

**PORTRAIT OF EFL LEARNERS' WRITINGS: ERRORS, CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to analyze EFL learners' writings. It focused on portraying the most dominant grammatical and lexical errors in writing. It also explored challenges and alternative solutions from students' perspectives. A qualitative approach in terms of descriptive design was applied in this study. The participants were thirty sophomores from four different faculties of a private university that were selected using stratified random sampling. Writing test, questionnaire, and interview were instruments to collect the data. Collecting, identifying, classifying, and describing were modified data analysis stages used in this study. The results revealed 445 grammatical errors and 111 lexical errors found in students' writing. Limited knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, lack of practice and motivation, and unsatisfactory writing skills are the most common students' writing challenges. The students also believed that review and feedback, various material, exercise and assignment exposure, and supporting technological tools are alternative solutions to anticipate the errors and challenges. The data of writing errors, challenges, and alternative solutions provide beneficial insights for the lecturers to formulate proper teaching methods, materials, and activities in writing.

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**Keywords:** *Grammatical Errors, Lexical Errors, Writing Challenges, Alternative Solutions, Students' Perspectives*

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Life in the twenty-first century requires global citizens to equip themselves with proper skills to adapt to the changes brought by knowledge and technological advancement. Among the numerous skills, language remains consistent to play a prominent role in facilitating people to build communication.

As a lingua franca, people around the globe learn and use English. It is the most dominant language in the world. Jaya (2017) In Indonesia, English is the first foreign language taught at all educational levels, (Ariyanti, 2016). Adds that, from primary to tertiary levels.

It is necessary to learn English skills to be more proficient in English. Learners require to master at least listening, reading, speaking, and

writing skills. Listening and reading are receptive skills since learners receive information

and knowledge of the language through involving the skills. Meanwhile, speaking and writing are productive skills because learners use the skills to produce the language.

Common European Framework of References for Languages (2020) divides learners into three broad levels (Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User). It also organizes language proficiency into six levels, namely A1 (Beginner), A2 (Elementary), B1 (Intermediate), B2 (Upper Intermediate), C1 (Advanced), and C2 (Proficiency). These levels describe what learners are supposed to do in listening, reading, speaking, and writing. In terms of higher education students, the students are encouraged to reach level C in all

language skills including writing skills.

As a productive skill, writing has a vital role that contributes to students' academic success. For teaching English in Indonesia context, writing has been included in the national curriculum for the last twenty years even though the curriculum has been changed several times (Ananda, Gani, & Sahardin, 2014). It is expected that the inclusion of writing skills into the curriculum will foster students' communication skills, especially in written form. In addition, proper English writing skill is widely recognized as an efficient skill not only for an educational reason but also for business and personal reasons (Seitova, 2016).

Writing is essential, yet it is also challenging. Ardiansyah & Aswadi (2020) It is commonly known as the most difficult and least liked skill although it plays a crucial role in language production (Anh, 2019). Writing involves complex process as it demands cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis. Thus, it takes amount of time and effort to be a skillful writer (Seitova, 2016). This complex process causes many students to find it hard to create proper sentences and avoid writing errors.

As a consequence of this complex process, many researchers have intended to investigate issues related to writing. Scholars in the field of error analysis emphasized the significance of analyzing language learner errors. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in error analysis. The study of error analysis related to writing has been one of the major concerns for researchers around the globe (Heydari, 2012). However, most studies only focused on a single writing aspect such as grammatical errors or lexical errors. Meanwhile, the discussions of writing challenges and alternative solutions from students' perspectives are frequently neglected.

A number of studies focused on grammatical errors analysis in students' writing (Ananda, Gani, & Sahardin, 2014; Anjayani & Suprpto, 2016; Sugeng, 2016). In line with it, some research dealing with lexical errors analysis in students' writing (Dodigovic & Wang, 2015; Cons, 2012; Nie & Zhou 2017). The result of error analysis presents beneficial information, particularly for the readers, practitioners, and future researchers. Nevertheless, it will be more meaningful and comprehensive if the

investigations of grammatical and lexical errors are in the same study. Moreover, it is important to identify writing challenges and alternative solutions from students' perspectives. The perspectives will provide meaningful insight that helps the lecturers to understand students better and facilitate them to reach higher achievement.

