



Impact of Phrase and Clause Errors on Correct Sentence Construction among the Undergraduate (UG) students in Tripura: An Analytical Study.

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Abstract

English occupies an important place in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in schools and colleges in Tripura, one of the eight sisters of the Northern Region of India, where learners aim to speak and write correct English in ELT classrooms. However, errors in the construction of English sentences using phrases and clauses are widespread at the tertiary level in the state. The primary objective of this study is to identify how phrase and clause errors make sentences incorrect in the writing of undergraduate learners in Tripura. The researcher has adopted a mixed-method approach. Data were collected from 10 (ten) government degree colleges using a stratified random sampling method, and error percentages are presented in charts. A codebook, along with interviews, focus groups, open-ended questions, and observations, forms the qualitative component of the study. The findings show that UG students are unable to construct correct English phrases, especially verb phrases, which results in errors in independent clauses and, ultimately, in sentence construction in UG students' writing. This study highlights the root causes of these problems and proposes teaching and learning strategies to help address them among undergraduate learners and teachers in Tripura.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition (SLA), English Language Teaching (ELT), tertiary level, Undergraduate (UG) students.

Introduction

English is taught as a compulsory subject at the primary level (Classes I–V) and the secondary level (Classes VI–XII), and as part of the higher education curriculum at the tertiary level (colleges, universities, and professional institutes) in Tripura. This paper aims to examine how phrase and clause errors result in sentence errors in writing. The teaching and learning of students about word formation, phrases, clauses, sentences, etc., begins at the primary school level in Tripura. However, to ensure quality education in schools, two key educational bodies function in Tripura: SCERT and TBSE. SCERT, the academic authority for Classes I–VIII, is responsible for curriculum development and pedagogical improvement, while TBSE, the board responsible for Classes X–XII, supervises and conducts secondary and higher secondary examinations in the state. (SCERT Tripura, n.d.; TBSE, n.d.).



After completing H.S. (+2), students get admitted to Government Degree Colleges under the Directorate of Higher Education (DHE). At present, Tripura has 28 Government Degree Colleges under the Directorate of Higher Education (Government of Tripura, 2024). The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), approved by the Government of India in July 2020, was implemented in colleges in Tripura from the academic year 2023–24 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020; Higher Education Department, Government of Tripura, 2023). English is a subject taught at the tertiary level in almost all government degree colleges in Tripura, the NEP-2020 English syllabus is given below for you to have a look at.

Year	Academic Components	Skills & Activities	Exit Award
1-Year	Foundation Courses, English , Environmental Studies, Value Education	Digital Literacy, Communication Skills, Basic Vocational Skills/ English	UG Certificate in English
2- Year	Core Discipline Courses, Minor Subject/ English Interdisciplinary Courses	Skill-based Courses, Vocational Training/ English	UG Diploma in English
3-Year	Advanced Discipline Courses, Open Electives, / English Multidisciplinary Papers	Internship, Field Work, Community Engagement/ English	Bachelor's Degree in English
4-Year	Specialisation Courses, Research Methodology, Advanced Electives/ English	Dissertation / Research Project, Industry Internship/ English	Honours/ Honours with Research/ English

Table No. 1 illustrates the UG syllabus (English) under NEP-2020 of the various Government Degree Colleges in Tripura. (Tripura University, 2023).

But feedback collected from undergraduate (UG) students, with a view to checking whether they can write correct English sentences? The researcher visits ten Govt. Degree colleges to get his data. Surprisingly, most undergraduate (UG) students at those colleges cannot write correct English sentences because they lack a solid understanding of phrases and clauses. Hence, the researcher wants to review the existing literature to identify the root causes of teaching phrase-clause rules and their contribution to correct sentence formation, as outlined below.

