

# GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN THE TENTH GRADE STUDENTS' NARRATIVE WRITING

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The present study examined the students' grammatical errors and source of errors in their narrative essays. This was a descriptive qualitative research method with a case study design. 84 tenth-grade students of SMA X Surabaya in the 2012-2013 school year participated in this study. The source of data of this research included 84 copies of the students' narrative essays written in English. The data were the grammatically incorrect sentences. The instrument used for data collection of this study was a narrative writing assignment. The collected data were then analyzed to discover the error types, their frequency of occurrence, and then their sources. The results showed that the grammatical errors which the students made in their personal narrative essays included errors in (a) verb form or tense, (b) shift in tense, (c) plurality of nouns, (d) articles, (e) adjectives or adverbs, (f) prepositions, (g) sentence construction, (h) subject-verb agreement (i) possessive pronoun and contraction, (j) sentence coordination, (k) fused sentence, and (l) pronoun reference. The sources of the above-mentioned grammatical errors included (a) interference from the students' native language, (b) intra-lingual and developmental factors, (c) communication strategies, and (d) context of learning. The errors caused by interference from the students' L1 included errors in phonology/orthography, morphology, grammar, lexico-semantic and style. The errors were also attributed by inter-lingual or developmental factors, such as overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, false analogy, hyperextension, hypercorrection, and faulty categorization. The*

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*communication strategies causing the errors included paraphrasing, substitution, words coinage, and language switch. The last source was context of learning which was caused by the teacher, teaching materials, or the order of presentation. The errors show that actually the students still have problems on grammar. Therefore, the students should learn more and the teachers should develop more material and teaching technique. And the teachers should also stress the comparison between Bahasa Indonesia as their first language and English as their second language.*

*Keywords: grammatical errors, students' narrative writing*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, writing gives students a great opportunity to find ways of expressing their ideas in a foreign language, i.e. English. It also gives a great chance for teachers to identify and diagnose grammar and vocabulary problems, and the learners' progress. In this context, the students are required to produce a particular writing genre which helps them establish a repertoire of rhetoric and relevant language forms of different genres (Al-Khasawneh, 2010).

One of the writing genres taught in Grade Ten of SMA X is Narrative Text. This type of text can be identified from its three characteristics, namely, objectives, generic structure, and language features. The objective of narrative text is to tell a story and, in doing so, entertains or informs the readers. It is composed of the generic structure starting with orientation (scene setting and introduction), a complication (a chain of events that influence what will happen in the story, resolution which resolves the crisis, and ended with re-orientation (Anderson and Anderson, 1997:8). The last is language features. The language features comprise uses of sentences containing action verbs, nouns to name people, places, and things, past tense, conjunctions, and adverbial phrase.

From the writer's everyday observation of her students, the students of SMA X are usually good at speaking; they can speak fluently and independently. Many of the students graduated from international or bilingual schools. It seems they have no problems in reading comprehension as well. Evidence from that preliminary study also showed that the major problems the students encounter were problems in writing. They included sentence construction, tenses, or word choice. Their errors in their writings might be caused either by their lack of knowledge about correct usage or by his lack of concern for correctness. This made it difficult for them to accomplish their writing tasks. These difficulties led them to lose motivation in writing. The writer interviewed some students who had difficulties and made errors in sentence structures and tenses, and they responded that it was difficult for them to write with good sentence structures.

Therefore, a study examining the students' difficulties needs to be conducted. The writer would like to conduct a research to examine grammatical errors and their sources in students' narrative writing. The purpose of conducting the study was to help the students identify and correct problems in sentence structure and usage so that so that students can write with greater competence and confidence. In addition, Fellowes (2007) suggests that grammar is only one element of the English language system. It is one resource available to the writer for effectively achieving the social purpose of a text. Observing the grammatical conventions of writing and being able to manipulate words and clauses in a text is beneficial to the meaning-making function of writing. Knowledge of grammar allows the writer to more confidently and adeptly add, delete, substitute or combine words and clauses in sentence as a text is constructed with intention.

In relation to the previous background, this study attempts at answering the following problems: (a) What grammatical errors are found in the students' narrative writing? and (b) What sources of errors are found in the students' narrative writing?

While learning a second language, learners build up a system for themselves which is different in some ways from learners' first language and second language systems. The system which the learners build up for themselves has been called interlanguage.

