

INFLECTIONAL MORPHOLOGICAL ERRORS IN EFL ACADEMIC WRITING: AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Wilna Tri Rahayu^{1*}, Siska Bochari², Mukrim³, Hastini⁴
^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Tadulako, Palu, Indonesia

wilnatryrahayu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Errors in inflectional morphology remain a persistent challenge in EFL learners' writing, particularly in Indonesian contexts where in-depth analyses of error patterns and their underlying causes are still limited. This study aims to identify the types of inflectional morphological errors produced by English students at Tadulako University and to examine the factors contributing to these errors. Adopting a descriptive qualitative design, this study involved 20 fifth-semester students from the English Education Study Program. Data were collected through document analysis of students' written assignments and semi-structured interviews with five selected participants. The data were analyzed using systematic error analysis procedures, including error identification, classification into inflectional categories, explanation of error sources, and frequency analysis. The findings indicate that verb inflection errors are the most prevalent, particularly in tenses marking and subject-verb agreement, followed by errors in plural and possessive forms. These errors are primarily attributed to first language interference, insufficient grammatical knowledge, and limited exposure to accurate language use in writing practice. This study contributes to EFL pedagogy by providing a more nuanced understanding of learners' difficulties in using inflectional morphology and underscores the importance of integrating explicit grammar instruction with meaningful writing practice to enhance grammatical accuracy.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Error Analysis, Indonesian EFL Learners, Inflectional Morphology, Subject-Verb Agreement

INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as a fundamental skill in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in academic contexts where students are required to express ideas, construct arguments, and demonstrate understanding through written texts. As noted by Harmer (2001) writing encourages learners to focus on accurate language use and supports overall language development, while Brown (2007) emphasizes its role in reinforcing grammatical competence. In addition, writing has been conceptualized not only as a productive skill but also as a complex cognitive process involving planning, organizing, and revising ideas (Ellis, 2005; Hyland, 2003). This complexity makes writing particularly

challenging for EFL learners, especially when accuracy and linguistic sophistication are expected in academic discourse. (Merriam et al., 2007)

Despite its importance, producing grammatically accurate writing remains a persistent challenge for many EFL learners. Students often struggle to apply appropriate grammatical forms, which can reduce the clarity and effectiveness of their written communication. This issue is especially evident in contexts where English is used as a foreign language, such as Indonesia, where exposure to authentic input is relatively limited (Taufiqulloh et al., 2025). Ellis (1997) further argues that grammatical inaccuracies in learner language are not merely performance errors but reflect underlying developmental processes in second language acquisition. Therefore, grammatical accuracy continues to be a central issue in EFL writing (Seddik, 2023).

One important aspect influencing grammatical accuracy is the use of inflectional morphology. Morphology, defined as the study of word formation and internal word structure (Aronoff and Fudeman, 2011), includes inflectional processes such as plural marking (-s), past tense (-ed), and possessive forms ('s). Inaccurate use of these forms frequently results in grammatical errors. Learners frequently experience difficulty in applying these inflectional markers (Irawansyah, 2024; Muhammed et al., 2024). These errors are commonly analyzed through the framework of Error Analysis by Corder, which focuses on identifying and explaining learner errors, as well as through the concept of Interlanguage by Selinker, which views errors as part of a developing linguistic system influenced by both the first and target languages.

These errors are commonly analyzed through the framework of Error Analysis proposed by Corder (1983), which focuses on identifying, describing, and explaining learner errors as a means of understanding language acquisition processes. In parallel, the concept of Interlanguage introduced by Selinker (1972) views learner language as a dynamic and evolving system influenced by both the first language (L1) and the target language (L2). From this perspective, errors are not random but systematic and indicative of learners' developmental stages. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) further emphasize that such errors can result from processes such as language transfer, overgeneralization, and simplification strategies.

