

Stabilized interlanguage patterns and fossilization risks in Indonesian EFL academic writing: A qualitative error analysis

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ABSTRACT

Stabilized interlanguage remains a persistent concern in second language acquisition, particularly in the academic writing of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who have received years of formal instruction. Although interlanguage stabilization has been widely discussed in SLA scholarship, less attention has been given to how it appears in the academic writing of advanced Indonesian EFL learners. This study addresses this gap by examining recurrent lexico-syntactic, grammatical, and discourse-level errors that may indicate stabilized interlanguage patterns and fossilization risks. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved seven undergraduate EFL learners from an Indonesian university who were selected purposively based on their experience in academic essay writing. Data were collected through controlled argumentative writing tasks and analyzed using error analysis supported by thematic coding. The findings show recurring problems in article use, prepositional choice, cohesion devices, nominalization, verb form, collocation, and academic register. These patterns suggest that some learners were able to communicate their intended meanings, yet still relied on non-target-like forms that had become familiar in their writing. The study also indicates that such patterns may be shaped by first-language transfer, limited noticing, insufficient corrective feedback, and repeated use of communicatively acceptable expressions. The findings highlight the need for discourse-level feedback, genre-based instruction, and targeted pedagogical support that helps learners notice, revise, and move beyond stabilized patterns. This study contributes to SLA and EFL writing research by situating fossilization risks within Indonesian higher education academic writing in university contexts.

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Introduction

Academic writing in higher education is not merely a language skill, but a central form of academic literacy through which students construct disciplinary knowledge, develop arguments, and participate in scholarly communities. For university EFL learners, writing essays, research papers, and theses requires the ability to control linguistic accuracy, coherence, genre conventions, rhetorical organization, and academic register (Hyland, 2013). However, even learners who have received years of formal English instruction may continue to produce recurrent errors in grammar, lexical choice, cohesion, and discourse organization. From the perspective of error analysis, such errors should not be viewed simply as signs of deficiency, but as meaningful evidence of learners' developing interlanguage system (Corder, 1967). Therefore, examining recurring errors in advanced EFL academic writing is important for identifying linguistic and discourse features that remain resistant to change and for designing more targeted feedback and pedagogical support in higher education contexts (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).

Persistent learner errors in ESL writing have long been interpreted by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers as potential indicators of interlanguage stabilization or fossilization. Fossilization refers to the phenomenon where L2 learners cease to develop their interlanguage toward target language norms, resulting in permanent non-target-like forms that resist correction (Selinker, 1972a; Han, 2004). When the same types of errors recur consistently in a learner's writing despite explicit instruction and corrective feedback, these errors may signal that certain linguistic features have become fossilized or are at risk of fossilization. However, it is important to note that confirming actual fossilization requires longitudinal evidence documenting that errors persist over time and resist remediation (Han, 2013; Lardiere, 2017). Cross-sectional error analysis, such as the present study, can identify recurring error patterns that suggest fossilization risks rather than claiming confirmed fossilization. These recurring errors may reflect stabilized interlanguage features that, if left unaddressed, could potentially develop into permanent fossilized forms. Thus, analyzing the types and frequencies of writing errors among advanced EFL learners can help identify which linguistic features are most vulnerable to fossilization and therefore require targeted pedagogical attention.

The Indonesian EFL higher education context offers an important site for examining recurrent writing errors and fossilization risks. Although English has been taught for many years across formal education in Indonesia, issues of English proficiency and academic writing development remain persistent concerns in higher education (Renandya et al., 2018). University EFL learners are increasingly expected to produce academic genres such as essays, research reports, and research articles; however, many continue to face difficulties in controlling grammar, lexical choice, cohesion, rhetorical organization, and academic register (Suherdi et al., 2020; Annazah et al., 2025a). These difficulties are pedagogically significant

because academic writing is not only a requirement for course completion, but also a means through which students demonstrate disciplinary understanding and participate in scholarly communication. When similar errors recur despite prolonged formal instruction, they may suggest stabilized interlanguage patterns rather than temporary developmental problems. From the perspective of interlanguage theory, such recurring non-target-like forms should be examined carefully as possible fossilization risks, particularly when they remain communicatively understandable and therefore receive limited corrective attention (Selinker, 1972a; Han, 2004). Identifying these patterns is therefore necessary for designing targeted pedagogical interventions that address not only surface-level errors, but also deeper linguistic and discourse features that may become resistant to change in advanced EFL writing.

Literature Review

Interlanguage and Stabilized Learner Errors

The concept of interlanguage, introduced by Selinker (1972a), refers to the dynamic linguistic system that second language (L2) learners construct as they move between their first language and the target language. This system is not random; rather, it is systematic, variable, and shaped by learners' developing hypotheses about the target language. From the perspective of error analysis, learner errors should therefore be understood not merely as failures to follow target-language norms, but as evidence of an underlying learner language system (Corder, 1967). In this sense, recurring errors in EFL academic writing can provide important insight into how learners process, internalize, and sometimes stabilize particular linguistic forms.

A central concern in second language acquisition is that some interlanguage features may stop developing despite continued exposure, instruction, and opportunities for practice. Selinker (1972) described this phenomenon as fossilization, referring to the persistence of non-target-like forms that resist further development toward target-language norms. (Han, 2013) later refined this concept by emphasizing that fossilization should be treated cautiously, particularly because confirming fossilization requires evidence of long-term persistence and resistance to remediation. This distinction is important for the present study because the analysis is based on cross-sectional writing data. Therefore, the study does not claim confirmed fossilization, but identifies recurring error patterns that may indicate stabilized interlanguage and fossilization risks.

Several theoretical perspectives help explain why learner errors may become stabilized. First, language transfer may occur when learners draw on structures, rhetorical habits, or lexical patterns from their first language when producing the target language (Odlin, 1989). In the Indonesian EFL context, this may help explain recurring difficulties with article use, plural marking, word order, cohesion, and explicit referential tracking, since these features are realized differently in Bahasa Indonesia and English. Second, stabilization may occur when

learners do not notice the gap between their own non-target-like forms and target-like academic English. Schmidt (1990) noticing hypothesis suggests that conscious attention to linguistic form plays an important role in language development. Errors that remain communicatively understandable but unnoticed may therefore continue to appear in learner writing.