Learning grammar rules is therefore one of the critical components of learning to write. Having strong skills in writing and grammar allows writers to get their message or story to their readers in a clear and understandable way. It is important to know the rules of grammar and how to use them properly.

In Error Analysis, the learner of English as a second language is unaware of the existence of the particular system or rule in English language. The basis of error analysis is to describe how learning occurs by examining the learner's output and this includes his / her correct and incorrect utterances. Error Analysis (EA) is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition (SLA) which replaced, in 1970, the Contrastive Analysis(CA) theory, whose major concern was "the comparison of two or more languages or subsystems of languages in order to determine both the differences and similarities between them" (Fisiak, 1981,1) as quoted by Sarfraz (2011, 32).

CA regarded the influence of mother tongue (MT) on all the levels of language; phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic, in second language acquisition. Due to the weaknesses of CA in its pedagogical implications, EA emerged as a more effective tool in the study of second language acquisition.

According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982:138), there are four descriptive taxonomies to analyze errors, namely linguistic category taxonomy (*it classifies errors according to either or both the language component and the particular linguistic constituents the error effects*), surface strategy taxonomy (*the surface strategy elements of a language are altered in specific and systematic ways*), comparative taxonomy (*Comparative taxonomies classify errors based on comparison between the*

*structure of language learner errors and certain other types of construction. The errors are classified into developmental errors, interlingual errors, ambiguous errors, and unique errors), and communicative effect taxonomy (Communicative effect taxonomy deals with errors from the perspective of their effect on the listener or reader. This taxonomy classifies errors into global errors and local errors).*

Grammar mistakes rarely occur in native speakers' writing but very commonly do in the work of less proficient ESL students, whose mother-tongue "interferes" with the production of correct English. A sentence is defined as grammatical if all the words in the sentence are well-formed words of the language in question (Foster, 2005). A sentence may contain one or more errors. This error can take the form of a performance slip which can occur due to carelessness or tiredness, or a competence error which occurs due to a lack of knowledge of a particular construction.

As language learners, EFL students experience trial and error in which they establish a hypothesis, and later on prove it, adjust it, or abort it. Error Analysis therefore aims to examine a learner's errors in a longitudinal way to reveal a learner's hypothesis and indicate the learner's progress. Learners' errors can also "provide the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language (Corder, 1967: 167).

Studies which focus on the analysis of ESL/EFL errors in the speech or written materials have showed that there are several common errors made by ESL/EFL learners: (1) use of words, (2) use of phrases, (3) grammar, (4) rhetoric, (5) use of punctuations, and (6) spelling.

The possible sources or errors made by EFL learners can be predicted. Richards and Sampson (1974) identifies six sources of errors: (1) interference, (2) overgeneralization, (3) performance errors, (4) markers of transitional competence, (5) strategies of communication and assimilation, and (6) teacher-induced errors.

## **METHOD**

As the purpose of this study is to describe the students' errors in writing narrative essay focusing on their uses of grammar, this study is therefore descriptive in the sense that it aims at describing the grammatical errors of the students in their narrative writing. In other words, the design of the study employed the qualitative descriptive case study type since this study investigated grammatical errors found in the students' narrative compositions. Yin (1984) argued that it deals with a phenomenon (errors) within a real-life context (writing).

84 tenth-grade students of SMA X Surabaya in the 2012-2013 school year participated in this study. The source of data of this research included 84 copies of the students' narrative essays written in English. The students' narrative essays had several topics. To make the data more specific, only the students' errors in the use of English grammar were regarded as the subject to be analyzed. The unit of analysis was grammar rules applied in sentences (words, phrases, and clauses).

The instrument used for data collection of this study is a narrative writing assignment. To do the assignment, the students were asked to write a personal narrative in one or two paragraphs. They were asked to recount a significant moment in their lives. It used a one-time writing format and its administration was as a test.

After the researcher obtained the results of the writing test she read all the submitted essays to identify the grammatically-incorrect sentences before proceeding to classify and describe those errors. The collected data in this study were analyzed to discover the grammatical and mechanical errors by using a content analysis. To analyze the data, the study employed the theory of error analysis (EA) and the procedural analysis model suggested by Ellis (1985:297). It involved (1) identifying the errors in sample, (2) describing these errors, and (3) classifying them according to their hypothesized causes, and (4) evaluating their seriousness.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and their discussion of the study. The students' errors and the sources of errors are first presented. It is then followed by discussion of the findings.

