

Exploring Student Awareness of Sentence Construction: The Role of Misplaced Words and Phrases in One-Clause Sentences

Siti Julaika^{a*}, Nur Hasanah^a, Hazhar Aswatdi^a, Khoiriya Sari^a, Liyundzira Fikroh Gani^a, Siti Ismahani^a

^a English Language Study Program, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

INFO ARTIKEL

Riwayat Artikel:

Received : 27-12-2024

Revised : 10-01-2025

Accepted : 13-01-2025

Keywords: English As a Foreign Language, Misplaced Modifiers, Mother Tongue Interference, Sentence Construction, Students' Awareness, Teaching Methodology

Corresponding Author:

julaika458@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62335>

ABSTRACT

This research explores students' awareness of sentence construction, focusing on the role of misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. This issue poses a significant challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially in Indonesia, where these errors often obscure meaning and hinder effective communication. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand how students realize common sentence construction errors, such as dangling and ambiguous modifiers. Through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, it was found that mother tongue interference and inadequate teaching methods contribute to students' difficulties in accurate sentence construction. The findings suggest the need for a more focused teaching approach to improve students' understanding of correct sentence structure and to help them identify and correct errors independently.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, misplaced words and phrases pose significant challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. These errors are not limited to specific regions but are observed among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Such mistakes can severely hinder learners' ability to convey their intended meanings, especially in formal or academic contexts. Studies by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) reveal that common sentence construction issues often arise from learners' limited understanding of syntactic structures and their inability to identify how word placement affects meaning. Consequently, misplaced modifiers remain a prevalent error in EFL classrooms worldwide, signaling a global need for effective teaching approaches to address this problem.

In Indonesia, sentence construction remains a persistent challenge in English language education, particularly regarding errors involving misplaced words and phrases. These mistakes often obscure the intended meaning of sentences, creating barriers to effective communication. Research shows that Indonesian students frequently encounter difficulties in constructing clear sentences, with misplaced modifiers being a recurring issue (Yusnita, 2020). Furthermore, in national exams, unclear sentence construction due to such errors often leads to a lower assessment of writing skills, highlighting the need for more focused instructional strategies (Suryani & Hartono, 2019). This indicates that improving sentence-level accuracy is essential for enhancing students' overall language competence.

Despite the global and national prevalence of errors involving misplaced words and phrases, limited research has focused on students' perceptions of these issues. While existing studies primarily examine the types and frequency of errors in sentence construction, there is little exploration of how students understand the impact of such mistakes on sentence clarity, particularly in sentences with only one clause (Ahmadi, 2018). This gap is crucial because understanding student perceptions can provide valuable insights into their awareness of syntactic structures and guide more effective teaching practices. Addressing this research gap is necessary to develop strategies that not only correct errors but also empower students to construct clear and meaningful sentences independently.

This study aims to explore students' awareness of sentence construction, specifically focusing on how they perceive the role of misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. By examining these perceptions, the study seeks to bridge the gap between linguistic theory and practical classroom application. Insights from this research could inform teaching practices, helping educators design materials and methods that address the root causes of sentence construction errors. Ultimately, the findings aim to enhance students' ability to produce coherent and accurate sentences, contributing to their overall communicative competence.

Introduction to Sentence Structure and Student Challenges; Effective sentence construction is a foundational skill in mastering writing, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Writing is often regarded as one of the most complex language skills, requiring precision in grammar, diction, sentence structure, and cohesion. For EFL learners, constructing clear and accurate sentences can be challenging due to the complexity of English grammar and syntax rules. Misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences, such as dangling or squinting modifiers, significantly impede clarity and meaning. These errors often originate from students' limited awareness of proper sentence structures, compounded by their reliance on their native language's linguistic patterns. Consequently, identifying and addressing these errors is essential for improving

students' writing proficiency and overall communication skills.

