

Error in Students' Thesis Writing: Syntactical and Morphological Error Analysis

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Abstract

Research on students' error writing has grown in the last few decades. In general, research on writing errors focuses on the results of students' writing in classes with various writing genres. Students in university also find some obstacle in their English writing, especially for EFL students that write their thesis in English. The students still made errors in their thesis of writing. However, research on errors in thesis writing is relatively unexplored. Therefore this study tries to explore the errors made by students when writing their thesis and factors of error making. This study uses data on ten students' undergraduate theses, which were randomly selected from 100 student theses from 2018-2021, and used an error analysis framework put forward by (Dulay et al., 1982). The results show that six categories of errors found in the student thesis, namely errors in the use of verbs with 24.54%, errors in the application of prepositions 24.39%, morphological errors 20.12%, errors in using articles 12.58%, errors in writing passive voice 9.45%, and the use of tense selection with 8.92%. Inter-lingual factors cause errors in students' thesis writing. The findings shows that the students in writing thesis still made errors even though they have been guided by the thesis supervisors. Therefore, in teaching academic writing, it is advisable to pay attention to these two factors so that students' writing abilities can improve. Further studies on error analysis in thesis writing are still needed to explore with varied types of errors and more data for analysis.

Keywords

writing skill; error analysis;
thesis writing



I. Introduction

Language is an arrangement of arbitrary symbols possessing an agreed-upon significance within a community. These symbols can be used and understood independent of immediate contexts, and are connected in regular ways. Naturally individual has the typical language characteristics which are influenced by the feeling, idea, emotion, situation and condition, articulation and cognition. (Ramlan, 2018)

English has become an important language in science and communication. Therefore, English skills are very important to teach in schools and train every student from primary level to higher education (Al-husban, 2018). Through the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Indonesian government's efforts to improve students' ability to acquire English are still experiencing obstacles. The expected learning results are still far from reality. Students still have difficulty communicating in English, especially in written language. This problem is also experienced by other countries where English is a foreign language (Nair and Hui, 2018;

Xie, 2019). Therefore, this problem is very important to find the right solution through intensive and targeted research.

English language competence is very important to be improved by students to maintain their English communication skills in global interactions and tight job market competition. English competence is based on the ability to master English skills, specifically, listening and reading are considered receptive skills, while writing and speaking are considered productive skills. Of the four skills, writing is the most difficult language skill. Writing skills require grammar skills and are also required to master the ability to develop ideas with appropriate and effective words (Harmer, 2003).

Research on errors in EFL writing has been carried out and continues to grow in various countries until now (Kumala, Aimah and Ifadah, 2018; Fadilah, 2019; Perlin, Sartika and Nery, 2020; Perlin, Sartika and Nery, 2020; Pratiwi, Aulia and Lilis, 2019; Rohmana and Jiangmahastu, 2019; Lestari, 2020). Karim et al. (2018) examined the most frequent writing errors made by Bangladeshi students. He discovered that students frequently made grammatical errors, misinformation, disorganization, and overgeneralization. Nair and Hui (2018) and Amiri and Putsch (2017) conducted error research conducted by students in Malaysia. They found that students often made mistakes were sentence structure, articles, capitalization, and punctuation. Al-husban (2018) researched students' errors in English writing in Jordan. This study claimed that the most common writing errors in freshman students' writings were addition and omission. Students' errors are attributed to interlingual difficulties as a result of language learning deformation and limited interlingual errors. Songsukrujiroad, Xin and Kaewyod (2018) examine errors in Chinese students' writing Chinese essays. This study demonstrates six different types of errors that students make when writing Chinese essays: incorrect word choice, incorrect word order, incorrect punctuation, incorrect Chinese characters, conjunction, and classifier. Research on EFL students' error writing in Indonesia is also widely carried out by researchers as well as practitioners and teachers of English. Pasaribu (2021) examined the most frequently made errors by students when writing narrative text. This study found that every type of error was discovered in student writing and the causes of these errors were first language interferences, translation process, and carelessness. Kumala, Aimah and Ifadah (2018) examined the grammatical errors of students' writing using the theory of Dulay, Burth and Krashen (1982). This study revealed that errors occur in all types, but the most dominant is the error or omission. More specifically, Fitria (2018) investigated errors in students' compositions of the simple future tense in their writing. She revealed that the errors found in students' writing were grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Kalee, Rasyid and Muliastuti (2018) also conducted the same research. They examined the errors made by Thai students in writing Indonesian papers. They found that the errors encountered in the student's writing were capital letters, italic letters, and bold letters. The errors are the result of a lack of knowledge about the rules governing the restriction of intra-lingual factors; besides, the students have not attained the Indonesian language's structure. Furthermore, Gayo and Widodo (2018) examined the morphological and syntactical errors made by junior high students and the causal factors. This study states that the types of errors often made by students are omission, addition, and misinformation. The main causes of errors that occur are inter-lingual (first language interference) and intra-lingual factors.

