

# An Analysis of the Written Grammatical Errors Produced by Freshment Students in English Essay Writing

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**Abstract :** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat taksonomi kesalahan gramatikal yang dibuat oleh mahasiswa di dalam menulis esei bahasa Inggris. Dua puluh esei yang dikerjakan mahasiswa baru sebagai tugas mata kuliah Writing dijadikan sebagai sumber data penelitian. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat lima belas kelompok kesalahan gramatikal yang dibuat mahasiswa. Lima kelompok utama adalah kesalahan dalam pemilihan kata, kelompok verba, artikel, preposisi, pluralitas, dan ejaan, sedangkan kesalahan tata bahasa lain adalah kesesuaian subjek dan verba, susunan kata dalam kalimat, kesesuaian pronomina, penghilangan pronomina, penggunaan pronomina relativa, kopula, penanda kepemilikan, dan mekanik. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, guru disarankan agar melakukan pengajaran yang lebih eksplisit tentang aspek gramatikal yang bermasalah tersebut. Di samping itu, guru juga perlu melakukan replikasi untuk melihat taksonomi kesalahan gramatikal yang dibuat oleh mahasiswa yang diajarnya.

**Kata kunci:** kesalahan gramatikal, koreksi kesalahan, analisis kesalahan, antar bahasa

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing has been realised by the English language teaching practitioners. Good language users are supposed to be able to express themselves in both spoken and written language. As an attempt to increase the proficiency of learners in written production of English, Writing has been widely taught as a discrete subject in various foreign language teaching programs.

However, Writing courses challenge students and teachers. In the part of the students, writing is viewed as a daunting and time consuming tasks. To satisfy the requirements, students should produce written texts with various types of

development and hand them to the teacher. And later, having corrected them, the teacher will return those texts to the original writer with feedbacks that may be in a form of cross-out in red or green ink through-out the paper or written comments in a more polite remarks. Similarly, in the part of the teacher, writing is viewed as a heavy-loaded course. The teacher should allocate a lot of extra time to read the texts produced by students. To illustrate this burden, when a teacher teaches three groups of students and each consists of forty and s/he spends five minutes to correct each essay, s/he will spend about six hundred minutes. This is equivalent to ten hours' work per assignment.

Do teacher's effort to spend ten hours correcting student's essay per assignment produce effective result? Some people are in doubt about it. The correction from the teacher may be counter-productive for several reasons. Firstly, it may discourage students. To express their frustration, some of the students cinically said that "the more we write the more we make mistake." Even though this expression can be taken as a joke, it shows how they feel about the correction made by their teacher. Secondly, the students may not learn from the correction provided by the teacher. This is specifically true when the teacher corrects all errors in the essay. Consequently, students could not see their particular weaknesses in the written production of English. Finally, the teachers could not provide a remedy for their students although they realise that their students do face problems. Since they correct all errors, they only know that students are weak in written production and they cannot locate the area of the weaknesses.

Actually, ther two strategies that can be applied by the teacher to use the students' errors as tools for improving their grammatical competence. First, the teacher may use the Garden Path Method developed by Tomasello and Heron (1988). This technique is used to encourage students to formulate their own general grammatical rules to the target language, and then overtly corrected when they make overgeneralization. Tomasello and Heron claimed that this technique may help the learners correct their errors caused by transfer and overgeneralisation. Secondly, the teacher may use error analysis to identify the students' common errors and focusing the correction on those errors. This attempt can besuccessful when the teacher could obtain beneficial information from students' writing by applying structured correction. This could be done when the teachers are able to analyse the errors and locate the source of these errors.

The writing product can be evaluated on the basis of five aspects, namely: content, organisational structure, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. In this study the examination will be limited into two areas, that is language use and

mechanics. To gain an understanding of the source and frequencies of errors made by Indonesian learners, the writer proposes the study of errors in written production of English. For this purpose, the writer has set up the research questions as follows:

1. What are the common errors made by Indonesian speaking learners on written production of English? What are the classification of those errors? What is the distribution of those errors in their categories?

This study is important for English teachers in Indonesia in the way that it may provide them with an understanding of what has been gained by the Senior High School graduates on English. Its significance for English lecturers is that the findings may provide a clear description of students errors so that the lecturer may make the attempts for handling students' errors in order not to be fossilised in part of the students.

### **Review of Related Theories**

Error analysis is different from error correction. Error analysis makes a scientific study of errors made a group of people who share the same mother tongue when they study a second or a foreign language. Sobahle (1986) stated that error analysis indicates all errors produced that are common to that group of people. In this study the group of people refers to Indonesia speaking learners.

