



Syntactic Errors and Binding-Related Referential Issues in ESL Academic Writing

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Abstract

This study investigated the syntactic errors and Binding Principle-related issues in the academic writing of Bachelor of Physical Education (BPED) pre-service teachers in a Philippine ESL context. Guided by Error Analysis and Binding Theory, the study analyzed student essays to identify patterns of grammatical and referential difficulties. The findings revealed that the most frequent syntactic errors involved word forms (28.18%), articles (19.09%), and subject-verb agreement (12.73%), indicating persistent challenges in functional grammar. In terms of binding-related issues, only one violation of Principle A (9.09%) was identified, while no violations of Principles B and C were observed. However, pronoun agreement and reference errors accounted for the majority of referential issues (72.73%), followed by reflexive formation errors (18.18%). These findings suggest that learners' difficulties are primarily associated with discourse-level referential clarity rather than violations of core syntactic principles. Pedagogically, the results highlight the need for ESL instruction to integrate grammar and discourse-level competencies, particularly in teaching pronoun use and cohesion. For teacher education, especially in BPED programs, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening pre-service teachers' academic writing competence. The study contributes to a context-specific understanding of ESL writing challenges in Philippine tertiary education.

1. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency plays a critical role in higher education, particularly in contexts where English functions as the primary medium of instruction (Ehsanzadeh & Dehnad, 2024; Li & Akram, 2024). In such settings, students are expected not only to comprehend academic content but also to produce written outputs that demonstrate clarity, coherence, and linguistic accuracy. Recent research highlights that while English-medium instruction supports academic participation and language development, significant challenges persist, especially in academic writing, where learners must simultaneously manage content, organization, and linguistic form (Rose et al., 2025). Moreover, English proficiency has been consistently linked to performance in academic and professional domains, underscoring the importance of strong writing skills in higher education (Escala et al., 2025; Karim et al., 2023).

Among the four macro skills, writing is widely regarded as one of the most cognitively demanding for second language (L2) learners. It requires not only the expression of ideas but also precise control over grammatical and syntactic structures. In academic contexts, ineffective writing, particularly due to grammatical and syntactic inaccuracies, can hinder clarity, coherence, and overall communicative effectiveness (Pham & Pham, 2024). For pre-service teachers, such as Bachelor of Physical Education (BPED) students, this challenge is even more critical. Beyond fulfilling academic

requirements, they are expected to produce instructional materials, lesson plans, and professional documents, all of which demand a high level of linguistic competence.

A substantial body of research has documented that L2 learners frequently struggle with syntactic accuracy, including issues related to verb forms, agreement, articles, and sentence structure. However, most of these studies focus primarily on surface-level grammatical errors, often overlooking deeper syntactic constraints that govern meaning and interpretation. One such area involves referential clarity, particularly how learners manage relationships between pronouns, antecedents, and referents within sentences. This dimension of syntactic competence is explained through Binding Theory, which accounts for how anaphors, pronouns, and referential expressions are structurally constrained in their interpretation (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 2009). Binding principles regulate co-reference within sentences and ensure that meaning remains clear and unambiguous. When these principles are violated, the result is not merely grammatical inaccuracy but also ambiguity, redundancy, and breakdowns in textual coherence. Despite their importance, binding-related violations remain underexplored in ESL writing research, where emphasis is typically placed on more observable grammatical errors.

In the Philippine context, where English is widely used as a second language and as a medium of instruction, pre-service teachers are expected to demonstrate strong academic writing skills. However, limited research has examined how deeper syntactic constraints, particularly binding principles, affect the writing of students in non-language-specialized programs such as BPED. This gap suggests a need to move beyond surface-level error analysis toward a more integrated examination of syntax and reference. Therefore, this study investigates syntactic errors and binding-related referential issues in ESL academic writing, with a specific focus on essays produced by Bachelor of Physical Education (BPED) pre-service teachers in one Philippine tertiary context. Rather than assuming that learners' referential errors stem from violations of core syntactic principles, the study uses Binding Theory as a diagnostic framework to examine whether such errors reflect structural violations or interface-level difficulties involving morphology, syntax, and discourse. By linking surface-level grammatical issues with deeper referential constraints, the study aims to provide a more context-sensitive and theoretically grounded understanding of L2 writing within this bounded classroom-based corpus.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