### Types of Grammatical Errors

The data obtained in this research were analyzed using a checklist. As suggested by Ellis (1997:15), the three stages of error analysis were employed. They included identifying the errors, describing these errors, and classifying them. The sentences are regarded to be ungrammatical if all the words in the sentence are well-formed but contain one or more errors (Foster, 2005).

Furthermore, the errors were classified into twelve categories, they are: (1) pronoun reference, (2) adjective or adverb, (3) preposition, (4) shift in tense, (5) subject-verb agreement, (6) fused sentence, (7) possessive pronoun and contraction, (8) article, (9) coordination, (10) sentence construction, (11) plurality of nouns, and (12) wrong verb forms or tense.

Table 1 summarizes the types of grammatical errors identified in the students' narrative essays ranging from the most common to the least common errors.

Table 1  
Types of errors

No	Types of Errors	Percentage (%)
1	Wrong verb forms or tense	50
2	Shift in tense	15
3	Plurality of nouns	7
4	Article	7
5	Adjective or adverb	6
6	Preposition	6
7	Sentence construction	4

No	Types of Errors	Percentage (%)
8	Subject-verb agreement	3
9	Possessive pronoun and contraction	1
10	Sentence coordination	.7
11	Fused sentence	.2
12	Pronoun reference	.1
	Total	100

It is shown that there were twelve types of grammatical errors. The most common error was error in verb form or tense. The least common error was the pronoun reference. The other errors included shift in tense (the second), plurality of nouns (the third), article (the fourth), adjective and adverbs (the fifth), preposition (the sixth), sentence construction (the seventh), subject-verb agreement (the eighth), possessive pronoun and contraction (the ninth), sentence coordination (the tenth), fused sentence (the eleventh), and pronoun reference (the twelfth).

Here are the example:

Table 1.1.

Wrong verb forms or tense

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Wrong verb forms or tense	My friend <i>help</i> *him to repair his foot

Table 1.2

Shift in tense

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Shift in tense	I went to school to know that something <i>will</i> * happen



Table 1.3  
Plurality of nouns

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Plurality of nouns	I play some game* at his home

Table 1.4  
Article

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Article	But I didn't go to hospital*

Table 1.5  
Adjective or Adverb

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Adjective or Adverb	The weather was mostly cloud*

Table 1.6  
Preposition

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Preposition	Mrs. Lidya told us to run at* the field  until five times

Table 1.7  
Sentence Construction

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Sentence Construction	One my friend* help him

Table 1.8  
Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Subject-verb agreement	There was so many students*

Table 1.9  
Possessive Pronoun and Contraction

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Possessive pronoun and contraction	I was very thankful about my mother words*

Table 1.10  
Sentence Coordination

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Sentence coordination	she laughed about my experience, and my father too*

Table 1.11  
Fused Sentence

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Sentence coordination	I took a shower with extra speed* waking up my brother

Table 1.12  
Pronoun Reference

No	Types of Errors	Example
1	Pronoun reference	The worst day you have ever experienced when I* woke up I* was very surprised

### Sources of the Grammatical Errors

The causes or sources of the errors as suggested by Richards (1971) in Ellis (2008, 53) are shown in Table 2.

Table 2  
Sources of the Errors

No	Sources of Errors	Percentage
1	Interference	15
2	Intralingual/Developmental	80
3	Communication Strategies	3
4	Transfer of Training	2
	Total	100

It is shown that there were four sources of the students' errors. They were (1) interference errors, (2) intra-lingual and developmental errors, (3) transfer of training errors, and (4) communication strategies. Interference errors are the result of language transfer and are caused by the students' native language, i.e. Indonesian.

Table 2.1  
Interference

No	Example	Reason
1.	I feel don't* happy	It contained a grammatical error as the student failed to use the common expression in English to show feeling 'I feel unhappy' instead of 'I feel don't happy'

Intra-lingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of L2, rather than from language transfer. Developmental errors occur when the learner attempts to build up hypotheses about the target language on the basis of limited experience (Ellis, 2008, 53).

