ERROR ANALYSIS OF PUNJABI ESL LEARNERS: AN INSTITUTION-BASED COMPARISON BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE COLLEGES

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Abstract

This study investigates the grammatical errors made by Punjabi English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in converting imperative sentences from direct to indirect narration, with particular emphasis on institutional variation in the Pakistani context. Drawing on Ellis's Error Analysis framework and supported by Interlanguage and Sociocultural theories, the research examines both error types and their underlying sources. A mixed-method design was adopted, combining quantitative data from a written test consisting of 20 imperative intermediate-level learners equally drawn from government and private colleges. The findings reveal eight dominant error categories, with government college learners exhibiting significantly higher error frequencies, while private college learners demonstrated greater control over reporting structures. Qualitative evidence indicates that limited exposure to English, insufficient instructional scaffolding, interlingual interference from Punjabi, and incomplete rule internalization contribute to learner errors. The study highlights the pedagogical importance of communicative instruction, contrastive teaching, and focused teacher development to enhance narration competence among Punjabi ESL learners.

Keywords:

Error Analysis; Imperative Narration; ESL Learners; Institutional Variation; Interlanguage; Sociocultural Theory; Pakistani Context

Introduction

English occupies a central position in Pakistan as the primary language of higher education, official communication, academic publishing, and employment selection, reflecting its global significance (Crystal, 2003). Although officially classified as a second language, English is rarely used beyond formal educational contexts, functioning more as a foreign language in everyday practice (Brown, 2000). For Punjabi learners, this challenge is intensified by the dominance of Punjabi and Urdu in social, domestic, and media domains, creating a sociolinguistic gap that adversely affects grammatical accuracy and structural competence (Abbasi, 2017).

Within English grammar, direct and indirect narration play a crucial communicative role by enabling speakers to report commands, requests, and advice. Imperative narration, in particular, requires complex grammatical restructuring, including pronoun adjustment, reporting verb selection, tense modification, and the insertion of infinitive constructions. These transformations place considerable cognitive demands on second language learners, especially those with limited exposure to English and restricted opportunities for communicative practice (Thornbury, 2000). While extensive research has examined grammatical errors among ESL learners, studies in Pakistan have largely focused on isolated linguistic features such as tense, articles, or gender differences, with limited attention to institutional variation (Khoso et al., 2018; Sultana, 2018). Educational institutions

differ markedly in instructional practices, teacher preparation, and learner interaction. Government colleges predominantly employ grammar-translation methods,whereas private colleges are more likely to adopt communicative and learner-centered approaches, differences that may significantly influence learners' narration competence.

Punjabi ESL learners frequently produce narration errors due to interlingual interference from Punjabi and intralingual overgeneralization of English rules, a distinction well established in error analysis research (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994). However, little empirical work has examined how institutional environments shape such errors within the same linguistic community. Sialkot offers an appropriate research context, as both government and private colleges serve comparable socioeconomic populations, allowing institutional factors to be examined in relative isolation.

This study addresses this gap by comparing imperative narration errors across institutional settings, offering pedagogical, curricular, and policy-relevant insights. By foregrounding institutional influence, the research contributes to ESL scholarship and supports more effective instructional practices for improving narration competence among Punjabi learners.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To identify the major grammatical errors made by Punjabi ESL learners in converting imperative sentences from direct to indirect narration.
- To compare the frequency and distribution of imperative narration errors between learners in government and private colleges.
- To examine the linguistic, cognitive, and instructional factors contributing to these errors.

1.2 Research Questions

- What grammatical errors do Punjabi ESL learners commit when converting imperative sentences from direct to indirect narration?
- How do the frequency and distribution of these errors differ between learners in government and private colleges?
- What linguistic, cognitive, and instructional factors contribute to imperative narration errors among Punjabi ESL learners?

1.3   Hypotheses

1.3.1 H_{01} (Null Hypothesis): There is no statistically significant difference in the frequency and types of imperative narration errors between Punjabi ESL learners of government colleges and private colleges.

