

Error Correction Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies for low-proficiency EFL Learners in Senior High School: A Descriptive Analysis of Writing Tasks

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Abstract: This study explores low-achieving senior high school EFL learners' perceptions of, challenges in, and preferences for error correction in writing. Despite extensive research on feedback efficacy, few studies focus on struggling learners' specific difficulties with writing errors. Using a mixed-methods approach, surveys (four dimensions: attitudes toward correction, writing challenges, learning strategies, and teaching suggestions), and interviews, this research applies Error Analysis Theory to identify common writing errors and their potential causes among low-proficiency EFL Learners in Senior High School. Descriptive statistics reveal that students struggle most with grammatical nuances and interpreting corrective feedback. While learners prefer explicit teacher guidance, many lack strategies to self-correct effectively. Findings highlight the need for tailored interventions directly from the English teacher. This study contributes practical insights for educators addressing error-correction gaps in low-proficiency contexts, emphasizing clarity, repetition, and targeted solutions.

Keywords: Error correction; Low-proficiency EFL learners; Error analysis theory; Tailored interventions

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1. Introduction

The New Gaokao Reform has increased the weight of English writing to 40 out of 150 points, emphasizing critical thinking and integrated language skills over rote learning. Writing, as the most complex competency, requires linguistic organization, logical coherence, and creativity. However, classroom observations by the researcher reveal that senior high school students often neglect self-correcting errors after writing tasks, which impedes their progress. While existing studies categorize composition errors, few addresses practical interventions for common issues like verb mistakes. This gap leaves teachers without effective strategies to enhance error correction for low-proficiency learners.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of errors

In Error Analysis Theory, an “error” is defined as a systematic deviation resulting from the learner’s inadequate interlanguage competence ^[1]. While there exists academic consensus regarding their definition, scholarly emphases

vary. For instance, Burt and Kiparsky, based on communicative effectiveness, categorized errors into global errors that hinder overall comprehension and local errors that cause only minor disruptions^[2]. Carl James developed a multi-level classification system, categorizing errors by form into omission, addition, misselection, and misordering, while also dividing them by linguistic level into grammatical, lexical, discourse, etc^[3].

For research purpose within this study, an explicit definition of errors becomes essential. Drawing upon prior research, we define it as follows: The concept of “language errors” defined at the grammatical level specifically refers to systematic deviations from grammatical norms in learners’ production (such as writing), which occur due to English learners’ failure to fully master or internalize the target language’s grammatical rules^[1].

2.2. Error analysis theory

In 1967, with the publication of *The Significance of Learners’ Errors*, Stephen Pit Corder first proposed that second language errors hold significant research value as they reflect underlying linguistic rules. Subsequently, Error Analysis (EA) was established by Corder and his colleagues in the late 1970s, evolving into a widely adopted methodology for describing second language errors.

As a response to the limitations and deficiencies of Contrastive Analysis Theory, Error Analysis Theory emerged. The shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis Theory primarily lie in its finite scope: differences and similarities between the target language and learners’ first language are limited, and mere contrastive identification of interlingual disparities cannot systematically account for all linguistic errors committed by language learners^[4]. In essence, interference from the native language is not the only source of L2 errors among learners. With the proposal of Error Analysis Theory, the focus shifted markedly. Error Analysis (EA) offers not only a pedagogical orientation but also a scientific outline. Rather than prioritizing language input, practice, or inductive learning, EA emphasizes on linguistic and cognitive processes^[5]. Put differently, instead of emphasizing contrasts between target and native languages, EA pays real attention to learners’ actual committed errors. Through systematic methodologies, it investigates, analyzes, and categorizes these errors, providing targeted remediation of linguistic rules from a teaching-friendly perspective.

3. Methodology

This study employs a two-stage mixed-methods approach to examine low-achieving senior high school EFL learners’ perceptions and preferences regarding error correction in writing. The student samples were recruited from a senior high school, whose scores are mostly below 70 out of 150. Initially, quantitative data is collected through a questionnaire focusing on four dimensions: attitudes toward error correction in English writing, challenges in error correction, learning strategy usage, and suggested teaching methods. Subsequent semi-structured interviews with selected participants provide qualitative insights into these challenges. This design prioritizes practical applicability, directly linking learner experiences to classroom strategies without requiring extensive text analysis.

4. Result analysis

4.1. Analysis of descriptive statistics

Q1 shows high recognition of error correction’s importance ($M = 4.480$, $SD = 0.680$). Q2, Q6, and Q7 indicate positive behavioral intentions toward feedback ($M = 4.010$ – 4.440 , $SD = 0.694$ – 0.757). However, Q4 reveals negative self-perception of self-correction ability ($M = 2.630$, $SD = 0.851$), significantly below the midpoint (refer **Table 1**).

In the second dimension of the questionnaire, which surveys difficulties in writing, 90.8% of students identified verb errors as the most common issue in English writing. This indicates that the primary grammatical challenge for the students currently lies in verb usage. The second-highest response rate was for sentence structure, suggesting significant problems

with syntactic grammar during the writing process (refer **Table 2**).

