



LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH REFLECTION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE AND CORRECT THEIR LINGUISTICS ERRORS

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Abstract

This study explores how Indonesian university students perceive and correct their linguistic errors through reflective learning, using narrative inquiry as the central methodological approach. While linguistic errors are commonly examined through structural or quantitative perspectives, less attention has been given to how learners themselves interpret these errors and construct meaning from them. Through in-depth narrative interviews and reflective journals, this research illuminates the emotional, cognitive, and experiential dimensions that shape students' engagement with their mistakes. The findings reveal three major themes: the development of error awareness, the interplay between emotional responses and cognitive processing, and the adoption of reflective strategies such as self-monitoring, contrastive thinking, and contextual experimentation. These narratives demonstrate that reflection transforms errors from mere deviations into valuable learning resources that promote metacognitive growth, resilience, and autonomy. By highlighting the personal stories behind error correction, the study contributes to a more humanistic understanding of language learning and underscores the need for reflective pedagogy in higher education EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL learners, learner awareness, linguistic errors, metacognition, Narrative inquiry, reflective learning

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is rarely a smooth and linear process; it is filled with moments of confusion, self-correction, and rediscovery. For university students in Indonesia who learn English as a foreign language, these moments often emerge most clearly in their encounters with linguistic errors. Errors are not merely evidence of failure; they reveal the learner's interlanguage system a dynamic stage between the first language (L1) and the target language (L2) (Ulviani, 2025). Yet, beyond this structural perspective, errors also hold stories of effort, frustration, and growth (Zamora et al., 2025). Students' reflections on their own mistakes provide valuable insight into how they understand and internalize the rules of English, and how they construct meaning from their struggles in using the language accurately and fluently (Mufida et al., 2025).

In many higher education contexts, English learning has shifted from a teacher-centred orientation to a more learner-centred approach that values autonomy, self-awareness, and reflective practice (Emaliana, 2017). This shift encourages students not only to learn linguistic forms but also to develop metalinguistic awareness, the ability to think about language itself. Reflection plays a crucial role in this transformation. Through reflection, students can identify their recurring errors, question the reasons behind them, and actively seek strategies for improvement. In this process, learning becomes personal and experiential rather than mechanical (Menekse et al., 2025). However, despite its importance, reflection is often overlooked in traditional language classrooms, where errors are corrected by teachers but rarely explored by learners themselves.

Within Indonesian universities, where English is taught as a compulsory subject for academic and professional purposes, students' writing and speaking performances frequently exhibit features of L1 interference. Grammatical structures, word order, and pragmatic choices often reflect the influence of Bahasa Indonesia (Septiana, 2020). While this has been extensively analyzed through quantitative approaches, less attention has been given to how students perceive these errors how they interpret their own mistakes, what emotional or cognitive responses arise from them, and how they construct meaning from these learning experiences. Understanding this human dimension of error-making can enrich pedagogical approaches that currently prioritize linguistic accuracy over reflective awareness. The present study arises from the recognition that learning from mistakes is a deeply subjective experience. Each student carries a unique story about how they notice, interpret, and correct their errors. Some may see mistakes as obstacles that trigger anxiety and self-doubt; others may view them as opportunities for growth and self-discovery. By listening to these individual narratives, educators can better understand the interplay between linguistic competence, learner identity, and reflective consciousness. Narrative inquiry, therefore, provides an appropriate methodological lens for exploring how students make sense of their linguistic challenges within the lived experience of learning English at university (Abrar, 2019).

Errors, in this sense, are not simply linguistic deviations to be categorized and counted; they are reflections of cognitive and emotional processes unfolding in real time. When students reflect on their mistakes, they engage in an internal dialogue that connects their prior knowledge, linguistic intuition, and evolving understanding of English grammar (Menekse et al., 2025). This reflective engagement allows them to transform errors into resources for deeper learning. By narrating how they recognize and correct these errors, whether through peer feedback, teacher guidance, or self-observation, students reveal the intricate ways in which awareness and understanding emerge (Williams, 2024).

