



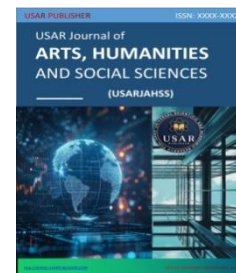
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## Effectiveness of Grammatical Categories on UNIZIK Undergraduates' Writing: A Correctional Intervention

By

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### Abstract

*This study examines grammatical categories in the academic writing of final-year students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, with a focus on tense, aspects, number and person errors. Using Corder's Error Analysis (EA) Theory and Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory. The study identifies the frequency and nature of these errors to highlight common challenges faced by English as a Second language (ESL) learners. A total of 20 students were randomly selected from a population of 154 students and their essays were analysed for grammatical inconsistencies. This study adopts a descriptive research design and analyses its data qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings reveal that number/subject-verb agreement errors (43.75%) were the most frequent, followed by tense/aspect errors (38.06%), while person errors (17.19%) were the least common. Notably, students made more errors in narrative writing, particularly in maintaining tense consistency and subject-verb agreement. These challenges were attributed to interlingual transfer, intralingual factors (over generalization of English rules) and inadequate exposure to corrective feedback. Based on these findings, the study recommends structured lesson to enhance grammar, incorporating Error Analysis methods in writing instruction and integrating SLA principles in teaching. It also advocates for corrective feedback strategies to help learners internalize grammatical rules.*

**Keywords:** Grammatical categories, correctional interventions, feedback, Error Analysis, English as a Second Language (ESL).

### Background to the Study

Writing is an essential component of academic success and a vital skill in professional and social spheres. In academic settings, writing serves as a means of communication, reflection, and

evaluation. It allows students to express their ideas, demonstrate understanding, and engage in scholarly discourse. For students in tertiary institutions, particularly those studying English language, strong writing skills are crucial for producing essays, research papers, and other forms of academic work that meet acceptable standards.

However, research has shown that many students fall short of the required writing proficiency. Lagu's *Challenges of Teaching English as a Second Language in Nigeria* pointed out that despite how long the language has been in the country, it is still a huge challenge to teachers and students as is evident in the poor performances in public examinations like WAEC and NECO. The 2023 WAEC examiners noted recurring issues, such as poor grammar, incorrect sentence structures, and inadequate coherence in essay writing, reflecting deeper systemic problems in English Language instruction and learning.

The challenge is more common for students learning English as a second language (ESL). Unlike native speakers, ESL learners often grapple with additional difficulties, such as interference from their first language (Okoyeukwu et al. 23) and limited exposure to authentic English usage (as noted in Fasanmi's *challenges of oral English in English as a second language (ESL) learning in Nigeria*). Nigeria, like many other multilingual nations, adopts English as a second language, which serves as the medium of instruction and official communication. While this status elevates the importance of English, it also places considerable demands on learners who must master both spoken and written forms of the language. Scholars such as Lim and Renandya emphasize that ESL students often require tailored interventions to address their unique linguistic needs, particularly in academic writing contexts (16-17).

Despite these challenges, the importance of improving grammatical competence cannot be overstated. Proficiency in grammar enhances not only the accuracy of writing but also its effectiveness in conveying meaning.

Academic writing requires a strong command of grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, number, and person. Despite completing several years of university education in English, students continue to make avoidable mistakes in areas like tense consistency, subject-verb agreement, and pronoun usage resulting in a lack of clarity and correctness of their writing.

These challenges raise concerns about their preparedness for academic and professional communication. The persistence of such errors suggests gaps in grammar instruction,

insufficient reinforcement of grammatical rules, or ineffective learning strategies. If students at this level still face difficulties in applying basic grammatical principles, it becomes necessary to examine the nature and extent of these errors and explore ways to improve grammatical accuracy.

This study, therefore, investigates the specific grammatical challenges in students' writing, identifies patterns of errors, and proposes practical solutions to enhance their proficiency.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is:

1. To identify the most frequent grammatical errors related to tense, aspect, number, and person in the writing of final-year students.
2. To explore the factors contributing to these grammatical errors in the context of English as a second language learners.
3. To evaluate the role of grammatical categories in enhancing students' academic writing.

## **Scope of the Study**

This study is delimited to the 2024/2025 regular final-year students of the Department of English Language and Literature at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. It focuses on investigating the grammatical categories of tense, aspect, number, and person in the academic writing of these students. The research will analyze the most frequent errors related to these categories in essays specifically written by the students on various topics, which will provide valuable insights into their grammatical challenges and writing proficiency. This study will focus on identifying and analyzing grammatical errors in the academic writing of final year students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. By understanding these patterns, the research will suggest strategies for educators and curriculum developers to address these challenges.

## **Research Questions**

1. To what extent do final-year students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University struggle with grammatical categories (tense, aspects, number, and person) in their academic writing?
2. What factors contribute to these grammatical challenges in the context of ESL learning?
3. What practical strategies can be proposed to address these errors and improve students' writing?

