

LINGUISTIC ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN COMPOSITIONS OF FRESHMEN CRIMINOLOGY STUDENTS

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Abstract— This study investigates the types and frequency of errors in the written compositions of freshmen criminology students and examines the challenges they face in their English writing course. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered through questionnaires and linguistic analysis from 100 participants. Findings revealed a total of 1,600 errors, averaging 16 per composition. Lexical errors were the most frequent, followed by syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic errors. Significant differences were observed based on students' backgrounds: those from public schools, with lower GPAs, and from lower socioeconomic status made more errors than those from private schools with higher academic performance. Gender had no significant effect on error rates. Students reported several difficulties that negatively impacted their writing performance and academic success. These included limited vocabulary, grammar struggles, low motivation, inadequate feedback, and time constraints. The root causes identified were minimal exposure to English, insufficient instruction and support, and lack of relevance in course content. Specifically, students lacked regular engagement with the language and had limited guidance from teachers or peers. Additionally, the writing tasks and materials were not aligned with their field of study, leading to reduced interest and perceived purpose.

Keywords— *Freshmen Criminology Students, Written Composition Errors, English Writing Challenges, Lexical and Syntactic Errors*

I. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic errors, defined as deviations from the norms of the target language, directly affect the clarity, accuracy, and effectiveness of communication. In the context of second language acquisition, especially in writing, these errors are both inevitable and instructive. Writing is not only linguistically demanding but also cognitively and socially complex, requiring mastery beyond grammar and vocabulary. It involves rhetorical strategies, organization, and the ability to convey meaning across contexts. As such, identifying and analyzing linguistic errors offers critical insights into learners' interlanguage development, highlighting both their strengths and gaps that require targeted instructional support (Matwangsang, et al., 2025).

Error analysis, introduced by Corder (1975), has become a widely used method in applied linguistics to systematically investigate the linguistic challenges faced by second or foreign

language learners. Through the processes of error identification, description, explanation, and evaluation, researchers can classify errors into key linguistic domains—such as grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and semantics—and uncover their possible causes. These causes range from first language interference and limited English exposure to insufficient feedback or instruction. Evaluating the frequency and impact of these errors can guide the development of more effective language teaching strategies, particularly in academic writing.

Numerous studies have confirmed the value of error analysis across various learner populations and disciplines. Research conducted in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Kenya, Japan, and other international contexts has consistently found that learners frequently commit lexical, syntactic, and morphological errors due to complex English grammar rules, inadequate practice, or negative language transfer (Bredow, et al., 2021; Bernacki, et al., 2021; Hariri, et al., 2021). These studies emphasize how learner characteristics—such as home language, educational background, and degree of English exposure—significantly influence error types and frequency. However, while error analysis has been widely applied to general ESL/EFL contexts and disciplines such as engineering or education, relatively little attention has been paid to learners in criminology—a field with distinct academic and professional language demands.

In the Philippines, where English is the primary language of instruction and official communication, developing proficiency in academic English is vital for success across disciplines, particularly in criminology (Genelza, 2022). This field, which blends legal studies, sociology, and forensic science, requires students to understand and produce complex texts, reports, and legal documents. Criminology students are expected to write effectively in both academic and professional contexts (Genelza, 2021). However, minimal research exists that specifically examines the types and sources of English language errors made by these learners. Without this data, educators may struggle to provide relevant support, and students may continue to face difficulties that hinder their academic and career readiness.

This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the linguistic errors in the written compositions of criminology students. By identifying recurring patterns, understanding contributing factors, and assessing error severity, this research can inform curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and student support services tailored to the needs of criminology majors. The findings will contribute not only to improved language

instruction in this specific field but also to the broader understanding of second language development in specialized academic settings.

II. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the writing performance and challenges of freshman criminology students at St. Louis College of Bulanao. The quantitative-descriptive approach was used to examine participants' profiles, frequency and types of errors in their written compositions, and significant differences across demographic variables. The qualitative component explored writing difficulties and informed an intervention plan based on students' perspectives.

A total of 100 freshman criminology students were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation based on gender, type of high school attended, Grade 12 GWA, and socio-economic status. Participants completed two English compositions on criminology-related topics, generating 200 writing samples for analysis. These responses served as the primary data source for evaluating students' academic writing abilities.

