Bridging the Gap Between Grammar Knowledge and Writing Practice in the Use of the Simple Present Tense

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Abstrak: This study investigates grammatical errors in university EFL students' use of the simple present tense in report text writing. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, the research involved 30 students from the English Language Education programs of two universities in Aceh, Indonesia. Data were collected through a writing test in which students produced report texts, and the errors were analyzed using an error analysis framework, particularly the surface strategy taxonomy. The findings reveal four major error types: misformation, omission, addition, and misordering. Among these, misformation was the most dominant, accounting for the majority of total errors (59.53%), followed by omission and addition (14.41%), while misordering occurred least frequently (11.62%). These results indicate that students experience serious difficulty in applying grammatical rules accurately, especially in verb forms and subject–verb agreement, suggesting a gap between the students' grammatical knowledge and its application in written production. The study highlights the importance of integrating grammar instruction with actual writing practice and using error analysis as an evaluation tool to enhance learners' grammatical awareness. Limitations related to sample size, single data collection technique, and focus on one text genre are acknowledged, and future research is recommended to involve larger samples, multiple genres, and data triangulation methods.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a fundamental component of academic literacy, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Beyond expressing ideas, academic writing requires grammatical accuracy to ensure clarity and credibility of information. Writing also promotes deeper understanding through the processes of organizing, editing, and structuring ideas (Nation, 2002). One grammatical feature that plays a crucial role in academic genre is the simple present tense, which is commonly used to state general truths, definitions, and factual information. This tense is especially dominant in report texts, a genre characterized by objectivity and systematic presentation of information (Gerot & Wignell, 1994).

Despite years of formal grammar instruction, learners often struggle to apply grammatical knowledge accurately in writing. Error analysis remains a valuable approach for identifying learners' difficulties, as it reveals patterns that may not be visible through test performance alone. The Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) classifies grammatical errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering

(Dulay, et al, 1982), and continues to serve as a widely accepted framework for analyzing EFL learners' grammatical errors.

Previous studies have documented persistent grammatical errors in students' writing, particularly in the use of the simple present tense. Research at the secondary school level frequently reports misformation and omission as dominant error types, often linked to difficulties in subject–verb agreement and verb form selection (Ailinah, 2022; Fahira & Arifin, 2024; Gaol et al., 2025; Imsaqiah et al., 2025; Saragi et al., 2025). Other studies indicate that these difficulties may be influenced by learners' limited grammatical mastery and the interference of Bahasa Indonesia, which does not mark subject–verb agreement in the same way as English (Huda & Wuda, 2019; Linarsih et al., 2020; Saputro, 2022; Septiana, 2020). Such findings suggest that students' conceptual understanding of tense usage remains incomplete and that grammar instruction may not sufficiently bridge the gap between rule knowledge and practical writing ability.

However, most of these studies focus on younger learners and descriptive texts, resulting in limited understanding of how grammatical errors occur in more formal academic genres and among learners at higher educational levels. University students majoring in English education are expected to demonstrate stronger grammatical control in academic writing; however, studies show that even advanced learners still experience difficulties in applying tense forms appropriately (Pasaribu, 2022). This indicates a need to examine how grammatical problems persist in university-level academic writing, particularly in genres that demand greater linguistic accuracy.

In addition to this gap, another issue relates to the research focus in previous studies. Many studies have applied the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) to classify learners' grammatical errors; however, fewer have examined how these error patterns specifically appear in report texts written by university students. Investigating error patterns in this genre can provide deeper insight into students' grammatical performance in academically oriented writing.

Writing difficulties among EFL learners are not limited to idea development but are strongly connected to linguistic problems, particularly grammar. Studies on Indonesian university students' writing show that learners often struggle to control sentence structure while trying to express their ideas, which leads to frequent grammatical inaccuracies. Problems such as incorrect verb forms, misuse of tenses, and incomplete sentence elements frequently appear in students' compositions, indicating that grammatical knowledge is not always successfully transferred into actual writing performance (Rusmiati, 2019).

