Assessing Grammatical Competence through Error Analysis in Pakistani Undergraduate ESL Learners' Writing: A Prescriptive Contextual Perspective

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Abstract

Grammatical competence is a critical aspect of second language proficiency, particularly in academic settings, and in Pakistan, there is a strong emphasis on prescriptive grammar that prioritizes adherence to standardized rules. This study examined the distribution and development of grammatical errors in the creative writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners, drawing on a sample of 140 students from the BS English program at the National University of Modern Languages, Faisalabad. Using stratified sampling across early, middle, and final program stages, a manual error analysis was conducted with a predefined coding scheme that grouped errors into four thematic categories: punctuation and connectives, syntactic and grammatical structures, lexical and orthographic aspects, and discourse organization. Results show marked improvement across the program in punctuation, subject–verb agreement, and lexical accuracy, while errors in tense consistency, prepositional use, and sentence fragmentation persisted into later years. Findings indicate that grammar-focused courses contribute to measurable gains but that L1 interference and contextualized usage gaps require supplementary instructional strategies. The study offers implications for curriculum design and targeted instruction to address persistent error types in university-level ESL writing.

Keywords: grammatical competence, error analysis, Pakistani ESL learners, prescriptive grammar, curriculum development

Introduction

Mastery of grammatical structures constitutes a fundamental component of second language proficiency, especially within academic contexts where

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precision, clarity, and syntactic accuracy in written communication are imperative for effective expression and scholarly success. In Pakistan, there is a strong inclination towards prescriptive grammar pedagogy, focusing on adherence to standardized rules (Towsey, 1952). In the Pakistani educational landscape, English as Second Language (ESL) learners, particularly at the undergraduate level, often encounter challenges in achieving grammatical competence. Learner writing provides a valuable corpus for analyzing linguistic features such as sentence structures, word usage, and syntactic patterns; this corpus can be systematically examined to identify the frequency and distribution of grammatical errors and deviations from Standard English norms.

Empirical studies have documented recurrent errors in areas such as verb usage, punctuation, and tense consistency. While previous research has primarily employed descriptive error analysis, there remains a gap in delving deep into the cognitive and developmental processes underlying language acquisition. However, these frameworks have not been sufficiently applied to understand the persistent grammatical errors among ESL learners in Pakistan. This oversight limits the development of targeted instructional strategies that address the root causes of these errors. For this purpose, this research intends to extend the current literature by applying the prescriptive approach to grammar in a detailed error analysis of student writing, and then interpreting the findings by drawing upon established Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. By doing so, it not only documents the frequency and types of grammatical errors but also elucidates the underlying structural relationships that students fail to internalize. This approach is particularly pertinent given the significant influence of L1 interference from Urdu, as evidenced in studies by Nazir (2023) and Sultana et al. (2022). Additionally, the study attempts to assess the impact of grammar-focused courses over the four-year undergraduate program on students' grammatical proficiency through a keen inspection of their creative writing on a given topic, thereby seeking to address the following questions:

- What are the predominant grammatical error patterns in undergraduate students' writing, and how do they evolve (improve, persist, or decline) over the four-year program?

- To what extent do targeted grammar-based courses (such as academic writing, reading and writing skills) contribute to improvements in students' grammatical competence?

This study thus aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the grammatical proficiency levels among Pakistani ESL learners, precisely those from NUML, Faisalabad campus, and the factors influencing their competence. The ultimate goal of this study, henceforth, is to provide a ground for proposing evidence-based recommendations regarding curriculum enhancement, teaching methodologies, and feedback mechanisms, thereby fostering improved grammatical competence among ESL learners.

Review of the Literature

Grammatical competence is widely recognized as a core component of second language (L2) writing, enabling learners to structure ideas, maintain cohesion, and engage effectively in academic discourse (Andaleeb et al., 2025; Belmekki, 2023). Error analysis, initiated by Corder (1967) and developed further by Brown (2000) and Ellis (1994), has established that learner deviations are not random mistakes but systematic indicators of developmental processes. These insights are closely tied to the notion of interlanguage, defined by Selinker (1972) as the evolving linguistic system learners construct by drawing simultaneously on elements of their first and target languages. Understanding grammatical competence within the Pakistani ESL context, which emphasizes adherence to prescriptive norms (Towsey, 1952), therefore requires considering a range of theoretical perspectives that explain why errors occur and persist.

Among these perspectives, Error Analysis (EA) and Interlanguage Theory underscore how deviations signal transitional stages in language learning. Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998) emphasizes predictable stages of grammatical development constrained by cognitive processing, while Usage-Based Models (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 2003) highlight the role of frequency and meaningful exposure in shaping linguistic competence. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) and the Competition Model further extend this view by showing how multiple factors—cognitive, social, and contextual—interact to shape learner language. Collectively, these frameworks provide a multifaceted lens for interpreting the persistence of grammatical errors among ESL learners.

Empirical studies in Pakistan have consistently reported high frequencies of errors in verb usage, punctuation, and subject–verb agreement, reflecting interlanguage

constraints and L1 influence (Sultana et al., 2022). Nazir (2023), using ICNALE data, identified low accuracy in prepositional verbs, attributing this to cross-linguistic interference and cue reliance, a finding consistent with the Competition Model. Similarly, Al-Khaza'leh (2021) noted errors in punctuation, capitalization, and tense consistency, which Processability Theory would interpret as developmental bottlenecks. These results suggest that while learners demonstrate incremental gains, certain structures—particularly tense and prepositions—remain resistant to instruction and are strongly shaped by transfer effects and processing limitations.

Instructional methodologies also play a critical role in grammatical development. Studies contrasting traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM) with more communicative approaches, such as the Direct Method, reveal that reliance on L1 translation often results in weaker outcomes, whereas immersive approaches promote greater accuracy (Hussain et al., 2022). Romadhon (2024) showed that Content-Based Instruction leads to stronger grammatical performance than memorization-heavy methods, underscoring the value of meaningful input. Task-Based Language Teaching, similarly, has been linked to improved fluency and accuracy (Bano et al., 2023), though its effects on persistent grammatical errors remain underexplored. Technology-enhanced instruction has also demonstrated potential: Belmahdi et al. (2022) report gains in grammatical accuracy through digital tools, while Mushtaq et al. (2021) highlight how iterative writing processes improve overall writing quality. At the same time, Kousar et al. (2021) caution that strong L1 social ties can exacerbate interference, illustrating the contextual dimension of grammatical competence. From a broader perspective, sociocultural approaches emphasize collaborative scaffolding (Najeeb, 2023), while CDST frames grammatical development as a dynamic and adaptive process influenced by multiple interacting variables.

