

## *Tanulmány*

Erzsébet Balogh & Nikolett Kiss

### **Grammatical errors in Hungarian EFL learners' argumentative essays**

#### **Abstract**

The main goal of the present paper is to provide a list of grammatical errors that Hungarian university students make in their argumentative essays (n=34) after one year of English studies. First, the essays were analyzed for errors that were then categorized by type. Subsequently, the grammatical errors were analyzed in terms of their types and the frequency of their occurrence based on the ratio of error-free and erroneous T-units. The overall results show that the most frequent errors Hungarian EFL learners make are related to the incorrect use of articles, reference words, and prepositions. While articles and prepositions are regarded as difficult elements of English grammar internationally, the correct use of reference words appears to be particularly challenging specifically for Hungarian EFL learners. Thus, the present paper aims to urge both language learners and language teachers to include this grammar point as a crucial material in their self-study or classroom teaching, respectively.

*Keywords:* grammatical errors, Hungarian EFL learners, argumentative essays

#### **1 Introduction**

English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learners' written target language production can be studied from various perspectives. First, to measure the learners' English proficiency level, the dimensions of the complexity and accuracy of the language used in writing can be analyzed alongside the fluency with which learners produce these texts (Barrot & Agdeppa 2021; Housen et al. 2012). In addition, to identify the elements of the English language that challenge learners, the examination of learners' written papers can focus on the interlanguage features that show the most considerable deviations from the target language (Ortega 2009; Paudel 2022). What is more, to understand the nature of how the target language is acquired by EFL/ESL learners, the frequency of occurrences, the characteristics, the sources, and the consequences of such deviations can be examined in foreign/second language (FL/L2) writing within the framework of error analysis (James 1998). The results of such studies may not only assist learners with their self-development, but they can also help English language teachers to prepare specialized classes or courses as well as various study, practice, or supplemental materials on the most difficult components of the target language (Ferris 2004).

The initial step in the process of in-depth error analysis is to identify the features in the texts produced by EFL/ESL learners that deviate from the target language (Gass et al. 2013; James 1998). The subsequent steps are the categorization of the errors and the examination of their frequency of occurrence. As far as classification is concerned, errors in FL/L2 writing are

most commonly divided into the following four categories: 1) mechanical (misspellings, punctuation errors, or typos), 2) lexical (formal or semantic with reference to errors connected to the form or to the meaning of words, respectively), 3) grammatical (morphological or syntactical), and 4) discourse errors with regard to the text as a whole (James 1998). As for frequency, apart from the number of errors or error types, the ratio of error-free T-units/clauses can also be calculated (Polio & Shea 2014). As the final step, study and teaching material should be developed based on how frequently and what types of errors language learners make (Gass et al. 2013).

Although research on error analysis abounds, substantial comparisons or drawing conclusions about FL/L2 learners' English language errors appear to be rather problematic due to the differences in variables in the studies conducted (a summary of which can be seen in Table 1). As far as FL/L2 learners are concerned, their age, level of English proficiency, and first language show considerable diversity. The genre of texts and their length also vary. Furthermore, minor variations can be observed in the categories according to which researchers classify the errors. Other studies attempt to control additional variables, for example, the corpus in Caleffi's (2023) research consisted of 50 handwritten and 50 computer-typed essays. Comparing the errors across the two modes of text production, the author states that while most errors in both types of texts were syntactic, computer-typed essays contained more spelling errors, while the second most frequent error category in handwritten essays was morphological.

In further papers, features of the English language production of different first language speakers were compared, for example, Chinese and Korean (Zheng & Park 2013), Burmese and Hungarian (Thi et al. 2023), or Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Malay, and Spanish (Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman 1989). This latter paper, apart from presenting the morphological and syntactic errors in academic writing, also compared the grammatical errors of the students based on whether they had passed or failed the English placement test at the beginning of their university studies. The results showed that students who had passed the exam produced fewer errors than those who had failed it; however, students appeared to produce similar types of grammatical errors in their academic papers regardless of the results of the placement test.

