CHALLENGES IN PHRASEOLOGY: AN ESL STUDY AT SPACE UTM

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Abstract:

This study investigates the phraseological challenges faced by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in academic writing at SPACE UTM. Despite ongoing efforts to enhance English proficiency in Malaysia, students continue to struggle with the accurate use of collocations, idiomatic expressions, and syntactically natural constructions, which significantly affect the clarity and fluency of their writing. The research aims to identify the most frequent phraseological errors and uncover the underlying factors contributing to these issues. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study analyzed academic writing samples and responses to structured questionnaires from ten ESL foundation-level learners. Content and thematic analysis revealed that the most common errors included incorrect phrasing, verb form inconsistencies, redundant expressions, and sentence fragments. These issues were linked to first language interference, limited exposure to authentic academic phraseology, and insufficient instruction in fixed expressions. The findings highlight the need for more targeted pedagogical interventions, including explicit teaching of collocational patterns, integration of academic phrase banks, and structured self-editing strategies. By addressing these areas, educators can significantly

enhance students' academic writing proficiency and prepare them for more effective communication in higher education and professional contexts.

Introduction

Mastery of phraseology is fundamental to achieving fluency and professionalism in English as a Second Language (ESL) academic writing (Ali et al., 2024). Yet, many ESL learners are impeded by persistent phraseological errors—such as incorrect collocations, idiomatic misuse, and awkward constructions—that undermine clarity and coherence. These challenges often stem from a combination of limited language exposure, first language (L1) interference, and insufficient pedagogical focus on phraseology.

In Malaysia, where English proficiency is a critical asset in education and professional sectors, numerous reforms have aimed to elevate language instruction. Despite these efforts, ESL students at SPACE UTM continue to grapple with phraseological inaccuracies that hinder their academic performance and communicative confidence. While substantial research has addressed ESL grammar and vocabulary, phraseology remains a significantly underexplored domain, particularly within the Malaysian context. This gap means educators lack a clear understanding of the specific phrase-related obstacles learners face, making it difficult to design effective pedagogical interventions.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the types and patterns of phraseological errors commonly found in ESL learners' academic writing. Specifically, it seeks to identify the most frequent errors, explore their underlying causes, and propose targeted pedagogical strategies to address them. Through a qualitative content analysis of student writing and structured questionnaire data, the research provides insights that are crucial for improving academic writing instruction and supporting learners' development of phraseological competence.

Literature Review

Proficiency in phraseology—the system of fixed expressions, collocations, and idioms—is an integral component of language acquisition and effective communication. For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, phraseological competence is essential for conveying meaning with the accuracy and naturalness expected in academic writing. Indeed, research confirms that a strong command of phraseology profoundly influences a learner's overall language proficiency and ability to engage in academic and social discourse.

Despite its importance, the bulk of ESL error analysis has historically centered on discrete grammatical and lexical issues. A substantial body of literature identifies common pitfalls such as subject-verb agreement and incorrect word choice, often attributing them to first language (L1) interference or insufficient exposure (Awang Ali et al., 2025; Manoff, 2025; Mardonova, 2025). For example, studies in the Malaysian context by Mehat and Ismail (2021) and Wan Khairunnisa' Wan Ibrahim and Zarina Othman (2021) have respectively highlighted grammatical errors in tertiary students and vocabulary challenges in secondary schools, underscoring the scholarly focus on these areas.

In stark contrast, phraseological errors remain a comparatively underexplored domain. While emerging research, such as that by Omongos and Villarin (2023) on semantic and collocation errors, has begun to shed light on this area, a significant gap persists in comprehensive analyses of learners' phraseological challenges. This lacuna in the literature means the specific nature, causes, and communicative impact of these errors are not fully understood.

To effectively analyze these challenges, this study is grounded in established theoretical frameworks. Models such as Corder's Error Analysis and the Interlanguage Theory provide a robust lens for identifying systematic errors and understanding the developmental processes of L2 acquisition (Hassan & Ramli, 2024). Applying these theories to phraseology allows for a deeper investigation into the complexities of language learning and the factors contributing to learners' difficulties.

Therefore, this literature review synthesizes these distinct research areas to establish the theoretical and empirical foundation for the current study. By providing a comprehensive overview of phraseology's significance, the established patterns of ESL errors, and the relevant analytical frameworks, this review demonstrates the critical need for focused research on the phraseological competence of ESL learners at UNISEL.

Methodology
This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate phraseological errors in ESL learners' academic writing. A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to explore language use in depth, capturing the nuances of learners' phrase construction and the contextual factors that contribute to these errors. Specifically, the research utilized content analysis supported by a structured questionnaire to examine both the written outputs and phraseological awareness of learners.