Feedback also plays an important role in preventing or reinforcing stabilized errors. Vigil & Oller (1976) argued that feedback can influence whether non-target-like forms are modified or reinforced in the learner's developing system. If an error does not disrupt communication and receives little corrective attention, learners may continue to use it successfully, making the form increasingly familiar. Corrective feedback research further suggests that explicit and focused feedback can support L2 development when it helps learners notice and revise problematic forms (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). For this reason, recurring errors in advanced EFL writing should be examined not only as linguistic problems, but also as signs of instructional, feedback-related, and discourse-level challenges.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that stabilized learner errors may result from the interaction of several factors: first-language transfer, limited noticing, insufficient corrective feedback, overgeneralization of target-language rules, and the communicative adequacy of non-target-like forms. In higher education EFL writing, such errors are particularly important because they may persist beneath an otherwise acceptable level of academic organization. This study, therefore uses the concept of stabilized interlanguage to examine recurring lexico-syntactic, grammatical, and discourse-level patterns in advanced learners' writing without overclaiming confirmed fossilization.

Learner Errors in EFL Academic Writing

Error analysis remains an important approach in second language acquisition because learner errors can reveal how students are developing and reorganizing their interlanguage system. Rather than viewing errors simply as signs of failure, error analysis treats them as meaningful evidence of how learners test hypotheses about the target language, use available linguistic resources, and negotiate form and meaning in writing (Corder, 1967; James, 1998). In EFL academic writing, this perspective is particularly useful because university students are expected to produce texts that are not only grammatically accurate, but also coherent, lexically precise, and appropriate to academic discourse conventions.

Recent studies show that recurring errors continue to appear in the academic writing of EFL learners even at the university level. In the Indonesian context, Annazah et al. (2025b) found that university EFL students' essays still contained frequent problems in article use, subject-verb agreement, tense use, and other grammatical features. Similar concerns have been reported in other EFL contexts. Azeez (2024), for example, examined fossilized writing errors

among Kurdish EFL students and showed that certain errors continued to recur across writing tasks. Albelihi & Al-Ahdal (2024) also found persistent grammatical and writing errors in Saudi EFL learners' academic texts, suggesting that some learner errors may remain stable when they are not addressed through sustained and targeted instruction. These studies indicate that recurrent errors in EFL academic writing are not merely local problems of grammar, but may reflect deeper patterns of interlanguage development.

In addition to grammatical errors, lexical and discourse-level problems are also central to academic writing development. EFL learners may produce grammatically acceptable sentences that remain awkward, imprecise, or less appropriate for academic discourse because of limited control over collocation, lexical choice, cohesion, and formulaic expressions. Such errors are often more difficult to address than rule-based grammatical errors because they require extensive exposure to academic texts, awareness of genre conventions, and feedback that goes beyond surface-level correction. When learners repeatedly use approximate expressions that remain understandable to readers, these patterns may receive limited corrective attention and gradually become familiar in their writing.

Feedback therefore plays an important role in preventing recurring errors from becoming stabilized. Recent work on written corrective feedback emphasizes that feedback in L2 writing is not only a matter of correcting errors, but also of helping learners notice problematic forms, understand why they are inappropriate, and revise their writing more effectively (Mao et al., 2024). For this reason, identifying persistent error patterns in EFL academic writing is pedagogically important. It allows teachers and researchers to recognize which linguistic features require more focused instruction, which discourse problems need explicit modeling, and which errors may indicate potential fossilization risks rather than temporary developmental difficulty.

Error Analysis in Higher Education EFL Contexts

Academic writing in higher education places complex linguistic and rhetorical demands on EFL learners. University students are expected to produce academic genres such as argumentative essays, research reports, literature reviews, and theses, all of which require more than grammatical accuracy. They also need to organize ideas coherently, develop arguments logically, use discipline-appropriate vocabulary, and maintain an academic register. For EFL learners, these demands are particularly challenging because academic writing requires them to control language form and academic meaning at the same time. Thus, difficulties in writing should not be understood simply as problems of grammar, but as part of a broader struggle to participate in academic discourse.

In the Indonesian higher education context, these challenges remain highly visible. Studies have shown that Indonesian tertiary EFL students continue to experience difficulties

with parts of speech, tenses, spelling, prepositions, vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, discourse markers, paragraph focus, coherent essay construction, paraphrasing, citation, and referencing (Bram & Angelina, 2022). Recent research on Indonesian EFL essay writing also found recurring problems in subject-verb agreement, article usage, misplaced modifiers, verb tense, and spelling, with article errors reported as the most frequent category (Annazah et al., 2025b). Similarly, research on cohesive devices in Indonesian EFL writing indicates that learners may overuse, underuse, or avoid certain cohesive devices, suggesting that cohesion remains an important area of difficulty in academic writing (Benu et al., 2022). These studies show that Indonesian EFL academic writing problems are not limited to isolated grammatical mistakes, but also involve discourse-level organization and rhetorical control.

Recent studies in other EFL contexts also suggest that persistent learner errors may continue to appear even among intermediate or advanced learners. Azeez (2024), for instance, examined fossilized writing errors among Kurdish EFL students through repeated writing assessments across two semesters, while Albelihi & Al-Ahdal (2024) investigated error fossilization in Saudi EFL undergraduate academic writing across different essay genres. These studies are useful because they show that recurring writing errors may reflect more than temporary developmental difficulty. However, such findings also need to be interpreted carefully, since confirmed fossilization requires evidence of long-term persistence and resistance to correction. For this reason, cross-sectional studies are better positioned to identify stabilized error patterns and fossilization risks rather than to claim permanent fossilization.

