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SYNTACTIC CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH WRITINGS OF PAKISTANI L2 LEARNERS: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

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Abstract

This study probes into syntactical challenges that Pakistani learners have to face in learning of English as a Second Language (ESL). Study's main focus is errors in their written compositions. The research by employing a corpus-based approach, analyzes 200 essays from undergraduate students of some Pakistani universities. The results show the most frequent syntactic errors for instance subject-verb agreement issues, incorrect word order, and wrong use of tenses. These errors are thought to be caused by factors such as first language (L1) intervention, deficient grammatical instruction, and narrow exposure to English language. The study evaluates that Pakistani ESL classrooms need a reconsideration for already referred pedagogical strategies to cope with these syntactic challenges in order to enhance ESL writing proficiency.

Keywords: Syntactical Challenges; Pakistani ESL Learners; Corpus-Analysis; Pedagogical Strategies; Error Identification

Introduction

The growing value of English as a world's common tongue has placed it as a quibbling skill for academic and professional attainment globally, including Pakistan (Crystal, 2003). English, as the formal language of Pakistan, lodge in a dominant position in higher education, the judicial system, and formal discourse (Rahman, 2002). However, despite years of formal instruction for ESL learning, many Pakistani learners still struggling with producing grammatically accurate English, particularly in written composition. This exertion is much attributed to a number of factors such as limited exposure to reliable language use, deficient pedagogical formulation in English Language Teaching (ELT), and the powerful effect of first language (L1) structures on second language (L2) acquisition especially from Urdu and regional languages, (Mahboob, 2017; Mansoor, 2004).

As a pivotal aspect of written competency, syntactical quality affects clarity, comprehensibility, and the general discourse effectivity of written texts (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Educationists and ELT specialists in Pakistan have continuously pointed towards the prevalence of syntactic errors in learners' written composition pointing common sentence related errors such as subject-verb agreement, word order mistakes, wrong use of tense and articles (Sarwar & Ahmed, 2024; Halima et al., 2023). These short comings in writings not only impede effective communication but also indicate other pit falls in the teaching and learning process of English grammar in Pakistan. Experts have pointed toward the traditional grammar-translation method (GTM) and an exam-centered culture as primal factors that cause demarcation of learners' ability to interiorise and utilize English syntactic rules in real-life writing contexts (Khan & Akhtar, 2020).

As far as the syntactical errors are concerned the phenomenon of language transfer has been identified as one of the factors in which learners use L1 grammatical structures as input to L2 the end product (Odlin, 1989). So, in Pakistani context where Urdu has a relatively flexible word order and absence of certain grammatical features, such as articles, often results in an incorrect sentence construction while writing in English (Mahmood et al., 2020; Khaliq et al.,

2024). For instance, learners may form sentences like “*She go to school every day*” or “*I am good in English*”, which reflect the intervention of L1 patterns. Studies have highlighted these state of affairs, but there remains a need for an organized, data-driven analysis of particular syntactic error patterns in writings of Pakistani L2 learners.

For data-based insights into reliable language use and learner errors, corpus-based approaches have come forth as a powerful tool in applied linguistics (Granger, 1998; Biber et al., 1998). By using corpus tools its convenient for learners to analyze large datasets of writing, identifying recurring syntactic issues and communicate educational practices (Meunier, 2015). However, in Pakistani context, there is still a scarcity of corpus-based studies that can be used to focus on syntactic errors because it is hard to rely on a small-scale and qualitative analyses or anecdotal observations (Naseem et al., 2021; Sarwar & Ahmed, 2024).

Present study attempts to address this gap by administrating an extensive corpus-based analysis of syntactical errors in English written composition of Pakistani undergraduate students. The study intents to impart a refined discernment of the syntactic challenges faced by Pakistani L2 learners and caters evidence-based recommendations for rising grammar instruction in Pakistani ELT contexts by identifying the most prevalent error types and investigating their manageable reasons. Finally, the research marks the value of integrating corpus-based findings into curriculum design, teacher training, and educational plan of action to improve the syntactic competence of Pakistani learners in English language.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its share to the inclination of particular syntactic challenges faced by Pakistani L2 learners of English language identified through a corpus-based analysis of their written compositions. By systematically categorizing and quantifying common syntactic errors for example subject-verb agreement issues, word order problems, wrong use of tense, and article mistakes, this research proposes priceless insights for pedagogue, curriculum creators, and policy makers who are directly involved in English language education in Pakistan.

