

Exploring sentence skills of the first-year English major students' argumentative essays

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ABSTRACT

Writing proficiency is one of crucial indicators of academic success, while most English learners face it as a challenging skill. Thus, this research aimed at analyzing sentence skills of the first-year English major students' argumentative essays. In the previous semester, they were given Grammar, Linguistics, and Paragraph Writing subjects to equip them with the ability in writing sentences. This current semester, they are taking an Essay Writing subject as a continuation of the previous subject they had. This research's scope was the analysis of the use of subject-verb agreements, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and pronoun references. Those grammatical categories refer to what was stated by Langan in revising students' essays which is the so-called four bases. By examining twenty-five essays written by the first-year English major students in a private university in South Jakarta, Indonesia, this research finding shows that students still struggle to apply the concept of English grammar since the errors were found in basic grammatical rules. Most of the errors were found in sentence fragment categories and subject-verb agreement which show that they had confusion in differentiating dependent and independent clauses and the use of singular subject for singular verb and vice versa. While only few errors were found in run-on sentences and pronoun reference. This result could shed light on learning strategies applied by lecturers based on students' weaknesses.

Keywords: EFL Students; Grammar; Writing

INTRODUCTION

English is one of the subjects on the national test in Indonesia and the first foreign language to be made a required course in secondary schools and universities. However, issues with learning English, particularly those pertaining to literacy (reading and writing) skills, are sometimes seen as distinct from the potential for learners to experience comparable issues with learning Indonesian. For instance, issues with students' English writing skills, such coming up with ideas and expressing audience awareness, are frequently seen as distinct from the possibility that the students will experience the same issues when writing in Indonesian (Rusfandi, 2025). English will broaden opportunities for Indonesians to escalate their knowledge, therefore mastery of English is important for Indonesian students (Alfarisy, 2021).

Second language learners face linguistic phenomena as their challenge in learning a language, including syntactic features defined as a set of rules for creating a coherent and grammatically correct sentences (Zhang & Xie, 2014). This challenge may appear due to the fact that they already have prior linguistics

knowledge, so that subconsciously they apply their first language grammar in learning a new language (Jensen & Westergaard, 2023). This phenomenon might also be triggered by the difference between their first and second languages' grammatical and syntactic features (Ying, 1999). This difference leads the second language learners to make errors which naturally occur as a part of learning to achieve competence and are not considered as a failure (Krashen cited in Rustandi et al., 2023).

Having good knowledge in English grammar is pivotal in developing students' writing skills. This means that grammar plays a role in showing how a student systematically organizes his ideas. Also, it has a role in the professional world since grammar skills could enable a student handle client in both spoken and written. This aim can lead a student's ability in arranging sentences correctly and properly so that his writing has a clear meaning (Riyawi & Wati, 2023). Grammar is also essential since readers could not clarify writers when they are bewildered what is written triggered by the incorrect grammar. Meanwhile, students' level in grammar could be recognized by the use of simple sentence patterns and vocabulary which are still limited to certain concrete situations. Basic errors are related to grammar structure such as subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, parts of speech, and parallel structures (Sukur & Mina, 2024).

Writing proficiency is a crucial indicator of academic achievement, while most English learners find it difficult to master it. This may lie in the need for a holistic grasp of content, text organization, genre, authorial stance, and language (Chang & Lee, 2019). Writing is also regarded as the most demanding language skill to learn since it requires a higher level of productive language control than the other skills. These are triggered by students' lack of vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and punctuation (Styati & Rodliyah, 2021). Moreover, EFL writing problems ranged from the incapability of using words in an appropriate way, lack of vocabulary, difficulty in grammar, and the students' different perception of English organization from L1 (Styati & Rodliyah, 2021). Therefore, L2 learners face difficulties due to the fact that they need not only to acquire the knowledge about text features, but also to be able to apply various writing strategies (Styati & Rodliyah, 2021). Meanwhile, various studies have indicated that grammatical complexity is a reliable indicator of L2 writing development (Seo & Oh, 2024). Some literatures also claimed that common problems appeared in an argumentative writing are the difficulties in grammar, organizational structure of writing, integrating and finding academic sources, writing topic sentences, counterarguments, refutation, punctuation, academic tone, and selection of irrelevant information (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020).

