

Patterns and Sources of Errors in EFL Descriptive Writing: Evidence from Universitas Jambi Students

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Abstract: This study investigates the types and causes of errors in descriptive writing produced by first-semester EFL students, focusing on texts describing people and places. Data were collected through two writing tasks administered to a purposively selected class, complemented by interviews with six representative students. Using Dulay's surface strategy taxonomy, errors were classified into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering, while their causes were analyzed based on the frameworks of Brown and Norrish. The findings indicate that omission and misformation were the most frequent error types, reflecting students' limited mastery of basic grammatical features such as subject-verb agreement, article usage, and adjective order. Interview data supported the written analysis, revealing contributing factors such as inadequate grammatical knowledge, native-language interference, and limited attention to linguistic accuracy. Although the small purposive sample limits generalizability, the study offers pedagogical insights to improve EFL writing instruction by enhancing grammar awareness and self-revision strategies.

Keywords: descriptive writing, EFL writing, error analysis, grammatical errors, sources of errors

INTRODUCTION

Writing skill is an essential activity that cannot be separated from teaching and learning processes at the university level (Mantra et al., 2020). Through writing, individuals are able to communicate, express ideas from within and beyond themselves, and enrich their experiences (Ariebowo, 2021). Moreover, writing contributes to personal development and is considered a mechanical skill that requires consistent practice rather than mere theoretical understanding. To produce well-organized writing, students must engage in regular writing activities (Handayani & Widiastuti, 2019). Writing skills are also closely related to

composing, as writing exercises help students apply linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary, style, and spelling in meaningful contexts (Widiastuti et al., 2020). In addition, supportive and conducive classroom conditions are expected to help students overcome difficulties in developing more engaging and effective language use (Mantra, 2017).

Writing is widely recognized as a powerful medium for conveying ideas, feelings, and opinions. It serves as a means of communication through which information can be shared clearly in written form (Sundari et al., 2021). However, developing writing skills is a complex and challenging process. Writing requires the simultaneous coordination of multiple components, including word choice, sentence construction, paragraph organization, and overall text development. Students must also master grammar, vocabulary, cohesion devices, and rhetorical structures, such as organizing ideas from general to specific. Richards and Renandya (2002) argue that writing is the most difficult language skill for second language (L2) learners to master. This is supported by Hyland (2019), who explains that academic writing in a foreign language presents significant cognitive and linguistic challenges, particularly for novice writers who are still developing grammatical accuracy and linguistic awareness. Furthermore, writing is not merely about recording vocabulary but involves elaborating and organizing ideas into a coherent structure (Amelia et al., 2022). As a result, students often face difficulties such as unclear content, inappropriate word choices, and limited variation in vocabulary and sentence structures (Sartika & Rachmanita, 2017).

In EFL contexts, grammatical accuracy remains a persistent problem, particularly among beginner university students. Ferris (2019) notes that grammatical errors in learners' writing reflect systematic patterns in their interlanguage development rather than random mistakes. Similarly, Klimova (2020) reports that beginner EFL learners frequently experience difficulties with verb forms, sentence structure, and morphological accuracy, which often result in recurring grammatical errors in written texts.

Considering these challenges, it is important to focus on a simpler genre that suits beginner learners, such as descriptive text. Descriptive text was chosen as the

focus of this study because it is considered the simplest and most suitable genre for beginner writers. It allows students to describe people, places, or objects based on their own understanding and observation, so they can write more naturally without relying on online references. The grammatical features of descriptive text, such as the use of simple present and adjectives, are relatively easy for first-semester students to apply. In addition, this text type enables students to concentrate on grammar accuracy rather than complex content, making the writing process more enjoyable and less demanding.

