Grammatical Competence in EFL Learners: A Quantitative Study on the Misuse of 'To Be' at University Level

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ABSTRACT

Developing grammatical competence is crucial to mastering the English language because it enables learners to construct precise and meaningful sentences in both written and spoken contexts. The verb to be is one of the most significant grammatical elements since it can serve as a primary verb, an auxiliary verb, or a copula. However, EFL learners frequently struggle to use it appropriately, which frequently leads to errors in sentence construction, tense formation, and subject-verb agreement. Both their general language acquisition development and their academic writing abilities may suffer as a result of these persistent problems. In light of these issues, this study investigates the grammatical competence of university-level EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, focusing specifically on the misuse of the verb to be. The research employs a quantitative approach involving grammar tests and written analysis from fourth semester of English education students of Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Abdul Mujib Laewang Dampal Selatan. Results reveal frequent errors in subject–verb agreement, tense usage, and sentence structure, with misformation and omission being the most common error types. The findings suggest a need for more targeted grammar instruction and continuous practice in academic writing.
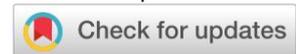
1. Introduction

One of the fundamental elements of language mastery is grammatical competence. It describes the capacity to identify and use a language's grammatical structures accurately and appropriately. Grammatical competence was first described by (Chomsky, 1969) as the internalized understanding of language principles that enables speakers to produce and understand grammatically correct sentences. In their model of communicative competence, Canale & Swain (1980) developed this idea further, defining grammatical competence as knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology. According to this concept, grammar is one of the fundamental skills required for efficient language use and is not separate from communication.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), grammatical competence plays a particularly vital role. Unlike learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, EFL learners are usually not immersed in an English-speaking environment (Octasary et al., 2023; Rahman & Weda, 2018; Prihandoko et al., 2019; Junaid et al., 2023). They encounter English primarily in the classroom, with limited exposure to real-world language use. As Celce-Murcia, (2001) implied for the development of their grammatical knowledge, students in EFL situations frequently rely more on formal instruction. Due to this, teaching exact grammar is not only beneficial but also necessary.

However, (Lightbown & Spada, 2021) several challenges exist in fostering grammatical competence among EFL learners. These include:

a. L1 interference, where learners apply structures from their native language (e.g., omission of to be in Indonesian),

b. Overgeneralization, such as using regular patterns with irregular verbs (e.g., goed instead of went),

c. Fossilization, where incorrect forms become fixed due to lack of correction or input.

The other word, Griffee & Gorsuch (2023) implied that the capacity to identify and use a language's syntactic and morphological components is known as grammatical competence. This competency is essential to EFL learning because it allows students to create grammatically correct sentences and decipher the meaning of others. Grammatical competency is usually addressed in classroom settings by explicit instruction, particularly in contexts where English is not the dominant language.

The verb to be is one of the most important grammatical components in English. It serves as an auxiliary in the production of nominal predicates, passive constructions, and continuous tenses in addition to being a main verb. Even with its basic structure and early introduction in language training, to be is still one of the most frequently overused words in EFL learners' writing (Leech, 2014). Even university-level students continue to misuse it, indicating a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and real-world application and emphasizing the need for specific instruction and practice in this area.

The verb to be functioning as a linking verb, auxiliary, and copula. Its forms—am, is, are, was, for singular and were—are irregular and vary depending on tense and subject. According to Murphy, (2019) to be is often introduced early in English instruction but remains one of the most error-prone structures due to its unique grammatical behavior.

The verb to be (am, is, are, was, were) is one of the most frequently used verbs in English. It functions as both a main verb such as she is a lecturer and an auxiliary verb in she is working, which contributes to its complexity. Although it is typically introduced at the early stages of English learning, its irregular forms and wide range of syntactic uses make it a persistent challenge even for intermediate and advanced learners (Murphy, 2019; Anggawirya et al., 2021 Mokoginta et al., 2021; Sukmawaty et al., 2022).

The correct usage of to be is essential in sentence construction, especially in nominal sentences like he is a teacher, passive structures like the book was written, and continuous tenses like she is studying. Errors in these areas often result in sentences that are syntactically incorrect or semantically unclear.

In the Indonesian EFL context, students are typically introduced to to be from elementary levels, often through rote memorization and isolated grammar drills. However, by the time students reach university, many still display difficulties in using it appropriately in academic writing. These issues according to Octasary et al., (2024) can be attributed to various factors, including negative L1 transfer, limited exposure to accurate input, fossilization of early errors, and a lack of contextualized grammar instruction.