Among other types of writing, an argumentative writing is the most essential writing type at the university level (Dang et al., 2020; Ghanbari & Salari, 2022), and it is the most difficult one (Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008, cited in Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). It demands writers express opinions and support stance by providing sets of reliable evidence and reasoning (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020). Argumentative writing is a genre of writing showing a position on a certain issue, explaining and supporting this stance with reliable pieces of evidence. It composes an essential part of English learning programs due to the fact that it is considered as a critical mode of written discourse (Ozfidan & Mitchell, 2020).

English writing adopts a writer-responsible rhetoric, requiring writers to reveal both information and transitional signals. This method is useful for readers to grasp the logic, argumentation, and persuasion within the text, thus it makes the writing comprehensive (Hinds cited in Rusfandi, 2025). The English argumentative essay consists of four components which are introductory paragraph covering a clear thesis statement, body paragraphs covering topic sentences and supporting sentences. Each paragraph presents evidence that logically connects to the thesis statement. There is also information where the writer presents opposing statements (counterargument) and refutation. Meanwhile, the last component is a concluding paragraph summarizing the argumentation written earlier (Rusfandi, 2025). In addition, an argumentative writing requires students to have sufficient knowledge of linguistics, genre, and topic (Mccutchen, 2011). Thus, linguistics accuracy is one of the hardest tasks for EFL writers (Xie, 2019).

Meanwhile, to produce an effective writing, writers are supposed to refer to four bases or standards encompassing unity, support, coherence, and sentence skills. Unity refers to the use of a consistent topic by sticking to one point, while support means the writing is backed up with specific evidence. In addition, coherence means organization and connection between the writing and the evidence, and the last base is sentence skills referring to clarity and error-free sentences. These error-free sentences involve subjects and verbs, sentence sense, fragments, run-on sentence, regular and irregular verbs, subject-verb agreement, additional information about verbs, pronoun agreement and reference, the use of pronoun, adjectives, adverbs, and dangling modifiers (Langan, 2010).

Subject-verb agreement means a verb should agree in number with its subject. Singular subjects take singular verbs, while plural subjects take plural verbs (Rinehart & Holt, n.d.). Mastering the subject-verb agreement brings a challenge for students when writing paragraphs (Amnuai et al., 2021). In addition, every sentence must have both a subject and a verb and if it is without one of them, it is called a fragment. A fragment is a piece of a sentence, and it is not a complete sentence (Folse et al., 2014). The sentence fragment covers four essential types which are missing a subject, missing a verb, missing a subject and a verb, and dependent clause fragment (Warriner cited in Lioni et al., 2022). Pronoun agreement use ensures that in writing a sentence, every pronoun and possessive agrees with the noun it refers to. It could be done by checking back in the sentence for agreement (Phillips, 2003). While a run-on sentence occurs when two or more independent clauses are connected improperly. It is usually triggered by the absence of punctuation (Center, 2021).

At this private university, the first-year English major students are obliged to take an Essay Writing subject after completing Paragraph Writing. The Paragraph Writing subject was given in the first semester, while the Essay writing was given in the second semester. The students are expected to master the organization of various essay types such as argumentative, cause-effect, narrative, and comparative essay which are all written in the syllabus. They were also given Grammar and Linguistics subjects in the first until fourth semester to equip them with sufficient knowledge on how to construct sentences. This condition becomes an assumption that they have basic knowledge about sentences as their basic know-how in writing an essay. In an argumentative essay, students' skills in writing can lead them to a success of convincing peers and lecturers to accept their opinions in an academic

setting (Dang et al., 2020). Ferretti et al., (2007) contended that having a good skill in an argumentative writing is pivotal for their competitive workplace.

