Common Errors Found in the Diverse Kinds of Paragraphs Composed by First Year EFL University Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at showing the major types of errors that students make in their written products and their perspectives on the cause of errors that they make. In this research, 180 students' paragraphs were analysed for the purpose of error analysis and a questionnaire was distributed to the students to find out their perspectives on the cause of errors that they made. The errors found in the students' written products were first categorised into several major categories, then further classified into four general categories: morphological, lexical, syntactical, and mechanical. The findings show that there were 12 major errors that the students made in their writing. Seven of them fall under the category of morphological, two under lexical, one under syntactical and another two under mechanical. The majority of students are aware that they make errors in their writing but find it hard to allocate them. As a result, they may not be able to correct or avoid the errors. Thus, incorporating error analysis in teaching and learning is a necessary practice for students to minimise the production of errors in their writing. Furthermore, lack of understanding of grammatical functions and limited knowledge of vocabulary are considered the major causes of errors based on the perspectives of the students. Through the classification system provided by the error analysis procedure, teachers are able to address this issue by incorporating smaller groupings of errors into the curriculum and teaching program.

Keywords: *EFL , Errors, Error Analysis, Paragraphs, Writing*

INTRODUCTION

The essence of learning a new language is learning to be able to communicate in that language. However, this idea of communication seems to be vague in terms of the second and or foreign language learning. Students' success in learning the language is closely related to their competence in the spoken use of the language. Little emphasise is given to their written ability in using the language. Miftah (2015) explained that the issue comes not only from students, but also lecturers. Students find it hard to adjust their writing ability from the first language writing pattern to the second language writing pattern. Meanwhile, applying varied teaching strategies and approach in the writing classroom for lecturers appears to be quite challenging due to students' lack of motivation to respond and learn in the classroom. Rashid, et al (2022) added that the curriculum and instructional techniques are not designed to support students' writing development. The inclusion of these factors influences the progress of students' writing proficiency. Yet, in order to be able to communicate effectively, an ability to comprehend the language both spoken and written is vital. It is said that to master a language, acquiring an ability to write in the language is fundamental (Wijayatiningsih, Lestariningsih, & Agustina, 2018). However, writing skill is still neglected by many students who learn a foreign language.

One of the factors that contribute to this issue is that writing is considered a complex task for students. They are required to develop good linguistic and communicative competence in the target language simultaneously (Hidayati, 2018). Additionally, students have difficulty in showing satisfactory results in writing in their first language, and to expect them to perform well in the other language seems to be hard both for the teachers and the students. Writing activities require students to perform various cognitive activities, such as deciding on the choice of words, styles, mechanics, and a proper structure for sentence production, which contribute to how students view writing skills (Eliwarti & Maarof, 2017). The nature of writing skill requires students to not only able to produce a product in written language, but also to formulate the information through a thinking process before transferring them into a product (Pardosi, et al, 2019). As a result, not many students are capable to master these two learning processes in writing skill. In addition, the task requires regular practice and is time consuming, which may not be supported by the curriculum used. Furthermore, the learning process of writing can be quite boring when it is not done properly (Nida, 2021). Teachers' creativity in preparing and delivering the materials for writing will also play an important role in students' writing achievement.

As an example, in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, the teachers work with students who have learned English for a certain time but rarely use the language in their daily life. Generally, the students have little access to the use of English for

communication. In relation to the written products of the students, the teachers not only work with the students' compositions per se but also other parts of the writing such as the use of grammar functions that may be less found in the first language writing.

Writing skill can be said progressing in a sequential way. Students will need to undergo several steps and development to be capable in writing (Huda, 2018). The first step that students will acquire is the ability to listen, which then followed by speaking ability. Then, students will actively gain the ability to read to finally are able to produce information in written. As it is the last aspect of language learning to be acquired, it makes the writing skill as the most difficult skill to conquer (Dewi, 2016).

A number of studies mentioned how this issue impacts on not only the students but also the teachers. The teachers found that the teaching of writing is a challenging job (Tran, 2013; Heydari & Bagheri, 2012; Silalahi, 2014; Chen, 2006). Ferries (2011) described the teaching of writing as a daunting task for a teacher. The teacher is required to not only know about the pedagogical options, materials, and techniques, they also need to have sufficient understanding of the linguistic knowledge and also be able to analyse the written products effectively. Adam et al. (2021) explained that teachers still find it difficult to balance the teaching of writing between theory and practice. Many times, teachers do not teach students how to acquire writing skills which are the skills that students should be able to perform at the end of the lessons. Furthermore, Hidayati (2018) divided two factors that are challenging for teachers to manage in writing classrooms namely internal and external factors. Internal factors come from the students, and external factors involve the teaching and learning circumstances of the teachers.