Taken together, these studies highlight both the strengths and limitations of existing research. On one hand, they provide valuable descriptive accounts of error types among Pakistani ESL learners and reveal the impact of instructional methods and social context. On the other hand, much of this work remains narrowly descriptive, focusing on cataloguing error types rather than embedding them in a comprehensive SLA framework. As a result, persistent challenges such as tense consistency, prepositional usage, and sentence fragmentation are often identified but insufficiently explained. Addressing this gap requires an approach that integrates cognitive, developmental, and contextual perspectives. The present study

therefore applies a multifaceted theoretical framework—drawing on Error Analysis, Interlanguage Theory, Processability Theory, Usage-Based Models, the Competition Model, and CDST—to examine the writing of Pakistani undergraduates at NUML, Faisalabad. By doing so, it aims to move beyond description and contribute both to theoretical understanding and to practical pedagogy for university-level ESL instruction.

Methodology

❖ Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research method where samples of students' writing are manually checked and scrutinized for the patterns of grammatical errors at multiple linguistic levels such as morphology, lexical, graphological, syntactic, and semantic stages. The design is rooted in Structural Grammar Theory, which provides a theoretical framework to interpret the systematic nature of grammatical errors in student writing. By integrating this framework with empirical error analysis, the study seeks to understand not only what errors occur but also why they persist, reflecting deeper issues within the interlanguage system of the learners.

❖ Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted during lecture sessions across all semesters of the Department of English at NUML, Faisalabad campus. With the consent of respective lecturers, the researcher administered the writing task on different days during regular classes. In instances where students were absent or otherwise unable to participate, some samples were not collected, resulting in an overall total of 140 responses.

In dreams, we enter the world that is entirely our own!
Dreams know no bounds to societal and economic hindrances. For instance, a girl of mediocre family might want to become a journalist, and a boy might urge to be a fashion designer or painter.

Feel free to share your dream line with us in **2 paragraphs** constituting **50-100 words** .

Requirements:
✓ Name (optional)
✓ Gender (compulsory)
✓ Semester (compulsory)
✓ F.Sc./FA/ICS (compulsory)

10:21 PM ✓✓

In addition to in-person data collection, an online component was incorporated for certain classes. The topic and detailed requirements were shared via WhatsApp groups, ensuring that students received the same instructions regardless of the mode of distribution. The message conveyed to the students read as follows:

Students were instructed to write their responses in two paragraphs, totaling between 50 and 100 words, and to include their name, gender, semester, and academic background (F.Sc./FA/ICS) as compulsory details. This combined approach of in-person and online data collection ensured a diverse and representative sample, forming a robust dataset for the subsequent empirical error analysis.

❖ **Sampling**

In order to map the distribution of grammatical errors and analyze the improvement in grammatical competence of students with progression in the degree and also to look for the impact of grammar-based courses over the four-year certification program on improving grammatical competence, the data has been organized through Stratified Random Sampling, where three strata have been made:

  I.   First Stratum – 27 samples from BS Semesters 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, the newly admitted students who are taught grammar-based courses such as listening speaking skills, reading and writing skills, academic writing, etc. as introductory subjects.

 II.   Second Stratum - 34 samples from BS semesters 4th, 5th, 6th with corresponding BBS semesters 3rd and 4th, where most of the language learning is carried out through self-pickup via reading textbooks and literary genres under study.

III.   Third Stratum - 73 samples from BS semesters 7th and 8th comprising students ripened with grammatical learning and extensive reading and have developed their whatsoever ultimate grammatical competence. This stratum gives us insight into the final product of ESL learners after completing certification in English language.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the grammatical competence of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners, this study employs a multifaceted theoretical framework that integrates four core perspectives. Error Analysis (Corder, 1967) provides the foundation by treating learner deviations not as random mistakes but as systematic indicators of developmental stages. Building on this, Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) explains how learners construct a transitional linguistic system shaped by both their first language and the target language, accounting for persistent error patterns in Pakistani learners influenced by Urdu. Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998) further contributes by emphasizing that grammatical structures are acquired in a

predictable sequence constrained by learners' psycholinguistic readiness, a perspective particularly suited to tracing error evolution across the four-year undergraduate program. Complementing these, Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) highlights the variability and non-linearity of language development, acknowledging the interplay of cognitive, social, and contextual factors in shaping grammatical competence.

In addition to these four primary lenses, the study also draws selectively on Usage-Based Models (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 2003), which underscore the role of frequency and meaningful exposure in consolidating grammatical accuracy, and the Competition Model (Bates & MacWhinney, 1989), which explains persistent error types—such as prepositional misuse—through learners' reliance on salient first-language cues. While not central to the coding scheme, these supporting perspectives enrich the interpretation of findings by linking error patterns to instructional practice and cross-linguistic influence.

Taken together, this integrated framework provides both depth and breadth: it enables systematic error identification, explains developmental sequences, accounts for variability in learner performance, and connects grammatical outcomes to pedagogical implications within the Pakistani ESL context.

❖ **Data Analysis Method**

The qualitative approach of this study emphasizes manual error analysis, where each sample is systematically evaluated using a predefined coding scheme that categorizes errors into four thematic categories according to their grammatical nature:

Thematic Category	Grammatical Features/Errors	
Punctuation and Connectives	*1.*	Punctuation
	2.	Conjunction usage
Syntactic and Grammatical Structures	*3.*	Syntactic constructions
	4.	Subject-verb agreement
	5.	Tense (+ conditionals)
	6.	Prepositional verbs
	7.	Pronoun cases
	8.	Adverbial positioning
	9.	Clausal combination

	10.	First language influence in syntax
Lexical and Orthographic Aspects	*11.*	Vocabulary enrichment
	12.	Spellings
	13.	Contractions
Discourse Organization	*14.*	Topic sentence
	15.	Cohesion

The error distribution adopted in this study was not drawn directly from a single published taxonomy. Instead, it represents an original coding scheme developed by the researcher, informed by established traditions in error analysis (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994; James, 2013). Earlier models have categorized learner errors as grammatical, syntactic, lexical, or substance-related (Hubbard et al., 1996), or emphasized teacher-correctable surface-level features in ESL writing such as grammar, mechanics, and lexis (Ferris, 2011). The present framework reorganizes these conventions into four thematic categories—punctuation and connectives; syntactic and grammatical structures; lexical and orthographic aspects; and discourse organization—reflecting recurrent error patterns in the dataset and aligning with pedagogical concerns documented in recent Pakistani ESL studies (e.g., Nazir, 2023; Sultana et al., 2022).