While existing studies have extensively examined surface-level grammatical errors in ESL writing, relatively less attention has been given to deeper syntactic constraints that govern referential relationships within sentences. One such framework is Binding Theory, which explains how pronouns, reflexives, and referential expressions relate to their antecedents within specific structural domains (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 2009). Violations of these principles may result in ambiguity, redundancy, or misinterpretation, thereby affecting both grammatical accuracy and discourse cohesion. Recent scholarship has also documented persistent writing difficulties among tertiary learners and pre-service teachers, particularly in grammar, coherence, and academic language use. Studies in stronger indexed journals show that academic writing remains demanding for pre-service teachers and undergraduate L2 writers, with recurring difficulties in grammatical accuracy, organization, and strategic control of writing (Bui et al., 2023; Taye & Mengesha, 2024; Barrot, 2023). However, these studies primarily foreground general writing performance and error reduction rather than binding-related violations affecting referential clarity and meaning.

Anchored in Error Analysis (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1997) and informed by Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 1997, 2009), this study examines both surface-level syntactic errors and deeper referential patterns in the academic writing of BPED students. Error Analysis provides a systematic approach to identifying and classifying grammatical deviations, revealing patterns in learners' interlanguage development. Binding Theory, in this study, is not treated as a predictive model of expected violations, but rather as a diagnostic lens for determining whether learners' referential difficulties arise from violations of structural constraints or from interface-level challenges involving

morphology and discourse. Within this small, classroom-based corpus, the study aims to identify the most common syntactic errors and to evaluate the extent to which referential issues align with or diverge from canonical binding conditions. Through this integrated approach, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of L2 writing by situating grammatical and referential errors within the interaction of multiple linguistic systems.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Syntactic Errors in ESL Academic Writing

Multiple studies consistently reveal that L2 academic writers struggle with syntactic accuracy across diverse linguistic contexts. Common errors include sentence fragments, run-ons, misformed phrases, function-word misuse (articles, prepositions), and subject-verb agreement issues that hinder clarity and reader comprehension. For instance, Pham & Pham (2024) examined argumentative essays by Vietnamese English majors and found frequent noun-phrase and sentence-level errors that compromised coherence. Meanwhile, Le (2023) reported pervasive grammatical mistakes, particularly in article and verb form usage among pre-intermediate Vietnamese EFL learners. Also, Ehsanzadeh & Dehnad (2024) conducted a corpus-based analysis of EFL medical students and identified high frequencies of verb-form errors and sentence-structure inaccuracies. Together, these studies underscore that syntactic weaknesses remain a structural barrier across learner profiles.

2.2. Philippine Context: Pre-service Teachers and Syntactic Proficiency

In the Philippine context, where students are considered second language learners, error analysis also confirms similar patterns among learners. Focused studies in the Philippines echo international findings, highlighting pronounced syntactic vulnerabilities among education-major students. Recent work in tertiary ESL/EFL contexts likewise confirms that academic writing difficulties remain pronounced among university learners, including those preparing for professional and teaching-oriented careers. Bui et al. (2023) found that pre-service teachers draw on varied academic writing strategies but continue to experience difficulty in producing effective academic texts, indicating that writing remains a demanding component of teacher preparation. Taye and Mengesha (2024), in a large undergraduate study, identified persistent challenges in grammar, coherence, and vocabulary, while Barrot (2023) showed that writing accuracy and error patterns among college L2 writers are sufficiently robust to respond to targeted instructional intervention. Taken together, these studies suggest that syntactic and grammatical weaknesses are not isolated problems but recurring features of tertiary L2 writing, making them highly relevant to education-oriented cohorts such as BPED students.

