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Analysis of Syntactical Errors Made by EFL students in Writing Descriptive Text

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Abstrak

Menulis berperan penting dalam pembelajaran. Menulis membantu siswa EFL mengekspresikan ide dan pemikiran mereka, serta membangun hubungan dengan orang lain, bahkan berpikir lebih kritis. Sebagai salah satu keterampilan produktif, menulis telah menjadi tuntutan bagi siswa di Indonesia dimana Bahasa Inggris merupakan bahasa asing. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan kesalahan sintaksis serta mengidentifikasi jenis kesalahan yang paling sering dilakukan oleh mahasiswa EFL dalam menulis teks deskriptif dengan mengadopsi teori yang dikemukakan oleh Politzer dan Romirez. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa jenis-jenis kesalahan sintaksis yang ditemukan adalah 1) penggunaan kata ganti, 2) penggunaan kata depan, 3) penghilangan kata kerja, 4) persetujuan subjek dan kata kerja, 5) konstruksi kata kerja dan kata kerja, 6) transformasi pasif, 7) transformasi negatif, 8) dan urutan kata. Kemudian, kesalahan yang paling sering ditemukan adalah penggunaan preposisi dengan jumlah 24,17%. Penelitian ini bermanfaat bagi guru bahasa Inggris lainnya dalam upaya untuk memperkuat siswa EFL dalam menyusun kalimat.

Kata kunci: *Analisis Kesalahan, Kesalahan Sintaksis, Siswa EFL, Menulis*

Abstract

Writing plays a pivotal role in learning. It helps EFL students to express ideas and thoughts, build relationships with others, and even to think more clearly. As one of productive skills, writing has become demanding for Indonesian students who perceive English as a foreign language. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. It aims to describe syntactical errors and identify the most frequent types of errors made by EFL students in writing descriptive texts, adopting the theory proposed by Politzer and Romirez as a guideline. The study revealed that the types of syntactical errors were 1) use of pronoun, 2) use of preposition, 3) omission of verb, 4) subject-verb agreement, 5) verb and verb construction, 6) transformation of passive, 7) transformation of negative, 8) and word order. Then, the most frequent error was found in the form of the use of a preposition with (24.17%). This research is beneficial for other English teachers to reinforce EFL students in constructing sentences.

Keywords: *Error Analysis, Syntactical Errors, EFL Students, Writing*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is essential for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in their language learning journey. The skill of writing is crucial in both educational settings and society. As one of the productive skills, writing must be effectively developed by EFL learners in Indonesia for the purpose of written communication. Furthermore, writing plays a significant role in language production that facilitates the global exchange of knowledge (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016).

The ability to write is typically utilized to articulate students' ideas and thoughts, foster relationships with others, and facilitate clearer thinking. Furthermore, it plays a crucial role in learning by enabling more efficient recording and retention of information. Mastery of a language, whether English or another, does not necessarily ensure that an individual can write logically and coherently in that language.

Writing skills involve communicating effectively through written text, which encompasses clearly and concisely expressing ideas, logically organizing information, and employing correct grammar and punctuation. Engaging in writing can be effectively supported by practicing other skills such as listening, speaking, and reading (Nation, 2009). Written communication is not simply spoken language transcribed onto paper; instead, it represents a unique form of communication that engages diverse sociocultural norms and cognitive processes (Weigle, Sara Cushing, 2002).

Writing, recognized as a productive skill, has become a challenging task for Indonesian students who view English as a foreign language (EFL). One contributing factor is that EFL students are required to showcase their English abilities, particularly in writing. However,

productive skills encompass more than just speaking; writing skills follow closely behind. The challenges they may encounter during the writing process include selecting a topic, generating ideas, grammatical mistakes, vocabulary issues, and several others.

Numerous studies have been carried out to explore writing errors. One such study indicates that native Arabic students face significant challenges when using English articles (Thyab, 2016, p. 3). Another recent study shows that Thai EFL students often make writing errors due to insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Sermsook et al., 2017). Similar research has demonstrated that errors are also present among Indonesian students and other EFL learners whose first language impacts their learning process.