Furthermore, the learning environment of higher education provides a distinctive context for such reflections. University students are typically expected to demonstrate not only proficiency but also critical thinking and self-evaluation (Golden, 2023). In this environment, reflective learning aligns closely with academic development, as students learn to analyze their performance, evaluate feedback, and take responsibility for their improvement. However, this expectation often clashes with the lingering perception that errors should be avoided or hidden. The fear of being judged or corrected publicly can inhibit students from engaging openly with their mistakes. Thus, fostering a reflective attitude toward errors requires a supportive and dialogic learning culture where mistakes are recognized as integral to progress (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019).

Exploring how students perceive and correct their linguistic errors can shed light on how reflection operates as a tool for language awareness and self-directed learning. Such understanding can inform teaching practices that go beyond error correction toward facilitating metacognitive engagement (Diab & Awada, 2022). Teachers, rather than simply providing the correct forms, can guide students to analyze the underlying causes of their mistakes, whether they stem from negative transfer, incomplete rule application, or gaps in comprehension (Emaliana, 2017). Through this reflective process, learners begin to internalize grammatical patterns more deeply and develop the confidence to self-correct in future communication.

The narratives collected in this study illuminate the complex emotional and cognitive landscapes of English learners in higher education. They reveal how students interpret the experience of making errors, whether as personal shortcomings, sources of embarrassment, or as meaningful moments of insight. These stories also highlight the strategies students employ to overcome difficulties, such as comparing English with their native language, seeking clarification from peers or digital tools, and developing personalized correction habits. Each narrative becomes a window into how learning evolves through reflection rather than repetition.

By focusing on students' lived experiences of error recognition and correction, this research emphasizes that effective language learning is not only about mastering forms but also about cultivating awareness, resilience, and self-reflection. In doing so, it contributes to a more humanistic understanding of language education one that values personal experience as much as linguistic accuracy. This narrative exploration thus seeks to uncover how university students perceive their linguistic errors and how these perceptions guide their efforts to correct and improve, offering insights that may help educators create more reflective and empathetic learning environments in the study of English as a foreign language.

Research on second language learning has long recognized that errors are inevitable and, in fact, essential to the process of language development. Early scholars such as Corder (1967) emphasized that errors are not simply signs of linguistic failure but evidence of the learner's internalized system, the interlanguage that evolves as the learner attempts to approximate the target language. From this view, error analysis became a central tool in

understanding how learners acquire and construct language rules. Later developments in applied linguistics expanded this perspective by acknowledging that errors are shaped not only by linguistic interference but also by cognitive, affective, and social factors (Ellis, 1997). These insights highlight that every learner's linguistic journey is unique, influenced by prior knowledge, emotional disposition, and the context in which learning occurs.

In the Indonesian EFL context, numerous studies have examined students' grammatical errors in writing and speaking. For instance, Septiana (2020) found that Indonesian university students frequently commit errors related to tense, preposition, and article usage, which can often be traced back to differences between English and Bahasa Indonesia. Similarly, Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2020) observed that most writing errors stemmed from direct translation habits and insufficient grammatical awareness. While such studies contribute to identifying linguistic patterns, they rarely address how students *perceive* these errors or how they emotionally and cognitively process the act of making and correcting them. As a result, much of the existing literature remains confined to the structural aspects of errors, overlooking the subjective and reflective dimensions that accompany them.

In recent years, a growing body of research has begun to integrate reflective learning theory into the study of error correction. Reflection, as conceptualized by Dewey (1933) and further developed by Schön (1983), refers to the deliberate process of thinking about one's experiences to derive new understanding and guide future actions. In language education, reflection enables learners to recognize their linguistic patterns, question their assumptions, and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. Emaliana (2017) emphasizes that reflective learning transforms students from passive recipients of correction into active participants in meaning-making. When learners reflect on their errors, they engage metacognitive skills, thinking about their own thinking, which leads to deeper awareness and self-regulated learning.

This reflective process is especially significant in higher education, where students are expected to demonstrate autonomy and critical thinking. Menekse et al. (2025) note that students who consistently reflect on their language use show measurable improvement in both accuracy and confidence. Reflection allows them to connect theoretical grammatical knowledge with practical language use, bridging the gap between knowing and performing. However, classroom practices in Indonesia often remain product-oriented, emphasizing correctness over process. Teachers tend to correct students' errors directly without inviting learners to explore the underlying causes. This limits opportunities for students to develop reflective habits that could enhance their long-term learning.

