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INVESTIGATING LINGUISTIC ERRORS IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION: A CASE STUDY OF NON-ENGLISH DEPARTMENT EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating linguistic errors committed by students majoring in Non-English Department in writing English composition. A total of 20 first year students at Economic College IBBI Medan who have taken an English subject course were involved in this study. Their compositions were analyzed for the purpose of scrutinizing linguistic errors they made. In analyzing the data, this study adopted Hubbard (1996) classification of errors including grammatical, syntactic, substance, and lexical errors. The results of data analysis discovered that students committed 352 errors in their compositions with the following frequencies: 82 errors in propositions, 32 errors in tenses, 29 errors in articles, 48 errors in subject verb agreements, 37 errors in word order, 17 errors in capitalization, 21 errors in punctuation, 28 errors in spelling, and 58 errors in word choice. Hence, it is concluded that the most difficult linguistic error that students face is prepositions, while the easiest part of linguistic error that poses difficulty for students is capitalization.

Contribution/Originality: The paper's primary contribution is finding that Indonesian EFL learners tend to face problems in deciding which prepositions to use in writing. The results showed that almost all types of prepositions were misused by students. Thence, it is important for English teachers in Indonesia to put more emphasis on preposition usage.

1. INTRODUCTION

Asian countries such as Indonesia as one of the fastest growing economy in the world have fostered many international relationships with English speaking countries. With the growing demand of English acquisition all over the world, people are more required to be able to master the four skills in English; writing and speaking (reproductive skills), reading and listening (receptive skills). Thus, mastering English is one of the mandatory skills required in order to contribute to that stronger international relationship in an attempt to develop economic advancement. Nevertheless, despite the fact that English has been introduced and taught from the level of primary school, composing in English still apparently poses difficulty for Indonesian EFL leaners.

The language produced by foreign language (FL) learners almost inevitably contains errors of various types. Their production of error is therefore known as the process of learning a language. This notion is supported by Gillet (2004) in which he discovered that writing is the most problematic use of English in Higher Education. It has been known to happen that EFL learners especially Indonesians tend to face challenges in writing in English. Various reasons cause this to happen. One of them is mother tongue interference, where students' mother tongue

tend to affect students' perceived knowledge of English structure. Writing is a complex process even in the first language. Undoubtedly, it is more complicated to write in a foreign language. Consequently, a lot of researchers have intended to identify the common errors EFL students make in writing the second language. Of course, a better understanding of the errors and the origin of such errors in the process of EFL writing will help teachers know students' difficulties in learning that language. Moreover, it will aid in the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies to help EFL students learn better.

Hyland (2003) and Ferris (2002) asserts that EFL writing has often been shorter, less cohesive and fluent, and consists of more errors. With regards to errors often commited by EFL university students, it is important to do an error analysis so as to find out which category of error must be emphasized. Corder (1973) stated that "errors are evidence about the nature of the process and or the rules and categories used by the learner at a certain stage in the course". Corder (1981) reported that learners' errors are a major element in the feedback system of the process which is called language teaching and learning. It is believed that learners' errors hold a significant role in improving language teaching-learning process (Lasaten, 2014). Error analysis has become an interesting task for the teachers in teaching writing as it helps them identify their own teaching methodologies and their students' ability in writing and to guide them in choosing the strategies and topics that best suit the students' capacity (Richards, 1992).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Error Analysis

The term "error" is used to indicate a form of structure that a native speaker considers unacceptable because of its inappropriate use Klassen (1991) or as Richards (1985) argues that error is the use of a linguistic item in a way in which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete learning.

Ellis and Gary (2005) describe error analysis as "a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors". They argue that the best method to investigate second language acquisition is by collecting samples of the learner's productive English. Hence, the written production reveals the learner's grammatical knowledge and provides evidence of how much the learner really knows which makes essays a perfect sample (Ellis and Gary, 2005).

