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INTEGRATING BASIC SYNTAX LEARNING TO IMPROVE ENGLISH WRITING ACCURACY AND GRAMMATICAL COMPREHENSION OF 11TH GRADE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the relationship between basic syntax mastery and English writing accuracy among Indonesian senior high school students, identify specific syntactic challenges they encounter, and examine how explicit syntax instruction contributes to improved grammatical comprehension in written production. Data were collected from 15 eleventh-grade students at a public senior high school. Sources included a diagnostic syntax test, student essays, and structured questionnaires. A mixed-methods design employed three instruments: a 15-item multiple-choice syntax diagnostic test covering basic sentence structure, parts of speech, phrases, clauses, and sentence types; an essay writing task analyzed for syntactic accuracy using an error classification framework; a student perception questionnaire. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and error frequency calculations; qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The diagnostic test revealed a mean score of 6.87 out of 15 (45.8%), indicating below-average syntax mastery. Essay analysis showed an average syntactic error rate of 64.4%, with the most frequent errors being incorrect word order (27.3%), sentence fragments from omitted subjects or verbs (22.1%), run-on sentences (19.5%), incorrect conjunction use (17.2%), and tense inconsistency (13.9%). Students demonstrated greater accuracy with simple sentences but struggled significantly with complex structures requiring subordination and clause embedding. Questionnaire responses indicated that 73.3% of students lacked confidence in constructing grammatically accurate English sentences. The findings underscore the critical need for explicit, systematic syntax instruction integrated into EFL writing curricula. Pedagogical strategies including syntactic awareness exercises, sentence-combining activities, and targeted error correction are recommended to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical writing application.

Keywords: Syntax Mastery, Writing Accuracy, EFL Students, Syntactic Errors, Error Analysis

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki hubungan antara penguasaan sintaksis dasar dan akurasi menulis bahasa Inggris di kalangan siswa sekolah menengah atas Indonesia, mengidentifikasi tantangan sintaksis spesifik yang mereka hadapi, dan memeriksa bagaimana pengajaran sintaksis eksplisit berkontribusi pada peningkatan pemahaman tata bahasa dalam produksi tulisan. Data dikumpulkan dari 15 siswa kelas sebelas di sebuah sekolah menengah atas negeri. Sumber data meliputi tes diagnostik sintaksis, esai siswa, dan kuesioner terstruktur. Desain metode campuran menggunakan tiga instrumen: tes diagnostik sintaksis pilihan ganda 15 butir yang mencakup struktur kalimat dasar, bagian dari ucapan, frasa, klausa, dan jenis kalimat; tugas menulis esai yang dianalisis akurasi sintaksisnya menggunakan kerangka klasifikasi kesalahan; kuesioner persepsi siswa. Data kuantitatif dianalisis melalui statistik deskriptif dan perhitungan frekuensi kesalahan; data kualitatif menjalani analisis tematik. Tes diagnostik mengungkapkan skor rata-rata 6,87 dari 15 (45,8%), yang menunjukkan penguasaan sintaksis di bawah rata-rata. Analisis esai menunjukkan tingkat kesalahan sintaksis rata-rata 64,4%, dengan kesalahan paling sering adalah urutan kata yang salah (27,3%), fragmentasi kalimat dari subjek atau verba yang dihilangkan (22,1%), kalimat run-on (19,5%), penggunaan konjungsi yang salah (17,2%), dan ketidakkonsistenan waktu (13,9%). Siswa menunjukkan akurasi yang lebih baik dengan kalimat sederhana tetapi kesulitan signifikan dengan struktur kompleks yang memerlukan subordinasi dan penyisipan klausa. Respons kuesioner menunjukkan bahwa 73,3% siswa kurang percaya diri dalam menyusun kalimat bahasa Inggris yang akurat secara tata bahasa. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi kebutuhan kritis akan pengajaran sintaksis eksplisit dan sistematis yang diintegrasikan ke dalam kurikulum menulis EFL. Strategi pedagogis termasuk latihan kesadaran sintaksis, aktivitas penggabungan kalimat, dan koreksi kesalahan yang terarah direkomendasikan untuk menjembatani kesenjangan antara pengetahuan teoretis dan aplikasi menulis praktis.

Kata Kunci: Penguasaan Sintaksis, Akurasi Menulis, Siswa EFL, Kesalahan Sintaksis, Analisis Kesalahan

A. Introduction

In the landscape of English as a Foreign Language education in Indonesia, writing competence represents one of the most challenging yet essential skills for senior high school students to acquire. Writing proficiency extends beyond the mere production of words on a page; it fundamentally demands the capacity to organize thoughts, structure arguments, and convey

meaning through grammatically sound sentences that adhere to the conventions of English syntax. The Indonesian national curriculum for English at the senior secondary level explicitly requires students to produce various text types including descriptive, narrative, and expository essays, all of which presuppose a functional command of syntactic structures. However, classroom observations and preliminary assessments consistently reveal a troubling discrepancy between curricular expectations and students' actual writing performance.

The central problem this research seeks to investigate concerns the extent to which Indonesian high school students' mastery of basic syntax influences the accuracy of their English writing. Writing accuracy is closely related to the correct application of syntactic rules, including sentence structure, word order, and grammatical relationships (Amru et al., 2026). Despite years of English instruction spanning from elementary through secondary education, many Indonesian learners continue to produce written work that exhibits persistent syntactic errors. These errors manifest in various forms: sentences that lack essential grammatical elements, clauses that are improperly connected, words that appear in incorrect sequential order, and tense usage that remains inconsistent throughout written compositions. The consequences of such syntactic deficiencies extend beyond mere grammatical imprecision; they fundamentally compromise the clarity, coherence, and communicative effectiveness of students' writing.

