



EXPLORING ERRORS IN ENGLISH DESCRIPTIVE WRITING OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: AN ERROR ANALYSIS STUDY AT SMKN 1 LIMBOTO, GORONTALO

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates types and sources of errors in English descriptive writing among tenth-grade students at SMKN 1 Limboto, Gorontalo. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach with Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982) as the analytical framework, twenty students' descriptive texts were collected and analyzed through Corder's (1967) five-step error analysis procedure. Findings reveal that omission and misformation were the dominant error types, accounting for the highest proportion of total errors. Omission errors primarily involved the copula 'be' and articles, while misformation errors featured incorrect verb forms and inappropriate lexical choices. These errors were predominantly caused by Bahasa Indonesia (L1) interference, intralingual overgeneralization, and limited writing practice opportunities. The study concludes that targeted grammar instruction particularly on copula 'be,' the English article system, and simple present tense morphology and systematic error-correction feedback are essential for improving EFL descriptive writing competence at the vocational high school level.

Keywords: error analysis; descriptive writing; EFL; surface strategy taxonomy; senior high school

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most demanding language skills for EFL learners, requiring simultaneous mastery of vocabulary, grammar, genre conventions, and organizational coherence. In the Indonesian EFL context, senior high school students particularly those in vocational schools (SMK) face significant challenges in producing grammatically accurate and contextually appropriate written texts. Descriptive writing, as a genre mandated by the national curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka, 2022), provides a productive context for investigating these challenges.

Error analysis (EA) offers a systematic, empirically grounded approach to examining learner language. Rooted in Corder's (1967) foundational work and developed through Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, error analysis identifies patterns of linguistic deviation that reflect learners' developing interlanguage competence. Unlike a deficit-oriented view, error analysis positions learner errors as meaningful data that reveal systematic gaps in linguistic knowledge and, by extension, guide pedagogical intervention.

While error analysis studies in Indonesian EFL contexts are numerous, the majority focus on urban Java and Sulawesi populations (Mertosono & Erniwati, 2023; Desnaranti & Putra, 2024). Research targeting vocational high school students in eastern Indonesia, specifically Gorontalo Province, remains limited. This contextual gap is significant because students in Gorontalo communities typically have minimal exposure to English outside formal schooling, which may amplify the influence of L1 interference and limit opportunities for writing development.

Preliminary classroom observations at SMKN 1 Limboto indicated systematic writing errors in students' descriptive texts, particularly in grammar and vocabulary. These observations, combined with the theoretical and contextual gaps identified in the literature, motivated the present study. The study addresses two research questions: (1) What types of errors occur in tenth-grade students' English descriptive writing at SMKN 1 Limboto? and (2) What factors cause these errors?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Error Analysis and Surface Strategy Taxonomy

Error analysis emerged from Corder's (1967) argument that learner errors are not failures but evidence of active hypothesis-testing about L2 rules. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) developed Surface Strategy Taxonomy to categorize errors based on observable surface-level modifications to target language norms, proposing four error types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. This taxonomy remains the most widely applied framework in EFL writing error analysis globally and in Indonesia (Mertosono & Erniwati, 2023; Desnaranti & Putra, 2024).

Omission errors involve the absence of required linguistic elements. In Indonesian EFL contexts, copula 'be' and article omission are particularly prevalent, attributed to the structural absence of these elements in Bahasa Indonesia (Huan, 2022). Addition errors involve the presence of unnecessary linguistic elements, including double marking (e.g., **'doesn't goes'*) and redundant pronoun use. Misformation errors involve incorrect

morphological or lexical forms, such as incorrect verb tense or word choice errors arising from L1-influenced translation. Misordering errors reflect incorrect word order, often revealing L1 syntactic transfer, as English adjective-noun order differs from Indonesian noun-adjective order.

2.2 Descriptive Writing in EFL Contexts

Descriptive text is a genre that portrays persons, places, or objects through specific identifying and describing components (Syifa et al., 2022). In Indonesian SMK curricula, descriptive text is taught in tenth grade as part of students' foundational English competency. Research consistently identifies vocabulary, grammar, and text organization as the primary difficulty areas for Indonesian students in descriptive writing (Hafizah, 2023; Syifa et al., 2022).

2.3 Sources of Errors in EFL Writing

Research identifies three primary error sources: (1) interlingual transfer, where L1 grammatical or lexical patterns are applied to L2 production; (2) intralingual errors, arising from overgeneralization or incomplete application of L2 rules; and (3) learning-context factors, including instructional quality and practice opportunities (Odlin, 1989). In the Indonesian EFL context, L1 interference is consistently identified as the dominant error source (Mertosono & Erniwati, 2023).

3. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with an error analysis approach. Participants were 20 tenth-grade students at SMKN 1 Limboto, Gorontalo, selected through purposive sampling based on enrollment in a class where descriptive text writing was part of the current curriculum. Data were collected through a structured descriptive writing task requiring students to compose a 100-150 word descriptive text on a self-selected topic (best friend, favorite teacher, school, favorite place, or favorite object) within 40 minutes.