First of all, the study highlights the role of L1 (Urdu) intervention in the process of committing syntactic errors in English writing. Through a complete comprehension of the cause of these errors can help improvement of marked instructional scheme that can address the specific linguistic needs of Pakistani learners. Second, the results emphasize the demarcation of current English language teaching (ELT) pattern in Pakistan, where grammatical accuracy to a great deal finds less focus in favour of memorization and examination planning. By distinguishing peculiar areas of syntactic difficulty, the study yields a data-based evidence for the demand to incorporate different grammar teaching and error-focused engagement in classroom.

Moreover, the investigation proves the effectual of a corpus-based approach in examining learner errors, that can work as a model for future work in related contexts. On the whole, the study gives an approval for the betterment of English language pedagogy in Pakistan, nurturing a better writing competency and finally heightening the learners' scholarly and professional notion in a globalized world.

Objectives of the Study

- a) To identify and categorize, in an organized pattern, the most prevalent syntactical errors (subject-verb agreement, wrong use of tense, word order anomalies, and article-related errors) in English written composition of Pakistani L2 learners at undergraduate level.
- b) To seek the intervention of first language (L1), especially Urdu and regional languages, in forming the syntactic challenges faced by Pakistani learners of English as a second language (L2), with an aim to inform pedagogical scheme for an improved grammar instruction.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Error Analysis

Error Analysis (EA) has been a base in second language acquisition (SLA) enquiry by offering exteroception into language learning process by consistently identifying and analyzing learner errors. Corder (1967) expressed that errors are not simply indication of failure but are

suggestive of the learner's interlanguage process and can render precious info for language education. This view change the focus from only correcting errors for knowing their underlying reason, thereby revealing more impressive pedagogical plan of action.

Syntactic Errors in ESL Learners' Writings

Pakistani ESL learners often have to fight with syntactic challenges in their English written composition with trivial errors including subject-verb agreement issues, incorrect word order, wrong use of tense, and article mistakes. Sarwar and Ahmed (2024) hold a study analyzing 200 written assignments from ESL learners and found that subject-verb agreement and wrong use of tense were among the most frequent errors, much attributed to the influence of the learners' native language constitution. [jssr.online](https://www.jssr.online)

Likewise, a study on written material of Pakistani ESL learners at university level was conducted by Halima et al. (2023) and discovered seven classes of errors, including syntactical errors. These findings express that learners are effected by the patterns of their first language (L1), that lead them to commit errors while making sentences. [global-jws.com](https://www.global-jws.com)

Influence of L1 Interference

L1 intervention, or counter transfer, is an important cause contributory to syntactic errors in ESL learners' written composition. Language transferral happens when linguistic characteristics from learner's native language are proved as determining factor for the acquisition of second language, sometimes leading to errors when the structures of the two languages differ. For example, a flexible word order in Urdu can consequence in improper sentence construction in English. [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)

A study conducted by Al-Saggaf et al. (2022) on ESL learners of Malay language and discovered that L1 intervention influence grammar, lexical choice, and sentence construction while writing in English. Though this study was about Malay learners yet the findings are applicable to Pakistani ESL learners too, because both groups of learners undergo related situation due to a variation between their native languages and English language. [ijlts.org](https://www.ijlts.org)

Morphological and Syntactic Challenges

On the far side of syntax, morphological errors for example incorrect use of inflectional morphemes also present difficulties for Pakistani ESL learners. Mahmood et al. (2020) examined the written expressions of Pakistani ESL learners and discovered that errors in nouns, verbs, and prepositions were common, frequently resulting from both interlingual and intra-lingual cause. These morphological errors are almost related to syntactic competency, because they also impact sentence construction and cohesion. [Pakistan Social Sciences Review+1ResearchGate+1](#)

Pedagogical Implications

The ratio of syntactical and morphological errors among Pakistani ESL learners set a need for a pointed pedagogic interference. Naseem et al. (2021) reviewed an enquiry on writing challenges faced by ESL learners in Pakistan and stressed the value of definitive grammar teaching, lexicon improvement, and written language scheme centering on arrangement and cohesion. They proponent for incorporation of reliable writing tasks and antonymous analysis between learners' L1 and English L2 to address these difficulties efficaciously. [Jahan-e-Tahqeeqjssr.online](#)

