INVESTIGATING MUHAMMADIYAH UNIVERSITY EFL LEARNERS’ GRAMMAR ERRORS IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPHS

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Abstract

This writing aims at investigating Muhammadiyah University EFL learners’ grammar errors in writing descriptive paragraphs and the causes of the errors. This employed a qualitative research in descriptive design by using error analysis. Investigating four aspects of grammar errors including addition, omission, misformation and misordering which is called surface strategy taxonomy, they then were analyzed by employing grammar units of analysis. These units were applied to identify errors of sentence elements. From the investigation, it is found that EFL learners’ tendency of making grammar errors in writing descriptive paragraphs was sourced from Bahasa Indonesia interference. They adopted a set of rule in Bahasa Indonesia into target language.

Key Terms: Errors, Descriptive paragraphs, and Surface strategy taxonomy.
A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian people have learned English for decades. Writing in English is a complex process for students of EFL (English as a Foreign Language). Its complexity puts numerous EFL learners in much trouble. In writing, mistakes or errors get less tolerance compared to speaking which is also categorized as one of the productive skills. This is because writing is usually permanent while speech is transient or temporary.

Naturally, in learning a foreign language, learners cannot evade from errors which are parts of language learning process. They cannot be detached from errors (Tarigan and Tarigan, 2011). In that process, some learners just make mistakes, and the others make errors.

Errors do not merely occur in low-level education, but also in higher-level education such as in institute or university. In Muhammadiyah University, EFL learners of Teacher Training and Education Faculty, especially English Education Study Program, perform errors in their writing. The errors were found in sentences, for example *She always go to school early* and *Ani does not likes cats*. From the two sentences, there found that errors committed are subject-verb agreement for the first sentence and additional error for the second one. This shows that even EFL learners in higher-level education still make such errors even though they have learned English since they were in lower level education.

Based on the previous description, I was interested in analyzing errors presented by the EFL learners of English Education Study Program at Teacher Training and Education Faculty of Muhammadiyah University Palu. I believe, without pointing out the EFL learners errors in writing, they might transfer the errors continuously. Therefore, this research aimed at giving contribution on English teaching and learning particularly in writing subject to avoid the same situation happens repeatedly.

Errors that I found in my preliminary research were subject-verb agreement (*She always go to school early*) and additional (*Ani does not likes cats*). However I realized that there were more kinds of errors also occur. Therefore, I wanted to investigate the kinds of errors made by the EFL learners by formulating research questions as follows: 1. what aspects of grammar errors are made by students of English Education Study Program at Teacher Training and Education Faculty of Muhammadiyah University Palu in writing descriptive paragraphs? 2. What are the causes of students’ grammar errors in writing descriptive paragraphs?
The objectives of this research are to identify kinds of grammar errors of the EFL learners in writing descriptive paragraphs and interpreting possible causes of errors tendency.

The result of this research could be a reflection for them to improve their teaching and to give special attention to the errors spots. This research could also be very worthy for EFL learners to avoid common errors which often happen because, besides their lecturers would give emphasis on the errors spots, they directly find out their weakness then correct the errors.

The investigation of this research was conducted at English Education Study Program at Teacher Training and Education Faculty of Muhammadiyah University Palu. The process focused on investigating grammar errors in writing descriptive paragraphs composed by EFL learners. By all accounts, the focus of errors inquired overwhelms on five aspect of errors namely article, possession case, simple present tense, comparison and preposition which was limited on four types of errors including omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

**B. METHOD OF THE RESEARCH**

This research is a qualitative research in terms of descriptive design. Error analysis was involved to detect errors on certain grammar units of analysis. Ary et al. (2010:220) states “The most widely used tools in qualitative research are interviews, document analysis, and observation”. This research analyzed EFL learners’ writing documents in terms of descriptive paragraphs.

This research was conducted at Muhammadiyah University Palu. The participants were the EFL learners of English Education Study Program. I took junior students or third year students with a consideration that they have taken Writing III and Grammar as their modalities. The data collection was done on 10th September 2014 in form of EFL learners’ writing documents. This research investigated 28 documents of EFL learners’ descriptive writings.

