

Grammatical Errors in EFL Students' Descriptive Writing at Al-Ghozali Senior High School

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Article History

Received : 15 July 2026
Revised : 09 August 2026
Accepted : 11 September 2026
Published : 12 September 2026

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Cite This Article:

Tampubolon, M. A., Sunardi, S., Anwar, M., Putri, A. D., & Martonagoro, I. R. (2026). Grammatical Errors in EFL Students' Descriptive Writing at Al-Ghozali Senior High School. *Jurnal Sosial Humaniora Dan Pendidikan*, 5(2), 127–136.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.56127/jushpen.v5i2.3108>

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the grammatical errors commonly found in the descriptive writing of tenth-grade students at Al-Ghozali Islamic Senior High School, Gunung Sindur, Bogor. The study employed a descriptive research design using documentary analysis, with students' descriptive writing as the primary source of data. The data were analyzed using a checklist of frequent errors made by ESL writers, adapted from La Trobe University. The categories of grammatical errors examined included subject-verb agreement, verb tense, word class, vocabulary, singular/plural forms, articles, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. The study identified the types of grammatical errors commonly made by the students and determined the most frequent error categories in their descriptive writing. In addition, the study examined the teacher's strategies for improving students' descriptive writing. The findings are expected to provide useful information for students and teachers in improving grammatical accuracy in writing and to serve as a reference for future researchers who are interested in similar studies.

Keywords: Error Analysis, Grammatical Errors, Descriptive Writing

1. INTRODUCTION

English is widely used as an international language in education, communication, science, and other professional contexts. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language at different levels of education, including senior high school. Students are expected to develop four major language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these skills, writing is often considered one of the most challenging because learners need to generate ideas, organize information, select appropriate vocabulary, and apply grammatical rules at the same time. Richards and Renandya (2002) explain that writing is particularly demanding for second- and foreign-language learners because it involves both higher-level skills, such as planning and organizing ideas, and lower-level skills, such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, and word choice.

Writing is not simply a process of putting words into written form. It requires learners to communicate ideas clearly and accurately so that readers can understand the intended meaning. Hyland (2003) views writing as a product that involves grammatical and lexical knowledge, while Harmer (2004) emphasizes writing as a process through which language is represented in conventional written forms. Therefore, grammatical competence is an important element of students' writing development. Inaccurate grammar may make a text difficult to understand and may prevent students from expressing their ideas effectively.

The challenge becomes particularly important in descriptive writing. A descriptive text is intended to describe a person, place, object, or other subject in sufficient detail to create a clear impression for the reader. Descriptive writing requires students not only to generate relevant details but also to organize them into meaningful and grammatically acceptable sentences. Students need appropriate vocabulary, sentence patterns, verb forms, articles, agreement, spelling, and punctuation to construct an effective description. Consequently, weaknesses in grammatical competence can influence the overall quality and comprehensibility of students' descriptive texts.

Errors are a natural part of foreign-language learning. However, repeated errors may indicate that learners have not fully mastered particular features of the target language. Corder (1974) considers learners' errors important because they provide evidence of the language-learning process and reveal areas in which learners experience difficulties. In the Indonesian EFL context, differences between Indonesian and English linguistic systems may also contribute to difficulties in written production. For example, English requires subject–verb agreement and grammatical distinctions between singular and plural forms that are realized differently in Indonesian. As a result, students may transfer patterns from their first language when constructing English sentences.

Previous studies have examined grammatical errors in English learners' writing in various educational contexts. Fasikh and Murtadho (2019) investigated errors in the English writing skills of junior high school students, while Nanning et al. (2020) analyzed grammatical errors in writing skills. Afrianti et al. (2022) also investigated English errors in students' descriptive texts. These studies demonstrate that error analysis remains relevant in English language education because different groups of learners may encounter different grammatical difficulties. Nevertheless, grammatical errors are influenced by learners' educational level, language background, learning experience, and writing context. Therefore, findings obtained from one group of learners cannot automatically represent the grammatical difficulties experienced by students in another learning environment.