This study shed light on the portrait of student writing errors that concern grammatical and lexical errors made by students in writing. It also focused on presenting information related to writing challenges and alternative solutions from the student's perspectives. These research findings bring comprehensive insights that contribute to teaching method, curriculum, and material design developments. For instance, it provides fruitful feedback that reveals the effectiveness of teaching methods, materials, and activities.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **a) Writing: A Challenging and Essential Skill**

Writing is the most difficult of the integral skills for mastering in EFL context. It comprises some stages, namely planning, drafting, revising and editing. (Ananda, Gani, & Sahardin, 2014). Although, it is considered as the least favorite skill, writing skill cannot be neglected. It is an important skill to support students' academic success (Anh, 2019). In addition, it is a basic requirement for participation in civic life and world business (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Since writing is considered as the most difficult skill in English, many students of any level encounter problems in writing. The most frequent problems related to content, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and spelling (Anh, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to anticipate the problem. Identifying and analyzing students' writing errors are alternative solutions to overcome the problem. The analysis results provide meaningful information for applying suitable teaching strategy, conducting proper learning activities, and selecting learning material which help students to write more effectively and efficiently.

### **b) Grammatical and Lexical Errors in Writing**

Error analysis is the development of contrastive analysis created in attempt to understand students' errors. EA is a worth-while issue in the EFL and ESL context because it is deemed fruitful for many stakeholders in language learning. EA is significant for teachers to find out the progress of their students and for researchers to learn the nature of language learning as well as for the students to better know the correct usage of the target language (Ananda, Gani, & Sahardin, 2014).

It is generally acknowledged that grammar and vocabulary are major aspects in writing skill. Thus, it is essential to identify and analyze grammatical and lexical errors in students' writing. Word form, sentence elements, verb tense, and active-passive sentences are among common grammatical errors in writing. Meanwhile, idioms, metaphors, word formation and phrasal formation are considered as frequent lexical errors in writing (Anh, 2019). Understanding the errors enables learners to minimize writing errors. Besides, it helps teachers to formulate proper material, technique, media, and activities for teaching writing.

### **c) Writing Challenges and Solutions**

As writing involves complex process, it thus causes challenges for the students. Lack of vocabulary, limited grammar knowledge, and writing skill insufficiency are main challenges experienced by students (Anh, 2019). It is highly important to identify writing challenges and solutions from students' perspectives. Students' perspectives will provide meaningful and relevant data which help teacher to understand more students' learning problem and strategy in order to create proper learning atmosphere and enhance students' writing skills.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study applied a qualitative approach in terms of descriptive design. The qualitative approach involves a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting data to provide a phenomenon explanation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The descriptive design aims to describe the phenomenon and its

characteristics. Its primary concern is to answer what instead of why or how (Nassaji, 2015). The researchers employed descriptive design to describe the grammatical and lexical errors, writing challenges, and alternative solutions to writing problems.

This research involved thirty sophomores of a private university in Palembang. The participants were from Health Sciences, Business and Accounting, Science and Technology, and Humanities and Education Faculties. In selecting the participants, the researchers employed a stratified randomized sampling technique. This type of sampling technique was applied because there is a great deal of variation within a population and to ensure that every stratum is adequately represented (Ackoff, 1953).

In this study, the participants represented sophomores with different proficiency levels. The total number of participants is thirty. Regarding the CEFRL standard and results of the English proficiency test, there are three students' categories namely Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User. Twenty students are Basic Users with a proficiency level range of 337-459. Then, nine students are Independent Users with a proficiency level range of 460-542. Next, only one student is the Independent User with a proficiency level range of 543-626. Finally, none of the Proficient Users with a proficiency level range of 627-677 participated in this research.

Writing test, questionnaire, and interview are instruments of this research. A writing test was employed to identify students' grammatical and lexical errors in writing. In the writing test, the students wrote a recount text entitled "My Best Vacation" Furthermore, to obtain data related to students' general perspectives on writing, writing challenges, and alternative solutions. The researcher distributed a questionnaire to participants and conducted an in-depth interview with the participants. To respond to the questionnaire that consists of twenty-two items, the participants chose one of the four alternative responses for each questionnaire item. The four-possible answers cover Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Meanwhile, 15 participants participated in the interview. In the interview session, the interviewee answered five questions dealing with writing.

