

Decoding IELTS writing performance: Grammatical Clauses mastery by Universitas Ahmad Dahlan students

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian learners of English produced ungrammaticalities in their writing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and faced complicated writing score descriptors for self-evaluations and improvements. These problems were observed among students at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan during their preparatory course for IELT. To address this issue, this study focused on identifying some rules in grammar, the grammatical and ungrammatical clauses based on subject-verb (S + V) structures in their writing performances and measuring the proportions of the two clause types in accordance with the performance's score variation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. To do so, the study conducted archival research by retrieving data from the teacher's course documents. The archived handwritten writing performances were transcribed manually into digital texts. It employed syntactic analysis to classify the clauses as either grammatical or ungrammatical. It converted the numbers of each clause type per performance into percentages for comparison, and grouped them according to the different scores as the variable. The results showed that the participants produced predominantly simple grammatical clauses to minimize failures when generating more complex structures. To achieve the minimum score of 6 in the writing section, the proportion of grammatically correct and incorrect clauses should be above 47% and below 53%, respectively. These findings offer valuable insights into predicting scores, especially concerning the dimension of 'grammatical range and accuracy in the writing assessment, which benefit both learners and educators.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is the most challenging skill for second or foreign language learners (Richards et al., 2002). The status of English in Indonesia is an international rather than a second

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language (Lauder, 2008). Consequently, the learners frequently produce ungrammaticalities. This predicament intensifies in examination settings (Al-Khresheh, 2016).

Enthusiasm for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is rising, as IELTS score is required by English-speaking university graduate studies. Admission to these programs requires a minimum IELTS Academic band score of 6.5, sometimes with a writing skill score of 6. To help its students succeed in IELTS, Ahmad Dahlan University Yogyakarta held the IELTS preparation Course. The course's final exam gauged the participants' competence. The writing skill section asks the students to write texts within a one hour duration (IELTS, Academic Writing, n.d.). Their writing performance revealed grammar deficiencies, including subject-verb structure (S+V). It confirms (Surina and Kamaruzaman, 2009, p. 190) that this S+V rule presents a barrier for ESL and EFL learners

In the context of S + V, the Indonesian language lacks a definitive grammatical feature compared to English. Below are two examples which show that the Indonesian language does not always require copula in nominal sentences while English always do:

(1) *Dia seorang ahli yang menjalankan mesin itu.*
He an expert who operate machine that
'He is an expert in operating the machine.'

Indonesian (Editorial Team, 2008, p. 21)

(2) *Mungkin ini hasil pendidikan-nya di sekolah.*
Maybe this result education-her at school
'Maybe this is the result of her education at school.'

Indonesian (Rusyana & Samsuri, 1976, p. 61)

Unfortunately, the course participants lacked understanding that S + V structure impacts their final exam writing scores, hindering improvement efforts. The score determinations relied primarily on the narrative-based public writing descriptors, which can be complicated (IELTS, 2016a, 2016b). In contrast, listening and reading skills are assessed using practical score charts based on correct answer counts (IELTS, *IELTS Listening Band Scores Explained*, n.d.; IELTS, *IELTS Reading Band Scores Explained*, n.d.).

Accordingly, we focused on analyzing the distribution of grammatical and ungrammatical clauses based on S + V in the mentioned writing performances to answer these research questions:

- (a) What are the grammatical and ungrammatical clauses based on S + V of the writing performances identified in the course's IELTS final exam taken by the students of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan?

- (b) What are the proportions of the grammatical and ungrammatical clauses based on the writing performances' score variation?

The numbers of two clause types were calculated and compared based on the score variation. This parallels the assessment approach used in the listening and reading sections, aiding in a clearer understanding of the scores.