Corder (1973) suggested that students' errors have positive value for teachers, student and researchers. Errors can give the indication for the teacher of how far the learner has come and what he still must learn. Meanwhile, in the part of student error is an instrument he uses to test out his hypothesis concerning the language he learns. In addition, the researchers use errors to support their hypothesis on the strategies and procedures used by learner to acquire the language (see Schachter and Celce-Murcia, 1977: 144).

As an effort to study errors made by students, error analysis has been used for identifying the source and classifying errors. In the first attempt of the analysis, the similarities and the differences between the source and target language system were used as the basis for predicting the source of errors. In accordance with the development in the other areas such an understanding of second language acquisition and empirical evidence that often do not support this hypothesis, the feasibility of this analysis is in question. Richards (1971: 214) suggested the inadequacy of the parameter used in contrastive analysis. He said that contrastive analysis contributes the idea of locating the inter language interference but many errors are attributable to the strategies used by the learners in acquiring the language system. He argued that contrastive analysis

may be most predictive at the level of phonology and least predictive at the level of syntax.

As an alternative, Richards (1971) proposed other possible sources of errors. From his analysis on previous research on errors made by many different mother tongues, he concluded that several types of errors caused by the difficulty in the language itself and the immaturity of learner acquisition which in his term called intra-lingual and developmental errors. On the basis of their causes intra-lingual and developmental errors are classified into four general categories namely over-generalisation, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesised.

Corder (1973) classified the errors based on learner's level of learning in to pre systematic, systematic and post systematic. Pre systematic errors are made by learners when they try to understand the new linguistic points. Those errors are characterised by the inability of learners to correct them and they even do not realise that they have produced errors on their utterance. The systematic errors are made by students as the consequence of the wrong concept of linguistic point involves. The post systematic errors are deviant language form produced by students after their errors have been remedied. These errors are characterised by the capability of learners to correct and explain them.

On the basis of the severity of errors affecting communication, Burt (1975) classified errors into global and local errors. Global errors "affect overall sentence organisation and significantly hinder communication." Meanwhile local errors "affect single element (constituent) in the sentence and usually do not hinder communication." General criteria for global errors are the mistakes that totally disrupt the S-V-O sequence of the English language, mistakes in subordinate and co-ordinate conjunctions that totally change the meaning of the sentence and make incomprehensible or equivocal. In the sentence with more than one clause mistakes in over-all organisation which confuse the relationships among the constituent clauses. Meanwhile the general criterion for local errors is the mistakes within clauses or simple sentences.

### **Review of related findings**

Several studies have been carried out to identify the taxonomy of errors in written English produced by speakers of other languages. The Government Teacher training College, Ceylon (1972) conducted a survey of students' errors in English. The findings revealed that the errors made by student are mainly on articles, prepositions, possessive forms and word order. Therefore, they suggested that those new categories showed that students' errors have been shifted from those in twenty years ago. Therefore, they suggested that those new

error taxonomies should be taken into consideration by the textbook writer for Ceylonese.

Wyatt (1973) studied the errors made by the prospective participants of the East African Certificate Examination. He identified fourteen categories of errors. The findings of his study showed that the major areas of errors were spelling (18.4%), sentence structure (16.6%), verb groups (15.2%) and noun groups (16.2%), punctuation (7.8%), whereas the other nine categories were less than five percent each. Those were: Pronouns (1.6%), adjectives (2.4%), prepositions (4.1%), intensifiers (0.6%), confusion and misuse of idioms (4.7%), contraction, abbreviation and informalities (2.6%), repetition (3.7%), clumsy or meaningless expression (2.4%) and carelessness (3.6%).

The same research was conducted by Thom (1985) to identify the taxonomy of errors produced by Vietnamese students and English teachers in Vietnam. He classified the errors into ten categories. In comparison, the major categories of errors produced by students and teachers were: Spelling (15.38 : 11.42), lexical (23.84 : 34.23), verbal (18.46 : 11.42), prepositional (15.38 : 11.42), article (13.84 : 8.57), punctuation (5.38 : 8.57) and morphological (4.61 : 11.42). Meanwhile, both students and teachers produced fewer errors on three other categories namely concord (1.53 : 0), word order (0.76 : 0) and discourse (0.76 : 0).

