EXPLORING STUDENTS' ERRORS IN CONSTRUCTING SENTENCES

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ABSTRACT

Ability to construct a good sentence is a requirement in writing an essay. However some students often found some difficulties in organizing the good sentences. They may face difficulties in various aspects, including grammar. Those difficulties faced by students are what then become mistakes or errors. The main focus of this study is to find out the types of errors in constructing sentences and the frequency of error occurrence in each type. This research is descriptive design with the sample from the second year students of English Education Program of University of Pasir Pengaraian. The data analysis was using error analysis by classifying the students' errors based on the surface strategy taxonomy errors involving omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. From the finding of the study, it reveals that the high frequency of error occurrence is error of omission with 40 times which means 37.7 % of error total. The next most error made by the students was in Error of misformation with 37 times or 34.9%. The students made 21 times of Error of Addition or 19.8 %. They also made 8 times of Error of misorder or 7.5 %. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the students still have problems in constructing sentences when writing an essay.

Key words: error analysis, surface strategy taxonomy errors, sentences, essay

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English has become a need for people around the world. In Indonesia, English is used as foreign language that has been a compulsory subject for junior and senior high school. Even, for some areas, it has been taught from the kindergarten until university. In this case, the students are expected to have English competences both English component and English skills. The English components involve grammatical structure and vocabulary; While English skills involve listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Moreover, English is not used in daily communication. It is only used as a subject in classroom teaching and learning process. Considering the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, it implies the students' opportunity to develop their English skills only happen in their English classes. Students may not be able to have adequate capability in using English in their environment that result in the lack of environment of their English. This causes them to make errors in using English skills and English component, especially in the productive skills that is writing and speaking.

As one of language skills, writing should be mastered by the students in language learning. There are many aspects that should be considered in writing; organization of writing, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and diction. Thus, grammar is also as one of the important parts in writing that may play essential role in how the writing is presumed. However, writing an essay is not easy for English foreign language (EFL) students. Some students often get difficulties in organizing the good sentences. In the real practice of writing, it is not all students doing well. Some may face difficulties in various aspects, including grammar one. Those difficulties faced by students are what then become mistakes or errors.

In learning process, making errors is natural. It is also true that knowing the error can be very important. The mistakes or errors can be used as reference to know the progress of learning. In specific case, like writing class, it is quite difficult for teacher to discover any difficulties faced by students. Students will not be able to fully express their problem because they do not know how to start expressing what they have not understood. Thus, knowing the error will be very helpful. Teacher can see the errors to evaluate what has been achieved and what is lack. By knowing the mistakes or errors, teacher can find specific problems or difficulties had by students and, further, improve the certain point that is lacking.

In University of Pasir Pengaraian, writing is a compulsory subject for English Study Program Students. It is considered as one prior skill to be mastered by the students. What they have learned needs checking. The fact is that on their level (second year students of English Education Program), they should have been able to construct kinds of sentence as a base to compose an essay. They also must have had the basis which could mean vocabulary and grammar rules. Thus, it is necessary to know whether the students have achieved the level based on what they have learned or not.

One way to assess the students' understanding of applying the target language is by evaluating the students' writing. This writing task could be a kind of integrated learning process, in which grammar as a part of writing aspects could be assessed separately. In short, by analyzing these students' writing, teacher can have some inputs related to teaching-learning process, including any information about the students' grammar achievement. This study focuses on studying any errors that the second year students of English Education Program of University of Pasir Pengaraian made in constructing sentences in essay.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. The Nature of Writing in Language Learning

The process of acquiring first language and second or foreign language is different. The acquisition of one's first language is a lifelong process, but the basic skills are acquired quite early in life. However, when learning another language, we have to add to, change, and readjust our native language strategies to fit the new language and culture (Celce-Murcia and Elite Olshtain, 2000:3). Moreover, in acquiring first language, someone tends to unaware with the regulations of a language. Oppositely when someone learns foreign language, he or she learns not only the skills such as speaking,

writing, listening and reading but also the components of a language like grammar and vocabulary. Developing all those skills is very important since language function is a mean of communication, and communication means the application of those skills.

Compared to other skills, writing involves more structural aspects to consider. In reading, for instance, pronunciation and intonation are the only aspects strongly counted, in which speaking also deals with the both aspects. Seen from the types of skill, writing is included into productive skill. According to Wright (2006:4), speaking and writing are productive skill by the mean people express ideas by producing language in oral form or written form. Speaking and writing may have some similar characteristics, such as consideration of grammar, organizing idea, and some other linguistic features (like pronunciation and intonation in speaking, or punctuation and capitalization in writing). Thus, it can be concluded that both speaking and writing consider grammar aspect.