From several writing errors research conducted by the researchers above, It can be noted that research on grammatical errors in EFL writing has evolved and covered a variety of topics, and parts of students' writing skills at the high schools and university level. The problems in EFL writing are also almost the same, where the errors that occur are around grammatical errors in the form of omission, addition, misinformation, and overgeneralization.

While the factors that cause errors are inter-lingual and intra-lingual. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the new object of study that still seems unexplored, error analysis on students' thesis writing. The reasons for this investigation are that thesis writing requires seriousness and thoroughness in the writer and good writing skills. In addition, thesis writing also involves thesis supervisors to guide students to write their thesis. With the help and guidance from the supervisors, it is hoped that the quality of students' thesis will be better, and errors in thesis writing can be hopefully minimized.

II. Review of Literature

Some linguists define errors as follows. Errors are mistakes made by second language learners when they acquire a second language, especially productive skills (Pasaribu, 2021; Gayo and Widodo, 2018; Nair and Hui, 2018). Dulay, Burth and Krashen (1982) ascertained that errors related to productive skills, conversation and composition. In line with this opinion, Harmer (2003) adds that the error is related to the inter-lingual and intra-lingual areas of writing.

Several factors generally cause the cause of the error. Grammatical ability and writing and speaking competence of students in a low second language are some of the fundamental factors that cause errors (Pasaribu, 2021; Kumala, Aimah and Ifadah, 2018; Gayo and Widodo, 2018). At the same time, other factors causing writing errors are caused by intra-lingual factors, namely fatigues and carelessness factors (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

Error analysis is needed to map students' weaknesses in writing and speaking skills. According to Harmer (2003), error analysis identifies the occurrences, characteristics, causes, and sequences of failed languages. Dulay, Burth and Krashen (1982) categorize errors into four types: addition, omission, misinformation (misuse), and disordering. The omission is a kind of inaccuracy in which language learners frequently overlook functional words in favor of content words. The addition is the type of errors that there are additions to the words or sentences. The term "misinformation" refers to an error in which students are unaware of changes in sentence structure. Eventually, disordering is the type of error where the students are unaware of the order of phrases, clauses or sentences.

III. Research Methods

This research is a mixed method. The quantitative descriptive method is used to analyze the data using numbers, percentages, and tables. This method counts occurrences of thesis writing errors and displays the total amount of each error type. The qualitative descriptive method is used to explain the types of errors in the thesis.

This research data consists of 10 English Department student theses randomly selected from 100 student theses from 2018-2021. Each thesis consists of an average of 55 pages written in English. The part of the thesis that was analyzed consisted of: introduction, theoretical review, review of literature, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusion. Furthermore, the data were analyzed differently from several previous error analysis studies carried out manually. Manual analysis methods can lead to less accurate analysis. Therefore, in this study, Grammarly Premium software was used to increase accuracy in identifying errors in thesis writing. Two raters are used to identify errors in the thesis that Grammarly Premium has identified. After the error is identified, the error is entered into the table to identify the type of error. Then, after all, data has been analyzed, each type of error is calculated and written in numbers and percentages to see the type of error and the trend of the most, less, and least dominant. The data analysis followed the syntax and morphological taxonomy proposed by (Dulay et al. (1982).