The more recent studies on error analysis still emphasize the taxonomy of the errors, the cause of errors and their implication on language teaching. In secondary school context, there have been two studies on error analysis on students' essay writing in Malaysian secondary school context and one in Jordanian context. Maros et al (2007) found that the three most common errors were the use of articles, subject-verb agreement, and copula *be*. While, Darus and Subramaniam (2009) studied the errors in the written English essays made by secondary school students in Malaysia. The findings of their study revealed there were fifteen categories of errors, and the most common errors were singular/plural forms, tense, word choice, preposition, subject and verb agreement, and word order. Zawahreh et al (2012) studied errors made by ten graders in writing English essays and found that the most prominent errors were subject-verb agreement, insertion of preposition, verb omission, tense, and word choice.

At the University context, error analysis has been conducted in Nepal, Jordan, and Iran. Giri (2009) found that bachelor level students of English in Nepal produced all sorts of grammatical errors in the use of the English language, and the seven most errors were on conditional, mood, verb forms, tense, main verb, subject-verb agreement, question formation. In Jordan, Abushihab et al (2011) studied grammatical errors produced by university students enrolled in

paragraph writing class. They found that the most problematic areas for students were preposition, morphological errors, articles, verbs, passivisation, and tense. While Abbasia and Karimnia (2011) studying students error in Iranian university tried to reclassified errors into lexico-semantic and syntactico-morphological errors. In lexico-semantic categories, they found that the student produced false cognates (82%) and Cross association (18%). In syntactico-morphological categories, the seven most occurrence errors were word order, tense, there-existensial, passivisation, word form, preposition, and question formation.

The research findings above show that the sources of errors are predictable but their frequencies cannot be predicted. Palmer (1980) suggested the frequency of errors in terms of percentage it represents of all mistakes is relevant in the analysis of errors on written production of a language.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

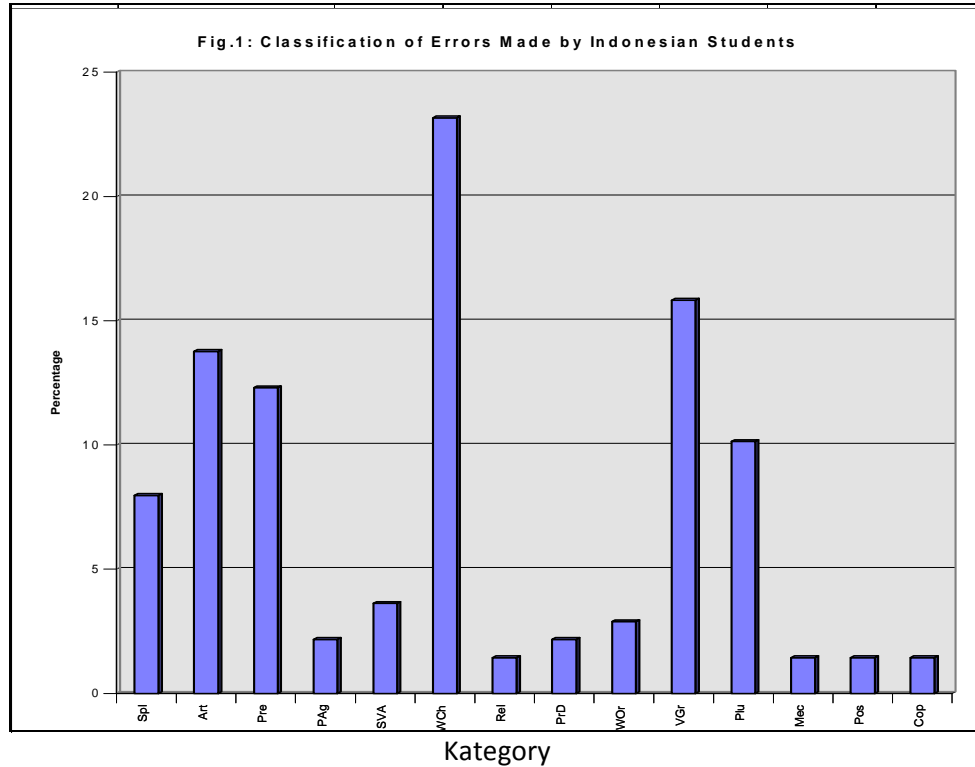
Twenty Indonesian students studying Writing I were chosen as the subjects for the study. Data were collected from the writing assignment written by students at home. The total language corpus collected is approximately 10.000 words. The writer corrected those essays by identifying the errors made by students in their written production. To maintain the consistency of the correction and reliability of the findings, the writer asked help from another lecturer to correct the other copies and label the errors made by the students. Then, The results of the correction made by the writer was matched against that made by the co-corrector.

