

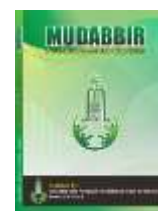


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An Analysis of Subject-Auxiliary Inversion Errors in EFL Students' Writing

Najwa Ramadhani Tarigan¹, Jihan Luthfi², Dirza Rizki Purnama³,
Siti Ismahani⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Email: ¹20nashua@gmail.com, ²jihanluthfi05@gmail.com, ³dirzarezki4@gmail.com,
⁴sitiismahani@uinsu.ac.id

ABSTRACT

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing, grammar is essential for achieving precision and clarity, particularly when it comes to creating questions. The subject and auxiliary verb must be reversed in yes/no and wh-questions, according to the necessary grammatical form known as subject-auxiliary inversion (SAI). Using a descriptive quantitative methodology, this study seeks to analyze the frequency and patterns of SAI mistakes in the writing of EFL learners. Twenty-two undergraduate EFL students from the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU) from various academic semesters made up the participants. Using a structured grammar test modified from Azar (2009) and administered electronically using Google Forms, data were collected. The frequency and kinds of inversion mistakes were determined using descriptive statistics and error analysis in the analysis. The results demonstrate that SAI is utilized with a very high overall accuracy rate (over 95%), suggesting that the majority of students have fully absorbed this grammatical principle. Nevertheless, there were still some little mistakes, especially in statements using present simple, past simple, and present perfect auxiliary verbs. Although formal grammar teaching is generally successful, these findings indicate that there is still a need for focused reinforcement on tense-auxiliary alignment. By highlighting the significance of targeted remedial grammar exercises in improving grammatical precision in writing, the research offers practical pedagogical recommendations for EFL teaching.

Keywords: Error analysis, Grammatical mistakes, Interrogative statements, EFL writing, Subject-auxiliary Inversion

INTRODUCTION

For writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to be accurate and clear, grammar is essential. Learners can create well-formed sentences and accurately convey meaning when they have a firm grasp of grammatical structures (Ellis, 2006). One of these patterns is subject-auxiliary inversion, which is a basic norm in English interrogative sentences. In most *wh*-questions and yes/no questions, the auxiliary verb must come before the subject (Azar & Hagen, 2017). When this guideline is not followed correctly, students frequently make grammatical mistakes that lower the caliber of their written work.

Subject-auxiliary inversion is well acknowledged as an issue for learners in EFL environments. First language interference, insufficient exposure to real English input, and a lack of comprehension of tense and auxiliary usage are sometimes blamed for this difficulties (Swan, 2005). Particularly in *wh*-question structures, learners frequently make mistakes like keeping declarative word order in questions, leaving out auxiliaries, or employing the wrong auxiliary verbs. These mistakes show that learners are having difficulty internalizing English syntactic norms, which are very different from their home tongues.

Even students who have received formal education in English grammar continue to make grammatical mistakes in interrogative statements, according to research (Brown, 2007). This implies that appropriate application in writing is not always guaranteed by formal grammar instruction. As a result, error analysis becomes a crucial instrument for pinpointing learners' particular grammatical flaws and offering insights into their interlanguage development (Corder, 1981).

Based on this problem, the current study uses a quantitative method to examine subject-auxiliary inversion errors in the writing of EFL students. The information came from a structured grammar test that was given to undergraduate EFL students from various academic semesters and backgrounds in grammar study. The test consisted of yes/no questions and *wh*-questions. Finding the prevalence and trends of inversion errors in students' written responses is the main goal of the analysis.

By providing empirical evidence of common inversion-related errors in students' writing, the study's findings are anticipated to improve EFL teaching methods. Additionally, the findings should help English teachers create more targeted grammar lessons and remedial exercises that highlight proper interrogative sentence construction, especially subject-auxiliary inversion.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive quantitative approach to systematically investigate the linguistic phenomena of Subject-Auxiliary Inversion (SAI) errors among EFL students. By utilizing a quantitative method, the researcher was able to objectively measure the frequency and distribution of syntactic errors, providing a clear statistical map of the students' proficiency levels. The participants of this study consisted of 22 undergraduate EFL students from the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU), who participated on a voluntary basis. These participants were recruited from the 1st to the 5th semesters to ensure a representation of various academic levels within the English Education program. A total sampling technique was employed, as all students who volunteered and completed the questionnaire were included in the analysis. These participants were selected because they had received instruction in core grammar courses, including the rules governing word order and auxiliary usage, making them suitable subjects for an error analysis study.

The primary instrument for data collection was a grammar test consisting of 15 structured items. To ensure academic validity, the test items were adapted from the grammatical framework and exercises proposed by Azar (2009) in *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. The test was specifically designed to evaluate the students' ability to correctly apply Subject-Auxiliary Inversion across various sentence structures. Data were collected electronically via Google Forms to ensure efficiency and accuracy in response recording. The procedure began with a briefing to provide participants with clear instructions regarding the research objectives. The test was then administered under a controlled timeframe to capture the students' spontaneous grammatical knowledge. After collection, raw responses were extracted from the spreadsheet and manually coded, where correct answers were assigned a score of one and incorrect answers were assigned a score of zero.