Moreover, Mazgutova and Kormos (2015) investigated how an intensive, four-week long English for Academic Purposes course can affect the development of syntactic features in Chinese, Japanese, and Thai EFL learners' written English production. Their study revealed that learners with lower English proficiency were able to develop their lexical and syntactical skills considerably as a result of frequent feedback on their vocabulary and grammar errors. While these studies shed light on some of the common grammar features of English that are problematic for most FL/L2 learners in general, such as, the use of articles or the singular/plural, other investigations contribute to a more thorough understanding of the nature of the most complex and complicated grammatical elements of English by focusing on more specific grammatical errors, for instance, morphological inflections (Romano 2019) or the use of demonstratives *this/these* (Lee et al. 2021).

Regarding Hungarian EFL learners, as far as academic compositions written by university students are concerned, research has been conducted with reference to, among other things, the structure of the introductions and conclusions of student essays (Horváth 2001), the use, distribution, and position of adverbial connectors (Tankó 2004), the overall coherence of the texts and the originality of the ideas that students present in their papers (Zergollern-Miletić & Horváth 2009), and the lexical profiles of the essays (Horváth 2016).

| Studies              | Language learners                                       | First language            | Texts for analysis                     | Error categorization                                                                           | Grammatical errors                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wu & Garza 2014      | 6th graders (n=5)                                       | Mandarin Chinese (Taiwan) | essay (100-150 words)                  | grammatical, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and mechanics                                       | S-V agreement, tense, sentence structure, fragment, coordination, relative clause, singular/plural, articles, verb/subject omission                                              |
| Solano et al. 2014   | high school students (n=351)                            | Spanish (Ecuador)         | narrative (100-150 words)              | morphological, syntactic, and semantic                                                         | use of verbs, word order, prepositions, pronouns                                                                                                                                 |
| Abushihab 2014       | university students (English) (n=20)                    | Turkish                   | essay (200-250 words)                  | orthography, lexicon and semantics, syntax and morphology, discourse                           | tenses, prepositions, articles, active and passive voice, plural, possessive, word form, comparatives                                                                            |
| Lahuerta 2018        | university students (modern languages) B2/C1 (n=100)    | Spanish                   | essay (300-350 words)                  | syntactic, morphological, and lexical                                                          | word order, constituents, passive, plural, number agreement, tense, non-count nouns, S-V agreement, determiners, articles, prepositions, suffixes                                |
| Daukšaitė 2019       | university students B2                                  | Lithuanian                | forum posts (n=34)                     |                                                                                                | articles, pronouns, tense, prepositions, verb forms, quantifiers                                                                                                                 |
| Zijlmans et al. 2022 | university students (psychology) B2                     | Dutch, German (Holland)   | corpus (texts selected, 150-250 words) | academic register, vocabulary, grammar, structure and coherence, content and comprehensibility | incorrect/incomplete sentence structure, articles, relative clause/pronoun, tenses, number/S-V agreement, references                                                             |
| Paudel 2022          | university students (English language education) (n=24) | Nepali                    | thesis proposal                        | grammatical, syntactic, mechanic, lexical-semantic                                             | articles, modifiers prepositions, verbs, adjectives, nouns, tense, fragments, pronouns, determiners                                                                              |
| Chuenchaichon 2022   | university students (non-English majors) B1/B2 (n=95)   | Thai                      | expository paragraphs (150-170 words)  | lexical, grammatical, syntactic                                                                | parts of speech, nouns, prepositions, articles, pronouns, adverbs, copula, transition words, verb forms, word order, relative clause, S-V agreement, adjectives, singular/plural |
| Caleffi 2023         | university students B1+ (n=100)                         | Italian                   | essay                                  | spelling, morphological, syntactic, morphosyntactic, and lexical                               | word form, word class, subject/verb, articles, subordination, word order, omission/addition of number and S-V agreement                                                          |