Based on the data above, the researcher aimed to identify syntactical mistakes and determine the most common errors committed by EFL students when writing descriptive texts, as numerous errors persisted in their writing. Writing is a crucial skill, and it is essential to minimize errors. The importance of this research underscores the ongoing issues in writing. This study was confined to a specific area of errors, focusing on syntactical mistakes according to the linguistic category taxonomy proposed by Politzer and Romirez as a reference.

Syntax

Syntax in English refers to the specific arrangement of words and phrases. It is an advanced aspect of language that can be challenging to grasp. Chomsky (2002) describes syntax as the examination of the principles and processes involved in constructing sentences within specific languages. Crystal (as cited in Ba'dulu, 2004) defines syntax as the analysis of the rules that dictate how words are combined to create sentences in a language. In this context, syntax is contrasted with morphology, which studies the structure of words. According to Crane (1981), syntax involves how words are assembled to create phrases and sentences. Thus, syntax can be characterized as a branch of linguistics that investigates the structure and formation of sentences, explaining the organization of words and phrases into correct sentences.

The Study of Syntax

Syntax in linguistics refers to the arrangement of words and phrases. The study of Syntax comprises phrase, clause and sentence.

a. Phrase

- 1) Prepositional phrase (PP), preposition as head, such as on the main street, in the class.
- 2) Noun Phrase (NP), noun as head, such as a lively classroom, a spacious playground.
- 3) Verb phrase (VP), verb as head, such as is studying, has started, will sit

4) Adjectival phrase, adjective as head, such as really interesting, so boring

5) Adverbial phrase, adverb as head, such as very happily, very seriously.

b. Clause

A clause, like a phrase, is a group of words. But unlike a phrase, a clause is pretty complete. A clause is a group of words that contains both a subject and a predicate. According to Frank (1972) clause is a full predication that contains a subject and a predicate with a finite verb. Typically, there are two types of clause namely dependent and independent clause.

1) Independent clause

An independent clause is a clause that can function on its own. According to Azar (1999), an independent clause is a full sentence. It contains the main subject and verb of a sentence, for example: *The school looks good. We often skip classes.*

2) Dependent clause

A dependent clause is a collection of words that includes both a subject and a verb but fails to convey a complete idea. Consequently, a dependent clause cannot stand alone as a simple sentence. Also called a subordinate clause, it is connected to the main clause of a sentence by a conjunction such as that or when. For example: *I did some homework that Mam Anny gave me last Wednesday.* The main clause of the sentence is "I did some homework" is a complete idea that can stand on its own as a complete sentence. The words that follow ("that Mam Anny gave me last Wednesday") are a dependent clause, acting subordinate to the main clause.

c. Sentence

A sentence is a collection of words that expresses a complete thought, idea, or directive. It consists of various words arranged in a specific sequence to communicate a particular message or concept. A sentence comprises a group of words that includes both a subject and a predicate. Based on how clauses are linked, there are four distinct types of sentences, as detailed below:

1) Simple sentence

Simple sentence is simple. It contains an independent clause, no more, no less. This includes subject and verbs, but can also include objects. For example:

a. I go to school.

b. The school is so comfy.

2) Compound sentence

A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses into a single sentence. The independent clauses can be connected in two ways: 1) Using a comma and a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so) between the clauses. 2) Using a semicolon between the clauses. For example:

- a. The school is big, yet the playgrounds are narrow.
- b. We can visit a library or go to a canteen.

3) Complex sentence

A complex sentence uses one main independent clause with any number of subordinate clauses. To connect the clauses together, subordinating conjunctions are used. For example:

- a. Although the tuition fee is high enough, the school is the best to study in.
- b. I enjoy studying in this school because I have many kind friends.

4) Compound-complex sentence

As the name suggests, compound-complex sentence combine compound sentences with complex sentences. It requires at least two independent clauses and at least one subordinating clause. For example:

- a. My classmates and I went to a canteen, but we forgot to bring our money, and we backed to class sadly.
- b. After we had finished the classes, we went to Lily's house, and did homework.

