FIRST-SEMESTER EFL STUDENTS: A SURFACE STRATEGY TAXONOMY APPROACH

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Abstract

The present study sought to identify grammatical and syntactic errors in EFL students' descriptive writing. The study was conducted on the basis of the observation that first-semester students had recently encountered difficulties accurately applying English grammar in creative and descriptive contexts. Given the importance of English syntax in academic settings, this research was conducted at a private university in Tangerang Selatan. There were 10 participants in this study who were enrolled in the first semester and had recently completed descriptive writing assignments. To obtain accurate data, the researchers collected student-written descriptive essays through a qualitative study employing a case study design. The students were asked to produce texts describing themselves. These essays were then analyzed using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by James (1998) to identify, classify, and report linguistic patterns. Under this category, errors were classified into four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. The result showed an interpretation of how students manipulate the surface structure of the target language. The findings of this research are expected to shed light on common issues and suggest that identifying these specific patterns is very influential in improving writing and confidence.

Keywords: Error analysis, Surface Strategy Taxonomy, Descriptive Text

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Introduction

Nowadays, every student is expected to be proficient in their own writing, which influences how they compose sentences and

produce well-structured texts. The unique and identical writing production is influenced by cognitive processing. This notion suggests that every student has a distinct linguistic perspective, which shapes their understanding of English grammar. Furthermore, each student has their own understanding of syntax from prior learning, including in-class study.

Some linguists have identified cognitive and analytical processes as Error Analysis (EA), through which educators and researchers gain awareness of the systematic patterns in students' language. It can be compared to how people perceive the word; error analysis can serve as a tool for teachers and researchers to understand students' difficulties in their writing development. In other words, students' errors in their writing can be analyzed through the way they create sentences or text. This means that we can assess their writing proficiency from their writing.

Several contemporary scholars have proposed definitions and concepts regarding error analysis (EA) that align with modern linguistic theories. According to Fawaid et al. (2022), error analysis is defined as the systematic process of determining the incidence, nature, causes, and consequences of unsuccessful language production. In other words, error analysis serves as a means of understanding the underlying linguistic stimuli and the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition. This analytical process often involves examining the language's surface structure, specifically focusing on how students compose sentences and texts (Lionny & Kusumadewi, 2022). Moreover, Arifin et al. (2024) state that this systematic approach is crucial for a realistic assessment of a learner's interlanguage development. Furthermore, Ningsi et al. (2025) explain that this process does not end with merely identifying a mistake; it continues with an in-depth interpretation of the error as a sign of the learner's active cognitive strategies.

One kind of foundational writing task is descriptive text. This can serve as a link to introduce the concept of error analysis. For EFL students, descriptive text is a critical skill because it requires students to demonstrate their grammatical competence, including parts of speech and tenses. This ability is beyond just communication. It is a gateway to academic proficiency and the ability to deliver detailed English speaking in an academic setting. In several types of writing, writing a sentence or text is considered difficult for first-semester students because this genre requires strong grammatical and syntactic skills. Moreover, writing for first-semester students does not appear to be a strong capability.

Some experts argue that descriptive text is a fundamental genre for assessing EFL students' writing proficiency, and that many educational

institutions use it as a foundation for literacy. In particular, analysing students' grammar and syntax in written texts is crucial for teachers to obtain descriptive and factual information. Given this importance, a key to analyzing students' writing performance and academic ability is understanding the errors students make, such as those categorized by James (1998).

Many studies have examined the process of writing descriptive text in second language acquisition (SLA) and composition studies. According to Shohamy (2001), students can meet academic standards when teachers provide effective instructional feedback, which plays a key role in improving students' linguistic accuracy. In line with Brindley (2001) and Weigle (2002), students use strategies to both simplify and generalize language, which researchers examine in error analysis. In other words, identifying patterns of omission, addition, misformation, or misordering is essential for students to perform well and succeed in higher education.

