

Grammatical Errors in Students' Descriptive Writing and Implications for English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Writing descriptive texts requires students to express ideas accurately and apply appropriate grammatical rules. However, grammatical errors remain a common problem among EFL learners, particularly at the junior high school level. Although previous studies have examined grammatical errors in descriptive writing, limited attention has been given to how specific error patterns can inform grammar instruction. This study aimed to identify grammatical errors in students' descriptive writing, determine the dominant error type, and examine their implications for English teaching. A descriptive qualitative design using error analysis was employed. The participants were 30 seventh-grade students of SMP Negeri 18 Surakarta. Data were collected from two descriptive writing tasks, My Best Friend and My Favorite Teacher, supported by interviews. The analysis identified 167 grammatical errors, of which 73.1% were omission errors and 26.9% were misinformation errors, while no addition or misordering errors were found. The predominance of omission errors indicates that students particularly needed support in recognizing and producing required grammatical elements in descriptive sentences. These findings are significant for EFL teachers because they provide an evidence-based basis for prioritizing explicit instruction on frequently omitted grammatical elements, contextualized writing practice, and continuous corrective feedback. Addressing these patterns may help teachers target students' specific grammatical difficulties rather than relying on general grammar instruction.

Keywords: *Descriptive Writing, Error Analysis, Grammatical Errors, EFL Learners, English Language Teaching*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most challenging aspects of language learning because it requires learners to coordinate linguistic knowledge and cognitive processes simultaneously. Unlike spoken communication, written texts provide limited opportunities for immediate clarification or negotiation of meaning, making grammatical accuracy particularly important for conveying ideas clearly. Brown (2007) notes that writing involves a series of processes, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing, in which grammatical accuracy contributes to the effectiveness and clarity of the final text. For EFL learners, particularly those at the beginning stages of language development, grammatical competence is therefore an essential component of successful writing. Adequate grammatical knowledge enables learners to organize and express their ideas accurately while reducing ambiguity and misunderstanding in written communication. Consequently, developing grammatical competence remains an important objective of English language instruction, especially at the early stages of EFL learning.

Descriptive text is one of the text types introduced to Grade Seven students in the Indonesian English curriculum. It provides learners with opportunities to describe particular people, animals, places, and objects by presenting their characteristics and distinctive features. According to Anderson & Anderson (1997), descriptive texts are used to describe particular people, places, or things through their characteristics. Producing descriptive texts also requires learners to apply several grammatical features, including the simple present tense, linking verbs, pronouns, adjectives, nouns, articles, and adverbs. Because these grammatical features

are closely related to the organization and linguistic characteristics of descriptive texts, descriptive writing provides a relevant context for examining students' grammatical competence. Analyzing students' errors in this type of writing can therefore reveal specific grammatical difficulties and pro

Although descriptive texts have rather easy features, Indonesian students who learn English as a foreign language still have problems in grammar when writing such texts. They do not include important grammatical structures, use verbs incorrectly, and show incorrect subject-verb agreement. These factors affect the readability of learners' texts and prove that grammatical knowledge is not developed enough. Grammatical errors made by learners are not accidental errors but part of learners' interlanguage and attempts to create English grammar systems.

Error Analysis is considered an efficient method of studying language acquisition in learners. As stated by (Corder, 1981), learners' errors play an important role in the analysis of language acquisition since they are able to show how learners create hypotheses about the target language. Furthermore, Dulay et al. (1982) suggested the Surface Strategy Taxonomy that includes four groups of grammatical errors: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The suggested taxonomy can help identify systematic errors and see in what areas learners have the most grammatical problems.

