



## Spelling mistakes in writing by Indonesian speakers in Timor Leste and their implications

Alowisia Since<sup>1</sup>, Ida Widia<sup>2</sup>, Mochamad Whilky Rizkyanfi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>SMA Nino Koni Santana Gleno, Timor Leste

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

[alowisiasince40@gmail.com](mailto:alowisiasince40@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [idawidia@upi.edu](mailto:idawidia@upi.edu)<sup>2</sup>, [wilkysgm@upi.edu](mailto:wilkysgm@upi.edu)<sup>3</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze spelling errors in descriptive essays written by BIPA (Indonesian for Foreign Speakers) students in Timor Leste and their implications for the development of teaching materials. Writing is a crucial productive skill, yet BIPA students often face difficulties with writing conventions, primarily due to first-language interference and limited morphological understanding. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research analyzed descriptive essays from eleventh-grade students at SMA Nino Koni Santana Gleno. Data was collected through document studies, observation, and interviews to identify, classify, and interpret errors. The analysis revealed that errors in writing prepositions were the most dominant, followed by errors in affixed words, basic words, and reduplicated words. This finding indicates that students face fundamental difficulties in distinguishing between prepositions and prefixes. This finding highlights the importance of developing teaching materials that focus on students' specific errors, provide structured exercises, and integrate learners' cultural contexts to enhance accuracy and linguistic awareness. Therefore, a focused pedagogical intervention is needed to bridge the gap between vocabulary mastery and the correct application of spelling rules.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: 25 Apr 2025

Revised: 25 Aug 2025

Accepted: 1 Sep 2025

Available online: 27 Sep 2025

Publish: 28 Nov 2025

#### Keywords:

BIPA; descriptive essay; spelling mistakes; teaching materials; writing skills

#### Open access

Inovasi Kurikulum is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesalahan ejaan pada karangan deskriptif peserta didik BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) di Timor Leste dan implikasinya terhadap pengembangan bahan ajar. Menulis merupakan keterampilan produktif yang krusial, namun peserta didik BIPA sering menghadapi kesulitan terkait kaidah penulisan, terutama karena interferensi bahasa pertama dan pemahaman morfologi yang terbatas. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini menganalisis karangan deskriptif dari peserta didik kelas XI di SMA Nino Koni Santana Gleno. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui studi dokumen, observasi, dan wawancara untuk mengidentifikasi, mengklasifikasi, serta menginterpretasi kesalahan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa kesalahan penulisan kata depan merupakan yang paling dominan, diikuti oleh kesalahan pada kata berimbuhan, kata dasar, dan kata ulang. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa peserta didik mengalami kesulitan mendasar dalam membedakan preposisi dan prefiks. Temuan ini berimplikasi pada pentingnya pengembangan bahan ajar yang berfokus pada kesalahan spesifik peserta didik, menyediakan latihan terstruktur, dan mengintegrasikan konteks budaya pembelajar untuk meningkatkan akurasi dan kesadaran berbahasa. Oleh karena itu, diperlukan intervensi pedagogis yang terfokus untuk menjembatani kesenjangan antara penguasaan kosakata dan penerapan kaidah ejaan yang benar.

**Kata Kunci:** bahan ajar; BIPA; karangan deskriptif; kesalahan mengeja; keterampilan menulis

### How to cite (APA 7)

Since, A., Widia, I., & Rizkyanfi, M. W. (2025). Spelling mistakes in writing by Indonesian speakers in Timor Leste and their implications. *Inovasi Kurikulum*, 22(4), 2173-2182.

### Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing is a productive skill that requires accurate mastery of language rules, encompassing spelling, morphology, syntax, and discourse. In the context of second- or foreign-language learning, writing skills serve as an important indicator of language proficiency because writing depends not only on vocabulary but also on solid knowledge of grammar. In Indonesia, the teaching of writing skills for foreign speakers is delivered through the Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA) program, which positions writing as one of the core competencies alongside listening, speaking, and reading (Widia & Annisa, 2023).

