

# **AN ERROR ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this study was to find out the category of errors that EFL students usually made in their writings at Business College LP3I, Banda Aceh. The subjects of this study were two classes of fourth semester students from the Office Management and Computerized Information majors which had a total of 17 students. The data was collected through quantitative method. The instrument used to collect the data was tests. The findings of the study showed that the highest percentage of errors was from the category of tenses, including subject verb agreement. The lowest percentage of errors was from the category of clauses and phrases (conditional, wish, reported/quoted speech). It is suggested that the teacher could have conducted brainstorming with the students first before the writing assignment was given so that they can be assisted in vocabulary choices to use in their writing. The students should also be trained with more rules of grammar needed by beginners such as simple tenses, determiners, usage of idioms and the like.

*Key Words: Error Analysis, Writing.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing is one of the four skills in English. It is taught at the Business College in Indonesia as one of the skills in English. According to the Syllabus of the LP3I Business College in 2009, the students of the Business College should be able to write about something, expressing their basic ability in writing using good punctuation, conjunctions and correct vocabulary with basic grammar.

They are also supposed to be able to produce narrative, recount of an event, descriptive and other kinds of texts. These skills will not be obtained unless they are trained to practice writing through exercises. Nevertheless, a lot of the exercises do not result in improvement unless they learn the mistakes they have made in their first attempts, and are taught on how to try to write better than before to avoid their earlier mistakes, such as in basic grammar and vocabulary.

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing instructors should take into account both strategy of learning and language skill development when working with their students. According to Hadley (1993), writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or descriptions, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Perhaps it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspect of “writing down” on the one hand, to the more complex act of composing on the other hand. It is undoubtedly the act of composing that can create problems for the students, especially for those writing in a foreign or second language (L2) in academic contexts. Formulating new ideas can be difficult because it involves transforming and reworking information, which is much more complex than writing as retelling. However putting together concepts can solve this problem, such as engaging in “a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text” (Bereither & Scardamalia, 1987:12). Indeed, academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in analyzing, developing and composing ideas.

It is true that grammar is not the only aspect that the teacher focuses on when grading the writing done by his students. Basic grammar is the most important things to check before checking other aspects such as using good vocabulary and relations between paragraphs. Feedback from the teacher on the grammatical and lexical errors made by students can result in significant improvements in both accuracy and fluency (Chandler, 2003:12). In order to make writing exercises done by students better than before, the teacher should remind students simultaneously about the types of mistakes they often make and tell them how to avoid such mistakes.

In learning a foreign language, students frequently make errors because they are common features of learning the new foreign or second language. According to James (1998:12), “lexically, ‘error’ in the speech or writing of a second or foreign language learner means the use of a linguistic item such as a word, a grammatical item, a speech act and others in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning”. According to Richards, Platt and Platt (1992), it is different from the meaning of mistake. Generally, errors result from incomplete knowledge, whilst a mistake is made by a learner when writing or speaking which is caused by lack of attention, fatigue, carelessness, or some other aspects of performance.

Writing errors was also faced by students at LP3I Business College in Banda Aceh to do writing exercises. The researcher who teaches there, required them to write about something freely and then found their errors. Although they had studied basic grammar, the students made many errors in their writings. This encouraged him to study the types of errors made by them in their writings. He also wanted to find out the factors that caused the errors made by the students in this college.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Introduction to Error**

Errors are an essential part of learning. Some pedagogical reasons have been suggested for the errors made by learners of a foreign language, but the most important reason is that the error itself may actually be a necessary part of learning the language (Norrish, 1983:6).

Errors are caused by factors such as fatigue and inattention, called as “performance” factors, meanwhile errors resulting from lack of knowledge of the rules of language, called as “competence” factors (Ellis, 1986). Both performance and competence errors are commonly made by new language learners. Human learning is fundamentally a process that involves the making of errors. The making of mistakes is an important aspect of the learning process for virtually any skill. Dulay (1982:138) defines errors as the flawed side of the learner’s speech or writing. They are those parts of a conversation or a composition that deviate from some selected norm of the mature language performance. This means that there is something wrong in the language performance and the making of errors is unavoidable in the

learning process. Besides, the making of errors is one part of learning and no one can learn without making them.

