



Analysis of Inflectional Morpheme Use in the Written Compositions of Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

This study examined the use of English inflectional morphemes in the short-written compositions of 26 first-year Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (BTLED) from a university in Caraga during the academic year 2025-2026. Specifically, it analyzed the types and frequencies of inflectional morpheme errors involving plural (-s/-es), past tense (-ed), progressive (-ing), and possessive (-'s), and classified them based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy of Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). The study employed a descriptive quantitative error analysis design supported by qualitative interpretations. The unit of analysis consisted of 26 reflective written compositions produced during an extemporaneous speech activity. Errors were identified and classified using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, while frequency counts and percentage distributions were used to analyze the data. The most frequent errors involved past tense inflectional morphemes, followed by plural, progressive, and possessive. The most dominant type of error was misformation, indicating that learners found it challenging to select and apply correct grammatical forms, and further suggesting that L1 transfer, overgeneralization of grammatical rules, and limited morphological awareness may have contributed to such difficulties. The study recommends strengthening explicit morphological instruction and focused writing activities.

Keywords: Inflectional morphemes, Error analysis, ESL learners, English morphology, Surface Strategy Taxonomy

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1. Introduction

Language learning involves not only vocabulary acquisition but also mastery of grammatical systems that enable learners to participate in clear and meaningful communication. One such system is Morphology, which governs how words change form to express grammatical relations such as tense, number, aspect, and possession. Inflectional morphemes such as plural markers

(-s/-es), past tense regular inflections (-d/-ed), progressive aspect marker (-ing), and possessive enclitics (-'s) play a very important role in ensuring grammatical accuracy and effective communication in English. The appropriate use of inflectional morphemes helps promote communicative precision, language proficiency, and grammatical accuracy, whereas misuse may impair comprehension, reduce fluency and obscure the intended meaning [1].

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Studies in relation to inflectional morphology have revealed substantial variation in learner production and differences in morphological processing. Almakrob [2] pointed out that the performance of second language learners varied across verb types and task conditions and suggested that factors such as first language background and task variation may influence the use of English past tense morphology. This emphasizes the context-dependent nature of inflectional morpheme use. Similarly, Dogar et al. [3], through corpus-based analysis of the ICNALE dataset, observed discrepancies in ESL learners' use of inflectional morphemes, particularly in possessive forms, plural nouns, subject-verb agreement, and tense-related forms. The study also identified challenges in the usage of comparative and superlative structures and noted variations in patterns according to linguistic background, stage of acquisition, and instructional exposure. Jacobson and Yu[4] also reported in their study that inflectional and derivational morphemes are processed differently in the mental lexicon, with morphological structure influencing word recognition and language comprehension tasks. Collectively, these studies indicate variability in both production and processing of morphology among second language learners.

In the Philippine context, Resueno and De Leon [5], examined the morphosyntactic performance of senior high school learners in translation tasks, reported frequent errors in verb tense, subject-verb agreement and pluralization, attributing them to both interlingual transfer from the first language and intralingual developmental processes. In a related study involving university students, Rabadi [6] found a significant positive relationship between morphological awareness and vocabulary knowledge, indicating that learners with stronger awareness of word formation processes tend to demonstrate higher vocabulary knowledge. These findings highlight the role of morphological knowledge in second language learning and provide

evidence that learners' morphosyntactic performance and lexical development may be shaped by linguistic transfer and developmental processes. Studies on ESL and EFL learners' writing have consistently reported difficulties in the use of English inflectional morphemes such as plural -s/-es, past tense -ed and subject-verb agreement markers [7, 8, 9]. These studies typically employ descriptive error analysis frameworks such as Error analysis [10] and Surface Strategy Taxonomy [11], to classify errors in written output. In the Philippine context, existing research has also identified recurring grammatical and morphological errors [9], indicating that such difficulties persist among Filipino ESL learners.

However, despite these findings, few studies have specifically examined the use of inflectional morphemes among Filipino pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programs. Existing studies have largely focused on general ESL or EFL learners or on broad categories of grammatical errors which provide limited evidence on the specific morphological difficulties encountered by beginning pre-service teachers. This represents an important gap because first-year Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (BTLED) students are future educators whose proficiency in English grammar and writing is essential for effective classroom communication and professional practice. Examining their inflectional morpheme use can provide valuable insights into their early morphosyntactic development and inform language support initiatives within teacher education programs. Moreover, by focusing on inflectional morphemes in authentic classroom writing, the present study extends existing research by providing localized evidence on error patterns of Filipino pre-service teachers.

