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University Students' Mastery of Standard Indonesian Language Conventions: A Descriptive Study at IAIN Takengon

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ABSTRACT

Writing proficiency is an essential competency in higher education because students are expected to produce academic texts that comply with the rules of Standard Indonesian. However, previous studies have primarily focused on general language proficiency, while evidence regarding students' mastery of fundamental linguistic rules across orthographic, morphological, and syntactic domains remains limited, particularly in teacher education programs. This study aimed to examine students' mastery of basic Standard Indonesian language rules in the Primary School Teacher Education (PGMI) Program at IAIN Takengon and to identify the linguistic domain in which students experienced the greatest difficulty. This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design, combining a questionnaire with follow-up interviews to explain the quantitative findings. The participants were 44 PGMI students at IAIN Takengon selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire assessing students' knowledge of Standard Indonesian language rules and semi-structured interviews to obtain participants' explanations of the observed learning difficulties. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to support the interpretation of questionnaire results. The findings indicate that syntax-related items produced the lowest proportion of correct responses compared with orthographic and morphological items. The most frequent difficulties involved identifying sentence ambiguity, recognizing appropriate sentence structures, and avoiding redundancy. Interview responses suggested that these difficulties were associated with limited understanding of grammatical rules, the influence of non-standard language use in daily communication, and insufficient opportunities to practice academic writing. The study concludes that syntactic competence represents the most challenging aspect of Standard Indonesian among the participants.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary medium that supports human communication. Throughout Indonesia, language serves as an essential means of conveying ideas effectively from one person to another. Beyond functioning as a communication tool, language also enables thinking, reasoning, and self-expression [1]. Given its fundamental role, language users are expected to continually improve their communication skills to ensure that messages are delivered accurately and effectively.

Higher education institutions have an important responsibility to facilitate students' communication skills, both oral and written. In particular, writing enables students to express their ideas and thoughts in an organized manner. Academic writing is expected to meet high standards of quality; therefore, the Indonesian Language is a compulsory general course in Indonesian universities. Besides fostering national pride in the use of the national language, this course aims to improve students' language proficiency while preserving the authenticity of Standard Indonesian [2], [3], [4].

Improving students' language proficiency requires mastery of both appropriate and correct language use. Appropriate language conforms to accepted social norms, whereas correct language adheres to the established rules of Standard Indonesian, including spelling, word formation, sentence construction, paragraph development, and logical reasoning [5]. In formal contexts, mastery of Standard Indonesian is essential because it represents intellectual rigor and academic prestige [6].

Among the four language skills, writing is widely regarded as the most challenging because it requires mastery of both linguistic and extralinguistic elements. Nevertheless, writing provides opportunities to organize ideas carefully, select appropriate vocabulary, and construct coherent texts that comply with linguistic conventions, making written communication easier to understand [7].

Writing proficiency is also a fundamental competency for completing university assignments, including papers, research proposals, undergraduate theses, journal articles, and other scholarly works. The quality of these academic products reflects students' intellectual abilities [8]. Furthermore, academic writing encourages active learning by positioning students not only as information gatherers but also as problem solvers and knowledge creators [9].

Scientific writing requires careful adherence to technical conventions and appropriate word choice. Failure to meet these standards may result in errors. According to Tarigan, errors refer to deviations from established language rules, whereas mistakes arise systematically due to insufficient mastery of language conventions [10]. Such language inaccuracies frequently appear in students' academic writing, reducing its quality and potentially obscuring otherwise valuable ideas.

According to [11] comparative taxonomy, language errors may stem from interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies. Intralingual transfer results from incomplete mastery of language rules, whereas interlingual transfer is influenced by interference from the first language. Context of learning relates to ineffective instructional methods or insufficient practice, while communication strategies

involve inappropriate approaches to expressing ideas, leading to errors in vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and overall meaning.

Another contributing factor is the excessive use of digital devices, which encourages informal writing habits, such as ignoring spelling conventions and frequently abbreviating words without correction [12]. Consequently, students need a solid mastery of the basic rules of Standard Indonesian to produce language that is both accurate and appropriate. In academic writing, words and sentences should be precise, effective, coherent, and standardized so that the intended meaning is conveyed accurately [13].

In this study, mastery of the basic rules of Standard Indonesian refers to students' understanding of the language's mechanical aspects. Language proficiency is represented through three categories of linguistic errors: phonological, morphological, and syntactic errors [13]. Similar classifications have also included lexical errors [14] and semantic, lexical, and stylistic errors [15]. However, this study focuses on phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects because they sufficiently represent students' mastery of Standard Indonesian.