Meanwhile, Brown (2000:170) states that errors are a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the inter-language competence of the learners. Learners of a language have different levels of competency in learning English and automatically this process may involve different causes for error. For example, if a learner asks: *Does John can sing?*, he is probably reflecting a competence level in which all verbs require a *do* auxiliary for question formation so he committed that error. On the other hand, Harmer (1998; 2001) says that “an error is the result of an incorrect rule of learning; the language has been stored in the brain incorrectly.” That error may happen in the teaching learning process, or may be caused by the teacher or may be due to the learner who has not yet learnt not to make that error.

When we talk about errors, we also need to think about mistakes. Errors and mistakes are not the same; it is crucial to make the distinction between errors and mistakes and most people still misunderstand the difference between them. Harmer (1983:35) explains that a *mistake* is less serious since it is the retrieval that is faulty, not the knowledge. In other words, the learner knows the rule, but made a “slip” when producing it. Brown (2000:170) further expresses it differently by stating, “a mistake refers to a performance error that is either a random guess or a slip.” In other words, it is a failure to utilize a known system incorrectly. All people can make mistakes in both native and second language situations.

Hubbard, et al. (1983) states that errors are caused by the lack of knowledge about the target language or by an incorrect hypothesis about it; and mistakes are caused by temporary lapses of memory, confusion, slips of the tongue and so on. Another way to differentiate an error and a mistake is if the learner can correct himself, it is probably a mistake, but if he cannot, then it is probably an error.

From the definitions of ‘error’ above, we can see that there can be some classifications of errors (Richards, 1971):

- Errors of competence: these are the result of the application of rules by the first language learner, which do not correspond to the norm of the second language.
- Errors of performance: these are the result of a mistake in language use and manifest themselves as repetition, false starts, corrections or slips of the tongue.

With errors of competence, the speaker/writer knows what is grammatically correct, whilst errors of performance occur frequently in the speech of both native speakers and second language learners and are what actually occurs in practice. Brown (1980) points out that learners will make errors and that these errors can be observed, analyzed and classified to reveal something about the system that the learners are operating in. This leads to the surge in the study of errors made by learners called *error analysis*.

### **The Causes of Errors**

Hubbard, et al. (1983:171) claims that there are three major causes of errors. They are mother tongue interference, over generalization and errors encouraged by the teaching material or the teaching method.

#### ***Mother Tongue Interference***

Although young children appear to be able to learn a foreign language quite easily and to reproduce new sounds very effectively, older learners can experience considerable difficulty. The sound system (phonology) and the grammar of the first language often impose themselves on the new language and this leads to foreign pronunciation, faulty grammatical patterns and often to a wrong choice of words (Hubbard, et al., 1983).

#### ***Over – Generalization***

The mentalist theory claims that some errors are inevitable because they reflect various stages in the language development of the learner. This theory claims that the learner processes new language data in his mind and produces rules for its production based on the evidence. For example: *He can sings.*

*We are hope.*

Over-generalization is signified by the creation of one deviant structure in place of two regular structures (Hubbard, et al., 1983).

#### ***Errors Encouraged by the Teaching Material or the Teaching Method***

Errors can appear to be introduced by the teaching process itself and the errors are evidence of ineffective teaching or lack of control. If the material is well chosen, graded and presented with meticulous care, there should never be any error. This is probably why so little is known about them.

According to Norrish (1983:21-27), there are three factors that can be classified as the causes of errors. They are carelessness, first language interferences and translation. They are explained as follows.

#### *Carelessness*

This is often closely related to lack of motivation. Lack of motivation may be the result of the presentation style of the teacher, which does not suit the students or maybe the materials are not interesting for the students (Norrish, 1983).

#### *First Language Interference*

First language interference is the result of language habits established in a native language of the student (Corder, 1987; Norrish, 1983). When the student uses English, he brings his native language habits into the target language being learned.

#### *Translation*

This is the most common source of errors made by students, translating word for word; especially idiomatic expression from the students' first language can produce errors of this type. This usually happens as the result of a situation when the learners are asked to communicate something but do not know the appropriate expressions or structures in the L2 (Norrish, 1983).

According to Lin (2012:1125), there are some major causes of errors; they are inter-lingual errors, intra-lingual errors and other errors. Definitions for these are set out below.