To address this gap, the present study examined the use of inflectional morphemes in written compositions of first-year BTLED students. Specifically, it sought to: 1) identify the frequency and distribution of errors in the use of English inflectional morphemes,

particularly plural (-s/-es), past tense (-d/-ed), progressive (-ing), and possessive (-'s); 2) categorize the inflectional morpheme errors based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy; and 3) distinguish the possible linguistic and developmental factors that influence the occurrence of inflectional morpheme errors among the students. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of morphological acquisition among Filipino ESL and provide pedagogical insights for enhancing writing instruction in teacher education.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

A descriptive quantitative error analysis design was utilized in this study. Although the analysis included descriptive linguistic interpretations of errors, the study remained quantitative with the use of frequency counts and percentage distributions to identify recurring morphological error patterns. Error analysis was suitable as it systematically classified errors and provided insights into learners' interlanguage development and morphological difficulties. Using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy developed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen [11], errors were categorized into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. To ensure comparability with prior studies, this study combined quantitative frequency analysis with close interpretive reading of students' written forms and linguistic contexts.

2.2 Participants of the study

The participants consisted of twenty-six (26) first-year Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (BTLED) students from a higher education institution in Caraga during the Academic Year 2025-2026. Purposive sampling was employed to select students who were officially enrolled in the BTLED program, completed the required English reflective writing task during the extemporaneous speech

activity, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. These criteria ensured that the participants could provide authentic written compositions relevant to the analysis of English inflectional morpheme use. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection and anonymity was maintained by assigning identification codes to each participant.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The primary source of data consisted of students' short-written compositions. The participants were asked to write a reflective composition about their experiences during the extemporaneous speech activity, which consisted of a minimum of one paragraph with approximately 100-150 words. The 26 compositions served as the unit of analysis, from which 50 inflectional morpheme errors were identified and analyzed.

The researchers reviewed all compositions to identify errors involving the English inflectional morphemes for plural (-s/-es), past tense (-ed), progressive (-ing) and possessive (-'s). The errors were classified according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy[11], which categorizes learner errors into omission, addition, misformation and misordering.

To ensure consistency and prevent overrepresentation of recurring errors, each error was recorded separately when students committed multiple errors within a sentence or different errors across sentences. However, repeated instances of the same error committed by the same students throughout a composition were counted as a single distinct error type. This procedure minimized the overrepresentation of repetitive errors and resulted in a validated dataset of 50 identified errors. Although some identified errors occurred within broader syntactic inaccuracies, only the inflectional morpheme component was analyzed and classified. Errors involving noun pluralization, past tense forms, progressive aspect markers, and possessive markers were included, while errors outside the scope of

English inflectional morphology were excluded. Frequency counts and percentage distributions were used to determine the number and distribution of errors while interpretive analysis was used to explain possible sources of the identified errors.

2.5 Reliability and validation

The identification and classification of inflectional morpheme errors were validated by two external language experts with the primary researcher serving as the initial coder. The experts independently reviewed a randomly selected 20% of the coded compositions using an operational guide based on Surface Strategy Taxonomy[11]. Although no formal inter-rater

reliability coefficient was calculated, independent review and consensus strengthened the reliability of the coding process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Types and frequencies of errors in inflectional morphemes

The analysis of the students' written compositions identified 50 errors in the use of English inflectional morphemes across four categories, as presented in Table 1. Past tense (-ed) errors were the most frequent (58%), followed by plural (-s/-es) errors (24%), progressive (-ing) errors (10%) and possessive (-'s) errors (8%).

Table 1. Distribution of Inflectional Morphemes Errors

Type of Morpheme	Frequency	Percentage
Plural (-s/-es)	12	24
Past tense (-ed)	29	58
Progressive (-ing)	5	10
Possessive (-'s)	4	8
Total	50	100

Past tense (-ed) errors primarily involved the use of base or present tense verb forms instead of the required past tense forms. Examples include "I *feel* nervous," instead of "I *felt* nervous" and "I *will deliver*" instead of "I *delivered*." These errors occurred because the learners described complete past events but failed to apply the appropriate past inflection. These findings indicate that learners experienced greater difficulty applying past tense inflectional markers than other English inflectional morphemes.

Pluralization errors accounted for 24% of the total errors. These included unnecessary plural markers in nouns such as "*weaknesses*" instead of "*weakness*," "*strengths*" instead of "*strength*," and "*students*" instead of "*student*." These examples suggest that learners overgeneralized the plural marker by applying it to nouns that were intended to express singular or general meaning. Progressive and possessive errors occurred less

frequently but still reflected inconsistencies in the use of English inflectional endings.

The predominance of past tense errors is consistent with Wahid et al [12], who reported that verb-related errors were among the most prominent inflectional errors committed by learners. Similarly, Almakrob [2] found that the learners' acquisition of English past tense morphology may be influenced by the type of elicitation task and by learners' first language contributing to variations in the use of English past tense markers across lexical categories. Dogar et al. [3] also noted that learners often experience difficulties with past tense inflection, particularly in the acquisition of irregular verb forms, which may result in the overapplication of regular past tense markers and other non-target-like forms. The authors further suggested that such patterns may be associated with differences in language exposure, instructional experiences and native language influence. Furthermore, Khan [13]

found that learners who received explicit morphological instruction showed significantly greater gains in the acquisition of irregular inflectional morphemes than those who did not. These findings indicate that the mastery of past tense inflectional morphemes remains challenging for most learners and that explicit instruction and consistent practice may help improve grammatical accuracy.

