SURFACE STRATEGY TAXONOMY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING: A STUDY ON VERB TENSE USAGE

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Abstract

This study is aimed at analyzing errors of verb tense usage found in the learners' writing production. The second semester students of English Department, STAIN Gajah Putih Takengon enrolled in Writing II course were taken as the participants in this investigation. Eight narrative paragraphs were scrutinized closely to detect errors pertaining to verb tense. In this case, a classification of errors proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982 in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005) called Surface Strategy Taxonomy is applied. It comprises four sorts of errors: addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. The finding reveals that the learners' errors encompass three types of four aforementioned above, i.e. addition, omission, and misformation. Among those, misformation is found to be the most prevalent type commited by the learners, as many as 62 errors making up 72.94 % of all. It was subsequently followed by omission and addition which were 13 errors (15.29 %) and 10 errors (11.77 %) successively. Whereas misordering was not identified among the learners' errors on paragraph composition. Eventually, a pedagogical implication as a result of this research was made. English instructors are expected to accentuate more on likely-to-produce-errors items to the learners prior to composing a paragraph.

Keywords: Surface Strategy Taxonomy, Writing, Verb Tense

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a way of communication among people. It is a media in which the people are able to deliver messages to the readers. However, writing does not only encompass using a wide range of words in conveying the idea. These words are noteworthy to be arranged in such a way that the messages can be appropriately attained by the readers. In this case, grammatical knowledge is inevitably possessed by the writer; otherwise, a writing production can result in communication problem to its readers. In unveiling their research finding pertaining to English essay of comparison and contrast, Karim, et al (2005, in Al-husban, 2018) noted that the students' errors on the usage of verbs lead to miscommunication. That is to say, "Language without grammar would be chaotic and cause the same communication problem, such as grammatical errors in writing and

speaking" (Batstone, 1994). Bondman (1951, cited in Abdullah, 2013) also stated that grammar is essentially the analytical approach to a language which will help to learn a language.

The appropriate use of words grammatically especially in writing will result in the proper understanding of the readers. It will make the readers catch the writers' idea easily from pieces of writing as it is noted that delivering idea or message is the main goal of writing. The necessity of using good grammar in writing can also be seen in many rubrics of scoring writing which takes this aspect into consideration. It gives contribution with certain percentage in assessing the work of writing. In other words, grammar takes its part in producing excellent writing.

According to the mention above, As Brown (2000) stated, "Compositions were supposed to (a) meet certain standards of prescribed English rhetorical style, (b) reflect accurate grammar, and (c) be organized in conformity with what the audience would consider to be conventional." He added that a good deal of attention was placed on how well a student's final product measured up against a list of criteria that included content, organization, vocabulary use, grammatical use, and mechanical considerations such as spelling and punctuation.

Furthermore, writing is one of four important skills in English. It is perceived as more challenging skill for students to master. They must have an idea to be able to produce a piece of writing; conversely, when students do not have idea, they will be difficult to write as there is nothing (story, experience or concept) to be expressed on their papers. In other words, idea is the most basic thing in writing. It will be more likely obtained easily when people have extensive knowledge, and this will mostly be gotten from reading activity. Hence, writing is said to be closely related with reading activity. As Brown (2004) said the following "The participation of reading performance is inevitable in writing effective paragraph. To a great extent, writing is the art of emulating what one reads. You read an effective paragraph, you analyze the ingredients of its cuccess, you emulate it."

Apart from ideas, to produce a piece of writing also takes a quite long process. Once students finish a paragraph, for instance, it does not mean they have accomplished their assignment. That composition will be checked by the Writing instructor and some comments concerning improvement of writing quality will be left there. Later, the students will revise their compositions based on the suggestions of the instructor.

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This sort of revision will be continously repeated untill the piece of writing reach the best version which contains no error or few errors. As it is defined that writing is not about the product, but it is more about the process. So, writing is a process to yield a good composition. This is one reason to say that writing skill becomes challenged for students as it requires ernest learning and practice to promote the skill. Oshima and Hogue (1998) asserted that writing is a process, not a product which indicates that a piece of writing is never complete; that is, it is always possible to review and revise, and review and revise again.