#### *Inter-lingual Errors*

Inter-lingual errors are caused when learners bring their mother tongue and its cultural habits into the learning and practice of the target language (Lin 2012, 2003). This kind of error is regarded as negative language transfer, and is influenced by the interference of their mother tongue. Examples from Chinese students are such as the interference of Chinese that lies in the following points: (1) in vocabulary: *the public medical fare* not *the free medical care*, (2) in grammar: *I you very much miss* not *I miss you very much*, and (3) in culture: since learners know little about the culture and customs of the target language, they tend to imitate the cultural habits of their mother culture when practicing the target language, which leads to language errors.

### *Intra-lingual Errors*

In human language learning processes, learners try to generalize the language materials they have learned and discover the language rules. Intra-lingual errors result from the learners' incomplete or misunderstanding of the target language rules (Lin, 2012). Since the students' English knowledge is limited, when they try to generalize some language rules too much or too little, they are easily affected by intra-lingual interference and hence make errors. For example, students who may have learned the past forms of some verbs (*work, play, want*) are to add *-ed* after the verbs (*worked, played, wanted*). By generalization, they may think all past forms of verbs will follow the same rules, and they could then make such errors as saying/writing: *go—goed, have—haved, and buy—buyed* in their speech/writings.

### **Error Analysis**

According to James (1998:1), error analysis is the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and sequences of unsuccessful language. In addition, Lado (1977), as cited in Haryanto (2007:20), says that one of the prime movers of constructive analysis makes clear, "the teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real problems are and can provide the easy way for the teaching and learning process".

Students have problems in learning English in terms of grammar, vocabulary and with certain aspects of the second language. The study of learners' errors has become a primary focus of foreign language research. It is called Error Analysis.

Ubol (1988:8) says that error analysis is a systematic description and explanation of errors made by learners or users in their oral or written production of the target language. This means that error analysis is concerned with the explanation of the occurrence of errors and the production of oral or written expressions that are different from that of a native speaker or of the target language norm. The error analysis movement is characterized as an attempt to account for the errors made by learners that could be explained or predicted by contrastive analysis. Error analysis has made a significant contribution to the theoretical consciousness-raising of applied linguistics and language practitioners. Error analysis provides a methodology for investigating the language usage of learners.

According to Corder (1981), errors could be significant in three ways: they provide the teacher with the information about how much the learner had learnt, they provide the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt, they serve as devices by which the learner discovered the rules of the Target Language.

Error analysis distinguishes between errors, which are systematic, and mistakes which are not. The errors can be classified according to its basic type: omissions, additions, substitutions or errors related to word order (Corder, 1973). They can be classified by how apparent they are. Overt errors such as *I angry* are obvious, even out of context, whereas covert errors are evident only in context. Closely related to this is the classification according to the domain and the breadth of the context which the analyst must examine, and the extent and the breadth of the utterance which must be changed in order to fix the error. Errors may also be classified according to the level of language: phonological errors, vocabulary or lexical errors, syntactic errors, and so on (Corder, 1967). They may be assessed according to the degree to which they interfere with communication: global errors make an utterance difficult to understand, while local errors do not. In the example above, *I angry* would be a local error, since the meaning is apparent.

### **The Goals of Error Analysis**

When a researcher conducts error analysis, he must have at least one goal to achieve. As Valette (1977:66) has said, one of the goals of error analysis is to reveal that strategies that learners use and to help in the preparation of more effective learning materials. Another goal is to classify the types of errors and identify those which native speakers find difficult to tolerate.

According to the opinion of Sridhar (1981), there are three goals of error analysis. It is believed that error analysis, by identifying the areas of difficulty for learner, can help in (i) determining the sequence of presentation of target items in the textbook and classroom, with the difficult items following the easier ones, (ii) deciding the relative degree of emphasis, explanation and practice required in putting across various items in the target language, and (iii) devising remedial lessons and exercises.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted at LP3I Business College, Banda Aceh, which is a Professional Development Educational Institute. The reason why the researcher chose this college is that he is also one of the English lecturers there and teaches the subject of *English Presentation and Negotiation (EPN)*. There are fifty three LP3I branches in Indonesia; one of them is in Banda Aceh. The syllabus taught in the LP3I business college in Banda Aceh follows the 2012 competency standard which was formulated by the Professional Development Educational Institute in Jakarta. The writing standard for the 4<sup>th</sup> semester students is that they must be able to compose various kinds of monologues especially within the form of descriptive, narrative, application letters, bidding letters and other letters needed in an office. The standard is quite general that the specific ability of a student in expressing those things depends on the environment of the student, and also that of the college.