Previous research regarding errors in writing was written by Pandapatan (2020) who investigated the subject-verb agreement ability among Indonesian English major students. By involving seventy English major students, she found that there were many participants making mistakes in choosing the right verb that agreed to the subject. The findings also revealed that the participants lacked of emphasis on grammar practice in writing, vocabularies, and cultural differences. Another research in similar topic was written by Rustandi et al. (2023) who investigated the interlanguage temporary, permanent, and fossilized errors in the second language writing of seven doctoral students from a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The findings revealed that they made fossilized errors such as subordination, omission, double verb, and passive voice. Based on the findings, it was suggested that the participants needed a continuous course to equip them with the ability to write an argumentative essay. Meanwhile, this is a case study which occurred in a specific university in South Jakarta. The analysis unit spans not only subject-verb agreement, but also sentence fragment, run-on sentences, and pronoun agreement and reference.

Due to the background of the study written in the previous paragraphs, this study aimed to examine students' sentence skills encompassing subject-verb agreements, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and pronoun agreement and reference towards the first-year English major students' argumentative essays. The investigation of sentence skills was applied to Indonesian EFL students majoring English Literature, the first-year university students who are Indonesian native speakers. Thus, this study questions how do Indonesian EFL learners apply sentence skills in their argumentative essays?

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative analysis which is defined as an approach used to investigate and understand problems which is related to social phenomena and is not related to numbers (Creswell, 2018). This research comprised twenty-five argumentative essays of the first-year English major students at a private university in South Jakarta, Indonesia, and they are all Indonesian native speakers. There were fifty-five students as population, however the selected participants were twenty-five. They were selected because they were given offline tests unlike the other students whose learning and test mode were given via online. This could keep their originality of writing and prevent them from using any artificial intelligence devices. The researcher was their English lecturer who taught them Essay Writing subject. The age range of them was between 18 to 20 years old. Essay Writing is a compulsory subject to take for them after completing Paragraph Writing. It was assumed that they acquired skills of argumentative writing due to the previous subject which was given to them in the first semester. Moreover, the students were given a final paper-based test in which they were assigned to write their opinion based on one out of six debatable topics which all of them lead the writing to an argumentative essay. The essay had to be written in four to five paragraphs. All the students' essays were completed and submitted on the same day they had the final test within 100 minutes. They were not allowed to use both online and printed

dictionary, nor any devices to protect the originality of their writing. To conduct the analysis, the analysis unit such as subject-verb agreement, errors in run-on sentence, pronoun agreement and reference, and sentence fragment were identified in each of the essay. The errors made by students were presented in a table and were classified based on each category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis conducted towards twenty-five essays of the first-year English major students at a private university in South Jakarta, it was summed up that only student 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 15 who did not make any mistakes in writing sentences using the subject-verb agreement. The results are presented as the following.

Table 1. Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

Student	Subject-Verb Agreement
1	Its make we usually meet new people, we can join organization, or anything else. Many job accept fresh graduate from high school I think in some university have expensive price In conclusion, every person want the best for their life, but every people have their plan
2	Media influencers is one of those things that many people knows First of all, being an influencer make kids more innovative. For example, if some jokes is really viral in social media, they need to add them to their content. If the young generation become successful and well-known, many company would wanted their product to be included in their content.
3	What I mean is sometimes when the teacher write on the whiteboard, it all become blurry, well if you sit on the back.
5	Handphones is so important for school because students can search the material of school easily and more teacher teaching by via online.
6	Because in their age, they still wants to play.
8	The first benefits is improving soft skill.
	The second benefits is networking.
12	Some people is more helpful with application, because the bill for study in school is bigger than in a application
14	It also save some time so they don't have to look books in library that require a lot of time to look the specific book on the shelf
16	Ma'am Diah's explanations are easy to understand because she uses simple language, clear PowerPoint slides, and gets straight to the point.
17	Learning linguistics make me more knowledge about the grammar in this lesson, such as skill pronunciation, meaning, foreign word and phonetics alphabet.

18	After that, studying grammar really make an impact on my English understanding.
19	Ask your friend who have more knowledge to help you to become more better.
21	From the way ma'am Diah teach me about Linguistic subject are more easier and help my pronunciation better.

