



Mapping Interlanguage through Error Analysis: A PEN Framework for Pedagogical Intervention in Rural ESL Contexts

¹ Soumita Sarkar

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Abstract. *Within contemporary English Language Teaching, narrowing the divide between learners' first language and the target language is essential for fostering communicative competence beyond rote grammatical instruction. This study quantitatively investigates persistent grammatical error patterns in the essays written by rural ESL learners in Gujarat, India and proposes the Productive Failure–Error Analysis–Noticing (PEN) framework as a conceptual pedagogical model emerging from empirical evidence. Grounded in Interlanguage Theory and Error Analysis, the study analyses a corpus of 423 descriptive essays produced by Class XII students from nine Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas in Gujarat, India, with a stratified sample of 127 essays examined in detail. Seventeen categories of morpho-syntactic and orthographic errors were identified, with spelling, articles, noun usage, and lexical choice structures emerging as the most frequent domains. Statistical analyses reveal significant variations across gender and academic streams, indicating patterned interlanguage development influenced by interlingual, intralingual, and overgeneralization factors. Findings are systematically mapped onto the PEN framework, establishing a clear connection between empirical analysis and pedagogical intervention. Building on these findings, the study synthesizes insights from errorful learning and productive failure, operationalized through Written Corrective Feedback, and culminates in Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis as the key learning trigger. The resulting PEN framework offers a structured, feedback-driven model that reconceptualizes learner errors as productive resources for language development. The study contributes to SLA and ELT by advancing a theoretically integrated and pedagogically actionable model for rural ESL contexts.*

Keywords: *error analysis, errorful learning, interlanguage theory, JNV, noticing hypothesis, SLA, WCF*

1. Introduction

In the Indian context, the significance of English extends well beyond its historical or political origins, functioning as a key medium for intercultural communication, knowledge access, and participation in an increasingly globalized economy. Despite its widespread institutional presence, English remains a non-native language for the majority of learners, which makes the acquisition of its linguistic competencies — particularly grammar, vocabulary, and communicative proficiency — a persistent challenge for learners in rural ESL contexts.

¹ Sarkar, S. Department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad – 380009, Gujarat, India. Email: sarkarsoumita806@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5269-2537>



Within contemporary language pedagogy, errors are no longer viewed as deficiencies but as inevitable and informative manifestations of the language learning process (Davies & Pearse, 2002; Hamouda, 2011). As emphasized in error analysis (EA), systematic examination of learner errors enables researchers and teachers to identify recurring patterns, underlying cognitive processes, and areas that require targeted pedagogical intervention (Lavery, 2001; Hamouda, 2011; Sarkar & Dave, 2024). In alignment with Interlanguage Theory, such errors are understood as evidence of a dynamic, evolving linguistic system rather than mere deviations from target norms.

However, while EA studies have extensively documented error patterns, there remains a limited integration of these insights into a structured pedagogical model that connects error generation, feedback, and cognitive processing, particularly in rural ESL settings. Existing approaches often treat error identification and correction as discrete processes, without fully theorizing their role in facilitating deeper language acquisition.

Addressing this gap, the present study proposes the Productive Failure–Error Analysis–Noticing (PEN) framework as a conceptual pedagogical model emerging from empirical error patterns. The framework synthesizes Interlanguage Theory and EA as its analytical foundation, integrates errorful learning and productive failure as cognitive mechanisms, and operationalizes WCF as a mediating process, culminating in the Noticing Hypothesis as the learning trigger. Through this integration, PEN reconceptualizes learner errors as productive sites for structured pedagogical intervention. This framework is a conceptually derived model grounded in empirical error patterns; future studies may validate its classroom implementation experimentally.

This study draws on a large corpus of Class XII ESL learners' essays from nine Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNV) located in Gujarat, a unique residential schooling system serving rural populations in India, and presents a focused analysis of grammatical error patterns alongside their pedagogical implications (Sarkar, 2026). The study examined the following objectives: to identify the frequently occurring grammatical errors committed by Class XII JNV students in their written texts; to classify, analyse, describe, and identify the causes of these errors; and to design pedagogically grounded innovative teaching methods through the PEN framework.

2. Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has progressively evolved from contrastive approaches to more nuanced, learner-centered perspectives that recognize the complexity of language development. Early frameworks such as Contrastive Analysis (CA) provided initial insights into cross-linguistic influence; however, subsequent developments, particularly Error Analysis (EA) and Interlanguage Theory (IL), reconceptualized learner errors as systematic and developmentally significant rather than as mere deviations from TL norms. Within contemporary pedagogy, this shift has been further strengthened by cognitive perspectives that view error generation as an integral component of learning.



