

A Descriptive Quantitative Analysis of Syntactic Errors in Students' English Writing Using Linguistic Category and Surface Strategy Taxonomies

Putri Alysia Dymiaty¹, Rendhi Fatrisna Yuniar²

¹⁻² Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia

e-mail: alysiady14@gmail.com, rendhyfatrisna@tbi.uin-malang.ac.id

Abstract:

This study investigates the syntactic errors produced by eleventh-grade students at an English-Arabic immersive boarding school, Pondok Modern Arrisalah International Program, Indonesia. Grounded in Corder's (1973) Error Analysis framework, the study applies Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Two-Tier Hybrid Taxonomy, combining the Linguistic Category Taxonomy and the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, to identify, classify, and quantify sentence-level syntactic errors. Using a quantitative descriptive design, thirty written compositions were collected from two intact classes selected through cluster random sampling and analyzed through document analysis. A total of 217 syntactic errors were identified and coded using a structured coding sheet, then analyzed descriptively (frequency and percentage) and cross-tabulated across the two taxonomic tiers. The findings show that Subject-Verb Agreement was the most frequent linguistic category (72 errors, 33.18%), followed by Determiners and Articles in Noun Phrases (40, 18.43%) and Prepositional Phrase Placement and Structural Complements (24, 11.06%). Concerning surface strategies, Misformation was predominant (112, 51.61%) followed by Omission (74, 34.10%). The cross-tabulation indicated Subject-Verb Agreement through Misformation as the most frequent occurrence (70 instances). The findings describe the distribution of syntactic errors in the students' compositions and highlight subject-verb agreement, determiner and article use, and grammatical form selection as areas that may warrant attention in writing instruction. The study provides an empirical, data-driven diagnostic framework for syntax focused writing instruction in multilingual immersive contexts.

Keywords: error analysis; immersive boarding school; linguistic category taxonomy; surface strategy taxonomy; syntactic errors

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing has been regarded as the most challenging of the four language skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as it demands that they simultaneously apply accuracy in grammar, organization, vocabulary, and development of ideas without the mitigating advantages of context afforded in interpersonal communication (Pasaribu et al., 2024; Isma et al., 2023). This task is especially revealing of learners' underlying command of English structure as it provides a permanent record in which grammatical deficiencies cannot be masked by paralinguistic features or spontaneous interlocutor feedback.

Of the various aspects of accuracy in writing, syntax plays a foundational role as it dictates how words are organized into grammatically acceptable phrases, clauses, and sentences, thereby determining whether the intended meaning of a learner's message is effectively communicated (Mahara et al., 2024; Ismahani et al., 2026). In fact, syntactic errors including incorrect word order, missing auxiliary verbs, inappropriate tense usage, and subject-verb disagreement have been found to be amongst the most prevalent problems in EFL writing at diverse educational levels and geographical locations (Palaguna, 2022; Faraj & Saber, 2025).

Previous studies have identified first-language (L1) influence as a potential factor contributing to syntactic errors in English writing among learners from various linguistic backgrounds (Khushik, 2025; Nangle et al., 2024; Xiaoling et al., 2024; Mirzayev, 2024). However, the extent to which L1 influence contributes to these errors may vary across educational and linguistic contexts. The present study did not directly investigate the students' individual first-language backgrounds and proficiency levels in English and Arabic. Therefore, L1 interference cannot be established as the cause of the syntactic errors identified in their compositions.

The school implements a mandatory immersive English–Arabic language programme, in which students are required to use the designated language throughout their daily activities. While this environment provides ample opportunity for language use, it does not necessarily ensure grammatical accuracy in writing. The mere presence of two languages in the school environment does not prove that language conflict or negative cross-linguistic transfer is responsible for students' syntactic errors. Accordingly, this study focuses on identifying and classifying errors in students' English compositions, rather than determining their underlying causes.

