

## GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN INDONESIAN-ACEHNESE EFL LEARNERS' DESCRIPTIVE ESSAYS

Zulfikar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Department of English Language Education, STAIN Mandailing Natal, Indonesia)  
Cross ponding author: zulfikar@stain-madina.ac.id

### **Abstract**

*This study was carried out to analyze the types and the sources of grammatical errors encountered in Acehnese EFL learners' essays. It focused on finding out the most dominant type of errors and the most plausible explanation for the source of errors the students made in their writing. Twenty (20) learner's essays were collected to be analyzed by referring to Azar's error classification as well as Richard's theory on learners' sources of the errors. The results showed that the most frequent type of errors in the learners' essays were incomplete sentences and verb tenses, making up more than a third (36.7%) of the total 392 errors. The findings also showed intralingual errors are the major causes of the learners' grammatical errors, followed by interference errors and developmental errors respectively. The findings suggest that in teaching essay writing, teachers of Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners need to adopt and devise more appropriate techniques in both grammar and writing instructions, focusing on complete sentence structure and tenses in order to minimize the possible errors made by the learners in their writing.*

**Keywords:** *grammatical errors, error classification, sources of errors, intralingual errors, developmental errors*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Among the four English skills, writing has long been considered such a difficult skill to acquire that, oftentimes, even most native speakers fail to produce a decent piece of writing (Javed et al., 2013). Accordingly, writing is not an easy task for EFL learners and it may require them to have an extensive learning and practice to produce a good piece of writing (Zulfikar & Aulia, 2020). Not only do writers need to display their compositional skill to organize ideas, but they also have to possess the grammatical skill needed to construct meaningful sentences. Indeed, mastery of grammar plays an important role in one's writing, and it undoubtedly affects his or her writing. As grammar prescribes the ways in which words can alter their forms and can be assembled into clauses (Harmer, 2015), grammatical competence is essential in constructing well-formed phrases and sentences. In fact, studies have consistently shown that there is a significant correlation between learners' grammar mastery and their writing skill (Etfita, 2019; Istiqomah et al., 2014; Kurniawan, 2017; Muhyidin, 2020; Santosa, 2017). In other words, the better a learner grammatical competence is, the better his or her writing will be.

Even though ESL learners are taught grammar much more than any other language aspects (Singh et al., 2017), they are still prone to making grammatical errors in their writing. Unlike mistakes, which can be self-corrected by learners when pointed out, errors are the part of learning process, and learners are normally unaware of the errors they have made in their speech or writing (Amara, 2018). Therefore, several studies have been conducted to investigate common errors EFL learners make in using English grammar. These studies, referred to as *error analyses*, attempted to examine inappropriate forms produced by language learners (Crystal, 1999, as cited in Seitova, 2016).

Sukasame et al. (2014) in their study of grammatical errors in learning English tenses found that most EFL learners committed grammatical errors in their use of Past Perfect Tense. Seitova (2016) studied the language errors among Kazakh and Russian EFL learners and found the learners most frequently committed errors in seven areas; pluralization, subject-verb agreement, articles, word choice, prepositions, spelling, and verb form. In their investigation of differences in the error rates between L1 and L2 students, Wilcox et al. (2014) highlighted that L2 writers had substantially higher margins of errors than L1 writers, particularly in the areas of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. In addition, Huda and Wuda (2019) in their analysis of the grammatical errors high-school EFL learners make in writing concluded that the most dominant type of errors made by the learners was error in verb form. They argued that this type of error occurred mainly due to the interference of the learners' L1. Similar findings were also reported by Abbasi and Karimnia (2019) who, in their study of junior and senior Iranian EFL learners' grammatical errors, revealed that most of the errors fall into the category of interlingual errors. Furthermore, in a similar study in a different Indonesian high school, Floranti and Adiantika (2019) reported that verb formation was indeed the area where EFL learners commit most errors. However, they argued that this type of error was caused by the learners' failure to understand, identify and comply with the laws of L2 and their restrictions.

A number of studies that attempted to explain the causes of the errors in EFL writing have also been conducted. Salima (2012), in her study of Algerian EFL learners' errors in English writing, reported out that among the major causes of the errors are learners' poor mastery of grammar rules, lack of concentration, and lack of practice. Her findings were reiterated by Sermsook et al. (2017), who, in their analysis of the sources of errors in Thai EFL learners' writing, identified six major sources of errors, namely interlingual interference, intralingual interference, negative transfer of L1, poor mastery of grammar and vocabulary, as well as carelessness. In another study, Sijono and Aristo (2019) also reported that negative transfer of EFL learners' L1 was also identified as the main cause of errors found in descriptive texts produced by high school EFL learners. Similar

findings were also reported by Khatter (2019) who conducted an exploration on the sources underlying the most common errors in Saudi female EFL learners' writing and subsequently established that interlingual and intralingual transfer were the two major causes of the errors.

