Syntactic and Lexical Error Patterns in the Academic Writing: Towards an Instructional Framework for College ESL Students

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1. Introduction

Academic writing serves as a vital indicator of a student's ability to articulate thought-provoking ideas and express them coherently and logically. The changing nature of academic writing in the Philippines has grown rapidly in recent years, despite many college students continuing to experience difficulties with various syntactic and lexical errors that negatively affect overall writing quality. By thoroughly investigating these syntactic and lexical error patterns, this study will help educators develop effective pedagogical strategies and improve students' writing skills in the Philippines. Furthermore, it highlights the syntactic and lexical error patterns common in students' academic writing in the Philippines and demonstrates how these patterns align with national and local higher education trends.

Writing in an academically correct manner is important for students in higher education. The ability to produce academically correct written material indicates that the student has developed the ability to think critically and understand the content of their discipline. Although many ESL students struggle with grammar and vocabulary, several studies have documented that they also encounter significant issues with syntax and vocabulary choices, leading to a loss of clarity and coherence when producing academic written materials (Joven et al., 2025).

Given the focus on English as the medium of instruction in the Philippines, educators must examine their learners' writing abilities more closely. Students have many problems with grammar and vocabulary when writing, and therefore, there is a need to place greater emphasis on providing high-quality instructional materials for this purpose. Kies and Lambert (2023) suggest implementing quality instructional practices to provide students with supportive strategies that foster vocabulary and syntax use.

The two primary types of mistakes found in students' writing include errors in syntax (word order) and in vocabulary, such as using the wrong word. Studies show that students frequently struggle with subjects, verbs, and sentence structure—this affects the clarity of their writing (Chiknaverova, 2019). On the other hand, evidence suggests that students make numerous mistakes when using articles and prepositions, indicating a lack of foundation in the basic principles of English grammar and syntax (Nguyên & Tuấn, 2024).

Lexical errors often occur when students select the wrong word or use only common vocabulary.

This affects how academically rigorous a student's writing appears to the reader (Joven et al., 2025). It is also described in one study that a large number of lexical errors occur because ESL students are not able to develop a strong vocabulary base; this presents an additional difficulty for ESL students when trying to adhere to standard academic writing practices. The aforementioned findings indicate that understanding patterns of grammatical error is important for developing targeted interventions to improve an ESL student's writing skills and academic performance.

This study seeks to provide further evidence for the systematic identification of error types in the academic writing of Filipino college students. By identifying the nature and frequency of these lexical and syntactic errors, educators can develop instructional strategies tailored to their students' particular needs. Another important step toward resolving these errors may involve examining how a student's first language influences his or her writing in English and the cognitive processes involved in writing. In addition, the use of technology and learning support resources may enhance the student's writing potential by adopting a holistic approach to language instruction that addresses both lexical and syntactic knowledge (Joven et al., 2025).

In summary, this study provides valuable insights into identifying syntactic and lexical error types in the academic writing of Filipino college students and highlights the importance of tailored instructional strategies to improve the classroom environment for learning and to inform future research. Thus, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1) What are the most frequent lexical errors observed in their academic writing?

2) What are the most frequent syntactic errors committed by college students?

3) Based on the findings, what instructional intervention framework can be proposed?

2. Research Methodology

In this chapter, procedures for examining syntactic and lexical error patterns in college students' academic writing in the Philippines were described. The study examined the types of syntactic errors present (e.g., run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement, and dangling modifiers) as well as lexical errors (e.g., poor word choice,

incorrect collocations, and informal register). The purpose of this research is to use these findings to propose an intervention that improves students' academic writing abilities.

3. Research Design

Using an error analysis framework as a foundation, the study employed a mixed-methods research design to identify and categorize syntactic and lexical errors in a sample of academic papers. Error analysis research has shown that a careful examination of students' writing samples can lead to greater insight into common academic writing difficulties.

3.1 Research Locale and Local

Research was conducted at a private institution in the Philippines, part of the College of Education. This context allows the collection of a set of academic paper samples representative of the academic writing skills of college students enrolled in education-related degrees, where English is the medium of instruction and learning. A total of 40 academic essay papers written by college students were selected for analysis. The selection criteria included papers from various academic disciplines, thus providing a comprehensive overview of syntactic and lexical error patterns across different fields of study. This number aligns with sample sizes common in qualitative studies, ensuring both depth and manageability in data analysis.