Even in this relatively accessible genre, students face significant challenges, which highlights the need to understand these difficulties. Previous studies have often shown that Indonesian students struggle to produce grammatically accurate English texts due to limited exposure to English and strong influence from their first language (Ariyanti, 2016; Widiati & Cahyono, 2020). More recent research also indicates that grammatical errors remain dominant in Indonesian university students' writing, particularly at the early stages of learning (Nurhayati & Susanti, 2021). Due to the fact that writing English for Indonesian learners is difficult since English is structured differently from Indonesian. Therefore, learning English is different from learning the Indonesian language. Thus, the students who study English may produce many errors in their writing.

Based on classroom observation, students often made grammatical errors in their writing, especially in descriptive texts. In actuality, grammar errors are frequently discovered in students' writing. While grammar is one thing that is very important to master, especially in written form. Rossiter (2021) states that grammar is crucial in written language because written communication is one-way and the recipient cannot typically ask for verification. To ensure that messages are immediately understandable to the reader and are not nonsensical or ambiguous, written communication and any other form of indirect communication depend on the correct use of grammar or syntax, as well as vocabulary and spelling. Considering the importance of grammar in writing a qualified text, the researcher was interested in paying attention in the use of appropriate grammar, especially in the descriptive text.

Consequently, conducting an error analysis is important to identify and understand the common types of grammatical errors in students' writing. This understanding is expected to help teachers become more aware of students' writing problems and to find strategies to overcome them. Understanding errors requires not just identification but also exploring students' thought processes, which necessitates qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, Ananda, Gani, and Sahardin (2014) point out that sentence errors remain a major issue for students when they are required to write a text, and the majority of EFL students find learning to write more difficult than learning to speak in a foreign language. As a result, language learners may commit various writing errors, particularly grammar-related ones. However, most error analysis studies focus on error frequency but neglect the underlying causes from students' perspectives, especially at the beginner university level.

While previous studies have documented error frequencies in various genres (Amaliah, 2012; Afifuddin, 2016; Karmilah & Narius, 2019), several critical gaps remain. First, a study focuses on secondary school students, with limited attention to university-level beginners at a critical developmental stage. Second, research has primarily employed quantitative error frequency counts without exploring the underlying causes from learners' perspectives.

Therefore, the present study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing grammatical errors made by beginner university students in writing descriptive texts. This study not only classifies the types of errors but also investigates their possible sources. By doing so, it is expected to provide deeper insight into the nature of grammatical difficulties faced by beginner university students and contribute to more effective grammar teaching strategies in higher education.

This study aims to analyze students' writing errors and the causes of the errors. The study answers the following research questions:

- 1) What types of errors do English Department students make when writing descriptive texts?
- 2) What are the causes of these errors?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach, analyzing the textual content of students' writing to identify patterns of grammatical errors, combined with thematic analysis of interview data to explore underlying causes. Moreover, qualitative research was employed because it seeks to understand not only what errors students make, but why they make them from their own perspectives. Quantitative approaches, while useful for measuring error frequencies, cannot capture the cognitive and linguistic processes underlying error production. Following Creswell (2014), qualitative inquiry is most appropriate when the research aims to explore meanings, experiences, and contextual factors, precisely the focus of this investigation into error causes. This approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of the grammatical errors and their underlying causes based on students' written texts and reflections.

This research was conducted at the English Department, Universitas Jambi, specifically in the Writing course of the first semester students, containing 23 students, from which all written assignments were collected for error identification. A purposive selection strategy was employed to select six representative participants for in depth-analysis. The six participants align with qualitative research guidelines suggesting 6-12 interviews are typically sufficient to reach thematic saturation in relatively homogeneous populations (Guest et al., 2006). Given that all participants shared similar educational backgrounds and language learning contexts, this sample size was deemed adequate for identifying recurring themes in error causations. The selection of participants was grounded in several strong and significant criteria to ensure the validity and representativeness of the data. First, the consistency of error patterns across two writing tasks was considered, meaning that only students who demonstrated stable and recurring errors, rather than random or accidental mistakes, were selected. Second, the stability of the students' overall performance level was taken into account, with clear tendencies toward low, moderate, and high levels of error production. Third, the representativeness of error quantity and variability was ensured so that each category (low, mid, and high) was meaningfully distinct and