2.1 Error Analysis

Error analysis conceptualizes learner errors as systematic and diagnostically valuable. This perspective enables the identification of recurring linguistic patterns that inform targeted pedagogical intervention (Ellis, 2008; Ahmed & Khan, 2019; Weireesh, 1991; Nazma, 2010). Within the PEN framework, EA can be reconceptualized as a pedagogical tool for both learning and assessment. Macías Borrego (2024, p. 272) proposes a systematic approach that integrates the core principles of EA across different stages of the corrective feedback (CF) process in ESL instruction (Fig. 1). This method facilitates structured identification, interpretation, and pedagogical response to learners' errors, and may contribute to progressively reducing recurring linguistic errors in students' written production.

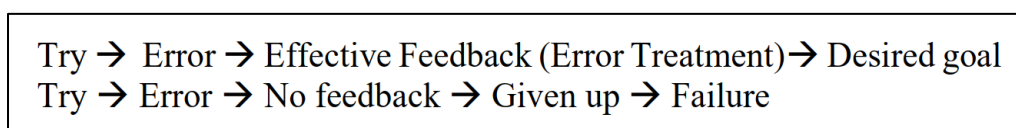


Fig. 1. Role of error treatment in Language Learning (Huang, 2013; Macías Borrego, 2024)

2.2 Interlanguage Theory

Interlanguage extends this understanding and conceptualizes learner language as a special language — an intermediate, approximative system that may be seen as a new system with its own specific grammar (Nemser, 1971). The American linguist Larry Selinker (1972) coined the term interlanguage (Mendoza Gonzalez, 2021). The term IL evolved from Uriel Weinreich's notion of "interlingual identifications" (1953) and was later elaborated by Selinker, who described it as a provisional yet systematic grammatical system shaped by processes such as overgeneralisation, transfer of training, language transfer, and learners' L2 learning and communication strategies (Selinker, 1972; Nazma, 2010).

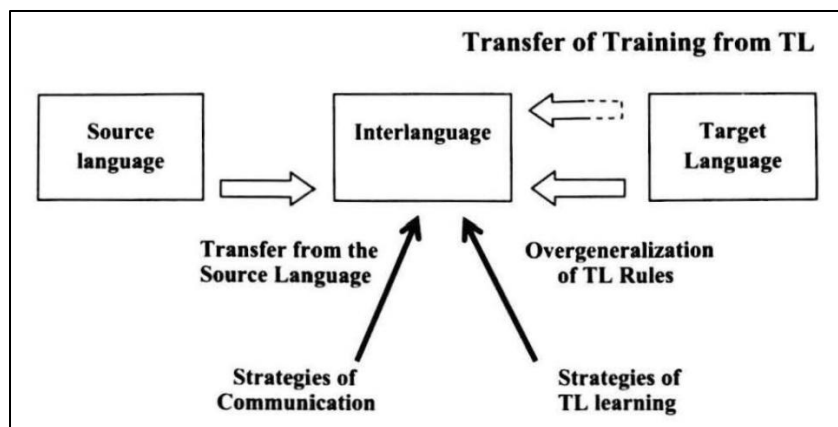


Fig. 2. Interlanguage Model (Keshavarz, 2023; Sarkar, 2026)



Maicusi et al. (2000) suggest that language errors can stem from psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and epistemic factors (Moiden & Liaw, 2021). Pedagogically, recognizing recurrent error patterns as manifestations of interlanguage development enables the identification of underlying causes and informs targeted instructional interventions, thereby enhancing linguistic proficiency. Within the IL framework, errors are treated as vital diagnostic indicators of the learner's developing interlanguage system rather than as signs of failure.

2.3 Written Corrective Feedback

Feedback literacy refers to the knowledge, capacities, and dispositions required for learners to interpret feedback meaningfully and apply it to improve their work and learning strategies (Carless & Boud, 2018). Students who develop feedback literacy are better able to engage with, interpret, and utilize feedback as a resource for learning improvement. As this competence is not innate, learners must participate in carefully designed pedagogical activities that scaffold their ability to understand and act upon feedback effectively (Gu et al., 2026).