Table 2.2  
Intra-lingual/Developmental

No	Example	Reason
1.	My course's teacher told* me that I had chemistry courses	The students used the regular Simple Past tense verb ending '-ed' to produce the irregular Simple Past tense verb 'telled' instead of 'told'.

Communication strategies errors are those which resulted from a learner's use of the limited linguistic resources available to him/her as strategies of communication to "bridge the gap between his limited linguistic knowledge of the target language and his communicative needs by using elements which are not linguistically appropriate for the context" (Corder, 1967, 103-106).

Table 2.3  
Communication Strategies

No	Example	Reason
1.	Our computer teacher asked us to choose group <i>by our choose*</i> .	It showed that the student's paraphrasing of 'by our choose' instead of 'by ourselves'

Transfer of training or teacher-induced errors are those which result from pedagogical procedures contained in a text or employed by the teacher. In other words, the transfer of learning errors come about as a result of course design or teaching techniques.

Table 2.4  
Transfer of Training

No	Example	Reason
1.	The weather was mostly <i>cloud</i> .*	It had adjective and adverb ending errors. This implied that the students had difficulties in forming adjectives and adverbs in appropriate contexts.

The findings of this study revealed that the students made grammatical errors in their narrative essays ranging from the most common errors, i.e. verb form errors to the least common errors, i.e. pronoun reference errors. This means that the students still have difficulties in using English grammar accurately and properly in their narrative writing. The difficulties were the wrong forms, the missing forms, and the wrong use of forms. This indicated that the students did not have sufficient knowledge and/or false knowledge of some particular grammar. This was what Corder (1981) regarded as errors. The students might know how to use a certain tense or get a wrong idea about it. This fact could be seen in the following erroneous sentences, ‘The weather was mostly *cloud*\*.’ and ‘I am very *scare*\* to see blood.’ which were written by one student, showing that he lacked knowledge on the endings of adjectives. He might know some other adjective endings, but not –ed ending to form adjectives.

Some errors showed that the students did what Corder (1981) called mistakes and not errors due to their carelessness. Thus the students learning English as a foreign language committed both errors and mistakes. In addition, they tend to associate and use the Indonesian grammatical patterns to write in English. This corroborated the theory of Contrastive Analysis (Fries, 1945) which stated that where the two languages differ,

errors would emerge, and this prediction could be tested against the acquisition data.

The results of this study corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous works in this field. A study by Yahya et.al (2012) found eleven categories of errors found to be most common which concerned articles, possessives, prepositions, pronouns, singular/plural, subject-verb agreement, verbs, infinitive “to”, word choice and spelling. Errors involving tenses are seen to have the highest percentage, 34.4% from the overall percentage of errors made in all eleven categories. Also, the findings of the current study were similar to those of Darus (2009) who investigated an error analysis research in Malaysia and the results of the study showed that six most common errors committed by the participants were singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, subject-verb agreement and word order.

Concerning the source of errors, the most common source of errors in the current study were intra-lingual and developmental errors. This finding confirmed the reasons for the students’ difficulties since the intra-lingual errors might reflect general characteristics of the rule learning of the students such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which the rules should be applied. The developmental errors occurred when the students attempted to build up hypothesis of English on the basis of the students’ limited experiences. Another common source of the errors was interference errors when the students used elements from the Indonesian language as the students’ native language while writing English. These findings were related to what Richards (1977) distinguished as three sources of errors: interference, intra-lingual, and developmental errors.

Two other sources of errors found in the present study were communication strategies and context of learning. The communicative strategies contributed to the errors since the students consciously used a certain verbal mechanism for communicating an idea when linguistic forms

are not available to the students for some reasons. The errors attributed by context of learning were errors resulted from being misled by the way in which the teachers give definitions, examples, explanations and arrange practice opportunities. These findings were also in line with Brown (1980) classification of sources of errors.

These errors could give information about how English was learned since they reflected the learner internal constructs, which for Selinker constituted an independent language system called *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972), and the amount of knowledge a learner has of a language. The positive contributions of the students' errors to the improved teaching and learning of English as a foreign language are in line with what Ellis (1985) stated in that "the most significant contribution of error analysis lies in its success in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process." The students' errors serve as a source of information on which the teacher relies to modify his teaching procedures or materials, the pace of the progress, and the amount of practice.

In addition, the sources of the errors were more or less identical but their maximum and minimum were various, which can be the consequence of a lot of variables, like different contexts, levels, the students' first language and so forth.