Subject-Verb Agreement

These errors are found because students did not write the tense properly referring to subjects and verbs in a sentence. Students did not know that the word 'its' is different from 'it is'. They also seemed confused to add suffix -s after a singular subject. Thus, these findings revealed that students lacked of understanding that a singular subject is followed by a verb attached with suffix -s and plural subjects are followed by plural verbs. Referring to the grammatical theory of English, singular subjects agree with singular verbs, and vice versa. As stated by Rustandi et al., (2023) that generally, the types of errors in syntax that occur in writing essays include omission, addition, miss-formation, disorders, passive voice, tense, noun phrase, auxiliary, and subject-verb agreement. Anyone who speaks or writes in English without making mistakes in this part is considered having good comprehension in the language. Problems in subject-verb agreement among EFL learners are common across educational levels from primary to university level. These problems seem to be normal because they are unaware of the rules and they see it less necessary and these problems mostly appear in writing (Pandapatan, 2020). These findings are in line with research findings written by Pandapatan (2020) who revealed that many of his participants made errors in subject-verb agreement in choosing the right verb that agrees to the subject. He added that lack of emphasis on grammar practice in writing is the main reason, followed by cultural differences as a barrier in interpreting the sentences, and limitation of vocabularies. Subject-verb agreement is relevant in determining one's grammatical ability (Pandapatan, 2020). In writing, students are required to use linguistics form accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. In the first year, many students struggle and often fail to finish projects owing to "weak writing skills". It seems to happen to students who are admitted to all fields, including the English department students. Thus, one of the most challenging tasks for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writers is linguistic accuracy (Tambunan et al., 2022; Xie, 2019). Thus, the acquisition of process is the core for them to apply in real communication. Exposing them with exercises and simultaneous practices are needed so that they can write a text properly (Nindya & Widiati, 2020).

Table 2. Errors in Sentence Fragment

Student	Sentence Fragment
1	Even though in time now more people think college not important because many job search experience job better than college
	Their attitude their language a very different
	Sometimes in some people hard to college because problem of money

	For go to college should spend more money and not little, I think in some university have expensive price, but in this era many “beasiswa” and of course we should hard to have that, but if that wish we want, we should try harder for accept.
	For success have different plan, different dream
2	It such a big phenomenon in modern society to the point many young generation want to become influencers. If the young generation able to become viral and famous, they will attract sponsors or advertisement.
	So it a waste of opportunity if the kids didn’t take their chances.
4	Any friends from much provinsi other
	There we can many games, meet alumny, we go puncak bogor at villa
5	Phones or electronic that we actually needed.
	Although the teacher can educate the students to using phones.
	Because there is a lot of school that using phones while in class.
6	Someone expert in some situation, some hobby, some problem.
	Still hard for them to school and work at the same time.
7	Interact with your friends to improve your language skills.
8	In this new era many student not interest to join college
	Because many benefits they can have if they join to college.
	Study in college not same as study in home or high school
	Because in college were study with many method
9	This in fact dangerous because that is straight up phedophile.
	Supports by underage kids that donot get enough parental supervision on social media.
12	Many application in handphone that can teach us.
	Because in school have material its easy to know
	Some people learn new language in an application, because they aren’t just learn one language, but can more than one.
14	First, unlimited access to information.
	Many people in social media able to produce income if they dedicated enough, even though they probably doesn’t have a high level education
16	Which makes it easy because my Linguistics lecturer has her own unique teaching techniques.
17	When we write a sentence or a paragraph, morphology is a very important thing to understand, because a mistake of using morphology on a sentence, could change the entire meaning of the sentence itself.
18	Because the learning includes grammar and phonetics as well as the structure of the language.

19	To improving communication between people, contributing to translation activities, assisting in literacy efforts, and treating speech disorders. Because I will study more advanced English than what I have studied in school. When I decided to move to my new college with confidence to learn English easily.
20	When I had to learn about Linguistics. Although learning Linguistics can teach us to understand more about sounds, its symbols and the meaning of those words we know.
21	explained by mam Diah is meaningful helping students understand the learning objectives.
22	By breaking down difficult topics into manageable, step by step, making even tricky concepts simple and simple to learn. Such as speaking, reading, and grammar.
23	An important subject to learn more about linguistics and its various symbols. A new subject that i learn to make it more understandable to study
24	linguistic learning that can improve communication and self-confidence. Makes you wonder what else we take for granted when we communicate every day, right?
25	Like memorizing phonetic symbols, oral movements and word stress. My experience when I studying linguistic.