The survey reveals that 55.20% and 60.90% of students respectively reported “not knowing where errors exist in writing” and “not knowing how to correct them,” indicating weak self-correction abilities. Urgent teacher intervention is needed, guiding error correction to prioritize teacher-led support over student autonomy.

Table 1. Students’ attitudes towards correcting writing errors

Dimension	Items	N of samples	Min	Max	Mean	Std. deviation
Students’ attitudes & opinions	Q1	87	2	5	4.480	0.680
	Q2	87	2	5	4.010	0.723
	Q3	87	1	5	3.440	0.758
	Q4	87	1	5	2.630	0.851
	Q5	87	1	5	3.640	1.000
	Q6	87	2	5	4.430	0.757
	Q7	87	2	5	4.440	0.694

Table 2. Response and popularity rate: The most common type of error

Categories	Response		Popularity rate (n = 87)
	N of samples	Response rate	
A. Verb Error	79	27.50%	90.80%
B. Noun Error	18	6.30%	20.70%
C. Article Error	13	4.50%	14.90%
D. Preposition Error	53	18.50%	60.90%
E. Sentence Structures	65	22.60%	74.70%
F. Choice of Vocabulary	53	18.50%	60.90%
G. Others	6	2.10%	6.90%
Total	287	100.00%	329.90%

a. The values 1 were used to tabulate the binary groups.

Table 3. Response and popularity rate: The greatest difficulty during error correction

Categories	Response		Popularity rate (n = 87)
	N of samples	Response rate	
A. Not knowing where my errors lie	48	31.20%	55.20%
B. Not knowing how to correct	53	34.40%	60.90%
C. Knowing the errors, errors still occur	27	17.50%	31.00%
D. Lack of tools or resources for error correction	24	15.60%	27.60%
E. Others	2	1.30%	2.30%
Total	154	100.00%	177.00%

a. The values 1 were used to tabulate the binary groups.

The survey shows high response rates for “providing targeted grammar exercises” (71.30%), “annotating error types during feedback” (70.10%), and “addressing common writing errors in class” (72.40%). This indicates that students with weak foundations rely on teacher-led classroom interventions and textual annotations, lacking autonomous correction abilities.

Table 4. Response and popularity rate: Expectation from the teacher’s help

Categories	Response		Popularity rate (n = 87)
	N of Samples	Response rate	
A. Specialized grammar teaching	62	26.10%	71.30%
B. Comparison of correct and incorrect examples	52	21.80%	59.80%
C. Mark and correct the errors	61	25.60%	70.10%
D. Class focusing on correcting common writing errors	63	26.50%	72.40%
E. Others	0	0.00%	0.00%
Total	238	100.00%	273.60%

a. The values 1 were used to tabulate the binary groups.

4.2. Analysis of qualitative results

In qualitative interviews, high school EFL learners with low proficiency consistently pointed to vocabulary as a major challenge. Students said they struggled to remember new words, often forgetting them soon after memorization, making it hard to truly master vocabulary. They also expressed confusion about grammar elements, such as telling predicate and non-predicate forms apart, using tenses correctly, and handling verbal phrase collocations and prepositional collocation properly. These insights offer practical guidance for future teaching, highlighting the need to focus on strategies that help consolidate vocabulary and build a solid foundation in grammar differentiation.

5. Discussion and implication

The results show that students understand the importance of error correction (Q1: average score 4.48) and are open to feedback (Q2, Q6, Q7: scores between 4.01–4.44), but many struggle to correct mistakes on their own (Q4: average score only 2.63). This suggests they recognize the problem but lack the skills to fix it. Verb errors were the most common issue in writing (90.8% of students chose this), followed by sentence structure problems, indicating weak grammar fundamentals. Over half admitted they “can’t finds their mistakes” (55.2%) or “don’t knows how to fix them” (60.9%), showing a strong need for teacher support rather than independent effort.

Additionally, most students preferred targeted grammar exercises (71.3%), written feedback marking error types (70.1%), and class discussions about common mistakes (72.4%). This highlights their reliance on clear teacher guidance. Interviews also revealed challenges like forgetting vocabulary quickly and confusion over basic grammar rules, such as identifying predicates, using tenses correctly, or handling phrasal verbs and prepositions, which further explains their difficulties.

Based on these findings, teaching should focus on the following.

- (a) Designing practical exercises focused on verbs and sentence patterns
- (b) Marking specific error types when grading essays to help students identify issues
- (c) Discussing frequent mistakes in class to build understanding step by step
- (d) Using repetition, association, and real-life examples to improve vocabulary retention

- (e) Starting with simple tasks and gradually encouraging self-correction

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that low-proficiency EFL learners face key challenges in vocabulary retention and grammar application. While they value error correction, they still depend heavily on teacher support. With targeted practice and clear feedback, their writing accuracy can gradually improve. Future teaching approaches should continue exploring effective ways to assist these students in building stronger language skills.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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