

Investigating Phrase Usage Errors in the English Language Education Study Program: A Student-Centered Analysis

Magvirah Octasary¹, Rahmatul Ummu Arifin², Destrin Lebagi³

¹Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP, Universitas Khairun, Indonesia

²Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP, Sekolah Tinggi Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Abdul Mujib Laewang Dampal Selatan, Indonesia

³Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP, Universitas Tadulako, Indonesia

Email: magvirah.octasary@unkhair.ac.id, desrinlebagi@yahoo.co.id, rahmatulummu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The primary objectives of this study were (1) to identify the types of errors made by third-semester students in the use of noun phrases and (2) to determine the most frequently occurring error type. To achieve these objectives, a descriptive qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected using two types of assessments: multiple-choice questions and essay writing tasks. These instruments were designed to elicit various forms of noun phrase usage to allow for a comprehensive analysis of student performance. Based on the data analysis, four main types of grammatical errors were identified; omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. Among these, misinformation errors were found to be the most prevalent. This suggests that while students may understand the general structure of noun phrases, they struggle with selecting the correct grammatical forms, such as appropriate determiners, pluralization, or adjective-noun order. The high frequency of misinformation errors may stem from several interrelated factors, including interference from the students' first language, insufficient grammatical instruction, and limited exposure to authentic English usage.

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Corresponding Author:

Magvirah Octasary

Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP, Universitas Khairun; magvirah.octasary@unkhair.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in English, particularly in academic settings, requires not only a strong vocabulary but also a firm grasp of grammatical structures, including the use of phrases. A phrase is defined as a group of words that operates as a single grammatical unit within a sentence but lacks both a subject and a predicate (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). Among

various types of phrases, noun phrases play a particularly important role in academic writing, as they are frequently used to introduce and elaborate on key concepts.

Proficiency in constructing and appropriately using phrases—especially noun phrases—is fundamental to achieving grammatical accuracy in both spoken and written English. This competence requires not only the recognition of individual lexical items but also an understanding of the syntactic and semantic relationships among them to convey precise meaning (Thornbury, 1999). In higher education contexts, students are expected to demonstrate sufficient English language proficiency to effectively participate in academic tasks. However, many students continue to encounter difficulties in forming grammatically correct and semantically coherent noun phrases, which negatively impacts the clarity and quality of their academic writing. Identifying and analyzing these common errors is therefore essential to improving pedagogical strategies in English language instruction.

According to Norrish (1983), there are 3 types of errors namely carelessness, first language interference and translation; (1) *Carelessness*, rather than a lack of linguistic expertise, carelessness is a sort of inaccuracy that is usually linked to a lack of effort or attention. It frequently occurs when students are not totally attentive and fail to apply rules they have already understood. Based on Pawlak, (2013) careless errors occur not because the learner does not know the correct form, but because of temporary lapses in concentration or effort. Some teachers acknowledge that such errors may be linked to a broader issue of low motivation, which can stem from the use of inappropriate learning materials, unengaging presentation methods, or a lack of contextual relevance in classroom content. For instance, a student might write “She go to school every day” instead of “She goes to school every day”—not because they are unaware of the rule, but because of inattention or a rushed effort. These mistakes emphasize the importance of fostering a motivating and stimulating learning environment to sustain students’ focus and reduce unintentional errors; (2) *First Language Interference*, First-language interference (also referred to as language transfer) occurs when a learner applies elements of their native language (L1) to their second language (L2), leading to errors. This phenomenon is a well-documented cause of errors in second language acquisition, as learners often rely on familiar linguistic structures, vocabulary, and rules from their native language when attempting to communicate in the target language. These errors can manifest at various levels, including phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics; (3) Translation, translation errors occur when learners use direct translation from their first language (L1) to their second language (L2). This leads to incorrect word choices, syntactic errors, and semantic misunderstandings, which can impede the clarity and accuracy of communication. These errors are particularly prevalent among learners who are heavily dependent on their native language to understand and produce sentences in the target language. While translation can serve as a useful tool for bridging the gap between L1 and L2, it becomes problematic when

overused or misapplied. Let's delve into the causes and consequences of translation errors, the types of errors involved, and how overreliance on translation can hinder language learning.

