# AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' ERRORS IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of the research was to reveal the types of grammatical errors made by 25 college students who were taking the course of Writing III on descriptive writings. Furthermore, it attempted to identify and describe the error types and then to find out the grammatical error type made the most by those students. To get the data from the field, the researcher asked the students to write about "STAIN Malikussaleh Lhokseumawe". To analyze the data, the researcher used the model by Miles and Huberman (1994) of qualitative analysis. The data were analyzed through analyzing the grammatical incorrect form of the sentences by marking the errors, reconstructing the correct sentences, classifying the types of errors and counting the errors in order to know the most common type of grammatical error. As the result, the researcher found that the students made 288 errors in their descriptive writings. The errors occurred in all types of errors investigated. They are verb tense, verb form, subject-verb agreement, plural, possessive inflection, definite article, indefinite article, word order, run-on, and fragment. And, the students made the most errors (77 occurrences or 26%) in fragment. The source of errors was also mostly due to interlanguage transfer. Therefore, English teachers should be aware of these findings as an input in their teaching of writing. Teachers can teach students to avoid these common errors in their future writing.

Key Words: *Error Analysis, Descriptive Text, Grammatical Errors.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Good English writing competence is widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business and personal reasons. Omaggio (1986) states that if learning to write in a second language was simply matters of knowing how to "write things down" in the new code, then teaching writing would be a relatively easy task. But writing is a complex process which demands cognitive analysis and linguistics synthesis (Tan, 2007). Most EFL students find it even harder to learn to write than to learn to speak in a foreign language, and sentence errors are still a serious problem for students when they are asked to write a text (Ananda, Gani & Sahardin, 2014). As a consequence, language learners may make errors in writing in various forms, such as grammatical errors, cohesion errors, coherence errors, etc.

It is believed that writing is very difficult, and thus the learners need to have a comprehensive understanding, cognitive analysis and linguistics synthesis to pattern the language in order to be able to deliver the ideas, messages and feeling to the listeners or readers through writings (Tan, 2007). As a matter of fact, in most cases grammatical errors are always found in students' writing. However, by making errors, learners will build their new knowledge to use the target language (Ho, 2003). It can be considered as a means of building learners' abilities when students make errors during studying the foreign language because they can learn something from making errors. It means that learners can increase their ability by learning from errors they make. Ho (2003) confirmed that instead of just being able to recognize errors, the learners are now able to explain the rules and correct the errors.

Based on a preliminary study on students of the English Study Program of STAIN Malikussaleh, the researcher found that they still committed many errors in their writing despite that they have obligatory classes of Writing I, Writing II, Writing III, and Essay Writing in their program. It turns out that these courses were not enough for them to build their ability in writing. Therefore, it was deemed important to analyze these errors. Sirait (2012) believes that by knowing the writing errors done by the students, the teachers can take them as advantages for the students themselves, such as (a) a device which the learner uses in order to learn, (b) to fully grasp and understand the nature of errors, and (c) instead of just being able to

recognize errors, the learners are now able to explain the rules and correct the errors.

Accordingly, the researcher formulated the problem of the study as follows:
(1) What grammatical errors are made by the students in descriptive texts?
(2) What sources of errors are made by those students?

This result of this research is expected to become a reference for either teachers or students to enrich their knowledge related to grammatical errors in writing, for it shares valuable inputs about errors that the students encounter in writing. Besides that, it is also hoped to be useful for other researchers who want to conduct some related studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A descriptive text provides a good platform for a writer to express his or her feelings on a subject. As the name suggests, the writing is a description of an object, person, location, or experience. The essay generally includes an introduction, body and conclusion centered on a chosen theme. The writing style is expressive and may include descriptions, opinions, comparisons, personal perceptions and sensory perceptions. The main objective of a descriptive essay is to relate the unique qualities of the person, object, etc. vividly and comprehensively.

McCarthy (1998) states that descriptive writing is that domain of writing that develops images through the use of precise sensory words and phrases, and through devices such as metaphors and the sounds of words. Furthermore, he explained that the term descriptive writing rightly makes us think of wonderful poetry of vivid story paragraphs that help us see settings of forests or seascapes or city streets, of passages that show us people acting, speaking and feeling in ways that make them believable and real to us. McCrimmon (1984) explains that description is a strategy for presenting a verbal portrait of a person, place, or thing. It can be used as a technique to enrich other forms of writing or as a dominant strategy for developing a picture of "what it looks like". Moreover, technical description provides readers with precise details about the physical features, appearance, or composition of a subject. Everett (1997) illustrates that a description is a verbal picture of a person, place, or thing. When describing someone or something, it is important to give readers a picture in words. To make

the word picture as vivid as possible, observe and record specific details that appeal to all of the reader's senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. A descriptive paper needs sharp, colorful details (Everett, 1997).