The data in this research was the fifth semester EFL learners’ descriptive writings. This research analyzed their existing documents with respect to descriptive writings. It meant that I did not conduct a test or having a direct contact with the students. I got in touch with the institution and the lecturer who had the needed data.

Data analysis was conducted after all writings from the samples were collected. Their writings were analyzed sentence by sentence. In analyzing the
data, I used the systematic steps as proposed by Abbott et al. (1987:218).

a. Recognition is an identification step of EFL learners’ writings.

b. Interpretation is a step of understanding what the EFL learners meant in their writings.

c. Reconstruction is a process of correcting the errors. The wrong sentences or the deviated sentences, which EFL learners produced, were reconstructed into well-formed sentences.

d. Linguistic classification is a step of sorting errors according to their kinds. The discussion was limited to five grammar units of analysis including article, possessive case, simple present tense, comparison and preposition.

FINDINGS

This research investigated four aspects of surface strategy taxonomy which Dulay et al. (1982) proposed that focusing on five linguistics aspects; article, possessive case, simple present tense, comparison and preposition. Because it is a qualitative approach, which is descriptively designed, this subchapter provides errors finding from the data obtained.

The percentage of errors in each aspect was obtained by adapting the formula proposed by Sudijono (2010: 79):

\[
P = \frac{Fe}{N} \times 100
\]

\(P\) = Percentage of errors
\(Fe\) = Frequency of errors
\(N\) = Total errors
100 = Constant value of percent

In order to have the average frequency of errors, which EFL learners made, I use the following formula:

\[
\text{Average} = \frac{\text{Total number of error}}{\text{Total number of students}}
\]

From the data collected, I found that some sentences contain an error, some have two, some have three, and several sentences contain four or more errors. Their errors were scattered into five aspects namely article, possessive case, simple present tense, comparison, and preposition. The frequency of each aspect and type of errors and its average are displayed in the following table.

Table 1 Frequency of Grammar Errors made by EFL Learners in Five Aspects of Sentence Elements

| No. | Aspects of Grammar Error | Error | Article Possessive Case Simple Present Tense Comparison Preposition Total | (%) |
|-----|----------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.  | Addition                   | 13    | 1 17 - 16                                                 | 47  14.1 |
| 2.  | Omission                   | 32    | - 81 1 20                                                | 134 40.4 |
| 3.  | Misformation               | 1     | 30 83 5 18                                              | 137 41.3 |
| 4.  | Misordering                | 1     | 5 6 - 2                                                 | 14  4.2 |
| Total|                           | 47    | 36 187 6 56                                             | 332 100 |
| Average|                       | 1.7 | 1.3 6.7 0.2 2                                          |      |

Table 1 shows totally 332 errors occurred in EFL learners’ writings.
From the total errors of the surface taxonomy aspect, the most dominant error was found in misformation category with 137 errors or 41.3 percent, the second dominant error was in omission category with 134 errors or 40.4 percent, 47 errors in addition or 14.1%, and the smallest error occurred in misordering category with 14 errors or 4.2%.

The table also indicates the errors in addition category are including article, possessive case, simple present tense, and preposition. The dominant error was in simple present tense with 17 errors or 36.2 percent, 16 errors or 34 percent occur in preposition, 13 errors or 27.7 percent occurred in article and the smallest error occurred in possessive case with one error or 2.1 percent. Of the five grammar aspects researched, the EFL learners did not construct any error in comparison.

From the data gathered, it is also revealed 134 EFL learners’ errors in omission category. They constructed errors of article, simple present tense, comparison, and preposition in this category. However, they did not perform any error in comparison. The dominant error was in simple present tense with 81 errors or 60.4 percent. The second most dominant error existed in article with 32 out of the 134 errors 23.9 percent. They also constructed 20 errors or 15 percent in preposition and the least error was in comparison with one error or 0.7 percent.