2.3. Binding Theory and Pronoun/Referential Errors in L2 Writing

Research grounded in Binding Theory has consistently shown that second language (L2) learners experience persistent difficulties in managing pronoun and referential relationships due to the interaction of syntactic constraints and discourse-level processing demands. Binding Theory posits that the distribution and interpretation of pronouns and reflexives are governed by structural conditions such as locality and c-command, which regulate co-reference within sentences (Chomsky, 1981). Empirical studies in second language acquisition reveal an asymmetry in learners' acquisition of binding principles, where reflexive interpretation (Principle A) tends to be more target-like, while pronoun interpretation (Principle B) remains unstable even at advanced levels of proficiency. For instance, Slabakova, White, & Brambatti Guzzo (2017) found that L2 learners exhibit greater difficulty in pronoun interpretation due to increased computational complexity and processing demands. Similarly, Kim, Montrul, and Yoon (2015) provided eye-tracking evidence showing that although learners can apply syntactic constraints during real-time processing, they often struggle to integrate grammatical knowledge with discourse information when resolving pronoun reference. These findings suggest that referential errors in L2 writing are not merely surface-level grammatical issues but reflect deeper difficulties in coordinating syntax with meaning and discourse.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with supplementary descriptive statistics. The analysis was grounded in qualitative error analysis, supported by descriptive frequency counts to illustrate the distribution of identified error types. This approach aligns with established practices in second language acquisition (SLA), where qualitative analysis is used to interpret linguistic patterns, while quantitative summaries provide an overview of their occurrence (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Riazi & Farsani, 2024). Rather than constituting a full mixed-methods design, the study adopts a qualitative analytic framework with supplementary descriptive statistics. The primary focus is on identifying, classifying, and interpreting errors within learners' written output, consistent with the principles of Error Analysis (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1997). Frequency counts are used only to support pattern identification and should be understood as descriptive rather than inferential. Participants were drawn from a cohort of 40 third-year BPED students enrolled in a Teacher Education Program. From this group, 10 students were selected through simple random sampling to provide a manageable corpus for in-depth qualitative analysis. While random selection was used to reduce selection bias within the class, the resulting sample size is not intended to be statistically representative of a wider population. Rather, the sample is appropriate for exploratory profiling of syntactic patterns within a bounded classroom context. As such, findings should be interpreted as context-specific insights into learners' interlanguage development rather than as generalizable claims about all BPED students or ESL learners. The data consisted of short academic essays written by the selected participants in response to the prompt "The Role of Teachers in Nation-Building" (250-300 words). The writing task was administered under controlled classroom conditions to minimize external assistance, thereby ensuring that the data reflected learners' actual linguistic competence (Ellis, 1997; Bryman, 2021). All essays were anonymized and assigned numerical codes to ensure confidentiality in accordance with ethical research standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The texts were then digitized and compiled into a small corpus for systematic analysis.

3.1. Data Analysis

The data collected from the students' essays were analyzed using a qualitatively driven, two-level analytical procedure, guided by Error Analysis (EA) and Binding Theory (BT), and supported by descriptive frequency counts.

Syntactic Error Analysis. Syntactic errors were examined following the principles of Error Analysis as proposed by Corder (1967) and further elaborated by Ellis (1997). This framework provides a systematic procedure for identifying, describing, and explaining second language learners' errors. First, errors were identified by comparing each sentence in the student essays with its target-language equivalent to detect deviations from standard English grammar. Particular attention was given to clausal and phrasal constructions. Second, identified errors were described and classified using the grammatical error taxonomy of Darus and Ching (2009): (1) subject-verb agreement, (2) tense, (3) verb form, (4) part of speech, (5) countable and uncountable nouns, (6) pronouns, (7) adjective forms in comparison structures, (8) articles, (9) prepositions, (10) fragment sentences, and (11) run-on sentences. Each occurrence was recorded and tallied to determine frequency and distribution. Third, errors were explained by interpreting their possible sources in relation to interlanguage development and second language acquisition processes (Ellis, 1997).

Binding Principle Analysis. To complement the surface-level error analysis, the data were further examined using Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 1997, 2009). Instances involving anaphors (e.g., himself, herself), pronouns (e.g., he, she, they), and referential expressions (e.g., the teacher, Maria) were analyzed in terms of structural constraints such as c-command, locality, and coreference. Each instance was qualitatively evaluated to determine whether it satisfied or violated Binding Principles A, B, and C. The analysis focused on how learners manage referential relationships

When Signs are Divergent: Analysing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Southwest Nigeria Through Biosemiotic Theory

within sentence structures, particularly in cases where ambiguity or redundancy arises from improper binding.