Ethical Considerations

Data have been collected with prior consent from course lecturers and voluntary participation of students, who were informed about the purpose of the research and assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All samples were coded anonymously and the identifying details were removed while compiling results. In both in-class and online tasks, identical instructions were provided to minimize bias. Participation involved minimal risk, and students were free to withdraw without penalty (cf. Towsey, 1952; Wren & Martin, 2012).

Validity and Reliability

The analysis employs a predefined coding scheme with clearly operationalized categories for error identification. Manual coding has been guided by established error-analysis frameworks, which emphasize systematic treatment of learner errors as indicators of interlanguage development (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). This manual examination not only provides rich, contextualized data but also allows for

the identification of nuanced patterns that automated tools might overlook. The coding scheme and exemplars provide an audit trail that supports replicability. Although multi-rater coding is limited, the use of consistent definitions and piloted categories attempts to enhance reliability and minimized subjectivity, in line with best practices in error analysis (Ellis, 1994; Pienemann, 1998).

Findings and Discussion

The coding scheme, with its clearly defined categories and error types, serves as the foundation for the manual analysis of each writing sample. It ensures that the evaluation of grammatical competence is both systematic and consistent across the dataset.

Stratum I
Early Stage – BS 1st, 2nd, 3rd & BBS 0, 1st, 2nd

This stratum comprises of newly admitted students who get through fundamental courses to both the receptive and productive language skills development. The hitherto grammatical efficiency of students is an out-turn of language skills taught during schooling and especially at the intermediate level, where syllabi are specifically designed to encompass almost every aspect of prescriptive grammar from advanced vocabulary and phrasal verbs to idioms and academic writing skills. A common erratic behavior appeared in almost every passage is the use of punctuation for the sake of meaning construction, particularly the placement of punctuation marks. The most frequent among these errors is the incapacity to manipulate comma (,) leading to indiscretion of phrases or clauses, and, at some times, sentences are not being differentiated precisely because of placing comma instead of full stop. For instance, a passage from BS 2nd begins as such: "If I had not come for BS English. I would surely have opted for Army field." Another passage comes up with the following structure: "I would have apted medicine as a profession. if I didn't do BS English". Two passages emerge in which there is no use of either full stop or comma at all, halting in fashioning a defined structure of passages. Moreover, capitalization seems to be another concerning aberration. Several passages showcase common words (not necessarily nouns) with first letter capitalization such as "… to serve his Nation if he put…", or "… either he Achieve or Not if he…" accompanied with instances where capitalization has been neglected in the beginning of passages or sentences. Occasionally, names of professions,

generally regarded as common nouns had first letter capital even in the middle of sentences such as "... because Doctors play a very essential role in human life" although abbreviations have been mistreated such as "PHD". There are several instances where the personal pronoun "I" was written in flow as "i". In addition to this, the interplay between punctuation and connectives seems to be an unchecked pursuit as according to Wren & Martin (2012) and Straus et al. (2014), comma (,) is placed only before coordinating conjunctions, also known as FANBOYS, while the subordinating conjunctions inaugurating a dependent clause are preceded by a semicolon (;). This rule has been violated several times; for example, in a passage, comma is placed before between (as ", between") while between not giving way to a new clause. Another common and most frequent error in conjunction usage is their placement in the beginning of simple sentences, especially the coordinating conjunctions including "So" and "And" as commonplace for the sake of maintaining coherence in the ideas. A passage has been found with 'and' irrationally placed frequently to combine short clauses such as "Then i got admission in NUML university and my prents support me very much." Students have also been discovered to struggle with contractions owing to the role of apostrophe comma ('), for instance, multiple passages have been caught with the same mistake of using "its", a possessive pronoun, in place of it's, the correct contraction of "it is" and vice versa, e.g. "... due to it's great demand.".

Then come the lexical and orthographical errors, addressing vocabulary enrichment and usage including verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs apart from the use of articles/determiners not to mention the spellings as well as contractions. As established by Straus et al. (2014), the extent of vocabulary enrichment as well as the exploitation of semantically appropriate phrases hints at the scholarship of learners, thereby errors at such customization-based areas hinting at lack of reading or reading preferences; for example, a passage embedding structures such as "and yes" in attempt to create flow among ideas, misspelling because as "cause" and using back instead of ago in past tense, e.g. "I myself took therapy sessions two years back" depicted a massive engrossment in social media language, as claimed by Asare et al. (2022). Furthermore, the redundancy in expressions such as "Army field", use of cardinal nouns such as "... since 1 class", non-acquaintance with the types of nouns such as "They cheat to other party due to some money" adjective and pronoun cases such as in "... can help the people who's cannot be fight yourself" respectively as in the sentence "In dreams, we enter the world that is entirely your own" or in the phrase "others life" where possessive case demands others' instead of subjective case

others, and indistinguishing adjectives from adverbs such as "In our society mostly people or lawyer cannot true to own job" stand out as some noticeable errors in this regard apart from the irrational use of determiners (articles); for instance, "I would have a apted medicine as a profession..." or "I got pass through it and a pray other people does too", or "If I didn't do the BS English, ...". The spelling mistakes, though far from these deficiencies, are seen as a concerning matter at this level, especially for language learners (Wren & Martin, 2012), and occured mostly in nouns and verbs, e.g. tuitions (tutions) and gaint (giant) referring to vowels transposition, gape (gap), carrer (career), persue (pursue), ventures (venues) etc. Flaws in adverbial usage are also prevalent, meddling with the overall sense of sentence such as "Mental health is not taken so seriously these days" where better placement would be 'much', or in "... so much conservative..." where 'too' is more suitable for negative connotations. In addition to this, incapacity to differentiate between homophones such as 'then' and 'than' is commonplace; for instance, "Once you chose Aim than stand firm". Similarly, in "... and after I take admission in NUML Faisalabad campus", 'later' must be the appropriate word to show succession of events rather than 'after'. Moreover, several passages also appear to be struggling with prepositional usage; for instance, "... pressure of my family to me to study" or "considered as" is a common mistake as consider is typically not followed by any pronoun. Apart from this, some passages show derivational incapacity while making lexical clusters such as "fantasy desires" rather than 'fantastical desires'. Students also lack in comprehending conventional way of writing compound nouns such as "Now a days" rather than nowadays or now-a-days. Last but not least, a rare but personalized flaw in vocabulary are students' created lame words, such as "goodnesses" more likely due to LI influence than limited vocabulary repertoire.

