

Investigating Grammatical Errors in EFL University Students' Argumentative Essays

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this study is to analyse grammatical errors in argumentative texts written by university students, with a specific focus on identifying the most common errors and determining their underlying causes. This study applied an explanatory mixed-method design. The researchers employ the Surface Strategy Taxonomy to identify errors. The results indicate that students make four types of errors: omission (63%), addition (27,5%), misformation (5,7%), and misordering (3,8%). The study found that omission errors were the most common, whereas misordering errors were the least common. The interviews revealed that sentence structure problems in students' writing were influenced by both interference from their mother tongue and the tendency to overgeneralize English rules and norms.

KEYWORDS: error analysis, argumentative text, writing skill

INTRODUCTION

The proficiency of Indonesian students in English remains comparatively low. This is evident from the limited quantity of student scientific papers in well-regarded international journals. Articles authored by Indonesian students remain uncommon. However, it is not difficult to locate articles authored by students from nearby nations like Malaysia, Singapore, China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, and even from countries with limitations on English education, such as Iran.

Despite English being a mandatory subject, the aforementioned evidence indicates students have inadequate proficiency in English writing. The students' limited proficiency in comprehending grammatical English, coupled with the influence of their native language, leads to inaccuracies in their written work.

Grammatical errors are a prevalent challenge encountered by students in their writing. These errors encompass a spectrum of issues, ranging from fundamental concerns like subject-verb agreement and verb tense consistency to more intricate problems such as sentence structure and punctuation. These errors not only disturb the clarity and logical flow of the text but also influence the overall quality and effectiveness of the work.

In their research, (Ningthias & Mulyana, 2020) asserted that students had numerous difficulties when composing English text, with one of the primary issues being a deficiency in fundamental grammatical comprehension. They have a tendency to utilize Indonesian grammar norms when composing their English texts. Their findings demonstrate that Indonesian students continue to struggle with creating English text due to their strong adherence to Indonesian grammar rules. Given the importance of effective communication in English, it is crucial to prioritize the study of grammar in order to improve one's writing and speaking skills.

Ratnaningsih & Azizah, (2019) demonstrated the common errors students tend to make in their writing, with capitalization ranking highest with 60 errors (14.67%) and sentence 3 having the lowest error rate of 0.73%. The researchers identified the root of the issue based on a common error. The language transfer category has the highest number of errors, with a total of 172 errors, accounting for 42.05% of the total. On the other hand, the communication strategy category has the lowest number of errors, with a total of 49 errors, accounting for 11.98% of the total.

In their study conducted in 2019, Kharmilah & Narius identified prevalent grammatical mistakes made by English language learners at Universitas Negeri Padang while writing discussion texts. The error analysis employed the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al. A total of 260 mistakes were identified, categorized as follows: omission (50.77%), misformation (28.85%), addition (15%), and misordering (5.38%). Ultimately, the pupils continue to have substantial challenges in comprehending the grammatical structure during the writing process.

The significance of error analysis stems from the notion that errors can only be reduced if they are discovered. Classifying and examining errors can offer more insight to students and instructors regarding the more prevalent forms of errors and their underlying causes. By recognizing, classifying, and analyzing the most prevalent mistakes produced by students in written tasks, the efficiency

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of English writing is enhanced. By implementing this method, lecturers will concentrate solely on specific sorts of errors that require correction, rather than expending time on less common errors committed by pupils.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to perform a thorough analysis of the grammatical errors frequently made by students in their written work. The study aims to reveal the fundamental causes of grammatical errors by analyzing the exact types and patterns of these mistakes. The results of this study are anticipated to provide valuable insights for developing effective strategies and resources that can be included into writing curriculums and training programs. The primary objective of this study is to provide lecturers with important insights and practical solutions that can be implemented to improve students' writing practices. This, in turn, will enhance their academic achievement and prepare them better for the professional world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Error Analysis

Error analysis, according to Richards (1980), is a process that aims to identify and examine errors present in written and spoken language. Error analysis is the examination of errors made by individuals learning a second or foreign language. Error analysis can be conducted to assess an individual's language proficiency, understand their language learning process, and gather insights into typical challenges faced during language acquisition. This knowledge can be used to enhance teaching methods and develop teaching materials. This definition emphasizes the roles and purposes of error analysis.

Further, it is necessary to clarify the distinctions between the terms "error" and "mistake" as they represent two distinct phenomena. According to Dulay et al. (in Rao, 2018), a mistake occurs when there is a temporary disruption or flaw in the delivery of a speech. Proficient speakers have the ability to rectify their errors, such as verbal slips, occasional grammatical errors, and other instances of imperfect performance. In this study, error is defined as an incorrect use of language in the process of learning, and learners are unable to repair it independently due to their incomplete understanding of the subject matter.

