

Sentence-Writing Patterns and Linguistic Challenges among Indonesian Primary EFL Learners

(Pola Penulisan Kalimat dan Tantangan Linguistik pada Pembelajar EFL Sekolah Dasar di Indonesia)

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ABSTRACT

Sentence writing provides insight into young EFL learners' developing control of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and writing conventions. This study investigated recurring sentence-writing patterns and linguistic challenges among Grade Six EFL learners in one Indonesian primary school. Using a qualitative descriptive document-analysis design, 28 students each produced five sentences through a picture-based task, yielding 140 sentence units. Data were analyzed through sentence-level qualitative content coding supported by descriptive frequencies and percentages. The findings showed that 36.4% of the sentences were complete without major structural problems, while 50.0% were complete but problematic. Non-standard or unidentifiable constructions accounted for 37.1% of the data, whereas S+V+C was the most frequent recognizable pattern at 33.6%. Recurrent challenges included vocabulary choice, word order, verb form and use, article or determiner use, capitalization, and subject-verb agreement. These context-specific findings may help primary-school English teachers identify sentence-level areas requiring instructional attention. However, the findings are limited to one class, one school, and one picture-based task.

Keywords:

Young EFL Learners; Simple Sentence Writing; Sentence-Level Analysis; Linguistic Challenges; Indonesian Primary Education.

ABSTRAK

Penulisan kalimat memberikan gambaran mengenai perkembangan penguasaan tata bahasa, kosakata, sintaksis, dan konvensi menulis pada pembelajar muda EFL. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi pola penulisan kalimat dan tantangan linguistik pada siswa kelas VI di sebuah sekolah dasar di Indonesia. Dengan desain analisis dokumen deskriptif kualitatif, sebanyak 28 siswa masing-masing menulis lima kalimat melalui tugas berbasis gambar sehingga diperoleh 140 unit kalimat. Data dianalisis melalui pengodean isi pada tingkat kalimat yang didukung frekuensi dan persentase deskriptif. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa 36,4% kalimat tergolong lengkap tanpa masalah struktural utama, sedangkan 50,0% lengkap tetapi bermasalah. Konstruksi tidak standar atau tidak dapat diidentifikasi mencakup 37,1% data, sementara S+V+C merupakan pola yang paling sering dikenali sebesar 33,6%. Tantangan yang berulang meliputi pemilihan kosakata, urutan kata, bentuk dan penggunaan verba, penggunaan artikel atau determiner, kapitalisasi, serta kesesuaian subjek-verba. Temuan kontekstual ini dapat membantu guru bahasa Inggris sekolah dasar mengidentifikasi aspek penulisan tingkat kalimat yang memerlukan perhatian. Namun, temuan terbatas pada satu kelas, satu sekolah, dan satu tugas berbasis gambar.

Kata kunci:

Pembelajar EFL Muda; Penulisan Kalimat Sederhana; Analisis Tingkat Kalimat; Tantangan Linguistik; Pendidikan Dasar Indonesia.

Introduction

Writing is a central component of English as a Foreign Language learning because it requires learners to transform linguistic knowledge and ideas into comprehensible written communication. At the early stages of EFL development, this ability is commonly observed through the production of simple sentences. A simple sentence is not merely a sequence of words but a minimally complete clause in which the learner must coordinate a subject, a predicate, and, where required, an object, complement, or adverbial element. Its construction therefore reflects learners' emerging control of syntax, grammatical relations, vocabulary selection, orthography, capitalization,

punctuation, and meaning (Akan, 2021). The ability to construct complete and comprehensible simple sentences consequently represents an important foundation for subsequent development toward longer and more complex written texts.

For young EFL learners, sentence writing is a developmental process in which linguistic knowledge, meaning-making, and writing conventions emerge gradually. Bai (2018) showed that primary-school learners' writing involves the development of self-regulated strategies, while Yasuda (2019) demonstrated that children make purposeful linguistic choices when constructing meaning in EFL writing. Studies have also shown that young learners' written production may develop through exposure to model texts, feedback, and collaborative writing activities (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Hidalgo, 2024; Luquin & García Mayo, 2021). In digital writing contexts, Garcés-Manzanera (2024) further emphasized the relationship between learners' language production processes and the quality of the texts they produce. Collectively, these studies indicate that young learners' writing should be understood not only in terms of final grammatical accuracy but also as evidence of their developing ability to organize linguistic resources into meaningful written forms.

The development of sentence writing among young learners is closely related to the linguistic demands of English. Even apparently simple sentences require learners to coordinate word order, verb forms, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Trüb et al. (2025) identified syntax, grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and punctuation as important dimensions in the assessment of Grade Six EFL writing. Similarly, studies of EFL writing difficulties have reported that grammatical, lexical, and mechanical problems frequently occur simultaneously within learners' written production (Hamdani & Abid, 2025; Tambunan et al., 2022). Vocabulary knowledge is also relevant because knowing isolated words does not necessarily enable learners to combine them into accurate and natural phrases or clauses (Minalla, 2024). Sentence-level analysis is therefore valuable because it can reveal how different linguistic difficulties overlap within a single unit of written production.