The basic structure of a clause has a subject as the first element, typically a noun phrase such as "the man" and a verb as the second constituent, for example, "was shaken" which is a verb phrase (Eastwood, 2002). Eastwood further describes main clauses and subclauses. A subclause, an integral part of larger sentence structures, must attach to the main clause. There are five types of subclauses: relative clauses, conditional clauses, noun clauses, adverbial clauses, and participle clauses

A clause is subject to subject-verb agreement (SVA) where verbs must grammatically match their subjects (Eastwood, 2002). For example, a singular subject "Almost two-thirds of the land in the southwestern areas of the country" must go with a singular verb "is" (Azar, 2002) which highlighted the SVA complexity.

Ungrammatical clauses are due to errors and mistakes. Errors are grammatical arrangements unlikely to be presented by native speakers (Lennon, 1991), while mistakes represent sporadic variations wherein learners intermittently produce incorrect forms (Norrish, cited in Hasyim, 2002). Further, Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) explained four types of ungrammaticalities. The first type, 'omission,' can be illustrated with "Car coming." The second category is 'addition'. The example is "He does not eats." The third type is 'misformation' exemplified by "He gots a flower." The fourth type is 'misordering', such as "I eat sometimes candy."

ESL and/or EFL learners' ungrammaticalities have been a focal point for scholars' investigations. Ungrammaticalities are challenges across learners at various educational levels, as evidenced by studies of Almahameed and Alajalein (2021), Handayani et al. (2019), Maftukhin (2023), Murad and Khalil (2015) Nair and Hui (2018). Dinamika and Hanafiah (2019), Talosa and Maguddayao (2018), and Zulfiah (2020) even highlighted a prevalent absence of verbs within clauses. Furthermore, Alahmadi (2019), Gayo and Widodo (2018), Mbau et al. (2014), and Ougan and Valle (2022) found that subjects and verbs were the most frequent problems, specifically in the context of academic writing similar to the one of IELTS which is the context of the present research. Meanwhile, Arham and Ariana (2020), Pouladian et al. (2017), and Tikupasang et al. (2022) discovered verbs as the primary contributors to imperfections in IELTS writing.

Nartiningrum et al. (2021) found that the 'grammatical range and accuracy' dimension was the most influential factor in this proficiency test's writing performance deficiencies. It emphasizes the critical importance of our study.

Previous research extensively examines ungrammaticalities in English writing, including IELTS settings. This study stands out by analyzing grammatical and ungrammatical clauses in IELTS writing performances, including their respective ratios for comparison based on the score variation. It aims to improve understanding of writing scores.

II. METHOD

We applied mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative data for a more holistic understanding. Accordingly, two methodologies were employed. The first one was a qualitative descriptive method. It involved syntactic analysis to explore clause construction elements (Bergmann et al., 2007). The second one was a quantitative method, which examined the ratio of the grammatical and ungrammatical clauses per writing performance based on the score variation.

Data and Data Source

The qualitative data is grammatical and ungrammatical clauses structured as S+V. The quantitative one represents the numbers of these clauses per writing performance.

The data source is six IELTS writing performances by six out of 21 undergraduate students of the Faculty of Islamic Religion at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan as part of a preparatory course on August 13th, 2022. Their performances were evaluated at the conclusion of the course. Despite the small number of writing performance, it is worth noting that those learners were the ones highly motivated and actively engaged in the entire learning activities and examination. The trend in performance remains pertinent to our research inquiries because it mirrors the present situation, given minimal changes in the IELTS writing scheme, questions, and scoring criteria since 2005 (Manhattan Review, 2024).

Data Collection

We conducted archival research by sourcing data from the teacher's course documents. Notably, the teacher, who is this study's corresponding author, is affiliated with an international English course and achieved an official IELTS band score of over 6.5. To do so, the handwritten writing performances from the archives were manually transcribed into digital format. The writers' identities were excluded to adhere to ethical standards (Podseva & Sharma, 2013).