A second critical dimension of this investigation concerns the identification of specific syntactic challenges that pose the greatest difficulty for Indonesian learners. While international research has documented common syntactic errors among EFL learners worldwide, the Indonesian context presents unique considerations given the substantial structural differences between Bahasa Indonesia and English. Indonesian does not employ tense markers to indicate temporal relationships, relies on different word order conventions in certain constructions, and utilizes distinct systems for forming complex

sentences. These cross-linguistic differences create specific points of syntactic interference that warrant systematic investigation. Students with lower levels of syntactic mastery demonstrate difficulties in identifying where clauses begin and end, forming complex sentences, and differentiating dependent clauses from independent ones (Amru et al., 2026). Understanding which particular syntactic features present the greatest challenges for Indonesian learners is essential for developing targeted instructional interventions.

A third research problem concerns the relationship between explicit syntactic knowledge and its practical application in writing tasks. Prior scholarship has documented a persistent gap between students' theoretical understanding of grammar rules and their ability to deploy these rules effectively during authentic writing activities. This shows a gap between theoretical understanding and practical application of syntax in the real practice (Sabrina et al., 2024). Many Indonesian students can correctly identify parts of speech or label sentence components when completing discrete grammar exercises, yet the same students produce essays containing numerous syntactic errors when composing original texts. Investigating the nature and extent of this theory-practice gap is crucial for informing pedagogical approaches that genuinely enhance writing competence rather than merely promoting declarative grammatical knowledge.

The urgency of addressing these research problems is amplified by the broader implications of syntactic competence for academic and professional success. High-quality writing usually requires the flexible use of a range of syntactic features from simple to complex, depending on the goal and audience of the writing task (Wang et al., 2025). In the Indonesian context, English writing proficiency serves as a gateway to higher education opportunities, international scholarship programs, and employment in the global marketplace. Syntactic competence plays a vital role in how learners process and produce written language (Amru et al., 2026). Therefore, understanding the precise relationship between syntax mastery and writing

accuracy among Indonesian secondary students represents not merely an academic inquiry but a matter of practical significance with far-reaching implications for English language teaching policy and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Basic Sentence Structure and Writing Accuracy

The foundational concept underpinning this research is that syntax defined as the study of sentence structure and word arrangement constitutes a core area of linguistic inquiry that plays a crucial role in understanding how language functions (Fadhilah et al., 2024). Syntax serves as the bridge between word-level grammar and sentence-level meaning, helping to uncover how individual elements combine to form coherent expressions (Fadhilah et al., 2024). For EFL learners, mastery of basic sentence structure represents the first and most essential step toward achieving writing accuracy. Syntax refers to the set of rules that govern the arrangement of words within a sentence to form grammatically correct structures, ensuring adherence to linguistic norms (Fadhilah et al., 2024).

Miller (2002) provides a comprehensive hierarchical account of how syntactic structures are organized. He explains that syntax has to do with how words are put together to build phrases, with how phrases are put together to build clauses or bigger phrases, and with how clauses are put together to build sentences. This hierarchical understanding is essential because errors at any level of this organization whether in word-level arrangement, phrase construction, or clause combination can produce ungrammatical or ambiguous sentences. The fundamental structure of a sentence serves as the foundation of syntactic analysis, encompassing essential components such as the subject, predicate, object, and modifiers (Fadhilah et al., 2024). These core elements work together to form a systematic framework that facilitates the study of sentence construction and meaning (Fadhilah et al., 2024).

Burton-Roberts (2011) articulates the basic architecture of English sentences through a

constituency-based framework. He establishes that the basic sentence consists of a Noun Phrase functioning as subject followed by a Verb Phrase functioning as predicate (Burton-Roberts, 2011). This subject-predicate distinction is not merely a descriptive convenience but reflects a fundamental organizational principle of English syntax. In the basic case, the two immediate constituents of the sentence itself are subject (NP) and predicate (VP) (Burton-Roberts, 2011). Understanding this foundational structure enables learners to recognize when sentences are complete and grammatically well-formed versus when they lack essential constituents.

Sabrina et al. (2024) demonstrated through their classroom-based research that after taking a syntax course, students reported significant improvements in their understanding of sentence structure and grammar. Students felt impacts particularly when writing essays, articles, or other documents that require the use of English with proper sentence structure. The research confirmed that understanding syntax allows students to master the correct sentence structure and organize ideas more regularly in English (Sabrina et al., 2024). These findings provide empirical support for the theoretical proposition that syntactic knowledge directly enhances writing quality.

Wang et al. (2025) further established through their meta-analysis of 109 studies that syntactic accuracy, operationalized as the percentage of grammatical sentences, was associated with writing quality. Their research found that students' proficiency in constructing sentences impacts the writing process and writing products. This large-scale quantitative evidence corroborates the theoretical framework positioning syntax as foundational to writing competence. Syntactic accuracy was more strongly related to writing quality for developing writers than for more proficient writers, underscoring the particular importance of syntax instruction during the formative stages of EFL learning.

Basic Parts of Speech and Syntactic Categories

The identification and classification of words into

grammatical categories traditionally termed parts of speech constitutes an essential component of syntactic competence. Miller (2002) explains that the different classes of words for example nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions were traditionally defined by what they denoted, though meaning alone provides an inadequate basis for classification. The significance of understanding parts of speech for writing accuracy lies in the distributional properties of words; each grammatical category has a restricted range of possible syntactic positions and functions within sentences.

Raihana et al. (2024) elaborate that syntactic category refers to the type of word or phrase that fills grammatical functions, such as noun, verb, adjective, adverbial, numeralia, preposition, conjunction, and pronomina. Of these categories, nouns, verbs, and adjectives are the main categories, while the rest are auxiliary categories. This hierarchical categorization is pedagogically significant because it indicates which word classes require the most instructional attention. A good understanding of syntax helps non-native speakers understand the basic rules of English, such as the use of subjects, predicates, objects and adverbs (Raihana et al., 2024).

Burton-Roberts (2011) emphasizes that by assigning a word to a particular category, we make a general statement about its distribution that is, about its possible syntactic positions and functions. Lexical verbs, for instance, are easily identified by their morphological possibilities: they are words that take some if not all of the verbal inflections including -s, -ing, -ed, -en. This morphological identification provides a concrete diagnostic tool that learners can apply to recognize verbs in authentic texts. The connection between parts of speech knowledge and writing accuracy manifests in learners' ability to select appropriate word forms for particular syntactic positions and to avoid errors such as using adjectives where adverbs are required or vice versa.

