



EFL Students' Grammatical Errors in Online Chat Groups as Indicators of Interlanguage Development

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Abstract

Grammatical errors are a natural part of second language acquisition and provide valuable insights into learners' language development. Based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), grammatical errors are viewed as indicators of interlanguage development rather than evidence of language failure. This study aimed to analyze the grammatical errors produced by postgraduate EFL students in academic WhatsApp group interactions and to examine how these errors reflect interlanguage development. A descriptive qualitative design was employed using naturally occurring WhatsApp chat messages collected from two academic WhatsApp groups of students enrolled in the Master of English Language Teaching Study Program. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and classified according to Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015) into three interlanguage processes: language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies. The findings revealed that the grammatical errors were systematic rather than random and reflected the learners' ongoing interlanguage development through these three processes. The findings also suggest that academic WhatsApp interactions provide an authentic context for observing how postgraduate EFL students construct and refine their interlanguage in natural communication. This study concludes that grammatical errors should be viewed as a natural part of second language development rather than as evidence of language failure. Future research is encouraged to involve participants from different educational contexts and digital communication platforms to provide a broader understanding of interlanguage development in online learning environments.

Keywords: Postgraduate EFL students, grammatical errors, interlanguage, WhatsApp group interactions, second language learning

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INTRODUCTION

مقدمة

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) places students in a complex and gradual process of acquiring a second language (Brown & Lee, 2025). In the process of Second Language Learning, grammatical errors made by students are often considered evidence of unsuccessful language learning. However, this perspective has shifted with the development of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, which recognizes grammatical errors not as signs of failure but as a natural and inevitable part of learners' language development (Leeman & Serafini, 2021; Schmidt & Strasser, 2022; Brown & Lee, 2025).

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, grammatical errors provide valuable insights into how learners gradually acquire and develop a second language. Rather than simply

indicating incorrect language use, grammatical errors reflect learners' effort to formulate, test, and refine their understanding of the target language. These errors may result from first language transfer, overgeneralization of grammatical rules, or learners' evolving hypotheses about the English language system (Hassanzadeh & Ranjbar, 2025). Therefore, error analysis focuses not only on identifying errors but also on understanding the ongoing process of second language development.

Selinker (2015), building upon the original concept of Interlanguage proposed by Selinker (1972), explains that second language learners construct a temporary linguistic system that differs from both their first language (L1) and the target language (L2). This linguistic system is dynamic and continuously develops as learners gain greater language competence. Consequently, grammatical errors can be viewed as indicators of interlanguage development because they reflect how learners process, internalize, and reconstruct English language rules throughout the learning process (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001).

Furthermore, grammatical errors are one of the fundamental components of second language learning because it enables learners to communicate accurately and effectively (Andleeb et al., 2025). Nevertheless, EFL learners frequently encounter grammatical difficulties, particularly when English structures differ from those of their first language (Rivera et al., 2023). These difficulties commonly involve tense usage, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, and sentence structure (Khan, 2022). Examining such grammatical errors not only reveals learners' grammatical competence but also provides valuable insights into their ongoing interlanguage development.

In Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), grammatical errors made by second language learners can be classified into several main categories, including language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and strategies of second language communication. Language transfer refers to the influence of the first language on the use of the target language, which often causes the structure or sentence patterns of the mother tongue to be carried over into English. Overgeneralization of target language rules occurs when learners apply English rules excessively or inappropriately, such as using a single grammatical rule for different contexts. Meanwhile, strategies of second language communication arise when learners use certain strategies to maintain communication even though their English skills are still limited, so that grammatical accuracy is often sacrificed for the sake of smooth communication. These three categories reflect the process of learners in processing, internalizing, and reconstructing English rules as part of their interlanguage development (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001).

In today's digital learning environment, online communication platforms such as WhatsApp have become an integral part of students' academic interactions. The language used in these online chat groups tends to be spontaneous, informal, and minimally monitored, providing a more authentic representation of learners' actual language use. Unlike formal writing tasks or examinations, chat group interactions capture naturally occurring language production, making them a valuable source of data for investigating grammatical errors and interlanguage development.