At Al-Ghozali Senior High School, Gunung Sindur, Bogor, preliminary classroom information indicated that students still experienced difficulties in English writing. Students showed limited ability to develop ideas, select appropriate vocabulary, and use grammatical structures accurately. Problems were also observed in the use of articles, verb forms, agreement, singular and plural forms, sentence construction, and punctuation. Identifying these errors systematically is important because teachers need specific information about students' linguistic difficulties before determining appropriate instructional emphasis and classroom practices.

Although earlier studies have discussed grammatical errors in EFL writing, context-specific evidence concerning the grammatical problems found in the descriptive writing of tenth-grade students at Al-Ghozali Senior High School remains limited. In addition, rather than discussing grammatical errors only in general terms, this study classifies the students' errors into specific linguistic categories: articles, verb tense, subject–verb agreement, singular/plural forms, punctuation, word class, vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling. These categories were derived from the checklist of frequent errors made by ESL writers adapted from La Trobe University and used as the analytical framework of the study. This classification enables the study to identify not only the occurrence of errors but also the areas of grammar that require greater pedagogical attention.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the grammatical errors commonly made by tenth-grade students of Al-Ghozali Senior High School in their descriptive writing and to determine the most frequently occurring type of error. The study is expected to provide a clearer description of students' grammatical difficulties and offer pedagogical information

that English teachers can use to develop more focused writing instruction. By identifying the dominant error categories, teachers can provide more appropriate explanations, exercises, feedback, and writing practice to help students improve grammatical accuracy in descriptive writing.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research design using documentary analysis. The design was selected because the study aimed to describe the grammatical errors that naturally occurred in students' descriptive writing without providing experimental treatment. Descriptive research is intended to describe existing conditions or phenomena as they occur in a particular setting (Gay, 1992). In this study, the primary documents analyzed were students' descriptive texts.

Documentary analysis was complemented by an interview with the English teacher. The interview was conducted to obtain supporting information concerning the instructional strategies used to improve students' descriptive writing. Thus, the study focused not only on identifying grammatical errors in students' written products but also on understanding the teacher's response to the students' writing difficulties.

2.2 Participants and Data Sources

The participants consisted of 21 tenth-grade students and one English teacher at Al-Ghozali Senior High School, Gunung Sindur, Bogor. The students were selected from an intact class through cluster sampling because the sampling unit consisted of a naturally formed group rather than individually selected participants.

The tenth-grade students were selected because descriptive writing was included in the English learning materials taught at this level. The study was conducted during the second semester, when students were expected to produce short functional and descriptive texts in accordance with the learning objectives of senior high school English.

Two main sources of data were used. The first source consisted of the students' descriptive writing assignments. Although descriptive texts may describe people, places, or things, this study specifically focused on texts describing people. The second source was an interview with the English teacher regarding the strategies used to improve students' descriptive writing.

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

The data were collected through documentation, a writing task, and an interview. First, the students were asked to produce a descriptive text. Their written work was then collected and examined to identify grammatical errors. Each text was carefully read, and incorrect forms were marked before being classified according to the grammatical-error checklist.

The grammatical analysis focused on errors involving articles, verb tense, subject-verb agreement, singular/plural forms, punctuation, word class, vocabulary, sentence structure, and spelling. The categories were based on the checklist of frequent errors made by ESL writers adapted from La Trobe University (1992).

In addition to the grammatical-error checklist, the students' writing was examined using an evaluative checklist. Tribble (1996) explains that written work can be assessed through major aspects accompanied by explicit descriptors representing different levels of performance. This evaluative procedure was used to support the analysis of the students' written production.

Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the English teacher. The interview focused on the teaching practices used to help students improve their descriptive writing, particularly in areas where grammatical problems frequently occurred.

2.4 Instrument for Grammatical Error Analysis

The main analytical instrument was a checklist of frequent errors made by ESL writers, adapted from La Trobe University (1992). The checklist was used to determine whether each category of error was present in the students' descriptive texts.