It can be concluded that the primary purpose of descriptive writing is to describe a person, place or thing in such a way that a picture is formed in the reader's mind. Capturing an event through descriptive writing involves paying close attention to the details by using all of the five senses. Teaching students to write more descriptively will improve their writing by making it more interesting and engaging to read.

**Identifying Errors**

There are those so-called "errors" or "mistakes" that are more correctly described as lapses (Şanal, 2007). Brown (1987) states that a mistake refers to a performance error, it is a failure to make use of a known system. It is common to make mistakes in both native and second language situations. Normally native speakers are able to recognize and correct such lapses or mistakes which are not the result of a deficiency in competence, but the result of imperfection in the process of producing speech.

Corder (1973) confirmed that errors are deviances that are due to deficient competence (i.e. "knowledge" of the language, which may or may not be conscious). As they are due to deficient competence, they tend to be systematic and not self-correctable. Whereas "mistakes" or "lapses" that are due to performance deficiencies and arise from lack of attention, slips of memory, anxiety possibly caused by pressure of time, etc. They are not systematic and readily identifiable and self-correctable. He adds that error analysis is a comparative process. So, in order to describe the errors, in a way, we use a special case of contrastive analysis, and we compare synonymous utterances in the learner's dialect and the target language, in other words we compare "erroneous utterance" and "reconstructed utterance".

Ferris and Roberts (2001) mention some categories of grammatical errors that occur in writings, they are: 1) verbs: tense, form, subject-verb agreement, 2) nouns: noun endings (plural and possessive), 3) articles/ determiners errors, and 4) errors in sentence/ clause boundaries: word order, run-on, fragments. Furthermore, in relation to measurement affectivity of error analysis, Şanal (2007) explains that the analyst must understand fully the mechanism that triggers each type of error. The sources of errors could be due to interlanguage or

intralanguage transfers (Richards, 1974). They are explained in the next sections.

**The Source of Error in Writing**

In the field of error analysis, it has been understood that the nature of errors implicates the existence of other reasons for errors to occur. The sources of errors are categorized within two domains: (1) interlingual transfer, and (2) intralingual transfer (Richards, 1974).

*Interlingual Transfer*

If the learners of a foreign language make some mistakes in the target language by the effect of their mother tongue, that is called as interlanguage transfer. Chelli (2014) defines that interlingual transfer as being the result of language transfer, which is caused by learner's first language. Errors from interlingual transfer may occur at different levels such as transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical and lexica-semantic elements of the native language into the target language.

Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) further define errors from interlanguage transfer as a continuum between the first language and the target language along which all learners negotiate. An example provided by Altunkaya (1999) is any Turkish speaker learning English may say, "Ahmet Fatma ile evlendi" in his mother tongue, and he may transfer his old habit to the target language. The result would be "Ahmet married with Fatma", which is not acceptable in English.

*Intralingual Transfer*

Interferences from the students' own language is not the only reason for committing errors. Ellis (1997) states that some errors seem to be universal and they reflect the learners' attempts to make the task of learning and using the target language simpler. Learners may also make mistakes in the target language, since they don't know the target language very well; they have difficulties in using it. This is called the intralingual errors (James, 1998). For example, they may say "mans" instead of saying "men" as the plural form of "man". In that way the learner overgeneralize the use of plural suffixes. Another example is the use of past tense suffix *-ed* for all verbs which is called simplification and over generalization. These errors are common in the

speech of second language learners, irrespective of their mother tongue.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is research aimed at describing grammatical errors of EFL students in descriptive writings. This research took place at STAIN Malikussaleh which is located in Lhokseumawe. The participants of the research were 25 students from the English Study Program of the college who were taking the course of Writing III.

The data were from the students' essays on descriptive text. Each of them was to write a 200-word essay on the topic "STAIN Malikussaleh Lhokseumawe" in a one hour time. After their essays were collected, there were 25 portfolios of students' descriptive writings to be analyzed for the errors occurrences. In detecting the errors, the researched categorized the errors into the grammatical categories proposed by Ferris and Roberts (2001). They are: 1) verbs: tense, form, subject-verb agreement, 2) nouns: noun endings (plural and possessive), 3) articles/ determiners errors, and 4) errors in sentence/ clause boundaries: word order, run-on, fragments.