However, there are some differences between writing and speaking. According to White (1987:260) the differences between writing and speaking are; first, writing is displaced by time. Second, it concerns in the explicitness of the message. The last is in the use of expressive features. It can be implied that these differences include that language in writing is more detail than that in speaking. Moreover, speaking tends to have non-complete sentences, less specific vocabulary, and loose grammar. In other hand, written language attends much to the mechanics of writing (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation) and grammar rules. Not only that, the use of oral skill is much more than written skill. That is the reason why writing is considered more complicated than other skills.

For English language learner, writing is one of skills that should be mastered. Nunan (1999:271) says that writing is one of language skills must be mastered by the student in language learning. In terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language. Sattayatham and Ratanapinyowong (2008) mention that In terms of ESL or EFL instruction, writing helps students learn in reinforcing the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary, giving a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have just learned to say, to take risks, and becoming them involved with the new language; the effort to express ideas and the constant use of eyes, hand, and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning.

Burns and Joyce (in Nunan, 1999: 278-279) add that unlike spoken language which tends to be unrehearsed and spontaneous, writing is editable and redrafted. Writing also put grammar as important point. That means that writer has space in which he/she can check and recheck his/her writing composition, including checking grammar, in order to minimize the possibility of making error or mistakes. It is necessary to know that without doing those checking and editing, writer may make unintentional errors (in grammar). The "unintentional errors" meant are any errors which actually the writer has understood or known how the correct construction should be. The writing process is very detail. The product of writing which has passed some basic writing steps (rechecking, redrafting or editing) should tend not to have the unintentional errors which means lacking grammar proficiency. A

synthesis is then can be created which states that any grammar errors in writing may strongly indicate someone's proficiency in grammar. In simple words, if writer still makes any errors after applying some editing or redrafting steps in writing, it can be concluded he/she has lack proficiency of grammar.

B. Errors in Writing

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) becomes more difficult to understand because between first language and English as foreign language are different which process two different system (e.g., phonetic, phonological, syntactic, and semantic system). Due to above conditions, the English learners sometimes produce the errors in their speech and writing. Spillner, (1991: ix) states that in contrastive linguistics, errors produced in the process of foreign language acquisition are thought to be caused by more or less unconscious transfer (in the mind of the learner) of mother tongue structures to the system of the target language. Insofar as there are considerable contrasts between the two language systems, there is, according to this hypothesis, a high probability of negative transfer, resulting in errors within target language performance.

Sometimes, differentiating the term error and mistake is confusing. Bartram and Walton (1991: 1) state that mistakes can be categorized into "errors", "slips", lapses" and, of course, "mistakes". Nunan (1999: 307) defines "error" as a piece of speech or writing that is recognizably different in some way from native speaker usage, which can occur at the level of discourse, grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. Corder in Gass and Selinker (2001: 78) states that errors are 'the result of some failure of performance'. While mistakes are akin to slips of the tongue and recognizable (by the mistakes maker), error is systematic in which it is likely to occur repeatedly and is not recognized by learner. Similarly, Norrish (1983:7) defines 'an error' as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something and consistently 'get(s) it wrong'. James (1998:1) identifies a language error as an unsuccessful bit of language. Errors are also considered natural products in language learning and in fact reflect the modes of learners' developing interlanguage system (Wang, 2008:186). It can be concluded that errors tend to be caused by imperfect or lack of competence. While mistakes or lapses are caused by stress, fatigue, boredom, emotion, or learners' slips of the tongue and tend to be not systematic.

Research Methods

The research design of this research is descriptive. It was conducted by collecting data in natural classroom situation without altering the situation in any way. In this case, this study intends to reveal what errors appear most in the learners' writing. Secondly, qualitative research studies real-world behavior as it occurs in the natural setting as they are found.

The research was conducted in English Study Program of University of Pasir Pengaraian, Riau. In conducting this research, researcher chooses the second year which has 42 students because they are considered capable in writing due to learn writing subjects. The data in this research were obtained from the students' writing products. The writing products are a scientific writing related to English teaching. Students are given freedom to choose the topic. The texts that are written by the students should be at least three paragraphs. The

focus is on the errors made by the students.

There were some steps in applying the error analysis to analyze the data. The following steps are based on the procedure proposed by Brown (2000: 220). The steps meant are explained bellow.