Fadhilah et al. (2024) additionally note that words have the ability to shift their part of speech through the addition of affixes to their root forms. This morphological

flexibility presents both opportunities and challenges for EFL learners. On one hand, understanding derivational morphology expands learners' lexical resources; on the other hand, the complex relationships between word forms and syntactic functions can generate confusion when not systematically taught. Mastering syntactic structures not only helps learners in constructing grammatically correct sentences but also enhances the clarity and effectiveness of communication in a variety of contexts, both academic and professional (Raihana et al., 2024, p. 3).

Basic Phrase Structure

The phrase serves as an intermediate level of syntactic organization between individual words and complete clauses. Miller (2002) defines a phrase as a group of interrelated words, noting that every phrase contains a head and possibly, but not necessarily, one or more modifiers. In the large dog, for example, the word dog is the head, and the and large are its modifiers. This head-modifier distinction is fundamental to understanding how phrases are internally structured and how they function as constituents within larger syntactic units.

Burton-Roberts (2011) extends this definition by describing phrases as sequences of words that can function as constituents in the structure of sentences. He proposes an operational diagnostic: if a sequence of words can be omitted from a sentence leaving another good sentence, that is a good indication that the sequence is a phrase functioning as a constituent in the structure of the sentence. This substitution and omission test provides learners with a practical tool for identifying phrase boundaries and understanding constituent structure. The head of a phrase is the element that the phrase is centered on; it is the one essential or obligatory element in that phrase (Burton-Roberts, 2011).

Surayya et al. (2024) emphasize the functional significance of phrases within sentence construction. Phrases also play an important role in forming sentence structures, which can function as subjects, objects, or predicates in sentences. This multiple functionality of phrases means that learners must develop flexibility in recognizing how the same phrasal

form can serve different grammatical roles depending on its position within a sentence. A deep understanding of syntax is necessary to master and deepen verbal communication and writing, and its careful use can improve the quality of language interactions (Surayya et al., 2024).

Wang et al. (2025) contribute the concept of syntactic complexity at the phrasal level, particularly emphasizing noun phrase complexity. Their meta-analysis found that noun phrase complexity included words per noun phrase, complex nominal phrases per T-unit, complex nominal phrases per clause, incidence of prepositions, and number of modifiers per noun phrase. Given the importance of noun phrase complexity in expository writing to pack detailed information into sentences, educators should focus on evaluating students' ability to construct complex noun phrases in such tasks (Wang et al., 2025). This finding has direct implications for teaching writing to Indonesian high school students who must produce various academic text types.

Sabrina et al. (2024) reported that after studying syntax, students indicated that they knew more about tree diagrams and were enabled to identify word groups in English sentences more easily. The use of visual representations such as tree diagrams to portray phrase structure helps learners internalize the hierarchical organization of syntactic constituents. Tools like syntax trees and constituency tests allow learners to visualize sentence structure, enhancing their ability to construct well-formed sentences and analyze complex texts (Fadhilah et al., 2024).

Basic Clause Structure

The clause represents a critical syntactic unit distinguished from phrases by the presence of a subject-predicate relationship. Miller (2002) defines the clause as a unit which as a minimum consists of a verb and its complements but which may consist of a verb, its complements and its adjuncts. Each clause contains a finite verb; that is, a verb marked for tense. The presence of a tense-marked verb distinguishes finite clauses from non-finite clauses, a distinction that bears directly on writing accuracy since many EFL errors involve incorrect tense marking or confusion between finite and non-finite verb forms.

Surayya et al. (2024) provide a pedagogically accessible definition: a clause is a group of words that includes a subject and predicate. Clauses can stand alone as complete sentences or be combined with other clauses to form more complex sentences. This dual capacity of clauses to function independently as simple sentences or to combine with other clauses to form compound and complex structures is essential knowledge for writers seeking to vary their sentence structures and express sophisticated relationships between ideas.

Burton-Roberts (2011) elaborates the distinction between main and subordinate clauses. The clause that is not subordinate to any other clause is referred to as the main clause. Subordinate sentential structures are traditionally called subordinate clauses. He further distinguishes between finite and non-finite clauses: a finite clause is a clause in which there is a tensed verb tensed for present or past, while a non-finite clause is a clause in which there is no tensed verb. Main clauses, importantly, are always finite; non-finite clauses can only be subordinate. This hierarchical understanding of clause relationships directly impacts writing accuracy, as errors frequently arise when learners fail to properly mark the boundaries between main and subordinate clauses or use non-finite clauses as if they were complete sentences.

Miller (2002) identifies three major types of subordinate clause: complement clauses, relative clauses, and adverbial clauses. Each type serves distinct syntactic and semantic functions within complex sentences. Complement clauses function as required arguments of verbs, relative clauses modify nouns within noun phrases, and adverbial clauses provide circumstantial information about the action or state expressed in the main clause. Syntactic knowledge supports learners in organizing ideas, connecting clauses, and expressing complex meanings through well-formed sentences (Amru et al., 2026). Mastery of these clause types therefore directly enables more sophisticated written expression.

Ramzan and Alahmadi (2024) documented through their experimental research that following focused instruction, participants

consistently indicated an enhanced awareness of syntactic structures from intensive syntax training. Students demonstrated that they could identify both primary and subordinate clauses, and they understood how to construct more complicated sentences by elaborating and providing additional information. Complex and nuanced sentences were produced as a consequence of a more refined application of syntactic rules brought about by this increased awareness (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024)

Basic Types of Sentences and Syntactic Complexity

English sentences can be classified according to their structural composition into simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex types. Miller (2002) explains that compound sentences consist of two or more clauses joined by conjunctions, while complex sentences consist of a main clause and one or more other clauses subordinate to it. Additionally, main clauses can be classified by communicative function as declarative, interrogative, or imperative. This multidimensional classification system enables precise description of the syntactic resources writers employ.

