

# Surface structure errors on undergraduate students' writing

**Rita Karmila Sari, Ni Ketut Pertiwi Anggraeni**

Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Jakarta

Correspondence: [karmilasari\\_rita@yahoo.com](mailto:karmilasari_rita@yahoo.com), [niketutpertiwi@hotmail.com](mailto:niketutpertiwi@hotmail.com)

## Abstract

Students will make an error in the process of acquiring a foreign language. Errors made by students in the process of learning need to be analyzed carefully so that it can help the learning process. This study aims to analyze the surface structure errors made by undergraduate students. The method used is a qualitative method which took a sample of 30 undergraduate students' writings which were writing assignments for English subject. The data were analyzed by looking at the taxonomy of the surface structure in 4 classifications, namely addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. The results of this study found that the most errors were misformation as much as 53%, followed by omissions as much as 23%, additions as much as 17% and misordering being the least errors found with a total of 7%. Misformation errors that often occurred in this study were in the tenses category where the use of morphemes was not in accordance with the rules of English grammar. The results show common errors made by undergraduate students and are expected to be a benchmark for learning outcomes. In addition, it can also show what indicators of English learning should be improved so that students no longer make repeated errors.

**Keywords:** Grammatical Errors, Surface Structure Taxonomy, English Writing, Undergraduate Students

## Introduction

It is widely accepted that English is a compulsory subject at university level in the Indonesian context. Students are expected to be able to compose sentences based on English rules or structurally correct sentences. A sentence that meets grammatical rules is what many learners put their efforts on. They try to compose words together and make many sentences with correct grammar. Language can be said to be made up from the smallest word units. Therefore, grammar cannot be separated from words which are then assembled into sentences. \

When students are learning English, they will make errors (errors). This error occurs because learners are frequently influenced by the characteristics of their home language. This may occur as a result of a lack of knowledge of

grammatical structures, rules, and words, as well as a deficiency in the target language. When students are learning a second language, they frequently employ the same language processes that they used to acquire their first language (Dissanayake & Dissanayake, 2019).

In other words, learners make mistakes while attempting to acquire a foreign language. Avoiding errors is nearly impossible for students during their learning period. When they make errors, it indicates that they are unfamiliar with the target language's rules (Aziz, Fitriani, & Amalina, 2020). However, Students' errors also provide teachers with information about their students' writing abilities. Additionally, the identification results are intended to provide useful information and to assist students in resolving writing problems (Maolida & Hidayat, 2021).

Numerous factors contribute to the occurrence of English writing errors in student work. Therefore, this study examines grammatical errors made by English language learners based on the Surface Structure Taxonomy.

## **Literature review**

### **Grammatical Errors**

Grammatical errors are mentioned as grammatical rule deviations (Tlonaen, 2020). In terms of writing, grammatical errors are errors that impair the meaning conveyed in writing, making it difficult for readers to comprehend the message. Unfortunately, Grammar is a significant barrier for many English language learners when it comes to writing. Grammatical errors are caused by a variety of factors, including interference from the first language, a lack of second grammar knowledge, and errors in grammatical rules. The more variables the learner encounters, the more frequently errors are made (Kumala, Aimah, & Ifadah, 2018).

In general, learners' errors are considered natural because they are a necessary part of the language learning process. Every language learner will make mistakes due to a lack of comprehension of the target language (Vera, Haryudin, & Herdiyanti., 2019). Error analysis is one method for correcting grammatical errors and preventing the learner from repeating them. Additionally, error analysis is required to develop proficiency in a foreign language (Wijaya, Nugraheni, & Bram, 2019). By identifying the errors made, students and teachers can evaluate and plan corrective learning strategies.