A growing body of research has examined grammatical errors in EFL learners' writing, particularly those related to morphology. Previous studies consistently show that inflectional errors, especially in verb agreement and pluralization, are among the most frequent difficulties faced by learners. For example, Mukarromah (2020) and Fitrawati and Safitri (2021) report that Indonesian university students frequently produce verb inflection errors due to overgeneralization and limited grammatical knowledge. Similarly, Artika (2025) highlights learners' difficulties in applying correct inflectional forms in writing. More recent studies (e.g. Azizah et al., 2025; Tambak et al., 2023) also confirm that verb-related errors remain dominant across different Indonesian EFL contexts. However, although these studies provide useful descriptions of error types and frequencies, they largely emphasize quantitative findings and offer limited explanation of the underlying causes of such errors (Mubarok & Budiono, 2022; Rahmani, 2023).

In addition, several studies have examined morphological errors by combining derivational and inflectional morphemes or by relying primarily on quantitative approaches. For instance, Guna et al. (2024) analyzed both types of morphemes without specifically focusing on inflectional error patterns, while studies conducted at Tadulako University (e.g. Amuntyastuti et al., 2023; Fajrin et al., 2025) mainly identify the frequency and difficulty of inflectional forms using descriptive quantitative methods. Although these studies contribute valuable statistical data, they provide limited insight into how and why such errors occur, particularly due to the lack of detailed error classification and qualitative exploration. This limitation is also noted in broader EFL research, where there is an increasing call for more qualitative and mixed-method approaches to understand learner difficulties in depth (Creswell, 2009; Miles et al., 2014).

Furthermore, recent pedagogical studies suggest that persistent grammatical errors, including those related to inflectional morphology, may also be influenced by insufficient exposure to meaningful language use and limited opportunities for contextualized practice (Mohammad & Hameed, 2025). This indicates that understanding error patterns alone is not sufficient; it is equally important to explore the underlying cognitive and contextual factors contributing to these errors.

Based on these considerations, there remains a clear gap in the literature regarding qualitative investigations that examine both the types and underlying causes of inflectional morphological errors in EFL writing. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types of inflectional morphological errors in the academic writing of English students at Tadulako University and to explore the factors contributing to these errors using a qualitative approach. By applying systematic error analysis procedures and incorporating learners' perspectives through interviews, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' grammatical difficulties. The findings are expected to contribute to EFL pedagogy by offering deeper insights into error patterns and supporting the development of more effective instructional strategies for teaching inflectional morphology in academic writing.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyze inflectional morphological errors in students' academic writing. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring and understanding how individuals interpret linguistic phenomena within their natural contexts, as it allows researchers to capture rich, detailed data related to learners' experiences, perceptions, and language use (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, qualitative approaches are widely used in EFL research to investigate complex language learning processes that cannot be fully explained through numerical data alone. This design was therefore selected because the present study aims to describe, interpret, and explain error patterns rather than test predetermined hypotheses.

The participants of this study were 20 fifth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University who had completed an academic writing course. They were selected through purposive sampling, which enables researchers to choose participants who possess relevant characteristics and experiences related to the

research focus (Creswell, 2009). In qualitative inquiry, purposive sampling is commonly used to ensure that participants can provide rich and meaningful data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, five participants were selected for in-depth interviews based on the frequency and variation of errors identified in their writing, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of underlying factors.

Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The written data consisted of students' academic writing assignments, which provided authentic evidence of language use in context. Document analysis is considered a valuable qualitative method because it allows researchers to examine naturally occurring data (Irawansyah, 2024). Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions, difficulties, and experiences related to grammatical usage. This type of interview provides flexibility, enabling researchers to probe deeper into participants' responses while maintaining a clear focus on the research objectives. Interviews are widely recognized as an effective tool in qualitative research for capturing participants' perspectives and meanings.