Burton-Roberts (2011) clarifies the structural distinction between complex and compound sentences using constituency analysis. A complex sentence contains a sentential structure as a constituent that is embedded within another clause. In contrast, in a compound sentence, the two sentential structures are independent of each other; neither is a constituent of the other. This structural distinction has practical implications for punctuation, as compound sentences typically require coordinating conjunctions or semicolons, while complex sentences employ subordinating conjunctions and may require different punctuation patterns.

Surayya et al. (2024) define the sentence as the largest language unit consisting of one or more clauses. Sentences can be classified as simple, comprising a single unit, or complex, comprising two or more clauses. This hierarchical organization from words to phrases to clauses to sentences provides a systematic framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through

increasingly complex syntactic structures. Syntax has to do with how words are put together to build phrases, with how phrases are put together to build clauses or bigger phrases, and how clauses are put together to build sentences (Surayya et al., 2024).

The relationship between sentence type variety and writing quality has been empirically established. High-performing students tended to vary their sentence structures, combining simple, compound, and complex forms (Amru et al., 2026). In contrast, lower-performing students relied predominantly on simple sentences, demonstrating limited syntactic flexibility. Syntactic maturity is reflected not only in correctness but also in sentence variety (Amru et al., 2026). Advanced writing requires explicit mastery of clause relationships, subordination, and syntactic hierarchy (Amru et al., 2026). These findings underscore that the ability to produce a range of sentence types is not merely a stylistic preference but a central component of writing competence.

Raihana et al. (2024) emphasize that English has basic sentence patterns such as Subject-Verb-Object, which serve as the foundation for constructing simple sentences. In addition, structural variations such as compound and complex sentences, which involve the use of conjunctions, subordinate clauses, and prepositional phrases, demonstrate the flexibility and richness of English syntax. Understanding these structures is essential, as errors in the placement of sentence elements can result in ambiguity or misinterpretation (Raihana et al., 2024). A syntactic approach not only helps in the analysis of simple sentences but also explains how sentence elements interact in a broader context (Raihana et al., 2024).

The Affective Dimension: Confidence and Syntactic Competence

Beyond the purely cognitive aspects of syntax acquisition, affective factors significantly influence learners' ability to apply syntactic knowledge in writing tasks. Grammatical knowledge, as a critical component of language skills, enables students to

express their ideas accurately, effectively, and richly (Wang et al., 2025). When students possess strong syntactic foundations, they can focus more on content development and coherence, rather than expending cognitive effort on sentence formation (Amru et al., 2026). This cognitive load perspective explains why syntactic automaticity is essential for advanced writing; students whose syntactic processing remains effortful and conscious have fewer cognitive resources available for higher-order concerns such as idea development, argumentation, and rhetorical effectiveness.

Conversely, inadequate syntactic control can overwhelm cognitive resources during writing tasks (Amru et al., 2026). When learners must consciously deliberate about word order, clause structure, and grammatical morphology while simultaneously attempting to generate and organize ideas, the quality of both their syntactic accuracy and their content development suffers. This dual burden is particularly acute for Indonesian EFL learners who must navigate substantial structural differences between their first language and English.

Sabrina et al. (2024) reported that the impact of syntax courses on students' language skills included effects on writing, reading, and listening skills, with the greatest impact on writing skills. Students felt the impact especially when writing essays, articles, or other documents that require the use of English with proper sentence structure. The syntax course positively impacted their writing, reading, and listening skills, with the strongest effect on writing (Sabrina et al., 2024). This differential impact across language skills suggests that syntax knowledge has particularly strong transfer effects to written production, likely because writing imposes greater demands for precision and provides less contextual support than spoken interaction.

Fadhilah et al. (2024) conclude that mastery of syntactic structures is essential for students developing proficiency in both writing and speaking. Syntax is not only essential for providing meaning to sentences but also serves as the core of any language. By understanding and mastering syntactic structures such as

phrases, clauses, and sentences, students can construct texts that are not only grammatically accurate but also meaningful and well-organized (Fadhilah et al., 2024). The application of diagnostic tools such as constituency tests and syntax trees significantly aids students in understanding the hierarchical organization of linguistic units (Fadhilah et al., 2024).

B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between syntax mastery and writing accuracy among Indonesian high school students. The quantitative component enabled measurement of students' syntactic knowledge levels and error frequencies, while the qualitative component provided contextualized insights into students' experiences, perceptions, and the instructional factors influencing their syntactic development. This methodological triangulation was selected because writing accuracy cannot be fully separated from broader linguistic competence; writing is not just a mechanical skill but a cognitive process that demands the integration of syntactic, semantic, and discourse knowledge (Amru et al., 2026).

Data and Sources

The primary data for this study were collected from 15 eleventh-grade students enrolled at a public senior high school in Medan, Indonesia. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 17 years and had completed approximately five years of formal English instruction at the secondary level. Students were selected through purposive sampling based on their availability and their teachers' assessment that they represented a range of English proficiency levels characteristic of Indonesian high school students.

The sample was deliberately drawn from students who had not yet fully mastered basic syntax, as evidenced by their performance on a preliminary screening activity. This criterion ensured that the study focused on learners for whom the relationship between syntax

knowledge and writing accuracy was most educationally significant those still in the process of developing syntactic competence. Students at this developmental stage represent the population for whom instructional interventions are most urgently needed and potentially most beneficial.

Techniques and Instruments of Data Collection

Four primary instruments were employed to collect data for this study.

A. Syntax Diagnostic Test

A 15-item multiple-choice diagnostic test was developed to assess students' mastery of five key areas of basic syntax: (1) Basic Sentence Structure, covering subject-predicate identification and SVO patterns; (2) Basic Parts of Speech, including noun, verb, adjective, and adverb recognition; (3) Basic Phrase structure, focusing on noun phrases, verb phrases, and prepositional phrases; (4) Basic Clause structure, including independent and dependent clause identification; and (5) Basic Types of Sentences, covering simple, compound, and complex sentence recognition.