Although some researchers described the application of error analysis as no use for the teaching and learning of a new language, most are positive about the importance of understanding the errors made by the students. Many researchers stated that error production in the students' learning process is unavoidable and it is related to their learning process. Robinson, for example stated that error-making is part of the natural phenomenon in learning of all kinds (as cited in Tizon, 2011). Similarly, based on the results of his research, Rao (2018) suggested that error production and the learning process are two aspects that cannot be separated and should be treated as something natural to each other. The same idea was proposed by Ancker, that learning happens when the students naturally make mistakes or errors (as cited in Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). This was also supported by Olasehinde who argued that errors are a necessary part of the learning process (as cited in Napitupulu, 2017).

To further illustrate the relation between errors and the learning process, Hasyim (2002) provided five aspects that influence the production of errors by students which again emphasised the idea that errors are

inevitable both for the students and the teachers. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) had also suggested that we should consider the production of errors by students as part of the cognition process. After all, one indicator to show that learning is happening is when the students make mistakes or errors and are able to correct them independently. All these studies highlighted the idea that errors are important in the development of students' learning.

On the other hand, some studies show that the errors made by students have not always been considered to be a good thing. Some researchers view errors as something to be avoided, and for most cases they are not acceptable. An earlier study by Klassen mentioned that student errors are the types of forms used inappropriately and are not acceptable by the native speaker of the language (as cited in Lu, 2010). Similarly, Richards related the production of errors as a result of incomplete learning by the students (as cited in Lu, 2010). Even though Rao (2018) mentioned that errors are closely related to the learning process, he also pointed out that there are some researchers who described errors as the result of insufficient learning by the students. Thus, it is their fault that they produce those errors. Furthermore, Gunawan strongly suggested that error production by learners should not happen. It is considered as a deviation in the learning process (as cited in Imaniar, 2018) and needs to be erased immediately (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009).

These two perspectives of errors made by the students lead to the question whether analysing errors is profitable for the students and teachers or does more harm than good in the students' understanding of their writing. However, previously conducted studies on these issues showed that it is important for the teachers and also the students to understand the errors in their writing. Al-Khresheh (2016) described errors produced by the students during their learning process as the main source for teachers' feedback. Thus analysing them will help teachers provide meaningful feedback to the students. Corder explained that a systematic analysis of the errors will provide a chance to understand and identify solutions for error production (as cited in Al-Khresher, 2016). It means that the students and the teachers will have a better understanding about the production of errors and work together to reduce the production of those errors. This is also supported by Cohen (1975). He explained that having error analysis in the classroom will enable the teachers to find a better way to deal with errors in their teaching and learning.

Other than that, Hasyim (2002) argued that for the students, error analysis will provide them with systematic information about a certain part of the language where they need to further improve their competence. Meanwhile, for the teachers, this technique will help them to evaluate their teaching and learning procedures in the classroom. Similar to Hasyim, Subekthi (2018) agreed that error analysis is important for teachers for it will

help them to be more prepared for the possibility of language difficulties in the future. The students will become more familiar with the errors and try to avoid the production of those errors. Subramaniam and Darus (2009) mentioned that there are two purposes in the application of error analysis in the second language learning process. The first purpose is "diagnostic" (to in-point the problem) and the other one is "prognostic (to make plans to solve a problem).

Despite the number of earlier studies addressing these issues, the current research tries to emphasise the idea that error analysis (EA) is not only a research methodology but it can also be used as a technique to teach in the classroom. It is important to understand that error analysis is not a one-time technique to identify and classify students' errors and expect the results to be applicable in general. The technique is universally used but the results from one study may be slightly different from another study. Thus, what works in one situation may not work in the other. However, the process itself has shown that error analysis will provide general aspects of the errors made. The current research suggests that error analysis should be used as an ongoing process of evaluation for the students, teachers and also the course.

This current research supports the idea that it is important to do an error analysis of the students' productive skills, especially writing skills. In order to properly illustrate this issue, the current study aims to first identify and classify the errors made by the students followed by a description of the students' perspectives of the errors, causes of the errors that they made and finally suggestions on the application of this error analysis as part of the teaching technique in the classroom.