EFL learners’ errors in relation to misformation category were 137 errors. They produced errors in all aspects of analysis. Simple present tense was the major errors spot with 83 errors or 60.6 percent. Second greatest errors occurrence was in possessive case with 30 errors or 21.9 percent. Errors also occurred in preposition with 18 errors or 13.1 percent, five errors or 3.7 percent in comparison, and one error or 0.7 percent in article.

In misordering category, the EFL learners performed 14 errors in four grammar aspects; they are article, possessive, simple present tense, and comparison. Simple present tense was the greatest number of errors with six errors or 42.9 percent. Possessive case placed second greatest errors with five errors or 35.7 percent. Two errors or 14.3 percent occurred in preposition. The smallest number of errors occurred in article with one error or 7.1 percent. In another aspect of analysis, they did not make any error in comparison.

The findings that have been explained previously are represented graphically in below figure.
Errors Percentage in Four Aspects of Grammar Errors

In the figure 4.1, it is seen clearer that the largest percentage of four aspect of error was misformation, which is signed by the green color with 41.3%. The second is the red pie partition indicating the error of omission with 40.4%. The green color pie partition indicates the error in Addition with 14.1%, and the smallest partition is the purple color with 4.2% error in misordering.

The Number of Grammar Errors on Unit of Analysis

The figure indicates the number of grammar errors on units of analysis. The biggest partition which signed by green color is the error in simple present tense with 56.3%, then it is followed by the cyan, green, and red color which assigned to the error of preposition 16.9%, error of article 14.1%, and error of possessive case 10.9%. The smallest partition of the pie, which is signed with purple color, is indicating the error of comparison with 1.8%.

C. DISCUSSION

Based on table 4.1, I presented the analysis of each finding in order to give detailed or further elaboration. The explanations were presented in each category of error. I provide paragraphs, which in them I found errors I investigated. Then the sentences, that contain errors, are taken and analyzed separately. In addition, I provided elaboration of the aspects of error analysis. The causes of errors were also presented in each category.

a. Addition

Errors in addition category, as displayed in Table 4.1, occurred in four grammar aspects; they were article, possessive case, simple present tense and preposition. It also revealed that the EFL learners performed 47 total errors in this category. Of the four aspects, the greatest number of errors occurred in simple present tense. They constructed 17 out of the 47 errors or 36.2 percent. The error excerpts below can represent their addition errors in simple present tense aspect.

The sentence is as follow:
• (R5) *... and this tradition is also have the leader.

Suggested correction
... and this tradition also has the leader.

The excerpt revealed that R5 (Respondent 5) deviated from simple present tense pattern especially auxiliary verb use. The R5 added unnecessary auxiliary verb be “is” while there has been the auxiliary verb “has” in the sentence.

• (R13) *The first term have two mind, there are is “hujan” and “udang”.

Suggested correction
The first term has two meanings, they are “hujan” and “udang”.

The error of preposition used in the excerpt was the addition of in before the phrase our place. R1 added unnecessary preposition “in”, while the sentence does not have an adverb of time. Preposition in was not needed because the existence of verb have needs a subject instead and adverb of place.

Error in article was then following error in simple present tense and preposition. In this aspect, EFL learners made 13 errors or 27.7 percent. Of the data found, these following excerpts represented EFL learners’ errors in article.

• (R19) *I am come from the Polewali Mandar.

Suggested corrections
I come from Polewali Mandar.

R19 provided a definite article “a” that preceded a name of a county in the first excerpt. The definite article must not exist there because “Polewali Mandar” is a county. Murcia and Freeman (1983) state “Indeed a majority of geographical names function as proper nouns occur without the article”. In line with that, the addition of definite or indefinite articles before the name of a county deviate from English rule. It was classified as an error because it deviated from the explanation proposed by Whitman (2010) in which a proper noun cannot be preceded by indefinite article.
The last error aspect in addition category is possessive case. R12 created only one error or 2.1 percent in this aspect. Below excerpt can give us a clear view how the sentence deviates from the pattern.

- (R12) *I come from Luwu’s regency.

