

Diagnosing Systematic Error in Myanmar EFL Writing: The Interplay of Burmese Linguistic Transfer and Examination-Driven Pedagogy

Bishwajit Khumukcham, Ph.D

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Naorem Birahari College, Manipur, India

Email: naoboi17@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates error patterns in L2 writing among high school students in Myanmar, where English is compulsory but proficiency remains limited. Drawing on Error Analysis (Corder, 1981) and Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), the research examines 200 test papers comprising grammar exercises, reading comprehension tasks, and essays. Results show systematic grammatical and writing errors, particularly in the use of articles, tense formation, spelling, and sentence structure. Only 15% of students used the indefinite article 'an' correctly, and 74% failed to apply the past-perfect tense appropriately. Writing samples revealed over 700 spelling errors and more than 2,000 syntactic errors, such as incoherent clause sequencing. These patterns are largely attributed to Burmese language interference, which lacks articles and tense markers, and to exam-oriented pedagogy emphasizing rote memorization over communicative competence. The findings highlight the need to integrate error analysis into English pedagogy in Myanmar, with implications for targeted grammar instruction, writing intensive curricula, and teacher training in error correction. By recognizing learner errors as evidence of developing interlanguage systems, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of L2 acquisition and underscores the urgency of rethinking English writing instruction in Myanmar.

Keywords: Error analysis, L2 writing, Myanmar English, grammatical competence, Burmese interference

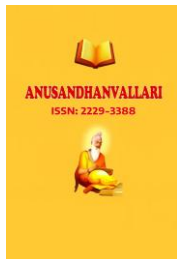
1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as the most complex skill for foreign language learners to master, demanding accuracy in grammar and syntax, precision in vocabulary, and the coherent organization of ideas into discourse (Hyland, 2019; Weigle, 2014). This challenge is acutely felt by learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in expanding-circle contexts like Myanmar, where opportunities for authentic exposure are limited.

Within second language acquisition (SLA), learner errors have been reframed not as mere failures, but as essential evidence of the learning process. Corder (1967) posited that errors are a natural and illuminating stage in the development of a learner's interlanguage the dynamic, rule governed linguistic system that bridges the first language (L1) and the target language (L2). Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory further emphasized the systematicity of these errors, viewing them as manifestations of the learner's active attempts to hypothesize and internalize L2 rules. Consequently, error analysis serves as a vital diagnostic tool for educators and a window into the cognitive processes of language acquisition (Ellis, 2019; Odlin, 2020).

The Myanmar context presents a particularly compelling case study. English holds prestige as a language of

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>



education and global mobility but is taught primarily as an academic subject with minimal use in daily communication (Tin, 2014). The structural chasm between Burmese, a tonal Sino-Tibetan language with an abugida script and no articles or tense inflections, and English predicts significant learning hurdles (Jenny & Tun, 2016; Yin et al., 2020). These are compounded by pedagogical practices: large, overcrowded classrooms, and teaching methods focused overwhelmingly on exam preparation (Khumukcham, 2021).

While strong writing skills are undeniably crucial for achieving success in both academic and professional spheres, research within Myanmar's own classrooms has consistently overlooked a key area: the systematic analysis of student error patterns. This article, which expands upon a comprehensive doctoral study (Khumukcham, 2021), seeks to fill that void. It offers a meticulous breakdown of the most common and persistent errors found in the writing of Myanmar's secondary students. Crucially, the analysis directly connects these mistakes to the influence of their first language (L1) and the specific realities of the local teaching environment. The study's primary goal is to not only pinpoint the linguistic roots of these errors but also to translate those findings into practical pedagogical strategies. In doing so, this work aims to make a dual contribution: enriching theories of second language acquisition while simultaneously addressing the pressing need to reform English language instruction in Myanmar.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Error Analysis and Interlanguage

The way scholars perceive learner errors was revolutionized by Corder's seminal work (1967, 1981). He posited that errors are far more than just indicators of failure; in fact, they are a necessary and invaluable part of learning a language. These mistakes offer a unique glimpse into the learner's mind, revealing the developing mental framework they are building for the new language. Selinker (1972) later coined the term "interlanguage" to describe this framework as a distinct, rule-based linguistic system that is constantly in flux, bridging the gap between the native and target languages. From this vantage point, errors aren't haphazard slips. Instead, they are natural and predictable results of learning strategies, such as relying on one's first language, applying new rules too broadly, or simplifying complex structures (Ellis, 2019). Consequently, this view argues that teaching should move beyond simply fixing mistakes to diagnosing their root causes, a shift that paves the way for far more targeted and effective instruction.