## Empirical Studies

Several studies have examined grammatical challenges in students' writing, both in Nigeria and globally. Many of these studies highlight common grammatical errors such as **tense inconsistency, subject-verb agreement issues, and coherence problems**, which are also central to this research.

One such study is Ekpe's **Analysis of Grammatical Errors in Final-Year University Students' Essays**. The population of this study were 100 final-year students of the department of English and Literature, university of Benin. The instrument was an essay writing task and the theoretical frameworks were **Error analysis** and **Content Analysis**. Data were represented in tables using frequency and simple percentages. The study identified five main error categories: **faulty sentence structure, inability to internalize grammar rules, poor use of transition words, misuse of English expressions, and lack of awareness of context in word usage**. Ekpe recommended intensive writing courses for first-year students to build foundational proficiency before their final year (78).

Similarly, **Mufidah and Islam** in 2022 analyzed students' grammatical errors using Duray's Theory of Linguistic Categories. Their study, conducted in an Indonesian senior high school using 26 students of the second grade, found that omission errors—particularly the omission of **tense markers and verbs**—were the most frequent (1-13). These findings align with **Zanna, Yakubu and Modu's study** in 2023, which examined English composition errors among senior secondary school students in Maiduguri. Their research identified four major types of errors: **tense, subject-verb agreement, pronoun, and preposition**

**errors, with tense errors being the most common** (111-119).

Beyond secondary school learners, university students also struggle with grammatical accuracy. **Zakhidova** examined **error types and correction strategies** in formal writing among 100 university students in Uzbekistan in 2024. The study found that **subject-verb agreement and tense errors were the most prevalent** and that these errors **hindered clarity and coherence**. Interestingly, **direct corrective feedback** was found to be the most effective method for reducing errors, a finding that supports structured intervention approaches in ESL writing instruction (105-110)

On the broader issue of **English as a Second Language (ESL) learning challenges**, **Okoyeukwu et al.** conducted a study in Enugu, Nigeria, focusing on the difficulties of teaching and learning English. They found that many students **transfer syntactic patterns from their first languages into English**, a phenomenon known as **language interference**. Their study suggested that **hiring specialized English teachers and providing instructional materials** could help mitigate these errors (23).

These studies collectively reveal that grammatical errors—particularly in **tense, aspect, number, and person**—persist at various educational levels. While past research has focused on general grammatical errors or secondary school learners, **few studies have specifically examined how these grammatical categories manifest in final-year university students' writing**. Additionally, while several researchers have recommended instructional interventions, there is **limited research on correctional strategies tailored to undergraduate writing**. This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing grammatical errors in **final-year students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University** and suggesting intervention strategies based on identified patterns.

We would now look at some concepts.

## Grammatical Categories as the Basis of Language Structure

Grammatical categories are linguistic properties that define the structure and meaning of language. They are the properties "of items within the grammar of a language" (Wikipedia). These categories, including tense, aspect, number, and person, are central to the coherence and intelligibility of sentences in English. In ESL contexts like Nigeria, mastery of these categories is essential for both academic and practical communication. Grammatical categories can be classified into three groups: Inherent category, Relational category and Agreement category. Tense, aspect, number and person all belong to the inherent category while Concord belongs to the agreement category.

Grammatical categories constitute the structural backbone of language, dictating how words function and interact to form coherent expressions. These categories include tense, aspect, mood, agreement, word order, and case, each serving a specific role in sentence construction. The proper use of these elements is critical to producing clear, precise, and meaningful writing.

Ifechelobi describes **Tense** as "the forms verbs take to denote our concept of time" (157). Tense provides temporal clarity, ensuring that events are situated in the appropriate timeframe. For instance, in academic essays, shifting between present and past tense without justification can confuse the reader and disrupt the logical flow of ideas. Similarly, **aspect**, which conveys whether an action is ongoing, completed, or habitual, is crucial for nuanced expression. In this context, Quirk et al. highlight that the mastery of tense and aspect enables writers to convey subtle distinctions, enhancing the depth and precision of their communication (92).

Grammatical number and person are fundamental linguistic categories that significantly influence sentence structure and meaning.

**Number** is a morphological category that expresses count distinctions, such as "one," "two," or "three or more" (Wikipedia). In English, this typically involves a two-way contrast between singular and plural forms. For example, "car" becomes "cars" to indicate more than one, and "child" changes to "children". This distinction extends to pronouns

and verbs, ensuring subject-verb agreement. For instance, "The apple is fresh" versus "The apples are fresh" demonstrates how verbs change form to align with the singular or plural subject.

Some languages feature more elaborate number systems, including dual (indicating two items), trial (three items), and paucal (a few items) numbers. These systems provide nuanced ways to express quantity beyond the singular-plural dichotomy.

