

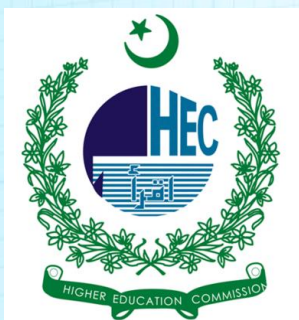
**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**Error Analysis of Undergraduate Students' Research Proposals  
in English**



**<sup>1</sup>Rifa Anjum**

**<sup>2</sup>Dania Wasi Khan**

**<sup>\*3</sup>Nisar Ahmed**

<sup>1</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Iqra University Karachi, Pakistan

Email: [syeda.rifa@iqra.edu.pk](mailto:syeda.rifa@iqra.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Bahria University Karachi, Pakistan

Email: [daniawasi.bukc@bahria.edu.pk](mailto:daniawasi.bukc@bahria.edu.pk)

<sup>\*3</sup>Subject Specialist (English) at Sona Public School and College Mirpur Mathelo Sindh, Pakistan

Corresponding Author Email: [nisarsoomro55@gmail.com](mailto:nisarsoomro55@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This study investigates the errors present in undergraduate students' research proposals written in English, with a focus on identifying, classifying, and analyzing the most common linguistic and discourse-level problems. Research proposal writing is a crucial academic skill at the university level; however, many EFL learners face persistent difficulties in producing accurate, coherent, and academically appropriate texts. These difficulties often result in various types of errors that affect the clarity, quality, and acceptability of their proposals. The study adopts a descriptive quantitative research design supported by qualitative textual analysis. A purposive sample of undergraduate research proposals collected from students of English or related disciplines is analyzed using Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The errors are categorized into grammatical errors (tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions), lexical errors (word choice and collocation), syntactic errors (sentence structure and word order), and discourse-level errors (cohesion and coherence issues). The findings reveal that grammatical errors, particularly in article usage, verb tense, and prepositions, are the most frequent, followed by lexical and syntactic errors. Discourse-level issues such as weak coherence and poor organization are also anticipated to be significant challenges. The study further explores the sources of errors, including interlingual transfer from the mother tongue and intralingual factors such as overgeneralization and incomplete rule application.

**Keywords:** Error Analysis, Undergraduate Students, Research Proposals, EFL Writing, Grammatical Errors, Academic Writing, Interlingual Errors

**Background of the Study**

Academic writing is a core requirement in higher education, particularly at the undergraduate level, where students are expected to demonstrate the ability to produce clear, structured, and academically appropriate texts such as essays, reports, and research proposals. Among these, the research proposal is considered a foundational academic genre because it introduces students to research thinking, problem identification, and methodological planning. However, writing research proposals in

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

English presents considerable challenges for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially in contexts where English is not the primary language of communication. These challenges often lead to different types of linguistic and discourse-related errors that affect the overall quality and acceptability of student writing.

Error Analysis (EA) has been widely used in applied linguistics to investigate learner language and understand the nature of errors in second language acquisition. Corder (1967) emphasized that learner errors are not simply signs of failure but are systematic and meaningful indicators of the learning process. According to him, errors provide valuable insights into how language is learned and internalized. Later, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) further developed error analysis by classifying errors into categories such as grammatical, lexical, and syntactic errors, and introduced the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which includes omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. These frameworks have been extensively used in analyzing writing errors among EFL learners.

In academic writing, errors can occur at multiple levels, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and discourse organization. Richards (1974) identified two main sources of errors: interlingual transfer, which results from the influence of the first language, and intralingual errors, which arise from incomplete understanding of the target language rules. Similarly, James (1998) argues that error analysis helps in identifying patterns of learner difficulties and informs effective pedagogical interventions. In EFL contexts, learners often struggle with article usage, verb tense consistency, prepositions, and word choice, which significantly affect the clarity and accuracy of academic texts.

Research has shown that academic writing, particularly at the undergraduate level, is highly prone to linguistic errors. Hinkel (2004) notes that second language writers often produce texts that are grammatically inconsistent and lack coherence due to limited exposure to academic discourse conventions. Similarly, Ferris (2002) emphasizes that L2 writers frequently face persistent grammatical errors even at advanced levels, especially in areas such as tense, articles, and sentence structure. These issues are further complicated in research proposal writing, where students must not only demonstrate linguistic accuracy but also present logical argumentation

and academic organization.