1. Identification of Errors

Identification of errors here refers to the identification of any deviations in English complex sentences which possibly could be found in the students' writing.

2. Classification of error

After the errors have been identified, the next step is classifying them into their types. A comparison between the original forms made by the students and the reconstruction of those forms in the target language indicate to which type of error belongs. The classification of error was done based on surface strategy taxonomy proposed by Dulay et.al (1982 : 154) which is classified into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

3. Tabulating the Errors

Besides the two procedures above, this research counted the frequency of occurrence of the error on the English complex sentences made by the students. It is needed to figure out the frequency of the errors previously identified and classified. The error are then counted and tabulated, and the number of errors is presented in the form of percentage. To find the percentage of frequency in each type of errors, the formula use is as follows:

$$x = \frac{n}{nt} X 100\%$$

Where:

x : percentage of errors type

n : the number of a particular type of error

nt : the total number of all types of errors

After identifying the errors in the students' writing and classifying the errors based on surface strategy taxonomy and the proportion of each error was calculated. Then, the next step is describing the errors in terms of their types and proportions. In the description of each error, the researcher examined the sentences containing errors, took those which can be taken as representatives and analyzed them based on the surface strategy taxonomy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this research consist of types of error and tabulation of error occurred in students' essay.

1. Types of Errors

Based on identification towards students' writing, the errors found in students writing were classified into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

a. Errors of Omission

This type of error was any form of the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance. This included:

1) Omission of {-s/-es} as plural marker

One common error made by the students is the omission of {-s/-es} as plural marker. In regular pattern, word or form which expresses more than one should be marked by {-s/-es} in the end of the word to indicate the plural mark.

Here are the examples of students' error.

Example:
As a student, I have **some strategy** in learning to improve my English skills.

In the example above, {-ies} should be attached to the word **strategy** to show the number of more than one. Thus, the reconstructed sentence should be:

As a student, I have **some strategies** in learning to improve my English skills.

2) Omission of "to be" as ordinary verb in nominal sentence

In constructing nominal sentence, a writer should put verb in the form of "to be". The "to be" could be *is, am, are, was, were, be,* and other possible forms of it, based on the subject and tense. The sentence below is the example of such omission.

Example:
Today, **technology important** for people around the world.

The sentence above is wrong because in nominal sentence, like the example above, it should be put verb in the form of "to be".

Thus, the reconstructed sentence should be:
Today, **technology is important** for people around the world.

3) Omission of auxiliary verb

Some students made error by omitting auxiliary verb when constructing negative or interrogative sentence. Auxiliary verb is a verb that gives grammatical information, for example about tense, which is not given by the main verb in a sentence. The "auxiliary verb" could be *does, do, or did.* Here is the example of students' error in the omission of auxiliary verb.

When I arrived to classroom, **I not see** my friends there.

The sentence above is wrong, because for negative sentence, the writer should put "**do**" as auxiliary verb to construct the right form of negative sentence. Thus, the correct construction is:

When I arrived to classroom, **I did not see** my friends there.

4) Omission of preposition

Preposition is a word which is used before a noun, a noun phrase, or a pronoun, connecting it to another word. The sentence below contains the omission of preposition.

Example:
They know the bad **impact smoking** for our health.

Preposition "of" should be placed in the sentence between words "impact" and "smoking". The reconstructed sentence is:
They know the bad impact **of** smoking for our health.

5) Omission of subject

The minimum requirement of a good sentence is that there should have one subject and verb. However, students used to make error by omitting the subject, such in the example below.

Computer and English skill are important for students **because can** help us in finding the job.

The sentence above is incomplete because at the second clause, the sentence has no subject. Thus, the correct one is:

Computer and English skill are important for students **because they can** help us in finding the job.

6) Omission of third person singular verb

When writing a simple present tense sentences, a writer must consider

the subject and verb agreement. When the subject is the third person singular, the verb must be added {-s/-es}. However, it can be an error for some students. The following is the example of the omission.

> Example:
> The teacher often give us suggestion about our study.

The sentence above is incorrect because the subject of the sentence, "the teacher" is the *third person singular subject*. The form of the verb should be attached with {-s} to indicate third person singular verb. The correct sentence is:

> The teacher often gives us suggestion about our study.

7) Omission of comma

One of punctuation marks usually used in writing is comma (,). When someone writes a complex sentence started by a subordinator, a comma is required at the end of the dependent clause. It means that when placing dependent clauses in the beginning, the writer needs commas at the end of dependent clause. The following sentence contains the omission of comma.

> Example:
> Finally, by having computer and English **skills the students** will be able to get the job easily.