Types of Errors

Dulay et al. (1986) categorized the common errors made by second language learners in their Surface Strategy Taxonomy theory as omission, addition, mis-formation, and mis-ordering errors.

A. Omission

Students may overlook certain linguistic forms due to their intricate nature in production. Morphology also experiences instances of omission. Learners frequently omit the third person singular morpheme –s, the plural marker –s, and the past tense inflection –ed. An example of an error made by a learner could be: "I play football yesterday". Instead of: "I played football yesterday".

B. Addition

Addition is the opposite of omission. It signifies the existence of an element that is not supposed to be present in a grammatically correct statement. It is a common phenomenon in the process of acquiring a second language by the learner. The errors in addition can be classified into three categories: double marking, regularization, and simple addition.

Regularization refers to the act of mistakenly applying rules to transform a regular verb into an irregular verb. For instance, saying "She hitted the ball" instead of the correct form "She hit the ball." Regularization is a phenomenon that occurs in verb production and in the formation of nouns in both singular and plural forms. For example, it can lead to the incorrect usage of "staffs" instead of "staff".

Simple addition refers to an inaccuracy in addition that is not accounted for by either double marking or regularization. For example, the correct phrase is "They can sing well," not "They can sings well".

Double marking is a method used to identify and eliminate specific components that should not be included in particular linguistic constructs. An instance of this type of error can be observed in the sentence "She wears glasses," which should be corrected to "She wears glasses."

C. Misinformation

Mis-formation refers to the incorrect usage of morphemes or structure (Dulay et al., 1982:156). The sorts of mis-formation errors include regularization, archi-forms, and alternating forms. The concept of regularization in misinformation error is closely related to regularization in addition error. Regularization error occurs when the rules of verb transformation and countable and uncountable nouns, such as using "oxes" instead of "oxen" or "flied" instead of "flew" or "flown" are missed. Archi-form is committing an error in the application of demonstrative pronouns: specifically, the pronouns "this," "these," "that," and "those." For instance, the phrase "those flower" should be corrected to "those flowers," and "this pens" should be changed to "these pens." Alternating forms refers to the act of intentionally introducing errors when selecting and utilizing the appropriate grammatical forms in sentence construction. The phrase "I gone to see my mom yesterday" should be corrected to "I went to see my mom yesterday".

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D. Misordering

Mis-ordering can arise at the morphological level. The misplacement of bound morphemes in English is rather rare due to their small quantity. However, in the example "He is got upping now," the learner incorrectly attaches the inflection -ing to the particle of the compound verb "get up" (Emmaryana, 2010).

The Cause of Errors

Brown (2000) identifies two primary sources of errors made by language learners: interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors occur when learners transfer the structure of their native language to the target language, resulting in a negative impact on language acquisition. According to Chelli (2013), interlingual errors occur when learners transfer linguistic patterns from their first language to the target language. Similarly, intralingual errors occur due to inadequate acquisition of the target language, rather than being a result of language transfer. According to Richards, (1975), there are four distinct categories of intralingual errors: 1) overgeneralisation; 2) ignorance of rule restriction; 3) insufficient application of rules; and 4) erroneous notions hypothesised.

Argumentative Text

An argumentative text is a form of writing that presents a central argument or claim and supports it with evidence, logical reasoning, and analysis. An argumentative book aims to persuade the reader to adopt a given viewpoint or take a particular action, using evidence and arguments to support its position.

METHOD

This research used an explanatory mixed-method design (Creswell, 2007) to examine students' English sentence structure errors in argumentative writing and the factors that contribute to them. The researchers first gather and quantify data, then perform a qualitative analysis to dig deeper into context (Ary et al., 2010). The quantitative study used Surface Strategy Taxonomy's theory. A total of 82 students, all of whom were enrolled in the Telecommunication study program at Politeknik Negeri Jakarta, participated. The qualitative data were collected through semistructured interviews (Fraenkel et al., 2012) to determine what causes students' English structure errors. Miles et al. (2014) interactive model analysis was used to analyse the data. According to the model, data analysis involved data gathering, condensation, display, and conclusion making.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Based on the data analysis, a total of 401 errors were identified in the descriptive writing compositions of 82 students. The identified errors were categorised into four classes according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, including omission, addition, mis-formation, and mis-ordering errors.

Table 1. Surface Strategy Taxonomy

No	Surface Strategy Taxonomy	Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Omission	253	63,0
2	Addition	111	27,5
	<i>Regularization</i>	2	0,5
	<i>Simple addition</i>	27	6,7
	<i>Double Markings</i>	82	20,3
3	Misformation	22	5,7
	<i>Regularization</i>	4	1
	<i>Alternating</i>	12	3,2
	<i>Archi-form</i>	6	1,5
4	Misordering	15	3,8
	TOTAL	401	100

The students most frequent errors, as indicated by the analysis results, were omission errors. For approximately 63% of the students, it was in their writing. The second highest error was 27,5%, which was caused by addition errors. The third highest error generated was the misformation error, which accounted for approximately 5,7%. Lastly, the misordering error was the least common among students, with a rate of only 3,8%. The errors occurred are displayed in the figure 1 below.