As LP3I is a business college, the approach, method and technique used in teaching English is adjusted to the environment where the students are studying both in and outside of class. The students are scheduled to study English on Mondays and Thursdays every week.

The data was collected through quantitative method. The instruments used to collect the data were tests. The students were given a free-writing assignment of about 250 words. After the assignments were submitted to the researcher, he looked at the length of the compositions and noted that some compositions were too short. The researcher counted the words and found that the longest composition had 225 words and the shortest had only 64 words. The average length of composition was about 120 words.

Having finished counting the words of every composition, the researcher then checked each one for the occurrences of every category of errors in it, which were divided into five categories:

- (1) spelling, capitalization, and punctuation marks;
- (2) articles, possessive adjectives and other determinants;
- (3) tenses, including subject verb agreement;
- (4) word order (a noun and its adjectives) and word form, and
- (5) clauses and phrases (conditional, wish and reported/quoted).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

From the writing assignments of the students, the researcher sets out the results of number of errors for each category as in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Summary of the Number of Errors in each Composition in each Category

|         | Category I | Category II | Category III | Category IV | Category V | Average |
|---------|------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------|---------|
| Highest | 22         | 60          | 84           | 62          | 54         | 56      |
| Lowest  | 2          | 1           | 18           | 1           | 1          | 5       |
| Average | 12         | 30          | 51           | 31          | 27         | 30      |

*Categories:*

- I. Spelling, capitalizations, and punctuation marks.
- II. Articles, possessives, adjectives and other determiners.
- III. Tenses, including subject =verb agreement.
- IV. Word order (a noun and its adjectives), word forms, derivatives.
- V. Clauses and phrases (conditional, wish, reported/quoted speech).

Based on Table 1, we can see that the highest category of errors is the third category (tenses, including subject verb agreement), with the total average of 51 occurrences per composition and the lowest category of error was the first category (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation marks) which had an average of 12 occurrences per composition.

### Discussion

The cause of errors made by the students may be due to inter-lingual interference and/or intra-lingual interference. There are errors that interfere with meaning such as verb tenses, word order and confusing choice of words and misspelling. The teacher should focus on teaching the students what is correct so they can avoid making these errors in the future. There are also errors that are less likely to interfere with meaning. These are considered mistakes, not errors if the students should know the rules but they are careless. Such mistakes include article mistakes, use of preposition mistakes, pronoun agreement, comma splices and minor spelling mistakes.

In this study, the most errors found were in category three, about using correct tenses and subject=verb agreement. The researcher can presume that most students at this college made errors in this category because they do not understand well how to use tenses even though they should know the formulae for tenses in English. Moreover, they

did not really understand many types of text or essay writing which are in the syllabus. Studying many types of essays will help them understand better and help them find what the topics are, what are the main idea, and the purpose of the text. They will find it easier to begin writing when they know the proper format for an essay.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study showed that the students at LP3I Banda Aceh conducted many errors in their writing. The highest percentage of errors was from the category of tenses, including subject verb agreement. The lowest percentage of errors was from the category of clauses and phrases (conditional, wish, reported/quoted speech). It is suggested that the teacher could have conducted brainstorming with the students first before the writing assignment was given so that they can be assisted in vocabulary choices to use in their writing. The students should also be trained with more rules of grammar needed by beginners such as simple tenses, determiners, usage of idioms and the like.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

The researcher has some suggestions for other English teachers concerning the teaching of writing and correction of errors. First, the teacher should know the difference between major and minor errors. Distinguishing between major and minor errors may be a good guide in choosing what to correct and what can be items to use for grading the students.

Second, teachers should prioritize what he/she is correcting and grading. Do not focus only on grammar so that the students start to think that correct grammar is the only thing that counts in writing.

Third, it is a good idea to distinguish between writers who have tried and those that have not. Obvious spelling, punctuation and capitalization mistake may be there because the students did not bother to edit—or proofread their own paper. The teacher needs to ask each student to edit their own writing or use a pair system where the students check each other's compositions before handing them to the teacher to check their work. In this case, the teacher should remind their students to be more careful and ensure their work has been checked before handing it in.

Fourth, to prepare students to get fluent, before starting free writing, the teacher should give the students lessons and practice in grammar rules needed for beginners, especially simple tenses, determiners, usage and so on.

Finally, it is necessary that teachers teach the sixteen types of tenses or at least twelve types due to the fact that the reading materials for high school level have been expressed in these various kinds of tenses.

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