Descriptive writing can be used to evaluate students' knowledge of grammar and their ability to compose accurate, coherent sentences or texts that describe people, places, and objects. According to Eckes and Grotjahn (2006), this can be difficult for non-native speakers of English due to the complexity of English morphology and syntax. They said that students face obstacles in tense and word order, which can affect the effect of their description. Moreover, students need to apply their knowledge to structure the sentence correctly. Hsu and Chiu (2015) state that it is challenging for students who lack a grasp of specific grammatical structures to express their ideas effectively.

When writing descriptive text, students need to demonstrate proficiency in English grammar, sentence structure, and syntactic accuracy. Although this seems important, students report significant challenges with the process that can affect their confidence and academic performance. Although several studies have examined issues such as language proficiency, there remains a gap in understanding the errors that writing students make when writing descriptive texts in the first semester. Through a systematic taxonomy of the errors, this study aims to offer a more focused understanding of these linguistic barriers.

Understanding students' errors is important for teachers for several reasons. First, it can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of current writing instruction and materials. If students consistently produce errors of omission or misformation in their descriptive texts, this indicates a need for targeted instruction or revised resources. Second, understanding linguistic patterns can help teachers develop more effective teaching

strategies to address these challenges, particularly by boosting students' performance and confidence in completing future writing assignments.

Additionally, studying these challenging offers crucial insights into students' "interlanguage". According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback from teachers, based on their subjective experiences and error patterns, has a significant impact on students' learning outcomes. They argue that identifying specific struggles can influence a student's motivation and engagement. In other words, how teachers identify and gain these surface-level errors can shape the students' performance and success in English writing.

Moreover, at the university level, first-semester students might face considerable challenges in mastering descriptive writing because this is not usual for them in composing a sentence or a text. These difficulties may come from several factors, such as gaps in grammar knowledge or interference from their native language. While some research has offered insights into writing trends, there still a need to understand the specific types of errors made by first-year students using a structured taxonomy. Using James's (1998) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, this study focuses on specific errors: students' omissions, additions, misformations, and misorderings.

Thus, this study explores the grammatical and syntactical errors encountered by EFL students in their descriptive writing. By utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the goal of the research is to uncover the specific patterns of error faced by ten selected participants. This detailed analysis will provide personal insights into their linguistic struggles, offering a perspective on how students manipulate the surface structure of English at the very start of their studies.

Research Methods

Design

This study employed a case study, which is a part of a qualitative study design that matches the needs of the research in terms of students' grammatical and syntactical errors faced by EFL students when writing descriptive texts. This approach aims to gain a deeper understanding of the specific linguistic errors that students encounter in their first semester at university.   According to Creswell (2009, p. 23), qualitative research is a method used to investigate and understand individuals or groups in relation to social or human issues. In this context, qualitative research provides valuable insights into the students' interlanguage development, moving beyond mere numbers to uncover the meanings behind their writing difficulties.

Some researchers agree that the qualitative descriptive studies are particularly suitable for this investigation. By analyzing students' descriptive essays, this study explores how learners manipulate the surface structure of the target language. Therefore, this study uses descriptive language to explain the nature of errors, employing a qualitative approach often referred to as descriptive qualitative. As supported by Ary et al. (2010), "qualitative research seeks to understand a phenomenon by focusing on the total picture rather than breaking it down into variables. The goal of qualitative research is a holistic image and depth of expertise as opposed to a numeric analysis of statistics."

Furthermore, this study employs the Surface Strategy Taxonomy proposed by James (1998), which uses a qualitative content analysis design. This framework is crucial because the study aims to analyze it thoroughly into the four types of errors: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. By using this taxonomy, the study provides a detailed interpretation of the challenges faced by the first-semester students, allowing the researcher to identify, classify, and report linguistic patterns that emerge in their descriptive writing. This qualitative study ensures that the findings illuminate common issues faced by students and suggest potential improvements in writing pedagogy.

