# ANALYSING GRAMMAR MISTAKES ON WRITTEN WORKS OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Students make mistakes because they practice to produce the language. However, sometimes the students do not realize that they make mistakes when they do exercises. Hence, they need to be shown on the mistakes as parts of the feedback that the teacher give in a process of teaching and learning. Written works of elementary students to a certain extent are similar with the spoken language that they produce when they practice. Accordingly, analyzing the grammar mistakes on written works of the language students of elementary level is very useful as it can be used as input for elementary students when they learn to communicate both in oral and written. The present study is an attempt to find out the mistakes that the students make on the basis on their written productions. The result shows there some grammatical aspects that the students constantly produced. As their elementary written work is similar with that in their spoken language, the present study will be beneficial for language teachers in pre-assuming and emphasizing on what to teach in elementary level.

**Keywords**: language errors/mistakes, feedback, written works, elementary students

## Introduction

Mistakes or errors are parts of what people learn in life. This also applies to students when they learn a language. Students make mistakes because they learn. In fact, they make mistakes as they would like to 'experiment' on the language materials that they have learnt before.

In learning the language, whether it is for English as the mother tongue or first language or English as a foreign language, the skills begin with the listening skill, then on to speaking, then n on reading and finally. Writing is the highest language skill after three others: listening, speaking and reading, It a productive skill involving some language elements including grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. For elementary students, to write in their first language is hard; moreover when they are asked to write in a foreign language.

Writing is used to express ideas. While most people can express his/her idea through speaking, not all can do so in written format. However, to a certain extent, writing is a representation of speaking. Accordingly, investigating errors or mistakes in the students

elementary written language can help identify problems that the students face in learning other language skills.

For this study, the researchers obtain data taken from first year students of first semester in a college in Bandung. The data collected are samples of students (simple essay writing from non-English department). The students were assigned to write an essay about 'Describing My Favorite Place' instead of presenting it orally.

This study is limited on identifying mistakes/errors made by the students in their written work. The mistakes /errors are focused on grammatical mistakes/errors. Mistake is a deviant made by the students in writing or speaking because lack attention, fatigue, carelessness or some other aspects of performance. Mistakes can be self-corrected when attention is called (Ellis, 1997). While, error is a deviant made by the students in writing or speaking because they do not know what is correct and thus it cannot be self-corrected. However, the term mistake and error in this study is used interchangeably.

Simple essay, in the present study, is an essay with limitation of words (150 – 200 words) and the topic is provided by the lecturer and is supposed to be familiar to the students.

The purposes of this study are:

1. to find out mistakes/errors often made by the students especially on grammar on the simple written work
2. to be aware of the mistakes/errors made by the students make.

With the knowledge on the students' mistakes, the teacher will be expected to pay more attention to the materials that he/she has to teach mistakes, so teaching can be more focused and effective. According, this study is expected to have implication for improvement on the teaching-learning process especially with the grammar applied in writing.

To have the right direction of the research, the questions below are formulated:

1. What kind of grammatical (elements) mistakes/errors made by the students in their (simple) essay writing?
2. What are the most common mistakes/errors made by the students?

## Literature Review

The literature review on error analysis and grammar mistakes/errors involve the concepts of English language errors or mistakes, why mistakes or errors happened and an idea on simple writing.

## Research on Language Error Analyses

There are a number of studies on error analysis. Saleha (2004), identified various grammatical errors which are classified into errors of addition, omission, substitution, and ordering. Her study showed that out of the four types of errors, error of omission is the most frequent (occurring 20 times), followed by error of substitution ( 19 times), error of addition (10 times) and error of ordering (3 times).

Another study by Sukyadi (2005), investigated how to understand the variables that had important role in determining the syntactic error in his students written work, and how to improve them. The variables mentioned are analytic ability, syntactic ability, paraphrasing and writing ability. His study showed that syntactic ability didn't become the prerequisite in deciding the high-low frequency of syntactic errors in the students' written work. In other words a respondent might have limited syntactic ability but his syntactic errors are few. This meant that, there was great possibility that his writing ability was good. The result of his study showed that syntactic errors found in written work didn't have any relationship with their syntactic knowledge more over with their analytic ability.

The great number of researches on error analyses and error correction were conducted because analysing and correcting errors has pedagogical benefit. Erdagon (2010) mentions some contribution of error analysis to foreign language teaching beneficial especially for language teachers and syllabus designers.