Review of Related Literature

The following selected books have been consulted because they are commonly prescribed in the schools and college curriculum of Tripura. Wren and Martin (2024) define a phrase as a group of words that makes sense but does not form a complete sentence. They explain that a phrase lacks both a subject and a verb and therefore expresses only partial meaning. For example, 'The Sun rises *in the East*'. Humpty Dumpty sat *on a wall*. A giant came to *my door*. etc. (Here, the group of words in italics is a phrase in English because it makes sense but does not have a complete meaning). (p.16)



Nesfield (2000) defines a sentence as a group of words containing at least one subject and one predicate that together make complete sense. Nesfield defines a clause as a part of a sentence containing its own subject and predicate and classifies clauses into noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses (pp. 220–251).

Jayaseelan (2000) offers a clear illustration by comparing a sentence to the solar system: the verb is like the *Sun* at the centre, and the *subject*, *direct object*, and *indirect object* revolve around it like planets. He calls these elements the *arguments* of the *verb*. The number of arguments depends on the meaning of the verb. Hence, if undergraduate students cannot identify the verb in a sentence, they cannot construct correct English sentences. Jayaseelan's explanation provides a functional framework showing how verbs determine sentence structure (p. 13).

Das (2025) divides English words into two major categories: structural and non-structural. Structural words—such as determiners, intensifiers, auxiliaries, prepositions, and conjunctions—are minor elements that form the basic structure of a sentence and carry limited meaning. In contrast, non-structural words like nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs convey the essential meaning of a sentence. Students need to focus on them to build correct and meaningful sentences. (pp. 285–286). Next, we move to the research gap section to identify whether undergraduate (UG) students understood the use of phrases and clauses in sentence formation in the school syllabus, as reflected in the above-listed books that are part of their curriculum.

Research Gap in Writing

The classical and pedagogical grammarians, such as Wren & Martin (2024) and J.C. Nesfield (2000), have provided ample explanations of phrases, clauses, and sentence structures in their grammar books for schools and college students. But their works primarily serve as prescriptive grammar guides rather than as representations of UG learners' actual performances. In a word, there is a huge gap between the grammar rules and their actual practice in writing, especially at the UG level in Tripura. Even Hossain's recommendations for resolving grammatical errors in English-language essay writing are not up to the mark and may not be applicable to undergraduate (UG) learners in Tripura. Hence, the following research questions arise in the present study.

Research Questions

The following research questions that obviously arise are cited below.

Can undergraduate (UG) students at the tertiary level construct correct sentences using correct forms of phrases and clauses?

If they cannot do so, is school background responsible for that?

What are the probable root causes of such errors in writing correct sentences? How can these errors be eradicated?



Significance of the Study

Let the teachers and students of reputed institutions know the causes of inability in sentence construction at the tertiary level among undergraduate students in Tripura, which may be applicable to other government degree colleges as well, where UG students are unable to frame correct sentences due to their poor understanding of phrases and clauses. Once they identify the root causes, the concerned authority can immediately modify teaching-learning strategies to improve the writing outcome. Now, let's discuss about the research methodology below.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, i.e., both quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a complete understanding of phrase, clause, and sentence errors in the academic writing of undergraduate students in Tripura. Data were collected via a feedback form from the ten selected government degree colleges, with prior permission from the Directorate of Higher Education, Government of Tripura, and all student responses were anonymised by the researcher.

Target Population and Sampling Technique

The target population of this study comprises undergraduate (UG) students with vernacular-medium schooling backgrounds across Tripura.

The researcher employs stratified random sampling to ensure representation from different colleges and to capture population-level diversity. This sampling strategy ensures that the findings are statistically valid and contextually reliable.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Interpretation

The primary data have been collected from the following ten selected colleges of Tripura for analysis and interpretation. These are,

