Investigating Errors in English Descriptive Texts: A Focus on Students' Written Language

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the types of errors made by Indonesian senior high school students in their English writing. The analysis of 39 students' written texts reveals four major error types: misformation errors (39%), omission errors (28%), addition errors (20%), and disordering errors (13%). The findings highlight the importance of targeted grammar instruction, focusing on verb forms, sentence structure, and the proper use of articles and prepositions. The study's implications suggest that language instructors should adopt a more nuanced approach to teaching grammar, providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication and receive feedback on their language use.

1.   Introduction

Students need to be able to write and talk well in order to reveal and communicate their thoughts. Effective writing and speaking skills are essential for students to convey their ideas, opinions, and perspectives in a clear and coherent manner. However, writing is acknowledged to be a challenging task, requiring students to have a thorough plan, conduct an intellectual analysis, and combine phonetics to create a language that allows them to express themselves effectively (Tan, 2007). This complexity is compounded by the fact that students must navigate the nuances of language, including grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, to convey their intended meaning.

Indonesian senior high school students, particularly in Aceh, continue to face significant challenges in writing effectively in English. Despite the importance of English language proficiency in today's globalized world, previous studies have yielded unsatisfactory results, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to support students' writing development. The primary reason behind these difficulties is likely the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, where the grammatical structures differ from those of the native language (Bahasa Indonesia). This linguistic mismatch can lead to errors in Morpho-Syntactic structures, as noted by Tauchid and Fatoni (2019), who found that 71.4% of errors were related to these structures. Furthermore, intralingual interference, where students' perception of English as a difficult language leads to errors, was identified as the main contributing factor, accounting for 59.5% of these errors. Other factors, such as limited exposure to English language instruction,

inadequate practice opportunities, and insufficient feedback, may also contribute to the challenges faced by Indonesian senior high school students in writing effectively in English. The study by Mutaqi (2017) highlights the challenges students face in differentiating between nouns, verbs, and adjectives, despite receiving instruction on basic grammar. This lack of understanding of word classification contributes significantly to grammatical mistakes. Word classification is a fundamental aspect of grammar, as it enables students to recognize the functions of words within sentences and construct meaningful expressions.

Baker (2011) emphasizes the interconnectedness of language elements, including grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and graphology. Effective writing requires a strong vocabulary and a solid grasp of grammar, as these elements work together to convey meaning. Without proper grammar, constructing meaningful and coherent sentences becomes difficult, making grammar one of the most challenging aspects of English for learners. Ur (2002) defines grammar as the system that governs how words are combined to create meaningful expressions. Grammar provides the structure for communication, enabling speakers and writers to convey their intended meaning. Without grammatical structure, communication becomes unclear, leading to misunderstandings in both written and spoken language. Therefore, students need to understand grammar to communicate effectively.

Despite the importance of grammar in communication, students frequently struggle with sentence structure and verb tense usage, resulting in grammatical errors in their writing. This suggests that grammar instruction needs to be more effective in helping students develop a solid grasp of grammatical concepts. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to support grammar instruction, including explicit instruction, guided practice, and feedback. The findings of Mutaqi's (2017) study and the insights from Baker (2011) and Ur (2002) have implications for teaching and learning. Teachers need to prioritize grammar instruction and provide students with opportunities to practice and apply grammatical concepts. Students, on the other hand, need to recognize the importance of grammar in communication and make a concerted effort to develop their grammatical skills. By working together, teachers and students can overcome the challenges of grammar instruction and develop effective communication skills.

The present study aims to examine students' understanding of the descriptive text genre using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy as a theoretical foundation. Previous studies on error analysis have each focused on a specific skill, but since students make various types of errors, it is crucial to analyze and diagnose the challenges they encounter in the classroom. Error analysis involves identifying, categorizing, and interpreting errors made in speaking or writing, providing insights into common difficulties students face (Choironi, 2017). This research seeks to replicate previous studies by applying Surface Strategy Taxonomy to analyze the types of errors made by first-grade senior high school students in their descriptive text writing. The key research question is: "What types of errors do students commonly make in written English?" By systematically classifying these errors, the study aims to gain a deeper understanding of students' difficulties and improve English language instruction. The descriptive text genre was chosen as it is a key topic in the first semester of grade X senior high school.

