



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-3; June, July & Aug(2026)

Demographic Influences on English Writing Errors: Gender, Residential Background and School Background of VIII standard students in Cuddalore district

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Article Received: 20/07/2026

Article Accepted: 24/08/2026

Published Online: 26/08/2026

DOI:10.53413/IJTELL.2026.7.3.80

Abstract

English writing errors of VIII standard students of Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu, India have been taken as the focus of this study to find the effect of various demographic factors, namely gender, rural or semi-urban background of the students and type of school management. A stratified random sampling of 105 boys and 105 girls was taken from Government, Government Aided and Welfare schools (70 students from each school type). Of these, 107 were rural students and 103 semi-urban students. This total of 5,138 errors was identified and quantified following the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, produced by writing samples elicited by six descriptive tasks. Welfare school students had the highest error rates, followed by Government school students and Government Aided school students (31.84%, 31.56%, respectively). Although there was no gender imbalance and little imbalance in school residential context in each school type, school management context was the strongest correlate of error frequency. The findings highlight the importance of institutional variables, especially differences in resources and staffing, alongside individual demographic variables, for L2 writing performance. The implications for equitable resource allocation, targeted remedial programmes, and teacher professional development are discussed.

Keywords: Demographic Factors, Gender, Rural Education, School Type, Errors in English writing, Error Analysis, Cuddalore District, Surface Strategy Taxonomy.



1. Introduction

English writing remains a persistent area of difficulty for middle school students across India, including Cuddalore district in Tamil Nadu, which has below-average academic performance. Although the traditional research of Error Analysis has focused on linguistic and psycholinguistic aspects or sources of error (Corder, 1967; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), there is increasing evidence that demographic and institutional factors such as gender, place of residence, and type of school management also influence the outcome of L2 writing. Identifying these factors is crucial for developing pedagogical interventions that are effective and important for advancing educational equity.

The present study investigates the relationship between gender, residential background (rural or semi-urban), and the types and frequency of errors made by students in VIII standard in the process of writing English. The investigation is based on three research questions:

1. What is the demographic composition of the learner sample across school types?
2. What are the differences in overall error rates between Government, Government Aided and Welfare schools?
3. What patterns can be found in the cross-tab of gender and residential background at each school type?

2. Literature Review

Studies on L2 writing show that learner background variables influence error patterns in L2 writing, which in turn are influenced by linguistic factors (Ellis, 2008; Gass & Selinker, 2008). Studies in Indian and international contexts support systematic variations linked to school type, socio-economic status, and differential access to instructional resources. Generally, Government and Welfare schools in the Indian education system cater to children from weaker sections of the socio-economic spectrum and are often plagued by constraints in teacher availability, learning materials, and teaching support. Results from various studies have been inconsistent, with some stating that females perform better in language tasks and others stating that any differences were either unimportant or context-dependent. Learners in rural areas face other difficulties due to low exposure to English outside the classroom and limited access to additional learning aids. These factors justify examining demographics alongside linguistic error analysis. Surface errors have been documented in previous research with VIII-grade students of Cuddalore District (Balaji & Nagalakshmi, 2023a) and secondary students (Balaji & Nagalakshmi, 2023b), and an analysis of Error Analysis further validated the need to explore the linguistic and socio-



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cultural factors (Balaji & Nagalakshmi, 2022) in the context of the present study. In the present study, the context is set at the intersection of gender, residential background, and institutional context in relation to error frequency.

3. Methodology

The study used a descriptive survey method. In Cuddalore District, 210 students in VIII standard from 7 Schools (2 Government Schools, 2 Government-Aided Schools, and 3 Welfare Schools) were selected using a stratified random sampling technique. The number of students sampled was equal across school management types: 70 students in each type. We obtained writing samples using six descriptive writing tasks, including picture story writing, paragraph writing, formal letter writing, and informal letter writing. Errors were detected, categorized using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay et al., 1982) and counted. Descriptive analysis explored the sample composition and error frequency by school type, gender, and residential background. Writing achievement, based on performance data (marks), was also analyzed and categorized into five achievement bands to provide complementary information on writing.

4. Results

4.1 Overall Sample Composition

The final sample of 210 students was perfectly balanced with regard to gender (105 boys, 50% and 105 girls, 50%), almost equally balanced with regard to the residential background (107 rural students, 50.95% and 103 semi-urban students, 49.05%) and evenly stratified with regard to the type of school management (70 students, 33.33%, each from Government, Government Aided, and Welfare schools).

