EXPLORING SYNTACTIC COMPETENCE IN ACADEMIC WRITING: EVIDENCE FROM UINSU TADRIS ENGLISH STUDENTS

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kompetensi sintaksis mahasiswa semester lima Program Studi Tadris Bahasa Inggris Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU) dalam penulisan akademik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan 20 mahasiswa sebagai partisipan. Data diperoleh dari tugas menulis akademik mahasiswa berupa esai singkat yang dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis kesalahan. Analisis difokuskan pada struktur kalimat, konstruksi klausa, kesesuaian subjek dan verba, urutan kata, serta penggunaan konjungsi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun mahasiswa telah memiliki pemahaman dasar mengenai sintaksis bahasa Inggris, mereka masih mengalami kesulitan dalam menggunakan struktur sintaksis yang kompleks. Kesalahan yang paling sering ditemukan meliputi kesalahan struktur kalimat, kesesuaian subjek dan verba, serta konstruksi klausa. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa belum sepenuhnya menguasai kaidah sintaksis yang diperlukan dalam penulisan akademik. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pengajaran sintaksis secara eksplisit, latihan menulis yang terarah, serta pemberian umpan balik untuk meningkatkan kompetensi sintaksis mahasiswa dalam konteks EFL.
Kata Kunci: *Sintaksis, Kompetensi Sintaksis, Penulisan Akademik, Analisis Kesalahan, Mahasiswa EFL*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the syntactic competence of fifth-semester Tadris English students at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU) in producing academic writing. The purpose of this study is to identify common syntactic errors and examine students' ability to apply syntactic structures accurately in academic texts. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach involving 20 students as participants. The data were obtained from students' academic writing assignments in the form of short essays and analyzed using error analysis techniques. The analysis focused on sentence structure, clause construction, subject–verb agreement, word order, and the use of connectors. The findings indicate that although students demonstrate basic understanding of English syntax, they still encounter difficulties in producing complex syntactic structures. Sentence structure errors, subject–verb agreement problems, and clause construction errors were the most frequently identified. These findings suggest that students have not fully mastered syntactic rules required for effective academic writing. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of explicit syntactic instruction, guided writing practice, and corrective feedback to enhance students' syntactic competence in EFL academic contexts.
Keywords: *Syntax, Syntactic Competence, Academic Writing, Error Analysis, EFL Students*

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental component of English language education at the university level, as it reflects students' ability to communicate ideas logically, critically, and accurately in written form. One of the key linguistic aspects that determines the quality of academic writing is syntactic competence, which involves the ability to construct grammatically accurate and structurally complex sentences. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), syntactic competence plays a crucial role because learners are required to produce written texts that meet academic standards while simultaneously navigating a language system that differs significantly from their first language. Previous studies have emphasized that syntactic complexity and accuracy are closely related to the overall quality of students' academic essays (Jaya & Susyla, 2025; Lahuerta, 2018).

Despite continuous exposure to English writing instruction, many EFL university students still experience difficulties in producing syntactically well-formed academic texts. Empirical studies consistently report recurring problems such as sentence structure errors, subject–verb agreement issues, clause construction problems, and inaccurate use of grammatical patterns in students' writing (Dewanto, 2025; Ismahani et al., 2026). These syntactic inaccuracies often result in unclear meaning, reduced coherence, and weakened academic arguments. Research conducted in the Indonesian EFL context further indicates that learners frequently struggle to apply complex syntactic structures when developing paragraphs and extended written discourse, even after completing formal grammar and writing courses (Ramadhiyanti, 2020).

In academic writing, syntactic competence is not only associated with grammatical correctness but also with students' ability to construct logical and cohesive arguments. When learners lack control over syntactic structures, their ideas may be fragmented or poorly connected, which limits the effectiveness of academic communication. Studies on EFL writing development suggest that insufficient mastery of sentence complexity often leads students to overuse simple sentence patterns, resulting in repetitive structures and limited rhetorical development. Consequently, syntactic weakness can restrict students' capacity to present arguments clearly and persuasively in academic texts (Lahuerta, 2018).

Furthermore, the persistence of syntactic errors at the university level indicates that grammatical knowledge acquired in earlier stages of learning does not automatically transfer to academic writing contexts. Even students who have completed multiple writing and linguistics courses may struggle to apply syntactic rules when producing extended written discourse. This gap between grammatical knowledge and practical application highlights the need for research that examines actual student writing to identify specific syntactic difficulties. Understanding these difficulties is essential for designing instructional approaches that explicitly address syntactic development within academic writing instruction (Jaya & Susyla, 2025).