### **Surface Structure Taxonomy**

Surface structure taxonomy works on surface mechanisms. This taxonomy focuses only on how the mechanisms of the linguistic organization are altered. English learners can omit required items or add unnecessary items. They can also misform items or misorder them (Maolida & Hidayat, 2021). The target language

is formed incorrectly. Therefore, the errors of the surface structure taxonomy can be categorized in four main ways (common errors) (Rofik & Sahid, 2019; Suhono, 2016):

1. Addition errors

This error occurs when the presence of an element or form of language is not supposed to appear. An example of an additional type error can be seen from the following sentence:

*He does not knows my address.*

In this sentence, the addition of the final suffix or suffix 's' to the verb know is not necessary

2. Omission errors

In this type of error, part of sentence is omitted. An example of a type omission error can be seen in the following sentence:

*I didn't see him because he came while I sleeping.*

In this sentence, to be 'was' is needed in the second clause to explain events that are taking place in the last period. Therefore, the correct sentence is '*I didn't see him because he came while I was sleeping*'.

3. Misordering errors

This type of error is caused by misordering of morphemes or groups of morphemes in the target language. Misordering errors can be seen from the following sentence:

*I don't know where is that place.*

This sentence has an interrogative sentence pattern where to be is before the subject, while the intent of this sentence is a statement. Therefore, this sentence requires a revision of the wording according to the statement pattern (subject + predicate). So, the sentence should be "I don't know where that place is".

4. Misformation errors

It refers to the wrong form of morpheme or structure in the target language. The difference between these types can be seen from the following example sentences:

*They must submit that documents on time.*

In this sentence, the article 'that' cannot be combined with documents which are plural objects. The articles that must be attached with the plural object are them, so that the correct sentence is '*They must submit those documents on time*'.

Many previous studies have focused on surface structural errors. Research conducted by Özkayran & Yılmaz (2020) discovered that misformation was the most common error among students with a percentage of 50.39. In addition, the error of omission was 29.66%, the addition error was 17.06% and the misordering error was 2.89%. Then they suggested that professionals who speak English as a foreign language should focus more on prepositions, verb “to be”, spelling, articles, singular/plural noun forms, word formation, tenses, word choice and subject-verb agreement, which is the most problematic area.

Rusmiati (2019) classified errors based on Dulay, Burt, and Krashen's theory of Surface Strategy Taxonomy which applied four types of errors, namely addition, omission, misformation, and misorder. The findings showed that misformation errors were found to be the most common type made by students as much as 72.94%, but misordering was not identified among students' errors in paragraph composition. The results of the study recommend English teachers to focus more on teaching materials for items that tend to produce errors to the learner before compiling paragraphs.

Research conducted by Momenzade, Khojasteh, & Kafipour (2018) aimed at finding the most consistent errors of medical students before and after taking English writing classes. This study discovered a significant difference between the errors made by students before and after writing class by using paired sample t-test and Wilcoxon test. The results showed that the number of errors in the re-test was significantly reduced compared to the number of errors in the previous test which at first glance could mean that the learning outcomes of the writing class were quite satisfactory. However, the study found significant differences between each type of error, including omissions, misordering errors, additions and misformation errors. These results can help the writing class teacher to find out the writing weaknesses faced by students and can immediately overcome them. In addition, teaching in writing class will be more focused.

## **Methods**

This study applied a mixed-method design. Quantitative methods were used to calculate the frequency and categorize the types of grammatical errors that most often appeared in writing. Meanwhile, qualitative methods were used to analyze the sources of these grammatical errors. A total of 30 students in the second semester studying English courses took part in the current study. They were English learners at the elementary (basic) level. Their writings were used as sources of data.

They were given a task to write an English writing, with a topic of “Letter to My Friend.”

## Results and discussion

The 30 pieces of writings written by participants under investigation contained 91 grammatical errors, the majority of which were misformation errors (48%), followed by 21 omission errors (23%), 16 addition errors (17%), and six misordering errors (7%).