Data Analysis

Grammatical and Ungrammatical Clauses

The data analysis initially involved identifying grammatical clauses based on Eastwood's theory of clauses (2002) and Azar's SVA taxonomy (2002). Clauses are ungrammatical if they contained ungrammaticality(es) in the noun phrases as subjects or verb phrases as the following verb—or both—whether they were due to mistakes or errors. They were then classified following Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's ungrammaticality categorization (1982). Other deficiencies such as tenses, punctuations, and linking words were excluded.

Proportions of Grammatical and Ungrammatical Clauses

The numbers of grammatical and ungrammatical clauses were obtained by summing the respective types in each writing performance. The percentages were calculated by dividing the number of grammatical clauses by the total clauses and multiplied by 100. The percentages were then averaged across all the performances to establish the mean proportions based on the score variation. The same procedure was applied to the ungrammatical ones. These procedures offer better clarifications than relying on numerical comparisons.

Presentation

The findings are divided into two sections: grammatical and ungrammatical clauses, and the proportions of both clause classifications per writing performance based on the score variation. The first section includes codification, where the writing performance is coded as 'WP' followed by a numerical sequence corresponding to the participant list number. A hyphen separates the numbers of the performance and identified clause. The code is presented in bold. For example, **WP2-9** refers to clause nine in performance two.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research identified 139 grammatical clauses. Recurring subjects and verbs were abundant due to only one set of questions given to all the participants. Table 1 below presents samples of the findings of grammatical clauses. The S + V parts are underlined.

Table 1. Samples of Findings of Grammatical Clauses

No.	Source	Singular Subjects + Singular Verbs
1.	WP2-26	" <u>I am</u> the one of the people."
2.	WP6-16	" <u>This topic is</u> right."
3.	WP2-14	" <u>This mode of transport was</u> the most popular number 2 after road mode of transport."
4.	WP4-1	" <u>The graph shows</u> the quantities of goods."
5.	WP2-18	" <u>The quantity has decreased</u> year by year."
No.	Source	Plural Subjects + Plural Verbs
6.	WP1-39	" <u>They ... also work</u> to make money."
7.	WP3-30	"If <u>we do not use</u> effectively."
8.	WP2-25	"... and <u>some people believe in</u> that."
9.	WP2-57	"So, there <u>are too many choices</u> in life."

In summary, all the grammatical clauses can be identified using a clause classification based on Eastwood (2002) and an SVA definition according to Azar (2002). As the table shows, the singular verbs correspond consistently to the singular subject forms. In **WP2-26**, the singular subject "I" agrees with the verb "am". The answer context explains that the writer is included in a particular group of people who believe that there are generally excessive choices. This group is also mentioned in the context of the question. **WP6-16** also presents a clear justification of grammaticality. The head noun "topic" preceded by the determiner "this" is relevant to the question context about life's myriad confusing options for people. They both form the noun phrase serving as the subject. A corresponding verb form is "is". The subject in **WP2-14** is arguably one of the most advanced structures identified in the dataset. The subject, which is a complex noun phrase consisting of the determiner "the", head noun "mode", and another modifier "of transport", is followed by the verb in the past tense form "was". The clause signifies the water transportation mode carrying a large number of goods as contextualized by the question. **WP4-1** shows the singular subject "the graph" pairing with the singular verb ending in '-s', "shows". This clause is coherent with the question diagram. A more complex verb is found in **WP2-18**: the singular auxiliary verb is "has" and the ordinary verb is "decreased".

The second type, the plural subjects require no inflection of the verbs, which are also plural. The sample **WP1-39** is grammatical: the subject "they" refers to mothers in general,

as far as the answer context is concerned. The verb “work” explains that they can still make money rather than merely play a role as a mother who looks after their children. Meanwhile, a verb phrase in **WP3-30** consists of the plural auxiliary verb “do”, the negation adverb “not”, and the ordinary verb “use”. The subject “we” is contextual as it refers to people in general. The context describes many available options at present that people can do useful things rather than simply doing nothing. In **WP2-25**, a quantifier “some” is followed by the head noun “people”, which both serve as the subject. It represents a distinct group of people who have thought about a particular matter. It is in line with the contexts of both the answer and the question. The verb phrase is in the form of a phrasal verb comprising the verb “believe” and the preposition “in”. The plural subject is also demonstrated using the expletive ‘there + verb ‘be’ + plural noun’ as shown in **WP2-57**. The answer context is about the abundant choices in our lives.