Research Significance

Understanding students' recurring mistakes can help educators refine their teaching strategies, focusing more on grammar instruction, differentiation of word classes, and methods to reduce error transfer from the native language to English. Moreover, since English is a foreign language in Indonesia, this study provides insights into how students acquire and process English grammar differently from their native language. It adds to broader discussions on L1 (first language) interference, intralingual transfer, and the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning. By highlighting the most frequent errors made by students, this research can inform the creation of tailored learning materials, such as grammar-focused exercises, interactive learning tools, and targeted remedial programs. This research is significant because it not only identifies students' difficulties but also provides actionable insights to improve English language education, benefiting students, teachers, and language researchers.

2.   Results

The research method employed in this study follows a qualitative approach. According to Ary et al. (2010), qualitative research aims to explore a phenomenon, process, or perspective from the viewpoint of those involved. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the errors students make in their writing, utilizing Error Analysis (EA) as the methodological framework. This study was conducted at a private Islamic boarding school in Aceh Besar, recognized as one of the top private senior high schools in the region. The school was selected because it met the research criteria of achieving high scores in English. The subjects of this study were first-grade students from an Islamic senior high school in Aceh Besar, while the focus of the research was the grammatical errors found in their written English. The study population included all 156 first-grade students, divided into six groups. A random sampling technique was used, with no specific selection criteria, resulting in 39 students being chosen as research participants. The test was conducted over three days, from February 3 to February 5, 2025, immediately after students completed their classes.

The researcher categorized the types of errors using two fundamental criteria: language transfer and context of learning (Aziz, 2017, p. 736). To determine the number and frequency of errors, the study applied Walizer and Wiener's (1990, p. 96) statistical formula for calculating error percentages: $P = (F/N) \times 100\%$, where P represents the percentage of errors, F denotes the frequency of errors, and N refers to the total sample size. The findings of this study reveal four major types of errors in students' written English: misformation errors, omission errors, addition errors, and misordering errors. The data is figured out in the following **Figure 1**.
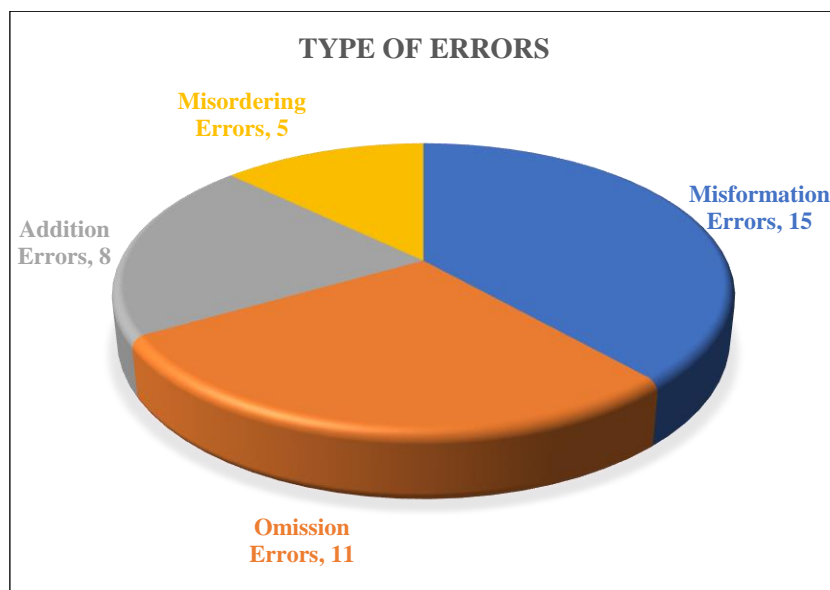

TYPE OF ERRORS

Misordering Errors, 5 — Addition Errors, 8 — Misformation Errors, 15 — Omission Errors, 11

Figure 1.