**Suggested correction**

*I come from Luwu regency.*

From the excerpt, error is represented by the existence of an apostrophe and an *s. The R12 intended to transform a singular noun *Luwu* into a possessive one. Nevertheless, *Luwu* itself is a name of regency in Central Sulawesi. It does not own regency beside itself.

The main cause why the students constructed errors in addition category is the English grammar mastery deficiency. Of several data investigated, most students performed simple addition errors such as *

*I am come from the Polewali Mandar, *..., and this tradition is also have the leader.* Another cause of their errors performance is literal translation of their source language. Before writing English sentences, the EFL learners provided the sentences in Bahasa Indonesia then translated them. Unfortunately, their source language and target language has different sentences construction system. The sentences *

*So, in our place have many culture and tradition and *In our language has many uniqueness terms... were translated from *Jadi, ditempat kami terdapat banyak budaya dan tradisi, Dalam bahasa kami terdapat banyak istilah-istilah unik. The sentences in Bahasa Indonesia are correct because preposition may precede the subject. This languages difference causes errors production.

**b. Omission**

Errors occured in four aspects in line with omission category; they are article, simple present tense, comparison, and preposition. The result of this investigation revealed that 134 errors occurred in this category. Simple present tense has the greatest errors than the other three aspects. The total error which students performed in this aspect was 81 out of 134 errors or 60.4 percent. The errors can be represented by the following excerpt.

- (R6) *

This terms unique because has different meaning

**Suggested corrections**

*These terms are unique because they have different meanings.*

In the excerpt, R6 omitted a required auxiliary verb “are”. He/she also ignored adding an auxiliary verb before the adjective.

The second greatest error of omission category was in article aspect. The EFL learners produced 32 errors or
23.9 percent. The excerpt below represented errors of article omission.

- (R2) *I am from rural area, west beach.

**Suggested corrections**

*I am from a rural area, Western Coastal.

R2 made ill-formed sentence by omitting the indefinite article *a* in the first excerpt. The noun phrase “*rural area*” should be preceded by indefinite article *a*, because the readers do not know exactly where the rural area is located. In other words, the area is specific for the speaker but not the readers (Murcia and Freeman, 1983:178).

Another aspect in which errors occurred in the EFL learners’ writings was preposition. They produced 20 out of the 134 errors or 15 percent in this aspect. The following excerpts are just the representatives of their total errors in preposition aspect.

- (R2) *Tradition which famous our area is nakeso.

**Suggested corrections**

*Tradition which is famous in our area is Nakeso.

The excerpt shows how R2 produced error by omitting preposition “*in*”. The noun phrase “*our area*” should function as an adverbial place in the sentence. It seems the sentence was constructed by following their local language pattern which does not require preposition use. Such kind of error frequently occurred in their writings.

The smallest error that EFL learners made in omission category was comparison aspect with one out of 134 errors or 0.7 percent. The following excerpt was the student’s ill-formed sentence.

- (R13) *But we language more easy.

**Suggested correction**

*But our language is easier.

The excerpt indicated that R13 was overwhelmed in constructing comparison sentence. He/she ignored the rule of writing English sentence which requires the anatomy of sentence (subject and predicate). Predicate in a sentence could be action or linking verbs. In the excerpt, he/she omitted the linking verb *is* that should precede the adjective.

Of the descriptions of the students’ errors in omission category, it was detected three possible causes; they are carelessness, language transfer, and English grammar mastery deficiency. Different system of mother tongue and target language causes their learning and performance difficulties. The excerpt *In our area not only have Buginese ethnic but have some...* shows that they were influenced by their way of writing sentences in Bahasa Indonesia. The
system of their mother tongue or Bahasa Indonesia was adopted into English whereas these languages have different rules. Low mastery of English grammar rule causes the errors occurrence. The sentence *But we language more easy proves that they do not master how to construct simple present tense sentence for the omission of auxiliary verb *is.

c. Misformation

Five grammar aspects became errors spots with regard to misformation category. The five aspects were article, possessive case, simple present tense, comparison and preposition. The table 4.1 designated that this category has the highest number of errors with 137 errors. Of the five grammar error aspects, EFL learners dominantly constructed errors in simple present tense with 83 errors or 60.6 percent. Below excerpt represented errors of simple present tense in misformation category.

