Grammatical Errors: An Analysis in Speaking Produced by EFL Undergraduate Students

Safrida*1,2 , Usman Kasim1

1Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh
2SMPN 1 Baitussalam, Aceh Besar

*Corresponding author: safrida.gandrant@gmail.com

Abstract

Many EFL learners produce many errors in their speaking regarding grammatical aspect. The present study aims to analyze the most dominant errors and causes of errors committed by the third semester students of Syiah Kuala University on their speaking in Indonesia. The data were collected from eight by asking them to produce short story about their most memorable experience orally for 5-8 minutes. Furthermore, the writer followed the error analysis procedures to analyse the data. Moreover, the errors were classified into surface strategy taxonomy as proposed by Dulay et. al. The result shows that the most dominant errors were omission (55%) followed by misformation (29%), addition (13%), and misordering (3%). The current study investigated that the causes of errors were intra-lingual and inter-lingual interference. Meanwhile, intra-lingual interference was considered as the major cause of the students’ errors. In conclusion, the students still have a serious problem in term of grammatical aspect, especially omission of noun inflections and irregular past tenses, and misformation of auxiliaries. It is suggested that the lecturers and the students do some efforts to reduce the grammatical errors in speaking, such as grammar drill and error correction.

Keywords: Error analysis, surface strategy taxonomy, causes of errors, speaking

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking in English is more complicated than speaking in a native language for a second or foreign language learner. Usually, speaking happens in a real time and spontaneously. It forces the students to produce the utterances in the target language directly. Moreover, there are many aspects that must be considered in speaking, such as grammar. Nevertheless, every language has its own grammar which makes the students feel more complicated. Thus, many EFL learners committed errors in their speaking. Actually, producing errors is an unavoidable thing in learning a language (Hassan & Sawalmeh, 2013; Tomkova, 2013). However, it cannot be seen as students’ failure since it can be as evidence that the
students are in the process of acquiring a language (Corder, 1967), for instance, the students of English Education of Syiah Kuala University. Although they have focused on learning English, they also committed errors in their speaking, especially in grammatical aspect. Since they produce many errors, their speaking was hard to understand. Therefore, it is important to help the students reduce their errors.

Furthermore, to diagnose the causes of problems, there is a systematic way called error analysis. In the field of error analysis, a number of studies have been conducted focusing on the grammatical error in speaking, such as Muhamad et. al (2013), Alahmadi (2014) and Amara (2015). The studies demonstrated how error analysis can be used to provide the information for teachers about the errors made by learners in their speaking. However, in Indonesia, it is (there is) a few error analysis studies conducted in term of speaking skill. Moreover, the participants of this study were EFL undergraduate students who majoring English Education in Syiah Kuala University, Indonesia. Hence, the writer was interested in conducting error analysis study to find out the dominant grammatical errors and the causes of errors committed by the students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Error Analysis

It is undeniable that the students produce errors in their language learning process. However, the errors committed can be analyzed through the way called error analysis. Error analysis is the study of second or foreign language learning to analyze the errors produced by learners (Myles & Mitchell, 2014). Corder (1974, in Ellis, 2008) stated that there are several steps that must be followed in error analysis, namely collection of data, identification of errors, description of errors, explanation of errors, and evaluation of errors.

First, the data is collected from the participants chosen (Savile-Troike, 2006). Second, the data are identified by comparing the acceptable form of the target language with the form of the utterances committed by learners (Gonzales, 2008). Third, the errors are classified based on surface strategy taxonomy which is proposed by Dulay et. al (1982). Then, the errors are analyzed to discover the causes of errors (Gonzalez, 2008). In this study, the causes of errors are divided into intra-lingual and inter-lingual errors. Last, the errors are evaluated to know how serious they are, because some errors are more serious than others (Saville-Troike, 2006).