These issues are particularly relevant in Indonesian primary education, where students' opportunities to learn English vary considerably across schools. English at the primary level has been influenced by changes in educational policy, local curricular decisions, teacher preparedness, instructional time, and the availability of learning resources (Astutik & Munir, 2022; Indriani, 2022; Zein, 2017). Because English is not implemented uniformly across primary schools, learners may reach Grade Six with different levels of exposure to vocabulary, grammar, and writing practice. Classroom support and scaffolding are therefore important for helping young learners transform their limited linguistic into comprehensible written sentences (Vickov & Jakupčević, 2025).

Previous research on young EFL writing has examined writing strategies, meaning-making resources, corrective feedback, collaborative writing, language-production processes, and multidimensional writing assessment (Bai, 2018; Garcés-Manzanera, 2024; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Hidalgo, 2024; Luquin & García Mayo, 2021; Trüb et al., 2026; Yasuda, 2019). More specifically, Allen (2026) examined sentence-writing instruction for an individual learner with a learning disability, while Criado et al. (2026) investigated model-based feedback in young learners' digital writing. Although these studies contribute important knowledge regarding the development and instruction of EFL writing, their primary focus differs from the present study. They generally investigate writing strategies, instructional interventions, feedback processes, collaborative production, overall textual quality, or assessment, rather than systematically examining the structural patterns and overlapping linguistic challenges found in individual sentences produced by Indonesian primary-school learners.

Research in the Indonesian context has also documented policy challenges, instructional needs, and general linguistic difficulties in English learning and writing (Hamdani & Abid, 2025; Indriani, 2022; Zein, 2017). However, small-scale, school-based evidence showing how Grade Six learners construct individual simple English sentences remains limited. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the relationship among sentence completeness, basic sentence patterns, and multiple linguistic challenges occurring within the same sentence. This narrower focus is important because a learner may produce a sentence containing an identifiable subject and predicate while simultaneously demonstrating problems with verb form, agreement, word order, articles, vocabulary, capitalization, or punctuation.

Drawing on the literature above, the present study conceptualizes simple sentence writing as a multidimensional form of written production. It includes structural completeness, recognizable clause patterns, grammatical control, lexical appropriateness, writing mechanics, and overall comprehensibility. This conceptualization informs the analytic coding sheet used in the study, which examines sentence completeness, basic sentence pattern, subject and predicate presence, subject-verb agreement, verb form and use, word order, vocabulary choice, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and comprehensibility. The framework enables the study to analyze not only whether learners can produce sentence-like constructions, but also how their developing linguistic competence is reflected in the internal organization of those sentences.

Against this background, the present study investigates patterns and challenges in simple sentence writing among Grade Six young EFL learners in an Indonesian primary school. Using students' written responses as the primary data source, the study identifies recurring sentence patterns and the linguistic challenges reflected in learners' simple English sentences. The study provides context-specific, sentence-level evidence from one Grade Six class and identifies linguistic areas that may inform diagnostic assessment and instructional planning in comparable primary-school EFL settings.

Based on this background, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the recurring patterns in simple sentence writing produced by Grade Six young EFL learners in an Indonesian primary school?
2. What linguistic challenges are reflected in Grade Six young EFL learners' simple sentence writing?

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive document-analysis design to examine recurring construction patterns and linguistic challenges in young EFL learners' simple sentence writing. A qualitative descriptive approach was appropriate because the study aimed to provide a close and context-sensitive account of how learners organized linguistic elements in their written sentences rather than to test causal relationships or make statistical generalizations (Bordens & Abbott, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Students' written test scripts were treated as naturally bounded textual documents that provided direct evidence of their sentence-level language production (Bowen, 2009).

The primary analytical procedure was qualitative content coding at the sentence level. Descriptive frequencies and percentages were used to indicate how often particular categories occurred across the dataset. These numerical summaries were used only to support the qualitative interpretation and were not treated as inferential statistical evidence. Following the content-coding stage, related codes were grouped into broader interpretive themes using an analytical process adapted Braun & Clarke (2022) framework.

Research Setting and Participants Selection

The study was conducted in one Indonesian primary school located in the BTP area of Makassar, South Sulawesi. The school was selected purposively because it provided access to a Grade Six EFL learning context relevant to the objectives of the study. The participants were 28 Grade Six students from one intact class. All students in the selected class who met the participation requirements were included through total sampling.

Grade Six learners were selected because they had received school-based exposure to English and were at a stage at which emerging sentence-level writing competence could be observed. The inclusion criteria were that the students were officially enrolled in Grade Six, were present during data collection, completed the assigned writing task, and had the required parental or guardian permission. The study did not attempt to treat the participants as statistically representative of all Indonesian primary-school EFL learners.

The 28 students constituted the participant group and the source of the written data. However, the primary unit of analysis was each student-produced sentence rather than the individual student. Because each participant wrote five sentences, the complete dataset comprised 140 sentence units. Participant-level information was used to describe the sample, whereas sentence-level data were used for coding, frequency calculation, percentage distribution, and qualitative interpretation.