Besides being challenged for students, the activity of writing is also a tough job for the teachers. They are demanded to devote a great deal of time and energy especially in giving feedback on students' works. Adapted from Shih 1986 (cited in Brown, 2000), one of the process approaches to writing instruction do give students feedback throughout the composing process (not just on the final product) as they attempt to bring their expression closer and closer to intention.

In addition, writing in English is indeed one of notable skills that must be mastered by English Department students. It is, therefore, a number of writing courses (Writing I – Writing IV or other terms) become compulsory subjects for them. In learning writing, there are several skills to be mastered, one of them is grammar. Brown (2004: 221-222) stated that one of skills in writing is to use acceptable grammatical systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), patterns, and rules. First year English Department students of STAIN Gajah Putih Takengon are enrolled in Writing II course in second semester.

After taking this subject, they are expected to produce several types of paragraph which are well-developed and grammatically correct; nevertheless, their compositions seem to be problematic with verb tense usage. As proposed by Brown (2014) that the most challenging areas in which students struggle are grammar and lexis. For this reason, the current investigation is trying to reveal the errors emerging on the students' paragraph writing. Types of errors and the most prevalent one are the two specified inquiries which are to be unveiled in this study.

Regarding the necessity of error analysis in language learning, a number of similar investigations respect to EFL/ESL learners' errors in several Asian countries have been carried out in last decade. It indicates that error is of leading areas to be further studied and thus, still becomes a field of interest for EFL/ESL researchers to conduct. To begin

with, a study by Maniam and Rajagopal (2016) investigated simple past tense errors in ESL Malaysian undergraduates writing. Thirty writing productions were collected and analysed. The findings unveiled that the highest rate of errors is under the misformation type followed by omission and few addition. It was due to overgeneralization of the grammar rule especially in the context of transforming the irregular verb to the past tense form of the verb. Next, Barzegar (2013) analyzed the errors produced by EFL Persian students.

Ten students were asked to convert ten Persian sentences to English language. The result revealed that the majority of errors produced by Persian learners involve syntactico-morphological errors (descriprive errors), substitution (source of errors), and intralingual (source of errors). Alhaysony (2012) also examined errors of article among Saudi female EFL students. A hundred first-year students were asked to write on one of six different descriptive topics related to their life and culture in one and a half hours. The result indicated that 57% of the errors were interlingual ones, indicating that the influence of the native language. L1 interference strongly influences the process of SLA of the articles, having a negative effect on the learning process.

In a similar way, Ting et al (2010) conducted a research on grammatical errors in spoken English of university students. Error analysis of 126 oral interactions showed that the five common grammar errors made by the learners are preposition, question, article, plural forms of noun, subject-verb agreement and tense. Apart from findings based on linguistic category classification, the main ways by which students modify the target forms are misinformation and omission, with addition of elements or misordering being less frequent. Moreover, another study was also conducted on grammar errors on Korean EFL learners TOEIC Speaking Test by Yoon (2012). Eighty four undergraduates who took the TOIEC speaking test part five became source of data in this study. The result revealed that errors of omission were the highest at 74.9 % followed by those of misformation at 19.9 %, addition at 3.5 %, and misordering at 1.7 %.

Hereinafter, a study on grammatical errors in spoken English to Thai learners was also performed by Phettongkam (2017). The results found out that omission errors accounted for more than half of the errors made by the the learners, followed by misinformation, addition, and misordering. And the 3 most occuring errors according to linguistic categorization were plural form, article, and verb form. Another research was

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by Kasmani and Jangodazi (2014) examining errors by two groups, i.e. Turkish (bilingual) and Persian (monolingual) speaking EFL students. The finding indicated that the learners of the target language (TL) deviate from TL rules which was perceived that interference from their mother tongue was not the core cause of the two groups' errors under the investigation although there were some differences between the two groups' errors which are not statistically significant.