The researchers follow a set of steps in collecting the data. First, the researchers prepared the research instruments. Second, the researchers conducted the writing tests, distributed the questionnaires, and interviewed the participants. Third, the researchers collected the research data from the participants. The researchers collected the data in a few weeks. To communicate with the participants and administer the research instruments, the researchers utilized WhatsApp, Google Forms, Google Meet, and Zoom. The physical interaction with the participants was limited due to the pandemic.

Pertaining to the aim of this research to analyze errors, challenges, and solutions in writing, the writers used and modified Corder's steps cited in Ellis (1994) as guidance to analyze the data. The steps comprise (1) collecting the data, (2) identifying the errors and responses, (3) classifying the errors and responses, and (4) describing the errors, challenges, and solutions.

In the first step, the researchers collected the data from the writing test, questionnaire, and interview. After that, the researchers identified grammatical and lexical errors from the writing test and the information on writing challenges and alternative solutions taken from the questionnaire and interview. Next, the researchers classified the errors and responses dealing with writing. Finally, the researchers described and interpreted the data related to students' grammatical errors, lexical errors, writing challenges, and alternative solutions.

#### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

##### **a) Results of Writing Test**

###### **Grammatical Errors**

On the basis of error analysis, there are 445 grammatical errors found in the students' writings. The grammatical errors are described as follows: 157 Fragment Omissions (35%), 137 Incorrect Mechanics (31%), 102 Tense Misuse (23%), 24 Wrong Fragments (5%), 19 Fragment Additions (4%), and 6 Inappropriate Pair (2%).

The highest percentage of grammatical error found in the fragment omission category. Subject, object, predicate, determiner, modifier,

adverb, preposition, and conjunctions are among omitted sentence fragments. For instance, Participant 2 wrote, "In the morning, looked at the beautiful sunrise." The writer did not state the subject of the sentence. The correct sentence is, "In the morning, we looked at the beautiful sunrise." Next, Participant 9 omitted the predicate of the sentence, "There a place." The sentence should be written, "There is a place."

Incorrect mechanics is the second-highest grammatical error type identified in students' writing. Capitalization and punctuation are frequently misused. For example, Participant 14 wrote, "we can see the beach, mountain, and trees." The capital letter is used at the beginning of the sentence. The correct form is "We can see the beach, mountain, and trees." Then, Participant 1 wrote, "We made a bonfire to bake corn, chicken, and sate," At the end of this sentence, the correct punctuation should be a period, not a comma. Thus, the right form is "We made a bonfire to bake corn, chicken, and sate."

The third highest grammatical error type is tense misuse. Some of the students described past activities by using the present tense. As stated by Participant 3, "Two years ago, I go to Yogyakarta with my family." The use of verb 1, "go" is incorrect because it is used to express present activity, not past activity. Therefore, the correct sentence is, "Two years ago, I went to Yogyakarta with my family."

The fourth highest grammatical error type is wrong fragment. Wrong use of prepositions, articles, and modifiers is found in students' writing. For example, "We took a airplane." It was written by Participant 4. The article "a" cannot be put in front of "noun" begun with a vowel sound. The correct sentence is, "We took an airplane." The same wrong fragments are identified in the sentence, "We went there on a motorcycle" which was written by Participant 17. The use of the preposition "on" in the sentence is incorrect. The correct form is, "We went there by motorcycle". The preposition "by" is used before "vehicle".

Fragment addition is the fifth most common grammatical error identified in students' writing. Several students added unnecessary words, such as articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. For instance, Participant 11 wrote, "At there were many sellers who sold many kinds of souvenirs."

The use of the preposition “at” is not needed. The correct sentence is, “There were many sellers who sold many kinds of souvenirs.”

The lowest percentage of grammatical error found in the inappropriate pair category. A few students used inappropriate pairs in the sentence. For example, Participant 24 wrote, “Tanah Lot is one of the very crowded tourist attractions in Bali.” “One of” should be used with superlative form, “the most.” Therefore, the correct sentence is, “Tanah Lot is one of the most crowded tourist attractions in Bali.”