Research Instrument

An analytic coding sheet was developed as an operational codebook for systematic sentence-level analysis rather than as a numerical scoring rubric (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Shkedi, 2019). The initial categories were derived from the research questions, relevant literature on English sentence structure and young EFL writing, and preliminary familiarization with the students' written responses (Akan, 2021; Trüb et al., 2025). The codebook was refined through preliminary coding to clarify category boundaries and decision rules before being applied to the complete dataset.

The first analytical domain concerned sentence completeness. A sentence was coded as complete when it contained an identifiable subject and predicate, expressed a recoverable proposition, and showed no major structural problem. A complete but problematic sentence contained an identifiable subject and predicate and conveyed a recoverable core meaning but included one or more grammatical, lexical, structural, or mechanical problems. An incomplete sentence showed an attempt to form a clause but lacked a required element, such as a finite verb or copula. A fragment consisted primarily of a phrase or word group without an identifiable subject-predicate relationship.

The second domain concerned sentence-construction classification. Recognizable constructions were classified as S+V, S+V+O, S+V+C, S+V+Adv, or S+V+O+Adv. A response was classified as a non-standard or unidentifiable construction when it could not be assigned reliably to one of these patterns without adding, deleting, or substantially rearranging essential elements. These constructions were subsequently examined according to their principal structural features, including missing predicates or copulas, severely disrupted word order, duplicate or unclear subjects, problematic verb-complement sequences, fragmental constructions, and multiple or indeterminate structural problems.

The third domain concerned linguistic challenges. The categories included missing, unclear, or duplicated subjects; missing predicates or copulas; subject-verb agreement; verb form and use; word order; vocabulary choice or limitation; article or determiner use; spelling; capitalization; end punctuation; and overall comprehensibility. Sentence-completeness and construction categories were mutually exclusive, meaning that each sentence received one code within each domain. Linguistic challenge categories were non-mutually exclusive

because one sentence could contain several difficulties simultaneously. Nevertheless, the same challenge category was counted only once per sentence, regardless of the number of occurrences within that sentence.

All coding decisions were based on the students' original written forms. The researchers did not grammatically correct or reconstruct a response before determining its completeness, construction category, or linguistic challenges. Representative examples and analytical notes were retained to document the basis of each coding decision.

Data Source

The primary data source consisted of students' written responses to a picture-based sentence-construction task. The picture prompt depicted people, objects, colors, and activities in a familiar outdoor or home environment. Each student was instructed to write five simple English sentences based on the picture. Picture-based elicitation was used because it provided a common stimulus while allowing learners to make their own lexical and grammatical choices (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2019).

A total of 140 sentences were obtained from the 28 participants, with each student producing five sentences. Each student-produced sentence was treated as one unit of analysis. Accordingly, the data represent 140 sentence-level observations generated by 28 students, rather than 140 independent participants. The picture prompt and the complete task instructions are provided in Appendix A to clarify the range of content and sentence constructions elicited by the task.

Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis Technique

Data were collected through the administration of the picture-based writing task to the 28 Grade Six students. Students completed the task individually under the same classroom conditions. After the task was completed, the written scripts were collected, anonymized, and assigned participant identification codes. The responses were transcribed without correcting the students' original grammar, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, or word order. Preserving the original forms was necessary because these features constituted the primary objects of analysis. Each script was segmented into five sentence units. The segmentation process produced 140 units of analysis. Each unit was then entered into the analytic coding sheet together with its participant code, original sentence, completeness category, construction category, linguistic challenge codes, and interpretive notes.

Data analysis involved six interconnected stages adapted from qualitative content analysis and Braun & Clarke (2022) analytical framework. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the original scripts and transcribed sentences. Second, each sentence was coded using the operational codebook. Coding focused on sentence completeness, recognizable construction patterns, and linguistic challenges. Third, the coded sentences were organized into category matrices, and frequencies and percentages were calculated to describe the distribution of each category. For sentence completeness, sentence-construction classification, and linguistic challenges, percentages were calculated using the 140 sentence units as the denominator. For the subtype analysis of non-standard or unidentifiable constructions, percentages were calculated using the 52 constructions included in that category as the denominator. Because one sentence could receive more than one linguistic challenge code, the percentages reported for linguistic challenges were not expected to sum to 100%. These descriptive counts referred to sentence-level occurrences and should not be interpreted as percentages of individual students.

Initial coding of the complete dataset was conducted by the first author using the final operational codebook. To examine coding consistency, the second and third authors independently coded all sentence units, representing 100% of the dataset. The subset was selected through systematic sampling and included examples from each major analytical category. The coders completed their classifications independently before comparing the results.

Coding disagreements were reviewed against the original student responses, operational definitions, decision rules, and representative examples. The coders discussed each disagreement until consensus was reached. Where a disagreement indicated ambiguity in a category, the relevant definition or decision rule was clarified, and the complete dataset was rechecked using the revised codebook. Cases that remained unresolved were reviewed by the fourth author, whose decision was used as the final classification. Records of the original coding, comparison results, disagreements, consensus decisions, and codebook revisions were retained as part of the coding audit trail.