2.2 Types of Error

In this study, it was used surface strategy taxonomy as proposed by Dulay et. al (1982) which classified the errors to omission, addition, misformation, and misordering. Omission is missing a necessary item in a sentence (Wee et al., 2010), such as *He talking to his teacher. In this sentence, an item of verb was omitted. Addition is adding an unnecessary item (Nezami & Najafi, 2012), for example, *She didn’t bought a new television. In the sentence, the past form of verb is used although there is an auxiliary that indicates the past tense. Misformation is using a morpheme incorrectly in a sentence (Abdullah, 2013), for instance *I don’t read that book yesterday. The sentence should be past tense since the meaning of the sentence is past event which is marked by adverb of time, e.g. “yesterday”.

72
Therefore, past form (didn’t) must be used instead of present form (don’t). *Misordering* error occurs when the words are arranged incorrectly (Mustafa, et al., 2016), e.g. *... where is your house. The sentence should be ... where your house is.*

There are two main causes of errors that may influence the second language system, e.g. inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Inter-lingual interference are the errors produced because of the influence of learners’ L1 (Corder, 1981; Pishwa, 2006). The learners do not realize that their native language structure is different from the target language. Meanwhile, intra-lingual errors are the errors that occur because of the target language itself, it is not influenced by native language (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Moreover, intra-lingual errors are the result of learners’ view about the target language because of their lack of experience with it (Erdogan, 2005). In other words, the errors are not related to the native language structure, but it is caused by learners’ limited information of target language.

### 2.3 Speaking

The aim of learning a language is to make the learners able to communicate with others using the target language. It is generally believed that speaking skill is one of the important skills that must be mastered by a language learner (Goh & Burn, 2012). According to Thornbury (2005), speaking is a speech production that becomes a part of our daily activities. He states that many people produce many words every day in order to express their idea and feeling. In addition, speaking is the process to deliver the speakers’ aim to the listener (Holtgraves, 2008). Thus, it is believed that learning speaking is very crucial since it makes the learners capable to express their ideas, purposes, and opinions using the target language.

### 3. METHODS

The writer gave a spoken test to the eight of the third semester English Education students of Syiah Kuala University. The writer used convenience sampling technique to limit the subject chosen. The writer asked the students to produce a short story about their most memorable experience orally for 5-8 minutes. Then, the students’ speeches during the test were recorded. The writer also asked some questions related to the students’ story which aims to gather more data. Then, the data which had been recorded were transcribed and analyzed in several steps.

Firstly, the data were identified to find out the errors in the sentences produced by students. Secondly, the errors were tabulated based on the surface strategy taxonomy as proposed by Dulay et. al (1982). The errors were categorized into omission, addition, misformation and misordering. Thirdly, the errors were calculated to find out the most dominant errors. Lastly, the writer analyzed the errors to discover the causes of errors.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Finding of the Occurrences of Errors in Each Type

According to the analysis, 441 errors were found. Omission error was the most dominant, followed by misformation, addition and misordering.
The first type of errors in this study is omission. After analyzing the data, it was found that omission errors can be identified into several categories, namely omission of auxiliaries, prepositions, articles, irregular past tense, inflections, and subjects. The students omitted the auxiliary “be” in both nominal and verbal sentences, for examples:

E1: We only two.
E2: It surrounded by sea.

The first sentence is the example of omission of “be” in a nominal sentence. In the sentence illustrated above, the student omitted a necessary “be” (were). The correct sentence should be We were only two. Similarly, in the verbal sentence, the students also omitted “be” which indicate a passive voice. The correct sentence is It was surrounded by sea. Moreover, the students also missed the auxiliary “do”. However, they only omitted this kind of auxiliary in the interrogative sentences, such as

E3: Why you move here? instead of Why did you move here?

In English, there are many prepositions which have difference functions. Therefore, an EFL learner should pay attention to the use of prepositions. However, some students omitted some prepositions in their utterances, as in

E4: ... to go Yogyakarta instead of to go to Yogyakarta.

There were also found the addition errors in the use of articles. In English, there are two types of article, namely definite (the) and indefinite article (a/an). The definite article refers to the specific nouns and noun that has been said previously while the indefinite article is used to general nouns and noun that has not been said in a prior time.

The finding shows that the students omitted all kinds of articles in their speeches, for example

E5: We had one night there without tent.

The student omitted the indefinite article a. However, the article should be put since the student did not yet mention the word “tent”. Therefore, the correct sentence is We had one night there without a tent.