The identified errors were counted based on their frequencies. When the same error occurred twice, they were counted as two errors in the tabulation. Then, these errors were classified based on the procedures suggested by Etherton (1977). In the classification level, the errors were tabulated and classified into the following categories: spelling, article, preposition, pronoun agreement, word choice, relative clauses, pronoun deletion, word order, verb group - productions of verb, distribution of verb and tense, plurality, mechanics, possessive and copula omission. Then, from this tabulation, the frequency of errors and the percentage for each category was calculated to see their distribution and severity - the most frequent errors were the mostly needed for remedy.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Major Findings**

Data analysis showed that there are fourteen categories of errors commonly made by Indonesian students studying writing I. The distribution of those errors is shown in the following table



- |                              |                   |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Spl = Spelling               | PrD = Pro Drop    |
| Art = Articles               | W.Or = Word Order |
| Pre = Preposition            | V.Gr = Verb Group |
| P.Ag = Pronoun Agreement     | Plu = Plurality   |
| SVA = Subject-verb agreement | Mec = Mechanics   |
| Wch = Word Choice            | Pos = Possessive  |
| Rel = Relative Pronoun       | Cop = Copula      |

The table above shows that the most severe errors regarding the occurrence are word choice for 23.2 %. The second place is errors in verb group with the occurrence of 15.8%. Errors in placing articles occupy 13.8% of errors

tabulated. Meanwhile, errors on the prepositional use are 12.31%. Placing plural markers produces problems to students with the level of occurrence of 10.1%. It is followed by errors in spelling 8%. Subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement and pronoun drop are not so many produced by students namely 3.6% and 2.1%. The field with the least errors produced are relative clause, possessive and copula omission. Each occupies only 1.4% of the total errors.

### **Discussion and Interpretation**

As shown in table 1, spelling is an area where students make significant errors. English spelling is difficult for the learners because of its irregularity and some sounds are represented by several different orthographic symbols. The most common errors seemed arise from students' carelessness in writing. This may result in the omission of a letter that is not an unsounded one in the word (\**avantages*, \**disavantages*, \**the* (= they). The second category of spelling errors arises from the confusion of irregularity of spelling system. This may result in the writing of two words into one (\**and soon* (=and so on), \**anymore* (=any more). The third category is caused by the intention of the writer to write the words based on phonetic analogy (\**influenacial*, \**quiz*). This finding confirms Haggan's (1991) idea that mispronunciation, lack of awareness of spelling rules and irregular spelling patterns strongly contributed to spelling errors. She found that this even will be more among the more advanced students.

The use of article is another area of errors for students. Like spelling, the use of articles is very confusing for Indonesian learners. It is due to the fact that Indonesian does not have an article. In addition, the English article rules are slightly complicated and more complex in the production level because the learners should work on two different things - content and language. The errors on articles are classified into the errors arising from the omission of an article when needed \**After ceremony in the morning people have \_ variety of competition*. \**He was attacked by \_ shark*. From data analysis, it is found that the omission of article dominates the errors in this category (70/95).

Besides omission, some students also inserted articles in the unnecessary slot. \**Parents should guide the(ir) children when they watch the television*. \**They really have to follow the school program(s) which are too much for them*. In the other occasion students chose the inappropriate article. \**One man which name is Bobby .had a tragedy*.

The use of preposition is other source of errors with the frequency of 12.31%. Those errors arise mostly from the confusion of the selection of appropriate preposition and the irregularity of uses. This category comprised the omission, insertion and the wrong choice of preposition. The errors are



dominated by the wrong selection of preposition (60/87). The wrong choice is, normally, caused by mother tongue interference. When the students do not know the exact preposition to use, they use their existing language rules to map up and shape the intended form. \*They are prohibited in their religion. In this example, students confused the use of oleh and dalam where in the Indonesian translation both are applicable. \*Tony Lee painted his colour(s) to his instrument. In this sentence the use of to (pada) is acceptable in Indonesian. Some respondents inserted or omitted the preposition. \*Some of teenager(s) take drugs for escaping from the problem. \*He explain \_ us that every aborigin(ese) has some colour(s). Those errors attributed to wrong analogy of the target language rules. The possibility of making the construction like some of them ... and He told me encouraged students to infer that they may be generalised into the form as the sample sentences above.

Pronoun agreement is very important in English. The speaker usually uses the common noun as a referent and then later uses pronoun to replace it through out the discussion. This pronoun should agree with the plurality of its reference. The findings showed that students do not produce significant errors on this category (3.6%). \*When they didn't have enough money to buy drugs they steal them. The probable reason for this error is the complexity of the sentence distract student's attention from finding the corresponding noun represented.