Sl. Nos	Names of the Government Degree Colleges	Names of the Districts & State
1	Ambedkar College, Fatik Ray	(North District, of Tripura)
2	A.M.B.S. Mahavidyalaya, Amarpur	(Gomati District, Tripura)
3	Govt. Degree College, Ganda Twisa	(Dhalai District, Tripura)
4	Government Degree College Dharma Nagar	(North District, Tripura)
5	Government Degree College, Pani Sagar	(North District, Tripura)
6	Netaji Subhash Mahavidyalaya, Udaipur	(Gomati District, Tripura)
7	Ram Thakur College, Agartala	(West District, Tripura)
8	Rabindranath Thakur Mahavidyalaya, Bishalgarh	(Siphahijala District, Tripura)
9	Swami Vivekananda Mahavidyalaya, Mohanpur	(West District, Tripura)
10	Women's College, Agartala	(West District, Tripura)

Table No. 2 presents the institutional details of the ten selected Government Degree Colleges in Tripura. The colleges are officially listed under the Directorate of Higher Education, Government of Tripura (2024). The specific data in the table were collected directly by the researcher during field visits (Field Survey, 2026).

The collected feedback is explained in (a) Phrase Errors Analysis from the Writings of the Undergraduate Students, (b) Clause Errors Analysis from the Writings of the Undergraduate Students and (c) Their contribution to the Correct Sentence Formation in UG Writing. To analyse the error percentage of the above-mentioned ten government degree colleges in Tripura, the researcher used the Error Percentage (p) formula for each category: For example,

$$p = \frac{n}{\sum n} \times 100\%$$

n = (Number of Errors): The total count of a specific error type (e.g., total Prepositional Phrase errors)

$\sum n$ = (total sample error size)

p = The percentage of that specific error type. The error percentage was calculated using the formula $p = \frac{n}{\sum n} \times 100$, following the quantitative procedures suggested by Corder (1973). Here, the researcher observed and calculated the errors in the Mode Percentage for all 10 (ten) selected government degree colleges in Tripura using the Mode Percentage formula.

$$\text{Mode Percentage} = \frac{\text{Most Frequently Occurring Value}}{\text{Total Values}} \times 100$$

Based on descriptive statistics outlined by Urdan (2017). This percentage reflects the most frequently committed errors by undergraduate students across the state, and thus, a solid approach can be taken to identify and minimise UG learners' writing errors.

Phrase Errors Analysis from the Writings of the Undergraduate Students

Under this category, the following phrases have been analysed in the writings of undergraduate students in Tripura. These are stated below:

- Misuse of Prepositional Phrases (e.g., wrong preposition choice of UG students)
- Verb Phrase Errors (e.g., incorrect tense or auxiliary usage of UG students)
- Noun Phrase Errors (e.g., missing determiners, wrong modifiers of UG students)
- Adjective phrase Error (wrong use of word order error of UG students)
- Adverb Phrase Errors (e.g., misplaced modifiers, degree errors of UG students). Please look at the percentile of phrase and clause errors charts given below:

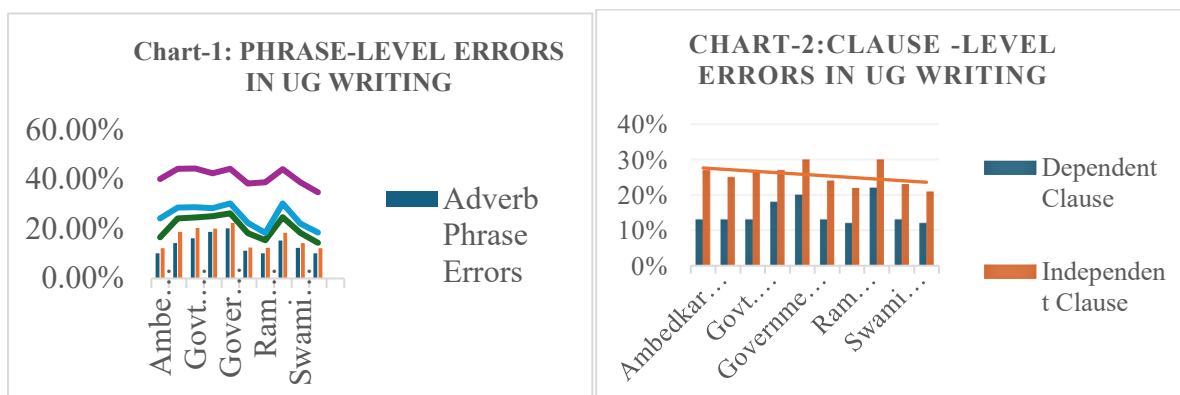


Chart -1: Phrase Errors in UG Writing.