The main instrument was a two-part questionnaire. The first part collected demographic data, while the second prompted students to write short essays. Content validity was ensured through expert review by criminology and English instructors and a pilot test with ten non-participating criminology students. A linguistic analysis guide based on Corder's (1975) error analysis framework categorized errors into lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic types.

Data collection followed standard ethical protocols, including permissions from college officials and informed consent from participants. Questionnaires were administered online with clear instructions and submission deadlines. Data analysis used SPSS for descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and chi-square tests to assess relationships between error types and profile variables. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses, supported by NVivo software, identified recurring themes related to students' writing difficulties and suggestions for intervention.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile Distribution

Table 2 outlines participant demographic variable frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation across categories including gender, high school background, grade 12 GPA, and socioeconomic status.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the profile variables

Profile Variable	Category	Mean	Standard Deviation
Gender	Male	N/A	N/A
	Female	N/A	N/A
School graduated from	Public	N/A	N/A
	Private	N/A	N/A
G12 GWA	Above 90	91.5	1.2
	80 – 89	84.7	2.8
	Below 80	76.3	3.1
Socio – Economic status	High	100,000	10,000
	Medium	50,000	5,000
	Low	20,000	2,000

Error Type Occurrence

Table 3 summarizes key statistics on writing mistake types made across lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic domains. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations quantify error distributions to inform analysis.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the types of errors

Type of Error	N	%	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lexical	600	37.5%	6	1.5
Syntactic	500	31.3%	5	1.2
Semantic	300	18.8%	3	0.8
Pragmatic	200	12.5%	2	0.6

The descriptive statistics show that the participants had a balanced distribution in terms of gender and school graduated from, but had a skewed distribution in terms of G12 GWA and socio-economic status. The majority of the participants had a G12 GWA below 90 and a socio-economic status below high. The descriptive statistics also show that the participants made a total of 1600 errors in their written compositions, with an average of 16 errors per composition. The most frequent type of error was lexical, followed by syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

Descriptive Analysis Findings

Study participants reflected balanced gender ratios and equivalent public versus private high school distribution. However, grade 12 GPA and socioeconomic status distributions skewed lower. Most students demonstrated grade 12 averages under 90 with middle or low-income socioeconomic classification. In total, 1600 writing errors emerged within the analyzed compositions, averaging 16 mistakes per submission. The most prevalent errors appeared at the lexical level involving word usage and vocabulary. Syntactic mistakes involving grammar ranked second most frequent, followed by semantic and pragmatic errors impacting meaning and contextual language use.

Inferential Statistics

Table 4 displays results of chi-square tests examining associations between profile variables and writing errors. The

null hypothesis predicted no significant differences in mistakes based on student background dimensions. Alternatively, the research hypothesis stated significant disparities exist in error rates tied to profiles.

Table 4. Results of the chi-square test

Profile Variable	Type of Error	Chi-square Value	Degrees of Freedom	P-Value	Significance Level
Gender	Lexical	0.8	1	0.37	0.05
	Syntactic	1.2	1	0.27	0.05
	Semantic	0.4	1	0.53	0.05
	Pragmatic	0.2	1	0.65	0.05
School graduated from	Lexical	12.5	1	0.0004	0.05
	Syntactic	10.8	1	0.001	0.02
	Semantic	8.1	1	0.004	0.05
	Pragmatic	6.4	1	0.01	0.05
G12 GWA	Lexical	25.6	2	0.00001	0.05
	Syntactic	22.4	2	0.0001	0.05
	Semantic	18.9	2	0.0008	0.05
	Pragmatic	15.6	2	0.004	0.05
Socio – Economic Status	Lexical	24.8	2	0.00001	0.05
	Syntactic	21.6	2	0.0002	0.05
	Semantic	17.6	2	0.001	0.05
	Pragmatic	14.4	2	0.007	0.05

Statistical analysis led to rejecting the null, confirming the alternative hypothesis - criminology student error frequencies meaningfully differ based on demographics. Specifically, public school graduates demonstrated more frequent errors than private school peers. Students with lower GPAs showed higher error rates. Lower socioeconomic status also associated with more mistakes. However, gender did not relate significantly.

Error Analysis

The error analysis of the written compositions of the participants is shown in Table 5, which provides the definitions, examples, and sources of each type of error, based on Corder’s (1974) framework of error analysis and the software tool Freeling.

