

INVESTIGATING MALE AND FEMALE UNDERGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS' ERRORS IN WRITING

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Abstract

Writing in English can be difficult for language learners, including for Indonesian learners. That is why they still make a lot of errors in their writings. There are many studies that have explored errors in students' writings. However, not many directly compare between male and female students. This study tries to fill the gap by exploring the types of errors made by male and female students. In total, there are 20 students whose work is used as the data for this research. There are 10 male and 10 female students. The writer analyzes a paragraph they wrote on the topic of "Children should not be given smartphones." The students are from the second semester of the English Department at Bunda Mulia University. The errors are grouped into grammatical and mechanical errors with more specific subcategories for each. The findings of the research shows that the most frequent error is related to tense and structure, while the least is related to subject-verb agreement. This is for both male and female students. The writer also found that between the male and female students, they made very similar errors. Based on the result, the writer suggests that the teacher pays more attention to the mechanical errors that are frequently made by the students because this kind of error is easier to improve compared to grammatical errors. Students can also use programs like Grammarly to help improve their writing.

Keywords: errors; writing; male and female students

Abstrak

Menulis dalam bahasa Inggris mungkin sulit bagi pembelajar bahasa, termasuk pelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Itu sebabnya mereka masih banyak melakukan kesalahan dalam tulisannya. Ada banyak penelitian yang mengeksplorasi kesalahan dalam tulisan siswa. Namun tidak banyak yang membandingkan secara langsung antara siswa laki-laki dan perempuan. Penelitian ini mencoba mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan mengeksplorasi jenis kesalahan yang dilakukan oleh siswa laki-laki dan perempuan. Total ada 20 mahasiswa yang karyanya dijadikan data penelitian ini. Mahasiswa laki-laki berjumlah 10 orang dan mahasiswa perempuan berjumlah 10 orang. Penulis menganalisis paragraf yang mereka tulis dengan topik "Anak-anak tidak boleh diberikan ponsel pintar." Mahasiswa tersebut berasal dari semester dua jurusan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Bunda Mulia. Kesalahan dikelompokkan menjadi kesalahan tata bahasa dan mekanis dengan subkategori yang lebih spesifik untuk masing-masing kesalahan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesalahan yang paling banyak terjadi adalah terkait tense dan struktur, sedangkan yang paling sedikit terkait dengan subject-verb agreement. Ini berlaku untuk mahasiswa laki-laki dan perempuan. Penulis juga menemukan bahwa antara mahasiswa laki-laki dan perempuan, mereka melakukan kesalahan yang sangat mirip. Berdasarkan hasil tersebut, penulis menyarankan agar pengajar lebih memperhatikan kesalahan mekanis yang sering dilakukan mahasiswa karena kesalahan semacam ini lebih mudah diperbaiki dibandingkan kesalahan tata bahasa. Mahasiswa juga dapat menggunakan program seperti Grammarly untuk membantu meningkatkan kemampuan menulis mereka.

Kata Kunci: kesalahan; tulisan; murid laki-laki dan perempuan

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in English can be difficult for language learners, including for Indonesian students. Even though they learned English maybe from a young age, they still have trouble writing in English since it is not their first language. They sometimes cannot express themselves well in English and end up making various errors such as grammatical errors, spelling, or even punctuation errors. Grammatical errors are usually made because not all Indonesian students have very good grammar. The Indonesian language does not have tenses, so when the students write in English, they often make grammatical errors related to tenses. Students also sometimes make spelling errors because between the pronunciation and spelling, words in English can be quite different, unlike in Indonesian where the spelling of the word is quite similar to its pronunciation. For punctuation error, between Indonesian and English, punctuation in writing is actually similar, but maybe they make mistakes in punctuation because they are not careful enough or maybe because they do not really know the proper use of the punctuation marks.