In addition, syntactic errors are not limited to isolated grammatical mistakes but often reflect deeper challenges in students' syntactic development. Studies focusing on EFL learners with lower writing achievement levels reveal that errors such as sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and inappropriate clause combinations remain prevalent in academic writing tasks (Setyaji et al., 2023). These findings suggest that students may possess basic syntactic knowledge but lack sufficient control over sentence complexity and grammatical accuracy when expressing complex ideas in writing. Furthermore, previous research highlights the importance of instructional strategies, such as sentence combining and guided writing practice, in improving both syntactic complexity and accuracy in EFL students' essays (Jaya & Susyla, 2025).

At Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU), Tadris English students are expected to demonstrate adequate academic writing competence by the fifth semester, as they have completed several linguistics and writing-related courses. However, preliminary observations indicate that students still encounter difficulties in applying syntactic rules effectively, particularly when constructing complex sentences and cohesive academic paragraphs. Therefore, this study aims to explore the syntactic competence of fifth-semester Tadris English students at UINSU by analyzing the syntactic structures used in their academic writing. By identifying dominant types of syntactic errors and areas of difficulty, this research is expected to contribute insights for lecturers, curriculum developers, and future researchers in designing more effective instructional strategies to enhance students' academic writing competence in EFL contexts.

METHODS

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the syntactic competence of students in academic writing. The participants were 20 fifth-semester students of the Tadris Bahasa Inggris program at UINSU. They were selected purposively based on their completion of fundamental linguistics and academic writing courses, ensuring that they had prior exposure to basic syntactic concepts. The data were collected from students' academic writing tasks in the form of short essays consisting of 250–300 words. The writing task was designed to elicit their ability to construct grammatically acceptable sentences, organize clauses accurately, apply correct word order, and use appropriate connectors within academic writing conventions. All writing samples were collected anonymously. The data were analyzed using an error-analysis procedure. Syntactic errors were identified and classified into several categories, including sentence structure errors, subject–verb agreement issues, clause construction problems, incorrect word order, and misuse of connectors. Each error category was examined to determine its frequency, while qualitative interpretation was used to explore the underlying difficulties and tendencies in students' syntactic performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of syntactic errors found in the academic writing of fifth-semester Tadris English students at UINSU. The data were obtained from 20 student essays and analyzed using an error analysis approach. The identified errors were categorized into five types: sentence structure errors, subject–verb agreement errors, clause construction errors, word order errors, and misuse of connectors.

Table 1. Types and Frequency of Syntactic Errors

No.	Type of Syntactic Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Sentence structure errors	38	31.7%
2	Subject–verb agreement errors	29	24.2%
3	Clause construction errors	24	20.0%
4	Word order errors	17	14.2%
5	Misuse of connectors	12	10.0%
	Total	120	100%

Based on Table 1, the results indicate that sentence structure errors were the most frequent type of syntactic error, accounting for 31.7% of the total errors. Subject–verb

agreement errors ranked second (24.2%), followed by clause construction errors (20.0%). Word order errors and misuse of connectors occurred less frequently but were still evident in the students' academic writing. These findings show that students experienced greater difficulty when producing complex syntactic structures.

Discussions

The findings of this study indicate that fifth-semester Tadris English students at UINSU possess basic syntactic knowledge; however, they continue to experience considerable difficulty in applying complex syntactic structures in academic writing. One of the most prominent issues identified is the high frequency of sentence structure errors, including run-on sentences and sentence fragments. These errors suggest that students have limited control over sentence boundaries, particularly when attempting to express complex ideas within a single sentence. Similar patterns have been observed in studies examining EFL learners' performance in academic and test-oriented writing contexts, where limited syntactic control often leads to reduced clarity and coherence in written texts (Sudarmono, 2025).

The difficulty in managing sentence structure also reflects broader challenges related to syntactic complexity in EFL writing. Research on syntactic complexity has demonstrated that learners frequently struggle to balance accuracy and complexity, especially when producing extended academic discourse. For instance, an analysis of IELTS writing performance revealed that EFL learners often rely on simple sentence patterns and avoid complex constructions, which negatively affects the overall quality of their academic writing (Suhendar, 2025). This tendency aligns with the findings of the present study, where students demonstrated basic syntactic awareness but encountered difficulties when attempting to construct more elaborated sentence forms.

