



Error Analysis in Descriptive Texts of Third-Semester EFL Learners: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated sentence structure errors in descriptive texts written by third-semester English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at Universitas Serambi Mekkah. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research analyzed 20 student essays to identify common grammatical mistakes and their underlying causes. The analysis revealed that tense consistency, especially in the use of the simple present tense, was the most frequent error (35%), followed by subject-verb agreement, word order, and imprecise word choice. Additionally, students demonstrated limited use of sensory language, which weakened the descriptive quality of their writing. Semi-structured interviews identified several contributing factors to these errors, including first language (L1) interference, inadequate grammar knowledge, lack of writing practice, insufficient feedback, and a habit of word-for-word translation. These findings suggest a pressing need for targeted grammar instruction, increased writing exercises, and constructive feedback to enhance students' writing accuracy and fluency in EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL writing, sentence structure errors, descriptive text, grammar accuracy, error analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most challenging language skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in the early stages of academic development. Among the many difficulties students face in writing, grammatical accuracy, especially in sentence structure and tense usage, continues to be a significant issue to achieving coherence and clarity (Harmer, 2004; Richards & Renandya, 2002). One useful approach to understanding students' writing challenges is Error Analysis, a method used to identify, categorize, and interpret learners' mistakes to better understand their language development.

Error analysis, as defined by James (1998), is a linguistic tool that helps uncover patterns in learners' interlanguage and provides insights into the processes they go through when learning a second language. Errors are not merely signs of failure; rather, they reflect the stages of learning and internalization of grammatical rules. In this context, analyzing errors in student writing offers a window into their cognitive processes and their grasp of syntactic and morphological structures.

A key area of concern in EFL writing is sentence structure, which involves the correct arrangement of syntactic elements such as subjects, verbs, objects, and modifiers. According to Quirk et al. (1985), understanding sentence structure is vital because it determines the grammatical correctness and semantic clarity of a sentence. When sentence structure is flawed, meaning is often obscured, leading to ineffective communication. Similarly, Chomsky (1957) asserted that in order to produce coherent and understandable phrases, sentence structure must have both surface structure, or the sentence's external form, and deep structure, or its underlying meaning. Further, Quirk et al. (1985) stressed the importance of knowing sentence structure as it aids writers in efficiently structuring their writings and preserving coherence.

Accordingly, in writing descriptive texts, students are expected to construct sentences that clearly and vividly portray people, places, objects, or events. Descriptive writing requires a strong command of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence variety to create vivid mental images. Oshima and Hogue (1997) emphasized that descriptive writing must effectively use adjectives, adverbs, and sensory language to appeal to readers' senses and form a mental "word picture". However, for many EFL students, constructing accurate and descriptive sentences remains a challenge, especially when it involves consistent use of the simple present tense, which is a fundamental aspect of descriptive writing.



Previous studies have provided valuable insights into students' grammatical error patterns in writing. A study by Christina and Rasmita (2021) examined descriptive essays written by students at an Islamic university. The researchers identified significant errors in tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and article use, which were attributed to a lack of understanding of basic grammar rules. Similarly, Nazir et al. (2023), through an analysis-based study involving university students in Banda Aceh, found major errors in verb usage and noun phrase construction. Ridwan and Karmila (2024) categorized university students' grammatical errors into omission, addition, and misordering, with incorrect use of tenses being the most dominant. Wahyuni et al. (2016), using a descriptive qualitative approach, analyzed grammar errors among junior high school students in Bali, focusing primarily on the use of *to be* and tenses. Their study recommended enhancing grammar practice through writing drills. Meanwhile, Suryana (2015) found that students frequently made errors in verb forms, plural nouns, and word order, mainly due to first language (L1) interference and insufficient writing practice.

Although previous studies have extensively explored grammatical errors in EFL writing, most have focused broadly on general writing skills or specific grammar points like tense or article usage, often involving high school or early university students in various regions. However, there remains limited research that specifically investigates the error patterns in descriptive texts written by EFL learners at Universitas Serambi Mekkah. Additionally, prior studies tend to analyze errors in isolation without deeply connecting the errors to their underlying causes such as learners' misunderstanding of sentence structure or tense usage within descriptive writing tasks.

This gap highlights the need for a focused, qualitative examination of how third-semester EFL students apply sentence structure and simple present tense in descriptive texts, and what specific instructional challenges they face. Addressing this gap will provide valuable insights for designing more targeted pedagogical interventions to improve grammatical accuracy and writing coherence in this specific learner population.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze sentence structure errors in descriptive texts written by third-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Serambi Mekkah. The purpose was to identify common grammatical issues, particularly those related to sentence structure, and to understand their underlying causes.

The research population consisted of all EFL students in the third semester, with a total of 60 students. From this population, 20 students were randomly selected as participants. The selection of 20 students was based on purposive sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research to focus on participants who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse data (Creswell, 2014). The sample size was intentionally limited to allow for an in-depth analysis of students' writing, which is essential for qualitative error analysis. A larger sample could compromise the depth and accuracy of the investigation, given the complexity of sentence structure errors and the time required for detailed examination of each student's writing.