Table 1. Comparison of the different research variables in FL/L2 writing

Further studies into Hungarian students' academic writing show how individual differences (Tankó & Csizér 2014), and more specifically, the gender of the students (Tankó 2021) can affect the scores of their argumentative essays in terms of task achievement, coherence and cohesion, grammar, and vocabulary and style. As for the grammar component of writing, research into Hungarian EFL learners' English language use displays some of the most typical and most frequently made errors, for example, in the case of articles as their use differs significantly in the two languages, or regarding word order since Hungarian allows for more variation than English (Budai 2015). In accordance with this, Zsigmondné (1991) and Gulyásné (2015) investigated the errors Hungarian secondary school students make in written English tests and compositions. Zsigmondné (1991) focused on the use of prepositions in 319 tests and compositions written by language learners. She classified the 416 prepositional errors into spelling (9), morphological (0), syntactical (246), and lexical (161) categories. The dissertation shows that prepositions are one of the most difficult grammar elements in the English language for Hungarian EFL learners. The main goal of Gulyásné's thesis (2015) was to demonstrate how language learners' awareness of errors could lead to a more effective self-correction. The most common errors found in the students' written tests and compositions were spelling/punctuation and lexical errors, as well as grammatical errors including the incorrect use of singular/plural nouns, absence of subject-verb agreement, incorrect formation of indirect questions, and wrong verb forms. The study concludes that once students are made aware of errors, especially grammatical ones, they are able to correct them by themselves.

Based on the above reviewed literature, the overall goal of the present study is to provide English language teachers and Hungarian EFL learners with a list of problematic areas of English grammar that still need to be addressed at a higher level of English proficiency. Therefore, the present study aims to delineate what grammatical errors, in particular morphological and syntactic ones, Hungarian university students make in their English argumentative essays. The authors hope that such a list would contribute to raising language learners' awareness of the English grammar features that require further attention, and thus help their self-improvement of the target language. Furthermore, we believe that it would support English language teachers and instructors when compiling materials for their English grammar lessons or courses.

## **2 The study**

### **2.1 The research questions**

By investigating the grammatical errors in the argumentative essays of 34 Hungarian EFL learners, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions: 1) What type of grammatical errors occur in the English argumentative essays of Hungarian first year university students? 2) Based on the ratio of error-free and erroneous T-units, what are the most frequently occurring errors in these essays? 3) Is there any correlation between the type and frequency of the errors and the marks the students received for the grammaticality component of their essays?

### **2.2 The corpus**

For the purpose of the investigation, a small corpus of argumentative essays was compiled using the essays written by 34 Hungarian university students of English at the end of their first year. Their English level proficiency at that time was assessed as B2+ given that the essays under

investigation were composed as part of the students' general English language exam (*English Yardstick Exam*). The prerequisite to being admitted into the English BA program requires students to take the higher, B2 level, school leaving (*Matura*) exam in English; consequently, students in the BA program start their university education at this level. Students admitted into the English teacher training program, on the other hand, are permitted to take the lower, B1 level English exam; however, only a few students in the teacher training program choose to do so. Indeed, students are allowed to take the English Yardstick Exam after having studied English at the university for at least two semesters and having successfully completed all the required university courses including those that develop their language skills. In our experience, the successful completion of these courses is only possible at a more advanced level of English proficiency; therefore, unless students with a B1 entry level improve their language skills to a considerable extent during the first year of their university studies, they will not be able to pass their courses, thus, they will not be able to take the exam at the end of the first year.

The exam has both written and spoken components; nevertheless, the present study focuses only on the essay writing component of the exam, where the students had 60 minutes to write an argumentative essay of 300-350 words with the title *Is handwriting a dying art?* without using a dictionary. In the exam, the students were required to type their compositions and submit them digitally via the official examination system of the university. The essays were then evaluated by two independent raters based on the following four criteria: 1) Ideas and communicative quality (effective arguments, supporting material), 2) Composition features (logical and coherent organizational structure, cohesive devices, paragraphing), 3) Grammar (range, accuracy), and 4) Vocabulary (range, accuracy, style). After the assessment, the students' names were removed from the files, and the authors received the anonymous, marked papers for analysis. All the essays of one cohort of exam takers were utilized in the study. The total number of words in the corpus amounts to 11,435 words, the shortest essay being 258, while the longest one 488 words long. The average number of words per composition is 336.

### 2.3 The analysis

The first step of the analysis was to identify the errors in the essays, which the two authors executed independently of each other. Subsequently, each error was discussed and then categorized by the two researchers together. The errors found in the essays were divided into the following four categories: 1) mechanical errors, 2) lexical errors, 3) grammatical errors, and 4) discourse errors. The current paper focuses predominantly on grammar errors based on James's categorization (1998: 154–161), including morphological errors (e.g., wrong word forms), and syntactic errors such as, phrase structure errors (e.g., incorrect article use in a phrase), clause-level errors (e.g., incorrect word order), sentence-level errors (e.g., problems with the coordination or subordination of clauses), and cohesion errors (e.g., incorrect use of reference words or conjunctions). As far as the frequency of error occurrence is concerned, the main unit of analysis in the present paper is the T-unit, that is, a main clause and its subordinate clauses taken together. As a further step of the analysis, each essay was divided into T-units followed by the calculation of the ratio of erroneous and error-free T-units. During the analysis, each error was counted even if the same error occurred within the same T-unit several times.