Next category of error assessment is syntactic dysfunction, the most important class of which is clausal combinations, some of the instances include "After became a CSS officer, I want to serve my life ...", also "I dance with graceful woolland creatures and felt happy". Clausal combinations are very significant in conditional sentences where meaning of both clauses is interdependent; however, is often mistaken such as in @@@ Besides, tenses secure the most significant role in writing not only for time reference but also bringing clarity in grasping the context of the situation. Nevertheless, this crucial aspect has often been found neglected in students' writing. The most common error in this respect is subject-verb disagreement, to exemplify, "various way", "many exampol", "People does not...", "it give me ...", "one of the most prestigious profession", "then this words became our goal", and so on. Insertion of

interrogative clauses within assertive sentences is also a most familiar error; for example, "I will embark my journey and reflect in the universe, the essence of who am I" where it should be "... who I am". Furthermore, imaginary situations are depicted by constructions other than these tenses which are defectively employed by students such as "... wish it was real" rather than 'it were' as per rule, and also "as if an artist has spilled ...", whereas rule demands 'had' to be there. Apart from this, a complicated aspect in their tense compatibility is the use of 'would', a nuanced feature in semantics.

A major drawback of scarcity of reading habit is reflected in the form of semantic failure where learners experience cognitive difficulty while dealing with compound or complex sentences and collaboration of multiple phrases as well, leading to irrational or 'absurd' constructions. To exemplify, "I was a child BecauseI like the army police. And they save to life in this people They are helped to the anothers and they gave duty to night and day for country." Another passage states, "I decided what carrer I want for myself because as a patient the last thing I wanted to hear from my therapist was to do compromise." The effect can also be noticed at lexical or phrasal level such as using the term "little by little" for gradual flow of time, overuse of "and" to connect clauses, erratic determiner clusters such as "no any pressure", "my two classes", "my all exams", etc. Likewise, word order holds the capacity to alter the meaning of syntax, and such mistakes have also been discovered such as "I have my own world dream where..." instead of 'dream world'. Same is the case with adverbial placement in a sentence that stands as a pragmatic tool in writing but is often neglected by learners in sense construction; for example, "I have also a dream to become CSS officer", "Then, the next year, I again decided to go for MDCAT", "One of my other dreams ..." and so on.

Among other common syntactic errors, incorrect verb usage or redundant verbal combinations are evident; for example, "... I got pass through it...", "... was to do compromise", the latter one acknowledging a predominant influence of first language, i.e. Urdu or Punjabi, on English syntactic constructions. Similar is the case with attributive nouns where former nouns are usually singular and latter may be pluralized as a contextual prerequisite. Nonetheless, there are found miscomprehension towards this rule as well such as in case of "tuitions center". Incomprehension of prepositional phrases also counts in to disrupt syntax of sentences. For instance, 'cheat on someone' means to deceive, while a learner wrote "They cheat to opposite party due to some money", or an omission of preposition

from required spot such as "... opted _ the degree of medicine". Learners have been inspected struggling with infinitives as well such as "to became" violating the tense where to is followed by base form of verb. Collocational misplacements have also been witnessed such as "... make it big..." instead of great or worthy, or "A Boy with a dream to serve his Nation if he Put his good ..." alluding towards lack of interaction to language (Straus et al., 2014) or social media distortion (Asare et al., 2022). Influenced by L1, that is Urdu, attempts are often made to adopt a poetic or metaphorical style to syntax that might contradict with English semantics. This issue is evident in several passages such as in the sentence "People wants to stay a long time in that imaginations" where subject-verb agreement demands 'those' with imaginations.

As far the beginning of passages is concerned, most of the passages have a straightforward commencement such as "I have a dream to become ...", "My dream is to ...", I dream of becoming ..." and so on. On contrary, some have borrowed the quote "In dreams, we enter the world that is entirely our own" whereas some instances are discovered to have their topic sentence AI generated, intimidating that students find it difficult to inaugurate their paragraphs.

Stratum II
Middle Stage – BS 4th, 5th, 6th

These semesters are done with grammar-based courses and are now going through exhaustive reading in literature subjects where they are exposed to vast patterns of descriptive correct grammar of English language. Moreover, they are getting through the linguistic subjects such as morphology, grammar and syntax, and stylistics among others. The semesters in this stratum show less variety of errors as found in the previous one, particularly due to shorter passages than required with simple sentences; therefore, narrowing down opportunities to study inherent cohesion as well as clausal combinations. Nonetheless, there has been found an overall advancement in vocabulary but demotion in syntactic construction and coherence in ideas. The errors that are found consistent include tense regularity, pronoun cases incongruence, and beginning of sentences with coordinate conjunctions among others.

To begin with, the use of punctuation, particularly comma, is more appropriate except in three passages where misplacements cause incoherence in syntax. This

situation appears more arbitrarily than in the previous stratum as comma is often found after conjunctions or adverbs, and also in between a clause; for example, "To take in that the 1st step, I will do the competitive exams …", "From where, I can start my working through my innovative ideas", "Here the ordinary, and the impossible becomes effortlessly attainable", or "We become more practical, when we become more mature". Oxford comma has also been mistaken such as in "Here the ordinary, and the impossible becomes effortlessly attainable". At times, sentences have been composed in the form of fragments usually because of putting period (.) in place of comma (,) such as in "I want to be a pilot. when i grow up", "By giving good services and taking care of my clients. I hope to make people happy and keep them coming back again". On the other hand, the number of capitalization errors is less in this stratum with only two passages using capitalization of common nouns in the middle of sentence or quote such as "I want to be a Writer, Producer, Director of my own stories", and more particularly the term 'Dream' as main topic of paragraphs though not used metaphorically but as a common noun, and one passage using "i" instead of "I" as subjective pronoun, whereas abbreviations have been found uncapitalized, such as "numl", "Fsc", while contractions often lack apostrophe comma, such as cant, apparently tracing text typing language habits, also because of the fact that contractions are not considered formal in academic writing (Asare et al., 2022; Straus et al., 2014; Wren & Martin, 2012).

