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Analysis of Common Mistakes in English Writing Among Law Students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the errors that appear in the English writing of third-semester students of the Law Study Program at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah in the English MKDU course. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research involved 24 students who were asked to spontaneously write a short essay on a general academic topic. The data were analyzed using the Dulay, Burt, and Krashen error taxonomy, which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering, complemented by an analysis of vocabulary, spelling, and coherence aspects. The results show that grammar errors are the most dominant category, followed by vocabulary errors, sentence structure, spelling, and paragraph coherence. The findings also reveal that Indonesian language interference, low mastery of basic grammar, limited exposure to English, and dependence on translation tools are the main factors causing these errors. Overall, this research emphasizes the need for a more integrated writing learning approach that focuses on developing linguistic competence, rhetorical strategies, and meaningful feedback to improve the writing skills of non-English language students.

Keywords: Error analysis, writing skills, law students, English MKDU.

INTRODUCTION

English language skills have become one of the essential academic skills in higher education because they serve as an international language for scientific communication, technology, and education. Universities in Indonesia include English in the category of General Basic Courses (MKDU) to ensure that every student has adequate basic English proficiency, including students from non-English study programs. The learning of MKDU English generally covers receptive and productive skills, one of which is writing, a skill with a high level of complexity. In the context of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, English is taught in the third semester, so students are expected to have a basic foundation in grammar and vocabulary from secondary education. However, in reality, many students still show unpreparedness in mastering writing skills because their previous exposure was not sufficiently intensive. This situation underscores the need for in-depth research on how students produce written texts in English in actual classroom settings. Writing is a language skill that requires the ability to organize ideas, master vocabulary, and apply grammatical structures accurately. Several studies mention that writing is one of the most difficult skills for Indonesian students to master because it requires linguistic accuracy and high rhetorical awareness (Purnamasari et al., 2021). Indonesian students often experience difficulties when organizing ideas and applying English sentence structures that are very different from Indonesian. Additionally, low reading habits of English texts contribute to weak understanding of writing structures and word choices. This situation becomes even more challenging for non-English students who lack in-depth linguistic knowledge. Therefore, analyzing writing errors becomes important as a reflection of students' actual abilities.

Mistakes in students' writing are often linked to limited understanding of grammar, sentence structure, and morphosyntactic rules. Previous studies show that grammatical errors—such as tense misuse, subject–verb agreement problems, and incorrect article usage—are the most dominant issues found in Indonesian students' writing (Nadya & Muthalib, 2021; Hafiz et al., 2018). These errors reduce message clarity and may lead to misinterpretation, especially in academic contexts. Non-English major students tend to produce more errors because they are not exposed to intensive grammar instruction and practice. Furthermore, secondary education in

Indonesia still focuses heavily on multiple-choice assessments rather than writing production, leaving students with minimal experience in independently constructing texts. Mother-tongue interference also contributes significantly to writing errors, as students often transfer Indonesian sentence structures into English, particularly in word order, prepositions, and nominal phrases (Gayo & Widodo, 2018). Because such errors are systematic and deeply rooted, they cannot be eliminated without explicit awareness of structural differences between the two languages.

Beyond linguistic issues, vocabulary limitations and organizational skills also create substantial barriers in students' writing development. Many students select inappropriate or informal vocabulary, misinterpret meanings, or rely on literal machine translations, all of which weaken lexical accuracy. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of exposure to academic reading materials that could enrich vocabulary (Handayani & Pratiwi, 2023). For law students in particular, inadequate mastery of academic and legal terminology leads to weak argumentation and incoherent text development. Additionally, Indonesian students often struggle with idea organization, including determining a topic, creating outlines, and developing paragraphs logically (Umamah et al., 2019). As a result, their writing tends to be unfocused and repetitive, relying more on intuition than on rhetorical awareness. Therefore, error analysis must address not only grammatical errors but also weaknesses in vocabulary use and text organization to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' writing challenges.

Research on themes and rema in students' writing also shows that improper information structure causes the writing to be ineffective. Previous studies have stated that inconsistent placement of themes and rema can disrupt the flow of information and make it difficult for readers to understand the author's purpose (Noviarini, 2024). Indonesian students often do not understand how sentences should be developed informatively, moving from what the reader already knows to new information. The improper management of theme-rema is a fundamental problem in constructing good paragraphs. Non-English major students are usually not introduced in depth to this concept during MKDU courses. Therefore, studying students' writing errors in law programs is important to see how well they use information structure correctly.

Writing instruction in MKDU classes is also influenced by instructional models and the quality of feedback from lecturers. Several studies indicate that learning strategies and students' critical thinking skills affect essay writing skills (Noviarini, 2022). However, in practice, large MKDU classes often make it difficult for lecturers to provide detailed feedback on students' writing. This situation results in students having a limited understanding of what mistakes need correction and how to fix them. The lack of quality feedback also hampers the gradual development of writing skills. Therefore, error analysis becomes an essential tool to identify recurring mistakes that require pedagogical intervention.