1.3.2 H_{11} (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a statistically significant difference in the frequency and types of imperative narration errors between Punjabi ESL learners of government colleges and private colleges.

Literature Review

Error Analysis (EA) has remained a foundational framework in applied linguistics for examining how second language learners develop grammatical competence. Moving beyond the view of errors as mere deficiencies, contemporary SLA research treats learner errors as systematic indicators of cognitive development and instructional influence. Early work by Corder (1967, 1973) established that errors possess diagnostic value, revealing learners' evolving internal rule systems. For learners acquiring English largely through formal instruction rather than naturalistic exposure, such as Punjabi ESL learners, errors provide critical insights into learning strategies, structural awareness, and classroom practices (Ellis, 1994; Brown, 2000).

2.1 Origin and Development of Error Analysis

Error Analysis emerged as a response to the limitations of Contrastive Analysis (CA), which attributed most learner difficulties to negative transfer from the first language (Lado, 1957). Although CA could explain certain interlingual errors, it failed to account for intralingual errors arising from overgeneralization or incomplete rule acquisition (Richards, 1971). Corder's (1967) reconceptualization of errors as evidence of learning led to the development of EA as a systematic methodology. Ellis (1994, 1995) further operationalized EA through a structured process of data collection, error identification, classification, and explanation. This model has since guided numerous empirical studies across ESL contexts. EA has been widely applied to grammatical domains including tense, articles, and narration. Studies conducted in diverse ESL settings, such as Bennui (2008) in Thailand, Erdogan (2005) in Sudan, and Sultana (2018) in Bangladesh, report consistent, rule-governed error patterns, particularly in reported speech. These findings demonstrate that narration errors reflect systematic interlanguage processes rather than random performance lapses.

2.2 Imperative Narration in ESL Learning

Imperative narration poses a particular challenge for ESL learners due to the multiple grammatical adjustments it requires. Converting direct imperatives into indirect speech involves selecting appropriate reporting verbs, inserting infinitive constructions, adjusting pronouns, and maintaining pragmatic intent (Thornbury, 2000). Such restructuring places high cognitive demands on learners, especially those with limited exposure to communicative English (Brown, 2000). Research indicates that learners frequently omit infinitive markers, misuse reporting verbs, and produce faulty pronoun alignment, errors commonly reported in South Asian ESL studies (Riyawi & Alwiya, 2017; Sultana, 2018).

2.3 Interlanguage and Institutional Influence

Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972) explains these errors as manifestations of an evolving linguistic system shaped by partial rule internalization and first-language influence. Learners often demonstrate approximations of target structures, resulting in systematic but non- target-like forms (Gass & Selinker, 1994). In contexts with limited corrective feedback and communicative practice, such as many government colleges in Pakistan, these patterns may fossilize.

Sociocultural Theory further highlights the role of instructional environments in shaping language development. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning occurs through interaction, scaffolding, and guided practice. Pakistani studies (Abbasi, 2017; Khoso et al., 2018) suggest that grammar-translation methods prevalent in government institutions restrict opportunities for meaningful narration practice, whereas private institutions more often provide communicative support.

Although prior research documents narration error types, few studies have examined how institutional contexts influence these errors within the same linguistic community. By comparing imperative narration errors among Punjabi ESL learners in government and private colleges, the present study addresses this gap and extends existing literature on institutional effects in second language learning.

Research Methodology

This study has adopted a mixed-method research design to investigate imperative narration errors among Punjabi ESL learners, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure analytical depth and methodological rigor. Mixed-method designs are widely endorsed in second language research as they enable systematic measurement of error patterns while also capturing contextual and learner-based explanations (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1994). The quantitative component has focused on identifying and comparing grammatical errors, whereas the qualitative components have explored instructional and experiential factors influencing

learner performance.

