

LOST IN TRANSLATION: UNRAVELING GRAMMATICAL INTERFERENCE IN STUDENTS' WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This study addressed the grammatical interference of Indonesian (L1) in the English (L2) writing of English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. The purpose of this study was to identify the types of Indonesian grammatical interference that occur in the writing of EFL students and to examine the factors that contribute to its occurrence. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. The participants were fourth-semester students of the English Study Program at STKIP Yayasan Abdi Pendidikan who were enrolled in the Scientific Writing course during the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were collected through a writing test, a semi-structured interview, and classroom observation, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal that the students' L1 grammar continued to influence their L2 writing and that grammatical interference occurred in two categories: syntactical interference and morphological interference. Within syntactical interference, prepositions produced the greatest number of errors, followed by word order, while within morphological interference, the omission of determiners was the most frequent error, followed by singular-plural forms and the be-form. The observation and interviews indicated that the interference stemmed primarily from the structural differences between English and Indonesian grammar, compounded by the

students' habit of composing their ideas in Indonesian first and then translating them into English, together with their limited mastery of English vocabulary and grammar. The study concludes that reducing grammatical interference requires contrastive, form-focused instruction that explicitly addresses the structural gaps between the two languages.

Keywords: *EFL Writing, Grammatical Interference; Higher Education; L1–L2 Differences; Language Transfer*

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that English plays an essential role in the contemporary world. Driven by rapid technological advancement, people are increasingly required to use English on a regular basis, and it has become a compulsory subject from secondary school through to higher education. When students learn a foreign language, particularly English, they inevitably encounter a range of difficulties (Misbah et al., 2017), and they commonly make errors in both speaking and writing. One of the most influential sources of these errors is the learner's first language: it is widely acknowledged that a learner's mother tongue, or any previously acquired first language, shapes the process of learning a target language (Ellis, 1986). This occurs because learners already possess mental knowledge of their L1, and when they begin to acquire a new language they must adapt to its unfamiliar structures. The encounter between prior linguistic knowledge and the new system gives rise to language transfer (Flores, 2023).

The use of English in Indonesia is frequently affected by the speakers' native tongue. Regrettably, learners are often unaware of this influence, assuming that mutual comprehension is sufficient even when grammatical structures have been disregarded (Martanti, 2011). For example, when an Indonesian speaker wishes to express "saya sangat suka menulis," they may produce "I very like writing" rather than "I really enjoy writing." Such grammatically deviant constructions can hinder communication. When a speaker applies the rules of their native language (L1) to a second language (L2), the result is language interference—also known as cross-linguistic influence or transfer—which frequently produces errors or non-standard forms in the L2. Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax are among the components of language that may be affected. Language interference is a natural aspect of language learning, particularly in the early stages when learners still rely heavily on their prior L1 knowledge.

According to Odlin (1989), interference is caused by the transfer of L1 linguistic habits to L2 use. When the structures of the two languages are comparable, positive transfer may facilitate learning; when they diverge, negative transfer produces errors. Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory illuminates this

problem by proposing that learners develop a dynamic linguistic system combining L1 and L2 rules. Errors arise when learners persist in applying L1 rules within their interlanguage, and such errors frequently manifest as grammatical interference.

Grammatical interference specifically describes how a learner's L1 shapes the way they speak or write in an L2. It occurs when learners inadvertently transfer the syntax, grammatical norms, and structural features of their L1 while communicating in their L2. Errors are especially likely where the two languages differ substantially, affecting features such as word order, tense usage, and subject–verb agreement. Depending on these structural differences, grammatical interference may take various forms, including improper verb conjugation, incorrect adjective placement, and the inappropriate use of articles (Ellis, 1997; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). This interference is more prevalent among learners who remain strongly influenced by the rules of their native tongue or who have not yet fully grasped the grammar of the target language.