### 3 Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Grammatical errors

This subsection presents the grammatical errors investigated in the corpus, organized from the most to the least frequently occurring errors in all of the essays and expressed as percentages (see Table 2). When applicable, it also provides a more detailed insight into the nature of the errors, for example, whether a certain grammatical item is used incorrectly, unnecessarily, or it is not used at all when it ought to have been used. The analysis shows that the most frequent errors are related to the use of articles (17.61%), reference words (16.67%), and prepositions (14.31%). Overall, these three grammar issues account for nearly half of the errors (48.59%) in the students' essays. As far as articles are concerned, the most common problem seems to be their unnecessary use (see Example 1). In addition, students tend to use either the incorrect article (as can be seen in Example 2) or no article at all even when it is needed (as in Example 3).

Example 1: *Since the advent of technical innovations, [\*the] handwriting become less relevant.*

Example 2: *Firstly, [\*the] new generation of kids are growing up using modern techniques.*

Example 3: *Lot of handwriting can cause pain in our hand, while using [\*Ø] keyboard is more comfortable.*

As for reference words, the most problematic issue is that in many cases it is rather unclear what students want to refer to or that they use them incorrectly (as shown in Examples 4 and 5, respectively).

Example 4: *Still, you first learn handwriting in school when you are a child and that you can adapt later to typing on a keyboard. [\*This] all needs a good base that can be taught with easily accesible items for everyone.*

Example 5: *We can type in any information, save it in under a few seconds, and make as many copies of [\*them] as we want.*

Regarding prepositions, they are either used incorrectly (Example 6) or unnecessarily (Example 7), or they are not used when they ought to be (see Example 8).

Example 6: *Those people have higher chances to get a well-paid job who has the ability to write very fast [\*by] keyboards.*

Example 7: *Internet and electrical devices are play an important role in our life, we use them [\*in] almost everywhere.*

Example 8: *Writing with pen all the time can cause inflammation and the diversity [\*Ø] our writing leads us to the problem where we could not read what the others scrawled.*

| Error types     |                     | Total (=100%) |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Article         | $\Sigma$            | <b>17.61</b>  |
|                 | No                  | 3.30          |
|                 | Incorrect           | 3.30          |
|                 | Unnecessary         | 11.01         |
| Reference words | $\Sigma$            | <b>16.67</b>  |
|                 | No                  | 0.16          |
|                 | Incorrect           | 4.56          |
|                 | Unclear             | 11.95         |
| Preposition     | $\Sigma$            | <b>14.31</b>  |
|                 | No                  | 1.57          |
|                 | Incorrect           | 10.69         |
|                 | Unnecessary         | 2.04          |
| Noun            | $\Sigma$            | <b>11.48</b>  |
|                 | Plural              | 7.39          |
|                 | Possessive          | 2.36          |
|                 | Number agreement    | 1.73          |
| Verb            | $\Sigma$            | <b>9.12</b>   |
|                 | SV agreement        | 3.46          |
|                 | Incorrect verb form | 5.66          |
| Tense           |                     | <b>7.08</b>   |
| Word order      |                     | <b>4.87</b>   |
| Connector       | $\Sigma$            | <b>3.78</b>   |
|                 | No                  | 1.26          |
|                 | Incorrect           | 2.36          |
|                 | Unnecessary         | 0.16          |
| Comparative     |                     | <b>3.46</b>   |
| Derivation      |                     | <b>3.30</b>   |
| Clause          |                     | <b>3.30</b>   |
| Pronoun         | $\Sigma$            | <b>2.20</b>   |
|                 | Incorrect           | 0.94          |
|                 | Unnecessary         | 1.26          |
| Miscellaneous   |                     | <b>2.83</b>   |

*Table 2. Error occurrences expressed as percentages*

Further errors concern the incorrect use of nouns (11.48%), verbs (9.12%), and tenses (7.08%). With reference to nouns, the most problematic issue is the use of singular nouns after quantifiers that require the plural form, followed by the incorrect use of the possessive, and the lack of number agreement (see Example 9 for the last one). As for verbs, either the incorrect verb form is used, or the verb lacks agreement with the subject.

