

REVISITING THE WRITTEN SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT OF THE ELEVENTH GRADERS ON DESCRIPTIVE TEXT: SURFACE STRATEGY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Many studies examining the subject-verb agreement errors in students' writing have been conducted; however, it still needs further exploration to revisit students' success in writing a text. The objectives of this study are analyzing students' errors related to the subject-verb agreement and revisiting the success of students in writing a descriptive text. To achieve those purposes, a total of 36 students from the eleventh class Accounting 5 from SMKN 2 Kediri were asked to write descriptive text on the topic provided. In addition, the researcher also conducted interviews with the teacher and several students. The findings showed that the participants contributed three types of subject-verb agreement errors in their descriptive writing, those were omission (38%), addition (8%) and misformation (54%), then misordering error was not found in this research. It was also revealed that students are also successful in writing descriptive texts in terms of using general structures, language features, tense, and quantifiers in writing descriptive text.

Keywords: subject-verb agreement errors, surface strategy taxonomy, descriptive text

I. Introduction

Based on the findings of several studies on the difficulty level of English language skills lately, writing is a skill that becomes a scourge for students and is considered the hardest skill when compared to other skills (Compe, 2017; Yaccob, 2019). In writing, we must express our ideas in the form of writing accompanied by considerations about the grammar used.

At least, students can write the correct subject and verb in a sentence. Considering the subject-verb agreement in a sentence is one of the important aspects that must be learned because students are required to make grammatically correct sentences. However, this is still far from expectations, as some research

results reveal that subject-verb agreement is the most general and most common error (Singh et al., 2017; Sermsook, Liamnimitr, & Pochakorn, 2017; Calanoga & Tamayo, 2019; Nuruzzaman et al., 2018; Burhanuddin, 2020). Students tend to make repeated errors related to subject-verb agreement in writing a sentence.

Those repeated errors occur because students have not recognized the concept of agreement between the subject and the verb (Shujairi & Tan, 2017). As a result, they tend not to be able to correct these errors independently. The same errors will continue to occur until the student understands the rules regarding the subject-verb agreement.

Some experts have defined what a subject-verb agreement is. They interpret it as the harmony between the subject and the verb in a sentence. If in a sentence using a single subject, then the verb used must also be single. If the subject used is a plural subject, then the verb must also be plural (Straus, 2014; Sparks, 2006; Arlove, 2004).

Considering the definitions of some of these experts, it is important for readers to know who is doing the action and what they are doing. If the subject and verb agreement is clear and precise, the reader will not wonder who and what it is. White (1986) said that writing is a process of communicating ideas, thoughts, knowledge or experience and understanding of writing to gain knowledge or thought to share and learn.

It can simply be concluded that the purpose of writing is to convey thoughts in written form. This goal will be challenging if the reader does not understand what we are saying. In addition, writing using the correct grammar will make our writing more reliable (Tajgozari & Alimorad, 2019).

There have been several previous studies that analyzed errors in students' writing. Maesrawati & Nariu (2019) examine subject-verb agreement errors in recount texts students make. They grouped these types of errors using a theory developed by Dulay et al. (1982), namely Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The results showed that students accounted for three types of errors in terms of subject-verb agreement in

their recount writing, namely omission (26%), addition (6%), and misformation (68%).

Agreement between the subject and the verb is still a very important topic to research. Sriasih (2020) noticed an example, who examined the case of subject-verb agreement errors in students' narrative writing and grouped it with the Surface Strategy Taxonomy theory by Dulay et al. (1982). The study results showed that there were four types of errors found in narrative essays made by students. The four types are omission (17.1%), addition (3.2%), misformation (78.6%), and misordering (1.1%).

Surface Strategy Taxonomy theory by Dulay et al. (1982) is also still used in other research, for example, a research conducted by Anantri (2017). She researches about subject-verb agreement errors on students' narrative writing. The results showed that students made errors in the omission category (23.36%), addition (9.34%), misformation (67%), and found no errors in the misordering category (0%).