The effectiveness of WCF is strongly mediated by teacher practices in EFL contexts (Lee, 2019; Mao & Lee, 2022; Miao et al., 2023; Mohammadkarimi, 2022). Direct feedback involves the teacher supplying the correct linguistic form in response to a student's error (Rajab et al., 2015). Studies in SLA indicate that learners must first become aware of the occurrence of an error; after identification, indirect feedback can encourage learners to participate in hypothesis testing, an approach that may promote more profound cognitive processing and aid in the internalization of correct linguistic forms (Daneshvar & Rahimi, 2014). Within the proposed PEN framework, WCF functions as the mediating mechanism that transforms error identification into opportunities for cognitive engagement and hypothesis testing.

2.4 Cognitive Perspectives: Productive Failure and Noticing

Evidence-based data from controlled experimental studies demonstrates that learning conditions permitting the generation of errors, when followed by timely CF, often lead to stronger retention of the correct response than error-free study conditions. Kapur (2016) critiques "unproductive success," referring to instructional designs that prioritize immediate performance gains without fostering deeper conceptual understanding. Such approaches may create an illusion of learning, where learners perform well on tasks but lack substantive conceptual mastery.

The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) posits that awareness is "necessary and sufficient" for learners to convert input into intake (Fig. 3). According to Robinson (1995, 2003), learning cannot occur without awareness at the rank of noticing. Noticing also results from the rehearsal process, whereby linguistic features in short-term memory are encoded into long-term memory (Yazid et al., 2023, p. 124).



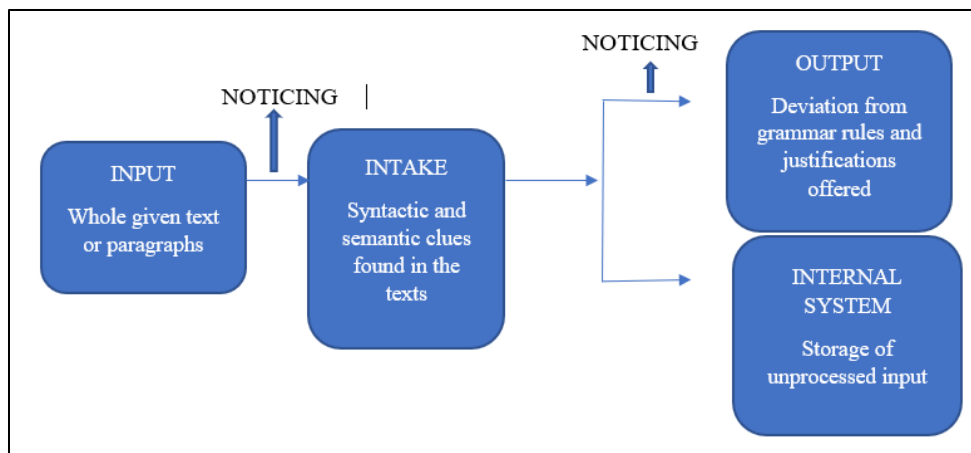


Fig. 3. Noticing in the stages of Learning Process (Yazid et al., 2023, p. 124)

