

## **AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS AT SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL**

Lidia Natalia Lumban Gaol<sup>1</sup>, Yenita Br Sembiring<sup>2</sup>, Elita Modesta Br  
Sembiring

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Prima Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Methodist Indonesia

### **Correspondence**

Email: [yenitasembiring@unprimdn.ac.id](mailto:yenitasembiring@unprimdn.ac.id)

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the grammatical errors made by tenth-grade students in writing descriptive texts at SMK Telkom Medan. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, the research aimed to identify the types and sources of grammatical errors found in students' writing. The data were collected through students' written tasks and analyzed using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), which classifies errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The findings revealed that misformation was the most frequent error (40.2%), followed by omission (33.7%), addition (16.8%), and misordering (9.2%). In terms of error sources, intralingual transfer was the dominant factor, indicating students' overgeneralization of grammatical rules. Other sources included interlingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies. The results highlight the need for more targeted grammar instruction and feedback in EFL writing classes. This study contributes to improving grammar pedagogy and promoting more effective teaching strategies in descriptive writing instruction.

**Keywords:** Grammatical Errors, Descriptive Text, EFL Writing, Error Analysis, Senior high school

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the English language skills is writing. Numerous experts have provided definitions of writing. Writing is an activity that can be effectively prepared for by practicing the other abilities of speaking, listening, and reading, according to Nation (2009:113). Writing is a type of writing that is used in high school and college courses, claim Oshima and Hogue (2007:3). However, Nordquist (2010) adds that writing is actually a communication activity. It implies that written language should be comprehensible to the reader since it cannot convey the information or provide many additional details immediately.

Writing is considered one of the most challenging skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, as it involves complex processes such as idea generation, organization, grammar use, and vocabulary selection (Hyland, 2019). Among various genres taught in senior high school,

descriptive text plays a foundational role in helping students articulate detailed information about people, places, and objects. Husna, Zainil, and Rozimela (2013) state that a descriptive writing is one in which the author attempts to visualize the subject of the description. This indicates that a descriptive writing is one that goes into great detail about the author's imagined world. A writer may use an object's appearance, texture, scent, and/or sound to describe it (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Furthermore, the main goal of descriptive texts is to describe an object—be it a person, place, or thing—so that readers can visualize it (Afifuddin, 2016).

Despite receiving instruction on the structure and features of descriptive texts, many Indonesian senior high school students continue to make frequent grammatical errors in their writing, which significantly affect the clarity and coherence of their compositions (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2020). According to Brown (2000), an error is a discernible departure from a native speaker's adult grammar that indicates a learner's proficiency in the target language. Put another way, errors happen when students deviate from the norm, which shows how proficient they are at learning the target language.

Making errors is normal when learning a language because it's regarded as a necessary component of the process; in fact, learning is impossible without making errors. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) asserted that "error is the flawed side of learner speech or writing. It indicates that when learning a language, children might use some improper speech and writing. Students' errors, however, cannot be disregarded since they can aid in their comprehension of language acquisition.

Although numerous studies have investigated students' grammatical errors in English writing, most of them focus on general essay writing or narrative texts (Siregar & Manurung, 2021; Yanti & Ramadhani, 2022). Very few studies have specifically addressed grammatical errors within descriptive text writing, particularly at the senior high school level in the Indonesian context. Furthermore, some recent studies lack a detailed classification of error types based on grammatical categories (e.g., tense, article, preposition, subject-verb agreement), which limits their pedagogical usefulness.

Grammatical competence, as a component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2014), is essential in writing accuracy. Ellis (2021) emphasizes that understanding learners' grammatical errors can provide insights into their interlanguage development. In line with this, analyzing students' grammatical errors in a specific text type such as descriptive writing becomes essential to improve instructional effectiveness.

The urgency of this study lies in its potential to improve the quality of EFL writing instruction at the senior high school level. By analyzing the most frequent types and causes of grammatical errors in students' descriptive

texts, this research can inform the development of more focused and responsive teaching strategies. As Richards and Schmidt (2019) highlight, understanding learner errors is essential for curriculum development and teacher feedback.