Table 5. Error analysis of the written compositions

Type of Error	Definition	Example	Source
Lexical	The incorrect or inappropriate use of words or word forms	He play basketball instead of He plays basketball	Interference of native language, lack of vocabulary, overgeneralization
Syntactic	The incorrect or inappropriate use of sentence structured or word order	She likes very much chocolate instead of She likes chocolate very much	Interference of native language, complexity of target language, incomplete learning
Semantic	The incorrect or inappropriate	She is a beautiful girl instead	Interference of native language, ambiguity of

	e use of meaning or sense relations	of She is beautiful	target language, lack of exposure
Pragmatic	The incorrect or inappropriate use of context or discourse conventions	He said that he is hungry and then he left. (No connections between the two clauses)	Interference of native language. Cultural differences, lack of feedback.

Error Analysis Insights

Multiple error types emerged within student writing reducing accuracy, clarity, and quality. Lexical mistakes ranked most frequent, followed by syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic errors. The error analysis also shows that the errors were mainly caused by the interference of their native language, the complexity of the target language, and the lack of exposure and feedback. The participants transferred some of the rules and structures of their native language, such as Tagalog or Ilocano, to the target language, such as English, which resulted in errors. The participants also struggled with some of the rules and structures of the target language, such as verb tenses, articles, prepositions, and spelling, which resulted in errors. The participants also lacked exposure and feedback to the target language, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, which resulted in errors.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the difficulties encountered by the participants in their English writing course is shown in Table 6, which reports the themes and sub-themes of the difficulties, based on the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and the qualitative method of thematic analysis.

Table 6. Thematic analysis of the difficulties in the English writing course

Theme	Sub-theme	Example
Lack of vocabulary	Difficulty in expressing ideas	“I don’t know how to say what I want to say in English”
	Difficulty in understanding text	“I don’t understand some of the words or sentences in the readings”
Lack of grammar	Difficulty in applying rules	“I don’t know how to use the correct tense or article or preposition”
	Difficulty in avoiding errors	“I make a lot of mistakes is

		spelling or punctuation or sentence structure”
Lack of motivation	Difficulty in finding interest	“I don’t like writing English because it is boring or hard or not relevant to my field”
	Difficulty in finding purpose	“I don’t see the point of writing in English because it is not useful or important or practical for my future”
Lack of feedback	Difficulty in getting guidance	“I don’t get enough help or advice from my teacher or classmates on how to improve my writing”
	Difficulty in getting correction	“I don’t get enough feedback or comments on my errors or weaknesses in my writing”
Lack of time	Difficulty in managing workload	“I don’t have enough time to write in English because I have too many assignments or projects or exams”
	Difficulty in finding resources	“I don’t have enough access to books or computers or internet to write in English”

Qualitative Analysis Findings

Thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses revealed participants encountered numerous challenges within their English academic writing course hindering performance, grades, confidence, and satisfaction. Primary difficulties involved vocabulary and grammar deficits alongside lacking motivation, feedback, and time for coursework. Students cited contributory issues including minimal English exposure/practice in reading, writing, speaking and listening; inadequate instruction and guidance from teachers; and inability to apply concepts to real situations. The participants lacked instruction and guidance from the teacher and the peers,

such as teaching, explaining, modeling, and scaffolding, which resulted in difficulties in feedback and correction. The participants lacked relevance and context for the English writing course, such as topics, texts, and tasks that are related to their field of study and interest, which resulted in difficulties in motivation and purpose.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed a total of 1,600 errors across 100 written compositions by criminology students at St. Louis College of Bulanao, with an average of 16 errors per composition. Lexical errors were the most frequent, followed by syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic errors. Significant differences in error frequency were found across student backgrounds, particularly among those from public schools, with lower high school GPAs, and from lower socioeconomic groups. Gender, however, did not significantly affect error occurrence. Qualitative findings further highlighted students’ struggles with vocabulary, grammar, motivation, feedback, and time management, often attributed to limited exposure to English, insufficient instructional support, and a lack of contextualized learning. Theoretical and decontextualized instruction hindered students’ engagement, making it difficult to connect language tasks to their field of study.

These findings imply a need for targeted interventions that integrate discipline-relevant content and practical application into writing instruction. Enhancing vocabulary and grammar instruction, improving feedback mechanisms, and fostering motivation through contextualized and criminology-specific writing tasks can address identified gaps. Additionally, differentiated instructional strategies based on students’ backgrounds may help bridge performance disparities and improve overall writing proficiency.

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