The next research was carried out to Jordanian first-year university students' English language writing (Al-husban, 2018). The findings showed that the most frequent error category was omission and addition, and the errors committed by the participants are attributed to intralingual difficulties due to the deformation of language learning as well as limited interlingual errors. Subsequently, a study on Filipino ESL students in written English sentences (Cruz, 2019) yielded that the respondents' greatest number of errors were in expository paragraph, followed by narrative, argumentatitve, and descriptive paragraphs. And the most common errors in these paragraphs were on misformation and omission.

Respect to the foregoing goals of this current investigation, error analysis (EA) is considered appropriate to be applied in this current study. It is defined as "the study and analysis of the errors made by EFL learners" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, in Al-husban, 2018). They also noted that EA could be implemented in order to identify the methods students use while learning the English language, study causes of learners' errors, and determine the difficulties in language learning. One of the EA purposes is pedagogic, i.e., errors provided information which could be used to sequence items for teaching or to devise remedial lessons (Ellis, 1986: 51).

The procedure of EA as proposed by Corder (1974) in Ellis (1986: 51-52) are as follows:

1. A corpus of language is selected.

   This involves deciding on the size of the sample, the medium to be sampled, and the homogeneity of the sample (with regard to the learners' age, L1 background, stage of development, etc.)

2. The errors in the corpus are identified.

   It is a necessity in this stage to distinguish 'lapses' (i.e. deviant sentences that are the result of processing limitations) from 'errors' (i.e. deviant sentences that are

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the result of lack of competence). In addition, sentences can be 'overtly idiosyncratic' (i.e. they are ill formed in terms of target language rules) and 'covertly idiosyncratic' (i.e. sentences that are superficially well formed but when their context of use is examined are clearly ungrammatical).

3. The errors are classified.

This involves assigning a grammatical description to each error.

4. The errors are explained

In this stage of the procedure, an attempt is made to identify the psycholinguistic cause of errors.

5. The errors are evaluated

This stage involves assessing the seriousness of each error in order to take principled teaching decisions. Error evaluation is necessary only if the purpose of the EA is pedagogic.

In analyzing errors, surface strategy taxonomy proposed by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982 in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005) is performed in this study. They classified errors into four types, namely addition, omission, misformation, and misordering.

To begin with, addition is an error type which is indicated by the presence of unwanted item in a sentence. In other words, students add an item into their sentences which is actually unnecessary. This leads error to come up in their writing. It happens when the learners overuse certain grammatical rules of the target language. For instance, My sister and I **walks** to school together. Since the pronoun or subject become plural, then adding –s to the base verb is unneeded in this sentence. The correct one is My sister and I **walk** to school together.

The second type of error is omission. Just reversed to the first one, this sort of error is signified by the absence of certain item which is required in a sentence. For example, I not study last night. This sentence needs an auxiliary. To make it correct, did is inserted: I **did** not study last night.

The subsequent type is misformation. This error occurs when the learners write a wrong form of certain morphemes or structures in a sentence. For instance, We **go** to the beach last weekend. Since it is a past action, then past participle is needed in this sentence. The correct sentence is "We **went** to the beach last weekend."

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The final type of error classification is misordering. It is indicated by the incorrect placement of certain morphemes. For example, He drove yesterday a car. The correct version is "He drove a car yesterday."

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative-descriptive approach. It is to get a description of errors that appear on the learners' compositions. For this reason, a number of steps in regards of data analysis are taken. First, the learners' compositions are read thoroughly and the errors detected in their compositions are highlighted. Second, words or phrases containing errors are rewritten on a piece of paper to be seriously analyzed in depth further. Afterwards, a number of errors are classified into four types: addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. The final step is that the number of errors are calculated in each category and then a statistical tool, percentage, is applied. Above all, after the aforesaid steps are performed, an illustration of the learners' errors can be obtained and a conclusion can be met in attempt to anwer the research questions.

