



Common Writing Problems Among EFL Learners: A Structured Narrative Review of Grammar, Vocabulary and Punctuation Difficulties

Imranullah Khanjar^{1*}, Zahidullah Jabarkhil², Ismatullah Miakhil³

1, 2 Department of Pashto, Faculty of Literature and Human Sciences, Laghman University, Laghman, Afghanistan.

3 Department of Pashto, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Nangarhar University, Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

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ABSTRACT

This structured narrative review examines grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation difficulties in English as a foreign language (EFL) writing. The evidence base contains 10 identifiable primary EFL studies published between 2016 and 2025, with one ESL intervention study and one systematic review used separately for context. Publisher records, abstracts, and accessible full texts were checked, and findings were organized by domain and evidence type. Explicit difficulty reports were confirmed in three core studies for grammar, five for lexical resources or their relationship with writing, and four for punctuation or mechanics; domains overlap. Specific reports include verb and tense errors, article and preposition errors, perceived difficulty with dependent clauses, inappropriate word choice, and misuse or omission of punctuation marks. Vocabulary research distinguishes productive knowledge from recognition and shows that lexical performance varies with genre. Intervention findings concern writing improvement rather than the frequency of individual errors. The synthesis identifies useful diagnostic priorities but does not establish a universal ranking of difficulties or causal relationships among the three domains. Integrated writing tasks, focused feedback, and revision are proposed as instructional implications requiring local evaluation.

KEYWORDS: EFL Writing; Grammatical Difficulties; Productive Vocabulary; Punctuation.

Introduction

Writing in a foreign language requires learners to make lexical and grammatical choices while organizing a readable text. Empirical error analysis documents difficulties across several of these dimensions rather than a single uniform problem. [Kadan \(2023\)](#), for example, identified grammatical, semantic, and mechanical errors in Turkish students' essays, while [Alsoweed et al. \(2025\)](#) examined grammatical and mechanical problems in Saudi preparatory-year writing. Such evidence makes a combined examination of language accuracy and written expression useful, but it also requires attention to differences in tasks, learners, and assessment methods.

Grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation are investigated through different research traditions. Error analyses classify deviations in texts; vocabulary studies measure knowledge and lexical performance; questionnaires elicit perceived difficulty; and intervention studies assess change following instruction. Their outcomes cannot be treated as interchangeable indicators of error frequency. [Cho \(2024\)](#) examined predictors of writing performance, whereas [Thy and Nuong \(2025\)](#) investigated punctuation proficiency, written errors, and learner explanations. Combining these studies without distinguishing their designs would obscure what each can establish.

A previous systematic review focused on interventions intended to improve university EFL writing ([Zhang et al., 2023](#)). The present review has a different, narrower purpose: to connect identifiable evidence about three

*Corresponding Author: (Khanjar I)

Email: khanjar.ranna@gmail.com

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writing domains and distinguish directly documented difficulties from instructional interpretations. It does not claim that no previous review has addressed these domains. Its contribution is an explicit map of a bounded literature base, including the limits of comparing error analyses, lexical research, and intervention outcomes.

Afghanistan is a prospective application context, not a population represented by the reviewed studies. None of the 10 core studies investigates Afghan learners. Consequently, this review cannot estimate local error rates or substantiate claims about Afghan class sizes, teaching practices, or resource availability. The relevant gap is the absence of directly applicable Afghan evidence within this corpus. Findings from other settings can inform questions for local diagnostic research, but their transfer requires evaluation.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim is to examine the identifiable evidence on grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation in EFL writing while making its methodological boundaries explicit. The review addresses three questions: (1) which grammatical difficulties are explicitly documented in the core studies? (2) What does the evidence show about lexical resources and written expression? (3) Which punctuation and related mechanical difficulties are reported? A supplementary question concerns the instructional implications that can reasonably be drawn from this evidence.