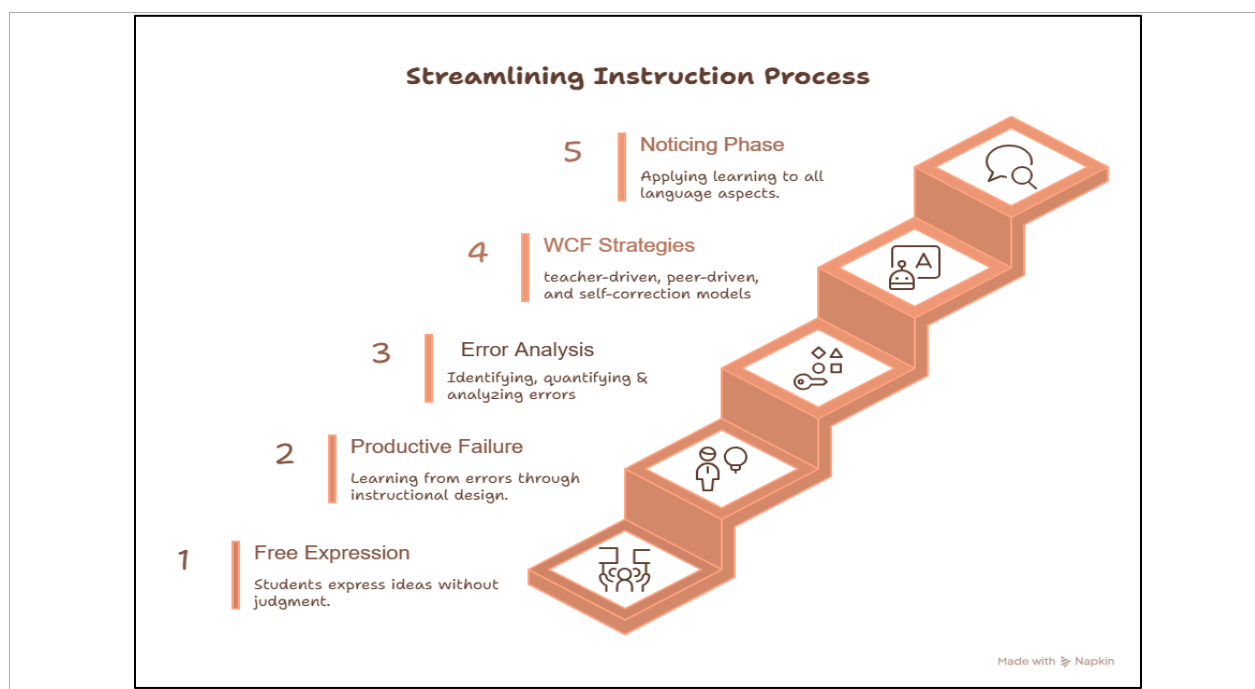


Fig. 4. Productive Failure–Error Analysis–Noticing (PEN) Framework

The present study addresses this gap through the proposed PEN framework that first encourages students to articulate their ideas freely in a non-judgmental environment (Figure 4). This approach aligns with the principle of productive failure in instructional design (Kapur, 2016). Subsequently, systematic EA is undertaken, followed by the selection of appropriate WCF strategies. The final stage emphasizes the process of noticing, which applies to all dimensions of language — grammatical form, lexicon, phonology, and pragmatics.

3. Research Methodology



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A non-experimental, cross-sectional, descriptive quantitative design within the framework of EA was adopted for the study. The primary dataset comprised a 90,680-word corpus of 423 essays (212 boys and 211 girls). The population comprised a homogeneous group with Gujarati as their L1. All students follow the same syllabus, have passed the same nationwide All India Secondary School Examination conducted by the CBSE in session 2022–23, and are required to pass the same nationwide All India Senior School Certificate Examination. The data were elicited through a controlled descriptive writing task, requiring students to compose essays of 150–200 words on one of three topics: Online shopping; The importance of discipline in a student's life; and If I were the principal of my school for a day.

Error identification and classification were conducted using a structured coding framework informed by established grammatical models. To enhance reliability, a subset of the data was independently cross-checked and discrepancies resolved through iterative review. The relative seriousness of errors was further validated through an error gravity survey administered to English PGT teachers who taught the participants. Ethical considerations were observed, and student responses were anonymized prior to analysis.

Table 1 outlines the factors considered in selecting a well-defined sample.

Table 1. Factors Taken into Account during Sampling (Al-khresheh, 2016, p. 51)

Sl. No.	Factors	Description
1.	Language	
	Medium	Written (Learner production can be oral or written)
	Genre	Essay writing (Learner production may take the form of a conversation, a lecture, an essay, a letter, etc.)
	Content	a. Online Shopping b. The importance of discipline in a student's life c. If I become the principal of my school for a day
2.	Learner	
	Level	Lower Intermediate (Elementary, intermediate, or advanced)
	Mother Tongue	Gujarati (The learner's mother tongue)
	Language Learning Experience	Classroom (This may be classroom or naturalistic or a mixture of the two)

A stratified sampling technique was employed to select 30% of the total population, comprising 127 participants (Table 2). While seventeen categories of grammatical errors were identified, this



study focuses on the ten most frequent categories, as these represent the most pedagogically significant domains.

Table 2. Stratified Sampling of the Population (Sarkar, 2026)

	Boys-212			Total	Girls-211			Total	Grand Total
	Science	Arts	Commerce		Science	Arts	Commerce		
Total population	187	9	16	212	161	28	22	211	423
Sample	56	3	5	64	48	8	7	63	127

Measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode) were calculated to summarize overall error patterns. A chi-square test was employed to determine whether significant differences existed in the frequency of seventeen grammatical errors across gender: $\chi^2 (16, N = 423) = 38.99, p < .001$. The null hypothesis is rejected because the p-value falls below the significance level of 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference in the distribution of grammatical errors between genders. Post-hoc residual analysis showed that tense, noun inflections, and modal auxiliaries error types are significantly different.