Considering the characteristics of online academic communication, this study focuses on postgraduate EFL students because they are generally expected to demonstrate a relatively advanced level of English proficiency and engage in more complex academic instructions than undergraduate students. Despite their advanced educational background, grammatical errors continue to occur in their online written communication, suggesting that interlanguage development remains an ongoing process. Therefore, examining grammatical errors produced

by postgraduate students provides valuable insights into how advanced EFL learners continue to construct and refine their interlanguage through authentic digital communication. Moreover, postgraduate students frequently use WhatsApp to discuss coursework, research projects, and other academic activities. These interactions provide naturally occurring language data that reflect their actual language use.

Previous studies have demonstrated that online communication provides authentic opportunities for observing learners' interlanguage development. Cruz & Waemusa (2023) found that Facebook Messenger interactions encouraged spontaneous English use, allowing grammatical errors to naturally emerge as learners communicated. Similarly, Arifin et al. (2024) reported that Hello Talk users frequently produced grammatical errors influenced by first language transfer and incomplete mastery of English grammatical rules. Korvesi & Michel (2022), as well as Ribeiro and Eslami (2025) further argued that increasingly complex online written interactions encourage learners to experiment with language and gradually develop their interlanguage. In addition, Mahriyuni et al. (2024) emphasized that interlanguage development is reflected through systematic grammatical patterns rather than random language mistakes. Collectively, these studies suggest that grammatical errors occurring in online communication provide valuable evidence of learners' interlanguage development.

However, despite these valuable contributions, previous studies have primarily examined grammatical errors in social media interactions, language-learning applications, or general online communication. Limited attention has been given to grammatical errors occurring in authentic academic WhatsApp interactions among postgraduate EFL students, particularly from the perspective of interlanguage development. Consequently, how advanced EFL learners continue to construct and refine their interlanguage through everyday academic online communication remains insufficiently explored.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze grammatical errors produced by postgraduate EFL students in academic online chat groups as indicators of interlanguage development based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015). The findings are expected to contribute to Second Language Acquisition research by extending the understanding of interlanguage development in authentic digital communication while also providing pedagogical implications for English language teaching in the digital era.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: 1) What types of grammatical errors occur in EFL students' academic WhatsApp group interactions based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015)? 2) How do these grammatical errors demonstrate postgraduate EFL students' interlanguage development in online chat interactions?

METHOD

منهج

Research Design

This study used a qualitative descriptive design (Creswell, 2017). It aimed to describe postgraduate EFL students' grammatical errors in academic WhatsApp group interactions and interpret them as indicators of interlanguage development in second language learning. The researchers did not intervene in the communication process, allowing the data to reflect authentic language use. Thus, this approach was chosen because it allowed the researchers to analyze language data in depth in a natural context of use.

Research Context

This study was conducted in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among students in the Master of English Language Teaching study program at a private university in East Java, Indonesia, with a focus on interactions in online chat groups. There were two selected WhatsApp groups including, Applied Linguistics group, and Second Language Acquisition Group. This kind of context was chosen because online chat groups were active medium of academic communication that allowed for spontaneous and authentic use of English. Through these interactions, students expressed their ideas, discussed academic topics, and negotiated meaning without formal pressure. Therefore, this context was relevant for examining grammatical errors as indicators of interlanguage development in second language learning.

Data and Data sources

The research data consisted of written conversation texts taken from online chat groups used by EFL students to communicate in English. In addition, the data were in the form of sentences written by students. The data sources were derived from the archived conversations of two WhatsApp groups, which reflected authentic language use without the manipulation of formal learning situations.

Data Collection

Data collection in this study was conducted through documentation techniques by extracting written conversations from online chat groups used by postgraduate EFL students during a certain period. All messages containing English usage were collected and selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly messages that showed grammatical errors based on Selinker's (2015) Interlanguage Theory. Data were collected without researcher intervention so that interactions took place naturally and authentically. Furthermore, the collected data was transcribed, anonymized to maintain the confidentiality of the participants' identities, and compiled into a text corpus for further analysis.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was the researchers themselves, who identified, classified, and interpreted grammatical errors. As a supporting instrument, an analytical framework based on Selinker's (2015) Interlanguage Theory was used to classify grammatical errors into language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2014). The analysis involved familiarizing the researchers with the data, generating initial codes, identifying recurring patterns of grammatical errors, reviewing and refining the patterns, and interpreting the findings. The identified grammatical error patterns were then classified according to Selinker's (2015) Interlanguage Theory into language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies. Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to previous studies on interlanguage development.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers carefully examined all collected chat data and classified the grammatical errors consistently based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015). The interpretations were continuously compared with relevant previous studies to ensure that the findings were theoretically and empirically supported. In