In academic writing, particularly in higher education, grammatical accuracy is essential for maintaining professionalism, clarity, and precision. Academic writers routinely convey intricate concepts, arguments, and research findings, and grammatical errors can obscure meaning, diminish credibility, and impair the reader's comprehension. Correct grammar enables students to express their ideas logically and clearly, thereby promoting effective communication (Hyland, 2003). Harmer (2007) similarly argues that accurate grammar keeps content cohesive, prevents misconceptions, and frees the reader to concentrate on the argument itself. This is especially crucial in today's international learning environment, in which students from diverse linguistic backgrounds—many of them learning English as a second language—are expected to produce work that satisfies prescribed academic standards. Moreover, grammatical accuracy is associated with academic achievement: students who write with fewer grammatical errors tend to receive higher grades because their work is perceived as being of higher quality (Bitchener, 2012).

Despite the substantial body of research on cross-linguistic influence, several gaps remain. Much of the existing scholarship on L1 interference in Indonesian EFL contexts has concentrated on general or secondary-school learners and has tended to catalogue error types without systematically linking them to their underlying causes. Prior Indonesian studies, such as those by Irmalia (2016) and Martanti (2011), documented the presence of morphological and syntactical interference but paid limited attention to the specific writing behaviours—particularly the practice of drafting in the L1 and then translating into the L2—that generate such errors in academic writing. Furthermore, relatively few studies have examined grammatical interference within the specific

setting of a Scientific Writing course, where students are required to meet formal academic conventions and where interference is therefore likely to be especially consequential. There thus remains a need for research that not only identifies the types of grammatical interference but also triangulates written products with observation and interview data in order to explain why such interference occurs.

This study addresses that need. Its novelty lies in combining a fine-grained classification of Indonesian grammatical interference—distinguishing syntactical interference (word order, preposition, extra word, and missing word) from morphological interference (omission of determiner, wrong determiner, subject–verb agreement, be-form, tense usage, and singular–plural form)—with a triangulated qualitative account of its causes among higher-education EFL learners enrolled in an academic writing course. By integrating writing-test data with classroom observation and learner interviews, the study moves beyond error description toward an explanation grounded in learners’ own composing processes and their perceptions of the structural distance between Indonesian and English. Accordingly, the study is guided by two research questions: (1) What types of Indonesian grammatical interference occur in the English writing of EFL students? and (2) What factors contribute to the occurrence of this interference?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Transfer and Cross-Linguistic Influence

The theoretical foundation for the study of interference lies in the concept of language transfer. Transfer refers to the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired (Odlin, 1989). Where the L1 and L2 share structural features, transfer is positive and supports acquisition; where they diverge, transfer is negative and produces errors commonly termed interference. This distinction between positive and negative transfer has been central to second language acquisition research since the era of contrastive analysis, which held that the greater the structural distance between two languages, the greater the difficulty learners are likely to experience (Lennon, 2008).

Contemporary psycholinguistic research has refined this view by demonstrating that a learner’s language background continues to shape L2 processing at the level of word order and syntax. Studies of bilingual sentence processing show that negative transfer effects on L2 word order are detectable both online and offline (Andersson et al., 2019; Erdocia & Laka, 2018), and that syntactic conflict between languages can be tracked over the course of L2 acquisition (Mickan & Lemhöfer, 2020). Such findings confirm that interference is not merely a surface phenomenon but reflects the persistence of L1 structural habits in the developing L2 system.

Interlanguage and the Nature of Learner Errors

Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory reframed learner errors as evidence of a systematic, transitional linguistic system rather than as random failures. According to this view, learners construct an interlanguage that draws on both the L1 and the L2, and errors reflect the rules of that evolving system. When L1-based rules are retained, interference errors result, and some of these may become fossilised if they are not addressed. Error analysis therefore offers a productive window onto the acquisition process: by examining the errors learners make, researchers can infer how, and to what extent, learners have internalised the grammar of the target language (Shahin, 2011). Analysing writing errors, in particular, is a well-established means of identifying grammatical interference (Sarfraz et al., 2016).