In light of the above results, the samples of grammatical clauses potentially serve as examples for fellow learners. It is strongly advised that participants should increase the complexity structures of the clauses, such as the subject in **WP2-14**. Another recommendation is that the verb structure involves a verb phrase consisting of multiple auxiliary verbs that modify the ordinary verb, but no sample is found in the data. This suggestion can limit the use of simple clauses such as **WP2-26**. A writing performance would be expected to contain a wider range of structures to attain a high score, as far as the dimension of ‘grammatical range and accuracy’ from the writing score descriptors are concerned (IELTS, 2016a, 2016b).

Samples of Ungrammatical Clauses

Table 2 presents samples of ungrammatical clauses. The ungrammatical elements are underlined. The suggested corrections are provided with square brackets.

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Table 2. Samples of Findings of Ungrammatical Clauses Based on SVA

No.	Source	'omission'
1.	WP1-37	"But they [are] still as a mother in house."
2.	WP3-12	"Rail [was] in the graph on third position."
3.	WP6-13	"But [it was] not many as 3 modes."
4.	WP1-47	"If you [do] not want effortles to make a choice."
No.	Source	'addition'
5.	WP2-34	"And it <u>is</u> sounds good."
6.	WP5-9	"But, year after year, they <u>are</u> have a personal way."
7.	WP1-22	"I <u>have</u> agree with statetment nowadays."
8.	WP3-33	"In conclusion, nowadays we have <u>have</u> to Many Choice."
No.	Source	'misformation'
9.	WP3-31	"Like we always <u>playing</u> [play]."
10.	WP6-1	"The picture <u>describe</u> [describes] about Goods."
11.	WP5-11	"So many <u>peoples lives</u> [people live] to use water transportation."
12.	WP1-27	" <u>Thats</u> [That is] the point of make a lot of choices in real life."
No.	Source	Multiple Types of Ungrammaticalities
13.	WP2-50	"now there are [a] lot of <u>menu</u> [menus] in restaurant."
14.	WP2-3	"the goods <u>was be</u> [were] dominated ..."

Only one type of ungrammaticalities delineated by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) is not identified in the data: 'misordering'. Some of the data, however, exhibit multiple ungrammatical constituents.

The samples in 'omission' mostly pertain to the verbs, for example in **WP1-37**. The subject "they" refers to contemporary mothers. It is also related to the object, being burdened with multiple tasks according to the answer context. The subject should be grammatically followed by the missing verb "are". In **WP3-12**, the verb "was" is advised. It considers the past timeframe indicated in the writing and question contexts. The clause is about transportation by rail among the other three different modes. A similar verb is expected in **WP6-13** since the period is the same as the previous sample when referring to both the question and performance contexts. It is combined with the adverb "not" to

form the negative verb phrase. The pronoun "it" as the subject is also suggested to be attributed to the pipeline transportation mode. Adding an auxiliary verb "do" is necessary for **WP1-47** just before the adverb "not". The ordinary verb is "want" to complete the verb phrase. The referent of the subject "you" is the reader(s). From these findings, what can be inferred is that the omitted elements may stem from the participants' oversight, supposing they already grasp these rudimentary constructs.