addition, all conversation data were collected from authentic academic WhatsApp group interactions without researcher intervention, allowing the analysis to reflect students' natural language use in real communication contexts.

RESULT

نتائج

The findings of this study show that grammatical errors produced by postgraduate EFL students in academic WhatsApp group interactions are systematic rather than random. Based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), these errors were classified into three categories: language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies. These categories illustrate how learners construct and develop their interlanguage through authentic online communication.

What types of grammatical errors occur in EFL students' interactions in online chat groups based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015)?

The findings revealed three types of grammatical errors in postgraduate EFL students' academic WhatsApp group interactions based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015). These errors were classified into language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies. Each category reflects how learners process, internalize, and use English in online communication.

Language Transfer

Grammatical errors in the category of language transfer occur when postgraduate EFL students carry structures or patterns from their first language into their use of English. The influence of the mother tongue is evident in sentence structure, verb usage, or the omission of certain grammatical elements that do not exist in Indonesian (Adnyani et al., 2023). These errors indicate that students still rely on their first language system in processing and producing English as the target language (De la Fuente & Goldenberg, 2022). The following excerpts illustrate language transfer.

Chat transcript 1

Student A: Sorry sir, I late submit the assignment because sick.

Mr. B: Okay.

The student's chat above falls into the category of language transfer in Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015). In the statement "Sorry sir, I late submit the assignment because sick," the student directly transfers the structure of Indonesian into English. It can be seen from the absence of the correct use of the verb "to be" and auxiliary verbs. This error reflects the strong influence of the first language (L1) on the production of the second language (L2), thus becoming an indicator of the development of students' interlanguage in the context of online academic communication (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001).

Chat transcript 2

Student D: Sir, can you explain again about this material?

Mr. B: Next meeting I will re-explain.

The student's chat falls under the category of language transfer in Selinker's Interlanguage theory (2015). The utterance "Sir, can you explain again about this material?" shows a transfer of structure from Indonesian, specifically in the use of the preposition 'about' after the verb "explain," which is influenced by the equivalent Explain about. In standard English,

the verb “explain” is transitive and does not require the preposition “about.” This error reflects the influence of the first language (L1) on the construction of the second language (L2), so it can be understood as an indicator of the development of students' interlanguage in online academic interactions (Selinker, 2015).

Overgeneralization of Target Language Rules

The category of overgeneralization of target language rules is characterized by the excessive or inappropriate application of English rules (Lamcja, 2025). Students tend to use a single grammatical rule in a variety of different contexts, such as using the same tense or verb form in inappropriate situations. These errors reflect an active learning process, in which students are constructing and reconstructing their understanding of English rules. The data examples are as follows.

Chat transcript 3

Mr. B: Can we have online class on this Friday morning at your convenience to replace our Saturday class because I have to handle new students on this Saturday.

Student C: Perhaps you could share your suggestion on what time the class will be held, sir? We can discuss it first, since some of them have work on that day.

The data above falls into the category of overgeneralization of target language rules in Selinker's (2015) interlanguage theory. This case is shown in the sentence “Perhaps you could share your suggestion on what time the class will be held, sir?” which is generally understandable but shows the use of a formal structure that tends to be rigid and excessive due to the broad application of English rules without adjusting to the context of communication. In addition, the use of the phrase “on what time” which should be “at what time” or “what time”, and the unclear pronoun reference “some of them” indicates that the student applied English grammatical rules partially. These errors reflect the learner's process of reconstructing the rules of the target language based on an understanding that is not yet fully stable, thus corresponding to the category of overgeneralization in interlanguage development (Lakshmanan & Selinker, 2001).