Previous studies consistently indicate that university students' Indonesian language proficiency remains unsatisfactory. Students often struggle to communicate ideas effectively in both spoken and written forms due to psychological factors (attitudes, interests, and motivation) as well as non-psychological factors (the influence of the first language and the learning environment) [16]. Other studies have reported deficiencies in the application of Standard Indonesian across phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic aspects [17]. Although [18] found that students' effective sentence-writing skills were generally good, many students still lacked an understanding of the characteristics of effective sentences. Similarly, only 10% of students achieved a very good level of mastery in Indonesian language learning materials [19]. [20] observed that while students generally understood theoretical concepts, they experienced difficulties applying them due to limited practical experience and insufficiently varied learning media. Furthermore, [14] concluded that students' mastery of Standard Indonesian remained relatively low and required further guidance.

Overall, previous studies suggest that university students' proficiency in Standard Indonesian remains inadequate and requires continuous instructional support. However, no previous research has specifically examined students' mastery of the basic rules of Standard Indonesian at IAIN Takengon. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap while also providing an indicator of the effectiveness of the institution's compulsory Indonesian Language course. The findings may serve as a basis for lecturers and university administrators to develop more effective instructional strategies to reduce language errors and improve students' mastery of Standard Indonesian.

Based on these considerations, this study is expected to improve the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of Indonesian language instruction and, consequently, enhance the quality of students' academic writing. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to (1) describe students' mastery of the basic rules of Standard Indonesian in the areas of phonology, morphology, and syntax; (2) identify the most common types of language errors committed by students; and (3) analyze the factors contributing to these language errors.

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2. METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative interviews to explain the quantitative findings. The study was conducted at the Primary School Teacher Education (PGMI) Program at IAIN Takengon during the 2025/2026 academic year.

The participants were 44 PGMI students from first to fifth semesters who had completed or were currently enrolled in the compulsory Indonesian Language course. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on these inclusion criteria.

The primary data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire comprising 30 multiple-choice items distributed across three linguistic domains: orthography (10 items), morphology (10 items), and syntax (10 items). Each item required students to identify the correct language form or detect grammatical errors according to the rules of Standard Indonesian. Each correct response received one point, yielding a maximum possible score of 30. Prior to administration, the instrument was reviewed by two experts in Indonesian linguistics and language education to establish content validity, and revisions were made based on their recommendations. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, indicating acceptable reliability.

To complement the questionnaire findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students representing high-, medium-, and low-achievement groups. The interviews explored students' perceived difficulties in applying Standard Indonesian rules. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes, was conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores for each linguistic domain. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage, where interview results were used to explain patterns identified in the questionnaire data.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and respondents' identities were kept confidential by reporting the findings anonymously.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The findings of this study are organized into three major aspects of students' mastery of the basic rules of Standard Indonesian: phonology, morphology, and syntax. Regarding phonological competence, the analysis focused on pronunciation errors (phoneme addition, substitution, and deletion) and spelling, particularly compound words, particles, and prepositions. The results showed that 40.7% of the students demonstrated good mastery of phonological aspects, 45.5% answered only about half of the items correctly, and the remainder scored below half. Common phonological errors included phoneme addition in words such as *mie*, *sukak*, and *shampoo*; phoneme substitution in *kemaren* and *cabe*; and phoneme deletion in *kriting*. Spelling errors were also identified in compound words,

including *dibebas tugaskan* (instead of *dibebastugaskan*), *mempadupadan* (instead of *memadu padan*), and *multi guna* (instead of *multiguna*). Errors involving particles included incorrect separation of the suffix *-lah* (e.g., *bertepuk tangan lah* and *sayangi lah*) and incorrect attachment of *pun* (e.g., *manapun*). Students also struggled with the preposition *ke*, with 45.5% incorrectly writing *kesana* and *kemari*, whereas only 29.5% correctly distinguished *ke sana* from *kemari*. In contrast, the preposition *di* was correctly used by 77.2% of the students, although some still incorrectly wrote *disamping* instead of *di samping*.