Choon (1992) asserts that error analysis can help the teachers to identify in a systematic manner the specific and common language problems students have, so that they can focus more attention on these types of errors. Such an insight into language learning problems is useful to teachers because it provides information on common difficulties in language learning so that effective teaching materials can be well prepared based on this ground. Choon also pointed out that by being able to predict errors to a certain extent, teachers can be well-equipped to help students minimize or overcome their learning problems.

Errors committed can result from the following aspects (Ellis, 1985):

1) Interference which is the result of proactive inhibition, concerns the way in which previous learning prevents or inhibits the learning of a new habit.

2) Transfer will take place from the first to the second language.

Errors can occur when transfer is negative due to the occurrence of proactive inhibition. Transfer will be positive when the first and second language habits are the same. Odlin (1989) (as quoted in Ellis (1994)) gives the meaning of transfer as follows:

Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired (1989:27).

3) Errors are the result of non-learning rather than wrong learning.

Therefore, classroom practice could be directed to the problem areas in order to help learners overcome the negative effects of first language transfer.

2.2. Procedures in Analyzing Errors

In doing an Error Analysis, Ellis and Gary (2005) propose some procedures which can be referred to as follows:

a. Collection of a Sample of Learner Language.

When collecting data one has to consider what the purpose of the study is and then try to collect relevant data for the study's aim and research questions that needs to be answered (Ellis and Gary, 2005).

b. Identification of Errors

Prior to analyzing a text, it is important to define what an error is in the first place. On one hand, for example, when identifying grammatical errors in English learners' texts one has to compare them to what is grammatically correct in English grammar books (Ellis and Gary, 2005). On the other hand, however, if the aim is to analyze learner's errors in oral production one has to take into count which English variety the learners are exposed to when identifying their errors.

c. Description of Errors

In order to describe an error one has to specify how the English learner's error differs from the native speaker's (Ellis and Gary, 2005). Therefore a categorization of the grammatical errors such as errors of omission, errors of addition, misinformation/substitution, misordering, and blends needs to be developed.

2.3. Previous Studies

In the past few years, there has been a large and growing amount of literature on error analysis on students' writing. Just recently, Napitupulu (2017) conducted a study on Students' Linguistic Errors In English Letter Writing. His study revealed that students committed 42.4% of grammatical errors, 26.7% of syntactic errors, 17.9% of substance errors, 13% of lexical errors. Based on the discussion of the findings, it is concluded that Indonesian students in this study committed a great number of errors due to first language transfer.

Sermsook (2017) conducted a similar research with the purposes of examining the language errors in a writing of English major students in a Thai university and exploring the sources of the errors. Their study discovered that punctuation, articles, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and fragment as the most frequently committed errors respectively. Interlingual interference, intralingual interference, limited knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, and carelessness of the students were found to be the major sources of the errors.

Another study conducted by Phuket and Othman (2015) which explored the major sources of errors occurred in the writing of EFL students. They investigated the types of errors and the linguistic level that presents the most errors in their writing. Their study discovered that the mostly frequent types of errors were translated words from Thai, word choice, verb tense, preposition, and comma. The errors extracted from two major sources, viz. interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual or native language interference was found to be the dominant source of errors.

Lasaten (2014) conducted an Analysis of Errors in the English Writings of Teacher Education Students. His study discovered that errors in verb tenses are the most common linguistic errors of the students, followed by error in sentence structure, punctuations, word choice, spelling, use of prepositions and articles. These errors fall under the grammatical, mechanics/substance and syntactic aspects of writing English. Majority of these errors are caused by learners' poor knowledge of the target language (English), specifically ignorance of rule restrictions. Others are attributed to the learners' carelessness, first language transfer or interference and limited vocabulary in the target language.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participant

The participants in this study were first year students majoring in the department of management Economic College, IBBI, Medan, Indonesia. They have taken the subject course of English as a basic subject course during semester two. However, their linguistic backgrounds vary from one to another.

3.2. Technique of Data Collection

In order to collect their compositions, students were purposely asked to write an unforgettable experience in their life at the course of creative writing. A total of 20 students comprising 11 males and 9 females were involved in this study. The composition was limited to circa 300 words. Upon completing the task, their writing was analyzed.