Strategies of Second Language Communication

Grammatical errors in the category of strategies of second language communication occur when students prioritize fluency in communication over grammatical accuracy (Matiso, 2023). In online group chat interactions, students often simplify sentence structure or omit certain grammatical elements so that messages can be conveyed quickly and effectively. This strategy demonstrates students' efforts to maintain communication even though their English skills are still developing (Binu, 2022). Here are the data examples of strategies of second language communication.

Chat transcript 4

Mr. A: Assalamu'alaikum. The SLA Course ended last week and so it is the time to finish the final project. Thanks

Student A: Ok sir. could you send google drive to send our task, sir?

The student's chat falls under the category of strategies of second language communication in Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015). This can be seen from the use of sentence structures that are not entirely grammatical, such as in the student's reply sentence which shows a simplification of structure and repetition of the word “send” in order to convey

the meaning of the communication quickly and effectively. Students prioritize message comprehension over grammatical accuracy, so mechanical aspects such as punctuation, word choice, and sentence structure clarity are less important. These grammatical errors are not random but reflect the communication strategies of EFL learners in the context of spontaneous online interactions, where language is used as a functional communication tool in the interlanguage development stage.

Chat transcript 5

Mr. A: Please start the literature class at 09.00. I'll be a little bit late.

Student B: Anyone knows the link of zoom. please send here.

The student's chat is included in the category of strategies of second language communication based on Selinker's Interlanguage theory (2015). This can be seen in the sentence, which shows a simplification of sentence structure and grammatical inaccuracies, such as the use of the verb form knows instead of know, the choice of the preposition of instead of to, and the omission of the more specific object "please send it here." These errors reflect the students' efforts to maintain fast and effective communication in an online situation, sacrificing grammatical accuracy for the sake of message comprehension. Thus, these errors represent the communication strategies of learners in their interlanguage development stage (Selinker 2015).

Chat transcript 6

Mr. B: At 1 after jumatan is ok for me

Student D: After discussing, we agreed to have the class afternoon, sir. However, the campus can't provide the Zoom account because it's being used by the first-semester students. If we use our own Zoom, it will only last for 40 minutes.

The chat above is included into the category of strategies of second language communication based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015). The sentence "we agreed to have the class afternoon, sir," shows a simplification of structure with the omission of prepositions that should have been used, such as "in the afternoon." In addition, the use of long and informative sentence structures shows that students focus on conveying meaning clearly despite grammatical inaccuracies. These errors reflect the communication strategies of EFL learners in the context of online interaction, where fluency and clarity of message are prioritized over grammatical accuracy, thus illustrating the stage of development of students' interlanguage (Selinker 2015).

How do these grammatical errors show EFL students' interlanguage development in online chat interactions?

The findings indicate that the grammatical errors identified in this study demonstrate EFL students' ongoing interlanguage development rather than random language mistakes. Based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), the three categories of errors-language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies-represent different stages of learners' attempt to construct, test, and refine their developing English language system. These errors reflect learners' active efforts to communicate meaningfully while gradually internalizing the grammatical rules of the target language.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that grammatical errors should not be interpreted as evidence of language failure but rather as indicators of learners' evolving linguistic competence. In authentic online academic interactions, students tend to prioritize effective communication

over grammatical accuracy, allowing their interlanguage to develop through continuous language use. Therefore, online chat interactions provide valuable evidence of how EFL learners negotiate linguistic knowledge and adapt their language production during real communication.

DISCUSSION

مناقشة

The findings of this study indicate that the grammatical errors produced by postgraduate EFL students in academic WhatsApp group interactions were systematic rather than random. Based on Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), these errors reflect learners' ongoing interlanguage development through three major processes: language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies. Rather than representing language failure, these grammatical errors demonstrate how learners continuously construct and refine their second-language system.

Although the participants in this study were postgraduate EFL students with relatively advanced English proficiency, language transfer remained evident in their online academic interactions. This finding suggests that advanced proficiency does not completely eliminate the influence of the first language. According to Selinker (2015), learners continuously rely on their existing linguistic knowledge when producing a second language, particularly during spontaneous communication. Consequently, Indonesian sentence patterns, lexical choices, and grammatical structures continued to influence English production even at higher educational levels. Rather than indicating low proficiency, these errors reflect the dynamic nature of interlanguage, which continues to develop through authentic language use.

