

An Error Analysis of Undergraduate Students' Formal Email Writing

***Nurhafeza Mohd Akhir, Nasiha Nasrudin, Rusreena Rusli, Muhammad Nasiruddin Aziz**

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100068>

Received: 06 July 2026; Accepted: 11 July 2026; Published: 24 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, email communication is considered prominent in daily communication, regardless of the field in which it is used. In the context of tertiary-level education, email communication also plays a significant role. This study examined the types of errors undergraduate students commit when writing formal emails. This study employed a qualitative approach, focusing on the detailed analysis of students' written emails. 30 undergraduate students from a public university were selected as the sample. Data was collected through document analysis of students' email writing. The data were analysed using Corder's (1981) error analysis framework to identify and categorise the types of errors identified in the emails. The findings revealed that although learners were expected to be aware of formal email writing conventions, their actual writing showed a lack of understanding. Common errors included spelling, verb usage, and tenses due to insufficient knowledge of target language elements. Therefore, the study highlights the importance of raising awareness of proper email writing conventions among both teachers and students. It also emphasises the need for constructive feedback and the inclusion of email writing skills in the curriculum to improve students' proficiency.

Keywords: email writing, error analysis, undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, clarity and accuracy are essential for English writing proficiency for effective professional interactions. That is to say, the ability to write clear and grammatically correct business emails in English has become increasingly important.

However, Waelateh et al. (2019) argued that ESL learners often face difficulty in mastering English writing skills, especially in business communication contexts. Moreover, grammatical errors in business emails can affect one's professional credibility, thus negatively influencing career opportunities and business relationships. Most importantly, most of the existing research has mainly focused on general academic writing rather than the specific challenges of business email communication, resulting in a significant gap in the understanding of genre-specific error patterns. According to James (1998), business email writing poses its own challenges as it differs from other forms of written communication. He added that it requires not only grammatical accuracy but also an understanding of professional etiquette, appropriate levels of formality, and specific structural conventions that emphasize brevity, directness, and action-oriented language, while still maintaining professional courtesy.

Hence, understanding the types of common errors in business contexts is crucial because it requires specialised pedagogical approaches that significantly differ from traditional academic writing instruction. The integration helps address business email writing's unique demands by combining traditional error analysis with genre-specific communication requirements, ensuring both theoretical rigor and practical applicability while accounting for the complex interplay between multilingual competence and formal writing demands in professional settings. That is the reason why this study examines the errors made by undergraduate students in formal email writing.

Research Questions

1. What are the types of errors undergraduate students commit when writing formal emails?
2. Which error category occurs most frequently in the formal emails written by undergraduate students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA) has emerged as a fundamental approach in second language acquisition research, providing valuable insights into the systematic nature of learner errors and their underlying causes. Various EA models offer distinct approaches to understanding learner errors. Dulay et al. (1982) focused on surface structures, categorizing errors into omission, addition, misinformation, and disordering, and analysing their frequency and causes, such as first language interference. The comprehensiveness of this model has made it particularly useful for large-scale error analysis studies, as it allows researchers to quantify and compare error patterns across different learner populations and linguistic contexts.

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) proposed a more comprehensive model that involves the systematic collection of language samples, error identification and categorization, and analysis of sources like language transfer and developmental stages, which helps in developing effective teaching strategies. Furthermore, Ellis and Barkhuizen's model emphasises the importance of understanding learner errors not merely as failures but as windows into the cognitive processes underlying language acquisition, thereby informing the development of more effective teaching strategies that address the root causes of persistent errors. On the other hand, Corder's (1981) model, widely used in writing, includes collecting samples, identifying and marking errors, and describing them by type, making it practical for classroom settings and useful for providing targeted feedback. This study employed Corder's model as the analytical framework for data analysis, as its structured approach aligned well with the study's objective of identifying and categorising errors in undergraduate students' formal email writing.

Email writing

The increasing prevalence of email as a primary mode of professional and academic communication has generated substantial research interest in understanding the challenges learners face when composing formal electronic correspondence. In the Malaysian context, studies have documented that student emails frequently contain spoken-like spelling, errors in punctuation, abbreviations, and ungrammatical sentences (Hamzah et al., 2009). Research on email writing errors highlights recurring challenges and proposed solutions across various contexts. Burgess et al. (2005) emphasised that unclear email communication often leads to misunderstandings, which can have serious consequences in professional environments where precision and clarity is important. Tella (as cited in Warschauer, 2007) highlighted email as a tool for purpose-driven language practice, shifting focus from teacher-led to independent writing. Suandhari et al. (2019) underscore grammatical errors due to incomplete language knowledge and interference, recommending targeted training.

In academic settings, Ewald (2016) argued that second language users often struggle with formality and politeness compared to native speakers. By way of example, Dumbrava and Koronka (2006) found that students' emails to professors frequently fail to meet formal standards, which can negatively impact communication and relationships. According to Konuk (2021), despite some awareness of email etiquette, student emails often do not reflect these practices, highlighting a need for enhanced guidance and training.