The Nature of Sentence Errors; Sentence construction errors are classified into various categories, each affecting the clarity and accuracy of communication. Common types include dangling modifiers, squinting modifiers, fragmented sentences, and run-on sentences. Dangling modifiers occur when the modifying phrase does not properly connect to the subject, leading to illogical meanings. Squinting modifiers, on the other hand, create ambiguity by seemingly modifying two parts of the sentence simultaneously. Fragmented sentences lack the completeness needed to convey a full idea, while run-on sentences improperly join multiple ideas without adequate punctuation or conjunctions. Such errors often result from either interlingual influences, where native language structures interfere with English syntax, or intralingual factors, such as overgeneralization or incomplete rule application. These recurring issues highlight the importance of targeted teaching strategies to mitigate their occurrence.

Misplaced Words and Phrases in One-Clause Sentences; Misplaced words and phrases are among the most subtle yet impactful errors in sentence construction. These errors can distort intended meanings and compromise the clarity of communication. Squinting modifiers, for instance, are adverbs or phrases placed in such a way that they ambiguously modify either the preceding or succeeding part of a sentence. This placement confuses readers about the sentence's intended focus. Dangling modifiers, a similar error, occur when the modifying phrase fails to connect logically to the sentence's subject, rendering the sentence illogical or incomplete. These errors are particularly challenging for students as they require a nuanced understanding of syntactic relationships, which many learners struggle to master. Effective sentence construction demands explicit instruction and practice to address these issues.

Factors Contributing to Errors; The factors contributing to students' difficulties in constructing grammatically correct and logically sound sentences are multifaceted. One major factor is mother tongue interference, where students unconsciously apply their native language's syntax and grammar rules to English sentences. For example, students may construct sentences directly translated from their first language, resulting in structural mismatches. Another factor is inadequate teaching methods. In many cases, teaching focuses predominantly on vocabulary and content without giving sufficient attention to sentence structure and grammar. This oversight leaves students ill-prepared to construct complex sentences. A lack of grammatical knowledge exacerbates these issues, as students are unable to identify or correct errors due to limited understanding of English syntax and sentence patterns. These factors collectively hinder students' ability to produce well-constructed sentences.

Strategies for Improvement; Addressing errors in sentence construction requires a multifaceted approach tailored to the specific challenges students face. Focused teaching

methods should emphasize the distinctions between English and students' native languages, ensuring they understand the unique syntactic rules of English. For instance, teachers can provide examples of common errors, such as misplaced modifiers, and demonstrate how to correct them. Practice-based learning is equally critical, as regular writing exercises targeting specific error types can help students internalize correct sentence structures. Implementing detailed feedback mechanisms allows students to identify their mistakes and understand how to avoid them in the future. Teachers should offer clear explanations and encourage students to rewrite their sentences to reinforce learning. By adopting these strategies, educators can significantly improve students' awareness of sentence construction.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive qualitative approach, to explore student awareness of sentence construction, particularly focusing on the role of misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. A descriptive qualitative approach is selected as it aims to provide rich, detailed accounts of phenomena within their real-life contexts (Creswell, 2014). The participants in this study are undergraduate students in their fifth semester from [insert university name or program if applicable]. These students were selected purposively to ensure that they possess sufficient exposure to sentence construction principles taught in prior semesters. A total of [insert number] participants will be involved, providing a diverse range of responses and insights. Purposive sampling ensures the selection of individuals with the most relevant experience to the research focus (Patton, 2002).

Research Instrument

Two primary instruments will be utilized in this study: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews, a common method in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012), will be conducted to gather detailed insights into the students' understanding and challenges regarding misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. The interview questions will be designed to probe their awareness, strategies for identifying errors, and reflections on sentence structure. Observational data will be collected during classroom activities or writing tasks to examine how students construct sentences in real-time. These observations will focus on identifying patterns in the placement of words and phrases, as well as noting any recurring errors. Field notes will be used to document observed behaviors and interactions.