The findings of the present study supported the findings of Hariri (2012) that there were four sources of the students' errors. They were the four sources of errors: inter-lingual, intra-lingual and developmental, context of learning and communication strategies. Also, the findings were consistent with those of Safraz (2011) that the mother tongue interference was the most common source.

Finally, the current study has provided an insight into language learning problems which occur when the English language learners internalize the rules of target language, i.e. English, in its production at a particular point resulting into errors in an unknown and a more natural way.

These errors serve as a useful guide for English teachers to design an effective curriculum for teaching and learning of English as a second language.

## CONCLUSION

The errors suggest that the students have not yet fully mastered the rules of the English language they had learnt. The errors are inevitable in any learning situation which requires creativity such as in learning a second or foreign language such as English in this instance, in particular in the students' narrative writing. The errors show that the students still have a lot of problems related to grammar in their attempt to express the intended meaning in English.

In conclusion, the errors made by the students in this study can be summarized below. First, errors that reflect the rules or forms might be caused by several factors:

1. They still had limited mastery in the target language, i.e. English.
2. They consciously used strategy of word-for-word translation. They switched into their native language and translated the identical forms in English.
3. They tried to reduce their learning burden by relying on themselves to state what they had already known, i.e. their native language.
4. They used over extension of analogy but they misused vocabulary items which share semantic feature.
5. It was obvious that the students' linguistic knowledge of the target language, i.e. English was insufficient.
6. The acquired English vocabulary and grammatical rules were quite limited;
7. In coping with the inherent complexity of the target language (English), they relied on what they had already known about the language (overgeneralization);



8. They incompletely applied the rules of English they had already mastered;
9. They were careless especially when writing long and complex sentences; and
10. They seemed to be forced to express meanings beyond their linguistic knowledge.

These findings provide an important source of information about the students' knowledge of English that shows what they still have to learn and which have caused them learning problems. The teachers should develop more materials aimed at facilitating the English learning. Regarding the students' native language interference, the teachers should include the comparison of native and foreign language and culture since the students based their English learning (L2) on the grounds of the previous one, i.e. Indonesian (L1).

### **Suggestion**

The types of the grammatical errors and their sources or causes provide insights into the students' learning strategies in writing their narrative essays. Eventually, this can contribute to ongoing developments and documentations of learner's profiles and the appreciation and evaluation of discourse and linguistic practices that are reflected in the written compositions of the students. They also provide insights on how English can be more effectively used and learned and how the existing methods of teaching and learning can be improved.

Regarding the grammatical errors made by the students, there are a number of important changes which need to be made. Thus, the findings offer the following suggestions:

1. To improve the students' grammar mastery, the teachers should conduct a diagnostic teaching to identify the causes affecting the student abilities and prescribe requisite learning activities. The teachers may employ direct instruction and individualized practice in

teaching grammar. For the direct instruction, the teachers may use student and literary examples as texts, simple **sentence diagramming**, sentence combining, error analysis, sentence manipulation, and sentence dictation activities. For the individualized practice, the students may do remedial grammar worksheets containing the parts of a sentence, the function of these parts (such as the parts of speech), the arrangement of words with the sentence, and word choice. Also, the students may have guided practice to help them in the grammar skills and rules they have not mastered and to have their self-correction.

2. After the students have retained the grammar skills and rules, they may apply them in the context of authentic writing, not in isolation, in particular their own narrative writing.

Finally, errors could therefore be analyzed to provide useful feedback in helping L2 learners acquire a certain level of linguistic or grammatical competence in the L2. At the same time, studying learner errors involves approaching learning more closely. This would enable teachers to promote appropriate teaching method for their students. It is by understanding the nature of the students' language that the teachers can better explain it and handle it. Teaching an L2 demands an effort of continuous search, but it is such a passionate task that all efforts are worth it.

It is recommended that further research be undertaken in the following areas:

1. Since many errors in tense usage are found in this study, especially in verb forms, it would be beneficial to conduct more research in these areas to find out more about the students' English writing.
2. Some future studies must consider more accurate and more varied data elicitation techniques, increased number of data and more precise categorization of errors for more generalizability and refinement of the findings. It was observed that some errors can be diagnosed with two

or more causes requiring not just the evaluation of the linguistic context but also the pragmatic context of the errors.

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