

Morphological and Syntactic Deficiencies in EFL Narrative Writing: A Surface Strategy Taxonomy Analysis of Past Tense Errors

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ABSTRACT

Mastering the simple past tense in narrative writing remains a significant grammatical hurdle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners due to the complexities of verb inflection. This study investigates the specific morphological and syntactic errors in using the simple past tense among tenth-grade students, aiming to identify the types and dominant categories of these deficiencies. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through a 90-minute narrative writing test from a random sample of 20 students at SMA Negeri 1 Popayato. The identified grammatical deviations were analyzed and categorized using Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The results revealed a total of 374 grammatical errors. Misformation was the overwhelmingly dominant error, accounting for 62% (231 errors), primarily driven by the misconjugation of irregular verbs and incorrect 'to be' usage. This was followed by errors of omission at 24% (90 errors), addition at 13% (48 errors), and misordering at 1% (5 errors). In conclusion, the high frequency of misformation and omission indicates a fundamental gap in students' understanding of past tense morpho-syntax, strongly influenced by first language (L1) interference where tense markers do not exist. This necessitates targeted pedagogical interventions, such as intensive verb-drilling and contextual grammar exercises, to improve EFL narrative writing accuracy.

Informasi Artikel

Kata Kunci:

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ABSTRAK

Penguasaan *simple past tense* dalam penulisan naratif tetap menjadi rintangan tata bahasa yang signifikan bagi pembelajar *English as a Foreign Language* (EFL) karena kompleksitas infleksi kata kerja. Penelitian ini menyelidiki kesalahan morfologis dan sintaksis spesifik dalam penggunaan *simple past tense* di kalangan siswa kelas sepuluh, yang bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi jenis dan kategori dominan dari kelemahan tersebut. Menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui tes menulis naratif berdurasi 90 menit dari sampel acak 20 siswa di SMA Negeri 1 Popayato. Penyimpangan tata bahasa yang teridentifikasi dianalisis dan dikategorikan menggunakan *Surface Strategy Taxonomy* dari Dulay. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan total 374 kesalahan tata bahasa. *Misformation* (salah formasi) adalah kesalahan yang sangat dominan, menyumbang 62% (231 kesalahan), terutama didorong oleh kesalahan konjugasi kata kerja tidak beraturan dan penggunaan 'to be' yang salah. Hal ini diikuti oleh kesalahan penghilangan (*omission*) sebesar 24% (90 kesalahan), penambahan (*addition*) sebesar 13% (48 kesalahan), dan salah urutan (*misordering*) sebesar 1% (5 kesalahan). Kesimpulannya, tingginya frekuensi *misformation* dan *omission* menunjukkan adanya celah mendasar dalam pemahaman siswa tentang morfosintaksis bentuk lampau, yang sangat dipengaruhi oleh interferensi bahasa ibu (L1) di mana penanda *tense* tidak ada. Hal ini membutuhkan intervensi pedagogis yang ditargetkan, seperti latihan kata kerja intensif dan latihan tata bahasa kontekstual, untuk meningkatkan akurasi penulisan naratif EFL.

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1. Introduction

Writing is fundamentally a complex cognitive process that requires EFL learners to simultaneously manage content generation, discourse organization, and strict grammatical mechanics [1], [2]. Among the various genres of text taught in high schools, narrative writing heavily relies on the accurate deployment of the simple past tense to chronologically relate past events and experiences. However, mastering the simple past tense poses a substantial challenge for Indonesian learners. Because the Indonesian language lacks morphological tense markers, students frequently struggle to conceptualize and apply English verb inflections, leading to pervasive grammatical errors that obscure the meaning of their texts [3].

Previous studies have extensively documented students' struggles with grammar. For instance, research by Fadillah (2019) and Anjani (2019) confirmed that EFL students consistently produce errors when translating or composing narrative texts due to a lack of verb mastery [4], [5]. Similarly, Syakur and Supraba (2022) highlighted that first-language interference significantly disrupts the acquisition of English past tense rules [6]. Despite the abundance of literature on general writing errors, there remains a critical research gap regarding the micro-level morphological deviations utilizing Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy, particularly in rural educational settings where English exposure is strictly limited to the classroom. Understanding whether students fail by omitting markers, adding unnecessary morphemes, or completely misforming verbs is crucial for developing targeted pedagogical interventions [7], [8]. Therefore, this study presents a novelty by moving beyond holistic error counting; it meticulously dissects and categorizes the exact nature of morphological and syntactic deficiencies in narrative writing. This research aims to determine the specific kinds of errors and identify the most dominant error made by the tenth-grade students of SMA Negeri 1 Popayato on the use of the simple past tense.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method supported by basic quantitative percentage calculations to provide a holistic and highly detailed picture of the educational phenomenon [9]. The research was conducted from February to April 2024 at SMA Negeri 1 Popayato, Pohuwato Regency. The population consisted of all tenth-grade students distributed across five classes. To ensure the acquisition of relevant and manageable data, a random sampling technique was utilized to select 20 representative students.