2.2 Common Error Taxonomies in L2 Writing

Researchers studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from various backgrounds have repeatedly identified a common set of stubborn error types. As outlined by scholars like Ferris (2006) and James (2013), these mistakes generally fall into a few key categories. These include grammatical issues with elements like verb tense, articles, and prepositions; lexical problems involving poor word choice or spelling; and syntactic errors such as faulty word order or poorly constructed sentences. The reason learners from particular language backgrounds tend to make the same errors can be powerfully explained by Odlin's (2020) research on cross-linguistic influence. A classic example is article omission, a well-known issue for students whose first language, such as Burmese, does not use articles at all.

2.3 The Southeast Asian and Myanmar Context

Research conducted across Southeast Asia confirms that while learners here face many of the same universal difficulties as those in other parts of the world, they also grapple with challenges unique to the region. For

example, a study by Darus and Subramaniam (2009) pinpointed verb tenses and prepositions as particularly troublesome areas for students in Malaysia. Similarly, research from Singapore by Hwee et al. (2013) revealed that their students commonly struggled with selecting the right words and forming complex sentences. A key takeaway from this body of work is how powerfully a learner's first language shapes their journey with English. The greater the linguistic gap between English and their L1, the more pronounced these specific error patterns tend to be. In Myanmar, the EFL landscape is defined by its exam-oriented culture. English proficiency is a key to university entrance and social mobility, yet the classroom environment often lacks communicative practice. Tin (2014) and Kirkpatrick (2010) note that instruction heavily prioritizes grammar-translation and rote memorization of model answers for high-stakes exams. This approach neglects the practice of extended writing and meaningful composition, leaving students ill-prepared to produce coherent text. Recent research by Thi and Nikolov (2021) begins to address this gap, demonstrating that Myanmar students benefit from a blend of automated feedback on surface-level errors and teacher feedback on meaning and organization, pointing to the multifaceted nature of their writing difficulties.

2.4 Burmese Linguistic Interference

The structural differences between Burmese and English are profound and directly influence error patterns. Burmese is an analytic, tonal language that does not inflect verbs for tense or number and completely lacks articles (Jenny & Tun, 2016). Concepts of time are expressed through lexical adverbs rather than morphological changes. Furthermore, its syntactic structure and rules for prepositional usage differ significantly from English. As Khumukcham (2021) and Okell (1969) suggest, these fundamental differences create predictable areas of difficulty, leading to transfer errors such as article omission (She is teacher), tense misformation (He go yesterday), and non-standard preposition use (depend on).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional research design to capture a snapshot of error patterns in student writing under normal classroom conditions. The data consisted of 200 anonymized test papers collected from Grade 9 and 10 students across eight public high schools in Shan State, Myanmar. These tests were part of the students' regular terminal assessments, ensuring that the data reflected authentic performance rather than experimental or coached behavior (Khumukcham, 2021). The test instrument was designed to elicit a wide range of language competencies and comprised three sections:

1. Structured Grammar Tasks: Fill-in-the-blank and sentence correction exercises specifically targeting articles (a, an, the), verb tenses (simple past, past perfect, present continuous), prepositions, and subject-verb agreement.
2. Reading Comprehension: Short passages followed by questions to assess vocabulary understanding and the ability to interpret text.
3. Free Writing: A short essay (150-200 words) on familiar topics such as "My Favorite Festival" or "A Memorable Day," designed to generate extended writing samples for analyzing syntactic, lexical, and compositional errors.

3.2 Data The analysis followed a two-stage process: Analysis Procedure

1. **Error Identification and Categorization:** Each test paper was analyzed line by line to identify errors.

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

Following Corder's (1981) established taxonomy, each error was classified as:

- a. Omission: The absence of a required element (e.g., She is teacher).
- b. Addition: The presence of an unnecessary element (e.g., I am went to school).
- c. Misformation: The use of a wrong form (e.g., a orange, She have).
- d. Misordering: Incorrect placement of words (e.g., She I talk).