4.2 Demographic Cross-Tabulation by School, Gender, and Residential Background

Table 1 presents the cross-tabulation of students by school type, individual school, gender, and residential background. The gender distribution of children was exactly balanced overall and within each of the three management categories for the schools (35 boys and 35 girls in each school type). Residential students showed little variation in background across individual schools.



Table 1. Demographic Cross-Tabulation of Students by School Type, Gender, and Residential Background (N = 210)

School Type	School	Boys	Girls	Rural	Semi-urban	Total
Government	Govt School 1	18	20	21	17	38
	Govt School 2	17	15	17	15	32
	Sub-total	35	35	38	32	70
Govt Aided	Aided School 1	15	17	17	15	32
	Aided School 2	20	18	17	21	38
	Sub-total	35	35	34	36	70
Welfare	Welfare School 1	11	11	12	10	22
	Welfare School 2	8	10	10	8	18
	Welfare School 3	16	14	13	17	30
	Sub-total	35	35	35	35	70
Grand Total		105	105	107	103	210

When disaggregated by gender and locality (Table 2), the two largest subgroups were rural boys ($n = 66$) and semi-urban girls ($n = 64$), while the smaller groups were rural girls ($n = 41$) and semi-urban boys ($n = 39$). The sampling imbalance does not explain these patterns; they likely reflect the natural demographic composition of the sampled schools.



Table 2. Gender-Locality Distribution of Students (N = 210)

Category	n	% of sample
Rural Boys	66	31.43%
Rural Girls	41	19.52%
Semi-urban Boys	39	18.57%
Semi-urban Girls	64	30.48%
Total	210	100%

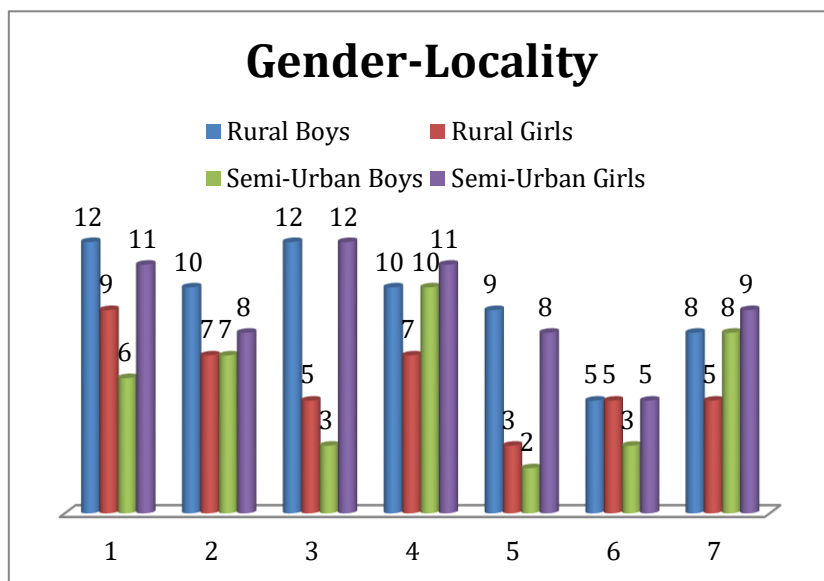


Figure 1: Gender-Locality Bar Diagram



4.3 Overall Error Distribution

In all 210 writing samples, 5138 errors were picked up. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics of total errors made by students. Errors ranged from a minimum of 11 to a maximum of 39, with an average of 24.47 (SD = 8.16) and a median of 21.00.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Total Errors (N = 210)

Statistic	Value
N (Valid)	210
Mean	24.47
Median	21.00
Standard Deviation	8.16
Minimum	11
Maximum	39
Sum (Total Errors)	5,138

4.4 Error Rates by School Management Type

The total number of errors (5,138) can be broken down by school management type, revealing a distinct hierarchy (Table 4). Welfare school students made the highest percentage of errors (36.59%), followed by Government school students (31.84%) and Government Aided school students (31.56%). The proportional differences are systematic because the sample sizes are equal across the three school types, suggesting that Welfare school learners make errors more frequently.

