

## A Study on Morphosyntactic Issues in Learning English among Undergraduate Students of Thiruvarur District

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### Abstract

Morphosyntax as the grammar bridge between words and sentences. It is one of the main areas of linguistics that refers to the interface between morphology and syntax. It deals with how those word level changes affect or are required by sentences structure in particular the structure of words and sentences work together to signal grammatical meaning. Morphosyntactic development is now viewed as a dynamic and evolving process, in main fluences by the interaction of cognitive processes, language input, and the learner's context. Through continuous exposure and use, learners gradually begin to connect grammatical forms with their meanings. Although many previous studies have examined morphosyntactic errors in detail, most of them rely mainly on descriptive analyses based on limited or isolated tasks. As a result, they do not fully capture how learners understand and use language in different contexts. This highlights the need for more exploratory and data-driven approaches that can examine both learners' explicit knowledge of grammar and their real language use. In response to this gap, the present study adopts a multi-instrument exploratory design, bringing together different sources of data to develop a more comprehensive understanding of morphosyntactic competence.

**Keywords:** Morphosyntax, grammatical meaning, cognitive processes. morphosyntactic errors, multi-instrument exploratory design, morphosyntactic competence.

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### Introduction

Morphosyntax is an important area of linguistics that focuses on how words are formed and how they are arranged to create meaningful and grammatically correct sentences. In the context of second language acquisition, morphosyntactic competence refers to a learner's ability to use grammatical features-such as tense, agreement, and articles-accurately within sentence structures. When learners face difficulties in coordinating these elements, it often leads to consistent patterns of errors. Rather than being random, these patterns offer useful insights into how the learner's language system is gradually developing. (Ellis, 2008; Gass & Selinker, 2008). Among undergraduate learners of English-especially in multilingual settings like Tamil Nadu-difficulties with morphosyntax often continue even after years of formal instruction. Common issues include errors in verb forms, subject-verb agreement, use of articles, prepositions, and sentence structure. For example, a sentence like "He attend the class yesterday" shows that the learner recognises the time

reference but does not apply the correct past tense form. Such errors are not random; they reflect deeper cognitive and linguistic processes involved in how a second language is learned and gradually developed. (Corder, 1981; Selinker, 1972). From a theoretical point of view, Interlanguage Theory suggests that learners gradually develop their own language system, which follows certain rules and exists somewhere between their first language (L1) and the target language (L2). Within this framework, morphosyntactic errors are not simply seen as weaknesses, but as signs of different stages in the learning process. In a similar way, Error Analysis helps in systematically identifying and classifying these errors, making it easier to understand learners' difficulties and plan appropriate teaching strategies. Additionally, language transfer plays an important role, as differences between Tamil and English-such as the lack of articles and more flexible word order in Tamil-often result in recurring and predictable patterns in learners' language use. (Lado, 1957; Swan & Smith, 2001).

Although many previous studies have examined morphosyntactic errors in detail, most of them rely mainly on descriptive analyses based on limited or isolated tasks. As a result, they do not fully capture how learners understand and use language in different contexts. This highlights the need for more exploratory and data-driven approaches that can examine both learners' explicit knowledge of grammar and their real language use. In response to this gap, the present study adopts a multi-instrument exploratory design, bringing together different sources of data to develop a more comprehensive understanding of morphosyntactic competence.

Recent trends in second language acquisition research also stress the importance of looking at morphosyntactic development from multiple perspectives. This includes not only explicit grammatical knowledge but also implicit processing and actual language use in meaningful contexts. While earlier studies have largely focused on identifying and categorising errors, current approaches suggest that such descriptions alone are not enough to explain the complex nature of language learning. (Ellis, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Morphosyntactic development is now viewed as a dynamic and evolving process, influenced by the interaction of cognitive processes, language input, and the learner's context. Through continuous exposure and use, learners gradually begin to connect grammatical forms with their meanings.

One of the main challenges in this process is the gap between what learners know about grammar and how they use it in communication. While learners may show a clear understanding of grammatical rules in structured or controlled tasks, they often struggle to apply those rules accurately in real-time language use. This difference is commonly described in second language acquisition research as the distinction between "knowing" a language and effectively "using" it. (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2005). Such discrepancies are particularly evident in academic writing, where increased cognitive load often leads to breakdowns in agreement, tense consistency, and syntactic organisation. Therefore, investigating morphosyntax requires approaches that capture both controlled performance and natural production.

