A LINGUISTIC CATEGORY ANALYSIS OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN THE SPEAKING OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BONE REGENCY

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the types and causes of grammatical errors in students' speaking performances, analyzed using the linguistic category framework. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, with data collected through a speaking test (in a question-and-answer format) and interviews. Participants were selected through judgmental sampling and consisted of one English teacher and ten second-year students from a senior high school in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The grammatical errors were categorized into two main types: morphological and syntactical. Morphological errors included mistakes in the use of inflections, articles, prepositions, and pronouns, with pronoun and article misuse being the most frequent. Syntactical errors involved incorrect usage of copulas, subject-verb agreement, adjective order, and tenses, with tense-related errors occurring most commonly. The analysis also revealed several contributing factors to these errors, including students' difficulty in understanding and internalizing grammar rules, limited exposure to correct grammatical forms, insufficient speaking practice, and low motivation to engage in grammar-based speaking activities. These findings underscore the importance of more targeted and engaging grammar instruction in speaking-focused English learning environments.

Keywords: errors, grammar, morphology, speaking, syntax

Introduction

English has become one of the most important languages in the global communication era, and Indonesia continues to improve its English language education to keep up with international standards. According to the English Proficiency Index by Education First (2022), Indonesia was ranked 81st out of 111 countries with a score of 469 out of 800, indicating a low proficiency level. As an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, English is taught in Indonesian schools alongside local and national languages. Students generally begin learning English in middle school and continue through higher education. Despite its systematic inclusion in the national curriculum, many students continue to face difficulties in productive skills, particularly speaking. According to Bygate (1987), speaking is a complex skill because it requires not only linguistic competence but also real-time processing, which makes it more susceptible to errors. One of the persistent issues affecting students' speaking performance is the occurrence of grammatical errors, especially in morphology and syntax, which reflect deeper linguistic challenges.

Grammar plays a significant role in speaking, as it governs how words and sentences are properly formed (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Nordquist, 2022). Despite its importance,

grammar remains one of the most difficult aspects for EFL learners to master, especially in oral communication (Chania & Amri, 2019). Errors in grammar while speaking can hinder understanding, affect fluency, and reduce learners' confidence (Al Hosni, 2014). According to Harmer (2007), speaking competence demands not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to produce language accurately and fluently.

Several recent studies have highlighted the grammatical difficulties faced by students in both written and spoken forms. Silalahi (2014) noted that students often have limited grammar knowledge and infrequent application in real contexts. Similarly, Paputungan et al. (2022) found that students commonly struggle with using the correct tenses, pronouns, and clauses, which often leads to confusion and miscommunication. However, while many previous studies have focused on analyzing grammatical errors in students' writing (e.g., Aini, 2018; Mufidah & Islam, 2022; Najla & Fatimah, 2020), limited research has explored how these errors manifest in spoken language.

This creates both a theoretical and empirical gap: theoretically, the use of grammatical error analysis in speaking remains underexplored compared to writing; empirically, few studies have investigated the actual types and causes of grammatical errors in students' oral performances in real classroom contexts. Furthermore, many students appear to have basic vocabulary knowledge but are unable to form accurate sentences due to limited mastery of grammatical rules. This observation indicates the need for a closer analysis of the specific grammatical issues that occur in speaking performances.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to address the following research questions:
1. What are the types of grammatical errors in the linguistic category in the students' speaking performances?
2. What are the causes of the grammatical errors in the linguistic category in the students' speaking performances?

The objectives of this study are to identify and classify the grammatical errors based on linguistic categories in students' speaking performances and to investigate the underlying causes of those errors. This study is expected to provide insights that can support more effective speaking instruction and grammatical awareness among EFL learners. The novelty of this research lies in its specific focus on oral grammatical errors using linguistic category analysis, which remains a relatively underexplored area in EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia.

Method

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the grammatical errors found in students' speaking performances. The data were collected through a speaking test in a question-and-answer format and supported by interviews. In the speaking performance task, students were asked to express their ideas orally on predetermined topics. These performances were audio-recorded and then transcribed for further analysis. The data sources included the results of the speaking test and responses from the interview session with their English teacher.

The participants of this study were selected through judgmental sampling, a purposive technique used when only a specific subset of a population meets the research criteria. The participants consisted of an English teacher and ten second-grade students from one of the senior high schools in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The selection of student participants was based on several criteria, including attendance records, active

participation in classroom activities, and demonstrated comprehension of lesson material. These criteria ensured the relevance and depth of the data collected.