Table 1. Frequency of grammar errors based on surface structure taxonomy

Types of errors	Frequency	Percentage
Misformation	48	53%
Omission	21	23%
Addition	16	17%
Misordering	6	7%

Furthermore, from a total of 91 grammatical errors based on the surface structure taxonomy, 10 categories of grammatical errors were found consisting of Prepositions, Adjectives, Articles, Singular/Plural, Irregular verbs, Tenses, Concord, Passive/active sentences, Adverbs, Possesive Case.

Table 2. Frequency of Grammar Errors in Students Writing

Grammar Error Categories	Omission	Addition	Misformation	Misordering
Preposition	5	8	4	1
Adjectives	2	0	4	0
Articles	0	1	1	0
Singular/plural	0	1	2	0
Irregular verbs	0	0	1	0
Tenses	6	6	21	3
Concord/S-V agreement	1	0	3	0
Passive/active	6	0	1	1
Adverb	1	0	10	0
Possessive case	0	0	1	1
Total	21	16	48	6

It is seen from the surface structure taxonomy, the most common grammatical errors found were misformations as many as 48 errors. Misformation errors that often occur in this study were in the tenses category where the author incorrectly placed the verb that was adjusted to the time of a sentence. Misformation errors in English tenses are often found in Indonesian

students because of the influence of the original language, Indonesian, where there is no time difference or tenses.

The following is a discussion of misformation grammatical errors in tenses.

*It's been 3 months since corona virus **come** to Indonesia*

In the sentence above, the tenses used is present perfect followed by the second clause in past tense so that the predicate in the second clause should be in the form of a past verb “*came*”.

Other example of misformation grammatical errors is also found in adverbs as in the sample below:

*I hope this condition ends **quickly**.*

The adverb *quickly* does not match the sentence above and should be replaced with *soon*. Although *quickly* and *soon* fall into the same adverb category, namely adverbs of manner, both have differences in the terms of usage. *Quickly* is used to express speed but *soon* is used to express duration or time immediately.

Other misformation error is also found in adjectives which is seen in the sentences below:

*what makes people **more happy** than birthday celebrations?*

The adjective *happy* when used in a comparative sense has its own word, namely *happier* and *happiest*, so the word formation “*more happy*” is said to be inaccurate and supposed to replace with *happier*. Misformation errors can occur when students tend to use the wrong word format such as the use of plural or singular words of a morpheme, also with the use of past verbs and past participles (Yakub, F., & Hossain, 2018).

The second most grammatical errors were found in omissions which is also called deletion with a total of 20 grammatical errors found. The omission error occurs when a language element is omitted so that the sentence does not comply with the grammatical rules (Erlangga, Suarnajaya, & Juniarta, 2019). Most omission errors are found in the use of passive/active as in the sample below:

*For these three months **everythings** done at home*

In the sentence above, the author intends to abbreviate *everything is done*, but does not put an apostrophe ( ' ) at the end of the word *everything*. Apostrophe punctuation is used to abbreviate one or two words, so *everything is done* should

be shortened to everything's done. Omission grammatical errors are also found in the use of prepositions.

*Boring at home and can't go anywhere **because covid 19***

The clause above uses the conjunction because followed by the noun covid 19. The conjunction “because” has two variations, the one with the preposition 'of' and the other without the preposition 'of'. The difference between these two variations lies in the word or clause that follows the word 'because' itself. If it is followed by a clause or sentence, it uses 'because', but if it is followed by a noun or noun phrase, it uses 'because of'. The above clause is followed by a noun but omitted the preposition 'of', so it does not conform to the rules of grammar. Omission errors are also found in adjectives in the sentence:

*I really bored*

The sentence above removes the predicate so that it does not form a perfect sentence. The word “*bored*” belongs to the adjective word class so that the appropriate predicate is to be in the form of am. Then the complete sentence becomes I am bored

The next grammatical error based on the structure of the surface taxonomy is addition. Addition grammar errors occur when unnecessary elements are added (Napitupulu, 2017). In this study, the most common addition errors were found in prepositions with the following samples:

***Shelter** in place didn't offer many options.*

The word “*shelter*” in above sentence means a place. However, the author adds the preposition ‘in’ so that it changes the meaning to “*shelter in place*”. This makes the sentence has an ambiguous meaning. In addition, the “*shelter*” itself already has the meaning of place, so there is no need to add the word ‘*place*’ to avoid redundancy.

