



An Analysis of Conditional Sentence Errors Made by Eleventh-Grade Students of the Tourism Services Department at SMKN 1 Samarinda

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/jpbi.v3i2.2399>

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Received: 21-12-2025

Accepted: 10-01-2026

Published: 27-01-2026



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Abstract: This study focuses on learners' errors in using English conditional sentences. The objectives of this research were to identify the types of errors made by the eleventh-grade students of the Tourism Services Department at SMKN 1 Samarinda in using conditional sentences and to determine the most frequent type of error. This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. The population consisted of 30 eleventh-grade students of the Tourism Services Department at SMKN 1 Samarinda in the academic year 2025/2026, and all students were taken as the sample. The instrument used was a written completion-type test on conditional sentences. The data were analyzed descriptively using illustrations, facts, statements, tables, frequencies, and percentages. The findings revealed that the students made two main types of errors: morphological and syntactical errors. These errors included mistakes in using modal auxiliaries, suffixes -s, main verb forms, and tenses. Based on error classification, the errors fell into omission, addition, and misformation, with misformation errors occurring most frequently. In terms of conditional sentence types, past unreal conditional sentences showed the highest error percentage (52.34%), followed by present unreal conditionals (40.23%) and future probable conditionals (25.69%). These findings indicate that conditional sentences, especially past unreal conditionals, remain challenging for vocational high school students.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Conditional Sentences, EFL learners

Introduction

English has developed into a global language used by people across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It functions not only as a native language but also as a second and foreign language for millions of speakers worldwide. As the number of non-native speakers increases, varieties of English continue to emerge, reflecting different communicative needs and sociocultural contexts. Consequently, English can no longer be viewed as the sole possession of its native speakers but as a shared global resource (Stevens, 2001). This reality presents important challenges for English language teaching, particularly in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language.

In foreign language settings, learners acquire English primarily through formal instruction rather than natural exposure. According to Krashen and Terrell (1992), language development occurs through two main processes: language acquisition, which emphasizes

meaningful communication, and language learning, which focuses on formal knowledge such as grammar rules. For non-native learners, these processes often occur simultaneously and are strongly influenced by internal factors (e.g., prior knowledge) and external factors (e.g., instructional methods and learning environment). As a result, errors are an inevitable and meaningful part of language development.

Error analysis has long been recognized as a valuable approach to understanding learners' interlanguage development. Errors indicate not only learners' difficulties but also their active engagement in constructing linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, errors are an inevitable and systematic part of second language development and reflect learners' interlanguage competence (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1997; Brown, 2007). Rivers (as cited in Djunaidi, 1987) emphasizes that native language interference often leads learners to apply first-language patterns when using a foreign language, especially in complex grammatical structures. One such structure is the English conditional sentence, which requires mastery of tense, verb forms, and logical relationships. Conditional sentences are considered one of the most complex grammatical structures in English due to their tense sequence and modal usage (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Azar, 2002).

Preliminary observations at SMKN 1 Samarinda revealed that eleventh-grade students of the Tourism Services Department frequently experience difficulties in constructing and transforming conditional sentences, particularly when shifting between future, present unreal, and past unreal forms. These difficulties suggest limited understanding of sentence structure and conditional rules. Therefore, this study aims to identify the types of errors students make in using conditional sentences and to determine the most frequent error type. The findings are expected to contribute to improved grammar instruction and provide insights for teachers in vocational and EFL contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design to identify and analyze students' errors in constructing English conditional sentences. The participants were 30 eleventh-grade students of the Tourism Services Department at SMKN 1 Samarinda in the academic year 2025/2026. Since the population was fewer than 100 students, all students were included as the research sample.

Data were collected using a researcher-made completion-type written test consisting of 25 items covering three types of conditional sentences: future probable, present unreal, and past unreal conditionals. Prior to data collection, the instrument was tried out on 15 students from a different department to ensure its quality. Item analysis showed acceptable difficulty levels (0.20–0.80). The instrument demonstrated high validity ($r = 0.708$) and very high reliability ($r = 0.901$) based on Pearson Product Moment correlation.

Data analysis was conducted descriptively by classifying students' errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering categories. The frequency and percentage of each error type were calculated to identify dominant error patterns. The study involved no experimental treatment, and all data were anonymized and are available from

the author upon reasonable request. Error classification in this study follows established frameworks in error analysis research (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; James, 1998).

Result and Discussion

Errors Based on Types of Conditional Sentences

Students' errors were identified across three types of conditional sentences: future probable, present unreal, and past unreal conditionals. The analysis showed distinct error patterns for each type.

In future probable conditional sentences, students frequently failed to use the correct present tense form in the if-clause and often omitted or misused the modal will in the main clause. Errors were also found in subject-verb agreement and verb form selection.

For present unreal conditional sentences, students commonly used simple present or simple future tense instead of simple past and past future forms. Errors in the use of the verb be (e.g., was/were) and incorrect main verb forms were also frequently identified.

In past unreal conditional sentences, students showed difficulties in using past perfect tense and past participle verb forms. In addition, modal auxiliaries such as will were incorrectly used instead of would, indicating confusion in applying the grammatical rules of past unreal conditionals.