### **Lexical Errors**

Based on the result of error analysis, 111 lexical errors are found in the students’ writings. The lexical errors comprise 30 Inappropriate Choices (27%), 27 Redundancies (24%), 24 Incorrect Forms (22%), 15 Misspellings (14%), 9 Improper Uses (8%), and 6 Wrong Orders (5%).

Inappropriate choice is the most common lexical errors identified in students’ writing. For instance, Participant 16 wrote, “We returned to grandpa’s house for eat afternoon”. It is not appropriate to use the words “eat afternoon” to replace the word “lunch”. The sentence should be written, “We returned to grandpa’s house for lunch”. Another example comes from Participant 20 who wrote, “We played to grandma’s house”. The word “played” is not suitable for this context. It is more appropriate to use “came”. The correct sentence is “We came to grandma’s house”.

The next common lexical error type is redundancy. Redundant adverb, verb, pronoun, conjunction, and preposition are frequently found in students’ writing. Participant 19 wrote, “We both of us sleep in the back.” The words, “we and us” imply the same meaning. Therefore, using the two words at the same time is redundant. To avoid redundancy, one of the words has to be eliminated. The sentences “We sleep in the back.” or “Both of us sleep in the back.” are more proper.

Another common lexical error type found in students’ writing is incorrect form. Incorrect use of singular-plural forms, regular-irregular verbs, and gerund infinitive are frequent errors. “I called my friends, Eric.” This sentence is found in Participant 3’s writing. The word “friends” in the

sentence is plural, and it is not suitable with the singular noun “Eric”. The right sentence is, “I called my friend, Eric.”

Misspelling is another frequent lexical error type. It is written by Participant 14 that “We were invited to a museum wich has a theater.” The participant misspelled “the word which”. The correct form is “We were invited to a museum which has a theater.” Similar errors found in writing made by Participant 28, “I and my friends were managed to find it on a websaite.” The correct form is, “I and my friends were managed to find it on a website.”

Improper use is also a lexical error type found in students’ writings. For instance, Participant 20 wrote, “Me and my elementary school friends went to see it.” In the sentence, the pronoun “me” is used as a subject, not as an object. “I” is the correct word used in the sentence. Therefore, the correct sentence is “I and my elementary school friends went to see it.”

The last type of lexical error is the wrong order. For example, “It was better to read a book than to play the game online.” This sentence was written by Participant 21. In this sentence, the participant used “game online” instead of “online game”. The right sentence is, “It was better to read a book than to play an online game.”

## **b) Results of Questionnaire**

### **General View**

In relation to the general view of writing, the students’ responses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Students’ General View on Writing Skill**

No	Statement	SD	D	A	SA
1	Current involvement in writing activity	0%	22%	55%	23%
2	Writing is an interesting activity	0%	6%	74%	20%
3	Unsatisfactory writing ability	0%	29%	55%	16%
4	Inadequate understanding of writing aspects	3%	39%	45%	13%
5	The importance of grammar mastery in writing	0%	16%	65%	19%
6	The importance of vocabulary mastery in writing	0%	6%	58%	36%
7	Writing is a challenging skill	3%	45%	42%	10%

The data of table 1 showed that 74% of the students agreed that writing was an interesting activity, yet it was challenging as stated by 42% of them. Furthermore, over 50% of the students agreed that they currently participated in a writing activity and realized the importance of vocabulary in writing. However, around 55% of the students considered their writing ability needed more improvement and 45% of them stated that they did not have an adequate understanding of writing aspects. In addition, most of the students (65%) agreed that it was important to have good grammar mastery for better writing.

### Writing Challenges

The students responded to 7 items related to the writing challenges. Table 2 presents the students' responses toward the questionnaire items.