There are many previous studies that are related to students' errors. For example, Tanihardjo (2020) investigated the sentence fragments that appear in Indonesian students' writings. Gulö and Rahmawelly (2018) also researched about errors in students' writings, but focusing on omission. In addition, Fitria (2020) did a study on students' errors in writing recount texts and focusing on three aspects which are grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Furthermore, Singh, Singh, Razak and Ravinthar (2017) and Kusumawardhani (2015) made similar studies where students' errors in writing are analyzed. Another research is from Murniati (2021) who investigated the grammatical errors students make, but emphasizing on the reason why they make these errors, which are implicit and explicit knowledge. Related to the reasons for making the errors, Tanihardjo (2012) also researched about how Indonesian language affected the learners' grammatical errors in writing. Similarly, Na Phuket and Othman (2015) also conducted a study that examined the major sources of errors in the EFL students' writings, which are interlingual and intralingual. The study by Ngangbam (2016) also showed how the errors made by the students are caused by mother tongue interference. Lastly, errors are not just made by learners, but errors can also be found even in English textbooks written by Indonesians just like in the findings of Murniati's (2014) research. This shows that errors are not just made by learners of English, but they can also be made by textbook authors and publishers who are supposed to be more knowledgeable.

Based on the description above, we can see that errors in writing are a topic that is commonly researched because errors are still being made. That is why the researcher is interested in finding out more about what kind of errors students make in their writing. However, this research is different from the previous ones because it will not only look at the errors made by the students, but it will also try to compare between the errors made by male and female students. From the previous studies described above, even though there are many studies about students' errors in writing, there are not many studies that focus on comparing between the errors made by the different genders. That is why this research tries to fill the gap by focusing on this aspect. There are two research questions for this research, which are:

1. What kind of errors do the students make in their writing?
2. How do the errors compare between the male and female students?

The main aim of this research is to find out what kind of errors that the students make in their writing. The errors are also divided into two main groups which are grammatical errors and errors related to mechanics. These two will be described in more detail in the section below. To make it different from the previous studies, the errors made by the students are compared between the male and female students. The writer wants to see if there are any similarities or differences in the errors made by both gender groups. Last but not least, this study is also limited to only analyzing the errors and not exploring the reasons why the students make the errors in their writing.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Errors can be understood as words, speech acts, or grammatical items that are not used perfectly and show incomplete learning (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). In the process of human learning, it is inevitable that people will make some errors (James, 1998). This is also true for language learning, so it is normal for students to make errors. However, students cannot keep repeating the same errors over and over again, or else they will not become proficient users of that language. In the beginning, errors were considered as problems by teachers, but nowadays errors are considered as signs of learning progress (Chomsky, 1986, as cited in Na Phuket and Othman, 2015). Therefore, if students can learn from their previous errors, this is proof that they are making progress in their language learning.

Writing is very important for university students. They usually have to do a lot of writing in their four years of study at the university. For English department students, they will definitely have to write in English. However, previous studies have shown how university students in Indonesia still make a lot of errors in their writing (Murniati, 2021; Tanihardjo, 2020), even though they have already learned previously English in high school or before that. According to Cumming (2001), EFL learners make errors in writing because writing is a complex activity that requires knowledge of syntax, vocabulary, organization, and other aspects. Lack of knowledge in these may lead to errors related to grammar or even mechanical errors. For example, errors in grammar may include those related to tenses (e.g., using the simple past form of a verb in a present perfect sentence), whereas mechanical errors may include those related to incorrect spelling or capitalization. Additionally, Burman, Evans, Nunes and Bell (2008) state that writing involves several aspects such as content development, organization, voice, word choice, fluency, and conventions. All of these are made even more difficult for Indonesian students if it has to be done in a foreign language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a descriptive qualitative study because the data analysis does not use any complicated calculations or formulas. The source of data is the students' writings. There are 20 paragraphs written by 10 male and 10 female students. The students are from the English Department at Bunda Mulia University from the second semester. They are currently taking the Writing 1 class, and one of their assignment is to make an argumentative paragraph with the topic "Children should not be given smartphones." The reason for choosing 20 students is that it is even between the male and female students. There are actually more female students in the class, so in the end only 10 from each gender group is randomly taken for this research for comparison between the male and female students.