In addition, this study contributes to the field of applied linguistics and EFL pedagogy by offering evidence-based insights into students' grammar performance in writing. It will also support the implementation of genre-based approaches in Indonesian classrooms as promoted by Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes the mastery of text types in context.

The process of identifying, evaluating, and categorizing mistakes produced by students while learning a target language is known as error analysis. When researchers and classroom teachers gather samples of a person's language, they employ a process called error analysis, which entails steps like identifying errors in the sample, characterizing those errors, categorizing them according to their nature and causes, and assessing how serious they are (Mustadi & Amalia, 2020; Pasaribu, 2021). Error analysis is a process used to find mistakes in writing and speech. Error analysis, as used in this study, refers to a process whereby a researcher learns about the types and sources of grammatical errors as well as the writing challenges of the students.

According to Divsar and Heydari (2017: 143, as cited in Panjaitan et al., 2023), error analysis (EA) is a technique for compiling errors found in students' language, determining whether or not these errors are obvious, and classifying the causes of the errors that students make. This suggests that error analysis is the act of totaling up all of the mistakes that students make. Moreover, the technique of error analysis is employed to ascertain whether or not errors are found in a systematic way. Finally, an error analysis that describes the causes of the errors the author found. Dulay et al. (1982, as referenced in Esmalde, 2020) classified the various types of errors using surface strategy taxonomy. The changes made to the surface structure are highlighted by the surface strategy taxonomy. Students might arrange or distort the objects in this scenario, or they might add unnecessary elements and omit essential ones.

The surface strategy taxonomy divides errors into four categories; 1) Omission: A well-formed speech necessitates the inclusion of a certain element, which is absent in errors. 2) Addition: this is the reverse of omission and is shown by the inclusion of something that should not be in a coherent statement. In this lesson, there are three types of additions: regularization, basic addition, and double marking. 3) Misformation: typified by the incorrect morpheme or structure being used. Three categories of misformation exist: alternating form and regularization, archy, and 4) Misordering: Misordering errors are defined by a morpheme or collection of morphemes being positioned incorrectly within the utterance.

Dulay and colleagues (1982) distinguished four types of errors: additions, omissions, mis-formations, and mis-orderings. Among these categories are: 1) Extra, which is the inclusion of unnecessary or undesirable words in the statement; 2) Omission is the lack of some words that belong in a statement or other phrases that ought to be in a sentence but are either overlooked or neglected to be included; The usage of words or morphemes that are not quite correct, such as the word order in a phrase, is known as misordering. The use of incorrect words or incorrect sentence structures, such as subject, plural or singular nouns, prepositions, and verbs, is known as misformation.

Students will learn the correct one and become proficient in English by examining the mistakes. Both teachers and students can profit from error analysis. Students must be able to analyze their mistakes in order to determine which parts of grammar they struggle with the most, become conscious of their faults, find the source of their errors, and learn from them in order to improve their language skills and prevent making the same mistakes again. Teachers might utilize errors as indicators to monitor their students' progress toward the objective. According to Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong (2008), mistakes can be regarded as a type of learning exercise that the student completes. The majority of the time, pupils committed mistakes because they were unsure of what was right.

Brown (2007) identifies four sources of error: communication methods, the learning context, intralingual transfer, and interlingual transfer. Teachers and students are the four causes of error. The researcher examined the sources of errors committed by the students. The majority of the sources, such as negative mother tongue and inaccurate generalization target languages, were provided by the students themselves. However, the instructor also plays a significant role in helping pupils acquire a second language through communication and subject tactics. One step in the mistake analysis process is determining whether the error will be obvious and accurate. According to Ellis (1999), the error analysis process consists of four steps.

The learning environment, intralingual transfer, interlingual transfer, and communication techniques are the four sources of error identified by Brown (2007). The four causes of error are students and teachers. The researcher looked at the reasons behind the students' mistakes. The pupils themselves supplied most of the sources, including unfavorable mother tongues and incorrect generalization target languages. However, through communication and subject-matter strategies, the teacher also plays a big part in helping students learn a second language. Assessing whether the error will be accurate and visible is one step in the mistake analysis process. There are four steps in the mistake analysis process, according to Ellis (1999).