**Person** indicates the relationship between the speaker, the addressee, and others. It is a deictic reference, meaning it points to participants in the discourse context. The primary distinctions are:

1. First Person: Refers to the speaker or speakers. Singular: "I"; plural: "we."
2. Second Person: Addresses the listener or listeners. Singular and plural: "you."
3. Third Person: Refers to others who are neither the speaker nor the listener. Singular: "he," "she," "it"; plural: "they."

These distinctions are crucial for subject-verb agreement and pronoun usage, ensuring clarity in communication. For example, "I am" (first person singular) differs from "you are" (second person singular or plural) and "he/she/it is" (third person singular).

**Agreement** (Concord), particularly subject-verb harmony, is another essential category. Anyanwu defines Concord as "a harmonious relationship between two grammatical items" (163). Errors in agreement, such as using "He go to school" instead of "He goes to school," are common among learners of English as a second language and often result from language interference or inadequate practice. Moreover, word order plays a critical role in ensuring clarity. English relies heavily on a fixed word order (subject-verb-object), and deviations from this structure can lead to ambiguity or misinterpretation. For example, the placement of modifiers can significantly alter the meaning of a sentence, as seen in the difference between "Only Mary saw the event" and "Mary saw only the event."

Addressing these issues requires a combination of explicit instruction, meaningful practice, and corrective feedback. Students must be exposed to varied contexts that demonstrate the application of grammatical categories, reinforcing their understanding through repetition and active engagement.

### **Error Analysis: A Diagnostic Framework**

Error analysis, as described by Corder, provides a systematic approach to identifying, categorizing, and understanding the mistakes learners make in their use of language (165). Unlike traditional methods that focus solely on correction, error analysis seeks to uncover the underlying causes of these mistakes, offering insights into the learners' cognitive processes and linguistic challenges.

Errors can be broadly classified into three types: omission, addition, and substitution. Omission occurs when learners leave out essential elements, such as articles or auxiliary verbs. For example, "I going to market" lacks the auxiliary verb "am." Addition involves inserting unnecessary elements, such as "He doesn't likes coffee," while substitution refers to replacing one element with another, such as "She do her homework" instead of "She does her homework."

The value of error analysis lies in its ability to highlight patterns. For instance, if a group of students consistently misuses prepositions, this may indicate a gap in their understanding of English syntax. By identifying such trends, educators can design targeted interventions that address specific problem areas. Additionally, error analysis promotes a learner-centered approach, as it considers the unique linguistic background and learning trajectory of each student.

### **Corrective Feedback: Bridging Analysis and Improvement**

Corrective feedback serves as the practical application of error analysis, transforming diagnostic insights into actionable strategies for improvement. It provides learners with immediate, constructive responses to their mistakes,

guiding them toward correct usage. Feedback can be explicit, implicit, or metalinguistic, each offering distinct advantages.

Explicit feedback directly identifies the error and provides the correct form. For example, when a student writes, "He don't like apples," the teacher may respond with, "It should be 'He doesn't like apples.'"

Implicit feedback involves indirect cues, such as repeating the correct form in a natural context: "Oh, he doesn't like apples?"

Metalinguistic feedback goes further by explaining the rule behind the error, helping students internalize the concept. For instance, the teacher might say, "In this sentence, we need the auxiliary verb 'does' to match the subject 'he.'"

Krashen emphasizes that feedback must be timely, specific, and relevant to be effective. Delayed or vague feedback may fail to address the error adequately, leaving the learner confused or discouraged. Moreover, feedback should be balanced, highlighting strengths alongside areas for improvement to maintain the learner's confidence and motivation (118).

### **Tense and Aspect in Writing: Key to Temporal Clarity**

Tense and aspect are integral to effective communication, particularly in academic and professional contexts where precision is paramount. Tense situates actions within a specific timeframe, while aspect conveys whether those actions are ongoing, completed, or habitual. Together, they ensure logical coherence and clarity in writing.

For instance, in research papers, the present perfect tense ("Researchers have studied this topic extensively") often indicates a connection to current relevance, while the simple past ("The study was conducted in 2020") refers to a completed action. Misuse of these forms can confuse readers and obscure the intended meaning.

Students frequently struggle with these elements due to the complexity of English tense-aspect combinations and the

influence of their native languages, which may lack equivalent structures. To address these challenges, educators must provide explicit instruction on the nuances of tense and aspect, supported by ample opportunities for contextualized practice. Quirk et al. note that consistent exposure to authentic examples helps learners internalize these concepts, improving their ability to use them accurately (178).

## **Word Order and Logical Sentence Construction**

Word order is a critical determinant of clarity and coherence in English, where the sequence of elements often dictates meaning. Deviations from the standard subject-verb-object structure can lead to confusion or ambiguity, particularly in complex sentences. For example, the sentence “The man saw the woman with the telescope” can have multiple interpretations depending on the placement of modifiers.

Errors in word order are often rooted in learners' native languages, which may follow different syntactic rules. For instance, many Nigerian languages prioritize emphasis over fixed word order, leading to constructions like “To the market, I went” instead of “I went to the market.”