The speaking test was designed to identify grammatical errors within the linguistic categories. The test followed these procedures: (a) the teacher presented a story in the form of a narrative text, (b) the teacher retold the story in English and explained the meaning of each sentence to aid student understanding, (c) students were asked to retell the story in their own words during a scheduled session, and (d) a question-and-answer session was conducted by the researcher based on the content of the students' storytelling. The goal of this session was to elicit spontaneous spoken responses.

The interviews were conducted to explore the possible causes of the grammatical errors found in students' speech. Interview questions were adapted from previous studies (Aini, 2018; Najla & Fatimah, 2020) and addressed themes related to students' speaking experiences, classroom learning environment, and language comprehension. The teacher interview provided complementary insights into the students' grammar learning process, common challenges encountered, and teaching strategies used in speaking activities.

The data analysis technique followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, (1994), consisting of three concurrent stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, relevant information from the transcriptions was selected and categorized. The data were then organized and displayed in the form of error classification tables to facilitate pattern recognition. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified based on the frequency and types of errors observed and were interpreted in light of relevant theories of second language acquisition.

To classify the grammatical errors, the study used an adapted version of the Linguistic Category Taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al. (1982). The rubric consisted of two major categories: (1) Morphological errors, including inflection, pronoun, article, and preposition; and (2) Syntactical errors, including copula, concord, tense, and adjective-word order. This categorization enabled a systematic identification of error types and supported the investigation into their potential causes during spoken language production.

To ensure the credibility of the error classification, interrater reliability was applied. Two independent raters with expertise in English language teaching analyzed and categorized the grammatical errors using the adapted taxonomy. Their results were compared and discussed to resolve any discrepancies, ensuring consistency and minimizing subjectivity in the classification process.

Result and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the types and causes of grammatical errors in students' speaking performances based on the speaking test and interview data with the English teacher. The analysis is organized according to the linguistic category of grammatical errors (morphological and syntactical) and their underlying causes.

1. **The types of grammatical errors in the linguistic category in the students' speaking performances**

Based on the speaking test, the researcher identified several types of grammatical errors made by students during their speaking performances. These errors fall into two main categories: morphological errors and syntactical errors.

a. Morphological Errors

Morphological errors are related to incorrect word formation, especially in terms of inflections, pronouns, articles, and prepositions.

1) Inflection

The following table presents the errors related to word inflection:

Table 1. The Errors in Inflection

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
The **ant** disturbing everyday	The **ants** disturbing everyday
The **haunt** house …	The **haunted** house …
… begin to hear some strange noises and see **ghost**	… begin to hear some strange noises and see **ghosts**
…little duckling and three **swan**	…little duckling and three **swans**
… **abandon** hospital	… **abandoned** hospital

These errors were commonly found in the omission or misformation of plural markers (e.g., *three swan* instead of *three swans*) and past tense markers (e.g., *haunt house* instead of *haunted house*). These findings indicate that students have not yet mastered the rules of word formation and understood the morphological changes needed to express number and tense correctly. This aligns with findings from Lingard et al. (2021) and Søby et al. (2023), who noted that suffixes such as *-ed* and *-s* are commonly misused by learners of English. These patterns suggest that students are still in the early stages of mastering word formation in English.

2) Pronoun

Errors in pronoun usage were also evident. The following examples illustrate these mistakes:

Table 2. The Errors in Pronoun

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
…then **it** jumped into the well	…then **she** jumped into the well
... from what **them** had collected	…from what **they** had collected
… of England because of **its legacy**	… of England because of **his legacy**
Their realized that the ugly duck has grown…	**They** realized that the ugly duck has grown…
…**them** helped each other	… **they helped** each other
Their realized that the ugly duck …	**They** realized that the ugly duck …

Students commonly confuse personal pronouns (e.g., *me, her, them*) and possessive pronouns (e.g., *my, his, their*), showing a lack of clarity in

distinguishing these forms during speaking tasks. They often interchanged subject and object pronouns or used possessive pronouns inaccurately, which led to confusion in meaning. This finding aligns with Hikmah and Wahyudi (2023) and Syaputri (2019), who noted that EFL learners often transfer grammatical structures and morphological patterns from their native language into English, which can lead to errors in pronoun usage.

3) Article

Many students struggled with the correct use of articles (*a, an, the*), particularly in narrative descriptions.

