

## Grammatical Mistakes: What Is the Problem Now?

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on discussing the kinds of mistakes made by students in their writings. The writings of the same students have previously been analyzed from which earlier form of mistakes were found. After they have studied for semesters, how are their grammatical ability now? This was the question underlying this research. The data were collected and analyzed from qualitative perspective of research. The findings show that the students still make mistakes. However, the kinds of mistakes found were mostly new and are in different level of complexity.

**Keywords:** EFL, grammatical mistakes, structure, verb agreement

### Introduction

In 2016, a paper on grammatical difficulties faced by students as seen in their writings was published (Widianingsih & Gulö, 2016). The students were studying English Literature in a university in Lampung. It is reported that the students faced grammatical problems related to plural markers, determiners, verbs and predicates, and tenses. Looking at the data presented in the paper, the problems faced by the students were mistakes common to learners of English in their early stages of study (Olasehinde, 2002; Vahdatinejad, 2008; Sawalmeh, 2013; Puspita, 2019; Sari & Putri, 2019).

The question now emerging is, after studying for four years, have those grammatical issues solved by the students? If they still have issues with the grammar, what is the problem now?

According to Corder (1967), errors are valuable information for teachers, for researchers, and for learners themselves. In accordance with that, Weireesh (1991) states that learners' errors are important because making errors is a device learners' use in order to learn. According to him, EA is a valuable aid to identify and explain difficulties faced by learners. This is also supported by studies recently conducted (Gulö & Rahmawelly, 2018; Setyawan, 2018; Puspita, 2019).

Based on the background above, the researchers conducted another research on the writings of the students. The data were collected in 2019, after the students have conducted for four years. The research was done from qualitative perspective and the data were analyzed and reported with descriptive qualitative method.

### Theory and Method

Although theoretically this research was based on the Error Analysis theory proposed by experts such as Richards (1972), Selinker (1972), and Corder (Lightbown, 2011), the main purposes of the researchers are not to classify the findings based on the addition, omission, etc. or based on any other classifications (Richards, 1972; Sawalmeh, 2013; Gulö & Rahmawelly, 2018), but to merely look into the characteristics of the mistakes, analyze them, and contrast to the results of the initial research.

The data sources were in a form of summary assignments on Indonesian culture and society. The students were not told and thus not aware of the plan that the writings would be

collected to analyze. This is to make sure that the data would be objective and there were no factors that would make the students more careful with their grammar in making the summary. Four different assignments from each 42 students were collected. This leads to 168 summaries collected from the students. Each summary is between 400 and 600 words in length.

The data were gathered by reading each writing, underlining sentences with grammatical mistakes, and then classifying them based on particular characteristics. Seven of the highest occurrences were then processed further and reported here.

### Findings and Discussion

In comparison with the results of the research conducted in 2016, the students made a lot of progress as most of the kinds of grammatical mistakes they made were not found in the present data. However, there are two things need to be mentioned here. First, this means that they overcame their early grammatical weaknesses. Second, this is not to explicitly say that they now have no problems about topics such as plurality and tenses. In the present research, they did make such mistakes related to those topics but most of which are in a higher level of complexity.

From 697 grammatical mistakes found, seven types of the most occurring mistakes are presented here. When the data for each finding are similar in their characteristics, only two data are given for each point.

#### Plurality

It was found from the data that, compared to the previous findings (Widianingsih & Gulö, 2016), students still made simple mistakes related to plural markers such as in [1] and [2]. However, from 226 mistakes concerning plurality, only 34 data are in the same characteristics.

[1] There are five *dance*.

[2] Many *souvenir* are sold there.

The rest of the data are more complex like those in [3] and [4] below. Almost all of the students made mistakes in forming this kind of plurality. As seen from the examples provided, the present of 'one of ... phrase' seems like the factor that makes it difficult for the students to add the plural marker *-s* to the nouns *problem* and *dance*. In other words, they do not understand the idea that semantically in English it does not make sense to say *one of ONE*. It has to be *one of MANY*.

[3] One of the *problem* is ....

[4] Saman is one of traditional *dance* from Aceh.

As proposed by Richards (1972), interference of the first language is the main factor for this. When compared to English grammatical structure, it is possible in Indonesian to form a phrase that is similar in logical meaning to *one of one* like *Salah satu dari buku itu adalah milik saya* 'One of the books is mine' in which the noun *buku* 'book' is in singular form. This is in line with results of other works on plurality (Astriyanti, 2016; Trisnadewi, 2019).

#### Past vs Present Tenses

The next kind of mistakes is related to confusion between past and present tenses. There are 142 data showing weaknesses in applying simple past tense and confusing it with simple present. As seen in [5], *go* is used instead of *went* while the student is talking about the past. In [6], *don't* replaces *didn't* in telling about past event. Compared to the findings of the first research (Widianingsih & Gulö, 2016), no significant difference as the occurrence is still high.

