
Exploring Tense Inconsistencies and Orthographic Features in Students' Digital Communication

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Abstract: *Digital communication has significantly influenced the linguistic habits of university students, often leading to a departure from formal grammatical norms. This research explores the specific patterns of tense inconsistencies and orthographic features in the online written communication of Indonesian university students on Social Networking Sites (SNS). Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study focused on 10 first-semester students from the Biology Education study program at Universitas Pejuang Republik Indonesia (UPRI) during an online English course. Data were collected through the observation of online group discussions and documentation of chat logs, then analyzed through a process of classifying and interpreting linguistic markers. The findings reveal two primary linguistic phenomena: first, a high frequency of orthographic variations, including intentional misspellings and non-standard capitalization, used to convey tone and speed. Second, a significant prevalence of grammatical errors, specifically the inconsistent use of English tenses, where students struggled to maintain temporal accuracy in their digital discourse. These results suggest that the informal nature of SNS communication, combined with the students' basic language proficiency level, fosters a "stream of consciousness" writing style that prioritizes expression over structural accuracy. This study highlights the importance of understanding these digital linguistic patterns to develop more effective English language teaching strategies for students in non-English majors.*

Keywords: *Digital Communication, Tense Inconsistencies, Orthography, Social Networking Sites, English Language Learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, everything is digital, and the way we communicate has completely changed. For today's university students, social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, or TikTok are not just places to play, but have become the primary spaces to interact and shape their own communication styles. Driven by the desire for speed, rigid language rules are often forgotten so that messages can be delivered immediately (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). This phenomenon gives birth to a more fluid and less rigid way of communicating, which is often referred to as "Netspeak" or internet language.

In the modern education era, online English learning through social media groups like WhatsApp has become a new norm. This digital space offers interaction flexibility, but on the other hand, it creates boundaries between formal academic language and daily conversational language. Students often feel more comfortable

expressing themselves in online groups, but this comfort comes at the cost of decreasing grammatical accuracy due to the relaxed and asynchronous discussion atmosphere (Syafrizal et al., 2020).

In learning English, social media actually provides many examples of sentences every day, but this also poses a major challenge. Due to the frequent use of casual language on the internet, students tend to get carried away and ignore proper grammar rules (Syahabuddin et al., 2025). This problem is particularly evident among non-English major students, specifically first-semester students in the Biology Education study program. As freshmen, they are in a transitional phase and are required to understand scientific journals with heavy language, but in real life, they are more frequently exposed to "slang" English with disorganized structures.

One of the most frequently disorganized aspects is the use of tenses. In fact, tenses are crucial for understanding when an event occurred. However, research shows that students often arbitrarily mix past, present, and future tenses when chatting in the virtual world. Their focus is usually just on getting the meaning across, without caring much about sentence formulas (Ellis, 2015; Listia & Febriyanti, 2020). If these incorrect habits are ignored, there is a concern that they will become difficult to change or undergo fossilization (Richards, 2015).

In addition to grammar issues, the way words are written or spelled (orthography) has also changed drastically in the digital world. Today, many people intentionally misspell words, omit vowels, or randomly use uppercase and lowercase letters. According to Yus (2011), this way of writing is actually used as a substitute for tone of voice or facial expressions that are invisible when we are chatting. Although effective for casual chatting, this habit often confuses students themselves when they have to write official academic reports where the spelling must be correct and standardized (Baron, 2015).

Research on the communication patterns of Indonesian students has actually begun to be widely explored. One important study by Sidiq (2019) on students in Makassar showed that the use of non-standard lexical and orthographic features has indeed become a characteristic of interactions on social media. However, research specifically focusing on the analysis of tense usage among science students is still very limited. Considering that Biology Education students are prospective educators who will deal with global science literature, they are required to have good language accuracy to prevent misconceptions when understanding or conveying international biological terms (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017; Sari & Pratiwi, 2025).

Therefore, this research aims to explore how UPRI Biology Education students use English in their digital communication amidst the demands of online learning. The main focus of the research lies in identifying the patterns of tense inconsistencies and the characteristics of orthographic features that naturally appear in group discussions. By understanding these patterns, it is hoped that more appropriate teaching strategies can be designed to bridge the gap between informal digital communication and the needs of formal academic English.

METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach aimed at systematically and accurately explaining the phenomenon of English usage according to the reality in the field. The main focus of the research is to describe grammatical errors and orthographic features that appear in online interactions without providing interventions

that alter the natural behavior of the subjects.

