

## Error Analysis of Written English Compositions Produced by Pre-Intermediate EFL Learners

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### Abstract

*This study attempts to investigate the errors in a corpus of 26 English compositions written by 13 Indonesian pre-intermediate EFL learners. All the participants in this study are foreign company employers based in Yogyakarta Indonesia who join a short English course held by the company. The instrument used for this study was participants' written composition in English language. All of the errors in these compositions were identified and classified into different categorizations. The results show that the EFL learners in this study committed fifteen errors. These errors are S-V agreement (17.8%), capitalization (16%), article (13.2%), spelling (8.7%), punctuation (7.8%), omission/addition of to be (7.3 %), word choice (6.3%), gerund/infinitive (5.9%), plurality (3.7%), verb tense (3.7%), modal (3.2%), pronoun (2.3%), preposition (1.8%), negative (1.4%), and sentence fragment (0.9%). There is the hope that the paper helps EFL teachers to become familiar with the most frequent errors committed by EFL learners and to adopt appropriate teaching strategies to help the learners learn better.*

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, error analysis, composition, writing

### 1. Introduction

Researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have been interested in examining the performance of learners in the process of acquiring a second language. In this process, learners inevitably make errors, and it is considered normal. Dulay et al. and Gorbet in Mohaghegn et. al. (2011) see errors as an integral part of learning. One of the most practical ways to understand learners' SLA is through the study of learners' errors (Ellis, 1994).

There have been increasingly rapid advances in the field of error analysis. However, research has consistently shown that learners

have not reached an adequate understanding on how to reduce errors in writing. Ulijn and Strother in Sawalmeh (2013) see writing as one of the active or productive skills of language usage. The importance of writing has been raised by English language teaching practitioners. In foreign companies in Indonesia, writing is also considered important for the company's staff. It is needed for writing daily report, writing and replying email messages, taking minutes, and so on. For these reasons, writing has always been an essential aim of teaching English.

Error analysis is said to have two functions, a theoretical function and a practical

function (Corder in Ellis 2008). The former involves investigation of the language learning process and the later is a pedagogical function to achieve a better remedial course for learners and teachers as well. This study is based on the second function given the fact that errors are advantageous for both learners and teachers. Error helps teachers in three ways; 1) to correct their errors 2) to improve their teaching and 3) to focus on those areas that need reinforcement (Al-haysoni in Sawalmeh, 2013).

To gain an understanding of the source and frequencies of errors made by Indonesian ESL learners, the writer proposes the study of errors in written production of English. In this respect, the present study aims to collect an adequate number of writing errors to represent the general trend of errors in the learners' English compositions and to analyze them in a way that is relevant to the practical teaching of writing. The examination is limited into two areas, which are language use and mechanics. For this purpose, the writer has set up the following research question: What are the distributions of errors like in students' English compositions?

Error Analysis is an influential theory of second language acquisition. According to James, as cited in Sawalmeh (2013), EA is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified

errors. Meanwhile, Ellis (2008) is concerned with the use of EA as a tool for investigating how learners acquire an L2. In line with this, Corder in Ellis (2008) noted that errors provided the researcher with evidence of how language was learnt, and also that they served as devices by which the learner discover the rules of the target language (TL).

There are five steps in conducting an EA; collection of a sample of learner language, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors (Corder in Ellis, 2008). One common way to describe errors is using a surface strategy taxonomy of errors which is proposed by Duay, Burt, and Krashen. The error types from this taxonomy include omissions, additions, misinformations, and misorderings. Another taxonomy to describe errors is linguistic strategy which covers lexical errors and grammatical errors.

A number of different sources or causes of errors are identified. Richards in Ellis (2008) distinguishes three causes of errors; interference errors, intralingual errors, and developmental errors. According to Richard, interference errors occur as a result of the use of elements from one language while speaking another. Intralingual errors reflect the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization and incomplete application of rules. Developmental errors occur when the learner attempts to build up hypotheses about the TL on the basis of

limited experience. However, Ellis (2008) stated that most researchers have operated with a general distinction between transfer errors (Richards' Category 1) and intralingual errors (an amalgam of Richards' Category 2 and 3).

Several studies have been carried out to identify the taxonomy of errors in written English produced by speakers of other languages. Mungungu (2010) investigated common English language errors made by Oshiwambo, Afrikaans and Silozi First Language speakers. The study examined errors in a corpus of 360 essays written by 180 participants. The four most common errors committed by the participants were tenses, prepositions, articles and spelling.

A more recent study was conducted by Mohagheh, Zarandi, and Shariati in 2011. This study investigated the frequency of the grammatical errors related to the four categories of preposition, relative pronoun, article, and tense using a translation task. This study showed that the students had the most number of errors in preposition (100.0%), relative pronoun (56.7%), article (25.0%), and tense (6.7%) respectively.

Hamzah (2012) also examined the grammatical errors made by the university students in written production of English. The data were obtained from twenty English texts written by students as a part of their task in writing class. The findings of the study reveal

that the errors can be grouped into fifteen categories ranging from severe errors to mild errors. The categories for severe errors are word choice, verb group, article, preposition, plurality and spelling. The other categories are subject-verb agreement, pronoun agreement and dropping, relative clause, possessive, copula omission and mechanic.