3.2 Data Gathering Procedure

Data was collected through the following steps:

- **Activity Administration**: The researcher, as the proctor, provided the students with questions that aligned with the previous lesson discussed in class. They are given one (1) hour and thirty (30) minutes to do the activity. The researcher did not provide the students with a structure to test their cohesion and coherence in writing.

- **Paper Collection**: The researcher gathered a group of forty (40) students' academic papers completed as a requirement of the preliminary examination. Students and faculty gave permission to use their work.

- **Error Identification**: Analysis was completed using Corder's Error Analysis framework. Errors in the paper included syntactic errors: subject/verb agreement errors, run-on sentences, and dangling participles; also included were lexical errors: poor word choice, incorrect words, and

collocational mistakes.

- **Coding Errors**: Researchers coded errors by setting frequency counts and categorizing them, enabling systematic coding and completing the analysis with ease.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of papers included systematic error analyses. This analysis focused on:

- **Syntactic errors**: The frequency and type of each type of syntactic error (run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement, dangling modifiers) and other syntactic structures that hinder the clarity of writing.

- **Lexical errors**: The frequency of inappropriate word choice, collocations, and use of informal language is not appropriate for academic writing.

- To assess the relative frequencies of the various types of errors identified in this study, statistical measures such as frequencies and percentages were also calculated.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The research in this study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and ensured the protection of student participants' identities and confidentiality. All student participants provided explicit consent before being included in the study, and their identities were anonymized in any reports of results to ensure confidentiality. The goal of the research was to inform the future design of instructional methods that would help student writers improve their ability to produce effective academic writing.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Syntactic errors committed by college students

Syntactical Error Category	Frequency	Percentage
Run-on Sentences / Comma Splices	24	37.50
Subject-Verb Agreement	20	31.25
Sentence Fragments	12	18.75
Faulty Predication / Logical Inconsistency	8	12.50
TOTAL	**64**	**100**

Table 1 shows that the most frequent syntactical error committed by college students is the use of Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices, which accounts for 37.50% of the total errors, with a frequency of 24. This is followed closely by Subject-Verb Agreement issues, representing 31.25% (n=20) of the identified mistakes. Together, these two categories comprise nearly two-thirds of all syntactical errors, suggesting they are the primary areas of grammatical struggle for students. In contrast, Sentence Fragments and Faulty Predication/Structure occur less frequently, with equal prevalence, each accounting for 18.75% (n=12) of the total 64 errors recorded. Overall, the findings indicate that students struggle most with managing clause boundaries and matching subjects with their corresponding verbs.

4.1 Dominance of Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices

The number of run-on sentences and comma splices observed among many college students indicates that they have difficulty creating clear sentence boundaries. These types of errors provide evidence of a student's inability to correctly create syntactic structures needed for clear communication. Studies indicate that errors of this type are common among English language learners and result from a lack of understanding of sentence-structure rules (Malip, 2022). Additionally, many students may be influenced by their first language (L1) and apply their native-language sentence structures when using English rather than learning to form proper English sentence structures (Malip, 2022). An example of this is the inability of many Filipino students to stop using sentence structures from their native language, despite being required to adhere to English sentence rules.

> *approached the 4c's. First, on collaboration I would make the group work where they do not divide task but make them each valuable where if one person would not function the others are also affected. For the communication are is that I would eliminate their use of devices but*

> *Additionally, Critical thinking is limited maybe because students doesn't understand the question or they have a poor comprehension. That's why before doing an activity teacher most assure that the student grasp the context. Furthermore creativity is not a decoration in choosing fonts. The answers must be*

4.2 Subject-Verb Agreement Issues

Subject-verb agreement is the second most common error type, demonstrating common syntactical challenges. Many students mistakenly use singular subjects with singular verbs or plural subjects with plural verbs; these errors indicate an essential area for improvement in students' grammatical proficiency (Dizon & Gatchalian, 2025). This problem can also be worsened by the structural differences between English grammar and the grammatical systems of the other languages with which Filipino students are familiar. The cognitive demands of learning a second language may lead learners to misconceptions, resulting in errors in subject-verb agreement (Geng, 2025). For these reasons, it is crucial to address subject-verb agreement errors in an academic setting to improve students' writing accuracy and increase their confidence in English.