For the data collection procedure, the students' paragraphs are collected and the writer reads through all 20 paragraphs. While reading the paragraphs, the writer identifies and collects all of the errors. However, for this study, the errors are grouped into two main categories which are grammatical and mechanics error. So other errors outside of these two are not analyzed, such as errors related to word choice or vocabulary. For the grammatical errors, any errors related to tenses, subject verb agreements, the use of articles, and other grammatical errors fall into this category. On the other hand, errors that are considered as mechanical errors include spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors. After the writer collects the errors from the students' paragraphs, the writer groups them into these two categories and organize them based on frequency to see which types of errors are the most frequent and which are the least frequent. This is done to answer the first research question. Finally, to answer the second research question, the errors are compared between the ones made by the male and female students. So the writer will see if there are any similarities or differences in the errors made by these two groups.

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

First of all, some data analysis related to grammatical errors in the students' writings are presented and described below. For this part, the errors are not separated between the ones made by the male or female students, but they are just explained based on the type of errors.

a) Tense and structure

Since the paragraph the students were asked to write is an argumentative paragraph which describes their opinion about the topic of "Children should not be given smartphones," the tense in the paragraphs is mostly in the simple present tense. However, there are times when the students either used inappropriate tenses in the context of the sentences, or their overall sentence structure is incorrect. Here are some examples related to this aspect.

- 1) There are five reasons children shouldn't be give smartphones.

From this sentence, it is clear that the error is in the word 'give.' It should be in the past participle form, especially since there is the word 'be' in front of it. So the correct sentence should be "There are five reasons children shouldn't be given smartphones."

- 2) ... staring at a smartphone for long periods of time can cause eye problem.

The sentence above is another example of how the students made an error in structure. The problem is in the word 'problem' since it is in the singular form. In the context of this sentence, it should have been made into the plural. So the revision is "... staring at a smartphone for long periods of time can cause eye problems."

- 3) Laziness could make them to forgot about the outside world ...

Another example sentence with incorrect structure is sentence (3) above. The error is in the words 'to forgot' which should have been 'forget.' So the correct sentence should have been "Laziness could make them forget about the outside world ...". In other words, this sentence should not have used the preposition 'to' and the word 'forgot' should have been in the infinitive form because we cannot other forms for verbs that follow modals such as the word 'could' in this sentence.

b) Subject-verb Agreement

Some of the students also made errors related to subject-verb agreement. We can see some of the examples the students made below.

- 1) Smartphones are things that makes people easier to do their work.

This sentence shows that this student made an error in the subject-verb agreement because if the subject before is plural or 'things' in this sentence, the verb should not be added -s in the end (it should not be 'makes'). The correct revision for this sentence is "Smartphones are things that make it easier for people to do their work."

- 2) Moreover, children becomes reliant on technology.

In the sentence above, we can see that there is a subject-verb agreement error because the verb 'becomes' should not have been added -s at the end because the subject 'children' is already plural. So the correct sentence is "Moreover, children become reliant on technology."

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c) Article

For the errors related to articles, most of the errors the students made involved missing articles in their sentences. We can see some of these errors from the examples below.

- 1) ... many children are provided with mobile phones since early ages in order to ...

The error from the sentence above is with the missing article before the words 'early ages.' Actually this word 'age' is not supposed to be in the plural form but in the singular form, and it should use the article 'an' before it. So the correction should be "... many children are provided with mobile phones since an early age in order to ..."

- 2) ... because use of technology is ...

As for this sentence, the error is the missing article 'the' before the word 'use.' The sentence is incorrect without this article. So the revision should have been "... because the use of technology is ..."

- 3) ... because they want their children to stay calm without worrying about the risk of the smartphones to children.

In this sentence, we can see that there is an error in the article 'the' in front of the word 'smartphones.' This article is not needed here because there is already the article 'the' in front of the word 'risk' and because in this sentence, smartphones refer to the general term. So the correct sentence should have been "... because they want their children to stay calm without worrying about the risk of smartphones to children."

d) Preposition

The students also made some errors dealing with prepositions. There are times when the students used the wrong preposition or when they used preposition unnecessarily. Below are some examples of errors with preposition.

- 1) ... they often lack of maturity to handle cyberbullying ...

Here the error is in the preposition 'of.' In this sentence, it is not necessary to add this preposition and it should have been added the article 'the'. The correct sentence should have been "... they often lack the maturity to handle cyberbullying ..."

- 2) "Young children are too busy on their smartphones ..."

In this sentence, the preposition is incorrect since it is supposed to use 'with' instead of 'on.' That is why the correct sentence should have been "Young children are too busy on their smartphones ..."