3.1 Population and Sampling

The population is comprised intermediate-level students enrolled in government and private colleges in Sialkot, Punjab, where Punjabi predominates as the home language. This level is selected because learners are formally introduced to narration rules and are expected to demonstrate structural competence. A total of 256 students participated, including 128 from government colleges and 128 from private colleges. Stratified random sampling has ensured balanced institutional representation and minimized sampling bias. The shared sociolinguistic background of participants has allowed institutional context to function as the primary comparative variable.

Research Instruments

Two instruments are employed: a written test and semi-structured interviews. The written test is consisted of 20 imperative narration items designed to elicit transformations involving commands, requests, permissions, suggestions, and warnings. Test formats are adapted from etablished narration studies and pilot-tested with 20 students to ensure clarity, validity, and appropriate difficulty. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with selected students and English teachers to explore learners' difficulties, instructional practices, and access to communicative exposure.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection has occurred in two stages: controlled test administration followed by recorded interviews conducted with informed consent. Quantitative data are analyzed using established Error Analysis procedures, including error identification, classification, and frequency comparison across institutions. Qualitative data are thematically analyzed to identify linguistic, cognitive, and instructional influences. Triangulation of findings enhanced analytical credibility.

3.3 Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

Validity is strengthened through expert review, pilot testing, and instrument alignment with research objectives. Reliability is ensured through consistent scoring procedures and cross-checking of scripts. Ethical standards, including informed consent, anonymity, and institutional permission, are strictly observed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining Ellis's Error Analysis (EA) Model, Interlanguage Theory, and Sociocultural Theory. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive explanation of how imperative narration errors are produced, systematized, and shaped by institutional contexts. The integration of structural, cognitive, and contextual approaches reflects best practices in second language research, where learner performance is viewed as multidimensional rather than purely linguistic (Ellis, 1994; Brown, 2000). Ellis's Error Analysis Model provides the primary analytical foundation for this research.

Emerging as a response to the predictive limitations of Contrastive Analysis, EA reconceptualizes learner errors as systematic evidence of developing linguistic competence rather than random failure (Corder, 1967, 1973). Ellis (1994, 1995) formalized EA into a structured procedure involving error identification, classification, and explanation. In the present study, EA is particularly appropriate because imperative narration requires multiple simultaneous grammatical operations, including reporting verb selection, infinitive construction, pronoun adjustment, and clause restructuring. EA enables these deviations to be categorized quantitatively and compared across institutional groups, while also distinguishing between interlingual errors arising from Punjabi influence and intralingual errors caused by incomplete rule internalization (Richards, 1974).

Interlanguage Theory complements EA by explaining why narration errors are systematic and developmental. According to Selinker (1972), learners construct an evolving linguistic system shaped by partial acquisition of target-language rules and first-language influence. Errors such as incorrect reporting verb patterns reflect transitional interlanguage stages rather than performance slips. Differences in instructional quality and feedback further influence whether such forms stabilize or develop toward target norms.

Sociocultural Theory extends this explanation by emphasizing the role of learning environments. Rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediated learning and the zone of proximal development, SCT highlights how interaction, scaffolding, and instructional practices shape grammatical development. Institutional differences in teaching methodology and communicative exposure thus play a decisive role in learners' mastery of imperative narration. Collectively, these frameworks justify the study's focus on institutional comparison and provide a coherent lens for analyzing both the form and sources of imperative narration errors among Punjabi ESL learners.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is conducted in two sequential phases. First, quantitative error frequencies are analyzed using Ellis's Error Analysis procedures to identify, classify, and compare imperative narration errors across institutional contexts. Second, qualitative interview data have been used to interpret the underlying linguistic and instructional factors shaping these patterns.