> *while they are working their (GROUP ACTIVITY). My suggestion are to improve the activities for the 4c's are the teacher need to be a*

> *in what they doing, the teacher know that they use 4c's but that's not enough and right way to use it.*

4.3 Less Frequent Errors: Sentence Fragments and Faulty Predication

The rare occurrence of sentence fragments and faulty predication must be acknowledged. Sentence fragments represent incomplete thoughts that may arise from insufficient teaching habits in creating cohesive sentences that convey an entire concept. Without significant exposure to an academic environment that demands logical sequencing to structure ideas, it may be more difficult for students to integrate their ideas into a single statement (Magsayo et al., 2024). At the same time, faulty predication occurs when students fail to appropriately connect a subject to its predicate, increasing the likelihood of confusion about sentence function. In contrast to run-on sentences and sentence errors involving agreement between subject and verb (SV), faulty predication and fragments are rare; thus, it is possible that specific areas where additional intervention could clearly provide academic gains by giving students more opportunities to utilize their skills.

4.4 Sentence Fragments

> *To bridge the gap between my students' technical proficiency and their lack of critical literacy. I, as a teacher needs to*

will not in collaboration if they are working in silence. not give out ideas.
no communication at all beacause they are working silence. Also in Communication

4.5 Faulty Predictions/Logical Inconsistency

I will teach them on how to properly shared the documents
without :conflicts so that they dont have a struggle to do
it and they know what their obing.

ITCAN AFFECT THE COMMUNICATION SO WITHOUT COMMON
THEIR IS A BARRIER. INSTEAD OF BANDAYAN YOU'RE RELYING
ON VIA CHAT APP AND THROUH THAT IT CAN AFFECT
ALSO THE CRITICAL THINKING. COLLABORATION AND

From the findings presented, we can see clear empirical evidence that educators in the Philippines must take urgent action to implement strategies to improve their pedagogy and conduct syntax interventions. Providing targeted instruction and feedback on the most common syntactic errors is necessary to enhance students' writing skills. Research indicates that when instructors provide systematic instruction on common syntactic errors, students' overall writing abilities improve (Geng, 2025). By implementing grammar workshops, explicit instruction on sentence structure, and practical exercises that focus on recognizing and correcting syntactic errors, educators can foster better writing outcomes for students. Another key strategy for improving students' writing ability is to incorporate an analysis of syntactic errors into instructional design. Students will adopt a more engaged approach to writing and develop a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind their syntactic choices through metacognition.

In summary, the patterns of syntactic errors described in this report provide important insights into the areas educators should focus their academic interventions. Educators should focus on supporting students' ability to develop their understanding of how to form clause boundaries and apply proper subject-verb agreement. By providing systematic instruction on both syntactic issues, students will be able to write more coherently and meet their schools' academic writing expectations. In conclusion, educators in the Philippines need to expand their grammar instruction to address the grammatical issues identified in this report and support students struggling with them.

Table 2. Lexical errors observed in college students' academic writing

Lexical Error Category	Frequency	Percentage
Misspelling (Orthographic)	48	57.83
Word Choice / Diction	20	24.10
Native Language Interference (L1)	12	14.46
Malapropisms / Phonetic Slips	3	3.61
TOTAL	**83**	**100**

Table 2 shows errors involving misspellings (Orthographic Errors) with 48 (57.83%) instances. The frequency of errors in this category indicates that students' most significant lexical challenge is related to the basic mechanics of spelling (orthography), and their inability to maintain consistency throughout their papers. The next most common category of error was Word Choice/Diction (the ability to select the most appropriate or accurate vocabulary), with 20 instances (24.10% of the data), indicating that students are having trouble finding the most appropriate/accurate words for an academic setting. Finally, there were equal numbers of Native Language [L1] Interference Malapropism/phonetic slips; each occurred 12 times (14.46% of the total). The results indicate that while students continue to experience challenges with various lexical issues, difficulties with orthographic accuracy pose the greatest barrier to the successful completion of their academic writing.

