A Descriptive Analysis of Sentence Construction Across English Exposure Profiles Among Elementary EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT
Research on out-of-school English among young learners has concentrated largely on vocabulary and broad proficiency, leaving limited evidence on how reported exposure profiles appear in micro-level sentence production among Indonesian elementary EFL learners. This study describes sentence construction across three reported exposure profiles and identifies recurrent grammatical difficulties. A descriptive qualitative design with frequency tabulation was used with 15 sixth-grade students at SDN 22 Mesuji Timur. Exposure labels were retained from the original classroom tabulation and treated as descriptive profiles because validated cut-off scores could not be reconstructed from the available dataset. Four English sentence-production prompts were coded as complete and accurate, complete with grammatical error, fragment or lexical response, irrelevant or non-target response, or missing. One translation prompt was analyzed separately. Each learner had four production opportunities. The high-profile group had 12 observed responses, while the moderate and limited groups had 11 of 12 and 35 of 36 observed responses because one response was missing in each group. Complete responses accounted for 7/12, 2/11, and 1/35 observed responses, respectively. Recurrent difficulties involved verb form after modal will, subject-verb agreement, unnecessary copula insertion, and article omission. Translation yielded seven accurate, five partial, and three inaccurate or irrelevant responses. Within this small, uneven sample, the archived profiles displayed different proportions of complete sentence production, but no causal or correlational inference is made. The study contributes a micro-level coding approach for distinguishing lexical knowledge, structural completeness, and grammatical accuracy in elementary EFL writing.
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1. Introduction

English learning increasingly extends beyond formal lessons because children encounter the language through audiovisual media, games, social media, music, books, and other everyday activities. Research on young learners shows that out-of-school English can contribute to differences in vocabulary and broader proficiency, particularly when exposure is frequent, interactive, and multimodal (De Wilde & Eyckmans, 2017; De Wilde et al., 2020b; Kuppens, 2010). Digital environments also allow learners to select, repeat, and engage with English for personally meaningful purposes (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). However, these findings do not show whether elementary learners can independently transform familiar words and meanings into structurally complete written sentences. This unresolved production problem provides the immediate rationale for examining sentence construction rather than treating exposure frequency as an outcome in itself.

Evidence also indicates that the quality and type of exposure matter alongside quantity. Interactive and multimodal activities have been associated with informal English development, while learner-related factors help explain differences in vocabulary knowledge (De Wilde et al., 2020b; Leona et al., 2021). Receptive vocabulary before formal instruction is likewise shaped by both learner and word characteristics (De Wilde et al., 2020a; Puimège & Peters, 2019). Usage-based accounts propose that repeated encounters can strengthen linguistic representations, but only when the relevant patterns are noticed and processed (Ellis, 2002). The present study therefore treats reported exposure as descriptive background and focuses analytically on the linguistic form of learners' responses.

Indonesia provides a relevant setting for this narrower question. Out-of-school English literacy activities have been reported to support elementary learners' literacy development (Setiasih, 2014), while research on Indonesian secondary EFL writers has connected extramural exposure with patterns of written-language accuracy (Oei et al., 2024). More recent Indonesian evidence found no statistically significant association between the frequency of incidental English encounters through social media and formal proficiency scores (Harmaini, 2026). Taken together, these studies support caution: exposure can describe learning opportunities, but it does not by itself explain whether a learner can construct a complete English sentence.

Sentence construction is a suitable unit of analysis because written production requires learners to coordinate lexical choice, subject-predicate structure, word order, and morphosyntactic form within a complete proposition. L2 writing research cautions against collapsing grammatical development into a single global score and emphasizes explicit accuracy criteria (Biber et al., 2011; Polio & Shea, 2014). At the elementary level, sentence-level practice is used to bridge isolated word knowledge and complete written expressions (Traga Philippakos, 2019). A recent Indonesian study with fifth-grade EFL learners further shows that contextual and visual support can help students generate ideas and construct English sentences (Lestari & Baidawi, 2026). These studies make sentence construction a more direct outcome of the present research than vocabulary or general proficiency.