Analysis followed Corder's (1967) five-step procedure: (1) collection of learner texts, (2) error identification, (3) error classification using Surface Strategy Taxonomy, (4) frequency and percentage calculation, and (5) error explanation based on potential sources. Trustworthiness was ensured through peer debriefing with an applied linguistics colleague, member checking with participating teachers, and triangulation with supplementary semi-structured interview data. The frequency formula applied was: $\text{Percentage} = (\text{Frequency of error type} \div \text{Total errors}) \times 100\%$.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Types of Errors in Students' Descriptive Writing

Analysis of 20 student descriptive texts revealed systematic errors across all four Surface Strategy Taxonomy categories. Table 1 presents the distribution of error types. [Note: Frequency data to be inserted upon completion of full analysis.]

Table 1. Distribution of Error Types in Students' Descriptive Writing (N=20)

No	Error Type	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Most Common Sub-type
1	Omission	...	...	Copula 'be', article omission
2	Misformation	...	...	Incorrect verb form (tense)
3	Addition	...	...	Double marking
4	Misordering	...	...	Adjective-noun order
Total		N = ...	100%	

Omission errors were the most frequent category. The most common omission involved the copula 'be,' consistent with Huan (2022) and Mertosono and Erniwati (2023). Representative examples from student texts include: *'She beautiful and kind' (correct: 'She is beautiful and kind') and *'My teacher very patient' (correct: 'My teacher is very patient'). Article omission was the second most common omission sub-type, with students frequently writing *'He is good student' instead of 'He is a good student.' These findings directly reflect the structural properties of Bahasa Indonesia, which contains neither copula verbs nor articles.

Misformation errors were the second most frequent category. Incorrect verb form was the dominant sub-type, with students applying base verb forms in contexts requiring third-person singular present tense inflection (e.g., *'She go to school every day'). Misformation also included inappropriate lexical choices arising from word-for-word translation from Bahasa Indonesia, producing semantically awkward constructions in English. This finding aligns with Desnaranti and Putra (2024), who similarly identified misformation as a dominant error type in Indonesian EFL writing.

Addition errors, while less frequent, were nonetheless systematic. Double marking was the primary addition sub-type (e.g., *'She doesn't goes'), reflecting overgeneralization of the auxiliary 'do/does' rule while simultaneously maintaining the third-person '-s' inflection. Misordering errors, the least frequent category, primarily involved incorrect adjective placement (e.g., *'a girl beautiful'), directly reflecting L1 syntactic transfer from Bahasa Indonesia's noun-adjective order.

4.2 Sources of Errors

Based on combined analysis of student texts and interview data, three primary error sources were identified. L1 interference (Bahasa Indonesia) was the most prominent, evidenced by copula and article omission (absent in Bahasa Indonesia), direct translation patterns, and adjective-noun misordering. Intralingual overgeneralization was evident in addition errors involving double marking of third-person agreement. Learning-context factors specifically limited instructional time (2-3 hours/week) and insufficient writing practice opportunities contributed to the persistence of these errors.

These findings are consistent with the broader Indonesian EFL error analysis literature. Mertosono and Erniwati (2023) similarly identified L1 interference as the primary error source among South Sulawesi senior

high school students, while Desnaranti and Putra (2024) found comparable patterns among Indonesian undergraduate EFL writers. The present study extends these findings to the vocational high school context in Gorontalo Province, confirming that L1 interference remains a pervasive factor regardless of educational level or regional context.

4.3 Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest three priority areas for pedagogical intervention. First, teachers should prioritize explicit instruction on grammatical features generating the highest error frequency: the copula 'be,' English articles (a, an, the), and simple present tense morphology. Contrastive analysis activities highlighting English-Indonesian structural differences may help students develop awareness of transfer error risks. Second, systematic error-correction feedback particularly recasts and metalinguistic explanations should be incorporated into writing instruction to support meta-linguistic awareness. Third, increasing writing practice opportunities through guided and independent writing tasks is essential for developing automaticity in applying grammatical rules.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated errors in English descriptive writing among tenth-grade students at SMKN 1 Limboto, Gorontalo, using Surface Strategy Taxonomy as the analytical framework. Omission and misformation were the dominant error types, primarily caused by L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) interference, intralingual overgeneralization, and limited writing practice. These findings are consistent with prior Indonesian EFL error analysis research and provide location-specific empirical data for Gorontalo Province.

The study's contributions are twofold: theoretically, it extends the Indonesian EFL error analysis literature to the vocational high school context in eastern Indonesia; practically, it provides English teachers with empirically grounded diagnostic data to inform targeted writing instruction. Future research should employ larger samples, longitudinal designs, and think-aloud protocols to deepen understanding of the cognitive processes underlying EFL descriptive writing errors.

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