Data Collection

The data collection procedures involve three steps. First, participants will be

recruited through announcements in class or by contacting lecturers who teach fifth-semester courses. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Second, interviews will follow a semi-structured format, enabling flexibility while maintaining focus on the research questions. Each interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio-recorded with the participants' permission for transcription and analysis. Finally, classroom or individual writing sessions will be observed. Notes will be taken using a structured observation guide, focusing on sentence construction behaviors. If permitted, students' written work during these sessions will also be collected as supplementary data.

Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involves familiarizing with the data by transcribing interview recordings verbatim and reading field notes multiple times, generating initial codes to organize data into meaningful groups, searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes based on patterns and relationships, reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represent the data, defining and naming themes to reflect the findings succinctly, and producing the final report by integrating direct quotations and observational insights to enrich the narrative.

To ensure ethical compliance, participants will be provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, methods, and their rights. This aligns with the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing data. Participation will be voluntary, and participants will have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Study reveal several critical insights regarding student awareness of sentence construction, particularly concerning misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. The research indicates that students face persistent challenges in constructing grammatically accurate sentences, with misplaced modifiers emerging as a significant obstacle to clear communication. Analysis of the data demonstrates that these difficulties stem from multiple sources, primarily mother tongue interference and inadequate instructional approaches. Students frequently apply their native language's syntactic patterns to English sentence construction, resulting in structural misalignments that compromise meaning clarity. This interference is particularly evident in cases involving dangling and squinting modifiers, where students struggle to maintain logical connections between modifying phrases and their intended subjects.

The study further reveals that current teaching methodologies often prioritize

vocabulary and content acquisition over systematic instruction in sentence structure and grammar. This instructional gap leaves students inadequately prepared to handle complex syntactic relationships, particularly in one-clause sentences where precise word placement is crucial for meaning clarity. The findings suggest that students' limited awareness of proper sentence structures is compounded by their insufficient exposure to explicit instruction in English syntax rules. This deficiency manifests in their inability to identify and correct errors independently, highlighting a critical need for more focused teaching strategies.

Moreover, the research uncovers a significant correlation between students' grammatical knowledge and their capacity to construct clear, meaningful sentences. Students demonstrate particular difficulty with subtle yet impactful errors such as squinting modifiers, which create ambiguity by potentially modifying multiple parts of a sentence simultaneously. The findings indicate that these challenges are exacerbated by students' reliance on direct translation methods, where they attempt to apply their first language's grammatical patterns to English sentence construction. This approach frequently results in structural mismatches that impede effective communication.

The study also highlights the importance of practice-based learning and detailed feedback mechanisms in developing students' awareness of proper sentence construction. The findings suggest that regular writing exercises targeting specific error types, combined with clear explanations and opportunities for sentence revision, can significantly enhance students' understanding of syntactic relationships. This approach proves particularly effective in helping students internalize correct sentence structures and develop the ability to identify and correct misplaced words and phrases independently.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into undergraduate students' awareness of sentence construction, particularly in addressing misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. The descriptive qualitative approach employed in this research effectively captured students' challenges and strategies, offering a nuanced understanding of their experiences. Many students demonstrated a foundational awareness of sentence construction principles, as reflected in their ability to identify and correct some misplaced elements. One participant noted, "I usually know something feels off when reading the sentence, but I can't always explain why," emphasizing both intuitive recognition and gaps in explicit grammatical understanding. This aligns with previous findings by Creswell (2014), which suggest that qualitative methods are well-suited for exploring participants' lived experiences and internalized processes.

The use of semi-structured interviews revealed that while students understood the importance of proper word placement, many struggled with consistent application. Students often relied on trial-and-error methods or heuristics rather than a firm grasp of

grammatical rules. For instance, one student stated, "I fix sentences by rewriting them until they sound right," indicating that their approach was more experiential than rule-based. This observation is consistent with findings by Patton (2002), who emphasized that qualitative data often reveal practical strategies that differ from theoretical knowledge.