The data were analyzed using Error Analysis procedures proposed by Corder (1983), which remain widely used in second language acquisition research in combination with qualitative data analysis techniques developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The analysis followed several systematic steps: (1) identifying inflectional morphological errors, (2) classifying the errors into categories such as plural forms, past tense, and subject-verb agreement, (3) coding and organizing the data, (4) interpreting the sources of the errors, and (5) analyzing the frequency of each error type to determine dominant patterns. This analytical framework aligns with qualitative data analysis principles involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014), which enable researchers to identify patterns and relationships within the data. Furthermore, qualitative coding procedures facilitate the identification of underlying themes and recurring linguistic patterns in learner language, providing deeper insight into the nature of students' errors.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied several validation strategies commonly used in qualitative research. First, methodological triangulation was employed by combining document analysis and interview data, allowing the researcher to examine the phenomenon from multiple perspectives and reduce potential bias. Triangulation is widely recognized as a key strategy for enhancing validity in qualitative studies because it integrates different data sources and methods to strengthen interpretations.

Second, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. This process enables participants to validate the researcher's interpretations and helps ensure that the findings accurately reflect their experiences. In addition, the researcher maintained careful documentation of the analysis process to enhance transparency and dependability. These strategies collectively contribute to the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, which are essential criteria in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

RESULTS

Types of Inflectional Morphological Errors

The analysis of students' academic writing revealed several types of inflectional morphological errors. These errors were identified from the students' written assignments and then categorized based on their grammatical forms. In general, the errors were related to verb inflections, plural markers, and possessive forms. Table 1 presents the distribution of the errors found in the students' writing.

Table X. Error Analysis Procedures and Data Analysis Framework

Type of Error	Description	Example	Surface Strategy Taxonomy
-s	Omission of -s in present tense verbs.	She always <u>walk</u> to campus every Monday.	Omission
-ed	Incorrect verb form in past context.	The students finish their assignment last night.	Omission
-ing	Incorrect use of the -ing form in progressive verb constructions.	The class is <u>prepare</u> their group presentations.	Omission
-en	Incorrect use of the past participle (-en) form in perfect or passive constructions.	The students have to <u>submit</u> their assignments for the past two weeks.	Misformation
ablaut	Incorrect internal vowel change in irregular verb forms.	He <u>choose</u> the easier topic for his project.	Misformation
suppletion	Incorrect suppletive verb form in tense constructions.	They <u>goes</u> to the library after class.	Misformation
zero inflection	Unnecessary or missing inflection in verb forms that do not change morphologically.	The <u>deers</u> moved quietly through the forest.	Addition
-s (noun)	Incorrect plural formation of regular nouns using -s / -es.	All the <u>box</u> in the storage room were labeled.	Omission
ablaut	Incorrect internal vowel change in irregular plural nouns.	Two <u>man</u> joined the discussion panel.	Misformation
zero inflection	Incorrect plural marking of nouns with identical singular and plural forms.	Several <u>fishs</u> were found near the shore.	Addition
-er	Incorrect comparative adjective or adverb form.	This explanation is <u>clear</u> than the previous one.	Omission

-est	Incorrect superlative adjective or adverb form.	This is the <u>shorter</u> paragraph in the entire essay.	Misformation
suppletion	Incorrect suppletive comparative or superlative form.	This is the <u>goods</u> explanation in the entire chapter.	Misformation
ablaut	Incorrect vowel changes in irregular comparative or superlative forms.	This section has the <u>little</u> relevance to the topic.	Misformation
clitics ('s)	Incorrect use of possessive clitic 's.	My <u>friend</u> comments helped improve my writing.	Omission

The results reveal the distribution and patterns of inflectional morphological errors identified in the students' written responses. Based on the analysis, verb inflection errors emerged as the most dominant category, accounting for the highest proportion of total errors observed in the dataset. These errors were most frequently found in the use of past tense forms and subject-verb agreement, particularly in sentences requiring the third person singular marker in the present tense. Such errors appeared consistently across students' writing and were evident in a wide range of sentence structures.