Types of Syntactical Errors

A syntactical error refers to a mistake in a language's usage that occurs when the arrangement of words or components in a sentence fails to adhere to the language's grammatical rules. Examples of syntactical errors encompass noun phrases that include determiners, nominalizations, number agreement, pronoun usage, and preposition application, as well as issues in verb phrases like the omission of verbs, the use of progressive tenses, subject-verb agreement errors, issues in verb forms and constructions, incorrect word order, and certain mistakes in transformations that involve negative transformations and passive voice transformations (Tammase, 2011).

Errors are categorized according to their Linguistic Category, focusing on both the language component and the specific linguistic element that is impacted (Dulay et al., 1982). The language components are restricted to syntax, which adhere to Politzer and Romirez's framework, leading to the classification of errors into the following types:

- 1) Noun Phrase, including determiner, number, pronouns, and preposition.

- 2) Verb, including omission of main verb, omission of be as an auxiliary, omission of be as main verb, addition of verb, misformation of verb after modal auxiliary, misformation of verb after preposition, and subject verb agreement.
- 3) Verb and verb construction, including Attachment of the past marker, and Misformation of verb in verb construction
- 4) Word order
- 5) Transformation, including negative and passive transformation.

Descriptive Text

According to Gerot and Wignell (1994), descriptive text is intended to explain or detail information. This type of text typically describes a specific location, individual, animal, or item. Descriptive text features a generic structure and linguistic characteristics that serve to convey the writer's expression to the reader. The generic structure consists of two components: identification and description. The identification section of descriptive text usually serves to introduce the reader to a location, individual, animal, or item that is discussed in the paragraphs of the descriptive text (Gerot and Wignell, 1994). The description section generally provides a more detailed portrayal of the object, location, or individual. The writer elaborates on the specific traits of the item being described, such as its color, shape, size, characteristics, and other attributes that define the place, animal, person, or object in question.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes descriptive qualitative research methods. The focus of the research is to identify and describe the syntactical errors made by EFL students when composing descriptive texts. Qualitative research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of a subject from the perspective of the individuals being studied. This approach involves going directly to the specific location of interest to observe and gather data (Franklin et al, 2012). As noted by Creswell (2012), the aim of the descriptive method is to systematically provide a thorough explanation and description of the research object.

In this study, ten participants were selected. They have spent four to five years learning English at Global Learning Center Palangka Raya. The females were seven and the males were three. All participants have different levels of cognitive ability. In the classroom, they were asked to write a descriptive text which describes place, entitled "*The School of Mine*." The texts consisted of three until five paragraphs.

The data was collected through document analysis. The source of data in this research

was the students' writing results. Then, the data were analyzed as well as classified based on category linguistics taxonomy proposed by Politzer and Ramirez theory as guideline.

In analyzing the data, the researcher employed the following steps: 1) identifying the errors, 2) classifying the errors, and 3) explaining the errors. Then, the data were presented in two ways: percentage and description. Percentage was used to find out the most frequent types of errors made by EFL students in writing descriptive text, while description was used to present errors that were classified based on their characteristics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. *Types of Errors*

The following data show the calculation of syntactical errors made By EFL students in writing descriptive text. The data are presented as follows:

Table 1. Calculation of Syntactical Errors

No	Type of Errors	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Use of pronoun	9	15.51%
2.	Use of preposition	14	24.17%
3.	Omission of verb	5	8.65%
4.	Agreement of S V	11	18.96 %
5.	Verb and verb construction	7	12 %
6.	Transformation of passive	7	12%
7.	Transformation of negative	3	5.27%
8.	Word order	2	3.44 %
	TOTAL	58	100

Table 1 elaborates that from fifteen syntactical errors proposed by Politzer & Ramirez (1973), there were eight types of syntactical errors made by EFL students in writing descriptive text. They were use of pronoun, use of preposition, omission of verb, subject-verb agreement, verb and verb construction, transformation of passive, transformation of negative, and word order. The data above also shows that dominant errors were found in three categories: (24.17%) in the form of use of proposition, (18.96%) in the form of agreement S V, and (15.51%) in the form of use of pronoun.