The research scenario was designed through a "Virtual Case Study" activity in an English course. Biology Education students were provided with materials in the form of practicum videos on cell observation and raw data on plant growth. Based on these materials, students were instructed to discuss their analysis results using English in a class WhatsApp group. This created a semi-formal communication context, where students had to collaborate online to complete academic tasks.

The subjects of this research were 10 first-semester students from the Biology Education Study Program at Universitas Pejuang Republik Indonesia (UPRI). The selection of these first-year students was aimed at observing their initial language patterns before they receive more intensive exposure to academic English in advanced semesters. The instruments used to collect data relied on a focus group discussion guide and a text observation sheet. Prior to use, all research instruments went through an expert validation process in the field of English education to ensure the accuracy of the instruments.

Data collection was conducted over two weeks through active participant observation techniques in the WhatsApp group. In this process, the researcher did not only monitor the course of the discussion but also occasionally provided stimuli, prompting questions, or reminders (scaffolding) so that students remained consistent in using English while interacting. Documentation techniques in the form of screenshots were used to record physical evidence of students' linguistic interactions, including how they responded to directions or subtle corrections given by the lecturer in the group.

Data analysis was carried out through several stages, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Text data were classified using linguistic classification techniques to separate types of tense errors, orthographic variations, and vocabulary errors. These classification results were then interpreted based on sociolinguistic theories and English grammar to understand the reasons behind the emergence of these digital communication patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

findings

This section presents the data obtained by the researcher through intensive observation after the virtual laboratory practicum activities were completed. The data were taken from discussions in the students' WhatsApp group while they were coordinating to complete their biology case study analysis. The researcher documented these written interactions through screenshots to identify patterns of linguistic errors that appeared repeatedly when students were discussing their scientific tasks. The researcher then filtered the data and classified them into several main categories, namely tense inconsistencies, variations in orthographic features, and vocabulary selection errors. The table below summarizes the most representative data samples from the field findings.

Table 1: Observation Data of Students' Digital Linguistic Errors

Subject	Text Data (Original Chat/Status)	Linguistic Analysis	Type of Inconsistency
S1	"I go to campus yesterday morning"	Using Verb 1 for the past tense.	Tense (Past as Present)
S2	"Wait, I am finish the report now"	Missing the '-ing' suffix.	Tense (Aspect Error)
S3	"R U done with the	Replacing words with	Orthography

	observation??"	single letters.	(Replacement)
S4	"HE NEVER REPLY MY CHAT!!!"	Omitting the '-s' suffix & using ALL CAPS.	Tense & Orthography
S5	"tmrw we hv lab practice at 8"	Omitting vowels.	Orthography (Shortening)
S6	"I have see that cell under microscope"	Using Verb 1 after 'have'.	Tense (Perfective Aspect)
S7	"y u late? lecture already start"	Using the word 'lecture' (should be 'lecturer').	Lexical/Typo & Tense
S8	"i will going to the library soon"	Mixing 'will' with 'V-ing'.	Tense (Future Confusion)
S9	"THX FOR THE HELP BRO"	Extreme use of acronyms.	Orthography (Acronym)
S10	"my plant is die because no water"	Using 'is' before a base verb.	Tense (Passive/Stative)

Discussion

1. Dominance of the "Stream of Consciousness" Writing Style

This research found that UPRI Biology Education students wrote digital messages at lightning speed without any editing process, even when discussing assigned case study tasks. This writing style prioritizes emotion and speed over formal English structure. This is in line with Herring & Kapidzic's (2015) theory, which states that synchronization in online conversations often sacrifices grammar. Students feel that as long as the biological information they discuss reaches their group mates, the English structure does not need to be perfect.

Considering the subjects are first-semester students, this phenomenon is highly expected. They are still in a transitional stage, and their basic English proficiency is often not fast enough to keep up with the speed of interaction on social media. As a result, they use a compensation strategy by typing whatever comes to mind without double-checking. If this habit of neglecting the editing process continues, it can reduce students' accuracy when they have to deal with academic tasks that require high concentration in the future.

2. Orthography as a Substitute for Paralinguistic Cues

The high variety of orthography, such as the use of all capital letters by subjects S4 and S9, shows the students' efforts to insert voice intonation into writing when they feel pressured by deadlines. This finding aligns with Sidiq's (2019) analysis, which found that students tend to use unique orthographic features and excessive punctuation to express their emotions in chat rooms. Yus (2011) also explains that in cyber communication, features like unique spelling serve as markers of feelings that cannot be seen physically.