Ethical Considerations

Formal ethics-committee review was not obtained for this small-scale, non-invasive classroom-based study. Institutional permission was obtained from the school principal before data collection, and the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements applicable at the participating institution. The manuscript does not claim formal ethical clearance beyond this institutional permission.

Written informed consent was obtained from the students' parents or legal guardians. The students received an age-appropriate explanation of the research and provided verbal assent before participating. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could decline or withdraw without academic penalty and that their responses would not affect their school grades.

Students' names were replaced with participant codes, and no identifying information was included in the coding records or manuscript. Electronic and physical data were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Representative sentences were used only to illustrate analytical categories and were reported without personal identifiers (Wiles, 2013).

Trustworthiness and Limitation

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Cohen et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by repeatedly comparing the assigned codes with the students' original responses and by presenting representative examples that demonstrate the basis of the interpretations. Coding dependability was examined through independent coding of a subset of the data by a second researcher, followed by comparison, discussion, and consensus resolution.

Confirmability was strengthened through a coding audit trail containing the anonymized scripts, sentence transcriptions, operational definitions, successive codebook versions, coding matrices, disagreement records, consensus decisions, and analytical notes. The students' original written forms were preserved without grammatical correction. Transferability was supported through a detailed description of the participants, school context, picture prompt, task instructions, data-collection conditions, and analytical procedures. The findings remain specific to the participating class and task and are not intended for statistical generalization.

Results

The results are presented according to the two research questions. The dataset consisted of 140 sentence units produced by 28 Grade Six students. Unless otherwise stated, all frequencies and percentages in the sentence-completeness, construction-pattern, and linguistic-challenge analyses refer to the 140 sentences rather than to the number of students. The first part reports sentence completeness and construction classifications, while the second part presents the linguistic challenges identified across the sentence units.

Sentence Completeness in Students' Simple Sentence Writing

The analysis of 140 student-produced sentences showed that the learners were generally able to produce sentence-like constructions, but many sentences were still grammatically or structurally problematic. Table 1 presents the distribution of sentence completeness:

Table 1. Distribution of Sentence Completeness

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Complete	51	36.4%
Complete but problematic	70	50.0%
Incomplete	9	6.4%
Fragment	10	7.1%
Total	140	100%

Note. Percentages were calculated using the 140 student-produced sentences as the denominator

As shown in Table 1, 51 sentences, or 36.4%, were categorized as complete without major structural problems. These sentences contained identifiable subjects and predicates and conveyed clear meanings. Examples included sentences such as "The tree is green," "My mother follows my father," and "The sky is very bright." Within this task, these examples show that some of the sentence units contained recognizable English clause structures.

However, the largest category was "complete but problematic," which appeared in 70 sentences, or 50.0% of the data. These sentences generally contained a subject and predicate but included grammatical, lexical, structural, or mechanical problems. Examples included "Children wears blue shirt," "The house colors is yellow," and "Father accompanys the kids play." Such sentences show that the students had begun to form complete clauses, but their control of English grammar and sentence organization remained unstable.

In addition, 9 sentences, or 6.4%, were categorized as incomplete, while 10 sentences, or 7.1%, were categorized as fragments. These sentences often lacked a predicate or contained unclear sentence structures. Examples included "they very bright," "Yard very green," "Chair the colors brown," and "Three kids with their parent." These findings suggest that some learners still had difficulty producing minimally complete English clauses, especially when the sentence required a copular verb such as "is" or "are."

Sentence Construction Classification

The analysis also identified several recurring sentence patterns in the students' writing. Table 2 presents the distribution of basic sentence patterns.

Table 2. Distribution of Recognizable Sentence Patterns and Non-standard Constructions

Basic Sentence Patterns	Frequency	Percentage
S+V	1	0.7%
S+V+O	19	13.6%
S+V+C	47	33.6%
S+V+Adv	19	13.6%
S+V+O+Adv	2	1.4%
Non-standard or Unidentifiable Construction	52	37.1%
Total	140	100%

Note. Percentages were calculated using the 140 student-produced sentences as the denominator

Among the recognizable constructions, S+V+C was the most frequent pattern, appearing in 47 sentences, or 33.6% of the dataset. This pattern was commonly used to describe colors, people, objects, and visible conditions, as illustrated by “The tree is green,” “The sky is very bright,” and “My family is happy.” The prominence of this pattern should be interpreted in relation to the elicitation task. Because the picture prompt prominently displayed people, objects, colors, and observable conditions, it naturally encouraged the production of descriptive clauses containing subject, copular verb, and complement. The finding therefore indicates a prompt-related preference in the present dataset rather than demonstrating that S+V+C is necessarily the earliest or easiest sentence pattern in young learners’ general writing development.