**Table 2. Students' Writing Challenges**

No	Statement	SD	D	A	SA
8	Lack of grammar mastery	0%	13%	68%	19%
9	Lack of vocabulary mastery	3%	23%	61%	13%
10	Lack of writing knowledge	6%	16%	55%	23%
11	Lack of writing practice	0%	23%	55%	22%
12	Lack of confidence in writing	6%	3%	61%	30%
13	Lack of motivation	0%	32%	58%	10%
14	Lack of effective writing ability	0%	29%	61%	10%

Regarding the challenges, more than 60% of the students showed their agreement on the lack of grammar mastery, vocabulary mastery, writing confidence, and writing ability contributed to writing challenges. In line with it, over 50% of the students also agreed that lack of writing knowledge, practice, and motivation caused writing difficulties.

### Alternative Solutions

The researchers administered a questionnaire that allowed the students to provide feedback on alternative solutions to overcome writing challenges and avoid writing errors. Table 3 reveals the students' responses to alternative solutions for writing challenges.

**Table 3. Students' Alternative Solutions**

No	Statement	SD	D	A	SA
15	Feedback from lecturer and friends	0%	3%	71%	26%
16	Discussing and sharing	3%	6%	52%	39%
17	Brainstorming activity	0%	6%	61%	33%
18	Technological device use	3%	3%	55%	39%
19	Reading varied references	0%	3%	58%	39%
20	Varied writing assignments	0%	13%	68%	19%
21	Pre and post drafting	3%	6%	68%	23%
22	Personal experience	0%	3%	52%	45%

Around 71% of the students agreed that feedback from lecturers and friends on their writing was highly important to improve their writing. Besides, over 60% of the students also agreed that brainstorming activities, varied writing assignments, and drafting were useful to support their writing progress. Additionally, over 50% of the students stated their agreement on reading varied references, using technological devices, relating personal experience, discussing, and sharing were other alternative solutions to cope with writing challenges and reduce writing errors.

### **c) Results of Interview**

The researchers interviewed 15 participants to gain insights related to general ideas of writing, writing challenges, and alternative solutions to the writing challenges. There are five questions in the interview session. The first and second questions aim to find out students' general perspectives on writing. The third and fourth questions intend to obtain information about students' difficulties and challenges in writing. The last question means to acquire data dealing with students' alternative solutions to overcome challenges.

Pertaining to general opinions, 11 participants stated that writing was interesting. As stated by Participant 4, "For me, writing is an interesting activity because I can deliver my idea

to others through it." Participant 9 said a similar idea, "I think, writing is interesting because it helps me to sharpen my creativity and thought." Additionally, Participant 12 mentioned that "Writing is an interesting activity. It also helps me to increase my vocabulary". Meanwhile, the other 4 participants had different ideas about writing. It was stated by 3 participants that writing was interesting enough because it was quite complicated for them and speaking was more interesting. The other 1 participant pointed out that writing was challenging and not interesting as it involved a complex process. For instance, Participant 15 said that "Writing is not really interesting. There are a lot of things to prepare before starting it."

In terms of favorite topics, the participants had varied answers. Most of the participants (8 interviewees) stated that personal experience was their favorite topic. Participant 10 mentioned that "I like writing something about my personal experience. It is easier to relate to it." Next, two participants said that they preferred the topic of fiction as it was fun to write something and imagine it. Then, the other two participants stated that it was fun to write about leisure activities, for example, any activity related to hobbies. In addition, the last two participants mentioned current issues and history as their favorite writing topics.

Dealing with writing difficulties or challenges, the students gave varied responses in the interview session. Grammar and vocabulary were the most dominant challenges stated by 6 participants. For example, Participant 7 said, "Building sentences by using correct grammar and vocabulary is difficult." The other three participants pointed out that grammar was the biggest challenge in writing. Two participants mentioned that vocabulary contributed to the writing challenges. Then, three participants were concerned with ideas and content. The participants believed that those aspects were the most challenging parts of writing. Finally, only one participant mentioned that the most challenging part was finding related sources for supporting writing.

The participants expressed different thoughts related to the solution to writing challenges. Some of them (5 interviewees) stated that research, reading, and learning the material or sources

related to writing content were ideal solutions. It was mentioned by Participant 12, "I try to read and understand the material related to my topic. It helps me to write well." Next, four participants agreed that the use of translation tools, such as Google translate was helpful. Then, three participants believed that revision and peer review were the best solutions to the writing challenges. After that, two participants said that connecting prior knowledge was an ideal alternative to overcome the challenge. The last, a participant mentioned the importance of providing a relaxing atmosphere and enough break time in the writing process.