The technique to analyze the data was as suggested by Norrish (1992), which consisted of collecting errors, identifying errors, describing errors, and explaining and evaluating the errors. This model presented analysis as a continuous, interactive process involving the phases that constantly impact upon each other and were carried out simultaneously. The phases were integral to this study and their application is outlined as follows: data display, description and conclusion/verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results showed that the total occurrences of errors in all categories were 288. The first category, verb errors category, occurred 50 times which is divided into three types of errors, verb tense, verb form and subject-verb agreement.

From the data, the first category of the verb errors is the verb tense which comprised 5 errors and the verb form comprised 14 errors. Meanwhile, in subject-verb agreement error, the students made the most errors with 31 occurrences in the category. The second category is noun ending errors. The errors occurred in this category were 53 times,

with the classification of 50 times errors that happened in plural error and only 3 times occurred in possessive inflection error. The third category is article errors which have two types of errors, definite and indefinite article errors. In this category the errors occurred 27 times, with the errors distribution of 6 occurrences in definite and 21 occurrences in indefinite type of error. The last category was sentence errors category. The first type of error in the category is word order. It consisted of 39 errors. The second one was run-on type of error, which consisted of 32 errors. And the last type of error was fragments. It had the highest frequency with 77 times of errors.

Looking at the errors, most of the students' errors were related to addition. These errors were identified when the students put unimportant words in their sentences. In line with Gustian (2012), these errors could be seen when they put auxiliary 'was' and 'were' in verbal sentences. Moreover, their errors that were related to misformation were characterized by the use of the wrong form of the morpheme or structure (Dulay & Burt, 1974). In this study, the researcher found that some students did not know about the use of tenses. They used the past form of the verb to express present events or condition. In addition, the errors were also related to misordering. He found that the errors that were related to misordering and made by the students were when they attempted to write a noun as the modifier for the other noun. These errors were characterized by the incorrect placement of a group of morphemes in an utterance. In this study, errors of misordering were found in word order.

It can be concluded that the students made the errors in all types of errors. The students made 5 errors or 2% in verb tense, 24 errors or 9% in verb form, 31 errors or 10% in subject-verb agreement, 50 errors or 17% in plural, 3 errors or 1% in possessive inflection, 6 errors or 2% in definite article, 21 errors or 7% in indefinite article, 39 errors or 13% in word order, 31 errors or 11% in run-on, 77 errors or 26% in fragment and 9 errors or 3% in other errors. Based on the data, the researcher confirmed that the students made the most errors with 77 times of occurrences in the fragment type of error.

Based on the students' errors explained above, the source of errors can be discussed in two terms of language transfers: interlingual and interlingual. From the errors that the students made in this study, the researcher can tell that they were influenced by their first language (Bahasa Indonesia) which has no specific verb form for actions. They failed to use the correct form of verbs in their sentences. For example,

the students wrote "Although the street was not yet". Furthermore, the use of auxiliary verbs, such as 'are' and 'were' in nominal sentences, also led them to make the errors in their writings. This error is simply affected by the grammar of Bahasa Indonesia which has no specific auxiliary in nominal sentences as in the English grammar.

Another source of errors is related to intralingual transfer. The use of past auxiliary in the past tense where the students put two marks for one tense was an example of simplification and over generalization. For examples, a student wrote, "There are have many trees…"and "You can coming to the library". These errors are common in the speech of second language learners; they result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer. They may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another.

Thus, it was found that the errors the students' made most were influenced by their mother tongue, and this is the interlanguage transfer. This led to the students' ignorance in mastering the rules of structure of English for the reason. They failed to put the correct tenses, the correct forms of verbs, the correct word order, their unfamiliarity of using articles, and their incapacity to create good sentences in English.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the data, analysis, and discussion in the previous chapters, the researcher concluded that the students made the most frequent errors in fragments, followed by the use of plural and word order, and finally article errors. Based on the analysis of the data, the source of these errors seemed to be most due to interlanguage transfer.

With regard to the result of the study, there are some suggestions that the writer intends to offer. Students should learn more about the ways of constructing sentences, the use of verbs in tenses, auxiliary verbs, articles, and word order to improve their writing skills. Furthermore, lecturers should understand the source of the errors so that they can provide appropriate remedy, which will resolve the learner's problems and allow them to discover the relevant rules. Thus, the source of the error is an important clue for the lecturers to decide on the sort of treatment. They should create comfortable classes that can stimulate the students to learn. Finally, the lecturers should give more exercises and explanation about the common problems and errors that students typically made to further avoid the redundancy of errors in their writing.

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