Spelling mistakes are among many types of writing errors and highlight serious underlying issues, such as poor word formation and inconsistent spelling. The high percentage of misspelling errors in this finding points to the clear need for direct instruction on how to spell correctly. Research has shown that students often struggle with spelling due to weak learning skills and the influence of their native language (Zhang et al., 2024; Slimi et al., 2022). Cognitive overload is another factor that contributes to spelling problems; it occurs when students attempt more complex writing tasks that require them to use the appropriate mood and tone (Karim & Nassaji, 2018). In general, this is also a sign that students have difficulty internalizing English spelling rules, and it will most often persist when students are influenced by the spelling rules of their native languages. Differences in phonetics and syntax between English and other languages will affect a student's ability to recognize and use the mechanics of English spelling.

4.6 Misspelling/Orthographic
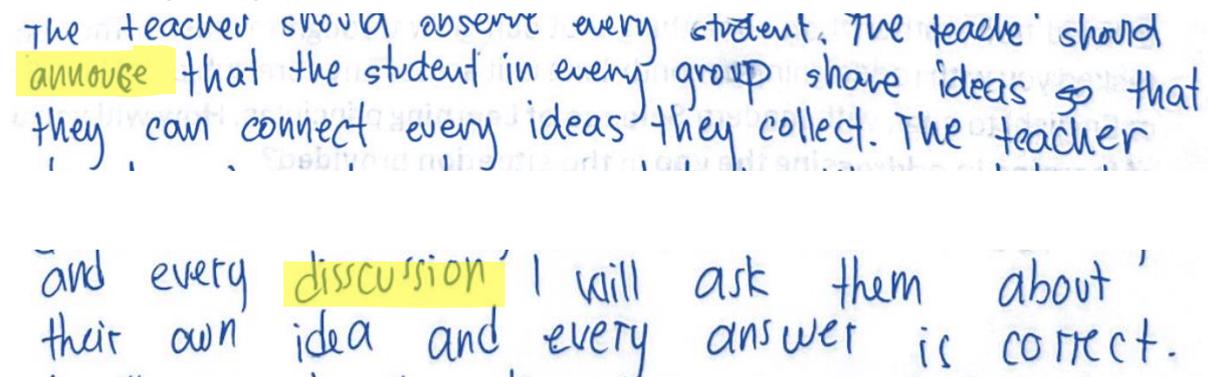
4.7 Word Choice/Diction Issues

The second biggest type of lexical error students make is related to their choice of words. While choosing the right words for your writing is not the only lexical error students make, it does highlight a key part of academic writing: being able to use accurate terminology to write clearly and support your ideas. There have been numerous studies that show a direct relationship between how many different types of words students have access to (their lexical richness) and what types of words are best suited for academic contexts, including how much they read and if they are exposed to a variety of different types of writing (Ignacy & Subramaniam, 2024). When students do not read as much or do not expose themselves to a wide range of vocabulary, they typically use limited vocabulary, which continues to create inaccuracies in their written work (Ignacy & Subramaniam, 2024). Additionally, when students translate their thoughts and ideas directly from their native language into English, this can also create problems with word choice because they are prone to making malapropisms, which are words that sound similar but may not have the same meaning (Kozolup et al., 2023).

As a teacher, I will check every tablet the only apps in tablet is the app that they need and if ever there is app that can lose their focusing reading, I'll tell to my student that they can DND or hide the apps. For news or checking news they

Suggestions: …distract them from reading…

No, because some of the student in 21st is not focusing to their doing, because their being busy to the other things or to their gadget so they are not having a deep competencies to the others. So I

Suggestion: …educational device…

actual text but not the content. As for my suggestion, I would change on how the teacher approached the 4C's. First, on collaboration I would make the group work where they do not

Suggestion: …implement the 4Cs…

4.8 Native Language Interference and Malapropisms

Native-language interference and malapropisms suggest that students are using structures from their first language (L1) when composing English (L2) texts. Developing metalinguistic awareness in students is extremely useful because it helps them understand the complexities of English, including syntax and semantics (Hládek et al., 2020). By utilizing appropriate pedagogical strategies to deal with the impact of the L1 on student writing, the students may improve in proficiency and accuracy in the English language, especially in a multilingual situation like the Philippines, where a student may be affected by language transfer when they produce written work (Karpathiou & Kambanaros, 2022).