The study focused on third-semester students for two primary reasons. First, by this stage, students have generally completed basic English grammar and writing courses, meaning they are expected to apply foundational knowledge of sentence structure and tenses in their writing. Second, the third semester is a transitional stage where students move from basic course to writing course. As such, analyzing their errors at this point provides valuable insight into persistent challenges that may not have been fully addressed in earlier coursework. This focus helps identify instructional gaps and suggests improvements in the teaching of grammar and writing skills at the intermediate level.

To collect and analyze the data, two main instruments were used: (1) a writing assignment and (2) an error analysis checklist, which was designed to help detect and categorize sentence structure errors. The checklist included aspects such as subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, word order, word choice (e.g, adjective and adverb) and sensory language.



The data analysis involved both qualitative interpretation and basic frequency counts. The research was guided by the error analysis framework developed by Corder (1974), which included five main steps: (1) collecting data, (2) identifying errors, (3) classifying errors, (4) explaining errors, and (5) evaluating the results. This framework allowed the researchers to systematically examine students' written texts and interpret the types and patterns of grammatical mistakes. The findings were then used to assess how these errors affected the overall quality of students' writing, and the underlying factors leading to this error production.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Identified Errors and Their Frequency

This study investigated common sentence structure errors found in descriptive texts written by third-semester EFL students. A total of 20 students were purposively selected, and their writing samples were analyzed using an error analysis checklist. The checklist covered five categories: subject-verb agreement, tense consistency (especially simple present tense), word order, word choice (especially adjectives and adverbs), and the use of sensory language. The results of error identification and each frequency are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Identified Errors and Their Frequency in the Students' Descriptive Writing.

| Error Category | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Tense Consistency | 42 | 35% |
| Subject-Verb Agreement | 26 | 22% |
| Word Order | 21 | 18% |
| Word Choice (Adj/Adv) | 17 | 14% |
| Sensory Language Usage | 13 | 11% |
| Total | 119 | 100% |

From the table, it is evident that tense consistency, particularly the use of the simple present tense, accounted for the highest number of errors (35%). This supports earlier findings that many students struggle with applying the correct tense in descriptive writing. Only 3 out of 20 students consistently used the simple present tense correctly, while the remaining 17 mixed past and present forms or defaulted to the past tense, reducing the coherence and appropriateness of their descriptions.

The examples of errors are as follows:

- Incorrect: "*The house had a large garden.*"
Correct: "*The house has a large garden.*"
- Incorrect: "*The cat is sleeping and it has white fur.*"
(Mixing continuous and simple tenses without context.)



The second most frequent error (22%) involved subject-verb agreement, where students mismatched singular/plural subjects with the corresponding verbs. For instance, *"She walk to school every day"* instead of *"She walks to school every day."* Word order errors (18%) included misplaced adjectives or phrases that confused meaning, such as: *"He has eyes blue"* instead of *"He has blue eyes"*. Word choice errors (14%) were mostly related to adjectives and adverbs. Students often misused or chose imprecise words, weakening the vividness of their descriptions. Sensory language, a key component of descriptive writing, was often missing or used ineffectively by many students (11%). Few used vivid details appealing to sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, which are essential to effective descriptive writing (Oshima & Hogue, 1997).

3.1.2 The Underlying Causes of Errors in the Students' Descriptive Writing

The result of semi-structured interviews analysis regarding the underlying causes of the students' error production is presented in the following table:

Table 2. Underlying Causes of Sentence Structure Errors Based on Interview Responses

| No. | Category of Cause | Description | Student Responses |
|-----|---------------------------------|---|---|
| 1. | L1 Interference (Mother Tongue) | Students tend to apply Indonesian sentence structure or tense usage directly in English writing. | <i>"In Bahasa, there's no tenses, so I get confused."</i> |
| 2. | Limited Grammatical Knowledge | Lack of understanding of English grammar rules, especially tense use and subject-verb agreement. | <i>"I'm still confused between past and present tense. Sometimes I know I have to use past tense but I don't know the correct forms."</i> |
| 3. | Lack of Writing Practice | Minimal exposure to or experience with writing descriptive texts in English. | <i>"We don't write descriptive texts often in class."</i> |
| 4. | Low Confidence in Grammar Usage | Fear of making mistakes results in vague or incorrect sentence construction. | <i>"I'm not sure if it's right, so I just guess the sentence."</i> |
| 5. | Inadequate Feedback | Insufficient correction or clarification from teachers regarding previous grammar or writing tasks. | <i>"I didn't know that was wrong until now."</i> |
| 6. | Inconsistent Vocabulary Mastery | Students misuse adjectives, adverbs, or sensory words due to lack of vocabulary or confusion. | <i>"I want to describe something but don't know the right word."</i> |
| 7. | Habit of Translation | Students often translate ideas from Indonesian to English word-for-word, causing structural errors. | <i>"I write the sentence like how I think in Indonesian."</i> |

The analysis of interview responses, as summarized in Table 2, reveals several key factors contributing to the sentence structure errors found in the students' descriptive texts. One of the most prominent causes identified was L1 interference, where students transferred the structure of their native language, Bahasa Indonesia, into English. This led to incorrect sentence construction, especially regarding word order and the use of tenses, since Bahasa Indonesia does not rely on verb tenses in the same way English does. Many students expressed confusion about when and how to use tenses, indicating a limited understanding of English grammar, particularly regarding the simple present tense and subject-verb agreement.