analytically useful. Fourth, the completeness and clarity of the students' written texts were evaluated, as well-developed responses were necessary for accurate error identification and categorization. Finally, the authenticity of the students' writing was maintained by selecting texts produced under natural classroom conditions without teacher correction, thereby reflecting their genuine writing ability. Based on these criteria, six participants were selected and categorized into three distinct groups according to their level of error production. Two students who consistently produced the fewest and simplest errors were classified into the low-error group and labeled as S1 and S2. Meanwhile, two students who demonstrated a moderate amount and range of errors were placed in the mid-error group and identified as S3 and S4. Finally, two students who produced the highest number and the widest variety of errors were categorized into the high-error group and labeled as S5 and S6. This grouping allowed for a balanced and meaningful comparison across different levels of writing proficiency.

Data were collected through two primary sources: students' descriptive writing tasks and structured interviews. The documents used in this research consisted of two handwritten descriptive texts produced by each participant on different days, one describing a person and another describing a place.

To learn more about the students' perspectives on the reasons behind their writing errors, a structured interview was employed. According to Mack et al (2005), this type of interview ensures consistency with the same set of prepared questions in the same sequence and allows the researcher to compare responses more easily. It is especially useful when the researcher aims to collect specific information related to the research focus.

After the data were collected, they were analyzed following Ellis's (1997) four-step procedure:

1. Identifying errors

In this stage, the researcher carefully read each student's writing tasks to locate any grammatical inaccuracies. Every text was examined line by line to ensure that no error was overlooked. The researcher then marked and circled all forms of incorrect grammatical features found in the descriptive texts, such as

incorrect verb forms, missing grammatical elements, unnecessary additions, misordered structures, or any other deviations from Standard English norms. This step served as the foundation for further categorization and interpretation of the errors.

2. Describing errors

After all errors had been identified, they were grouped according to the framework proposed by Dulay (1982). Each circled error was examined and placed into one of four categories: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This categorization process enabled the researcher to determine the dominant types of errors made by students and to observe patterns in their grammatical difficulties

3. Explaining errors

To understand the underlying causes of the errors, the researcher conducted interviews with the six selected participants by using the theories of Brown (2007) and Norrish (1983).

4. Evaluating errors

In the final stage, the researcher compared the interview findings with the students' writing tasks. This comparison allowed the researcher to confirm whether the students' stated difficulties aligned with the grammatical errors they produced. The evaluation process provided a deeper understanding of the specific challenges students faced when constructing descriptive texts, such as vocabulary limitations, confusion between similar grammar rules, or the influence of their first language. The results of this evaluation were then used to conclude students' error patterns and their underlying causes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the classification put forward by Dulay (1982), four main categories of errors were found based on the analysis of the students' descriptive texts: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Each of the six focal participants (low, medium, and high) represented a distinct amount of error frequency in the instances that follow. The following tables list typical errors that

students made in their writing, along with their proper versions and an explanation of the errors' nature.

Table 1. Students' Errors: Omission

Code	Student Sentence	Correct Form	Type of Error
S5	He often late to wake up.	He is often late to wake up.	Omission of the auxiliary <i>is</i>
S1	There are many attractions such as swings and gazebos you can sit.	There are many attractions such as swings and gazebos where you can sit.	Missing relative pronoun <i>where</i> to connect clauses
S6	In South Korea many couples.	In South Korea, there are many couples.	Missing existential <i>there are</i> and plural <i>s</i>
S3	I have to become a boxer.	I have to be a boxer.	Missing infinitive marker <i>be</i>