Table 4. Distribution of Total Errors by School Management Type

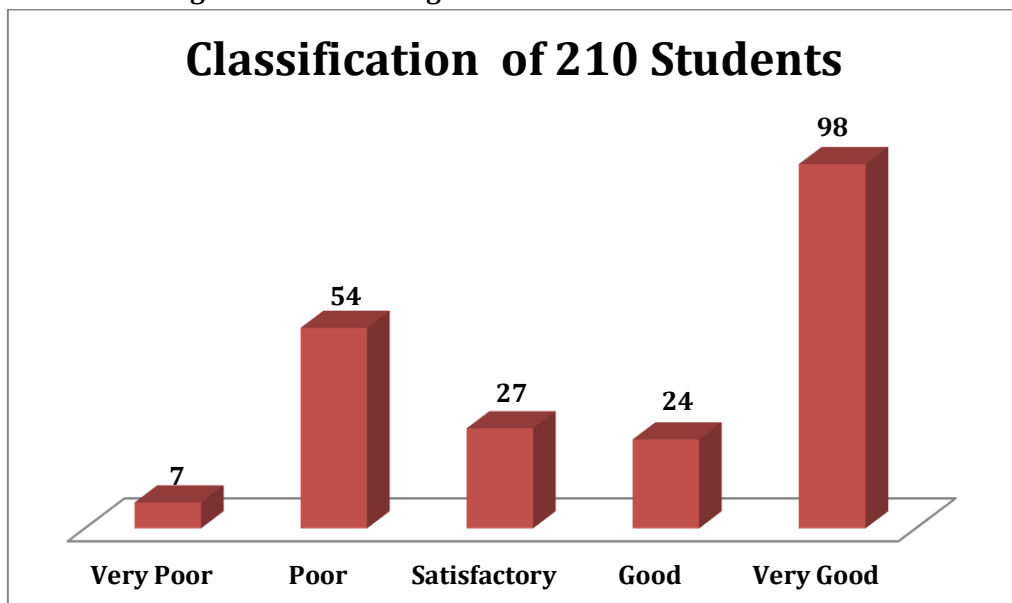
School Type	Share of Errors	Rank
Welfare Schools	36.59%	1 (Highest)
Government Schools	31.84%	2
Government Aided Schools	31.56%	3 (Lowest)

**4.5 Writing Performance (Marks) Classification**

Overall, students' writing marks were divided into five achievement bands (Table 5) to complement the error-frequency analysis. Nearly half the sample (46.67%, n = 98) fell into the Very Good category (≥ 60 marks), while 25.71% (n = 54) were classified as Poor (25-39 marks) and 3.33% (n = 7) as Very Poor (< 25 marks).

Table 5. Classification of Students by Writing Marks (N = 210)

Category	Marks Range	n	%
Very Poor	< 25	7	3.33%
Poor	25-39	54	25.71%
Satisfactory	40-49	27	12.86%
Good	50-59	24	11.43%
Very Good	≥ 60	98	46.67%

Figure 4.2.2. Bar Diagram for Classification of Students



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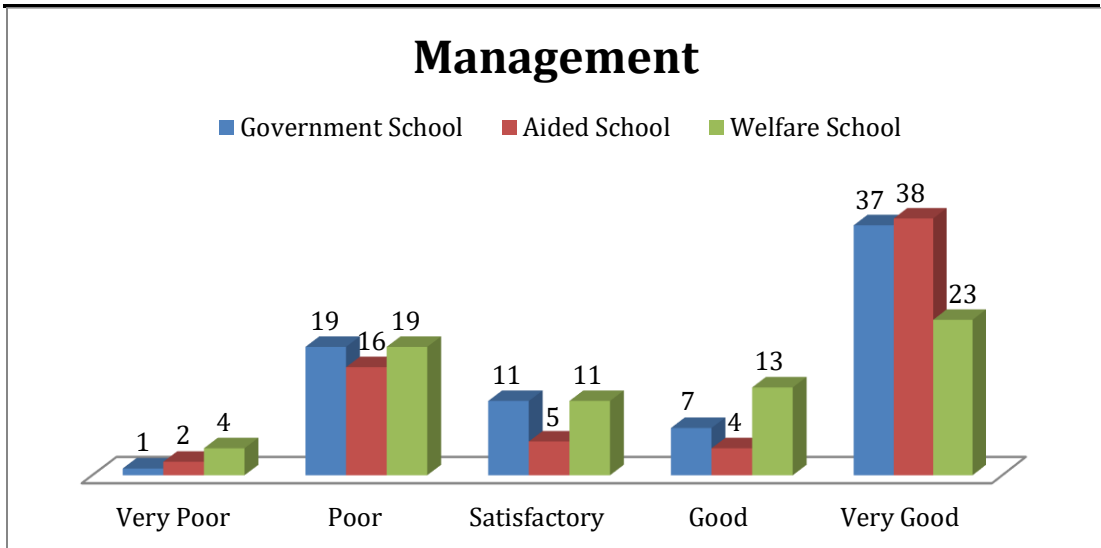
A disaggregation by school management type (Table 6) reveals that Government Aided schools had more Very Good performers (38/70 students), followed closely by Government schools (37/70 students). Very Good performance was lowest in welfare schools (23/70), and the absolute number of Very Poor students was highest there (4). A gender-wise analysis showed that in the Very Good group, girls outnumbered boys (69 girls to 29 boys), but in the Poor and Satisfactory groups, boys predominated. Semi-urban students also achieved better results in the Very Good category (58 compared to 40 for rural students).