In addition to prepositions, sentence errors with additions are also seen in tenses such as the sample below:

*Now we **are enter** new normal stage*

The sentence above has two predicates, to be '*are*', and the verb '*enter*'. The use of two predicates makes the meaning of the sentence ambiguous whether the sentence is simple present tense or present continuous tense.

Furthermore, for the least surface structure taxonomic errors are misordering errors with a total of 6 errors. Misordering error is misplacement of morpheme or a group of a morpheme (Pardosi, Karo, S.Sijabat, Pasaribu, & Tarigan, 2019). Most errors occur in tenses such as the sample below:

***what you are busy now?***

In the sentence above, the word order that forms the interrogative sentence is incorrect. The sentence above is meant to ask 'are you busy right now?' to which the answer is yes or no. Question sentences with yes/no answers in English grammar have a predicate pattern to be or a verb that precedes the subject. Thus, the correct arrangement of sentence patterns is 'are you busy now?'

Misordering errors are also found in the possessive case as in the sample sentence:

*And how about your's of kitty?*

The sentence above has the meaning of possession, yet in an inaccurate pattern. The grammar for expressing possession using the preposition 'of' must be preceded by a noun followed by the preposition 'of' and the possessive pronoun. Therefore, the sentence is supposed to be revised into 'And how about kitty of yours?' Or 'how about your kitty?'

Here are several factors causing students to make errors on their writings (Irmalia, 2016):

1. Students are not familiar with the use of English and they also do not have enough practice that makes them cannot use English fluently.
2. Students are less motivated to use English out of the class session. Whereas, writing skills are determined by how often someone reads or listens to English. In addition, students are also not interested in writing English in their daily usage.
3. The use of a dictionary that interferes with the correct use of English as a result of students not checking whether the word forms in the dictionary are in the proper written context.
4. Students tend to write what they think in Indonesian then translate it into English without looking at the context. This causes errors when students have assumed that sentence formation between their mother tongue and English sentence formation is the same (Erlangga et al., 2019).

Writing skills require a complex process. Students are not only required to have language skills, but also cognitive analysis and linguistic synthesis skills (Fithriani, 2020). Thus, students obviously need time and effort to develop writing skills and to avoid more errors.



## Conclusion

Based on the surface structure taxonomy, the most grammatical errors were found in the form of formation errors as many as 48 errors with a percentage of 53% followed by the omission of 21 errors (23%), the addition of 16 errors (17%) and misordering was the fewest errors found with a total of 6 errors (7%).

Grammatical errors in the surface structure taxonomy happen due to the lack of students' knowledge of the grammatical rules in English. In addition, the influence of the original language is also one of the factors causing this grammatical error. Therefore, it is highly recommended to practice the use of English in daily usage so that students are familiar with the rules of English grammar. In addition, teachers also need to provide more exercises emphasizing writing skills with a focus on grammatical rules.

To expand the results of this study, it is recommended that further research to be conducted with a focus on the factors that cause grammatical errors made by students. In addition, this research can also be continued by taking additional data in the form of interviews or questionnaires from research subjects so that they can be analyzed using the triangulation of research data and results.