Similar finding is reported in another study analyzing university students' essays, which revealed that tense usage, subject–verb agreement, and article use were among the most dominant sources of error (Fhonna & Rusmiati, 2015). The study indicates that although students recognize the importance of grammar, they still experience difficulty applying grammatical rules accurately in writing, as reflected in the frequent and repeated grammatical errors found in their compositions. This suggests that writing places a heavy cognitive demand on learners, as they must simultaneously manage ideas, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. As a result, grammatical accuracy often weakens when students focus more on content delivery than on language form.

In addition, learner reflections from previous research indicate that students themselves perceive grammar as one of the most challenging aspects of writing. They report confusion in choosing correct verb forms, especially in tense selection and agreement patterns, as well as uncertainty about sentence completeness. These findings emphasize that grammatical errors in writing are not merely careless mistakes, but signs of ongoing developmental processes in learners' interlanguage. For this reason, examining grammatical errors in specific academic genres, such as report texts, becomes important for understanding how grammatical knowledge functions in more structured and formal writing contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types and frequencies of grammatical errors made by university EFL students in using the simple present tense in writing report texts. By identifying dominant error patterns, this research contributes empirical evidence to error analysis studies and offers pedagogical insights for integrating grammar instruction with genre-based writing practices to improve students' grammatical accuracy in academic writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error Analysis in Second Language Learning

Errors are an inevitable part of second language learning and show how learners gradually develop their language ability. Dulay, et al (1982) argue that learners cannot acquire a language without making systematic errors, as these errors provide evidence of how the language system is forming in the learners' mind. Rather than being signs of failure, errors are indicators of learning progress and offer valuable insights into learners' linguistic competence.

Error Analysis (EA) serves as a framework for identifying, classifying, and interpreting learner errors. Brown (2000) explains that EA allows researchers and teachers to observe patterns of deviation from target language norms and understand the internal system learners use when producing language. In this sense, errors are not random but reflect how learners organize grammatical rules at a particular stage of development. Through EA, teachers can identify problematic grammatical areas and plan more focused teaching strategies.

Similarly, Harmer (2007) emphasizes that errors are natural features of interlanguage, the developing version of the target language that learners build over time. As learners gain more exposure and practice, this system gradually changes and becomes closer to the standard form of the language. Repeated grammatical errors in writing therefore indicate areas where learners' interlanguage has not yet fully developed, especially in structures that require rule consistency, such as tense and agreement.

Errors may arise from various sources. Hubbard et al. (1983) identify mother-tongue interference, overgeneralization, and teaching-induced factors as major causes. Brown (2000) further categorizes error sources into interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies. These perspectives highlight that learner errors are not random, but stem from cognitive processes and learning conditions.

Types of Errors: Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST)

To classify learner errors systematically, Dulay et al. (1982) propose the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST), which categorizes errors into four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Omission refers to the absence of required grammatical elements, such as auxiliary verbs or articles. Addition involves the presence of unnecessary elements, such as redundant auxiliaries. Misformation occurs when learners use incorrect grammatical forms, for example, wrong verb forms. Misordering refers to incorrect word order in sentence structure as in "Eats the cat fish" which should be "The cat eats fish".

SST is widely used because it reveals how learners alter the surface structure of sentences when attempting to produce the target language. By identifying whether learners tend to leave out elements, add extra forms, use incorrect forms, or arrange words improperly, researchers can detect dominant grammatical problem areas. This taxonomy is particularly relevant to tense-related studies, as tense use involves verb morphology, auxiliaries, and sentence structure.

Report Text and Grammatical Demands

Report text is a factual genre that presents general information about natural, social, or artificial phenomena (Gerot & Wignell, 1994; Hyland, 2004). Its social function is to describe how things are through classification and detailed description. Structurally, it consists of general classification followed by descriptions of characteristics.

Linguistically, report texts are characterized by use of the timeless simple present tense to express general facts (Azar & Hagen, 2016), objective and factual language, generic participants (e.g., birds, cats), and relational processes for definitions and descriptions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Because this genre focuses on general truths rather than specific events, the simple present tense becomes the dominant tense choice. Inaccurate tense use in this genre can reduce clarity and affect the academic quality of the text.

Simple Present Tense, Grammar, and Writing

Among grammatical areas, tense usage frequently appears as a major source of difficulty in EFL contexts. Azar and Hagen (2016) explain that the simple present tense is used to express general truths, habitual actions, and factual information. Although often considered a basic tense, it involves several rules, including subject–verb agreement, the use of auxiliary verbs, and distinctions between verbal and nominal sentences. These features make the simple present tense more complex in actual use than it may initially appear in classroom instruction.