For morphological competence, the study examined affixation, reduplication, compound words, and non-standard vocabulary. Overall, 56% of the students answered the morphology-related items correctly. Although affixation was generally well understood, errors remained, such as writing *Saya akan tetap semangat* instead of *Saya akan tetap bersemangat* and *Jangan pernah putus asa* instead of *Jangan pernah berputus asa*. Most students mastered reduplication; however, 63.6% incorrectly used the word *saling* together with reciprocal reduplication (e.g., *saling tolong-menolong*), resulting in redundancy. Additionally, 31.8% failed to revise *jalan-jalan* into *berjalan-jalan*, while others omitted hyphens in reduplicated forms such as *terus menerus* and *seakan akan*. Compound word errors were also common, with 93.2% incorrectly reduplicating *lalu lintas* as *lalu lintas-lalu lintas* instead of *lalu-lalu lintas*. Other frequent mistakes included writing *orangtua* and *terimakasih* as single words. Although 70.5% of the students successfully distinguished standard from non-standard words, errors persisted in words such as *napas*, *fikir*, *kemaren*, and *tapi*.

The weakest performance was found in syntactic competence, where only 26.1% of the students answered the syntax questions correctly, indicating that more than 70% had difficulty with sentence structure. Approximately 63.6% were unable to revise sentences to achieve conciseness, as demonstrated by expressions such as *Sangat banyak sekali tumbuhan*, which contain redundant markers of plurality. Some students also failed to recognize redundancy in expressions such as *berbagai macam gambar-gambar*. Furthermore, 70.9% were unable to identify incomplete sentence structures, such as *tanaman yang dijadikan obat-obatan itu*, which lacks a predicate, while 65.9% omitted subjects in sentence construction, producing expressions such as *masih harus banyak belajar*. Finally, 85.9% of the students were unable to identify ambiguous sentences, as illustrated by *Pagar rumah bercat abu-abu itu terlihat indah*, and often introduced unnecessary revisions that made the sentences more verbose. Overall, these findings indicate that students have not yet mastered essential aspects of effective sentence construction, particularly clarity, unity, conciseness, and the avoidance of ambiguity. The overall levels of phonological, morphological, and syntactic mastery are presented in Figure 1.

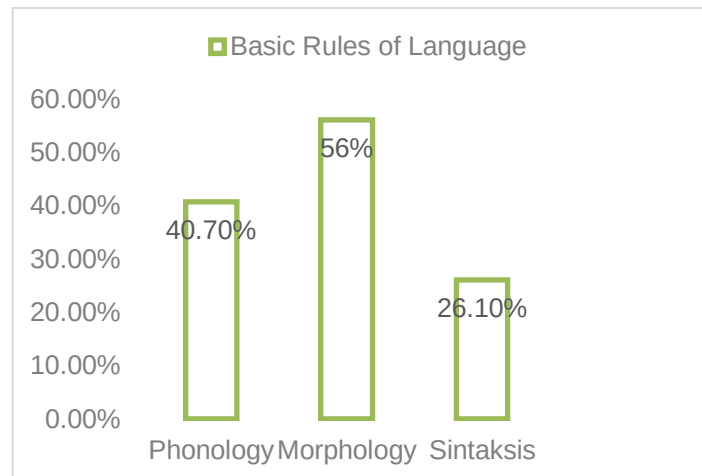


Figure 1. Graphic Representation of Students' Mastery of Basic Standard Indonesian Language Rules

3.2 Discussion

As shown in Figure 1, students' mastery of the phonological aspect was only approximately 40%. Several writing errors were identified, including phoneme addition, phoneme substitution, and phoneme deletion. These findings indicate that many students still do not adhere to the standard spelling prescribed by the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia/KBBI). In fact, the use of Standard Indonesian constitutes one of the fundamental requirements of academic writing. Standard language refers to a standardized variety that serves as the authoritative reference for correct language usage [6]. Therefore, academic writing should employ Standard Indonesian to ensure higher linguistic quality and credibility.

Furthermore, some students still had difficulty writing compound words correctly. Although the writing of compound words is regulated by the General Guidelines for Indonesian Spelling (EYD), it is also closely related to morphological competence. Students' inability to write compound words correctly reflects weaknesses in their understanding of affixation. Affixation can alter the meaning of a word because attaching an affix to a base form creates a new derived word [23]. In addition, the incorrect spelling of *multi guna* (which should be written as *multiguna*) indicates that students have not yet fully mastered the concept of bound morphemes. According to the EYD, bound forms such as *multi-*, *non-*, *pra-*, *pasca-*, *anti-*, and similar forms must be written together with the words they modify [24].