In this case, mastery and understanding of the subject-verb agreement are important for students. Without such mastery, they tend to have many problems with basic sentence structure, the formation of question sentences and negative sentences, and the marking of tense and number agreement (Eastwood, 1994). Therefore, it means that the subject-verb agreement is the basic sentence structure that must be mastered by the student.

Taking into account the importance of understanding and mastering the agreement between the subject and the verb in a sentence and the fact that many students still find it difficult to write which ultimately results in a mistake, then in this case, the researcher analyzed the subject-verb agreement errors on descriptive writing of the eleventh graders.

Considering that there have been many studies that analyze errors in student writings, especially in terms of the agreement of the subject with verbs, then in this study in addition to analyzing errors related to the subject-verb agreement using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy theory from Dulay et al. (1982), the researcher also revisited the success of the student in writing descriptive text. It was conducted to fill in the gaps in previous research that had not addressed students' success in writing.

The researcher grouped the errors in the students' writing into four categories according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy theory by Dulay et al. (1982). The first type of error is an omission characterized by the absence of an item that should appear in a sentence e.g. loss of verb inflection (s, ice, or ies) or auxiliary verbs (am, is, and are). The second type of error is addition which is characterized by items that should not be in a sentence such as the addition of verb inflection. The third type of error is misformation characterized by structural or morpheme errors in a sentence. The last is misordering, characterized by the incorrect

placement of morphemes in an expression (Nurjanah, 2017).

By analyzing and classifying errors in students' writing, students' writing skills will be detected as early as possible. Error analysis is very necessary in language learning because the results of the study can be useful to find out the difficulties of students which sometimes bring errors, to reduce students' errors in writing. In addition, reviewing the success of students in writing is also no less important. With the review of success, we know what should be improved and what has been mastered and must be maintained. It is in line with the statement of Richard et al. (1985:96) which says that error analysis is done to (a) know how well a person knows the language, (b) know how one learns the language, and (c) obtain information about the general difficulty in learning the language.

In line with the background outlined earlier, this study investigates the errors of the subject-verb agreement in descriptive writings made by the eleventh-grade students and investigates the success of their descriptive writings. By writing this descriptive text, students can visualize what they read, what they see, what they hear, what they feel, what they smell and what they experience to readers (Fulwiler, 2002). Thus, the results of this research can later contribute both theoretically and practically in the world of learning. Theoretically, the results of this study are expected to contribute

to the development of grammar learning in English writing, especially in terms of subject-verb agreement in descriptive writings. Practically, it is expected that students can improve their writing skills and are not confused anymore to apply the theory of subject-verb agreement in writing, especially in descriptive texts.

II. Method

This study analyzed the results of descriptive writing made by students. A total of 36 students from the eleventh grade of Accounting 5 from SMKN 2 participated in the study. To make this study was not too widespread, then researcher only focused on analyzing errors related to subject-verb agreement in students' descriptive writing and categorized it with the theory that has been developed by Dulay et al. (1982), Surface Strategy Taxonomy. In addition, the researcher also reviewed the success of such students in writing sentences in descriptive text. The data in this study were in the form of 36 descriptive texts written by the students of the eleventh grade of Accounting 5.

This class was selected to consider that students in this class were already learning and practicing writing descriptive texts at the end of the semester. They were also willing to follow the entire process in this research. Thus, the English teacher who taught the eleventh grade strongly suggested the class as the object of this research. Each student in

the class wrote a descriptive text and chose one of the topics they wanted to describe: a person, place, or animal.

To collect the data, the researcher used two types of instruments in the study: the main instrument and the complementary instrument. The main instrument in this study was the researcher herself who collected and analyzed the data obtained, while the complementary instruments were a writing test and an interview.

This writing test was used to obtain samples from the students' descriptive writing. While the interview at the beginning of the study was used to get more information about student errors in writing English.

The study lasted for approximately one week. Before taking data from the results of students' descriptive writings, the researcher interviewed one of the English teachers who taught the eleventh grade. The interview took place by asking two questions, which were related to the problems that students often faced when learning English and the expectations of the results of this study in the future.