The analysis remains primarily qualitative in orientation, with frequency counts used to support the identification of patterns across the dataset. These counts are descriptive rather than inferential and are not intended to establish statistical generalizations. Instead, they serve to highlight recurring error types and binding-related issues within the specific context of the study. By integrating syntactic error analysis with binding principle analysis, the study provides a more comprehensive account of learners' writing, capturing both surface-level grammatical deviations and deeper referential constraints that affect clarity and coherence in ESL academic writing.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

This study strictly followed ethical research protocols to protect participants and uphold academic integrity. All BPED students were informed of the study's objectives and procedures, and written consent was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring voluntary participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing identifiers from student essays and securing data in password-protected files, consistent with APA ethical guidelines (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). Errors were analyzed as part of natural interlanguage development rather than deficiencies, respecting participants' roles as future educators and aligning with pedagogical approaches that treat error analysis as constructive feedback.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the analysis of syntactic and grammatical errors in the written compositions of student participants. The analysis followed Corder's Analysis of errors: identifying errors, describing and classifying them, and explaining the nature of the errors. The data were collected from students' written outputs, which were examined carefully to detect errors in grammar, structure, and mechanics. In the course of discussion, the errors are categorized according to Darus and Ching's (2009) taxonomy, which provided a clear framework for classification.

4.1. Common Syntactic Errors Found in the Academic Writings of ESL Pre-service Teachers

Analysis of the students' written outputs revealed a total of 110 syntactic errors across all categories. To provide a comprehensive interpretation, errors were analyzed at two levels: (1) within-category distributions (Tables 1-3) and (2) overall distribution across all error types (Table 4). The most frequent errors were related to word forms/parts of speech (28.18%), followed by article usage (19.09%) and subject-verb agreement (12.73%). Other errors included issues with countable/uncountable nouns (10.91%), tense (6.36%), prepositions (6.36%), run-on sentences (6.36%), pronouns (5.45%), and fragment sentences (4.55%). These findings indicate that learners experience persistent difficulties in both functional grammar and lexico-grammatical accuracy, particularly in morphological formation and grammatical selection. These results suggest that learners' errors are not random but reflect developmental processes, such as overgeneralization and incomplete rule acquisition, which are characteristic of interlanguage systems (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1997). This supports the view that syntactic errors should be interpreted as evidence of ongoing linguistic restructuring rather than mere deficiencies.

4.1.1. Errors in Verb Usage

Table 1 presents the distribution of errors related to verb usage.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Errors Related to Verb Usage (n = 21)

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Wrong Tenses	7	33.33%
Subject-Verb Agreement	14	66.67%

Total	21	100%
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As shown in Table 1, subject-verb agreement errors (66.67%) were more frequent than tense errors (33.33%) within the verb category. When considered in relation to the total number of errors, subject-verb agreement accounts for 12.73%, while tense errors account for 6.36%.

Examples of subject-verb agreement errors produced by students include:

a. **He don't care about the class. (Student 4)*

Correct form: He doesn't care about the class.

b. **She teach our class every day. (Student 4)*

Correct form: She teaches our class every day.

Examples of tense inconsistency include:

a. **I have this teacher when I was a Senior High. (Student 8)*

Correct form: I had this teacher when I was a Senior High.

b. **She ensure that no student is left behind. (Student 3)*

Correct form: She ensures (or ensured) that no student is left behind.

These errors suggest that learners are still developing control over verb morphology and grammatical agreement, particularly in aligning subject features with appropriate verb forms. Similarly, tense inconsistencies reflect challenges in managing temporal reference across discourse, rather than purely grammatical deficits. As noted by Pham and Pham (2024), L2 writers often struggle to maintain tense consistency when integrating past and present perspectives, particularly in narrative or reflective writing tasks. This pattern is consistent with previous findings that highlight verb-related errors as persistent challenges in ESL writing (Darus & Ching, 2009; Muftah, 2023).

4.1.2. Errors in Parts of Speech, Articles, and Prepositions

Table 2 summarizes errors related to lexical and functional categories.

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Errors Related to Parts of Speech, Articles, and Prepositions (n = 77)

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Wrong Word Form / Part of Speech	31	40.26%
Countable/Uncountable Noun Errors	12	15.58%
Pronoun Errors	6	7.79%
Wrong Articles / Lack of Articles	21	27.27%
Preposition Errors	7	9.09%
Total	77	100%

As shown in Table 2, word form/part-of-speech errors (40.26%) were the most frequent within this category, followed by article errors (27.27%). In terms of overall distribution, these correspond to 28.18% and 19.09% of total errors, respectively.

Examples of word form errors include:

a. **The teachers are often called the future molder... (Student 1)*

Correct form: The teachers are often called the future molders.

b. **She is very discipline in our class. (Student 4)*

Correct form: She is very disciplined in our class.