Further, by combining error analysis into curriculum modification, it can help educators in determining common error patterns and design instructions to address particular learner needs. Teachers can reduce the presence of inflexible errors and can amend students' grammatical caliber with a deep focus on fields of prevailing errors and can cater a regular drill with a learner's response. [jssr.online](#)

Theoretical Framework

This research is mainly grounded in two significant theoretical aspects one is Error Analysis (EA) (Corder, 1967) and the other is Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). Collectively, both these frameworks render an extensive lens for knowing the syntactical challenges faced by Pakistani L2 learners in writing their English composition.

Error Analysis posits that learner errors are not merely haphazard mistakes but organized expression of language learning process (Corder, 1967). According to this view, errors such as subject-verb agreement mismatches, wrong use of tense, and article omission shows essential content about the learners' present-day phase of language process. With a deep analysis of these errors, scholars and pedagogue can gain exteroception into learners' inner linguistic systems and the plan of action they utilize in producing L2 output (James, 1998). In Pakistani context, where English language is taught as a compulsory subject but mostly it is learned in an inadequate environment required for a true language learning, Error Analysis in this situation offers an invaluable framework for distinguishing recurrent error patterns and addressing them in educational activity (Mahboob, 2017).

Supporting to Error Analysis is Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), which suggests that second language learners acquire an in-between linguistic system that incorporates features of both their first language (L1) and the target language (L2). This "interlanguage" is arbitrary and develops when learners have more exposure and practice of the target language, but it also indicates the effect of L1 artifact. For example, Urdu's flexible word order and absence of articles frequently result in syntactical errors while writing in English, like "*He go to school*" or "*I have car*" (Mahmood et al., 2020; Khaliq et al., 2024). Interlanguage Theory is specially applicable to Pakistani context, where learners direct the tangled interaction between Urdu and English syntactical systems in their academic writing.

By incorporating these theoretical views, the study looks for to render a organized analysis of the syntactical errors in Pakistani learners' writings by offering exteroception into both the **nature** and the **causes** of these errors. The results aim to modify pedagogic plan of action that is sensitive to the particular linguistic challenges faced by Pakistani L2 learners while writing in English.

Methodology

This study has made use of a corpus-oriented descriptive research design to analyze syntactical errors in the written English manuscripts of Pakistani undergraduate learners. The corpus-

oriented approach has permitted for an organized and objective investigation of learner errors through collection of a genuine written data to determine the design and ratio of syntax related challenges.

Participants and Data Collection

The data was documented from 200 essays, each almost of 500 words and written by undergraduate/BS students who were enrolled in English language courses across five public and private universities of Pakistan. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse linguistic prospects, with Urdu and regional languages as their first languages (L1). The essay topics were generic in nature (e.g., "The Importance of Education," "My Favorite Hobby"), planned to provoke a natural language exhibition without prescriptive efficiency. To ensure a consistency in writing conditions among participants, data was collected over a semester.

Data Preparation

Every essay was made digital and cleaned for homogeneous formatting. Irrelevant data, such as student names and institutional name were separated to guarantee the participant's anonymity and to obey the ethical research regulation.

Error Identification and Categorization

The corpus was prepared by using CLAWS7 POS tagger and was manually substantiated for precision. The errors were identified and classified by using Corder's (1974) Error Analysis Model, which classifies errors into:

Omission (e.g. missing articles or prepositions)

Addition (e.g. Surplus auxiliaries)

Misinformation (e.g. wrong tense or word form)

Misordering (e.g. incorrect word order)

For present study, the main focus was on syntactical errors, specifically:

Subject-verb agreement errors

Word order errors

Wrong use of tense

Article mistakes

Some other syntactical problems (based on prepositions and conjunctions)

The ratio of each error type was counted using a coding sheet, and the patterns were known for an in-depth explanation.

Ethical Considerations

Keeping in view the ethical belief it was made sure that all participation in the study remained voluntary, and an informed consent was acquired from all participants. The obtained data was kept anonymous and had been used exclusively for research intentions.