In the type of 'addition', the samples also show unnecessary verbs. **WP2-34** involves the unnecessary verb "is". The verb "sounds" is an appropriate predicate since the subject "it" elucidates a response to a multitude of choices in life based on the answer context. In **WP5-9**, the verb "are" is unnecessary owing to the object presumably being associated with a specific way related to the subject "they". The pronoun describes two transportation modes. In **WP1-22** the verb "agree" should be maintained and the other verb "have" should be excluded. This is because the clause object is about a specific statement that the subject "I" agrees to. **WP3-33** has a double verb "have", one of which is redundant. The subject "we" refers to us in general, contextualized by the answer. These four unnecessary words are likely motivated by the participants' mistakes.

For the 'misformation' type, the verbs continue to be the most frequently spotted ungrammaticality. Sample **WP3-31** demonstrates that the suffix "-ing" in the verb "play" is incorrect. According to the answer context, the correct form of the verb explains 'doing something fun'. The subject "we" refers to general people. In **WP6-1**, the verb "describe" should have an '-s' inflection to be grammatically aligned with the subject "the picture". Two ungrammatical forms are found in **WP5-11**: "peoples" and "lives". The intended referent is communities from various ethnic, cultural, racial, or national origins, which the writer may be unfamiliar with. It is also irrelevant to the performance context, so it should be replaced with "people". This suggestion refers to those who use the water-based transportation mode. The second, the verb "lives," should be in the plural form 'live' to agree with the plural subject.

Multiple different types of grammatical inaccuracies are found, illustrated with two clause samples. **WP2-50** needs a determiner "a" for the quantifier expression "lot of". This omission is an error caused by the participant's confusion with the alternative version—"lots of". Consequently, it requires the plural head noun "menus". It is suspected that the inaccuracy is due to a lack of knowledge regarding the noun's countable nature and potential plural form rather than a mistake. Another reason is that the preceding verb "are" requires the plural noun form. Within the performance context, the clause describes an overwhelming array of options within a restaurant's menu, which is potentially

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confusing. Sample **WP2-3** demonstrates an extraneous auxiliary verb "be", and the auxiliary verb "was" must be replaced with "were". Both the errors supposedly originate from two consecutive combined unfamiliarity: the preceding noun "goods" which is assumed to be uncountable and the passive verb structure. Based on the answer context, the clause explains the quantity of commodities transported by land-based transportation mode.

According to the analysis results above, the prevalence of all these ungrammatical structures can be attributed primarily to one factor: prioritizing conveying ideas over structural accuracy. The participants aimed to answer questions effectively but were hindered by examination pressure, particularly due to limited time. This pressure might have caused them to overlook the grammar aspects, leading to both collective grammatical mistakes and errors. Unfortunately, this tendency likely results in lower-than-expected scores. To address this issue, they are highly recommended to recognize and correct ungrammaticalities more carefully prior to the submissions, especially those deemed as mistakes since they can still know the correct forms, during the writing process. It would improve their scores.

Proportions of Grammatical and Ungrammatical Clauses

The two types of clauses are mainly calculated based on their use in the participants' writing performances. The percentage of grammatical clauses (GC %) and ungrammatical clauses (UC %) are obtained from the total number of grammatical clauses (GC) or ungrammatical clauses (UC) divided by the total number of clauses (Σ). They are eventually converted into percentages. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Proportions of Grammatical and Ungrammatical Clauses Based on SVA

No.	WP	Score	Number of GC	Number of UC	Σ	GC %	UC %
1.	WP2	5.5	20	39	59	36	64
2.	WP1	5	19	33	52	37	63
3.	WP5	3.5	18	20	38	47	53
4.	WP3	3	16	20	36	44	56
5.	WP4	2.5	7	13	20	35	65
6.	WP6	2	5	14	19	26	74
Total			85	139	224		
Average %						38	62

Based on Table 3, the total proportion of grammatical clauses is roughly one-third smaller than that of ungrammatical ones. The underlying assumption for grammatical clauses is that the higher the score, the higher the percentage. Nevertheless, it does not

necessarily mean as such. **WP2**, with a score of 5.5 (the highest score), demonstrates 36% (not the highest) grammatical clauses. The largest percentage (47%) is demonstrated by **WP5** with a score of only 3.5. However, **WP6** with the lowest score, which is 2, and the smallest percentage (26%) seems to meet the assumption.