Table 3. The Errors in Article

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
When ***winter*** came….	When ***the winter*** came….
Ant slipped and fell, and ***dove*** save ***ant***	***The ant*** slipped and fell, and ***the dove*** save ***the ant***
Crow and ***pitcher*** …	***The*** crow and ***the pitcher*** …
…what inside ***haunted house***	…what inside ***the haunted house***
…***abandon*** hospital	…***the abandoned*** hospital
Group of teenagers …	***A group*** of teenagers …
… ***little duckling***, ***three swans***	… ***the little duckling***, ***the three*** swans

The misuse of definite and indefinite articles shows students' difficulty in applying the appropriate form, especially when describing singular and plural nouns. These errors indicate a lack of awareness regarding when and how articles should be applied—an issue frequently encountered by learners whose first language does not contain article systems. These findings align with Atapattu et al. (2019), who highlighted article confusion as a persistent issue for English learners.

4) Preposition

The following are the students' prepositional errors:

Table 4. The Errors in Preposition

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
…. ***at*** the spring	… ***in*** the spring
… teenagers began to wonder ***through*** dark	… teenagers began to wonder ***in the dark***

These errors occurred were the use of prepositions of place and time. The students faced difficulty to use preposition of place and time in the speaking test. Students either omitting necessary prepositions or using them incorrectly, which disrupted the intended meaning of their utterances. These findings align with the study by Aybek and Can (2025), which revealed that EFL learners tend to underuse prepositional phrase fragments while overusing alternative

structures such as verb phrase fragments. This suggests that mastering the correct use of prepositions within natural lexical bundles remains a significant challenge, ultimately impacting learners' fluency and lexical diversity.

Morphological errors were found to be widespread among students, particularly in their use of inflections, pronouns, articles, and prepositions. The dominance of these morphological errors supports previous studies that highlight article use, pronouns, and prepositions as persistent areas of difficulty for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. These types of errors confirm the classification made by Aini (2018), who stated that morphological errors are among the most common in English language learning. Students frequently made errors in nominal and verbal inflections, such as omitting plural endings or misusing verb tenses.

b. Syntactical Errors
Syntactical errors identified in students' speaking performances include mistakes in the use of copula, concord, tense, and adjective word order.

1) Copula
Errors involving copula verbs (e.g., *is, was, were*) were identified in the following table:

Table 5. The Errors in Copula

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
The fox and the goat *trapped* in the well	The fox and the goat *were trapped* in the well
…while the ant *distributing*	…while the ant *was distributing*
No one knows what *inside* …	No one knows what *is inside* …

Students showed limited understanding of linking verbs, especially in passive or descriptive constructions. Students would often say phrases such as "*the fox and the goat trapped in the well*", omitting the necessary verb "*were*", which is essential for forming a grammatically correct past progressive or passive sentence. This confirms Gayo and Widodo (2018), who found that copula omission is a typical syntactical error among learners.

2) Concord
Errors in concord (subject-verb agreement) were observed, as shown below:

Table 6. The Errors in Concord

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
A goat came to the well and saw the fox *were* there	A goat came to the well and saw the fox *was* there
Hercules were tricked by the goddess Hera, and *were* given	Hercules *was* tricked by the goddess Hera, and *was* given
The goat *were* too innocent	The goat *was* too innocent
…*stole* gold then *distribute* to the poor	…*stole* gold then *distributed* to the poor

These errors reflect students' difficulties with agreement between the subject and verb in terms of number or tense. Singular subjects were sometimes paired with plural verbs and vice versa, reflecting a lack of sensitivity to number and person agreement. Khan (2022), Ko (2024), and Muftah (2023) also found that concord is a common source of error among EFL learners.

3) Tense
Students often failed to consistently use the past tense in their narrative texts.

Table 7. The Errors in Tenses

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
Hercules *is allow*…	Hercules *was allowed*
ant *help* dove from the hunter	ant *helped* dove from the hunter
dove *save* ant	dove *saved* ant
they *begin* to hear some strange noises	they *began* to hear some strange noises
…and he *become* a symbol of hope	…and he *became* a symbol of hope
and *see* a ghost figure	and *saw* a ghost figure

Narrative speaking tasks require consistent use of the past tense. The errors observed suggest that students have not yet fully mastered this aspect. Despite being instructed to narrate stories using past tense forms, many students reverted to the present tense or used incorrect verb conjugations, which disrupted the temporal coherence of their narratives. This is consistent with the explanation found in *Research Methodology in Second-Language Acquisition* (Tarone, Gass, & Cohen, 1994), which highlights that tense misuse among second language learners often reflects interlanguage development and the overgeneralization of irregular verb forms. Interlanguage—the evolving linguistic system that learners construct as they acquire a second language—tends to produce systematic errors, such as tense misuse. These errors commonly result from the influence of first language rules or oversimplified patterns in the target language and reflect the learner's current stage of development rather than mere carelessness.