The participants comprised ten ESL learners enrolled in the English foundation program at SPACE UTM, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all had prior experience with academic writing tasks and could provide relevant, information-rich data. Two primary instruments were used: academic writing samples and a structured questionnaire. Each participant submitted an academic essay on a predetermined topic, enabling the analysis of authentic written language, while the questionnaire, which included multiple-choice and short-answer items, assessed learners' understanding of collocations, idiomatic expressions, and fixed phrases.

Data collection was conducted under controlled classroom conditions, and all participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided written consent to ensure ethical compliance and anonymity. The data analysis followed a two-stage process. First, inductive content analysis was applied to the writing samples, using an emergent coding scheme to identify phraseological errors such as incorrect phrasing, verb form misuse, redundancy, and sentence fragments. Second, thematic analysis was conducted on the questionnaire responses to uncover patterns in learners' perceptions, particularly in relation to literal translation, L1 interference, and limited exposure to authentic phrase use. This comprehensive methodological approach ensured both depth and validity, offering a nuanced view of learners' phraseological competence from both textual and cognitive perspectives.

All procedures conducted in this study adhered to ethical research standards. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants. To maintain confidentiality, all names and identifying details were anonymised, and the collected data were securely stored for research use only. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the internal research ethics committee of SPACE UTM.

Findings

Research Question (1): What Phraseological Errors Are Commonly Made by ESL Learners at UTMSpace?

PHRASEOLOGICAL ERRORS IN ACADEMIC WRITINGS AMONG ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) LEARNERS AT A UNIVERSITY
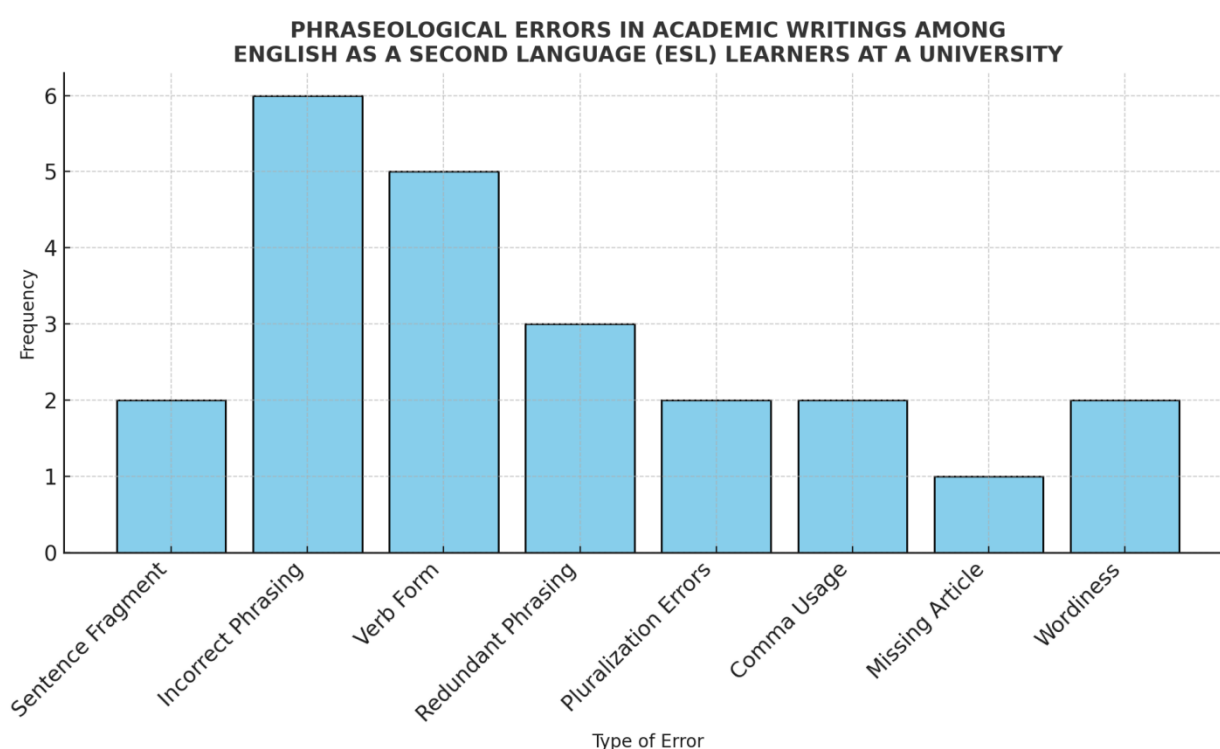
Figure 1: The Frequencies of Errors