Table 1. Categories of Grammatical Errors Used in the Analysis

No.	Error Category	Descriptor
1	Articles	Incorrect use or omission of articles such as <i>a</i> , <i>an</i> , and <i>the</i> .
2	Verb Tense	Incorrect use of a verb tense or verb form.
3	Subject–Verb Agreement	The subject and verb do not agree in number or person, for example, <i>She run</i> instead of <i>She runs</i> .
4	Singular/Plural	Incorrect use of singular or plural noun forms, for example, <i>three doll</i> instead of <i>three dolls</i> .
5	Punctuation	Missing or incorrect use of capital letters, full stops, commas, or other punctuation marks.
6	Word Class	A word is used in an inappropriate grammatical class, for example, using a noun where an adjective is required.
7	Vocabulary	An inappropriate lexical item is used in a particular context.
8	Sentence Structure	A sentence is incomplete, incorrectly organized, or requires restructuring.
9	Spelling	A word is spelled incorrectly.

Source: Adapted from La Trobe University (1992).

In the original coding procedure, an X indicated the presence of an error, whereas a check mark (✓) indicated the absence of an error in a particular category.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, all students' descriptive texts were read carefully to identify grammatical problems. Second, each identified error was classified into one of the nine predetermined categories. Third, the occurrence of each error category was recorded using the checklist. Fourth, the number of students who produced each type of error was calculated and converted into percentages to determine the most common grammatical difficulties.

The percentage of each error category was calculated using the following formula:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

where *P* represents the percentage of students making a particular error, *F* represents the number of students producing that error, and *N* represents the total number of students.

The error categories were then ranked from the highest to the lowest percentage. Examples of incorrect sentences were compared with corrected forms to illustrate the students' grammatical difficulties more clearly. Finally, the teacher interview was analyzed descriptively to identify the strategies employed to address the students' difficulties in descriptive writing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The analysis of the 21 students' descriptive texts identified nine categories of errors: subject–verb agreement, verb tense, word class, vocabulary, singular/plural forms, articles, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. The percentages represent the proportion of students who produced at least one error in each category rather than the total number of individual error tokens. Subject–verb agreement was the most widespread problem, found in 19 of the 21 students' texts, whereas punctuation was the least frequent category.

Table 2. Distribution of Errors in Students' Descriptive Writing

Rank	Error Category	Students with Errors	Percentage
1	Subject–Verb Agreement	19	90.47%
2	Verb Tense	14	66.66%
3	Word Class	12	57.14%
3	Vocabulary	12	57.14%
5	Singular/Plural Forms	11	52.38%
6	Articles	10	47.61%
7	Sentence Structure	9	42.85%
8	Spelling	7	33.33%
9	Punctuation	2	9.52%

Source: Research data processed by the authors (2026).

The results show that grammatical difficulties were not concentrated in only one linguistic area. Although subject–verb agreement was clearly the dominant problem, more than half of the students also experienced difficulties with verb tense, word class, vocabulary, and singular/plural forms. This pattern indicates that the students' problems involved both grammatical accuracy and lexical choice.

3.2 Subject–Verb Agreement Errors

Subject–verb agreement was the most dominant error category. A total of 19 students, or 90.47% of the participants, produced errors involving agreement between the subject and the verb. The students particularly experienced difficulty in applying the third-person singular rule in the simple present tense and in selecting the appropriate form of *have/has*.

Several examples from the students' writing are presented below.

Table 3. Examples of Subject–Verb Agreement Errors

Incorrect Form	Correct Form
He teach English.	He teaches English.
I has English teacher.	I have an English teacher.
Mr. Sumarna live with his family.	Mr. Sumarna lives with his family.

Source: Students' descriptive writing.

The examples demonstrate that students had difficulty adjusting verb forms according to the grammatical subject. In sentences with third-person singular subjects such as *he* and

Mr. Sumarna, the students tended to use the base form of the verb rather than adding -s or -es. The data also show confusion in the use of *have* and *has*.

This finding indicates that students may already recognize the basic structure of English sentences but have not fully internalized agreement rules. The report also notes that some errors may be associated with incomplete mastery or inconsistent application of previously learned grammatical rules.

The predominance of subject–verb agreement errors is consistent with previous studies cited in the research report. Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009) also identified subject–verb agreement as a common difficulty in learners’ written work. Similarly, Stapa and Izahar (2010) found that learners experienced difficulties with several forms of subject–verb agreement, including agreement of person and number. These similarities suggest that agreement remains a persistent problem for learners of English, even across different educational settings.