4) Adjective-word order
The table below shows errors in adjective word order:

Table 8. The Errors in the Adjective word order

Incorrect Usage	Correct Grammar
….met three *swan friendly*	….met three *friendly swans*
…grown into *a swan beautiful*	…grown into *a beautiful swan*

Errors in adjective order, such as placing descriptive words after nouns or mixing up the conventional sequence of adjectives, also indicated syntactic confusion influenced possibly by the students' native language structure. These errors indicate a lack of understanding of the standard adjective order:

determiner + opinion + size + age + shape + color + origin + material + purpose + noun. Learners from languages with post-nominal adjective placement face notable challenges internalizing English syntax for modifiers because they must adapt to a different structural pattern where adjectives precede nouns. This contrast in adjective placement and ordering can lead to errors and slower acquisition of English adjective syntax, as evidenced in studies of Idǫma, Arabic, and other language backgrounds (Kachakeche & Scontras, 2020; Titilola & Sunday, 2024; Trainin & and Shetreet, 2021)

Syntactical errors were found to be a significant obstacle for learners in achieving fluent and grammatically accurate spoken English. Among the types of errors identified, adjective word order errors were the least common, followed by errors involving copulas and subject-verb agreement. Tense errors were the most frequent, highlighting verb tense as a persistent area of difficulty in students' spoken narrative production.

Based on the results of the speaking test, it was evident that the most frequent morphological errors occurred in the use of articles and pronouns. In terms of syntactical errors, incorrect tense usage stood out as the most common issue. These patterns resonate with the findings of Erlangga et al. (2019), who similarly highlighted that verb forms, pronouns, and prepositions were among the most persistent challenges faced by EFL learners. Such recurring difficulties suggest a continued need for targeted grammatical instruction, particularly in these areas, to enhance students' spoken accuracy.

2. **The causes of the grammatical errors in the linguistic category in the students' speaking performances**

Based on the interview data, several causes of grammatical errors in students' speaking performances were identified. These causes are categorized and explained as follows:

a. Limited understanding of basic grammar

The researcher found that the students struggle with the fundamental aspects of grammar, particularly parts of speech.

> (Extract 1)
> *"Kesulitan siswa dalam aktivitas speaking itu… adalah part of speech, siswa masih perlu diajarkan mulai dari basicnya lagi."*
> (The students' difficulty in speaking activities was… part of speech, the students still need to be taught from the basic again)

The teacher emphasized the importance of reteaching basic grammar to help students construct proper sentences in their speaking activities. This limited understanding hinders their ability to communicate accurately in English. Many students struggle to understand and apply grammatical rules, particularly in spontaneous speech. This finding is in line with Pelawi (2025), who emphasized that the persistence of grammatical errors, even after repeated instruction, is often due to the inherent complexity of English grammar rules.

b. Difficulty in memorizing grammatical rules
Students face challenges in remembering and internalizing grammar rules.

(Extract 2)
"….dan mengenai penyebabnya, saya rasa ini karena kurangnya …mengingat ataupun menghafal aturan grammar"
(…and about the causes, I think it is because of the lack of students' effort to remember or memorize the grammar rules)

The teacher suggested that students often forget or avoid memorizing grammatical structures, which contributes to repeated errors in their speaking. This may stem from low motivation or ineffective learning strategies. The teacher noted that students frequently forget previously taught rules or apply them incorrectly, mainly due to limited exposure and insufficient reinforcement. This corresponds with the findings of Junaidi and Zaim (2022), who highlighted that inadequate internalization of grammar rules significantly contributes to the occurrence of errors.

c. Lack of practice in applying grammar during speaking
The teacher explained that students do not actively engage in grammar review or practice, which prevents them from applying what they have learned in speaking.

(Extract 3)
"….mengenai penyebabnya, saya rasa ini karena kurangnya minat siswa melakukan pengulangan materi…"
(…about the causes, I believe it is due to the students' lack of interest in reviewing the material…)

This lack of practice results in limited exposure and application, ultimately leading to frequent grammatical errors during speaking activities. Students are often unmotivated to engage deeply with grammar learning and tend to be passive during speaking activities. As a result, they continue to make the same grammatical mistakes and experience difficulties constructing accurate sentences. This observation supports Sari (2019), who found that students' lack of motivation and limited practice with grammatical structures are major causes of persistent errors in their spoken English.

d. Limited effort in improving grammar mastery
It can be inferred from the interview that the teacher makes efforts to correct students' grammar through question-and-answer sessions and casual conversation.