At lexical level, aptitude of vocabulary is the pivotal element encompassing nouns, verbs, adjectives as well as adverbs (Straus et al., 2014; Wren & Martin, 2012), yet lexical errors prevail to a great extent; for instance, in the sentence, "Dream is the most unreal and anticipating thing of this world" where 'unreal' and 'anticipating' are contradictory ideas presented synonymously; another example states "… nothing can stop a person rather his/her own self", and also "… getting over my dream". Lexical misplacements also lead to semantically disrupted sentences either with inappropriate choice of word such as "continual learning" rather than 'continuous learning', "to complete someone's wish" instead of 'fulfil', "Pilots don't need much school …", and "Having the sheets (of achievements) at these levels" instead of 'shields', or, otherwise, with unsuitable word class such as in "My dream is to become a CSS officer, serving my country with …", yet again, this may be due to the influence of first language constructions. Similar is the error of collocations such as "you can't do heavy things" rather than 'hard' tasks among others. Moreover, homophones are often mistaken for each other at this level as well such a confusing 'there' with 'there' such as a passage using both options side by side where correct placement is 'there':

"... there is no use to have ..." and "... their is no such field ..." another example stating "Hazrat Muhammad SAWW spent there whole life for humanity", and also "vast expenses" in place of 'expanses'. Lexical clusters incompatibility also stands out as a miscalculation such as "true shared experiences", where adverb 'truly' should have been written rather than adjective 'true' before the verb (past participle) 'shared'. Such incompatibility may lead to collocational errors as well such as in the phrase "true shared experiences", 'reality-based' would be semantically more suitable concordance with experiences. Furthermore, derivational errors in morpho-semantic level have been discovered such as "... to do house job and home maker", "... this is big and challenges", "From where, I can start my working through my innovative imaginations". Spelling errors are lesser, mainly lexical, e.g. "facinate" (misunderstanding of consonant cluster), "trails" (vowels transposition), "menifest", "boundries", indivisual", "coridores" (pronunciation-induced spellings), "fundamentle" (indiscretion between –le and –al), "any one" (word inflection), "entre" (enter), the last one has probably occurred due to indecisiveness in adopting spelling patterns of either British or American English, ultimately causing confusion in similarly spelled words as well, for 'entre' is not an English word at all but a French word meaning 'between'.

Inappropriate verb usage has been frequently evident such as in two to three passages where 'be' has been mistaken for 'become' as in "I want to be a pilot", "... whenever people asked what do you want to be ..." and so on. Further, redundancy of verb phrases within a sentence also stands as an indicator of L1 influence; for instance, "I want to write on the lives of others, want to be the reason for someone's smile, want to be the reason to heal someone, want to complete someone's wish, if I could, if life gives me a chance". Students also face incapacity to differentiate between infinitive and gerund or present and past participle such as in "... to help the suffered ones by opting medicine as a profession", therefore, meddling with the sense of statement. More than that, prepositional dispositioning has also been frequently observed such as "... to go in another field ..." predominantly due to indiscretion between the meanings of 'in' and 'into' in this context, "everyone feels this in their lives on one point or another", "... reason for someone's smile", "I belong with a middle class family", "... we just depart ourself to the reality", "I want_capture the secrets" etc. In the same vein, prepositional phrases are mistaken including unrequired addition of prepositions, e.g. "explained to me" or their altogether absence, e.g. "... free to roam_vast expenses of creativity". Apart from this, disagreement in respective pronoun cases, such as in "In my dreams, we enter the

world that is entirely our own", is a persistent error in addition to the incaution in suitable use of adjective or adverb, such as in "As commonly in Pakistan, …". Additionally, appropriate structure of quantifier-phrases is often lacking; for instance, "… want to become an international cricketer but lot of hurdles in this way" "… a privilege reserved for the few, but …", as well as reflexive pronouns such as "we depart ourself …", or "… no one is able to enter in that world that we made by ownself." Erratic employment of determiners or determiner clusters has also been persistent leading to constructions like "There was not any societal or economic issue" or "… had not money to be selecte". Imbalanced usage of articles, i.e. in the form of redundancy or absence, is commonplace such as in "It's_place where the boundaries of the possible and impossible blur". Besides, sentences starting with "But", "And", "So" are still common; to exemplify, "I wanted to become a fighter pilot by joining PAF. But unfortunately, I could not fulfil my dream …" Furthermore, the superlative adjective has also not been preceded by 'the' at times, such as in "The best of people are those who are most beneficient to people". This error is justified in the way that 'most' without determiner 'the' gives the meaning of 'very' but not superlative degree of adjective (Swan, 2017; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

One of the most recurrent error in syntactic constructions here is sentence fragmentation, where two periods (.) surround phrase-like structures rather than a complete sentence predominantly due to omission of verb or auxiliary, such as, hinting at either the L1 influence or fragmented writing in fiction, notwithstanding the fact that the syntax used in literary fiction is determined by authorial style or tone of the text (Dizdar, 2021; Guignery, 2019). The examples of aberrated constructions might include "Something that is not tiring though it may be hard.", "The system that is destroying the lives of many.", also look at the topic sentence of a passage, "Dream, a world that is entirely our own. A world where I can be wherever I want and whenever I want." Clausal combinations, on the other hand, are less common; simple sentences are commonly employed; errors might occur in temporal consistency between clauses such as in "I have given under 19 trails but had not money to be selected" or in "We just need to menifest and it became our reality". At times, there is found fluency in the overall narrative but representation of distinct clauses is ambiguous; for example, "… I loved those stories a lot literally so inspirational and motivational", yet the basic factor in vague characterization of clauses is still neglecting punctuation; for instance, "I think I lost everything, my dreams my career everything". Although the use of tenses has been comparatively simple; no use of 'would' or perfect tense is found, recurring errors might include

tense inconsistency where past tense has been employed amidst universal statements written in present disrupting the sense of discourse such as "Dream taught us what we want and what we can do", or, more frequently, there is a past sentence incorporated between two present sentences. Disagreement between verb and auxiliary, such as "… will surely has …" or "Not all dreams are come true …", and subject-verb, such as "… a terminology that facinate everyone", "… first spark that make me think …", "For me, one's have to dream the the most delusional things" "Here the ordinary, and the impossible becomes effortlessly attainable", have also been observed. In addition, use of past tense in universal statements has been spotted; for example, "In this ethereal domain, we became the architects of our own reality". A major defect in passive voice appeared in the samples is verb determination, inevitably past participle (third form), to exemplify, "… so they won't be scare". Moreover, the confusion between direct and indirect narration w.r.t. tense and pronouns agreement also exhibits the impression of L1 on L2 syntactic constructions; for example, in " … whenever people asked what do you want to be when you grow up? I always used to say with pleasure and pride that Army officer", "… some people were saying that any officer tryout is very difficult".