Participants

The participants of the study are from the first semester of the English department in one of the universities in Tangerang, Indonesia. There are more than 30 students in the class. They are the foundation of developing their academic writing. However, the study only used ten students as the participants, who were chosen intentionally based on specific criteria. They have completed their initial descriptive writing assignments and demonstrated a diverse range of grammatical variations, yielding rich data for analyzing errors at the beginning of their studies.

Instrument

The techniques used and employed to gather data in this study include the collection of student-written documents, a classification checklist based on James's (1998) Surface Strategy Taxonomy, and qualitative content analysis. These instruments are designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the grammatical and syntactic errors students encounter when composing descriptive texts. The chosen methods ensure that the study captures the physical deviations in the students' writing through a systematic lens.

1. Document Collection (Descriptive Essays)

   In this study, the document collection process involves gathering authentic, primary language samples directly from student participants, with a deliberate focus on the production of descriptive texts. According to Fawaid et al. (2022), this methodological technique is prioritized because it allows for the observation of naturalistic language use, providing a rich dataset that reflects the students' actual communicative competence rather than simulated responses. By focusing on descriptive essays, the researcher is able to capture a wide array of contextualized grammatical structures and vocabulary choices, which are essential for a thorough identification of the systematic errors occurring in an academic setting (Arifin et al., 2024).

2. Surface Strategy Taxonomy Checklist

   In order to systematically process the gathered documents and ensure objective data management, a specialized classification checklist is meticulously employed. This instrument is structured according to contemporary applications of the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, which provides a rigorous framework for the precise categorization of linguistic deviations. As established in the recent literature by Ningsi et al. (2025), the analysis involves the distribution of identified errors into four distinct and specific categories: omission, where a required item is absent; addition, where an unnecessary item is present; misformation, involving the use of the wrong form of a structure; and misordering, characterized by the incorrect placement of morphemes or groups of morphemes. By utilizing this detailed checklist, the researcher can transform raw qualitative data into a structured inventory of errors, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the students' syntactical and morphological challenges (Arifin et al., 2024).

3. Qualitative Content Analysis

   The data is gathered through the collection of student-written documents, such as descriptive essays, which serve as the primary evidence of linguistic performance (Fawaid et al., 2022). Once collected, these texts are screened to identify systematic errors, distinguishing them from occasional slips in performance (Arifin et al., 2024). These identified errors are then categorized using a Surface Strategy Taxonomy checklist, where they are organized into specific types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (Ningsi et al., 2025). Following this classification, qualitative content analysis is applied to interpret the

nature and underlying causes of the deviations, thereby revealing the cognitive mechanisms and active strategies employed by the learners (Lionny & Kusumadewi, 2022). Finally, the results are synthesized through methodological triangulation to ensure a comprehensive and valid assessment of the students' grammatical and syntactical development.

4. Methodological Triangulation

By combining document collection, taxonomic checklists, and content analysis, researchers achieve triangulation. As noted by Arifin et al. (2024), this multi-layered approach ensures a comprehensive and realistic assessment of the learner's language competence, reducing researcher bias and increasing the validity of the findings.

Data Collection

The data collection methods used in this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic challenges students face in descriptive writing. To capture a wide range of error patterns, a combination of document study and systematic classification was employed:

1. Document Collection: The primary data source consists of descriptive essays written by the ten participants. These texts provide authentic evidence of the students' "interlanguage" and their ability to apply English grammar rules in a creative context.

2. Identification and Classification: Each essay was carefully reviewed to identify deviations from the target language. These identified errors were then categorized using James's (1998) taxonomy, specifically looking for instances of omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

3. Content Analysis: The collected errors were examined through qualitative content analysis to identify common patterns. This helped to clarify the specific syntactical hurdles faced by first-semester students.