The S+V+O and S+V+Adv patterns each occurred in 19 sentences, representing 13.6% of the data. Examples of S+V+O constructions included “My mother follows my father” and “Father wears yellow shirt,” whereas S+V+Adv constructions included “He plays in the garden with his siblings” and “Kids play in front of their house.” These patterns show that some learners used the people and activities depicted in the prompt to construct action-based clauses with objects or adverbial information. Nevertheless, the distribution should be understood as a description of sentence production elicited by this particular picture rather than as a comprehensive representation of the learners’ full range of sentence-writing ability.

Table 3. Subtypes of Non-standard or Unidentifiable Constructions

Subtype	Frequency	Percentage
Missing Predicate or Copula	8	15.4%
Severely Disrupted Word Order	6	11.5%
Duplicate or Unclear Subject	6	11.5%
Verb-complement or problematic verb-sequence construction	15	28.8%
Fragmental Construction	10	19.2%
Multiple or Indeterminate Problems	7	13.5%
Total	52	100.0%

Note. Percentages were calculated using the 52 non-standard or unidentifiable constructions as the denominator. Each construction was assigned to one primary subtype

The 52 non-standard or unidentifiable constructions were examined further to determine the primary structural feature that prevented their reliable classification into the predetermined sentence patterns. As presented in Table 3, verb-complement or problematic verb-sequence constructions were the most frequent subtype, accounting for 15 cases, or 28.85% of the non-standard constructions. These responses commonly contained inappropriate auxiliary-verb combinations, unclear relationships between verbs and their complements, or verb sequences that did not correspond consistently to the sentence-pattern categories used in the study. Examples included “He is watch kids play in park,” “Father accompanys the kids play,” and “the dove is fly.”

Fragmental constructions were the second most frequent subtype, occurring in 10 cases, or 19.23%. These responses generally consisted of noun phrases, prepositional phrases, or incomplete word groups without an identifiable subject-predicate relationship, such as “Three kids with their parent” and “Chair the colors brown.” Missing predicate or copula constructions occurred in eight cases, or 15.38%, including “Yard very green” and “they very bright.”

Multiple or indeterminate structural problems accounted for seven cases, or 13.46%. These constructions contained several overlapping problems that prevented the identification of one dominant structural difficulty. Severely disrupted word order and duplicate or unclear subject constructions each occurred in six cases, representing 11.54% of the category. The subtype analysis indicates that the non-standard constructions did not constitute a homogeneous group. Instead, they reflected distinguishable difficulties involving verb-complement relationships, clause completeness, subject identification, word order, and fragmentary production.

Linguistic Challenges in Students' Simple Sentence Writing

The second research question asked what linguistic challenges were reflected in the students' simple sentence writing. The analysis found that one sentence could contain more than one linguistic challenge. Therefore, the total number of challenge occurrences exceeded the total number of sentences. Table 4 presents the distribution of linguistic challenges.

Table 4. Distribution of Linguistics Challenges

Linguistics Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
End-Punctuation Omission	140	100%
Vocabulary Choice	92	65.7%
Word Order	66	47.1%
Verb Form/Use Problem	61	43.6%
Article/Determiner Problem	51	36.4%
Capitalization Problem	44	31.4%
Subject-Verb Agreement Problem	39	27.9%
Missing Predicate or Copula	15	10.7%
Spelling Problem	13	9.3%
Missing, Unclear, or Duplicate Subject	8	5.7%

Note. Percentages were calculated using the 140 student-produced sentences as the denominator. Because one sentence could more than one linguistic challenge, the categories were not mutually exclusive and the percentages do not sum to 100%

End punctuation was absent from all 140 sentence units. None of the responses ended with a full stop or another appropriate end mark. However, this pattern should be interpreted cautiously because the worksheet required students to write one sentence on each separate line. The visual separation of the response spaces may have functioned as an implicit sentence boundary and may have reduced the perceived need to add full stops. The finding is therefore reported as a consistent omission of end punctuation within this task rather than as conclusive evidence that the participating learners lacked punctuation knowledge. Continuous-writing or paragraph-based tasks would be needed to determine whether the omission persists across other writing formats.

Vocabulary choice or limitation was the second most frequent challenge, appearing in 92 sentences, or 65.7%. This challenge included limited lexical range, awkward word combinations, inappropriate word choice, and unclear noun phrases. Examples included "She is Mrs. Putri as Mom," "chair is yard," "home look colors yellow in red," and "The tree colors is a green." These examples suggest that learners often had ideas to express but lacked sufficient lexical control to express them accurately and naturally in English.

Word order and sentence structure problems appeared in 66 sentences, or 47.1%. These problems included unclear arrangement of sentence elements, duplicated subjects, misplaced complements, and sentence forms influenced by non-English structures. Examples included "Children they play marbles," "Tree the color green," and "the road the color is grey." These structures suggest that learners were still developing awareness of English word order and the relationship between subjects, verbs, objects, complements, and modifiers.

Verb form/use problems appeared in 61 sentences, or 43.6%. These included incorrect verb forms, omitted auxiliaries, inappropriate use of verbs, and problematic verb sequences. Examples included "She watchs kids play," "Father accompanys the kids play," "the kids playing in the park," and "He is watch kids play in park." Such errors indicate that verb use was one of the central areas of difficulty in learners' simple sentence writing.

