

Students' Grammatical Errors in Writing Descriptive Texts

Kesalahan Tata Bahasa Siswa dalam Menulis Teks Deskriptif

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study was to investigate and describe the various types of grammatical errors observed in written descriptive texts of seventh-grade students. A quantitative research design was employed, aligned with the recommended research project design proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011). The data collection process involved analyzing students' written descriptive texts. A total of 82 errors were identified and categorized according to their frequency, namely omission, misformation, addition, and misordering. The study argued that the nature of the formative assessment and the national examination, with an emphasis on grammatical dimensions, were significant factors influencing these errors. These findings provide valuable insights into comprehending specific grammatical error patterns, thus facilitating the development of targeted instructional strategies to address these issues effectively.

Keywords: descriptive texts; formative assessment; grammatical errors

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki dan menggambarkan jenis-jenis kesalahan gramatikal yang ditemukan dalam teks deskriptif tulisan siswa kelas tujuh. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kuantitatif sesuai dengan desain proyek penelitian yang direkomendasikan oleh Creswell dan Plano Clark (2011). Data dikumpulkan menggunakan dokumen - teks deskriptif tulisan siswa. Ditemukan 82 kesalahan yang diklasifikasikan berdasarkan urutan kesalahan paling sering hingga paling jarang terjadi, yaitu penghilangan, pembentukan salah, penambahan, dan pengurutan yang salah. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa faktor yang diyakini mempengaruhi kesalahan tersebut adalah sifat penilaian formatif dan ujian nasional, dengan penekanan pada dimensi gramatikal. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan berharga dalam memahami pola kesalahan gramatikal tertentu, sehingga memudahkan pengembangan strategi pembelajaran yang tepat untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut dengan efektif.

Kata kunci, teks deskriptif, asesmen formatif, kesalahan tata bahasa,

1. Introduction

Classified as a productive skill, writing has been acknowledged as one of the most important parts of promoting language acquisition for students (e.g., Faisal & Carabella, 2023; Faisal, Parr, & Wilson, 2021; Hyland, 2019; Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Brown (2001) wrote that writing is a process of transforming ideas into words by structuring and organizing them logically and coherently. Comparably, Kitchen (2021) argues that writing integrates a cognitive process and learning experience, allowing people to convey their thoughts and respond to those of others through written forms. Therefore, it can be concluded that writing is a process in which sentences are arranged to exchange ideas.

One type of written English text that has to be learned by seventh-grade students is descriptive text. The Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture or MoEC Number 37 of 2018 (2018) writes that descriptive texts are one English text that seventh-grade students should master. Furthermore, Husna (2017) and Evi Khoirun, Sri, and Astuti (2022) suggest that

descriptive texts are a kind of writing that consists of descriptions, characteristics and definitions of an object or something. Meanwhile, Knapp and Watkins (2005) and Nagao (2022) share one observation in common that a descriptive text aims to describe a particular thing, person or place and clearly show readers the physical appearance of something. Therefore, it can be summed up that a descriptive text is a text which describes people, places, and objects physically based on their appearance.

When constructing their descriptive texts, students need to be aware of their key principles; hence, their written texts will be able to convey the main ideas – describing things – appropriately, fluently and acceptably (MoEC, 2018). The first principle concerns the text's generic structure. Doddy, Sugeng, and Effendi (2008) explain that the generic structure of a descriptive text has two primary parts: an identification and a description. The identification part is for the writer to identify the phenomenon being described. Meanwhile, parts, qualities, and characteristics are written in the description part. The description part presents the appearance of things that occupy space, like objects, people, buildings or cities (Stanley, David, & Allen, 1992).

Secondly, a descriptive text has particular language features, which include but are not limited to the focus on using nouns to signal specific participants and simple present tense, adjectives and pronouns (Hyland, 2019; Knapp & Watkins, 2005). In a more detailed manner, emphasizing a specific participant means that a descriptive text should be focused on one immediate object that will be described (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Utilizing nouns appropriately gives readers a more concrete vision of what is being written; hence, the passage looks more engaging and vivid, Hyland (2019) asserts. A descriptive text is typically written in the simple present tense (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). In this regard, this tense describes general truths, as in 'The earth goes around the sun' (Murphy, 1994) and statements of a factual action or condition, like 'She is an SMP student'. As the examples show, a sentence in simple present tense could be in a verbal and nominal sentence. The former is indicated by the use of verbs (*goes*), and the latter utilizes the verb to be (*is*) (Pratiwi, Susilawati, & Wardah, 2020). Another key language feature of a descriptive text is the use of adjectives. Such use is to help readers understand how something being described looks, feels, or sounds (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). Pronouns are also commonly found in this text and used in place of nouns to avoid tedious repetitions (Azar, 2003; Stobbe, 2008).