Students in the tenth grade are required to learn descriptive texts, one kind of written English text. Descriptive texts are a type of writing that includes definitions, attributes, and descriptions of an object or anything,

according to Husna (2017) and Evi Khoirun, Sri, and Astuti (2022). However, Knapp and Watkins (2005) and Nagao (2022) agree on one point: a descriptive text seeks to explain a certain object, person, or location and make it obvious to readers how it looks. Thus, a descriptive writing might be defined as one that uses physical characteristics to describe people, places, and objects.

Students must understand their fundamental principles while writing descriptive texts so that they can describe things and communicate their major ideas in a way that is appropriate, fluid, and acceptable (MoEC, 2018). The first principle relates to the genre structure of the work. According to Doddy, Sugeng, and Effendi (2008), an identification and a description are the two main components of a descriptive text's generic structure. The writer must identify the phenomenon being described in the identification section. In the meanwhile, the description section lists the components, attributes, and traits. Things that occupy space, such as items, people, buildings, or cities, are shown in the description section (Stanley, David, & Allen, 1992).

The emphasis on utilizing nouns to indicate distinct participants, as well as the simple present tense, adjectives, and pronouns, are among the unique linguistic characteristics of descriptive texts (Hyland, 2019; Knapp & Watkins, 2005). According to Knapp and Watkins (2005), highlighting a particular participant in a descriptive text entails concentrating on a single immediate object that will be described. According to Hyland (2019), the chapter appears more captivating and vivid when nouns are used effectively since they provide readers with a more tangible picture of what is being stated. The simple present tense is usually used while writing a descriptive paragraph (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Among the distinctive language features of descriptive writings are the focus on using nouns to identify individual participants, as well as the simple present tense, adjectives, and pronouns (Hyland, 2019; Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Highlighting a specific participant in a descriptive text means focusing on a single immediate object that will be detailed, according to Knapp and Watkins (2005). Effective usage of nouns gives readers a more concrete image of what is being spoken, which makes the chapter seem more engaging and vivid (Hyland, 2019). When writing a descriptive paragraph, the simple present tense is typically employed (Knapp & Watkins, 2005).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze students' grammatical errors in writing descriptive texts. The research was conducted to the tenth grade students of SMK Telkom Medan. The participants of the research were 15 students. The procedure began with the preparation phase, where the researcher coordinated with the English teacher to select a class that had already been introduced to descriptive text writing based on the national curriculum. The selection of participants was carried out through purposive sampling, focusing on students who

had completed the relevant writing unit in their syllabus.

During the data collection stage, students were asked to compose a descriptive text of topic given topic. The writing activity was done in class under the supervision of the English teacher to ensure the originality of students' work and to avoid any external assistance. This method ensured that the writing reflected the students' actual grammatical competence.

Once the texts were collected, the researcher began organizing the data by eliminating incomplete or plagiarized submissions. Each writing sample was then coded and anonymized for ethical considerations. The grammatical errors found in the students' writing were identified and analyzed using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), which categorizes errors into four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This taxonomy was chosen because it allows a comprehensive analysis of how grammatical rules are misapplied or ignored by learners.

To provide a more focused analysis, each grammatical error was further classified into linguistic categories, including verb tense errors, subject-verb agreement, article usage, prepositions, and plural forms. These categories were selected based on their relevance and frequency in second language learners' writing, as supported by Ellis (2021) and Celce-Murcia (2014), who emphasize the importance of grammar in achieving writing accuracy in EFL contexts.

The researcher served as the main instrument in the study, supported by several research tools. A writing test prompt was used to guide students in writing their descriptive text. The prompt was designed in consultation with the English teacher to ensure it aligned with the school curriculum. An error analysis checklist was also developed to document the types and frequency of errors systematically. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the identified errors were reviewed by two independent raters—experienced English teachers—who analyzed the data using the same checklist. Their feedback was used to calculate inter-rater reliability and enhance the accuracy of the analysis.