The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality was applied to log-transformed data of the three streams (Science, Commerce, and Humanities). The findings indicate that errors generated by science students follow a normal distribution, whereas errors from commerce and humanities students do not. Welch's ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference between groups, $F (df_1, df_2) = 2.74, p = .014$. A heatmap was generated to visualize the relationship between observed and expected seventeen error frequencies across districts (Figure 5). All analyses were conducted at a standard level of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).



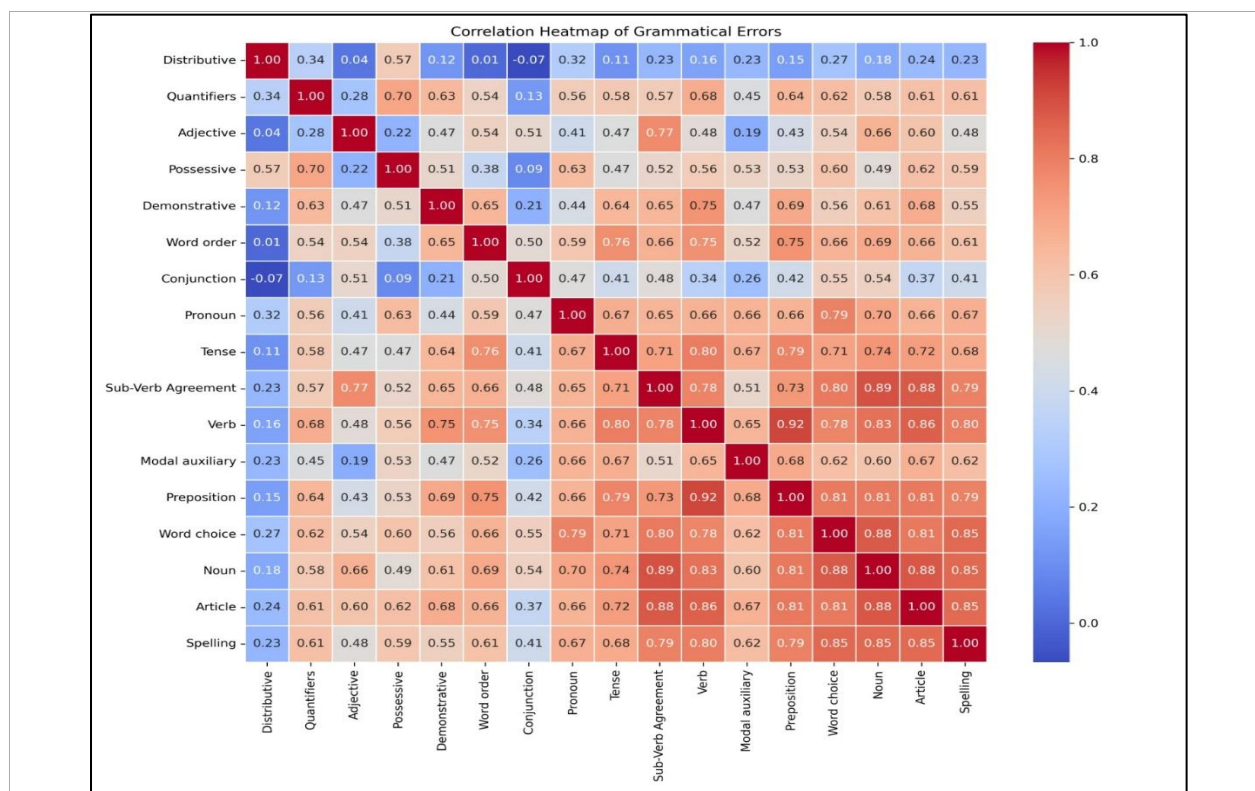


Fig. 5. Heatmap showing the Correlation of 17 grammatical errors

4. Results and Data Analysis

Table 3 presents the frequency and distribution of the ten most recurrent grammatical error categories identified in the learner corpus. Spelling errors emerged as the most dominant category (21.24%), followed by articles (13.62%), nouns (10.39%), and word choice (10.17%), indicating that both orthographic and morpho-syntactic domains pose significant challenges for rural ESL learners.