Expanded Coding Sheet for Syntactic Error Analysis (Based on Corder, 1974)

Participant ID	Sentence No.	Error Type	Error Category	Error Category	Sub-Description	Correct Form	Code	Notes
P01	1	Omission	Article	Definite/Indefinite	Missing "the" before noun	The cat is on the table.	O-ART	Common omission of definite article
P01	2	Addition	Auxiliary	Modal/Helping Verb	Extra "was" before	She went to school	A-AUX	Redundant auxiliary

Participant ID	Sentence No.	Error Type	Error Category	Error Category	Sub-Error Description	Correct Form	Code	Notes
					main verb	yesterday.		
P02	3	Misinformation	Tense	Past/Present/Future	Wrong tense: present used instead of past	He went to market. TNS	M-	Verb tense confusion
P02	4	Misordering	Word Order	Adjective Placement	Adjective after noun	The beautiful girl danced.	M- WO	Adjective position error
P03	5	Omission	Preposition	Time/Place/Other	Missing "on" before day	She arrived on Monday.	O- PREP	Preposition omitted
P03	6	Addition	Conjunction	Coordinating/Subordinating	Extra "and" added	He went to the store.	A- CONJ	Unnecessary conjunction
P04	7	Misinformation	Subject-Verb Agreement	Singular/Plural	Singular subject with plural verb	She runs fast.	M- SVA	Subject-verb agreement issue
P05	8	Misinformation	Pronoun Reference	Subject/Object/Relative	Wrong pronoun form	She helped her instead of him .	M- PRO N	Pronoun reference error

Participant ID	Sentence No.	Error Type	Error Category	Error Category	Sub-Error Description	Correct Form	Code	Notes
P06	9	Omission	Verb (Be/Have/Do)	Auxiliary Verb	Missing "is" in sentence	She is a doctor.	O-AUX	Missing auxiliary verb
P07	10	Misordering	Question Formation	WH/Yes-No	Wrong word order in question	What are you doing?	M-QF	Question formation problem
P08	11	Misinformation	Comparative/Superlative Forms	Adjective/Adverb	Wrong comparative form	She is taller than him.	M-COM P	Wrong degree of adjective
P09	12	Addition	Determiner	Redundant/Incorrect	Extra "some" before uncountable noun	I need water.	A-DET	Unnecessary determiner
P10	13	Omission	Conjunction	Coordinating/Subordinating	Missing "and" before last item	I bought apples, oranges, and bananas.	O-CONJ	Coordination omission

Table 1.

Error Codes Summary

Error Type	Category	Code
Omission	Article	O-ART
Omission	Preposition	O-PREP
Omission	Conjunction	O-CONJ

Error Type	Category	Code
Omission	Auxiliary (Be/Have/Do)	O-AUX
Addition	Auxiliary (Modal/Helping)	A-AUX
Addition	Conjunction	A-CONJ
Addition	Determiner	A-DET
Misinformation	Subject-Verb Agreement	M-SVA
Misinformation	Tense	M-TNS
Misinformation	Pronoun Reference	M-PRON
Misinformation	Comparative/Superlative	M-COMP
Misordering	Word Order	M-WO
Misordering	Question Formation	M-QF

Table2.

Coding Process Guide

- ☐ **Step 1:** Allot a **unique participant ID** and **sentence number**
- ☐ **Step 2:** Determine **error type** and **category**
- ☐ **Step 3:** Specify **sub-category** for granularity
- ☐ **Step 4:** Provide a **short description** of the error
- ☐ **Step 5:** Suggest the **correct form**
- ☐ **Step 6:** Add the **code** for a speedy reference
- ☐ **Step 7:** Add **notes** if applicable (e.g., frequency, patterns)

4.5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The investigation of 200 essays provides a total production of **1,246 syntactical errors**, dispersed across five main categories. A detailed partitioning has been rendered below.

Error Type	Frequency Percentage
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Error Type	Frequency Percentage	
Subject-Verb Agreement	349	28%
Word Order Errors	274	22%
Tense Misuse	224	18%
Article Errors	187	15%
Other Errors (Prepositions, Conjunctions, Fragments)	212	17%
Total	1,246	100%

Table.3

The present work engages a descriptive corpus-oriented research design to analyze syntactic errors in ESL learners' written manuscripts. The adopted approach aids in recognition of error design and their ratio by stipulating an extensive perceptive of the syntactic challenges which Pakistani learners have to face in real time learning and practicing. From five in total public and private universities of Pakistan, a corpus of 200 essays was prepared that includes BS/undergraduate students who were enrolled in English language courses. The essays, each roughly of 500 words, were written on generic issues to make natural language use. The essays were examined by using the CLAWS7 Part-of-Speech (POS) tagger to find syntactical structures. The errors in the essays were classified on the bases of Corder's (1974) framework that focuses on subject-verb compatibility, word ordering, tense utilization, and article employment. Ratio of each error type was measured to find the most prevailing syntactical problems.