Several previous studies have analyzed grammatical errors in descriptive writing in the context of Indonesian EFL teaching. For instance, (Laili, 2022) analyzed the grammatical errors generated by seventh-grade learners and revealed that misformation was the dominant error type, implying that learners tended to choose the wrong grammatical structure even though they understood the sentence structure well. Moreover, recent studies have shown that the issue of grammatical errors still remains relevant in the process of EFL writing. Thus, for example, Sipayung & Benarita (2023) noted that university students made various types of grammatical errors in descriptive writing, with tense errors being the most common category. This finding proves that learners still face difficulties in using the appropriate grammatical structures even though they have already studied the basic rules. In addition, (Maharani, 2023) pointed out that the learners often experienced difficulties in verb forms, subject-verb agreement, and sentences structures while writing descriptively. In yet another study, (Prayuda et al., 2023) revealed that the mistakes in writing were linked to parts of speech, especially to nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs. This proves that poor knowledge of grammar seriously influences the writing process.

Despite the successful identification of different grammatical errors made in descriptive writing (Laili, 2022; Maharani, 2023; Sipayung & Benarita, 2023), these pieces of research mostly concentrated on categorizing the grammatical errors and counting their frequency. Not much has been done regarding interpretation of these grammatical errors and finding out what they mean for classroom practice and grammar teaching. In addition, not many works have considered the pedagogical implications of these grammatical errors for junior high school EFL learners. Hence, this study not only aims to analyze the error patterns, but also interprets their pedagogical implications for English language teaching by analyzing two representative descriptive writings written by seventh-grade students.

The current study seeks to address this research gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of grammatical errors in two representative descriptive writing tasks, *My Best Friend* and *My Favorite Teacher*, produced by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 18 Surakarta. Rather than merely categorizing the errors, the study also explores their possible causes through interviews and examines their implications for English language teaching. Accordingly, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What types of grammatical errors are found in students' descriptive writing? (2) Which type of grammatical error occurs most frequently? and (3) What are the implications of these grammatical errors for English language teaching?

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design using an Error Analysis approach to examine grammatical errors in students' descriptive writing. This design was appropriate because the study focused on identifying, classifying, and interpreting errors in students' written production rather than measuring the effects of an intervention or testing a predetermined hypothesis. Qualitative research enables researchers to explore and interpret patterns and meanings within naturally occurring data (Creswell, 2009). Error Analysis was adopted as the primary analytical framework because it provides a systematic procedure for identifying, classifying, and interpreting learners' errors and for exploring possible sources of their grammatical difficulties (Corder, 1981).

Respondents

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 18 Surakarta during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of 30 seventh-grade students from Class VII F. The class was selected because the students had completed the instructional unit on descriptive texts and had been introduced to the grammatical features commonly required in descriptive writing. These features include the simple present tense, linking verbs, subject-verb agreement, pronouns, articles, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.

Instruments

Three instruments were employed to collect the data: a writing test, interviews, and documentation. The primary instrument was a grammatical writing test consisting of two descriptive texts, namely *My Best Friend* and *My Favorite Teacher*. These two texts were deliberately selected because they represent the fundamental grammatical structures expected at the seventh-grade level and provide sufficient opportunities for students to demonstrate their grammatical competence in descriptive writing. Creswell (2009) notes that written documents and participants' responses can provide valuable qualitative data for understanding a research phenomenon. The analysis focused on students' use of simple present tense, verbs, linking verbs, pronouns, articles, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, which are the principal grammatical components of descriptive texts.

To support the findings from the writing test, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher and several students. The interviews aimed to obtain additional information regarding the grammatical difficulties experienced by students and the instructional practices implemented during English lessons. Documentation, including students' written work and instructional materials, was also collected to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Procedures

Data collection was carried out in three stages. First, students completed the descriptive writing tasks individually during classroom instruction. Their written texts were collected as the primary source of data. Second, the researcher reviewed each student's writing and identified grammatical errors based on the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by (Dulay et al., 1982). Third, interviews with the English teacher and selected students were conducted to explore possible factors contributing to the occurrence of grammatical errors.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was carried out according to the process of Error Analysis suggested by (Corder, 1981), which includes the identification of grammatical errors, classification of the errors, description of the frequencies of error types, determination of the reasons for the errors, and interpretation of results. Grammatical errors were classified into four categories using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy created by (Dulay et al., 1982). There are omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