Article/determiner problems appeared in 51 sentences, or 36.4%. Students frequently omitted articles such as "a" or "the," used unnecessary articles before adjectives. Examples included "She is mother," "The park is a beautiful," "She is on the park," and "Father looks the kids play." These findings indicate that function words remained difficult for learners, especially when forming noun phrases or describing locations.

Capitalization problems appeared in 44 sentences, or 31.4%. These problems included failure to capitalize the first word of a sentence and inconsistent capitalization of proper nouns. Subject-verb agreement problems appeared in 39 sentences, or 27.9%, as shown in examples such as "Children wears blue shirt," "Parents is happy," and "The house colors is yellow." Missing predicate or missing copula problems appeared in 15 sentences, or 10.7%, while spelling problems appeared in 13 sentences, or 9.3%. Although spelling problems were less frequent than grammar and vocabulary problems, they still affected the clarity and accuracy of some sentences

Main Themes Found in Students' Simple Sentence Writing

Based on the coding and thematic analysis, several major themes were identified. These themes represent

the recurring patterns and challenges found across the dataset.

Table 5. Main Themes in Students' Sentence Writing

Main Themes	Related Codes	Representative Examples
Emerging complete simple sentence construction	Complete clause, clear subject and predicate, recognizable S+V+C or S+V+O pattern	"The tree is green"; "My mother follows my father"
Prompt-related prominence of descriptive constructions	Frequent S+V+C constructions describing visible people, objects, colors, and conditions elicited by the picture prompt	"The sky is very bright"; "My family is happy"
Verb-related grammatical challenge	Subject-verb agreement error, incorrect verb form, missing auxiliary, missing copula	"Children wears blue shirt"; "Yard very green"
Word order and sentence structure difficulty	Unclear arrangement, duplicated subject, problematic noun phrase, run-on structure	"Children they play marbles"; "Tree the color green"
Vocabulary and lexical limitation	Inappropriate word choice, awkward collocation, limited noun phrase development	"chair is yard"; "Home is colors yellow and brown"
Task-sensitive writing-mechanics features	End punctuation omission in line-separated responses, capitalization problems, and spelling problems.	Missing full stops; lowercase sentence openings

The first theme, emerging complete simple sentence construction, shows that students had begun to develop the ability to write simple English clauses. Some sentences were clear, meaningful, and structurally acceptable. However, this ability was not consistently demonstrated across the dataset. The second theme, prompt-related prominence of descriptive constructions, reflects the frequent use of S+V+C responses to describe visible colors, people, objects, and conditions. Because these elements were foregrounded in the picture prompt, the prominence of descriptive constructions is interpreted as a feature of the elicitation task rather than as evidence that such constructions are developmentally easier for young EFL learners.

The third theme, verb-related grammatical challenge, was one of the most important findings. Many students struggled with subject-verb agreement, verb inflection, auxiliary use, and copular verbs. This indicates that verb control remains a central challenge in early EFL sentence writing. The fourth theme, word order and sentence structure difficulty, shows that students often had difficulty arranging sentence elements according to English syntax. Some sentences appeared to follow non-English structures or contained duplicated subjects and unclear complements.

The fifth theme, vocabulary and lexical limitation, indicates that learners' sentence construction was strongly affected by limited lexical resources. Students often attempted to describe the picture but produced awkward or inappropriate word combinations. The sixth theme, task-sensitive writing-mechanics features, encompasses capitalization and spelling problems as well as the consistent omission of end punctuation. The punctuation finding was interpreted cautiously because the line-separated response format may have functioned as an implicit marker of sentence boundaries.

Discussion

The present study examined recurring patterns and linguistic challenges in simple sentence writing produced by Grade Six young EFL learners in one Indonesian primary school. The study was motivated by the limited availability of small-scale, school-based, and sentence-level evidence showing how Indonesian primary-school learners organize linguistic elements when constructing simple English sentences. Previous studies have provided valuable insights into young learners' writing strategies, meaning-making processes, feedback, collaborative writing, and multidimensional writing assessment (Bai, 2018; Garcés-Manzanera, 2024; Lázaro-Ibarrola & Hidalgo, 2024; Luquin & García Mayo, 2021; Trüb et al., 2026; Yasuda, 2019). However, less attention has been given to the relationship among sentence completeness, construction patterns, and overlapping linguistic challenges within individual sentences. The present findings contribute to this gap by providing a fine-grained, context-specific analysis of 140 sentences produced by 28 students in one school-based task.

The first major finding concerns sentence completeness. Although only 36.4% of the sentences were classified as complete without major structural problems, 50.0% were categorized as complete but problematic. This indicates that many learners had begun to understand the basic structure of an English clause because they were generally able to produce identifiable subjects and predicates. Nevertheless, their control of grammar, vocabulary, word order, and writing mechanics remained unstable. This pattern suggests partial rather than absent sentence-writing competence. The learners were able to initiate clause construction, but the linguistic resources required to produce accurate and natural sentences were not yet consistently coordinated.

