

Navigating Grammatical Challenges: Verb Usage in Malaysian ESL Students' Writing

^{*1}Muhamad Izzat Rahim, ²Mohamad Hanis Yahaya, ³Nur Haziq Fikri Ahmad, ⁴Rasyiqah Batrisya Md Zolkapli, ⁵Sri Fitriaty Mohd Kenali, ⁶Ahmad Muhyiddin Yusof

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}Academy of Language Studies, Centre of Foundation Studies, University Technology MARA, Selangor Branch, Dengkil Campus, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.922ILEIID0047>

Received: 26 September 2025; Accepted: 03 October 2025; Published: 22 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates verb usage errors in the writing of Malaysian university students. It is a common challenge among English as a Second Language (ESL) students. By employing an error analysis framework on fifteen students' assignments, 156 verb-related errors were identified. The errors were categorised into six categories. Findings indicate that wrong auxiliary/modal verb forms (27.6%) and incorrect tense usage (24.4%) are the most frequent error types. These results align with previous research, underscoring the universal nature of these difficulties for ESL learners. The study recommends targeted pedagogical interventions, including using technology driven tools, to improve verb usage accuracy among ESL students.

Keywords-English as Second Language, Error analysis, Verbs

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the essential skills required to master a language. Compared to other skills such as reading, listening, and speaking, writing is often regarded as the most challenging to acquire, particularly from the perspective of second language acquisition (Mehat & Ismail, 2021). Brown (1994) explained that writing requires individuals to transform their ideas into written words, a process that demands both linguistic and cognitive ability.

Given the significant role of writing in second language acquisition, numerous studies have examined this skill. One area that has attracted considerable scholarly attention is error analysis in writing. In general, error analysis refers to the process of identifying errors in written discourse with the aim of providing corrective feedback (Md Yazid et al., 2023). Scholars consider error analysis a valuable tool in teaching and learning as it benefits both students and educators.

Typically, error analysis focuses on the grammatical accuracy of language use. Among the various grammatical elements studied, verbs have been a central focus. As the core element of a sentence, verbs convey actions, states of being, and occurrences. Hence, verb usage can be regarded as a cornerstone of clear and effective writing.

Despite their importance, verbs remain problematic for learners of English as a second language. Mehat and Ismail (2021) suggested that such difficulties may stem from first language interference. Other scholars, such as Apse and Farneste (2014), argued that verb usage errors may arise from simplification, as learners have not yet mastered the necessary skills to use verbs appropriately in English. Studies have also noted that certain verb forms, such as phrasal verbs, add to the complexity and pose further challenges for learners (Kamarudin et al., 2017). As a result, language learners, especially English as Second Language (ESL) learners often struggle to produce effective and high-quality writing.

Similar issues are observed among Malaysian university students. Many Malaysian universities use English as the primary medium of instruction, and students are therefore expected to write accurately in English across a range of academic tasks. Despite this expectation, Malaysian students continue to struggle with using verbs

correctly. Stapa and Izahar (2010) found that Malaysian postgraduate students committed frequent errors in their writing, particularly in subject–verb agreement. Similarly, Singh et al. (2017), in a case study, reported that verb usage was one of the main weaknesses among her participants, who were university students.

In view of the above issues, the present study seeks to investigate verb usage errors in the writing of Malaysian university students. Specifically, error analysis was employed as the primary analytical tool. The following research questions guided this study.

1. What are the common verb usage errors in the writing of Malaysian university students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Errors in the application of verbs can affect intended meaning, potentially leading to misunderstandings and diminishing a writer's credibility. Despite their central importance, verbs remain one of the most common sources of error in English usage, particularly among non-native speakers. Hence, error analysis is being utilised widely to investigate errors in verb usage. The focus of such studies is commonly to investigate the common errors made by non-native speakers, especially in writing. Findings of error analysis studies are valuable in understanding the problems so that elegant solutions can be proposed.