After all errors had been classified, the frequency and percentage of each error type were calculated to determine the dominant error. The percentage was calculated using Corder's formula:

$$P = \frac{N_1}{\Sigma N} \times 100\%$$

Where P is the percentage of each error type, N_1 is the frequency of a certain error type and ΣN is the total frequency of the errors. The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using the interactive method proposed by (Miles et al., 2014). This method includes data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions. Then the findings from the interviews were incorporated into the findings of grammatical analysis to explain the factors contributing to students' grammatical errors and to formulate implications for English language teaching.

Trustworthiness

In order to improve the credibility of results, data triangulation technique was used, which consisted of analyzing data obtained through students' written samples, as well as interviewing the English teacher and students themselves. Multiple sources of data helped the researcher confirm the reliability of the results and gain more insight into grammatical problems of students in descriptive writing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to identify the types of grammatical errors found in seventh-grade students' descriptive writing, determine the dominant error type, and discuss the implications of the findings for English language teaching. The analysis was conducted on two descriptive writing tasks, namely *My Best Friend* and *My Favorite Teacher*. Students' grammatical errors were classified according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by (Dulay et al., 1982), consisting of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

Grammatical Errors in *My Best Friend*

The first descriptive writing task, *My Best Friend*, produced a total of 91 grammatical errors. Among the four categories of the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, only omission and misformation errors were identified. No addition or misordering errors were found.

Table 1. Types of Grammatical Errors in *My Best Friend*

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	68	74.7%
Misformation	23	25.3%
Addition	0	0%
Misordering	0	0%
Total	91	100%

The findings indicate that omission was the most frequent grammatical error in students' writing. Most students omitted obligatory grammatical elements such as the third-person singular marker *-s*, linking verbs (*is* and *are*), and articles (*a* and *an*). These errors suggest that although students were able to generate ideas and organize simple descriptions, they still experienced considerable difficulty applying English grammatical rules consistently. For example, several students wrote:

My best friend very kind.

The sentence omits the linking verb *is*, resulting in an incomplete English sentence. The correct form is:

My best friend is very kind.

Another common example was:

She like reading books.

The omission of the *-s* marker in the verb *likes* indicates difficulty in applying subject-verb agreement in the simple present tense.

These findings demonstrate that students tended to transfer Indonesian sentence patterns into English. Since nominal sentences in Indonesian do not require linking verbs and verbs do not change according to the subject, students frequently omitted grammatical elements that are obligatory in English.

The second category identified was misformation. Although less frequent than omission, these errors indicate that students attempted to apply grammatical rules but selected inappropriate forms. Typical examples included the misuse of auxiliary verbs, pronouns, and verb forms.

For instance,
She have long black hair.
 should be written as
She has long black hair.

This error shows that students recognized the need for a verb but had not yet mastered subject-verb agreement.

Grammatical Errors in *My Favorite Teacher*

The second writing task, *My Favorite Teacher*, produced 76 grammatical errors. Similar to the first text, only omission and misformation errors were identified.

Table 2. Types of Grammatical Errors in *My Favorite Teacher*

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	54	71.1%
Misformation	22	28.9%
Addition	0	0%
Misordering	0	0%
Total	76	100%

The results reveal a pattern similar to that found in *My Best Friend*. Omission remained the dominant error type, particularly involving linking verbs, auxiliary verbs, and third-person singular verb endings.

One example is:

My teacher very patient.

The omission of *is* indicates that students continued to rely on Indonesian sentence structures, where a copular verb is unnecessary. Another frequently occurring error was:

She teach English every day.

The correct sentence should read:

She teaches English every day.

The omission of the *-es* ending reflects students' limited understanding of subject-verb agreement in the simple present tense.