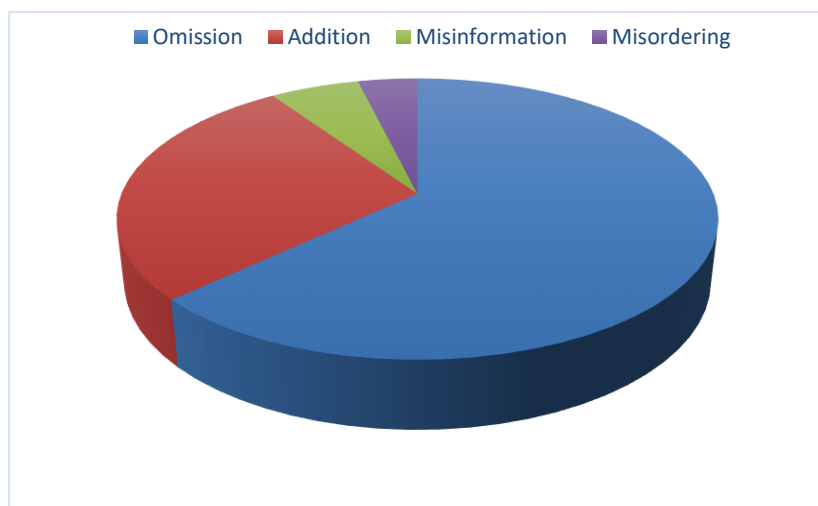


Figure 1. Total of the Error Percentage

A thorough assessment of the analytical findings is conducted in order to generate recommendations for enhancing language acquisition in the future. Therefore, examining language errors is anticipated to generate pedagogical insights for enhancing learners' proficiency. Upon identifying all the errors made by the students, the lecturers can address the practical requirements of the learning process and develop suitable materials and teaching methodologies. An analysis of error frequency will allow the lecturers to instruct specifically at the point of error and allocate greater attention to areas with higher error rates. The research findings indicate that students enrolled in the Telecommunication study program at Politeknik Negeri Jakarta made the four types of errors when producing argumentative texts. Here are a few instances of mistakes that were made:

Table 2. Some of Examples of Students' Errors

No	Identified Sentences	Correct Sentences	Explanation	Categories of errors
1	Smoking has long been controversial topic (a), particularly when it come (b) to whether it should allowed in public places (c).	Smoking has long been a controversial topic (a), particularly when it comes (b) to whether it should be allowed in public places (c).	These three instances are incorrect in terms of proper sentence construction. In example (a), the student omitted an article before the object in the sentence. In example (b), the student omitted the letter 's' that should be present in a singular verb. In example (c), the student omitted a verb auxiliary (be) after the modal to construct passive voice. Those omissions contravene the laws of grammar.	Omission
2	Smoking is should be banned in public places (a) because it protecting non-smokers' health (b),...	Smoking should be banned in public places (a) because it protects non-smokers' health (b),...	In example (a), "is" is added before modal "should" that is not acceptable in English grammar. In example (b), the inclusion of the suffix "-ing" is unexpected in the sentence structure and results in grammatical problems due to the double marking of grammar.	Addition
3	This was to encourage more people for quit smoking or prevent... (a)	This is to encourage more people to quit smoking or prevent... (a)	Those two examples are unsound regarding agreeable sentence construction in grammar. In having a argumentative text, one	Misinformation

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	smoking or prevent ...(a)	...harmful effects of secondhand smoke justify restrictions on smoking in public places (b)	of the language features is using Simple Present Tense. However, in example (a), the student used "was," meaning that it includes Past Tense use; therefore, a regularization error occurred. In example (b), there is a usage of the wrong preposition "to" and it contains an alternating error.	
4	...reduce environmental pollution, and promote a society healthier (a)	...reduce environmental pollution, and promote a healthier society (a)	The study found that misordering accounted for a small percentage of total errors, specifically 3,8 %. This error occurs due to the improper positioning of a morpheme within a phrase. These two sentences are incorrect as they utilize the grammatical structure of Indonesia instead of following the right English grammar structure.	Misordering
	Butts Cigarette are one of the most common forms of...(b)	Cigarette butts are one of the most common forms of...(b)		

DISCUSSION

The researchers discovered that interlingual and intralingual errors are determinants of errors in grammar in students' argumentative essays after studying their work. Students make blunders in their transfer errors when it comes to interlingual errors. Sentence "*They believe that people must give the freedom to smoking wherever they choose...*" demonstrates that the student used the source language (L1) to transform the target language (L2) into an unnatural statement in L2. So, it's clear that the student uses the framework of his first language to build his second language. Students have a tendency to directly translate words or sentences from their first language (L1) to their second language (L2) without taking into account the disparities in grammar, syntax, or vocabulary. For another instance, in the sentence "*I am not very fond of smoking*", the student uses the structure "*Saya sangat tidak suka merokok*" instead of "*I really like smoking*".