Data were systematically collected through a 90-minute written production test. Students were instructed to compose a narrative text based on selected familiar topics, such as "The Ant

and the Dove" or "The Rats and the Elephants," forcing them to continuously apply simple past tense rules. The collected data were analyzed interactively based on Corder's error analysis stages: collection, identification, description, and explanation [10]. Each sentence produced by the students was cross-referenced against standard English grammar rules. Deviations were then rigorously classified into four categories based on Dulay's Surface Strategy Taxonomy: Omission, Addition, Misformation, and Misordering [11]. Finally, the frequency of each error type was calculated using Sudjana's percentage formula to definitively isolate the dominant error category [12].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The rigorous identification and classification of the 20 narrative texts produced by the students yielded a total of 374 grammatical errors specifically related to the use of the simple past tense. The distribution of these errors across the Surface Strategy Taxonomy categories clearly illustrates the students' profound struggle with verb inflection and auxiliary application.

The data reveals that **Misformation** was overwhelmingly the most dominant error, accounting for 62% of the total deviations, with 231 recorded instances. In this category, students fundamentally used the wrong form of the morpheme or structure. The majority of these errors stemmed from an inability to conjugate irregular verbs or appropriately select the past 'to be'. For example, students frequently wrote sentences like "*She come to a spring*" instead of the correct past form "*came*", or utilized present tense auxiliaries in past contexts, such as "*The ant quickly is bit him*" instead of "*bit*".

The second most frequent error was **Omission**, which accounted for 24% of the total, translating to 90 specific errors. Students failed to produce essential items required for a well-formed utterance, primarily by omitting the regular past tense marker '-ed' or completely dropping the 'to be' verb. Prominent examples from the data include "*The ant climb on the leaf*" instead of "*climbed*", and "*She slip*" instead of "*slipped*".

Furthermore, **Addition** errors represented 13% of the total, with 48 recorded instances. These errors were characterized by the presence of redundant or grammatically forbidden items, commonly presenting as double marking. For instance, students wrote "*She is could have drowned*" and "*and is fall into the water*", erroneously combining present tense auxiliaries with past or modal verbs. Lastly, **Misordering** was the least frequent error, constituting only 1% (5 errors), where students incorrectly placed morphemes or groups of words, such as writing "*It carry her ground to dry safely*" instead of "*It carried her safely to dry ground*".

3.2 Discussion

The empirical findings of this study heavily substantiate the theoretical premise that mastering English verb morphology is exceptionally challenging for Indonesian learners. The dominance of *Misformation* (62%) and *Omission* (24%) strongly points toward severe interlingual and intralingual transfer issues [13]. Because the students' first language (L1) does not require verbs to change form to indicate past events (relying instead on temporal adverbs like *kemarin* or *tadi*), students naturally default to the base form (infinitive) of the English verb, leading to massive rates of omission [6]. When they do attempt to apply rules, intralingual overgeneralization occurs, resulting in misformation; students often apply regular '-ed' rules to irregular verbs or become entirely confused regarding when to use verbal versus nominal predicates [14].

These results corroborate the findings of Aminah (2016) and Masriani (2018), who also identified a severe lack of vocabulary and structural mastery as the primary culprits in past tense errors [5], [15]. The frequent double marking observed in the *Addition* category further indicates that students are trapped in a transitional stage of language acquisition; they are aware that a rule must be applied but lack the syntactic maturity to apply it exclusively to the correct element. Consequently, the narrative texts produced lost much of their chronological clarity. To mitigate this, teachers must move beyond theoretical grammar explanations and implement intensive, contextual verb-drilling exercises that explicitly contrast L1 and L2 sentence structures to break the habit of word-for-word translation.

4. Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive surface strategy taxonomy analysis, it is concluded that the tenth-grade students of SMA Negeri 1 Popayato experience severe morphological and syntactic deficiencies in narrative writing. The students generated 374 errors, with *Misformation* standing as the unequivocally dominant error category (62%), followed by *Omission* (24%), *Addition* (13%), and *Misordering* (1%). These errors predominantly manifest through the failure to conjugate irregular verbs, the omission of regular '-ed' markers, and the chaotic misuse of auxiliary verbs. These findings emphasize that students lack a fundamental internalized understanding of English past tense inflection, largely due to native language interference. To overcome these deficiencies, educators must significantly increase practical writing exercises focused on verb transformation and contextual narrative drafting.

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