It is undeniable that grammar has become something that cannot be separated from teaching and learning writing, particularly in descriptive texts. Ellis (1997) stressed that grammar is a traditional principle concerning constructing and interpreting words, phrases, and sentences. In addition, Harmer (2001) said that language learners should know some aspects of grammatical structure to obtain competency in using a language that consists of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns. Accordingly, in writing descriptive texts, they need to know grammatical rules and pertinent ways to apply them to protect against potential errors in sentences. In addition, by having a good grammatical understanding, the message or information will be delivered correctly; hence, there will be no misunderstanding in comprehending the meaning of the message. Without grammatical understanding, students tend to make errors. Furthermore, students' limited knowledge of the use of language features and generic structures of descriptive texts may lead them to make some errors in writing descriptive texts (Novita, 2017; Nurprihardianti & Harsiati, 2021; Rizqullah, Sudiro, & Karim, 2023).

However, some students still encounter difficulties and problems when writing descriptive text in classroom practices. They likely make errors in the agreement production, as in the sentence '*She always take a bath and clean the bedroom*' (Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020; Wulandari & Faisal, 2015). Others have difficulties in dealing with tenses in 'My father was special in my life' or verb as in '*His name Effendi*' (Novita, 2017; Rizqullah et al., 2023). Some others encounter difficulties in dealing with nouns in '*I have a one brother*' (Amelia, Rachmajanti, & Anugerahwati, 2021), and pronouns, for example, '*My sister never complained when he educated me*' (Nurprihardianti & Harsiati, 2021), and preposition as in '*She was born on Lamongan*' (Aziza, 2022). In a similar vein, Novita (2017) and Wulandari and Faisal (2015) found in their studies that one of the difficulties students encountered when writing descriptive texts is the grammatical aspect. This is because grammar rules in a language allow a person to join several words into a larger unit (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002). It means that in foreign language learning, some students may have difficulties writing descriptive texts, specifically in creating and organizing ideas and translating them into readable written texts.

A substantial and extending literature body has examined wide-ranging error-analysis fields in writing descriptive texts, including types and sources of errors and factors affecting errors. In relation to the former, Rachmawati (2018) conducted research aiming to find out grammatical errors the eight-grade at a junior high school in Sumatra dominantly produced in their descriptive texts. The analyses identified that omissions of verb inflexions (suffix -s or -es) were the most errors, accounting for 27.8%. In what followed was misinformation of article uses (7.96%). An addition of tenses (0.85%) constituted the lowest error. A surprising finding from the interview analyses emerged that the students acknowledged the impacts of the national examination, emphasizing grammatical dimensions, on their texts. In a similar vein, Rizqullah et al. (2023) found out that their students mostly made omission (34.4%) and misinformation (29.3%) errors when writing descriptive texts. Other scholars, Sadiyah and Royani (2019), revealed that their students' grammatical errors comprised omissions (41%) and misinformation (33%). These researchers have one observation in common the most common factors to cause such errors concern students' limited vocabulary repertoire and native language interference.

A considerable amount of literature in the Indonesian context has examined the factors that might have affected students' grammatical errors. Such factors predominantly fall into the national examination and the nature of formative assessment. In terms of the national examination, Endriyati and Anggraeni (2019), in their study, revealed that the teachers tended to treat English as a subject and were not concerned with acquiring skills. They claimed the national examination might have influenced teachers' teaching materials and techniques. Mukminin et al. (2013) claimed a similar indication that most teachers in their study predominantly directed their instructional activities to prepare their students for the exams. In those cases, textbooks are designed to match the purposes of an exam and contain national-examination-oriented materials rather than basic competencies their students should master.

Kinarasih (2016), Popham (2008), and Owen (2016) in their studies found that formative assessment was one of the sources of errors their students made. Teachers and students use formative assessment during the learning process to provide ongoing feedback to enhance students' achievement of envisaged learning outcomes (Popham, 2008). Consequently, because formative assessment observes student learning and provides ongoing feedback to the students and teachers, they are less likely to be afraid of making errors or taking risks (Owen,

2016). It means that formative assessments have low stakes and usually carry no grade. In other words, they focus on the feedback they would receive rather than the grade they have to earn. Accordingly, it led the students to ignore the grammatical rules in compiling the sentences and make some grammatical errors in writing descriptive texts.