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of various phraseological errors identified in the academic writing of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at SPACE UTM. This analysis responds to the research question: *"What are the phraseological errors made by ESL learners at SPACE UTM?"*

The most prevalent error type is Incorrect Phrasing, with 6 recorded instances, indicating that students often struggle to express ideas using syntactically and semantically appropriate structures. This suggests challenges in mastering collocations, idiomatic expressions, and the overall natural flow of English. Following closely are Verb Form Errors, with 5 occurrences, highlighting a common issue among ESL learners in appropriately conjugating verbs based on tense, aspect, and subject-verb agreement. This type of error may stem from first language

interference or insufficient understanding of English grammar rules. Redundant Phrasing appears next with 3 instances, revealing a tendency among learners to repeat ideas unnecessarily, possibly due to a lack of lexical variety or uncertainty in expressing complex thoughts concisely. Other observed errors, such as Sentence Fragments, Pluralization Errors, Comma Usage, and Wordiness, each occurred twice, while Missing Article was the least frequent, with only 1 recorded case. These less frequent errors still reflect broader concerns with grammatical precision, punctuation norms, and stylistic clarity in academic discourse.

Overall, the data highlights a clear need for focused instruction in grammatical accuracy, sentence construction, and lexical selection to improve the academic writing proficiency of ESL learners. Targeted interventions in areas like phrase structure, verb usage, and coherence development could significantly enhance learners' ability to produce clear and effective academic texts.

Research Question (2): To analyze recurring patterns in the identified phraseological errors.

ID	Type of Error	Frequency	Example Sentence (Based on Individual Mistakes)	Correction	Justification
1	Sentence Fragment	2	Student1: "With its engaging short-form videos, personalized content feed, and creative tools."	"TikTok is a popular social media platform that offers numerous benefits with its engaging features."	Fragments lack a main clause; they need completion to form a full thought.
			Student2: "Especially for those who are not able to showcase their talents physically."	"TikTok gives opportunities, especially for those who are not able to showcase their talents physically."	Fragments are incomplete ideas; adding a main clause makes the sentence stand alone.
2	Incorrect Phrasing	6	Student3: "This platform can open more career opportunities to everyone in a variety way."	"This platform can open more career opportunities for everyone in a variety of ways."	Awkward phrasing lacks grammatical flow and precision. The revised sentence uses standard grammatical structures.

			Student2: "TikTok has been a source of entertainment for many."	"TikTok is a significant source of entertainment for many."	Clarity is improved by rephrasing to highlight TikTok's relevance as a source of entertainment.
			Student3: "TikTok is increasingly used for educational purposes."	"TikTok has become increasingly popular for educational purposes."	Grammatical flow is corrected by rephrasing the sentence to use appropriate verb forms.
3	Verb Form	5	Student1: "TikTok provide knowledge to users."	"TikTok provides knowledge to users."	Subject-verb agreement error corrected; singular subject requires the verb 'provides' to align in tense and number.
			Student2: "Many influencers has started their careers on this platform."	"Many influencers have started their careers on this platform."	Plural subject ('influencers') must pair with the plural auxiliary verb 'have.'
			Student5: "TikTok provide a platform to show creativity."	"TikTok provides a platform to show creativity."	Singular subject 'TikTok' needs the verb 'provides' for grammatical accuracy.

4	Redundant Phrasing	3	Student6: "To put the statistics into words, TikTok increase job opportunities."	"To illustrate, TikTok increases job opportunities."	Excessive wording removed to make the sentence more concise while maintaining the intended meaning.
			Student7: "TikTok could help users earn a useful knowledge on all kinds of topic."	"TikTok helps users gain knowledge on various topics."	Sentence simplified by removing unnecessary modifiers for clarity and precision.
			Student8: "TikTok is a great app because it's easy to use, let us be creative, and connect."	"TikTok is a great app because it's easy to use, fosters creativity, and connects users."	Rephrased to reduce redundancy and create better parallel structure.
5	Pluralization Errors	2	Student3 "Users can upload shorts video to show their creativity."	"Users can upload short videos to showcase their creativity."	The plural noun 'videos' must agree with its modifying adjective 'short.'
			Student6: "Many people now earn full time income by doing small business."	"Many people now earn full-time incomes by running small businesses."	Corrected to pluralize 'incomes' and 'businesses' for grammatical agreement with 'many people.'
6	Comma Usage	2	Student4: "While TikTok initially popular with younger audiences it also has expanded."	"While TikTok was initially popular with younger audiences, it has expanded its appeal."	A comma is added to separate the dependent and independent clauses for proper sentence