Nevertheless, writing practice in BIPA learning still faces several specific issues, particularly related to spelling and morphology. Many foreign speakers make errors in writing affixed words, for example, writing “memasak” as “masak-masak” or “membaca” as “baca” (Colenbrander, 2025). Errors in affixed words (affixation) are so common that they constitute a fundamental problem, involving not merely the addition of affixes but also complex changes in word structure and meaning (Anis & Saddhono, 2016; Putri, 2023). Another common error involves capitalisation and punctuation, for example, writing “saya pergi ke Jakarta kemarin” without capitalising the place name. In addition, learners often encounter difficulties in using morphemes, such as writing “meminumsusu” without spacing. These errors indicate that the assessment of BIPA writing skills places significant emphasis on spelling, grammar, and text coherence, as mistakes in these areas occur most frequently (Rijlaarsdam *et al.*, 2008). These errors are caused by limited vocabulary, a lack of variety in teaching methods, minimal use of interactive learning media, and insufficient guidance during the learning process (Widyawati & Purnomo, 2025).

Previous studies on the detection of Indonesian spelling errors have primarily focused on technical, computationally based aspects. Some research has highlighted the development of spell-checkers and correction models based on long short-term memory (Aziz *et al.*, 2021; el-Atawy & Ahmed, 2021; Kiros & Aray, 2021). Meanwhile, other studies have emphasised the limitations of spelling correction systems in handling compound words and affixation (Gleneagles *et al.*, 2024). Recent literature reports that, although algorithms such as Levenshtein Distance, Jaro-Winkler, and N-gram are widely used, their practical application in language learning remains rare (Yanfi *et al.*, 2022). Thus, research focusing on the integration of corrective technology with pedagogical needs in writing instruction remains relatively limited.

On the other hand, research on language learning in Timor-Leste indicates that mastery of writing skills is closely linked to curriculum readiness, teacher competence, and students' communicative needs (Dos-Santos-Gonçalves, 2014). These findings are relevant to BIPA learners from Timor-Leste, who use Indonesian as a working and academic language but still face difficulties with formal writing (Dos-Santos-Gonçalves, 2014). This situation indicates a gap between the corrective technology-based approaches widely studied in previous research and the realities of writing instruction in BIPA classrooms, which require adaptive pedagogical strategies.

Based on the above explanation, this study aims to analyse spelling and morphological errors in the writing of BIPA learners and to propose a learning framework that bridges error-detection technology with contextual writing instruction practices. The contribution of this research is expected not only to enrich the literature on writing skill acquisition in BIPA but also to provide practical recommendations for educators in designing more effective assessments and instructional interventions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

## Writing Skills in BIPA Learning

Writing is a fundamental productive language skill in second language acquisition, including in the context of Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing (BIPA). Foreign language writing functions not only as a tool for indirect communication but also as a medium for expressing ideas, thoughts, and feelings (Fitria, 2024; Ivanova *et al.*, 2023). In second language learning, writing requires accurate mastery of linguistic elements, such as spelling, morphology (word formation), and syntax (sentence structure) (Naz *et al.*, 2025). BIPA learners' linguistic competence directly affects the quality of their writing, making this ability an important indicator for measuring active and communicative mastery of the Indonesian language (Haryanti *et al.*, 2025).

## Descriptive Essays in Writing Instruction

Descriptive essays are a type of text commonly used in writing instruction, including for BIPA learners. These texts aim to depict objects, places, or events in a concrete and detailed manner, enabling readers to clearly visualise the content. Knapp and Watkins, in their book *Genre, Text, Grammar: Technologies for teaching and assessing writing*, explain that descriptive texts rely on specific, detailed vocabulary to create vivid imagery. However, BIPA learners often face challenges in composing descriptive essays due to limited mastery of word writing rules. Common errors include incorrectly combining prepositions with the following word, improper reduplication, or incorrect use of affixes (Pratiwi, 2017; Widia, 2021). Therefore, mastery of descriptive text structures and word-formation rules in Indonesian is crucial for BIPA learners.