In the Pakistani context, English is used as a medium of instruction in many higher education institutions, yet students often have limited proficiency in academic writing. Studies indicate that undergraduate students face significant difficulties in structuring research proposals and frequently produce errors that affect coherence and readability (Rahman, 2013). These errors are often linked to insufficient training in academic writing, lack of exposure to research genres, and reliance on rote learning approaches in earlier education stages.

Despite the importance of research proposal writing in undergraduate programs, limited studies have specifically focused on error analysis in this genre. Most existing research has concentrated on general essay writing, leaving a gap in understanding the specific linguistic and structural challenges students face in research proposal writing. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types and frequencies of errors in undergraduate students' research proposals and identify their possible sources. The findings are expected to contribute to improving academic writing instruction and enhancing students' research writing competence in EFL contexts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research proposal writing is a fundamental academic requirement for undergraduate students, as it serves as an entry point to formal research and scholarly inquiry. Despite its importance, many undergraduate students in EFL contexts struggle to produce well-structured and linguistically accurate research proposals in English. Their writing is often affected by a wide range of errors, including grammatical, lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level problems, which negatively impact clarity, coherence, and academic quality.

In Pakistani higher education institutions, students are generally exposed to English as a medium of instruction, yet they continue to face persistent difficulties in academic writing. These difficulties are often linked to limited exposure to academic discourse conventions, insufficient practice in research writing, and inadequate feedback on writing errors. As a result, research proposals submitted by undergraduate students frequently contain recurring errors that hinder effective communication of research ideas. However, despite the significance of research

proposal writing, limited studies have specifically analyzed the types, frequency, and sources of errors in this genre. This gap highlights the need for a systematic error analysis of undergraduate research proposals to better understand students' writing challenges and improve instructional practices.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it addresses a critical gap in academic writing research by focusing specifically on error analysis in undergraduate research proposals. Understanding the nature of errors in students' writing can help identify the linguistic and structural difficulties they face in academic contexts.

The findings of this study will be beneficial for students, teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers. For students, it will increase awareness of common writing errors and help them improve their academic writing skills. For teachers, the study will provide insights into recurring error patterns, enabling them to design more effective teaching strategies and provide focused feedback. Curriculum developers may use the findings to improve academic writing courses by incorporating targeted instruction on problem areas such as grammar, sentence structure, and coherence. Furthermore, this study will contribute to the field of applied linguistics by providing empirical evidence on error patterns in research proposal writing within an EFL context, particularly in Pakistan, where such research remains limited.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the most common types of errors found in undergraduate students' research proposals written in English?
2. What are the frequency and distribution of grammatical, lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level errors in students' research proposals?
3. What are the possible sources of errors in undergraduate research proposal writing, including interlingual and intralingual factors?

### **Literature Review**

Error analysis has been a significant area of interest in applied linguistics and second language acquisition, particularly in understanding how learners develop proficiency in writing. It provides a systematic approach to identifying, describing, and explaining errors made by language learners. In academic writing, especially at the undergraduate level, error analysis is widely used to examine linguistic difficulties

that affect the clarity, coherence, and accuracy of student texts such as essays and research proposals.

### **Concept and Development of Error Analysis**

Error Analysis (EA) emerged as a response to the limitations of Contrastive Analysis, which primarily focused on predicting learner errors through differences between the first language (L1) and second language (L2). Corder (1967) was among the first scholars to emphasize the importance of learner errors, arguing that errors are not simply signs of failure but evidence of a learning process. According to him, errors provide valuable insights into the internal system of learners' language development.

Richards (1974) further expanded the concept by identifying different sources of errors, including interlingual transfer (influence of the mother tongue) and intralingual factors (overgeneralization, incomplete rule application, and false concepts). These categories helped researchers understand that errors are systematic and often reflect learners' stage of language development rather than random mistakes. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) contributed significantly to error analysis by introducing the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which classifies errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This framework is particularly useful in analyzing written texts because it allows researchers to identify how learners manipulate linguistic structures in their writing.

### **Types of Errors in Academic Writing**

Academic writing involves multiple linguistic levels, including grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse organization. Studies have shown that EFL learners frequently make errors at each of these levels, which affects the overall quality of their writing.