Table 1. Syntax and morphological errors adapted from (Dulay et al., 1982)

Tenses	Preposition	Articles	Passive Voice	Verbs	Morphological errors
Simple past tense rather than present perfect tense	preposition omission	Omission of "the"	Omitting "be" in passive	Omitting verb "be"	Omitting "s" for plural
Simple present tense rather than present perfect tense	preposition addition	Addition of "the"	Adding "be" intransitive verbs	Adding verb "be"	Adding "s" for plural
Simple past tense rather than simple present tense	Preposition misuse	Omission of "a/an"	Wrong past participle form	Misusing verb "be"	Misusing possessive "s"
Present progressive tense rather than simple present tense		Addition of "a/an"		Omitting the verb	Misusing comparative adjectives
Past perfect tense rather than simple past tense		Misuse of article		Incorrect subject-verb agreement	Misusing derivatives

IV. Results and Discussion

The results showed that all categories of errors were found in the thesis. Of the six categories analyzed, it was found that the most dominant error was errors in the use of verbs with 24.54% of the total errors found, slightly more with errors in the preposition usage which were in the second position with 24.39%. Then the morphological error is also in third place with 20.12%. Errors interrelated to the use of the article and passive voice ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. The error in selecting the appropriate tenses in writing a thesis is the least error made by students. Table 2 shows the results of the error analysis in this study.

Table 2. Category of error

Error category	Number of error	Percentage of error
Tenses	117	8.92
Preposition	320	24.39
Articles	165	12.58
Passive Voice	124	9.45
Verbs	322	24.54
Morphological Errors	264	20.12
Total	1312	100

The errors found in this study are in each of the error categories stated above. Furthermore, each of these error categories will be discussed to identify the errors that occur and see new findings from previous research and similarities with previous research.

4.1. Errors in the Use of Tenses

The first error discussed is the selection of the appropriate tenses for the part of the thesis. This error type is the least category, with 117 occurrences or 8.92% of all error categories found. Errors in the use of these tenses are categorized into five categories, as mentioned in table 1. The most dominant error in using these tenses is using the simple past tense rather than simple present tense, with 32 errors or 27.35% of the total errors in the use of tenses. The error in selecting the least tenses is using the present progressive instead of the simple present with five errors.

Interestingly, this study finds inaccuracies in the application of simple futures instead of the simple present, which are not mentioned in the error taxonomy in table 1. This error category is also very significant, being in the second order of tense errors with 25 occurrences or 21.37% of the total errors. This finding was also not found in the research conducted by Mohammed and Abdul Husein (2015). Details of errors in the use of tenses are shown in table 3 below.

Table 3. Types of tense error

Types of tense error	Number of error	Percentage of error
Simple past tense rather than present perfect tense	18	15.39
Simple present tense rather than present perfect tense	22	18.80
Simple past tense rather than simple present tense	32	27.35
Present progressive tense rather than simple present tense	5	4.27
Past perfect tense rather than simple past tense	15	12.82
Simple future tense rather than simple past tense	25	21.37
Total	117	100

In the tense of error data analysis, some students use tenses that do not follow the incident's context. Explanation of events in the past is blocked using the simple present tense. This incident is probably influenced by the use of their mother, Indonesian, which does not have tenses like English (Gayo & Widodo, 2018). Here are some excerpts related to the misuse of tenses.

The following excerpts demonstrating this type of error:

1. This kind of studies shown popularity in the last decade. (This sentence uses the simple past tense, which should use the present perfect tense because it describes an event in the past and is still ongoing today.)
2. The trend of speech act studies shows increasing interest. (This sentence uses the simple past tense instead of the present perfect tense, just like the sentence in number one.)
3. Students are listening to the teacher's explanation. (This sentence is in present progressive instead of the simple present, where "are listening" should be "listen".)
4. The researcher had analyzed the data based on the theory explained. (This sentence should be in past simple instead of past perfect. The verbal phrase "had analyzed" should be "analyzed".)
5. The data will be analyzed and categorized into the types of refusal strategies. (This sentence should be in simple past instead of simple future. This type of error was not found in the research conducted by Muhammad and Abdulhusein (2015). In this study, the error in using the simple future in explaining past events is very frequent, namely 21.37 % of the total errors in using tenses.