Examples of article errors include:

a. **The Role of Teacher in Nation-Building... (Student 9)*

Correct form: The Role of a Teacher in Nation-Building.

b. **She is also an math teacher. (Student 2)*

Correct form: She is also a math teacher.

These findings indicate that learners struggle with lexical selection, morphological formation, and the appropriate use of functional words, particularly articles and prepositions. Such difficulties

When Signs are Divergent: Analysing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Southwest Nigeria Through Biosemiotic Theory

suggest incomplete mastery of both grammatical and semantic constraints, reinforcing previous studies that identify article usage and word form as persistent challenges in ESL writing (Darus & Ching, 2009; Ting et al., 2010). Pronoun-related errors within this category further reveal issues in agreement and referential clarity, suggesting that learners struggle to maintain consistency between grammatical features and discourse-level meaning.

4.1.3. Errors in Sentence Structure

Table 3 presents errors related to sentence-level structure.

Table 3

Frequency and Percentage of Errors Related to Sentence Structure (n = 12)

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Fragment Sentences	5	41.67%
Run-on Sentences / Misordering	7	58.33%
Total	12	100%

Table 3 shows that errors related to sentence structures accounted for a total of 12 errors. These errors reveal that learners face difficulties in constructing complete and well-ordered sentences, which affects both clarity and coherence. The most frequent type of error in this category was run-on sentences and misordering (n = 7; 58.33%), while fragment sentences (n = 5; 41.67%) were slightly less common.

Run-on sentences/misordering were observed when learners connected multiple ideas without proper punctuation or used awkward word order. For example:

a. **And also Sir M's teaching philosophy that I really admire and Sir X's prank personality and fearless words that he is really a good leader... (Student 1)*

Correct form: I admire Sir M's teaching philosophy and Sir X's playful personality and fearless words. He is truly a good leader.

b. **Because he just doesn't only teach lessons and such but also inspire students to be a much better version of themselves... (Student 7)*

Correct form: Because he not only teaches lessons but also inspires students to be a better version of themselves.

Fragment sentences were also present in the students' writing. These fragments often lacked a subject, a verb, or a complete thought. For instance:

a. *Our story, our destiny. (Student 1)*

Correct form: This is our story, our destiny.

b. *My teacher in CESC Sir Darwin & my English teacher Ms. Opena. (Student 5)*

Correct form: My teacher in CESC is Sir Darwin, and my English teacher is Ms. Opena.

These errors indicate that learners attempt to express complex ideas but struggle with syntactic organization and sentence completeness, often transferring spoken discourse patterns into written form. This aligns with findings that ESL learners frequently produce structurally incomplete or loosely connected sentences (Ting et al., 2010). Run-on sentences suggest that learners attempt to express complex ideas but lack control over coordination and subordination, leading to overloaded sentence structures (Taye & Mengesha, 2024).

4.1.4. Overall Distribution of Syntactic Errors

To provide a holistic view, Table 4 presents the overall distribution of errors.

Table 4

Overall Distribution of Syntactic Errors

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Wrong Word Form / POS	31	28.18%
Articles	21	19.09%
Subject-Verb Agreement	14	12.73%

Count/Uncount Nouns	12	10.91%
Wrong Tenses	7	6.36%
Prepositions	7	6.36%
Run-ons	7	6.36%
Pronouns	6	5.45%
Fragments	5	4.55%
Total	110	100%

These findings demonstrate that the majority of errors are concentrated in lexico-grammatical domains, particularly word formation and article usage. The prominence of these error types suggests that learners experience difficulty not only in applying grammatical rules but also in selecting appropriate lexical forms and maintaining morphological consistency. Furthermore, the presence of sentence-level errors indicates challenges in syntactic structuring and discourse organization, which affect overall clarity and coherence. These results highlight the need for instructional approaches that integrate form-focused grammar instruction with discourse-level awareness, particularly in developing both grammatical accuracy and referential clarity in ESL academic writing. This interpretation is consistent with recent SLA research emphasizing that language production involves the integration of multiple linguistic subsystems, and breakdowns often occur at their interfaces (Riazi & Farsani, 2024). Thus, the observed error patterns reflect not only gaps in grammatical knowledge but also difficulties in coordinating linguistic resources during writing.

4.2. Binding Principle Violations in ESL Writing

This section examines the occurrence of violations related to Binding Principles A, B, and C in the students' essays. Binding Theory, as proposed by Noam Chomsky (1981) and further elaborated by Andrew Radford (2009), accounts for the distribution of anaphors (e.g., reflexives), pronouns, and R-expressions based on structural constraints such as c-command, locality, and co-reference.