A closer examination of the data shows that many students experienced difficulties with both regular and irregular verb forms. In several cases, students used base forms of verbs in contexts where inflectional marking was required. For example, some students produced incorrect forms such as "She always walk to campus every Monday" instead of "She always walks to campus every Monday." Similar patterns were also observed in past tense constructions, where students used present or base forms instead of correctly inflected past forms. These patterns appeared repeatedly across multiple writing samples.

Errors in adjective and adverb inflections were also identified, although they occurred less frequently than verb-related errors. These errors were mainly associated with comparative and superlative forms, particularly in the use of irregular forms. For instance, students produced forms such as "more better" instead of "better" and "most fast" instead of "fastest." These forms were found in different parts of the students' texts, including descriptive and argumentative sentences.

In contrast, noun inflection errors were relatively less frequent compared to verb and adjective errors. The identified errors mostly involved irregular plural forms, such as "foots" instead of "feet." Other examples included incorrect pluralization of nouns that require internal vowel changes or do not follow regular plural rules. These errors appeared sporadically and were less consistently observed across participants' writing.

In terms of error types, misformation errors were the most prevalent, indicating that students frequently produced incorrect forms of words rather than omitting them entirely. Omission errors were also observed, particularly in cases where required inflectional markers were not included, such as the absence of -s in third person singular verbs or missing possessive markers (e.g., "my friend book" instead of "my friend's book"). In

addition, addition errors were identified, although they occurred less frequently and were mainly found in verb constructions, where unnecessary inflectional markers were inserted.

Overall, the identified errors were distributed across different grammatical categories and appeared in multiple forms throughout the students' writing. These patterns were consistently observed across the dataset and reflected recurring forms of inflectional usage in the students' responses.

Factors Contributing to Inflectional Morphological Errors

The interview findings reveal several factors associated with students' inflectional morphological errors. One factor identified from the interview data was the influence of the first language. Several students reported relying on Indonesian sentence structures when constructing English sentences, particularly in relation to verb forms and the use of inflectional markers. These reports were reflected in both the interview responses and the patterns observed in the students' written work.

For example, one participant stated:

"Honestly, I often find it difficult when learning English grammar and tend to get confused. I especially struggle with the suffix -s. For example, I am often unsure whether 'does' requires an additional -s, and I usually forget to add -s to the verb." (Informant 1)

Similar responses were also expressed by other participants, who reported difficulties in determining when inflectional markers should be used in sentences. The data show that students frequently experienced problems in applying subject-verb agreement, particularly in the use of the third person singular marker -s in present tense constructions.

Another factor identified in the data was limited grammatical knowledge. Several participants reported uncertainty about the use of specific inflectional forms, especially when writing more complex sentences. This uncertainty was evident in both the interview responses and the students' written texts, where errors such as omission and incorrect use of inflectional markers were frequently found.

One participant stated:

"Grammar. I often get confused, which makes me feel insecure when writing everything. It feels like everything depends on grammar and has to be structured properly." (Informant 1)

In addition to these findings, patterns in the data show that students often used similar grammatical forms across different sentence contexts. These patterns appeared in various types of inflectional errors, including verb forms, plural markers, and comparative forms. The use of similar forms across different contexts was observed in multiple students' writing and was consistent across the dataset.

Overall, the interview data and written texts show recurring patterns related to the use of inflectional morphology. These patterns were identified across participants and appeared consistently in different types of writing tasks.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reaffirm that inflectional morphological errors remain a persistent and systematic challenge in EFL students' academic writing, with verb inflections, particularly tense marking and subject-verb agreement, emerging as the most problematic areas. Rather than interpreting these errors as mere deficiencies, they can be more meaningfully understood within the framework of interlanguage development proposed by Selinker (1972), which conceptualizes learner language as a dynamic and evolving system. In this sense, the errors identified in this study reflect transitional stages in learners' linguistic competence, where rules are actively constructed, tested, and modified. This perspective is further supported by Ellis (1997), who emphasizes that learner errors provide evidence of underlying cognitive processes rather than simple performance failures, and by Dulay et al. (1982), who argue that such errors are systematic and predictable.