Nevertheless, errors are beneficial to not only learners and teachers, but also researchers (Sermsook et al., 2017). For teachers, errors serve as proofs of learners' advancement in learning, and they can aid in the selection and adoption of suitable approaches, techniques and methods to help learners perform better. For learners, errors can function as resources to identify their areas of strengths and weaknesses. As for researchers, errors offer data of language learning and acquisition processes. To reap these benefits, *error analysis*, in which researchers and teachers collect samples of learners' language, identify the errors in the samples, categorize them based on their types and causes, and assess their significance, is necessary (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012).

Despite the many studies already carried out on the analysis of EFL grammatical errors, research on the senior Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners at the university level has not yet been reported. Therefore, assuming that the types and sources of grammatical errors are distinctive to many factors including learners' current linguistic knowledge and their L1, this study aims at filling the gap by analyzing the types and sources of grammatical errors found in descriptive essays submitted by Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners who had completed their four compulsory courses in grammar consisting of *Basic Grammar*, *Intermediate Grammar*, *Advanced Grammar* as well as *Grammar and Communication* respectively in the span of four semesters (two years). It is hoped that the findings of this study could provide a new perspective in the area of EFL writing error analysis, and give useful insights for EFL teachers and syllabus designers tasked with teaching English grammar and writing material or curriculum development.

### **Classification of Errors**

According to Dulay et al. (1982), errors can be categorized into six types based on their features, namely omission of grammatical morphemes, double marking of semantic features, use of irregular rules, incorrect word forms, alternating use of two or more forms, and misordering. Keshavars (1994, as cited in Abbasi & Karimnia, 2019) classified errors into syntactical morphological errors and lexical-semantic errors. Syntactical morphological errors include errors in the use of prepositions, articles, plural morphemes, qualifier and intensifier, as well as typical L1 sentence in L2 construction. Lexical-semantic errors, on the other hand, include cross association and language switch. Additionally, James (1998) divided errors into substance errors (capitalization, punctuation, and spelling), lexical errors (word formation and word selection), syntactic errors (coordination/subordination, sentence structure and ordering), semantic errors

(ambiguous communication and miscommunication), and grammatical errors (adjectives, adverbs, articles, nouns, possession, pronouns, preposition and verbs).

This study employed error classification as proposed by Azar (2009), who categorized learners' errors based on how they should be corrected. This classification is illustrated as follows:

*Table.1. Azar's grammatical error classification*

<b>Types</b>	<b>Example</b>
a) Singular-plural	<i>He <u>have</u> been here for six months.</i>
b) Word form	<i>I saw a <u>beauty</u> picture.</i>
c) Word choice	<i>She got <u>on</u> the taxi.</i>
d) Verb tense	<i>He <u>is</u> here since June.</i>
e) Omission	<i>I <u>want go</u> to the zoo.</i>
f) Addition	<i>She entered <u>to</u> the university.</i>
g) Word order	<i>I saw <u>five times</u> that movie.</i>
h) Incomplete sentence	<i><u>Because</u> I was tired.</i>
i) Spelling	<i>An accident <u>occured</u>.</i>
j) Punctuation	<i>What did he <u>say</u>.</i>
k) Capitalization	<i>I am studying <u>english</u>.</i>
l) Article	<i>I had <u>a</u> accident.</i>
m) Unclear meaning	<i>He borrowed some smoke.</i>
n) Run-on sentence	<i>It's <u>raining we</u> need an umbrella.</i>

### Sources of Errors

Investigation of sources of errors is regarded as an essential feature of an error analysis process (Abbasi & Karimnia, 2011). It assists language researcher in observing and making sense of the process of second language learning and acquisition. It also helps teachers in making a calculated decision on the need to provide remedial instruction for their learners (Irawansyah, 2017). In addition, it allows teachers to focus their instruction on the recurring errors among their learners as an early prevention for error fossilization (Fauziati, 2011).