Table 5

Summary of Binding-Related Issues

Binding Principle Violation	Frequency	Percentage
Principle A (Anaphors)	1	9%
Principle B (Pronouns)	0	0%
Principle C (R-expressions)	0	0%
Reflexive Formation Errors	2	18%
Pronoun Agreement / Reference Errors	8	73%
Total	11	100%

4.2.1. Principle A (Anaphors)

Principle A of Binding Theory requires that reflexive pronouns (e.g., himself, herself, themselves) be bound by a c-commanding antecedent within their local domain (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 2009). This entails that reflexives must have a local antecedent within the same clause. Subsequent accounts refine this view by incorporating constraints on both binding and syntactic distribution. Pollard and Sag (1992) argue that reflexives must be locally bound within argument structure, while Reinhart and Reuland (1993) propose that reflexivity requires co-arguments within the same predicate domain.

One instance of a Principle A violation was identified in the dataset:

**I let myself to be inspired by our teacher. (Student 2)*

Correct form: I let myself be inspired by our teacher. / I allowed myself to be inspired by our teacher.

This violation occurs because the reflexive himself is not properly licensed within its local domain as required by Principle A. Two additional instances of reflexive formation errors were also

When Signs are Divergent: Analysing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Southwest Nigeria Through Biosemiotic Theory

observed, involving the use of non-standard reflexive forms such as *theirselves* and *hissself*. These do not violate Principle A per se, as the reflexive intent is clear, but they represent morphological errors in reflexive formation. For instance:

a. **...to be a much better version of theirselves... (Student 7)*

Correct form: *...to be a much better version of themselves...*

b. **...he did it hissself... (Student 9)*

Correct form: *...he did it himself...*

To illustrate the application of Binding Theory in this analysis, consider the following sentence: Students need to improve themselves. In this sentence, the subject *Students* serves as the antecedent for the predicate *need to improve themselves*. Within the embedded TP, the verb *improve* takes the reflexive pronoun *themselves* as its complement. The reflexive *themselves* is an anaphoric pronoun, and is therefore subject to Principle A of Binding Theory, which requires that an anaphor must be bound by a c-commanding antecedent within the closest TP containing it.

In this structure, the subject *they* c-commands the reflexive *themselves* because they is positioned in Spec-TP, and the reflexive is contained within the VP which is the sister of T. Since the antecedent *they* is within the same TP as the anaphor, the locality condition is satisfied. Consequently, *themselves* is properly bound, and there is no violation of Principle A. Accordingly, the sentence is grammatical because the reflexive pronoun satisfies both the c-command condition and the local binding requirement, in line with the principles outlined in Binding Theory (Radford, 2009).

4.2.2. Principle B (Pronouns)

Principle B states that a pronoun must be free within its local domain, meaning it must not be co-referential with a c-commanding antecedent within the same clause (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 2009). Although pronoun-related errors were frequent in the dataset, none of these constituted true Principle B violations. Specifically, no instances were found in which a pronoun was clearly co-referential with a local antecedent in a configuration that satisfies the structural conditions for binding (i.e., c-command within the same TP).

Instead, the observed errors fall into two main categories. First, pronoun agreement errors involve mismatches in gender or number agreement, which are morphological rather than syntactic in nature. For example:

**I admire Ma'am Babasa because of his amazing strategies. (Student 6)*

Correct form: *...because of her amazing strategies.*

Second, referential and discourse-level issues reflect redundancy, ambiguity, or improper clause structuring, where pronouns are used alongside their antecedents in ways that affect clarity but do not violate structural binding constraints:

**And also Sir M's teaching philosophy that I really admire and Sir X's prank personality and fearless words that he is really a good leader... (Student 1)*

Correct form: *I admire Sir Martin's teaching philosophy and Sir Xarder's playful personality and fearless words. He is truly a good leader.*

These cases reflect redundancy, ambiguity, or improper clause structuring, where pronouns are used alongside their antecedents in ways that affect clarity but do not violate structural binding constraints. Importantly, these constructions do not represent true Principle B violations because the pronoun is not in a clear c-command relationship with its antecedent, or the structure is ill-formed at the sentence level, preventing a valid binding configuration. Thus, the findings suggest that learners' difficulties with pronouns arise primarily from challenges in agreement, sentence construction, and discourse-level reference tracking, rather than from a failure to acquire the syntactic constraints of Principle B. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that L2 learners experience difficulty in coordinating syntactic knowledge with discourse processing when resolving pronoun reference (Slabakova et al., 2017; Li & Akram, 2024).