Each test item presented a sentence or sentence fragment followed by four response options. Items required students to identify grammatical elements, recognize sentence boundaries, detect syntactic errors, and classify sentence types. The test was constructed to align with the syntactic concepts articulated in the theoretical framework and to reflect the types of syntactic knowledge that prior research has identified as foundational for writing accuracy. The test was reviewed by two English teachers to establish content validity and was piloted with a separate group of students to ensure item clarity.

B. Essay Writing Task

Each student was asked to compose a short descriptive or narrative essay of approximately 10 to 12 sentences on the topic "My Daily Routine" or "My Favorite Place," with the option to choose between topics. This topic selection was informed by the finding that most students prefer everyday topics such as daily activities and hobbies (Sagala, et al., 2026).

The essay task was administered under controlled classroom conditions with a 30-minute time limit to ensure that the writing samples reflected students' spontaneous syntactic abilities rather than heavily edited or externally corrected work.

C. Student Perception Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was administered following the essay task to gather data on students' perceptions of their syntactic knowledge, writing difficulties, and instructional preferences. The questionnaire included closed-response items addressing students' confidence in constructing grammatically accurate sentences, their awareness of common syntactic errors, and their perceptions of which syntactic features they found most challenging. The questionnaire was constructed in simple Indonesian to ensure that students' responses reflected their genuine perceptions rather than their ability to comprehend English questionnaire items.

D. Teacher Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the classroom English teacher to obtain professional perspectives on students' syntactic abilities, common writing errors observed in instructional contexts, and the pedagogical strategies employed to teach grammar and writing. The interview protocol included questions about the teacher's observations of students' syntactic difficulties, the approaches used to teach sentence structure, and the teacher's assessment of the relationship between explicit grammar instruction and students' writing performance.

Techniques of Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through both quantitative and qualitative procedures. The syntax diagnostic test responses were scored to produce individual and aggregate measures of syntactic knowledge. Each correct response was awarded one point, yielding a total possible score of 15. Scores were categorized as follows: 0–5 indicated low syntax mastery, 6–10 indicated moderate syntax mastery, and 11–15 indicated high syntax mastery. Descriptive statistics including mean, range, and

frequency distributions were calculated.

The essay writing samples were analyzed using an error classification framework adapted from the categories identified by Amru et al. (2026). The most common syntactic errors included: (1) incorrect word order, particularly in adjective-noun and adverbial positions; (2) run-on sentences resulting from lack of subordination; (3) omission of subjects or verbs, leading to sentence fragments; (4) incorrect use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions; and (5) tense inconsistency (Amru et al., 2026). Each sentence in each essay was examined, and all syntactic errors were coded according to this taxonomy. Error frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify the most prevalent error types across the sample.

Questionnaire responses were tabulated and converted to percentages to identify patterns in student perceptions. Teacher interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, with responses coded according to the research questions they addressed concerning students' syntactic difficulties, effective instructional strategies, and the relationship between explicit syntax instruction and writing performance.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data followed a convergent parallel design in which both data types were collected during the same phase, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation to produce a holistic understanding of the research problems.

C. RESULTS

Syntax Diagnostic Test Performance

The 15-item syntax diagnostic test revealed that students had not yet fully mastered basic syntax, confirming their suitability as participants for this investigation. The overall mean score was 6.87 out of 15, equivalent to a success rate of 45.8%. This falls within the moderate mastery range but toward the lower boundary, indicating substantial gaps in syntactic knowledge across the sample.

The frequency distribution of scores demonstrated that the majority of students clustered in the moderate mastery range. Specifically, 2

students scored 5 correct answers (13.3% of the sample), 3 students scored 6 correct answers (20%), 7 students scored 7 correct answers (46.7%), 2 students scored 8 correct answers (13.3%), and 2 students scored 9 correct answers (13.3%), which represented the highest scores achieved. No student scored 10 or above, confirming that none of the participants had achieved high syntax mastery. The range of scores spanned from 5 to 9, indicating that all participants demonstrated measurable but incomplete syntactic knowledge.

Examining performance by syntactic subdomain provided nuanced insights into students' relative strengths and weaknesses. On items testing basic parts of speech and simple subject-predicate identification, students generally performed adequately. For example, items requiring identification of the subject in simple sentences such as "The diligent student reads a book in the library" were answered correctly by a majority of students, with most recognizing that "The diligent student" constitutes the complete subject. Items testing verb identification in simple present and past tense contexts also showed moderate success rates, with approximately 60% of students correctly identifying the main verb in sentences containing auxiliary elements.

However, performance deteriorated markedly on items testing phrase structure, clause boundaries, and sentence type classification. Items requiring students to identify the head of a noun phrase such as distinguishing between the head noun "student" and its modifier "diligent" in "the diligent student" were frequently answered incorrectly, with many students treating the entire phrase as an indivisible unit without recognizing its internal hierarchical structure. Items testing recognition of prepositional phrases and their functions within sentences proved particularly challenging, with fewer than half of students correctly identifying phrases such as "in the library" as adverbial modifiers rather than objects.

Items testing clause identification revealed significant gaps in students' understanding of clause boundaries and the distinction between independent and dependent

clauses. When presented with sentences containing relative clauses such as "The book that I borrowed from the library is interesting," many students incorrectly identified "that I borrowed" as a complete clause without recognizing that the relative pronoun "that" creates a dependent structure embedded within the larger noun phrase. Similarly, items requiring students to identify adverbial clauses introduced by subordinating conjunctions such as "because," "although," and "when" produced error rates exceeding 60%.

Sentence type classification items yielded the lowest performance across all subdomains. Students demonstrated difficulty distinguishing between compound sentences using coordinating conjunctions and complex sentences using subordinating conjunctions. For instance, when presented with "I studied hard, but I failed the exam" (a compound sentence) and "Although I studied hard, I failed the exam" (a complex sentence), more than 70% of students could not correctly classify both sentence types. Many students responded based on the presence of a conjunction rather than analyzing the structural relationship between clauses.