In academic genres such as report texts, the simple present tense functions as the primary tense for presenting factual and timeless information (Swan, 2016; Murphy, 2019). Mastery of this tense requires control of verb morphology, especially subject–verb agreement and the correct use of *to be*. Difficulties in these areas frequently lead to errors in written production.

Grammar plays a crucial role in conveying meaning accurately in writing because it provides the structural system that allows ideas to be expressed clearly. Mulyani et al., (2019) note that grammatical errors are among the most common difficulties students face in writing, indicating that grammatical knowledge is not always successfully applied during text production. Writing tasks demand simultaneous control of ideas, organization, vocabulary, and grammar, which often

results in reduced grammatical accuracy when learners focus more on content than on language form. This explains why grammatical errors, particularly in tense use, remain persistent even among learners who have studied grammar for years.

Writing development, therefore, does not occur automatically but requires guided practice and instructional support. Research indicates that improving writing skills involves the use of appropriate pedagogical techniques combined with supportive tools and structured guidance, which help learners develop their writing performance more effectively (Herwanis et al., 2024). Instructional support and feedback are essential, as they assist students in recognizing weaknesses in their writing and gradually improving both grammatical accuracy and overall text quality.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to identify and categorize grammatical errors in students' writing. Qualitative research enables in-depth examination of linguistic phenomena in natural written production (Flick, 2018; Morse, 2020). The design was appropriate because the study focused on describing the forms and patterns of errors rather than testing causal relationships. Error analysis procedures followed the framework proposed by Ellis (2008).

Participant and Setting

The study was conducted at the English Language Education Departments of Abulyatama University and Muhammadiyah Aceh University. The participants consisted of 30 final-semester students (15 from each university) selected through purposive sampling (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2023). They had completed courses in grammar and academic writing, ensuring they had received formal instruction related to the study focus.

Instrument and Data Collection

Data were collected through a writing test administered once. Students were asked to write a report text on the topic *"Online Learning Platform in 2025."* The topic was chosen for its relevance to students' academic experiences. Participants wrote manually without access to grammar-checking tools or AI applications to ensure authentic language production. The task specifically required the use of the simple present tense, which is dominant in report texts.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using error analysis procedures outlined by Ellis (2008). The analysis involved the following stages:
1. Error identification: students' texts were examined to locate grammatical inaccuracies in the use of the simple present tense.
2. Error classification: errors were categorized based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) by Dulay et al. (1982), which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.
3. Error quantification: the frequency of each error type was calculated and converted into percentages using the formula:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

where *P* represents percentage, *F* frequency of a specific error type, and *N* total number of errors.

This analysis allowed the identification of dominant error patterns in students' report writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

This study analyzed 30 university students' report texts to identify errors in the use of the simple present tense based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST): omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. A total of 215 grammatical errors were identified.

Overall Distribution of Error Types

Misformation errors were the most frequent, accounting for 128 errors (59.53%). Omission and addition errors occurred at the same frequency, with 31 errors each (14.41%), while misordering errors were the least frequent, with 25 errors (11.62%). These results indicate that students' primary difficulty lies in forming correct grammatical structures rather than merely omitting or adding elements.

Table 1. Distribution of Error Types

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Misformation	128	59.53%
Omission	31	14.41%
Addition	31	14.41%
Misordering	25	11.62%
Total	215	100%

Omission Errors

Omission errors involved missing grammatical elements required in simple present tense structures. The most frequent omissions included auxiliary verbs (is/are/do/does), articles (a/an/the), subjects in clauses, and infinitive marker *to*.

Typical examples include:"Duolingo very friendly" → Duolingo is very friendly
"If you want check your…" → If you want **to** check your…

These findings show students' difficulty distinguishing between nominal and verbal sentence patterns and maintaining complete clause structure. The frequent absence of auxiliary verbs, articles, and infinitive markers suggests that learners have not fully internalized the grammatical elements that are obligatory in English sentences. In many cases, these errors may reflect transfer from Bahasa Indonesia, where auxiliary verbs, articles, and infinitive markers are not grammatically obligatory. As a result, learners may not consistently perceive these elements as required components in English sentence structure. This indicates that students' grammatical knowledge may remain theoretical and has not yet developed into automatic use during writing. As a result, sentences become structurally incomplete, which affects both grammatical accuracy and clarity of meaning in report text writing.