Error analysis and interlanguage provide the analytical basis for distinguishing types of emerging production. Recurring errors can be read as evidence of the learner's current linguistic system rather than as random failure (Corder, 1967), while interlanguage theory explains why learner forms may remain systematic but differ from target English (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Selinker, 1972). Indonesian EFL studies have documented difficulties in sentence structure, verb forms, and other morphosyntactic choices (Royani & Sadiah, 2019; Winarta & Rahmanu, 2020). For this reason, the present coding separates complete but

grammatically inaccurate propositions from fragments or isolated lexical responses instead of placing all non-target forms in one category.

Previous research has left a specific gap at the intersection of elementary EFL exposure and micro-level sentence production. Extramural English studies have commonly emphasized vocabulary, general proficiency, academic performance, or broader writing accuracy (De Wilde et al., 2020b; Leona et al., 2021; Oei et al., 2024; Tran & Miralpeix, 2024). Primary-school research has begun to examine writing outcomes, including communicative appropriateness under different levels of classroom and extramural English exposure (Guzmán-Alcón, 2026), yet limited evidence describes how Indonesian elementary learners with different reported exposure profiles move from lexical responses and fragments to complete sentences. The novelty of this study lies in examining this transition through response-level coding that separates structural completeness from grammatical accuracy.

A second analytical distinction concerns translation and independent production. The translation item is not used as a general proficiency measure or as proof of a developmental sequence. It provides a task-specific comparison of whether learners who can access the meaning of a simple English sentence can also independently retrieve and organize English forms in production. Therefore, the study aims to describe sentence construction patterns across reported exposure profiles, identify recurrent grammatical and structural difficulties, and compare independent English production with performance on the related translation task.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design, supported by frequency tabulation. The qualitative component consisted of response-level linguistic coding of sentence structure and grammatical form, while frequencies were used only to summarize how the resulting codes were distributed within the bounded classroom samples. This design was selected because the study did not test a causal effect, estimate a population-level correlation, or treat the exposure categories as validated scales.

Participants and Context

The participants were 15 sixth-grade students at SDN 22 Mesuji Timur, selected purposively because they had received English instruction and completed the research instruments. All belonged to the same classroom and received comparable formal instructional input. The available dataset records grade level and school membership but does not provide sufficiently complete age, gender, or other demographic information for analysis; therefore, these characteristics were neither reconstructed nor used as explanatory variables. The participants were treated as a bounded classroom group, and the findings are not intended to represent the wider population of elementary EFL learners in general.

Instrument

Data were collected using two instruments: an English Exposure Questionnaire and a five-item language task. The questionnaire documented reported engagement with five common sources of English outside the classroom: movies or cartoons, songs, digital games, books, and social media. Each source used four frequency options: never, less than one hour per day, one to two hours per day, and more than two hours per day. The archived questionnaire tabulation assigned three learners to the high-exposure label, three to moderate exposure, and nine to limited exposure. The present analysis did not recalculate these labels because item-level scores and a validated aggregate scoring rule were not available. Accordingly, high, moderate, and limited are retained only as descriptive profile labels, not as psychometric levels or independently verified cut-off categories.

The second instrument consisted of five written language tasks. Four prompts required English sentence production using target frames related to future actions and aspirations,

including will, want to be, and want to work in. One additional prompt required students to translate the English sentence 'I will go to the museum tomorrow' into Bahasa Indonesia. The translation task was analyzed separately from the English production tasks so that comprehension of sentence meaning was not treated as equivalent to the ability to independently construct an English sentence.