In addition, studies focusing on instructional interventions highlight that syntactic development does not occur automatically through exposure alone. Research on additive extensive reading indicates that while increased language input can contribute to syntactic growth, learners still require structured guidance to develop syntactic sophistication in writing (Kim & Ro, 2023). This finding supports the present results, suggesting that students at UINSU may benefit from pedagogical approaches that explicitly integrate syntactic instruction with writing practice to strengthen their ability to produce complex yet accurate sentences.

Another major finding of this study concerns subject–verb agreement errors, particularly in sentences containing complex noun phrases. These errors suggest that students may rely more on intuitive grammatical judgment rather than systematic application of syntactic rules. Similar difficulties have been documented in Indonesian EFL contexts, where learners frequently struggle with subject–verb agreement due to interference from their first language and limited exposure to complex grammatical patterns in academic writing tasks (Mayasari & Sari, 2024). Such errors not only affect grammatical accuracy but also reduce the overall credibility of academic texts produced by EFL learners.

Furthermore, subject–verb agreement errors often co-occur with other syntactic issues, such as inaccurate clause construction and inappropriate modifier placement. An analysis of university students' paragraph writing revealed that syntactic errors tend to cluster, indicating interconnected weaknesses in learners' syntactic systems rather than isolated mistakes (Putra, 2025). This observation reinforces the findings of the present study, which show that subject–verb agreement problems frequently appear alongside sentence structure and clause-related errors.

Difficulties in clause construction further demonstrate students' limited mastery of subordination and coordination in academic writing. The inability to effectively combine independent and dependent clauses often results in fragmented ideas and disrupted logical flow. Research focusing on tertiary EFL learners has shown that clause construction, particularly the use of subordinate clauses, remains a persistent challenge even at advanced levels of language study (Patwary et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with the results of the current study, where students struggled to construct syntactically complex sentences that accurately reflect academic conventions.

The misuse of connectors such as however, therefore, and because also indicates insufficient awareness of logical relationships between ideas. In academic writing, connectors play a crucial role in signaling coherence and argumentative structure. Studies examining the quality of EFL academic essays have found that inappropriate or inaccurate use of connectors often weakens textual cohesion and obscures meaning (Annazah et al., 2025). This issue was similarly observed in the present study, suggesting that students may possess a superficial understanding of connectors without fully grasping their functional roles in academic discourse.

Taken together, these findings suggest that syntactic competence among fifth-semester Tadris English students at UINSU remains underdeveloped in terms of complexity, accuracy, and functional use. Although students have been exposed to grammar and writing instruction, the persistence of syntactic errors indicates that existing pedagogical approaches may not sufficiently address the integration of syntax into academic writing practice. Previous research emphasizes that focused instruction on syntactic complexity, combined with guided writing activities, can significantly improve learners' ability to produce coherent and grammatically accurate academic texts (Kim & Ro, 2023; Sudarmono, 2025).

Taken together, the patterns of syntactic errors identified in this study indicate that students' difficulties are not merely technical or incidental, but rather reflect systematic limitations in their syntactic development within academic writing contexts. The recurrence of sentence structure errors, subject–verb agreement problems, and weaknesses in clause construction suggests that students tend to prioritize meaning expression over grammatical control when composing academic texts. Similar tendencies have been reported in studies of EFL academic writing, which show that learners often struggle to manage syntactic complexity while maintaining accuracy in extended written discourse (Suhendar, 2025). This imbalance between complexity and accuracy highlights the need to reconsider how syntactic knowledge is reinforced and practiced in academic writing courses, particularly at the tertiary level where students are expected to produce more sophisticated written arguments.

Therefore, the results of this study highlight the importance of explicit syntactic instruction that emphasizes sentence construction, clause combination, and accurate use of grammatical agreement within meaningful writing contexts. Incorporating instructional strategies such as sentence combining, model analysis, and corrective feedback may help students develop greater control over syntactic structures. By addressing these syntactic challenges systematically, educators can better support EFL students in achieving higher levels of academic writing competence.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the syntactic competence of fifth-semester Tadris English students at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara (UINSU) in academic writing. The findings reveal that although the students demonstrate basic syntactic knowledge, they still encounter significant difficulties in applying complex syntactic structures accurately. Common problems

were identified in sentence structure, subject–verb agreement, clause construction, and the use of connectors, which negatively affect the clarity and coherence of their academic writing.

These results indicate that syntactic competence among EFL university students requires more than general exposure to grammar and writing instruction. Explicit syntactic instruction integrated with guided academic writing practice and corrective feedback is essential to improve students' control over sentence complexity and grammatical accuracy. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of strengthening syntax-focused pedagogy to enhance students' academic writing competence in EFL contexts.

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