3.3 Verb Tense Errors

Verb tense was the second most common category, occurring in the writing of 14 students or 66.66% of the sample. The students frequently had difficulty selecting an appropriate verb form and distinguishing between lexical verbs and forms of *be*.

The errors indicate that some students had not yet developed sufficient control over verb forms when describing people and habitual characteristics. Since descriptive texts frequently employ the simple present tense, inaccurate verb forms directly affect grammatical accuracy. The problem was not merely the selection of tense but also the construction of predicates, particularly when students combined *be* with lexical verbs incorrectly. The research report attributes these errors to limited knowledge in selecting appropriate verbs for the intended sentences.

This finding reinforces the importance of teaching tense within meaningful writing contexts. Instead of presenting tense only as an isolated grammatical formula, students need opportunities to apply the simple present tense in descriptions of people, objects, and places. Such contextual practice may help learners understand the relationship between grammatical forms and their communicative functions.

3.4 Word Class and Vocabulary Errors

Word class and vocabulary errors were each found in 12 students, representing 57.14% of the participants. Word-class problems included inappropriate use of pronouns, adjectives, nouns, and other lexical categories. One example was “*I love he because ...*”, which should be written as “*I love him because ...*”. Another problem occurred when students selected forms that did not perform the grammatical function required by the sentence.

Vocabulary errors, in contrast, were associated with inappropriate lexical choices. For example:

Table 3. Examples of Word Class and Vocabulary Errors

Category	Incorrect Form	Suggested Correction
Word Class	I love he because ...	I love him because ...
Vocabulary	He is not height.	He is not tall.
Vocabulary	... because we not answer the question with true.	... because we do not answer the question correctly.

Source: Students’ descriptive writing.

The findings indicate that grammatical knowledge and vocabulary knowledge were closely connected in the students’ written production. Students sometimes appeared to

know the general meaning of a word but could not select the appropriate grammatical form or lexical item for a particular context.

The report also identifies influence from Indonesian in some vocabulary choices. Students tended to translate expressions directly from Indonesian into English, resulting in phrases that sounded unnatural in English. This finding suggests possible first-language influence in the students' written production. For EFL learners, direct translation can become problematic when the grammatical and lexical patterns of the first language do not correspond directly to those of English.

3.5 Singular/Plural and Article Errors

Errors involving singular and plural forms were found in 11 students or 52.38%. A common problem was the omission of the plural marker *-s*, as illustrated in "*There are five English teacher in my school*", which should be written as "*There are five English teachers in my school.*"

The difference between Indonesian and English number systems may contribute to this difficulty. English commonly marks plurality morphologically by adding *-s* or *-es*, whereas Indonesian can express plurality through repetition or contextual interpretation. Consequently, learners may omit English plural markers when transferring familiar patterns from their first language.

Article errors were identified in 10 students or 47.61%. Students sometimes omitted articles entirely or selected *a* instead of *an*. For instance, the sentence "*I have teacher*" requires the indefinite article *a*, while "*a English teacher*" should be written as "*an English teacher.*"

These findings show that apparently small grammatical items can remain problematic for EFL learners. Articles carry grammatical information that does not have a direct equivalent in Indonesian, which may make their use difficult for students.

3.6 Sentence Structure, Spelling, and Punctuation

Sentence-structure errors appeared in nine students or 42.85%. These errors included incomplete sentences, inappropriate word order, missing verbs, and problems in constructing negative and conditional structures. This suggests that some students experienced difficulty beyond individual grammatical forms; they also had problems organizing words into complete and acceptable English sentences.

Spelling errors were identified in seven students or 33.33%. Examples included *fourty* instead of *forty*, *mistic* instead of *mistake*, and *theacher* instead of *teacher*. Although spelling had a lower percentage than the major grammatical categories, inaccurate spelling can still reduce readability and affect the overall quality of students' writing.

Punctuation was the least frequent category, appearing in only two students or 9.52%. Compared with the other categories, punctuation therefore appeared to be a relatively minor problem for this group. However, the low frequency should not be interpreted as evidence that punctuation is unimportant. Correct capitalization, full stops, and other punctuation marks remain necessary for organizing written information and ensuring readability.