METHOD

The present study is a qualitative study that concentrates on the errors in writing of undergraduate students majoring in English Literature and their perspectives on the causes of the errors. The samples used in this study are what Ellis (1999) called a specific sample in which data was collected from a limited number of participants. In this case 180 paragraphs were taken from the students who enrolled in two classes of English in Academic Discourse (writing class). During the research period, the students were in their second year as university students. The data analysed for this study were the errors in the students' written products. These were gathered during the first half of their fourth semester in their English in Academic Discourse classes.

This study was conducted for three months in which the participants were required to write three types of paragraphs over time. The students were free to choose the topics and approach. Thus, they were able to write the paragraphs as they wanted and by doing so, the researchers were able to collect the data in their natural production.

At the end of the third submission, an online questionnaire was delivered to the students. Their participation in this part of the research was voluntary, thus they were free to answer or not answer the questionnaire. The results of the questionnaires were used to describe the students' perspectives on the errors made in their writing and their views on the cause of the errors.

In order to describe the errors made in these paragraphs, the researchers had to familiarize themselves with the paragraphs to get the general ideas about what the paragraphs were about. Then, the identification of the errors was done by highlighting the parts in which the errors occurred. Once the errors were identified, they were classified into more general classifications. The last step was to explain and describe the errors based on the classification. Additional data collected from the results of the questionnaire were used to support the results of the main data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Errors Found in the Students' Writing

From 180 paragraphs collected in this study, there were two divisions of errors found in the writing; minor errors and major errors. In this research, the minor errors were those that were less than 1% of the total; the major errors were all greater than 1% of the total. The minor errors in this study were considered too small. The study concentrated on the understanding of the major errors only.

From 180 paragraphs there were 563 errors in the students' assignments. The table below illustrates the type of errors, the frequency of occurrence and the percentages of the errors in total.

Table 1:
Student Error Types

No	Error Types	Total Number of Errors	Percentage of the Total Errors
1	Article	120	21%
2	Noun Ending	72	13%
3	Preposition	70	12%
4	S + V Agreement	60	11%
5	Verb Form	50	9%
6	Word Form	45	8%
7	Verb Tense	35	6%
8	Punctuation	30	5%
9	Translation	27	5%
10	Word Choice	15	3%
11	Spelling	16	3%

12	Conjunction	8	1%
	Total	563	100%

Based on the above table, it appears that the students' production of errors is relatively low. However, almost all errors could be found in each of the students' writing. No paragraph was found without any errors. The conclusion is that these errors are frequently made by students. Errors in the use of the article were found to be the highest error produced by the students, which was 21% of the total errors made. These errors were caused by either the students leaving out the article or adding unnecessary articles which were not needed or the wrong choice of article.

The second highest error was in the use of noun ending which was about 13% of the total errors made, followed by the use of preposition and the use of noun ending. The students tended to overgeneralise the idea of singularity and plurality in English. It also appears that the idea of countable and uncountable nouns is one of the issues related to this type of error. Below are some examples of sentences made by the students (SS) that show the errors made related to the use of noun endings in sentences and their revised versions:

SS   : *These **foods** provide the necessary vitamins, proteins and fibre*
Revision   : **This food provides** the necessary vitamins, proteins, and fibre
SS   : *So many beautiful **moment** over there*
Revision   : So many beautiful **moments** over there
SS   : *Why I like those **place**?*
Revision   : Why **do** I like those **places**?
SS   : *First make it **for 10 cup*** (dough)
Revision   : First, make it into 10 cups (dough)

Meanwhile, in terms of preposition most of the students made a wrong choice of preposition in their sentences.

SS   : *People start to learn **music instrument** to **fulfill** their likes **about** music*
Revision   : People start to learn how to play a musical instrument to fulfil their liking of music
SS   : *The right thing to do is **seat** under **tree** near the beach and **seat in a** chair around*
Revision   : The right things to do are sitting under the trees near the beach or sitting on the chairs around

Another type of error frequently made by the students (more than 10% of the total errors) was the errors on the subject + Verb Agreement. Most of the errors were related to the understanding of the students on whether the subject of their sentence was singular or plural and the correct choice of related verb.

SS   : *The situation at home* **make relax myself**
Revision   : The situation at home makes me feel relaxed
SS   : *All the instruments* **makes** *you smarter*
Revision   : All the instruments make you smarter

Even though the rest of the error types in this study are below 10% of the total errors made by the students, these errors were spread throughout the written work. The errors on verb form contributed 9% of the total. Almost all errors related to this type were connected to the use of verb + ing in sentences.