Table 2. Students' Errors: Addition

Code	Student Sentence	Correct Form	Type of Error
S6	I'm be interested to visit it.	I'm interested to visit it.	Unnecessary auxiliary <i>be</i>
S5	They are really love to party.	They really love to party.	Unnecessary auxiliary <i>be</i>
S6	I will visit to Seoul.	I will visit Seoul.	Preposition <i>to</i>
S1	Since I rarely saw people in there.	Since I rarely saw people there.	Unnecessary preposition <i>in</i>

Table 3. Students' Errors: Misformation

Code	Student Sentence	Correct Form	Type of Error
S6	I will describing Seoul in South Korea.	I will describe Seoul in South Korea.	Incorrect verb form (describing-describe)
S4	This large building cannot be make by one person.	This large building cannot be made by one person.	Incorrect verb form (make-made)
S2	He is a singer and an actor from South Korea who has born in 30 December 1995.	He is a singer and an actor from South Korea who was born on 30 December 1995.	Incorrect auxiliary 'has'+missing passive form
S6	I am very interesting at the place.	I am very interested at the place	Wrong adjective form (<i>interesting-interested</i>)

Table 4. Students' Errors: Misordering

Code	Student Sentence	Correct Form	Type of Error
S6	There are many seller food.	There are many food sellers.	Incorrect noun phrase order
S5	I often see in the picture like my teacher visited, my friends, and my family.	I often see in pictures visited by my teacher, my friends, and my family.	Misordered modifiers
S5	This place really I want to visit with my family.	I really want to visit this place with my family.	Incorrect word order

The analysis showed that omission and misformation were the most frequent error types, whereas addition and misordering occurred less frequently.

Students' Perceived Causes of Errors

Following the writing tasks, a structured interview with the six focus participants was used to determine the reasons behind the students' errors. Four primary categories of error sources were identified through analysis of their responses: translation, carelessness, intralingual transfer, and interlingual transfer (Brown, 2007; Norrish, 1983).

a. Interlingual Transfer

Many students stated that their writing was greatly impacted by the influence of their first language, Bahasa Indonesia. They frequently used Indonesian structures to directly construct English sentences.

"I was influenced by Indonesian sentence structure. For example, I wrote 'In here' because in Indonesian we say 'Di sini'." (S6)
"English is not my first language, and I rarely use it in daily life, so I often transfer patterns from Indonesian when writing." (S2)

These statements demonstrate how frequently students relied on L1 syntactic patterns, which led to inappropriate preposition usage, omission, or misordering.

b. Intralingual Transfer

One of the main causes of errors was found to be an inadequate understanding of English grammar. Students mentioned having trouble with verb tenses, sentence structure, and other concepts.

"I am still confused about when to use simple past and when to use present continuous." (S4)

“I do not fully understand tenses, which is why I often make errors.”
(S3)

“Minimal grammar understanding and limited vocabulary make me feel unsure when writing.” (S6)

These excerpts indicate errors were frequently caused by insufficient internalization of target-language rules rather than first-language interference.

c. Translation

Some participants acknowledged that they frequently used awkward or improper sentence structures as a result of using translation tools or translating Indonesian words into English word by word.

“I often use an online translator to translate sentences word by word, but the results sometimes sound strange.” (S5)

“I usually use Google Translate directly when writing.” (S6)

These claims imply that because sentence structures were not modified to conform to English syntax, a reliance on literal translation resulted in problems with misformation and order.

d. Carelessness

Carelessness and a lack of proofreading were blamed for fewer errors. Students talked about writing quickly or assuming their phrases were correct without proofreading them.

“The omission errors happened because I believed my sentences were already correct, so I didn’t check them again” (S1)

“I was often in a rush when writing, so I didn’t pay attention to details.” (S3)

These responses show that not all errors were caused by linguistic constraints; some were the consequence of carelessness and inadequate correction.

The findings of the interviews showed that interlingual influence, intralingual learning challenges, translation techniques, and carelessness all contributed to students' errors. Intralingual transfer, namely inadequate grammar knowledge and misunderstanding of tense usage, were the most commonly cited causes, followed by reliance on translation and the influence of first language structures. Even while it was less common, carelessness also led to mistakes in

students' writing. These interview insights triangulated with the written error analysis, confirming that most errors stemmed from grammatical misunderstanding rather than random mistakes.