Errors Based on Error Types

Based on error classification, students' errors were grouped into omission, addition, and misformation errors. Omission errors involved missing obligatory elements such as auxiliaries or modals. Addition errors occurred when unnecessary elements were inserted into sentences. Misformation errors involved the use of incorrect grammatical forms and were found across all types of conditional sentences. Among these categories, misformation errors occurred most frequently.

Percentage Distribution of Errors

The distribution of error percentages based on the types of conditional sentences is presented in Table 1. The total number of incorrect responses across all test items was 311.

Table 1. Distribution of Error Percentages Based on Types of Conditional Sentences

Type of Conditional Sentence	Total Incorrect Responses	Percentage (%)
Future probable conditional	74	25.69
Present unreal conditional	103	40.23
Past unreal conditional	134	52.34
Total	311	38.88

As shown in Table 1, past unreal conditional sentences accounted for the highest percentage of errors (52.34%), followed by present unreal conditional sentences (40.23%) and future probable conditional sentences (25.69%). This indicates that past unreal conditional sentences posed the greatest difficulty for the students.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight persistent difficulties faced by EFL learners in mastering English conditional sentences, particularly unreal conditional forms. The findings demonstrate that students made the highest number of errors in past unreal conditional sentences, followed by present unreal conditionals, while future probable conditionals produced the fewest errors. This pattern suggests that grammatical complexity and temporal abstraction significantly influence learners' accuracy in conditional sentence construction.

The dominance of errors in past unreal conditional sentences indicates that students experience serious challenges in coordinating tense sequence, modal auxiliaries, and verb forms simultaneously. The high frequency of errors in past unreal conditional sentences supports previous findings that learners struggle with abstract temporal reference and perfect verb forms (Swan, 2005; DeKeyser, 2005). Past unreal conditionals require the use of past perfect tense in the if-clause and perfect modal constructions in the main clause, which may overload learners' grammatical processing capacity. This supports interlanguage theory, which posits that learners simplify complex structures when their linguistic competence is still developing. The frequent misuse of will instead of would and incorrect past participle forms reflects incomplete mastery of English verb systems and tense distinctions.

Errors in present unreal conditional sentences further confirm learners' reliance on surface-level grammatical patterns. Students often substituted simple present or future tense for the required simple past and past future forms, indicating overgeneralization of more familiar tense structures. This finding aligns with previous error analysis studies showing that learners tend to apply dominant or frequently used grammatical rules when faced with less common or abstract structures.

In contrast, the lower error rate in future probable conditional sentences suggests that students are more familiar with real and likely situations expressed in English. Future probable conditionals resemble everyday sentence patterns commonly used in communication, making them easier to process and produce accurately. This supports the hypothesis that frequency of exposure and communicative relevance play a crucial role in grammatical accuracy.

Regarding error types, misformation errors were the most frequent across all conditional sentence types. This indicates that students were generally aware of the required grammatical elements but selected incorrect forms. Such errors suggest developmental issues rather than random mistakes, reflecting learners' transitional grammar systems. Omission and addition errors occurred less frequently, implying that the primary challenge lies in form selection rather than sentence completeness. Misformation errors are commonly found in EFL learners' grammatical production and indicate developmental stages of interlanguage (Ellis, 1994; Richards, 1974).

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings emphasize the need for more focused and scaffolded instruction on unreal conditional sentences. Grammar teaching should prioritize contrastive explanations, guided practice, and contextualized use of conditional forms rather than isolated rule memorization. Explicit attention to tense sequencing and modal usage may help reduce misformation errors. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the

view that grammatical errors are systematic and meaningful indicators of language development, confirming the importance of error analysis as a diagnostic tool in EFL instruction. Effective grammar instruction should combine explicit explanation with meaningful practice to reduce persistent grammatical errors (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the eleventh-grade students of the Tourism Services Department at SMKN 1 Samarinda experienced considerable difficulties in constructing English conditional sentences, particularly unreal conditional forms. Among the three types examined, past unreal conditional sentences resulted in the highest number of errors, followed by present unreal conditionals, while future probable conditionals caused the fewest errors. This indicates that grammatical complexity and tense sequencing significantly affect learners' accuracy.

In terms of error classification, misformation errors were the most dominant, suggesting that students generally recognized the required sentence components but struggled to apply correct grammatical forms. Omission and addition errors occurred less frequently, indicating that the main challenge lies in selecting appropriate verb forms, tenses, and modal auxiliaries rather than sentence completeness.

Overall, the findings confirm that students' errors in conditional sentences are systematic and reflect developmental stages of language learning. These results underline the importance of targeted grammar instruction that focuses on unreal conditional structures and provides learners with clearer guidance on tense and modal usage in English. Future research may extend the scope of this study by involving a larger and more diverse sample from different vocational schools or academic tracks to improve the generalizability of the findings. Further studies could also employ a mixed-methods approach by combining error analysis with interviews or think-aloud protocols to explore learners' underlying cognitive processes when producing conditional sentences. In addition, experimental or classroom-based research focusing on instructional interventions, such as explicit grammar instruction, contrastive analysis, or task-based learning, is recommended to examine their effectiveness in reducing errors in unreal conditional sentences. Longitudinal studies may also provide valuable insights into learners' developmental progress in mastering conditional structures over time.

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