(Extract 4)

"Biasanya… menggunakan Q & A dari bacaan siswa, bisa berupa teks seperti teks naratif atau descriptive dan lain-lain sesuai topic pelajaran mereka. Kadang iseng juga tanya keseharian mereka untuk deteksi grammatical errornya. Sayangnya, setelah kegiatan kelas selesai, sebagian besar siswa jarang berinisiatif meninjau ulang aturan grammar atau berlatih sendiri. Kalaupun saya tanya minggu berikutnya, masih banyak kesalahan yang sama.""
(Usually… I use Q & A based on the students' reading, which may be narrative or descriptive texts depending on their topic. Sometimes I casually ask about their daily life to detect grammatical errors. Unfortunately, once class is over, most students

seldom take the initiative to review grammar rules or practice on their own. Even when I ask them the following week, many of the same errors remain.)

However, it also reflects that students rarely take the initiative to enhance their grammar mastery outside these sessions. As a result, progress remains slow due to their lack of proactive engagement in addressing grammatical weaknesses. This is consistent with Behforouz and Al Ghaithi (2024), who highlighted that self-directed learning fosters essential skills such as awareness, strategy use, and self-evaluation, which are crucial for mastering grammar through continuous practice and reflection. Similarly, Aisyah et al. (2024) and Rahim et al. (2024) emphasized that learners who actively apply language learning strategies—particularly metacognitive strategies like self-monitoring and planning—tend to achieve better outcomes, including improved grammatical competence. The students' limited efforts may indicate a lack of awareness or confidence in using these strategies.

e. Lack of motivation to apply grammatical rules

The teacher recognizes students' low motivation in applying grammar during speaking.

> (Extract 5)
> *"Saya rasa memang mereka masih kurang termotivasi untuk menerapkan grammar yang benar ketika berbicara. Maka dari itu saya kadang mengkombinasikan beberapa metode agar mereka tidak bosan dan tetap menggunakan grammar yang benar."*
> (I think they are still not motivated enough to apply correct grammar while speaking. That's why I sometimes combine several methods so they won't get bored and will keep using correct grammar.)

While the teacher tries to use various methods to maintain students' interest, the lack of intrinsic motivation from the students themselves becomes a significant barrier to consistent grammar usage. This finding aligns with research that emphasizes the role of interest and perceived competence in grammar learning. Zakaria (2024) found that interest, a key component of intrinsic motivation, is central to sustained engagement and significantly influences learners' perception of their grammatical performance. When intrinsic motivation is lacking, students tend to engage with grammar only superficially and often avoid using more complex structures during speaking tasks.

The teacher specifically identified several root problems: insufficient foundational knowledge of grammar, inability to retain and apply grammatical rules, a lack of regular speaking practice using correct structures, and low enthusiasm to improve their grammatical proficiency. The causes of grammatical errors are not solely linguistic in nature but are also influenced by affective and behavioral dimensions. As Junaidi and Zaim (2022) noted, the relationship between motivation and grammar proficiency is deeply interconnected, suggesting that addressing both cognitive and emotional factors is essential for improving students' grammatical accuracy in speaking. Therefore, efforts to minimize these errors should involve not only enhanced grammar instruction but also strategies to increase student motivation and active engagement in using grammar communicatively.

Conclusion

This study examined the morphological and syntactical errors found in the speaking performances of students, alongside the underlying causes of these errors. The analysis revealed that students commonly made morphological errors such as incorrect use of verb inflections and plural markers, as well as syntactical errors involving misordered sentence elements, missing auxiliaries, and improper subject-verb agreement. These errors indicate limited mastery of English grammatical structures, especially in spontaneous spoken communication.

The causes of these grammatical errors were traced to both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Key issues included the students' difficulty in understanding and internalizing grammar rules, limited exposure to and practice with correct grammatical forms, and low motivation to actively engage in grammar-based speaking practice. These findings were consistent with previous studies (e.g., Junaidi & Zaim, 2022; Pelawi, 2025; Sari, 2019), which underscore the interplay between cognitive challenges and affective factors in shaping learners' grammatical performance.

Addressing these errors requires a multidimensional approach. Teachers are encouraged to implement more communicative and contextualized grammar instruction, integrate consistent oral practice, and foster student motivation through interactive and engaging activities. Future research may explore intervention-based strategies or compare the effectiveness of grammar-focused versus communication-oriented instruction in minimizing students' spoken grammatical errors.

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