4. Methodological Triangulation: To ensure the reliability of the findings, the data were analyzed using multiple stages of review. By combining the identification of errors with a structured theoretical taxonomy, the study was able to capture a well-rounded view of the students' writing difficulties, enhancing the validity of the results.

Data analysis

The analysis of all data was conducted qualitatively. The following is the detail of how all the sources were analyzed. In analyzing the data, there was a systematic approach used to identify errors in descriptive essays. The essays were gathered and read thoroughly to find the mistakes based on the four types proposed by James (1998). These errors were carefully selected, identified, and categorized into specific types. Then, the data was presented in tables and descriptive sentences to organize the findings into clear patterns. The qualitative analysis in this study is conducted by following a structured flow model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as established in the methodological framework proposed by Lionny and Kusumadewi (2022). Finally, the analysis was used to get more data regarding the sources of errors, such as L1 interference or overgeneralization of rules, to ensure the results of the study were valid.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the grammatical and syntactical errors encountered by first-semester EFL students, serving as a direct reflection of their developing interlanguage systems. Through qualitative content analysis of descriptive essays, systematic error patterns were identified that reveal the "latent psychological structure" of the learners as they attempt to internalize the target language rules (Fawaid et al., 2022). Using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, the results highlight significant struggles with linguistic accuracy—particularly in the use of the verb "to be" and the construction of simple present tense sentences—which represent the transitional stages of the students' interlanguage development rather than mere random mistakes (Arifin et al., 2024; Ningsi et al., 2025). This analysis confirms that these errors are evidence of the learners' active cognitive strategies as they navigate the complexities between their native language and English (Lionny & Kusumadewi, 2022).

1. Omission

   The analysis revealed that omission was a frequent error type among the participants. Students often left out mandatory elements required for a well-formed sentence. The most prominent finding in this category was the omission of the verb "be" in nominal sentences. For example, one student wrote, *"My cat __ very cute,"* omitting the auxiliary "is." Another participant wrote, *"The flowers __ blooming,"* leaving out the plural

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marker "are." Based on the findings, many students struggle to remember that English sentences require a verb, especially when describing qualities in the simple present tense. This suggests that students may be influenced by their native language structures (L1 interference), where the equivalent of the verb "to be" is often absent or used differently in descriptive contexts.

2. Addition

Additional errors occurred when students included unnecessary items in their sentences. A common trend was the double marking of the verb "be" alongside a main verb. For instance, several students produced sentences such as *"They are play video game"* or *"I am speak English."* In these cases, the auxiliary "is/are" was added incorrectly to a simple present tense verb. The data indicate that students frequently overapply the rule of using "be" because they are accustomed to using it in descriptive patterns. This "double-be" addition suggests that while students are aware of the verb's importance in descriptive text, they do not yet fully understand when its use is prohibited in favor of a standard action verb.

3. Misformation

Misformation was the most prevalent error type identified in the study. This involved the use of the wrong form of a morpheme or structure. The findings show that students made significant errors in subject-verb agreement and the incorrect selection of "be" forms. For example, students often wrote, *"He am a tall man"* or *"My sisters is very nice."* According to the results above, students face a significant challenge in matching the subject with the correct form of the verb "to be." Even in simple present tense—the primary tense for descriptive text—the students frequently chose the wrong singular or plural markers. This indicates a lack of morphological mastery, where the student knows a verb is needed but cannot yet retrieve the correct form from their mental lexicon.

4. Misordering

Misordering errors were less frequent than misformation but remained a notable challenge. These errors occurred when students placed words in an incorrect sequence, particularly within noun phrases. One student wrote, *"I have a cat white"* instead of "white cat." Based on these observations, it is clear that students' internal grammar (interlanguage) is still heavily influenced by their mother tongue's word order. When descriptive writing requires the use of adjectives before nouns, students occasionally revert to the syntax of their first language, resulting in misordered phrases that hinder the natural flow of the description.