- 3) They could also get attached into movies, games, ...

In this sentence, the student also made an error in the preposition. The word 'attached' is normally combined with the preposition 'to' and not 'into' like in this sentence. In other words, this is an error because 'into' does not collocate with the word 'attached.'

Besides errors related to grammar, the students also made errors related to mechanics. Like it was mentioned before, errors that are included in this category are spelling, capitalization, and

punctuation. Some examples and elaboration are presented below. Once again, the errors here are still combined between the male and female students' errors and are just presented based on the type of errors.

a) Spelling

For the spelling errors, the writer is not really sure if the errors the students made were because they were careless or because they did not really know the proper spelling of the words. There are not really that many spelling errors in the students' writings, but some of the examples are described below.

- 1) ... obesity can lead to serious attack in medical ...

The error from the sentence above is in the spelling of the word 'attack.' This is of course the incorrect spelling for this word since it is supposed to be spelled 'attack.' This word is actually misspelled several times by the same student in his paragraph, so perhaps he really did not know the proper spelling for this word.

- 2) Since it is accessible for everyone, there is a high chance for them to ...

It can be seen from the sentence above that the word 'accessible' is spelled incorrectly. The correct spelling of the word should be 'accessible.' This word is only used once by the student, so it is possible that she really did not know how to spell this word properly.

- 3) ... which could lead them to obesity dan many other health diseases.

The word that is not spelled correctly in the sentence above is 'diseases.' This word is supposed to be spelled 'diseases.' Since this word is only used once by the student, it is unclear if the student made an error because she was not careful or because she really did not know how to spell the word correctly.

b) Capitalization

Some of the students also made some errors with capitalization. Most of the time, the students capitalized letters in words that were not supposed to be capitalized. Some examples can be seen below.

- 1) For example, Distraction from Studies ...

In this sentence, the first letters in the words 'distraction' and 'studies' do not need to be capitalized because they are not proper names or anything like that. They are just common noun, so they should have been written all in lowercase.

- 2) ... smartphones can hinder the Social Skills Development by reducing ...

Another example can be seen in the sentence above. The first letter in the words 'social skills development' are also not supposed to be capitalized. The student probably thought that these words some key words that needed to be capitalized, but this is actually an error because it is not necessary to capitalize in the context of this sentence.

There are also times when the students did not capitalize when they should have capitalized the letters in some of the words. This is obvious from the examples presented below.

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- 3) internet is world wide connection.

The error in the sentence above can be found at the beginning of the sentence. The first letter in the word ‘internet’ should have been capitalized because it is the beginning of a new sentence. As a matter of fact, there are also several other errors in this sentence. So the correct one should have been “The internet is a world wide connection.”

c) Punctuation

Some errors related to punctuation were also made by the students in their writing. There are times when the students did not use the proper punctuation in their sentences. Some examples are explained below.

- 1) For example, Distraction from Studies Smartphones can lead to decreased attention in class.

In this example, the error is in the use of a period or full stop. There are actually supposed to be two separate sentences here, so there should have been a period before the word ‘smartphones.’ Without the period, the sentence is incorrect if it is combined with the previous one (although the previous one is actually also incorrect because it is an incomplete sentence).

- 2) ... distracted by random contents on social media, that will lead to ...

In the sentence above, the error is in the comma before the word ‘that.’ There should not be a comma there. So the correct sentence is “... distracted by random contents on social media that will lead to ...”

- 3) ... smartphones are a necessity for everyone to have, however I believe children should not be allowed to have one just yet.

Another error related to punctuation can be seen in the sentence above. Here, the mistake is before and after the word ‘however.’ If it is used in a sentence like this one, there should be a semicolon and a comma because the word ‘however’ is supposed to combine two separate sentences. So the revision should be “... smartphones are a necessity for everyone to have; however, I believe children should not be allowed to have one just yet.”