Despite growing research on EFL academic writing errors, studies in the Indonesian context have often focused on identifying and classifying error types, while fewer studies have interpreted recurring lexico-syntactic, grammatical, and discourse-level errors through the lens of interlanguage stabilization. This gap is important because advanced EFL learners may produce texts that are generally understandable and structurally organized, yet still contain recurring non-target-like forms that weaken academic precision, cohesion, and register. A qualitative error analysis can therefore provide a deeper account of how these errors function in learner texts, why they may persist, and which linguistic features may require targeted pedagogical intervention. In this study, recurring errors in Indonesian EFL argumentative writing are examined as possible indicators of stabilized interlanguage patterns and fossilization risks, not as proof of permanent fossilization.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design within an interpretivist orientation. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to provide a close, context-sensitive account of recurrent linguistic errors in advanced Indonesian EFL learners' argumentative writing

rather than to quantify errors or establish statistical relationships. A qualitative descriptive approach enables researchers to describe and interpret language phenomena in relation to their natural instructional and sociolinguistic contexts (Levitt et al., 2017; Yadav, 2022). In line with error analysis, learner errors were treated as meaningful evidence of interlanguage development rather than merely as deviations from target-language norms (Corder, 1967; James, 2013). Therefore, instead of claiming confirmed fossilization, the analysis focused on identifying recurring lexico-syntactic, grammatical, and discourse-level patterns that may indicate stabilized interlanguage and fossilization risks. This position is consistent with interlanguage theory, which views fossilization as a persistent stabilization of non-target-like forms that requires careful interpretation and, ideally, longitudinal confirmation (Selinker, 1972). The qualitative approach allowed the researchers to interpret learner errors in relation to possible language transfer, instructional experience, corrective feedback, academic writing conventions, and contextual factors shaping EFL writing development.

Participants

Seven undergraduate EFL learners from an Indonesian university participated in this study. They were selected purposively because they had completed several years of formal English instruction and had experience writing academic essays in English. Their participation was voluntary, and they were informed about the purpose of the study, the writing task, and the use of their texts for research analysis. To protect confidentiality, participants were identified using codes rather than real names. Although the number of participants was limited, the sample was considered appropriate for a qualitative error analysis because the study prioritized depth of textual interpretation over statistical generalization.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a controlled argumentative writing task. Each participant was asked to write a 500–700 word argumentative essay on a socio-academic topic relevant to higher education and English learning. The task was selected because argumentative writing requires learners to organize ideas, construct logical relationships, use academic vocabulary, and produce syntactically complex structures, making it suitable for identifying recurrent linguistic errors in advanced EFL writing.

The writing task was administered in a monitored classroom setting to ensure that the texts reflected participants' own language production. Participants completed the essay within a limited time frame and were not allowed to use dictionaries, AI-assisted tools, grammar-checking applications, or external revision support. This procedure was intended to capture learners' spontaneous academic writing performance and to reveal recurrent lexico-syntactic,

grammatical, and discourse-level patterns that might be less visible in heavily revised texts. The collected essays then served as the primary data for qualitative error analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through qualitative error analysis supported by thematic coding. Error analysis was used because learner errors can provide meaningful evidence of interlanguage development rather than merely indicating deviations from target-language norms (Corder, 1967; James, 2013). First, all essays were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data and to identify recurrent linguistic features. Second, errors were coded according to linguistic categories, including lexico-syntactic errors, article and determiner use, verb form and tense, prepositional choice, cohesion devices, ambiguous reference, and lexical-pragmatic imprecision. Third, similar errors were grouped into broader patterns through thematic coding, allowing the researchers to identify recurring linguistic tendencies across participant texts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Fourth, the emerging patterns were interpreted in relation to interlanguage theory and fossilization risk, particularly by considering whether the errors appeared systematic, repeated, and resistant to target-like academic writing conventions (Selinker, 1972b; Han, 2004). Because this study employed a cross-sectional design, the analysis did not claim to confirm fossilization. Instead, it identified stabilized error patterns that may indicate fossilization risks and require pedagogical attention.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability principles. Preliminary interpretations of learners' errors were reviewed through participant confirmation, while the categorization of recurrent error patterns was discussed with experienced ESL instructors to strengthen analytical consistency. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board under the number B-0348/Un.29/L1/PN.03.1/02/2026. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were kept confidential throughout the research process.

Results

The qualitative error analysis of students' argumentative essays revealed three interrelated themes of recurrent learner errors. These themes were: (1) lexico-syntactic errors, (2) grammatical and morphological errors, and (3) discourse and rhetorical structure issues. Each theme represents a cluster of recurring linguistic patterns that appeared across the participants' texts and were interpreted as possible indicators of stabilized interlanguage and fossilization risks. Rather than treating the errors as separate linguistic mistakes, the analysis examined how they reflected broader patterns of lexical choice, grammatical control, cohesion, academic register, and rhetorical organization in advanced EFL writing. The following sections present

each theme with representative examples, interpretive explanations, and the potential fossilization mechanisms associated with the observed error patterns.

Lexico-Syntactic Errors

The analysis revealed that lexico-syntactic errors—particularly redundancy, conjunction misuse, ambiguous reference, and word choice confusions—constituted the most frequent category of learner errors. Critically, these errors varied not only in type but in the depth of stabilization they exhibited. While some reflected developmental or stylistic issues with low fossilization risk, others demonstrated clear signs of entrenched interlanguage patterns. Below, each subcategory is examined with explicit attention to why specific errors appear resistant to change.

Redundancy and Repetition

Redundancy errors occurred consistently across participant essays, primarily manifesting as semantic repetition (using two words that carry the same meaning) and awkward lexical ordering. While such errors are common in L2 writing, their persistence among advanced university learners warrants closer examination. The fossilization risk of redundancy errors depends largely on whether the learner receives corrective feedback and whether the redundant structure is reinforced by L1 rhetorical conventions. Below are examples:

"There are several different obstacles that Indonesian students must overcome in order to effectively acquire and become proficient in the English language..." (A1)

The word *several* already implies multiplicity, rendering *different* semantically unnecessary. This is not merely a stylistic lapse; it reflects intralingual overgeneralization—the learner has acquired the individual lexical items but not their semantic constraints. More critically, the error is communicatively harmless. A reader understands "several different obstacles" without difficulty. Because the error does not trigger a breakdown in meaning, there is no negative feedback from instructors or interlocutors to prompt restructuring. In the absence of such feedback, the interlanguage system gradually automates the redundant form as a "safe" default. This pattern may be further reinforced if similar doubling structures are stylistically acceptable in Bahasa Indonesia, creating positive L1 transfer that competes with target-like economy. While this particular error currently carries a low to moderate fossilization risk, it could become high if uncorrected over multiple years of continued writing without targeted feedback.