On the top, undefinable semantically poor constructions have been tracked down in the passages of this stratum as well such as "As, everyone has a dream, just like I have also a dream", "Sometimes, if a girl want to become a journalist and it is her dream, but her family want to become a doctor or in a medical field", "Whether it is not achieved, but I will do anything to make it possible for me to help people", "Having the sheets of these levels but which are not acceptable at high performance center Lahore". Adverbial misplacement also persists such as in "My dream is also to become a CA like my uncle", "Like everyone, I have a dream too." Moreover, redundancy of expressions meddles with the coherence of a passage such as a passage from BS 6th repeating "… dream to be a fashion designer" several times with slight alteration in word order. L1 influence on learners' syntax is continuously discernible via determiners, pronouns, or conjunctions; for example, "Dreams are the way to escape from this reality", "After achieving my this goal …","… we always want that things which is far away in reality".

To delve into discourse- level analysis pertaining to the overall organization, it has been observed that the choice of topic sentence is not predominantly related to the grammatical proficiency of students but a customized preference. For instance, there are many well-written passages from BS 4th with straightforward beginnings

while several ones from BS 6th have paragraphs commencing with either the provided quote or AI generated sentences. AI generated statements are caught with sudden change in syntax from sound vocabulary and compound or complex sentences, such as in "In dreams, we escape the confines of realityand enter a realm where our minds reign supreme …" to rather simpler syntactic constructions often characterized by spelling mistakes or subject-verb disagreement such as the previous sentence followed by "It is a place where impossible becomes possible. I want to become a CSS officer. I always imagine power and authority in dreams". Coherence has also been observed to a negligible extent as most of the samples tend to adopt simple syntax rather that clausal combinations.

Stratum III
Final Stage – BS 7th, 8th

This stratum holds massive significance as it gives insight into the final product of ESL learners after completing certification in English language.

In the first place, the use of punctuation has shown minimal progress, mainly because of preference to simple sentences instead of making organization of ideas complicated. In this regard, there lacks an acknowledgement of the very significance of comma (,) for clear distinction of clauses, phrases, as well as series, apart from irregular placements such as after conjunctions (e.g. "So, dreams are like a secret journey) or adverbial phrases, eventually leading to obscurity in the narrative; for instance, "… i would prefer to join the computer science but on the other hand if i possibly rely only on my choice i would definitely prefer English literature after that i would lie to be a teacher". Moreover, altogether absence of commas has also been observed such as in "… we are free to wander to fly to confront our demons …" As the error of coordinating conjunctions, i.e. "But", "Because", "And", "So" inaugurating new sentences persists, it has been followed by comma rather than before, hinting towards a speculation of using these conjunctions as indicators of flow; for examples, "… demand us for help because, they himself does not". This error has been noticed in case of "that" as well which neither follows nor is followed by a comma; an example appears as such: "After taking admission I realize that, the depth of Human Condition & explor the history, human experience & social issues". Also, there have been instances where period (.) has not been placed within the entire passage except at the termination. Punctuation errors may lead to semantics as well, particularly the role of apostrophe comma in case of either possessive

nouns/pronouns or contractions, such as "special one's", "Its only place where …", "Its all just for us", "Its OK", "Thats why …" Among other orthographic problems, there are instances where 'and' has been written as symbol "&", a taboo in academic writing.; for instances, "In dreams, is a world that is entirely based on a person's mindset and his experience & will." Markers like "nowadays" have been written with spaces such as "Now a days". Capitalization within sentence is still an error in the flow, no more than the instances where first letters of proper nouns have not been capitalized, particularly the names of persons, countries, events such as "odi", as well as the titles of fields such as computer science, english literature, etc. but professions that are common nouns in general such as "… to be an Artist…"; "… being a Fashion designer…", and not to mention the most frequent error of writing "i" in place of the subjective pronoun "I" within sentence.

To begin discussion on linguistic errors from lexical categories, the use of definite articles with abstract nouns, such as in "… but still a temporary happiness", "finds a hope and piece of tranquility through the process", seemingly due to L1 influence, and the proper nouns, such as "I would like to adopt the LLB", "the computer science", "the English literature", has especially been found other than the incorrect use of indefinite articles such as "a English literature student", ".. to run a NGO" not to mention the unwanted use of articles such as in "Because the village is the name of love, peace and grattitude", "… that actually need a help", "I belong to the mediocre family", etc. Word class dissonance is another potential error such as "holy and prophethood career" or "Dreams is a part of mentally satisfaction" (Adj-N), "… made more encourage and determine towards my goal" (Adv-Adj), "In actually I dont like to talk too much…" (Prep-Adj). Among others, there are instances of pronoun cases disharmony including "My own personal dream to study abroad is going to be complete soon by experience it, by entering into the world of our own", "due to my family pressure", "They can show us hidden thoughts and feelings that we might not even know we have", "… a poor person dreams is to…", "… in this field both student and teacher knowledge always increases", "… after pursuing this degree i can also appear in competitive exam and in the media where we can also join journalism which is a good profession", "We must stable ourself", "We cannot stand ourself";adjective misuse such as "From the most beginning"; conjunction misuse "From my childhood period…"; adverbial placement, specifically of 'also' lingers; for example, "It would be also source of pleasure for me", "It would be also source of communication to the pharmacist society and companies"; and unnecessary usage of conjunctions such as in "And also a black colour girl dream is that to be white

fairness", "Or, if I choose to be a fashion designer, it is because, in our society a person is being judged by the clothes style". Prepositional errors are also prevalent either in the form of absence (e.g. "But some major issues i can't able to do fashion designing"), incorrect placement (e.g. "I think in any other field, being a CSP officer I can serve freely"), redundancy (e.g. "… and few more alongside with Islamic philosophy of middle ages"), or incorrect prepositional phrases (e.g. *"I almost took admission on that major…", "… take interest on it", "so befitting to my persona"*).