Based on the explanations above, this study aimed to investigate students' grammatical errors in writing descriptive texts by conducting an error analysis. Divsar and Heydari (2017) suggest that error analysis collects errors identified in students' language to clarify typical errors they potentially commit. Furthermore, error analysis can assist teachers in obtaining comprehensive data on errors (Amelia et al., 2021; Rizquallah et al., 2023; Yang, 2022). In particular, this current study was to investigate the types of grammatical errors that most students frequently commit in writing descriptive texts based on the language features of the text. It utilized a taxonomy of surface strategy Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) coined as a starting point in describing errors. The surface strategy taxonomy holds opportunities to identify the cognitive processes underlying students' new language reconstructions (Choironi, Sukirlan, & Suparman, 2017). To approach the aims, the current study formulates its research question: *What are the most common types of grammatical errors in constructing descriptive texts?*

2. Method

To address the aims, this current study utilized a quantitative method within a single research project Creswell and Plano-Cark (2011) coined. In a more detailed manner, it applied a follow-up explanation model that began with a quantitative data collection, and then the data was analyzed quantitatively (Creswell & Plano-Cark, 2011). A quantitative method was used to describe students' grammatical errors in writing descriptive texts emphasizing the language features, namely simple present, nouns, and verbs.

Employing a random sampling technique, this study involved 20 junior high school students in Central Java. The research data was sourced from two primary instruments. The first was students' written descriptive texts serving as the quantitative data. These texts were then quantitatively analyzed to identify grammatical errors focusing on language features made in their texts.

This current study employed a different analysis technique relevant to the instruments. It utilized the error analysis method Gass and Selinker (2008) suggest to analyze the quantitative data: Data collection and identification, error classification and quantification. Particularly, it underpinned the error classification by the taxonomy of surface strategy Dulay et al. (1982) proposed: Omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The quantitative analysis results were in the forms of percentage categories of students' errors.

3. Findings and Discussions

This section specifically presents the error classifications based on the analyzed participants' written descriptive texts. It is important to note that this research focused only on analyzing grammatical errors based on the language features of descriptive texts. Other errors not concerned with language features were not analyzed. The analyzed data was sourced from students' formative tests – writing descriptive texts assigned by the English teacher. The teacher required the students to write a descriptive text to portray one of the celebrities – Enthis Sutisna/Sule, Prilly Latuconsina, or Rey Bong.

3.1. Findings

This section aims to present the classifications of errors in writing descriptive texts. The following paragraphs will present the results of the error classifications.

There were 20 pieces of the students' written descriptive texts. The data were descriptively analyzed and presented in terms of the error types, the frequency of the occurrence and the examples of sentences with particular errors. Each error category was classified based on the error types. The analysis showed that 82 grammatical errors were identified in the 20 students' written descriptive texts, as detailed in the following table.

Table 1. Error classifications according to the surface strategy taxonomy

Surface Strategy Taxonomy	Components	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Omission	Grammatical morpheme	36	43.9	48.8
	Lexical morpheme	4	4.9	
Misformation	Alternating form	29	35.4	39.0
	Archi form	3	3.7	
Addition	Double marking	5	6.1	9.8
	Regularization	3	3.7	
Misordering	-	2	2.4	2.4
Total		82	100	100

As seen in the above table, following the most-to-the-least-frequent-error order, the students' typical errors were omissions, misformation, addition, and misordering. The following will elaborate on each error classification identified in the student's written descriptive texts.

The analyses found that accounting for 48.8%, omission constituted the most error students made. It is characterized by the absence of an item or morpheme (Dulay et al., 1982) and happens when students unintentionally leave out necessary elements crucial for their sentences to conform to grammatical rules. The omission errors this study identified were grammatical and lexical morpheme omissions detailed in the following explanations.

The omission of grammatical morpheme is characterized by the absence of the word that functions to specify the relationship between one lexical morpheme and another, like the verb suffix (-s/-es) (Dulay et al., 1982). The students in this study made an omission of grammatical morphemes in the use of verb inflexion (suffix -s/-es). The students made 36 errors or 43.9% of verb inflexion (suffix -s/-es) errors in writing descriptive texts, making this dimension the most. An example is '*He wear black jaz and a T-shirt*'. The sentence examples have errors because of missing the suffix -s. Simple present tense requires verb inflexions of -s/-es for specific subjects. All the verbs (*wear* and *use*) in the sentences above need a suffix -s because they used the third-person singular subjects.