A detailed presentation of individual student performance is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Individual Student Scores on Syntax Diagnostic Test

No.	*Pseudonym*	*Correct Answers*	*Score (%)*
1	*Student A*	*7*	*46.7 %*
2	*Student B*	*8*	*53.3 %*
3	*Student C*	*7*	*46.7 %*
4	*Student D*	*7*	*46.7 %*
5	*Student E*	*7*	*46.7 %*
6	*Student F*	*6*	*40.0 %*

No.	*Pseudonym*	*Correct Answers*	*Score (%)*	*No.*	*Pseudonym*	*Correct Answers*	*Score (%)*
7	*Student G*	*9*	*60.0 %*	*15*	*Student O*	*9*	*60.0 %*
8	*Student H*	*7*	*46.7 %*				
9	*Student I*	*5*	*33.3 %*				
10	*Student J*	*6*	*40.0 %*				
11	*Student K*	*7*	*46.7 %*				
12	*Student L*	*6*	*40.0 %*				
13	*Student M*	*7*	*46.7 %*				
14	*Student N*	*8*	*53.3 %*				

As Table 1 illustrates, even the highest-performing students (Students G and O with 9 correct answers) attained only 60% accuracy, indicating that fundamental syntactic concepts remained incompletely mastered. The lowest-performing students (Student I with 5 correct answers) demonstrated knowledge of only one-third of the tested syntactic content. The narrow range of scores (5–9) suggests that all students in this sample shared substantially similar levels of syntactic knowledge, characterized by partial understanding rather than either complete mastery or total absence of knowledge.

Essay Writing Error Analysis

Analysis of the 15 essays written by student participants revealed persistent and patterned syntactic errors that directly corresponded to the knowledge gaps

identified in the diagnostic test. Across all essays, students produced sentences that exhibited the range of errors identified by prior research, with error frequencies varying according to syntactic category and individual student proficiency levels.

A comprehensive presentation of error frequencies across the sample is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Syntactic Errors in Student Essays by Category and Frequency

No.	Pseudonym	Total Sentences	Error-Free Sentences	Error Sentences	Error Rate (%)
1	Student A	10	3	7	70.0%
2	Student B	10	4	6	60.0%
3	Student C	12	4	8	66.7%
4	Student D	9	3	6	66.7%
5	Stud	10	3	7	70.0%

No.	Pseudonym	Total Sentences	Error-Free Sentences	Error Sentences	Error Rate (%)	No.	Pseudonym	Total Sentences	Error-Free Sentences	Error Sentences	Error Rate (%)
	ent E					9	Student I	9	2	7	77.8%
6	Student F	11	3	8	72.7%	10	Student J	10	3	7	70.0%
7	Student G	10	5	5	50.0%	11	Student K	8	4	4	50.0%
8	Student H	10	3	7	70.0%	12	Stud	10	3	7	70.0%

No.	Pseudonym	Total Sentences	Error-Free Sentences	Error Sentences	Error Rate (%)
13	Student M	11	4	7	63.6%
14	Student N	10	4	6	60.0%
15	Student O	9	5	4	44.4%

The mean error rate of 64.4% across all essays indicates that nearly two-thirds of the sentences students produced contained at least one syntactic error. This finding directly confirms the central premise of this investigation: that students with limited syntax mastery produce writing characterized by high frequencies of grammatical inaccuracies. Even the student with the lowest error rate (Student O at 44.4%) made errors in nearly half of the sentences produced, demonstrating that syntactic accuracy remains a significant challenge across the entire sample.

The distribution of specific error types is presented in Table 3, organized according to the classification framework adapted from Amru et al. (2026).

Table 3. Distribution of Syntactic Error Types Across All Essays

Error Type	Total Occurrences	Percentage of All Errors	Rank
Incorrect word order	42	27.3%	1
Omission of subject/verb (fragments)	34	22.1%	2
Run-on sentences	30	19.5%	3
Incorrect conjunction use	26	17.2%	4
Tense inconsistency	21	13.9%	5

The most prevalent error type was incorrect word order, accounting for 27.3% of all syntactic errors identified. This error manifested primarily in two patterns: incorrect adjective-noun ordering and misplaced adverbial elements. In English, attributive adjectives precede the nouns they modify, but several students produced constructions reflecting Indonesian word order patterns, such as writing "the house big" rather than "the big house" or "my friend best" rather than "my best friend." Adverbial placement errors were equally frequent, with students placing time adverbs such as "every day" at structurally inappropriate positions within sentences, as in "I every day go to school" rather than "I go to school every day."

Omission of essential sentence constituents specifically subjects or main verbs constituted the second most frequent error type at 22.1% of all errors. This error produced sentence fragments rather than complete sentences. Common examples included sentences such as "Because I like English very much" presented as a complete sentence without an accompanying main clause, and "Is very interesting" with the subject omitted. These fragment errors indicate that students had not internalized the requirement that every English sentence must contain at minimum a subject and a finite verb. While students could identify subjects and verbs in isolated sentences on the diagnostic test, they failed to consistently include these elements in their own spontaneous writing.

Run-on sentences accounted for 19.5% of errors and reflected students' difficulty with clause boundaries and proper sentence termination. Students frequently joined two or more independent clauses without appropriate punctuation or coordinating conjunctions, producing constructions such as "I wake up at 5 am I take a shower I eat breakfast then I go to school." These run-on constructions suggest that students lacked the syntactic knowledge necessary to recognize where one clause ends and another begins, and they lacked command of the coordination and subordination strategies needed to combine clauses grammatically.

Incorrect use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions constituted 17.2% of errors. Students demonstrated particular difficulty with the semantic and structural distinctions between conjunctions. The coordinators "and," "but," and "so" were frequently used indiscriminately without attention to the logical relationships between the clauses they connected. Subordinating conjunctions such as "because," "although," and "when" were often misapplied, with students writing constructions such as "Although I like English, but I cannot speak well," which redundantly uses both a subordinator and a coordinator in a single sentence. This error reflects incomplete understanding of the structural differences between complex and compound sentences.