Misformation errors were also identified. Students frequently selected incorrect grammatical forms despite recognizing that a grammatical element was required. Examples included the misuse of *has* and *have*, inappropriate pronouns, and incorrect adjective-adverb forms.

Overall, the findings from both writing tasks demonstrate consistent grammatical difficulties, suggesting that students had not yet fully internalized basic English grammatical structures required for descriptive writing.

Distribution of Grammatical Errors

A total of 167 grammatical errors were identified across the two descriptive writing tasks.

Table 3. Distribution of Grammatical Errors

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	122	73.1%
Misformation	45	26.9%
Addition	0	0%
Misordering	0	0%
Total	167	100%

The predominance of omission errors indicates that students experienced greater difficulty supplying obligatory grammatical elements than selecting appropriate grammatical forms. This finding suggests that the grammatical features absent from Indonesian, such as linking verbs and subject-verb agreement markers, continue to present significant challenges for beginning EFL learners.

The absence of addition and misordering errors also indicates that students rarely inserted unnecessary grammatical elements or arranged sentence components incorrectly. Instead, their grammatical difficulties were concentrated on incomplete sentence construction and inaccurate grammatical forms.

Discussion

The findings revealed that omission was the most dominant grammatical error, accounting for 73.1% of the total errors, while misformation constituted 26.9%. No addition or misordering errors were identified in the students' descriptive writing. These findings indicate that seventh-grade students experienced greater difficulty supplying obligatory grammatical elements than selecting appropriate grammatical forms. Such a pattern reflects learners' incomplete mastery of basic English grammar, particularly in the use of linking verbs, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verbs, and articles.

The predominance of omission errors suggests that students were generally able to express their ideas but frequently failed to include grammatical elements that are obligatory in English sentence construction. The omission of linking verbs, third-person singular verb endings, and articles demonstrates that students had not yet fully internalized English grammatical rules. According to [Dulay et al. \(1982\)](#), omission errors commonly occur among beginning language learners because they tend to simplify grammatical structures by excluding linguistic features that are absent or less salient in their first language. This explanation is consistent with the present findings, where many students omitted grammatical markers that do not exist in Indonesian.

The findings also support [\(Corder, 1981\)](#) view that learners' errors should not merely be regarded as failures but as evidence of language development. The errors identified in this study indicate that students were actively constructing their interlanguage system while attempting to apply English grammatical rules. Rather than reflecting carelessness, omission and misformation errors illustrate learners' transitional stage of language acquisition, in which grammatical competence is still developing through continuous exposure and practice.

The interview findings further suggest that students' grammatical errors were influenced by three interrelated factors: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, and the learning context. Interlingual transfer was evident when students directly translated Indonesian sentence patterns into English, particularly by omitting linking verbs and subject-verb agreement markers. Since Indonesian nominal sentences do not require copular verbs and verbs do not change according to the subject, learners frequently transferred these grammatical characteristics into English writing. In addition, intralingual transfer contributed to students' confusion regarding grammatical rules, especially in distinguishing between *has* and *have*, selecting appropriate verb forms, and applying subject-verb agreement correctly.

Classroom factors, including limited grammar practice and insufficient corrective feedback, also appeared to reinforce these difficulties.

The present findings differ from those reported by (Laili, 2022), who identified misformation as the most dominant grammatical error in seventh-grade students' descriptive writing. While both studies investigated grammatical errors in descriptive texts at the junior high school level, the dominant error categories were different. One possible explanation is the difference in instructional contexts, students' grammatical proficiency, and the writing tasks analyzed. In the present study, omission errors occurred more frequently because students tended to exclude obligatory grammatical elements rather than substitute incorrect forms. Nevertheless, both studies consistently demonstrate that students continue to experience considerable grammatical difficulties when composing descriptive texts.