2. *Identification, Type, Explanation, and Correction of Syntactical Errors*

Table 2 shows the results of identification, type, explanation, and correction of syntactical errors made by EFL students in writing descriptive text. The data were analyzed based on the theory of (Politzer & Ramirez, 1973). Then, they were descriptively presented as follows:

Table 2. Description of Syntactical Errors

No	Identification of Errors	Type of Errors	Explanation & Correction of Errors
1.	<u>Our gazebo usually use</u> for them to hang out	Transformation	<u>Our gazebo usually use</u> indicates passive voice. It tells what happens to subject (our gazebo). In the context of passive voice, there are two parts left, namely auxiliary (is) and past participle (V3). Therefore, the sentence should be changed into <u>our gazebo is usually used ...</u>
2.	<u>Some classes</u> on the second building <u>has</u> air conditioning	Subject verb-agreement	The phrase " <u>some classes</u> " indicates plural subject. Therefore, plural subject must go with plural verb. The sentence should be " <u>Some classes</u> on the second building <u>have</u> air conditioning".
3.	<u>My school</u> <u>have</u> mosque, canteen, library, and two labs ...	subject verb agreement	<u>My school</u> is singular subject. <u>Have</u> is the verb that indicates plural verb. Therefore, the subject must agree with verb. Thus, <u>have</u> should be changed into <u>has</u> .
4.	My school is located <u>in</u> A. Yani Street Number 12	Preposition	The preposition <u>in</u> refers to general location when the name of the street is not specified. Meanwhile, A. Yani Street shows a specific street. Thus, the proposition should be <u>on</u> as in " <u>My school is located on A. Yani Street Number 12</u> ".
5.	My school is close to <u>another schools</u> .	Noun phrase	<u>Another</u> is always followed by singular countable noun. It does not describe something specific. Therefore, the plural form should be changed into singular form <u>another school</u> .
6.	It <u>can feels</u> like the sun is crashing down on us.	Verb and verb construction	Modal <u>can</u> must go with bare infinitive. <u>Feels</u> is additional infinitive. Therefore, the -s should not be inserted. The sentence should be " <u>it can feel like ...</u> "
7.	... I <u>have ever see</u> are scout, e-com, marching band, ...	Verb and verb construction	<u>Have ever see</u> indicated action which is already done. The auxiliary " <u>have</u> " must go with past participle (V3). The verb " <u>see</u> "

			should be seen. Therefore, the correct construction should be " <u>have ever seen</u> ".
8.	My school has twenty seven <u>room class</u> .	Noun phrase	<u>Room class</u> is incorrect term. <i>Room</i> is used as a general term for any divided part of a house, while <i>class</i> is a room in a school or college where classes are held. The correct term is <u>classroom</u> (compound noun)
9.	I often get <u>mad with</u> the rules or something else.	Preposition	Based on AE, the preposition is incorrect. <u>Mad at</u> means very anger or annoyed.
10.	My school has also seven canteens and <u>its</u> location ...	Pronoun	The pronoun " <u>its</u> " shows the ownership of thing. It is followed by singular noun. " <u>Its</u> " refers to seven canteens. Therefore, " <u>their</u> " is the appropriate pronoun.
11.	... But, <u>the school is not provide</u> air conditioning.	Transformation	<u>The school is not provide</u> is verbal sentence. The auxiliary "is" cannot go with bare infinitive. The auxiliary "does" is the correct one. The sentence should be " <u>the school does not provide ...</u> "
12.	<u>There also a room</u> where we can do ...	Omission	<u>There</u> (pseudo-subject) that needs linking verb. Since a room shows object (singular), auxiliary to be " <u>is</u> " should be inserted. The correct sentence should be " <u>there is a room where we can do ...</u> "
14.	The building is pretty much the <u>same with</u> the second building.	Preposition	<u>Same with</u> does not imply similarity, but it conveys indifference. Therefore, <u>same as</u> is the correct preposition.
15.	I guess, the size of lab is <u>enough big</u> ...	Word order	<u>Enough big</u> is incorrect. When enough goes with adjective, adjective must be placed first. It means quantifier (<i>enough</i>) comes next. Thus, the correct one is <u>big enough</u> .
16.	It is also <u>a two stories buildings</u> .	Word order	<u>A two stories building</u> shows incorrect formation. The word "stories" functions as adjective which modifies building (noun). Adjective cannot be pluralized. Therefore,