Narrative inquiry provides an alternative framework that captures the reflective and experiential aspects of learning. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert, narrative inquiry views human experience as storied people understand their lives and learning journeys through the stories they tell. In the context of language learning, narratives illuminate how learners perceive challenges, make sense of mistakes, and negotiate their identities as L2 users. Barkhuizen (2013) argues that narrative inquiry humanizes language research by giving learners a voice to articulate their emotions, beliefs, and evolving understandings. Through narratives, the researcher does not merely analyze data but co-constructs meaning with participants, situating their linguistic experiences within broader social and personal contexts.

In studies focusing on EFL learners, narrative inquiry has been used to explore a wide range of experiences, including identity formation, motivation, and emotional responses to language learning. For example, Abrar (2019) used narrative inquiry to examine Indonesian university students' experiences of English learning and found that storytelling helped them reflect critically on their language struggles and progress. Similarly, Pavlenko (2007) highlighted how learners' narratives reveal tensions between native and target language identities, showing how self-perception evolves through linguistic challenges. These studies underscore that language learning is deeply intertwined with personal meaning-making, making narrative inquiry an ideal approach for exploring learners' reflections on their own errors.

The connection between narrative inquiry and error analysis lies in their shared recognition of learning as a developmental process. Traditional error analysis seeks to describe *what* errors occur and *why*, whereas narrative inquiry seeks to understand *how* learners experience and interpret those errors. When students recount stories of how they noticed or corrected mistakes, they externalize their inner dialogues, transforming tacit awareness into explicit knowledge. Golombek and Johnson (2017) describe this as "narrative mediation," where reflection through storytelling helps learners reconstruct their understanding of language use. This process aligns closely with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which views learning as a socially mediated activity. Narratives thus become tools of both expression and cognition, allowing learners to articulate the developmental path between confusion and mastery.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how university students perceive and correct their linguistic errors in learning English as a foreign language. Narrative inquiry was considered the most suitable approach because it allows for an in-depth understanding of learners' lived experiences rather than the measurement of linguistic performance. It assumes that human experience is storied and that people make sense of their lives through narratives. In this research, the students' stories about their encounters with linguistic errors, their feelings of frustration or success, and their reflections on learning formed the primary data that revealed how reflection contributes to their language development.

The study was conducted in a higher education context, specifically among undergraduate students at an Indonesian university where English is taught as a compulsory course. The participants were selected purposively based on several criteria: they were active students in an English-related course, had prior experience in academic writing or speaking in English, and were willing to participate in extended reflective activities. A total of eight to twelve students were involved in this study, representing varied backgrounds and proficiency levels to ensure diversity in the narratives collected. Their participation was voluntary, and they were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Data were gathered through multiple narrative sources to construct a rich and holistic picture of each participant's experience. The primary method was in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted over two to three sessions with each participant. These interviews provided space for students to narrate their personal experiences with language learning—particularly moments when they noticed, confronted, and corrected their errors. The first interview focused on students' broader experiences in learning English and their general perceptions of making mistakes. The second and third interviews centered on specific incidents where they became aware of their linguistic errors and engaged in self-correction, allowing participants to reflect on the emotions, thoughts, and strategies involved in those moments. Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To complement the interviews, participants were also asked to keep reflective journals over a period of six to eight weeks. In these journals, they wrote about their weekly experiences in English learning, focusing on situations where they made or recognized errors, the reactions they had, and the strategies they used to correct them. The journals offered an introspective and temporal dimension to the data, capturing how reflection developed over time. Additionally, students' written assignments and selected speaking transcripts were collected as supporting artefacts to triangulate the stories told during interviews. These linguistic artefacts provided a visible trace of the learners' evolving awareness of their errors and their progress in correcting them.