Recent research also points to the importance of both language exposure and emotional factors in the development of morphosyntactic skills. Learners who engage more frequently with meaningful English input—such as through reading, media, and interaction—are more likely to develop stronger grammatical control. In contrast, limited exposure can lead to the persistence of certain errors, which may become stable over time. (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In addition, emotional factors—such as learners' confidence, levels of anxiety, and their attitudes toward grammar—play an important role in how effectively they understand and produce accurate language. (Dörnyei, 2007). These factors are particularly relevant in rural and semi-urban educational contexts, where opportunities for authentic English usage may be limited.

Considering these complexities, relying on a single method is often not sufficient to fully understand the multidimensional nature of morphosyntactic competence. As a result, researchers increasingly support the use of triangulated and exploratory research designs that combine multiple sources of data, allowing for a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of learners' language abilities. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such approaches make it possible to examine different aspects of language competence, including

learners' explicit knowledge of grammar, their accuracy in controlled tasks, and their ability to use language spontaneously. This, in turn, provides deeper insights into the processes underlying second language development.

In line with this perspective, the present study uses multiple tools to capture these dimensions. A Morphological Awareness tool is used to assess learners' understanding of word formation, including roots, inflections, derivations, and compound structures. To observe natural language use, a writing task is included, allowing for the analysis of morphosyntactic errors as they occur in context. Additionally, a Morphosyntactic Error Identification task evaluates learners' ability to recognise and correct grammatical errors in controlled conditions. Finally, a Student English Exposure and Learning Background Questionnaire is used to gather information on factors such as language exposure, reading habits, medium of instruction, and confidence in grammar, all of which are known to influence second language learning. (Dörnyei, 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

This triangulated approach enables the study to examine the relationship between learners' explicit grammatical knowledge (as measured using the morphological awareness tool), their performance in controlled conditions (using the morphosyntactic error identification task), and their actual language use in spontaneous contexts (via the writing task). By bringing these dimensions together, the study can identify possible gaps between what learners know and how they apply that knowledge in practice. Such an approach is particularly useful in exploratory research, as it goes beyond simply identifying errors and instead helps reveal patterns, underlying causes, and the influence of contextual factors on morphosyntactic performance.

From the perspective of applied linguistics and language teaching, understanding these different dimensions is crucial for designing effective and targeted instructional strategies. By examining morphosyntactic competence through both cognitive and contextual lenses, the present study seeks to offer a detailed understanding of the types and distribution of morphosyntactic difficulties among undergraduate learners. At the same time, it aims to provide practical, evidence-based insights that can support improvements in English language teaching in similar educational contexts.

### **Aim of the Study**

The primary aim of the present study is to explore the nature, patterns, and underlying factors of morphosyntactic issues in English among undergraduate students.

The study seeks to:

- Examine the range and types of morphosyntactic errors in learners' language use
- Analyse patterns of grammatical inaccuracies at the morphology–syntax interface
- Explore the relationship between learners' grammatical knowledge and their actual language performance
- Investigate the influence of first language (L1) on morphosyntactic structures in English
- Identify the role of contextual factors such as exposure to English, learning background, and affective variables in shaping grammatical competence

### **Objectives**

- To identify and analyse the distribution of morphosyntactic error types among undergraduate students of Thiruvavur District.

- To examine the relationship between learners' grammatical knowledge and their actual language performance among undergraduate students of Thiruvapur District.
- To investigate the influence of first language (L1) on morphosyntactic error patterns among undergraduate students of Thiruvapur District.
- To analyse the relationship between learners' exposure to English and their morphosyntactic accuracy among undergraduate students of Thiruvapur District.
- To compare learners' performance in controlled grammatical tasks and spontaneous language production among undergraduate students of Thiruvapur District.
- To examine the relationship between learners' morphological awareness and their morphosyntactic accuracy among undergraduate students of Thiruvapur District.

### Methodology

The present study adopts an exploratory research design with a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques. This design is appropriate as it enables a comprehensive examination of morphosyntactic competence by capturing learners' explicit knowledge, controlled grammatical performance, and spontaneous language use, along with contextual factors influencing language development. The study aims to explore patterns, relationships, and underlying factors associated with morphosyntactic issues among undergraduate learners.

### Population

The population of the study comprises undergraduate students enrolled in Arts and Science colleges in the Thiruvapur District. These students come from diverse academic disciplines and predominantly have Tamil as their first language, providing a relevant context for examining morphosyntactic development in English as a second language.

### Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample of approximately 120–150 undergraduate students is selected for the study based on feasibility and suitability for exploratory analysis.

A stratified random sampling technique is employed to ensure representation across:

- Academic disciplines (e.g., English, Commerce, History)
- Year of study (I, II, III)
- Gender
- Schooling background (rural/urban; medium of instruction)

This approach ensures diversity and enhances the reliability of findings.

### Tools for Data Collection

Data for the study are collected using four key instruments:

- 1. Morphological Awareness Diagnostic Test (MADT):** This tool assesses learners' explicit knowledge of word formation, including identification of root words, inflected forms, derived forms, and compound words. It measures learners' ability to recognise and process morphological structures.
- 2. Writing Task:** Participants are required to write a 150–200-word paragraph on a general topic (e.g., "My College Life" or "Importance of English"). This task is used to capture authentic language production and identify naturally occurring morphosyntactic errors.

- 3. Morphosyntactic Error Identification Task (MEIT):** This task consists of 15 sentences containing morphosyntactic errors. Students are required to identify and correct the errors. It measures learners' controlled grammatical competence.

- 4. Student English Exposure and Learning Background Questionnaire:** A 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire is used to assess, along with necessary demographic questionnaires:

- English exposure
- Reading habits
- Medium of instruction
- Grammatical confidence

This tool helps in understanding contextual and affective factors influencing language learning.

### Data Collection Procedure

Before the commencement of data collection, formal permission is obtained from the authorities of the selected colleges. The participants are informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality are clearly explained to ensure informed consent.

The data collection is carried out in a systematic and structured manner within a controlled classroom setting to maintain uniformity in administration. Initially, the Morphological Awareness Diagnostic Test (MADT) is administered to assess learners' explicit knowledge of word formation processes, including their ability to identify root words, inflected forms, derived forms, and compound words. This is followed by the administration of the Morphosyntactic Error Identification Task (MEIT), which requires students to identify and correct grammatical errors in given sentences, thereby measuring their controlled grammatical competence. Subsequently, participants are asked to complete a writing task, in which they produce a paragraph of approximately 150–200 words on a general topic. This task is designed to capture spontaneous language production and to identify naturally occurring morphosyntactic errors in authentic contexts. Finally, the Student English Exposure and Learning Background Questionnaire is distributed to collect data on learners' exposure to English, reading habits, medium of instruction, and their confidence in using English grammar. All instruments are administered during regular class hours under the supervision of the researcher to ensure consistency in instructions and testing conditions. The collected data are then compiled systematically for further quantitative and qualitative analysis.

### Data Analysis Technique

The data collected for the study are analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of morphosyntactic competence among undergraduate learners. For quantitative analysis, statistical techniques such as frequency counts and percentages are used to determine the distribution of different types of morphosyntactic errors. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, are employed to summarise learners' performance across various tasks. Inferential statistical methods, such as correlation analysis, are applied to examine relationships between key variables, including grammatical knowledge, morphological awareness, language performance, and exposure to English. Additionally, statistical tests such as t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) are used, where appropriate, to compare differences between groups and performance levels.

For qualitative analysis, the study focuses on detailed error analysis and interpretation. Learners' responses from writing tasks and grammatical exercises are carefully examined to identify and classify morphosyntactic errors. These errors are systematically categorised into major types, including subject–verb agreement, tense and aspect, article usage, prepositions, word order, and morphological forms. Furthermore, patterns of errors are analysed to understand underlying linguistic processes and learner strategies. This combined approach of quantitative measurement and qualitative interpretation enables a deeper exploration of morphosyntactic issues and provides meaningful insights into learners' language development.

### **Reliability and Validity**

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, several measures are undertaken. A pilot study is conducted with a small sample of participants to test the clarity, appropriateness, and feasibility of the research instruments. Based on the pilot results, necessary modifications are made to improve the quality of the tools. Content validity is established through expert review; wherein subject experts evaluate the instruments to ensure that they adequately cover the relevant aspects of morphosyntactic competence.