The predominance of verb-related errors in this study is consistent with a substantial body of EFL research, including Mukarromah (2020) and Pranata et al. (2022), which identify verb morphology as one of the most challenging aspects for EFL learners (Rahmani, 2023; Seddik, 2023). However, this study extends previous findings by demonstrating that these errors are not only frequent but also systematic, reflecting underlying cognitive processes in language production. The high occurrence of misformation errors suggests that learners are not simply omitting grammatical markers but are actively attempting to apply rules, albeit inaccurately. This pattern indicates that learners rely on rule-based generalizations, particularly when they have limited control over more complex grammatical structures, as also reported by Mardhiyah et al. (2025) and Noor Azizah et al. (2025).

Furthermore, the tendency to use base verb forms across different contexts suggests that learners adopt simplified grammatical representations when faced with uncertainty. This observation supports Brown's (2007) distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge, where learners may understand grammatical rules conceptually but struggle to apply them accurately in real-time language production (Ellis, 2005).

From a cognitive perspective, these patterns can be interpreted through the distinction between declarative and procedural knowledge as proposed by Brown (2007). While learners may possess explicit knowledge of grammatical rules, such as adding *s* for third person singular verbs, they may struggle to proceduralize this knowledge during real time writing. This gap becomes more apparent in academic writing contexts, where learners must simultaneously manage content, organization, and linguistic accuracy. Recent studies suggest that learners often rely on simplified language forms when faced with high cognitive demands, which results in the overuse of base verb forms or inaccurate inflectional patterns (Li, 2023). This indicates that grammatical errors are influenced not only by linguistic knowledge but also by cognitive processing limitations.

Moreover, the findings highlight the interaction between interlingual and intralingual factors in shaping learner errors (Mubarok & Budiono, 2022). The influence of Indonesian as the learners' first language is particularly evident in the omission of inflectional markers, since Indonesian does not encode tense or subject-verb agreement morphologically. This

observation is consistent with the concept of language transfer as discussed by Selinker (1972) and Ellis (1997). At the same time, many of the errors identified, such as the overgeneralization of regular verb forms, are intralingual in nature. These errors arise from learners' attempts to internalize and systematize the rules of the target language. This dual influence supports the view that learner errors are the result of complex interactions between linguistic systems and cognitive processes, as also highlighted in recent research by Murtisari et al. (2025).

In addition to verb related errors, the occurrence of errors in plural and possessive forms, although less frequent, provides further insight into learners' morphological development. These errors suggest that learners have partial knowledge of inflectional rules but experience difficulty with irregular forms and exceptions (Muhammed et al., 2024). This finding is consistent with Kracht (2008), who notes that morphological competence develops gradually and that irregular forms often require greater exposure and repeated use. The persistence of such errors at the university level suggests that learners may not have sufficient opportunities to internalize these forms in meaningful contexts.

An important contribution of this study lies in the identification of misformation errors as the dominant error type. This finding has both theoretical and pedagogical significance. From a theoretical perspective, it supports Corder's (1983) argument that errors serve as evidence of hypothesis testing in language learning. Learners are actively constructing their understanding of the target language rather than simply failing to apply rules. From a pedagogical perspective, this suggests that instruction should move beyond surface level correction and focus on helping learners understand the underlying rules and patterns of the language (Mohammad & Hameed, 2025; Murtisari et al., 2025). Teachers should therefore guide students in reflecting on their errors and developing a deeper awareness of grammatical structures.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of input, exposure, and meaningful practice in developing morphological accuracy. In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, learners have limited access to authentic English input, which restricts their ability to internalize inflectional patterns. As noted by Taufiqulloh et al. (2025), learners' writing performance is closely linked to the quality and quantity of language input they receive. Without sufficient exposure, learners may rely on simplified or incorrect forms, which can lead to the persistence of errors over time. This highlights the need for instructional practices that provide rich and contextualized input alongside opportunities for active language use (Taufiqulloh et al., 2025).