Chart -2: Clause Errors in UG Writing.

The column chart-1 shows that errors in the use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositional phrases are common among undergraduate (UG) learners across institutions in Tripura. This is not a positive sign, as it indicates that students are unable to construct accurate phrases, which are the fundamental building blocks of clauses in writing. It has been found that undergraduate students in Tripura make the most errors in using verb phrases (VPs) in writing.

Clause Errors Analysis from the Writings of the Undergraduate Students

Under this category, the following two clauses have been analysed using data collected from the aforesaid government degree colleges in Tripura. These are,

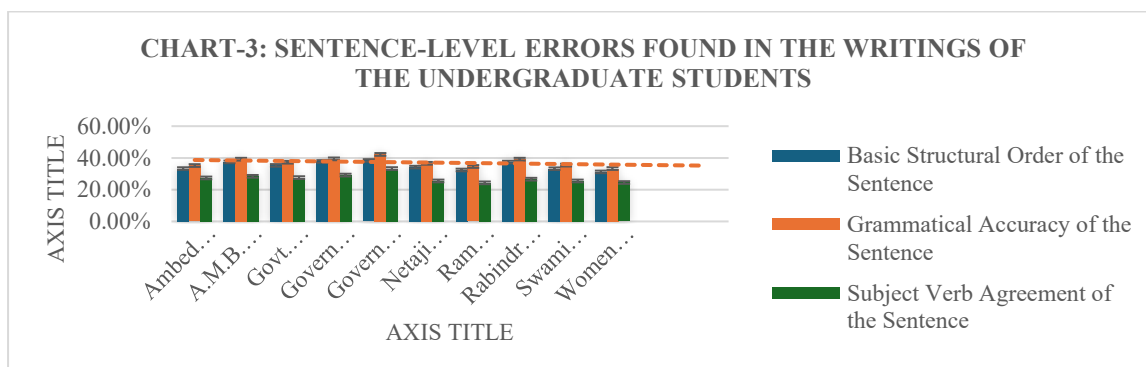
Independent Clause Errors

Dependent Clause Errors

The clause-level error analysis, as shown in Chart No. 2 across 10 (ten) colleges, reveals that students exhibited more errors at colleges such as Rabindranath Thakur College in Siphahijala District, Government Degree Ganda Twisa in Dhalai District of Tripura, and G.D. C. Panisagar in the North district of Tripura. In contrast, Women's College, Agartala, under the West District of Tripura and Ram Thakur College, Agartala, demonstrate comparatively lower error percentages in writing correct clauses. These findings suggest that extra care and greater emphasis on addressing independent clause errors are required for UG learners in Tripura to help them construct correct, error-free writing.

Their (Phrase & Clause Errors) contribution to the Correct Sentence Formation in UG Writing.

How do UG students commit errors in correct sentence construction? The chart below shows their percentage:



Shows their (Phrase and clause errors) contribution to the Correct Sentence Formation in UG Writing.

In the above chart 3, it is seen that (i) due to Phrase errors, the internal sentence components (subject, verbs, modifiers) are disrupted, and the undergraduate students (UG) commit errors in correct sentence constructions. (ii) Clause as explained in the aforesaid Chart No. 2, which shows that Clause errors in UG writing disturb the logical and grammatical relationships between ideas. (iii) When both phrase and clause errors occur together in writing, the sentence naturally loses its syntactic balance, and the result is the birth of incorrect sentences in Writing. The following disorders are observed in the undergraduates' (UG) writings. These are stated as: (i) Basic Structural Order (Word arrangement), (ii) Grammatical accuracy (tense, agreement, connectors), and (iii) Subject – Verb agreement (semantic unity). Thus, it is observed that the sentence level is the culmination of the previous two: it visualises how the foundational phrase and clause errors contribute to errors in sentence construction.