Errors involving to be are commonly categorized as omissions like we late for class last week, misformations like the homework were done by the student and additions in he is eats dinner, all of which interfere with sentence clarity and grammatical accuracy (Dulay et al., 1982). These errors often occur in both spoken and written production, especially when learners are under cognitive load or unfamiliar with the appropriate syntactic structures.

Misuse of to be often stems from negative transfer from learners' first languages. In Indonesian, for instance, there is no equivalent of the copula in nominal sentences like dia guru for he is a teacher, which can lead to persistent omission errors like dia bahagia for she happy

Several studies have shown that even more experienced EFL learners continue to misuse the verb to be. It is not just a problem for beginners. This ongoing difficulty raises the possibility that learning how to use to be correctly is a more complex problem involving first-language transfer, the preservation of wrong forms, and the complex grammatical functions that to be serves in English rather than just being a question of early training.

Studies by Ellis (2018), Menggo et al., (2021) and (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi, 2012) emphasize that such persistent errors, particularly with high-frequency verbs like to be, require more focused, contextualized, and communicative grammar instruction that addresses both form and function. Addition, Darus & Subramaniam (2009) implied also one of the most common mistakes in the written work of Malaysian ESL students was the usage of the verb to be. Their results highlight how common this problem is throughout the world and in various EFL contexts. Similarly, Dwi et al., (2019) noted that learners often added to be before main verbs, reflecting confusion between simple and continuous tenses.

This study seeks to fill that gap by quantitatively analyzing the misuse of to be among fourth semester university students in an English Education program at Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Abdul Mujib Laewang Dampal Selatan. By identifying the types, frequency, and sources of errors, this research aims to provide insights into the current state of grammatical competence and inform pedagogical practices in EFL grammar instruction.

2. Methodology

The frequency and kinds of errors related to the use of the verb to be among learners were examined in this study using a quantitative descriptive research approach. Finding and measuring the grammatical patterns that represent student's degree of grammatical competency was the main goal. Quantitative analysis was chosen for its ability to provide statistical insights into language usage patterns and to support generalizable conclusions based on empirical data (Arikunto, 2023).

The participants in this study consisted of 15 students at the fourth semester students enrolled in the English Education program at Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Abdul Mujib Laewang Dampal Selatan. These students were selected using purposive sampling, as they had recently completed basic and intermediate English grammar and academic writing courses and were expected to demonstrate foundational grammatical competence, including correct use of the verb to be and all participants were native Indonesian speakers

In this research, the main research instruments included

1. Writing task where each student was asked to write a 150–250 words personal narrative essay (e.g., "My First Week at University") without using a dictionary or grammar checker.

2. Error analysis checklist. A coding framework based on Dulay et al., (1982) was used to identify and categorize errors related to to be, including:

a. Omission (e.g., She happy

b. Addition (e.g., He is eats lunch)

c. Misformation (e.g., They is students)

d. Misordering (though rare in to be us)

Students were given 45 minutes to finish the writing assignment in the classroom to gather data. The writings were then gathered and made anonymous. The texts were then manually examined to find and count occurrences of both proper and improper usage of the verb "to be." Fourth, errors were labeled by type and recorded in a spreadsheet. Lastly, the results were summarized using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage).

The collected data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, focusing on total number of to be uses, total number of errors involving to be and the frequency and percentage of each error type. The results were visualized using tables and graphs for clarity. In addition, findings were compared with existing studies to contextualize the results and assess their implications for EFL grammar instruction.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings of an error analysis that examined how 15 fourth semester EFL students used the verb "to be" in their written texts are presented in this section. The study examined the frequency and accuracy with which students employed different forms of to be in a personal narrative that was between 150 and 250 words long.

The analysis revealed a total of 74 instances of to be usage, among which 28 errors (37.8%) were identified. The most frequent errors fell into three main categories: omission, mis formation, and addition.