Instrument Quality and Analytical Coding

The English Exposure Questionnaire functioned as a descriptive profiling instrument rather than a unidimensional psychological scale. The available dataset did not contain the item-level frequency matrix needed to reconstruct a total exposure score, test internal consistency, or verify non-overlapping cut-off points. Therefore, no Cronbach's alpha, standardized exposure score, or newly imposed threshold is reported. Profile assignment follows the archived classroom tabulation, and the source descriptions in Table 2 are presented only as recorded indicators of activity type. This limitation means that profile membership cannot be independently recomputed from the present dataset and must be interpreted cautiously.

For the written production data, the analytical unit was each response to one production prompt. Coding followed a fixed decision sequence. A blank entry was coded missing (M). A response that did not address the prompt or used another language when English production was required was coded irrelevant or non-target (I). A relevant word or phrase without a subject-predicate proposition was coded fragment or lexical response (F). Responses containing a complete proposition were then classified as complete and accurate (C-A) or complete with grammatical errors (C-E). This separation of structural completeness and accuracy follows the need for explicit criteria in L2 writing analysis and Error Analysis (Corder, 1967; Polio & Shea, 2014). Minor spelling errors did not by themselves convert a complete response into a fragment. The same rules were applied to all four production prompts by one coder; because no second independent coder was available, inter-rater reliability could not be estimated, and this is treated as a study limitation.

Table 1. Coding Criteria for English Sentence-Production Responses

Code	Analytical criterion	Operational definition
C-A	Complete and accurate	A complete proposition containing a subject and predicate and using the required target frame in an acceptable grammatical form.
C-E	Complete with grammatical error	A complete proposition in which the communicative meaning is clear, but one or more grammatical choices are inaccurate.
F	Fragment or lexical response	An isolated word or phrase that does not form a complete subject-predicate structure.
I	Irrelevant or non-target response	Responses that do not meet the communicative demand of the prompt or use another language when English production is required.
M	Missing	No responses were recorded in the available dataset.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two recorded stages. Participants first completed the English Exposure Questionnaire to report the sources and frequency of English encountered outside the classroom. They then completed the five-item language task individually, after which responses were stored using anonymized participant codes P01-P15. The original wording and spelling were retained for linguistic analysis. The available documentation establishes this sequence and individual administration but does not record the exact completion time, room arrangement, time limit, or assistance conditions. Those procedural details are reported as unavailable rather than reconstructed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three stages. First, learners were organized according to the archived descriptive exposure profiles; no new exposure score or cut-off was calculated. Second, the four production prompts yielded 60 response opportunities across 15 learners. Each response was classified using the C-A, C-E, F, I, and M rules in Table 1. Two entries were missing, leaving 58 observed production responses. Percentages were calculated using observed responses as the denominator within each profile, while total opportunities and missing responses are reported separately to prevent denominator ambiguity. For C-E responses, linguistic errors were identified operationally as follows: a non-base verb immediately after modal will was coded as a modal-verb-form error; mismatch between the subject and finite verb as subject-verb agreement; insertion of be before a lexical verb where the target frame did not require it as unnecessary copula insertion; and absence of an article before a singular count noun where one was required as article omission. A response could contain more than one error type. Third, the translation item was classified as accurate, partial, or inaccurate/irrelevant and compared descriptively with the production. No significance test, correlation coefficient, or causal estimate was calculated.

3. Research Findings and Discussion

English Exposure Profiles

The archived questionnaire tabulation contained three descriptive profile labels: high (n = 3), moderate (n = 3), and limited (n = 9). Table 2 lists the anonymized participant codes and the activity types recorded for each profile. Because the item-level frequency matrix and aggregate scoring rule were unavailable, the table does not present reconstructed exposure scores or infer a numerical cut-off. The activity descriptions therefore indicate reported source types only and are not used as independent quantitative evidence of profile intensity.

Table 2. Descriptive English Exposure Profiles

Exposure profile	Participant codes	n	Reported activity pattern
High	P01, P02, P03	3	Recorded sources included textbooks, storybooks, and songs. Aggregate score/cutoff unavailable.
Moderate	P04, P05, P06	3	The recorded sources were textbooks, social media, and songs. Aggregate score/cutoff unavailable.
Limited	P07, P08, P09, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15	9	Recorded sources: Textbooks and songs. Aggregate score/cutoff unavailable.