Table 3. Frequency, Percentage, Mean, and Average of Top 10 Types of Errors (Sarkar, 2026)

Rank	Error Type	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Average
1	Spelling	566	21.246	62.889	4.46
2	Article	363	13.626	40.333	2.86
3	Noun	277	10.398	30.778	2.18
4	Word choice	271	10.173	30.111	2.13
5	Preposition	229	8.596	25.444	1.80
6	Modal auxiliary	225	8.446	25.000	1.77
7	Verb	223	8.371	24.778	1.76



8	Subject-Verb Agreement	176	6.607	19.556	1.39
9	Tense	115	4.317	12.778	0.91
10	Pronoun	52	1.952	5.778	0.41

From the perspective of the Productive Failure (P) stage of the PEN framework, the high frequency of errors across multiple categories reflects learners' active engagement in meaning-making despite incomplete linguistic competence. Rather than indicating failure, these error patterns represent productive attempts at language use, providing a rich diagnostic base for pedagogical intervention. The predominance of spelling and article errors suggests cognitive overload at the level of form encoding, where learners prioritize semantic expression over formal accuracy.

At the Error Analysis (E) stage, the systematic classification of errors into ten high-frequency categories enables targeted identification of persistent linguistic gaps. The clustering of verb-related errors (tense, subject-verb agreement, and modal auxiliaries) points to an interconnected domain of grammatical difficulty, reinforcing the interlanguage perspective that learner errors are rule-governed and developmentally structured.

A chi-square test was conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference in the frequency of errors in the essays written by boys (212) and girls (211). Table 4 shows the gender-wise distribution of top ten errors.

Table 4. Gender-wise Distribution of Top Ten Errors

Error type	Boys	Girls
Spelling	281	284
Article	187	176
Modal auxiliaries	141	84
Word choice	135	136
Nouns	116	161
Preposition	121	109
Verbs	102	121
Subject-Verb agreement	80	96
Tense	70	45
Pronouns	29	23

Statistical analysis using the chi-square test and post-hoc residual examination revealed notable gender-based variations in grammatical error patterns (Figure 6). Boys exhibited a significantly



higher frequency of errors related to articles, modal auxiliaries, prepositions, tense usage, and pronouns, whereas girls demonstrated a comparatively higher occurrence of errors in spelling, noun usage, verb usage, and subject-verb concord. Lexical error challenges are experienced equally by both genders.

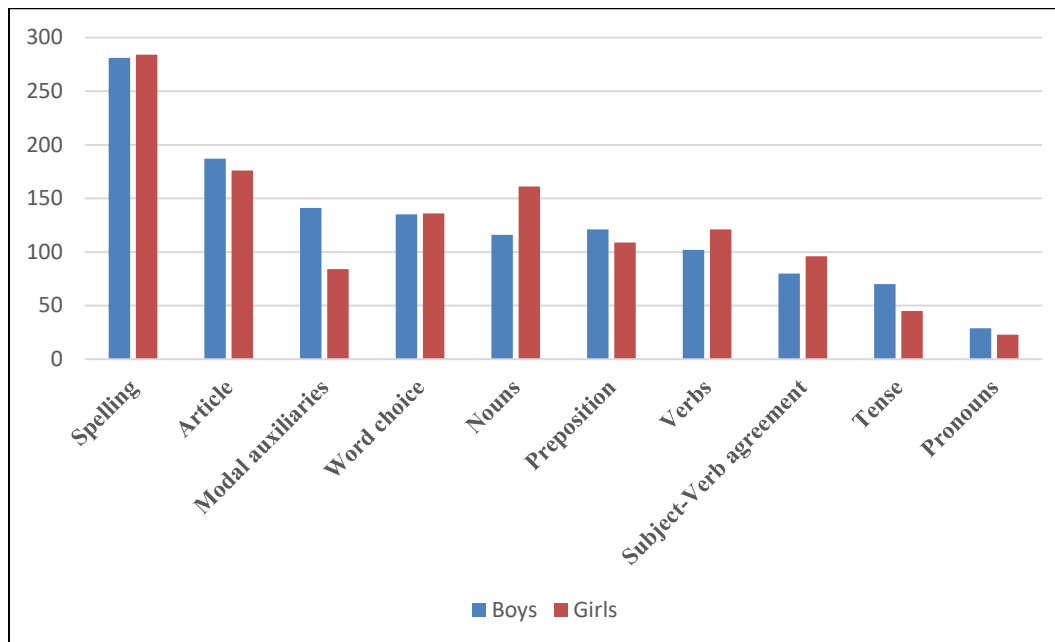


Fig. 6. Gender-wise Distribution of Top ten Errors

Within the PEN framework, these gender-related tendencies are particularly relevant at the WCF mediation stage, as they suggest the need for differentiated feedback strategies tailored to learner-specific tendencies. Targeted CF focusing on tense, preposition, and modal auxiliaries may be more beneficial for male learners, whereas noun and verb-related usage may require greater attention in feedback provided to female learners.