"Besides, as a means of communication, the English language has many students still do not fluently communicate in English been adopted as an academic subject." (B3)

The phrase “many students still do not fluently communicate in English” demonstrates more than a surface-level problem of awkwardness. The placement of the adverb fluently between the auxiliary and main verb produces a non-target-like word order, whereas a more natural form would be “do not communicate fluently” or “still struggle to speak English fluently.” This pattern may reflect transfer from Bahasa Indonesia, where adverb placement follows different syntactic tendencies. Under time pressure, learners may rely on familiar L1-based ordering patterns because they require less conscious monitoring. In this study, the pattern is best interpreted as a high-risk stabilized interlanguage feature that requires explicit attention, rather than as confirmed fossilization.

“...the level of English proficiency at the school level shows less than perfect results...” (C5)

The phrase “less than perfect results” is understandable, but it remains vague and less precise for academic writing. In this context, the learner appears to avoid using more direct evaluative expressions such as “limited proficiency,” “weak learning outcomes,” “unsatisfactory results,” or “suboptimal achievement.” The issue is therefore not a serious grammatical error, but a problem of lexical precision and academic register. The phrase communicates the general meaning, yet it does not specify the nature or degree of the problem being discussed.

This example suggests that the learner may rely on a safe and general expression when a more precise academic term is needed. Such lexical choices are common in EFL writing because they allow learners to convey meaning without taking the risk of selecting a more specific evaluative word. However, when vague expressions are used repeatedly, they may limit the development of academic precision. Since the intended meaning remains understandable, this type of error may not always receive focused corrective feedback. If similar patterns recur across the learner’s writing, they may indicate a risk of lexical stabilization, particularly in relation to evaluative language and academic word choice.

Misuse of Conjunctions and Cohesion Devices

The analysis also revealed recurring problems in the use of conjunctions and cohesion devices. Several learners appeared to rely on a limited set of familiar transitional expressions, such as “hence,” “therefore,” “in fact,” and “because of this.” Although these expressions are commonly associated with academic writing, their use in the learners’ essays did not always support clear logical progression. In some cases, connectors were placed awkwardly, combined unnecessarily, or used without a clear semantic relationship to the surrounding ideas. This suggests that the learners had some awareness of the need for formal cohesive devices, but had not yet fully developed control over their rhetorical and pragmatic functions. One example can be seen in the following sentence:

"Because of this instructional approach, pupils frequently lack the self-assurance and proficiency to converse..." (A3)

The sentence is generally understandable, but the phrase "the self-assurance and proficiency to converse" sounds rather formal and slightly unnatural in academic English. A more natural formulation might be "the confidence and ability to communicate" or "sufficient confidence and proficiency to use English communicatively." The issue here is not a serious grammatical error, but a problem of academic phraseology and idiomatic expression. The learner seems to be attempting to produce a formal academic tone, yet the lexical combination does not fully reflect natural academic usage. For this reason, the example is better interpreted as a lexical-stylistic problem rather than as a strong indication of fossilization. A clearer cohesion-related problem appears in the following example:

"Hence, although English has been taught since an earlier age, in fact, many students still do not fluently communicate in English." (B8)

In this sentence, the use of "hence," "although," and "in fact" within a single construction creates an overloaded and somewhat confusing logical structure. Each connector has a different rhetorical function, but their combination does not guide the reader smoothly from one idea to the next. A more effective revision would be: "Although English has been taught from an early age, many students still struggle to communicate fluently in English." This example suggests that the learner may have memorized several academic connectors but has not yet fully acquired the discourse-level awareness needed to use them selectively and appropriately. The problem is therefore not simply the presence of too many connectors, but the lack of control over how connectors shape argument flow and reader orientation. Another example points to a related issue of lexical and collocational appropriateness:

"Opponents of internal factors in education argue..." (C8)

Although the intended meaning is partly recoverable, the phrase "opponents of internal factors" is not a natural academic expression. The expression "opponents of" is usually used to refer to people who disagree with a specific policy, proposal, or position, rather than with an abstract concept such as "internal factors." Depending on the intended meaning, a more appropriate formulation might be "scholars who question the role of internal factors" or "those who reject internal explanations of educational problems." This example shows that the learner understands the individual lexical items, but has not yet fully acquired their conventional combinations in academic English.

Taken together, these examples indicate that some learners were able to use formal academic expressions, but their control of cohesion, collocation, and rhetorical appropriateness remained limited. The recurring use of familiar connectors and academic-sounding phrases

may reflect an attempt to construct a formal written voice. However, when these expressions are used without sufficient attention to meaning, logic, and context, they may weaken coherence rather than strengthen it. Because such expressions often remain understandable, they may not always receive focused corrective feedback. If similar patterns recur across writing tasks, they may indicate a risk of stabilization in learners' use of academic phraseology and cohesive devices.

This example points to a problem of collocational appropriateness at the phrase level. Although the learner appears to understand the individual words "opponents," "internal," "factors," and "argue," the combination "opponents of internal factors" sounds unnatural in academic English. The expression "opponents of" is usually used to refer to people or groups who disagree with a specific policy, proposal, or position, rather than with an abstract construct such as "internal factors." A more natural formulation would depend on the intended meaning, for example, "those who reject internal explanations" or "scholars who question the role of internal factors."

The error is important because it does not prevent readers from understanding the general idea, but it weakens the precision and naturalness of the academic expression. This suggests that the learner may have developed partial lexical knowledge: the individual words are known, but their typical academic combinations have not yet been fully acquired. Because such expressions remain communicatively understandable, they may not always receive focused corrective feedback. If they recur across writing tasks, they may indicate a risk of collocational stabilization, particularly in relation to academic phraseology and argument structure.

Ambiguous Antecedent Reference

Errors involving unclear or missing referents appeared across multiple essays, though most indicated weak discourse tracking rather than deep fossilization. However, the persistence of such errors among advanced learners is noteworthy because referential clarity is a foundational feature of academic writing. Unlike grammatical errors, which may be noticeable to both writer and reader, ambiguous reference often operates below the learner's conscious awareness: the writer knows what "the change" refers to and assumes the reader does as well.