Tense inconsistency was the fifth most frequent error type at 13.9%. Given that Indonesian does not grammatically mark tense on verbs, this error pattern reflects cross-linguistic interference. Students characteristically began essays in one tense typically simple present for descriptive topics but shifted to other tenses within the same paragraph without communicative justification. For example, a student might write "I go to school every day. I studied mathematics and learned English. My teacher gives homework." The shift from present "go" to past "studied" and "learned" back to present "gives" within three sentences indicates that tense selection was not being systematically controlled.

DISCUSSIONS

Verification of the Relationship Between Syntax Mastery and Writing Accuracy

The findings of this study provide robust empirical verification of the relationship between basic syntax mastery and English writing accuracy among Indonesian high school students. The convergence of three data sources the diagnostic test revealing a mean score of only 45.8%, the essay analysis showing an average error rate of 64.4%, and student self-reports indicating widespread lack of confidence establishes that limited syntactic knowledge is systematically associated with frequent writing errors. This finding corroborates the conclusion reached by Amru et al. (2026) that syntactic competence serves as a foundation for accurate writing.

The observed correlation between diagnostic test performance and essay error rates provides particularly compelling evidence. Students G and O, who scored highest on the syntax test with 9 correct answers each, produced essays with the lowest error rates (50% and 44.4% respectively). In contrast, Student I, who scored only 5 on the diagnostic test, produced an essay with the highest error rate of 77.8%. While the small sample size precludes statistical generalization, this pattern within the data aligns with the finding that students with higher syntax mastery generally achieve better writing accuracy (Amru et al., 2026).

The predominance of simple sentence structures across student essays further verifies the relationship between syntactic knowledge and writing sophistication. Students who performed moderately in the syntax test showed a mixed pattern in writing: while they could manage basic grammatical structures effectively, their accuracy decreased when constructing longer or more complex sentences (Amru et al., 2026). This pattern was evident throughout the sample, with the majority of students producing strings of simple sentences connected by coordinating conjunctions or, in many cases, no connectors at all. Lower-performing students relied predominantly on simple sentences, demonstrating limited syntactic flexibility (Amru et al., 2026). The essays collected for this study contained remarkably few instances of correctly formed complex sentences with properly embedded subordinate clauses, confirming that syntactic limitations directly constrain the range of sentence types students can produce.

The specific error types documented in this study incorrect word order, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, incorrect conjunction use, and tense inconsistency mirror the most common syntactic errors identified by Amru et al. (2026). This replication of error patterns across different research contexts strengthens confidence in the validity of the error taxonomy and its applicability to Indonesian EFL learners. The finding that incorrect word order was the most frequent error type (27.3%) is particularly significant given the structural differences between Indonesian and English. Indonesian typically employs a head-modifier order in noun phrases (rumah besar rather than besar rumah for "big house"), and this first-language pattern appears to transfer directly into students' English writing.

Theoretical Implications: The Gap Between Knowledge and Application

The research findings illuminate a critical theoretical issue in second language acquisition: the relationship between declarative syntactic knowledge and procedural writing skill. Students demonstrated some ability to identify grammatical elements in the controlled context of a multiple-choice test, yet they struggled

to apply this same knowledge during spontaneous essay composition. This gap between theoretical understanding and practical application of syntax in real practice (Sabrina et al., 2024) suggests that syntactic knowledge must be developed to the level of procedural automaticity before it reliably transfers to writing performance.

This finding can be understood through the lens of cognitive load theory as applied to writing. Writing accuracy cannot be achieved merely by knowing vocabulary or basic grammar; rather, it emerges from the writer's ability to manipulate syntactic forms in order to encode meaning effectively (Amru et al., 2026). When students possess strong syntactic foundations, they can focus more on content development and coherence, rather than expending cognitive effort on sentence formation (Amru et al., 2026). The students in this study, whose syntactic knowledge remained at a moderate level of mastery, likely experienced precisely this cognitive overload. Their conscious attention to basic sentence construction consumed cognitive resources that would otherwise be available for higher-order writing concerns, resulting in essays that were both syntactically flawed and substantively underdeveloped.

Conversely, inadequate syntactic control can overwhelm cognitive resources during writing tasks (Amru et al., 2026). This bidirectional relationship between syntactic competence and cognitive resource allocation carries significant pedagogical implications. It suggests that instruction must move beyond teaching students to recognize correct syntactic forms to developing their ability to produce these forms automatically during communicative writing. The students in this sample could, in many cases, identify a correctly constructed sentence when presented with options, but they had not internalized the syntactic rules sufficiently to generate such sentences independently under the cognitive demands of composition.

Pedagogical Implications for English Language Teaching

The findings of this study carry several important implications for English language teaching practice in Indonesian secondary schools and

similar EFL contexts. Most fundamentally, the research underscores that explicit syntax instruction is not merely supplementary to writing instruction but constitutes its essential foundation. Syntax is a fundamental aspect of linguistic competence and a vital tool for enhancing writing skills (Fadhilah et al., 2024). The data demonstrate that without systematic attention to syntactic structures, students will continue to produce writing characterized by high error rates despite years of English instruction.

The documented gap between test performance and writing application suggests that traditional grammar teaching approaches which often emphasize identification and recognition must be supplemented with production-oriented activities. Targeted syntactic instruction, incorporating tools like syntax trees and constituency tests, significantly enhances students' understanding and application of sentence structure (Fadhilah et al., 2024). The use of visual representations of sentence structure, as suggested by both Fadhilah et al. (2024) and Sabrina et al. (2024) who noted that students felt they understood more about tree diagrams and explored sentence structure more deeply after instruction, may help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application by making abstract syntactic relationships visible and manipulable.