Grammatical errors are among the most common in L2 writing. Ferris (2002) found that persistent grammatical issues such as subject-verb agreement, tense inconsistency, and article misuse are typical in second language writing, even among advanced learners. Similarly, Hinkel (2004) notes that L2 writers often struggle with grammatical accuracy due to limited exposure to academic English and insufficient practice in formal writing tasks.

Lexical errors also play a significant role in reducing writing quality. These include incorrect word choice, inappropriate collocations, and literal translations from the first language. James (1998) explains that lexical errors often arise due to limited

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

vocabulary knowledge and overreliance on L1 transfer, which affects precision in academic expression.

Syntactic errors involve problems in sentence structure, word order, and sentence complexity. According to Ellis (2008), learners often produce fragmented or overly simplified sentences because they lack control over complex grammatical structures required in academic discourse.

Discourse-level errors are particularly important in academic writing because they affect coherence and cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that cohesion is achieved through linguistic devices such as reference, substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. When these devices are misused or underused, the text becomes difficult to follow. Witte and Faigley (1981) further emphasize that cohesion alone does not guarantee coherence; instead, coherence depends on how meaning is logically organized and interpreted by the reader.

## **Error Analysis in Academic and Research Writing**

Research has consistently shown that academic writing is challenging for EFL learners due to its complex linguistic and rhetorical demands. Hinkel (2004) highlights that second language writers often produce grammatically correct but rhetorically weak texts because they lack knowledge of academic conventions. Similarly, Ferris (2002) notes that writing errors in L2 contexts are often persistent and require targeted instructional intervention.

In the context of research writing, particularly research proposals, students are expected to demonstrate not only linguistic accuracy but also academic argumentation and methodological understanding. However, studies suggest that undergraduate students often struggle with structuring research proposals and making appropriate language choices. Rahman (2013) found that Pakistani undergraduate students face significant challenges in academic writing, including frequent grammatical and organizational errors that affect clarity and coherence.

## **Sources of Errors**

Understanding the sources of errors is essential in error analysis. Richards (1974) identified two main sources: interlingual errors, which result from L1 interference, and intralingual errors, which arise from incomplete learning of L2 rules. Interlingual errors are common when learners translate directly from their native language, leading

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

to unnatural expressions in English. Intralingual errors occur when learners overgeneralize rules or apply them incorrectly due to incomplete understanding.

Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of interlanguage, suggesting that learner language is a transitional system influenced by both L1 and L2. This explains why errors are systematic and reflect developmental stages rather than random mistakes.

## **Research Gap**

Although numerous studies have examined errors in general essay writing, relatively few have focused specifically on undergraduate research proposals. Research proposals are a distinct academic genre that requires a combination of linguistic accuracy, logical organization, and research awareness. In many EFL contexts, including Pakistan, students receive limited training in research writing, resulting in frequent errors that affect proposal quality.

Therefore, there is a need for a focused error analysis of undergraduate research proposals to identify common error patterns and their sources. Such research can provide valuable insights for improving academic writing instruction and helping students develop stronger research writing skills.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design supported by qualitative textual analysis to investigate the types and sources of errors in undergraduate students' research proposals written in English. The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled at Bahria University, Karachi. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants from relevant academic programs who had recently completed or submitted research proposals as part of their coursework. A total of 60–100 research proposals (depending on availability) were collected as the primary data source for analysis. These written documents served as authentic academic texts for identifying and categorizing linguistic and structural errors.

The collected research proposals were analyzed using Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework along with Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy. Errors were identified and classified into grammatical errors (such as tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions), lexical errors (word choice

and collocations), syntactic errors (sentence structure and word order), and discourse-level errors (cohesion and coherence issues). Both frequency counts and percentage analysis were used to determine the most common error types. In addition, qualitative interpretation was applied to explain the possible sources of errors, including interlingual transfer and intralingual factors. This mixed approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of students' writing difficulties in research proposal writing.

### **Data Analysis / Results**

The data collected from 80 undergraduate research proposals written by students of Bahria University, Karachi were analyzed using Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The errors were categorized into grammatical, lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level errors. Frequency and percentage were used to present the distribution of errors, followed by qualitative interpretation to understand their nature and impact on writing quality.