In the context of technological development, the use of multimodal feedback such as audio and video has been proven to improve students' writing quality (Fransiska & Al Fatih, 2023). However, not all students have access to this type of feedback, especially in non-English study programs. Law students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah are likely still dependent on limited traditional corrections. As a result, complex errors cannot be explained in depth through regular written comments. The integration of technology can support writing learning, but it requires readiness from lecturers and proper infrastructure. From these phenomena, research on law students' writing errors remains relevant and important to conduct.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become increasingly important in non-English study programmes, including engineering and law. Research on ESP learning needs shows that students in these fields require writing skills tailored to their academic and professional contexts (Badu et al., 2020; Ekayati et al., 2020). However, writing instruction at the MKDU level is still general in nature and not discipline-oriented, causing law students to learn writing without exposure to legal genres or terminology relevant to their discipline. This mismatch often results in errors in argumentation, terminology use, and text organisation. Thus, error analysis should also take into account the specific contextual needs of law students, who require writing instruction aligned with the conventions of legal discourse.

Previous studies have frequently underlined the importance of error analysis as a tool for evaluating writing instruction. Research across various educational contexts demonstrates that

classifying errors can help instructors identify learners' error patterns and understand whether the errors arise from lack of rule knowledge, incorrect application, or language transfer (Atmowardoyo, 2018; Salehi & Bahrami, 2018). Through the use of error analysis, instructors are better positioned to determine which linguistic areas require targeted instructional intervention. Nevertheless, studies specifically examining writing errors among law students—who represent a unique group within non-English majors—remain scarce. This gap highlights the need for research that explores writing difficulties within this discipline-specific context.

In the context of law students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, the urgency of improving writing skills is particularly significant due to the nature of legal studies, which require students to work with legal texts, case analyses, and scientific arguments demanding high accuracy and clarity. Despite this necessity, their writing proficiency in English remains low, largely due to the limited writing practice they receive. Previous academic writing training programmes indicate that students still struggle with paragraph structure, coherence, and the formulation of clear arguments (Noviarini et al., 2023). Since law students tend to prioritise mastering legal content, English writing often receives less attention, meaning that the errors they produce stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from instructional design that does not sufficiently support writing development.

Given these circumstances, this study aims to analyse the errors found in the writing of third-semester law students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah and to identify the factors contributing to these errors. Conducted through a qualitative approach, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive profile of students' writing abilities by examining both the linguistic and contextual influences behind the errors. The findings are expected to serve as a basis for lecturers in designing more effective writing instruction and providing more targeted feedback. Furthermore, the results can guide the development of writing materials that accommodate the specific needs of law students. Ultimately, this research contributes to improving the quality of English language learning in MKDU courses at the higher education level.

METHOD

This research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach to naturally describe the phenomenon of writing errors based on authentic data generated by students when completing writing assignments. The qualitative approach allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the types of errors and the factors causing these errors through contextual interpretation of language data (Atmowardoyo, 2018). This study involves 24 third-semester students from the Law Study Program at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah who are enrolled in the MKDU English course. During the process, students are asked to write a short essay of 150–200 words on general topics such as "My Future Career in Law" or "The Importance of Justice," so their writing represents their spontaneous writing ability. Thus, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the writing skills of non-English major students within the MKDU learning context. Data collection was carried out through three main techniques: documentation, interviews, and observation. Documentation involved collecting students' written products, which were then analyzed to identify various types of linguistic errors, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling, and coherence. In addition to analyzing the written products, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected students to understand the causes of errors based on their learning experiences, writing habits, exposure to English, and strategies used to complete writing tasks. Classroom observations were conducted three times to observe how the instructor gave writing instructions, how students responded to assignments, and how feedback was provided during the learning process. These three techniques were used for triangulation, thereby increasing the validity and credibility of the data obtained. Data analysis was performed using Miles and Huberman's model, which consists of three steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, all errors in students' writings were identified, coded, and classified based on the focus of analysis. The data were then presented in tables to show the frequency of each error type among the 24 students. Error analysis refers to the taxonomy of Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, which includes omission, addition,

misformation, and misordering (Dulay et al., 1972). Additionally, the researcher analyzed aspects of cohesion and coherence by paying attention to the use of transition signals, flow of ideas, and paragraph integration. By combining the error taxonomy and qualitative analysis approach, this study can reveal consistent error patterns and their underlying causes in a deep and contextual manner. This approach is effective in language studies because it can describe linguistic phenomena as they are without data manipulation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Findings of Errors in Student Writing

An analysis was conducted on 24 student writings collected through writing assignments in the form of short essays ranging from 150 to 200 words on the topics "My Future Career in Law" or "The Importance of Justice." This task was designed by the lecturer as part of formative assessment in the English MKDU course in the third semester and was completed individually in class, so the resulting writings reflect students' spontaneous writing abilities without many revision opportunities. This condition aligns with the characteristics of qualitative descriptive research, emphasizing the naturalness and authenticity of language data. Each piece was analyzed in depth, paying attention to error types at the sentence level and discourse level. Therefore, the data obtained not only depict errors in form but also in meaning and discourse organization.