Sentence Fragment

These errors were caused by students' bewilderment in constructing a proper sentence. As it can be seen from student 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, and 14 until 25. While, only students 3, 10, 11, 13, and 15 who did not make any mistakes in constructing sentences which means they have sufficient knowledge on how to write sentences. On the other hand, the students who made errors thought that it was a sentence by putting a period at the end of the statement. The statement is started by using subordinating conjunctions such as 'even though', 'although', and 'because'. What they wrote were dependent clauses which had to be attached with an independent clause to bring clear and meaningful sentences. It seems that the students lacked of grammatical comprehension of what a sentence is, as it is stated that a sentence consists of at least subject and verb (Merrita, 2025). Even though Ying (1999) contended that linguistics became EFL learners' challenge in learning a language due to differences between their first and second language's grammatical and syntactic features, in Indonesian grammatical features, a sentence written by student 6 *Still hard for them to school and work at the same time* is not a sentence due to the same reason as English grammatical rules. These findings are in line with the investigation conducted by Rustandi et al. (2023) contending that errors occurred when participants lacked the linguistics competence between two languages. He added that the influence of L2 writing on L1 writing has been viewed as a complex process. Meanwhile, there were also some students who thought that

a phrase is a sentence. This could be clearly seen by statements written by students 14, 22, and 25. As a result, they did not realize that the verb should exist for making a meaningful sentence. Also, it implies that students lacked knowledge of the practice of writing and overgeneralization between the first language and target language. It means they lack the knowledge to recognize the culture of writing in a second language (Rustandi et al., 2023). They need a long-term bridging course to train and practice contextual writing skills. This practice will help them know the sentence's construction in a paragraph. In this context, with appropriate training and practice, all learners can become better writers. Finally, through the training process, they will get proficient in writing academic essays based on knowing their errors (Rustandi et al., 2023). This finding is also in line with the investigation of Shilva et al., (2022) that students only used a piece of information without carrying about the key information needed in a sentence, such as subject and verb. In this case, they only provide incomplete information in their writing both in terms of completeness of information and grammatical elements.

Table 3. Errors in Run-On Sentence

Student	Run-On Sentence
1	For go to college should spend more money and not little, I think in some university have expensive price, but in this era many "beasiswa" and of course we should hard to have that, but if that wish we want, we should try harder for accept.
13	Taking class is way more better when you have questions you can ask immediately and taking notes, also you can practice with someone who taking the same course like you in the class, so when you miss spelling a word the teacher could correct it, and tell you how to pronounce it correctly and why it is sounds like this and why it doesn't sounds like that. Because you could meet new people, new friends who gonna help you with practicing, questions and you could feel more new experience it's totally different when you only taking online class or learn it through appas you don't have someone to practice with or to discuss about something.

Run-On Sentence

It is called as a run-on sentence error because the sentence length is too long which leads to ineffective information. It could be revised by breaking the sentence down into several sentences and combined with conjunctions. It seemed that the student did not recognize the function of punctuation properly as written by student 1 *For go to college should spend more money and not little, I think in some university have expensive price, but in this era many "beasiswa" and of course we should hard to have that, but if that wish we want, we should try harder for accept.* This sentence is too long and consists of several clauses. The sentence construction itself is written improperly as it has no subject at the beginning of the sentence. There is no clear information who should spend more money. This information is continued by writing another clause which is also inappropriate because the writer misused the word 'in' which makes it become an object of preposition. These run-on sentence errors could also be read from student 13's sentences. He wrote such a long sentence without having any period to separate the ideas. It is in line with the

investigation of Shilva et al., (2022) that the sentences overlap with each other due to its length. The students did not concern about punctuation matters. They ignore the rules to use and put period between sentences. These errors impact the presence of double subject and verb in one sentence. In order to make the sentence complete, students could use several alternative methods such as simply separate the sentence into two sentences, link them with a coordinating conjunction, use a semicolon, or add a subordinating conjunction (Shilva et al., 2022). As it is opined by Rustandi et al., (2023) that the practical instructor should give more corrective feedback to the students in order to help them know their errors in writing an argumentative essay. Lecturers and educators need to motivate their students to create a sufficient writing product by minimizing errors. The learning process of English writing should be informed of the urgency of English sentence completeness in organizing a text and introduce the strategies for avoiding and making less run-on (Shilva et al., 2022).