Table 1: Frequency of Imperative Narration Errors (Government vs. Private)

Error Type	Government Learners	Private Learners
Pronoun Errors	893	648
Tense Errors	342	263
Imperative Verb Errors	579	417
Infinitive "to" Errors	611	452
"Let" Construction Errors	324	257
"Should" Construction Errors	202	151
"Forbade" Structure Errors	241	182
Direct Transfer Errors	335	267
Total Errors	**3527**	**2637**

Description: Table 1 shows a substantial quantitative difference between institutions.

Government college learners produced 3,527 errors, 890 more than private college learners. For both groups, pronoun errors and infinitive "to" errors are the most frequent, indicating persistent difficulties in perspective shifting and complement structure formation. Errors involving *should* and *forbade* have occurred least often, likely due to limited instructional exposure and lower frequency of use.

Pronoun Errors: Pronoun misalignment is the most frequent category (Government: 893; Private: 648). Learners have often failed to adjust reference appropriately in reported contexts (e.g., *Teacher asked to bring her water*). These errors reflect strong L1 influence and difficulty with perspective shifting in indirect narration.

Tense Errors: Tense errors (Government: 342; Private: 263) have resulted from retaining the original tense of direct speech instead of applying required shifts, suggesting incomplete procedural control of reported speech rules.

Imperative Verb Errors: Errors involving imperative verbs (Government: 579; Private: 417) have frequently showed incorrect conversion into declarative past forms (e.g., *He said closed the door*), indicating confusion between imperative and declarative transformations.

Infinitive "to" Errors: Omission or misuse of the infinitive marker is widespread (Government: 611; Private: 452), reflecting weak syntactic control in command-reporting structures (e.g., *He told me close the door*).

Other Constructions: Errors in *let*, *should*, and *forbade* constructions are comparatively fewer but systematic, largely attributable to semantic ambiguity, limited exposure, and lexical unfamiliarity.

Direct Transfer Errors: Direct transfer from Punjabi has accounted for a notable proportion of errors (Government: 335; Private: 267), revealing interlingual influence through literal structural mapping.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Errors

Error Category	Govt %	Private %
Pronoun	25.30	24.56
Tense	9.69	9.97
Imperative Verb	16.41	15.81
Infinitive "to"	17.31	17.13
Let	9.18	9.74
Should	5.72	5.72
Forbade	6.83	6.90

Direct Transfer   9.50   10.12

Description: Table 2 indicates similar proportional distributions across institutions, with pronoun and infinitive errors dominating in both groups. Private learners show marginally higher

percentages in *let* and direct transfer errors, suggesting occasional overgeneralization despite stronger overall control.

5.1 Comparative Interpretations

Error Density: Government learners exhibit higher overall error density, indicating weaker grammatical restructuring and greater susceptibility to fossilization.

Rule Internalization: Private learners demonstrate stronger internalization of reporting rules, fewer pronoun and infinitive errors, and reduced L1 interference, whereas government learners

rely more on rote memorization, resulting in inconsistent application.

Teaching Methods: Grammar-translation dominance in government colleges limits communicative practice, while private colleges' use of role-play, peer correction, and contextualized tasks supports accuracy.

5.2 Qualitative Results and Triangulation

Interviews corroborate quantitative findings. Government learners have reported rule memorization with limited application opportunities; private learners have described practice-oriented instruction and regular feedback. Teachers have highlighted institutional constraints in government colleges and scaffolded support in private settings. Triangulation has confirmed that instructional environment plays a decisive role in imperative narration accuracy.

Discussion

The present study examines imperative narration errors produced by Punjabi ESL learners and compared their frequency, patterns, and underlying causes across government and private colleges in Sialkot. Consistent with the research objectives, the findings reveal systematic error patterns across both learner groups, alongside marked institutional differences in overall error density. While learners from both settings struggled with pronoun shifting, infinitive construction, reporting verb selection, and structural reorganization, government college learners produced substantially more errors, underscoring the influence of instructional context on grammatical development.