To address these issues, educators should emphasize the importance of syntactic patterns through exercises that focus on sentence construction and error correction. Reordering jumbled sentences, analyzing ambiguous structures, and practicing varied sentence types can help students develop a stronger grasp of English syntax. Quirk et al. stress that understanding word order not only enhances grammatical accuracy but also improves overall communication skills (201).

## **Reducing Recurring Errors through Targeted Interventions**

Recurring grammatical errors, such as subject-verb disagreement or misplaced modifiers, often indicate systemic issues that require targeted interventions. These errors can persist despite general instruction, highlighting the need for personalized support and practice.

Interventions may include focused exercises, peer review sessions, and individualized feedback that address specific problem areas. For instance, if students struggle with article usage, activities that contrast definite and indefinite articles can help clarify their functions. Group discussions and collaborative editing tasks can also foster a deeper understanding of grammatical rules and their application.

## **Interplay of Feedback and Analysis in Writing Instruction**

Error analysis and corrective feedback are interdependent processes that form the foundation of effective writing instruction. While error analysis identifies patterns and underlying causes, feedback provides the guidance needed to address these issues. Together, they create a comprehensive framework for improving grammatical proficiency.

## **Motivation: The Driving Force in Grammar Mastery**

Motivation is a critical factor in students' ability to learn and apply grammatical concepts effectively. It influences their willingness to engage with feedback, practice regularly, and seek improvement. According to Krashen, intrinsic motivation, driven by personal goals and interests, leads to more sustained effort and better outcomes than extrinsic motivation, which relies on external rewards or pressure (143).

Educators can enhance motivation by highlighting the practical benefits of grammatical proficiency, such as improved academic performance and career prospects. Celebrating progress, setting achievable goals, and fostering a supportive learning environment can also boost learners' confidence and enthusiasm. By integrating motivational strategies into grammar instruction, educators can empower students to overcome challenges and achieve long-term success.

## **Existing Approaches to Teaching Grammar**

Grammar instruction in Nigerian educational institutions has been inconsistent. Research suggests that traditional methods, such as rote memorization, may not effectively improve students' writing skills (NCTN). Instead, there is growing support for integrating contextualized grammar instruction, which links grammatical rules to real-world writing scenarios. Chien highlights the effectiveness of this approach, noting that teachers who design grammar lessons around meaningful contexts observe greater student engagement and retention (1-22). Similarly, the Center for the Professional Education of Teachers (CPET) emphasizes the need for grammar to be embedded within students' reading and writing activities, rather than taught in isolation. These insights align with broader calls for innovation in grammar instruction, as studies show that students benefit more when grammatical concepts are directly applied to their writing. However, such progressive methods are yet to be widely adopted in higher education curricula, particularly in ESL contexts like Nigeria.

### **Challenges of Academic Writing in ESL Contexts**

Academic writing poses significant challenges for ESL learners, especially in Nigeria, where English functions as the medium of instruction and an official language. Ekpe found that Nigerian undergraduates often struggle with grammatical accuracy, coherence, and organization in their writing (78). Similarly, Singh et al. identified verb-tense inconsistencies and subject-verb disagreements as recurrent issues among students (16-27). The 2023 WAEC Chief Examiner's report highlighted widespread grammatical errors, including wrong concord/tenses and lack of coherence, which were attributed to inadequate grammar instruction during formative year.

### **Importance of Grammatical Accuracy in Writing**

Grammatical accuracy is pivotal for effective written communication, particularly in academic settings. Errors in grammatical categories can distort meaning, reduce credibility, and lower academic performance. For Nigerian students, the ability to write with grammatical precision is

not only an academic necessity but also a professional requirement, as noted by Dahusi (49-61). Employers often assess candidates' written communication skills as a measure of competence, making grammatical accuracy a determinant of career readiness.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in two key linguistic theories: **Error Analysis Theory** and **Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory**. These theories provide a strong foundation for understanding the grammatical challenges faced by ESL learners and offer insights into how students acquire and apply grammatical rules in their writing.

#### **Error Analysis Theory**

Error Analysis (EA) Theory, developed by **Stephen Corder**, is a significant framework in second language research that focuses on identifying, classifying, and analyzing learners' errors. The theory emerged as a response to earlier Contrastive Analysis approaches, which primarily focused on the differences between a learner's first language (L1) and the target language (L2). Unlike Contrastive Analysis, which assumed errors were entirely caused by L1 interference, Error Analysis recognized that errors are an integral part of language learning and can arise from multiple sources, including developmental stages, overgeneralization, and misapplication of linguistic rules.

According to Corder, error analysis serves three primary purposes:

1. **Learner Diagnosis** – Identifying the specific difficulties learners face in acquiring the target language.
2. **Language Acquisition Insights** – Providing valuable information about how second language learners internalize language rules.
3. **Pedagogical Applications** – Informing language instructors about the most common errors to improve teaching methods and materials (161-170).