Previous studies in Indonesian boarding schools and intensive English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts have examined various aspects of students' language-learning experiences, including speaking anxiety in bilingual programmes (Setyana et al., 2022), psychological well-being in boarding university settings (Keisha Jessenianta et al., 2025), challenges in oral participation (Anggrisia & Robah, 2023), and collaborative strategies for engagement in intensive EFL classrooms (Basori et al., 2026). However, the written syntactic accuracy of students in English–Arabic immersion programmes remains an area that warrants further investigation. This gap is particularly relevant because examining written compositions can help identify the grammatical categories in which learners experience difficulties.

Furthermore, despite the substantial literature on EFL syntactic errors, several studies have employed a single error taxonomy to classify errors according to either grammatical categories or surface-level modifications (Prihandani, 2023; Prayuda et al., 2023; Hardiany & Budiati, 2023; Pham & Pham, 2024). Applying both perspectives in a single analytical framework may provide a more comprehensive description of syntactic errors by showing both the grammatical categories

involved and the ways in which the errors are realized. Accordingly, further investigation is needed into the types of syntactic errors produced by students in an English–Arabic immersive environment and their distribution across these two analytical dimensions.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing the syntactic errors found in the English writing of eleventh-grade students at Pondok Modern Arrisalah International Program using a Two-Tier Hybrid Taxonomy that combines the Linguistic Category Taxonomy and the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay et al., 1982). The objective of this study is threefold: firstly, to identify and classify the types of syntactic errors based on the Linguistic Category Taxonomy; secondly, to classify the surface strategy mechanisms (omission, addition, misformation, misordering) underlying those errors; and thirdly, to examine how the dominant syntactic errors are cross-tabulated across the two-tier taxonomy. Beyond its descriptive contribution, this diagnostic mapping is intended to inform future instructional design, given evidence that explicit, targeted syntax instruction can measurably improve learners' sentence-level accuracy (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024).

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What types of syntactic errors, classified according to the Linguistic Category Taxonomy, occur in the English descriptive compositions of eleventh-grade students at Pondok Modern Arrisalah International Program, and what are their frequencies and proportions?
- 2) What surface strategies (omission, addition, misformation, and misordering) characterise these syntactic errors, and what are their frequencies and proportions?
- 3) How are the syntactic errors distributed across the two tiers of the taxonomy when the linguistic categories are cross-tabulated with the surface strategies, and which category-strategy combinations occur most frequently?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Syntax and Syntactic Errors

Chomsky (1965) established the foundations for the generative view of syntax, which conceptualises it as the set of principles that govern the combination of words to form acceptable phrases, clauses, and sentences (Carnie, 2007; Radford, 2004). Within this system, a syntactic error is defined as a systematic deviation from standard English sentence-level rules, as opposed to a random slip of the tongue or pen. Such errors encompass structural violations such as subject-verb agreement, verb tense, word order, and passive voice construction (Corder, 1973; Dulay et al., 1982). In order to comprehend these violations, it is necessary to consider the interaction between sentence elements in a structural context, as opposed to a mere consideration of isolated grammar rules. This is due to the fact that a single misapplied rule, such as agreement, has the potential to propagate errors across an entire clause (Mahara et al., 2024).

2.2 Error Analysis Framework

Error Analysis (EA), as initially proposed by Corder (1973), regards learner errors as indicative of the systematic competence of interlanguage development. As Ellis (1994) describes, there are five sequential procedures in the ELAN system. These are: the collection of language samples, the identification and classification of errors, the explanation of the causes of errors, and the evaluation of the communicative gravity of errors. This study covers only the first three of these five steps, while explicitly excluding causal explanation (step four) and gravity evaluation (step five) in favor

of a strictly quantitative descriptive focus. The chosen scope allows, therefore, obtaining reliable descriptions of what errors occur and how they are structurally realized, without attempting to establish why they occur (possible causative factors are discussed as directions for future research in the Discussion section).