**Table 1:** *Frequency of Error Types in Research Proposals*

<b>Error Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Grammatical Errors	320	40%
Lexical Errors	180	22.5%
Syntactic Errors	150	18.75%
Discourse-Level Errors	150	18.75%
<b>Total</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>100%</b>

The results indicate that grammatical errors were the most frequently occurring type, accounting for 40% of the total errors. These included issues such as subject-verb agreement, incorrect tense usage, article omission, and preposition misuse. This suggests that students still struggle with fundamental grammatical structures in academic writing, which directly affects the clarity and accuracy of their research proposals. This finding aligns with Ferris (2002), who states that grammatical errors are persistent among L2 writers even at higher proficiency levels.

Lexical errors (22.5%) were the second most common category. These errors mainly involved inappropriate word choice, incorrect collocations, and literal translation from the mother tongue. Such errors indicate limited academic vocabulary and overreliance on L1 transfer. According to James (1998), lexical errors often occur

due to insufficient vocabulary depth and lack of exposure to academic discourse.

Syntactic errors (18.75%) included problems related to sentence structure, word order, and fragmented or overly simple sentences. These errors suggest that students face difficulty in constructing complex academic sentences required in research writing. Ellis (2008) argues that syntactic errors are common among EFL learners due to incomplete mastery of sentence construction rules.

Discourse-level errors also accounted for 18.75% of the total errors. These included weak cohesion, poor paragraph organization, and lack of logical flow between sections of the proposal. Many students failed to use cohesive devices effectively, resulting in disorganized and unclear arguments. Halliday and Hasan (1976) emphasize that cohesion is essential for maintaining textual unity, and its absence leads to reduced readability and coherence.

**Table 2:** *Sources of Errors*

<b>Source of Error</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Interlingual Errors	340	42.5%
Intralingual Errors	460	57.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>800</b>	<b>100%</b>

The analysis shows that intralingual errors (57.5%) were more frequent than interlingual errors (42.5%). Intralingual errors included overgeneralization of grammatical rules, incomplete application of language rules, and false analogies. This indicates that students' errors are largely developmental and stem from insufficient understanding of English grammar and academic writing conventions rather than direct interference from their first language.

However, a significant proportion of interlingual errors was also observed, particularly in sentence construction and word order, suggesting influence from the students' native language (Urdu). Richards (1974) explains that such errors occur when learners directly transfer structures from their L1 into L2 writing, resulting in unnatural or incorrect expressions in English.

### **Findings**

The overall findings reveal that undergraduate students at Bahria University face multiple layers of difficulty in writing research proposals in English. Grammatical errors were the most dominant, followed by lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level

issues. The presence of both interlingual and intralingual errors indicates that students' writing problems are caused by a combination of limited linguistic competence and incomplete understanding of academic writing conventions.

These results suggest that students require targeted instructional support in grammar, academic vocabulary, sentence construction, and discourse organization. Strengthening these areas can significantly improve the quality, coherence, and academic acceptability of undergraduate research proposals.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal that undergraduate students at Bahria University, Karachi face persistent and multi-layered challenges in writing research proposals in English. The dominance of grammatical errors, followed by lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level errors, indicates that students' difficulties are not limited to one aspect of language but extend across multiple levels of writing competence. These results are consistent with Ferris (2002), who argues that grammatical errors are among the most persistent issues in second language writing, even at advanced levels of study. The frequent occurrence of errors in tense, subject-verb agreement, articles, and prepositions suggests that students still lack full control over fundamental grammatical structures required for academic writing.

The presence of lexical errors as the second most frequent category highlights students' limited academic vocabulary and reliance on inappropriate word choices and literal translation from their first language. This finding aligns with James (1998), who notes that lexical errors often arise from insufficient vocabulary depth and overdependence on L1 transfer. In the context of research proposal writing, such errors can significantly reduce precision and academic tone, making it difficult for readers to understand the intended meaning clearly. This also reflects a gap in students' exposure to discipline-specific academic vocabulary, which is essential for producing formal research writing.

Syntactic errors, although less frequent than grammatical errors, still represent a significant challenge for students. These errors, including incorrect sentence structure, word order issues, and fragmented sentences, suggest that learners struggle to construct complex academic sentences. According to Ellis (2008), such difficulties are common among EFL learners due to incomplete mastery of syntactic rules and

## **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

limited practice in academic writing tasks. In research proposal writing, where logical progression and clarity of argumentation are crucial, syntactic weaknesses can severely affect readability and coherence.