[5] When I *go* to Jambi last year, ....

[6] It is because the parents *don't* teach their children when they were small.

It is emphasized by other researchers that tense is one of main problems faced by both students of English as a foreign language Astriyanti, 2016; Setyawan, 2018; Puspita, 2019). This number of occurrences, however, has not been compared in particular to the number occurring in the previous data. What can be mentioned here for sure is that the data source of the first one is only one assignment per student. In contrary, the data source of the present research comprises four different summaries from each student.

### Passive Voice vs Adjective Clause

Seen from the work done by Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2009), grammatical structure is what makes most students of English afraid of speaking or practicing English. Not highlighted in the previous research done by Widianingsih and Gulö (2016), the problem that lies between the passive voice and adjective clause was found in the data.

[7] It is a ceremony *which done* by villagers.

According to grammatically acceptable English structure, that ill-formed construction in [7] should be made either *done*, omitting the relative conjunction, or *which is done*, making it a passive voice (Azar & Hagen, 2017; Murphy, 2019). The same explanation applies to that in [8] below. The student missed the two options and ended up with this ill-formed construction *that given*.

[8] The cloth *that given* by the family should be ....

Sentences like these two were found 108 times in the data. The reason for this is interference of Indonesian grammatical structure. To express the same thing in Indonesian is by constructions like *yang dilakukan* 'which is done or done' and *yang diberikan* 'which is given or given'. As obvious in the examples, *which done* and *that given* are exact literal applications of the Indonesian grammatical rules to the English language, resulting in ill-formed reduced adjective clauses in [7] and [8].

### Particular Verbs

This type is named particular verbs as when it comes to certain verbs like *matter* and *happen* below, most students used them incorrectly. Other verbs that fall under this category are linking verbs such as *seem* and *appear* and other common intransitive verbs like *hurt*.

[9] It *is really matter* for us.

[10] It *is happened* because ....

There are 66 data found and the verbs used are these five; *happen* and *appear* being the used the most. In the data, there are two different ways in with which they used these

verbs. First, they treated the verb like an adjective, forming sentences like that in [9]. Second, they treated the verb like a transitive one, forming a passive voice form like in [10]. When using the other verbs, they might end up forming clauses like *\*It is seem*, *\*It was appeared*, and *\*It was really hurt*. The presence adverbs like *really* is not the source of the mistake as event without them, incorrect forms were also made by the students.

### Simple Form for Gerund

Another interesting kind of finding is related to the verb used in the beginning of sentences.

[11] *Eat* in the door is not polite.

As seen from [11], simple form of *eat* is used instead of gerund form *eating* which should be there. Shown by that in [12], different students are also in the same level of understanding this use of gerund. The verb *take* in [12] is used in the place of *taking*.

[12] *Take* the fruit which given to the gods is not forbidden.

These two examples represent the other findings about this point. Students have the tendency to use simple forms of verbs where present participle forms acting as gerunds are needed.

### Adverbial Clause

In a more complex form of sentence the findings show that students have difficulties in constructing clauses. Especially in the data analyzed, they made mistakes in forming adverbial clauses.

[13] When *go* to Padang, I learned a lot about culture.

Compared to the previous, discussion about gerund, the case in [13] can be categorized as problem about gerund. However, this is categorized differently with two reasons. First, if *go* is changed into *going*, it is used in a dependent clause. Second, there is a grammatical option to add the subject *I* to the verb *go* which in turn changes the form of the verb into a past form *went*. In this case, the clause no longer contains a gerund. As seen from the data, however, the student was not able to figure out this option.

[14] Although come to them with presents, they will refuse.

That in [14] also shows the same case in which the students who wrote the sentence was not able to make the right form of adverbial clause. The data collected show that the mistakes related to adverbial clauses like this are always in the same pattern. The students used the simple forms of the verbs and failed to see grammatically correct options.

### Double Subjects

The last point to be presented here is related to how the students realized the subjects of the sentences they made. Twelve data show that there are students who used two subjects for the same verb.

[15] *People in West Java they* speak Sundanese.

In [15], the phrase *People in West Java* carries the same function as subject with the personal pronoun *they* that follows. In [16], a different student used the phrase *The length of*

*the talk* with the same function of pronoun *it* that follows the phrase. In both cases, either of the two should be omitted in order to make the sentences grammatical.

[16] *The length of the talk it* is depend on the speaker.

In [16], however, there are additional mistakes seen. First, the to be *is* is used where it should not be used. Second, the verb *depend* is in incorrect form as third person singular marker for present tense *-s* is not attached to the end of the verb.

### Conclusion

As seen from the results and the discussion, the students are different in their ability to understand and apply the grammatical rules of English. For this reason, the findings of this study were not organized according to common types of grammatical errors or mistakes. Instead, the findings were classified based on the mistakes made the most in order to see the grammatical problem faced by the students. The findings also show that the Indonesian linguistic background is the main reason of the mistakes found in the data.

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