The final stage involved interpreting the results in light of interlanguage theory and second language acquisition principles, particularly focusing on possible sources of errors such as language transfer, developmental stages, and overgeneralization. The findings from this analysis are expected to provide valuable insights into students' grammatical competence and offer practical implications for improving writing instruction at the senior high school level.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **FINDINGS**

This study analyzed grammatical errors found in the descriptive writing of 15 tenth-grade students at SMK Telkom Medan. Using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), a total of 184 errors were identified and categorized into four major types.

**Types of Error**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	62	33.7%
Addition	31	16.8%
Misformation	74	40.2%
Misordering	17	9.2%
Total	184	100%

Misformation errors were the most dominant. These occurred when students used incorrect grammar forms, especially in verb tense and subject-verb agreement. Omission errors happened when students left out necessary elements such as auxiliary verbs (is, are) or articles (a, the). Addition errors were caused by inserting unnecessary grammatical elements, often due to confusion or overuse. Misordering errors involved the incorrect arrangement of words, affecting sentence structure and clarity.

**SOURCES OF ERROR**

According to Brown (2007), errors in second language learning can stem from four main sources. The findings are summarized as follows:

Source of Error	Frequency
Interlingual Transfer	53
Intralingual Transfer	66
Context of Learning	29
Communication Strategy	36

Intralingual transfer was the leading cause. Students tended to generalize grammar rules without understanding exceptions, such as forming all past tense verbs with "-ed. Interlingual transfer occurred when students translated directly from Indonesian into English, leading to inappropriate word order or omitted grammatical elements. Context of learning contributed to errors resulting from unclear or incomplete teaching. Communication strategy-based errors were caused by students avoiding difficult structures and simplifying their sentences.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study revealed that students frequently make grammatical errors in their descriptive writing, particularly in the form of misformation errors (40.2%), followed by omission (33.7%), addition (16.8%), and misordering (9.2%). These findings suggest that while students may understand the general structure of a descriptive text, they still face significant challenges in accurately applying English grammar rules.

The dominance of misformation errors indicates that students often use incorrect word forms, especially in verb tenses and subject-verb agreements. This aligns with the observations of Ellis (2021), who noted that such errors are indicative of developmental stages in second language acquisition, where learners tend to overgeneralize grammar rules. For instance, replacing "go" with "goes" may be confused due to inconsistent understanding of third-person singular rules in the present tense.

Omission errors, such as leaving out auxiliary verbs or articles, are often associated with interlingual transfer from Bahasa Indonesia, a language that does not require articles and often omits auxiliary verbs. This supports Brown's (2007) theory that first language interference significantly influences second language learning outcomes.

Addition errors, though less frequent, may result from learners' overcompensation or misunderstanding of grammatical rules. Meanwhile, misordering suggests students' struggle with English syntax, which differs markedly from their native language structures.

The analysis of error sources showed that intralingual transfer was the primary contributor to students' grammatical mistakes. This finding confirms previous research by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), stating that learners often internalize incorrect patterns due to overgeneralization or incomplete understanding of grammatical rules. Additionally, errors caused by context of learning such as ineffective instruction or inaccurate language models suggest a need for improving classroom practices and instructional materials.

The presence of errors from communication strategies reflects students' efforts to simplify or avoid complex structures when they lack vocabulary or grammatical confidence. This simplification often results in telegraphic speech, which reduces sentence clarity and completeness.

Overall, the discussion highlights the pedagogical importance of integrating systematic error analysis in EFL classrooms. Teachers should not only correct errors but also explain their causes to help students internalize correct usage. Explicit grammar instruction, interactive writing exercises, and peer feedback can be effective strategies for reducing grammatical errors in students' writing. Moreover, exposing students to well-structured English texts and encouraging self-monitoring and revision practices are essential steps in enhancing grammatical accuracy and fluency.



## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

### **CONCLUSION**

From the analysis of 15 students' descriptive writing at the senior high school level, it can be concluded that grammatical errors remain a significant challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The study revealed that misformation errors—where students used incorrect word forms or grammatical structures—were the most frequently occurring type of error. This was followed by omission errors, in which students left out necessary grammatical elements, as well as addition and misordering errors, which involved either the inclusion of unnecessary words or incorrect word arrangement.

These grammatical inaccuracies were not random; they reflected systematic difficulties that students encountered in mastering English grammar. The dominant source of these errors was identified as intralingual transfer, where learners overgeneralized grammatical rules due to limited understanding. In addition, interlingual transfer—the influence of the students' first language—also contributed significantly to the errors, particularly in word order and sentence structure. Other sources, such as insufficient or unclear instruction (context of learning), and students' simplification strategies when faced with limited vocabulary or grammar knowledge, further compounded the issue.

Overall, the findings indicate that while students may be familiar with the structure of descriptive texts, they still struggle to apply grammar rules accurately. This suggests a need for more focused and responsive instructional approaches in grammar teaching, especially in writing classes.

In light of the findings, several suggestions can be proposed to enhance the teaching and learning of grammar in descriptive writing. For English teachers, it is important to integrate systematic error analysis into writing instruction. By identifying and discussing common errors made by students, teachers can design targeted exercises and grammar-focused interventions. Moreover, feedback should go beyond surface correction; it should guide students to understand why certain structures are incorrect and how to revise them. Teachers are also encouraged to use authentic texts and examples that reflect proper grammatical usage in descriptive writing.

Students, on the other hand, should be encouraged to take an active role in recognizing and correcting their own grammatical errors. This can be facilitated through regular peer reviews, self-editing exercises, and the use of grammar-checking tools. Exposure to well-written English texts—such as articles, stories, and descriptions—can also help them internalize correct structures and vocabulary usage.

For future researchers, this study opens the door to more extensive

investigations. Longitudinal studies could be conducted to observe how students' grammatical accuracy evolves over time. In addition, expanding the participant pool to include students from various schools or regions would allow for broader generalizations and deeper insights into error patterns in different educational contexts.

Ultimately, addressing grammatical errors should not only be about correction but also about fostering students' understanding of language patterns, enabling them to become more confident and effective writers in English.

## **SUGGESTION**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, the following suggestions are proposed for various stakeholders involved in English language teaching and learning:

### **1. English Teachers**

Teachers should incorporate explicit and focused grammar instruction into writing activities, especially in teaching descriptive texts. Since misformation and omission were the most frequent errors found in students' writing, teaching strategies should emphasize correct verb usage, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. Additionally, teachers are encouraged to adopt error analysis as a formative assessment tool to identify students' common mistakes and tailor instruction accordingly. Providing constructive and reflective feedback on students' writing is essential to help them recognize and correct their grammatical errors.

### **2. Students**

Students should become more aware of their own writing challenges by actively engaging in self-correction and peer feedback activities. They are encouraged to read more well-written English texts such as descriptive articles, short stories, and learning materials to enhance their grammatical intuition and vocabulary. Practicing writing regularly and consulting grammar references or digital tools (such as Grammarly) can help strengthen their grammatical competence.

### **3. Schools and Curriculum Developers**

Schools should provide continuous professional development opportunities for teachers on grammar teaching and error analysis strategies. Furthermore, curriculum designers can integrate genre-based writing instruction aligned with the Kurikulum Merdeka, ensuring that students not only understand the structure of descriptive texts but also gain sufficient mastery of grammar usage within each genre.

### **4. Future Researchers**

Future studies could expand the sample size and include students

from various schools or educational levels to improve the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to investigate how students' grammatical competence develops over time with focused intervention. Moreover, researchers may explore the impact of instructional techniques—such as blended learning, peer feedback, or grammar games—on reducing grammatical errors in writing.

By implementing these suggestions, it is hoped that English language instruction, particularly in writing, will become more effective and responsive to students' actual learning needs, thereby contributing to the overall improvement of English proficiency among EFL learners.

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