3.3. Technique of Data Analysis

Having collected their individual tasks, the researcher investigated respective students' letter writings thoroughly with the aim of discovering any ill-formed sentences. Then, an analysis was done by detecting the errors and classifying them under the umbrella of Hubbard (1996) classification of errors namely grammatical, syntactic, substance, and lexical errors. They are subsequently counted to find their frequencies and percentages which later to be put in a table and a graph.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having analyzed the whole data, the following results are found.

Table-1. Proportion of Errors Committed by Students

Category	Sub Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Grammar	Propositions	82	23.2
	Tenses	32	9
	Articles	29	8.2
Syntax	Subject verb agreement	48	14.7
	Word order	37	13.6
Substance	Capitalization	17	4.8
	Punctuation	21	5.9
	Spelling	28	7.9
Lexical	Word choice	58	16.4
Total		**352**	**100%**

Source: Data Processed (2017)

From 20 students participated in this study, it was found that a total of 352 errors committed by students. The dominant error classification was preposition use with a total of 82 errors, while, the least dominant error was capitalization with the total of seventeen. Thus, based on each category, the total errors can be classified in the following graph:
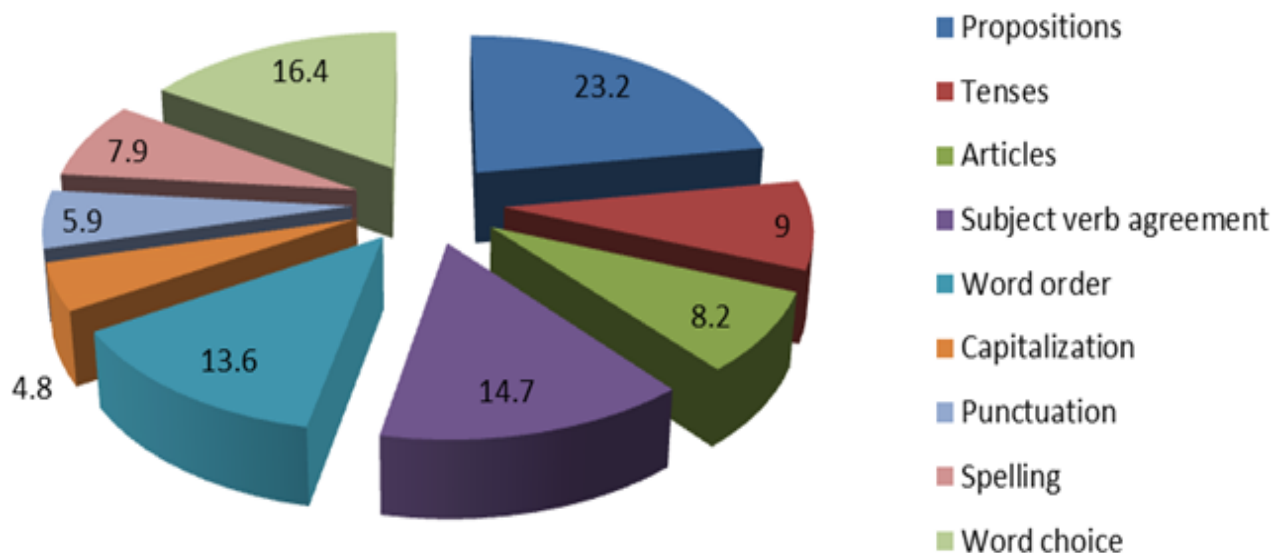
Figure-1. Percentage of Student's Errors

Source : Data Processed (2017)

Described below are the examples of the data on errors in students' compositions in English.

4.1. Grammatical Errors

a. Propositions

Preposition is one of the most difficult aspects in English writing. This is supported by Gvarishvili (2012) statement where prepositions are especially difficult for the English language learner when L1 is not cognate language and belongs to synthetic, agglutinative type of languages and the functions of preposition may be performed either by inflections, postpositions or other lexical units. In this study, quite a number of participants demonstrated confusion for the right usage of prepositions as shown in the examples below.