Literature Review

Grammar and the Interpretation of Difficulty

Evidence about grammar depends on how difficulty is measured. Written error analysis provides evidence of actual deviations in a particular task, while reported attitudes indicate perceived demands. [Wongkittiporn \(2024\)](#) surveyed 30 Thai undergraduates and identified perceived difficulty with dependent clauses. These responses cannot be interpreted as observed clause-error rates. Similarly, a study identifying grammar as its largest error category does not establish that grammar is the dominant problem in every EFL population. The background literature therefore supports separate treatment of observed errors, perceived difficulty, and learning outcomes.

Vocabulary Knowledge and Lexical Performance

Productive vocabulary involves using words in a task, whereas receptive knowledge involves recognizing or understanding them. This distinction matters for evaluating writing difficulties. [Cho \(2024\)](#) found that productive vocabulary measures predicted writing performance, while the receptive measure did not significantly predict it in that sample. Lexical richness also depends on genre and measurement choices ([Heng et al., 2023](#)). A repetitive text, a low vocabulary-test score, and a low lexical-diversity score may be related, but they do not represent the same outcome or establish a common cause.

Punctuation and Writing Instruction

Punctuation research addresses conventions that help readers interpret sentence relationships. [Raheem and Ghafar \(2024\)](#) analyzed punctuation and spelling in Iraqi academic writing; [Thy and Nuong \(2025\)](#) examined a Vietnamese sample using assessment, essays, and interviews. These studies support attention to mechanics but do not establish a universal order of punctuation difficulty. Intervention scholarship supplies a separate perspective: [Zhang et al. \(2023\)](#) synthesized research on instruction, feedback, cooperation, and technology. Its findings inform discussion of teaching options and are not counted as additional primary error evidence here.

Methodology

Design and Scope

This article uses a structured narrative review with descriptive evidence mapping. The starting corpus is the 12 identifiable references in the manuscript: 10 primary EFL studies, one primary ESL study, and one secondary systematic review. This is a bounded body, not the result of a newly completed comprehensive database search. The identifiable primary EFL articles fall between 2016 and 2025.

Corpus Classification and Eligibility Boundaries

Core evidence consists of identifiable primary studies explicitly addressing EFL writing difficulties, lexical resources in writing, perceived syntactic difficulty, or an intervention with writing outcomes. Background-only sources are separated to avoid combining primary and secondary evidence or treating ESL and EFL populations as identical. [Almashy et al. \(2024\)](#) studied Indian school learners described as ESL learners and is retained

solely as contextual intervention evidence. [Zhang et al. \(2023\)](#) is a systematic review and is also contextual. Neither contributes to the denominator of 10 core studies.

Extraction and Descriptive Synthesis

The article organizes the available information by citation, setting, design or instrument, verified sample, and contribution to the review questions. Table 1 identifies all core studies and Table 2 reports confirmed coverage of specific themes. Coding is descriptive: a study is counted once per theme only when the inspected source explicitly documents that theme.

Results

Characteristics of the Evidence Base

The core corpus contains 10 primary studies. Its methods include written error analysis, a questionnaire about syntax, vocabulary assessment, longitudinal lexical analysis, and writing interventions. These studies contribute different kinds of evidence, so their inclusion does not imply that all measured the frequency of writing errors. No study in the core corpus directly examines Afghanistan.

Table 1. Core EFL studies and their evidence contributions

Study	Setting and verified sample	Design or instruments	Contribution
Alsoweed et al. (2025)	Saudi Arabia; preparatory-year learners; sample size not verified	Composition-based error analysis	Grammar and mechanical difficulties
Cho (2024)	South Korea; 42 college students	Vocabulary and grammar tests; argumentative essay; regression	Productive vocabulary and writing performance
Heng et al. (2023)	China; 54 students; eight compositions each	Longitudinal analysis of argumentative and expository texts	Lexical richness and genre
Kadan (2023)	Türkiye; 42 B2 preparatory students	Essay-based document and error analysis	Grammar, word choice, and mechanics
Raheem and Ghafar (2024)	Iraq; 117 written samples	Quantitative analysis of academic writing	Punctuation and spelling
Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi (2016)	Setting not independently verified; 30 female upper-intermediate learners	Vocabulary tasks and compositions before and after instruction	Productive vocabulary use and retention
Sukying (2025)	Thailand; 63 English majors	Five vocabulary tests; rated speaking and writing tasks	Vocabulary depth and writing
Thy and Nuong (2025)	Vietnam; 41 intermediate learners	Punctuation assessment, essays, and interviews	Specific punctuation errors and reported factors
Wei et al. (2023)	China; 190 EFL students	Randomized trial; IELTS writing sample test	Automated feedback and writing outcomes
Wongkittiporn (2024)	Thailand; 30 sophomores	Five-point questionnaire; descriptive statistics	Perceived syntactic difficulty