## Error Analysis Theory

To understand the errors made by BIPA learners, error analysis provides a relevant methodological foundation. Corder introduced Error Analysis as viewing errors not as failures but as a natural part of the language acquisition process, which can be analysed to understand learners' linguistic development (Corder, 1967). Error analysis involves the systematic identification, classification, and interpretation of errors to uncover underlying patterns and causes (Read *et al.*, 2021). This approach not only helps teachers identify learners' weaknesses but also provides empirical data for developing more effective and targeted instructional materials (Srijono, 2017).

## Implications of Error Analysis for Instructional Material Development

Analysing word-writing errors in BIPA learners has practical implications for the development of contextual instructional materials. Tomlinson, in *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, emphasises that effective learning materials should be grounded in learners' real needs, including the difficulties they encounter. By basing instructional materials on actual learner errors, teachers can design learning activities that target improvements in spelling, word formation, and morphological understanding (Do, 2023). This approach aligns with the principles of contextual learning, which centre learners' experiences in the learning process. Ultimately, error-based instructional materials can help learners develop a more accurate and communicative language awareness.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because it aims to describe and analyse in depth the various types of word-writing errors found in descriptive essays of BIPA learners. The descriptive qualitative method allows the researcher to understand linguistic phenomena naturally, without manipulating variables, and focuses on data interpretation. The research design comprises three main techniques: document analysis, non-participant classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews with BIPA teachers to elicit the learning context and the teaching approaches employed. The unit of analysis in this study is the word-writing errors found in learners' descriptive essays, including errors in root words, affixed words, reduplications, and prepositions.

The subjects of this study were 56 BIPA learners in grade XI at SMA Nino Koni Santana Gleno who were taking Indonesian language classes. The total number of learners also constituted the research sample (n=56), selected through total sampling due to the relatively small population, all of whom were relevant to the study's focus. The classroom context indicates that Indonesian language learning for foreign speakers in grade XI focuses on developing descriptive writing skills, integrating language and cultural materials. The essays analysed were final assignments in the descriptive text learning unit. From an ethical standpoint, the researcher obtained written permission from the school and the subject teacher. All learner data were anonymised to maintain confidentiality, and participation was voluntary after participants were provided with an explanation of the study's purpose and procedures.

Data collection in this study was conducted using three techniques:

1. Documentation: Collecting Lembar Kerja Siswa/LKS (Student Worksheets) in the form of descriptive essays completed by 56 learners over two sessions (90 minutes each) of writing instruction. For example, the completed LKS were collected for error analysis. Sample tasks include: 1) A descriptive essay on the topic "Describe your house"; 2) Write a description of a close friend of yours.
2. Observation: Conducting classroom observations to obtain a contextual understanding of the writing learning process, including learners' interaction with the material and language use within the essay context. The researcher used an observation sheet to capture learners' writing activities. Sample items on the observation sheet include: 1) How often learners consult with the teacher or peers; 2) Are learners actively asking questions when encountering difficulties?
3. Interview: Structured interviews were conducted with the BIPA teacher and several selected learners to gather additional information on factors that might contribute to word-writing errors. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted with one (1) teacher and seven (7) selected learners, chosen based on variation in writing error levels. Sample questions for the teacher include: In your opinion, what are the main factors causing learners' errors (L1 influence, grammar understanding, or lack of practice)?

Learners were asked questions such as: 1) Which part of writing an essay do you find most difficult (vocabulary, grammar, spelling)?; 2) Do you often use your first language (Tetun) when writing in Indonesian? Why?