After conducting an interview session to one of the teachers directly at the school, the researcher continued the interview session with several students of the eleventh grade of Accounting 5. Because at that time there had been an outbreak of Covid-19 that caused schools to be closed and replaced with an online school, interviews with some students were conducted online also using

Whatsapp calls. There were three questions that the researcher asked: the first time students learned English, how often they practiced their English skills, and what problems they often faced when learning English.

Furthermore, to collect data through a written test, the researcher also had to do it online through a WhatsApp group following the English lesson schedule at that time. Before the test was conducted, researchers who were also assisted by the English teacher who taught the class reminded again about the theory of descriptive text. After that, the researcher explained how to perform the test. Students were only given 1 hour and 30 minutes to work on the test. Students were not allowed to use translation tools or get help from others during the test.

After the writings were collected to the researcher in the form of photos, then the researcher who an English teacher also assisted examined and marked the parts in the sentence that had an inappropriate subject-verb agreement. Then the writings were returned to the students to be addressed in the marked section. If the student could fix the marked part, the student made a mistake. But if the student could not correct the mistake, it could be said that the student made an error.

To analyze the data that had been obtained, the researcher used the error analysis procedure proposed by Corder (1974). First, the researchers collected student writing samples to obtain the sentences that have errors

related to the agreement of verbs. After that, the next stage was grouping the errors into omission, addition, misformation, or misordering categories. The last step was to match it with the results of data obtained from the interview session, whether the problems of students and teachers did occur in the results of descriptive writing of students and explained why the error could be occurred. Finally, to find out what students often made errors, the researcher divided the total number of errors in each type by the total number of all types and multiply them by 100%.

To make the results of this data analysis were not biased, it was very important with the validation of research. In this case, the researcher used expert assessments as well as peer reviews as validators in the study.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

In this section, the researcher presented two important points of results from analysis data. The first point was about the types of errors in the subject-verb agreement and their frequency in the student's descriptive writing. The second point was about the success of eleventh graders in writing descriptive texts. The results and discussions of these points could be presented below.

3.1.1 Types of Students' Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

A total of fifty (50) subject-verb agreement errors were found on

thirty-six (36) students' written works. These errors occurred differently. For more detailed information about the

type of error, the number of events and examples of errors that occurred, the researcher presented it in table 1.

Table 1. Number and Types of Subject-Verb Agreement Errors Made by Students

No	Errors Category	Sub Errors Category	Number of Errors and the Percentage	Errors Sentences
1	Omission	-	19 (38%)	Mr. Hasan always smile .
				His name Ø Kim Junmyeon.
				He Ø also very handsome.
2	Addition	Regularization	0 (0%)	-
		Double Marking	4 (8%)	I am know him
				It is make me like her.
		Simple Addition	0 (0%)	-
3	Misformation	Archi Forms/ Alternating Forms	27 (54%)	He have brown skin.
				He have a height of 160 cm.
				He have a thin mustache.
4	Misordering	-	0 (0%)	-

Based on the results of the exposure of data in table 1, there were three categories of errors in the subject-verb agreement in students' writings, namely omission, addition and misformation. This study did not find errors in the miso ring category at all.

Misformation was the category that had the highest number of errors which are 27 errors with the percentage of 54%. Then, it was followed by omission with the number of 19 errors and with a percentage of 38%. Furthermore, the lowest number of errors and percentages were in the addition

category, which was the number of 4 errors with a percentage of 8%.

One of the errors in the omission category was in the sentence *Mr. Hasan always smile*. In that sentence, the error occurred in the world *smile*. Students did not add -s to indicate that the verb is a single verb. In the sentence, it was clear that the subject was *Mr Hasan* which was categorized as a single subject. So, to form the correct subject-verb agreement, students must add a single marker -s for the word *smile*. Therefore, the sentence *Mr. Hasan always smile* could be corrected to *Mr. Hasan always smiles*.

The next, in the addition category, the researcher only found errors in the double marking sub-category. While errors in the sub-categories of regularization and simple addition were not found at all in this study. Errors in this category could be seen in the sentence *I am know him*. In that sentence, a double marking error occurred in a positive sentence. Students added an auxiliary verb that is not needed in the sentence. Considering that the sentence was a verbal sentence in the simple present tense, then students simply added the first form of the verb after the subject. Therefore, the right sentence should be *I know him*.