Table 6. Marks Classification by School Management Type

Category	Government	Aided	Welfare	Total
Very Poor	1	2	4	7
Poor	19	16	19	54
Satisfactory	11	5	11	27
Good	7	4	13	24
Very Good	37	38	23	98
Total	70*	65*	70	210

*Note. *Slight discrepancy in Aided School total relative to the planned $n = 70$ reflects the original data tabulation; overall N remains 210.*

Figure 4.2.3. Bar Diagram for Management-wise Classification of Students



4.6 Summary of Key Patterns

The cross-tabulations of detailed respondents verify that the sample was carefully balanced by gender for each school type and was almost balanced by residential background. However, variations in error rate and achievement classification between school management types were clear; though not completely unexpected, the differences were apparent. Welfare schools recorded the highest share of errors and the lowest proportion of high-achieving writers. Gender and residential background, while associated with secondary performance differences (favouring girls and semi-urban learners in the highest achievement band), did not independently explain the main variation in error rates. These results indicate that school context, particularly the resource and staffing conditions characteristic of Welfare schools, influences English writing error frequency more strongly than gender or residential background alone.

5. Discussion

The findings show that school management type influences English writing error rates more than either gender or rural versus semi-urban background. Welfare schools, which frequently operate with fewer teachers and more limited instructional resources, accounted for the largest share of the 5,138 recorded errors (36.59%). The perfect gender balance within each school type and the near balance in residential background suggest that these individual demographic variables do not independently explain the observed variation in error frequency.



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These results are consistent with broader observations that institutional factors, including teacher availability, learning materials, and instructional support, play a critical role in second-language writing development (Ellis, 2008; Gass & Selinker, 2008). They also align with earlier Error Analysis studies conducted in the same district, which documented high frequencies of preposition and modal auxiliary errors among middle-school learners in government and aided schools (Balaji & Nagalakshmi, 2023a, 2023b). The complementary marks analysis further corroborates this interpretation: Welfare schools produced fewer Very Good performers and more students in the lowest achievement bands. Although girls and semi-urban learners showed relative advantages in the highest achievement category, these patterns did not override the primary effect of school type on overall error frequency.

Interventions that focus exclusively on gender or residential background therefore risk overlooking the structural conditions that shape learner performance. The present data indicate that institutional disparities constitute the more consequential lever for reducing writing errors and improving proficiency among VIII standard students in the district.

6. Implications for Policy and Practice

The study has several implications for educational policy and classroom practice. The priority is resource allocation and teacher deployment, giving priority to Welfare schools and under-resourced Government schools, which had the highest proportion of writing errors and the lowest proportion of high-achievement writers. Second, remedial English programmes are likely to be more effective if they target schools that make the most errors, rather than being administered uniformly across all schools. Thirdly, teacher professional development related to Error Analysis and evidence-based writing instruction needs to be extended equally to all school management categories to ensure teachers in all settings have effective diagnostic and instructional strategies. Lastly, future studies should gather and examine more detailed cross-tabulations of specific error types (e.g., omission, addition, misformation, misordering) by gender and residential background. These analyses could then allow investigation of potential interactions and provide a richer understanding of how demographic and institutional characteristics shape learners' writing.

7. Conclusion

The present study focused on the effect of the demographic composition of VIII standard students in Cuddalore district on their English writing errors and investigated the relationship between the two. There were equal numbers of students in Government, Government Aided and Welfare schools (70 students in each). Overall, boys and girls were



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perfectly balanced (105 boys and 105 girls, and 35 boys and 35 girls at each school type). Residential background was nearly balanced (107 rural, 50.95%; 103 semi-urban, 49.05%).

Despite this balanced demographic composition, overall error rates differed clearly across school management types. Of the total 5,138 writing errors, Welfare school students accounted for the highest share (36.59%), followed by Government school students (31.84%) and Government Aided school students (31.56%). Achievement classification showed similar patterns, with Welfare schools producing fewer high-performing writers.

The results showed that the influence of school management type, particularly the resource and staffing conditions associated with Welfare schools, exerts a stronger influence on English writing error rates than gender or residential background. Addressing institutional disparities in teacher availability and learning support is therefore essential for promoting more equitable development of English writing skills among middle-school learners in the district.

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