A frequently observed issue among learners is the inappropriate use of noun phrases within specific contexts, which often leads to ambiguity and diminished clarity in written communication. This problem is compounded by students' limited understanding of the structural components and grammatical functions of noun phrases, including the ability to differentiate between nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. As a result, students may construct sentences that are syntactically incorrect or semantically unclear, thereby undermining the overall coherence and effectiveness of their writing.

Errors in the use of noun phrases can significantly hinder students' ability to write and communicate effectively in English. Octasary et al., (2024) implied that such errors are generally understood as deviations from standard language norms, often resulting from a lack of full comprehension of grammatical rules. In line with that, Swandana et al., (2020) these errors tend to recur due to the absence of corrective feedback or the learner's inability to internalize linguistic structures. The persistence of such errors highlights a disconnect between the grammatical knowledge delivered through formal instruction and its practical application in real-world communication.

Several theories can serve as recommendations for defining errors to recognize, classify, and examine linguistic errors. These include Surface Strategy Taxonomy. This taxonomy focuses mostly on understanding the cognitive processes that students use to learn a new language. Students could add extraneous morphemes or words, forget essential ones, or misform or rearrange things. Dulay et al., (1982) explain that error based on surface category is classified into four types, such as omission, addition, misformation, misordering. Those are; (1) *Omission*, the mistake of leaving off something that is necessary for an utterance to be considered grammatical is known as omission. When a crucial component of a noun phrase is left out, it can lead to ambiguity or misinterpretation. Determiners, adjectives, and modifiers that add more information about the noun in question are examples of elements that are typically left out. In the context of noun phrases, this type of error arises when essential components such as determiners (e.g., a, the), adjectives, or other modifiers are omitted. For example, saying "boy plays football" instead of "the boy plays football" omits the definite article, which may lead to confusion regarding the specificity of the noun. Such omissions can significantly impact meaning, causing ambiguity or misinterpretation, and often reflect the learner's developing grasp of syntactic and semantic roles within noun phrase construction; (2) *Addition*, this type of error occurs when the speaker or writer includes unnecessary words or phrases, resulting in redundancy or structural inappropriateness within the sentence. Such errors often reflect a lack of syntactic efficiency or a misunderstanding of the grammatical structure, leading to phrases that are overly verbose or semantically repetitive. In the context of noun phrases, these errors typically involve the insertion of superfluous determiners,

adjectives, or modifiers that violate the rules of noun phrase structure. For example, a learner might say “the a dog” or “many the books”, where the use of multiple determiners is incorrect and leads to redundancy or confusion. Addition errors may stem from overgeneralization of rules, transfer from the learner’s first language, or a lack of familiarity with the syntactic constraints governing noun phrase formation in English. Such mistakes hinder both fluency and clarity, highlighting the importance of mastering the structural sequence of elements within noun phrases; (3) *Misordering*, errors of misordering are characterized by the incorrect placement of a morpheme or a group of morphemes within an utterance. In the context of noun phrase usage, this type of error occurs when the components of the noun phrase — such as determiners, adjectives, quantifiers, or nouns — are arranged in an inappropriate sequence. Such misordering can significantly alter the intended meaning or render the sentence grammatically incorrect or unclear. For example, a learner might say “red big car” instead of “big red car”, violating the conventional adjective order in English. These errors often reflect learners’ limited awareness of the syntactic rules that govern noun phrase structure in English; (4) *Misinformation*, Misformation errors are characterized using incorrect word forms or the inappropriate selection of grammatical elements. In the context of noun phrase construction, misformation occurs when the learner uses an incorrect form of a determiner, adjective, quantifier, or noun that does not align with standard grammatical rules. These errors indicate that the learner has understood the need for a particular structure but has failed to apply the correct form. According to Dulay et al., (1982) misformation happens when “the learner supplies something, although it is incorrect”.

Although numerous studies have examined grammatical errors among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the majority tend to focus on general grammatical categories or broader writing issues, such as verb tense, subject-verb agreement, or sentence structure. Relatively few investigations have isolated noun phrases as a specific grammatical construct for in-depth analysis, especially within the Indonesian higher education context. Most prior research does not provide a detailed categorization of the types of errors that occur within noun phrases, nor does it situate such errors within a well-established theoretical taxonomy. This limited attention to the structural complexities of noun phrase formation represents a significant research gap in the current literature.

