

Challenges in Inflectional Morphology: Errors in Plural Formation among EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Many EFL students continue to struggle with plural formation, particularly in distinguishing regular and irregular noun patterns. This study aimed to identify the inflectional markings most frequently misused in forming plural nouns, to classify inflectional errors, and to calculate the frequency of each error type produced by EFL students. The researchers employed a quantitative descriptive research design. The study population consisted of third-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, with 153 participants selected via simple random sampling. A test consisting of 35 questions was used as the main instrument in this study, and the errors were analysed using Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The findings showed that the irregular form -f/-fe to -ves was the most frequently misused inflectional marking by the students, with a total frequency of 500 errors. Furthermore, 2,358 errors were found in students' answers across four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Misformation was the most frequent type of error with a frequency of 1,014 (43.00%), followed by omission with 813 (34.48%), addition with 385 (16.33%), and misordering with 146 (6.19%). These findings indicate that students require more targeted instruction on irregular plural forms. The results highlight the need for teaching strategies that explicitly strengthen students' morphological understanding to reduce recurring errors in plural formation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nouns are the fundamental part of English grammar, serving to label people, places, things, and abstract ideas. One important aspect of understanding nouns is the difference between singular and plural forms. Alternberg and Vago [1] explained that singular and plural forms convey information about quantity or number. The plural forms of nouns are divided into two types, consisting of regular and irregular [2]. Regular nouns typically form

plurals by adding suffixes such as -s or -es, whereas irregular nouns undergo structural changes. The ability to form plural nouns correctly requires morphological competence, especially in inflectional morphology.

Morphology is defined as the branch of linguistics that studies the structure and formation of words. According to Aronoff and Fudeman [3], morphology refers to the mental system involved in word formation, or the branch of linguistics that studies the internal structure of words and how words are formed. It examines how words are constructed from the smallest meaningful units called morphemes, including roots, affixes, and stems. Lieber [4] also states that morphology is the study of words and how they are formed. One of the key aspects of morphology is inflection, which is the process of changing the form of a word without changing its meaning or word class. According to Artika et al. [5], inflection is an important morphological process of changing the word form to express its grammatical function without changing its word class or category. In English morphology, inflection is a suffix that is added to a word to give it certain grammatical features [6].

Inflectional morphology is the modification of words to reflect grammatical features such as number (singular/plural), tense, or aspect. In nouns, this involves changes from singular to plural, either regularly (such as “cats” or “boxes”) or irregularly (such as “children” or “geese”). Inflection changes the form of a word without changing its basic meaning, such as marking the plural form of English nouns with the suffix “-s” [7]. In regular inflection of nouns, the plural form is usually formed by adding the suffix -s or -es to the base form. For example, the word “cat” becomes “cats,” showing the addition of the inflectional morpheme “-s” that indicates plural marking on the noun [8]. This pattern is systematic and consistent compared to irregular ones. Irregular inflection of nouns, including ablaut and zero morph, is considered inconsistent because these forms do not follow the common patterns of plural formation.

Despite formal instruction, many EFL students, including English Education students, continue to struggle to apply these rules in writing. This is supported by Mardiyah et al. [9], who found that EFL students at Tadulako University who had already studied morphology, particularly inflectional markings, still experienced difficulties in applying inflectional rules in their writing, especially in the use of regular plural markings. English language learning, especially singular and plural nouns, has been introduced and taught since middle school and reinforced at senior high school. This is evidence from research conducted by Sidauruk et al. [10], who taught regular and irregular nouns to seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 4 Pematang Siantar. The study shows that noun material has become part of English language learning at the middle school level. Although instruction on singular and plural nouns begins as early as middle school, recurring errors persist at the university level, especially among English Education students. Ninsiana and Hakim [6] found that fifth-semester English Education students still made errors in using inflectional affixes, including the suffix for forming plural nouns, indicating that recurring errors in using plural nouns persist even at the university level. In reality, based on the researcher’s personal experience, the researcher found that many EFL students did not fully understand how to distinguish between regular and irregular nouns. In addition, recurring errors were often found in the pluralisation of nouns, particularly involving irregular nouns. For instance, some students

often write forms such as “childs” instead of “children” and “gooses” instead of “geese” to show the plural form of nouns. An example can be seen in the sentence like “The teacher gave some toys to the childs” which should be written as “The teacher gave some toys to the children.”