According to Richards (1975), errors made by learners are mainly caused by *interference errors*, *intralingual errors*, and *developmental errors*. Interference errors occur when the forms of a learners' L1 are different from those of L2. In this case, learners tend to construct sentences by literally translating from their L1 without conveying the sense of the original text. In other words, they produce L2 sentences by using their L1 grammar rules. Intralingual errors predominantly occur because of

learners' incomplete knowledge of L2, incomplete application of grammar rules, or failure to identify which rules they should use in a certain condition (Brown, 2014). For instance, an EFL learner will probably write "She is walks" because he or she confuses Simple Present Tense rules with Present Continuous Tense rules. Furthermore, developmental errors reflect learners' current competence of linguistic features of a language. They often take place when learners try to develop a hypothesis about L2 on the basis of their incomplete knowledge and experiences (Heydari & Bagheri, 2012). For example, a learner incorrectly uses singular or plural verbs (as in "*He walk slowly*"), the ~ed morpheme for an irregular verb ending (as in "*He catched the ball*"), and negation (as in "*He not like reading*").

## METHODOLOGY

This study used descriptive qualitative method to identify common patterns, behaviors, or concepts, involving not only an inductive examination of the data but also a description and an interpretation of those classifications (Nassaji, 2015). This research employed document analysis (Burns, 1999) by adapting the procedure of error analysis, which consists of sample collection, identification of errors in the samples, description of the errors, and evaluation of the errors. The population of this study is the fourth-year Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners of Ar-Raniry State Islamic University, Banda Aceh. These learners had completed four grammar courses consisting of *Basic Grammar*, *Intermediate Grammar*, *Advanced Grammar* as well as *Grammar and Communication* in the span of two years of study.

The stages performed to investigate the most common errors and the sources of the errors in the Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners' essays were as follows:

*Table.2. Stages of error analysis of learners' essays*

<b>Procedure</b>	<b>Example</b>
Stage 1	20 learners' written assignment were collected
Stage 2	Their writing was examined and the errors and mistakes were underlined by the researcher
Stage 3	The errors were categorized based on Azar's (2009) error classification and their frequencies were calculated
Stage 4	The causes of errors were analyzed using Richards's (1975) theory

## RESULT/FINDINGS

The types of grammatical errors found in Acehnese EFL learners' essays were described in the table below:

*Table.3. Types of grammatical errors in Acehnese EFL learners' essays*

<b>Error Types</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
a) Singular-plural	37	9.4%
b) Word form	36	9.1%
c) Word choice	26	6.7%
d) Verb tense	64	16.3%
e) Omission	19	4.8%
f) Addition	13	3.3%
g) Word order	10	2.5%
h) Incomplete sentence	80	20.4%
i) Spelling	10	2.5%
j) Punctuation	5	1.3%
k) Capitalization	33	8.4%
l) Article	6	1.5%
m) Unclear meaning	14	3.6%
n) Run-on sentence	39	9.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 shows that incomplete sentences are the most frequent type of errors in the learners' essays. This type of errors appeared 80 times (20.4%) of the total number of errors. The second most frequent type of errors is verb tense errors, found 64 times (16.3%) of the total errors. These errors occurred mainly due to learners' misuse of verbs in the texts. Since a descriptive essay requires that learners describe something – an object or person, an event, a place, an experience, a situation, etc. – Present Tense should be mainly used in their essays.

Run-on sentence (9.9%), singular-plural (9.4%), word form (9.1%) and capitalization errors respectively are the next most common type of errors with a slight difference in their occurrence frequencies (39, 37, 36, and 33 times respectively). Other types of errors, in order of their percentage, include errors in word choice (6.7%), omission (4.8%), unclear meaning (3.6%), Addition (3.3%), spelling (2.5%) and word order (2.5%), all of which make up less than a quarter (23.4%) of the total number of errors. Finally, article and punctuation errors were the least frequent type of errors, amounting to only 2.8% of the total errors, with the former slightly higher in frequency than the latter.

The sources of grammatical errors in Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners' essays are shown in the table below:

Table.4. Causes of grammatical errors in Acehnese EFL learners' essays

Sources of Error	Frequency	Percentages
a) Interference errors	95	24.2%
b) Intralingual errors	252	64.2%
c) Developmental errors	45	11.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100%</b>

The findings show that of the three sources of grammatical errors in the learners' essays, intralingual errors were strikingly the chief cause of errors, occurring 80 times or making up almost two third (64.2%) of the total 392 errors encountered. These errors mostly include errors in singular-plural, run-on-sentences, and punctuation errors. Intralingual errors in the learners' essays are exemplified by:

[1] \**You can taste it in other place in Aceh.*

[2] \**Kindergarten are usually not required for children in some countries, one of them is Indonesia.*

[3] \* *Students will be equipped with three basic aspects, such as. knowledge, attitudes, and skills.*

In sentence [1], one learner erroneously used singular noun *place* after the adjective *other*. The learner in this case incorrectly used a prepositional phrase in the place of a subject. In [2] the learner improperly connected two (independent) clauses with a comma (comma-splice). In [3], the learners improperly used a period after *such as*.