The process of data analysis followed the logic of narrative inquiry as proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), moving from raw data to storied representations. Each participant's interview transcripts, journal entries, and artefacts were read and re-read to identify meaningful events, emotional tones, and recurring reflections. The data were then organized chronologically to reconstruct the individual stories—how each student experienced, interpreted, and responded to linguistic errors across time. These personal narratives were presented in coherent forms that captured the context, turning points, and reflections embedded in each learner's journey. After the construction of individual narratives, a cross-case thematic analysis was carried out to identify broader patterns and shared meanings among participants. This involved coding and categorizing key themes related to awareness, emotional response, reflection, and correction strategies. The process combined inductive reasoning from the data and interpretive reflection from the researcher, allowing both convergence and divergence in learners' experiences to emerge naturally. The aim was not to generalize but to highlight the diversity of perspectives and the human dimension of learning through errors.

Throughout the study, the researcher maintained reflexivity as part of the narrative inquiry tradition, acknowledging how their own background and assumptions might shape the interpretation of the stories. A reflexive journal was kept to record decisions, impressions, and reflections that arose during the research process. The final narratives were returned to participants for validation to ensure that their voices were authentically represented. In essence, the methodological process of this research reflects the philosophical stance of narrative inquiry itself: that knowledge is co-constructed through stories, lived experience, and reflection. The combination of interviews, journals, and artefacts enabled a deep exploration of how students engage with their errors not as failures to be corrected, but as meaningful experiences that foster self-awareness, linguistic development, and a stronger sense of agency in their English learning journey.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The stories shared by the participants in this study revealed that the process of learning English through reflection is deeply personal, dynamic, and shaped by emotional and cognitive engagement with language. Through narrative inquiry, the participants' experiences became a window into understanding how learners perceive and correct their linguistic errors not as isolated moments of failure, but as evolving steps toward greater awareness and autonomy. As each participant recounted their journey, patterns began to emerge, showing that reflection was not a single event but an ongoing dialogue between self, language, and context. Their narratives highlighted how error awareness, emotional experience, and reflective strategies interacted to shape their learning process.

For these students, reflection functioned as a bridge between experience and understanding. The act of recalling and reinterpreting past mistakes allowed them to move beyond the technical aspects of grammar correction and enter a more transformative form of learning. In narrating their struggles, moments of confusion, and realizations, the students were essentially constructing their identities as learners who could take control of their growth. This aligns with Dewey's (1933) idea that reflection transforms experience into genuine learning when individuals think critically about what happened and what it means. In the students' accounts, their errors became not simply data points of deficiency but moments of insight that revealed how language, thought, and identity are intertwined.

Another dimension that emerged was the influence of the learning environment teachers, peers, and institutional culture on how reflection occurred. Many students described how classroom interactions, feedback sessions, and journal assignments created spaces where they could pause and think about their learning. These reflective spaces, both personal and social, enabled them to become more conscious of their progress and more open to self-correction. Narrative inquiry helped capture this complexity: reflection was not a detached analysis of errors but an emotionally textured process shaped by social interaction and personal meaning-making. In light of these stories, three interrelated themes emerged as central to the participants' reflective learning journey: (1) awareness and recognition of errors, (2) emotional and cognitive responses to errors, and (3) reflective strategies for self-correction and growth. Each theme is discussed below in relation to existing theoretical and empirical perspectives.

Awareness and recognition of errors

The first recurring theme in the narratives was the development of awareness, students' realization that their linguistic performance contained patterns of error that could be identified and understood. For most participants, awareness was not immediate but gradually emerged through repeated exposure to feedback, opportunities for self-review, and structured reflection activities such as journal writing. Several participants recalled that they had been making the same grammatical or lexical errors for years without realizing it until they began reflecting intentionally on their language use.

One participant vividly described her moment of realization after reviewing her essay feedback:

"When I saw the teacher's notes, I realized that my verbs were mixed between past and present. At first, I thought it was just small mistakes, but then I noticed it kept happening in every paragraph. That's when I started to pay attention to how I was forming sentences."