- (R3) *Every day we used Indonesia language...*

**Suggested corrections**

*Every day we use Indonesia language...*

As presented in the statistics, simple present tense becomes the biggest problem for EFL learners. The excerpt indicates that they were confused in forming a good simple present tense according to English rules. In the first excerpt, R3 put a past participle verb “used” which should be placed by a present participle “use”. The use of different verb form in a tense created difficulty for them.

Possessive case is the EFL learners’ second biggest problem in misformation category. They made 30 errors or 21.9 percent in using possessiveness. The excerpts below can give further information of their errors.

- (R21) *We area rich with culture and tradition.*

**Suggested corrections**

*Our area is rich with cultures and traditions.*

The excerpt above show that how confused they are in using possessiveness in a sentence. They could not differentiate the use of *our* and *we* in a sentence. The first sentence should use a possessive adjective *our* to show possession of an area but R21 used a pronoun *we* which functions as subject.

- (R26) *Language that our makes in my area is Buginese Sinjai.*

**Suggested corrections**

*Language that we use in my area is Bugisese Sinjai.*

In the excerpt displayed, the same case with the R21 occurred. The EFL learner uses possessive adjective *our* instead of pronoun *we*. It seems like he/she was confused in replacing the possessive
adjective and pronoun in English sentences.

Errors also occurred in preposition aspect. EFL learners produced 18 out of the 137 errors or 13.1 percent. The errors are reflected in below excerpts.

- (R4) *I am of the Buginese ethnic.

**Suggested corrections**

*I am from Bugisese ethnic.*

The displayed excerpts reveal the EFL learners difficulty in selecting the proper preposition. The second displayed R4’s misuse of preposition. The learner was supposed that the prepositions of and from are equal in their usage because the meaning is dari. However, Beare (2014) distinguishes these prepositions from their usage. He adds that of is used to express possessiveness while from is used to express that something or someone originates from something or somewhere else. He then instantiates the prepositions; *He is a friend of mine; The color of the house is red; Jack comes from Portland; This formula derives from the work of Peter Schimmel.*

Comparison aspect seemingly also became a matter for the subjects of this research. They produced five out of 137 errors or 3.6 percent. The errors can be represented by these following excerpts.

- (R26) *….our language more slow, soft….*

**Suggested corrections**

….our language is slower and softer…. *

The excerpt indicates that the EFL learners have intricacy in transforming one syllable adjective especially in comparative degree. The different rule of constructing comparative degree and superlative degree caused them confused. In the excerpt, the R26 intended to compare their language to another language by using a syllable adjective. However, they used the rule of constructing comparative degree with more than one syllable which requires the use of more preceding the adjective.

Article became the smallest error in misformation category. It is shown by the occurrence of one error or 0.7 percent. The following excerpt is student’s error of misusing article.

- (R10) *…. the child happy if speak that.*

**Suggested corrections**

….a child is happy if he/she speaks that.

In the ill-formed sentence, error occurred because the definite article was added preceding a non-specific referent. R10 meant “the child” as youth in general. In the second excerpt, misordering occurred for the misplacement of the definite article placed after the proper noun. Definite or
indefinite articles may not precede a word, which functions as verb.

There are two main causes of the EFL learners’ errors related to misformation. The two causes are different system of mother tongue or Bahasa Indonesia and the target language and language transfer. The first cause has two sub-causes; they are different rule of predicate usage and different rule of possessive adjective and pronoun usage. In English, every predicate must agree with the subject while in Bahasa Indonesia, such rule is not applicable. They also got difficulty in selecting possessive adjective or pronouns. Their paradigm in constructing sentences, which contain possessiveness, is still Bahasa Indonesia pattern paradigm. They generalized the use of pronouns and possessive pronouns because in Bahasa Indonesia, to construct possessiveness, writers or speakers can use pronouns.

d. Misordering

Misordering is the category that has the least errors occurrence. Totally, there were only 14 errors in this category. Of the five aspects investigated, errors simply occurred in four aspects; they are article, possessive case, simple present tense, and preposition. Students performed six errors or 42.9 percent in simple present tense and it becomes the highest error in this category. The following excerpts can represent how errors were constructed.