Example 9: [...] and using less paper equals cutting out [\*less] trees.

Finally, the analysis shows further problems with English grammar in terms of word order (4.87%), connectors (i.e., linking words, 3.78%), the comparative (3.46%), derivation and clause structure (3.30% each), pronouns (2.20%), and some other grammar points that could not be classified into the above-mentioned categories (2.83%).

Overall, this list of elements of the English grammar that might affect Hungarian learners' written language production displays similarities to the findings of previous studies inasmuch as they also identified articles (Caleffi 2023), prepositions (Solano et al. 2014), and reference words (Lee et al. 2021) as the most common errors EFL learners make in writing. In the case of Hungarian EFL learners, previous research has shown that articles (Budai 2015), prepositions (Zsigmondné 1991), and nominal and verbal morphology (Gulyásné 2015) frequently challenge them; however, most available English teaching and self-study materials for Hungarians focus on the question of reference words to a lesser extent. Raising both learners' and language instructors' awareness of the difficulty of this grammatical feature of English at a higher level of proficiency has been one of the main goals of the present paper.

Nevertheless, due to the rather low number of essays that were analyzed, the results of the analysis cannot be generalized for all Hungarian EFL learners. Therefore, the authors conducted a more detailed examination of the data. For this purpose, first, the essays were divided into three groups based on the marks that they received in the exam for the grammatical accuracy category. Out of the 34 essays, 10 were evaluated with the lowest marks of 1 and 2 (Group 1), 11 essays were assessed with the average mark of 3 (Group 2), while the group of essays with the highest marks of 4 and 5 contains 13 papers (Group 3). Second, the grammar errors in the essays in the different groups were subjected further statistical analyses to explore the correlations between the frequency and the type of the errors and the marks the essays received for grammaticality.

### 3.2 Comparison of errors between the groups

This subsection presents and discusses how the errors are distributed in the three groups formed on the basis of the marks the evaluators awarded to the essays. Errors in essays with the lowest marks of 1 or 2 are discussed within Group 1. Besides, Group 2 represents the errors that are found in the essays that are evaluated as average, that is, with mark 3. Group 3 comprises the errors found in the highest rated essays that were awarded marks 4 or 5.

First, Table 3 presents the frequency of error occurrences within T-units depending on the mark received for the grammaticality of the essays. The average number of words is  $M = 336.32$  ranging from 258 to 488 words, with Group 1 consisting of essays of  $M = 325.2$ , Group 2 of  $M = 347.45$ , and Group 3 of  $M = 335.46$  words. We hypothesized that the number of erroneous T-units would decrease when the marks received for the grammaticality of the essays increased. Due to the small number of essays the data are skewed (Group 1: -0.36, Group 2: 1.13, and Group 3: -0.36), thus the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to test the hypothesis. It indicated that there was no significant difference with regards to the number of words between the different groups,  $\chi^2(2) = 0.66$ ,  $p = .7177$ , with a mean rank score of 15.45 for Group 1, 18.91 for Group 2, and 17.88 for Group 3.

As for the number of T-units, our hypothesis was that the number of T-units would increase when the grades decreased. The data on the total T-units are skewed as well (-0.77 for Group 1, 0.91 for Group 2, and 0.23 for Group 3), similarly to the number of words (with the mean

scores as follows: Group 1: 25.80, Group 2: 24.45, and Group 3: 23.00). Thus, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used which indicated that there was no significant difference in the number of T-units between the three groups,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .298$ , with a mean rank score of 21.25 for Group 1, 17.32 for Group 2, and 14.77 for Group 3. Nevertheless, the range is considerably wider, with the minimum 16 and the maximum 32 T-units.