Figure 7 illustrates a scatter plot representing the distribution of errors across three academic streams. The analysis indicates a significant difference between students from the Humanities and Science streams, with Science stream students committing a higher number of errors. However, no statistically significant differences were observed between Humanities and Commerce students, nor between Commerce and Science students.



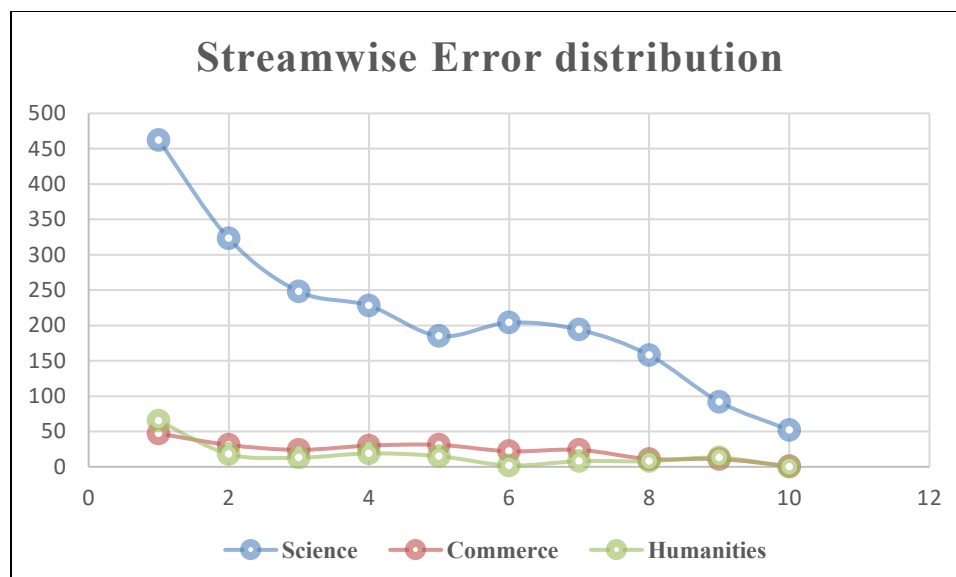


Fig. 7. Scattered Chart showing the Distribution of Top Ten errors Stream-wise

At the Noticing (N) stage, the structured identification and feedback on recurrent error patterns create conditions for learners to consciously recognize discrepancies between their interlanguage and the TL. The high frequency of specific error types, particularly in orthography and verb-related structures, provides an opportunity for focused noticing, essential for transforming input into intake.

5. Discussion

To further operationalize the proposed PEN framework, Table 5 maps the ten most frequent grammatical error categories onto specific stages of the model, along with their underlying cognitive challenges and corresponding pedagogical interventions. This mapping demonstrates that learner errors are not homogeneous but arise from distinct cognitive and linguistic constraints, thereby requiring differentiated instructional responses.

At the Productive Failure stage, errors in spelling, word choice, modal auxiliaries, and tense reflect learners' attempts to prioritize meaning-making over formal accuracy. These errors indicate active engagement with the TL and should be preserved as entry points for learning rather than prematurely corrected. In contrast, errors categorized under the EA stage — such as articles, nouns, prepositions, and verbs — reveal systematic gaps in learners' interlanguage, which can be addressed through structured identification and classification.

Table 5. Mapping of Error Types to the PEN Framework and Pedagogical Interventions

Error Type	PEN Stage	Cognitive Issue	Pedagogical Strategy (WCF + Instruction)
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Spelling	Productive Failure (P) → Noticing (N)	Weak orthographic encoding; phoneme–grapheme mismatch	Indirect WCF (underlining) + guided self-correction; use of word logs and pattern recognition tasks
Articles	Error Analysis (E) → Noticing (N)	Absence/mismatch of article system in L1; low salience	Explicit WCF + contrastive input enhancement; rule-based mini-lessons with contextualized practice
Nouns	Error Analysis (E)	Number marking, countability confusion	Focused feedback on pluralization and count/non-count distinction; form-function mapping exercises
Word Choice	Productive Failure (P) → WCF	Lexical approximation; limited vocabulary depth	Recasts + lexical alternatives; collocation-building tasks and semantic field expansion
Prepositions	Error Analysis (E) → Noticing (N)	High arbitrariness; L1 transfer	Metalinguistic feedback + chunk-based learning; usage through phrases rather than rules
Modal Auxiliaries	Productive Failure (P) → WCF	Pragmatic and functional misuse	Scenario-based correction; explicit feedback on modality (possibility, obligation, etc.)
Verbs	Error Analysis (E)	Base form confusion; irregular forms	Focused corrective drills + feedback cycles; verb pattern reinforcement
Subject–Verb Agreement	Noticing (N)	Failure to track syntactic relations	Indirect WCF + prompting; sentence restructuring tasks
Tense	Productive Failure (P) → Noticing (N)	Temporal conceptualization gaps	Timeline-based feedback; contrastive tense usage tasks
Pronouns	Error Analysis (E)	Reference ambiguity; gender/number confusion	Clarification requests + referent tracking exercises