Vocabulary, nevertheless, has advanced to some degree though some samples still reflect the similar plainness as initial semesters. Nevertheless, collocational errors are discernible w.r.t. word class, such as *"Thanks God"*, and vocabulary as well, including *"pharmacist society and companies"* rather than pharmaceutical, *"seeing own dream"* instead of having, *"completing one's dream"* instead of fulfilling, "to finish pollution and corruption" rather than to eradicate, *"help them to take the right thought process"* rather than develop/adopt, *"we cannot stand ourself financially stable"* rather than making ourselves, *"The people here are coordinative but realizes you a bit that you are foreign*!" instead of make you realize, and transforming compound noun to adjective-noun pair such as *"I am also interested in poem's writing in my own words"*. Such sematic inaccuracies by collocational errors are likely caused by L1 influence in the narrative such as *"We can help the law creating institute to create a useful law"*. Moreover, confusion in placement of no/not is still evident such as "*… that they have not potential*". Homophonic errors, such as in *"I am not thinking about any other field expect teaching"*, are still prevalent. Besides, errors related to word order, most commonly for 'all' and 'both' have also been discovered such as *"I failed to pass the all exams"*. Among conjunctive collocational errors, there has found a "though-but" or "whether-but" clausal combinations such as *"Though writing is an art, reading and exploring book is an art but colours and pictures reflects inner self"* and *"Whether they come true or not, but they have a spark"*, apart from inappropriate conditional adverb usage such as *"If it comes to my dream(s), you will find a whole spectrum of meagre, humble, but passionate ones"*. Adding on, redundancy errors of various kinds are commonplace; at word level (e.g. *"I find take interest on it", "white fairness", "As this field of profession has always influenced me", "a black colour girl", "… of pandemic disease", "From my childhood period…"*), clausal level (e.g. *"The reason is that because I want to help others", "Any other field other than the English literature", restricting to not getting…", "I entered my degree program of BS English passively without any particular ambition"*), and inter-clausal level (e.g. *"I love to read minds and also love to solve the mental issues of the people", "But today,*

at this stage near completion of my graduation degree", "They who don't have dreams, they don't have hope, don't have any destination to reach"), the last one is likely due to the influence of L1, that is, Urdu syntax.

Spelling errors persist along with vocabulary enhancement, including juxtaposition of adjacent letters (e.g. "perferences"), vowels (e.g. "feild"), or consonants (e.g."reings"), phonetic simplification error (e.g."asthetic", "mentaining", "jornlist", "bondries/boundries", " posible/imposible", "examplify", "opertunities", "Istambul", "once" for one's), incorrect placement of vowel (e.g."skatching", "persue", "togather", "squarrils") or consonant (e.g. "fantacy"), syllable omission (e.g. "insted" for insisted) or addition (e.g. "penademic/penadenamic", "satisfication"), elision error (e.g. "fortunatly/unfortunatly"), doubling rule error (e.g."beautifull", "fulfill", "mentall/physicall"), overgeneralization of regular verb rules (e.g. "choosen"), superfluence of vowels (e.g. "eutopic world", "tourchored","gape", "trape", "margine") or consonants (e.g. "grattitude", "dissapointed", "aggencies","decission"), functional shift incapacity (e.g. "studing", "relateable"), confusion with pluralization rule (e.g. "alway", "somethings") as well as informal language intrusion (e.g. "ppl", "gonna"), not to forget that the mentioned spelling error patterns are not based on single occurrence. Another erratic pattern observed in this stratum is compound word fragmentation such as "child hood", "mind set", "plat forms", "with in", "some how", "script writing, "new born babies").

In context of syntax, the most frequent error is subject-verb disagreement w.r.t. numbers, even in the very well-composed passages. There are three variants of this error: the direct incongruity between the subject and present indefinite verb such as *"... any education that are based on...","a phenomena that sets", "every nights"*, *"The river have got the precious specie which have been endangered", "I always supports Pakistan team", "... but colours and pictures reflects inner self";* or in correlative constructions such as *"It is widely regard but have limited scope", "Specially movies on social issues always attracts people more", "knowledge always increases and grow side by side", "Either that ideal world provokes our happy emotions or make us dissapointed";* negligence when a series of items are listed such as in *"... our deepest thoughts, fear, and desires";* or infinitives such *as "There's a lot of things to writes", "... opertunities to grown up one's career", "i am going to masters in English".* Apart from this, auxilliary-verb dissonance has often been witnessed such as in *"This field can also helps you to explore...", "May this path leads me towards...", "It might represents..."* Another consistent error to 2nd stratum is fragmentation, a

conventional, journalistic practice never acceptable in formal or academic writing; for instance, *"A place unrestricted by norms, conventions, rules or regulations, where one can imagine their lives to the fullest extent without the fear of being judged",* yet less common in comparison as this stratum has been inclined towards simple sentences in general. However, the underlying factor behind fragmentation is omission of auxilliaries such as in *"… because I actually interested towards skatching and drawing", "Other players in the world even not close to this feat", "My main aim to become a fashion designer"*. In well-composed passages, however, fragmentation reflects the narrative style of literary fiction such as "A realm where own imaginations take helm." (Naishtat, 2025).

As per the use of tenses, the error mostly appears in the correct employment of helping verbs which are basically the identification of tense to be used; to exemplify, the sentence, *"Pakistan cricket team always done good job in odi and T20 format but they always struggled in test format"*, is clearly portraying a want of 'have' to make this sentence perfectly fitted in context. Likewise, the sentence, *"I was choosen this profession",* semantically indicates that it ought to be in active voice, while *"The content of our dreams believed to be shaped by our own thoughts, experience, emotions and desires"* gives the sense of passive construction apart from the absence of helping verb. Similarly, the structure of sentence, *"From my childhood period, I was so much engaged with automobiles…"* alludes that there ought to be a perfect continuous construction. Besides, the sentence, *"In our real world we alway following social norms but…"* is actually giving sense of a universal statement that must be in present indefinite tense. further, these are instances where helping verbs are not placed in accordance with the intended tense such as in *"… we can enjoy different things that is not occur in reality"*. Another common aberration is the use of present tense amidst past narrative and vice versa *"But then I talk to my family, they did not allow me and alludes that this profession or field is not suitable for girls", "CSS first become my dream, then at once stage it turns into my goal and now it is my passion"*, *"some of my relatives were not happy with my decision so they convince my parents…"* Apart from this, the employment of suitable form of verb in passive voice has also been neglected such as in *"It is widely regard but have limited scope"*. Indirect narrations, though less utilized, are also disrupted w.r.t. tense; for instance, *"… because they informed us untill the pandenamic end academy will not open"* Moreover, as far the clausal combinations are concerned, improvement has been observed with fluctations noticed in tense congruity between clauses; for instance, *"If i don't take admission or don't adopt English literature, i choose real estate field",*

"I will adopt the degree of Law if i was not in English literature", *"I had a strong interest in computer sciences, but due to my family pressure I can't join this field"*. Furthermore, phrasal combinations within a sentence often lack harmony such as in *"To be more practical, or it ought to be the straightforward statement to make …"*

Semantically distorted constructions are frequently evident. Worth mentioning examples might include *"The career I want to be a pharmacist"*; *"Salary is a drug which gives you to forget your dreams"*; *"He is only player in the world whose break the world record virat kohli and hashim mamasa in terms of runs"*; *"Other than being a jornalist my second choice but in our society this profession is not acceptable. specially for girls."*; *"Isn't feel that dreams make you more superior than those who don't have"*; *"After my completing graduation, I mostly prefer to go to abroad for Master degree"*; *"Whatever, comes in our mind either it is a positive or negative its our personal"*; *"They take us to special places that are just for us, like when we are kinds playing make believe"*; *"The tiny world in our brain, that is more than a fantasy; that gives an earie satisfication can worldly life can work in our way for a brief moment"*.