Table 4. Pronoun Agreement and Reference

Student	Pronoun Agreement and Reference
14	Student can connect their phone to school internet so they can look for reference that related to their subject. Some school allowed their student to use their smartphone during classes to browse specific and related material to whatever subject they want to discuss with their room teacher.

Pronoun Agreement and Reference

Among twenty-five students who became the participants, only student 14 whose sentences were identified as pronoun agreement and reference. These errors could be seen by the use subject 'student' at the beginning of the sentence and the word 'their' in the following information. If the writer would like to use 'their', he was supposed to use a plural form of 'student' instead of a singular one. This error was repeated in the following sentence in which the writer wrote 'some school' in a singular form, however he used 'their' to refer to 'school'. The third error he made was the use of the word 'they' which refers to 'student' which is written in a singular form. These errors are in line with what was stated by Zhang & Xie (2014) that the ability to produce good writing corresponds to the ability of students' grammatical knowledge. Grammatical knowledge such as subject-verb agreement, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, and pronoun agreement and reference are not new concept for the participants. Based on the syllabi provided by the English Department, those concepts are given for them in the preceding semester scattered in several subjects. However, they seem to have confusion constructing sentences by ignoring grammatical rules. Moreover, this research finding remains the same as the previous studies which focused on sentence skills used by the EFL students.

Since essay writing is a compulsory subject for them to take in the second semester, they are obliged to improve their writing skills. It is supported by the fact that in the previous semester, they had been given Grammar, Linguistics, and Paragraph Writing subjects to equip them with basic knowledge of writing sentences. However, the students' errors in writing sentences were the basic rule of grammar as it is stated by Sukur & Mina (2024) that students' level in grammar could be recognized by the use of simple sentence patterns and vocabulary which are still limited to certain concrete situations. Basic errors are related to grammar

structure such as subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, parts of speech, and parallel structures.

CONCLUSION

This study examined grammatical errors in argumentative essays written by the first-year English major students, with a specific focus on subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and pronoun reference. The findings which is in line with the research question indicate that many students struggle with applying basic grammar rules which reflects a generally low level of grammatical mastery. One of the most frequent errors involved sentence fragment. Students have not had sufficient comprehension regarding both completeness in information and grammatical elements to make up a sentence. They ignored the fact that a sentence needs, at least, a subject and a verb. Many students constructed incomplete sentences that lacked either a subject or a verb, making their writing unclear and grammatically incorrect. These fragments disrupted the logical flow of ideas and weakened the argumentative structure of their essays. Another crucial concern as a teacher was also the use of subject-verb agreement. Students often had difficulties in matching singular subjects with singular verbs and plural subjects with plural verbs, leading to inconsistencies and confusion in sentence construction. This shows a limited understanding of fundamental grammar rules necessary for coherent writing. Moreover, run-on sentences were another issue. Students often combined multiple ideas into a single sentence without proper punctuation, such as periods or coordinating conjunctions. This led to overly long and confusing sentences that obscured the intended meaning and showed a lack of awareness regarding punctuation norms. Finally, errors in pronoun reference were also observed. Students frequently used plural pronouns to refer to singular nouns and vice versa, resulting in ambiguity and confusion in their writing. Overall, the results suggest that practice in basic grammar particularly in these key areas are needed to support them in developing clearer and more accurate writing. Also, students could use real-time corrective feedback such as Grammarly so that they could avoid similar errors in the future. By using this tool, they could also equip themselves and enrich their knowledge regarding grammatical structures. Further research could investigate sentence skills and the systematic writing of an argumentative essay.

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