Recent studies on error analysis in English consistently show that verb-related mistakes are among the most frequent difficulties faced by learners. An analysis of secondary English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' narrative essays by Kangani et al. (2024) revealed that errors in verb tense and subject–verb agreement (SVA) dominated the grammatical error profile. Learners often struggled with maintaining tense consistency when sequencing events, which compromised the overall coherence of their narratives.

Similarly, a learner corpus study in Turkey by Gazioğlu and Aydin (2024) reported that verb errors constituted the single most frequent grammatical category. These primarily involved the misuse of verb forms and incorrect tense–aspect alternations. Such findings underscore persistent challenges in mastering English verb morphology and tense usage, even after years of formal instruction.

In the context of Malaysia, Mehat and Ismail (2021) investigated the errors in writing by 30 university students. It was found that subject-verb-agreement and verb tenses dominated the errors made by the students. They explained that this error might stem from first-language interference. Hence, it was suggested that students be assisted in mastering the English language grammar, especially verb usage, as this will help them produce better writing.

A similar study was conducted by Altabaa and Zulkifli (2024). They conducted error analysis on Malaysian undergraduate dissertations. Based on the analysis, it was found that the students have difficulty using verbs when it comes to different tenses. Although this was not the most common error identified in the analysis, it is still considered one of the issues found in the dissertation. The researcher suggested an intervention to help students prepare quality dissertations.

Building on these findings, it is evident that verb usage continues to pose significant challenges for non-native speakers of English. As such, scholars recommend employing error analysis to understand the root causes of these errors better and to design effective pedagogical interventions. Another common note from the studies is that many of the scholars explained that error analysis can help to understand better the difficulties in writing by recognising the problems. Eventually, this may lead to a solution to such problems.

METHODOLOGY

Error analysis is a widely used method in language studies, particularly for examining students' language errors. The present study adopted the procedure proposed by Corder (1967) and later refined by Ellis (1994). This procedure has been extensively applied in linguistic research. It involves five key steps: (i) collection of data, (ii) identification of errors, (iii) description and classification of errors, (iv) explanation of errors, and (v) evaluation of errors.

In line with this procedure, data for this study were collected. Data were collected from written assignments produced by Malaysian university students. The task was an individual assignment in which students were instructed to provide a short written response to a question based on a short story they had previously read. Convenience sampling was employed, with the writings gathered from students in the same class. In total, fifteen scripts were collected for analysis.

Prior to analysis, the scripts were labelled to to facilitate systematic examination and discussion. Errors were then identified with reference to prior studies (e.g., Gazioğlu & Aydin, 2024; Kangani et al., 2024; Altabaa & Zulkifli, 2024). The identified errors were subsequently classified into distinct categories and tabulated for clarity and ease of reference.

Thereafter, the errors were evaluated to determine how they occurred and to illustrate them with examples drawn from the data. Finally, the frequency of each error type was calculated to establish the most recurrent patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The error analysis revealed a total of 156 errors across the students' writings. These errors were classified into six major categories, namely: (i) wrong auxiliary/modal + verb form, (ii) wrong tense (past/present mismatch), (iii) subject–verb agreement error, (iv) missing auxiliary verb, (v) wrong word form after auxiliary/modal, and (vi) unnecessary auxiliary verb. Table 1 illustrates the overall findings.

Table 1 Description of the table

Error type	Total Count	Percentage
Wrong auxiliary/modal + verb form	43	27.6%
Wrong tense	38	24.4%
Subject-verb agreement error	27	17.3%
Missing auxiliary verb	21	13.5%
Wrong word form after auxiliary/modal verb	19	12.1%
Unnecessary auxiliary verb	8	5.1%

Among the errors detected, the most frequent error type was wrong auxiliary/modal + verb form, accounting for 43 instances (27.6%). Errors in this category included incorrect verb forms following modal verbs and auxiliaries, such as “He used to worked as a bus driver” and “willing to left his easy life...”. For this error, students seemed to be confused with the verb form after the auxiliary or modal verbs.