The researcher found errors in sub-category archi forms or alternating forms in the misformation category. One example of an error in that category was in the sentence *He have brown skin*. The error in the sentence occurred because students used the plural verb, *have*, which should not follow a single subject in the sentence, *he*. Thus, the correction of the sentence is *He has brown skin*.

The findings of errors from the results of descriptive writing tests of students were further strengthened by the results of interviews that had been done before to one of the English teachers and some students who showed that it is true if indeed there were still some difficulties in English lessons, especially in writing skills.

According to the statement from Mrs. G, the problem that students often encountered was when they were faced with the practice of writing. In this context, students still

often found it difficult to apply basic grammar, as did the application of the subject agreement with its verb. Students sometimes still used plural verbs for a single subject, and vice versa.

This was further supported by statements of some students who stated that they understood what their teacher explained about the tense and agreement of the subjects-verbs in it. But when there was a writing practice, they still found it difficult to apply it, when they should add -s, -es, or is at the end of the verb and when they should not need to add the addition at the end of the verb. In addition, they also still found it difficult to distinguish verbal sentences and nominal sentences.

3.1.2 Students' Success in Writing Descriptive Text

If we look further at the results of this study, students' success rates in writing descriptive texts turned out to be much higher when compared to the error rate that occurred, including in terms of the use of subject-verb agreement.

This can be proven through several aspects. One of them was through a common structure in descriptive text, namely identification and description. A total of 34 of the 36 texts written by these class students had a typical structure that was in line with what descriptive text should have. In fact, most of the 23 students described an object using more than two paragraphs, of which the first paragraph was identification and the second paragraph and the next were

descriptions. It clearly showed that the students had a good level of understanding of the general structure of descriptive text.

In addition, students also had a fairly good understanding of language features in descriptive text. For example, as with the use of certain nouns, the use of simple present tenses, the use of detailed noun phrases to provide information about a subject, and the use of various adjectives that describe, indicate the number and classify a noun.

Although some errors were found related to the agreement of the subject-verb in the students' simple present tense sentences, the number of correct sentences found in the students' descriptive writing was much higher, both in positive and negative sentence writing. In fact, no misordering errors were found in accordance with the data presented in table 1. It means that students were able to place morphemes correctly in a sentence.

Another success that needs to be highlighted was students' attention to the use of quantifiers in a sentence. For example in the sentence *she has an ideal body, I have a penpal, he is a member of seventeen groups* and many more. These sentences clearly showed that the students understood how to distinguish when they should use *a* and when they should use *an*. They also realized the importance of quantifiers to determine the number of objects in English sentences.

3.2 Discussion

The purpose of the study was to analyze errors related to subject-verb agreement using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy theory from Dulay et al. (1982), the researcher also reviewed the student's success in writing descriptive text. In this discussion section, the researcher analyzed and critically discussed the findings by considering the formulation of the problem and the purpose of the study.

The findings of this study showed that misinformation type errors were the most common errors made by students in their writings which was in line with the findings in previous studies conducted by Nurjanah (2017), Tampubolon (2020), and Ma'mun (2016). Errors in this type were characterized by the use of incorrect structural or morpheme forms (Dulay et al., 1982). For example in the sentence *he have brown skin* which should be *he has brown skin*. Here, students did not distinguish the use between the word *have* and *has*. Whereas in English, it is clear that the two words have differences regarding when they are used even though both have the same meaning in Bahasa Indonesia that is *memiliki*. If viewed further, the error occurred due to the negative influence of their native language. Considering that in Bahasa Indonesia, there is no difference in the form of verbs even though the existing subject is classified as single or plural. As Brown (2007) stated, students tended to use their first language experience when they practiced a second or foreign language. It is supported by

khumphee & yodkamlue (2017) which stated that most errors made by students were the result of negative transfer of their native language.