On the other hand, both interference errors and developmental errors were relatively less significant contributing factors of errors among the learners, amounting to slightly more than a third (35.6%) of the total errors, with the former causing than twice as much errors (95 times or 24.2%) as the latter (45 times or 11.4%). Interference errors in this case include errors in verb tense, word order, word form and word choice, while intralingual errors mostly consist of errors in singular-plural, run-on-sentences, and punctuation.

Interference errors in the learners' essays were exemplified by:

[6] \**This three classes are very enjoyable.*

[7] \**She likes to play piano when I sing.*

[8] \**I obtain information from internet.*

In [6], the rule of Indonesian determiners, which always remain the same when used with either singular or plural nouns, was applied in English sentence. In [7], a learner did not

use a definite article when generalizing about an entire class of musical instruments, and in [8] a learner also did not use a definite article when referring to a specific noun *information* and when using *Internet* as a noun referring to the *network*. This type of errors results from interference of Indonesian grammar, which general does not necessitate the use of such definite article with such nouns.

Furthermore, developmental errors in the learners' essays are exemplified by:

[4] \* *It was helped me to finish many assignments.*

[5] \* *Many of them don't interested in continuing their study.*

In sentence [4], the learner applied passive sentence construction for an active sentence, while in [5], one learner used auxiliary *do* in the place of copula *be*.

## DISCUSSION

All the fourteen types of errors proposed by Azar (1989) occurred in Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners' descriptive essays, with incomplete sentence and verb tense being the two most frequent, followed respectively by run-on sentence, singular-plural, word form, capitalization, word choice, omission, unclear meaning, addition, spelling, word order, article, and punctuation errors. The results of this study were relatively in line with those of the previous studies of ESL learners' grammatical errors (Garrido & Romero, 2012; Nima, 2019; Rahman & Ali, 2015), which reported that tenses were the dominant types of errors among EFL learners' writing. They are also in accordance with the results of Qonitatun's (2016) study, in which she found that incomplete sentences were among the top errors in Indonesian EFL learners' paragraphs. This reasonably similar result might indicate that both ESL and EFL learners share common problems in their usage of English tenses especially in their writing, even though further research might be need to test this assumption. Nevertheless, the findings of this study deviates from that of Sermsook et al.'s (2017) research, which showed that the most frequent type of errors among EFL learners is punctuation. This difference might be attributed the different research methodology and population backgrounds in both studies.

The analysis the sources of the errors was conducted based on Richards' (1975) theory of the sources of errors. The findings showed that intralingual errors were the chief source of errors in Indonesian-Acehnese EFL learners' essays. The findings are in agreement with the results of a number of other studies of grammatical errors in EFL learners' writing (Murtiana, 2019; Phetdannuea & Ngonkum, 2016; Sari, 2016). However, the results contradict Abbasi's and Karimnia's (2011) findings which indicated that interference error is the most possible cause of EFL learners' errors. They also differ from the results of Sorg's (2014) investigation of ESL learners' sources of errors, which

revealed that their source of errors is developmental error. Accordingly, ESL learners might have different sources of errors from EFL learners.

## CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the most common type of grammatical errors in Acehnese-EFL learners' descriptive essays are incomplete sentence and verb tense errors. In connection to the source of errors, this study also proposes that, of the three sources of grammatical errors, intralingual errors are the major source of the errors, thus indicating that the learners made errors due to their inadequate mastery of English grammatical rules.

The findings of this study suggest that even after two-year grammar instruction in four different courses, the learners still displayed difficulties with the use of proper English sentence structure and tenses. This finding should be a cause for alarm, and therefore, it might be wise to revise grammar teaching approaches and resources in light of learners' errors in order to figure out solutions to help them master the use of English sentence structure and tenses. In addition, suitable teaching techniques and approaches should be adopted in teaching essay writing as remedies, with a particular attention given to minimize the two types of errors in their writing.

All things considered, further research is highly suggested to replicate the study in a population of EFL learners with different backgrounds in order to gain different perspective in the issue of learners' grammatical errors. In addition, the writer also recommends that further in-depth studies on error analysis in more specific areas of EFL grammar and writing be conducted as an effort to improve the quality of EFL teaching and learning.

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