The subject of this study is eight second-semester students which are registered in a writing class, called Writing II. This course serves the students with several types of paragraphs and one of them is past narrative which becomes the focus of this investigation. The subject is selected purposively, i.e those who fulfill the ensuing two criteria: full participation in classroom and production of a well-developed paragraph. The final test answer sheets are taken as the data in this research. It is assumed that it serves a better and more accurate information due to the fact that the learners have attended the course in such a lengthy period of time. Apart from it, they are considered to have devoted the best effort in facing final examination.

The focus of this study is the use of verb tense in composing a past narrative paragraph. Past form, in this case, is the supposed verb tense to be used as the learners are required to write a paragraph telling their experience. In fact, most verbs are found to be written not in past forms. And even when they use past form, at the same time, the verbs are used mistakenly. In other words, a lot of errors are presumably commited by the learners related to verb tense usage. Hence, a further investigation is in need of unveiling the phenomenon in this case. To this end, two research questions are proposed in this study, namely what types of errors appeared on the learners' composition? and what error do the students frequently commit?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the data analysis, it is found that the total error commited by the learners in regards of using correct verb tense in telling experience is 85. It is generally recognized that past form is the exact verb that should be implemented in conveying past events. Of all errors detected, misformation is the most-frequently-used error type appeared on the students' work, that is 62 errors making up 72.94 % of the total. Then, it is followed by omission, addition, and misordering with the number of errors is 13 (15.29 %), 10 (11.77 %), and 0 (0.00 %) respectively. Each type of classification will be subsequently illustrated in the order of importance, starting from the most-often-commited error, as follows:

Misformation

As has been discussed in the literature review, this sort of error occurs when a word is used in the wrong form in the sentence. It happens for 62 times in the students' work. Some of them can be noticed in the following illustration. First, it is "*I saw some people picked up coffee and we **stop** for a moment to saw fruits of coffee.*" This sentence contains an error by using word "stop". As it tells about an action that happened in the past, then past form is required which is "stopped". Besides, there are also some verbs which are mistakenly used in this sentence; however, that kind of mistake doesn't include in the focus of this study and thus, will not be discussed further. The suggested revise of the above sentence is "*I saw some people picking up coffee and we **stopped** for a moment to see fruits of coffee*".

Second, sentence "*In short, my family **maked** a surprise in my bedroom.*" also has an error with the formation of verb. Past form "made" is an appropriate verb to write instead of "maked". The revised sentence would be "In short, my family **made** a surprise in my bedroom." The last description of this error type is "*Then in journey we **stop** for a moment to fill up gasoline.*" This sentence also uses the incorrect form of past verb, just like the first example, it is "stop". The word "stopped" is the best to substitute in this sentence. Hence, the better one would be *"Then in journey we **stopped** for a moment to fill up gasoline"*.

Omission

This type of errors is signified by the absence of certain morphemes which are needed in sentences. The occurence of this error will result in grammatically incorrect

sentences. To begin with, the first example is *"I not brought."* This sentence misses an auxiliary which is needed in negative sentence, and "did" is a proper one applied in this sentence. Thus, the revised sentence would be *"I **did** not bring"*. Next, the sentence *"We around the museum."* has the same missing word, to be in past form is necessarily required in this sentence. Adding "were" in this sentence makes it grammatically correct, that is *"We **were** around the museum"*. The final example is "*I very happy with this moment."* This sentence also lacks of to be since it is a nominal one. Inserting to be "was" makes it better and it would be *"I **was** very happy with this moment."*

Addition

The ensuing kind of error is addition, which is indicated by the presence of the unwanted certain morphemes in the sentence. It is just in the opposite of omission. To illustrate, the sentence "*They ask me to open what **did** they give."* contains unnecessary auxiliary which should be omitted to make the sentence correct. What's more, the verbs *"a*sk" and "give" will be changed to "asked" and "give" successively; nonetheless, these errors do not include in this type. So, the better revised sentence becomes *"They asked me to open what they gave."* Second, "*It **is** almost made me dropped out."* also has the unwanted to be "is"*. Containing a different type of error, the verb "dropped" is changed to "drop", so it is revised to *"It almost made me drop out."* The subsequent examples have the same error, the unwanted to be, in them. To specify, "*I **am** forgot."* and "The examination **is** began."* are revised to "*I forgot."* a*nd "The examination began."* respectively.