The dominance of pronoun and infinitive-related errors aligns with Error Analysis research, which interprets persistent errors as indicators of incomplete rule internalization rather than random performance lapses. Pronoun misalignment reflects learners' difficulty in adjusting perspective within reported contexts, a challenge also observed in earlier ESL studies. Similarly, frequent omission of the infinitive marker "to" highlights the cognitive demands involved in restructuring imperative commands into indirect forms. These findings corroborate results from comparable ESL contexts in Asia, suggesting that imperative narration poses universal developmental challenges for L2 learners.

The institutional comparison provides critical explanatory depth. Although proportional distributions of error types are broadly similar, government learners' higher error counts indicate weaker procedural control of narration rules. This supports the view that declarative knowledge of grammar does not automatically translate into accurate use. Limited opportunities for communicative practice and feedback in government colleges appear to constrain interlanguage

restructuring, increasing the likelihood of fossilization. In contrast, private college learners' lower error frequencies suggest that regular interaction, guided practice, and feedback

facilitate more effective internalization of reporting structures.

Insights from Sociocultural Theory further illuminate these patterns. Learners in environments that promote interaction, scaffolding, and contextualized tasks demonstrate stronger grammatical control. Interview data have confirmed that private institutions provide more opportunities for oral practice, peer correction, and instructor feedback, all of which support the internalization of complex narration structures. Conversely, reliance on memorization and examination-oriented teaching in government colleges limits meaningful mediation and slows grammatical development.

Overall, the findings affirm that imperative narration is a cognitively demanding process requiring simultaneous grammatical, syntactic, and pragmatic adjustments. Persistent errors reflect transitional stages of interlanguage development rather than lack of awareness. The study thus demonstrates that institutional learning environments significantly shape learners' interlanguage trajectories, reinforcing the need to integrate structural analysis with pedagogical and sociocultural considerations in ESL instruction.

Conclusion

This study has investigated imperative narration errors among Punjabi ESL learners and has examined institutional differences between government and private colleges in Sialkot. The findings demonstrate that while narration errors are common across both contexts, government college learners produce substantially higher error frequencies, confirming that grammatical performance is strongly influenced by instructional environment rather than learner ability alone. Analysis has identified eight recurring error categories, with pronoun misalignment and omission of the infinitive marker *to* emerging as the most frequent across both groups. These patterns reflect the cognitive complexity of imperative narration, which requires simultaneous syntactic restructuring, perspective shifting, and maintenance of communicative intent. The systematic nature of these errors supports the view that they represent developmental stages of learner interlanguage rather than random inaccuracies.

Institutional comparison has revealed clear pedagogical effects. Government college learners, who experience limited communicative practice and feedback, have exhibited weaker rule internalization and greater reliance on native-language structures. Their error patterns suggest a higher risk of fossilization. In contrast, private college learners have showed relatively better control of reporting structures, benefiting from interactive instruction, scaffolding, and contextualized practice.

These results underscore that effective grammar learning, particularly for complex structures such as imperative narration, requires more than rule memorization. Meaningful use, guided interaction, and corrective feedback are essential for internalization. Consequently, government institutions should prioritize communicative and feedback-oriented approaches, while private institutions should ensure systematic reinforcement of grammatical principles to avoid partial understanding.

By foregrounding institutional influence, this study extends existing research on ESL error analysis and highlights the importance of learning environments in shaping interlanguage development. The findings offer valuable implications for ESL pedagogy, curriculum design, and teacher training in Pakistan, emphasizing the need for instructional reform to improve learners' narration competence.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may extend this study by examining imperative narration errors across a wider geographical range and at different proficiency levels to enhance generalizability.

Longitudinal designs are recommended to track how narration competence develops over time and to identify stages of interlanguage restructuring. Further studies could also investigate the

effectiveness of specific instructional interventions, such as task-based or technology-assisted learning, in reducing narration errors. Incorporating experimental or quasi-experimental designs would allow stronger causal inferences about pedagogical impact. Finally, comparative research involving other regional languages of Pakistan may provide deeper insight into the role of first- language influence on narration accuracy.

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