One of the key assumptions of Error Analysis is that errors are systematic and can be studied scientifically to improve language instruction. Corder distinguished between **errors** (systematic mistakes that reflect a learner's developing interlanguage) and **mistakes** (random slips that learners can correct when pointed out). By analyzing errors, educators can determine whether a mistake results from incomplete knowledge of a rule or from momentary forgetfulness.

This study focuses on identifying and categorizing errors related to **tense, aspect, number, and person** in the academic writing of final-year English language students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The principles of Error Analysis provide a systematic approach to examining these errors, allowing for a deeper understanding of their sources.

- **Error Categorization:** By applying Error Analysis, the study classifies errors in tense, aspect, number, and person to determine which grammatical category presents the most difficulty for students.

- **Interlanguage Development:** The study examines whether students' errors reflect developmental stages in their language learning process.

- **Instructional Improvement:** The findings can inform instructors about the most persistent grammatical difficulties, helping them tailor their teaching methods for better grammar instruction.

By using Error Analysis, this study not only documents grammatical errors but also investigates their causes, contributing to better teaching strategies and corrective interventions.

## Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, pioneered by **Stephen Krashen**, in his *Principle and Practice*, explores how learners acquire a second language, particularly in academic settings. Krashen's model consists of five key hypotheses:

1. **The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis**– Differentiates between **acquisition** (subconscious, natural language

development) and **learning** (conscious, rule-based language study). According to Krashen, fluency in a second language is primarily driven by acquisition rather than direct learning.

2. **The Monitor Hypothesis** – Suggests that consciously learned grammatical rules act as a “monitor” that checks language output but does not directly produce fluency. This hypothesis is particularly relevant to writing, where learners may struggle to apply grammatical rules accurately.

3. **The Input Hypothesis**– States that learners progress when they are exposed to slightly more complex language than their current level (i+1). This highlights the importance of exposure to correct grammatical structures in written texts.

4. **The Affective Filter Hypothesis**– Suggests that factors like anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence influence language acquisition. High anxiety levels may inhibit students from experimenting with new grammatical structures in writing.

5. **The Natural Order Hypothesis** – Proposes that learners acquire grammatical structures in a predictable sequence, meaning certain errors may be expected at different proficiency levels.

SLA Theory is crucial to this research because it helps explain why final-year ESL students at UNIZIK continue to struggle with grammatical categories despite years of English language education.

- **Error Persistence:** Krashen's hypotheses suggest that grammatical errors in writing may persist because students have not **acquired** certain rules naturally but have instead relied on **memorized** grammatical rules that they struggle to apply effectively.

- **Role of Corrective Feedback:** Since SLA emphasizes meaningful exposure and corrective input, this study explores whether students have been receiving **effective grammatical feedback** in their writing.

- **Impact of Instructional Approaches:** If students are still making errors in tense, aspect, number, and person at their



academic level, it suggests that traditional grammar instruction may not be fostering genuine acquisition, reinforcing the need for improved teaching strategies.

- **Language Anxiety and Writing Performance:** The Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that writing challenges may also stem from psychological factors, such as fear of making mistakes or a lack of confidence in using grammatical structures.

By integrating insights from SLA Theory, this study does not merely document errors but also examines the broader linguistic and instructional factors that contribute to these challenges.

### **Integrating the Two Theories in This Study**

Both **Error Analysis Theory** and **Second Language Acquisition Theory** complement each other in providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing students' grammatical errors.

- **Error Analysis identifies and categorizes** the specific grammar errors students make, while

- **SLA Theory explains why these errors persist** and how students' grammatical knowledge develops over time.

By combining these theories, this study achieves a dual purpose:

1. **Descriptive** – It systematically categorizes errors in tense, aspect, number, and person.
2. **Explanatory** – It investigates the underlying causes of these errors, considering both linguistic and instructional factors.

This framework supports the study's broader goal of recommending effective corrective interventions that enhance students' grammatical accuracy in academic writing.

## **Methodology**

This study is conducted at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, specifically within the Department of English Language and Literature. The university is located in Awka, Anambra State. The final-year students in this department are expected to have attained a high level of proficiency in English, making them a suitable population for studying grammatical challenges in academic writing.

This study adopts a **descriptive research design**. Descriptive research is suitable because it aims to systematically identify and analyze the grammatical errors in students' academic writing without manipulating any variables. By examining essays written by final-year students, the study will provide a detailed account of the types and frequency of grammatical errors related to tense, aspect, number, and person.

The primary instrument for data collection is **essay writing tasks**. Twenty final-year students will be given a list of essay topics and required to write a minimum of 300 words on a topic of their choice. The essays will serve as the data source for identifying grammatical errors. The researcher will manually analyze the texts to classify errors into the four grammatical categories under investigation.

The population of this study comprises all **154 final-year students** in the Department of English Language and Literature at Nnamdi Azikiwe University. These students have undergone years of training in English language studies, making them ideal subjects for assessing grammatical accuracy in academic writing.