The results presented above indicate that discrepancies in grammar rules between the first language (L1) and second language (L2) are responsible for the errors seen. The Indonesian language lacks the concept of the verb "to be," leading Indonesian speakers to exclude it in English phrases. For example, instead of saying "*People smoking in public area*", the student writes "*People are smoking in public area*". Besides, English and Indonesian have differing syntactic norms, which influence word order in sentences, causing linguistic problems.

On the other hand, intralingual errors occur in the target language, not in the native language. These errors generally stem from overgeneralization, simplification, or rule misapplication in the second language. Intralingual errors occur when language learners apply taught principles to new settings in English grammatical error analysis. The subjects of this study commonly make intralingual errors in English as described below:

First, overgeneralization in error analysis pertains to the erroneous application of a broad grammatical norm to contexts where it is not applicable, frequently resulting in mistakes. This is a prevalent occurrence in the process of language acquisition, wherein learners erroneously generalize a rule they have acquired to all comparable instances, even in the presence of exceptions. A few instances of errors made by students in overgeneralization are (1) Applying the regular plural "-s" ending to irregular plural nouns. For example, "*Smoking is harmful to childs*"; (2) Omitting or adding the third-person singular "-s" to all verbs, even when not required or incorrectly applying it. For example, "*People who smokes in open spaces don't think about others*"; (3) Overgeneralizing the use of articles "a" or "the" where they are not needed. For example, "*They can smoke in places that have been provided*"; (4) Applying standard word formation rules to create incorrect forms of word. For example, "*Cigarette smoke dirtyfy the air*" (Cigarette smoke pollutes the air).

Secondly, simplification occurs when students exclude aspects that they perceive as challenging or perplexing, typically in order to facilitate the construction of sentences. For instance, a student deleted auxiliary verb in negative statements, such as expressing "*Some people not like smoking*" instead of "*Some people do not like smoking*".

Furthermore, the misuse of prepositions is occurring due to the fact that prepositions in English do not necessarily possess direct counterparts in the Indonesian language. Students make errors in preposition selection, either by choosing the incorrect preposition, omitting important prepositions, or adding unneeded ones, resulting in grammatical mistakes.

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Finally, another kind of intralingual error made by the students is word order errors, which occur when the arrangement of words in a phrase deviate from the usual syntactic structure of the target language, specifically English. These errors can have a substantial impact on the clarity, semantics, and grammatical accuracy of a statement. Word order mistakes occur due to the distinct syntactic norms of English and Indonesian, for instance in sentence: “*Bans Public smoking help to denormalize smoking*” instead of “*Public smoking bans help to denormalize smoking*”.

The results of this research were consistent with previous studies on English sentence structure errors, including those undertaken by Mufidah & Islam (2022), Fadli (2023), and Putri (2023). Indonesian English students at both secondary and higher levels commonly encounter difficulties in accurately constructing English sentences, resulting in blunders. This study suggests that English pedagogy in Indonesia need significant enhancement to assist students in improving their English writing skills.

This research also identified factors that contribute to students' English sentence structure errors in writing. Two primary factors were found in this study: mother tongue interference and overgeneralisation. Regarding the initial aspect, mother tongue interference, Kramsch (2013) refers to it as the impact of a profound culture that is already ingrained within an individual. According to Fauziati (2014) and Morganna (2019), interlanguage theory suggests that a person's native language is a natural and innate cultural connection that might influence their proficiency in developing their English interlanguage.

The second factor is a common issue that frequently arises among English as a foreign language user. This phenomenon is referred to as natural creativity, as described by Kachru (1990) and Crystal (2008). Overgeneralisation refers to a developmental process observed in students' English interlanguage. This factor can be reduced if students have received sufficient exposure to English, particularly through reading authentic texts that resemble those produced by native speakers. By immersing themselves in these texts, students will eventually be able to produce written English that closely resembles that of native speakers, without making generalisations or using non-native forms or structures.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study, sentence construction problems in student writing include omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Omission is 63%. Addition errors are 27,5%. Misinformation is 5,7%. The percentage of misordering is 3,8%. There are two factors contributing to students' errors in English sentence construction. The first factor is mother tongue interference—culture, linguistic structure, and vocabulary. The second is overgeneralisation, which includes students writing strategies.

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