Several previous studies have discussed related topics, but none have specifically examined inflectional errors in the formation of plural nouns. Firstly, Sunandar [11] analysed inflectional affix errors in students' writing. Secondly, Fajrin et al. [12] examined morpho-syntactic errors made by EFL students. Lastly, Ninsiana and Hakim [6] focused on errors in the use of inflectional affixes in English students' argumentative writing. Most of these studies focused only on inflectional or general grammatical errors, involved non-English majors, and did not provide specific quantitative descriptions of the types and frequencies of inflection errors in plural formation. In addition, research specifically focused on such errors at the university level remains limited. Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap by analysing inflectional errors in plural formation among third-semester students at Tadulako University.

This study aims to analyse the inflectional errors in forming plural nouns, focusing on both regular and irregular noun forms such as -s, -es, -ies, -f/-fe to ves, ablaut, and zero morph. In this study, the researchers seek to determine which EFL students most frequently misuse inflectional markings. It also identifies the types of inflectional errors made by students and calculates the frequency of each type of inflectional error in plural noun usage. Through a focused analysis of regular and irregular noun forms using a descriptive-quantitative approach, this study offers new insights by examining inflectional errors in the use of plural nouns. It also provides a clearer picture of the morphological difficulties students still face. Additionally, this study offers implications for instruction, particularly in the development of more effective morphology teaching strategies, including improvements in materials, approaches, and classroom methods.

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive, quantitative research design to analyse the most frequently misused inflectional markings, as well as the types and frequencies of inflectional errors in plural formation made by students. This method was chosen because it aimed to describe phenomena systematically by presenting numerical data [13], [14]. As this study focused on describing existing conditions rather than manipulating variables, a non-experimental design was considered appropriate.

Population and Sample

A population is a group or collection of subjects with specific characteristics that will be studied. According to Willie [15], a population is a group of individuals who share similar characteristics and serve as the basis for determining the focus of a study. The population in this study consisted of third-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. The total number of the third-semester students was 248, divided into seven different classes labelled A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. From the total population, 153

students were randomly selected using a simple random sampling technique to serve as the research sample. Simple random sampling is a probability sampling technique that allows researchers to select study participants at random and without bias [16]. This technique ensured that every student had an equal chance of being selected, resulting in a representative sample. The sample size was determined using Slovin's Formula, a commonly used method for simple random sampling that estimates the sample size from a large population [17].

Research Instrument

The main instrument in this study was a written test designed to identify the most frequently misused inflectional markings, the types of errors, and the frequency of each type of inflectional error in plural formation. The test consisted of 35 items, which were divided into two parts. The first part contained 30 fill-in-the-blank questions, which included five items in the regular form with the suffix -s, five items with the suffix -es, five items with the suffix -ies, five items in the irregular form -f/-fe to -ves, five items for ablaut, and five items for zero morph. The second part consisted of 5 items in jumbled-word form. For each part of the test, the researchers provided instructions to ensure that students understood how to answer the questions.

Data Collection Procedures

In this study, data collection was conducted in several stages. In the initial stage, the researchers designed a test that was given to the students. The test consisted of 35 items. It was divided into two parts: 30 fill-in-the-blank questions on regular and irregular forms, and five jumbled-word questions. After designing the test, the researchers distributed it to third-semester students, who served as the research sample, with an allotted working time of approximately 35 minutes. After the test had been distributed and the students had finished working on it, all answer sheets were collected for further analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began by examining the students' answers one by one. Then, the students' errors were classified by identifying the inflectional marking that was most frequently misused. After that, the errors were classified using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay et al. [18], which included four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Then, the frequency of each type of error was calculated. Finally, the data were presented in a simple tabulation using Microsoft Excel to calculate the results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the collected data and the analysis results. The data are displayed and explained based on the students' test.

3.1. Results

In this study, the researchers designed a test to answer research question 1, which sought to identify the inflectional marking most frequently misused by students. Specifically, the researchers collected the data from the test in Part A, which focused on students'

application of plural noun forms. The researchers limited the suffixes used by the students, as presented in the table below:

Table 1. Inflectional Markings

Regular Plural Nouns	Irregular Plural Nouns
Suffix -s	-f/-fe to -ves
Suffix -es	Ablaut
Suffix -ies	Zero morph

Table 1 shows the forms of inflectional markings that become the scope of this study. As shown in the table above, there are two columns. The first column contains regular plurals in nouns and the names' suffixes, while the second column contains irregular plurals in nouns.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of the Incorrect Answers for Inflectional Markings in Singular to Plural Nouns