3.7 Discussion of the Error Patterns

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the students' major difficulties were concentrated in grammatical features that require morphological adjustment and careful selection of forms. Subject-verb agreement, verb tense, word class, and singular/plural marking all require learners to modify linguistic forms according to grammatical context.

The dominance of these categories suggests that students possessed some ability to express meaning but still lacked consistent control over English grammatical conventions.

The results can also be interpreted from the perspective of error analysis. Corder (1974) argues that learner errors provide useful evidence about the process of second- or foreign-language development. Rather than being treated simply as failures, errors can reveal which aspects of the target language have not yet been fully acquired. In this study, the high frequency of subject–verb agreement and tense errors identifies specific grammatical areas that require greater instructional attention.

The findings are also consistent with the broader problem identified in the research context: students had limited grammatical mastery and vocabulary knowledge when producing English texts. The preliminary observations reported in the study showed difficulties involving vocabulary development, grammatical structures, articles, pronouns, prepositions, and punctuation. The error analysis therefore provides more specific empirical evidence for those classroom observations.

Another important pattern concerns possible first-language influence. The report explicitly notes that some vocabulary expressions appeared to be directly translated from Indonesian. Similar influence may help explain difficulties with plural markers and articles because these grammatical systems operate differently in Indonesian and English. Nevertheless, because the present study did not systematically classify the causes of errors into interlingual and intralingual categories, these explanations should be treated as pedagogical interpretations rather than definitive causal conclusions.

3.8 Teacher's Strategies for Improving Descriptive Writing

In addition to identifying grammatical errors, the study examined the English teacher's strategies for improving students' descriptive writing. The interview indicated that the teacher relied on repeated practice and continuous exercises. The instructional process began by introducing the characteristics of descriptive writing and explaining the tenses commonly used to describe people or things. The teacher then presented examples, asked students to produce simple descriptions in groups, and subsequently required them to write individually. According to the report, the practice was continued until approximately 85% of the students had mastered the material.

The strategy can be organized into three stages: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing. During pre-writing, students generated and organized ideas before beginning their texts. During the while-writing stage, students developed their texts based on the examples and guidance provided by the teacher. In the post-writing stage, students shared, revised, edited, and proofread their work.

These strategies are pedagogically relevant to the error patterns identified in the study. Since subject–verb agreement and verb tense were the most widespread difficulties, repeated contextualized writing exercises can provide students with opportunities to notice, practice, and revise problematic grammatical forms. Teacher feedback can also be directed toward the most frequent categories rather than treating every grammatical feature with equal emphasis.

The findings therefore suggest that error analysis can function as a diagnostic tool for writing instruction. By identifying the grammatical categories that occur most frequently, teachers can design exercises, corrective feedback, and revision activities that directly address students' actual linguistic difficulties. Continuous practice should not merely involve repetition of grammar rules; it should integrate grammar into meaningful descriptive-writing tasks so that students learn to apply the forms in communicative contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that grammatical errors remain a significant challenge in the descriptive writing of tenth-grade students at Al-Ghozali Senior High School. Among the nine categories identified, subject–verb agreement was the most frequent error, followed by verb tense, word class, vocabulary, singular/plural forms, articles, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. The dominance of subject–verb agreement errors indicates that students still have difficulty applying basic grammatical rules consistently, particularly when matching subjects with appropriate verb forms. Errors in tense, word class, and vocabulary also show that the students' writing problems are not limited to one grammatical aspect but involve broader difficulties in constructing accurate and meaningful English sentences. These findings confirm the importance of systematic error analysis because it provides teachers with clear information about the specific linguistic areas that require greater instructional attention.

The study also shows that the teacher employed several strategies to improve students' descriptive writing, including introducing the characteristics of descriptive texts, explaining relevant tenses, providing model texts, conducting group practice, assigning individual writing tasks, and using repeated drills until most students demonstrated better mastery. These strategies suggest that grammatical accuracy can be improved through continuous, contextualized, and guided writing practice. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to provide more focused exercises on subject–verb agreement and other frequently occurring errors, combined with engaging classroom activities that help students apply grammar in meaningful writing contexts. Future researchers are recommended to investigate grammatical errors in other text types, such as narrative, recount, or argumentative writing, and to involve broader samples or different educational settings in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of EFL learners' writing difficulties.

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