Reliability is maintained by ensuring consistency in the administration of the instruments and in the scoring procedures across all participants. Standardized instructions are provided, and uniform conditions are maintained during data collection to minimize variability. Furthermore, the study employs triangulation of data sources, incorporating multiple instruments such as tests, writing samples, and questionnaires, which enhances the credibility, validity, and robustness of the findings. This multi-source approach allows for cross-verification of data and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles are carefully observed throughout the research process to ensure the protection and well-being of the participants. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and informed consent is obtained from all participants before data collection. The purpose of the study is clearly explained, and participants are assured that they have the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity are strictly maintained by ensuring that no personal identifiers are disclosed in the data or in the reporting of results. The information collected is used solely for academic and research purposes, and no academic penalty or disadvantage is associated with participation in the study. All data are handled responsibly and securely, thereby upholding ethical standards and ensuring the integrity of the research.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

The present study is delimited to ensure a focused and manageable investigation of morphosyntactic competence among undergraduate learners. The study specifically examines grammatical aspects related to the morphology–syntax interface, including subject–verb agreement, tense–aspect usage, article usage, prepositions, word formation, and sentence structure. Errors related purely to vocabulary and spelling are excluded from analysis unless they directly affect morphosyntactic accuracy.

The scope of the study is confined to undergraduate students selected from Arts and Science colleges, with participants

representing different academic disciplines and levels of study. As the study is context-specific, the findings may not be generalised to all learner populations beyond similar educational settings.

The data collection is limited to selected instruments designed to capture different dimensions of morphosyntactic competence, including learners' morphological awareness, controlled grammatical performance, spontaneous language production, and contextual learning background. The study does not extend to broader linguistic domains such as phonology, semantics, pragmatics, or discourse analysis, except where they have a direct impact on grammatical performance.

Furthermore, the research does not focus on specialised language domains such as literary analysis or advanced communication skills, unless they are directly related to morphosyntactic usage. The delimitations are thus intentionally set to provide a clear and in-depth understanding of morphosyntactic issues within a defined academic and linguistic framework.

### **Discussion and Summarisation**

Based on the analysis of morphosyntactic competence among undergraduate learners, the study highlights that morphosyntax remains a critical area of difficulty in English language acquisition. Morphological and syntactic errors are not isolated phenomena but reflect deeper challenges in integrating word-level and sentence-level grammatical knowledge. The findings indicate that learners experience persistent difficulties in applying grammatical rules accurately, particularly in contexts requiring both structural awareness and real-time language production.

One of the major areas of concern identified in the study is morphological accuracy, especially in the use of inflectional morphemes such as plural markers, tense markers, third-person singular forms, and progressive markers. Learners frequently exhibit patterns of morpheme omission, where essential grammatical markers are absent, as well as overgeneralization, where regular rules are applied to irregular forms. These patterns suggest incomplete acquisition of morphological rules and limited sensitivity to grammatical distinctions. Such difficulties are often influenced by first language structures and reduced exposure to consistent grammatical input.

In addition to morphological issues, the study reveals significant challenges at the syntactic level, including errors in subject–verb agreement, tense–aspect consistency, article usage, prepositions, and word order. These errors frequently affect sentence clarity and coherence, particularly in extended writing tasks. The findings indicate that learners struggle to maintain grammatical consistency when producing spontaneous language, highlighting the cognitive demands involved in real-time language processing.

A key insight emerging from the study is the distinction between controlled grammatical knowledge and actual language performance. Learners are often able to identify and correct errors in structured tasks, yet they fail to apply the same rules consistently in their own writing. This gap between knowledge and performance reflects the difference between explicit and implicit language competence and underscores the need for integrative approaches to language learning.

The study also highlights the role of morphological awareness in shaping grammatical accuracy. Learners with a better understanding of word formation processes demonstrate

relatively higher accuracy in language use, suggesting that morphological knowledge supports overall morphosyntactic competence. However, this awareness is not always effectively transferred into spontaneous language production, indicating the need for stronger connections between knowledge and usage.

Furthermore, contextual and affective factors play a significant role in influencing learners' morphosyntactic performance. Limited exposure to English, restricted reading habits, and lack of confidence in using grammar contribute to persistent error patterns. Learners from backgrounds with minimal interaction in English often show higher levels of grammatical inaccuracy, emphasizing the importance of meaningful language input and practice.

Overall, the study demonstrates that morphosyntactic issues among undergraduate learners are multidimensional, arising from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and contextual factors. The findings suggest that effective language learning requires not only knowledge of grammatical rules but also opportunities for meaningful use, exposure to authentic input, and development of linguistic awareness.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of morphosyntactic challenges by examining patterns of errors, relationships between key variables, and contextual influences on language learning. The insights gained from this analysis contribute to the development of more informed and effective pedagogical approaches for improving English language proficiency among undergraduate learners.

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