A **random sampling technique** will be used to select 20 students, comprising both male and female, from the total population of 154. Each student will have an equal chance of being selected, ensuring that the sample is representative of the larger group. This technique enhances the objectivity and reliability of the study by reducing researcher bias.

The validity of the instrument (essay writing task) is ensured through expert review. The essay prompts will be carefully selected to encourage students to demonstrate a range of grammatical structures, making it possible to observe errors naturally occurring in their writing. Additionally, grammatical error classification will be guided by

established linguistic frameworks to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Data will be analyzed **qualitatively and quantitatively**. The qualitative aspect involves categorizing errors and describing patterns observed. The quantitative aspect involves using **frequency distribution tables** to present the occurrence of different error types. Percentages will be calculated to determine the most prevalent grammatical issues, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by students in their academic writing.

The data analysis for this study will be guided by **Error Analysis Theory** (Corder, 161-170), which serves as the foundation for identifying and classifying grammatical errors in the academic writing of final-year students. The analysis will focus specifically on errors **related** to four grammatical categories: **tense, aspect, number, and person**. These categories will be analyzed as follows:

### Step 1: Identification of Errors

The first step will involve the careful reading of students' essays. Errors related to the grammatical categories of tense, aspect, number, and person would be identified.

### Step 2: Classification of Errors

These errors would then be streamlined and classified into the following for an easy analysis:

- Tense/aspect usage errors: Errors in the use of present, past and future tenses.

- Subject-verb agreement/number errors: Singular, plural and concord errors.

- Grammatical Person errors: Errors in the placement of first, second and third person pronouns.

### Step 3: Analysis of Causes

The next step will involve exploring the **causes** of these errors using **interlingual interference** (errors from mother tongue interference), **intra lingual errors** (errors caused by overgeneralization of English rules), and **developmental errors** (errors that arise from the natural progression of language learning). This will help explain why specific errors occur more frequently, providing insights into the students' common challenges when applying grammatical categories in their writing.

### Step 4: Frequency Distribution and Error Patterns

After categorizing and analyzing the errors, a **frequency distribution table** will be used to summarize the occurrence of each error type. This will allow the study to identify the most common grammatical challenges related to tense, aspect, number, and person. The analysis will help draw conclusions about the most problematic areas of grammar that require targeted intervention.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

#### Types of Grammatical Errors

**Table 1: Errors Related to Tense/Aspect with their Correct Forms**

INCORRECT	CORRECT	REASON
1. If I had known I would have been polite to him and not exchange words with him and all my things <i>will still be</i> safe with me.	If I had known, I would have been polite to him and would not have exchanged words with him, and all my things <i>would have still been</i> safe with me.	Tense inconsistency. Since the first part of the sentence refers to a past hypothetical situation, the second part should also follow the same pattern.
2. The media <i>has introduce</i> different legal	The media <i>has introduced</i> different	The verb should be 'introduced'

and educational platforms...	legal and educational platforms...	since it refers to something that happened in the past.
3. From the moment we're born. We <i>were</i> immersed in a world of custom...	a) From the moment we're born, we <i>are</i> immersed in a world of custom...  b) From the moment we were born, we were immersed in a world of customs...	Tense inconsistency. Either use present all through or past tense.
4. For example, in some cultures, individuality is highly valued while in other, collectivity is <i>emphasize</i> .	For example, in some cultures, individuality is highly valued while in others, collectivity is <i>emphasized</i> .	The verb should be in the past participle form "emphasized" to match "is".
5. The 20 <sup>th</sup> of October, 2021 was a day I <i>will</i> never forget.	The 20 <sup>th</sup> of October, 2021, was a day I <i>would</i> never forget.	Tense inconsistency.  'Will' should be changed to 'would'
6. Then something even worst <i>happen</i> , it began to rain.	Then something even worse <i>happened</i> , it began to rain.	Incorrect tense.  "Happen" should be in the past since you're relating a past event.
7. I silently and fearfully began to pray the rosary, confessing my sins and promising that I would become a changed person if only God <i>leads</i> me safely to my destination.	I silently and fearfully began to pray the rosary, confessing my sins and promising that I would become a changed person if only God <i>led</i> me safely to my destination.	Tense inconsistency.  "Leads" should be "led" to match the other past tense verbs.
8. As the say <i>will goes</i> , too much of everything is bad.	As the saying <i>goes</i> , too much of everything is bad.	Incorrect tense.  Present tense should be used for common sayings.