5. Strategies for Pedagogical Improvement

Based on the high frequency of errors related to the verb "to be" and tense consistency, the participants' writing indicates a need for specific instructional shifts. The patterns show that students would benefit from targeted grammar workshops focusing on the distinction between nominal and verbal sentences in the simple present tense. Furthermore, incorporating "error correction" activities—where students practice identifying omission and misformation in their own drafts—could help bridge the gap between their current interlanguage and the target language norms.

The findings suggest that by focusing on these four surface-level categories, teachers can provide more precise feedback. Rather than simply labeling a paragraph as "poor grammar," educators can point out specific patterns of omission or misformation, helping first-semester students build the foundational accuracy needed for more advanced academic writing.

Discussion

Based on the analysis in this study, the findings show that first-semester EFL students face several ongoing challenges in composing descriptive texts. These challenges include persistent issues with grammatical accuracy and syntactical precision, specifically manifested through omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. These results are consistent with the theoretical framework of James (1998), who highlighted that analyzing the surface structure of errors is essential to understanding a learner's linguistic development. The findings indicate that students struggle significantly with the verb "to be" and noun phrase construction, which are pivotal elements of the descriptive genre.

In response to these challenges, the findings of this study emphasize the need for more focused writing strategies. Specifically, addressing the frequent omission of the copula "be" supports Sridhar's (1980:103) argument that error analysis provides a realistic assessment of the learner's language by validating the influence of the native language. This is also in line with Corder's (1967) view that errors are significant indicators of the strategies learners use to internalize the target language. The high frequency of misformation errors suggests that students require more than just vocabulary; they need a stronger morphological foundation to select the correct grammatical forms.

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Furthermore, the study's focus on targeted grammar instruction within descriptive contexts is consistent with recent research emphasizing that grammatical accuracy is the backbone of effective writing. The prevalence of misordering errors, likely caused by L1 interference, supports the findings of Brown (2007), who noted that a learner's "interlanguage" is a unique system that often reverts to native syntax when the learner is under the cognitive load of creative writing. This underlines the importance of pedagogical interventions that move beyond general rules and address the specific "surface" deviations students make during the draft process.

The study's recommendation to implement error-correction activities is well-supported by existing research on feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasized the power of feedback in improving student outcomes, noting that when students understand the specific nature of their errors—whether they are adding unnecessary elements or omitting required ones—they become more capable of self-regulation. By identifying patterns of omission and misformation through James's (1998) taxonomy, teachers can provide a more nuanced interpretation of student struggles, moving away from generic corrections toward a more detailed linguistic dialogue.

In conclusion, these findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to writing pedagogy that combines genre-based instruction with systematic error analysis. This approach would better prepare first-semester students for the specific demands of academic writing. By incorporating insights from previous research, it is clear that improvements in teaching strategies are essential to help students overcome the challenges of descriptive text composition. This structured approach will not only enhance grammatical accuracy but also build greater confidence in the students' ability to produce coherent and professional English texts from the very beginning of their university journey.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that students have several challenges in their grammatical and syntactical aspects when writing descriptive texts. The students found that they consistently struggled with omission, addition, misformation, and misordering, especially in using the verb "to be" and adjective-noun sequencing. These problems arose because English morphology is complex and is subject to interference from their native language. It shows that teachers need to use targeted instructional strategies to help students reach the target language norms.

There are some suggestions regarding the research findings and conclusions. First, teachers are supposed to evaluate writing instruction

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methods in the class. Moreover, they are also expected to use "consciousness-raising" tasks to highlight common error patterns. Instead of general grammar drills, instructors should use James's taxonomy as a feedback tool to help students identify their mistakes.

Second, another researcher is expected to explore these error patterns in other genres, such as narrative or argumentative texts, to better understand how error types might shift. Additionally, it is recommended to use a longitudinal approach, tracking the same students across multiple semesters to examine how these error patterns evolve as their proficiency increases.

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