Errors in subject-verb agreement are found in students' writing with the frequency of 26/691. There are two possible reasons for the production of this error. Firstly, when the sentences are long and the verb has been preceded by another noun, the error is caused by the lack of anticipation of the writer on the corresponding noun related to that verb. \*The serious disadvantages of television is producing a harmful influence on children. \*Television is one of the media which have been used widely all over the world. Secondly, students are careless when they are writing. This happened specifically in writing simple sentences. \*That are the main problem of students in Jakarta. They doesn't like the way their parent(s) (treat) them.

There were 163 out of 691 errors concerning the choice of word in students' writing comprising the errors in the word selection (diction) and the selection of wrong morphemes in derivational words. Some inappropriate diction resulted in the meaning distraction directly in the part of the readers. \*The United States tried to persuade hardly to all delegates accepting it (=strongly). Hardly is direct translation from Indonesian dengan keras/alot, therefore it can be concluded that the mother tongue interference causes this error \*They doesn't like the way their parents threat them (=treat). The almost similar sounds confuse the learners in choosing the appropriate orthographic representation of the

intended meaning. The errors caused by the wrong selection of morphemes in the formation of derivational words seemed not to distract meaning directly, even though it may produce an awkward sentences. \*on independent day (=ence), \*Every aboriginal have some colours (=es). Those errors seemed arise from the lack of understanding of function of different morphemes affixing to the basic words in the formation of derivational words.

From the language corpus collected the writer found only one error on relative pronouns. This error is caused by the confusion of the which and whose. \*One man which name is Bobby had a tragedy.

Pro-drop occurred four times. Students omitted the pronoun either in subject or object position. \*Children just absorb what they watch without thinking whether is suitable or not for them. \*If you want to go to gymnastic, you can go. It is near. There is near city. Pro-drop is caused by mother tongue interference. Indonesian is a pro-drop language in terms that it does not need it-impersonal in sentence constructions.

Four errors are identified on the ordering of the words in sentences. The misordering of the words may produce distraction on communication. Burt (1975) classifies this type of error as global error in the way it influences the sentence in general. \* If parents controlled what are their children watching.... \*Behind of the apartment has a park. \*You need to come home at late night.

Twenty-two verbal errors are identified. They comprise the production of verb group, the distribution of verb group and selection of tenses. Errors in the production of verb group dominated this category. Word stem is used for word+s in five occasions: \*Television also influence children, \*but it depend on monitoring from parents; wrong form after modal \*They will fighting without any reasons, the confusion of active and passive form \*The fire brigade was tried hard to extinguish the fire. \*They have been work hard. \*We released from Japanese in 1945.

Errors related to the distribution of verb group occurred seven times. They comprised the confusion of verb+ing and verb+s \*It showing too much violence. Please thinking about it. The confusion of past and present form \*The police still investigated cause of fire. some teenagers taken drugs for escaping from their problems. Included in this category is the wrong selection of tenses for nominal sentences \*Aids still was a dangerous illness. \*Aids was different with other illness.

Plurality of nouns is another major problem for Indonesian Learners. The table shows that ten percent or 70 of the total errors are on plurality. The common errors on plurality of English are the omission of plural markers from intended nouns. Those errors may be attributable to the different system of

plurality between Indonesian and English where Indonesian only has quantifiers before nouns without additional affixed plural marker to noun. \*Children have fewer activity. \*Some of teenager and student taken drugs.... \*It is very difficult for them to break their viewing habit.

Mechanics of writing, possessive pronouns and copula are not a big problem to students. Each was represented by two errors or 1.4% of total errors. The problems with mechanics of writing are capitalisation and run-on sentence. For the possessive students do not use the suitable possessive pronoun before noun. Two nominal sentences were written without the copula as a verb-predicative.

## **CONCLUSION**

The discussion section reveals that there are five major categories in which students produce many mistakes namely word choice, Verb group, article, plurality and spelling. Therefore, it is worth suggesting that the teacher should pay more attention to the occurrence of those errors in the future and provide relevant remedies as an attempt to prevent student from fossilising the wrong concepts of language usage. The very limited data of the study prevents the researcher from making the generalisation of the findings into a larger population. Therefore, the writer suggests that the further research should be carried out to replicate the study in to a wider population. What is shown by this study is the general taxonomy of errors in writing. In order to make further exploration in this field, the writer also suggests that further research is needed to study the relationship between errors made by student and his age and length of stay in target language environment, and whether the mode of discourse affects the error production on writing.

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