Types of Grammatical Interference

Weinreich (2011) provides a foundational taxonomy of interference, distinguishing phonological interference, which arises when the production of L2 sounds is shaped by L1 sound patterns; lexical interference, in which vocabulary from one language intrudes upon another; and grammatical interference, in which the structure of the L1 is transferred onto the L2 (Mahmud & Arifin, 2017). Grammatical interference is frequently subdivided into morphological interference, concerning the internal structure and inflection of words, and syntactical interference, concerning the arrangement of words within phrases, clauses, and sentences (Suwito, 1983). This two-part classification underpins the analytical framework of the present study.

Within this framework, English and Indonesian differ in ways that are especially conducive to interference. English employs a comparatively large inventory of prepositions whose use is often obligatory and semantically precise, particularly when indicating time, place, or direction (Carter & McCarthy, 2006), whereas Indonesian relies on a smaller set of prepositions, such as *di* (at/in/on) and *ke* (to), that cover broader functions (Chaer, 2009). At the level of phrase structure, English typically follows a Modifier–Head order, while Indonesian follows a Head–Modifier order, so that literal translation readily produces word-order errors (Erdocia & Laka, 2018; Hopp et al., 2020). English further marks definiteness through determiners and distinguishes singular from plural through inflection, both of which are largely absent in Indonesian (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). These contrasts help to explain why prepositions, word order, determiners, and number marking are recurrent sites of interference for Indonesian learners of English.

Grammatical Interference in EFL Writing

Empirical studies of Indonesian EFL learners consistently report grammatical interference in written production. Irmalia (2016) found that learners

frequently struggled to select appropriate verb tenses, while Martanti (2011), analysing the language of newspaper articles, identified both morphological and syntactical interference as the dominant error categories. Comparable patterns have been reported in other contexts: Nangle (2024) documented pervasive L1 interference in the grammar, vocabulary, and syntax of Lithuanian learners of English, and Sarfraz et al. (2016) examined grammatical interference and its social acceptability in the Pakistani context. Across these studies, a recurring conclusion is that the greater the divergence between the two languages, the more negative transfer can be expected (Nangle, 2024).

Pedagogical Responses to Grammatical Interference

Research on instruction offers several strategies for mitigating grammatical interference. Explicit grammar teaching has been shown to strengthen learners' grammatical competence by equipping them with the tools needed to navigate the complexities of L2 grammar (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2018). Innovative instructional models, such as the flipped classroom, have likewise demonstrated positive effects on learners' grammatical proficiency by fostering an engaging and interactive learning environment (Shaari et al., 2021). The provision of explicit feedback is equally important: explicit rule presentation combined with negative feedback can significantly enhance learners' understanding of grammatical structures and thereby reduce the impact of L1 interference (Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2004). Contextualised grammar instruction, which links grammatical input to the demands of authentic writing tasks, has been found to yield substantial improvements in learners' writing outcomes (Chatterjee & Halder, 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest that effective intervention must be contrastive and form-focused, targeting the specific structural gaps from which interference arises.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design in order to determine whether Indonesian grammar interferes with the English writing of higher-education students, to identify the types of grammatical interference that occur, and to examine the factors that contribute to it. The researcher sought to recognise, categorise, and explain the grammatical errors found in the work of students enrolled in a scientific writing course.

In qualitative research, sampling is deliberate (Creswell, 2012): the researcher purposefully selects individuals and sites in order to discover or understand the central phenomenon. The participants in this study were fourth-semester students of the English Study Program at STKIP Yayasan Abdi Pendidikan who were officially registered in the Scientific Writing course during the 2024/2025 academic year. Purposive sampling was used to select the

participants on the basis of their enrolment in this course, and their written work formed the corpus analysed for grammatical interference.

Three instruments were used to collect data: a writing test, a semi-structured interview, and classroom observation. The writing test was used to elicit and identify the grammatical errors produced during the writing process. The interviews, conducted in a casual setting using a semi-structured format, were used to probe more deeply into the writing difficulties associated with the influence of the native language. Classroom observation was carried out during the teaching and learning process to document the students' composing behaviour. Together, these three instruments allowed the written products to be triangulated with process and perception data.