Furthermore, the use of this orthographic variation also functions as a tool for forming group identity among Biology Education students during distance learning. Students feel closer to each other when they use the same language, even if the language is technically incorrect (Kolobe & Ekanjume, 2023). This phenomenon creates a sense of belonging in their digital community, but on the other hand, it widens the gap between conversational language and the standard language they should master as prospective science teachers.

3. Tense Inconsistencies and Lexical Errors

Massive tense errors, such as those made by S1 and S10, indicate that students rely more on lexical time markers like the word "yesterday" rather than morphological markers or verb changes. Changing verbs according to time (grammar) is considered a heavy cognitive burden for first-semester students. Interestingly, even though the context was an online academic discussion, fatal word choice errors were also found. For example, subject S7 wrote "lecture" when they meant "lecturer". Students seem unable to distinguish between a noun referring to the lecture activity and the person teaching them.

The word choice error between "lecture" and "lecturer" indicates that the new students' understanding of parts of speech is still very weak in digital interactions. They tend to generalize one base word for various functions without understanding the suffix differences that determine the exact meaning of a word (Sihotang et al., 2021). If such basic concepts are confused in the context of campus discussions, it will be difficult for students to understand international biological literature, which involves much more complex language in the future.

4. Digital Literacy Challenges for Science Students

As prospective biology educators, UPRI students are required to have high accuracy because science highly values data precision. However, the social media environment provides validation for language errors as long as the meaning is conveyed to fellow students (Tagg, 2015). The irregular use of mixed language or code-mixing also shows that students are becoming accustomed to scientific terms but have not been able to place them in grammatically correct sentence structures (Darics, 2015).

This digital literacy problem becomes even more complex because students often do not realize that casual habits on social media can damage their formal writing skills. There is a kind of unconscious habit transfer from WhatsApp chat rooms to their case study report drafts. First-semester students need special guidance as early as possible to be able to distinguish the context of language use so that they do not lose their professional identity (Yuliah et al., 2020) when they have to communicate in international scientific forums later.

CLOSING

Conclusion

Based on the results of this research, it can be concluded that there are two main linguistic phenomena in the digital communication of first-semester Biology Education students at UPRI during online learning. First, there is a high frequency of orthographic variations, including intentional misspellings and non-standard capitalization, to convey tone and speed of speech. Second, a highly significant prevalence of grammatical errors, specifically in the inconsistent use of English tenses where students struggle to maintain temporal accuracy in their conversations. These results indicate that the informal nature of communication on social media, coupled with the limited basic English skills of new students, encourages a freer writing style that prioritizes expression over structural accuracy. This research emphasizes the importance of understanding students' digital linguistic patterns as a basis for developing more effective English language teaching strategies for non-English major students in the future.

Suggestions

Based on the research findings, the researcher provides several practical suggestions for related parties to improve the quality of students' English communication in the digital era:

1. For English Lecturers and Instructors. Instructors are advised to begin integrating digital literacy into the English learning curriculum, especially for new students. Lecturers need to provide more intensive guidance or scaffolding in online group interactions to help students distinguish when they should use formal language and when it is acceptable to use informal language. In addition, providing subtle corrections directly in digital discussions can help reduce the occurrence of grammar fossilization before these errors become permanent habits.
2. For Biology Education Students. Students are expected to have higher linguistic awareness when interacting in public or digital academic spaces. It is crucial for prospective educators to understand that structural accuracy in language, such as the consistent use of tenses, reflects the precision of their thinking as scientists. Students are advised to double-check (self-correct) the messages they send, especially in group discussions related to course assignments or science reports.
3. For Educational Institutions. Institutions are advised to hold specific workshops or training on digital academic writing at the beginning of the semester. The goal is for students to not only be proficient in using technology for socializing but also be capable of utilizing it for professional communication. The campus environment can support this by setting good language use standards in the online learning management systems (LMS) to familiarize students with a formal communication culture from their first year of study.
4. For Future Researchers. This research is still limited to 10 students in one study program. Future researchers are advised to expand the scope of research subjects by involving a larger sample size or conducting comparative studies between different study programs. Furthermore, the use of mixed-methods approaches can provide a more comprehensive picture of the extent to which these digital habits directly impact students' academic grades or scientific article writing skills in the future.

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