Discourse-level errors, which accounted for a considerable proportion of the data, further indicate that students face challenges in organizing ideas and maintaining cohesion across sections of their research proposals. Many students failed to use appropriate cohesive devices, resulting in weak logical flow and poorly structured arguments. This supports Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory that cohesion is essential for textual unity, and its absence leads to fragmented and less comprehensible writing. The weak organization observed in students' proposals suggests a lack of training in academic discourse conventions, particularly in structuring research writing.

The analysis of error sources revealed that intralingual errors were more frequent than interlingual errors, suggesting that most difficulties arise from incomplete learning of English rules rather than direct interference from the mother tongue. Intralingual errors such as overgeneralization and incorrect application of rules indicate that students are still in the developmental stage of language acquisition. This finding is consistent with Richards (1974), who explains that intralingual errors are common in second language learning and reflect learners' evolving understanding of the target language system. However, the presence of interlingual errors also confirms that L1 transfer continues to influence students' academic writing, particularly in sentence construction and word order.

Overall, the findings highlight that undergraduate students' research proposal writing is hindered by a combination of linguistic and developmental factors. The results suggest that current instructional practices may not be adequately addressing discourse-level writing skills, as students tend to focus more on grammatical accuracy than on coherence, cohesion, and academic organization. This imbalance results in writing that is structurally weak despite containing basic linguistic correctness.

Pedagogically, these findings emphasize the need for a more integrated approach to teaching academic writing. Instruction should not only focus on grammar and vocabulary but also include explicit training in sentence construction, academic vocabulary development, and discourse organization. Teachers should also provide

# **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

targeted feedback on common error patterns to help students develop greater awareness of their writing weaknesses. Strengthening these areas can significantly improve the quality of research proposals and better prepare students for advanced academic writing tasks.

In conclusion, the discussion confirms that error analysis provides valuable insights into students' writing difficulties and highlights the need for focused pedagogical intervention in EFL academic writing contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the errors in undergraduate students' research proposals written in English at Bahria University, Karachi, using Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The findings revealed that students' research proposals contain a wide range of linguistic and discourse-related errors that significantly affect the clarity, coherence, and academic quality of their writing. Grammatical errors were found to be the most frequent, followed by lexical, syntactic, and discourse-level errors. These results indicate that students face persistent difficulties in applying basic grammatical rules, selecting appropriate vocabulary, constructing complex sentences, and organizing ideas effectively in academic writing.

The analysis of error sources further showed that intralingual errors were more dominant than interlingual errors, suggesting that most difficulties arise from incomplete understanding of English language rules rather than direct interference from the mother tongue. However, the presence of interlingual errors also confirms that first language influence continues to affect students' academic writing. Overall, the study concludes that undergraduate students lack sufficient proficiency in academic writing conventions required for producing well-structured research proposals. This highlights the need for stronger instructional support in grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, and discourse organization to improve students' academic writing performance.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Teachers should provide systematic instruction in academic writing skills, focusing on grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, and research proposal

# Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

organization to reduce recurring errors.

- Instructors should identify common error patterns in students' writing and provide targeted corrective feedback to help learners understand and avoid repeated mistakes.
- Students should be encouraged to improve their academic vocabulary through reading research articles, using word lists, and engaging in discipline-specific writing exercises.
- Regular practice sessions should be conducted where students are guided step-by-step in writing research proposals, with emphasis on structure, coherence, and cohesion.
- Teachers should use well-written sample research proposals to demonstrate correct usage of language, organization, and academic style.
- Universities should organize academic writing workshops to strengthen students' understanding of research writing conventions and common error avoidance strategies.
- Future studies may explore error analysis across different disciplines, compare undergraduate and postgraduate writing, or investigate the effectiveness of feedback strategies in reducing writing errors.

## References

- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 5(4), 161–170.
- Dulay, H., Burt, M., & Krashen, S. (1982). *Language two*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Ferris, D. R. (2002). *Treatment of error in second language student writing*. University of Michigan Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. Longman.
- Hinkel, E. (2004). *Teaching academic ESL writing: Practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- James, C. (1998). *Errors in language learning and use: Exploring error analysis*. Longman.
- Rahman, M. M. (2013). Academic writing problems faced by undergraduate students

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

in Pakistan. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 3(1), 123–130.

Richards, J. C. (1974). *Error analysis: Perspectives on second language acquisition*.  
Longman.

Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 10(3),  
209–231.

Witte, S. P., & Faigley, L. (1981). Coherence, cohesion, and writing quality. *College  
Composition and Communication*, 32(2), 189–204.\*