Addition Errors

Addition errors occurred when unnecessary grammatical elements were inserted. Common patterns included redundant to be after verbs (make, can), unnecessary articles, double comparatives (more easier), and auxiliary duplication (will cannot).

Example:

"make our learning process to be effective" → make our learning process effective

This suggests overgeneralization of grammatical rules and uncertainty about verb complementation patterns. Students appear to assume that adding extra grammatical markers makes sentences more complete or formal, even when such elements are not required. This tendency reflects partial understanding of English structure, where learners apply rules broadly without fully recognizing contextual restrictions. It also indicates that students may rely on memorized patterns rather than a clear awareness of how verbs function within specific sentence constructions. As a result, addition errors reveal that learners are not yet consistent in applying grammatical rules in context, particularly in determining when grammatical elements are necessary and when they should be omitted.

Misformation Errors

Misformation was the dominant error type. Errors reflected incorrect grammatical forms rather than absence or excess of elements. Frequent patterns included: incorrect subject–verb agreement (platform utilize), wrong verb form after modals or infinitives (can learning, to learning), incorrect pluralization (many knowledge, another languages), and incorrect passive structures (is using by teachers)

Example:

"Ruang Guru giving you many benefits" → Ruang Guru gives you many benefits

This dominance shows that students mainly struggle with forming grammatical structures correctly, especially verb forms and plural nouns. These errors suggest that learners may recognize the general grammatical rules but have difficulty selecting the correct forms while writing. The high frequency of misformation also reflects incomplete internalization of English morphological systems, especially in areas where form changes are small but meaningful, such as third-person singular -s, plural -s, and past participle forms. As a result, grammatical inaccuracy in this category affects not only correctness but also clarity and academic quality of the text.

Misordering Errors

Misordering errors involved incorrect arrangement of sentence elements. Though least frequent, they demonstrate problems with syntactic organization.

Example:

"…Teachers other use Kahoot to review lessons…" → … Other teachers use Kahoot to review lessons…"

These errors indicate that students are sometimes unsure about how words should be arranged to form clear and natural English sentences. Even when they know the vocabulary and grammar rules, placing elements in the wrong order can make sentences confusing or unnatural. This shows that sentence structure is still developing and that learners need more practice in producing complete sentences with correct word order.

Overall, the findings show that students' errors do not only involve missing or extra words but mainly incorrect grammatical forms. The large number of misformation errors suggests that students still have difficulty using correct verb forms, subject–verb agreement, and choosing the right verb patterns in the simple present tense. This means that learners may understand grammar rules in theory, but applying them accurately while writing remains challenging. Continued writing practice combined with focused grammar support is therefore important to help students use grammatical forms more consistently in academic writing.

Discussion

This study examined grammatical errors in the use of the simple present tense in university students' report writing and found that misformation, omission, addition, and misordering errors all occurred, with misformation being overwhelmingly dominant. These findings indicate that even advanced EFL learners continue to experience difficulty applying grammatical knowledge accurately in academic writing, suggesting a gap between explicit grammar instruction and practical written performance.

Dominance of Misformation Errors

The predominance of misformation errors (59.53%) shows that students' main challenge lies in incorrect grammatical formation, particularly in subject–verb agreement, verb morphology, and noun number marking. According to Dulay et al. (1982), misformation reflects learners' use of incorrect linguistic forms despite knowing that a form is required. The high frequency of this error type suggests incomplete internalization of morphological rules rather than simple carelessness.

This result aligns with previous studies reporting misformation as the most common error in learners' use of the simple present tense (Ailinah, 2022; Fahira & Arifin, 2024). However, while those studies focused mainly on secondary school learners and descriptive texts, the present findings demonstrate that similar grammatical instability persists among university students in a more formal academic genre. This indicates that increased exposure to grammar instruction does not automatically ensure grammatical accuracy in writing.