Most learners were placed in the limited profile by archived tabulation, but the profile labels should not be read as standardized exposure thresholds. Prior research shows that language outcomes vary with the type, intensity, and interactivity of out-of-school English (De Wilde & Eyckmans, 2017; De Wilde et al., 2020b; Lee & Dressman, 2018), and frequent contact through a single channel does not necessarily correspond to a stronger formal proficiency (Harmaini, 2026; Tran & Miralpeix, 2024). Because the present dataset cannot reconstruct individual exposure scores, the results below describe co-occurring patterns between archived profiles and sentence responses. They did not test whether exposure caused, predicted, or was statistically associated with production performance.

Sentence Construction Across Exposure Profiles

The four English production tasks yielded different proportions of complete responses across the three descriptive profiles. Each learner had four production opportunities. The high profile therefore had 12 opportunities and no missing response, giving 12 observed responses; the moderate profile had 12 opportunities with one missing response, giving 11 observed

responses; and the limited profile had 36 opportunities with one missing response, giving 35 observed responses. Among the observed responses, the high profile contained seven complete responses, the moderate profile two, and the limited profile one. Four of the seven complete responses in the high profile were C-A and three were C-E; both complete moderate-profile responses were C-E, while the single complete limited-profile response was C-A.

Table 3. Coding Matrix Across Four English Production Tasks

Profile	Participant code	Q1 will	Q3 future activity	Q4 career	Q5 workplace	Complete responses
High	P01	C-A	C-A	C-E	C-A	4
High	P02	F	C-E	C-E	F	2
High	P03	C-A	F	F	F	1
Moderate	P04	F	F	C-E	C-E	2
Moderate	P05	F	F	F	F	0
Moderate	P06	M	F	F	F	0
Limited	P07	F	I	F	F	0
Limited	P08	F	I	F	F	0
Limited	P09	F	F	F	I	0
Limited	P10	C-A	F	F	I	1
Limited	P11	F	F	I	F	0
Limited	P12	F	F	F	I	0
Limited	P13	F	I	M	I	0
Limited	P14	F	I	F	I	0
Limited	P15	F	I	F	F	0

Table 4. Distribution of English Production Responses by Exposure Profile

Profile	C-A	C-E	F	I	M	Observed/total	Complete among observed
High	4	3	5	0	0	12/12	7/12 (58.3%)
Moderate	0	2	9	0	1	11/12	2/11 (18.2%)
Limited	1	0	23	11	1	35/36	1/35 (2.9%)
Total	5	5	37	11	2	58/60	10/58 (17.2%)

Table 4 presents a descriptive distribution, not a statistical comparison. Complete responses accounted for 58.3% of the observed responses in the high-profile, 18.2% in the moderate profile, and 2.9% in the limited profile. Similar studies report that richer out-of-school contact can coincide with stronger vocabulary, broader proficiency, or written-language performance (De Wilde et al., 2020b; Leona et al., 2021; Oei et al., 2024), but the present sample is too small and uneven to infer the strength or stability of such a relationship. Within-profile variation also cautions against deterministic interpretation: P02 in the high profile produced fragments and grammatically inaccurate complete sentences, while P10 in the limited profile produced one complete and accurate sentence. The proportions are therefore reported only as characteristics of this classroom sample.

Future-Tense Construction with will

The first production task required learners to use will to describe an image of a mother cooking. P01 wrote ‘My mother will cook fried cicken tomorrow’, P03 wrote ‘Bu Rina will cook’, and P10 wrote ‘Ibu Joshua will cook fish’. These responses were coded as complete because each contained a subject, the modal will, and a base-form verb. Most other learners produced lexical items or short verb phrases such as ‘cook’, “” ”chef’, or ‘will cook’. The pattern indicates that recognition of relevant vocabulary was more common than independent construction of a complete future-tense sentence.