Moreover, existing studies often adopt qualitative approaches or general error analysis frameworks without utilizing a comprehensive error classification system that accounts for learners’ cognitive processing. In contrast, this study employs Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay et al., 1982) as an analytical framework to classify errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This methodological choice offers a novel perspective on understanding how and why these errors occur, moving beyond mere identification to explore their underlying causes. By applying this taxonomy specifically to the analysis of noun phrase errors, the study provides a new lens for investigating syntactic development in EFL learners.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study enhances the state of the art in second language acquisition research by addressing a micro-linguistic feature—noun phrase construction—that plays a critical role in learners' academic writing performance but has received insufficient attention. Additionally, by focusing on third-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program at Khairun University, this research also offers context-specific insights that have direct pedagogical implications for improving grammar instruction in local EFL classrooms.

Ultimately, this study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical grammar instruction and practical language use by identifying the most common patterns of noun phrase errors, analyzing their sources, and offering recommendations for instructional improvement. In doing so, it contributes not only to the academic understanding of grammatical competence but also to the development of more effective teaching strategies tailored to the needs of Indonesian EFL learners.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive qualitative research methodology was employed in this study. This approach was selected to examine and characterize the different kinds of mistakes and the most common mistakes made by third-semester students at Khairun University's English Language Education Study Program when utilizing noun phrases. A descriptive qualitative method works well for comprehending and analyzing occurrences in their natural setting, claims (Cresswell, 2017). Based on the information gathered from students' written projects, the researcher concentrated on identifying the different kinds of noun phrase errors and figuring out which faults were more common. Without comparing the results to those of other institutions, the qualitative analysis was carried out and the results were presented descriptively to show the trends and patterns in the mistakes made by the students.

Thirty students of third-semester from Khairun University class B English Language Education Study Program served as the research subjects. The study's tools included five essay questions, and fifteen multiple-choice questions intended to detect and examine students' misuse of noun phrases. The multiple-choice questions were carefully designed to target specific aspects of noun phrase usage, such as identifying noun phrases in context, distinguishing between simple and complex noun phrases, and recognizing their syntactic functions within sentences. These objective items allowed for efficient assessment of students' foundational knowledge and recognition skills related to noun phrase structures.

In contrast, the essay items demanded a higher level of cognitive engagement by requiring students to actively construct sentences that incorporated various types of noun phrases. This not only evaluated their ability to apply grammatical rules but also provided qualitative insights into their depth of understanding and practical usage of noun phrases in coherent written contexts. By employing both multiple-choice and essay formats, the study leveraged

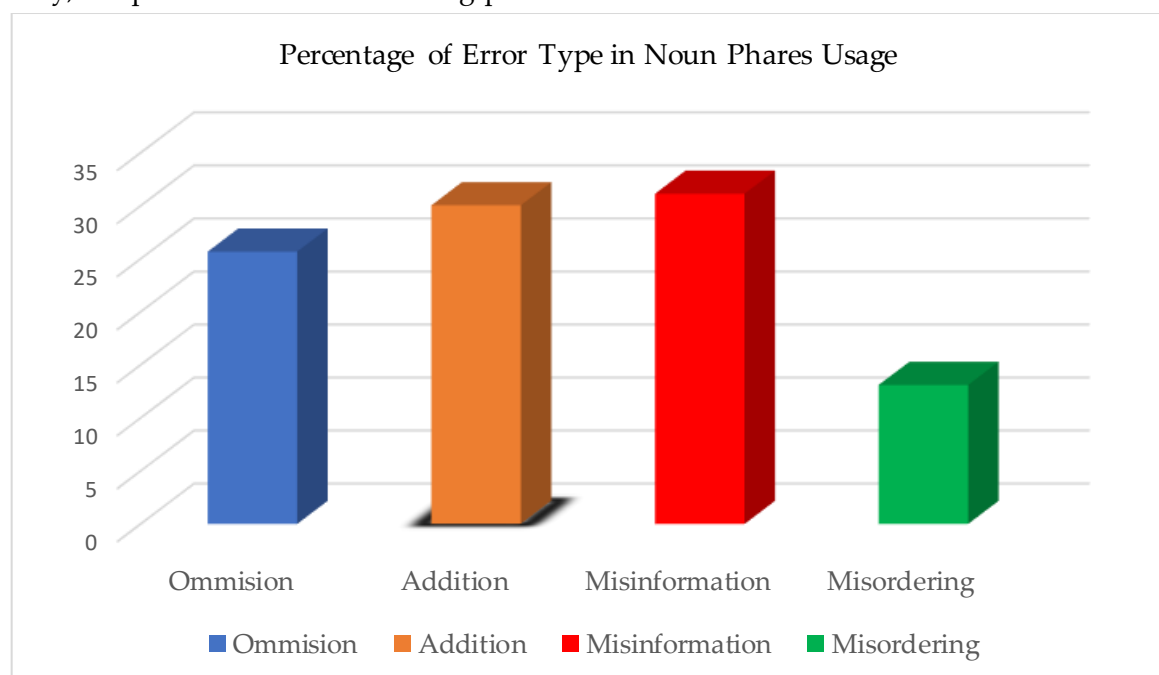
the strengths of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, ensuring a more holistic evaluation of students' grasp and application of noun phrase constructions in English. This comprehensive approach aligned closely with the research objectives, allowing for a nuanced analysis of both theoretical knowledge and practical competence.