2. Linguistic and Pedagogical Analysis: The categorized errors were then analyzed quantitatively to determine frequency and prevalence. Crucially, a qualitative analysis was conducted to interpret the sources of errors. This involved cross-referencing error patterns with the structural features of Burmese grammar (Jenny & Tun, 2016; Okell, 1969) to distinguish between developmental errors (common to all L2 learners) and interlingual errors (specifically attributable to L1 transfer). This mixed-methods approach allowed for both statistical description and rich interpretation of the underlying causes.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis revealed a pervasive and systematic pattern of errors across all 200 papers, with the vast majority of students (74%) scoring below 50% on the integrated test. The errors are presented below in order of frequency and severity.

4.1 Grammatical Errors Grammatical errors were the most frequent category, indicating a fundamental struggle with the core systems of English.

- **Articles:** This was the area of greatest difficulty, directly reflecting the absence of articles in Burmese. Only 15% of students correctly used the indefinite article *an*. The definite article *the* was used correctly 86% of the time in obligatory contexts, while **a** was used correctly 46% of the time. Overall, 85% of students made at least one article error, predominantly omissions (She is teacher) or misformations (a orange, an book).
- **Tenses:** Mastery of the English tense-aspect system was severely limited. Only 6% of students correctly formed all required tenses in the grammar section. Errors were pervasive, with 74% failing to correctly form the past-perfect tense. Common errors included using the base verb form for past events (He eat yesterday), using the past participle without an auxiliary (She gone), and confusing continuous and simple forms (I am go to school).
- **Prepositions and Conjunctions:** These function words posed significant challenges. Only 17% of students used prepositions correctly in all tested instances, and a mere 3% scored full marks on conjunctions. Errors included using *on* instead of *at* (on the weekend), *in* instead of *on* (in Monday), and omitting necessary conjunctions, creating run on sentences.
- **Subject-Verb Agreement:** While 55% of students demonstrated control over subject-verb agreement in targeted exercises, 45% exhibited errors in their free writing. Common mistakes included third-person singular omission (She have) and using *was* with plural subjects (They was playing).

4.2 Compositional and Lexical Errors

The essay task revealed the students' most significant challenges, moving beyond isolated errors to expose a fundamental difficulty in crafting coherent, multi-sentence text. Among these issues, problems with syntactic

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

coherence and sentence structure were by far the most severe in the free-writing samples.

- **Syntactic Coherence and Sentence Structure:** An analysis of the essays identified over 2,000 sentences that were either grammatically flawed or rendered nearly incomprehensible due to erratic structure. A primary cause of this incomprehensibility was direct syntactic transfer from Burmese, where the rules for word order and clause sequencing were incorrectly applied to English. This often-produced baffling sentences that required significant interpretation.

For instance, the phrase "She I talk she have no time" appears to be a direct translation of Burmese structure, intended to mean "I talked to her but she said she had no time."

An even more complex example, "I while cry she I happy a varty make," seems to be a strained attempt to convey "While I was crying, she threw a party to make me happy."

- **Spelling:** The essays contained over 700 spelling errors. These ranged from severe phonetic misspellings likely influenced by Burmese pronunciation (intelgent for intelligent, envernement for environment, hornes for horrors) to the invention of non-existent words (flami for family, fife for five, libarily for library, norish for nourish). This points to extremely limited exposure to English orthography and minimal reading practice.

- **Punctuation:** While not quantified as minutely, punctuation errors were rampant and further reduced text clarity. Students routinely omitted commas in compound sentences, used full stops incorrectly, and lacked any punctuation to mark clause boundaries, creating long, confusing run-on sentences.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings present a clear and alarming picture: the English writing of Myanmar students is characterized not by occasional mistakes but by systematic and pervasive errors that severely impede communication. These results strongly confirm the study's hypothesis, revealing that these patterns are the predictable outcome of the interplay between deep-seated L1 interference and a pedagogy ill-suited to address it.