"The lack of certified English language instructors in Indonesia is one of the country's biggest issues." (A5)

The pronoun *one* refers back to the same point made earlier, creating repetition and weak cohesion rather than genuine ambiguity. This pattern is frequent among intermediate and advanced learners and is often ignored during feedback, which may inadvertently reinforce its

persistence. The fossilization risk remains low to moderate, as the error does not fundamentally block understanding.

"The change is thought to be a major regression..." (B14)

Here, the noun "change" is vaguely defined, with no clear antecedent in preceding discourse. This error reflects discourse-level fossilization rather than grammatical deficiency. The learner can construct grammatically correct sentences but has not acquired the anaphoric reference conventions of academic English – specifically, the rule that a definite noun phrase must refer to a specific, identifiable entity introduced in prior discourse. The fossilization risk is low to moderate but significant because it operates below conscious awareness.

Word Choice and Semantic Confusion

Within the lexico-syntactic category, lexical errors appeared to carry a particularly high risk of stabilization. These errors were not limited to incorrect word choice, but also reflected learners' difficulty in using words in contextually appropriate and academically acceptable ways. Unlike some grammatical errors that may be addressed through explicit rules, lexical problems often involve collocation, semantic precision, and register awareness. These aspects of language usually develop gradually through sustained exposure to academic texts, meaningful writing practice, and targeted feedback. Therefore, the recurrence of lexical errors in the participants' essays suggests that certain patterns of word use may have become familiar and communicatively acceptable to the learners, even though they remain non-target-like in academic English.

"English has become a used language worldwide..." (D1)

The intended meaning of the phrase "used language" is understandable; however, the expression remains semantically incomplete and does not fully reflect conventional academic English usage. A more target-like form would be "a widely used language," in which the adverb "widely" functions as an intensifier that completes the collocational pattern. This error suggests that the learner may already understand the basic lexical item "use" and its passive participial form "used," but has not yet fully acquired the phrase "widely used" as a conventional lexical combination in academic discourse. In this sense, the problem is not simply a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Rather, it reflects limited control over collocational patterns, semantic precision, and the natural co-occurrence of words in English. Such patterns are often difficult for EFL learners to acquire because they are not always learned through explicit grammatical rules, but through repeated exposure to authentic academic texts, meaningful language use, and corrective feedback. The recurrence of this type of lexical choice may

therefore indicate a stabilized pattern of word use that is communicatively understandable but still non-target-like in academic English.

Table 1 summarizes the representative lexico-syntactic error types identified in the learners' essays, along with their possible fossilization mechanisms and estimated risk levels. The error codes (E1–E8) are included to make the coding process more transparent and to show how each example was linked to broader patterns of interlanguage stabilization.

Table 1: Representative Lexico-Syntactic Errors, Fossilization Mechanisms, and Risk Levels

Error Code	Error Type	Example	Fossilization Mechanism	Risk Level
E1	Spacing Error	"one of the"	Developmental; low cognitive salience	Low
E1	Ambiguous Lexis	"increasing our funding"	Semantic underspecification + no feedback	Moderate
E2	Lexical Redundancy	"useless when not balanced with science"	Communicative adequacy + L1 rhetorical transfer	Moderate
E6	Preposition Misuse	"Except that, the problems..."	Formulaic fossilization + positive reinforcement	Moderate
E6	Tense Inconsistency	"There's some not-qualified teachers"	Automatization of incorrect agreement + L1 absence of plural marking	Moderate→High
E6	Word Form Error	"not-qualified"	L1 derivational transfer + unnoticed omission	Moderate
E7	Verb Choice	"not exposed to fluent English speakers"	Avoidance strategy + proceduralized safe form	Moderate
E8	Passive Overuse	"is often perceived as difficult"	Overgeneralization of the academic register stereotype	Low→Moderate

Grammatical and Morphological Errors

Grammatical and morphological errors – particularly article misuse, verb form problems, tense and modal inconsistency, and preposition errors – formed another important category of learner difficulty. These patterns are pedagogically significant because several of them involve grammatical features that have no direct equivalent in Bahasa Indonesia, such as articles and obligatory plural marking. Because such errors often do not prevent comprehension, they may remain unnoticed or insufficiently corrected. For this reason, they can become stabilized in learner writing and should be understood as potential fossilization risks.

Article Misuse

Article misuse appeared consistently across the corpus, reflecting the absence of an equivalent grammatical system in Bahasa Indonesia. One participant wrote:

"...teachers with the abilities and information required to teach English in a successful manner." (A8)

The intended form requires *the skills and knowledge* rather than *abilities and information*. This error reflects more than simple article omission; it demonstrates faulty noun-collocation compounded by the absence of an article system in Bahasa Indonesia. Learners from article-less L1 backgrounds frequently fossilize article misuse because the error does not typically impede communicative success. A reader understands the meaning despite the missing or incorrect article, so the learner receives no corrective feedback that would trigger restructuring. Another participant demonstrated article omission before a list of countable skills. A similar pattern can be seen in the following example:

"...developing students' language skills... speaking, reading, writing, and listening." (B4)

In this sentence, the list of language skills would be more clearly introduced with a determiner or a more explicit phrase, such as "the four language skills: speaking, reading, writing, and listening." The absence of such framing does not prevent readers from understanding the intended meaning, but it makes the sentence less precise and less complete in academic English. This suggests that the learner may have difficulty managing determiner use and explicit nominal reference when presenting academic categories. Another related example appears in the following sentence:

"...students' motivation, interest, and perception of the subject matter..." (C11)

The sentence is understandable, but the parallel structure could be improved. A more target-like formulation would be "students' motivation, interest, and perceptions of the subject matter" or "students' motivations, interests, and perceptions of the subject matter," depending on whether the writer intends to emphasize these as collective or individual learner characteristics. The issue here is not only article use, but also control of plural marking and parallel noun structure.

These examples suggest that some learners still experience difficulty with grammatical features that are realized differently in Bahasa Indonesia and English, particularly determiners, plural marking, and noun phrase parallelism. Because these forms often do not cause serious communication problems, they may not always receive focused corrective feedback. As a result, they may continue to appear in learners' academic writing. In the context of this study, such

patterns may indicate a risk of grammatical stabilization, especially when similar article- and noun-phrase-related problems recur across different texts.