#### **d) Discussion**

This study investigated grammatical and lexical errors made by students in writing. It also examined writing challenges and alternative solutions to overcome the problems from the students' perspectives. The findings reveal that there are 445 grammatical errors and 111 lexical errors identified in the students' writings. The grammatical errors consist of fragment omissions, incorrect mechanics, tense misuses, wrong fragments, fragment additions, and inappropriate pairs. Meanwhile, the lexical errors comprise inappropriate choices, redundancies, incorrect forms, misspellings, improper uses, and wrong orders. These results are in line with previous research (Ananda, Gani & Shardin, 2014; Seitnova, 2016; Suvarnamani, 2017; Khatter, 2019). Mother tongue and target language mainly contributed to grammatical and lexical errors (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). The similarities between those error sources occurred during the language acquisition process (Suvarnamani, 2017).

Most students agreed that writing is interesting, yet it is challenging. Students faced several challenges in writing. Limited knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, lack of practice and motivation, and unsatisfactory writing skills are among the most common writing challenges. These challenges are frequently affected by several factors, such as teaching material, teaching method, or the students (Anh, 2019).

In conjunction with it, the students stated that review and feedback, varied material, assignment and exercise exposure, and

supporting techno-based tool use are among highly recommended alternative solutions to anticipate errors and challenges. The perspectives were in line with several studies that suggested similar solutions (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016; Arianti & Fitriana, 2017; Anh, 2019).

Applying pair review and feedback is an alternative strategy to boost effective learning. The students are encouraged to work in pairs. Then, review their writings with each other. After that, the students are provided a chance to give feedback to each other. Through this process, the students are not only able to be actively involved in the writing process but also learned from their mistakes. In addition, the students will be aware and managed to avoid the same mistakes.

Next, exposing students to current and different materials might be helpful to cultivate interest and elevate motivation. For instance, writing about trending makes students more enthusiastic because it is easy to relate to the topic. Besides, it is fun to research related sources to develop writing content.

Afterward, designing interesting learning activities is another solution to boost students' interest in writing. As writing is considered one of the most challenging skills, it is thus necessary to combine it with fun activities. For example, lecturers can ask students to do free writing on a blockbuster movie or other hot topics related to their writing. Lecturers are also able to use social media for writing. Asking students to write a topic on social media and commenting on each other might be alternative fun activities in writing.

Finally, the use of proper techno-based tools is highly beneficial to support students' writing activity. Students can use a translation tool like Google translate or other online dictionaries to check unfamiliar words. The students can improve their vocabulary by using the media as well.

In short, finding and understanding the data related to the errors, challenges, and solutions provide fruitful insights for the lecturers in applying proper teaching strategies, selecting suitable materials, designing fun learning activities, and using techno-based tools to anticipate the problems and elevate students' writing achievements.



## V. CONCLUSION

Pertaining to the findings and interpretations of the research, the conclusions are described as follows:

First, there are 445 grammatical errors and 111 lexical errors found in 30 students' writings. The grammatical errors of students' writings cover fragment omissions (35%), incorrect mechanics (31%), tense misuse (23%), wrong fragments (5%), fragment additions (4%), and inappropriate pair (2%). Meanwhile, the lexical errors found in students' writings comprise inappropriate choices (27%), redundancies (24%), incorrect forms (22%), misspellings (14%), improper uses (8%), and wrong orders (5%). Both errors are potentially caused by mother tongue and target language influences.

Second, limited knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, lack of practice and motivation, and insufficient writing skills are among the most common challenges faced by the students during the writing process. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors might contribute to the challenges. It takes active involvement from both lecturers and students to anticipate the challenges.

Third, the students believe that review and feedback, various material, assignment and exercise exposure, and supporting techno-based tool use are highly recommended alternative solutions to overcome the errors and challenges. These perspectives provide beneficial insights that need to be considered by the lecturers in helping the students to cope with the writing problems.

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**ESTEEM JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDY PROGRAMME**  
**P-ISSN 2622-9323**  
**E-ISSN 2622-2213**