Inflectional Markings	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Regular suffix -s	62	3,33
Regular suffix -es	178	9,55
Regular suffix -ies	327	17,54
Irregular -f/-fe to -ves	500	26,82
Irregular ablaut	409	21,94
Irregular zero morph	388	20,82
Total	1864	100

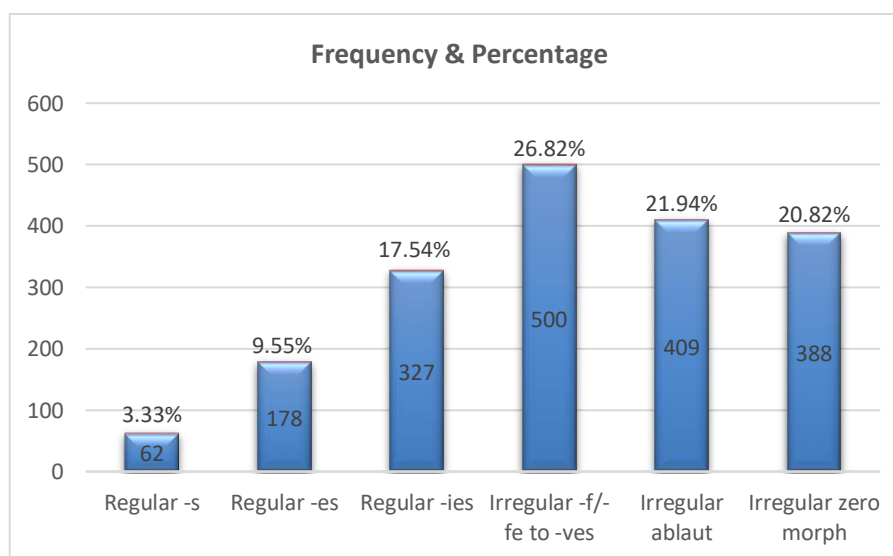


Figure 1. Diagram Frequency and Percentage of the Incorrect Answers for Inflectional Markings in Singular to Plural Nouns

Table 2 and Figure 1 present information about the frequency and the percentage of inflectional marking errors in forming plural nouns produced by students. Based on the table and the diagram, the highest frequency was found in the irregular -f/-fe to -ves form with

500 errors (26,82%), followed by irregular ablaut with 409 errors (21,94%), and irregular zero morph with 388 errors (20,82%). In contrast, regular forms such as suffix -ies with 327 errors (17,54%), suffix -es with 178 errors (9,55%), and suffix -s with 62 errors (3,33%) were less frequently misused. This shows that the irregular -f/-fe to -ves inflectional form is the most frequently misused by students in sentences. The data also show that students have a better understanding of regular inflection, such as suffix -s and suffix -es, than irregular ones. This suggests that regular forms are easier to apply because they follow consistent and familiar patterns.

In addition, to answer research questions 2 and 3, the researchers conducted a test to determine the types of inflectional errors and the frequency of each type of error in students' use of singular to plural nouns. The data were obtained from Part A and Part B of the test. This is because Part A focused on students' mastery of applying regular and irregular noun forms through fill-in-the-blank questions, while Part B provided jumbled word items to examine whether students can apply the correct plural forms and arrange the words into the correct order.

Table 3. Errors Made by Students: Omission

No	Test Item / Sentence	Student's Answer	Correct Answer	Errors
1.	The _____ (party) that I went to last night were very enjoyable and lively.	party	parties	Students omitted the plural suffix -ies.
2.	My grandmother owns a few antique _____ (watch) from the 19th century.	watch	watches	The plural marker -es was omitted after the word ending in -ch.
3.	Some _____ (bus) are already waiting at the station while others are still on the way.	bus	buses	Students omitted the plural marker -es for a noun ending in -s.
4.	Many _____ (dress) in that store are on sale today.	dress	dresses	Students omitted the suffix -es at the end of the noun.
5.	She washed all the dirty _____ (dish) that had been left in the sink after dinner.	dish	dishes	The plural suffix -es was omitted for the noun ending in -sh.