Overall, the number of erroneous T-units displays a gradual decrease as marks get higher. While there are  $M = 15.7$  erroneous T-units in Group 1 and  $M = 12.82$  in Group 2, Group 3's erroneous T-unit count decreases to  $M = 10.38$ . To test whether there are statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the three groups, the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used. It indicated that there is a significant difference in the dependent variable between the different groups,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.15$ ,  $p = .006$ , with a mean rank score of 24.75 for Group 1, 17.95 for Group 2, and 11.54 for Group 3. The post hoc Dunn's test using a Bonferroni corrected alpha of 0.017 indicated that the mean rank of Group 1 and Group 3 is significantly different.

|                    | Group 1 |       | Group 2 |       | Group 3 |       | Total  |       |
|--------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|--------|-------|
|                    | Mean    | SD    | Mean    | SD    | Mean    | SD    | Mean   | SD    |
| No. of words       | 325.20  | 40.41 | 347.45  | 62.23 | 335.46  | 31.76 | 336.32 | 45.44 |
| Total T-units      | 25.80   | 5.12  | 24.45   | 3.45  | 23      | 2.86  | 24.29  | 3.88  |
| Erroneous T-units  | 15.70   | 3.92  | 12.82   | 3.22  | 10.38   | 2.90  | 12.74  | 3.90  |
| Error free T-units | 10.10   | 4.43  | 11.64   | 3.01  | 12.62   | 3.78  | 11.56  | 3.79  |

*Table 3. Frequency of error occurrence based on T-units: Mean scores and standard deviation based on the mark received for grammaticality*

As the number of participants in the three groups was not equal, the overall results of error occurrences were converted into percentages (Table 4). As it can be seen, the mean scores of erroneous article use show a gradual decrease as the mark received for grammaticality increases. All participants have problems with using unnecessary articles, especially participants in Group 1 ( $M = 3.25$ ), which received the lowest marks for the grammatical accuracy of their papers. Nonetheless, the use of incorrect articles seems to be the most problematic in Group 2 ( $M = 1.80$ ). The mean scores also show that the use of reference words was problematic for all groups, especially for Group 2, which received the average mark of 3. At the same time, while the mean scores of incorrect reference words use show an incremental increase as the mark decreases, the case of unclear reference words is rather different. Namely, it is Group 1 that appears to display the lowest mean score ( $M = 2.33$ ) in this category. Concerning prepositions, while Groups 1 and 3 show similar mean scores ( $M = 1.50$  and  $M = 1.65$ , respectively), the highest mean score can be observed in the case of Group 2 ( $M = 2.60$ ). The most frequently found problem with prepositions was the use of incorrect prepositions.

The results show that the frequency of grammatical error occurrences in Hungarian EFL learners' English argumentative essays does not correlate in a linear manner with the marks they received for the grammaticality component of their essays. The non-linear correlation in the present study can be explained by the individual students' different stages of English grammar development. Evidence of similar non-linear English language development of EFL learners can be found in the study of Mazgutova and Kormos (2015). In their research, the EFL learner participants displayed a non-linear development of syntactic constructions in their English argumentative essays over a period of four weeks. While in the initial and later stages

of development the syntactic structures used in the essays were relatively similar, their use in the middle stage of development showed significant variation. Concerning grammar, a similar transition stage can be observed in the present study with regard to Group 2. Namely, the overall test results indicate that all of the most frequently occurring error types (articles, reference words, and prepositions) were problematic predominantly for the students in Group 2, where the grammaticality of the essays was evaluated with an average mark of 3. In Group 1 with the lowest marks and in Group 3 with the highest marks, however, the frequency of errors was appropriate to the marks given for grammaticality.

In addition, we assumed that the proportion of the various error types will differ based on the marks received for grammaticality, and that articles, reference words, and prepositions will prove to be the most problematic areas of English grammar in Group 1 and the least problematic in Group 3. To test for a correlation between the marks received for grammaticality and the error types in the essays, Fisher tests were conducted because of the small amount of data. While these tests show no significant correlation at  $p < .05$  between the mark received for grammaticality and errors in the areas that are considered most challenging, that is, articles, reference words, and prepositions, the correlation between the erroneous use of nouns (use of plural, possessive, and number agreement) and the mark received for grammaticality is significant,  $p = .0157$ .