Data were collected using a worksheet consisting of 15 multiple-choice items and 5 essay items focused on noun phrases. Errors were identified and classified into omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering based on (Dulay et al., 1982) theory of error classification. This process aimed to describe the errors comprehensively and highlight the most frequent error types to offer insights into students' difficulties in using noun phrases.

In addition to using essays and multiple-choice tests as instruments for data collection, the researcher also aimed to investigate the underlying causes of the errors made by the students. To achieve this, the researcher applied the framework proposed by Norrish (1983) who identified three main categories of error causes. These categories, as previously outlined, provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing the reasons behind students' language errors. By utilizing Norrish's theory, the researcher was able to systematically classify the errors and gain deeper insights into the cognitive and linguistic challenges faced by the learners.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing and calculating the errors related to noun phrases in the students' answer sheets, the researcher compiled a list showing the percentage of each type of error. The findings from this analysis, which highlight the students' difficulties in using noun phrases correctly, are presented in the following picture:



Picture 1. Percentage of Error Type in Noun Phares Usage

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of four types of errors students made when constructing noun phrases. These types are omission, addition, misinformation, and misordering. By examining the chart, we can interpret not just the frequency of errors but also gain insight into the nature and severity of the students' difficulties.

A. Misinformation – The Most Frequent Error

Misinformation errors top the chart, indicating that many students struggle with selecting the correct grammatical forms in noun phrases. This could involve incorrect use of determiners, adjectives, or plural/singular forms—such as saying “*a informations*” instead of “*information*”. The high frequency suggests that students may lack a clear understanding of the structural rules that govern noun phrase formation.

a. Student AY:

Incorrect : “*I need some advices from you*”.

Correct : “*I need some advice from you*”

b. Student DC:

Incorrect : “*The children is playing in the yard.*”

Correct : “*The children are playing in the yard.*”

c. Student RU:

Incorrect : “*He bought an beautiful white shirt.*”

Correct : “*He bought a beautiful white shirt.*”

B. Addition – Also Highly Prevalent

Addition errors come second, showing that students frequently include extra or unnecessary elements in noun phrases. This may reflect confusion about article usage (e.g., “*the a car*”) or redundancy in modifiers. These errors imply that while students attempt to construct complex noun phrases, they often overcompensate or misapply grammatical rules.

a. Student UL:

Incorrect : “*The very beautiful garden is full of colorful flowers.*”

Correct : “*The beautiful garden is full of colorful flowers.*”

b. Student NF:

Incorrect : “*The latest and updated version of the software includes new features.*”

Correct : “*The latest version of the software includes new features.*”

C. Omission – A Significant Issue

Omission errors rank third, which means students often leave out essential components of a noun phrase. For example, they might omit an article (“*I saw cat*” instead of “*I saw a cat*”) or a noun entirely. This type of error could reflect a lack of attention to detail or an incomplete grasp of phrase structure

a. Student NS:

Incorrect : *"She bought beautiful red dress."*

Correct : *"She bought a beautiful red dress."*

b. Student DC:

Incorrect : *"Group of talented musicians performed at the concert."*

Correct : *"A group of talented musicians performed at the concert."*

D. Misordering – Least Common but Still Notable

Although misordering is the least frequent, its presence is still noteworthy. It suggests that some students have difficulty arranging words in the correct syntactic order within a noun phrase—for instance, saying *"a red big balloon"* instead of *"a big red balloon"*. This indicates issues with word order conventions in English, especially regarding adjectives and determiners.