Based on the test results (Table 3), the researchers found that students made many errors. In this stage, all errors in students' answers are categorised based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982). This taxonomy divides errors into four main types, namely omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

Some examples of omission errors made by students in forming plural nouns are illustrated in Table 3. As shown in the table, these errors occurred because students did not add the inflectional suffix, such as “-es/-ies”, to nouns that should be used to indicate the plural form. From the examples in the table above, it can be seen that they tend to use singular forms such as “party,” “watch,” “bus,” “dress,” and “dish” even when the context of the sentence requires the plural form.

Table 4. Errors Made by Students: Addition

No	Test Item / Sentence	Student's Answer	Correct Answer	Errors
1.	There are four _____ (sheep) grazing in the wide field behind the farmhouse.	sheeps	sheep	Students added an unnecessary plural suffix, -s, to a noun that does not change in the plural.
2.	They saw several _____ (deer) walking in the middle of the forest this morning.	deers	deer	Students added the plural suffix -s to a noun that has the same form in both the singular and the plural.
3.	Anton hunted three _____ (deer) in the forest when it was almost dark.	deers	deer	Students repeated the same addition error by adding the suffix -s.
4.	Many _____ (fish) live in this pond, but only a few are large enough to catch.	fishs, fishes	fish	Added the suffix -s or -es to a noun that normally keeps the same form in plural usage.
5.	A few _____ (species) of monkeys are found on the island.	speciees	species	Added the plural suffix -es to a noun that has the same form in both singular and plural.

Examples of students' addition errors are shown in Table 4 above. Most errors occurred when students added the plural suffix “-s/-es” to nouns that did not require it. As illustrated in the table above, it can be observed that students mostly write forms such as “sheeps” instead of “sheep,” “deers” instead of “deer,” “fishs” or “fishes” instead of “fish,” and “speciees” instead of “species” where these words should not undergo any change to indicate the plural form. Some nouns, such as “sheep,” “deer,” “fish,” and “species,” have the same form in both the singular and the plural.

Table 5. Errors Made by Students: Misformation

No	Test Item / Sentence	Student's Answer	Correct Answer	Errors
1.	Aulia collects many _____ (leaf) from the park for her art project.	leafs, leafes	leaves	Used the wrong plural form by adding -s or -es instead of changing -f to -ves
2.	Several _____ (goose) are swimming peacefully in the lake not far from our house.	gooses	geese	Applied a regular plural rule -s to an irregular noun.
3.	They saw five white _____ (butterfly) flying in the colorful garden.	butterflys	butterflies	Added -s directly instead of changing -y to -ies.
4.	There are three _____ (box) under the table that contain old toys and magazines.	boxs	boxes	Students used the wrong plural form by omitting the correct -es ending.
5.	My grandmother owns a few antique _____ (watch) from the 19th century.	watchs, watched, watching	watches	Formed the plural incorrectly by using the wrong suffix instead of the suffix -es.

As shown in Table 5, several examples of misformation errors produced by students are provided. This type of error appeared when students used incorrect forms or patterns in forming plurals, such as adding inappropriate suffixes (“leafs,” “boxs”), incorrectly applying rules for changing forms (“butterflys,” “gooses”), and using other incorrect forms (“watched,” “watching”). These findings indicate that most students tend to generalise regular plural rules by adding -s or -es to nouns that do not follow them. In addition, they may not understand the rules for certain letter changes when forming plurals, such as changing “-f” to “-v” and then adding “-es” in the word *leaf*, or changing “-y” to “-i” and adding “-es” in the word *butterfly*. This result is similar to [19], who stated that the tendency to overgeneralize regular plural rules caused students to make errors, resulting in forms such as “leafs” and “toies.”

Table 6. Errors Made by Students: Misordering

No	Test Item / Sentence	Student's Answer	Correct Answer	Errors
1.	The library has _____ (book / old / many) on the top shelf.	old many book, many book old	many old books	Students placed the words in the wrong order, not following the correct adjective-noun sequence.
2.	Last night, _____ (mouse / two / big) ran across the kitchen floor.	two mouse big, two mice big	two big mice	Placed the adjective and noun in the wrong order, not following the pattern number + adjective + noun.
3.	The teacher gave _____ (interesting / book / several) to the diligent student.	interesting several books, several book interesting, several books interesting	several interesting books	Students repeated the same error by putting the words in the wrong order.
4	There are _____ (child / three) playing near the fountain.	child's three	three children	Students reversed the correct order between the number and the noun.
5	She bought _____ (loaf / bread / six) for the party.	six bread loaf, six bread loaves, bread six loaf, loaf bread six, six breads loaf	six loaves of bread	Ordering words in the wrong sequence.