The identification and correction of errors is necessary for a writer to understand their errors and improve their writing. This type of feedback should be accurate, consistent, and tailored. Tiensawangchai (2014) conducted a study classifying grammar errors found in business writing. While written business communication skills are important for students to succeed in their future career, many EFL and ESL students do not have the skills to satisfactorily perform their writing tasks at their workplace, which may be due to a lack of grammar knowledge, practice and appropriate corrective feedback from the teachers.

Past Studies

A substantial body of empirical research has investigated error patterns in learner writing across various contexts and proficiency levels, providing valuable comparative data for understanding the nature and prevalence of different error types.

Adhikary (2022) found differences in error patterns between structured and unstructured email in his study. On the other hand, Lestari and Widiadnya (2021) analysed the errors of students' email writing and they found specific errors, such as plural noun omissions (52%) and malformations (42%), were identified. Similarly, Chen (2016) examined the writing errors of Chinese university students and categorised them into morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic errors. The findings revealed that syntactic errors were the most prevalent, followed by semantic and morphological errors. Apart from that, Khansir and Shahhoseiny (2013) analysed the writing errors of Iranian pre-university students and reported that 38% of the errors were related to article usage, while 33% involved tense errors. In a separate study, they also found that punctuation errors were the most frequent, followed by spelling errors. In addition, Thananart (2000) investigated the writing errors of Thai university students and found that nearly 75% of the errors were related to grammatical structures. Research on email writing errors has identified issues such as unclear writing and the necessity for formal training to enhance effectiveness.

In the Malaysian context, several recent studies have examined writing errors among undergraduates, revealing patterns that align closely with the current study's findings. Altabaa and Zulkifli (2024), for instance, conducted an Error Analysis on written dissertations produced by undergraduates from the English Language and Literature department at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Utilising Corder's EA framework, their analysis identified a wide range of common errors, including word choice, punctuation, prepositions, plurality and singularity, verbs, articles, pronouns, ambiguity, adverbs, and subject-verb agreement. The breadth of these error types suggests that even students specialising in English studies continue to struggle with fundamental grammatical structures in academic writing.

Extending the focus to professional writing contexts, a recent study by Suhaila et al. (2023) examined errors in resumes and job application letters produced by Malaysian undergraduates, also employing Corder's (1973) EA framework. Their findings revealed that common errors fell into five categories: misselection, addition, omission, blends, and misordering, with misselection being the most prominent error. This study carried particular significance as it underscored the critical importance of impeccably crafted professional documents in the context of intense job competition among recent graduates in Malaysia, highlighting the direct implications of writing proficiency for employability.

Collectively, these Malaysian studies reveal consistent patterns of difficulty across different learner populations and writing contexts, with grammatical and structural errors emerging as particularly prevalent. Research specifically focused on email writing has further identified challenges such as unclear organisation, inappropriate formality levels, and failure to adhere to conventional email structures, all of which underscore the necessity for formal training to enhance communication effectiveness. These findings align closely with the current study's analysis of undergraduate email writing errors, providing a contextual foundation for understanding the specific challenges faced by Malaysian students. Hence, this study aims to address this gap by analysing the email writing errors of undergraduates, building upon the foundations established by previous research while offering new insights into the specific challenges faced by students in the Malaysian context.

METHODOLOGY

This study analysed 30 business email samples written by 30 undergraduate students at a public university. The participants were selected as they represented students enrolled in an email writing course. All students had completed relevant writing courses and were at upper-intermediate English proficiency level (B2 high). The data consisted of email writing tasks that included inquiries and information exchange. Each email followed a standard format and required a minimum of 180 words. The main research instrument was the students' email compositions, which were analysed using qualitative content analysis, following the steps outlined in Corder's (1981) model. The process involved collecting samples, identifying errors, and describing them. The errors were

then identified and classified into four types: omission, addition, mis formation, and misordering. The analysis helped identify the patterns and frequency of errors in students' business email writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

		Errors Identification	Frequency of errors
1	Singular-plural forms	- Some advice... - Two times is enough... - Earlier in the mornings... - A few suggestion... - Some heavy exercise... - I personally encourages... - A lot of package and trainer... - A lot of customer... - It have flexible time.... - One of my colleague... - It is greats... - It is quite a works... - This activities... - A gym sessions... - This sessions... - I aims... - I rewards... - A lot of thing... - The first tips.. - First sessions...	21
2	Verb related errors	- This problem can effect... - During weekdays or your work holiday... - It easier for you... - Since we finished work late... - I can committed... - I am so happy when heard from you... - I will gonna do... - This is mainly to increased... - It would be suits... - You do not have to worried... - I have been joined...	21