In the analysis process, the researcher used the error taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, namely omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (Dulay et al., 1972). These four categories were applied to the data to identify the types of structural errors made by students in writing English texts. Additionally, the researcher examined errors in spelling, vocabulary, and coherence to provide a more comprehensive picture of their writing quality. The analysis was carried out through several stages: repeatedly reading the students' texts, marking parts containing errors, coding the error types, and recording them in a summary sheet. This process aligns with the data reduction and coding model by Miles and Huberman, which emphasizes sorting and organizing data before further interpretation.

Overall, the findings show that grammar errors are the most dominant category and appear throughout the students' writings, in the form of omission (missing sentence elements), misformation (incorrect word forms), and addition (unnecessary elements). Vocabulary and sentence structure errors also occur frequently, indicating that students face difficulties not only at the grammatical level but also in word choice and clause construction according to English language rules. On the other hand, spelling errors almost always appear as deviations from standard forms, while coherence issues are evident in writings that lack a clear flow of ideas and adequate linking between sentences. These findings reflect the complexity of writing problems faced by non-English major students in the context of MKDU learning.

Table 1. Recap of Student Writing Error Types (N = 24)

No	Student Code	Grammar Errors	Vocabulary Errors	Structure Errors	Spelling Errors	Coherence Issues	Total Errors
1	M1	12	5	4	3	2	26
2	M2	10	4	3	2	3	22
3	M3	14	6	5	4	2	31
4	M4	11	3	4	3	2	23
5	M5	9	5	4	3	4	25
6	M6	13	4	6	2	3	28
7	M7	15	6	5	4	3	33
8	M8	10	3	4	3	2	22
9	M9	12	4	4	2	3	25
10	M10	13	6	5	4	2	30
11	M11	11	3	3	2	4	23
12	M12	12	6	5	3	3	29
13	M13	14	5	6	3	3	31
14	M14	10	3	4	3	4	24
15	M15	13	4	5	3	3	28
16	M16	12	5	6	4	2	29
17	M17	11	4	5	3	3	26
18	M18	13	6	6	4	3	32
19	M19	9	4	3	2	4	22
20	M20	15	7	6	4	3	35
21	M21	12	5	4	3	2	26
22	M22	14	4	5	3	3	29
23	M23	13	6	6	4	3	32
24	M24	11	3	4	2	3	23

When considering the total errors, the number of mistakes per student ranges from 22 to 35. Students with the M20 code exhibited the highest error count (35 errors), while M2, M8, and M19 were in the lowest range (22 errors). This pattern indicates that even students with relatively few errors display problems across nearly all categories, particularly grammar and spelling. Conversely, students with a high total error count tend to have more complex combinations of errors related to grammar, structure, and coherence. This observation underscores that the writing skills of law students, in general, are still developing and need targeted pedagogical support.

Summary of Key Findings

The results of the reduction and presentation of the data show that:

(1) Grammatical errors are the most prevalent, particularly subject–verb agreement, verb omission, incorrect verb formation, and inconsistent tense usage. This indicates that students have not fully mastered the basic grammatical rules that underpin writing in English.

(2) Vocabulary errors happen because of wrong word choices, using words that don't fit the legal context, and literal translations from Indonesian. Students often struggle to find the correct equivalents for abstract ideas, especially in legal terms and the concept of justice.

(3) Structure errors mainly involve misordering, which reflects the strong influence of the Indonesian language on sentence word order. Students tend to write English sentences with

an Indonesian mindset, causing the arrangement of sentence elements to not adhere to English language rules.

(4) Spelling errors appear in almost all writings, for example: becouse, studing, whent, which indicate weak spelling skills and limited exposure to correct word forms in written texts.

(5) Coherence issues are evident in paragraphs that lack a clear flow, do not contain transition signals, and have ideas that shift without logical connections. Such paragraphs make it difficult for readers to follow the author's line of thought and diminish the quality of the arguments presented.

Example of Error Findings
Grammar Errors
"*She go to campus every day*." → subject–verb agreement
"*My friend very kind*." → verb omission
"*He was study law last year*." → misformation
Vocabulary Errors
"*I law student want justice my life*." → wrong lexical choice
Sentence Structure Errors
"*I very like study law*." → misordering
Spelling Errors
because, studying, went
Coherence Problems
Ideas are not sequential, there are no connectors, paragraphs jump, making it difficult to grasp the main message.