A sample of the Codebook for Verb Phrase (VP) Errors in Undergraduate (UG) Writing (Standard in ELT error analysis)

Code	Error Type	Description	Examples from UG Students' Writing	Correct version with explanation
VP-WF	Wrong Verb Form	Wrong tense, wrong inflexion, and wrong participle	He runned fast in the race.	He ran fast in the race. (It is wrong because run has an irregular past tense (ran), not runned .)
VP-AX	Auxiliary Error	Wrong Auxiliary, missing auxiliary, extra auxiliary	He was go to school every day.	He does go to school every day. This is because was cannot be used for habitual action; the simple present needs do/does.
VP-MD	Modal Error	Wrong verb after modal	He can drives a car.	He can drive a car. As we know, after modals, the verb must be in the base form , not V-s.

VP-PRG	Progressive Error	Wrong missing form or -ing	<i>She is <u>read</u> a book</i>	<i>She is reading a book. This is because Progressive requires the verb to be in the -ing form.</i>
VP-PSV	Passive Error	Wrong participle in passive	<i>The letter was <u>wrote</u> by Rina.</i>	<i>The letter was written by Rina. This is wrong because "wrote" is V2; the passive requires V3 (written).</i>
VP-AGR	Subject-Verb Agreement	Singular-passive mismatch	<i>The homework <u>were done</u> by Rina.</i>	<i>The homework was done by Rina. We know that homework is singular → needs was, not were.</i>
CL-INC	CL-INC caused by verb error	The subordinate clause cannot be used independently.	<i>When he <u>go</u> to school, he met his friend.</i>	<i>The clause "When he go to school" is incomplete because the verb go is wrong (should be goes) The clause begins with "when", so it must be complete and correct to function as a dependent clause.</i>
S-ERR	Sentence Error	The sentence becomes ungrammatical	<i>The boy ran fast <u>who won the race</u>.</i>	<i>It is a relative clause, but it is placed after a verb ("ran"), not after a noun. A relative clause must modify a noun, not a verb</i>

Table No. 3 presents the researcher-developed codebook for Verb Phrase (VP) errors identified in the writing of undergraduate students at government degree colleges in Tripura (Ratan, 2026).

Research Findings

The above error analysis exposes that our Undergraduate (UG) students of government degree colleges in Tripura commit the following errors. These are discussed below:

(i) UG students commit more Verb Phrase (VP) Errors in writing.

The undergraduate (UG) students of Tripura, for whom a sample of the above sample error codebook is provided, clearly indicate that they commit more errors in the use of Verb Phrases (VPs). Thus, it suggests that they have poor knowledge of both the regular and irregular use of verbs, proper auxiliary selection, and a weak understanding of the progressive aspect of tense

(ii) *Incorrect use of Verb Phrase Errors often leads to the incorrect use of Clause in writing.*

It is observed that undergraduate learners do not understand the importance of using the 'verb' in their writing and therefore cannot even form a correct subordinate clause. For example, "*Because she go to college*". Here, the verb 'go' is used incorrectly by the student, and the result is that the subordinate clause loses its meaning.

(iii) *Incorrect use of Verb Phrase Errors (VP) often produces incorrect Independence Clause.*

The undergraduate (UG) writers may not understand how important a verb is in a verb phrase and often misuse verbs, leading to incorrect independence errors in writing. For example, "*He eating breakfast*". We can see that the clause has its own subject (*He*) and a verb form (*Eating*), but it fails to function as an independent clause because the students lack knowledge of the correct verb phrase (VP) in English. The correct independent clause is "*He is eating breakfast*" because an independent clause must contain a complete verb phrase. The progressive aspect always requires 'be+ verb-ing'. And when a student omits the auxiliary verb, the whole clause loses its grammatical completeness and becomes meaningless.