		• There is still store that opened until late night... • It not the big issue... • Once you joined the class... • To join me to... • I also working... • I do healthy lifestyles... • Help you and reduce your worried... • I'm feel pleasure... • This session not did...	
3	No introduction	• No introduction.	13
4	Errors related to tense	• We still can joined... • You will feel refreshed... • You have to balanced... • I hope you was in good health... • I were read your problem... • Its was good... • I will you to fix the problem...	7
5	Preposition	• ...are available in the store. • On my opinion... • Register as a member on the store... • I've make for solve your problem.... • In the beginning, you will... • In that time...	6
6	Spelling	• Glade • Suffice • Commit • Esily • Untill	6
7	Missing subject line	• No subject line	2
8	No sender information	• No position	1
9	Capitalisation	• Pronoun: i	1

Table 1 presents the types and frequency of grammatical errors found in the students' responses. The data reveals that nine categories of errors occurred in email writing such as singular-plural form errors, verb-related errors,

no introduction, errors related to tense, preposition, spelling, missing subject line, no sender information, and capitalisation.

As for the first category, singular-plural form errors include incorrect use of singular and plural nouns, determiners, and quantifiers which recorded 21 errors. To illustrate, "*Some advice*," "*A lot of customer*," and "*This activities*" indicate that students experienced difficulties in using nouns and quantity markers. These errors suggest that the participants have limited knowledge of countable and uncountable noun forms as well as pluralisation rules in English grammar.

For the second category, verb-related errors also appeared 21 times. This category involves mistakes in verb tense, verb form, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. By way of examples, "*It can be suits*," "*I will gonna do*," and "*This session not did*" demonstrate students' confusion in applying correct verb constructions and auxiliary verbs. These findings indicate that verb usage remains one of the most challenging aspects of English grammar for the participants.

No introduction in email writing falls under the third category, occurring 13 times. This indicates that many students directly presented their ideas without providing an opening or introductory sentence. The absence of introductions suggests that some participants may lack awareness towards proper paragraph organisation and text structure in email writing.

The fourth category, errors related to tense, appeared 7 times. For example, "*We still can joined*," "*You have to balanced*," and "*Its was good*" demonstrate confusion in the use of verb tense and verb forms. These errors indicate that participants still struggle to apply appropriate tense rules consistently, particularly when combining modal verbs, auxiliaries, and past forms.

Besides that, the fifth category, preposition errors, was also found 6 times. Sentences such as "*On my opinion*" and "*I've make for solve your problem*" show incorrect or unnecessary use of prepositions. This suggests that participants may have difficulties understanding proper prepositional collocations and sentence patterns in English.

For the sixth category, spelling errors occurred 6 times. Misspelled words such as *glade* instead of *glad* and *Committee* instead of *commit* indicate insufficient attention to spelling accuracy and vocabulary knowledge. These mistakes may result from pronunciation interference, typing habits, or limited familiarity with correct English word forms.

Lastly, missing subject line error was identified 2 times, showing that some participants omitted the subject in their email writing, which caused incomplete sentence structures. Meanwhile, no sender information and capitalisation errors each appeared once. The capitalisation error, shown in the incorrect use of the pronoun "*i*" instead of "*I*," reflects minor mechanical inaccuracies in email writing.

Overall, the data demonstrated that students encountered not only grammatical difficulties but also problems related to organisation, mechanics, and sentence completeness. Although these errors appeared less frequently, they still affect the clarity and correctness of students' written communication.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, this study reveals a clear gap between students' perceived knowledge of formal email writing and their actual writing performance. While students may feel confident, their practical work frequently shows weaknesses in spelling, grammar, and appropriate levels of formality. These errors likely happen due to a combination of insufficient linguistic knowledge, a lack of attention to detail, and simple typing mistakes.

The findings of this study have direct implications for how educators support students in developing their email writing skills. Because these errors stem from a mix of insufficient knowledge and simple carelessness, it is critical for educators to provide structured guidance on formal communication at an early stage. This early

intervention ensures students receive the necessary foundation to better prepare them for future academic and professional correspondence. Furthermore, the presence of frequent grammatical, spelling, and formality errors implies that traditional grading alone is not enough to fix these habits. To encourage real improvement, educators need to shift toward offering constructive, targeted feedback. This means moving beyond generic marks and instead implementing practical methods such as providing model answers, leaving targeted written comments, or conducting individual consultations to directly address student weaknesses.

Overall, this research aims to raise awareness among both educators and students about the importance of formal email standards. Mastering these conventions is essential for clear, professional, and effective communication in both academic and career settings.

However, this study was only focused on the analysis of language errors in formal email writing and did not examine broader dimensions of professional email communication, including discourse organisation, politeness, cultural expectations, and workplace appropriateness. Hence, future study should focus on that and provide a mixed-methods approach combining document analysis, surveys, and interviews with students and instructors in order to provide deeper understanding of the causes behind email writing difficulties.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We sincerely thank all those who contributed to the completion of this research and manuscript preparation. We are particularly grateful to the study participants, whose involvement made this work possible.

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