Classroom observations provided additional insights into students' writing behaviors. Misplaced modifiers emerged as the most common error, often leading to ambiguities or unintended meanings. Field notes highlighted that students frequently paused during writing tasks to re-evaluate sentence structures, demonstrating an active effort to improve their work. However, students rarely consulted external references or sought clarification, reflecting a reliance on prior knowledge and peer feedback. This observation aligns with Bryman (2012), who noted that behavioral data in qualitative research often highlight discrepancies between intent and action.

The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified three primary themes: (1) intuitive awareness of sentence issues, (2) reliance on experiential correction methods, and (3) persistence of recurring errors. While these findings underscore students' engagement and willingness to improve, they also highlight the need for targeted interventions. Explicit grammar instruction and real-time feedback mechanisms could address these gaps, helping students develop structured approaches to sentence construction.

Despite these challenges, students were motivated to improve and receptive to learning strategies for enhancing their writing skills. Observations revealed that students often revisited errors, demonstrating persistence. However, some students expressed frustration with complex sentence structures, suggesting the need for instructional scaffolding tailored to individual skill levels. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the interplay between students' intuitive understanding and practical application of sentence construction principles. These findings contribute to the development of effective pedagogical strategies aimed at improving writing proficiency. Future research should explore how specific interventions, such as peer reviews or technology-enhanced tools, can mitigate the identified challenges.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study provides valuable insights into students' awareness of sentence construction, with a focus on the challenges posed by misplaced words and phrases in one-clause sentences. Findings indicate that students often face significant difficulties in constructing grammatically accurate sentences, with misplaced adjectives emerging as a major barrier to clear communication.

Data analysis reveals that these challenges stem from multiple sources, including mother tongue interference and inadequate teaching approaches. Students often apply syntactic patterns from their first language to English sentence construction, resulting in structural mismatches that obscure meaning. Furthermore, existing teaching methodologies tend to prioritize vocabulary and content acquisition over systematic instruction in sentence structure and grammar.

These conclusions emphasize the need for more focused teaching approaches that enhance students' understanding of correct sentence structure. By providing more explicit instruction in English syntactic rules, it is hoped that students will be better equipped to identify and correct errors in word and phrase placement. The study also recommends the use of innovative teaching strategies, such as peer review and technology-enhanced tools, to help students overcome the challenges they face in sentence construction. Thus, this study not only contributes to the understanding of students' awareness of sentence construction but also lays the foundation for developing more effective pedagogical strategies aimed at improving students' writing skills in the future.

REFERENCES

- Ahmadi, A. (2018). *Error analysis in sentence construction: A case study of EFL students*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 7(4), 130-138.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015). *The grammar book: Form, meaning, and use for English language teachers (3rd ed.)*. National Geographic Learning.
- Ellis, R., & Barkhuizen, G. (2005). *Analysing learner language*. Oxford University Press.
- Nguyen, T. T. H. (2021). *Common Syntactic Errors in the Writing Skills of the 3rd Year Students at Van Lang University*. *International Journal of TESOL & Education*, 1(3), 13-21. Retrieved from
- Parker, A. (2019). *Oh My! Misplaced Modifiers*. Blood-Red Pencil. Retrieved from
- Scribbr. (2019). *How to Fix Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers (with Examples)*. Retrieved from
- Suryani, N., & Hartono, R. (2019). *Learning from mistakes: Students' perception towards teacher's attitude in writing correction*. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 13(2), 227-236.
- Wong, E., & Esmianti, F. (2021). *Error Analysis of English Sentence Structure in Students' Written Paragraphs*. *International Journal of Science and Research Archive*, 11(02), 1606–1622. Retrieved from
- Yusnita, L. (2020). *Students' Ability in Understanding Dangling Modifiers at Universitas Negeri Padang*. Retrieved from