After the data had been collected through the writing test, interview, and observation, they were analysed qualitatively following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1992), which comprises three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The researcher first prepared and organised the data on Indonesian grammatical interference in the students' writing. The data were then reduced and classified according to Weinreich's (2011) two categories of grammatical interference—syntactical and morphological—drawing on Suwito's (1983) subclassification. Following Yusuf (1994), the analysis treated the difference between the source and target languages, particularly in vocabulary and structure, as the primary explanatory factor. The classified data were displayed in tabular and narrative form, and conclusions were drawn and verified against the observation and interview evidence.

FINDINGS

Based on Weinreich's (2011) classification of grammatical interference into syntactical and morphological categories, the analysis of the students' written work identified interference in both categories. The results are presented below, beginning with the overall distribution of syntactical and morphological interference and followed by illustrative examples of each type.

Syntactical Interference

Syntactical interference, as Suwito (1983) notes, can be found in phrases, clauses, and sentences. In this study it was classified into four types: word order, preposition, extra word, and missing word. The distribution of syntactical interference is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Syntactical Interference

Kinds	Number	Percentage
Word order	14	22.5
Preposition	25	40
Extra word	10	16.5
Missing word	13	21
Total	62	100%

As Table 1 shows, the analysis identified 62 instances of syntactical interference: 14 on word order, 25 on preposition, 10 on extra word, and 13 on missing word. Preposition was thus the most frequent source of syntactical interference, accounting for 40% of the errors, followed by word order at 22.5%. Illustrative examples of each type are provided below.

Word order

sample data :

...reading is an important subject in *education English*...

The phrase *education English* follows the Indonesian Head–Modifier pattern, whereas English requires a Modifier–Head order, so that the intended phrase should be *English education*. The error reflects interference from Indonesian, in which the phrase is rendered *pendidikan bahasa Inggris*.

Preposition

sample data :

It is *similar with*... *Different with* that opinion, I believe that...

The construction *similar with* should be *similar to*, and *different with* should be *different from/to*. The students translated *mirip dengan* and *berbeda dengan* directly, rendering *dengan* as *with* rather than the required preposition, thereby importing Indonesian influence into the phrase.

Extra word

sample data :

The teacher can to communicate the objective of the lesson in the beginning of the class.

Here the word *to* was added unnecessarily. The addition arises from a literal translation of the Indonesian *mampu untuk berkomunikasi* (be able to communicate), in which *untuk* is rendered as *to*.

Missing word

sample data :

Not only the teacher has to master the material, *but* she/he has to be able to manage the class.

The correlative *not only* is conventionally paired with *but also*. In this sentence the students wrote only *but* and omitted the word *also*, producing a missing-word error.

Morphological Interference

Morphological interference occurs when the formation of words in one language absorbs affixes or patterns from the L1 into the L2 (Suwito, 1983). In this study it was classified into six types: omission of determiner, wrong determiner, subject–verb agreement, be-form, tense usage, and singular–plural form. The distribution is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Morphological Interference

Kinds	Number	Percentage
Omission of determiner	31	27
Wrong determiner	12	10.3
Subject–verb agreement	16	14
Be-form	20	17.4
Tense usage	14	12.17
Singular–plural form	22	19.13
Total	115	100%

As Table 2 shows, 115 instances of morphological interference were identified: 31 on omission of determiner, 12 on wrong determiner, 16 on subject–verb agreement, 20 on be-form, 14 on tense usage, and 22 on singular–plural form. The omission of determiners was thus the most frequent morphological error, accounting for 27% of the total, followed by singular–plural form at 19.13% and be-form at 17.4%. Illustrative examples are provided below.

Omission of determiner

sample data :

Purpose of this writing is...

The determiner *the* is required before purpose. Although the meaning is broadly recoverable, the determiner *the* is needed to mark the noun as definite and specific.