## References

- Aziz, Z. A., Fitriani, S. S., & Amalina, Z. (2020). Linguistic errors made by Islamic university EFL students. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9(3), 733–745. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v9i3.23224>
- Dissanayake, M. S. D., & Dissanayake, M. C. B. (2019). Common Syntactic Errors made by the Undergraduates in Writing English as a Second Language. *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science*, 7(11), 1–8. Retrieved from <https://ijlass.org/articles/7.11.1.1-8-1.pdf>
- Erlangga, I. P. B., Suarnajaya, I. W., & Juniarta, P. A. K. (2019). An Analysis of Grammatical Errors Made by the Seventh Grade Students of SMP Negeri 2 Sukawati in Writing Descriptive Texts in the Academic Year 2018/2019. *LEJU: Language and Education Journal Undiksha*, 2(1), 19–29.
- Fithriani, R. (2020). Grammatical Errors in Madrasah Aliyah Students ' Narrative Texts : An Error Analysis of the Surface Strategy. *Ta'dib: Journal of Islamic Education*, 25(1), 6–20.
- Irmalia, M. (2016). Indonesian Interference in Students' Writing. *English Education Journal (EEJ)*, 7(4), 496–508.
- Kumala, B. P., Aimah, S., & Ifadah, M. (2018). An Analysis of Grammatical Errors

- on Speaking Activities. *2nd English Language and Literature International Conference (ELLiC)*, 2, 144. Semarang: Unimus.
- Maolida, E. H., & Hidayat, M. V. C. (2021). Writing Errors Based on Surface Structure Taxonomy: A Case of Indonesian EFL Students' Personal Letters. *Proceeding International Conference on Education of Suryakencana 2021*, 336–344.
- Momenzade, Z., Khojasteh, L., & Kafipour, R. (2018). An analysis of the most consistent errors in English composition of Shiraz medical students. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 26(2), 1189–1202.
- Napitupulu, S. (2017). Analyzing Linguistic Errors in Writing an English Letter : A Case Study of Indonesian Undergraduate Students. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 5(3), 71–77. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20170503.12>
- Özkayran, A., & Yılmaz, E. (2020). Analysis of Higher Education Students' Errors in English Writing Tasks. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 11(2), 48. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.11n.2p.48>
- Pardosi, J. D., Karo, R. E. V. B., S.Sijabat, O. A., Pasaribu, H., & Tarigan, N. W. P. (2019). An Error Analysis of Students in Writing Narrative Text. *Linguistic, English Education and Art (LEEA)*, 3(1), 159–172.
- Rofik, A., & Sahid, S. (2019). Structuring Tenses of English by Islamic Higher Education Students: A Case Study at Universitas Sains Alqur'an. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Studies*, 1(1), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.29103/ijevs.v1i1.1391>
- Rusmiati, R. (2019). Surface Strategy Taxonomy on Foreign Language Writing: a Study on Verb Tense Usage. *Jurnal Serambi Ilmu*, 20(2), 189–201. <https://doi.org/10.32672/si.v20i2.1453>
- Suhono. (2016). Surface Strategy Taxonomy on the EFL Students' Composition: A Study of Error Analysis. *Iqra: Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan*, 1(2), 1–30. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.25217/ji.v1i2.128>
- Tlonaen, Z. A. (2020). Grammatical Error Found in the Academic Essays Written by Students of English Education. *Lectura: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 11(1), 15–30.
- Vera, B., Haryudin, A., & Herdiyanti. (2019). Error Analysis on the Students Writing of Simple Present Tense in a Descriptive Text. *PROJECT (Professional Journal of English Education)*, 2(4), 514. <https://doi.org/10.22460/project.v2i4.p514-520>
- Wijaya, A. R. T., Nugraheni, G. V. A., & Bram, B. (2019). Grammatical Errors in Undergraduate Students' Research Proposal Writing. *Jurnal Bahasa Lingua*

*Scientia*, 11(2), 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.21274/lis.2019.11.2.291-308>

Yakub, F., & Hossain, F. (2018). Morphological Error Analysis Of English Written Texts Produced By The Tertiary Level Students Of Bangladesh. *Research Journal Of English Language and Literature*, 6(4), 202–218.