The third task, which elicited a personal future activity, produced a similar pattern. P01

wrote, ‘ I will watch anime after school, ‘ while P02 wrote, ‘ I will play with friends’. P02’s response was structurally complete but grammatically inaccurate because the modal will requires a base-form verb. Most of the remaining responses consisted of isolated actions such as eat, study, sleep, or play. These responses suggest that several learners could retrieve the lexical content demanded by the prompt without consistently accessing the full grammatical frame required for written production.

A usage-based account helps interpret this difference between lexical availability and sentence control. Repeated encounters with recurring constructions can strengthen learners’ familiarity with linguistic patterns (Ellis, 2002); however, exposure does not guarantee that the internal relations within a construction have been fully analyzed. Attention to form remains relevant because learners must notice how modal auxiliaries constrain the verb that follows them (Schmidt, 1990). Similar verb-form and sentence-structure difficulties have been documented in Indonesian EFL production (Royani & Sadiah, 2019; Winarta & Rahmanu, 2020). The present findings suggest that future-tense instruction should move beyond vocabulary recognition by repeatedly requiring learners to reconstruct the full subject + will + base verb frame in varied communicative contexts.

Career and Workplace Sentence Construction

The career and workplace prompts further demonstrated why structural completeness should be distinguished from grammatical accuracy. In the career task, P01 wrote, I want to be teacher’, P02 wrote, She wants to be a teacher’, and P04 wrote, I is want to be a Director’. All three responses communicated a complete proposition, but each contained a grammatical problem involving article use, subject-verb agreement, or unnecessary copula insertion. Most other learners supplied only a profession, such as teacher, director, doctor, CEO, or pilot. In the workplace task, P01 produced the complete sentence, I want to work in a school’, while P04 wrote, I is want to work in office’. The majority again supplied a location noun such as school, office, or hospital or produced an unrelated response.

These data show that a binary correct-versus-incorrect judgment would conceal meaningful developmental differences. A learner who writes ‘She want to be a teacher’ has assembled a subject-predicate proposition and the intended lexical frame, even though agreement remains inaccurate. A learner who writes only teacher demonstrates relevant lexical knowledge but not sentence construction. L2 writing research emphasizes the importance of transparent criteria when evaluating grammatical accuracy (Polio & Shea, 2014), while Error Analysis views systematic deviations as evidence of an evolving interlanguage rather than random failure (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). For elementary learners, this distinction has direct pedagogical value because sentence-level support can be targeted differently for learners who need a grammatical correction within an existing frame and those who still need explicit scaffolding to build the frame itself.

Sentence-focused instructional practice is especially relevant at the elementary level. Developing writers benefit from guided opportunities to expand, combine, and manipulate sentence structures rather than relying on word-list memorization alone (Traga Philippakos, 2019). Recent Indonesian elementary EFL research also indicates that contextual and visual support can facilitate idea generation and sentence construction (Lestari & Baidawi, 2026). For the present learners, familiar words from professions, workplaces, songs, stories, or digital media could be recycled into structured frames such as ‘I want to be ...’ and ‘I want to work in ...’, followed by substitution, expansion, and independent rewriting.

Translation Performance and the Comprehension-Production Gap

The translation task produced a different performance pattern from the English production tasks. Seven learners translated ‘I will go to the museum tomorrow’ accurately into Bahasa Indonesia, five produced partial translations, and three produced inaccurate or irrelevant responses. All three learners in the moderate-exposure group produced accurate translations,

while the limited-exposure group contained a mixture of accurate, partial, and inaccurate responses. Table 5 summarizes the distribution.