The second most frequent error was wrong tense usage, with 38 occurrences (24.4%), reflecting students' difficulties in maintaining consistent tense throughout their writing. Examples of errors found during the analysis were “Bala goes to temple”. Instead of goes, students should use the word went as they are describing something that had happened in the past.

The third highest error category was subject–verb agreement errors, with 27 cases (17.3%). Examples include mismatches such as “This show that” instead of “This shows that.” Missing auxiliary verbs were closely followed by 21 cases (13.5%), where students often omitted required auxiliaries. An example of such error is as follows: “They not happy” instead of “They were not happy.”

Less frequent but still noteworthy were incorrect word forms after auxiliary/modal verbs, with 19 cases (12.1%), such as “can success” for “can succeed,” and unnecessary auxiliary verbs, which were the least frequent, with eight instances (5.1%).

In summary, the ranking of errors from the most to the least frequent is as follows:

1. Wrong auxiliary/modal + verb form (27.6%)
2. Wrong tense (24.4%)
3. Subject–verb agreement (17.3%)
4. Missing auxiliary verb (13.5%)
5. Wrong word form after auxiliary/modal (12.1%)
6. Unnecessary auxiliary verb (5.1%)

These findings indicate that errors involving auxiliary verbs and tense usage form the largest proportion of mistakes, suggesting that students face persistent challenges with core grammatical structures that are central to English sentence construction.

A possible cause of these errors is first language (L1) interference. As explained by Pudín, et al. (2020), the structure of a students' L1 may become intertwined with the structure of English among ESL students in writing. In their study, Pudín et al. (2020) found that approximately 25% of the errors were attributable to L1 interference, including errors with auxiliary verbs. Mehat and Ismail (2021) had similar notion when they stated that L1 can interfere with the process of second language acquisition.

Another possible explanation for verb usage errors is offered by Apse and Farneste (2014), who noted that students may lack sufficient knowledge and information about verb use. As a result, they often develop misconceptions about the correct application of verb forms. Singh et al. (2017) echoed a similar notion, stating that students demonstrated limited knowledge of English verbs. Consequently, they tended to overgeneralise verb rules and assumed that verb tenses could be used interchangeably.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that verb related errors constitute the most significant grammatical challenge among the students under investigation. Out of the total 156 errors recorded, the majority were concentrated in four categories: wrong auxiliary/modal + verb form, wrong tense usage, subject–verb agreement, and missing auxiliary verbs. These error types collectively accounted for more than four-fifths of all errors observed, underscoring the central role of verbs in shaping grammatical accuracy and coherence in student writing. The examples highlighted, such as "He used to worked as a bus driver" and "They not happy", illustrate how even seemingly small deviations in verb usage can compromise clarity and meaning in written communication.

The findings are consistent with international and local studies, which consistently report that verbs remain one of the most persistent sources of error among non-native English writers (e.g., Kangani et al., 2024; Gazioglu & Aydin, 2024; Mehat & Ismail, 2021). The persistence of these difficulties, despite years of formal instruction, suggests that verb usage poses not only a linguistic challenge but also a cognitive one, often exacerbated by first language interference. In line with prior studies, the evidence here points to the urgent need for targeted pedagogical interventions that emphasise tense consistency, subject–verb agreement, and accurate auxiliary/modal application.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings highlight the importance of designing classroom practices that directly address students' difficulties with verb usage. A clear integration of theory and practice can benefit students, thereby enhancing their mastery of English verbs.

To begin with, teachers can utilise technology to assist them in creating effective instructional materials. Stapa and Izahar (2010) suggested that learners be exposed to online learning to enhance their understanding of verbs. Accordingly, various technological tools can be employed by teachers to support this goal.

One concrete classroom intervention is the use of game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot!. Idris et al. (2020) found that using Kahoot! improved students' mastery of simple present tense verbs after just a four-week intervention.

Similarly, Segaran and Hashim (2022) discovered that online quiz platforms were highly effective in improving ESL learners' grasp of grammar. Learners also viewed these platforms positively, which contributed to a more effective teaching and learning process.