The present findings are also partially consistent with Sipayung and Benarita, (2023), who found that students continued to experience considerable grammatical difficulties in descriptive writing. Although their study identified tense errors as the dominant category, both studies demonstrate that learners still struggle to apply grammatical rules consistently in writing. The difference in dominant error categories may be attributed to differences in participants, educational levels, and analytical frameworks.

Likewise, Prayuda et al. (2023) emphasized that grammatical errors in students' writing were closely related to weaknesses in parts of speech, particularly nouns, verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. This finding supports the present study, in which omission and misformation frequently involved incorrect verb forms, linking verbs, and pronouns. Together, these studies indicate that improving students' grammatical competence requires continuous integration of grammar instruction with writing practice.

In summary, the study findings clearly suggest that grammatical competence is still one of the biggest problems facing beginning English language learners. The students generally knew what information they wanted to convey, but had problems in conveying their ideas using English sentences that are grammatically correct. Therefore, while teaching grammar, emphasis should be placed on not just memorizing the rules, but also applying them practically.

Implications for English Language Teaching

The consistency of findings across previous studies and the present research suggests that grammar instruction should move beyond isolated rule explanation toward contextualized writing activities. Since omission and misformation errors repeatedly occur in descriptive writing, teachers should integrate grammar instruction into the writing process through guided practice, feedback, and revision. Such an approach enables students to apply grammatical knowledge meaningfully while gradually improving their writing accuracy (Schenck, 2019; Spada & Lightbown, 2008). The findings of this study have several important implications for English language teaching, particularly at the junior high school level. Since omission errors were found to be substantially more frequent than other error types, English teachers should place greater emphasis on grammatical elements that are obligatory in English but absent in Indonesian. Classroom instruction should explicitly address the use of linking verbs, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verbs, articles, and verb inflections through contextualized examples rather than isolated rule explanations (Mustafa & Al Bajalani, 2024).

In addition, grammar instruction should be integrated into writing activities instead of being taught separately. Students should be encouraged to practice constructing descriptive texts while simultaneously applying grammatical rules in meaningful contexts. Guided writing tasks, sentence-combining activities, and collaborative writing can help learners develop greater awareness of grammatical accuracy while maintaining their ability to express ideas effectively (Mujtaba, 2023).

Corrective feedback should also become an integral component of writing instruction. Rather than merely indicating that a sentence is incorrect, teachers should explain why the error occurs and encourage students to revise their own writing. This process can help learners recognize recurring grammatical patterns and gradually improve their self-editing skills

(Kang, 2022; Kang & Han, 2015). Peer review activities may further reinforce grammatical awareness by allowing students to identify and discuss errors collaboratively (Vuogan & Li, 2023).

Finally, the findings suggest that grammatical errors should be viewed as valuable diagnostic information rather than indicators of learning failure. By systematically analyzing students' errors, teachers can identify the grammatical areas that require additional instructional support and design targeted learning activities that respond directly to learners' needs. In this way, error analysis can function not only as a research tool but also as an effective strategy for improving grammar instruction and students' writing proficiency in EFL classrooms.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated grammatical errors in descriptive texts written by seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 18 Surakarta. Analysis of two writing tasks, My Best Friend and My Favorite Teacher, identified 167 errors based on Dulay et al.'s (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, comprising 122 omission errors (73.1%) and 45 misformation errors (26.9%), with no addition or misordering errors. Omission errors predominated, particularly involving linking verbs, subject-verb agreement markers, auxiliary verbs, and articles, indicating difficulties in applying obligatory grammatical elements. Although students could generally communicate their ideas, grammatical inaccuracies affected sentence accuracy and may have reflected incomplete rule mastery, interlingual influence, and limited writing practice. These findings highlight the importance of integrating grammar instruction with writing through explicit teaching, contextualized practice, guided writing, and continuous corrective feedback. Teachers should use error patterns diagnostically to address students' specific grammatical needs. Future research should examine diverse genres, educational levels, and instructional strategies with larger participant groups to improve grammatical accuracy and writing performance.

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