According to Dulay et al. (1982), the omission of lexical morpheme refers to the absence of words that carry the bulk of the referential meaning of a sentence because they have sense and meaning by themselves, like nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The students made omissions of lexical morphemes, accounting for four errors or 4.9% of all the errors students made in constructing descriptive texts.

In this study, the students made omissions of lexical morphemes in using nouns and verbs (to be). A number of students omitted a noun that should appear in a grammatically cor-

rect phrase or sentence construction, for example, in the sentence 'He wears **a black**'. This sentence is not correct because of the missing words that should appear. A sentence needs a noun as the object in order to make a meaningful sentence or a noun to complete the noun phrase written in bold. The analysis also found that students omitted lexical morphemes in using verbs to arrange nominal sentences, as in the sentence 'She beautiful and smart'. The sentence example is incorrect because of the missing verb (to be) that should appear. It is not grammatically correct because the verb (to be) is missing before adjectives.

This current study identified that omission errors had the highest percentage. The finding is in agreement with other previous studies, including that of Rachmawati (2018). In her studies, omission of verb inflexion (suffix -es) was the most frequent error her students committed, accounting for 98 errors or 27.84%. Furthermore, the study Sadiah and Royani (2019) conducted showed similar results, in which omission of verb inflexion suffix -s/-es became the most frequent error their students committed, accounting for 43 errors or 41%.

In this study, incorrect uses of the wrong morpheme or structure typified misformation errors (Dulay et al., 1982). Of the three types of this error – regularization, alternating form, and archi-form – the participants mainly made errors in the last two types, accounting for 35.4%. In a more detailed manner, errors in the misformation of alternating forms include but are not limited to, the use of tenses and verb agreement. Regarding the former, the simple present tense is usually applied in writing a descriptive text (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). A typical error in using the tense is in such a sentence as 'She used a bracelet and wristwatch'. This sentence should use the present tense because it describes general statements of a fact. More specifically, this tense in this current study is required because the students wrote a descriptive text Murphy (1994).

Some students committed errors in the verb-agreement dimension. As understood, verbs alter their forms to agree with their subjects. The difference in the form of a simple verb occurs in the present tense, and the use of the third person singular is shown by adding the suffix '-s/-es' or changing the verb 'have' into 'has' (Azar, 2003). The students made misformation of alternating forms in the use of the verb-agreement represented in '*Prilly have a beautiful smile*'. Rather than using the verb 'have', the verb should be 'has' as the subject – Prilly – is a singular person.

The analysis identified errors concerning misinformation of archi-form or the selection of one member of a class of forms to represent others in the class (Dulay et al., 1982). Errors regarding the use of the verb to be, as in '*There is bracelets on her hand*', were typically found. In this regard, the copula or to be in the sentence should be adjusted with its subject – bracelets; hence, the correct form of to be should be 'are'.

As presented above, the students in this current study made misformation errors, accounting for 32 or 39.0%. A similar finding was identified in the existing literature. Sadiah and Royani (2019) and Rachmawati (2018) shared one observation in common their students still made this error type.

Identified by the inclusion of an item that is redundant or not required in a grammatically correct sentence (Dulay et al., 1982), addition errors were also found in students' written descriptive texts. These errors primarily fall into additions of double marking and regularization. Double marking is an error where the students fail to delete specific components in some

linguistic construction and provide more than one marking in sentence constructions (Dulay et al., 1982). In this research, the students made an addition of double marking in the use of auxiliary verbs. There were five errors or 6.1% addition errors of double marking from all the errors students made in writing descriptive texts, as in *'Prilly is wears blue shirt and jeans'*. The auxiliary verb 'is' should be omitted in this sentence since it was unnecessary.

Regularization error happens as students add morphemes to extraordinary words (Dulay et al., 1982). The rules usually apply to classes of linguistic items such as main verb classes or noun classes. In this research, the students made this error in the use of the noun. The study found three errors, or 3.7% error addition of regularization from all the errors students made in writing descriptive texts. An example of the error is *'She is the first of two childs'*. The sentence has an error because of the inappropriate use of the word *'childs'*. From the example, the student wanted to say, *'She is the first of two children'*. In this case, the students should know the differences between plural and singular nouns in special nouns.

As presented above, it was found that the students in this current study made addition errors, accounting for eight errors or 9.8%. A similar finding was identified in the existing literature. Rachmawati (2018) shared an observation in common that her students still made this error type. Her study revealed that it was found addition errors in using tenses, accounting for three errors or 0.85%. Unlike her study and this current study, Sadiyah and Royani (2019) did not find this kind of error students made in writing descriptive texts.