This finding supports the view that young learners' writing development should not be evaluated solely through grammatical correctness. Yasuda (2019) emphasized that children's EFL writing reflects developing meaning-making choices, while Trüb et al. (2026) identified syntax, grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and punctuation as interconnected dimensions of Grade Six EFL writing. The present results similarly show that a sentence may be structurally recognizable while simultaneously containing grammatical, lexical, or mechanical problems. For example, "Children wears blue shirt" contains an identifiable subject, predicate, and object, but also

demonstrates subject-verb agreement, article or determiner, and punctuation problems. Such sentences illustrate that emerging structural competence can coexist with limited grammatical accuracy.

The second major finding concerns the distribution of sentence constructions. Non-standard or unidentifiable constructions accounted for 37.1% of the dataset, while S+V+C was the most frequent recognizable pattern, representing 33.6% of the sentences. The prominence of S+V+C constructions was closely related to the characteristics of the picture prompt, which displayed people, objects, colors, and observable conditions. This visual stimulus naturally encouraged descriptive sentences such as “The tree is green,” “The sky is very bright,” and “My family is happy.” Therefore, the dominance of descriptive constructions should be interpreted as a task-related pattern rather than as evidence that S+V+C is necessarily the earliest or easiest sentence structure in young learners’ general writing development.

The picture prompt also influenced the vocabulary and content available to the learners. Many sentences relied on recurrent words related to colors, family members, houses, trees, clothing, and outdoor activities. Although this common stimulus supported comparability across participants, it also constrained the range of possible sentence types. Consequently, the frequency of S+V+C, S+V+O, and S+V+Adv constructions reflects both learners’ linguistic choices and the affordances of the elicitation task. This finding reinforces the importance of interpreting young learners’ written products in relation to the task conditions under which they were produced.

Further analysis of the 52 non-standard or unidentifiable constructions revealed that this category was not homogeneous. Verb-complement or problematic verb-sequence constructions formed the largest subtype, accounting for 28.85% of the non-standard constructions. Examples such as “He is watch kids play in park,” “Father companys the kids play,” and “the dove is fly” show that learners often had difficulty coordinating auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, objects, and verb complements. Fragmental constructions represented 19.23%, while missing predicate or copula constructions accounted for 15.38%. Other subtypes included multiple or indeterminate structural problems, severely disrupted word order, and duplicate or unclear subjects.

These subtypes provide more specific pedagogical information than a broad “Other” category. Missing predicate or copula constructions, such as “Yard very green” and “they very bright,” indicate difficulty forming complete predicative clauses. Duplicate-subject constructions, such as “Children they play marbles,” show instability in organizing subject positions. Fragmental responses, such as “Three kids with their parent,” demonstrate that some learners produced phrases rather than complete clauses. The subtype analysis therefore identifies distinct areas in which sentence construction became unstable, including clause completeness, subject identification, verb complementation, and syntactic organization.

The analysis of linguistic challenges further showed that several problems frequently occurred within the same sentence. Vocabulary choice or limitation was one of the most recurrent difficulties. Many learners appeared to recognize relevant objects, colors, and people in the picture, but they often combined familiar words in awkward or inaccurate ways, as shown in “chair is yard,” “home look colors yellow in red,” and “The tree colors is a green.” This result is consistent with Minalla (2024), who showed that vocabulary development among young EFL learners involves more than knowledge of isolated words. Learners also need to understand how words combine within phrases and sentences. The present findings indicate that lexical knowledge was often sufficient for identifying visual content, but not always sufficient for producing appropriate collocations or grammatically acceptable noun phrases.

Word-order problems were also frequent and occurred in constructions such as “Tree the color green,” “the road the color is grey,” and “Children they play marbles.” These examples show that learners had difficulty organizing sentence elements according to English syntactic order. Although simple sentences are often considered basic, they require learners to coordinate subjects, verbs, objects, complements, articles, and modifiers. The findings are consistent with studies reporting that grammatical and structural difficulties commonly overlap in EFL writing (Hamdani & Abid, 2025; Tambunan et al., 2022). In the present dataset, word-order problems were often accompanied by vocabulary limitations, duplicated subjects, inappropriate verb forms, or missing function words.

Verb-related challenges were another central feature of the students’ writing. Errors such as “Children wears,” “Parents is,” “She watchs kids play,” and “Yard very green” demonstrate difficulties with subject-verb agreement, verb inflection, auxiliary use, and copular verbs. These findings suggest that verb control remains a major area of difficulty in early EFL sentence construction. Indriani (2022) emphasized the need for context-sensitive English instruction at the primary-school level, and the present results indicate that explicit support in verb use, subject-predicate relations, and clause construction is especially important in this context.

Article and determiner problems also appeared frequently, particularly in sentences such as “She is mother,” “Father wears yellow shirt,” and “The park is a beautiful.” These difficulties show that learners had not fully mastered the function of articles in noun phrases and predicative constructions. In several cases, article problems occurred together with vocabulary and word-order difficulties, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of sentence-level writing challenges.