Omission and Addition as Indicators of Rule Uncertainty

Omission and addition errors occurred at equal rates (14.41%), reflecting learners' uncertainty about when grammatical elements are obligatory. Omission errors, particularly of auxiliary verbs and articles, support Dulay et al.'s (1982) view that learners often exclude elements absent in their first language. This is consistent with research findings on L1 interference, stating that Bahasa Indonesia does not mark subject–verb agreement or articles in the same way as English (Linarsih et al., 2020; Septiana, 2020).

Addition errors, on the other hand, indicate overgeneralization, where learners apply rules excessively in an attempt to produce grammatically complete sentences. Research has shown that addition errors often occur when learners attempt to apply grammatical rules even where they are not required, indicating overgeneralization in their developing language system. Such overgeneralization can lead learners to insert unnecessary elements in written sentences when they try to ensure grammatical completeness.

Relatively Lower Misordering Errors

Misordering errors were least frequent (11.62%), indicating that students generally maintain basic English word order. Nevertheless, their presence points to remaining weaknesses in sentence structure, particularly within noun phrases. This pattern aligns with findings from studies on descriptive writing, which report that misordering is often one of the less frequent error types compared with omission, addition, and misformation in learners' writing (Ailinah, 2022; Imsaqiah et al., 2025). For example, research on secondary EFL learners' descriptive texts found misordering to be the least common category (12%), while misformation and omission were much more prominent (Saragi et al., 2025). This suggests that students usually acquire basic word order earlier, whereas smaller grammatical details, such as correct word forms, remain challenging. In other words, their main problems relate more to choosing the correct grammatical forms than to arranging sentence structure.

Pedagogical Implications

These findings reinforce the idea that grammatical knowledge acquired through formal instruction does not easily transfer into accurate written production. Previous research also shows that although grammar knowledge is significantly related to writing performance, it does not fully determine writing quality, indicating that learners often struggle to apply grammatical rules consistently when producing longer texts (Sari et al., 2025). The dominance of misformation errors highlights the need for instructional approaches that emphasize morphological accuracy in context, especially subject–verb agreement and verb form selection within specific genres such as report texts. Integrating grammar instruction with genre-based writing practice may help learners move from rule recognition to consistent application. Research has shown that when grammar instruction is embedded within regular writing activities, learners improve not only their grammatical accuracy, but also coherence and cohesion in text production, indicating more consistent application of grammatical forms rather than isolated rule memorization (Ulfiana et al., 2025).

CONCLUSSION

This study investigated grammatical errors in university students' use of the simple present tense in report text writing and revealed that grammatical inaccuracy remains a significant issue even at the tertiary level. Four types of errors were identified: misformation, omission, addition, and misordering, with misformation emerging as the most dominant error type. This indicates that learners' primary difficulty lies in forming grammatical structures correctly, particularly in subject–verb agreement and verb morphology. The findings confirm that mastery of explicit grammar knowledge does not automatically translate into accurate written performance, highlighting a persistent gap between grammatical competence and language production.

From a theoretical perspective, the dominance of misformation supports error analysis frameworks that view learner errors as evidence of incomplete rule internalization rather than random mistakes. The presence of omission and addition errors further reflects L1 influence and overgeneralization processes, while the relatively lower occurrence of misordering suggests that the word order is less

problematic than morphological accuracy for these learners. These patterns reinforce the importance of focusing not only on rule explanation but also on meaningful and actual grammar use in writing instruction.

Pedagogically, the results emphasize the need for integrating grammar instruction with genre-based writing practice. Instruction that combines explicit focus on form with writing tasks in authentic academic contexts may help students develop more consistent grammatical control. Error analysis can also function as a diagnostic tool to inform teaching strategies and raise learners' awareness of their own grammatical patterns.

However, this study involved a relatively small sample from two universities, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the research relied solely on a writing test, focusing on the final written product without triangulating data through interviews or process-based observations. As a result, the study explains what errors occurred more than why they occurred. Furthermore, the analysis was restricted to one genre (report text), which may not fully represent learners' grammatical performance across different writing contexts.

Future research is therefore recommended to include larger and more diverse participant groups, incorporate data triangulation methods, and examine additional text genres such as narrative, expository, or argumentative writing. Investigating learner variables such as proficiency level, learning strategies, or L1 influence would also contribute to a deeper understanding of grammatical development in EFL academic writing.

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