These findings support Dulay et al.'s (1982) claim that omission and misformation errors are common during early interlanguage stages and align with Brown's (2007) concept of intralingual transfer.

Based on the research, the most common error types were omission and misformation, followed by addition and misordering. These results are in line with the surface strategy taxonomy developed by Dulay (1982), which explains how learners alter target language structures by adding, omitting, misordering, or misforming linguistic components.

Particularly frequent were omission errors, which frequently involved the absence of auxiliary (He often late to wake up), prepositions (In South Korea many couple), or relative clauses (Swings and gazebos you can sit). This illustrates the propensity of students to simplify sentence formation, which may have been influenced by Indonesian sentence forms that do not require specific connectors or auxiliaries.

Misformation errors show an overgeneralization of grammatical rules and an inadequate understanding of English morphology and syntax. Examples include wrong verb forms (I will describing), misuse of passive structures (has born), and unsuitable verb selection (be make). These errors imply that learners in the intermediate stage of second language acquisition frequently try to apply familiar patterns to new contexts.

Although they are less common, addition and misordering errors also show that learners are having difficulties with English grammar. While misordering errors (There are many seller food) show direct translation from Indonesian word order, addition examples (I'm be interested) reflect uncertainty in auxiliary usage. These findings suggest that EFL writing instruction should prioritize grammar-focused feedback and peer correction activities to address common omission and misformation errors.

When compared to previous research, similar results were also reported by Karmilah and Narius (2019) in their study of error analysis, where omission and misinformation were the dominant errors among Indonesian EFL learners.

Causes of Errors

Interlingual transfer, or first language interference, occurred when students immediately translated Indonesian phrase patterns into English; they made mistakes in word order and structure (*in here* instead of *here*). This supports Brown's (2007) assertion that, particularly at lower skill levels, learners' L1 has a significant impact.

The most common cause turned out to be intralingual transfer. The most common reasons given by students for their errors were limited vocabulary, unclear tense usage, and inadequate grammar knowledge. These problems frequently result in verb form misuse, insufficient rule application, and overgeneralization (I will describing). These findings corroborate Richards' (1974) statement that internal challenges in the target language system, rather than interference from the L1, account for a large portion of learner errors.

Another frequent reason was translation, since students frequently used online translation tools or word-by-word translation (I often use Google Translate directly). Unnatural sentence constructions as well as grammatical and word choice problems resulted from this practice. According to Norrish (1983), literal translation ignores more profound structural distinctions between languages, and it frequently produces superficial errors.

Finally, a lower percentage of errors was caused by carelessness. Some students acknowledged that they wrote quickly or without extensive proofreading. This supports the idea that carelessness is a performance-related error rather than a competence-based one, as defined by Norrish (1983).

CONCLUSION

This descriptive qualitative study investigated the types and causes of grammatical errors in descriptive texts written by first-semester students of the English Department at Universitas Jambi. Four types of grammatical errors were

identified: omission, misformation, addition, and misordering with omission and misformation being the most frequent. These findings reflect students' transitional interlanguage stage, characterized by overgeneralization and transfer from their first language. Interview data indicated that the principal sources of errors were intralingual transfer (incomplete grammar knowledge), interlingual transfer, translation strategies, and carelessness. The dominance of omission and misformation errors supports Dulay et al.'s (1982) theory of surface strategy taxonomy and Brown's (2007) notion of intralingual transfer as a major source of learner error.

This study provides empirical evidence of how beginner EFL university students' grammatical difficulties manifest in descriptive writing and identifies pedagogical strategies to address them. The study's small purposive sample (six participants) allowed for in-depth analysis but limited generalizability. Future studies could include larger participant groups, examine different genres, or apply mixed-methods designs to quantify error frequency.

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