This complex sentence is placing dependent clauses in the beginning, so it needs comma. The correct sentence is then:

> Finally, by having computer and English skills**,** the students will be able to get the job easily.

b. Errors of Addition

The type of this error usually appears by adding any unnecessary morphemes in a sentence. Here are types and examples of addition errors found in the students' writing.

1) Addition of determiner

One of the confusing elements of grammar is the using of determiner "the". Determiner "the" must be placed before the word "most" when it is used as superlative degree of "much". However, the word "most" also has meaning as "more than a half of something". In this case, determiner "the" is needed for specific thing or person only. Students used to make error by adding determiner "the" for that case.

The following is the example of addition of determiner.

> **The most** of male students in my village cannot operate the computer.

In the example above, the subject is not specific. So, it is not need placing determiner "the" before it. Thus, the determiner should be omitted. The correct one should be:

> **Most** of male students in my village cannot operate the computer.

2) Addition of "to be" as auxiliary verb

Students usually made error in writing a verbal sentence. Most of students still use auxiliary verb in verbal sentence. The sentence below contains this kind of addition error.

Example:

> I **am get** many advantages from learning computer in my campus.

Auxiliary verb "am" in the sentence above cannot be putted together in a sentence with verb. So, the auxiliary verb "am" should be omitted. The correct one is:

> I **get** many advantages from learning computer in my campus.

3) Addition of plural marker

Students also made an error by adding plural marker such {-s/-es) in singular noun. The sentence below is the example of this kind of addition error.

> **Andi, my friends** in this university is **a good students**.

In the sentence above, the student made two errors in using plural mark. First, students wrote "Andi, my friends". It is wrong because Andi is singular but the writer wrote "my best friends" where {-s} in the word friends indicates the plural form. Another error is the article a mainly seen as singular. Thus, {-s}in word students as plural marker is not necessary, and the correct one is:

> **Andi, my friend** in this university is **a good student**.

4) Addition of preposition

Using preposition in writing sometimes can make students confused. One of students' errors is in using prepositional "to" after modals auxiliary. Here is the example of student's error.

> In globalization era, students **must to study** many skills such as English, computer, and etc.

Modal auxiliaries have specific characteristics. First, verb that is used after modal should be in the form of bare infinitive (without "to"). Second, the verb after modal cannot be added by -s/ -es/ -ed/ -ing. In the sentence above "to" is used after modal "must". Then, "to" is not necessary used. The correct one is then:

> In globalization era, students **must study** many skills such as English, computer, and etc.

5) Addition of Third person plural verb

Subject of pronoun is attached before verb. The verb can be in the form of bare infinitive with or without -s/ -es/ -ed/ -ing depends on the subjects and the tenses used. The example of error in addition of third person plural is below.

> Every week, the students must practice how to speak English well because if **they wants** to succeed in learning English.

The verb attached after the third person plural pronoun in present tense should be written without addition -s/ -es/ -ed/ -ing. Thus, the addition "s" of the verb from the example above is not necessarily used. Then, the construction should be:

> Every week, the students must practice how to speak English well because if **they want** to succeed in learning English.

c. Misformation

Misformation errors were characterized by the use of wrong form of the morpheme or the structure. Some substitutive errors found in the students' writing included misformation of:

1) Misformation of Passive construction

Constructing passive voice sentence is considered difficult for students. They miss the regulation and form of passive voice sentence. Passive voice is mainly constructed by "to be" + "past participle verb". The example of misformation of passive construction is below.

> **Smoking prohibited** because it can damage our lungs.

The sentence above is wrong because in constructing passive sentence, the writer should put appropriate to be before verb "prohibited". The correct one should be:

> Smoking **is** prohibited because it can damage our lungs.

2) Misformation of Pronoun

Sometimes students used pronoun does not refer to appropriate reference. Here is the example of student's error in using pronouns.

Nowadays, **the technologies** are important because **it** can help students in studying.

The error in that sentence is the using of pronoun "it" to refer word "the technologies". It is wrong because the word "the technologies" indicates the plural nouns but the student used pronoun **it.** The correct sentence is:

Nowadays, **the technologies** are important because **they** can help students in studying.

3) Misformation of Tense

Tenses are confusing for students because the form of verb is much influenced by tense used. Thus, when the form does not represent the time when the event occurs, it will cause error. The example of misformation of tense is below.

Last holiday, my friends and I **go** to Bukit Tinggi in West Sumatera.