					structure and readability.
			Student7: "TikTok is a source of entertainment with funny videos, creative challenges.	"TikTok is a source of entertainment with funny videos and creative challenges."	A comma between coordinate adjectives improves clarity by appropriately separating the descriptors.
7	Missing Article	1	Student10: "In conclusion TikTok is a beneficial platform."	"In conclusion, TikTok is a beneficial platform."	The article 'a' and a comma after 'In conclusion' are added to ensure grammatical completeness and proper punctuation.
8	Wordiness	2	Student3: "TikTok platform offers their users with filters, effects and soundtracks..."	"TikTok offers users filters, effects, and soundtracks..."	Wordiness reduced by removing 'their' and 'with,' simplifying for better readability.
			Student9: "This platform helps users earn money by creating and posting a video."	"This platform helps users earn money by creating videos."	Unnecessary repetition ('and posting') removed to simplify the sentence while retaining meaning.

The analysis of phraseological errors among ESL learners at SPACE UTM revealed several recurring patterns, highlighting common challenges in academic writing. The most frequent error identified was Incorrect Phrasing (6 occurrences), which reflects learners' difficulties in constructing natural and idiomatic expressions. This pattern suggests a reliance on literal translation from the first language and limited familiarity with authentic phraseological structures in English. Such errors often disrupt fluency and clarity in academic texts. Following this, Verb Form Errors (5 occurrences) emerged as another prominent pattern. These errors involved incorrect tense usage, auxiliary verb misapplication, and inconsistent verb conjugation, indicating a need for more focused instruction on verb use within larger

phraseological units. The tendency to mishandle verb forms also highlights a deeper issue in integrating grammatical accuracy into cohesive language chunks.

Redundant Phrasing (3 occurrences) was also observed, where learners repeated meanings unnecessarily, such as using expressions like "revert back" or "final conclusion." These errors suggest a lack of awareness regarding conciseness and precision in academic discourse. Other less frequent but still notable patterns included Prepositional Collocations (2 occurrences) and Lexical Choice Errors (2 occurrences). Prepositional errors, such as "discuss about" or "depend in," point to weaknesses in mastering fixed multi-word units, while lexical misselections indicate gaps in vocabulary depth and register-appropriate word usage. Lastly, Article and Determiner Errors (1 occurrence) revealed occasional difficulties in constructing accurate noun phrases, although this was not a predominant issue.

Collectively, these findings point to a broader concern with learners' limited control over lexico-grammatical combinations, particularly in the context of academic phraseology. The recurrence of such errors underscores the need for pedagogical interventions that emphasise collocational competence, contextualised grammar instruction, and exposure to authentic language use through corpus-based resources or phrasebank integration. By addressing these recurring patterns, educators can better support ESL learners in developing fluency and precision in their academic writing.

Discussion

Analysis of ESL learners' academic writing at SPACE UTM reveals that the most significant challenges are Incorrect Phrasing and Verb Form Errors. These issues point to a deeper pattern of lexico-grammatical misalignment, where learners struggle to combine words naturally and grammatically. Such errors, likely stemming from L1 interference and a lack of exposure to authentic academic language, fundamentally compromise writing fluency and clarity. These findings affirm the need for a pedagogical approach centered on teaching language as formulaic sequences, as advocated by Wray (2002) and Boers & Lindstromberg (2012). An integrated instructional model is required—one that prioritizes collocational awareness and contextualized grammar practice using tools like academic phrasebanks. By focusing interventions on these specific, high-frequency phraseological errors, educators can more effectively enhance learners' academic writing proficiency and foster measurable improvement.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the phraseological errors prevalent in ESL learners' academic writing at SPACE UTM and to uncover the underlying patterns and causes of these errors. The findings reveal a consistent struggle with incorrect phrasing, verb form inconsistencies, redundancy, and incomplete sentence structures—issues that collectively impair clarity, cohesion, and academic tone. These challenges are rooted in limited exposure to authentic phraseological input, reliance on literal translation from the first language, and insufficient pedagogical emphasis on collocations and fixed expressions. By identifying these recurring problems, the research provides a clearer understanding of where ESL instruction can be improved. Specifically, it advocates for a pedagogical shift toward teaching academic phraseology as an integral component of writing instruction. Strategies such as incorporating phrasebanks, contextualised grammar practice, and guided self-editing can directly address the issues uncovered. Ultimately, enhancing phraseological competence will not only improve the

fluency and accuracy of ESL learners' writing but also boost their confidence and readiness for academic and professional communication. Future research should explore larger sample sizes and investigate the effectiveness of targeted interventions across different ESL contexts.

Acknowledgement

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