2.3 The Two-Tier Hybrid Taxonomy

Instead of treating error taxonomies as mutually exclusive analytical tools, Dulay et al. (1982) claim that different taxonomies can be complementary in capturing different aspects of the same error. Hence, this study used a two-tier hybrid taxonomy, combining the Linguistic Category Taxonomy (Tier 1) and the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Tier 2). The Linguistic Category Taxonomy classified an error in terms of the grammatical element involved, namely: Subject-Verb Agreement; Tense and Aspect Construction; Word Order and Phrase Structure; Auxiliary Verbs and Modals Usage; Passive Voice Construction; Sentence Fragments; Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices; Determiners and Articles in Noun Phrases; Prepositional Phrase Placement and Structural Complements; and Clause Structure and Conjunction. Meanwhile, the Surface Strategy Taxonomy classified errors in terms of the mechanical process used to realize them, namely: Omission (lack of an obligatory element), Addition (presence of an unnecessary element), Misformation (use of a wrong form in a required slot), and Misordering (incorrect placement of a morpheme/constituent). Jointly used, Tier 1 identified what rule was violated and Tier 2 explained how it was violated, providing a more diagnostic picture than using any single taxonomy (Hardiany & Budiati, 2023; Seddik, 2023).

2.4 Previous Studies on EFL Syntactic Errors

A substantial body of research confirms the prevalence of syntactic errors among EFL and ESL learners across diverse national contexts. In Indonesia, EFL writers have been found to struggle particularly with subject-verb agreement, tense, and sentence construction in academic writing tasks (Pasaribu et al., 2024; Isma et al., 2023). Similar patterns have been documented among secondary and university students elsewhere: Pakistani ESL learners' comparative error profiles (Ahmad et al., 2023), Kurdish first-year university students' paragraph writing (Faraj & Saber, 2025), Vietnamese third-year university students' writing at Van Lang University (Pham & Pham, 2024), and Indonesian senior high school students' descriptive texts (Hardiany & Budiati, 2023). At the morphosyntactic level specifically, Fajrin et al. (2025) reported similarly recurrent agreement, tense, and word-formation errors among EFL students across several language education institutions, while Ismahani et al. (2026) documented comparable syntactic construction errors in EFL students' sentence-level writing. Narrower error-category studies have likewise found parts-of-speech errors (Prayuda et al., 2023) and grammatical errors in narrative text writing (Prihandani, 2023) to be persistent problems, and errors related to digital or "new media" syntax have even been shown to distort meaning in informal written registers (Anyanwu et al., 2024). Palaguna (2022) similarly found a broad range of syntactic error types among third-grade madrasah aliyah students, reinforcing that these difficulties cut across both formal and informal writing tasks and institutional settings.

Collectively, although these studies corroborate the prevalence and heterogeneity of syntactic errors among EFL learners in many respects, most are based on a single taxonomy and are carried out in traditional monolingual classrooms, leaving specialized multilingual immersive contexts and combined two-tier analyses of the kind proposed in this study relatively unexplored.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study utilizes a quantitative descriptive study design based on Error Analysis to objectively measure and describe the frequency, dominance, and distribution patterns of syntactic errors in students' written English without manipulating extraneous variables or establishing causal relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A descriptive design was selected specifically because the research aims to map the current state of students' syntactic errors as they naturally occur in classroom writing, rather than to test an intervention or establish a cause-effect relationship.

3.2 Participants

The population of this study comprised 87 eleventh-grade (Grade XI) students distributed across four classes at Pondok Modern Arrisalah International Program, an English-Arabic immersive boarding school in Indonesia. Grade XI students were selected because they had completed the preliminary language adaptation stage and were participating in the institution's daily English-Arabic language program. This group of students represents a valuable subject population for the purpose of observing the impact of extended dual-language immersion on syntactic accuracy. Using cluster random sampling, two intact classes were randomly selected by lottery (Sugiyono, 2023), resulting in a sample of 30 students, comprising 16 students from one class and 14 from the other. Each participating student contributed one English descriptive composition produced during regular classroom writing activities, yielding a total of 30 compositions for analysis.