a. Student FA:

Incorrect : *"He has an amazing car red."*

Correct : *"He has an amazing red car."*

b. Student AY:

Incorrect : *"A book interesting."*

Correct : *"An interesting book."*

The present study aimed to analyze students' errors in constructing noun phrases and to determine the most dominant error type based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which includes four categories: misformation, addition, omission, and misordering (Dulay et al., 1982). Data were collected through a descriptive text-writing task, along with multiple-choice and essay tests. A total of 183 noun phrase errors were identified. The distribution of errors is as follows: misformation errors were the most frequent, accounting for 31.14%, followed by addition errors (30.05%), omission errors (25.68%), and misordering errors (13.11%). These results indicate that students predominantly struggle with using incorrect word forms or structures when constructing noun phrases.

These findings are in line with previous studies. For instance, (Widiastuti, 2021) who examined noun phrase errors among Indonesian EFL learners, also reported misformation as the dominant error type. Similarly, (Saputra, 2019) found that students often misused determiners and adjectives, resulting in syntactic inaccuracies in noun phrase constructions. This reinforces the idea that learners frequently experience challenges in applying grammatical rules consistently when forming complex syntactic units such as noun phrases.

Additionally, (Zainuddin & Manan, 2017) found that addition errors were the second most common type among university students, typically involving redundant use of determiners like *"the a"* or *"many the,"* which aligns closely with the findings of this current study. This suggests that learners tend to overgeneralize grammatical rules, particularly in the use of articles and quantifiers, leading to structural redundancy and ambiguity.

In regard to omission errors, the results of this study correspond with the findings of (Rahmawati, 2018) who observed that learners often omitted crucial components such as determiners and modifiers in their noun phrases. These omissions frequently resulted in vague or incomplete sentences, thereby weakening the clarity of written communication.

The least frequent error type in the present study was misordering, which also supports the findings of Laili (2020) who noted that while learners might be aware of necessary components, they often placed them incorrectly due to lack of syntactic awareness or interference from their L1.

In terms of error causation, this study identifies three major contributing factors: carelessness, first language interference, and translation, which have been similarly identified in prior literature. Carelessness errors are often performance-based, resulting from lapses in attention rather than lack of competence. This was evident in many student responses, where errors such as omitted suffixes or misplaced modifiers were found despite evidence of prior understanding (Pawlak, 2013).

First language interference has been widely recognized in second language acquisition literature. As stated by Ellis (2008) and supported by learners often rely on familiar syntactic structures from their L1, which, when transferred to L2 contexts, lead to deviant sentence constructions. In the current study, numerous errors reflected Bahasa Indonesia sentence patterns, especially in noun-adjective ordering and determiner usage.

Lastly, translation-based errors also emerged as a significant factor. Many students appeared to translate ideas directly from Indonesian into English, without adjusting for structural or idiomatic differences. Wijayanti (2020) observed similar patterns in her study, where literal translation often resulted in awkward or grammatically incorrect expressions, especially in academic writing contexts.

In conclusion, the findings of this study not only align with but also reinforce existing research on error types and causes in EFL writing. They underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that address specific syntactic challenges, especially those related to noun phrase construction. Emphasizing practice-based, contextualized grammar instruction, along with timely corrective feedback, may help bridge the gap between linguistic knowledge and practical language use.

CONCLUSION

According to the study, third-semester English Language Education Study Program students at Khairun University committed a number of noun phrase usage mistakes. This is clear from the test results, which show that students made 183 mistakes in total, divided into four categories: 57 misformation errors (31.14%), 55 addition errors (30.05%), 47 omission errors (25.68%), and 24 misordering errors (13.11%). The most common kind of error that was found among these was misformation. The findings suggest that while students are able to construct noun phrases, they face significant challenges in applying grammatical rules

accurately, particularly in the use of correct forms and in avoiding redundant or incorrectly ordered elements. These errors indicate not only gaps in linguistic competence but also the influence of performance factors such as carelessness and first language interference. By addressing these pedagogical needs, educators can better support students in developing greater grammatical competence and syntactic accuracy, particularly in their written English. Future research could expand on this study by exploring error patterns across different linguistic structures or proficiency levels, offering a broader understanding of learner difficulties in EFL contexts.

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