Richards et al (1992) states that error analysis can make teachers able to identify strategies which learners use in language teaching, identify the causes of learner errors, and obtain information on common difficulties in language teaching. While Corder (1987) formulates that errors tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn (when necessary to reteach some parts still misunderstood). While Jimena et al (2010) emphasizes that error correction can become a bridge in a sense of improving grammatical accuracy in second language writing.

Ellis (1997) suggests two ways to differentiate error from mistakes: the first one is to check the consistency of learner's performance. The learners can correct their own mistakes, learners do not know what to correct the wrong parts of the language.

Error identification by Barlett, C C (2010) involved a group of Korean teachers of English to see how well this group could identify and explain errors in a series of language examples that reflect concern with spoken English.

Errors and mistakes happen for some reasons. First, it is the language transfer, overgeneralization, simplification and fossilization. Language transfer happens because there

are similarities in two languages. It may have a positive effect on language learning, but it can interfere the second and foreign language learning (Richard, 1974, p.37). Overgeneralization refers to the situation in which one form or rule of the language is overgeneralized over the other forms. This phenomenon is also observed in children while learning their first language (James, 1998). Simplification happens when learners avoids the use of the complex structure and prefers to use the very simple forms and fossilization refers to the situation when linguistic or grammatical development in certain areas is stopped while as, in other linguistic areas, the learner is developing his/her knowledge.

In another instance, Richards, J. C, et al, 1992 suggests that mistakes in a foreign language happen because of the influence of the first language (interlingual transfer) or of faulty or partial learning (intralingual transfer). The mistakes can be major or global (causing the misunderstanding or confusion to the readers) or minor or local (which may not cause misunderstanding but may annoy the readers). It is similar with what Bown (2000) suggests that global errors hinder communication, preventing the message from being comprehended, while local errors do not prevent the message from being misunderstood. This study will focus on the investigation of minor or local mistakes, especially on grammar aspects. This is because mistakes on grammar can be analysed easier or can retain the memory resulted from learning.

Making mistakes is oftentimes important as learners can realise that they learn the lessons from the mistakes thay have made. Jabeen et al (2015) suggests that it is essential for learners to make mistakes in the process of language learning. They furher asserts that the systematic analysis of these errors is very important because the error analysis serves as a linguistics analysis and it provides a deep insight in the process of language learning.

**Grammar Mistakes on Simple Writing**

First of all, it has to be clatified that the idea of simple writing refers to the written language produced by students of elementary level. The topics of such type of writing is pre-determined and  be familiar with the students' world.  Whilst, the level of elementary students may be varied in the community, hence, they are referred to  those whose paper-based TOEFL score are between 300 and 350 or IELTS of 3.5 to 4.00.

The quality of an essay does not just depend on its contents, but also on how the ideas are expressed. Accordingly, to evaluate an essay in a writing test or to find out whether an essay is of good or bad quality, it has to be seen from its size (whether it matches what it is

assigned), paragraphing, language style, and mechanics. The term mechanics refers to punctuation, spelling, and grammar. This is in line with the three levels of errors identified by James (1998 cited in Gao, 2009) including substance errors, text errors, and lexical errors.

For this study, researcher will carry out the investigation of grammar mistakes as the focus because the instruments for this study are simple essays deriving from the works of students learning English as supportive subject. In such a case, there would be no use to do an investigation on factors bigger than the grammar mistakes, such as paragraphing and language style.

A number of researches have been carried out on writings done by students. Setiawan et al (2003) made an investigation of errors on and student writing involving engineering students with around 500 subjects under investigation. While Chen, L (2009) made an analysis of error of Taiwanese beginning EFL learner's English essays with the use of multimedia tutorial on grammar learning. Jimena et al (2010), on their study,concludes that both teacher and students play important roles in error correction; when teacher can play the roles as judges, designers, scholars, motivators and trainers, learners play the roles as active participants in class, attentive monitors of their own progress and autonomous learners.