In another study, Anumanthan and Hashim (2022) suggested using a more modern platform, TikTok, to teach English verbs. Their findings revealed that students could learn and use English verbs more effectively by utilising TikTok, demonstrating that incorporating technology into the teaching process can positively impact learning outcomes.

Integrating theory with practice through technology-based interventions can therefore enhance students' mastery of English verbs. Studies have shown that tools such as Kahoot! and TikTok improve learners' grammatical accuracy and engagement (Idris et al., 2020; Segaran & Hashim, 2022; Anumanthan & Hashim, 2022). These platforms make learning more interactive and motivating, underscoring the vital role of technology in supporting effective verb instruction in ESL classrooms.

Furthermore, by adopting such technology-driven tools, educators can not only reduce recurring verb errors but also foster greater confidence and competence in academic writing among learners.

Moving forward, it is recommended that future studies investigate the underlying causes of verb usage difficulties among ESL learners, as this would provide valuable insights for developing more effective pedagogical strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the students who participated in this study for their valuable contributions.

REFERENCES

1. Altabaa, H., & Zulkifli, N. (2024). Error analysis of English writing in final year projects in Malaysia: The case of IIUM. *Journal of Islam in Asia*, 21(1), 306–349. <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v21i1.1199>
2. Anumanthan, S., & Hashim, H. (2022). Improving the learning of regular verbs through TikTok among primary school ESL pupils. *Creative Education*, 13(3), 896–912. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2022.133059>
3. Apse, V., & Farneste, M. (2014). Common errors in the use of English verb forms. *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*, 4, 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.04.2014.01>
4. Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An Interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Prentice Hall Regents.
5. Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5(1–4), 161–170.
6. Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
7. Gazioğlu, M., & Aydın, S. (2024). Identifying grammatical errors and mistakes via a written learner corpus in a foreign language context. *Journal of Language Research (JLR)*, 8(2), 91-106. <https://doi.org/10.51726/jlr.1553484>
8. Idris, M.I., Said, N.E.M., & Tan, K.H. (2020). Game-Based Learning Platform and its Effects on Present Tense Mastery: Evidence from an ESL Classroom. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 19(5), 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.5.2>
9. Kamarudin, R., Rahim, M., & Arifin, Z. (2017). The descriptions of common phrasal verbs in learner textbooks: Implications on language learning. *Advanced Science Letters*, 23(8), 7424–7427.
10. Kangangi, B. M., Ndung'u, C. W., & Mwangi, P. K. (2024). Error Analysis of English Narrative Essays of Secondary School Learners in Kirinyaga Central Sub-County, Kenya. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 12(2), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.12n.2p.3>
11. Md Yazid, N. H., Malik, M., Jelani, S. A., & Md Naim, I. A. (2023). Error analysis: The correlation between justification inclusion and learners' performance in an English grammar assessment. *Journal of Creative Practices in Language Learning and Teaching (CPLT)*, 11(1).

12. Mehat, S. Z., & Ismail, L. (2021). Malaysian tertiary ESL students' writing errors and their implications on English language teaching. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 17(3), 235–242.
13. Pudín, C. S. J., Storey, J. M., Loh, Y. L., Swanto, S., & Din, W. A. (2020). Exploring L1 Interference in the Writings of Kadazan Dusun ESL Students. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 5(1), 1–15.
14. Segaran, V. C. & Hashim, H. (2022). 'More online quizzes, please!' the effectiveness of online quiz tools in enhancing the learning of grammar among ESL learners. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 1756-1770.
15. Singh, C. K. S., Singh, A. K. J., Abd Razak, N. Q., & Ravinthar, T. (2017). Grammar errors made by ESL tertiary students in writing. *English Language Teaching*, 10(5), 16-27. <http://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n5p16>
16. Stapa, S. H., & Izahar, M. M. (2010). Analysis of errors in subject-verb agreement among Malaysian ESL learners. *3L: Language, Linguistics and Literature*, 16(1), 56–73.