Table 6 displays examples of misordering errors made by students. These occurred when students arranged words in incorrect sequences, such as by switching the positions of quantifiers/numbers, adjectives, and nouns. For example, some students wrote “old many book” or “many book old” instead of “many old books” and “interesting several books” instead of “several interesting books.” In addition, forms such as “child’s three” or “bread six loaf” were also found, indicating that students were still confused about placing numerals before nouns and adjusting the plural form appropriately.

From the total frequency of the types of inflectional errors, the researchers attempt to explain in more detail in the table and the diagram below:

Table 7. Frequency and Percentage of the Types of Inflectional Errors in Singular to Plural Nouns

Types of Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Omission	813	34,48
Addition	385	16,33
Misformation	1014	43,00
Misordering	146	6,19
Total	2358	100

Table 7 provides information on the frequency and percentage of the four types of inflectional errors made by EFL students when using singular to plural nouns, totalling 2,358 errors. Based on the test results, the misformation errors appeared most frequently, with 1,014 errors (43.00%). The omission errors ranked second with a total frequency of 813 errors (34.48%), followed by the addition errors with a total frequency of 385 errors (16.33%), and the misordering errors with a total frequency of 146 errors (6.19%). It can be seen that misformation errors had the highest frequency compared to the other types. The high frequency of misformation errors occurred because many students produced incorrect word forms by applying the wrong morpheme or plural rule, such as writing “leafs” or “leafes” instead of “leaves.” These errors indicate that they tended to overgeneralize the regular plural rules -s/-es to all nouns, including irregular nouns, and often failed to apply irregular plural changes, such as not changing the letter “-f” to “-v” (for example, “leaf” becomes “leafs” instead of “leaves”). This pattern shows that the students still struggled to distinguish and correctly apply regular and irregular plural forms.

3.2. Discussion

In this section, the researchers present detailed findings related to the research questions: (1) Which inflectional markings are most frequently misused by EFL students? (2) What types of inflectional errors do EFL students? and (3) How frequently does each type of inflectional errors? For the first research question, the researchers focused on how frequently errors in inflectional markings occurred in students’ test results. The findings showed that the most frequently misused inflectional marking was the irregular form -f/-fe to -ves. Meanwhile, the regular inflectional forms such as -s, -es, and -ies showed relatively lower error rates. This is because regular plural forms are easier and more familiar to students compared to irregular forms. The large number of errors in the form -f/-fe to -ves indicate that students tend to overgeneralize the regular plural form by adding the suffix -s/-es to all nouns, especially irregular ones. In addition, they may not be familiar with certain morphological changes, such as the transformation of -f/-fe into -ves in some nouns, which makes it difficult for them to predict the correct plural form. Fanani and Fathoni [20] reported that many students had difficulty forming irregular plural nouns by failing to change the letter “f” to “v” (for example, in the words “knives” and leafs”), and they tended to overgeneralize the regular plural form (-s/-es) to irregular nouns.

These findings differed from those of Artika et al. [5], who analysed inflectional morphemes in sentences written by EFL students and found that the inflectional form of

nouns, particularly zero morph, was the most misused by EFL students. However, there was a similarity between their study and the present study, in which their findings showed that students more easily understood and applied regular inflectional forms, such as the suffix -s, than irregular inflectional forms, because the former are simpler and more frequently encountered in everyday language use. Furthermore, the study conducted by Al-Jarf [21] also revealed that EFL college students faced major difficulties in forming irregular plural nouns. Similar to the present research, her study found that students overgeneralized the regular plural forms by adding -s/-es to irregular forms, such as -f/-fe to -ves, and by using ablaut (such as “calfs,” “gooses,” and “loafs”).

For the second research question, this study identified types of inflectional errors made by EFL students, which were divided into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Omission errors arise when students omit a grammatical form that should be in the word or sentence because they do not fully understand it [22]. James [23] emphasised that addition is an error in which students add a form that is not required in the correct structure. Dulay et al. [18] stated that misformation errors occurred when students used incorrect morphemes due to incomplete knowledge of grammatical rules. A misordering error happens where students place a morpheme in an incorrect position [18]. The findings of this study can be compared with those of Kanwal [24], who examined errors in inflectional morphology using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy. Although Kanwal’s study focused on a broader range of inflectional morphemes, both these studies analysed errors related to plural forms. However, unlike the present study that identified four types of errors, such as omission, addition, misformation, and misordering, Kanwal’s study only produced three categories, such as omission, addition, and misuse.