No, because some of the student in 21st is not focusing to their doing, because their being busy to the other things or to their gadget so they are not having a deep competencies to the others. So I

Or shared a digital tools without conflict. We know that some student are didnt know to use technology or digital tools so as teacher we need to explain the different

As this analysis indicates, it is necessary to develop appropriate pedagogies. First, spelling instruction should emphasize the use of frequently misspelled words, along with the rules of orthography, as an integral part of an academic writing course. Researchers agree that specific remediation strategies, such as spelling drills and contextualized vocabulary instruction, enhance the retention and use of cognitive knowledge and reduce word misspelling (Zhang et al., 2024; Slimi et al., 2022). Second, creating a vocabulary-rich environment through extensive

reading and exposure to various academic texts will improve students' accuracy in word choice (Ignacy & Subramaniam, 2024).

Additionally, recognizing the influence of the first language as a barrier to learning English necessitates incorporating techniques that help students transfer skills to improve English literacy and address barriers stemming from their complex language backgrounds. Additionally, a comprehensive professional development program for educators on error analysis, feedback mechanisms, and the need for

written comments on errors can help address these challenges that students face.

The outcomes of this study highlight the frequency of major lexical errors among the academic writing samples from college students in the Philippines. By identifying major issues, including misspelled words, inaccurate word choices, and first-language barriers to learning, educators can tailor their instruction to improve students' writing skills and academic success.

4.9 Academic Writing Enhancement (AWE) Framework
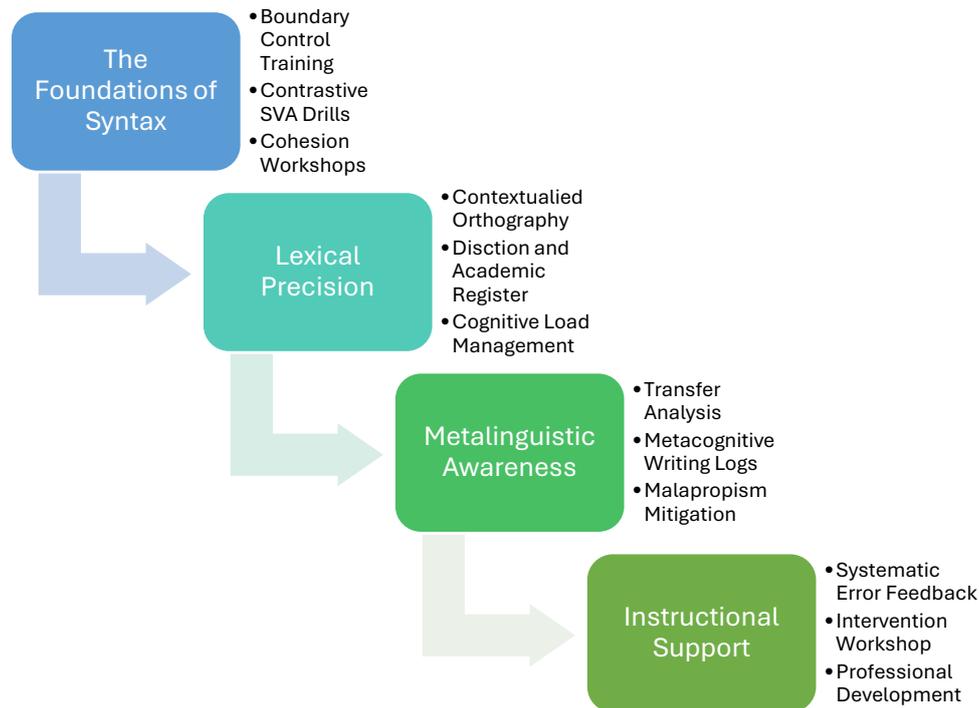
The Academic Writing Enhancement (IAWE) establishes four intervention phases that integrate writing instruction with improved educational outcomes for newly identified at-risk students. Statistical data are used to identify specific error types in the student's academic writing, which are then used to guide intervention strategies that improve the student's writing skills. To provide a comprehensive solution for both the cognitive and technical aspects of developing writing skills, the AWE model employs a multilayered approach.

Phase One—The Basics of Syntax (The Structural Bridge): Focuses on the three most common writing errors that occur in student writing: run-on sentences, comma splices, and subject-verb agreement (SVA).

- Boundary Control Training—The Boundary

Control Training component provides explicit skill development to help the student identify clause boundaries and will be used to reduce the rate of run-on sentences and comma splices found in the student's writing.