Meanwhile, data analysis in this study was conducted using three techniques, namely:

1. Identification: Identifying each word-writing error found in the learners' descriptive essays.
2. Classification: Classifying these errors according to their types, referring to error analysis theory. This classification includes morphological errors (word formation) and orthographic errors (spelling and word writing);

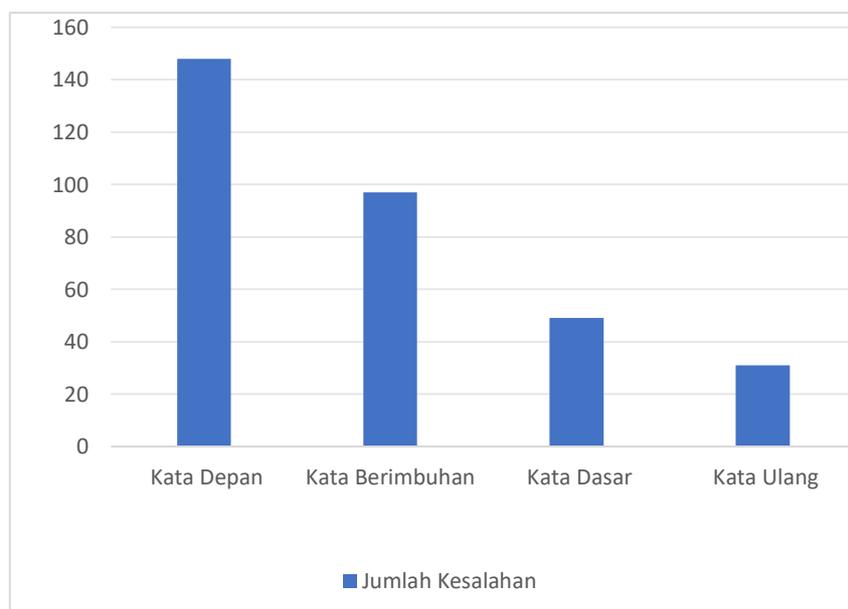
3. Interpretation: Interpreting the most frequent error patterns to identify underlying causes, such as first language influence, incorrect rule generalisation, or insufficient understanding of Indonesian language rules.
4. Conclusion Drawing: Formulating conclusions based on the analysis findings and applying them to the development of more contextual and effective writing instructional materials.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### Results of Word-Writing Error Analysis in Descriptive Essays of BIPA Learners

In this section, we present the findings from the analysis of word-writing errors in the descriptive essays of XI-grade BIPA learners at SMA Nino Koni Santana Gleno. From the 56 essays analysed, a total of 325 word-writing errors were identified.



**Figure 1.** Bar Chart of Word-Writing Errors  
*Source: Research (2025)*

The bar chart in Figure 1 presents data on the number of word-writing errors found in learners' essays, grouped by error type. The data show an uneven distribution of errors, with some types being far more dominant than others. The tallest bar in the chart represents errors in Prepositions, indicating the largest number of mistakes, at approximately 150. This suggests that the use of prepositions is a major challenge for learners in writing.

The second most frequent errors are found in Affixed Words, with nearly 100 mistakes recorded. This high number indicates that learners still struggle to understand and apply morphological rules for forming affixed words. Two other error types, Base Words and Reduplicated Words, show much lower frequencies. Errors in Base Words are around 50, while Reduplicated Words have the fewest errors, fewer than 40. Overall, the chart indicates that the most common writing errors among learners involve Prepositions and Affixed

Words, whereas errors in simpler forms, such as Base Words and Reduplicated Words, occur relatively less frequently.

**Table 1.** Frequency and Percentage of Spelling Errors

No	Error Categories	Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Preposition Writing	148	45.5%
2	Writing Affixed Words	97	29.8%
3	Spelling of Basic Words	49	15.1%
4	Duplicate Word Writing	31	9.6%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: Research (2025)*

**Table 1** shows that errors in Prepositions account for the largest proportion, namely 45.5% (148 cases), followed by errors in Affixed Words at 29.8% (97 cases). Base Word errors contribute 15.1% (49 cases), while Reduplicated Word errors are the least frequent at 9.6% (31 cases). The most common examples include *disekolah* (should be *di sekolah*) and *memberikan* (should be *memberikan*). This pattern indicates learners' confusion in distinguishing between the use of prepositions (*di*) and prefixes (*me-*). Similar errors are also observed in reduplication, such as *jalanjalan*, which should be written as *jalan-jalan*.

## Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, errors in affixation are common among foreign language learners, and BIPA students frequently make errors in writing prefixes and prepositions (Mauilida & Ekawati, 2020; Widia, 2021). These findings emphasise that students still face fundamental difficulties in morphology and spelling, particularly at the intermediate level. Moreover, these results are consistent with error analysis theory, which posits that language errors reflect an ongoing learning process and simultaneously provide guidance to teachers on areas requiring special attention (Haryanti *et al.*, 2025). In the context of Timor-Leste learners, this is also influenced by first-language interference, consistent with Ellis's view in *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* that negative transfer is a major cause of foreign-language errors.

This study also contrasts with other findings that highlight vocabulary errors as the dominant category among beginner-level BIPA learners (Srijono, 2017). This difference can be explained by proficiency level factors: intermediate-level learners tend to make more structural errors (spelling and morphology) than lexical errors, which aligns with other findings highlighting that BIPA learners vary significantly in their handling of Indonesian morphology and often engage with it in greater depth (Hastuti *et al.*, 2018; Kalee *et al.*, 2018). Other findings indicate that sound changes resulting from morpheme grouping can be studied through morpheme variations (Saddhono *et al.*, 2023).

It should be noted that this study is limited to the analysis of errors in descriptive texts written by eleventh-grade learners. Therefore, the results obtained may not fully represent writing errors in other text types or among BIPA learners with different proficiency levels. Although other studies highlight vocabulary errors as the dominant category, this study finds that errors in prepositions and affixation occur much more frequently (Widia, 2021). This difference can be explained by the learners' proficiency levels in our study, which indicate a shift from lexical to structural errors as language competence increases.

The implications of this study suggest that focused pedagogical interventions are necessary. Teachers and curriculum developers need to revise teaching materials and instructional strategies to better address

specific learner problems related to the use of prepositions and affixed words, which have proven to be the primary obstacles to their writing proficiency (Septiana & Ardiyanti, 2021). The importance of learner needs analysis in developing BIPA teaching materials aligns with the findings of this study. The unique characteristics of foreign learners require pedagogical approaches and teaching materials tailored to their challenges, consistent with the study's implication that interventions should focus on learners' specific needs, such as the use of prepositions and affixes (Obidovna, 2023).

## **Causes of Word Writing Errors and Their Implications**

Based on the analysis, it is evident that the writing errors made by BIPA learners from Timor-Leste cannot be attributed to a single factor. These errors are not merely technical mistakes but reflect the challenging process of language learning. In general, three factors have the greatest influence: interference from the first language, limited understanding of Indonesian spelling rules, and the teaching methods employed in the writing class (Aminullah, 2024). The three factors are interconnected and form a consistent pattern in the learners' writing. The most prominent factor is the influence of the first language. Most learners have been accustomed to using Tetun and Portuguese since childhood. These two languages have grammatical rules, word-formation processes, and writing systems that differ from those of Indonesian. Such differences often cause "interference" when they write in Indonesian. It is not uncommon for them to write words according to the patterns of their first language, making their written forms appear unusual to native Indonesian speakers. This aligns with Ellis's view in *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, which holds that differences between the first and second language systems are often a source of learning errors.

In addition, there are still issues with understanding spelling rules. Many learners do not fully grasp the distinction between prepositions and prefixes, so errors such as "dirumah" instead of "di rumah" or "kesekolah" instead of "ke sekolah" are frequent. Similar mistakes are found in the use of affixes, for example, writing "bermainan" instead of the correct form "bermain." Such errors indicate that although learners already know many vocabulary words, they have not fully mastered the rules for writing them correctly. As a result, their knowledge of word meanings does not always align with their ability to spell them properly. This aligns with findings from other studies showing that prepositions (prefixes) and affixes are used according to the speaker's communicative needs within sentences (Muhsan, 2021).