3.3 Research Setting and Language Program

The study was conducted at Pondok Modern Arrisalah International Program, an Islamic boarding school that implements a mandatory immersive English-Arabic language program. Students are required to use English and Arabic alternately on a weekly basis, with each designated language period running from Friday through Thursday. The designated language is used throughout students' daily activities, from waking up until before going to sleep. According to the school's language-use arrangements, opportunities to use their first language are limited, except during interactions with teachers in the classroom.

This language program provides the educational context for the present study. However, the study did not directly assess the participants' individual first-language backgrounds, proficiency levels in English and Arabic, or duration of participation in the program. Consequently, these factors cannot be used to explain the causes of the syntactic errors identified in the compositions.

3.4 Instrument

Data were collected through document analysis, the systematic examination of existing written records rather than researcher-elicited data such as interviews or questionnaires (Creswell, 2012) applied to the students' original composition sheets, with no experimental treatment involved. A structured syntactic error coding sheet (Document Analysis Guide) based on the Two-Tier Hybrid Taxonomy was used as the main instrument. For each of the identified errors the student code, the original (error-ridden) sentence, its corrected standard version, its Linguistic Category (Tier 1) and its Surface Strategy (Tier 2) were recorded.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

Each composition was read to identify sentence-level syntactic deviations, excluding non-syntactic errors (e.g., spelling) and non-systematic performance slips. Each identified error was then double-coded into its Linguistic Category and Surface Strategy. Frequencies and percentages were calculated using the following formula: $P = (f/N) \times 100\%$, where f is the frequency of a specific error type and N is the total number of identified errors. A two-dimensional cross-tabulation matrix (Linguistic Category $\times$ Surface Strategy) was then generated to identify the dominant error pattern. In order to establish the reliability of the coding, a second independent coder recorded 45 instances of error (20.74% of the total 217 errors) using the same protocol. Agreement was substantial for the Linguistic Category Taxonomy ($P_o = .756$, $P_e = .172$, $\kappa = .705$) and almost perfect for the Surface Strategy Taxonomy ($P_o = .911$, $P_e = .371$, $\kappa = .859$), following Landis and Koch's (1977) benchmarks ($\kappa \geq .60$ = substantial agreement; $\kappa \geq .80$ = almost perfect agreement).

4. RESULTS

The reliability of coding was confirmed through inter-rater agreement ($\kappa = .705$ for the Linguistic Category Taxonomy; $\kappa = .859$ for the Surface Strategy Taxonomy; see Section 3.4), lending confidence to the frequency distributions reported below.

4.1 Types of Syntactic Errors Based on the Linguistic Category Taxonomy

A total of 217 syntactic errors were identified across the 30 compositions that were analysed.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Syntactic Errors by Linguistic Category

Linguistic Category	f	P (%)
Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA)	72	33.18%
Tense and Aspect Construction	7	3.23%
Word Order and Phrase Structure	15	6.91%
Auxiliary Verbs and Modals Usage	19	8.76%
Passive Voice Construction	18	8.29%
Sentence Fragments	2	0.92%
Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices	18	8.29%
Determiners and Articles in Noun Phrases	40	18.43%
Prepositional Phrase Placement & Structural Complements	24	11.06%
Clause Structure & Conjunction (Subordination/Coordination)	2	0.92%
TOTAL (N)	217	100.00%

Subject-Verb Agreement was the most prevalent category, accounting for approximately one-third of all errors. In conjunction with Determiners/Articles and Prepositional Phrase Placement, these three categories accounted for 136 of 217 errors (62.7%), indicating that a small number of grammatical categories accounted for the majority of the students' syntactic difficulties. This distribution is further illustrated in Figure 1.