The data analysis followed the framework of Error Analysis (EA) using descriptive statistics to determine the prevalence of errors. The researcher calculated the frequency of incorrect responses per item to identify the percentage of errors relative to the total number of respondents. Furthermore, the errors were analyzed qualitatively to identify the specific patterns of inversion errors made by the students. Throughout the process, the study adhered to strict ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of the test. To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymized, ensuring that no personal identifiers were used in the analysis or reporting of the final results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A structured grammar test adapted from Azar (2009) and given via Google Forms to 22 undergraduate EFL students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU) revealed an exceptionally high overall proficiency in Subject-Auxiliary Inversion (SAI) in interrogative sentences, with an average accuracy rate of over 95% across all sections. In Section B (Yes/No Questions), questions 4–6 had 100% accuracy, as participants consistently picked inverted forms like *Are you happy today?* over *You are happy today?*, *Can she drive a car?* over *She can drive a car?*, and *Did they finish the assignment?* over *They did finish the assignment?*. Due to an oversight in the selection of the present simple auxiliary, item 7 showed a slight decrease to 95.5% accuracy for *Does he like coffee?*, with only 4.5% of respondents choosing the non-inverted *He likes coffee?*.

The same strength was shown in Section C (Wh-Questions), with 95.5–100% accuracy: Items 9–11 received perfect scores on this section. In contrast, in item 8, in *"Why are you late?"*, 4.5% of the responses had mistakes in the subject-verb order. The error rate in Section D (Sentence Correction) ranged from 86.36% to 100%, with 100% accuracy in item 13 (*"What is he talking about?"*), 90.91% in items 12 (*"Why didn't you come yesterday?"*) and 14 (*"Does she understand the lesson?"*), and the lowest at 86.36% in item 15 (*"Where have you been all this time?"*), where 13.64% failed to correctly invert the perfect tense auxiliary *have*. In addition to *"What is she doing now?"*, *"Where are they going?"*, and *"How did you solve the problem?"*, other questions include *"Why are you late?"*. The demographics of the respondents provide additional context for these findings: 95.5% had prior formal grammar training, 77.3% were female, 50% were from semester 5, and 40.9% were from semester 3, indicating that the sample was appropriate for the mistake analysis as described in the research methodology.

In accordance with Ellis (2006), who highlights grammar's significance in allowing learners to create well-formed sentences and express meaning accurately, these results support the idea that UINSU EFL students have successfully internalized SAI as a fundamental grammatical structure necessary for good writing. Azar & Hagen (2017), who define SAI as a basic interrogative rule that EFL students learn relatively quickly after explicit teaching, are supported by the almost flawless performance on simple yes/no and wh-questions, particularly considering that 95.5% of the study participants had prior formal grammar exposure. Nevertheless, the persistent little mistakes (4.5–13.64%), mostly in auxiliary omission or misplacement in the present simple (*does*), past simple (*didn't*), and present perfect (*have*), reveal underlying difficulties, particularly in pairing auxiliaries with tense, even among advanced students. This pattern is similar to Swan (2005), who blames such problems on interference from Indonesian, which is the first language (L1) and uses declarative word order for questions, which results in overgeneralization in interlanguage forms. It also aligns with Brown (2007), who points out that formal grammar instruction does not always

guarantee perfect writing output, as theoretical knowledge does not always translate completely to spontaneous application—a gap that is apparent here, despite the participants' high level of education and fundamental grammar training. These discrepancies indicate systematic interlanguage development, where students approach target norms but need focused correction for exceptional cases like tense-specific auxiliaries, rather than arbitrary errors, according to Corder's (1981) error analysis methodology.

The >95% accuracy is encouraging for UINSU's English Education curriculum from a pedagogical standpoint, supporting the descriptive quantitative approach's usefulness in mapping proficiency as per the research methodologies. However, the error trends highlight the necessity for improved instruction, such as remedial activities that concentrate on auxiliary-tense alignment and visual aids (such sentence diagrams), drawing inspiration from Azar (2009)'s exercise frameworks. Incorporating regular error analysis, as Corder (1981) recommends, might bridge the theory-practice gap and foster a deeper understanding of syntax, similar to Ellis (2006)'s call for grammar proficiency in EFL writing. Future research might expand on this by comparing SAI errors across different L1 backgrounds or by evaluating longitudinal treatments to improve these findings.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that EFL students in the State Islamic University of North Sumatra's English Education department typically exhibit a high degree of understanding of subject-auxiliary inversion in interrogative sentence construction based on the findings and discussion. The majority of students have effectively assimilated the fundamental concept of putting auxiliaries before subjects in English questions, especially in basic present and past tense structures, as evidenced by the overall accuracy rate above 95% across yes/no and wh-questions.

Nevertheless, the study also shows that there are systematic and recurrent errors, particularly in sentences that use tense-sensitive auxiliaries like *does*, *did*, and *have*. These mistakes imply that even while students have a strong understanding of explicit grammar, they nevertheless struggle to consistently match auxiliary verbs with the proper tense forms when writing. This result lends credence to the idea that accurate spontaneous usage is not always a direct result of grammatical competence.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings suggest that grammar training in EFL contexts should prioritize reinforced practice that targets exceptional circumstances, especially perfect tense and auxiliary selection in wh-questions, in addition to rule explanation. Regular error analysis, contextualized drills, and targeted feedback could assist students improve their writing correctness and get past lingering inversion issues.

In conclusion, even though the students' subject-auxiliary inversion competency is encouraging, minor but persistent errors require ongoing instructional attention. By using a larger sample size, comparing students from various first-language backgrounds, or using experimental methods to assess the efficacy of focused instructional interventions on lowering inversion errors in EFL writing, future research may expand on this work.

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