SS   : *I really love my* **family,** *we can laugh together,* **sharing** *each other,* **dinner** *together, and many kind of activities*
Revision   : I really love my family. We can laugh together, share with each other, have dinner together, do other types of activities
SS   : *We can* **playing** *the sand,* **listening** *music while* **sunbath** *and reading* **book** *while* **sunbath**
Revision   : We can play with the sand, listen to the music while sunbathing or read a book while sunbathing

8% of the errors were made due to the wrong choice of word forms by the students. It seems that the students found it difficult to identify the words that belonged to two different word classes or they used the same words to represent two different word classes.

SS   : *The right thing to do is* **seat** *under* **tree** *near the beach and* **seat in a** *chair around*
Revision   : The right things to do are sitting under the trees near the beach or sitting on the chairs around
SS   : *The beautiful* **colors** *of sunset that* **treat** *my eyes* **like a peaceful**
Revision   : The beautiful colour of sunset that treats my eyes peacefully

6% of the errors were due to the use of incorrect verb forms to follow the tense used in the sentences. This type of error is closely related to the subject + verb agreement error. The first sentence below indicates that the error can be seen as an incorrect choice of verb form or it can also be seen as an error on the subject + verb agreement.

SS   : *He always* **give** *me good advice when I am sad*

Revision   : He always gives me good advice when I am sad
SS   : *She likes **to playing** games*
Revision   : She likes to play games

Both punctuation and translation contribute 5% to the total errors made by the students. The students prefer to use commas rather than full stops which in many cases ended with their paragraph running. In relation to the translation errors, it seems that the students first thought or wrote the paragraph in Bahasa Indonesia and then directly translated into English.

SS   : *I really like **noodles,** I have tested various kinds of processed noodles*
Revision   : I really like noodles. I have tested various kinds of processed noodles
SS   : *My favourite place to relax is a garden restaurant **near from** my hometown*
Revision   : My favourite place to relax is a garden restaurant near my hometown

3% of the errors were due to the incorrect word choice and misspelling of the words. Looking at the errors that the students made on the choice of words used in their paragraphs, it can be said that it is closely related to their issues with translation. The students directly translated the words into English without making sense of the sentences or understanding whether the words represented the intention of the sentence.

SS   : *They can **make** a rich harmonic sound*
Revision   : They can produce a rich harmonic sound
SS   : *They really cute and always make me want to **huge** them*
Revision   : They are really cute and always make me want to hug them

Finally, 1% of the errors were because of the false use of conjunction. This error is also closely related to that of punctuation errors. As previously mentioned there were some run-on sentences in the students' writing in which they preferred to use a comma instead of a full stop. Another option for the student is to insert a conjunction in their sentences. Below is one of the examples in which no conjunction was added.

SS   : *Then **seperate** half of **dough mix** with food colouring*
Revision   : Then separate half of the dough and mix it with food colouring

From those individual error types made by the students, a more general classification is made based on the Ferries' model of common errors in students' writing.

Table 2:
Student Error Categories

No	Error Categories	Error Types	Total Number of Errors	Percentage of the Total Errors
1	Morphological Errors	Article	120	74%
		S + Verb Agreement	60	
		Preposition	70	
		Conjunction	8	
		Verb Form	50	
		Verb Tense	35	
		Noun Ending	72	
2	Lexical Errors	Word Form	45	11%
		Word Choice	15	
3	Syntactical Errors	Translation	27	5%
4	Mechanical	Spelling	16	8%
		Punctuation	30	
Total			563	100%

Based on the above table, almost two third, 74% of the errors made by the students are considered as morphological errors and 11% of them are lexical errors. Both syntactical and mechanical errors are not as frequent as the other two categories of errors. A closer look at the error categories above shows that the biggest error contributor to the students' writing is related to grammatical errors. It doesn't mean that the students do not know the grammar but it shows that most of the students still have a lack of understanding of the use of English grammar in forming good sentences and paragraphs. These findings are in line with the study conducted by Setiyorini, Dewi, & Masykuri, (2018) who also found that majority of the students produced grammatical errors in their essay product.

Lexical errors were much less than those categorised as morphological. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, the

written product used in this research was a short paragraph which may have limited the use of vocabulary. Secondly, the topic used in their writing was free choice. This may have affected the choice of words that the students used. Students generally use those words they are familiar with. It also appears that the students are more comfortable writing in simple sentences rather than compound or complex sentences, even though they have learnt them. As a result, the syntactical and mechanical errors are very small compared with the morphological errors.