Most of the passages in the final semester have straightforward beginnings without topic sentences, reflecting a sense of staying "to the point": however, literary-inspired passages have dedicated two to three initial, complex sentences for creating context. A few passages in senior most semester, however, lack coherence due to repetition of similar ideas and sentences, which should not be a feature of language-graduates output.

Cumulative Insights

The analysis reveals that Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners demonstrate a clear developmental trajectory in grammatical competence over their four-year program, yet persistent challenges remain. The observed improvement in punctuation, tense consistency, and lexical usage can be attributed in part to targeted grammar-based courses such as Academic Writing and Reading and Writing Skills. This aligns with Belmahdi, Li, and Muirhead's (2022) observation that writing instruction significantly enhances grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Mushtaq, Taseer, and Ghori (2021) highlighted the role of iterative writing processes in improving accuracy, suggesting that structured practice across multiple drafts—comparable to the repeated writing exposure in this program—may account for the reduction of basic errors in punctuation and capitalization.

Despite these gains, certain errors, particularly in prepositional usage and sentence fragmentation, persisted even in advanced stages. Such results corroborate Nazir's (2023) findings from ICNALE data that Pakistani ESL learners exhibit low accuracy with prepositional verbs due to L1 interference, and they resonate with Al-Khaza'leh's (2021) report of tense and capitalization errors in tertiary-level learners. From a theoretical perspective, Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) explains these persistent errors as features of a learner's evolving linguistic system shaped by transfer from Urdu. At the same time, Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998) suggests that some learners may not yet be psycholinguistically ready to fully acquire complex grammatical forms such as conditionals or advanced clausal structures, accounting for the endurance of such errors despite instruction.

The influence of L1 transfer is particularly evident in syntactic and prepositional errors. This finding supports Sultana, Sarwat, and Zahoor (2022), who noted that L1 remains a dominant factor in shaping error types in Pakistani ESL writing. The Competition Model (Bates & MacWhinney, 1989) offers an explanatory lens, suggesting that learners rely on familiar L1 cues that compete with target-language forms, producing error patterns resistant to formal instruction. Addressing such entrenched issues requires more than prescriptive grammar teaching; Usage-Based Models (Bybee, 2006; Tomasello, 2003) emphasize that frequent, meaningful use of target structures in authentic contexts is essential for restructuring learners' interlanguage and reducing fossilized errors.

These results, therefore, reflect both progress and limitations of Pakistan's prescriptive, course-driven approach to grammar. While systematic grammar instruction clearly fosters measurable gains, the persistence of error types highlights the need for more integrated pedagogy. Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) helps interpret these findings by situating them within a dynamic interplay of cognitive, social, and contextual factors—where classroom instruction alone cannot fully overcome variability and L1 dominance. A more holistic approach that combines formal instruction with task-based, collaborative, and context-rich writing practice, as suggested by Bano, Laghari, Sahito, and Channar (2023), may be more effective in producing durable gains in grammatical competence.

This study also faced methodological limitations that may affect interpretation. Data collection outside classroom supervision raised the risk of external assistance, leading to the exclusion of a significant number of samples. The uneven stratum

distribution (27:34:56) and reliance on sessional-mark incentives further skewed representativeness. Additionally, while a predefined coding scheme ensured consistency, the manual analysis by a single rater introduces subjectivity and limits inter-rater reliability (cf. James, 2013). Future research should consider incorporating multiple raters, inter-rater agreement checks, and larger, more balanced samples across strata to enhance validity.

Despite these constraints, the findings have important implications. Grammar-focused courses contribute meaningfully to foundational accuracy, yet persistent errors require curricular adaptation. Explicit focus on prepositions, collocations, and sentence structuring—areas most affected by L1 transfer—should be combined with usage-driven, interactive tasks that promote authentic practice. A longitudinal extension beyond the undergraduate program, or cross-institutional comparison, would further clarify the durability of these gains. By bridging Error Analysis, Interlanguage, Processability, and Complex Dynamic Systems perspectives, this study underscores the importance of integrating prescriptive and contextualized approaches in advancing ESL learners' grammatical competence in Pakistan. The findings suggest several practical directions for strengthening undergraduate ESL writing instruction:

Target persistent error types explicitly: Curricula should allocate focused instructional time to problematic structures such as prepositions, collocations, and sentence organization, which remain resistant to general grammar teaching and are heavily shaped by L1 interference.

Integrate usage-based practice: Beyond rule-based drills, learners should engage in frequent, meaningful tasks—such as writing portfolios, peer editing, and project-based assignments—that encourage authentic use of grammatical forms (Tomasello, 2003; Bybee, 2006).

Combine grammar instruction with communicative pedagogy: Formal grammar courses should be reinforced with task-based and collaborative writing activities (cf. Bano et al., 2023), creating conditions for both accuracy and fluency.
Embed formative feedback mechanisms: Continuous, formative feedback on grammar in student writing—whether peer-reviewed, teacher-provided, or technology-assisted—can support ongoing interlanguage restructuring (Ferris, 2011).

Contextualize teaching to learner background: Given the influence of L1 and varied educational trajectories (FA, FSc, ICS, A Levels), grammar instruction should be responsive to learners' prior exposure, providing differentiated scaffolding where needed.

Adopting these measures would allow university programs to move beyond partial improvements in surface-level accuracy toward fostering deeper, more sustainable grammatical competence.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the evolution of grammatical errors in the writing of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners, with particular focus on students from the Department of English at NUML, Faisalabad campus, across their four-year program. By examining error patterns across three strata, the research identified significant improvements in punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and lexical accuracy, particularly in the later stages of the program. However, errors related to prepositional usage, sentence fragmentation, and tense consistency persisted throughout the program, suggesting that certain aspects of grammatical competence are more resistant to improvement. The findings emphasize the importance of targeted grammar-based courses in promoting grammatical accuracy, though they also indicate that more interactive and context-based instruction is needed to address persistent L1 interference. Overall, this research highlights the dynamic nature of language acquisition and the necessity of incorporating both formal and practical language instruction to improve grammatical competence in ESL learners.

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