Below is a detailed analysis of each error type along with its occurrence among the 39 participating students.

1) Misformation Errors (39% = 15 students)
Misformation errors were the most frequently occurring errors, affecting 15 out of 39 students (39%). These errors typically involve incorrect forms of words or verb conjugations due to students' misunderstanding of grammatical rules. Examples of misformation errors include:
   1) Using the wrong verb tense, e.g., *"He go to school every day"* instead of *"He goes to school every day."*
   2) Incorrect word formation, such as *"childs"* instead of *"children"*.
   3) Applying incorrect affixes, e.g., *"happily"* instead of *"happy"*.

These errors indicate that students struggle with grammatical structures and word formation rules, which may be due to intralingual transfer (errors caused by difficulties within the target language itself) rather than direct influence from their native language.

2) Omission Errors (28% = 11 students)

Omission errors were the second most common, affecting 11 students (28%). These errors involve leaving out necessary grammatical elements, making sentences incomplete or ungrammatical. Examples of omission errors include:

1) Missing articles, e.g., *"I saw cat on the street"* instead of *"I saw a cat on the street."*
2) Leaving out auxiliary verbs, e.g., *"She playing football"* instead of *"She is playing football."*
3) Omitting necessary prepositions, e.g., *"She depends her parents"* instead of *"She depends on her parents."*

This type of error suggests that students may not fully understand the function of small but essential grammatical elements in English, which often differ from their native language.

3) Addition Errors (20% = 8 students)

Addition errors, which were observed in 8 students (20%), occur when students unnecessarily insert extra words or grammatical elements that do not belong in a sentence. Common examples include:

1) Adding unnecessary auxiliary verbs, e.g., *"She can to go home"* instead of *"She can go home."*
2) Overusing articles, e.g., *"The my friend is coming"* instead of *"My friend is coming."*
3) Inserting unnecessary prepositions, e.g., *"I went to to the market"* instead of *"I went to the market."*

These errors suggest overgeneralization, where students apply a rule too broadly, assuming that certain structures are always required when they are not.

4) Misordering Errors (13% = 5 students)

Misordering errors were the least frequent but still significant, affecting 5 students (13%). These errors involve incorrect word order, making sentences awkward or difficult to understand. Examples include:

1) Incorrect adjective placement, e.g., *"She is a teacher good"* instead of *"She is a good teacher."*
2) Misplacing adverbs, e.g., *"He eats always breakfast"* instead of *"He always eats breakfast."*
3) Reversing sentence structure, e.g., *"Is coming the bus"* instead of *"The bus is coming."*

Misordering errors often indicate negative language transfer, meaning students apply sentence structures from their first language to English, which follows different syntactic rules. The analysis of student errors demonstrates that misformation errors are the most common, indicating difficulties with English morphology and verb conjugation. Omission and addition errors follow, showing that students struggle with the correct use of small grammatical elements like articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs. Misordering errors, though less frequent, suggest challenges in sentence structure and word placement. These findings highlight the importance of targeted grammar instruction in English learning, particularly focusing on verb forms, sentence structure, and the proper use of articles and prepositions to help students improve their writing accuracy.

3. Discussion

The analysis of error types among the 39 participating students reveals valuable insights into the challenges faced by English language learners. The prevalence of misformation errors (39%) underscores the difficulties students encounter with English morphology and verb conjugation. This finding is consistent with previous research, which highlights the complexities of English verb forms and the tendency for learners to overgeneralize rules (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Omission errors (28%) and addition errors (20%) further emphasize the struggles students face with the correct use of small grammatical elements, such as articles, prepositions, and auxiliary verbs. These errors often result from incomplete or inaccurate understanding of English grammar rules, leading to difficulties in sentence construction (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Misordering errors (13%), though less frequent, indicate challenges in sentence structure and word placement. This error type is often attributed to negative language transfer, where learners apply sentence structures from their first language to English (Odlin, 1989). The findings of this study highlight the importance of targeted grammar instruction in English learning. By focusing on verb forms, sentence structure, and the proper use of articles and prepositions, educators can help students improve their writing accuracy and reduce error frequency. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for language instructors to be aware of the common error types and to develop strategies to address these errors in their teaching practices.