Wrong determiner

Sample data:

The teacher uses **a** academic module, not general training modules.

The student used *a* before a word beginning with a vowel sound, where *an* is required. This may occur because *a* corresponds to the Indonesian *sebuah*, and Indonesian does not distinguish between *a* and *an* as English does.

Subject–verb agreement

Sample data:

In reading comprehension, there **was** some strategies to help students read.

The plural subject some strategies requires the plural verb *were*, but the singular *was* was used. The interference arises because the students treated there as a singular subject and made the verb agree with it rather than with the true plural subject. Indonesian has no comparable subject–verb agreement, so such errors are common.

Be-form

Sample data :

The academic module used to determine a candidate's eligibility for study at undergraduate or postgraduate level.`

The sentence lacks the verb **be** that a passive construction requires. Because the intended meaning is passive, *is* should be added before *used*, so that the active past form becomes the required passive form *is used*.

Tense usage

Sample data :

The teacher **use** a monotonous strategy in the teaching–learning process.

Tense concerns the relationship between the time reference and the verb form. Here the context calls for the past tense, so the verb *use* should take the past form *used*.

Singular–plural form

Sample data :

...their ideas or **thought** about the topic that they have read.

The noun *thought* should be pluralised to *thoughts* in order to parallel the preceding plural noun *ideas*. Because Indonesian does not mark plurality by inflection—typically adding no plural marker to the noun—students frequently omit the plural *-s* that English requires.

Factors Contributing to the Interference

Following the teaching and learning process, observation and interviews were conducted to identify the factors underlying the interference. The observation revealed that the students continued to begin their writing in Indonesian: they first formulated their ideas in Indonesian and then attempted to translate them into English, so that they never began by thinking directly in English. One student explained:

Kalau gak dibuat dalam bahasa Indonesia dulu buk, lama selesainya, belum memikirkan kosakatanya dan susunannya lagi (If it is not written in Indonesian first, Ma'am, it takes a long time to finish, and we still have to think about the vocabulary and the structure.)

Almost all of the participants responded in a similar way. They believed that the writing task could be completed more quickly if they first set down their ideas in Indonesian, and they assumed that writing directly in English would confront them with the difficulty of finding the right words. Composing in Indonesian first allowed their ideas to be expressed rapidly, without immediate concern for English vocabulary.

The students also reported considerable difficulty with vocabulary. Their limited command of English vocabulary made it hard for them to write and to locate appropriate words. In addition, because they were influenced by Indonesian, whose structure differs markedly from that of English, they possessed only a limited understanding of English grammar. As one student put it:

Bahasa Inggris itu beda bentuknya dengan bahasa Indonesia, Buk. Sudahlah cara bacanya beda dengan tulisannya, ditambah lagi dengan kadang susunannya terbalik dengan bahasa Indonesia. (English is different in form from Indonesian, Ma'am. Not only is the pronunciation different from the writing, but sometimes the sentence structure is reversed compared with Indonesian.)

This response indicates that the students struggled not only with pronunciation but also with structural reversal between Indonesian and English, particularly in phrases that follow a Head–Modifier pattern in Indonesian but a Modifier–Head pattern in English. The interview data thus confirm that the students generally drafted in Indonesian and then translated into English, and that they still found English grammar confusing and did not understand it in depth, whether in speech or in writing. Taken together, the findings indicate that grammatical interference occurred because the students attempted to equate the fundamentally different patterns of Indonesian and English.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that students enrolled in the Scientific Writing course continued to experience Indonesian interference in their English writing. Within syntactical interference, prepositions produced the greatest number of errors, whereas within morphological interference, the omission of determiners was most frequent. In both cases, the underlying cause was the structural difference between the L1 and the L2, a result consistent with the premise that the greater the divergence between two languages, the more negative transfer can be expected (Lennon, 2008; Nangle, 2024).