Students' Perspectives on the Cause of Errors that They Made

Understanding the reason why errors are made is important for the teachers and also the students. There are many studies that discuss this topic, but not many of them look at the causes from the perspectives of the writers, in this case the students. Analysis of the questionnaire shows that students identified two major causes of errors in their writing: lack of grammatical understanding and limited knowledge of vocabulary.

The result of the questionnaires shows that most of the students believed that the majority of errors in their writing were grammatical errors. This view is in line with the results of the current research that the highest number of errors made by the students was morphological errors. The students further indicated that they have a problem with the use of tenses and articles in English. This is borne out by the research findings. Although Pan (2010) was quite pessimistic with the application of error correction to writing, the result of her study documented similar issues as what has been described in the current study. She grouped the errors found in her study into grammatical, lexical, and semantic errors, in which grammatical errors appear to be the most common errors made by the participants.

When the participants were asked to think about the cause of errors, most of the students explained that they don't have "good grammar skills". It is interesting that the students considered understanding grammar as a skill in the English language and they found themselves lacking in this skill.

"I can write something but most of the time I find that what I wrote is grammatically incorrect" (revised version).

"I don't know how to connect the first word and the next word so it will be grammatically correct" (revised version).

Clearly, it is not that students cannot write but their lack of grammatical understanding that hinders them in writing effectively and correctly. Insufficient ability to produce good grammatical text influences their confidence to produce a writing product in general. Therefore, it is not surprising that almost all students who filled in the online questionnaire considered writing as their worst skill in English. It appears that most of the

students are fully aware of the cause of the errors that they make. It was also documented in the earlier study by Sermsook, Liamnimitr, and Pochakorn (2017) that grammar and vocabularies understanding affect how poorly students view their writing ability.

Similarly, the current study confirms that another cause of error from the students' perspective is their limited English vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to express themselves in their writing.

"I think that I am ok with my writing but I don't have many words to write and sometimes I choose the wrong words in my writing"(revised version)

"I can't write well because I don't have beautiful words in my mind" (revised version)

This is contrary to the research analysis which indicates that the problem is related to lexical understanding rather than grammatical issues. It can be assumed that the length and the free topic given to the students helped them to produce fewer errors in their vocabulary choices and form. One of the student's responses noted that the students could not write properly because they did not understand the topic for their writing.

"*It is more difficult to write when we are given a topic. Sometimes, I do not understand the topic and in the end I do not have much idea about it" (revised version).*

It is possible that when the students write about something that they know well, they may be able to write better. As what Setyorini (n.d) described in an earlier study that for students to be competent in their writing, they need to be capable of writing production and also excel in their content knowledge.

Pedagogical Implication

The present study proposes that error analysis can be applied as part of the teaching technique in the classroom. There are two key findings from this study: firstly, that morphological and lexical errors form the greatest number of errors produced by the students and secondly, that the students' responses concurred with these findings. Students are aware that they make errors in their writing but do not know the types of errors that they make and what to do to correct or avoid those errors. Thus, it is important for the students to know the errors so they will be able to do something about those errors.

Firstly, use the error analysis technique as a pre-test for students. It will help teachers to know the language level of the students and their initial

writing skills. Secondly, an adjustment to the writing syllabus is needed. One of the advantages of error analysis is the usefulness of the classification system it provides. It is suggested that when the error classification is broken down into smaller groupings, the analysis can be incorporated into the curriculum and teaching program. Dealing with the errors in a chunk will help teachers and students to focus on that particular error (Fang & Xue-Mei, 2007). Lastly, getting students involved in the analysis of the errors that they make. If students are familiar with the process, they will become accustomed to recognizing and reducing the production of errors.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that there are 12 different common error types that the students produced in their writing. These errors were classified into four different categories: morphological, lexical, syntactical, and mechanical. The study showed that students made the most errors in the morphological category which was related to errors in grammatical functions. The second highest number of errors was the lexical errors which were related to the use of appropriate vocabulary or word forms. These two categories of errors found in the study were supported directly by the findings from the questionnaires given to the students in which they describe lack of understanding of the grammatical functions and also limited knowledge of vocabulary as the cause of errors produced in their writing. The syntactical and the mechanical errors in this study were considered to be less compared to the other two categories because the students did not have to write a long paragraph and the writing was based on a topic in which they were interested which gave them more confidence in their writing. This was supported by the findings of the questionnaires that they had difficulties in writing when they are not familiar with the topic.

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