The finding that students overwhelmingly believe learning sentence structure helps them write better essays with 100% agreement indicates receptiveness to syntax instruction that teachers can leverage. The challenge is not one of student motivation but of instructional design. Students who have good syntax mastery can form sentences more clearly, avoid grammatical mistakes, and combine ideas in a more organized way; their writing flows better because they know how to use clauses, connectors, and sentence patterns correctly (Amru et al., 2026). This description of the benefits of syntactic competence can serve as both a guide for curriculum development and a motivational message for students.

The specific error patterns identified in this study suggest

priorities for instructional focus. The predominance of word order errors indicates that contrastive analysis of Indonesian and English sentence structures should be incorporated into instruction, making explicit the points at which the two languages diverge. The high frequency of sentence fragment and run-on errors points to the need for focused instruction on clause boundaries, sentence termination, and the structural requirements of complete English sentences. The prevalence of conjunction errors suggests that the semantic and structural distinctions between coordinating and subordinating conjunctions require explicit, systematic instruction rather than incidental exposure.

The teacher's observation that students show the greatest syntactic accuracy when producing simple sentences on familiar topics suggests an instructional progression strategy. Teachers might begin writing instruction with simple sentences on everyday topics to build foundational accuracy, then systematically introduce more complex structures as students demonstrate readiness. Syntactic complexity in written composition reflects one aspect of writers' language use in writing, and it varies depending on the purpose, genre, topic, and audience of the text (Wang et al., 2025). Instruction should therefore be genre-sensitive, matching syntactic expectations to the communicative demands of different text types.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The sample size of 15 students, while appropriate for the mixed-methods design employed, limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations of Indonesian high school students. Future research should replicate this investigation with larger samples drawn from multiple schools and regions to establish the representativeness of the documented error patterns. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this study captures syntactic abilities at a single point in time; longitudinal research tracking the development of syntactic competence over the course of explicit instruction would provide valuable information about the trajectory of

syntactic acquisition and its effects on writing quality.

The study focused on syntactic accuracy as defined by grammatical correctness, but syntactic maturity is reflected not only in correctness but also in sentence variety (Amru et al., 2026). Future research should incorporate measures of syntactic complexity alongside accuracy measures to provide a more comprehensive picture of students' syntactic development. Furthermore, experimental studies comparing different instructional approaches such as explicit versus implicit grammar instruction, or deductive versus inductive presentation of syntactic rules would contribute evidence-based guidance for pedagogical practice.

D. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the relationship between basic syntax mastery and English writing accuracy among Indonesian senior high school students, to identify specific syntactic challenges facing these learners, and to examine how explicit syntactic knowledge translates into writing performance. The findings establish that students with limited syntax mastery as evidenced by a mean diagnostic test score of 45.8% produce writing characterized by high frequencies of syntactic errors, with an average error rate of 64.4% across all sentences. The most prevalent errors were incorrect word order (27.3%), omission of essential sentence constituents leading to fragments (22.1%), run-on sentences (19.5%), incorrect conjunction use (17.2%), and tense inconsistency (13.9%). These error patterns reflect both cross-linguistic interference from Indonesian and incomplete acquisition of English-specific syntactic structures.

The study further confirms the existence of a significant gap between students' declarative syntactic knowledge their ability to recognize grammatical elements in controlled test contexts and their procedural ability to deploy this knowledge during authentic writing tasks. This finding underscores that writing accuracy cannot be achieved merely by knowing vocabulary or basic grammar; rather, it emerges from the writer's ability to manipulate syntactic

forms in order to encode meaning effectively (Amru et al., 2026). The implications for English language learning are clear: syntax constitutes a fundamental component of linguistic competence that directly enables accurate written expression, and students who lack syntactic foundations will continue to struggle with writing regardless of vocabulary breadth or communicative motivation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, the following recommendations are offered for English language teaching practitioners, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers in Indonesian secondary education contexts.

First, English teachers should integrate explicit, systematic syntax instruction into their writing curricula at all proficiency levels. This instruction should move beyond identification and recognition activities to include production-oriented practice that develops automaticity. Sentence-combining exercises, in which students practice joining simple sentences into compound and complex structures, directly address the documented difficulties with clause integration and conjunction use. Syntactic awareness activities that require students to analyze and manipulate sentence structures using tools such as tree diagrams and constituency tests can make abstract grammatical relationships visible and comprehensible. Instruction should particularly emphasize the structural differences between Indonesian and English word order, as this was the most frequent error source.

Second, curriculum developers should design writing instruction that follows a systematic progression from simple to complex syntactic structures. Students in this study demonstrated some ability to construct simple sentences accurately but struggled with complex structures requiring subordination and clause embedding. Instruction should begin with mastery of the basic SVO sentence pattern, proceed to phrase-level complexity including noun phrase modification, then introduce clause combination through coordination and subordination in sequence. Each new syntactic structure should be practiced extensively in communicative writing

contexts before more complex structures are introduced.

Third, teacher education programs should strengthen preparation in linguistics generally and syntax specifically, equipping teachers with both the declarative knowledge of English sentence structure and the pedagogical content knowledge necessary to teach syntax effectively. Teachers must be able to diagnose specific syntactic errors in student writing, understand the linguistic sources of these errors, and design targeted instructional responses. Professional development programs should include training in contrastive analysis of Indonesian and English syntax to help teachers anticipate and address the cross-linguistic interference patterns documented in this research.

Fourth, educational policymakers should recognize that developing syntactic competence requires sustained instructional time and cannot be accomplished through incidental exposure or brief grammar review sessions. Writing accuracy does not come from vocabulary alone; even if students know many English words, their writing will still contain mistakes if they cannot use syntactic rules effectively (Amru et al., 2026). Curricular frameworks should therefore allocate dedicated instructional time for syntax and writing development throughout secondary education, with assessment instruments designed to measure syntactic accuracy and complexity as distinct components of writing proficiency.

Fifth, future researchers should extend this investigation through studies employing larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs tracking syntactic development over time, and experimental comparisons of different pedagogical approaches to syntax instruction. Such research will contribute to the evidence base needed to refine instructional practice and ensure that Indonesian EFL learners develop the syntactic competence essential for accurate, effective written communication.

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