5.1 Interlanguage Fossilization and L1 Transfer

The nature of the errors provides a textbook illustration of Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). The errors are not random; they are systematic and rule-governed. The overwhelming prevalence of article and tense errors is a direct manifestation of negative transfer. Burmese learners, lacking a cognitive framework for articles and morphological tense, either omit these elements or apply simplistic, overgeneralized rules (e.g., *a* for all singular nouns). Their interlanguage system is heavily influenced by the structure of their L1, a process Odlin (2020) identifies as a primary force in SLA. The syntactic errors, particularly the incoherent clause sequencing, suggest that students are not just translating words but are attempting to map Burmese syntactic structures directly onto English, resulting in sentences that are incomprehensible to a native speaker but may follow a logical, transferred pattern for the learner.

5.2 The Failure of Exam-Oriented Pedagogy

The findings offer a powerful indictment of the current pedagogical approach. An education system that prioritizes rote memorization and discrete-point grammar testing for exams has demonstrably failed to develop functional writing skills. The fact that students can sometimes correctly fill in a blank with *a* or the but cannot apply this knowledge in free writing reveals a superficial, fragile understanding. The pedagogy provides knowledge about the language but no opportunity to develop skill in using the language communicatively. The

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

severe spelling and syntactic errors are perhaps the strongest evidence of this failure; they indicate a critical lack of extensive reading and meaningful writing practice, which are essential for developing orthographic knowledge and intuitive grammatical competence (Hyland, 2019).

5.3 A Dual Crisis: Linguistic and Pedagogical

The situation in Myanmar represents a dual crisis. First, there is a significant linguistic gap between Burmese and English that naturally creates major learning hurdles. Second, there is a pedagogical gap where the teaching methodology actively exacerbates the problem instead of mitigating it. The system focuses on testing easily gradable, discrete grammar points but ignores the harder-to-teach, harder-to-grade skills of composition, coherence, and communication. Consequently, students are caught in a perfect storm: their innate learning strategies (relying on L1 transfer) are leading them astray, and their instruction is not providing the correct input, practice, or feedback necessary to restructure their interlanguage systems.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The severity and systematicity of the errors demand a fundamental rethinking of English writing instruction in Myanmar. The implications extend across several domains:

6.1 For Classroom Pedagogy:

- **Shift from Error Correction to Error Analysis:** Teachers must be trained to move beyond marking errors to analyzing them. Identifying patterns (e.g., a student consistently omitting articles) allows for targeted mini-lessons and remedial exercises.
- **Implement a Process Writing Approach:** A fundamental shift in teaching methodology is required. First, instructors should implement a Process Writing Approach. This means moving beyond a single final draft and instead structuring lessons around multiple cycles of drafting, peer review, and revision. This process provides the sustained practice and constructive feedback students desperately need to build both fluency and accuracy over time.
- **Integrate Contrastive Analysis:** Teachers must be equipped with a clear understanding of the key structural differences between Burmese and English. By explicitly highlighting these contrasts—for example, demonstrating, "In Burmese, we often use 'He go yesterday,' but in English, the past tense requires 'He went yesterday'" the grammatical rules of English become more noticeable, logical, and memorable for students.

6.2 For Curriculum and Assessment Reform:

- **Writing-Intensive Curriculum:** Systemic change must be driven by reforms in curriculum and evaluation. The national curriculum should be redesigned to be writing-intensive, mandating frequent and diverse writing tasks. This involves a conscious move away from solely relying on short answers and toward requiring well-structured paragraphs and essays across various genres.
- **Reform High-Stakes Exams:** The structure of high-stakes national exams must be reformed to include and heavily weight tasks that assess extended writing and communicative competence. This change is critical, as it would create a "trickle-down" effect, compelling classrooms across the country to prioritize the writing skills that are finally being measured.
- **Incorporate Formative Assessment:** assessment itself should be diversified by incorporating formative

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

assessment models. Tools like writing portfolios, learning journals, and project-based assessments can be used alongside traditional exams to value a student's progress, effort, and development throughout a course, not just their performance on a single test.

