

In contrast, Student 1 demonstrated a more basic structural writing tendency characterised by:

- shorter sentence constructions,
- limited elaboration,
- repetitive structures,
- and heavier grammatical instability.

Compared to higher-band learners, Student 1 demonstrated less rhetorical expansion and lower organisational flexibility across both writing tasks.

Nevertheless, even lower-band learners continued attempting to fulfil communicative expectations within the tasks, indicating active engagement with meaning-making despite substantial linguistic limitations.

Overall Discussion of Findings

Overall, the findings suggest that ESL writing performance among Malaysian undergraduates is highly multidimensional in nature. While grammatical inaccuracies remained prevalent across the dataset, learners differed substantially in:

- communicative orientation,
- rhetorical awareness,
- organisational ability,
- audience engagement,
- elaborative reasoning,
- and lexical experimentation.

As opposed to viewing ESL writers through the grammatical errors in their writing, the findings reveal that there were indeed writers who used writing to communicate and organise. However, in terms of their communicative priorities and approaches to writing, there were considerable differences between these learners, despite their similar degree of linguistic instability. Some emphasised interpersonal communication and functional writing.

Others displayed more argumentative ambition, were more elaborative in their writings, or even more reflective towards society. In general, the more structurally unstable their writing was, the more their various priorities were in evidence. These trends are compatible with communicative competence views whereby good writing comprises not only linguistic correctness in the grammatical sense but also negotiation, knowledge of the audience and what they want to say, and the organisation of words and ideas in such a way as to elicit intent (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hyland, 2007). The results additionally strengthen genre-based writing perspectives, proposing that writing behaviour occurs in a world influenced by communicative purpose and rhetorical expectations. The tone, organisation, and communication strategies were altered by learners as required through the email and opinion writing tasks, depending on how genres were applied.

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to gain qualitative insights into repeated linguistic errors, communicative structures, and emergent learner writing strategies in Malaysian ESL undergraduate writing. The results revealed clear linguistic difficulties related to sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, lexis usage and collocational control that persisted in learners' writings. Yet apart from grammatical errors, the participants showed significant differences in terms of communicative orientation, organisational capacity, audience awareness, rhetorical elaboration, and meaning-making. More importantly, the study demonstrated that, on average, learners with overlapping grammatical flaws would still vary significantly in their communicative approaches. Whilst some learners prioritised practical clarity and interpersonal engagement, others were more involved with verbal elaboration (increased elaboration, social awareness, lexical experimentation, and argumentative ambition) despite structural disorganisation.

From a pedagogical point of view, the results would serve to motivate ESL teachers to acknowledge students' communicative potential as well as grammatical competence through employing more balanced and genre-sensitive teaching methods for learning to write. Methodologically, the study also contributes to existing debates surrounding authentic learner writing in the age of AI-enabled technologies, based on the analysis of manually generated classroom writing tasks.

However, as with any qualitative inquiry, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis was based on a purposively selected sample of authentic classroom writing scripts from a single Malaysian tertiary institution. While the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to the wider population of Malaysian ESL undergraduates, the study prioritised analytical depth over breadth, providing contextually rich insights into recurring linguistic patterns, communicative variation, and emerging learner writing tendencies. The analysis was further confined to two handwritten classroom writing tasks which, although selected to represent contrasting communicative purposes, do not encompass the full range of academic writing genres. Thus, more research involving larger numbers of learners of different levels and from different educational institutions can help to establish the degree to which the current study's findings can be generalised to other ESL contexts. A comparison of learners' supervised handwritten classroom writing with their computer-mediated writing, and writing with the aid of AI, using the current framework for analysis of linguistic accuracy, communicative approaches and tendencies, would be particularly interesting.

Collectively, the study demonstrates that beneath recurring linguistic inaccuracies, ESL learners exhibit different communicative strengths, rhetorical tendencies, and meaning-making approaches that reflect the multidimensional nature of ESL writing development.

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