4.2. Error in the Use of Preposition

Preposition errors are ranked second in writing errors found in thesis writing, 24.39% of the overall errors found in the data. This category of preposition error was dominated by the preposition omission with 48.44 % (155 occurrences), followed by misuse of the preposition with 110 occurrences (34.38%), and addition of preposition 17.18%, respectively. Table 4 shows the error of prepositions.

Table 4. Types of preposition error

Types of preposition error	Number of error	Percentage of error
preposition omission	155	48.44
preposition addition	55	17.18
preposition misapplication	110	34.38
Total	320	100

The use of prepositions in thesis writing shows errors in the preposition omission, preposition addition, and prepositions misuse. Prepositions are caused by students' lack of understanding of how English prepositions are used in writing (Pasaribu, 2021; Fauzan, Aulya and Noor (2020). Here are some examples of preposition errors in student thesis writing.

1. The results agree with the data to some extend. (In this sentence, there is an omission of preposition where the verb "agree" should be followed by the preposition "with".
2. The data analysis has shown interesting results. (In this sentence, the use of the preposition "with" is not necessary. It is better if the preposition is omitted.)
3. The study was focused on the speech act. (In this sentence, there is an error of preposition that does not match the preposition "in" paired with the verb "focus". The pair that matches the verb "focus" should be the preposition "on".

4.3. Errors in Article

The application of articles in English writing by EFL students is common in errors. The error is due to the students' lack of understanding of how articles function in English (Ref). Data analysis proves that the error of articles shows a significant number with 165 occurrences (12.58 %) of the total errors in student thesis writing. The most dominant errors of the article made by students were omission of "the" and "a/an" with error frequencies of 52 (31.51%) and 34 (20.61%), respectively. Meanwhile, other types of articles, such as the addition of "the" and "a/an" and misuse of articles, showed almost the same number of occurrences. Table 5 shows the types of errors in using articles.

Table 5. Types of article error

Types of article error	Number of error	Percentage of error
Omission of "the"	52	31.51
Addition of "the"	28	16.97
Omission of "a/an"	34	20.61
Addition of "a/an"	28	16.97
Misuse of article	23	13.94
Total	165	100

Errors of articles are often found in EFL students' writings because students' understanding of how articles are used in English writing is still relatively low (Karim *et al.*, 2018; Rohmana and Jianggimahastu, 2019). The following are some errors of the article found in the students' thesis.

1. (The)Analysis was performed to reveal the results. (In this sentence, the use of the article "the" should not be needed because this sentence is an introductory sentence."
2. An order of analysis was considered according to the previous study. (The use of the article "a" in this sentence is incorrect. The appropriate preposition in this sentence is "an" because the vowel sound precedes the pronunciation of the word "order".

4.4. Errors in the Active Voice and Passive Voice

The application of the voice in English writing is very important to note because it will cause misunderstanding of the meaning that appears. In general, EFL students still make passive voice errors in their writing, either in exercises, project reports, or other assignments. In this study, this type of error shows the number 124 (the most frequent use of passive voice errors).

Table 6. Types of voice error

Types of voice error	Number of error	Percentage of error
Omitting "be" in passive	56	45.16
Adding "be" intransitive verbs	44	35.48
Wrong past participle form	24	19.36
Total	124	100

The use of active/passive voice by students in writing theses are often found with errors. Consequently, the error reduces the quality of the thesis. The factor causing this error is more likely to be caused by the lack of competence in English grammar of students in the use of active/passive voice (Pasaribu, 2021; Lestari, 2020). For example, there are frequent errors in passive voice, such as the form of the verb used does not match the formula of the passive voice. The following is an example of an error in using active/passive voice.

1. The theory used in this study. (In this sentence, the error found is the omission of the verb "be" between the subject "the theory" and the predicate "used".
2. This research method is a descriptive qualitative. (The error found in this sentence is the improper use of the auxiliary verb "be". This sentence is an active voice, so it should be correct if written: "This study uses or used descriptive qualitative method".