Prepositional Errors

Verb-form and lexical-morphological errors were also evident in the learners' writing. One participant wrote:

"...proofed to have a significant effect..." (C10)

In this example, the learner used "proofed" where the target-like form should be "proved to have." The error does not primarily involve prepositional choice, but rather confusion between the noun "proof" and the verb "prove." This suggests incomplete control over lexical category, word formation, and irregular verb use in academic English. Although the intended meaning remains understandable, the form is non-target-like and may indicate a stabilized lexical-morphological pattern. Such errors are important because they can remain unnoticed when they do not interfere with communication. If learners repeatedly use forms that are communicatively acceptable but linguistically inaccurate without receiving focused corrective feedback, these forms may become increasingly familiar in their interlanguage system. Therefore, this example may be interpreted as carrying a relatively high risk of stabilization, particularly if similar verb-form errors recur across the learner's writing.

Modal Nuance and Academic Register

The analysis also showed that some learners had difficulty selecting verb forms that matched the rhetorical function of academic writing. In several cases, the problem was not grammatical accuracy in a narrow sense, but the appropriateness of tense, modality, and register within the argumentative context. One participant wrote:

"This includes supplying modern teaching aids, technology, and texts to schools." (A14)

Although the sentence is grammatically acceptable, the use of the simple present form "includes" does not fully match the intended function of the sentence. In this context, the writer appears to be making a recommendation rather than describing an existing condition. A more appropriate academic formulation would be "This should include supplying modern teaching aids, technology, and texts to schools" or "This could include the provision of modern teaching aids, technology, and texts to schools." The example suggests that the learner may have difficulty using modal expressions to express recommendation, obligation, or possibility in academic argumentation. This tendency is important because modal verbs help writers position their claims, express caution, and construct appropriate academic stance. A similar issue can be seen in the following example:

*"...learning English in Indonesia brings up a lot of issues, but there is a lot that can be done."
(D31)*

The phrase "brings up a lot of issues" is understandable, but it sounds relatively informal for academic problem-solution writing. A more target-like academic expression would be "English learning in Indonesia raises several challenges" or "English language learning in Indonesia has created a number of pedagogical challenges." In this case, the issue lies less in tense accuracy than in the learner's control of academic register and lexical precision. The use of informal or conversational expressions in formal writing may suggest that the learner has not yet fully developed a repertoire of discipline-appropriate academic language. When such forms recur across texts, they may indicate a stabilized tendency in academic expression that requires explicit feedback and sustained exposure to academic writing models.

Cohesion Devices and Referential Clarity

The analysis also revealed recurring problems in the use of cohesion devices and referential clarity. These problems were not simply grammatical in nature, but were closely related to how learners organized ideas and guided readers through academic arguments. One participant wrote:

"Hence, although English has been taught since an earlier age, in fact, many students still do not fluently communicate in English." (B8)

In this example, several connectors—"hence," "although," and "in fact"—are used within a single sentence without a clear rhetorical function. Although each connector is commonly found in academic writing, their combined use disrupts the logical flow of the sentence. This suggests that the learner may have memorized high-frequency academic connectors but has not yet developed sufficient pragmatic control over when and how they should be used. Rather than indicating a simple knowledge gap, this pattern may reflect a stabilized formulaic tendency in which academic connectors are used to create an impression of formal writing, even when they do not contribute effectively to coherence. A similar discourse-level issue appeared in the use of unclear reference. Another participant wrote:

"The change is thought to be a major regression..." (B14)

In this sentence, the noun phrase "the change" is presented as if it refers to a clearly identifiable idea introduced earlier, yet the preceding discourse does not provide a sufficiently explicit antecedent. The sentence is grammatically acceptable, but the referential link remains unclear for the reader. This type of error is important because it shows that learners may be able to

construct well-formed sentences while still struggling to maintain cohesion across sentences and paragraphs. In academic English, definite noun phrases need to refer back to information that has been clearly introduced or can be easily inferred from the surrounding text. When such referential links are left implicit, the argument becomes less transparent and more difficult for readers to follow.

These examples suggest that cohesion-related errors may carry a risk of stabilization because they often do not cause immediate communication breakdown. Readers may still understand the general meaning, and instructors may overlook these problems if feedback focuses mainly on sentence-level grammar. However, in academic writing, inappropriate connector use and unclear reference can weaken coherence, argument development, and reader orientation. Therefore, these patterns require explicit pedagogical attention, particularly through discourse-level feedback, model-text analysis, and guided revision activities.

Taken together, the grammatical, morphological, and discourse-related errors identified in this category indicate that several features of English academic writing remain difficult for advanced EFL learners to control consistently. Features that differ substantially from Bahasa Indonesia—such as article use, plural marking, modality, cohesion, and explicit referential tracking—appeared to be particularly vulnerable to stabilization. Table 2 summarizes the representative error patterns, possible stabilization mechanisms, and estimated risk levels identified in this category.

Table 2: Representative Grammatical and Morphological Errors, Fossilization Mechanisms, and Risk Levels

Error Code	Error Type	Example	Fossilization Mechanism	Risk Level
A8	Article-Noun Collocation	"the abilities and information"	L1 absence of article system + communicative adequacy	High
B4	Article Omission	"developing students' language skills"	L1 absence of determiners + unnoticed omission	High
C11	Plural/Determiner Concord	"students' motivation, interest, and perception"	L1 absence of obligatory plural marking	High
C10	Verb Form Error	"proofed to have a significant effect"	Irregular verb overgeneralization + no feedback	High
A14	Modal Nuance	"This includes supplying..."	Fossilized lack of modal nuance + cognitive load	Moderate → High
D31	Tense-Register Mismatch	"brings up a lot of issues"	L1 absence of aspectual marking + simplified tense system	Moderate
B8	Connector Overuse	"Hence, although... in fact"	Formulaic fossilization + positive reinforcement	Moderate
B14	Ambiguous Reference	"The change..."	Discourse-level fossilization + below awareness	Low → Moderate

Discourse and Rhetorical Structure Issues

Beyond sentence-level grammatical errors, the analysis revealed systematic issues at the discourse and rhetorical level. These included overuse of limited cohesive devices, overgeneralization of nominalization, and pragmatic imprecision in verb and lexical selection. Critically, discourse-level errors showed higher fossilization risk than many grammatical errors because they operate below conscious awareness and receive less corrective feedback from instructors, who tend to focus on local errors rather than global coherence.