- (R17) *We used language in that race is Saluan language.
  
  **Suggested correction**
  
  Language which we use in that area is Saluan language.

  The excerpt reveals that the student was tricky in sequencing a good simple present tense sentence. The student seemingly has low mastery of simple present tense. He/she ignored a set of rules in simple present tense, which requires subject verb-agreement. In some errors produced, he/she did not match verbs with subject especially third singular persons. The errors occurred because in Bahasa Indonesia, all verbs agree with all pronouns. It does not require certain verbs for certain subjects. Students evidently adopted this rule to writing English as their target language. They ignored English rules in constructing sentences based on tense especially simple present tense.

  Possessive case also became an error spot in which the students produced five errors or 35.7 percent in this aspect. Students’ errors can be reflected from these following excerpts.

- (R21) *Tradition that famous in area our are “Sambulu Gana”
  
  **Suggested correction**
  
  Tradition that famous in our area are “Sambulu Gana”
The famous tradition in our area is “Sambulu Gana”

The bold words in the first sentence represent misordering error in the use of possessiveness. The error occurred because the possessiveness rule requires the possessive adjective our placed preceding the noun area. In fact, the order of the possessive adjective is not agreeable with the rule. Apparently, R21 wrote the sentence by following Bahasa Indonesia pattern.

Students also cannot avoid from making errors in preposition aspect. They constructed two out of 14 errors or 14.3 percent. Their errors can be seen in the following excerpt.

- (R11) *Language in used area is language buginess

**Suggested correction**

Language used in the area is Bugisese language

In the excerpt, error occurred because of the misplacement of preposition in preceding the verb. Preposition is used to modify a noun. In fact, the student did not place it preceding a noun.

Article was the aspect with the smallest error with regard to misordering category. Only one error or 7.1 percent occurred in this aspect. Student’s error can be seen below.

- (R18) *Area the located in Central Sulawesi

**Suggested Correction**

The area is located in Central Sulawesi

The student seemingly was still difficult to sequence a sentence containing an article especially article “the”. He/ she has low mastery on how to place article “the”. The preposition was placed preceding a verb which functions as a predicate in the sentence.

It seems the students are challenging to determine when they must use definite article or indefinite article, whether the article is used for singular or plural noun. Their mother tongue and Bahasa Indonesia influence how they use article.

The significant cause of their error in misordering is source language order or source language interference. It can be seen in *Tradition that famous in area our are “Sambulu Gana”*. It clearly shows that the sentence was constructed by following the source language or Bahasa Indonesia order. In other words, students’ mother tongue or Bahasa Indonesia influences the way they constructed English sentences.

D. COVERING

CONCLUSION

Most errors occurs in misformation category. Students made 137 total errors in this category. The second biggest errors occur in simple present category with 134 errors. The
causes or their errors are language transfer interference, carelessness, and grammar mastery deficiency. The interference is revealed from students’ sentences writing containing possessive case in which our (should function as possessive adjective) is functioned as subject and vice versa. Bahasa Indonesia interference also causes students constructed ill-formed simple present tense sentences. Students’ low mastery of simple present tense pattern which contains subject-verb agreement becomes the errors source. Another errors cause is verb generalization in writing simple present tense. The students generalized all verbs to all pronouns as in Bahasa Indonesia pattern.

SUGGESTION

Considering the students’ role in the future will be very crucial, that is transferring their English knowledge to their students, not only performance but also competence, the students must develop their skill more especially in writing. Patterns of tenses must be mastered well because in the future they will teach some genres or kinds of text, which require good English patterns mastery. They have to throw away their thoughts about “language is just about communicating with others. In other words language performance is more important than language competence”. They have to receive a consequence that as English Education Study Program students, they have to be proficient either in performance or in competence. In addition, lecturers should emphasize the teaching and learning in linguistics aspects especially in the five errors spots.

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