As it can be seen in Table 4, the participants who received the lowest marks of 1 or 2 were most likely to make errors such as incorrect nominal agreement in the case of plurals (10.30%) and numbers (2.58%), comparative (4.29%), or incorrect verb form use (7.73%). Furthermore, they were also the most likely to leave out articles (4.72%), add unnecessary prepositions (2.58%), and to make tense (10.30%) and clause errors (4.72%), in addition to leaving out connectors (2.58%). The most common error type in this group (11.16%) was the use of unnecessary articles. What is more, the analysis showed that the participants who received the average mark of 3 were most likely to make errors such as using unnecessary or incorrect articles (12.27% and 4.09%, respectively), incorrect derivational forms (3.64%), and unnecessary pronouns (1.36%). The most frequent errors they made was the use of incorrect prepositions (15.45%). They were also more likely to produce errors that are related to complexity, such as word order problems (7.27%), using incorrect reference words (5.45%), or adding unnecessary connectors to combine clauses in the text (0.45%). Finally, students in Group 3 were most likely to produce errors in relation to complex structures more frequently than the previous groups. Unclear reference words were the most common among all errors in this group (15.3%); nevertheless, there were cases where the reference word is completely omitted (0.55%).

| Error types    |             | Group 1 |      |      | Group 2 |      |      | Group 3 |      |      |
|----------------|-------------|---------|------|------|---------|------|------|---------|------|------|
|                |             | %       | M    | SD   | %       | M    | SD   | %       | M    | SD   |
| Article        | Σ           | 18.88   | 2.44 | 2.20 | 19.54   | 2.26 | 1.56 | 13.66   | 1.67 | 1.23 |
|                | No          | 4.72    | 2.20 | 1.30 | 3.18    | 1.75 | 0.50 | 1.64    | 1    | 0    |
|                | Incorrect   | 3.00    | 1.40 | 0.55 | 4.09    | 1.80 | 0.45 | 2.73    | 1.25 | 0.50 |
|                | Unnecessary | 11.16   | 3.25 | 3.01 | 12.27   | 2.70 | 2.06 | 9.29    | 2.13 | 1.55 |
| Reference word | Σ           | 13.73   | 2.29 | 1.68 | 17.73   | 2.79 | 1.93 | 19.13   | 2.19 | 1.76 |
|                | No          | 0       | 0    | 0    | 0       | 0    | 0    | 0.55    | 1    | 0    |
|                | Incorrect   | 4.72    | 2.20 | 0.84 | 5.45    | 2    | 1.26 | 3.28    | 1.50 | 1    |

|             |                     |       |      |      |       |      |      |       |      |      |
|-------------|---------------------|-------|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|------|------|
|             | Unclear             | 9.01  | 2.33 | 2.06 | 12.27 | 3.38 | 2.20 | 15.3  | 2.55 | 1.97 |
| Preposition | $\Sigma$            | 10.30 | 1.50 | 0.89 | 17.72 | 2.60 | 1.68 | 15.31 | 1.65 | 0.93 |
|             | No                  | 1.72  | 1.33 | 0.58 | 0.91  | 1    | 0    | 2.19  | 1.33 | 0.58 |
|             | Incorrect           | 6.01  | 2    | 1.15 | 15.45 | 3.09 | 1.70 | 10.93 | 2    | 1.05 |
|             | Unnecessary         | 2.58  | 1    | 0    | 1.36  | 1.50 | 0.71 | 2.19  | 1    | 0    |
| Noun        | $\Sigma$            | 13.31 | 2.21 | 1.58 | 8.64  | 1.58 | 1.44 | 12.57 | 1.44 | 0.89 |
|             | Plural              | 10.30 | 2.67 | 1.73 | 4.55  | 2.50 | 2.38 | 7.10  | 1.44 | 1.01 |
|             | Possessive          | 0.43  | 1    | 0    | 2.27  | 1    | 0    | 4.92  | 1.50 | 0.84 |
|             | Number agreement    | 2.58  | 1.50 | 1    | 1.82  | 1.33 | 0.58 | 0.55  | 1    | 0    |
| Verb        | $\Sigma$            | 11.16 | 1.86 | 1.23 | 6.82  | 1.36 | 0.67 | 9.29  | 1.31 | 0.63 |
|             | SV agreement        | 3.43  | 1.33 | 0.52 | 2.27  | 1.25 | 0.50 | 4.92  | 1.29 | 0.49 |
|             | Incorrect verb form | 7.73  | 2.25 | 1.49 | 4.55  | 1.43 | 0.79 | 4.37  | 1.33 | 0.82 |
| Tense       |                     | 10.30 | 2.67 | 1.58 | 6.36  | 1.75 | 1.04 | 3.83  | 1.75 | 0.50 |
| Word order  |                     | 3.00  | 1.17 | 0.41 | 7.27  | 2    | 0.76 | 4.37  | 1.14 | 0.38 |
| Connector   | $\Sigma$            | 5.16  | 1.20 | 0.42 | 1.81  | 1    | 0    | 4.37  | 1.14 | 0.38 |
|             | No                  | 2.58  | 1.20 | 0.45 | 0     | 0    | 0    | 1.09  | 1    | 0    |
|             | Incorrect           | 2.58  | 1.20 | 0.45 | 1.36  | 1    | 0    | 3.28  | 1.20 | 0.45 |
|             | Unnecessary         | 0     | 0    | 0    | 0.45  | 1    | 0    | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| Comparative |                     | 4.29  | 2.50 | 1.73 | 2.27  | 1    | 0    | 3.83  | 1.40 | 0.55 |
| Derivation  |                     | 3.43  | 1.60 | 0.55 | 3.64  | 2    | 0.82 | 2.73  | 1.67 | 1.15 |
| Clause      |                     | 4.72  | 1.38 | 0.74 | 1.82  | 1    | 0    | 3.28  | 1.20 | 0.45 |
| Pronoun     | $\Sigma$            | 1.72  | 1.33 | 0.58 | 2.27  | 1    | 0    | 2.73  | 1.25 | 0.50 |
|             | Incorrect           | 0.43  | 1    | 0    | 0.91  | 1    | 0    | 1.64  | 1.50 | 0.70 |
|             | Unnecessary         | 1.29  | 1.50 | 0.71 | 1.36  | 1    | 0    | 1.09  | 1    | 0    |
| Misc.       |                     | 0     | 0    | 0    | 4.09  | 0.82 | 0.87 | 4.92  | 0.69 | 1.11 |