- Contrastive Subject-Verb Agreement Drills—These structured drills will help the student understand the structural differences between English and the student's native language, thereby reducing subject-verb agreement errors by improving the student's awareness of how to control for SVA.

- Cohesion Workshops—These activities will provide the author with an opportunity to develop complete, cohesive sentences that are logical by combining previous sentence

elements together to form a complete thought.

Phase Two – Lexical Precision (The Bridge to Correct Spelling): This phase examines spelling (orthography) and word choice, which have been identified as the largest impediments to students' successful completion of their academic work. Examples of lexical precision include:

- **Contextualized Orthography (spelling):** Instead of simply memorizing how to spell words, teachers should provide spelling instruction in the context of the academic writing tasks students must complete.

- **Diction and Academic Register:** An instructional program should assist students with limited vocabulary by encouraging extensive reading of a wide variety of academic texts, thereby increasing their lexical richness.

- **Cognitive Load Management:** An instructional program should help manage cognitive load and thus prevent cognitive overload associated with writing tasks. Thus, by managing the level of complexity students are exposed to and by providing foldable tools to help organize complex writing tasks, the likelihood of students misspelling words will be reduced.

Phase Three – Metalinguistic Awareness (The Cognitive Bridge): Phase 3 involves metalinguistic awareness as a cognitive bridge from addressing or "fixing" errors to understanding them and their connection to a student's native language (L1). In this phase, a teacher's feedback will help the learner become more aware of how their native language structure(s) translate into English.

- **L1-L2 Transfer Analysis:** The student learns to consciously identify instances when they use their native-language sentence structure(s) in English.

- **Metacognitive Writing Logs:** The student develops a more engaged and reasoned approach to their writing by using metacognitive writing logs that encourage them to consider their syntactic choices.

- **Malapropism Mitigation:** Students are specifically trained to recognize and differentiate between words that sound alike but have different meanings.

Phase Four—Instructional Support (The Pedagogical Bridge) is a collaboration between the teacher and the school district that provides support for development. Instructional support includes:

- **Systematic Error Feedback**: Training teachers to provide systematic error feedback that provides more than just a grade and, instead, gives detailed written comments about the student's errors.

- **Intervention Workshops**: The implementation of intervention workshops to include grammar workshops and practical examples to support recognition and correction in real-world situations.

- **Professional Development**: Professional development for educators to ensure that they have mastered the process of error analysis, as well as allow educators to directly infuse into instructional design processes.

5. Conclusion

The study examining how college students in the Philippines write in English concluded that there are serious obstacles to effective communication, stemming from weak grammar and word-choice skills. Most of these problems stem from confusion about where clauses begin and end, as well as inconsistent spelling (orthography). Syntactically, problems with sentence structure account for about two-thirds of students' writing errors. The errors are mainly due to a lack of understanding of how to construct sentences properly and apply English grammatical rules when writing, rather than relying on the rules of the students' native languages (L1).

The errors found related to the use of words (the lexical component) were primarily due to students not knowing how to spell or use identifying words correctly. Half of all the word errors (orthographic) reported by students fell into the category of misspelled words. Additionally, choosing the right types of academic language for the context is also difficult for students. Cognitive overload during complex writing tasks and limited exposure to reading materials are other major factors contributing to students' lexical problems. Additionally, the continued influence of students' L1 structures prevents them from producing their best writing.

The data of this study suggest that until there is a thorough intervention addressing these patterns of syntactic and lexical errors, students will continue to encounter problems with producing

writing that meets the high standards of academic English composition.

6. Recommendations

Educators can begin tackling the problems identified above by using the Academic Writing Enhancement Framework (AWE). This framework combines the ongoing collection of error feedback on academic writing with a series of pedagogical intervention strategies. One critical part of implementing the AWE framework is changing how we teach academic writing. Rather than focusing exclusively on rote memorization, we must provide students with extensive, context-based training opportunities, such as run-on sentence elimination workshops that help learners identify problematic patterns in their own writing and contrastive drills that help them analyze how the written language structure differs between their first language and English. Additionally, creating extensive, vocabulary-rich environments through reading experiences and using metacognitive writing logs will help learners use better words and develop a reflective awareness of their syntactic choices. Lastly, institutions need to offer ongoing, comprehensive professional development for all educators to help them develop their skill sets in providing detailed error analyses and in fostering the proper use of feedback to support student growth rather than simply using this information as a grading tool.

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