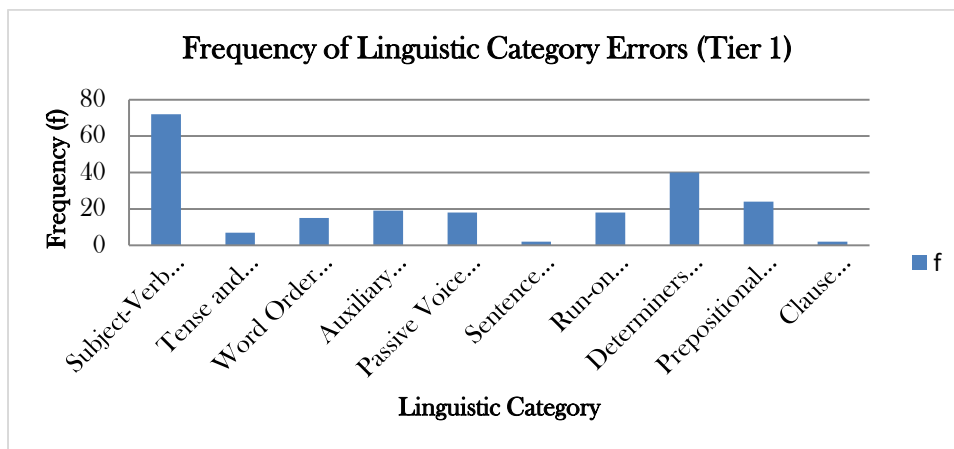


Figure 1. Frequency of Syntactic Errors by Linguistic Category (Tier 1).

4.2 Surface Strategy Mechanisms

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Syntactic Errors by Surface Strategy

Surface Strategy	f	P (%)
Omission	74	34.10%
Addition	16	7.37%
Misformation	112	51.61%
Misordering	15	6.91%
TOTAL (N)	217	100.00%

The analysis revealed that misformation and omission collectively accounted for 85.71% of all errors, suggesting that the majority of syntactic deviations were characterised by either the use of an incorrect grammatical form or the absence of a required element. This distribution is further illustrated in Figure 2.

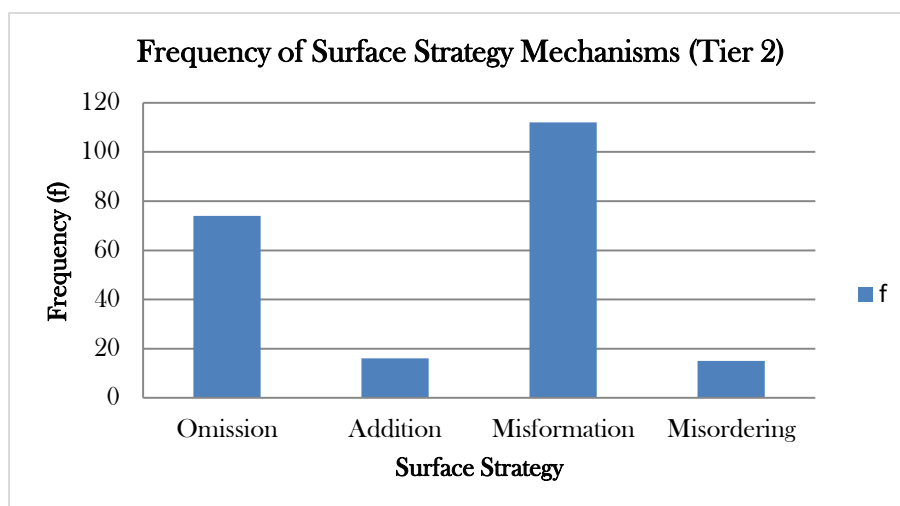


Figure 2. Frequency of Syntactic Errors by Surface Strategy (Tier 2).