**Table 2: Errors Related to Number/Subject-verb Agreement with their Correct Forms**

INCORRECT

CORRECT

REASON

1. All <i>this</i> come together to make us who we are.	All <i>these</i> come together to make us who we are.	In the context of the essay, 'all this' referred to multiple elements so should be 'these'.
2. It was not long before we discovered that the vehicle had no <i>wiper</i> ...	It was not long before we discovered that the vehicle had no <i>wipers</i> ...	Plurality error  'Wiper' should be 'wipers' since they come in a pair.
3. I began to imagine many <i>thing</i> that could go wrong.	I began to imagine many <i>things</i> that could go wrong.	plurality error:  "Many thing" → "Many things"  "Thing" is singular, but "many" refers to multiple items, so it should be "things."
4. Technology has revolutionized the way we learn. <i>They have</i> made education more.....	Technology has revolutionized the way we learn. <i>It has</i> made education more.....	Mismatched number.  "Technology" is singular, therefore it pronoun ought to be singular as well.
5. Laboratories <i>helps</i> students to see...	Laboratories <i>help</i> students to see...	Subject-verb agreement error.  "Laboratories" is plural so the verb that follows should also be plural.
6. <i>Student tends</i> to learn online through the use of their <i>computer's</i> .	<i>Students tend</i> to learn online through the use of their <i>computers</i> .  <i>A student tends</i> to learn online....	Confusion in number use.  Omission of the plural marker or an article creates confusion.
7. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and all that <i>is</i> very common among Nigerian youths.	Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and all that <i>are</i> very common among Nigerian youths.	Subject-verb agreement error.  "Platforms" is plural so the verb ought to be plural as well.
8. That was how my phone, wallet and 1,000 naira <i>was</i> stolen from me.	That was how my phone, wallet and 1,000 naira <i>were</i> stolen from me.	Subject-verb agreement error.  The items listed should go with a plural verb.
9. It is important that <i>parent</i> , educators and policy makers take note of <i>this</i> negative effects and take steps to reduce	It is important that <i>parents</i> , educators and policy makers take note of <i>these</i> negative effects and take steps to	"Negative effects" signifies plurality therefore "this" is wrong. Also the pronoun "it" should be "them"

<i>it.</i>	reduce <i>them.</i>	(referring to "effects")
10. Those who <i>has</i> been sitting there all day couldn't even get in.	10. Those who <i>have</i> been sitting there all day couldn't even get in.	Mismatched number. "Those" should go with "have"

**Table 3: Errors Related to Grammatical Person with their Correct Forms**

INCORRECT	CORRECT	REASON
1. <i>Me and my Mother</i> couldn't believe our ears.	<i>My mother and I</i> couldn't believe our ears.	Wrong use of object pronoun.  <i>Me</i> should only take the object position
2. It provides them with a platform to express <i>theirselves</i>	It provides them with a platform to express <i>themselves</i> .	There is no pronoun as theirselves, the right pronoun is <i>themselves</i> .
3. My brother and <i>myself</i> were born in Lagos	My brother and <i>I</i> were born in Lagos	<i>Myself</i> is a reflexive pronoun. Reflexive pronouns do not take the subject position.
4. "Who should I give it" he asked.	"To whom should I give it?" he asked.	"Who" is used as subject.  The correct object pronoun is "whom"
5. One should do <i>your</i> best if one wants to be great.	5. One should do <i>his or her</i> best if one wants to be great.	It mixes two different grammatical persons:  "One" (used twice) is a third-person singular indefinite pronoun.  "Your" is a second-person pronoun, which does not match one.
6. <i>Myself</i> and my mum went to the market.	My mum and <i>I</i> went to the market.	"Myself" is a reflexive pronoun. Reflexive pronouns do not take the subject position.
7. One should always do what <i>they</i> feel is right.	One should always do what <i>he or she</i> feels is right.	Shift from singular noun to plural noun.  Although "they" is now accepted in

informal and modern English as a gender-neutral option.

However, in formal academic writing, "he or she" is preferred to avoid ambiguity

**Research question 1: To what extent do final-year students at UNIZIK struggle with grammatical categories in their academic writing?**

**Table 5: Frequency of errors identified in the essays:**

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Tense/Aspect	25	39.06%
Number/Subject-verb agreement	28	43.75%
Person	11	17.19%
Total Errors	64	100%

The results show that errors in Number/ subject-verb agreement (28 errors) were the most frequent errors. Followed by errors in tense/aspect (25 errors) and person-related errors (11 errors). The findings from this study indicate that final-year students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (UNIZIK) struggle significantly with grammatical categories in their academic writing, particularly in tense/aspect, number/subject-verb agreement, and person. The error analysis reveals the following distribution:

1. Number/Subject-Verb Agreement Errors (28 errors, 43.75%)

- These errors were the most frequent, accounting for nearly half of all grammatical mistakes. A finding that concurs with previous researchers like that of Zanna et al. (111-119).

- Common issues included mismatches between singular and plural subjects and their corresponding verbs (e.g., **Laboratories helps** instead of **Laboratories help**).

- This suggests that students struggle with the syntactic rules governing verb inflection, possibly due to L1 interference or inadequate mastery of English grammar rules.

2. Tense/Aspect Errors (25 errors, 39.06%)

- A substantial proportion of errors were related to incorrect tense usage and aspectual distinctions, a finding that aligns with notable research works like Sigh et al. (16-17).