Table 1. Error of the students

ERROR TYPE	EXAMPLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
OMISSION	*She happy with her family.*	15	53.6%
MISFORMATION	*They is playing outside.*	9	32.1%
ADDITION	*He is go to school every day.*	4	14.3%
TOTAL ERRORS	—	**28**	**100%**

53.6% of all errors involving the verb "to be" were omission errors, which contributed to the highest frequency of misuse in the data. These mistakes happen when students use the wrong form of the verb "to be" (am, is, are, was, were) in nominal sentences, which are phrases where "to be" serves as the primary linking verb instead of an auxiliary. In present

tense nominal formations, learners most frequently omitted the verb to be combining the subject and complement straight without the need of a verb. Examples include:

a. *I happy when I with my friends.*

Corrected: *I **am** happy when I **am** with my friends.*

b. *My mother very kind to everyone*

Corrected: *My mother **is** very kind to everyone.*

c. *They not ready for the test*

Corrected: *They **are** not ready for the test.*

In these situations, students failed to use the proper form of "to be," which led to statements that were both grammatically and semantically unclear. First language (L1) interference is clearly seen in this form of error, especially in Bahasa Indonesia, where nominal phrases do not need a copula. For example, the Indonesian equivalent of "I am happy" is simply *Saya senang*, which translates word-for-word as *I happy*. The absence of a linking verb in Indonesian naturally leads learners to transfer this structure into English, resulting in the omission of *to be*. In addition to L1 interference, developmental variables in second language acquisition can also lead to omission. Content terms are frequently given priority over function words by beginning learners, particularly when the function words do not correspond precisely to their first language. The verb to may be excluded in the early stages of interlanguage development because it is thought to be semantically "empty" or less necessary, especially in its copular role.

With 32.1% of the total faults, misformation errors were the second most common type of abuse. These mistakes happen when students employ the verb "to be" in an inappropriate way, either in terms of tense consistency or subject-verb agreement. Two major patterns were identified among the misformation errors. This result showed how students frequently find it difficult to choose the appropriate form of to be depending on the subject number and tense context.

a. *They is students.*

Corrected: *They **are** students.*

b. *My father and mother is teachers.*

Corrected: *My father and mother **are** teachers.*

d. *I was go to the market.*

Corrected: *I **went** to the market. or I **was going** to the market.*

e. *She is came yesterday*

Corrected: *She **came** yesterday. or She **has come** already.*

Both intralingual and interlingual elements are reflected in misformation errors. Although L1 interference is important, particularly when it comes to subject-verb agreement, overgeneralization or insufficient use of English grammar rules are the main causes of many mistakes. For instance, students might internalize it as the default form of "to be," using it in every situation, regardless of the tense or subject plurality. Bahasa Indonesia does express tense through time adverbials like kemarin = yesterday, it lacks inflectional tense markers and does not use auxiliary verbs in the same way English does.

With addition errors making up 14.3% of all attached errors, they were the least common but nonetheless significant group. These mistakes occur when a form of to be is needlessly added before a primary verb in situations when it is not grammatically necessary, particularly in the simple present or past tense.

The incorrect insertion of to be before base verbs in simple tenses was the most common pattern seen. Students interpreted the simple tense's structure as though it were the present continuous or past continuous, producing sentences like:

    a. *She is eat breakfast.*

Corrected: *She **eats** breakfast.*

    b. *They are go to school every day*

Corrected: *They **go** to school every day.*

    c. *I was play football yesterday.*

Corrected: *I **played** football yesterday.*

These sentences demonstrate the learners' confusion between simple tenses which do not use to be and continuous tenses which do require to be followed by the present participle. Learners may mistakenly apply the present or past continuous tense structure to all verb phrases, even when it is inappropriate, once they have mastered it like *she is eating*. This indicates a lack of knowledge about tense rules, specifically the differences between simple and progressive elements. Misunderstanding English sentence structures during practice or instruction could be another significant cause. For instance, students may unintentionally absorb the idea that all English sentences must contain some form of "to be" in order to be grammatically sound; this idea may be supported by the fact that "to be" occurs frequently in both nominal and continuous forms.

4. Conclusion

This study examined EFL university students' grammatical proficiency, paying particular attention to how they used the verb "to be" when writing personal narratives. Although to be is one of the most basic components of English grammar, many learners still struggle with using it correctly, according to the study of 15 student narratives. Of the 28 errors found, the most common ones were omission (53.6%), misformation (32.1%), and addition (14.3%).

The results show that students still have trouble with the structural and functional parts of to be, which is frequently influenced by their first language (L1), especially in situations like Indonesian where the copula is not grammatically necessary. These findings support previous study that found that without focused teaching and feedback, even highly proficient EFL learners may fossilize simple grammatical errors.

The contextual teaching of to be must therefore be given more importance by educators, who should incorporate it into writing assignments, communication tasks, and corrective feedback techniques. It may be possible to lessen recurring mistakes and improve overall grammatical competency by using explicit grammar instruction, awareness-raising exercises, and contrastive analysis with learners' first language. More studies with a bigger sample size and longitudinal monitoring may shed more light on how grammatical accuracy changes over time.

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