The types of grammar mistakes made by the students can be as varied as the grammar units often found in grammar books or courses. One of the most widely used grammar book by Azar (1989) lists 10 chapters of grammar lessons ranging from Tenses to Conditional Sentences, Another widely used grammar book by Hewings (1999) has 17 chapters to discuss the grammar lessons. If each chapter has about 10 sub-chapters, there will be around 170 parts of English grammar that students have to master to use English language. While, the Learner's Grammar Dictionary (Stern, 2001) lists over 250 terms which represent English grammar sections. Murphy (1987) list 130 grammar units on the most frequently used grammar deriving from some grammar areas and I think it can be the most suitable book to refer to.

From the accounts above, we can conclude that research on analysing students' writings is very common but there are always aspects to learn from the research conducted. This has proved that error analysis has beneficial pedagogic aspects from some stakeholders involved in English language learning.

## Methodology

This chapter will discuss sections related to methodology such as research design and data collection.

### Research Design

This research is about error analysis. It is dictinct from 'discourse analysis', which is concerned with the study of relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysts study language in use: written texts of all kinds, and the spoken data, from conversation to highly institutional forms of talk (McCarthy, 1991). So, discourse actually can be in a form of spoken or written text, but this research is especially conducted on written text analysis focusing on grammar mistakes.

The instruments, which are written works of students, are in a form of qualitative data, but later these data are quantified as we will have to see the ranking and percentage of the mistakes found in the writings.

### Data Collection

### Population and Sample

The population of the subjects under investigation for this research is first year students of a Polytechnic of Engineering departments. They study English as a support subject and their English level is about Post Elementary with a TOEFL score of about 350. As this is mini research, the samples are represented with the written works of 10 students.

### Instrumentation and Materials

The instruments for this study are simple essay writings which were done by the 10 students. The essay was about 'favourite place' which became one of the topics found in a syllabus studied in Engineering classes in Polytechnic. This is a simple and familiar topic so that students are supposed not to have problems on the contents to be written. Moreover, this essay assignment is a follow up or even an ending part of a series of activities in which students were given several speaking tasks before on the topic.

### Procedures

To collect data, first, each of the sample students was asked to write an essay on a favourite place. The essays were coded. Then, they were checked and analysed for the grammar mistakes The number of mistakes was calculated and compared with the number of words in each writing. This is meant to find out the percentage of the mistakes which also tell us about

the quality of the writing. This means that the smaller the percentage of the mistake is, the better the writing should be.

The next stage is tabulating the data, which means putting all the identified mistakes/errors into one big table. This will become the main data table which we will refer to find out the ranks and others. From the main table, the ranks were made to see the most common mistakes that the students have written.

The final stage is discussion on the result of the research which includes making assumptions or prediction on why the mistakes were made by the students.

## Result and Discussions

This chapter discuss the result or findings of the research and its discussion. This is especially intended to answer the questions.

### Distribution of Mistakes on The Students Written Works

The percentage of mistakes in this chapter is discussed here to see the quality of the writings, with the assumption that the smaller the percentage is, the better the quality of the writing should be. However, it should be noted that the quality of a writing depends also on other aspects such as the contents, paragraphing, style, and so on. But, a writing with a small number of mistakes is certainly better that that with a greater number.

The table below shows the percentage of mistakes made by their corresponding writers/students with their individual codes. We can see that the least mistakes was made by the subject coded number 4, while the biggest mistake was made by the subject coded number 3.

**Table 2  Percentage of Errors/Mistakes of Each Student Writing**

| Coded Essay | Number of Mistakes/Errors | Number of Words | Percentage of Errors/Mistakes |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 1 | 7 | 108 | 6.48 |
| 2 | 8 | 100 | 8.00 |
| 3 | 15 | 92 | 16.30 |
| 4 | 3 | 91 | 3.30 |
| 5 | 6 | 80 | 7.50 |
| 6 | 6 | 104 | 5.77 |
| 7 | 5 | 136 | 3.68 |
| 8 | 8 | 88 | 9.09 |
| 9 | 4 | 93 | 4.30 |
| 10 | 8 | 90 | 8.89 |
| | **Total** | | **100** |

There may be a question of whether those who made least mistakes are good learners. To find out about this, we should see the background of the writers; and for that, it needs other data including a pre-test on grammar to find out how much the writers have known about their grammar skills. The concept about a good learner should also consider 'risk 'learning strategy' as suggested by Brown (19..) in that in writing lesson, risk takers mean those who have written a lot or those who have a courage to express their ideas through writing. In this case a risk taker student should be awarded to writer coded number 3.