Seen from the adverb of time, the event in that sentence occurred in the past. However, the student used the verb in present form (go). The correct formation should be:

Last holiday, my friends and I **went** to Bukit Tinggi in West Sumatera.

4) Misformation of To be

The form of "to be" is always influenced by the quantity of the subject. When the "to be" does not fit the subject, it will cause error, as in example below.

I usually go to computer laboratory; however **some computers is** broken.

As the subject is "some computers", the appropriate form of "to be" should be "are". Thus, the correct construction is:

I usually go to computer laboratory; however **some computers are** broken.

5) Misformation of Plural – singular noun

To change the singular noun into plural form can be difficult for students. They tend to make error in forming irregular plural noun. The example of this kind of error is below.

My old sister has **two childs**.

The plural form of child is not childs but it should be children. Then, the correct construction should be:

My old sister has **two children**.

6) Misformation of Comparative and superlative form of adjective

There are three kinds of the degrees of comparison (positive degree, comparative degree, and superlative degree).The example of error made by student is as below.

The computer today is **more fast** than the old one.

The word "fast" has only one syllable and, in comparative form, it should be attached by {-er} instead of "more". Thus, the correct one is:

The computer today is **faster** than the old one.

d. Misordering

Error in misorder refers to any incorrect placement of a morpheme or a group of morphemes in a sentence. This might happen in both sentence and phrase. The word order errors found in the students' writing included misorder of:

1) Misordering of Noun phrase

Noun in noun phrase generally places in the end of the construction. The example of this error is as below.

Although I cannot speak English well, I want to be a **student clever**.

Noun phrase generally places the head in the end of construction. In the example above, "student" is the head, then, the construction should be as below.

Although I cannot speak English well, I want to be a **clever student**.

2) Misordering of Negative form

If there are two verbs gathered in sentence both in affirmative and negative sentence, it should be given *to* between the both verbs. For affirmative the pattern should be "V+ to+ V" and for negative "V+ not+ to+ V". The following example shows this misordering error.

Our teacher always suggests us **to not** give up in studying English.

In the example above, *to* is placed in the former rather than in the latter. Thus the construction should be:

Our teacher always suggests us **not to** give up in studying English.

2. Tabulation of the Errors

Errors which had been identified and classified were then tabulated. The tabulation was presented in the form of percentage. The tabulation of students' error in constructing the essay can be seen on the following tables.

Table 1. Types and number of Errors in constructing sentences in Essay

No	Types of Error	Frequency	Percentage
1	Omission	40	37.7
2	Addition	21	19.8
3	Misformation	37	34.9
4	Misorder	8	7.5
	Total	106	100

Table 1 was presented to show the distribution of students' error in constructing sentences in essay. After the errors were calculated by tabulating them, researcher found various types of errors which total were 106 errors. From the table as the result of tabulation, it can be seen that the second year students of English Education Program of University of Pasir Pengaraian made most error in Error of omission that was 40 times which means 37.7 % of error total. The next most error made by the students was in Error of misformation with 37 times or 34.9%. The students made 21 times of Error of Addition or 19.8 %. They also made 8 times of Error of Misorder or 7.5 %. It means that students more frequently made errors of omission.

Discussion

According to Dulay, et al. (1982: 154) the error types are based on surface strategy taxonomy into *omission, addition, misformation ,* and *misordering.* The objective of this study was to uncover common various kinds' error of misconstruction of sentences in the writing of second year students of English Education Program of University of Pasir Pengaraian, Rokan Hulu, Riau. After the findings of the errors found, then they were described from those which most frequently occurred to the most rarely occurred.

The result of this research is in line with the result of Dulay's research (Dulay et.at, 1982: 154) where those omission errors are found in greater abundance and across a greater variety

of morphemes during the early stages of second or foreign language acquisition. In addition, teacher should use this data to help them in improving their writing. Pastor and Mestre (2013:8) say that Errors detected in writing can provide us with knowledge of production and help us to understand the mechanisms that the speaker of a foreign language employs. However, too much error correction could frustrate students and even overwhelm students' motivation and interest of learning the TL language (Wang, 2008:186).

Conclusions

The research shows that the second year students of English Education Program of University of Pasir Pengaraian Rokan Hulu made various kinds of errors in constructing English sentences. Errors they had made were categorized into error of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. From the finding of the study, it reveals that the high frequency of error occurrence is error of omission with 40 times which means 37.7 % of error total. The next most error made by the students was in Error of misformation with 37 times or 34.9%. The students made 21 times of Error of Addition or 19.8 %. They also made 8 times of Error of misorder or 7.5 %.

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