The students also failed to change some irregular verb forms to be past ones. They tended to use infinitive verbs in their speeches, i.e.

E6: We take the picture.
The sentence is erroneous as the student used present form instead of the past one. The formation of the verb “take” was not changed into past tense, “took”. Moreover, in this study, it was found that the students produced both omissions noun and verb inflections, for instance

E7: You also can see many ancient building.
E8: I create a documentary film.

The student missed suffix –s as the plural noun marker and omitted –ed in the word “create” instead of “created” to indicate past tense.

The second type is addition errors. It was found that the errors of addition included addition of preposition, auxiliary, conjunction, verb, redundancy and unnecessary words. Many unnecessary prepositions were added in the students’ sentences, such as the addition of preposition “at” in the sentence below

E9: I mean at the place was great.

Moreover, the students also added an unnecessary auxiliary be in their sentences, for instance:

E10: I was became a photographer.

Actually, the auxiliary is also used in a verbal sentence, but it is only used in passive voice. Meanwhile, the example above is an active voice. It means that the auxiliary “was” should be omitted as it causes an error.

The use of conjunction is also one of kind of errors which were committed by the students in their speeches, e.g.

E11: ... a lot of unhappy things that happen to us.

The student used an unnecessary conjunction (that). Therefore, the correct phrase is ... a lot of unhappy things happened to us.

The finding shows that there are also errors of adding a verb. It was displayed in the following sentence:

E12: We need to have memorize for a subject.

The student put two verbs in her sentence. Moreover, there were also found redundancies and added unnecessary words on their speeches, for example:

E13: We such like crazy people...

The student used two words with the same meaning, namely the word “such” and “like”. The sentence could be corrected to be We were like crazy people ...

In this study, it was found misformation of auxiliaries, prepositions, pronouns, and articles. The example of this type of errors is

E14: I’m so glad. The example shows that the students did not change the auxiliaries into past form. Moreover, the students failed to use an appropriate preposition in some contexts, such as

E15: I arrived in Jakarta in 12 o’clock.

The sentence could be corrected into I arrived in Jakarta at 12 o’clock.

In this study, it was also found that the students used inappropriate auxiliaries. He used the auxiliary for the singular noun instead of plural one, for example
E16: All my friends is shocked.

In fact, the auxiliary is should be used in the singular subject. Moreover, the student should use the plural “be” in the past form. Furthermore, the students might get confused to use the suitable article in a sentence, for example

E17: So, in a dormitory...

The students should use the article “the” because she had previously mentioned the dormitory in the prior time.

After analyzing the data, it was found that the students also produced misordering errors. Nevertheless, this kind of errors committed rarely. It was only a few phrases in the students’ utterances were arranged incorrectly, such as

E18: How can I make my flow to be better.

In this case, the student aimed to make a statement, not a question. Meanwhile, the words order of the sentence above shows that it is a question. Thus, the correct sentence should be How I can make my flow be better.

4.2 The Causes of Errors

In this study, it was found that the majority errors were caused by intra-lingual interference. It means that the errors occurred due to students’ incomplete knowledge. The examples of the errors were displayed below:

E19: I ask my old friend.

E20: I can’t go to Yogyakarta...

In the above excerpts, it can be concluded that the students did not change the present form to be the past form while they were talking about the past event. The students did not use the past form of regular and irregular verbs, and auxiliaries. It shows that the students still lack knowledge about the rule of the target language. Moreover, the students also committed errors in the use of the items in a sentence, such as in the following excerpts:

E21: We past the night by sleep in the ground.

E22: So, in a dormitory...

The students used preposition “in” and article “a” incorrectly. It can be seen as the evidences that the students do not master completely the rule of using preposition and article. Therefore, it is clear that such errors are intra-lingual errors. There was also found errors caused by inter-lingual interference. The students tended to be influenced by their L1 structure. However, it only occurred in a small numbers, such as the omission of plural marker and articles, and misordering, e.g.

E23: .. and other city.

The students omitted the plural noun marker. It was caused by the negative transfer since there are no plural noun markers in Bahasa Indonesia. In short, the errors committed by the students can be caused by intra-lingual and inter-lingual interference.