End punctuation was absent from all 140 task responses. However, this finding requires cautious interpretation. Each sentence was written separately in the worksheet, and the visual separation between response lines may have functioned as an implicit sentence boundary. Therefore, the universal absence of full stops cannot be interpreted conclusively as evidence that learners lacked punctuation knowledge. It is more

accurately understood as a consistent feature of the responses produced under this particular task format. A continuous writing or paragraph-based task would be required to determine whether punctuation omission represents a stable writing-mechanics difficulty. Nevertheless, capitalization and spelling problems found in the data indicate that basic writing conventions still require instructional attention.

Taken together, the findings show that young EFL learners' sentence writing is multidimensional. Sentence production involves not only the presence of a subject and predicate but also the coordination of grammatical agreement, verb form, lexical choice, word order, function words, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and comprehensibility. This interpretation is consistent with Trüb et al. (2025), who conceptualized young learner writing assessment as involving multiple textual dimensions, and with Yasuda (2019), who highlighted the relationship between linguistic choices and meaning construction in children's EFL writing.

The results also have practical implications for primary-school EFL instruction. Teachers should provide explicit and sustained practice in building complete clauses, distinguishing subjects and predicates, using copular and lexical verbs, applying subject-verb agreement, and arranging sentence elements according to English word order. Vocabulary instruction should extend beyond isolated word learning and include collocations, noun phrases, and sentence-level application. Activities may also be designed around the identified subtypes of non-standard constructions, including exercises on missing copulas, verb complementation, duplicated subjects, fragments, and disrupted word order.

The findings have practical relevance for sentence-level diagnosis and instructional planning in primary-school EFL contexts that share characteristics with the participating class. They identify aspects of sentence writing that may warrant closer classroom attention, including clause completeness, copular and lexical verb use, subject-verb agreement, noun-phrase construction, vocabulary use, and word order. These implications should be understood as pedagogical considerations arising from descriptive evidence rather than as evidence that a particular instructional approach is effective.

Teachers in comparable contexts may use short sentence-writing samples to identify recurring difficulties and to select focused activities such as subject-predicate identification, controlled copular-be practice, third-person singular verb forms, noun-phrase expansion, article or determiner practice, sentence rearrangement, and guided editing. The study did not implement or evaluate these activities; therefore, their effectiveness would need to be examined through intervention research.

The contribution of the study lies in integrating sentence completeness, recognizable construction patterns, subtypes of non-standard constructions, and overlapping linguistic challenges within one analytical framework. Within the boundaries of one Grade Six class and one picture-based task, the analysis identifies specific points at which sentence construction became unstable. The findings offer a context-sensitive basis for comparison with similar school-based EFL settings but do not represent the writing competence of Indonesian primary-school learners as a national population.

Conclusion

This study provides a context-specific account of 140 sentences produced by 28 Grade Six learners in one Indonesian primary school through one picture-based writing task. Its main contribution is an integrated sentence-level framework that distinguishes sentence completeness, recognizable construction patterns, subtypes of non-standard constructions, and overlapping linguistic challenges. The framework makes it possible to identify where sentence construction became unstable within the participating class without reducing writing performance to a single general score.

The findings may assist teachers in comparable primary-school EFL settings in identifying aspects of sentence writing that require closer attention, including clause completeness, verb use, subject-verb agreement, noun-phrase construction, vocabulary choice, and word order. They may also inform the selection of focused classroom activities and diagnostic writing tasks. However, the study did not test an instructional intervention and therefore does not demonstrate that any particular activity or teaching approach would improve learners' writing.

The picture prompt enabled comparable responses but also influenced the vocabulary and sentence patterns produced. Sentence-level assessment may therefore benefit from using several task formats, including picture descriptions, sentence-combination tasks, guided paragraphs, and short narratives. Such variation could provide a broader basis for determining whether particular difficulties persist across writing contexts.

The findings should not be generalized to all Indonesian primary-school EFL learners. The participants came from one intact class, and the data were generated through one picture-based task. Future studies should involve multiple schools, grade levels, geographical contexts, and writing tasks. Longitudinal and intervention studies are also needed to determine how sentence-level writing develops over time and whether particular forms of instruction support greater accuracy, variety, and comprehensibility.

Overall, the study demonstrates the analytical value of examining individual sentences in a bounded primary-school context. Its categories may serve as a reference for subsequent school-based research and for teachers seeking to interpret learners' sentence-writing difficulties more systematically.

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Conflict of Interests

The researchers declare that there were no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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APPENDIX A. Individual Picture-Based Sentence-Writing Task

INDIVIDUAL PICTURE-BASED SENTENCE-WRITING TASK

Participant Code: _____

Date: _____

Instruction:

Look carefully at the picture below. Write five simple English sentences describing the people, objects, colors, or activities shown in the picture. Complete the task individually. Write one sentence on each line.



No.	Sentences
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Figure 1. Picture Prompt Used in the Individual Sentence-Writing Task