6.3 Empowering Educators Through Development:

- **Pre-Service Training:** Sustainable improvement hinges on teacher support. Pre-service training in teachers' colleges needs a update, embedding modern writing pedagogy and core Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory into its curriculum. This ensures new graduates enter the classroom with a foundational understanding of concepts like *interlanguage* and communicative teaching methods.
- **In-Service Professional Development:** Equally important is robust in-service professional development for current educators. Ongoing workshops should move beyond theory and focus on delivering practical, classroom-ready strategies for teaching writing, providing efficient and effective feedback, and leveraging technology. For instance, as suggested by Thi & Nikolov (2021), training teachers to use tools like Grammarly for initial grammar checks can free up their valuable time to focus on providing feedback on higher-order concerns like organization, argumentation, and clarity.
- **Create Support Communities:** Establishing communities of practice where teachers can share challenges and successful strategies would help overcome the isolation and lack of confidence many teachers report.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a systematic, empirical analysis of the error patterns that characterize the L2 writing of Myanmar high school students. The findings are stark: students' writing is plagued by systematic errors in article usage, tense formation, subject-verb agreement, spelling, and syntax, which render their compositions largely incoherent. Through the lenses of Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory, these patterns have been interpreted not as mere failures but as evidence of a developing linguistic system heavily influenced by the fundamental structural differences between Burmese and English.

Furthermore, the study conclusively links these error patterns to the deficiencies of an exam-oriented pedagogy that emphasizes rote learning over communicative practice. The significance of this research lies in its move beyond description to a diagnostic explanation of why these errors occur and how they are perpetuated by the current system.

While the study is limited to one region, it illuminates a national challenge. The implications are clear and urgent: improving English writing proficiency in Myanmar requires a dual approach of addressing L1 interference through targeted instruction and fundamentally reforming pedagogy to prioritize meaningful communication. This entails a collective effort from curriculum designers, policymakers, teacher trainers, and classroom teachers to create an ecosystem that supports the development of writing not as an academic exercise, but as an essential skill for global engagement. Future research should expand this work longitudinally and explore the efficacy of the proposed interventions in the Myanmar context.

References

- [1] Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 5(1-4), 161-170. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1967.5.1-4.161>

Available online at <https://psvmkendra.com>

-
- [2] Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford University Press.
- [3] Darus, S., & Subramaniam, K. (2009). Error analysis of the written English essays of secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 483–495.
- [4] Ellis, R. (2019). *Understanding second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [5] Ferris, D. (2006). Does error feedback help student writers? New evidence on the short- and long-term effects of written error correction. In K. Hyland & F. Hyland (Eds.), *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues* (pp. 81–104). Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Ferris, D. (2011). *Treatment of error in second language student writing* (2nd ed.). University of Michigan Press.
- [7] Hwee, S., Yuanbin, C., & Joel, C. (2013). Error analysis of Chinese ESL learners: A case study of Singaporean secondary students. *English Language Teaching*, 6(2), 98–106. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n2p98>
- [8] Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [9] James, C. (2013). *Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. Routledge.
- [10] Jenny, M., & Tun, A. (2016). *Burmese: A comprehensive grammar*. Routledge.
- [11] Khumukcham, B. (2021). *A Study on the Problems of Learning English by Burmese Speakers of Shan State of Myanmar* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Manipur University.
- [12] Kirkpatrick, A. (2010). *The Routledge handbook of World Englishes*. Routledge.
- [13] Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- [14] Odlin, T. (2020). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [15] Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(1–4), 209–231. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1972.10.1-4.209>
- [16] Thi, N. K., & Nikolov, M. (2021). How teacher and Grammarly feedback complement one another in Myanmar EFL students' writing. **Asia-Pacific Education Research*, 31*(5), 489–502. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00625-2>
- [17] Tin, T. B. (2014). Interpreting English language teaching and learning in Myanmar: A case study. *English Today*, 30(3), 11–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000143>
- [18] Weigle, S. C. (2014). *Assessing writing*. Cambridge University Press.
- [19] Win, M. T. (2004). *A study of English language teaching in Myanmar with special reference to the universities* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Delhi.
- [20] Yin, M. O., Wattanavekin, T., Li, C., De Silva, P., Sarin, S., Pipatsrisawat, K., Jansche, M., Kjartansson, O., & Gutkin, A. (2020). Burmese speech corpus, finite-state text normalization and pronunciation grammars with an application to text-to-speech. In *Proceedings of the 12th Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC 2020)* (pp. 6328–6339). European Language Resources Association.