Students also experienced difficulties in the use of the particles *-lah* and *pun*. The particle *-lah* is a bound morpheme and should therefore be attached directly to the preceding word. However, some students incorrectly wrote it as a separate word. Conversely, the particle *pun* should generally be written separately, except when it forms part of conjunctions that are conventionally written as a single word, such as *andaipun*, *sementangpun*, and *bagaimanapun*. Nevertheless, many students incorrectly separated these conjunctions into forms such as *sementang pun*, *andai pun*, and *bagaimana pun* [24].

In contrast, most students were able to distinguish between the prefix *di-* and the preposition *di*. This was demonstrated by the fact that nearly all students correctly wrote

expressions such as *di samping* ("beside") and *diletakkan* ("placed"). However, confusion remained regarding the prefix *ke-*. Many students incorrectly wrote *ke mari* by analogy with *ke sana*. In fact, the correct form is *kemari*, because *mari* does not refer to a specific location in the same way that *sana* does. Therefore, *kemari* functions as a lexicalized form and should be written as a single word [23].

These findings suggest that many students have not consistently used the KBBI and the EYD as references for Standard Indonesian writing. Moreover, the errors were often inconsistent. In some items, students correctly applied spelling, punctuation, and word choice, whereas in others, they repeated the same mistakes. Such inconsistency indicates not only limited mastery but also a lack of attention to language accuracy. In many cases, students appeared to recognize their own mistakes but regarded them as trivial and therefore made little effort to correct them [25].

On the other hand, students' morphological mastery reached 56%. Morphology plays an important role in producing language that is both engaging and easy for readers to understand; therefore, morphological errors reduce the effectiveness of written communication [26]. The morphological errors identified in this study involved affixation, reduplication, compounding, and the use of non-standard words. Overall, students demonstrated a better understanding of correct affixation than phonological rules. Nevertheless, some words still contained incorrect affixes. In general, morphological errors or word-formation errors commonly occur during the affixation process [27]. For example, the sentence "*Benda itu diketemukan...*" ("The object was *diketemukan...*") contains an incorrect derived form because *diketemukan* should be replaced with the standard form *ditemukan*.

The most prominent errors, however, were found in reduplication, particularly in reciprocal reduplication, reduplication of base forms, and the omission of hyphens as markers of reduplicated words. Previous research similarly reported 35 reduplication errors [28]. In general, students were able to recognize and apply reduplicated forms in their writing. However, some still experienced difficulties in identifying derivational reduplication, namely reduplicated forms whose meanings differ from those of their base words [29]. For example, the sentence "*Dia seperti mata profesional*" ("He is like a professional eye") should have been revised to use the reduplicated form *mata-mata* ("spy"). Such errors likely stem from students' limited understanding of reduplication.

Regarding compounding, almost all participants were unable to correctly reduplicate the compound *lalu lintas*. Some students also incorrectly wrote compound words that should have been written as single words. In addition, a small proportion of students were still unable to distinguish between standard and non-standard vocabulary. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that one of the most common errors in students' academic writing involves the incorrect use of compound words and the use of word forms that do not conform to the standard forms listed in the KBBI [25].

Regarding the final component of the mastery of basic Indonesian language rules, namely syntactic mastery, students' performance in the syntactic aspect was the lowest compared with the other two aspects. Only 26% of the students answered the syntax questions correctly. In other words, their ability to revise sentences was still very limited.

The students were not yet able to make sentences more concise, identify ambiguous meanings, or determine whether a sentence contained both a subject and a predicate. In fact, a statement can only be regarded as a sentence if it contains at least a subject and a predicate [13], [30]. Consistent with these findings, previous studies have reported that students frequently produce ineffective sentences characterized by ambiguity, wordiness, lack of clarity, indirectness, and lack of parallelism [25]. Scientific writing, however, requires accurate and factual information presented in a clear, concise, unambiguous, and explicit manner without unnecessary repetition or irrelevant information [31].

Morphological and syntactic errors, commonly referred to as morphosyntactic errors, are technical language errors associated with the grammatical conventions of a language. Errors in phonology and syntax can generally be attributed to three major sources: *intralingual*, *interlingual*, and communicative factors. Nevertheless, most of the errors identified in this study originated from *intralingual* factors, primarily due to insufficient knowledge of grammar, lexical usage, and proper sentence construction [32]. This lack of linguistic knowledge may also be influenced by the widespread use of slang among young people. The increasing use of slang, together with rapid technological and computational developments, has contributed to several problems, including: (1) reduced adherence to the Indonesian Spelling System (*Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan*—EYD) in writing; (2) diminished motivation to learn proper and correct Indonesian; and (3) decreased use of standard Indonesian in everyday communication, particularly in formal contexts [2], [33].