Grammatical Difficulties

Explicit grammatical difficulty was confirmed in three core studies: [Kadan \(2023\)](#), [Alsoweed et al. \(2025\)](#), and [Wongkittiporn \(2024\)](#). Kadan reported verb or tense, article, and preposition errors in actual writing. [Alsoweed et al. \(2025\)](#) documented grammatical and mechanical deviations, but the inspected abstract does not support a detailed ranking of individual grammatical subtypes. Wongkittiporn documented perceived difficulty with dependent clauses rather than directly counted syntactic errors. These distinctions prevent a defensible claim that one specific error is the most frequent across the entire corpus.

Vocabulary and Written Expression

Five core studies contribute direct evidence about lexical problems, knowledge, or textual performance: [Kadan \(2023\)](#), [Cho \(2024\)](#), [Heng et al. \(2023\)](#), [Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi \(2016\)](#), and [Sukying \(2025\)](#). Kadan identified word-choice problems. Cho and Sukying examined associations between vocabulary knowledge and writing, while Heng et al. investigated variation in lexical richness across genres and over time. Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi reported increased productive use following explicit vocabulary instruction. These studies collectively distinguish lexical accuracy, available productive resources, and lexical richness; they do not establish that limited vocabulary causes weak idea development in all learners.

Lexical associations require careful interpretation. A relationship between vocabulary knowledge and a writing score does not determine the direction of causation. Genre-related differences also mean that lexical repetition or sophistication cannot be interpreted independently of the writing prompt. Intervention evidence supports the possibility of improving productive use under particular instructional conditions, rather than a population-wide estimate of vocabulary difficulty.

Punctuation and Related Mechanics

Punctuation or mechanical difficulty was explicitly confirmed in four core studies: [Kadan \(2023\)](#), [Alsoweed et al. \(2025\)](#), [Raheem and Ghafar \(2024\)](#), and [Thy and Nuong \(2025\)](#). The Vietnamese study reported misuse or omission of semicolons, commas, and periods, as well as improper ellipsis use. Its within-study ordering placed semicolon errors ahead of comma and period errors. That ordering is not a cross-study ranking. Capitalization is recorded separately as a related writing convention; it is not itself a punctuation mark.

Table 2. Minimum confirmed theme coverage among 10 core studies

Theme	Confirmed studies	Count
Grammar or syntactic difficulty	Kadan; Alsoweed et al.; Wongkittiporn	3/10
Verb or tense errors	Kadan	1/10
Article errors	Kadan	1/10
Preposition errors	Kadan	1/10
Perceived dependent-clause difficulty	Wongkittiporn	1/10
Lexical problems, knowledge, or richness	Kadan; Cho; Heng et al.; Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi; Sukying	5/10
Inappropriate word choice	Kadan	1/10
Productive vocabulary knowledge or use	Cho; Solati-Dehkordi and Salehi; Sukying	3/10
Genre-related lexical richness	Heng et al.	1/10
Punctuation or mechanical difficulties	Kadan; Alsoweed et al.; Raheem and Ghafar; Thy and Nuong	4/10
Comma, period, semicolon, or ellipsis errors	Thy and Nuong	1/10 for each named mark
Capitalization difficulties	Kadan	1/10

Intervention Evidence and Contextual Sources

[Wei et al. \(2023\)](#) reported better writing outcomes in an automated-writing-evaluation intervention than in its control condition, including lexical and grammatical dimensions. These outcomes do not supply counts of particular error subtypes. Contextual evidence from [Almashy et al. \(2024\)](#) identifies agreement, verb-form, article, preposition, punctuation, and capitalization errors in Indian ESL writing. However, its punctuation outcome favored the control group over the digital-tool groups. Its reported total of 213 participants also differs from the sum of the four group sizes, which is 220. This internal reporting discrepancy and the ESL setting limit its use here. The secondary review by [Zhang et al. \(2023\)](#) is used only to contextualize instructional discussion, avoiding double counting of its underlying studies.