Another factor is the teaching method. In writing classes, teachers typically place greater emphasis on content and on learners' fluency in expressing their ideas. Formal aspects of language, such as the accuracy of word writing, receive insufficient attention. This results in learners being less sensitive to the differences between prepositions and affixes, or other spelling rules. Because they are not accustomed to focusing on these aspects, the same errors recur without adequate correction. In fact, even a small emphasis on the formal aspects of language can help learners become more aware and better trained to write words correctly. This differs from the view of a previous study, which suggested that improving accuracy and understanding in identifying and correcting errors in Indonesian texts could be addressed using the SPECIL Corpus (Soyusiawaty *et al.*, 2025).

Overall, learners' spelling errors arise from a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, there is a strong influence of the first language and a limited understanding of spelling rules. Externally, teaching methods that place insufficient emphasis on language form further perpetuate errors. These two factors interact and reinforce one another, causing errors to recur. Therefore, improvement cannot rely solely on expanding vocabulary; a more balanced teaching strategy is also necessary: learners should remain free to express their ideas, but they should also be trained to pay closer attention to Indonesian spelling and morphological rules. Another factor contributing to writing errors is the emergence of new Indonesian

vocabulary related to the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign-language influences, and learners' creativity (Mulyono & Subiyanto, 2021).

The findings regarding the causes of these errors extend beyond mere analysis and carry important implications for the development of writing instructional materials. Repeated errors can, in fact, serve as a foundation for designing more targeted learning materials. In other words, the results of this analysis can function as a “roadmap” for teachers to adjust teaching materials according to the real needs of learners. First, writing materials should place greater emphasis on the most frequently occurring errors, particularly the distinctions between the use of prepositions and affixes. In this way, learning is no longer overly general but directly addresses learners' actual weaknesses.

This aligns with Tomlinson's view in *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, which emphasises the importance of designing instructional materials based on learners' real needs. Second, writing materials need to provide structured exercises. For example, teachers can present sentences with incorrect spelling and ask learners to correct them. Such exercises are simple yet effective because they help learners become aware of their own errors while simultaneously training metalinguistic skills. Bitchener and Ferris, in their book *Written Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition and Writing*, also stress that feedback and specific exercises like these are crucial for developing more accurate writing habits. Third, the development of instructional materials should take into account the learners' linguistic and cultural context. For learners from Timor-Leste, for instance, sentence examples can be linked to everyday situations that are close to their experiences. In this way, they feel more connected to the material being studied, making learning more meaningful. This context-based approach emphasises the importance of relevance in language teaching (Samsudin & Sukarismanti, 2025).

By integrating these three strategies—focusing on dominant errors, providing structured exercises, and incorporating cultural context—writing instructional materials will not only help learners correct technical mistakes but also foster their awareness of how the Indonesian language functions. Ultimately, writing instruction can become more effective, relevant, and sustainable when it is grounded in a genuine understanding of the challenges learners face.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that the word-writing errors made by BIPA learners from Timor-Leste are not merely matters of misspelling but rather part of their journey in mastering the Indonesian language. The errors reflect the strong influence of their first language, a still limited understanding of spelling rules, and learning methods that have not fully emphasized linguistic accuracy. From these findings, it is evident that teaching writing is insufficient if it merely encourages learners to express ideas fluently. Students also need guidance to become more sensitive to word forms and their correct usage. This can be achieved through targeted exercises that focus on the most common types of errors and through instructional materials that are closely connected to students' daily lives and cultures. With such an approach, the writing learning process becomes more relevant, easier to understand, and ultimately more effective.

The main contribution of this study lies in two aspects. First, it provides a concrete overview of the factors underlying students' errors in word writing. Second, it offers practical guidance for BIPA teachers in developing writing strategies and instructional materials that are better aligned with learners' needs. Thus, the findings not only enhance academic understanding but also directly benefit classroom teaching practices.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article. The author confirms that the article's data and content are free of plagiarism.

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