Similarly, the pluralization errors observed in the present study are consistent with Rabadi [6], who reported that learners with limited morphological awareness may struggle to manipulate inflectional suffixes accurately. In addition, Niez et al. [9], noted that ESL learners often struggle to maintain grammatical accuracy in authentic writing tasks, which resulted in recurring errors in pluralization and

tense marking. These findings support the present results, suggesting that students continue to experience challenges in accurately applying English inflectional morphemes in authentic writing tasks, reflecting limitations in their knowledge of English morphology and grammar.

3.2 Classification of errors according to Surface Strategy Taxonomy

To examine further the nature of the errors, they were classified according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy developed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen as shown in Table 2 [11].

Table 2. Classification of errors based on Surface Strategy Taxonomy

Error Type	Plural (-s/-es)	Past Tense (-ed)	Progressive (-ing)	Possessive (-'s)	Total Errors	% of Total Errors
<i>Omission</i>	3	7	0	0	10	20
<i>Addition</i>	9	4	0	0	13	26
<i>Misformation</i>	0	18	5	4	27	54
<i>Misordering</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Total</i>	12	29	5	4	50	100

Of the 50 identified errors, misformation was the most frequent accounting for 27 occurrences or 54%. These were primarily related to past tense (-ed), progressive (-ing), and possessive (-'s) morphemes, with past forms recording the highest number of instances (18). These errors involved the usage of wrong grammatical forms, such as in the words “*feel*” instead of “*felt*,” “*deliver*” instead of “*delivered*,” and “*stand*” instead of “*stood*.” Rather than omitting the verb, learners supplied an incorrect form, indicating an attempt to apply grammatical rules despite incomplete mastery of English tense inflections.

With 13 or 26% of all errors, addition errors came in second. Most of these errors (9) involved plural (-s/-es) morphemes and consisted of the unnecessary attachment of plural suffixes to words that did not require

them. Examples included “*weaknesses*” instead of “*weakness*” and “*strengths*” instead of “*strength*.” These errors illustrate the unnecessary addition of plural suffixes to abstract nouns used in general sense.

Omission errors accounted for 10 occurrences (20%). Most involved past tense (-ed) forms (7), followed by plural (-s/-es) forms (3). These errors primarily involved the absence of required grammatical markers in sentences referring to completed action, as illustrated by “*conquer*” instead of “*conquered*” and “*observe*” instead of “*observed*.” In these cases, the omission of the past tense markers resulted in verbs that did not agree with the intended time reference of the sentences.

No instances of misordering were identified in the students’ compositions. This suggests that the students generally demonstrated familiarity with basic English

word order. Since the study focused on the use of inflectional morphemes, the findings indicate that students experienced greater difficulty with grammatical marking and word formation than with sentence construction.

The predominance of misformation errors suggests that students experienced challenges in selecting and applying the appropriate grammatical forms rather than simply omitting inflectional markers. This finding is consistent with Hatifi et al. [8], who identified misformation as one of the most common errors among EFL learners. Similarly, Niez et al. [9] reported that ESL students frequently have trouble applying tense and aspect markers correctly in real-world writing activities.

The addition errors further suggest learners' tendency to overgeneralize pluralization rules. This finding aligns with Oz's [14] discussion that morphological awareness involves the recognition and manipulation of inflectional morphemes and that awareness of inflectional morphology contributes to grammar accuracy. Together with omission errors, the prevalence of addition and misformation errors indicates that learners attempted to apply grammatical rules but had not yet fully mastered them.

Overall, the Surface Strategy Taxonomy suggests that the students experienced greater difficulty in applying appropriate inflectional forms than in constructing sentence structure. These findings highlight the need for writing instruction that emphasizes noun inflections, verb tense marking, and the accurate application of English inflectional morphemes.

3.3 Possible sources of inflectional morpheme errors

To interpret the observed inflectional morpheme errors, the present study adopted an analytical framework informed by Error Analysis [10], where errors are viewed as systematic indicators of language development,

and Interlanguage Theory [15], which proposes that learners develop an evolving interlanguage system. Guided by these perspectives, the identified error patterns were examined in relation to four possible sources commonly discussed in the second language acquisition literature: (1) L1 transfer, (2) overgeneralization of grammatical rules, (3) developmental factors, and (4) cognitive constraints. Since these factors were not directly investigated in the present study, they are presented as possible explanations rather than confirmed causes.