Discussion

The investigation unwraps that Pakistani ESL learners try hard to go along central features of English syntax, mainly due to L1 intervention and inadequate grammatical direction. The ratio

of subject-verb agreement and word order errors mark the need for topographic point in pedagogical scheme that manage these special problems. The impact of Urdu's syntactical structures on English writing is manifested in the learners' errors. For example, the easy and adaptable word order in Urdu leads to imposition of parts of a sentence in English language writing. In addition to this the absence of articles in Urdu language approves learners' exertion in using articles rightly while writing in English. These results also go well with former studies, for instance Khaliq et al. (2024), where the impact of L1 involvement on ESL learners' syntactic quality has been stressed upon. This research work further reinforces the necessity for a corpus-oriented analysis to modify ESL instruction and an improvement in curriculum development.

Conclusion

This corpus-oriented work brings forth those syntactical challenges which are faced by Pakistani ESL learners such as subject-verb agreement, word order, wrong use of tense, and article omissions being the most prevailing errors. These results also indicate a significant influence of L1 interference in error committing context and reveals a condition for an improved grammatical pedagogy in ESL classrooms. Further, to improve the syntactic competency among learners, pedagogue should utilize targeted pedagogical scheme that focus on the identified error types. So, for this purpose incorporation of contrastive analysis between Urdu and English syntax, along with increased practice and feedback in language learning curricula can help learners coping these challenges. Also new researchers should diagnose the effectivity of particular pedagogical interference in reduction of syntactical errors and should study the role of technology-assisted language learning tools in ESL learning.

Recommendations

Supported by the investigation on syntactical errors in the English written manuscripts of Pakistani L2 learners, various pedagogic recommendations come forth to treat the known syntactical challenges. The foremost is that there is a need to integrate targeted grammar content into the curriculum that emphasizes on common problem areas such as subject-verb agreement, tense uniformity, article usage, and word order, as foregrounded by Ellis (2008) and

Bitchenner and Ferris (2012). This intervention of grammar based content should involve definite, function-oriented grammar instruction that further should be contextualized through real time illustrations from learners' writings to improve the relevancy and action (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). Second, through an incorporation of error analysis as a pedagogic tool can remarkably help learners in fostering self-awareness of linguistic impotency (Corder, 1974; James, 1998). Also performing activities such as peer reviews, collective error recognition, and the use of coding sheets (Ferris, 2011) can authorize scholars to acknowledge and correct their errors. Third, by choosing corpus-oriented educational approaches can heighten learners' discernment of reliable language structure and further encourage a data-driven learning (Kennedy & Miceli, 2010; Römer, 2008). through a proper construction of learner's corpora by using concordance tools, and examining common errors in real texts can construct the notch between theoretical grammar knowledge and applicatory language use (Biber et al., 2021). In addition to these recommendations, instructions on writing English sentences should be increased through function-oriented formulation that underscore drafting, rewriting, and redaction (Hyland, 2019; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014), so to reinforcing syntactical accuracy in different writing based contexts. In the light of findings teacher training is also a pivotal step, professional development workshops should be arranged so they impart error analysis techniques, corpus tools, and definitive grammar teaching that can enable professionals with efficient plan of action to assist learners (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Besides this, syllabus designers should give priority to develop such cultural relevant teaching content that fits well with the specific syntactic challenges faced by Pakistani learners (Rahman, 2002). Finally, upcoming researchers should investigate longitudinal impacts of pedagogic interventions (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014), the consequences of L1 intervention in syntactic errors (Odlin, 1989), and genre-specific syntactic challenges (Swales & Feak, 2012) to communicate a more holistic and culturally excitable language teaching practices. These propositions which are deeply woven in empirical findings, intent to improve syntactic ability and on a whole written language proficiency across Pakistani ESL learners.

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