This initial recognition marks the emergence of metacognitive awareness, which Flavell (1979) defines as the ability to think about one's own cognitive processes. In this case, students began to view their language production not as automatic but as something that could be observed and controlled. The reflection journals assigned during the semester played a crucial role in cultivating this awareness. As one student noted in her journal, *"When I wrote about my mistakes, I began to notice patterns. I realized that missing articles or prepositions wasn't random, it was because in Bahasa Indonesia, we don't use them the same way."*

This kind of self-realization illustrates what Corder (1967) described as the learner's internal syllabus, a personal system of understanding that evolves as students recognize and repair errors. The narrative evidence showed that awareness often emerged from contrasts between the learners' native language and English, suggesting that reflection naturally integrates contrastive thinking even when it is not explicitly taught. Moreover, peer feedback and collaborative learning also stimulated awareness. Students reported that hearing others' mistakes during group tasks made them notice similar errors in their own speech or writing, reinforcing the social dimension of reflection. As Menekse et al. (2025) note, reflection is often co-constructed; it develops through interactions where learners mirror and respond to each other's linguistic behavior. Awareness marked the first turning point in students'

reflective journeys. Recognizing errors was not simply noticing what was wrong, it was about reorienting how they thought about their own learning process. Once awareness was achieved, reflection began to transform from a passive acknowledgement of mistakes into an active process of understanding and problem-solving.

Emotional and cognitive responses to errors

The second major theme emerging from the data involved the interplay between emotional reactions and cognitive processing when students confronted their errors. Nearly all participants described strong emotional responses to being corrected or realizing their mistakes. These emotions ranged from embarrassment and frustration to acceptance and eventual confidence. Initially, many participants viewed their mistakes as evidence of incompetence. For instance, recalled feeling humiliated when his grammatical errors were pointed out in front of classmates:

“I felt very nervous every time the lecturer corrected my grammar in front of the class. It made me afraid to speak again. But later, I realized that I couldn’t improve if I didn’t make mistakes. That moment changed how I saw errors.”

This narrative echoes the developmental nature of reflection: emotional discomfort often precedes growth. Zamora et al. (2025) refer to this as linguistic resilience, a learner’s ability to reinterpret negative emotions as motivation. Over time, through guided reflection and repeated exposure, students learned to see errors not as personal flaws but as natural and necessary steps in language acquisition. Another participant expressed this shift clearly in her journal: *“When I make mistakes, it means I’m trying. I tell myself that every error is part of the process.”* Such reframing indicates the development of what Schön (1983) calls a reflective practitioner mindset, where learners approach their performance with curiosity rather than judgment.

The cognitive side of this theme was equally revealing. Emotional engagement appeared to influence how well students retained and applied corrections. Mistakes that caused strong feelings of embarrassment, surprise, or even pride were often remembered longer and corrected more effectively. This aligns observation that emotional salience enhances language retention. For instance, students who could recall a particularly embarrassing mistake in speaking often reported that they never repeated it, precisely because it had left a deep emotional impression.

However, the narratives also highlighted the delicate balance required in feedback delivery. When corrections were harsh or unclear, students’ emotional reactions tended to block reflection, leading to avoidance rather than learning. In contrast, supportive feedback and opportunities for private reflection encouraged positive reinterpretation. As Emaliana (2017) emphasizes, reflective learning flourishes in environments where learners feel psychologically safe to make and discuss errors. Overall, the emotional and cognitive dimensions of reflection cannot be separated. Emotions shaped how participants perceived their mistakes, while cognition determined how they acted upon them. The dynamic interaction between feeling and thinking became the driving force behind sustained engagement with the reflective process.

Reflective Strategies for Self-Correction and Growth

The final theme concerns the strategies students developed to engage with their errors reflectively. Once awareness and emotional readiness were established, participants began to adopt intentional practices to monitor, analyze, and correct their linguistic output. These strategies varied across individuals but shared a common purpose: to transform external correction into internalized understanding.

The first strategy, self-monitoring, involved consciously checking one’s speech or writing during or after production. For example, one participant explained how she became more deliberate in her speaking *“Sometimes when I speak, I pause and repeat the sentence in my mind. I ask myself, is it right? Is the verb correct? It slows me down, but it helps me to be more accurate.”* This reflective self-monitoring aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of inner speech, where learners use internal dialogue to regulate their linguistic behavior.