In addition to linguistic interference, lack of writing practice emerged as another significant factor. Students mentioned that descriptive writing was not regularly practiced in class, which reduced their familiarity and comfort with the genre. This lack of exposure, coupled with low confidence in using grammar, often caused students to form sentences based on guesses rather than grammatical knowledge. Some students were aware that their constructions might be incorrect but lacked the confidence or strategies to improve them.

Moreover, insufficient feedback from instructors contributed to the persistence of errors. Students reported that their previous writing assignments had not been thoroughly corrected or explained, which prevented them from identifying and understanding their mistakes. Without corrective feedback, students continued to make the same errors in subsequent writing tasks. Another related issue was vocabulary limitations, where students struggled to select appropriate adjectives, adverbs, or sensory words due to a restricted vocabulary range. This sometimes led to vague descriptions or the misuse of descriptive terms.

Finally, many students relied heavily on direct translation from Indonesian to English, often translating word-for-word without considering the structural differences between the two languages. This approach led to awkward phrasing and grammatically incorrect sentences, particularly in longer or more complex descriptions. Overall, the findings suggest that a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and instructional factors influenced students' writing errors, highlighting the need for more targeted grammar instruction, increased writing practice, and specific feedback to address these challenges effectively.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that sentence structure remains a significant challenge for EFL learners, particularly when writing descriptive texts that require grammatical accuracy and vivid expression. The dominance of tense consistency errors (35%) suggests that students still struggle with one of the most fundamental grammar elements, namely using the correct tense to match the communicative purpose of the text. Since descriptive writing typically requires the use of the simple present tense to describe habitual or factual information (Oshima & Hogue, 1997), the frequent use of past or mixed tenses indicates a gap in understanding the relationship between grammar and text type. This aligns with Christina and Rasmita's (2021) findings that students lacked basic grammatical awareness, especially in tense selection.

Equally concerning are the errors in subject-verb agreement (22%), which, although elementary, persist even at the third-semester level. This indicates that students may have memorized rules but struggle to apply them in context, especially when constructing more complex or longer sentences. The presence of word order errors (18%) reflects L1 interference, where students often transfer Indonesian syntax into English structures, a phenomenon also noted by Suryana (2015). These errors are further exacerbated by the habit of direct translation, as confirmed by interview responses in this study.

Word choice and sensory language errors, while slightly less frequent, have a significant impact on the descriptive quality of writing. These issues suggest a lack of expressive vocabulary and insufficient exposure to descriptive models in English, limiting students' ability to create vivid mental images. Wahyuni et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of guided writing practice and exposure to target language input to develop these competencies, which are recommendations that are supported by the present study's findings.

The qualitative interview data reinforces these results by pointing to several contributing factors: limited grammatical knowledge, low confidence, and inadequate feedback from instructors. These factors reflect broader pedagogical challenges within the EFL writing curriculum. As Nazir et al. (2023) and Ridwan and Karmila (2024) found, students often repeat the same types of errors due to a lack of detailed feedback and insufficient opportunities for practice. The students in this study echoed similar concerns, stating they rarely practiced descriptive writing and were often unaware of their grammatical mistakes until explicitly shown.

Furthermore, the cognitive challenge of managing vocabulary, sentence structure, and content generation simultaneously may overwhelm learners at this level. This supports Corder's (1974) view that errors are a natural



reflection of the learning process and a window into learner interlanguage development. However, without targeted intervention, these fossilized errors can hinder fluency and academic progress.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored sentence structure errors in descriptive texts written by third-semester EFL students at Universitas Serambi Mekkah, with a focus on tense usage, subject-verb agreement, word order, word choice, and sensory language. The findings revealed that tense consistency, particularly the misuse of the simple present tense, was the most frequent grammatical error. This was followed by errors in subject-verb agreement and word order, indicating persistent difficulties in applying fundamental grammar rules. In addition, weaknesses in vocabulary selection and sensory detail usage reduced the effectiveness of students' descriptive writing.

The analysis of student interviews further revealed several contributing factors to these errors, including L1 interference, limited grammatical knowledge, lack of writing practice, low confidence, insufficient teacher feedback, and vocabulary limitations. These findings highlight the complex interplay between linguistic competence and instructional practices in shaping students' writing abilities.

The study underscores the importance of targeted pedagogical strategies to improve EFL writing. Specifically, instructors should incorporate more consistent writing practice, explicit grammar instruction integrated into writing activities, and detailed formative feedback. Encouraging students to move beyond literal translation and fostering awareness of English sentence patterns will also help minimize structural errors.

Ultimately, by understanding both the types and causes of errors students make, educators can design more effective interventions to improve writing accuracy and overall language proficiency. Future research may expand on this study by examining the impact of specific teaching interventions on reducing sentence structure errors across different genres and student levels.

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