The latest related study was conducted by Sawalmeh in 2013, attempting to investigate the errors in a corpus of 32 essays written by 32 Arabic-speaking Saudi learners of English. The results showed that the Arabic speakers in this study committed ten common errors. These errors are: (1) verb tense, (2) word order, (3) singular/plural form, (4) subject-verb agreement, (5) double negatives, (6) spellings, (7) capitalization, (8) articles (9) sentence fragments and (10) prepositions.

Thirteen Indonesian learners of English as a second language, who are the employees of a foreign company located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, were chosen as the subjects of the study. All of them are native speakers of Indonesian who had experienced approximately the same numbers of six years of education through the secondary education system. All of the participants joined a short English course (20 meetings) held by the company. They are placed in a pre-intermediate class based on the result of the written placement test before the class began.

The data used to find the answer to the research question is the English composition of all participants. They were required to write two compositions on two different topics so that there were 26 pieces of compositions as the data. The first composition is a description text about them and the second one is an argumentative text about Superman versus Batman. Each composition consists of approximately 200 words. They did not know that their writings were going to be under investigation.

The analysis of the compositions is derived from Corder's method in Ellis (2008) on error analysis. The method covers three steps, namely (1) collection of sample errors, (2) identification of errors, and (3) description of errors.

## 2. Discussion

In this section, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study in light of its objective. First, the errors made by the students are classified; second, the common errors are identified with illustrative examples; and finally, these errors made by the learners are corrected by examples. The following table shows the distribution of the errors made by the participants in their written work.

**Distribution of Errors**

No	Type of Error	Frequenc y	Percentag e (%)
1.	S-V agreement	39	17.8
2.	Capitalization	35	16.0
3.	Article	29	13.2
4.	Spelling	19	8.7
5.	Punctuation	17	7.8
6.	Omission/additi on of to be	16	7.3
7.	Word choice	14	6.4
8.	Gerund/infinitiv e	13	5.9
9.	Plurality	8	3.7
10.	Verb tense	8	3.7
11.	Modal	7	3.2
12.	Pronoun	5	2.3
13.	Preposition	4	1.8
14.	Negative	3	1.4
15.	Sentence fragment	2	0.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>219</b>	<b>100 %</b>

The following is the explanation of the frequent errors made by participants in their written work.

### 1. Subject Verb Agreement

Subject verb agreement is an area in which participants make the most errors (17.8%). This error occurs as a result of the use of elements from Indonesian language while speaking English, or what is called as interference error. In English, subjects and verbs must agree with one another in number, while there is no such a rule in Indonesian.

Error identification	Error correction
Some people <u>says</u> that I'm clever but I'm not sure about it.	Some people <u>say</u> that I'm clever but I'm not sure about it.

### 2. Capitalization

Capitalization errors occur frequently in this study (16%). Meanwhile, the capitalization rule in English does not differ a lot from Indonesian. For instance, in both languages, a capital letter is always used for the first letter of a name or proper noun. Thus, this error can be considered as developmental error, i.e. those errors that are similar to those in L1 acquisition (Dulay and Burt in Ellis, 2008).

Error identification	Error correction
He doesn't need <i>gadget</i> like <u>batman</u> .	He doesn't need <i>gadget</i> like <u>Batman</u> .

### 3. Article

Article is the third type of error found in this study (13.2%). The common article errors produced by the learners are the use of the

wrong articles and the use of an article unnecessarily. This can be attributed to the fact that in Indonesian there are no articles.

Error identification	Error correction
I am not <u>ø</u> easy going person.	I am not <u>an</u> easy going person.

### 4. Spelling

Spelling is one area in which participants make a lot of errors. This error can be caused by some sounds which are represented by several different orthographic symbols. In other word, it might be caused by the intention of the learner to write the words based on phonetic analogy. It is in line with Haggan's (1991) idea that mispronunciation, lack of awareness of spelling rules, and irregular spelling patterns contribute to spelling errors.

Error identification	Error correction
It means that this person can make a bat <u>camuflase</u> .	It means that this person can make a bat <u>camouflage</u> .

### 5. Punctuation

Using punctuation marks properly is one of the most crucial elements in making the meaning of a sentence clear. Punctuation mark itself is a signpost to give directions to readers about which way a sentence is going. Similar to capitalization, punctuation belongs to the five most common errors found in this study. Both capitalization and punctuation in English do not differ from Indonesian. Thus, the source of this

error is probably the learners' unawareness of the use of punctuation.

**Error identification      Error correction**

I try to smile every day, <i>it's make me looks so cheerfully.</i>	I try to smile every day, <i>It's make me looks so cheerfully.</i>
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**6. Omission/addition of to be**

*To be* is very important in English. However, Indonesian does not have this *to be* rule. This mother tongue interference causes some learners omits *to be*. On the other hand, some learners add *to be* when they are not necessary.