Another important finding concerns the overgeneralization of target language rules. Consistent with Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), learners occasionally applied English grammatical rules beyond their appropriate contexts. Rather than indicating inadequate grammatical competence, these errors suggest that learners were actively formulating and testing hypotheses about the target language. This finding further demonstrates that interlanguage develops through continuous experimentation and gradual refinement of linguistic knowledge during second language learning.

Another important finding is the influence of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) on learners' grammatical performance. In online academic chat groups such as WhatsApp, communication is generally spontaneous, fast-paced, and interaction-oriented. Under these conditions, students tend to prioritize successful message delivery and fluency rather than grammatical accuracy. Consequently, learners simplify sentence structures, omit certain grammatical elements, and rely on communication strategies to maintain smooth interaction. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Korvesi and Michel (2022) and Ribeiro and Eslami (2025), which suggest that Computer-Mediated Communication environments encourage meaning-focused communication where grammatical monitoring is often reduced compared to formal academic writing.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research showing that grammatical errors produced by EFL learners are part of the interlanguage development process rather than evidence of language failure. These findings support the studies of Cruz and Waemusa (2023), Arifin et al. (2024), and Mahriyuni et al. (2024), which reported that grammatical errors reflect learners' evolving interlanguage through first language influence, overgeneralization of target language rules, and ongoing language development. Furthermore, the present study extends previous research by demonstrating that communication strategies play an important role in

academic WhatsApp interactions, as postgraduate EFL students often prioritize successful communication over grammatical accuracy in spontaneous online contexts.

The findings also have important pedagogical implications for English language teaching. Rather than viewing grammatical errors solely as mistakes requiring correction, teachers and lecturers should recognize them as valuable indicators of learners' interlanguage development. Understanding these error patterns enables instructors to provide more meaningful feedback and design learning activities that balance grammatical accuracy with communicative competence. Moreover, online academic communication platforms such as WhatsApp can serve as authentic learning environments that facilitate continuous language development through meaningful interaction.

The uniqueness of this study lies in the use of naturally occurring language data collected from academic WhatsApp group interactions without researcher intervention. Unlike studies that rely on language tests or formal writing tasks, this research captures authentic language use in real academic communication. Consequently, it provides a richer understanding of how postgraduate EFL students construct, negotiate, and refine their interlanguage while communicating in digital learning environments.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that grammatical errors in postgraduate EFL students' academic WhatsApp group interactions serve as meaningful indicators of interlanguage development. Language transfer, overgeneralization, and second language communication strategies illustrate learners' ongoing efforts to construct and refine their second-language system through authentic communication. These findings reinforce Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015) by showing that interlanguage remains dynamic even among advanced EFL learners, and continues to develop through everyday academic digital interactions.

CONCLUSION | خاتمة

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the grammatical errors produced by EFL students in academic WhatsApp group interactions serve as meaningful indicators of interlanguage development. Consistent with Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (2015), these errors are systematic rather than random, reflecting three major interlanguage processes: language transfer, overgeneralization of target language rules, and second language communication strategies. The findings demonstrate that, in spontaneous online academic communication, learners often prioritize successful communication and fluency over grammatical accuracy. Therefore, grammatical errors should be viewed as a natural component of second language development rather than as evidence of language failure. Furthermore, academic WhatsApp interactions provide an authentic context for observing how learners continuously construct, negotiate, and refine their interlanguage through meaningful communication. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing grammatical errors as a valuable pedagogical resource that can support both language instruction and learners' ongoing English language development in digital learning environments.

While this study provides valuable insight into grammatical errors as indicators of interlanguage development in academic WhatsApp group interactions, future research is encouraged to involve participants from different educational levels and learning contexts to improve the generalizability of the findings. Future studies may also compare grammatical error patterns across various digital communication platforms, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and other online learning applications, to obtain a broader understanding of interlanguage development in

digital learning environments. In addition, longitudinal research is recommended to examine how learners' grammatical errors and interlanguage develop over time, providing deeper insights into the dynamic nature of second language acquisition.

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