Misordering

Lastly, misordering is an error in which several words are arranged in reverse order. For instance, "I not was happy at that time." places "to be" after "not" which in fact to be "was" should precede "not". This sentence can be revised to *"I was not happy at that time."* That notwithstanding, it is interesting that such error is not discovered in this investigation.

All in all, it can be deduced that misformation constitutes the sort of error that is frequently commited by the learners. Almost three-quarters of all errors emerging on the learners belong to misformation, that is 62 errors or 72.94 %. While the succeeding most common errors are omission, addition, and misordering, namely 13 (15.29 %), 10 (11.77 %), and 0 (0.00 %) successively.

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Indeed, misordering is the least frequent error performed by the learners, even none of those errors is committed by the learners. This finding is exactly in line with Muhamad's research result (2013) unveiling that just above half of Malaysian students' errors in oral presentation belong to misinformation, which is then followed by omission, addition, and misordering. Maniam and Rajagopal (2016) also yielded the same finding when analyzing simple past tense errors to ESL Malaysian undergraduates writing.

They found misinformation was the highest errors produced by the learners, i.e. 63.7% and 64.6% in letter and essay respectively, followed by omission (29% and 30.5%) and addition (7.3% and 4.9%). Other similar findings were by Ting et al (2010) resulting that misinformation and omission the most frequent errors in university students' oral interactions, that is 38.13% and 34.02 % successively, and by Cruz (2019) who discovered that misinformation was the most prevalent type of errors made by Filipino ESL students in their writing English sentences, viz. 37.43%, followed by omission (34.5%), addition (19.88%), and misordering (8.19%).

On the other hand, there were some studies producing somewhat discrepant findings to this present investigation. Yoon (2012), for instance, found that omission was the highest error type consisting of 74.9% produced by Korean EFL learners in TOEIC speaking test. Likewise, in spoken English, undergraduate Thai learners produced errors the most of omission type, accounted for more than half of the total errors. In the same way, Al-husban (2018) found that omission and addition were the most two frequent errors commited by Jordanian first-year university students in paragraph writing. Lastly, finding on Saad's and Sawalmeh's study (2014) also revealed that omission accounted for the majority of errors produced by L2 Malaysian learners in role play presentations.

From the aforementioned findings, it can be assumed that the learners' committing errors result from the distinct system of two languages. In the learners' native language, Bahasa Indonesia, it is not found different ways in stating an action which happens at present or past. In other words, they use the same verbs in both tenses. Obviously, it is exceedingly different from English language which distinguishes the way of expressing an event in present tense and that of expressing an event in past tense. This difference, therefore, can result in a number of errors produced by the learners since they learn a quite different system of that foreign language. This circumstance is in line with the idea as

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noted by Rod Ellis (1986: 34) that the greater the difference, the greater the difficulty and the more numerous errors will be.

CONCLUSSION AND SUGGESTION

Eventually, several points can be summarized concerning the errors commited by the learners in using verb tense when composing a past narrative paragraph. First, the learners conducted errors in three categories of four, they are: misformation, omission, and addition. Next, of all categories, misformation is the sort of error in which the learners exceedingly often commit, that is 62 of the total 85 errors or 72.94 %. Afterward, the reason for commiting errors by the English Foreign Language learners is likely a result of the discrepant system of their native and foreign languages. Subsequently, it is suggested that the language instructors accentuate more the discrepancies of both languages to the learners prior to learning, so that the learners can be more conscientiously in producing sentences in English.

This study, however, has limitation. It is restricted only on analyzing verb tenses in composing a narrative paragraph. As a suggestion for a further investigation, it can be expanded to analyzing more aspects in the learners' writing or probably on more various kinds of paragraph or essay.

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