Discussion

What the Evidence Establishes

The studies show that grammar, lexical resources, and mechanics merit attention in EFL writing, but the evidence does not support a universal hierarchy of problems. Counts in Table 2 describe coverage in a small, predetermined corpus and are influenced by what researchers chose to investigate. An error-analysis study can report several domains, whereas a vocabulary study may never assess punctuation. Greater theme coverage therefore cannot establish greater learner difficulty, severity, or prevalence.

The strongest defensible distinction is between different forms of evidence. Text analysis documents errors under specific task conditions; questionnaires document perceptions; correlational studies document associations; and interventions document outcomes under particular instructional arrangements. Lexical research demonstrates the relevance of productive knowledge and genre-sensitive assessment. Error analyses supply diagnostic categories. Neither alone establishes causal relationships among grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation, and no core study tests their combined causal interaction.

Pedagogical Interpretation

An integrated approach is a pedagogical interpretation of this evidence rather than a directly tested conclusion of the review. Complete writing tasks can give teachers opportunities to observe grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation together, while focused feedback can address selected recurring problems. The corpus does not establish that rule-focused instruction alone is ineffective, nor does it compare every alternative instructional approach. Recommendations should therefore be treated as options to test rather than proven requirements for every classroom.

Digital feedback may support writing development, but improvement in broad writing scores should not be translated into guaranteed correction of every error type. The contextual ESL intervention's mixed punctuation result reinforces this caution. Teachers need to examine whether corrections are understood and transferred to independent writing. Claims about long-term retention, the best feedback method, or superiority over classroom instruction require evidence beyond this bounded review.

Relevance to Afghanistan

For Afghan EFL classrooms, the review offers a provisional diagnostic framework. Teachers and researchers could classify locally collected writing by grammatical subtype, lexical accuracy and variety, and punctuation conventions. The resulting data would show which problems require attention in a particular institution or proficiency group. Peer review, guided revision, and paper-based checklists may be practical options where appropriate, but their feasibility and effectiveness in Afghanistan are suggestions for local evaluation, not findings of the reviewed studies.

Pedagogical Implications

First, diagnose difficulties from complete writing tasks rather than assuming that all learners share the same profile. Second, distinguish lexical recognition from productive use and evaluate vocabulary in context. Third, connect punctuation feedback to sentence relationships and use targeted editing tasks. Fourth, provide opportunities to revise and then assess independent writing to examine transfer. Finally, select digital or non-digital support according to local access and teacher judgment.

Limitations and Future Research

A subsequent systematic review should use a prospectively specified protocol, reproducible database-specific searches, dated exports, documented duplicate removal, explicit eligibility decisions, and article-level reasons for full-text exclusion. It should separate primary studies from reviews, apply design-appropriate appraisal, and independently verify extraction and theme counts. Local research should assess Afghan writing directly and evaluate feasible instructional interventions using transparent error definitions and follow-up writing tasks.

Conclusion

The identifiable EFL literature documents grammatical and mechanical difficulties and links lexical resources with written performance. Its diverse evidence supports careful diagnosis of verb and tense use, articles,

prepositions, syntactic demands, word choice, and punctuation conventions. Productive vocabulary and genre-sensitive assessment deserve particular attention. The review provides a transparent account of a bounded corpus rather than a PRISMA-compliant systematic synthesis. Integrated writing practice, feedback, and revision are reasonable instructional proposals, but their effects and relevance to Afghan learners require direct evaluation.

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