With respect to syntactical interference, the Indonesian students frequently produced errors when arranging words in phrases and sentences, and the most common difficulties concerned prepositions and word order. English contains a

comparatively large inventory of prepositions whose use is often obligatory and semantically precise, particularly when expressing time, place, or direction (Carter & McCarthy, 2006), whereas Indonesian relies on a smaller set of prepositions, such as *di* (at/in/on) and *ke* (to), that serve broader functions (Chaer, 2009). This asymmetry makes the selection of English prepositions especially confusing for learners. Word-order errors arise from a parallel contrast: English phrases follow a Modifier–Head order, while Indonesian follows a Head–Modifier order (Erdocia & Laka, 2018; Hopp et al., 2020), so that literal translation of an Indonesian phrase readily produces a deviant English construction, as in the students' education English for English education.

With respect to morphological interference, the omission of determiners and the marking of singular and plural forms were the dominant sources of error. In English, a determiner introduces a noun and specifies quantity, ownership, or definiteness, and is obligatory in most contexts (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Indonesian, by contrast, has no determiner system as such; a comparable function may be expressed through numerals, pronouns, adjectives, or adverbs, but there is no direct equivalent of the English article. Because Indonesian places little emphasis on determiners, students frequently omit them when translating into English. A similar explanation applies to number marking. English distinguishes singular from plural through clear morphological rules—adding *a/an* or *one* for the singular and the inflectional *-s/-es* for the plural (Carter & McCarthy, 2006)—whereas Indonesian nouns remain unchanged for both singular and plural. This fundamental difference means that Indonesian is comparatively simpler in expressing plurality, and learners consequently omit the English plural inflection or fail to make nouns agree in number.

These patterns are best understood as instances of negative transfer, which occurs when features that differ between languages are incorrectly carried over from the L1 into the target language (Andersson et al., 2019; Mickan & Lemhöfer, 2020). The interview and observation data reinforce this interpretation: because the students composed their ideas in Indonesian and then translated them into English, the structural differences between the two languages became the immediate cause of interference. This finding is consistent with Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, in which learners operate within a transitional system that retains L1 rules, and it echoes earlier Indonesian studies reporting morphological and syntactical interference in learners' writing (Irmalia, 2016; Martanti, 2011).

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. Effective language instruction must take account of learners' grammatical backgrounds and target the specific areas in which interference occurs. Explicit grammar teaching has been shown to improve grammatical competence by giving learners the tools to manage the complexities of L2 grammar (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2018), and

innovative approaches such as the flipped classroom can enhance grammatical proficiency by fostering an engaging and interactive learning environment (Shaari et al., 2021). Explicit rule presentation combined with negative feedback further strengthens learners' command of grammatical structures and reduces the impact of L1 interference (Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2004), while contextualised grammar instruction that links grammatical input to the demands of writing tasks can produce substantial gains in writing outcomes (Chatterjee & Halder, 2022). For the students in this study, instruction that explicitly contrasts Indonesian and English in the areas of prepositions, word order, determiners, and number marking—and that discourages a translate-from-Indonesian composing strategy—would be especially valuable.

CONCLUSION

Errors are unavoidable in the process of learning a new language, and language interference is a normal phenomenon that reflects learners' progress in comprehending the L2. This study has shown that Indonesian students learning English applied the same grammatical patterns from Indonesian and English while writing, so that grammatical interference occurred. Analysis of the students' written work led to the conclusion that their English learning was affected by both syntactical and morphological interference. Preposition was the most common type of syntactical interference, while the omission of determiners, together with singular–plural forms and the be-form, dominated morphological interference. The observation and interview data indicated that this interference arose from the structural differences between Indonesian and English, compounded by the students' habit of drafting in Indonesian and then translating into English and by their limited mastery of English vocabulary and grammar. These findings underscore the value of contrastive, form-focused instruction and explicit feedback that directly address the structural gaps between the two languages. Future research might extend this work through larger and more varied samples, longitudinal designs, and experimental evaluation of interventions targeting the specific interference types identified here.

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