After looking at the students’ errors in writing, now these errors will be summarized and discussed here. This is to answer the two research questions. The summary of both the male and female students is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Summary of the Students’ Errors

	Types of Errors	Male Students	Female Students
Grammar	Tense and Structure	25	47
	Subject-Verb Agreement	1	1
	Article	6	4
	Preposition	3	6
Mechanics	Spelling	8	4
	Capitalization	22	20
	Punctuation	13	12
Total		78	94

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For the first research question which is about the types of errors, we can see from the table above that the errors in the students' writings can be grouped into grammatical and mechanical errors. The first group has four specific types of errors, which are tense and structure, subject-verb agreement, article, and preposition. For the mechanical error, there are spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. In terms of the most frequent error, the top three are tense and structure, capitalization, and punctuation. The least frequent error is the subject-verb agreement.

Again, even though the writer does not explore the reason why the students made these errors, the writer tries to give general comments and discussions on the possible reasons. First of all, tense and structure are probably the most frequent error because the students still have low grammatical competence because they are still in the second semester. They may have already learned English in high school or even junior high school, but they just started learning in the university for two semesters, so it is possible that their grammar is still not that good. Next, the students also made a lot of capitalization errors. Most of the time, the students did not capitalize the first letter of the first word in the new sentence. This may be an error because the students were not careful enough when writing. They already know that they always have to capitalize the first letter in a new sentence, but maybe they missed it because they were careless. However, there are also times when the students did not capitalize proper names such as YouTube, or they capitalized letters in words that did not need to be capitalized. Moreover, the students also made a lot of punctuation errors. Most of the errors of this type are missing commas or semicolons in their sentences. The students sometimes make very long sentences that should have been inserted some commas or even semicolons. Finally, the least frequent error is subject-verb agreement, maybe because the students already know that sentences in English should have at least a clear subject and verb. Only very few students made this error and only in one sentence. Maybe it is because they were also not careful and missed it.

To answer the second research question, Table 1 above shows that in total the female students made more errors compared to the male students. The female students made 94 errors while the male students made 78 errors in their writings. This is a bit surprising for the writer because based on the writers' experience in teaching, female students are more careful and perform better in language compared to the male students. But this time, the girls made more errors compared to the boys. However, we can also see that the frequency of the errors is very similar between the boys and the girls. For example, tense and structure are the most frequent for both groups, with the male having 25 errors and the female students having 47 errors in total. The least frequent is also subject-verb agreement for both of them. They also had similar results for the capitalization and punctuation errors. Overall, we can conclude that if we compare between the male and female learners, the results are quite similar.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

For this research, the writer proposes two research questions. The first is about the type of errors the students make in their writing, and the second question is about how the male and female students compare in terms of the errors they make. First, the students made several errors related to tense and structure (this is the most frequent error). They also made errors related to capitalization and punctuation, as well as other errors in their writing. The least frequent errors made by the students is related to subject-verb agreement. Based on this result, we can conclude that the students are still not very good at writing overall. They made quite a lot of errors. Of course, this is maybe understandable because they are still in their second semester.

For the second research question, after comparing the results between the male and female students, both the boys and the girls made very similar errors. In other words, there are not that many significant differences between the two groups. They both made a lot of errors related to tense

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and structure, and they both made the least errors in subject-verb agreement. Other errors such as capitalization and punctuation are also quite similar, not only in frequency, but also in the specific errors in their paragraphs. For example, not capitalizing the first letter in a new sentence is often made by both the boys and the girls. Therefore, the writer can conclude that gender does not really affect the type of errors made in writing. Of course, this is not a generalization but just what the writer can conclude based on the data for this research.

Suggestion

From the findings of the research, we can see that the students still made a lot of errors in their writings. There are also several types of errors that the students made from grammatical errors like tense and structure to mechanical errors like capitalization and punctuation. Therefore, the writer can suggest that the teacher or lecturer pay more attention to these errors and focus on improving them. Especially errors related to mechanics. For grammar errors, maybe it is difficult to fix until the students have improved their overall grammatical competence, but for errors related to mechanics, the writer believes that it is something that can be improved since it is more related to being careful when writing. So the teacher should remind the students to be more careful. Additionally, to improve students' writing ability so that they can avoid making mechanical errors, teachers can do more practice involving games so that the students can have a more pleasant and memorable learning experience. Lastly, the writer also suggests that the students make use of tools like Grammarly to help them avoid errors in their writing. The students can also learn from the errors because this program gives a brief description of the errors and some suggested revisions.

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