Based on the findings presented above, it can be concluded that students' mastery of standard Indonesian language conventions remains relatively low. This finding is consistent with previous studies reporting that many university students still use non-standard Indonesian during classroom presentations. Such non-standard language use can be observed across phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic aspects. One of the primary causes is the students' inadequate competence in standard Indonesian [17]. Furthermore, weak language proficiency may also be attributed to (1) psychological factors, including attitudes, interests, aptitude, and motivation, and (2) non-psychological factors, such as students' first language, environmental influences, and Indonesian functioning as their second language [16].

The present findings also support previous research indicating that only 10% of students demonstrated a very good understanding of Indonesian language course materials, while the remaining students ranged from good to poor levels of comprehension. The largest proportion of students fell within the moderate category [19]. Similarly, another study reported that students' mastery of standard Indonesian remained low, with achievement levels of 70% in the phonological aspect, 20% in reduplication, and 20% in syntax [14].

However, these findings differ somewhat from those of other studies, which report that students generally possess strong skills in writing effective sentences. Nevertheless, such competence was not equally distributed across all characteristics of effective sentences. For example, only 24% of students demonstrated adequate mastery of sentence conciseness [18]. Likewise, another study found that although students generally had a good understanding of Indonesian language concepts, they still experienced difficulties in

applying those concepts because of insufficient practical exercises and limited instructional media [20].

The findings further suggest that *intralingual transfer* constitutes one of the major sources of students' language errors. The phonological, morphological, and syntactic errors identified indicate that students' understanding of standard Indonesian grammar and language conventions remains inadequate. The two-credit Indonesian language course appears insufficient to improve students' language competence substantially. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies identifying *intralingual transfer* as a major source of language errors [34]. Another study even documented 134 instances of language errors resulting from *intralingual transfer* [35].

In addition, the *context of learning* also contributes to these language errors. The influence of regional dialects, local languages, and informal language used in daily communication frequently leads to deviations from standard Indonesian usage. Furthermore, the limited allocation of only two credit hours provides insufficient opportunities for students to practice and apply the language directly. Finally, *communication strategies* also contribute to language errors. Excessively long, convoluted, ambiguous, redundant, and unfocused expressions found in students' writing indicate problems related to ineffective communication strategies.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' mastery of proper and standard Indonesian remains inadequate. These results have several implications. First, students still require continuous guidance and instruction to improve their mastery of the fundamental rules of standard Indonesian. Second, the inconsistency in students' use of standard Indonesian suggests that many are aware of their own language errors but tend to disregard them rather than correct them. Therefore, greater awareness should be fostered through continuous corrective feedback [36]. Third, frequent reading, regular practice, and continuous writing exercises are essential for improving students' language proficiency. The better students understand texts and language theory, the better their writing performance will become [37].

Fourth, lecturers responsible for the General Indonesian Language course should improve the teaching and learning process by implementing more appropriate and effective instructional strategies. More suitable teaching methods are needed to strengthen students' language mastery. Collaborative learning assisted by the Padlet application and the *Project-Based Learning* (PjBL) model may serve as effective alternatives. Previous studies have demonstrated that both approaches significantly improve students' writing abilities [38], [39]. Finally, responsibility for improving students' language proficiency should not rest solely with Indonesian language lecturers. Collaboration with lecturers from other disciplines is also necessary to raise students' awareness of the language errors they make in completing their academic assignments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the mastery of basic Standard Indonesian language rules among PGMI students at IAIN Takengon, with particular attention to phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects. The findings indicate that, among the 44 PGMI

students participating in this study, syntax-related items produced the lowest proportion of correct responses compared with orthographic and morphological items. These results suggest that syntactic competence remains the area in which students experience the greatest difficulty. The findings answer the research objective by demonstrating that students' understanding of Standard Indonesian varies across linguistic domains, with syntax requiring the greatest instructional attention. This study contributes to the literature by providing an overview of students' mastery of fundamental Indonesian language rules in the context of teacher education and highlights syntax as a priority area for language learning. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need for diagnostic assessment, targeted instruction on sentence structure, and increased opportunities for guided writing practice in Indonesian language courses.

This study has several limitations. It involved participants from a single study program at a single institution, relied primarily on questionnaire data supplemented by interviews, and did not analyze authentic student writing. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within these methodological boundaries. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions, employ validated diagnostic instruments, analyze authentic academic writing, compare students across different semesters and first-language backgrounds, conduct pre- and post-course assessments, and evaluate instructional interventions specifically designed to strengthen syntactic competence.

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