Table 5. Translation Performance by Exposure Profile

Profile	Accurate	Partial	Inaccurate / irrelevant	Total
High	2	1	0	3
Moderate	3	0	0	3
Limited	2	4	3	9
Total	7	5	3	15

The translation task and independent production showed different response patterns. Several learners produced accurate or partial Bahasa Indonesia translations even when their English production consisted largely of fragments. This task-specific contrast is compatible with the broader interlanguage view that performance may vary across linguistic forms and tasks (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Selinker, 1972), and it supports analyzing partial responses rather than collapsing performance into one global score (Corder, 1967). It does not establish that comprehension development precedes production development, because only one translation item was used and the two task types placed different demands on learners. The appropriate interpretation is narrower: some learners in this sample could access the meaning of the target sentence even when independent English sentence construction remained limited.

Discussion

Regarding the first research objective, the main descriptive pattern was a shift in response form across the archived profiles: complete sentences constituted a larger share of observed responses in the high profile, whereas fragments dominated the moderate and limited profiles. Because profile cut-offs were not independently validated and the groups were small and unequal, this pattern cannot be treated as an exposure effect. Its contribution is more specific. Exposure studies have often emphasized vocabulary, general proficiency, academic performance, or broad writing outcomes (Leona et al., 2021; Puimège & Peters, 2019; Tran & Miralpeix, 2024), whereas primary-school research has begun to connect extramural English and contextual support more directly with writing (Guzmán-Alcón, 2026; Lestari & Baidawi, 2026). The present analysis adds response-level evidence by separating lexical fragments, complete but inaccurate propositions, and complete accurate sentences.

Regarding the second objective, the recurrent difficulties involved incomplete frames, verb form after modal will, subject-verb agreement, unnecessary copula insertion, and article omission. These errors show why completeness and accuracy need separate coding: a learner who produces a complete proposition requires different instructional support from a learner who produces only a lexical item. Regarding the third objective, translation was comparatively more successful; however, the single translation item permits only a task-level comparison, not a claim that comprehension generally precedes production. The pedagogical implication follows directly from these two findings. Learners at the fragment stage need explicit sentence-frame reconstruction and expansion, whereas learners who already produce complete propositions need focused feedback on the specific morphosyntactic relation that remains inaccurate.

The findings of this study are limited by the dataset used. The sample included 15 learners from a single school. Exposure was self-reported using a brief questionnaire. Item-level exposure scores and validated cut-offs were unavailable, and coding was conducted by one researcher without an inter-rater reliability coefficient. Two production responses were missing, and the translation comparison relied on a single item. These limitations restrict generalization and prevent causal or correlational inferences from being made. Future studies should use larger and more balanced samples, validated multidimensional exposure measures or exposure diaries, repeated production and translation tasks, and independent coders so that

profile assignment and linguistic coding can be tested more reliably.

4. Conclusion

This study provides a micro-level descriptive account of sentence construction among 15 sixth-grade EFL learners grouped by archived English exposure profiles. The central finding was not an exposure effect, but a difference in the form of observed responses: the high profile contained a larger proportion of complete sentences, while fragments predominated in the moderate and limited profiles. Across groups, the coding also distinguished complete but grammatically inaccurate propositions from lexical fragments, revealing recurrent problems with verb form after modal will, subject-verb agreement, unnecessary copula insertion, and article use. This distinction between structural completeness and grammatical accuracy is the study's main analytical contribution.

The translation task produced seven accurate, five partial, and three inaccurate or irrelevant responses; however, this single-item contrast should be interpreted only as evidence that some learners could access sentence meaning when independent English production remained limited, not as proof that comprehension development precedes production. Pedagogically, learners who remain at the fragment stage require explicit sentence-frame construction and expansion, while learners who already produce complete propositions require targeted feedback on specific morphosyntactic errors. Further research should validate exposure measurement, use repeated tasks, include independent coders, and examine larger samples before testing whether particular forms of out-of-school English are associated with sentence-construction development.

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6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

7. Author Contribution

R.A.I. conceptualized the study, collected and organized the data, conducted the analysis, developed the manuscript, and approved the final draft. R.A.I.: 100%.

8. Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study may be made available by the corresponding author, R.A.I., upon reasonable request, subject to student confidentiality protection.

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