**Error identification      Error correction**

He $\emptyset$ not rich.	He <u>is</u> not rich.
<i>kryptonite is come from superman planets.</i>	<i>kryptonite comes from superman planets.</i>

**7. Word choice**

The use of wrong word is the seventh most common error (6.4%). Some inappropriate words result in meaning distraction. An example of this was the use of the verb *use* instead of the *wear*. The word *use* is a direct translation from Indonesian *memakai*. Therefore, it can be concluded that the mother tongue interference causes this error.

**Error identification      Error correction**

When I was a child, I	When I was a child, I
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had a curly long black hair but now I'm <u>using</u> hijab.	had a curly long black hair but now I'm <u>wearing</u> hijab.
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**8. Gerund/infinitive**

English has a list of verbs which should be followed by a gerund or an infinitive. There are 13 (5.9%) cases in which learners do not use gerund/ infinitive after those verbs. This error can be categorized as an intralingual error, i.e. incomplete application of rules and failures to learn condition under which rules apply (Richards in Ellis, 2008).

**Error identification      Error correction**

I loved to <u>sharing</u> with my friend.	I loved to <u>share</u> with my friend.
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**9. Plurality**

The table shows that 3.7% percent or 8 of the total errors are on plurality. The common errors on plurality are the omission of plural markers from the nouns. These errors may be attributable to the different system of plurality between Indonesian and English. Indonesian only has quantifiers before nouns without additional plural marker to noun.

**Error identification      Error correction**

<i>he have many <u>gadget</u> to help him in every situation.</i>	<i>he have many <u>gadgets</u> to help him in every situation.</i>
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### 10. Verb tense

Errors related to wrong tense occur when a learner uses the wrong verb tense in a certain sentence. The results of this study reveal that the participants were not aware of applying the correct tense to the verb in the sentences.

Error identification	Error correction
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I always <u>spent</u> my weekend to <i>playing</i> game.	I always <u>spend</u> my weekend to <i>playing</i> game.
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### 11. Modal

Modal verbs do not have *to*-infinitive form, *-ing* form, *-ed* past form or *-ed* form. It is always followed by an infinitive without *to*. There has been a fix rule for the use of modal. Thus, this error can be categorized as an intralingual error, i.e. faulty generalization, incomplete application of rules and failures to learn condition under which rules apply (Richards in Ellis, 2008).

Error identification	Error correction
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Batman <u>can't to</u> fly	Batman <u>can't</u> fly
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### 12. Pronoun

Pronoun agreement is very important in English. It must agree in number — singular/plural — with the thing to which it refers. The findings show that participants do not produce significant errors on this category (2.3%). The pronoun errors committed consist of demonstrative pronoun, relative pronoun, and possessive pronoun. The probable reason for this error is

the complexity of the sentence which distracts learners' attention from finding the corresponding noun represented.

Error identification	Error correction
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Superman don't have technologies, he only using <u>her</u> natural power.	Superman don't have technologies, he only using <u>his</u> natural power.
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### 13. Preposition

Preposition belongs to the most problematic word class for L2 learners. However, the participants in this study do not produce a lot of preposition errors (1.8%). Most of them are transfer errors, i.e. when L2 learners translate sentences directly from their mother tongue into the second language. In this case, sometimes the Indonesian language can be very helpful when translating a sentence into English but usually they fail and use an incorrect preposition instead.

Error identification	Error correction
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I do it <i>everyday</i> except <u>in</u> <i>sunday</i> .	I do it <i>everyday</i> except <u>on</u> <i>sunday</i> .
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### 14. Negative

Three errors (1.4%) are on negative sentence formation. Indonesian has a different simpler system for negation, thus probably causing error in producing a correct negative sentence in English.



Error identification	Error correction
Second, Superman doesn't has any weapon to fight Batman.	Second, Superman doesn't has any weapon to fight Batman.

### 14. Sentence fragment

A complete English sentence has, at a minimum, a subject and an object. The sentence must also express a complete thought. If a sentence is lacking one of the mentioned three essential components, it is a sentence fragment. The study found that sentence fragment is not a big problem for the learner since it is the least common errors (0.9%).

Error identification	Error correction
<u>Reasons why Batman win against Superman.</u>	<u>These are the reasons why Batman win against Superman.</u>

### 3. Conclusion

This study began with a question of “What are the distributions of errors like in students’ English compositions?” It also aimed at finding the general trend of errors in the learners’ English compositions. The results would then contribute to give an idea of which grammar points to focus on when teaching English to L2 learners.

This study shows that there are fifteen categories of errors made by pre-intermediate EFL learners. The categories for severe errors are S-V agreement (17.8%), capitalization (16%), article (13.2%), spelling (8.7%),

punctuation (7.8%), omission/addition of to be (7.3 %), word choice (6.3%), and gerund/infinitive (5.9%). The other errors are on plurality (3.7%), verb tense (3.7%), modal (3.2%), pronoun (2.3%), preposition (1.8%), negative (1.4%), and sentence fragment (0.9%). It can be said that most of the learners’ errors can be due to L1 transfer. In addition, all types of errors in the composition were analyzed quantitatively and discussed in terms of grammar and semantics.

It is worth suggesting that teachers should pay more attention to the occurrence of those errors in the future and provide relevant remedies as attempts to prevent the students from fossilizing the wrong concepts of language usage.

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