The clearer picture about the subjects with high or low percentage of mistakes can be seen from the graph below.

**Types of the Grammar Mistakes**
Grammar or structure is a term used to refer to a rule in producing a sentence. As the nature of a language, the rule can be in a form of patterns or set of regulations and also exceptions to the rules. Accordingly, when a sentence is written away from the rule, the sentence is wrong, or it is a mistake or error. Such a mistake or error can be found in words, phrases, clauses or sentences.

As seen from the table below, there are some grammar aspects made by the students. We believe that they are mistakes rather than errors, because the students are supposed to have learnt all the grammar aspects in before; whether they realize the mistakes or not, that is another matter.

The grammar mistakes found in the writings are *article, to be, noun (parts of speech), adjective (parts of speech) , plural/singular forms,  pronoun, possessive, preposition, vocabulary, verb, (parts of speech),  subordinator, word order* and *spelling*. The last one mentioned (*spelling*) does actually not belong to the grammar aspects, but as there is a rule in spelling a word in English, it is listed here.

The number of mistakes and the types of mistakes made can be seen on Table 1. For further details about the mistakes which include the wrong sentences where the mistakes are made, further discussion is provided afterwards.

**Table 1 Identification of Errors/Mistakes**

| Code | Error/Mistake Types | | | | | | | | | | | | | SUM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Article | To Be | Nouns | Adjectives | Plurals | Pronouns | Possessive | Preposition | Vocabulary | verbs | subordinates | Word Order | spelling | |
| 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | | | | 7 |
| 2 | 3 | 1 | | | | 1 | | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | 8 |
| 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | | 3 | 2 | | | | | 15 |
| 4 | | 1 | 2 | | | | | | | | | | | 3 |
| 5 | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 1 | | 2 | | | 1 | 6 |
| 6 | 1 | | 2 | 1 | | 1 | | | | 1 | | | | 6 |
| 7 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | | 1 | | | | | | | 5 |
| 8 | 1 | 3 | 2 | | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | | 8 |
| 9 | | 2 | | | 1 | | | | | 1 | | | | 4 |
| 10 | 3 | 1 | | | 2 | | | | | 2 | | | | 8 |
| **Total Number of Mistakes** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | **70** |

Some of the examples of errors can be seen in the following and the categories of errors are discussed below; please note that in one sentence, there may be more than one grammar mistakes found, but what are displayed below are the mistakes which are fundamental to understanding of the idea of the sentence.

**Articles:**
As seen from the example, we can see that the mistakes on the article re in the absence of the article a or the (which should be there) as in: It is good beach (sic) and It is medium bedroom (sic). and the choice of a or the or no article required as in: We can meet a good places (sic)

**Vocabulary**
We can see that the mistakes happened because the writers did not know the correct form of vocabulary as in There is a mount (sic). They used the incorrect words: The hill is quit wide (sic).This is often the choice of words that the learners may have been confused with..

**Singular/Plural**
The mistakes that the students made here are the absence of 's' for plural forms as in there are s lot of tree (sic) and a beautiful views (sic); the ignorance of the type of word whether it is a singular or plural verb as in This place are on (sic), and many kind (sic) The word 'news' is confusing to learners as with the existence or ending of 's', the word looks plural.

**Verbs**

The mistakes that the students make here are the choice of form of verbs whether it is with s or without as in Some farmers harvests (sic), the use of suffixes 'ing' or 'ed' form: There also I can listening (sic) and It is design (sic) or even the use to be; the gerund form: I like spend (sic).

**To be**

Here the mistakes are found in the form of the absence of to be (is, are, was, were or just 'to be'): The creature designed this place very perfect (sic, My room at number 3 (sic), Pictures is the west (sic), This place big enough (sic), This type of mistake may be connected with tenses or sentence type (whether it is passive or active sentence).

**Nouns**

The mistakes here mainly happened in the choice of correct form of word as in Borobudur has wide (sic), I'm always silence (sic), and

Other mistakes made by the students are found in the choice of pronouns, spelling, possessive and subordinates as in Its small (sic- pronoun), Because it is so quite (sic - spelling), and It has scenery make me (subordinator).

The mistakes made by the students as exemplified above may be categorised into two different types of grammar; they cannot be just grouped into one type of grammar mistake. However, what was shown above are the mistakes where the students have probably made.