The least errors (2.4%) the students made concern misordering, characterized by incorrectly placing a morpheme or group of morphemes in an utterance. In this respect, they made misordering errors in the subject's use. An example of the error is *'I like what wears she, such as wristwatch and bracelet'*. This sentence is incorrect due to the improper placement of some words. From the example, the student wanted to say that she likes what Prilly wears. In this case, the student should know how to arrange a good sentence after what must be followed by the subject first and then the verb.

As presented above, the students in this current study made misordering errors, accounting for two errors or 2.4%. A different finding was identified in the existing literature. Sadiyah and Royani (2019) and Rachmawati (2018) shared one observation in common that their students did not make this error type. So, it can be explained that this error type became the least frequent error in this current study and was not made by Sadiyah and Royani (2019) and Rachmawati (2018) students.

3.2. Discussions

This section aims to discuss potential and possible factors that have affected the students' errors in writing descriptive texts. Descriptive texts were collected and analyzed from the 20 students as respondents in this study. This research found that students' typical errors in their writing were as follows. The most frequent error was omission, followed by misformation and addition. The least frequent error was misordering.

This study argues that the errors appeared to have been primarily affected by the nature of the formative assessment and the national examination. Teachers and students use formative assessment during the learning process to provide ongoing feedback to enhance students' accomplishment of envisaged instructional outcomes (Popham, 2008). Consequently, because

formative assessment observes student learning and offers ongoing constructive feedback to the students and teachers, they are less likely to be afraid of making errors or taking risks (Owen, 2016).

Referring to the above paragraphs, formative assessments have low stakes and usually carry no grade (Endriyati & Anggraeni, 2019). In other words, they focus on the feedback they would receive rather than the grade they have to earn. So, it caused the students to ignore the grammatical rules in compiling the sentences and tend to make some grammatical errors in writing descriptive texts. The findings of this study that the formative assessment is one affecting factors are in line with previous studies, including those of Kinarasih (2016) and Endriyati and Anggraeni (2019).

Regarding the National Examination, Endriyati and Anggraeni (2019) revealed that teachers consider English a subject and are not concerned with acquiring skills. It means the students were given the tricks to face the exam rather than acquiring and developing the knowledge and skills required to write descriptive texts appropriately. The national examination seems to have influenced teachers' teaching materials and techniques. Mukminin et al. (2013) argue that what student's study inside the classrooms at school and a tutoring institution is primarily addressed to prepare them for the exam. In those cases, the textbooks are designed to match the purposes of an exam that contains the material for the National Examination rather than the basic competence. The students are given the same types of questions as much as they are able in order to make them answer the National Examination questions correctly. These scholars argue that most of the questions in the National Examination concern text genres.

Consequently, the students need to translate the texts. It is because if the students do not know the meaning, they are not able to answer the questions correctly. Then, as most of the material in the National Examination is reading text, the teachers tend to highlight grammatical aspects and ignore the other skills, such as writing skills. There is enormous pressure to practice such items rather than the writing skill itself (Davies et al., 1999). Accordingly, should the teachers provide only multiple-choice items for the assessment, the writing skills to practice grammar rules will be lacking. Thus, it may lead the students to make many errors when occasionally allowed to write a text.

4. Conclusion

It is crucial for the teacher to do an error analysis to detect students' errors in their descriptive writing products. Based on the research result, the total number of grammatical errors 20 grade-seven junior high school students in Central Java committed was 82. Further, the errors with the most frequent error occurrence were omission, making up 40 errors or 48.9% of all errors. In what follows were misinformation errors, constituting 32 errors or 39.0%. The next was an addition with eight errors, or 9.8%, followed by misordering errors making up two errors or 2.4%. The factors deemed to have affected their errors were the nature of the formative assessment and the national examination, emphasizing grammatical dimensions. This study offers the following suggestions. First, teachers can provide enrichment based on students' grammatical errors. They can repeat and emphasize material related to student errors, explain material clearly, and develop exercises to increase students' understanding and knowledge of particular grammatical aspects in an integrated manner. Second, they should

identify their students' grammatical knowledge. Grammatical error analysis informs the teachers of what learners know and how they apply the target language rules. Thus, they can provide relevant corrections for students' errors to improve their grammatical understanding and writing quality. Fourth, they can modify the target language learning material in the classrooms and textbooks. They can emphasize the material that contains student errors and provide explanations that are more likely to allow students to correct their errors. They can use effective learning methods or media. For example, when most students omit the verb be in writing nominal sentences in the present simple, the teacher can apply the deductive method explaining how to write nominal sentences in the simple present form.

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