4.3 Cross-Tabulation of Linguistic Category and Surface Strategy

Table 3: Cross-Tabulation of Linguistic Category $\times$ Surface Strategy

Linguistic Category	Omission	Addition	Misinformation	Misordering	Row Total
Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA)	2	0	70	0	72
Tense and Aspect Construction	0	0	7	0	7
Word Order and Phrase Structure	0	0	0	15	15
Auxiliary Verbs and Modals Usage	10	7	2	0	19
Passive Voice Construction	8	0	10	0	18
Sentence Fragments	2	0	0	0	2
Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices	18	0	0	0	18
Determiners and Articles in Noun Phrases	26	5	9	0	40
Prepositional Phrase Placement & Structural Complements	6	4	14	0	24
Clause Structure & Conjunction (Subordination/Coordination)	2	0	0	0	2
Column Total	74	16	112	15	217

The most prevalent single combination was Subject-Verb Agreement realised through Misinformation (70 instances). The realization of determiners and articles primarily occurred through the process of omission, with 26 out of 40 instances falling into this category. Conversely, all 15 instances of word order errors were characterised by misordering, exhibiting a direct one-to-one correspondence.

In order to provide a qualitative texture to the quantitative distribution presented above, Table 4 provides one representative example per linguistic category, drawn directly from the coded data.

Table 4. Representative Examples of Syntactic Errors by Linguistic Category

Linguistics Category	Original Sentence	Corrected Form	Surface Strategy
Subject-Verb Agreement	"Durian have many trons on its skin."	"Durian has many thorns on its skin."	Misinformation
Determiners and Articles	"Durian is fruit from Indonesia..."	"Durian is <i>a</i> fruit from Indonesia..."	Omission
Prepositional Phrase Placement	"Durian tree can grow up to 4-15 meter height."	"Durian tree can grow up to 4-15 meters <i>in</i> height."	Omission
Auxiliary Verbs and Modals	"...if we will eating the durian more..."	"...if we eat the durian more..."	Misinformation
Passive Voice Construction	"...if the durian sell to other people..."	"...if the durian <i>is sold</i> to other people..."	Omission
Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices	"Durian is my faforit fruit, the durian tree so very height, so the durian fruit there have a grade..."	Split into separate sentences with proper punctuation/conjunctions	Omission
Word Order and Phrase Structure	"Durian also is our favorite..."	"Durian is also our favorite..."	Misordering
Tense and Aspect Construction	"Yesterday, my mother make fried banana..."	"Yesterday, my mother made fried banana..."	Misinformation

Sentence Fragments	"And banana origin from south east asia..."	"And the banana's origin is from Southeast Asia..."	Omission
Clause Structure & Conjunction	"There are many people in Indonesia have a banana fruit."	"There are many people in Indonesia <i>who</i> have banana fruit."	Omission

These examples show that most errors did not stem from an inability to attempt the target structure, but from selecting or supplying its elements incorrectly, a pattern consistent with the Misformation- and Omission-dominant distribution reported in Table 2.

5. DISCUSSION

The prevalence of Subject-Verb Agreement (33.18%) mirrors patterns observed in numerous preceding studies on EFL error analysis (Prihandani, 2023; Prayuda et al., 2023; Palaguna, 2022; Fajrin et al., 2025; Faraj & Saber, 2025; Isma et al., 2023). The present study contributes to the existing body of research by demonstrating that Subject-Verb Agreement errors remain the most prevalent error type, even within the context of intensive English-Arabic immersion, thereby suggesting that intensive language exposure does not inherently guarantee enhanced grammatical accuracy in written communication. This finding is in alignment with observations that immersion environments frequently prioritise the swiftness of oral communication over grammatical precision, a tendency that is often observed to extend to written expression (Ahmad et al., 2023; Anyanwu et al., 2024; Siswoyo et al., 2024). This pattern is similar to L1-interference explanations found in other learner populations (Mirzayev, 2024; Nangle et al., 2024; Khushik, 2025; Xiaoling et al., 2024), though this study's design only implemented the identification and classification stages of Ellis's (1994) Error Analysis procedure without attempting to explain causes, so this similarity is presented here as a potential area of investigation rather than a definitive explanation for the current findings.