4.2.3. Principle C (R-expressions)

Principle C requires that R-expressions (e.g., proper names, full noun phrases) must be free in all domains, meaning they cannot be bound or co-referential with a c-commanding antecedent (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 2009). The analysis revealed no instances of Principle C violations in the dataset. Learners consistently used referential expressions such as Ms. F, my mother, and Sir D in structurally acceptable ways, without creating illicit co-reference configurations. The absence of Principle C violations suggests that learners are able to maintain the referential independence of full noun phrases, which are less dependent on syntactic binding conditions and more lexically explicit. This supports previous findings in second language acquisition that violations involving R-expressions are relatively rare, as they require highly specific structural configurations that are less common in natural learner production.

4.2.4. Overall Interpretation of Binding-Related Findings

While the analysis is grounded in Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981; Radford, 2009), the findings reveal that most learner difficulties are not attributable to violations of core syntactic binding principles. This creates a potential theory-data tension, as the theoretical framework foregrounds structural constraints, yet the observed errors are largely morphological and discourse-related. In this study, Binding Theory is therefore best understood as a diagnostic framework that helps demonstrate that learners' difficulties arise at the interface of syntax, morphology, and discourse, rather than from a lack of underlying syntactic competence. Specifically: Principle A: One valid violation was identified, alongside additional errors involving reflexive formation at the morphological level. Principle B: No violations; errors involve agreement and discourse-level reference. Principle C: No violations; referential expressions used appropriately.

These findings indicate that, within this bounded classroom-based corpus, learners demonstrate an emerging sensitivity to structural constraints on reference, but experience difficulty in correctly forming reflexive pronouns, maintaining agreement features, and organizing referential cohesion across clauses. Thus, the observed ESL writing challenges in this study are better explained by interface-level difficulties, rather than by a lack of underlying syntactic competence in binding. Although the analysis was guided by Binding Theory, the results suggest that learners' difficulties are not primarily rooted in violations of syntactic binding constraints, but rather in interface-level challenges involving morphology and discourse. These results align with the Interface Hypothesis, which posits that structures involving the interaction of syntax and discourse are more vulnerable in second language acquisition (Slabakova et al., 2017). Consequently, the findings suggest that ESL writing difficulties are not due to a lack of syntactic competence, but rather to challenges in coordinating multiple linguistic systems simultaneously.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the syntactic errors and Binding Principle-related issues in the academic writing of BPED pre-service teachers within a Philippine ESL context, guided by Error Analysis (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1997) and informed by Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981). The findings showed that grammatical errors remain prominent, particularly in word forms (28.18%), articles (19.09%), and subject-verb agreement (12.73%), indicating persistent challenges in learners' control of functional grammar. In contrast, violations of core Binding Theory principles were minimal. Only one instance of a Principle A violation (9.09%) was identified, and no violations of Principles B and C were observed. Instead, most binding-related difficulties were associated with pronoun agreement and reference errors (72.73%) and reflexive formation errors (18.18%). These results indicate that learners' difficulties are better explained by challenges in referential clarity and cohesion at the discourse level rather than by violations of deep syntactic constraints.

From an ESL teaching perspective, these findings suggest the need for a more integrated instructional approach that moves beyond isolated grammar rules toward the development of discourse

When Signs are Divergent: Analysing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Southwest Nigeria Through Biosemiotic Theory

competence. Explicit instruction on pronoun reference, cohesion, and contextualized language use can support learners in producing clearer and more coherent academic writing. For teacher education, particularly in BPED programs, the results highlight the importance of strengthening pre-service teachers' academic writing proficiency as part of their professional preparation. As future educators, BPED students must be able to communicate ideas clearly in both academic and instructional contexts. Embedding writing-focused interventions and discipline-sensitive language support within teacher education curricula can enhance their linguistic competence and pedagogical readiness. Within this bounded sample of BPED pre-service teachers, the study demonstrates that ESL writing difficulties are predominantly discourse-level rather than syntactic in nature. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions on second language writing by emphasizing the importance of integrating grammatical accuracy with discourse-level competence in both ESL instruction and teacher education.

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