- Students often shifted tenses inappropriately (**From the day we are born, we were immersed in a world of customs** instead of **from the day we are born, we are**

**immersed in a world of customs**), or misused progressive and perfect aspects.

- These errors suggest difficulty in maintaining temporal consistency in writing, which may stem from inadequate exposure to correct usage and ineffective instructional approaches.

### 3. Person Errors (11 errors, 17.19%)

- Errors in person were the least frequent but still significant.

- Common mistakes included inconsistent shifts between first-person and third-person pronouns (**One should do your best** instead of **One should do his or her best**).

- These errors indicate a lack of awareness of pronoun agreement rules, which affect sentence clarity and coherence.

### 4. Higher Frequency of Errors in Narrative Writing

- Students made more grammatical errors in narrative writing compared to other forms of academic writing.

- Narrative writing often requires frequent tense shifts and complex sentence structures, making students more prone to errors.

- This suggests that students struggle more with grammar when writing expressively, compared to structured academic writing tasks.

### **Research question 2: What factors contribute to these challenges in the context of ESL learning?**

From the perspective of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, several factors contribute to these grammatical difficulties:

- First Language (L1) Interference: Many of the errors reflect structural patterns from students' native languages,

showing that full mastery of English grammar has not been achieved.

- Inadequate Grammar Instruction: Traditional ESL teaching methods often focus on rote memorization rather than practical application, leading to poor grammatical accuracy.

- Limited Corrective Feedback: Students may not receive sufficient feedback on their grammatical errors, leading to fossilization—where incorrect structures become permanent.

- Lack of Extensive Writing Practice: Writing requires repeated exposure and practice to develop accuracy. The limited emphasis on structured writing tasks may hinder students' grammatical development.

### **Research question 3: What practical strategies can be proposed to address these errors?**

Based on Error Analysis (EA) and SLA theories, the following strategies can help improve students' grammatical accuracy:

1. Explicit Grammar Instruction: Teaching grammatical categories directly, with a focus on tense/aspect, number, subject-verb agreement and person, will help students understand and apply the rules correctly.

2. Targeted Corrective Feedback: Teachers should provide focused feedback on students' errors, particularly in tense usage and subject-verb agreement, using both direct and indirect feedback strategies.

3. Increased Writing Practice: Students should be engaged in frequent structured writing exercises, particularly in narrative and expository writing, to reinforce correct grammatical usage.

4. Peer Review and Editing Workshops: Encouraging students to identify and correct errors in their peers' writing can improve their awareness of grammatical mistakes.

5. Use of Error Analysis Techniques: Incorporating error analysis activities into the curriculum will help students recognize common mistakes and avoid them in future writing.

## Discussion of Findings

One of the most prominent issues observed was tense and aspect errors, which accounted for 39.06% of the total errors. Many students demonstrated frequent incorrect tense shifts, often inconsistently moving between present and past tense within the same passage. Additionally, the misuse of progressive and perfect aspects was evident, suggesting difficulties in applying appropriate verb forms based on context. In some cases, past tense markers were entirely omitted, indicating gaps in students' understanding of tense structures.

Errors related to number and subject-verb agreement were the most frequent, constituting 43.75% of the total errors. A common issue was the mismatch between singular subjects and plural verbs or vice versa. These errors became more pronounced in longer and more complex sentences, where students struggled to maintain agreement. Morphosyntactic challenges were also evident, particularly in cases where verb inflections did not align correctly with subject forms.

Person errors, though the least frequent at 17.19%, still posed notable challenges. Many students displayed inconsistent shifts between first-person and third-person pronouns within the same sentence, leading to confusion in sentence clarity. Misuse of subject and object pronouns was also observed, with instances where pronouns were incorrectly substituted or used ambiguously. Such errors can obscure meaning and disrupt the logical flow of writing.

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An interesting trend emerged in the analysis—students committed more grammatical errors in narrative writing than in other forms of academic writing. Narrative essays appeared to pose greater difficulties in maintaining tense consistency and subject-verb agreement, as students frequently switched tenses without clear justification. The influence of first-language (L1) structures was evident in sentence formation, leading to direct translations that did not align with English grammar rules. Additionally, the tendency to write longer and more complex sentences in narratives seemed to increase the likelihood of grammatical errors.

These findings suggest a need for targeted interventions to improve grammatical accuracy, particularly in tense usage and subject-verb agreement. A focus on structured writing exercises and explicit grammar instruction could help address these persistent challenges and enhance students' overall writing proficiency.

## Conclusions

Based on the findings, the study concludes that tense/aspect and subject-verb agreement errors are the most prevalent grammatical issues in the students' writing. These errors largely stem from interlingual transfer (influence of L1 structures), intralingual factors (overgeneralization of English rules), and inadequate exposure to corrective feedback.

From an SLA perspective, the persistence of these errors suggests that students may have reached a fossilization stage, where certain mistakes become ingrained due to insufficient explicit instruction. This reinforces the need for targeted grammar intervention at earlier academic stages to prevent error fossilization.



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