(iv) *Many Verb Phrases (VP) errors occur due to the mother tongue interference in Tripura.*

English follows a basic sentence structure, **S-V-O**, and within this structure, students make more errors in the **V** position due to the influence of their mother tongue, as they translate it directly into English.

In vernacular-medium backgrounds, students such as Bengali and Kokborok speakers in government degree colleges in Tripura follow an **S-O-V** sentence structure. So, they make a mistake here.

For example, look at the following examples:

(i) *I went to college yesterday. /aɪ went tə 'kælɪdʒ 'jestədeɪ/*

(English follows the **S-V-O** structure: I (S), doer of the action; Went (V), action of time, past tense; College (O), destination, receiver of the action; yesterday (Adverb of Time).)

(ii) */ami goʃkal koledʒe /gi:etʃhɪlam/.*

In Bengali, the **S-O-V** (subject-Object-Verb) structure is generally followed. Here, আমি → /ami/= subject, গতকাল → /goʃkal/ (Adverb of Time), কলেজে → /koledʒe/ (Object), and গিয়েছিলাম → /gi:etʃhɪlam/ = Verb.

Such examples are very common in the writings of undergraduate students in Tripura and indicate that they are unable to construct English sentences properly, following the **S-V-O** pattern, due to the direct influence of their mother tongue.



Recommendations

The study recommends several measures to minimise writing errors among undergraduate (UG) students in Tripura.

Teachers should act as patient counsellors

UG students from Bengali and Kokborok backgrounds struggle with English *S-V-O* structures because their mother tongues follow *S-O-V* patterns. Teachers must remain patient, use bilingual support, and clearly show how English *S-V-O* differs from vernacular *S-O-V*. When errors persist, small remedial or bilingual classes should be conducted regularly. Students often write forms like “*Ami boi pori*” or “*I book read*”, reflecting *S-O-V* influence. Through counselling, bilingual explanations, and practical examples, teachers can help students comfortably shift to the English *S-V-O* pattern.

Teachers should guide students to amplify their writing

Teachers need to demonstrate how basic *S-V-O* sentences can be expanded using extended noun phrases and verb phrases.

They can show how subjects may include determiners, modifiers, and appositives, and how predicates can be enriched with objects, complements, and adverbials. For example, “*Sima reads a book*” can be expanded to “*A third-semester college student, Sima, reads a colourful short story book in the library during the leisure period.*” Such demonstrations help UG students learn how to write fuller, more informative sentences.

Teachers should act as logical guides, not mere rule-givers

Teachers should counsel students in small groups, where weaker learners feel free to ask questions. Grammar must be taught with logical meaning, not mechanically. For instance, although “*The cake ate the boy*” is grammatically correct, it is logically impossible. Teachers must help students understand that correct sentences require both proper structure and meaningful words. Thus, “*The boy ate the cake*” is the correct form. By focusing on meaning, teachers guide students from rule-based grammar to meaningful sentence construction.

Conclusion

The study observes that teaching in many schools and colleges in Tripura remains largely textbook-driven and exam-centred. Teachers focus on completing the syllabus and preparing students for a single written examination, which encourages rote memorisation rather than meaningful learning. As a result, students often memorise rules without understanding them, leading to poor performance, exam anxiety, copying, failure, and even dropout cases—issues that have long affected the state’s education system.



Classroom interaction is minimal, and students rarely ask questions because teachers do not create a friendly or supportive learning environment. This leads to a communication gap where only a few front-bench students receive attention, while the majority remain silent and disengaged. When final examinations arrive, many students who learned little throughout the year face severe stress, as failure carries social stigma in the state.

Therefore, the role of the teacher must go beyond lecturing on the correct constructions of phrases and clauses in English. Teachers should act as *friends, philosophers, and guides*, especially for students from weak vernacular-medium backgrounds. A more supportive, interactive, and student-centred approach is essential to reducing sentence errors, improving learning, and strengthening the overall academic environment in Tripura.

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