Discussion

The data reveal that the most significant errors are primarily at the grammatical level, particularly concerning subject–verb agreement, verb forms, and tense usage. Students frequently confuse present and past tenses within a single paragraph without apparent grammatical justification and omit the 'to be' verb or main verbs, as exemplified in the sentence "My friend very kind." This pattern indicates that their understanding of temporal concepts in English remains underdeveloped, despite the fundamental importance of this concept in narrative and descriptive writing. Such errors are not merely incidental but systematic and recurrent across nearly all their written work. This finding corroborates previous research suggesting that Indonesian students continue to face difficulties in consistently applying correct verb forms (Nadya & Muthalib, 2021). Consequently, the grammatical shortcomings among law students are not accidental mistakes but reflect a weak underlying structural foundation stemming from earlier education levels.

Beyond grammatical issues, errors related to vocabulary and sentence structure are also prominently observed in students' compositions. Phrases like "justice my life" demonstrate improper word choice and a limited grasp of semantic relationships and collocations typical in English. Interview data indicate that most students rely on literal translation from Indonesian through machine translation without adequate rechecking. Such dependence results in awkward and non-idiomatic expressions. This aligns with studies demonstrating that limited vocabulary mastery negatively impacts clarity and appropriateness in writing (Handayani & Pratiwi, 2023). Therefore, lexical errors in this context are linked to insufficient exposure to English reading materials and inadequate practice in employing vocabulary within relevant academic and legal frameworks.

From a syntactic perspective, many sentence errors can be classified as misordering per the Dulay, Burt, and Krashen taxonomy. Sentences such as "I very like study law" reflect an influence of Indonesian syntax, exemplified by structures like "Saya sangat suka belajar hukum." Interviews confirm that many students consider such sentences correct as long as the meaning is comprehensible, indicating that their linguistic intuition is still heavily influenced by their native language. This corroborates findings that Indonesian language interference is a major cause of

syntactic errors among Indonesian students (Gayo & Widodo, 2018). Additionally, persistent spelling mistakes such as "becouse," "studing," and "whent" signify a lack of regular reading of English texts and no established habit of editing or proofreading. Interference from the mother tongue, inadequate practice in sentence structure, and limited attention to spelling details collectively suggest that students' writing processes remain far from an ideal, process-oriented approach.

At the discourse level, issues with coherence and cohesion indicate that many students have yet to master organizing logical and focused academic paragraphs. Their writing often lacks clear topic sentences, supporting sentences that diverge in multiple directions, and abrupt transitions without signals like "however," "therefore," or "in addition." Consequently, paragraphs resemble disjointed collections of sentences lacking logical flow. This observation aligns with prior research noting that Indonesian students frequently encounter difficulties in systematically organizing ideas and developing arguments within expository texts (Umamah et al., 2019). For law students, poor paragraph coherence directly hampers their capacity to construct effective legal arguments. Therefore, writing instruction should extend beyond grammatical correctness to encompass rhetorical structure and paragraph development strategies.

Considering the broader context, the factors contributing to these errors—including limited mastery of basic grammar, interference from Indonesian, inadequate writing and revision practices, and low exposure to English—are interconnected and reinforced by pedagogical practices still predominantly focused on examinations. Many students report that secondary education in English mainly emphasized multiple-choice questions and rote memorization rather than continuous writing exercises like paragraphs or essays. Reliance on Google Translate and the lack of detailed feedback from instructors exacerbate these issues. Previous research indicates that multimodal, specific feedback can markedly enhance students' essay quality (Fransiska & Al Fatih, 2023). Accordingly, improving law students' writing abilities necessitates strengthening linguistic competence alongside pedagogical reforms that prioritize sustained writing practice, meaningful feedback, and judicious use of technology—not limited to instant translation tools.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that third-semester law students at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah are still developing their writing skills, with common errors mainly in grammar, such as subject–verb agreement, verb forms, tense consistency, and omission of 'to be.' These errors reflect a weak understanding of English grammar learned previously. Students' Indonesian language interference affects sentence structure, and limited vocabulary and legal terminology hinder academic writing. Reliance on machine translation results in non-idiomatic expressions and semantic errors. Spelling mistakes and poor coherence diminish writing quality, indicating a lack of skills like using topic sentences, developing arguments, and applying transitions. Causes include insufficient grammar mastery, native language interference, limited practice, and weak feedback. Students also lack prior essay-writing experience, affecting drafting and revision skills, compounded by overuse of Google Translate. Improving their writing requires a comprehensive approach beyond grammar, including sentence and paragraph exercises, vocabulary use, meaningful feedback, reading, and technology. These insights can help develop better instructional strategies for non-English majors in academic settings.

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