4.5. Error in the Use of Verb

The use of the verb in writing a thesis is also a big concern of students. Errors in using verbs often occur, using the auxiliary verb "be" and using other verbs, such as subtraction and addition, or incorrect subject-verb agreement. This study shows that this type of error is 322 occurrences, where the omission of the verb "be" is the most frequent with 90 occurrences (27.95%). The detailed results of this type of error are shown in table 7 below.

Table 7. Type of verb errors

Types of Verb error	Number of error	Percentage of error
Omitting the verb "be."	90	27.95
Adding the verb "be"	28	8.69
Misusing the verb "be"	50	15.53
Omitting the verb	15	4.66
Incorrect subject-verb agreement	139	43.17
Total	322	100

The use of verbs in thesis writing is still found with basic errors. This error is found in the omitting and adding the verb "be", misuse of the verb "be", and the subject-verb agreement. Lack of English grammar competence is one of the error factors in student thesis writing. The understanding and practice of using verbs certainly need to be improved to avoid this error in the future (Pratiwi et al., 2019). Errors of verbs in writing this thesis can be seen in the following example.

1. The researcher used library research in this study. (The error of verb is seen that the subject "researcher" does not agree with the verb "use". The sentence should be written as "The researcher uses or used library research in this study".)
2. Around 25 students as the participants in this research. (This sentence is incorrect as it does not have a verb. This sentence will be correct if it is written, "Around 25 students were participating in this research".)

4.6. Errors in the Morphological use

In the investigation of errors in the thesis writing, morphological errors were also found, with a total of 264 occurrences, or 20.12% of the total errors in the thesis writing. The most dominant error is a misuse of plural and derivatives with 91 occurrences (34.47%), followed by the omission of the plural ending "s" with 80 occurrences (30.30%), misuse of possessive "s" with 36 occurrences (13.64%), the addition of plural ending "s" I number of 34 occurrences (12.88%), and the incorrect use of comparative adjectives with 23 occurrences (8.71%). Table 8 shows the results of morphological errors in the thesis writing.

Table 8. Types of Morphological Error

Types of morphological Error	Number of error	Percentage of error
Omitting "s" for plural	80	30.30
Adding "s" for plural	34	12.88
Misusing of possessive "s"	36	13.64
Misusing comparative adjectives	23	8.71
Misusing derivatives	91	34.47
Total	264	100

Errors in the use of morpheme are dominated by the use of morpheme "s". Typographic errors cause the factor. On the other hand, incorrect uses of comparative adjectives and derivatives are caused by the lack of grammar competence in the case of comparative adjectives and derivatives (Gayo and Widodo, 2018; Kharmilah and Narius, 2019). The followings are examples of this kind of errors.

1. The distribution of data is done by tabulation. (The sentence is an error due to the addition of "s" to the word of "distribution". It should be written, "The distribution of data is done by tabulation".)
2. The student was given a writing task about a certain topic. (This sentence is incorrect due to the omission of "s" to the subject "the student". The sentence should be written, "The students were given a writing task about a certain topic".)
3. Students in group A are more smart than in group B. (The sentence is incorrect in terms of misuse of comparative degree. The word "smart" is one syllable, so it should be "smarter" in the comparative degree.)

V. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine the errors done by students when writing their theses. The current study's findings revealed that students made errors with tense, prepositions, articles, passive voice, verbs, and morphology. The most common error in writing a thesis is the use of prepositions and verbs. In general, the errors made by students in this study were relatively the same as writing errors made by other students in similar studies. Then the factors that cause this error are lack of grammar practice, carelessness of students in doing their thesis writing, and lack of typo-check. Therefore, the error identification exercise effectively reduces students' grammatical errors, and frequent sentence writing exercises can

significantly reduce students' sentence structure errors. This finding has theoretical implications that the students made most grammatical errors in preposition and verb use. The finding suggests that lecturers practice more in these grammatical areas, besides other grammatical areas of errors.

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