Overuse of Limited Cohesive Devices

The analysis showed that several learners relied heavily on a limited set of causal and logical connectors. Although the use of connectors is expected in academic writing, the repeated use of similar devices without sufficient rhetorical control may weaken coherence rather than strengthen it. One participant wrote:

"Because of that, English lessons have never been successful as a subject in education in Indonesia." (B47)

In this example, the phrase "because of that" is understandable, but it functions as a relatively informal and broad causal link. A more precise academic formulation would require a clearer reference to the preceding idea and a more formal causal transition, such as "As a result" or "Consequently," depending on the surrounding context. The issue, therefore, is not simply the use of a connector, but the learner's limited ability to select a cohesive device that accurately reflects the logical relationship between ideas. A similar pattern appeared in another participant's essay, where "hence" and "therefore" were used repeatedly:

"Hence, although English has been taught since an earlier age..." (B15)

"Therefore, English classes should be intense and effective..." (B48)

These examples suggest that the learner may have acquired several high-frequency academic connectors but has not yet fully developed pragmatic control over their rhetorical functions. In academic writing, connectors are not interchangeable markers of formality; each carries a specific logical function and must be used in relation to the surrounding argument. When learners repeatedly use connectors such as "hence," "therefore," and "because of that" without clear semantic or rhetorical precision, the writing may appear formally academic on the surface but remain weak in logical progression.

This pattern may indicate a stabilized formulaic tendency in the use of discourse markers. Rather than showing a lack of awareness that connectors are needed, the data suggest that learners may depend on a narrow repertoire of familiar linking expressions. Because these

expressions do not usually prevent readers from understanding the general meaning, they may receive limited corrective feedback. As a result, the repeated use of these connectors can become familiar and difficult to revise. The pattern therefore carries a moderate risk of stabilization, particularly if learners are not given explicit feedback on the rhetorical functions of cohesive devices in academic writing.

Collocational Precision and Academic Register

The analysis also showed that some learners attempted to use academic-sounding expressions but did not always demonstrate sufficient control over collocation, semantic precision, and register appropriateness. In academic writing, lexical accuracy is not only a matter of choosing words with correct dictionary meanings, but also of selecting words that naturally occur together and fit the intended rhetorical context. Several examples in the data suggest that learners were able to communicate their general ideas, yet their lexical combinations sometimes sounded unnatural or imprecise in academic English. This indicates that the learners may have developed partial knowledge of formal vocabulary, but had not yet fully acquired the phraseological patterns that make academic writing precise, idiomatic, and contextually appropriate. One participant wrote:

“Purchasing workshops, seminars, and certification programs for educators can provide them with the tools they need...” (A21)

In this example, the word “purchasing” is not contextually appropriate because workshops, seminars, and certification programs are not normally “purchased” in academic English. A more natural formulation would be “providing workshops, seminars, and certification programs,” “funding professional development programs,” or “organizing training opportunities for educators.” The issue, therefore, is not simply grammatical accuracy, but the learner’s ability to select verbs that collocate naturally with academic and institutional activities.

This example suggests that the learner may be attempting to use a formal academic expression, but the lexical choice does not fully match the intended meaning. Such errors are important because they are often communicatively understandable, yet they reduce the naturalness and precision of academic writing. When learners repeatedly rely on approximate word combinations that are accepted as understandable but remain non-target-like, these patterns may become familiar in their writing. Therefore, this type of error may indicate a risk of lexical-collocational stabilization, particularly if learners receive limited feedback on word choice, collocation, and register appropriateness.

Pragmatic and Lexical Imprecision

The analysis also revealed several cases of pragmatic and lexical imprecision. These errors did not always make the sentences grammatically incorrect, but they reduced the precision, naturalness, and academic quality of the learners' writing. One participant wrote:

"The Indonesian government ought to fund teacher training initiatives to address this problem."
(A8)

This sentence is grammatically acceptable, and the verb "fund" can be used in this context. However, depending on the intended meaning, a more contextually nuanced academic expression might be "invest in teacher training initiatives," "support professional development programs," or "allocate funding for teacher training." The issue here is therefore not a clear lexical error, but the learner's limited range of academic verb choices for expressing institutional responsibility and policy recommendation. A clearer example of lexical imprecision appeared in another participant's writing:

"...students can learn English through the stories of local culture..." (B50)

The phrase "stories of local culture" is understandable, but it sounds vague and less idiomatic in academic English. More precise alternatives would be "local folktales," "cultural narratives," or "locally rooted stories," depending on the intended meaning. Similarly, another participant used the phrase "fun and educational games" (B57), where "educational games" would be the more target-like expression. This example indicates a word-form and collocational problem, as the learner appears to use "educated" to describe the instructional function of the games, although the appropriate adjective is "educational."

Taken together, these examples suggest that some learners were able to communicate their intended meanings but had not yet fully developed control over collocation, register, and semantic precision in academic writing. Because such expressions remain understandable, they may not always receive focused corrective feedback. As a result, approximate word choices and non-target-like collocations may become familiar patterns in learners' writing. These lexical-pragmatic patterns may therefore indicate a moderate risk of stabilization, particularly if learners are not given explicit feedback on academic vocabulary, collocation, and context-appropriate expression.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that recurring learner errors in Indonesian university EFL writing are not limited to isolated grammatical inaccuracies. Instead, they appear across interconnected linguistic and discourse domains, including discourse-level organization, grammatical features absent from learners' first language, and lexical-pragmatic precision. In

line with interlanguage theory, these patterns suggest that some non-target-like forms may have become stabilized in learners' academic writing. However, because this study used a cross-sectional design, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of stabilized interlanguage and fossilization risks rather than as confirmation of permanent fossilization. The following discussion connects the results with previous work on interlanguage, error analysis, L1 transfer, feedback, and academic writing pedagogy.

Discourse-Level Instability as a Stabilized Interlanguage Pattern

The first major finding concerns recurring instability at the discourse level, reflected in semantic redundancy, overuse of limited cohesive devices, and ambiguous referential tracking. These features did not appear only as individual mistakes; rather, they formed a repeated pattern across learner texts. This finding is consistent with studies of EFL academic writing showing that learners often struggle not only with sentence-level accuracy but also with cohesion, coherence, and rhetorical control. In this study, such patterns suggest that learners had developed some ability to organize argumentative texts, but they still lacked full control over English academic discourse conventions.