Recent pedagogical studies also highlight the effectiveness of integrating explicit grammar instruction with communicative and contextualized activities. Mohammad and Hameed (2025) demonstrate that discourse-based grammar teaching can significantly reduce morphological errors by situating grammatical forms within meaningful contexts. In addition, the use of technology supported feedback, such as AI assisted writing tools, has been shown to enhance learners' awareness of grammatical errors and support self-correction, as reported by Murtisari et al. (2025). These approaches reflect current perspectives in language teaching that emphasize the integration of form and meaning in instructional practice.

In relation to broader pedagogical frameworks, the findings of this study can also be interpreted through the lens of form focused instruction. This approach suggests that attention to linguistic form is essential for language development, particularly in contexts where learners have limited exposure to the target language. While communicative approaches prioritize meaning, this study demonstrates that insufficient attention to form, especially inflectional morphology, may result in persistent grammatical inaccuracies. Therefore, a balanced approach that combines explicit instruction, meaningful practice, and corrective feedback is necessary to support learners in achieving greater grammatical accuracy.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research in EFL writing by offering a more nuanced understanding of learners' grammatical difficulties. Unlike studies that focus primarily on error frequency, this research explores the underlying causes and processes of error production, providing deeper insight into learner language development. By situating the findings within established theories of second language acquisition and recent empirical research, this study reinforces the view that errors are not merely obstacles but valuable indicators of learning. Addressing inflectional morphological errors therefore requires a comprehensive approach that considers linguistic, cognitive, and contextual dimensions of language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the types of inflectional morphological errors in EFL students' writing and the factors contributing to their occurrence. The findings demonstrate that verb inflection errors, particularly in past tense and third person singular forms, constitute the most dominant category, followed by errors in plural markers and possessive forms. These results confirm that inflectional morphology remains a persistent and systematic challenge for EFL learners, especially in written production where grammatical accuracy is required.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of learner language by providing empirical evidence that inflectional errors are not random but reflect developmental processes within learners' interlanguage system. The identified patterns of omission, misformation, and overgeneralization support key assumptions in second language acquisition, particularly regarding the roles of first language transfer and cognitive processing strategies in shaping grammatical performance. By situating these findings within the Indonesian EFL context, this study also enriches existing research on morphological development among university-level learners.

Despite these contributions, this study is limited by the relatively small sample size and its focus on a single institutional context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the reliance on written data and interviews may not fully capture the complexity of learners' grammatical development.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for both pedagogical practice and future research. For EFL teaching, instructors are encouraged to adopt a more contextualized approach to teaching inflectional morphology. Rather than focusing solely on explicit rule explanation, grammar instruction should be integrated into meaningful writing activities that allow students to apply inflectional forms in context.

Providing consistent corrective feedback, emphasizing frequently used grammatical forms such as verb inflections, and designing tasks that promote repeated exposure may help students improve their grammatical accuracy. Additionally, raising learners' awareness of common error patterns can support more conscious language use.

For future research, it is recommended that similar studies involve larger and more diverse participant groups to enhance the representativeness of the findings. The use of mixed-method or longitudinal research designs is also suggested to examine how learners' use of inflectional morphology develops over time. Furthermore, future studies could investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies in reducing inflectional errors, thereby offering more direct contributions to EFL classroom practice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the English Education Study Program of Tadulako University for the academic support and research facilities provided during the completion of this study. Special appreciation is extended to the research supervisor for valuable guidance, constructive feedback, and meaningful suggestions that contributed to the improvement of this article. The author also thanks the students who participated in this research for their cooperation and willingness to share their experiences.

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