Table 4. Results of the error analysis based on the three groups (overall percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation)

In addition, errors related to the possessive (4.92%), the lack of subject-verb agreement (4.92%), the use of incorrect connectors (3.28%) or incorrect pronouns (1.64%) as well as the omission of prepositions (2.19%) were the most problematic areas for the students that received the highest marks of 4 or 5 for the grammatical accuracy of their essays.

Overall, the comparison of errors between groups demonstrates that differences exist as far as the types of errors and their distribution are concerned. In other words, students who received a lower mark for the grammar component of their essays produce different errors than their peers who received a higher mark for the grammaticality of their papers. For instance, the former group is more likely to use incorrect verb forms or incorrect tenses, while the errors in the latter group relate to problems with subject-verb agreement or with reference words.

## 4 Conclusion

To sum up, the in-depth error analysis of 34 English argumentative essays written by university students offers an insight into what grammatical errors are made most frequently by Hungarian EFL learners in writing. Corresponding to previous investigations conducted by both international and Hungarian researchers, articles and prepositions appear as one of the most challenging grammar elements in the English language. At the same time, the current study sheds light on the incorrect use of reference words in the Hungarian students' essays, thus, encouraging both language learners and language teachers to incorporate this grammar point in the learning/teaching materials of English as well.

Indeed, the current study is not without limitations, one of which pertains to the size of the corpus. A higher number of essays would enable us to provide a more comprehensive picture of the grammatical errors Hungarian EFL learners make in their English argumentative essays. At the same time, the small corpus size may have skewed the results of the significance tests that, in many cases, indicated insignificant differences. As a matter of fact, the number of essays in the present study was determined by the number of students who took the exam at one particular time. Another limitation might be that all the essays had to be typed. This made us disregard the differences that may exist between computer-typed and handwritten compositions. In order to eliminate the effects of these limitations, further analyses of argumentative essays are needed in the area of grammatical errors.

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Dr. Balogh Erzsébet  
 University of Debrecen  
 Institute of English and American Studies  
 Department of English Linguistics  
 H-4002 Debrecen  
 Pf. 400  
[balogh.erszabet@arts.unideb.hu](mailto:balogh.erszabet@arts.unideb.hu)

Kiss Nikolett  
 University of Debrecen  
 Institute of English and American Studies  
 H-4002 Debrecen  
 Pf. 400  
[nikolettkiss1998@gmail.com](mailto:nikolettkiss1998@gmail.com)