4.3 Discussion

In order to get a detail explanation, the error of each type is elaborated in the following categories. The first category is auxiliary. It was found misformation error because they used the present form instead of past one. In addition, they added unnecessary auxiliaries in their speeches. In this case, the errors are caused by intra-lingual because the students got confused about the rule of using the
auxiliaries. Otherwise, they also omitted the necessary auxiliary in the sentence, as in
E24: it so beautiful.
This error is affected by students’ negative transfer. This result seems to be consistent with other research which found by Saad and Sawalmeh (2014).

The second category is preposition. They committed misformation, addition and omission errors of preposition, e.g.
E25: So we get there in 8 p.m.
This finding is supported by the previous studies conducted by Mariko (2007), Ting et al. (2010) and Hojati (2013). They also found that preposition is a problem for EFL learners. This kind of error is regarded as intra-lingual interference because of the complexity of the use of preposition in English.

The third category is article. The cause of those errors is considered as intra-lingual error since the students did not master completely the target language. However, the students also omitted the necessary articles, such as
E26: ...without tour guide.
The omission of articles is considered as the inter-lingual error. The result is in agreement with those obtained by Muhamad et. al (2013) and Rashid (2015).

The following category is inflection. The biggest problem in this part is the omission of verbs inflection of past tense marker, for example
E27: We visit Aya Sofya.
The student missed the suffix –ed as the past form marker. The finding shows that such errors were the biggest problem that the students encountered. The verb tense errors were also found in the previous studies conducted by Beltran (2014). According to Dulay et. al (1982), missing the past tense marker is kind of intra-lingual error. Therefore, the writer regarded that the cause of this error is intra-lingual.

Moreover, the students also omitted plurality marker such as *many modern building and *two car. Such errors are classified into the inter-lingual interference because there are no plural nouns in Bahasa Indonesia. This kind of error was also committed by EFL students in Vietnam (Linh, 2013), Malaysia (Saad & Sawalmeh, 2014) and Saudi Arabia (Alahmadi, 2014).

The next category is omission of irregular past tense. The students used the present forms instead of past form, as in *I know nothing. The student should change the verb “know” into “knew”. This kind of errors is caused by students’ incomplete knowledge in constructing past form of irregular verbs. Therefore, the errors belong to intra-lingual errors.
The students also produced misordering errors. However, it has the lowest percentage among other types. This finding supports the idea of Mustafa et al (2016) who state that misordering errors mostly committed by the beginner learners. However, it was found that the misordering errors in this study were also caused by inter-lingual interference. But, there were only a very few words ordered by following the rule of students’ native language, Bahasa Indonesia, for example Academy Military. The pattern of noun phrase in English is adj+noun, but the words were ordered according to the L1 structure.

Otherwise, the misordering errors which were caused by intra-lingual interference have the bigger number. It can be seen in the excerpt below.
E28: ...what is about the screen.  

Actually, she wanted to deliver a statement but she ordered the words as a question. The correct statement is what the screen was. The misordering errors were also found in the previous studies undertaken by Furtina et al. (2016).

The other errors produced by the students are the omission of subjects, the addition of conjunctions, verbs, unnecessary words and redundancies. However, they are considered as not a big problem because they were only the least. It seems possible that these errors are due to intra-lingual interference because the students built their own assumption about the target language in constructing sentence.

In conclusion, the result of this study shows that the causes of students’ error in their speaking performance are both intra-lingual and inter-lingual interference.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The result shows that the most dominant errors produced were in omission. In this study, the students mostly neglected the past forms of both regular and irregular verbs. On the other hand, the smallest occurrences of errors were in misordering. Two main factors causing the students to commit many errors were inter-lingual and intra-lingual. However, the major cause of errors produced was intra-lingual interference. It was because the participants of this study were the students majoring in English. Therefore, they were no frequently influenced by their L1.

It is suggested that EFL teachers to pay more attention to the grammatical aspects and give corrective feedback to the learners. Furthermore, the students should pay attention to English grammar rules in their speaking and do grammar drills. Last, it is recommended the future researchers promote the study on types of taxonomy of error analysis.

REFERENCES