The role of WCF emerges as central in mediating between error production and learning. Different feedback strategies — ranging from indirect marking to explicit correction and metalinguistic explanation — can be selectively applied depending on the nature of the error. This reinforces the need for adaptive, learner-sensitive feedback practices rather than uniform correction techniques. The Noticing stage is activated when learners engage with feedback and become consciously aware of discrepancies between their output and the TL. Errors in domains such as subject–verb agreement and tense particularly benefit from feedback strategies that promote hypothesis testing and self-correction.

Overall, this mapping substantiates the central claim of the study: that learner errors, when systematically analyzed and strategically mediated through feedback, can function as productive resources for language development. The PEN framework offers a coherent and scalable model



for integrating error-based learning into ESL pedagogy, particularly in rural contexts where targeted and efficient instructional strategies are critically needed.

6. Implications and Recommendations

Within this context, the present study advances the PEN framework as a pedagogically actionable model that streamlines the learning process by systematically integrating error generation, analysis, feedback, and cognitive engagement. The framework begins by encouraging learners to produce language freely in a low-anxiety environment, thereby operationalizing the principle of productive failure (Kapur, 2016). Subsequently, systematic EA enables the identification of recurring linguistic patterns, which form the basis for targeted instructional intervention.

At this stage, WCF functions as a mediating mechanism, and its effectiveness depends on alignment with learner-specific variables such as L1 background, proficiency level, and cognitive readiness, as well as adequate time for learners to process feedback (Park et al., 2015). Rather than adopting uniform correction strategies, the PEN framework advocates differentiated feedback practices that promote deeper cognitive processing. Digital tools may be employed to support reinforcement and practice; however, they should complement, not replace, teacher-mediated feedback.

The final stage of the framework foregrounds the process of noticing, wherein learners consciously attend to discrepancies between their output and the TL. This stage is critical for transforming input into intake and facilitating durable learning across linguistic domains including grammar, lexis, and pragmatics. Pedagogically, the framework has significant implications for curriculum design, particularly in rural and tertiary-level ESL contexts. Educators may implement bridge courses or remedial modules informed by identified error patterns, thereby addressing persistent gaps in learners' linguistic competence.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of integrating empirical classroom data with theoretically informed pedagogical design in addressing the linguistic challenges faced by rural ESL learners. It reaffirms that errors are essential indicators of interlanguage development and productive sites for learning. Moving beyond traditional error-avoidance approaches, the study demonstrates that error generation, when systematically analysed and supported through targeted feedback, can facilitate deeper and more durable language acquisition.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the formulation of the PEN framework — a conceptual pedagogical model that integrates core insights from Interlanguage Theory, Error Analysis, cognitive learning research, and the Noticing Hypothesis. By linking error production, feedback mediation, and conscious awareness into a coherent instructional sequence, the framework offers a structured pathway for transforming learner errors into meaningful learning opportunities.



Aligned with contemporary educational priorities, particularly those articulated in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020, Section 22.7), language teaching must evolve toward more experiential approaches that prioritize communicative competence and interactive proficiency. The PEN framework advances a learner-centred, data-driven, and context-sensitive pedagogical model whose foundational principles remain adaptable and applicable across diverse instructional environments. Future research may extend this work by examining the implementation of the PEN framework across varied learner populations, proficiency levels, and institutional contexts.

Abbreviations

CA: Contrastive Analysis | CF: Corrective Feedback | EA: Error Analysis | ELT: English Language Teaching | ESL: English as a Second Language | IL: Interlanguage | JNV: Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya | L1: First Language/Mother Tongue | L2: Second Language | NEP: National Education Policy 2020 | SLA: Second Language Acquisition | TL: Target Language | WCF: Written Corrective Feedback

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Ethics Statement: Ethical considerations were observed. All student responses were anonymized prior to analysis.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: S.S.; Methodology: S.S.; Data collection: S.S.; Formal analysis: S.S.; Writing – original draft: S.S.; Writing – review & editing: S.S.

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