				<i>stories</i> should be <i>story</i> . The correct formation should be <u>a two-story building</u> .
17.	There are a few buildings <u>that consists</u> of the agreement classes.	Subject verb	Subject and its subject must agree in number. <u>A few buildings</u> is subject plural, while consists is singular verb. Thus, the verb consists should be changed into <u>consist</u> .	
18.	... <u>despite of</u> clogging up schedule, these activities help ...	Preposition	<u>Despite of</u> means "regardless of". It is used to express a contrast between two things. The preposition "of" does not need to be inserted. <u>Despite</u> is the correct one. Despite has similar meaning to in spite of.	
19.	My school has many trees, but now <u>they already cut down</u> .	Transformation	<u>They already cut down</u> is passive voice. The sentence misses one part, namely auxiliary to be "are". Passive voice focuses on what happens to subject. Thus, the sentence should be <u>they are already cut down</u> .	

a. Errors in the Form of Noun Phrase

According to Miller (2013), a phrase is a group of interrelated words. Words that work together in a sentence but is not a complete sentence by itself. They are grouped into phrases or groupings which typically bring together heads and their modifiers. EFL students made errors in noun phrase comprising determiners, number, the use of pronouns, and the use of preposition. Many EFL students failed to put appropriate prepositions such as in, on, at, of and with. Putting different preposition in verb, noun, adjective or noun may cause different meaning. *It is located in* indicates general location, yet *it is located on* shows specific location. Therefore, to use correct preposition is a must. The errors also occurred in using pronoun. When non-living subject "*seven canteens*" is plural, the pronoun must be plural "*their*" as well.

In the use of determiners such as those, another, that, some, EFL students should be careful. The determiners such *those*, *many* and *some* must be followed by plural noun. On the contrary, *that* or *another* must go with singular noun. The error in using determiner can be seen from this following example:

Incorrect : Those special *class* ...

Correct : Those special *classes* ...

b. Errors in the Form of Verb

The following category of errors is verb phrase. Verb is a word that describes what the subject of a sentence is doing. Verbs can indicate physical or mental actions, occurrences, and states of being. In the context of part of speech, verb is a complex part. Verb has also its rules. Singular subject must go with singular verb. Plural subject must go with plural verb. See the following example:

Incorrect : *One* of my friends in the classroom *have* won Spelling Bee

Correct : *One* of my friends in the classroom *has* won Spelling Bee.

Like noun, verb also has grammatical properties of person as well as number. According to Marcella (1972), verb also has several other grammatical properties that are shared with no other part of speech.

c. Errors in the Form of Omission of Verb

Adding auxiliary to be such is, am, are, was, were, be, and being to form passive voice is absolutely needed. Auxiliary to be in passive voice must be inserted. To make passive or progressive forms, is must be added (Michael, 20025). Missing of it causes incorrect formation and ambiguity in meaning. Passive and active voice are totally different. Passive answers what happens to subject, whereas active answers what subject does. The following example shows the omission of verb.

Incorrect : The school already completed with air conditioning.

Correct : The school *is* already completed with air conditioning.

d. Errors in the Form of Transformation

The errors in transformation occurred in two categories, namely negative transformation and passive transformation. The negative transformation involves a rearrangement of structure, as when moving "not" to the position after the first occurring auxiliary or after be. Here is the example:

Incorrect : The school *is not provide* air conditioning.

Correct : The school *does not provide* air conditioning.

The passive voice is used to emphasize the action (the verb) and the object of a sentence rather than subject. This means that the subject is either less important than the action itself. Auxiliary and past participle verbs are the most important parts. They must always be inserted, as the following example:

Incorrect : My school has many trees, but now they already cut down.

Correct : My school has many trees, but now they *are* already cut down.

CONCLUSION

This study found that EFL students made 8 of the 15 types of syntactical errors proposed by Politzer and Ramirez (1973). The errors included the use of pronouns, prepositions, omission of a verb, subject verb agreement, verb-and-verb structure, and word order. Errors occurred slightly in both passive and negative transformations.

EFL students made the most syntactical errors in the categories of proposition (24.17%), agreement S V (18.96%), and pronoun use (15.51%). The findings also suggest that writers should pay more attention to using determiners, pronouns, and subject-verb agreement in descriptive text.

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