    1. Error identification   : As we arrive in Batam, we wait a vehicle

       Correction   : As we arrive in Batam, we wait **for** a vehicle

    2. Error identification   : I was sick **in** the time

       Correction   : I was sick **at** that time

It is typical in English writing that Indonesian students misuses appropriate prepositions for certain words. As can be seen from the example one above, student did not use the preposition of "for" for the word "wait". In this case, prepositional verbs tend to be a problem faced by Indonesian students. It is believed that the use of the word is influenced by Indonesian language, where in the origin of Indonesian language, the word "menunggu" needs no prepositions.

In the example number two above, student misuses the correct prepositions for time. It is often confusing for Indonesian students when to use which in a sentence. The above example shows that the correct preposition for "the time" is "at" instead of "in".

b. Singular/plural nouns:

Shown below is an example of error in plural nouns.

    Error identification   : You can see many big truck crossing the road

       Correction   : You can see many big trucks crossing the road

Most students commit mistakes in singular and plural nouns. This is influenced by Indonesian language since in Indonesian, there is no countable and uncountable nouns. As can be seen in the above example, a student commit

errors in classifying plural forms. It is obvious that an English quantifier "many" is followed by plural nouns. Thus, the plural form of "truck" in the above example should have been "trucks".

c. Tenses

Shown below is an example of error in tense.

      Error identification   : Yesterday I go to Berastagi with my friends.

      Correction   : Yesterday, I went to Berastagi with my friends.

This is a common error student made with regard to English tense. Some students are not oblivious to the use of Past tense to indicate something happened in the past. This error is mainly influenced by students mother tongue interference where in Indonesian, tese is not recognized.

d. Articles

It is noteworthy remembering that in English grammar, some proper nouns usually require article "the". Some words that need article "the" are: family names, names of large regions, oceans, or rivers, names of mountain ranges, names of countries that use a plural form or contain the words "united," "union," or an "'of' phrase", names of most buildings or structures, names of companies that contain the words "company," "corporation," or "foundation," or that include "the" as part of the registered or official name, and names of theories, effects, devices, scales, etc. modified by a proper noun used as an adjective. In this case, the misuse of article is frequently found before a noun. This type of error committed by one the students as illustrated below:

      Error identification   : In ship, I joked with my friends

      Correction   : In **the** ship, I joked with my friends

As can be seen in the above example, a student left article "the" in the sentence. Certain English nouns require article "the", such as "the ship". If article "the" is left in the phrase, the text would sound unnatural and inappropriate.

4.2. Syntactic Errors

Syntactic errors in this study are classified into several sub-categories, viz. noun/pronoun, word order, subject-verb agreement. Shown below are examples of syntactic errors.

a. **Noun/pronoun**

      Shown below is the example of error in using pronoun as an object of a sentence.

      Error identification   : I am shocked and I let **his** go

      Correction   : I am shocked and I let **him** go

      The above example shows that the student used possessive pronoun instead of an object personal pronoun. It is commonly found that the first year students misuse possessive pronouns for personal pronouns.

b. **Word order**

According to Biber (1999) the term word order is most often used to refer to the order of the elements in the clause, elements, in which are, of course, often each realized by phrases or clauses rather than just one word each: subject, verb, objects, and adverbials. Word order refers to a broad range of errors, from completely incorrect word use, to connotation being off, to substitution of antiquated forms for more common ones, to using words together that do not typically appear with each other.

Error identification   : We took selfie again with **Go Pro my friend**

Correction   : We took selfie again with **my friend's Go Pro.**

The above example causes confusion to L2 learners due to mother tongue (L1) interference and the negative language transfer from L1 to L2. Instead of clarifying that the camera is his friend's, the student places the modifier after the noun. In English, when the two nouns meet, one noun must modify another noun. In the above example in particular, the phrase "my friend" is the modifier which modifies the noun "Go Pro".

c. Subject Verb Agreement

Researcher like Bhatia (1974) as cited by Shuib (1991) indicates that agreement presents a problem to ESL learners. Shown below is the example of subject-verb agreement error committed by student.

Error identification   : This child **don't want** to shake hand with me.