At the surface-strategy level, the dominance of Misformation (51.61%) over Omission, Addition, and Misordering indicates that students more often attempted the required structure but selected an incorrect form, rather than omitting or misplacing it, a distinction invisible from the Linguistic Category Taxonomy alone (Hardiany & Budiati, 2023; Seddik, 2023). The cross-tabulated SVA-Misformation pattern (70 of 72 SVA errors) and the representative examples in Table 4 further specify that students' difficulty lies primarily in selecting the correct inflected verb form rather than in recognizing that agreement is required at all.

The prominence of Determiners/Articles (18.43%, realized mainly through Omission) and Prepositional Phrase Placement (11.06%) suggests that noun-phrase and complementation structures constitute a second major area of difficulty. Interpreted alongside broader evidence on this research setting, this pattern may also reflect converging pressures already documented in similar intensive or boarding-based EFL environments, including speaking anxiety (Setyana et al., 2022), psychological adjustment demands (Keisha Jessenianta et al., 2025), and limited opportunities for extended, monitored writing practice amid heavy oral-communication demands (Anggrisia & Robah, 2023), even as collaborative classroom strategies continue to be explored as a way of sustaining student engagement in such settings (Basori et al., 2026). Taken together, these findings suggest that syntax instruction in similar immersive multilingual settings may benefit from prioritizing (1) accurate subject-verb form selection, (2) consistent use of determiners and articles, and (3) correct prepositional complementation, rather than treating "grammar errors" as a single undifferentiated problem, a prioritization that is likely to be pedagogically productive given

evidence that targeted, explicit syntax instruction can measurably improve learners' sentence-level accuracy (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024).

Although the students participated in a mandatory English–Arabic immersive language program, the present findings do not establish a causal relationship between the program and the syntactic errors identified. The study was designed to describe and classify errors in students' English descriptive compositions rather than investigate the linguistic or cognitive factors underlying them. In particular, the students' individual first-language backgrounds, proficiency levels, and language-use patterns were not directly measured. Therefore, possible explanations involving first-language influence or cross-linguistic transfer should be treated as avenues for further investigation rather than conclusions drawn from the present data.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined 217 syntactic errors made by eleventh-grade students at an English-Arabic immersive boarding school through the Two-Tier Hybrid Taxonomy, which integrated the Linguistic Category and Surface Strategy Taxonomies. Subject-Verb Agreement emerged as the most frequent linguistic category (33.18%), and Misinformation was the most common surface strategy (51.61%), with Subject-Verb Agreement realized by means of Misinformation accounting for the highest percentage of cross-tabulated patterns (70 instances). The findings highlight the fact that intensive multilingual immersion does not necessarily equal syntactic accuracy in writing and that the sources of student difficulty are concentrated in specific patterns rather than being distributed throughout the grammatical system. This study has demonstrated the efficacy of the two-tier taxonomy as a diagnostic tool in that it differentiates not only between the types of grammatical errors but explains their structural realization, thereby informing the instructor of specific areas of difficulty.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study only involved students from one school, so the findings cannot be generalised to other educational settings. Secondly, the analysis was restricted to descriptive compositions, so the distribution of syntactic errors may differ in other genres of writing and tasks. Thirdly, while the study identified and classified syntactic errors in the compositions collected, the available data do not establish whether the observed patterns represent systematic errors in students' writing more broadly. Finally, the analysis relied on raw error frequencies and percentages rather than normalised accuracy measures based on the amount of language produced. Consequently, the findings describe the distribution of identified errors, but do not independently demonstrate students' overall syntactic accuracy.

Future research could examine writing samples from multiple schools and genres, collect more extensive data and incorporate normalised accuracy measures. Additionally, future studies could investigate the relationships between students' first-language backgrounds, proficiency levels, language-use patterns and syntactic errors. Building on this descriptive study, future studies could adopt causal-explanatory or intervention designs to establish whether education focused on mitigating sources of interference, such as subject-verb agreement, determiner use and prepositional complementation (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024), would have an observable impact (Mirzayev, 2024; Nangle et al., 2024).

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