Additionally, these findings differ from those reported by Dewi [25], who found that, based on the four types of inflectional morpheme errors in the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, the students produced errors only in omission and addition. Although the scope and results of the present study differed from Dewi’s study, both still shared similarities, as they identified inflectional errors in plural nouns caused by students’ limited understanding of the grammatical rules for forming plural nouns. In contrast, the present study focused only on plural noun inflections, whereas Dewi’s study examined several types of inflectional morphemes, including plural, tense, and possessive markers. Furthermore, for the third research question, the frequency of each type of error was calculated. The findings showed that among the four types of errors, misformation was the most frequent, followed by omission and addition, while misordering was the least frequent. The high number of misformation errors indicated that students struggled to apply and understand the pluralisation rules and their exceptions, especially when forming irregular plural nouns. Moreover, these misformation errors were largely caused by overgeneralization [20]. These findings are in line with those of Fanani and Fathoni [20], who investigated students’ errors in forming irregular plural nouns. Their study revealed that misformation was the most frequent type of error made by students, followed by omission and addition. Similar to the present study, most students tended to overgeneralize the rules of plural formation by adding the suffix -s/-es to irregular nouns.

The findings of this study provide several important implications for the English learning process, particularly in teaching plural forms. Since most students made the highest number of errors in irregular plural forms, especially in the -f/-fe to -ves form, instruction should focus more on irregular plural nouns. Teachers need to provide specific exercises for irregular plural patterns and not just treat them as additional material. Teaching should include explicit explanations of change patterns (for example, “knife” becomes “knives,” and “leaf” becomes leaves”), accompanied by contrastive exercises that compare regular and irregular forms to reduce students’ tendency to overgeneralize. In addition, considering that students frequently apply regular plural rules to all nouns and struggle to predict morphological changes, teachers can explicitly emphasise that some words do not follow general rules. This can be achieved through error-awareness exercises, such as comparing correct and incorrect forms (for example, “gooses” to be “geese”), as well as using visual pattern grouping to categorise irregular forms based on their types of transformation.

The fact that misformation was the most frequent error type also shows that teachers need to provide practice through production tasks that require students to form plural nouns from singular forms in various sentence contexts, rather than relying solely on multiple-choice exercises. This approach can be supported through scaffolding in the steps of morpheme identification, starting with recognising the base form, determining whether it is regular or irregular, applying the appropriate rule, and conducting formative evaluation that specifically targets the most frequent types of errors.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirmed that EFL students still have difficulty applying inflectional morphology, particularly in forming plural nouns with irregular forms. The findings show that the most frequently misused inflectional marking is the irregular form -f/-fe to -ves, with a total of 500 errors, suggesting that students tend to overgeneralize regular plural rules to irregular nouns. In addition, this study reveals several types of inflectional errors made by students, categorised into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Out of 2,358 errors, the most common type is misformation, followed by omission, addition, and misordering.

This study contributes to the theoretical literature on inflectional morphology and error analysis by clarifying EFL students’ dominant error patterns in plural noun formation. The results show that misformation is the most common error type, especially in irregular plurals such as -f/ -fe to -ves, ablaut, and zero morph, indicating a strong tendency toward overgeneralization of regular plural rules. By focusing specifically on plural inflection and quantifying each error type, this study helps strengthen the application of Dulay’s Surface Strategy Taxonomy in explaining persistent difficulties in irregular plural forms at the university level.

Pedagogically, the findings of this study provide concrete guidance for English teachers, especially in designing instruction and materials for teaching plural nouns. Since the highest error frequency occurred in irregular plural forms, particularly -f/-fe to -ves, classroom instruction should place greater emphasis on explicit teaching of irregular plural patterns, rather than treating them as supplementary material. Teachers are encouraged to

use contrastive exercises that directly compare regular and irregular forms, as well as error-awareness activities targeting common incorrect plural forms such as “leafs” and “gooses.” Learning materials should also include systematic grouping of irregular plurals and guided practice activities to reduce students’ overgeneralization of regular plural rules.

Based on these findings, future research may develop learning activities that focus more on irregular plural forms, such as -f/-fe to -ves, ablaut, and zero morph. Future studies may also expand the scope by increasing sample size, including different educational levels or institutions, and analysing the causes of errors using a qualitative approach.

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