Furthermore, the type of error in the second-order students often did that was the omission type. This error was characterized by the omission of a sentence element that should exist to make the sentence grammatically correct (Dulay et al., 1982). Errors in this type were still found in nurjanah (2017), Tampubolon (2020), and Ma'mun (2016) research. In this study, 13 errors out of 19 errors showed that students did not give the s or-es or its appendage at the end of the verb since the subject in the sentence was a single subject and the rest were students not giving extra *to be* in sentences that should have used *to be*. It further strengthened that the transfer of native languages in addition to having a positive impact also has a negative impact. Students did not fully understand the rules of the target language, so they applied their knowledge in the native language to the target language (Richards, 1974). An example is in the sentence *His name Ø Kim Junmyeon*. The students did not add *to be* in the sentence because in Bahasa Indonesia, there were no such rules, so they used the rules in Bahasa Indonesia to be applied in English.

Moreover, addition type errors were also found in this study. But, the number was not as much as the previous types of errors. This error was characterized by an addition that should not be in the sentence (Dulay et al., 1982). An example was in the

sentence *I am know him*. Students added unnecessary *to be* in the sentence. This error appeared to be characterized by intralingual transfers, where students generalized the rules in the target language (Brown, 2007). Students did not really understand the use of English rules, so they imposed certain English rules in some sentences they make. This type of error was also the least type of errors found in nurjanah (2017), Tampubolon (2020), and Ma'mun (2016).

As already mentioned in the results section, although many errors were found related to the subject-verb agreement, students' success rate was still far superior when compared to existing errors. It turned out that this happened because of a high level of motivation in students so that it could reduce the level of carelessness that exists (Norrish, 1974). According to Norrish (1974), learning materials and presentation styles that suit students could be factors that made students have high motivation. Three basic things affect student motivation: students themselves were able to increase or decrease their motivation, the way teachers taught, and learning materials provided by teachers (Mali & Yulia, 2012). In addition, the researcher also found that there was a positive influence of feedback provided by a teacher on the results of student writing. This was very important and could also reduce the level of errors that exist in student writing both in terms of the agreement of the subject with verbs and in other aspects.

Considering that the errors that occurred in English were not their native language, it was natural for the students to make errors in the use of the language, especially in writing. It was precisely from those errors that students could gain more knowledge that they did not previously know (Mason et al., 2016). So it was highly recommended for students to practice writing more often by paying attention to the rules related to subject-verb agreement. In addition, the existence of corrections and explanations from a teacher regarding existing errors was very helpful for students to improve their understanding. This was following the statement of Zhang & Hyland (2018) that with feedback on the results of student writing, it would have a positive influence on student understanding and become one of the sources of students' success in writing.

Since the study was limited to the analysis of error types related to the subject-verb agreement and students' success in writing descriptive texts, the analysis of other errors that occurred in students' writing was not considered. However, in the students' descriptive writings were not only found errors related to the agreement of the subject-verbs, but there were also other errors such as tense, the use of pronouns, capitalization and other errors that were usually found in writing. It clearly proved that writing was one of the English skills that was difficult to be mastered. By looking at the existing fact that the errors that occurred were not limited to the

agreement of subject-verbs only, it is highly reerrors were found not only to examine the aspect of error in students' writing with a wider range of attention to the cause and source of the errors.

IV. Conclusion

The findings presented in this study showed that it was true that students still encountered some difficulties in writing descriptive texts related to the use of subject-verb agreements because there were still errors in omission, addition, and misinformation types. But behind that, their success rate in writing descriptive text was far superior when compared to the error rate. Moreover, it turned out that the errors could not be separated from the negative influence of the transfer of the student's first language. Students also had a tendency to generalize the rules between their native language and the target language.

To reduce the level of error due to some of these factors and maintain the existing success rate, it is highly recommended for teachers to improve student understanding by always providing corrections and explanations related to mistakes made by students in writing descriptive texts. In addition, it is also advisable for students to practice writing more often, especially on the use of subject-verb agreement in a sentence, so they have a deep understanding because they often practice it. Since the study was limited to the analysis of subject-verb agreement errors and paid attention to the extent of students'

success in writing descriptive texts, it is highly recommended for further researchers to examine a wider range of areas than subject-verb agreement on other types of text. Due to the fact, many errors were found outside the subject-verb agreement area such as tense, the use of pronoun, capitalization, and other errors.

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