Correction   : This child **does not want** to shake hand with me.

The example above shows that student wrote "This child don't want". As child is a singular form, then it should go with "does" in negative sentence. It indicate that the student is not aware of the basic grammar rule in English.

4.3. Substance Errors

a. Punctuation

Shaughnessy (1977) has pointed out that basic writers make punctuation errors mainly because they assume that the uses of spoken language can be transferred to writing without change. For many Indonesian students, correct use of punctuation has always been underestimated as is shown in the example below.

Error identification   : My sister and I went to the same school we had the same English teacher

Correction   : My sister and I went to the same school. We had the same English teacher

As can be seen, sometimes students do not check the punctuation as a marker of ending a sentence. This causes a run-on sentence in which the message failed to be delivered successfully. A run-on sentence is a common error caused by merging two sentences (i.e., independent clauses) without suitable punctuation.

b. Spelling

Spelling means the act or process of writing words by using the letters conventionally accepted for their formation.

Error identification   : Oh my **good**, I am speechless and very very very happy

Correction   : Oh my **God**, I am speechless and elated.

This type of error in also common in Indonesian students' writing where at a glance the word looks similar but in fact, it has a totally different meaning and causes a fatal error once it is read by a native speaker. The example above shows that a student wrote "Good" instead of "God" where he wanted to mean "Oh my God". Again, student did not check the spelling thoroughly. This type of error is coined by Klimova (2010) as false friends. False friends are words in two languages (or letters in two alphabets) that look or sound similar, but differ significantly in meaning.

c. Capitalization

Shown below is an example of capitalization error in a sentence written by one of the students:

Error identification   : My name is **fauzul** and I will tell you….

Correction   : My name is **Fauzul** and I will tell you….

Capitalization is commonly applied as a head of a sentence, names of a person, country, river, places, etc. In the example above, student wrote a name of a person "fauzul" instead of "Fauzul". This kind of error is sometimes committed by students as they might think it would not matter whether the case is uppercase of lowercase.

4.4. Lexical errors

Santos (1988) argues that native speakers consider lexical errors as the most irritating. Similarly, Carter (1998) suggests that 'mistakes in lexical selection may be less generously tolerated outside classrooms than mistakes in syntax'. This study discovered that lexical errors tend to happen since students are not willing to look up dictionaries, online resources, etc. In this study, only one category of lexical error is identified that it word choice error. Shown below is the example of word choice error:

a. Word Choice

This particular error is closely associated with interference by the native language. That means that a word in English does not necessarily mean one thing, but rather depends on the context of the sentence. Below are two examples of wrong word choice:

Error identification : I **use the ship** to go to Samosir Island

Correction : I **took a speedboat** to go to Samosir Island

The above example shows that student uses the word "use" as an influence of their mother tongue. To indicate that someone travels using particular transportation, the word "take" is commonly used. Another word choice confusion is found on the word "ship". As a matter of fact, to go to Samosir Island, which is only a half kilometer away from the land, the transportation provided is a small boat, hence the use of word "ship" would be inaccurate.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, most students confess that they did not do revision on the composition writing. Hence, they tended to commit errors in any of the linguistic errors above explained. The participants also had a relatively weak vocabulary and their sentences were sometimes incomprehensible. They committed errors in applying sentence structure rules in the English language. Hence, we can conclude that these participants have problems in acquiring normal grammatical rules in English. However, the results of this study help teachers to reflect on their students' writing and teach some of the above-mentioned aspects to improve students' writing in English.

6. SUGGESTIONS

a. For Researchers

Since this study covers only a small percentage of participants, future studies may seek to investigate a larger number of students from different schools. In so doing, more heterogeneous data are gathered leading to a more comprehensive conclusion. In addition to that, it is also important for future studies to compare female and male students as well as their previous English learning experience so that the factors that might impact their English writing can be revealed.

b. For EFL Students

It is suggested that students do extensive writing drills more often outside the classroom and ask somebody else to correct his/her writing. Besides that, students should familiarize themselves with how English is used in writing and how English grammar differs from that of Indonesian grammar.

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