The findings of this study not only highlight the importance of targeted grammar instruction but also underscore the complex interplay between linguistic, cognitive, and environmental factors that contribute to error formation in English language learners. One possible explanation for the prevalence of misformation errors is the concept of "interlanguage" proposed by Selinker (1972). Interlanguage refers to the unique linguistic system that learners develop as they progress from their native language to the target language. This system is characterized by a mixture of correct and incorrect language forms, which are influenced by the learner's native language, the target language, and the learning context.

The high incidence of omission and addition errors can be attributed to the challenges learners face in mastering the complex system of English grammar. As noted by Bialystok (1994), learners must develop control over the grammatical rules of the target language, which requires extensive practice and feedback. The occurrence of misordering errors, although less frequent, underscores the significant role of negative language transfer in error formation. Negative language transfer refers to the phenomenon where learners' native language (L1) interferes with their acquisition of the target language (L2), leading to errors in language production (Odlin, 1989). In the context of misordering errors, learners often rely on their L1 as a reference point when constructing sentences in the L2, resulting in errors in word order and sentence structure. Recent studies have further elucidated the mechanisms underlying negative language transfer. For instance, research by Jarvis (2017) has shown that L1 influence can manifest in various ways, including lexical, grammatical, and phonological transfer. Moreover, studies by Ringbom (2007) and Cenoz (2001) have demonstrated that negative language transfer can be influenced by factors such as language similarity, proficiency level, and learning context. From a cognitive perspective, negative language transfer can be attributed to the activation of L1 linguistic knowledge during L2 processing (Kroll et al., 2015). This activation can lead to interference from L1, resulting in errors in L2 production. Neurological studies have also shed light on the neural mechanisms underlying negative language transfer. For example, research by Abutalebi et al. (2013) has shown that the brain's language control system, including areas such as the prefrontal cortex and basal ganglia, plays a crucial role in managing linguistic interference from L1.

The findings from these studies have important implications for language teaching and learning. To mitigate the effects of negative language transfer, instructors can raise awareness by informing learners about the potential for L1 interference can help them develop a more critical approach to language production. Providing explicit instruction on L2 grammar and syntax can also help learners develop a more accurate understanding of the target language. Teachers should do practice and feedback by offering opportunities for learners to practice L2 production, combined with feedback on errors, can help them develop more accurate language habits. Lastly, designing tasks that require learners to use the target language in context can help them develop more authentic language production skills.

By acknowledging the role of negative language transfer in misordering errors and incorporating strategies to mitigate its effects, language instructors can help learners develop more accurate and effective language production skills. The implications of this study are far-reaching, suggesting that language instructors need to adopt a more nuanced approach to teaching grammar. Rather than focusing solely on the presentation and practice of grammar rules, instructors should also provide learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication and receive feedback on their language use.

By acknowledging the complex factors that contribute to error formation and adopting a more comprehensive approach to teaching grammar, language educators can help learners develop a more accurate and effective command of the English language.

4.   Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the error types made by Indonesian senior high school students in their English writing. The findings highlight the need for targeted grammar instruction, focusing on verb forms, sentence structure, and the proper use of articles and prepositions. By adopting a more nuanced approach to teaching grammar and providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication and receive feedback on their language use, language educators can help learners develop a more accurate and effective command of the English language. The study's implications are significant, suggesting that language instruction should prioritize the development of grammatical accuracy and linguistic fluency.

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