The second common strategy was contrastive reflection, in which students compared English structures with those of Bahasa Indonesia to understand the source of errors. This was particularly evident in grammar-related reflections. As one participant wrote, *“I realized that in Indonesian, we can say ‘Dia guru,’ but in English, we need ‘He is a teacher.’ Now I always check if I forget ‘to be.’”* This process embodies the essence of contrastive analysis (Ellis, 1997), reimagined as a learner-driven, reflective act rather than a prescriptive comparison.

The third strategy involved contextual experimentation using corrected forms in new contexts to test and consolidate understanding. Students described trying out revised expressions in conversations, journal entries, or presentations to see if they felt natural. Over time, repetition and contextual use transformed conscious correction into intuitive accuracy. One student explained, *“When I used the corrected sentence several times, it started to sound right. I didn’t need to think about the rule anymore.”*

Through these strategies, reflection became cyclical: awareness led to monitoring, emotional engagement sustained effort, and practice solidified learning. The process mirrors Dewey’s (1933) reflective cycle experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation applied to language learning. It also underscores the narrative nature of reflection: each student’s strategy was not prescribed but evolved organically through personal experience and meaning-making.

Integrating Reflection into the Broader Learning Process

Taken together, the narratives reveal that reflection in language learning operates on multiple levels: cognitive, emotional, and social. Individually, students engaged in introspection, questioning, and self-evaluation; socially, they found meaning through interaction with teachers and peers who acted as reflective mirrors. This integration illustrates Golombek and Johnson’s (2017) view of narrative inquiry as a mediational space a setting where reflection and learning are co-constructed through dialogue.

Beyond linguistic development, reflection also reshaped students’ sense of self as English users. Through the act of narrating and analyzing their experiences, participants began to see themselves as capable learners who could take responsibility for their progress. Barkhuizen (2013) emphasizes that such identity reconstruction is central to narrative inquiry: learning is not only about mastering language forms but also about reimagining oneself in relation to the language.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are significant. Incorporating structured reflection into higher education English instruction can enhance students’ metacognitive awareness, resilience, and autonomy. As Diab & Awada (2022) noted, reflective writing promotes both linguistic accuracy and deeper self-understanding. The narratives in this study reaffirm that reflection transforms the traditional focus on error correction into a more holistic process of meaning-making and growth. Ultimately, the students’ stories suggest that learning English through reflection is not simply about mastering rules; it is about understanding oneself as a learner. Errors become mirrors that reflect not failure, but development. Through narrative reflection, learners discover that every mistake tells a story, and every story contributes to their evolving competence and confidence as users of English.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that learning English through reflection is a developmental, emotionally layered, and cognitively engaged process in which students actively make sense of their linguistic errors. Through the narrative inquiry approach, the participants’ stories revealed that errors are not merely indicators of deficiency but meaningful experiences that trigger awareness, emotional negotiation, and strategic self-correction. The students gradually shifted from being passive recipients of feedback to reflective learners who could recognize recurring patterns, question the causes of their mistakes, and connect these insights with their evolving understanding of English.

The findings highlight that reflection emerges through the interplay of three key dimensions: awareness of errors, emotional and cognitive responses, and the deliberate strategies students adopt to correct themselves. Awareness served as the turning point where learners began noticing their linguistic habits; emotional engagement influenced how they internalized and remembered corrections; and reflective strategies such as self-monitoring, contrastive thinking, and contextual experimentation transformed isolated feedback into lasting development. Importantly, reflection was shaped both individually and socially, supported by teachers’ feedback, classroom interactions, and reflective spaces created through journal writing.

Overall, this study affirms that integrating reflective practices into EFL instruction can enhance learners’ metacognitive growth, resilience, and autonomy. When students are encouraged to narrate, interpret, and revisit their experiences with errors, they develop deeper linguistic insight and a stronger sense of agency in their learning. Reflection allows learners to see their mistakes not as failures but as meaningful moments that contribute to identity

formation and linguistic mastery. In this way, learning English through reflection becomes a continuous journey of understanding oneself, negotiating challenges, and constructing new possibilities for language use.

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