One possible explanation for this cluster of discourse-level errors is L1 rhetorical transfer from Bahasa Indonesia. Indonesian writing may allow more repetition and implicit contextual reference, whereas English academic writing tends to value lexical economy, explicit cohesion, and clear anaphoric reference (Benu et al., 2022; Fajrina et al., 2022; Hyland & Jiang, 2022). When learners transfer familiar rhetorical habits into English, their writing may remain understandable but less precise and less aligned with English academic conventions. Because feedback in EFL classrooms often prioritizes grammar over discourse-level cohesion, these patterns may receive limited corrective attention and gradually become stabilized. Therefore, the findings suggest a need for discourse-level feedback that explicitly addresses redundancy, connector use, and referential clarity.

Grammatical Difficulties in L1-Absent Categories

The second major finding concerns grammatical features that have no direct equivalent in Bahasa Indonesia, particularly articles, obligatory plural marking, aspectual distinctions, and modal nuance. The results show that learners repeatedly omitted or misused articles, produced verb form errors, and relied on simplified tense or modal forms. This finding supports previous SLA research showing that L2 features absent from the learner's L1 are often difficult to acquire because learners cannot rely on positive transfer and may not notice the communicative importance of these forms (Han, 2004; Master, 1997).

These grammatical categories may become particularly resistant to change for two reasons. First, learners must acquire new grammatical concepts that are not obligatory in their

first language. Second, errors in these forms rarely block comprehension, so learners may not receive enough negative evidence to restructure their interlanguage. For example, missing articles or simplified tense choices may still allow the reader to understand the intended meaning. As a result, learners may continue to use non-target-like forms successfully, which increases the risk of stabilization. Pedagogically, this finding points to the need for sustained form-focused instruction, input enhancement, and explicit contrastive analysis of English and Indonesian grammatical systems (Chung & Révész, 2024; Sharwood Smith, 1993).

Lexical-Pragmatic Imprecision as Formulaic Fossilization

The third major finding involves lexical-pragmatic imprecision, including overgeneralized nominalization, generic verb selection, and unidiomatic expressions. Unlike article or tense errors, these problems are not always visibly grammatical; many of them are grammatically possible but pragmatically weak or collocationally unnatural. This finding is important because advanced EFL learners may appear capable of producing academic-looking sentences while still lacking control over the lexical patterns and phraseological conventions that make academic writing precise and idiomatic.

What distinguishes these errors from grammatical difficulties is their formulaic nature. Learners seemed to rely on familiar academic-sounding expressions, nominalized forms, and high-frequency connectors without always understanding their collocational or pragmatic constraints. This supports previous research showing that L2 writers may equate formal complexity with academic quality, even when the resulting expression is semantically vague or stylistically inappropriate (Hyland, 2005; Hinkel, 2004). Because such forms may sound academic to learners and may not obstruct comprehension, they can be reinforced through use and remain resistant to change. Therefore, lexical-pragmatic instruction should move beyond vocabulary lists and address collocation, genre-specific phraseology, and near-synonym distinctions.

Selective Fossilization and Pedagogical Directions

Across these findings, a consistent pattern emerges: stabilization is selective rather than global. Learners demonstrated developing macro-level academic literacy, including recognizable argument organization and attempts at formal academic expression. At the same time, recurring problems in discourse management, article use, cohesion, and lexical precision indicate that some linguistic subsystems may have stabilized while others continue to develop. This finding is theoretically important because it suggests that advanced proficiency should not be judged only by overall text organization or communicative success. Instead, teachers need to examine which specific linguistic and discourse features remain resistant to development.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings argue against isolated and occasional error correction. Three integrated interventions are recommended. First, contrastive rhetoric instruction can help learners compare Indonesian and English discourse conventions, particularly in relation to repetition, connector use, and referential clarity. Second, input enhancement and structured input tasks can target L1-absent grammatical features such as articles, plural marking, tense-aspect distinctions, and modals. Third, corpus-informed lexical instruction can help learners notice collocational patterns, academic phraseology, and differences among near-synonyms (Coxhead, 2000; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Without such targeted and sustained intervention, the recurring patterns identified in this study may continue to stabilize in learners' academic writing.

Conclusion

This study examined recurring learner errors and fossilization risks in the academic writing of Indonesian university EFL learners. The findings show that non-target-like forms appeared across several domains, including lexico-syntactic structure, article use, prepositional choice, cohesion devices, lexical precision, and rhetorical control. Three interconnected patterns were identified. First, discourse-level instability, including redundancy, conjunction stacking, and ambiguous reference, may reflect the transfer of Indonesian rhetorical habits into English academic writing. Second, recurring grammatical errors in L1-absent categories, such as articles, plural marking, and modal nuance, suggest that some forms remain difficult to acquire because they are not required in Bahasa Indonesia and often do not disrupt comprehension. Third, lexical-pragmatic imprecision, including overgeneralized nominalization and generic verb choice, indicates that learners may associate academic writing with formal complexity rather than precise and idiomatic expression. These findings suggest that advanced EFL proficiency may coexist with stabilized linguistic vulnerabilities that require explicit pedagogical attention.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design captures recurring errors at one point in time and therefore cannot confirm permanent fossilization. Second, the study involved a small number of participants from one institutional context, which limits the transferability of the findings. Third, the analysis focused only on argumentative essays and did not examine other academic genres or spoken production. Future longitudinal research should follow the same learners over multiple writing tasks and semesters to identify how particular error patterns stabilize, change, or respond to instruction. Intervention studies are also needed to examine whether contrastive rhetoric instruction, input enhancement, discourse-level feedback, and corpus-informed lexical training can reduce stabilized error patterns in Indonesian EFL academic writing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article. No financial, personal, institutional, or professional relationships influenced the conduct of the study, the interpretation of the findings, or the preparation of the manuscript.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Nadira Syifa Azzahro: Conceptualization, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, data curation, writing – original draft, and manuscript formatting.

Noor Malihah: Supervision, methodology, validation, theoretical refinement, writing–review and editing, and academic integrity review.

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