The findings reveal that a high score is not automatically linked with a low percentage of ungrammatical clauses. This is demonstrated by **WP2**, with the highest score of 5.5 and 64% of ungrammatical clauses. The percentage of ungrammatical clauses is higher than that of **WP5** with a score of 3.5 but 53% of ungrammatical clauses. However, a low score demonstrates a high percentage of ungrammatical clauses. It is shown by **WP6** with the lowest score of 2 and 74% of ungrammatical clauses (the highest). This unexpected finding can be explained by analyzing the total clauses (see Σ). The clauses produced by the participants tend to have some correlations with the obtained scores. The largest number (59 clauses) is demonstrated in **WP2**, with a score of 5.5 (the highest). The smallest number (19 clauses) was produced by the one with the lowest score, 2 (**WP6**). From this correlation, we can infer that the writing performances with higher scores contain more clauses (intended by the writers to give more elaborations to the response), consequently increasing the probability of making ungrammatical clauses. Similarly, the writing performances assessed with lower scores comprise fewer clauses, thus decreasing the probability of making ungrammatical clauses.

Such indications happened because some factors could increase and/or decrease the writing performance scores at the same time. Fundamentally, a grammar concept is not only S+V, meaning those excluded from this structure, such as conjunctions and punctuations, influence equally in the 'grammatical range and accuracy' dimension. The other three dimensions also significantly affect the whole score summation.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis findings have addressed the research questions. They help to understand the given scores by examining the descriptions and ratios of grammatical and ungrammatical clauses from each writing performance with its score.

Regarding the grammatically correct clauses, the participants might not fully realize that generating the complex structures tends to be ungrammatical. This conjecture likely stems from the participants' limited English proficiency. This characteristic aligns with some results of the previous studies (Arham and Ariana, 2020; Nartiningrum et al., 2021; Tikupasang et al., 2022).

Additionally, the quantitative analysis reveals that the ungrammatical clauses prevail in all performances. Nevertheless, to achieve a score of 6, it is recommended to produce over 47% grammatical clauses and under 53% ungrammatical ones.

It is important to acknowledge the constraints of this study, including the small number of data sources. Only six writing performances were analyzed, none of which achieved a score of 6. To gain deeper insights into grammatical and ungrammatical clauses, more performances should be examined, especially ones with a score of at least 6. Additionally, focusing solely on these clauses represents less than 25% of the total writing performance score, as it pertains to the 'grammatical range and accuracy' dimension out of the four dimensions assessed. Therefore, similar investigation is suggested for other structural elements such as pronouns, articles, and ellipses, as well as aspects in the other three dimensions.

This research analyzes both grammatical and ungrammatical clauses based on S+V in IELTS writing performances, while the prior studies (Alahmadi, 2019; Dinamika & Hanafiah, 2019; Mbau et al., 2014; Nartiningrum et al., 2018; Zulfiah, 2020) highlighted reducing ungrammaticalities, revealing that grammaticalities is also vital for providing replicable examples. Comparing the proportions of both clause types also offers novelty as the previous research (Alahmadi, 2019; Arham & Ariana, 2020; Dinamika & Hanafiah, 2019; Gayo & Widodo, 2018; Mbau et al., 2014; Ougan & Valle, 2022; Pouladian et al., 2017; Talosa & Maguddayao, 2018; Tikupasang, 2022; Zulfiah, 2020) primarily focused on ratios among ungrammatical structures. Thus, this study presents an alternative approach for evaluating and improving IELTS writing performances, particularly in terms of the clauses.

This research provides learners with insights into both grammatically correct and incorrect clauses, aiding in predicting their readiness to attain the targeted writing score in the official test. Educators can also enhance teaching effectiveness regarding related structures for their students based on these findings.

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