The table below shows the types of mistakes made by the ten subjects under investigation. As they are already ranked, we can see that the the most common types of mistakes made are about *article, to be* and *noun*. This finding is actually similar with that of research done by Chen (2000 cited in Chen, 2009) in Taiwan in which he found that English articles could be one of the most difficult grammatical parts for Taiwanese EFL students.

The least types of mistakes made are about *subordinator, word order* and *spelling*. This may happen because the written words made are simple essays done by elementary students, so they may write with simple sentences, so not many *subordinators* were found in the instruments. While, *spelling* and *word order* are considered to be easy because they write with relatively common words (or the so-called 1000 word level).

These types of mistakes are actually groupings of more specified chunks of grammar. For example, article consists of the uses of *bare article,* and *articles a, an* and *the*. Plurality should also consists of *plural* and *singular* forms as well as exceptions. While, *vocabulary* could be a mistake in the choice, the forms or the uses of it. However, those types above can

also be grouped into a bigger section; such as, *noun, adjective,* and *verb* may be categorised into *parts of speech*, and the mistakes can be the mistakes in derivatives or choices.

**Table 3 Types of Mistakes Made by Subjects Under Investigation**

| No/ Ranking | Types of Mistakes/Errors | Numbers of Mistakes/ errors | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Article | 12 | 17.14 |
| 2 | To be | 11 | 15.71 |
| 3 | Noun | 10 | 14.29 |
| 4 | Adjective | 8 | 11.43 |
| 5 | Plurality | 7 | 10.00 |
| 6 | Pronoun | 7 | 10.00 |
| 7 | Possessive | 4 | 5.71 |
| 8 | Preposition | 4 | 5.71 |
| 9 | Vocabulary | 3 | 4.29 |
| 10 | Verb | 1 | 1.43 |
| 11 | Subordinator | 1 | 1.43 |
| 12 | Word order | 1 | 1.43 |
| 13 | Spelling | 1 | 1.43 |
| **Total** | | **70** | **100.00** |

This finding will be beneficial for teachers so that we can priorities the grammar topics to be presented to the students. Curriculum designer or student book writer can certainly take the benefits of this research as well as they are the developers of teaching materials in a course.

## Conclusions

The following is conclusions and suggestions deriving from the research on analysis of grammar mistakes of simple essays done students learning English as supportive subject in an Engineering class in a Polytechnic.

From the findings of the research, we can see that all students made grammar mistakes such as article, to be, noun (parts of speech), adjective (parts of speech) , *plural/singular forms, pronoun, possessive, preposition, vocabulary, verb (parts of speech), subordinator,* and *word order*. We believe they are considered mistakes rather than errors because they know or have studied the grammar rules or patterns but they made mistakes because of some reasons.

The percentage of mistakes on each subject is useful to see the quality of the writing of the student, although it should be noted that the quality is not just represented by the number of mistakes, especially when the writing belongs to a higher level student.

The most common grammar mistakes made by the students are ranked from 1 to 3 which are article, to be, and noun (parts of speech). While the least frequently made mistakes are verb (parts of speech),  subordinator, and word order. This finding especially of the first rank is in line with what has been found by a researcher in Taiwan, in which Taiwanese find that articles one of the biggest grammar problems. While, subordinator and word order were found the least common, maybe because the written works are simple essays written by beginning students. If the instruments had been of higher level, the result might have been different.

The validity issue in this mini-research is particularly related to the sampling factor which is only 10 student simple essays. This can be overcome with increasing the number of samples to around 150 students comprising 5 students from each Engineering class with the use of stratified random sampling method. While the reliability issue can be handled through inter-rater reliability principle which is corrections done by two raters from each writing.

This research is just a mini research which can be followed up later with a bigger scale research involving a bigger number of subjects under investigation. The investigations could also be made further with not just investigation on grammar mistakes, but also 'wider aspects' of writing. It would also be better if the instruments were accompanied with interviews, questionnaires or pre-tests to find out why the mistakes are made.

The greater number of subjects under investigation will be solution to respond to the threat against validity issue. While the support instruments such as questionnaire, interview and pre-tests will be useful to investigate the background of the subjects when making the mistakes. Whereas, to deal with reliability issue, inter-rater reliability method, in this case two raters check one student writing and then compare the results,  can be done.

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