L1 Transfer. Because inflectional marking rarely occurs in many Philippine languages, which rely more on particles and contextual cues rather than on bound inflectional morphemes to signal tense and aspect, the inflectional errors observed in the present study may reflect L1 transfer in English writing. The present study provides evidence consistent with this interpretation, as evidenced by 54% misformation errors, 20% omission errors, and 58% of the total errors involving tense marking. Alsawsh and Shormani [16] reported that first language transfer plays a significant role in L2 acquisition, where learners' first language structures may influence the production of English forms, alongside developmental and intralingual factors. Similarly, Munder [17] observed recurring grammatical errors in Filipino ESL learners' written outputs, particularly in areas involving verb tense, subject-verb agreement and noun-related forms. The study also suggests that such errors may be influenced by first language structures and differences between English and learners' native linguistic systems. This interpretation is further supported by Lin et al. [18], who suggested that grammatical errors in L2 writing reflect the combined influence of L1 transfer and learners' developing interlanguage system.

Overgeneralization of Grammatical Rules. Another possible explanation is the overgeneralization of grammatical rules. This was particularly noticeable in addition errors

(26%), where the students added plural markers to singular or non-count nouns needlessly, such as “*weaknesses*” instead of “*weakness*” and “*strengths*” instead of “*strength*.” These errors may indicate attempts to apply familiar grammatical rules beyond appropriate contexts. Rabadi [6] similarly reported that limited morphological awareness may hinder learners’ ability to manipulate English inflectional suffixes accurately.

Developmental Factors. The identified errors may also reflect learners’ developmental stage in acquiring English morphology. Consistent with Selinker’s Interlanguage Theory [15], learners gradually construct knowledge of the target language and may apply grammatical rules inconsistently. This interpretation is supported by the predominance of misformation errors, particularly the use of the base forms such as “*feel*” and “*deliver*” instead of “*felt*” and “*delivered*.”

Cognitive Constraints. Cognitive demands may influence the written output of the students. Writing is a cognitively demanding activity that requires learners to coordinate multiple processes, including planning, language formulation, monitoring, and revision [19]. Because these processes draw on limited cognitive and attentional resources, increased task demands may result in tradeoffs among different aspects of writing performance [20]. Consistent with the principle of limited attentional capacity, learners may not be able to attend fully to all dimensions of writing simultaneously [20].

Overall, consistent with Corder’s view of errors as indicators of language development and Selinker’s Interlanguage Theory [10, 15], the observed error patterns may be associated with L1 transfer, overgeneralization of grammatical rules, developmental factors, and the cognitive demands of writing. These interpretations are based on the observed error patterns and existing literature and should be regarded as

possible explanations rather than confirmed causes.

The findings indicate that the first-year BTLED students experienced greater difficulty in applying English inflectional morphemes than in constructing sentence structure. Past tense (-ed) errors were the most frequent, while misformation was the predominant error type, suggesting that learners often attempted to apply grammatical rules but selected inappropriate forms.

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for explicit instruction that strengthens learners’ morphological awareness and provides meaningful opportunities to apply English inflectional morphemes accurately in authentic writing tasks.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how first-year BTLED students at a higher education institution in Caraga used English inflectional morphemes in their written works during the 2025-2026 academic year. The findings showed that students still experience difficulties with grammatical inflections involving tense, number, aspect, and possession. A total of fifty (50) inflectional morpheme errors were identified across four main inflectional categories: possessive (-’s), past tense (-ed), progressive (-ing), and plural (-s/-es). The most frequent errors involved past tense (-ed) morphemes, accounting for 58% of all errors. These errors mostly included the use of present tense and base form verbs incorrectly when past tense forms were needed. Pluralization errors ranked second, accounting for 24% of all errors, and were mainly related to the unnecessary insertion of plural markers to nouns. Errors involving progressive (-ing) and possessive forms were less common, at 10% and 8% respectively, but they still reflected the students’ confusion about verb forms and apostrophes. When sorted by error types based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, misformation was the most dominant at 54%, followed by addition errors at 26% and

omission errors at 20%. Because the study focused on inflectional morpheme errors rather than word arrangement, no misordering errors were identified. These findings indicate that the learners mainly struggled in selecting and applying English inflectional endings accurately. Several overlapping factors may have led to these errors such as native language interference, over-application of grammatical rules beyond appropriate contexts, limited morphological awareness, and natural stages of second language learning.

The findings highlight the need for explicit morphological instruction in ESL classrooms. Instructional activities should provide focused practice on past tense formation, pluralization, progressive and possessive forms through guided sentence construction, error identification and correction exercises, editing tasks and short paragraph writing with teacher feedback. Such activities may help strengthen learners' morphological awareness and improve learners' accurate use of English inflectional morphemes in written communication.

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